

t h r e e

In the morning there was a great rush to get ready for the trip. When the wagon came to take us to the railroad station, Hari was carried out under a little tent of cloth to protect him from the dust along the road. A woman from the village came to stay with Chandra. The two of them stood in the courtyard to see us leave. "I wish you were coming," I whispered to Chandra.

She only shook her head. Her sad eyes seemed to say it was foolishness to expect such a thing. "When you return," she said, "I have only to touch you and I will share in your darshan, your sight of the holy Ganges. That is all I ask."

I kissed Chandra and said good-bye. For a

moment I wished I might stay behind. I imagined the two of us sitting in the courtyard, chattering away under the mango tree, without Sass there to scold, and with no worries about Hari.

As I was about to leave, Chandra said, "If something happens, see that Hari has a garland of marigolds from me." She turned and fled into the house. I shuddered as I realized what she meant.

We had not even reached the railway station when I began to see that the journey was going to be very hard on Hari. The sun beat down on the tent, and the dust found its way through the floorboards of the wagon. The road was rough, and Hari's head wobbled on his neck like a flower too large for its stem. He complained about being hot and thirsty. Twice Sass gave him water, and still he could not stop coughing.

The railway was even worse. All my pleasure in my first railway journey was lost over my worry about Hari. Along with a rush of other people, we squeezed onto the third-class coach. I felt the sharp pokes of elbows in my side and the crush of other

people's feet treading on my feet. Everyone carried bundles. There were many people like Hari who were ill and going to the Ganges to be cured, but they were all older. When the passengers in the railway car saw how sick and how young Hari was, they made room for him so that at least he had a seat. The crowds and the heat made it hard to breathe. Sassur tried in vain to protect Hari from the crowds, while Sass bent over, fanning him with a palm leaf.

Just before the train pulled out, I saw several urns being loaded onto the baggage compartment of the train. I knew they contained the ashes of dead people. They were being taken to Varanasi so they could be scattered over the Ganges. I thought it inauspicious that Hari should be on a train with so many dead people. I wanted to believe that the Ganges would make Hari better, but when I looked at Hari, my hope slipped away like a frightened mouse into a dark hole.

The journey took four hours. We had brought cooked rice and a melon to slice. Sass urged Hari to have some, but he would not eat. Much of the time

he slept, which was a mercy, for he coughed less in his sleep. Once, when I looked at Sass, I saw that tears were running down her cheeks.

From the train window I watched as miles of flat land went speeding by. As we neared a village, the train slowed, came to a stop, and gave us all a good shake. The jerk of the train woke Hari, who looked about in a dazed way and then drifted off to sleep again. At every stop new crowds pushed into the car to squeeze into what little space remained. Once, when I looked out the window, I saw washerwomen stretching out lengths of saris to dry in the sun, long strips of yellow and blue and pink against the green fields. At one stop I heard the name of a village called. I knew the place well; it was walking distance from my own village. It was all I could do to keep from jumping from the train and running down the dusty, familiar road to my home and my maa and baap and my brothers. They would have no idea I was so close. As much as I longed to see them, though, I knew that after all the sacrifices they had made for my dowry, I would shame them by returning home.

We reached Varanasi late in the afternoon. The city in all its confusion seemed too large for us. It was several minutes before we knew which way to turn. We pushed past crowds of beggars. Sassur paused to drop coins into their cups, for the giving of alms brings one much credit with the gods. He clutched the address of his old friend Mr. Lal, a Brahman scholar, who had invited us to stay with him. Sassur found two bicycle rickshaws. After bargaining with the rickshaw wallahs, Sass settled Hari and Sassur in one rickshaw and directed me to join her in the second one.

The streets were crowded with motorcycles, automobiles, bicycles, and horse-drawn tongas. People clung to buses like swarms of bees on a branch. Cows and dogs and goats wandered in and out of the traffic. I even saw a camel.

Hari's face was flushed, and like me he was looking about in amazement. "Look there!" he whispered hoarsely. In this city of fifteen thousand shrines, each shrine was more splendid than the next, but he was pointing to the great mosque of Aurangzeb,

where the city's Muslims worshiped. Its eight towers were like lanterns suspended from the sky.

Just before we turned off onto a narrow street, we caught a glimpse of the Golden Temple of Vishvanath and the great river itself, Maa Ganges. "How soon will we go?" Hari asked in a weak voice.

"When you are rested, Hari," Sassur said.

Hari closed his eyes and made no reply. His silence broke my heart. All of Hari's sullenness and temper were gone, and without them Hari seemed to be disappearing.

Mr. Lal and his wife greeted us warmly. They were elderly and very stately. I was not introduced as Hari's wife. I believe they took me for his sister. I wondered if Hari's parents were ashamed to admit before this dignified man that they had married so young and so sick a son to get money. Mrs. Lal brought us a meal of dal and chapatis. Mr. Lal brought a small jar of water. With great ceremony he held it out to Hari. In a solemn voice he said, "From the Ganges."

We all watched, holding our breath and hoping

for some miracle, while Hari drank the water. But there was no miracle that we could see, only Hari suffering a new attack of coughing.

Though everyone was eager to take Hari to the river, he was too weakened from the long journey to go. Just before we lay down to sleep, Mrs. Lal gave Sass some mustard oil and camphor to rub on Hari's chest. The next morning he seemed a little better.

After a quick meal of tea and lentils we set off. Two men were hired to carry Hari's cot. With Mr. Lal and Sass and Sassur, we began our pilgrimage to the Golden Temple. We could hardly move, for like us, half the city was making its way to the river. There were women wearing saris the color of jewels, many of them woven with gold. There were holy men whose faces were covered with ashes and who wore nothing at all. There were Jains with masks tied around their faces so they wouldn't accidentally breathe in an insect and so kill a living thing, which was against their religion. There were Sikhs from the Punjab who never cut their hair but

tucked it all up under their turbans. In their saffron robes, sadhus, holy men, were everywhere. They carried begging bowls, and the air was heavy with their chants.

When I looked into the temples, I could see the holy sadhus sitting in long rows, bare chested, their heads shaven, holding sacred lamps and accompanying their chanting with bells. Pigeons fluttered in and out of the temple's open doorways. I looked at Hari to see if he was as astonished as I at such sights. When I caught his eye, a faint smile came over his face. I thought he might have been telling me that I had him to thank for so wondrous a trip.

At last we came to the Golden Temple of Vishvanath. A ghat, a long, wide flight of steps, led down to the river. With the two men holding Hari's cot between them, we made our way down the ghat, pushing through the crowds. Hari had to hang on to the cot to keep from slipping off.

Along the river's edge women were scrubbing clothes and even washing their pots and pans. Barbers were cutting hair. There were dogs and a

cow wandering about. Two boys were flying kites. We saw people with every kind of illness. Some could not walk; others were as thin and wasted as Hari was; some had terrible sores and deformities. I could hardly bear to look at all the misery. Yet the expressions on the faces of the sick were not sad. They were not hopeful, but they were peaceful. Even Hari looked more comfortable and content.

The crowds on either side of us and behind us swept us forward. Ahead of us was Maa Ganges. As the pilgrims reached the greenish-brown river, they walked right into the water. They faced the morning sun and began their pujas, reciting their prayers and making their offerings of flowers or grain. The saris of the wading women floated on the surface of the water like the petals of pond lilies. Beyond the pilgrims hundreds of small boats skimmed over the river.

Sassur and Mr. Lal helped Hari from his cot and eased him into the water. As the water slid over his body, Hari appeared surprised, as if he could not believe that at long last Maa Ganges was

wrapping herself about him.

I did not know whether I might be allowed to step into the water myself. When I looked at Sass, she nodded her head. It was still early in the morning, and the water felt cool on my legs. I waited, not knowing what to expect. Hari had been too weak to walk to the river on his own legs, but now the river seemed to strengthen him. He had taken his shirt off to bathe, and I could see draped over his left shoulder the sacred thread given to Brahman boys when they come of age. He called out to me, "Koly, look here. I can make myself float. Try it for yourself." Hari played about in the water, even splashing me. For the first time I could see what Hari must have been like before he became so sick. I thought he was very like my brothers.

Sassur was shocked. "This is not a game, son. It is a sacred river to be treated with respect." Though he scolded, I saw that he was pleased at Hari's liveliness.

Hari's liveliness did not last. He had to be helped from the river. He was shivering and then

feverish. When we returned to Mr. Lal's house, Hari was put to bed at once. His coughing became so bad that a Varanasi doctor was called. The doctor wore a proper black suit and carried a black bag. When at last he came out of Hari's room, he looked very solemn. Speaking in a low voice so Hari could not hear, the doctor said, "I am sorry to have to tell you this, but the boy is gravely ill. There is nothing to be done."

It took me a moment to understand what the doctor meant. I turned to Sass, and we held on to each other. We were both crying. If she wished me gone, or I believed her unkind, neither of us thought of such things now. All that was in our minds was our worry over Hari. I had not known Hari for very long, but I remembered the verses said at our wedding by the priest: "I am the words, thou the melody; I the seed, thou the bearer; the heaven I, the earth thou." How could all that be with just one of us? I couldn't understand what was happening to Hari and me.

After the doctor left, Mr. Lal said in his quiet

voice, "At least your son will die in Varanasi." Though he meant his words kindly, they did little to comfort us.

No one slept that night. Hari's coughing grew louder. I heard the voices and footsteps of people hurrying back and forth. In the middle of the night the doctor came again. After he went into Hari's room, there was silence. A moment later I heard a terrible wailing. I knew it was Sass and that there could be only one reason for such a cry. I folded myself into as small a ball as I could and pulled the quilt over my head to drown out the frightening sound.

When Sassur came in to tell me of Hari's death, I would not listen. He sat down beside me and put a hand on my shoulder. "We should never have let you marry our son," he said. "It was not fair to you. We only wanted him to get well. We thought if we could bring him to the holy river, there would be a chance. You must be like a daughter to us now." At last I heard his heavy steps going away.

Whatever my sassur had said, I knew Sass

would never think of me as a daughter. I was nothing now. I could not go back to my parents and be a daughter again. I was no longer a wife or a bahus, a daughter-in-law. Yes, I thought, I am something. I am a widow. And I began to sob.

In the morning Hari's body was wrapped in a cloth and covered with garlands of marigolds. I put one of the garlands on him for Chandra. Hari was carried on a bamboo platform through the streets to the Ganges. Walking behind the platform were Mr. Lal and his wife, Hari's parents and I, and a priest who was a friend of Mr. Lal's. As we walked along, we chanted over and over, "Rama nama satya hai," "The name of Rama is truth."

This time the crowds did not push past us but stood a little aside to let us by. A few men joined in our chants and followed us for a short distance. There were many processions like ours that morning, all moving toward the Ganges. Some of the processions were accompanied by music and dancing, for in the midst of the sorrow there was happiness that

the death had taken place in Varanasi.

Only the men accompanied Hari's body to the Manikarnika Ghat for the cremation. After the cremation the scattering of Hari's ashes over the Ganges would set his soul free by returning his body to fire, water, and earth. As we three women waited at a respectable distance, we clung to one another. I could hear the men recite the chants for the dead; Hari's voice was to go to the sky, his eyes to the sun, his ear to the heavens, his body to the earth, and his thoughts to the moon. Finally we heard the words "Amar rahain," "Live eternally," and the ceremony was over.

When the men returned, we made our way quietly back toward the Lals' house. As we walked through the Golden Temple, a dove wove a pattern just above our heads. I knew that the spirit of the dead hovers about for a time, and the swooping dove seemed very like Hari.

Before we left Varanasi, Sass purchased a cheap white cotton sari for me. "It is what widows wear," she said.