

The next day as I waited nervously, I asked Maa Kamala about the rich lady. Maa only shook her head and said, "You must not call her that. She has a name like everyone else, and it is Mrs. Devi. Now, go quickly and wash your feet properly. You cannot go with dirty toenails. And don't forget to take your quilt with you."

It was my first ride in an automobile. The man who drove the car sat in front, and Mrs. Devi and I in the back. There seemed to be a cool breeze trapped inside the car.

Amazed, I could not help asking, "Where does the coolness come from?"

"That's the air-conditioning in the car," Mrs. Devi replied.

Of course I had heard of such a thing. I could feel the cool air as I walked by the entrances of the more expensive cinemas, but here I was in the middle of it. Mrs. Devi talked pleasantly while I sat straight up, afraid to open my mouth. We drove through the streets, sitting upon soft cushions with our windows shut against the heat and dust. The people on the street seemed very far away from us. I thought of Raji and how hard he had to work to carry someone in his bicycle rickshaw and how easily the thing inside the automobile pulled us or pushed us; I did not know which.

Mrs. Devi said, "When I first saw your quilt, Koly, I thought of my baap. He came from a village very like yours."

I must have shown my surprise, for she went on to say, "When my baap was ten years old, his mother, who was a widow, was taken ill and could no longer work. Baap was sent to stay with his uncle for a few days. When he returned, he found that his maa was gone. He was told she had died, but he soon found out she had been taken to Vrindavan and abandoned here."

I stared at Mrs. Devi, amazed at the telling of this story, which was so much like my story. "What happened?" I whispered.

"The unhappy boy ran away to Vrindavan to find his maa. He got a job as a helper to an iron-monger. At the end of each day he looked for his maa, but he never found her. One day a man who made his living drilling wells for water came to have his drill repaired. My baap, who was now a young man, had an idea that if the drill were made in a certain way, it would be more effective. And so it was. He began to make such drills, and soon they were sold all over India, and he became rich." She smiled at me. "When he died, he left money in his will for a widows' house."

I had a million questions I wanted to ask, but the car had pulled up in front of a small shop. Draped in the window of the shop was a rainbow of saris. A small sign with the proprietor's name, Mr. Das, was in a corner of the window.

When we entered, Mr. Das folded his hands and bowed to Mrs. Devi. I liked the man at once, for he

reminded me of the bandicoot under the veranda. He was sleek, with sharp black eyes and little ears. He was as quick as the bandicoot as well, for as soon as we had stepped in, he latched the door behind us, as if he had caught us and had no mind to let us go. I would not have been surprised to see a long tail snapping back and forth behind him. He greeted Mrs. Devi with a happy, expectant smile.

"No, no, Mr. Das, I didn't come to buy today. I came to bring you a gift."

He looked even more pleased.

"Here she is." Mr. Das stared at me. I am sure he knew at once from my appearance that I was not there to buy a sari of king's muslin. Still, he bowed to me and waited.

Mrs. Devi spread open my quilt. I wanted to disappear; I had looked around the shop, and the embroidery on the saris was very fine. I was sure it was beyond anything I could do.

Mr. Das bent over the quilt, taking a corner up in his hand and holding it close to his eyes. He turned the work over, and I silently thanked my maa

for teaching me that one side must look as well done as the other. He nodded as if the quilt were something of value that had been dropped upon his path.

"That is Koly's doing," Mrs. Devi said. "She is looking for work, and why should she not work here for you? Could she find a more suitable place?"

Mr. Das's quick black eyes darted from the quilt to me and back. He did not seem anxious to have me, but I could see he did not want to displease his good customer. "There would be much to teach her."

"Could she find a better teacher than you?"

He looked at me again. "We might try," he said.

"Excellent! There is no time like the present. I'll just leave her here." With that she bowed briefly to Mr. Das, who hastened to return her bow. In a moment she was gone, and Mr. Das and I were left facing one another.

I couldn't help saying in a small voice, "You don't have to take me." I edged toward the door.

Mr. Das seemed pleased with my remark. "At

least you do not push your way in because of Mrs. Devi. Come with me."

I hurried along behind him. He led me through a long, dark passage that was more tunnel than hallway. At last we came into a large, bright room with five or six women sitting cross-legged, some on the floor, some on charpoys, all bent over lengths of cloth that were spread out over the floor like bright carpets. Around them were skeins of thread, scissors, and little fabric squares poked full of needles.

The women paused in their work and glanced at me curiously. They were all older than I, and I was sure that they did not think I could even draw a thread through a needle. Mr. Das hunted about until he came upon a scrap of cloth. He tossed it to me. "Show me what you can do with this," he said.

I looked quickly at the borders the other women were embroidering. One of the women was working a pattern of twining ivy. I did the same.

When Mr. Das came to look at my work, he shook his head. "No," he said. "Why should you

copy what another does? That already exists. I want to see what is in your own mind." I expected him to send me away. Instead he gave me another scrap of cloth.

Raji was never far from my thoughts. Over and over again I had looked back at our evening at the river and wondered why I had not heard from him. As I thought of the river, I remembered the heron. I began to stitch its long neck and its head with its sharp beak. I stitched the long dangling legs and the great wings. I forgot where I was. From time to time Mr. Das looked over my shoulder but said nothing. When at last I finished the heron, I looked up to see Mr. Das standing there smiling. "That is what I want. It is not just a heron; it is *your* heron. It has flown right out of your head and, more important, out of your heart. Come back tomorrow, and I will have a sari for you to work on. I must think a little what weave and what color will be best. Now I suppose you want to know what I will pay you."

He named a sum three times what I was paid for the stringing of marigolds. Surprised, I almost

told him the sum was too much, but one of the other women came up to him just then to ask for thread the color of the fruit of a mango. By the time he had turned back to me, I had resolved to hold my tongue. I smiled politely and said the sum seemed very fair and I would return the next day at whatever hour he wished.

Mr. Das's workroom became the most important place in my life. I couldn't believe that someone was paying me for doing what I loved best. There were days when Mr. Das looked at my work and shook his head. "Koly, what can you be thinking of? What woman would wish to wear a sari on which a dog chases a goose? You have lost your senses." So I put aside the memory of the little pariah dog and the gosling. I was able to embroider many other memories, though. I worked a design of silver hoops, and in that way I got my earrings back again. I made a pattern of marigold garlands in honor of Hari and to remind me of the hours I had spent in stringing the orange flowers. One thing after another in my life was captured and stitched to be saved. All the

work was done on the finest muslin, each weave of muslin with its own name: woven air, dragonfly wing, summer cloud, evening dew.

My only sadness was Raji's absence. Each evening I waited in the courtyard hoping he would appear, hungry and eager to open a book. Each evening I was disappointed. At last I had to admit to myself that he had probably returned to his village and was looking for a suitable bride. Still, I could not keep myself from hoping I would see him again.

Sitting beside them each day in the workroom, I got to know the other women, who soon became my friends. The surprise was that they did not judge me by my age, but by my work. The older women laughed at some of my designs, but their laughter was kind. "Your designs are so original, they surprise us," one of them explained.

In the workshop scarfs and cushions as well as saris were embroidered. One woman kept a critical eye on my work and the work of the others. She always noticed when our threads became tangled

or work had to be ripped out and done over. If we used too much thread, she reported it to Mr. Das. Because of her long sharp nose, which she was always sticking into the business of the other women, she was called the Shrew.

The Shrew shook her head over my work. "Who will buy such a sari? Women want what they are used to, not some outlandish thing."

"No, no," Mr. Das said. "My ladies are always asking for something new and different." He was a good-tempered man and treated us all kindly. He took an interest in our lives and would give time off if a woman was wanted at home for a child or a husband's sickness. Some women were even allowed to do all their work at home.

Only once had I seen him angry. A phul-khana, a wedding veil of fine silk and embroidered in gold thread, disappeared overnight. The phul-khana was meant for the daughter of a wealthy customer, and Mr. Das could hardly stand still with frustration. The embroidery had been done by the Shrew. Though her words were harsh, her stitches were

deftly done. The scarf with its gold and silver moon and stars had been admired by all of us. She was as furious as Mr. Das at its disappearance. Mr. Das put new locks on our doors and windows and began to pay an old man to watch the workroom at night.

I began to confide in one of the younger women. Mala was nineteen, only two years older than I was, but she looked older. She was tall and as slim as a bamboo shoot. Her eyes were heavily outlined with kohl. Her long, tapered fingers with their bright-red nails pulled the threads in and out, stitching designs so intricate and clever, they took my breath away. Young as she was, Mr. Das entrusted her with embroidering threads of real gold. The Shrew was jealous of Mala and complained to Mr. Das that Mala often arrived late in the morning.

When Mr. Das scolded Mala for her tardiness, Mala only laughed. "Don't lecture me, Mr. Das," she would say in a taunting voice. "Your competitor, Mr. Gupta, down the street, stops me every day to beg me to work for him." Mr. Das would grow silent, for he couldn't bear the thought of Mala's

clever fingers at work on Mr. Gupta's saris.

Often a young man would be waiting to walk home with Mala, but sometimes Mala would let me walk home with her, for her room was not far from the widows' house.

When Mala heard I was living at Maa Kamala's she said, "I know the place. How can you stand that old woman? She won't let you out of her sight. It's worse than a prison. Come and spend a night with me and see how delicious freedom is." I should have objected to the way she spoke of Maa Kamala, but I was anxious to be Mala's friend. I longed to accept her invitation, for I had heard from the other women in the workshop that Mala's room was often crowded with artists and musicians.

When I asked permission of Maa Kamala, she was indignant. "I know all about Mala. Her room is no place for a young girl. Certainly you cannot spend the night there."

"Just for a few hours then? I won't spend the night."

"No! Not while you are under my roof."

For the first time, I was angry with Maa Kamala. After our evening meal I whispered my plan to Tanu. "I'll say we're going to the cinema together. I'll give you the money for your ticket," I told her, "and enough for two lemonades."

Tanu was as eager as I was to hear about Mala's place. "All right, but don't be late. I can't sit in the cinema forever."

I borrowed Tanu's lipstick and kohl, waiting until I was out of the house to apply them while Tanu held a small mirror for me. I left her buying her ticket for the movie and hurried quickly toward Mala's place.

It was only when I reached the narrow dark stairway that led to Mala's room that I dragged my feet. What would a girl like me from a small village have to say to such clever city people? I wished I were safely with Tanu in the dark cinema sipping lemonade.

It was the music that drew me. The sound drifted down the back stairway and pulled me up the stairs toward it.

The door to the room was open. After a minute or two I gathered my courage and stepped inside. There were a dozen people there, as many men as women. It was the first time I had ever been with such a mixed group. I thought how horrified my maa would have been to see me in this room where men and women mingled. In the middle of the room were two men, one playing a sitar and the other a tabla. The fingers of the sitar player traveled up and down the strings like clever mice. The tabla player followed the notes of the sitar like a shadow.

Mala came to welcome me, leading me into the room. One or two of the guests gave me a curious glance. Mala pulled me down beside her on a cushion and turned her attention to the players. I glanced hastily about the room. Most of the women were older than Mala; at least with their sophisticated hairdos and makeup they looked older. A few of them wore jeans and T-shirts instead of saris or salwars and kameezes. Except for the musicians, who wore kurta pajamas, the rest of

the men were also in jeans and T-shirts. They were talking and laughing together, paying little attention to the music.

There were real paintings on the wall and a rug on the floor. There was a faint odor of incense and something else that smelled sweet. I could see that Mala had electricity; there were two lamps in the room. To soften their glare, veils had been thrown over the shades. One veil was a pale blue, and its puddle of light was turned into blue shadow. The veil on the other lamp cast a pattern of moons and stars onto the ceiling. I looked again. It was Mr. Das's missing phul-khana. There could not have been another like it.

"Mala," I whispered, "it's the wedding veil."

"Of course. I took it to get back at the Shrew. Don't look so shocked. You're such a baby. Besides, Mr. Das doesn't pay us half of what we're worth."

What would Mr. Das have said if he had seen me sitting in the room of the person who had stolen his phul-khana? Before I could get up to leave, Mala summoned a man to join us. "Here is a real

artist for you to talk with," she said. "Kajal, here is Koly, fresh from a village." Mala left us to greet a girl who had just come into the room.

I did not see how I could run away without looking foolish. The artist, Kajal, was studying me. He had a catlike face with slanted eyes and a half smile. "I must paint you," he said, looking as though he wished not so much to paint me as to devour me.

I tried to move away from him, but he took my arm and held on to me. "Those are my paintings on the walls," he said. "What do you think of them?"

There was a scene of a dark forest with a tiger peering out from some trees. The tiger had the same half smile as Kajal, which made the man more frightening to me. I saw that he was no house cat to be tamed, but a malicious cat, even a dangerous one. The other painting was of Mala. Kajal had made her very beautiful. At the same time the expression on her face suggested that she and the artist shared an unpleasant secret. "I'll make you look as beautiful as Mala," he said. "You must



come to my room on your day off."

"Oh, no," I said. "I couldn't." Go to the room of a man! Maa Kamala would be horrified.

He held on more tightly to my arm. "You are no longer in a village now," he said. "You are living in a city. You are with adults here. You must act like one. Have some bhang. It will relax you."

I shook my head. I had passed bhang shops in the city. I knew bhang was made from marijuana leaves. "I have to go," I said. "I'm already late."

"You haven't had anything to drink. Let me just get you something cool. Then you can leave. I can see you aren't happy here."

The music had stopped, and across the room I saw the sitar player watching us. He started across the room toward me, but Mala reached out and drew him away.

Kajal returned with a glass of lassi. The glass felt cool in my hands, and I smiled gratefully at Kajal. I drank the lassi down, anxious to get away. After a moment the room began to whirl, and I felt sick to my stomach. I saw the sitar player, an angry

expression on his face, pulling away from Mala and hurrying toward me.

I was outside. It was dark. The sitar player was supporting me, and passersby were giving us curious looks. "Where do you live?"

"I live in Maa Kamala's widows' house, but I have to meet Tanu at the cinema around the corner. Who are you?"

"My name is Binu, and you are a very foolish girl. How did you get mixed up with that crowd?"

"I work with Mala. She asked me to come. Why am I so sick?"

"That animal, Kajal, was playing a trick on you. The lassi was laced with bhang. You're lucky I was there. The sooner I hand you over to your friend, the better. I'm not a nursemaid to take care of every naïve village girl."

As he propelled me toward the cinema, he grumbled, "You are no end of trouble."

I saw how foolish I had been. I had disobeyed Maa Kamala because I was excited about going to Mala's room. Now I hated Mala. I gritted my teeth

and made fists of my hands trying to fight the tears. Little by little I began to calm down. "Why were you there?" I asked the sitar player.

"The boy playing the tabla invited me to come with him. It's my first time with that crowd, and the last. Here is the cinema. That must be your friend." With a sigh of relief he pushed me toward Tanu, who stood staring at us with wide eyes and an open mouth.

I turned to thank him, but he was hurrying across the street and didn't look back.

"What happened to you?" Tanu asked. "You look upset."

When I finally got all the story out, she said, "How can such wicked people be?"

We were nearly at the widows' house. I stopped, afraid to face Maa Kamala. Tanu brought out her bit of mirror. "Comb your hair and wipe off the makeup. The kohl has run down on your cheeks. I'll say something we ate in the cinema made you sick."

I was sure Maa Kamala would see at once all

that had happened and would make me leave the house.

"Let me do the talking," Tanu said. To a worried Maa Kamala she explained, "It's her stomach. It was the monkey nuts. We bought a whole paper full, and the greedy girl ate most of them."

Maa Kamala put her arm around me, and the kindness brought out my tears. "Poor girl, I'll fix some ginger water for you to sip. Then you must go to bed at once. If you're not better in the morning, I'll send a note to Mr. Das."

I nodded gratefully, sure that nothing in the world would ever make me face Mala again.

Yet in two days' time I was back at the workroom. I had a living to earn. Besides, even the thought of seeing Mala again could not keep me from my embroidery. On my first day back I would not look at Mala, but as soon as Mr. Das was out of the room, Mala whispered in my ear, "If you say anything about the veil, I'll tell your precious Maa Kamala you came to my house and took bhang." She gave me a sly smile. I moved hastily away from

her, bending my head over my work so the Shrew, who was staring at us, would not see the look of anger on my face and become suspicious. I thought I would never be done with scolding myself for my foolishness, but the next day Raji returned.