one

"Koly, you are thirteen and growing every day," Maa said to me. "It's time for you to have a husband." I knew why. There were days when my maa took only a bit of rice for herself so that the rest of us—my baap, my brothers, and I—might have more. "It's one of my days to fast," she would say, as if it were a holy thing, but I knew it was because there was not enough food to go around. The day I left home, there would be a little more for everyone else. I had known the day was coming, but the regret I saw in Maa's eyes made me tremble.

My baap, like all fathers with a daughter to marry off, had to find a dowry for me. "It will be no easy task," he said with a sigh. Baap was a

scribe. He sat all day in his marketplace stall hoping to make a few rupees by writing letters for those who did not know how to write their own. His customers had little money. Often from the goodness of his heart Baap would write the letter for only a rupee or two. When I was a small girl, he would sometimes let me stand beside him. I watched as the spoken words were written down to become like caged birds, caught forever by my clever baap.

When they learned Maa and Baap were looking for a husband for me, my two brothers began to tease me. My older brother, Gopal, said, "Koly, when you have a husband, you will have to do as he tells you. You won't sit and daydream as you do now."

My younger brother, Ram, whom I always beat at card games, said, "When you play cards with your husband, you'll have to lose every time."

My brothers went to the boys' school in our village. Though there was a school for girls, I did not go there. I had begged to go, promising I would get up early and stay up late to do my work, but Maa said school was a waste for girls. "It will be of no

use to you after you are married. The money for books and school fees is better put toward your dowry, so that we may find you a suitable husband."

When I stole looks into my brothers' books, I saw secrets in the characters I could not puzzle out. When I begged them to teach me the secrets, they laughed at me. Gopal complained, "I have to sit in a hot schoolroom all day and have my knuckles rapped if I look out the window. You are the lucky one."

Ram said, "When a girl learns to read, her hair falls out, her eyes cross, and no man will look at her."

Still, I turned over the pages of my brothers' books. When Maa sent me into the village for some errand, I lingered under the windows of the school to listen to the students saying their lessons aloud. But the lessons were not like measles. I did not catch them.

My maa had no use for books. When she was not taking care of the house, she spent her time embroidering. Like her maa before her, and her maa, and as far back as anyone could remember, the women in our family embroidered. All their

thoughts and dreams went into their work. Maa embroidered the borders for saris sold in our marketplace. One sari might take many weeks, for a sari stretched all the way across the room. Because it took so long, each sari became a part of our lives. As soon as I could work with a needle, I was allowed to stitch simple designs. As I grew older, Maa gave me peacocks and ducks to embroider. When the border was finished, Maa took the sari to the marketplace. Then there would be rupees to spare in the house.

Now Maa sat with a length of red muslin for my wedding sari on her lap. Because he valued her work, the shopkeeper had sold the sari to Maa for a good price. She was embroidering a border of lotus flowers, a proper border for a wedding sari, because the lotus pod's many seeds are scattered to the wind, suggesting wealth and plenty.

Relatives and friends began to search for a bridegroom. A part of me hoped they would be successful and that someone wanted me. A part of me hoped that no one in the world would want me

enough to take me away from my home and my maa and baap and brothers. I knew that after my marriage, I would have to make my home with the family of my husband. For my dowry I began to embroider a quilt, making all my worries stitches, and all the things I would have to leave behind pictures to take with me.

I embroidered my maa in her green sari and my baap on the bicycle that took him to the marketplace every morning. My brothers played at soccer with a ball they had fashioned from old rags. I added the feathery leaves of the tamarind tree that stood in the middle of our courtyard and our cow under its shade. I put in the sun that beat down on the courtyard and the clouds that gathered before the rains. I put myself at the courtyard well, where I was sent many times each day to get water. I stitched the marketplace stalls heaped with turmeric and cinnamon and cumin and mustard. I embroidered vegetable stalls with purple eggplants and green melons. I made the barber cutting hair, the dentist pulling teeth, the man who cleaned ears,

and the man with the basket of cobras. Because I was kept busy at all my other tasks, the stitching took many weeks.

While I stitched, I wondered what my husband would be like. Stories were told of girls having to marry old men, but I did not think Maa and Baap would let that happen to me. In my daydreams I hoped for someone who was handsome and who would be kind to me.

My older brother said, "We're too poor to buy you a decent husband."

My younger brother said, "There is sure to be something wrong with anyone who agrees to marry you."

When I heard that at last a husband had been found for me, I almost ran away. How could I spend the rest of my days with someone I had never seen? Yet Maa had finished embroidering the wedding sari, Baap had written a letter of acceptance to the bridegroom's family, and my brothers began to treat me with respect, so I didn't run away.

A gift of money had to be paid to my bridegroom's family for taking me. To get money for the dowry, Maa sold three brass vases and a brass wedding lamp that had been a part of her own dowry. Hardest of all, our cow had to go. The family would no longer have fresh, rich milk to churn for butter to make into ghee. Instead they would have to buy ghee in the marketplace, where it was expensive and not fresh. Money was not enough, though. The family of my bridegroom asked, "What jewelry will she bring?"

I had two bangles made of glass beads and some plastic toe rings, nothing more. I heard Maa and Baap talking together so late in the night that the moon slid up and down in the sky. The next morning Maa brought out the silver earrings she had worn as a bride. They were solid silver, and so heavy that when I tried them on, I was afraid my ears would stretch to the size of an elephant's. The bridegroom's family was satisfied.

To please me, my baap asked for my bridegroom's picture, but none was sent. I knew little about him except that his name was Hari Mehta

and that he was sixteen. "He has a younger sister," Maa said, "so you will have help with the household tasks."

The marriage was considered a good one. Hari's baap, like mine, was a Brahman, the highest Hindu caste, and he was a schoolteacher. Hari would surely have been to school. "Will he mind that I have no learning?" I wondered aloud.

"What do you mean no learning?" Maa asked in a cross voice. "You can cook and keep a house, and you embroider as well as I do. Should a wife sit with a book and let the work go?"

Even though it meant leaving my home for the home of my bridegroom's family, I was becoming very nearly happy about my wedding. There was someone who wanted me. Best of all, instead of scraps from my maa's worn saris, I was to have a sari of my own to wear.

Because the Mehtas were anxious to have the ceremony as soon as possible, the astrologer was told to be quick in fixing an auspicious date for the wedding. The ceremony was to take place at Hari's

home instead of our home. This was not usual, but it pleased my parents, for it meant they would not have the expense of feeding wedding guests.

My brothers were not to come with us. I dared to hug them as I said good-bye. My older brother looked embarrassed, and my younger one shy, as I clung to them. Though they sometimes teased and tricked me, they could be kind as well. If no one was around to see him, my older brother would help me carry the heavy pails of mud from the pond to plaster our walls. My younger brother had once caught four fireflies in a jar for me.

As I walked out of the courtyard with Maa and Baap, I looked back. The courtyard was where we had our meals and where we slept on warm nights. I would awaken to the sound of the cuckoo in the tamarind tree that shaded the courtyard. Maa and I would wash our hair by the courtyard well and dry it in the sun. Then we would braid each other's hair. Once when the small wild lilies were blooming, I wove them into Maa's hair, and she laughed like a girl. All this I was leaving behind.

I carried with me my quilt, a sandalwood box that held the silver earrings, and a photograph of my parents, my two brothers, and myself. It had been taken the year before by a traveling photographer. My brothers and I are grinning, but my maa looks angry and my baap guilty. I remember maa saying the five rupees the picture cost would have bought half a kilo of rice. At first the colors of the picture had been too showy and not as they were in real life, but after a year they faded into softer, life-like colors.

I felt tears stinging my eyes as the bus pulled out of the station. It would take me to the Mehtas' village, but it would not bring me back. Maa must have had the same thought; she reached for my hand and held it tightly.

Mr. Mehta was there when the bus stopped. He was a short man with a small round face and a pair of large, dark-rimmed glasses. It was hard to see his face behind the glasses. I made my best ceremonial namaskar, saluting him and even touching his feet, but he gave me only a quick look. Instead he turned

to Baap and, after a courteous but quick greeting, asked, "You have brought the dowry, sir?" Until that moment I had believed it was me the Mehta family wanted; now it seemed that what they cared for most was the dowry. Was my marriage to be like the buying of a sack of yams in the marketplace?

A wagon drawn by two bullocks took us down a dusty road. The hot winds sent the bamboo groves rustling. Even the crows seemed restless, lighting on first one tree and then another as if the branches were hot to the touch. I heard Maa whisper that we should have been met with something better than a wagon, but we soon saw that the distance to the Mehtas' home was not far.

The Mehtas' house was larger than ours, but some of the mud-brick walls were tumbled, and a part of the house had no roof. A scrawny cow, looking like a pile of bones, was slumped down in the middle of the courtyard. We were greeted by evil-tempered geese hissing at us. Mr. Mehta shooed them away and led us to the doorway, where Mrs.

Mehta met us. She was tall and shadow thin, with small bright bird eyes and a sharp nose. I bowed and touched her feet. Unlike her husband, she looked closely at me. I was conscious of my unruly hair that would not be trapped in a neat braid and my enormous eyes, which my younger brother called owl eyes. As always when I met someone new, I didn't know what to do with my hands and feet.

"Your girl is big for her age," Mrs. Mehta said to Maa. "That's good. There is plenty for her to do here."

"Koly is a good worker," Maa replied. There was pride in her voice, but I saw that something was bothering her. I was beginning to wish I were back home. I had not expected to be made much of, but so far there was little welcome in the Mehtas' greeting.

A girl who looked a year or so younger than me was staring at us from a corner of the room. "Chandra," Mrs. Mehta called, "come here and meet your new sister-in-law."

Chandra was very beautiful, with golden-brown

skin and sad, pleading eyes. She was plump, with a soft round face and body. Her thick black hair hung loosely over her shoulders, partly covering her face. She bowed shyly to me and then looked quickly away, as if she knew secrets about me that I did not.

Mrs. Mehta prodded her husband, giving him a sharp glance. Looking embarrassed, Mr. Mehta beckoned to Baap saying, "There are one or two things to settle before the wedding."

Mrs. Mehta showed Maa and me to a room inside the house. As soon as she left us, I whispered, "When will I see Hari?"

Maa said, "Tomorrow at the wedding ceremony. Before would not be proper."

"What if I don't like him?"

"Of course you will like him."

"But what if I don't?"

Maa impatiently slapped at a fly. "Then you must learn to like him." She put her arms around me, and I felt the wetness of her tears against my cheek. I began to cry as well.

There was only a curtain between my rope cot and the charpoy of my parents. When Baap returned, I heard him say to Maa, "He has the money now, and soon he will have our daughter."

"Did you see the son?" Maa asked.

"No. Mehta said the boy has a bit of flu and is resting for the ceremonies tomorrow."

"That is not auspicious," Maa said.

"Nothing here is auspicious," Baap replied.

In a frightened voice Maa asked, "Should we postpone the wedding?"

Baap's voice was hard. "Don't even speak of such a thing! You know if a wedding does not take place at the appointed time, some evil is sure to come to the bride."

Too frightened by their words to sleep, I lay awake that night listening to the unfamiliar sounds. Voices rose and fell in a nearby room, and from another direction someone coughed. I longed to beg my parents to take me home. I would promise to eat very little and work very hard. But I could not ask such a thing. To refuse to go through with the

marriage would bring dishonor on my family. I told myself that if my eyes were not so big or my nose smaller, if I were not so large or my hair straighter, the Mehtas would be kinder. Still I knew that despite my flaws, my parents cared for me. Perhaps, I comforted myself, in time the Mehtas would too. Or if they didn't grow to like me, they would at least get used to me.

Maa got me up so early, the pigeons had not yet begun their cooing. We went to the courtyard well and drew water to wash my hair. Maa oiled and braided it. She dusted my face with golden turmeric powder, and with a paste of sandalwood and vermilion painted the red tikka mark on my forehead. My eyes were outlined with kohl. My lips and cheeks were rouged. The kautuka, a yellow woolen bridal thread, was fastened around my wrist. I put on my choli and my petticoat. Finally I fastened the silver earrings in my ears and wrapped the new chili-pepper-red sari as my mother instructed. I had never had so much cloth to manage. When I tucked it in properly at my

waist, it was hard to walk, and it kept slipping off my head.

At last I was ready, and Baap came in to see me. I thought he would be pleased. I turned one way and the other to show off my splendor, but to my disappointment he began to cry.

"She is dressed like a woman, but she is only a child," he said.

At that I too began to cry, and it was only Maa's angry words that made us stop. After her scolding I gave her a frightened look and saw that she too had tears in her eyes.

At that moment there was a pounding on the door. "We are waiting," Mrs. Mehta called.

We heard the sound of a sitar and tabla. I looked at my parents and smiled. I must have some worth if the Mehtas were spending money for music. It did not occur to me that the music was not for me but to impress the Mehtas' friends.

A handful of people had gathered in the courtyard, where a priest was waiting. A garland of yellow and orange marigolds was placed around

my neck, and I sat down across from my bridegroom. I kept my eyes down, as was proper, but I stole a quick glance at Hari. I could not hold back a small gasp of surprise, for I was sure there must have been a mistake. The boy sitting across from me seemed no older than I was, perhaps even younger. He was thin and pale and very frightened-looking. His eyes were fringed with long lashes, and he had a sulky mouth turned down at the corners.

Still, he was surely the bridegroom; I saw that his forehead had been painted, and he wore a marigold garland. Upon his head was the bridegroom's headdress, with its tassels of tinsel. The priest reached out for our hands and joined them under a small cloth of silk. Hari's hand was hot and sweaty. I nearly pulled my own hand away, but he was hanging on to it hard, as if it were keeping him from falling over.

I heard his voice for the first time as he repeated the marriage words. It was very faint, and every few minutes he had to stop to cough and clear his throat. Even in such a voice, the verses touched me:

"I am the words, thou the melody; I the seed, thou the bearer; the heaven I, the earth thou." As he said the words, the priest tied together a corner of my sari and a bit of Hari's shirt. Finally, our heads were sprinkled with water.

After the ceremony was over, and the celebration began, there was no chance to see Hari. The women were on one side of the courtyard and the men on the other. The guests seemed interested only in the food. There were potatoes with cumin, chick-peas cooked with onion and ginger, several kinds of curries, and platters of melons and mangoes. Best of all, there was my favorite sweet, coconut cakes. The men ate first, and when it was the women's turn, the coconut cakes were all gone. I thought it very unfair that a bride should not have a coconut cake on the day of her own wedding.

I saw Baap talking angrily with Mr. Mehta. Maa would not speak to Mrs. Mehta at all. The Mehtas had given no invitation to my parents to stay on, so after the feast they came to say goodbye to me. While we were alone for a minute, Maa

said, "The boy is much younger than they told us, and he is sickly."

Baap quieted her. "Don't worry our daughter. There is nothing to be done now. You heard them say he is ill with flu. He will soon be over his sickness. As for his age, there is plenty of time for him to grow into a man."

Before they left, Baap brushed my hand with his and slipped me a coconut cake.

It was night when the last guest left. Mrs. Mehta, who as Hari's mother was now my sass, took my arm, holding it as I have seen women in the marketplace holding a chicken's neck before they killed it.

"You can sleep in Chandra's room," she said. "Hari is sick. He must stay with us so that I can take proper care of him. Take off your silver earrings and give them to me for safekeeping."

From what I had overheard my maa and baap say, I had guessed that the Mehtas had not been honest with us. How could I trust Mrs. Mehta now? Stubbornly I shook my head. I knew if I defied her

now, we would be enemies, but I didn't care.

"What have I done to deserve so disobedient and willful a daughter-in-law?" Sass snapped at me, and left the room in a huff.

Later, when Chandra was out of the room, I hunted until I found a loose mud brick in the wall. I pried it out, hid the earrings, and replaced the brick, carefully brushing away any dirt that might give the hiding place away. In a house where there were secrets, I would have a secret of my own.

When Chandra returned, she smiled at me and took my hand in hers. "You will be my sister now," she said.

For the first time that day I felt a little happiness. Truth be told, I would rather have had a sister than a husband, especially a husband like the one I had. Chandra lay down on her charpoy, and I lay down on mine. In no time Chandra was asleep.

I slept very little that night, kept awake by my longing for my home and by Hari's coughing in the next room. As I lay there in the strange house, I felt

like a newly caged animal that rushes about looking for the open door that isn't there. I thought I might be able to endure one day in my new home and perhaps two, but I did not see how I could live there for the rest of my life.