

# *Specks of Dust*

*Pragashnie Naidoo*

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*“If they’d known, would they have swept the specks of dust  
under the carpet too?”*

*A Story of Love, Vengeance, and Survival!*



## *Dedication*

To all the children of the world! May we break the chains of abuse and treat you the way you so deserve, with dignity and care.

To all in the hands of systemic social constructs! May we boldly sever the ties that bound us stifled and voiceless.

To the vulnerable populations of the world! May we cut through the stigma and discrimination and live freely.

To future generations! May you forge ahead with a new normal that doesn't condone the concept of spanking and abuse. May your voice echo through subsequent generations.

## *Acknowledgements*

To my beautiful life partner – if I lived another thousand lives, I will never be able to repay your kindness, love, and generosity you give, not only to our kids and me but to others too. Thank you for saving me from myself. I am a woman of too many words, but I often get stuck on finding the right words to express how much I love you. My love for you doesn't compare to all the clichéd expressions of affection, compassion and caring.

To my beautiful sons - all that I do is for you. Breaking the chains of generational trauma, so you both, together with future generations, have the best lives possible steeped in unconditional love, empathy, compassion, and kindness. Thank you, Yashodan, for being my confidant who always inspired and motivated

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To my parents – without you, I wouldn't have been here. Thank you for bringing me into this world, and for your friendship in my adult years.

To my favourite brother and sister – you were never only my siblings. Thank you for being such an enormous part of my childhood and into adulthood. I never left [this world] because of you. Without us, there is no story. I love you!

It would not feel right if I did not acknowledge my nieces and nephew. I love you all immensely. May you carry on the legacy of knowing that you have a voice, use it, and, most importantly, understand what respect feels like, so you don't give anyone permission to disrespect you. Be you!

To Katariina Köngäs. Thank you for reading my story, taking it up several notches, and for giving me the confidence to carry on the process. You have held my hands till the end. I love you!

To Ginny Porter, thank you for your kindness and patience with me and the story. You've egged me on. I wrote a novel. You took the account to a greater competency level, and your expertise and advice have been profound. I will never forget the guidance and love from you during this process.

To those working hard every day to break the generational chains of child abuse, gender-based

violence, systemic racism, including other discriminations and promoting mental health awareness - thank you for keeping it going and, at most times, at the peril of your inner demons. It's a mammoth task to shift social paradigms, but together we can do it. We do it because we walked through it. It's challenging enough personally because we have to break through our generational constructs to rebuild a safe space for future generations so that they get to live in a fair and just world. We heal as we heal others. I see you! I hear you! I love you! We are because you are! *Charaiveti!* Keep walking!

To my late mother-in-law - she asked me to let people know in my interviews for my book, the reason for the story and what it meant to obtain a degree in my forties as an empowered woman. I was aware of how she came from a generation of women disempowerment. I wanted to do better. I never got to tell her that she has already broken the patriarchal chains. It has been evident in her son, my life partner, from the day I met him. He watched her, so he did things differently for me. He empowers us women every day, through his ideas of freedom. I thank you, Nanthee Govender for that, I love you.

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# Prologue

## *Divya and Darun - 1986*

The long walks to school were a breath of fresh air. Darun and Divya would cross the river on the far left from the mini bamboo-forest, and hopscotch on rocks to land gracefully on the other side to make their way to the Sweet Aunty to get our early morning sweets. They never had the money for sweets, but stealing ten cents from the auspicious brass *chombu* that sacredly held the weekly coins placed in it as an offering to Mother Luxmi, the goddess of good fortune, did get them quite a few unnecessary luxuries for the week.

Bubble-gum was one-cent for three, and bor and figs were one-cent a packet. The Sweet Aunty would sit on a low stool sprawled out like a Buddha in her sari tucking it in places to hide the rolls that seemed to coyly take a peek every now and then, as she systematically collected the coins for the exchange of the goods spread out on the cloth that she had neatly set out on the ground. She smiled all the time, and occasionally she would take her right index finger to push her thick-framed glasses back up the ridge of her nose because they slid down from the beads of sweat forming on her forehead and nose due to the exotic Durban heat.

Before the children could even get to the Sweet Aunty there was another obstacle they had to face after the river. Some days the beasts would be there and other days they would give them smooth passage to the Sweet Aunty and climb the small hill to get onto the road where their school stood in front of them. When

they were there the trip to school seemed longer and the breath of fresh air became stale with fear. The beasts usually followed the herd boy when they were majestically passing through the plain heading in the direction of the bamboo forest. Sometimes they lounged in the open air whilst the herd boy sat on the ground basking in the pleasant warmth of the sunrays. The cows' bottom jaws seemed to have a mind of their own moving from side to side busily chomping away whatever it is that cows chomped on, as Darun's heedless trousers shuffled to their rhythm. Darun would hold Divya's free hand and walk behind her clutching onto her school belt with his other hand as they both braved the fierce animals that towered above them taking their place on their grassy thrones. They would walk quietly at times trying not to disturb their rituals and meditations, and there were times they would scurry through the spaces between them. This is when the cows decided to let them know how displeased they were with a huge "Mooo" from their now disturbed religious chewing. Only when Darun and Divya made it through this obstacle would they start breathing again. Darun would run behind his sister while she held his hand pulling him to safety. All this was left in the distant stale air once they reached the Sweet Aunty.





## *Divya and Darun - 2017*

The old river behind the house seemed to have its banks chopped up wider making it impossible for anyone to cross. The river used to be a place of belonging, where tadpoles appeared during summer after the great spawning of the frogs in spring. The tadpoles would swim freely as they should during the first crucial few weeks of their lives. There were usually some unlucky ones when a big hand holding a cup was submerged into the river to capture them. As kids, they did not know any better and would often cruelly exploit nature, but Darun did have a sense that he needed to release them back to their wild habitat before going home to his own confinement. The bamboo reeds still towered above on the opposite bank facing east from the back door of the house. Their unswerving poles stood tall offering protection from the harshness of life once you cradled yourself in the belly of their forest. A wooden bridge strategically placed across the river banks merrily connected you to the other side – the blithe side. Through its veins, the beautiful, blithe side drew the malicious affairs from the other side and became its keeper of a paradox.

The house stood nervously with some kind of immunity provided by the newly erected precast wall that soldiered around the boundary of each property. It boldly pursued to assist in the menace of the country's crime. There was no free passage between properties.

The family still lived freely back then, during the apartheid days, as long as the children roamed demarcated areas ensuring they did not break the sanctions of the Group Areas Act. One time they returned from a visit to their aunt to see the door of the

house wide open. They thought someone had broken in only to realise they had forgotten to lock up. Nothing was stolen. Not a damn thing. Zilch. Nada! What would they steal anyway, the age-old mattress that they lay on at night or the all too sunken Imbuia lounge suite? Now every resident had burglar bars not to mention the faithful armed response that everyone devoutly signed up for. Things were certainly different back then when our illusion of freedom was confined to ordained areas. A place called home should be where children find comfort, love, the ideal family, the white picket fence and a place of protection, a womb to the world which sometimes exhibited far more dangers than the outside world. However, their home was a prison within the mirage of free-roaming in their confined areas.



The old house was now in its fourth occupancy since the family moved all those years ago and the senior resident was kind enough to let Darun in. Everything smelled so different and looked so much smaller than he remembered. He didn't ask to go upstairs, but it was clear from the modern finishes in the kitchen and open plan lounge that the home was well-kept. The only bathroom in the house felt like a little hut hidden from the rest of the ground floor under the stairs. Many nights were spent on that toilet floor where Darun and Divya took refuge from the great, big monsters that possessed their mother every so often. Castigated by the monsters, they had nowhere else to run when the stairs that led to the upstairs bedrooms were blocked.

A kind old lady, the Paarti of the house, greeted Darun, "Vannakam. Are you Darun? Come, Khanna. She's outside in the backyard. She wants to go to the

bamboos by the river, but there's no way to the river from here. It's all fenced off at the boundary, and there's no back gate to the open ground." She waddled nonchalantly as Darun kept in step behind her to go to his sister Divya.

The Paarti continued to talk as they walked down the slight slope to where the woman stood with her white *Punjabi*. She would not say her name and she kept repeating, "Please take me to the bamboos. He's waiting for me and he promised to always be there when things are bad. Things are bad now, so please take me there."

That's when Darun noticed Paarti's cellphone in Divya's hand. Darun gently asked her for it and took it to Paarti's grandchild to help search the phone to call someone. He thought it must be the last number she dialled. "Just watch your step there, Khanna," Paarti pointed to an insignificant mound that Darun had to step down.

That mound was quite big thirty years ago. Their mother had cried and blamed the death of her father on that mound of sand that was put there a few days before he died. It was bad luck and a curse to have heaps of sand delivered to your yard. It was ominous and denoted death and burial, though Hindus never bury their dead but cremate them. It never made sense to Darun then, but he supposed they had lived in superstitious times.

The woman stood there holding onto the precast fence peering through the patterns on the top slab standing on the balls of her feet to get a better glimpse of whatever it was she was looking for.

"Divya, how are you doing?" Darun's voice startled her as he started to speak, but she did not turn around.

“Hey, Darun, I waited for you. Look what they’ve done. They’ve blocked all of this, and I can’t get to him,” she spoke with real concern.

“There’s another way to the river, Divya. We just need to go around all the other houses and access it from the beginning of this road, but we need to come back some other time when it’s much brighter and not nearing dark,” he replied.

Divya didn’t seem pleased with what he said and annoyingly replied, “But he will help us, Darun. You know he will always help us. Don’t you trust him?”

“Please listen to me, Acca, you know I will do anything for you. We can pick this up tomorrow when it’s brighter and I’m sure he’ll be there, waiting for you.”

Calling her ‘big sister’ in Tamil always got Divya’s attention, and she knew that when Darun called her that, he was looking out for her safety. There was always a seriousness to the word. She turned around and looked at him with such familiar sadness in her eyes. Her tear-stained cheeks ran black from her *kajol*, and her long hair lay limp and unkempt around her shoulders. Darun took her by the hand and led her towards the house, negotiating the small uphill mound again. They walked through the house, out the front door and up the once familiar short flight of stairs. Then a long landing and another short stairway. As Darun reached out to unlatch the steel pedestrian gate, Divya turned around to look at the Paarti standing at the front doorway with her eleven-year-old grandson and spoke loud enough for the granny to hear her.

“This home is full of ghosts—ghosts from the past, my past, my brother’s past. Do you not feel it?” she inquired. “I’m afraid it’s coming for you all, and there’s

nothing you can do about it. It will not leave you alone till it has taken your soul and the soul of everyone dear to you. There's evil that lived here, and it still lives here lying dormant until the time is right. And now the time is right. Please take care of yourself, Paarti."

The granny, who was close to seventy, looked at Divya and Darun somewhat nervously but reassuringly and said, "Don't worry my child, we will take care. God will always keep us safe."

Divya sounded a doubtful chuckle, "God never saved me and my brother all those years ago. What makes you think you're so special?"

On that note, Divya turned around, and they both left quietly through the gate. Darun opened the door of the old yellow Mazda and let Divya slide into the front passenger seat. The old cow didn't start instantly on the ignition, so Darun had to rev the engine a bit to warm it up.



Darun took Divya back home. She was quiet all the way. She opened the door to her apartment and Darun followed her into her bedroom to make sure she was okay. She took off her sandals, pulled the covers halfway down the bed, and organised the pillows.

While she laid down to sleep, Darun asked, "Must I put the lights off for you, sis?"

"Yes, please Darun. Darun?"

"Yes, sis?"

"Thank you for always being here for me. I love you."

"And I love you, sis. Get some sleep, we have a long day ahead tomorrow. The funeral arrangements have been made. I know you want to visit the bamboo forest, but we'll have to get to that on Wednesday."

“I know,” she replied. “See you in the morning. Goodnight.”

“Hey, sis. What did you mean by telling the old lady that?”

“I worry about her grandson. He reminded me of us.”

# *Part One*



# 1

## *Goodbye old house*

The empty house left a familiar strangeness—the same strangeness she had felt living in it for almost all her life. Divya helped clear the last box from her room. She thought of the many events that had occurred, some expected, some frightening, and some confusing. She contemplated how moments like this mould and define your character as you become a product of circumstances from an early age which compound throughout your life.

Changing schools was a big move for Divya. She was moving from primary school to high school, and she felt burdened with anxiety since she first got wind of the change a few months before. It felt like the universe said that it wasn't enough that she was changing schools—she was also moving to a new house. She started to wonder ...

*Who was going to watch over my brother? Who was going to take care of him and protect him from the nonsensical, from the things that are conveniently hushed into safekeeping? At home I can protect him from the monsters that existed here, but what about the monsters outside the house? The monsters kept them locked up by their own culpability, as they had already gone too far to complain, or maybe they were held captive by the twisted sense of pleasurable fear they got from it all.*

There were three empty rooms upstairs. One of them was where their parents had slept, and she and her brother had their own separate rooms. He had often



slept with her as scary things came in all shapes and sizes. Divya visited each room, going into her parents' room first.

She stood at the doorway of their room and dropped her eyelids shut, letting the photo memory of the room take up space in her head. Her senses were activated when entering the room and she caught a whiff of a mixture of the scent of her mother and the woody-floral perfume she used. It was a pleasant, comforting smell. Her mind's eye then reached the cupboards that stood boldly against the wall opposite the door.

Snuggled between the cupboards was a dressing table, where her mother had often sat on a cushioned wooden chair doing her makeup in front of the mirror. On most days, Divya would help pin-up her mother's hair or attach clips to the top front of her hair to keep it from bothering her eyes.

She imagined her mother standing in front of the mirror. Her mother was an exceptionally beautiful woman, and she knew it—but not egotistically; she just shyly acknowledged her beauty. Everything about her was perfect; the way her nose hooked slightly in the front and her dark brown eyes nestled in exact symmetry on both sides. Her skin was flawless and had the perfect tan that any White woman would risk skin cancer for in the Durban sun. Her height gave her body a slender appearance, and her bust-line was typical of a Hindu goddess. Divya always felt compared to her, to this unmarked goddess. To think she was a product of her, yet she could never live up to the beauty of her mother. They were often asked if they were sisters, even though Divya was just thirteen years old. She had not even started budding and would never blossom into a full-bodied woman. Every part of her body was flat.

*How can I ever satisfy the world by being a cheap replica of the beauty of my mother?* She thought as she twirled her hair upwards in an attempt to copy Rose's hairstyle.

The cot that kept her and her brother in safe custody during their infant years was partially concealed behind the door. In later years, it had been full of her things; things she hoarded and things that she kept as mementoes. It was filled with haberdashery, old clothes, and cosmetics of all sorts. Their parent's bed had been against the wall opposite the cot. It was an old bed, but it was always tidy. The blue knitted shawl-like bedcover always had its frills combed through at the end, leaving no possibility of getting tangled. Two pillows laid under the cover at the headboard, which was folded under the pillows, making it look like two eyes, or two boobs, or two adjacent islands... You could let your imagination run wild.

That was everything the space in the bedroom could hold, leaving a small area empty in the middle of all the strategically placed items. Divya opened her eyes. That was all she wanted to take from this room. She would not allow her photo memory to capture anything else, as she wanted a peaceful, perfect departure from the room. She didn't want the demons to follow her. The room's emptiness made her feel more at home—more than when it had been full.

Divya closed the door as she went back into the narrow passage with the door to her bedroom on the right and the door to her brother's bedroom on the left where the prayer room had been. She wanted to say goodbye to all the rooms before she had to descend the stairs back into reality.