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Gods’ Eyes

Even before he left home at fifteen to become enlightened, my brother Rahoul had been making sculptures with gods’ eyes. He bought eyes in many sizes from the Gods’ Eye Shop in the Bhuleshwar temple bazaar of central Bombay. Back from the sweaty trip to town, he stood in the breezy living room of our seaside home, unfolded packets of searing pink tissue paper, and spilled eyes onto his palm. I raised my chin for a better look. Pitch-black irises gazed up blankly from moist-looking whites, a hint of lifelike pink staining each corner.

“All the better to see you with . . .” chanted Rahoul as he turned the eyes on me.

“Don’t!” I objected, pulling back fast.

The largest eyes spanned Rahoul’s palm; he looked down, considering, and the eyes considered him back. The tiniest eyes clustered like shiny seeds in the hollow of his hand. Usually, such unblinking eyes looked out from gods and goddesses in temples or in household pujas. Eyes staring from the creases of my brother’s palm were too weird for me. I was intrigued and also scared.

Rahoul didn’t intend these eyes for actual gods, but for the Rahoul-beings he made from odds and ends he found washed up on the beach. He gathered scrap wood, shells, bones, and rusty tin cans. He glued, hammered, or welded combinations of these materials to create his beings, and then he gave them character with gods’ eyes.

* Rahoul being. Photograph by Stella Sneed.
eyes. One Rahoul-being was just a cross-eyed, puzzled face with eyes of different sizes on either side of the nose-knob of a sea-bleached animal bone. Another was a huge wood head ending in a hook, big eyes looking with surprise down its long nose, joined by a small armless torso to giant feet. Yet another, made of tin, had oversize eyes glaring with fierce dignity from between fanning metal ears, arms extended as though in blessing. A female Rahoul-being contemplated the world sweetly, her eyes tilted downward at the edges of her flattened condensed-milk-can face, her hands clasped over the long lilac gown of another, painted can. Of all these beings, she appealed to me the most, but all the same I protected my own dolls from seeing her.

Rahoul was my big brother, with a six-year head start on life. Even when he baffled me, I usually assumed I would someday grow into understanding his actions. The gods' eyes watching from multiple angles in our home reminded me how, since I was the tiniest child, I had yearned for a connection to forces hidden within the visible world. I had examined the frames of mirrors looking for a way through; watched my dolls' mouths in hopes of conversation; checked on the progress of a fairy chrysalis stuck to the underside of a cane chair before someone else, seeing it as a glob of red Kiss san jam, wiped it away. I loved reading partly for the ways that it made the realities around me crumble and grow indistinct; I loved holding a pencil close to the point to write my way into story-worlds. I vaguely understood that Rahoul was reaching for something I couldn't yet see. Though I frankly preferred art with symmetry, happy colors, and straw-haired heroines, my brothers had all teased me so much for liking The Sound of Music that I now hid my opinions. I listened in and watched everyone else's reactions to the Rahoul-beings without saying anything myself.

Maw, our mother, was thrilled by the Rahoul-beings. She borrowed one for a Bombay party scene in a Merchant-Ivory film, The Guru, for which she was arranging sets. Our father, Paw, raised his eyebrows, twisted one corner of his mouth, and went back to his room. Our grandmother Ba, who periodically enjoyed personal meetings with gods and goddesses, was at first startled when she came to visit and saw gods' eyes on a Rahoul-being, but because her adored eldest grandson was responsible, she just laughed. Various guests streaming through our house studied the sculptures, exclaiming over Rahoul's genius. Even our next-door neighbor, the British surrealist painter-turned-photographer Stella Snead, came across the driveway to take a look.

"They're rathuh good, aren't they?" Stella airily pronounced, snorting down her nose with a laugh.
"Remember when he was nine and writing haiku?" Maw asked.
"Don't, Maw," said Rahoul.

Stella went back to get her camera and snapped portraits of each being. A few weeks later, I came home from school and found her prints lying out on our living room table. I leafed through them, awed that my teenage brother had inspired a grown-up's art, especially a grown-up as grand and formidable as Stella. In addition to the series of portraits, Stella had made a black-and-white collage. The Rahoul-beings gathered in a mountainous landscape around a lake, where they all peered, puzzled, over reflections that didn't quite match.

Later, I wondered: had handling all those gods' eyes inspired Rahoul to leave home?

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Eyes were, for us, a source of family groupings. For years, grown-up visitors had observed that our Indian-American looks fell into two matched brother-sister pairs. Our sister Maya, the oldest, and brother Deven, the third child, were supposed to look alike because of their hazel "Western" eyes; second-born Rahoul and I, the youngest, were similar because of our darker "Indian" eyes. (Tashi, our adopted brother, who was around Deven's age, had always looked Tibetan.)

As a teenager, Rahoul's eyes were still deep-set and intent, fixing on an object as if he could see into it and through it at the same time. Otherwise, he had become unfamiliar, as though viewed in a mirror that stretched and warped his features. He had grown tall, with an oversize head, narrow hunching shoulders, bony elbows, erupting skin, and a nose that the rest of his face had yet to catch up with.

Sometimes, Rahoul brought up our old pairing to torment me.
"Just a few more years and your nose will be just like mine," he said one afternoon when I appeared by his side to watch him make art. He sat at his desk in the room that had been Maya's before she left for college. With a Rahoul-being looking on, he experimented with drawing while never lifting his pen from the paper. He bent forward, left elbow jutting awkwardly above his hand, as he outlined figures jumbling, tumbling, and overlapping in big, heaped patterns.
"Never!" I objected. I could never be sure when anyone in the family was
making things up to tease me, the gullible youngest. Still, looking at the shiny end of his nose, my hand crept to my face.

"And then your nose will grow even longer. Why do you think we used to call you Baby Elephant?"

I had thought this affectionate title came from a recognition of my special relationship to the royal family of Babar. "That’s not true!" I said.

"You’ll also grow curly hair all over your legs," Rahoul went on in a matter-of-fact voice. He stuck out a leg, bare below the knee. "Look how hairy my legs are?"

"Don’t!"

"Anyway, you don’t have to worry that no one will marry you, because your horoscope says you’ll have seven husbands."

"It does not!"

"And you know what? You’ll always be my beautiful baby sister."

I was not used to being described as pretty, let alone beautiful. Our American grandmother, Nani, had worried aloud that I looked like my Indian grandfather. Maw always said that my big sister Maya was the beauty, while I was sharp. But there was a big step between having stern or sharp features and becoming a freak! Would I really grow up into some sort of Rahoul-being with an elephant trunk and poodle-like leg hair, surrounded by seven equally weird husbands?

"Don’t tease me!" I ordered.

But Rahoul was smiling so brightly that I couldn’t help smiling too.

Rahoul had reminded me so often of the skills I had learned from him that I could list them inside my own head.

"Hey Baby, I taught you to walk!" he said, and I remembered a faraway time when I had faced him, my hands raised to his, resting my small feet on top of his bigger ones as he walked backward taking me forward, or forward so that I walked backward.

"I taught you to fly!" he said, reminding me how he and Maya had hauled me up by my then-chubby hands to speed along the beach, their feet leaving tracks in the sand but not mine.

"I taught you mirror writing!" he claimed. I immediately pictured Maw’s low dressing room table and Rahoul holding up an EMIT/TIME magazine soon after I’d learned to read. "All spies can read in mirrors," Rahoul had instructed. "You have to learn how to watch so people never know it."

I carefully watched my family and everyone coming and going through the house, never entirely sure who I was spying for.

We lived beside Juhu Beach, in the northern suburbs of Bombay, inside a long, fenced stretch of coconut grove that contained three houses: my parents’ house, our American grandmother Nani’s house, and Stella’s house. The land had been leased to us with the understanding that once or twice a year a swarm of bare-chested, bare-legged men would fling their arms and legs around the trees and climb straight up to harvest smooth green coconuts. Maw had designed the low, whitewashed houses to accommodate the trees. Set into our porches were squares of earth from which coconut trunks rose up, through the roof.

Paw remembered childhood outings by ferry to Juhu’s stretches of beach. But by 1959, when our houses were built, Juhu was connected to downtown Bombay by roads and bridges, and Paw could drive to his architecture and engineering office in the old Fort area almost two hours away. Through the 1960s, Juhu remained partly a fishing village; in the mornings fishermen still brought in their boats laden with flopping silvery nets. Juhu was already becoming famous for people associated with the Hindi film industry. Between our house and the beach stretched a grand mansion rented by the film star Meena Kumari, and saying “behind Meena Kumari” made it easy
to direct a taxi from town. On the other side of Stella’s house was the home of a screenwriter named Abrar Alvi; down the road, Kaifi Azmi wrote Urdu poems that were adapted as film songs, and his daughter Shabana would one day be a movie star. Beyond them the actor Prithviraj Kapoor, who we knew as Papaji, had his weekend home and theater.

Paw loved playing with language, and the names he tossed could stick. When he and Maw were poor students with a baby living in a trailer under the Flatiron mountains in Boulder, Colorado, he had called for her, in a hill-billy twang, “Hey Ma-a-aw!”—to which she answered, “Hey Paw!” My big sister Maya picked up these titles and passed them on to the rest of us, born later in India. As the child born last, into family traditions that were already set, I found that having a “Maw” and a “Paw” was awkward to explain when everyone else’s parents were Mummy and Daddy, Mama and Papa, Ma and Baba, or Ammi and Abba. The only other Maw and Paw I’d heard of were in Bob Dylan’s song about Maggie’s farm, and they didn’t seem like the sort of people who lived in Juhu.

Maw often told the story of how I was born because of their move to Bombay from Nasik, where she and Paw had lived with his family for eight years. Her mother, Alice Fish Kinzinger, whom we called Nani, had retired from her job teaching art in Taos, New Mexico and decided to move to Bombay too. She arrived with seventeen steamer trunks and a request: “I haven’t had a chance to enjoy any of the grandchildren. Have another for me.” One of those trunks was filled with clothes for a baby girl; Maw said I was lucky to fit the plan.

By the time I was born, Maw had grown bored with the company of small children and, as she said, the endless repetition of instructions like “No, the other foot.” She had just turned thirty-one and was keen to pursue her own interests. She had never finished college in America, but she painted canvases and designed everything from buildings to furniture to fabrics. When His Highness of Udaipur came to consult Paw about structural engineering for transforming his ancestral Lake Palace into a tourist hotel, Maw persuaded the suave king to employ her as decorator and to do the place up in a traditional Rajasthani aesthetic. Throughout the early 1960s, she often traveled to Udaipur for long stretches, leaving me in Nani’s care.

Nani was my doting, almost constant companion. I had lived with her across the driveway from the main house. She taught me to read and write when I was barely three; first printing, and later the looped script of her childhood schoolhouse in Grand Rapids, Michigan. As I grew bigger, she sewed not just my clothes but also tiny matching outfits for my dolls. But by 1967, Nani could no longer stand the heat, the bugs, the chaos that encircled her daughter’s life. She moved back to New Mexico, taking Maya to college.

With Nani gone, my existence had lost substance. Without her constant protection, something scary happened to me that I didn’t have words for, only fears that would tighten into a aching heart and stinging throat. I ran mysterious fevers and was absent from school so often that when classmates assembled a crossword using our names, the entry for which mine was the clue (six letters, ending in Y) was not “brainless” (as I had hoped) or even “skinny” (as I’d feared) but “sickly.” Sickly! I cringed at the shaky
knelt over tiny flowers growing in the grass. I stroked the vibrating undersides of cats’ chins, turned pages of books, colored in gowns of princesses, folded origami. My eyes were studiously lowered, but my ears fanned out like a baby elephant’s.

Maw especially loved talking about wildly unconventional, creative, and surprising people, which is probably why she told more stories about Rahoul than about the rest of us. She enjoyed remembering how in 1963, Rahoul had come in from a walk calling, “Hey Maw! Guess what I found on the beach!”

Maw looked up expecting shells or driftwood or maybe even a stray puppy. Instead, she saw two shaggy British beatniks with backpacks. Rahoul gestured backward. “They are poets!” he said. At that point, he was a poet too, writing haiku. To them, he grandly offered, “You can pitch your tent in our garden.”

These poet-beatniks, it turned out, were precursors of the hippies, and again, Rahoul was partly responsible for bringing them to us.

In 1968, Maw’s friend Marilyn Silverstone received an assignment from a French magazine to cover the hippies finding their way to India. Marilyn was an American photographer for the Magnum agency, and in 1960 she had done a photo essay about Maw called “East-West Wife” for Coronet magazine. Marilyn usually lived in Delhi, but she thought that Maw could help her locate hippies. So she traveled to Bombay, bringing along a British hippie to serve as a decoy. Maw was off in Udaipur for the week, and Paw was away in Nasik. Nani and Maya—who usually stood in as parents—had left for America. So it was Rahoul who received Marilyn and the hippie called Broderick.

Broderick must have been in his early twenties, and to me he looked like a glamorous version of George Harrison, my favorite Beatle, crossed with Jesus Christ: dark brown locks parted in the middle, well-fitting white cotton kurtas and pajama, and an extra-long wooden mala that hung beyond his waist. Sitting on the beach watching sunsets with Rahoul, Broderick shared stories about his spiritual adventures with gurus in Rishikesh, far to the north, where the Beatles had recently visited the Maharishi. I squatted nearby building a drip sand castle with a moat, the wind blowing strands of their words from my grasp.

Broderick and Rahoul reasoned that if the beautiful people and freaks in America crowded around Ravi Shankar, hippies in Bombay would be drawn
Rahoul looked on. When the concert was over, servants brought out a big buffet supper. A few hippies asked if they might “crash” for the night—the mats and cushions were spread out, after all—and, still flushed with excitement, Maw agreed.

This was the moment our home became a Groovy Pad. From the Happening onward, young foreigners with lots of untidy hair began appearing at our open doors, asking for Maw on their migrations between Kathmandu and Goa. They camped out on our porch or in the living room for a few nights, a few weeks, sometimes a few months. We hosted American draft dodgers, German stained-glass makers, French women who had traveled overland. Sometimes people showed up who couldn’t even remember who had sent them. One couple had been robbed and assaulted in their Volkswagen bus but had been left with a piece of paper bearing Maw’s name and address; they camped in our backyard, becoming honorary family, and Maw helped them find jobs—teaching art at our school and serving as Hindi movie extras—until they were able to travel onward.

“My address is passed all along the hash trail,” Maw observed with satisfaction.

But it wasn’t just the gods’ eyes and the hippies that lured Rahoul to leave home. I later realized that Rehana Ma, the first mystic I remember meeting, had a role in this too.

We children came to know Rehana Ma in the winter of 1968, when Maw decided to leave Paw and took us all to Delhi. Maw said she could no longer handle Paw’s drinking and our constant worry over money; Delhi, she thought, would be a good place for her to find interior decorating jobs. None of us children wanted to go to Delhi, and Rahoul in particular was furious about being yanked away from working on his sculptures and drawings. But Maw was adamant that we should at least travel as far as Delhi and then decide what to do next.

We had piled into our old gray Ambassador car along with Maw and a driver, taking a rambling route north, with stops to stay with relatives and friends and to visit monuments. In Delhi, we crammed into the various guest rooms of Maw’s friends. But just as Maw was starting to make contacts for possible jobs and schools, she was needed in Bombay. She left us younger children in Rahoul’s care: me, who had just turned nine, Deven, who was thirteen, and Tashi, who was also probably a recent teenager. No
one was sure of Tashi’s exact age. The dentist had said he was probably around five when he joined us, but other details had been lost when the Chinese invaded Tibet and his family fled to India.

Delhi cold was colder than anything we had known before; the air was smokier, the city flatter and more spread out. Days passed, and I felt as though we had wandered into a dream where everything was both too bright and too faded, and we ourselves had lost our outlines. In the mornings, Rahoul insisted that we dress warmly in sweaters, then took us down to the Yamuna River, where a fringe of wilderness still stretched out beyond new rows of cement houses. He brought along binoculars so we could scan the water for migrating winter birds or half-burned corpses that had floated downstream from cremation grounds. After lunch, we ventured further: to the zoo, where a chimpanzee smoked the lit cigarettes that laughing visitors threw toward him; the National Museum, where Rahoul herded us through echoing galleries; or the bat-scented monuments in Delhi parks, where we clambered up and down narrow stairs. Most often, by late afternoon, we dropped in to visit Maw’s friend Rehana Ma.

"Rehana Ma is a mystic," Maw had explained before she left for Bombay. "She’s from a famous Muslim family. She lived in Gandhi’s ashram when she was a young woman, and now she’s also a Hindu."

"What’s a mystic?" I asked. I knew the word “mystery” and was intrigued.

"A person who talks to God," Maw said.

Rehana Ma lived in a house that also contained an exhibition of objects that Gandhiji had once used. In the big echoing front room, we viewed a spinning wheel that Gandhiji had rotated to make cotton thread, a copy of the Bhagavad Gita he had thumbed through, and his bottle-cap spectacles.

"Anyone who puts on those glasses sees through Gandhiji’s eyes and starts acting nonviolent," Rahoul announced.

"Really?" I asked, wide-eyed.

"Yeah, right!" said Deven.

Tashi offered to find a way into the case so we could make off with the glasses, but Rahoul shepherded us onward, down the corridor to Rehana Ma’s room.

To me, Rehana Ma was mysterious as an old brick well so deep that it turned the sky into a silver coin. Her room was dim and close, with drawn curtains, closed shutters, and an aromatic smell that might have been oranges, camphor, or cloves. White patches of leukoderma mottled her face. She wore a knit scarf wrapped around her head and knotted under her chin.

She seemed to be wearing a sweater and a sari, but it was hard to be sure since a shawl concealed her torso and her legs were hidden under blankets. She was not sick, as far as I could tell, though she never seemed to leave her bed. I wondered if, as a mystic, she needed to stay put so she could enjoy conversations with her favorite god, Krishna. Other families in Delhi, busy with their routines, didn’t really see us, it seemed, but she, staying put in the twilight, saw not just our displaced present, but our past and future.

"Come, child," Rehana Ma received us one by one from her bed, grasping our hands as we stepped forward. Rahoul said that she could read character from the way your hand draped around hers. I felt her goodwill and acceptance, but still, when we touched, I was careful to keep my mind on good thoughts.

We children settled on chairs and stools around her. Rahoul usually taking the lead in the conversations. I darted looks at the framed picture by her bed, where a blue-skinned, long-haired Krishna looked on. I hoped I might catch his lips in motion.

"You brothers and sisters have karma together," Rehana Ma said one afternoon, the whites of her eyes glinting in the semidarkness of the room. "This is why you were born sharing the same parents. You all have been connected over many lifetimes, being born as a group again and again. Sometimes you died together. Just one or two lives ago, you were all together in a building when it collapsed."

She closed her eyes, consulting the inner vision. I imagined the crash of beams, the floor caving in: the shock of an instantaneious ending instead of the slow, draining departure from life as we knew it in Bombay. I felt a pang for the girl who had fallen asleep to the sounds of waves and sea winds; she too seemed to belong in some other life, and I didn’t yet know whether I should mourn her.

Rehana Ma unexpectedly smiled to herself, then opened her eyes and beamed at us.

"Another person in the group hasn’t as yet joined," she announced, voice filled with gladness. "You will meet up later!"

I sat up straighter. Wasn’t it about time that I stopped being the youngest and had someone with whom I could be the authority for a change: someone I could teach to walk, fly, and read in mirrors? A few years earlier, when I had delicately brought up the possibility of a baby sister, Maw had said sharply, "It’s never going to happen." But Rehana Ma, I thought, knew more than Maw when it came to the future. The only problem was the verb she used: what did she mean by “meet up”?
Another afternoon, Rahoul said, “Rehana Ma. I need a guru. I’d like to take off for the Himalayas. Places like Hardwar and Rishikesh aren’t that far from here, right?”

Rehana Ma turned her gaze behind her lids. We waited, suspended in the peaceful time-outside-of-time of her presence. Then her lids fluttered open. She looked around, finding us. “Why go to Himalayas?” she asked. “First you go back to Bombay.”

My heart turned into a big, pink blossom of hope. So, she had seen that we wouldn’t remain like ghosts at the margins of friends’ families in Delhi. And truly, Maw returned soon after, her voice sounding unnaturally bright and American after her absence. She told us that she had worked things out with Paw. He had agreed to see a psychiatrist and to stop drinking, and we were going home to Juhu.

But already, Rahoul’s plans for leaving home to find a guru had begun to unfold.

We had missed the beginning of the school term. Our high-strung, cross-eyed cat Whisky had disappeared, though his brother Soda was still a stolid purring presence. Some of our toys were missing too. The house smelled strange, as though other people had been living there.

Maw was energetically reclaiming the space by changing things around. She often moved high cupboards and unfolded wooden screens to split or shrink rooms. Now she moved the big bed into what used to be a guest room off the back veranda, making this Paw’s room. She lined up separate beds along the walls of the room they had once shared, and I joined her there. Maw also arranged for Tashi to go to a Tibetan boarding school in northern India. His older Tibetan sister had studied at the same boarding school, then moved to Switzerland, where his younger brother had been adopted as an orphaned infant: their older brother was still at the school and Maw hoped that he would be a good influence on our Tashi. For years, Tashi had seemed unable to stop himself from being willfully bad — cutting up Paw’s shoes for slingshot “catties,” smoking bidis in the servants’ quarters, throwing ink bombs from the school balcony, and other things that I found too scary to talk about.

I was glad to be back in school. Rahoul, though, had always done most of his learning on his own. After our trip, he began to openly rebel. He carried a sandalwood mala to school and rolled the beads in his pocket when classes were boring. He told us that he stretched out on the floor in the corpse pose for meditation during recess. He didn’t turn in homework, flunked tests, and talked more about leaving school to become enlightened. Rahoul’s teacher called Maw in after the class took IQ tests and his high scores contradicted his low grades.

“What’s the point of it all?” Rahoul shrugged his bony shoulders at Maw. “If you don’t know the meaning of life, how are grades and degrees going to help you? At school, everything is ‘Learn page 113 by heart because it has the answer.’ It’s this indirect, secondhand experience. I don’t want lots of numbers, formulas, and facts clotting up my brain. I want to learn to use my mind. I want to be for a change.”

I looked up from rows of fractions, waiting for Maw to defend school, but she said emphatically, “I know just how you feel.”

So Rahoul wrote to Rehana Ma, asking again where in the Himalayas he could find a guru. She wrote back, “What is the need of Himalayas? One of the greatest gurus in India today lives in Ganeshpuri, just outside Bombay. His name is Swami Muktananda.”

“What an amazing coincidence,” Maw said, rereading the letter. “Can you believe we were already there?”

It turned out that when Pandit Ram Narayan had given a concert for Swami Muktananda’s sixtieth birthday celebration on the full moon of May the previous year, Maw and Rahoul had tagged along. Maw brought out an orange Agfa box of black-and-white photographs she had taken at the event. I hung around as she and Rahoul sorted through the prints of a wiry man with piercing dark eyes, a short beard, knit cap, dark glasses, and cloth hanging loosely around his shoulders. I was especially struck by a photograph that showed him resting in a chair, his feet stretched out atop a huge pile of coconuts brought as offerings by disciples.

Rahoul studied the pictures intently. “I guess I’m headed to Ganeshpuri,” he said.

“At least finish the term,” Maw coaxed.

Paw was mostly off in Nasik, selling yet another piece of land from the properties that his father had assembled. He spent some weekends in the misty green hills of Khandala with his friends Mulk, Shirin, and especially Dolly. When he was around, he sat reading or listening to Hindustani classical music in his room. He was staying away from his bottles but seemed too tired and subdued to pay much attention to Rahoul’s plans.

Maw, though, was excited. “Rahoul is renouncing the world,” she announced to her friends. “He’s leaving home. He’s going to find a guru so he can get enlightened.”
“Oh, not the guru with the sunglasses!” sniffed our neighbor Stella, when she heard the news. She looked down her shapely nose, pursing her lips. “I’ve already met that one.”

Apparently, in 1962, in the misty era before I could remember, a New York painter friend of Stella’s, Sam Spanier, had visited Juhu and taken her to Ganeshpuri. Stella had asked her cook Zachariah to pack a picnic of roast chicken, and she and Sam ate this under a tree near the vegetarian ashram before proceeding inside. Sam had just returned from a visit to his own guru, a French woman known as the Mother, who lived in southern India. Meeting Sam, Swami Muktananda said through a translator, “I can see you have already found inner sweetness.” Stella thought this sort of conversation was absurd, and she insisted that they leave. “For a guru to wear sunglasses!” Stella had complained, turning up her nose at Sam’s suggestion that maybe the guru saw too much light.

Now, years later, Stella was still fixated on the sunglasses. “He wasn’t even out in the sun,” Stella said. “I never trust anyone who wears sunglasses indoors, and I’m absolutely not into gurus.”

Rahoul put sunglasses on his big-eyed, big-footed being and set it on the hood of Stella’s white Ambassador.

“Oh Ra-hooi!” said Stella, snorting with laughter. She brought out her camera for a photograph.

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“Remember how Maw always says that Stella’s my godmother because she was there when I was born?” Rahoul asked as we walked on the beach. The sea blew in evening coolness after the day’s humid heat. We moved from scattering pale brown sand under our bare feet to where our toes sank into darker sand still moist from the withdrawing tide. The stretch of the wet sand reached out, reflecting sky, to where the gray blue ocean rushed and receded, rimmed in white. Dobeyboy, our Doberman who had been raised by cats, ran in wide circles, digging soggy tracks around us.

“Um-hmm,” I nodded.

As I knew well from family stories, Stella was about twenty years older than Maw, a friend of both Maw and Nani’s from the artists’ colony in Taos. When Maw moved with Paw to India, Nani had followed a year or so later to bring her home, and Stella came along. Nani wasn’t able to dislodge Maw, and Stella stayed on. Stella was waiting in the next room when Rahoul was born at home, and so she became his godmother. Later, when Maw and Paw were building a house in Juhu and Nani decided to build beside them, Stella opted for a third, fancier house with an air-conditioned darkroom.

By the time I knew Stella, she was in her midfifties: slim, perpetually tanned, and with a shock of white curls. Her tailored clothes were often in searing colors like lime green, which enhanced the vivid green of her eyes, and she wore gold leather chappals to set off the hot pink of her toenails. Stella claimed that she didn’t like children, so we mostly spied on her through the big screen of crimson bougainvillea that cascaded between her and Nani’s houses. Rahoul though, had always been the exception to Stella’s not-liking-children rule.

“See, the year before I was born, Stella traveled overland from England to Nasik,” Rahoul said. “On the way, the bus stopped in Afghanistan. She got out to climb to the top of the head of this giant standing Buddha and to take photographs. She met a chief and fell in love, so she lived with him for a while. But you know how Stella is really independent, so she left. Then she arrived in India and found out she was going to have a baby. That was me. Since Stella doesn’t like children, she gave me to Maw.”

“No!” I objected, thrown into confusion. I had heard about many of Stella’s loveuh’s; Maw relished quoting Stella’s breathy pronunciation, “I’ve always preferred to be a mistress rather than a wife.” I assumed that being a mistress made a man into a kind of pet; wasn’t I, after all, part-mistress of Dobeyboy, sending him to the ground with the command “sit,” causing him to leap over the coffee table with the word “walk”? But I had never heard of Stella’s being either a mistress or the wife of any chief.

“Haven’t you ever wondered why I look Afghani?” Rahoul pressed.

“Never.”

“Where have you been, Baby?! You have to learn to wonder about how things look, you have to start digging under the surface. See, now that I’m leaving home, the truth is coming out. Stella is writing to the chief so I can go back to my father in the Hindu Kush mountains.”

Was it because I was the baby that I had so far been protected from this truth? If Rahoul really wasn’t the special eldest son, then how did this rearrange everything I had taken for granted about my family?

“Really?” I ventured.

“Really!”

But Rahoul’s eyes crinkled, a smile signaling mischief played over his face. Beside us, the sun was sinking, growing long and orange as it touched the horizon over the sea. The waves made a crunching, sighing sound as
they rushed and withdrew. Dobeyboy dropped a piece of driftwood before us as an invitation to throw.

"I'm leaving home soon, Baby," said Rahoul, looking down at me, taking hold of my smaller hand. "Are you coming?"

"I have to go to school," I said.

In May, Maw accompanied Rahoul to the Ganeshpuri ashram so, as Rahoul put it, they could "scope out the joint." Maw returned home alone. Nani's rooms were already rented to an American ex-Peace Corps couple, and Maw now rented out Rahoul's room to a lean Indian painter of mysteriously lovely and almost uniformly black canvases, who usually lived in Switzerland.

Maw visited Rahoul whenever she could get away from the jobs she picked up as a freelance interior decorator for rich people in downtown Bombay. Every week or two, she would bring back a bulletin on his spiritual progress. "Rahoul is getting up at 3:30 to meditate," Maw reported to friends. "He's seeing a blue point of light between his eyes—it's called the neel bindu, the blue pearl, and it's the light of consciousness. He does a lot of seva in the ashram: you know, garden work, serving food, standing behind Babaji to hold the garlands that people offer. I think he's learning so much more than he ever would in a classroom."

Swami Muktananda, it turned out, was "Babaji" to his disciples. Soon Maw also began referring to Babaji as "my Gurudev," or guru-god. "The root for 'god'—dev—is divya, or shining," Maw reported. "I tell you, his skin shines!"

"Babaji's the real thing," Maw told everyone. "All through my years in India, I've been reading The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna and wondering if I'd ever have a chance to meet a live saint. Babaji has the same message as the classic Hindu scriptures: you know, that the divine Self is inside you for you to meditate on and recognize. But Babaji says it all in this wonderfully earthy Hindi, with a great sense of humor."

Maw regularly brought home more photographs of Babaji, especially close-ups of his face. At first the photographs crowded into the puja alcove in Maw's dressing room. Then they spilled onto the bulletin board above her desk and out into the living room, where many of our guests eyed them warily. I sensed that Maw's semiabstract paintings of women with nets in the ocean or coconut palms twirling in the wind were regarded by most of

our friends as more appropriate wall decoration than photographs of staring saints.

"But Didi, aren't those godmen guru-baba types all charlatans and rogues?" an occasional downtown Bombay friend would ask her. To them, gurus were part of a backward, traditional religiosity best left behind if you were a cosmopolitan intellectual. "Really, you can't be so idealistic."

"He's the real thing," Maw insisted.

The hippies were more encouraging. "Far out," they said. But when they heard of the ashram's separate dormitories for men and women they didn't usually take up Maw's invitation to visit with her.

The ashram people who occasionally showed up at our house, though, were attuned to Maw's new vocabulary and décor. Maw referred to these ashram friends as her guru-bhai and guru-bahen—brothers and sisters through the guru; they gave Maw rides and asked her help with the things she was good at, like designing. The Indian disciples who visited the ashram from Bombay were often businesspeople, film stars, and politicians, who seemed reassured by a guru's blessings. In 1969, very few Westerners came through
the ashram, but those who did usually stayed with us when traveling to or from Ganeshpuri or recuperating from illness.

Paw seemed to treat the ashram as an enthusiasm that he could best tolerate by ignoring, but he did go to Ganeshpuri to visit Rahoul on Guru Purnima, the full moon honoring gurus. The picture that Maw brought home showed Babaji gesturing impishly, Rahoul looking on from behind with amusement, and Paw seeming distinctly uncomfortable with a set chin.

One drizzly day at the end of the monsoon, Maw took Deven and me with her to the ashram. By this time, Rahoul had moved from Ganeshpuri to a different ashram, on a mountaintop near Nasik, run by one of Babaji’s older disciples. Maw’s own connection to the Ganeshpuri ashram, though, was undisturbed.

Paw gave us the use of the car and driver. Deven and I skipped school to ride with Maw through Bombay’s suburbs, across the Thana creek and then through flooded rice fields. We entered through a front gate adjoining the road, and suddenly Maw was animatedly greeting everyone she met as if they were old friends. We trailed after her into a small hall fragrant with incense. Orange carpets were folded in strips over the linoleum, making long low seats around a single oversize orange chair.

Maw pointed Deven to the men’s side, and she talked for a minute with a thin man whom she introduced as a professor and Babaji’s translator into English. Then she and I sat cross-legged on the women’s side. Maw had said that weekends and holidays were crowded, but on this weekday morning the hall stretched spaciously beyond a cluster of ten or fifteen people.

I pressed my knee against Maw’s and looked around. Sparrows were hopping in and out through open windows, and the call of other birds was louder than in Bombay. I could feel that this was a peaceful place, but I was surprised by the décor. As the daughter of two painters, Maw had a particularly vivid palette. Only feelings so strong that they lifted her out of herself could have allowed her to overlook the glaring synthetic tangerine and saffron colors. At home, she would have unfolded lengths of vegetable-dyed hand-printed cloth and banished the big plastic clock and overstuffed chair.

The walls, though, were lined with huge photographs of the sort that Maw now favored, including many of a holy man with a big belly wearing just a loincloth.

“Thats Bhagavan Nityananda, Babaji’s guru,” said Maw in my ear. “He left his body in 1961.”

“Bhagavan” meant God. Together, the photographs of him from different angles gave me the sense of a live, three-dimensional presence. The weighty intensity of Bhagavan Nityananda’s round face, flared nose, and unblinking eyes gave me the feeling that he was looking into me.

I tried to think of something else, something firm and graspable like a school assignment, but my heart was racing. What would happen now when a live guru with gods’ eyes saw straight inside me, saw everything about me and my family that I was ashamed of and tried to hide? With Rehana Ma in her cavelike room, the possibility of being looked into hadn’t seemed scary at all, but this setting was so much grander, both more formal and more mysterious.

People scrambled to their feet as Babaji strode in, a blur of orange clothes. He wore his trademark orange knit cap and sunglasses. An orange cloth was tied around his waist, falling to his knees, and another length of cloth hung loosely around his shoulders, revealing a mala of brown rudraksha beads on his bare chest. He settled briskly into his chair, cross-legged, and looked around. As Maw had said, he really did shine: with his own high energy and also, it seemed, from the focus of everyone’s attention.

Maw joined others to bow, dropping to her knees and pressing her forehead to the floor. Deven and I hung back, palms joined in greeting, uncertain what was expected of us. I looked down, eyes fixed on Maw’s handloom sari-wrapped bottom.

“Rahoul’s little brother and little sister,” announced Maw in Hindi when her bottom was no longer the topmost part of her and she stood tall beside me.

Babaji examined us through his sunglasses. My breath was heavy with worry, and I tried to think good thoughts.

“Bade duni aur bade kum,” Babaji said to Maw, speaking Hindi in a strong, resonant voice. “Big teeth and big ears. Those are good signs. Very good.”

I peered from the corner of my eye toward Deven. The guru liked our big teeth? Our big ears? If Babaji’s presence had not been so awe-inspiring, I would have giggled with relief. But Deven was still calmly evaluating Babaji and would not catch my eye. Babaji was already talking to other visitors.

A harmonium was brought out, and slim chanting books were passed around. The small group began chanting. I stared at the Sanskrit words, too disoriented to follow. Maw, though, happily blasted along without even
looking at the text. She had always said that she was tone deaf and couldn’t
ing, but in this group her voice emerged from so deep inside her front-
tying sari blouse that I couldn’t help remembering the opera singer Bianca
Castafiore from the Tintin comics we exchanged at school.

Eyeing my mother sideways over the edge of my chanting book, I was
baffled: did I really know her? I sensed that it wasn’t just Rahoul but also
Maw who wanted to see the world through gods’ eyes.

As Maw’s daughter and Rahoul’s sister, was I also supposed to focus on
this goal? I tried to figure out how I could fit in going to school and getting
enlightened at the same time. As the group rose, I decided: maybe later,
maybe when I was a teenager.

Maw shepherded us out through a courtyard and toward another build-
ing. “Big teeth and big ears are the marks of yogis,” Maw explained, clearly
pleased by our review. “It’s like long arms with elbows below the waist,
which all my children have.”

We entered a shadowy hall smelling of grated coconuts and savory
spices. Everyone sat on rows of sacking. Servers rushed up and down the
lines, flipping down leaf plates, clanking metal glasses, pouring water. I
looked around, half expecting to see my biggest brother. But once again,
as Rahoul walked backward, his feet guided me forward into spaces he had
left behind.