

Ashram, ashram

a novel by Devaraj

1 - Papancha

Fuck! What's going on? Ed almost groaned aloud as he pulled himself back upright on his cushion. His head was reeling. He struggled to remember where he was and what he was supposed to be doing. Inhaling deeply, he tried to stay calm. It wasn't working. He sensed a deep, dark pit of insecurity right beneath him. At any moment he could fall in. Fall in and never get out.

Ed stirred on his cushion, trying to shuffle his weight around. He felt so uncomfortable. His legs ached, in fact his whole body screamed in protest. He couldn't stay focused, his mind jumping around all over the place.

What was it he was supposed to be doing, he asked himself in desperation? What did Swamiji call it? Pancha? Papanza? Papancha? Yes, that's it. *Papancha*. Watching the thoughts - the endless stream of ideas his mind created. Watch them but not get attached. That was what he was supposed to be doing. He exhaled, trying to rid himself of the waves of insecurity washing through his body.

A moment of recognition suddenly flashed across his mind. This is *papancha*, he thought. These thoughts right now are *papancha*, and I'm attaching to them. So, I'm doing it wrong. I'm fucking it up yet again. Why am I so hopeless at everything, he asked himself? I'm wasting my time here. I should never have come. He felt his mind spinning around in hopeless confusion, dragging him down.

Ten more minutes passed. How much more of this shit do we have to endure, Ed asked himself, starting to get pissed off now. Come on, Swamiji, ring that bell! Just do it. If I sit here for another minute, I'll go completely bat-shit crazy, and it

will all be your fault. Please, I'm begging you, ring the fucking bell!

His heart was beating fast. Ed could feel it like a drum banging against his ribcage. It seemed to be in rhythm with his ever-increasing thoughts. Calm down, he told himself. Stop freaking out. Remember the exercise. Focus on the movement of your belly as the air comes in and goes out. Just the belly. Relax your attention. Just the feeling of the belly expanding and contracting with the breath. It felt better. A wave of contentment surged within him. I can do this, he thought. Yes, I can. It's happening. This is home. I'm home. He felt his body relaxing deeply. It felt amazing.

The sound of a temple bell ringing invaded his senses. It took him a moment to understand what was happening. It was the end of the meditation. Ed opened his eyes reluctantly. Fucking typical, he thought. Just as I'm getting into it, it's over. Story of my life. Still, at least now it would be time for food, and they would be allowed to talk again.

* * *

Whilst the others slowly filed out of the meditation hall, Ed found himself hanging back, deliberately fumbling around at the shoe rack. He was waiting. Finally, she appeared. Ed hadn't come on this retreat to learn to meditate, or to be subjected to bizarre therapies. He wasn't here to find himself. He was here because she was here. Standing at five foot nine inches, with blonde hair, blue eyes and possessing the most perfect figure he had ever seen, was Cindy. She slipped her shoes back on, barely stopping to do so, and walked out of the meditation room in front of him, seemingly without a care in the world. Ed's vague attempts to meditate, when not interrupted by bouts of insecurity and self-loathing, were constantly hijacked by his infatuation with Cindy. Sitting on his cushion, eyes closed, he couldn't seem to get the image of her perfect ass out of his mind's eye, nor in truth did he want to.

Following her back up the long, windowless corridor that led to the main house, his eyes fixated on her ass, Ed felt himself to be in a state of grace. Just watching those perfect curves, moving rhythmically through her tight leggings, was so pleasurable. But, just beneath the surface, something worrying was tugging at him, trying to get his attention. His mission. He'd been here on this retreat for three days already and had yet to say a word to her. The idea of talking to Cindy filled him

with deep dread.

Fantasising about women was something that Ed was very much used to. But speaking to them, actually creating a real connection, the idea terrified him half to death. Ed could think about a woman for literally years without saying a single word to her.

Yet, here over these three days, Ed had to admit that something was changing. All his well-worn excuses for not making a move no longer seemed to work. Some part of Ed's mind seemed to have taken on the task of challenging his habitual behaviour. As each opportunity to communicate with Cindy came, he would hear an inner voice, larger than life, urging him onwards, demanding, 'Make a move. Speak! Be a man!'

It seemed so real. Almost as if someone actually was whispering in his ear. When he gave in to his fear and shyness, and yet again missed his chance, the same inner voice would berate him for hours afterwards, telling him over and over just how useless he was. Only positive action seemed to silence it. Only when he took a stand for himself would the inner voice let him be.

He called it 'The Voice.' He despised it, but also had to acknowledge that it was slowly compelling him to go beyond his shyness. And it was utterly ruthless, allowing no excuses. Ed knew he had to speak to Cindy this dinnertime, otherwise he would be hammered by it for the rest of the day. It would invade his night-time dreams too. He sighed and followed her up the corridor, resolving to make a connection, his gaze still very much fixed on her ass.

His reveries were suddenly broken by a forceful slap on his back.

"Hey, buddy!"

Turning, Ed recognised the face of Dean, the tanned, athletic-looking American, grinning at him. He'd just joined the retreat the day before, flying in from some exotic location. He placed his hand under Ed's chin, pushing it upwards, pointedly showing Ed that his gaze had been fixated on Cindy's ass.

"She's not just a sexy body, you know," Dean told him, his voice high and mighty. "She has a mind too. Don't forget that, man. Women need to be respected."

Ed felt his jaw tighten as he choked back his rage. God, he hated this guy, trying to humiliate him like this.

There was something else that really pissed him off about Dean - his confidence. He was jealous of the guy. Dean seemed to personify every trait that he lacked - confidence, looks, and the desire to be the best. He'd like to punch him right in the mouth.

Marching ahead, Dean fell into step beside Cindy and spoke. "Hey, you're Cindy, right?"

She turned to look up at him as Dean continued to speak.

"I'm Dean. I've just arrived on the retreat, well, only yesterday. I was sitting with this other teacher over in Rishikesh when I heard Swamiji was here running this intensive. He's so awesome. I just felt the call. You know what I mean? When someone speaks straight to your heart?"

"Yes," Cindy nodded, clearly moved by Dean's seeming sincerity.

"I'm so nearly there," Dean continued. "Just on the edge of Enlightenment, I mean. I know this other teacher could tell. But he's got like thousands there in his *satsangs*, so I wanted to come somewhere more intimate. You know, to really put myself on the line. Up close and personal." Dean checked his watch. "Ah, I have to go check in properly, but I'll be seeing you!"

With a smile and a wink of his eye, he walked on.

Still following behind, Ed felt his body literally shaking with rage. How dare Dean just march in like that? So fucking confident. He felt the urge to scream his frustration but knew he had to let it go. It was his own fault that he couldn't muster up the courage to speak to Cindy. Dean had the balls to make a move and he didn't. It was that simple. He breathed out and let his rage and self-loathing dissipate. He knew his mission. He must make contact with Cindy at dinner. He must sit with her and he must speak to her. There was no other option.

* * *

The Food Hall was open plan, a wide room with large windows that stretched from just above floor height to the ceiling, all the way down one side. Natural light flooded in, revealing a highly polished wooden floor on which sat large tables, some of which were pushed together. The room could sit approximately fifty people. Their food was laid out in trays, and set on tables lined up on the side furthest from the window, the hot dishes placed on special warmers.

Ed had heard that the ashram was originally a manor house. A group of people had purchased it about a decade before, some years after the previous owner had died. The place had been going to rack and ruin. Working hard for long hours, they'd slowly turned it into a thriving enterprise - the Dharma Vision Ashram. The centre regularly invited famous gurus and workshop leaders to come and lead events within its walls. This week, it was the turn of Swamiji, an Indian guru with something of a controversial reputation.

Ed focused back on the lithe form of Cindy, standing slightly ahead of him in the queue for food. His mind only half on its task, he slowly filled his plate with quinoa, boiled cabbage and raw carrot sticks. With surprise, he realised he was actually salivating at the prospect of eating this stuff, food that he would usually have avoided like the plague, his usual diet being snacks and junk food. As he ladled on a little tamari, the one spice allowed on the retreat, he saw Cindy sit down at a small unoccupied table for four. Giving himself no time to back out, he swiftly followed her and sat down diagonally opposite, asking, "Okay, if I join you?"

"Sure," she replied, looking up at him. "It's so nice to be able to talk again, isn't it?" she continued. "I really struggle with this being in silence. I'm such a social creature. I need to chat."

"How's the retreat going?" Ed asked.

"Okay, I guess," Cindy replied. "I kind of knew what I was signing up for before I came. So, I suppose I was prepared. I think this is just the easy bit anyway. They let you settle in for a few days, then they really give it to you."

Ed felt his mind race. "Give it to you?"

"Yes, I mean, Swamiji, he's really committed. He really wants to take you all the way to Enlightenment. He doesn't care if your ego gets bashed around on the journey. It's bound to get really tough. I'm kind of hanging back, making sure I keep myself rested, and waiting for when the shit starts to fly."

"God!" Ed exclaimed, panic filling him. He felt his mind conjuring up all sorts of fear-filled scenarios but, sitting in the presence of Cindy, her blue eyes looking trustingly into his, his concerns seemed to just melt away. She really was a total goddess. He could barely bring himself to speak, but he knew that just listening was okay. Women liked being listened to. They liked being heard. That much he had

learned in his thirty-five years.

“So, how are *you* doing Ed?” she asked him.

He felt a panic immediately grip him but resolved to speak.

“It’s intense for me,” he said, his eyes upon hers. “I’m really struggling with these hour-long sitting meditations. I mean, what’s it all about? Just sitting there feeling your belly and watching your thoughts? I don’t get it.”

“What actually happens for you?” Cindy asked, her full attention upon him.

“It’s like I can’t stop thinking. My mind is going crazy, round and round like an animal in a cage. It’s driving me nuts. I don’t know if I can stick the course.”

“What is it you think about?” she asked.

Ed felt his chest tighten. He could hardly say, ‘Well, your gorgeous ass, your breasts and oh yeah, those long legs. In between bouts of deep insecurity and self-loathing, that is.’ Too honest, too creepy.

“I just feel like a child most of the time,” he told her. “Like I’m back at home and my parents are on my back, telling me I haven’t got it right, telling me everyone else is better than me. Or back at school and the teachers are giving me a hard time. I thought I had left all that behind.”

“But, Ed, is that really your parents and teachers?” Cindy asked him, with sincerity. “Or, is it just your own inner voice?”

Despair swept over him. Oh God, it was *his* inner voice. He was doing it to himself. He couldn’t even blame others. This was just awful. He felt like breaking down and weeping but stopped himself, gritting his teeth and holding his jaw tight. He didn’t want Cindy to think he really was a no-hoper. Feeling like shit, Ed returned to eating his food, unable to continue speaking. A silence fell between them.

The peace was broken by the arrival of Dean who, without asking, sat down with a plate of food right in front of Cindy, ignoring Ed completely.

“Wow, that was quick.” Dean began. “I mean, these guys are really efficient. Not like some places I know. I just filled in this form, gave them my Amex, and it was all done in 3 minutes. Impressive.

“Jesus, I was in this ashram like in Devon somewhere this one time,” Dean continued. “Is that how you pronounce it, Devon? I was doing this *Tantra* intensive.

Anyway, I had to fill in this whole form, like 8 pages, wanting to know everything about me.

“Then, I had to fill it in twice, once online and they lost that, and so I had to do it all again when I arrived. Then they wouldn’t take Amex. I had to like ring up my bank in New York on my cell phone, costing a fortune, and get them to do a transfer. I was like, Jesus, guys, is this the 19th century all over again? I mean, what the fuck? Anyway, this place is cool. They’ve really got their shit together.”

“Yes, the admin here is really up-to-date,” Cindy agreed, nodding along. “Swamiji too. He loves electronic gadgets. He’s got an iPad. I’ve seen him playing with it in between meditations... a guru with an iPad.” She laughed. Dean joined in.

Ed sat there, seething with frustration as Dean and Cindy connected. He felt himself being engulfed, fixed to the spot, unable to do anything but sit there and have his own uselessness with women rubbed in his face.

Dean’s fork fell to the floor and he leant over to pick it up. “Jesus, Ed. You’re wearing Birkenstocks,” he cried out. “I mean, they are so out of date now. Like no one wears those things anymore. Did you just arrive out of some time machine, or what? Next up you’ll be wearing Crocs!”

“Oh, I had a pair of those once,” Cindy chimed in.

“Yeah, me too,” Dean continued. “They were like bright green. Funny story attached to them. I was like in Bali visiting Maya Leaves, you know, the *Tantra* teacher...”

“You know Maya Leaves?” Cindy interrupted, clearly impressed.

“Oh, like totally,” he told her. “We met at that World Peace Conference in LA a few years back. She was there, sitting next to like Deepak Chopra, and suddenly we just connected. You know how it is between spiritual beings. Anyway, she invited me to come over to her place in the west of Bali. I was kinda busy at the time, but a year later, I made it out there after Koh Pha-Ngan. Anyway, while I was on the island, I heard about this amazing energy master guy called Amir Agung. You ever heard of him?”

Cindy shook her head.

“Oh, he’s like totally incredible. He can stop people’s hearts and then start them again later. Like real magical, Bruce Lee kinda stuff. So, I’m over in the west of

Bali and I hear about his guy and, of course, I know immediately that I need to go and check him out. So, I get on my scooter and go over to the north of the island to look for his ashram. It's so amazing, Cindy. I swear you've never seen anything like it. It's like shrouded in mist most of the time and really hard to find. They say you'll find it if you're meant to."

Ed sat there, listening passively as Dean, like some huge vampire, seemed to just suck the life out of him. Everything Dean said was interpreted by Ed's mind as 'I'm better than you.' Despair began to take him over. What chance did he have with Cindy against a guy like Dean? None, simple as that.

Dean was still going strong.

"So, like one day Amir had really been giving me energy. I could feel it coming in. He's like facing me for ages during the session and at the end, I walk out of the temple, and I go to get my shoes, my trusty bright green crocs, that I've been wearing for like ages. They'd been with me throughout my spiritual journey. Like when I was sitting with Gangaji in Berlin, and when I was drinking ayahuasca in Peru in the middle of the jungle. Oh, and when I was with Thich Nhat Hanh in France. When I was like walking through Thailand and I just came upon Mantak Chia. But anyway, so, I come out of the temple and my shoes are gone. I'm searching high and low but they're like nowhere to be found. Everyone else has their shoes but mine had gone.

"Suddenly, I'm aware of this barking, like all the ashram dogs are in some kind of fight over by the kitchen. I walk over and they've got both my crocs and are like tearing them to shreds, each trying to get a part of them. Amir comes out of the temple and like walks over and starts shouting at the dogs. He looks at my shoes, then stares at me and starts laughing, like this big, belly laugh, and says 'You... no shoes now!' I mean, he doesn't speak much English, but I knew what he was really saying."

"What?" Ed demanded brusquely.

"He was saying that I'm complete," Dean told him patiently, his voice deeply spiritual. "That I don't need like outer garments anymore over my spiritual body. That I'm ready to just walk the earth as I am, giving to people of my being."

"Maybe he was just saying that the dogs ate your shoes?" Ed pointed out.

“I know the truth of what happened in that moment, Ed,” Dean replied testily. “I know the truth of my own being. I am complete.”

Ed pressed on, irritated by Dean’s superior attitude. “So, how come you’re here on this retreat? If everything is so *complete* for you, how come you need to travel all this way and pay all this money to be here with us?”

“To support the process. To be here for you guys as you go deeper. Plus, I guess, if I’m honest, because I want Swamiji to acknowledge me for all my development. Like I know I’m there, but I also want his blessing. I just need that.”

Ed felt like rolling his eyes but didn’t want to appear mean in front of Cindy. He nodded in resignation as Dean got up from the table.

“Okay, I gotta dash now,” Dean told them. “Nice talking to you guys. Hey, Cindy, maybe we should hang out some time and do some *Tantra*. I feel a big calling to share my gifts. To heal women from the wounds that other men have inflicted upon them.”

“Uh, okay,” Cindy told him.

Once Dean was out of earshot she turned to Ed. “What do you make of that guy?”

Ed shrugged. “Whenever he’s near me, I end up feeling totally small,” Ed told her miserably. “Like he’s just so much better than me at everything. I feel like I’m being sucked into a huge vortex of inadequacy, and I’m never going to be strong enough to escape. Like it’s all just hopeless.”

“You really feel like that?” Cindy seemed incredulous.

“Do you think that’s just me?” Ed asked her, concerned.

“I don’t know, it could be,” Cindy told him. “He does seem pretty full of himself. But, who knows, maybe he just is an incredible guy.”

Misery overwhelmed Ed. Dean just *was* better than him.

“I mean, I don’t know any of these people he talks about,” he told her. “Like they’re all his friends. I’ve never heard of any of them. Have you?”

Cindy laughed. “Sure, most of them,” she replied. “Like Gangaji’s famous. Maya Leaves, and Thich Nhat Hanh too. But I don’t think that it matters so much.”

“God, I don’t know what I’m doing here,” Ed told her, shaking his head. “I feel so out of my league.”

Cindy looked at him closely. “Why did you come on this retreat?”

Feeling embarrassed, Ed looked down. He shrugged but said nothing. How could he say it was because of her?

“Okay,” she told him. “But I don’t think you should just leave, Ed. We’re not even halfway through yet and it’s a learning journey for all of us. Don’t worry about Dean and what he brings up in you. Stick with it. Tomorrow, we sit with Swamiji again. You should ask him a question. Ask for some advice.”

Ed looked at her as though she were mad.

“Are you joking? I already feel totally inadequate. No way am I going to risk getting up in front of everyone and showing them I’m a complete loser.”

“Don’t be like that, Ed,” she told him sincerely, looking right into his eyes. “Stop putting yourself down. You’re a sweet guy, do you realise that?”

“I am?”

“Yes, totally,” she assured him. “I know loads of people in this scene, but hardly any of them would share so easily the things that are hard for them. You know, allow themselves to be vulnerable the way you do. That’s really a gift. Most guys call themselves ‘spiritual’ but are just macho assholes. You’re different. I like that.”

Ed felt his heart swell. “Really?”

“Yes, really.” Cindy reached over and placed her hand supportively on his shoulder. “You have a natural openness, Ed. Most guys don’t have this even when they’ve been doing workshops for years. I admire that in you.”

Relief swept over him in waves. He felt himself lightening up. She liked him. He was captivated, held by her every word. “Thank you, Cindy.”

“I mean it. So, don’t worry and don’t put yourself down. You are a great guy, Ed. Please remember that.”

“Okay. I’ll try,” Ed agreed, smiling happily. “It’s been fantastic talking to you. Hope we can do it again soon.”

No sooner had he spoken than his inner anxieties rose and gripped him like a vice. He hated himself for saying that last line. *Hope we can do it again soon.* God, she must find him so lame. All the good feelings he’d been basking in a few seconds earlier vaporised in a flash. For a moment, just one little moment, he’d allowed

himself to believe that a woman like Cindy could be attracted to him. But it was all just a fantasy, he realised. He was a loser, plain and simple. Always was, always would be. Hopelessness consumed him. Would it never end?

2 - Day Four

Loud voices permeated Ed's cosy dream like a brutal sergeant major, forcefully dragging him back into wakefulness. Realising with a jolt where he was, he cursed inwardly and resolved to never, ever do anything like this again. "Why the fuck can't they just let us sleep?" he groaned loudly.

Knowing the futility of resisting, he sat up slowly in bed, stretching and yawning deeply.

Every day so far had seemed to follow the same pattern. They were woken up at 5.40 am by 'the assistants' - a group of four people who had done the intensive at least once before. Presumably, having been tortured into wakefulness themselves for a week, they now enjoyed inflicting the same treatment on others. The assistants knocked on the doors of the dorms, shouting "Wake up time!" Ten minutes later they would return but, this time, they would enter and make sure the participants were actually up.

Ed had witnessed already how pointless it was trying to resist. He glanced at the guy in the bed to his left, Simon Barrow. He seemed to hate getting up each morning even more than Ed. "I need to sleep," he would mumble at the assistants when they came for him. But to no avail.

"You're here on this retreat to look at yourself, Simon," would be the inevitable response. "Not to laze around snoozing off. Now get up!"

The assistants were never abusive. They would just search for his toes under the duvet and give one a shake. Eventually, Simon would seem to accept that he had no option but to crawl out of bed.

“Everyone needs to be dressed and down in Mayaloka by six o’clock on the dot. No exceptions! Showers are after morning meditation.” The assistants had a real military edge to them.

Ed liked Simon. He also felt relieved that there was at least one person on the retreat who seemed to be more out of place than himself. His misery had company and it made him feel better.

* * *

Morning meditation was not the same as the sitting meditation which they did each day before lunch and dinner. It was highly physical and involved a great deal of shouting and jumping around. To Ed, it seemed to be the antithesis of what meditation was meant to be about. It had five stages, the first three of which involved a great deal of huffing, puffing and noise-making, and which left him feeling utterly shagged out. After this, they had to stand still for a quarter of an hour, banned from moving even a millimetre. Then finally, once they were stiff as boards through staying in one position, they had to dance around the room to some weird raga music which sounded to Ed like the backing track from an Indian porno film.

After morning meditation, it was time for showers and breakfast. Only one hour was assigned for this. Taking a leisurely shower on that first day, and then chilling on his bed chatting to Simon, resulted in him missing breakfast. The cheery riposte from the assistants, “They’ll be another one tomorrow!” did nothing to lighten his spirits or stop the growling noises from his stomach.

Another thing about this retreat that bugged Ed deeply was “Social Silence.” From the time they got up, until dinner time, no one was allowed to talk or make any social contact with anyone else in the group. The only exceptions being during the *satsang* and therapy sessions. Ed resented being told what to do in this manner, reminding him as it did of being back at school. He elected to rebel in a relatively underhand manner. He wouldn’t openly flaunt the rules - too risky. Rather, he took pleasure in sneakily communicating with others when the opportunity presented itself. It felt good, rather as though he were a free individual, surrounded by those who aspired simply to become robots.

After breakfast each day, the whole group would gather in Mayaloka, the

room where sessions and meditations took place, for a meeting with Swamiji. This meeting was called a *satsang*. Swamiji would sit in a big chair at the front, whilst the participants would sit facing him on cushions on the floor. Each morning so far, Swamiji would begin by speaking for a while and would then invite questions from the retreat participants. Swamiji, or one of his two principal aides, Blake and Chandani, would provide answers.

The *satsang* seemed to be completely free of time-constraint, something that Ed found confusing. As long as people asked questions, Swamiji and his aides would answer them, taking as long as they wished. Ed couldn't understand why *satsang* was allowed to just run and run like this. On the first morning, it had lasted a full 5 hours, and then they still had to do the one hour of sitting meditation that always preceded lunch. He was absolutely starving by the end, having already missed breakfast. He just couldn't get his head around it.

After lunch, there would always be a break for an hour and a half, which Ed invariably spent lying on his bed, surreptitiously talking in hushed tones with anyone else who was up for breaking the rules. Then, at the ding of a bell, they would have to return to Mayaloka, where Blake and Chandani would lead some kind of therapy session. This too could go on for hours. The therapy session would be followed by another hour of sitting meditation and then finally, they would eat dinner. Social Silence would be lifted at this time and they could chat to each other while eating.

Thus far, dinner had been at 10 pm on the first day, and at around 7 pm on the two following. It all depended on the length of the *satsang*, and on the length of the afternoon therapy session. But no matter how late dinner took place, there was always dishes to do afterwards. This would be followed by a short break and then another meditation of some sort. Only after this would they be allowed to go to bed. The first night they didn't end up sleeping until one o'clock in the morning. But it seemed that no matter what time they finally went to bed, they would always have to get up at 5.40 the following morning.

The logic of all this played havoc with Ed's mind. He was used to living a life that revolved around food and rest coming at relatively fixed times. Yet here, it seemed that these things were of little importance. If Swamiji felt like answering

questions for hours on end, or if Blake and Chandani decided to run a five-hour therapy session, then everything would just follow on afterwards. And, no matter how late they went to bed, they'd still have to be up at 5.40 in the morning.

Ed found himself imagining a situation where the *satsang* and therapy sessions went on for so long that there simply wasn't an hour left for the late evening meditation before they had to get up. How would they cope with this, he wondered? But he knew this question would soon no longer arise. Swamiji had announced yesterday that they were about to start 'transcending time.' This had turned out not to involve entering into some mystical state of consciousness, but rather the assistants going around removing all the clocks in the building. They'd also collected everyone's watches, putting them away somewhere until the end of the retreat. Mobiles and laptops had already been handed in by the participants on arrival. Time no more!

* * *

As the early days of the retreat passed by, Ed found himself slowly slipping out of his usual day-to-day reality. At times, he'd feel an immense panic, and a strong impulse to get the fuck out. At other times, it actually felt liberating, like he was a kid again, seeing everything with freshness and a sense of wonder.

Life was becoming incredibly raw for him. He could feel a volatility developing inside and found himself being triggered by the smallest of incidents. The highs felt super-high, and the lows were just plain terrifying. Events that would have barely registered in the outside world could now provoke intense reactions. Yesterday, someone had stood very close to him in the food queue, without acknowledging him, and he'd felt the eruption of a rage so powerful he could barely keep it suppressed. Then, later in the day, an hour after he'd finally spoken to Cindy, he found himself feeling as high as a kite. When this morning, she'd failed to respond to his shy smile and wave, he found himself plunged into a pit of despair and self-loathing. Everything here was intensified, he reflected. In each moment, overwhelming emotions might engulf him.

His assessment of the situation that he found himself in also seemed to change by the hour. Each day, there were times when he'd kick himself for signing up for this retreat, without having really checked in advance what it was about.

Several times he'd even become paranoid, convinced that Cindy was the front woman for a brainwashing cult, luring in sex-starved young men. At other times, he felt like this was the most awesome fucking place he'd ever been in his entire life.

Ed found himself more in this latter frame of mind as he walked back towards Mayaloka for the morning meeting with Swamiji. As he walked happily along the corridor, suddenly Monika hurried past him. She was a young Slovakian woman who, only the day before, had explained to the group how she'd worked 14-hour days for a whole month, cleaning houses, to raise the money to come. She seemed to Ed incredibly focused and determined, like a highly-honed machine. He could only admire her spirit and negatively compare his own faltering commitment.

As she rushed ahead of him, to ensure her front row seat, Ed felt himself flush hard with sexual desire. God, she was hot! Her hair was cut in a cute, bob style and dyed purple, rather like something out of a futuristic space movie. The firmness of her body, as she receded into the distance, seemed to penetrate deep into his cells, like she was tearing into him, taking him over. True, her face lacked the clearly defined beauty of Cindy's, but there was an animal rawness to her and he felt his body responding. Walking behind her, his mind began to construct a fantasy of what it would be like to be in bed with her. She would immediately take control, of course. Her brusque East European accent delivering curtly-phrased demands as she set about getting what she wanted from him, regardless of his feelings about it.

The depth of his sexual arousal at these thoughts was almost overwhelming. So much greater than anything that happened when, in his normal life, he would go through his nightly routine of summoning up images to masturbate over. Everything here was intensified, he reflected once more. Someone was turning the gain control right up on his emotions and he feared that at some point, his reactions would be too strong to keep suppressed. At some point, all hell was going to break loose from within him.

Striding confidently into Mayaloka, Ed spent a few moments taking the room in. It was octagonal in shape and built entirely of wood, which had been deeply varnished. The whole area seemed to be cleaned almost constantly by the assistants to maintain its crisp, zen-like feel. There was absolutely no clutter at all. Everything in this room was meant to be there - the cushions, mattresses, temple bells, sound

system, and, of course, the focal point - Swamiji's chair.

Everything had its place and the assistants ensured that once anything was used, it was returned to the space allocated for it. It was clear to Ed that Swamiji demanded very high standards, completely over-the-top even. Ed could see no reason for this obsessive desire for everything to look perfect all the time and assumed that Swamiji, despite his spiritual gifts, also had something of the Howard Hughes about him.

Turning his attention to the rows of cushions laid out before him, Ed noticed that roughly two-thirds of the group were already present. Monika had grabbed a front row seat. Dean and Cindy sat next to each other one row further back. Jorge, a skinny, thirty-something former drug user from Spain, was seated the other side of Cindy. From their body postures, Ed suddenly sensed clearly that Jorge and Dean were competing, no doubt to see which of them could get Cindy into bed first. The realisation provoked a rush of righteous anger in his belly. These manipulating predators competing for his woman, he'd like to punch them out! He breathed deeply. Did he need to worry? Hadn't Cindy told him that he was the 'sweet one' in her eyes? He reassured himself that he would win through. Let the macho fools fight it out.

Ed spied Simon Barrow sitting in the back row, near to one end. He made his way over and sat down next to him. They had sat together in this corner each morning so far, both figuring this to be the safest place in the room.

Ed had already noticed how loving Swamiji and his staff could be towards those who asked questions. But, equally, it had become clear how they could also tear into them quite brutally. There would always be a moment of trepidation after a question was asked, while the group waited on tenterhooks to see in which direction the reply would go. To Ed, it seemed to be an entirely random decision as to whether the leaders would heap praise on someone, or rip them to shreds. As he settled onto the cushion on Simon's left, Ed suddenly heard The Voice command him from within. 'Go sit at the front. Take a risk.'

A wave of terror shot through him. Fuck that, he thought! But Ed knew The Voice would berate him unendingly if he didn't comply. So, trembling slightly and swallowing hard, he stood up and moved to the front. At least this might impress

Cindy, he reasoned.

As he sat down, he heard The Voice once again command him from within. 'Ask the first question!' Shit, Ed thought, grimacing. What the hell should he say?

Within a couple of minutes, the room was full. Everyone sat patiently, awaiting Swamiji's arrival. One of the assistants closed the door. Time seemed to pass slowly. Five minutes, then ten, but still no sign of Swamiji.

Why the hell does he keep us waiting like this, Ed wondered, glancing around the room? Is he just fucking with our minds? He had asked this very question on the second night of the retreat during dinner. Clare, a corporate accountant from Surrey in her forties, had explained things to him.

"They all do it," she'd told him. "All the great masters make you wait at the beginning of *satsang*. It's so the energy in the room can become calm before they arrive. They're so sensitive, you see. It's really a sacrifice for them to remain in this *rajas* form, surrounded by all these lower beings - us."

Ed hadn't found this argument so convincing, not least because he didn't understand what the hell she was talking about. He found Clare an odd character. She seemed to hold down a high-paying, high-pressure job in the city that required her to be really focused the whole time. Yet, whilst here, she dressed herself up in long robes and would speak endless amounts of what he considered to be 'hippy nonsense.' He'd love to see her in her nine to five role. Would she use similar language, he wondered, when answering queries about a company's negative performance in the last quarter?

As the minutes passed, Ed's anxiety increased steadily. Frustration churned through him. If only Swamiji would just come in so he could get his question over and done with. It didn't help to have all this time to imagine what might happen when he asked it. The more he thought about it, the more he became convinced that he was going to get hammered. Swamiji or one of the others would be down his throat, like the teachers at school, probably before he'd even finished speaking.

Ed's anxiety levels started to go through the roof. Fear and anger raged through him in bursts, the one following the other with no space in between. His mind was going berserk. This is way too risky, he decided. I'm going to look like an utter idiot in front of everyone, especially Cindy. It's all Swamiji's fault. Why the

fuck didn't he just come in when he was supposed to? I was okay ten minutes ago. Now I'm completely fucked up and it's all his fault, bastard. Well, fuck him, he thought, I'm going to just get up and walk out of this place.

As his recriminations rose to a dark crescendo, a door at the back of the room opened.

3 - Swamiji

Blake entered the room first. Tall, at least six-foot, he cut a figure both impressive and intimidating. His dark skin rippled with muscles and on the surface he had the appearance of a nightclub doorman or bodyguard. But Ed could see that he wasn't quite this. Blake's movements revealed a litheness and a flexibility that you'd never see on a guy who's role was simply muscle.

He moved like a predator, Ed thought, unable to pull his gaze away. Like a tiger, powerful, waiting to pounce at any moment. He sighed in resignation as he saw the women in the group following Blake's movements with barely concealed lust. This man is a God, he thought enviously. I need what he's got.

Having entered, Blake stood to one side, holding the door open for the main man. Swamiji entered. Moving slowly, carefully placing each foot, he was clearly in no rush at all. He seemed to actually relish each step that he took.

Ed figured Swamiji to be about five foot five inches tall, slightly shorter than the average British male. He was wearing a long, dark yellow robe. It reached to just above the floor and was adorned with various items of rather blingy jewellery. He stood out. But Ed realised that, even dressed in jeans and t-shirt, Swamiji would still command attention with ease. You just didn't see people around who were this relaxed, so utterly unhurried, so comfortable simply being alive.

Beneath his robe, Swamiji's body appeared to be trim but not muscular. He seemed ageless, his eyes shining with joyfulness. He radiated charisma. Everything about him seemed to grab a hold of Ed's senses, from his sandalled feet to the small goatee on his chin and his long, flowing dark hair. He could be thirty or he could be

in his fifties, it was impossible to tell.

Blake closed the door behind Chandani, the last to enter. She was shorter than Swamiji and looked to be in her late forties or early fifties. Age regardless, she was another striking-looking being. There was an incredible lightness to her movements, something Ed had rarely seen in women even half her age. She could be as capricious as a dragonfly, turning on her heels in an instant to gaze at something with childlike wonder. But, moments later, she might turn into a raging tigress, tearing brutally into someone who had upset her. Her moods seemed completely unpredictable and liable to change in an instant.

Ed scrutinised her movements, transfixed. Blake was reputed to be her lover. Yet, despite being around a foot shorter than him, Clare had informed him that Chandani most definitely wore the pants in the relationship. And that no other woman would dare to give him more than a fleeting glance for fear of Chandani's rage.

Taken together, Swamiji, Chandani and Blake seemed to Ed like something out of *The Matrix*. They were otherworldly. When you saw these guys coming you just knew something was going to go down.

* * *

Swamiji walked slowly to a spot in front of his chair and then raised both his hands in the classic Indian *namaste* gesture, a position Ed remembered from prayers in church. Ed returned the gesture as did everyone else. Swamiji sat down and everyone followed. It all seemed very formal.

A pin-drop silence ensued. In his belly, Ed felt a rising panic at the thought of having to ask his question. He still had no clue what he was going to say. He knew he still had a little while though. Swamiji would invariably give a short discourse before inviting questions.

“Greetings, everyone,” Swamiji began, raising his arms in salutation. “It is very beautiful for me to see each morning how much more open you are all becoming. Like flowers in springtime. I feel truly blessed that you all have gathered here, to follow the path to the great prize... Enlightenment.”

Ed was enraptured. He loved Swamiji's relaxed voice. It had the characteristic sing-song quality that the British associated with Indian shopkeepers on television,

which Swamiji occasionally reinforced with a little side-to-side head shaking gesture. Yet, Ed had heard that Swamiji was educated at Oxford. His parents had been wealthy *Mumbaikars* and he'd been sent there as a teenager. He remembered asking Clare why Swamiji adopted this bizarre caricature, and she'd explained to him that he did it so that Westerners would feel safe with him. Like this, he presented no threat, and so it was easy for him to convince people to take part in all kinds of extreme therapies, without them realising what was going on until they were well into the process.

Swamiji lowered his hands and continued to speak.

“Today, I would like to start with a famous spiritual story,” he began. “It’s the story of two Buddhist monks, one young and one old, both living in a monastery a thousand years ago in Tibet.”

Sweeping the room with his gaze, his voice utterly relaxed, Swamiji seemed to immediately draw everyone into a state of loving attentiveness. In an instant, he became the kindly, knowing father that each person in the room wished had been their own. He continued with his story.

“Each morning, the two monks would walk some miles from the monastery to gather wood ready for lighting a fire, crossing a river as they did so. One day, as they were returning with the collected sticks, they came across a beautiful young woman standing, somewhat distraught, by the riverside.

“‘Oh, please help me, kind monks,’ she entreated them, clasping her hands together as she pleaded. ‘The river has swollen with last night’s rain and I cannot cross it. Would one of you be so kind as to carry me across on your back?’

“Immediately, the younger monk offered to do just that. She climbed upon his back and he slowly waded through the water. When they reached the other side, he carefully placed her down on the ground and, with a *namaste*, she departed.

“The two monks continued their long walk back to the monastery. After some distance, the younger monk became aware that his older companion was really quite angry, he appeared to have a dark cloud above his head. ‘Are you okay?’ the younger monk inquired. ‘You seem to be angry about something.’

“‘Can’t you guess?’ the older monk replied sarcastically. ‘I can’t believe you picked that young woman up and had her on your back. It’s disgraceful. We are

sworn to strict celibacy. As soon as we're back, I'm going to report you to the Abbot!

"They continued walking for another mile, the younger monk in deep contemplation whilst the older one fumed and continuously muttered under his breath. Eventually, the younger monk turned to the elder and spoke. 'Well,' he said. 'I carried the young woman for a short while and then set her down. Whereas you, you are still carrying her now!'

"The elder monk received this information sombrely and quietly contemplated. After a while, his anger dropped away and he looked humble. He knelt before his younger companion's feet and gave a deep *namaste*. 'Thank you' he said."

Swamiji leant back in his chair, his tale complete, and gazed with kindness at the seated listeners. "Can anyone tell me the meaning of this story?" he asked.

Clare's hand shot up. Teacher's pet, Ed thought.

"Yes." Swamiji motioned for her to speak.

"It means that it's easier to let go of something that you *have* picked up, than it is to let go of something that you haven't," she declared proudly.

"Very good," Swamiji intoned, in his sing-song accent. "That's exactly right."

He continued. "Meditation is to simply sit, breathe, and to watch your thoughts, emotions or whatever it is that is in your senses. Monks meditate for years, trying their hardest to not attach to these things. But, it is very difficult, despite their good intent. At every sitting, they try. And at every sitting they find themselves fixated on the same thoughts - money, power, what the abbot may think about them, what they're having for dinner, or when the fat monk who always sits in the corner is going to stop picking his nose." He laughed. "And, of course," he intoned slowly, "they all think about sex."

At the mention of the word 'sex' the room moved to a new level of focus. Suddenly, everyone sat upright on their cushions.

"And what this parable is telling us is... that it is easier to let go of things like money, power and sex if you have picked them up first. When you have never experienced money, the thought of money exerts greater control over your mind. When you have never experienced power, the thought of power exerts greater control over your mind. And when you have never experienced sex, the thought of

sex exerts greater control over your mind.”

He beamed at everyone. “Yes, truly, it is easier to let go of something that you have been attached to. This is why on my retreats, I encourage you to pick up fully that which you have not yet experienced. I am not handing out money and giving away power. But I am doing the next best thing, allowing you to train daily with my two excellent therapists. They can help you clear out any internal blockages and move towards gaining all that you want in life.

“Follow them and you will see that the blocks are all internal. You can make money if you want. There is nothing external stopping you. You can get all the power you desire. The difficulty is not on the outside. And, right here on this retreat, you can also go for more sex. If, of course, you have not had enough already. We will support you to do this.”

My God, Ed thought excitedly. He going to make us start fucking each other! He swallowed hard. He wanted this so much but it was scary also. Glancing around, he felt the expectation in the room rising, as everyone’s mind, like his own, tried desperately to work out what was coming. Fear and excitement pulsed through the room. Cindy had said things would soon ramp up. This must be it coming now.

Aware that he had everyone’s full attention, Swamiji continued speaking, his voice still entirely relaxed.

“This is my way, the way of experiencing. This way your ego can fully ripen. And, like all ripe fruit, when the moment comes, it just falls. It falls, and into that void arises Enlightenment. Whilst your ego is not ripe, you are not mature. So, it is not easy for it to drop. Indeed, often the desire in the unripe ego to attain Enlightenment is itself evidence of immaturity.”

He paused for a moment, allowing the participants to take in his words. “It is not natural for the ego to seek Enlightenment,” he continued. “The ego likes to seek money, power, and sex, and, to a degree, you must give it these things. It must see the outcome of its seeking.

“A poor man goes through life believing that, if he only had money, he would be happy. A rich man knows that this is not the case. He has tried it. He has experienced it. He knows that it does not bring happiness. The poor man has not had the experience, so he lives in fantasy. And so, it is with power or sex. How many

of you believe that, if you just had more money, more power or more sex, it would make you happy?”

Ed glanced around. A few participants had bravely put their hands up. Seeing them, Ed too followed.

Swamiji continued. “How many of you believe that the reason you don’t have enough money, power or sex is because of something outside of you? You believe that some people are lucky and they have all the money or power and they are keeping it all to themselves. Or, you believe that getting sex is about how you look and that you are not attractive enough? How many of you believe these kinds of things?”

Ed slowly put his hand up and surreptitiously glanced behind him, hoping he was not alone. Several others had been similarly honest.

Swamiji smiled. “So, you can see, this is how the prison of the mind operates. You believe that you need something in order to be happy. And you believe that you are blocked from attaining this something because of forces over which you have no control. This is the prison in which you live, a prison of false beliefs.”

Swamiji leaned forwards very slightly on his chair, his tone still relaxed. “You actually don’t need money, power or sex to be happy. But as long as you believe you do, and you believe that some outside force is blocking you from getting them, then you do not look for happiness where it is actually to be found... right here.” He pointed to the centre of his chest. “Yes,” he repeated. “Right here in the heart.

“So, seeing this problem,” Swamiji continued, giving a little sideways headshake, “I am thinking to myself, well, what to do? Am I to be just another guru telling you to sit there on your cushion waiting for your mind to clear, so Enlightenment can descend upon you? I don’t think so. It is not my way. It is a part of my way but I am a little more, as you say, fast-track. I like to offer a shortcut, for those who are ready for it. In these coming days, Chandani and Blake will lead structures that will support you to overcome any fears you have around sexual expression.”

Ed felt a wave of panic and excitement sweep through the room with these words.

My God, it’s true, he thought. We are going to have to fuck each other. This is

fucking A! Finally, I'm going to get to be with the goddess, Cindy. Hooray for meditation! Hooray for Enlightenment! Twisting on his cushion, he looked briefly around the room, recognising the same excitement and anxiety in everyone.

But his exultation was short-lived. Suddenly he felt himself gripped by a whole array of anxieties. Shit, he thought. What if I can't get it up? What if I am just a disaster in bed? What if there's an orgy and I'm the only person who no one wants to be with? His mind exploded with possible outcomes – most of them bad. The dark, negative thoughts seemed most definitely to be winning.

Ed realised that it was one thing to *fantasise* about having sex with heaps of gorgeous women, as he had anyway been doing for years. But actually *doing* it was far more risky. By far the safest thing was to keep these things as fantasies. Something to enjoy in the privacy of your own mind, a place where things didn't go horribly wrong. Where there was no chance that you'd end up feeling like shit.

Swamiji continued to speak. "Of course, you won't have to do anything you don't want to do. We just support you if you do want to explore who you are as a sexual being, so that it no longer preoccupies your mind when you sit down to meditate.

"Then, when you have explored, and you have matured, once the fruit has ripened, we both sit and wait for it to fall from the tree. We wait for the drop to drop into the ocean, to rediscover its true nature. We wait for your Enlightenment."

He paused, allowing time for his words to sink in.

"Of course, there are those that come to me to fulfil their desires. But they are not so interested to drop them afterwards!" Swamiji gave another of his comical headshakes. "They seek to build up their ego with sexual conquests.

"But, usually, they find that, on this journey to satiating their lusts, something deeper starts to change within them, regardless of their intention. They might think that they are coming on the retreat merely to have sex with as many men or women as possible. But, along the way, many other things can happen.

"Indeed, sometimes the one who has the worst of intentions, the one who is the most corrupt, becomes the one who attains Enlightenment. This is because we can never really know who is pulling the strings that guide us in life.

"For example, our self-image might be very negative, perhaps that of being a

worthless and unlovable individual. We might decide to avenge ourselves upon the world, seeking to have sex with as many people as possible, and leaving a trail of misery and destruction in our wake. But who actually placed this image of worthlessness inside our head, and with what intention? That is the question. The ego might think that it is the predator, that it is the dangerous one. But often, it is this ego that makes a tasty meal for the divine.”

Swamiji’s eyes gleamed ever more brightly.

Ed was lost. He found that he could usually follow Swamiji, but these last sentences had gone right over his head. He watched quietly as Swamiji stroked his goatee beard and started to look inquisitively around the room.

“Okay,” Swamiji asked. “Does anyone have a question today?”

In an instant, and seemingly of its own volition, Ed’s hand stretched towards the ceiling. He stared at it aghast. He had no clue what to say. He felt wide open, exposed and totally vulnerable. He desperately wanted to bring his arm down, but seemed unable to get it to move.

Swamiji gazed at him, his features serene. “Yes, Ed.”

4 - Question

Ed felt paralysed with shock. Regret flooded his every pore. What the fuck was he doing putting his hand up? He hadn't prepared a question. What the fuck was he going to say? He opened his mouth to apologise, but The Voice was upon him, commanding him to just speak.

"Uhm," he started. "Uhm." He felt a deep panic beginning to take him over. As he looked at Swamiji, however, Ed suddenly felt a calmness enter him. He realised that he was safe. He just needed to say something.

"I feel scared, Swamiji," he said, allowing himself to speak without thinking about what he was saying.

"Scared?"

"Yes, scared. I don't know where I am anymore. Everything here is so intense. It's too much for me." Ed realised with a jolt that tears were rolling down his face. Embarrassment flooded through him and he felt his cheeks reddening. He wished he wasn't speaking so openly, but it also felt like a relief.

"I feel like a phoney," he continued. "I came here because of... a friend. But I don't understand this place. I don't know anything about Enlightenment. I don't want to feel like this." His lower lip began to quiver and he started to shake. He felt naked.

Mortified, convinced he'd ruined any minuscule chance he might have had with Cindy, it nevertheless felt as if a huge weight was being lifted from his chest. He realised how constricted he had been. Inside, he resolved to keep speaking before his fear of embarrassment took over and he froze.

“I’m not like the others here,” he continued. “They all know so much more than me. I feel like I totally stick out. I don’t know anything about this scene. I’m just a normal guy from North London. I go to the pub on Wednesday evenings, because that’s what I always do. I don’t belong here. Please, Swamiji, tell me what I should do. I want to feel normal again.”

The sound of Dean struggling to stifle his amusement behind him increased Ed’s sense of mortification. He lowered his gaze expecting ridicule from Swamiji too. When it didn’t arrive, he looked up in surprise.

Swamiji studied Ed for what felt like an aeon. Then, his face lit up, tiny age lines framing his expression. “Wow, Ed! I salute you,” he said with a gesture. “Thank you for being so open and so honest and for having the courage to say what’s in your heart.”

Ed’s jaw dropped. He glanced at Blake and Chandani, who were seated on either side of Swamiji. They too were gazing at him with loving smiles. This didn’t make any sense. Had he really done the right thing? Could it be true that he wasn’t going to get a huge bollocking?

“You say you came here because of a friend. Did this person, this ‘she’ perhaps,” Swamiji said, with a twinkle in his eye, “convince you to come?”

“Kind of,” Ed blubbered.

“Okay. You came because someone told you to and now a lot of feelings are coming and it feels too much. Am I right?”

“Yes.”

“And you want to leave because you feel out of place? You think you made a mistake.”

“Yes.” Ed gulped.

“Well, you didn’t make a mistake,” Swamiji told him with a smile. “Actually, you’re doing very much what I was talking about earlier. This is really quite synchronistic. You think you came for a certain reason, but you were actually led here by a deeper, spiritual impulse. Can you see that, Ed?”

“But I’m not a spiritual person, Swamiji,” Ed protested, shaking his head. “Really I’m not. I read men’s magazines and I fantasise about women. I dream about getting a better job, but I know I’m never going to do it. I’m like all the other

guys down the pub. I'm just normal. I'm not a spiritual person."

Swamiji sat back in his chair for a moment, studying Ed and then, as if he could not control his humour, he let out a colossal belly laugh, whilst slapping his knee a few times. Once his laughter had subsided, he became sincere.

"Listen to me, Ed," he said. "No one is spiritual. A person is just a person. They might think that they are a spiritual person. But it is just a thought, and mostly a big ego-trip.

"I like you, Ed," he continued. "You are open and you are honest. You are who you are in the moment. You cannot do more. No one can. Maybe you are *the one*."

"The one?" Ed asked, intrigued, his tears drying up now.

"Yes, the one. The one who gets it. I like to think that there will always be one on each retreat. Sometimes I'm right and sometimes, not."

"Gets it? You mean..."

"Yes, Ed. The one who becomes Enlightened. Maybe you are that one."

"I don't think so, Swamiji," Ed explained.

"Why not?"

"I'm a mess," he stammered. "I'm not good enough. I'm 35 years old. I've hardly ever had a real girlfriend. I live with my Mum. I have a terrible job where I get treated like dirt, and I just accept it. As for sex, well, I haven't had anywhere near enough sex, just like you said."

"Maybe you don't need to have it. Maybe what you've had is enough."

"I don't know, Swamiji. I can't stop thinking about sex, every time I sit down to meditate. I've got a one-track mind." The words tumbled from his mouth in grateful relief.

Swamiji sat back in his chair once more, stroking his goatee, thinking things through. "Okay," he said, nodding. "Perhaps you do need to have more sex. I think you should meet with Blake and he can coach you on attracting women. What do you think?"

Relieved and excited, Ed felt like cheering out loud. With a guy like Blake on his side, things would be improving big-time. He was sure of it.

"Thank you, Swamiji," he said, barely able to contain his excitement. "I'll definitely stay now."

“Okay,” Swamiji said. “But, once you’ve had more attention from women, and more sex, then it’s time to drop it, right? Don’t forget that.” He gave a little Indian headshake.

“I’ll try,” Ed affirmed, not remotely convinced that he could ever get enough attention from women, or enough sex. How many times would he need to have sex with Cindy before he could drop it? A thousand times? Maybe.

* * *

Ed’s question resolved, the attention of the group moved on. Straightaway, other hands sprang up, clamouring for attention. Dean seemed especially desperate to speak, thrusting his hand ever higher into the air. Leaning forward in his chair, Swamiji surveyed the people in front of him, as relaxed as ever, his gaze settling on each for a few moments, apparently deciding who to pick. Finally, he pointed at a young woman seated roughly in the middle of the group. She looked unsure as to whether he meant her, and gave a querying look.

“Yes, you. Sandrine,” he affirmed.

Sandrine was an attractive Parisian woman, perhaps 30 years old, with long, light-brown, frizzed-out hair and a tall, wiry frame. She always sounded agitated, whenever Ed had heard her speaking, and like someone prone to thinking excessively.

To Ed, women communicated in different ways. Cindy communicated that she was out of his league through her beauty. It was obvious that she could take her pick of men. But, with Sandrine, it was her accent and her body posture that communicated to Ed. She was just so utterly French. The way she looked at Ed, on the rare occasions that she did, said to Ed, “There is no way on God’s earth that you are ever, and I mean *ever*, going to get close to me sexually. Just don’t even bother thinking about it!’ A stressed-out ice goddess.

Clasping her hands together at her chest to show her earnestness, Sandrine leaned forward on her cushion and asked her question.

“Beloved Swamiji,” she began. “I am trying to understand what’s going on with me and I’m sure you can help. I am feeling energy moving around my left shoulder, right here.” Sandrine indicated the area with her right hand. “It seemed to start when I thought about my mother yesterday. She was such a bitch. She did not

want me for a daughter, and I did not want her for a mother. I was not good enough for her and she was not good enough for me. This was our game together, always.”

She drew a deep breath as if steadying her nerves.

“Anyway, this energy is coming yesterday to my shoulder. But today, while meditating, I noticed something. It is moving! It is moving to the right side of me, here.” She put her hand on the right side of her ribs and continued. “Can you explain to me what is happening? Why is this energy moving? Does it mean that something is healing between me and my mother? Or are things between us going to get worse? Or is it to do with my second chakra?”

Swamiji said nothing, but remained watching Sandrine intently.

A little nonplussed by Swamiji’s lack of response, she continued. “Because I went to see this chakra healer in Zurich and she told me that my second chakra is very weak with low energy. I think because I was not eating enough potassium. And now I’m wondering if there is sufficient potassium in the food here. Maybe, this is why the energy returns. I am thinking and thinking about it and going over my life history. I think about my useless parents, my awful friends, and all the traumas of my life, and I am not sure. So, I am thinking more and more and...”

“Sandrine!” Chandani’s broad New Jersey accent cut through the room.

Sandrine, looked up, startled. “Yes?”

“Do you feel like you’re getting fucked enough?”

“Excuse me?” Sandrine blushed.

“I mean, like, when was the last time?” Chandani persisted.

“Last time?”

“Yes. When was the last time you got laid? You know, had sex? With a guy.”

“Oh.” Sandrine reflected for a moment. “Well, to be honest, a long time ago. I don’t really meet many men who I feel to be worthy of me.”

I knew it, Ed thought, amazed at Chandani’s intervention.

“You think this has something to do with the energy?” Sandrine was shocked.

“Yes,” Chandani asserted confidently. “You should be getting fucked once a week, or, ideally, once a day. But, at least once a week. That’s the minimum.”

“If I do this, I will be alright?”

“Yes, you will feel much better. I guarantee it.” Chandani smiled broadly.

“But,” Sandrine continued with a Gallic shrug of her shoulders, “how am I to do this? Where can I find the right man?”

“Try looking around,” Chandani suggested. “This room is full of guys, at least half full. All different types. Take your pick.”

“These guys?!” Sandrine said, with a level of incredulity that suggested Chandani had asked her to have sex with an ape. She straightened her spine and pulled her head back upright. “*Impossible!*” she gasped aloud. “No way. *Totalement* no way. I could not even think of it.”

Chandani leaned forward in her seat. “Is there really no one here you fancy even the slightest little bit?”

Sandrine cocked her head slightly to one side. “Well-lll.” She drew the word out. “Perhaps one.” Her eyes moved slightly towards Blake.

Chandani’s eyes flashed fire.

Sandrine acknowledged the warning. “No, no,” she asserted. “There is no one. Absolutely no one.”

“Well, maybe it’s time to lower your standards a little,” Chandani suggested. “Perhaps be a little more open.”

Sandrine’s eyes opened wide with incredulity. “Lower my standards? I cannot believe you ask a French woman to do such a thing!”

Chandani thought for a moment, accepting that she had a point. “Well, perhaps make some kind of scale,” she suggested, moving her hands to suggest a set of scales. “You know, put the benefits of regular sex on one side.” She lowered her left hand. “And the selection standard on the other. I’m sure you can find someone if you put your mind to it.”

“Okay,” Sandrine replied abruptly, clearly wishing that this discussion end now. “I will think about what you say. Thank you for your answer.”

“Great. Thank you,” Chandani replied.

As soon as the question appeared to be over, more hands were raised. Ed looked around at the participants, each clamouring to be picked next. It reminded him of school. Please sir, pick me!

The *satsang* continued for another hour and a half. Many questions were answered but Dean didn’t get picked, despite his repeated attempts to attract

Swamiji's attention. Finally, Swamiji announced that this was all they had time for and brought the gathering to a close with a *namaste* and the words, "All is good!"

The group started to rearrange themselves on their cushions, making themselves comfortable for the one-hour sitting meditation which followed *satsang*.

Swamiji waited for everyone to be settled and for the room to descend into silence, and then he spoke.

"Vipassana," he began, "is the first technique that the Buddha gave upon his Enlightenment, two and a half thousand years ago. Some people think that it should be updated. But I say, what is there to update? People change, society changes, everything around us changes. But one thing stays the same. Awareness. Awareness is the same now as it was two and a half thousand years ago. What is there to update? Nothing." He smiled at the group.

"So, place all your relaxed awareness on your belly. Feel the movement of the air, in and out, in and out. Nothing else. This is the only job your mind has to do. Just following the movement of your belly as it fills with air, and as it empties again. Let the thoughts come in, and let them go out again."

Ed sat on his cushion, his mind racing like crazy. He tried to get some control over it but it seemed impossible, it would be easier to get a hundred monkeys into a box that had no lid.

His mind chased around, frenziedly trying to work out what was coming next on the retreat, going through all the possibilities, and deciding how good or bad each might turn out for him. More than anything, he dreaded finding himself stuck in a bad place with no way forward. No one to come and save him. Everyone else having a great time while he just felt totally rejected, totally shit.

* * *

Lunchtime came and went in silence. It was Ed's turn to help with the dishes afterwards. Each day, one half of the group would help with the dishes after lunch, and the other after dinner. To ensure that you didn't have to do the same shift with the same people each day, a list was put up on the ashram notice board in the morning.

Once the dishes had been finished, he went back up to the dorm and rested on his bed, determined to relax before the afternoon's therapy session. Gradually his

mind started to slow down. Slowly, he let go of trying to figure out what was coming next and what he should do about it.

Let's face it, Ed thought to himself, before dozing off, you're pretty fucked up anyway. How much worse could things get?

