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Soon Sass and Sassur consulted an astrologer, and Chandra was dancing with excitement. "The astrologer brought out his charts, and after much study he named January second as the most auspicious day." She told me with great importance, "The gataka has done well for me. The bridegroom, Raman, is nineteen and has been to mission school. Already he has written to an uncle who has promised him a job working with computers."

"Computers!" I had heard of such a thing from my own baap. "One day they will have no need for scribes like myself," he had complained. "They will put a machine in the marketplace instead. The machine will write the letters well enough, but the

words the machine writes will have no elegance and no heart."

I told Chandra, "Your bridegroom must be very learned." Though I was impressed, something was bothering me. "Chandra, how can you tell if you will love him?" I asked. "You have never seen him." Though he was dead and I knew I should not think badly of him, I remembered how disappointed I had been in Hari.

"I will learn to love him," Chandra said. "I had never seen you before you came to our house, and I learned to love you."

"What if he isn't good to you?"

"If I am a good wife, he will be good to me."

I hoped Chandra was right, but I could not help remembering a stall in the bazaar where Chandra and I had sorted through a heap of mismatched earrings. We had looked through them hoping to find two that matched. What if it was as difficult to find two matching people?

I wanted to be happy for Chandra, but I felt a sadness deep inside me. The wedding brought back

all the memories of my own short marriage—all my excitement and pleasure and my hopes coming to nothing. Also, I knew how much I would miss Chandra. Now, when Sass scolded me all day long, I could bear it, for I knew I could whisper my complaints into Chandra's ear in the evening. Soon there would be no one to comfort me.

As Chandra's wedding approached, Sass came to me one day. "We have no money for a new sari for Chandra," she said. "She must have your wedding sari. You need nothing but your widow's sari."

I longed to say that I did not want to spend the rest of my life dressed as a widow, but I knew Sass would be scandalized by such words. So I watched Chandra try on my sari and said nothing. With her womanly figure, her smiles, and her bright eyes, she looked very lovely.

"Chandra must have your silver earrings as well," Sass said.

Stubbornly I shook my head. I would not give up the earrings. As long as I had them, I could keep my dream of running away. I knew that if I simply

refused, Sass would find a way to make me give them up. So I lied. "I have lost them," I said.

"I don't believe you!" Sass screamed. "You are an evil girl! All these days we have put a roof over your head and fed you. This is how you repay us, with selfishness."

I should have kept quiet, but I could not. "I have worked for my food," I said, "harder than anyone."

Sass squinted her eyes as she always did when she was very, very angry. In a harsh voice she said, "You do not know the meaning of work. You idle about with your daydreams and your foolish books and your stitching. I will see to it that from now on you do indeed earn your keep."

That evening, when I should have been asleep, I crept out to the courtyard. I did not want to spoil Chandra's happiness with my misery. As I sat thinking of whether I ought to give in and hand over the earrings, I heard Sass complain of me to Sassur. "She is a wicked girl not to give Chandra her earrings. I am sure she still has them. I have searched

their room but I can't find them. It was an inauspicious day when that girl came into our house."

"She is not a bad girl," Sassur said in a weary voice. "Think of what her life is like with Hari gone. She has nothing to look forward to. Remember that without her dowry we would never have had the money to go to Varanasi, and her widow's pension these two years has added to Chandra's dowry."

His last words were like a slap. Widow's pension? I didn't wait to hear more but hurried in to Chandra, who was already asleep. I shook her awake. "Chandra, is it true? Did they take my widow's pension for your dowry?"

Chandra sat up in bed and gave me a surprised look. "Didn't you know?" She looked frightened. "You wouldn't take the pension back, would you? If you do, I'll have no husband."

I was very angry, but not so angry that I would ruin Chandra's happiness. I shook my head. I did not blame Chandra for taking what was rightfully mine, but I knew I would not have done the same

to her. I was more determined than ever to keep the silver earrings. They would buy me a railway ticket. The pension might go with me to keep me from starving.

It took me all night to work up my courage, but in the morning I went to Sass. Clenching my hands behind me, I took a deep breath and said in a weaker voice than I would have wished, "The next time the envelope comes from the government, it is to be handed over to me."

For just a moment Sass looked frightened, but then she quickly said, "If you are speaking of the few rupees you are sent each month, do not think they are due you. They hardly pay for your keep." She gave me a triumphant look. "If it were not for our son, you would not be a widow. So there would be no rupees at all for you." She marched out of the room.

Defeated, I stood looking after her. She was like a great boulder shutting me into a cave. I could not move her, and I could not get around her.

Despite my anger at Sass I longed to give

Chandra something for her wedding. "I wish I had money to buy you a gift," I told her.

Chandra thought for a moment. "Would you make me a quilt?" she asked. "I could take it with me, and if I became homesick, I could bring it out to remind me of you. Put in all the things we have done together."

"Your maa is angry with me over the earrings and would never give me cloth for the quilt or money to buy thread."

I was wrong. When Chandra went to her, Sass said, "It would not be such a bad thing if your dowry were to include a quilt. Let her make one if it doesn't keep her from her tasks."

I stitched a picture of our little room, the two of us sitting cross-legged on our charpoys with large smiles on our faces. There we were dancing in the rain. There was the river where we went to wash the clothes and the kingfisher that watched us from a tree. There we were sitting together in front of the village television set. I stitched the colors of the fireworks exploding into the sky on Lord Krishna's

birthday and the two of us covered with red powder at the celebration of Holi. I embroidered us having our baths at the well. I put in Sass chatting with her friends in the courtyard and Sassur reading from Tagore's book of poems. I even put in the cow and the bandicoot. In a moment of mischief I made the border of blossoms from the mango tree. Sass could not scold me for stealing those blossoms, for they were all mine.

I had to squeeze in the time for the quilt, for there was much to do to prepare for the wedding. The courtyard where the wedding was to take place had to be carefully swept and a ceremonial fire readied. The walls had to be ornamented with a mixture of rice flour and water, which I dribbled through my fingers. I went to the village to buy firewood and food for the wedding feast. I peeled mangoes and chopped cucumbers and onions and mixed the turmeric and coriander for the curry.

I had to do the stitching of the quilt early in the morning or in the evening when the light was poor, so I went about with a frown from squinting.

When at last the quilt was completed, Chandra exclaimed, "Koly, it's beautiful!" and hugged it to her. Though she tried, even Sass could find no fault with it.

I had looked forward to helping prepare Chandra on her wedding day, but Sass sent me away. "It is not proper," she said. "Only those women who are not widowed and have borne a male child are privileged to help."

I knew this was the custom; still, I had hoped I might at least be allowed in the room to enjoy the ceremonies. I had to be content with a peek at Chandra when the women were finished with her. Seeing her in my wedding sari, her eyes darkened with kohl, her cheeks and lips rouged, and designs painted on her forehead, was like seeing myself again as I had been almost three years before. For Chandra's sake I smiled and told her how beautiful she looked, as indeed she did. Inside I was miserable and did not know how I would ever be happy again. My life seemed to be over. What was there to look forward to but years and years of slaving away?

When the day for the wedding came, Chandra and I hid by the window so that we could get a glimpse of the bridegroom. Led by his male relatives, Raman arrived on a horse covered with a cloth embroidered with small, round mirrors. The mirrors glittered as he rode along, so he looked like he was arriving on a shaft of sunlight. He was tall, with a great deal of wavy black hair and a small mustache.

"The mustache is like a mouse's tail," I said, giggling.

"It is not!" Chandra said. "It's a fine mustache."

We stretched our heads out the window to get a better view. Just then the bridegroom looked our way. I saw a slight smile hurry across his face as he saw us, and I began to believe Chandra's marriage might be a good one.

Sassur greeted the bridegroom with the required perfumed water and mixture of honey and curds. The guests arrived: all the relatives who lived within a day's drive, Sassur's fellow teachers, the women who gossiped with Sass in the courtyard

and their husbands and children, the relatives and friends of the bridegroom who came to see how well or how poorly the parents of the bridegroom had done in their choice.

How different this wedding was from mine. Instead of a frightened gawky girl and a young and doomed bridegroom, there were a handsome young man and a happy and beautiful bride. The ceremony was soon over, and the feasting began. A tali was brought out piled with boiled ducks' eggs, crisply fried pooris, dal, rice, curries, chapatis, mango chutney, and many kinds of sweets. The food was served first to the men and then to the women guests, and last I ate with the women who had been hired to help with the cooking and serving. I did not mind being last, for I had prepared much of the food and sampled it whenever Sass's back was turned.

At last it was time for Chandra to go to the home of her bridegroom. She embraced her maa and baap. She threw her arms around me. "Koly," she whispered, "I will miss you most of all." With her face

pressed against mine, I could not tell whether the tears I felt on my cheeks were hers or mine.

As I watched Chandra and her bridegroom leave for his home, I felt my last bit of happiness disappearing.