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When I returned home with Hari's parents, everything was different. We all tiptoed by the room where Hari had slept as if any noise would awaken him. I felt his not being there more than I had felt his being there. There was little talk in the house. We all moved silently about our tasks. As the days passed, Sass had little to say to me, addressing me only to give an order or to scold me for not carrying the order out as she wished.

I was glad to have Chandra with me. When Chandra mourned for her brother, we put our arms around each other. When I woke in the middle of the night to find the room full of ghosts, the reassuring sound of her soft breathing sent them away. She told me what Hari was like when he was

growing up. I told her of my own brothers. Chandra had movie magazines that we looked at together. One night a fruit bat flew through our window, and we hid, giggling, under the covers until it was gone.

A few weeks after Hari's death Sass told me to put on my widow's white sari. "We are going into the village," she said, but she would not tell me why. She hurried us past the outskirts of the village, where the untouchables had homes made of bits of metal and old crates. "You must not let their shadow fall upon you," she warned, "or it will pollute you."

Sass seemed to take pleasure in finding someone who was worse off than she was, while I could not believe there was anyone more miserable than I was.

Sass led me to the government office, where there was an official wearing a suit, shirt, tie, and jacket. As we approached the official, Sass warned me in a low whisper, "There will be no need for you to talk. I will explain."

"What is there to explain?" I whispered. Sass only gave my arm a yank and propelled me into the office.

"Sir," Sass said to the man, "my son has died. This is his widow. Does the government not have something for her?"

The man gave me a quick glance, and after saying he was very sorry to hear of Hari's death, he pushed some papers at Sass and me to sign. Since neither of us could read the papers, Sass said she would take them home so that her husband, who was a scholar, could read them. Then she would return them with our marks.

When we were outside the office, I asked, "What does the government have for me?"

Sass brushed aside my question. "It is a way of speaking. The papers are only to record Hari's death." I was sure there was more to it, but the mention of Hari's death had set her to weeping, and I could do nothing but trail along behind her as she hurried home with her misery.

After that, each month an envelope with a government stamp came for me. "It is official business," Sass would say, taking it from the postman, "and nothing for you to bother about."

In her sadness over Hari's death Sass grew bitter. Her angry words buzzed around me, stinging like wasps. "Your dowry did not save Hari, and now we are burdened with one more mouth to feed," she scolded. She made my own name hateful to me. All day long she sent it screaming through the house and across the courtyard: "Koly, we need water!" "Koly, sweep the courtyard! The geese have soiled it." "Koly, the clothes you washed are still dirty!" "Koly, the spices you ground for the masalas are too coarse!"

I did the best I could, thankful for a bed to sleep on and food to put in my mouth. Each morning I got up before the sun swallowed the darkness. It was so early that I felt as if I were the only one awake in the world. I made a respectful puja, bowing to the household shrine. I washed at the courtyard well and brushed my teeth with a twig from the neem tree. I gathered dried leaves to light the dung in the stove so the water for tea would be boiling when the family awoke. I slapped the cow dung into nicely shaped cakes and plastered them

to the walls, a neat handprint on each one. After the sun dried them, they would feed the fire. I hurried to the well for a pail of water. When you hold water in your hand, it weighs nothing, but put it in a pail and it is as heavy as a stone! I threw sticks at the handicoot, the nasty rat that lived under the house, to keep it from getting our food.

If Sass had let me creep quietly about my tasks, I would have been content. I still would have had a little place inside me to go, a place I could wrap myself in like the cocoon a caterpillar makes. You can touch the cocoon, but you cannot touch the little thing inside unless you tear it apart. That is what my sass was doing to me, worrying and badgering me with her never-ending orders and scoldings.

She screamed at me, "You are no better than the handicoot that burrows under our house and eats our food. Go home to your miserable parents!" But she knew as well as I that I could not go back to my village. It would have been a terrible disgrace to return like a hungry dog to my parents' home.

To comfort myself, I began a quilt. When I

explained to Sass that the quilt would be a way to remember Hari, for once she was not angry with me but only cautioned me to finish my tasks before taking up the quilt. She gave me rags for the quilt and a few rupees to buy thread. Though she pretended to take no notice of my work, even complaining that I was neglecting my tasks, I would sometimes come upon her looking to see what I had stitched. I embroidered Hari in his bridegroom's headdress as the two of us sat before the priest. I stitched the train that took us to Varanasi, and Hari splashing about in the river. At last I made the procession to the Ganges with Hari's body covered with garlands. All around the edge of the quilt I put a border of bugs and butterflies.

In February on the night of the full moon we could hear the sound of drums in the distance. It was Holi, the feast that celebrates the god Krishna's love for the fair Radha. At first Sass would not allow Chandra and me to go into the village. At Holi a special red powder mixed with cow's dung and urine is thrown at everyone. But Chandra kept

pleading, and finally, after we promised to wear our oldest clothes, we were allowed to go. To our surprise Sass decided to go with us. She said it was to see that we behaved, but I believe she was glad of an excuse to leave the sadness of the house.

In no time everyone was covered with the red dye. Small boys ran about squirting everyone with their water guns. Late in the evening, when the dancing became wild, Sass hurried us home. But for a few hours we had forgotten our troubles.

When the hot weather came, I worked on the quilt in the courtyard, hoping for a little breeze. Day after day the heat pressed down on us. I longed to be like the turtles in the dried-out streams, hidden in the mud, waiting for the rains to give them life again.

Chandra loved to watch me embroider. "Your needle makes the pictures come alive," she said.

"I can teach you," I offered, but Chandra only shook her head.

"I'd rather watch you," she said.

Chandra was not lazy, but only a little spoiled.

She was allowed to sleep later than I was in the

morning, was given more food to eat, and had fewer tasks than I did, always the easier ones like airing the quilts and pillows. Still, I could not be angry with her for the way Sass treated me. Chandra was willing enough to help me, but she gave little thought to a task. She was always dreaming of something else—the shape of the clouds or the color of the sari she had seen in the marketplace or, most often, the husband she would have one day.

I sometimes teased her for her daydreams, but I was happy to have her for a sister. If Sass scolded me, Chandra would find an excuse for me. When she was given some treat to eat that was not given to me, she would secretly save some and give it to me when we were alone. Chandra had tied a rope to the mango tree, knotting the end. When Sass was busy elsewhere, we hung on to the rope and swung ourselves into the treetops.

The best parts of the days were the afternoons, when Chandra and I had the courtyard to ourselves for our baths. We took turns pouring pails of water over each other. We would unwind our saris. Only

then, as the cool water washed over me, could I forget Sass's scalding words and the fiery sun. We would put on fresh, dry clothes, making sure all the while that no parts of our bodies showed, so as to preserve our modesty.

I sometimes looked into Hari's room. The bugs had dried up and fallen to the floor. The butterflies had lost their color. His room was now used to store flour and lentils. A stray cat often slept there. It would gaze at me with its sly brown eyes just as Hari had done. One of Hari's schoolbooks still lay on the trunk. No one touched the book, and day by day the dust grew on it. Though I could not read, I sometimes opened the book and looked at the words. They were words that Hari had known.

I thought it would be a fine thing to have a book of my own. No one seemed to want it, and I began to think of asking for it, wondering if such a request would be met with a new round of scoldings. One evening I gathered my courage and went to Sassur. I blurted out, "May I have Hari's schoolbook?"

Sassur always seemed surprised to find I was

still there. After staring at me for a moment, he said, "It would fetch only a rupee or two in the marketplace. Take it. But what will you do with it? Can you read?"

I shook my head. "I thought if I turned the pages over and over, I might learn."

I expected Sassur to laugh at my foolishness. Instead he gave me a long look. For the first time since Hari's death I saw his smile. "Say nothing to your sass, but come to me each evening when she is talking in the courtyard with the neighbor women. I'll help you to learn to read and write."

That night I could not keep the happy news to myself. "Chandra," I whispered, "your baap is going to teach me to read. You can learn as well."

Chandra shook her head. "I could never learn such things."

"Yes, you could."

"I have no need. My parents are looking for a husband for me."

After that I went each evening to my sassur. He showed me how each word is a little package of

letters. He was clever with a pencil. For each letter he drew a picture of some creature, a hawk or a pig, and printed its name below the letter. When I had all the letters, he drew a railway. The engine pulled several words, so that now I had a sentence. Page by page I learned the secrets in the book. What was even more exciting, Sassur told me there were many books, each one with a story in it. As the months went on, he gave me some of those other books to read. Chandra and I were not allowed oil to light our room at night. In order to read the books, I had to take them with me, hidden in my sari, when I went to wash the clothes in the river. I hurried to finish the washing so I would have a little time with my book.

I looked forward to those walks to the river, for I was walking away from Sass and her scolding. It was June and hot summer now. The dry bamboo leaves rattled in the wind. Puffs of dust exploded with my every step. Along the road I saw women winnowing baskets of threshed grain in the wind, the clouds of chaff flying off in the breeze. The

mustard fields were golden with blossoms and smelled fragrant when I walked by them. In this dry season only a trickle of muddy water remained in the river. Though I rubbed the clothes on the stones to get them clean, the clothes sometimes looked even dirtier when I was finished.

Still, I loved the river. Sometimes a tiny silver fish would leap from the water after a fly. Hawks circled overhead. Bright-green dragonflies wove in and out of the reeds. A kingfisher perched on a peepul tree, its red breast like a tongue of fire. I washed the dust off my bare feet and splashed the water over me for the coolness. I thought of how Hari had splashed me in the Ganges. I wondered what my life would have been like as Hari's wife. I knew that Hari had been spoiled and would not have been easy to live with, yet I was sure I would have been happier than I was now.

There were days at the river when I did not pick up my book but only daydreamed like Chandra. I imagined myself returning to my village, to my maa and baap and my brothers. I wanted to picture

welcoming looks on their faces when they saw me come back to them in my widow's sari. As hard as I tried, I could not put such looks on their faces, nor could I feel their welcoming embraces. Instead I saw them all lined up in the courtyard, frowning and cross. I heard them order me back to the home of my husband's parents. "It is where you belong now," they would surely say.

Sometimes I would picture myself running away, selling my earrings to get a railway ticket to Varanasi. I thought of the excitement of the city. But what would I do for a living, and where could I stay? I remembered all the families living on the streets. Though I turned these things over and over in my head, I did not see how I could escape.

As the summer days grew hotter and hotter, Chandra and I would stand in the courtyard every afternoon, looking up at the sky, waiting for the rains to cool us. One day just as we had given up hope, huge gray clouds, large and clumsy as elephants, came rolling in. A moment later a million pails of water emptied on us. Holding hands, we

danced and danced, tipping our heads up and opening our mouths. Our clothes clung to us, and under our feet the dry dust of the courtyard softened into mud and squeezed up between our toes.

Even Sass forgot her scolding and stood a little apart in the courtyard letting the rain fall on her as if it were washing away some of her sorrow.

Now that the monsoon had come, everything was damp. The quilts on our beds and the clothes in our chest were limp and smelled of mildew. Overnight our sandals turned green with mold. In every room water dripped down from the ceiling, so when we had a hard rain outside, it was like a small rain shower inside. The mud-brick walls of the house became even thinner. A part of the roof caved in.

Overnight the wilting wheat and millet fields turned green. Mosquitoes bred in the little pools along the roadside. We could not walk very far without snakes for company. They were everywhere, hanging from the mango tree and crawling under our charpoyos so that we were afraid to sleep. Sassur had to come to our room with a big branch

and beat the invading snakes to death.

Though we were refreshed by the rain, there were still scoldings from Sass. Either I did not rub the clothes hard enough to get them clean or I rubbed them so hard they were worn thin. One day she accused me of putting too much water in the rice, so that it was like gruel. The next day she said I did not put in enough water, and the rice was dry as dust. If I answered back, I was impudent. If I kept silent, I was sullen. I saw that no matter how hard I worked, I could never please her.

At the end of summer Krishna's birthday was celebrated. It was a national holiday, and Sassur took Chandra and me into the village to see the fireworks. The colors exploded like handfuls of petals tossed into the sky. There were trained monkeys and clever starlings that had been taught to talk. There was a man who rode a bicycle on a tightrope and a snake charmer whose cobra was so old and lazy, it could not be coaxed from its basket and had to be tumbled out. Sassur gave us a few coins to buy a cone of spun sugar. We each ate half and laughed at how our faces were sticky

all over with pink sugar.

Though Sassur was kind to me and had taught me to read, I could not turn to him for help. He left early in the morning for school and came home with papers to correct. He was paid very little for his teaching and often appeared troubled.

"Is the teaching very hard?" I once asked him.

"The teaching would be nothing, but my students are rude and disrespectful. They hide my glasses so that I cannot see the lesson. Last week they put a scorpion on my desk."

"How can that be? They should be grateful to you."

He smiled at me. "Ah, Koly, I only wish my students were as anxious to learn as you are."

Sassur suffered from more than the students' tricks. When he was home, Sass was always complaining about how poor they were and how others were better off. I think Sassur was as miserable as I was.

The only time my sassur seemed to come alive was when he had a book in his hand. Now that I could read, he often took out a book of poems by

the great Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore. The book had a fine leather cover with its title in gold letters. The inside covers had fancy colored paper on them. The most impressive thing was Tagore's own signature in the book.

"He signed the book for my baap," Sassur said. "My baap went to hear him give a reading of his poems. The book has been handed down from son to son, but now . . ." He sighed, and I knew he was thinking of Hari, so I began to read aloud to Sassur from my favorite poem. It was about a flock of birds flying day and night through the skies. Among them was one homeless bird, always flying on to somewhere else.

One day Sass caught us at our reading. She was very angry.

"What are you teaching that girl?" she cried. "It is no wonder she forgets to do her work."

Sass was suspicious of books, treating them as if they were scorpions and might sting her. From then on if she caught me reading, she would call me lazy and set me to a task or send me off to the village on an errand. But no matter what Sass thought,

the secrets in the books were now mine, and try as she might, she could not snatch them away.

I still bowed to the household shrine each morning, but now I begged Krishna to find a way to let me escape. In my books I had read that as a child, Krishna was very mischievous. Now I became mischievous as well. The milk I churned would not turn into butter. The grain I ground for chapatis had bits of chaff that got between our teeth. In the garden I pulled up the potato plants and left the weeds. The dung cakes I made fell apart, so the fire went out. I put a dead frog in the water bottle. The bottle was brass, so no one noticed the frog until all the water had been drunk. I left the geese's mess where Sass would step into it. I looked away when the bandicoot ate the mangoes.

In one thing I was careful. I never spilled the salt, for my maa had told me in the next world you had to sweep up every grain of salt you spilled, and I didn't want to waste my time doing that.

"Why do you anger my maa?" Chandra asked. "She is like those little red ants that swarm all over you and bite and bite."

I knew what Chandra said was true, but I also knew that I could not crawl about like a beaten dog. I had heard about families that had murdered the widows of their sons to get rid of them. Though I knew Sass would never do such a thing, I believed she would surely kill my spirit with her spitefulness if I didn't fight back.

I would not let Sass's scoldings touch me as they used to. She became smaller in my mind. I had the comfort of Chandra, for we were as sisters now, and each evening after my work was finished, my books were there to welcome me. In this way two years passed, and then whispering began in the house. Sass and Sassur spoke in low voices. Chandra began to wear a secret smile. One night she confided to me, "The gataka has found me a husband."