

# The Silent Journey

Naini Kumar



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*“The yogi who strives with zeal, purified of all sin and perfected through many births, thereupon reaches his transcendent goal.”*

—BhagawatGita



# PART I



## CHAPTER ONE

**W**e live in a big house. I came here when I married Mr. Lal's son. I was twenty-two at the time. Mr. Lal has lived here all his working life. One of my two sons also lives here. I know this house as well as it knows me. It may be bricks, mortar, wood, and sand, but it has been a good house. It has started to exist for me. It is strange to say that the inanimate can have an existence. It is true in my case. This house has a meaning for me. I can feel its existence. I feel safe here.

For many years, I was busy in married life, giving birth to children, and this house hardly occurred to me. I was living in it. I was sleeping in it. I hardly knew it existed. It is a sanctuary for me. I can hide here. I have no fear. My living has extended here. I have grown here. The sensitivity of my feelings I can experience as never before. I am not the "living dead," after all. I have died here and been reborn. These walls are a witness to this. They share my secrets, only these walls.

Each of the fourteen rooms has a feeling. They have personalities of their own. This depends on the time of the day, whether windows are open or closed. To my little son, the moonlight in sheets on the floor may be haunting, but I walk in these rooms any time of the night without hitch or hesitation. I can tell the time of day or night from any room. I have walked all the six staircases as often as I like, going to the first-floor rooms or the *chaat* around the courtyard at

ground level. I know the number of steps in each staircase. I know the doors with a step to cross over. I will never fall even in pitch darkness.

The entrance gate leads into the largest courtyard. This is flanked by a veranda on the east side and a high wall on the west. The entry door to the hall is on the south of the courtyard. I can hear the rhythm of the doors opening. The way the chain knocks against them is familiar to me. I can tell who is at the door. Strangers make their own sound of tap.

The smallest courtyard is tucked deep in the west side of the house, it is exclusively for the use of my mother-in-law. It is in her suite with a kitchen, where cook prepares breakfast and lunch. The bathroom and two rooms are for her use all day. I do not go into these rooms. The *aangan*, or the central courtyard, is the heart of the house. Everybody and everything has to go through it or come out into it. My room is on the east side of the *aangan*. A veranda separates my door from the *aangan* floor. The walls of my room and the veranda are about three feet thick.

There is so much space in the units that one can be on her own without anybody knowing. This is a blessing to me. I can sleep, suffer, awaken or dream; nobody knows. I get up early before anyone else. I have my bath and get ready in my freshly laundered sari. The washer-woman leaves one every evening on my bed. I keep them in my metal trunk under my bed. I then take the stairs, rising from the south side of my room, to another set of stairs through Vir's room, who is away in London at the moment, to the top-floor *chaat*.

Here I stand higher than any house around. The sky is as wide and far as I can see. The crimson dawn changes to gold very quickly. I usually get here before this happens. Nobody ever knows. They are all asleep on the *chaat* below. I can see down on them in their mosquito nets. The sky is full of activity. There are changes in color,

variations in hues, and brightness. There is so much movement. I do not want to miss this for anything. What is more, it changes every day. Never the same, like a new life every day. What could be a better start for me?

My breakfast is usually brought to me – a glass of tea and a plate of *puris*. I wait for it sitting on my *charpoi*. I can tell who has brought it without opening my door. Mr. Lal always opens the door partially and puts it inside the room. Hunger wakes me to my existence, extends my life by the day and I eat to live it. When cook is late, my tea comes late. It is futile for me to cook my breakfast; then a lot of complications will occur, changing the status quo. Thus, I remain in my room away from others. Hidden out of their way, yet in their knowledge. I am used to it. I do not venture out for any curiosity.

Life goes on outside in the voices, in the sounds of coughing, in the tinkling of utensils, and thumping on the stairs. Above all is the “tuk-tuk” of the wooden slippers of Mr. Lal. This “tuk-tuk” is confident. It is sure. It is unhurried. It is never shaky or unbalanced. I can hear it from a distance. I get time to get out of his way. He is my father-in-law. I must be out of his sight.

“Do-you-hear” is his wife’s name. He calls this as he enters the *aangan*, even when she is out, and then I get the warning. I cover my head with the end of my sari for a veil as a mark of respect, or retreat out of sight.

There is no offense in this tradition. I would not know how else to react. It is as harmless as anything unnecessary. I know many women walk in front of and talk to their in-laws openly, but I have never come round to this. It is not important anymore.

Maybe I will ignore him more than I do now. Our connection does not depend on whether I exist or not. There is no burden in this. There is no embarrassment for us. Before my illness and my

husband's death, I would never have thought like this. Now I live in a reality which is like a nothingness, I can do nothing about. If it is not him, the road behind my room has much for me to hear. I can tell when a *tonga* has come. Vir, my elder son used to come in a *tonga* in his vacations from his medical college. I could guess by the trot of the horse when *tonga* comes to this house. The shoes have their own tapping sound. I could always make out when Nitin's father had come. He had a typical cough, and I knew the unique rhythm in the taps of his walking stick.

There is always something happening. Women singing on their way to *mandir*, or a cyclist back from the office, or a seller of vegetables or ice cream. It is like living in a jungle, unnoticed and unseen. I can think what I like. I even write my thoughts and feelings in words, in sentences, and sometimes, in paragraphs. It is my way of communicating with myself. It clears the clouds in my mind, defining shapes of my thoughts. Unreal ones get dissolved. It is a revelation in itself.

A shout of "Hari om" follows another. It is loud and clear. Blind, ascetic Soordas is making his way to our front door. I can hear his staff hitting the wall behind my room for the direction. I have to go.

As I enter the veranda, he has opened the latch of the gate. I hear in the *aangan* his loud "Hari om," and then quietness. He must have sat down with his staff by his side, as always. I slip in the store, deep in the south side. I fill a large ladle with wheat flour. I know nobody objects to this act of mine; it is the only act not out of my so-called madness. It is an act of generosity, of *daan*, which should make the gods happy

This is not what concerns me, Salvation from the gods or no salvation. I identify myself to this blind man. I have always given him alms. He may have his limitations and handicap, but he knows. He may even be thinking like me. I want him to feel the connection.

I open the door. He spreads his cloth. I empty the flour.

He feels it. “May God bless you,” he says looking and rolling his eyes towards the sky. “Would you like a drink of water?”

“No, I am all right.” I see him walking out then, latching the front gate behind him. I close the front door and walk back to my *charpoi*.

There are many moments when I do not live in my mind and feel the fulfillment of my existence. Such is one of those moments. It has a catalytic effect. My confidence overwhelms me. I get a feeling of rebirth. I come alive. What can I do? What am I supposed to do? All I can do is have a bath. I walk in my bathroom in my veranda. I pour water on my body. I fill another *lota* and pour more water. There is such relief in cooled eyes and a clean body.

As I sit on my *charpoi* in my room the bell of the Shiv Mandir is rung. Evening has started. A devotee has come to *Mandir*. I salute the Shiva from here.

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