

## Prologue



1947

I am running. It is dark in this place, and I do not know my way. I climb up through the brush. Suddenly the prickly scrub where the path ends catches hold of my sari. A cow path only! I push and pull, and it will not let go. Where am I? Is this a dream? I struggle to free the charred remains, the hem once gold, now blackened and crumbling. My sari caught like the breath in my throat. I rip and tear and the shredding sound tells me I am free. A tangle of fabric stays in the bush. I am running through the cool night. The heat is in me still. Varanima, can you forgive me? I run from you and all we have known. On this mountainside, little fires below and above spit into the night. Is that the cart flaming below? I reach for her bangles and they are gone. Around my neck, the pouch, the key, the gold—all are gone! Only the gold of the flames. I burn. I run. Is this a dream? There is a flash of silver like starlight on water. There, beyond sound of Varanima up the stairs, singing her love chant, her patron preparing to take leave of her. I am running toward the river. There is no more breath. May I awaken in my Amma's arms.

At 7:00 am on the first day of 1997, Wendy Rabin boarded a train in Coimbatore, traveling east from lush Nilgiri foothills to Chennai, along an ever-more arid route toward the Bay of Bengal. She hadn't purchased her ticket in advance, so after a harrowing bus ride 7000 feet down the ribbon of single lane highway from Ooty, she arrived at the station to find that only fourth-class seats remained. It would be a long journey, the ladies' car was full, and she was directed to a car crowded with men pressed together on worn wooden seats. For the first time in her life, she felt gawky and tall as she walked to the only seat left beside a woman, a wedge of bench by a window. The familiar view, she reminded herself, would be no different from this fourth-class window than the one from the luxury coach she had booked last time. She murmured a low apology to the elderly woman in the aisle seat, who seemed to be asleep, and took her place, stowing her backpack beneath the seat and placing her water bottle and notebook in the small space between them.

The old woman's dark face was etched around the eyes and the corners of her mouth, and there were swaths of white and pink in the teak of her complexion, but the skin on her cheeks and forehead was taut and youthful. Wendy would have suspected a face lift, but the woman's dusty chappals and plain saffron sari belied that notion. Even in this heat, beneath her sari, the woman wore flesh-colored sleeves—a kind of undergarment that covered her neck, and her hands were covered in flesh-colored gloves. But it was clear that she had been a beauty. There was a kind of noble radiance in her face. The rest of her small frame seemed as insubstantial as cobwebs. Yet Wendy had distinctly felt the woman's boney knee as she'd climbed over the curve of her to claim the seat. The woman wore no jewelry but for a small gold stud in her left nostril. Smearred across her brow was *vibhuti* ash from a recent purification ritual.

A young, bare-chested man, a dhoti of white muslin draped between his legs and hanging from his hips, came down the aisle with a tray of snacks. Another man, older and slighter, followed him, selling coconuts punctured by straws. Wendy bought a wax paper sack filled with idlis, grainy white patties that reminded her of the taste of her Tennessee grandmother's grits. As she reached across to receive her change, the woman's mottled eyelids raised, and for a moment, before she closed them again, Wendy glimpsed her eyes.

Hard to describe the quality of her look even now, although she can name the effect it had on her. Satisfaction. Or something deeper. Not quite fulfillment, but a soothing at her core. It was curious at the time, but she thinks she understands it now. It wasn't a personal look, not an "I love you," but rather, "I see you, and know you are lovable." Like the look her neighbor gave her when Wendy sat retelling her day at Norma's kitchen table after school. It was the direct look that, despite the thousands of miles she had traveled, Guru Nityananda had denied her.

In that moment on the train, Wendy felt tears brimming on the edges of her lower lids, and then they escaped, and her body heaved in silence. She wasn't thinking of the pummeling loss she felt now

that this last miserable year of divorce proceedings was over, or the unfairness of resigning from the job she loved or what her life would look like when she returned to Boston. Nor, in that moment, was she grieving the damaged relationship with Guru Nityananda or any of her damaged relationships—Aaron, her daughter Becky, Cal. It was simply the fragile play of opposites in the woman’s face—beauty and its temporality—that had drawn tears. In the instant the old woman’s eyes met hers, Wendy had known that there was not a thing she could keep from leaving—not her lover, nor her child, nor her aging parents, nor her body’s good health and its new-found power to twist into yoga asanas requiring strength and flexibility.

A week after her divorce decree was entered into the public record in the State of Massachusetts and ten-year-old Becky was out of the tsunami of her grief, safely (Wendy thought) with her best friend Linny Stein at summer camp in the Poconos, Wendy received an email from a fellow *gurukula* student. Guru Nityananda had suffered a second heart attack.

*Guruji. Nitya. Nityananda.* Ananda means bliss. Nitya means eternal. How she felt when she first met him—that “Yes!” a palpitation in her heart. Here is my teacher. *Finally.* But “No,” had come next. Now, when she considered his name, there was a clutch at her heart, and then a breath, an opening. Memory was like that—remembered moments when the heart flooded, unbidden, like morning light. And then the terrible slam of the heart when the pounding against the door of the beloved was ignored. On her second trip to India, when she was 21, Nitya did not respond. Nityananda, her Guruji, had ignored her, shunned her and sent her home.

And now at forty, she had come back to sit with her dying Guru, the Sanskrit scholar with whom she had studied in the late seventies, when he was in residence at Boston University and she was an undergraduate there. On that first trip, she had followed him back to India and had spent her junior year at the Gurukula, getting academic credit for rapture.

She had returned to India this time with the hope that whatever she had done or not done on successive visits to the gurukula as a twenty, then twenty-one, then twenty-two-year-old, Guru Nityananda had forgiven her, and she could say goodbye. But this last visit had been no different. When she arrived at the mountain gurukula, the school where Nityananda had spent most of the last 40 years of his life teaching and translating and writing commentary on the Upanishads, he refused to see her. She had struggled with the why of that refusal for so many years, but this time she could let it go.

Outside the open window, the hands of children dressed in rags stretched toward her. She reached out with the rupees the idli seller had given her and let them fall into their hands.

She felt content to sit on the hard, wooden seat, her sleeping blanket folded beneath her. As the train left the platform, she looked around at the other passengers. Most of the men were thin and small and wore a uniform of brown trousers and short-sleeved white shirts. There was a great din of high-pitched talk among them, but they respectfully kept their distance.

She was glad to have made the trip to Tamil Nadu. She cherished those old friends still on the mountain top, nestled in the tea-growing region of the Nilgiri Mountains. Ashvin, whom she'd met on her first college visit at the bus stop on the dusty dirt road that ran through the village of mud huts and shanties, still took her to town in his auto-rickshaw. Sudhir, Ashvin's best friend, a college student when she had last seen him, now had a wife and two teenaged boys, the oldest of whom was already studying at the gurukula.

She was happiest to see her dear friend Jyothi, who on that first trip had been a beautiful girl, not yet twenty. Back then, when the disciples called her "Auntie," the name seemed unfit for the vibrant life force that lit up her every movement. In flight from an arranged marriage, Jyothi had gone into service, caring for her beloved Guruji and running the gurukula; feeding and housing, with little help, the thirty or so students who lived there; going by bus to the market in town to shop for the food and tending and watering the garden. Twenty years later, age had made a home on her face. Even the thick, black once-shining hair had lost its luster. Wendy tried to be "Auntie" to Jyothi, then and now, giving her back rubs, taking her to town in Ashvin's auto rickshaw to buy what she needed for the gurukula, as well as the personal items she had long denied herself—Ayurvedic facial oils, vitamins and stockings, and even a little chocolate. Was it this that had turned Guru against her?

Nityananda was a mountain of a man, tall even by Western standards. His white beard and grey hair flowed down his saffron robes. Beneath his bristly mustache, he was quick to smile, and he teased her about her need to practice postures or her desire to see more of India, to travel to sacred sites and ashrams. She loved that his library and his talk was laced with references to T.S. Eliot, to Einstein, to Freud. That first year, he often invited her along on his daily strolls, staff in hand, parka zipped over his robes, his head covered in an orange knitted cap, for it was cold on those morning walks. Though already in his eighties, his gait was brisk and strong. He told her tales she later learned were common teaching stories—the three blind men describing the elephant, each touching the large mammal from different positions; the man who thought the rope was a snake. She thought they were brilliant metaphors for the spiritual mana he was feeding her. She was special, singled out, beloved. The other disciples walked behind.

When on Wendy's second visit, Nityananda had shown himself so unforgiving of her, never looking or speaking to her and snarling when she dared to cross his path, it was as though the river of love flowing through the universe had been dammed at its source. She made up stories to explain his rejection. It was the kindness she offered when she and Jyothi were both young and possibility, at least for Wendy, had seemed endless. But if that were true, would it mean that the Guru was jealous? Fearful? How could that be? Over the years, her mind followed many trailheads that dead-ended like cow paths in the bush. Was it the numerous drawings she made of Jyothi and several of Guru's young disciples, perhaps taking them away from their duties? Was it her morning yoga practice while the rest of the ashram slept or studied scripture or did their chores? Or was it the circuitous journey she had

taken around India on her second visit, visiting ashrams and temples, instead of coming directly to him when she landed in Bombay? One morning, she did yoga breathing and used imagery to give her courage and then waylaid him on his walk. “What have I done? Please tell me. Please forgive me.” He had glared at her and without a word had used his staff to push her aside. At the time Jyothi said, “Guru does this sometimes. There is a lesson in it.” Since her studies with him in college and that first visit to India had left an imprint of love that continued through letters and dreams until her second visit, if there was a lesson, she wasn’t smart enough to get it. She returned from India in deep depression, her body wracked with joint pain.

Almost as though there had been no change in her or in India, the train chugged slowly through a village, and she could see the girls, the shimmer of their well-oiled hair braided and ribboned, in their blue pleated skirts and pressed blouses, walking arm in arm along the dusty road to school. And the bright-eyed boys, friends holding hands, as though they were lovers, but she knew better. Twenty years ago, the affection between friends had confused her. She’d felt that kind of affection for Jyothi, a kind of sisterly love that made her want to take care of her, protect her, ease the burden of her service to the Guru.

In the last twenty years, she had done some serious thinking about gurus, as one after another spiritual master was accused of sexually abusing his devotees. Charismatic and brilliant, those radiant beings, most but not all of them men, may have transcended body and mind to achieve Samadhi, but many hadn’t done their psychological homework. She had come to understand that a great master might have a mind like a still pond, reflecting the divine consciousness of the universe, but he may have done a premature work-around when it came to his emotions. As a result, most ashrams and gurukulas were not immune to petty jealousies, politics and scandals.

She had been happy on this visit to offer Jyothi support. Though she left the gurukula without an audience with Nityananda and knew she would never see him again, her heart was full. Nityananda had loved her once, and, briefly, like a child, she had flourished beneath his gaze. It had seemed like enough. No, it had seemed like *everything*. Since then, she had experienced an elusive yet life-changing love, she’d spent several years in therapy and her daily practice had grown a resilience, like a deeply rooted oak, branches spreading toward the sun. It was beginning to feel almost the same, each time she stepped onto her yoga mat and more and more off her mat, sometimes with a client—a feeling of deep and intimate connection to something more vast and generous than the Guru’s gaze, Cal’s promises, the client’s story. Despite Nityananda’s rejection and the four-hour bus ride to sea level, she had been in a peaceful mood when she boarded the train.

Judging by her lined and discolored face, the woman next to Wendy might be in her 70’s or 80’s, but in that brief instant when she opened her eyes, the light in them had seemed ageless. She wore no customary bangles or earrings, and her chappals were worn and dusty. The color of her sari suggested a monastic life as a sannyasin, but the stud in her nose did not.

Wendy turned back to the window where the road that meandered near the tracks was clogged with early morning traffic. Ox carts and lorries decorated to honor deities were stopped in all directions as bicycles and mopeds threaded through. Once the train moved beyond the city limits, the road veered away from the tracks, but now and then she caught sight of people—a woman in a bright colored sari sweeping the dirt around her hovel, a young boy playing by the tracks, another in a deep squat, taking care of his hygiene. As the landscape began to flatten, she could see great fissures in the dry earth, cracks that looked as old as the continent. Where she remembered a lush landscape twenty years before, the land was thorny and overgrown with weeds. The people seemed poorer, dustier. Was she seeing the effect of drought and the on-going battle between neighboring states for water? Farmers on both sides had been fighting for nourishment and livelihood for centuries.

The woman beside her let out a low chant. “Om A-im.” She recognized the Saraswati seed mantra. Saraswati was the Goddess of wisdom, music, dance and the arts. It was unsettling, because in secret, when Wendy was nineteen, it had been given to her in a ceremony in Cambridge, Massachusetts by a local meditation teacher. Wendy looked more closely at the serene face, the erect spine, the chin tilted nearly to her chest. Her hands, folded in her lap, were in *Dhyana*, the meditation mudra. Wendy hadn’t noticed that before. The strange moment drew her in to her own meditation, and she closed her eyes, holding her mantra at her brow point. But the invitation didn’t last long, and she was ruminating about Nityananda again.

Then she heard the bright voice of the woman beside her asking her name. Wendy had thought her a poor villager, but her English was perfect, and she spoke with a grace that indicated a keen mind. The woman introduced herself as Saraswati and explained that her mother had wanted her to be educated, and so had named her after the Goddess of wisdom. Wendy offered Saraswati her own Sanskrit name.

“Ahhh,” the woman said. “Divyajyothi means Divine Light. It is an honorable name.”

“I love it, but when it was given to me, years ago, by an Indian guru visiting the US, I felt undeserving.”

“You’ve grown into it, I think. You are an artist, Divyajyothi?”

Rattled, Wendy suddenly had Pinocchio ears, that tingled and seemed to grow. Saraswati could not possibly know her history—the time spent in an MFA program, the failure to get a gallery, the depressive moods, back to school for a masters in clinical social work, painting part time, and then the decision when Becky was six never to paint again.

Her body trembled with the memory of that horrible day four years ago. Layer upon layer of paint. Weeks before, her husband Aaron had said the painting was finished, to leave it alone, had even taken a photograph of what would soon be covered up. But Wendy had been driven. The sheer power of the brush in her hand, the moving forward and back to see the five-foot canvas, the physicality and texture of the new paints she had ordered—vermilion, *terre verde*, *caputi mortem*. Her palette thickened by

days of thinking in cobalt, then ochre, then again in sienna. But the wailing of six-year-old Becky comes back to her now. The last day of her life as a painter. How had the backdoor, *always* left open during the day, become locked? Becky had stood, apparently for a long time—Twenty minutes? Even a minute was too long—pounding on the door, crying. Of course, Wendy had heard. How could she not? But she hadn't. And then suddenly, as though coming up for air, she'd heard.

For the last four years, her drawing had been confined to a loose-leaf notebook, pages she could tear out, crumple up. And no color—only a black marker or one of Becky's number two school pencils. She wouldn't allow herself the shellac-based inks she loved or the fine hand-ground paints, not even pastels or conté crayons. She hadn't held a sable brush in her hand since that day.

"I see it in your eyes," the old woman said. It was as though they spoke in a dream. Wendy rubbed her arm against the rough metal beneath the window of the railcar, just to feel the physicality of being awake, of not being in a trance. She didn't tell the woman of her slow recovery from depression, the years of therapy and medication that lasted for most of her marriage. She didn't talk about how the last few years of yoga practice had brought prana, life breath into the darkest places of her psyche, had in fact gotten her through the divorce. "I'm a social worker now," she said.

Saraswati shook her head slowly, her eyes offering something between solace and sorrow. "We do what we must..." She paused, sighed "...when we can no longer do what we love."

Wendy felt embraced and chastised and could not look away. Objections spooled out in her mind—how she'd loved her clients, how she was grateful to feel those moments of wordless intimate connection that sometimes enveloped them, how lost she would feel if she couldn't practice therapy anymore.

Saraswati continued as though she had read Wendy's mind. "You will serve with true devotion, only if you follow your dharma."

"But I'm not sure..."

Saraswati interrupted. "Who is it that says 'no' to art?" She took a deep breath and turned away. "In the time of terror when everything was lost to us, even though it was forbidden, I knew I would dance again. I am an old woman, Divyajyothi, and still I dance my morning prayers." She pivoted toward Wendy. "You must paint yours."

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## 2016

It's been nearly twenty years since that last trip to India, and something inside Wendy is still saying "no," even though Becky is grown, an artist in her own right now, a choreographer and founder of a provocative dance troupe. Why can't she paint her prayers? How was it that, twenty years ago, a stranger on a train had believed in her, had seen her as an artist, and she cannot, even today, believe in herself?

What is wrong with you, Wendy? Why are you always daydreaming? Her mother would ask. Another year—first grade, second grade, third grade—another “U” for attention. Mostly in elementary she got “S’s,” but not for paying attention. “You can’t go through life with your head in the clouds.” First her crayons were taken away, and then the Play-do and the clay and the colored pencils. She had been caught, not listening again, doodling in the margins of her reader. “Why aren’t you learning to read?” Sometimes she thought the leaves outside her first-grade classroom window were whispering to each other and that she could almost, but not quite hear. The leaves wrote in a secret code she could read more easily than the words on the blackboard. But suddenly there would be an interruption, like waking from a dream and not remembering, and there was Miss Pastenbach, standing over her, asking her what she thought she was doing.

The reports home confused her. Sometimes she seemed smart and sometimes the dumbest girl in the room. She didn’t think Miss Pastenbach, whom she adored, would have said “dumbest” in the parent-teacher conference, but that’s what Wendy heard. Tutors were hired. Play time was cut. Crayons disappeared. “Buckle down,” her father said. “Listen to your mother. Straighten up and fly right.” And when he said these things, she imagined herself soaring, even beyond the leaves outside her classroom window. But when they took away her crayons, she felt herself crashing against the pavement of the playground. Smash. And then the see-saw coming down on her head. “Wendy, where are you? Pay attention to what I’m saying,” her father’s voice was pleading. “What are we going to do with you?”

Her mother’s voice was firmer. “She needs more discipline. No visits to Norma for a week.” And that would wake her up. How could she go without her next-door neighbor for a whole week? Norma was the one who made her feel warm inside, even when the temperatures in Newton plunged below zero. That’s who the woman on the train reminded her of...that was the look she’d been searching for since Norma died.


 Each time Saraswati opened her eyes after a period of silence, the story of her life continued. She spoke of maharajas and temple priests and women, auspicious women, “We were the bearers of ancient wisdom. Our dance was sacred, performed in the temple, surrounded by deities and gaze of only the most faithful.”

After thousands of years of devotional dance, of leading the processions at festival time, of the sacred duty of caring for the temple deities, the devadasis were banned from dancing in the temples. “In one of the first acts of independence, the Madras Legislative Council enacted the Devadasi Act, and our tradition was decimated,” she said.

“That must have been shattering. I would have thought that the British would have devised restrictions, not Indians themselves.”



“We devadasi were too powerful. We were educated to dance and to please, and our patrons made us rich. No man had a claim on us. To some, we were a threat; to others, an embarrassment.” She was unmarried as a devadasi, she said, and like most, remained so after the ban. “In the days when we danced in the temple, our marital freedom was the source of our strength, but after we were outlawed, it was the source of our shame.”

Wendy nodded as though she understood, but, how could she? “You must have been devastated. So much loss. So much grief. How did you handle the emotions?”

Saraswati shook her head “We were struggling to survive,” she said. “We did not have time for emotion. Ask me what we did to keep from starving. Ask me what we did for shelter when we were thrown out of the temple.”

“I’m sorry. What did you do?”

Saraswati narrated her life, moving back and forth in time—before the ban; after the ban. Before the ban they were honored, respected, and well-trained students of sacred dance and song. When a devadasi reached womanhood, she was dedicated to God and ritually deflowered by the temple priest or the maharajah of the kingdom. “So, when the monsoon of shame swept through in 1947, we were not marriageable. A few of my sisters moved to the city.” One of Saraswati’s friends had become internationally known before the temple ban, so she continued to dance but only for show. “It broke her heart that she could perform in cities around the world, but not in the temple.” A few managed to eke out a living as teachers to wealthy European and American students, but not to the middle-class Indian daughters who now studied the “high art” of Bharatanatyam.

Schools were established; most often staffed by the male dance masters, who taught a cleansed Bharatanatyam. “The proper schools drained every milligram of sensuality, what is called the *sringara*, the erotic portion, from the dance. Once we were vital to temple ritual, and then we starved.” Forced from their temple housing, with no means of support, many had become prostitutes. Others died an early death, rolling beedis on the street or in wretched factories and working in the tobacco fields where Saraswati herself had grown up.

“How did you survive this fate?”

Saraswati looked at her with eyes of fire that Wendy sensed had seen the burning of worlds. “I did not.” She turned away and seemed to be considering. “I think we have met for a special reason.” She pulled a small red book out of a cloth sack she had strapped to her chest and paused again, then placed it in Wendy’s hands. “Please, take it back to America. Have it translated. It is up to you, Divyajyothi, to let the world know how the devadasi were once valued, honored in our villages and cities. You must tell the world how we danced with God. You must paint us.”

“But... I don’t know anything about translations or publishing. I mean, I’d like to help you, but...”

She covered Wendy's hand with hers. "If you paint us, you will not fail. There will be no more shame." Her hand was oddly cold, and when she closed her eyes, Wendy did as well.

She felt the word "shame" the heat of it, so that she had to swipe at the strands straggling out of her bun to wipe the sweat at the back of her neck. Even before her mind sought a story, her body understood. Shame had been her companion in intimacy since she was a teenager—the image of Mac's hand on her breast intruding into Mr. Ashburner's biology class—how her head with an involuntary jerk had lowered onto her desk, and her arms had covered her up. The wanting to disappear. Unworthy of teaching art to the little kids in Temple School the morning after. Unworthy of sitting in this class. The constant fear of discovery with Cal. Shame had put a stop to making art.

She sensed that shame had been born in her long before she had the word to name it. Shame was very young and also very old. *A limbic response without cortical understanding*, would be how she might sum up a client's response in case notes. A shiver in her belly, heat rising through her chest and the back of her neck, a catch in her breath. She wasn't breathing now. But there were no coherent memories, no shaming scenes; only flashes, like the images that surface and dissolve just before sleep.

For a long time, Wendy felt the chill of Saraswati's hand and then she did not. When she opened her eyes, the train was pulling into the station in Chennai, and the seat beside her was empty. The small red volume was in her lap.

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## 2016

But she *had* failed. Even if she unrolled her canvas, bought new paints or water colors, how could she paint what she couldn't read? It had taken her two years to find a willing translator. At seventy-two, N. M. Krishna, professor emeritus of Indian music at Wesleyan and a tabla instructor, born in Karnataka, not only spoke fluent Kannada, but grew up in a time when the devadasi still danced in the temple. His father and, for perhaps thousands of years, his ancestors had played tabla, accompanying the sacred ritual dances of the devadasi.

N. M. Krishna died before he sent Wendy the completed translation. For years, Wendy tried to find the small red book and the manuscript that she knew he'd finished. By the time the PDF had shown up in her inbox two weeks ago, along with an email from N. M. Krishna's son Ramesh, she had come to believe she had failed Saraswati and failed herself. There was no book. There were no paintings. Only lately had images of fire and eyes and abstractions of mudras become so vivid that she was thinking about buying a sketch pad.

In the email message, Ramesh told her that he and his thirteen-year-old daughter had been going through boxes stored in the attic, looking through her grandfather's music books and instrument collection, and found a package with Wendy's name on it. Ramesh asked his grad assistant at MIT to

scan the manuscript and to research the name on the envelope. It didn't take much of a Google search to find Wendy listed as a therapist in North Kingston, RI on the *Psychology Today* website.

Now she has the translation in her hands. It's been nearly twenty years since the small red book, hand-written in a language she could neither read nor speak, was left in her lap on a train in South India. After N.M. Krishna died, she'd given up hope of seeing the translation or of finding the original again. Neither his colleagues in the World Music department at Wesleyan nor his heirs had been able to locate them. But here is the manuscript, a miracle, arriving as a PDF in her in-box two weeks ago. She could have read most of it on the flight from Providence, but instead, she's creating a personal retreat of reading, of fall color, of yoga and meditation, and of discovering why this devadasi's story is hers. She will cap off her retreat with a business expense—a weekend at the ashram of yoga with CEUs for mental health professionals.

In the rental car lot, she loads all but her water bottle, phone, charger, tablet with audio book ready, and a credit card into the trunk. A nondescript car. As she buckles in, she can't remember the color. Gray? She thinks it's a Hyundai logo on the steering wheel.

She finds a way to charge both her phone and audio book before she pulls out of the lot. Last night, she downloaded the new Anne Patchet novel. As she drives and listens to the barks of the GPS competing with the narrator's voice, she realizes she's too distracted to follow the scenes, to get to know the characters—so many family members, two blended families. Her mind is stuck on that long-ago train ride with Saraswati and all the rationalizations for abandoning the search and failing to paint the story.

In the nineteen years since, both her parents had died—her mother from the wretched and dreadful Alzheimer's disease, and her father, with his sense of humor intact until the end, from the slow ravages of age. In what felt like a torpedo slicing through the eighty percent of her that was salt water, she had been off the grid in India in 1997 when Becky needed her most. She is still navigating that ocean of regret. And, despite the sacrifice she'd made of leaving the job she loved, Cal had kept his. Those are losses marked on a calendar, stark moments of grief and betrayal. But Wendy is becoming familiar with another kind of absence, one that is slower, without markers on the map of leave-taking. When had she lost the capacity to touch the back of her head with her toes? When had it become necessary to write lists, to have a specific place for keys and glasses and phone? As she pulls into the Whole Foods lot to buy lunch and almond milk and ginger kombucha for the refrigerator in her room at the ashram, she reminds herself to notice where she parks and for that matter, *what* she is parking.

It's nearly 3:30, when she climbs back in the car, with at least an hour of driving ahead. At a red light, she pulls the visor down to block the sun, sees in the attached mirror that her long, lank brown hair, threaded with silver has some body to it, even a bit of curl. She wonders if it will rain. Maybe it's time to cover the gray and maybe highlights too. At 59, she ought to invest a bit in her appearance. Filler to stretch out those lines edging her mouth? A consult with a plastic surgeon? She is pulling her

left cheek towards her ear when the light turns green. No, her chin would look pointy. Her face is narrow as it is. She presses the gas pedal nearly to the floor to get the little car going. And no Botox in her third eye. At least until she's in her 60's. She chuckles at her wavering commitment to be a role model to her clients for total self-acceptance as she ages.

N.M. Krishna's translation is the first thing she unpacks. She sets it on the nightstand with her reading glasses, ready to spend a week without coffee or wine or decent cell phone service and internet access. She is on time for evening meditation.

### Translator's Note

I have done nothing to embellish this story, which, as I worked to translate it into English, brought back memories of an India that no longer exists. I am grateful to Ms. Rabin for the opportunity to relive a part of my past. On occasion, my tears fell to the page, obfuscating words. The story is Saraswati's. The errors are my own.

*–N.M. Krishna, Professor Emeritus, World Music Department, Wesleyan University.*

*June 3, 1999.*



## 1938, Kingdom of Mysore

Today I am ten-years-old, and I rolled many *chapattis* for older sister Lakshmi's wedding. I have always loved to roll out flatbread. The *chapatti* stand we use was our mother's favorite possession, painted with many colors all around like a *mandala*. I think it is the loveliest *chapatti* stand in the village. Amma's brother brought it from the city in honor of the marriage of our parents, so it is just one year older than Lakshmi. It has little feet like a stool. When I roll *chapattis* on it, I am reminded of Amma. I close my eyes and hear the low Kali Durga chant she hummed, *Om Mata Kali, Om Mata Durga, Om Mata Kali, Om Mata Durga*. I pretend Amma is squatting beside me as I work. Is it possible I can remember myself a baby in the hammock, where my younger brother Ganesha is now? I have a memory of watching Amma through the netting as she worked rolling breakfast *chapattis* each morning before Appa rose from his mat. I can almost hear the soft sound her mouth made early in the morning, so she would not wake him with her singing. It came deep from her chest, when she wasn't coughing. She almost never coughed when she sang to God.

The *aarti* lamp has never looked so fine as it does today. The brass shines like a lotus in the sun. It sits on Amma's altar. It was she who offered *puja* each morning. Appa said that the Gods could hear her prayers, even though she was a woman, because the beauty of her soul was neither male nor female. He said Amma's prayers were for our entire family, so the rest of us could go about the business of life. As soon as I was big enough, I helped Amma prepare, and then I knelt beside her. I sang the name of God until only my body remained beside my mother, and Amma had to shake me and make me drink strong tea, so that I could go to school.

Now, I am alone before the altar each morning, and it is Lakshmi who shakes me. Who will shake me when she goes to live with her husband's mother? Will Lord Siva help me roll beedis, so that I will have enough *rupees* to marry? The women of our family have always rolled beedis. A girl without a dowry brings shame to her father. Poor Appa—two daughters to marry off and an infant son, years too young to help. Appa sits by the maharaja's gate waiting, just as his father, and his father's father and all the fathers in our family have done in days' past. But last year was the long drought and now there is little work. Dear Appa does not say it, but I feel his worry in the sorrowful way he looks at me and baby Ganesha.

How Amma would love the *aarti* lamp now. After *aarti* she chanted *Hari Krishna Hari Rama*. The low sweet sound of her voice would rock me to sleep, and her sharp cough would slice me out of my dreams. No one troubled about her cough. Every village woman has one. Their throats are sore from the dust of the tobacco and cloves they roll into beedis. Amma stopped rolling beedis just before Ganesha was born, but Appa did not stop smoking them. After Ganesha was born her cough grew worse, until she could only lie on her mat all day. Lakshmi and I swept and made the *chapattis* and

cooked the *dhal* and took care of Younger Brother. The sister of my mother came to take care of Amma, and Lakshmi and I stopped going to school so we could do the chores. There will soon be no one but me to cook Appa's meals and roll the beedis.

Amma wanted me to go to school. That's why she named me Saraswati, the Goddess of knowledge. Amma used to say when she prayed to Saraswati, she was praying for my education. Appa laughed at her for this. "Better you should pray for a dowry for her marriage."

"That is my prayer to Lakshmi, the Goddess of fortune, for Elder Daughter Lakshmi," she would say. It made Amma so happy when I learned to read and write and could read stories to her about Radha and Krishna and all his beautiful Gopi consorts or the tale of Lord Krishna as Arjuna's charioteer, teaching him his warrior duty on the battlefield.

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Wendy takes off her reading glasses and sets them on the nightstand. Her eyes are tired, and she wants to sleep, and yet there are already more questions. The manuscript itself is lyrical and vivid but puzzling. If it's a diary, how can she be rolling chapatis and also writing in the present tense? Maybe it's the translation itself. N.M. Krishna wanting to improve it or make it more ... accessible to the Western reader? Kannada verbs have both past and present. She knows this from her time in India.

Saraswati sounds immature in a sweet way yet old beyond her years. Village life in India, especially for the poor beedi rollers, was hard. With her mother gone, Saraswati would have had to grow up fast but with the emotions of a child. It's already after 9:00 pm, and the first meditation is at 5:00 am tomorrow morning. But Wendy can't resist. She puts on her glasses again.



We have rolled enough beedis for my sister's dowry. I feel sad that Amma is not here to celebrate Lakshmi's fourteen-year-old birthday and to see her in her beautiful red wedding sari with roses woven in her hair.

This is the day we have been planning for so long. I am awake early to offer a special *puja* to Krishna and Radha. I shall ask for their love to surround Lakshmi and her new husband Shankar and to bless their marriage with many sons. Her husband is very handsome. We saw him when he came with his parents to inspect. Lakshmi was much pleased with his appearance, but now she is afraid of what will happen when she goes to live in his mother's house. It is not the work, I think, that frightens her, for she is a hard worker like me. She is afraid that a mother-in-law will make her long for our Amma all the more. That is what I would fear if I were facing the wedding ceremony today. Here, at least, are Amma's pots and saris and bangles. Here, I can remember her as I boil the rice in her pot or pray before her altar.

The rose petals I gathered are fragrant, and I have saved a few grains of the wedding rice we will boil later this morning. As I pray to Radha and Krishna I offer a prayer of my own. I ask for this boon—

that I never have to leave my mother's house. I do not know from where the money would come for a second dowry, so it is not such a difficult wish.

When I close my eyes, I can still see the light from the *aarti* lamp, burning behind my eyelids. I focus on the light as it merges in the center of my forehead. It is quiet this morning. I am the only one awake at this hour and I sit in silence for a very long time. As I breathe, I feel the lamp light glowing around my body. My skin is tingling as it did when Amma rubbed me with sesame oil. It has been so long since I felt my Amma's touch, and now I am feeling touched all over. I am so bright; I am suddenly afraid there must be fire. When I open my eyes to look, it is only the small flame of the *aarti* lamp burning, and I am just the same as I was. I am simply a girl doing her morning *puja* before God.

But I feel changed. I feel the glow inside me now, everywhere inside me. I know now that God is with me, and that the Divine Mother has heard my prayers. My boon will be granted. I will not be a servant in my mother-in-law's house. I will never leave my Amma's side. I know this altar is mine now, that the Divine Mother has wrapped me in her holy light, that I am divine.

I begin to make sounds, like chanting without words. I know they are blessings from the Divine Mother. "Ma," I call, and then I begin to chant to her in all her many names, chanting the name of the Goddess, Saraswati, for whom I am named, and Lakshmi, the Goddess of abundance, and Parvathi, Siva's consort, and wonderful wild Goddess Mother Kali, and terrible demon slayer, Durga. And soon the household is awake and gathered around me, and I stand in prayer, swaying still with the fullness of song in my heart. When I open my eyes, Appa is bowing at my feet.

All day I am filled with the blessings of the Divine Mother. On the way to the wedding hall, I stop. Tears come to my eyes as I step on an ancient crack in the surface of this dry sunbaked road. I am so young in this body; yet, in this moment, I am caught in the current of an underground stream of wisdom that has been flowing since the beginning of this world. Only this body is new. The cracks in my path tell me of this and of many other secrets existing deep beneath the surface of this earth we call reality.

As the wedding guests arrive, they are brought to me, one by one. I do not know what words to speak, and yet the words come from a place inside me that my mind does not recognize. I listen to the words, hearing them for the first time, just as the guests hear them. Each guest *pranams* at my feet. Even the swamis and saints in saffron robes bow down.

It takes a long time for the wedding ceremony. My sister is beautiful in her red sari trimmed in gold. She is fragrant and sweet as the roses and jasmine twined in the locks of her hair.

As I look around I see God everywhere--in the weary old woman who sits toothless and grinning in the corner, in the beggar with one leg who waits at the door for the guests to remember him, in the little one, unused to wearing pants who has pulled them off to do his business in the corner of the tent. I see God in my beautiful sister and in my mother's sister, and in each *chapatti* and each sweet that was made with so much love and attention for these guests on this special day.



There are many musicians sitting together, but only the *tabla* player is beating his drums. Now the *veena* player begins to pluck the strings. The room is bright with excitement. My father calls for a dance, and several ladies rise. Three women and a girl about my age begin the slow circle on the ground in front of Lakshmi and Shankar. "Dance, Saraswati," Appa says. "It is why God gave you legs."

I have never danced in public before. I am shy at first, moving slowly, pacing my movements with the others. We move with precision, each lifting her hands and raising and stamping her feet to the pattern of her neighbor's movements. I feel the peace of moving in harmony with my sisters and forget there are others watching. The tempo of the music increases, and we circle faster and faster, our saris and skirts fluttering as we spin. Suddenly, I am pushed into the center of the circle and dance my own dance as the women circle me with the graceful rhythm of their limbs. I dance until my hair unwinds from its braid as my head moves by itself on my neck and my hands fly into *mudras*. Then my eyes flutter back, my body trembles, and I am on the ground, shaking in the embrace of my Lord Brahma. Light shoots up through the top of my head, and I am with Amma. I am in bliss. I am the Goddess; I am Saraswati!

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Wendy puts the manuscript down on the nightstand and takes off her reading glasses. She feels more awake now than she did before she started reading. What *is* she reading? She's never read John of the Cross, but she thinks maybe she should. This manuscript...it's like reading the old testament. All those miracles, the burning bush—the fire that burns but does not consume, the tablets carved by the hand of God. It's exciting and disturbing in equal measure. It feels right to be reading it here while diving more deeply into her practice—meditating three times a day with the swamis and devotees and community she loves. She'll ask Ramesh to send the original back to her in Rhode Island, so she can hold the small red book in her hand again, even if she can't read the words. It has the weight of love in it. Love and trust. Why would she possess it, if Saraswati hadn't trusted her? She's been given a second chance.

Her long hours at work provide too many distractions to meditate more than once a day, let alone give this story the mindful attention it's due. Her private practice consumes her in a way that would not allow her to sink into this story. Now, she has five days to read before she joins the yoga and mental health program next weekend.

She's excited about the workshop—how to integrate appropriate yoga practices into her clinical work. Yoga helped her survive the most painful year of her life and has contributed to her emotional wellbeing ever since. Why shouldn't she be able to share a little of what transformed her life with her trauma survivors. She thinks of 52-year-old Jeffrey who can't get out of bed in the morning. She would like to teach him something he could do right there in his bed, so he starts his day with more energy. And 37-year-old- trauma survivor Carla, who calls her between sessions, always in crisis and usually

angry and blaming someone. What might she teach her to self soothe? She wants to finish this diary or whatever it is...fiction? Memoir? before her focus lands back on her clients and how what she learns this weekend can deepen their work together and empower them in their own self-regulation.

She was happy to see the program for therapists and yoga teachers listed in the Shantiville catalog. She could have taken the same program closer to home, but Shantiville and its temple and shrines nestled in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains in rural North Carolina is special. Those fleeting moments on her mat at home that take her beyond the boundaries of her mind, seem limitless on the grounds of this ashram. A few years ago, when she tried to explain the healing potential of yoga to her colleagues, eyes would roll, and the subject would be changed. More and more though, they are curious and a few of them have even become yoga teachers.

As much as she loves to visit, she would never move in. Ashrams, like every other organization, have their politics. Well-meaning spiritual people, conscious and intending to do good in the world, have their own hidden, even to themselves, agendas. Can we ever be entirely clear, she wonders, free of unmet childhood needs, or of our own self-interest, despite prayers for an “ego as pure as crystal?” And she loves that about humanity—loves the push and pull that makes life interesting. As long as she’s a visitor here, who adorns herself with an “in loving silence” badge in the dining hall, she is immune to the push and pull of ashram life. This is her retreat. For Saraswati. And for Becky. In her heart’s mind, everything she does is for her daughter, to soothe the tears of that six-year-old, but that’s not the way it has looked to others. Not to her family. Not to her friends. Certainly, not to Becky’s father Aaron. Becky is the only one who knows. And to Wendy, Becky’s knowing is all that matters.

In the morning, Wendy lies in bed. Instead of going to the early meditation, she ponders the vivid scenes she read the night before. Could these truly be the words of a young girl of what? Ten or Eleven? After the initial hurdle of first grade, when survival meant training her mind to seek shelter somewhere other than here, Wendy was reading and had a good vocabulary by eight. Still out-to-lunch in second grade and barely there in third, she had mastered reading and it had mastered her. She was enslaved by those childhood mystery series about the Dana Sisters. But she could not have expressed herself clearly about anything, much less life and death and transcendent states of Samadhi. And Becky at ten, smart as she was—could she have been so precise? Becky, grown now, despite or because of her brilliance, was still beautifully child-like at 29.

Unlike Becky, Wendy had been an introverted child, burrowing into the corner of the bed after school with a gothic novel, and then drawing into a sketch book her imagined Nancy Drew or Heathcliff or the mad wife confined in the tower. Becky didn’t escape into reading or drawing as a child, but as soon as she could walk, she danced alone around the living room until she dropped, sometimes so dizzy she banged her shin into the coffee table, and once her head on the Queen Ann side table, so that she had to get stitches in her brow. Becky danced to “Beauty and the Beast” and “Miss Saigon,” the call to dinner unheard. She and Becky were both like that—tuned out or tuned in,

depending on your perspective. Except for the terrible time when she was ten, Becky has never stopped dancing.

The trance of the dance, the absorption of art. Creation. The flow. Saraswati's description is familiar to Wendy in a way. Had she been born in India, maybe her absorption in the things that didn't seem to count in Sharon, Massachusetts would have been considered holy. Instead of ... what had her parents called her? Not space cadet. But something like that. Scatterbrained. Absent minded. She remembers those report cards in elementary school. *Day-dreaming, inattentive, distracted. Slow. She does not pay attention in class.* Today, she would be sent to the school psychologist. She might have been labeled, just as Becky had been when she was ten and therapy had been suggested for her supposed ADHD. Her teachers were unable to handle her angry outbursts, her speaking out in class. But, oh, there was good reason for that.

Ritalin had been recommended by the medical director, but thank God, the therapist, a former colleague at the clinic from which Wendy had been forced to resign, had a different perspective. After watching Becky fidget and kick over a Lego construction her last client had left in the corner of the office, Sarah had the brilliant idea of putting disco music on her boom box and leaving the room to use the bathroom. When she returned, there was Becky dancing, bright eyed, smiling. Really, she hadn't stopped taking dance lessons since. There were still more years of disruptive behavior, alcohol and drugs, and on-going therapy, but the dancing never stopped after that.

Wendy rubs her eyes, as though she could rub out the vision of ten-year-old Becky sobbing, her arms thrown around Wendy's neck and then pushing her away. *Where were you?* Enough of this! Wendy throws off the covers and climbs out of bed. If she doesn't wash her hair, she can make the second meditation that begins at 6:20 am. But she'll skip the yoga class, so she can fit in a little more reading time before noon meditation.



1939

I am not sure where I am, but it is light again, and there is my Auntie by my side, offering me water from a cup. I ask her if it is morning.

"It is two mornings since your sister's wedding," she says.

I recognize Amma's aarti lamp and the ghee pot and I know that I am home on my own mat. I lift my head and Auntie helps me take a sip.

"Your father thought you had died, but I knew you would come back. Where did you go, child?"

"I do not know. It was peaceful and quiet, and I was happy." Once I saw Amma, felt her hand rest on my shoulder. Then I felt a gentle push, and here I am again without her. I do not tell Auntie that Amma was there.

"How do you feel?"

I move myself carefully, testing each joint, each muscle. Everything works, although I am stiff as a reed. Amma's hand on my shoulder. If I close my eyes, I can almost feel it there. She spoke to me. The melody, the rhythm, I remember. But not the words. I have lost the words. I want the words.

"No time for tears," Saraswati, and Auntie is wiping my face with the edge of her *dupatta*.

Soon I am up, and Auntie helps me bathe and dress. I have had two days without labor, so there is no time for *puja* this morning. Auntie gives me some *chai* and idlis, a real treat, and then I sit down at my place with the leaves she has already cut to size in the days I slept. She places a big pile of tobacco in my lap.

So young to be motherless. Wendy thinks Saraswati must be about the age Becky was when she and Aaron separated. Saraswati had her Auntie. And her sister. Becky had Martha, the fourth in a long chain of nannies. Becky had Penny next door. Becky had Linnny and her other friends. But the day she needed her mother most, Becky did not have her.

Motherless children. The fragile, essential bond between mothers and daughters—it cuts across continents, cultures. Winnicott's theory of the "good enough mother." Did she have one? Did Becky? It's like an ear worm. Wendy knows she's beginning to ruminate. Never a good thing for the default of depression she carries in her genes. But she can't help it. The year itself sets her off. 1939. Jewish children in Europe separated from their parents, sent into hiding in barns or attics or taken to camps, parents in one line, children in another. Separation. Death. By 1945, as many as 1.5 million Jewish children dead. Oh, God, I'm spiraling into the dark. I should have practiced yoga this morning. I can't miss any more practices, she thinks, as she pushes herself up from the chair. Let in the light! Let it seep through these wounds—mine, Becky's, Saraswati's, the great grandchildren of survivors with Holocaust genes mutating their DNA. I'll hike, I'll meditate, I'll breathe, I'll chant, and come back to this narrative tonight.



1941

The sister of my mother has gone back to her family, so I do not see her very often. In the morning, I offer *puja* and then make the food we will eat for this day, while Appa and Ganesha sleep. As soon as there is enough light, I begin to roll my beedis. I am proud of Ganesha. Just five years of age, and he cuts perfect leaf squares for my beedis. I give him 5 *paise* for 100 leaves. This way he has learned to count. I tell him his name should be Hanuman instead of Ganesha, because he is such a little monkey. He makes me laugh and laugh until I sometimes spill my tray. But if he cuts the leaves for me, when he comes home, and bundles the finished beedis, I can sometimes make 2000 a day.

Lakshmi comes today with Bindu, her precious little one, already a year old. It worries me that Lakshmi looks so tired, and she has a cough. She only rolls beedis now and then, so it is surely not the tobacco that irritates her throat. She works very hard in the house of her mother-in-law, who is not loving at all to Bindu. Older Sister whispered to me that she feared her mother-in-law would feed the baby poisoned milk, so set she was on a male child, but Bindu is strong and healthy. Now Lakshmi is with child again, so we are praying for a boy.

Lakshmi is here now, and we are not doing any work. No grinding, cutting or rolling today. It is like a holiday. Since her marriage, so rare! We simply sit and talk. Bindu crawls from one lap to the other, reaching for the gold around my neck and in my nose.

"I have heard," Lakshmi says, "some news about Appa."

"You have heard news? I cook his meals and wash his clothes. I see him every day. How have you heard news, and I have not?"

"I heard my husband and his father talking while I was serving them."

"So, tell me. Is it bad news or good?"

"Shankar told his father that Appa will take another wife."

"But he has me! Does he think I do not take care of him?"

Lakshmi puts her hand on mine. "I do not know what he thinks. You are nearly eleven years old. Perhaps he means to marry you off." Lakshmi's eyes are bright. "Just think, Saraswati, a husband of your own."

I pull my hand away. "I do not want to marry! Appa knows that. I want to stay here. There is Ganesha to see to and *puja* each morning at Amma's altar. I have no reason to leave."

"No one said you must, Little Sister." Lakshmi's arm circles my waist and I put my head on her shoulder and feel a tear roll across my nose and into my mouth.

Lakshmi wipes my face with the edge of her sari. "I know. I know," she whispers. She looks around at our little house. When I look up, there is a sad expression on her face. I know she misses it, misses Amma, misses me and Ganesha and Appa. Bindu is crawling toward the altar, reaching for the *aarti* lamp, and Older Sister lets go of me to reach for her. "I am so grateful you are mine," she sings, as she rocks her baby in her arms.

With Bindu at her breast my sister is radiant with happiness. This is not a happiness I will share. There are some things you know. Soon, I could carry a baby in my womb, give birth, suckle a newborn in my arms, but I will never do so. If Appa marries again, there will be more children in this little house, none of them mine. "Did you hear them say who it was?"

"Shankar said Appa had talked to Subhash about his daughter."

"Shakuntala?"

Lakshmi nods. "She is fifteen, like me. She goes to school. She will be like a sister to you."

"No one could take your place." It is my turn to wrap my arms around her shoulder, and she leans back into my embrace as Bindu nurses.

When Lakshmi leaves, I light the lamp for Siva *aarti*, although it is only mid-afternoon. *Om Jai Siva Omkara*. Only God knows what is best for this life. All glory to Siva. Change is coming. Oh Siva, great destroyer, I rest in your bliss. I lay myself at your divine feet. *Om Jai Siva Omkara*. Your will, oh, great destroyer, not mine. I chant the *aarti* prayer and then *pranam* on my knees, praying to my Lord Siva, great master of the dance, master of destruction.

I hear the *damaru*, the drum beat of creation, even as the fire in your hand touches my life, dissolving all that is familiar and known. You, Nataraja, oh glorious Siva, keep all things changing, ending and beginning. What is ending of this life, and what is it that begins? What is my *dharma*, if not to be here in my mother's house, serving my father and brother in love and devotion, and serving you, oh, my Lord?

In my head, I hear the beat of Siva's drum, as I rock on my knees, and I feel the heat of His flame burning in my chest, my feet, my fingertips. My whole torso is alive with the pulse and glimmer of the fire, and I move with it. I roll on the floor, my body a tiny ball, as though I could tamp the leaping flames, but I cannot. My legs kick out, the tingling energy pitching me forward and back at the waist, my pelvis rocking, heat rising. My feet stamp and kick at the ground as I lie on my back, and then roll to my belly where the heat is so great, I think I will explode in yellow light. I press my belly into the floor, tamping the heat with the earth that supports me. *Om Namah Sivaya*. And then I am up and dancing, the fire in my heart leads me around the room. There is so much I love in this house. I pick up the beautiful *chapatti* stand and hold it to my chest as I dance.

And there is Siva, my Lord, and I hold the small brass statue in my hand, and his sparks sear my skin, shimmer sacrum, pelvis, yoni. The drum in his hand beats in my chest. New fires, little leaps of flame, take my breath away. I dance him around the room on my own two legs. *Om namah Sivaya*. Fill me with your fire. You are my Lord, my master.

Suddenly my legs quiver, and I cannot hold him any longer. Every cell of my body is vibrating, and I stumble and fall to the ground. A warm glow fills me, not a fire at all, but luminous as the sun. Each light-filled breath is God's gift to me. There is splendor behind my eyelids, and there is peace. I know that Siva has heard me, is with me still. Whatever happens, I will be safe and loved by my Lord. Oh, Siva, you will not forsake me. *Om Namah Sivaya*.

Wendy realizes she has been holding her breath again. She lets out a deep sigh, as she sets the pages on the floor beside her chair. She remembers chanting at the ashram years ago, standing, rocking, filled with light, and a sense of timeless, all-pervading love. It had seemed like the antithesis to her marriage. She recalls the inner vision of firelight—a dancer whirling in the dust around the fire,

her movements a flash of gold and green and ankle bells. And now, the image of Saraswati's dance churns in her—sensual, erotic—like the lightning bolt of the 16<sup>th</sup> century poet Mirabai, who ran naked through the streets, chanting her love-crazed praise to Lord Krishna.

She knew then what was missing in her marriage. After the visit to this same ashram over twenty years ago, she had succumbed to Cal's yearning looks at work, his innuendos, his outright declarations by email: *God, I love you so much. Talk about obsessed--I can't delete the "deletes."* *They're the only thing of yours that I have constant access to*, and her own desire—how alive she felt and how young. After that horrible trip, she and Aaron had taken across Massachusetts to the New Hope Inn in Lenox to “save” their marriage, she had been receptive to Cal's alluring whispers, his pleas: *Please don't say no. I'm not ready to accept that we will never touch, that I can never hold you (yes, maybe even bathe you!) that we can't do the things that lovers do. But today, all I'm asking of you is to meet me for lunch. Just lunch.* Two days after that ashram visit, the memory of that horrible weekend still festering, she met Cal for lunch and many more lunches after that. It doesn't do her any good to think of Cal. It suspends her heart in uncertainty and grief, even now. Better to remember the clear decisions she has made in her life. Even if they were wrong.

And she is back in Aaron's over-heated car, the blur of the winter landscape rushing past. There are trigger moments in a marriage, she believes, when there's a flash of knowing that all the effort, the therapy, the memories of happier times are not enough to carry you through. It must have been 1995, because they were divorced by '97. There was the watershed moment she'd heard her clients talk about. The moment she knew for sure that she would not remain married to him. And then, of course, the knowledge dissolved in a murky sort of hope. She kept trying for a while longer, which was the way with her back then.

“Any water left?” he had asked.

Without turning to look at him, Wendy unscrewed the cap and handed the nearly empty bottle across. This was the part of the drive that dulled the senses—endless miles of snow-patched hills sparsely populated by barren trees, a leaden sky. In the distance, an abandoned barn, roof caved in, weathered siding, a broken-down corral fencing emptiness. Everything gray, especially at this time of year. The middle of February. The middle of Massachusetts. The middle of their lives. Three months ago, Aaron had turned forty, and in a few months, she would follow.

As he stretched the bottle across the console, he kept his eyes on the rise and arc of the road ahead. A simple question. She hadn't answered “here” or “a little,” nor had she smiled. Just the thrust of the bottle. Mechanical. Dumb. He was handing it back the same way.

Wendy screwed the cap back on, as she registered his face in profile. Labile, she would call it in her clinical mode, emotion always shifting beneath the mask of failed dominion, the German Jew in him from his mother's side. Emotion he rarely expressed. Even now, the Litvak cheek, so much like his father's, round, clay-colored at its peak, quivered with a feeling she couldn't name but regretted all the

same. As if she were the source of the pulse at his temple. The tension in his jaw, the push of his thick lower lip out and in against his teeth—about her? She hadn't accustomed herself to the buzz cut he came home with last month. When she'd married him, his auburn curls framed his long Lincoln-like face and stood away from his skull like mahogany shavings. Now he was prickly as a cactus. Stiff. Agitated.

Aaron's head swung away from the road. "What?"

"Nothing."

"I hate it when you gawk. That blank look and your mind's in China."

"Sorry." She cracked the window an inch. It was close in the car. The heater. His irritation. Hers.

"You just spaced out on me again. Sometimes I feel so shut out of your life."

"I'm here, honey."

"Then please tell me what you're thinking."

There it was again—his desire to walk around inside her head, as if it were some unexplored swampy acreage he owned. His acute attention had pleased her once. She imagined the tall curve of his body like a lean question mark, striding through the marshes of her mind. Back in her twenties, when she barely knew herself, his deep inquiry had penetrated the fog of her unknowing, had helped her understand and even define herself. But he seldom gave her the same privilege. What bugged her was his faith in his possession—that he could read her moods, discover her thoughts. It was a piece of the story he told himself about their marriage—for him a single word—*happilymarried*. She could feel his expectations, even as he watched the road ahead and stole wary looks at her. New Hope. Even the name of the inn a cliché. "Nothing special," she said.

She wished she could remove the turtleneck from under her jumper without completely undressing, but all she could do was unbutton down to the belt and sling out of the arms.

"What are you doing?"

"Aren't you hot?"

"Turn off the heater in the seat."

She'd forgotten about that. Her five-year-old Subaru had no such amenities. Oh, who cares? She lifted the turtleneck over her head, struggling to pull out of her sleeve and free her left earring, stuck on a thread at the shoulder seam.

"Wen-dy!" He was almost tsking.

She was small breasted, and, as usual, not wearing a bra. Fifteen years ago, he might have pulled off the road. A few years ago, he might have raised his eyebrows, pretended to ogle, laughed. Now he *tsked*. Later, at the appropriate time, teeth brushed, face washed, pills taken, he might want to make love, which, given their sex life lately, or lack of it, was the point of the trip. Wendy shrugged into her



corduroy sleeves and leaned forward to touch the smiley-face sticker Becky had stuck on the wood-veneered glove compartment. The fact that Aaron allowed it, this imperfection on his BMW, endeared him to her, almost made up for his prudishness.

He glanced over. "I shouldn't have let her do that. Will it come off without a mark?"

She shrugged, laughed. "I think it balances the car's Teutonic character."

"It's not the car you object to, it's me."

"Only when I can't find my lemongrass tea in the morning." She gave his arm a playful punch, as though she were kidding about the fact that he had been up in the middle of the night, reorganizing the tea shelf. Again.

Though it was only four o'clock, a mass of gray clouds had moved in, obscuring the sun, and he turned on the headlights. She gazed over her shoulder. Was he right? Behind them, the hills were fading into the horizon, where, though it had become too cloudy to see it, the sun was low in the sky. Maybe it *was* about him.

As she turned back, light from a highway lamp glazed the glass, and the momentary reflection of her eyes made her think of Becky. Those big eyes that pulled something out of her, always a little more than she knew how to give. Thank God, at nearly eight, Becky wasn't as clingy when Wendy left for clinical trainings or for the ashram—the only place she no longer felt the pressure to paint. Becky was happy to spend a weekend with a friend now. Until lately, Becky had clung to her neck when Wendy tried to kiss her goodnight, not wanting to go to sleep, demanding a story, then another. A circle of insufficiency was the way she saw it, because if Becky felt sufficiently loved, those scenes wouldn't happen. *Bad mother*. She could blame herself or she could blame the long matrilineal chain of insufficiency.

"What are you thinking?"

"About Becky..."

"Tell me."

She remembered a younger Becky, floating in the bathtub, gazing up, her eyes trusting, serene. "Nothing special...about giving her a bath when she was little. It's a soothing image." When the self-critical thoughts assailed her, Wendy often went back to the unforgettable moment nearly bursting in her heart—Becky's hair spiraling out like some Ophelia, firm little torso—wide shoulders, narrow hips. How beautiful she was at two. Still was.

"She was perfect, you know, with that long torso I've always loved about your body." Wendy noticed his face soften and a little tug at his lips, almost like a smile, and realized how little she complimented him these days. Her Gottman score, five compliments to one criticism—the ratio for couples likely to stay together—was going down.

"There's something about my body you love?"

She knew he was on to her, had noticed how she avoided looking at his undressed body that still

had that Mick Jagger length and leanness, but not its appeal. “You’ve got a great body,” she said the way her next door neighbor Norma had said it to her when she came back freshman year with all those dorm carbs riding on her hips, and her mother had insisted she go on a grapefruit diet.

“What made you think about bathing Becky, now?”

“I don’t know. It’s one of those moments I go back to when I’m being hard on myself. I cried when I looked at her. I felt this weird feeling of longing and love and, at the same time, this feeling like I was going to disappoint her.”

“Guilt, maybe.”

Her right hand gripped in a fist. Does any mother not feel some measure of guilt? A client had asked her that just last week.

“You were still trying to paint,” he added.

She looked out the window, feeling the fist in her belly now. *Trying to paint*. She didn’t know whether she was feeling angry because she’d tried and failed, because she hadn’t tried hard enough, because the word “trying” was wrong, because she was painting, not trying, and she was good but not good enough, and she’d quit and she shouldn’t have, or maybe because she should have quit a long time ago, should never have started, in fact. Maybe the whole problem was that she had an artist’s sensibility, an artist’s longing for immortality or, what was it that Freud had said? —that the artist consoles himself by creating fantasies that fulfill his repressed infantile longings? And what were hers? Whatever they were, in the moment of creation, they were fulfilled. But she just wasn’t good enough to make a career of it. Or maybe she was angry because *he* had said it—*trying to paint*—and he was the one who had led her here, to this cliché of *happily married* that did not—why not? —allow her to paint? Well, of course she couldn’t be serious about her art with a child to raise and a full-time job that wrung her out so that there was little energy left to give to art, not her own, anyway. Someone else’s maybe. Yoga had become her passion once she’d rolled up what was left of her empty canvas.

But damn it! Painting or not painting—it was her business, not his. It was intolerable to even hear him speak of it. *Trying to paint!* She’d never told him of the time she’d come up from a painting to realize that the sound in the background, constant but unheard, had been Becky crying, waking long ago from her nap. Or the time Aaron was away, and she hadn’t bothered to brush her teeth or change out of her nightshirt. Just picked up the paintbrush and started right in on the picture in her mind. That was the day Becky missed her school bus. She sat beneath the easel in the basement studio, eating left-over tuna noodle casserole and looking at the pictures in Wendy’s art books.

Wendy has a flash of Becky’s tear-stained six-year-old face the day she was locked out that still, more than twenty years later, sitting in her private room at the ashram, sends heat vibrating through her nerves. That was the moment, the one that convinced her to put away her oils and her sketch pad.

In the car with Aaron, she told herself that it was *her* decision, not his. She couldn’t justify the self-indulgence anymore, when, in all the years she’d been painting, the closest she’d come to a solo

exhibition had been her thesis show in college. And of the five group shows in which she'd exhibited, two were nonjuried Women's Sacred Art Exhibits at the Unitarian Church.

Here at the ashram, the only art is the stunning beauty of the mountains at sunset, the temple, the lake, the polished brass of the icons, the shrines, and the Guru's beloved face in tinted photographs hung in every room. For a long time after Cal, the ashram and her yoga practice had almost been enough to fill the empty space of his absence. Now, there is this pulse in her hands, the urge to feel the fine texture of sable in her fingers, and the yearning for the smell of turpentine. It has been too long since she has even looked with the keen absorption of an artist at the world around her. Can she translate what she sees onto paper? Can she even really *see* anymore? Musicians do finger exercises before they play. After years of absence from a violin, a violinist doesn't pick up the instrument and play a *rondo*. Yoga and meditation have tamed the fire to paint that had burned in her. She senses the little red book will implode her life once again. Aaron had said it. Maybe he was right. When she rolled up her canvases, she unmasked an abyss of longing that not even Cal could fill.

"I don't want to borrow trouble, but I think when you stopped painting, other problems surfaced. Do you blame me for making you quit?"

"You didn't force the issue. *I* decided."

"Then why do you seem unhappy?"

"I'm not unhappy." It was a small lie, really: just another basted stitch to hold the seam together. Is that what was happening? Were they coming apart? Would her growing feelings for Cal rip through the fabric of her marriage?

*Had* she changed since she stopped painting? Maybe, yes. But it seemed to her that Aaron had changed too. She couldn't put her finger on how exactly or when. It had been a slow erosion of curiosity over the years. Wasn't he more compulsive than ever? There had been a time when she appreciated his need for order. She could relax a little, let him sweat the details. Plus, she thought she understood him. How else was an eleven-year-old boy supposed to cope with a mother like Bea? A mother whose undiagnosed mental illness had him talking her down from the rooftop ledge of a Memphis hotel on a visit to his grandparents? His idiosyncrasies seemed a window to his wounds, and it was through his wounds that she could love him. But lately, she had only to look at the hard lines of his face, as she was doing now, to sense the layers of scar tissue covering those wounds. Just last week, he'd written to the school superintendent, supporting a new values curriculum that, among other things, banned the proposed diversity program. What had happened to the poet, the leftist, the passionate lover, the man she'd fallen in love with? Even back then, his pencils lined up vertically by his tablet and his jeans hung in rows. But after business school, out on his own, charting clients' profits and losses on the program he'd designed before QuickBooks took over the market, the poetry ran dry and the politics veered right. That's when he began taking his jeans to the cleaners, adding starch to his shirts and insisting that dinner be a sit-down affair at 6:30 every night. There was so little passion these days. She thought he

loved only the idea of her.

Washed out black and white images rolled past the windshield. Even the upholstery of the car was gray. The only color, the smiley-face sticker, and she stared until it blurred, and her eyes closed. They rode in silence for several minutes, maybe longer. She couldn't be sure that she hadn't fallen asleep, because the sound of his voice startled her.

"You're like a wall I can't break through." He turned his face from the road for a moment, and she met his gaze. She recognized the clench of his jaw, girdling rage.

"I want to be attentive, honey. I don't want to think about work or anything else while we're away." She hoped this could happen. Away from their ordinary routines, maybe the spark of connection would ignite, maybe it would rekindle the kind of love she could feel. Really, she did want that with Aaron. But as soon as she said it, her mind latched onto an image, unbidden: the look on Cal's face yesterday when they happened to walk out of the building at the same time. They'd stood for a moment, talking by her car. Her lips twitched into a smile as she remembered the longing she thought she saw in his eyes when she told him that she and Aaron were going to the Berkshires this weekend.

In that instant, Aaron's hand surrounded hers, and something froze inside. Closing her eyes, she prayed to be able to feel something when he touched her. She felt the car slowing and opened her eyes into the descending dark.

"Gas," he said, pulling off the highway onto the exit ramp. "Gas will be cheaper off 90. I thought we'd take that rural route off 20."

The car rolled to a stop alongside the gas pump, and she opened the door. "I'm going to get a snack. Want anything?"

A grimace traveled one side of his face. She took that for "no." More than no. Some commentary on no, like you shouldn't have to ask, like you should know by now what I want, like you're incapable of giving me what I want. Or maybe she was reading all that in. In that moment, she *was* incapable of giving him what he wanted.

Inside the convenience store, Wendy faced the narrow aisles crammed full of processed, edible substances in glaring packages, and her mind went blank. She wanted something. What? Nothing here. Something. Avoiding the cashier's gaze, she headed toward the back of the store to the door with the skirt sign. In the bathroom, she splashed water on her face, and when she came out she was able to focus on the rack of hanging snack food. Too much sodium, too much sugar. A bag of pretzels? Then her attention was drawn to a stack of oranges in purple mesh bags on the floor in front of the cashier. Aaron loved oranges. Loved peeling and eating. It was something she could give him.

"You sell produce?" She looked into the bloodshot eyes of a skinny young man whose hoodie covered his hair and was tied under his chin.

"Owner's daughter sent those from Orlando."

"Navels?"

“Don’t know.”

“Any good?”

“Don’t know.”

By the look of him—pasty complexion, the bluish gray rimming his eyes—it had been a long time since he’d eaten anything fresh. She bent and picked up a bag, holding it as if it were a bundled infant. The weight of it and the way the spheres pushed into her belly and chest reminded her of that stage in Becky’s life.

“You want ‘em?”

“Uh...yes.” She reached into her shoulder bag for her wallet and extracted her credit card with one hand, without letting go of the bundle. As he rang up the sale, she was aware of the light citrus scent, and it made her think of all the times she’d peeled oranges for Aaron, then of a particular time on the beach at Plum Island, the day after she’d sat for the social work boards. Bundled in layers of winter clothes, on a blanket pushed back against a sheltering dune, they’d fed each other orange slices between kisses. As she signed the charge slip, she imagined her fingers bringing an orange slice to Aaron’s lips. Something like hope made her offer the cashier an orange.

“Guess it won’t kill me.” He reached out. His face was the same drooping gray sack it had been before, but, for an instant, his eyes seemed to reflect the brightness of the orange in his hand. “Thanks.”

As she pushed through the door, heading toward the circle of light where the car was parked, she felt lighter, not tired anymore. She sensed that more than her cramped muscles had relaxed. She wanted to see the look on Aaron’s face when she slid a slice of orange between his lips. For the first time in—what? Two years?—she wanted to do this.

“Oranges?” A real smile twitched on his lips as she climbed in.

“Can I peel you one?”

“I can do it.” He reached out, but when he saw her face, he let his hand drift back to the steering wheel. “Oh. Okay. Thanks.”

He started the car and drove onto the road. “I think that left up there is the back road we took before.”

“How can you remember—what 12 years ago?”

“Where’s your sense of adventure, Wendala?”

Right here, she thought, as she covered her skirt with a tissue—*my fingers in your mouth*. “Can you smell the citrus? Kinda reminds me of those picnics we used to take on the beach.” She could feel him turn from the road to look at her as she peeled slowly, bending over her lap, concentrating on removing the fibers, suddenly hungry, breathing the orange smell filling the car. Was it arousal she was feeling now, as she imagined her juicy fingers touching his lips? She had the first clean segment of orange mid-air, on the way to Aaron’s mouth, when he shouted.

“What the...?”

“What?” In the middle of the road—something white and wavering. A flag? No, vertical. A banner? It was moving. “Can you see? Aaron, slow down.”

“I am.”

“Is it a person? Stop! It’s a person!” The person—woman or boy or small, thin man, she couldn’t tell—was running toward their headlights. “Aaron, stop!” Then she saw the white flash of nightgown.

“It’s a woman!”

“Honey, she’s crazy,” Aaron said, and accelerated.

“Please, slow down, Aaron.”

As they drew nearer, the woman’s mouth opened wide in a soundless scream. Wendy pushed frantically at the window button, but it wouldn’t go down. “Open the window! Please!”

He swung the wheel hard, throwing Wendy off balance. Pieces of orange rolled onto the floor.

“She’s saying something!” What she heard was the quick catch of each other’s breath and the sound the tires made as Aaron swerved to avoid her.

She craned her neck as they passed and saw the woman turn, too—saw her wild, feral eyes, the henna hair frizzing out from her head, the arms flapping like empty coat sleeves. Then it was just the night again outside the window and Aaron, driving on the wrong side of the dark country road.

Wendy flung off her seat belt. Now turned fully around on her knees, all she could see in the glow from the taillights were a few yards of blacktop and a dash of yellow down the center. “We should go back.”

“Honey, I saw her. I know that look.”

“Maybe someone’s chasing her.” In her mind the story was reeling out—a drunken husband, a rapist.

“She wasn’t running from anyone.”

“How do you know? It looked like a distress signal. Her arms were waving.”

“Wildly. She was demented, Wendy. If it were a flat tire, you know I’d stop. But that woman looked dangerous.”

*Dangerous.* It was the word he’d used describe his mother. *Out of control*, he’d said, and he just a boy of four. Terror reigned for a time, cracking through the absolute order of the household. Wendy had never seen that side of Bea, but of course she was medicated now.

Wendy settled back into her seat, forgiving him a little. But not herself. The image of the woman still fresh on her mind, the words—“thou shall not stand idly by...” rolling through her mind, beating against her temples, until everything was quiet, and the thought was gone and so was she. From somewhere else, she watched the car’s headlights flash against the ribbon of road unfurling in front of them.

“And we have dinner reservations,” he said, pointing to the dashboard clock.

She nodded numbly. “Dinner reservations.”

She felt a piece of orange under the toe of her boot and ground it into the mat.

They drove on. The woman's wild eyes, her mouth in a scream—the image there in a flash and then not. Inside the silence between them, was he seeing her too? Or his mother? After a while, she began groping through her bag.

“What are you doing, honey?”

She felt the antenna of her Nokia. If she did something, the creeping fog of numbness might dissipate. Even her limbs felt heavy. “Calling the police.”

“Good idea but I don't think you'll get through,” he said. “It's a dead zone.”

She ignored him, pounding the digits. “You're right,” she said after a minute, tossing her phone back into her purse. “Not even 911 works.” She grabbed the peel with the few remaining segments still attached. Juice dribbled on her dress, and her hands were sticky.

She thought she saw a light, and she strained to see. “Are there gas stations out here?”

“Maybe not until we get back onto 20. We may as well wait until we get to the inn.”

“Up on that hill! There's a light.”

“That's a farmhouse, Wendy. Do you want me to get shot?” He paused, looked over. “I thought you were peeling me an orange.”

She felt the weight in her hand and remembered she'd had a crazy notion she would feed him. “I did.” She took another tissue and laid it on the console between them, then picked the orange pieces out of the crevasses of the seat and set them there. “It's ready.”

