

# LEAVING WISDOM

SHARON BUTALA

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Press

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*In memory of Hazel  
And for  
Nikki*

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PART I  
WISDOM



## CHAPTER ONE

# CONCUSSION

At first she heard nothing at all, only perfect silence, even while flesh-coloured orbs slowly materialized, wavy and dim, before her unblinking gaze. It took a second before they became faces, and another second or two — as she tried to rise and Adrianna tried to help her, while others, their voices fraught whispers in the frigid air, told her to lie still — before a cacophonous roaring began in her head that settled into a whistle and then began to swirl and pulse rhythmically at the same time as Adrianna said “Judith” several times — was she talking into her cellphone? — as hard, dry snowflakes struck and moved away, and the wind that surely accounted for the racket in her head got louder, and a young man fiddled with gadgets he was trying to attach to her while speaking briskly in some brand new language into his shoulder. Of the noise in her head, she thought, *It is like static on a broken television*, while her current, local brain reverted to report-writing: *Mrs. Aziz, a slightly obese, short woman of thirty-eight with four children and a good command of English*, and her shadowy larger mind that was equally herself, or was a bigger self, observed it all rather as though she were an actor in a film being watched by the omnipotent audience, only she herself was also the audience.

*Without love, what is the world?*

She had read that somewhere, although she had no idea where, nor did she know what it meant. But it would not leave her, and for all the

next days and nights, as she ranted, babbled, remembered, forgot, saw things that weren't there, or saw two of things that were, it remained in her head as if God wanted her to know this question, to never forget it, even though what it meant was, to her, perfectly nothing.

The next thing she would remember in the years to come was the sight of two of her four daughters gazing at her from the foot of the bed she was unaccountably lying in: blonde, blue-eyed Catherine's expression quizzical, faintly annoyed; Jessica's carefully neutral, but with a touch of something she couldn't then quite identify — questioning? sympathizing? — widening her dark eyes. For an instant she puzzled over how she had produced daughters so different; then she remembered — different fathers — and it was as if something miraculous had risen into view. She would remember how she laughed out loud then, in wonder.

But she had two more daughters. Where were they? She couldn't recall their names, a fact that didn't bother her, although she suspected it should.

"We're taking you home today," Catherine said in her familiar no-nonsense tone. Judith noticed then the wheelchair by her bed, the clothes laid across the bed's foot, the nurse hovering impatiently at the door.

"Where the hell am I?" she asked, using her elbows to try to push herself upright. As the girls opened their mouths in unison to explain, she said, "Oh, never mind. This is a hospital. I can see that." The nurse stepped forward, brushing along the bed to look directly down on Judith's face. *Alice and Lucy?*

"Yes, hospital," she said, smiling professionally and reaching for Judith's wrist, which Judith irritably pulled away.

"Now let's get this straight," Judith said, as if addressing a recalcitrant client of whom she had always had far too many — especially the teenagers — then stopped mid-sentence. Get what straight?

“You don’t remember?” the nurse asked. Her skin had the glow of dark honey and seemed to give off light.

“What?” Judith said, but she gazed into space, frowning, lifting one hand to the back of her head, encountering some odd-feeling thing there, and dropping it as pictures passed in front of her of which she could make little to no sense. Noise — a siren, maybe? Faces peering at her. That foul taste in her mouth.

“Gilles — is he coming?” Her daughters exchanged glances. “To take me home.” But — Gilles, who is he, exactly? She tried to shake her head to clear her confusion, but pain struck with such intense precision she gasped and froze.

Jessica spoke. “Gilles was here yesterday, Mom. He came before too, as soon as Cathy called him.” She came up the other side of the bed to stand opposite the nurse. “We talked about this yesterday. I guess you don’t quite remember yet.” She lifted her mother’s other hand to hold it in both of hers, at which Judith didn’t protest. “You had a fall — on the ice — on the sidewalk — on the way to your retirement lunch. Adrianna called the ambulance.” Adrianna? Oh, her co-worker at the Department of Social — something — Services: short, dark, once beautiful, now a little worn looking. Who wouldn’t be?

“You hit your head. Hard. You had a concussion.” This was from Catherine, as usual trying to rush things along.

“Well, I don’t remember that,” Judith said dubiously, as if they were trying to put something past her. “I’ve been here a while, haven’t I?”

“Two weeks,” Catherine answered. At this, Judith, who had been trying to sit up, fell back against the pillows.

“Amazing,” she said. “Simply amazing — that I don’t remember a thing.” Yet how bright everything was, such perfect edges everywhere, the colours scintillating in their purity.

“It will come back,” the nurse assured her. “Or not. Either way it’s not something to worry about. We just have to worry about getting you well. We think you will do better in your own home now.”





SHARON BUTALA is the author of twenty-one books of fiction and nonfiction, numerous essays and articles, some poetry and five produced plays. She published her first novel in 1984, *Country of the Heart*, which was nominated for the Books in Canada First Novel Award, followed closely by a collection of short stories, *Queen of the Headaches* (shortlisted for the Governor General's Award). Sharon's books have been on the Canadian bestseller lists, including her memoir, *The Perfection of the Morning*, which reached #1 in July 1994. Her work has been nominated for, and received, numerous awards. Most recently, her story collection *Season of Fury and Wonder* was nominated for the Rogers Trust Fiction Prize and won the City of Calgary's W.O. Mitchell Book Prize for 2020. She is an Officer of the Order of Canada. She lives in Calgary.