



"Astonishing . . . gorgeous and ambitious."

FOREWORD REVIEWS

TEMPLE DANCER

a novel

Amy Weintraub

Bestselling Author of Yoga for Depression

PROLOGUE

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 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. Lord Shiva, 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 wake up in my Amma's arms.

CHAPTER

One

1997

AT 7:00 AM ON the first day of the year, Wendy Rabin boarded a train in Coimbatore, India, traveling east from the 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. 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 sleeves the color of her skin—a kind of undergarment that covered her neck—and her hands were covered in flesh-colored gloves. 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. Smearred 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 Oklahoma 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.

It was hard to describe the quality of her look, although she could 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 wouldn’t understand it until later. 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 ski camp in the Berkshires, 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. 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 in the winter sun, skiing down a category blue slope for the first time, then jumping into the hot tub with her friends. And then 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, 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 ironed 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 ongoing 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 woman’s 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.

Wendy 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 U.S., 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,” she said. “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 *devadasi* 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. When she turned back, she grasped

Wendy's hand. "I think we have met for a special reason." Wendy looked down. The fingers that held her were long, bony, and surprisingly rough. When she let go, Wendy's hand felt cold, as though she'd touched metal in the frigid Northeast. The woman 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 ..."

Saraswati covered Wendy's hand with hers. "If you paint us, you will not fail. There will be no more shame." When Saraswati closed her eyes, Wendy did as well. Through the cold vessel of her hand, the heat of the world pulsed 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. It 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.