



That night, for the first time since coming to Vrindavan, I felt safe. Lying nearby were other widows, their soft sighs and turnings like so many doves fluttering around me. I tried not to think what would have happened to me if I had not found Raji. No one was more fortunate than I.

Early in the morning Maa Kamala stirred us up like a pot of rice. "Hurry, hurry," she called. "You must not be late for your work." We quickly washed beside the courtyard faucet and swallowed some dal. Chapatis were given out, and we were shooed like chickens from the courtyard out into the city.

"You will work with Tanu, in the same stall,"

Maa Kamala said. "She will show you the way. And here is money for your lunch."

Together Tanu and I hurried down the streets. We had to pick our way over sleeping bodies. Whole households of baaps, maas, and children lay on their charpoys or on the sidewalk. On the way to the bazaar we passed the doorway where I had spent my nights. Another widow was curled up there, still asleep. I shivered at the sight and gave thanks for a roof over my head. As I hurried by, I looked for the half-starved child who had stood there watching me eat. I still held my breakfast chapati and would gladly have given it to her. There were children there, but she was not among them. I could not put her hungry stare out of my head, and my happiness dwindled a little.

The early-morning streets were crowded with cars and bicycles and rickshaws and oxcarts. Here and there a cow wandered in and out of the road, bringing the traffic to a halt. In the bazaar the booths were already open. We passed leather workers and pillow shops and booths where brass

vases and pots were for sale. There was a booth that sold bangles and another with bolts of brightly colored cloth for saris. There were stalls with rugs and stalls with heaps of spices: gold turmeric and precious orange saffron.

Tanu pulled me after her. "If we are late, Mr. Govind will be cross all day and will give us no time for our lunch."

As we entered the booth, Mr. Govind, a small man with flowing mustaches, was shouting at two women seated on the floor surrounded by a pile of marigold blossoms. "No gossiping," he ordered. "We have three funerals and two marriages." He gave me a quick look. "You are the new girl? Tanu will show you what to do. I hope you will learn fast. I can't pay someone who is slow and clumsy. Quick now, girls."

We were surrounded with heaps of orange flowers. The smell of the marigolds was so strong, I could hardly breathe. Now I knew what Tanu smelled like. It was the spicy, sharp odor of the marigolds. "You'll get used to it," Tanu said when

she saw me sniffing. "Here is how it is done." The flower heads had already been snapped from the stems. She showed me how long fibers from banana stems were soaked in water to soften them. "The flower is threaded onto the fiber and caught in a knot like this. Then the next flower is slipped on. You are not to put the flowers too close together. That uses too many of them."

I watched for a minute or two and then began to thread the flowers. Tanu and the other two women worked twice as fast as I did. If I tried to hurry, the flowers dropped off the fiber, but the work was simple, and I soon caught on. By lunchtime I was knotting the garlands into neat circles and tossing them onto the heap of garlands as quickly as Tanu and the others. Once or twice Mr. Govind came by to see how I was doing. He must have been satisfied; he allowed us twenty minutes to eat our lunch.

Tanu and I wandered through the marketplace admiring the cinema posters with pictures of glamorous women and handsome men. In the

mirror booth we stopped to look at ourselves. Keeping an eye on the clock, we bought a little pot of vegetables and rice. We ate quickly and then wandered by a perfume stall that smelled deliciously of sandalwood. We stopped at the bangle booth. We tried on so many of the brightly colored glass bangles that the owner complained, "You are keeping my customers away. Come back when you have some money." He smiled at us. "You make the marigold garlands?" He was looking at our orange hands. "Could you string beads?"

Eagerly we said we could.

"Stop by tomorrow. I'll talk with Govind. If he tells me you are good girls, maybe I will give you some beads to take home to make into bangles. If you make them well, I'll give you one. Now off with you."

Giggling, we hurried back to the stall, planning all the while what colored beads we wanted for our own bangles. We found Mr. Govind beating his fists against the wall and moaning, "They have sent jasmine blossoms instead of marigolds! We will be short for the wedding!"

Tanu whispered, "It is always a crisis with him. Pay no attention."

But I felt sorry for him. "Couldn't we make some garlands from the jasmine?" I asked Mr. Govind.

"Not traditional. We must have marigolds."

"What if we mixed the flowers? It would stretch them out, and there would still be marigolds on each one."

He looked worried. Finally he said, "It is all we can do."

When the family came for the garlands, they complimented Mr. Govind. "Something new, something different," they said. "Our guests will be impressed."

After that Mr. Govind must have spoken well of us to the bangle maker. The next day, at lunchtime, the bangle man gave us a bag of beads and a spool of wire. He showed us how to fasten the bangle after it was finished and warned us, "I have counted every bead. There had better be the right amount on the bracelets, or you will pay for each one that is missing."

The girls at Maa Kamala's were envious of our work. To pacify them, we let them try on the finished bangles. Each evening we sat cross-legged in the courtyard threading beads in the last light of the day. When it was dark, we went inside and kept threading, stopping only to hunt for any beads that slipped away. By the end of the week Tanu and I each had our own bangle. Tanu would have gone on until she had an armful of bangles, but I soon grew bored with the work. Unlike my embroidery, which came from my head and heart, the threading of tiny glass beads grew tiresome.

Tanu and I became good friends. We shared a room with three other widows, two of them much older than we were. They said bangles on the arm of a widow were unseemly and grew impatient with our staying up late and giggling, which kept them awake. Our room was very plain, so I hung my dowry quilt on one of the walls to make the room more cheerful. There was my maa in her green sari and my baap on his bicycle. There were my brothers playing at soccer and our courtyard

with its tamarind tree and me at the well. After a while I stopped looking at the quilt, for it made me very homesick.

Half of our wages went to pay our expenses at the widows' house, and the rest was put aside for us. Each week Maa Kamala made a note in a little book of what was saved from the wages. My savings were not much, but each week they grew. Early one morning I went to apply for my pension. This time I proudly filled in the form myself, giving an address and signing my name. Soon the envelope with my pension came, and the pension was added to my savings. I saw that though it would be a while, the day might come when I could move from the widows' house to make room for another widow. Tanu and I even talked of a time when we might share a room.

Now that we were no longer stringing beads, I entertained Tanu after supper by reading Tagore's poems aloud, although the older widows said I would have done better to read the sacred verses. Tanu loved to hear the poems, and after a bit even the widows who had disapproved of them began to

listen. Everyone had her favorite; the older widows asked for the poems about the sadness of life and the younger ones for the poems about love.

One evening Raji came to the courtyard while I was reading the poem about the homeless bird. He sat in the far corner of the courtyard munching some leftovers Maa had given him and listening to the poem, a dreamy expression on his face. He seemed to get such pleasure from it that I handed Raji the book and asked him if he would like to read some of the poems.

He shook his head. From the embarrassed look on his face I guessed why and blurted out, "Can't you read?"

Angrily he snapped at me, "How could I read when I was working on the land from the time I was five years old? Besides, there is no one in my family who reads. Who would teach me?"

I took a deep breath and asked, "Would you like me to teach you?" I was grateful to Raji for all he had done for me and was anxious for a chance to do something for him in exchange.

Raji kicked at the dust and glowered at me. At last he shrugged and agreed.

Each evening I would return to Maa Kamala's house exhausted, the scent of marigolds hanging over me like a cloud. I would join the other widows for a dinner of curried lentils or rice, sometimes with a bit of fish or some morsels of chicken. At dusk Raji would appear, tired and cross and half starved, for he was counting every rupee until he had enough to return to his farm. Maa Kamala would give him something to eat, and after a bit, as his stomach filled, he would stop snapping at me. At first he was impatient, but as the letters became words, and the words thoughts, he became both eager and suspicious, as though I were holding something back from him. Soon he took the book in his own hands and, moving his finger slowly, read the words by himself.

He did not like to have the other widows see him struggling with his reading, so we sat in a corner of the courtyard with only Maa Kamala to keep an eye on us. I began to look forward to Raji's

visits. I would steal a glance at him as he read out the words of the poems. His tousled hair fell over his forehead, and sometimes, when the lesson was too long and Raji was too tired, his long lashes would flutter as he tried to keep from falling asleep. His hands on the book were the strong hands of a man who has worked all his life, but his hold on the book was a gentle one.

When his day had been successful and he had received generous tips, he would bring me some little thing, a paper of sugared almonds spiced with pepper and cumin, and once a handful of lilies, which he wound in my hair while I put one behind his ear. I would tell Raji about the girls I worked with, and he would tell me about the people he had carried that day. Raji was the only one to whom I could complain, confiding in him that I was afraid I would have to spend the rest of my life in a sea of orange marigolds. After a day when he had few customers and no tips, Raji would have no heart for books, but most of the time he was eager to learn.

His favorite poems were those that described the countryside, poems about being out early when

the morning light is thin and pale, and about hearing the birds' songs. "Your poet must have spent time in a village like mine," he said. "I count the days until I can return there."

"Don't you like the city, Raji?" I asked.

"I hate its crowds and misery. In the countryside around our village it is easy to find a place where there is not another human being. I can go to that place, and my thoughts will not be all tangled with the thoughts of other people."

"I know what you mean," I said. I told him about the river where I had washed the clothes among the kingfishers and the dragonflies, and the calls of the doves and the wind rustling through the leaves of the peepul trees.

"I know of a place on the river I could show you," he said. There was an eagerness in his voice. "Tomorrow I'll come for you right after you eat. In only a half hour's walk the city disappears."

I agreed at once. I was happy at the thought of walking along the river, and I guessed Raji was anxious to give me some treat in return for my teaching.

The next evening I slipped away to meet Raji.

Maa Kamala was very proper and didn't approve of boys and girls mixing except under her watchful eye. Raji was waiting down the road for me. Work was over, and people had returned to their homes. Even the monks and widows in the temples were silent. The whole city seemed elsewhere. We hurried through the deserted streets and headed north along the river, Raji always a bit ahead of me and looking back to be sure I was following.

The breezes off the river were pleasant. We were outside the town's center now. Only a few people passed by, no one paying attention to us. A few fishermen were out in their boats. Two women at the river's edge were beating clothes against rocks while their children placed twigs and leaves on the water and watched as the current caught them up. I thought of the times Sass had sent me to do the laundry at the river, and how much happier I was now.

Raji pointed to a temple on a distant hill. "That's where we're headed," he said. He began to run. I raced after him. We arrived at the temple laughing and breathless.

The temple was deserted. Through the arched entrance I could see an image of Krishna. "What is he holding up?" I asked.

"The hill of Govardhan," Raji said. "It's a hill not far from here. Krishna saved the sixteen thousand milkmaids he had married and all their cows from drowning in a terrible thunderstorm. He lifted the Govardhan hill on his little finger to shelter them. But it's not just the temple I want to show you. Come this way."

He scrambled down the riverbank. "Here," he said. "Here is a place on the river like the one you told me about. Listen—instead of the noise of the city, you can hear the wind through the trees. And there." He pointed to a branch that stuck out over the river. "A kingfisher." His voice was proud, as if he had caused the bird to appear.

We took off our sandals and paddled our dusty feet in the cool water. As it edged down, the sun seemed to rest on the river. A frog poked its head up, blinked a few times, and disappeared. "It's so quiet," I said. "It's the first peaceful minute I've had since I came to the city."

Raji smiled. "Yes, in the city it is all push and shove." He gave me a long look. "Koly, I have nearly enough now to rebuild the house and buy what I need for crops. Soon I'll be back in my village."

I wanted to tell him that I would miss him, but I didn't think saying such a thing would be seemly. Instead I said, "You're lucky to be leaving the city where one day is like another and you hardly notice the weather. It's like living inside a glass bottle. You'll be happier on your farm."

"I'll work the farm, but I'll have to live with my uncle until I fix the house. It's fallen apart since my maa and baap died." He reached down and, picking up a handful of pebbles, began to pitch them into the river. "When the house is finished," he said in a low voice, "I'll want a wife."

I found nothing to say to that. It was only natural that Raji should want a wife, but his words silenced me. I could only think how lucky a woman would be to be married to Raji; he was so kind and clever. I imagined him together with his wife on their farm, and for a moment I felt as lonely as I

had on my first night in Vrindavan.

I saw him steal a glance at me and look away. He kept flinging pebbles, sending up little explosions of water. The commotion startled a heron hunting frogs along the edge of the river. The heron flew up, his great wings beating as fast as my heart, and melted into the dusky sky. We watched until the bird disappeared.

It was growing late. The setting sun had turned the river a muddy gray. "I have to get back," I said. "It will be dark soon."

We returned to the city talking of nothing more than a famous cinema actress who had just married, and the mosquito bites we got by the river.

After that several weeks went by, and though I was there in the courtyard each evening waiting to greet him, Raji did not return. I wondered if I had said something to anger him. I worried that he had already left for the country and I would never see him again. I tried not to think about him, telling myself that now that I had taught him to read, our meetings were over. Still, I could not help but



wonder why he had not come to say good-bye. I tried to put Raji out of my mind, but my mind would not obey me.

One evening Maa Kamala announced that the rich lady who paid for our widows' house was coming to see us. Everything, including the courtyard, was given a thorough cleaning. We put about vases of flowers and dressed in our best clothes. Maa Kamala fried pumpkin pooris and made shikanji with sweetened lime juice and ginger juice and sent us out to the bazaar at the last minute to get ice cubes in a little plastic sack, admonishing us to hurry so the ice would not melt.

Just before the rich lady arrived, Maa Kamala lined us all up to see if we were presentable. Tanu was sent back to wipe off some of her lipstick and mascara. An elderly widow was told not to cover her face with her sari because the rich lady did not approve of that custom.

We all stared as Maa Kamala greeted the rich lady with a respectful namaskar. Most of the widows

thought her a great disappointment. "A face plain as a clay saucer and no gold threads woven in her sari," Tanu whispered. "And where is her jewelry?"

Our visitor was an older woman with a shapeless figure and unadorned clothes, but as she stopped to greet each of us, she had some small pleasant thing to say. She spoke to us in a direct and open way, so we did not feel like poor widows. She smiled knowingly, and I believe she understood just what we were thinking—perhaps she was amused at how we puzzled over her simple appearance. As she moved closer to me, I saw what Tanu had not noticed. Though there were no gold or silver threads woven into her sari, she wore a sari of great rarity and beauty. It appeared simple, but I knew it was made of a handwoven cloth called king's muslin, the very best you could buy. My maa had pointed out to me just such a sari when we visited the shop where she took her work. Along the borders of the rich lady's sari were embroidered flurries of blossoms in pale yellows and pinks twined with green leaves. I could not take my eyes from the clever work. She

must have noticed my wide-eyed stare, for when it was my turn to greet her, she paused to ask, "What is it you do?"

"I string marigold garlands in the bazaar, madam," I said.

"I am sure you make a very good job of it." She seemed to want to say more, but after a second or two she moved on to the next widow.

We all stood stiffly with our cups of shikanji while Maa Kamala made a polite speech about how well we were doing and how grateful we were for the rich lady's help.

To my dismay Maa Kamala called out, "Koly, Tanu, show Madam through the rooms." She turned to the rich lady. "I hope you will find everything in order."

The lady smiled and said, "If there is too much order, I will think I have caused a lot of trouble for everyone."

That made me feel better. I nudged Tanu, who seemed unable to move, and we began to lead the rich lady from room to room. Some of the rooms

were brightened with artificial flowers, and gaudy scarves hung on the walls. Some rooms had pious pictures of Lord Krishna. In one room I had to kick a pair of dirty sandals under a charpoy. As she followed along, the lady asked where we had come from and whether we were content at Maa Kamala's house and what our plans were. Tanu was tongue-tied, but I could still remember my nights on the street and the man who had tried to take me away, and I told the rich lady about those things.

When she had heard my story, she put her hand softly on my arm. She looked as if some mournful tune had found its way into her head and she could not lose it. "Those of you here at Maa Kamala's house are so few, and in the city there are so many." She sighed. "I wish I might do more. Indeed I will try." She gave herself a little shake and, smiling again, said, "Have I seen all the rooms?"

"Not ours," Tanu bravely answered.

"Then you must show it to me."

As we walked into the room, Tanu and I looked

frantically about for any disorder. The rich lady noticed the copy of Tagore's poems beside my bed. "Ah," she said touching the book, "he is my favorite, too." She stopped to look at my quilt. For a long moment she was silent. "Whose is this?" she asked.

I was too shy to claim it. Tanu said, "Koly made it for her dowry."

The lady turned to me. "Tell me about this quilt you have embroidered. The clouds there—why have you put those in?"

"They are the shape of the clouds that gather in our village before the rains come. That's our marketplace with the herb stalls and the barber and dentist and the man with the basket of cobras." When I noticed Tanu standing there staring at me, I suddenly realized I was talking too much, and I closed my mouth.

The rich lady said, "I remember that you mentioned working in the bazaar making garlands."

I nodded, wondering if there was something in the quilt she did not like, and I would lose my job and be thrown out of Maa Kamala's house.

"I know a maker of fine saris," she said, "who is anxious to find women who are skilled in embroidery. But he does not want women who merely copy what others have done. He wants women who have original ideas and who can translate those ideas into their work. He is looking for artists."

I did not know what that had to do with me, but the woman was looking at me as if she were waiting for me to say something, so I mumbled, "Such artists must be difficult to find."

The rich lady laughed. "Evidently not so difficult, for just now I have found one! Tomorrow I will come and take you to see him."