

# Lips unsealed

by Pallavi

Groups of ill-paid chauffeurs gossiped over a smoke. None of them paid attention to the car in the darkest corner. Nobody cared, really. It was just another car. Tinted glasses, fully rolled up.

From the rear seat came muffled sounds. Floundering hands, unsure of their next move. A young couple, in their early twenties. Half-children, half-adult. Clandestine visits to the local video store had resulted in them getting to watch several tapes that *read* 'Tom and Jerry' but which were more than just a cat vs. mouse tale. They had a vague idea of how lips were to be used. Lips that parted feverishly, lips that burned. Lips - old, but still amateur. It was no wonder, considering that 'boys from good families' would never dream of even looking at a woman, let alone kiss her!

As the boy finally moved to the driver's seat, the girl whispered nervously '*Are you sure?*'

*'Don't worry... they absolutely adore you!'*, replied the boy, giving her a final kiss on her full lips. She smiled. They drove over to the old quarter of the city, where his family lived.

*'Our lord has finally arrived!'*, a frail-looking woman taunted as he walked through the rusty iron gate, and splashed his face with cold water drawn from the well. He didn't reply, but gave her a quick hug instead. *'Hungry, Amma!'* he muttered. The girl joined her palms and bowed her head, in a gesture of greeting. *'Welcome home, dear daughter'*, the older woman replied.

Dinner today was an extravagant affair. Different varieties of rice, dhal, coconut-garnished vegetables. A feast in honour of the girl who was to be daughter-in-law. Relatives of various shapes, sizes and age had been invited. They introduced themselves. She smiled, trying hard to remember their unfamiliar names. At dinner, he sat beside her, licking his lips as he relished his favourite dishes.

When he had gulped down the last sip of sweetened milk, it left a moustache of white cream. *'Look at your future husband! Twenty-five years old and still such a child!'*, they teased. She blushed. The

evening regaled with laughter and fun! By the end of the evening, she actually relaxed a little, and enjoyed the teasing smiles and affectionate innuendoes from the older women of her future husband.

Soon, it was time for him to take her back home. *'Girls coming from good families' didn't venture out this late at night*, they emphasised.

They took a detour through an abandoned road. It suited them just fine. An hour later, he took her to her home. As she tossed about in her bed that night, unable to sleep with excitement, she ran her soft fingers over her cracked lips. She blushed, as her body tingled with excitement. She thanked her stars, that her mother, with eyes like a vulture, had not noticed anything unusual about her that evening.

Back in the car, the boy tuned in to his favourite radio station, and set the volume as loud as he could. He was so much in love. He was happy too, that his family had accepted the girl of his choice. Under normal circumstances, a boy of an upper-caste family marrying into a family that was not Brahmin, would have caused an outrage. Luckily for him, his parents accepted the girl without any visible animosity!

It was 1 am when he returned home. The lights were all out. Not wanting to wake up the sleeping family, he walked around the dusty path to the back door. He was surprised to notice an open window in one of the bedrooms. Silvery moonbeams cast long shadows, and carried out the soft sound of late-night whispers.

*'These women!'* he thought, and smiled to himself. *'They seem so excited about my wedding! Chattering away at this late hour!!'* He discreetly edged towards the open window.

*'You are a fool!'*, he heard an angry voice.

*'Hush!'* came the reply.

*'A bloody fool. Had I been in your place, I would have never allowed that lower-caste girl into the family!'*

*'I am helpless'*

*'Disgraceful! He wants to marry into those, whose impure names are never ever uttered by the same lips that chant our sacred texts!'*

*'What to do? He just announced unceremoniously that he had DECIDED to marry this girl! We had no choice!'*

*'Stupid woman. People of our caste do not allow untouchables into our house even! And here, we have that little vixen taking over our lives!'*

He stared in disbelief. The evening had gone off so beautifully. They had all been so excited, and so happy. But behind all that, the unspoken truth was being unravelled.

He peeped into the window, and squinted until his eyes could see the shadows. A woman sat on a coir mat, her head in her palm, as if she had lost everything. In the light from the candle, her eyes seemed swollen, with crying. She covered her mouth with the edge of her crumpled cotton sari, as if she had lost everything, and had nothing left to say!

As he slowly recognized the shadow of his mother, his lips parted in shock. His mouth went dry. He desperately needed to get away. But he couldn't move a step. He felt numb. A silent tear rolled down his cheek, and disappeared into the dust.

*'How could you.... Amma !!!'* he sighed, and walked back towards his car. After all that he had heard, he could not face his family, not just yet.

*As he tiredly walked out into the night, he felt nothing but the relentless throbbing of his swollen lips.*

