

Witness the Night

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Chapter 1

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You asked me to write my thoughts. But there are too many questions in my mind, too many fears. First I would have to remove all those worries, only then can I think again. You cannot understand how painful it is. No one can.

How does one avoid the tyranny of dreams? The footsteps that keep taking you back to a house full of ghosts, where every window has a face staring from it, each face once beloved and known, now with bloodied eyes and grey lips, their hands drooping, bodies limp, yet yearning. They are all silent. The thick bile of sadness oozing from their hearts has regurgitated into their throats and blocked their voices, their pale shadowy hair seems like seaweed, green and stringy, floating in the air. Yet, all around their collapsed bodies is the scarlet odour of fresh killing, the meat at their feet is newly shredded for the dogs, which are peculiar and never bark. They do not even nudge the meat. Do they know whose flesh it is? How can they tell? Does human flesh taste different? Is there some loyalty hidden in the DNA of animals that allows them to differentiate? Nothing in the house is as it should be, because now another smell permeates and rises, the smell of burning flesh. The house is a shamshan ghat, and the phool have yet to be gathered...the flowers, because that is what bones are called when they are incinerated, they turn into white flowers.

*Each of those faces, at the windows, caressed by my hands and kissed by my lips will be now poured, all white flowers, into earthen urns and drowned in the Ganga. The bubbles of the dense unforgiving water will rise and grab each urn with greedy fingers, snap it away, yank it from my helpless hands. I will say thirteen prayers for each one of them, thirteen times mumble what I have been told to say
The house, as I gaze upon it, sways in the wind...*

It is raining, I love the rain. I stand perfectly still in the garden, in the tightening embrace of the night, and let the rain beat into my skin. I want to let it touch me all over, let my tears mingle with the steady downpour until I cannot tell the difference between my tears and the rain, till everything is within me, the rain, the clouds, the wind, and I am struck by each of those thousands of droplets into numbness, and my eyes are blinded as they are raised to the open sky, so I can no longer see the

house, or the relentlessly loving faces in the windows. If I could escape I would, but where can I go?

I turn to run out onto the open road, take a rickshaw, get to the train station and leave for Delhi, as I have been told to do. But something holds me back. Is it the blood congealing on the white marble steps? I turn around again and, shivering in the cold rain, try to scrub my footprints in the rain water but the blood still pours out of the house, and the footprints form again, perfect and recognizable. I pull myself away because I slowly realize that the dark house, looming large out of the ground, is eternal, as though it was built along with the rest of the earth, for ever and ever. And looking out from each window, which I have left open so that the smell of burning flesh and bone can evaporate, will still stare all those vacant gentle faces, all thirteen of them, beckoning with listless eyes, their open fingers clasped in the sure grip of death.

But I did. I did run from there. Not very far, though. I only had to cross the road, and he was waiting for me. I was still crying and I kept wiping the blood from my hands. He had said we were going to Delhi to start a new life. But, standing there under an umbrella, he said we could not go immediately because we needed money. So he told me what to do. I was to go back to the house and when they found me I should cry, just as I was doing now, and say that I had been unwell and asleep in my room. I had been woken up by the smell of burning flesh and as I came out of my room, I saw all these bodies, one after the other. I had become hysterical and was screaming and then someone assaulted me. I did not see the man, he was dressed in black, and he wore a mask. The servants were all on leave. I did not know what to do. I was feeling dizzy, and though I screamed for help, no one heard me because it was raining and it was so late at night.

We went back into the house then, the two of us, and he slapped me across my face because I was crying too much, and then he tied my hands and told me to struggle to release them so that marks would remain on my arms. It should look like someone had tried to hurt me, and tied me up. Even though we were surrounded by blood and burnt flesh, he pushed up my shirt and squeezed my breasts, and then he took me to my room, where he removed my salwar and pushed me down on the bed. I was feeling sick and did not want to do what he asked me to do, but he said he had to do this to me so our story seemed more credible. I listened to that familiar reasonable voice and drowned myself in the feel of his hands and his mouth.

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My eyes snap open and I stare at the ceiling. I look at the clock – 3 a.m. The occasional flash of a passing car lights up the room. It is quiet, as only Jullundur can be quiet. After all those years of terrorism, when bomb

blasts used to light up the room, now it is only car headlights. I reach for a cigarette. The pleasures of not sharing a room are many. You can fart in bed, and you can smoke without asking ‘May I?’ I look across the chintz printed bed sheets and imagine The Last Boyfriend sprawled there. Hairy, fat, rich. Better than bald, thin and poor. But unbearably attached to his ‘Mummyji’.

Funny thing, this umbilical cord. If you’re female, they can’t wait to snip it off. But for boys, Mummyji’s breasts drip milk like honey dew. I watched Boyfriend squirm with delight under Mummyji’s gaze, as he piled on his millions in stocks and shares. With the ever increasing millions, and the solitaires glittering ever so brightly, why would she want a daughter-in-law dark and khadi clad like me? I gently exhaled and blew Boyfriend away.

I can still hear Mummyji’s shocked voice, the solitaires shaking in opprobrium: ‘Simran, you are a sardarni, a Sikhni, and you smoke!’

I settle down on the bed more comfortably, lolling over the side where Boyfriend would have lain. The Punjab police guest house room smells of smoke. They say that once smoke enters the air conditioning ducts, it keeps circulating there for years. Just like my Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, of not being able to erase a single detail from my mind.

Playing it over and over again. Like smoke it filters through my mind. The girl. The remand home. The theory I have, which is both a hypothesis and a nightmare. The scenario I have examined over and over in my mind for three months. The only part that makes me uneasy is my inability to put the pieces together. Was there a man, an outsider? The girl denies it—but she had obviously been raped. Or was it murder in self-defence? Did she kill anyone? Did her brother or her father try to molest her? When they found her, she was covered with so many wounds and so much blood—her own as well as that of, perhaps thirteen other people—that it was difficult to find out what had happened. And then, she could hardly speak. She was in hospital for three months and has just been shifted to a room near the jail, in judicial custody.

It worries me. Something tells me instinctively that the evidence is too obvious. We have to get under the skin of this case. As a professional social worker (and a rather amateur psychiatrist), I am shocked to find this poor traumatized fourteen-year-old orphan. In the last twenty-five miserable years I have not seen a more sorrowful sight. I look through my notes, reading how every single member of her family had been poisoned and some of the victims stabbed with a knife. Since there was no other evidence or fingerprints—she is the chief suspect, and under investigation. Once the police has finalized its case, she could of course be under trial for years, as no case in India ever comes to the courts (unless you are Rich and Famous) before the mandatory twenty years. By that time she would

be thirty four years old and would probably have become a hardened criminal and, if she wasn't already, a murderess as well.

I light another cigarette. Shit, the electricity has just gone off. Why does anyone bother to live in this corrupt country? They screw you if you don't pay your taxes, but you can't do anything to them once you elect the damn ministers who live in palatial electric splendour while the rest of us scrounge around for a scrap of light. In recent hurtful memory is a wedding: my mother's best friend's daughter married the son of a Minister in the Central Cabinet with Independent Charge. The wedding venue was lit up as though to guide a NASA spaceship to earth. The twenty lakh rupees spent on hiring generators for the various hotels and houses could have kept several hundred ordinary homes blazing with lights for a few years at least. My mother was moved to tears, of happiness of course, that her friend's daughter was being given away in a blaze of glory. She always said that if you have it, flaunt it. It was a long-standing Punjabi tradition in her family.

I fumble around and find a candle, then go back through my notes about the 'case' as I still think about it. Sweat trickles down my back. It is obvious that no one actually cared about Durga. Were it not for her large inheritance, the 'case' may not even have attracted the kind of publicity that it had. Perhaps the publicity would force an early decision?

I know what makes me uncomfortable—the danger of accepting the more obvious and easy explanations.. Yes, the justice system has been known to give up, and the completely wrong person ends up being convicted.

Just as well that, long ago, I veered away from becoming a lawyer. I chose the much more thorny but independent route of trying to 'help' those who fall by the wayside. I know that sounds quite self-serving; but let me tell you that smugness is the greatest attribute of the social worker in India. We stand for the human rights of the downtrodden, the voiceless, faceless, nameless, and often blameless millions. So can't a little congratulatory self-promotion be forgiven amongst the mandatory hand-wringing and sobbing from the wings? Why do I do it? Sheer cussedness. Or, as my mother put it, I deliberately chose a profession that would make most bachelors (unless they were criminals or deviants) blanch. And scoot.