eight

I suppose part of me had known all along. The thought had been waiting like a scorpion at the edge of my mind. Now it stung me, and I nearly cried out with the pain. There had been the letters from her brother in Delhi that she had never let me see. There had been the secret buying of the railway tickets. There had been the mysterious smile. She had taken care that I did not know her address in Delhi. I knew I could never find her in that city of millions. All I had were the forty-seven rupees tied into my sari. I understood now why she had entrusted me with so much money. It was to ease her conscience. Much as I hated to let the boy see me weep, I could not keep tears from streaming down my cheeks.

The boy looked at me. "It happens every day here," he said. "You can go and chant in the temple like the other widows do. The monks will give you food."

He continued to look at me. The insolent look was gone, and there was kindness in his face. He was about to say something when a man with a briefcase jumped into his rickshaw and ordered, "Get along." The boy gave me one more look and pedaled away.

It was evening. The shadows climbed up the walls of the jumbled buildings and fell across the narrow alleys. I walked aimlessly. One street looked like another, and I could not tell if I had been down them before. I didn't know what I was looking for, only that I hadn't found it and didn't think I ever would. My bedroll and basket were heavy. I was tired and hungry and only wanted to lie down. I knew others must have felt the same, for charpoys and mattresses began to appear on the sidewalks. Sometimes one person, sometimes a whole family settled down to sleep. I would have welcomed

dropping down on a bit of sidewalk, but I didn't know what was allowed or what bit of sidewalk was spoken for.

An elderly woman was watching me from a doorstep where she huddled, her dirty white widow's sari drawn about her. She beckoned to me with a long, bony finger. When I went over to her, she moved even further into the corner of the doorway. She pointed to the empty space she had made. "You can sleep here," she said. "The people in the house will not chase you away. They even threw out a little food for me." She handed me a small portion of rice. It was cold and sticky. Gratefully I swallowed it. "Have you just come?" she asked.

"Yes, my sass left me this morning. I don't know where she is. Maybe she will come back for me."

The old woman shook her head. "You won't see her again. It was the same with me. I came two months ago. When my husband died, I was no longer needed. His property was divided between his brothers. The brothers brought me here."

"Why would they bring you here and leave

you?" I asked. "Why didn't they take care of you?"

"Once they had my husband's property, they had no more use for me. They said widows were unlucky to have about. The truth is that I am too old for hard work."

If there were such cruelness in the world, then it might indeed be true that Sass had taken me to this place of widows just to get rid of me. I was alone in a strange city with only a few rupees and no friends. "How do you get by?" I managed to ask.

"I am a servant of the Lord Krishna. Like the other widows I go each day to a temple and chant for four hours. The monks in the temple feed us, and there is the pittance of my widow's pension. I had a room I shared with other widows, but the landlord wanted it back for his family, so we were all turned out. Now I must find a new room."

All around us people were settling down on the sidewalks. Babies and small children snuggled against their mothers or sisters. Some of the people fell asleep immediately, as if their square of sidewalk were as much a shelter as a house would be.

Others chatted with their neighbors or prepared a bit of food, feeding the cooking fires with leaves and twigs. Across from us small children were pushing dogs aside to hunt for bits of food in a pile of rubbish.

Even with my bedroll to soften the stone of the doorway, I could not sleep. Often I reached down to assure myself that the rupees were still tied carefully in a corner of my sari and then tucked securely into my waist knot. I told myself I should see if the rupees would buy a railway or bus ticket back to my maa and baap. But how could I do that? What the woman had told me was true. Because they had lost their husbands, widows were considered unlucky. If my family learned what had happened to me, it would bring them unhappiness and even shame. By now my older brother might be married, and his wife would be living in the home of my parents. There would be no room for me. Somehow I would have to make my life here.

The next morning I was awakened by the chanting of morning hymns coming over loudspeakers. The widow I had shared the doorstep

with was gone. The mattresses and charpoys were disappearing from the sidewalks. At a street corner I joined a line at a faucet for a little water to wash in and to drink. I bought the cheapest bowl of dal I could find.

I could not keep myself from returning to the railway station. I did not really believe I would ever see Sass again; still, I could not help hoping that she would come back. I waited all day. Once I saw a woman in the distance who I thought was Sass. I called out and ran toward her, only to find a stranger, annoyed by my cries. Even the rickshaw boy did not appear.

That night I had the doorstep to myself, for the widow did not return. Just as she said, the door to the house opened and a bit of food was handed out, this time a chapati, which I quickly ate though a small child stood nearby watching hungrily. Afterward I was ashamed, for I still had some rupees, and the child had nothing.

I knew that I could not afford a room, but wandering through the city I saw signs tacked to some houses, advertising beds. When I inquired, I learned

that if I were to pay for both food and a bed, my rupees would soon be gone. After asking several widows, I found the government building where pensions were given out. There was a form to be filled out. Because of Sassur's teaching I was able quickly to complete the form, all but an address. I could not say I lived on a doorstep off the Purana Bazaar.

"You have not put your address down," the official said.

"Until I get my pension," I explained, "I can't afford a place to live. Can't I pick up my pension here?"

He shook his head as if the thought were beyond considering. "No, no. Pensions are mailed. Return when you have an address."

I tried everywhere to find work, but for every job there were a hundred seekers. For a week the doorstep was my home. When others tried to sleep there, I was not as generous as the elderly widow had been but selfishly chased them away. My rupees were nearly gone, and all I had was the doorstep

and the bit of food tossed out to me by the hand of someone I had never seen. I would fight for the doorstep rather than give it up, but I knew that my hunger and my fear were making me into another person altogether, a greedy and coldhearted person I despised. I thought it would be Sass's final cruelty to me, to make me be like her.

I visited the temples: the Govindji, with its great hall and its row of columns like tree trunks and its high ceilings where neat rows of bats hung like small furry pennants. I went to the Banke Bihari, where there was a darshan each day—the curtains were opened for a moment to give a glimpse of the deity, which is a great blessing. In all the temples, I saw the widows chanting hour after hour. I admired their piety and envied the food the monks gave them in return for their devotions, but try as I might, after only a half hour of chanting, my mind wandered. I could hardly breathe for the smell of incense and the mustard oil burning in the hundreds of little lamps. I found myself stealing away from the temple, relieved to be out in the open air.

I made my way through the bazaars and along the ghats of the Yamuna River, lost among all the pilgrims to the city. Each afternoon I returned to the railway station, not from any hope but out of habit and because it had become familiar. On the day I had spent my last rupee and thought that I must sell Tagore's book, I saw the boy with the rickshaw again. I tried to get his attention. Thousands of people had hurried by me without so much as a glance. I longed to exchange a word with someone who recognized me.

At first he had eyes only for the passengers who had just gotten off a train. When no one climbed into his rickshaw, he squatted down, waiting for his next chance. Hesitantly I went over to him. He gave me a quizzical look. I guessed how untidy and dirty I must appear after a week of sleeping on the doorstop. "You still here?" he asked, but not unkindly. "I've seen you before. When are you going to give up coming to the station?"

"I have no other place to go."

"Well, you shouldn't stay here. There are bad

people about this station who look for young girls from the country."

I could not keep from telling him my worries. "I am tired of sleeping in the street, and my rupees are all gone." I bit my lip to keep from crying.

He looked at me. "Don't blubber. I'll show you a place to go. You have to wait until I have finished work. Sit over there, and I'll come back for you." He called to a family who had just left an incoming train. After bartering with him, they climbed onto his rickshaw, and he pedaled away.

As it grew dark, people began to look for places to lie down for the night. I saw a man in blue jeans and a red shirt staring at me. I huddled into a corner of the station, trying to make myself as inconspicuous as possible. After a bit he came over to me. Bristly hair stuck out of his cheeks and chin. When he smiled at me, I saw that most of his teeth were missing. When he spoke to me, his voice was pleasant enough, but he had about him the smell of a hungry dog. "A refined girl like you," he said, "should not have to sleep in the streets. If you come

with me, I will find a proper place for you where there is plenty of food." I thought of what the rickshaw boy had said about bad people. I drew myself further into my corner, trying to escape the man.

Still he hovered over me like a bat. "It is a waste for such a pretty girl to dress in a widow's sari. I have a sari with real gold threads. It would make me very happy to see you wear it." He reached down and took my arm and jerked me to my feet. Terrified, I pulled away, but he was too strong for me. I looked about, hoping to find someone to help me, but the crowds were so great, no one was paying attention. I thought of the dog's grip on the gosling's neck and knew I must not let him take me. I sank my teeth into the man's arm, making him howl in surprise and pain. He slapped me and ran off.

For safety I settled near a family of a maa and baap and their three children. They were waiting for a seat on the early-morning train, they said, and would be there all night. It hurt to see the way they laughed and played with their little ones. It was so long ago when I was small and a part of a happy family.

I did not have much faith that the rickshaw boy would return. Like Sass, he was probably trying to get rid of me with his promise. It was growing late, and by now someone else would have claimed my doorstep. In the morning, I decided, I would go to the temple. I would chant all day to show how holy I was, and the monks would keep me from starving. At least in the temple I would be safe from evil men. I would become one of the thousands of widows of Vrindavan. That would be my life for as long as I lived.

When at last the boy returned, he said "You can get into the rickshaw now."

"I have no money left to pay you."

"That's all right. The man I work for won't know. I pedaled fast all evening so I could report enough rides to cover this time, but hurry. In a few minutes I have to turn the rickshaw in."

"You don't own it?"

"How could I own such a thing? A man hires me and pays me a percentage of my earnings. It buys me food and the corner of a room I share with some other boys."

"Why don't you ask for more money?"

"The owner of the rickshaw would fire me and give my job to another boy. There are boys coming in from the countryside every day in search of work. Still, as little as the money is, I spend only half of it."

"You spend only half? What do you do with the other half?"

"I own land," he said. A smile grew on his face. "It was left to me by my father. My uncle cares for it. When I have enough money for seeds and irrigation, I'm going back to my village. I hate this city." Perhaps it was because it was the end of the day, but he seemed not to have much strength left for the pedaling. In the dark I could just make out white shapes like ghosts huddled in doorways and curled against buildings. "There are so many widows," I whispered.

"Yes," the boy said, a little out of breath. "Families bring them here from all over India. They are left just as your sass left you. Only if you ask me, you're lucky to be rid of her."

It was true that Sass had often scolded me. She had left me alone in this city as if she were dropping a kitten down a well. Still, I would have given anything to be back in the village, safe behind the walls of a house, even if it meant spending the rest of my life being scolded by Sass.

We rounded a corner and turned into a small courtyard where several women were gathered, some as young as I was. An older woman came toward us. She was very plump, as though she had been put together with pillows. Even the many meters of her sari barely stretched around her. "Raji," she called to the boy, "have you brought me another? There is no room! Never mind, we will manage. What is your name, girl?"

"Koly," I whispered. I put my hands together and bowed.

"I am Kamala, but here everyone calls me Maa Kamala. Go away now, Raji—you have no business in the courtyard with the girls. But wait, first take some of this curd and cucumber to fill your stomach. You are looking thinner than ever. It will do you no good to save money by going without food.

You will be too weak to pedal your rickshaw."

She turned to me. "Come along, Koly," she said in a brisk voice. "I'll introduce you to the others. Then we must put aside that widow's sari. Here you are not a widow but a young woman with a life ahead of you."

The others looked at me with curiosity. "Where do you come from?" one of them asked. I named our village. "I never heard of it," she said. "You must be a country girl. You'll have much to learn if you stay in this city."

"Tanu," Maa Kamala scolded, "what kind of welcome is that? Were you so rudely greeted when you came? I think not. Show a little kindness. Take Koly inside and find her something to wear from the clothes in the chest."

Tanu led me into a small room off the courtyard. She was eighteen, a year older than I was, and much more sophisticated. She wore dark lipstick, and her eyelashes were heavy with mascara. She was tall, with long, narrow feet and hands. Her hands had a strange orange color and she had a

distinct smell, not unpleasant but very strong. She threw open a chest and pulled out some clothes, flinging a pair of trousers and a tunic at me. "These look your size. Put them on."

I slipped the trousers on under my sari, and then, as my sari came off, I hastily pulled on the tunic. Taking off my widow's sari was a great relief. I once saw a small green snake rub itself against a stone until its old skin peeled away, transparent and thin as paper. I felt now as I imagined the snake felt after it rid itself of its old, confining skin.

"Much better," Tanu said. She smiled in approval.

"What kind of place is this?" I asked, lowering my voice.

"A widows' house," Tanu said. "Maa Kamala takes in widows off the street and finds us jobs. She helps us get our widow's pension and lets us stay here until we can support ourselves. Someday I hope to be earning enough to share a room with some other girls and live on my own. Maa Kamala is nice, but she is very strict."

"Where does Maa Kamala get the money to take in so many girls? There must be twenty out there in the courtyard."

"A rich lady from the town supports the house, and we pay a little for our room and board from our wages."

"How did you come here?" I asked.

"I ran away when I heard my sass and sassur plotting to get rid of me so my husband could marry again and get another dowry."

"How could people be so cruel!" I was horrified.

"What about you?" she asked.

"My husband died. I was brought here by my sass after she became a widow and was going to her brother's house, where I was not wanted."

That night in the courtyard I heard many stories like mine and many stories like Tanu's. Hearing so many frightening stories made me feel less sorry for myself.

At last Maa Kamala threw up her arms and ordered us to stop. "Enough of your miserable tales,"

she said. "You wallow like pigs in mud. That is all in the past. Now, Koly, we must find you a job. Nearby in the bazaar is a man who furnishes all that is needed for ceremonies. Tanu works there stringing marigold garlands. The man is looking for another girl. I warn you, the hours are long and you have to be fast. What do you say?"

I could not stop myself. For an answer I put my arms around as much of Maa Kamala as I could reach and hugged her.