

I am *doli* (the palanquin), an integral part of the Choudhary household and its customs.

I am telling you an important event that took place last year and nearly toppled every thing I stood for. In relating this event, I am trying to make sense of it myself. Last year, in the height of summer, I undertook my most important and sacred task: conveying the new bride to her husband's home. I had been ready and waiting for ages. My deeply carved wooden frame, silk curtains and velvet cushions have been painstakingly cleaned and repaired by Manka, the crooning, muttering aunt who is also a fixture in the Choudhary household for (what seems like) a hundred years. I alone know how old Manka is, but I am not telling. Manka lives and breathes for the family. Every evening, she hobbles into the back courtyard, takes her *hookah* (water pipe), crumples herself onto the giant couch swing and under the cool darkness of the Banana tree she regales us about family happenings. She takes gurgling puffs of the hookah and talks about the family. I am installed on a brick platform, also under the Banana tree, covered by a thin muslin cloth. All the family, sit on this swing to relax and talk. Children lie underneath the tree, clamber in and out of me when I am not on duty, so to speak, while the elders rock on the swing and keep an eye on them. The tree, Manka and I are connected. The tree bends her branches and listens, I creak my boards and agree or disagree, as Manka goes on. She makes all her tellings so tasty. Sometimes the story is sweet, other times salty or tangy or bitter. We live for the stories of family: our household family, the extended family and the village family. As keeper of the family secrets, Manka is not above giving even Babuji, Urmila's ponderous father a sharp set down. After all, she had fed him with gruel and semolina halvah, almost 50 years ago, when *his* milk teeth were emerging.

If I were a person, I would be the most favored yet slightly feared village storyteller, so riveting are my tales, but so firm are my convictions concerning the absoluteness of ritual, the essentialness of the rights of passage milestone of a Hindu's life. What I am about to tell you will surprise you. It still astonishes me, so as I said, I explain the story in different ways, over again, to try to understand it myself. Are you listening? No, No, don't take up your pen to edit. Listen with your feelings. Close your eyes when I describe a *happening* and picture it in your mind....

Last year, on the next to last day of a very cruel Summer, Urmila, our beloved child and Babuji's only daughter got married. The Pundit, after consulting old scrolls, had declared the very next day as the auspicious time for giving away the bride, or the departure of the *doli* - my departure. The house had vibrated with heightened activity. Incense and flower smells mingled with smells of frying *puris* (puffy bread) and *jeera alu* (cumin potatoes). Everything reached fever pitch in anticipation of this parting. "Ulll Ulll.. " the older females moaned, the *shahnai* (Indian flute) accompanied their ululating. "Come quickly girls, Auntie Nalini had shouted to her nieces, "the bride is leaving the house for the last time..." A chorus of laughter, mirrored skirts glinting, the girls seemed to glide through the house. Weddings are

such a carousel of colors and music, emotions and scandals. Now was the opportunity for the women of the household, to be giggly and girlish, feel deliciously languorous in all their feminine finery. Kohl-lined eyes darted sidelong womanly messages to the eligible males in the group, while faces remained demurely downcast. The older folk petted and scolded everyone alike, and demanded complete spoiling from all. Kids ran crazily throughout the house, eating and screaming without ceasing. Men looked embarrassed or grave, as they were teased or consulted depending on their stature within the family. Even Auntie Nalini's normally grumpy face was placid - with sweets and *almond sherbets* (concentrated, cold sweet drink) she imbibed, while loudly bullying the cooks and passing snide remarks about the boy's family. She didn't even smack Niven, when he wiped his perpetually runny nose on her skirt...*He tried to do it once on my curtains, but I creaked so loudly, that he ran away sniveling...* Anyway, back to the girls, running through the house...Time enough for responsibility and cares. They were not the bride, after all, but the bride's friends and cousins - this wedding had given them ample opportunity to vie with each other about their clothes, spend long hours combing hair, hennaing hands and gossiping over endless cups of cardamom *chai*.

Escorted by her unabashedly weeping mother and grandmother, Urmila bent to receive the blessings of her father, grandfather and uncles. As the beautiful, timeless ritual of the *Kanyadaan* (Kanya - girl, Daan - Donation) unrolled before the assembled family and friends, there wasn't a dry eye in the room. Babuji rested his hand on his daughter's bent head. He stopped and hugged his daughter very hard. I knew that his mind flickered back to a little baby Umie, sleeping on him, a miniature face, no bigger than an orange snuggled against his neck. He had lain rock still - controlling even the slight lift of his chest to draw breath, for fear of awakening her. Life was going to be skeleton-like without Umie. However, he is puffed that he has given her a royal send off. Not even the moneylender's impending visit, to claim his due in the morning dimmed the elation. Meeting his wife's glance over his daughter's head, he was relieved to read the thankfulness in hers - they have managed to pull it off. As parents of a well married daughter, they have fulfilled the most burdensome of all Hindu parental obligations. The placing of the bride into the *doli* is the culmination of their years of saving, borrowing and worrying. Putting their daughter in me, is a sacrament - symbolic of their highest achievement.

They can rightfully claim their place in this society and in heaven.

In the traditional bridal colors of spring and new beginnings, crimson, gold and green,- Urmila, is weeping under her veil. The weight of her new status seemed heavier than all the gold she was wearing. She gleamed like a newly minted coin - an offering to her in-laws. Her forehead, haloed by a gold intricately woven chain, highlighted the delicacy of her features. Her nosering proclaiming her espoused condition, caught the sun through the gauze veil and threw rainbow light into the air. Large eyes could

not contain the moisture, so it had dripped slowly to her cheeks and down to her neck, encircled by the gold passed down from fore-mothers to daughters - a link of ages, clasping one generation to another, in the ancient privileges and bondage of the Indian bride. Hennaed feet crushed rose petals and rice grains-wishes of fruitfulness and felicity bestowed by her family- in their dutiful tread towards myself, the waiting *doli*, the pinnacle of a young girl's destiny. Anklets tinkled as she swayed forward, never turning around to take a last impression of her childhood home and friends, though her heart and mind, I felt she left there.

Marigold and Rose petals descended on her and her family engulfed her. She will not see them for many years, perhaps never, since her husband's village is on the other side of India and her family do not have anything left over with which to make the journey. She walked away with her father's life savings, to increase the prosperity of her husband's home. She walked away with her mother's and grandmothers' bridegifts as a dowry to her husband's home. She walked away from childhood, innocence and irresponsibility, to take on life as a wife, daughter-in-law and the mother to all dependents in her inlaw's extended family. She whispered her family and friend's names under her sobs, like talismans against unsurety and fear. "Ma, Babuji, Nanima (grandmother), Manka, Vishal (brother), Vinay (brother), Ma, Babuji, Nanima, Manka, Vishal, Vinay..."