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Acknowledgements

I cannot believe that I have actually written this book. Why I put it all down on paper I really don't know, but I feel that I was propelled by a force outside of myself to do so, a force that somehow made me note down chronologically all that has taken place. "That's all you are really doing," I convinced myself. But as the days flew by, an exciting avenue presented itself. Thoughts and words catapulted into chapters and suddenly – it became a whole book. Strange events mingled with beautiful stories of people who arrived at my doorstep in the most inexplicable ways and remained forever to be my good friends.

I could never have undertaken the task of writing this book without the help and encouragement of one of them in particular, Amie Rabadi. I now know that she was brought to me to fulfil a definite purpose. My deepest thanks go to her for her help, guidance and support, which has been really invaluable. She has kept herself unobtrusively in the background, working tirelessly, correcting chapters and helping me find the right words and sentences. Together, we worked at projecting my thoughts accurately; and there were times when it was her deep feelings that made me re-evaluate these thoughts and put them into perspective. Every other week or so, we held writing sessions, where I read out what I had originally written. More often than not, she silently shook her head in mock despair, but we discussed, questioned, rewrote, joked, had dinner and then I began all over again.

Being rather a private person, I would have preferred to confine my experiences to the limited circle of my family and close friends. But so much has taken place and I know in my heart that a lot more still has to come for that is what life is all about. Sadness and

misfortune come to everyone and strange circumstances cause stranger things to take place. So, to all those who have shared their experiences with me for the last fifteen years, but have not been included in this book, I hold out my hand in gratitude. I would like them to know that each one of them has been responsible in some way of contributing to my spiritual awakening and therefore to this book. Some by a word or smile, some by the strength of their faith, and some even by their reservations in believing. A few names have been changed to safeguard privacy, but most have given me permission to use their names. To both these categories, I extend my deepest thanks.

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Last of all, my son Karl, without whom this book would never have been written – he has made me write it.

Preface

Young Karl Umrigar had only one passion in life – horses and racing. At the age of eighteen, his childhood fantasy came true – he raced to fame. The world was at his feet for he had won every major race of the season, but tragedy struck. Karl died of an accident on the racetrack.

However, this is not a story of his rise to fame or of his tragic end, it is a faithful account of what happened six years later – of Karl's determination to show his mother the way out of grief, to happiness.

I am his mother.

The years that followed his death were dark ones for me, but in 1984 something happened which was to change my life forever. It was the day I embarked on my journey into the realms of mysticism and automatic writing. 'Sounds' filtered in from the 'silence', and I began to converse with an energy-force which I eventually believed to be my son. I was exhilarated but at the same time could not help questioning this phenomenon. Was this fantasy, imagination, or just plain wishful thinking on my part? Was there really a higher energy, a higher consciousness – angels, guides, guardians and a God?

It did not take Karl long to guide me to a place quite alien to my way of being or belief, and to the *Samadhi* of a man known as Meher Baba and believed to be the '*Avatar* of the Age'. The life of a Spiritual Master held no interest for me, but the manner and tenacity with which my "spirit son" led me to Him, intrigued me. To understand what was happening, I sought out and began meeting 'mediums' here in India, and abroad, asking questions to which they seemed to have no answers. "In the ambit of

spiritualism," Coral Polge said, "there has never been a recorded experience such as yours." In the effort to explain some of it to those who arrived at my doorstep, to find answers to the connection between Karl and Meher Baba and therefore, between Meher Baba and me, I had to repeat my story over and over again.

To Amie Rabadi, the first who rang my doorbell, Karl's communication was unquestionable. As time went by, not only did she depend on her own instinct and detailed study of Meher Baba, she also came forward to encourage and support me when, in spite of all my insecurities, I decided it was time to share my experience with the outside world. She then began to direct and selflessly involve herself with the writing, publishing, and distribution of the book. "This book will have a far-reaching effect on many," she said, "and above all it will be of the heart, for that is the seat that belongs to Meher Baba, whose love graces us all. As for our children, they too belong in our hearts and therefore to Baba – and that is enough for me." I must admit at this point that while my stubborn focus of attention was Karl and his stories, it was Amie who steered me throughout and towards the conclusion of the book, where not only had I to acknowledge that my love for Meher Baba was absolute, but that He was and is God to me.

Sounds of Silence was published in December 1996 – and the first copies went out into the world. In spite of reassurances from friends and family, I was nervous about its reception. Would anyone listen? Would they believe? But I really needn't have worried so much. The book took on a life of its own and touched the hearts of many people. Its appeal seemed to lie in the fact that it was not only a true story of a young boy who had been well-known in India, but it was also about the love of a mother and son – about a love that never dies. It was something new, something different. The book reached out to thousands of people and interest seemed to rise by the day. Reviews and write-ups appeared in local newspapers and international magazines. Ladies' Clubs and the Rotary Club organised meetings and seminars to discuss its contents. Could all this really happen? Could it be true? Slowly but surely, the interest crept from social gatherings into homes, where people began discussing the incredible incidents that had taken place, sharing the beautiful messages that came through Karl from the spirit world, and marvelling at the help that some of them had received from his Master, Meher Baba. It progressed into people wanting to know more about the Master.

Preface

So it has gone on. The response has been overwhelming – the reactions spontaneous and heart-warming. “I am not afraid of death any more,” or “...I keep it by my bedside for it makes me feel loved and protected” or “Whenever I am in trouble, I just open a page and I get my answers,” were some of the comments I received from people who read the book. Through its pages, Karl, in his own inimitable way, has encouraged people to make their own connections with the *Avatar* and to look at life from a new perspective. With Baba’s help, many hearts have been healed. Those who were bereaved came to know that their loved ones are not lost forever. Broken relationships have been cemented and new ones formed. People have been shown how to let go of pain and suffering, and find inner peace. Many lives have undergone a change for the better.

It has now been nine years since *Sounds of Silence* was first published. Yet the interest in the book appears to keep on growing. The time has now come for it to still go further – to reach out to a world that has evolved to a new awareness – a world that is in search of peace, happiness, and a spiritual love that is timeless.

Nan Umrigar
Jan 2006

Notes:

1. Till such time as the Author is convinced of the Godhood of Meher Baba, all references by her pertaining to Meher Baba are made in small letters e.g. ‘his’ instead of ‘His’.
2. The quotes and messages from Karl, which you will come across in this book, have been reproduced faithfully without any alteration or editing on the Author’s part.



Karl



Karl

“Wake up, Ma, it’s morning.” My eyes flew open with the excitement in Karl’s whisper. I responded quickly, “OK son, I’m up!” But before I could focus on anything, or swing my legs to the floor, he was gone.

As I splashed my face with water, I heard the impatient rattle of tea cups. Minutes later, with the towel still wiping the sleep out of my eyes, I returned to the bedroom and caught glimpses of him putting on his breeches and sweater and frantically pulling on his boots in between gulps of hot tea. Snatching cap and whip in hand, he raced out of the door calling, “Come on Mum, I’ll be late for work.” Caught up by his urgency, I threw binoculars, stop-watch, pen and book into my bag and dashed out behind him.

It was still dark as we drove into the racecourse – into a time and place that was always special to me. I walked over soft tan and dewy grass, savouring all the sounds of a beautiful morning. I could hear the muted call of birds as they fluttered in the trees and the thud of huge red almonds as they fell onto the damp earth below. The snort of horses could be heard as they champed on their bits, straining at the reins as they were being led around the trainer’s ring, waiting to be exercised. Shadowy figures criss-crossed my path as I made my way to my usual seat in the stands. I settled in and watched the golden glow of the sun creep slowly through the mist. Adjusting my binoculars, I looked out for Karl and caught his graceful figure cantering along with the others. Leaning back in my chair, I thought proudly of what the day promised to hold for him.

It was Sunday, April 15, 1979 – the last day of the Bombay racing season.

Karl had just broken the Indian record of fifty-four winners in a single season. By the end of the day, he only had to notch a few more wins to keep ahead of his arch rival who was four behind in the winner's tally. He would then receive the Championship Trophy and fulfil the dream that he had cherished for as long as I could remember.

I thought of our bags, packed and ready for Karl's first trip abroad, where he was to match his skills with the best in his profession. What did the future hold for him, I wondered?

My mind drifted pleasurably as it swung way back to the day Karl was born – October 4, 1960. He was a premature baby weighing four pounds and four ounces. I remember the moment when my doctor drew our attention to his frightening body weight and warned us to prepare for any eventuality. Saddened with helplessness, I lay crying softly, praying for his survival.

The first time I set eyes on his puckered little face and thin and scrawny body, my heart went out to him. I longed so desperately to reach out and hug him closely, but could not touch him because of the numerous tubes that the doctors had inserted into almost every vein in his fragile body.

As the days went by, I sat next to him, talking quietly, hoping and praying that little Karl would sense my love and my need to enjoy a lifetime with him. These moments would often be interrupted by a nurse who wheeled in bottle after bottle of blood that was to be transfused into him. I worried endlessly. The only way to feed him was through a pipette, which regulated drops of milk into a digestive system that had not fully developed. How was he ever going to survive?

Every evening Karl would turn blue and have the medical staff and family running anxiously to his bedside to turn on the oxygen cylinder. The crisis would be averted and somehow, he would get through another day.

Thus he battled on with a mysterious single-mindedness of his own, a trait that was to follow him throughout the life he had determined was worth fighting for.

Karl grew into a spirited child who never lacked courage. He was tiny and skinny, but had a strong will to win. He directed his energies at trying desperately to keep up with his handsome elder brother, Neville, who was well on his way to becoming a brilliant

athlete. In his final year of school, Neville received seven colours for excelling in almost every sport and was given the honour to lead the march-past and carry the school flag.

Little Karl, therefore, had a hard time keeping up with this excellence and gravitated more towards boxing, which he used with a great deal of proficiency. Sometimes, his frustration broke through, resulting in a major hand-to-hand between the two boys. His small but strong little hands would attack Neville with unimaginable fury; his head, covered with thick dark hair, would lower as he bent his wiry torso and charged like a bull into the ring, unmindful of the consequences. Woe betide anyone who laughed – for then, all hell would break loose!

In spite of the rivalry, the brothers shared a relationship that was special. Neville always played the role of protector and defender, while Karl retained the spirit of an attacker and fighter. I always knew that he would remain headstrong and stubborn, but I also knew of another side to his nature – soft, loving and sensitive to the needs of his family. Without being prompted, he would hasten to help his old grandparents negotiate a difficult step or get them comfortably seated in their chairs. He took a special delight in smaller children, holding them on his lap and playing with them for hours. His baby sister, Tina, became the recipient of much of this affection. If ever I was cross or chose to punish him, he would come running headlong to give me a bear hug and the most lovable smile would light up his face. Everything was, of course, forgotten in a matter of seconds.

When he was a child, his favourite resting place was my lap. But even as he grew older, this need continued and he would still burrow his head in my lap and go to sleep.

But the love and passion of his life was horses.

It became increasingly clear to us during Karl's kindergarten years that school to him was merely a playground, where alphabets were made more exciting because he associated them with the names of horses and jockeys. That was the only way he would learn! His heroes were trainers and games were always races out of starting gates.

Being an avid lover of the horse myself, I spent much time at the stables teaching him how to groom, feed and water the animals. A special treat for the day was to double seat with me and canter

around the racecourse or in and out of the area surrounding the stables. He knew no fear, and by the age of two, could sit a pony on his own.

I remember the day vividly – a misty morning in the hill station of Matheran where we went regularly on holiday. I was taking Karl with me on the leading rein and as we trotted through the bazaar, the sight of this tiny two-year-old, mounted like a prince on his small pony, arrested the attention of the passers-by. Heads turned and smiles soon turned to applause as Karl rode on, oblivious of the effect that he was having on the crowd. I wondered then, but I know now that he had been born with an affinity and love for horses that was rare and precious. I also knew that this charisma would make crowds set their sights on him and applaud as they did that day.

Every Christmas, when other little children would ask for toys, he would be thrilled to receive a bag full of coins that paid for rides around the bandstand near our house. He would spend every



Karl on Fury

paisa of every rupee, till all the money was over, and then he would beg for more. The syces, who hired out the ponies, loved him. They would say, "Yeh toh jockey bun-nay-walla hai," (He is sure to become a jockey). It seemed they knew more about his future than we did!

By the time Karl was seven years old, he was an excellent horseman who rode bareback, did show jumping and took part with great success in the mounted sports. For all his efforts and achieve-

ments, we gifted him with his first pony, aptly named Fury.

But his greatest dream was racing.

Karl would fashion make-believe horses out of pillows, ingeniously hooking belts over them, straddling and beating them with his whip, till the cotton flew out like snowflakes around the room. He would work himself into a frenzy with his own loud running commentary and in this way, he rode many an imaginary winner for himself!

I remember a time when my husband and I left for the movies, leaving Karl with his fantasies. When we returned three hours later, he was still at it, sweat pouring profusely from his body. His voice rose to a fevered pitch, "...and it's Karansingh on Sombrero coming round the bend two lengths ahead of Eric Eldin on Storm... and it's Sombrero from Storm, Sombrero from Storm, Storm from Sombrero as they pass the winning post locked together!" We watched, amazed, as he collapsed into his pillow with outstretched arms and heaving shoulders, quite oblivious of the time and the fact that we had gone and returned. Such was his passion!

Can you wonder then that Karl showed little interest in academics, for he was a dreamer, living in his own private world. He had to be threatened with dire consequences if he did not do his homework – but somehow, he always had a ready excuse. One day, he failed to take his workbook to school. When his teacher scolded him, he blithely replied, "Oh, you know Sir, I took my book to the racecourse to study and, would you believe it, the horse ate it up!" History and geography were subjects that brought out the dumb act in him, but his eyes would light up and sparkle as his over-active brain would give rapid-fire responses to questions on rides and wins, lengths and distances. He probably inherited this expertise from his father Jimmy, whose racing pictures evoked an intense interest in Karl. He loved to be tested with these pictures and none could win an argument with him over the result of any race, for his "racing" mind knew each horse and rider even if we covered the names with our hands. His answers shot out at us without hesitation for he had ridden them all in the privacy of his own room on his make-believe horse – the pillow!

When he was ten, the day dawned on his first gymkhana race. The fact that he had won on Fury made him very happy, but it was not enough. He wanted more, much more. On the following

gymkhana race day, he sat outside the weighing-in enclosure and looked expectantly at the owners going in and out. When questioned about this, he replied, "Oh, Ma, I am waiting in case I get a chance ride."

"Come on, off with you," I scolded. "You know your father will never allow it." And with that, I literally dragged him off to join the spectators in the stands.

But on the very next Sunday, Karl was hiding in the same place again. This time, luck was on his side and he soon came hurrying towards me, his face pink with pleasure, pulling along a big burly companion. "Look Ma, he wants me to ride his pony, because he has no jockey. Oh, please, please, just this once let me do it," he begged. I did not have the heart to refuse him, but it was not an easy thing he asked of me. First of all, I had to face his father's wrath and secondly, I had to get him to ride at the declared weight of 45 kg when he was a mere 30 kg. With the help of a friend, I rushed around getting a heavy saddle and a weight bag and somehow, finally, we were ready. But the worst shock was yet to come. When the pony in question came into the paddock, I took one look at it and wanted to run away. It was thin, scrawny and had sores and scabs all over its body. Besides that, it had to be pulled along for it could hardly walk! Karl did not seem to see any of this, nor the thunderous face of one of the officials, his father, who came marching up to us. "What is the meaning of this?" he demanded. But it was too late to change anything and an ecstatic Karl mounted his pony and went off to the starting post.

The bell sounded and they were off. I looked anxiously for Karl, but he was not with the field as they came around the bend and down the straight. He was still nowhere in sight when they passed the winning post! I scanned the tracks with my binoculars and it was much later that I saw a little figure intently urging on the pony, who would not do anything but just amble along. He eventually passed the winning post, quite oblivious of the fact that the others were already entering the saddling enclosure. But did he stop after the post and turn around? No, he just continued to ride! In exasperation, I gave up on him to concentrate on other things; but soon, to my horror, I saw him coming back to clash head on with the horses which were leaving the paddock for the next race! I dashed to get hold of him knowing, that if he had his way, he would have turned and gone with them to take part once more.

But he was so happy! He was not deterred by the fact that his pony was ugly or could not raise a gallop or that he had come last. It was the simple joy of being able to ride. His day was made. He had ridden another race and a part of his dream had come true.

Years went by, but not quickly enough for the boy, for as soon as he turned fifteen, Karl begged his father's permission to apply for a jockey's licence. After much deliberation and discussion with the family, we concluded that we could not deny him something that had become an obsession. And so we agreed, on the one condition that he was to finish his schooling. He was ecstatic. He doggedly appeared for his final exams, knowing in his heart that he was but a hair's breadth away from the fulfilment of his dream.

He waited anxiously for the day.