

Chapter One

India

Kalpana Chawla was born in the small provincial city of Karnal, Punjab (now Haryana), India, on 17 March 1962. Her birthdate was subsequently stated as 1 June 1961 to enable her to enroll early in school at her insistence. Her given name was “Montu”, and at age three, she chose “Kalpana”, meaning “imagination”, as her formal name. She was the youngest child of Banarsi lal (Pa-ji) (1) and Syongita (Chai-ji) Chawla, and she had two sisters, Sunita and Deepa, and one brother, Sanjay. Kalpana spent the first part of her childhood in what she always referred to as the “old house” in the Model Town area of Karnal. It was here that she lay on the roof and gazed into the night sky, pondering the mysteries of the constellations above.

Pa-ji’s younger brother and his family lived at this house during Kalpana’s time there. She delighted in bossing around her younger cousins, Monnu and Jonnu, and making them stand in the hot sun, facing the garden wall, when they displeased her. In her early teenage years, Pa-ji moved his family into a large, comfortable house on Kunjpura Road, a stone’s throw from the Grand Trunk Road made famous by Rudyard Kipling in his book *Kim*. Kalpana rarely saw Pa-ji while she was growing up, as he spent long hours at his various business enterprises. Chai-ji spent much time attending to Pa-ji’s mother, who lived with the family, and her other children; by default, Sunita, the oldest sister, had a large role in raising the youngest member of the family, as is a common Punjabi custom.

Karnal is now a prosperous, expanding city supported by many business and agricultural enterprises. The house on Kunjpura Road is still there. Its new owners have heavily modified it, though it is still clearly recognizable. The “old house”, also extensively remodelled, is owned by an extended-family member and is now well known in Karnal for its association with Kalpana. Just down the road from the Kunjpura Road house is the Sugarcane Breeding Institute, and further on still the National Dairy Research Institute. Take a

1. “-ji” is a Hindi honorific.