

Sass was as sorry as I was to see Chandra go. She wept, moaning, "I have lost my daughter forever." Sassur disappeared into his room and took down the book of Tagore's poems, but each time I looked into the room, I saw that no page had been turned. I had no one to talk with now but the little green lizards that crept up my wall.

My pension was lost to me, and I did not know how far my earrings might take me. It seemed that I must stay where I was forever. I hoped that if I worked very hard, and did exactly as I was told, Sass might begin to look kindly upon me. I hoped that someday she might love me as she loved Chandra, or if not so much as that, at least a little.

I was sorry for the times in the past when I had been mischievous. I began to rise earlier in the morning, so early the stars were still in the sky and the snakes at the edge of the courtyard were still twined into sleepy coils waiting for the sun to warm them. Each morning I made my puja at the kitchen shrine, careful to present an offering of fruit or a few scattered flower petals. I plastered the chula, the small stove on which we cooked, with fresh mud. I set the fire, waiting until everyone was up to light it so that no fuel would be wasted. I soaked the rice before boiling it and stirred it so that it was fluffy and the grains did not stick together. I ground the spices to a fine powder with the stone roller and churned the milk carefully. I swept the courtyard morning and afternoon.

When I saw Sass sitting by herself, a sad look on her face, I said, "Let me comb your hair and braid it for you." It was something that Chandra used to do for her maa.

"No. You are too clumsy. If you have time on your hands, there are pots to scrub."

It was that way with everything I asked to do for

her. It was no better with Sassur. He had troubles of his own. The school where he taught now had electricity. Computers had been installed, and more and more responsibility was taken away from Sassur, who knew nothing about such things. When he came home in the evenings, he went to his room and closed the door. We could hear him chanting his prayers hour after hour. He would not come out for meals but took only a handful of cold rice and a chapati or two. He grew thinner, his cheeks more hollow, his neck scrawnier.

I saw that there was a bowl of rice ready for Sassur when his chanting was finished. I even offered to read some of Tagore's poems to him, but he merely shook his head. "My son is dead, my daughter is far away, and I am laughed at by my students. What is left for me? One day I will walk off across the fields, and you will see no more of me."

If Sass tried to tell him of problems in the house, he would silently climb up onto the roof of the house, pull the ladder up after himself, and resume his chants.

When I found I could no longer talk to Sassur,

I looked about for something to care for. If no one would love me, I could at least love something. A pariah dog would slink into the courtyard from time to time in search of a morsel of food. Now I began to save a bit of our dinner for the dog. Its dirty yellow fur was mangy. Its eyes were red and watery. There were sores on its back, and one foot was lame. Still, it was clever enough never to appear when Sass was about. Soon it was following me to the river where I washed the clothes. I would bathe its sores and pet it until it lost its wary look. When it curled up next to me, I could feel its warmth. Instead of slinking about and hiding in corners, it began to appear openly in the courtyard.

One afternoon Sass caught me giving the dog a bit of chapati smeared with dal. "What are you doing, girl?" she scolded. "We hardly have enough for ourselves, and you throw our food to the dogs. What can you be thinking of?" She started to chase the dog away.

At that moment a gosling waddled close to the dog, who had been cringing in a corner of the

courtyard. The dog closed its teeth over the unfortunate gosling's neck. Sass ran after the dog with a stick, landing several blows. Still the dog would not let go. As it disappeared around a bend, we could still hear the squawking of the gosling. After that the dog knew better than to return.

So I tamed the bandicoot. It was an ugly animal with a pointed snout, tiny eyes, and large pointed ears. From its head to its long ratty tail it was nearly two feet long. Unlike the foolish dog, it never showed itself in the courtyard when others were there, but would come only to me. It crawled out from under the veranda on its belly and crept carefully up to me to take the bit of food I had saved from my meal. It sat hunched next to me, munching slowly as if it wanted to make the morsel last. When the food was gone, it would lick its whiskers and crawl back under the veranda. I was glad enough for the bandicoot's company, but I did not think I wanted to spend my life sweeping goose droppings from the courtyard and talking to a rat.

It was on the way to the village where Sass sent

me to buy some chilis and a paper of cumin that the idea came to me. I ran the rest of the way to the village so that I should have a few extra minutes there. When I reached the village, I made my way to the office where we had been given the papers that brought my pension. Through the open door I could see the man who had given us the papers to sign, but his very dark suit and very white shirt frightened me away. Twice more when I was in the village, I went to look into the office, and twice more I hurried away, too timid to speak to a man dressed so formally. Then one evening I saw the same man walking past our house. He had taken off his suit and shirt and was wearing a simple kurta pajama. Under his arm he carried his suit and shirt, carefully folded so that they would stay fresh.

The next day I stood bravely by his door while others went into his office and left. Finally he looked up. "Why are you staring at me, girl? What do you want?"

I crept into his office and stood respectfully at his desk. "Sir, my sass brought me here to sign some

papers to say I was a widow and to get a pension."

"Yes," he said impatiently, "what of that? Are you not getting your pension?"

"My sass is getting it. She takes the envelope."

He frowned. "How that is arranged in your family is not for me to say. The pension comes. That is all that concerns this office."

"What if I came here each month to your office and the pension were to be handed to me?"

"Certainly not. That is not how it is done. The pension is mailed."

I took a deep breath. "What if I moved to another place?"

"Have you come here to tell me you are moving?"

"No, sir. I only want to know what would happen if I did."

"You are wasting my time with 'if, if, if.'"

"Please, just tell me. What would happen if I moved away?"

"Then you must go to the office in that new place and tell them you are there."

"And the pension would come to me there?"

"Yes, yes, yes. Now leave me in peace."

I hurried back through the marketplace, past the man with the trained monkey on a chain and the stall where birds were imprisoned in tiny cages. In one of the cages was a mynah bird that had been blinded to make it sing. I shuddered, feeling no better off than the chained monkey and the miserable birds. I knew I had to find a way to escape. I could write to my maa and baap, but what could I say that would not bring shame and sorrow to them?

I began to make plans. I doubted that I could live on the pension alone, but my silver earrings would help until I could find a job of some sort. But who would hire me? In the city I would be seen as the poor country girl I was, shrouded in a widow's sari and with no proper schooling. And where would I live? How long would the money from my earrings last? With all these questions I did not think to run away today or tomorrow, but as long as I had the thought of someday, I could stand

Sass's scolding. To leave would take courage, and of that I did not have much.

As long as I stayed with my sass and sassur, I at least had a place to sleep and food to eat, though food seemed to be getting scarcer. As Sassur ate less, Sass became more stingy. She kept the keys to the cupboard knotted in her sari, all but counting the grains of rice. Some days I was so hungry, I felt dizzy. Worse than my hunger was the lack of happiness in the house. Even the bandicoot sensed it. After a while he would no longer come out from under the veranda, even for the bit of food I could spare him.

Then suddenly my world changed once more. Late in the afternoon of a day when the sun was like a circle of fire in the sky, Sassur came home early from school. This had never happened before. He went into his room and lay down on his charpoy. Minutes later I heard Sass screaming. Sassur had quietly died.