

The Final Exam

Marina Shershevskaya

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Exam*

Yekaterinburg
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Shershevskaya, Marina Aleksandrovna.

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What if our whole life is nothing but a preparation for one defining moment? Not a preparation for success, wealth, or prestige, but for the way we will one day depart from this world.

Marina Shershevskaya was no saint. She was an ordinary woman—a wife, a mother, and a keeper of her hearth. Yet through the agonizing pain of losing a child, a profound crisis in her marriage, and a devastating diagnosis, she walked steadfastly toward a single, ultimate goal.

On July 19, 2026, at the break of dawn, enveloped by the love of her closest kin, she passed the final exam. Without any fear. Without any pain. But with a gentle smile. This book isn't about death. It is about life. This book is an exploration of how to conquer fear, and a beautiful testament that love is far more powerful than separation.

The Final Exam is an intimate, profound, and radiant narrative written in the first person. It is a story destined to reshape how we view our own existence, fully grounded in real-life events.

This book serves as a preview to the main edition. If you knew the author and wish to share your memories of her, personal experiences, or any stories related to her, please reach out to us via e-mail at: vip@lotus1.ru. Any feedback you wish to provide will be received with our deepest gratitude.

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This book is a profoundly honest account of a challenging life, a joyful spiritual journey, and a peaceful, blessed passing. I am certain that Marina Shershevskaya's example will inspire many to live their lives with equal dignity and to successfully pass their own ultimate, most difficult exam.

There is no pretense in this book. Every word in every sentence is filled with absolute, utmost sincerity by the author, which is why each simple word touches the reader to the very depths of the soul.

Bhakti Vijnana Goswami

In your hands is a printed revelation of an ordinary woman — a wife, a mother, and a true friend. Life, love, death, and God — only a few are able to speak of these things as she did. She speaks no longer from this world, but through her loving husband who still remains here. We live in a world where words have lost their real meaning. Only one thing is real: the choice between fear and faith, between love and resentment. Marina Shershevskaya's choice was not an easy one, but she made it, showing all of us the true path.

Bhaktivedanta Sadhu Swami

This book was never intended or meticulously planned. It wasn't written over the course of many long years.

Instead, it was born from the night. It was born from the silence. And from the utter emptiness that remained after my wife, Marina, left her body.

In the immediate days following her departure, sleep completely eluded me. Lying in the darkness, I felt her presence—not as a fleeting memory or a distant image, but as a living reality. Then, something began to happen for which I still can't find a rational explanation: every single night, I started to hear her voice. I didn't hear her speaking to me aloud, but deep within — guiding me chapter by chapter, episode by episode, and layer by layer.

I am no writer. I have never written any books, nor did I have any idea of how it was done. Yet every night, I would sit down and record whatever came to me. It was as if Marina herself were directly narrating her entire life — reliving it from its very beginning to its end. She uncovered details I had long forgotten. She repeated the words I had failed to catch in her lifetime. She explained the moments I had completely misunderstood then but truly comprehend now.

I could vividly feel her hand in this writing process. Her guiding me. Her profound desire for me to record everything precisely as it happened — unvarnished, without pretense. Only the truth. Only the light. Only her path.

The resulting book is vibrant and deeply emotional. Not by my own design. But because her life itself was exactly that way. The narrative offers a concise yet comprehensive account

of Marina's entire spiritual journey. It vividly shows how the Lord guided her through life. Through pain and joy. Through loss and gain. Through doubts and miracles. Through all and everything — He led her straight to Himself.

This book isn't a memoir. It isn't a biography. It is a testimony. It is proof that our lives are no coincidence. Every step, every lesson, every trial — all of these are steps on the path Home.

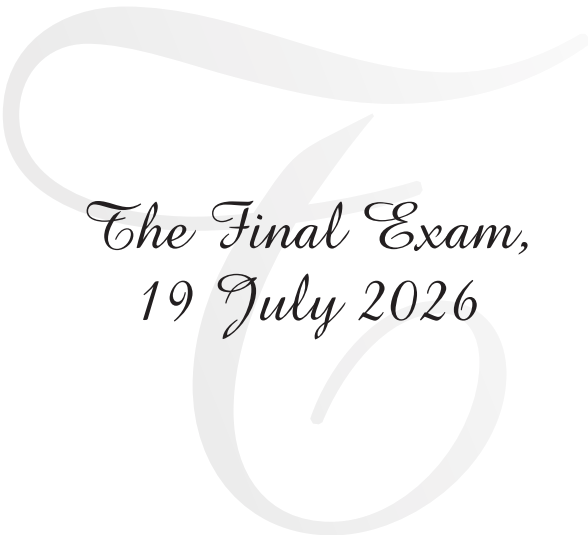
I haven't written this book. I have simply transcribed what she spoke to me from eternity beyond. Now, I shall pass it on to you.

Read it for yourselves. Share it with others. And perhaps, through Marina's story, you will be able to see that the Lord, even by the smallest of steps, is leading you toward Himself as well.

*With love and gratitude,
Alexander Shershevsky*



Prologue



*The Final Exam,
19 July 2026*

*Our whole life is a preparation
for the final exam.
And the process of leaving the body
defines our next birth.*

The room smelled of cool air and night flower blossoms. A draft, for which I had asked, was drifting between two wide-open windows, brushing against the curtains and cooling my face. It was just past five in the morning. The July dawn was breaking with full force, and the sky outside was turning from pitch black to a soft gray, before beginning to flush with pink as the sun was awaking behind the surrounding rooftops. I knew immediately — that was the day of my final graduation exam.

My body, now light and nearly weightless, was lying on its left side. I could no longer move, but that didn't matter. The body is merely a form. As if it were a worn-out garment soon to be discarded. Behind me, I could feel the warmth and the gentle breathing of my dearest person — my husband. He was half-sitting, holding me close, cradling my head upon the pillow, with his love enveloping me more tightly than any blanket could. I couldn't see his face, yet I felt his every movement. I felt his

hand, tenderly touching my cheek with a napkin, wiping away my cold sweat, and with it — his own tears. A few warm teardrops fell onto my skin. I wanted to say, “Don’t cry, this is a moment of joy,” but the words would no longer come out. I could do nothing more than listen.

Right before my eyes, just an arm’s length away, a radiant image was shining—the photograph we had brought back with us from Vrindavan. There were Lord Shri Krishna and Lord Balarama. Their beautiful forms photographed in the very temple my husband and I had visited so many times. How deeply and strongly I loved that temple. How I adored those Deities. But this time, They had come to me. Our dearest little girl, Arina, was holding Them before me. Looking at Them — I saw her. Looking at her — I saw Them. At that moment, there was no longer any difference. At that moment, my daughter had become the Deities’ very hands.

At the foot of the bed was sitting Irina. There was no panic, no tears — she was simply present there, like a quiet, calm river. Her palm was resting upon my foot. Those were three persons, three souls, who were helping me to complete my earthly journey.

The Holy Name was resonating through the room. The kirtan, turned on by my husband, was drifting through the air, permeating the walls of the room, the coolness of the air, and the morning light. Mukunda's voice — so familiar, deep, and powerful—was chanting on and on the Holy Names of the Lord, and they — all three of them — were quietly chanting along the kirtan. My husband — right beside my ear — his whisper weaving into my very breath. Arina — looking into my eyes just over the top of the photograph. Irina — silently, with her lips alone. It was no mourning, not a farewell. It was a haven. The sound was bringing me back Home.

I was gazing upon the Deities. My breath was shallow and even — just an open mouth — an inhale and an exhale. My pupils were moving, tracing the face of Lord Balarama, then — Shri Krishna's, and then back again. Occasionally, I would slightly lift my head from the pillow to see more, and my husband would instantly adjust it, sensing my every movement. My body was barely obeying me, but my soul was looking forward with a clear yearning — like a wanderer who has finally caught sight of the lights of home.

“Mommy, you are about to meet your very best friend, Shri Krishna.” — my daughter’s voice cut through the kirtan. It rang out pure and resolute. That was the final instruction I needed to hear. The final closing note.

And inside, everything became so calm. So clear. There was no fear. No pain. Only gratitude. Only those eyes, gazing at me from the photograph and the hands holding it. Only the Name.

An inhale. Slightly deeper than before. Then — an exhale.

The air left me, and with it — everything else. Time stood still. I watched as the pupils of my eyes, which just a moment ago were on Krishna, simply stopped moving. I observed it as if looking from afar. The body remained on the bed—with a calm, serene face, perhaps even with the ghost of a smile. The body was still there, but I was no longer present within it. The one they loved had left.

The room filled with emptiness — mournful, yet serene. My husband, who had just been whispering words of love to me, could no longer feel me there. He sensed the difference between body and soul — more profoundly than ever before. Immediately, he understood everything.

And I, having finally spread my eternal wings, looked upon them — my husband, my daughter, my friend — no longer with eyes, but with the gaze of all eternity. I could hear Arina, wiping away her tears, opening the Bhagavad-gita and beginning to read the second chapter — the very one where the Supreme Lord explains to Arjuna, and thus — to them all, “For the soul there is neither birth nor death at any time. He has not come into being, does not come into being, and will come into being.

He is unborn, eternal, ever-existing and primeval. He is not slain when the body is slain.”

The sound of the ancient verse wove into the morning silence, into the birds singing outside the window, and into the fading kirtan.

The exam was passed.

I was returning Home, back to Vrindavan.

And Krishna prepared one last gift for me — as if a token, as if to say “yes.”

On that very day, July 19, in Yekaterinburg, the Ratha-yatra festival was being celebrated. It is a grandiose occasion that takes place only once a year. A magnificent chariot, adorned with vibrant fabrics, flowers, and fruits, carries the Deities — Lord Jagannatha, Baladeva, and Subhadra —

through the streets of the city. Hundreds of devotees chant the Holy Names, dance, and distribute sweets and fruits to passersby. The chariot moves slowly and majestically, and everyone who catches sight of it receives a blessing. The Lord emerges from His temple to reveal Himself to ordinary passersby, allowing everyone to behold Him.

Being constantly engaged in the hustle and bustle of life, I had never once been able to attend this festival in Yekaterinburg.

My husband participated in that festival every year. And this time, my body once again couldn't be there. However, I could. And I was.

The devotees learned of my passing almost immediately; the news of it spread in an instant. Then they did something I could have never expected. They took my photograph—that very one where I am smiling in Varshana, the sacred abode of Shrimati Radharani — and placed it upon the chariot. Right in front of the Deities.

My face — directly before the countenances of Lord Jagannatha, Baladeva, and Subhadra.

I witnessed that from where I am right now. I watched the chariot drifting through the streets of Yekaterinburg. I saw the devotees singing, and how the sun dappled the canopy of the chariot and

its flower garlands. I saw my photograph standing face to face with the Ones toward whom I had been journeying my entire life.

Then I understood: Krishna had arranged everything. Down to the smallest details.

He didn't merely allow me to depart surrounded by my loved ones, accompanied by the sound of kirtan, gazing at the image of the Deities. He orchestrated it so that on the very day I would leave my body, His chariot was already waiting for me. After all, Ratha-yatra is, in itself, the path to walk. The path to Vrindavan!

On that day, the chariot was carrying the Deities through the streets of the city. But it was also carrying me — back home, straight to where Krishna and His devotees abide!

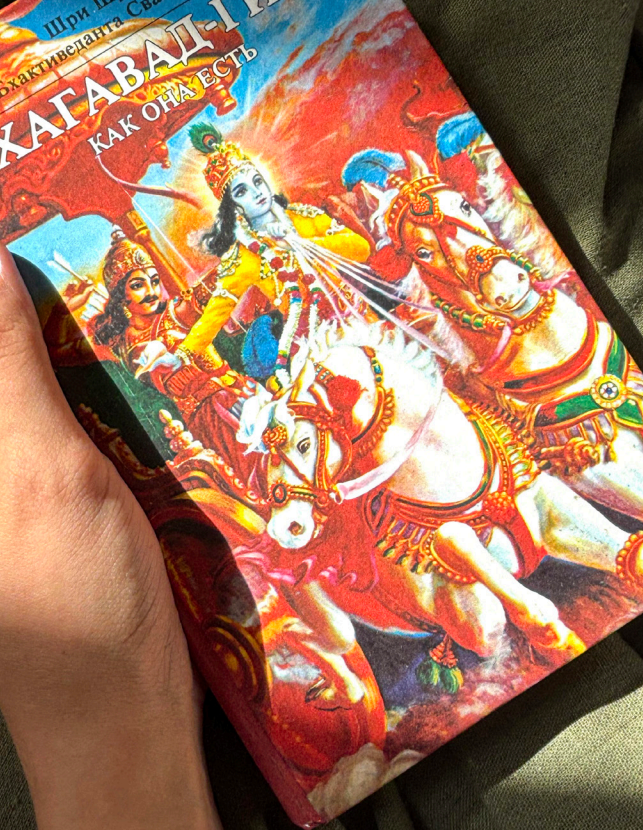
Krishna left no room for doubt for those who remained behind. He gave them signs. For my husband, for my daughter, for Irina, and for all the devotees who attended the Ratha-yatra that day — it was the ultimate testament. Marina hadn't died. Marina returned Home. Moreover, the Supreme Lord Himself came to take her away in His own chariot.

I watched it all from above or perhaps from within — I can't find the correct words, for where

I am, there is no above or below. I was watching and smiling. I could see my husband, pulling the chariot by its ropes, chanting the Holy Name, sometimes weeping for my physical body, and at other times rejoicing that I had finally returned home.

Krishna once again confirmed everything to him, “Do not worry, do not weep, be happy. She has passed the exam. She has returned Home.

Шри Шримад
А.С. Бхактиведанта Свами Прабхупада
БХАГАВАД-ГИТА
КАК ОНА ЕСТЬ



Chapter One



The Red Book

All my life, I had been searching for a remedy for pain. Instead, I found the One who takes that pain away forever. Not from the body—from the heart. The body is merely a temporary home. Yet, it took me nearly twenty years to realize this. Twenty years, and a single red book that I dragged along with me from apartment to apartment every time we moved, not opening it even once.

It didn't all begin in India. It began when our world cracked. Or rather, not just cracked. It collapsed like a wall that had supported the familiar picture of my life.

The year was 2009. Yekaterinburg. The crisis they kept talking about on television suddenly stopped being just a word and crawled into our home. My husband's business was bursting at the seams, and a man we had considered a friend turned out to be... No, not an enemy. Simply someone who, in the hour of need, chose his own interests over friendship. I saw my husband fight for it, saw him try to keep the company, his employees, and his family together. So, I threw myself into this fight alongside him. Our daughter was six. I still remember the shame — the moment we couldn't pay for her activity club. Looking at

her carefree smile then, I felt like a traitor. How do you even begin to explain things like an economic crisis or a partner's betrayal to a child?

I held on. Smiled for our daughter, supported my husband, made soup out of a stone, and believed that everything would work out. And it did. By 2011, it became easier. We had made it out. And it was then, for the first time in a very long while, that we looked at each other not as mere survival companions, but as husband and wife. We decided — it was time. A second child. Our home once again needed to smell of milk and baby powder.

We started visiting doctors. First — a routine checkup. I was absolutely calm. Just some tests, maybe an ultrasound — a mere formality. However, the doctor's face as she was moving the ultrasound probe all over my belly — that thing I didn't like.

"A fibroid. The size of a walnut. We need to perform a hysterectomy."

Just like that. Not "Let's keep an eye on it," or "We can try to treat it." Straight to "hysterectomy." Like it were a worn-out, useless spare part. I was thirty-six. I still wanted to give birth. I was not ready to become a "faulty mechanism." A wave of protest

surged within me—a wild, primal stubbornness. I would not allow them to simply take a part of me away. There had to be another way.

And so, our quest began. Moscow. Endovascular embolization — a complex term that carried a glimmer of hope. Cutting off the tumor's blood supply while preserving the uterus. It sounded too good to be true. Yet, we couldn't make up our minds immediately, even for that. What if there was a way without a knife? Without hospitals? Without that sticky, cold, sterile atmosphere that reeks of fear?

Thus began our great search for a miracle. Healers, herbalists, psychics. We plunged into the world of esoterics as if into a murky river: in some ways it was amusing, in others — terrifying. We read books about energy, thought-forms, and karma. Then — Qigong. Chinese Image Therapy. We even flew to Beijing to meet the grand master himself, waiting with trepidation for his mysterious hand movements to heal me. He was a wise, respected man. However, no miracle happened. The tumor kept growing.

Driven by sheer helplessness, we went to church. The Church of Alexander Nevsky. Silence, the gleam of gold icons, the scent of incense.

I stood before the image of the saint, trying to pray, “Lord, help me. Holy Mother, save me.” But inside, I felt completely empty. No, I did have faith. But my faith was somehow... transactional. As if I wanted God to be my first aid kit.

Twice we traveled to Merkushino, to a convent. We stood at the morning prayers at five o'clock, surrounded by black robes and the austere, gaunt faces of the nuns. I tried my best. I listened closely to the chanting, I immersed myself in the prayers. It was beautiful, sublime. Yet, it was still all about suffering. About repentance. About guilt. But what I needed was Love. The kind of Love that heals.

Then a close friend of mine, who practiced yoga, said, “Why don't we go to India? For Panchakarma. It's a cleansing process, maybe it will help?”

India. Udupi. The heat, the smells, the blaring car horns, and cows roaming the roads. We were accommodated in a three-room apartment together with our friends. Our mornings began at the clinic of Dr. Tanmay Goswami. Smiling and always calm, he spoke in English, and Nanda Kishor translated for him. Nanda Kishor was a man of extraordinary Destiny, originally from Kazakhstan, who had lived in Israel and then came

to India to work. It felt as if Fate itself had brought us together. In the daytime — oil massages, herbal decoctions, and treatments. But in the evenings... In the evenings, that was when the very thing we had truly come for began to unfold.

Nanda Kishor would come to our place with a book, “The book of Victors! The Victors of Death!” — that was what he called it. We would sit in a small circle around him, and he would open the Bhagavad-gita. The blue one, not the red. The new edition. And he would read:

“For the soul there is neither birth nor death at any time. He has not come into being, does not come into being, and will not come into being. He is unborn, eternal, ever-existing and primeval. He is not slain when the body is slain.”

I watched him in silence. But inside, I was vibrating down to my very core. It was as if someone had struck a giant bell inside, and its sound filled the emptiness that I had felt back in the church. No one told me I was a sinner. No one demanded repentance. I was simply told the truth that I am not this body. I am a soul. This tumor, this fear, this fibroid—it all comes from the body. But the body is merely clothes. It is not I. It is not ME!

There was no resistance to the truth. There was only recognition. It was as if I had known this always. As if someone had simply spoken aloud what had been in my heart since the very day I was born. As I sat there, listening to Nanda Kishor, a strange vision suddenly surfaced in my memory. A young student girl. Winter. A trolleybus. A young man. And a book. The red book he had gifted me. I opened it then, caught sight of words about a battle, about the field of Kurukshetra, and thought, “Ugh, it’s about war. I want it to be about love.” And I slammed it shut. But I didn’t throw it away. I carried it along with me from apartment to apartment. Seven, ten, seventeen years. It lay somewhere in a box. In my very own home. All this time.

When we returned to Yekaterinburg, we found it. A red cover, slightly weathered. I opened the first page. Now, it was no longer a book about war. It was a book about the greatest love of all.

After visiting India, we stopped eating meat. Alcohol, too, simply left our lives on its own. We began to read the *Gita* together, aloud. The fibroid was still growing, and after four years of tribulations, feeling weak, and having constant blood loss, we finally underwent the surgery in

Moscow. I remember that month of agony — the dying tumor within me was perishing torturously. I was lying in the very same room where, many years later, I would leave my body. My husband was giving me painkilling injections. I was wailing from the pain, gnashing my teeth, but there, beyond all that pain, an island of stillness already existed. It was knowledge. I am a soul. It is the tumor that is dying, not me. The body is suffering, but I am not the body.

This was my mock exam. A mock one for the very exam Krishna speaks of in the *Gita*. Only back then, in 2015, I didn't yet have the strength to live by this knowledge fully. I was only just learning to separate myself from the torment of the body. Yet, precisely that surgery, that pain, that month in a chilly room with the windows wide open — all of it was preparing me for that July morning when leaving would not hurt. When leaving would be easy.

The seed sown in a trolleybus took its roots in India, sprouted in Moscow, and bloomed in my own bedroom. On that morning, as my daughter was holding the image of the Deities in front of me, and my husband was whispering words of eternal love into my ear. This was not the end. It was merely the beginning of my real life.



Chapter Two



Arina

Let's return a few years back. The first time I experienced what it means to be a soul was long before I ever learned that word from the Bhagavad-gita. It happened at the moment when my body failed me in the most terrifying way. When I knew that you can love someone without ever having looked into their eyes. And then — lose them. Forever to this world, but never to the heart.

We called her Veronika. For eight months, I carried her beneath my heart. I talked to her in the mornings, stroked my belly in response to her kicks, and sang her silly lullabies. My husband read fairy tales to her, his lips pressed close to my stomach. We had already seen her in our dreams — a blonde-haired girl with dimples on her cheeks. We bought tiny socks. We were parents. Almost.

And then, one day, she grew still. I woke up in the middle of the night from a strange, ringing silence inside. “She isn’t moving,” I whispered. My husband tried to soothe me, “She’s sleeping.” But I already knew. A mother always knows. The ultrasound at the hospital confirmed it: there was no heartbeat. Eight months. It was already a stage where a baby could be delivered and cared for. But she was gone.

I was weeping the whole day. No, that's not right. I was whimpering, I was whining like a wounded dog. It was the longest day of my life. I was sitting there for hours, pressing my palms against my belly — it was still warm, still holding the shape of her tiny body — and I was pleading with God I didn't really believe in back then, "Bring her back. Please. Bring her back..."

God remained silent.

Then came the doctor's words that make the blood run cold, "You need to give birth." It wasn't just a heartbreak. It was an absurd nightmare. To give birth to a child who was already gone. To go through all of the labor — the contractions, the pain, the pushing — knowing that in the end, you would not hear a cry. That they would not place a bundled baby into your arms. That you would give birth to silence.

I don't remember how I survived it. I only remember the cold ceiling of the delivery room, the metallic taste in my mouth, and the thought, "Why? Why me?" Back then, I still thought that I was my body. And that the death of one's body was the end.

Then came the medical examinations
Conflicting Rh factors. Diagnoses, medical

reports. “Carrying a child in the future will be extremely difficult. There will always be a risk of loss.” The doctors spoke those words like a death sentence. But inside us, something had already changed. Maybe after going through the worst, you have nothing left to fear. Or maybe it was Veronika who, in her passing, awakened something in me that no books ever could. She awakened an instinct. I had to become a mother. No matter what.

We began our preparations. Health resorts, vitamins, herbs, cutting out everything harmful. Yoga, breathing practices, minimizing stress. I transformed my body into a temple where a new life was meant to be born. Months of trying. Useless pregnancy tests. Being disappointed. Then trying again. And hoping for a miracle once more.

Then, one day — two lines on the test. Instead of joy came fear. A sticky, cold fear that settled in my chest and refused to leave for all nine months. I was terrified of every movement within my womb. I was terrified of the silence. I didn’t allow myself to grow attached: I gave it no name, I bought no things for it. Was I being superstitious? Not at all. It was simply my soul

remembering the pain and protecting itself. No name for the fetus. We went through this pregnancy day after day so carefully, as if cradling a fragile crystal vase.

And then — the childbirth. We enrolled in a course for couples. I remember the instructor, an energetic woman with her hair in a bun, using a model to show how a baby passes through the birth canal, repeating over and over, “The husband is an anchor. The wife breathes into him. He is her rhythm.” My husband and I sat there, holding hands, rehearsing our breathing. He was trying so hard. It was so amusing and touching to see him puffing like a “little dog” and blowing like a “locomotive.” I laughed. Then, looking at him, I suddenly realized — I was not alone. I had never been alone.

The contractions started in the middle of the night. He didn’t panic. He calmly packed the bag and started the car. A private room, one bed for the two of us. I was lying there, and he was sitting beside me, holding my hand as the contractions washed over me like waves. It felt intimate and sacred. When my waters broke and they wheeled me into the delivery room, he walked right by my side.

After that, everything became a blur. The contractions stopped. The doctors scrambled into action: labor induction, an IV, a needle in my vein. “Make sure she doesn’t bend her arm!” they shouted at my husband. And he made sure of it. He stood at the head of my bed, holding my IV arm with one hand, squeezing my shoulder with the other, and he breathed. He was breathing loudly, demonstratively, looking straight into my eyes. Inhale — exhale. Inhale — exhale. I was clinging to his breathing as if to a lifeline. The pain was intense, but I knew: here he was, my person. He was breathing for me. He was holding me here, in this world.

Between contractions, his hands would rest on my shoulders and neck—he massaged them, easing the tension. I would close my eyes, and for a few seconds, everything grew silent. Only the weight of his fingers. Only his warmth. I never knew what true compatibility meant until I lived through those hours. We were one then.

And then — a cry. Not mine. Hers. A resonant, demanding, fierce cry of life.

I only saw a little hand and a foot that the midwife held up. But I heard her. She was breathing.

The pediatrician examined her, swaddled her, and handed her to my husband. I wasn't allowed to hold her just yet — the doctors were still treating me. I watched this scene as if from the outside. A grown, strong man holding a tiny bundled baby. Looking at her. And she was looking at him. He told me later, "She looked at me with such awareness, as if she understood everything. I told her that we had been waiting for her, that we loved her, and she listened. She didn't cry. She just listened." This was their first conversation. The first meeting of two souls.

And then, they covered my face with an anesthesia mask. Something went wrong. My husband was asked to leave the room. He looked into my eyes, trying to encourage me with his gaze, but fear was obvious to see. Uterine curettage of the retained placenta. The doctor said the surgery was a success. I was discharged, but the pain and fever wouldn't ease up. We went back to the hospital: uterine infection. Anesthesia — once again, curettage — once again. My husband was waiting in the hallway with our daughter in his arms. My body was rebelling, malfunctioning, causing pain. But now I had her. And I had him.

For thirty days, we didn't know what to name her. Officially, you can wait a month, and so we waited. We gazed at that tiny face, watching her knit her little brows, how demandingly she cried when she was hungry. Her nature showed itself from the very first days. Strong. Willful. The one who walked this path with us until the very end. "Arina," I said on the last day, when we were already supposed to go to the registry office. A name starting with the first letter of the alphabet. The first. The winner.

And only many years later, holding the Bhagavad-gita in my hands, did I realize that it wasn't just my daughter being born back then. It was the birth of myself — someone completely new. In that hospital room, beneath the humming of the fluorescent lights, I truly felt for the first time that I was something more than my suffering, fragile body. Because the body was saying, "You will die, you won't survive this, your baby will die just like the first one." But as for me — I was giving birth to life. I was a vessel bringing an eternal soul into this world. And for that sake, everything was worth enduring.

Veronika and Arina. My two girls. One left without ever casting a single glance at me. The

other came so that one day, twenty years later, in a chilly July room, she would hold the image of the Deities before my eyes and say, “Mommy, you are about to meet your very best friend.”

Now I know that there is no life without loss. However, for the soul, there are no losses. There are only lessons. There is only love. There is a path back home, to Vrindavan, where all of us will one day be reunited with those we love.



Chapter Three



*The Land
Awaiting Us*

They say that Vrindavan is not just a place on a map. It is a state of heart. However, to understand this, you must first travel there in a stuffy Indian train with your ten-year-old daughter, praying for it to finally start moving.

Six months had passed since Udupi. We returned to Yekaterinburg, but India would not let us go. We read the *Bhagavad-gita* we had found in a box, chanted the *maha-mantra* we had learned at the Ayurveda clinic, and felt that something was maturing within. A next step of some kind.

And then Katya — the very friend with whom we had undergone Panchakarma — suggested a tour of the Golden Triangle (Delhi, Agra, Jaipur). We agreed almost instantly. But on one condition: at the end of the tour, we would make a stop in Vrindavan.

“Why do you even want to go to this Vrindavan?” Katya wondered. “There’s nothing there but temples. You aren’t Hare Krishnas, after all.”

I remember how I exchanged glances with my husband and smiled. Back then, we still didn’t know who we were. But the word “Vrindavan” was ringing in our hearts like a distant bell. There was no way we could fail to hear it.

We wrote to Nanda Kishor. The very same translator from Udupi who used to read the *Gita* to us in the evenings. He replied immediately, "I'll come with you. Let's meet on the train." And so, we set off.

The first days of the tour were like a kaleidoscope. The majestic Taj Mahal, the pink walls of Jaipur, tombs, gates, bazaars, the smells of spices and exhaust fumes. It was a visual overload; our feet were aching from walking. Arina took everything in with wide open eyes, asking questions for which we had no answers.

"Mom, why are they bowing to statues? Is that a god?"

I explained as best as I could, fumbling for words. But inside, I felt it: for now, we were just tourists. We were looking at a foreign culture through a pane of glass. We were not home yet.

And then came the day — we boarded the train to Mathura. Third-class carriage. There were simply no other tickets available. We squeezed into a carriage packed with people, bundles, boxes, and an unbelievable din. The heat was so intense that sweat ran in rivers even if you stood completely still. Arina was sitting by the window, fanning herself with her palm. My husband was trying to

find a place for the suitcases. I was holding the bag with our documents on my lap and thinking of only one thing: how would Nanda Kishor ever find us in this chaos?

When we gave him the train number, we didn't even have the physical tickets in our hands yet. We hadn't told him our carriage number. We had no cell phones. We gave him only the date, the train number, and the station where he was supposed to board. There were twenty carriages. Hundreds of people. Walking through the train was impossible: the aisles were completely blocked with passengers sitting on the floor. Only during station stops could someone hop out, run along the platform, and jump into another carriage. But how could anyone guess which carriage?

"He won't find us," I told my husband. "It's impossible."

My husband shrugged:

"He said the Lord in his heart would guide him. Let's see."

I scoffed skeptically. Back then, my faith was like a newly sprouted seed that had only just broken through the soil. I didn't trust the Lord one hundred percent yet. I still believed that miracles only happened to others, not us.

The train came to a halt at the station. The name of the station matched. We froze. One minute passed. Two. Five. I had already opened my mouth to say, "See, I told you so," but the carriage door swung open. And there, standing in the doorway and smiling as if we were meeting in the lobby of a five-star hotel, was Nanda Kishor.

He stepped inside. Right into our carriage. On his very first try.

"How?" we gasped in unison.

He laughed, lifting his bag onto the luggage rack:

"Lord Shri Krishna, who resides in my heart, told me where to go."

He said it so simply, so matter-of-factly, as if he were talking about where to buy a loaf of bread. But I was sitting there, feeling goosebumps run down my spine. This was my first Vrindavan miracle. Even though we hadn't even arrived there yet.

The train stopped right outside Mathura. And there it stood. Dead still. The heat inside the carriage became unbearable. You couldn't step out: no one knew when the train would start moving again. People said such delays could last for hours. Our daughter was sweltering from the stifling air,

and I fanned her with my headscarf. And then all of us — myself, my husband, Arina, and Katya — began to pray. For the first time in my life, I wasn't praying for health, nor for salvation, nor out of fear. I was praying for the train to move.

"Please, Lord," I whispered. "Please, let the train move."

Thirty minutes later, the train jolted and started rolling. I don't know if it was a miracle. But I know that at that exact moment, I felt it — I had been heard.

Mathura. Noise, dust, colorful taxis, and touts. We found a car and drove on. The road twisted and turned; fields, cows, and people were flashing past the window. I was watching it all, feeling my heart begin to beat faster. Not out of fear. Out of anticipation. It felt as though I were approaching the most important thing in my life.

"Vrindavan," the driver said.

The car stopped outside the hotel. We stepped out. And the very first thing Nanda Kishor did after getting out of the car was to drop to his knees, and bow on the ground. He simply pressed his forehead flat against the earth. My husband and I exchanged glances. Then, without saying anything, we did exactly the same. I touched

my forehead to the dusty Vrindavan land, and suddenly felt such a... No, I can't describe it in words. It was as if the land responded to me. As if it knew me. As if I had returned to a place where I had been expected to be all along.

We dropped our bags in the room and ran to the temple. The Krishna-Balarama Temple. I remembered it forever.

It was getting dark when we approached the temple. Before we could even see the altar, we heard the sound. Kirtan. The continuous, round-the-clock chanting of the Holy Names. The sound was pouring from the temple like a river, and we stepped into its waters. Then, we went inside.

And we froze.

The altar was radiant. I can't describe it any other way. It was radiant. The Deities — Krishna and Balarama — were dressed in festive attire, adorned with garlands of fresh flowers. And the flowers were everywhere: around the Deities' necks, on Their robes, on the altar, and on the floor. Their fragrance blended with the scent of sandalwood and incense. The eyes of the Deities looked straight at me. I felt Their gaze physically, upon my skin.

My eyes beheld Their beauty. My ears heard

the Holy Names. My nose inhaled the fragrance of the flowers. A gentle breeze from the open doors brushed against my face and hands. All my senses became captivated. But most importantly — my heart was captivated.

I don't remember how I sank to the floor. I simply found myself sitting there with a straight back and wet eyes.

My husband was sitting beside me, his eyes wide open. We didn't exchange a single word. Each of us was completely absorbed in our own Krishna. Having our own intimate conversation with Him.

The exhaustion, the heat, the chaos, the two-week tourist race — all of it was gone. Everything dissolved into this sound and this light. I had only one thought, pulsing in my mind like a heartbeat, "Why did we go anywhere else? Why did we ever go to see the Taj Mahal, all those forts, and palaces? We should have come straight here. Immediately. We have lost so much time..."

Then came another thought, from somewhere deeper than my mind, "You haven't lost any time. You have been walking here your entire life."

The next day, Nanda Kishor took us on parikrama. Ten kilometers through Vrindavan,

visiting ancient temples. We walked barefoot along the dusty paths, entered various shrines, and listened to different stories. Yet, no matter where we went, our hearts kept returning to the Krishna-Balarama Temple. It became the center of gravity for us. Our place of power. Our home.

Back then, I didn't yet know that many years would pass, and the photograph of these exact Deities would be before my eyes in my final hour. That to this very temple I would return in my heart during the most difficult moments. That it was this land I would call my true home.

However, that evening, sitting on the cool marble floor before the altar, I already knew. I knew and no words were needed, no proof, or doubt.

I was back.



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Chapter Four

*The House
Where Krishna
Lives*

They say that when Krishna enters your heart, He claims every single inch of it. Not a single corner is left for boredom, or laziness, or the question, «What should I do now?» He simply pushes out everything unnecessary, filling you to the very brim — with duties, people, concerns, the fragrance of spices drifting from the kitchen, and the resonant sounds of kirtans and morning prayers. This was exactly how our new life after Vrindavan began. A life in which our home ceased to belong just to us.

Our third day in Vrindavan brought yet another gift. We were already packing up to leave when Nanda Kishor said, «Come along. Maharaj is here. I want you to see him.» We walked over to the neighboring cottage where the guests were staying. And there, for the very first time, I saw him — Srila Bhakti Vijnana Goswami. Everyone called him simply “Maharaj.”

He was sitting on a plain chair, surrounded by a handful of disciples, speaking softly about something. I don't recall exactly what he was saying. I remember something else. His eyes. They were shining. Not in a figurative way — they literally radiated tranquility. The way he behaved

was so gentle, so profoundly humble, that for a moment, I forgot where I was.

He wasn't preaching, he wasn't lecturing, and he wasn't using grand words. He was simply speaking about Krishna. And that was enough to make us realize: this man knew something we didn't. And he lived by that knowledge.

Then came the invitation to Israel. For a retreat with Maharaj. We agreed, not yet understanding what we were signing up for. However, when we arrived, we dived into that world headfirst. The early mornings, which felt like pure torture at first. The morning prayers, the sounds of Sanskrit that initially felt foreign, but then suddenly became like a second language. The kirtans — long, ecstatic, where one wouldn't even notice an hour flying by. And the krishna-katha — stories that Maharaj told in such a way that everyone sat there open-mouthed, even forgetting to breathe.

And, of course, the prasadam. Oh, that prasadam! I can still recall the taste to this day. The taste of food cooked specifically for Krishna. We ate, unable to comprehend how ordinary ingredients could create such incredible flavors. People told us, "It's because Krishna tasted it first. And when Krishna tastes it, the food turns

into nectar.” Back then, it seemed like a beautiful metaphor. Now, I know it is the truth.

We returned to Yekaterinburg as different people. Literally. We could no longer live our lives the old way. In the mornings, we would play those very prayers we had heard at the retreat and, stumbling over the words, try to sing along. We found recordings of Maharaj’s classes, and I listened to them voraciously — morning, noon, and night. I would go about my endless household chores and just listen, listen, listen to them. Stories about Vrindavan, about Radha and Krishna, about Their pastimes and Their love. This was exactly what I had been searching for back then in that trolleybus, holding that red book in my hands, “I want it to be about love. “ And here it was. The greatest love story in the universe.

We stopped cooking “for ourselves.” From that moment on, every meal in our home was prepared for Krishna. We would place a plate before the image of the Deities, recite the prayers, and ask the Lord to accept our offering. Only then would we eat ourselves. It wasn’t a rigid ritual. It was a way to communicate. Every lunch became a small sacrifice, a small act of love. The kitchen transformed into an altar.

And then, something began that we never could have anticipated. Our home started turning into a guesthouse for saintly persons.

Jagadish Prabhu found out that we had a large house and asked us, “Could someone stay in your house? Dhirashanta Prabhu, a preacher from England, is coming, and he has nowhere to lodge.” We said, “Of course.” After that, it became a tradition. Almost every month, someone would come and stay there. Sometimes a single person. Sometimes an entire team. I remember when Indradyumna Swami — a legendary disciple of Srila Prabhupada — arrived with six or seven traveling companions. We accommodated them all.

With guests in the house, life spun like a wheel. An early morning — getting up at five, sometimes at six. We had to manage to cook breakfast for the guests. What would they eat? The prasadam had to be delicious, hot, and diverse. During the day, it was all about taking care of them, having conversations, and managing household matters. Lunches for them would be cooked by other devotees. In the evenings, it was time to clean up. I was always the last to go to bed. Sometimes at one in the morning, sometimes — at two. I would tidy the kitchen, mop the floors,

and prep the ingredients for the next day. My feet were throbbing. My back was aching. My eyes were heavy with sleep.

But I remember that feeling. I would collapse onto the sofa in the basement — the beds were all occupied by guests — stretch out my aching legs, close my eyes, and a wave of such happiness, such fulfillment, would wash over me, the likes of which I had never experienced before. I would replay the past day in my mind: the faces of our guests, their smiles, their words of gratitude, a fragment of a spiritual conversation overheard by chance in the living room, the scent of spices, the sound of the morning kirtan... And I knew: this was life. The real life. Vibrant. Full of meaning.

I once heard a phrase somewhere, “In Krishna consciousness, it can be hard. It can be difficult. But it is never, ever boring.” And that was the absolute truth. From the moment Krishna entered our lives, we didn’t have a single spare minute left for boredom. He occupied everything. And I was happy.

Back then, I didn’t yet know that this service — cooking breakfasts, mopping floors, caring for guests — was not just service. It was a

preparation. Every time I was exhausted and kept going, every time I sacrificed my own comfort for the sake of others, every time I remembered Krishna amidst the pots and rags, I was taking a little exam. Another one. And yet another one. Getting ready for that final, most important graduating final exam.

But before the great trials and tribulations arrived, Krishna gave me something truly incredible.

A small miracle that changed me forever. Then, for the first time, I dared to ask Him, “Do You hear me?”



Chapter Five



*A Peacock
Feather*

This happened at Govardhan in 2018. We had come for a small retreat featuring Srila Bhakti Vijnana Goswami. There were about twenty of us, and we stayed in the gated resort of Brij Vasundhara — the very place where Maharaj himself was lodging. Quietness, lush greenery, trees, shrubs, single-story cottages, wide roads, and narrow paths cutting through the bushes between the houses. A place where everything was saturated with the presence of Krishna.

And there, enveloped in that silence, I suddenly felt an unbearable, burning desire to check: does Krishna actually hear me?

I have no idea where that urge came from. I was reading the Gita, I was chanting the mantra, I was rendering service. Yet, somewhere deep down inside, just as in any other human being, a question lingered, “Are You truly there? Do You really hear me? Or is it all just beautiful words?”

On the very first evening, right before sleep, I spoke to Him. Simply, in a child-like manner, without any pretense:

“Krishna, if You can hear me, please give me flowers tomorrow.”

My husband and I slept in separate rooms. He had already gone to his, leaving me all alone.

The moment the words left my mouth, I felt terrified by my own audacity. But there was no turning back.

The following day was packed with meetings, conversations, and walks. No one gave me any flowers. I wasn't upset — well, I figured I either didn't deserve it, or it simply wasn't meant to be. In the evening, we went to Goswami Maharaj's class. It was held in an open area, right under the sky. After the class, the devotees who lived there and organized the retreat invited everyone to their place to drink hot milk with sweets.

We sat on the floor: men on one side, women on the other. I sat on the very edge, right by the front door. Maharaj sat at the very front of the room, far away from me. At some point, he took off the flower garland that had been placed around his neck before the class and laid it on the arm of the sofa. He was served milk first. He drank it quickly, thanked everyone, and went back to his room.

And then, the incredible happened.

Vamshibihari Prabhu, the devotee who was distributing the milk, took Maharaj's garland. He carried it through the entire room. He walked right up to me. And then he placed the garland around my neck.

I squealed with surprise. Everyone turned around. Some people were smiling, while others looked on in astonishment. And I was sitting there with Maharaj's garland around my neck, feeling goosebumps rippling across my skin. Krishna had answered. He had given me flowers. And not just any flowers — a garland right from the neck of His pure devotee.

Yet that evening, lying in bed, doubt crept in once more. What if it was just a coincidence? What if that devotee simply noticed me sitting on the edge and decided to cheer me up? What if...

So, I turned to Krishna again:

"If You can hear me, please treat me to fresh fruit tomorrow."

The following day, everything repeated itself. More meetings, another class. And after the evening program, a young woman approached me. She had also come for the retreat, and her family had their own Deities. She handed me a plate of fruit and said:

"This is maha-prasadam from our Deities. For some reason, They asked me to give this fruit specifically to you."

I was standing there, completely at a loss for words. A deep resonance filled my entire being.

Krishna had heard me again. He had answered again. However, my restless mind started whispering once more, “Well, fruit... that’s a common thing. Vaishnavas treat each other to fruit all the time. Maybe this was a coincidence, too?”

That night, I made a decision. The final one. I would ask for something that simply didn’t happen in the everyday life of devotees. Something that couldn’t possibly be a coincidence.

“Krishna, if You can hear me, give me a peacock feather tomorrow.”

The moment I said it, fear washed over me. A real, paralyzing fear. Because if He didn’t give me one — and how on earth would a peacock feather appear inside a gated, secure resort? — I would begin to doubt. I would lose my faith. Or, worse yet, I would be left with the crushing feeling that I didn’t matter to Him.

I barely slept. I tossed and turned, berating myself, “Why? Why did I do this? Why am I testing the Lord?” By dawn, I felt completely shattered and didn’t even go to the morning program. I was just lying there and praying:

“Krishna, forgive me. Forgive my doubts. You don’t have to fulfill my request. I still believe that You are there. That You hear me. Always.”

After that prayer, I felt a little lighter, though everything inside me was still trembling.

In the evening, my husband and I went to the class. When it ended, I asked him to walk me back to our apartment. I had no desire to talk to anyone. It was already completely dark outside; there were no streetlights.

“Walk me home, and then you can come back there if you want,” I said.

To shorten the way, we cut through the neighboring yards — narrow passages woven through the thickets, some kind of fences. My husband was walking ahead, and I was following right behind him. As we emerged from the last of the bushes onto the asphalt road, he offered his hand and let me pass ahead of him. The road led straight to our cottage. Along this road stood a single lamppost. It illuminated a small spot on the asphalt road.

I was approaching this spot of light. And suddenly, I froze.

Right there on the road, in the very center of that illuminated spot, was lying a peacock feather.

I don’t remember how I fell to my knees. It felt as though my legs simply gave way beneath me. I pressed the feather to my chest and burst

into tears. Sobbing. From sheer happiness. From profound shock. From the realization: Krishna is near. He hears. He always hears!

My husband knelt down beside me, but he remained silent. He didn't ask a single thing. He was just there. And I was weeping, completely unable to stop. In those few minutes, a colossal transformation took place within my heart and my mind.

It was as if the last remaining wall had crumbled. As if I had finally seen everything — not with my eyes, but with my soul.

How could a feather appear inside a gated, secure resort where no one had ever seen a peacock? On the single illuminated spot on the entire road? On this very evening? Right after my request?

The quill was neatly trimmed at the bottom. It hadn't just fallen out on its own. It was definitely Krishna. It was His answer. His gift. His sign.

When I calmed down a little, I asked my husband to help me up. He lifted me, and we walked slowly back to our room. He didn't go back out after that. He stayed with me. And then, I told him everything. About the flowers. About the fruit. And about the feather.

He listened in silence. And then he said:

“Now you know.”

Yes. Now I knew. I didn’t just believe. I didn’t just hope. I knew.

Krishna exists. Krishna hears us. Krishna loves us. And He is always near. Even when we doubt it. Even when we ask for the impossible. Even when we are afraid to believe.

That feather is still with us at home. It rests on our little altar in the kitchen — as proof. As a reminder.

As a quiet testament to the fact that the Lord answers those who seek Him. Even if it is in a child-like way. Even if it is with a trembling heart. Even if it is through the impossible.

He hears us.

Yet soon, I was to face a trial of such a nature that merely knowing He hears me would no longer be enough. I had to learn to trust Him not only in moments of miracles, but also in moments of pain. Not only when a feather appears beneath a lamppost on the road, but also when you close the door to your room and pray, “Krishna, take me home.”

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Chapter Six



*Praying in
a Locked Room*

For twenty years, we were like a single whole. My husband and I. For twenty years, we discussed everything — from what to cook for lunch to our business development strategies. We were a team. The best team in the world. I knew what he was thinking before he even spoke. He could sense my mood just by the way I placed a teacup on the table. We went through Veronika's death, Arina's birth, a financial crisis, a battle with uterine fibroids, through traveling through India, and through finding Krishna. We breathed in unison. And I thought it would always be this way.

But Krishna had other plans.

When Krishna consciousness entered our lives, it was pure happiness. But it was also a trial. My husband has a big, kind, open heart. That's just the kind of man he is. And when many new acquaintances appeared in his life — devotees, seekers, simply people with burning eyes — he began to help. With money, connections, and time. He invested himself in people because he saw them not just as those who were asking for help, but as brothers and sisters on the same spiritual path. He wanted them to succeed. And some took advantage of that.

Then came “business projects” with devotees. Big words, beautiful presentations, and quotes from the shastras. However, behind all of that there was nothing. Money drained away, projects collapsed, yet my husband believed and tried again and again. He would say, “We are devotees, we are supposed to help each other.” And I understood it. I used to think the exact same way. But when there was suddenly nothing left to eat at home again, when the company — his brainchild, which we had built back up after the last crisis — faced losses once more, something inside me snapped.

And then he appeared. The coach.

One of the senior devotees in Yekaterinburg recommended him as a specialist in socionics and business consulting. He was from another city, a devotee, he spoke all the right words. And my husband trusted him. Completely. Unconditionally.

Every week, this man would come to our house. To stay overnight. I cooked prasadam for him, made his bed, and smiled. But inside, a cold lump was forming. He was working with my husband in the office and interacting with the staff. Soon, the employees began to resign. One after another.

Good, proven workers who had stayed with us for years. The coach would say, “This is normal.

“The disloyal ones are weeded out. We will find new ones.” And find them we did. They might have been loyal, but they were completely out of their depth. Sales plummeted. Clients walked away. Yet the coach kept coming, time after time.

When I found out how much my husband was paying him, it felt like a physical blow. It was a staggering sum of money — all to watch the company sink to the bottom. I began to speak up. Quietly at first, then louder, until finally, I was screaming. I wept. I begged. I laid out the hard numbers right in front of him. He would just stare at me with glazed eyes and nod. And then he would pick up the phone and call the coach again.

One day, I couldn’t take it anymore. I approached that man myself. I asked him directly, “Do you see what is happening? The company is hemorrhaging money. People are quitting. What exactly are you being paid for?” He looked at me, cold and unfazed, “What I receive is only a small fraction of what I am actually worth.”

At that exact moment, the final cord snapped inside me. There were no more words left. There were no tears. Only emptiness. And silence.

I retreated to my room. Turned the key in the lock. Lay down on the bed. And I spoke — not to my husband. To Krishna.

“Krishna, take me away from here. My service means nothing to my husband anymore. He doesn’t hear me. He doesn’t see me. I can’t do this. Take me away. Please, take me home.”

I lost all track of time. Whether two hours passed or twenty — I don’t know. I didn’t eat, I didn’t drink, I didn’t step outside. I just lay there, curled into a ball, staring at the wall. Inside, there was only one prayer. It repeated itself effortlessly, like a heartbeat, “Take me away from here. I don’t want to go back to the relationship we have now. I don’t recognize my husband. I don’t recognize my life. Take me away.”

Looking back now, I think that might have been the exact moment Krishna heard me. Perhaps it was then that He set in motion the process that would culminate on that July morning. Because He knew I wasn’t asking out of a whim. I was asking from the depths of my soul. And my plea would be answered. Not immediately. But it would be.

My husband knocked on the door. Softly at first, then louder. He was saying something, but the words didn’t register. It was just a low rumble

on the other side of the door. I stayed silent. The night passed. In the morning, he took the lock apart and stepped inside.

He sat down beside me. He murmured something, stroking my hair, and began to massage my feet. I remained silent. Eventually, he fell silent, too, and simply stayed close. We spent another twenty-four hours like that. Just the two of us. In complete silence.

Arina, our wise little girl, stayed out of it. She told me later that she had been weeping quietly in her room, begging the Lord to help us — to help us survive this, to help us find our way back to each other. The Lord heard her prayers, too. I know He did.

Because after some time — I cannot say how long, for time flowed differently back then — I found the strength to stand up. I did it without resentment. Without demands. Without conditions. I simply got up and began to do what I had always done. Cooking. Cleaning. Taking care of things. I hadn't forgotten, but I had let go.

He parted ways with the coach. Thank God. And later, once the storm had fully passed, we sat down and had a real conversation. I asked him:

“Where is the Alexander I used to know? The one who always knew what to do. The one who received guidance from Krishna and pulled the company out of every crisis. You have so much experience. Why do you need coaches? Come back to your senses. Trust your own understanding again.”

He looked at me for a long time. And then, I watched as the expression in his eyes began to shift. It was as if a veil were being lifted. He had truly forgotten who he was — his own capabilities, his talents, his connection to Krishna. He had turned into an insecure, fragile man looking for a foothold on the outside, when his anchor had been within him all along.

Thank God, he heard me. He pulled himself together. He stepped back into the business, and the company, which is named “LOTUS,” began to flourish once more — like a lotus flower pushing its way through the mud toward the sun.

That was our most severe crisis. I hold no resentment toward my husband or the coach. I understand that they are all merely instruments in Krishna’s hands. Later on, my husband and I even took care of the coach and his family when they lived in Yekaterinburg, letting them stay in our

separate apartment. However, that crisis taught me a lesson that would later sustain me in my ultimate battle: I learned how to let go. I learned how to pray not for things to go my way, but for everything to unfold according to Krishna's will. I learned how to close the door, turn to Him, and say, "I cannot handle this. Please, take over."

That was exactly what I did when I finally found out about the diagnosis. But that is a completely different story.



Chapter Seven



Diagnosis

After that crisis, my health declined. I started to tire more quickly, and I no longer had the strength for the constant stream of guests and service that we used to maintain. We stopped accepting every single devotee who wished to stay in our house. However, we became especially close to one of them. His name was Bhaktivedanta Sadhu Swami. Quiet, deep, and genuine. He came to stay with us not as a guest, but as a member of our family. There was no need to fuss over him, no need to lay out elaborate spreads — he was one of us. He was simply present.

My stomach ached from time to time. I didn't pay attention. Well, it aches, and it aches, I thought. I treated it with folk remedies: burdock juice, aloe, and a strict diet. I had a different attitude toward my body by then. Not neglect, no. Rather, a calm understanding that this body wasn't me. If the body hurts, well, let it hurt. The main thing was that inside, in my heart, there was always happiness. I would walk around the house, slowly going about my chores. Sometimes I would sing the Holy Names — quietly, under my breath. Sometimes I would listen to krishna-katha. Sometimes I would just sit in silence and

think about Krishna. It was a strange, wonderful time: outwardly — a lull, a growing weakness, but inwardly — a profound fullness.

My husband was actively running the business again, and everything was working out for him. “LOTUS” was blossoming. I felt at peace for him. A few times, my friend Irina and I traveled to Khosta in the Krasnodar Region to see a healer named Nadezhda, who treated people with acupuncture and her own prayers. A couple of times, my husband and I went to the Uvildy sanatorium. My health wasn’t improving, but it wasn’t getting significantly worse either. I had grown used to it.

And then, an attack hit.

During one of Sadhu Swami’s visits, I suddenly felt a pain so intense that I couldn’t get out of bed. I lay there for two days. My husband and Sadhu Swami managed on their own. I felt terribly uncomfortable: a guest was in the house, and the hostess was bedridden. However, my body refused to cooperate.

Sadhu Swami left. My husband and I had a secret, though: we had bought tickets for the exact same flight as his, heading to Novosibirsk. Sadhu Swami was scheduled to speak there at a seminar

called “Fathers and Children.” We wanted to surprise him — to board the plane and suddenly appear right beside him. But Destiny had other plans. We refunded the tickets; there was no question of flying while I was bedridden. The airline, however, requested a medical certificate from the hospital to process the refund.

And so, because of the ticket refund, I finally went to see a doctor.

They checked my intestines. They checked my stomach. The doctor stared at the screen for a long time, and then said in a calm — too calm — voice, “You have a tumor. It covers about a third of your stomach. We need to take a biopsy and wait for the results.”

Three weeks.

Never in my life had three weeks lasted so long. I continued to drink my herbs — burdock and aloe — and stuck to a gentle diet. But a premonition had already settled inside me. Quiet, dark, like distant thunder. I knew. For some reason, I just knew the tumor was malignant.

The result: stomach cancer. Stage three.

My first thought wasn’t “why me?” My first thought was, “Krishna, why stage three right

away? Why not stage one? Stage one can still be cured. Stage three — almost never.”

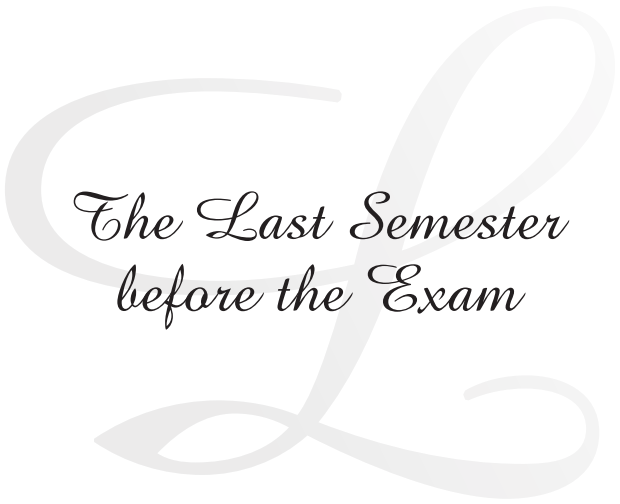
I sat there holding that piece of paper in my hands, thinking about my mother. How would she handle this? She was already elderly, and she loved me so deeply. I thought about Arina. She was still a fourth-year university student, not nearly as independent as she liked to seem. How would she manage without me? I thought about my husband. Despite me feeling so weak, I continued to help him, to serve him. He needed me, too. We had only just found our way back to each other after that crisis. And now — this.

“Krishna,” I asked, “why now? Everything was just starting to improve. My husband’s business was turning around. Our daughter is about to graduate. I have a milestone birthday coming up — fifty years old. I wanted to celebrate it in some special way...”

The “special” had arrived. But it was completely different from what I had wanted.



Chapter Eight



*The Last Semester
before the Exam*

The healthcare system swung into motion with terrifying speed. The oncologist, the tests, being registered at the cancer center. They laid out the plan: four rounds of chemotherapy, followed by a surgery — a total gastrectomy, the complete removal of my stomach. I agreed. What choice did I have?

Chemo was pure hell. With each successive round, bouncing back became increasingly difficult. My body grew frail, my hair thinned out, and nausea became my constant, shadow-like companion. Yet, I held on. I clung to the mantra. To the Holy Names. To the unwavering conviction that Krishna knew exactly what He was doing.

During my final stay at the oncology center, while I was hooked up to an IV drip, a young woman walked up to me. She was so young, only thirty-four. She shared her story: six months ago, they had completely removed her stomach. She thought she was saved. For all those months, she had been unable to eat almost anything. And then, they discovered metastases in her intestines. She spoke in a quiet, steady voice, looking straight into my eyes. As I listened, something shifted deeply inside me.

What was the point of cutting out an organ if it offered no guarantees? If cancer could return even without a stomach?

That night, lying in the ward and staring up at the ceiling, I was speaking to Krishna, “If You so desire, You can heal this body of mine without any surgeries at all.

And if You do not want to — no matter what I do, nothing will help.” And I made my decision. No more surgeries. Come what may.

After the chemotherapy, my immunity plummeted to nearly zero. My body could no longer fight. The tumor continued to grow. Attacks of pain set in — so excruciating that I would curl up on the bed, unable to breathe. During one of those intense episodes, believing I was about to leave my body, I begged my husband to sing kirtan. And he sang. Through his own tears and heartbreak, he sang the Holy Names. I just lay there, huddled into a tight ball, listening to them through the haze of pain.

Then came the ascites. My abdomen swelled so severely that they had to perform a paracentesis to drain the fluid. Later, an ultrasound. It revealed that the cancer had metastasized to my intestines.

My husband refused to give up. He ordered

yajnas, searched for doctors, healers, and herbalists. One day, he came to me and said, “There is a practitioner named Mother Nandini. An herbalist from Kislovodsk. She has cured many people. In the early stages — without chemo. In our situation, she cannot give any guarantees, but she promises one thing: there will be no more pain attacks.”

I agreed instantly, without a second thought. The pain was more terrifying than death itself.

The herbs arrived by mail. And from that moment on, my life turned into a strict military routine. Four times a day — strictly by the clock. Different herbs, spaced exactly thirty minutes apart. In the brief intervals between them, I had to manage to eat. My body could barely assimilate any food, and everything burned me from inside. Yet, the intense attacks of pain truly ceased, just as Mother Nandini had promised.

I was hungry all the time, but my body was caught in a constant, agonizing pendulum between vomiting and diarrhea, which proved more draining than any pain. We used IV drips to keep me going, but with no real nourishment, my muscles began to waste away. First, I lost the ability to walk. Soon, I couldn’t even turn over in bed on my own.

Three people took care of me: my husband, Arina, and Irina. They washed me, changed my diapers, helped me sit up braced against the headboard, and brought me food. Right up until my final days, I managed to feed myself — only a little, but I did it. I felt incredibly awkward. Terribly uncomfortable. I, who had spent my entire life serving others, was now a burden. But there was absolutely nothing I could do. I could only thank them. I could only pray.

Until the very end, I hoped for a miracle. Yes, every single sign indicated that my final graduation exam was drawing near. Yet I kept hoping. However, just in case, I also began to pray for something else.

“Krishna,” I would whisper to the Lord softly, “if this is already destined, then please, let it happen without pain. Without fear. And in the presence of those I love. Please, do not leave me alone at that moment. Be with me.”

Krishna heard that prayer. Just as He had heard every single one of my prayers before.



Epilogue



*The Roadmap
Back Home*

I heard this verse long before it became my reality:

“Whatever state of being one remembers when he quits his body, O son of Kuntī, that state he will attain without fail.”

Bhagavad-gita, 8.6

Back then, many years ago, in that three-room apartment in Udupi, listening to the measured voice of Nanda Kishor, those words seemed to me like a beautiful philosophy. A sublime truth that was undeniably valid — but somewhere far off, in sacred scriptures, in ancient worlds, in the lives of great saints. I never applied it to myself. I thought that someday, in the distant winter of old age, I would probably think about God, too. But not now. Right now, there is life, business, family, and service. Right now, there are pots in the kitchen, guests in the house, my husband's company, and a teenage daughter. Why should I, an ordinary woman from Yekaterinburg, be dwelling on the moment of death?

Yet even then, Krishna was already smiling. He knew that this verse wasn't just philosophy. It was a roadmap. A roadmap back Home. And quietly, step by step, He was leading me along it.

Through the painful loss of Veronika. Through the birth of Arina. Through the red book in the trolleybus and the blue book in Udupi. Through the dust of Vrindavan upon my forehead. Through the late-night kitchen cleanups when my feet throbbed but my heart sang. Through the crisis and the locked door, behind which I begged for the very first time with my whole being, “Take me home.” Through the diagnosis. Through the chemo. Through the attacks of pain that dissolved into kirtan. Through the herbs by the clock and a body that melted away like a candle.

He was leading me toward that morning.

July 19th. 6:30 AM. Open windows. Cool breeze. Light.

My body lay on its side, already light, already almost translucent. My husband’s hand cradled my head. My daughter’s hand held an image of the Deities before my eyes. My friend’s hand rested upon my foot. The three of them. The three dearest people Krishna had given me, so I wouldn’t have to walk this path alone.

And the Names resonated in my ears.

The maha-mantra. Mukunda’s kirtan. My husband’s voice close to my ear. Arina’s voice,

loud and steady, “Mommy, you are about to meet your very best friend.”

What did I remember at that exact moment?

Krishna. Only Him.

His eyes, gazing back at me from the photograph. His land, upon which I had walked barefoot. His temple, where I for the first time felt that I had finally returned Home. I gave no thought to my body. I gave no thought to the pain. I didn’t think about the past, nor did I feel anxious about the future. I simply looked at Him. And I was with Him.

An inhale.

A little deeper than the ones before.

And then — an exhale.

The soul departed with that very breath. They say this is an auspicious sign, but I wasn’t thinking about signs. I simply took a step forward. And I found myself exactly where I had always belonged. In a place where there is no fear, no pain, and no separation. Where Krishna is.

Verse 8.6 ceased to be mere words on a page. For me, it became reality.

And now, from where I am, I want to say to all of you — to every single person reading this book. To those who fear death. To those

who tremble for their loved ones. To those who believe the spiritual path is meant only for saints, and not for ordinary women with kitchens and pots.

That is not true.

The roadmap is already in your hands. It is written right there in the Bhagavad-gita. And it works. It guided me through my entire life — a simple life, full of mistakes and worries — straight to that morning when it was not windows that opened, but gates. And I walked through them. And you will walk through them, too.

Remember Krishna. Serve those who have dedicated their lives to Krishna. And one day, when your time comes, you will also pass this exam. Without fear. Without pain. Enfolded in love.

Then we will meet. There, in Vrindavan. Where there is no death, no time, and no separation. Only love! Only eternity! Only Krishna!



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What if our whole life
is nothing but a preparation
for one defining moment?