

# LOSING TOUCH

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SANDRA HUNTER was born in Ely, Cambridgeshire and grew up in Hayes, Middlesex, England. A writer and visual artist, her short stories have been published in a number of literary magazines and have won numerous awards including the 2012 Cobalt Fiction Prize and the 2011 Arthur Edelstein Short Fiction Prize. She currently lives in Ventura, California, with her husband and daughter, and teaches English and Creative Writing at Moorpark College. *Losing Touch* is her first novel.

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SANDRA HUNTER



ONE WORLD

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*For Maureen Luxton and Hugh Dunton who  
opened doors and taught me to walk forward*

# PART I

# A TENDENCY TO FALL

SEPTEMBER 1966

The viewing of the body has started. Arjun breathes in cold chapel air, looks around at his family, the Kulkanis, and friends of Kulkanis, and those married to Kulkanis. The family is large and loud and quarrelsome, but today they are a subdued queue, forming in front of the coffin. Jonti: beloved younger brother; quick with a line to make you laugh, quick-witted answers that found him an architect's job in London, but not quick enough to outpace the disease that took him at thirty-two. Five years younger than Arjun. It is wrong.

An overripe west London September presses damp, sticky heat into the small chapel. Even so, Arjun's hands are cold. His wife, Sunila, sits beside him wearing dark glasses; his son, Murad, is scowling and his daughter, Tarani – what convinced her to wear purple?

He tries a whisper. 'Sunila. Take those off.'

She holds her hand up to her face and edges back, as though he is about to snatch her sunglasses away.

Murad lifts his sad, patient expression. Sunila tucks a handkerchief into the cuff of her black blouse. Look at them – just look. Sunila can't bring herself to wear a sari, claims it doesn't suit her, it's too long, too uncomfortable. *We don't wear that kind of thing here.*

*We.* How earnestly she has embraced the culture that rejects her. They have lived in Hayes, north London, for twelve years and she longs for the acceptance held out of reach. Her English colleagues at the insurance office ask her opinion on curries. She provides recipes with translations of the difficult Hindi words. They ask if she still speaks Indian. She explains she was brought up speaking English. *How funny – just like us!* Yes, just like them.

Arjun catches Murad's eye and smiles. Murad quickly looks away. The boy clings to his mother, even though he's twelve – an age, surely, when he should be more interested in his friends.

Arjun tries to remember himself at twelve. Back in India, in his younger days, he was a runner, a climber, the first one to find a new route up the side of a mountain, the first to run down from the school to the village in less than thirty minutes. He is startled to find he can remember the feeling of running, feet barely touching the ground, almost flying. Was that really him?

He feels the tears rising. His brother, Jonti, also ran; not as fleet, but determined. Chubby little legs trying to

catch up. *Arjun, Arjun, wait for me!* And those legs followed him, growing longer, more muscular, the voice once high-pitched, now yodelling, now dropping a full half-octave deeper than his own. His little brother, who grew up to enjoy the strange language of numbers that conjoined, split apart, writhed together on multiple planes, that translated into shapes that rose and fell like empires, threw out fishing lines across graph paper and disappeared off the edge, reappearing as columns, city blocks, telegraph poles.

Jonti was a genius, they said. He could have been in research, but he settled for an assistant architect's position that allowed him eight-hour days, time for a life with his wife and their two little girls.

Jonti told Arjun, 'We've given up enough, isn't it, just by coming here? I don't want to leave my family for all this nonsense travelling to America and Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. What do I want with this MIT and H2M and AHA? I have enough *aha* in my life as it is.'

Arjun remembers the fuss over Jonti, a Hindu, marrying a Muslim girl. Their mother, the highly respectable Monisha Kulkani, was appalled. A *Muslim*? These days, young people marry whomever they want. He expects Murad will come home one day with some girl in jeans and short, dyed hair, and they will have to smile at her while she makes comments about their food, their *batiks*, their lovely culture.

He glances at Tarani. She is nine. In the old days

she might have been betrothed by now. Some girls were betrothed even earlier. Horrible custom. He shivers.

It hadn't been easy for Jonti. But finally, his mother's and the aunts' hissing slid away before the pragmatism of his father and the uncles. Jonti had a good job and could provide amply for Nawal: let them marry. Nawal's family, high-caste but impoverished, was less accommodating. They disowned her.

Now, Arjun looks over at his poor purple-clad child. He would never disown her, no matter who she decided to marry. Her legs are thin and they curve away from each other. She should wear longer dresses. Tarani has one hip thrown out, her weight on one leg, chewing a fingernail before she notices him and whips the finger out of her mouth.

At the front of the chapel, Nawal is surrounded by a group of women. She cannot bring herself to view the body. Arjun knows he should do something. He stands up to join the queue near the coffin. He will see Jonti for Nawal. It is the least he can do.

*Jonti is dead. My brother.* Thirty-two. Less than a year from energetic young man to a half-presence inside pyjamas that became too large too quickly, head bobbing to one side as if shaking the motor neurone disease out of one ear.

Arjun tries to breathe more deeply, but the scent of lilies is too strong. The chapel is too small. He is now third in line. Someone should open a door, should hold up Nawal who is going to collapse. Surely there isn't enough air for

her: she will faint. It is his turn to step forward, to look into the face of his dead brother.

Suddenly, he is falling. A quick grab at the coffin saves him. They must think he is overcome with grief. He looks at Jonti's calm, empty face. How can he leave his brother in this ridiculous box with satin and pillows? Jonti would be appalled. *What's the use of primping and posing and all when you're dead, bhai? Spirit is gone, isn't it? Phut. Up into the air. After you eat the panipuri, only empty paper is there. Let it blow away in the breeze.*

He steps away to make room for the next person and looks around to see Jonti's two little girls, eyes too big, too stark. He gathers both of them in a hug and they hang on. They are too young to lose their father. His eyes are misting when he hears Sunila's voice. 'Arjun?'

He settles the girls back into the pew, manages a smile, and walks back with Sunila trailing him.

Nawal's sister, Haseena, is near. He apologizes to her. 'I'm so sorry. I must have tripped.'

'I've been tripping over everything,' she says. 'I can't judge distance any more. It feels as though I'm in someone else's body.'

She has accurately described what has just happened. For a moment, he felt his body falling without him. The strangest idea. It was just a slip. There are more important things to consider. As Jonti's older brother, he must now take care of Nawal and Haseena. They will need a man's help now, especially in this country.

On his way back to his seat he glances at Nawal. A faint touch of her perfume reaches him. Jonti always bought her Chanel No 5. *The best for the best.* The scent takes him back to when Jonti bought the first tiny bottle.

When they'd arrived in England in 1954, Arjun had gone straight into the RAF at Northolt. He had a job, a uniform and a rigorously disciplined life that was mostly away from home. Meanwhile, Jonti faced the job search head-on, presented his credentials and listened to numerous reasons why he couldn't be hired. He finally found an assistant architect's job in central London. Jonti's route to work took him by tube to Bond Street Station, then a walk along Oxford Street past the imposing bulk of Selfridges to the office in Portman Mews.

Once in a while, schedule permitting, Arjun would take the train to meet him from work. For two years, Jonti had passed and repassed Selfridges without a thought of what might be inside. And then came Nawal's twenty-first birthday in 1956. Arjun and Jonti stood nervously just inside the massive brass and glass front doors. Jonti had wanted to leave.

'Should we even be here? Posh people and all.'

'Jonti, just relax. We're the same as everyone else.'

'Not the same, *bhai*. No other Indians in here, nah? Not even cleaning ladies.'

'It's okay. We'll just buy the perfume and leave.'

'Security will throw us out on our ear. "What are these brown buggers doing in Selfridges?"'

‘It’s just a financial transaction. Come on.’ He had patted Jonti on the back as they stepped up to the counter.

Arjun’s throat is aching. *I loved him best.* This is something he has never admitted to anyone. As he sits down, Sunila hisses, ‘I hope you realize what you’ve done. Making a scene like that. Hanging all over the coffin. What were you thinking?’

He doesn’t know. For a moment, his body behaved as though it wasn’t his. ‘We are grieving. Jonti is dead.’

She puts a handkerchief over her mouth and he can see tears trickling out from behind the dark glasses. She whispers. ‘It’s just that Jonti... It was the same as Mum.’ She gasps. ‘I miss her.’

It is something, perhaps, that his mother never lived to see her youngest die. Frail and desperately homesick for India, she lived long enough to attend Pavitra’s wedding and then succumbed to the same disease as Jonti.

Sunila and Mum must have been close, he supposes, although he never really noticed it. His own relationship with his mother was respectful, formal. Still, Sunila is suffering and he must do something. He moves to put his arm around her.

‘Don’t touch me. I don’t need any of *that*, thank you.’

The children stare ahead, Murad’s mouth an exact copy of his mother’s. Tarani has her hands tucked under her thighs, her head carefully turned away.

One day, it will be their turn in some chapel like this one. He wonders if Sunila will mourn him like they are

mourning Jonti. To mourn, surely, you must also have experienced great joy, and Jonti inspired happiness. Arjun wonders what he inspires in Sunila.

Haseena is hosting the wake, since this is the first time Nawal has been able to get out of bed. Haseena's house has been hung with black crêpe and wreaths. Her touch shimmers behind it all: her gold and cream cushions, the cinnamon sofa, the silver candlesticks. Her house of light is overlaid with the shadows of Jonti's death.

Nawal cannot bring herself to respond to anyone. She is handed around from relative to relative in some sad, fragile game of pass the parcel. He watches how she fails to lift her head as each one embraces her, enfolds her. As each pair of arms surrounds her, she seems to slip further away.

He goes upstairs to the bathroom and squeezes past Sadiq, Haseena's six-year-old son, crouching over a transistor radio. 'These boots are made for walking...'  
As he is coming down again, he is sure he hears Jonti's voice. It is only one of the children, but the sound of his brother's voice is so persuasive that he turns quickly. The next moment, he is sliding to the bottom of the stairs.

Tarani is watching.

He is up almost immediately.

She looks angry. 'You fell.'

'I tripped.'

'I saw you.' In her eyes he sees the accusation that reaches down and jerks up an unnamed fear. 'I saw you in the chapel, too.'

The others are coming.

‘Are you all right, Arjun?’

‘Too much wine, Uncle?’ One of the cheekier nephews.

‘*Arré*. I’ll give you a clip.’ An irate aunty.

‘Come and sit here, Arjun.’

‘Have some Love Cake. Haseena made it.’

And Haseena arrives, the soft cloud of her cream chiffon pallu smelling faintly of lemon and mint. ‘Come, Arjun. Let me give you some tea.’

He is glad that Sunila isn’t close by. How she would bustle and push people away. Her husband, her responsibility. *Did you tie your shoes properly? I’ve told you. A hanging lace can cause a broken neck.*

Haseena deftly moves with him into the kitchen and brings tea, says nothing about the fall until she sits opposite him at the table. ‘Arjun. I am your sister-in-law and we are able to speak with each other.’

‘Of course, Haseena. You can say whatever you want.’

‘Don’t put this off. Go to the doctor.’

‘It’s nothing. I’m just clumsy today.’

‘But what if, Arjun? Please?’ She looks down. ‘I don’t know if Nawal told you. The first time Jonti fell was when he was getting out of the shower. He laughed about it.’ Arjun can imagine his brother. *Clumsy fool, nah?*

He nods.

Before she can say more, Sunila arrives. ‘What happened? Are you hurt? Murad said you fell downstairs.’

Haseena immediately gets up. ‘*Didi*, can I bring you tea?’

‘Not for me, thanks.’ Sunila turns her attention back to Arjun.

‘I’ll go and see if anyone else wants tea.’ Haseena picks up a tray on her way out.

‘Didi! Why can’t she drop all this Hindi-bindi business?’

Arjun says nothing.

‘And what was she saying? How long were you in here with her?’

‘Sunila, she gave me tea. I slipped, that’s all.’

‘Their family is so conniving. You know how she caught those husbands of hers.’

‘Haseena’s marriages were arranged.’

‘I know what I know. Both of them dead, just like that.’ Sunila pauses for breath. ‘How did you slip on the stairs? Is the carpet loose?’

‘Possibly. I don’t know. Anyway, I’m fine. No damage done.’ He smiles at her. Sunila is only worried. She doesn’t know how to show love any other way. ‘Come. Let’s go back to the others.’

At the other end of the dining room near the French doors, he sees Tarani. She has a slightly blank look that means she’s trying to remember something. Instantly he knows. She’s trying to remember exactly how he fell. The fear comes back. Surely they’re all making something of nothing.

He smiles at her to show he’s okay. She doesn’t smile back.