



Chapter Twenty-Three

When I got back to Pune, I took the next morning off from practice at the institute and did yoga on my roof. The ambient noise of India was louder there; kites and cuckoos swooped from orange poinciana, making hoot and swish and flute echoes; maids clattered stainless-steel breakfast plates beneath hoses; a woman flung water from laundry on the next rooftop; splattering drops made *whoosh* sounds.

How I missed the quiet of that practice I used to do at home, under no one's stern judgment, with nothing to observe but the way my breath slowed, my muscles loosened, my flesh became sensitive in places I hadn't yet known were there. No phones, no gossip. Nothing.

I was no longer progressing as a yoga student here. Abey and his parents were teaching me more Marathi than asana. We still hadn't gotten to those balancings and advanced backbends. I was

FIRST THERE IS A MOUNTAIN

still studying pranayama with Geeta, and there, thanks to longevity, I was finally exempt from those errors the new students never ceased making. Wrong fingers continued to fly to wrong nostrils: the same wrong fingers every month, the same wrong nostrils, the same unclipped fingernails, the same tedious rants by Geeta. But I was nonetheless a "backbencher," as Iyengar once called himself. Geeta spent endless minutes explaining the proper seated position for breathing: the angle of the buttocks bones; the orientation of spine to sacrum, throat to ear canal, rib cage to navel. When the actual breathing part of class began, my mind clung to that minutiae, never nearing the focus or emptiness we strived for. I didn't understand pranayama. I didn't grasp what we were doing there. I didn't see how it could point me someplace more sublime than a physical or emotional calm, to something that might be spiritual, to some understanding of spirituality itself.

I began a sun salutation on my roof. As I started, a recent dream came to me: I asked Iyengar what we were doing in our pranayama breathing classes. "What should I be looking for?" I pleaded. Pranayama was an empty hole, holding no particular meaning. In the dream, Iyengar took me to a pond, saying nothing. There was a plank hovering over the pond. The guru, barefoot, walked to the end of it. He picked me up and put me on the plank, and then crossed to the land on the other side without me. I walked out onto the plank clumsily, in big boots, thinking only about how my feet were unconnected to the earth. When I woke up, all I understood was how little I understood. I didn't know how to cross to the other side, where meaning lay, how to make the bridge, how to root myself on either side. Iyengar had nonetheless helped me enter the empty sea. There, I was suspended, footless. Ready.

On the roof, I wrapped my legs into lotus and swung my arms around my back to catch my big toes with my hands. I

arched my head back. My right shoulder, under my clavicle and behind my scapula, let out its quiet yelp. I breathed deeply, which heightened the pain. I had an urge to resist the feeling, to protect myself against the tightness in my shoulder by caving forward. After so long, though, I knew not to give in.

I swung forward and brought my belly over my feet, and my chest and forehead to the ground. The stretch in my groin was strong. I didn't flinch from it, as I'd learned to persevere so long ago. I kept stretching, pulling my torso out from my hamstring, pushing my belly deeper down. I felt a pull in my groin. It felt like the grief I'd once held in my chest, the sensation of a knife cutting into me, an ache like a broken heart. Millions of minuscule sobs cried out from singular cells in my groin.

Yoga gives you the strength to face God when he appears, a yoga teacher once told me. I repeated the phrase in my head. The pain did not scare me as it once might have. I stayed. Millions of small sobs gathered into a single sob, a throbbing grief that after a while was only sensation. The feeling didn't go away. It stayed, personified, talking to me. It said, This is the reason to work on advanced poses, to stretch strings of flesh you never felt before. This is how the pain becomes a part of you, with an ache you carry in your body like a well-thumbed stone between your fingers. This is how you learn to feel more, to resist less, to cultivate your senses so you detect so much, smell it and see it and hear it, so much so that the world itself starts to ring, and you realize that as much as you feel every cell in your throbbing hamstring, your senses have become tuned to experience the world in the finest detail, and that world is luminous and alive. This is where you understand that Iyengar's supposition is correct, that the "fluctuations of consciousness" really do reside in the flesh, and when each and every cell quits its constant irritating quivering and joins in with a pulsing inside your body, your consciousness stops quivering too.

After, I did savasana, with a cloth over my eyes to block the light. I thought of one of Iyengar's phrases: *When you still the flickering eyes, you still the consciousness*. I concentrated on relaxing the muscles in my eye sockets, and then on resisting the wandering, circling motion of my eyes behind their lids. When my eyes got very still, the roof sounds got very loud. And the pulsing of each of the cells of my body, in concert, got loud again too, and then the world outside began to reverberate with the same sound, a single thrum that was kites and plates and wind. And I knew that I was asleep and I was not asleep.

And with my eyes closed I saw the blue of the sky sheet out into two dimensions and split into striations of blue and beige. The beige was my flesh, and the strips of blue whirled like banners in wind. My body lost form. Sinuous, it threaded inside the banners, flying to the sound of a rhythmic, musical bass. I merged with the sky and the sky merged with me. And I wondered what exhilarating thing this was. And *whoosh*. It was over. And I was awake again. And I knew that for a second I had collapsed inside of something outside me. I knew that I had been a part of something greater than I was, and whatever it was, it felt like bliss.