

## Foreword

This docu-novel seeks to trace the extraordinary companionship of a remarkable couple. It is our hope that readers feel touched by these deeply human experiences and, through them, awaken to a deeper compassion for life's unforeseen trials – especially for those enduring Alzheimer's disease, and for their caregivers who walk that demanding path with grace and devotion.

We wish for *Sharad Ni Sudha* to be not just a narrative, but also a gentle source of insight and inspiration.

This work would not have been possible without the generous cooperation of Mr. Sharad Mehta, his family, and his circle of friends. Their openness and support have made this story come alive.

We are very grateful to Ms. Janki Parikh, for readily translating our original 'Sharadni Sudha' from Gujarati in English, both fluently and expeditiously. She also made valuable suggestions, for which thanks are due.

Our heartfelt thanks also to Zen Opus for his valuable support.

– Prakash Trivedi & Nina Sanghavi

## *Translator's Note*

There was just something about this book that captivated me right from the moment I started to read it. The characters are so real and relatable, and yet the narrative flows with the richness of a novel – at times light-hearted with humor and adventure, at others, deeply moving and inspiring as it captures the unwavering courage and quiet heroism of its characters.

As I translated, my effort was to keep the heart of the original alive – the tenderness, the cultural nuances, the deep humanity – all conveyed through the gentle rhythms of Gujarati thought and speech. The rhythms of languages differ, but emotions don't, and I hope these pages carry the same warmth and poignancy that the original does.

I chose the title *Autumn's Grace* because “Sharad” in the original title carries the meaning of autumn – a season of color, maturity, and reflection, while “Sudha” evokes nectar, grace, and sweetness. Together, they mirror not just the names of the protagonists but also the essence of their journey: a companionship that transcends seasons and endures with dignity and love.

To Sudhaben and Sharadbhai: thank you for demonstrating what companionship truly means.

To Prakashbhai and Ninaben: thank you for giving me the opportunity to bring this English version to life.

And to the readers: if this story moves you, the credit belongs to the authors; it has been my privilege to help their words find you in English.

– Janki Parikh

## *Prologue*

That day, Aalok's home overflowed with joy – laughter spilling through the rooms like sunlight through open windows. The sound of children's chatter, the patter of little feet racing from room to room, love and laughter everywhere.

The occasion? Arin's second birthday.

His sister Aaliya and their cousins Eva and Raina had invited all their friends. The children arrived clutching gifts, wide-eyed with excitement at the promise of balloons, games, pizza and cake, as well as the party favors they'd carry back home like treasure.

When it was time to cut the cake, Sudha, Arin's loving grandmother, gently lifted him into her arms, her face aglow. Of course, the knife wasn't meant for his small fingers – that honor went to his older sister, or perhaps his mother. But Sudha was the one who kissed his cheeks, soft as petals, and smoothed back his hair as if memorizing the moment. When the cake was cut, she scooped up a little piece with her finger and placed it tenderly in his mouth. Arin clapped in delight, and a sweet chorus of "Happy Birthday to you!" rose around them like a wave.

As the final note drifted away and the candles flickered low, Sharad and Aalok stepped forward to take Arin from her arms.

Sudha turned to them, holding the little boy tight in a loving embrace, a faint smile touching her lips.

"Who is he?" she asked. "Whose child is this?"

At that moment, someone leaned in and quietly blew out the last glowing candle.

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## *The Hindu Temple of Malibu*

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In the picturesque town of Malibu, California, near the tranquil shores of the Pacific Ocean, nestled in serene hills, stands a magnificent white Hindu temple, its pristine white gopurams intricately carved in the grand tradition of South Indian temple architecture. It is not dedicated to Lord Murugan, however, but to Lord Venkateshwara, an avatar of Lord Vishnu. This five-story architectural marvel, standing as a serene beacon of faith and culture, has welcomed devotees and spiritual seekers for years.

The breathtaking natural beauty of Malibu – the rolling hills, the vast sky, and the rhythmic dance of ocean waves – only deepens the temple’s sense of sacredness. More than just a place of worship, this temple awakens the divine consciousness that lies within one’s heart, and fosters a deep spiritual connection with the universe.

Adjacent to the temple of Vishnu – the preserver of the universe – is a relatively smaller yet equally sanctified shrine dedicated to Lord Shiva.

As one enters the Vishnu temple, the mind resonates with the sacred chant:

*“Mangalam Bhagavan Vishnu.”*

*Auspicious is the Lord, Bhagavan Vishnu – Harbinger of harmony,  
Protector of worlds.*

In the same way, upon stepping into the Shiva temple, the soul stirs with the powerful vibrations of the *Mahamrityunjaya Mantra*:

*“Om Tryambakam Yajamahe, Sugandhim Pushtivardhanam,  
Urvarukamiva Bandhanan, Mrityor Mukshiya Maamritat!”*

*We offer our worship to the Lord Shiva, the Three-Eyed One,  
fragrant with grace, who nourishes all life.*

*Like a ripe fruit severed from the vine, may we be freed from  
the bonds of death, yet never from the nectar of immortality!*

If Vishnu is the preserver of the universe and Shiva is the deity of death, it is only through the guidance of both that all souls can navigate the path of immortality. This profound realization dawns in the hearts of visitors within the sacred space of the Malibu Hindu temple, where the eternal forces of preservation and transcendence meet in perfect harmony.

The temple courtyard is alive with activity today – flowers bedeck the space, and a sacred energy fills the air. As visitors remove their shoes and step inside, their feet tingle from the cool, moist marble floor. The air is thick with the fragrance of ghee lamps, and the Upanishadic peace mantras resonate through the hall, easing the turmoil in every heart.

In the temple courtyard, arrangements have been made for the gathering. Chairs have been set up, and a framed photograph adorned with floral garlands rests on a central table. Nearby, a *havan kund* (sacred fire altar) has been prepared, surrounded by seating mats for those participating in the rituals.

Even in her absence, Sudha’s presence is deeply felt.

The prayer assembly begins with chanting peace mantras. Two South Indian priests seat Sudha’s sons, Anurag and Aalok, near the sacrificial fire and commence the Vedic rituals. Though many do not fully understand the meaning of the

Sanskrit chants, their rhythmic intonations soothe restless minds. Among the fifty to sixty attendees – family members and close friends – there is sorrow, yet a strange sense of relief. Despite being a memorial, the occasion carries an aura of auspicious serenity.

After nearly forty-five minutes of chanting, offerings of flowers, and the pouring of ghee into the sacred fire, the ceremony progresses to a visual tribute.

A screen now displays a slideshow of Sudha's life – pictures from her childhood, adolescence, youth, marriage, and family life. Her entire life story unfolds before everyone's eyes. Each photograph radiates her familiar, cheerful smile, making it momentarily easy to forget that Sudha is no longer physically among them. The images evoke memories of her and Sharad's long and happy journey together as a couple, and in this moment, her presence lingers in the laughter and love she shared with those around her.



After enduring the long and painful separation from Sudha brought on by the COVID pandemic – when visits to the rehabilitation center in Santa Monica were no longer allowed – Sharad carried on with quiet resilience. In January 2022, with pandemic restrictions easing slightly, he made a short trip to India. He had some personal and family matters to tend to, and Mumbai offered him not only a practical break but also an emotional one. There, among old friends and new acquaintances, he found a sense of healing. He attended cultural gatherings, reconnected with familiar faces, and even considered organizing a grand felicitation for Shri Purushottam Upadhyay, a gesture of honor and deep respect.

Amid these engagements, one idea kept calling to him – a book. A book that would not just chronicle Sudha's long

and difficult battle with Alzheimer's, but also offer insight and empathy to others walking similar paths. Sharad resolved that this book would be written. He planned to narrate his insights and personal experiences, while two collaborating authors would shape it into a published work.

Despite being physically distant from Sudha, Sharad remained in constant touch with their son Anurag, and frequently called the rehabilitation center to check on Sudha's health. One fateful night, Anurag called, relaying an urgent message:

"Mom's health has declined severely. She is struggling to breathe. They've asked me to come immediately. I'm heading there now. Please make arrangements to come back quickly."

Sharad's heart dropped. From thousands of miles away in Mumbai, he could do nothing but wait and pray. Another call from Anurag soon followed:

"The doctors say her condition is critical, but we have decided not to move her to the hospital. She is being given oxygen, but she will not be put on a ventilator. Let whatever must happen, happen according to God's will."

Sudha's final hours were quiet and dignified. After enduring a few hours of labored breathing, Sudha took her final breath and, with one last exhalation, her soul was freed from the constraints of her body.

Sharad scrambled to return to the U.S., but COVID-era limitations made travel difficult – flights were few and far between. After much persistence, he secured a ticket and began the long journey back home.

For the past ten years, Sudha had already been slipping away due to Alzheimer's. Yet, her physical presence had offered a sense of comfort – a tangible connection. Visiting her, preparing her favorite meals, feeding her – these small

acts had given Sharad a sense of purpose. But with her passing, even that connection was severed and that solace was gone. She had moved to a place beyond all physical ties, and Sharad had to reshape his life around an absence that was absolute. He had to embrace a new purpose in life. His priorities had to shift.

In India, after the passing of a loved one, it is customary to hold a *Shok Sabha* (mourning gathering) or a *Prarthana Sabha* (prayer gathering). A similar tradition exists in the West, known as a memorial service. Sudha's memorial service was scheduled for February 11, 2022. Family and friends would gather to share their experiences, memories, and feelings about Sudha. Prayers would be offered, and some religious rituals would be performed.

Usually, after a memorial service, an *Alpaahar* (small meal) is arranged for attendees. Organizing such an event requires a great deal of planning. However, overall, the entire event was conducted in an atmosphere of peace and serenity. Anurag took great care in ensuring that everything was arranged properly.

After returning from Mumbai, Sharad had also personally overseen all the arrangements with meticulous attention. His second son, Aalok, arrived with his family from New Jersey. Sharad's sisters, brothers, relatives, and friends all started gathering. The primary hosts of the event were Sudha and Sharad's sons, Anurag and Aalok, along with their wives Sanjna and Anisha, and their children. Of course, Sharad himself was deeply involved in all aspects of the arrangements as well as the ceremony.

To the guests, the gathering felt just like the numerous grand events that Sharad had organized in the past. However, there was a key difference – this was not a celebration, but a farewell.

Unlike past events, this was not being held in the basement of *Mehta Mahal* in Cherry Hill, New Jersey; rather it was held in the beautiful courtyard of the Malibu Hindu Temple.

This was not an ordinary gathering; it was a prayer gathering:

A meeting to help ease the sorrow in everyone's hearts.

A meeting to bring peace to restless minds.

A meeting to offer prayers for the liberation of Sudha's soul.

Sudha's life had been filled with love and kindness. There was not a single doubt in anyone's heart that her soul had found eternal peace. Close family members and dearest friends from all over the country had come to offer heartfelt tributes to Sudha. Those who could not attend in person had sent messages and videos, expressing their sorrow and sharing their fond memories of her.

The beautiful shloka that is the essence of the Bhagavad Gita was echoed in everyone's words:

*"Ajo Nityam Shashvato Yam Puraano  
Na Hanyate Hanyamane Shareere."*

*(The soul is eternal, immortal, and ancient.  
It is never destroyed even when the body perishes.)*

Sudha's love for everyone would remain alive in their hearts. It would never fade, never diminish, never be forgotten.

Anurag poured his heart out as he spoke. If anyone had been by Sudha's side until her very last breath, it was Anurag. Now, this moment was about accepting a real, immense and painful loss. The end of an Alzheimer's patient was bound to come this way.

"But we must be grateful to God," Anurag said, addressing the gathering, "that Mom never had to endure any major physical suffering, especially in her final years."

“Mom was a remarkable person – always smiling, always cheerful. She never let sorrow defeat her. Even in the fiercest storms of life, she remained calm and unshaken, Sthitapragya (firmly established in wisdom and peace, like an enlightened being.) She never chased after recognition or rewards. Instead, she became a pillar of support for everyone around her. The energy of her love, the fragrance of her relationships, and the light of her presence – these are things we have deeply cherished, and they will forever shine in our memories,” Anurag added.

Later, Aalok recited a heartrendingly beautiful poem – “*Mother o’ Mine*” by Rudyard Kipling, his voice steady with emotion, before taking up the sitar and playing a soulful tribute. Daughters-in-law Anisha and Sanjna followed with heartfelt speeches and songs, to commemorate their cherished memories with Sudha. All four grandchildren – Raina, Eva, Arin, and Aaliya – also took part in the ceremony. They recited Sanskrit *shlokas* with quiet reverence and sang songs that filled the space with innocence and love – a fitting tribute to the grandmother who had meant so much to them all.

Sharad’s speech was the final and most heartfelt of all.

“As we pay tribute to Sudha, everyone has spoken of her virtues – her kindness, her smile, her loving and affectionate nature, her ability to bring people together. She was an ideal wife, an ideal mother, an ideal homemaker.”

But Sharad had much more to say.

“Sudha was born in Mumbai. After spending some time in Surat, her family eventually settled in Vadodara. She grew up there and completed her graduation in Library Science.

Usually, people fall in love first, and then they get married. But for us, it was the opposite. First, we got married, and then love blossomed. After marriage, Sudha stayed back in

Vadodara to complete her studies, while I returned to the U.S. Back then, Sudha did not have a telephone at home. Communication methods were not as easily accessible as they are today.

So, we wrote letters. And oh, how we wrote!

What started as mere acquaintance turned into friendship, and that friendship slowly grew into love. We were both fortunate to have found each other, to have been chosen for one another, and to have genuinely liked each other.

They say that marriages are made in heaven. If that is true, then this marriage was truly heavenly. We were incredibly happy together. You may not believe it, but in our 52 years of married life, we never fought, never argued, and had no major misunderstandings.

It was a deeply fulfilling, profoundly beautiful relationship.

Sudha had immense faith in The Mother and Sri Aurobindo. She believed that it was with the blessings of the Divine Mother that our marriage remained so peaceful and blissful. Her personality was extremely simple – never demanding anything, never complaining about anything.

When our first son, Anurag, was born, Sudha was the most petite mother in the hospital, and Anurag was the biggest newborn there. True to his nature, Anurag arrived late – he had to be delivered through a C-section. If I were to name the two most precious gifts Sudha gave me in this life, they would be our two wonderful sons: Anurag and Aalok. I have always felt that God's grace rested upon her, and through her, it touched all of us.

I always believed that whatever I could do, Sudha could do too. When we were in New Jersey, Sudha learned to drive a car. Not just that, she drove a motorhome too. She learned to

play tennis, bowling, and even poker. She became my business partner as well! Some people in the office called her a 'Tycoon,' while others affectionately referred to her as the 'Big Boss.'

Sudha was an amazing host, and also a remarkable cook. People still remember her hospitality. Guests who came to our home once always wanted to return. The warmth of her presence made every gathering special.

Our scriptures say that a wife is an *Ardhangini* (half of the husband's being). But in my view, Sudha was more than half. She was a source of inspiration and encouragement throughout my life. If I progressed in my life, I did so only because Sudha was by my side. If she had not been a part of my journey, perhaps my success wouldn't have been even half of what it is today.

Sudha's presence, her companionship, her support – were always positive, always uplifting, always motivating.

For 40 years, she managed our home and family. She took care of everyone, gave encouragement, and provided unwavering support. In the last 10 years, it became my turn to take care of her. But even then, the scales still tilted in her favor – she was always the greater giver.

Toward the end, Sudha could no longer respond to anything. She required the same level of care as a six-month-old infant. But there was one heartbreaking difference – an infant laughs, cries, plays, and shows emotion. But Sudha, by then, had fallen completely silent. She was like a statue, like a still photograph – frozen in time. Alzheimer's had taken away her ability to react, to engage, to express.

People often say that caring for an Alzheimer's patient can be so demanding that, at times, the caregiver's health gives way even before the patient's. I don't know where the strength came from, but somehow, I found it within myself

to carry out this responsibility with complete and unwavering dedication. But even then, I am the lucky one to have been by her side for the major part of my life, and for that, I will eternally be grateful to God.”

As the ceremony reached its end, the temple bells chimed as the priests recited the final prayers. Rose petals and marigolds lined the path that led to the ocean. When the time came to release Sudha’s ashes into the ocean, Sharad stepped forward with trembling hands, the urn cradled close to his heart. Anurag and Aalok followed closely behind. As they let the ashes go, the wind carried them into the water – into the great, breathing body of the Pacific Sudha had always loved. It felt like an offering, a return, a release. As the ceremonial prayers ended, Sharad felt as though Sudha’s spirit was finally free – one with the wind, the sea, the eternal flow.

Their children and grandchildren stood close, their hands folded in prayer, a circle of love and remembrance – each a living legacy of Sudha. The priest’s voice rose in blessings – for peace, for release. In that moment, Sharad felt grief give way to something lighter – a sense that Sudha had not ended, but transformed. She was now in the breeze, in the warmth of the sun, in every familiar smile.

As they turned to leave, Sharad glanced once more at the ocean. A white seagull glided low over the water, her wings catching the morning light. Her companion, another white seagull, watched the flight from his position, perched on a rock. Then, with effortless grace, the first seagull rose up into the sky and disappeared from sight. Sharad smiled. The journey that had once brought them here had now come full circle.

Even after her death, Sudha continued giving to others. Her body was donated, and her brain was given for Alzheimer’s research.

A relative arranged a meal donation in her memory for an orphanage and an old age home. A friend donated to a Gurudwara in her name. Another made a generous contribution to the Alzheimer's Association. Sharad's sisters performed a ritual of Bhagavad Gita recitation for two days and dedicated the merit of their prayers to Sudha's soul.

At the end of the memorial service, Sharad expressed his heartfelt gratitude to every person who attended, to every guest, to every well-wisher, to all those who joined virtually, and to those who had paid their respects in any way. As the gathering dispersed, refreshments were served according to American tradition.

As people left the temple, many husbands pondered: "If my wife were to suffer from Alzheimer's, would I be able to care for her as devotedly as Sharad did?" And many wives thought: "If I were to be affected by Alzheimer's, would my husband take care of me with such love and patience?" Some even feared: "If I had to care for my husband through such an illness, would I be able to do it with the same devotion and sincerity?"

And a haunting thought arose in some men's minds: "If I had to take on such responsibility, would I be able to survive the emotional burden, or would I break under its weight?"

With Sudha's passing, a chapter in Sharad's life had ended. But her loving memories would remain alive in his heart forever. From now on, his life would have to move forward, guided not by Sudha, but only by her gentle remembrance.