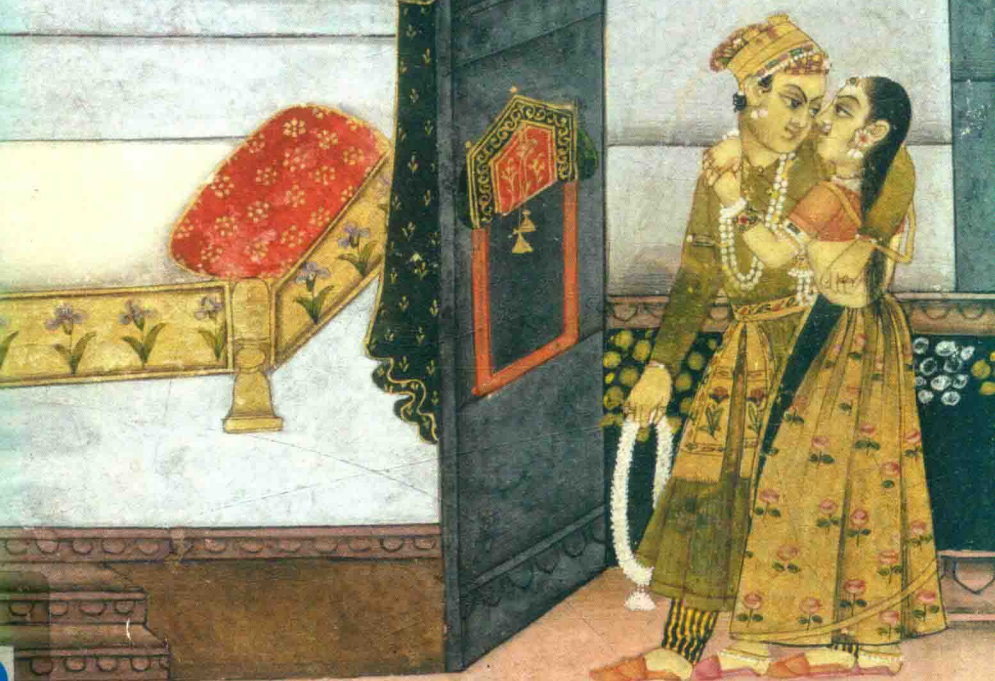


The Seduction of Silence



BEM LE HUNTE

"A lovely... ambitious novel... Le Hunte threads events together with a confident, steady hand... [and] succeeds in creating an evocative portrait of India."

—*Washington Post*

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For my love, Jan.

This book is for you, for the faith you showed in my work.

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Prologue

“Do not think that life without the body is an empty one, my friends, for the spring from which we all draw life is here. We bathe in it, you and I. That same spring. You bathe your body and I my soul . . .”

“It is this spring — this Source — that supports every miracle, every phenomenon you see as ordinary in your world. You see it all. You are excruciatingly close to this Reality. But just as you cannot see your own eyes, only the visions they offer, this Reality evades you. Just as you can no longer see the water that makes the snows . . .”

[CLICK]

Rohini switched off her tape recorder when the voice started to fade. The contact was fractured. The spirit of Aakash was unable to animate the body of the medium for much longer.

It was always at this point that Rohini remembered to check on her own existence. She felt for the awareness of her own body, not just the soup of her thoughts. Her exact location on the physical plane. Second row from the front in a stuffy room in the Spiritualist Church of Great Britain, Belgrave Square.

Around her Rohini heard the shuffling of bums, searching out their ideal sitting postures. Coughs, whispers and other noises that interludes

make. Dora's voice, too, could now be heard, a voice returned from its temporary exile, giving instructions in familiar tones. Rohini followed those instructions and then, like the fifty or so other people gathered there, she closed her eyes and held out her hands. Midwife's hands, deft with life, intuitive, capable, expectant.

What followed was what Fleur Heuspeth at the Spiritualist Church of Great Britain called "*a divine gift.*" At first it tickled, dancing patterns onto her palms, softly, like an angel landing.

Opening her eyes Rohini saw something quite ordinary: a fresh pink lotus. Ordinary perhaps if one of the ladies who collected donations was walking away all chuffed and cardiganed down the aisle. But there was no one there. And no way it could have been tossed forward from the small stage.

Tossed down from the heavens?

Maybe ...

Or perhaps it had been pushed through the silent hum of the Infinite, to manifest first as sound, and then matter. Dividing, dividing, dividing the unity of existence until it found its own unique manifestation in waxy pink flesh.

For Rohini this was not just a minor miracle, it was a gift of love. Aakash, the spirit who had lectured on that day, was her grandfather in his earthly years. A grandfather she had never met. A man she could only know years later, through the soft, padded, feminine face of Dora Hindes, the medium who now channeled him.

Although he was unreachable on the other side of life, Aakash was closer to Rohini than all her family members who had deserted her. He had filled the gap left by her family by transcending the chasm between life and death. Only he could hold her pain and feel its weightlessness. Only he could be there for her in spirit, embracing her in totality. But at the end of every trance session Dora's head would droop and Aakash would be gone, back into the infinite recesses of his own timeless universe.

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And Dora – she was left to feel her way back into her own form, slowly, timidly at first. Lifting her head and recovering her own eyes with their neighborly twinkle that defined her smile. Regaining her body's own lift, her unique relationship with gravity.

At the end of every session she was the same woman who had powdered her cheekbones that morning. Now she patted down her hair-do, smiled at the audience, using her very own wrinkles and her own cheery personality to communicate. Nobody could have been less related to the great Aakash. Nonetheless, she was the one he had chosen.

But not for much longer.

Aakash had announced at the beginning of this lecture that he was going to return to the world of the living.

Rohini was still disturbed by this revelation as she listened to Fleur Heuspeth's regular speech, thanking everyone for coming and sharing these wisdoms from beyond the grave.

"Of course none of this would be possible without the generous support of our fellowship. We're collecting now for the many urgent repairs that need to be done. And of course, we ask you once more to think of the work we do when you write your will. Think of the solace we provide for so many people in their time of need when loved ones have departed ..."

The room where Aakash had made one of his last visitations was called the Arthur Conan Doyle Room. Donated by Arthur himself, who made invisible guest appearances, taking advantage of his post-mortem privileges.

The spirits of the room sang of a former glory. The marble pillars and floors were patched up clumsily with cement, and the upholstery peeled itself from the seats as if it had no concerns in the material world.

Fleur was right. The church urgently needed repairs, but when the tray went around, the ladies from Knightsbridge who valued this service so *much* only chinked ten new pence each onto the metal.

"Oh well," whispered the spirits. "The day will come for our velvet curtains."

Dora Hindes stepped off the platform, ready for a cup of tea. Behind her was the usual sign: "Please do not clap until the medium has returned to his or her normal self." Today few hands clapped. Instead the hands held lotuses as their owners sat suspended in disbelief, in curiosity, in wonder.

In the next room people were starting to mill out of a regular seance meeting. Rohini tried to catch Dora's attention as she left Arthur's room and the two rivers of living human traffic merged with vanishing spirits moving toward the front door.

"Dora, can I have a quick word?"

"Of course, dear. I have a special message for you today," she said. Rohini followed, anxious to talk with the person who linked her back to her family through generations, through lifetimes, through different realms way beyond the divisions of Time and Matter.

Rohini had attended every one of Dora's trance sessions, and had booked so many private sittings that Dora knew her face as intimately as the face of Aakash. Sometimes when Aakash stood behind Rohini at a private sitting, with his spirit hand on her shoulder, she could see them as if in a family portrait. A photograph captured in ether, etched in ectoplasm. She with her beautiful high cheekbones, dark curly hair (only a little gray) and slim body in colorful clothes, human and fully sentient. He in white robes behind, an earnest expression, long white beard, more faded. The two of them made a noble pair, full of secrets.

Through Dora, Aakash had visited often, leaving behind prophecies like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Only he understood Rohini's state of aloneness. He was her guide and adviser. It was he who had first told her that she would have her own visionary experiences. And soon after, she started to decipher messages that rang in her ears like voices from a mixed-up radio frequency – clairsaudience they called it, here in this church.

In the seance room, Dora sat in her usual seat, and swapped her usual

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set of senses with the extraordinary set she kept just behind the bones of her forehead. She looked through Rohini's intense stare and into her mind, waiting for the thought forms to settle. Letting the questions rise to the surface ... His talk had disturbed her. Was he really going to leave the spirit world? How could he?

One thought bubbled up and Dora read it in Rohini's mind: *He can't leave me. Without Aakash there'll be nobody to guide me. Eternity will be empty.*

Was she seeing these thoughts in the cavities of her eyes? Dark black Indian eyes, absorbing light into their chambers and throwing back only sadness. Eyes that used to look to life with all the greedy joy of a spoilt child, now looked only toward elusive spirits.

Dora couldn't help but notice.

"My dear, Aakash has told me it's time you turned your attention back to the world of the living."

Rohini shrunk back and another thought form emerged: *I can't rely on them.* Her world of the living was peopled with disappointment. A ghost of a husband who had deserted her. An only child. Elsewhere ...

But the dead were safe. They never went away. They never hurt you. And they looked away when you did. Aakash had no right to just get up and leave. To vacate his space in the Absolute.

"Aakash has told me that he is going to take birth again in your family."

"What!" Rohini's eyes were wide now, absorbing this information. Why her family? It seemed so inappropriate.

"According to the vedas, after a child is conceived the spirit will enter the body at around three or four months, when the mother first feels the child move. Do you know any of this?"

No. She was still absorbing the shock of it all. And no, Rohini had never studied the vedas. They just didn't seem as exciting and immediate as somebody speaking to you directly from the spirit world. The vedas were open to interpretation, but the voices from Infinity you could never argue with, although everyone had tried. Her daughter Saakshi had

laughed at her preoccupation with receiving messages. "It's the fillings in your teeth," she'd said, "they're acting as receivers for radio signals. And all these people you think are contacting you from the Great Beyond are probably sitting at a microphone in a studio in Wimbledon."

Dora caught the thought and held Rohini's hand to bring her back to the present. She knew her role as Aakash's medium was soon going to end, although he hadn't told her exactly when. They had a quiet agreement with no expectations of each other, like spirit twins. In fact, somehow, Dora was looking forward to having control over her body at all times. It was time for her, too, to retire and return to the ordinary life of a woman in her seventies.

"My daughter has just discovered she's pregnant," said Rohini. "Is it Saakshi whom he has chosen?"

"Yes," came Dora's quiet reply.

Rohini's eyes took stock, smudged tears and blinked. Saakshi was living in Australia. Rohini would be closer to Aakash on the other side of life, she realized, than she would be to him on the other side of the world.

"Why does he have to come back when he was doing such good work in the spirit world?" As if she could have sent him back toward the Source with these words.

"Unfinished business. The same reason most of us are called back."

"He left nothing unfinished. He was enlightened."

"So doesn't the world need more enlightened souls in it?" Dora was insistent. "An enlightened soul returns to the world as an avatar. And Aakash will return with the wisdom of the ancient seers. He'll be able to shift mountains ..."

Of that Rohini had no doubt. But Saakshi? *What do I say?* she thought. *Darling, you're going to give birth to an avatar? She'll think I'm crazy. How do I ring her up with this news?*

Dora instantly pieced together the fragmented cloud of thoughts and continued Rohini's internal dialogue.

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"Don't worry about your daughter or about how you will maintain contact with Aakash. There is so much support in the spirit world for coming events."

Nothing could have prepared Rohini for this prophecy. But she had this feeling, and she'd had it before in her life. *This feeling that everything happens for a reason.*

"Don't stop coming to see me," said Dora. "I'm always here if you need me."

Gripping her slightly sweaty fresh lotus, Rohini bade farewell to Dora. She felt an atmosphere of seriousness and importance as she left the eccentric haunted house in Belgrave Square and stepped out into London proper.

One minute out of the door and her focus on spirits was disturbed by the usual London concerns. Had her car been booked? Or even clamped? How on earth was she going to drive back to Chelsea before the rush hour?

Unreal London.

She drove, her thoughts in limbo, through London. Along Knightsbridge in the spitting rain. Past the parks filled with nannies and toddlers. Past the travel agent that always advertised fares to Australia and taunted all Londoners with pictures of how good life could be Elsewhere. It always made her think of her daughter Saakshi in Sydney. And wonder when they would meet up again.

By the time she reached Chelsea, Rohini felt a sense of relief. She closed her front door and cut out the world. Inside now she hovered, making small changes to the rooms whilst the big thoughts floated above. Lifting this, shutting that, closing curtains, checking her expression in the mirror and finding it too stern. Smiling at the mirror, and looking at the still space that surrounded her.

She turned on her answering machine and a voice broke her silence. One of her private home-birth patients was in labor. It was a third baby,

and the mother was the sort of birther who popped out babies over lunch between courses.

She called them.

"Hello, Rohini here." Her involvement was so professional, nobody would have known that nowadays when she attended a birth she was more interested in the spirit helpers who gathered around than the new child taking its first breath of life.

The baby had already been born whilst Rohini's pager was switched off, as if to prove that time waits for no one, least of all a midwife. "But that's wonderful. The best births are always the ones where I'm not needed. How's Laura?"

She had switched off her pager and switched off from life. And during those few hours Laura's baby had been born. Whilst she was out of touch. Disconnected. Thinking about her own daughter and the loss of Aakash ...

Saakshi, will I be there when you deliver your child?

Rohini knew she had already done too much damage to her family to have the right to ask for anything. Anything at all. She wanted so much to be there, but she had been given strict instructions to stay away. Her daughter didn't need her. And neither had Laura.

So what of it? And why should a midwife feel obliged to deliver her daughter's children? A child always delivers itself, if its destiny is to be born at all.

"Rohini, are you still there? We need you now. When can you come over?"

Needed?

She said she would come. She had to. She was still responsible for her patient, even though nature had made her redundant. She gave her usual advice about how to keep the baby warm and nourish the post-natal mother. And with all these reassurances, she climbed back into her car. This time going out into the world of the living, instead of returning from the world of the dead.

Part One



Go into the Silence and find the Reality that informs your existence. Then you will see everything as sacred. Your eyes will fill with tears for this life that you have been given. You will look at the blue skies above and know that there is more — much, much more to life.

