



# THE SILENT STONING

Rediscovering innocence after childhood sexual abuse



JEETI POONI

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childhood sexual abuse

**JEETI POONI**

**TO  
DESIRE  
PRESS**

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Published by To Desire Press

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This book is the author's true story as she knows it. It is a memoir.

The author recognizes that others may recall events described in this book differently than she does. The author would like to thank her entire family, extended family and other people portrayed in this book for blessing her with experiences that shaped her to become the person she is today. This book is not intended to hurt any immediate or extended family members or any other people. The author's intent, in publishing this memoir, is to bring to light the passed down cultural norms and beliefs that continue to hinder and suppress women.

This book does not contain medical, psychological, or health advice. It provides information for general and educational purposes only.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication information is available upon request.

ISBN 978-1-7779757-0-8 Paperback

ISBN 978-1-7779757-1-5 Hardcover

ISBN 978-1-7779757-2-2 Ebook

Cover design: Grateful to Bob

Cover author photos: Chelsea Brooke Roisum of CBR Photography

Interior author photo: Grant McAvoy of Image Werx Photography

Interior design: Sandy Kreps of Wildcat Design Studio

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## Prologue

**D**ear Reader,

In 2011, the title of the book I had yet to write popped into my mind—*The Silent Stoning*.

It encompassed what I had experienced and witnessed in my life—the *silent stoning* of girls and women. The title was perfect!

As I sat down to write this book six years later, from deep within came the voice encouraging me to write my story in a unique heartfelt way: through a series of letters to Little Jeeti, the young girl I once was and to whom I still have a deep connection. As I wrote the beginning letters in this book to Little Jeeti, I was compelled to also write to my loved ones and others who have impacted my life.

The story of my life unfolds page by page, letter by letter, with details of the most impactful moments of my life and the lessons learned as a result of living through childhood sexual abuse, trauma, immense suffering, and the cultural parameters and belief systems that shaped my life, my mind, and my choices. I appreciate my family, extended family and people portrayed in this book for blessing me with experiences that shaped me to become the person I am today. This book is not intended to hurt any immediate

or extended family members or any other person. My intent, in publishing this memoir, is to bring to light the cultural norms and beliefs that continue to hinder and suppress women.

I am so grateful my book has made it into your hands. I am honoured to share the chapters of my life with you. There are many details shared in this book that may be triggering for some of you, especially if you have experienced sexual abuse. I encourage you to find support through a friend, support group, counsellor, therapist, help line, or other networks available in your community as needed. I also recommend that you read this book with a friend, group, or book club for added support, thought-provoking discussions, and healing. If your trauma is more recent or something you have yet to acknowledge or work through, you may want to pause reading through this book until you've sought professional help or emotional support.

As you read through the pages of my lived experiences, know that I am with you wherever you are on your journey.

With Love,

*Jeeti*

# **PARTONE**

Innocence





## I Will Take Care of You



**D**ear Little Jeeti,

You were only four years old when you climbed the never ending stairs to board a plane from Delhi airport. You were so scared as you climbed each step on that bright sunny day in April 1973. You were holding your older sister Salakshana's hand while Mom carried your younger sister, Kira, on her hip. It was so hot, nearly 36 degrees Celsius. The sun beamed off the long shiny metal stairs. The noise of the bus that drove you from the terminal and the loud engines of the planes taking off and landing frightened you. You had never seen a plane or an airport before. The environment was so foreign to you, a village girl.

You grew up in Mothada Kalan, a village in Punjab, India, where you rarely saw a car, bus, or motorcycle. You got around mainly by walking, on a bicycle, or in a cart pulled by ox. Here, the ground beneath your feet felt different; it was paved. Even the floors of the airport were different. In your village, you had only seen floors laced with cow dung, straw, and clay. Like the other homes in your village, your house didn't have any electricity or toilets, and water was fetched from a well or a hand water pump. Mom cooked food on a clay structure called a chula (*stove made from clay and bricks*),

fueled by cow dung patties and dried corn stalks. To call it a stove would be an overstatement.

That day, your hair was tied back in one braid just like your two sisters. You were all wearing recently stitched clothes your grandfather, Amar Singh Pooni, had custom made for you by a tailor in Goraya, a small city close to your village. You were also wearing shoes, something you were not accustomed to because, in your village, you seldom wore shoes. You walked barefoot inside the house and out in the village streets.

Your stomach was in knots. On the steps of the plane, you were terrified. Perhaps leaving your home in India, not being able to understand where you were going, and knowing you were leaving your teary eyed grandfather behind had something to do with your elevated fear. The truth is, you were a child who was always afraid. You knew not where this fear came from or exactly who drilled it into you. It was just always there.

You stopped and looked back at Mom. Looking at her reassured you everything would be okay; she would always take care of you. Mom did not look tired of carrying Kira and her red plastic hand basket with the square holes up the daunting stairs. She was excited. She was going to reunite with her love, your father, after three years of being separated by a faraway land called Canada.

Mom and Dad had been arranged in marriage at the age of 16. They had no idea what the other one looked like until after they were married. They were both 23 when Dad left for Canada. Now, three years later on the steps of the plane, Mom's excitement was immeasurable and understandably so. At 26 years old, she was going to leave behind a life full of hardship, anguish, and pain. Ever since she got married, she had to work hard to complete her daily chores, waking up before sunrise and going to sleep well after sunset. She was beautiful, smart, responsible, and a strong workhorse, exactly what Grandfather wanted in a daughter-in-law for his household.

Grandfather was tall, slender, and belonged to the Kuka

(*pronounced Koo-ka*) Namdhari Sikh Punjabi faith, so he always wore traditional white cotton clothes: a turban, kurta (*long, loose shirt*), and pajami (*tight-fitting, skinny pants*). He was the head of the household and took care of the daily needs. You loved your grandfather. You believed you were his favourite grandchild. The two of you shared a bond that even you didn't comprehend at the time. You just knew that, around him, you felt safe, loved, and protected. When he used to come home for lunch after working on the family farm and running errands, he would share his lunch with you. He used to play with you and your sister, Kira. Your youngest Phua (*meaning Dad's sister*) told you he never used to share his lunch with any of the other grandkids. So yes, you definitely were his favourite.

Your family was not very well off in India. By the age of 22, Dad had fathered four children: your older sister Salakshana, Umba (your brother who died at only nine days old), you, and Kira, who was just an embryo in Mom's stomach when Dad left India. Daughters are a burden in Indian culture, and the pressure of having to give dowry is immense. Grandfather was a visionary who took risks. In 1970, when you were only a year and a half old, he sent Dad, his workhorse, out to Canada in hopes of economic prosperity for all the Pooni family. Dad was expected not only to share his wealth but also to help his relatives immigrate to Canada. From a very young age, Dad worked hard on his family farm in India, so Grandfather knew Dad was the most responsible of all of his sons.

Once in Canada, Dad was to get a job and send money back to India to help feed the entire Pooni family, which consisted of Mom, Salakshana, Kira, you, Grandfather, Grandmother, Thaya (*meaning Dad's older brother*) and his family, and Chacha (*meaning Dad's younger brother*). Thanks to the policies of Canadian Prime Minister, Pierre Elliot Trudeau, Dad was granted permanent residency in Canada. Dad did as he was obliged and made his father proud. He found a labor intensive job at Lignum Limited, a lumber

mill in Williams Lake, British Columbia working on the chainsaw.

Once Dad was settled and became a permanent Canadian resident, Grandfather decided to send Chacha out to Canada, too. Chacha arrived in 1972. Of course, Grandpa hoped Chacha would follow in Dad's footsteps, getting a job to send money back home. Grandfather had no desire to send Mom, you, and your sisters to Canada. He saw you all as a burden on Dad. If you were in Canada, Dad would have to provide you with food, shelter, and clothing, an added expense that meant he would not be able to send as much money back home to the village. Grandfather wanted to buy land to expand his small family farm. But Dad was sponsoring Chacha's permanent residency application, which was based on a point system. The application would hold more points and would fast track Chacha's permanent residence status if Dad was a family man in Canada. So, he told Grandfather it was vital to send Mom, Salakshana, Kira, and you over to Canada.

That's how you finally ended up on the plane to Canada.

You had four seats in a row in the middle section of the plane: one each for Mom, Salakshana, you and Kira. Kira mostly sat in Mom's lap. Everything about being on a plane was foreign to you—the inside of the tubular plane itself, the air hostesses, the seats, the seat belts. You had never seen a seatbelt before and found it difficult to fasten.

You had a night's stay in Tokyo. Mom didn't understand the language and couldn't communicate in anything other than Punjabi. A woman travelling on our flight helped Mom use food vouchers to order food at the hotel. Hunger pains jabbed at your stomach as you waited for that meal in your hotel room. Lying on the bed, you cried off and on, repeatedly asking Mom when the food was coming. You bounced up full of delight when you heard the knock on the door. You stared at the Japanese person who brought in your meal, as you had never seen a Japanese person before. You were so excited to eat, but your excitement was short-lived. It was some kind of rice mixed with what Mom said were worms (though

looking back, it must have been shrimp or something). You were all vegetarian, and you girls had never eaten meat of any kind. So, Mom told you not to eat the worms, only the rice. Sadly, the rice tasted awful; it was nothing like what you ate in your village. You had a few bites and fell asleep hungry.

Dad picked you all up at the Vancouver airport on April 24, 1973. Salakshana, Kira, and you were too shy and scared to greet or give hugs to Dad, a person you didn't remember. You hid behind Mom. You drove straight to Williams Lake, a 7 1/2-hour journey by car back then. You all were so tired. Salakshana and you sat in the back seat of Dad's humongous yellow car, a four-door Dodge. You were afraid of him and spoke only to Mom to ask when you would be home.

Prior to your arrival into Canada, Dad had bought a three-bedroom brown bungalow house on the corner of the street. It was across from Marie Sharpe Elementary School and the ice arena and within walking distance from downtown. The best part was that you lived only a two minute walk from Kiwanis Park, which had an outdoor wading pool, swings, teeter-totter, slide, and monkey bars. Overwaitea Foods and the Alston movie theatre were close by, too. It was a great place for a family.

You were one of the few Indian families who lived in town, as it was more expensive than living on the outskirts. Most Indian families lived in Glendale, an area that had not been incorporated into the town yet. You lived with your older Phua (Dad's sister), her husband, their three children, Chacha, and two other young adult males who had recently immigrated to Canada. Phua and her family shared one room, and Mom, Dad, your sisters, and you shared the second room. Chacha and the two males, Bikkar and Rai, shared the other room. There was only one washroom for all 13 of you.

You and your sisters adapted quickly to your new lifestyle in this predominantly white town. There were so many things in your house you had never seen before, including a chesterfield, a black

and white TV, a telephone, a fridge, a stove, a record player, and much more. You learned how to use the sink, the toilet, taps, and toilet paper. You also started to brush your teeth and got your first haircuts. You even got to eat ice cream and popsicles for the first time! You saw your first Bollywood movie, and you immediately fell in love with the beautiful actresses and actors, the songs, the dancing, the bold jewelry, and the colourful fabrics of the saris and ghagra cholis (*traditional Indian women's clothing*). The screen was huge with burgundy velvet curtaining, and the adorned actresses lit up the entire theatre and your heart. You thought the actors all lived behind the burgundy curtaining and could see you watching from the other side of the screen. You thought that if the villains saw you sticking out your tongue at them, they would stop being mean to the heroine and leave her alone.

You were like a kid in a candy store then. Canada was so exciting. You watched English TV shows even though you didn't understand the language. *Brady Bunch*, *Good Times*, *Sanford and Son*, *Hawaii Five-O*, *Mannix*, *Star Trek*, *Six Million Dollar Man*, *Kojak*, *Columbo*, *The Streets of San Francisco*, *Flintstones*, *Bugs Bunny*, and old western movies were among your favourites. Of course, you saw all the heroes on TV and film in Dad. Sometimes he reminded you of a brown version of Captain Kirk from *Star Trek*. Other times, he reminded you of Dharmendra, a Bollywood actor you had seen in Indian films. Dad would pose in front of the bathroom mirror, which had openable mirrored doors, and have pictures taken of himself. He would adjust the mirrored doors so the camera would capture his many reflections. I stood outside of the washroom door admiring Dad and watching him pose. He always looked so handsome. He took pictures of Mom and you girls, too. You were excited when he took pictures of you and your sisters dancing to *Heer Ranja* songs in your living room. You girls twirled with Mom's georgette chunni (*scarf*) or shawl on your heads pretending you were actresses just like in the Bollywood movies. You felt so much joy and excitement. You learned how to stretch your imagina-

tion and tap into endless creativity. You also learned how females seemed to have to be beautiful, perfect, obedient, and submissive. In the movies, they would be punished and cast out if they weren't.

Of course, it wasn't all magic and excitement in those early days in Canada. At times you felt a little confused. You had to get used to living with Dad and other members in the house. You and your sisters did not know English; you only spoke Punjabi. Chacha did not want you to call him "Chacha," the word in Punjabi for a younger uncle on Dad's side of the family. He wanted you to call him "Uncle," which was very odd for you and your sisters. Back in your village, he had always been your Chacha. There, you girls would have been punished for being impolite if you had called him something else. Of course, you were very obedient and always complied with the adults in your family. So, in Canada, you always tried to do as you were asked.

Salakshana was obedient, too. Kira, on the other hand, was a very curious and rambunctious child. Dad registered both of his obedient daughters in summer school to learn English. (Kira was too young anyhow.) He knew the importance of you girls learning English quickly in your new country. Summer school was full of newly arrived children from India. Even your instructors were Indian. You played games you had never played before to help you get acquainted with each other and the language. You also got to go for a picnic and camping at the lake. It was fun, and you and your sisters quickly learned English, only to be reprimanded later by Dad. He still wanted you to speak Punjabi, not English, at home.

In September, Dad took you to the school across the street from your house to meet the principal. Dad and the principal chatted in English. The principal tried talking to you, asking your name. You were extremely shy and too scared to respond. You hid behind Dad, looking for safety behind his legs. Because of this, the principal did not register you into the school. You would have to go to Chilcotin Road Elementary, a school 6.8 km out of town.

Salakshana was sent to a school in Glendale, 4 km away, where all the new Indian immigrant kids were enrolled.

You didn't know why you and your sister had to be separated in two different schools. Dad reprimanded you for not answering the principal at that first meeting. You felt a huge lump in your throat as the overwhelming feeling of having disappointed him took you over.

"She didn't take you because she thinks you don't know English. You should have answered her," he said. "You can speak."

With Love,

*Jeeti*



You Will Not Understand at First  
❧

**D**ear Little Jeeti,

It was the first week in February 1974, a year after you came to Canada, that you and your family moved to your new red and white house up the hill on 4th Avenue North in Williams Lake.

You, Mom, Salakshana, and Kira could not contain your excitement. This house was much more beautiful, bigger, and newer than your old house. It had huge front and back yards for you and your sisters to play tag, chase butterflies, do cartwheels, roll in somersaults, and find four leaf clovers until sunset. There was a fire hydrant in the front you could jump off of, a large sundeck you could twirl, dance, catch, and eat snowflakes on, and a driveway large enough for you girls to ride your bikes and play with your skipping ropes—singles, doubles, angels and devils, or Chinese skipping. Mom could have her large vegetable garden in the back yard and even a swing set for you girls. The numerous trees would definitely provide shade in the hot summer sun.

Inside, the house had two real wood-burning fireplaces accented with stones and a raised black slate hearth. You couldn't believe you could have a real fire. The yellow kitchen with its olive green

fridge and stove, countless brown cabinets all around the top and bottom of the four walls, large cream laminate countertops with a yellowy gold marble pattern, and an island large enough to seat all five of you at its breakfast bar seating was so inviting. The living room and dining room were spacious, too. The house was carpeted with a green shag rug that could transform into green grass under your feet while you danced like a Bollywood actress or become your friend in moments of boredom as you twirled its never ending strands between your tiny fingers. The washroom was huge with a large countertop the three of you sisters could sit on. The expansive mirrored cabinets on the wall were perfect for you to sit in front of while you applied Mom's makeup, put on her Indian jewelry, and imagined yourself as a Bollywood actress just like in the movie posters. The pink bathtub, sink, and toilet all sat looking happy and pretty. The walls surrounding the bathtub were covered in countless one inch tiles. You could run your fingers along the grout as if you were following a maze while bathing. The house even had a second washroom with an olive green sink and toilet in the master bedroom. It had three bedrooms upstairs and a large spacious basement. One bedroom for your parents, one for Uncle, and one for you and your sisters. The house was perfect and full of colour, just like your box of Crayola crayons.

You, Salakshana, Kira, and Mom all loved that home. It felt as if the joyous feeling you found there would last forever. It felt like the beginning of something, but you didn't know what.

One day, when you, Salakshana, and Kira were playing in the big backyard of your new house, a young, fat Italian neighbourhood boy started throwing rocks at the three of you. He stood in the yard next to you, repeatedly throwing stones and calling you all names. You and Salakshana ducked, but Kira stood straight. She was too young to know better. One of the rocks hit her forehead and cracked it open. She screamed and cried at the top of her lungs as she bled. The boy took off. All you and your sisters wanted to do was play. You wanted to become friends with other kids in

your new neighbourhood. Why someone would throw rocks at you and call you names is something you didn't understand, but you knew then that you didn't want to be that boy's friend.

Another time you and Salakshana were walking home from school, the same boy would not stop making fun of you two. Salakshana got so mad she finally hit him straight in the face with her school textbook. He never bothered you girls again.

There were others that took his place though. There was the white girl who pulled your pigtail when you were six years old one morning as you were walking to school. There was the white boy and his friends who blocked your path with his bike and said, "Go home, Hindu." There was the boy who repeatedly blocked the door to the school entrance so you couldn't get in. In short, it wasn't always easy.

You felt hurt, terrified, unsafe, different, unwanted, and out of place. It made you feel as if you didn't belong. You didn't understand why these kids wanted you to go "home" or the meaning of the word Hindu. It turns out that the list of things you wouldn't understand would only grow in that time of your life.

You were around six when Dad rented the basement suite to an Indian family. Dad called the man Pago. He was about Dad's age, around 28. He was skinny, unattractive, dark skinned, clean shaven, and smelled like cigarettes. He moved in with his wife and daughter, who was your age. The door inside the house leading into the basement suite was never locked. Mom and Dad had a trusting relationship with the tenants. You and your sisters were even allowed to go down and play with the little girl if you wanted to.

When your parents were gone to buy groceries, Pago would come upstairs and sit on the sofa while you would be watching TV. Sometimes Salakshana would be sitting on the other end of the sofa, and he would lie down with his legs facing her, tucking his feet under her thighs. She would wiggle and move as far to the corner of the sofa as she could, looking very uncomfortable and scared. When it happened, she would frown, and her eyes would

bulge out. Other times he would go into the kitchen and touch her budding breasts as she made roti for you and Kira. You didn't know why she always had a scared look on her face every time he came upstairs, but you were both uneasy having Pago upstairs without your parents. Salakshana told Mom what Pago was doing to her, but Mom didn't do anything about it. All she did was tell Salakshana not to go to him.

One day, Pago had you in his bedroom downstairs. He must have asked you to come into his room, and of course, you were obedient. That's what children were supposed to do. The room was very basic with one window and not very much furniture. His bed was in the center of the bedroom. You know because Pago put you on the bed.

Everything was quiet in the house. You couldn't hear anyone. That's what you were thinking when he took off your pants and underwear. Then he took off his clothes. He was skinny and dark, and you felt very uncomfortable. He spread your legs. Scared, you lay in complete silence, frozen. He spit into his hand and put the saliva on his penis. He also put saliva from his wet hand onto your genital area. He leaned his body on top of you and glided his penis back and forth against your genitals.

"Swad ondha?" he asked you, meaning, "Do you feel pleasure?"

You shook your head. The gliding back and forth of his penis on top of your genitals was hurting your entire private area. The pressure of something hard against your genitals was very uncomfortable. He glided back and forth a few more times and then, he just stopped. He put your clothes back on and said, "Don't tell anyone. Don't tell my wife. She will say we are stupid."

You did as you were told. You never told anyone, not even your sisters or Mom. You didn't really know what happened or what Pago had done to you at the time. So, you carried on with life as a 6-year-old girl—cheerful, playful, loving, and obedient.

To cope, you shut out the incident from your mind and let yourself be swept up by the Bollywood world.

Your imagination soared without bounds. One day you were a Bollywood actress. The next day you were Cleopatra or Scarlett O'Hara. It was the Bollywood melodies you danced to daily pretending to be Asha Parekh, Hema Malini or Mumtaz. You loved escaping into your imaginary Bollywood world, dancing to your favourite 1970's Hindi movie songs from *Aan Milo Sajana*, *Dharmatma*, *Aya Sawan Jhoom Ke*, *Neel Kamal*, Pakastani version of *Heer Ranja*, and so many more. You would pull up and twist your t-shirt to mimic a sari blouse and wrap yourself in a khesi (*traditional Punjabi blanket*) to pretend it was an elaborate silk sari in the brightest colours—yellow, magenta, lime green, orange, or whatever hue came to your mind. Your little girl heart beat quickly as you sang, twirled around and around, swivelled your hips, and moved your arms with grace as the record player dropped one record after another. Your feet would take you rapidly from one end of the living room to the other, on to the sofa, back down to the green shag carpet, and then on to the cold black slate fireplace hearth. You pretended you were on a mountain top or in a luscious field just like in the movies adorned in elaborate Indian jewelry. You imagined dancing around the smiling, handsome, and loving male actors, just as the actresses did.

You performed and performed to your heart's delight. You didn't pick up on the wiring of subliminal cultural messages and the dark shades of indoctrination embedded in each song and film. You were oblivious to it all, just like you were unaware of what Pago had unleashed on you.

In your Bollywood, you were safe.

With Love,

Jeeti

***The Silent Stoning*** will be available for purchase on Amazon soon.  
I am eager to share the rest of my book with you and can't until it's published.  
You will be notified by email so be sure to check your inbox. Oh, and to ensure you  
receive my personal note please add me to your address book or whitelist.

Thank you so much for reading!