

# BEING GOD

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Smashwords edition

## Chapter one

You never really know when something big is going to happen to you, but once it has, you think you should have realised before that something was building up, something was on its way. For me, the giveaway sign I missed, were two very big, very loud crows. The real give away though, was their behaviour: they were leaning down from the tops of their respective trees squawking at me like two demented gargoyles, and what's more, as I walked along, they flew above me to other trees and continued with their ominous, demented squawking. This strange behaviour did not last for long, maybe a minute or two, then they just flew off into the distance. I would probably never have remembered this if it had not been for the even stranger events that were to unfold within the hour; but I know now those everyday crows were the harbingers of change.

It's early December in the west of Ireland and the air is wet and sodden, even without it having to rain. This sounds impossible, but is quite normal here, its to do with the gulf stream, which also means that it is relatively mild. This accounts for the saying, "Soft weather," which makes everything else soft, the stones, the ground, fallen trees, everything is sodden and just about everything, which can't move, is covered in at least two inches of moss. It lies like a quilt absorbing water and sound, creating a stillness that's quite rarely experienced outside of a coma. That, I think is what bought me here, the stillness; that and a degree of fate.

I had lived here in Ireland, for about three years before this day in December, spending my time mainly painting, reading, practicing tai-chi and walking. Your typical hippy living in the west of Ireland, leading a new age life. Nothing that out of the ordinary then, until it all took a turn for the strange. Looking back now I can see that what happened was my choice, my dream if you like, but I did not for one-second, expect it to happen. Who truly believes their wildest dreams will become a reality? Even though it was what I wanted most and had spent nearly twenty years working towards. I think I relished it more as a goal than something I might achieve. My dream gave me motivation, a reason to paint, a reason to read, and above all, a reason for my tai chi. In other words, a cosy spiritual life, reading eastern philosophy, with the odd trip to India thrown in for good measure. Organic food in an organic environment, the perfect hippy life. No ties and most importantly no responsibilities. But all that was about to change. I was just about to become, at least part, responsible for everything. You might think that it's impossible for one mortal person to be even remotely responsible for everything. Before I would have agreed with you but not any more.

After the crow incident I continued my walk home, which just happens to be

halfway up a mountain, along what can only be described as the roughest track in Ireland. As usual just before arriving home, I stopped at a bridge to survey the river below, to see if there was anything interesting going on, maybe a duck or a fish, something normal like that.

Then totally out of the blue, it happened. What I had been wanting and working towards all these years happened. My pulse started to quicken and I felt a kind of lightness, my lightness turned to movement, then to my total surprise, I spontaneously stepped out of my body. Amazingly enough I did not panic, even the sight of the back of my head in front of me did not make me run away screaming: I was probably too shocked to move, but what happened next, I can assure you, was the most terrifying phenomenon ever to befall a living soul: well maybe not, but I'm not very brave, so it petrified me. The part of me which had stepped out of the normal me, and who's hair I had been admiring from the back, started to turn around, and in that instant I knew what was coming, I knew that very shortly I was going to be eye to eye with myself, and the prospect of this felt excruciating.

I think I could have stopped whatever it was that was happening to me at that stage, but I was in a "fuck it!" kind of mood, so I didn't. I was feeling quite stagnant in my life at that time so I wanted something to happen, whoever I was thinking more along the lines of a girl friend, having been single for well over a year. Or a holiday maybe, something to break up a long winter.

By this stage my heart was pounding, not fast, just incredibly hard: every beat threatening to explode out of my chest, to burst my entire body. Just as I had predicted I found myself staring into my own eyes, fear paralyzing my body. Mercifully I had no time to think about anything, because instantaneously my whole life story started to flash before my eyes, a picture at a time; in just the same manner as you hear from people who have had near death experiences. As my life was being pictorially relived in all its glory, with just a few embarrassing episodes, which gratefully flashed past just as quickly as the more noble ones did, I thought to myself, this does not bode good, I might actually be dying here, but I was still standing and my heart was still beating, all good signs of life, but I didn't know, for the life of me, what the hell was happening.

My trip down memory lane ended as abruptly as it had started, with no trumpets or fanfare, and, it would appear, with no judicial judgment, I was half expecting to be sentenced, or to somehow fail. It felt like a reckoning up of my life, the final tally: either I passed scrutiny, or that was not the point of the exercise at all.

What happened next was even more unworldly. I say unworldly, because at this point I completely left my body, and by the feel of it the planet as well. There was a whoosh, and I was accelerated, not in any particular direction, but in many directions at once, through what seemed like tubes or paths, accelerating faster and faster. As I zoomed along these paths, I passed and touched things and events, touching everything, everything that has existed and everything that will exist, nothing was left out; I must have even touched you, but don't worry, I didn't linger and who am I to judge anyway.

As you can appreciate, I did not manage to take in many, if any, of these events, given the fact that I was travelling close to the speed of light in a billion directions at once. Looking back at this now it seems obvious what was happening. First, I had my whole life flash before my eyes, and then I had the whole of the universe's life flash before my mind's eye. How long the universe took to flash past, I really can't say with any accuracy, but I would say just a few minutes, five max. Not very long for an entire universe with all its contents, past, present and future. That seems quite sad

really, you would hope a universe would take at least an hour to flash past, even at an unbelievable speed. If it were a fair ground attraction billed as THE UNIVERSE and it only lasted a few minutes I would be very disappointed indeed.

Just as I thought, I cannot possibly go any faster, I unceremoniously shot out into nothing. After the constriction and nauseating speed and turns of the paths I had been following, this felt great, but I realised straight away this was no ordinary nothing. How could it be after what I had just been through? This was an infinite nothing, not the sort of nothing with something out side of it. Not the sort of nothing with an end. You could not say it was dark, or that it was light, There was no noise, but it was not eerily silent. It just had nothing to do with either light or noise. At this point, I must say, that it was the most beautiful place I had ever been or could have imagined. Not the look of it obviously, unless you were a fanatical minimalist, but I mean beautiful in the way it felt. Totally serene. There was a complete impression of wholeness. A oneness. I felt totally complete.

Then it dawned on me what was going on, and I unintentionally said to myself, "Fucking Hell! Its my turn to be God!" Just about the most inappropriate thought possible to think, at such a beautiful and meaningful time. I hadn't ever suspected that I was god, not even in my most narcissistic of fantasies. Even after all the other stuff I had already been through earlier: seeing the universe in its entirety is one thing, but to suddenly realise you are god is in a different league.

I knew that it was me who was god, because there was no one else there. I realised there could not be anyone else there, because that would make two things, and then there wouldn't be a oneness. There would be a twoness and there is only room for one god in heaven. I had left the world of opposites, the world of yin and yang, and had been launched consciously, if not consensually into the world of one: and by consequence it really was, literally, my turn to be god. Unfortunately I was not the sort of god who could create floods or turn lead into gold, even throwing down a little bit of lightning on a few choice people seemed beyond my powers: but what I could do really, really well, was to just be, and experience infinity in a perfect: timeless, spaceless nothing. I felt I could have seen all around myself, if there was anything to see. I had spherical vision, I could see nothing everywhere at once. It wasn't just getting away from the world that gave me such peace, it was getting away from myself, I knew I was aware, but that was all I had taken on the trip. The rest of my baggage I had left on the bridge.

Reluctantly, I seemed to be returning to my body, if I had been given the choice I think I might of stayed, but I wasn't. The journey back was totally calm, unlike the outward journey. I just seemed to drift back into my body, which amazingly was still standing rooted to the bridge. The years of tai-chi payed off, saving me a cracked head. What I wasn't expecting, was there to be someone standing next to me on the bridge, talking to me. It took me a few seconds to regain my senses, and my composure, after which I realised that it was a local farmer, asking if I had seen any of his cattle.

I looked into his face, to see if he had noticed anything strange about me, but he just looked back at me normally. Probably thinking I had not understood him, he took his teeth out of his pocket, gave them a bit of a blow and a wipe, put them in his mouth and repeated his question. This performance gave me the time to gather my wits for social interaction, so I answered him truthfully, "Yes, I've seen your cattle and all the cattle in the world, for that matter, but I had been travelling at the speed of light at the time, so it would be hard for me to pin point them exactly." Now he does look at me like I'm a lunatic. I've probably confirmed to him the locally held belief

that hippies, even of the younger, non bearded variety, smoke a lot of weed. He laughs, maybe for a little too long, then turns and walks away. I watch him remove his teeth and stuff them back in his pocket as he wanders off, I then hear him start to sing very loudly, or he could have been calling his cows, I'm not sure, but I am comforted by the fact that I am not the only lunatic around here and the world is continuing as normal.

The next morning I woke up feeling anxious and a bit worried, not at all the emotions I was expecting. I had just been shown my divinity, now I felt like an emotional wreck. I thought I should be the happiest person on the planet, dancing and singing at the very least. I would even settle for total contentment, but there was none of that, just a feeling of foreboding. I now started with the self recriminations. What had I done to myself? What had I thought would happen? You spend the best part of twenty years reading philosophy, meditating, practising tai-chi and generally leading the life of a monk; a monk with quite a good social life and not totally celibate I admit, but very monkish in many ways: so really I should not be so surprised that something like this has happened.

When I dreamt of something like this happening. 'Yes,' I did dream of becoming enlightened: I always pictured my self really old, like eighty, almost ready to die, and I would spend the last years of my life, sitting under a tree somewhere hot, living on a grain of rice a day, totally blissed out. But I was only just forty, much too young to wear a loin cloth without looking silly, especially as a westerner, and this morning I was not feeling in the slightest bit blissed out, at all.

Then it dawned on me what was triggering this sense of foreboding. I felt I had somehow died, which in a way I had, but I felt that what had happened the previous day might just be a prelude to my actual death. I felt that I might of somehow cheated death, and that he might be waiting just around the corner, to finish the job.

I had read in several books that it was impossible to become enlightened without a teacher, and if you tried you could get it all wrong and go mad. I was always very cynical when I'd read this, and thought it was more of a marketing ploy than based on fact. Well, I had proved them wrong about the enlightenment part, I had achieved that, but I was growing increasingly concerned about the madness side of the prophesy. What had happened the previous day had changed everything. My understanding of who I am, and even of what I am. It had changed totally my view of the world and how it all works, and all this had happened more or less instantaneously. No wonder I was hanging by a thread.

So, I make a decision to run away and give myself time to think about all of this, without having to explain myself to friends and family, which I would have had to do, as I'm sure I must look as weird as I feel.

I decide to go to India. First because I had been there before, so it would be easy and furthermore, if I had any questions of the esoteric kind, it has to be the best place in the world. While I was on this train of thought, I decided on Varanasi, the city of light, though many people call it the city of death. I don't know if I was tempting fate or what, but with my whole feeling about death, it seemed the most logical place to go. This decision was taken about an hour after I'd gotten up, so an hour into my new life, there was probably not much logic around at this time, but it just seemed to be the right thing to do.

## Chapter two

I arrive in Delhi, but immediately fly on to Varanasi, so when I step out of the airport there, it is my first real taste of India again. I am exhausted after all the traveling but I immediately feel better, this is a place where being spiritually odd is considered normal, even encouraged, but that might be just my foreigner's perspective. The first sensation to hit me, even quicker than the taxi touts, is the smell and it's a smell I love. The strongest part of the smell is curry, in second place it's rubbish, then very quickly that's followed by shit, and just at the end of the smell, when you're about to wrinkle up your nose, there lies an exotic hint of Jasmine. I don't think it is going to catch on as a perfume but on this day, to me, it smells like heaven. While I am savouring this and the accompanying heat, there is chaos all around, as the touts descend on the new arrivals, like a billion locust on a crate of lettuces. I can see a few, I assume unworldly types, looking as though they might crumple under the onslaught.

I just stand there, watching this feeding frenzy for a few seconds, before I realise I don't appear to be on the menu. I am being left alone, completely, no one approaches me, and it's not because they haven't noticed me. There are lots of people looking at me, but turning away or looking down as soon as I notice them. I must look really crazed or something. Standing still, outside an airport in India, looking baffled, is madness. You might as well just empty all your money and belongings out onto the pavement, and get back on the plane, but here I am patently flouting this unwritten law.

I take full advantage of this phenomenon, and walk past the thrashing crowd, out into the open, where I spot a lone taxi driver, leaning against the wing of his car, apparently absorbed with picking something out of the sole of his foot. I decide on him because he obviously does yoga, as he is now biting at the sole of his foot, while standing. This must be how I managed to catch him off guard: the first he knows of me, I am standing in front of him, asking if he can take me to the old city, he is shocked, in fact he is beyond shocked, he keeps looking around for some sort of explanation. I can see in his face the question, 'how did a foreign tourist arrive at my taxi, without being cajoled or dragged?' I repeat my question just to see the disbelief a moment longer. The moment the hunted becomes the hunter. Being the quarry for once, really must have disarmed him, because he gives me a decent price, which then totally throws me, as I am getting ready to haggle. We looked at each other, both of us knowing that this is all just wrong. Together we get in the taxi, him in the front, me in the back, two very confused people. The only conversation is for the destination.

This at least gives me time to think about the way people are reacting to me. In Ireland and then Britain, you would hardly notice if people were avoiding you. But it's not just that, it seems here as if everyone is noticing me, and then avoiding me. It might just be paranoia, but I don't think so. Even now as we drive past people, at brake neck speed, they seem to glance in my direction, even people facing the other direction take a quick look over their shoulder, then turn quickly back. It might be that I'm looking, to see people's reaction, so noticing more reactions, or it could be that I have a totally crazed expression etched into my face, and a weird vibe, hence the avoidance. I do hope not. I haven't met anyone I know since the event, so it's hard to judge, and I don't know if weird, crazed looking people realise they look crazed and weird or not. For the moment I'm going to put it down to exhaustion, as I haven't really slept in days, just fitfully on planes.

We are getting closer to my destination now, I can tell because the use of the horn has increased tenfold, just about to the point where it's continuous. You only notice it when it stops, and the silence becomes remarkable.

We arrive at the closest point to my hotel that a car can go. The rest of the journey is going to be on foot. I pay the taxi driver and even give him a tip as compensation for surprising him earlier.

Clutching my bag close, I plunge myself into the flow of people going in the direction of the Ganges. Too tired to really notice anything, I rely on the stream of people and gravity to carry me down to the mighty river. From there I get my bearings and continue down stream along the famous steps, until I can see my hotel, up above me to the right. There is a long, narrow flight of steps leading up to street level, which I have to take. Even looking at these steps makes me feel tired, I think the heat is starting to get to me, though it must be getting on for six o'clock, and a long way past the hottest hour.

I decide to sit for a while and soak up my surroundings. Taking a bottle of warm water from my bag, I drink and survey the other shore, which is flat and basically barren. I suppose it must get flooded in the rainy season, so nothing is built there. But just on the shore line, I see what looks like a crocodile: that would be a very rare thing, so I think it might be just a crocodile shaped log, but the more I look, the more it starts to look like a human body, which sends a shiver down my spine. Not the most auspicious of greetings. I stop looking, as staring in this heat is just going to give me a headache. Instead I watch all the people washing in the river below me and wonder how they can survive being in such infected water. Part of the washing process appears to be, to take a mouth of water and then squirt it out like a fountain, it looks great fun and I'm envious that I can't join in. I would love to bathe and splash about, in the most mystical river in the world, but either from lack of faith or lack of immune system, I can't. I'm pretty sure it would kill me if I so much as dipped a toe in the sacred yet contaminated water. I take another quick look at what I have convinced myself is a body on the other bank, before I stand and wirily walk on up the steps to my hotel.

When I walk into the hotel it feels cooler, not because it has air conditioning but because it's old, with tremendously thick walls. How old, I can only guess, somewhere between three hundred and three thousand years maybe. I walk straight across a big hall, to a door marked reception, I go through this into a really big room, which is actually the dining room, with the reception desk at this end. The room is long with one small window on the right and two big wide windows at the end, which I imagine overlook the river. There are two rows of tables and chairs down either side of the room, all of which are of different styles, and a mixture of heights and widths giving the room a quaint higgledy piggledy look. There are a few European looking people at the far end and a couple who look Japanese half way along. The Japanese man has dyed blond hair and looks seriously stoned, I like the feel of this place already, it's got a really nice vibe.

The Indian man behind the high desk is smiling at me and beckoning me over, he looks like the owner, as he appears to have become part of his desk: his chair and all his bits and pieces, everything, seems to extend from his big round body. I walk over to him and inform him that my name is Alex Jones, and that I had made a reservation that morning. With this, he smiles even more, which causes his eyes to disappear. To stop myself from laughing I look away, only to see the stoned Japanese man looking at me, for some reason he too, quickly turns away and goes red. He's probably got to the paranoid stage of stoned, and his reaction has nothing to do with me. The girl he's with turns to see what has had this effect on him, so I give her what I hope is a knowing smile, and she smiles back.

The man behind the desk asks if I would like to see my room before I sign in, I

say, “No,” “I’m sure it’s a lovely room as everything else is lovely.” I gesture around, this wins me another no eyed smile, and I hope an even better room. He takes all my details from my passport, and tells me about the washing service and the very good food they serve all day long, and if there is anything I need, all I have to do is ask. With that, he pulls a string, which opens a door just to the right of him, he shouts something in Hindi at the open doorway, which I can see leads down some stone steps, he lets go the string and the door closes. This I can tell is a party piece, by the no eyed smile he flashes at me again. I smile back, and am very tempted to scrunch my eyes up as well, but manage to stop myself.

The door beside the desk opens again, this time by a young Indian man with darker skin and stained red teeth, he is out of breath as though he has been rushing about, giving me the impression that he probably does most of the work around here. The owner snaps something at him in Hindi, then turns back to me and tells me cordially, that this man will show me a very fine room indeed. I thank him, then follow the younger man back out the door I had previously come in by.

Back in the hall, we take a door on the left, up a flight of stairs to a corridor, We turn left up another flight of stairs into another corridor, which we walk along for a while, then we step out onto a tiled balcony. The tiles are still radiating heat, even though the balcony is now in total shade. There is a slight breeze, the first I’ve felt all day. This is because we are so high, at least four storeys up, with just a low wall on my right and straight in front of us, which allows for an incredible and uninterrupted view over the flood plane. Such a low wall would not be permitted in Europe, so I don’t even bother asking about a fire escape. Here in India death is governed by destiny, not precautions. If your time is up, there’s nothing anyone can do to stop it. This accounts for many breaches of health and safety, like over taking on a blind bend, walking on the railway tracks, and most dangerous of all, taking a mouthful of water from the Ganges: this requires total faith, whereas really, it should be cordoned off.

My anxieties over my impending death come back to me now. I had felt a bit more at ease after surviving three airplane flights, but there’s no way I’m going anywhere near that wall, this high up. On the left of the balcony are two doors and two windows, with a beautiful bougainvillea climbing along wires above them. My guide leads the way over to the second door, the one closest to the big drop, he opens the door, hands me the key and steps back so I can go in. It’s only a little room but has an open feel, as it’s painted white and has two windows. The first looks back onto the balcony, with the bed opposite it, the second has the view down on to the river, when I’m brave enough to look. My guide turns the fan on which is one of those big slow ones, on the ceiling in the middle of the room, he gives me a red toothed smile, pushes past in the confined space, to open a door to the left, where there is a very small shower and basin, and a hole in the floor toilet. It all looks clean, so that’s good enough for me. I smile back at him and nod, drop my bag onto the floor, so I can give him some rupees. He leaves a happy man, and I close the door after him. Then I just drop down on the bed, feeling slightly dizzy, as though I’m still moving after all the hours, or is it days, of traveling.

I wake with a bit of a start, and it takes a few second to orient myself, as it’s gotten dark while I slept. I lean over and find my bag, get my phone out of a side pocket to see the time, it’s eleven past eleven. I hear the toilet flush in the room next door, then voices. This is what must have woken me up. Then there is some giggling, at least I have happy neighbors next door. I lie there a while with thoughts drifting in and out of my head, but I need to drink so I get up and find my bottle of water, which

is still really warm from the days heat, and not very pleasant.

I step out onto the balcony, it's all very quiet out here, India goes to bed early. There are no lights on with the neighbors, so they must be tucked up in bed as well. The balcony is only lit by the light from my window, so I step very carefully, over to about three feet from the wall, to see if anything is going on down below, but all I can see is darkness. I can hear dogs barking in the distance, then closer I hear a cow bellowing, there's not many cities where you hear cows at night, and not cars.

I am suddenly feeling very happy, standing out here on this balcony, in just my shorts and T-shirt, with a warm exotic breeze caressing my body and filling my lungs. I want to totally absorb this feeling, so I decide to do some tai-chi. I start by doing some standing meditation, taking long slow breaths of this exotic air, feeling it travel throughout my body, filling me to the brim, then ever so gently letting it out. I can feel my whole body shrinking and relaxing as the air leaves, my energy sinking down, then down farther, until my feet feel like they are sinking down into the balcony. I give my body a gentle squeeze, with my mind, to empty it totally of air, so that it's ready to receive the next dose. Then I start again, slowly breathing in, feeling my body once again fill with this exotic air. The energy I can feel slowly creeping up my spine, hot and somehow thick. It climbs higher and higher as my body fills with air, eventually the hot energy reaches my head and fills it, at the same time as I'm totally full with air. Just for a second, on the turn between breaths, my forehead seems to open, and what is inside and what is outside become "one." Then I let it go and the cycle continues.

I haven't done any meditation since my experience on the bridge, I was scared I might again experience what had happened on the bridge, but I was also scared that I wouldn't feel anything different. Thankfully, I was now breathing with the universe, and staying in my body, that's just as I wanted it: you know where you are when you're in your body, it gives you a sense of security, it grounds you. I keep going for twenty minutes or so, then without stopping, I start to do a tai-chi form, which is a series of movements done really slowly. Each movement starting from your centre which is just below your belly, and is literally your physical centre, then expanding out from there, reaching an optimum point of expansion, then slowly and gently contracting back into your centre, completing the cycle of yin and yang.

It's like a dance, with the most basic of rhythms, one two, one two, open close, expand and contract. All of you is moving to this rhythm, every part of your body from your centre to the tips of your toes, and the tips of your fingers back to your centre, and everything in between. Your breathing is also a part of this dance, all in unison, creating a frequency which is the rhythm of life. Night and day, in and out, expand and contract, open and close, full and empty. I continue like this, lost in this most beautiful and basic of dances until I again become conscious and separated from the universe, by my mind.

There are a few tables and chairs on the balcony, so I sit at one of them, put my feet up on the table and look up to the stars. I think it's time I thought about what happened to me on the bridge. I've been avoiding thinking about it, ever since it happened. To be honest I've been scared, but also elated also I've been feeling isolated, but at the same time very connected, almost too connected. I can feel everything going on around me intensely, because it all feels like me. Being quite logical for a space cadet, I decide to take it a step at a time, and analyse and interpret each part in sequence.

Ignoring for the time being the two crows, as they were just weird and quite spooky. The first 'real' thing to happen, was back on the bridge, when I stepped out of



my body: I must have been in a really weird state of mind, to let that happen to myself, anything could have transpired. That spirit part of me could have just walked off or simply disappeared. I start to sweat thinking about it, all the, what-ifs. I reach for my bottle of water and take another drink hoping somehow this might bring some sanity to my thoughts, but all I can think, is no wonder I've avoided going over what happened if it's going to bring me out in a cold sweat.

I decide to move on to what happened next, the bit where the spirit me, slowly and menacingly turned to face me. I remember thinking at the time that my spirit was turning slowly, I don't know whether this was for dramatic effect or to stop me from having a heart attack, but it was the most terrifying moment imaginable, then our eyes met and it was not so bad. I already know everything I've done, thought and said, the good bits and the bad. There are a few things that I'm not proud of, but nothing I would go to hell for. But what I feared most and thankfully didn't happen, was that I would see myself as a person, with my fragile ego, my arrogance and vanity, and all my insecurities. My fears and silly inadequacies, the really embarrassing stuff: the vulnerable part of being a human being, my character. I didn't get to see my character. That's what I think I was so scared of. To witness the events of my life was not earth shattering, it was non judgmental. That's why my character was not in question, I was not being judged as a person, it was more like a purification, getting rid of stuff, so I was empty; empty so I could receive something else, or empty so I could go on to the next place, that, I don't know.

My head is starting to spin and I'm not sure if I am really getting anywhere, it all seems to be just as confusing as when it happened. The moon has come up, while I have been going around in circles, in my head. I turn my chair so I'm facing the moon, and carry on with the next section of my trip, the part where it all went ballistic. This part is the hardest to remember because it was happening so fast. First there was a whoosh and I was accelerating along paths, it was just like you read about, it was the web of creation, everything joined, everything connected, and what I was doing, was travelling along the strands to each and everyone of those connections, passing every event as I whooshed on to the next, but the path was not straight at all, it was like travelling though a plate of spaghetti, all knotted together.

It reminded me of Celtic knot work all linked and turning back in on itself, but my perspective was from the inside. I could imagine I was in an immense brain, and I was an electrical spark travelling along all the neurons, it was an incredible feeling, more exhilarating than any extreme sport. I must have been travelling at the speed of light. What I can't quite remember now, is whether I was travelling along more than one thread at a time, I think I was, I seemed to go off in lots of directions at once, more like expanding out of myself, or an explosion. Then, in a very short time I was moving so fast it all became a blur, the same as when Scotty puts the Star Ship Enterprise into warp drive.

Luckily for me this place with all its paths and threads, connections and events, is not infinite, otherwise I would still be there now, stuck on the roller coaster from hell, More importantly, what this does mean, is the physical universe is not infinite, which I find amazing, especially as I'm looking up into space right now, and it looks pretty dam big from down here. I've always assumed the universe was infinite, but now I've had direct experience to the contrary, it does have an end. I know because I shot out of it, or it might have been the beginning I shot out of, or possibly a side, but whichever it was, it means the universe is not infinite. Which in turn has huge implications on a whole plethora of things, which I can't think about now, as I'm so tired. It will have to wait till tomorrow, if there is a tomorrow. Because in a finite

universe there is no guarantee of a tomorrow.

The moon has all but disappeared behind the main building of the hotel, it must be really late now. I go back to my room and brush my teeth, quietly so as not to wake the neighbors. I think about having a pee but I don't need to, in this heat you just sweat it out, which reminds me, tomorrow, first thing, I'll have a shower. I get into bed, under just a sheet, with the fan spinning slowly above me. I'm looking forward to tomorrow as the best is yet to come, in the last scene of my bridge odyssey. I want to be wide awake for that, so I can appreciate it fully and maybe even understand it. Now, after a few days of being in denial, I'm finally beginning to admit to myself what really happened, and what it's going to mean to my life.

### Chapter three

I wake late the next morning after a poor nights sleep, I feel like I did a lot of dreaming, although I can't remember much of it, but I do remember jumping into a flooded river to save my hat: not that I ever wear a hat. The current was much stronger than I thought, and I immediately got swept away. I don't know the significance of the hat, or of jumping in to save it, but I do know the feeling of being swept away: it's the same feeling I've had with me since ..... since the crow day. I get up still feeling groggy. Amazingly, I still don't need to pee, I'll have to remember to drink a lot more water today. I must be dehydrated, but I've run out of bottled water, so I take a shower instead, I might absorb some moisture through osmosis or something. I'm definitely not going to get any tap water in my mouth, that's tantamount to suicide in this city.

I dress quickly in my coolest of cloths, light baggy trousers and baggy T-shirt with sandals. I look like a total hippy, but in this heat you have to dress baggy to stay cool, maybe all the other foreigners here aren't hippies after all, they just dress like that to stay cool too.

It's gone eleven already, so I make my way speedily down the labyrinth of passages and stairs, as my stomach it rumbling at the thought of food. I walk into the dinning room to be greeted by almost the same scene as the previous evening, the only difference being the Europeans down the end aren't there. The owner is doing his freaky smile again, I ask him if I can order some breakfast. "Of course you can sir" he says, and hands me a typed menu. Without really looking at the menu, I ask for two bottles of water, a cup of tea, with toast and an egg. He then asks me to take a seat, and tells me that my food will be brought over. I walk past the Japanese couple and nod, the guy is looking a lot more together today, not half as crumpled as last night.

I take a seat right at the end, by the window, so I can look down at the river. It's not nearly as far down from here, and much easier to see the steps below. The river bank is much busier than it was yesterday evening, with people washing and generally milling about. There are a few holy men I can see under sun shades, sitting cross legged, with flowing hair and beards: all of them looking very holy. I wonder to myself if they have been through the same thing I have. I feel envious of them, that they come from a culture where what I've been through is considered normal, even revered, and that I would have someone to talk to, at the very least.

I couldn't imagine walking into a church, and telling the priest that I had just been god. He would think that I was some sort of Satanist from the dark side, or that I was just taking the piss. Maybe I will find someone here I can talk to, maybe that's why

I'm here thousands of miles from home.

Eventually my food arrives, it's never quick in India, but always good. The opposite to the West, where it's always fast, but never good, I know which I prefer. I start by taking a long drink of water. I hardly ever drink water back in Ireland, for some reason it always tastes boring, and a glass is about as much as I can manage: and that's only because I feel I should. But in hot countries, even the most plastic and tepid water tastes like nectar, I can drink it all day long. It's funny how your tastes change with your needs: our body's are cleverer than we think.

I eat all there is in front of me, then go and ask the owner if I can have more tea and toast. He looks pleased with my appetite, so I ask if I can borrow a newspaper which is on his desk, it's an Indian paper but written in English. I take it back to my seat to read, not because I really want to read it, it's just become very quiet in here, as even the Japanese have left now: they weren't glued to those seats after all.

I checkout the headlines, and a story about a moving statue of Vishnu catches my eye. Apparently, several pilgrims had witnessed the event, and now the statue is being watched by several hundred people, who have been keeping a vigil, in the hope that it might move again. This story brings home to me, how desperate people are to have their faith proven to them, so that it's no longer a belief, but a proven fact.

The waiter with the red teeth arrives with my tea and toast. He notices that I am reading the piece about the moving statue, he nods emphatically, and points at the picture still nodding. "It's very good" he says, so I nod back. I eat my toast while looking out the window again. I remember the body I saw on the other bank, but it's gone now, whatever it was. Maybe it's been spirited away, by the statue of Vishnu. Maybe he did more than just wobble. I think to myself, I shouldn't be so cynical, if I told people what I'd seen, they would be laughing at me.

I finish my tea, then make my way back up to my room, but half way up one of the stairways, I suddenly have a thought, about karma of all things, and reincarnation. It must have been the article about Vishnu that triggered this thought, as he had a hell of a lot of incarnations, which is why there are so many different statues of him.

I have thought a lot about reincarnation in the past, and it always seemed very logical and symmetrical. It's become almost universally accepted in the West now. Almost all non Christians and many Christians as well, now believe in reincarnation: anyway, it seems like that to me. But now I'm starting to have my doubts about it. Something is wrong with the linear aspect of it. A succession of lives, just doesn't seem right any more. I can't quite put my finger on it yet, but it's not right. I really have to think about, and understand the last part of my experience. I'm sure the answer is there somewhere, infact I think the answers to many questions lie there.

I carry on up to my room, determined and excited, all thoughts of foreboding seem to have evaporated in the thrill of the chase. I reach the balcony and all is quiet, everybody must be out for the day. This is good, I don't want to have to make conversation, I just need to think. The only shade on the balcony is under the bougainvillea outside my room. I pull the chair I was sitting in the previous night over, so I can sit in the shade. I put my bottle and a half of water on the windowsill beside me, then settle down to do some serious thinking, but instead, I find myself gazing out over the flood plane, and on into the haze.

I have never had a very disciplined mind. It has been said, I have a distinct lack of focus, but looking out over such a great distance, into the haze of heat, has a very relaxing and mind expanding effect on me, all the better to contemplate infinity.

I start by going back to the moment I shot out of the web of life. The first thing I felt was opening up, like bursting out of my skin or Being. Retrospectively, I realise

life is constricted, that we live squashed into a small place, but I had never realised it before the opening. I had opened so far, that what I opened out of disappeared completely, leaving nothing to block me in any direction. There was nothing, for ever and ever. All there was, was a feeling of total completeness, total wholeness, oneness. This was the “one” thing, except it was not a thing at all, it was just “one,” without the thing attached, total perfection, because there was nothing to be imperfect.

If that is where we go when we die, or when the universe is done and dusted, then everything is going to be all right. You could be there forever without a bother. You might think you would get lonely there by yourself, but you wouldn't. There is such a feeling of completeness, and now, as I think about it, I was there forever, as there is no time or space on that level. I couldn't have arrived at a certain time and then left at another time, there is no time. I am probably still there now. On my GODNESS level, I'm always there, I'm always connected to that source of infinity. The only thing that lies between me and the source is the web, and it's in the web that all the trickery and the clever stuff happens. That's where the pure energy of the source is converted into the world we know, both the mental and physical.

However, it must start with a consciousness developing, because the source, or god, has no consciousness. No super powers. Nothing. Totally one hundred percent passive. There's not so much as one small grain of anything. So what started it all off? What was the trigger that turned nothing into something? Having experienced the oneness, I would say it's impossible. There was nothing that could change, there was no frequency to change, there was nothing outside to have an effect, there was nothing inside to have an effect, there was not even any reason to change, it was totally perfect.

The only thing I can think of that's happened there, is for people like me to have inadvertently turned up, but then, you get this mind twistingly complicated time thing happening. How could I arrive before the universe existed, to trigger the start? Not that there was a start. No day one of the universe. It's very confusing, maybe it's just possible that, “Mind travelers” triggered the start. It could all be happening once, it's very hard to think out side of time. So it is just possible that people are the trigger. After all, people are the only consciousness creating the web.

One consciousness, one soul! That's the problem with reincarnation. It suddenly dawns on me. On a spiritual level, the level of the soul, there is only “one,” So there can't be many souls, leading multiple lives. We are only divided on the physical level, not on the spiritual. I know that for sure, from visiting the “nothing.” Reincarnation would entail a division, a division of the soul, and that's just impossible.

I can't think about this for long, as it's getting too hot out here on the balcony. The shade is disappearing fast. I think my foot might be already burning, so I drag myself in, and flop down on my bed, under the fan. As I do so, I see my water bottles outside the window. I am sure that it would be possible to miraculously make them appear in my hand, given the fact that we are the consciousness behind everything, but I'm not ready to put it to the test yet. If it didn't work then I would be disappointed, and if it did, I would be so freaked out that I would probably lose the plot altogether. Which just goes to show, that I'm complicit in the status-quo, that says, if you want something further away than your arms can reach, you just have to get off your ass to get it. So I get up to fetch them instead. I also close the shutters on the window, before the sun starts to shine in, and makes the room unbearably hot. I lie back down again and drink, I even pour some water over my face, it really doesn't matter what gets wet in this heat, I'm not going to catch a cold.

I decide to think about the things I do know for a moment, but even these seem to

have evaporated in the heat. I feel I have thought myself out of existence. As I can't figure out life, I decide to just take one of the simple pleasures, a siesta. Maybe it will all be clear later, maybe I will be brave enough to brake the status-quo.

I wake a couple of hours later feeling a lot better, and decide to go out for a mooch around. To get some exercise and absorb the atmosphere of a very ancient city. When I get down to the street, it's a lot darker than my balcony, which I think of as home already, even after only one day, it's also a lot damper. It's very much like being in a narrow gorge down here, where the sun may only shine for a few minutes every day. The walls of the buildings are all black, not from cars as there are non, but, I imagine from the breath and sweat of people and beasts, over the hundreds and thousands of years these buildings have been here. Which all adds to the gloom and creates the atmosphere of a medieval city, which it is.

I wander off, not in any particular direction, but just follow my nose. It's not too busy, and it only feels crowded when there is a cow, or more commonly a bull, taking up most of the alley. This creates a bottle neck, so you all have to squash past these steaming, smelly, pissing, sacred beasts. I'm beginning to think they might be a major factor contributing to the dampness of these alleys.

The shops are tiny, some are just holes in the walls with shopkeepers crouched in them, handing goods out to the customers. There are a few bigger ones where you can actually walk in, if you're not too big, or don't mind crouching yourself. Every few hundred meters or so there is someone selling spices wrapped up in some kind of leaf, which men chew. I think it's this that is turning peoples teeth red, and a lot worse, as all the men buying this concoction look really messed up, with bloodshot eyes and red dribble stained chins. Not a good look, they've put me of trying it.

I haven't mentioned the alley floors yet, as I think this is what really separates this place from all others, and provides proof that this place is no fake. This is a living breathing medieval city. Fortunately it is really dark down there on ground level, sparing you, at least visually, from most of the horrors lurking and scurrying in the gloom. Where you walk it's not so bad, the volume of feet tends to grind up most of the rubbish into a thin wet paste, similar to slimy mud, but towards the sides it starts to build up and even forms drifts in places of low traffic. It is mostly paper I would say, paper, curry and old flowers.

I don't know if people are throwing it out deliberately for the cows, or if they are just throwing out their rubbish. A bit of both I suspect. An ancient form of recycling. Regardless, it gives the cows something to graze on, as there's no grass in the city, and the cows play their part by shrinking the rubbish down to shit sized mounds, and what they don't eat decomposes or the rats eat. So maybe it kind of levels out and stays at a constant height, a unique little ecosystem. I've never been here in the rainy season, so I don't know what happens then, but I have a suspicion it's not pretty. I imagine that all the rubbish, shit, rats and compost probably starts flowing towards the river. You wouldn't want to be in it's path, unless you're an experienced, extreme shit surfer dude.

One of my favorite things to look at, besides all the comings and goings of people, are the Hindu statues. They are so authentic, so much a part of every day, life that people just use them like tools. They are totally integrated in peoples everyday lives. Like we would use a mobile phone, they would make an offering to a deity. Maybe I am just too used to Christian statues, which leave me feeling indifferent, and are always placed up high, well out of reach. There's always a distance between you and the statue: but Hindu statues are right there with you, accessible and used, smeared with butter and rice, and daubed with paint in the most slap dash fashion.

They look a right state, but a beautiful authentic state. There is no distance between the worshiper and the worshiped they are like everything else in India, right there with you, in your face.

I wonder around aimlessly for an hour or two, loving every minute of it, feeling totally anonymous in the gloom of the alleys. I then stop at a café for tea and biscuits, a small place with just five tables. It's on a kind of dog leg in the alley, with the front all open except for one stone pillar, so it feels like you are sitting in the alley itself.

There are three westerners sitting at one of the tables and a well to do Indian couple sitting at another. A pretty girl comes to take my order, she looks about nineteen or twenty. I ask for tea and biscuits, then give her a big smile, she smiles back, but not as enthusiastically as I had hoped. I watch her walk back into the kitchen and then out of sight. The door to the kitchen is left open and I can see a cooker, an old two ring camping gas stove, with a big aluminum kettle on top. The walls are white washed but very sooty. The girl comes back into sight and pours water from the kettle into a teapot. She must sense that I'm watching her because she looks over her shoulder directly at me, we both instinctively look away. A minute later she appears again, with a tray full of tea and biscuits. I say, "Thanks," with just a casual smile, as she is laying the things out on the table. I don't want to appear too leery, but can't stop myself from watching her as she walks back into the kitchen. I pour my tea and dunk my biscuits, while I watch the comings and goings of the alley.

Then the girl comes out of the kitchen again, this time carrying a very small baby. I can tell it's hers by the way she's holding it so close. As I'm watching the girl and the baby, they unexpectedly, and without any warning, amalgamate and become the same person. Not physically, but spiritually, as though they have the same soul. This takes me totally by surprise and I start to get a familiar rushing sensation, then all the connections start to come flooding back, and I too become part of the mother and child: we are suddenly all part of the same soul, there is no longer any distance between us.

This time it's all too much for me, and instead of making even more connections, everything goes dark, and the last thing I remember is a falling sensation. I wake up, or rather come round, on the floor. There are people leaning over me asking if I am all right, I sit up on the floor, not risking standing just yet. I have attracted quite a crowd while unconscious, and I seem to be in a sea of legs. Feeling really embarrassed, I pull myself back up onto my chair, with the help of far too many pairs of hands.

I thank everyone and insist that I'm all right. It still takes a while for the crowd to disperse, they are obviously looking me over for signs of alcohol, drugs or maybe madness. I mutter something about the heat and ask for a bottle of water, this seems to satisfy everyone's curiosity, so all the customers sit back down, and the passersby leave. I drink from the bottle of water, more for show than anything else. The Indian man leans over and gives me a comforting pat on the shoulder, "You must drink plenty of fluids in this heat young man" he says. I ignore the fact that he is half my age and apologise for being so careless, assuring him it would not happen again, which I punctuate with another big gulp of water. He nods with satisfaction, his work done, then turns back to his wife. Having never fainted before, I am pleasantly surprised that you feel all right afterwards, even refreshed. I feel like laughing but I don't think that would be a good idea under the circumstances. It must be the effect of the adrenalin after feeling such an idiot.

It then dawns on me that this is no laughing matter, I can't go around fainting like that, I could hurt myself, or I might get known as the fainting man. I might have to wear a helmet all the time, just in case. I rein in my imagination, it was probably just

an after shock, reverberating from my experience on the bridge. Like after an earthquake, my ground had drastically shifted the other day and now it was just settling down, it might never happen again.

I pay the girl, who has left her baby somewhere in the kitchen, well out of harms way from the crazy foreigner. I give her a big tip and a sheepish smile, but I get the feeling that I will not be her favorite customer of the day. I decide that this is enough site seeing for one day, in fact I have seen more than I can cope with, I make my way down to the river so I can find my way back to the hotel, which I manage without once fainting. So far so good.

I lay back down on my bed to ponder this latest development. How could I become so connected to someone I don't even know? It was more than connected. For an instant we had become one and the same. Now I'm back to what I was thinking earlier. There is only one soul, and all this division is really just an illusion. We have the use of the one soul, for the duration of our lives, then, when we come to the end of our lives, the next person uses it, and so on. The first illusion is that we think we are leading are lives concurrently with other people, the second is that we are divided from other people. Whereas, in reality we all create our worlds and live them, while they are simultaneously they all being knitted together into the frame work of time and space, giving the illusion of a seamless, yet divided world. It's like a jigsaw puzzle, with each piece being a life, each piece shaped to fit in with all it's neighbouring pieces, but that doesn't mean it has to be there at the same time, or that it can't occupy the same space. This means that everyones life can be happening now, all at once or separately. It's the same thing, as really there is no time. You don't really die, you just complete your jigsaw piece, you complete your life, and then the piece next to you can have the same soul, but in another life.

When I sort of united with that girl and her baby earlier, I must have been looking with my soul and seen her soul. That's why I saw we were one and the same. Lying here on my bed, in the heat, the conclusion I come to, is that my jigsaw piece must have a very blurry edge, as I seem to have a tendency to leach into other peoples pieces. What this means, is that I could just as easily merge, like I did earlier, with someone who is dead: Not dead as in an after life, but dead, as in living in a different time to me, like a thousand years ago, or for that matter with someone who is not yet born. I shiver at the thought of this. I passed out bonding with a pretty girl just in front of me, I don't think I would ever be brave enough to try it outside my time.

Then I remember that it was when I looked at the baby that it all started. Maybe because it's soul, or I should say our soul, was in such a new life that it made it possible to connect with, but that would not account for the mother, unless she too, was still feeling very connected, having not long ago given birth.

I suddenly and abruptly stop thinking about what happened at the café, and realise that I've come to the unexpected conclusion that there is no after life! I don't know if I'm pleased about this or not. When Alex dies, that's it for me. The end of my story. One jigsaw piece completed. But it's not so bad, because I now know I'm part of one whole thing, and it's not as though anything is going to be going on after me, because it all happens at the same time. Which is a relief, because I would hate to miss out on anything. Our many individual lives all start together, and all finish together, regardless of the actual physical amount of time we spend on this planet. Regardless of the epoch we live in. I was born the same instant as everyone else, and will die together with everyone else: we live and die as one.

I must be feeling very emotional or something, because this thought brings tears to my eyes. Just thinking we are all in this together, all at the same time, for one

glorious instant, makes me feel delighted to be a person, to be part of it all. It feels like I am part of a team. I can safely say I have never felt so close to my brethren before, and it more than makes up for no after life. Who wants to spend eternity eating grapes sitting on a cloud anyway, or shoveling coal. Even sleeping with virgins for eternity would lose its appeal eventually, I'm sure.

Feeling so much love for my fellow beings gets too much for me, and I just burst into tears. I pull my pillow over my face so no one can hear my sobs, which soon turn into laughter, then back to crying. I don't know what to feel, it's just a letting go. I realise that I'm having a moment: What I experienced a few days ago mentally, has now become an emotional reality as well, and I feel complete for it. I had been wondering why I felt so separated and uneasy, but it was just myself that I had become split from, not the world. Going through this alone was like stumbling around a dark unfamiliar room, not even knowing if it's a sitting room or a bedroom, just bumping into things and trying to make out what they are.

Now though, I think I'm starting to get it. It's not just one room, it's all rooms, they are all connected and we have access to them all. We are all GOD, and not just a part of him, but the one whole magnificent, all creating, omnipresent god. Our bodies and egos are separate because that is how we perceive them to be, but our soul and energy are the same, the one god. So if I can look at someone, separate from my ego and past their ego, I should be able to see our one soul.

Hearing people next door brings me back to the present. I sit up in bed so I can drink. Noticing that the sun is no longer shining through the gap in the shutters, I get up to open them to let some light in. I don't want to fall asleep now, because it's time for something to eat and I'm starving. I go to the sink and splash water over my face, so I won't look like I've just woken up. Sitting back down on my bed so I can strap my sandals back on, I hear laughter from the people next door. I listen more closely to try to make out what language they're speaking, but it's gone quiet again. Then I think to myself, it doesn't matter anyway, because we are all in it together.

They start talking again, and I can hear quite clearly that they are two English speaking girls. They are talking quite loudly, so I guess one of them is in the bathroom. Because of my earlier thoughts, I find my mind searching their room to try to touch them, or connect with them, something like that anyway: only so I can test my theory, but I realise, when I hear the shower start to run, that this is definitely an invasion of privacy. I instinctively realise, even in the name of science, I should not be doing this. We might have the same soul but we are not the same person. I have to remember to respect the right of the individual, even if I now feel that everything and everyone, is part of me: an extension of me, my joint creation, sorry, I should say, 'our joint creation.'

I must not let all this go to my head, but it's not every day you realise you are god, even if you share that distinction with everyone else, past, present and future. My neglected physical being is now making its self heard, by rumbling my stomach, reminding me that until I've perfected the art of controlling things, I've still got a body to feed.

## Chapter four

I decide to eat in the restaurant here at the hotel, as it's getting late and I'm still a bit nervous about the episode I had earlier in the café. Restaurant seems a bit grand



for the motley collection of tables and chairs here, the only décor is a book shelf on the wall opposite the desk and a few notices around the door itself. The walls are a faded red, apart from a near perfect line of a yellowish colour, where the chairs and peoples shoulders have rubbed away the red, about three feet from the floor. The floor is tiled, but very cracked, with many missing pieces, and has been repaired with cement of all different shades, so now it looks more like crazy paving. In future, I think I should call it the hotel mess, rather than restaurant. I haven't really tried the food yet, but I am hopeful, as my egg this morning was delicious.

There are quite a lot of people already eating, maybe twelve or thirteen, so the only empty table is opposite the desk, next to the book shelves, but fortunately for me, the people at the end, stand and start to leave, just as I'm going to sit down. I didn't want to have to sit opposite the desk, it would've seemed like being back at school, directly under the gaze of the teacher. I always preferred being at the back, well out of sight and mind. So I sit at the back again, but at the other table from this morning.

A woman I haven't seen before, comes and takes away the dirty plates, she leaves a menu and says she'll be back. As I look through the menu, I realise that this will be my first proper meal since arriving in India, and that I've hardly eaten at all since, 'that day.' I am going to have to find a word or a phrase to denote 'that day,' as I don't know what to call it. I'm not going to call it anything to do with being 'born again,' even though it was a new beginning, anyhow, it had a lot more to do with death, or rather what lies behind life, which is not death at all. It should be something like 'my reaching god day,' but that is not quite right either, because I didn't just reach god, I realised that I was god, and I certainly can't call it 'the day I was god,' as I don't think I could say that to anyone, without them thinking I was a total narcissistic megalomaniacal freak.

The woman arrives back to take my order, I haven't really been looking at what to eat, so I ask for spinach and potatoes with basmati rice. I know this has a name but I can't think of it off hand, fortunately, she seems to know what I mean. I also order a jasmine tea and a bottle of water. She leaves and I go back to my thoughts, trying to name an event like this, without any precedent that I know of, is becoming harder than naming a baby.

While staring into space, a symbol on one of the posters by the door, suddenly catches my attention. It's a symbol I've seen many times, but never really taken much notice of, it's a singular eye with a squiggle under it, which is the nose, but it's the eye that is the important part. I've always taken this to symbolise 'the third eye' or 'middle eye,' something along those lines. Now I suddenly realise, that from a spiritual perspective, you only need one eye, to see the "one" thing. Before duality, there is only the one, so one eye is plenty. I realise that this is a physical phenomenon too, we have two eyes in the physical world so we can distinguish the distance objects are from us in space and time. As there is not really any space or time, we only need one eye, metaphysically speaking, to see everything. So maybe I should call that day 'my one eye day,' as it was the day I saw with my one eye, but somehow I don't think it will catch on.

My food arrives just in time, as I think I maybe becoming delirious. I've been imagining myself wearing an eye patch over one eye, then bashing into everything and ranting, 'that wall only exists in my imagination.' The food is amazing and I don't care if it's in my imagination or not, it's one of those meals I shall remember for a long time, all oily and spicy, just as I like it, and the woman also bought a naan bread to soak up all the oil without me even asking, we must be on the same wave length, or the naan bread is just part of my good imagination.

While I have been eating many the people have left, but two new one's have arrived, and have sat at the table beside me. They are speaking English, so I assume they are the two girls. Who are staying next to me up on the balcony. They look like good wholesome girls, no makeup, with clear nicely tanned skin. I would say they are in their early to mid twenties, but I'm not a good judge of age. I can hear from their accents that they come from somewhere up north, but I wouldn't know where exactly as I don't know that area of England at all.

The one I can't see very clearly, because she is sitting directly beside me, is quite tall with short blonde hair, that is all I can see without being too obvious. The other one is shorter with longer darker hair, she looks very enthusiastic or maybe she just likes her food. Not that she's fat, just curvy in a good way. Her face has a funny combination of features: what I noticed first is her mouth, it's large with big voluptuous lips very relaxed looking, but then her nose is straight and narrow and quite long, a hoity looking nose, then her eyes are slightly hooded at the edges making them look soft and relaxed like her mouth, this might not sound like a good combination, but it is, she is very pretty indeed, not glamorous but very pretty.

As I'm thinking this I remember what happened earlier, so I look away fast, still fearful to focus too hard on anyone, but when I look up she is looking at me, so I smile and say, "Hello." She looks pleased with herself and says, "Hi, I thought you looked English, it's funny how you can always tell." I didn't want to contradict her straight off, but it's impossible for a Welsh person to agree to being English, even if you really don't care, it must be something inbuilt, so I say, "Well, I'm actually Welsh, but I do come from very close to the border." She apologises for calling me English, I shrug "I've been called a lot worse" I say.

To get off the subject of ethnicity fast, I ask "how long have you been staying here?" She says, "About three weeks," then nods towards her friend and says, "we have been going to a Buddhist teacher, here in Varanasi for the last week." Her friend turns to me now that she has been bought into the conversation and says, "Hello," but she looks weary of me for some reason, maybe she just doesn't like strangers, so I say in my most sincere voice, "hello, nice to meet you," which I follow up with my most trust worthy smile.

I wonder to myself, why am I making such an effort? Especially as she seems a bit frosty. Maybe I'm in need of a bit of company, so to keep the conversation going, I ask "how did you hear about your Buddhist teacher?" The frosty blond brightens up a bit now, and says, "From the poster over there." She nods towards the opposite wall. I'm a bit shocked, "What, the one with the eye?" I ask. "Yes, that's the one" she says. I don't know if this is synchronicity or not, but it excites me enough to ask, "What are the lessons like?" She answers with a question as if she is protecting a secret cult, "Why? Are you a Buddhist?" I decide to be as cagey as she is and reply cryptically, "I'm very interested in all religions." She squints at me so I relent and give her a bit more information, "In fact, religion is my favorite subject, and in a way it's the reason I'm here." "How's that?" asks the dark haired one. As she finishes her food, she leans back, and looking very satisfied, adds, "Are you learning or teaching?"

That makes me think, why am I here? As I've always been a student of religion, I stick with that: it's always best to stick with what you know when you're put on the spot, so I say, "Learning, but I'm not sure, if or where I'm going to find what I want." "Wow, you know what you want, don't you?" She says in a slightly sarcastically tone. I wasn't expecting this, especially from the pretty one, as she looks so amiable. She has put me right on the spot, but I think she was just playing, so I say, "I might not be able to put a name to it, but I'll know it when I see it." I add, "I hope" to this,

for the sake of honesty.

The waitress arrives to clear my plates, she also takes the plate of the pretty one, but frosty knickers is still eating, in her precise manner. I get up to leave and say, "It's been nice to meet you both and I'm sure we will bump into each other again soon." Knowing that they are my neighbors I can say this with some confidence, but unexpectedly the pretty one blurts out "we have a very nice balcony outside our room, and we often have a smoke out there after dinner, why don't you join us?" As she is saying this, she glances at her friend a couple of times, maybe to ask permission or something, but old frosty knickers gives no reaction, that I can see. I say to the dark haired girl, "That sounds very civilised, and I think we must be neighbors, because I have a balcony outside my room too." She seems very pleased with this turn of events, and says, "Wow, the balcony over looking the river? I didn't think anyone was in the room next to us, you must be very quiet." "I've only been here a day and I think I've slept for most of that time" I reply. I can see her wondering if I have heard them, but I say nothing. "So I'll see you on our balcony," I say to both of them as I leave. I glance back as I get to the door, I see frosty knickers looking daggers at her friend, somehow I don't think she likes me.

I go back up to my room and think about pulling my book out of my bag, but decide not to, I've only got philosophy books with me, and I'm not sure if I want to fill my head with other peoples thoughts at the moment. In the last few years I've limited myself to only reading philosophical or religious books, I find most fiction novels boring these days, too much like escapism, and they take over my personality, I seem to always take on the characteristics of the characters. I couldn't read an American crime novel without drinking far too much Jack Daniel's. I think, I read philosophy for that same reason though, it puts me in a philosophic mood. It still amazes me, that whatever it is that spends the most time in your head, has the greatest influence on your mood. I don't know why it took me so long to learn this, as it now seems so bleeding obvious. Now I'm more discerning with what I fill my head. However, I'm kind of thinking, I could have over done it a bit, with the philosophy. So, I'm going to leave my book where it is for the moment, and try to empty my head all together.

About one second after that noble thought, the pretty girl from the restaurant invades my head, and I'm powerless to resist. Those lips of hers and her excited energy: maybe it's impossible to have a totally empty mind, but I do have the choice with what it's filled. So I do what I have to, that is take control, by forcibly removing her from my head. The last thing I need is a holiday romance, with someone far too young for me.

I take my bottle of water and go outside onto the balcony. The two English girls aren't there yet, and I'm not sure they will turn up at all after the look on the face of the frosty one. But I don't care, it's just getting dark and the first stars are coming out. My favorite time of day, when everything goes quite, the day things have finished and the night things have not yet started. A no mans land of time. I stand relatively close to the edge, so I can see the river below, but in this light it looks like oil with a gray shore in the distance. I sense people behind me, the two girls have turned up. It's too dark to see their faces but they both say, "Hi," in a friendly way, so I assume they have sorted out their differences, whatever they were.

They sit at the round table, close together as if they are conspiring. I have no choice other than to sit opposite them, but I turn sideways and stretch out my feet to keep it casual, and for it not to feel like an interview. I hold out my hand to frosty knickers, as she is sitting closest to me and say, "Hi, I'm Alex," she gives my hand a

gentle squeeze and says her name is Sally. Then the pretty one takes my hand, “Hi, my names Beth,” she says, she doesn't squeeze or shake my hand, and I respond likewise, both of us are playing it cool: being neutral, so neutral that it becomes instantly intense.

I lean back and wipe my hand on my leg to erase the electricity, and the feeling of her hand from mine. It's going to be harder than I thought to keep Beth out of my head. She asks, so do you fancy a smoke? We've got some really good black.” Normally I would jump at the chance to smoke some good black, with two girls on a balcony in an exotic country, by the light of the stars. Infact this could be another interpretation of heaven, but tonight, after everything that's past and the fragile psychological edge I feel I'm on, getting stoned might just push me over that edge, especially as I haven't had a smoke for weeks. The best case scenario is that I turn into a gibbering, gabbling wreck, the worst is that I merge with Beth, spiritually not physically, and we both go mad. That wouldn't be a very good first impression for beautiful Beth, and frosty Sally would be justified in her opinion of me.

So, feeling like a complete wuss, I say, “No thanks, but if you two get stoned, I can get stoned off you. I feel very frayed and somewhat sensitive at the moment and a contact high, is all I need tonight.” I know this makes me sound like a total wimp, and just about the least cool guy on the planet, but I've never been that susceptible to peer pressure, even when put on the spot by two fit girls, so I don't really care too much, and maybe it's a good thing if Beth goes off me.

Beth says, “Wow, your cheap to keep, most men I know just cane my smoke, the bastards,” she giggles at this and stands, “so it's safe to get my smoke then?” she says, walking off too her room. It's actually more of a saunter, not a sexy saunter, but a relaxed saunter.

This leaves me and Sally alone she leans forward and says, “Alex there's something I need to tell you, before we go any further.” I lean forward “what's that then? Do you fancy me?” I say as a joke. She laughs at this suggestion and then she really busts out laughing uncontrollably, it's good to see that she can let go. I'd said it as a joke, but it wasn't that funny, “I'm sorry,” she says, as she regains her composure, “I don't fancy you. What I was going to say is that Beth and I are gay.” She starts laughing again.

I'm very pleased that Sally has a sense of humour, even if it's at my expense. I sit back and just watch her laugh for a second before I ask, “So why is that so funny?” She wipes the tears from her face and says, “I'm sorry, it just seemed a funny situation, you asking me if I fancied you, when I was just about to tell you I was gay, and your obvious attraction to Beth just made it even funnier, in a perverse kind of way. I really am sorry for laughing like that.”

She reaches over and puts her hand on mine, even giving my hand a bit of a rub. “Don't worry about it,” I say, “I'm sure I'll see the funny side one day, maybe even by tomorrow.” Sally has totally relaxed now, I can see it in her face. I think she was finding it difficult, me not knowing that she and Beth were together. Now that I know, everything is good again in her world, but this could also be an indication that she is not very secure about her relationship.

Beth arrives back and asks, “What have I missed? What's all the laughing about?” I don't say anything, because if I say Sally just told me you're gay, it might sound like an accusation, or that I'm pissed off, which I'm not. Infact, it makes things easier, so I leave it to Sally to answer. “I just told Alex about us being gay.” Beth frowns and says, “What's so funny about that?” So I say, “It was one of those times, when you'd have had to be there to appreciate the funny side.”

Beth has bought a candle out with her which she places in the middle of the table, as she lights it she gives me a look. I don't know what it means, but it was definitely a look. I think Beth is a much more complex character than her relaxed manner suggests, she sits back down next to Sally. Sally takes Beth's hand, lifts it to her lips and kisses the back of it, while looking at me. "Here in India we don't normally show that we're gay, it's hard enough just being a woman here, I don't know how they would react to us if they knew we were gay," Sally says. I don't know why Sally feels she has to give me a physical demonstration of their affection by kissing Beth, even if it's only on the hand, and looking at me while doing it. That's just weird. I haven't thought about it before, but I think you should always be looking at the person you're kissing, not someone else, otherwise you're bringing that other person in, where they might not want to go.

Beth takes her hand away, ostensibly to roll a joint, but I think she's finding the demonstration a bit too much as well. She pulls the joint rolling paraphernalia out of her pocket and lines them all up in-front of her, papers, cigarettes, dope, lighter. She looks like she is preparing for some sort of religious Mass. She starts by sticking papers together.

Sally asks, "Have you been to the burning ghat yet?" I look away from Beth performing her ritual, "I went last time I was here, and found it one of the most powerful things I've ever witnessed." Sally says, "I would love to go, but apparently women aren't allowed to go without a man, so we haven't been yet." I say, "I think you're right, even Indian woman aren't allowed to go too close, but there is a balcony you can stand on to see, although they don't like you to stay too long, only a minute or so, but that's all you need for it to be seared on your mind for life. It's all swirling smoke, and everything is black from the soot and ash. The fires are blazing, each topped off with a burning charred body, amongst mounds of ash and charcoal. Like burning, steaming magnum in the craters of a volcano, and as a sound track, there are women howling and wailing in the distance. If you wanted to symbolize death, you couldn't do better." I think I went a bit over the top with the description, Beth laughs and Sally says, "You make it sound terrifying, like hell or something. I thought if you got cremated here you went straight to nirvana." She adds "will you take us there tomorrow? I need to see this for myself, that's if you've not got other plans."

Beth fires up her joint, it flares for an instant, and I see her through a haze of smoke and fire. It reminds me of the funeral pyres and the wailing, the sadness of death, as though she was disappearing forever behind a curtain of smoke. Even here, where you go straight to nirvana, there is wailing and mourning. If only people realised that there is no such thing as personal death. Not for one-second are we alone or separated, how can you be alone when all you are is god. We all start together and we stop together as one, everything happening simultaneously. One ginormous pulse of existence: one connected thought.

Sally says again, "So how about tomorrow?" I look back to her from my thoughts, rather than from Beth, and say, "Of course I will, maybe it will seem different to me this time, I think I've changed, since last time I was here." Sally says, "Great, and it's going to be so much easier having a guy with us, you would not believe the hassle we get just going out. Most Indian men think all unaccompanied western women are prostitutes, or just gagging for it. I feel like carrying a big knife, and the next time one of those bastards touches me, I'll chop off his hand, or something else. That would show the bastards!" Beth laughs and passes the joint to Sally, "I think you need this more than me sister," she says. Sally takes a long toke, I can see she is still contemplating pay back, she starts to grin. I don't think it's their

hands she's thinking of cutting off.

I must be looking worried because Beth says, "Don't worry she only chops up people she doesn't like," I say, "that's what I'm afraid of." Beth says, "Anyway it sounds as if she has plans for you, so you will probably be safe enough: until you have served her evil purpose." She does an evil laugh, then just giggles. "I'm glad men have some purpose then," I say. Sally says, "Only to protect us from other men." Either her humour is very dry or the joint is having no affect on her what so ever.

I wonder again why I'm letting myself get involved with these two crazy girls. For some reason it seems to be what's happening, and as I don't have any other plans, it could be the right thing to do. I am getting a feeling of inevitability about it all. Beth says, "Why don't you come to our Buddhist class as well? We can make a whole day of it." Beth says everything with such spontaneity and enthusiasm, she makes me feel like a cynic. I always have to weigh everything up. I resist the temptation to ask what it's like, and just say, "Yes, why not? Lets make a day of it."

Sally offers the joint over to me, "Go on, you know you want to, don't be a light weight," she says, but before I can answer, Beth leans over and takes the joint from her, "he said he didn't want to smoke tonight," she says curtly to Sally. I don't know if she feels she has to protect me from the knife wielding Sally or what, but they both go silent. I think they have reached that point in their relationship which I think of as, the power struggle. I don't know if this is a recognized event, but it seems to me all relationships go through it. First the lovey-dovey bit, then the power struggle. The aim is to reach a compromise quickly before the struggle gets nasty and sours everything.

"So, how long have you two been together?" I ask. I know this is a very pointed question, given the silence, but I don't see why I should give them an easy time, especially as they've bought me into their skirmish. Beth is the one to answer, "Seven blissful months" she says in a whimsical voice, designed I think to annoy Sally. "But we've known each other for five years," she adds. Sally doesn't rise to the bait and instead asks me, "Have you got anyone Alex? A girl friend, or a boy friend maybe?" This is definitely pay back for my last query, so I can't help smiling, "No, I don't have a girl friend, at the moment Sally," I say flatly, "and I'm not looking for one either, as they can be such hard work sometimes," I add pointedly. Beth starts to laugh, and so do I. Sally just sits there a moment playing the butt of the joke, then laughs as well. Her humour is as dry as a witches tit, but she is growing on me. Beth asks, "So what do you do if you don't have a girl friend?" I feign surprise and look shocked. "I didn't mean that" she says, "I mean, do you live by yourself?" I give her an answer that I've never given before, but it suddenly seems true and appropriate "To be honest, I think I'm what you would call a monk," I say.

Beth practically chokes on this answer and says, "What? You live in a community?" I'm not sure now, if it was a good thing to have said, but I'm going to have to redefine myself sometime, and it's a lot easier to do that with strangers than with friends or family, so I continue. "I use the word monk because I don't know any other word that comes close to describing my way of life. I don't live in a community and I haven't taken any vows, I just try to lead an aware, simple, spiritual life. Well, I try my best too keep it simple, you know, meditating and being close to nature, that sort of thing." Beth says, "I see what you mean, but I don't think, 'monk' really suites you, isn't there something else you can call yourself?" I shrug and say, "I'm open to any suggestions, and it's true I don't feel like a monk, but what's the alternative? I'm definitely not going to call myself a priest." Beth laughs and says, "No, don't do that, they perform strange rituals. No, I see you more as a wizard, like you know something and your not scared to use it." She squints at me, "Yes, you're definitely a

wizard,” I think she’s gotten stoned, and her world has become mysterious.

I say, “So next time someone asks, I should tell them I’m a wizard should I?” Beth says defiantly, “Yes, why not? If they don’t like it, they know what they can do.” She looks over to Sally for confirmation. I think she is comparing my wizardness to her gayness, we have something in common, we all belong to minorities. Maybe it’s this, that’s brought us all together. Sally asks, “Can you do any magic? Or maybe a bit of divination?” Everything is so new to me, like I’ve arrived in a new land, I’m not sure what to answer anymore, so I say, “I think I might be able to do a bit of both, if I dared.” Sally says in a withering tone, “What? You could if you weren’t scared?” I take a deep breath to relax. She is so confrontational and annoying, but I just ignore her tone and answer. “Yes, the world we live in is only like it is, because we have all agreed that it should be like this. If I start changing things, especially in a big way, then where would we be?” The last few words make me sound petulant, so I continue in that vein. “Wizards just can’t go around changing the world willy-nilly, a certain amount of responsibility comes with the job. What if everyone stops creating the world by agreement, and just starts doing their own thing? Then it wouldn’t all fit together, we would be royally bolloxed then.”

Sally nods and says, “I see, first you are a wizard, then second a very troubled individual,” I can’t help but to agree with her analyses. I nod reluctantly, I’m tempted to tell her what I think of her, but that would just be petty, and she’s not so bad really, as long as you’re not too sensitive, or insecure, or have any vulnerability whatsoever. To change the subject, I ask, “So what is it you do Sally?” She sits up a bit and says, “I’m an addictions counselor.” This doesn’t surprise me, “I kind of guessed you did something which involved telling people what to do,” I say. She just ignores this comment. I get the impression I’ve gone too far, and that she’s hurt. That’s the problem with insensitive people, they are very sensitive about themselves, so I tell her, “That was just a joke.” She doesn’t look convinced and says, “People always think I’m a bossy cow, and I’ve only just met you, and you think that already.” She seems to be serious, so I give her a serious answer, “You’re bossy and I’m troubled, there’s nothing fundamentally wrong with either of us, it’s just the way we are, it’s the roles we play, it’s the roles we’ve been allotted, and the world needs all of us.” She looks at me like I’m not just troubled, but mad as well.

Beth asks, “Allotted by whom?” I don’t really want to get into all this, but what’s on your mind, is always the first thing to come out, whether you like it or not, so I just say, “God.” Beth laughs incredulously, “You really believe, there’s someone up there handing out lives, and Sally just happened to get a bossy one?” She pulls a face at Sally, who again ignores her. We both seem to enjoy picking on Sally, luckily it’s not me who has to live with her. I say, “Of course not, I believe there’s nothing up there, or even out there, it’s all inside and we negotiate our lives with each other. Let me give an example, say I wanted to invent something new, I would have to agree that with everyone who is involved, the people who are going to benefit from my invention, and the people who are going to lose out because of it. There’s a lot of people involved, and everyone has to agree, and all this happens on a subconscious level.” Beth says, “That sounds very egalitarian, but I think it would be impossible for people to agree on anything.” I nod, but add, “Luckily this happens on a spiritual level, so the ego’s not involved, and as we all have the same spirit, the consensus is not motivated by personal gain, but by the needs of all humanity at that particular juncture.”

Beth looks thoughtful for a second, in that far away stoned manner, then asks, “Do you think it’s possible to control the world on a more conscious level? If you

knew how it worked, say if you were a wizard.” Beth pouts her lips when she says the word wizard, I feel it’s me who is being controlled. “Yes, I’m sure anyone can control the world, to a lesser or greater extent, depending on their personal power and motivation, but if you were doing something harmonious then it would happen without much effort. So, I’m not sure whether one should force things too much: and you have to take into account that if you know the real universe, and your part in it, you wouldn’t be so selfish, and realize that when good things happen to other people, that also benefits you as part of the whole.”

I lean back and stretch, and even give a little sigh, to signify that I’ve gone as far as I want on this subject. I don’t want to go any deeper into how connected I think we all are: I’m obviously not going to tell them that I believe we are god. Beth copies me by leaning back and stretching, through a yawn she says, “You’re a real hippy, you know, a hippy wizard, a hipzard or a wizippy.” She finds this funny, but I think you need to be stoned, or really tired to appreciate it fully.

At that moment, the candle wick topples over, and flares up for a second. Suddenly, we are all lit up brightly, so we can see each other clearly. It creates a kind of snap shot. Beth relaxed and happy, but with a stoned tiredness about her, Sally, arms folded, deep in thought, me, I’m not sure, I can feel the universe rumbling around inside, but I’m not sure if it shows on the outside. Then the wick is flooded and we are plunged into total darkness.

We all say our good nights. Sally and Beth go off to bed, Beth using the spark from her lighter to find their way, they say a final good night from their door, both silhouetted in the light from their room. Then they’re gone, except for flitting indistinct shadows in the square of light on the balcony floor, shining from their window.

I turn my chair around so that I’m facing out into the utter darkness, out over the Ganges, which takes my thoughts back to death. I seem to have become obsessed with death, that’s probably why I’ve come here to the city of death, and that’s why I’m sitting here, looking out over the river of death. It reminds me of standing on the bridge back home, looking at the river, then unexpectedly leaving my body. I realise now, sitting here, that, that instant was the moment of my death, and that it was a real death. I had actually died. The only difference to a normal death, was that my body was not in anyway damaged, so my soul could return. I had wondered if the same soul had returned, but then I remember, there is only the one soul, so I couldn’t have come back with the wrong one.

Isolated in the darkness, I experience a moment of panic, maybe I’m dead, a spirit who hasn’t come to terms with it’s death. I turn around so I can see the girls light, but there is only darkness. I look up and I can see the out line of the building against the sky. This doesn’t seem to help much, I still feel panicked, maybe my soul has left me and I’m just a body. I try to pull myself together, but panic seems to turn into self pity, and for the first time, I wish it had not happened. I wish I could be normal again, like those two mad girls. I start to sob for the life I have lost, I realise I am mourning my own death, mourning the loss of the person I once was, but I know, for my sanity, that somehow I’m going to have to find some form of new identity that fits, but I don’t really think Hipzard will work.

## Chapter five



The next morning I wake to the sound of shouting and cheering, from down by the river. I leap out of my bed, so I can see what sort of religious practice is being pursued, but it turns out to be a gang of lads playing cricket, whacking the ball into the river, then everyone jumping in, to be the first to get the ball, it looks a lot more fun than traditional cricket.

I open the window, the air is still relatively fresh, so it must still be quite early. I hold on tight and peer down to the steps below, where I see Beth watching the boys, laughing at their antics. I now realise why the boys are being so exuberant, they have an audience, a very attractive, appreciative audience. I shout down, "Morning," to Beth, she looks around, perplexed for a while, before she sees me up at my window. Though the boys spotted me straight away, and found it hilarious that Beth hadn't, they all start shouting, "Morning," and point at me, so Beth can see where I am.

Beth waves and says something, but I don't hear over all the noise. The boys have reached boiling point, with double the audience they start pulling and pushing each other, until they all fall into the river, which was obviously the plan from the start. At least this quiets them down enough for me to hear what Beth is saying, "Have you had breakfast yet?" she shouts up, "No, I've only just been woken up by your friends," I shout back down, "where's Sally?" I add. "Still in bed I think, why don't you call her? And we can all have breakfast together," Beth shouts back up to me. I shake my head and laugh, "No way am I doing that. I'll bang around in the bathroom a bit, that might wake her" I shout down, but before Beth has a chance to answer, Sally shouts, "you two are making enough noise to wake the bloody dead." This sounds so clear, that I spin around to see where she is, thankfully she's not in my room, so I shout back a jovial, "Good morning" just to be on the safe side.

I hear water start to run, so I lean back out the window, and tell Beth that Sally is awake and up. The boys are back out of the water and asking Beth if she would throw the ball for them. I shout down, "Good luck, I'll see you in twenty minutes, if you survive?" I give a wave and close the window, I can hear some of the boys shout, "Goodbye" as I do so.

I think about having a shower, but it sounds like Sally is already having one. I decide not to, I'm worried that the water might go cold if I do, and that might just turn her homicidal. In any case, it would be strange showering in such close proximity, just a very thin partition wall between us, our naked bodies just inches apart. I would probably ask her if she could pass the soap or scrub my back, something really inappropriate.

All this waiting, reminds me that I need to use the hole in the floor. I go into my bathroom and the plug hole in the shower is gurgling away. I pull my pants down and squat over the toilet hole, I listen to the rhythmic glug, glug of the water in the waste pipe and feel happy in the isolation of all the noise. This is short lived, as Sally almost immediately finishes her shower and the glugging peters out. I'm left squatting in total silence. I feel stupid that this has such a profound effect on my bowels, which promptly freeze. I reach up and turn the sink tap on, then again relax down to the business at hand, but Sally shouts through the wall, "Alex, did I hear right? You and Beth have arranged for us all to have breakfast together?" This interruption does not bother me as much as I would have thought, as she can't possibly know I'm squatting over the hole, "Yes that's right, in about fifteen minutes," I reply casually, my voice controlled and as neutral as I can make it, under the circumstances. Then there's a deafening plop, as three days of food disappear down the hole in the floor. I imagine, it has created a mini tsunami in the river below, probably washing away several of the young boys. Sally would have to be deaf not to have heard that. I almost start to laugh

out aloud at my embarrassment and the irony of trying to be quiet. I finish the rest of my washing and brushing of teeth, before I flush the toilet, just to throw her off the scent, even though she is probably squatting over her own hole in the floor just a few feet away.

When I arrive down to the mess hall, both Sally and Beth are already there, sitting at the same table as last night. As I walk up to the table, both of them look up and smile, simultaneously and unreservedly. I suddenly feel very lucky to have met them, they seem so fresh and uncomplicated, in the light of day. Sally says, "We were just talking about you." She changes from uncomplicated to mischievous in an instant. I ignore her and ask if they have ordered breakfast yet, they say, "Yes," so I go back to the counter to order mine. The owner is on his perch as usual, with a grin so big he is at risk of swallowing his own face, "I hope you are enjoying your stay," he says, I don't know if it is my imagination or not, but he seemed to nod towards the girls when he says this, as if he had laid them on especially for me, complements of the house. I just give him an enigmatic smile and nod, then order my breakfast he obviously doesn't know they're gay.

I go back to the table and take the seat opposite Sally, but I face towards Beth, the same as last night on the balcony, this seems to be the natural dynamic of our little group. "So what do you make of the owner then?" I ask, Beth answers first, "He's really nice, if you need anything, he will get it for you, or tell you where you can find it, dead handy," then Sally says, "yes, he is one of the good ones." I take this to mean, men. I'm tempted to tell her about the innuendo he made, but that would be mean, he was probably just being blokey and didn't mean anything derogatory by it, and I would be putting his life at risk. So, instead I say, "He's got a great smile, hasn't he?" they both agree. We then make small talk about some of the other people in the restaurant, until breakfast arrives.

After breakfast we start to plan our day out, which doesn't take long. First the funeral fires, then wander around for a bit, maybe eat something, if we still have the stomach for it, then it will be time for the Buddhist class. I suggest to the girls that they should wear clothes that cover them up, to visit the cremations, maybe even a head scarf, I'm not sure if this is necessary, but it seems like a good idea to me.

Sally, "Bloody inequality," but I tell her that, it's not good for women to incite lust in men, at such a solemn event as a funeral. Sally points her fork at me, "Do you want me to stab you?" she asks, totally deadpan. Winding her up is so much fun, I can't stop, "You just don't understand the effect the female form has on us men, we just can't control ourselves." This does not have the desired effect. Sally says very seriously, "Alex that's not funny, if men can't control themselves at the sight of a woman, then they should wear fucking blindfolds, not make women become invisible by making us wear sacks." Beth shakes her head, "You'd better be careful," she warns me. I think to myself that they both look very sexy when riled: all flushed cheeks and flared nostrils. Heeding Beth's warning, I control myself and say nothing, even though I think the smirk on my face has given away my thoughts, but no one says anything. "we'll go and get our invisibility scarfs then," Sally says. "OK, I'll be out on the steps by the river, whistle so I know you're there, will you?"

I go out and down to the river. The boys have gone and it's quiet again, everyone's done their morning washing, there are just a few people walking along the steps. I look up river towards the center of the city, where all the action is. I can see what looks like a bright patchwork of cloth: as saris, flags and parasols all flutter and mingle in the heat haze, they're all the colors of fire, reds, oranges and yellows. This creates the illusion of fire tumbling down the steps and flowing into the river, and with the

smoke from the pyres rising behind this tributary of fire, like steam, creating a powerful, elemental image of what happens when fire meets water: when life meets death.

I hear whistling behind me, look around and see Sally and Beth, walking down the steps, with their heads and faces wrapped up in scarfs. They look more like Egyptian mummies, than respectful funeral goers. “Do we still incite lust?” Beth asks. I lie, “No, not so much as a twinge of lust, but I think it would be a good idea to lose the bandages, otherwise people are going to think I'm dragging around a pair of lepers.” They unwrap themselves, and we set off towards the fires.

As we walk along the steps I start to feel distant, and my perspective changes. I find myself looking down on us from above, Beth is a step below me by the river, and Sally is a step above, they're both slightly in front, with their scarfs fluttering back towards me. From above it looks like I'm being pulled along by two nymphs, which is what was happening, as I don't think I would be going to the pyres by myself, maybe I was using them for protection, not the other way around.

As we walk along, the number of people around us increases, until we are in a crowd. Now Sally and Beth fall in behind me. From above we now look like an arrow head, traveling straight, with purpose, cutting our way through the pilgrims: not in conflict, but in harmony. Just as we reach a point, it is empty, just long enough for the three of us to pass, then without interruption we move into the next empty space. I could just as easily have had my eyes closed, it was like playing an instrument in a ten thousand piece orchestra, all perfectly synchronized. A few people join our wake, but are knocked off pretty soon by the turbulent current of humanity, eddying around us: obviously they are not a part of our united purpose. We magically slip past the hand masseuses, who grab your hand as you pass. We glided past the Holy men who sell you good luck, in the form of an orange cotton bracelet which stains your wrist for weeks, and we mercifully slide past the gropers without incident.

Once we have gotten out of the thick of it we stop, and look back at what we have traversed. A seemingly impenetrable tide of humanity, we have past through without breaking our stride. We all look at each other with big grins on our faces, as though we had just survived some form of extreme sport. Beth says in a silly voice, “Can we go again? Please? Please?” “Yes, of course you can,” I say, “we'll wait here for you.” “Very funny” she says, as she takes Sally's arm and marches off, on up the river. I hear her saying something to Sally about men and only one time. Sally turn and says, “Come on we still need you.” I dutifully follow. They stop and wait, when I reach up with them, they each take an arm and off we all go again.

After about five minutes there's a slight bend in the river, with a half sunken temple on it, the water lapping half way up the walls. The worshiped had swallowed the worshiper. We carry on, and there, about three hundred yards in front of us is the crater of charcoal, about the size of a tennis court, with four or five fires burning. The girls put there scarfs back on, but properly this time. There are no jokes, the atmosphere has become deadly serious. With the blackened buildings and the smoke billowing around, and distant wailing, we walk on in silence, the girls tucked in behind me.

I think we all feel like intruders, When we get to within a hundred yards, a man breaks away from the crowd by the fires and hurriedly walks over to us. He asks us to wait, offering no exclamation or saying anything other than wait: but he does look like he might have something to do with the goings on, as he is covered in black soot.

We stand like we are rooted to the spot for what seems ages, only exchanging the odd glance, our blackened sentinel with his back to us, staring out over the river.

Eventually there's a woman's voice behind us, which shocks us all, Sally acutely gasps and grabs my arm. "Follow me" the woman says, we all obediently follow. It would be impossible to guess her age because she is also very black with soot like everything around here. She leads us up the steps to a wall, there she points out a dirty sooty hole, in which is a lamp, made of some sort of thick wick in a plate of liquid fat, burning with a very sooty flame. The woman informs us that it's the original flame, lit by Vishnu himself, and that it has been burning for thousands of years, it's where they get the fire to light the funeral pyres.

We have no time to absorb this information, as no sooner has she said this, than she is off up an alley. We almost have to jog to keep up, as she wafts on in front of us. She glides to a stop outside a very big, very sooty old house, with big wooden double doors. She explains that it is a hospice for poor people, and that she is going to take us out onto a balcony, where we will be able to see the funeral fires for just a short time, so that we won't disturb the mourners, and after we can make a contribution to the running of the hospice, we all nod. I realise that not one of us has said a word, since we first set eyes on the fires.

The woman opens one of the doors and leads us into a big hall which is like a waiting room, with chairs around the outside. There are many really old lady's sitting on the chairs, and others just milling about. I'm not sure if they are waiting for funerals, or waiting to be funerals. We have no time to find out, as we are whisked through this room, and into the next which is very similar. This place is like a train station, except no one knows what time their train is due, but as the platform is just outside nobody cares.

We are in a corridor now, and for the first time the blackened lady slows down, and we catch up just as we arrive at a door that leads out onto a balcony. She stands aside to let us go out first I hesitate for a second, so the lady of mercy gives me a gentle but purposeful shove. I'm quickly followed by Sally and Beth, Sally stands beside me, but Beth pushes her head in between us and holds on to my arm, with her other arm around Sally. A very tightly packed group on a very large empty balcony. I look around, but the woman of mercy has gone, I then look down for the first time, the fires are just below us about forty feet away.

The last time I was here I was down on the street below and I couldn't see half as much as I can today, this is a birds eye view and every detail is laid out below us. There are four fires going, all at different stages, luckily the most gory one is the furthest away down by the river. It had not long been lit, and there was a completely recognizable blackened corpse on top, with flames licking and contouring the body, but not yet devouring it.

I instinctively try to imagine that person's life, in an attempt to preserve it in some sort of archive, but nothing comes to me. Then I remember, their life doesn't need recording, it already occupies an irreplaceable place in space and time, so their existence is forever tied in with everyone else's. It can't be lost. In fact they are still alive, it's just my perception of time that makes me think them dead, it's just an illusion that we are separated. I look at my part of the time continuum and call it now, but everyone does this and we are all right to do so. There is only now, there is only one time. This makes me feel a lot better. This person is still living their life. Not from my perspective as I can see a dead body, which is looking more dead by the second: it's starting to steam, or smoke now, but for them they are still alive. We stop being conscious, or I should say creators, at the moment of our death: actually, our death is our last act of creation, and our soul leaves. Then we are no more, and the universe is no more. We all return to nothing together as one. Our only real, tangible

personal immortality is, our lives. Our soul is not personal property, our lives are.

I can feel Beth's breathing quicken as she absorbs such an overwhelming sight, she grips even tighter on to me. With her breast pressed against my arm, I can feel her breathing move me like it is my own breath. I can feel myself start to rock to the rhythm of her breathing. Then the balcony and everything starts to pulsate to the same rhythm, my heart begins to quicken, the same as yesterday in the cafe. I try to relax, but it's too late. I get a sound like the roar of the sea in my ears, and feel that my heart is going to explode out of my chest. I have the sensation that I'm being lifted out of my body. Then all of a sudden there is complete silence and total stillness. For a second I think I have fainted again, but that's not possible as I can still see, even though I can't physically feel or hear anything, but I do feel connected and complete again. Not to my individual world, but to the greater world all around me. The pyres down below, with their grotesque burning bodies, don't seem any more important now than the river flowing past, or the men unloading the boats of wood. Everything feels and looks just right, like I'm all these things at once. I don't feel their emotions, just their existence.

For some reason I notice a man standing below me at the closest fire to us, he is looking directly up at me: he has just thrown a pot backwards over his head and is waiting for the sound of it breaking. This is the ritual, after the body has burnt some of the ash is scooped into a pot, the chief mourner walks around the fire three times, then throws the pot backwards over his head, when the pot breaks the soul is released, if it doesn't break I don't know what happens, but it's not good. Thankfully the mourner is not allowed to look behind to see if it has broken or not, he just has to leave without a backwards glance. The man continues looking up at me, the pot has not broken, and he knows it. I sense him screaming at the pot with his mind to break. Normally I would feel great sympathy for anyone in this situation, but I just watch feeling emotionally detached and just as serene as before. A holy man is walking over to the mourner to lead him away, then, for no reason other than the mourner is asking. I brake the pot. Well, I think I brake it, I had the intention in my mind of breaking it, and then it broke, after siting on the ground for a second or more. Another reason why I think it was me who broke it, was because I heard it brake, it was the only noise in the silence, I know the mourner heard it break as well, I see the look of anguish leave his face. He seems to look at me for some explanation but gets nothing. I probably look as detached as I feel.

I start to hear other things now, but they seem to be coming from a long way off, then I realise that it's my name that I'm hearing, and for one shocking second I remember that I'm a person, which brings me around with a start. Beth is shaking my arm, "Alex, Alex!" she says, with a note of panic rising in her voice, "yes, I'm here," I say rather stupidly, as if I am invisible or something. "We've got to go," Beth whispers and nods her head to the lady of mercy who is behind me by the door. She must have arrived while I was preoccupied, and is now standing with her arm out stretched indicating the door. Are time must be up.

Beth looks at me quizzically, "Are you all right?" she asks. I just smile enigmatically, or it could be inanely, not to be mysterious, but because I was also mystified. I look briefly back down to the fires which all seem normal again in their weird, macabre way.

I turn and walk past the woman, back into the building, I give her a big smile as I do, which she returns. I'm not sure it's the appropriate emotion to be displaying given the occasion but she is obviously very used to death.

As for me, I'm getting used to these experiences now, I managed this one without

passing out, or even making too much of a fool of myself. I'm quite proud. We stop in the passage to give our contributions to the lady, which she takes without looking at them, she leads us back through the building and out on to the street at a trot. I think she has much more important work than showing tourists around, but she does give my arm a squeeze and the girls a smile just before going back into the building.

I'm just about ready to walk off, when Sally stops me, by putting her hand on my chest, "Well?" she asks, "well what?" I reply evasively, "Well what happened to you? We thought we'd lost you, have you got some sort of condition or something?" I mull this over for a moment, "Yes, I have a condition," I say, "but don't worry it's not contagious or life threatening." Sally, for the first time looks concerned, "Has it got a name your condition?" she asks in a voice bordering on sympathetic. "It's not so much a medical condition, and I don't think a psychological condition, but rather a spiritual condition, affecting people who have spent too long meditating and contemplating god, and not enough time out and about in the real world," I say, in total honesty. Sally looks at Beth and shakes her head in exasperation, "is there any cure for that?" she asks caustically, returning to her normal voice, "no, once you've contracted it, that's it, there's no going back, you have it for life, and unlike other conditions it can't be treated with drugs," I tell them, "I haven't acutely put this to the test, but I'm sure it's right. Lets go to a cafe and get a drink, we can't stand out in the sun discussing conditions or we'll all have one. Heat stroke" I suggest.

I lead off up an alley in the opposite direction to the river, I haven't a clue where it goes but it feels good to be moving, I even feel like running, not away from anything but because I suddenly feel full of energy, as though I'm busting with adrenalin. As I stride past a cow, I'm tempted to give it a good slap on the arse, but I manage to reign in my exuberance and just give it a pat instead, which it totally ignores. I look back to see if the girls are still there, they are, but traveling a lot slower. I wait by the cow so they can catch up. The cow, I notice is eating a leaflet with a picture of Ganesh, the deity who looks like an elephant, on it, he is the deity of good luck, so to see a picture of him being eaten by a sacred beast, I take as a very good omen indeed.

The cow has finished it's snack by the time the girls have catch, but I tell them about it anyway. Cynically, Sally thinks it's another symptom of my condition, but Beth is a bit more impressed, or she could just been humoring me. We walk on for at least ten minutes, along different alleyways, before we come to a road with anything commercial on it. By now we need a break, so we just stop at the first cafe there is. It's in the style of an American dinner of the fifties, with big red plastic bench seats and fixed Formica tables, it would look totally out of place if it did not look so used and worn, and so full of people, all of whom look Indian.

A waiter ushers us to an empty table and almost immediately, even before we decide whether we are going to eat anything, another waiter arrives with a huge round aluminum tray, covered with small round aluminum dishes, which are full of food. He places all the dishes in the middle of the table. As he is doing this the first waiter arrives back with a bottle of water and three glasses, then they are both gone. This only takes, what seems like seconds, and leaves us speechless, we just sit there for a while not quite sure what to do next. Beth brakes the silence by asking, "Who wants water?" we all say, yes to water, but the problem with the food is there are no plates or cutlery. We know we have to eat with our hands, but you have to be a bit of an expert to eat rice and different coloured, runny sauces, with just one hand. The only solid things are poppadums, "So, are you two any good at eating with your hands?" I ask, "Because I know I can't, I've tried it before and ended up looking like a toddler,

who's been let feed itself for the first time."

Beth says she's going to give it a go "it can't be too hard, and we will look stupid if we're the only ones eating with forks," she says. She pours some yellow sauce into her bowl of rice, then casually mixes it together, as though she had always done this. "This feels great, you really feel in touch with your food," she says. She expertly forms a small ball of it in her hand, then tries to get it into her mouth. This is when it all goes wrong, half seems to squish out between her fingers, as she tries to funnel it into her mouth, and the other half is stuck to her lips and chin. "Shit!" she says, as she attempts to scrape the rice off her face with her rice covered hand. Within seconds she has gone from adult to toddler. I suggests she tries the red sauce next, trying not to laugh. "How is this so hard?" she asks incredulously, and tries again with exactly the same result, except there is twice as much food stuck to her face now, and not a serviette in sight. "I'm going to ask for some forks before you put me off my food altogether," Sally says. She goes off in search of humble, yet vital eating equipment. Meanwhile, Beth attempts to clean her self up, first by licking the rice off her hand, then by scraping her face with a poppadum. "How do I look now?" Beth asks seriously, while still abusing the poppadum. "Like a total retard," I say, "there's a sign for a toilet over there, maybe water might work better." Beth just nods, as she is now stuffing the poppadum in her mouth, and not making a very good job of that either. Between laughing and choking, she puts her hand over her mouth and makes a dash for the toilets.

I nibble on a popodom while I wait for Sally to return, "Voila," she says triumphantly as she arrives back brandishing three forks, she passes me one which is incredibly light as it's also made of aluminum. "Alzheimer's here we come," Sally says cheerfully, as she sees me scrutinizing the fork. I shrug, take a bowl of rice, add some yellow sauce and tuck in. As per usual, it's delicious. I try the other sauces, which are just as good, but the only discernible difference is the degree of heat.

Beth arrives back looking a lot cleaner, Sally passes her a fork and says, "I know we're going to look like the stupid foreigners, eating with forks, but you were starting to make me feel ill. I'm not sure if I can ever kiss you again, until I've gotten the image of you, with what looked like puke all over your face, out of my mind." Beth puckers up her lips at Sally and asks "is that better Honey?" in a fake American accent. "Sure is sweetie pie" Sally replies, then leans forward to kiss her. That is until I intervene, "Girls! We are in public you know?" I say this spontaneously and far too primly for my liking, and for the girls, who just stare at me in disbelief, until they start laughing. "Sorry, you do what you like, it's got nothing to do with me," I say apologetically, feeling a bit stupid and for the first time I feel like the adult of our group.

I console myself with the thought that age does have some advantages, like knowledge and wisdom, or more accurately perspective. Having already gone through several different stages of life, you know and understand that there are different perspectives. Because of hindsight you can look at the youth patronizingly, or sympathetically, depending on your character. Knowledge is power. There has to be some compensation for getting older, we loose beauty and physical power, but gain sagacity, which is a more refined form of power, therefore not so obvious and less tangible, but a lot more potent used wisely. I would not swop my sagacity, for youth. Sagacity is hard to gain and youth is easy to lose, and now, with what happened to me on the bridge, I have reached a level of power that I had not even dreamed existed. I feel invincible: not physically or emotionally, but spiritually. I am everything, how can I lose anything?

We easily finish all the food, from all the dishes, and order another bottle of water to cool us down. I think we are all over heating from the curries. Sally says, "I saw whole pineapples on the bar, shall I get one for us to share? Unpeeled fruit is all right isn't it?" Beth and I both agree that it's a good plan, so Sally's goes of again, on her next mission. Beth says, "I think Sally's in a lot better mood today, she's been really pissed off these last few days, with all the hassle we've been getting. She hasn't wanted to go out, for some reason she seems to get more hassle than me, which is strange, as I would have thought she was a lot more intimidating than me. Anyway, today it's been great, maybe we should hire you?" I shake my head and say, "You don't seem to need to, I'm here anyway and I might be getting something in return, I don't know what it is yet, but nothing happens without a reason." Beth says, "Wow, you mean like destiny?" I nod and frown simultaneously, and say, "Destiny makes it sound very important, it might be just a trifling amount of destiny, who knows, a mere teaspoon full and hardly worth a mention." Beth looks around, I imagine to see if Sally is coming back, she leans forward and says quietly, "I came to India because I want my life to change, I need something to happen, I've been here for three weeks and nothing, but now suddenly, I feel there are possibilities." Before I have time to ask her what she means I see Sally coming back, so I say nothing and just shrug.

Sally arrives back laughing, "He didn't seem to understand why I wanted to cut up the pineapple myself, but he gave in eventually, but I think I might have offended him though." The pineapple is predictably on an aluminum tray, which Sally puts down in front of her. She kneels on the bench so she has a good angle of attack, she holds up the knife and says, I think rhetorically, "Shall I do the honors?" I'm not brave enough to come between that woman and a knife, so I nod encouragingly. Sally does look very happy dissecting that pineapple, but if Beth's changes don't involve Sally, which I kind of get the impression, they might not, then she won't be happy for long.

Sally stabs one of the rings she has made and passes it to me on the end of the knife, she does the same for Beth, then slides down onto her seat and we all tuck into a juicy, perfectly ripe pineapple, the best antidote to a hot curry. We clean our faces as best we can with our hands and arms spreading the juice so it dries quicker. I look at Sally who has remained a lot cleaner than Beth and I, "That was a great plan, thanks," I say, Beth mumbles agreement still licking her fingers.

Sally picks up the knife again and absentmindedly runs the tip along the back of her arm, which leaves a faint white line, she does this a few times then looks at me, and says totally out of the blue, "Why don't you tell us about this spiritual thing you've been alluding to? Your condition." My natural instinct is to avoid saying anything, but then I think why not, maybe it would be good to tell someone, even if this is not how I imagined my first telling of my exsperiance to be.

I imagined telling some ancient, maybe blind, guru type, who I just happened to meet in a cave, through some bizarre sequence of events, but maybe two young, averagely messed up girls, from the north of England, in a tatty fake American style cafe, with hot sticky plastic seats, is just as good, who knows. One day it might become more popular than the traditional guru in a cave combo.

Beth says, "Go on, your holding back on us," as though our lives had suddenly become communal and must be shared. "O.K.," I say, "but with some conditions. First, no laughing unless I make a joke, second, and most important of all, I don't want you to tell anyone else." Sally gives me one of her disparaging head shakes, but says, "All right, but whatever it is, it has made you paranoid." Maybe she's right, maybe I have become paranoid, I've never been into secrets before, I must be scared of something, probably ridicule. The best way of over coming that, is to just jump



straight in to the bit that scares you most, so I start telling the girls about what happened to me whilst I was standing on the bridge.

From the moment I mention the part about stepping out of my body, I have a captivated audience. Beth seems particularly sympathetic to the fear I felt, having to look myself in the eyes. "Fucking hell, a nightmare," she exclaimed "I'd have freaked out there, why did you let it happen?" I look at her, "Because I wanted something to happen, I wanted change, that was the motivation that made me brave," I say directly to Beth. She nods knowingly, "I see" she says. I continue my story to the accompaniment of sounds of wonder like, wow, my god, no! Your not serious, wow again, amazing. A very similar bunch of adjectives, to what I was thinking at the time, in the small area of my brain that was not being totally blown away, or rather being thrashed around space and time. "So there you have it" I say to my silent, and I think shocked audience.

Sally is the first to say something, "You've experienced being god?" She asks this, not in her all too common sarcastic voice, but with an unexpected note of reverence. This was not the reaction I had imagined. I look at Beth to judge her response, she is just sitting there beaming at me. I know girls are always pleased when guys reveal stuff, that is deeply personal to themselves, they call it opening up, and all women without exception love it, but the look that Beth is lavishing on me, goes even beyond that. She leans forward, grabs my hand and beams even brighter, "I knew I was right about you, wow, I just knew it," she says, I recoil slightly, from her effusive attention, but I'm none the less pleased by their response. "To tell you the truth, I was not sure you would take me seriously. If someone told me they had been god and had seen the whole universe, then I'm sure I would be a lot more sceptical than you two," I say. I look at Sally and add "no disrespect, but I thought you would be hard to convince, I thought you would think I was a crack pot." Sally shakes her head and says, "Well this might sound just as stupid, but what you said sounds kind of possible, it seems to make sense. Mind you, I've never heard anything like it before, I'm going to have to think about it a bit more. It's actually quite a shock, the more I think about it the more shocking it is." She's looking at me with a lot more bewilderment than before, I think all the implications are only just dawning on her. "Wow" she says taking Beth's pet phrase. Beth asks, "What other responses have you gotten when you've told other people?"

This makes me laugh hysterically for some reason, it might have something to do with feeling relief at having told someone. The girls are looking worried now because I can't stop laughing. Wiping away the tears I say, "This only happened a few days ago, you're the first people I've told." Beth thinks this is great, "Wow, my god, that means we are a part of it, it's like this is supposed to happen, us meeting you, I new there was something going on," she says. "So why did you leave Ireland so quickly? And why are you here in Varanasi now?" Sally asks. I shrug "I really don't know, I felt that I needed to get away for a while to think, or it could have been running away, anyway, here seemed the right place to come and think about things," I say. Beth adds, "I know it's the right thing you coming here, I've had psychic experiences as well, not like yours, but I've had premonitions ever since I was a child, I just know some things before they happen, and I new there was something about you, that's why I believed you." I can see Sally studying me now, she is not one to take things at face value, I think she is the sort of person who has to get to the bottom of everything, extract every last detail.

Right on cue, Sally asks, "So what happened back there at the burning ghats? You went very funny, it looked like you were in a trance, and wobbling. Actually, it was

more like shaking, slow shaking or fast wobbling, I thought we were going to lose you!” Sally keeps her unwavering eyes on me, ready to squeeze out every last drop of information from my answer. Even Beth is totally focused on what I’m going to say. Suddenly it seems, in the blink of an eye, I’ve gone from just another person, to someone who is worth listening to, I can see that their attitude to me has changed seismically in just a few minutes. This is just what I was afraid of, but something I’m going to have to come to terms with, if I decide to tell anyone else.

I believe that other peoples attitude to someone, changes that person, not just psychologically but fundamentally. What I mean by fundamentally is spiritually. They are creating their reality, and as I’m a part of that, then they are creating me, and the more people there are thinking about you in a certain way, the more power that thought has on you. Everything becomes what thoughts dictate, for better or for worse.

I can see now, that at least part of Sally and Beth’s rolls in my life, are as my guinea-pig, they are a practice run. I’ll wait and see how my revelation goes with them first, before I tell anyone else. Not that I’m not going to tell them this. The girls are still waiting for an answer, so I tell them what happened. “I had an out of body experience, everything started to pulsate.” I’m not going to mention that it was Beth’s breast and breathing that seemed to be a trigger. Then I left my body, at least my consciousness did, I lost all connection with my senses and my body, everything became still and whole in that connected spiritual way, I just looked down on the fires without any real emotion, it was very strange.” Beth looks at me and says, “That’s very strange, because I looked at you when you started your wobbling thing, and you had your eyes closed.” Now it’s my turn to be shocked, “Are you sure?” I ask. “Definitely, I looked at your face loads, because I was worried about you, and each time you had your eyes closed,” Beth says. I shake my head incredulously, “That’s amazing because I remember it all visually.”

This news leaves me speechless, it seems to be one thing after another, and I haven’t even told them about the breaking pot, or the incident I had yesterday. I think I’ll leave that till later. Right now though, I feel the need to move, this is becoming an all to common need of mine, it all gets too much, and then I need movement to stop myself thinking.

This is not how it’s rumored to be. After seeing god, it’s alleged you can just sit under a tree, or by a river for the rest of your life in a state of bliss. Maybe I’m in some sort of transitionary phase. The trance state I found myself in at the burning ghats, probably was bliss. I was certainly detached, it evaporated all fear in an instant, it boiled away every last drop of anxiety in a heartbeat, but it’s so detached that I’m not sure I want it now!

For years I’ve read about detachment, and thought, “No problem,” I’m not attached to material things, I’m not attached to my swirling emotions or my ego, I can let these things go whenever I like. How wrong was I? Detachment is like moving to another planet, infact it’s even stranger than that, it’s more like suddenly becoming an alien.

I’m not sure if this is a decision I have to make at the moment, or if it has already been made. If I still have a choice I’m going to put it off for a while, because it’s tantamount to dying, and thats a big decision to make impulsively. I see now detachment is letting go of everything, you are no longer a creator, but a passive observer. No longer a person. Without your fears, anxieties and desires, all the things that make us human, there is no motivation to do anything. So now I’ve changed what I want. Now I want both, detached bliss and my anxieties. Both heaven and earth. I’m

not sure if this is possible, they do sound diametrically opposed. However I did break that pot while in a state of bliss, which does show there was at least a modicum of ego at work, but it could have been just a slight residual amount, which would not last long. I did think it strange at the time, doing something like that, I must have been straddling both worlds at the same time somehow. Maybe it is possible.

Sally says, fortunately interrupting my chaotic thoughts, “The Buddhist lesson is starting in an hour and it might take us that long to get there from here, do you still feel like going?” “yes, why not, things can’t really get any stranger than they already are. Even if they do, I’ve come too far to bottle it now.”

## Chapter six

Off we go again to find the river, we are like a tributary, always in search of it’s future. Sally’s leading at a brisk pace, that is until we catch up with a funeral procession which, slows us down considerably. This is not a problem, and we would be happy to amble behind, if it were not for the stomach churning stench, which even the incense and fragrant flowers cannot mask. We all involuntarily pull faces of horror, and stop dead in our tracks. “Lets just turn off and find another way to the river,” I suggest while holding my breath, the girls nod and we dash down a side alley, before we turn blue from asphyxiation. After twenty yards we stop to catch our breath, “I nearly lost my lunch that time,” Beth gasps, “I need to smell something nice to get the memory of that stink, out of my nostrils,” she adds. We look around but there is only rubbish lining the road and cows trampling it in. “Come on, you’ll live, anyway you’ll smell like that one day,” Sally tells her, then leads on again. She seems to be impatient to get to her Buddhist class, she must be more devout than she’s letting on.

We find the river inevitably, then follow it for a while and take the appropriate alley off, back into the city, a few lefts and rights later and we are standing outside a closed door, set into a big stone wall, with a few high windows. The only giveaway that we are at the right place, is the same little poster as at our hotel, tacked to the door. Beth says airily, “Early again, lets go and wait in the square.” We walk on a little and arrive at the square, in truth it’s just a crossroads with one house missing from a corner, creating a house sized square. “Over here,” Beth says, indicating some steps leading up to some more closed doors, we perch along the steps like three naughty children, who’ve been expelled from the building, but it’s the perfect spot, we are looking straight down the Buddhist buildings alley way, and we are in the shade.

I don’t know who’s steps these are, but it doesn’t take us long to relax, and before long we are sprawled out like bold, truant children. I ask Sally, “How long have you had Buddhist tendencies,” she looks up into the air for an answer, “almost ten years, since I was seventeen and started thinking about life, and what’s it all about. I was bought up without any religion, or any question of what life is about, and maybe because of my sexuality, I had to ask myself these questions, to find out more about myself, which led me to find out more about life, which bought me square up against religion. After that there was no contest, I can’t imagine how someone with even half a brain can become a Christian, and I think Islam is even worse, even more dogmatic and controlling especially for a woman. I don’t want to be controlled, I just want an answer to the question, “What’s it all about?” So I’m a Buddhist, because at least

Buddhism try's to answer questions and doesn't just try to control you.”

I nod my agreement, but she continues anyway, “That might have been all right back in the dark ages, but for anyone who's had an education, it's just not going to wash anymore. I think that those controlling kinds of religions are on their way out. They don't even accept who I am, so why should I consider them. They have no relevance to me.” Sally looks fit to bust and I can see sweat starting to break out on her face, Beth and I are silenced by her passion. I would normally make a joke to lighten the atmosphere, but Sally is too wound up for that, I don't want to risk bringing her fury down on me. After her breather she continues, “They're all just a bunch of power crazed, fascist bastards, using the name of god as their own personal weapon, it's only about power and control for them, and nothing to do with the soul or God.”

She seems to have run out of steam now and is looking like she is close to tears. Beth moves closer and puts her arm around her, I hadn't expected tears from Sally, she seemed too tough. She sniffs a bit then wipes her eyes, and to explain her tears she says, “It's like being accused of something you haven't done, I can't help being the way I am.” I reach out and rub her arm, “I'm with you totally on this, fucking fascists, using gods name so they can't be questioned,” I say with indignation to show Sally that she's not the only person to think like this. We all sit in silence after that, the quiet after the storm.

Beth is the first to speak, “Look those Americans are here again.” I look up and see six or seven people, standing by the door to the building. “They've been a few times while we've been going,” Beth says, “and they are really annoying, asking the most stupid questions.” Sally brightens up and adds, “Last time we were here, one of the boys asked if he could breath through his mouth because his nose was blocked. I felt like telling him, No! You should just asphyxiate silently.” This makes Beth and I smile. More people are arriving now and waiting by the door, about thirty I would say, someone must have opened the door because the crowd start to shuffle their way in.

Sally is the first to stand and pulls Beth and me up, I'm feeling lethargic now after eating, then siting for a while, I think I would prefer a siesta, to whatever it is we are about to do. “Come on” Sally says, and leads us up the alley and through the door into a big, almost empty hall. On the floor by the door are everyones shoes and sandals, looking lost and forlorn without their owners. We add our footwear to this abandoned jumble, then walk down the hall in our bare feet to where the rows of cushions start. There are plenty left, not even half are taken. We start a new row so that we can all sit together, and to the right, as the Americans are to the left, everyone is fidgeting around and chatting.

I look around to see if I can spot our teacher, there's only one Indian person, so I assume it's him, sitting down the front, on one of the cushions, talking to a white girl with dreadlocks. I nudge Sally and ask her if that's our teacher, she looks where I'm pointing and nods. He is wearing saffron robs and has lots of hair and a long beard. I would have thought that he was a Hindu holy man from his look, I was expecting red robs and a shaved head, but I wasn't going to let this put me of, anyway he seemed to be smiling a lot. Well, his eyes were scrunching up, you couldn't tell what his mouth was doing behind the beard. The hall looks like it might have been an old warehouse, with the only windows up high and no ceiling, it's open right up to the roof rafters, so it's nice and cool, with plane white washed walls making it feel even bigger and cooler.

After a while, a young Indian boy who looks about seventeen comes in, and

closes the door behind him. He walks down the side of the cushions to the front and picks up a wooden box from our teacher, then proceeds to go around all the people collecting money. While this is happening, our teacher stands and walks back and forth at the front, nodding hello to some of the people, Beth and Sally included. After the boy has finished he goes and sits cross legged on one of the cushions, on the very back row, tucking the little wooden box under his knee.

“Right, are we ready?” our teacher starts by saying, “Thank you all for coming, we will start as usual with a short meditation, to relax the body and clear the mind, this will be most, beneficial, and help you to concentrate on our talk later, which will be on reincarnation and the wheel of life.” When he says, reincarnation, I know I am going to be in conflict with his teaching.

I had been hoping to find someone, who would know, what I now know, but I don't think it's going to be this man. I feel like leaving, but I'm also fascinated by how it's going to play out, like watching a crash, so I stay. He is telling us, “Just follow your breathing and if you have any thoughts don't hold on to them, just let them go, that way, you will not become stressed. So we will start then, and remember to keep your back straight too, this is also very important, no slouching.”

He then pulls the cushion he had been sitting on earlier, out into the front and sits on it cross legged, facing us. From somewhere, he produces a pair of little cymbals, which he strikes together, either to signal the start or maybe to tune us in, I'm not sure which, but the note hangs in the air of the big hall, competing with the silence, until Beth whispers to me, “Are you going to be all right?” Sally tells her to shut up, under her breath, I can feel Beth bristle but she says nothing, and we settle down to our meditation.

I do my circular breathing, as I normally do while practicing tai-chi, feeling the energy moving up and down my body with each complete breath. This slow rhythm is very relaxing and I feel all the tension drain out of my body. Thankfully my heart also stays calm because when my heart goes ballistic, weird stuff happens. After not very long, some of the people start to fidget and cough, our teacher strikes his cymbals again, I think to bring the wandering back into the fold. After more intense fidgeting, the room settles down again, this lasts for about the same amount of time as the last session, our teacher strikes his cymbals again, and says, “That's very good, that will do for now, if you want to stretch your legs out, now is the time.” We all mercifully stretch our legs out, I've never met a European who enjoys sitting cross legged. Beth leans behind Sally and taps me on the shoulder, “You're still with us then?” she says. I lean back and nod, “Yes, nothing weird to report, in fact I rather enjoyed that” I say. Then Sally lets out a puff to signal her displeasure at our talking. As we are literally talking behind her back anyway, we both pull faces and try not to laugh. Beth's eyes dart off to my right, then she smiles sheepishly, I think she's been caught pulling faces, by the youth at the back.

Our teacher stands and we all quieten down again, “as this is a beginners class, I will start at the beginning,” he says, pulling on his beard, “We are all on the great wheel of life and one of the fundamental concerns of Buddhism is to help us get off this wheel and move on to a state we call Nirvana, the end of suffering. The means by which we have the opportunity to do this, is reincarnation, reincarnation gives us a more or less unlimited chance of moving on to Nirvana.” He paces back and forth still pulling on his beard, “By advancing with each life, we are assured that in the end, we will be freed from this world of desire and suffering. We do this by leading a spiritual life,” he pauses, to give us time to decide if we are leading a spiritual life or not. “What I mean by spiritual, is mental and moral discipline, you have to put some effort

in, it will not happen by chance. If you lead your life, by satisfying every desire your mind or body has, then you will get nowhere, not even in a thousand lives.” He stops and looks us over as a group, assessing how many lives we’ve squandered between us, on satisfying our desires.

I think this might have run into the millions, as he says, “If you have any questions as we go along, then raise your hand and I will try to clarify things for you.” No sooner has he said this than up pops a hand, followed by an American accent. “When you say desire, do you include sex in that?” One of the American lads asks. Sally huffs her intolerant displeasure, our teacher smiles at him, “no that’s not what I mean, if there was no sex there couldn’t be any reincarnation, as there wouldn’t be any babies to be born into, but if you were obsessive about sex, and obsessed about it all the time, then that wouldn’t be good for you, it would weaken you and probably lead to suffering and torment, neither of which brings you any closer to Nirvana.” Our teacher turns and addresses the Whole class again “everything which you do, you must ask yourself, does this bring me closer to Nirvana? That is leading a spiritual life.” He pauses for breath then continues, “reincarnation is the souls way of evolving over time, it would be inconceivable that a soul could become mature enough to reach Nirvana in just one life.”

Involuntary my arm goes up, not because I want any question answered but because I have heard it all before, and I didn’t really believed it the first time. Now, as I know that it’s a load of rubbish, I just can’t bring myself to hear it one more time but as he has stopped and is looking at me, I blurt out the first question that comes into my head, “How many souls are there?” then I add, “and are there new souls being produced all the time?” He doesn’t smile at me the way he did at the last questioner, he’s looking at me quizzically, trying to work out if I’m a trouble maker, I think my tone might have inadvertently had an edge to it. “I don’t think anyone knows how many souls there are,” he says, “but they were all there at the beginning. Souls are like the sparks that fly from the original fire and that is where they return.”

I’m not going to let him get away that easily, it’s just too easy to create some profound sounding analogy with fire, and that’s supposed to answer all my questions. “That seems to be a very fragmented view,” I say, “all those souls thrown out like that, they must be very lonely, no wonder Buddhists see the world as suffering, and can’t wait to return to the fire.” Our teacher ponders on this for a while, I can tell he is pondering by the way he is stroking his beard, I hear Sally whispering, “Alex?” Which means, what the hell are you doing? As he has still not said anything I continue “I just don’t believe that existence is all about suffering, who would agree to becoming a soul, if all you had to look forward to was thousands of lives of suffering?” He looks as if he is about to speak, but I’m in full flow now, and the words seem to be coming on their own, “And it can’t be so we can evolve. As you say, we came from perfection and we will return to perfection, where’s the evolution in that? Whatever happens in life, there’s no where else we can go after. We are either alive or we have returned to the source, returned to the perfect state. The only reason a soul would leave perfection, is for the pure joy of it!”

It had been nagging, at the back of my mind, this question of why there is any existence at all. What would induce pure perfection, the perfect nothingness I had experienced, to change, to create us? Now I had answered my question spontaneously. Pure joy, it had to be something as simple as that, because the god I had felt, or more accurately been, needed nothing, it was complete by itself.

I think our teacher is speaking now, but I am not listening. This revelation that we have been born of joy, is surging through me in waves. I am telling myself, at our

center there's our soul, which is god in all his greatness, and from that, for the pure joy of it, springs our lives, life is about joy not suffering.

I stand up abruptly, and tell our teacher, "Life is about joy, not suffering." I don't even worry about everyone looking at me, it feels like the last piece of the puzzle has slipped into place, and I'm on a high, I think I might even be grinning at everyone, but I'm not sure. I say to the girls, "Sorry, I've got to go." Beth jumps up, "I'm coming too," she says, "come on Sally" she says to Sally urgently, as if we are trying to escape. Sally hesitates and looks about to protest, but Beth cuts her off before she even has a chance to speak. "Come on, don't be stupid, we've got the real one here!" Beth says flicking her head at me. A look of comprehension spreads across Sally's face as she looks up at us, "Yes, I see" she says and springs to her feet catching Beth's and my arms in hers, and we all hot foot it to the door, past the young disconcerted helper, then we spill out into the street, laughing like idiots. "We are free from the obligation to suffer," I shout "We are gods folly," I yell, as we career up the alley, "Are we follies?" Beth shouts back quizzically. "Yes, but in a good way, like doing something that serves no purpose, but you do it anyway for the sheer hell of it." "Great choice of words Alex," Sally says. I give her a bit of a shove with my shoulder, "I know, and that was for the hell of it too," I say. "You'd better watch who you're pushing," Sally says, and with that she gives me a playful shove back.

We are still walking quite fast and three abreast, still surfing the rush of energy. "Let's stop for more tea and biscuits," I say, "before Sally knocks some poor defenseless person over." She looks at me with mock menace in her eyes, "Yes, good idea, and as you now owe us a lesson, you can tell all, while we partake of tea," she says in the voice of a snooty head mistress, whom I have come to recognize as her favorite alter ego.

Within seconds we arrive at a tiny cafe with just three small tables, and three small chairs per table. We sit at the first table, but have to shuffle it about a bit so we can all fit around. We are now occupying half the cafe and feeling like huge toys in a dainty doll's house. An oldish man pops out of the doorway from the kitchen, then stops dead in his tracks, surprised to see half of his cafe filled by three oversized foreigners, he recovers quickly and the look of shock is replaced by a wry smile "You are welcome," he says while performing a slight bow, "may I get you anything?" he asks with over politeness, I think to make up for his initial look of shock. We order tea and biscuits, also very politely to indicate that no offense had been taken.

As we wait for him to return Sally says, "So, what's with your sudden aversion to Buddhism?" I take a deep breath and lean back, ready to start my tirade against Buddhism, but instead I hit the back of my head on the wall, "Ouch! Perhaps I shouldn't slag Buddhism, if that is what's going to happen." Beth laughs "you see Buddhism is about suffering," she says. Sally does one of her exasperated puffs. "The problem with Buddhism, is the same as with other religions, and that is, it's a religion, and so again it's about control, they use karma as their means of control. It all boils down to, if you don't tow the line, you're not going to heaven or nirvana or whatever you want to call the perfect place at the end of life," I say.

Sally sits mulling this over, and I can see that she is agreeing with me, but just incase, I continue, "You're right Beth, it's their obsession, with seeing anything to do with life as suffering. I find it inconceivable to think that life equates to suffering, and that, at the first opportunity we should try to get hell out of here, it just doesn't make any sense. Where's all the shit supposed to come from? We are born of god, that's definite, even if you're not quite ready to believe that you are god, so there's no shit there, and even if suffering happens, which I'm not saying it doesn't, then that too

comes from the same place: the suffering there is, comes from god.” I pause, realizing the best way to explain myself is to tell them about my little epiphany back in the class. “Sorry girls, this isn’t actually how I got to my understanding of it.” Beth says, “Don’t worry, I’m following you,” I smile at her, she is such an appeaser. “No, how I got to my understanding was by wondering, why would something as perfect as god, need to do anything, or manifest anything, when it’s totally complete as it is: it is one perfect whole. Then, back there at the class, it just came to me, for the joy of it. Life’s not about suffering, but about joy.”

I raise my hands up in a gesture of embracing the world and sing, “For the pure joy of it,” in my best Welsh baritone. Sally shakes her head, “Your going to go all happy clappy on us aren’t you? I can see it coming,” she says. I give her a big beaming happy clappy smile, “I love you, I love the world and all gods creatures, just not in that order.” Sally feigns being sick, just as the old man appears in the doorway with our tea. “Is everything all right?” he asks looking worried, Sally turns slightly pink with embarrassment, but not red, she has more neck than that. “Yes, I’m fine, I just had something stuck in my throat” she says, while doing a little cough. The polite old man serves us our tea, while Beth and I resist the urge to laugh at Sally being caught out. We wait to do that until after he leaves.

Sally totally ignores us while we make fun of her and instead helps herself to biscuits, “Do you want to hear something really amusing?” I ask the girls, but continue anyway without waiting for an answer. “The other day, infact it might have even been yesterday, anyway, the question, “Why anything?” Was going around and around in my head, as it has been ever since I felt what it is to be god. Infact it was the only real question left unanswered. I’d been shown the how but not the why, anyway, yesterday I was thinking about it and the only thing that seemed to make any sense at all, was that existence might have been triggered by people like me turning up there in the nothingness, and with some weird outside of time and space thing going on, where to be conscious of god you have to already exist, yet on the other hand you start the whole thing rolling, by turning up there.”

I see the girls looking as perplexed as I was, “Anyway to cut a long story short, I thought for a brief moment that I might have been the trigger, I might have been that spark in the nothing” The girls are still saying nothing. I was expecting laughter or comments about ego. “Don’t you find that funny?” I ask, Sally puts her hand on my arm and tells me, “You’ve told us so much stuff in the last few hours, I hardly know which way is up anymore.” Beth adds, “And you did say that you had been god. If we believe that, then we’ll believe anything.” She adds quickly “I’m just joking, I did believe you about the god thing you know” she says earnestly. I wish she wouldn’t do that, she looks so alluring, when she does her earnest look. “Anyway,” I say again, “I had nothing to do with starting this whole thing,” I gesture to the world again, “I’m happy to announce, non of this is my fault, not the starting of it at any rate. The rest obviously is all our doing. But what I’m really happy about, is suddenly realizing what did trigger the start of everything, it’s curious how you just know when something is right. When you work things out intellectually, it’s a process, but when it just comes to you in a moment of inspiration it feels great, it’s like Bang! It’s there, it’s so exciting. I think it’s just as important as what happened to me on the bridge, even if it’s not quite so spectacular, it’s the other half of the mystery. Now I have both the how and the why, I can’t put into words how happy I am.” Beth takes my hand, “We can see how happy you are,” she says, “you look like you might burst into song again.” Sally shakes her head “It’s just as I feared happy clappy. The only way I can handle that, is if I’m as happy clappy as you. So, can you tell us how it all works,



from start to finish in one go? Because I'm not sure I've understood that much of it so far."

I think about it for a second, but I haven't a clue where to start, it's all still swirling around my head. "I will try to make sense of it all for you, I promise, but I don't think I can right now, I need to think about it a bit more first. This is almost as new to me, as it is to you, and some of it is hot off the press." Sally nods, "O.K, but you do know, now that you've lost me my other teacher, you owe me." I think Sally says this as a joke, but you can never quite tell with her. "How many lessons do you think I owe you? Because I don't come cheap," I say. "Well," Sally says, "I'll be generous, and pay you the same as my last teacher, even though you're just a beginner," she pauses, "but I must warn you, I am expecting to become enlightened."

Again, I'm not sure if she's joking or not, so I play her at her own game. "I will be able to explain it to you," I tell her, "but whether you will understand it is another matter all together." I relent slightly "you will probably get it on an intellectual level, but I'm not sure you will be ready to understand it on a more emotional level" I think she knows I'm only messing with her, but she visible bristles. "It depends how in tune you are with your soul," I say. "What's that supposed to mean?" she asks curtly. "It means, how much room do you allow your soul to occupy inside you." She frowns at me, not understanding. "Life is a partnership, you and your soul together. It's actually our soul, but that's another lesson. The important thing is, you have to make room for it, it's very easy to not realise it's even there, and just occupy all the space yourself. You know, with your ego. You need to have a still place inside, for it to live in. Once you have that, you can understand everything together, on all levels. So there you go, that's your first lesson," I say to Sally. "If you think I'm paying you for that, you must be mad, because, I knew all that already, my soul and I live very happily together, thank you." I nod and smile, "I'm sure that one of our souls most beautiful memories is living with you," I say. Beth laughs getting into the swing of it. "I can attest to Sally's ease of nature and harmonious spirit, every day I live with her, is a delight, I'm sure our soul feels the same." I finish the last of my tea and say to Sally, "Well you can pay for the tea, in lieu of that lesson then." To my total surprise she gets out her purse to pay, which makes me feel guilty, but I let her pay anyway.

"What are you going to do now?" I ask the girls. Beth looks at Sally who says, "I fancy just going back to the hostel myself." Beth nods, "Me too, I could do with chilling out for a while." "Chilling, is what I need to do as well," I say, "it's only five, but I feel like I've had two days already today." We all trundle slowly back to the hostel. The day having taken it's toll on us, the last few sets of stairs up to our balcony, nearly finishes us of. "Maybe I'll see you girls later, or maybe not, I'm not sure if I'm going to be up again today," I say. "O.K, good night" they both say, and we go to our rooms.

## Chapter seven

I have been lying on my bed drifting in and out of a light sleep, when there is a knock at my door. At first I'm not sure if it is real, it seems to be inside my head, perhaps part of my dream, but then it sounds again and I have to reluctantly except it's reality. I walk over to the door, rubbing my eyes as I go to wake myself up, I open the door and the red toothed handy man is there. "There is someone waiting at the reception, to see you, sir," he says, for some reason I ask him if he's sure, and he tells

me he is. "O.K, I'll be down in a minute," I tell him. He goes off and I go and throw some water over my face, while wondering who could be looking for me, no one I know, knows I'm here.

I step out onto the balcony and notice that the girls light is on, I can see it shining around the sides of the closed shutter, even though it's still just light outside, but dusk is on it's way. I walk down the stairs, not sure whether to be excited or worried, as I reach the reception door, I think worry has the upper hand.

I walk into the reception, which is quite busy, everyone back from their day out. I glance around to find my caller, but all I see is the owner beckoning me over. I walk up to the desk, and as I do, I see the youth from the Buddhist class sitting on a stool at the desk with his back to me. The owner smiles his smile, then says, "This boy said that he needed to speak to the man, who was with the two English girls, Sally and Beth, so I'm assuming this is you Mr Jones, I hope you didn't mind me bothering you?" He glares at the youth after saying this, "Not at all, thank you, it's no problem," I tell him.

I turn to the youth, who looks like he would rather not be here at all. I get the feeling the owner has been glaring at him quite a lot. "How can I help you?" I ask him. "My teacher would like it very much, if you would come with me, to meet him, so that you could talk." He blurts this out as though he were unburdening himself. "Why does he want to talk to me?" I ask him. He thinks for a moment, "He was telling his master about you, then they wanted to talk to you, that's all I know." He wobbles his head after saying this, which is the Indian equivalent to shrugging our shoulders.

I think about this for a minute, it seems a bit strange. "Where are they?" I ask. "At the masters house, which is not far from here, I can take you there," the youth says, then heads for the door, expecting me to follow. Instead, I turn to the owner who I think had been listening intently, though pretending not to, "Do you know who this is?" I ask him. "I don't, but he says he is with Mr Sharma, he is the man who runs the Buddhist class's," he adds pointing to the poster on the wall. "Do you think it would be safe if I went and saw him," I ask. He looks at me puzzled, "Many guests who stay here, go to his classes," he answers. I'm not sure if he has really understood my question, but I thank him anyway.

The youth is still waiting by the door for me. I follow him out into the hall, where I tell him to wait outside while I get something from my room, he seems pleased with this, I think he is just thankful to be out from under the scrutiny of the owner. "I will be waiting outside," he confirms. I go back up stairs, not to get anything, but to tell the girls where I'm going, I think it's safest that I tell someone what's happening, just in case.

I knock on the girls door and say, "It's just me." Beth opens the door, "Hi, come in," she says stifling a yawn, I follow her into the room trying not to look at her legs, as she is just wearing a long T-shirt. Sally is propped up on the bed reading. "Sorry to bother you" I say to them, "but you won't guess who has just turned up at reception asking for me." Sally says flippantly, "The Buddhist teacher?" I know she is just being flippant, but it's a bit weird her guessing that. "Very close," I say incredulously, "but it's his helper, you know, the youth." "Wow" Beth says, "no way, what does he want?" "He wants me to go and talk with the teacher, and it sounds like the teachers master as well, and right now," I tell them. "Now?" Beth repeats, "Yes, that's why I came to tell you, I thought it was safest to tell someone where I was going," I say. "Well, I want to come too," Beth says petulantly. I shrug my shoulders, "If you want to, I can't see why not, and there's safety in numbers." Beth turns to Sally, "Are you

coming?" she asks her. "Someone has to look after you two," Sally says getting up off the bed. "You are both the type of people, who just jump into everything and anything, without thinking it through." Beth glances at me and raises her eyebrows. Sally says to me, "We'll be out in a minute, we just have to get ready." "O.K, I'll be waiting out on the balcony," I say and head out, closing the door behind me.

I hope they're not long, because it's getting dark fast now. I would like to arrive in the light, so at least I would know where we were. In case we have to make our own way back. I'm actually a bit worried, what the hell do they want to talk about? It still seems a bit strange. I'm pleased the girls are coming to keep me company, but I'm not going to tell them, Sally would be just too pleased.

I can hear them talking inside their room, and they sound quite animated. I don't know what they are having words about, but all the upheaval of the day could be putting a bit of a strain on them. First there's Sally, who wants to understand things so she can make sense of her life, then there's Beth, who just wants adventure and a bit of excitement. That leaves plenty of room for misunderstanding.

The door opens and Beth comes out looking flushed, Sally follows and locks the door. "Right, we're ready, I've left a short note explaining where we've gone, just in case," she says, all business like. "Great, lets go then," I say and hurry off down the stairs with the girls following. Outside, the youth is still waiting, he looks more pleased than surprised to see the girls, "This way please," he says, and we start following him. It's practically dark now, down in the alley, with most of the light coming from windows and a few scattered lights outside of doorways. There are hardly any people about at all. It's not the sort of city you wander about in at night, the only people here, are moving quickly, with purpose, on some sort of mission, like us. After a few minutes I give up trying to remember the way, as it all looks the same in this light, and I've forgotten how many lefts and right we've taken.

The youth suddenly stops outside a lit doorway, "This is the place," he says with a note of reverence in his voice. It looks the same as all the others to me, dark and imposing. I look up and see that there are two windows with light shining out on the second floor, but that's all, the rest of the windows are dark. I turn to the girls, "This is the place," I say mimicking the youth. "Do you think we should go in?" Sally asks. The youth opens the door, which I notice is not locked. Inside, I can see a dimly lit hall almost the same as at the hostel. "As we've come this far, I think we should go all the way," Beth says sassily. Before I have time to say anything witty, she has pushed me through the door and I think she is dragging Sally in after her, anyway, before I know it, we are all packed together in the middle of the hall, as though we are trying to stay as far away from the four doors as possible.

The youth closes the door to the street then opens the door to the left, revealing a stairway, "This way please," he says, leading the way up the stairs, which is lit from the landing above. When we reach the landing we turn back on ourselves and go up another flight of stairs to another landing. The smell of incense is thick in the air here, but that's the only sign of life. We walk along until the youth stops outside a pair of double doors with light shining from under them, for some reason he checks to see if we are ready by raising his eye brows, I nod for want of anything better to do.

He knocks lightly on the door and goes in without waiting for an answer, holding the door for us he beckons us in. We take a few steps in, sticking together as a group, not knowing what to expect. The room is very big which is a good thing as the six people sitting on rugs and cushions are at least twenty feet from us. If they had been any closer, I think we would have done a runner. I can feel one of the girls hands tighten on my arm, "Oh, my god," one of the girls whispers under her breath. What

has so freaked us out, is that they are all Hindu sadhus, dressed in their robes, some covered in ash, some in paint, all with long hair and beards. When you see them in the street, or down by the river, they seem a bit scary, but in a room, the same room you're in, they look totally surreal, in a very freaky way, especially given the number of them. Add to that, the room being thick with incense, and with some sort of shrine at the end behind the men, which is surrounded by candles. I don't know what I had been expecting, but it wasn't this.

They stop talking and turn to look at us with blank faces. The one with his back to us gets up and I am relieved to see he is our teacher from earlier, he is also the only one without ash or paint. He comes up to us, puts his hands together and does a little bow, which we all copy. "I'm very glad you came, I wasn't sure you would," he says to me. "First, can I explain myself, you see I am infact a sadhu but I also teach Buddhism, as that is what the westerners want to learn, and as the two faiths have a lot in common, it's not a problem for me, infact Buddha was an incarnation of Vishnu," he says as way of an expansion.

"Have you studied the Hindu faith at all?" he asks. I shake my head, "Not at all, I've seen the shrines and that's about it." He looks at me and pulls on his beard, "I was telling my guru what you said about existence being started from pure joy, I also told him you were very passionate about it," he does a little laugh, I think he's referring to me doing a runner from his class. "This you see is very close, if not the same as we Hindus believe. Would you like to come and talk with my guru? He is interested in talking with you." I nod, "Yes, I would be honored to," I say.

Maybe this is the person who will know what happened to me on the bridge, but I hadn't expected he would be a Hindu. I had always associated Hindus with worshiping lots of animal gods, like Ganesh, or Hanuman: pagan stuff. He ushers the three of us over to where the others are all seated, they all shuffle about to make room for us, he places cushions on the floor for us to sit on, then we all sit down. I'm sitting directly opposite the one who I presume is the guru, as he is the oldest and the skinniest, with an air of authority. He is flanked on either side by two other sadhus. Beth and Sally are sitting on my left and the teacher has sat himself to my right, we are like two teams of delegates about to start negotiations, apart from the incense and candles, and the dress code.

The guru is either studying me or trying to psyche me out, as he is just starring at me, but I just ignore his scrutiny and relax. I then realise that it's strange that he's more interested in me, than I am in him. All my adult life I had hoped that I might meet a real life guru, who would point me to the right path. The irony now, is that on the very same day that the last piece of the puzzle has slipped into place, is the very same day, that I finally meet one. I toy with the idea of telling him that he's a bit bloody late now. The thought of which almost makes me laugh, which he sees and prompts him to smile back at me for the first time.

I wonder suddenly if he is reading my mind, you never know with these guru types, what they are at. His eyes are glazed, bloodshot, sunken, and impossible to read. You would think he had spent fifty years on heroin, rather than fifty years meditating. Eventually he speaks, but in Hindi, so I don't understand, but without hesitation our teacher translates. "He says that your heart is full of joy, and that he thinks that you lead a very spiritual life," I just nod and say nothing, as all I've thought about him is that he looks like a heroin addict who has fallen face first into a child's painting palette. I really hope he isn't reading my mind.

He speaks again and the teacher translates, "He wants to know if you have a teacher and whether you meditate?" "I don't have a teacher," I say, "but I study from

books, I meditate most days and I also practice ti-chi most days.” The teacher translates this and they seem to be discussing it between themselves as well, even one of the sadus joins in. “How long have you been doing this?” the teacher asks. “Tai-chi for thirteen years and meditating for about twenty years,” I say. The teacher discusses this again with the guru and there is even laughter. “How old are you?” the teacher asks. This is turning into an interview, I wonder what the job is. I would prefer to just get down to the real stuff, but I go along with it out of respect, “forty two,” I say. “We thought you were a lot younger,” he says. The guru is looking pleased with me, I don’t know if he’s pleased because I’m older than he thought, therefore more mature, or whether it’s good to look younger, judging from his appearance the former is the most likely.

The teacher asks me, “Why have you come to India? Are you searching for real enlightenment? Or are you just a spiritual tourist, like most of the others?” I don’t like this sort of question, it’s just confrontational and bullying. “Neither,” I say, “I’m a spiritual refugee.” He translates this and they discuss it for a while. “What do you mean a refugee?” the teacher asks, frowning.

I choose my words carefully because it’s time that I get on with it, and do what I came to India to do, that is, tell my story to a guru, to see what he makes of it, and here I am, after only a few days, sitting in front of one. This comes to me in a moment of clarity, I had almost forgotten why I was here in India myself, it wasn’t just to get away. So I say, “I thought that in India, I might find someone who would understand a spiritual experience that happened to me recently, that is why I came to India, and that is why I’m sitting here now.” The teacher lets go of his beard and nods, “I see,” he says like a doctor who has encountered a really interesting disorder. He does the translating for the other men, all of whom look as equally pleased, even the guru’s eyes seem to regain a glimmer of life, they are all looking at me now, waiting. Again, in this telling of my experience, I’m not going to mention the two crows, I don’t know where Hindus stand on signs and omens, so I’m just going to start with what happened on the bridge.

I tell the teacher the first bit about me stepping out of my body, then pause to let him translate, then I tell him the next bit and he translates. This goes on for quite a while, mainly because the translation is taking a lot longer. I haven’t a clue what he’s saying, but he is enacting it at the same time, so I can more or less know where he has got to. The funniest part is when he is miming the tunnels I was hurtling along, his arms are going like frenzied snakes, signifying traveling along tunnels at speed, then he would do ducking motions as though he was just about to hit his head, I think this must be me passing events, but I’m not sure. When he translates being in the nothingness, Beth accidentally sniggers, he looks more like he’s miming underwater, than miming being god. I don’t think anyone else noticed, they are totally engrossed with the story, they are definitely getting their moneys worth tonight.

When I and the teacher have finished we all sit in silence for a while, not an awkward silence, but a satisfied silence. The guru is the first to speak and it sounds as though he is reciting a poem. After he has finished the teacher says, “That was a passage from the Rig Veda, I will try to translate it for you. There was not then, what is, nor what is not. There was no sky and no heaven beyond the sky. What power was there? Where? Who was that power? Was there an abyss of fathomless water? There was neither death nor immortality then. No signs were there of night or day. The ONE was breathing by its own power in infinite peace. Only the ONE was. There was nothing beyond. Darkness was hidden in darkness. The all was fluid and formless. Therein, in the void, by the fire of fervour arose the ONE. And in the ONE arose love.

Love the first seed of the soul. The truth of this the sages found in their hearts. Seeking in their hearts with wisdom, the sages found that bond of union between Being and Non-being. Who knows the truth? Who can tell whence and how arose this universe? Only that god who sees in highest heaven.”

I turn to the girls, “That sounded a lot more dramatic and biblical than when I said almost the same thing, it’s not fair, you would’ve had to been born a thousand years ago to get away with such great drama as that.” I turn back to the teacher, “Love, the first seed of the soul, that is what I was saying in your class earlier, but I said joy because it is more dynamic. When I reached the stillness, the nothingness, it felt like complete love, totally all encompassing, but also passive. That is why I think it is joy, that is the first seed of the universe, joy is love in motion.” The teacher translates this back to the guru who nods and smiles at me, then says something to the teacher, the teacher says, “In one of our scriptures there’s a man named Bhṛigu Varuni, and he asked his father to explain to him the mystery of Brahman, the mystery of the universe. His father told him that Brahman was joy, for from joy all things have come, by joy they all live, and unto joy they all return.” “That’s great,” I say, “it’s just as I felt it to be, it really can’t be any other way, and when it came to me, I just knew it was right.”

Then I remember that he didn’t know I came to that realization in his class, so I tell him, “And it was only today in your class that it came to me.” He looks a bit stunned at this news. I think we both realize at the same time, that I came to this understanding, not because that is what he was teaching, but because he was teaching the exact opposite, that life is suffering. So I ask him, “Why do Buddhists think life is only suffering and something to be gotten out of, as quickly as possible?” He shakes his head “they do think that much of life is suffering, but that is not why they want to reach nirvana, they want to reach nirvana because that is the climax of their evolution.” I must still look sceptical because he continues, “Karma is the process by which we evolve, life after life, to reach nirvana, we Hindus believe this too you know.” I think he says the last bit to give it even greater credence, I just shake my head, this is more or less the same stuff he had said earlier, and he was wrong then and he is still wrong now.

The guru says something gruffly to the teacher, I think he is getting annoyed at being left out of the loop for so long, so the teacher and the guru talk for a while. My knees are starting to ache from sitting cross legged for so long, and I think it’s making me feel a bit cranky, and now the teacher and the guru seem to be going on for ever.

Eventually, I butt in and say to the teacher “just now you quoted something, saying. “By joy everything lives,” and as joy is love, which is god, how can you evolve higher than that? You have just contradicted yourself. We are the manifestation of gods joy, we are joy, we are god” He doesn’t answer me but just translates straight away. I think he got admonished for not doing that last time, the poor chap is getting it in the neck from both sides. After they have finished talking, the teacher turns back to me. “The guru says that it’s true you can’t evolve higher than god, but you can evolve to know you are god. In the Bhagavad Gita it says,” he takes a breath and starts another quote. “By love he knows me in truth, who I am and what I am, and when he knows me in truth he enters into my Being. And in the Mundaka Upanishad it says very clearly, Who knows God becomes God.”

As he says this, I realise where our difference of opinion comes from, he is saying that a cup isn’t a cup until it realizes it is, so I say to him. “I believe even people who have not had the direct experience of being god, are just as much god as those who have.” This gets translated and the reply comes back quickly for once. “No,

only those who have reached god become immortal.” This sounds elitist and just feels wrong. I then realise, that he’s on about his bloody reincarnation crap again. If I ask, “What happens to the people who don’t reach god?” He will just say, “They will eventually, given enough lives,” so instead of arguing about reincarnation, I decide to tell him what I believe to be the way it works, so he has to argue with me instead. That way, we might get to some agreement quicker than if I was the one being confrontational. You don’t want to get on the wrong side of a guru.

I start by saying, “Can I tell you how I think it all works?” the teacher translates this and the guru smiles at me benevolently, maybe thinking that if he gives me enough rope I will surely hang myself. The teacher says, “He is very interested in hearing how you think it works, he says that you have been very enlightening so far and have already given him a lot to think about.” I feel a bit guilty now, maybe I was being a bit disingenuous. I start by saying, “In the beginning there was only the One, pure love, but this one was so great that the pressure built up and it brimmed over, or rather exploded, with joy, as joy is love in action. This explosion of joy is the whole of the universe, past, present and future, and everything in it, everything outside of it, every event that happens, every everything.” The teacher has been translating as I go along and everyone has been nodding agreement, so far so good. I continue, “But this explosion of joy does not happen anywhere, or in any time, as there is no place for it to happen in, and no time for it to happen in, there is no IN, there is only, ‘The One.’ So, the next big question is, how does the world we perceive come into being? Well, the energy comes from god, as we have already seen with love turning into dynamic joy, but the consciousness comes from us. It is people who have created the world, and people who are still creating the world as we speak. God has no consciousness, we are the only consciousness in the universe, we created the universe. In Christianity, they say god created us in his likeness, but it’s the exact opposite, we created him in ours, we attribute our life to him, but it is a partnership, he supplies the energy and we supply the creativity.” They are looking a bit more sceptical now, and the nodding has ceased, so I press on incase he tries to contradict me. “It is us all collectively, every man, woman and child who has ever lived and who will ever live, that have created all of creation. Individually we are just a small part, but we have access to all the rest. That is what I saw while standing on that bridge, all of creation, that we have created together. Life is not about getting anywhere, some people can’t go here while others go there, some people can’t be immortal while others aren’t. Collectively, we are the creators of the universe. We are one giant brain. We started this thing together and we will finish it together, and whether we as individuals see god in his pure state, is irrelevant. Those of us who have had direct experience of god are not going anywhere different when we die, to those who haven’t. Even those who don’t believe in god, or even those who have committed heinous crimes, they are all still part of the one. We are indivisible from each other, one giant brain imagining the universe, then creating it.”

The guru is silent as are all his followers, but I hear Beth say, “Wow.” Then Sally says to me in a hushed voice, “So are all these people, who are trying to find god, just wasting their time?” I turn to Sally, and also speak in a hushed tone, “Well there’s no need for everyone to see god face to face, to understand the nature of god and of the universe. You can just as easily let someone who has already seen it all face to face, tell you about it, that way it will only take a couple of hours, not twenty, or thirty, or eighty years. I don’t have to go to the Antarctica to know what it’s like, I can let someone else, who’s already been tell me. It’s nice to see for yourself, but it’s not necessary, we all end up in the same place in the end. There really isn’t anywhere else

we can go.”

The teacher, I think, is translating this as well, as the guru is not looking happy and he has started to stare at me again. After a while he says something which translates as, “What do you think about reincarnation, the corner stone of eastern philosophy?” I reply to this as sensitively as possible, as I don’t want to pull the rug out from under him. “There is only one god,” I say, “and he can’t be divided, he isn’t broken up into many little souls, so, at our center is god in his infinite glory, in every one of us we are all god. So no, I no longer believe in reincarnation. I am part of everyone, I am connected to everyone, and I think we can have direct experience of other peoples lives. So, if you ask me have I lived before, I will tell you, I live in the six billion people who are alive today, and the billions who have already lived, and the billions and billions who will live. All these lives, I can have knowledge of, because we are the same god. Whereas Alex will never live again, but my soul lives on in everyone, because I am god.”

The guru looks as I feared he would, as though someone has stolen his rug and he is left floating in space he looked old before, but now he looks old and drained. I feel I have stolen his life from him. No one says anything, we just sit there, thinking our own thoughts. Eventually it’s me who speaks first, “It’s late, we are going to get going,” I say to the teacher. He doesn’t translate this, he just looks at his guru who is still lost in space, so he turns back to me. “Yes, it’s very late, would you like the boy to show you the way back?” he asks. I say, “Yes please, that would be very good,” then the three of us and the teacher stand.

The teacher walks us to the door and out into the corridor, where he shouts for the youth, who comes running from another door on the corridor. He looks half asleep, I think we could have just woken him up. The teacher says something to him, then he turns to me and takes my hand and holds it in his hands, he doesn’t say anything but just nods, until finally he says goodnight again, then turns and re-enters the room which the guru is in.

The youth says, “This way please” and leads the way, back down all the stairs and out into the street which is even darker than before. It’s a relief to be out of that building, at the end there, it had felt really oppressive, like unexpectedly finding oneself at the funeral of someone you hardly knew not knowing quite what to say, or to whom. Beth puts her arm through mine and Sally’s. “Lets go home,” she says. We all huddle up for a moment to dispel the gloomy atmosphere, then we set off after the youth who is quickly disappearing into the dark.

The alleys are completely deserted now, so we follow in silence, which gives me time to reflect on my meeting with the first guru I’ve ever met. It had been nothing like I had imagined it would be. No cave, and no direction given, except ‘piss off,’ as that is what I inferred by his silence. I should have realised, that if you don’t fully agree with their philosophy, then you are not going to be very popular. He has spent many years believing one thing, then someone turns up saying something different, it’s going to throw you, even if you are a guru and I didn’t really go there to learn, which must have been annoying. I just wanted to get my newly acquired philosophy vindicated, or at least thought about, by someone who thinks about this sort of stuff. It probably wasn’t very polite, doing it the way I did, but it just seemed to happen like that. I don’t feel like I had much of a choice, anyway, it’s done now, but I would have liked some sort of feedback, other than stunned and despondent.

When we arrive back at the hostel, we see that it’s midnight by the clock in the hall, the whole place is quiet and appears to be asleep. As quietly as possible we make our way up all the stairs and out onto the balcony, where we can breath easily again.



Beth must have thought the same as me, “It feels like home, when I reach our balcony,” she says. We all stand a minute and absorb the atmosphere of our friendly balcony, the silence, the stars, and this evening there’s a slight hint of jasmine floating on the soft warm night breeze.

I turn to the girls who are leaning against each other, I think, it’s hard to see anything except shadows in the dark. “Good night again, and I’ll see you tomorrow,” I say,

Beth comes to me, puts her arms around my body and gives me a big hug, pressing the entire length of her body against mine. I hug her back with equal intensity, my eyes closed with my face in her hair, until that is, I become aware of Sally standing there beside us in the dark. I give Beth an affectionate kiss on the side of her head as I reluctantly push her away. Then Sally gives me a hug, but I’m hardly aware of it, as I’m still reeling from the intensity of feeling, from Beth.

I say good night again and go to my room, leaving the girls out on the balcony. Safely in my room, the feeling of passion quickly evaporates, and I forcibly put Beth out of my mind. I have a lot more important and pressing things to think about, than a young adventure seeking girl. I go into the bathroom and throw some water on my face, brush my teeth, then get into bed.

I contemplate reading for a while, as I’m not feeling tired now, I think I’m way past tired. I pick up my book and look at it, but I’ve gotten fed up with it and I can’t be bothered to read any further. I think what’s been happening these last few days just makes the book I’m reading sound mundane, I put it down and turn off the light. Now that it’s dark I can hear the girls talking faintly in the next room, so I make a conscious effort to ignore them. The first thing to come into my head is the look on the face of the guru when we left him. He looked shocked, like he had been slapped in the face with a fish but I was shocked too. It’s very hard to let go of the idea of reincarnation I had been trying to fit it into my picture of how things work, trying to squash it in somewhere. I had been thinking along the lines of, maybe we all had the use of the one soul, then, when we died the next person would get it, and all this happening outside of time, so it could all happen at once. That would be some sort of reincarnation, but not as people understand it. Reincarnation is such an attractive proposition that I find myself holding on to it, far too hard, but the truth of the matter is, we only have one life, we’re individuals, in our everyday lives. It’s only when we go deeper, that we see we’re one and the same, the one god. That’s what makes it feel like reincarnation is happening, because on that level we have access to all the lives there are, so we assume they’re ours, but they’re not, not on a personal level anyway.

Letting go of the idea of reincarnation was hard, it is basically accepted, as how it all works, in the West as well as the East. Everyday you hear someone say, ‘well in my next life I’m going to do such and such,’ or, ‘in my last life I must have been bad or something.’ You hear this all the time from atheist’s, Christians and everyone in between. So how that poor guru must feel, I don’t know. I wonder if he has dismissed my ideas or is re-evaluating his.

As I’m wondering this I hear a noise. At first I think it’s someone outside, tripping over a chair or something and I wonder who it could be at this time of night, and the hairs on the back of my neck go up, then I hear it again, and realise it’s coming from the girls room. It happens again and I quickly realise they must be having sex. I get up and quietly close the door to my bathroom in the hope of blocking out some of the moaning and groaning that’s now started. I get back into bed but it’s gotten louder not quieter. There’s no way I’m going to be able to sleep, with them going at it, just next door. I don’t know which one of the girls is making all the

noise, but she's started to sound like a steam train struggling to make it to the top of a steep hill. They must know I can hear them, maybe they just don't care, or it might be Beth wanting me to hear. I wouldn't put it past her, she would think it funny and a bit daring.

I pull on a T-shirt and go outside on to the balcony, pick up a chair and carry it to the corner, the furthest point from the girls room. I put my feet on the wall, look up to the stars and breath deeply. I think I might have been holding my breath or something, hearing them at it, had made me tense. I breath deeply again and let the tension drain away, I notice that the jasmine smell has gotten stronger, maybe there is such a thing as a night flowering variety. I keep breathing in large lungs full, but they are never quite enough, the scent is intoxicating but just not satisfying, so I give up trying to intoxicate myself with jasmine, it doesn't seem to be able to reach the spot, but at least it has taken my mind off the girls and I can't hear them from here.

After half an hour or so of watching satellites cross the sky, I wonder if it's safe to return to my room. I don't know how long lesbians make love for, or how they know when it's finished, but I'm sure it's probably longer than when a man is involved, so I leave it a bit longer to make sure.

After another few minutes I hear the door to the girls room open, one of them comes out onto the balcony closing the door behind her, she walks towards me in the dark then stops. I'm not sure if she knows that I'm here or not, so I say, "Hi." Shocked, Beth says, "Oh, Hi, I didn't see you there Alex," sounding honestly surprised. "I hope we didn't keep you awake," she says casually. I lie, "No, I just felt like siting out here for a while, I couldn't sleep either." "Can I sit with you?" she asks, "yes, of course you can," I say. She slowly walks over in the dark, puts her hand on my shoulder, drags a chair next to mine, then surprisingly, sits on my lap, sideways. She puts her feet on the chair she has dragged over, the chair I thought she was going to sit on.

She is siting in a kind of fetal position with her arms wrapped around her legs, I can feel she is tense. After the initial sock of her being on my lap has receded, I put my arms around her, she lets go of her legs and relaxes against me, turning her body slightly and laying her head on mine, she sighs deeply. I think it took a lot of courage, even for a brave girl like Beth, to come and sit on my lap.

We sit like this, silently for a while, but I've got a hundred things going through my head, most of them reasons why this is not a good idea, but either out of desire, or joy I don't mention any of them. My nose is level with her shoulder and her hair is covering my face, I breath her fragrance in deeply, it's a thousand time more intoxicating than the jasmine and hits the spot, she smells like she has just gotten out of bed, which she has, and slightly musky as well, in a very tempting way.

I nuzzle my face into her shoulder and lift the arm of her T-shirt with my nose, letting my lips drag passively along her arm: not wanting to be the one who starts anything. My eyes are closed and I move my head up and down so my dry lips drag and pull on her silky soft skin. Eventually I can't stop myself from tasting her, I open my mouth and bite gently into her arm, tasting the arousing acid of her skin, which makes my tongue tingle. This animal gesture has provoked an animal response, in one movement she has kicked the other chair away and has swung her leg over, so she is now standing astride me, she grabs my hair in both hands and pull my head back, leaning over me with the weight of her body pining me to the chair. Our mouths instinctively find each others in the dark, her kiss is wet and passionate, our tongues sliding and whirling around each other. I place my hands on the backs of her naked legs, just behind her knees and run my fingers up and down as we kiss, sliding my

hands up further I discover, to my excitement, she is not wearing any knickers, I dig my fingers firmly into the cheeks of her bum, she stops kissing me, arches her head back and presses her pelvis into my chest, the harder I squeeze, the harder she presses into me.

I let go, and run my hands up her arched back, she relaxes almost immediately and slides down my body until she is sitting on my lap, she pushes her forehead against mine, then slides back on my lap just far enough so she can undo my shorts. My dick naturally springs out, with no encouragement whatsoever. Beth with her head still firmly pressed against mine and holding my dick in one hand to guide it, lifts herself up then lowers herself back down on top of me, I feel myself slide into her.

For the first time since she'd sat on my lap, Beth speaks, "I wanted you from the first second I saw you, I knew there was something different about you, and that really turns me on." She breathes this into my ear, rocking her pelvis to the rhythm of her speech, then she is rocking to the rhythm of the faint panting noises she is making in my ear, it's the same rhythm as at the burning ghat. I can feel my body start to shake under the force of my banging heart, I'm not sure if it's my heat or Beth that's shaking me. We've now merged into one rhythm, become one person, with our one soul. I start to lose any connection or feeling in my body: which is not my normal reaction to sex, instead I get a rush much higher up in my body.

I feel myself leave my body again, but not as violently as before, more as though my soul had been gently rocked out of my body. This time I seem to leave through my chest. Every time I've left my body it has been through a different area, first on the bridge, I just stepped out of the whole length of my body, then in the cafe it was more of a mind melt but it was through the forehead, and then at the burning ghats it was definitely through the top of my head, now through my chest. The results each time have been different as well, this time I'm in a timeless place without form or light, but it's not the infinite nothing, it's not complete like that.

I think of Beth and me and, as if by magic, I can see us floating in a black space, still making love. Then I think of Sally, and I see her curled up asleep in her bed, also in space, with no background. Then for some reason I think of my mother: not the usual thing to do while having sex, but I'm hardly aware of being in the middle of, the throws of passion anymore, all I'm aware of is a slight rhythmic pulsating, but have no idea where it's coming from. I see my mother lying on her sofa with her glasses on, and her dog laying beside her, and again I don't see the room. Then I think of the world, and hay-presto, I can see it, in all its blue glory, it's just like looking at the moon, but five times the size, it is also floating in space, but that was kind of inevitable really.

The next thing I know Beth is calling me. To start it's coming from a long way away, but it's getting more insistent and closer, "Alex ..... Alex ...Alex!" and the rhythm has gone too, to be replaced by a shaking. I open my eyes and I see Beth, she is holding my face in her two hands, "Are you all right?" she asks, kissing my face. My first reaction is to be angry. I want to say, 'you stupid cow, what the hell do you think you're doing, calling me back. We can have sex any old day, but that was a physical experience you interrupted,' but I don't, as she didn't realise what was happening, and I can still feel myself inside her. I move my pelvis to check, I am definitely still inside her and as hard as ever. Beth interprets this as an indication that I want to continue, and starts to rock on me again.

I put my hands on her hips and push her back along my legs until I feel my dick slip free of her, then I pull her close again, "I'm sorry" I say in her ear, "but I don't

want to cum. I've got to keep all my energy, for everything that's happening to me." Beth stands up abruptly, "Fine, no problem," she says curtly and stomps off towards her room. Halfway there she stops, turns, and asks in a much softer voice, "Did you have one of your, out of body experiences?" "Yes," I say, "and it kind of broke the mood for me, I'm sorry." Which it did, but the main reason I stopped, was because I didn't want to use all my energy up on sex: that I shouldn't be having anyway. That out of body experience reminded me, what my main mission is at the moment, and it's spiritual, not physical.

Beth comes back over, "I suppose I'll forgive you then," she says, and gives me a kiss on the lips, "but I'm going to go to bed anyway, you can tell me about it tomorrow, goodnight." She gives me one last peck on the forehead, then goes off to bed. I put my dick back in my pants, then sit awhile thinking about the experiments I wished I had done while I had been out of my body, like seeing if I could have looked into the past or even the future. I wonder if the only way to get back to that place, is while I'm having sex. These different states of consciousness are getting stranger and stranger. I wander off to bed exhausted, but not depleted. I know I made the right decision not to cum. I have to keep that kind of energy intact until things are sorted out.

## Chapter eight

I wake feeling happy and relaxed, even though it looks quite late, judging by the sun coming in through the crack in the shutters. I stretch feeling decadent and contented, until that is, I remember about Beth and what happened last night. On the other hand, it is also because of her that I'm feeling so happy. It amazes me, that with everything that has happened: being god and all the rest, it's the attention of an attractive young girl that has made me feel so uplifted, but it's also because of her that I suddenly feel anxious. I wonder if she's told Sally what happened last night. That depends on how she really feels about me I imagine. I don't think she's so enamored, that she will want to leave Sally and be with me, at least I hope not. I know for sure she is not the girl for me, she's too young for one thing. Then I try desperately to think of other good reasons why she's not my type, but have difficulty finding any, except for her being a lesbian of course, but that didn't seem to bother her last night.

In any event, I'm not going to encourage her, that is if she is still talking to me, you never know exactly where you stand with woman. Maybe they have both upped and left, I haven't heard so much as a whisper from them this morning: I'm sure I would have heard them getting up, with the walls being so thin. I look at the time, it's half past ten, maybe they're just having a lie in as well.

I get up and have a shower, and decide not to worry about them, they're big enough to look after themselves. I don't feel like I behaved in a bad way, these things happen, even though Sally would probably not see it like that. I go out onto the balcony and stretch, rotating slowly with my eyes closed, feel the hot sun hit my skin as I turn, I'm feeling decadent again. The girls shutters are still closed but that doesn't mean much, as I've left mine closed to keep it cool inside. I notice a chair on it's side by the wall, then I remember Beth kicking a chair away, that must be the one. I go over and right it, I feel like I'm hiding the evidence, covering my tracks, but I'm not, it's just a chair on it's side, needing someone to pick it up.

I go down to the dinning room and glance around to see if the girls are there,

which they're not. I walk over to the desk and ask the owner, "Is it to late for breakfast?" He over smiles, "It's never to late, Mr Jones," he says. "I hope you had a good time last night?" he adds. For an instant I thought he was on about Beth and I, as that is foremost in my mind, but then I realise, he's on about my meeting with the guru, which I had hardly thought about. "Yes, thank you, it was very interesting," I answer cagily, as I'm sure he wants to know more. Before he has time to ask anything else, I say, "Can I have egg on toast with a pot of tea?" He smiles and nods, but I think he realizes I've given him the brush off. "Have Sally and Beth been down for breakfast yet?" I ask as casually as possible, "No, I haven't seen them this morning, it must have been a late night?" he asks. I don't know why he's so interested, or if his curiosity is to do with the guru, or if he's interested in the dynamics between the girls and myself: which ever it is, I'm not going to give anything away, "Yes it was quite late," I say, then smile and nod before walking over to the table furthest from him, by the window.

It's not long before my breakfast arrives, and I tuck in with enthusiasm. Everything feels and tastes good to day, and it can't all be down to Beth. A hell of a lot happened yesterday, like talking to the guru, which I think helped me a lot, even if it didn't help him. It was good for me to express what I had been thinking, now I feel ten times lighter, having unburdened myself, probably at the expense of the guru, who is probably feeling ten times heavier. I wonder if he will pass it on, this burden of knowledge, or just live in denial. Maybe when more people know about it, it won't be a burden, it will take on it's own existence: carry it's own weight independent of me, have it's own adventures out in the big wide world, in peoples minds, hearts and lives.

Yesterday was the first day I started to spread that seed, first by telling the girls, then the guru: who got the first real rendition, with no holes barred. It occurs to me, he might have told other people, twenty or thirty people might have heard what I had to say already. Maybe it's this, not Beth, that's making me feel so excited today, after all, I did stop myself from sowing my physical seed. It must have been a day for planting mental seeds, not physical ones. Though I do find it a bit strange that I would rather plant a seed in a wrinkly old guru, than a beautiful young woman. Maybe that's why this whole thing has happened to me, I have been making those kinds of choices since I can remember, going for the spiritual over the physical. I have always been more interested in why people do things, rather than what they do.

The door opens and in comes Sally, I expect Beth to follow but Sally just closes the door behind her, she sees me looking and waves. She looks happy enough, so I assume Beth didn't tell her what happened. She talks to the owner, then comes over and sits on the seat opposite me. Casually without asking or anything, a stranger would assume we were together with the casualness of her action. "Morning," she says, "did you sleep well?" she asks. "Like a log," I say. I think about asking her where Beth is, but decide not to, Sally must have been reading my mind though, as she says, "Beth's still in the shower." Straight away I get a mental image of Beth naked in the shower, with water running over her bum in rivulets, the same bum I was passionately squeezing just last night. I quickly push this thought out of my mind, and remind myself that I have already decided where my seed is going, in the spiritual not the physical, but I can see it's going to be a bit of a battle, especially hanging around with pretty girls.

Sally's siting sideways in her seat now, with her back against the wall and one foot on the other chair, she's engrossed in scratching something off her nail, out of the blue I get a feeling of overwhelming love for her, she suddenly looks so innocently beautiful and vulnerable, I feel I want to hold her in my arms to protect something so

perfect. I look away from her in case she sees, or feels, me staring at her. I can feel tears welling up in my eyes with the emotion, I swallow hard trying to make them go away. I glance over at the desk, where the owner is sitting reading something, even he seems so human and vulnerable to me now, with his big ugly head, that I feel the same way about him, I want to put my arms around him and protect him as well. In a way it's a relief that it's not just Sally that's making me feel like this.

Still the emotion is building, I'm having more and more difficulty holding back the tears, I can't look at either of them, so I put a hand over my eyes and try to relax, but in my mind I see myself sitting in the corner holding back tears. I also look so small, fragile and pathetic, but in another way beautiful, and even heroic. Meeting each day with optimism, even though we are so physically and mentally fragile: maybe it's because we know, that at our very center is pure love, it's this that keeps us going. We know if something really bad happens and we end up in a black hole, then right at the bottom of that hole we will find that love. It's there at the end of everything: it's there all the time, but it's impossible to miss when you're at an end. Then, when you see that love, joy will fill you, you won't even have a choice in the matter, it's what happens when love is made active by consciousness.

I must be out of my body again, or at least a bit out, or maybe just out of my mind, whichever. I'm not seeing things from a normal perspective at the moment. Everyone I look at I'm feeling an overpowering love for. Why I'm feeling like this now I don't know, but it's a bit like I imagined it would be, after becoming enlightened. Feeling love for everyone, and all that, but I thought it would be more detached, not these waves of emotion I'm feeling, I don't know where that's coming from. I'm only just managing to hold back a deluge of tears, if I just let go, I feel I'd flood this room. I want to cry a river of love, to wash away all the fears that haunt people: if people only knew their true divinity. Of course I don't, I'm a man and British, so I hold them back.

The door swings open and in comes Beth in her usual manner, assured but in an unconscious way, a bit like a blind person relying on fate to keep them safe, simply stepping into the unknown. Our eyes inevitably meet the moment she comes into the room. The overpowering love I had been feeling for humanity as a whole, is in an instant funneled into her eyes. She stops dead in her tracks as though she had walked into a wall, still holding onto the door she steady's herself before turning to close it. I look away so that our eyes don't meet again, I don't want her to think that the look of love, that nearly floored her, was because I'm in love with her.

I must find an opportunity to explain what is happening, and as soon as possible, before something silly happens. I think she only feels this way about me, because of the erratic and powerful physical tremors I've been experiencing. I'm like an uncontrollable volcano, spurting out love randomly in all directions, and she is inadvertently being showered, in fact, just now she was hit by a pyroclastic blast of love. The poor girl must be really confused. I must make it right as soon as possible.

Sally notices Beth arriving at the table and moves her foot off the chair so Beth can sit down. After she's sat down, I say as casually as possible, "Hi." She smiles airily and says, "Hi," back to me. Her hair is still damp and is brushed back, she looks fresh and not at all worried about anything, with her face held high and shining. She turns to Sally and asks if she has ordered her some breakfast, and I can tell that her pretend nonchalance, is just an act. I can see that inside she really is confused, whether it's the way she feels about me, or the way she thinks I feel about her, I'm not sure, but I'm going to have to tell her what I'm feeling so she can sort herself out.

Our breakfasts arrive at once, and we all have the same things. Sally says, "It

feels like we have all merged into one person, all getting up late, now all eating the same things, I feel like I'm losing my individuality, especially after you saying that we are all one." Beth looks at me, "It looks like you've started a cult," she says. I'm not sure if she is inferring anything, so I say, "I think there has to be at least a dozen people to make a cult." Sally puts her hand on my arm, "After last night's performance, I think you might have more followers than you think." This takes me aback for a second, before I realise she is on about the guru and his cronies. I pinch myself, I have to remember there was more to last night than Beth. "Well, I don't know about that," I say, "I'm not sure how well they took it, they might even be after my blood by now, for corrupting their beliefs." I glance at the door for dramatic effect. "We'll protect you, won't we Sally? Lay down our lives for our master," Beth says. I'm sure she's being ironic, but I blush anyway, then shake my head at her, "Now you're just freaking me out," I say, "that's much too much responsibility for me, it's only a philosophy you know. Believe it if you like, or don't, it's up to you, but there will be no laying down of lives." Beth shakes her head at me now and says rather worryingly, "It's too late now to start back tracking, you've started something and we'll just have to wait and see what happens." I don't know what she's referring to, so I say nothing.

Beth looks at me defiantly, "What are you planning for today?" she asks. "Absolutely nothing," I reply. "After such a hectic day yesterday, I'm going to walk down river until there're no more buildings or people, then I'm going to lie in the sun until I melt into the ground." Beth's face lights up, "That sounds great," she says, "we can take a picnic and spend the day sunbathing by the river." I must look a bit taken back as Sally says to Beth, "I don't think Alex was inviting us." Beth rolls her eyes, "Of course he is who else is going to look after him, if he has another turn?" she says to Sally. Sally looks at me for confirmation. "If you want to come, I would like the company," I say. I then turn to Beth, "But if I do have one of my turns, it's best if you just leave me to get on with it, I've got to learn from them you see, so don't bring me round again will you?" Beth goes bright red, I think it's the first time I've seen her blush. "No, of course I won't," she says defensively, but I have a feeling she is thinking, no I won't bring you round, I'll just let you die, you bastard.

Sally is already talking about the organization of the picnic and that we shouldn't forget to take something to lie on. Just to annoy her I say, "So shall we get going then?" she looks daggers at me, knowing I'm taking the piss. "If you want to go hungry, get sunburn and have to lie on thistles that's fine by me," Sally says scathingly. I shake my head, backing down quickly, "I'll be ready whenever you are," I say. She nods at me like I'm a schoolboy who's learnt an important lesson, "I'll go up and get a ruck sack and everything we need," she says, "and Beth if you get three litre bottles of water from here, then we'll get some food on the way, from a stall, O.K.?" Beth and I both say O.K.

Sally goes off to get the essentials for a comfortable picnic, leaving Beth and I alone to have our talk. Neither of us say anything for a while, Beth just stares out the window into the distance while I'm study her profile, hoping for a moment of inspiration or clarity. She's acting calm again, but I can see she is waiting for me to speak, no inspiration comes so I just start. "So Beth," I say, Beth turns her head and fixes her eyes on mine, her expression is totally noncommittal, she is just waiting. My mind has gone totally blank now, I have lost all powers of cognitive thought under her gaze, and to make it worse I know Sally won't be long. I must look like a frightened rabbit. I see a shadow of a smile cross Beth's face, which is just enough to open the block that had paralyzed me. I reach across the table and take Beth's hand in mine,

she doesn't resist but neither does she respond, she is still waiting. "Beth, you are so beautiful and open, every time I see you my heart jumps," I say in all honesty, "but at the moment I'm just an emotional wreck, one minute I want to laugh like a lunatic, the next I want to cry, which means I can't rely on anything I'm feeling. Just now I was feeling love for the toad behind the desk," I nod towards the desk. Beth opens her eyes wide in mock horror. "Now is not the time for me to get involved emotionally with anyone, and what's happening to me at the moment is really important, I don't want to lose it by focusing on something else, or someone else. This mad spiritual thing I'm on, is my path and I have to continue along it for a while at least. It might change later, who knows, but at the moment it's a purely spiritual path for me."

I start to take my hand away but Beth holds on to it, "I know what you're saying," she says with a slight laugh, "I think it's because you are an emotional wreck, that I want you, I want to put you back together. I see a vulnerable, and yet powerful man. That paradox is an irresistible combination for a woman. You're going to have to watch yourself, as we're all going to be after you, when even a devout lesbian like Sally is flirting with you, you know you've got something we girls want. So I think temptation is going to be everywhere you look until you settle down." I give her hand a friendly squeeze, then sit back in my seat. "Alex, I felt your passion last night, why are you denying yourself? What difference would it make?" she asks sincerely. "I don't know Beth, but I know it's what I've got to do for the moment, I've got to keep that kind of energy, my creative energy. O.K.?" I say. Beth nods her head, "O.K, but you know where I am, if you need me," she says. She then goes back to looking out the window.

I'm not sure if that went the way I had hoped, but at least she now knows as much as I do, about the way I feel, and I know something about the way she feels. To break the silence I say, "I haven't noticed Sally flirting with me," Beth looks at me and slowly shakes her head as though my stupidity was unbelievable. "She smiles at you when you talk, she touches you, you're a man and she hasn't stabbed you, what more do you want? Believe me, for Sally that's serious flirting." Beth pauses for a moment, "I'm not saying she wants to sleep with you, but she is attracted to you, and I've never seen that before." Beth says this as though lesbian Sally were some sort of official barometer, whereby all woman's feeling can be measured.

Just at that moment the barometer in question comes back into the room, holding up a small ruck sack like a trophy. "Come on, lets get moving," I say to Beth. Beth says, "You know, you can run, but you can't hide," she says this with a sinister grin as she stands. I think she's joking, but I say in an authoritarian voice, "You can stop that, right now, I'm the one who's in control here." Her grin just widens into a benevolent smile, taking away any authority I might have had.

We walk up the room to where Sally is waiting, "Did you get the water?" she asks Beth, Beth doesn't answer, but just turns around and asks the owner if she could have three bottles of water. I say to Sally, "I'll carry the ruck sack as you have done all the organization." Sally passes the ruck sack to me, then nonchalantly puts her arm around mine while we wait for Beth. When Beth turns around with the three bottles of water, I see that she notices this. I hold the ruck sack open so she can put the water in. As she's doing this Beth lifts an eyebrow knowingly at me, Sally had just confirmed everything Beth had said.

We all say goodbye to the owner, as he is watching us, then we troop out into the alley and the heat. "There's a stall that fry's food just around the corner," Sally says and leads us off in the opposite direction than we want to go for sunbathing. After a couple of minutes and a few turns, we arrive at a big vat of boiling oil, perched



precariously on a fierce gas burner. It's blocking half the ally and I wonder how many cows or children have been accidentally deep fried. Just standing close is making me sweat. Sally asks for three samosas and three onion bargees. The cook, who is bright red, fishes out what Sally has asked for with great flair, a true master at work. He slaps them onto some newspaper, then rolls them up with a flourish and passes them to Sally with a slight bow. Sally gives the two bundles to me to put in the rucksack, then pays him, but before I have time to stow them, my hands are covered in oil and the newspaper is sodden. The cook sees what's happened and casually gestures to me to pass them back, he wraps them all together in more newspaper, then more, and again more. He's acting like a machine that's lost the run of it's self, then finally, when the ball of newspaper has reached the size of a football, he ties it up with string and hands it back to Sally, with another even deeper bow. Sally bows back, then we set off down to the river, Sally swinging the ball of paper by the string as it's now too big to fit in the rucksack.

As we are passing our hostel, on the way to the river, I think I see the youth from yesterday go inside. "Did that look like the youth to you?" I ask the girls. Beth just shrugs but Sally thinks it might have been. "Do you want to check?" Sally asks me, but Beth answers, "No, lets just go and lie in the sun, I'm sure it can wait." I feel I should see what he wants but Beth is probably right, it can wait till later. "Come on," I say urgently, then run off down the ally beside the hostel, before the youth comes out and finds us. I can hear the girls running behind me, the sound of our sandals slapping off the stone steps, echoing in the alley like gun fire, until we break out into the sun and space of the river side. "Stay close to the wall," I tell the girls, "so we can't be seen from the windows." I point up to the windows and our balcony. We walk along the wall in single file, then when we reach the end of the building we scamper around a corner, "I think we're safe now" I say.

Sally shakes her head in disbelief at our antics, Beth just laughs. "Come on, lets try to find a quiet sunny spot," I say, and lead off at a brisk pace along the river. After ten minutes we come to the end of the ghats and have to move away from the river onto a small road, with some suburban looking houses, brick rather than tin. Then, after a mile or so they stop and the road ends at a big steel pipe, disgorging vast quantities of murky liquid into mother Ganges. "Well, I wasn't planing on swimming anyway," Beth says cheerfully.

After having a drink of water in the shade of a tree, from our bottle not the river, we continue on down stream, along a well worn footpath, which weaves it's way through some scrubby undergrowth and out into a big field of ripening barley. We carry on walking along the path which separates the river from the field. It must be close to midday now and it's gotten a lot hotter out in the open. In the distance we can see a tree by the river and hope it's a good place to picnic, as it's the only tree there is, apart from the scrub we had already passed through. We press on. The agitated air over the barley, frantically shimmering in the heat, creates a sense of urgency. The tree in the distance is our oasis, the field of barley our desert. It takes us at least ten minutes to reach the tree but it's worth it. This trees primary function is for picnicking under by the looks of it. The grass under the tree is short and flattened by the bodies of countless people and even more animals. We kick all the sticks and dry poo to one side, and check for snakes and any bitey beasts. Then we spread a saffron colored, Indian tapestry thing, with little mirrors sown into it, that Sally had packed, out over the area in the shade.

I think the idea of sunbathing, has been abandoned in favor of getting in the shade. We all flop down with the exertion of having been moving about in the midday

sun. The sun is directly overhead but hardly any of its rays are hitting us, as the tree is surprisingly lush. It must be drinking hundreds of gallons of water from the river on a day like today. Sally's mind is going in a completely different direction than mine. "There could be snakes up there in the tree, that might fall on us, you know?" she says. "There's more chance of there being spiders than snakes" I say, while scanning the tree for either, "anyway, I had assumed you were fearless," I add. "It's just snakes, I really don't like snakes," Sally says defensively. I can hear in her voice that she is looking a lot harder than me, for snakes in the branches above. "Do you think it might have anything to do with snakes, subconsciously, representing the male member?" I ask with feigned indifference. Sally leans over Beth and I see her face looming over mine, looking more frightening than a ten foot boa, "It was just a thought," I say backing down quickly, again.

Beth's laugh's are muffled because Sally is lying across her. "I think you would be well advised to stick to spiritual matters," Sally says sweetly, before adding venomously "because you suck at psychology." She gives me the evil eye for a moment longer, just to see if I have learnt my lesson, then retreats back to her side of the blanket, allowing Beth to breath again. "I'm so hot," Beth says, "and you two fighting is just making me hotter." She pokes me in the ribs with her elbow, "Why don't you go for a swim?" I suggest helpfully, "The water looks lovely." Beth sits up, "It sure does, I don't think I've ever wanted to swim more in my whole life than now, and there's a beautiful river right there in front of me," she points to the river as if we hadn't noticed it, "yet I can't so much as dip a toe in, how perverse is that?" She lifts her T-shirt and flaps it up and down, trying to cool herself.

I try not to notice the flashes of breast, this flapping action is revealing to me, as strobe lighting has given me a headache before, and this could easily be the same. Instead, I sit up and reach for the rucksack which is propped against the tree and pull a bottle of water out. I take a drink then pass it to Beth who has stopped flapping her T-shirt and is looking a lot cooler, sitting cross legged contemplating the river, but still with a frown on her face. She sips slowly from the bottle, making slurping noises, still intent on the river, I think she is plotting some revenge on the river for denying her access.

Sally turns onto her side and props her head up on her hand, "Alex, I've been thinking about what you said last night, about people being the creators of the world and not some independent god, and it's blown me away, but what about evolution, do you believe in evolution?" Before I have time to answer, Sally adds, "It's become the biggest problem for all religions, as far as I can see. Most just tend to ignore it, so what do you reckon?" Sally looks at me solemnly as if this is a deal breaker, never being good at pressure I say, "Well, yes and no."

Beth leaves the river alone and spins around to face us. "You can be such a woolly muppet at times," she says to me, then tries to push me over. "I haven't finished yet," I say as though I was speaking to a child. "O.K, to start, I don't believe we have evolved from animals, even though there could be the odd exception, ape girl," I say this to Beth, who starts making monkey noises. "Can you two just stop for a while?" Sally asks getting a bit annoyed, "This is something that interests me and for some stupid reason, I think you might know something about it." She directs this at me, so I pull myself together. "The process of creation is a bit like evolution, that's why religions get confused. Creation works by imagination. First, someone has to imagine something existing, before it can exist. Once the people of the world have bought something into existence, they can see the next step, and bring the next thing into existence. Your imagination can go further and further, a bit like evolution. It's only

limited by what you know at the time: I'm saying this process is not random evolution, which works by trial and error, but creation which has a conscious next step. What makes our creative powers so incredible and amazing, is that we are creating the past as well as the future, we have created evolution and the evidence for it because we needed an explanation as to how we got here. I'm sure the theory of evolution will be superseded, and in turn that next theory will be superseded and we will create the evidence for all these theories, because we can: we start in the middle and radiate out, creating as we go."

Beth who has been listening intently asks, "What about the Loch Ness monster?" I give her a shove, "We are the creators, but we can only create what fits in with the system that's already there, you can't just create something random, like a five headed beast with pink snot. Ideas have to evolve, the universe is an evolution of ideas, not an evolution of matter, everything is radiating out from god, radiating out from us."

Beth looks impressed and doesn't push me back. "So what system is already there?" Sally asks, "The system of yin and yang, is the system that we weave the fabric of creation around, it's the skeleton that we hang our creations on, if it doesn't fit in with yin and yang, then it can't exist." Sally sits up now and faces me, "So we are not as powerful as you had said," she says. I nod, "I'm only just putting it all together now," I say, "but what I'm sure of, is that we are the only consciousness. Yin and yang is just a system, it's not conscious and it creates nothing by it's self, it's actually the most basic of systems, on or off, one or zero, active or passive. It's like the double helix of D.N.A, the frame work of life that is almost infinite in it possibilities, but it still follows the simple system of opposites. I don't know if you have ever seen a picture of the double helix, but it looks like the perfect example of yin and yang in action, two segmented spiraling strands, with each segment connected to it's opposite by a link. People think things are so complicated, such as parallel universes, or loads of unfathomable dimensions, but really it's as simple as it's possible to be, the absolute minimum. If you want space for things to exist in, then you have here and there. If you want time to differentiate events, then you need now and then. You always need two points of reference, and that's what we have in all of creation, it's so simple and yet so perfect." Sally nods but asks, "So where do we fit into that system?"

I stretch my legs out then take another drink of water before I answer, more for dramatic effect than necessity, "We don't fit into that system," I say dramatically "we employ it, it's our tool for creating the universe, it's like a magic sword that divides the absolute. First we chop ourselves off the whole, then we can chop everything else up, people into male and female, temperature into hot and cold, we couldn't perceive temperature if it was not divided into hot and cold, so this process of division is behind everything we do, think, feel, touch or see. We only know that it's hot today because there exists other temperatures. We only know it's daytime because we know night time, but most importantly of all, that magic sword chopped us up into individual people. We would have no concept of self if we weren't divided into you and me, it's quite amazing really"

Sally takes the water from me, drinks then says, "For some reason it sounds a bit of a paradox to say we created our selves in the beginning." "Not at the beginning of time," I say, "but at the beginning of every thought. I think we are doing it all the time, everything is creative and we have to create ourselves before we can create something else. To see ourselves we first have to separate from the whole, become an individual. To think or experience anything we have to put it in relation to something else. That's why the great nothing, that is our source, is not conscious: it has no self

because it has nothing which it isn't, it is divided from nothing, it is complete and total."

I sit up now and wipe the sweat from my forehead on the sleeve of my T-shirt. "But why do so many people feel the need to get back to that state of non-being?" I ask. "It's great and everything but it's not conscious, you can't do anything there and most of all, it's always going to be there, so what's the rush?" Sally shuffles towards me a bit, then leans forward and takes my hand, "Alex, I can answer this one" she says, "people just need a break from time to time, don't you ever feel exhausted by it all? Sometimes I feel like I just want to stop the world and get off for a few hours." I rub her hand, she looks like she really means it, that she has felt like taking a break from it all on quite a few occasions. "I was really talking about Buddhists and Hindus wanting to get off the wheel of life," I say, "but I know what you mean, that's why I meditate and practice tai-chi, just to take a break for a while. I think everyone needs at least twenty minutes of stillness a day to relax, but also to feel connected to the whole again."

I notice Beth has been watching me holding Sally's hand, so I hastily let go, for some reason that I'm not sure of. "First, your saying you shouldn't go back to the nothing, then you are saying you should, make your mind up," Beth says rather curtly. I think she might be jealous, but of whom I'm not sure. "To live life to the full," I say ignoring her tone, "you have to be aware of both sides at once. Your full title should be Beth the creator god, who's power comes from the great nothing." This seems to improve her mood "wow, that sounds great, but I'm not sure that I've ever created much," Beth says. I shake my head at her, "No, you're wrong" I say, "you've created everything, you have to think of your eyes, not as lenses to see the world through, but as projectors that you are projecting the world out of." Beth looks sceptical, frowning "are you sure, how do we all see the same thing then?" she asks. "To start, I don't think we do see exactly the same things, only our individual subjective perspective, but it's quite close because of the collective subconscious," I say "but I think that implies lots of little bits of consciousness all joined, where as really, it's one flash of joy, all happening at once, outside of time and space, and we, as gods, turn this flash into conscious life, each of us projecting a more or less unified picture of the world. We are the writer, director and actor of our individual parts, and because we are conscious of our selves, we are also the audience, no wonder it's so exhausting"

I flop down onto the rug dramatically and roll onto my back watching myself in my mind's eye as I do. I open my real eyes and look up to see Sally looking directly down on me, with a knee either side of my head, as she is sitting cross legged behind me. Knowing I'm playing with fire I ask, "Is this the closest any man has got to being between your legs?" The look of upside down surprise on Sally's face makes me laugh out loud, but I close my eyes in case of violence. When nothing happens I gingerly open them to see Sally just about to pour water over my head, which she does, but as it's at least as hot as I am, it's not very shocking. "That should cool you down," Sally says, "and no, you're not the first man between my legs, so don't flatter yourself" she says smugly. I pull my T-shirt up and wipe my face, "So tell me about him, or them?" I ask. "Nothing much to tell, he was a friend and a boy, so I thought I should try it out, even though I knew it wasn't for me, in fact you remind me of him a bit," she says.

Sally puts her hand on my forehead and brushes my hair back, affectionately like a mother would to her son. In the bright light this makes my eyes heavy and impossible to keep open, so I go with it and almost immediately start to doze off. I hear Beth say, "I think you've put him to sleep." I can feel Sally is still running her

fingers through my hair, “Men are so much nicer when they’re asleep,” I hear Sally say to Beth. In my drowsiness I think to myself, wait till I start snoring, I then hear Beth say, “it’s a good job you’re gay, you’ve had a mans head pressed between your legs for a few seconds and you’ve put him to sleep.” They both laugh. “That’s why I prefer woman,” Sally says, “a lot more stamina.”

It goes slightly dark and I can feel that Sally is leaning over me, then I can hear the girls start to kiss. I consider coughing or something to let them know that I’m still awake, but they stop before I have summoned the energy to do anything. “I think I’m going to have a little nap too,” Sally says. I can feel her move but not far, she just lies on her side so, she is cured around my head, then she starts running her fingers through my hair again. “Why are you doing that?” I hear Beth ask sounding peeved. “I don’t know,” Sally says, “he makes me feel like everything in the world is full of love or something, like everything is perfect, even the bad stuff, I’ve never met anyone who’s done that before.” I hear Beth move then I feel her head lean against my side, she must be lying down too. “Yes, I know what you mean,” Beth says as she snuggles up closer to me. “It’s nothing sexual,” Sally says, “it’s a spiritual thing, it’s a spiritual feeling I’m getting.” Sally’s hand stops moving and I hear her sigh.

Then there’s quiet except for the insects buzzing and vibrating in the heat, I feel so relaxed, I feel like I’ve sunk down into the warm ground. Enveloped in heat, I feel the same security that the girls had been talking about, a spiritual certainty that everything is born of love, even the bad stuff.

I wouldn’t have thought that I would have a very strange and slightly disturbing dream under these circumstances, but I did. It started with me and the girls high up in some mountains in the snow. There’s a path in front of us winding it’s way right up to the summit, but we are just standing around talking. Until a stag comes along, and my dream turns weird. I tell the stag that I have to cut him in half, but not to worry as everything is going to be all right, so the stag lies down on it’s side and I kneel in front of him between his forelegs and rear legs, I put one hand on his rump to steady him, then proceed to saw him in half through his waist. Blood pours out and stains the snow a shocking red, the stag turns his head to look at me, to make sure that this is what’s supposed to be happening, I reassure the beast by telling him, it’s what’s got to happen and everything is going to be all right. After I’ve sawn him completely in two, I stand and look down in shock at his severed lifeless body, but then there is a voice telling me, ‘now you have everything you need to reach the summit.’ I look around for the girls, but they’ve gone. I notice their footprints in the snow going back down the mountain. I want to follow them but I can still hear the voice in my head, ‘you have everything you need,’ so I turn and walk past the blood soaked remains of the stag and crunch my way over the virgin snow, up the path that leads to the summit. Before I get any distance, or see what’s at the summit, I wake and I’m back on the rug, curled up with Sally and Beth like a little pack of pups.

I roll onto my side and watch them sleeping for a while, wondering what my dream meant. Sawing the animal in half was the most powerful part and I think this might mean I have to detach myself from my physical desires. Then the voice saying, you have everything you need to reach the summit. I have no idea what was at the summit, but it was definitely some sort of spiritual thing. Then there was the girls going back down the mountain, that must mean our paths are going to part or have to part. I think this dream was about Beth and Sally.

Beth’s hair has stuck to her face in the heat and she looks even more disheveled than normal, so I gently peel it off her face and hook it behind he ear. Her face is all flushed with the heat, compared to Sally, who looks as cool as ever. She might not

like snakes but she reminds me of one, cool most of the time but quick to anger. Whereas Beth would be some sort of rodent, maybe a guinea pig, all hot and excitable.

I suddenly hear voices close by, so I close my eyes and pretend to be asleep, so no one will disturb us. Then I hear the splashing of water and realise that the people are on a boat. I peak over the top of Sally's head so I can see the river. Just as I do, there is a small rowing boat full of people drifting by. It looks like an entire family, from small kids to grannies, with umbrellas for the sun, squashed in like sardines. Some of the kids start to wave as they spot me peering at them, I wave back, not expecting the boat to erupt with waves and cries of, "Hello sir, hello sir," from the children. One of the older gentlemen shouts, "A most glorious day for a picnic." I just wave and nod silently, overwhelmed by the exuberance of the greeting. The girls start to stir with all the commotion, just as the older gentleman takes out a camera.

Beth sits up rubbing her face, looking hot and bothered, not really knowing what's happening, while Sally just looks behind her, sees what's happening and collapses back down on the rug saying, "Oh no," and buries her head in the rug. The gentleman, I think, has taken a photo or two for posterity and is now waving goodbye. The children are still shouting, "Goodbye sir," as they disappear from view behind the barley. Sally mumbles from the rug, "Have they gone?" While Beth stretches and yawns. "Yes, the coast is clear" I say. Sally pushes herself up to a sitting position, squinting in the bright light, "Was that guy on the boat taking pictures of us?" Sally asks incredulously, I nod, "But I don't think he really captured us at our best." Beth turns round to face us, "I never saw anyone taking pictures," she says, then stands up to take a look. Almost immediately I hear, "Hello, hello" from down river, then Beth starts waving madly, "Aaarr, they look so sweet all squashed into that boat" she says still waving. "I wonder if they thought the same about us?" I ask "most likely, they thought we looked like sleepy lobsters, floundering on a rug, only able to wave." Sally pushes me, "Don't call my girlfriend a lobster, even if she does look like one," she says with a laugh.

Beth steps over to the tree, and with her foot she rolls the ball of newspaper with the food inside on to the rug, then pulls another bottle of water out of the bag and rolls that onto the rug as well, "Lunch is now being served on the poop deck," she says, keeping with the nautical theme. She then plonks herself back down on the rug with the grace of a boned seal. Sally goes to pick up the ball but Beth grabs it first and starts ripping at it like the demented child she probable once was. She doesn't get far as the string is still on, Sally spots her mistake and makes a grab for it, looking just as determined, but Beth is too quick and turns towards me using her body to shield the parcel from Sally. Holding on now, with both hands, Beth starts tearing at the parcel with her teeth, with Sally clambering over her back. I suddenly remember the guinea pig and the snake, and crease up laughing as they enact their parts: Beth rolled up and round, gnawing away, Sally slithering around her like a boa constrictor. I stop laughing with a start. I'm wondering if it's because I've imagined them like this, that they are now suddenly behaving this way. A freaky thought, what manner of monster have I created?

Sally has now managed to surround Beth and is slowly but surely prising the parcel from her clutches, eventually flinging herself backwards onto the rug with the shredded parcel in her hand. I have to laugh at Beth, who is looking more disheveled than ever, her hair looks like she has been dragged through a hedge backwards, ripped newspaper is hanging from her mouth, and is spread all over her and the rug around her, and to top it all she is crimson. She straightens herself out with as much dignity

as she can muster, totally ignoring my laughter. She then turns to Sally, "Bitch," Beth says simply, then takes a drink of water. Sally is trying to open the shredded ball, but the string has pulled tight and all she can do is copy Beth by pulling bits of paper through the strings. This pleases Beth no end who says, "That's karma." Sally throws the ball back to Beth, who throws it to me. "Men are supposed to be good at opening things, aren't they?" Beth says naively. I only just manage, to snap some of the string, even though it leaves deep red lines on my hands. I must be more macho than I realised, but I had no intention of failing in front of the girls. I throw the ball back to Beth with a casual, "There you go," and try my best not to look smug. Beth finishes unwrapping the many layers of paper, creating a mountain of oily rubbish, until she finally gets to our picnic, which incredibly has remained whole, and by the looks of it edible, even after all the abuse it has received.

Beth lays them on one of the less oily sheets of paper, and puts them in the middle. "Lunch is served," Beth repeats, "and before we eat, I would like to take this opportunity to thank Sally for providing this feast, and Alex who had the bright idea of coming on this picnic, and last but not least, I would like to thank myself, for adding a touch of class to the proceedings." She then flicks her bedraggled hair in an elegant flourish. "I would like to say something as well before we eat," I say, "I would just like to thank god, who has made this all possible, who has bought us all together, or divided us: whichever way you look at it. It's been an incredible experience working with me, with you, with us, and all the other people who have had a part in creating this world, and I look forward to further collaborations. So without further ado, I accept these onion bargees on behalf of everyone." Sally and Beth clap lightly, then we all tuck into our Indian fast food, which I think has benefited from being wrapped up in newsprint, then dried in the sun for several hours, and finely squashed by two fighting lesbians. A delicious dish, probably never to be created again. Then Sally produces a bag of Litchis from the rucksack for pudding, just to prove she is the best picnic provider. After we have finished and all the paper has been rolled back up into a ball and tied, Beth asks. "What shall we play now?"

Sally and I just look at her as if she's our child, who we don't particularly like. "I know" Beth says excitedly, "why don't you show us some tai-chi?" Sally suddenly brightens up and joins in with Beth's enthusiasm, "That's a brilliant idea, I would love to see some, I've never seen anyone do it in real life," she says. I know there's no point arguing, "O.K.," I say, "but I have to warn you, people don't really like to watch, it seems to make people very uneasy, it might be the intensity or something. I think I'd get the same reaction, if I was being watched having sex or masturbating, first shock then embarrassment." Beth says naughtily, "Why, do you also pull faces when you do tai-chi?" Sally laughs, not knowing the full story, and I feel bad for her. I think Beth does too, as she shuffles over to Sally and leans against her. "Go on then, we're both adults," Beth says, "if it all gets too much for us we can scream or something."

I stand and walk out into the sun, find a spot on the path which is the flattest, then stand facing the girls. I have a quick look around to see if there is anybody about, Beth shouts, "You look like a dirty old man, preparing to do something dirty." I flick her the V's, then slow my breathing right down, feeling my energy sink down and my body relax. After a couple of breaths I start to move on an in breath, letting my breathing regulate my speed. Because I'm being watched, I think I make more of an effort to get it right and concentrate harder, so as a consequence, I can feel the energy rushing around my body with greater than normal vigor. After a minute or so, I forget about the girls and lose myself in the ebb and flow of movement and energy. Then I gradually become aware of a strange sensation, at first I think it must be sweat

running down my arms, but then I realise it's not water at all but energy, running down the outside of my arms, from my hands down to my elbows, and from my upper arms down to my elbows. It feels so tangible and physical, as though it's real water running down my arms in warm rivulets. I have read about this phenomenon years ago, but I had not realised how literal they were being, it feels so physical. I start to feel it run down my back now, along my spine. If it were real water, I would be standing in quite a sizable puddle by now with this amount of flow.

Again, I remember last night with Beth, and congratulate myself on my will power, to stop going all the way with her, and ejaculating all my energy away. I'm sure I wouldn't be experiencing this incredible phenomenon if I had. Call me selfish, but I think it's better for me to have my energy running down my body in this incredible way, than for it to be running down Beth's leg. I become so absorbed in experiencing this sensation that I forget where I've gotten to, which pops the bubble of stillness that tai-chi movements are performed in. Then the whole thing comes down like a house of cards, my concentration lapses, the energy stops circulating inside and the rivulets dry up on the outside.

I just stop, knowing there's not a chance of me getting back up to full steam again. I do a little bow towards the girls, then walk back to the rug and lie down. I look up into the tree, still wrapped in the silence and stillness: a very similar mood to that which follows sex, follows ti-chi, contented and peaceful, but without the tiredness. "Is that it?" Sally asks, "It seemed to end rather abruptly." I can't help but laugh, "You girls," I say, "it's just never enough for you, you always want more." Beth leans over and looks down on me seriously. "It did look like you just stopped without reaching the end," she says, raising her eyebrows to indicate that I'm making a habit of not finishing. I give her arm an affectionate rub, "I'm sorry, I just lost concentration, then the moment was lost," I say, sticking to the story of last night. "Anyway, it was very impressive," Sally says, "and I can see why people might find it embarrassing, it's because you look like you are on another plane and not really here, which probably makes people feel like voyeurs, watching you doing something intense without you being conscious of them." I sit up and take a drink of water, "Yes, it's probably that which freaks people out" I say.

Beth nods her head with her own far away expression on her face, "I saw a ghost once" she says totally out of the blue, "and that freaked me out." The randomness of this statement makes me laugh, but Beth take this to mean that I don't believe her. "No, really I did," she says earnestly. "You're going to hear Beth's ghost story now," Sally says with a note of derision in her voice. Beth ignores her sarcasm and prepares herself to tell me her ghost story. "Don't expect too much," Beth says, "it's not a very exciting story, but it was awesome and scared the shit out of me."

I was staying at a friends house for a sleep over, when I was twelve. I think it was one of my first sleep overs, anyway, in the night I had to go for a pee, I think we had been bingeing on Coke or something. The toilet was down stairs, which was not a problem because it was just at the bottom of the stairs, and the hall light was on. I can remember seeing the light shining in under the door. I got up as quietly as possible so not to wake everyone, and I crept out the door and headed straight down the stairs, just concentrating on being quiet, but after I had gone a few steps down, I noticed a woman start to climb the stairs from the bottom. I was a bit shocked to see someone, and I thought it strange that she was carrying a candle when the light was on, but I wasn't really scared at that point, just surprised really. I think I might have made some sort of noise, like a cough or something, so she would know I was there, but she had no reaction whatsoever. It was at that point that I realised she was a ghost." I can



see the look of horror, still on Beth's face, as she is telling me this story, and I can feel the hairs on the back of my neck start to rise as I'm being transported there through Beth's tale. "I was frozen to the spot with fear," she continues. "The woman, dressed in an old fashioned kind of nightgown, was just a couple of steps away and the stairs were narrow, I had no where to go. All I can remember is feeling totally trapped, so I just screamed, I really screamed, I pinned myself against the banisters to give her room to pass and screamed. It's lucky she was a ghost because I would have deafened her if she had been a real person. Just as she was about to brush past me, I put my hands up to cover my face still screaming, it could have still been the same piercing scream, I'm not sure. Then everyone came running, my friends parents and her brothers, it was so embarrassing. I couldn't even speak, I think, I just said take me home, between sobs, I was crying by this time, so they took me home."

Sally looks bored and slightly embarrassed by Beth's story, as though Beth had let the side down, "I don't suppose you believe in ghosts?" Sally says to me. "I can't see any reason not to believe in ghosts, it's being dead I don't believe in, or the after life," I say. "The woman walking up the stairs was obviously alive, she was just seen outside her time. Infact it goes to prove that it's all there, every time we've walked up a flight of stairs. It is still there, happening now, and we are still there walking up those stairs. It's just that we only experience it once because we set it in time, in chronological order." Beth looks really pleased with herself and pokes her tongue out at Sally, "It's funny that I've always assumed the woman was dead," Beth says quizzically, shaking her head, "but it's bloody obvious now. She wasn't, she was walking up the stairs the same as anyone would." I can't help smiling at Beth who looks visibly relieved that she hadn't seen a dead person after all. "It's a contradiction in terms to think of a dead person" I tell her, "people are alive. Once you do reach the end of your life, that's it, there are no new events happening to you, you don't become a dead person with new things happening, wandering around with your head under your arm, or floating around somewhere."

Sally's frowning, and I've gotten to know her well enough to know that she's formulating a question, but whether to catch me out, or to learn, I'm not sure yet, a bit of both probably. I think she's one of those people who wants to know everything but doesn't like being told anything. "So what about mediums and psychics who say they talk to dead people?" She asks. "Anyone who thinks they talk to dead people, must be at least a sandwich sort of a picnic," I say. Sally nods thoughtfully mulling this over, but before she says anything that might make her look stupid and bruise her fragile ego I carry on, "But what they could be doing is talking to living people from another time." Sally says nothing but I can see she knows I was taking the piss. "I'm sure you could get in touch with your great aunt Agnes, who stopped living thirty years ago," I say to Sally, who is looking frosty despite the heat, "but only while she was alive: it's only the separation of time that's separating you from your great aunt Agnes, and time is something you are creating, and therefore have control over. Great aunt Agnes is still alive, just living in a different time. If you can get past this concept of time, you might be able to see her, or her life, or even communicate with her. She could be a bit shocked to hear the voice of her great niece in her head, who's not even born yet. Maybe that's why she ended up in an asylum?" Sally smiles now and shakes her head "I don't know how it works," I say, "maybe it would just register as a thought or a feeling, but I'm sure it's possible to communicate or at least have some sort of contact, with all living people, and as I don't believe in death, that means everyone who has been born. We are just one big happy organism type thing, but instead of many little parts making up a whole, we are a whole that is being divided into lots of

little parts, creating relative experiences, and with those relative experiences, we can become conscious. It's so simple yet so perfect"

Beth shakes her head, "It doesn't sound very bloody simple to me. I'm starting to get dizzy trying to think of everything happening at once, and people who are dead but aren't, they are still living their lives, but we can't see them because we have separated our selves from them with the sword of yin and yang." She begins laughing hysterically, which starts Sally and me of. We all roll about laughing until we start to cry, then through tears I say to Beth, "Yes, I think you've got it," which sends her to even greater heights of hysteria where she's having trouble breathing. Once Beth has got herself under control and wiped away the tears, I say, "I know it sounds funny, but if you consider that billions of people believe, you either go to somewhere called heaven, or somewhere called hell, forever, when you die, with lots of other people, then it doesn't sound quite so crazy"

Beth nods, looking like she is controlling another outbreak of hysteria. "Then, there are billions, who think that in their next life they might end up becoming an Aardvark, if they're not careful. When you think about it, it's surprising there are not more atheists, but most people seem to realize there is more than just what you see," I say. "So I'm going for the least crazy: that we are gods, wielding the sword of yin and yang and creating the world around us." Beth wipes away more tears. "Only in a disturbed mind could that be the least crazy way of describing the world," Beth says half jokingly. "Well, I've told you already, my mind was disturbed quite dramatically on the bridge, so it's your look out if you want to listen to this gibbering wreck," I tell Beth, also half jokingly.

Beth holds on to her chin to study me, pretending to make her mind up, but Sally who has been frowning away says, "What you just said about heaven and hell, and Aardvarks, they are both ways of manipulating you to do good things, or things people want you to believe are good, which I don't agree with. But, if all these billions of people believed they were gods and could do whatever they wanted, wouldn't the world turn into total chaos?" Still being silly, I ask sarcastically, "Do you think we're meddling with Pandora's box, and that we should leave well alone?" Beth, lowering the tone of the conversation even further, saying, "I wouldn't go anywhere near Pandora's box, I've heard she's a right skanky bitch," then she doubles up laughing again. Sally slaps Beth on the arse, "I'm being serious," she says seriously, "it could all go to shit." Beth rubs her bum, "Ouch, that hurt" she says to Sally between laughs, "but I quite liked it." Sally raises her hand to give her another whack on the arse, but thinks better of it, "It would only encourage her," Sally says to me, with a look of exasperation on her face.

Not wishing to add to Sally's woes, I think about what she is saying, about everything going to shit, but the only reference I have is myself, so I think about how I've felt towards other people since my experience. "Well, I think I feel a lot closer to people since I've seen how connected everyone really is," I say, "we really are all in this together, our collective thoughts create the world we live in, so, if the happy people can outnumber the miserable feckers, then it shouldn't be such a bad place." To punctuate this point I give Beth a slap on the arse too, as she is lying out between Sally and myself, practically inviting a slap. Beth rolls onto her back with her T-shirt all twisted, "You're a pair of bastards," she says indignantly, "but I love you both." I raise my eyebrows to Sally in feigned shock, "So much for woman's lib," I say, "a slap on the arse and she's anyones." Beth elbow's me in the leg "that's what liberated means, acting how I want, and not as I'm expected to" she says from behind her arm, which is shielding her eyes from the sun.

Continuing my conversation with Sally I say, “And I think if people realized their full potential, there would be an explosion of creativity, which could lead to amazing things we’ve not even dreamt of yet. I know this might sound radical, but people might even start working together.” Sally puts her hand up, “Steady on there, this is starting to sound dangerously utopian,” she says. “Well, something I noticed even before my experience, is that the biggest problem facing the West is boredom,” I say, taking the serious role for once, “which is incredible, because that’s tantamount to god saying, ‘I’m bored now, fed up with this game.’ I know it’s not like that for people in the third world: you’re hardly going to get bored if you don’t know where your next meal is coming from. But for the rest of us, we need a good shake up, and this might be just the thing, a whole new way of looking at the world, a whole new way of being. It might go pear shaped for a time, while people get used to the power of being creators, but then, I think we could be in for an incredible amount of growth and fun, and I mean real fun. When we realise the only limiting factor is our imagination, that the power is there, the source is totally, completely, absolutely fucking infinite, all we have to do is direct it. Lets saddle this bitch up, and take her for the ride of her life.”

Beth starts giggling again but says nothing, Sally says, “That sounds great, but where are we going to ride this..... bitch? Is there anywhere new to ride?” Beth is still lying between Sally and I, and for a moment I’m distracted by her breasts jiggling up and down and her exposed midriff, beating out the same rhythm, as she giggles away behind her arm, which is still covering her face. Then I remember my dream, the part about sawing the horny beast off of me: that’s my interpretation of it anyway. I manage to rein in my desires for the time being, but I know they’re not yet amputated, and I’m not sure I want full amputation, these feeling’s of desire are, if truth be told, quite pleasant.

I turn my attention back to Sally who I assume thinks I’ve been formulating an answer to her question, not checking out her girlfriend. With my cheeks still feeling flushed, I try to remember what she’d asked. “Well, it’s the same as doing anything creative, it’s one step at a time,” I say, having returned to my normal color. “It’s a process, first you have to be aware that you can create something, that would be like seeing the power, or the horse in this analogy, and, realizing it’s there for you, you’ve got to saddle the bitch up. That’s you taking the first steps to controlling this power, harnessing this power. It’s your first vague intention of going somewhere, it’s as small as that. Then there does require an act of bravery, an act of faith. You’ve got to leap up onto this horse of infinite power. Your not going to get anywhere if you don’t get on, but once you’re up there you will feel the intoxicating potential for creativity between your legs, just rearing to go, but which is now under your control. Then, without a shadow of a doubt, you will see the next step, so you just go off in that direction. Then you see the next step, and continue on like that, it wouldn’t be creative if you knew where you were going to end up, that would just be copying or repeating yourself.” Sally nods her head thoughtfully, “I’ve always liked to have an idea where I’m going to end up before I set off,” she says. I shake my head at her, “You’ve just got to be brave and have faith in yourself, and leap on that horse, then you’ll see that your wildest dreams are not so wild, and you could probably go even further if you want. You are god after all, you’ve already created what’s around you, so why stop there. Make it even more fantastic, just go for it.”

I can see by the look in Sally’s eyes, that she is about to ask what the IT is, so before she has a chance, I say, “First, start the going and the IT will become apparent. The going is just an attitude, an attitude of bravery and faith in the power that is our

selves.” Sally stands, then stretches “my biggest problem is that I think things through too much,” she says, “and I have to admit, I often think about the ways they could go wrong, which stops me doing things I feel I should. I need to have more faith. I need to be more like Beth, who does what she feels without thinking,” Sally says, giving Beth an affectionate prod with her toe. “I do think sometimes,” Beth says defending herself, “just not so negatively.”

“I’m going for a pee,” Sally says, then wanders off down stream. When she’s out of earshot, Beth asks, “Do you think she knows about us?” I’m a bit surprised by the way she’s phrased her question, as there is no us. “I don’t think there is really such a thing as a secret, especially between two people who are close. If she doesn’t know, it’s because she doesn’t want to know,” I say. Beth moves her arm which is covering her eyes, she looks surprised, “We are all so connected,” I continue, “that telepathy is just so obvious. I bet there’s not a person alive who hasn’t experienced it, on even a daily basis.” Beth nods her head, “So you think she knows,” Beth says thoughtfully. I shrug my shoulders, “She probably does, just not in any detail,” I suggest.

Beth frowns, and I can’t help laughing, “You’re so funny,” I say. “Thinking that thoughts and deeds are all safely locked up in your head, and that you’ve got the only key. It’s not like that. It’s open access for anyone who care’s to look. Most people are just too polite to comment.” Beth’s frown deepens, “So how can you look into my head so easily then?” she asks. I put my hand on her forehead and smooth out her frown, “Because nothing is stored in there,” I say, squeezing her head gently. I can feel her frown wanting to reform under my hand. “So where is it all stored then?” she asks. “It’s not stored anywhere, it doesn’t have to be stored, because it’s all happening now. Don’t forget, there is no time, you’re experiencing now as now, but last night you were experiencing that as now. There is only now, and every now is eternal or as long as existence lasts anyway. Every act of creation lasts forever. There is no death of thoughts or actions, because there is no time,” I say. Beth groans with brain pain, so I continue, quite enjoying watching her brain melt under my hand. “You just see the Beth part of this jigsaw,” I say, “but you can take a peek at other peoples pieces if you want, as I’m sure Sally has.”

Beth pulls herself up, using my leg as an anchor. “Well, it’s too late to worry about it now,” she says, still leaning on my leg, “anyway we don’t know where it will end, it’s just one step at a time, isn’t it?” she says mischievously, quoting me. “I think our journey was probably a one step journey,” I tell her. She gives my leg a squeeze, then pushes herself up onto her feet, “I need a pee too,” she says, then walks off in the same direction as Sally.

I collapse down on the rug, then spread myself out, taking up all the room, luxuriating in the physical and mental space of being alone. I can feel the sun on my legs now as the rug is no longer completely in the shade. Mercifully the sun has lost most of it’s intensity, as it too has gone in the same direction as the girls, down river.

After a few minutes, I hear a shriek from one of the girls, which instantly banishes the calm and provokes an adrenalin rush that catapults me onto my feet. I can see the girls, about fifty yards down river, with Sally leaning over Beth. I sprint down the path, fearing a snake bite, or something of that magnitude, but before I get there, Sally has started to laugh like a drain and has collapsed on the floor. Beth is standing, with her shorts around her knees and one hand on her heart. When I get there Beth says, “It must have jumped into my shorts while I was peeing.” Still looking shaky she points down to a crushed grass hopper in her shorts. “After I pulled my shorts up I felt something moving, so I just crushed it,” she says, starting to see the funny side. I reach down and delicately pull the hapless grasshopper out of her

shorts by one of its big back legs. It's still in one piece, but unnaturally contorted, and unmistakably broken. Beth, who has just about recovered, pulls up her shorts over her quite sexy knickers, which I'm sure are not her everyday ones. "I think we should consign this poor beast to mother Ganges," I say holding up the grasshopper for everyone to see. Sally has stopped laughing and has stood up to inspect the damage inflicted on the beast. "That was the second most scary thing ever to happen to me," Beth confesses shaking her head in disbelief. "Would anyone like to say a few words before I ceremonially fling him in the river?" I ask. Beth points her finger at him, "You bastard, I hope you come back as a slug" she says.

I throw him into the river, and we watch as he floats off down stream. "I think he might have been the victim," I suggest. "I know he was the victim," Sally says, "he was just the wretched instrument of karma." Beth turns to face Sally. "What do you mean?" Beth asks indignantly. Sally as cool as ever says, "Well, I'm sure you must have deserved a big shock, it was payback for something." She lifts her eyebrows to me, "Don't you think?" she asks. I don't know if she is implying anything or not, but I tell her what I think anyway. "I don't believe in any form of divine retribution, like karma, or heaven and hell," I say, looking at Beth. "But, she might have been thinking about getting some animal action in her shorts, which could account for the incident: creating your own world and all that." I turn back to Sally. "She just got it a bit wrong, like a novice witch would. She wanted a prince, or a princes, but got a grasshopper," I say, cracking up with laughter, and basically letting the cat out of the bag. Beth slaps me quite hard on the arm. "you two always want to make something out of nothing. It was just a fucking grasshopper, that just hopped into the wrong fucking pair of shorts," Beth protests fervently, before stomping off down river.

Sally watches Beth, who has stopped about twenty yards down stream and has started throwing pebbles at something in the water, probably the grasshopper. Sally sighs, then turns to me. "So if there is no punishment or karma, horrible, violent people just get away with being horrible and violent?" I crouch down on the sandy mud of the river bank, and Sally does likewise. "They're not getting away with it, they have to live that horrible violent life everyday, being surrounded by horribleness and violence. What's the saying? 'Those that live by the sword die by the sword,' that's not getting away with it, that's creating shit, and then having to live in it."

Beth is slowly wondering back, but pretending not to be, she's probably wondering what we are talking about. Sally continues, "So what about someone like Hitler? Is he not burning in hell?" she asks, already knowing the answer. "He did kill himself," I say, "he also killed many other people. Killing was his thing, he must have thought a lot about it. It surrounded him and permeated him, then he killed himself. End of story. Hitler is not somewhere dead, suffering the consequences of his deeds, except they did take him as well." I shrug, not knowing what else to say.

Beth walks past, behind us, and says, "I'll go and get some water." Sally smiles at me, then shouts out to Beth, "Thanks, sweetie pie." Beth ignores her. "I watched a program on telly once, about big lotto winners," I tell Sally, "and they had all, basically blown the lot. The premiss of the program was, how awful this was. They could have been set up for life, but the silly sods had spent it on nothing. What the makers of this program failed to realise, is that these are exactly the sort of people who do win the lotto, because they are generous and open people: things come and go for them. You are never going to get loads of money to stick in the bank. Some tight, mean person is not going to win, because they are tight: generosity begets generosity, and tightness begets tightness. You see it works in both directions. You create the world around you by being the way you are. If people could see this, I think they would have a really

long look at them selves, and change for the better. It's no good being a tight person, and telling yourself a thousand times, 'today I'm going to win the lotto, today I'm going to win the lotto,' because that's not what creates the world around you, it's yourself and your general attitude." Sally nods, "You've got to do more than just wish it, you've got to live it," she says, encapsulating what I'd said. Contradicting myself almost immediately, I say, "In a way it's a kind of karma: there are rewards, and a sort of punishment system. Loving people are surrounded by love, and hateful people are surrounded by hate, and it does come from the divine, as it comes from ourselves, who are gods."

Beth arrives back with a bottle of very warm water, which Sally passes to me, after she has taken a drink. "What are you two talking about?" Beth asks. "We're still talking about the in's and out's of your shorts," I can't help saying. Beth glares at me, but Sally valiantly comes to her rescue. "No, we have moved on slightly," she says, "I've just discovered why I've never won the lotto, it's not from lack of positive thinking after all, but because I'm just not a generous person." Beth squints at me dramatically, "Is he picking on you as well?" she asks Sally, while giving me the evil's. "I think it's time we headed back," I suggest, "before we all fall out and someone ends up in the river." Sally stands up. "Good idea, I'll pack up the stuff."

She walks back towards the tree, but shouts over her shoulder "you two play nicely now," so I throw a stone in the river just in front of Beth which splashes her. "I can't believe you did that," Beth says indignantly, looking at her wet cloths. She then leaps at me, trying to push me over, but I just lie down and think heavy, so she hasn't a chance of budging me. Beth leans over me and presses down on my chest. "You coward, fight like a man," she says. "O.K.," I say, and tickle her under her ribs. She lets out another scream, and leaps back. She must be very ticklish. We hear Sally shout, "What did I tell you two?" I stand up and offer my hand to Beth, "Come on," I say, "this is either going to end in tears or....." I don't finish my sentence because I don't want to voice it. Beth takes my hand and I pull her up "Where you going to say, 'relations'?" Beth asks provocatively, without letting go of my hand. "Come on," I say, then lead her back up the path, to where Sally is waiting.

## Chapter nine

We arrive back at the hostel feeling weary, after walking back through the tired, dusty, sun scorched air of the late afternoon. "I don't think I can make it up the stairs," Beth says, leaning on the wall in the hall, "one of you is going to have to carry me." Sally leans on the wall beside her and for once looks almost as flushed as Beth. "Only in your dreams," Sally informs Beth. "I definitely feel too exhausted to find out what the youth wanted, I need to lie down for a bit first," I tell the girls. I take a steadying breath, and lead the final assault up the stairs. I can hear the girls following with leaden feet, with Beth muttering about something. When I reach the balcony, I head straight for my door and say to the girls, "See you later," without even turning round to see if they're still there. Once in my room I collapse, face down on the bed with my feet hanging over the edge, as I've still got my sandals on.

I hear the shower start up next door, and I'm jealous that one of them has the energy to shower. My skin feels tight and raw with dry sweat and dust. I can just imagine how gratifying it must feel to have cool, soothing water, wash away the tightness. So I start to talk myself into it. I tell myself it will only take two minutes

max, all I have to do, is get up, take off clothes, step into shower, turn on tap, just the cold one, as that will be tepid, stand there for a minute letting the water do all the work, wrap myself in towel, collapse back on bed. I can imagine what it will feel like after and it will be worth it, so I tell myself. After three go for it.

The plan worked perfectly and I'm now lying on my bed, still damp, feeling much better having washed away the burning salt, and happy in the knowledge that a snooze is just around the corner. Even before the water has time to evaporate off my skin, there is a knock at the door. How anyone knew we were back I don't know. The owner does look like the sort of person who would have cameras around the place, probably in the hall, or maybe he has a spy lurking somewhere, whichever it is I've been spotted. I stand up, pull the towel tight around my waist and answer the door. As I expected the man with red teeth is standing there. "Most sorry to disturb you, sir," he says, looking at my towel, "But there is a boy here to see you, he has been here nearly all day sir" he says wobbling his head: I think to signify the madness of it all. I smile back to agree with him, "I'll be down in a minute," I say.

Back in my room I pull on some clean clothes, but most reluctantly I put my dusty old sandals back on. When I arrive back down in reception, the youth is again sitting on a stool under the full gaze of the owner. I immediately feel guilty, I could have spared him this ordeal, if I hadn't run away this morning. He looks relieved to see me, so I walk up to him with a big smile and shake his hand, as though I am pleased to see him, which I'm not, particularly at the moment. "Mr Sharma would like to talk with you again please," he says. Not knowing which one was Mr Sharma I ask him. "Is that the teacher or the guru?" He looks puzzled for a second, then realizes what I'm on about. "He is the teacher one," he says, pointing to the poster. I hesitate, to think for a moment, not wanting to go out again straight away. Before I can say anything the youth says. "Mr Sharma said he can come here also." This sounds better to me, so I shrug, "O.K," I say, "what time do you think he will come?" The youth looks perplexed again. "Straight away," he says, "I will bring him back straight away." He scuttles off out the door, a boy on a mission. I wonder to myself what the urgency is all about. I look at the owner, who smiles his inscrutable smile, I'm sure he must have got why Mr Sharma wanted to see me out of the youth, he'd all day to work on him, but I'm not going to ask, and I'm sure he is not going to volunteer the information. I order some tea and biscuits instead, and take my, by now usual seat by the window, in the otherwise empty restaurant. My tea arrives, delivered by the man with red teeth, I'm beginning to suspect that he is one of twins, both of whom chew too many red leaves.

I sip my tea and eat biscuits, wondering what it could be that the teacher wants with me again. After the youth has been gone for about twenty minutes, the door opens and in walks the teacher, Mr Sharma, followed closely by the youth. When the owner sees Mr Sharma, he hops down off his stool and starts going through a ritual of bowing and smiling, both done to an exaggerated degree. He even comes around the desk to guide Mr Sharma to my table. I am surprised to see he even has legs, let alone ones that work. I take all this to mean that Mr Sharma must be someone important, or at least respected around these parts. It's obvious that he's well educated by the way he speaks, and obvious that he is used to being bowed to, by the way he almost ignores the owners demonstrable esteem.

Mr Sharma takes the seat opposite me, the one the owner pulls out for him, "I hope you had a good day," he says, to break the ice. I assure him I have, then we sit saying nothing. He looks like he wants to broach a difficult subject, but doesn't know how, so to help, I ask him, "I hope the guru is well? He was looking a bit tired last

night.” Mr Sharma brightens up. “Yes, he is very well, very well indeed,” he says, “in fact, you’ve really stirred him up, I don’t think I’ve ever seen him so excited.” He stops again, like he has some bad news, or something unpleasant to add. “He wants you to go on a journey with him,” he finally says. I hadn’t been expecting this.

I imagine a trip with the guru, no wild nights on the town come to mind, or even eating, as I don’t think he has eaten for years. “Where does he want to go?” I ask incredulously. “To the mountains,” the teacher answers. A ski trip instantly comes to mind and I nearly laugh out loud as I visualize the guru on skis, negotiating an alpine piste. “To the high Himalayas,” he adds, as I must look a bit perplexed. “We have a small temple and ashram there.”

I wonder who the WE are, but before I can ask he continues. “It’s a very beautiful and very spiritual place, you will be very well looked after, there.” He’s starting to sound like a holiday rep, so before he can say anything else, I cut in and ask “Why. What am I going to be doing there?” This stops him in his tracks and for a moment he says nothing. “There is a very important work, only you can do,” he says cryptically. I say nothing and wait for him to continue, but he just starts pulling on his beard, and stares into the distance behind me, which is probably the direction of the Himalayas. After a moment of beard pulling he looks directly into my eyes. “We need someone who has been god,” he says, very seriously.

I notice that he’s referred to WE again so I tell him. “We are all god.” He nods and smiles. “But only you have straddled the two realities, been conscious of being man and god at once,” he pauses. “We need someone who has been there, to lead the rest of us.” Now I’m the one who is speechless, how the hell does he think I can lead anything, he obviously doesn’t know me well. I’m a background person, not a leader, so I tell him this. It’s better to just nip this plan in the bud, than to raise his hopes. He shakes his head and smiles. “This is not an accident,” he says, “the time for this to happen is in seven days, on the full-moon. The next equally auspicious time will be in seventy two years.” He stops to give me time to grasp the enormity of the situation. “We had given up on this juncture,” he says, “then you turn up. You nearly gave sadhu Banji the guru a heart attack, you see it must be fate, it must be you.” Grasping at straws now, I ask, “Has no one else seen that they are god?” He slowly shakes his head, in the manner a doctor would, if there was no hope. “Why not?” I ask him, feeling a bit pissed off. What the hell have all these religious types been doing with their time? There’s me an amateur attaining it, while the professionals, they appear to have achieved nothing. I don’t voice this, but that’s what it amounts to. “In ancient times,” he says, “many spiritual people attained enlightenment, but in the last century there has been no one that we’ve heard of.” He reaches forward and grasps both my wrists, “But now, you have come to us.”

I know by the look on his face that there’s no point arguing, and going to a monastery, high up in the Himalayas sounds like a hell of a lot of fun. He may just be right, maybe that’s why I had my experience on the bridge, and why I’m sitting here now, contemplating leading a group of people to god. “Don’t blame me if it doesn’t work,” I tell him. He lets go of my wrists and claps his hands. “Yes,” he says, “yes, this is most wonderful. I was not sure you would go, you westerners can be very independent and a stubborn lot.” I must look a bit surprised at this cultural observation, as he quickly adds, “But my guru sadhu Banji, he knew you would go. He sees it as destiny, he had no worries about you at all.” We sit in silence for a while, both thinking our own thoughts. “You do know I don’t believe in reincarnation?” I say, without warning as it pops into my head, suddenly realizing that we don’t agree on several important theological points. He waves his hand as though



he where brushing away an irritating insect. “Reincarnation has not always been a part of Hinduism,” he says glibly. “What we want to achieve, is to raise the consciousness of the whole planet,” he says, “not just of Hindus. We want to reach everyone on a spiritual level and raise them up, like erecting a tent. First you pull up the middle, and the rest follows, because it’s all attached. The closer we can get people to seeing god, the closer we are to them being gods and acting like gods.” He quotes again, “Who knows god becomes god.”

Suddenly, he’s talking about enlightening the whole fucking planet, he’s sitting there calmly pulling on his beard and smiling at me, while I’m starting to brick it. I’m seriously starting to suspect that they’ve lost the plot. Whoever thought this up must be barking. I reflect on some of the bastards and morons I’ve had the misfortune to meet in my life. No way are they going to change, let alone become enlightened. “I really don’t think it’s possible to enlighten everyone,” I tell Mr Sharma earnestly. He waves this thought away as well, “The world has been going through a very flat spiritual period, that’s what we hope to change. Not everyone will become enlightened, but we want to raise the vibration so more people will, as they did in ancient times,” he says, Like the tent, the outside is not as high as the middle, but the higher the middle the higher the rest. So, with you and seven hundred spiritual men on the holy mountain, all vibrating at the very highest level....” He lifts his hands up and marvels at the space between them. “It will make a difference. It will usher in a whole new spiritual era,” he proclaims.

What the hell have I let myself in for? I was thinking, ten or twenty sadhus max, not seven bloody hundred. I’m not going to ask him anything else, this is starting to freak me right out. I think of Beth and Sally, blissfully asleep up stairs, just to grasp onto some sort of normality. Mr Sharma notices my distress and puts his hand on my arm. “It will all be perfect,” he assures me, “you don’t have to think about anything, it has all been taken care of. As long as you’re there, that’s all we’re asking of you.” I think about asking what exactly my role will be, but think better of it. If I knew that, I would only worry. I’ve come to believe that deliberating about things is not very constructive, and it’s best just to wing it at the time, especially something like this, which is potentially very stressful. If I spend the next seven days worrying about it and not sleeping, and everything else that goes with thought induced anxiety, I will definitely be crap. Instead, I need to have a little faith in myself. Especially as this appears to be what I’m good at: Spiritual stuff.

I relax slightly, “So when will we have to set off on this journey?” I ask. Mr Sharma looks elated to see that I’m going along with the master plan, he can hardly contain himself. I can see that he wants to rush off and tell his people the news, whoever they are. “You need to leave tomorrow,” he says, “there is three days traveling. First you will fly to Katmandu, then you will take a bus, after that there is two days walking.”

It looks like I’m not going to have any time to think about it, if we’re going to be leaving tomorrow. “Are you coming?” I ask, realizing he’s been saying, ‘you,’ all the time. “I have to stay and coordinate things from here for a few days, but I’ll be there by the full moon,” he says. The guru, Mr Banji, will be traveling tomorrow, plus about thirty other sadhus. The boy will collect you at about nine tomorrow morning,” he says, gesturing to the youth, who has been sitting on the stool by the desk for nearly the whole day now. “So all I have to do, is be ready to leave at nine?” I say just to confirm the time. “Yes, that is correct,” he says, being equally meticulous. We shake hands, as if to seal the deal.

He pauses, having remembered something important, “There is just one thing,” he

says, then pauses again, searching for the right words, “The two ladies, you were with last night,” he stops again. I think I can see where he’s going with this, but I leave him to struggle, out of solidarity to the girls. “It would be very distracting for everyone,” he stops again looking worried. I can’t endure his pain any longer, so I say, “You don’t think the girls should go.” He looks relieved that I have said it and not him. “It’s not me,” he assures me, “I think they are two very nice ladies, it just wouldn’t be appropriate, and there aren’t the facilities there for ladies,” he adds as a final nail in the girls coffin. I wonder if he means padded cells and straight jackets, as the facilities they’re lacking.

I will miss the girls, but I also feel that things would get a whole lot more complicated, very soon, if we all stayed together, and I do find Beth very distracting, which is wholly my fault, so maybe it’s for the best. Mr Sharma has stood up, so I stand as well, “The next time I’ll see you, will be at the temple,” he says. I nod, “God willing” I say. He looks worried for a moment, then smiles. “This endeavor has the blessing of all gods,” he proclaims. Then leaves with the youth following in his trail.

I sit back down almost in a state of shock. What is happening? A week ago I was wandering around an Irish Mountain, minding my own business. Now after one of the strangest weeks imaginable: where I’m not sure if I’ve lost the plot or not. Things look like they are going to attain even greater levels of madness. I look up from my thoughts and see the freaky owner smiling one of his biggest smiles at me, I imagine his tongue shooting out and catching me, like a frog with an insect. This thought is very appealing right now, as it would mean that it was all just a bizarre dream, and I was going to wake up, just before I get dragged into his mouth. Nothing happens, so I smile back, then look away. Apparently I’m destined to continue this outlandish path that is unfolding before me.

I don’t want to sit in here any longer being smiled at, so I inform the owner that I’ll be leaving tomorrow morning, but that I will settle my bill later this evening. He tells me it’s a shame that I’ve only been here a few days, but he understands that I have important business with Mr Sharma. I don’t know if this is a question or not, or whether he knows what the business is or not, so I just say, ‘yes,’ nod enigmatically, and leave it at that.

When I get back up to the balcony it’s in partial shade, so I sit in one of the chairs, in the shade and try not to think of anything, just look out into the distance and be. This doesn’t last long, because I quickly realize, with a thrill, I’m looking in the direction that I will be traveling tomorrow. I admit to myself, discreetly, that it might have all gone crazy recently, but it is exciting. I put my feet on a chair in front of me, and my arms out behind me, then slowly stretch, savoring the butterflies in my stomach.

I sit on the balcony watching the shadows lengthening, and listen to the noise from the river below slowly diminish, as the days pilgrims leave for wherever they go at night. I’m too excited to sleep, yet too tired to move. Eventually the girls door opens, and Sally comes out onto the balcony. “Oh! Your up,” she says, surprised, “We thought you were still asleep, we didn’t hear any movement.” Beth comes out now. “There you are,” she says, as if I had been hiding. “We were just going to get something to eat, down in the restaurant, are you coming?”

The last supper comes to mind, but I say nothing, I’ll tell them later. “Sounds good,” I say, getting up. “I just need to get something from my room.” I go into my room and grab some money so I can pay my bill, then we all troop down to the restaurant which has filled up a bit since I was there an hour or so ago. The stoned Japanese are there, the loud Americans and many other nationalities, doing their

thing.

We sit at the table just past the desk, as it's the only empty one. I have my back to the desk, thank goodness, Beth is sitting opposite me, and Sally is sitting next to her. We check out the menus, which have been placed on the tables since I was here, presumably by the man with red teeth, or his twin. Then, to my surprise, the owner appears at our table. Leaving his stool twice in twenty four hours, it must be a red letter day. "May I take your order?" he asks, visibly relishing the novelty of standing at a table. We order our food, then the owner inclines his head to me. "It would give me great pleasure, if you would accept tonight's meal, as a gift from me," he states formally. I think this is a good indication that he does know my business with Mr Sharma after all. I accept graciously, trying to ignore the look of disbelief on the faces of the girls.

When the owner has left, Beth asks, "Why is he offering us a free meal?" Sally adds cynically, "There's no such thing as a free meal," in her broadest northern accent. I tend to agree with her, I think his motive is obvious, he wants to earn brownie points. "Because he wants to get in my good books," I tell the girls quietly, leaning forward so he can't hear. "Why?" Sally asks, with a jealous tone I've not heard from her before, "What's so special about your books?" I ignore her mood swing and say, "After we got back today, the teacher guy, Mr Sharma, came to see me," they both looked shocked that they had missed something, "he wants me to go to some temple up in the Himalayas, where they're going to have a ceremony to raise the consciousness of mankind," I say matter-of-factly, "and incredibly, they think I should be at the center of this ritual, or whatever it's going to be. So I'm assuming that's why we get a free meal,"

Beth looks ashen, as though she'd seen another ghost. "Are you going to go?" she asks, searching my face for an answer. I just nod solemnly. I knew this was going to be hard for Beth, now I realize that it's hard for me as well. I've grown fond of Beth, and even Sally, it must have something to do with the intense emotional state I've been in since I've been here. Powerful emotions and situations, create powerful ties, extremely quickly it would appear. I reach out and hold Beth's wrist, "Yes I'm going to go," I say, "I've got to go, I'm galloping along on my horse and that's where it's taking me." Beth sits mute, mulling this over.

Surprisingly, Sally says, "We're really going to miss you," she even sounds sincere. "When are you planning on leaving?" she asks. "Tomorrow morning at nine, then the ceremony is, 'going down' on the the full-moon," I say. Beth comes back to life now. "Oh my god," she says, "this is our last supper then." She slides her hand into mine and squeezes tight. "It's our last supper," I say, "but no one's going to die, we can still stay in touch." I pull my hand from Beth's iron grip. "Are you going to come back here after?" she asks. I wobble my head Indian style, "I don't know, but I doubt it, I don't think there's anything else for me to do here."

Our food arrives now at a very opportune moment, as silence has descended on our table. "Come on," I say, "lets be happy. New adventures await us all. When something vacates our life, there's room for something new. As long as we don't fill that space with grief, or yearnings for things that are not right for us that is. Keep that space open, and label it adventure, if that's what you want, then before you know it, that's what'll turn up." I take a few mouths of food then continue, as I'm starting to enjoying the subject. "You can't have a hole in a whole," I say, "so just make your hole the right shape for what you want, then that's what you will suck into that vacuum." Beth laughs, "My dad would say you were right mucky." I laugh and am happy to see that Beth is not too upset, "But don't forget it's your hole," I add "so you

do what you like with it. Don't make it adventure shaped if that's not what you want." Beth shakes her head, "Now you sound just like him," she says. Sally coughs, "You two are starting to put me off my food." I shrug my shoulders, "We are talking about creation you know, I thought you liked that subject," I say. Sally puts her fork down, "I do like that subject, but you're making it sound passive and girly, just waiting around for something to turn up and fill your hole. What about making something happen? That would sound more creative to me" she says. "That's because you're a girl of action," I say, "shaping what you want is the creative part, then how to achieve that will become apparent later. For you it probably would be action."

We eat the rest of our meal in silence. Beth looks at me a few times but says nothing. It's as if we have gone our separate ways already. I'm thinking about going to the mountains, Beth and Sally are thinking about their next move I presume. I can't help wondering if they are thinking along the same lines as each other or not. These last few days might have been as life changing for them, as they were for me. "Well, I'll tell you one thing," I say, "I'm never going to forget you two, or our time together." I lift my cup of jasmine tea and make a toast, "To us," I say. "To us," Beth says, "the three musketeers, all are one, and the one is all." Sally and I look at Beth, and applaud lightly. "I thought of that this afternoon," Beth admits preening her hair. "I'm impressed," I say, "I didn't know you did thinking as well." Beth pulls a face, "I've just had another thought," she says, "I don't think I'm going to miss you after all." At least the mood has lightened, it feels like we are old friends again, who have gotten back together, all in the space of a few minutes. It just goes to show how irrelevant time is, we have gone through all the stages of friendship in just a couple of days, this could have taken years. There's always time to do what we want, or need to do. We can do it in a day, or a year, or a lifetime. Lack of time is only ever an excuse.

Sally says to me, "I'm not sure if you've complicated my spiritual life, or simplified it. One thing I know now, is that it's not worth me going on anymore courses, I've just got to do it for myself from now on." She stops and thinks about this, "I used to like doing those courses, you bastard," she says, sounding peeved. "Now I know that everything is in me and even the stuff around me, is still me. I had a hand in creating it all. Before, I felt passive, feeling like I was just being carried along, but now I feel strong, like you have given me the tools to be brave, but that's also kind of scary. It's the reason I'm pissed off with you," she pauses again but smiles, "what I'm trying to say is, now I feel awake, and aware of what is actually happening, I know what I am." I nod sagely, "That's good, I'm glad one of us does."

Our plates get taken away, and Beth suggests we adjourn to the balcony for a spliff. I agree to the adjournment, but not to the spliff. On the way out I stop at the counter to pay my bill, which the owner has ready and waiting for me. He is as simpering as ever, and insists that I come again for a longer stay. He wishes me a safe and fruitful trip, then shakes my hand with both of his, whilst bobbing his head like a bird performing a courting ritual. I thank him for the meal and make my escape up to the balcony.

Beth has already started rolling one up. "I really feel like getting spangled tonight," Beth says, while putting the finishing touches to her joint. "Why are you abstaining?" she asks me. "For lots of reasons," I say, "firstly, it would buzz me up so much I wouldn't sleep, second it would start my brain racing, making me think too much, which would lead to me freaking out with everything that's happening." Beth lights her joint and nods her understanding. "And I've spent ages opening my energy channels up, so energy can flow through me unhindered and profusely. Getting stoned would just burn them out, with the added flow rate that weed induces." Beth starts to

giggle, "It sounds like you might explode," she says, then starts to laugh. "I just had a visual of you," she says, between laughs, "you're standing with your arms by your side wearing a silly helmet, which makes your head look like a golf ball, in your mouth is a spliff, then I light the spliff like a fuse, I stand back and you shoot off like a rocket." She cracks up now, in floods of laughter, and passes the joint to Sally, who is laughing as well, but I think at Beth, rather than her story.

Beth starts to sing and mumble the lyrics to Rocket Man, then it's not long before Sally joins in, looking cool with smoke coming out of her mouth as she sings. They look so free silly and that I'm envious of them. I would like to just stop the world and get off for a while too, but I know I'm under obligation. To whom, I'm not sure, probably not to Mr Sharma I've never had trouble saying, 'no,' if I didn't want to do something. So I must be driving myself forward, which is strange as I've never been driven before. Discipline yes, I can do discipline, but I've never been driven or determined before, even before Mr sharma had told me his plan I knew I was getting ready for something, that's why I had stopped short with Beth last night, and that's why I had stopped thinking I was going to die, just recently, I felt I had something more to do.

I suddenly realise that I am breaking my own rule, about thinking things though too much, as I speculate, that this could be the last thing for me to do. This might be the culmination of my life. I might die after this one last task in the mountains. Sally asks instinctually, as if she had been reading my mind, "Do you think that this ritual your going to be involved in, has been your destiny all along, but you just didn't know it?" Before I have time to answer she adds, "I was just wondering about destiny, I always feel that the things that happen were meant to happen, like meeting you." She's looking quite spangled now, to use Beth's phrase. I can remember that feeling of destiny and connectedness that dope gives you, as you first get stoned. When your brain is thinking so fast that it momentarily breaks though the barrier of time and space. Before it implodes back in on itself under the gravitational pull of being perishable and vulnerable. The highs and lows, being god then being man, what a roller coaster. The momentary glimpse of light, making the darkness seem darker. "Well, it's a funny thing destiny," I say, wondering how to approach it, "there are several reasons why lots of things feel as though they were meant to happen. Firstly, the future has already happened. Everything happens at once, so there's no real reason why we can't know it, which we do more than you would imagine. So when something happens especially something profound, it feels like destiny, because you knew it was going to happen." I stop, not knowing if I'm making any sense. "Yeah, I can understand that," Sally says, "but is that destiny in the sense that I understand destiny to be?" I can tell she's stoned by the way she thinks I can read her mind. "That brings me to the next feeling we have about destiny," I say, "most people assume that there's some power outside of ourselves, that dictates our future, and you know my thoughts on this." Beth chirps in, "A big no, no." I nod, "Exactly, because we create our own future. When the wheels of the universe bring about something for us, which it does because we've created it, it feels like destiny."

Sally looks at me sternly and does a kind of juggling action with her hands. "So destiny, yes or no?" she asks threateningly. "Yes, but of our own making," I say, "though I think that might be a contradiction in terms." Sally shrugs her shoulders, "Don't worry about that, I get your drift." Now it's my turn to laugh, "You sound like a right hippy," I say, "if you get my drift." Sally picks up the ripped packet of skins and throws them at me, missing by miles, with her stoned girly throw, "You should listen to yourself sometime hippy boy, then you would know what a real hippy sounds

like,” she says.

Beth walks halfway across the balcony to retrieve the papers. When she sits back down she starts rolling up another one. “I told you I wanted to get spangled,” she says, noticing me watching her. “It’s just that I believe that peoples individual thoughts, reverberate around us all to an extent,” I say, “so I’m also getting spangled just being around you.” She smiles at me dreamily, ‘lucky you,’ she says. I nod, enjoying the silliness coming off her. “luckily, I won’t be around for the come down tomorrow morning,” I say. I regret saying this immediately, as Beth’s smile fades. “I’m sorry” I say apologizing, “That was a crap thing to say, I’m just jealous because I have to keep it together for the moment.” Beth looks into my eyes, “You’re right, I know I’m going to feel bad tomorrow, that’s why I’m making the most of tonight.”

Beth lights her joint, then suggests that we play cards. We finally agree to play rummy, a special Thai version that Beth insists is easy to learn. It does turn out, not to be very difficult, but no one knows how to score, and with more than half the players stoned, it quite quickly degenerates into silliness and ends finally with Sally sweeping the cards off the table. We eventually settle on calling it a draw.

It’s gotten dark while we were playing and now it’s gotten late. “I’m off to bed,” I tell the girls. “I don’t suppose we will see you in the morning?” Sally says. I shake my head, “I doubt it, I’ll be gone by nine,” I say, “so this is goodbye.” I stand and so do the girls, Beth is the first to give me a hug, “You had better send me an e-mail,” she warns, practically squeezing the breath out of me. I kiss her on the forehead as her cheek is pressed against my chest, “I will, I promise. We’ve been through too much for me just to disappear,” I tell her. She eventually lets go and I can breathe again. Then Sally gives me a hug, not as intense as Beth’s, but very friendly with much rubbing of backs and arms. “I’m going to be e-mailing you lots of questions, you know,” Sally says. “O.K, goodnight,” I say, and walk back to my room without looking back. I hate goodbyes and I know if I hang around any longer we’re all going to be in tears.

Once back in my room, I regain my composure quickly and start packing so I can just get up and leave in the morning. I lay the clothes I’m going to be travelling in, out on the chair. I then take a shower, even though I had one a couple of hours ago, as it’s quite possible I might not get the opportunity to have another for a couple of days or even weeks, who knows. After my shower, I have a quick look around my room to make sure I’ve not left anything, as I’m not good in the morning. I set the alarm on my phone for eight fifteen, get into bed and turn the light out.

Just as I’m dropping off to sleep, there’s a light knock at the door. I get a sense of *deja-vu*, turn the light on, get out of bed, pull on the T-shirt I’d laid out for tomorrow, then answer the door. Instead of the red toothed man standing there, it’s Beth. “I’ve told Sally about last night,” she blurts out, “and she doesn’t mind,” she pauses a moment, “well, she said she understood.” Beth steps forward and puts her arms around my neck. “I can’t just let you go, I want to spend the night with you.” My first thought is that she’s being incredibly self indulgent, then I remember that she’s a lot younger than me, but finally I conclude that I just don’t want her as much as she wants me. If I spend the night with her it will be a sign of commitment, which I don’t feel I would want to honor in the morning, or at a later date. If I say yes tonight, it will be a very selfish act. Last night was different, it was a moment of passion, but this would be premeditated.

I put my hands on her waist, not around her waist, so I can regain some control, physically as well as emotionally. “I can’t spend the night with you,” I say, as sympathetically as possible, “because you would think too much of it, and I would

probably spend the next few weeks thinking about you too. I've got stuff I've just got to do, and that's not even mentioning the energy thing. I need to preserve it," I nearly say, I can't waste it, but catch myself just in time. Beth purses her lips and squints up at me, "You can be so annoying, why can't you do what your told?" I reach up and remove Beth's arms from around my neck, "And what about Sally?" I ask, "I'd feel really bad about her, lying just a few feet away in the next room." I nod my head to their room. "O.K, so no sex, that's fine by me, but lets just curl up together, I just need a few more hours of you," Beth says encouragingly, while putting her arms around my waist now, and pulling herself against me.

I sink my face into her hair and laugh, "You minx, you know I wouldn't be able to control myself," I say. Beth does a little evil laugh, "And Sally would still have a horrible night next door, thinking the worst." I remove her arms for a second time, "Good night," I say, with as much resolve as I can muster. I put my hand on the door to indicate that I'm about to close it, Beth does one final pout before she turns around abruptly and leaves.

I can't help noticing her knickers showing just under her T-shirt as she spins around. I close the door and contemplate banging my head off of it, for being so stupid. How could I have turned her away, I must have become even crazier than I'd thought. I can hear the girls talking in the next room, but not what they're actually saying, it's just mumbles from here, thankfully not shouting. I feel I need a cold shower before I can sleep tonight, but I can't as that would be too obvious. I get back into bed, turn the light off and try to think of something boring.

A little while later, maybe ten minutes or so, there's another knock at the door. I turn my light back on and drag myself back out of bed wondering who it could be. I'm pretty confident that it's not going to be Beth, not again, so I open the door again with some trepidation as to who it is. Standing there this time is Sally, with Beth behind her, "Beth told me you were worried that I would be lonely, if she stayed the night with you," Sally says, casually, "that's really thoughtful, she also said you didn't want....." She pauses, looking for the right word but doesn't find it, so she changes tack. "So we thought that, as it's like that. We could all spend the night together as friends, it being your last night here?" she emphasizes the word friends. Beth is behind her, nodding her head frantically. "O.K," I say with very little hesitation, "but no funny business," I warn Sally, waving my finger at her. "In your dreams" Sally says, witheringly, and laughs at the thought of it.

I stand aside so they can come in. Beth gives me a peculiar look as she passes, I think it might mean, see, I got my own way. Sally gets into bed first and I see she is wearing white knickers under her T-shirt. Beth's pinky red ones, I'd seen earlier, and as my boxers are black, I feel we're all expressing ourselves correctly. Sally scoots over to the far side of the bed, while Beth waits by the bathroom door so I can get in next. "Well, I wasn't expecting to have a sleep over," I say, to make it seem normal that I'm getting into bed next to Sally. "Me neither," Sally says, laughing. Beth says nothing, but turns the light out and gets into bed beside me.

## Chapter ten

Even after I realise the noise I'm hearing is my alarm, and not an alien ray gun that increases gravity, so you're pinned to the ground: I still can't move. On my left, Sally has wrapped herself around my arm like a koala bear on a tree, and I've lost all

feeling from the shoulder down, she might have chewed it off for all I know. On my other side, or more accurately on top of me, is Beth, my face pressed into her breasts. She has her arm around my neck in some sort of throat lock and has somehow pinned my hand to my leg with her thighs: I am completely paralyzed.

Assessing the situation, I make a tactical decision to first retrieve my arm from Sally, then I can roll over onto my side, which will lower Beth back onto the bed, then I'll be free. First, I have to connect my arm back to my body, so with my years of training in tai-chi finally being used for something practical, I send my mind back into my arm to regain control. It don't like what it finds there, a mass of oxygen starved cells and a knot of traumatized nerves, but there is still a glimmer of life, which I activate with the power of my mind. I don't know the exact location of my hand under Sally, but I can only guess it is somewhere quite sensitive, as she unfurls herself from around my arm as if I had used a cattle prod. I mumble, "Sorry" from under Beth's breasts, as I don't think it was the mighty power of my mind that got her to move so fast.

I quickly summon the energy to roll over and Beth rolls off me as planned, onto the bed, but tightens her neck lock as she does, pulling my face even tighter into her breasts. I reach over her to turn my phone off with my, now free traumatized hand, even though it feels three times as big as usual and has started throbbing. I finally release Beth's head lock, prise my leg out from between her thighs and manage to put my one foot on the floor. I put all my weight on my right elbow, and swing the other leg out, then finally stand, a free man,

Beth and Sally both make themselves more comfortable now, as there's more room, but they keep their eyes closed. I notice Beth has a wet patch on her T-shirt, where her left breast is. I must have dribbled in the night, but they were the only fluids that had been lost during the course of the night. My energy, and everyone's honor remains intact.

I'm really sweaty, but I've not left enough time for a shower. I go into the bathroom, have a pee, then throw some water on my face, brush my teeth, and leave it at that. I do get a clean T-shirt out of my rucksack, then put the rest of my clothes on, which I'd laid out last night. I notice Beth is watching me now, but she says nothing. Sally is facing the other way and I think asleep. I push the final remaining things into my bag, then I'm ready to go, I take one last look at Beth, neither of us says anything, but she is pleading and holding me with her eyes, I dare not go near her.

Reluctantly, I turn and walk out onto the balcony, closing the door softly behind me. The air is fresh and I breath deeply, replacing the feeling of suffocation bought on by loss, with one of energy, bought on by excitement at the prospect of going to the Himalayas. I go down stairs and into the dinning room. The youth is nowhere to be seen, so I order a cup of tea from the owner and sit on the stool the youth normally occupies. There's no one in the dinning room, so it would feel very churlish, if I had sat anywhere else under the circumstances. "You have much travelling in front of you," the owner says, wobbling his head. I don't know if he thinks this is good or not, so I just nod noncommittally in response. "It will be nice and fresh in the mountains" he says, wiping his brow, to emphasize the heat of Varanasi.

My tea arrives only seconds before the youth steps into the room, he looks relieved to see me, maybe he didn't relish waiting again. I drink my tea quickly, by blowing and slurping, so I don't keep the youth waiting too long. I then get some money out to pay for my tea, but the owner waves it away, as though he were allergic to such a vulgar substance. I thank him again and follow the youth out, that is, after the youth and I have fought over who was going to carry my rucksack. I win, thanks again to



years of ti-chi. It's really paying off today and it's only just nine o'clock.

The youth leads the way through the maze of alleys, away from the river to where the roads start. Waiting for us there is a yellow and black, three wheeled auto rickshaw, pimped to the max with dangly bits, lots of mirrors and old C.D's stuck on randomly here and there, it's crowning glory though, is a row of statues, Hindu gods, in a line above the windscreen, who will hopefully look after us. The driver, a young man, all spivved up in gold chains and go faster sunglasses, is leaning against his machine as though it were a super car. I haven't seen anyone like him for a few days in the old city, or any motorized vehicles come to think of it: I've gone from medieval, to a sort of modern in just a short walk. The youth and I get in the back, with my rucksack between us. The driver throws away the match he has been nonchalantly chewing, then slides into the driving seat in one fluid movement. He pulls a lever to start the beast, then revs a few times to signal his intent.

I hold on tight, this might not be a super car, but by the look of it, might be packing nitrous. The driver puts his hand on the horn, then pulls out into the traffic, without bothering to use any of the twenty or so mirrors at his disposal. I look at the youth beside me, he smiles realizing that I'm a bit worried. "He's very good driver, he's my friend," the youth assures me. Luckily there's lots of traffic so we don't get much speed up. After about fifteen minutes of slaloming around anything you could possibly slalom around, cars, buses, cows, dogs, people, we finally reach an open road, it's almost a motor way. Here the roles are reversed, and everything is overtaking us, much to the dismay of our racing driver, who only after several minutes realizes the futility of having his hand on the horn, and eventually he gives the poor thing a well deserved break.

Along the hard shoulder, where we've been relegated, our driver hones his swerving skills, every mile or two, by avoiding the stinking, bloated carrion that litters the motor way. They also give him a reason to rekindle his love affair with his horn. We turn off the motor way and down the short road to the airport, but instead of pulling up in front of the main building, we take a service road down the side of the airport building, to a barrier with two armed guards. The youth and the driver both start talking to the guards at once, so I don't have a clue what's happening. I'm pointed at several times by everyone, then the barrier is lifted and we go through. "Where are we going?" I ask the youth. "To the plane," he answers, making me feel stupid. "Why aren't we going through the airport?" I ask him, getting a bit worried, as our driver has started swerving around planes now. "It's private plane," he says, with pride. I smile with delight at this unexpected turn of events, 'wow,' I think to myself, this is rock and roll, being driven out on to the tarmac. To a private plane. I come back down to earth with a bang. I'm in a bloody rickshaw not a limo. What the hell is the plane going to be like? This question is answered immediately as we swerve around a petrol tanker.

I see in front of us a flock of Sadhus, milling around the steps to a plane, that, to my relief, looks normal. Two good looking engines and a shiny white body. It's my traveling companions that I'm a bit apprehensive about now: I'm going to stick out like a sore thumb in that crowd. "Who owns the plane?" I ask the youth. "A very generous and holy man who is a friend of Mr Bangi's," is all I get out of him. We pull up beside the waiting group of my fellow travelers.

I then remember we are not just mere travelers, but we're on a mission, we are a hand picked, crack spiritual team, on a mission to brighten this world up. I step out of the rickshaw with purpose, dragging my rucksack after me. The youth follows me out, then leads the way. I follow him, most likely in slow motion: as you do, walking

towards a plane, the shimmering effect of the heat coming off the tarmac is probably making me look cool and purposeful, my thinning hair blowing manfully in the breeze. The youth leads me to one of the Sadhus, whom I suddenly realise is Mr Bangi the, guru. Our commander in chief for this mission. I refrain from standing to attention and saluting, my little fantasy evaporating, and just as well.

He looks very pleased to see me. We shake hands and bow lots, like long lost friends. We don't say anything as we don't speak the same language, but I can see he is as excited as me about our mission. Infact the atmosphere of the whole group, reminds me of the start of school trips, when everyone would meets up at the bus, full of anticipation, wondering if anyone is going to be eaten at the safari park.

I shake hands with the youth and thank him before he leaves, then I'm on my own, amongst thirty or so Sadhus. I can see I'm the main topic of conversation, but no one is approaching me, so I take the bull by the horns and make the first move. Stepping up to the closest one and shaking his hand. Before long I'm surrounded by Sadhus shaking my hand, some even say, "Hello" which I'm relieved about, but mostly I think they are checking me out, in a spiritual way.

After a while, a steward comes down the steps and says something. We all then follow him back up into the plane. A strange procession of brightly colored flowing clothes, painted faces, ash covered bodies, long beards, very hairy, extremely skinny men, and me, ascend the steps and into the plane. I throw my rucksack into a locker: there's plenty of room as I seem to be the only one with any luggage what so ever. I take a window seat in a big luxurious, and I imagine fake leather, chair. The whole plane is one class, and that is first. When we're all in, there's not many seats left. Mr Bangi sits in the seat next to me, we exchange smiles and nods.

As the plane takes off, most of the sadhus are standing, looking out the windows. I get the impression most of them haven't flown before, and when the plane starts to really clime, they all jump for their seats, amongst a cacophony of exclamations and excitement. I assume many of these men have spent time living up trees, or living in caves, for years on end, or just wandering around on foot. It's great for me to be here with them, sharing a new experience together. It makes them more human to me, as I'm finding it difficult to get past the visual affect they are having. I feel more than foreign, I feel like an alien.

Apparently when you become a Sadhu, you become officially and symbolically dead, I think they even have funerals for themselves. So we do have one thing in common, we have all had an experience of our own death, in one way or another. I relax a bit more in my seat and smile at my fellow passengers, I'm sure in a day or two they are going to feel like family to me, probably not in the way Beth and Sally did, but extended family, maybe like cousins.

I get one final glimpse of Varanasi and the divine river, winding it's way east as we bank right and head north for the mountains. In my head I can see Beth and Sally, still asleep in my bed, and I think of the dream I had, all of us half way up a mountain, before I sawed the stag in half and set off to clime the remainder of the mountain on my own. What I ignored then, but realize now, is they were there with me halfway up that mountain, so we had climbed a long way together, the three of us. I've taken so many quick steps on my path in the last seven days that I can hardly keep up, it's been more like stumbling forwards head long, than steps, maybe I will catch up with myself soon.

The sun is shinning in my window and making me drowsy, so I close my eyes, I don't think I slept much last night for obvious reasons, there was always one of us moving, but the attachment we all felt for one another was palpable and real, and

worth a sleepless night. The love even shone through the confusing and distorting layer of lust, and now sitting here, it is the affection that is the enduring emotion, and the one that's making me smile. I'm glad we all spent the night together as close friends.

I wake up with my head banging off the window and the plane shaking. We must have hit some turbulence. I don't panic though, there's no point this plane crashing, as we are all kind of dead anyway. I look down and see green mountains, with steep valleys cut into them by thread like rivers. The plane starts to shake and buck again, it must be the mountains creating strange wind currents. None of my fellow passengers seem in the slightest bit worried. Maybe being already dead makes them impervious to fear, they have nothing to lose except their bodies, and they hardly have those, they're just skin and bones.

I peer forward and get my first sight of the snow covered Himalayas, a wall of mountains stretching as far as I can see into the distance, and reaching up into the sky, creating a jagged white wall in front of us, like fat white spires. I now have to reclassify all the other mountains I've ever seen down to hill status. The mountains of my native Wales are now the hills of Wales, and the mountain I live on in Ireland is just a bump. The captain makes an announcement over the speakers, I hope it's about us landing, otherwise we will be crashing into those mountains which are looming closer all the time. The plane hardly has to descend at all, as the hills, or by now mountains below, reach up to meet us. We bank left to land and I'm looking down on the city through the windows opposite, but the tops of the mountains are still visible in my window.

Once we land and leave the plane, a Nepalis customs official arrives in a jeep to stamp my passport, then leaves ignoring everyone else. Maybe when your dead you don't need a passport to travel. It's hot out on the tarmac, but nothing like Varanasi. The air feels thinner so the heat also seems thinner and superficial. An old bus trundles into view, it's the only thing moving so I assume it's our transport. As it gets closer I can see the black diesel smoke it's leaving in it's wake, it pulls up in front of us, I hold my breath as the black cloud it's been trailing washes over us then moves on.

We all climb aboard this dusty relic, which is just as dusty on the inside as it is on the outside. We've gone from first class to something that can't even be classified. I wipe a circle of glass so I can see out, this leaves the side of my hand black. The guru has sat next to me again, I can only imagine out of a sense of duty, we smile and nod again. The bus pulls out of the airport and turns left away from the city, this is just like a mystery tour for me, I know we're going to end up at an ashram, but when and how I have know idea.

After about twenty minutes and ten miles of road, we stop at a roadside cafe, the Nepalis equivalent of a truck stop, we all pour out the bus, and towards the cafe. There are a group of Europeans sitting at one of the outside tables, who not so discreetly start to take photos of us, or rather of the Sadhus, as we file past into the cafe. I can see they are intrigued to see me, amongst what in their eyes must look like a traveling freak show, but what is starting to seem normal to me: infact the Europeans look strangely foreign now.

I walk past them with the same indifference as the rest of my party. We walk through the cafe where there are many Nepalis people, mainly lorry drivers by the looks, but a few families as well. They all watch us as well, as we pass through. The Sadhus must be used to it, as they look indifferent to the attention. We walk out into a shady court yard where we sit down cross legged under the trees in little groups. I sit

down uninvited with a group of younger looking men, maybe of a similar age to me. "Baba ji," they say. I smile and nod, not really knowing what they mean but it sounds like a greeting. I think Baba might mean father. I say, "Hello." I have no intention of learning Hindu now, my little bit of French took me long enough. One of my new companions asks, "You English?" I tell him I'm Welsh but he just looks blank, so I capitulate, "Yes English," I say. He looks pleased that he had guessed right and tells his friends.

I can see he's working out the next thing he wants to say. "The guru," he says, pointing to the guru who is sitting in another group, "speaks us." He moves his hand like a ventriloquist's dummy when he says, "Speaks," and points at his friends when he says, "us." "You god," he says, he points at me when he says, "you," and makes as big a circle as possible with his hands when he says, "god." There's no point me elaborating, so I just say, "Yes," and nod. He and his friends discuss this amongst themselves, then he turns back to me. "Baba ji," he repeats, beaming at me. He then grabs my arm and gives it a good shake, his friends then join in shaking both my arms with their bone like fingers. Maybe it's some sort of test, maybe they believe only gods have well attached arms, I don't know, anyway, using my tai-chi for the third time that day, I regain control of my arms while going along with the joke and laughing.

Food starts to arrive, delivered by a whole family I would say. Lots of young kids carrying metal cups and jugs for the water, then a hoard of women bringing metal plates of rice and dal and a couple of old men handing out Nan breads. I ask one of the kids for a fork, and she comes back with a spoon a couple of minutes later. We wash our hands from water in the jugs, then we eat in silence. After eating everyone washes their hands again and that's it, meal done, no pudding, no port and no cigar.

They all start to wander back through the cafe to the bus, leaving all the dirty plates and cups in the court yard. I surreptitiously slip the spoon, they have very kindly lent me, into my pocket, realizing now that I am on a hardcore trip, and that at the ashram there was, more than likely, not going to be any facilities. I'm beginning to suspect these guys lead a pretty spartan life. On the way through the cafe I stop at the counter to buy some bottled water, but realize that I have no Nepalese money. Thankfully the man doesn't want paying, he waves away the notion of being paid, even before he sees the colour of my Indian money: being a holy man has it's rewards.

I walk out the door with two bottles of water and a stolen spoon, feeling downright guilty. I'd felt guilty as I slipped it in my pocket but I genuinely needed it, which eased the guilt. Now, with every step I take towards the bus I feel worse. In the end, I turn around and walk back to where the kids are gathered watching us leave. I hand the girl a big Indian note, then gesture that it's for all of them, it's doubtless enough to buy fifty spoons, but on the up side, I'll be able to use the spoon without choking.

Our whole stop lasts no more than half an hour and we're back on the road, blazing our way north. The bus apparently has only one speed, about forty miles an hour, which when we're on a straight bit of road feels terminally slow, but on corners feels death defyingly dangerous. We all have to hang on, lest we end up in the lap of the person next to us, in my case that would be the guru. On the down descents the bus makes a horrendous noise, screaming at gravity for making it go faster than it's beloved forty, and on the ascents I can't bring myself to look out the back window, because of the thick black smoke this nightmare of a bus, is pouring into the atmosphere.

We trundle on like this for hours, the road getting smaller and more twisting with every mile. The villages we pass are also getting smaller, but the scenery, by contrast, is growing exponentially. The giant mountains are starting to loom over us like hovering shadows in the failing light, just when it would not be possible for them to loom more, we stop. I surmise this to be the end of the road, as the bus would need to sprout wings to take us any farther. I stumble out into the cool, late evening air, dragging my rucksack after me. My body is still vibrating at forty miles an hour, the drone of the engine, still muffling my hearing, my arse has lost the will to live, and has stayed, I think, in the bus, stuck to the plastic seat.

We have landed, or rather surfaced, in a linear village, of about twenty or thirty buildings, at the mouth of a gorge. We are in fact a bit further in than the mouth, probably the throat, with the mountains rising steeply on either side, and the first stars appearing in the blue black opening of sky in front. We are all very quiet, the only noise now since the bus has turned off its decrepit engine, is the sound of a fast flowing river to our right.

Out of the dusk, arrive a small group of Sadhus, two of whom are carrying lanterns. They bow to the guru and say hello to a few others, but the mood is still somber, I think we're all still shell shocked from seven or eight hours of continual droning. They lead the way up the deserted street, we then take a left between two buildings and walk straight towards the mountain, which has a strange light emanating from its base. When we get a bit closer I can see this is a cave. We thread our way around some boulders and into the cave which is lit by two hissing tilly lamps.

On closer inspection the cave is more of an indentation in the cliff than a proper cave. It's only about thirty feet deep and a hundred feet long, with a few random boulders for decoration. To the left is a clay, man made, wood burning fire, sparking energetically, with a large pot steaming away on top. Sitting around this are another handful of Sadhus. There are more greetings, then they start dishing out plates of food to us weary travellers. I take my plate and find a comfy boulder to lean my back against, while I eat thick rice and lentil stew and potatoes, with my stolen spoon. I've gotten over the guilt now, and see this spoon as more of a gift from god, and who knows where it will end up, and who, or what purpose it will serve in the future. After eating, everyone goes outside to wash their hands, so I take my spoon out and wash it. Meanwhile a few of the sadus are laying out canvas tarpaulins on the ground, I assume to sleep on. These Sadus do like their creature comforts.

While I'm contemplating the best place to sleep, taking into account wind direction, the proximity to damp walls, not to mention wild beasts wondering in. I need at least one row of people between me and the outside, so they can get eaten first. The Sadhu, who I had been kind of communicating with earlier, comes up to me and says, "You sleep, house." He does all the accompanying actions, then starts to lead the way, gesturing for me to follow. For some mad reason I say, "No." He turns around looking confused, "House," he repeats, pointing to one of the houses just visible in the darkness. "No," I repeat, pointing to the cave where all the Sadhus are starting to lie down to sleep. "I sleep here," I say, in pigeon English. He smiles, wobbles his head and pats me on the arm in a camaraderie fashion, nodding his understanding. I quickly grab my rucksack, then find a good spot before all the prime sleeping locations are taken. I reserve one, more or less in the middle, by putting my rucksack there and laying out a sweatshirt where I intend to lie.

I then go out to have a pee. It's totally dark now, the boulders and houses are just darker shades of black. I walk along the cliff face gingerly, avoiding obstacles. I can

see other human forms moving about among the boulders, I imagine up to the same caper as myself. Once I've gone far enough for hygiene and decencies sake, I stop and pee, looking up at the stars, which are out in abundance in the clear mountain air. I can't see the mountain opposite but I know it's there by the way the stars suddenly stop as though someone had erased half the sky out with a colossal rubber. After peeing I walk back feeling very tired and ready for sleep, most of the lights are out now in the cave, bar one dim oil lamp whose light doesn't even reach to the walls of the cave. I carefully step around prostrate bodies lying on the tarpaulins, some with blankets, some without, to my little spot between a boulder and my rucksack. Someone has placed a blanket there for me. I pull on my sweatshirt then wrap the blanket around me and lie down, shuffling around a bit to fit my body into the contours of the cave floor.

I wake in the night with a numb hip, wondering where the hell I am. The river sounds like choir music echoing around the cave, rising and falling in rhythm. The lamp must have run out as there is only darkness. I roll onto my back and lie awake listening to the river choir, after a short while I start to hear a clear voice amongst the music, it sounds like someone chanting. After listening intently for a while, I realize it's the Buddhist chant Nam-myohorege-kyo. In the disorienting darkness, it's hard to know if the chanting is just in my head, or echoing around the cave as well. The more I try to pinpoint the sound, the more allusive it becomes. I can feel my body start to rock to the rhythm of the chant, even though physically I don't think I'm moving at all. I smile to myself as the sensation of rocking gets stronger, this is starting to become normal to me, this prelude to entering a more spiritual consciousness.

With each beat I feel like I'm growing in size. It feels like my head has filled the cave, as if the darkness of the cave is now inside my head and the other people in the cave are in there too. I can hear their own faint rhythms for a second, like a distant melody behind the primal bass beat, which is growing my body with every pulse. It is probably just my heart banging like a jackhammer, but I have no time, or inclination to explore that aspect, as I'm expanding underneath the Himalayas, like a giant mythical creature, turning rock into flesh, until I feel I am the whole chain of mountains, my feet in the east, my head to the west, the contours and peaks of the mountains, are the contours and peaks of my body. I lie there, calm now, feeling still and heavy, my immense weight pressing into the planet, the starry night sky above me. I lie like this, as a chain of living mountains, until the first rays of light from the rising sun strike my toes in the East, and we separate. The mountains return to rock, and I return to the cave at the base of the mountain.

## Chapter eleven

When I open my eyes in the morning, the first thing I see is the guru and a few of his cronies looking down at me. I close my eyes then open them again, but they're still there. This is one freaky end, to an incredible night. The guru smiles and nods knowingly: knowingly about what happened to me last night, not about me thinking he and his friends look like freaks first thing in the morning. He says something profound which I don't understand, then walks out of the cave with his compatriots. The cave is now empty, except for two Sadhus by the fire, who look like they are making breakfast. I don't know what time it is but it feels exceedingly early, I get up nevertheless, which entails unwrapping myself from the blanket and standing.

I slip on my sandals then wander out into the pastel light of morning, the sun is not going to be down here in this gorge for a good while yet. I can see the backs of the houses now, they are made of stone and proportionally quite tall and square, the roofs have big overhangs making them look vaguely alpine, particularly with the backdrop of a towering mountain. I follow the path that leads back between two of the houses and out onto the high street. There is not a soul about, not one sign of life, animal or human. I wonder for a minute where my homies have gotten to, you can't lose forty Sadhus in a place this size. There is another path opposite me, leading, I presume, to the river. I take this path, between what looks like might be a shop, when it's open, and a shed the other side. I follow this to the steep boulder strewn bank of the river. The river has cut a deep channel, and is thirty feet below me, where I see my homies, all of whom are washing in the milky snow melt water, standing amongst the boulders, in the fast flowing river.

There is not enough camaraderie in the world to induce me to get in there, at this time of the morning, so I duck out of sight before anyone sees me and suggests that I take a dip. Instead, I walk back to the cave where the two remaining Sadhus have lit a small fire at the entrance. I fetch my tooth brush and bottle of water and go to brush my teeth. When I arrive back, some of the Sadhus are also coming back from their morning wash. They look invigorated, or it might be just shock, as they seem to have acquired mad staring eyes. They crouch in front of the newly lit fire warming themselves, then swopping around as more arrive. Some reapply the ash they have not long ago washed off, while warming by the fire, rubbing it over the exposed parts of their bodies and into their hair, while others get to work redecorating their faces with paint. Colorful stripes down the forehead and onto the bridge of the nose appear to be the most popular, but the ash is a close runner up, they do seem to like their ash. As for hair, there is a wide variety of choice, there are lots of turbans of course, mainly white or orange, and there are some quite impressive buns and braids, but mainly it's the wild look, tamed this morning by freezing mountain water.

After all the superfluous decorating and pantsing around, it's time to begin ones preferred spiritual practice. Some sit meditating, while others sit chanting or they might be reciting some spiritual poems, I don't really know, but they're rocking back and forth rhythmically incanting. I'm not going to practice my tai-chi here because I'll look like a prat. I could go off and do it, but I want to stay here with these chaps, absorbing and participating in a group spiritual practice, something I never do up my mountain in Ireland. I sit in, as close as I can get to the lotus position and begin meditating. To start I'm listening to the chanting and watching the others. The morning is not my best time for spiritual practice as I find it difficult stopping myself from thinking about the day ahead, the evening is the best time for me. But after a while I get into it and can feel the energy start to move. It's all about energy for me these days. Before I used to enjoy the deep relaxation, but now I think I've turned into an energy junky, I don't know if that's a good thing or not.

After about half an hour or so the spiritual meeting breaks up and it time for breakfast, which is exactly the same as we had last night, except we get a tin mug of tea as well. Then it appears that we are getting ready to go, plates are being washed and packed into hairy hessian sacks, the tarps and blankets are all rolled up and tied together, every one working together. Then, right on cue, another group of Sadhus arrive from somewhere with four donkeys, two of which are already laden with sacks of stuff. My group load all our stuff onto one of the other donkeys. As I'm not doing anything, I say hello to the one who is as yet empty, giving him a good scratch under his chin, which he obviously likes because he lifts his head and curls his lip. As I'm

talking to him, I see one of the new Sadhus look at me as though I were a mad man, so I give the donkey a manly pat on the neck and walk away casually. I see my bag getting tied on to the poor beast, who is starting to look top heavy: I don't protest though, as I really don't want to be carrying it either.

We all set off, but we don't go far, just to the shop in the high street, where we stop. This time the last donkey gets loaded up with sacks of rice and a sack of peas and a couple of other sacks. Many the villagers are out now, it must be eight o'clock and the sky is bright and clear with the imminent arrival of the sun. A group of the Sadhus have started walking off up the street, I think they might be going on ahead. The rest are milling around, so I stick with this lot as the guru is still here. I do a vague head count and get to about sixty, they seem to be appearing from nowhere and I'm finding it increasingly hard to see who's who, especially with the ash men.

I'm still quite a talking point and am being looked at a lot, I smile back, but half the time I'm not sure if it's someone I already know or not. Soon we're properly off, I see the guru checking to see if I'm following, so I wave and he waves back. We walk up the street with the locals bowing with their hands together, I suppose it must be in reverence to holy men, but it feels strange to me, as my spirituality has always been somewhat hidden and not an overt way of life. I get more than my fair share of attention from the villagers as well. The normal looking person in a group of abnormal looking people is the freak, but we're all out of the village in about two minutes and following the path up the gorge, beside the river.

We are keeping a good steady pace considering how old some of the Sadhus are and I'm not feeling any ill affects of the altitude, which I was a bit apprehensive about. Leaving Varanasi which can't be more than a few hundred meters, at a guess, above sea level, to here, which must be two and a half thousand meters: quite a decrease in pressure. Two and a half kilometers up, and rising, not steeply, but steadily, at the same rate as the river. The sun has still not hit us, as the gorge is getting narrower. Then it suddenly gets very narrow and I can see a bridge up ahead, built over a water fall. The path abruptly steepens to allow for the water fall, then we're across the wooden bridge which has a massive drop the one side, while the other is just normal: quite disorienting.

Immediately over the bridge is a small stone cottage, with an old toothless woman sitting out side, grinning and nodding as the Sadhus file by, but as I pass her, her hand shoots out in a lightning reflex action. As I have no money on me I just smile, but it does show that quite a few foreigners must pass by here, as her hand is evidently well trained, and has a hair trigger. The path now has turned into steps and we are doing some serious climbing, back and forth, zigzagging our way up the side of the mountain. We are in thick jungly woods, so it's hard to see how high we are climbing, every now and again we get glimpses of the mountain opposite, receding further away each time, until we reach one corner where the trees have been cut away, and we can look back down the gorge and see the village we'd left earlier, way below us. I hadn't expected to see that place for a good while.

We continue climbing steeply, our band getting increasingly stretched out as we go. I start to over take some of the older ones and find that it's a good way of meeting them, having the opportunity to make some sort of sign regarding to the steepness of the climb, or the heat. Any sort of banality acts like oil, and lubricates social interaction and tightens the bonds. Maybe it's just making a connection that's enough, after that you have gotten each others psychic address, and know where each is in the grand scheme of things. If we are going to get anywhere with our undertaking, then feeling connected is going to be paramount.



Eventually, when everyone is starting to feel tired, we stop on the edge of a small plateau, that has been cleared of trees. As we arrive we gratefully flop down on the short grazed grass, some lie while others sit cross legged. I stretch my legs out and lean back on my hands, and for the first time I get a proper view of the high snow capped mountains above us. They are awesome, silhouetted against the blue sky. I can see the wind whipping up great plumes of snow from the tops of the mountains and spreading it across the sky. It's the sort of spectacular show of power by nature, that normally induces a feeling of trepidation and apprehension, but after my experience, or vision of last night, I feel like I'm home. From the ground where I'm sitting, and the path that I've walked, to the highest peaks, I feel the energy, and that energy is me. In a bizarre schizo kind of way I feel like I'm sitting on myself, it's like being in a play where you are also the scenery.

I look around me and can't help but smile at my fellow people. In this awesome stillness anything feels possible, there's nothing to confuse or distract the mind, just a feeling of power, ready and excited to do our bidding. I feel giddy with anticipation, like I just need to shout or jump up and down, anything to use some of the energy swirling around. Instead I start to laugh. I realise people are starting to notice me, so I try to hold it in, which works for about five seconds, until there's no containing it, and I'm rolling around on the ground hysterical, with tears rolling down my cheeks. Some of the other guys start to laugh too, but at least they have something to laugh at: me, then everyone's at it, we've turned into a mad flock of squawking birds excited by some invisible power.

Eventually calm descends and food is given out, a couple of small bananas and a ball of dal each. The chap who has inadvertently become my interpreter comes over with a cup, he sits down then hands it to me, "It's for high," he says, pointing to the mountains. I'm not completely sure if he means it's going to make me high, or whether it's going to stop me being high, most likely it's for altitude sickness. I shrug my shoulders and look confused, this starts him off on more amateur dramatics, he's rolling his head around like he's drunk and saying, "High, bad," then pointing to the mountains again. Eventually he gives up and pushes the cup towards my mouth and just says, "Drink." Inside the cup are slices of garlic in what looks like water. I taste it cautiously and just as well, it's revolting, really salty, I pull a horrified face to try and get out of drinking the crud, but he just says, "Drink, good." I have no option but to drink the salty garlic tea as he is watching me, but I make a mental note not to exhibit anymore signs of what he calls, 'bad high,' such as laughing uncontrollably.

After a blissful period of lying, looking up at the mountains, made even more pleasurable by being physically tired, we set off again. Across the small plateau, then climbing. Now and again where it's not so steep there are a few little fields with people working in them who stop and watch us pass. They have wooden houses up here with tin roofs, sitting perched on the edge of their fields. At one of these hamlets there is a woman drawing water from a well with a bucket, so I stop and ask her if I can fill my bottle. She fills my bottle whilst bowing continuously then hands it back reverently. I take the bottle back off her with equal reverence, then a few Sadhus stop and drink from the bucket with a ladle which is hanging by the well. This sends the woman into raptures of spiritual ecstasy, I wouldn't be surprised if this well, has just become a holy well, and maybe even the ladle has acquired divine powers.

We climb on throughout the afternoon, the pace slowing as the afternoon turns into evening. The trees start to thin, being replaced by more bare rock and short grass. The high mountains have disappeared in some clouds which have arrived from somewhere and there's a discernible drop in air temperature. I can see a village up

ahead, the first proper village since we left this morning, about twenty houses and a handful of sheds but it's hard to tell at this distance. I hope it's where we're staying tonight because my legs feel like weights which I'm having to drag along. As I arrive I'm happy to see that we are being given food, the first arrivals are already tucking into plates of steaming grub. I sit down, leaning against a house in the center of the village which is a triangular shaped space. There are lots of women and kids rushing about giving out food, I have mine within a minute of sitting, delivered by an eager young lad, it happens to be a pretty hot dal, rice and potatoes.

I finish mine before the last of our troop arrive, the last stragglers look drained as they stagger into the village, their matchstick legs quivering, and bloodshot eyes bulging. They are helped down onto the ground by earlier arrivals and quickly given food before they evaporate entirely. I get up and stretch my legs, my muscles are stiffening up now, so I go for a wander round, hobbling on the cobbles, my legs feeling twice the size as normal. I amble through the rest of the village which is deserted, everyone must be busy in the square. I walk out into the vegetable gardens which are on terraces and full of food, I pick a few peas and sit on a wall marveling at the view which just goes on and on, down the mountains, probably all the way to India, I just can't see that far. I eat the shells as well as the peas, they are young and tender and I'm sure chemical free in this more or less, pristine environment away from roads.

I stand and do a few very gentle tai-chi moves to loosen up. This is the time of day that I love, when everything is thinking about going to sleep. I can switch off my brain and just be. You're supposed to do your practice in the morning, when the chi is fresh and vibrant but that just excites me too much, which impedes the main function of tai-chi, which is to become still. That capricious, flibbertigibbet morning chi, is not for me, I prefer good old stale evening chi. You know where you are with that stuff, it's much calmer, and in my opinion deeper, more mature, so stillness is effortlessly attained, and with stillness comes openness. Open is what I'm feeling now, as I move gently through this vegetable garden, turning and twisting, pouring my weight from one foot to the next as I go. Openness lets you see and experience everything in all it's glory: as soon as you focus on something you've isolated it, frozen it in space and time, severed it's connections from god, and therefore from yourself. You end up seeing a glimpse of a memory, of something that interested you, just a shadow and not the real thing at all. Where is the fulfillment in that? You don't need to hold it in your sensory grip, squeezing the life out of it. Experiencing something needs to be gentle, it will come to you if you're open, and the experience will be total contact with the joy and luster of life, which makes participation worth it. Seeing only shadows can only be demoralizing, and just plain depressing after a while.

As my hand sweeps down temptingly close to where the peas are growing, I stop and pick a couple more, then start to wander back to the village munching away as I go. When the square comes into view it looks more thronged than before, as I get closer I can see why, there is another contingent of Sadhus arriving from the other corner of the triangle, they are streaming in from another track, looking as weary as we did. They have bought with them six more donkeys, which are being lead off to a shed to get unloaded. I squat down on a step a good way away, staying well out of the mayhem and wondering where in hell we're all going to sleep tonight, there must be well over a hundred Sadhus in the square now and not a cave insight.

I fancy taking a look at the path the other Sadhus came in on but I don't want to go through the square. I suddenly feel self conscious again, about being a foreigner. I tell myself not to be stupid, we are all just people and I now know we even have the

same soul. This dissipates all my doubts and irrational fears, so I stroll back down to the square, dodge my way through the sea of people, some standing, but mostly sitting. I don't know what reaction I get, because I don't wait to see, I just slip out along the other path without a backwards glance. I walk along the path for a few minutes until I come to a big boulder which has lots of stones piled on top of it. Above all of this Buddhist prayer flags have been tied to poles, then randomly stretched to other poles creating a giant knot of fluttering colour, from a distance, and if you squint a bit, it looks like a whopping big cake covered in hundreds-and-thousands.

I find a small stone nearby and throw it on top with all the others, then I make a wish. I assume this is what you do, and maybe the stones which are lying at the base of the rock, the one's which have fallen off, are wishes already granted. The path from here drops steeply, so I don't go any further, I just sit on a small boulder and watch as the light begins to fade. I'm not sitting long, before my interpreter comes walking along the path. He looks a bit embarrassed about disturbing my solitude, he bows then says, "Sorry," he then wobbles his head which I take to mean that he was sent, "time for sleep," he says, then he does a bit more head wobbling to turn it into a question. "Great" I say, as I slide down off the boulder. It's probably only about nine, but we got up not long after five and walked most of the day, and we might do the same tomorrow.

We walk back up to the village, where tarpaulins have been stretched between houses, and between sheds, and just about anywhere it's possible to stretch one. The place has been transformed from a sweet little mountain village into a refugee camp within minutes, and all the Sadhus are getting ready for bed. My guide leads me to one of the houses and I follow him in. We enter into a dim smoky living room with a stone floor, there is a family there, two parents a granny and two children. The two women are boiling something on a clay, wood burning fire, the man is sitting at a smoking brasier in the middle of the room, with the guru and another Sadhu, who I don't think I know. When they see me there's great excitement. My host jumps up and comes around the brasier to greet me, he grabs my arm and drags me to the stool he's just vacated and makes me sit there, he even drags the brasier closer, to make me comfy. I see that the brasier is just an old car wheel, with coals on it, and a bottomless paint tin plonked on top of the hot coals, as an attempt at a chimney. No wonder it's smokey in here, there are two fires and not one chimney, just an open window, where some of the smoke happens to be drifting.

The women hand us glasses of hot black tea, then two jars of white powder are placed on the floor, with tea spoons in them. My interpreter tells me one is sugar and the other salt. I take the sugar, my interpreter laughs, "Salt good for high," he says to me, then he tells everyone about my aversion to salty garlic tea, which they find hilarious, but I notice all us lowlanders take sugar, while the mountain folk take just a small spoon of salt. While us adults sit and chat, well, to tell the truth I just sit, the two small children are playing with a chicken, which looks like it would prefer not to be wrapped up in cloths, but as it's a Hindu chicken, it has resigned itself to its fate anyway, and remains unruffled. After our tea, a few candles are lit and the window closed, which entails sliding planks, which are stacked in the corner of the room, into two grooves at the top and bottom of the window opening, the last one is pegged in place so they're all held tight and secure.

Then it's time for bed. Our host leads us out of the house to a small lean-to shed, where two beds and two sleeping mats are laid out in a row, he puts a candle on the window sill, then leaves us to it. The interpreter tells me the bed at the end is for me. I don't argue with him and offer to sleep on the floor, as the mats look meager, and the

stone floor unforgiving. I get into bed which feels cold, damp and hard, if I knew where my rucksack was I'd put on some more clothes, but I don't, so I curl up and go to sleep as best I can.

In the morning I hear the others getting up, but it's ludicrously early again, so I pretend to be asleep. Once they've gone I roll onto my back and stretch, my legs are stiff from walking, my back is stiff from being curled up in a cold damp bed. I can see the dim, gray light of dawn through the window and I quickly realise I've woken up in a bad mood. Seven is very early for me, five is still the middle of the fucking night. I growl to myself, knowing that I'll have to get up soon, otherwise I'll get left behind. Once we get to the temple I'm not getting up before seven, no way, they can like it or lump it, getting up early is their trip not mine: and look where it's got them, not one of them has seen god, so they need me. I lean over and snatch the blanket off the gurus bed while I'm ranting away in my head, then lay it out over mine. Why do the stupid fucking idiots think you have to suffer to find god? What's wrong with them? There are some Sadus who hold one of their arms up in the air for years, until it withers away. Fucking imbeciles. A little bit of self discipline is required I know, but that's just normal mindfulness, not self torture. They're all probably out there now, washing in the coldest water they can find. It's just spiritual machismo, which shows it's more about ego than finding god.

I must have drifted back off to sleep as the next thing I know is my translator gently shaking my arm and saying, "Food now, food." The translator is smiling at me like an indulgent parent who has let their child sleep in. My bad mood seems to have improved, probably because it's a lot later and the morning sun is shining in, and I've warmed up a bit. I think I've missed the morning wash again, and this mornings meditation. A good thing too, I haven't joined a sect, I'm my own person. It would be a foolhardy person who told me different today. After the translator goes out, I get up. I go to the door and stretch in the fresh morning air, the sun is low but bright in the thin mountain atmosphere. There's no one about, so I step out into the little courtyard, wiping the sleep from my eyes. I look down the valley and see a lake of morning mist obscuring the ravine I know to be there, I turn around to go and get my sandals from the shed, but I'm hit by the sight of the mountains that have been towering behind me all the time, without me realizing. Last night when we arrived here, they had been hidden behind the clouds, but now they are right there, whiter than white, bigger than huge and more arresting than a posse of naked ladies. I'm held motionless by their splendor and enlarged by their magnificence. My silly little hissy fit of earlier is just embarrassing now, and came about because I was tired and had cold toes. No one's told me what I should be doing, everyone's been really nice, and I probably had one of the only free beds in the village, I've really nothing to complain about.

I go and put my sandals on, walk down into the field behind the shed and brush my hands in the still dewy grass until they're wet, I then wash my face with my hands. Once I've dried my face in my T-shirt I'm ready to face breakfast with a hundred or so strangers. In the square, breakfast is still going on, my translator sees me and calls me over, where he has a plate of rice and dal saved for me, I sit next to him grateful of his company. Communication is basically impossible, but we are getting to know each other anyway. I thank him for saving me some food and try to ignore the fact that most of the Sadhus are discussing me. I imagine that the first Sadhus I met back in Varanasi, are getting bored, explaining who or what I am, each time there are new arrivals. After breakfast everything is packed onto the donkeys again and we set off. I say goodbye to the family I stayed with last night. As we are walking up the street, all the villagers are standing around watching us leave and

waving us off.

Without warning, after several hours of climbing steadily, we suddenly leave all trees behind. Above the tree line, there's just coarse grass and a steady thin breeze coming down off the mountains, which we are still heading towards. We walk for another hour, then stop by a small, fast running stream, where there is a curious right angle bend: some sort of water shed which has cut deep into the land. It has been adorned with prayer flags hung from poles on either bank, but in such a chaotic and bright way: with many the flags hanging down into the stream, and others fluttering around in the breeze. It looks like the flags are the cause of the change in direction, rather than a celebration of that change. I look around me at the brightly colored and fluttering Sadhus sitting and milling around, and it seems as though the dam of hope and thanks, color and change has been splashed across this exposed treeless mountainside.

As I sit eating my lunch I think about all the prayers wrapped up in that mass of flapping cloth, all those wishes and hopes, and I wonder why people feel the need to externalize their prayers. Why ask something outside ourselves for help? How did it come about that ultimate power is seen to be outside of oneself? I then remember the wish I made yesterday evening at the other prayer site. When I threw the stone up onto the rock to make a wish. As I was doing this, I remember I was also sending that wish deep down inside myself, pushing it to my very beginning or center. I almost laugh out loud now, as I think about that wish incubating somewhere in my psyche. Maybe we make that physical representation of our wishes because deep down, on a subconscious level, we know that what we see around us in the world is a map of our inner selves. So, posting a flag or placing a stone is the same as just making a wish, but with the added bonus of having a reminder of what we have done. Thinking like this brings me back to the cave on my first night in the mountains, when I did literally become part of the scenery. As I remember the feeling of being the mountains, I let my mind sink down into the ground I'm sitting on, back down into the mountains roots, just to see if I still can. I can, I feel myself start to grow in size as I spread out in all directions connecting with everything again.

Before it gets out of hand, and with my last vestige of personal thought, I force myself to stand up, which is a good idea, because it brings me back to myself, but no sooner than I'm upright, I get a head spin, and have to sit back down, before I fall. As it is, I kind of wobble down and only just avoid collapsing backwards in a complete faint. I take a good few deep breaths until I can feel that sufficient blood has filled my head to resume normal service, then very slowly, this time going on all fours first, I stand up. After which I casually but gingerly walk down to the stream, not far below the flags, and throw the ice cold mountain water on my face, which shocks me fully back into the moment, and myself, with a freshness that is bordering on painful. The water is so cold it feels like it has needles in it, stabbing at my face. I throw a few more handfuls of this pain at my face to make sure, then slurp some out of my cupped hands, hopeful that no microbes can live in water this cold.

I walk back up to where our party are starting to ready them selves for the next leg of our journey. I feel much better, and excited about reaching the ashram today. The guru comes up to me holding a cup which he passes to me, inside I see the chopped up garlic and I know it's the dreaded salty garlic tea, my little wobble must have been noticed and quite possibly the altitude could have been a contributing factor, but this feels like I'm being punished for something I haven't done. The guru looks concerned and sympathetic, so I drink it down obediently, forcing myself not to gag from the salt. I hand the cup back and thank him. His blood shot eyes look tired, it

should be me looking after him, not this way round, as I'm half his age. Infact I'm amazed how some of these old guys have kept on going with the serious walking we've been doing in the last day and a half. Weighing about as much as a hungry whippet probably helps, there's really not a lot for gravity to grab hold of, on any of them.

We get moving again, not at anyones command but some people start and then we all follow. My legs feel stiff from sitting but they will soon loosen up. It looks as if we have done most of the steep bit, from here it looks like there is just a relatively gradual slope up to the snow line, and I'm sure the ashram won't be above that. The walking now has turned into an absolute delight, with a brilliant blue sky, panoramic views and a fresh breeze to keep us cool. For a moment I think I've been transported into a National Geo magazine, as we pass by a group of yak herders with their herd of hairy yaks. The whole visual affect is so foreign to me that it feels surreal, like I'm looking into another world. Maybe it's because recently I seem to be fluctuating between feeling connected to everything intensely, and then feeling like I'm totally separate, floating outside looking in. It could be down to the lack of oxygen, or might be some sort of brain glitch, but I think these two opposites are the two extremes of the same phenomenon.

I seem to have taken a step back from myself, where everything is either connected, or impersonal and detached. Both of these feeling could be explained by me having lost myself, maybe a part of me really did die on the bridge, maybe Alex the individual is lost forever. Everything has become objective, whereas before everything was subjective. My new found impartiality allows me somehow to connect or remain detached, but as I walk along I don't really care. I don't remember subjectivity being that great, and at least I can still have normal relations with other people, my friendship with Beth and Sally proves that. It was a bit peculiar, but so are all human encounters. I might have swopped one peculiar for another, but no one will notice as we are all weird anyway, when we come face to face with each other. So I won't have to live in a cave by myself for the rest of my life. I can't help chuckling under my breath when I think that technically I wouldn't even be by myself in a cave, as it's becoming apparent that I've gone and swopped myself, for a back stage pass to the theater of life.

I look up from the ground, and my musings, to see we are walking towards a double peaked mountain, the second peak has only just become visible as it was hidden behind the first, but now, as our path is running slightly parallel to the mountains, the whole of the twin peaked mountain is becoming visible. The ashram must be at the base of this mountain, as that's as far as we could walk today, and it has the air of a holy mountain. It looks different from the other mountains, and anything that differs from the norm gets imbued with special powers or meaning, by people who look for patterns such as myself, the Sadhus and most enquiring minds. Anyway, with twin peaks it's bound to pack twice the punch.

We keep walking and walking, taking hours to move slowly around the shoulder of the mountain. I look behind and see that our line of pilgrims are getting strung out, the farthest back are about a mile behind now, just little yellow dots looking almost stationary in the vastness of the mountain highland, and there is still no sign of anything resembling civilization up ahead. I keep walking, following the twenty or so Sadhus in front of me, the donkeys are in the line just behind me, every now and again I hear one of the donkey drivers encouraging them on, but that is the only sound, apart from the wind blowing in the grass. Eventually, after another hour or so of trekking in exhausted silence, one of the Sadhus points to something in the

distance. From here it just looks like a tiny pile of stones with a few flags, tucked tight into the base of the mountain, but as we get closer I can see that the piles of stones are actually arranged into several stone buildings and the flags are, I think, tents.

I feel a flood of new energy with the excitement of seeing this place, which is going to be home for the next week, and even from this distance I can see it's a special place, nestling directly between the two mighty peaks and protected from the weather on either side by the hips of the mountain, curling around it. Looking at the vast expanse of snow above the ashram does make me think of avalanches, and the way that snow would be funneled down on top of the ashram if there was one, but I will reserve judgment until I get there, which won't be long now. We have picked up the pace, the end is in sight, and soon we can make out people, some of whom are waving. We wave back, but only for a second as we are all really tired.

Finally we arrive, with much excitement from the twenty or so Sadhus who are there to greet us. They are bobbing up and down and some even burst into song, maybe they've been here by themselves for months, who knows, but their enthusiasm is infectious and I can't stop myself from bowing madly as well. After the initial enthusiasm has died down, a few men lead us past three empty bell tents, then past one of the low stone buildings and into a roughly cobbled courtyard. There are four buildings around the courtyard, but as none of them touch, the courtyard is open at all four corners. All the buildings are, more or less, the same, except for the one facing the mountain, which is slightly higher than the others and has two small windows, which makes it look grand compared to the rest, which look like low sheds. They all have stone roofs, which is why they looked like piles of stone from a distance.

The donkeys are being lead diagonally across the courtyard and out the other side, so I follow them as I don't want to lose my rucksack again. It's going to get cold very soon, the sun has already dropped behind a mountain from the direction we came. As the donkeys are being tethered to a rail along the back wall of the end building, the one opposite the grand building, I have a quick peak through the door. There's a big store room taking up about half the building, but I can also smell cooking, so I imagine the rest is a kitchen. I go back out and find the donkey who is carrying my rucksack, retrieve it, then walk back around into the courtyard which is filling up with weary trekkers. I drop my rucksack down against the wall, then collapse down against it in sheer relief. With my eyes closed and my legs slightly trembling I listen to all the others arriving, most are quiet, but a few are excited and animated, maybe they have old friends here.

Just as I'm starting to doze off someone shakes my arm, I open my eyes and see my interpreter crouching beside me, "Good walk, yes?" He says cheerfully. I just nod with a silly tired grin on my face. He shakes my arm again, but this time harder. "Come," he says, standing up. He offers me his hand to help, I pull myself up onto my tremulous legs, then follow him across, the now full courtyard, to a door in the end wall of the building we first past. He leads the way in and I follow, into a long, narrow, almost dark corridor, the only light coming in, is from ten small holes in the wall just under the eaves, each one is opposite the ten equally spaced doors along the corridor.

My interpreter walks up to the seventh door, pushes it open then steps aside so I can go in. "For you," he says magnanimously. I duck down to get through the low wooden door and step into the plain white washed room. In truth, it's more of a cell, about eight feet by five. Inside there is a small, hand made, wooden bed, with a rolled up sleeping mat at one end and a few folded up blankets at the other. There's a stone shelf, with a candle and a box of matches on it. The wall behind this is all sooty, from

years of candle burning, and that's it, apart from a window with no glass. Technically, just a hole, but it won't let much weather in, as it's only about the size of a paper back book. The sides are sloping through the thick stone wall, so I can stick my head in, to look out. I've got a good view, I can see all the tents and the path we arrived on, so I can keep an eye on the comings and goings, not that I plan to spend much time in here, I don't think it was designed with that in mind. My friend says, "Soon food," and points in the direction of the courtyard. I thank him and he leaves.

Once he's gone I close the door, roll out the sleeping mat and try the bed. It's probably one of the most basic beds I've lain on, with not so much as a hint of a spring, but I know if I lie here much longer I'm going to fall asleep. I haven't had a good night's sleep for days, not last night because it was cold and damp, the night in the cave wasn't a great night's sleep either, and the one before that, which feels like weeks ago with Beth and Sally, I don't think any of us got any sleep. Tonight, I think I could sleep through an avalanche. I open my eyes and throw my legs over the edge, so I'm sitting facing the wall with the stone shelf. I sit like this for a moment trying to summon the energy to go and eat. Left to my own devices I wouldn't bother with food, but I know they would be worried, and probably force garlic tea on me, so I make the effort and go back out to the courtyard. Everyone has formed into lines, sitting cross legged with their plates in front of them. Servers are walking up and down the lines, dragging big pots with them, ladling out big dollops of food as they go. I sit at the end of the last line so I don't miss out on anything. Now I've got here it smells great, and I'm starving.

As I eat, I look up at the twin peaks of the mountain towering above the grand building. The mountain itself has turned black and is just a silhouette, but the peaks are still lit, making them glow gold, like a pair of golden wings on a crouching black eagle, who's just about to take flight into the night sky. A shiver runs down my spine, so I look away. After I finish eating I look back up, but it's gone now, and the stars are filling the sky.

## Chapter twelve

I wake in the morning with the impression that the black eagle with the golden wings, had been circling above us all night, making me feel quite giddy. I'm wearing just about all my clothes, as I was worried about getting cold when I went to bed last night, but now they're all twisted in different directions, adding to my sense of unbalance. Feeling too constricted to lie in bed any longer, I throw the blankets aside and get up. I quickly take a few layers of clothing off, realizing that I might have overdone it a bit. Once I can breathe again, I feel much better and take a look out of my miniscule window.

Outside there's lots going on, with more tents and awnings going up just outside my window, and it's sunny which you wouldn't know from inside my cell. In fact it's really sunny, which means it's really late, so the first thing I'm going to do this morning is wash all the dirt from traveling off. I grab a towel, a few clean cloths and a little bar of travel soap from my rucksack and venture out in search of water to wash in. When I open the door to the outside, I have to squint, as it's incredibly bright after the gloom of my cell. I can hear the chanting of an army of voices coming from the big building, and with many the others putting up tents there's not going to be any people around, so I can explore undisturbed.



I walk across the courtyard, over to the building opposite mine, and take a peek in the door, it's identical, with a long dark corridor and a row of doors, I close the door quietly. There's a path leading around to the front of the big building from this corner of the courtyard, but I'm sure there's no water there, so I walk down the courtyard to the corner which leads to the back of the store room, here the path splits, one fork goes around the back, to the store room, the other looks like it drops quite steeply in about twenty yards or so. This looks like a good bet to find water, but first I poke my head around the corner to see what's happening at the back of the store room, as I can hear voices. More donkeys have arrived from somewhere and are being unloaded, but before I can leave I'm spotted and called over. I just wave and point in the opposite direction, and try to make an escape, but he is having none of it, and insists I come over to him. He darts into the storeroom and comes back out with two bananas, which he hands to me with a big grin on his face. I thank him and he waves me off, to indicate I can continue on my way now.

I walk along the path with a warm feeling, he must have known I'd missed breakfast this morning, it's funny how two bananas and a grin can make you feel cared for. Once I get to the ridge, I can see that there is a small stream at the bottom of the gully. I follow the path down to a little ford, here you can cross the stream and follow the path up the other side of the gully, to who knows where, or there's a path down stream. I follow this one and very quickly arrive at a pool with a small waterfall tumbling into it. The pool looks well used, all the grass has been worn away leaving a sand and pebble beach either side, this is definitely the bath. I also know it's going to be freezing, but at least it's sheltered from the constant breeze down here in the ravine, which is allowing the air to gain a little heat, and feel quite warm.

I strip down, grit my teeth, and walk straight in without thinking about it. The pool is about four feet deep, so I have to crouch down to get totally submerged. As I do, I feel like I'm being crushed by the cold, so I can't even breath. I jump out feeling numb after about only ten seconds and soap myself up quickly, after which I just throw myself in to rinse off. I spin around kicking and splashing a few times, frantically, I might even be screaming, I don't know, I certainly am on the inside. I leap out like I've been electrocuted, wrap my towel around me, still in a state of shock, then vigorously dry my goose-bumps, creating as much friction as possible. After I'm dry I quickly put my clean clothes on, it's only after that I feel my body start to relax again, so I lie on the bank to warm up in the sun. I also make a promise to my body that I won't put it through that again, so that was my one and only bath at four thousand meters, ever.

I quickly forget the pain as I regain my body temperature, and in fact, feel quite invigorated. I walk back up to the ashram feeling tingly and fresh, but at too high a cost. Once I've thrown my old clothes back into my cell, I'm ready to have a bit of a walk. There's still chanting going on in the big building and it gets louder as I walk around the side, because at the front facing the mountain there are two open doors leading out to a huge plateau, which runs all the way up to the base of the mountain, about half a mile away. I think we are just about safe from avalanches. Yesterday it had looked a lot closer, I think, because of the incredible scale of the mountain, making everything around it look small.

Between the two doors is a stone statue of some deity, but I can't see from here which one, I'll have to walk past one of the open doors, if I want to take a look. I hesitate a while, wondering what to do, but finally I remind myself that I'm not a tourist here, I've been invited and I'm a vital part of what's going on, so, it's my duty to see which deity lives here. I walk past the open door without hesitating, but out of

the corner of my eye I see the room is full of chanting Sadhus. The sound is beautifully evocative and hypnotic as it blends with the ever present breeze, you can almost see the sounds being carried away down the mountain.

I discover that the stone statue is a relief of Shiva, as lord of the cosmic dance. He is standing on his right leg with the other held up and crossed over, he's has four arms held high. In one of his four hands he holds a small drum, in the opposite one, a hand full of fire. The other two are empty but I'm sure their position signifies something, he seems to be standing on a little prostrate person, for some reason: I don't know what the significance of this is, but the little chap, doesn't look happy. Finally, he has long wild hair, crashing about with the exuberance of the dance. All this is framed by a circle of fire which probably represents the universe, and him dancing madly, or joyfully inside this universe represents the dance of life.

Standing in front of the statue on one leg, I copy the pose of Shiva which is very similar to a tai-chi standing meditation I do, I go from copying the one set of arms to the other, and it feels just like a tai-chi move. As I'm getting into this big time, going from one to the other, faster and faster, the guru steps out of the door. He must have seen me walk past a couple of minutes ago. I freeze, feeling like I've been caught doing something silly, but he just smiles and nods, so I smile back, still standing on one leg. I think he came to tell me something, but has changed his mind, and instead he just waves and goes back in. I'm sure he had a grin on his face as he turned to leave. Sheepishly, I put my foot back down on the ground. If he didn't already know how infantile I can be, he knows now.

There's a small roof over the statue, held up by a massive wooden ring beam, but what I hadn't notice straight away, is that into this are carved lewd scenes. To copy these I would need a very busty woman and super human strength, as in most of the depiction's, the guy seems to be carrying the very buxom lady around, on his penis. Thankfully I'm distracted from this by my nose. It suddenly dawns on me that since I've been standing here, there's been the aroma of incense, but mingled with this is the unmistakable smell of dope, and now that I've noticed it, it's actually the dominant smell. They're all in there getting stoned. No wonder they can keep chanting for so long like that, they've probably just forgotten to stop. Maybe the guru came out to see if I fancied a toke, but realised I didn't need to get any sillier, and that grin on his face was because he's wrecked, not because of me at all. It's all falling into place now, no wonder they've bloodshot eyes. Here I am on the roof of the world with hundreds of stoners, working themselves up into a frenzy. One way or another this is going to be one very memorable party. Once the rest arrive and it all starts to kick off, somethings bound to give and I'm going to be in the middle of it. I quickly push this thought out of my head, as I start to wobble when I think of it like that.

I turn around to look back at the mountain, it must be midday as the sun is directly above the two peaks. I don't know if it has anything to do with seeing those carvings, but standing here directly in front of the mountain the two peaks look like a pair of woman's knees protruding from a white skirt, in a very provocative fashion, with her generous hips encircling us from either side, which would place us a lot closer to her pubis than her bellybutton. I hope it's not just me, seeing the mountain like this, otherwise I've just created a new fetish. I'm sure not, it's so obvious, I imagine that's why it's a holy mountain and why this temple is built here. What greater symbol of creation is there than the voluptuous hips of a woman. As I stare in wonder, I'm sure I see her start to move. Maybe it's the sun shimmering off her white skirt dazzling me, but she looks like she's moving ever so slightly and rhythmically back and forth. I turn around and look back at Shiva, so this is what he's been looking

at for hundreds of years, no wonder he's dancing with joy.

Without thinking about it I set off in a straight line across the plateau towards her, as if drawn, I feel I need to touch her. It doesn't take me long to walk briskly across the plateau, five minutes or so. When I get there I'm greeted by a huge mound of boulders in a semi circle filling the ravine between the two sides of the mountain. From under this pile appears the fountainhead of the stream which I bathed in earlier. I lean against one of the boulders and look up at the mountain, but have to squint. From this angle the sun is shining directly down from between her knees and dazzling me. Instead, I crouch down by the stream in the shade of the boulders, cup my hands together to scoop some water up to drink, but on a whim I change my mind and lie down on my stomach so I can drink directly from the mountain's stream. It's as cold as can be, but it seems to fill me with possibilities, like I'm drinking from the original source. The possibility to create anything here is infinite. I look back towards the temple with water dripping off my face and excitement growing in my stomach. If ever there was a place to create something spiritual and great, this is it, and that stoner in there, chanting his heart out, knows it too.

I take another long drink from the spring, because I'm going to see if I can climb the mountain, hopefully as far as the snow, which doesn't look that far up from here. I walk west along the bottom of the mound of boulders, until they stop and are replaced by loose shale, which would be no fun to climb on either, so I keep walking, in the hope of an easier route. Eventually, when the ashram is due east of me, I find a small track leading up the mountain. I'm not sure if it's man made or made by animals, but I take it regardless, as there's not a great deal of choice. To start it's quite shaley and loose, but it soon turns to solid rock with tufts of course weeds and grass growing out of the cracks in the rock, and in the small pockets of soil that have collected. Sometimes I use these to pull myself up when it's really steep.

Every few minutes I stop to catch my breath, because however hard I breathe, I just don't manage to get enough air in my lungs, but the one good thing about climbing steeply, is that after only half an hour, I can look down on the ashram. I can see a few people moving around amongst the tents but that's all, so I imagine the rest are still chanting away. From here I can see the way the stream starts at the base of the mountain, then cuts a deeper and deeper gully until it drops out of sight. The land drops steeply away, not far from the back of the ashram just after a small field with a stone wall around it at the back of the store room, where a little herd of donkeys now reside. I can see the path across the stream, where I washed this morning, disappear around the other hip of the mountain, and the path we arrived on yesterday is down below me, and is visible for miles off into the distance, as a ribbon of darker green. I don't see anyone on it at the moment, in fact the only life I can see, apart from at the ashram, is an eagle circling way off, and it is just a tiny speck in a huge landscape.

I start climbing again pulling myself up. I don't think climbing the Himalayas in a pair of sandals, and without any equipment, not even a bottle of water, is recommended in any reputable travel book, but I feel light and free and unburdened by all the crap people carry about to make themselves feel safe. I must be becoming influenced by the Hindu attitude, which is, when your time is up, your time is up, and there's nothing you can do about it, which sounds frighteningly like destiny. I sit down again feeling slightly dizzy, there's air gusting all about me, making my clothes flap, but I can't get enough of it in my lungs. Maybe one piece of equipment I should have bought with me, would be a little canister of oxygen, but to tell you the truth I'm not that interested in going any higher. When I had my dream about having everything I need to reach the top, I'm sure it was a spiritual mountain, and not this

physical one, that my subconscious had in mind. So this will do just fine, I'll leave the snow, and the death zone, for someone else to play with.

My game is going to be played out down there, in the spiritual death zone, in the rarified world of extreme transcendental spiritual practices. I laugh at myself sounding like a sports commentator, but can't stop now. I've started and as there is no one around, I put on the accent and let fly, "Can a band of seven hundred highly trained, extreme spiritualists take on a world of ignorance, or will they be defeated by a wall of apathy? Can this small but determined team punch a hole through the suffocating blanket of organized religions and let the people breath directly from the heavens? Is it possible that, once again, David can beat Goliath, and give back to the people what is rightfully theirs: their freedom, and their divine right to be god? We will find out soon, because this epic crusade is only days away, and the results will follow soon after, so tune in and be part of the action!"

I look down to where this epic crusade is going to take place, and reflect on how I got here, how I became a striker for AC-Spiritual. What happened on the bridge was a shock but it was something I'd worked towards, but this, a temple high up in the Himalayas and trying to change the world, how did this come about? I've never imagined such a thing and yet here I am. I pinch myself to make sure I'm here and sure enough it hurts, so at least I know I'm somewhere. What keeps coming to mind, or rather who keeps coming to mind, is the guru. I know physically he bought me here, but I'm beginning to suspect that on a more cosmic level, he had a hand in getting me here too. Not that I believe he asked for me by name, but he needed someone who had been god, so through hundreds of connections and apparently random happenings, I'm here, at the right place, at the right time, just like clock work. It feels such a perfectly symmetrical fit that one would be inclined to call it destiny, but for destiny to work, you need a higher consciousness to control everything, like a conscious god. But I know from experience we don't have that, we are the only consciousness creating the world, so what I have to ask myself is, how do we create what appears to be destiny?

I close my eyes, and the first thing I see is the guru with his boney finger in a spiders web, tapping away, then there are many fingers in the web tapping away, and before long the whole thing is a heaving, surging, churning, boiling sea of tapping fingers. We all have our fingers in the web. Collectively, we are tapping out our lives. Can such perfect destiny come from this? I let it play out in my mind, and before long it calms down, as patterns start to form. Finally, there's an amoeba kind of thing, with twelve or so points around it's circumference, all joined by a stretchy thread. These points are pulsating, expanding and contracting and affecting each other, so the whole thing is moving around expanding and contracting rhythmically. Is this the universal consciousness? An amoeba. It seems crazy that the simplest thing like an amoeba, could work on the same principles as the most complex thing, universal consciousness. I've come to realise the whole thing is very simple, unbelievable simple. We look around and see the world in all it's diversity and complexity, and we assume it's all terribly complicated and unknowable, but really there's just one basic principle, the principle of yin and yang. If you look one way, you see all the connections, all the yin and yang connections going off and multiplying exponentially until very soon you can't count any further, and it all becomes mind boggling. However, if you look the other way, you can see how simple it really is, it's just opposites, reacting off each other, creating a dance.

Us sticking our fingers in the web, creating a rhythm, pulling in the same direction at just the right time to slingshot our objective into being, is like dancing

with Shiva. You can't stop the dance or you will get flattened, but you can change the direction slightly without getting trampled. If you are sensitive and can feel the flow, and know by just how much it can be changed, before something gives, then you will be successful. If not, you could end up like the poor chap Shiva is dancing on. We might all be god, but there's a lot more to being a creator than simply commanding something to be. First you have to feel which way the tide is running, then you have to take into account the way other people are directing things. We are all in this together. Finally, at the opportune moment, you do a nifty pirouette, metaphorically speaking, and it's all going your way, for a while at least.

I open my eyes and see the ashram and the magnificence of the mountains and I can feel this is the right place. As for the time, it's got to be the right time. With what happened to me not even a fortnight ago, and this ceremony happening only every seventy two years, it feels like people have been steering this for many years, gently creating the environment where a mass illumination can take place. And then, hopefully, that light itself will become an instrument to shift the flow still further, so the whole world benefits. It feels incredibly exciting, to be a cog, in a mechanism, that has the potential to change the world, and peoples lives.

We are like one colossal head with billions of faces, with an internal dialogue going on continuously behind the scenes, coordinating events to fulfill what is required at that particular moment. The chance meeting or the seemingly accidental event, like me meeting Sally and Beth, then them taking me to the class with Mr sharma, and now here I am. It could not be choreographed so perfectly, if we were not all one. There are no mistakes, because it's one whole thought. That one thought was what I zoomed around in on the bridge. The points of energy or events are the places, where changes between yin and yang occur, giving the thought structure, and shape.

I look up into the blue sky and listen passively for the one thought, hoping to hear it over the sound of the wind. After a while my eyes start to water, but I can hear something that sounds like chatter, like hearing a party from a distance, lots of excited voices. The more I listen, the more I start to distinguish different voices amongst the chatter, people I know friends and family, hundreds of them. I can't make out what they're saying but I smile at the thought of them being right here with me. Maybe on the colossal head with billions of faces, the faces next to ours are people we know: which would make sense as they are the people who influence us most and the people we mostly influence. They are the people who we are in closest dialogue with.

A real sound, I hear with my ears, sends the voices in my head back into the subconscious. Wiping and blinking the water from my eyes, I see the eagle has eventually made it's way over here, announcing it's presence with a high pitched cry. I stand up now and am eager to get back down there. I've had enough of an over view, I know this is the time and the place, now it's time for me to get down and dirty and start preparing for the big moment, whatever that is. I'm not quite sure yet, but I know it's down there with my new gang of friends, not up here by myself. I've done all I can by myself.

The going back down the mountain is just as hard as the climbing, much of the time I have to go down backwards or wiggle down on my arse, I'm definitely not a natural born mountaineer. About half way down, I look over to the ashram and spot a group of Sadhus coming around the other hip of the mountain, at least fifty, trooping around the corner coming from I don't know where, but it makes my blood race with excitement. I look the other way, along the track we arrived on, and in the very distance, like a yellow thread, I see what must be more Sadhus on their way. I look down from left to right at each group, it's like a pincer movement of Sadhus. I start

howling like a wolf, as it seems to be the only appropriate noise I can make in this mountain wilderness. No one hears me, not on the physical plane anyway, except the eagle, who releases a salvo of cries. I carry on sliding down the mountain with added enthusiasm, stopping every now and then to howl. It reminds me of when I was a boy in Wales, running down the mountains so fast that my legs couldn't keep up and I would go head over heels, just for the fun of it, just with the exuberance of being alive. Howling like a wolf, I think, is the adult version of that, the safe version.

When I get to the bottom of the mountain where the grass starts, I can see there's a lot of action at the ashram. The group of Sadhus coming from the other direction must have arrived, so instead of going straight back, I go and have another drink from the source. I'm really thirsty from all my climbing and walking, but I can only just take small sips from the spring as it's so cold. I slurp it slowly letting it warm up in my mouth before I swallow, to avoid brain freeze. Between slurps, I study my face in the pool, I look like someone who has gone through something major. I've acquired a slightly dazed or shocked look, maybe even haunted. I squirt my mouthful of water back in at my reflection in defiance, I can't crack up now. I notice the arm I'm leaning on is shaking, I lift my other hand up in front of my face, as a test, and that's trembling too. I'm a bag of nerves. I fill my lungs with air, plunge my head down into the pool and blow as hard as I can, down into the spring, in an attempt to make the mountain shake as I am shaking. Once I've run out of breath, I roll away from the pool, gasping, and look up at the mountain. I can't see her shaking, but I can feel her trembling through my back, which makes me feel better, as I realise it's not just me, but everything around here that is vibrating at a frightening high tempo: this is not serene spiritual contemplation going on here, but intense dynamic spiritual practice, which is both exciting and scary.

With three days still to go, I hope I'm not peaking too early. I can't see how I can keep this intensity going for that long, it already feel like sparks are involuntarily flying off me. I'm going to have to spend the next few days just trying to contain myself, that means no more howling like a mad beast, and definitely no more blowing into the fountainhead with total abandonment, and any sudden movements will have to be kept to a minimum, lest I spontaneously explode. I watch the eagle, still circling above, adding to the already electrified air. I wonder to myself whether I should have finished having sex with Beth that night on the balcony, it would certainly have moderated my energy levels, but moderate is not what I need now. I'm just going to have to be controlled, and anyway if we had gone any further, it would have created lots of distracting complications, so I'm going to put Beth out of my mind, as thinking about her is not helping in the slightest. It's just taking me closer to detonation. I crawl back over to the spring for another drink, but decide against it. I'll wait until I get back and drink from a bottle, it's the same water but much safer, as drinking from a bottle is sanitized and not as bestial and raw as drinking directly from the source, where the natural power is unfettered.

When I arrive back at the temple the chanting is still going on, and again the guru comes out to check on me. He looks deep into my eyes and I'm sure sees what's going on in my mind. He smiles knowingly, steps up to me, reaches up, puts both his hands on the top of my head then presses down firmly, as though he's trying to stop the top of my skull from lifting off. After a very long minute, he stops. I think I do feel a bit more stable and less shaky. He nods and motions for me to stay put, while he goes back in and comes out with the translator. "Go to sleep now, and later eat," he says, while doing the actions to make sure I understand. I nod and walk off towards my cell, feeling suddenly very tired. I don't know what the guru did to me, but I can

hardly keep my eyes open now. "I call later," the translator shouts after me. I just lift my hand in acknowledgment and hardly make it back to my bed before I fall asleep.

What seems like a minute later, a knock at the door wakes me, the translator sticks his head around and tells me it's time for food. "O.K.," I manage to say before he's gone. I sit up in bed feeling slightly peeved with the guru. I'm going to have to watch out for that guy, messing around with my energy like that. I don't know what he did, but it was very powerful: I don't think I like, people taking control of me like that, even if he does know what he's doing, it's not on, especially without warning. My stomach starts to rumble so I get up and put a few more clothes on, as I can see through my tiny window the sun has just dipped behind the mountains and the air is too thin to hold any heat.

Outside, I'm shocked to see so many people. Hundreds more must have turned up since I'd been asleep and there's hardly any room left in the courtyard. After eating, I collect a blanket from my room and go around to the front of the temple, to watch the moon coming up, which it's bound to soon. I sit down against the wall at the far end of the building, away from the noise of the tents, and the Sadhus getting ready for bed. With my blanket wrapped around my shoulders, I snuggle in. The sun has done its trick of turning the peaks of the mountains, red and gold, and it's now dark with the only light coming out of the doors of the building behind me, forming two oblongs of light either side of Shiva. Inside there are still thirty or so Sadhus chanting, they must be the night shift, as I can't imagine they can be the same ones who were going for it earlier.

After about half an hour of star gazing the peaks suddenly turn silver in quick succession, like silver sails appearing on a black sea, then, the moon appears from behind the mountains and our twin peaked beauty is revealed to be wearing her cool sparkling silver evening dress. She has come out to dance with Shiva, and they are being serenaded by rhythmic chants, hanging on the now still cold night air. Also hanging in the air, is the pungent smell of dope smoke, slowly drifting out of the doors in long blue ribbons. As the almost full, crystal clear moon rises higher, the whole mountain starts to shimmer, and now I can see the same vibration I felt earlier. It is so bright, my eyes water and she starts to swim before me, swaying around to the tempo of the chanting. Eventually I have to close my eyes, but I can still see her burnt onto my retina. With my eyes closed the chanting reaches a new clarity and instead of a group incantation, it sounds like one voice, but not coming from one person, resonating from everywhere, inside as well as outside.

Keeping my eyes closed, I stand up letting the sound pass through me, but being careful not to hold on and snag the flow. The swaying motion this induces, soon transforms itself in to a circular motion, and before long I'm spinning around the plateaux with my blanket swirling around like a cape. I open my eyes and see the mountain then Shiva then the mountain again, then Shiva again, as I whirl around. This is exactly what I told myself not to do, I feel the impulse to howl as I spin, but manage to at least refrain from that. I really am an energy junky. When I feel the energy rise, I can't stop myself from wanting to take it even higher, I spin faster and faster, Shiva and the mountain are blurring into one. Then everything starts to slow, the chanting turns into a single note and I loose contact with my body again. I know I'm spinning, but it's all gone still. Shiva is superimposed on the mountain, his matted hair flailing about her peaks, illuminated from above by the moon.

This stillness I've reached again, is before creation. My energy doesn't rise here, there's no up or down. When everything becomes one there is only stillness. Then, just as suddenly, it all starts to come crashing back. Shiva and the mountain separate,

the one note separates into rhythm, I separate from zero gravity and rejoin the ground with a thump. From where I'm now sitting on the cold grass I can see into the temple with the Sadhus chanting. It looks really cosy in there, the candles flickering, a haze of smoke softening further the gentle shadows, and them, all united in their chant.

I by contrast, don't know whether to laugh or cry. The only way I can account for the half of me that feels sad, is that I've realized I can't have both at once: these two separate worlds I keep slipping between. It's impossible to straddle the two at once. I have to feel happy and sad, that's what a dualistic world is all about. Jumping back into this world, it's a bit of a shock to realise how confusing it all is. No wonder we find life so baffling. When you can feel two opposite things at once, and with not a second to take a breather, as time ticks on relentlessly, everything changes again in a blink of an eye. Standing up and wiping myself down, thinking about this flowing, dynamic world we live in, I realise that to feel happy and sad is inevitable, that's why, in all likelihood, I love it and hate it. I've spent most of my life looking for the place where these contradictions don't exist, but now I've found it, I've discovered its not a place you can live. Life is about being torn between two opposites. You can't live in bliss in a dualistic world, but that doesn't mean I want to get off, like the Buddhists and Hindus. The only way to survive is to follow the Tao, or to put it in hippy language, go with the flow man.

I walk back to my room in a somber but happy mood. After I've finished living I know I'll rest in peace in infinite stillness. Until then I'm going to try my best to love everything, the good and the bad, the happy and the sad, the ups and downs. See them for what they are, which is life: then ride them like a warrior. It's pitch black in the corridor leading to my room, so I have to feel along the wall counting each door as I go. Hoping I've counted right, I gingerly push open the door and go to feel the bed to make sure there's no one in there, but as I do, I trip over something left on the floor, stumble forwards and bang my head on the fucking shelf. I stagger to the bed, holding the side of my head swearing repeatedly under my breath, I then collapse down onto the thankfully empty bed and roll around uttering profanities, until the pain starts to ease. At which point I remember that this is life, comfort and discomfort. This is certainly the latter, but it does suddenly feel a lot better: maybe not the pain it's self, but the experience. I even manage to marvel at the speed with which life reacts to events. It was just a couple of minutes ago that I was thinking about opposites such as pain and pleasure, and if we want to be alive we have to accept them, then low and behold, through the glory of creation, this point is hammered home. What makes it even more incredible, is that the stage for my little accident was set before I even had the thought that instigated it. Whatever I'd tripped over had been there before the thought.

The pain has turned into pleasure, I'm starting to love my incident. First, I love the fact that it shows time is an irrelevance, something not even worth thinking about, and second, it shows that our thoughts go on to create our world, but in a very bizarre way. I would not have personally chosen to learn this lesson by a whack on the head, and yet it was just about perfect. So there is a part of me which is less interested in perceived creature comforts, and more interested in me fulfilling my potential. Our bodies are our most personal creations, so they're a great reflection of what's going on in our heads, and the symmetry of me banging my head to confirm what I had been thinking was brutal, but effective.

Wakening to the distant sound of mystical chanting, I discover, is an excellent way to start the day. You know you are somewhere that's been, and is being, infused with spirit. An involuntary smile spreads across my face, I reach up and rub the bump



that has risen in the night on the side of my head, even this lifts my mood as I remember last night, feeling so alive, sad, happy and human: in contrast to experiencing being nothing and still, just before.

Rolling onto my side I see for the first time someone has scratched, 'I woz here,' into the wall. My initial reaction is, dam! How dare they ruin my experience. I sit up and study it closer, even running my finger along it, to try and absorb the total meaning of a very simple statement. I say it several times, slowly in my head, and come to the conclusion that the person who wrote this, on some level realised that every moment lasts forever, and by saying, 'I woz here,' they are actually saying, 'I am here,' which is why I felt so peeved when I first saw it, I felt intruded upon. Now I've seen it in a new light, I quite like it. Pulling my spoon from the pocket of the trousers I'm still wearing, I scratch, using the end of the handle, 'We are here,' under their, 'I woz here.'

I get up and have to shake the dust from my handy work off the blankets. Looking out my window I see what looks like a refugee camp, with tents and tarps of every color strung haphazardly from one another, and a myriad of blankets, hanging from every piece of rope. But what's most striking, and I must confess intimidating, is the volume of the chanting. I can't hear any particular voice, it's just a rumble reverberating, in through my tiny opening. I sit back down on my bed and wonder what to do with my day. My inclination is to hide in my room, based on feeling very out of place, or I could sneak off and go for another walk, but I know in my heart that I have to join in. So without thinking about it any further, I resolve to just go and do, whatever it is they are doing. After having a drink and a pee I head for where all the noise is coming from: behind the big building.

As I step around the corner, I see that today they are all sitting outside facing Shiva, with their backs to the mountain and the sun. So very casually and without catching anyones eye, I find a spot and sit down. That was the hardest bit done and I feel a bit pathetic for having worried about it. For a while I just sit quietly absorbing the sound, then slowly I start rocking in rhythm, and finally under my breath I start chanting more or less the same sounds they are. Before long it feels very natural and relaxing, even if my chant seems to change spontaneously of it's own accord every few minutes. After a long time, and my legs have gone to sleep, I'm shocked back into the world by the translator taping me on the shoulder. "Food," he says quietly, motioning me to follow him. I gingerly stand up on numb legs, only just managing to stagger after him, without collapsing on the chanters I have to negotiate around.

Once we are in the courtyard, I see there are eight people already eating. The translator leads me up to the door of the kitchen where the same man who gave me bananas yesterday is cooking away. When he sees me he smiles and serves me up a plate of food. I ask my translator why there are only a few of us eating. "We eat after festival" he says, pointing to where the others are still chanting their mantras. I must look surprised, "Is good for mind, very clear," he adds, pulling a face and making a gesticulation that implies a light bulb being lit in his head. I nod and he goes off, back to the able bodied, leaving me with the very old or infirm members, who can't survive fasting. I sit down and nod hello to my fellow diners, again feeling a bit silly and wondering if I should fast as well, but as it is I'm starving, having only eaten about half of what I would normally, since I've been away from Varanasi. If I did start fasting, I would only be able to think about food, leaving no room for any light bulb in my head.

Instead of going back to chant after eating, I go for a walk to stretch my legs, and try to regain some confidence, after not being very good at the chanting and crap at

the fasting. As I walk along the other path, the one over the stream, I convince myself I don't have to be good at what they do. I'm approaching the same thing but from a different angle and from a very different culture. They've probably practiced these disciplines for years. I just need to chill out, and try to get used to the way they are, and look, which is still freaking me out. The hair, the paint, the ash, and the general aura of Halloween menace, they do it to set themselves apart from the rest of society, I'm sure, but it's having the same effect on me, however friendly they are. After a short walk I go back and rejoin the chanting.

Following a considerable length of time, maybe four hours, of very mixed emotions such as boredom, anxiety and mild distress, I finally glimpse a place where I stop being aware of my body and mind, probably because they're not nice places to be. My body's racked with cramp and my mind is protesting fervently. This glimpse is like the eye of a storm, my body and mind are the circling storm clouds, black and dangerous, and the one tiny little piece of calm probably is my soul. For me there are far nicer ways of becoming aware of it than this. Slowly I edge my way back to some clear space, stretch my legs out and lie back, the relief is palpable, spreading through me like a warm tide. Well, I've tried, but from now on, I'm going back to doing my own thing.

Allowing myself to doze off in the last sun of the day is my thing, made even the more pleasant by other people chanting around me and occasionally opening an eye to watch the eagle circling above. Until that is, I notice a slight change in the chanting, I sit up to see what is happening. Right on cue, this evenings arrivals are trooping in, looking tired and dragging their feet as we had, but tonight they keep on coming and coming, hundreds of them. The chanting slowly breaks down around me, and many the Sadus get up to greet the new arrivals, but there are a hardcore group who retreat into the big building and continue the chant.

I slip into the courtyard from the other side and sit quietly against a wall with my head down, so I can watch them arrive without them noticing me. After the first deluge it takes more than an hour for the last to arrive, the final ones having to be helped in. This must be just about everyone who's coming to the party now, there's got to be at least seven hundred people here, but I didn't spot Mr Sharma, which is a shame as I could do with someone to talk to. A few of the new Sadus who do spot me, look shocked to see me, but by tomorrow I'm sure I will have been explained. Anyway, it just adds to everyones excitement which is reaching new heights now, after the days chanting and with the new arrivals.

The next day follows a similar pattern for me, I keep a low profile and join in occasionally with the extraordinary chanting, that seven hundred people can produce. The whole plateau is vibrating to the same sound. Even when I go on my, by now, daily pilgrimage to the spring for a drink, I can hear it, and I'm sure I can feel it when I lean against the rocks. It's all getting to the Sadus as well, I see some go into spasms and start shouting and writhing. The guru then goes and calms them down, as he did me.

The atmosphere is feeling more tense and volatile as the day goes on, and it's a relief when the day draws to a close and a small band of twenty Sadus arrive in a group, and most of the hysterical chanters stop for the night. I see Mr Sharma arrive in the group but he is quickly ushered into the temple building, where the night shift has started chanting, and where I think the guru is hanging out.

## Chapter thirteen

My eyes spring open and I'm immediately awake. This morning, to add even more excitement, we have drums as well as chanting, this furor, is going to undoubtedly awaken the normally still mountain from her sleep. She will resonate with the pure rhythm of life and creation, the first original thought of joy, and send this thought echoing around the world from her bountiful peaks.

I jump out of bed all thoughts of anxiety and doubt gone, it's time for action. I know this is the day my life has been leading up to, I haven't even thought beyond today. Two weeks ago I died and started a new life: I changed, or was changed, so my world changed accordingly, reflecting the new me. Now, today I feel there is going to be another death, and tomorrow my world will change again, to mirror whatever I will have become.

Going out onto the plateaux is like entering an open air cathedral, the sound of seven hundred worshipers echoing off the walls of the mountain, and with the awe inspiring magnitude of scale, all around us. The Sadus are not as organized today, some are still sitting chanting and rocking, others are standing, chanting and gazing into the distance, while others are dancing to the drums in slow, but convulsive movements. There are three drummers, with a few dancers following each of them. As they wander slowly around, beating out their rhythm, the drumming looks like it's controlling the dancers, and they are being involuntarily jerked along.

I'm standing there only a few seconds taking this in, when someone I don't think I've seen before, comes up to me and motions me to follow him. He leads the way through one of the two open doors into the temple. It's the first time I've been in here, the inner sanctum. The room looks very old with crimson walls, which are virtually black from soot. It's empty of any furniture, except for a stone box with steel doors, which are wide open, directly behind where Shiver is standing outside: between the doors. I glance inside this stone box. It's lined with mirror, and in the center is a golden statue of Shiva, his reflection dancing and sparkling in the mirrors, by the light of five candles placed in front of him, and reflected a thousand times.

A group of men are sitting on rugs in the center of the room, busy discussing something of the utmost importance, or at least that's what it looks like, but when Mr Sharma the teacher sees me, he jumps up and comes over to greet me. "It's good to see you again," he says, shaking my hand "I can see that this place is working it's magic on you," he adds while scrutinizing my face. I wonder silently what he means, but smile anyway and try to look as normal as I can, under the circumstances. "Come and sit down," he says, walking over to a rug away from the group of men still having the heated discussion. We sit opposite each other on the rug, neither of us saying anything, until Mr Sharma slaps me on the knee, "You look very good here, I was worried it would be too ...." He pauses, looking for the right word, "Strange for you, with all of us," he says, pointing out the door, at what could look like a freak show if you didn't know what it was all about. "But the guru, Mr Bangi, he knew," Mr Sharma adds ambiguously. "You are right, it's all very strange for me, but strange has become the new normal in the last two weeks," I joke. He looks at me seriously and runs his fingers through his beard, "Yes, it must have been a very big shock for that to happen, without a guru there to guide you," a smile breaks out beneath his beard, "and now you are the guide," he says laughing.

I wish he hadn't remind me of this. "My intention, when I came too India, was to look for a guru," I tell him solemnly, this makes him laugh even louder. "It's too late asking for directions, when you've already arrived at your destination," he say

between fits of laughter. He finds this so funny, he announces it to the whole room, which slightly annoys me, so I say, "Well, as I'm the guide, I'm the one who decides where we're going." He stops laughing and looks puzzled and slightly worried, which was my desired effect. "What do you mean?" he asks. I rub my chin slowly and stare into the distance letting him sweat awhile, "Well I've been thinking," I say then pause again, savoring the moment, "it seems a bit of a waste of time and effort, for us all to become less than we already are." Now he's starting to look very worried. "What do you mean?" he asks again. "We are already god, the source and creator of our world, why would we bother getting rid of the creator side of our beings, to be just god the source?" I ask him. "That is what you did, you became god, by knowing god" he says defiantly.

I want to argue with him, that we're all god whether we know it or not, or whether we like it or not, but he looks too worried, so I say, "what I've been thinking is, that as we are all here and everything, I would like to try and create, or experience, the moment when the infinite one, spills over and becomes two: the moment the physical world starts." This suggestion has not made him look any happier. "Wait here, I'll be right back," he says, and hurries off. I'm starting to regret saying anything, but it's what I've been thinking about for days. I'm more interested in creation than in the source, and I'll probably never get another opportunity like this: with seven hundred peoples energy and concentration to help, it's the best chance of seeing it for myself.

Mr sharma, predictably, arrives back with the guru, and they both sit down. The guru smiles hello and nods, not looking the slightest bit worried. Before anyone says anything, I cut straight in, "What I want to do, is not just become one with the infinite, but to then try and expand to the point where the world is created. To see if we can find that first spark of creation." Mr Sharma translates all this back to the guru, who starts to grin. They talk back and forth for a good while, after which Mr Sharma is again looking his happy confident self. Finally, the guru clasps my arm and gives it a squeeze and a shake with his long boney fingers, that suddenly remind me of talons. It dawns on me, in that moment, that here is the eagle that has been circling since we arrived, keeping an eye on us from above, and I think from within as well. Ever since that first night here, I've been aware of a silent presence gliding just out of reach of my consciousness. Without a moments hesitation and with lightning speed, I grab his wrist with my free hand, and hold it firm. For a split second he looks shocked, but then starts to laugh, as he realizes the eagle has been caught. He releases my arm and I release his wrist, he looks pleased to have been caught, and nods knowingly before he gets up and leaves.

The teacher looks totally perplexed by this turn of events, but I ignore his inquiring looks. "So what's the verdict?" I ask him instead. He quickly gets over being left out the loop, and tells me, "The guru thinks it's a most wonderful idea, to complete the whole circle, he said it would be more than he ever dreamt of. He also told me I should have faith that everything is going to come into line, at just the right time, to allow us to slip through the door to nirvana, and if we are then destined to witness the birth of Maya, so be it." I can hear in his voice that nirvana is his real goal. For Hindus the created world, the world of Maya, comes a very lowly second place to the exulted nirvana. I say to Mr Sharma, "But this temple is dedicated to the dancing Shiva, and if I understand it right, he represents the creation of time and space and the rhythm of life, so I don't think it's any accident that we're here. Where else would we be to witness the birth of creation?" I can see by the look on his face he hadn't thought of this, he had one goal in mind and has become blind to what is

actually going on around him. He gazes at the sparkling golden statue in it's case of mirrors, deep in thought.

Eventually he turns back to me, "We call this aspect of Shiva, Nataraja, the lord of the dance," he tells me. "He symbolizes more than just time and space, also the primal creative force, that you are talking about. I now see why we are here, and most of all why you are here." He takes my hand and holds it tight, "I did not think that we needed you, but now I can see that the guru was right, you are taking us where we need to go. I should have had faith," he nods solemnly and releases my hand. "I've had more than my share of doubts as well," I tell him, "but I can see now, this is where we're all being collectively led. Something has been set in motion, now we must just enjoy the ride, and whatever it is that's soon to manifest." He nods in agreement, then we sit in silence.

The room is filling with smoke, because several bunches of incense sticks have been lit around the stone box, containing, who I now know is, Nataraja. Some of the smoke I can see is being sucked out the doors, but the rest is swirling around the room, being driven I think by the force and impetus of the chanting, blasting into the temple from the increasingly frenzied gathering outside. The small group inside are taking a different approach, and light up a chillum, which they pass around amongst themselves, adding quite considerably to the volume of smoke billowing around the room.

Mr Sharma taps me on the knee to get my attention, in the din. "I nearly forgot, the girl Beth came to see me, and she wanted me to give you this," he says, pulling a slightly crumpled yellow envelope from his robes. He hands it to me, it just has Alex written on it, in very loopy handwriting, which I know is Beth's, even though I've never seen her handwriting before. Yet another example of everything about us being a reflection of our fundamental individual character. We can't get away from being ourselves, not for one second. "Did she seem all right?" I ask him. "Yes, yes I think she was just a little worried about you," he assures me. "I will see you later, if there is nothing else?" Mr Sharma asks getting up. I tell him I'm fine and he goes of leaving me alone in the temple, with the band of stoned Sadhus and a letter from Beth, which I'm feeling uneasy about. Eventually I decide to open it tomorrow, because it's contents will in all likelihood be distracting, whatever they are. Infact, I wish Mr Sharma had waited until tomorrow to give it to me, I sniff the envelope for a clue, but that only tells me it could have been written by a donkey. I slip it into my back pocket and endeavor to forget about it until tomorrow. It dawns on me that this is the first time I've thought about anything beyond today, and no doubt it's significant that it's to do with Beth, as there is no slack in life for coincidences or accidents.

The guys are on a session in here, and spark up another chillum, so before the temple turns into a hot box, and renders all occupants bollocked, I beat a hasty retreat out into the clear mountain air, which is so pure it's devoid of almost everything, including oxygen and heat. I sit down, leaning against the wall of the temple enjoying being back under the suns rays. Today I don't feel at all conspicuous to just sit here, and watch the spectacle, as the Sadhus are so engrossed or frenzied in their practice, and the atmosphere is so chaotic and anarchic. It could be dressed as a gorilla and no one would notice me. Sitting wondering how I'm going to somehow fit into this chaos, in any constructive way, I start to worry again. I quickly push the doubts out of my head and remember to have faith. It'll all fall into place at the right time, and if you can't muster any faith stop thinking about it altogether.

So instead of worrying myself, I wander off for my daily drink at the spring, but with the chanting and drums accompanying me I can't totally relax. I realize my

energy and nerves have been drawn taut, by days of continual, relentless, escalating hysteria. As an antidote, or at least a distraction from this, I decide to practice some tai-chi, but this doesn't go entirely to plan: what would normally be thirty minutes of slow flowing movements, turns out to be ten minutes of spinning, whirling and whipping, which just adds to the frenzied vibrations bouncing off the mountain and rippling through the air around me. Instead of becoming calm, I've now become aware of my whole body trembling like a leaf in the breeze. I have another attempt, and this again deteriorates into a fast, tempestuous river of movement, which if observed would look like I'm battling some invisible demon, attacking from all directions. As I whirl around madly to defend myself, I give up fighting the beast, which is in actual fact my energy, on the brink of spasms, and collapse onto the ground breathless.

I can see the sky above me like a clear blue sea with waves and currents flowing through it. The waves are eddying and surging around the peaks of the mountain above me. I suddenly become aware of the weight of this sea pressing down on me, pressing me into the ground, then the whole world seems to be pressing in on me, the whole of existence threatening to come crashing in on me in one seismic wave. The enormous responsibility of existence itself is swamping me. I feel if I let go for one instance, the whole of existence will come to an abrupt end. One moment let up and it all disappears, with not so much as a grain of sand left to bear witness to the former existence of the universe. I can feel my fingers have dug in and locked into the ground, desperately trying to hold it all together. Then, again from the depths of this ocean, I hear the cry of the eagle, circling above me. With utter relief, I know I'm not alone, I know the guru is with me. I can let go now, there's someone else to hold the rope that binds the universe, when I get tired. I sit up and the sound of the chanting comes back to me. Turning around I can see all the Sadus doing their thing back at the temple. It's reassuring to know there are so many gods to hold it all together, this universe is just too big for one god. There has to be at least two for creation to continue, an Adam and Eve: so with the billions of gods surrounding me, there's no imminent danger of a cessation of activity that is the universe.

I get up and dust myself down, washing the mud off my fingers in the spring. I don't know if there is any food being served today, but I'm suddenly very hungry. After all the physical activity and my panic attack, a bite to eat could help with the shaking. So I wander slowly back to the courtyard, feeling quite light headed. When I get to the kitchen, there's nobody about and it doesn't look like there has been any cooking activity at all today. I assume it's a fasting day for everybody. Undeterred, and driven by need, I shakily look around for something to eat. The only things I can find that are not going to take ages to peel then cook, are eggs, so I beat four up and pour them into a frying pan. Then I put some water on for tea. When this is all ready, I stuff a couple of bananas in my pocket and leave the kitchen with my booty. Instead of eating outside by myself I go back to my room where I can eat without feeling guilty.

The tea is hot and sweet and works its magic instantly. Maybe I've just been suffering from caffeine withdrawals all along, but when I tune into the thundering of hundreds of voices, competing with the din of even more drums than before, coming through the stone walls as though they are paper, I know why I'm shaking like a leaf. When I've finished my snack, I lie motionless on my bed and merely listen to the powerful, insistent and pulsating rise and fall of the chanting, safe in my dim little cocoon of a cell, too unnerved to go out.

I must have fallen asleep because I wake in a panic, in almost total darkness,

fearful that I might have missed the big event. Jumping up quickly to look out my tiny window, I can see it's only just getting dark out there, panic over, but the fright has done nothing to calm my nerves. I lie back down with butterflies doing summersaults in my stomach, almost paralyzed now by fear. Nervously, I laugh at the irrational reaction I'm having, my whole body has started to shiver in spasms.

Remembering Beth's letter, I sit up and light the candle. I was worried earlier it might be a distraction, now I'm hoping it will be. I tear it open with shaking hands like a lover should, but my shaking is not caused by passion. It's one sheet of paper with a short note written on it. "Dear Alex, I don't know why what happened between us, happened, but I know what did take place, was supposed to. You've had a profound effect on me; in a good way, and believe it or not, even Sally's happier. Anyway, what I want to tell you, is we are going to spend the night of the full moon out on the balcony, looking up at the moon, sending you all our love and energy. Love Beth XXXX . P.S Stay in touch, or I'll come looking for you."

I read it a couple of times by the light of the candle, wondering now why I was so worried. The moon is probably just about coming up, so I close my eyes and picture the girls on the balcony, in my imagination I see them lying back in their chairs with their feet up on the wall, Beth has just rolled a joint and just lighting it, as the moon starts to rise and shine down on the Ganges below them. I slip the letter back in the envelope, then back into my pocket, knowing my friends are with me. The shivering has stopped, but I'm feeling sweaty now, so I change all my clothes, and for some reason I put on the best ones I have, which makes it feel like I'm getting ready to go out on a date or something.

I blow the candle out, and very carefully this time, feel my way to the door, then along the corridor and finally out the door into the cold night air. The moon is indeed up, it's monochrome light casting strong shadows about the buildings I walk with some trepidation, but also determination, around the side of the temple where everyone is gathered. Since I was last here, three fires have been built in a triangular formation, pointing towards the mountain about thirty yards apart. Their smoke is filtering and softening the moon light cutting across the plateaux, but is doing nothing to diminish the blinding luminescence of the towering mountain herself. I glance now at Shiva, who I'm glad to see has also made an effort, He is surrounded by hundreds of candles, giving life to his ring of fire, and movement to his dancing stone body. A forest of incense sticks has been lit at his feet, the smoke of which is obscuring him from the knees down, giving him an authentic rock star look.

The drumming has completely taken over from chanting now, with about thirty drummers beating out a wild, and in my ears, exotic rhythm. Some are sitting cross legged in groups, using their hands to beat their drums, while others are dancing about hitting their drums with sticks. They are all keeping the some basic beat, but filling in with their own individual flourishes, creating a cacophony of sound with a blur of hands. Meanwhile, the dancers are whipping themselves into a frenzy of contorted bodies and a flashing sea of delirious faces, possessed by the insistent calling of the drums, and the answering of others, echoing and resonating around the plateaux.

All this mayhem is in direct contrast to the last time I became one with the god inside. It was stillness that bought it all into line. Maybe this other extreme will somehow have the same effect, but I don't know how.

Like a novice at an orgy, I tread apprehensively into the fray, but without a clue how to get into the groove. I jig about a bit, while watching the moons slow ascent, feeling like a spare part in a well oiled threshing machine. Even the thought of Beth and Sally watching the same moon doesn't put a spring in my step. I work my way

into the center of things, to the middle of the three fires, hoping some of the wildness and euphoria, from the dense excited throng, will rub off on me. Closing my eyes, I start to feel the music push my body around and I feel I'm getting it, but on opening them, I see I'm a long way from the rapture of the others.

I've spent the last few days fighting to keep my energy in check, while it's been continually on the very brink of climax, and now when the time is right, nothing. Hardly a flutter of energy, not even enough to call a spark, let alone enough to create an illuminating lightning bolt. Maybe I should have spent the last few days fasting and chanting after all, like these guys who are clearly riding the groove.

Just as the moon comes into line above the first peak, and mild doubt is turning into unease, someone grips my arm. I instinctively know it's the grip of the guru, before I even look down. His face is shining back up at me, his eyes ablaze. I smile and nod to hide the fact that I think I've blown it. He doesn't say anything, but thrusts a fully loaded chillum in my hand, then pulls me through the crowd with his iron like grip, over to one of the fires. Here he reaches into the ashes at the edge of the fire, and with his bare hand pulls out a small glowing ember, which he quickly drops into the top of the chillum I'm still holding. Smoke starts to curl up from the bowl of the chillum and the guru prods my hand to indicate that I should take a toke. As he seems to know what he's doing, and because I've got nothing to lose now, I take a puff. It's quite hot so I only take a small pull, feeling it burn my throat. After I've exhaled, the guru urges me to take another pull of the still smoking chillum, obviously not impressed with my last one. So I lift the chillum high to get into a good smoking position, and looking directly up at the full moon, fill my lungs with the hot sweet smoke. Resisting the urge to cough I hold it in, until my eyes start to water, then finally exhale a mighty cloud of spent smoke, into the night air above the thrashing dancers. The guru nods sagely to signal that I've received the right dose, and only then releases his grip on my arm. He smiles then disappears off into the crowd with his pipe.

The smoke has an almost immediate affect. I feel a surge of energy rise from my feet and blast it's way up my body into my head, beads of sweat well up on my forehead and I'm tingling all over. The fires seem to have gotten brighter and their colors deeper. I look at the dancers who's bodies have taken on a sheen of their own, and their dancing has stopped being frantic and become magically complex. I notice the drumming which has become infinitely intricate, with a myriad of drums carrying on a beautiful conversation. I'm finding wherever my attention falls, comes into crystal clear clarity, with everything else slipping into a soft warm background. A smile spreads over my face as I play with it, swopping my attention back and forth. Finally I let it rest on myself and I realise, in a flash of clarity, how stressed I've been for the last while. As I recognize this, I literally feel the tension drain out of my face and body, leaving me relaxed, open and still.

I look over the top of the fire, where I'm still standing, to the mountain, then up to the moon, which is almost directly between the peaks and shining down on us and the mountain, with an unbelievable intensity. Turning around I can see Shiva over the tops of the heads of the dancers. Then suddenly the noise and vitality of my surroundings comes crashing back into my awareness, like a whirlwind, and I'm swept away on a wave of rhythm. My arms start to fly, taking on a life of their own, and my feet start to stomp sending vibrations deep into the ground. Then before I know it, I'm one of the euphoric dancers, twisting and turning, rising and falling. We are seven hundred individual people, but have become one unified dancing machine.

With every twist and turn I feel energy surge about my body like hot liquid being



squeezed through a hollow doll, my breathing becomes deep and hard, pumping this energy still faster. When movement and breathing unite, in this frenetic dance I've embarked upon, it's like tai-chi, but at a thousand miles an hour, with the energy moving with a thousand times the force. Being guided by the drums, I send the volatile energy first this way, then that. I soon start to show off to myself, sending it around my body in ever larger elliptical loops. The larger the loops, the faster I have to send them around to stay in time with the rhythm. A big grin spreads across my face as I start to play, changing the size and the speed, and also keeping these changes in time with the rhythm. The pounding rhythm created by the drums, and the dancing, are the yin and yang guiding the energy, keeping it moving and creating the paths for it to flow along. I'm in the groove, I'm flying about with controlled abandonment.

As my head is spinning about, a gap opens up in the crowd through which I catch a glimpse of Shiva, and I know in an instant that I am dancing the universe. My arms are flying out to the full width of the universe, then out again to the full depth of time. The drummers seem to increase the tempo even further if that is possible, and the circles of energy I had been creating, now take on a life of their own, and instead of being confined to my body are forming above my head in ever larger and ever faster orbits. Very soon it seems as though it's these that are rotating me, not the other way round. Within seconds a huge purple cyclone, or vortex of energy forms above my head, reaching high into the sky, where it becomes at least a mile or two across. As I swirl about on the ground, this ridiculous looking hat is spun about the sky like a giant lasso above me.

While marveling at this phenomenon and wondering why I feel myself getting lighter and lighter, even though I know I'm still on the ground dancing, I feel like I'm being lifted up. The drumming is also getting quieter, as though I'm moving away from it, but I can still just about make out the drummers cavorting around me, as I'm being lifted: even if it's only in my head. I seem to expand to fill the void in the center of the vortex, and the more I expand the less dense I become, which accelerates the lift, and the more I expand. Just before this process goes critical and I leave the world, I sense those familiar boney talons gripping my arm. I start laughing to myself, that canny guru is coming along for the ride. I'd selfishly forgotten about everyone else in the heat of the moment, with all the spinning, expanding, lifting and whatnot, and yet still, with all of that happening, I can't stop laughing, knowing the guru is hanging on. I must be stoned out of my head to find it so funny. I wonder to myself if he has bought everyone with him, I hope so. I imagine all the Sadhus being dragged up into the vortex, one after the other in a long chain, arms, legs and hair flying everywhere as they enter the cyclone.

After this thought I do go critical, I've expanded to the point where there is nothing holding me together and everything stops simultaneously. No more spinning and no more lifting. It's more shocking, everything stopping so abruptly, than the turmoil preceding it. There is total silence and the total lack of every other sensory sensation. I have left my body again, and the world, and for that matter, the entire physical universe. I am again infinite, and feel free, not being constrained by a finite universe, however big it looks. The dualistic world we live in with all its separations, night from day, here from there, you from me, feels so restrictive compared to this. Here I am complete and limitless, stretching on forever in all directions. Yet size is not an issue here, there is no perspective. All that is left, is the greatest feeling I've ever felt, the feeling of completeness. I am whole once again, not divided by thoughts or emotions. This is love, and I am in love with this feeling.

I hope the other guys have made it here, and are experiencing being god with me.

This was their goal, this is their nirvana, we have left the created world, 'Maya,' and returned to the uncreated.

I had wanted to experience the first moment of creation, but now I'm not so sure, this is nirvana after all, there's absolutely no reason to leave. Maybe the Sadhus, and many other religious types are right, maybe the illusionary world is just a place to get out off, as quickly as possible. I search around for something to justify creation, but there is nothing, nada, diddly-squat, not so much as a spark of anything. This place is complete with nothing to it's name. There is only the feeling of complete, unconditional, unidirectional love. I stop thinking now and just experience that, leaving everything else behind .....

Shockingly, there's a bang and a flash. It seems, even in an infinite non-place, love, paradoxically, cannot be contained and explodes in an eruption of joy. The fantasy we call life, is destined to continue, with us, as gods, at it's helm, and the winds of joy in our sails.

The End