Prologue

1947, India

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 is caught like the breath in my throat. I rip and tear; 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 my 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. God, let me awaken from this dream. There is a flash of silver like starlight on water. Trees throw their branches, screaming, and in my heart is the cry of Varanima up the stairs, singing her love chant. 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 appeared to be sleeping, 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. Even in this heat, beneath her saffron 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 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's only jewelry was a small gold stud in her left nostril. Smeared across her brow was vibhuti ash from a recent purification ritual. Wendy's attention shifted to the aisle. A young, bare-chested man was coming down the aisle with a tray of snacks. His white muslin dhoti draped between his legs and hung from his hips. Another man, older and slighter, followed him, selling coconuts punctured by straws. She 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 beloved neighbor Norma had given her when Wendy sat retelling her school day at Norma's kitchen table. 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 silently. 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—her husband 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 ex-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 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 knew what traveling alone in a car full of men could mean for a young Indian woman, and for once she was glad for her well-covered Western-looking body and her age. She and the lady beside her were not likely to become a statistic in the rising rate of rape and murder. In that moment, the stories she'd heard of stoning and of the sexual abuse of a girl or a woman for the crime of walking unaccompanied or for trying to escape the path laid out for her by her elders, made her tremble with memory. She did not want to think about her own humiliation, but there it was, too recent to call it a flashback. It was the final straw, the turning point, when she knew she would leave. Horrible to think about now, but there was no way to not think about it. She began chanting her mantra, visualizing her daughter Becky, happy at camp—emerging from a lake, dripping, chilled, laughing with friends. But there was the cold water, and the memory of the tub was back. She was submerged in it, hardly able to breathe. She was drowning.

She and Aaron were on that last desperate romantic getaway to heal their marriage. Aaron didn't know about Cal. There was nothing to know. Cal was merely the thought she tried not to think, the quickened pulse, the rapid heartbeat. All that, but nothing more. She had been faithful. That night at the inn in Stockbridge, she lay in the claw-footed tub, letting the cooled bath water slide out.

Aaron knocked then entered. He had something in his hand as he knelt on the floor, and he leaned over the tub. "Honey, spread your legs." His voice was gentle, and she thought he was about to overcome his inhibitions and bring her pleasure. Was this the harbinger of something other than missionary position?

But it was her hand mirror, the one he'd given her as a gift with the teak frame and the magnification that he shoved between her legs.

"Look at that. See how ugly you are?" His face was contorted.

She looked at her genitals enlarged in the mirror—the place that disgusted him. She tried to push the hand holding the mirror away, but he held it firm.

"You think a man really wants this?"

When he saw her tears, he drew back. "Cry, damn it! Finally. Feel something!" He flung the mirror

against the wall, and she gasped as it crashed and shattered. The shards that littered the floor reflected pieces of him standing over her.

She drew her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around them.

He stood there, rocking forward and back, shaking his head. “Oh, god damn. God damn!” He reached to stroke her hair. “Jesus, I’m sorry.” He sat on the tub ledge. “I didn’t mean it. I don’t know why.... It’s just... I’m desperate to break through. .... No, Wendy.... You’re lovely. Every part of you.”

She pushed his hand away and stood, letting the water drizzle from her body. “Not to you.” She took a deep breath. “Not to myself.” She reached for the towel, feeling the truth and the terrible ache in her chest. Her body went hot, then cold. “I revolt you.” Every word in her almost inaudible voice, a knife in her heart. And his.

She was thousands of miles away from that tub, and yet she still carried it inside her. She had needed the Guru for something—to absolve her? To love her no matter what? To forgive her? He gave her nothing. But the woman on the train sitting beside her had given her something. She didn’t know what it was, but with that single look, something had shifted. Thinking about those eyes now, Wendy was no longer drowning in memory. She was looking out the window again. A group of girls were walking arm in arm, their dark braids glistening, their navy pleated skirts swinging just beneath their knees. They were laughing as though they could be friends forever, as though they could marry for love, as though none of them would be raped or burned. She hoped that would be so.

Here she was, again coming down from the mountain top, closer to sea level. She had seen her old friends. 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 back then, living in a hovel with his one-legged father, had long ago quit school. Now he had a wife and two teenaged boys, the oldest of whom was already studying at the gurukula.

Her dearest friend Jyothi, had been a beautiful girl, not yet twenty on her first visit. 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 on that first visit, he teased her about her need to practice postures and her desire to see more of India, to travel to sacred sites and ashrams. She loved that his library and that his talk about the ancient texts was laced with references from T.S. Eliot, Einstein, and Freud. That first year, he often invited her along on his cold morning walks, staff in hand, parka zipped over his robes, his head covered in an orange knitted cap. He was old, but his gait was brisk and strong. He told her tales she later learned were common teaching stories—the three blind men whose descriptions of the elephant didn't match, each touching the 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.

On Wendy's second visit, Nityananda was enraged. He neither spoke nor looked her way. There were no invitations for morning strolls, and he snarled 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?

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 uniform skirts and iron blouses. They walked along the dusty road to school with books pressed to their chests. 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 stood accused. 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 the pool of his emotions was murky. As a result, most ashrams and gurukulas were not immune to petty jealousies, politics and scandals.

Though Wendy left the gurukula without an audience with Nityananda and knew she would never see him again, she was leaving without the rash of symptoms that had plagued her last time. 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 the birth of her daughter and loving her only child with a fierceness she had yearned for all her life. She'd succumbed to a life-changing love affair, and then spent several years in therapy talking about it. Through it all, with her daily practice she had grown a resilience, leaving her with a feeling of deep and intimate connection to something vaster and more generous than the Guru's gaze, Cal's promises, the client's story. She marveled at how, despite Nityananda's rejection and the four-hour bus ride to sea level, her morning mantras had put her in a peaceful mood when she boarded the train. Soon, those mantras would be enough to drown out the memories. Soon, she would sleep again without the terrible dreams.

Wendy turned slightly to study the sleeping woman next to her. She might be 50. She might be 80. In that brief instant when she'd 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 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." Wendy recognized the Saraswati seed mantra. 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. Saraswati was the Goddess of wisdom, music, dance and the arts. 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 into her own meditation, and she closed her eyes, holding her mantra at her brow point.

She was floating in a spacious state of mind when 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 felt herself redden. 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 master's in clinical social work, painting part time, and then the decision when Becky was six never to paint again. 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. "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 at the same time. 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."

Wendy closed her eyes. Her heart was beating too fast. She felt exposed and suddenly longed to be off the train, anywhere but here. When she opened her eyes again, the woman seemed to be in meditation.

Each time Saraswati opened her eyes after a period of silence, the story of her life continued. Wendy relaxed. Listened, awestruck. The woman 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." 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 emotionally devastated."

Saraswati shook her head "We were struggling to survive," she said. "We did not have time for emotion."

"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 devadasi she knew 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. 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.”

She looked down at the book in her hands, opened it to words in a small, cramped handwriting she could not understand. “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 intimate companion since she was a teenager. 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, only flashes—a boy’s hand where it shouldn’t have been, a teacher asking a question she couldn’t answer, an email she had to delete—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.

CHAPTER TWO

2016

But she had failed. Even if she unrolled her canvas, bought new paints or watercolors, 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. 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 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 saltwater, 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 in her yoga practice? 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 unaccustomed body, even a bit of curl. The humidity, no doubt. Maybe it's time to cover that silver, turn it to gold. At 59, she could afford to invest in her appearance. Filler to stretch out those lines edging her mouth? She is pulling her left cheek towards her ear, making her chin look pointy, when the light turns green. Her face is narrow as it is. She presses the gas pedal nearly to the floor to get the little car going. No Botox in her third eye. At least not until she's in her 60's. She has a wavering commitment to be a role model for 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.

Wendy takes off her reading glasses and sets them on the nightstand. Her eyes are tired, and she wants to sleep, yet there so many 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 innocent 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!

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? It feels like 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 divorce 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 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.

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. 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, anywhere, 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. 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. Becky's teachers wanted to subdue 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 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.

CHAPTER FOUR

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 Linny 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 16th 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.