



Chapter Twenty-Two

So," Sam Motiwala said, making deliberate eye contact and standing up slowly so that he seemed conscious of balancing his weight evenly between the two sides of his body. He rocked on the balls of his feet. "Are you ready?"

"You can change in this bedroom," Freny offered, leading me down the long wood-floored hallway in their flat.

Sam was teaching a yoga class.

About a dozen Indians dressed in sweat suits like Sam's gathered on the balcony outside, among the bougainvillea and geraniums. Beyond the mosaic railing was an exquisite sunset, blue fading into purple. Class was in English. We began by sitting on woven mats with our eyes closed. "Feeeeeel the energy," Sam began. His voice boomed. I imagined him as a great Zoroastrian priest giving rites at a rooftop funeral. "Feeeel the energy moving doooooowwwwn into your fingertips." He lingered on the feel-

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ing in the limbs, the flow of sensation through them, the "energy" inside.

This was nothing like the Pune classes, but I did not feel dislocated. In fact, I felt very much at home, someplace warm and familiar. I lay in savasana at the end and tried to remember when I'd last attended a yoga class in which the teacher spoke about feeling the pulse in your temples. And I realized that Sam's teachings reminded me of Santa Cruz in the middle eighties. The Motiwalas were a bit like children of the seventies themselves.

A vast ocean, a continent, and several cultures separated Sam Motiwala of Bombay from Julie Kimball of Santa Cruz. But as I listened to airplanes hovering overhead, and to Sam's baritone uttering soothing formulas, and to kids cracking cricket balls on the maidan below, and to a horse carriage clopping down the cobblestones on the affluent suburban street, and as sunset melted to twilight, and the planet Venus blinked at me in the purple sky, I believed that I could have been anywhere.

That night, another American and I wandered through downtown Bombay. The streets were quiet, and in the moonlight the old buildings took on a silver cast, their crumbling facades becoming ghostly and otherworldly. We passed the Parsis' downtown fire temple. Larger-than-life feline caryatids in pharaoh's garb flanked the entrance, their claws curled under. There was no sign of vultures, but I imagined what the temple might look like if the stealth animals came for bits of corpse, then flew to the vanishing point at darkness — little shreds of human soul, carried off in bite-size flecks of flesh. This was as exotic as India had ever been to me.

We turned onto a quiet alley. Light and noise came from a building farther up the crumbly street, the building freshly white-washed but as ancient as the Parsi temple. It was a synagogue. It

was Friday night. The thought of the Jewish Sabbath hadn't entered my mind since I'd been in India. Upstairs no doubt another arcane ritual was playing out, only this one was a practice I could call my own. How disoriented I felt to discover the familiar in this strange land, on this street where vultures carrying off dead might be as commonplace a ritual as davening. I hadn't gone to temple much in my life, but I certainly knew to think of it as a place where I might, or even should, go, where my absence was felt, where if I paid the High Holiday dues I'd certainly be welcomed — no questions asked, other than "Are you Jewish?" Whatever my ambivalences, I could certainly answer yes.

We heard Hebrew chanting as we climbed the steps. Upstairs, a small cluster of men was gathered up front. With a bar separating them from the entranceway, the men davened — swathed in tallithim, fringes swaying at the edges. A man noticed us and gestured for my friend to come forward; he dangled a yarmulke, beckoning. I counted the men in the group and realized they needed another man in order to make a minyan. My friend would suffice. Another man signaled for me to move backward. It was an Orthodox synagogue, and a woman's presence was not welcomed past the bar.

As instantly as I'd detected the warmth of this familiar culture, I remembered what had pushed me from it. Here was my own family, or at least part of my family. This synagogue might have seemed a warm light on a dark street amid the unknown, but tonight it repelled me. I'd felt more among my kind earlier in the evening listening to familiar relaxation jargon at the Motiwalas'. What a twisted riddle I'd walked into. Hindu and Hebrew were traditions equally arcane, equally arbitrary, as rich with history as that of the Parsis. In between stood the amorphous modern hybrid that was yoga, yoga as executed in English, on an outdoor patio, in the resonant deep-voiced oratory of a Bombay subur-

banite. By some circuitous route, I'd come to that patio and found my people.

Asana, it struck me, was a ritual as redolent of mystery as the davening of the old Jews in the Bombay synagogue. *Asana is my prayer*, Iyengar had famously said. I'd never prayed, and my own connection to my ancestors was little more than tenuous. But asana was my rite.