

e l e v e n

He was waiting for me when I left the workshop. I was so pleased to see him that with no thought for modesty I reached for his hand. "When did you get back?"

"Last night. I went to Mr. Govind's and Tanu sent me here. But I must return to my village very soon. I have to get the lentils planted in time for the rains next month."

No sooner had he returned than I was to lose him again. "What about your rickshaw job?" I asked, hoping that might keep him here for a bit.

"I'm all finished with rickshaws. Koly, let's go back to our place on the river. I want to talk to you."

I was surprised at his request, but pleased at

any chance to be with Raji. And he had called it "our place."

As we walked along, I thought how the city had changed for me. When I had first come, the city had been unwelcoming, even treacherous, but now I had found my place in it. I had my work and friends. Still, I was never so happy as I had been with Raji, and I could not help but be sad at how soon he would leave me.

It was the dry season. We could see the muddy cradle of the banks through which the river ran. We settled on a patch of grass, and taking off our sandals, we swung our feet into the brown water. Behind us the deserted temple looked shabby. In the gloominess I could not help remembering my evening at Mala's apartment and wondering what Raji would think of me if he knew of it.

Raji listened to my silence for a while and then said, "Something is troubling you."

I nodded, unable to get out my words. Just then a heron flew over us and drifted down to the river's edge. We stayed quiet to keep it there. I wondered if Raji, like me, was remembering the first time we

had seen it. After it flew away, Raji said, "Why should we have secrets?"

The whole story of my evening at Mala's came out in a flood of words.

Raji did not say at once that it was all right or that I was very foolish. He only looked out at the Yamuna River, which minded its own business. After a bit he said, "I would like to meet that Kajal. I would stamp him to pieces like the scorpion he is. I'm glad you told me, but that is in the past. I came back to the city to talk to you about what is ahead. My uncle has decided to rent half my land. With his money I can fix up my house. A man from the government is showing me how to make my land more fertile. Already the wheat I planted has pushed up. I want you to come back with me to my village. You would like it there. We have all the things that please you."

Puzzled, I asked, "But what could I do in your village?"

Gazing down, Raji mumbled, "You would be my wife, of course."

I stared at him. I had never imagined such a

thing would be possible. I thought I must be dreaming. "But what of your family?" I managed to ask. "They wouldn't want you to marry a widow; such a marriage is inauspicious. And you own land. You would have no trouble finding a wife who would bring you a dowry."

Raji tore up some reeds and tossed them into the river. "I don't want to marry a handful of rupees. Can I come to my house at the end of a day in the fields and talk with rupees? Can I bring up my children with rupees for a mother to watch over them? My maa and baap lived in the same house, but no word passed between them except when my maa offered a second helping of rice to Baap or my baap said the eggplants were wormy. I want to talk to my wife. I can talk to you.

"I have no family but my uncle and aunt. Surely I can make up my own mind. Anyhow, I have told them about you." He grinned at me. "Besides, I have need to improve my reading, and no one in my family can read."

I smiled back, but no words came. I could only sit there looking out across the river. The setting

sun was turning the water from brown to gold. The first streaks of evening lay against the sky like a purple border on a blue sari. I had never thought of marrying again. I had known that Raji would make a fine husband for some lucky girl, but I could hardly believe that he had chosen me or that his family would accept me.

"At first," Raji said, "we'd be poor, but I have fixed the house up so the rains can't get in, and we would grow all the food we need on our land. My crop of okra and lentils will bring in money. There's a well in the courtyard. If we have water and food and a roof over our heads, that is all we need."

I still had not found words, and Raji studied me. "Maybe I should not have spoken. Maybe you do not care for me."

I looked lovingly at Raji's strong shoulders and brown skin and his foolish wayward hair, which he had tried to slick down with coconut oil. "I do care for you. I missed you when you were away. I was in the courtyard every evening looking for you." He took my hand, and I did not pull it away. Had I not always been happy with Raji? I wanted to tell Raji

yes, yes. But his asking had happened so quickly. And what of my embroidery at Mr. Das's place, and my friends at Maa Kamala's house? I could see myself in two places, with Raji and in Mr. Das's workroom, but I could not see myself in just one place. "How could I give up my work?" I asked Raji. "What would I do?"

"You'll have the house to care for and the marketing and cooking." In a voice so quiet I could hardly hear him, he added, "And I suppose there will be children." He ran his hand over his hair, ruffling what was already ruffled.

I could not forget my days with Sass. I saw myself once again sweeping a courtyard and carrying heavy jugs of water. Even without Sass the work would be hard, yet Raji and I would be there together. "I don't know, Raji," I managed to get out. "Perhaps we should wait a bit."

In a disappointed voice he said, "You want to stay here and go to more parties at your friend Mala's."

"I don't! I wish I hadn't told you."

"I'm sorry." He looked miserable. "How long

do you want to wait?"

I thought for a bit, trying to make out what this new life would be like. At last I said, "Not long." When I saw the hurt look on his face, I couldn't help asking, "If I don't come right away, would you find another wife?"

"I have found the wife I want." He pulled more reeds up until I thought that if we did not leave soon, there would be no reeds left along the Yamuna River.

"It's late," I said. "Maa Kamala will wonder where I am."

"But you don't say no."

I shook my head. "I don't say no. Give me a little time, Raji, and yes will come." The pulling up of the reeds stopped and Raji took my hand again. He had a mournful look on his face. I reached up and smoothed his hair. "It is only for a short time, and I'll write to you," I promised. "Will you write to me?"

With a slow smile he said, "If you don't treat my letters like a lesson and send them back with red marks."

Each week a letter came from Raji. Some letters were no more than a few sentences, but some went on for many pages to tell me how the blossoms had come out on the lentils and how the water from his well was sweet and good tasting.

In one letter Raji wrote that he had planted a tamarind tree in the courtyard. "It says in the Vedas, 'He who plants a tree will have his reward.' How soon will my reward come?"

Often he told me of the birds he had seen, the hawks and falcons and once an eagle. In the evenings there were fireflies in the courtyard, and he could hear the cries of the nightjars as they circled overhead. Because Raji was a farmer, every letter told of the weather.

In my replies to Raji I told him how often I thought of him. I hardly ever mentioned the weather, for there didn't seem to be much of it in the city. It was very hot or it wasn't. The seasons were hidden behind all the houses and the traffic on the streets. Tanu and I had moved out of the widows' house and now had a room of our own with only one

small window and no courtyard. For us the weather had disappeared altogether.

We had left the widows' house shedding tears and clinging to Maa Kamala. "You are women now and must make room for other widows here," she gently chided us. "Only don't forget us." There were tears in her eyes as well.

As I saw the fearful looks of the widows who were to take our place, I realized how much things had changed for me. I had friends and a secure job, and now I had Raji. But if I married Raji, would I have to give up my friends? My work? I lay awake at night trying to sort it all out.

Tanu and I were proud of having our own place. We put pictures from old magazines on the wall and bought two charpoys and a small hot plate to cook on. The entrance to our building was off a narrow alley. Four families lived in our building, and we all shared a toilet and a faucet where we got our water and did our washing.

At first it was exciting to have a room of our own, but I soon tired of it. It was the beginning of

May, and it seemed the monsoon would never come. There was no breath of air. Dust from the street covered everything. If I took my eyes from them, the walls of our room crept closer and closer to me until I thought I would suffocate. I could go up onto the roof, but the corrugated tin burned my feet. In the street there were a hundred other people breathing in the air I needed. There were no night-jars or fireflies or hawks to be seen. I began to long for Raji and his village.

I eagerly awaited his letters. The tamarind tree was doing well and one day would shade the courtyard. He had made shutters to keep out the rains when they came, and he was working on a surprise for me. Tanu teased me. "You will wear the letters out with all the folding and unfolding."

At the workroom tempers were short because of the heat. There were arguments over the sharing of scissors or who was to have the place with the best light. Even the sheerest muslin lay hot and heavy on our laps. Mr. Das said we were behind schedule, and his customers were complaining. He

was always scolding Mala, who was coming in later and later. She only tossed her head and spoke of how Mr. Gupta was after her to work for him.

It was on a day so hot that we had to wipe our sweaty hands on a cloth to keep them from soiling our work that Mala was fired.

One of the women was embroidering a wedding sari, coiling gold thread along its borders and fastening it with the tiniest stitches imaginable.

"You haven't given me enough gold thread to finish the sari," she complained to Mr. Das. All the gold thread was kept locked in a cupboard. Only Mr. Das had the key.

Mr. Das looked puzzled. "Yes, yes. You are mistaken. I put a new skein beside you only an hour ago. You have mislaid the thread," he insisted. "That is no way to treat something so valuable. It must be somewhere. Look carefully."

The woman stood up and shook out her clothes and the sari she was working on. In a puzzled voice she said, "There is no thread here."

The Shrew was watching. She said, "Look in

Mala's purse." There was a satisfied smirk on her face.

We all looked at Mala. She snatched at her purse, but before she could reach it, Mr. Das had it in his hand and was opening it. Mala sprang at him, shrieking that he had no business with her property. As she grabbed the purse, the skein of gold thread fell out. No one made a sound.

"You are finished here," Mr. Das said, breaking the silence. "Go and work for Gupta. It will bring him nothing but trouble."

I was angry with Mala and disgusted with her stealing. Yet a part of me was sorry for her. All her beauty and cleverness were wasted. What had happened to her was like the breaking of a fine vase.

That evening, to forget the scene with Mala, I convinced Tanu to walk down to the river where Raji and I had gone. I was missing Raji more each day and thought seeing the river would bring him closer.

As I had hoped, the thoughts of Mala began to fade. But Tanu was a city girl, and all the open

space around the river made her nervous, so we soon returned to our little room. A part of me returned, but much of me stayed with the river and the kingfisher and the heron and the memories of my times there with Raji.

In June a letter came from Raji with wonderful news. "My surprise is finished," he wrote. "I have built a little room in the house you can keep just for your embroidering. It has two big windows so you have the sun up and down. From one window you will see the courtyard and the tamarind tree. From the other window you will see the fields where I work."

It was not only the room that brought tears to my eyes but the idea of a room for me taking shape in Raji's mind, and then being built with his hands. My last doubts about the marriage flew from me like a flock of birds starting up from a field to be lost in the distance.

I thought often of the room Raji had built for me. There would be no sound of automobiles or motorcycles or buses. Instead, I would hear the

rustle of the leaves of the tamarind tree and the sound of the birds that nested there. I would put up white muslin curtains that would flutter when the breezes blew across the fields. My son would be in the fields helping Raji. My daughter would sit beside me in the room, a small scrap of cloth and a needle and thread in her hand.

Once again I began a quilt for my dowry. My first quilt was stitched as I worried about my marriage to Hari, the second in sorrow at Hari's death. Chandra's quilt was stitched to celebrate her happiness. This time as I embroidered, I thought only of my own joy. "When it's finished," I wrote Raji, "we'll be married." In the middle of the quilt, spreading its branches in all directions, I put a tamarind tree to remind me of the tree in my maa and baap's courtyard and the tree in the home I was going to. I stitched Mr. Das, Mrs. Devi, Maa Kamala, and Tanu. There was even a place on the quilt for Mala, though I had heard she was no longer at Mr. Gupta's. I stitched a rickshaw and Raji in the fields and me embroidering in the room

Raji had made for me. Around the quilt for a border I put the Yamuna River, with reeds and herons beside it.

One day I confided my plans to Mr. Das. I knew there were women who sent their work in to him and hoped I might do the same. At first Mr. Das was distressed at my news, but soon his black eyes flashed with excitement.

"Why should you not be happy with your husband and home?" he said. "I remember the boy waiting for you outside the store. Very polite boy. Full of energy. I could tell that from the way he paced back and forth. With such a husband you will never go hungry. But Koly, you must not stop your work. Does he understand that?"

I told Mr. Das about the room Raji had built for me.

"Ah, that is good. Every few months you will come to see me, and I will give you work to take back to your room. But will you not have a house to care for? Meals to cook? Children whining for this or that? Will you have time for the work?"

"I'll make time," I promised. "The house will not always be so clean, the cooking may be a little hasty, and the whining children will sit on my lap and I'll sing to them while I work."

Mr. Das laughed. "If you make that a promise, I'll give you a sari for your dowry."

Tanu wasn't taking the news of my leaving so well. "You are lucky," she said, and her voice was bitter. "Where will I find a man who will marry a widow? And who will take your place here and pay so much rent?" Because I made more money than Tanu did, I paid a greater share. At Maa Kamala's place we learned of two girls who were looking for a room, and they were happy to join Tanu.

"Still, it won't be the same," Tanu said.

As much as I was looking forward to my marriage, I knew how much I would miss Tanu. "I'll see you when I bring my work to Mr. Das," I promised, "and you can come and visit us in the country."

Tanu shook her head. "I'll see you here, but you won't get me near the country. It's full of snakes."

The rains had come. In his letters Raji told how green everything was. He wrote proudly of how the government agent had brought other farmers to see how well his crops were doing. Sometimes, he said, he looked into the room he had built for me, hoping to see me there. How soon would the quilt be finished?

In my answer I wrote that the quilt was almost done. "No more than a week or so," I promised. More and more my thoughts flew to Raji, and I stayed up late in the evenings, finishing the quilt.

At Mr. Das's workshop we listened to the rain beat steadily on the tin roof. We were snug and comfortable in our workroom, teaching one another stitches, trading gossip, telling one another our plans. The workroom and the women in it had become a part of me. All the while I stitched, I thought of how lucky I had been to find Raji, and how without him my life would have been very different. Even in my happiness my thoughts sometimes wandered to Sass. I thought that because of her sharp tongue and unloving ways, she would not

find a welcome in her brother's home. Poor Sass.

Mr. Das must have told Mrs. Devi that I was to be married. The next time she came to the store, she said to Mr. Das, "I must have the first sari Koly embroiders in her new home. You will give her a length of king's muslin to take with her." She smiled at me. "Koly, will you find something for the border in one of Tagore's poems?"

Immediately I knew that it would be the homeless bird, flying at last to its home.