

Homeless Bird



Gloria Whelan



"Koly, you are thirteen and growing every day," Maa said to me. "It's time for you to have a husband." I knew why. There were days when my maa took only a bit of rice for herself so that the rest of us—my baap, my brothers, and I—might have more. "It's one of my days to fast," she would say, as if it were a holy thing, but I knew it was because there was not enough food to go around. The day I left home, there would be a little more for everyone else. I had known the day was coming, but the regret I saw in Maa's eyes made me tremble.

My baap, like all fathers with a daughter to marry off, had to find a dowry for me. "It will be no easy task," he said with a sigh. Baap was a

scribe. He sat all day in his marketplace stall hoping to make a few rupees by writing letters for those who did not know how to write their own. His customers had little money. Often from the goodness of his heart Baap would write the letter for only a rupee or two. When I was a small girl, he would sometimes let me stand beside him. I watched as the spoken words were written down to become like caged birds, caught forever by my clever baap.

When they learned Maa and Baap were looking for a husband for me, my two brothers began to tease me. My older brother, Gopal, said, "Koly, when you have a husband, you will have to do as he tells you. You won't sit and daydream as you do now."

My younger brother, Ram, whom I always beat at card games, said, "When you play cards with your husband, you'll have to lose every time."

My brothers went to the boys' school in our village. Though there was a school for girls, I did not go there. I had begged to go, promising I would get up early and stay up late to do my work, but Maa said school was a waste for girls. "It will be of no

use to you after you are married. The money for books and school fees is better put toward your dowry, so that we may find you a suitable husband."

When I stole looks into my brothers' books, I saw secrets in the characters I could not puzzle out. When I begged them to teach me the secrets, they laughed at me. Gopal complained, "I have to sit in a hot school-room all day and have my knuckles rapped if I look out the window. You are the lucky one."

Ram said, "When a girl learns to read, her hair falls out, her eyes cross, and no man will look at her."

Still, I turned over the pages of my brothers' books. When Maa sent me into the village for some errand, I lingered under the windows of the school to listen to the students saying their lessons aloud. But the lessons were not like measles. I did not catch them.

My maa had no use for books. When she was not taking care of the house, she spent her time embroidering. Like her maa before her, and her maa, and as far back as anyone could remember, the women in our family embroidered. All their

Forced to leave her family
at thirteen and marry someone
she has never met . . .

Koly's parents have arranged a marriage for their only daughter and now, like many girls her age in India, she will leave home forever. She yearns to flee, but tradition dictates that it's too late to turn back. On her wedding day, Koly's fate is sealed.

Caught up in a current of tradition that threatens to sweep her toward a terrifying fate, Koly finds herself cast out, lost in a strange and cruel world. But sometimes, courage and hope can be more powerful than tradition, and fate can be taken into one's own hands.



"Graceful and evocative."

—*The New York Times Book Review*

"An insightful, beautifully written, culturally illuminating tale." —*ALA Booklist* (starred review)

National Book Award Winner