

PEOPLE ON OUR ROOF

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**NIYOGI
BOOKS**

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*To my father from whom I came to know and
understand those, who are 'not all there',
and my mother, who let me be that a lot*

PROLOGUE

It is a deep, dark blue—dusted with gold, *sona!* Like the night sky studded with stars.’ At ‘stars’ he raises his hands towards the sky and flowers open his fingers. The many rings on his fat fingers glint as they catch the late afternoon sun.

‘From far away—Afghanistan.’ He stretches the word and with his right index finger, loops the air to indicate distance. ‘*Badakhshaan.*’ His voice soars. ‘Or from *Roos*—Russia. It is called Lapis—brings *shaaanti.*’ The elongated ‘sha’ softens his tone. Stealing a look at Nani sitting beside him on the front steps of the porch, their backs to the house, he whispers, ‘Healing—*aarogya.*’

Nani, in her cucumber green cotton saree, drawn over her shoulders, sits like a small dhobi-bundle on the steps, and beside her, in a well-worn khadi kurta, this huge man, an afternoon visitor whom only she meets. Always outside.

He turns his ruddy face towards Nani, the coiled string of hair springing from the flat of his bald head, undisturbed. ‘This chakra here? he points to his brow, ‘Fate! Where the *teesri aankh*, the third eye, is—our *hosh*, consciousness—*this* is the door to our thoughts, our dreams and emotions.’

Nani’s silence is unusual. She is always quick to respond to Bajpayee *ji.*

‘The dark blue crystal will release serenity into her mind and body—*especially* her mind.’

That’s what she’s always waiting to hear—a cure for the mind. But today, Nani seems far from enthralled.

‘Lapis lazuli is the stone for spiritual healers and kings. It *connects* us to our deepest truths—our fears—’ he clears his throat, ‘and the flaws in our karma.’

He falls silent. Then, tries again, ‘It stops psychotic attacks by blocking evil energy.’ He’s now holding an imaginary brick in his hands, that he pushes away, as he says, ‘Like a powerful mantra, it stops and sends it back.’

‘The most potent is the darkest blue with golden streaks. Like a river of gold flowing in the night sky.’ He intones again.

Nani stoops over, resting her chin on her open palms, her elbows digging into her folded legs. Bajpayee *ji* sighs. He sounds a little resigned as he continues, ‘Otherwise, I also have the yellow sapphire—*pukhraj*.’

‘Make her wear it in the left hand, on the third finger. Make it in gold and the demons of the mind will stay away.’

Bajpayee *ji* rambles on, but Nani is only half-hearing because she is very afraid that Nana will return home any minute and find her doing what he had said he would not allow *as long as he lives*.

‘Amethyst of a violet hue? *Jamuni*?’

She does not respond.

‘It will bring peace of mind—prevent accidents and there are other benefits. Mata *ji*?’

‘Bajpayee *ji*, can you come another day? I cannot decide.’

‘*Fikr!* That is your enemy, Mata *ji*. Leave your worries to me. She is innocent and guileless—a gift of the merciful God. Just her mind—it is in a thick fog. We will clear it by and by.’

As a little girl hiding behind the main door, Naina had watched this scene play out on the front porch of her grandparents’ home, her home now, on so many afternoons that if she closed her eyes, it ran in her head, frame by frame, like a much-watched film.

I

New Delhi, 1997

A dinner party had been arranged on the lawns for her Nana's best friend from school, a renowned neurosurgeon in England. Many friends of theirs were expected.

The bungalow seemed to be puffing up with activity; so, when in the evening, just as the sun was setting and its doors and windows were opened to the still summer outside, it gently tipped itself into the small garden in the front. Out came everyone carrying tables and chairs, plates and glasses. They carried the big folding table from the storeroom and pulling out its legs, set it up at the far end of a slightly damp lawn. Nani came out clutching her treasured white damask rose-patterned tablecloth. It had been laundered and bleached so that only she, who knew where the curry stains had been, could spot those with a very close look. As the sky dimmed its light, the whites—the tablecloth, the mogra buds studding the bushes, and the lace curtains that billowed in the windows—began to glow. When the lights inside were switched on, they fell out through the windows in long, warm rectangles. Nani smiled as she placed the dahi vada platter on the kitchen counter and sprinkled roasted jeera powder over the creamy curd. Two of the cook's teenaged daughters, who had come to help, dashed in and out of the front door, carrying plates and counting cutlery, giggling and whispering into each other's ears. One of them wore a blue dupatta edged with *gota* that glinted as she moved in light

and shadow. Naina wanted it with all her heart. She would tell Nani, later.

At 7, Papa called and spoke with Nani. When she placed the receiver back on the cradle, Nani's happy, dahi vada platter bearing shoulders seemed to flop and Naina felt as if 'the voltage has gone low' as the elders would say when the lights suddenly dimmed.

Nani started to hurriedly dress Naina, pulling the white organdie frock over her head impatiently, propelling her firmly around to tie the belt into a bow at the back, a tad too tight. The comb furrowed Naina's head as Nani parted her hair in the centre and fastened it with ribbons into two pigtails. Then she sent her off to be socked and shoed by the maid. Naina forgot Nani's low voltage when the maid rolled the lace socks that she loved, up her knees.

Just before the guests arrived, Papa came with Amma and Tara. Amma did not look at anyone. Tara was sleeping, her head bobbing on Papa's shoulder where a steady thread of drool was forming a wet patch on his lemon-coloured shirt. They went into the guest room, where Amma sat down on the bed with her feet up and her back very straight. Papa settled Tara next to her, arranged pillows on the other side, and hurried into Nana's study. On his way out, he saw Naina watching them from the door and only lightly patted her cheek.

As the evening slowly filled up with guests, the aroma of food and perfume, the tinkle of ice in glasses of squash, and soft chatter, Naina pushed away thoughts of her glassy-eyed mother and baby sister in the guest room, and wove her way among the guests, hiding into the folds of Nani's crisp saree when people spoke to her. She received kisses, pats, and much praise for being 'such a quiet little girl', but soon everyone got busy with grown-up talk and Naina was left to amuse herself.

When no one was watching, she withdrew behind Nani's chair and slowly moved to the *madhukamini* bush that stood outside the guest room window. Sitting at the edge of a water-filled flowerbed,

she was completely engrossed in setting the fallen blossoms a-sail, prodding them around with a twig, when she heard a shrill cry, and turning around, saw Amma in the lawn.

Amma without her clothes. Perfectly still. Like a photograph.

No one laughed.

Except her.

Naina giggled at the sight of her mother naked. The only other sound was that of the empty glasses that clanked on the tray the cook's daughter held. She put it down on a chair and taking off her *gota*-edged, blue dupatta, tried to cover Amma.

Papa and Nani caught Amma by her arms and led her away, inside. The *gota* shimmered against Amma's brown body.

It was all over in a couple of seconds, but the silence stretched for seemingly long moments, until some voices, punctuated with nervous coughs, floated up—someone asked for a drink they did not want, someone complimented another on a saree they did not really care much about, someone cracked a joke that prompted feeble laughter—and everyone joined the pretend game of 'nothing happened', the adult make-believe.

The forever changes in their lives were triggered off that evening. Papa stopped coming to the dinner parties. Naina would be left with Nani for days. Whenever he came, they squabbled—he and Nana-Nani. Those times, he referred to Amma as 'your daughter' instead of Naintara. When he thought she was sleeping, he would kiss Naina. She would be awake, but would not dare to move, too scared to upset anyone and conflicted about which side she was supposed to be on.

Naina held Tara responsible for all this. Ever since Tara had come into their lives, Amma had started behaving strangely.

Awake before dawn, lying in bed, unable to stop herself from slipping into the black hole of memories, Naina looked out the window of her

room that was once the guest room where her mother sat with her feet up, not looking at her. How things had changed in the two decades since then, and yet, how little they had—like the *madhukamini* outside the window, a keepsake from another time of which so little remained—no lawn, no laughing people in cane chairs, no zinnias and dahlias, like upside-down ballet dancers. But it was the stillness of the once-bustling home that was the most palpable. Fewer doors opened and closed, the doorbell and the phone rang rarely, no feet scuttled in the lobby outside, no one called out to the *subziwala* or the *bartanwali* from the kitchen window. Of the four that lived in the house, only two had words to communicate with; none to laugh, joke, or tease.

A slight breeze blew in the citrus fragrance of the *madhukamini* blossoms that she could not see yet. A new day lay before her—she could still turn things around. She sat up and, picking the notepad from the bedside, began to write her to-do for the day in small, squat letters.

Run

Check vacancies

Copy-test

Interview

Tuition 1

Tuition 2

At 6—she had to wait till 6 to feel safe outdoors—with streams of sweat running down the sides of her face and her soaked tee stuck to her back like butter paper, as she sprinted past the bus stop, she heard him holler.

Just another among the morning sounds—the emerging cacophony of the day—unobtrusive if you did not focus, but if you did, each very distinct: the grinding halt of milk lorries, the screeching

roll of store shutters, the gentle thump of newspaper bundles being dropped off at street corners, the clip-clip of stray dog feet on empty pavements, an occasional tinkle of bicycle bells.

His cry rang out clear—two words that could mean much or nothing at all. She did not think he was directing it to her. He was, like so many on Delhi's streets to whom this came as naturally as pissing on the walls—calling out to a passing woman, brushing past her in a hurry, squeezing a breast, whispering a lewd something into a little girl's ears, just venting. It was not her problem. Nor anybody's. She was venting too. Running like this.

Late again. Releasing her sweat-soaked hair from the grip of the band with one hand, she lifted the gate open with the other and saw Amma sitting on the stone bench in the empty, craggy lawn with her back to the house, holding a mug of tea between her palms—still as a photo.

'Amma!' Willing cheer into her voice, Naina walked up to her, 'You got up early today? Had tea?' She sat down next to Amma on the cool bench. The air was dense with rain that was swelling up in some unseen layer of the sky. It could be days, even weeks, before they got some temporary relief from the humidity. 'Amma, today I have two interviews. It is an important day. I will first go to this ad agency...' She was used to talking for two—to say something, imagine what a mother would say, reply to that, carry on till it felt like a conversation, and end when her heart tired of it.

Amma turned slightly to look at her and lifted one finger to her lips to quieten Naina.

'What happened?' Naina whispered.

'Shhh—those people.' Amma raised her eyes slightly in the direction of the roof.

The people on the roof. The people that no one but Amma could see or hear. On some days, they assailed Amma's mind to the depths

of fear; on others, they quietly watched her from their perch. These days, they did the latter.

‘Why don’t you come inside with me, Amma?’ Naina waited for a few moments for some reaction, and then added, ‘Okay, Amma, I am going to get ready. You don’t worry about them. They will leave. Come inside or Tara will get late, okay?’

She gave Amma’s hand a squeeze and got up. Turning towards the house, she looked up at the terrace. A cloudless monsoon sky sat over the straight line of the parapet wall. Naina hurried inside.

Tara was in the hall, gently rocking her chair to the soothing strains of the Gayatri mantra—her morning ritual.

‘Good morning, Tara!’

Tara did not look up. She never did. Her whole world of talking, listening, thinking, and loving was inside her. Those that mattered to her could listen to her unspoken word, respond to her silent enquiry. She kept to her neatly ordered life. Like Naina ran, just focussing on one foot in front of the other, one at a time, Tara too looked at each task at hand as though through a fire lens. Her days were neatly slotted into tasks. She would move from one to the other only when the last had been put into place, like pieces of Legos. Everything in her world was in order, in the particular order that she had everything set in her head.

This was her time to rock with the chants of *Oṃ bhūr bhuvahḥ svaḥ...*

Raju handed Naina a cup of tea and the carefully folded newspaper. Over the years, there had grown a silent understanding between the two. Ever since he noticed Naina’s anxiety over the Wednesday newspaper with its jobs supplement, Raju had made it a point to bring it in first thing in the morning and keep it carefully folded in the kitchen.

Taking the newspaper and tea from him, Naina shut herself in her room. Sitting on the cold floor, she began to skim through

the vacancies—three columned attention-calling ones, as well as the tiny-boxed, money-per-word-counted ones. Nothing too relevant showed up, but she noted down the address of one place she could pop in if she had time after the two appointments that were scheduled for the day.

By 8:45, she was ready to leave, when she heard a familiar voice boom, ‘Naina, where are you, *beti*?’

‘God! Not Ajit Mama today!’ She panicked as she quickly tied her hair and grabbing her bag, rushed to the drawing room.

As long as Nani was alive, Ajit Mama had pestered her to divide the house and will a portion each to him and Amma. But Nani had declined. A roof over their heads was all she could leave the three, rather four, unfortunate souls with, she had said.

‘*Aao, beti*. Come, come,’ he said and smiled. Amma was sitting next to him and Tara, at the dining table across from the hall, was lingering over milk from her yellow cup and slices of bread, the sides of which has been sliced off carefully—every speck of brown removed.

‘Mama *ji*, I really have no time now. You know how desperately I’m looking for a job. Today, there are several people I have to meet. I must hurry.’

‘What to do, *beti*, you are always busy, either rushing somewhere or not at home. I’ve even waited for you till late in the evening, but...’

‘Please don’t start all that again, Mama *ji*,’ she cut him short.

‘*Arré*, what did *I* say? You also know it’s not alright for girls your age to stay out so late in the night. People don’t look upon such girls with respect. They talk. What did *I* ever say?’ he turned to Amma for support.

Amma seemed uneasy, frowning at a spot on the carpet.

‘*Ab dekho*, Didi, see if *I* don’t think of you all, who will? *Woh sala...*’

With that, Ajit Mama had tried his luck with Amma too far. As he spoke those words, Amma's expression changed. She got up, caught hold of his arm and started to lead him out the front door.

'Didi, why are you getting angry with *me*? I am telling you, this girl will ruin our family name. She has already brought shame to the family, *badnaam kar diya!* I can still salvage our reputation. If you don't listen to me, you will all be ruined. You will be out on the streets! Let me rent out the back portion, just two rooms, Didi. I'll pay you some money too—every month.'

But Amma was not listening. She was gesturing to him to leave, like one would a tramp who had got to the front door. Naina walked past them to still try and reach her first test in time, by 9.



The ad agency was in the basement of one of those posh bungalows that one knows are posh because of how completely hidden behind tall walls and iron grilles they are.

Naina sat staring at the paper in front of her, the silence inside the room completely distracting her. Each time a door opened, each time someone coughed or turned a page, she was startled, losing all threads of thought. Ajit Mama's words boomed in her head. She needed so badly to do this copy test well, but she knew it was not a day for writing headlines for washing powder. Reluctantly, she turned in her answer sheet and came out knowing she would not be called back in there again.

The other agency was familiar. She'd been there a hundred times, or so it felt. Every time she went, the creative director was busy. Finally, yesterday his secretary had confirmed that she could meet him.

When she arrived there at 12:30, after changing two buses, the receptionist asked her to wait. Naina waited for forty minutes and

finally, the creative director decided to speak with her on the phone from his cabin somewhere on the upper floors of the building.

‘Yes?’ his officious voice shot in from the other end as she stood in the lobby, speaking self-consciously with three other waiting faces looking intently at her.

‘Mr Pandey, this is Naina. You called me for an interview today,’ she hoped, he remembered. ‘At 1 pm,’ she added nervously.

‘Okay.’ That was all he said. It did not mean no; so, she figured, she should wait.

At 1:50, a middle-aged man came down the stairs and the receptionist, on a phone call, mouthed ‘Mr Pandey’ and pointed one long, scarlet-nail-painted-finger at Naina. Naina looked at Mr Pandey’s expressionless face and her heart began to beat in her ears as she stood up to meet him. He nodded to her hello and walking straight across to a small cabin, held the door open for her. The moment they were seated, he began, ‘Okay now, there is this one manufacturer, who has produced 40,000 cups—disposable cups. These were made for something, but are now—say—surplus. He has to sell these. What you have to do is, find buyers for these cups. You have to think what these cups could be used for, who would buy them, and how you will sell these through your print ad. Okay? You may go now and think over it. Whenever you’re ready—tomorrow, next week, next month, six months later, you can come back.’

Even before he finished speaking, he was on his feet, holding the door open again. In a daze, she got up and walked out. Six months! This man does not need a copywriter. She watched him dash back upstairs, climbing two steps at a time, and had an irrepressible desire to go after him, three steps at a time, and punch him smack in the face. He’d wasted so much of her time. Angry and humiliated, she came out of the office.

The sun dripped down furiously. Against her better judgment, she stopped at a dingy tea stall and asked for a Pepsi. The man at the

stall called out to a little boy with a mop of haystack hair, 'One Campa!' When she looked at the only other customer, a man wearing a tie and blowing smoke through his nostrils, he winked at her.

A rag-picker was walking around the garbage dump next to the tea stall, rummaging through it. Tea, coffee, cold drink, soup, ice-cream, jelly, candle holder, planter—the uses of disposable cups on her mind, Naina saw him pick a soiled, squashed pack of Frooti from the sweeping expanse of rot and without a moment's hesitation, suck from its straw. Nauseated, she looked away.



The bus to Maharani Bagh inched ahead. Near Ashram, a burly Jat got in stomping a heavy lathi and plonked himself next to Naina. As a few other women got in, the conductor mustered enough courage to ask him lightly, '*Tau*, sit there comfortably,' pointing to the vacant seats.

'Why?' he boomed threateningly and in a brazen show of clout, squared his shoulders moving closer to Naina. Naina kept her head turned towards the window. The bus had stopped at a traffic signal and two little girls outside in colourless salwar kameezes, their necklines falling off their bony shoulders, were jumping up to touch her arm. They implored her to buy the garnet roses in cellophane cones they were carrying. 'Buy one for your Sa'ab, your mister,' they said.

Rose Day.

The bleak winter afternoons hurtled hastily into dark evenings. Their second semester exams were due in a week. She had taken the week off from the tuitions and spent the afternoons before class, studying in the library.

One evening, Professor Chopra's lecture continued over the next hour and it was 7:30 when he finished. The girls were talking excitedly