seven

Chandra was called home. It had been over a year since her wedding. She no longer looked like a young girl. She wore a handsome sari. It was white, out of respect for her father's death, but unlike my white sari, Chandra's was made of fine muslin. Her hair was caught up in a complicated twist, and there were gold bangles on her arms. And the toenails sticking out of her sandals were painted! After embracing her mother and shedding many tears, she put her arms around me. "Koly, how I have missed you. There is no time now, but tonight after the funeral we'll talk the sun up."

This time there was no money for a funeral in Varanasi. Sassur's thumbs were tied together to show

that he could no longer work, and his big toes were also tied together so that his ghost could not return. He was carried on his charpoy to an empty place in one of the fields to be cremated. As I watched, I thought of how he had said, "One day I will walk off across the fields, and you will see no more of me."

Three fires were lit nearby, and the men of the town chanted during the cremation until his spirit had left his body and a holy man announced that Sassur was dead.

After the funeral, as we walked back to the house, each of us was given seven pebbles. We had to drop the small stones, one by one. It is known that a spirit is poor at counting but loves to count anyhow. Sassur's spirit would occupy itself with counting the pebbles and would not follow us home. I whispered to Chandra as we dropped our tiny stones that I did not believe her baap would wish to return.

Chandra had been lucky. That night as we sat up and talked, she told me of her new life. "My sass is not well and spends her day lying on her charpoy in the courtyard talking with her friends about her

poor health. Each day she has a new symptom. The running of the house is left to me with no interference, and there is a servant to help with the hard work. We had electricity put into the house so that my husband could bring home a computer from his workplace. He sits before it and touches the keys, and he can make colored pictures." She looked shyly at me. "Koly, if only I had listened to you and learned to read, I could know some of what comes up on the screen. There are words in every language and from everywhere. My baap was wrong to dislike those machines. They are magic.

"And because of the electricity we have a television. You remember how we went to the village to see the television? But there my baap was right. Such things you see on the American programs! Very improper!" She whispered what some of the things were, and we giggled until Sass poked her head into our room to shame us, reminding us that a funeral had taken place that day.

In the three days we had together, Chandra was treated as a guest. While I went about my usual

tasks, she spent most of the day in the courtyard with Sass, so Sass could brag about Chandra's good fortune to the neighbor women. It was only in the evenings that we could whisper to each other. I told her how I had talked with the man in the village about my pension. "One day I will run away," I said.

"No. You must never do that. Where would you go, and who would take care of you?"

I knew that Chandra was never one to think of taking care of herself, so I said no more. Still, seeing how happy she was, I began to think more often of whether one day I might be happy as well.

At the end of the week Chandra returned to her husband's home and our life went on, but without Sassur nothing was the same. Sass did not even have the energy to scold me when I let the ghee boil over into the fire or forgot to sweep the courtyard. As the months went by, her sad moods drove away her friends, and the courtyard was now empty in the afternoons. She sat all day long staring at nothing. Her hair was untidy and her sari soiled. Often I caught her looking at me in a strange way.

I was sorry for her. We might have been a comfort to each other, and once I even said, "Now we are both widows."

Sass drew herself up. "What do you say? Do you have a daughter who has married well? Or a son who died in the holy city of Varanasi? We are not the same."

After Sassur's death there was no more money coming from the school. Her widow's pension hardly bought our food. The brass bowls, Sass's best sari, and her silver bangles were all carried to the moneylender in the village. On the days Sass returned from the moneylender, she would stare and stare at me. I tried to keep out of her sight and to eat as little as possible, but I think if she could have snapped her fingers and made me disappear, I would surely have been gone.

Often she asked about my silver earrings, still sure I had hidden them. I only shook my head. I tried to be as silent and invisible as the little chameleons in the courtyard, but when I saw her take down Sassur's book of Tagore's poems with

his signature, I begged her not to sell it.

"We cannot eat the book, and the moneylender will give me a good sum. My husband always said it was valuable." She wrapped the book carelessly in a bit of cloth and set off for the village. I stood in the road and watched until I could bear it no longer. I ran after her, my feet sending up little clouds of dust.

"If I find my silver earrings and give them to you, will you give me the book?" I asked.

Sass's eyes flashed. "So you have lied to me all along!" she screeched. Then she thrust the book at me. "Take it and give me the earrings at once."

As soon as I pried out the brick and held the earrings in my hand, I saw what a foolish thing I had done, but it was too late. I knew I could not bear to see the book that meant so much to Sassur sold. So it was my earrings that Sass carried to the village to sell, and with them my last hope.

One day a letter came. Sass would not show it to me but took it to the village for the scribe to read

to her. When she returned, Sass was smiling. "It is from my younger brother. He lives in Delhi, and he will take me in. He says he needs someone to look after his children and help with the housework."

In a small voice I asked, "What will happen to me?"

Sass gave me a sly look. "Oh, you will come as well. No doubt he will find something for you to do. Now I must sell the cow and the house to get money for our trip."

The house with its melting mud walls and skimpy square of land brought little. Sass did better with the cow, but I was sorry to see her go, for many times when I had milked her, I had whispered my worries to her. I helped to drive the cow to the village, but when it came time for Sass to buy the railway tickets, she sent me home. "There is no need for you to come along," she said.

When Sass returned, the tickets were quickly put away. Sass appeared almost happy, pulling out the few remaining pots to make pooris, which we had not had since Chandra's marriage. "I have an

appetite," she said. And then she added, with the same sly smile I had seen so much lately, "I have a treat for you. We will stop at Vrindavan on our way to Delhi. It is a holy city with a great many temples. It would be well for us to make a pilgrimage before beginning our new lives."

I was excited at the thought of seeing such a holy city, but puzzled. Never before had my sass spoken of temples. She seldom started her day with a puja to the household shrine. Perhaps, I thought, Sassur's death has made her think more about such things. Still, I was uncertain.

As unhappy as I had been in my sass's house, a thorn of sadness pricked at me when it came time to leave. I had swept the courtyard so often that every inch was familiar to me. There was the mango tree with the rope Chandra and I had swung on. There was the little garden where I brought water to the neat rows of eggplant and okra. The river where I washed the clothes and studied my books was a friend. I could not guess how it would be to live in a large city like Delhi. I did not know how the family

of Sass's brother would treat me. Because I was leaving it, my sass's house, where for so long I had felt unwelcome, now seemed like home. I even said good-bye to the bandicoot, which switched its tail and twitched its whiskers at me in a friendly way.

Sass said good-bye to nothing and counted the hours until our departure. She hummed as she packed her things. I was pleased to see she took the quilt I had made in Hari's memory.

The morning we were to leave, she was up before dawn, a greedy smile on her face as if she were about to take a big bite of something tasty. I made a bedroll of the quilt I had made for my dowry. My few clothes and my book of Tagore's poems went into a basket. We set out in a wagon for the railway station. I kept looking back over my shoulder at what had been our home, but Sass stared straight ahead.

At the station we pushed our way through the crowds and past water wallahs, tea wallahs, and ice cream wallahs. Sass paused only to buy two palm leaf fans, giving me one. I took it gratefully. It was the only gift she had ever given to me.

By the time we struggled into the ladies' compartment of the train, all the seats were taken. We had to push our way onto a little space of floor. It was hot and smelly, and I couldn't move without getting in the way of someone else. Still, my unhappiness and worry soon melted into wonder as miles of green fields rushed by, and small villages, and once a large city.

More people crowded onto the train, so I was pushed into a corner where I could no longer look out or feel the slight breeze from the open window. Most of the passengers, like ourselves, had brought something to eat for the journey. The smells of the food, along with the swaying and jerks of the train, were beginning to make me sick.

Sass studied me. "You're pale, girl; you had better get out at the next stop and take some air." At the next stop, with much complaining, Sass led me off the train. She opened her umbrella to shield us from the hot sun and walked me about. When we got back on the train, I finally fell asleep.

When I awoke, we had reached the holy city of Vrindavan. As we got off the train and I saw the

crowds of people, I asked, "Where will we stay, Sass?"

"I'll find a place," she said. "For now we'll leave our things at the parcel office so we won't have to carry them about."

After we checked our baskets and bedrolls, Sass handed me my claim check and hurried me into the street, where she hailed a bicycle rickshaw. The rickshaw was decorated with small flags in bright colors. The seats were swept clean and the bicycle polished. "Take us to a temple," Sass ordered the rickshaw boy.

The boy laughed. "There are four thousand temples. Which one do you want?" The boy was only a few years older than I was. He was tall and lean, but in the leanness there was strength. His hair was badly cut and stood up in odd tufts. There was an insolent look on his face. I admired him for not being intimidated by my sass. "Make up your minds," he told us. "I'm losing money by standing here."

Sass gave him a push. "Don't be rude with me,

boy. Just take us to a temple. Any temple." She gave the boy a shrewd look. "One close by. I'm not going to pay a big fare." She climbed into the rickshaw and pulled me in after her.

The boy shrugged and, standing on the pedals to give himself a start, he took off. As we rode through the streets of the city, everywhere I looked I saw women in white widows' saris like mine. "Why are there so many widows here, Sass?" I asked.

She shrugged. "It is the city they come to. They are taken care of here."

Many of the widows were old, but many were young, some even younger than I was. Suddenly I was anxious to leave the city. "How long will we stay here, Sass?" I asked.

"Only a day."

I breathed a sigh of relief. However difficult my life would be in Delhi, I would not be surrounded by thousands of widows to remind me that my life, like theirs, was over.

The boy stopped his rickshaw and held out his hand. "Four rupees," he demanded.

Sass glared at him. "You take us for country folk who know no better? Two rupees is enough." The boy ran after us complaining so loudly that Sass grudgingly gave him the other two rupees. As he turned away, he gave me an impudent wink.

The temple was filled with chanting widows in white saris. Some looked peaceful, almost joyful. Others looked thin, hungry, and miserable, as if they wished they were somewhere else. Their hunger reminded me of my own. Our food on the train had lasted only until breakfast. As if she could read my mind, Sass said, "Here is a fifty-rupee note. Go and find us some food, and don't settle for the first vendor you see. I'll wait in the temple where it's cool. Mind you don't lose the change."

I clasped the money tightly in my hand, afraid someone would take it from me. Sass had never before trusted me with so much money. Keeping my eye on the temple to be sure I would not be lost, I went by two vendors before I found one with samosas that looked both clean and tasty. I asked the price and counted my change twice. Holding

two samosas in one hand and the rupees I had received in change in the other, I hurried back to the corner of the temple where I had left Sass. She wasn't there. While I waited for her to return, I ate my samosa. I could not imagine where she had gone. Finally I decided she was looking for a place for us to stay. Still, I felt little shivers of fear.

I tried not to worry. The temple was cool and the sound of the chanting peaceful. Now that my stomach was satisfied, I felt a little better. I waited for an hour and then another hour. The chanting never stopped. Somehow I believed that as long as the chanting went on, I had nothing to worry about. It would only be a matter of time before Sass would return for me and all would be well. It was nearly dusk when the chanting stopped. The second samosa had been eaten long ago. The widows in their white saris stole silently from the temple. A terrible panic came over me. I rushed from the temple.

I didn't know where to start looking for Sass. I was used to our small village. The streets of

Vrindavan were like an overturned ants' nest. I wondered if I had misheard Sass. Perhaps she had changed her mind about staying in Vrindavan. Maybe she had told me to meet her back at the railway station. I stopped one of the widows and asked for directions to the station. She looked at my white widow's sari. I thought I saw in her look pity, and something more frightening—a look of kinship.

Though the sun was setting, it was still hot, as if some invisible sun were beating down on me. Beads of perspiration formed on my forehead and my upper lip and ran down my face. My sari clung to me. Shops and businesses were closing, and the streets became moving rivers of people pushing against one another.

Twice more I had to stop someone to ask directions. Each time there was a pitying look on the face of the widow I asked. It was nearly dark when I finally arrived at the station, where passengers waiting for the morning trains were cooking their suppers on small stoves. Some were already stretched out on mats. I quickly made the rounds of the station, but Sass was not there.

I went to the parcel counter where we had checked our things and got my basket and bedroll. "Did the woman who was with me come for her things?" I asked, but the attendant had just come on duty and knew nothing of Sass.

At the entrance to the station stood a line of rickshaws. I had forty-seven rupees tied up in my sari, but I could not waste them on a rickshaw, and anyhow I would not know where to go. In the line I saw a rickshaw with small flags, and next to it stood the boy with the wayward hair. I felt a great relief in seeing someone in the city I had seen before, someone I almost knew. I hurried toward him. "Have you seen my sass?" I asked.

He stared at me for a long while as if he were trying to remember me. "Oh, yes," he said with a bitter smile. "I was back here when she returned. She tried to cheat her new driver just as she cheated me."

"If she came back, where is she now?"

"On the train. I saw her get on the train to Delhi. It wasn't an hour after I had taken you to the temple."