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Opening Extract from...

Witness the Night

Written by Kishwar Desai

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Witness the Night

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For Meghnad, for dreaming up
a wonderful life together

CHAPTER 1

9/9/07

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.

✦✦✦

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 night, 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. From experience I know we have to redefine the boundaries—push away the walls that block us. As a professional but unsalaried social worker, rudely called an NGO-wali (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 haven't 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 have finalised their case, she could, of course, be under trial for years, as few cases in India ever come to the courts before at least twenty years. By that time she would be thirty four years old and would probably be immune to any sort of reform and, if she isn'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 full technicolour memory is a recent 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. I know, to my constant regret, that we sometimes take those options. We could be tired and exhausted, the so-called criminal might not co-operate, the victim's family could be much more rigorous and demanding. Or influential and demanding. Yes, the justice system has been known to give up, and the wrong person ends up being convicted. If there is a conviction at all.

But of course, these days high-profile cases call forth candlelight vigils and activist journalism. Not that it helps, because thanks to mass vigilantism the courts are being pressurized into taking popular decisions. Democracy drives everything, you can even vote to hang someone today.

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, smugness is the greatest attribute of the social worker in India, especially those like me who prefer to work as freelancers, at the non-government end of things. Because then I have the right to shout abuse at the mindless public machinery while virtuously maintaining my own prim attempt to improve things. Luckily, because the government has little thought or time for

social welfare, I can wear my halo of righteousness with panache. My faultless tribe stands 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 hand-wringing and sobbing from the wings?

Of course, it may be an entirely mistaken notion that I have helped anyone at all. But it keeps me going till I occasionally reach the last bloody hole and drag out someone who has been kicked into the ground. 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.

I prefer to do things the difficult way. When I think there has been a miscarriage of justice, I get into the system, meet everyone, represent no one, and try and get to the truth. I never know whether my efforts will be successful. Sometimes, someone will confess, or drop a hint. Funnily enough, the criminal community often trusts me because I am such an oddity, with my convent-school-Hindi and salon-cut curly hair. I look so far removed from the world of shady deals and drugs and knives and punishment that they know I can't be a money-making lawyer or a fixer: I am just a powerless social worker, from my outsized red bindi to my kolhapuri chappals. When I tell them I want to see them free and living in a just world, they know I mean what I say because I wear my idealism like a brahmastra ready to slay all the rakshasas.

Sometimes, they too begin to believe, like me, that there could be redemption (the convent school I had gone to taught me optimistic things about guilt, confession, redemption).

Actually, I have seen too many cases of criminals being 'reformed' and then going back to their old haunts and sinking into that familiar cycle of home-jail-home, until reality is completely distorted. In many cases it is difficult to distinguish the criminal from his circumstances, and then you understand that life can really be unfair. Now that they have discovered an infidelity gene, I suppose it is only a matter of time before they discover the 'criminal gene', and then what do we do? Open large gene reconstruction centres and get rid of jails? Or, after multiple experiments on mice, scientists will conclude that by injecting more serotonin and extracting testosterone, they can rectify the faulty chemical imbalance and we will become gentler, kinder, compassionate…

I thought I would never do this again (my last experience as a do-gooder had almost convinced me that there was no point to it), but when I read about this case, it intrigued me because it was in my home town, Jullundur. I had a very good idea what it was like to grow up as a small-town girl. It may sound like misguided conceit, but I thought I could understand Durga better than most people. I could perhaps help her cope with her distress. These days everything becomes 'a cry for help'. Killing thirteen people could also qualify for this, I suppose.

We all have our little weaknesses. Mine has always

been to wade in where others feel it wiser not to. When Amarjit, an old college friend (we had shared our moments) who had always encouraged my work in the jails, and who was now Inspector General in Punjab, called me, I could not refuse. He wanted me to meet the girl, give her some support, help the police reach some sort of a decision, whatever it might be, about her mental health. He also felt responsible, because the girl's parents had been close friends of his. Now she had no one. Except a sister-in-law in Southall, who had escaped death only because she had recently gone back to the UK. Her husband, Durga's brother, was dead.

So here I am, at 3 a.m., staring at a candle in a police guest house. My night clothes are full of sweat. I strip off and step under the shower, instantly relieved by the cool water. I randomly pick up each flabby forty-five-year-old breast and check it for lumps or bumps. Nothing. But I can't stop worrying. Are we somehow trapping a fourteen-year-old in a swamp of guilt? Could she have really killed thirteen people? In one night? All of them had been poisoned, some were slashed with a knife, a few had been half-heartedly burnt. Had it not been raining, it is possible that the house would have burnt down.

And she had been raped. Or had she? Is my judgement going haywire or am I being lured into the kind of pop psychology which brands female adolescent sexuality a crime? The Lolita syndrome. I am reminded uncomfortably of another case I read about, earlier today, which has probably affected me more than I thought. While the internet has shrunk the world—it has also

made it bloodier, and less trustworthy. If in the past I had treated every case as unique, I know now I can always find something if not more gory than the one I am dealing with, then at least something which could provide a glimmer of understanding. If people grope the internet for soulmates, I click on to find twisted minds and tortured lives. And hopefully, some information about why they became the way they did.

This latest concerned a young girl called Billie Jo who had been killed in Hastings, in the UK. Her stepfather was accused of killing her. A teenager, she was stabbed to death while she was painting the front door. Some of the testimony seemed to imply that the adopted girl knew she was attractive, and used that to manipulate the father (who was a schoolmaster) and the other male teachers in her school. There was a suggestion of an illicit affair, of the stepfather not been able to control his own anger or his passion, or perhaps being blackmailed by his daughter. Ultimately he was acquitted. Clearly, the easy explanation isn't always the right one.

It is precisely the easy explanation I have to watch out for. As my mind sifts through various possibilities, I know that Durga's case fascinates me. The name itself is so apt—Durga, the fiery, many-armed goddess whose capacity for blood and mayhem is pure mythological theatre. However, the Durga I have come to examine in Jullundur's overcrowded jail seemed terribly insecure and rather vacuous. We had our first meeting yesterday and I found myself at a complete loss.

Obviously, there is a chasm between us. I left Jullundur,

a dusty, haphazardly-constructed city in Punjab, which resembles an ambitious village, when I was twenty. I broke all the rules and my mother's heart, as well as my engagement to a sardar who appeared to have a Very Promising career in Hosiery. Initially, because all around me girls were being 'arranged' into marriages, I assumed that I had no choice, even though I was eighteen and above the age of consent. Fortunately, the lingerie business can be very liberating. Once I thought I had learnt enough about v-fronts and padded bras, and the difference between synthetic and natural fibres (mostly taught to me on long drives on a Vespa scooter which eventually meandered into fields of suitably long-stemmed sugarcane), I felt I should move on.

Now, returning to the same city, still unmarried but a woman of the world, veteran of several love affairs, seasoned traveller, an expert on 'Women in Incarceration: What Unfreedom Does to Women', twenty-five years later, what can I possibly have in common with a young, frightened girl who had been brought up in this provincial town?

Durga looks older than her years. I had seen pictures of her on TV but she is much thinner in real life. The snub nose and sulky full-lipped mouth are set in an oval face. When she was brought into the ante-room, on one side of the warden's office (I had insisted that I needed privacy), she was wearing a plain blue salwar kameez, not the jail uniform—a special concession, given that every high official in the government had known her parents, and known her since she was a child. It is embarrassing

for them now to see her in the lock-up. And worse, she is still little more than a child. So a few allowances have been made for her: better food, proper clothes, occasional access to television. (Though I was told that it had been cut down after she reacted very badly to some of the coverage of the murders). By another court sanction the police have been able to seal off a room and keep her there.

None of these concessions would have made her popular with the other inmates, and fortunately she did not have to see them. But the sad thing is that she should not be here anyway. She should be in a proper juvenile home. Unfortunately, the juvenile home was recently raided and newspaper headlines screamed that many of the children were being sexually exploited and used for prostitution. So Durga has been put here, in a makeshift 'remand home for children'.

The regular Nari Niketan (the reformist school for 'fallen' women) was another possibility; but it was also ruled out because of the high risk of exposure to drug and prostitution rackets. Or so I was told. From my experience, *any* institution which robs you of your freedom is a place where every kind of vice can be found, but if the courts have decided that she should be kept here, I cannot question it. Besides, till she agrees to see a lawyer, nothing can be done anyway. Right now, she is still too vulnerable and traumatized to be forced into any kind of situation.

Durga is not pretty, but she has a healthy, pink complexion like most Punjabi girls from semi-rural India,

who have been brought up on fresh milk and home-grown food. Yet she hunches as she sits down, anxious not to be noticed. Or at least, not have any attention drawn to her. Her clothes are loose and, even though she is tall and well built, she gives an impression of frailty, further enhanced by her meek demeanour.

I introduced myself.

She looked at me and looked away as though what she saw did not quite please her. I asked her to tell me about herself.

'I'm in Class 10, in St Mary's convent school.' She lapsed into silence and I could see tiny beads of sweat on her upper lip. She said nothing about her family; perhaps the thought of them was far too distressing.

'What subjects?'

'Literature, history…computers.' She was almost whispering now. Her English was accentless, which was also an indicator that her parents had belonged to the Punjabi upper-middle class, where the language is spoken clearly, and with little indication of the region you come from.

'Durga…' I reached out to touch her hand lightly and she flinched as though I had hit her. On her arm I noticed a small, intriguing tattoo, but she quickly covered her arm with her dupatta. For the first time, I noticed a light in her eyes. She seemed to smile. Or it may have been a nervous tic at the corner of her mouth.

'I'm here to help you, Durga. I'll come every day, and we'll talk about whatever suits you. Is there anything you want?'

'How long do I have to stay in here?' she asked softly, gazing at the dusty floor.

'I don't have the answer to that, but let's hope it won't be long. Is there anything you want to talk to me about?'

She hung her head and said nothing. After that she completely withdrew and stared at the floor, as though there was a meaning in the squares of cement that puzzled her. I gave her some paper and asked her to write down anything she might want to share with me, and touching her briefly on the head, left.

So young! The thought drummed through my mind. It never failed to shock me. Over the years I had met children capable of the most vicious crimes and it always saddened me, the loss of a childhood. Very occasionally, they were freed and able to walk out, but usually they grew up behind bars, and despite all my attempts to educate them, get them into yoga, teach them music and song, even theatre, most of them I knew were just waiting for a chance to avenge themselves on the world that had robbed them of the one thing they would never enjoy again, their childhood.

I needed to get away from the claustrophobia of the city and the jail. I desperately needed a glass of cold beer. But I knew that in Jullundur a woman drinking in public would be an aberration. Indeed, during the days of terrorism, women here had been forced to cover their heads and threatened out of their jeans to wear only salwar kameez. No better than the Taliban.

Now, lying in bed in the stuffy guest house, early in

the morning, I can still hear her voice, muffled by grief, perhaps even an inability to grasp the cards that life has dealt her. I can only hope that things will improve over the next few weeks. For the first time in my life, I doubt my ability to deal with a situation. Does she remind me of myself at fourteen? Confused and depressed? Could I have ever killed another person?

I stub out the cigarette and try to sleep. The important thing is to remember to organize some liquor if I am going to stay on here. Should have brought some in my suitcase from Delhi.

✦✦✦

To simransingh@hotmail.com

Hi, u don't know me, but I got your email id from Amarjitji. He has been a big help to all of us. I am Durga's sis-in-law. Obviously this is a blow for all of us. I wish I could come back but my baby is due any day now. I love Durga. Please look after her. She's been thru a lot. So have I, but at least I'm at home with my parents. If u're ever in Southall...u know who to contact. Cheers, Brinda.

PS. u can call me Binny.

To binnyatwal@gmail.com

Dear Binny,

It's wonderful to communicate with someone who knows Durga well, and cares for her. You can imagine how sad she is, and I am trying very hard to get her to speak to me. If there is anything you think will make her feel comfortable enough to talk, let me know. And of course, if there is anything you think I should know, let me know that too. Believe me, I will keep it confidential.

Do you have any family photographs? If you email them to me, it may be nice for Durga. Let us know when the baby comes along.

With best regards and thanks, Simran