



## Chapter Six

More than four years later, I got on a plane in Los Angeles believing I would find my teacher. The trip to India would take two days. I hewed closely to my instincts and refused food the entire journey. Today, I was ostensibly healthy. But I still craved hunger, was still a junkie for the visual starbursts of a skipped meal. Hunger could protect me, I believed in some way, like a shield.

I had my first coffee as the flight departed Los Angeles. Iyengar wrote in *Light on Yoga* that while yoga must be performed after a fast, "a cup of tea or coffee, cocoa or milk may be taken." It had always seemed funny to me that Iyengar never proscribed coffee — in L.A., everyone knew that coffee stained your teeth, depleted your vitamin C, disturbed your sleep cycle, and, of course, jangled your nerves. But as I fasted and felt the giddy effects of the caffeine on the first leg of my flight, Iyengar's advice made all the sense in the world. The yogi wanted to keep his

## FIRST THERE IS A MOUNTAIN

stomach empty of solids — the injunction was purely physical. It had nothing to do with the particular qualities of the substances inside him. In this way, he left room for God; God took up physical space. I too wanted to keep my body clear. I wanted to create as uncluttered a transition as possible between L.A. and India. I wanted to keep outside of me anything that lay between. I wanted to be empty when I met my teacher.

Unfortunately, a dozen coffees coupled with two days of traveling left me feeling not so much empty as polluted. When my plane opened onto the Bombay tarmac, I had a headache in every cell. Bombay smelled exactly as bad as its reputation. There were many things floating on the air currents, things I couldn't recognize and things I could: roasting meat, soot, fire, shit. On the street, the smells were even stronger. I traveled by cab through the last minutes of late night to Bombay's central train station, where after a short wait I would catch the train to Pune. Five hours and the mountainous Western Ghats of India stood between me and Iyengar.

It was the height of monsoon season. Water puddled everywhere. I stood on the train platform, watching a thick gray cloud gather above the far edge of the railway terminus. I had arrived in India prepared — for Iyengar and his poses; for Sanskrit nomenclature and mythic resonances; for filth, purity, feet, left hands. But I'd learned nothing to explain how this land of yoga had produced the squalor and poverty that stretched before me.

Across from the train platform was a rough sidewalk lined with vendors' carts made from scrap wood. Sheets of soggy cardboard flapped above the carts from connectors made of old twine, lengths of wire, twist ties. Dawn light broke through the monsoon sky, revealing people sleeping under wraps on carts and rubble pavement.

Soon a gust of wind, wet and rich with tree smells, swept

over the platform. Bird sounds got loud; squawks and screeches accompanied the frantic beating of wings. Herons with long yellow necks landed on the tracks and then flapped up into the air. The noises seemed invented to try nerves. Short sharp horns blasted. A hawker advertised his foods with a sibilant and alliterative song. It echoed shrilly in my head. I tried to hear in its threads the devotional chants we recited in yoga classes, but I couldn't find the rhythm. The wind carried a tremendous heat, hot as a blow-dryer, like a Santa Ana. In L.A., the winds' nervous energy was fabled for making people do things they were never wired to do: men murdered wives; authors found themselves shopping in supermarkets dressed in nothing but bikinis. "Every voice seems a scream. It is the season of suicide and divorce and prickly dread, wherever the wind blows," was how Joan Didion described it.

The winds aroused the sleepers. The shrouded figures began to move slowly on the carts and pavement. Rain began to patter, drawing whole families from under covers. Blinking children emerged and squatted naked over puddles. Lithe women with black skin in water-streaked, brightly colored saris moved to street-side cook pots; the landscape transformed into a sea of scarlet and emerald and magenta and mud. Vendors set up wares — papayas and bananas and cauliflower and cooked things, everything dripping water at its edges.

Finally, the spicy smell of fried food overtook the stench of sewage and earth. I was hungry. I felt light-headed, floaty. I smelled fresh bread and traced it to a young boy and girl huddled over a dry metal cylinder. I wheeled my luggage off the platform and walked through craggy pavement and puddles to the stand, moving quickly to dodge the water and waking humans. An ounce of dirt hosts 28 million bacteria, I'd read in *Harper's* before I came. The same dirt, wet, hosts 28 billion: 28 billion bacteria

swimming in the wet spot on my suitcase. I walked faster. These people were the fabled untouchables of India's streets, that caste whose touch and food and shadow were once thought to pollute, I tried to banish the thought, but it was easy to imagine that the people had lifted from the filth of the sewers.

The boy and girl were balling up dough globes and flattening them into the dry drum. I held up two fingers to ask the boy for two chapatis. He palmed two globes and flattened them into patties in the pan and, when they were cooked, rolled the breads in pink newsprint. He charged me two rupees, the equivalent of three cents. The newspaper was moist and fragrant. I ripped a small hemisphere from the chapati's edge. It tasted like rich clay.

As I chewed, a small wet thing caught my hand. I jerked it away. There was a girl. She was about five, wrapped in a tattered dress cut from emerald sari cloth; mud streaked her bare feet and legs. Her right arm ended at a stub just above her elbow. Her feet rested at the edge of a puddle the color of sienna. She moved her one hand away from my wrist and up to her mouth, her eyes stabbing toward mine. Behind her, the eyes of several dozen hungry Indians under the age of seven turned circumspectly toward us. I gave the girl some rupees, the eyes of the strangers moving closer.

The girl was unsatisfied and repeated an insistent gesture, her fingers hitting at her mouth, then pointed at my roll of steaming Hindi newspaper. "Chapati," she said. *Chapati*, of course. I handed her the chapatis, a cramp in my stomach killing my hunger anyway. I edged back to the train platform, handing out rupees as I slunk back, the children following until rail guards stopped them.

Back on the platform, my train had pulled in. I rolled my luggage along its length to locate my compartment. Amid a roar of shouting and throwing at the rear of the train, bags and boxes careened toward the train doors, vying with hundreds of passengers

attempting to board. A sign on the carriage said SECOND CLASS. Farther along the platform, signs on windows designated the cars SECOND-CLASS SLEEPERS. Here, the commotion was tempered. Next came SECOND-CLASS AIR-CONDITIONED, then SECOND-CLASS SLEEPER AIR-CONDITIONED, the chaos lessening and the crowds thinning outside each successive car. I imagined each category as one of India's four castes, chugging across the landscape in self-contained hemispheres fashioned from train cars.

On a list on a window at the front of the train I found my reservation. A family of well-to-do Indians and several men with briefcases and loafers lingered on the platform. The family members looked serene, exhibiting none of the anticipation and panic of those at the rear. The adult son, a handsome if pudgy young man in a Dartmouth sweatshirt, Adidas pants, and Reeboks, talked on a cell phone. The sister wore a saffron sari of a silk so lustrous it showed not a wrinkle, from the bottom of which peeked elegant pumps dyed the exact same hue. A rope of black braid ran down her back, tied at the end with a swatch of silk from the same sari cloth. She reminded me of girls I knew when I used to visit my father in Boston. *We "summer" on the Cape*, they used to say. The edge of the woman's sari hung in a long scarf slung over her left shoulder, but its end lay in a puddle of iridescent water. A wet stain crept up the scarf like a rising pestilence. Finally, she peered over her shoulder with a haughty arch of the upper back and lifted the silk from the puddle. Then she flicked its excess water toward the track and scowled at its tassels, casting off the creep of Indian dirt. Then she flung the cloth so that it was suspended precisely two inches above the puddle.

My seat was in a sleeping compartment featuring flat sleeping bunks, air-conditioning, and hazed windows. This seemed wrong, as I was wet, cold, and awake. Only one man shared the compartment, a middle-aged Indian in loafers who was studiously ex-

amining the contents of his briefcase. A porter popped in his head and handed trays to each of us. I scrutinized mine uncertainly.

My cabin mate looked at me and assumed a similar sneer. "Vegetarian," he noted.

I lifted the aluminum wrapping and indeed found a piping gelatinous meal that appeared to lack meat. Chana masala, rice, chapatis. I sniffed it, not sure it could resurrect my hunger.

"You are American?" my cabin mate ventured.

I nodded, trying to determine the oil content of my chapatis. They were not smooth and dry like the chapatis on the street.

"California?" he added.

I nodded. I was preoccupied with whether I could perform the one-handed chapati-and-chana-masala maneuver on a moving train, though I was still not committed to the act of eating.

"And I imagine you are vegetarian?" he continued.

I nodded again, wondering what to make of this mystic.

"You see, I thought so. Because I happen to live in California as well." He went on to explain that he was an engineer who had just flown in from his home of the last ten years, Sunnyvale, California, and was now visiting his family in South India. In his lilting Indian-English accent, he added that he'd chosen this class of car because he liked the darkened windows, which gave our compartment and its flat bed-seats the surreal yellowish tint of a darkroom. He said he preferred to sleep through the landscape, that he wasn't ready yet to look closely at his native India.

"And you, what brings you halfway around the world?" he asked with a mocking grin.

"Iyengar yoga," I offered.

"Iyengar. Yes, I know the name. The Iyengar family comes from the same state as mine. Tamil Nadu. This name, Iyengar, it is, like mine, a Brahmin name. In Tamil Nadu," he said, "there are two strains of Brahmins. The Iyers and the Iyengars. I am an Iyer."

He winked, suggesting that his name meant everything — that his lineage connected him to the sages and scribes who for all India's history had occupied the top tier in the caste hierarchy — but also proposing that, paradoxically, he was now far too modern to put stock in such clannish identifications. "My family chose not to use the name," he added with even more pride. "My last name now is Singh. Keeping the old caste name is a way of advertising your family, that you come from the priestly race, that you are from an old strain of Indian royalty. We've ripped off the sacred thread." He said it with an air of importance.

The sacred thread was associated exclusively with Brahmins, but I'd never known exactly what it meant. In fact, I didn't actually know, precisely, what a Brahmin was, and only vaguely that Iyengar was one. I knew that he wore the thread. It appeared in the photos of even the most elaborate postures in *Light on Yoga*. The sling rested loosely over Iyengar's left shoulder, crossing his chest between his nipples, circling to his back at the waist, and looping again around his neck. In the upside-down poses, it fell haphazardly toward the floor. I'd never given much thought, though, to the meaning of the word *Brahmin*. A Brahmin was from India's highest and most cultured class, a Boston Brahmin only from India.

As I considered the man's words, I thought about how my grandmother used the term. She was a Boston Jew with Protestant airs and little patience for the rigors of her Orthodox upbringing. She'd told me about how she used to sneak bacon grease into her matzo-ball soup such that her mother — who kept kosher until the day she died — declared it the best matzo-ball soup this side of Grodno. Despite her mixed feelings about her Jewish roots, my grandmother often spoke in snide terms about the Boston Brahmins — those elitists who thought the Jews inferior and denied

them membership in their country clubs. When my grandmother talked about Boston's WASPs, it always seemed to me that she did so with equal parts scorn and respect. I wondered now about the significance of our own rituals in this context. On the one hand, our Jewish rituals made us strong. But on the other, they made those elegant and handsome WASPs inaccessible. I always got the feeling that my grandmother believed, on some level, that if we could all talk like Cary Grant, if we could wave our gloves in the air like Katharine Hepburn, then Boston's glamour would coat us too. We could glide through the world with that cultured patina.

My grandmother's ambivalence was especially complicated when applied to her grandchildren. She didn't really consider my sister and me Jews. Our mother, though a convert for the sake of her marriage to my father, was forever regarded by her Jewish in-laws as a shiksa — albeit a beautiful and charming one. After the divorce, I became for a whole clan of Boston Jews the doppelgänger for the French beauty my father let get away. "You're not Jewish," my grandmother would tease me. I never knew how to take it, as insult or compliment.

Where, I wondered now, did India's Boston Brahmins "summer"? Did non-Brahmins feel the same complicated draw to them? Were these Brahmins oppressive too, their rituals exclusive and arcane, the Indian equivalent of croquet and Harvard-Yale games? Just then, the porter peeked his head back in and, without pausing to ask, extracted both of our untouched trays. Food. Was refusing food a way to keep us separate?

Iyengar was certainly a product of his exclusive upbringing. In the photos in *Light on Yoga* he looks like an emissary from an exotic tribe. Many of these images were taken from an album the yogi put together in the 1950s, when he was just thirty-three, a thick-lipped, dark-skinned, slick-haired Gary Cooper of a yogi.

One of the poses, simhasana, had always stuck in my mind when I tried to imagine where Iyengar came from. The pose was named for the god Narasimha, an incarnation of Vishnu in which he was part man, part lion. It was also the asana that won Iyengar his sobriquet, the Lion of Pune — a description, however lovingly bestowed, of the yogi's infamous temper. Iyengar was known for being fierce and fiery, proud and fearsome and animallike, a feral king. I had always found this photo the most startling and strange in the guidebook, sleeved though it was among hundreds of images of the man twisting into flying, crouching, arching, balancing impersonations of moods, deities, and circuslike wonders.

In simhasana, Iyengar was a contortion of feet wrapping into middle, his face morphed into the horrific cross-eyed expression of an enraged monster, its mouth agape, its tongue bayoneting forward. Here he acted out the myth of Narasimha, in which Vishnu proved the existence of a boundless and universal God by revealing his divine form. His transformation was as awe-inspiring as the metamorphosis of Krishna into the multilimbed discus-throwing warrior in the Bhagavad Gita. In the legend of Narasimha, Vishnu turned himself into a chimera that was part lion, part human, part god. Breathing fire, he made mincemeat of a demon who had challenged the existence of God. Iyengar, it was said, dealt with detractors with a similar lack of restraint.

The metamorphosis of Iyengar into simhasana made him fearsome, but it also made me wonder how he came to present such a ritualistic image to the modern and Western readership of *Light on Yoga*. In the photo, he wore the string, giving the sleeve the look of a document from an anthropologist's field book. It occurred to me now that Iyengar embodied the very essence of Brahmin here: regal and otherworldly; part animal, part god; an anachronistic relic from an India ruled by sages. Not a Boston Brahmin, but an ancient and Eastern one.

"We've traded in the sacred thread for our computers and our Ph.D.s," I heard my seatmate saying, now sounding almost wistful. "This Iyengar, what does he do?"

I told him about the yoga institute in Pune — how despite a lengthy waiting list, it attracted nearly a thousand Western visitors a year, how Iyengar was the single most important influence on the practice of yoga in the United States, how Indian and foreign students learned the mind-body healing techniques of the master side by side according to a strict pedagogy that was half exercise workout, half meditation.

He looked at me ironically. "I have never done yoga," he confessed.

"Why not?"

"It is not something you would do," he responded. "Frankly, no one I know has ever done yoga. They think it is old and quaint, something your grandfather might have done. When I was young, I never knew anyone who did yoga. It is not something that interests the Indian people. If you are someone who works in the professional sector, if you have the time for this kind of study or recreation, you want to do the Western things, hiking and jogging. You go to the gym." He gestured toward the cabin with the young Indian man in sweats.

"Yoga's popular in the West, though," I offered.

"Yes," he said. "And so it will come to India." He sighed. "All things come here backwards. And now, I must sleep." He lifted his loafers onto the vinyl seat and lowered the shade over his yellowed window, casting the compartment in a deeper shade of jaundice.

I looked long at his loafers on the seat but finally kicked off my own sneakers before laying my feet on my bunk. Then I drifted to sleep to the rhythm of train gears and crashing monsoon bursts. The hum of the downpour and the circular drone of