All for Love
2001

PROLOGUE

BLINDNESS KEEN

As I sit down to write this letter, I scarcely know how to address you. "Love" or "darling" or "sweetheart" belongs to the distant past. Yet each of you lives in my memory the way you were and the way I knew you, in the sixties.

I was prompted to write this book about each of you individually, and about the four of you together, because of a long and profound interior journey that I started in 1970 and that has altered my life. When you knew me, I was resistant to any such undertaking, so you may be surprised that I embarked on it at all. Indeed, I myself was surprised, so much so that I did not breathe a word of it to anyone during the years in which I was engaged in it, or for years afterward. And yet, strangely, my journey was not taken alone. In a metaphorical sense, all of you came along with me. In fact, each of you, in your individual way, prompted me to undergo the process that provided me, bit by bit, with a new perspective on my life,

even as, in my loneliness, my relationship with my guide became a surrogate for my lost relationships with you.

You will find the full story of that journey in this book, but I should caution you that, in order to describe it, I needed to tell the intimate details of the joyous and painful times I spent with each of you. By publishing an account of our private romantic relationships, I am taking the strangers who will read it into my confidence. They will sit in judgment on us—on what was done, what was said, and what was not said. The thought of this may be unsettling to you, especially since the only basis readers will have for their view is my account. But if there is any embarrassment at the revelations in the text, or blame for all the things that went horribly wrong, it will attach only to me, for I have taken care to disguise the identity of individuals wherever I felt it appropriate to do so.

ONE IMPULSE for laying myself bare in this uncharacteristic way is the wish to get at the truth of exactly what happened, another is to understand the effect of love on one's sense of self, and still another is to put in place a piece in the mosaic of the Continents of Exile series of books, which I have been writing and publishing, between other books, for the past thirty years. In the series, I explore many continents, real and imagined, that I have inhabited and from which I have been exiled, and also examine some of the things that I have come to understand about my personal history, things that, in many instances, I had no idea even existed before I began my self-exploration. In fact, my aim in Continents has been to take subjective experiences and put them into an objective framework and so avoid the pitfalls of confessional writing. I know that I would not have been able to do that without the long, arduous journey, which, among other things, changed my attitude toward my blindness.

When we were seeing each other (how, even today, the word "seeing" mesmerizes me), the fact of my blindness was never mentioned, referred to, or alluded to. My recent friends cannot believe that could have been the case—indeed, from my present vantage point, I myself can scarcely believe it, especially since we

were so intimate in every other respect. The silence must have been a testament to the force of my will.

I now understand that, at the time, I was in the grip of the fantasy that I could see. The fantasy was unconscious and had such a hold on me, was so intense and had so many ramifications, that your indulgence in it was the necessary condition of my loving you. Indeed, if I got interested in a woman and she interfered by hint or gesture with the fantasy, I would avoid her, feeling sad and frustrated. Yet there was hardly a day that I did not feel defeated, condescended to, and humiliated—when I did not long to be spared the incessant indignities that assailed me. To give a fairly innocuous example, I still come across a man I have known since my university days who tells me his name every time I see him. I have gently told him many times that I recognize him by his voice, but to no effect. Although this man is a historian of international repute, he cannot seem to comprehend that a voice is as distinctive as a face. Could it be that the fantasies that sighted people have about the blind are based less on reality than are those that blind people have about the sighted?

Even when I was most under the influence of my fantasy, I maintained the habit of checking external reality. I never accidentally walked off a cliff, for instance. Without such continual checking, I could not have survived in the sighted world. But the sighted can think what they like about the blind without feeling the need to check the reality of the blind. What a gulf! In my experience, the sighted go from one extreme to the other—from assuming that the blind are virtually cut off from all perception to endowing them with extrasensory perception. When I ended up as a writer, I thought that I would be able to bridge that gulf—that that would be one of the benefits of my apprenticeship to the craft. But it turned out that people who can see seldom come into contact with those people who can't, and therefore have no particular need to understand them. Even if they did, they generally have an elemental fear associated with the loss of sight that they cannot easily overcome.

I NEEDED to be accepted on my own terms by you and anyone else I was close to. It was, therefore, easier for me to conduct myself as if I could see. So the fantasy was not wholly irrational. In order for me to live as if I could see, it had to remain largely unconscious. I had to function as if I were on automatic pilot. Talking about the fantasy, analyzing it, bringing it out into the open, would have impeded my functioning. Or, at least, that was my unconscious fear. I went overboard. I allowed the fantasy to pervade every part of my life: the way I dressed myself, wrote books and articles, collected antique furniture and modern paintings.

Over the years, I have often thought of asking, "How was it that you all played along without once slipping up?" Was my fantasy infectious? Did I seek you out because you were susceptible to my reality and, in your own ways, could take leave of your reality and mold yourselves to mine? Anyway, isn't that the sort of thing that all people do when they are in love—uniting, as it were, to become, as Genesis has it, "one flesh"? Yet I wonder whether, in my case, your accommodation prevented you from getting to really know me and me from getting to really know you, thereby condemning me ultimately to devastating isolation. But then, as this book will make clear, the fault was mine. I no doubt impressed you with my mastery of my surroundings. Sometimes I wonder if, as a result, you credited me with something like the exceptional sight that Keats ascribes to Homer:

Aye on the shores of darkness there is light,
And precipices show untrodden green,
There is a budding morrow in midnight,
There is a triple sight in blindness keen.

But you knew me well enough to understand that, even in those heady days, I would never have laid claim to the "triple sight" that gave Homer the power, as Keats imagines it, to see and describe the heavens, the sea, and the earth. I merely felt that I was not limited in any way, and I think I must have

felt that from the moment I became blind, two months short of my fourth birthday, as a result of an attack of cerebrospinal meningitis. When I was twenty-three, I published a youthful autobiography, which dealt with my illness and my blindness, but by the time we met I had all but disowned the book as juvenilia, so I never mentioned it to any of you. Now, belatedly, in the hope of clearing things up, I want to tell you the things that it never occurred to me to tell you then.

When I bounced back from my bout of meningitis, which lasted some two months, I probably forgot in my conscious mind what it had been like to see. Unconsciously, I assumed that I could do everything that anyone else could do—indeed, I was scarcely aware of any change, for I was incapable of distinguishing between sight and the absence of sight. Keats says that in "darkness there is light," but the entire experience of darkness and light became, in a sense, meaningless to me. As a four-year-old child, I imagined that my world was everybody's world. If I had been older, I might have experienced my blindness differently—hesitating, perhaps, to put one foot in front of the other, moving about with outstretched hands, or clinging to the end of my mother's sari. Had that been the case, I would have experienced blindness as frightening, tragic, debilitating. As it was, I laughed and played, jumped around, ran about, hopped and skipped, climbed up and fell down—much as I had done when I could see.

At the time, my four sisters and one brother were all younger than twelve, and, like children anywhere, they made no concessions for me. My Westernized father, a born optimist, did not curtail his aspirations for me. Instead of equating me with the blind beggars outside the gate, he took inspiration from what Milton had attained and wished the best for me. Only my mother, a devoutly Hindu woman with very little schooling, was unable to accept my new condition. Believing that blindness, like poverty, was a curse for misdeeds done in a previous incarnation, she would search my face for some sign of my bad deed and, finding it innocent, was sure that my blindness was merely

a passing curse of the evil eye. No matter how much or how often my father, a medical doctor, explained to her that the long, raging fever had damaged my optic nerves and that I would be permanently blind, she insisted that my condition was temporary. She carted me around to healers and astrologers who prescribed Ayurvedic or Unani treatments, along with a variety of penances. She tried all of them. That was her form of denial, and it must have reinforced my own denial—my habit of living as if I could see. As you know, within hours of meeting you, I was able to surmise what you looked like—even the shade of your lipstick. But what you were not to know was that I had reached that level of mastery only after years upon years of using alchemy to transform my ears into my eyes—of developing, in Keats's words, "blindness keen."

At that time, in India, the blind were considered uneducable, and there were years at a time when I was not sent to school but kept at home. Attentive and alert, curious and adventurous, I had to do whatever I could find to do. When my mother was gardening, I tagged along, smelling this or that flower, taking a bite out of it, touching and exploring its shape, learning its color and name. When she mentioned the pinkness of a sweet pea's petals, I associated it with the pink georgette sari that she had worn to an evening party the night before, the pink dress of my baby cousin, the unpainted lips of my imagination—anything soft, yielding, and sweet.

In the garden, in the house, or on the street, I always knew, long before I ran up to my mother and embraced her, which pair of earrings she was wearing—the danglers, the bell-shaped, or the beaded; which footwear she had on—the clicking heels, the squeaking sandals, or the banging clogs; what clothes she was wearing—cuff-flapping *salwar* or swishing sari. And the fabrics of her clothes—poplin, muslin, silk, taffeta, brocade—all sounded different. If she had neglected to wash her hair, it crackled. If she had just stood up from dinner, there might be a lingering scent of aniseed or cardamom about her mouth. If she had just got up in the morning, her voice sounded a little husky.

Indeed, her breathing and her voice sounded one way when she was smiling, another way when she was pouting, and still another way when she was scowling.

If I noticed that my mother was scowling, I never said, "You sound as if you are scowling, Mamaji." I simply said, "Why are you scowling?" to which she would say something like, "I trusted the fruit vender, and he sold me a bad mango." There would be a short tinkle of her gold bangles as she tried to cut out the stem of the mango, and then a rhythmic jangle as she sliced out the rotten part. The plop of the piece on the cutting board gave me a sense of how much of the fruit she was throwing away.

When one of Mamaji's new acquaintances came calling, I had to hear just one or two footfalls, and I would have an idea of the stranger's gait and weight. When the stranger leaned down to embrace me, I might be able to tell the size of her nose from the way her face tilted, and the shape of her mouth—whether her lips were tight or generous—from the kiss she planted on my face. Depending on what parts of her face I came into contact with, I might even get an impression of her chin and ears. Certainly, I would be able to surmise all kinds of things about her height and figure from her hug. I would be able to tell the length and thickness of her hair. And the timbre of her voice provided its own set of clues. Moreover, at home conversation was always about people, and I would squirrel away someone else's chance observations about the acquaintance: whether she wore too much or too little makeup, whether she had good or bad skin, what her coloring was like and whether the shade of the sari suited her. I never made any conscious effort to gather the information; still, if something was unclear, I would always ask questions, like "What's wrong with her skin?" and someone might reply that it was blotchy or pimply or oily. Everything I heard was put together in my head like a jigsaw puzzle, and any new piece of information I gleaned later got fitted in, until I developed a knack for describing that person in vivid, minute detail to others. "Auntie Kimmi has fat cheeks, a narrow forehead, a tight little mouth, a big nose, and when she walks, her

chest almost seems to go ahead of her," I might say. "Green really suits her; it picks up the color of her eyes." People began crediting me with extrasensory perception, when, in reality, it was nothing more than a judicious assemblage of information gathered in bits and pieces at different times.

Every moment, I instinctively translated into images any and all information received by my sharpened senses. I made sounds visible, the images resonating with the visual impressions that were hidden away like a treasure trove in my early memory. No doubt I was creating my own reality, seeing things in my own way—only imagining that what I saw was identical to what other people saw. But perhaps no two people ever see the same thing in the same way.

There were other aural signals. The echo in a room announced the furniture it contained. I would walk along the street with my hand in my mother's, astonishing her by counting the street lamps with my facial vision—a sort of sixth sense that the blind develop to perceive objects and terrain through, as it were, sound-shadows, rather like a bat's echo system. This perception depends on sound bouncing off objects; the sound is affected by their size, location—close or distant—and their relation to the terrain. Blind people unconsciously sort out, classify, and interpret these echoes in order to orient themselves and negotiate their way. The younger they are when they lose their sight, and the more they are able to run about fearlessly without worrying about bruising and hurting themselves, the more acute their facial vision tends to be.

I was the only blind child and the only child not at school in our particular social circle, so I was left at home among women. I soaked up their feminine energy and creativity. Meanwhile, the boy in me gained in prowess, too. I remember that when we were living in the crowded city of Lahore and there was a slight stirring in the summer wind, my boy cousins and I would run up to the terraced roofs of our houses, send aloft our kites of all shapes, sizes, and colors, and, imagining we were warriors, fly our kites against other kites rising up from the roofs

of neighboring houses. Sometimes as many as a dozen kites—their strings strengthened with glass and resin and as sharp as a razor blade—would be joined in battle, and sooner or later a vigorous tug on a kite string from a kite warrior would cut the whole tangle free. As it floated away and down, all of us would be off, vaulting from roof to roof, running along parapets and ledges and *gullis* (alleyways) to reach the kites and claim the booty. With my ears cocked, my fingertips tingling and alert, and my competitive spirit charged, I would race after them, vaulting and scrambling in my turn, oblivious of the fact that if I lost my footing I would plunge, like a stone, two or three stories to the ground. Not being able to see the drop made me, if anything, bolder, and my cousins today recall that, although I was not the first to start, I was sometimes the first to reach the jumble of kites.

In the beginning, my mother tried to keep me indoors, out of harm's way. But, right off, my father, realizing that to tame my spirit would be tantamount to killing it, instructed her to leave me alone to do whatever I liked. Being a good Hindu wife, she submitted to his superior judgment, as she thought it, and, after that, I was treated no differently from other boys in the family.

Later, when we were living in the spacious city of Rawalpindi, my older sisters started going to school on bicycles instead of in a tonga or a chauffeur-driven car, as they had in Lahore. The whole world seemed to be on wheels, but no one thought of getting me a bicycle because it was assumed that I could not ride one. I felt that I alone was left behind like a foot-dragging throwback. A fighter in spirit, I got hold of a servant's broken-down bicycle, ready for the dump heap, and occupied myself with fixing it. I took the bicycle apart, chain from pedal, seat from rod, handle from frame, tire from wheel. As I breathed in the smell of grease, I fancied that I was a soldier in grubby battle fatigues, fighting far away in Europe and drawing in the intoxicating smell of gunpowder. With a hammer, I straightened the frame and the handlebar. With a basin of water, I found

the punctures in the tube and got a bicycle repair shop to patch them, and I also bought a saddle and a carrier, handgrips and mudguards.

As soon as the bicycle was roadworthy, I set about learning to ride it in the compound of our bungalow. I would put one foot on a pedal and push with the other to make the bicycle go, and when it gained a little speed, I would swing my leg over the seat and straddle it. The more I fell—the more I scraped my knees and shins, the more I banged myself up—the more I liked it. I felt that if I could only get the bicycle to go with myself astride, without tipping over or tilting from side to side, even for a stretch, I would be king of the road. In time, I mastered the secret of keeping the bicycle balanced by defying the law of gravity, as I imagined it, and learned to ride around the compound, picking out and circumventing deck chairs, tables, watering cans, buckets, and whatnot with my facial vision. I became so adept at riding the bicycle that I would put my little sister on the carrier and my baby brother on the shaft between the seat and the handlebars and ride fast, now and again throwing up my hands and bringing them down just in time to steady the bicycle, all the while enjoying their happy, though frightened, shrieks.

No matter how I managed to play and occupy myself, I was dogged by the feeling that I was missing out on school, that I was falling behind my sisters and brother, and that, without learning, I would amount to nothing. In fact, with my father's encouragement, I constantly dreamed of and worked on getting out of India and making my way to the West, where my disability would not be perceived as a barrier to education. After years of rejections from both English and American schools, I was finally admitted to a school for the blind in Little Rock, Arkansas, and flew there alone with a one-way ticket at the age of fifteen, in 1949. There, in addition to compressing twelve years of elementary and secondary education into three, I learned to get around the streets by myself on foot and in trolleys and buses, first with a white stick and then without it. I became so

skillful that I hardly ever bumped into anything or missed a step or a curb. I even hitchhiked alone from one end of the country to the other.

I went to college in southern California. There, without a car, it was virtually impossible to get a date. I bought an old Chevrolet and, on one occasion, slowly drove it around the campus with the windows open so that I could spot people or obstacles with my facial vision and avoid hitting them. On another occasion, I sat in the driver's seat with my date at my side, just like any other college man, speeding along the stretch of highway between Pasadena and Los Angeles. The girl at first was directing me and giggling, but then, suddenly seized by terror, she grabbed the steering wheel from me. If she hadn't done that, my recklessness would probably have killed us both. These daredevil experiments were never repeated, only savored, as if, by climbing into the driver's seat, I had reclaimed my sight and the feeling of power that I imagined went with it.

No matter how adept I became at getting around by myself, I had to prove every day, all over again, to everyone I encountered, that I was able to do things that they thought I could not do but that, by now, were so instinctive that I was barely conscious of doing them. The effort was especially galling because, whenever people tried to help or protect me, they jarred my self-confidence and dulled my senses. I felt that if I could be accepted as I was even by one person, a woman, I would be somewhat comforted. But the difficulty of my search was exacerbated by, in addition to my blindness, my confused identities. I was an Indian in permanent exile, belonging nowhere and everywhere. (In my first sixteen years in the West, I returned to India only once, for a brief visit.) At high school and college in America, and at university in England, girls were prepared to be friends with me but generally spurned any romantic overtures. It was as if dances and corsages, walks along the river and intimate talks, were not in my karma, and I had to dream alone, each and every girl I was drawn to seemingly a perfect, unattainable being. It was only after I started writing and publishing that any "nice"