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the Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny

A NOVEL

Kiran Desai

BOOKER PRIZE–WINNING AUTHOR OF

THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS

HOGARTH

BY KIRAN DESAI

The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny

The Inheritance of Loss

Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard

The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny

A N O V E L

Kiran Desai

H O G A R T H

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Lonely? *Lonely?*

CHAPTER

1

THE SUN WAS STILL SUBMERGED in the wintry murk of dawn when Ba, Dadaji, and their daughter, Mina Foi, wrapping shawls closely about themselves, emerged upon the veranda to sip their tea and decide, through vigorous process of elimination, their meals for the rest of the day. Orders must be given to the cook at breakfast so that he could go directly to market. It was Mina's fifty-fifth birthday, the first of December in the year 1996, and the mutton for the dinner kebabs had been marinating overnight in the kitchen.

"Rice?" Ba shouted. "Roti?" She was growing deaf, but she knew she must raise her voice over the morning traffic thundering past the front gate and the cawing of hundreds of crows—their racket and the sun's struggle so closely linked, it was as if each morning the crows gave birth to the light. "Pilau?" she suggested. "Paratha?"

Perched above them, at the entrance portico, sat a plaster bust of a portly gentleman in a cravat, perhaps inspired by a drawing made by the bungalow's original owner, who had toured Europe, sketchbook in hand, in the same manner he'd observed foreigners doing in India. And perhaps it was the fault of the artist's rendering, or the dissonant surroundings of Allahabad, or a splattering of bird droppings, but the bust resembled less a dignified nobleman than a foolish snob with an interest in the sky overhead, which had not turned vivid for a quarter of a century. Not since the national highway had been widened to accommodate the lorries that trawled

cabbages, cement, goats, wheat, and—if one was to believe the newspapers or the gossip—prostitutes and venereal disease.

Unperturbed by the fancy gentleman, or the polluting lorries, or the family upon the veranda, the crows' *kava kaw* rose to crescendo.

"Cauliflower?" Ba urged. "Spinach?"

"Potato?" Dadaji said, lifting his feet off the ground. He rubbed them together as lovingly and extravagantly as if they were soft, velvet hands. "The Gujarati loves a potato more than most," he said, as if explaining themselves to an absent anthropologist. They were a displaced family, Gujaratis marooned in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Years ago Dadaji's law practice had brought him to the Allahabad court.

Two squat phones—one in the living room corner, one on Dadaji's desk—rang out like toads in a swamp, *trr trr trr,* and they knew it would be a birthday call from Mina Foi's brother, Manav, Dadaji and Ba's second child. Dadaji picked up the phone on his desk and Mina Foi the extension in the living room. Ba never spoke on the phone for she had not the habit, even if she'd had the hearing.

"Long life, Mina," Manav wished his sister.

"It's been too long already," said Mina Foi. She wanted to tell her brother that she hoped the missionary couple would stop by as they had last year with cookies made with chocolate chips brought from Iowa—but then they may not remember it was her birthday, and she could not remind them. She was forbidden to make telephone calls on her own because they were a useless luxury.

Dadaji discussed the rising value of one of his investments, and then, at the end of the conversation, he inquired about the health of his daughter-in-law, Seher, and his granddaughter, Sonia.

"We are worried about Sonia," Manav answered. Sonia attended college in Vermont. "She's fallen into a depression. She weeps on the telephone, then when we call her back a day later, the same."

"But why?" asked Dadaji. "She's been there three years already. Why is she suddenly crying?"

“She says she is lonely.” The last time Sonia had traveled home was two years ago.

“Lonely? *Lonely?*”

In Allahabad they had no patience with loneliness. They might have felt the loneliness of being misunderstood; they might know the sucked-dead feeling of Allahabad afternoons, a tide drawn out perhaps never to return, which was a kind of loneliness; but they had never slept in a house alone, never eaten a meal alone, never lived in a place where they were unknown, never woken without a cook bringing tea or wishing good morning to several individuals:

Namaste, Khansama.

Good morning, Mummy.

Good morning, Daddy.

Mina, good morning.

Ayah, namaste—

Whenever Dadaji thought of the Wordsworth poem he had been taught in school—*I wandered lonely as a cloud / that floats on high o’er vales and hills*—the line struck him as so ridiculous, it made him throw back his head and guffaw so hard his upper dentures fell down with a smash. But feeling unusually generous because of the growing value of his shares, Dadaji directed Mina Foi to telephone Sonia. Because vision problems afflicted him—a detached retina, glaucoma, cataracts—he put a magnifying glass to his rheumy red eye and bent over so his nose touched the address book as he read out the number for the Hewitt College dormitory in North Hewitt. Mina Foi put her finger into the holes of the telephone dial and tried for nearly an hour to call until her finger numbed. Finally the phone rang distantly, and someone with what she assumed was a cowboy drawl answered.

Luckily Dadaji picked up the extension line. Mina Foi did not trust herself to speak to a cowboy. Her finger remained stuck up in the air with a crick.

“Hallo, hallo, please connect us to Sonia Shah, who is in room number five,” shouted Dadaji. Then when Sonia arrived at the phone booth, “What

is the matter? Why is your father saying you are unhappy? Your studies are all right?"

"Yes," said Sonia in a measly voice.

"Then? What is the problem?"

"What do you get to eat there?" Mina Foi inquired.

"Macaroni!" answered her grandfather on the phone extension.

"No, Dadaji," answered Sonia, "the menu is very international. We have Chinese night, Mexican night."

Mina Foi ventured, "Indian night?"

"Lunch is sometimes Tomato Tigers, which are tomatoes and cheese on a toasted English muffin with curry powder on top."

"Never heard of such a thing!" Outrage.

"Pudding?" Mina Foi whispered.

"Brownies with ice cream, pecan pie, and blueberry pie."

Just to contemplate such lavish mysteries made Mina Foi faint with heartbreak.

"Pie is a very American food," Dadaji confirmed. "Well, what are you crying for, you lucky girl?"

Sonia tried to explain. "I've ballooned in my own head. I cannot stop thinking about myself and my problems. I'm dreading the winter. In the dark and cold, it will get worse—"

"Do some jumping jacks, get your spirits up, and then pick up your books. You have to persevere through hardship. If I hadn't left the life I was born to, you would be in Nadiad, married at sixteen, not studying in America."

Mina Foi's hands strangled each other in her lap when she remembered her childhood visits to their ancestral home, where the women scrounged what was left after the men had eaten. When the girls menstruated they were banished—even from this marginal existence—to a hut at the bottom of the property, where they ate from clay dishes that were later broken upon the rubbish heap so they would not pollute the world.

Dadaji had single-handedly extracted them from such backwardness. He may be iron-willed and furious-tempered, but these were precisely the

qualities that had given Ba a place at the polished mahogany dining table every day of the year. When he had retired, he'd taken her on a round-the-world trip along with his younger brother, Amal Kaka, and Amal Kaka's wife, because Amal Kaka had not yet stolen the ancestral property and the brothers were still close.

All these years later, Ba and Dadaji could not remember a single sight, not a monument, not a museum, but they never forgot the green muffler lost on the way to Machu Picchu or the machine that promised to deliver a recorded history of the Vatican through headphones, but when they put in the coins, it didn't, and when they went to complain, the counter was closed for lunch. "Should we return in twenty minutes?" they had asked the guard. "Does lunch happen in twenty minutes?!" the guard had replied angrily. They remembered this, then they remembered how they had suffered constipation in Vienna and spent a day searching for reasonably priced fruit but found none. In London, at a hotel called The Buckingham, where you assumed people would be honest, they had been told breakfast would be included in the rate, but it was not. They'd saved a small fortune in Paris by cooking rice and lentils in the electric kettle for their dinners, Dadaji climbing on a chair and dismantling the hotel room's fire alarm. They'd been disappointed by French cooking—what was all the fuss about? They found the same three sandwiches and two sauces everywhere they went. With these two sauces, the French had terrorized the world.

Then, in most foreign lands, they'd observed that the denizens had no respect for Indian tourists, whereas they pursued and flattered the white ones. Therefore it was best to reside among your own people and keep to your own meticulous standards. Having made the big world small, Ba and Dadaji returned home satisfied.

"Why lonely?" said Dadaji to Sonia. "We found Americans most friendly. When we went to the Grand Canyon, we left our bananas on the bus, and a lady got off and chased us down to give them to us. She had to wait for the next bus."

"They are friendly," agreed Sonia's tiny voice.

"And a beautiful country," said Dadaji.

“It is,” said Sonia.

“And so much empty space!”

“Yes.” They heard Sonia begin to weep, and then the line went dead.

They reemerged upon the veranda; it would be too extravagant to call again. The sun was now glinting blearily above the haze; the crows had quieted; and the hunchbacked ayah had arrived to sweep, lugging a twig broom several times her size. With her head and face covered with her sari, which was the color of dust, she swept the dust from the house to the veranda, then down each wide, shallow step out into the guava orchard—which in season produced the famous pink guavas of Allahabad—fanning the dust into the dust upon the dust, to make a final pattern of dust scallops all the way to the outskirts of the compound.

By evening, the dust would have flown back and clogged the little wire squares in the insect screens, covered the philodendrons, shadowed the name on the gate that read *M. L. Shah, Advocate, High Court,* sanded the papers and files, imparted a crunch to the typewriter keys. When Sonia had been a little girl, Mina Foi had shown her—with a certain pride in her misfortune—that when she spat into the sink, she spat out lorry dust beige.

Ba and Dadaji hadn’t taken Mina Foi on their round-the-world tour, for by then, she had proved herself unlucky, and when someone is born unlucky, you don’t have to make an effort with them. Thirty-three years ago Dadaji had greeted his daughter’s return from a six-month marriage with silence suffused with blame, although he was the one who had brokered the engagement. It had felt like Mina Foi’s fault because she was unfortunate.

“Nothing ever works for Mina,” Ba had announced, and it was as if her tragedy had been washed, folded, and snapped into one of those black tin trunks filled with trousseau saris and mothballed woolens that outlasted generations. On her birthday each year, though, to make it an occasion, the Ambassador was soaped and washed by the driver in as intimate and friendly a manner as if the car were a buffalo, then driven to the front portico for mother and daughter to visit Mina Foi’s patrimony, the ancestral jewelry secured in a locker at the State Bank of Baroda. On the way, they dropped Dadaji off at the Colonel’s home on Thornton Lane to keep his

weekly chess-playing appointment. Clad in a navy blazer and red tie, for he always dressed formally when he left the house, Dadaji joined the Colonel, also clad in jacket and tie, waiting with the chessboard on his front lawn and he reminded the women to return for him in two hours' time.

Mina Foi was wearing her new birthday sari of flowery purple. Her mother wore one in a green wavy pattern. Both women had switched from cotton to polyester, which they found more durable, glamorous, and easier to care for. On her feet, Mina Foi wore her usual blue Hawaii chappals. Her soles were chapped. She had a wart on her nose, a slight mustache, and soft, hairy legs, which she lavished against each other under her sari when she was pleased, or sometimes in bed, in the predawn when she was peaceful, holding on to her sleeping breasts. When she held her breasts and caressed her legs in this early hour, it was for a little gentleness and kindness at the beginning of the day.

Mina Foi and her mother arrived at the bank and descended from the daylight into the morgue-like basement, where a security guard with a curly mustache and a rifle that belonged to the past age of weaponry guarded the metal lockers that held sleeping treasures. A clerk recorded the time of their arrival and held the shaky ladder so Mina Foi could clamber to their family safe at the topmost row, from which she handed down faded boxes and plastic bags, noticing meanwhile the clerk's bobby-pinned henna toupee and feeling a pang for his vanity. The boxes and bags bore the names of establishments long shuttered, names that came from a past age of grandeur: Jewellers Gopaldas Chandraprakash & Sons, Bhagatram Jainarain Jewellers, Haji Rafique Jewellers, KG Sultania Calcutta Walla Jewellers. The plastic bags were discolored and crispy with age, secured with rubber bands that had melted in the summer heat and hardened into wormy encrustations. The cotton wool that wrapped the jewels was also gray, but inside the gleam of the gems had been concentrated by age. Mina Foi and her mother admired the cloudy rubies and emeralds, the knobby pearls with a clotted buttermilk sheen that were mixed with glass and simple beads in the gay Gujarati style. There were kundun diamonds in large, clumsy chandeliers, part of Mina Foi's dowry that Ba had worried

Mina Foi's in-laws would keep after Mina Foi's divorce. When they didn't, the better to establish they were the blameless party, Ba experienced not happiness, of course, given the circumstance, but a resettling of her gut. The State Bank locker had been decimated, then it was restored. Her spirit had been assaulted, now it was sanguine. There was, however, a deeper sense of loss that haunted her, one she had inherited from her mother, who lamented, over and over, a precious Burmese ruby the size of a pigeon's egg that had vanished when the family was forced to leave their business in Rangoon and return to Nadiad. The loss of the ruby and the downfall of her father's wealth meant that something had shifted in Ba's sense of self.

When Sonia had last visited her grandparents in Allahabad, the summer before she left for college in the States, Ba and Mina Foi had taken her to the bank to visit the family gems. After reciting the story of the lost ruby from Burma, Ba had dutifully said, "The most beautiful set of all will be for you, Sonia, when you marry." She'd masked the pain of uttering this sentence by looking serious, as if discussing illness, and she had turned away in case Sonia brazenly accepted, "Thank you, Ba."

Mina Foi had helped Sonia try on a pearl bracelet with a tricky emerald clasp, remembering how she'd worn it on her wedding day with—and this is what still wrung Mina Foi—a giddy hope. She had been so innocent, and when her innocence was destroyed, she'd felt so ashamed. It had suddenly occurred to her that she was fastening her ill luck upon Sonia: "Take it off!"

Ba, unable to stand her plummeting heart, had said, "Come on, now, put it carefully back!"

But the clasp would not unclasp, and Mina Foi had to wrest the bracelet off Sonia's hand, scraping her skin.

"They don't wear jewelry in America, just small trinkets," Ba had said.

Now, on Mina Foi's fifty-fifth birthday, Ba made sure that the gems were not frivolously tried on, only admired and counted to make sure no piece was missing. She mopped the sweat from her upper lip with her hankie. "Fortunately you've never been one for dressing up!"

Did Ba mean that had Mina a taste for dressing up, her divorce at age twenty-two and the fact she no longer had an occasion to adorn herself

would have been intolerable? That she was fortunate in this regard? Or did her mother mean it was fortunate she'd been divorced and that her wedding jewelry had been returned to her mother's bank locker?

She felt an unusual stab of hate for Ba. If her life had been different, Mina Foi might have been a different person as well—one who might have enjoyed sitting before her reflection at a dressing table mirror, dabbing perfume behind her ears, donning earrings, a necklace, rings, bracelets.

She said, "But how would I know if I'm one for dressing up or not?"

Her mother did not answer, not seeing how this question could be answered, and they bundled the pearls, emeralds, rubies, diamonds, and gold back into the dingy cotton wool, back into their secret boxes, back into the crispy, disintegrating plastic bags. They swept away the broken, wormy rubber bands and asked the clerk for new ones.

"I don't have any," he said grumpily. "Why did you not bring your own?" Then he opened a drawer and gave them two, glaring.

Mina Foi locked the safe again and handed back the spindly key. "Why don't you make a stronger key?" she asked. Mother and daughter climbed back up into the late afternoon, unsettled by how this excursion hadn't reiterated and deepened their bond, which they considered unassailable, but had instead taught them that it could be vanquished by a pearl.

"Do you think Betsy and Brett will come by with chocolate chip cookies the way they did last year?" asked Mina Foi.

"I don't know. They may not remember."

"Should we stop by their house?"

"Stop by their house? But it is far out of the way." Betsy and Brett lived in a poor neighborhood at the outskirts to emphasize their missionary devotion. "And we are already late collecting Daddy."

Exactly on time, Ba and Mina Foi retrieved Dadaji, who was waiting amidst the Colonel's petunias in a deflated mood because he had lost the game, and they returned home feeling the relief of approaching sundown, anticipating the dinner that would bring their deliberations at the hour of dawn to a culmination.

“The galawati is a damn tricky kebab,” reminded Dadaji. “It must be smooth as silk.”

Ba said, “Khansama uses no egg or any kind of binding agent, and then it is an exceedingly delicate task to turn the kebab. But you can only eat such rich food occasionally or you will develop gout.”

Ba supervised Khansama delicately turning the kebabs, and she counted so no piece went missing before it was served. She inserted her nose deep into every dish to sniff closely and suspiciously, making sure all was as it should be. She checked the storeroom and the fridge to be certain every jar and canister was depleted only in exact proportion to their meal. The cockroaches that lived inside the warm laboring fridge didn’t bother her—in fact, she couldn’t see them, the voltage was so low. Neither did she notice that atop the greasy jars, daddy longlegs had got their long legs stuck and died. Nor that at the top of the door almost as tall as the wall, a lizard had been squashed, and the squashed leather of its torso and empty face still dangled from the high doorframe.

Then she bathed. In Allahabad they took their baths before dinner and dined formally about the table in their pajamas, nightgowns, and robes.

“It’s Daddy’s, it’s Daddy’s,” shouted Ba when Mina Foi reached for the last bit of potato. Ba never addressed her husband directly, disrespectfully, and she rescued the delectable morsel to deposit on her husband’s plate. This delivery of a potato to her husband linked back to the loss of the Burmese ruby. Dadaji ate it with a spoon and a fork and the disgruntled expression of having to be the person dealing with a problem as usual. “Everyone likes a potato,” he said, “except for our daughter-in-law, Seher. She is the only person I have ever met who does not like a potato.”

Mina Foi’s finger zipped out and collected a stray sliver of fried onion that lay upon the tablecloth, and she put the sliver in her mouth with an absent-minded expression, not glancing about to see if anyone had spotted her because if nobody sees you, you didn’t do what you did. She was brimful of sadness for no particular reason, just a poignancy, a melancholy that comes from eating such royal food when your life is so very empty, when there is austerity in all matters save dinner. Or was it the phone call to

Sonia that had unsettled her, bringing in the big world and the knowledge that other people out there lived lives in fresh snow hills eating blueberry pie? Or she was brimful of sadness because the missionaries had indeed forgotten her birthday. Her niece, too, she remembered, had not thought of wishing her aunt.

Ba's flower-shaped diamond earrings, which she never removed, not even when she slept, caught the glum light in the dining room as she licked the last dal off the ladle with housewifely efficiency. She began to count the number of kebabs to make sure that none disappeared before the leftovers were presented at another meal.

"But Khansama may not have served all the pieces in the first place," Dadaji said. "Or even cooked them."

Here Mina Foi said loyally, "Mummy knows exactly what a kilo of mutton looks like." There was no point harboring anger against the only person who had tried to give you a birthday treat.

When the knives and spoons had been licked, the size of leftovers memorized, and the melamine dishes removed, Dadaji held up his hand.

When he did this, Ba upturned her surprisingly small palm, the paleness of which had indicated caste superiority, so it was considered at the time Ba and Dadaji's marriage was arranged. When Ba upturned her palm, Mina Foi repeated the gesture with her large brown hand that resembled her father's. Khansama came out with a tray laden with bottles of pills and handed the bottles to Mina Foi, who counted the pills into the palm of Ba, who in turn passed them one by one to her husband, who conceded to lift his own water glass to his mouth. Vitamins, papaya enzyme, cod liver oil, Dabur Chyawanprash.

"The date has gone on the Seven Seas garlic capsules." Mina Foi scrutinized one of the bottles.

"You take them then," Dadaji ordered Khansama. "Don't waste them. Give them to your children—perfectly fine for another year or two."

Mina Foi noticed that the yellowed newspaper that lined the tray read: *Boy Brought Up by Wolves Is Found in Tribal Area.*

After all the practical matters had been taken care of, Dadaji said, “Look here!”

They looked at him.

“When I was playing chess with the Colonel, he happened to mention his grandson in America—I’d completely forgotten about the boy. I asked if he was married—he has finished his master’s degree—and they said he was not. I asked what he was waiting for. They said he had his own ideas and those ideas did not amount to anything. Meanwhile the Colonel’s wife told me she could smell a royal aroma when she drove past our house. She said, ‘I thought if they didn’t send us any kebabs, then there must be some reason. At least give us the recipe, I’ve been begging for years.’ ”

“Why should we hand over the secrets of our kitchen for no reason?” asked Ba. In any case, why would the Colonel’s wife make such a request when everyone knew a person must always render a sly omission when pressured for a recipe—subtract an ingredient, jiggle a quantity to leave the recipient tormented: *Something isn’t right!*

Dadaji said, “Let’s take the remaining galawati over tomorrow.”

“But why?” asked Mina Foi. “We could eat them for lunch.”

“If Sonia is lonely, the problem is easily solved. Let us make an introduction between Sonia and their grandson.”

Dadaji, Ba, and Mina Foi each privately recalled an incident from a decade ago that nobody had forgotten, when the Colonel had encouraged Dadaji to invest in a woolen mill started by an army colleague to whom the Colonel believed he owed his life—they had fought in Kashmir together. The business failed, and the considerable investment in military blankets, socks, balaclavas, and sweaters had resulted in a financial loss to Dadaji, who had been as upset, naturally, as the Colonel had been apologetic. While the incident had interjected a new undertow of regret and falsity into their former neighborliness, by the magnanimity of continuing to dispense free legal advice on the subject of the Colonel’s court case seeking compensation for the family land in Lahore that was lost during Partition, by continuing to send across kebabs and other dishes from their kitchen as unstintingly as always, by continuing their games of chess and gallantly

losing, Dadaji had been unconsciously biding time until he might call the debt home.

It was essential to remain close to those who had caused you harm so that the ghost of guilt might breathe through their dreams, that their guilt might slowly mature to its fullest potential. Not that Dadaji had thought it through—it never worked to consciously plot, to crudely calculate—and he himself was astonished at the possibility of what was unfolding. Even now it would never do to name this liability. The Colonel would not allow his grandson to bear the burden of his grandfather's mistake. Dadaji and Ba may simply suggest a desirable match between the grandchildren, two America-educated individuals, two equals, two people who naturally belonged together because of where they came from and where they were going. Without either of them mentioning it, the obligation might be beautifully unraveled.

Ba and Mina Foi were once again witness to the brilliance of Dadaji. He might have lost the afternoon game, but he'd played a consummate match of chess. Said Ba, "And they will not have the face to ask for a dowry!"

Again the driver soaped and washed the rotundity of the Ambassador and drove the family to the Colonel's residence. They carried a ceremonial scalloped silver platter of kebabs.

Dadaji said, "We recently heard from our granddaughter. It seems loneliness is a big problem over there in America."

Mina Foi noticed on the side table of inlaid ivory that along with the Colonel's wife's ikebana arrangement, there was a photograph of their grandson. Haughty with the nose of a nawab but the lips of a cherub, he was reading a newspaper. She found him handsome.

"Lonely? *Lonely?*" said the Colonel's wife.

"Without people one is nothing," said Mina Foi. "Especially in wintertime. It snows nonstop over there." Betsy and Brett had lent her *Little House on the Prairie,* which had become Mina Foi's favorite book. She must have read it a hundred times, although her parents considered novels as much a useless luxury as telephone calls to missionaries.