

# SOFTLY, AS I LEAVE YOU

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*Bay Owl*  
P R E S S

 *Bay Owl*  
COLOMBO



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*For James*



*Bay Owl*  
PRESS

There has never been a time when you and I have not  
existed, nor will there be a time when we will cease  
to exist.

*Bhagavad Gita*



One day, he'll follow her hand as it traces the ancient design of a lotus in full bloom painted on the walls of the rock temple.

'The artist has turned the lotus into a mathematical design,' he'll say, 'it's not the beautiful flower that I know.'

'But you miss the point,' she'll reply, 'you talk of the flower as you see it. The artist has removed its mortality, you see, and when that's done, what is reached is pure form.'

They'll stand together regarding the flower, then quietly he'll touch her arm, and quietly she'll let herself be led away.

Remembering their son, they will meander out of the temple.

'Let go of the past and the future, and of the passions,' the monk will counsel them, 'Surrender to the present and to that beautiful silence. Enter the purity of the lotus.'

See life as transparent light.



*Bay Owl*  
PRESS

A decorative border consisting of two horizontal, overlapping branches of leaves and small flowers, framing the chapter title.

## Chapter 1

Rubbing her eyes, Uma awakened to a light-filled bedroom in her house in Melbourne. Chris had already drawn back the window curtains so the garden spilt in with an excess of green and a flock of noisy parrots in the liquidambar tree.

Uma stretched and rose languidly out of the quilt. In the full length mirrors opposite she saw herself – her honey-complexioned face and shoulders framed by black hair against the gold of the quilt and the green in the window. The mirrors softened the light, and ensconced her in a private world and she was lost in it for a moment – introspective and intense – like in an intimate kiss.

When they had bought this house over twenty years ago, she and Chris had talked often enough about

removing the absurd mirror-doors of the wall-to-wall wardrobe. It was a little embarrassing, the way it threw back at them their most private moments. Uma would often catch herself in the mirrors reluctantly, noting her movements with Chris as though they belonged to some other woman. But, as time went by she became less conscious. You get used to things, especially in a marriage.

And of course, Arjuna had loved the mirror when he was a child. Uma and Chris thought that he'd grown up to be so sociable because of the little mirror self he'd discovered when he was just about six months old. It was also in front of these mirrors, with his parents lying behind him in the big bed, that he had learned to perform so scintillatingly with his guitar and harmonica.

Chris held out her mug of coffee. He'd returned from his jog in the park and was still in his tracks and tee shirt, a slightly gaunt, appealing presence with his tanned skin, greying hair and reflective blue eyes behind black-framed rectangular spectacles.

Uma reached for the mug, still immersed in her exchange with the mirror. Absently, she glanced up to thank Chris and saw his reaction to the way she

looked this morning. It was not unexpected. He was drawn to her on the bed. He looked down into her eyes, smiled, and reached a little uncertainly for her lips. But she turned sideways to rest her mug on the bedside table and burrowed back into the quilt.

Chris stood up, his eyes shuttered. Uma was immediately regretful and moved. She regretted having flirted with the mirror. She knew his hurt, felt his yearning. But she had not the heart to respond. She wanted him to move away from the window because he was blocking out the morning light but asked him instead about the day's weather predictions and the news. He sat beside her, in control again.

'The news on Sri Lanka is a bit depressing, Uma. Yet another boatload of Sri Lankan refugees has landed in Queensland. They were all walking inland in single file when the police got them. They've been taken off to a detention camp. I just heard it on the 7 o'clock news. Who knows how long they'll be there. It's a wretched business.'

Later, Uma would surf the net for information on these refugees and their inopportune entry into Australia. She'd print it out and read it to Arjuna when they next sat around in the lounge with their

weekend newspapers and magazines. As Uma shared with him the tragedy of a homeland that could offer no refuge to its people, Arjuna would place his arm comfortingly around her shoulder. Chris would sit back and watch them absently. Held in a glow of light, lost to the world around, their bond seemed tactile. He would not want to break into it, but felt alone for a moment, like driftwood – now towards, now away...

Now, he had something else to share with Uma, as half-sitting up in bed again, she began to sip her coffee. Those books that he had ordered months ago had finally arrived. He placed a little package in her lap. It was an early edition of the *Gitanjali* that he had specially ordered for her. Returning the mug to him, she touched it with loving fingers. She traced the intricately etched border on the faded cloth cover, turned the fragile pages to a few cherished stanzas.

Her voice, as she read Chris' inscription, was moist with affection. She breathed in the moment – his caring, the aroma of the coffee so caringly brewed by him – warm, warm.

But then, imperceptibly, her face changed. It was like a veil subtly drawing over her face. Casting down her eyes, she began to pluck at the quilt. She wanted

more than anything to hide the truth; she wanted more than anything for Chris to know, so it would be out in the open between them. But the moment passed as others had, before.

'See you when you get back from Sydney, then, Uma. Have a great time – and good luck with the research.' Caressing her face lightly, Chris walked away to the bathroom, his mind already on the busy day ahead, the traffic on Lygon Street, the consignment of books that had arrived at Ekphrasis, the inventory that it required, the training of a new shop assistant. He called out to Arjuna that he would drop him off at the university. Arjuna's assent from somewhere in the backyard was followed by the thud of his soccer ball.

Uma turned back to her new book. Reluctantly, she glanced again in the mirror, her eyes congested with remorse. It seemed to reprove her now, and censure her – and the tragedy that recurred in their bedroom. She immersed herself in the book, listening for Arjuna's footsteps.

And here he was at last. Before Uma could lay down her book, he was at her side, bending down obligingly for her morning kiss, his hair still damp from the shower. Trying to contain the uprush of