

The Vital Breath

"... ..attain what was previously unattainable!"

"... ..can an atheist be Jewish?"

"... ..do you believe in the equality of the human soul?"

by

Veru Narula

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— Veru Narula

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About the Novel and its Authors

The Vital Breath is a dynamic collaboration between Ashok Wahi and Veru Narula. Through four distinct characters, *The Vital Breath* explores four dynamic religions through the principles of Yoga.

After publishing many successful How-To-Yoga books as part of *The Missing Peace* series, Wahi conceived the idea of a novel to promote Yoga worldwide. As an avid Yoga practitioner for over twenty years, he wanted to reflect on the movement of *non-violence* as it relates to Yoga in modern times. After the death of his sister, Malika Gandhi, he became interested in the migration of the human soul.

Narula, born and raised in the New York Metro Area and a part of the South Asian diaspora, was enthusiastic about writing the challenging interaction of exploring the heights and depths of the many philosophies. As a Columbia University graduate with the precision of an engineer and the imagination of a surrealist artist, Narula's unique style of narrative and story telling was the perfect match for *The Vital Breath* collaboration. He wrote his first novel with the vibrancy of an oil painting.

The authors take the reader on a gripping multi-century journey, in which the roots of the partition of India and Pakistan and the effects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in America are explored.

Ultimately, *The Vital Breath* is a metaphor for personal, political and spiritual understanding and unity.

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Prologue: The Burning Eagle

How long has the Eagle been burning?

In Sanskrit, the word *Garuda* means eagle. In a Hindu legend, Garuda is the king of birds because he transports the god Vishnu. Often depicted with a bow and arrow, Garuda is eager to help humanity fight against its demons.

On June 20, 1782, the United States of America chose the bald eagle as its national emblem because of its long life, great strength, and majestic look. The great seal of the nation became the emblem of authority, freedom from evil, and justice around the globe.

In the practice of Yoga, there are seven steps of the Eagle pose *Garudasana*. Each step in the Indian philosophy of Yoga brings together the body and the mind. Ultimately, the purpose of Yoga is to bring about a change that was, at one point, previously unattainable.

How can a change be previously unattainable? In 1947, India became independent from British rule because of the Gandhian non-violent resistance movement that started years before. But the effects of the partition of India and Pakistan left lasting scars in the region. Another change that was previously unattainable occurred in 1967 during the Six Day War in the Middle East, when Israel was attacked but defeated the combined forces of Egypt, Jordan and Syria. Israel seized control of the Sinai Peninsula, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights. These effects are still seen today.

Perhaps the greatest change that was previously unattainable was when the world watched two planes crash into the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001. The courageous emblem of freedom burned with the fuel jet of hatred, and the Western world awoke to their responsibility in the world.

Throughout the globe, lands continue to burn, and one wonders if there is any connection between these events. Why do enraged conflicts simmer in one place and time, only to resurface and spark later elsewhere?

Consider the constant in these different places and epochs of time. It is a constant that fuels fire, but without it, we suffocate. Essential to existence, uniting us with the cosmos, is there anything more conscious, more physical, more powerful than the human breath?

In all the destruction and turmoil in the world, both past and present, there is the constancy of millions of breaths and spirits. Nourishing them both has effects on one's daily life and the world as a whole. Where do the conflicts cease, and the breath and spirit unite?

Breathe in the Vital Breath, and allow the Eagle to fly.

The Eagle Pose Begins

“Step 1: Stand feet together and arms by your sides...”

On this day of the Moon,

The first Cosmic day,

The sin of Wrath,

And the Birth of Love coincide.

Before there was logic and reason,

Disorder created your demon.

As the planet became tender.

Stand with the feet together and arms by your sides.

Words mean little,

Actions are man's judge.

There was nothingness in a primordial world,

Of Religious Persecution.

Before the cosmic tear was first shed,

As you realize all that has come before.

...Stand with feet together and arms by your sides: Step 1.”

Episode I

One

Collision

New York City, USA

September 1998

"Good morning, Abdul, do you have yesterday's *Times*?"

"Yesterday's *Times*, hmm, let me look." The vendor looked under the counter.

"I heard the new play at the Neil Simon was reviewed in it," the woman said. The vendor pulled out a copy.

It was a Tuesday morning at Grand Central subway station in New York City. Wedged behind two steel pillars, the newspaper stand stood at the crossroads of the shuttle to Time Square and the East Side subways.

This newspaper stand owner observed the random motions of daily commuters, seasonal tourists, and occasional vagabonds. Sarita Rena was certainly one of his most personable customers. She stopped there every morning to buy a paper.

"For you madam, I saved you one copy," said Abdul.

The Pakistani owner had an antiquated set of glasses that crowded his face. The thick prescription made his eyes look like a caged bird in a small hut. Abdul Karim had come to the country over a year and a half ago with his wife and had taken over the shop from his brother.

Sarita smiled in anticipation of the review. She perused the news of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the front page. Interest rates were lowered by one quarter. Railway thief struck again in spite of the mayor's police efforts. There was another explosion in the Kashmir Valley on the Line of Control.

"It is such a shame," Sarita said.

"It will continue indefinitely. I tell my wife this," said Abdul.

In front of the newspaper stand, the morning rush hour vibrated with the musicians' Caribbean rendition of "Strangers in the Night." Down below the Manhattan streets, hundreds of people flowed like water in the rapids of the Metro Transit system.

"Thank you," she said. With her coffee in one hand and her paper in the other, Sarita went down the platform steps to wait for a local train. That morning, a person with a suspicious set of hands followed her down to the platform. The subway platform was a perfect cross-section of New York City's population. Men in khaki trench coats, women in suits and a motley array of business casual disasters stood on the concrete island.

Sarita leaned against the green pillar and read the review in the Arts and Leisure section, "New Play 'The Economist: The Musical' should be bottled for sale to insomniacs and canned faster than Campbell's Soup."

Her coffee dripped down the corrugated sleeve of her cup into her morning drudgery. Sarita opened her big handbag and rummaged through some book proposals to find a napkin.

As Sarita caffeinated the handbag's silk lining, her mind percolated with the thoughts of the day's ambitions. Like most New Yorkers, Sarita Rena was a bit different. She moved to Manhattan after her graduate studies to work at a publishing and marketing company. The publishing industry revolved around a simple idea: the pitch. It was the hook-line-and-sinker approach applied to the written word. But unlike other forms of salesmanship, publishers never used the word 'product'. Rather, publishing was selling a way of life, an inspirational rags-to-riches autobiography, the latest weight loss diet or a 'practical' penny-pinching technique. In an Internet-bubbling, free-flowing Amazon.com world, musical artists were not the only talent measured by their 'hits', and at the end of the day, everybody had a pitch.

"Let's see," she thought as she sifted through the pile of *How-to* instruction book proposals. *Kickboxing for Kindergarteners*. "That could be too violent," she thought to herself. *Scuba for Snoring Husbands*. She was amused but not sold, "too nasally," she thought. She read the next proposal and thought, "Hmm, this could be an interesting angle." She reread the title, *Yoga for a New Beginning*.

As she looked over the document, the downtown express had passed but still no local had arrived. The platform filled with commuters who peered over the yellow caution line at the edge of the platform. In the underground tubes of London, signs of "Mind the Gap" warn people of the tracks down below. But the precautions of London had no place in New York. Sarita stood with the heel of her designer *Via Spiga* shoe at the edge of the platform as the tunnel was illuminated by the oncoming train.

There were many onlookers that morning. They were all waiting, leaning, peering and about to move. While the mayor's zero-tolerance policy on 'squeegee men' had cleaned up the city, the hiatus in petty crime had also washed away New Yorkers' street smarts. Behind the stairs a young man with avaricious hands waited to pickpocket this woman, whose handbag was wide open with book proposals. The railway thief would strike right before the subway came to a complete stop and escape when the doors opened.

Sarita looked through the *Yoga how-to* book proposal and read the author's prologue and introduction, "*Yoga is the movement in Indian philosophy that brings together the body and mind. I can provide you with many words about the word Yoga, but eventually one learns by doing...*"

A homeless woman staggered down the stairs with a cup filled with coins and sang a catchy 1960s tune in a raspy voice, "Rescue me, come on and take my hand..."

Sarita did not pay attention to the audience of observers.

"Come on baby and Rescue Me!" the woman sang.

A pickpocket about to strike, hoards of grumpy commuters and the sharp sound of a homeless woman were lost to Sarita. She stood on the yellow painted edge of the platform, deep in thought, as the eyes circled around her.

"... the deeper interpretation of the word 'Yoga' is to attain what was previously unattainable," she read.

She wiped the last drop of coffee before she saw the whole cup thrust from her hand. Two bodies brushed behind her. Sarita felt herself losing her balance at the edge of the subway platform!

In a split second, the homeless woman pushed the pickpocket out of Sarita's way. The two women fell on the platform directly on the yellow strip of caution. It was as if they were falling forever. As Sarita fell to the ground, she had a memory of when she fell to the floor as a little girl.

Looking through a white lace veil, a seven-year-old Sarita walked down the church aisle to receive her first communion. In the Catholic Church, young boys and girls receive their first communion at an age when they could distinguish ordinary bread from sacramental food, which was believed to be the true body of Jesus Christ. Knowing how to receive the ritual with proper religious spirit, this age of discretion marked the beginning of one's spiritual journey.

With a bouquet in her hand, the young Sarita walked down the aisle and tripped over her white patent leather shoe buckle. The floor looked like a heap of cotton balls, but Sarita got up and kept going. The little girl held back from crying with a lump in her throat. She walked past the wooden benches filled with her family and well-wishers. Sarita reached the altar to meet the parish priest. He placed a simple rosary with a gold cross over her neck. With a little bruise on her knee, she received the bread.

On the subway platform, the crowd of commuters gasped as Sarita lay unconscious. She was precariously balanced on the edge of the platform. The oncoming train screeched on the tracks with a metallic roar.

Sarita rubbed the cross on her neck like she did when she first received it, and she awoke to the rumble of the oncoming subway car.

In the commotion of the subway platform, the old homeless woman placed her hand on Sarita's back and rolled her away from the edge towards safety. The train stopped abruptly with a piercing halt.

A police guard came to Sarita's side and two other security guards apprehended the pickpocket, but the homeless woman had disappeared. Sarita got up from the subway floor and realized what had nearly occurred that morning.

"Ma'am, are you alright?" the police guard asked her.

"I'm fine." She brushed the dirt away from her knees. "What happened?" she asked.

As Sarita stood up straight, she started to hear the sound of water in her

head, but there was nothing dripping around the platform.

"Someone just saved your life," said the policemen.

"Who?"

No one seemed to know the answer to Sarita's question. She looked around for her savior, but she was gone.

"Ma'am, I think we should get you to a hospital," the policeman insisted.

"I'm fine. I just need to catch my breath." She gathered her things. She was more embarrassed and startled than physically hurt. In fact, Sarita wanted to just take the next train instead, but the police assisted her up the subway steps to the hospital.

Rescued by city police officers in blue uniforms, escorted by nurses wearing green jumpers, and surrounded by doctors in white smocks, Sarita felt like she was getting a tour of the filming sets of all her favorite primetime television shows. In the emergency room of New York Presbyterian Hospital, Sarita waited with an ice pack on her head. As she met reality with the long lines, insurance cards, and indecipherable forms, she could not help but peek around for a potential Dr. Noah Wiley.

She had called her colleague Alice Parker at the office to let her know what had happened. The two were working on the *How-to* marketing project together.

Sarita's mother and father Jillian and Anthony Rena drove in from Queens after they heard of her near fatal fall.

"Sarita Honey, this is why we tell you not to walk to work alone." Her mother comforted her daughter in her arms.

"Do they know if the thief was trying to push you?" her father asked.

"No, the police have him in custody and he confessed," Sarita said. "In his statement, he said someone just got in his way, almost as if that person knew what he was thinking."

"Who was this vagrant that saved you?" Jillian Rena was very concerned about her daughter's lifestyle.

"The police are calling her the 'Subway Beggar'," Sarita said. "But no witnesses were able to describe her. It's just a bit odd, that's all."

"I'll say. I bet she could have claimed a reward by stepping forward," Anthony said.

"It's not that," Sarita clarified. "It's just that when she touched me, she seemed so familiar."

"This is what I'm so scared about, Sarita. Please just move home," her mother urged.

"Jillian, she just had a little scare. But she's a strong girl, aren't you pumpkin?"

The father gave his daughter a kiss on the forehead.

"I know I had a bad morning. But, there is no need for all this fuss," Sarita said. She pulled out her cell phone to return the calls to friends who had

inundated her voicemail. News traveled fast with a mother of Italian decent.

"I'm sorry, Miss," a hospital attendant came over to her, "But you can't use that in here. You'll have to go outside."

"Oh, okay," Sarita accepted. She picked up her bag and her book proposals. "If you'll excuse me, I'll be right back."

She looked at her parents sitting on the waiting room bench. "I'm fine, guys. Really, I'm fine. Nobody in this town gets my wallet," she joked. She put her mother at ease with a kiss on the cheek.

She walked around the corner of the hospital, looking through her phone book.

Sarita weaved through doctors with clipboards, nurses wheeling bed patients and the cleaning crews with mops. Coming around the other side of the corner was another person trying to get a breath of fresh air.

It was a basic law of physics that if enough particles are scrambling around in a space, there is bound to be a collision. Before she could go any further, she found her entire proposals scattered over the sanitary tiles of the New York Presbyterian hospital floor.

"I'm so sorry." An apologetic man joined her kneeling to pick up the worksheets.

"No, don't worry about it. I'm having a lot of accidents today."

Sarita got over the initial impact and leaned over. "I think that one's mine."

"It's my fault, I was thinking and not looking," he said.

They realized both their respective papers had fallen and mixed, in what was now a hospital spectacle.

The stranger was in his late thirties and had a well-trimmed beard. Kneeling on the floor hardly revealed his tall stature. His head was covered with a navy blue yarmulka with the Star of David embroidered in white.

The strangers stood up to sort through the papers and searched for familiar titles.

Yoga for a New Beginning. "This must be yours." The man handed her the packet. Sarita noticed the wedding band on his left hand and proceeded to collate her pile.

The Truth about Treating Breast Cancer. "And I think this one must be yours." Sarita handed him the pamphlet.

"Thank you. Sorry again," he said.

"These things happen." She looked into the pupils of his eyes. He left an impression. It was just that and nothing more, like the impression on the eye a traffic light makes when it turns from red to green. The navy blue yarmulka flashed in her subconscious, and Sarita Rena smiled and walked off. It had been an eventful day that she wanted to end and turn into night.

As with most near-death, partly embarrassing, partly humorous, partly please-love-me experiences, Sarita was eager to talk. Later that evening when her

cell phone's free minutes kicked in, she called her friend Mira Steinbeck and told her of the news. Mira had just moved to DC to write as a journalist for the *Washington Post*.

"So what happened?" Mira asked

"I don't know. It was all a little odd," Sarita said.

"Yeah I heard all about it. Do you think it will be in the papers tomorrow?"

"Oh God, I hope not."

"Did you get hurt?" her friend asked.

"No, my body feels fine. It's just, when I was falling to the ground, I remembered falling in church when I was a little girl."

"And you remembered this in the subway?" her friend asked.

"See, that's the thing. I haven't thought about that day at church for years now, but it felt like it was happening all over again. I remembered feeling the same embarrassment and fear as I did this morning. But," she paused.

"It's like a double déjà vu," Mira said.

Sarita thought to herself, "*Double déjà vu? Doesn't that just revert back to 'vu'?*"

"Maybe the same emotion and the same physical position triggered a repressed memory?" her friend suggested.

"Or something," Sarita said.

But that *something* lurked in the back of her mind.

"Did they ever find the person who saved you?" Mira asked.

"No. I never actually saw her myself. I have no idea what she looks like. I only felt her hand when she rolled me away from the train."

"How eerie!" Mira exclaimed.

"They said I blacked out for a second, but I just remember hearing the sound of water."

"Water? Did anything spill on you?"

"No. I don't think so. I can't place what happened in that split second of time."

"This sounds suspicious. I mean, maybe it was all just a ploy. Maybe that thief and this 'Subway Beggar' were in cahoots."

Mira was just assigned to cover Israeli and Palestinian news stories for the *Post*. Her natural impulse was to look out for deception and back-door deals.

"But why did she save me?" Sarita asked.

It was a question that would resonate in her soul. Why did the Subway Beggar save Sarita Rena?

"Well, I'll be in New York later this week for the UN General Assembly meeting," Mira announced. "We can talk about it then."

"It would be really good to see you," Sarita said. "Just take good notes on how to get world peace, and then we can go to dinner." The two friends laughed.

In the office the next day, Sarita's desk was fertile with fresh flower

bouquets. Colleagues came up to her throughout the day and asked about her well-being. Sarita was not about to let all this attention get in the way of her work.

"Do you need a few days off? Maybe you should rest?" her boss Bill Geary asked.

"No really, I'm fine. I'm just preparing the book proposals that we'll present this week."

"The proposals you are working on with Alice Parker?"

"Yes, those are the ones."

"Great, make sure you two have worked out all the kinks. We'll talk later this week."

The corporate world brushed aside the personal woes of workers like junk emails. Sarita looked in her black leather planner and called Alice Parker on the interoffice phone.

"Hi Sarita, how's that bump of yours?" Alice asked.

"I don't have a bump," Sarita said.

"Well, Bill said you were all bent out of shape."

"No, I just saw him. I'm fine. Nothing is physically wrong with me."

"With all the drama surrounding you these days, I just figured..." Alice paused. "What can I do for you?"

"We have a set of book proposals to select for marketing," Sarita said.

"Yes, I think I liked that set of Yoga instruction books you left on my desk," Alice acknowledged.

"You do? Those are the ones I liked best too."

"I'm thinking of doing a whole marketing scheme around alternative athletics," Alice said.

"Yes. I will come up with a set of test markets and surveys that *we* could do for the alternative sports." Sarita was mindful of the credit parasites in her industry.

"Alternative sports, or alternative *athletics*?" Alice pinpointed.

"What's the difference?" Sarita asked.

"Athletics' conjures up the idea of freeing exercise, liberation, the nakedness of ancient Greece." Alice's voice heightened with great enthusiasm. "But Sports is a husband on the couch with a beer on a Sunday afternoon. *Athletics* captures the female demographic."

"You can't go to a bookstore these days without seeing Yoga instruction books," Sarita pointed out. "Call it what you want."

Sarita had started to survey the increasing popularity of Yoga in America. Sarita was unaware of what the practice entailed or its primary goal, but she would soon learn.

Alice raised a point, "If there were only a more direct way of gaining insight into our demographics than those little test markets of yours."

"Well, the only real way of knowing is to try it ourselves," Sarita suggested.

Alice put Sarita on hold and picked up the phone for information. She got back on the line with Sarita, "There is a Yoga center two blocks down. There is a beginner class that starts at 7:30 tonight. Are you free to go?"

"It is not like I have anyone to go home to," Sarita initially thought. "Absolutely," she said. "Backed by real statistics, going to an actual class will give us great material for our pitch to Bill."

"You won't black out or do anything dramatic again will you?" Alice asked.

"No Alice. I'm fine, and I'll see you tonight." Sarita hung up the phone with a little irritation.

She looked up from the grey walls of her cubicle and attended to her cases and tasks of the day. The time went by without another thought on how the day started and about fifteen permutations on how the day could end.

When she finally left the office that evening, she took a stroll in the park past a lone tree. Ever since yesterday's fall, Sarita's perception of seemingly random things heightened.

"I just need to get home to change and maybe eat something. Can you eat something before Yoga?" she thought to herself.

The twilight reflected in the bits of glass mixed in the concrete sidewalks. She waited at the crosswalk in the rapids of yellow taxicabs that drove by. The taillights of the Midtown exodus glowed on her face. The pedestrians bumped into her while passing in the opposite direction. She had become immune to it all.

She walked into the crowds at the Grand Central subway station. Abdul was closing his newspaper hut and noticed the young woman.

It was the time of the day to bring down the steel metal grating on the hut. Time to break down the cubicle partitions that man builds to isolate himself. The twilight of evening was a comfort to lovers who have spent their days apart. It was the time in the day to connect with the inner self.

That was, of course, unless you work on Wall Street during an economic boom. With his office's high demands for his corporate presence, Josiah Tamarind, the wearer of the navy blue yarmulka, had little time to tear down office partitions. Josiah had been staying late for the last couple of weeks. He rationalized that this year's bonus would pay for Mrs. Erica Tamarind's chemotherapy treatments, but beneath the latte-froth of financial deals, he profoundly feared for his ailing spouse.

Yesterday, Josiah's collision at New York Presbyterian was a stark reminder of how quickly order could turn into chaos. He had gone to the hospital to pick up medication for Erica's nausea.

Every morning, Josiah would take Erica to the Sloan Kettering Memorial Cancer center for her breast cancer treatments. By noon, he and his wife were normally home in their Upper East Side apartment. Erica's sister Rebecca and the Dominican nurse Josiah hired would be by her side for the remainder of the day. Josiah would return from work by late evening.

This evening on his way home, Josiah stopped at a flower shop in the Grand Central Subway Station.

"Maybe I should pick up carnations. She likes those," Josiah's mind wandered in the station. "Thursday is our prognosis consultation... I'm sure Dr. Rosenblatt will say the treatment is working... What if it isn't? ...She said she was feeling better than yesterday".

The Thursday consultation had become the Tamarind consultation. Erica was not alone in this. The phenomenon of cancer was that it spread beyond the breast, beyond the body, to affect the many lives and families the disease touched.

Josiah's colleague at work Donald Goldstein said, "If the cancer was found early it could probably be cured with rounds of chemotherapy, just as long as it didn't spread."

At the flower shop, he saw the same lilacs that he remembered were at the center table at their wedding. Josiah thought about when Rabbi Koshner confirmed their marriage vows, "And you shall lay these words upon your heart and upon your soul."

He revisited the thought, "Maybe roses are more appropriate?"

"In times of adversity, people turn to the familiar," Josiah remembered Rabbi Koshner's words. "...and then they look deeper."

Ever since Erica Tamarind was diagnosed with breast cancer, she had turned to her Jewish faith. The Tamarinds lived in a brownstone with a Victorian style doorknocker that was at eye level with the welcoming mezuzah. The apartment was split with piles of medical journals on the living room coffee table and a stack of Jewish better-living books on the side tables.

Ten years ago, the idea of reading about Jewish spirituality would have been a complete joke. These days, Jewish exploration graced nightstands across the city. It was an extraordinary time of religious renewal in America, and the residents of New York City were asking what being Jewish was all about?

Yet, Erica somehow equated fighting cancer and trying to figure out the questions of being Jewish as one mission. Her exploration of Judaism needed more time than her body could accommodate. Mrs. Tamarind would take her Jewish spirituality periodicals to her treatments, but hid them under copies of *Vogue*.

"These women will gossip about me if they saw me reading *those* types of magazines," Erica said to her sister Rebecca.

That evening, Josiah exited the subway car at the stop closest to the Tamarind brownstone.

"I think she likes the carnations best," Josiah finally confirmed to himself. "They last the longest."

As he stepped off the car, so did the Subway Beggar. The homeless woman traveled the rails every day and sang off-key renditions of Motown songs. She held out her coffee-stained cup and proceeded to the next car on the rail.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," she announced her presence, "Allow this poor

woman to sing to you a little song... about some Respect." She had rhythm in her.

"I'm about to give you... all my money...and all I'm asking...in return Honey..." she proceeded with her Aretha Franklin repertoire.

The Subway Beggar had a left-leaning swagger as she carried her limp knee, wailing and walking. There was an unconventional endearment of a woman who rode up and down the subway rail each day and got to know the passengers.

The door opened with great force, and she walked in the opposite direction of the moving car. She would get the commuters to pull out their change. The Subway Beggar saw many different lives each day. They were workers and students, tourists and the natives, each on a separate path. She saw the interrelationships and the personal distance each commuter kept. Looking up from the bottom of the skyscraping New York City social totem pole, what connections did the Subway Beggar see?

Flowers will always fall, but the thread that binds them will always remain.

The riders would look down and away from her eyes. She was the city's lowest of the low. They avoided touching the hand that begged.

She was completely Untouchable.

Josiah Tamarind left the station buried in a trench coat of thoughts. His mind had been wandering the entire day, and in his distraction, he dropped a carnation head and stem by the Subway Beggar's foot as he left the station.

She picked up the carnation head and had a peculiar attraction to the petals. She twisted the stem between her fingers. Her fascination continued as the flower rotated in a circle. At that very moment, Josiah saw a rush of flames in his mind. It was startling, as he had not seen fire all day. It appeared out of nowhere. He shook away the image in his head.

New Yorkers dealt with a lot in their daily lives.

That evening, another commuter finally returned to her apartment after an active day. It was a little after six o'clock, and Sarita had just an hour to eat and change before her first Yoga class. Off came the designer shoes that could have been stolen from a Chinese princess to shrink her feet. She washed her face of the grime of the pore-clogging uptown buses. As she dried her face, her mother called on the telephone.

"Are you sure you are feeling okay?"

"I'm fine Ma."

"Are you sure you want to try this new Yoga class today? Can't it wait until you feel stronger?"

"But there is no reason to wait. Besides, maybe I'll feel more relaxed. They say it is very soothing – whatever that means."

While the new-age proponents had become deft at packaging the 'soothing' effects into hermetically sealed sessions, the Yoga promoters had just barely started to understand what happened when those seals were broken. Often in her mind, Sarita's dotted lines between having an attention deficit and being

rewarded for pursuing the cutting edge blurred like the vision of a taxi driver who lost his contact lens. In pursuit of new ideas, Sarita had always been one for trying new things.

On the first day Sarita got her driver's license, her parents warned her to ease into driving because she still required practice.

She said, "Well, that's the whole reason they have the test."

Soon enough, she found herself on the expressway with no idea where she was going or how to exit. She scraped the side of the car against a concrete barrier and nearly spun out of control.

Sarita never thought there could be a risk of jumping into something new.

Years later, the end of the 1990s brought terms like 'low-fat' and 'exercise bunnies' into modern rhetoric. Prescriptions like drinking a glass of red wine a day swung like a pendulum, from healthy to dangerous and back again. Like the millions of Americans trying Yoga in those days, Sarita was cautious of the promises of the 'new-age'.

Sarita went to the Yoga class as a woman looking for a marketing pitch. Her subway fall gave her an awareness of what her emotional state and body's position could reveal. It would alter the typical beginner's Yoga experience forever.

The Yoga center was on the second floor of a building across from the Flatiron Building, at the crossroads of 23rd and Broadway. On top of a barbershop, an old dance studio had been converted into a Yoga center. The wallpaper of the entrance hall carried the Grecian key design of continuous connected squares; it was a progression of infinite waves.

"It's a metaphor, you see." The barber would explain the design to his customers, "The waves are like lifetimes that repeat. They are like lifetimes that repeat in a cycle over and over."

Sarita ascended the steps, repeated in a cycle over and over like the Grecian key design. She saw her colleague Alice Parker at the top of the steps.

The top platform looked like backstage at a ballet performance, as men and women in tank tops stretched out their legs like scissors. Sarita looked around and tried to get a feel for the climate of people.

There were different types of people waiting outside the old dance studio used for Yoga. She saw a grandmother tie a hot pink headband around her unyielding gray hair. A man with a dark complexion and extremely toned biceps put his elbow over his head. A corporate executive in a suit and glasses went into the locker room with a duffle bag.

At a quarter after seven, the six o'clock class was letting out. A remarkably tall, lean man walked out with a significantly shorter girl, and Sarita overheard them talking about the class.

"That was just amazing," the man remarked.

"It was so relaxing." The girl was in awe of both the class and her classmate.

"Are you going to the Friday session?" he asked.

"Yeah, I think so. I may try the Friday *hatha* session," the woman remarked.

"Oh really? I heard the instructor was phenomenal."

"Isn't he the same one who does tonight's 7:30 session?"

Sarita stopped listening to the conversation as she turned her attention to the clock outside the studio. The two colleagues went in to meet the receptionist at the podium.

"Welcome to *Yoga: Life in Motion*." The receptionist found a blank entry in her register, "Your name?"

Alice stepped up first, "Alice Parker."

"And is this your first time at *Life in Motion*?"

"Yes."

"Great, and how did you hear of us?" She read off the inquiry sheet.

"I am doing research on Yoga."

The receptionist had a friendly disposition, but it was hard in a big city to tolerate overfriendliness. "Okay, we have a first lesson discount."

She handed over a chart of prices that Alice began to scrutinize.

"And what is your name?" the receptionist turned to the next woman in line.

"Sarita Rena."

"Oh that is a very pretty name."

"Thank you." Sarita smiled.

"May I ask what it means?"

"Oh, well," taken aback, "*Sarita* means river, and *Rena* means peace. My parents are Italian but they are into eclectic names."

The receptionist took it upon herself to grant Sarita a Native American title. "Interesting. Well, then, welcome *Peace by the River*."

"This price is fine." Alice was not amused. They paid the ten-dollar introductory lesson fee.

"Sarita, save your receipt," Alice said. "I can write this off as a business expense."

"It's okay." Sarita laughed, "I have wanted to try this out for a while."

"Here, let me just hold onto it." Alice took the receipt.

Sarita noticed the enclosure of the Yoga room. The hardwood floors were glossed and reflected the studio puck lights. There was a ballet rod that stretched along the mirror wall.

"Alice, I think you can change over there." She pointed out the curtain of changing room. There were cubbyholes for shoes and bags.

"But that's just a curtain area."

"It's okay, I'll stand guard," Sarita said.

Sarita took off her shoes and coat as her colleague went into the changing room. She tightened the string of her warm-up pants.

An army of purified bottled waters saluted on the windowsill that overlooked Broadway. The light from the streetlamps made halos on the window reflections. Traffic noise came in from the street. The Yoga students in the room started to assemble their blue foam mats across the floor like a fleet of ships in the harbor.

The door opened and the instructor entered the room. Sarita was surprised by his age. He must have been well into his fifties but looked quite healthy. With distinguished gray sideburns and a tall stance, the instructor huddled over the podium to talk to the receptionist.

"I think it's starting," Sarita said when Alice came out.

They each took a tightly rolled mat from the side and unfurled it on the hardwood floors. Twenty-two mats lay in a uniform direction parallel to the window. Men removed their glasses and women tied back their hair. The room of adults instinctively took their seats on the mats, remembering childhood manners, and took last minute sips of waters. The receptionist dimmed the lights and left the room. As the only person standing, the instructor towered over them and placed an unlit candle in the middle of the room.

The chatter subsided as the participants looked at the match the instructor used to light the room; it was the spark of a sorcerer's wand. There was a calm focus of silence as the instructor's direct voice pronounced the Sanskrit greeting, "Namaste."

The twenty-two Yoga students repeated the *Namaste* greeting together. The official gateway of the class had opened, and Sarita already felt a bit overwhelmed.

"My name is Don Stellar and I will be your instructor for the evening." He was exceptionally precise in his words. His voice came from his abdomen and was quick to gain the attention of his students.

Don had lived on the Upper West Side almost all his life. He became interested in Hindu and Buddhist philosophy as a teenager, and he started practicing Yoga when he was sixteen. Later, Don juggled part-time odd jobs with his academics at Columbia University in Gandhian Study.

As the time progressed, he turned himself into a staunch believer in Gandhi's *Ahimsa* non-violent resistance philosophy. Followed by leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. in the 1960s civil rights struggle, *Ahimsa* was a theory of passive resistance as a means of bringing about political change.

Don became a Yoga teacher to impart what he loved, and one day planned to apply the principles and practices of Yoga to the modern political spectrum.

"As we go through today's *asanas*, that is, the poses of Yoga, we must remember that *Yoga* was traditionally a medium used throughout India to prepare the body for meditation."

Don had captured the attention of the class.

"Your Yoga practice will become your own. It will allow you to prepare

for meditation. You will focus your mind on the body and the breath. The breath is the single most important aspect of Yoga. It is absolutely Vital."

It was a soothing voice over a crowd of people that had heard so many noises throughout their day. But not one office phone or rush hour noise encouraged the crowd to simply take a breath.

The instructor sat in a cross-legged position, and the class mimicked his movements. He straightened his back and put his arms in his lap.

"Now close your eyes as we start to focus."

Sarita felt like she was listening to a trance-renditioned Beatles song. She closed her eyes and saw the room's fractals of light scatter like a kaleidoscope in her eyelids. It was the first time she had felt still the entire day. She started to listen to the traffic on Broadway and the tick tock of the clock above the door. The instructor then chanted out an invocation to start the class, "Om..."

It was not just a word. It started in the nasal passages and worked its way down through the throat to the spine. It came from the pit of the stomach. Sarita had a river of impressions. It flowed through the first chant, as the instructor began the Yoga lesson. The vibration of the word "Om" pervaded the room.

"Starting a Yoga session with the word *Om* helps to focus the practice and helps the mind and body to start to interrelate. *Om* is the Hindu word for the eternal truth. Now, depending on your own comfort level, you can repeat this word after me," Don explained.

"You may repeat after me two more times." He opened his mouth with a gulp of oxygen even bigger than before, repeating the "Om." It was a strange but familiar feeling for Sarita who had now forgotten about the traffic on the street altogether. The tick tock of the clock was now overshadowed by the consecutive repetitions of "Om" that filled the room.

Don proceeded, "We will try to go slowly. This is, after all, the beginner session. However, we will try some more advanced poses at the end of today's class," the instructor continued. "You can attempt them depending on your comfort level. Remember," instructor Stellar declared, "There is no competition in Yoga, and there is no end goal. Yoga is a practice specific to how each person is in tune with his or her own emotions and body."

Alice leaned over from her neighboring mat to whisper to Sarita, "I already feel in tune with our profit margins."

Sarita never saw the candle but felt the singular glow of a light source. The Yoga instructor was lean in his toned arms and chest. He showed the class some eye exercises that were a good way to lift the strain of looking at a computer screen all day.

"That's it, look up and then rotate your eyes in a counterclockwise direction..."

As Don spoke, Sarita's mind started to wander, as a conversation she never had played out in her head.

"...Guruji...what is Yoga? ..."

"... I can provide you many words about the word Yoga. There are many interpretations. Some translate it as to come together..."

"To come together?"

"Others write it is to 'tie the strands of the mind together'." These two meanings may seem different, but they are similar..."

Sarita's consciousness did not understand the dialogue in her mind.

The class had adapted to the relaxed mood of the room. In the middle of the bustling city, the emptiness of an old dance studio created a sphere of concentration.

After preparing the class with the seated pose and the eye exercises, Don showed the participants the basic steps of the *Downward Dog*, a pose whose name had many connotations.

"You see, Downward Dog is the basic Yoga step we use to get the body going. It is the first *asana* to begin the process of Yoga. It helps to move around all the fluid in the body and warm up all the muscles. This series of stretches will become more and more fluid as the weeks progress. You will get more comfortable with your own development and practice."

With that preamble, he started giving rapid directions, and the commands and actions took over the class. He was like a surreal drill sergeant, "Hands touch the floor, knees bent, stretch out, and release."

The scene was a typical distinction between type A and type B learners. Alice Parker was trying to stretch out for the *Cobra* pose as if her spine were about to disconnect. Sarita Rena, on the other hand, took the time to understand what was going on in her body. The difference between them was patience.

"We will now practice some standing poses, starting with the first standing pose, *Tadasana*, or Mountain Pose. The Mountain Pose *Tadasana* helps to improve your posture, it strengthens your thighs, knees, and ankles, and it helps to relieve your sciatic nerve."

"This is such bull," Alice whispered. "We're just standing here." Her voice did not carry very far.

Don gave the background of the Yoga pose before he started performing it. He instructed, "Stand with the base of your toes together...Lift the inner ankles...Balance your head...Stay in this pose for 20 more seconds and breathe easy..."

By this time, Alice and Sarita were on par with the rest of the class with this first standing pose. Sarita had taken to the instructions very carefully, while Alice had looked around to her neighboring mats to fill in the visual gaps.

Something strange occurred to Sarita. Like the sound she heard during the split second of her blackout, Sarita started to hear the sound of running water.

They waited for the next command. As the class stood in the Mountain Pose, the instructor used the intermediate time to lecture.

"Now, one of the things we'll cover in the course of this class is the eight limbs of Yoga. The eight limbs are: moral principles, observances..."

He took a second to adjust someone's crooked stance. "...Posture, breath control, not to be confused with birth control, which, unfortunately, Yoga can't help you with..."

There were a few giggles in the Yoga room, which had assembled twenty-two frozen figures.

"...Withdrawal of the senses, concentration, meditation, and finally, the whole reasoning behind Yoga: pure contemplation. Okay, release your arms," said Don.

Alice took a drink from her water bottle. She whispered to her colleague, "Sarita, check out that guy in front, what a hot ass."

Sarita did not justify her colleague, giving only a cursory look. The class adjusted their arms and feet for a minute, before the instructor reestablished himself in front of the candle and the fleet of Yoga mats. It was either the repetitions or the still moments in between, but the clock was now at 8:30, and there were only fifteen minutes left in the class. It was hard for Sarita to imagine how the time had passed, but she simply breathed in as the instructor led the last pose.

Like the droplets of condensation on the water bottle, water dripped in her subconscious.

"We're now going to try something very special," the instructor said. "It's not necessarily for everyone at this stage, but it is worth trying. It is a standing position that builds on the last pose we learned. This is a more advanced pose that I will now demonstrate."

Don stood in front of the class and bent his knees as he twisted his legs. He took a deep breath and brought his arms together, curling them as well. Taut and twisted, he looked like a rope that connected the ground to the sky. The light of the candle cast shadows on his contorted pose. Twenty-two pairs of eyes cast their amazement. The wonder of what a teacher could impart to his students balanced in front of the class.

He demonstrated years of practice and discipline in a matter of seconds, and he held the position with all the energy contained in a tightly packed nucleus. "Okay, now I want all of you to try this pose, entitled *Garudasana* - The Eagle Pose."

Perhaps there was a flash of light from the outside street, or perhaps the candle light flame had hit the corner of Sarita's retina, but she suddenly went blind for a split second. The sound of water resurfaced in her mind!

Don came around to each person as they adjusted their knees from standing pose. He narrated,

"Step 4: Cross your arms at the elbows, left over right..."

On this day of Jupiter,

As Love collides,

Find your balance in an unstable light.

Ask the messenger,

For interpersonal fortitude,

Cross your arms at the elbows, left over right.

Pulsars are the timekeepers of the cosmos.

Into a desert oasis,

Shelter the storm, the Fire and brimstone.

Cross your arms at the elbows, left over right: Step 4."

Don came around and adjusted a man in the front, whose hips were not in line with his back.

This exercise had already gone beyond the workout at the gym. This pose had energy and depth, combined with tension and restraint.

"...Join the palms of your hands together, keeping the fingers pointed upward."

Sarita leaned forward into the pose as the instructor came around and complimented her.

"This is excellent. Very good." He circumambulated her stance like he was admiring a marble statue.

The class held the pose for a few more seconds, and then the Yoga teacher instructed them to release.

"Relax your shoulders for a while," he announced. "I think it will be beneficial, just before we close the session, if we see the *Garudasana* Eagle Pose performed by one of your fellow classmates. We can get an idea of how a more advanced position is attainable for beginners. What is your name Miss?"

Sarita's cheeks blushed by the question when she realized she had been chosen to demonstrate.

"Me?"

"Yes, you. You seem to know the pose very well. Would you mind demonstrating it for us?"

The flash of light she saw before vanished into a simple case of stage fright.

"Oh, well, yes, I suppose so... although I just started."

"That's okay, there is no yardstick in Yoga," he told the class. "Yoga is finding the right pose and comfort for each person at each time. Now," he directed towards her, "What was that name again?"

"Sarita," she exclaimed.

"Now," he paused, "after you have bent your knees and crossed over your legs, the next step." He paused again to wait for her to demonstrate up to that point.

There was a flicker of candle in the front of the room on the left side of Sarita's face. Her thin but distinct nose caught the light. The corner of her eyes reflected the stillness of the moment. She demonstrated the Eagle Pose, which reflected on the two mirrored walls opposite each other.

Infinite reflections of the same pose extended beyond comprehension as the spark of light and the sound of water consumed her conscious mind.

She held the pose with a great deal of patience and naturally fell into its rhythm. She listened to his words and thought about how her childhood memory had resurfaced. Could a certain emotional state and positioning of the body trigger a repressed experience?

“Step 4: Cross your arms at the elbows, left over right.”

She stood like a holy tree.

Episode II

Two

The First Breath

Kashmir, India

March 1856

She stood like a holy tree under which sages throughout the centuries had meditated. Like marigold garlands ornamenting the tree’s branches, taut muscles spanned her arms. Her foot burrowed its roots into the viscous river mud and took the weight of her elevated body.

She was the symbiosis of earth and breath. It was there in the Kashmir Valley in northern India that Asita Mandiran mastered the Yoga pose *Garudasana*, the Eagle Pose.

On the banks of whispering river waters, she was a lone silhouette in a white *salvaar* shirt. She rolled the inside of her foot up to her inner thigh.

The morning light created a haze around her stance. She lifted her arms to the sky, like the wings of the bird to which she paid homage. Asita learned the steps of each pose from her guru. “Clarity of the mind will bring about a change,” her guru always said.

They were words spoken quickly but learned in stages. Yoga was her medium.

Asita continued her morning routine on the banks of the river Indus. Her body’s lymph fluid cleaned out the residue from her joints, and she bathed in the waters. She swept up her dark locks to echo the mountain peak behind her. The moisture of a new day lured her skin, as her ankles felt the first ripple of the river’s edge. The pocket of air behind her knees disappeared, and Asita waded into the chilled surface.

The currents of the River Indus awoke her saffron dreams.

The peaks of the mighty Himalayas lined the horizon. Knowledge unfurled from the majestic rocks. The Kashmir Valley had grown akin to the young woman who bathed in its vein.

“You cannot go running around India chasing after roosters,” her father once said when Asita was a little girl. She would play out in the barn and chase the livestock.

Daughter of the esteemed Doctor Vijay Mandiran, Asita was born of the highest Hindu caste in the valley, the Brahmins.

“You must present yourself as a respectable young woman. Wake early; live in moderation,” her father would say.

Asita's father was often away in distant villages for year-long visits, setting up medical clinics. Her mother accompanied him and helped the missionaries. For most of her life, Asita spent her time in the ashram of the Khalsi village and was raised by her guru, Swami Vunde. Each morning, the Brahmin girl would awake from her straw cot and remind herself of how fortunate she was to study with her guru.

"Look at this as a very special opportunity, my dear," Asita's mother encouraged. "Studying with Swami Vunde is a major achievement and will be very good for you."

The guru had mentored Asita's father when he was young, and the Mandirans felt he would be a source of stability during her educational years.

Asita's forefathers had respected the bond between teacher and student since the age when the *Upanishad* passages were first written in the 7th century B.C. The valley had had many rulers since that time, but the Hindu Brahmin tradition was strongly rooted in the river's soil. As the river waters seeped into the capillaries of her skin, a depth of chill awoke her senses.

'Asita', Sanskrit for a river that flows through the North Indian Himalayas to meet the sacred Ganges, was a name chosen by her mother. Asita was the spirit of wandering waters.

The river was the source of many odes, but no poet could divulge its true intricacies. There was a clarity that one could only see while standing in it, and nowhere else. To sit on its banks and claim to absorb its fervor was to see the rain from a covered shelter and claim to know a storm.

"It is a river that makes man wet inside. The left-over debris of a lifetime washes away in its waters," her guru once said.

"There is left-over debris from a lifetime?" Asita thought to herself.

That morning, the debris of ashes floated on the water surface. Further up the river, past her bathing spot, beyond the morning fog, along the ancient pilgrimage routes, there was a funeral procession. Death and rebirth were part of the currents.

The Hindu villagers brought a corpse to the river's shores to perform the last rites. The mourners collected dry branches and driftwood from the surrounding forest. The smoke rose above the pyre, which burned continuously at the cremation hollow. To witness a cremation was a reminder of the dust to which life returned.

In the Kashmir Valley, however, not all bodies were cremated. The town of Nurla was a horse-drawn cart ride away from the village of Khalsi.

On the narrow streets of Nurla, the Muslim townsmen carried a coffin. A white cotton shroud with Urdu inscriptions draped the wooden box in which Mrs. Kardal was to be laid to rest.

"We stand before her body, as a great woman leaves this earth," the priest announced.

The Islamic townspeople turned west to the sacred Ka'bah in Mecca and

raised their hands up to their ears. The *kazi* priest formulated the intention and recited the Qur'an.

The late Anjali Kardal was the devoted wife of Mr. Zackir Kardal, a handicraft businessman who had a local establishment. Following the coffin trail were the handmaidens with whom Mrs. Kardal spent her time weaving renowned woolen shawls. The face of her daughter Henna was veiled. Her son Rashiq, whose eyes were blood-shot with grief, led the pallbearers like a towering minaret.

Along with the left corner of her coffin, Rashiq carried his mother's sense of spirit that day. It was Rashiq who felt her sense of awakening.

The priest performed her final rites and recited a prayer from the Qur'an.

"O God, be inclined to Muhammad, and bless (him) and protect (him). O God, pardon those who are alive among us as well as the dead, those who are present as well as those who are absent, and this by Thy great mercy."

Mrs. Kardal's lifetime was shortened by illness. Her body was now carried onwards towards the site of interment. Her final days gave her the clarity to reflect on her life and its shortcomings. Her only regrets were limited to worries for her children's future happiness.

Her passing words to her son were, "Rashiq, my pure child, I want that you follow your path. Follow your heart. Follow the truth."

The words echoed in Rashiq's mind at the hollow of the burial ground.

Mrs. Kardal was dedicated to her orthodox husband, who strictly followed the Islamic traditions. Zackir Kardal prayed five times a day in the direction of Mecca. He quoted from the Qur'an and could cite the exact Surah, book, and passage number of each quotation. Mrs. Kardal did not believe in such numbers or citations.

As a Sufi Muslim, she would say, "The Sufi lives in Islam not only in the word, but in the spirit. For this person, we say that there are Muslims, and there is Islam."

She believed in a divine love with Allah, which manifested in both her daily shawl weaving and her moral code. Anjali Kardal did not fear her death.

Her husband was jealous of her divine Sufi love affair. Out of fear and caution, he would not allow his wife's approach to Islam to overtake the household. He tried to inculcate a strict regimen in his children. Anjali would often debate late at night with Zackir about the mystic identity of her faith, but the conversations would never reach the morning breakfast table when the children were around. She would share her outspoken opinions at the Friday services and congregations, but that was only in the company of adults.

"Some would say that Sufism is the pearl of Islam. Others would call it heresy," acknowledged Anjali.

Mrs. Kardal had a special reputation in the town of Nurla for these controversial convictions.

"Anjali is at it again, talking about Sufi poets," her fellow shawl weavers

gossiped.

"It is as the great Sufi Kabir says," Anjali quoted. "The savior of wandering in the ocean of deathless life has rid me of all my asking. As the tree is in the seed, so all diseases are in this asking."

"Is she in competition for sainthood or something?" The handmaidens snickered. "She wants the whole world to spin like Whirling Dervishes to Allah."

On the day of her funeral, the town mosque held a moment of silence. The townspeople came to show their respect to a woman they would dearly miss.

Rashiq took some soil in his hand and felt the wetness of his mother's graveyard. The congregation looked at the tall young man whose head was covered in a round cap. He looked down with two blurry eyes at the Urdu script on the coffin. His throat grew heavy with the burden of her final words. From the crevice of her son's palm the moist soil fell on top of Anjali's shroud, returning to the earth once again. The final rites affirmed the resolute and profound belief in the earth's natural cycle.

"Mother, why does the earth swallow you whole?" he invoked her site of entombment. But his answer would only come from within.

Rashiq Kardal's remaining parent was an ardent father. It was the *word* of the Qur'an and only the *word* that he would have to live by. But there was more than the *word*. There was his path. There was his heart. And on that mournful day, on that moist soil, Rashiq began his search for the Truth.

In that year of 1856, the Kashmiri Muslims and Hindus shared the soil. They coexisted and tilled the land together. But with foreigners' sights set on the Indian subcontinent, there were many seeds 'of asking' being planted.

It was on the same moist soil that Asita Mandiran grounded her feet to the earth and mastered the Yoga pose, the *Eagle*.

After her bath, she dried her wet body and prepared to make her daily climb to the Khalsi ashram, where she would study with her guru. The white *salvaar* pajamas she put on were a warm relief from the river chill.

Asita picked up the clay pot that she had deposited by her clothes. With her creative impulses directed at a slab of clay, she had made the pot with her own supple hands during her free time at the ashram. She would often help direct the workers in the preparation of food at the ashram, and find time between shifts to make pottery.

Before she left the riverbanks, she would fill the pot with the 'sacred' river water. Sometimes she wondered how could water, however consecrated or packaged, truly be sacred?

From the banks of the river, Asita looked up to the motley hills. Projecting from the jagged slopes of the nearest mountain, the Khalsi Ashram distinguished itself from the fog. The orange sun illuminated the triangular roof.

Asita looked up to the ashram's balcony. She knew later that day she would find herself standing on that very balcony, perhaps on a break from a lesson or a Yoga pose. On that balcony, she would have a panoramic view of her

life, her world, with Khalsi below, the river flowing ahead, the ancient mountains behind her, and her guru by her side. But, when she stood on that balcony, she would search out in the distance for something that was missing.

With the sheer force of her impending Indian womanhood, Asita picked up the pot of water and trekked up the road through the town. Her morning solitude was met with the bustling motion of the Kashmiri villagers. The carts with uneven wheels rolled by, and Asita reaped the reward of dust stirred from the road. Every morning she saw the familiar faces of the drivers with their moustaches.

Asita walked past the vegetable salesman on the way to the ashram. His flat wooden cart held a tapestry of carrots and eggplants that resembled the pattern of the cloth *saris* maidens wore.

"Fresh *Sabjee* Vegetables ...*Sabjee* Vegetables!" the salesman piercingly advertised. Asita thought his sharp calls would trigger an avalanche at the southern Zanskar mountain range.

She spilled some water from her jug as she passed the goat shepherd and his trotting entourage. Asita approached the *dhobi* washer man, who had his clients' laundry in a pile by the side. The washer man had a wet rag over his shoulder and was stationed underneath a tree that grew off the side of the mountain.

"Good morning, Asitaji," he greeted her. The washer man sipped his morning Kashmiri chai tea.

"Good day, Dhobiji, can I come tomorrow to pick up my clothes?" She smiled as she slowed. "I have to be on my way this morning. I'm late to see Guruji."

"Fine, no problem, you come tomorrow. I'll have it ready," he said with the nonchalance of an Indian morning.

"Thank you, Dhobiji."

The washer man noticed her white *salvaar* shirt dripping with mud on the side where she was holding her pot.

"But Asitaji, aren't you planning on giving me *more* of your clothes today?"

By that time, Asita had made her way up the road to the ashram. The dirt pathway was lined with yellow marigolds scattered in the grass. The roadside was a repository of the garlands shed in the auspicious wedding procession that had passed through that season. The contrast of the dirt road spiced with floral jewels was the contrast of India herself.

In festivals and funerals, marigolds were always at their full blossom. They were the quiet reminders of life's resilient changes. In the Kashmir Valley, there was an unusual desert flower that bloomed among the barren rocks. The purple anomaly had six petals that always curled inwards. The desert flower was a striking contrast to the commonplace marigolds. As Asita passed over the bloom of marigolds, she remembered the words of her guru, "Flowers will always

fall, but the thread that binds them will always remain.”

After the momentum with which she came up the hill, she came to a full stop. It was a spontaneous moment in a determined morning. She felt overwhelmingly intrigued with the desert flower. The flower aroused and emitted a fragrance on the fingertip, but she never plucked it. She renewed her trek on the road to the ashram.

As Asita moved away from the bed of marigolds, another set of hands became intrigued with the flowered remains. The village’s lone outcaste picked up the desert flower and held it to the scrutiny of a watchful eye. The outcaste had emerged from the shadows of the Himalayan oak tree that grew at the side of the ashram’s pathway. He was collectively known in the valley as the “Untouchable”.

He was a departure from the village’s caste system. The Untouchable was the social pariah brushed to the side of the road. He rotated the flower head with two fingers, churning the stem with contemplation.

Born in the cycle of misery, the Untouchable was fated to live out his life like a communal slave. His job was to look after the sanitation of the livestock on the mountain plateau. He removed the dead animals and got just enough food to keep his body alive. If there were a famine, he was the first to suffer. The Untouchable looked at the flower and remembered her. She was a missing element, which he could only sense. It was unclear what he felt, and he did not have the capacity to express it. The Untouchable had little experience talking or interacting with others, so he muttered monosyllabic sounds under a lone tree.

As he rotated the stem, the Untouchable saw Asita and the flower in the impression of his memory.

At that moment, Asita arrived at the Khalsi ashram. The marble steps that led to the Khalsi ashram had cracks cutting through the center. The entrance gateway had an onion-top arch, which was in essence an architectural portal. When Asita entered the wooden double doors, the world of *dhobi* washers and vegetable cart men was left behind. A sealed crack, a stone restored, her ashram was the gateway to rejuvenation.

As she entered the central atrium of the two-tiered ashram, she saw a pin balanced on its head; her guru balanced upside down in a Yoga stance. Ten toes curled in midair and pointed to the ceiling. The light from the outdoors created a silhouette of the guru’s feet, like two hands praying. The weight of his body rested on the shoulders and forearms laid flat on the ground. His body rested on the atlas of his head. Swami Vunde was in perfect balance.

The gray hair that framed his face contrasted with the defined bicep he used in his pose. He looked towards the ceiling cracks with a deep furrow between his eyebrows. The half shoulder stance had brought him into an inner world where the morning sun did not penetrate.

When he was a young man, the guru had gone to study in the eastern part of the Himalayas. He had learned from an established Brahmin sage. With a formal education and command of the Sanskrit language, he had a fundamental

understanding of the two millennia old texts, the *Vedas* and the *Yoga Sutra*.

The Brahmin sage had taught Swami Vunde the inner workings of the body. Inspired by the literature and religion in the *Vedas*, the guru wanted to spread the message of Yoga. Swami Vunde trekked along the river Indus until he reached the Kashmir Valley, where he founded the Khalsi Ashram. For decades he had lived in the communal ashram complex overlooking the river currents. It was here that he faced the morning.

Asita stood at the edge of the mat with her daily appreciation. Sweat drops lined her forehead. Water dripped from her clay pot. The guru continued with the *asana* pose, although he sensed her presence. He had a measured sense of breath, while his twenty-one year old student tried to catch hers. The muscles in her stomach twisted as the pot rested by her navel. She was hesitant to make the first move and disturb his meditation.

“Come sit by me, Asita.” The voice of the guru resonated like the depths of a drum.

The quiet coolness of the teacher with his student pervaded the room. Asita sat on the edge of his mat. Her youth brought the moisture of the river’s edge to the ashram. The guru’s facial lines told a story of decades dedicated to the dry, mountainous climate.

As she sat in silence next to her elevated guru, she felt the energy of her guru’s knowledge of the *Yoga Sutra*. He had the understanding of both student and teacher, and Asita was the beneficiary.

“The *Sutra* teaches the teacher to transmit the power of the heart to the student,” she recalled his lesson. “It is a vastness of insight that must only be studied and practiced with a competent teacher.”

It was in the valley where Asita herself would learn to become a guru, a teacher of Yoga.

What an elusive concept it was, Yoga. Asita’s mind started to wander as she remembered an early lesson.

“Guruji, what is Yoga?”

The guru took a moment to himself.

“Asita, I can provide you many words about the word Yoga. There are many interpretations. Some translate it as ‘*To come together*’.”

“To come together?”

“Others write it is to ‘tie the strands of the mind together.’ These two meanings may seem different, but they are similar.”

The guru paused. “But Asita, as with most things in life, there is a deeper interpretation.”

She remembered every intonation of the statement that followed.

“Yoga is to attain what was previously unattainable.”

She understood each individual word, but the concept as a whole was still vague. The guru continued, “Asita, I can provide you with many words about the word Yoga. But eventually, one only learns by doing.”

Just as Asita had become comfortable with the silence of the room, she heard her guru breathe once again. With her eyes closed, she no longer saw the myriad of color spots in the eyelid. The layered reverberations of the chant traveled from the pit of his stomach to the rings of his larynx. With an irrefutable knowledge and fortitude, he filled the room with his Sanskrit mantra,

"Om..." The room echoed. The guru continued, "May all beings in the Universe be peaceful."

Swami Vunde returned to a seated position on the mat. It was a very familiar arrangement as the teacher and student sat next to each other. He was her 'guru', her illumination from the darkness.

She recalled a statement from the *Upanishads*, "In education, the first requirement is the teacher, the second is the student; what occurs between them is learning." That morning in the ashram, thousands of years since the original thought was first transcribed, learning Yoga had brought them together. She and the guru unknowingly had synchronized their breathing patterns. For the guru, the purpose of Yoga was to bring about a change. A change in flexibility and strength not only occurred in the body, but in the mind, and in the thoughts.

"Thoughts on politics, thoughts on human sufferings...thoughts on love...all can change through Yoga," the guru once said.

Asita looked out to the balcony. She looked out in the distance for something that was missing. She would endure these changes through Yoga.

The inhales and exhales of their hearts' pulses caused education to overlap with life.

"So tell me, Asita," he started. The pure penetration of his voice startled her. A portal from the inner wanderings of the mind, her thoughts unfurled to the present, to the voice of her guru when he asked,

"Are you ready to start today's lesson?"

Episode III

Three

Ruby Red Taillights

New York City, USA

The windows that overlooked Broadway had become foggy and misty from the heat released through the exertions of twenty-two students. The streetlights were halos in the condensation on the window. In her mind, all Sarita Rena could hear was the sound of water rushing.

There was a cool whisper from the instructor when he gently narrated her out of the Eagle Pose and guided her back to the standing Mountain Pose. "And there you have it," Don Stellar said in front of the class. "Thank you."

Sarita awoke from her trance.

She felt a rush of oxygen and walked out of the attention back to her mat. The instructor then sat down in a cross-legged position, and the class followed his lead in crossing their legs.

"Now, we are going to do some deep breathing as we conclude today's lesson. Be sure to sit up straight from the lower back, as we close our eyes and inhale deeply."

Sarita was still thinking about the moment she just had. She could hear water trickle in the completely dry room.

"We're just going to sit here for the next minute, and hold this seating pose, very relaxed, very still, just let the breath take you over..."

The twenty-two yoga practioners rested on their mats.

"...Inhale for the closing *Om*," the instructor proceeded. "Okay, thank you for today and I hope to see you soon."

It was like a comforting constraint was lifted from the room. Disorder returned. The Yoga class got up from the mats and started to pack up their duffle bags. The receptionist turned the lights back on, and the eyes adjusted.

"Ah, so much to do when I get home," said Alice. The din of to-do lists and errands flooded the old dance studio.

"What did you think?" Sarita asked.

"Well, it was definitely interesting. It seems like you have an admirer."

"Don't be silly, he just picked me at random."

"Okay Sarita, whatever," Alice said. "I'm going to gather my clothes and change."

"Sure, I'll just be up front."

Sarita approached the instructor and waited for the crowd to disperse.

"I just wanted to thank you for today. It was my first time here."

"Is that right?" Don replied. "Well, thank you so much for coming. You did very well. How long have you been practicing?"

"Oh, no. Today was my first time ever."

"That's remarkable. You held the *Garudasana* Eagle pose very well. You should definitely come in again."

"You know, it was strange. I didn't feel like I held the pose. I felt like the pose held me."

"Intriguing," Don said calmly.

"I'm actually doing some research for work. I have to understand my subject matter and its audience."

"What do you do for work?"

"I work in publishing."

"And you are researching Yoga?"

"Yes, it is for an upcoming book series."

"Very interesting, indeed. I'm teaching on Friday. Here, let me give you a schedule." He reached over the podium to find a timetable. "If you are interested in coming to another session..." Don handed over the schedule.

"It would be good for my work," she said, "I really want to understand the practice so I will know how to sell it to the world."

Don was a bit taken back by her intentions.

"That is a unique way to look at Yoga. You know, I believe it was Gandhi who said 'Be the change you want to see in the world.' Although, somehow I have a feeling he was not referring to sales."

Sarita laughed. She looked over the schedule. "Thank you. I will try," she said.

Alice came out and headed for the door.

"Namaste," Don gestured to them with his hands closed.

"Goodbye," Alice said.

"Thanks," said Sarita. She smiled back.

They descended to the street. That night Sarita got on the uptown bus to her apartment. In the glass of the buildings on Madison Avenue, she saw the reflection of a peculiar triangular shaped building lit up. She turned around to see the rooftop, but it was gone. It must have been a vision, for that day, something in her had been sparked ...*that was previously unattainable.*

The next morning, Sarita woke up to the sound of an untimely car alarm musing.

After she got dressed, she dashed through the kitchen filled with unused appliances and grabbed her black leather planner on the table. She had a meeting with Bill Geary and was going to pitch the *How-To-Yoga* book series to him. She had highlighted the opening and beginning passages. She kept thinking about the Yoga session and the flash of water images and sounds that came through like a

fountain. The sensation was stronger than a daydream but less concrete than reality.

It was a paradox. There she was in the middle of an old dance studio meditating, while the cars and trains and the entire city scrambled to get home in the mad rush. The vacuum of the studio was a connected isolation. Had Sarita found a structured way to isolate herself from the world, in order to connect with it?

She picked up the stack of papers for Bill Geary's project and left for the subway. While waiting at the platform, she looked around for a familiar face, the familiar touch, but did not find the one she was looking for. With thousands of homeless people in the city, the Subway Beggar was a needle in the NY Metro Transit haystack.

She got on the subway car and started reading the introduction of the *Yoga for a New Beginning* book.

"The aim of Yoga is to know the truth which is oneself. This knowledge alone can help us to get out of all turmoil and petty-mindedness."

At her transfer stop, Sarita got out at the front end of the train, while her Motown-singing savior entered at the rear car.

"...I heard it through the Grapevine!"

Like an environmental lobbyist at a Texas oil convention, the Subway Beggar meandered through the crowd begging with her recyclable coffee cup. As her charcoaled hands reached out to humanity for her next meal, there was a reserved gesture in donating to her coffee cup funds. Perhaps a quarter would drop her way, but how long would it last? The Subway Beggar would travel the rails by day and at night return to the heated grates where she slept.

The Subway Beggar had not always implored strangers. She had held a job in a temp agency until the last recession had caught up with her. Unemployment and welfare had lasted a few months before her landlord wanted his overdue checks. The mistakes she drew into her veins eased the eviction, but her dealer at the corner of 43rd and 9th eventually grew wary of her lack of funds. She had not an asset to her name and lived a life without any material attachment. The acute chemical withdrawals led to a form of dementia called thought disorder. The lack of any material possessions gave her a gift of omniscience. It was a gift that could neither be sold, nor pitched. It gave the Subway Beggar the gift of knowing the inner history of people's souls.

"...heard it through the grapevine...oh I'm just about to lose my mind."

Sarita took the introduction and got off the subway at Grand Central to change trains. She picked up her newspaper at Abdul's stand.

"Hello, how are you this morning?"

"Ay, Hello."

She read the headlines, *UN Summit: Palestinian Representation at Israeli Expense... 'The Economist: The Musical' Stage Goes Dark After Lighting Crew Falls Asleep ...Railway Thief Pleads Guilty...Third Day of Explosions in Kashmir Valley.*

"Oh dear," she was disappointed. "Well, thank you so much."

Abdul's wife Ayesha was sitting inside the hut with her hand over her pregnant stomach.

"Any day now?" Sarita said.

"Grace to Allah," Ayesha said. She smiled and rubbed her stomach some more.

Random chaos and random kindness permeated the underground tunnels. Sarita got to her office vestibule and saw Alice Parker talking to a colleague.

"No, it was great. I was able to do a market segmentation on the demographics of people who go to these things," Alice remarked.

"Well, I'm certain that you will do a good job with the campaign and strategy," said Marc Phillips, a director in the Arts Department.

"Then, of course, there was Sarita," Alice started.

"What about Sarita?" Ms. Rena herself came into the conversation.

"Oh," Alice caught herself. "Then of course there was Sarita, who seemed to have mastered the poses on the first day."

"Is that right?" Marc interjected.

"Well, I wouldn't go that far," Sarita said, "I think I was just picked at random to demonstrate."

"You never know Sarita, this could be your calling." Marc suggested with a friendly flirtation.

"We'll see. Sometimes you have to be the change you want to see in the world," she repeated her instructor's words at an opportune moment. "If you'll excuse me, I need to get this introduction to Bill."

"Of course, I'll join you in a few," Alice said.

There was a bit of commotion in the lobby this week because of the blood drive setup that occurred every fall. The booths were lined up under the company insignia and signs were posted, *Give the Gift of Life*. But books needed to be marketed, and Sarita went in to see her boss.

Bill Geary was on the phone by the time Sarita had come into his office. He waved her in as he finished his talk. "Great Tom, I'll see you for lunch next week...Take care..." Bill was the gregarious executive of corporate America.

"So," he started, "how's that bump of yours?"

Sarita cringed inwardly. "Well Bill, the only bump worth talking about is the one to your sales figures next year," she transitioned.

He laughed. "That's what I like to hear. So what's happening with the book series, the *Yoga for Beginners* books?" He reread from the title off the memo on his desk. Bill leaned over, "You know," he lowered his voice to a whisper, "this is a very big series we are launching. It could be huge."

"That's why I've spoken with the writers and I'm working with Marc in graphics," she started to divulge her status.

"How did it go with Alice Parker?" Bill asked. "I think you two will make

a damn good team."

"Well, I actually went to a Yoga class with her last night. She has a few opinions," Sarita was tactful.

"Now this is off the record, but in that Yoga class of yours, do they teach you any of that Indian *Kamasutra* stuff, if you know what I mean?" he chuckled.

"How could anyone not know what he means?" she thought to herself. "Well, no Bill, the class doesn't teach those types of positionings. I think Giuliani did away with them," she joked.

He laughed along. Alice knocked on the door and came in. She joined Sarita on the second chair in front of Bill's desk.

"So Alice, I was just telling Sarita what an important account this is."

"It certainly is." Alice played the corporate game as well. "We have a direct marketing strategy already worked out," she announced.

"I see," concurred Bill. Sarita was taken aback by this unknown strategy declaration, but Bill continued.

"Well, I'm sure you two will put your heads together and do an excellent job," he repeated a one-minute manager adage. "But as they say in Yoga," he attempted to dispel some underlying tension, "well, just don't hold your breath."

As they were coming out of the meeting, Sarita tried to confirm with Alice, "So, are we still on for Yoga on Friday?"

"Sure, and I'll definitely let you know if something more interesting comes up...like a root canal," Alice snickered. Sarita parted with frustration and went back to her desk to attend to some of her phone calls.

"Hi, Mira, I got your message," said Sarita to her old college friend on the phone. "So, you're in town?"

"Yeah, I'm covering what's going on at the UN General Assembly."

"Oh really, how's it going?"

"Well, it's okay...The UN General Assembly is voting to give Palestine a larger role in the United Nations. They'll have the right to take part in General Assembly debate, co-sponsor resolutions on Middle East issues, and take part in a range of United Nations conferences and meetings."

"That's good. Everyone needs representation," Sarita advocated.

"Well, the Israeli representative denounced the resolution. He thinks Arafat is going to declare a Palestinian state next year."

"Is that a possibility?" Sarita asked.

"Well, it raises the possibility of new bloodshed. That's for sure. I got a statement from the European Union Rep, who was in favor of it. I just can't seem to get in touch with the US Rep, who said it was the wrong resolution."

"That's not surprising," Sarita said.

"I think he's avoiding me because I spilled tarter sauce on him at a benefit in DC last year. I hope he didn't leave the Plaza yet."

"So, you're on the Upper East Side tonight?" Sarita asked.

"Yes, I'm still up for dinner. I'm sending in my copy by seven, if I can just

get in touch...Oh, there he is. I gotta run."

Mira hung up before Sarita could get any more information. She was laughing at the thought of her opinionated friend chasing down a UN representative for a quote on conflict between Palestine and Israel. After all, the topic was just as sour and choppy as the spilled condiment.

Sarita was not sure how she felt about Israel. It was a concept that meant many different things to different people. For the Zionists, Israel was the 'destiny' for the Jews to create and live in. For Arab nations, it was a stolen land created in deceit. For the United Nations, Israel was reparation for the Holocaust. Carved in the Middle East, it was an alliance with the West.

The history of Israel could be partitioned into two parts, with the dividing line at the 1967 war when it was attacked. After the conquest of its neighboring lands in that year, Israel was the Goliath to its enemies and preacher of David to its friends. In the years to come, Israel was the victim of terrorist attacks, as well as the violator of what some deemed human rights.

When it came to Israel, everybody had a pitch.

Each year there was over five billion dollars spent on newspaper stories, endless editorials, and new opinion books. Israel was a perennial best seller! Peace was just not as profitable as installments of conflict.

Throughout New York, the influx of TV news shows started shifting their headquarters to midtown, the daily presses were gaining higher subscriptions within and outside the city, and a number of publishing headquarters consolidated in the area. With all the media and broadcasters, New York embodied the town that loved to talk, often to itself. A handshake, a quick expensed-out lunch, it was a relationship-building island where everybody had something to say, and where there was always somebody to talk about.

Sarita went to her tasks at the publishing company and resumed reading the *How-To-Yoga* book introduction, "*Knowledge alone can help us get out of all turmoil and petty-mindedness.*"

Meanwhile uptown, the turmoil was just starting for Josiah Tamarind, who had left work in the middle of the day. He met Mrs. Tamarind at the Sloan Kettering Cancer ward for their Thursday consultation.

The coffee in hospital waiting rooms was the most bitter taste known to man; it was dripped with the beans of anxiety, grounded with fear, and stirred with anger and regret.

Dr. Rosenblatt was straightforward, in a professional way. "The cancer has metastasized."

Just like that, the Tamarind world had been in for yet another turn.

"What does that mean, doctor?" Josiah asked.

It was the type of question people asked so they could be proactive about an uncontrollable situation.

"It means the cancer has not been responding to the chemotherapy as we had hoped," Dr. Rosenblatt said. "But we will have to run further tests to

determine the exact prognosis."

It meant she was dying.

The Tamarinds left the hospital later that afternoon and got in a cab. It was one of those days that would not end. The Tamarind ride home was quiet and somewhat forcefully solemn. Erica's sister Rebecca had come to meet them at the hospital and accompanied them home. Having a third person around helped to broaden the conversation. It was not until evening, after a few bits of food had stayed in Erica's stomach, that the night quelled the day's news.

"Josh, honey, could you get me some water from the kitchen? I think there is some in the water jug," Erica continued.

Erica did not seem phased by the results of the consultation. The word 'terminal' was just not part of her vocabulary. But Erica was hiding the pain and directing it inwards. As if to divert the severity of the cancer, she had become immune to her own condition. Her optimism was keeping Josiah strong as well.

"So, I was talking with Rebecca," Erica started her story as she heard his footsteps return. "She was telling me about this Yoga class she was taking downtown."

Collision! Josiah's subconscious mind wandered, "*Yoga for a New Beginning...I think this is yours'...*"

"Is that right?" he responded, "Your sister is always trying out crazy new things."

"No, seriously, she said it was really good. She said it made her feel *alive*." There was a masked melancholy in Erica's voice.

"What? She still gets money from your parents, what's there not to feel alive about?"

"Well, maybe it will be helpful for me. I've been reading about the connection to breathing in my Judaism books."

"Judaism books? You're reading about that mystic gibberish." He joined her in bed.

"It's not gibberish, there's something going on here...Did the *Torah* not state that 'God blew his breath into man.'" Erica still had her wits late at night.

"But dear, that is just figurative."

"But it's still a breath. I'm telling you Josh, there's some truth to this, and you'll see one day when I'm gone."

There was an immediate pause on her end. "*Did I just say that out loud?*" she thought to herself.

She tried to recover from the awkwardness, but then just continued with the conversation, "Well, anyways, Rebecca was saying that she was going once a week to get motivated, and it beats the gym. Personally I think she's just trying to meet guys outside the Jewish Professional Association."

"So she's going to a Yoga class to meet men. That's absurd!" Josiah had become accustomed to the antics of his sister-in-law.

"Not really, the J.P.A. is a real meat market. I mean, its stiff competition

trying to get a ring out of some schmucks.”

Josiah chuckled as he rubbed his beard. “Some schmucks just face their doom early I suppose, and get down on one knee on a beach in the Hamptons.”

Josiah always had a boyish knack for making her smile.

“...Under a moonlit night,” she recalled with equally girlish romanticism. She jested, “Yes, but some schmucks just don’t realize who they’re destined for ‘til later in life.”

Erica was absolutely enamored of Josiah Tamarind.

She picked up a book from her nightstand, and he pulled out his finance magazine. After they got comfortable under the covers, Erica turned to page 67 of her handbook on Jewish spirituality.

After a few minutes, she started talking as if she were finishing a conversation she had started in her head while reading the book. “You know what is really interesting?...this concept of *Sefirot*,” she asked.

“Seri-what?” He was utterly perplexed as he put down his *Fortune* magazine.

“*Sefirot*. It’s what the Kabbalists taught, that there are ten steps between mankind and God.”

“I see, where are these magic stairs?”

“Not those steps, like practices. Through prayer, contemplation, and meditation, you get closer.”

“We’re already close.” He cuddled his wife with a masculine affection. She struggled to harbor his bedside attention.

“It’s closer to meeting a type of Truth... ‘To bring this presence into our lives with immediacy’...” she read from her book.

Josiah entertained his wife’s didactic effort. “And how do you do that, immediately that is?”

“Well, here’s what I understood so far,” she said.

“Okay. I’m listening.” He closed his magazine.

“Well, according to the *Torah*, life begins with a cry or perhaps a whimper, and then the very first breath of earthly existence.”

“That’s true, you’ve got to breathe.” Josiah had a good attitude.

“Okay, so then life ends with a whimper or perhaps a cry, the final breath of earthly being,” she reasoned aloud.

“That makes sense too,” Josiah concurred.

“So,” she hesitated, “From where does that first breath come? And to where does that final breath go?” Her thoughts had become heavy. “And what about all those breaths in between, look.”

She read him a figure from her book, “We take more than twenty-three thousand breaths every day...hmm, and this is a passage from the book of Genesis.” Erica read aloud, “The lord God formed man from the dust of the earth, and He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul,” Erica finished the passage.

“Well, there you go,” said Josiah. “It’s the opening of the Bible.”

“The Breath of God is the breath, the life force, of human beings...” Erica got excited, “Oh this is interesting, and the Hebrew word for breath is *ruach*.”

“Why is that interesting?” Josiah was a bit lost in the whole reading aloud session his wife had imposed on him.

“Well,” she thought for a second. She ran through her mental lexicon. “I believe the Hebrew word for ‘breath’ is the same as the word for ‘spirit’...there it is.”

She pointed and turned the page as she leaned over to him. The sheets folded and curled under her.

“Yet how often do we appreciate, how often do we even notice, the ‘gift of breath’ that flows within us?” she said quietly aloud.

Josiah had turned back to his finance magazine as the two of them lay in bed quietly. Josiah then confessed something to his wife.

“Can I ask you something?” Josiah said.

“Of course.” Erica lifted her head from her Jewish Spirituality handbook and looked towards her husband.

“I mean, I go to an Orthodox synagogue, and I fast during the high holy days. I feel very connected to the Jewish community,” he defended himself.

“I know this Dear.”

“But all the major phenomena on the earth, which the *Torah* provides explanations for, can be explained through logic or science.”

“Well, that’s true.”

“So,” Josiah paused, “If what the *Torah* describes as the work of God is really a scientifically understandable phenomenon, that would leave little room for the role of God.” Josiah was thinking aloud and trying to explain himself to his wife, who was equally engaged with his thought process.

“Well,” Josiah said, “It’s just that sometimes I think man created God, and not the other way around. They didn’t know about science at the time. They didn’t have answers, so they created a God. I suppose,” he paused, “Would this make me an atheist?”

Erica was thinking about what it meant to be an atheist.

As Josiah took a John Lennon “Imagine” moment to himself, he looked back at his wife. “So,” Josiah concluded, “My question then is this: can an atheist be Jewish?”

“There is just so much more to learn,” Erica was resigned. “I don’t have the answer for you. I think you’ve done a lot by just asking the question. You know what I really want to read?” she said as a request. He looked up. “I want to read *The Zohar*,” she exclaimed.

“What?” Josiah had turned back to his finance magazine.

“The *Zohar*... I’ll write down the translation I want for you.” She took out a scrap from the drawer of her nightstand. She had a pain in her side and quickly realized her restrictions. Still, she was careful to hide her pain away.

“Can you go pick up the book for me? You can get it from the bookstore

at the Kabbalah Center in midtown somewhere. I left the directions on the side table in the living room."

"Honey, isn't there anywhere else I can go for it? There are so many gigantic bookstores to choose from, and they have coffee bars and everything."

"No, they won't have an authentic version. Please, Josh."

"Why do you want this *Mask of Zorro* book, exactly?" the Y chromosome in him spoke.

"It's the *Zohar*," she tried to make her point. She rolled over from her side of the bed. "You know, the book was written in the thirteenth century. It helps to explain the unanswered mysteries found in the *Torah*. There's a lot under the surface that we have yet to discover, and what better time than now when I have all this time."

Josiah looked at his wife and paused. "You never cease to amaze me," he said with a simple sense of wonder.

It was one of those ordinary revelations that occurred in a marriage or partnership that made closeness worthwhile. It was a quiet thing when two people were aligned for that singular moment in time, and, in the chaos of it all, genuinely appreciated one another. It was a simple revelation.

"Alright," he said with a husband's compassion. "I'll get it tomorrow after work." He kissed her on the cheek and caressed her arm.

Erica continued reading intently while Josiah dozed off. As he was falling asleep, his wife asked for one more quiet favor, although a less concrete one.

"Josiah, I want you to find out for yourself the fruits of the tree."

"Which tree?" he muttered in his sleep.

"You'll know when you see it."

His dream floated into the woods, where he once went on retreat with other Jewish singles. Along the riverbed, a lone tree stood tall. A storm hit that evening and, in following morning, the lone tree had fallen to the ground. He dreamed of fire ...the late night conversation.... *The Seri-what?*

The Sefirot tree? ...The ten nodes of the Kabbalah unlocked the order of the universe? In her sickest days, what did Erica Tamarind mean in her request to Josiah?

"I want you to find out for yourself the fruits of the tree," he heard in his dream.

His wife was trying to understand spirituality. But "spirituality" was a rather awkward phrase. "Spirituality" evoked crystals, chanting, numerology, or burning rituals. Kabbalah half-digested, and much less than half-understood by fashionable celebrities evoked the same caution.

All things misty in outline, airy-fairy, fey, and esoteric, "spirituality" had become the pre-millennium catchall phrase.

The Kabbalah Center was on the East Side at 48th Street, located right across from an upscale Indian restaurant with overpriced samosas. The center had a green flag hanging in front of the entrance, which was next to a small

church.

He had left work a bit early that evening to pick up his wife's book. Josiah waited for a car to pass before he crossed the street. The glow of the ruby red tail-lights illuminated his briefcase. There was an orange streetlight and a mist in the air. Josiah looked up to the center's flag with the slogan, "*Destroy Your Ego*" and three Hebrew letters written under it.

Josiah was skeptical of this whole Jewish exploration mission he had been sent on. "*Don't shoot the messenger*," he thought to himself. "*I'd rather be watching CNN right now.*"

The same decorator upholstered all the East Side buildings. The wingtip armchairs that were left over from the Reagan administration guarded the staunch dull carpet. A menorah stood shoulder height in the lobby. There was a wooden podium at which the greeter stood, like an airline hostess in a bizarre Jewish flight.

"Would you like to try the introductory lesson? There is a free lesson tonight on the second floor," said the receptionist.

Josiah had an uneasy feeling about the whole thing. The room reminded him of a cult restaurant. He expected a waiter to offer him some mind-altering kosher mushrooms. He did not want to go up to the second floor.

"Maybe some other time," he was polite.

It was a level of the center to which he was not yet ready to ascend.

"Actually, I'm looking for something from the gift shop."

"All right," the receptionist grinned.

"If you step just to your right, someone in there will be able to help you." She showed him the way.

The gift shop had a pile of books in the middle of the room. The back shelf had Kabbalah mugs and tee shirts. There were books on Jewish spirituality and bookmarks with Hebrew calligraphy. The Hebrew script affirmed the link to the culture. Traffic passed the window on the left side of the store and rekindled Josiah's mistrust of the retail aspect of the Kabbalah Center.

"Good evening sir," the second greeter came into the store.

"Good evening. I'm looking for a book my wife wanted to read..." he paused. He pulled out the note on which Erica had scribbled, "...the *Zohar*?"

"Ah, yes, the *Book of Splendor*," the gift shop saleswoman affirmed. "We have it in many languages, would you like the English version?"

"That will be fine."

"Okay, it comes in a single volume or as a twenty-nine volume set. Which edition will you be interested in?"

"I think for the sake of transportation, I'll take the single volume," he said when he thought about the alternative.

"Wonderful." She rang up the bill.

Josiah picked up a key chain at the registrar that read, *The Power of Kabbalah: Understanding your Dreams*.

"Will that be all?" she asked.

"Yes, that will be all for now." He put the trinket back in its canister. "I wonder if they make *Kabbalah antacids*?" he thought as he rubbed his stomach.

Josiah walked down the Grand Central subway platform to catch the six train with his bag containing the book. He walked past the newspaper stand where Abdul pulled down the steel grid. He was ready to call it a night, at least for a few hours.

In a city that supposedly never slept and had a constant source of energy, not to mention a neurotic case of insomnia, some people left in the evening and even more came out at night. Perhaps the cycle had its own quiet beauty, the natural rhythm of a New York night.

As trendy bar-hopping yuppies and bourgeois vagabonds passed his stand, Abdul was talking to his brother Hussain about his wife and her pregnancy, "You know, it wasn't even planned."

"It is a blessed event, indeed," his brother remarked.

"Praise to Allah for the conception."

"But Abdul, how will you manage?"

"I mean, there is money coming. We will buy another stand," Abdul clarified.

"Good, you must do so."

"Ayesha has already hinted that she would like to move into a bigger apartment."

"Yes, women will always hint at these things, often by circling the place they do want with a red pen."

He looked through the headlines of the front page. "*Explosion in Palestine: Conflict in the Promised Land...Technology stocks to boom indefinitely.*"

"Come to think of it, the real estate section has been left open on the kitchen table for the last couple days," resigned Abdul.

There was a quintessential familiarity at the newspaper stand, like a neighborhood bakery in the metropolitan conglomerate. To know the comings and goings of each customer would be absurd. Josiah was just one of the thousands that passed by the Grand Central newsstand every day.

Friday had come instantaneously this week. Perhaps it was sent via email.

That evening, Sarita went to the 'Life in Motion' Yoga center. There was a crowd of people from the neighboring movie theater who congregated around the entrance. Sarita threaded through the crowds and ascended to the second floor.

She felt proactive about ascending a story of this building with its bold triangular roof. It was typical of Sarita Rena to precipitate into something like Yoga. She was not the type to let a new opportunity drain into the wishing well of missed experiences.

When Sarita was a teenager, she developed a passion for the English language and theater. A few directors in local church performances told Sarita

that she had a natural talent for acting.

"You have a real empathy for the characters, Sarita," the director said. "I think you understand both human joy and suffering."

Despite the encouragement, Sarita never pursued theater.

"I just don't want to delude myself into thinking I'm better than I really am," she justified. "I don't want to pursue a pipedream."

But in trying to understand both human joy and suffering, something ambitious sparked in Sarita. She pursued her education in psychology and English. With varying interests in recreational athletics, and the world of publishing diverting her attention, she never really focused on one thing. A painting class for a few weeks, a new instrument to learn, and swing dance classes found their way in and out of her black leather planner.

In her pursuit of new experiences, she never really found one truly meaningful, concrete experience. Once again, there in the old dance studio, Sarita Rena took up a new interest.

There was a certain irony in her plunge into Yoga, since the practice encouraged patience and fortitude.

"Was it possible to rush into a Yoga pose?" she asked herself a bigger question than it seemed.

People were waiting outside the room for the first Yoga class to let out. The center had a cinnamon wall and a stylized track-lighting system that highlighted the Tibetan tapestries. There was modernity to this old dance studio.

An executive type pulled out his cellular phone, stretching his day longer before the class began. There was an older woman who Sarita thought she recognized from the last class, but the rolling tummy and purple bandana by no means constituted a fingerprint.

It was nearly seven o'clock and Alice had not yet arrived. As Sarita was waiting, she picked up a brochure for the Integration Yoga teaching certification entitled, "*Yoga: Practice and Preach.*"

She asked the receptionist, "Excuse me, what is this teaching certification about?"

"Well," the receptionist had a nasal, slightly pinched response, "In order to practice as a Yoga instructor, you need to get certified."

"And how does that work?" Sarita had the time to be curious.

"Well, you have to accumulate over 400 hours of Yoga time in a clinic. Concurrently, you take courses about the philosophy behind Yoga. And then," the receptionist paused to join her in looking at the brochure. "I think you spend six weeks in a Yoga ashram somewhere in Virginia."

"A Yoga ashram? What on earth is that?" Sarita mocked.

"Well, it was recently established as a national training ground for instructors. There is such a high demand for Yoga that they established this training center."

"And anyone can be certified as a Yoga instructor?"

"Well, normally the type of person who gets through the program believes in Yoga whole-heartedly as a medium to change lives," the receptionist said. "You can talk to Don. He's the instructor for tonight."

"Oh, yes, we've met." Sarita smiled to herself.

"Some people do it part time, after work, even," the receptionist added.

"Really?" Sarita was surprised. "How is that possible?"

"It takes awhile, but you become an instructor nonetheless," the receptionist ensured.

The door from the classroom opened and the lights went on inside.

Sarita took her place in the room, near the mirrored wall under the wooden ballet bar. She rolled out her blue foam Yoga mat on the hardwood floor. She looked out, but there was no sign of her uninterested colleague. Although, she felt a sense of adventure in going it alone.

Don came into the room with a towel on his shoulder, and he checked in with the receptionist. There was a certain allure to the teacher as he prepared for his class by unrolling his mat. The receptionist brought him the candle that he would later light.

"The type of person who gets through the program believes in whole-heartedly Yoga as a medium to change lives," Sarita remembered the profile.

"Namaste. Welcome. You may all take your place on the middle of your mats. I will give you a little introduction, and then we will begin today's practice..." Don adjusted his tone.

There was chatter among the students while he gathered his thoughts and adjusted the towel on which he was sitting.

"I suppose the actual practice of Yoga takes each person in a different direction," he began. "We go through this every week, but it is not necessary to subscribe to any particular ideas to follow the Yoga path."

Sarita listened intently.

When Don was not quoting Gandhi, sometimes he phrased concepts like the *Star Wars* character Yoda.

"This week we start with the first breath, which leads to awareness. Awareness leads to consciousness. Consciousness leads to action. Action leads to Reflection. Reflection leads back to the Vital Breath."

He was the Yoda of Yoga!

"It only requires us to act and pay attention to our actions, so that we pay attention to where we are going and how we are going to get there," said the instructor.

There was a quiet composure as the class listened to Don, like a kindergarten class at story time.

"This observation in ourselves will inspire us to discover something new. Think of Yoga as a coming together of body, breath, and mind."

Sarita took a deep breath.

"We will now begin...Bring yourselves to the top of the mats and stand in

prayer position."

The class started to follow his lead, as Sarita began her *second* Yoga experience.

"Bring your toes and your focus inward...Inhale and bring your arms all the way up above your head...Exhale and bring your arms down to your toes...Bend your knees and walk yourself back...Bend yourself down...Inhale...Exhale..."

The class was like a machine whose gears were exposed. There was the cyclic rhythm that reflected in the mirror wall. Sarita was rusty but rotated into the apparatus of the Yoga class as an enthusiastic beginner.

Before long, she felt her joints. She went to a place in her body and mind that she had not been before. She induced a conscious stream. There was hardly time for her mind to wander in that old dance studio, wrapped up in a well-oiled system.

And so she went through the different poses presented in the class. The traffic of Broadway and 23rd Street exchanged their tirades of horns. New York hit the gym and scurried along before it started the collective peacock mating rituals of a Friday evening.

The upper echelon of Manhattanites created their own reality on the Upper East Side, where Josiah stopped for a service at the synagogue while Erica was resting at home. The brown stone buildings were paved with old money and new ambitions.

Religions often provide a sense of comfort and security as members of the community convened, whether at home or halfway around the world. For Josiah, the synagogue was a place for such comfort.

Before the services started, there were many anxious questions about Erica's health.

Mrs. Lieberman was known in the community for her vociferous questions. "So how is your wife feeling? It is so sad dear, that poor thing, so young she is. Give her my best, darling."

It was hard to tell where the realm of social etiquette blurred into pure annoyance.

"Hey, Josh," there was a friendly voice in the crowd, "Hey, Josh."

"Martin, good to see you ol' chap," said Josiah, who seemed compelled by his old friend Martin Goldberg to speak like an Aussie sailor.

"You've canceled twice for racquetball this month. How are you doing? How's Erica doing?"

"Her treatments are going. We were hoping for a better recovery, but she's hanging in there. She started reading all these books about Jewish spirituality and whatnot."

"Well, whatever helps her through it. Is she at home?"

"She's at home resting. Her sister is there taking care of her, but I think I'll leave right after Rabbi Koshner gives his sermon."

"Yes, you should probably get home soon. So, what happened with that merger you were working on? Does the deal look like it's going through?"

"To tell you the truth, between everything going on with the treatments, I'd rather not be assigned to the project altogether."

"There's a lot of money involved in the deal," Martin pointed out. "Speaking of funds, I wanted to let you know about the congregation's homeland unification fund."

"You mean the Western settlement the synagogue wants to start supporting?"

The New York synagogue was a powerful entity. Back in 1948, when the world recognized the independent State of Israel and the British withdrew from Palestine, Israel could hardly fathom the more than eighty billion dollars that would pour in from America over the years to support the state.

There was a rumbling of chairs, and people took their seats in the moments before the service began.

"I'll talk to you about it later," Martin said.

At the Orthodox synagogue on 86th street, a *mechitza* wall separated the men and women. Strict Jewish law forbade men from seeing women during services. According to the rabbi, women distracted men from prayer; however, the women were able to hear the *Torah* reading.

Was it any wonder why five thousand years later Jewish women around the world used any available opportunities they did have to say what was on their mind? At that moment, Rabbi Koshner read his passage to start the services.

"Shabbat Shalom."

The crowd repeated the greeting of the Sabbath.

"Life ebbs and flows like a river. The blessings we receive are so sweet: life, the air that we breathe, the food that we eat, and the people that we love and who love us. On Shabbat, we thank God for all of these gifts and more."

The crowd listened to the Rabbi's words, "On Shabbat itself, we rejoice in the fruits of the field. We receive the gift of the *Torah* on Shabbat. Still another gift given to the world..."

The evening had a kinetic calmness, like an open window with a sheer, white drape flowing gently. The congregants were attentive as they listened.

"...When you think of all that we have, all that there is in life about which to rejoice, it is sometimes astounding. We are grateful and we thank God," said the Rabbi. He read a few passages from the *Torah*.

There was a moment of quiet in the synagogue. There was a quiet moment in the world. No Palestinian bombs or Israeli shooters were heard. The cars stopped honking in Midtown and stood still at traffic signals.

For a moment in time, all the taillights in New York City were illuminated ruby red.

For that very second in space and time, nothing moved relative to anything else. The worshipers listened to the sermon. The Yoga class listened to

their instructor.

"Stretch forward over your knees as we now prepare for standing pose," said Don.

Sarita Rena stretched out. There were memories and sensations that she was not sure she was equipped to handle. It was a creative but still environment. It was as if she had just opened a vacuum trance, and she stepped into it through her mind. There was once a world, and then there was concentration. Now there was concentration through motion.

The rabbi continued his Shabbat sermon,

"Life flows, but it also ebbs. There are blessings in life but also times of sadness. And Shabbat brings this to our attention as well..."

In one of those awkward moments of technological advancement, Josiah's beeper went off. The men sitting in front looked back at him with an ironic look of judgment. He was not supposed to use technology during a Shabbat sermon, but his wife's precarious condition was a higher priority so he brought his pager in case of an emergency. He looked at the number, and it looked like the same first three digits of the doctor at the Sloan Kettering Cancer ward.

Josiah Tamarind made an even more awkward move, and he got up from his seat to depart. Those to the side of him adjusted their legs to allow him to pass. Josiah found a phone and called the pager number. Martin Goldberg saw the perturbed look of his friend and followed him out.

"What's the matter?" Martin asked.

As Josiah hung up the phone, a blank look came over his eyes. His throat went dry. He held down a potential gulp. "That was Rebecca. Erica has been rushed to the hospital." He started for the door.

"If you need anything, let me know," Martin called out to his friend's back. Martin watched from the hall and saw Josiah through the entrance of the synagogue trying to hail a cab. Josiah got in and was gone.

Time stood still in the lights of the ruby red taillights. The cars and traffic rolled through the Upper East Side. They drove downtown past Museum Mile and through midtown. Traffic flowed like a river past the Broadway Yoga center.

"...and exhale..." Don said.

Sarita stood in the standing pose where she awaited further instructions. At that very moment, the sound of water returned in her head!

"...Return to the *tadaasana*, Mountain Pose. Repeat the posture on the opposite side..." Don instructed.

The ripples and then the gush of water poured through her head. The gears of the class churned and her forehead broke into a sweat. The water dripped down the side of her face, along the arc of her silky hair that was tied behind her.

"Wrapping the right leg over the left..." the instructor said.

A water drop splattered on the blue foam mat.

"And the right arm over left..."

Sarita emerged from the foam mat like the mighty mountains.

Episode IV

Four

River Waters

Kashmir, India

The mighty mountains looked down. Along the Indus River in the northern Himalayan range, the village of Khalsi was robust with merchants. Swirling waterways spilled into the village. The waterways were lined with houseboats that were now part of the Kashmiri aquatic culture.

The arrival of the British in the past few years had brought houseboats on the river, as their rule over the land started to show its influence. Maritime traders cruised the lakes and tributaries. The eccentric flower men were as mottled in their schemes to make a sale as the floral colors they presented.

The Kashmir terrain had an ancient history, with an assortment of small lakes and temples that surrounded the hills. The memory of the Hindu king Laliadyita could be found in the remains of the massive temple of hewn stone at Martand. Interspersed in the valley forests were mosques built in the 15th century. Made entirely of wood, the mosque of Shah Hamadan was built on the banks of a muddy rivulet. Anjali Kardal had been taking Rashiq and Henna there since they were little children.

"I will tell you why the Hamadan is very important to us," Rashiq Kardal recalled his late mother's words.

The mosques were laid out in square, symmetrical planes and were remarkable for their colonnades of lofty cedar.

"The Hamadan mosque was the place where many Hindus were converted to Islam," Anjali described the 14th century event.

"But *Mama*, why is this mosque so dirty?" Henna had once asked.

"It isn't dirty, the waters around it are filled with the soil from the earth. How could this be dirty?"

"But *ma*," Rashiq interjected, "there is blackened wood on the sides, why is the house of God blackened?"

At one point, the mosque was reconstructed after a severe fire.

"The mosque has all the colors of life, Rashiq. You see, a long time ago, *Allah* came to India."

"But you said *Allah* was everywhere, *mama*," Henna insisted.

"Yes he is, dear, but people were needed to bring His message," the mother explained.

"Which people?" asked Rashiq.

"You see, Muslims had come to India and they wanted to spread the message of *Allah*. And there were many Hindu Brahmins that were converted to the Sufi way of life."

"Why were they converted, mama?" Henna asked at the time. Rashiq's curiosity would come later in life.

"Some of the Brahmin Hindus were not happy with their way of life. They had chosen to convert. It is hard to say, Henna, why after hundreds of years people did what they did. Some of the Brahmin Hindus were persuaded to do so. Some could have been forced."

Mrs. Kardal's straightforwardness was very helpful in her children's understanding of the truthful path she lived by.

"So are we Muslims and then Brahmin Hindus?" Rashiq surprised them both with his quick tracing of ancestry.

"Rashiq, you should treat all Brahmins as your brothers and your sisters. There is a very important lesson that the great poet *Abu Bakr Al-Shibli* once wrote, 'No one is a Sufi until he considers all mankind as his own family.' Follow this idea."

The Kashmir Valley infused a culture that had become unique unto its own history. Different religions had come to the land. In fact, for the generations that followed the conversions of Hindus to the Islamic faith, Muslims in the Kashmir Valley lived by the Hindu culture. There was an assimilation of certain cultural rites, such as marriage ceremonies, festivities, and funerals.

Rashiq stood at the Hamadan Mosque's wooden colonnades after the funeral and remembered the stories his mother had told. After her death, the Mosque had lost all its colors. He was on his way to Khalsi to visit his grandmother, on his father's side, who was too old to leave her bed. As he walked into her room, the ducts of his eyes were filled with salt from the days before. He looked pale and weak.

"Come here my Rashiq." The old woman was gleaming from her grandson's presence. "Such a brave young man you have become."

She kissed his forehead.

"How are you *Dadi*?"

"Life is difficult these days."

"Yes, it is."

"You will always have your mother in here." She pointed inward to her chest.

"I know," Rashiq sighed.

"Grace to *Allah*. Anjali was a wonderful woman."

There was an unintended moment of silence before the old woman confessed, "You know, I didn't even like her at first."

Rashiq laughed, "Why was that?"

"I wasn't sure if she could live up to the title of *Mrs. Kardal*. It is a very

important one." The woman made him happy like only a grandmother could.

"You have held the title well," he joked with her.

"So did she, Rashiq. So did she, more than I could have ever hoped for."

"It's so hard, *Dadi*." Rashiq had started to conceptualize their loss.

"But you know, she has raised two beautiful children. And one of them was raised with enough intelligence and heart to find the next *Mrs. Kardal*."

"There's time for that, *Dadi*."

"Time is always there. But how can I go to the gates of Heaven and not tell the *Prophet Mohammad* of a great-grandchild?"

Rashiq smiled at her honesty.

"Rashiq, you never know what the future holds."

"Father wants me to take over the business," he said.

"I think that will be good for you. You will learn the shawl trade in time, and then you will take it over one day. You are good in mathematics, and you will take to the finances of business." She praised him as honestly as she could.

"But I don't know if I want to do that right now," said Rashiq. As a man in his early twenties, he was expected to.

"Rashiq, you are someone who thinks. This is twofold, for you question things," she said to his liking. "Since childhood, you have always asked questions. You like to challenge, and believe me, curiosity is a spice of life."

He listened to his grandmother intently.

"However Rashiq, your mind often wanders," she warned, "and that can work against you. When you think in the past, or think in the future, how will you listen to *Allah* in the present?"

"But the present is not the right time to work in the business," Rashiq persisted.

"No one is going to do anything in the next hundred days. It is a time of mourning, not of beginnings. Rashiq, one day, life will resume," his elder explained.

"It's not that, *Dadi*. I want to do something else."

"What child? What is on your mind?" The bedside was filled with concern for the visitor.

"I want to study in the Sufi *madrassa* here in Khalsi."

The *madrassa* schools in the mid 19th century were liberal Islamic schools that taught everything from the passages in the Qur'an to ideas of government.

His grandmother was surprised by his declaration but not his intent. "Child, you have been through so much, too much for one person to handle. Decisions like these require more thought."

"I have thought about it, *Dadi*."

"My child, in a time of loss, it is only natural to want to connect. You are her blood, and you will always be connected to her."

"*Dadi*," he pleaded, "ever since I was four, I started to memorize the *surahs* of the Holy Book. At school I learned my mathematics ..."

"And we are very proud of you, Rashiq." Her heart warmed.

"It is as if I am ready to go out into the world, the world of business and trade, but am I ready to exist?"

"You know, every young man at your age asks these questions. Did I not see a brother grow? Did I not raise sons? So, too, I have raised a grandchild who will be ready to *exist*."

"The Hindus have their ashrams. They know the importance of discovering spirituality with a guru. Why shouldn't a Muslim?"

"What makes you think a Muslim doesn't discover his spirituality?"

"I just mean," he gained his composure, "I can memorize the passages of the Qur'an, but do I really even know Islam? The *madrassa* is a place where the community lives, works, and even worships under the guidance of the master."

"Are these your original thoughts, Rashiq?" She was almost certain that his idea would not subside, so she pushed as best as an old woman could. "Or are these thoughts trying to regain a connection lost?"

"These are thoughts I want to explore further," he answered.

"You are blinded by sorrow right now. One day you will see light again, Rashiq. I have lived for many years and seen many things. Suffering is always there. But time has a way of shaping and healing the soul."

There was a quiet contrast of age as the mid afternoon sun turned to dusk. She gave some final advice. "I feared this day would come. I feared it when your mother was getting really sick. I feared that the day after her funeral I would have to tell her only son about the mending quality of time."

"Is it true?" he asked quietly. His voice quivered slightly.

"I must confess, I cannot be certain that time will ever truly heal your wounds. But, grace to *Allah*, it helps us move on. Our Muslim forefathers had the foresight to allow you one hundred days of mourning."

"*Rashiq, my pure child, I want you to follow your path. Follow your heart. Follow the truth,*" his late mother's words passed through his head.

"I will carry out my duty, *Dadi*," the grandson replied.

"That's all that we can ask for." She was complacent about his ambiguity. "Now you should go home to your sister. She is missing you."

"Good night, *Dadi*. Thank you." His broad palm held her wrinkled fingers.

"*Ali quom sa' Allah. God be with you.*"

Rashiq left with the evening moon overhead. It was the type of moon that appeared in competition with a setting sun. The moisture and heat of an Indian afternoon cooled to a tepid evening, when families took walks outside to enjoy the hour of dusk.

Back at the house, Mr. Zackir Kardal was cleaning up the empty *thali* trays in which the guests had eaten after the wake. He never really considered himself domestic by nature, but his handiwork revealed a subtle penchant for the work. Having an export business, he had developed a keen eye to the minutest details.

One afternoon he had reprimanded his employee, "There are only two hundred twenty weaves in this shawl. I specifically asked for two hundred fifty for the Municipal's wife."

"But Zackir *Sahib*," the weaver replied, "This is the finest fawn thread. It can only have two hundred twenty weaves."

"If you look at the Persian methodology, their craftsmanship is just as fine and our fawn is much more pure. I assure you, two hundred fifty weaves is feasible. We will have the finest pashmina shawls in all of Kashmir if you trust my instinct."

Zackir knew his craft first. He was a businessman second. He was very intent on teaching Rashiq the nuances of the craft, which he felt would be the best way to make him a good businessman. And so he adjusted the cushions in his living room. It was now exactly how *she* had left it.

"Good evening Papa. Do you need any help with that?" Rashiq entered the door.

"No that won't be necessary," Zackir continued to fuss over the living room, "I think Mrs. Khan had brought some curry and rice. It's in the kitchen if you are hungry."

"No, thanks, I remember her *Eid* dinner. It wasn't very appetizing."

"Rashiq," the father chuckled, "You mean to tell me that after a month of fasting during *Ramadan*, you were still picky over your food."

"Well I figured if I had waited that long, at least I should eat something tasty."

"I suppose." His father was trying to remember all he had to do for the next day. Normally Mrs. Kardal would remind him.

"How is Henna doing?"

There was no immediate response.

"I think she is resting in her room." The father also did not know how to react.

"I should go see her," Rashiq insisted.

"Tell her to be ready tomorrow morning. We are going to volunteer in the orphanage all day."

"The whole day?"

"Your mother liked that place very much. She would have liked us to go there. Why, did you have other plans tomorrow?"

"I had something in mind," Rashiq hesitated, "I suppose it could wait though."

"What is it?" the father's interest was piqued.

"I wanted to visit the *madrassa* in the village of Khalsi."

"The *madrassa*, that Sufi school? Why would you want to do that?"

"I want to study there for the next six months."

"Is that so? And when did this idea come into your head?" Mr. Kardal had a reserved pessimism.

"I don't know. I've had it for a while, I suppose. I figured now was a better time than ever to start something new."

"I agree, Rashiq. But a young man must first heal. Then he must go make his way in the world. You won't have time for the *madrassa*."

"I'll make the time, Papa."

"I don't think that would be a good idea. Let us not talk of this matter any further tonight."

"How can I go out into the world without interpreting all these *surahs* I have memorized?"

"I don't understand what you mean, Rashiq."

"I'm saying, how can I go out into the world and have a fully conscious life without understanding the *sharia* code by which we all live?"

The *sharia* code was the body of Islamic laws that involved interpreting Muslim rights, rituals, and the moral code.

"We shall not discuss this any further," the father was firm. There was an awkward silence as Zackir Kardal started fixing tablecloths and cushions to avoid eye contact. Rashiq curbed his passion in the house that had endured so much in the last few days. He went to visit his sister, who had fallen asleep with tears on her pillow.

The new adjustments in the Kardal household were like the adjustments felt elsewhere in the valley. The British had taken paramount hold since 1818, but their rule had become official ten years ago, in 1846. Before their arrival, the natives understood the cultural differences in the Valley, but there was also a coexistence of differences. It was never so much a celebration of the differences amongst religions and castes, the old ways and the *older* ways. It was just the coexistence of differences.

In the years that followed, the British settlers had tried to integrate the local governments with the general colonial rule they had set up. They called the Kashmir region a paradise valley. Settlers would write letters back to London about the land. "It is a quiet Utopia filled with hidden treasures."

There was a feeling of rebirth in India in 1856. The British felt their arrival would bring modern comforts to India.

"Social Reform!" they colonialists called out. They introduced a bill to remove all legal obstacles to the remarriage of Hindu widows. Across India, missionaries were challenging the religious beliefs of the Hindu and Muslim natives. The British changed property laws, which allowed family members who converted to Christianity to share the family estate with their Hindu brothers.

The agent for this rebirth was the East India Company. The Kashmiri natives, however, believed that the British had aims of breaking down the caste system. Commander Blake was a liaison to the East India Company.

"The spread of western education will bring light to the unenlightened Indian peasants," the commander motivated his staff. "Railways will also be the great destroyer of caste, and the greatest missionary of all."

The introduction of western methods of education was a direct challenge to orthodoxy, both Hindu and Muslim. There was a growing discontent among the noble Brahmins, who had lost many of their lucrative government positions. Everywhere British officials were replacing the old Indian aristocracy.

"It was a quiet Utopia..."

But as is known in so many literary allusions, there was a tragic paradox in being an Eden. Self-awareness of the ideal that made a paradise only comes after the ideal is lost.

"Fresh *Sabjee* Vegetables!" the salesman maximized his marketing strategy with his loud and shrill shriek. He rolled his creeping cart with green string beans and purple eggplants up the road. He shrieked some more in order to make an honest living. Everybody had a pitch.

The social laws of caste and education would wed the vegetable salesman to a washerwoman, who would later give birth to worker children. It was a cycle of economy. But there was an element of *the cycle* that also rolled along the dirt road, which was lined with a motley array of bricklayers, goat herders, and cow maidens. They all had their own story to tell and living to make.

By the end of spring, the Kashmir Valley was a sea of the green rice fields. Villagers lived in double-story farmhouses made of wood and brick. Chinar trees along the mountains shaded the houses and huts. The innumerable streams carried the scent of wild briar roses.

The trickling of a stream was about the only audible sound inside the Khalsi ashram's walls.

"*Yoga is to attain what was previously unattainable,*" Asita thought of the core meaning in her head.

"Are you ready for today's lesson?" asked Swami Vunde.

Swami Vunde had a precise nature with a global outlook. In the beginning of the 19th century when he was a student, there had been little interaction with Western Influences. The initial investigators of the British East India Company were starting to explore the towns of Simla, where he was studying mathematics at the Simla University.

The young guru had a great affinity to the new probability theories that were coming out of Cambridge at that time. He had engrossed himself in the abstract approach to mathematics the English had cultivated. The rigorous mathematical proofs that had been born during the Western Enlightenment were very stimulating to the young student. He would spend many nights by candlelight, reworking the proofs of Kesler and Bayes.

The Simla University gave him the initial training to understand such abstractions with the rigor of their Sanskrit program, a language that put as much emphasis on the root and meaning of the word, as it did the effects of the reverberation of the words on the body. But the mathematics field in the Simla University did not satiate his interest in the West. When he got an opportunity to study at Cambridge, he pursued it along with an apprenticeship in physiology.

Swami Vunde began to study the vibrations not only of Sanskrit on the body, but also the vibrations of mathematical doctrines. Abroad he learned of the science of the body and the inner workings known to that generation.

Upon his return to northern India, he stayed with a Yoga Master. Eventually, he settled in the Himalayan village of Khalsi, where he founded the Khalsi Ashram to encourage the continual study of the body, the mind, and the effects of knowledge on people's lives.

Having a western education in the time of India's "Rebirth" was politically insightful. He saw through the imperial rhetoric and questioned intentions of the British.

Not only did his Western education and subsequent return to India make him politically savvy, but he also became a pioneer. He was the first guru in Khalsi to take on a female student.

"Good morning Guruji. Yes, of course I am ready." Asita let out a smile that stretched across her entire face. The young *Yogi* was elated as her guru returned the gesture. Asita's body rested on the straw mat on the marble floor.

"I am pleased to hear this," the guru said. "I see you have brought the water from the river." He noticed the dripping clay pot and stretched his neck up to look inside. "It seems half empty."

"Yes, I may have spilled some along the way. Should I go back and get some more water, Guruji?"

The guru was amused by her enthusiasm, although he had no real need for any particular quantity.

The maturing face of Asita Mandiran looked back with laughable honesty. Her long black eyelashes fanned out around her wide-eyed curiosity.

"Asita dear, do not burden yourself with this chore. Just try, the next time, to carry the water vessel with a little more care. In life, always remember the task at hand."

The guru had read so much in his lifetime that he could not even realize his quotations, and they had become common in his speech pattern.

"The Hindu dharma says to do your deeds to the best of your ability, but do not worry about the fruits of your labor."

They both looked back to the clay pot she had sculpted that sat on the side of the mat. The pottery was like a mediator, a treaty between his years of knowledge and her learning mind. She looked at the jug as a *deed*. He admired the craftsmanship. The guru's eyes scanned the container, "Asita, my dear, you have done well with your pottery," he praised.

"Thank you Guruji," she was honored. He picked up the half-filled container and held it at eye level. He squinted at the detail, "Do you know which part of the water vessel pleases me most?" he asked. He scrutinized the work of pot in his hands by rotating the jar at minute angles.

She hesitated to answer, a bit perplexed at his appreciation. With her craftsmanship under intellectual inspection, she tried to formulate the words to

give a respectable answer. "I suppose you would like the spout the most. It is intended to pour the sacred river water."

"The spout is nice, yes, but the part of the vessel that pleases me are these small impressions around the side. These clay impressions are very intriguing indeed," the guru claimed as he realized the meaning of what he is saying. "The impressions of the water jug," he repeated. "This water vessel will be instrumental in our lessons. Asita, bring this again." He concluded, "The impressions will be useful, indeed."

Overwhelmed by the attention, she proposed, "You can keep this one. You can keep it here at the ashram. I have made more. You can have this one," she noticed his reluctance. "Please take this as a gift from me. You do so much for me, please Guruji."

"Asita, I know that sometimes I am as stiff as the folds of the mountains, but I do appreciate this."

She lifted the pot and put it by his side.

"It is only fitting to use my sagacious sanctimony to turn this gesture into a lesson," he answered with a self-deprecating raise of the eyebrow. "Tell me this, with this beautiful vessel you have just given me, why do I ask you to bring the water from the river? Each morning, you bring the river water, but why?" the guru asked.

He was not concerned about the answer, but he listened for her approach to the question.

"The river's waters come from the mountains of the deity *Indra*. The Mighty River is sacred," she gave her response.

"Now allow me to ask you in a different manner, why is the Mighty River sacred?" the guru probed.

"Well, *Indra* is the goddess of earth, and earth must be respected in all its forms. The river is to be respected," she recited.

"This is true, Asita. The Indus River is historically very important to Hindu civilization. Let us look a bit deeper. Every morning you go to the river, and from this wonderful vessel you gave me," he smiled. "You collect water for this ashram. But why is that? The ashram has its own source of water. Why, then, do we use *this* water for rituals? What is it about these river's currents?"

The realm of her expansion awakened the guru's affection for teaching. His propensity to expand the mind, to teach, sparked a reaction in his body, and his voice undulated as he stressed each word.

"It is sacred, Guruji. We use it in rituals because the waters are sacred and always have been," she reaffirmed. She was resolute in her answer and slow to understand the guru's intent.

"Yes. It 'always has been,'" he repeated her answer. "Why *always*? Why do you think the Mighty River currents have *always* been sacred?" With no response he suggested, "Because of the currents, Asita, the currents are cyclic," he simplified.

The light of the midmorning sun entered the room. She looked to the aged guru who spoke softly. Asita tried to follow him, but she had no idea what he was saying.

"Close your eyes," the guru instructed. She listened. Asita always listened. He was going to try a new visualization exercise.

"Imagine that you are the river currents. You are physically the river currents," he conjured an image for her mind to see. "You stream down below, between the rocks. You flow from day to day. At times you flow very fast. At other places, you take your time."

He narrated as her eyes fluttered underneath her closed eyelids. "You are the river water," he continued. "Tell me, Asita, what does it mean for you to be *cyclic*?" he asked. He left the comfort of his narration. "What does it mean to be *in a cycle*?"

"Guruji," she tried to discover her teacher's thinking pattern. With her eyes closed she described, "I see the rocks. I flow very fast. I am in a cycle of rapid movement. I splash on the side of the rivers...I'm not sure what you mean," she finally confessed.

"Imagine you are the river. Imagine you are in the cycle, Asita," he whispered as he tried to encourage.

She visualized the morning riverbed.

"Imagine you are flowing down the mountain side. You reach the valley," he directed her along the path in his mind. "The valley is hot and little by little your waters become thin. You are slowly disappearing into the air," he cautioned.

Asita was listening to the description. She was trying to picture the geography the guru verbalized. The guru continued with the exercise, "You are evaporating into the air. You rise just above the river. It is a mirror in which you can now see yourself. You see a part of your former self," the guru suggested. He once again brought his student out of her mental realm of comfort.

"Am I still the river water?" Asita interrupted, with a tone of confusion in her voice.

"You are still the river water," the guru confirmed. "You are still part of the river, but now you are in a different form. You are the mist that huddles over the river in the early morning," the guru added. "You are the fog that blankets the mountaintop."

She envisioned the fog of a gray, misty day.

Then he asked his student, "Are you still the river water?"

She thought before she spoke.

"Yes, Guruji, I am the river water, and I see the river down below," she affirmed.

"You are the moisture in the air," he continued and instructed. "Now, take a slow breath. Inhale slowly the Vital Breath. Breathe in the scent of wetness in the air. Can you feel it?" he asked.

"Yes," she smiled with her eyes shut. She, herself, did not know where the

guru was leading her. She continued to take slow deep breaths.

"And as the monsoon season rolls overhead, Asita, you are the clouds. You are the clouds and you meet the mountains. You are *still* the river water," he persisted, "and as the clouds meet the mountain, what form do you take?" he questioned.

"I am the clouds and I meet the mountains," she agreed. "I become the rain!" she exclaimed with innocence.

"The rain, indeed! You are *still* the river water, but now you take on the form of rain. Roll your neck slowly. Roll your head towards the ground. And now, as the rain, you fall from the sky, down towards the ground. Where do you go, Asita?"

"I rejoin the river," she said with a quietness of understanding. She opened her eyes.

"Yes," he affirmed, "You rejoin the river down below. You were always the river waters. Remember, Asita, you changed forms many times along your course. But you were always, at your very core, the essence of the river."

As Asita reflected on her guru's explanation, a change that was previously unattainable occurred in her mind.

It was the first step of Yoga.

That day in the ashram, the guru felt an older sense of happiness. He felt worthy of following the path of a teacher. He felt he had learned from *his* ancestors and the wisdom of the *Upanishads*. What occurred between student and teacher was learning.

Swami Vunde attended to his protégé.

"Yes, Asita. You are the essence of the river. Like the river, the course of your own existence takes many forms. You will take the form of rapid currents. You will take the form of morning mist. You will take the form of cloudy fog, and falling rain. Perhaps you have taken these forms many times before. Perhaps you will take them many times more."

The meetings of the mind quieted the room as he asked, "Do you now know what it means to be *in a cycle*?"

"Guruji, I understand that the river is in a cycle, but I know you are telling me more. I understand that the course of my river takes many forms," she answered. She was hesitant to say more.

"Asita, your intuition is correct. Follow it through," the guru encouraged. "Asita, there are much deeper truths to your instinct, because the truth has many layers."

The guru delayed his explanation to find the careful words.

"You see, mankind is made of many rivers," he explained the metaphor. "Each man is his own river water. Just as the river tributaries lead into the mighty River, so does each man's soul flow into a Mighty Source."

Asita took a moment to understand the guru. She tried to make the connection between her Yoga exercises and the forms of the river water. *'Each man*

is his own river water,' she thought to herself. Her sharpened consciousness tried to place, in order, all his selected words.

After the initial digestion she asked, "But the river water takes many forms. The river waters do not always return. The valley was hot and the river water became mist. The river water became clouds, and rain. How then, can each river water return?" Asita asked.

Her precision was pleasing to the guru. His happiness led him to expand his discourse, "As I said, Asita, the truth has many layers."

The guru then prepared for his strengthened words, "You know, there is a famous idea that came to us thousands of years ago from the ancient scripture, the *Rig Veda*." His intensity awoke the words of the ancient text, "That which has death and that which is deathless have the same source."

Asita heard his words. She listened for the meaning. Closing her eyes with a sense of determination, she breathed in slowly. Each breath brought the patience to understand. Her mind cleared as the air expanded in her lungs. "Each man's soul flows into a mighty Source". She breathed in and thought to herself, "That which has death and that which is deathless have the same source."

"Good, Asita. Breathe in," the guru commended. "Follow your intuitions," the teacher instructed. "Please have patience. It will come. I promise."

The guru then adjusted his example to the pace of his student, "You see. There is no contradiction. Each man is his own river waters. The river waters are in a cycle. The river waters take many forms in many cycles, but they still flow back into the Mighty River. While man may take many forms, in many lifetimes, he too still flows into the same source."

At this time of the day, the room appeared dark because the sun shifted outside. In the middle of the room, she sat across from her guru on the straw mat. They sat on the floor as she connected the lesson. Asita looked at her guru with a sense of wonder. Her breathing had untied the knot that bound the mind together. Her strands of perception loosened to a possibility.

"Then, each man is his own river waters," she worked her lesson aloud, primarily directed towards herself. "He takes on many forms. It takes him many cycles. It takes him many lifetimes. But each person is still flowing into the mighty source." She looked at him for completion.

"You have followed your instincts," the guru agreed, "And we call these cycles the many forms of the river waters, the many lifetimes that each man takes on. We call these the cycles of reincarnation."

Reincarnation.

Education persisted there inside the Yoga ashram. Sitting side by side, learning brought together the teacher and the student. The concept of Yoga prevailed: *to attain what was previously unattainable*. Asita's consciousness raced like a comet across the night sky. Drowned moons flowed through her mind. She looked to her guru for completion. She looked to her guru for an explanation of the source, a source *that has death and which is deathless*.

"Guruji, I want to understand. When does each man reach the mighty source, the mighty River?"

"Some waters reach without turning to mist. Some waters fall as rain for thousands of years. The question, Asita, is not *when* does each man flow into the Mighty River. The question is what *prevents* him from flowing and returning into the Mighty River?"

The guru's role as a teacher merged with his role as a student, as the pair identified the mystery. The two sat across from each other on the straw mat.

"All right. What then prevents man from flowing and returning into the Mighty River?" she reconsidered.

"That is the question I would like *you* to consider," he retorted. He prepared to conclude the day's investigation. The guru left a lasting thought in her head. "I would like you to think about the lesson at hand. Reflect on this one question for some time," he instructed.

There was an enthusiasm in Asita's face. She wanted so badly to remain seated. The straw mat had caught the fibers of her white *salvaar* shirt. She valued her time with her guru much more when she sensed it would disappear for the day. The youth in her face begged for further inquiry. He had gotten his student to raise the question. Nothing could satisfy him more.

While the guru had concluded his teaching, he still wanted his student to remain in high spirits. "Come, Asita, let us go outside to the balcony. The sun will illuminate my words, and we will do some *asana* poses," the guru suggested. He rose from his cross-legged position. The student and teacher slowly walked to the flat timber planks that served as a railing. The white caps and salted peaks outlined the contours of the Himalayan range. It was a comforting view, a view she looked forward to all morning.

Standing side by side, their age separated the teacher and student by years. Their heights separated them by only a few centimeters. Their curiosity put them on the same plane.

After Asita's eyes adjusted to the outside light, the guru started his instructions, "Now, place one foot on the opposite knee," he began the instructions of the Yoga *asanas*, "Let the knee of the bent leg fall outwards." He narrated the movement of the Yoga pose *Garudasana*, the Eagle.

"Step 2: Draw the left foot upward, bending the knee, and wrap the left foot around your right leg..."

On this day of Mars,

As love is imminent,

From snake pit, the serpent hatched its egg.

Draw the left foot upward bending the knee, and wrap the left foot around your right leg.

Rosetta stone translates a language of Temperance,

But from ancient texts, what insight can you see?

*Giants and dwarfs of the stellar world,
Finds a musical Angel unfurled.
...Draw the left foot upward bending the knee
and wrap the left foot around your right leg: Step 2."*

Her slender neck directed her head outwards. She closed her eyes once again.

She stood with all the weight of a young woman on five toes. She held the pose until she listened for the switch. "Now repeat the process with the other leg," Swami Vunde said.

She remained in position balanced on one foot, with the other foot touching the opposite knee. In her mind, she pictured the river that coursed down below. She remembered the feeling of immersion as she bathed each morning. She felt like the essence of the river.

The guru gave his Yoga stretches for some time. When he was finished with his breathing exercises, he asked her to open her eyes.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"Guruji, I feel like a new river." She laughed and was grateful to him all in one gesture.

"I am glad you are able to take advantage of the body's potential."

The guru was proud that one day, she would become a guru of Yoga. Guru Vunde was a progressive thinker and believed the effort he put into his student would be rewarded many times over.

Her discipline was extraordinary. It was remarkable for her age, how a young lady would be willing to give up the different stages of womanhood, the different stages of life, to become a guru in the ashram. It was revolutionary for a woman to do so, indeed. She would give up a family. She would give up marriage. She would give up motherhood. And when her day finally came, she would return to the *Mighty River Source*.

Later that afternoon, Asita returned to the Khalsi riverbanks. She had normally gone to the same coast not too far from the ashram, but she decided to walk along the currents. She contemplated the lesson earlier that morning.

She was the wandering river the name 'Asita' suggested. Whenever her father Dr. Mandiran was at home, he would be protective of her and her wandering spirit. "Young Brahmin girls shouldn't go to certain parts of Khalsi."

She reached a part of the riverbank she had never visited before. The forest leaves were of the same breed, but the rustle of the branches was strange.

Asita stood on the riverbank with one foot embedded in the ground. The deep mist of the evaporating river pleased her skin. She stretched into a centered pose.

She stood there like a sanctuary. She was her own temple and she worshiped her stance. She was an order against entropy, a pattern against chaos. She concentrated on holding her place in nature. The river was a chattering sound

in a secluded part of Khalsi. Thoughts raced through her brain synapses, "What then prevents man from flowing into the Mighty River?"

Subtle to her ears, she could hear the afternoon *azan*, the call to pray. It was a subtle call from the wooden mosque that was nestled back in the forest. She could hear the distant call to *Allah*.

That afternoon, the Kardal family had come from their town of Nurla to Khalsi to feed the children in the orphanage. They fed the younger children first and then the older children.

After the younger children's supper, Rashiq had snuck out and made the trip to the *madrassa* on the remote outskirts of Khalsi.

He too heard the *azan* call to pray. He walked to the sound of the mosque at the side of the school. He never realized that the school was so secluded. How appropriate that true knowledge was hidden from the masses, he thought. As he walked along the river, a flash of white collided in his eye.

The apparition was quite a distance away, but he could make out that it was a white *salvaar* shirt flapping in the wind. Rashiq saw a ghost by the river. It was a lucid dream. It was a white lucid dream against the forest foliage with the sound of the *azan* prayer call.

He stopped at the riverbank. He stared at the ghost. She was a kindred apparition. Like a lone, elongated tree, she stretched from the ground to the heavens. The folds of her white *salvaar* shirt swayed in the wind. She was peace by the river.

Rashiq was intrigued by her calmness. He questioned her stance. He wanted to know more.

However, Rashiq's mind wandered. The calls from the minarets echoed. He could not be still. When he heard the fifth and final call to pray, he looked once more at the white ghost. She left an impression in his mind.

He knew he would return to the river one day. But for now, Rashiq made his way to the mosque and his first visit to the *madrassa*.

Off the side of the road, away from the deposits of marigolds, the Untouchable observed from the shade of a tree. He observed the comings and goings of the villagers as they left the riverbanks to do holy processions. Relegated to a life of isolation, he kept to himself the few syllables he knew. He sat in the forest grass and the weeds that grew beside him. He observed the simplicity of the wild marigolds on the soil and the lone desert flower that grew from the rock.

The Untouchable picked up the desert flower stem and rotated it between his fingers. The stem produced a tactile sensation. He saw the two river visitors and rotated the flowers he plucked.

Flowers will always fall, but the thread that binds them will always remain.

In this year of the rebirth, the Untouchable watched the flowers bind together again.

Episode V

Five

The Center Shifts

The new millennium invigorated the city of New York. There was a sense of accomplishment on the streets, as the world's greatest city led the triumph of human civilization. An ATM card swiped into the vestibule of a commercial bank and prompted a screen, "*Choose a language, please.*" With over two hundred fifty languages spoken in the city, New York was perhaps the most ethnically diverse place that had ever existed on planet Earth.

After Giuliani 'cleaned' up the streets and the perception of crime subsided, there was a feeling of elation in the year 2000. Gone were the jokes about Y2K, and *Partying Like its 1999* became banal. The grunge music era was over, and in its place were electronic beats invented in Hell's Kitchen and exploited in Chelsea. Cellular phones were now necessities instead of novelties. In the inboxes around the world were emails and digital photographs of loved ones. The new century propelled forward, and Manhattan was at its epicenter.

In a city that recognized that perhaps a man could be an island unto himself, a familiar backdrop reverberated. The Hudson River coursed on one side, and the East River on the other. Along the Hudson Valley, the buildings stood like mountains that secluded the people.

As the Clinton era drew to a close, the Gore-Lieberman ticket rallied around the country in a pre-election haze, while the first lady led the polls in the New York Senate race. As one ambitious woman pioneered her campaign to Congress, another propelled her campaign in the *how-to* book market, as well as on the Yoga mat. Two years after her first Yoga experience, Sarita Rena had become an avid practitioner.

"Hi, Mira," Sarita said on her cellular phone. She was walking out of the office towards the subway. "You have to come to my next yoga class. My instructor is amazing."

"Well, I'm in town at the end of the week. We can go to your Yoga class then, I suppose. Sarita, is this how you spend your Friday nights?"

"No, not every Friday," Sarita defended. "Sometimes I try Pilates."

Mira laughed. "How's work going?"

"It's going well. We're releasing the fourth in a series of seven *How-to-*

Yoga books.”

“Sometimes you need to leave your work at the office, Sarita,” Mira advised.

“I know. I would like to, but I’m working alongside this woman who has become an absolute pain in the ass.”

“Oh, that same woman?” Mira remembered.

“Yeah. I mean, ever since I got the promotion, she has been constantly undermining my work. I feel like she’s trying to sabotage the campaign or something.”

“Well, from what you said of her, she definitely has that type of personality,” Mira said.

“I think it will be fine. I have a presentation this week, which should make the line of control clear.”

“Sounds like the 38th parallel,” Mira said, referring to the divide between North and South Korea.

“Well, she definitely has an iron fist,” Sarita laughed.

“Listen, I got to run, I’ll see you later this week,” she said.

“Great, look forward to it.” Sarita flipped her phone shut.

She went down the stairs of the subway station and swiped her metro card with grace and got on the uptown six train. Across the station, there was the distant din of an old Motown song.

“Ain’t No Mountain High Enough!”

The Subway Beggar was arriving at the platform at the same time Sarita was leaving it to board her train. Two years after the Subway Beggar had saved her life, there was something in Sarita’s subconscious about the mysterious touch of her hand.

“Ain’t No Valley Low Enough! Ain’t No River Wide Enough...”

The Subway Beggar had a loud preach. Her voice, albeit piercing, was not her only gift. Her alternate view of reality took her to a higher field of consciousness. It was a perception that was granted to the lowest of low, society’s forgotten citizens. As she observed the energy forms in the coming and going in the Metro transit lines, the Subway Beggar could perceive the core of a man and knew the history of his soul. She watched as Sarita Rena embarked on the rail car.

“...To keep me from getting to you...” the Subway Beggar’s voice trailed off.

There was no cell phone service down in the subway but when she emerged, Sarita was greeted with an envelope displayed on the screen of her phone.

She listened to her voicemail, “Hey Sarita, It’s Don. I wanted to know if you were available to meet before Yoga class on Friday. I have something I wanted to ask you.”

She left him a return message and walked home past a shop on 73rd and Lexington. The fall night became a bit cold. A porcelain urn in a home goods

storefront caught her eye. She rang the bell and the saleswoman unlocked the door.

“Where is that vase from?” she asked the saleswoman.

“Its design is a 17th Century Portuguese replica,” the saleswoman smiled.

“You have some beautiful pieces.” Sarita glanced up and down the shelves of the store. Each bright pattern differed from the next. She took a moment to notice the animals that swirled on the Portuguese design.

“Is there anything in particular you are looking for?” the saleswoman asked.

“No, I was just passing by and saw the vase in your window.” Sarita navigated around the breakables for a closer look at the display, noticing the inflated prices.

“This vase just spoke to me, I suppose,” Sarita mused.

The bell rang as another customer entered. Realizing the time, Sarita left the store unable to associate why she entered in the first place. She chalked it up to satisfying her artistic inclinations. But what was it that drew Sarita Rena towards the pottery?

Later in the week, her colleague Alice Parker walked into Sarita’s office fuming.

“Did you send these prints to graphics without my authorization?” Alice said.

“No. You had authorized them to graphics last week. We needed them for today’s Tokyo publishers’ presentation.”

“I did not authorize anything for the presentation today. These are a different set of files altogether. You’re going to ruin our campaign, Sarita.”

Sarita was taken aback at the accusations. “But when I asked you that very point, you said you would be fine with using the same set of graphics in Japan as for domestic marketing.”

“You better watch your step, or should I talk to Bill about your recklessness?”

“But I’m the one who spearheaded the different Far East introduction initiatives, which is why I asked you for your opinion on the graphics,” Sarita retorted.

“This is absurd.” Alice Parker was livid and walked away.

The presentation ‘Yoga for Geishas and Japanese Businessmen’ went off well, and they promised the client a new set of graphics. Bill Geary was happy with Sarita’s performance, and he walked out of the meeting feeling good about the work she had done. But there was something in the way Alice Parker had attacked her that disgusted Sarita. Corporate America could bring dissatisfaction to a hard day’s work.

As she left her square office in her square office building, she realized just how tired she was of thinking ‘outside the box’. The afternoon ripened, and Sarita took a stroll into a few shoe stores to relieve her frustrations. It was one of those

days New York sometimes gets in autumn, when the air on Fifth Avenue is a soft, light wine.

With two new strapless pairs of heels in her shopping bags, Broadway broke upon her with a babble of noise. She went to the familiar Yoga center to meet Don at his request. Mira would come later after the U.N. summit meeting that she was covering for the *Post*.

"Hi, Don, how are you?" She walked into the back office of the old dance studio with her duffle bag, shoe purchases, and marketing briefs.

"Hi, Sarita, I'm glad you came. I wanted to tell you something."

Don looked like a shop clerk in his back office. He stapled some papers and filed them in the drawers.

Sarita settled her things as they sat down on the office swivel chairs.

"What is it?"

"I have good news. I'm going to be moving my clients uptown. I bought a Yoga space."

"You did? That's wonderful, congratulations!"

Don Stellar lived above a Turkish restaurant on the Upper West Side with his wife. He had a grown son, a view of Broadway, and a taste for baba ganoush.

"I knew you'd be happy for me. It's going to be great. My wife and I have been talking about it for a long time, but family costs had always been a priority. Finally we decided to go for it, and I found a dance studio that was closing down on the Upper West Side. You'll love the name," he paused. "It's called *The Missing Peace Yoga Center*."

"Oh, I do love it. Its catchy, this is so exciting," Sarita exclaimed.

"It is. It will have three major rooms, including a Hot Steam Yoga room."

"Well, you'll have to give me all your information so I can check it out."

"That's why I wanted you to meet me. I want you to come with me," Don revealed.

"Oh, I would love to go to your class. How often will you be instructing there?" Sarita asked.

"Well, not as much as you will," Don said.

Sarita was perplexed as to Don's forthrightness. "What do you mean?"

"I want you to teach Yoga. You are a phenomenal student, and you have a genuine interest in it."

"But Don, I don't know anything about teaching Yoga." She rotated in the swivel chair. "I got involved to help market a line of books."

"It doesn't matter what the reasons are. I can tell you are genuine, and it comes through."

"But I work. I have a job."

"You can come to my studio at night, you can host evening classes. I'm looking for certified Yoga instructors."

"Ah, that's where you're wrong. I don't have any certifications or anything."

"It's fine. You can take the training course to become certified. You can do it on the side. It may take you a few years even, but it's fine. It'll be its own reward, Sarita."

Sarita rotated around in the swivel chair as she looked out to the setting sun. There was a sense of excitement that day, as though things had come into her life in consecutive moments.

"I know you must have reservations," Don said, "Let me give you the background."

She was relieved just to listen again.

"I have been an associate at the Gandhian Institute for many years now. There is more to Yoga than just the breathing or the *asana* poses. There is a thought process that Yoga allows to come to the surface. And teaching allows you to give that gift to people."

"This is a lot to take in. What does Gandhi have to do with teaching Yoga?"

"You see, somehow I do not judge myself in Yoga" Don said. "The *Ahimsa* philosophy of political change through non-violence has many ramifications, but non-violence starts with the self."

"Well, I'm generally not a violent person." Sarita said. She scowled slightly.

"Exactly, nor am I. After all, Gandhi showed through the defeat of the British empire that non-violence is several fold more effective than violence."

Sarita crossed her legs in the swivel chair and listened to Don.

"I realized that the power of the Gandhi movement was that he believed in the power of the individual's consciousness. Because he was able to imprint upon the psyche of the masses the philosophy of non-violence, he was able to strike a chord in their hearts. In believing in the power of the individual, he was able to unite them towards one goal. Yoga, Sarita, is one—just one—of many ways to do this."

"So the goal of your Yoga center is to control people?" Sarita asked.

"No, it is to empower them. Gandhi never controlled the minds of his followers. He believed in them. And I believe through Yoga, the non-violence philosophies of *Ahimsa* can arise, and can raise the consciousness of Americans to the problems in their own backyards. What better way to raise consciousness than in a daily practice like Yoga?"

Sarita was impressed with the passion with which her instructor spoke. She felt flattered by the faith he had put in her, even though he only knew her as a student in his class.

"Yoga is a process of coming together," Don professed, "And there are a number of things this center will tie together."

"Really, like what?" Sarita asked.

"You see, I came to the dilemma of where the profits of the Yoga center should go. If people were willing to pay for the Yoga services and products, I see

no reason for not selling them. Contrary to popular belief, money is not the root of all evil. Money is just currency. But, that doesn't mean the money has to go into my pocket," Don declared.

"Where will the money go?" Sarita asked.

"We have set up partnerships with a few Palestinian Refugee organizations. The funding will go towards education about the plight of the Palestinians, non-violent demonstrations, and aid for children of refugees."

The *Missing Peace Yoga Center* now had a political agenda. Everybody had a pitch, even a Yoga instructor.

"And you want me to join this new center?"

"Yes, I do. It is crucial to have the right people with the right values. After all, we will have the highest standards in the city."

She took a second to consider the radical idea of a Yoga Center funding a non-violent political movement. At the same time, the Yoga center would be funding one side in the most tumultuous region on earth. Wasn't the aim of Yoga to escape the politics of the world? Or did Yoga have broader goals?

Don continued, "It would be devastating if, after all the training and effort we put into our *yogis*, the center lost its best teachers. The center would lose its reputation, and the cause would suffer. I think you will make a remarkable teacher, Sarita. But I need..." he paused.

She looked at him as if she could anticipate his thoughts.

"I need a long term commitment."

The opportunity of finding a meaningful purpose appealed to her, but a commitment certainly did not.

Of all the locations in the world, of all the causes, Don had chosen to advocate for the Palestinians using non-violence. Could such a philosophy take root in a land choked with fear and violence?

"The Palestinians have suffered tremendously under the Israeli occupation of the lands captured during the Six Day War of '67. And the world is still feeling the effects."

"I have heard a lot of different things about the situation, but to be honest, I never really know what the real story is," admitted Sarita.

"You are not alone. Even those that do know don't really know what to do about it. But there is an opportunity for us to affect change," Don said.

"Okay," Sarita said hesitantly.

"You see, after the war, the surrounding Arab nations wanted the lands returned. By the early 80s, most of the Sinai Peninsula was returned to Egypt. And at the time, Palestinians were allowed to travel freely inside Israel in the West Bank and in Gaza. That was of course, until the First Intifada."

The Intifada, or the "shaking off," started in 1987 when Palestinian frustrations erupted, at first in spontaneous outbursts, and later into well-organized rebellions, and officially ended in 1993.

"Since they first revolted against Israel, Palestinian lands have been

closed off from Israel and the outside world. After a total closure in the spring of '96, unemployment among Palestinians jumped to sixty percent. And the number of Palestinians living under the poverty line has increased by fifty percent."

Don relayed the statistics with fervor in his voice.

"Today, Gaza and the West Bank are essentially ghettos, cut up by checkpoints, barricades, and roadblocks. The Palestinian territories continued to be closed off from Israel and closed off to the world. And do you know who suffers?" Don asked.

Sarita wanted Don to answer the question.

"The children. There is so much malnutrition in the children. The teachers cannot make it to the school because of the blockades," Don said. "And, after all, education is the key to change."

Sarita wondered if perhaps Don was too harsh, as crimes of injustice occurred around the world. She questioned if the condemnations of Israel concealed a double standard?

"I mean, you can accuse Israel of injustice," Sarita said, "But what about some of the brutal practices in other Middle Eastern nations?"

"Don't get me wrong," Don said, "I'm not saying Israel shouldn't live freely and safely, but the Palestinians have as much right to freedom and dignity as anyone else."

"It was in the news a lot after Camp David. My friend Mira is a journalist, and she covered that in July," Sarita said.

"And this is exactly why now is the right time to act. The failure this summer to establish a Palestinian state is a troubling sign," Don said. "As it is, they estimate that the fatalities of last month's outbreak will soon rival that of the first Intifada. And the Palestinian Authority has endorsed the violence!"

"Yeah, Mira was really disturbed too, even though she's supposed to be impartial," she added.

"This cycle of violence is more than a generation old, Sarita. And their own people are committing suicide with bombs in order to increase the impact of their attacks, can you even imagine?" Don said.

"But, I just don't know how educating people in New York will raise consciousness for a conflict an ocean away?" Sarita said.

"The real question, Sarita, is what will happen if we don't?"

Perhaps the impressions of the past, soiled with unresolved rage, could surface in the present.

"Did Yoga have broader goals?" Sarita rethought.

Don looked at the clock on the wall. "Listen, we could keep talking, but I need to start my class. Please give it some thought."

"I will. Thank you, Don."

He entered the room and gathered his things from the back room. Mira Steinbeck was waiting in the reception area, looking lost until she saw Sarita. The two friends hugged.

"So glad you could make it," Sarita said.

"You look great. God, look at you, no wonder you come here so much," Mira exclaimed.

"It's from doing Yoga, I assure you," Sarita laughed. "Oh, its so good to have you here. You're always so busy when you're in town."

"I wouldn't miss it. How'd it go today at work?" Mira asked.

"Oh, I'll tell you later. Let's take our seats. Don's going to start."

"Oh, so that's the infamous Don," Mira teased.

"Stop it," Sarita laughed. "Come, we'll sit there."

The other participants took their seats. The receptionist dimmed the lights.

"Namaste," Don said as he folded his hands in prayer position. "I see we have some new faces," Don said as he looked out to the room. "As well as some favorites back again." Don and Sarita smiled at each other with a mutual respect and an ongoing admiration.

Mira adjusted her inflexible hips on the foam mat. She looked at Sarita as the friendly spectator.

Don started the class as he always did. The room became quiet.

"Om..."

There was something beautiful about that evening. The caffeinated population of driven workers turned into Yoga practitioners. Maybe the city attracted people who were curious and adventurous. Or maybe it was the practice of Yoga itself, as its breathing and *asana* poses were starting to reveal something new, something previously unattainable. The hustle and bustle of the day subsided.

On this lovely island, nighttime presented a variety of opportunities. Restaurants in neighborhood hideaways, walks on Christopher Street on a pleasant fall night, a screening of a foreign film downtown, a gala opening, or a late night cab ride to the hottest new bar brought out the secret treasures that were Manhattan. With all the choices and possibilities, people were also taking the time to practice Yoga, an increasingly popular national trend.

The students sat on their foam mats with one leg stretched out. Sarita crossed her leg over her thigh and bent her knee. As she twisted in the opposite direction of her thigh, she realized that she was exactly where she wanted to be at that very second in time. She had a close friend beside her, and her possible future boss in front of her. She realized she was in the city she loved, from which she drew her strength with people she felt drawn towards. But there was something that gnawed in the back of her mind, just above the level of the subconscious. Was it possible to feel that everything one could want was right there in the present, and yet something was missing?

Later that night, the two old college friends went out to dinner to the hottest new kosher Sushi and Brazilian fusion restaurant. If New York was supposedly the 'Melting Pot', then the food ingredients certainly made a brand new stew.

Sarita and Mira went to the second floor where they were seated under a faux palm tree. The waiter, who was uniformed in all black, gave them their chopsticks.

"I think I'll have the jalapeno flavored seaweed wrap," Mira read the menu.

"I'll have the vegetarian salad with matza balls," Sarita decided.

After the waiter left, there was a moment of silence, as the two adjusted themselves to the sound of vegetables simmering on the flat grill.

"Are you turning vegetarian?" Mira asked

"I don't know. Don always says how eating meat is absolutely repulsive."

"Seems like you two have been spending a lot of time together," Mira remarked.

"Well, it's like I told you, he wants me to work for him," Sarita explained.

"And how do you feel about that?"

She was not sure how life-altering it was to become a Yoga teacher. But, Sarita felt a deep connection to what would have normally been an ordinary training process.

"I don't know, I feel almost destined to do this. I mean, it had to have happened for a reason, right?"

A sense of duty echoed in Sarita's soul.

"I mean, all of a sudden there is an opportunity to do something I really enjoy, and for a good cause, too. Think of all those people who will benefit from the class. Think of all the Palestinians who will benefit from the funding and the cause. I feel like this will lead me to something greater. I don't have all the answers, but I just feel it in my gut."

But in finding a calling, she had to confront a gnawing flaw: commitment.

"You know," Mira was suggestive, "I saw the way he looked at you..."

"Well, we're friends. He has a great outlook and I'm interested in learning more."

"But could you imagine the possibilities?" She leaned in over the table and lowered her voice to a secretive whisper. "Think of the Yogasm."

The term 'Yogasm' had appeared in the modern vernacular that year to describe an orgasm in a tryst between Yoga classmates. The ladies of *Sex and the City* would have been quite proud of the dinner conversation.

"Mira, He's married...with children!"

The two laughed as their apple martinis were served.

"Besides, he's a lot older than I am."

"You're not getting any younger, you know."

"I'm the same age as you!" Sarita exclaimed.

"I know," Mira laughed. "But seriously, what's holding you back from seeing someone?"

"I see people," she defended herself.

"But you don't," Mira was blunt.

"Well, I've been busy with work," she said. Sarita realized she was not completely open. "I just," she paused. "I don't want to end up like my brother and his wife and end up moving to Westchester and start the proverbial big Italian family."

"Yes, but it doesn't have to be like that, you know."

"I've been raised with the notions that I have to fit into the good Catholic girl mold. And marrying someone Catholic was part of it, at least for a long time it was. When I moved to New York, I saw first hand that you did not have to live that way. Now I feel like I'm just beginning all over again."

The city's diversity gave an edge to the status quo and threatened the assumptions of all its residents.

"People just get too used to being single," Mira judged.

"Besides, why should I settle for just anything?"

In a city of millions of singles, the probability of meeting another person was fairly high. As the apple martinis were cleared from one table, two glasses of Jewish wine were being served on the other side of the restaurant. Two men toasted 'to life.'

"L'Chaim!" said Martin.

"Cheers," Josiah replied.

The two men sat at the melting pot of a sushi bar. The Japanese chefs rolled their salmon in rice and seaweed, the *shochet* butcher cut slices with Kosher knives, and the Brazilian assistant added a little Latin passion to the jalapeno wasabi.

There was old camaraderie between the two pious men and a somewhat school-boyish assessment of the waitress.

"I'll have the tuna," Martin decided.

"The teriyaki salmon would be just fine." Josiah was altogether less adventurous these days. He was resigned to his normal choice. There had been little variety in the meals in personal doldrums. He watched the men in red aprons slice the California rolls with industrial rotations. With a widowed heart and wounded soul, Josiah desperately wanted something special to come home to.

"So tell me, Josiah, what's on your mind?" Martin asked.

"There's a lot on my mind, work primarily. I've been really busy with work."

"Work, is that right?" Martin was overtly skeptical.

"Work is pretty busy, I'm going to close on a deal in a few weeks and there is a lot of preparation. I spend my nights at the office,"

"Nights at the office, Josiah?"

"I'm sure it will lighten up in a few months," Josiah defended.

"Are you listening to yourself?" Martin asked sincerely.

"What do you mean...listening?"

"You have become a workaholic."

"I like my work. Its fast paced. You know how finance is. It has its cycles."

"Josiah, we've been friends for a long time."

Martin was a good friend and supportive through Erica's illness and her death. He was used to handling Josiah with kid gloves, a restraint of sorts, giving an almost brother figure his due respect.

"Josiah, what do you come home to?"

"Well, these days, microwave dinners..." he confessed.

"Have you been practicing the piano?" Martin asked.

The piano was Josiah's hidden talent. He released himself in the white and black keys. The slow talent of music was one of the things to which Erica was initially attracted.

Carnegie Hall, 1990, was the first date Josiah had with Erica. They listened to Bach's *Brandenburg Concerto Number 3*. The piece would resonate through the apartment in the years to come, sometimes from a CD, sometimes on the wooden piano with which he amused Erica.

The piano was more than an escape. Josiah's mind would focus on the sounds and notes. He would be in the present moment, and he used the piano as a medium of concentration.

"I don't really play anymore," Josiah said.

While his pursuit of music may have stopped, there was a place in his mind and heart yearning for concentration on the present.

"You don't do a lot of things you used to, ol' sport." Martin patted him on the back.

"Things change," Josiah was closing up.

"I'm just concerned, that's all. It's been a long time, you know."

"It feels like just yesterday."

"Look," Martin was candid, "closing yourself off to the world..."

"I'm just busy at work, Martin," said Josiah.

"You still have a lot to look forward to, you're what—forty? When, again?"

"Forty years old. Next week." Josiah hated birthday celebrations.

"You know, that is the age of wisdom in Jewish custom. You are on the verge of wisdom."

"Thanks." Josiah was not sure how to take that.

"And maybe, just maybe, it's time to find someone to share that knowledge with."

"I don't know." Josiah was uncomfortable with the direction Martin Goldberg was leading him in. Josiah looked down into his plate and played with his salmon roll.

"You'll never know unless you get out there," Martin said.

"You'll never know unless you get out there. What does that even mean?" Josiah thought to himself.

"And I'm sure you're going to say, life goes on, or something like that."

Josiah was starting to get irritated. *Life goes on* speeches were a dime a dozen.

"No," Martin said, "But I'm glad you did. All I'm saying is keep an open perspective."

"I know." In the back of Josiah's mind, albeit reluctant, he was relieved to talk about the unspoken permission, however awkward and unwarranted.

"And don't stop playing the music."

It was as if Julie Andrews had whispered into his ear. Martin had this all round quality of being clichéd. He couldn't help it. It was in his molecular structure to copy others at the most appropriate moment that arose. One-liners proved to be quite convenient during that trademarked New York Minute.

Josiah got home from the Kosher Sushi Brazilian fusion restaurant to an apartment that had much less spice and excitement. The red light on the answering machine was blinking. He pressed the "Listen" button and took off his tie and dress socks.

"Hi Josiah, it's Rebecca. I just was checking up on you, I wanted to see how you are doing. We're having a dinner next week at the house. Give me a call and I'll get you the details...Why are you never home? ...Call me, I'm up late."

Erica's sister was a good support to Josiah. They shared something that no one else really could understand. It was celebration, and it was tragedy, but most of all, it was friendship. In one of life's ironies, it was a friendship that would likely have remained dormant if his wife were still alive.

Josiah never seemed to remember phone numbers, and he looked through the nightstand for the phone book.

He picked up one of Erica's old books: *Jewish Spirituality: Unlocking your Potential*. He always had a fond and skeptical reaction to her books.

He found the phone book and dialed. "Hi, Rebecca,"

"Good to hear from you, stranger," Rebecca was upbeat.

"I know. It's been busy. I had dinner with Martin Goldberg tonight,"

"Oh, how's he doing? His wife is pregnant, right?"

"Something like that. So what's this about a dinner?"

"At Mom's house, next Friday, Sabbath dinner. They've been asking about you."

"It's just been busy at work." Josiah himself was getting tired of his excuse.

"I just think it's important that we all be there next Friday. You know that day is very difficult. I mean, that day I got the news... and the doctor came out," Rebecca reminisced.

"I'll try to make it." Josiah was terse on the phone. He held one of Erica's books in his hand: *What is Kabbalah?*

"Can you do a favor for your favorite younger sister-in-law?"

"Hmm, a favor? That means you want me to bring something."

"Dessert, oh thank you, Josiah, I just want this dinner to go well."

"I know...Is pie okay?"

"Pie is just fine...I guess it's the change of weather, or the leaves changing, something about this time of year." Rebecca talked on.

"I have a reminder in my hand, one of her books she was reading at the time."

"Oh, I remember, she was really searching those last days,"

"I remember." Josiah was quiet.

"She was open to all of it. She always said, 'You never know until you try it for yourself.'" Rebecca was in the mood to talk. "That's why I started a *Torah* Yoga class...the mind, the body...the Commandments, they all relate to breathing..."

"Listen," Josiah interrupted, "I have to get to bed. Tomorrow is a big day." They hung up.

There was nothing but loss in Josiah's life. The market had just started to look shaky. The community ties were weakening. And unlike a tree that would surely blossom in spring, the widower did not know if he would ever open his splendor again.

"I want you to find out for yourself the fruits of the tree," he recalled the words of his late wife. Again in the universe an abandoned soul had to start afresh with a message from beyond.

...The tree...the Sefirot tree...

He looked at Erica's books and started reading.

"What is Kabbalah?" he asked aloud. He could almost feel the presence of Erica Tamarind in the room. He was dozing off as he read.

"When one faces joy, normally the Jew may force himself at all times to discover a place of joy, with singing, laughter and wine. The Kabbalist approach says you pursue joy with all your heart, all your being, with a great deal of self."

As a member of an orthodox religion, he challenged the interpretation found in the text. "In that case, what about sadness?" he asked softly aloud.

He could feel the presence of his late wife in his dream-like reading.

"One does not weep from one's own pain. One weeps for the pain of the Jewish people, for the pain of exile. There is a wall in Jerusalem called the Wailing Wall. They don't weep for their own problems. They weep because the world is broken."

He had completely fallen asleep. The next day, after he showered and made his way to the train station, he did not truly awaken. He was thinking about Erica's book on the nightstand. As Josiah was getting out of the subway car, he heard the joy of the city that even echoed in the city's poorest.

"Stop, in the name of Love!" the Subway Beggar belted the lyrics. "...Before you break my heart!"

Walking on the street alone was the perfect time to indulge oneself, when loneliness reflected in the bits of glass mixed in the concrete sidewalks.

"Think it oh oh over...Think it oh oh over..."

That afternoon, another person indulged in her solitude. Sarita found herself in yet another shoe store. In the forefront of her mind, she knew the fall

collection of *Miu Miu* shoes was just the right patch for the incompleteness she was feeling.

As she came out of the store one more set of strappy sandals richer, she saw St. Patrick's Cathedral. It was as if she saw an old friend.

Sarita would go there each Easter with her family to celebrate the day. This evening she found herself walking in an aisle where the benches were empty and a few candles were lit. She walked towards the front nave where she took a seat.

It was quiet and still in the great cathedral, like a sanctuary from the material goods flaunted in the stores outside. Along with the afternoon's fatigue, the idea of training to become a Yoga teacher had just settled into her. There was something deep about the idea of training to become a teacher. She thought about duty.

As she walked around the inner sanctum, she looked at the images of the Virgin Mary. In one painting, the Christ child had fallen asleep, and Mary, with her sibylline lips parted and her distant eyes, looked at the child knowing the fate that would come. Sarita kept thinking about the incredible burden that the Virgin Mary had to carry out. From the Immaculate Conception to the Crucifixion, the Virgin Mary lived out a higher calling. She watched humankind take her son.

As she walked around the quiet and dim cathedral in the near closing hours, the story changed as the Virgin Mary lamented over the dead body of Jesus Christ. The sculpture of Mary cradling the body of the dead Christ moved something in Sarita, as the marble impressions revealed the drapes of Mary's dress. The folds in her dress flowed like water. Her expression looked at the closed eyes and the limp feet. It was perhaps in the feet where the viewer saw the craftsmanship most. The toes were splayed in divinity, as Christ lay collapsed.

The anatomy of the chest captured the lack of breath.

Sarita looked up to the feet of the sculpture in St. Patrick's Cathedral and took a deep breath. In her Catholic bones, she affirmed her obligation. And while becoming a Yoga teacher and supporting a political movement were by no means a sacrifice, she was starting to transfer her established commitment, from an indoctrinated religion to a liberating practice of her own choosing. It was a small step in a change that was previously unattainable.

A few avenues over on the East Side, that evening was a time of contemplation for another person questioning the doctrines of his religion.

"...I want you to find out for yourself the fruits of the tree..."

Josiah descended the steps of Grand Central and walked over to Lexington Avenue. The Kabbalah Center on 48th Street still had the green flag that flew over the front entrance. The upscale Indian restaurant had changed owners three different times, which somehow managed to shrink the already paltry proportions of samosas.

The golden light from the street cast shadows on the catty corners and owl sculptures of the Kabbalah Center's outer wall. The Kabbalah Center was an

uncanny reflection of an errand that came back to haunt him.

Josiah entered the double doors precariously. He knew the entrance of the Center, but he had never reached any further. While he had stood at the same podium only a few years ago, it felt like a lifetime had passed.

The gift shop on his right had not changed much. The book covers were reprinted, but the texts remained the same. The receptionist came from the coatroom to greet him.

"Welcome to the Kabbalah Center. Is this your first time here at the Center?"

"Yes, well, no. I wanted to attend an introductory class." Josiah was awkward.

"Wonderful. Can I please have your contact information?"

"Ah, yes, sure. What do you need?"

"Just your name and a mailing address, and your email if you would like to receive newsletters."

"I'd prefer not to give that information."

"Okay, that's fine," the receptionist agreed. "If you hurry, the class is about to start, so you may want to fill this out later, Mr....," she was probing.

"Tamarind, Josiah Tamarind."

"Tamarind. 'Tamarind', like the seed?"

"Yes, that's right."

"You know," the receptionist remarked, half idly, in the habit of relating anything and everything back to Judaism, the word 'Tamarind' is of Hebrew origin, it comes from 'Tamar Hind', which refers to a type of seed from India."

Josiah, who had always wondered about the origin of his family name, made no reply but filed this information in the back of his mind.

The receptionist proceeded, all business once again, "The class is on the second floor, second door on your right. You can take the elevator."

The Kabbalah Center room on the second floor had wooden benches and an altar in the center. There was a Star of David in the middle of the room, and the walls were decorated with Hebrew script. It was remarkably modern and less grand than the synagogue on 86th. The room had a solid mahogany wood backing with stained-glass windows depicting Moses and Abraham.

In the middle of the room, the receptionist gave the man at the altar a laser pointer. He was about to host the power point slideshow presentation from a projecting computer.

"Shalom," he stressed the sound. The breath exhaled with the word. "Good evening, and welcome to the one night that can change your life," the host introduced. He advanced the slide.

Josiah took a seat in the back bench. He tried to remain inconspicuous, but his left leg hit a menorah in the aisle. The other visitors looked back. There were a few couples on the benches.

"So I pose this question to the audience." The rabbi host looked at Josiah.

"Is there such a thing as Jewish Spirituality?"

Josiah thought about Erica.

"We all experience fleeting glimmers of a truth, a higher consciousness. When we cross the street at busy intersections, and when we fall in love, wander in a new market, or attend a funeral. We experience these glimmers of truth that make us grateful to be human."

Josiah tried to focus on the speaker.

"The *Torah* tells us of Adam and Eve. They ate the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. On the surface it seems that the *Torah* conceives of time as linear. There is before eating, and there is after. What is past is past. But in the Tree of Life, there is an ever present dimension of time."

Josiah adjusted his posture on the bench.

"Moses came down from Mount Sinai and gave to us the Ten Commandments. Like all great doctrines, there is always more than meets the eye," the host took a pause from the philosophy to connect with the audience. "So, what brought you here tonight?"

The audience was surprised. He looked directly at them. "You there," he pointed to a lady in the audience.

"Oh, me?" she thought for a second, "Well, I've been hearing so much about it. You hear about it in the news and all these famous people. I thought it would be interesting."

"Okay, word of mouth," the host summarized. "It's the best form of advertising. You there, in the red shirt" He pointed to a man in the crowd.

"I just wanted to find out what Kabbalah was. I'm a bit skeptical," said the man in the red shirt.

"Okay, curiosity, good and bad, that's only natural," the host was diplomatic.

"And what about you, all the way in the back," the host signaled Josiah.

"Me? Well, my wife got me interested."

"Interested, sir?"

"Yes, interested in something called the *Sefirot*." Josiah was very dry in his throat.

"I see someone has some background in the subject. That's always good to know," the host said as he began.

The host advanced the slide. "What is Kabbalah? Kabbalah comes from the Hebrew term, *to receive*. That is, we as humans are receptacles capable of receiving."

"*To receive what?*" Josiah thought to himself.

"It originated several centuries before the beginning of the Common Era, when man began to study and interpret the *Torah*, that is, the first five books of the Bible. Kabbalah became better known in the Middle Ages, passed down from teacher to student. The major work of Kabbalah was published in Spain in the late 1200s, the *Zohar*."

He displayed the next slide on the illuminated screen.

"As a disclaimer, there are some aspects of Kabbalah that are almost impossible to understand without absorbing a great deal of Jewish tradition. But, for the most part, Kabbalah is primarily about understanding the Divine and all its aspects. It is open to everyone to understand and, ultimately, for everyone to receive."

Josiah listened and thought about what the rabbi was saying. "*To receive what?*" he asked himself.

"The Kabbalists went so far as to try to diagram reality, that is, to draw the Divine psyche. They envisioned a *sefirotic* tree, that is, a tree diagram of energy flows with ten aspects."

A slide on the projector showed the diagram and the Hebrew letters at each node of the diagram tree. Their rabbi host then advanced the projector to a more familiar picture.

"Yet today, we are more comfortable with the double helix of DNA. They both diagram the same concept, the unified integrated human being, known as the 'Self.'"

"*What does the double helix of DNA have to do with Judaism?*" Josiah wondered to himself.

"You have all heard of the 'Names of God'"

The crowd was listening intently.

"The 72 Names of God are not 'names' in any ordinary sense. They represent the connection to the infinite that flows through life's realities."

Josiah was listening there, and remembering things Erica would read to him before bed. He could practically feel the pillow she would lean on. His memory and conscious thoughts were jumbled into one. "*Connection to the Infinite...*" Josiah heard.

"Perhaps the student has returned to this world to acquire the knowledge of Kabbalah, which he did not acquire in the previous lifetime. Denying him the opportunity to study pushes him back into the *Gilgul*, the Wheel."

"*The Wheel?...from a previous lifetime? When did Judaism have a Wheel?*" Josiah thought.

"The literal translation for the Judaic term *Gilgul*, the Wheel," the rabbi explained, "is the cycle of life known as Reincarnation."

Reincarnation.

"*Did he just translate the Hebrew term to mean Reincarnation?*" Josiah listened to the lecture and tried to work out the logic in his head.

"*I thought that was only in Eastern philosophy? Is this Eastern philosophy?...the Gilgul?*"

Josiah remembered some passages from the books Erica would read and tried to apply reason. The presenter proceeded, "It represents the cyclic nature of a lifetime. Reading and studying the ways of the Kabbalah bring us closer to complete understanding of cause and effect."

"I understand cause and effect," he said to himself.

"...a complete understanding that every action has an opposite and equal reaction, which permeates over many lifetimes. The student learns to break free from this Wheel," the rabbi described.

Josiah wandered in the workings of his mind. "Every action has an opposite and equal reaction...Isn't that a law of physics? I'm almost certain he's quoting from a science textbook...that permeates over many lifetimes...lifetimes? Is he suggesting...what is he suggesting?...Surely a rabbi of all people could not mean..."

"Each lifetime we start from where we ended, and where we end is where we will start," said the rabbi. "The Hebrew teaching of *Gilgul HaNefesh* is the cyclical reincarnation of the wandering of the soul."

Josiah thought to himself, "Jews wandered around the desert all those years, I guess this was the next logical step."

He chuckled a little, and then rabbi host made a disclaimer to the class. Josiah listened.

"I do not mean to inundate you with too many terms, but the Hebrew word *Hashgacha* means baggage, so to speak, carried from the previous lifetime. There is a specific cause and effect relationship molded by past lives."

"How can a past life mold your soul?" Josiah thought. He then revised, "Wait, past life?"

"There are tests and opportunities that constitute the moments of opportunity to change the natural flow of one's destiny," the rabbi host said.

His conscious mind tried to grab onto information, as if it were reading a stock ticker on a heavy trading day. "Tamarind...It means 'Seed' ...cyclic reincarnation of the wandering soul...Hebrew word...baggage, so to speak, carried from previous lifetimes...baggage?"

"You will learn at the Center how to mend your soul. Kabbalah teaches that within each of us is a 'soul', that continues on a cycle of birth, death, and reincarnation to free the limited parts of our consciousness that we have failed to elevate in past lifetimes."

Josiah took a small, comforting breath.

"Kabbalah teaches us of the spiritual forces behind the ever-turning *Gilgul*, the Wheel of the soul."

"Are there any questions from the audience?" the host opened up the discussion.

The man in the red shirt raised his hand and posed a difficult question to satiate his skepticism, "You are familiar with Maimonides' 'Thirteen Principles'?"

"Yes, of course, it is a major advancement of Judaism. It affirmed that 'God is aware of all our deeds'."

"Yes," the man in red was difficult, "But it also says that the *Torah* is the authentic word of God and may not be changed."

"Ay, yes, you have brought up one of the major concerns people have with Kabbalah. I am glad you have," he was ready to defend, "The *Torah* is the

authentic word and may not be changed. And as in the rest of the Bible, and in pivotal texts through out the world, like *The Bhagavad-Gita*... or *The Qur'an*, there are many ways to interpret these texts. That is why they are the pivotal texts by which most of the world's people live their lives. Because there are so many interpretations."

The man in the red shirt looked satisfied with the answer.

"Experiencing Joy and Sadness of the deepest kind starts with a very simple mechanism," the Rabbi continued. "In the Torah, the Lord blew his breath into Adam. This breath was very important. For Adam received the Breath of Life, the Breath of Light."

Josiah listened to the rhetoric.

"When you open your heart each day," the Rabbi said, "You receive that Vital Breath."

There was a marked resemblance between ancient Hindu doctrines and the Kabbalistic inner tree. It was almost as if there was a common origin for both systems, diverse as they were.

...*The Vital Breath*...

The rabbi continued, "And here, there are everyday techniques that can be used, for people of all faiths, or no faith at all for that matter. It is all based on the idea that there is more to reality than meets the eye."

Josiah had become very curious in the Kabbalah Center.

"Are there any more questions or hesitations from the audience?"

Josiah raised his hand, "I have one."

The rabbi acknowledged him, "Please."

He was acknowledged in the Kabbalah Center of 48th and Lexington Avenue, in a center he had visited just a few years ago at the request of his wife.

At the time, all he wanted to receive lay right there by his bedside. He had come once before to the Center before he ever 'needed' to find out about the *Wheel of the Soul*. He had a world of finance and business models. He had a world where he went to go to synagogue on 86th Street. He had a life in which there was so much hope. Now there was darkness, sadness. Josiah's mind raced uncontrollably and could not return to the comforting anchor that once lay by his bedside.

On the bench, he raised his hand like an adolescent. Dreams, symbols, signs, and adventure followed him like echoes of wise, ancient voices. Like an odyssey from Orthodoxy, he would ask a question layered with intricate elements from his life.

The day's news was buried in explosions in Israel. Josiah's mind had disconnected from his body, and he was alone. He wanted to ascend from the hole of blackness his life had become. He would ask a question that begged for answers to why he no longer played the piano.

That year, many centers shifted. One moved uptown from 23rd and Broadway to the Upper West Side, and brought with it a special Yoga

practitioner. Meanwhile a personal center shifted, from the 86th street synagogue to 48th and Lexington, and brought with it a will to heal.

There, on the bench at the Kabbalah Center, he set out on his spiritual treasure journey. In his curious wonder and disbelief, what did *The Zohar* and the mysticism behind the Torah have to offer? He lowered his voice.

Josiah Tamarind asked, "What is the connection to the Vital Breath?"

Episode VI

Six

The Tree Birds

A year later, the centers of power were shifting in British occupied India. Conversions to Christianity, heavy taxation, changes in second marriage laws, the building of the railways, and trading exploits brought rapid changes to the lifestyles of Indian natives.

Eleven years earlier in 1846, the British Raj had granted Maharaja Gulab Singh of Lahore dominion over Kashmir for just under eight million rupees. Gulab Singh's Hindu monarchy in Kashmir ruled equitably, and his predominantly Muslim subjects were not treated any worse than their Hindu counterparts. His successors, however, proved to be less open-minded.

The successors granted control of the most prized agricultural lands to the Kashmiri Brahmin pundits. Consequently, *jagirdar* landlords owned entire villages and extracted the towns' revenues. The landowners rented most of the cultivatable lands and levied harsh taxes on the Muslim population that worked on these lands.

Allotment of fertile lands was not the only change after India's 'Rebirth.' Kashmiris often boasted of an unrivalled tradition of craftsmanship, which flourished in the household carpet looms and back alleys. Villagers washed hand-knotted rugs amidst clucking chickens in open courtyards. Among clotheslines, shawl weavers folded garments threaded with fawn hair finer than eyelashes.

In the last year, the *jagirdar* landlords imposed a handicrafts tax in the Muslim town of Nurla, and Zackir Kardal was starting to feel the financial burdens. The payments due to the *jagirdar* landowners were now overdue. Additionally, he had to save for the upcoming dowry for his engaged daughter Henna Kardal, who was to be married off in a few weeks.

Zackir earned capital through both his farm and shawl business to pay the *jagirdar* landowner for the surrounding land on which he rented. Fortunately, it had been a good harvest.

"Grace to Allah," Zackir said.

The rains fell by early autumn and nourished the aqueducts. The farm had produced enough crops to sustain itself, but the seasons were variable and could not be trusted. Unfortunately, in the last year, the shawl business had

declined significantly.

The finest shawls were made of pashmina wool from the mountain goats that coursed the trails of Kashmir's slopes and peaks. The royal shawl was so finely woven that it could pass through a ring like wine. Patient and delicate wool embroidery on shawls was the work of village women stitching away under apple boughs. However, since Anjali Kardal died, the shawl maidens made no royal shawls. The time went slowly. No longer would the looms ring with the melodious poems that Anjali would recite.

"I give you the words of the great Sufi poet, Rumi." Anjali would deliver from memory, "It tells of the deepest longing of the human heart. It searches for the divine. The poem is called 'Do You Love Me?'"

The women would spin their looms, make pashmina shawls, and listened for the answer. However, the Sufi poetry recitations did not die in the Kashmir Valley. They simply shifted, from the town of Nurla to the village of Khalsi.

Over the past year, Rashid had lived in the Sufi *madrassa* in the Khalsi forestlands.

"Why, Rashid? Why did you join the *madrassa*? Grace to Allah, what led you astray?" Zackir asked when his son first made the announcement.

"Ever since I was four, I started to memorize the words of the Holy Book. It is only now that I can learn to interpret them."

The father scowled with his thick eyebrows and raised his voice, "It is the word delivered by Muhammad, Rashid. You would be naïve to listen to a Sufi's interpretation. Your mother was different. She did not carry this Sufi propaganda too far. She did not abandon her family."

"The schooling will not deter me from the family. It will bring me closer to everyone," Rashid said. "It will bring me closer to the Truth, as *mama* would have wanted."

His father was unconvinced.

"Have you not seen the Handler in the town? This is absurdity."

The Handler was Nurla's supposedly crazy seer, who would predict events and interpret omens. The Handler walked in the streets, and his hand constantly moved. From the minute he awoke in the morning until he fell asleep at night, he incessantly chanted *Surahs* and counted the recitals on his fingers in rapid motions. His fingers juggled the counts with the precision of a palmist and the speed of a *tabla* drum player. His hand was his Sufi connection to the presence he had recognized as Allah.

"I am not the Handler, and neither was my mother," Rashid declared. His face was stoic but his voice undulated.

In his year of mourning, the devout Muslim father gave his son more liberty than he thought fit. But Zackir Kardal knew he could not imprison a young man's will. While he may have been jealous of his wife's divine love affair, he was certainly more fearful of his son's estrangement.

"I will neither support this endeavor. Nor will I stop you," the father said.

"Without the Connection, the words of Islam will remain words," Rashid affirmed.

He was not ready to join the family business without discovering what his mother's last words urged him to do. He packed some clothes in a burlap sack used for *chawal* rice, and made the move to Khalsi, where the *madrassa* had also once relocated.

Built in 1402, the Sufi *madrassa* originally opened on the outer walls of the Jama Masjid mosque, where a large religious congregation flourished. After severe fires destroyed the mosque, the townspeople claimed the Sufis from the *madrassa* were responsible for setting the fire. When the Muslim townspeople demanded the Sufi center be destroyed, the *madrassa* moved to the forests of Khalsi, where it had thrived ever since.

Rashid walked through the foliage until he reached an opening. The *madrassa* complex was a square, symmetrical fortress. Inside, colonnades of cedar wood created an enclosure for the grand courtyard. When Rashid first entered the open plaza of the *madrassa*, he was fascinated by the inlaid geometric designs.

"Welcome Rashid," greeted a tall man in a woolen robe.

Like monks, teachers in brown woolen robe walked around the *madrassa* courtyards and conversed with other Sufis in the *Tariqas* order. These brotherhoods originally emerged in the twelfth century during the development of Sufism in the Middle East. Formed in reaction to the legal restrictions of orthodox Islam, the members of the order chose a master. At the *madrassa* in Khalsi, the head sheikh of the Sufi order welcomed the newcomer.

"Come in, I remember your mother fondly," said Sheik Abdul.

At the call of the *azan*, Rashid saw the brothers of the order pray for the first time. They stood straight on their prayer carpets. The *kazi* priest in the *madrassa* recited prayers and passages of the *Qur'an*.

Rashid watched as the members of the order brought their hands to their ears. Rashid touched his inner lobes. Slowly, Rashid joined the repetitions of the order on his own prayer rug. He bent forward and then stood up straight. He was then on his knees. Then his forehead touched the floor, stretching his spine.

In the first few days, he learned the physical *dhikr* exercises under the instruction of Sheik Abdul.

"The Sufi seeks a closer, personal relationship with God through these disciplines," the Sheik said. "Repeating the names of God while performing physical movements will have an outcome that lasts much longer than daily prayer."

Like an adolescent, Rashid was introduced to his many teachers at the *madrassa* school. The teachers of Islam taught the rights of the *sharia*, the philosophy of Islam, and the grammar of the *Qur'an*. He would attend classes, but there were no marks or examinations.

Within the first few weeks, Rashid felt reassured about his decision.

The sheik confirmed, "To the Sufi, perhaps the greatest absurdity in life is

the way in which people strive for things such as knowledge without the basic equipment for acquiring them. They have assumed that all they need is two eyes and a mouth."

"But that is how the world is. I mean, how can people know what they don't know?" Rashiq responded.

"This is why Sufis do not speak about profound things to people who are not prepared to cultivate the power of learning—something which can only be taught by a teacher to someone who is sufficiently enlightened to say: 'Teach me how to learn.'"

The idea of learning to learn resonated with Rashiq.

One night last autumn, he sat with the sheik while the rest of the order celebrated a festival. He watched the men in robes dance in the courtyard. They looked up to the night sky and took a breath. He had stopped missing home, but he still felt a little isolated.

"What does mean to be a Sufi?"

"It was simple," the sheik replied. "The substance of Sufism is the Truth, and the definition of Sufism is the selfless experiencing and actualization of the Truth."

"But, what does that actually mean?"

"There is nothing trivial about the Truth, only that it is just that, truth. Sufism is a way of being with God without attachment."

"Without attachment? Attached to what though?"

"In Sufism, you should not possess anything. Nor should anything possess you."

Rashiq sat there in silence. His mind wandered less than before. But in the *madrassa* at Khalsi, there was less in his life to think about.

For months he dwelled at the *madrassa* complex, living the code of Islam through the teachers. In the back of his mind, he thought about his isolation from his life in Nurla. Rashiq wondered about how people on the outside perceived the complex. He thought about how the Sufis were accused of setting the fire at the Jama Masjid mosque.

"But they were all Muslims?" he thought to himself.

Then he thought about the geography and age in which Sufism arose.

"Islam was part of a religious heritage that dated back to the Old Testament," the sheik once said. "In fact, there was a large overlap between Kabbalist and Sufi practices. Like Kabbalists, Sufis had always sought to maintain their legitimacy within mainstream religion."

"But they could not?" Rashiq responded.

"Since the popularity of the practices in the 12th century, Sufis and Kabbalists were both accused of practicing demonic, black magic."

"And so what happened?" Rashiq asked.

"Partly to counter accusations of heresy, Jewish Kabbalists adopted a more traditional approach, but in many ways, Kabbalah had declined as a force

within the Judaic tradition since its heights in the 17th century. In Sufism, withdrawal from the world was only a temporary phase of a cycle," the sheik resigned.

Rashiq looked up to the night sky and wondered. Was a 'spiritual path' an alternative to the ordinary human experience, or an extension of it?

Then one night in spring he got his answer. Rashiq was listening to the *hafiz*, who knew the Qur'an by heart and sang a melodic *sama* chant that echoed throughout the complex. Every night the mystics called out these chants. Rashiq liked this time of the day best. He then turned his attention to Sheik Abdul, who was in the middle of a topic.

"On a universal level, if unity is realized, and the process that leads to it is achieved, I thank Allah that I am able to leave this earth, taking with me the Light that will lead me afterwards," said the master.

Rashiq joined the other members that came to the *madrassa* discussion on a wooden bench in the grand courtyard.

"Truth can only be acquired by one who is after it, and it is a permanent quest. Our perception of what is Divine constantly changes," said Sheik Abdul.

"But how can Truth change?" Rashiq interrupted.

"According to the Qur'an, 'Every day, he is different.' The Truth takes many faces according to time, terms and place. Sufi education is never static. It changes, and there is always an ample liberty of thought and the need for a personal daily quest."

It had been a year since Rashiq had first entered the *madrassa*. Without any real experiences outside the *madrassa*, he had learned the details of Islamic philosophy, codes, and Arabic grammar. That night, Sheik Abdul called for a change that was previously unattainable.

"In order to live a Sufi life, you must first live your life. Exposure to the outside world is necessary. In order to recover from vice, we must introduce it, in a small dose, into the body of the person."

"What does this mean?"

"It is the principle of inoculation."

Rashiq was quiet and did not know how to react. At times he had wanted to leave. At times he had wanted to stay forever.

"I know I will not forget my experience here at the *madrassa*. But the outside world is different," he paused.

Sheik Abdul recognized his student's apprehension and prescribed a verbal reminder.

"Let me share something. There is a *zikr* prayer technique called the 'Pas-an-Fas', which in Persian means 'guarding every breath.'"

The group sat upright and listened. Rashiq watched the hand of the sheik gesture softly.

"This *zikr* is performed with the heart through breathing. If not carried out attentively and vigorously, the normal achievement of one day might take many

years. The method is very simple.”

The sheik bowed on the prayer rug facing the *qiblah* arrow on the rug.

“When you breathe in, concentrate on letting the word ‘ALLAH’ penetrate the depths of your heart,” he said. “So that it calls out ‘ALLAH’ when you breathe out.”

With all his time at the *madrassa*, he had never seen this technique.

“We know the pronoun for Allah is ‘Hu,’ again uttered by the ‘Qalb’. The words are carried by the breath to strike the abdomen. While breathing outwards, exhale ‘Hu’. It will strike His Sublime Throne,” the sheik said.

Rashiq took a deep breath. He knew something special happened. His mind felt calm. But he also knew himself, and wondered if that state would remain when he departed the *madrassa*.

Follow your path. Follow your heart. Follow the Truth.

In April of 1857, Rashiq left the *madrassa* to find out.

In the forestlands of Khalsi, he wandered along the river. While his return to Nurla was imminent, his transition back into society would not be easy. He had, after all, joined the Sufi *madrassa* after his mother’s death, in spite of his family’s reservations. He was unsure of what to expect and was not quite ready to return home.

The spruce trees settled in the wind, and he slept under the forest lace. For a few days he gathered fruits from the shrubberies. He went to the river to wash himself.

In the spring mating season, male birds congregated together in trees and displayed elaborate feathers. Certain species developed specially colored breeding plumage to interest females. After the breeding season was over, however, many of these males had problems compensating for the loss of feathers when flying, and often crashed into the ground when coming in for a landing.

As deer and stags chased in fields and birds took flight, the guns also came out.

If the British Raj were to be preserved in India, British society would have to advertise its cohesion. The strongest ties were those of social background, shared attitudes and the ‘character of the gentleman,’ which allowed the Briton to step naturally into the role of the Indian aristocrat.

Up-country hunting was the marked pastime of the British gentleman, and the excursions had become profitable. In April 1857, a lieutenant in the Bengal Horse Artillery took a six-month hunting and fishing trip to Kashmir. The goods he reaped would pay off the debts he owed back home.

Listening to the birdcalls, the lieutenant loaded his rifle. He took a deep breath of fresh air. Sages, rishis, townsmen, shawl maidens, farmers and pariahs all breathed that same alpine air. They were all part of the Kashmir Valley’s duality.

That morning, the valley looked down on a woman who was also

concentrating on breathing, as well as grappling with the duty of becoming a Yoga guru. With one foot in contact with the earth, the cool waters of the riverbanks anointed her foot.

In many bird species, females arrived on breeding grounds after males each spring, and they had the privilege of choosing among prospective mates. The potential pair then engaged in a series of displays by one or both birds over the next several hours, days, or weeks, to initiate and strengthen a bond between them.

Asita stood in silent concentration. She practiced the standing pose *Garudasana*, the Eagle.

Representing the pride of its species, the Eagle was a magnificent bird. The early light of day struck her face, and her white *salvaar* shirt flapped in the wind like the feathers of the bird to which she paid homage. Her arms bent at the elbows and her hands pressed together in prayer position. She stretched and toned the muscles of her leg. The taut legs and centered torso released an upward flow of energy through her fingers towards the blue Kashmiri sky.

Behind her, the Himalayan rocks soared to immense heights, guardians of the knowledge of those that had come before. Coursing and eroding their affection in sedimentary gestures, the river was the daughter of the mountains. With the spirit of femininity, in its strength and candor, the river knew warmth, but also wrath. Through its desires, the river waters returned to the mighty source. The waters bathed the foot of a dutiful Yoga student.

Each morning she would return to the river and continue her practice. From the distant fields where he tilled the land, the Untouchable would watch her on her journey. Today her normal audience of observers had grown.

Rashiq came to a clearing in the forest and saw the apparition. He observed her raise her arms above her head. It was a peculiar site. She adjusted her body.

“Who is that?” Rashiq thought. “And what is she doing?”

Rashiq was intrigued by her peace and her posture. He approached her through the forest trees, but she heard the snapping of a branch.

“Is someone there?” she asked.

There was no answer.

She did not see his face in front of her, but when she turned back, she saw the pupils of his eyes.

PAACHOO!

An unnatural sound pierced the forest’s spring birdcalls. The British lieutenant caught his first payment towards his debts. Rashiq receded into the bushes.

Startled and uncomfortable, Asita gathered her water pot and quickly left the riverbank.

At a hurried pace, she made her usual way up the road to the Khalsi ashram.

In the last year, she had come to know every grain of the familiar wooden doors that framed the ashram's entrance. The handle's latch cried with antiquity with her arrival. Some students leaving the ashram noticed the sweat dripping down her forehead. As she reached the central atrium, she finally caught her breath.

Interrupted in her morning routine, she was early to meet her guru. She first went to the prayer room on the second level.

"Remember, the purpose of Yoga is to prepare the body and mind for mediation," the guru said.

While meditation was the core of the Yoga path, there were other aspects of her education, such as her diet. Her Ayurvedic diet was composed of the seven tastes, but the tastes of sour, sweet, salt and astringent were the strongest. Sometimes when she talked with her guru about foods, her mouth would salivate. She loved *dhal* soups, spicy *sambars*, hot *chapatti* breads. Foods and nutrition had physical effects on her body, as well as her mind. After indulging in desserts like *gulab jamans*, her mind jittered from the sugar.

She bypassed the communal kitchen on the way to the prayer room of the ashram, where she hungered for *prasad* from the week's *puja* rituals. She smelled the garlands of flowers and broken coconut that were on the side of the *murthi* statue of the goddess *Sarswathi*. Asita then lit some incense that soon pervaded the room. Circling the tray of flames in her morning *arti* ritual, she affirmed her commitment to the Hindu rituals.

After finishing her *darshan* offerings, she returned to the central atrium, where her guru stood upside down.

In the past year, Swami Vunde had spent a lot of time training his first female student to be a Yoga Teacher. While he had invested most of his time in his students, he particularly watched this one's potential grow like a seed.

She would become the example of the Brahmin existence that he would leave behind. He inculcated in her the daily lifestyle and educational background to eventually teach in the ashram and serve as a guide in the village of Khalsi.

When she entered the room, her guru was holding the *Sarvangasana* pose, the Shoulder Stand.

"It is one of the greatest boons conferred on humanity by our ancient sages," Swami Vunde once stated. "It is the 'mother asana', as a mother strives for harmony and happiness in the home, so this asana strives for the harmony and happiness of the human system."

Asita watched her guru in the stance. She remembered how he emphasized repeatedly the importance of *Sarvangasana*, the Shoulder Stand.

"Inverted poses are an extremely important group of *asanas*. Inverted poses reverse the action of gravity on the body; instead of everything being pulled towards the feet, the orientation shifts towards the head."

Before the human body's systems of cardiovascular, lymphatic, nervous, and endocrine were ever formalized in biology textbooks, Swami Vunde said,

"Inversions also ensure healthier and more effective use of the breath's organ. When standing or sitting upright, forces pull our fluids earthwards, and blood unnecessarily clouds our breathing organs. When we invert, we allow our blood to take the nutrients of air to the rest of our body and exchange with the body."

Asita was convinced she would never explain the poses the way her guru could. Swami Vunde also had a way of simplifying the connection of the physical poses to their emotional interpretation.

"Similarly, on the emotional levels, inverted *asanas* turn everything upside down, throwing a new light on old patterns of behavior and being. Generally, these practices improve health. But most importantly, what do they do?"

Her Yoga practice started in the morning on her own by the riverside and continued in the day at the ashram. Swami Vunde was very clear in his intent for the intensive Yoga practice she underwent.

"They calm the mind," Asita had answered.

The strength in his shoulders was a testament of his mind within.

He held the stance for three repetitions, and then lowered his entire body. The veins in his arms protruded from the skin. The guru then relaxed into a seated position. Perched on the floor in his sphere of energy, Asita watched the nimble form in front of her. She could foresee the place of Yoga in her years to come. Always careful not to disturb until summoned, she listened for his call.

"Come Asita, join me," he finally said.

She sat by him as she did every morning. She put down her pot filled with river water and awaited instructions. The cold floor stung her nerves.

"You have come in good time. You come with the water from the river."

"Yes, Guruji."

Asita looked onto the balcony, distracted. The sound this morning had startled her. Even the heat of the flames in her *arti* ritual now dwelled in the moment. But it was the pupil of the eyes in the bushes that haunted her most.

"Why do you seem distant this morning?" her guru asked.

"No, no, Guruji. It's just that sometimes I feel lost, but then I find ways to feel better."

While Asita tried to brush over the topic, the guru tried to delve into it.

"Do you feel you lose your focus?"

"Sometimes," she admitted.

"Let me ask you something," the guru said. "What happens when you come up the hill to the ashram. Is your breath not a little short?"

"Yes, it is," said Asita.

"And what happens after we do our Yoga *asanas* and breathing exercises, and we come to seated position?"

"We are calmer," Asita answered.

"But why are we calmer?"

"Because we have finished our routine."

The guru paused.

"You see, what has happened is that the breath has become longer. When we focus on the breath, do you know what happens?"

She often thought about their Yoga routine, but now had to consider the consequences.

As a student of mathematics, Swami Vunde remembered concepts like formulas. He did not always remember dates or figures, but he knew he could reason things using a formula.

"What happens is the mind becomes clear," the guru stated. "It is a fact that the longer the breath is, the clearer the mind."

"Guruji, what does a clearer mind really even mean?"

The guru appreciated her honesty. He tried to think of an example in her life to which she could relate.

"During the busy workday when you are supervising the kitchen workers, is your mind distracted?"

"Yes, sometimes. There are *paneer* cheese and vegetables stews that could overcook, or *nans* that could burn, or *sambar*s that could boil over."

"But you are only thinking about cooking and supervising. After all, the food is very tasty, right?"

"Yes, this is true."

"Your mind is clear. It is busy with the tasks at hand, that's fine."

"Then, Guruji, I still don't understand what you are getting at?"

"Simply this: A clear mind stays in the present. A clear mind will not vacillate from past to future. It stays," he paused.

"In the present," she completed.

"And a clear mind is open to receive new thoughts in the present. A clear mind is open to receive love."

Asita thought for a second, trying to stay in the moment.

"So, Guruji, you are saying that all these *asana* poses can lead to a clearer mind, and what else? A new perspective?"

The guru smiled.

"And you know what the secret is?"

"Secret?" she asked.

"The secret is the breath. It is absolutely Vital."

He was still. She paused.

"But I already know about the breath. I do it all the time." She laughed when she realized what she said.

"Yes Asita, you have been coming here for some years now. You are learning very well. You are aware of what you've learned, but unaware of what you *will* learn."

"I am learning the ways of the Brahmans. Yoga and Meditation..."

"That, Asita, is what you are learning, not the reason."

"Then what is the reason?" she asked.

"You tell me the reason. I'll ask you, why am I here?"

"You are here to teach me."

"What other reasons are there?"

"You like to teach."

"Well, that is part of the reason, Asita. I believe my duty is to teach."

She looked to her guru with his legs crossed on the floor.

"Perhaps I am destined to teach," he speculated, "Perhaps I have always done it. Perhaps I *always* will."

Asita listened for the guru's implications.

"I think of the word *Upanishads*. It means 'sit down near someone'...It suggests the pupil sits down near his teacher at the time of instruction. Each morning my student comes to me. She sits down beside me. We do our exercises. She asks questions and seeks knowledge. I am teaching the student, who is learning to teach. This is how I know I am fulfilling my duty."

"Duty," she repeated.

The guru's voice undulated with excitement. "Now it lies in teaching a teacher," he said. "That is, to teach a student to become a teacher."

He looked at Asita for a reaction. She was quiet for a while and pursed her lips. She finally spoke.

"If I'm that student, then how can I learn to teach?"

"It's simple. Learning comes by doing."

"Then, how can I learn to be a teacher if I don't have a student?"

She felt the question went unresolved that day at Khalsi ashram. The guru explained.

"You see, it is my duty to teach you how to teach. Afterwards, if the entire village benefits or no one at all learns the asanas, that is not the fruit of my labor. I cannot be concerned with the result, just the action."

Unknowingly, she had been preparing her lessons for years.

"Guruji, I want to understand. I really want to understand."

"Asita, there is, indeed, much to understand. It will not come in hours, nor days, nor months. It is an understanding that comes when you are ready."

She looked at the new clay pot that sat on the side of the mat. The light elongated the pot's shadow.

"Here at the ashram, we teach people from many different backgrounds. Many faiths. Each comes with his own story to tell," the guru said.

"But not everyone can master the *asanas* poses. You are nearly there. I am certain of that."

"Thank you, Guruji," Asita replied, surprised by the unanticipated flattery.

There was the sweet security of a purpose. When she struggled, the guru granted her purpose. What did it mean to be a teacher?

Like a sitar that lulled during a performance and then built again towards crescendo, she renewed a sense of vigor in her breath. She sat across from her

guru in animated stillness, learning to teach.

In the afternoon after their session, Swami Vunde and Asita went out onto the balcony.

The sun warmed their skins from cold floors inside. Asita stood at the railing of the balcony that overlooked the valley.

The guru pointed to a stretch of flat land. "Do you see those hills far over there?"

"Yes. I've never been there though."

"In twenty years time, mark my word, a train track will run through those hills."

"Do you mean the East India Company's plan for a railway?" she asked.

"Yes. Part of India's so-called 'Rebirth' is this plan of the Company to transform India for the better, as they had in Britain."

"But they said in the newspaper that the railways will be beneficial for the country. It will allow for travel and broaden the average Indian's horizons."

"Yes, that does sound like something the British would have the editors print," Swami Vunde commented.

"The newspapers even say the railways will bring an end to the caste system. How do you feel about that, Guruji?"

"Well if it were to happen for the benefit of India, I am in favor of it. If it is a ruse to gain authority, which I believe it to be, then I am not."

"How is it a ruse?"

"There are hidden truths to the propaganda. Perhaps the most powerful is that the Protestant tradition is very strong. The Christians will regard Indian ignorance as evil. They already view the Hindu rituals as pagan, in need of conversion, and they seek to oppress the Muslims."

Asita looked out to the patch of flat land.

"You see, you are right partially," the guru clarified. "The railways will mobilize India. Progress is not only necessary, it is imperative. But I feel the intent of the railways is to convert and oppress."

"But what can be done?"

"It's hard to say what will motivate the Indian into reaction. The situation may be imminent or in the distant future. But mark my words, the colonialist will not fight all constituents at once. First they will condemn the Hindu temple, then the Muslim *madrassa*."

She thought about the statements she read in the newspaper. "*Railways will also be the great destroyer of caste, and the greatest missionary of all.*"

Was there a common threat to Hindus and Muslims?

The fusion and assimilation of faiths and cultures resulted in their particular and specific ethnicity in Kashmir. In the fourteenth century when Islam came to India, hundreds of Brahmin priests of the highest order were converted to Islam. The land, the climate, and the geography shaped the evolution of their ethnic profile, as a common language bound them together, creating a place

where Hindu and Muslim coexisted. While a disparity in the ownership of land separated Hindus and Muslims, a common ethos and lineage gave the Kashmiri similar, distinctive looks of fair completion, light eyes and sharp, pointed noses.

The next morning, Asita returned to the riverbank to perform her Yoga routine.

She stretched her arms upwards that morning once again, unaware of the spectator that roamed by the river.

A clay pot of water lay by her feet when she performed her daily routine. One summer day, she discovered the pottery wheel in the back of the ashram's kitchen. When she saw the women making beautiful earthen clay vases, she was awed by terra cotta. Her curiosity led her to the clay on the pottery wheel, unleashing her creativity on the base. She learned ways to create a clay coil, and rolled it round in light motions, joining the rough edge of base and applying the coil. She joined the clay and continued to add coils until she shaped the walls of the clay pot. Making the pot was raw and sensual.

Using the back of her thumb to make peculiar indentations into the pot, she created the surface effects. She asked one of the servant girls to help her harden the clay in the oven. It dried slowly. The clay that had once been clay on a spinning wheel transformed into something beautiful.

The shrubs behind her started to rumble. She heard something but tried to remain in the present moment and progressed into a more advanced standing pose. Her routine was coming to its natural end when she had an uneasy feeling.

Asita put one knee on a rock and lifted her pants to dry her lower leg. She caressed her leg with a towel. Like a Greek water bearer on Mount Olympus, with her peculiarly indented clay pot, Asita picked up the clay pot that she had made with her own hands. The lush shrubbery of berry bushes whispered in the breeze, and she turned behind her.

"OH DEAR GOD!"

She screamed and dropped the pot on the ground, shattering it to pieces. The clay pot crashed into the ground in millions of jagged pieces. The scream scattered the white birds from the trees. By the river, her utter fright paralyzed her, and she looked at the strange bird emerging from the trees.

"Please forgive me. I did not mean to startle you," Rashiq apologized.

"Do you always lurk in the bushes and spy on women?" She looked into his familiar pupils.

"No, no. I was not spying, honest."

"What do you want?" she resisted.

The shattered pieces of coiled clay were jumbled in the sand of the riverbank. The young man that had emerged from the bushes started to pick up the pieces of her broken pot.

"I was walking through the forest," he said as he helped her on the ground. "And I saw you standing by the river. I did not know what you were doing and why you did these postures every day," he said.

"What is your name? And how do you know I do this every day?"

"My name is Rashiq Kardal. I have seen you before."

"Well, next time, make your presence known."

"I am sorry." He handed her a piece of the broken base. She reluctantly accepted it and started to move away. "May I ask you something?"

"You can ask what you wish, but I don't know you."

"Why do you stand at the riverbanks all alone, and then jump in fear when figures seek you in curiosity?"

Asita was scared to make a sudden move. Who was this young man who questioned her daily routine?

"I stand at the river to meditate. I am a student of Yoga," she answered. He knelt by the riverbank picking up the pieces. The young man looked at her sad expression.

Asita took a deep breath to herself in front of the male stranger. She looked down at the grass twined between her toes. She put the broken pieces he handed her in her white *dupata* shawl. There was a vibration between them, as she avoided his glare.

"Would you like to hear what my master would say?" Rashiq said.

"Your master?" She took a breath to herself, "What would your master say?"

"My master would remind me of the message of Islam. He would say, 'Love the pitcher less,' he started to talk aloud as he reminisced about his days in the *madrassa*, 'Love the pitcher less and the water more.'"

She wiped the dirt from their knees. "My name is Asita Mandiran," she stated.

"It is my pleasure to meet you. I am sorry for your broken vase."

"It is transitory...non-attachment. That's what I say," affirmed Asita. "But I must be on my way now."

"Wait, you cannot go," he raised his voice. "Why do you speak of non-attachment?" asked the Sufi student.

"I speak of non-attachment because it is just a water jug. It is just clay, and there should be no emotion attached to it."

"Where did you learn this?" Rashiq was taken by the young woman's assertiveness. He was quick to inquire.

"I have learned many things," she said. She was reluctant to speak further to the stranger from the shrubbery.

"Did you learn about non-attachment by meditating near the river?" he persisted.

Rashiq's experience in the *madrassa* had taught him to question everything. His time there and his sojourn in the woods had left with him few social skills now that he finally met an outsider.

"I learned it through meditation, yes. But I learned about non-attachment from Yoga as well. Preparing the body for meditation entails..."

There was an inclination to teach in her voice, but she decided to contain herself from going further. "Well, I really must be on my way."

He did not want her to leave his eye's view, "Preparing the body for meditation entails...what does it entail? Why do you avoid me so?"

She looked straight towards him and said, "Preparing the body for meditation entails preparing the body for Yoga." She took a deep breath to herself, as she purged her hesitation with him. "It entails preparing the body for non-attachment to the world," she answered his question.

She was a bit uneasy with the young man, and added, "It also entails restraint...which you may wish to try! I must be on my way now, my guruji is waiting."

Asita Mandiran was absolutely beautiful to him.

"Who is this guruji you speak of?" Rashiq was relentless in his questions.

"He is my teacher. I do not mean to be rude, but I do not know who you are," she resisted. "And I don't feel..."

"You may call me Rashiq," he said. "I recognize your feelings of non-attachment," he stated. "I have just left my Sufi order."

"You are in a Sufi order?" Asita responded.

"Yes. I have just left the *madrassa* here in Khalsi."

She took a moment to understand who was standing in front of her. His beard crowded his face and his emerald green Kashmiri eyes penetrated her comfort.

"I do not doubt your recognition, but I do not know you, nor do I know why you lurk in the bushes and then reveal yourself to young women. Forgive my skepticism, but I must leave now," she said as she started to turn her back.

Rashiq called out to the resilient woman. "The master would always say, *feed the mind in stages.*"

She stopped and turned around to look at him in bewilderment.

"Who told you this?"

Rashiq took one step closer and answered, "As the prophet Mohammed would say, 'Address people according to their ability to understand.'"

Asita was on guard and at ease all at the same time when he spoke.

"It is reasonable for you to have fear. I grant you this emotion."

"You grant me this emotion?" Asita knew she had to leave, but there was a striking sense of self-awareness that Rashiq radiated. She recognized the interest he had generated in her and was not sure how to react to the attention. Asita was not sure whether she should walk or stay. "My guruji awaits."

"My master gave us half the truth," Rashiq narrated his experience to the woman in a white *salvaar*. "The other half we have to discover through our reflection and our inner experiences."

Every man is his own river waters. In any shape or form, Asita was naturally fascinated with the words of a master, a teacher, or a guru. Her duty to become a great teacher required her insight and patience. Patience came from

understanding. Understanding came from listening, and, curiously, she wanted to listen to him.

She took a deep breath, and asked patiently, "What do you want?"

"I want to learn...to prepare the body for meditation. I want to know these postures," he said with great zeal. "It entails preparing the body for non-attachment to the world. I have been learning the ways of non-attachment, but I know there is more to know, I know it in my breath. I want..."

His mouth and eyes conveyed a passionate desire to learn. Rashid was captivated by the young woman in a white *salvaar* shirt, a spring plumage of sorts. She talked of non-attachment and was at a level of understanding he wanted to realize for himself. While his mother's dying words may have motivated him to enter the *madrassa*, it was Rashid's experience that propelled him to discover the breath of Allah.

...My master gave us half the truth...

He was searching for the other half when he stared at Asita Mandiran and said, "I want to learn Yoga."

Episode VII

Seven

A Cobblestone Divider

Three years later, orange *Don't Walk* signs flashed to white *Walk* on the Manhattan streets. It was a cool, rainy Thursday morning in New York City, and there had been a series of flood warnings in effect. But the only things that ever flooded on Park Avenue were voicemails with calls to sell stock or overpriced duplexes with a view.

The rain brought gray anonymity. Waiting to cross the street, New Yorkers in trench coats darted with frustrations through the sidewalks. Umbrellas crowded pedestrians like conical wooden hats in a busy Thai water-market. Taxicabs came close to the curb and created walls of water that splashed on nameless trousers and designer shoes.

Sarita Rena crossed the street talking on her ever so indispensable cellular phone. She would enter her building on the north side of 28th street because would be the shortest distance to walk in the rain. Her friend Mira Steinbeck had another imminent trip to town planned.

"I can't hear you. You seem distant," Mira said.

"I said I'm leaving the office at six o'clock this evening. I'm teaching at the Missing Peace Yoga Center tonight," Sarita announced.

"How's that going?" Mira echoed.

"It's going really well. I just got back from training in Virginia."

"Virginia? Virginia is for lovers," Mira repeated the state slogan.

"Not for me, it wasn't," she laughed. "But I passed my Yoga accreditation test!"

Sarita was in the middle of the street on the divider of Park Avenue with her mobile phone in one hand, her umbrella in the other and her box of newly printed business cards hanging out of her open tote bag. She had just picked up the box of her new identity from the copy shop.

"Sarita, it's so wonderful that you have actually stuck to this Yoga thing. It is so refreshing to see you follow through with something," her friend said.

"Yeah, I don't know what it is, but I feel good about myself afterwards. I feel like I am transported into another world, and when I emerge I am refreshed," Sarita said. Underneath her umbrella, she had created her own private telephone booth on a busy street. "I finally feel like I'm on my way, to somewhere."

Fewer late hours at the publishing company gave her more time to figure out what she wanted out of the “work-life balance.” After she had been encouraged to train as a Yoga teacher three years ago, Sarita started leading the professional duality she hoped to maintain. Don Stellar was an important driving force of her Yoga path, and he encouraged his student to follow this path that was previously unattainable. Working at Don’s studio gave Sarita the flexibility she needed, and soon she would start teaching an evening class that would accommodate her schedule.

To complete the official Yoga certification, she took a few weeks off to train in an ashram in Virginia, where she practiced Yoga and started to learn to teach. She remembered the instructor’s words.

“That is why it is so important to be attentive to our action. We must be able to recognize which effects are positive and which are negative. For our students, we can emphasize the positive and neutralize the negative.”

While crossing the street on the cobblestone divider, Sarita put her cellular phone into her already overstuffed bag. Not looking at the street, oblivious to her surroundings, she avoided the metal umbrella eye pokers. In the morning rush hour, she bumped into a tall, anonymous figure, and the box of business cards fell to the ground.

There on the cobblestone divider of Park Avenue at 28th Street, Sarita saw her new beginning, in raised lettering on stiff, off-white paper, scattered like confetti after a victory parade. In the pouring rain, her entire new set of business cards floated in a puddle under a wrought iron bench. On this dreary, dismal, dull morning, Sarita’s new Yoga instructor business cards were drowning in defeat.

“Let me help you with those,” said the tall figure.

Water streamed down the sides of Park Avenue like a rapid river. In a city of millions of inhabitants, commuters and vagabonds that made up the anonymity of New York City on a rainy morning, Josiah Tamarind knelt down to the woman’s assistance.

Years since their first collision, the initial impression reflected in concentric circles created by the raindrops in the puddle.

What had brought Josiah to this cobblestone divider? This morning, he crossed the street from the other side to meet a client. As Josiah knelt down to the woman’s assistance, he had the sensation of having knelt down the same way once before.

It was so long ago, when had he knelt down and looked over a body that no longer breathed. As he knelt down on the cobblestone divider, the feelings of his wife’s funeral day haunted him.

Jewish funerals were very simple. Before they began the service, the immediate relatives of the deceased tore their garments, symbolizing their loss. Mrs. Erica Tamarind had been dressed in *tachrichims*, white burial shrouds purposely kept simple to avoid distinguishing rich and poor. The procession

stopped seven times as they carried the coffin. At the foot of the grave, Josiah watched Erica Tamarind being interred into the ground.

He knelt over the open hole in the ground and covered the coffin with a few handfuls of dirt.

Rabbi Koshner repeated the *El Maleh Rachamin* Psalms. “May God comfort you among all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.” Mourners passed and recited a condolence.

Josiah knelt over the open plot. Was it possible for a certain emotion and positioning of the body to awaken a repressed memory?

His navy blue yarmulka hung low on his head for the years to come. Tightly held into a ball of fear, shame, anger and despair, his spirit was lost in the draped mirror.

Eventually the neighbors went away. The meals were no longer cooked out of sympathy. People moved on. After his visit to the Kabbalah center on 48th and Lexington, his initial questions were resolved.

“Could an Atheist be Jewish?”

He thought of the conversations in his head. His wife’s unresolved quest to discover her Jewish spirituality had influenced Josiah’s healing. Over the past three years, visits to the Kabbalah Center discussion groups and reading the *Torah* in a manner that was relevant to him had opened his mind to the notion of receiving the so-called light. He had grown comfortable with the central idea of the system.

“The Kabbalah teaches that we are each a reflection of the whole Cosmos,” the rabbi told Josiah. “Each lifetime we start from where we ended, and where we end, we will start again.”

In a city where beginnings, endings, and middles were jumbled like Midtown gridlock, Josiah started to feel a change that was previously unattainable. All his life, he felt connected with the Jewish tradition and influences that ran strong in New York. Specials at Kosher delis and Friday Shabbat dinner specials were never more than a few blocks away. Not surprisingly, support for Israel ran high in this town.

Then last September, the High Holy Days brought a new development to Josiah’s outlook. His visits to the synagogue at 86th Street had become infrequent, but he joined the liturgy on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

“I just want take responsibility for myself, and the rest of my life to come,” Josiah admitted to Martin.

“Is that you talking, or the Black Magic speaking?” Martin responded. He was weary of his friend’s interest in the New York Kabbalah trend.

“I just think it’s time, you know?” Josiah said.

“Each person takes their time, in fact, the whole world needs to take responsibility. Look at what those terrorist Palestinians are doing to Israel.”

“But Martin, most Palestinians aren’t terrorists.”

“How can you say that after their threat to the state. The conditions of

Palestine, that is Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, were hardly enviable before the arrival of European Jews," Martin said with rage. "Arab leadership does not want to compromise, and worse, wants to prevent Jewish statehood and transfer the Jews out of the Middle East entirely."

"Isn't that a bit extreme? Palestinians would be satisfied to get back any land."

"Extreme! They want to destroy the state of Israel and reap the fruits of our labor," exclaimed Martin.

"The Holy Land ties together the land, the people, and the *Torah*. But if the teachings of the Torah are so fundamental, then is there any reason to tie a belief with a land? Isn't there something more fundamental to tie the knowledge to?" Josiah asked.

"Josiah, let me tell you something. It's a very simple rule of a country. If you take over another peoples' land, kill the people. But let them live and they'll never forget," Martin said.

Josiah got a shiver in his neck.

After the services, Josiah went home and looked in mirror.

He saw just the rim of the yarmulka on his head.

Yiddish for 'skullcap', the yarmulka was a symbol to separate man from the divine presence, thought to live in the heaven above man. In ancient times, an uncovered head was a symbol of freedom and human strength. The skullcap thus proclaimed that man was subject to the Hebrew God, whose hand was always over him. By the 1500s, it became a universal sign among all Jewish males of their special relationship to God. Orthodox Jewish males wore the yarmulka at all times, whereas Conservative and Reformed Jews were more flexible in their use.

"It's just a dress code," Rabbi Koshner said. "Actions speak louder than clothes ever will."

That day, Josiah respectfully removed his yarmulka from his head.

His faith was never stronger. He had never felt so free.

In the days following the Jewish High days of Atonement, America remembered its solemn September day. 'Destroy' had new meaning since the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. When the towers fell, the skyline of Manhattan had drastically changed, and New York was never the same again. After the war on terrorism waged in Afghanistan and the recent U.S. led invasion of Iraq broke out, the world had new atonements.

"The aim of Yoga is to know the truth which is oneself. This knowledge alone can help us to get out of all turmoil and petty-mindedness."

But for Josiah, there remained a question that the break with tradition had yet to resolve.

"What is the Connection to the Vital Breath?"

Years since he had knelt down in New York Presbyterian, years since he had knelt down and put dirt on Erica Tamarind's coffin, on the ten-foot wide cobblestone divider of Park Avenue at 28th Street, Josiah Tamarind knelt down

one more time.

"I believe these are yours."

He picked up some of the 500 business cards absorbing the rain. The cards collapsed like corn flakes soaking in milk.

"Just my luck," Sarita said. She fumbled with her umbrella and bag, which now touched the ground. She tried to salvage whatever she could.

"Thank you, I'm sorry about this."

"No, don't worry about it." He picked up one of the cards.

Sarita Rena

Yoga Instructor

The Missing Peace Yoga Center

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"I just picked these up from the *Village Copier* too," she said to the stranger.

Their umbrellas created a dry tent under rain pouring down on them.

"Maybe it's a sign," Josiah said. "You teach?" he asked.

"I just started teaching a class actually. The center told me I needed cards."

She looked at his face just briefly. His eyes looked down at her curiously.

She picked up the papier-mâché scraps near the leg of the bench.

"So I ordered cards," she told the stranger.

Two *Walk* and *Don't Walk* cycles had passed in the storm. Josiah's mishap for the morning had made him late. He helped her gather all the cards.

"Thank you, sir."

The rains flooded the veins of the streets. Swarms of people crossed the street divider. Despite the chill of March rains and wet shoes, on that cobblestone island in the middle of Park Avenue, she felt a kind warmth.

"Not a problem," he said.

Josiah put one business card in his suit pocket. He lifted the umbrella tent from over their huddle.

"Take care." She got up and crossed the street in the opposite direction. She was resigned to leave the cards soaking in the nearest trashcan.

They walked in opposite directions after their second collision.

Sarita walked into the ornate building vestibule and passed the police officer at the reception table. Security in all buildings in Manhattan had increased. "Orange Alert" was introduced into the American's daily weather report.

Last year, Sarita was promoted to the publishing director of *Emerging Activities*. By day she wore business suits and designer *Kate Spade* shoes, and by night she wore her spandex tights and went barefoot as a Yoga teacher. Don's Yoga center had become one of the trendiest Yoga spots.

Featured in *Yoga Magazine*, Don's center was gaining attention. "Yoga and Politics: Enablement through Consciousness?" the article heading said. *New York* magazine featured the center in their article, "Palestinians and Pilates: Who's really feeling the crunch?"

Later that day, Sarita met her visiting friend for lunch.

"It's good to see you!" Sarita got up from her seat at the restaurant. They gave a cosmopolitan double kiss, one on each cheek.

"Damn it, Sarita, why do you always look phenomenal?" Mira asked.

"Come to my class and I'll show you," Sarita winked.

"So how are you? I heard you were finally teaching. That's fantastic!"

"After my umpteen-hundredth hour of practice, I finally got certified."

Sarita laughed at the application process.

"This is so amazing. I remember when you first started in publishing."

Mira looked at her, "and now look at you."

Sarita had become the *New Yorker* she had always dreamed of being.

"Oh, check this out. I have a card."

She thought about the soggy mess after the morning on the cobblestone divider.

"Actually, I will give it to you later, I have to go back to the *Village Copier* for some. So what's the story you're in town for?" Sarita asked the journalist.

The waiter came with their waters – no ice – and two twists of lemon.

"Could I have a tofu salad?" she asked the waiter and handed him the leather bound menu.

"The same old. Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation," Mira sighed.

"Anything new?"

It was a question met with resign.

"I mean, I'm a journalist. I try to stay impartial, but I know it probably doesn't always happen in the writing. But few journalists' writing ever is, and often it's skewed in favor of the Israeli viewpoint. Look at the refugees who have suffered."

"But they are responding with a bomb. That's not right."

"It's the only way to get attention to the atrocities. The UN Partition Plan of 1947 was unfair to Palestinians."

"But Mira, the UN had portioned off sections of Israel that had a majority of Palestinians and Israelis."

"And this war for these Weapons, it's just going to delay any progress and slip under the American radar. But the fact that the lands have gone unreturned since the Six Day War is reprehensible. The Jews have exploited the Holocaust to gain sympathy for a Jewish state at the expense of Palestinians," Mira motioned.

"I hardly think you can say the Holocaust was exploited?"

"But it's true to some extent. I mean, in all the horror that the Jews went through, look at the Israeli human rights violations against the Palestinians."

Sarita sat back and thought about the awareness Don's center was trying to generate. Since the war on terrorism and the US led invasion in Iraq broke out, the attention paid to global politics had grown. The Israeli prime minister vowed to set Gaza free and pull out settlers, but the borders would not be those of 1967. Palestinian suicide bombers continued to cause havoc in the region.

As Don had predicted, Pandora's box opened with the outbreak of the second *Intifada* in 2000. The Palestinian violent resistance to Israel was more deadly than the 1980s *Intifada* and had broader reach. Heightened maternity deaths, increasing numbers of traumatized patients suffering from lack of treatment, emergency services unable to come to the rescue of the injured, acute malnutrition, anemia and stunting among Palestinian children were a few of the dramatic consequences of the occupation since the outbreak of the second *Intifada*.

Based on testimony from those suicide bombers whose attempts were foiled, the most common reason for suicide bombing was an incident of the bomber's past. Whether it was a brother killed or a father tortured, a mother or sister raped, every explosion was a ripple effect from the past.

Everyone was feeling the effects of the regional partition. Israelis had suffered a steady volley of attacks, terrorized, bound to homes, stained with the blood and the stigma of suicide bombers.

"No Peace with Israel, no negotiations with Israel, no recognition of Israel."

This declaration from a 1967 Arab summit in Khartoum echoed in the new millennium. Two generations of scholars from the West, the Holy Land, and the Middle East as a whole had yet to find a peaceful solution. The lands were scorched and the winds had shifted; where they came together was the breath of humanity, waiting.

That evening, Josiah waited on his way to a distant land, on a cross-town subway heading towards the Upper West Side.

Perhaps his friend and sister-in-law Rebecca, who was constantly trying the latest hot spot or trendiest restaurant, was having a greater influence than he thought.

"That Yoga class of mine is just amazing, and you've just got to try my pilates class, my body is ripped..."

"Your body is ripped?" Josiah asked.

"Oh yeah, I'm developing a great yoga butt."

Or perhaps there was another reason for his journey to the Upper West Side.

"Crazy," Josiah thought.

As he changed trains at Grand Central station, he walked past Abdul's small newspaper hut wedged between two steel pillars. As he walked through the station, a curly haired woman stuck out her coffee cup.

"Please, Mr. Postman," she sang the tune. "Look at me."

It was a discordant melody as the Subway Beggar held out her jingling

cup and asked, "Please, Mr. Postman, can you spare a dime?"

She sang aloud and looked into the very history of Josiah. The Subway Beggar sensed that again in the universe, a seed was being led to a different kind of spiritual pursuit. A seed that was soon to sprout needed a womb into which to be nourished. It was a return to a different era in his life. Possessed by no material attachments and possessing nothing of her own, she was the lowest of the low.

Railways will also be the great destroyer of caste, and the greatest missionary of all.

Later that night, Sarita walked up the steps of the Yoga center where she was scheduled to teach.

Completing the training was a two-fold accomplishment. Not only was she fully certified to teach Yoga, but Sarita Rena saw a passion of hers to fruition. In self-fulfilling twist, her interest in Yoga was generating an interest in concentration. But in her personal life, Sarita still had trouble concentrating on her concept of finding 'Mr. Right'.

"What's different about this guy than any others? Why should I settle?" Sarita asked a friend.

In asking this, she had gotten herself into a personal dating dilemma, and had made herself into an unattainable Manhattan maiden.

One summer she and her friend Donna were at the Javits Center, and Sarita met an Olympic swimmer. After a few dates, she called her friend.

"But Sarita, he's a really cool person. He looks like a GQ model and he's totally into you," said Donna.

"The problem is," Sarita considered, "I'm dating a fish. The only difference is that he comes up for air to talk about himself."

During the national primaries one year, Sarita was dating a political consultant. He was a Yale educated welfare activist.

"Sure he is really smart and very proactive about politics, and I love that," Sarita told her friend Nora. "But surely there is more to life than bashing Republicans. I feel like he reiterates everything he reads in the newspaper. I mean, if the press went on strike, he would have nothing to say on our dates."

She had never determined in her head the type of person she wanted to be. Consequently, she never determined the type of person she wanted to be *with*. She had the looks, a smart outlook, genuine compassion, and good friends, but when it came to commitment, Sarita Rena was breathing a different breath.

So Sarita Rena floated from date to date, boyfriend to beau, in pursuit of the one person that would hold her interest at the time. But as her focus would change, so too would the guy. Maybe she was delusional in thinking there was that perfect person out there in the cosmos for her.

"Besides, where can you even meet someone?" she resigned.

Don's Yoga center was a few blocks away from the Lincoln Center, with a prime location on Broadway and 73rd, where Amsterdam and Broadway

diverged.

It was the modern American Yoga center, complete with a gift shop. Cash registers rang up the \$3.75 Yoga bottled water and blue foam mats with *The Missing Peace Yoga Center* insignias printed on the back.

Don was filling out some paperwork in the back office. Sarita changed her clothes and came out to talk to him.

"How was your day?" he asked.

"It was a very eye opening day," she said.

"How's that?"

"I met an old friend today."

She paused for a second and then continued, "We discussed the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. I feel like I'm just starting to understand some of the implications," she paused, "or, well, possibilities of the Gandhi movement."

"You know, there was something that helped me to understand the movement. Let me tell you a story," he started.

Don was moved by a real event in Calcutta amidst Hindu-Muslim riots before the partition of India. It was something he felt deep inside his heart.

"A Hindu man had approached Gandhi and pleaded, 'I am going to hell because I killed a child by smashing his head against a wall.'"

"Why?" asked Gandhi," Don narrated.

"Because the Muslims killed my son, my boy."

"I know a way out for you', Gandhi proposed. 'Find a child. A child, whose mother and father have been killed and raise him as your own. Only make sure that he's a Muslim and you raise him as one.'"

She started to think about some of the effects that occurred since the land's partition.

"It's like he says, '*An eye for an eye makes the whole world go blind,*'" Don concluded the narration.

Don then became a bit hyper in his voice, "Did I tell you that I even got Fox News to cover a peace march I'm organizing for next week?"

"Oh that's fantastic," Sarita said.

"Hopefully this will bring attention to the cause. If we are to demand non-violence, we must take our cause to the world."

Don never told her that 'being the change she wanted to see in the world' would make her nervous. Sarita had a twinge of stage fright and could tell her heart was beating faster than normal. She took a sip of water from her bottle.

Her heart was still racing. She rubbed the cross on her neck and took a breath.

Somehow, in the last few years, her sense of self and spirituality were no longer limited to the physical confines of a church or cathedral. As she entered the Yoga room where she taught, she felt the same closeness she did inside her religious structure.

Like many Americans, Sarita's Catholic upbringing had given her a

strong sense of prayer. She felt it when she received communion. She felt it when she made a cross on her forehead, chest and heart. She felt it when she said, "In the name of the Father, Son and Holy ghost."

But, like many in the Western world, she had problems with the social dogmas the Catholic Church decreed. Vatican funding made her suspicious. She disagreed with the Church's restrictions on birth control, and the low birth rate in Italy was not likely due to abstinence. Priests taking alter boys into private quarters was not always for the reason of private counseling. The Church's doctrine of 'Love thy fellow man, shun the homosexuals' disturbed her as well.

Yet despite the politics and decrees, Catholic rituals did enforce her sense of faith. It was a special quality of an organized religion to help the believers channel their sense of curiosity. She maintained that sense of faith and sense of curiosity when she started teaching at the Yoga center.

And that evening, Sarita felt it, with every calm, steady breath.

She was confident in her training, which had consumed much of the last few years of her life. She had become more aware of herself and her surroundings.

Participants trickled into the newly refurbished Yoga room. The students took their place on their mats, arranged like a fleet of ships in a hardwood harbor.

She introduced the premise of the class. "The technique of meditation is to keep the mind fully occupied on one thing."

The receptionist closed the door of the room.

"When the mind is fully occupied on one thing, it is kept away from many things and it becomes quiet," she continued.

She commanded the attention of the students that had paid the thirty-six dollar lesson fee.

The cars passed on the street, and the Yoga instructor faced the class. There were whispers as the receptionist talked with a stranger behind her. Sarita carried on with the class, careful not to allow the interruption to disrupt her class and her students.

"Breathe in. You find a kind of calmness, and in that stillness, even that one thing will slip away after some time."

While her commitments to men may have fluttered, her breath certainly did not. Perhaps out there in the cosmos was that one person who could hold the interest of her calm, steady breath.

Even more cosmic, what if that one person actually came along?

Sarita began the class as she stretched into the standing pose and saw a figure standing in the door.

"Stand in *tadasana*, Standing Pose," she said.

But the interruption could not be overlooked. The door opened in the middle of the Yoga lesson. In the middle of the lesson at the Missing Peace Yoga Center on 1750 Broadway, Josiah Tamarind arrived.

"Breathe in," she told the class.

She saw the familiar face. Something about the man that stood with a

well-trimmed beard startled her. There was a familiarity she could not place, and could not understand. She stared at the man standing there, looking back curiously.

Her arms felt goose bumps. It was as if an electric current twinged her skin. In the quiet room of the Yoga center, Sarita started to hear the sound of water in her head.

"...I want to learn Yoga..."

Episode VIII

Eight

The Indian Mutiny

"I want to learn Yoga...from you," said Rashiq.

"You want to learn Yoga...?" Asita was taken by the young man's request, "Why do you say this?"

Rashiq spoke slowly. "I see your peace. The poses are like the *dhikr* exercises I practiced with my sheik. But they are here, outside the *madrassa*. They are poses of truth," Rashiq stated.

There was something extraordinary about Rashiq Kardal. He had an uncanny way of striking people to the core. He did not hide his logic. He did not hide his emotions.

Asita looked up through the morning haze to the hills of the Yoga ashram at Khalsi. The pink layers in the stone walls of the ashram glowed with the shell of disapproval. The ashram dome leaned over the cliff to where the river touched the shore. Two onion domes fortified with pillars extended beyond the ashram. She was late, but she had to inquire more.

"If you spent your days in the *madrassa*, why learn Yoga?"

"You said that the purpose of Yoga is to prepare your body for meditation?" he repeated.

"That's correct," Asita replied.

"Do I not have a body?"

"Of course you do." Asita paused, "I just thought that your days in the *madrassa* would preclude you," she stated.

"Isn't Yoga a relationship based on a master and a disciple?" he persisted.

"It absolutely is."

"Then what conflict could there be?"

"I do not know much of the Sufi order you belong to. I admit that," she exclaimed, "But you already have a spiritual master," she affirmed.

"My relationship with him was mostly based on the model of a spiritual relation between a master and his disciple. Sheik Abdul has numerous responsibilities. He is very important in the community."

Asita looked at him with a peculiar glance.

"I do not see any reason why I would have to abandon my master in order to prepare my body," Rashiq said.

His tone startled Asita, as well as challenged her. She held the broken clay pieces in her *dupata*.

"No, that is not the case," she admitted.

"I can say that I feel my master's presence. Must I give up his presence to learn Yoga?"

"No, please, this is not true. You are a Muslim and you have the right." Her stomach writhed with the stranger's request.

"To worship the Divine is an integral part of our being. It is like breathing!" Rashiq exclaimed.

"Enough!" she silenced him.

There was a moment of awkward reflection for the fervent young man who leaned over the young woman with a pouch of broken pieces and an expression of confrontation. She stopped and looked into the pupils of his eyes.

"Allow me to explain." She accepted that she would just be late to the ashram. "It is not necessary to subscribe to any particular one idea to follow the Yoga path," she said. "The actual practice of Yoga takes each person in a different direction."

She looked up to his tall stature and his sharp, darting Kashmiri nose and continued.

"Yoga only requires us to act and pay attention to our actions," she affirmed.

Her words were like a siren, calling him in a meditative direction. Familiar yet mysterious, persuasive but warm, her words resounded with him like a call to prayer.

"I want to learn Yoga," he repeated. "If it is not necessary to 'subscribe' to any one particular idea, then can a Muslim learn Yoga?"

He proved willing. She wanted to prove herself.

"Yes, of course. Anyone can learn Yoga."

"Anyone...then ...I do not know why I cannot learn..."

"You can." She quickly realized that her questioning had disheartened him, "You have to follow your own path," she encouraged. "And I must follow mine, which now leads me to the ashram. I must go."

He knew he would have to face the outside world. But he also knew there was a transition needed. After the last day at the *madrassa*, when he learned the "ALLAH" inhale, and the "HU" exhale, he was certain of it.

"Then you will teach me," Rashiq decreed.

"Me?"

She looked up to the pink onion domes that looked back at her. Her guruji waited. With the broken clay pieces in her *dupata* shawl, she could bring him no water this morning.

For what Hindu ritual would he need the sacred waters? The Mighty River flowed beneath her foot each morning next to which she performed a salutation to the sun.

"I must go," Asita said to Rashiq.

"Teach me Yoga," Rashiq persisted.

There was a moment of dormancy in the conversation.

Why did she go the river each morning?

"Now it lies in teaching a teacher," she thought of her guru's words. "That is, to teach a student to become a teacher."

"How can I learn to teach?" she remembered her concern.

"Asita, learning comes by doing."

Finally, she said to Rashiq. "I must think it over. Return tomorrow. I will give you my decision."

She looked up to the midmorning sun and left the river spot.

The dormancy continued, as the cosmos had predicted.

In the mid 1800s, a German astronomer realized that there were black blotches that disfigured the sun. The astronomer called the moving storms on the solar surface *sunspots*. Spots came and went in cycles of around 11 years and were correlated with erratic behavior in the cosmos. *Sunspots* caused solar flares and large ejections out into open space, a storm of weather in the black abyss that caused waves from the currents of gas that traveled across the surface of the earth. Minute and simple waves traversed the earth in dynamic patterns and emanated thousands of miles away from a solar body. Were the dynamic waves from the sunspot storms detectable to man?

That year, the cycle of solar storms that occurred every 11 years blew threw the Kashmir Valley. A single *sunspot* created its wave in 1846, when the British took official control of the region and decided to transfer Kashmir to the Maharaja Gulab Singh.

The deals benefited the two parties, and the British used the Gulab government to protect their imperial conquest in the Northern Frontier, which ran along the Himalayan mountain range from the Indian Ocean to China.

British exploration of Gulab Singh's land began immediately after the Kashmir Valley was transferred in 1846, and the Government of India dispatched a boundary commission. The explorers of twenty years ago had discovered the valuable commercial importance of the Valley, including the sources of *pashm*, the undercoat wool of the valuable shawl industry. But in 1846, the British rulers had much to learn about the structure of the Northern Frontier.

Sunspots came and went in cycles of around 11 years, and by the decree of the cosmos, the bizarre behavior started in the year 1857. As the storms raged on the surface of the sun, the surface of India felt the vibrations.

In order to perpetuate their rule on vast India, the British lived by one philosophy as the foundation of their entire political activities. It was the 'divide and rule' diplomacy. They gave it recognition in the constitution. Divide a land. Divide the people, and then, in the chaos of squabbling, take control.

The British knew the caste system of India, and used the principle of 'divide and rule' to weave through the caste-based political process.

“Social reform!” they would preach, “Social reform!”

With ‘social reform’ and patronage, the British started to intertwine their way with many of the institutions of the Kashmir Valley.

The ruler of Kashmir, Gulab Singh, once wondered, “*Why be loyal to the foreign power?*” But the rulers of the Indian states did not dare oppose the foreign powers, since they were too busy being entertained. British “gentlemen” gave great importance to the individual lifestyles of the rulers, and never interfered in their world of pleasure. British rulers remained unperturbed and used the Gulab governments of India as the base for its stability.

It was one thing to control the rulers; it was another thing to control the people.

By 1857 the British controlled everything from the borders of Afghanistan in the west to the jungles of Burma in the east, from the Himalayas of Nepal to the beaches of Ceylon. Missionaries had caused great unease among the Indians, and Evangelical Christians had little understanding of India’s ancient melting pot of faiths. Indians believed the British wished to convert them all to Christianity. In the heartlands, the “Doctrine of Lapse” changed the property laws, forfeiting to the British any land owned by an Indian dying without a male heir.

In order to maintain a military presence in the Northern Frontier, the British Army had some European soldiers, but for the most part the soldiers were native Indians known as *sepoys*. Somewhere along the way, the British seemed to lose touch with their Indian subjects.

Some blamed the advent of steamships that reduced the journey times from Britain to India, since now it was possible for officers to go home on leave, or for wives and children to come out and live with their men folk. Prior to this, officers had spent all their time with their *sepoys*. Now a re-creation of English domestic bliss in India awaited them when their hours of duty were over. With less supervision, the *sepoys* could congregate easily, and all good battles started with a rumor.

A new rifle was developed as part of a self-contained cartridge. The rifle required only the end to be bitten off, and the cartridge could then be used to muzzle the weapon. And throughout military history, there was an excellent way to grease up the cartilage: with animal fat.

There was one animal that is sacred to the Hindus, the sometimes bone skinny, but often road blocking, sacred Cow. There was one animal that was absolutely abhorrent to Muslims, the garbage rummaging, loud, grazing Pig. The neglected *sepoys* soldiers heard about the animal fat used to grease up the new cartridges.

In 1857, the Indian *sepoys* soldiers started a rumor that the grease was a mixture of cow and pig fat. Naturally, biting such a cartridge would be against both Hindu and Muslim doctrine.

It was quite a rumor - a bovine heresy and sacrilegious swine!

When the rumor spread, the state of Meerut, southeast of Kashmir,

refused orders to handle the new cartridges. The *sepoys* battalions of Meerut were arrested, tried and sentenced to 10 years of labor. At a ceremony in front of the whole Meerut garrison, the British stripped their uniforms. Publicly humiliated, shackled with leg and arm irons, the Indian *sepoys* troops were led to jail.

Then, the solar flares of insurgency erupted in India. The following day was a Sunday. As the British prepared for the church, Meerut exploded. Enraged *sepoys* broke open the town jail and released their comrades. A mob from the bazaar poured into the settlements where the Europeans lived and murdered any Europeans or Indian Christians they could find. Men, women, children and servants, were all slaughtered.

It was in 1857, in the year the cosmos emitted waves of solar *sunspots* that India’s insurgency began. After the murders that occurred at Meerut, London papers called the insurgency the “*Indian Mutiny!*”

News of the mutiny spread throughout India. Could there have emerged a sub-nation of Kashmiris that challenged the Indian state?

But Kashmir was like its own nation. The cultural identity of Kashmir, whether it be Muslim or Hindu, whether it be the Sufi or the Brahmin, was isolated. Waves swept across the earth in dynamic patterns. Alpine mountain air was crisp, cool and calm. What would become of the pious Kashmiri lands?

Emerging from the darkness, the Untouchable twirled his yellow emblem between his fingers. The lone outcast in the valley looked after the sanitation of the livestock in the pasture. Famine wrapped him in her arms, as the ribs in his chest protruded. The Untouchable found little joy, if he could even articulate where it was that joy grew. He was the lowest form of man in the village’s caste system, relegated to a life of communal slavery. He held a marigold up to the light.

The Untouchable had a peculiar interest in the marigold, and rotated the lone stem between his two fingers. From the plateau that looked down, he saw the mighty river between the leaves. The river waters splashed on the rocks near the bend. There was a quiet vibration in his hum as he sounded out what his limited voice could create.

The Untouchable felt the awakening from dormancy.

That morning, Asita left Rashiq with the shattered pieces of clay in her shawl. She left an impression on him as she walked out of sight from the riverbanks to the road. Through the village, she made her way to the Yoga ashram of Khalsi.

“*A Muslim man wants to learn the ways of Yoga?*” She thought about the proposal. “*How can I learn to teach?*”

She passed the villagers in the town. She breathed the dust created by the wooden wheels of the carts that passed her. She saw familiar faces in the village’s main intersection. Perched on the side of the rocks were the malingering workmen who sipped their morning Kashmiri chai. She contrasted their pace of life, as the young woman’s black tresses swung back and forth like a horse’s tail.

The equestrian pendulum overtook the horses that drew their carriages. Holding the broken vessel pieces, she hurried to the ashram. The vendor carrying the vegetables gave her a blank stare. The *dhobi* washer man saw her gait.

"Asitaji!" the *dhobi* washer man called out, "the clothes are ready, pick them up on your way down."

"Thank you, Dhobiji," she smiled, "I'll be sure to do that."

"What is all this hurry?"

She was out of sight by then.

"She never comes to pick up her clothes. I wonder if she only wears dirty garments?" the *dhobi* washer man thought.

The birds of morning announced her progress. She looked above to the rooftop that lay ahead. Illuminated pinkish orange, the day came into the familiar. She reached the ashram doors. She knew each crack and wooden fingerprint of the ashram's door.

She entered the space that housed the peculiar form, who stood like a parched tree in the middle of the room. Asita removed her shoes and took her place by his side on the mat.

Her initial breathing exercise calmed her arrival and centered her in the mode of the ashram. Swami Vunde was positioned in a classic half shoulder stand. He lay on the ground with his back on the straw mat that separated him from the hard wooden floors of the ashram. Most of his shoulders were taking the weight of the stance. Asita watched his stomach move up and down from the rhythmic breath. His toes were like fairy tale puff clouds in the sky.

Swami Vunde felt the presence of his panting student, and slowly came out of the position. He put his palms back on the ground and lowered his legs.

"Good morning, Asita. You come in good time." He ignored her tardiness.

"I do apologize, Guruji, I broke the water vessel on the way here. I have no water for you this morning."

"Asita, be careful, and let the prudence be a lesson to you," he said in a calm voice.

"I shall make..." she paused for a second, "I'll obtain a water pot even more beautiful than the one that broke," she declared.

"I do not doubt that when you touch any pottery, it shall be transformed to beauty."

"I think so," she said.

"Although, at no stage on the Yoga path should we think we have become masters."

She calmed down and sat quietly for a while. The thoughts of the morning had made her light-headed.

"Guruji, may I ask you a question?"

"That is why I am here."

"I know we have talked of this before. But, what makes a good teacher?"

"Many people throughout time have asked this question. It is a central idea." Asita listened. "If you look for a definition in the *Upanishads*, then they will give one perspective on the role of a teacher."

"All right, what would that role be?"

"The function of a good teacher is two fold. In the case of understanding the *Vedas*, one function would be to explain the scriptures."

Asita thought about her morning proposition and asked, "What if there were no scriptures, just Yoga?"

Swami Vunde thought for a second. "If there are no scriptures to learn, then it would be unwise to understand the definition of the role of a teacher through the scriptures."

He laughed, but she was confused.

"There are no scriptures to learn," she restated.

"Then in that case, I will be honest with you. I am not sure. I have always learned the role of the teacher as twofold, but perhaps it is my fault that I have only taken a half step."

The guru spoke from the heart and realized that Asita had come to him with an earnest dilemma.

"I tell you this, Asita, a teacher must teach by his life, itself. He must teach life through his daily acts, his most casual words, and even sometimes by his silence."

Asita became calm as she sat next to her guru.

"Only to be near him," the guru continued, "does the student learn."

"Only near him...or her," she thought to herself.

The guru continued, "The only purpose of scriptures is to inform the intellect, they cannot live life."

Asita thought about her potential student. He learned from other sources of scriptures.

"So let us say the student is not a Brahmin." She masked the situation, "and the student only wants to learn Yoga."

"There are many paths, but the Truth is one. Yoga transcends religion," affirmed the guru. "Let us talk more about religion," he continued.

Swami Vunde closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

He got up unexpectedly from the seated position. He brought back a basket of fruits. Like a painter's palette, the colors of the fruit basket were vibrant and primary.

He started to peel an orange, and Asita helped him. The citrus fragrance pervaded their area on the straw mat. She was not sure why her guru peeled in silence, but she helped.

"Do you smell them?" the guru asked after a while.

"The oranges?"

"Yes. Do you see this one orange?"

He picked a bright, fiery ball. It was the largest one. The skin was tough

and leathery. There were a few black spots and a crack at the top. The guru continued.

"Do feel this skin?"

Asita picked up the fruit. Ripe and soft, resistant to her finger that went along its curve, she felt the orange. The fragrance was sweet.

"You see, religion is a human construct. It is the customs of humans."

He paused.

"It is the skin of the orange."

"The skin?" Asita asked. "But what about the rest of the orange? The inside, the fruit?"

"You tell me," the guru said. "What is inside?"

She was quiet. She looked at the fruit.

"It is sweet. And refreshing. And nourishing."

The guru let her think. Then he spoke.

"You see, the skin protects all that is splendid. It allows the fruit to travel from the tree to the ground, and eventually, you can discover the inside."

"Discover the inside," she repeated in her head.

The guru continued, "The fruit can only be eaten once the skin is peeled away, and if one waits too long to do this, the orange will rot, skin, fruit, and all."

"But there are so many oranges in the trees?"

"There are many skins of religions. But in essence, what is at its center?"

"It's center?"

"Let us look at two religions, Hinduism and Judaism. Whether it be *Abraham* or it be *Brahman*, they both mean 'father.' There were two fathers, two customs, and two religions."

Asita was surprised that the guru would mention specifics.

"You see, Judaism, the thoughts of the *Old Testament*, gave rise to Christianity, which gave rise to Islam."

She thought about the young man who appealed to her that morning.

"You see, Hinduism, the thoughts of the *Vedas*, gave rise to Jainism, and at the same time to Buddhism. It also gave rise to the thoughts in Sikhism."

She thought about the two branches he described.

"If you look into the language of the Jewish people, what do they call 'knowledge'?"

Asita's eyebrows created a furrow. "I am not familiar with that, Guruji."

"It is in their language they call knowledge, *Deyah*."

"*Deyah*", she could not pronounce the Hebrew but repeated it nonetheless.

"Since you know Sanskrit, so I ask you, what do they call 'knowledge'?"

Asita was very quick with her books, "They call it '*Veydah*'."

"How would you compare the words?"

"*Deyah* and *Veydah*. They are very similar, Guruji."

"That is correct, Asita. In two parts of the world, there were two customs

that arose, There were two fathers of their lands. There were two sources of knowledge, but 'knowledge' is very similar."

"Guruji," Asita confessed, "I know there is something deeper here."

"Think of the skin of these two fruits. Then think of knowledge."

She paused.

"I know there is something more to what you are saying."

The guru was content, and he wanted to let the lesson sit.

"You came to me this morning, and you asked me about a scenario. You asked me if a student of a different religion can learn Yoga. I ask you, 'What does Yoga teach?'"

"Yoga teaches us to take responsibility for our actions," Asita stated.

"Yoga gives us the 'knowledge' to be fully aware of ourselves. It makes us aware of that sweet, refreshing, and nourishing inner fruit, so we take the correct actions."

"Is it all the same?" she paused as she thought aloud. "Is this similar 'knowledge' all the same, in every religion, Guruji?"

She thought about the young man that emerged from the forest. He had left an impression in her mind.

She listened to Swami Vunde as he tried to answer her concern.

"By knowing your true nature, that sweet, refreshing, and nourishing inner fruit, you will know the truth in others. In that truth, we come together in Yoga. And that is why Yoga transcends religions," the guru said.

Fertility in the ashram overlooked the Kashmiri hills. Asita could not pin down completely the connection between the ancient languages of Hebrew and Sanskrit. Perhaps, more than the similarity of the words, she saw an opportunity.

...*The Vital Breath*...

She felt like a Michelangelo sculpture that had yet to be refined from the marble. Either directly or indirectly, in all the different religions and philosophies, contemplating these points, she wanted to prepare the body for meditation. She wanted to come together in Yoga.

The cold floor seeped into her nerves and into her mind as she contemplated the words of her guru and the actions she would have to take. The guru then spoke.

"If you can convey this without scriptures, then do so. Teach the Yoga path the best way you know how."

She was waiting for these words, as her decision over whether to teach the young man by the riverside had become clear.

The conversation about religion rolled around and finally settled in her head like a small ball in a bowl. "*Yoga transcends Religion*."

The guru continued his instruction of the *asana* poses. They centered themselves on the mat and raised their arms up to the sky to prepare their bodies for meditation.

Teacher and student, master and disciple, the transitions from the body to

the breath occurred in the ashram's vacuum. In a change that was previously unattainable, Asita no longer wavered in her role as the Brahmin guru.

She spent the rest of the afternoon in the ashram working on her Yoga poses. In the time that lagged in the day, she went into the outer walls of the ashram complex, where the pottery wheel stood. There was clay everywhere and she looked around for any pottery maidens, but they had taken the afternoon to rest. She just knew she would be at that spinning wheel again. Before Swami Vunde retired for the day, Asita called to him, "I will come later in the day tomorrow to see you."

"Oh, is that right? Why is that?"

She smiled to herself and filled with joy. "I need to peel an orange."

She looked out on the balcony of the ashram. The sun had lowered itself behind the peaks of the Himalayans that soared in the sky. The view from the balcony overlooked the river where she made her daily pilgrimage.

The river coursed through the valley in its cyclic currents. The waters evaporated from the surface steam, and rose to the sky, forming clouds to rain again back into the river waters. Each man was his own river waters, in a cycle through that which is nameless. The reincarnated waters flowed through the valley, a metaphor for the cycle of life that the guru had inculcated in his favorite student.

A Yoga student became a Yoga teacher, in order to teach another Yoga student.

By the river bends, water splashed on the rocks in gentle ripples. The Muslim young man asked to learn Yoga, and a teacher stood by the river.

The next morning he emerged from the shrubbery once again.

Asita Mandiran stood by the river waters practicing the Eagle pose. Her one foot touched the river waters. When the shrubbery shook in the breeze, she knew Rashid Kardal had appeared to her. Her eyes were closed, and she sensed his presence, like her guru had done with her.

She spoke, "I have your answer. I will take you on as an informal student, and teach you the Yoga path."

"That is Allah to my ears." Rashid was almost sure he would learn today.

"I have the time now, and I will teach you the best way I know how," she was upfront.

"And what way would that be?"

"Well, one learns by doing, so we will do."

Asita had a renewed sense of confidence as she took on her first student as a Brahmin guru. They sat by the river that morning.

Settled, warm, undisturbed, alive with the possibilities of a new day, they were like two cups of tea on a breakfast table. She took the first teaching sip.

"The actual practice of Yoga takes each person in a different direction. It is not necessary to subscribe to any particular ideas to follow the Yoga path. It only requires us to act and pay attention to our actions, so that we pay attention

to where we are going, and how we are going to get there."

"This is what you said yesterday."

"That is why I repeat it today," she continued, "This process of self-observation will become one of self-discovery, one of unification. Think of Yoga as a coming together of body, breath and mind."

"Let's start," she said, "The first pose is the sitting pose. It is simple. You simply breathe in and out and start to pay attention to the breath."

"Pay attention to the breath? But that happens regardless," Rashid said.

"It is a constant," Asita affirmed.

There by the river on the shore, two figures sat on the sand with straight backs. It was a quiet beginning, as two young minds and bodies came together by the river, to breathe.

"Now, the poses are called *asanas*," she started to teach but was not sure at what pace she should go. "The positions will grow more difficult as we progress."

"That is as *Allah* made it. Things progress in their due time," Rashid commented.

Asita was unsure how to treat her new subject. He was not exactly a *carte blanche* when it came to the 'skin of the fruit'.

"I must make a confession, Rashid."

"Please do."

"You are my first Yoga student. I am not myself right now, as I am now the teacher."

"I thank you for your honesty. But you are clear and I understand you."

Rashid was very pleasing to her. She started to admire his precision.

"You have a perspective that is well," she paused to herself, "different than mine. I think, I too, will learn from this."

The thought of becoming a better teacher was starting to settle, and Asita was also excited at the new prospect.

"May I ask you something?"

"Of course, you may ask anything you deem fit."

"Why do Muslims call it 'Sufi'?"

Asita was curious about her only student. Rashid had emerged from the *madrassa* having had very little contact with the outside world. He had studied concepts that were commonplace in the complex. The young woman sat across from him, as the river waters passed by, asking about what had been the center of his life for the past year.

"The root of the word 'Sufi' means wool," Rashid explained. "After the death of Muhammad, there were those in the Islamic community who wanted to convey the inner message of Islam."

"Bare the inner message," she repeated quietly to herself.

"Many of them donned coarse woolen garments. They wanted to protest the sultans who adorned themselves in silk and satin," he described the fabric

hierarchy.

"And so they were called *Sufis*," Asita ascertained the etymology.

"They saw a world overtaking Islam. They sought to purify it from within." Asita listened as to the quiet intensity of the young man as he tried to relate his experience. "They wanted to recover its liberty and its love, and restore its deeper tones."

His piercing glance, intensified by a strong jaw, intrigued her to the core.

"Externals should yield to internals," Rashiq remembered a phrase he liked. It was a release for him to tell the story of his days at the *madrassa*.

"Outward symbol of inner reality," he told of his change.

He thought about the lonely road from Khalsi back to Nurla. He was reminded of the depths of his familial needs, but after leaving them for so long, how could he go back?

"Love the pitcher less...and the water more," she thought about their chance meeting yesterday.

"In the *Qur'an* itself, Allah presents himself as *Al-Zahir* and *Al-Batin*, the Outward and the Inward. Many Muslims are satisfied with the explicit meanings of the *Qur'an*," he rephrased his words.

"Are you?" she asked.

He was silent.

"The contemplation of God occupies a significant place in every Muslim's life. But for the most part, it must compete with life's other demands and yield to the demands of people's busy lives."

There was a sense of maturity, a social understanding as he talked about his fellow man.

"Is your life busy?" she asked.

"No. It stands, well, to reason to think that not many Muslims will have the time...or the inclination...to keep up with the Divine order in their lives..."

Asita listened to a young man who pondered aloud. Rashiq continued.

"But that sense of Faith exists in most people, and in the end, their reward will be as great as the Sufi's."

"You speak of rewards." Asita tried to understand the young man that sat across from her, "Would you say that in searching, you encounter impatience?"

"Perhaps a Sufi does encounter impatience- impatience to encounter the reward, the Divine," he said.

"Then how can you ever expect to encounter a reward, if impatience blocks your way?" the new Yoga teacher asked.

"I am impatient to encounter the Divine...to encounter the reward in this very lifetime."

"In this very lifetime?"

"At this moment," he reiterated.

"At this very moment," she repeated.

"Now."

It was at that minute, that very second in time that it felt like the earth stopped. The Himalayan mountains stopped converging. The river's rapids lost their ripples. And there in the Kashmiri valley, two figures sat by the motionless rocks. It was a moment of stillness, a moment of change.

"How can you encounter your reward, if you can not conquer your impatience?" she asked.

"One must encounter before one can conquer."

"Perhaps," Asita said, "or perhaps it is the opposite. Perhaps you must conquer all the things in your life that inhibit you, and then you can encounter all that you are searching for."

Like a coyote whose howl was quelled, Rashiq was silent. He was taken by surprise by her insight, as he looked towards her and said in a slow voice,

"How will I conquer?"

It was like the Socratic method of teaching, and she waited for her student to 'encounter' his own questions.

"Yoga will conquer impatience, that is, if you want to take the Yoga path."

She was secure in her knowledge.

It was a connection of minds, as he followed the breath she led. *Al-Zahir* and *Al-Batin*, the Outward and the Inward, followed. Their ribs moved up and down, as she brought him into an *asana* pose. Like windmills, their arms moved in circles up and down.

Beyond religions, beyond *darshan* offerings and *zikr* prayers, minds connected in a simultaneous search.

"By knowing your true nature... you will know the truth in others, also. In that truth, we come together. That is the meaning of Yoga," the words of her guru passed into her mind.

"I suppose now would be a good time to tell you the definition of 'Yoga'," she said.

"How would you define it?" said Rashiq.

"I can provide you many words about the word 'Yoga'. There are many interpretations. Some translate it 'to come together'."

"Others write it is to 'tie the strands of the mind together'." These two meanings may seem different, but they are similar," she said.

"However, Rashiq, as with most things in life, there is a deeper interpretation. Yoga is to attain what was previously unattainable."

It was there by the river that they exchanged thoughts. Two bodies breathed in unison.

It was their second conscious encounter.

The familiar set of eyes looked upon the pair. The familiar eyes looked on as the marigold rotated between the Untouchable's fingers.

There in the Kashmir Valley, the Muslim learned from Hindu, and the Hindu learned from Muslim. Encrusted in the Himalayan peaks, the Kashmiri identity flourished and absorbed the influences of the verdant hills.

Sunspots created currents in the sky.

Meanwhile in Meerut, Indian *sepoys* torched the British settlement. Hours upon hours of mayhem ensued, and the Indian *sepoys* feared retaliation when the British recovered and organized the European forces.

The British planned their "Divide and rule" diplomacy counter strategy and planted the seeds to divide a land, divide the people, and then in their chaos of squabbling, take control. The Indian *sepoys* fled down the main road to Delhi, and took refuge in the Palace of Bahadur Shah, the last Moghul Emperor. Europeans were then attacked in Delhi.

Retribution would not remain dormant in the Kashmir Valley.

The Khalsi ashram looked down upon the Brahmin woman. The riverbanks were at a visible distance. But, downstream was somewhat of a mystery to her since the British had set up a trading post hill station there a few years ago. In Kashmir, the major rivers were becoming important to the economy and provided a major line of communications between the State and the outside world. With the colonization of Kashmir, houseboats had become very popular. Europeans resided on these boathouses with their ever-increasing families. However, downstream was still a mystery.

A lonely dirt road passed from the village of Khalsi to the town of Nurla. It was a road with few travelers. A rickshaw driver waited by the road. The oxen blinked from the flies that circled their heads.

That afternoon, the ox drawn cart hit many bumps, and Rashiq took the path from Khalsi back to Nurla.

The town of Nurla settled its movements for the late afternoon. The *sabjee* vegetable salesman rolled his cart back down the hill. Men with moustaches sat on the roadside all day. Cascades of residences lay low to the ground, evolving slightly from the mud of the ground. Half walls of bricks protected the houses from the roaming animals that ate the shrubbery in the front yards. The wardrobes of the households hung on the clotheslines between houses. Candlelight flickered dimly in the windows. The ailing dusk sky concealed the road that came before, as the villagers congregated around the last house on the street.

In the distance, far from the audible conscious, there sounded the afternoon *azan*, the call to prayer.

There are two things in Kashmiri culture that drew a crowd: a funeral and a wedding.

"Mr. and Mrs. Kashif Sattar request the pleasure of your company on the occasion of the marriage of their son Akbar Sattar with Henna Kardal, daughter of Zackir Kardal at Nurla, on July 4, 1857. An answer will oblige."

Henna Kardal was engaged to the son of a wealthy shawl trader in the major city of Srinagar. Zackir Kardal had met Kashif Sattar at a trading post in the

Kashmiri capital of Srinagar. British ladies' infatuation with the pashmina shawls had boosted business abroad, and Kashif Sattar had found a friend in the British East India Company that was posted in Srinagar. The trading boom had increased Kashif's business fourfold, and the joint venture between him and Zackir Kardal would combine their resources and double the available capital. How exactly was the deal struck?

"Assalàm alaikum." *Peace be upon you* said Mr. Kardal.

"Your daughter is of age," Mr. Sattar said.

"As is your son," Mr. Kardal replied.

"Then it is set!" They both rejoiced.

"*Vàlaikum assalàm And on you be Peace,*" responded Mr. Sattar.

The deal was simple. Arranging a marriage generally was.

While Matchmaking may have been simple, child-rearing certainly was not. For a young adult coming into his manhood, Rashiq Kardal was a pious rebel. For the last year, he had forsaken the life his father wanted him to lead by leading the life he chose for himself.

Zackir Kardal had mourned for his wife the best way he knew how, quietly. He had granted his son the liberty to explore his interest in the *madrassa*, but he also needed help with the shawl business. Payments to the *jagirdar* landlords were overdue, and the new business prospects required new hands. Upon his return to Nurla, Rashiq was met with a new brother-in-law to be, and old sentiments.

"Listen Rashiq, you cannot spend your entire life in that *Sufi* school, that *madrassa*, I mean look where it has got you in the last year...nowhere."

"I am not going to spend the rest of my life there," Rashiq broke the news to his father.

"Meanwhile your father's business has suffered. Have you no duty to your family?"

"My duty is very explicit," Rashiq answered, "And we both know to whom it is due."

"Rashiq, listen, I know this year has been difficult. It has been difficult for us all, and we have all grieved in our own different ways."

"I know, father." Rashiq was saddened.

"But we must still attend to our responsibilities, especially now."

"Sheik Abdul told me of the outside world."

"It is due time as well, my son," Zackir said gently.

"He said that I must first experience temptation. It is the only way to purge it."

"There is some logic in that, Rashiq." The father tried to understand his son's rationale, "and helping with the business will be very important. The day will come when you will take over."

"If it is what I choose to do," Rashiq clarified.

"But for now, at least get to know the business. Work with the weavers.

Watch the process of weaving pashmina. Talk with the vendors and the tradesmen."

Rashiq was listening to his father's logic. There was a subtle hesitation to let himself be reabsorbed into the Kardal family lifestyle.

"What about the righteous path?" Rashiq questioned.

"When you have a family of your own, Rashiq, then we will talk of righteousness," Zackir said. "It is very important you be at all your sister's wedding functions. There will be potential clients from the British Company, and you will meet the local vendors."

"That is the reason for me to attend my own sister's wedding?"

"No, of course not. But, by the same logic, there is no reason to ignore the obvious."

The Kardal household was gaining wedding momentum, and the pashmina maidens were working past sunset to prepare Henna Kardal's red wedding dress.

"It is good, then, that your Sheik has sent you away from Khalsi." His father was expecting his son's obedience, "You will have no reason to go back."

"That is not true," Rashiq stated.

"What do you mean?"

"I will return to Khalsi. It is there that I am learning to prepare my body for meditation."

There was a grim expression in Zackir Kardal's eyes. He was almost lost in thought as he spoke aloud.

"I cannot believe this behavior from my own son. I give him liberty to grieve. I did what I think a father should do. And when I need him most, he will leave? Rashiq, tell me this is not true."

"I do plan to go back to Khalsi. It is not the *madrassa*. I will come to your business in the afternoons and work till evenings. I will do this until I am ready."

"You go to Khalsi to prepare your body?" his father said. His forehead cringed, perplexed.

"Yes, prepare my body for meditation...and bring about a change that was previously *unattainable*."

Rashiq found himself employing the Yoga rhetoric Asita had used. He was defending his decision to learn because he knew in the pit of the stomach that this would be the right path for him.

Rashiq left the room. The two men were not angry, but rather at an impasse, which they would not resolve that evening. Rashiq went to his sister's room, where the door was ajar. With the wedding in a few weeks, there were many emotions on the pillow that absorbed her head. Rashiq brought her a glass of chai tea in a steel tray.

"Henna? Lift your head. We have not eaten yet."

Henna revealed her face from the bed, as the tears on the pillow revealed her angst.

"Why do you cry at night, Henna?" She sniffled and looked at the brother who had been out of her life in the last year.

"Why do I cry, Rashiq? You are a stranger in this house."

"I know, we have drifted. In part it is my fault."

He came and sat on the bed, creating creases in her bed as he looked down at her face, shadowed by the diminishing candle by her bedside. "What are you feeling, now?"

"Why is mummi not here with me?" Henna asked her older brother.

"She is," Rashiq replied. "She is here in spirit. She is here." He pointed in towards his chest.

"She would tell me what I want to know," Henna wallowed.

"What is it that you want to know?"

"I am marrying a man I do not know, for the sake of the family. Mummi always talked of love..."

"She knew many things."

"But what would she tell me now, as I will soon leave home in a departing palanquin of fear?"

"Do you remember what she would say before we went to bed?"

Henna took a sip of tea from the glass he had brought to her. "She said many things. Grace to *Allah*."

"She would remind you of the meaning of love."

"What meaning of love?"

Rashiq tried to remember her exact words.

"She would say, 'Both light and shadow are the dance of Love. Love has no causes; it is the astrology of God's secrets,' or something to that effect," Rashiq said.

"How do you remember this?" She was impressed.

"I learned some of this in the Sufi *madrassa*," he affirmed.

Henna sat up with curiosity, "What else?"

"Well, let's see," he thought for a minute. "Every moment is made glorious by the light of Love," he thought again. "I like this one, and 'Lover and Loving are inseparable and timeless.'"

"I like that one, too," Henna said, smiling slightly.

The candles by the nightstands went out for the evening. The summer grasshoppers serenaded Rashiq as he lay awake at night, looking at the low ceiling of his room. Everything was in the process of changing, from East India Company vendors and pashmina weddings, to the river rapids of Khalsi itself. A unique history of the Kashmiri rapids flowed through the valley. Cyclic currents of the coming and departing of visitors throughout the years passed throughout the centuries.

The lakes of Kashmir had always been of interest to foreigners who ruled the land. The Dal Lake became the beginning of the gardens made by the Moghuls, the famous Muslim rulers. Pari Mahal was the name of one such

Moghul garden, named after the gushing spring that feeds it. A series of enclosed terraces and buildings were once used as a Sufi garden college. The Sufi *madrassa* schools had shifted location many times since the movement emerged in the 14th century.

One larger Moghul garden was the Shalimar Garden. It was famous perhaps because it celebrated the romance between the builder Emperor Jahangir, and his queen, Nur Mahal. There was a centerpiece on the upper terrace of the summer house, where the emperor and his bride reclined on warm summer afternoons surrounded by millions of roses and cooled by the fine spray of the spring water.

The Moghul summer romance was renowned through out the Kashmir Valley. Under the Moghul rule, Hindus maintained vitality, and India did not become a Muslim country. Muslims were rulers who depended on Hindus for much of their labor. Their ranks were augmented by the millions of Hindus who had been converted to Islam. The Moghuls were just one of the rulers of India, one of the rulers in the cyclic currents of history.

"Yoga is a coming together, to tie the strands of the mind together."

But not everyone in the Valley lived by coexistence.

Divide and Rule!

Divide a land. Divide the people, and then, in the chaos of squabbling, take control.

Fearful Muslim landlords accepted the British and feared that the end of British rule would change their status quo. Where there was fear, there was an opportunity.

Indian Mutiny!

At that time, the Asita Mandiran School of Yoga had opened for the summer months. Her only student Rashid Kardal came early in the morning for his practice. It had become an everyday affair. They performed sun salutations, cobra poses, warrior stances and standing poses.

"The discipline of the daily *asana* poses will be beneficial to your practice," Asita said.

One morning, the two stood by the gentle ripples, in preparation of their lesson.

"Om...." she started the process. Rashid listened, but did not repeat.

"Stand in *tadasana*, Standing Pose," she directed him.

"Like this?" he showed the young woman with uncertainty.

"Straighten your back a little," she observed. "The first areas of the body to stiffen up are the neck and shoulders."

She placed her hand on his muscular back and aligned him upward with the gentle press of her hand. Rashid stood more straight, fully conscious of how awkward he felt.

"Like this?"

"Yes, stand more with the trunk upright. Do not slouch or throw the chest

out."

He squirmed trying to find the balance she was talking about. Asita was starting to realize the patience it required to teach another person how to breathe.

"Become aware of your breath for a minute or two. Then begin to slow it down a little and ensure that it is rhythmical."

Learning was a quiet thing. Slowly, before even realizing it, there was a subtle change, a shift in thinking. Rashid was starting to understand how to concentrate on breathing without speaking any words. Rashid stood with Asita, as she instructed.

"Concentrate quietly on the breath and its rhythmical movement."

The *Upanishad* notion of sitting beside a teacher resonated by the river that morning.

"You see, Rashid, *tadasana*, the Standing Pose, is fundamental for all the more complicated poses, like the *Garudaasana*, the Eagle Pose."

She was not sure how to teach him the advanced pose, but continued. "As you gain flexibility and strength, you will advance more in your practice."

"I feel very calm here." Rashid was quiet for most of his instruction. "I feel this will help me."

"Good, I am glad this pose suits you. Each person has to go at their own pace."

"I am beginning to feel the breath of Allah," the young Sufi man stated.

"When you close your eyes, you can feel whatever is sacred to you. But concentrate on the breath."

The two stood under the lace of leaf formation in the trees.

"Let us progress," Asita set the pace. "Lift your hands up to the sky, and then bring them down to your toes." She demonstrated the reflexive motion.

Rashid tried to follow but encountered difficulty with stretching his back to the ground.

"I cannot touch my toes." He jerked himself forward. "If I only..."

"Do not strain yourself, Rashid." Asita stood up to tell him. "There is a law of science. Are you aware of it?"

"Aware of science? I know from my schooling."

"Nothing is created, nothing is destroyed. Everything is in the process of changing," she said.

He made a smoother attempt at touching his toes.

"Your needs will develop, they will mature and change. For instance, your needs include flexibility. I am very flexible."

Rashid felt belittled as he tried to touch his feet. "I am beginning to realize my inadequacies."

"No, no," Asita tried to clarify. "You see, I am very flexible. But sometimes I lack strength. Ultimately the goal is to achieve balance."

"I feel I have some strength." Rashid was starting to feel confident in front of the lovely young woman.

"And ultimately, you will strike the balance between strength," she paused as she looked at the muscles on his developed arms, "and flexibility."

"You have strength, Asita,"

"Sometimes."

She became quiet and looked towards the ground. "Sometimes, I find myself using my flexibility where I should be using strength. I am working towards the balance, but as I said, it is the process of change."

"You have illustrated your viewpoint. I thank you," Rashiq was formal.

"Sometimes," she confessed, "I find myself compensating for my strength in my daily life too. I find myself bending to people, or utilizing my flexibility, when I really should be strong," she admitted. A kindred familiarity came with repetition, whether it was repetition of thought, repetition of sight, repetition of poses, or repetition of breath.

By the river waters there stood a balance of flexibility and strength, a young woman and man, Brahmin and Sufi, Hindu and Muslim.

In the few weeks they had been together, she had revealed herself to her student.

"The teacher must teach by his life itself, his daily acts, his most casual words, and even sometimes by his silence," she thought to herself.

He had enjoyed the Yoga sessions by the river. It was his transition from Outer world to Inner. As he started to survey the weavers, and pashmina shawl vendors in the afternoons and evenings, he was finding concentration in his dealings. His Inner was starting to transition to the Outer.

By the end of their lesson one morning, they sat together on the sand.

"The breath is the connection between the mind and the body," she said softly. She knew he knew this, but said it anyway.

There was the union of breath.

There was a quietness about Rashiq, as he did not reveal, but rather absorbed. The sun on his forehead released sweat on his face and in the crevices of his body. The morning lesson had come to a close, and Asita would go to her guruji, while Rashiq returned back to Nurla.

At the end of his lesson, they lay down on the sand. He felt an awakening in his body, as though he had lifted barrels of butter, but had lain in a wheat field all day. The balance was a composition of his different daily experiences, and he was starting to realize the potential.

When they rose from their seated positions, Rashiq wanted to wash away the humors in his body, and suggested, "I think I may go bathe in the river before I go back home." Rashiq said, "Do you bathe here?"

"I do not go very deep," Asita admitted, "I am afraid of the water."

"I did not know that a Yoga guru had fears?"

"We do," she laughed, "We are people, too. We laugh, and we cry, and we have fears," she smiled.

"Why do you fear the water?"

"I do not fear it to the touch. I like the water, I just don't like being immersed in water, under the surface," she clarified.

"Did you have a bad experience?" Rashiq asked.

"No, but I cannot swim. I do not know where the fear comes from exactly. Guruji has a theory," she wondered alongside with him.

"What is your Guruji's theory?" he was amused.

"He said that the Brahmin drinks cow milk," she hesitated.

"Yes?"

"Well, the cow is afraid of water," she tried to convey the causality in the process.

"The cow?"

"Yes," she laughed.

"I see. What about the milk of the buffalo?"

"Oh, well, the buffalo likes water," she said in her own logic.

"Well, so that would mean that a buffalo milk drinker...likes water?" he tried to understand.

"Something to that effect," Asita confessed. Rashiq was amused by her honesty, delighted in fact. Asita herself had trouble submitting completely to the theory, but she had an open mind to convey it. As she left the riverbanks that day, she was determined to open herself completely to her student.

When she reached the ashram doors, Asita had a renewed sense of purpose. She was following the Brahmin path, and by her own convictions, she had taken on her first student. But there was something deeper that touched her about her experience with the young Sufi man.

"Good morning, Guruji."

"Good morning. How are your duties treating you?"

"I feel there is progress. There is a slow change beginning. I feel it."

"Then what is the reason for the lackluster in your shine?" Swami Vunde said.

"I want to be a good teacher, Guruji, I really do. I just do not know how to truly reach my student."

"You must understand what precludes this, Asita."

Back in the ashram, a teacher returned to her role as student.

"It is the deed of breaking barriers," the guru prescribed. "It is in doing," the guru said, "that the teacher secures his student's fundamental walls."

Asita listened. He continued, "It is in doing that learning will occur."

At the core of the guru's teaching, there was something so fundamental, so elementary, that it questioned to the essence what essence was. It imparted the very nature of what could be imparted. "Asita, there is something at the very nature of light, yet it cannot be seen."

"What is that nature Guruji?" she asked.

"It is the very nature that is in darkness, but cannot be hidden."

The guru sat near his student as he described the awakening from

darkness, the 'gu' of *darkness* and the 'ru' of *towards the light*, the guru.

"There is a force in this world that underlies all things created and uncreated," Vunde said.

Asita listened intently. Her mind's synaptic connections surged.

"The question is," the guru asked, "not whether or not such a force exists, my dear student, but rather, whether or not to access that very force, that very divinity that makes us whole."

"And how do you answer that question, Guruji?"

"Often times, the answers are not of 'how', but of 'when'? Each entity in this universe must confront this force. They must confront it with knowledge."

"Knowledge, Guruji? I thought there was no question of divinity?"

"To access Divinity, Asita, is to inquire for knowledge. It is to go through the disciplines, such as the *asanas* of Yoga, and to prepare the mind for meditation. It is only then, that the question of *when* to ask for the knowledge of Divinity remains."

"How then, Guruji, does one know *when* to ask for the knowledge of divinity?"

"I shall ask you now, Asita."

"Now," she remembered. It was an interesting concept, *now*. It had the immediacy that nothing else in the world could. It was the present, the *carpe diem* of time. It was a linear standstill in history. *Now*. There was nothing to regret. There was nothing to lose, except the moment. It was a moment of opportunity, and a change that was at one point unattainable came, Now.

"Are you ready to access the knowledge of Divinity...Now?"

There was a momentary pause from a student rightfully overwhelmed. It was an intense moment of her studies. Asita was tested beyond her comfort, beyond the normal expansion her mind was used to.

"What will it mean, Guruji, to have such knowledge, now?"

"It will be the knowledge of Divinity that transforms man from a mortal to the higher force, where man leaves all the connections and attachments one has on this earth, in favor of something greater."

She thought of the water pot that crashed into pieces. The attachment did not lie in the vessel. Another man contended with principles of attachment.

"It is knowledge, and, like the Fruit of Eden, the act of eating it cannot be reversed," he warned.

Asita realized she had become attached to the young man who spoke of non-attachment. If divine knowledge meant giving up all the connections she had on earth, Asita had an answer to her guru's question.

"No, Guruji. I am not yet ready for this knowledge."

An honest sentiment, she knew there were limits to a student's capacity. Knowing that capacity was already a success in her learning. Swami Vunde respected her for following the Yoga principle *to know the truth in oneself*.

"So, not now!" the guru laughed.

In that year, not only were there limitations recognized by students, but also limitations recognized by the residents of India.

After the uprising of Meerut and those insurgencies that followed throughout the country, the British changed their policy towards the Muslims, stripping them of their minority rule.

A few weeks later, Karl Marx made a profound remark about the 1857 Indian Mutiny,

"However infamous the conduct of *sepoys*, it is only the reflex, in a concentrated form, of England's own conduct in India, not only during the epoch of the foundation of her Eastern Empire, but even during the last ten years of a long settled rule. The characteristics that rule it suffice to say that torture formed an organic institution of its financial policy. There is something in human history like retribution; and it is a rule of historic retribution that its instrument be forged not by the offended, but by the offender himself."

After the Indian Mutiny of 1857, the British actively partook in creating a rift between the Hindus and Muslims.

"A united India is too much of a threat..."

It was convenient for foreign rule to take control in the chaos of squabbling. They took control of the Islamic schools and the *madrassas*.

A few days later by the river, Asita was wondering if she had become too attached to her new student. He was attentive, always happy to see her, and his eyes pierced into her very insecurities.

Their Yoga routine began with the quiet seated pose. She reiterated the definition of Yoga she had learned. The new teacher was eager to begin her lesson this morning. Upstream, away from the British hill stations and their houseboat residences, there were two young minds by the river waters, and the barriers started to crumble.

"*Tadasana*, the Standing Pose..."

She placed her hand on his spine, and adjusted him forward. In the last few days, he had still not fully understood the breathing fundamental.

"But I am breathing out" Rashiq insisted.

"You are exhaling, not breathing out. Exhalation is what you have been doing all your life. You are here to breathe out," she corrected him.

"And when you fold your legs over each other—like so," she demonstrated, "you have what they call the lotus position. Now you try."

He was sometimes impatient. He did not have the flexibility and scoffed, "I never quite understood why they call it the lotus position."

"Is that right?" she said.

"No honestly. I mean, I know there is meaning to the lotus flower, but why a Yoga pose?" he said with frustration.

"Well, alright, the lotus flower then," she said.

"Yes, those Hindu gods are always standing on one. It must moisten their feet."

"I suppose," she laughed. "There is more to it, though."

She thought for a moment and then she said, "Come, I will show you."

"Where?"

"In the forest, there is a natural pond. Nature gives a far better description than my words ever will."

She got excited about the lesson. They made their way through the forest. It was dark in the shadows of the trees, and the two set out on a small adventure. The trees all around them were dark and soft with moss. Rashiq's eyes squinted from the sun's reflection on the small pond in the clearing. A secluded secret, Asita shared with Rashiq one of her favorite spots.

Seven lotus flowers floated on the surface of the pond.

"You see." She brought him to the edge.

"Ah yes, the lotus flower," he smiled.

"Here's a good spot," she directed.

They sat at the edge of pond, and she cupped the water with her hand. She let it pour like a waterfall. "You see how the lotus grows."

"Yes. It grows to the surface," he observed.

"It will drown under the water. It always grows to the surface." She poured water on wide petals.

"The water does not stick. It glides off the flower."

"I see that," Rashiq confirmed.

"Look how the liquid cannot penetrate the leaves."

"This is why it floats."

"The water cannot weigh down the lotus," she demonstrated. "In floods and droughts, the lotus always adjusts to the water level."

Rashiq looked at his teacher. The end of her black braid dipped in the pond. She placed her hand on the petal. "You see." She pushed the petal down in the water, and two curious pairs of eyes watched the flower rise to the surface.

She observed the furrow in his brow when he stared at the lotus flower.

"The water never penetrates it. I know this means something, but I do not really understand," he admitted.

She guided the pink lotus to the edge.

"The flower never succumbs to water. This is a state of mind," she revealed. "Think of one's mind as the lotus flower."

"The mind?" he asked.

"Yes. The mind, the body, the soul. The lotus is all. At its core, it is safe from anything that might harm it." She submerged the flower into the pond.

They watched it surface.

"No matter what the environment, it will always survive, and rise above."

Rashiq scowled at first. He was enthralled with the demonstration. He

enjoyed their time together and was amazed at a woman his age who knew the lessons of existence.

"So we are like lotus flowers?" he finally spoke.

"Yes," she was pleased. "When we breathe in and out, when we stretch our bodies, we are the lotus flower, impermeable but adaptable. And there you have the name of the Yoga pose."

Rashiq warmed with her enthusiasm. With raised cheeks he grinned,

"Then tell me this." He cupped water from the pond in his hand.

"What should I tell you?" she said.

"Tell me to what you are resistant?" He gently poured the water on her arm.

She felt the tepid water drip from her arm to the grass. She looked to his face, which now had a lighter expression, and smiled, "Obstacles I am still working to overcome."

He put his hand back to the ground and looked to the floating lotus.

"Do you want to try it?" she asked.

"Try it?"

"The lotus pose."

With their backs against the sunshine reflecting on the pond, Asita taught Rashiq the Lotus position.

"For centuries the sages of Yoga have likened human life to the growth of the Lotus flower. The Buddhists have a saying, '*Om mane padme hum.*'" *Behold the jewel in the lotus.*

The roots of the lotus were deep at the bottom of the pond. The lotus roots used the murky ingredients as nutrients, and sent out shoots, which rose in the water until they reached the surface. At the surface, the bud formed, and the perfect flower emerged.

When they crossed their legs, Asita instructed. She inhaled slowly, "Impermeable but adaptable."

There was a slow change. "Good," she affirmed.

"I learned about the breath in the Sufi *madrassa*," he said.

"Rashiq, I want to know more about you," she said. Asita was curious about his past. "It is important for a student to know his teacher, and a teacher to know his student."

"What would you like to know?" he was resigned.

"I am not sure," she confessed, "perhaps your schooling."

"Well, I entered the Sufi *madrassa* after my mother died."

Asita listened to her first student with great care. She looked into the deep, receding, verdant eyes that pierced into her soul.

"There, my study of the *Qur'an* started. We started in the month of Ramadan," he continued. "It was a fertile period of time during which I had a master."

"Your Sufi master?" she confirmed.

"Yes. Under the supervision of the master, we commented and debated, sometimes till dawn," he reminisced. "We debated on the historical...the ritual...and the spiritual aspects of the Qur'anic text."

"That sounds so familiar." She thought of her relationship with her guru. "And why did you leave the *madrassa*?"

"I knew it was time to leave."

"How?"

"My master said that in order to purify your life of poisons, you must first taste them. They never explicitly stated it, but they sent me out to the world," he explained.

"Can you ever go back?"

"Yes. Oh, yes. After reaching the age of religious responsibility, we are able to ask for the initiation."

"The initiation?" she asked.

"The initiation represents the entrance into the path, where we receive the 'spiritual bondage' to the spiritual master," he explained.

It occurred to Asita that she seemed to have more in common with her student than he could possibly know.

"The spiritual master is able to trace his tree of ancestry as far back as Prophet Mohammed."

"Will you ask for this initiation?"

"I will one day make the journey to Mecca. I will ask for initiation if I find the Truth there."

Rashiq Kardal was very dedicated, and at the same time, very receptive to new ideas.

"I had to go to the *madrassa* first, and I learned."

"What did you learn?" Asita was absolutely engrossed.

"It is hard to say. Sometimes it sounds arrogant."

"It's okay, speak what's on your mind," Asita encouraged.

"Most of us have faith."

"Yes, most of us do."

"However, some of us are less aware of it than others."

"Less aware?" she asked.

"Some of us are less aware of our own consciousness."

"I agree," Asita said. "Yoga brings us to an awareness."

As she started to relate to Rashiq on these different levels, she realized how nourishing a friend was. She paused for a moment, before she quoted her guru. "To know the truth in yourself is to know the truth in others."

"Yes! This is it," Rashiq also related. "It is a means, a quest for the Truth."

The barriers of student and teacher had crumbled to a form of friendship.

"In his commentaries, the master gave us half the truth," he relayed.

"Guruji does the same!"

"The other half we have to discover through our reflection and our inner

experiences."

"One learns by doing," she smiled.

"I learned that to worship the Divine is like breathing."

"Breathing," she contemplated.

"Many things are like breathing," he affirmed, "And something else."

"What else is like breathing?" she asked.

"Something that you must do at every moment, at all times," he waited.

There was a quiet moment between Rashiq and Asita. Yoga had brought the two young minds together. Of the seven lotus flowers that grew in the pond, a new kind of impermeability grew to the surface.

"Love is like breathing, you just have to do it."

Episode IX

Nine

The American Yoga Center

“And to do so, you must release the breath,” the female Yoga instructor said.

Sarita Rena stood in the front of the class in preparation for *Tadasana*, Standing Pose. Under the metallic doorframe, Josiah Tamarind stood at the entrance.

*Sarita Rena
Yoga Instructor
The Missing Peace Yoga Center
1750 Broadway
New York, NY 10025*

Something about the business card he found that morning on the cobblestone divider of Park Avenue had convinced him to come. When she saw the tall stranger in the doorway, her foot felt cold, damp, and wet.

Josiah came in. He was searching for something deeper in the five-year aftermath of his wife’s passing, five years since the doctors had come back with the news that the cancer had spread. Jewish spirituality books had laid on the Tamarinds’ nightstands for years. Long nights at the office had consumed his life, and the financial statements and valuation reports distracted him from the solitude. There was something missing.

“I want you to find out for yourself the fruits of the tree.”

A visit to the Kabbalah Center on 48th and Lexington had opened his eyes to the ancient philosophies of the ten-node *Sefirot* tree. The popularity of Kabbalah as a departure from mainstream Judaism was a unique step for Josiah. But throughout the country, Americans were changing religions, and religions were changing America. He had become familiar with the doctrines, but there was still something missing.

“In the 21st century, there is no East. There is no West,” Don told Sarita when he opened his studio. “We live in the greatest city in the world, a city that personifies the Western ideals of ambition and materialism. What separates New York from anywhere else in America is the ambition.”

"It's so true," Sarita said. She thought about Alice Parker, and took a breath to herself. At work when she interacted with Alice, and pettiness and ugly competition seeped into their interactions, Sarita would take a breath to herself.

"But here we are, opening a Yoga Studio on lady Broadway herself," he continued. "Not only do we acknowledge the spiritual philosophies and meditation practices of the East, we thrive on them. Ambition makes the world go round. Meditation makes it think."

Something about the way Don pitched the city appealed to Sarita. By uniting the materialism of the so-called "West", with the spiritualism of the so-called "East," she wondered if they could find that missing something?

As one mentor provided explanations, another mentor posed questions. The rabbi at the Kabbalah Center had given Josiah a framework, nodes of emotions diagrammed in a tree, a tool to take responsibility for one's actions. But one question remained.

"What is the Connection to the Vital Breath?"

Then came a morning when Josiah had a collision, in fact the second collision, with Sarita Rena, the young woman who tried to market the ubiquitous *How-to-Yoga* instruction books and, in turn, had become a practitioner herself. She had just picked up her newly certified *Yoga Instructor* business card. His second collision with Sarita Rena, peace by the river, brought him to the Yoga center that evening.

The windows that overlooked Broadway fogged from the heat that built up and revealed the fingerprints of those who had come before.

The studio had mirrors on opposite walls. Sarita stood in front of the room, with her back to one of the mirrors. When Josiah entered the room with his gym bag on his left shoulder, he obstructed her view. In between the two mirrors, Josiah reflected into an infinite image of himself.

The infinite reflection went back lifetimes.

He left his gym bag by the door, and went to the side where he saw a fellow straggler grab a blue foam mat and lay it out horizontally. The rest of the class looked at him. They had laid their mats vertically.

"As I was saying," she started. "When the mind is fully occupied by one thing, it is kept away from everything else, and it becomes quiet."

She looked at the man curiously.

She lit the candle in the middle of the room. Sarita learned in her training the importance of setting the appropriate mood for the Yoga lesson. In Yoga studios across the American landscape, teachers tried to preserve the essence of the practice in a frantic world.

"Yoga teaches us to pay attention to our actions, our thoughts, and ultimately, ourselves," Sarita said.

The class started to focus on the candle in the middle of the room.

"We will begin class with the chanting of OM," she told the class. "For those of you who do not feel comfortable chanting along, that is absolutely fine as

well."

In 1994, a poll found that 11 million Americans did Yoga at least once a week, and six million practiced it regularly. The trend continued to gain momentum. One estimate figured that by the year 2000, twelve million Americans practiced regularly.

That evening, an art vendor closed the gallery for the night, swung her *Prada* Yoga mat carrier over her shoulder, and came to the center. In the back corner, a second blue foam mat belonged to a mother of two, who left the kids with the sitter during the evening session. In the middle of the room, an aging woman with life sagging from her chest to her waist stretched into old age with vigor. Towards the back, a struggling actor with an audition for a theater role in the morning, found the time in his week for his Yoga practice.

The number of Americans practicing *asana* poses continued to grow by the year, perhaps as more practitioners sought the physical benefits the postures provided. But, were there any other benefits to which Yoga led?

Beyond the norms of the American Yoga industry, one person in the class came to find out. Josiah Tamarind listened to the instructor for a while, and then to the outside noise. The sound of cars on the street rushed by outside, and the horns at traffic lights made him realize the orientation of his mat.

He grabbed the foam mat and found a spot at the back of the class. He aligned himself with the orientation of the class and spread the Yoga mat out in the air. Josiah unfurled the Yoga mat like a sacred prayer rug. As he did, he felt a bizarre feeling of sanctity.

He sat cross-legged on the foam mat. Somewhere against the grain of the hardwood floors in the trendy Yoga center, familiarity settled into his limbs. Josiah listened to the Yoga instructor.

"Inhale to the sound of OM," Sarita directed her class.

The resonance of the word permeated the room as Josiah closed his eyes and listened to the instructor. The dark room calmed as the candle flickered, and the sounds of the street waned for the evening. Sarita looked at the sitting participants, whose eyes were shut.

"In the anatomy of the human beings, the spine is tremendously important," she said. "It provides flexibility and support, and provides a channel for the nerves."

Josiah looked at the teacher he had met earlier, interested in what she had to say. Josiah listened and felt calm. The instructions struck something in him, something familiar but untouchable, something that was previously unattainable.

"We will start the class with a pose called the Cat Drop on all fours."

Josiah tried to keep up with the instructor's command. On the hardwood floors, he dropped the back and raised his head.

"Breathing out, arch the back as high as it will go, drop the head between the arms," Sarita said. The whole class moved like feline puppets at her command.

“Bow down with your face to the mat.”

Josiah bowed his head between his prostrated arms. Like a devotee on a prayer rug in the direction of Mecca, Josiah closed his eyes.

“Exhale,” she said.

Something in Josiah Tamarind sprouted, like the type of seed his surname suggested. Inexplicably, he saw an image of fire in his mind.

“Breath is life,” Sarita said, “We have great control over our breathing. The key to our energy system is in the diaphragm, the strong sheet of muscle attached to the bottom of our ribs,” she described.

“We will now try *tadasana*, the Standing pose,” she said.

The students got to their feet on the center of their mats, standing like masts on their blue ships. Sarita floated her way between the fleet to correct the postures.

“Straighten your shoulders,” she told the technology manager. She made her way closer to the back of the room. The mother of two had a bad sciatic nerve in her back. Sarita gently adjusted her lumbar spine to ease her. She walked over behind Josiah, and placed the palm of her hand on his back. The hand extended from her forearm, like a barrier and an entrance, all in one touch.

“That’s it,” she whispered. He looked familiar. With a bearded face, tall stance, broad shoulders, and an inexplicable piercing gaze, she tried to recognize him.

In her training, she had learned not to exclude students, and she did not want to judge any one of them either. But Sarita looked at Josiah with great curiosity.

In this Yoga studio on the Upper West Side, a diverse amalgam of people compressed into the space with varied backgrounds, religious beliefs, and lifestyles. They were a microcosm of the city they called home.

Josiah stood in the Yoga pose with great comfort. It felt part of him somehow.

“Very good, the *Tadasana*. Standing pose suits you,” she smiled at him. When he looked back at her, she skipped a breath. It felt as if there were only two people in the room. He felt transported to another realm. Josiah stood in the Standing Pose, and Sarita stood beside him.

She became aware of the class and then continued weaving through the forest of standing participants.

“...The *Tadasana* Standing Pose is the foundation for more advanced poses, which we will try as the class progresses. Standing poses build strength as well as flexibility, something we can all work on,” she admitted to the class.

The energy flow of the class directed back to the teacher. She returned to the front of the class. She felt the need to reveal something personal.

“As we are still beginners, it is interesting to know the effects of the basic pose. We will progress to a more advanced pose of *Garudasana*, the Eagle pose,” she said. “Allow me to demonstrate.”

She narrated the pose.

“Step 5: Join the palms of your hands together keeping the fingers pointed upwards.

On this day of Venus,

Halt, Stop, and Love continues.

Benevolence gives but tepid water,

Vindicates the judgments of a spinning martyr.

Join the palms of your hands together the fingers pointed upwards.

The erosion of soiled hypocrisy runs into streams,

Responsibilities for one’s actions,

Proactive hands come together

And promise to cherish.

...Join the palms of your hands together keeping the fingers pointed upward: Step 5”

As with all cosmic occurrences in modern society, at the exact moment they exhaled the same breath, she heard the sound of something buzzing.

Like the embarrassing sounds in movie theaters throughout the countries, or first dates in restaurants, or business meetings of crucial strategy planning, the most devastating sound was the cell phone.

The sounds of Broadway returned, and Josiah felt the embarrassment of modern connectivity. Beep Beep Beep.

The sound of a message waiting assaulted the class. Late to the class in the first place, disruptive of her opening speech, Sarita ignored the sound coming from the overcoat pocket at the entranceway. But their connection was interrupted.

Sarita carried on like a professional.

“Om...” she spoke to the class, which had come under her spell once again.

The candle in the middle of the room flickered. The wick shortened. The tick tock of the 75 minute class progressed.

Perhaps it was the pronunciation of the Sanskrit word, or perhaps the way she demonstrated the pose, but something in Josiah Tamarind was released.

“Remember,” Sarita educated her class, “Yoga is a coming together...” she repeated the definition.

“...to tie the strands of the mind together”

“In our practice of the physical poses, remember that the aim is to bring an awareness to our mind and body,” she recited before she spoke from her experience. There was a moment of silence.

“You know, we all go through the ups and downs of everyday life, and sometimes it is easy to forget ourselves in the process. Yoga is one way to focus inwards and remember our true selves, and to bring that awareness to the

surface.”

Josiah went through the repetitions of the Yoga poses prescribed in the class. The class concluded that evening in the quiet sitting pose.

Josiah rested his eyes after so long. It had been a long time since he had relaxed both his mind and his body from the daily tension of financial reports and valuations, pitching a deal and sealing it with the hearty handshake. He felt a renewal. He started to understand what his neurotic sister-in-law preached. There, in the old dance studio on the hardwood floors amidst the fleet of Yoga practitioners, he started to think. Perhaps he had just needed to get away, and perhaps Yoga was that escape, the escape to the body.

He looked at the Yoga instructor, *Sarita Rena, Yoga Instructor*. But there was something more.

“Take a deep breath,” she told the class.

She was seated with her legs crossed and her arms behind her. She grabbed her wrist with the opposite hand. She bent slowly down as the spine collapsed into the legs; she instructed her class to bend in a similar way.

“Surrender.”

Each of the participants in the Yoga class, including Josiah Tamarind, bowed his head and back into the legs, as she narrated the philosophy.

“Surrender your body. Surrender your ego,” she said as she closed the Yoga class.

“*Surrender your Ego?*” Josiah reacted in his head.

The phrase that had resonated in Josiah for the last few years, reminiscent of his visit to the Kabbalah Center and the interpretation of the Torah, “Conquer the Ego.”

The students lifted their backs upright. Josiah returned his eyes to the vision of Sarita. In some layers of his mind, the memories flowed like the currents of a sacred river. He tried to place her familiarity, beyond the business card, beyond the *Garudasana* Eagle pose.

“Thank you, have a great evening, and continue on your Yoga path,” she gave her farewells.

The din of packing bags and rolling blue foam Yoga mats filled the old dance studio. The Yoga practitioners scrambled from their mats to return to their everyday Manhattan existence. The art vendor walked over to the gift shop and bought a 16-ounce bottle of water with the *Missing Peace Yoga Center* label. The mother of two returned the rented towel embroidered with the center’s logo, and the technology manager contemplated buying the Yoga mat tote bag. The sound of the credit-card slips united with the Divine Truth, and the American consumer culture returned its breath.

“Our next class is on Friday, 7:30 p.m.,” Sarita announced over the shuffling noise.

Josiah made his way to the front of the room. He stepped over mats and held the ballet bar against the mirrored walls. As he approached her, in front of

the mirrored walls, he reflected infinitely.

“I enjoyed your class,” he acknowledged the instructor, who looked back at him with great curiosity.

Sarita was nearly speechless before she said, “I feel like I know you...” She articulated the mystery “.... like I know you from somewhere?”

Josiah fumbled with his side pants pocket, but she could not discern what he was doing. He took out a withered piece of paper that he showed her, *Sarita Rena, Yoga Instructor*

“Oh, of course, this morning!”

She was ecstatic at the recognition. It was like everything in that class had *come together* when she realized from where she knew him.

The dirty blond streaks of hair framed her face when she took out her ponytail. Sarita Rena, standing in front of Josiah Tamarind, did not realize in her conscious mind the true number of encounters she had with him in the past.

“That was terrible, wasn’t it?” she said.

She thought about the collision of umbrellas on the Park Avenue cobblestone divider. She remembered him as the gentleman who held the umbrella over her head as she picked up the cards. He knelt down to help her pick up the shattered pieces...of her business cards.

“Yes, this morning,” Josiah revealed, “I picked up one of your cards. There was something about this business card...Something about this center...*The Missing Peace Yoga Center*,” he read. “I don’t know, I had become interested in this concept of the breath.”

“Well, you’ve come to the right place. All are welcome,” Sarita said.

“Can I tell you something.”

“Sure.”

“It felt familiar here.”

She looked at him curiously and smiled. “That tends to happen. After my first Yoga experience, I felt the same way. I can’t really explain it, but we all live such hectic lives that I guess its some kind of stress withdrawal.”

The other participants left the room. The receptionist cleared the podium and dusted the class schedule. Josiah stood tall, and she looked up at him. He had broad shoulders and a sharp nose, and his eyes looked deep into hers.

“Will you be attending the Friday class?”

Josiah did not have much time to think, but she had an intoxicating smile, “Yes, I will be.”

“Great, see you then.”

She smiled and grabbed her backpack. He wanted to stay and ask her more. He wanted to know all about her. How did she learn these words that were so powerful to him?

Sarita gathered her things, and, before he could turn around, she was gone, like an apparition in the mist, only minutes after she had stood in a Yoga pose and revealed herself, in all her strength and all her vulnerability.

"A teacher must teach by his life itself, his daily acts, his most casual words, and even sometimes by his silence."

The next morning, the orange seats of the subway car were filled with passengers. The door in between subway cars opened abruptly as a familiar sound emerged. The Subway Beggar walked through the different carts, singing, as usual, a classic Motown song.

"Baby Love, My Baby Love... Why must you... separate our love?" she wailed.

She went through the compact car with her coffee stained cup, begging for money. The Motown mendicant made her way onto the platform. Like the masterful works of the French sculptor Auguste Rodin, there was a certain sense of Divinity in her hands. In his sculpture *The Hands of God*, a loving couple is united in the palm of God.

"Why you do me like you do...to make me stay away so long..."

On the platform, most people avoided touching the beggar's hand. As she changed trains that morning, Sarita heard the jazzy message of the poor performer in the underground din.

In the crowded subway car, Sarita looked down to the floor. She remembered something Don once told her.

"Consider the great people of the 20th Century. Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Einstein. Their greatness was like glorious, spiritual reveries. But in the fusion of their higher selves was the work of their hands."

Somewhere in the buzzing neurons of her mind, Sarita remembered the foreign touch of her savior years ago on the subway platform. She had never seen her face, nor really remembered the details of the event. That morning, she looked down and away to avoid eye contact with the Subway Beggar, and a Manhattan Brahmin revealed a social caste system in the Big Apple.

Something happened when an independent New Yorker hardened. In her pursuit of professional success and her own interest, Sarita had gotten used to control.

But sharing something, anything, with another human being was a source of vulnerability. When Sarita shared her marketing pitches, she opened herself up to professional acclaim, but also criticism. When she taught her evening class, she opened herself up to teach, but also to learn.

While Sarita was naturally selective in looking for someone to share her life with, there was something deeper to her resistance.

"I just think that if you spend enough time with someone, you're going to change," she told a friend. "You're going to get lost in them. I just don't know if I'm ready for that. What if I lose the things that are important to me?" she worried.

She had filled her life with enough commotion to numb this particular vulnerability. In attaining her many successes and changes, she had become resistant to the change a relationship would bring. There was a great irony of the

principle of Yoga: to attain what was previously unattainable. Could one change, patiently worked towards, offset the others once attained?

"Are you ready to start today's lesson?"

Learning the *asana* poses of Yoga required a class. Teaching the *asana* poses required certification. Living the *asana* poses required actually living life.

It was something she had been grabbling with for some time. Perhaps, despite all her promotions, Yoga certifications and trainings, the connection between the *asana* poses and the breath of resistance still needed to be fulfilled.

Sarita could not sleep much that night. She remembered the man kneeling over the cobblestone divider to help her with the scattered cards. She secretly wanted to know more about him.

The next morning, the random particles scattered, as they did every morning, in the Grand Central Station. She saw the familiar newsstand at the station.

"Good morning," she said with a smile. Abdul looked at Sarita with great pleasure, and his thick prescription glasses magnified his eyes.

"I have for you an excellent review in *Arts & Leisure*." He handed her the daily copy of the *Times*. The front-page headlines reported the world news, *"Israeli Leaders will not Compromise over West Bank, but Gaza Looks Promising."*

The newspaper stand owner was always kind to the familiar face that passed by every morning.

"Take care," Sarita said. She continued on with her day, which flowed like a river, rapid in its cyclic current.

She walked through Madison Square Park and looked at the gated dog park. Alice told her the gates were built because the squirrels in this park were reported as the skinniest in New York City. Animal activists protested, and the dogs were no longer allowed to chase the emaciated squirrels around the park. She thought about the extremity of what people could will through their protests. As she left the park, Sarita sneezed and took out a tissue to blow her nose. She saw a lone tree, and then inhaled her sniffle.

As she waited for the elevator in her office vestibule, she perused the Arts & Leisure section of the paper she purchased. She noticed an article about the direction of Yoga, and wondered if perhaps spiritualism had also been sentenced to the doghouse.

"Is Yoga in the West divorced from its Indian philosophical, religious, and spiritual origins?" the title read. The subtitle read, *"Is Yoga reduced in presentation and practice to an exotic, chic way to get a great looking body?"*

The article estimated that there were more than seventy Yoga studios in Southern California alone last year. The article critiqued the studios and said the transition of "traditional Yoga practices" into a modern lifestyle was losing sight of the ancient, universal goal of liberation and "a coming together."

Consumerism had become a priority. The second level of the American Yoga studio even had a second floor gift shop. Even instructors began to question

whether Yoga had strayed from its spiritual aims as the cash registers rang up foam blocks, mugs, books, and other paraphernalia.

Hard Yoga bodies and celebrity status took over the covers of magazines at the newsstands. What was the real motivation of the American Yoga practitioner? And where were the Yoga studio profits going?

That evening, Josiah called his friend to talk about his first Yoga experience.

"You know Martin, I knew I had to be open 'to receive'. But I didn't know why," he said.

"Josiah, what the hell are you talking about?"

"I don't know. It's just there was something about that first moment I walked into the center. I felt the doors open. It was this slow and steady creak. They were like doors I was never supposed to enter."

"Maybe you went through the side door?" Martin responded.

"No. I mean..." Josiah was having trouble explaining the experience. "You know how when you visited the Wailing Wall, you had that sense of realization."

"Yes, but that was in Israel. That is the Holy Land. You went to a Yoga center on the Upper West Side. They are hardly the same thing."

"But does it really matter where you go as long as you feel connected..."

"*What is the connection to the Vital Breath?*" floated through Josiah's subconscious.

Perhaps his Jewish understanding could be transferred from the Holy Land to an old dance studio. Although, Josiah wondered what being a Jewish state even meant. To many people, it was a place where Jewish people from around the world could come and live, not as guests, but as citizens. It was an idea in the making for thousands of years: A nation of Jews –for Jews, by Jews. First initiated at the creation of the state to build the population of Israel, the *Law of Return* granted automatic citizenship to people of Jewish descent. But a non-Jewish citizen was also given the right to vote.

"Some people are definitely not connected," Martin said. "Palestinians attack Israel because they hate Jews," Martin said.

"But there were also Jews in the land of Palestine," Josiah stated.

There was not only a cycle of violence, but circular logic.

"*When did questioning the actions of Israel equate hating Jews?*" Josiah thought.

Three years ago when Don Stellar opened the *Missing Peace Yoga Center*, he questioned the actions of that state.

"This is the principle of *Ahimsa*, resistance to inequality through non-violence. We will move the people to the streets with demonstrations," Don said. "We will instill in them the breathing and body positions to prepare their bodies for meditation."

He chose a cause he believed needed the affirmation of non-violence.

"I say, let's give America something truly worthy to meditate on," Don said.

Perhaps Don was the champion of a new Palestine, but did that make him an anti-Semite?

In that year, the Palestinians' own government was led by Yassir Arafat, whether they actually believed in him or not. With a sense of nationalism that soared through the desert, Arafat's historical rejections of peace proposals and compromises had left one of the world's hotspots in need of hope, even if it was only a mirage. Like the Kashmiri culture that absorbed Hindus and Muslims, the Palestinian culture, though overwhelmingly Muslim, was diverse, including some Christians. With divisions of religions and class among Palestinian society, there was an internal conflict about what exactly they were fighting for. Some Islamic militant groups detonated bombs in the name of the destruction of Israel.

"Drive the Jews into the sea!" some militant leaders called out the proverbial demand. Other militant groups detonated bombs and demanded the return of land seized during the 1967 war. The world watched, and the reputation of the Palestinians fractured like a Picasso portrait, with one side screaming for blood and Intifada, and the other side calmly arguing for peace and coexistence.

Moderate Palestinians asked what kind of life they were living and prayed for a peaceful solution. For a Palestinian state to live in peace with Israel, a change that was previously unattainable had to take a deeper breath.

That Friday evening, Josiah arrived early at the Yoga center.

He prepared his mat on the hardwood floor. There were no familiar faces when he entered the establishment for the second time. There was something in Josiah that stirred. He knew he was on the path to answers.

An army of water bottles stood in formation on the window, as the Yoga practitioners congregated for the 7:30 class. The participants were fewer on Friday. Most people were with their loved ones on a Friday night in Manhattan, or at the very least in active pursuit of one.

On the back wall, there was a poster for the center's purpose. Donations were welcome for children of Palestinian refugees. As he was about to walk towards the back wall to read the poster, he heard the door open and turned towards the figure. She was captivating.

Sarita Rena walked into the room with a towel over her shoulder. The Yoga instructor had a thin pair of glasses on that she normally would not have worn. He was excited about the new activity and could not resist the smile of the woman beside whom he had knelt down that rainy Wednesday morning.

The setting sun brought wisps of color that shone through the window of the Yoga center. The moon would enter in competition and take over the darkness. From the window, the triangular roof that soared outside reflected. Most buildings stood anonymously, but this building illuminated a special white glow, as if it were the focal point for Sarita when she sat in front of the class and started to talk.

The room dimmed. She spoke to the class after they settled on their mats. "You know, I came to Yoga class this evening, but I haven't been feeling myself lately."

Josiah listened to the teacher who had spoken the words he was feeling. They both sat on the Yoga mats and breathed slowly.

"I felt like I could have been coming down with a cold. I just rolled out of bed. I didn't even put on my contact lenses."

Josiah opened his chest. He noticed the delicate pair of spectacles on her face, but her glistening eyes shone through.

"As I was thinking about this, I started to realize how my need to come to class was affecting my practice. I started thinking about this and how it related to Yoga."

Something about how her Yoga practice connected with her body and mind captivated Josiah.

"You know, Yoga is a practice of non-attachment. It is trying to do the *asana* poses and focus on the body without worrying about the results. It is this idea of doing the deed and not worrying about the outcome."

Josiah liked how her hair framed her lovely face.

"And so," she continued, "When I was getting dressed to come to class today, I realized that I feel really attached to my students. I did not want to take time off, even though I knew my body would do it. And you should remember this idea when you are trying to advance in your practice."

Is Yoga in the West divorced from its Indian philosophical, religious, and spiritual origins?

Josiah was even more curious about the resilient woman.

She concluded, "The idea is not about the outcome of a Yoga practice, but the process."

There in the Missing Peace Yoga center, he realized she would be the answer to the question he once posed. The soft-faced, intelligible Yoga instructor appealed to something deep inside him.

"...It is not about the outcome of a Yoga practice, but the process..." he heard in his head during the routine. He danced into new poses and feelings during the seventy-five minute class. He progressed further into complicated postures, combining strength and flexibility.

On that Friday evening, after the class, Josiah Tamarind went up to the graceful, intelligent, curious *Yoga Instructor*, Sarita Rena, peace by the river, and after all those years since their first collision, finally asked,

"Would you like to have coffee with me on Sunday?"

Episode X

Ten

A Kashmiri Paradise

As Sunday ushered in an aquamarine sky, there was a paradigm waiting to be shifted. The Kashmir Valley was once described as the world's "Utopia." Lush, verdant, alpine breezy, hidden and surrounded by snow-capped mountains, the valley was a quiet piece of paradise. In the book *Paradise Lost*, about the exile from Eden, Milton recognized that only an outsider could recognize the idealism of a paradise.

One Sunday, a townsman who had lost his livestock had to find a new means to make a living. Distraught with the mishap, he brought his goods to the Khalsi Ashram and asked Swami Vunde,

"Guruji, what is Paradise?"

The guru deliberated over the question for some time. Not only did he think about the cowherd's situation, but also the state of affairs in the valley. His fellow Brahmins were tired of playing sycophant to the British rulers, who tried to strike deals for their land. The Muslim landlords were growing uneasy, and their rights were disappearing faster than the rainless crops. The guru knew that the foreign rulers were going to bring unrest to the region.

He read in the papers of the British railway plans, as well as the conversions to Christianity. He thought of the 'Divide and Rule' policy, and then reflected on the concept of Paradise. He consulted many books. He looked at the *Vedas*, and he looked towards the *Qur'an*. He read the *Guru Granth Sahib Ji*, the Sikh holy book, and reflected some more. He sought his answer in the *Torah* and in the *Gospels*, all of whom talked about the concept of Paradise.

Finally, Swami Vunde told the cowherd,

"Paradise is where your poetry is sung."

It was a simple statement, but it encompassed all the situations the guru could conceive.

A few weeks later, Asita lay in bed at night, restless.

Something she could not herself articulate was gnawing at her slumber. The darkness of night crept on, and she continued rolling in her bed. Having laid vigil all night, her mind could not settle. She thought about her life in the making. A Brahmin guru, a *yogi*, she was on her way to becoming a Yoga master in the ashram. Now, all the discipline of her experience had come to fruition, and Rashid

had nestled into her mind. "Love is like breathing. You just have to do it," she remembered. Something about Rashiq was undecipherable.

In the early morning hours, the sky faded to a softer hue and wisps of light streaked through her bedroom window. She got up from underneath the sheets and stood at her bedside. She practiced an asana pose.

"Hands together in Prayer position, feet together...Lift the hands and arms to the sky, and bring them down slowly to the feet..." she thought as she practiced. She bent down and stood up again. The strokes of the morning light painted the dawning sky. She thought of what her life was, and what it was not. The storm of nighttime thoughts had passed. Twisting her spine, her hands came together in prayer position. Like lightning on a metallic rod, Asita tried to ground her chaos.

Later that morning, she went to the ashram.

"Guruji, why do we as Brahmins have to sacrifice?"

"We are the intellectual leaders. We are the spiritual leaders of the lands. We do so for a type of higher duty."

"Are you content with your sacrifice, Guruji? You can have no wife, no children," she said.

"I don't think of it as a sacrifice. I live the life of a higher duty."

She thought her guru was distant today.

"I live in a world of no gray areas," he said. "There is no middle ground on a higher road. There is only the path."

With little sleep that day, she perceived his words as gray and lifeless. He closed his eyes in detachment. She knew she had not asked the right question.

Later she stood on the balcony, and thought of Rashiq's words, "Our masters only gave us half the truth..." Both were students of a higher teacher. Guru and master, striving for path of their own, she connected with his story.

She looked down to the river. The Mandirans' daughter was fully conscious of her dharma, her duty, not only to the life in which she had been born, but also to the one she lived. She hardly thought of her parents, who were setting up medical camps in distant villages. When their letters came in the mail, she felt their love. But it was her guru who gave her stability. She would live the life of celibacy and give up the material, eliminating the gray. She was a Brahmin *yogi*, part of the highest caste.

Looking down to the valley trees, she remembered her eager student, "It is the idea of introducing temptation slowly. How will you purify yourself if you are not exposed to temptation?"

As she waited by the rivers in the morning for her student to arrive, she knew why he sometimes came late. Perhaps he had to attend to a shawl weaver or another aspect of his father's business. She understood why he needed to go out into the world. She knew he had a duty to himself, and in doing so, would live a higher duty to Allah. Yoga bridged his Inner and Outer world. In this way, Asita knew Rashiq like no one else could.

The seven lotus flowers floated in her favorite pond. Once submerged in

the liquid, the lotus rose to the surface to face the light. Each came to the surface at their own pace. She wanted to give Rashiq another visualization exercise, but could not think of the right way to do it. He finally sat by her, careful not to disturb her meditation.

"Inhale," Asita began their lesson.

They had become used to one another. Rashiq performed the standing pose *Tadasana*, and they transitioned into downward bends to warm up their bodies. Their bodies began to synchronize, and the Yoga poses increased in both speed and difficulty. He followed her pace.

"Hands together," she instructed.

Rashiq followed in consistent iterations. Rashiq brought his legs back with a great deal of thrust, and Asita noticed a disturbance in his rhythm. They continued with their warming poses. Twenty toes secured the ground, and twenty fingers supported them. Their bodies balanced like tables before two triangular pyramids formed in the air. It was as if they breathed one single breath.

When they finally stopped, she asked her student,

"How are you finding the *asanas* this morning?"

"They are fine," he spoke between breaths.

"Good," she said.

"In fact, that felt great. It relieved some of the tension from the wedding preparations," he admitted.

"Wedding preparations? Are you getting married?" she exclaimed.

She actually held her breath waiting for him to respond.

"No, not me, my sister."

"Oh, I see," she exhaled.

Her cheeks were flushed. She almost laughed, "When is the ceremony?"

"This week. Papa has been anxious to make sure all the plans are tip-top."

"And you are helping?"

"Yes, I have been busy with the strain of the preparations," Rashiq said. "I won't have the time to come to Khalsi for a few days though," he announced.

Asita listened to the situation before she said, "It is in times of stress and strain that we need our Yoga practice most, to keep us centered. Abandoning your practice in these times will not let you follow your true progress."

She was very earnest about his continuation. She gave him some instructions on exercises that he was to do on his own. Then she reflected on the breath, as Rashiq sat on the straw mat alongside his teacher and listened.

"I suppose I feel fine," Rashiq said. "The outside world can only see part of us. They can only see our strength and our suppleness."

"The outside world can see very little of us in fact," Rashiq added.

"It is a practice involving the breath as much as the body," Asita continued. "The control over the breath is extremely important, because it expresses our inner feelings."

He sat and listened to the babbling river.

"If we are in pain, it shows in our breathing. If we are distracted, we lose control over our breath," she said. "The breath is the connection between our inner and outer world."

Rashiq thought about the connection he longed to make. For the past few weeks, his Yoga lessons had been very helpful to his transition back into his life at Nurla. He practiced the *asana* poses, recited the *zikr* prayers in his head, and then would attend to the shawl weavers. The weaver maidens were producing more knots per minute since the son of Anjali Kardal returned.

"I was thinking of the breathing we started to learn," Rashiq said to her. "There is a non-attachment in breathing. A non-attachment to the outer world...through breathing." He struggled to complete his thought, but Asita understood.

She too wanted to illustrate her ideas but did not know how. At their spot near the river, tall spruce trees gave them shade in the summer months. Relieved from the baking sun, she looked at the trees as an opportunity.

"There is a lone tree that grows by the river not far from the road," Asita pointed to the dirt path. The oak tree diverged from its trunk into two distinct directions.

"Yes, I think I see it." Rashiq squinted.

A lone tree.

"Do you see how it grows up from the grass?"

"Yes, it's beautiful."

"Look at the grass around the tree."

"The grass is so little compared to the tree," he stated

"You see, the tree reaches to heights, but the grass stays low to the ground."

"That is the wonder of nature," Rashiq extolled.

"Now, move your head, and look to the side of the tree, towards the north." She pointed to the side of the tree, scarred at the bark. "There were four branches at one time, now there are only two."

"It would seem so, as if the tree was cleft in two."

"When the season changes in autumn, the summer ends in heavy rains. There was a storm."

"Was the tree damaged?"

"Yes. The winds came through with great force, and the lightning of the storm split the trunk. Part of it fell into the river and drifted away."

"Like that log over there." Rashiq pointed to the dam made by the tree foliage.

"Yes, that tree was destroyed two storms ago," she affirmed. "But the grass remained."

A warm summer breeze touched their faces like a lucid dream. The scene of their Yoga practice had become a piece of the earth entirely their own.

"Do you know why the tree falls, and the grass stands?" Asita asked.

"I would say that the grass is closer to the ground," Rashiq hypothesized.

"The grass is humble."

"Humility?"

"Look how the wind comes through the river," she said. Two pairs of eyes watched the grass on that summer morning, waiting for something to occur. Blue jays flew by, but nothing happened to the grass stalks.

"The grass just blows in the wind," Rashiq observed.

"You see, the tree is tall with pride, with ego," she said.

"With ego?"

"Yes, with ego. When you stand tall and proud, you cannot bend with the shifts in the wind."

His eyes were awake and alert, realizing there was more to her example than just the whims of nature.

"Look at the grass, see how it handles the shifts in the winds," she said.

"Tell me more of the ego. It sounds like something I know, but I want to hear you say it first," Rashiq relayed.

She appreciated his patience.

"The tree is like a man who allows himself to lose control, and allows his ego to take over," she said.

They looked over at the dam of fallen foliage, water pooling in the cracks. As Asita talked, Rashiq looked over with intoxication to the woman who spoke to something inside him.

"But a man with humility can bend in the breeze, adapt, and transcend. Overcome the Ego," she concluded.

Rashiq looked at the grass and the broken tree. Even months after first meeting her, he was enchanted. *Al-Zahir* and *Al-Batin*, the Outward and the Inward, followed. Their ribs moved up and down, and they synchronized their breath.

"You are a beautiful person," he said.

"Beautiful?" Asita crossed her hand on her chest. "Thank you, Rashiq. So are you."

"You talk of the ego with great care. I don't know how I understand you." Rashiq was having trouble articulating.

"You don't understand me? I was not clear?" Asita asked.

"No, no," Rashiq was excited, "I mean, I don't know on which level I understand you, but you speak to my core."

Almost overwhelmed by his expression, but at the same time calmed, she knew what he could not say. He tried to explain.

"You see, the Sufi speaks of three levels of the Ego. There are three natures of ego."

His voice fluctuated. For the first time, he relayed what he had learned to another person.

"What are the three levels?" she asked, feeding his enthusiasm.

"The first ego seeks and cherishes evil."

He then spoke softly and calm.

"The second ego is both good and evil, but regrets evil. And the third," he paused. He held her captive in his moment of silence.

"What is the third?" she asked.

"The third nature of the ego is that which is appeased, satisfied. It is the peaceful one."

She exhaled. He looked at the young woman who appealed to his ego. She looked back at him with soulful eyes thirsty for more. Wisps of her dark hair framed her face. He looked at the young woman who was on a different path, but was seeking a similar Truth.

"There are many paths, the Truth is One," she recalled in her mind.

Asita had come to understand his duty and his struggle. She had come to understand his Sufi path, but at the same time, the honor of a simple man. Maybe it was weeks ago, maybe a moment ago, but the barrier between teacher and student had fallen, and in its place, was a sprouting seed. It was as if the river waters nourished a type of mustard seed called a Kardal, like his surname suggested.

"The concept of ego is central in the Yoga practice," she said quietly. "In Yoga, each breath connects the mind and the body. There is a book called the *Yoga Sutra*, an ancient text, which teaches the philosophy of Yoga."

"The *Yoga Sutra*," he repeated. "Doesn't 'sutra' mean 'rules'?"

"That's right. In the book, many passages first ask and then answer questions. There is one passage that relates to your comments."

Asita's posture was upright with confidence in her teachings. She quoted the passage and asked, "How do we arrive at a state of Yoga?"

They had come to a stage in their sessions where she asked her student a question, listened to his response and guided him to the answers.

"What do you mean at a state of Yoga?" he asked. "We take breaths," Rashiq affirmed.

"And what does the breath do?"

"It connects the mind and body," he answered.

She knew only a competent teacher could guide a Yoga practice, and a competent teacher needed to understand the character of her student. In the last few months, she had come to appreciate her student's personality, and in doing so, he had taught her how to teach him.

"Yes. And with the breath, the mind can reach the state of Yoga, and stay in the present moment."

"I like the present moment," he said.

She kept in mind the character of his Sufi path.

"In the present moment, you become more aware of your actions, you become more responsible for them," she said. "And as you become more responsible for your actions, you become more prudent with your choices.

Ultimately, by prudence in your choices, you overcome your ego."

As she spoke of the ego and its conquest through Yoga, he listened and calmed his senses. Perhaps it was the Yoga warm-ups, or their Indian-style discussions, but at that point, they both changed.

They attained a change that was previously unattainable.

It was a change not visible through the eyes, nor heard in the ears. The change could not be touched with fingers, nor smelled with the nose. No taste of the tongue brought this change. Between their two breaths, they formed an inner space, an inner self. It was the inner core of their sweet, refreshing and nourishing inner fruit.

In this breath, in this common quest for a Truth, the two souls connected. As the strands of their minds came together, they created an ashram in the open space by the river. In their inner space, their third, peaceful ego would flourish. That morning, they breathed something different, something deeper. They breathed an ethereal love for one another found in two minds free of attachments. At that present moment, sitting side-by-side, spanning time, spanning differences, bridging understanding for one another, breathing for one another, Asita Mandiran and Rashiq Kardal attained the Vital Breath.

Flowers fell.

The Untouchable looked on in the distance, and he twirled his yellow marigold between his fingers. He looked onto the spot on the riverside, a small piece of paradise where poetry was sung. He continued to rotate his marigold. As petals fell from his hand, he could not articulate what he felt. Perhaps he knew what they never did. Perhaps in some time, he would attain the voice to express the songs of love that pulsed in his heart.

Flowers fell in jubilation. Red carnations lined the door of the Kardal household, in preparation for the wedding.

The scent of saffron permeated the household. The lifted curtains let the sun through, and the newly-polished Islamic scriptures shone. *Pashmina* bridesmaids ran like schoolgirls through the house, preparing the red wedding dress Henna would soon wear.

One thing in the town of Nurla attracted a crowd more than a funeral, and the Kardal household was boisterous with the sounds and scents of the family wedding celebration.

Upon his return that afternoon, Rashiq went upstairs to find his sister Henna, who was hiding from wedding household chatter. He sat down by her on the bed. Over the last year, they had emerged from mourning individually, but they had come together. A sense of renewal and a sense of departure filled the air between the brother and sister, as Henna would soon leave the Kardal family. Their bond was disturbed, but the spirit of their mother held its hand over them.

"You know, you will find happiness," Rashiq told his sister. "I am certain of it," he said with his own experience. "You know what *mummi* would do if she were here," he hypothesized.

"She would put my hair up. She always promised to put my hair up for my wedding," she lamented.

"No, she would sing to you. She would sing to you, or..."

"Or she would quote from a poem. *Grace to Allah*, she loved her poets," the daughter said.

Rashiq decided to give his sister a pre-wedding gift, "The Great poet Kabir says", he started to announce, and "I am neither Hindu nor Muslim."

Henna listened to the words her brother recited with great fondness.

"O Kazi, O Pundit, consider it well. What is there that is not in the soul?" He quoted the Sufi poet Kabir. "Listen to the Word, the Truth, which is your essence."

Henna shed a tear in the corner of her *kajal* eye. As the *pashmina* bridesmaids fluttered into the room, Rashiq left the room. His father was busy with preparations of his own. "You must be at your sister's wedding. There will be a lot of contacts you must meet..."

That week, the town of Nurla wailed with the first *dhol* drum of the wedding procession. The sharp sound of the drum marched towards the Kardal household. The marigolds showered the front entrance of the household, as the *baraat* groom's procession led its way to the bride's house.

Random particles swarmed the road in rhythmic music from the *dhol* drum. "Tha tha tha thika tha thika tha," the vibrations penetrate the town. The frequency of each hit of the stick against the leather drum reverberated as a spectator watched from the distance. The sound built to a heightened crescendo, hitting each chord harder than the last. A spectator stood on her tip toes. The drummer hit the note of the *dhol* drum.

Women in shimmering *saris* reflected garish and delightful colors. Lascivious pink and awful orange paraded complete with gold Kashmiri ornaments. The whole town came out to watch. Men raised their hands above their *beeni* hats in excitement as the groom's procession pressed on up the road. Their long *kurtha* shirts swayed and danced in anticipation.

"Maasha Allah!" the *dhol* played on.

The spectator watched on, trying to make sense of the random particles flowing through the road.

Inside the house, with heads uncovered in a room isolated to men, the *pashmina* bridesmaids in lavender clothes tittered with preparation of the bride. The bride had the *mehendi* henna on her hands.

"Akbar will look through your *mehendi henna*, and try to find his name," one maiden taunted. The intricate patterns of her hand encrypted the groom's name.

"He won't be looking at her hands on their wedding night," another maiden jested.

The women dressed her in her red wedding dress, embroidered with thousands and thousands of knots by the prize weavers. The women ran and

encircled the young bride, adorned like an empress.

"Henna! The groom has come!" one maiden shouted when she looked through the window to the wedding procession. The *pashmina* weavers clapped their hands and laughed, as they urged her enthusiasm. They danced in the room, away from visitors.

Outside the gentlemen awaited and greeted the groom. The guests had gone outside to face the *dhol* drums, and there remained a father and his son alone in the entranceway.

"Grace to Allah," said Zackir, proud father and melancholic widow.

Zackir had a quiet moment with his son, who was the only person to know the hole he felt at that very moment in time.

"Your mother would have sung the words of the poet Kabir," he said, "She loved her Sufi poets," he sighed.

"She would have been very proud. You have done her proud."

"She would have been very proud of you, Rashiq. You have followed the path she would have wanted for you," he shared with his son.

The spectator looked from the side. She took a deep breath and approached the procession. Asita Mandiran was a curious individual, and nothing was more satisfying to a curious individual than crashing a wedding.

"She would be very proud, Rashiq," he repeated. "When you bring the next Mrs. Kardal into this home, mother will be singing the songs of Kabir from the heavens, *Grace to Allah*."

The relationship between father and son was often unspoken, often unheard, and often untouched, but always felt. The family change was a new breath in their old relationship.

The bride's party and the groom's party moved jointly to the mosque, where the ceremony was to take place. Inside the mosque, a screened verandah separated the two genders. Islamic law mandated that a Muslim woman fully agree to a marriage without force.

"*Salamun Alaykum*, Peace be upon you," the Kazi began reading. "We are gathered here to witness the marriage of Akbar Sattar, son of Kashif Sattar and Henna Kardal, daughter of Zackir Kardal. We will read some verses from the *Qur'an*, the Final Testament from God to Mankind."

Rashiq sat by his family as the ceremony had begun. He took a small breath as he thought about his departing sister.

"God is our creator. He knows everything in the heavens and the earth. He knows everything you conceal and everything you declare. God is fully aware of your innermost thoughts," the Kazi priest continued with the Islamic services.

The mosque was on the side of a lake by the ruins of an ancient Buddhist settlement. Non-believers were not allowed in the mosque, but were able to look through its intricately painted partition walls.

Asita had come around the lake to the mosque. She was curious about the ceremony and had found a comfortable spot on the lower left hand corner of the

partition wall. She listened to the Kazi. Through the small hole, Asita looked at the bride, dressed in a beautiful wedding dress, about to enter the household of a warm, loving family.

"Does she object?" the Kazi asked the female side of the mosque.

Henna Kardal whispered to her closest *pashmina* maiden. The maiden repeated her words to the crowd, "No objections!"

The townsmen in the mosque rejoiced, and the marriage was declared. Henna Sattar was born, *bahu* daughter-in-law of the wealthy *pashmina* shawl trader. In the reception that followed, Rashid was introduced to the vendor contacts.

"Bahut Mubarak! Congratulations!"

The handsome brother of the bride was greeted by a Kashmiri vendor.

"Thank you so much, it is our honor for your presence."

"You know," said the vendor, "we are opening a trading post in the neighboring village of Khalsi. The East India Company and I have worked out a deal," he relayed.

"In Khalsi?"

"You are familiar with the town, not too far. It is right on the river banks," the shawl vendor relayed.

"Yes, of course, I am very familiar," Rashid said.

"The East India Company is providing boathouses for the traders. There is great demand from London these days. It is very fortuitous business. We could use your help," the Kashmiri vendor offered.

"I am interested in the village of Khalsi," Rashid said.

Rashid dutifully greeted the guests of the wedding party at the evening reception. Noisy cheers erupted as the couple emerged together. The crowds threw marigolds and flower petals in festivity. In the chaos of the floral jamboree, he glanced towards the outer perimeter of the lake and saw an ethereal figure in a white *salvaar* shirt.

The flaps of her shirt blew in the wind like the wings of a bird and reflected in the waters. It was a familiar mystery.

"Will you please excuse me?" Rashid said to the Kashmiri vendors.

"Wonderful, I will talk to your father about further details," the vendor was in a festive mood. "Bahut Mubark! Congratulations! Maasha Allah!"

Rashid left the crowd and walked slowly past the mosque. He could no longer see the white apparition. The lakeside was buzzing with fireflies that sparked sporadically in the evening. He heard the crickets in the bushes, but the figure in white had disappeared. He looked down to the lake where he saw a lotus flower blossom, impermeable to the surface.

In delusion, he looked around the lake. He remembered his days in the *madrassa*, when he would speak of Truth, and there were no barriers in dialogue. He felt that way with Asita, but there was something more.

"Lover and loving are inseparable and timeless," he remembered Sheik

Abdul once said. He looked through the nighttime steam but the apparition had disappeared.

Up in the ancient Buddhist shrine, the white *salvaar* flapped in the wind, and she looked at the Mosque in the distance. It was so distant, yet so close. Asita looked out to the mist above the lake on the night of Henna Kardal's wedding. She had come unannounced, and did not make her presence known. She was interested in knowing more than the social character of her student. She watched from the side of the lake, as the torches lit the midnight reception. What would she sacrifice as a Brahmin guru?

The rouge bride emerged with her new husband in the reception crowd. The guests cheered and threw petals with blessings.

She wanted to see for herself, in the deepest form possible, who her student was. How had they found an instant in space and time that transcended religion? She wanted to know how they found their place of Yoga.

That night, she did not see the young man standing on the other side of the lake, wondering something similar. She left the Buddhist shrine and told the ox-driver from the ashram to take her back to Khalsi.

She felt an anxious nausea the next morning. She knew that a Brahmin Yogi was forbidden to have relations of the heart. Finally in the ashram, she could no longer hold the guilt in her head.

"Guruji, I snuck into my student's sister's wedding," she confessed.

"That is shocking, Asita," Swami Vunde said.

Her heart dropped in the guilty lump in her throat. She felt shameful in front of the man she had come to most admire.

"You mean to tell me, that after all this, you did not get a proper invitation?"

Her agony laughed away with a social *faux pas*.

"Asita, you are often alone in the ashram. You are taking on this student and, in doing so, testing yourself. You must not become so detached from life and the community that you are detached from yourself."

"I felt like I had disappointed you."

"Asita, I do not judge you. I have enough faith in myself to have faith in you. I know you will make decisions of your own volition. You have a strong foundation to become a Brahmin guru."

"But do I though? I mean, I was tempted by a wedding."

"You are a sum of all your actions, as am I. Let me tell you something. I was a young man studying probability theory. I had studied philosophy, physiology and Sanskrit. I felt it would be nothing short of fulfilling my duty to live the life of a Brahmin Guru. But at the end of the day, no matter whatever my situation was, or the education I had, it was my choice. And so it must be yours."

"Guruji, thank you."

"I know the Himalayan rocks and I compete in old age. However, I do remember what it was like to be young and partake in the latest of social galas.

We cannot forget the people. They renew in us whatever cause we take on."

She took a breath, and the pain in her stomach disappeared.

The next morning, Rashiq returned to their spot by the river's edge.

"How was the wedding?" she asked Rashiq. A party-crasher never revealed her secrets.

"It was tiring. Henna was beautiful. My father was happy, and so was I."

"Oh, good," Asita said.

She did not admit why she went, but she wondered why he did not include her in the festivities. He wondered if the apparition by the lake was his teacher and why she did not make her presence known. They did not share their thoughts, and instead, Rashiq continued.

"And I even got to meet a lot of important contacts from the Company."

"What would you want with the Company?"

"Well, Father and I are going to start exporting some of the shawls and handicrafts made at the house through the Company."

Asita thought for a second about his nonchalant statement.

"Rashiq, you can't do business with the East India Company. They are pillaging this valley, one household at a time."

"My father believes that the shawl trade with the Company will be beneficial to the family, and even the town of Nurla."

"But how can you do business with such an institution? They are threatening the daily lives of craftsmen such as your family."

"It is a family duty to take over this trade. You don't..." he paused. "I don't live in an ashram tower. I must make a means for myself one day."

"Rashiq, my guru believes that the very *madrassa* schools in which you studied are at risk of British conversions. They are going to manipulate them for control."

"I won't let that happen," he said with resolve. "I just won't."

Rashiq was quiet. He had realized how much she had come to know him. He opened up to her, not as an instructor, but as a friend.

"Aristotle, the Greek, once said, 'A friend is one soul in two bodies,'" he said.

She listened to his art of expression.

"You are more than a friend to me," he said. "I thank you for your opinion, but I must make these decisions on my own."

"I just want you to be aware of your alliances," she said, "But I'll respect your decision."

Rashiq Kardal meant more to her than she had ever imagined.

Over the course of the summer months, she had seen him change from a forest dweller to a young man of business. Even in his Yoga practice he had changed and became proficient in certain poses. Yet he came every morning to prepare his body for meditation. With changes in his strength and flexibility, Asita knew she had to challenge his mind and challenge his body.

"You have become proficient in the standing pose *Tadasana*. Now it is time to progress. It is now time to learn *Garudasana*, the Eagle Pose," Asita proclaimed.

The cycle of the asanas continues, and once again, a student learned the *Garudasana* Eagle Pose.

Two inhales and two exhales breathed through their nostrils. Two twisted pillars soared to the blue Kashmiri sky like the bird itself. The Hindu and the Muslim inhaled. The Brahmin and the Sufi exhaled. She narrated the *asana* pose, one-step further than had ever journeyed before.

"Step 3: Rest the back of your left thigh on the right thigh..."

On this Day of Mercury,

When the stars explode,

Love is taken to a sexual high.

Rest the back of your left thigh on the right thigh.

As the Envy and desires consume,

Is Tolerance threatened with death?

Books and Pleasures tolerate,

And Flames of famine run dry.

...Rest the back of your left thigh on the right thigh: Step 3."

They had returned to their piece of paradise, and they progressed.

Later that night in Nurla, Rashiq felt something new in his joints. He felt more dynamic, more awake. He met his father in the workshop where the shawl weavers were leaving for the evening.

"Have you met with the representatives of the Company yet?" he asked his father.

"No, not yet. I was thinking of sending you actually. You seem to like Khalsi so much," the father laughed, betraying a tinge of bitterness.

"Do you think it is a wise idea to meet with them though?"

"I think it is a great opportunity for trade. You know this, why do you ask such silly things?"

"I just think you have to be aware of your alliances, Papa."

"My alliances? Ha, speak for yourself."

"You know that the East India Company is trying to take control of the valley," Rashiq said.

"These don't sound like your words my dear son. If you want to talk about alliances, look towards the Brahmin superiority. They don't want the Muslim landowners to pay their dues to the *jagirdars* so they can take control of the valley."

"Not all Brahmins are like that," Rashiq exclaimed.

"I'd think twice Rashiq. What is that old Kashmiri saying? Something about keeping friends near the chickens, and enemies in the flock...I don't know," he laughed.

Rashiq took a breath to himself and stopped the conversation. He did not understand what his father meant by 'Brahmin superiority', but it lurked in his mind.

That night he could not sleep. In the days that followed, he could not sleep much either. His Yoga teacher had become more influential in his life than he had realized. He lay in bed looking at the roof. He could not discern if following the heart, and following the path, were in opposition to following the Truth.

"One day I want to visit Mecca, and fulfill one of the pillars of Islam," he once told Asita. He thought about her often, and did not sleep at all. His mind wandered again.

The next morning, by the river in Khalsi, Rashiq joined her while she was in her Yoga pose. She felt his presence. That morning, a shadow crept over the pond, over the seven lotus flowers that rose to the surface. The sun turned toward the vernal equinox, and the shadows swept across the valley.

As they practiced their warm-up exercises, his head began to hurt and he felt a darting pain in his temples. Yoga could not replace sleep. Rashiq felt dull, limp and lackluster.

When they finished their routine, they sat on the grass. The flower weeds were crisp in his hand. Rashiq picked a few stalks of grass. Asita felt the ground beneath her, sensing its moisture.

"I used to tear the grass too when I was little," she smiled.

"Did you uproot the grass from the soil as I do?"

"Yes," she thought about their moment. "I would uproot it from the earth."

"Did you pick flowers too, as a child?" Most little girls do that, he thought. He looked into the distance.

"No, but I would dream of flowers," she laughed.

Asita sat cross-legged, entertaining Rashiq's questions and finding amusement herself.

"In your dreams, would you run through the fields of flowers?" Rashiq looked right towards her.

"No, I would dream I *was* the flower – the color, the petals, the scent," Asita answered.

"How deep would you go?" Rashiq was clear, as his mind drifted deep into himself, deep into a darkness his Sufi path tried to light. There was something different about him today, and his memories entered into his rhetoric.

"Deep? What do you mean?" Asita raised her eyebrows.

"Did you go into the depths of its stem, in the tube of its pollen, the veins of its leaves?"

"I don't think so. I was only a child."

"Why, because that would be...." Rashiq paused, not really knowing what he was saying at all.

"Because, that would be infinite," she finished his thought.

"Infinite," he repeated.

"Man has always tried to understand the being of the single flower. These are his dreams."

There was a moment of silence before she inquired, "Rashiq, what do you dream of?"

"I don't dream."

"Surely you must." Her elbow nudged him.

"I try not to."

"When you close your eyes at night, what do you see?"

There was another moment of silence. Rashiq was reluctant to speak, and he did not know if he wanted to be completely open.

An image in his head appeared, one that he had been unable to shake lately. Hundreds of candles appeared, like the ones that lit the passage for the bride and groom. But the candles started to merge in his head. Fifty little candles became twenty-five, twenty candles merged to form large candles of ten. Four candles became two and finally all the candles of celebration merged into one another and formed an engulfing flame. It was something that haunted him, but he had not shared it with his teacher. Rashiq was not sure of what it meant. He did not answer her. He did not want to admit that he had gone sleepless for the previous few nights, and his mind was not as clear as he wanted her to believe.

"I try not to dream."

Asita knew she could not push her student, but she was excited to teach the lesson she had in mind.

"No matter what it is you dream of," she smiled, "You have gained great strength and flexibility in your Yoga practice. I believe today is a good day."

Rashiq felt at ease with her support, and he smiled back. His mind did not absorb her words though, and he could not stop thinking about the image of the merging flames.

When they were finished, she picked up her clay water jug and parted from her student as usual. Rashiq was unsure if he would travel downstream to the new British trading post. He felt indecisive and conflicted.

"*Why didn't I tell her?*" he thought to himself.

In the village of Khalsi, Asita walked through the streets towards the ashram. The townspeople were the same. Men with moustaches sat under the shaded trees and wasted the late summer day. The tomato cart rolled with red jewels. The vegetable salesman shrieked his marketing strategy throughout the town, "Fresh *sabjee* vegetables!"

Asita trekked up the dirt road in Khalsi, creating dust as she walked. Those behind her tasted the dust. Rashiq rubbed his eyes as he followed her that morning.

She walked up the hill where she saw a familiar entity on the side of the road.

"Good morning, Dhobiji," she greeted the *dhobi* washer man.

The *dhobi* washer man called her name, "Hey, Asita, why don't you ever pick up your clothes?"

"I will come tomorrow, Dhobiji," she said personably.

"Aye, Asita, cleanliness is next to godliness," the *dhobi* washer man made his case.

"I am late today, I must see my Guruji," she passed him by.

"Aye, what odor do I have that no one comes anymore?" the washer man yelled.

"I will come later, Dhobiji," she was out of sight and on her way. Her student followed.

"I tell you," the *dhobi* washer man said aloud to himself, "I am a man of cleanliness. Cleanliness is next to godliness. They go to their temples and their mosques, but who will come next to me?"

Rashiq walked past the villagers on the road. His mind had grown cloudy like the murky sky above. In the distance, he saw a familiar figure, whose hands move with fast with mind numbing repetitions.

The Sufi Handler stood at the side of the road and counted on fingers the Islamic chants of Allah. His wild eyes, seeing everything and nothing, stood out from his neglected face and tangled white hair.

Rashiq was surprised to see the Handler in Khalsi because he had never seen him outside Nurla. Yet he was now in two places, or perhaps there were many Handlers. From the moment he awoke in the morning until the moment he slept, he recited endless repetitions of the *surah* verses of the holy *Qur'an*, which formed his sustenance, his occupation, and his very consciousness.

The villagers called him a madman, but Rashiq did not judge him. He passed the Handler slowly, caught up in the wild eyes that stared heavily. The Handler struck fear in Rashiq's sleepless mind, possessing him for a moment in time.

"The Uprising against the Infidels..." the Handler called out, "The virtuous will rise up from the deceitful on the Day of Judgment...they will face Allah. They will face the Fire of Judgment..."

The moment passed, and Rashiq broke the Handler's stare. He saw his Yoga teacher up ahead, and his gait filled with fury, while her pace remained steady and calm. He followed the drops of the sacred water on the road that fell from her clay pot.

The *dhobi* washer man watched as the young man walked with great force.

"Why does everyone rush in this village?" he asked aloud.

Breathing heavily, Rashiq followed her up the hill to the ashram. He needed to reach her. He needed to tell her what he was withholding.

Unaware of the figure following her, Asita felt her strength grow as she approached her ashram. This was her home, where she learned the Brahmin path she was destined to live. She ate an astringent diet of sour and sweet, carefully

balanced with salt and stringent. At this ashram, she reflected on her thoughts and her actions, lived by her Hindu dharma, and renewed her sense of self. She took sanctuary here and could return to being a student under the guidance of a guru who knew the path's pitfalls.

Rashiq stumbled on a stone while trekking up the hill, but recovered his footing. As he regained his balance, he looked up to the triangular roof of the ashram, which had greater prominence than when viewed from the river spot.

He knew what he had to tell her, and every step increased his intensity.

On the slopes of the ashram, a marigold twirled in the fingers of the Untouchable. He looked away from tending to the animal feces to watch the imminent reunion. He was too far to hear and too excluded from humanity to understand. But as he rotated the marigold, the lowest caste member felt a disturbance in the winds.

"Asita!" Rashiq called out her name just as she reached the familiar doors. She turned around and could hardly believe the sound.

"Asita!" he called out again. She saw the beige *kurtha* shirt flapping and coming up the hill.

"Rashiq!" she called back. Her voice strengthened in disbelief.

As the young Muslim man approached her, she stood at the threshold of her sanctuary. "Rashiq? What are you doing here?"

"I had to tell you something."

Short of breath and face to face with his uphill target, Rashiq was at a loss for words.

"What could you say that could not wait until tomorrow?"

"I have not told you the whole truth."

Standing at the familiar wooden doors, with familiar cracks, Asita was stunned. She turned away from the splintered doors and looked at her Yoga student.

"If you have not fully disclosed the truth in your heart, then you should do so," she said with reservation, "at the time when you deem appropriate."

She knew Rashiq wanted to confide in her, but she was a little scared of what his confession would bring.

"When I close my eyes, all I see is the sight of fire," Rashiq confessed.

He searched her face for a reaction. She looked back, waiting for more.

"You asked me earlier what I dreamed of," he said. "I close my eyes and I see fire. The flames burn continuously. It haunts me."

"Fire, why do you close your eyes to fire?"

"Because it burns. It burns from our sins."

Rashiq puffed his exhalation. He wanted her to understand. Since he had returned to the world from the madrassa, Asita had been the one person able to understand him. Rashiq's fingers twitched nervously. Verses he had studied from the *Qur'an* whirled in his head. His terror, his visions, his insomnia, and his fire were so real to him that he wanted her to understand. He looked to her face.

"Why do you think of sins...our sins?" she asked. Her eyes were alarmed.

"It is the fire of the Judgment."

Asita was disturbed by his vision. She wanted to reach him, but he did not respond. "Rashiq, why are you plagued like this?"

"I close my eyes, but I have not slept...I do not know since when," he confessed.

"Rashiq," her voice warmed, "You haven't slept? Why didn't you say anything about sleeplessness?"

"Sleep! The stars are out, who needs to sleep?"

A villager once told him the Handler slept only one night a week.

"But your body, Rashiq, you must take care of yourself. The stars will not cure your insomnia. Yoga perceives the human body as the cosmos, but you must give it rest for it to function."

"Yoga perceives the body?" he repeated. He was nearly giddy. "Do go on with your worldly lessons Asita," he said.

"This isn't the right time," she said.

"Say it, please."

"Yoga perceives the body as a replication of the levels of the cosmos."

"Levels of the cosmos..."

Fire and surahs blazed through his thoughts. Rashiq was tired and did not understand her.

"Rashiq, I do not know what plagues you, but try to get some rest. You will extinguish the flames in your dreams with sleep and through the techniques we have learned. But you can not bypass sleep."

Rashiq was unconvinced and felt like he was not in control. He was determined to resolve his vision of a thousand candles forming one engulfing flame. He put his hand on the old wooden door of the ashram and started to push inward.

Asita resisted. She stepped closer to the door, blocking his path with her arm. Her facial expression was stern. Her stance was tense.

"Rashiq, you cannot go in."

"Is this not your ashram?" he asked.

"Yes, but you cannot," she paused. "What are you doing here, Rashiq?"

His erratic behavior alarmed her. She placed her hand on his, which was splayed across door cracks. She was not sure if she should press his hand further, or prevent him from opening the ashram's door. Their fingers splayed across the wooden grains.

At that moment, as if representing the random patterns of the year's sunspots, a white moth settled on the two hands, one on top of the other. Rashiq brushed the moth away, but she kept her hand on the door.

"I like it here at the ashram," he sighed. "I can only be at peace here with you."

She looked at his bloodshot eyes.

"Rashiq, for me, the peace lies inside. The ashram is a place to study. I must go inside, and you..."

The new guru was unsure of his attachment towards her. She realized that her attachment for him had gone too far.

"Why can't I enter?" he persisted.

She told him with less flexibility, and more strength, "The ashram is a place to study. Rashiq, you are not a..."

"I am not a what? A Brahmin?"

"That is not what I said," she protested.

"What!" he was angered, "... I am not a Brahmin...a Muslim cannot enter?"

"Rashiq, you are angry, and..." she tried to speak.

"I came here because I had to tell you something, but I see I cannot."

"I know, and we will speak more tomorrow."

He did not see her eyes freeze with fear when he said, "There will be no tomorrow."

"Rashiq, please, do not say this."

"This is what my people warn of, why my people reject the castes you uphold...Idol worship. You claim Brahmin superiority." His mind filled with the visions of fire. "And despite all your Yoga training, that is the greatest Ego to which you are attached!"

"You're out of line!"

Her pride resisting him, she started to wonder how she ever thought she understood him. As she saw the unrest in his bloodshot eyes, she said, "Rashiq, you are unruly, and your temper, please."

"If you are part of the highest caste, then how can you believe in the equality of soul?"

He cut through her like a blade.

"Rashiq, please listen. I do not know what torments you this way..." Her student showed both love and hate in his green verdant eyes.

"We Sufis learn to consider all mankind to be our family. Do you not believe in the brotherhood of humankind?" he yelled.

Asita was speechless. She felt ambushed.

He moved forward towards the entrance of the door, but she reaffirmed her hand on the door. Her arm stretched out, like a barrier to his entrance. He looked at her with disbelief. He gasped, deeply offended. She looked at her hand splayed across the wooden grain.

Both of them now breathed short, fearful breaths of fallen pride. Her arm had become a blockade into their Vital Breath.

"Please, just calm down and breathe," she pleaded.

"I will not breathe!" he yelled. He looked at her with determination. "I will not breathe...unless you believe in the equality of the human soul."

Rashiq called into question her very existence.

The stunned look on her face placated him. Asita said nothing. Her entire foundation came into question, and the man she had come to love looked at her with watery, tormented eyes. She felt her joints stiffening as she watched him turn his back. Before she knew it, he had started to descend the hill.

“Rashiq!”

She called out his name, but he was gone. He did not turn back, but he left an impression deep in the layers of her mind. She could hear her heartbeat palpitating through her chest. Her throat constricted and she could hardly stand.

“Please, come inside the ashram,” she wished she had said. She wished she had invited him in and introduced him to her guru.

A tear rolled down her delicate face. As Rashiq left the road of the Khalsi ashram, she tasted the salt on her lips. That day, poetry was no longer sung in her Paradise.

From the side of the ashram hills, the lowest of the low tended to the feces of the herded animals. The Untouchable looked on and sensed a rift in the lotus. Two birds that had once sat in the same tree now parted ways. He twirled the yellow marigold between his fingers.

In her tears, Asita knew she had failed her student. She had failed her Brahmin duty by upholding it. The beige *kurtha* shirt disappeared from sight, and the young Brahmin woman entered the ashram.

Rashiq left in a fog of chaos. He could not discern the road. He could not understand the events that had occurred or where he had gone. He made his way to the trading post at Khalsi down the river.

Another rift in a valley was becoming more and more divided. After the Indian Mutiny had occurred throughout India that year, a rising Hindu middle class assumed dominant positions in industry, education, professions, and the civil services. Muslim separatism arose out of the opposition to the Hindu majority. The British encouraged a rift in the lotus of Hindus and Muslims, and ego tore through the Kashmiri Paradise.

“Mrs. Kardal will be singing the songs of Kabir from the heavens, Grace to Allah.”

“There is a strange tree, which stands without roots and bears
fruits without blossoming;
It has no branches and, no leaves, it is a lotus all over.
Two birds sing there;
One is the guru, and the other the disciple;
The bird is beyond seeking, yet it is most clearly visible.
The Formless is in the midst of all forms.

I sing the glory of forms.”

- Kabir

- *Songs of Kabir*, translated by Rabindranath Tagore

Episode XI

Eleven

Menus Crumble

New York on a Sunday morning was a rebirth in its own sense. Gone were the Saturday stupors and black cloaks that paraded the night. Gone were last night's bad decisions and dulled senses. Sunday renewed the discipline that escaped for that brief, epicurean moment. Sunday renewed the importance of structure in the week. The Sunday newspaper arrived on the front mats of apartments, and the local gospel choirs welcomed the girls in lace dresses. And the Sunday brunch in New York was that point of commencement.

“He asked you out?” Mira Steinbeck asked on the telephone.

“Mira, he asked me to coffee...on a Sunday,” Sarita said.

“Coffee on a Sunday? The coffee is with food, right?”

“Yes,” Sarita hesitated.

“Then that's a date, dear,” Mira said “with your student.”

“I don't even know if I'm going to go. I'm getting over a cold.”

“You should go. What is he like?” her girlfriend encouraged.

“I don't know. He's nice, I guess.” She felt a little peculiar having to describe him.

“Nice? Honey, nice won't pay the bills.”

“I don't need anyone to pay my bills, Mira! Although, he did give me his card, I think he works in finance or something,” Sarita said.

“Well, this Yoga trend may come and go, but a well-balanced portfolio never goes out of fashion,” Mira laughed.

Sarita laughed too. “I don't know, he's been to my class twice already.”

“So is he attentive?”

“I wouldn't say that just yet, but he does have a certain quality about him.”

“Quality?”

“I have to admit, Mira. When he walked into my class that first day, I had such a strange feeling of déjà vu. He learned certain beginners' pose right away, but it was bizarre. I can't put my finger on it,” Sarita described, “But there is something so familiar about him.”

“Now, isn't it against the rules or something to date a Yoga student?”

“I mean, there is the integrity of the student-teacher relationship that must

be upheld," Sarita thought aloud, "I suppose." Somehow she evaded her girlfriend's question.

"*Maybe I should ask Don?*" she thought to herself. She had never considered how that integrity could be compromised. Then again, she was a single woman in New York City. Had they met in a bar or a club, there would be no taboos, nor any 'ifs'.

However, Sarita met him in her Yoga studio.

"That's great, you got yourself some hot Yoga sex," Martin said to Josiah on the phone that morning.

"Martin, it's coffee. How do you go from coffee to Yoga sex?"

"Well, you said the class went well. I don't understand what's the problem?"

"I went to the class because I wanted to understand something, Martin."

"If you went for meditation and breathing, why did you say you were stressed out in the second class?"

"I wasn't stressed out. At times, it was just difficult to concentrate. She's like, 'Focus on the breath.' So I'm trying to concentrate on the breath, and then all of a sudden she says, 'Meditate on the exhale.'" Josiah went on a bit of a tirade.

"Calm down. Good God, man, why are you putting so much emphasis on this?"

"How am I supposed to concentrate if she keeps talking? I just kept getting distracted with all these random words...about concentrating!"

"So you didn't feel the same way as you did the first time?"

"See, that's the thing. Sometimes I got distracted. But other times it felt very intense. It was as if I hit a D note and it remained in me, vibrating somehow. Especially during this one standing pose we did. I remember she adjusted my stance, and it was as if my mind went blank."

"Huh. Interesting," Martin said.

As he talked on the cordless phone, Josiah walked outside the door of his apartment into the hallway to get the Sunday newspaper.

"There's something to it," Josiah continued, "I just don't know what." As he reached down for the paper, he heard the door slam behind him.

"Ah, Shit."

Sometimes people need to dine alone. Every so often, just dine alone. One must persist and follow the host to the table, and sit there head up. Bringing reading material will aid in avoiding eye contact with the tables of two. Although, the glances from the tables of four may be even more socially embarrassing. However, under no circumstances, should one overhear conversations while sitting alone. Studying the menu for too long could be unnerving. Perhaps look out into space.

As Sarita waited at Eli's Luncheonette at the corner of 73rd and Lexington, she did just that. Josiah Tamarind was late.

Inside every grown man was the deep-rooted, unquestionably strong

desire to be a superhero. Perhaps it was the inculcation from toy manufacturers at an early age, or perhaps it was the Y chromosome's genetic coding to swoop in to rescue the damsel in distress. Leaping tall buildings in a single bounce, Josiah's taxi sped down Park Avenue. Don't worry, Lois! Superman was on his way.

Sarita waited a little longer, a little agitated. She remembered her teenage years when her staunch father opened the door to greet her boyfriends and looked at them with a mental clobbering bat. Even after all these years of proving commitment to a cause, she still had skeleton fears of opening up to a change a relationship may bring. Perhaps she was selective and Darwinian.

"If you want good genes, you can't be bashful," Mira once told her.

Or perhaps she was in search of something more.

"*Would you like to go for coffee on Sunday?*"

Sarita got a call on her cellular phone as she waited. "Ma! No, I don't want to meet Tony DeLuca's son."

"He's such a good catch. He's taking over the butcher shop," Jillian Rena advocated.

Raised to follow a maternal tradition, Sarita's career progression as a publishing director and Yoga instructor had not come easily.

"Ma, I don't doubt that he can slice the best piece of venison this side of the Hudson," Sarita said. There was a pause on the phone and a motherly response, before Sarita had enough. "I know *Ma*, but I'm a vegetarian," she concluded.

She finally flipped closed the technology trap. With that gesture, she closed the paradigms of tradition. As she did, she saw Josiah open the door and whisper to the maitre de. From the red vinyl booth, Sarita watched the host smile and point in her direction. Sarita took a small breath to herself.

Josiah walked with a pleasant disposition. He was a tall man and had a curious style. In the last week they had become familiar to one another's eyes.

"I'm sorry I'm late, I locked myself out of my apartment this morning. I was in my bathrobe," Josiah confessed.

"Oh that's okay," she smiled, "How did that happen?" She got up from her seat to greet him.

"Well, I swear I put the dead bolt on when I left the apartment to get the paper," he said.

"How did you get in?" Sarita settled down in her seat. She opened the menu she had been looking at for the last fifteen minutes.

"The building super was out to church, so my sister-in-law brought over a spare key. She lives nearby."

"You have a brother?" Sarita assumed from the *in-law*. She was casually assessing more at the table than just the brunch specials.

"Oh, I still call her my sister-in-law, Rebecca. She was my wife's sister."

"Wife?"

"My wife passed away five years ago. She had breast cancer."

Josiah's directness struck something in Sarita.

"I'm sorry to hear that," she said calmly.

The barriers of their encounter slowly came down as he said, "If it weren't for Rebecca, I don't think I would have paid attention to the whole Yoga thing," he corrected, "Well, that is part of the reason."

The waiter took their orders and gestured to take back the menus. The menu was like a fortress, or a protective force field, laminated with today's specials.

"Protect me, Oh Solid Menu. Protect me from thy awkward moments that may occur."

The menu served as a mid-date barrier, much like the Great Wall of China. When Qin Shih Huang built the Great Wall, he intended to keep the Huns out of his country, to make a stable future for his descendents, who would be the Second Emperor, Third Emperor, and so on. However, forced enlistment for wall building and other cruel treatments provoked a rebellion that overthrew his empire. In building walls with the purpose to keep people out, the emperor learned that the greatest threat came from within.

After the waiter took away the menus, Sarita was the first to talk.

"This is a bit strange."

"Strange?"

"I've never met one of my students outside class before," she admitted.

"Is that how you think of me, a student?"

"Well, to a certain extent, yes. You do participate in my class," she emphasized.

"Well, if I am your student, then may I ask you questions?"

She sat up straight, but there was an instant impression between them. She smiled.

"What led you to become a Yoga teacher?"

"You know, I didn't start out doing Yoga. I just kind of fell into it."

"How do you just fall into Yoga. Don't you have to stretch into it?"

Sarita laughed. "I've always had an interest in the physical body. I mean, in college I was really into fitness and aerobics, and then I went out to the corporate world and ended up in publishing."

"That sounds interesting. What do you do for publishing?"

"I work on pitching books and series. It keeps me on my toes."

"And here I thought the thing that kept you on your toes were the *asana* poses." He grinned a boyish smile.

"Ah, you're a fast learner. I like that."

She felt a kinetic connection she could not place.

"So what happened? How did you become a teacher?"

"I don't know—I was not really as satisfied with my work as I thought I could be. I was actually working on a marketing campaign for this string of *How-To-Yoga* books that our company was hired to publish and market. So I took a

class to find out more about my target demographic."

"That sounds like a fun job to me," Josiah said.

"Yes, it is, but I took my work very seriously. I still take my work very seriously. But somehow, during that first class, I don't know. Something happened."

"What was it though?"

"I just felt such a strong connection. It felt great."

"A connection, in what sense?"

A driving force of curiosity buttressed the table for two.

"I've always been a bit of a wanderer, but I never really knew why until the day I started Yoga. Yoga was like a portal for me. It opened my mind to a whole other world, and it led me to teaching."

A striking femininity in Sarita's honesty appealed to Josiah. His interest and inquiring eyes melted a few barriers she conceived of when seeing a student outside her studio.

"Don't you need a license or something to teach?"

"Oh, absolutely—I attended an intensive Yoga training school. It was through the Yoga Alliance, which is a society for yoga certification."

"I don't mean to sound skeptical," he paused and wiped his very subtle beard. "But how do you get certified to breathe?"

She just smiled at him with composure.

"Well, for one thing, Yoga is all about keeping an open mind. But there were about 400 hours of Yoga that you needed to put in. I spent about a month in an ashram, where I took tests and participated in clinics and really, just immersed myself in the nuts and bolt of the practice."

"What exactly do you do in an ashram?" he was intent on finding out all about her training.

"In order to become a Yoga instructor you have to get certified. I went through this intensive four month training program part-time. There is a full curriculum for the details in teaching Hatha Yoga. I went through an entire 150 hours of actually teaching."

"I've never been in an ashram," Josiah said innocently.

"Let's see. There were courses on physiology and anatomy," she listed.

"What was that like?"

"Imagine a skeleton doing the Cobra Pose," she laughed. "But, for the most part it was very fascinating, seeing the physiological effects of the different poses on the body."

"You did all this here at the Yoga studio?"

"Well at the beginning stages. Then I went to a Yoga ashram down in Virginia. Don't laugh, but the ashram was in the village of Yogaville."

"Yogaville!" He could not contain his chuckle.

She laughed, too. "I know, most people get a kick out of it."

"No, no," he regained his composure. "I mean no disrespect," he took a

breath.

She smiled back, "It's okay, you should have seen how my family took the news."

She reminisced, "They were very strict at the ashram. We ate only vegan foods. It was so difficult. All I wanted to do was eat a bar of Hershey chocolate."

"Oh really?" he amused. "Hershey was *heresy*, in Yogaville!"

They laughed like old friends.

She liked his sense of humor, and her composure came back. "Well, we did do other things. We studied *pranayama* meditation along with the theory behind it. Discipline for the one month at the ashram really changes your outlook."

"In what sense?"

"I went through the entire course in the *Bhagavad-Gita*. We had discussion sessions after each of the eighteen chapters. The scriptural study of the teaching of the *Gita* definitely expands the foundation you get and expands the universal understanding of Yoga for both your own personal development and for expanding the understanding of your teachings."

"I studied the *Bhagavad-Gita* in college, about the internal struggle of Arjun as he talked with Lord Krishna," Josiah said. He definitely had an appetite for discovery, in whatever form it took.

"That's definitely the major component of it. It's the major dilemma, which really goes to demonstrate Karma Yoga, that is, the idea of Yoga by your deeds. You'll find that in most scriptural studies, at the end of the day, you are responsible for your own actions and the effects they have on others."

The food they ordered had arrived. The server refilled their coffees.

"Alright, your turn," she said. She took a napkin from the dispenser.

"There are turns?"

"Yes," she affirmed with a good deal of flirtatious strength, "and it's your turn."

"Okay, what do I have to do to fulfill my turn?"

"Well, why did you start taking Yoga?"

"You mean what led me to the class?"

"Alright, if that's how you think of it," she said. She started to eat.

"Well, what led me to the Yoga class was the emphasis on the breath I had been learning," he stopped midway.

"The breath you were learning... where?" she asked.

"Well, this is going to sound really trite, but at a Kabbalah Center."

"Why would it sound trite?"

"Well, I mean, you hear about all these celebrities trying it out and what not, but I actually heard about it a long time ago."

"Oh. I heard about it, but what is it?"

"It is basically a way to interpret the *Torah*, and it gives you a more personal connection to Judaism." He defended his interest.

"That sounds reasonable. You seem suspicious, though?"

Sarita wanted to understand Josiah Tamarind.

"Well, it gets a lot of flak in the Jewish community. Most people do not even acknowledge it as part of Judaism, because it does not take the strict word of the *Torah*. It gives you greater freedom."

"It seems like you know a lot about it," Sarita was encouraging, "Why does it get flak?"

"Well, the Jewish community likes things that are very rational, and, as they say, verifiable. They call Kabbalah black magic. But there are certain things that are just inexplicable."

"Inexplicable," she repeated quietly. At that moment, she felt a curious sense of ease with him.

"Like, why certain people become fixtures in your life, and then leave."

There was a little boy's hidden misery in Josiah's thoughts, but he changed the topic. "Well, let's just say that certain things happen for reasons we don't understand. Sometimes there is loss without explanation."

Sarita perceived something in his description, but did not press further. She wanted to say something more, but continued instead with something innocuous, "Sometimes you just have to go on your own path for a while. Sometimes we just need to understand everything that we went through, in order to move on."

"That's true, I suppose." He started to think aloud, "I mean I think going to the Kabbalah Center helped expose me to things I wasn't aware of, let alone wanted to confront."

Their intensity filtered the din of the restaurant. She was completely intrigued.

"I was learning of these ten nodes, which is how the Kabbalists diagram their interpretation of the universe and the individual. They call the diagram the 'Sefirot Tree'."

"Tree?"

...A lone tree...

"They have a way of calling it the 'Tree of Life'. I can't claim to understand it entirely. But the ten different layers are released. These nodes, are branches for something greater to ascend."

Somehow sitting across from her, he felt at ease enough to speak openly.

"They say that if you can conquer these nodes, you can attain immortality."

"Immortality...That's interesting," she said earnestly. "In the original spiritual aims of Yoga, the ultimate purpose is to unite the individual soul with the universal soul, which is often called, the immortal soul."

She took a quiet breath to herself.

...The Mighty River Source...

"The way they presented the connection between the individual and the

universe was something I initially didn't want to pay attention to," he confessed.

"Sometimes we put up walls. Sometimes it's hard to go against the opinions of others," Sarita lamented.

Sarita Rena was a mystery he could not place in his thoughts. Her hair, tucked behind her ears, framed her face well. Her soft chin extended down to a soft neck. She wore a gold cross pendant and would intermittently draw it back and forth on her box chain.

She put some pepper on her eggs, and the only ring she wore was on her right hand. The ring had a foreign script written around it, but he could not decipher the words.

"You seem to have done it," he suggested.

"I don't know. I had a lot of support, I guess."

"Did you get support at home?"

She laughed aloud with a spurt of liveliness. "That was hardly the case. Telling your Catholic parents you want to train to be a Yoga teacher doesn't get you too many brownie points."

"Really, Catholic parents?"

"Yes, my parents were very intent on marrying me off to a nice Italian man. But I had other plans."

Josiah was impressed and wanted to learn more.

"Other plans?"

"Well," Sarita looked at her food. "I'm sure this will come up at Easter next week, but whenever I see them, they remind me of a culture, a lifestyle...like I said," she joked. "Sometimes you have to go on your own path for a while."

"Then who did you get support from?" Josiah asked.

"Well, the Yoga instructor who originally taught me. When he opened his studio he encouraged me to train and get certified. It took a couple years doing it part time, but I took him up on his offer."

"Sounds like an interesting proposition," Josiah said. He started to eat his salad.

"Well, I really like the tenets of the Yoga center."

"Which are what?"

"Well, essentially he's a firm believer of *ahimsa*, that is, the resistance through non-violence movement. He's sort of a Gandhi groupie."

"So you teach non-violence through Yoga. That makes sense," Josiah completed.

"Well, it's more than that. Its *ahimsa*."

He looked at her with a blank stare.

"Well, essentially it's about using the daily practice of Yoga to ingrain a sense of consciousness in everyday life. With this consciousness, you not only go through the day contemplating your actions, but you become aware of all the different influences in the world."

"Like, funky 'new age' influences?"

"I mean, I wouldn't go that far out there. There are more practical applications. Like after September 11th, people started taking Yoga to become more aware of themselves. After all, America was more aware of its perception in the world. Don, the guy who owns the center, believes in the political possibilities of galvanizing practitioners."

"That's a new one." He thought for a second and then said, "It's a bit idealistic to think Yoga can galvanize political change."

"Well, change comes from within, and Yoga brings together a lot of the core roots of change."

"...the inner and outer world..." Josiah thought to himself on a subconscious level.

"I think it is important because, through concentrating on the breath, our mind focuses, and it empowers people to go out into the world and be the change they want to be, no matter how small," she affirmed. "It's absolutely Vital."

Something she said struck a chord in Josiah, and resonated in him like a symphony. Their forks hit the side of their plates as they ate. They liked each other's quiet moments, and then Josiah spoke.

"You said a lot of people came into the center after 9/11, where were you that day?"

The question defined a generation, but it linked them to a common feeling they both experienced at the exact same time.

"I was in the office in midtown," she said quietly. "I watched from the top floor of our office as the first tower crumbled down. I remember losing my breath."

She recounted the disbelief that had become the familiar unifying story of the world's citizens. "I just burst out crying. It was so surreal."

"May I ask you something?"

"Sure," she said. She felt comfortable opening up in front of Josiah, more than a student, but as a new friend.

"Did you doubt your Yoga Center's faith?"

She took a moment to collect her thoughts.

Over the last few years, her Catholic beliefs and her Yoga tenets had started to intertwine. She had never verbalized the links, but had integrated the principles of Yoga to replace words like 'faith' with 'truths'. Yet there was no confusion for the instructor, and Yoga had brought all aspects of her value system together.

"Not one bit," she was resolute. "Where were you?"

"I was walking out of the subway into the office downtown when I saw the first plane hit the North Tower," he said. "I just looked up and saw this huge explosion."

Explosion!

He continued, "And it was just huge from down below. By the time the second plane hit, everyone was running in panic."

As Josiah and Sarita shared their stories, they felt something communal. Contained in a red vinyl booth, the two shared something personal, something fearful, and something sweet.

His mind remained calm and still, and he was able to enjoy the present moment. She appealed to something in him, but he could not identify it. They continued eating their fruit salads.

"It would have been nice to go to your Yoga center that day," Josiah said.

"It certainly would have been. The purpose of Yoga and the center is to provide another medium for taking responsibility for your actions, whether it has to do with personal responsibilities, or national responsibilities. But, it is just one approach, and certainly not the only one."

"It has some interesting implications," Josiah said calmly.

"The Palestinian plight is really what drove Don to open the center," Sarita announced. "He didn't agree with actions of Israel and decided to do something about it. I really admire that."

She ate away at her fruit nonchalantly.

"What do you mean that's what drove him to open the center? It's a yoga center." Josiah paused, "Right?"

"Don believes that if we galvanize both people here in America, as well as abroad, to peacefully resolve the conflict, then we are doing our part in the world. We donate money towards the peace process." She finished chewing.

"But it's a Yoga center?" Josiah vaguely recalled the poster of the center's mission statement on the back wall of the Yoga room. '*Palestinian Refugees*,' floated through his subconscious.

"He believes that Yoga can be a medium for personal change," Sarita said. "It can lead to greater societal changes."

"Do you believe that?"

"I didn't at first. I was skeptical of the whole idea. I mean, it was almost unheard of. The two concepts seem so separate. But, the more I live and teach, the more I learn and realize the connection."

"*What is the Connection to the...?*" raced through the secondary layers of Josiah's mind.

"I'm not really sure how I feel about the center, to be honest," Josiah said.

Perhaps larger than the menu, more dividing than the Great Wall of China, there was a wall that brought together and drove apart the western world. Tired of Palestinian suicide bombings, the Israeli government planned to start building a dividing wall in the disputed West Bank to keep the Palestinians out.

Sarita kept talking. "I mean, think of the possibilities of the world meditating on the dire circumstances of the children of South Africa, or women kidnapped and forced into prostitution rings in Thailand, or even if they incorporated the thought about the human rights violations in Palestine into their daily lives."

"The human rights violations in Israel you mean?"

"No, I mean the Palestinians who were displaced since the '67 occupation."

At that moment, Sarita reached for the salt shaker and her arm extended across the table. Along with her words, the gesture brought a shock to the table. Josiah was stunned. For an instantaneous second, the two looked at the extension of her arm that reached across the table.

It felt like an eternity of silence. As he saw her stretched-out arm, he felt something uncontrollable in him awaken.

"How they suffered? That's backwards!" Josiah said.

"I mean, the European Jews that came to Palestine did displace the people who were originally there," acknowledged Sarita.

"But the land was unpopulated and the land on which the Jews moved was rented from land owners who were not even in the region."

"I mean, I'm not questioning the validity of giving the Jews a homeland," she clarified. "The Holocaust was one of the most egregiously evil events of human history. But you have to admit, there has been an outcome which has favored the Jewish people. There has always been push-back of a two state solution."

"As soon as the partition into two states was proposed, the Jews accepted it, while it was rejected by the Arabs."

"What about the mass Palestinian refugees that followed after the '67 war? There are millions of people living in detriment due to the Israeli occupation, which is in violation of international law and UN resolutions. How do you justify the violations of human rights?"

"Violation of human rights?" he exclaimed.

"It is just alarming that the US gives almost one fourth of its foreign aid budget to Israel, as if the Palestinians are second class citizens, unworthy of relief from the blockades and economic sanctions."

"How can you even assume they believe in human rights when bombs go off every other day. They kill the parents and leave bleeding children by the roadside? What about the terrorism of groups like Hamas and the Islamic Jihad? The Palestinians are terror blind to their own faith, murdering Jews, Muslims and Christians!"

The table shifted, like a rift in their meal. His mind wandered.

"*Could a Yoga Center be anti-Semitic?*" Josiah thought to himself.

Josiah now confronted opposition towards the country he idealistically supported. It was the historic Jewish homeland, the land of his people.

"*And now, a group of yoga hippies are sending money to mysterious 'Refugee' sources? Is it a front for terrorism? Was this a Yoga center or a Concentration Camp?*" Josiah's mind wandered.

Over the few years, Josiah had become more emotionally and intellectually vested in his religion. With so many questions he had asked, there was a conflict between the strict and the liberal interpretation. But he still had a

Jewish grounding and wondered if freer forms of Judaism could bring compromise to the treatment of 'illegal' Israeli settlements.

The demons that caused one Partition resurfaced like angry river rapids, and the effects of another Partition burned in a holy land.

Even after working at the center for years, she wondered, "*Was the fundamental existence of the Yoga center flawed?*"

Sarita took a deep breath that stretched into the pit of her stomach. She believed in non-violence. It was in her calmness, it was in her breath.

"*Yoga teaches us to see the truth in others,*" she thought to herself.

The new Yoga teacher would not be silent any longer.

"You are right. I agree in a non-violent solution. I really do. The Palestinians should not resort to violence."

Her words appealed to him in a way that was more passionate than politics, deeper than religion, and stranger than when he first practiced the standing pose, *Tadasana*. He took a breath, and a comforting silence came to the table.

"*Conquer the Ego,*" Josiah thought to himself.

The student finally listened.

"I suppose part of this cycle of violence has been caused by long years of not necessarily fair maneuvers on the part of Israelis," he admitted.

At that moment, the yoga teacher and her student attained a change that was previously unattainable. Sarita put the salt back and rescinded her arm. With that gesture, a barrier of egos was removed, and the two continued on their way towards the Vital Breath.

And as she pulled back her arm, she managed to tip over the salt. The cap opened, leaving a pile of salt on Josiah's plate.

"Oh, boy," she exclaimed. She quickly managed to contain the salt spill by creating a dam with his potato skins. Josiah took out a napkin from the dispenser, and the outer palm of their hands touched.

Like a static spark from discharged electrons, the touch brought them both into the present moment. The two eyes met. Overwhelmed, Sarita then looked down to the mess.

"I'm so sorry," she said.

"No, don't worry about it. I'll just order something else."

As she cleaned the plate with a napkin, he looked at the peculiar ring on her finger. He had tried to discern what the design was.

"What is this?"

"This ring? They gave me this ring when I completed my training in Yogaville. It has a Sanskrit phrase on it."

"What does it mean?"

He held her finger and examined the ring like a jeweler. A kinetic stir rumbled in the red vinyl booth, and he looked at her for an answer.

"It means, 'Paths are many, the Truth is One.'" she translated. "Basically,

it's the central theme behind the practice of Yoga. That is, there are many people from different backgrounds, and they are traveling on different paths. Ultimately, however, they are all going towards the same goal."

He held her hand longer than she expected. His curiosity magnified as he examined the ring. He took a moment to gather his words.

"In Hebrew, there is the word for truth, *Emet*," Josiah was thinking aloud.

She was impressed by his knowledge as he spoke.

"The first letter of the word is *aleph*, which is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The final letter is *tav*, which is the final letter of the alphabet. The middle letter, *mem*, is at the very center," he continued.

Sarita did not understand the relevance, but his gaze pierced something in her.

"What I learned at the Kabbalah Center is that while not all things are separately true, truth lies in the integration of all the composite parts," he paused. "From beginning to end, and everything in between," he said. "The Truth."

The strands of their mind connected. She took a breath to herself.

As he put her hand down, she returned it to the comfort of the fork on her plate. He drank from his coffee cup and looked at her with the corner of his eye.

She appeared lost in space. She thought about their conversation, which was heavier than she could have expected. Their backgrounds were different, but his sense of familiarity was uncanny. As she quietly sipped her coffee, she started to hear a trickle of water in her head.

"...*truth lies in the integration...Beginning to end...everything in between...*" she thought before she quietly spoke,

"Like a circle."

They breathed at the same moment, and somehow returned to the present moment. Outside the window, Josiah saw someone light a cigarette. He saw the small flame from the lighter, and then looked at Sarita. Sitting across from her, he had an unresolved feeling that could not settle.

"A full circle indeed..."

After a moment of stillness, Sarita could hardly contain her nervousness and had to break the silence.

"So what are you thinking about?" she asked.

"*Find out for yourself the fruits of the tree,*" he recalled his late wife's words. He responded, "I'm thinking of something that has interested me for awhile."

There was a distinct determination in his eyes. In the red vinyl booth, he looked directly at her, and she felt revealed.

"What's that?" she asked.

In all that had occurred over the last five years, Josiah remembered a quiet bed, books on the nightstands, passages like '*He blew into his nostrils the breath of life,*' and at that moment, he felt encouraged.

When Sarita introduced her class with a reminder of the breath, she became a proponent of a 'coming together'.

Josiah looked across to Sarita Rena, *Yoga Instructor, The Missing Peace Yoga Center*. He now had a more complete understanding of the center, its funding of pro-Palestinian information dissemination, peace marches, and financial aid to children of refugees.

Explosion!

He recalled the rabbi's statements on Joy and Sadness, and breathing them both daily. He thought of the *Torah's* explanation that the Lord blew the breath into Adam. His thoughts digested with the ketchup over his eggs, before he asked the yoga instructor,

"What is the connection to the Vital Breath?"

Her face was calm in a way that delighted him.

"What do you mean?" she asked. "I'm not familiar with what that is."

"I mean, you studied all this Yoga, all this breathing. You obviously are involved in politics, but how does it all come together?"

"I'm sorry, I still don't know if I understand," she said.

He tried to pinpoint, "I mean, this circle, this breath, world suffering, is it all removed? Is this Yoga state outside our reach, or is it here on earth?" he asked.

Sarita was quiet, stunned in fact. He amazed her, moved her, but she could not answer him.

Something was missing.

"Can I think about it?" she asked. At that moment, her honesty about her uncertainty was the thing that appealed to him most.

The waiter brought their check and Josiah quickly put down the payment.

"Thank you," she said. She smiled.

"Any time," he smiled back.

She was somehow both uneasy and comfortable sitting across from him. As they got up, he helped her put on her coat. It was the first time in a long while that someone had helped her put her coat on.

They walked outside the diner and felt the sun of a March afternoon. He hailed a taxicab. She was only walking a few blocks over, and said goodbye. She watched him get in the cab. As his cab sped down Lexington Avenue, she felt a sense of longing she could not place.

"What is the Connection to the Vital Breath?"

Episode XII

Twelve

An Untouchable Presence

In the mid 19th century, the English travelers described the canal passages on which the Kashmiri houseboats traveled as the "The Venice of the East." Kashmiri gondola houseboats were grand with hand-carved furniture and rich carpets. A houseboat boy served three meals daily from a menu of exquisite cuisine. Symbols of luxurious living, the houseboats floated with the world's tallest mountains rising behind them.

Throughout the centuries, India had been under the rule of many sovereigns. In the 2nd century BC, King Ashoka conquered the hills and left humbling edicts of Buddhism on the soil. In the 9th century, Hindu rulers built salacious temples to Shiva in central and southern India. When the 17th century Mogul dynasty spread Islam to the north and south, they built alluring Islamic monuments like the Taj Mahal. India had always assimilated its influences of cultures, and, in 1857, foreign influence strengthened its grip on India once again.

That summer, the British Army built a new hill station overlooking the houseboats of Khalsi. The river tributaries of Kashmir had become strategic for the trading posts of the East India Company, who multiplied downstream faster than wild poppies. Hunting exhibitions to Kashmir had become popular, and the goods were sold on the boats.

"Bird hunting in India is an old sport," said the lieutenant on a six-month exhibition.

The lieutenant tried to repay his debts back in England, but was not the only one who thought the Kashmiri territories could pay their obligations. In Khalsi, the Hindu landowners were benefiting from the increase in political rights granted by British control, and the Muslim *jagirdars* were growing impatient with their disappearing payments.

On the veranda of the new hill station, the chief officer of the army Richard DuMount picked up the newspaper and read the headlines.

"A Third Bloody Indian Uprising against English Settlers."

With news of the mutinies throughout India, the army officers suspected an outbreak could occur in the Khalsi trading posts. On a side table inside the hill station, Chief DuMount looked at the black and white photograph of his wife, who was expecting a child. He read in the article how the Indian mutineers broke

open the army residence's doors and killed women and children.

"This cannot continue," said the chief officer. He looked at Lieutenant Henry Blake, the second-tier lieutenant, who understood his concern.

"What would happen if there were an 'accident'?" the lieutenant said.

"And what if the 'accident' was blamed on Brahmin leaders," DuMount paused.

"Then the Muslims would attack the Hindus."

"And in the squabbling, they could not band together in insurrection, and we would secure our position in Kashmir," said DuMount.

He looked at the photograph on the side table. "No one need get hurt," said the officer. "After all, accusations can cause more division than rifles."

As the British officers plotted the 'Divide and Rule' policy in Khalsi, the second lieutenant asked the chief officer,

"How many pounds of gunpowder do you think are on that houseboat?"

From the veranda of the hill station, the chief commander and second-tier lieutenant looked down to the river.

Across the valley, on a hill all her own, Asita stood at the gateway of the Khalsi Ashram.

She looked downhill at the dusty road. Drops of water had fallen from her clay pot and had left their mark on the road. She looked for the young man who had followed her spotted trail.

Asita leaned against the ashram doors. Her hand moved across the splintered cracks, and she felt the sharp intrusions. The noon heat scorched her like the intensity of her student, and the Yoga teacher remembered his indelible question.

"Do you believe in the equality of the human soul?"

She looked over the side of the ashram and noticed the Untouchable on a lower plateau. Alone on the flat terrain, he sat crouched, cleaning the livestock feces. She had hardly paid attention to the workers outside the ashram before, but rather climbed the hill looking down.

She thought about religions and systems of philosophy. In order to justify their existence, she knew every system of religion had to explain the relationship of souls to God, to the material world, and to other living beings. Her guru felt each system was worthy of study because they each offered a code of ethics.

As she looked down to the plateau, she questioned to herself, *"Did God create man, or did man create God?"*

If the latter were true, what was the human construct of 'God' responsible for? The patterns of divide and rule took root in the Kashmir Valley, and the Hindus and Muslims pinned against one another in a political stratagem.

And if the former were true, and God created man, then was there a secret of the universe? A code perhaps? And if so, which linguistic structure would reveal that code? Would it be Hebrew, or Latin or Sanskrit, Swahili or Chinese?

Which people would claim their civilization as the decoders of God's plan? And if anyone did know, would they pass on the knowledge?

She went inside the ashram at last. The cold floors stimulated the nerves in her calves, and she walked to the central atrium. Careful not to disturb his concentration, she waited for her guru, like her student had waited for her.

When they performed *asana* poses to warm their bodies, Asita thought about the reaction of Rashiq. She tried to find the patience that she saw in her guru when he followed the *Upanishad* tradition of 'to sit beside and learn.' But her mind was not calm that morning.

"I once asked you, what prevents each man from flowing into the Mighty River Source?"

"Yes Guruji, I remember well."

Asita had often thought about the migration of the human soul, like the sacred river waters that flowed in cyclic currents, evaporated into mist, and then fell back as rain. The Brahmin girl had learned this cycle, but had never thought about each man's equality.

"Tell me your thoughts, Asita."

"There could be many reasons for one's spiritual evaporation."

She could not envision the river in her head. Instead, she imagined an other image.

"Fire comes to mind," she said.

"Fire? What do you mean?" the guru asked.

"It's a fire that burns inside a person. It has a source of heat that engulfs you from within."

"What is that fire, Asita? What is this desire?"

She looked away from the guru towards the hills.

"I wish I knew, Guruji. I only know it plagues the heart."

Her voice quivered and, at any moment, she thought she might cry.

"I cannot seem to return to the river myself today," she said.

The guru realized the somber mood in her eyes.

"And that is fine," he smiled. "Every day is different."

He stood up on the straw mat. He straightened his back and said, "Come, let us see for ourselves."

She instinctively stood up to join him. He spread his arms straight out, forming a T-shaped cross. His hands pointed outwards and aligned with his shoulders. She took a step back and spread her arms.

"Close your eyes, and move your arms in a circle," he said. "Inhale."

His voice soothed her.

"Imagine you are a tree in the wind," he said.

He swayed slightly, and with her eyes closed, she did as well.

"Imagine you are a tree," he repeated. "How do you feel?"

She twisted her torso.

"I feel like I'm swaying in the wind," she smiled. She imagined a green

treetop.

"Inhale," he said. "Tell me more. What do you look like?"

She thought of a lone tree by the river.

"I have a tall trunk, with many branches."

She tightened her arms like wooden appendages.

"Good. Tell me what is on those branches. Loosen your hands," the guru said.

She remembered the buds on the branches that fell after the last storm.

Out of the dark wood grew green, splayed leaves.

"I see leaves," she said. She dangled her fingers.

"Yes, beautiful leaves," he said. "Describe a leaf."

She rubbed two fingers together and pictured her fingerprints.

"There are tiny lines on the leaf. Small, infinite lines," she said.

She pictured a leaf with small tributary veins.

"Yes. Do you know what these leaf lines... what these impressions are?"

She swayed slowly and tried to imagine the very smallest lines on the leaves.

He finally spoke, "These small infinite lines on the leaves, these indentations at the end of your fingers, these are the *Samskara* impressions on the soul."

"What are *Samksara* impressions?"

She took a deep breath as she opened her arms and chest into the air.

"Clarity of mind," she thought of the leaves at the end of her branches. "Our master gives us half truths..." Asita recalled.

Her fingertips longed for the young Muslim man.

"You see, every great action produces a *Samskara* impression," he said.

"What do you mean *every action*?"

His raised an eyebrow and he opened his eyes. "Come, let us sit."

She was a little disappointed because she enjoyed pretending to be a tree; this morning it seemed easier being a person.

The two sat comfortably and made eye contact. She listened intently.

"Let me first start by saying that what I am about to say is the belief on how the cycle works. You're task is to consider it."

"I will, Guruji," she said.

The wrinkles on the side of his eyes rose with his smile.

"Whatever you see, whatever you hear, feel, smell, taste it causes a *Samskara* impression," he said in a calm voice. "The acts of thinking, feeling, willing...breathing...*every action* produce a *Samksara* impression. They are just that, and nothing more, an impression."

"Guruji, I am not sure if I understand you. I think of each vein on the leaf, but what are these *Samskara* impressions on the soul?" Asita asked.

"Excellent," he said. "For instance, if you cast your eyes in jealousy, it produces an impression of jealousy in the different levels of the mind.

Impressions are indestructible."

"Indestructible."

She thought, "What are all the different levels of the mind?"

"You remember how the tree has many branches, many leaves, each leaf with many veins and impressions. This is man's soul," the guru said. "The soul is a bundle of *Samskaras* impressions."

She looked at her hands and noticed the lines.

There was a quiet moment in the ashram. She thought of all the trees in the forest. She thought of the intricate patterns on a leaf. She took a small breath, wondering how a *Samksara* impression left a physical imprint on her soul.

"These *Samskara* impression are indestructible," he repeated. "They assume the form of waves, small components, memory, the inner workings of the mind. They do not even disappear at the time of death."

"Guruji, are you saying that the impressions in the memory do not die?"

"Yes, Asita. Like energy that is neither created, nor destroyed, these waves, these *Samskara* impressions are born in us again and again. The impressions may take on different forms, but they are the cause of rebirths."

"I am still uncertain, what are these lines on the leaf, these impressions, made of?"

"Desires," he said resolutely. "First, one has a union with an object. Then one possesses it. The object may not be present, but it stays in the mind and a craving for the object is created. The craving makes a print, an impression on the mind."

Her eyes widened.

"Guruji," she waited a moment. "I think I understand. Desires form *Samksara* impressions. The impressions of man's soul do not die at the time of death, which is why man returns to the river waters. But," she waited until the thought settled. "What prevents each man from returning to the Mighty River Source?"

On the day she learned the very mechanics of reincarnation, the cyclic currents of the river, the new teacher now asked the question back to her guru. A vibration traveled throughout the cold marble floor of the ashram and touched the nerve of her spine. "Whatever you hear, smell, taste... breathe...desire...causes a *Samskara* impression," passed through her thoughts. What was in the mind, consciousness, subconscious, super-conscious, or perhaps even the unconscious that prevented each man from leaving the cycle of rebirth?

"The source of desires," the guru said. "The Ego."

At that moment, Asita remembered Rashiq, who spoke of the three levels of the ego. She remembered his intense state when he first approached her, and he asked to learn Yoga. His desire to prepare his body to meditate was raw, natural, familiar, and pure. Asita thought about their first lesson. He told her of his days in the *madrassa*, and she learned half of his truths. First lessons turned into first weeks, and then months. By the river, they talked of fallen trees and

enduring grass. Curious, intrigued and uninvited, she remembered watching him from across the lake. He was a young man realizing his duty, and she recognized something in him. Through the lace partition wall of the mosque, she saw a bridal gown she would never wear.

Desires.

She had disappeared at night, but he had returned to the river in the morning. By the cyclic currents of the river, she taught her student again. They strived for non-attachment and the Yoga state. In an ethereal ashram they created in space, together they breathed one sweet, nourishing and refreshing breath.

In the Khalsi ashram that morning, Asita knew Rashiq had left impressions that were indestructible.

She felt out of balance when they came into conflict. His impatience scared her, but she craved his intensity. Asita remembered the look he gave her when she did not allow him in her sanctuary. Sufi accusations of Brahmin hypocrisy, inequality, and silence passed through her mind. She felt empty like the hollowness of the ashram's atrium. The new teacher wanted to fill the void by answering the indelible question of her Yoga student.

"You see, Asita," the guru said, "These *Samskara* impressions coalesce together through repetition." The guru noticed lines of hesitation on his student's forehead. "Close your eyes. You are the tree."

She envisioned the lone tree once again.

"The lines on the leaf spread out, and form the leaf itself. The impressions of the soul become tendencies in a person."

"I am picturing just one leaf on the entire tree, right, Guruji?" she said with her eyes tightly shut.

"Yes. One leaf. One tendency in man. Many leaves form bundles and clusters of leaves at the ends of the tree. Man's tendencies develop into a person's habits."

"I see the clusters of leaves at the end of the branches."

"Then these clusters of leaves flourish on the branches. Do you see? The sum total of impressions, tendencies and habits forms a person's character."

As if she were looking up from the ground, she imagined the many branches stratifying along the tree.

"Tell me, Asita, what do the branches create? What does a person's character form?"

She thought of the central, massive tree trunk that supported the many branches.

"The branches form the tree's mode of living. A person's character forms a man's will. If the character is pure and strong, the will of man can be pure and strong," the guru said.

"When you stand tall and proud, you cannot bend with the shifts in the wind," she thought about a session with Rashiq.

"You are the entire tree."

She envisioned a tall tree with a trunk that led to many branches. Branches gave way to clusters of leaves. A leaf was made of tributary veins, *Samskara* impressions. She took a breath to herself.

"I am the entire tree," she said.

She thought for a moment and opened her eyes.

"But, Guruji, how can a person's will, this trunk of the tree, just be a mix of these impressions?"

"It is because the tree produces fruit," he said. "The will of man dictates the actions he takes."

"If actions are the fruit of the trees, doesn't every action cause an impression?"

"Yes. Do not get too attached to the image. Find out for yourself the fruit of the tree."

His words nestled in her mind.

"There are consequences of actions, *every action*. Fruits produce seeds. Some grow in winter, some grow in summer, and some in the rainy season. If you throw all the seeds on the earth, only the seasonal seeds will grow, while the others will remain dormant. Tamarind seeds will grow in different seasons than mustard seeds."

Her face was solemn until her eyes suddenly became animated. She realized the guru's cycle of the river had transformed.

"Guruji, I think I understand. These seeds are already the results of past desires, which formed past impressions, past tendencies, past habits, a previous character, a lasting will, prior actions. These seeds were the consequence of a past tree!"

"Yes! If we plot with depraved people, the bad seeds will grow and flourish, and the good seeds will remain dormant. If we sit with honest people, good seeds will grow and flourish."

She became quiet. She had sat with an honest person, and had not allowed him in her ashram.

"Asita, it is important to understand that a human being is not entirely bound by *Samskaras* impressions in the different levels of their mind. Actions have consequences, bearing seeds to blossom in both this life and lives to come. As long as the Tree of Life exists, so does the source of desires, the Ego. The tree will continue to bear fruits, and seeds will grow according to the person, place, or thing with which they associate."

At that moment, Asita felt her body arresting in a soft pain. She knew her tree would bear seeds. She knew her river waters would continue to flow.

"Guruji, is there anything I can do to dissipate the *Samskaras* impressions in the layers of my mind? How do I get rid of my desires?"

In all traditions on the earth, was there an answer to this question? Was Swami Vunde the decoder? Did he have the knowledge?

He asked his student, "When the change you *want* does come, how will you know?"

She felt her guru was testing her. Her voice hesitated.

"I believe I will know."

"Asita, are you asking for the divine knowledge that will put to rest all the desires you will ever have?"

It was a pinnacle moment in her progression as a Yogi. Looking at the past, looking to the future, she knew the knowledge her guru offered was irreversible.

"When I am ready, I will ask. I know I will ask for the Truth."

Her guru smiled. He knew that when she was ready, she would return to ask the technique to rid her of her *Samskaras* impressions. They continued with their Yoga lesson, and prepared their bodies for meditation. That day, they had achieved a change that was previously unattainable.

The next morning Asita left the ashram and headed towards the river. As she descended the hill, she saw the Untouchable on the plateau. In a bed of marigolds, he twirled a flower stem between his fingers. Alone was the Untouchable who knew the true reality of the guru's words without having ever heard them. The waves of the *Samskara* impressions were all around him. He could connect the impressions of all those he saw.

The Untouchable could trace the *Samskara* impressions and perceive the desires that each man took with him from one lifetime to the next.

He held out his hand of Divinity.

She went down the road and through the village. Asita returned to the river to perform her *asana* poses.

Meditating by the river she thought, "*The purpose of Yoga is to make us responsible for our actions.*"

She remembered when Rashid first emerged from the shrubbery and the clay pot smashed in one fortuitous fall. The pot shattered into a hundred opportunities.

She buried her foot in the sand and stood on one leg, practicing the *Garudasana* Eagle Pose.

The tides of the river had shifted in the late summer. The monsoon clouds were upon the Kashmiri Valley. As the grey clouds deepened in despair, she was not aware of the rising river tides, but she felt a shift in her Yoga practice. Ripples of the river were now up to her calf as she stood in the pose.

She remembered how her arm had forbidden him to enter the ashram door. Asita now wanted to let Rashid in, but she did not know how to reach him.

That morning, Rashid did not appear at the river.

Was it a student in rebellion, or worse? Asita waited for the morning hours, but he did not appear. She craved to see him emerge from the shrubbery and ponder the tall tree. She craved the young Sufi, who was on a path that she understood. More than the surface of the pond, he rose every time to meet her

expectations and transcended the poses they practiced. It was a craving that formed an impression in the layers of her mind.

The river waters rose.

The day became as black as night with the darkness of the approaching storm. The winds had intensified during the annual rainy season. A symphony of thunder echoed in the mountain peaks. The air of the lush valley filled with moisture, and the rains were imminently going to fall back down to earth.

In Khalsi, the Sufi Handler hailed Rashid, or perhaps no one in particular, "The Infidels will rise up...the earth will burn in flames...and there will be the Day of Judgment!"

But Rashid did not pay attention to the Sufi Handler.

Rashid's own visions haunted him night and day. The insomnia had driven him to a conscious madness. He had abandoned his Yoga practice at the time he needed it most. He walked on the road to Khalsi to visit the *madrassa*.

In a dust storm of angered winds, he walked on the road without balance. He walked on the road filled with impatience stemming from when she placed her hand on the wooden cracks of the ashram and blocked his entrance. He wanted to go back to a place where Sheik Abdul had sent him away. The sheik sent him away into a world of *pashmina* shawl traders and Brahmin hypocrisy so that he might know the taste of evil. He had faced the "Outside World", and his lips tasted of salt and indignation.

Rashid walked on to the Sufi *madrassa* complex. The minarets of the complex were not illuminated with candles. As he stood in the roadside, he noticed the entrance of the *madrassa's* gates were closed. There was no *azan* call to prayer that day. The school no longer illuminated in a glow that he remembered.

Rashid did not hear his favorite Sheiks singing the *sama* chants that resonated in the outer walls. No Sufi students chanted the melodic calls of Allah. As Rashid reached the complex gates, he saw on the gilded doors a horrifying contraption, a lock.

The river waters started to overflow.

The lock had an inscription, written in English.

"Sheik Abdul!" Rashid called out to a man in a long white robe.

The sheik perambulated the complex as the last of the candles blew out in the minarets of the outer walls. The geometric patterns inside were tarnished on the entrance walls. There were no *sama* chants. There were no exultations. The light was dimmed throughout the *madrassa* complex. The British had taken control.

"Rashid," the sheik spoke to him. "You have come in good time."

"I always do." He greeted his Sufi master, "What has happened?"

"It is the foreigners who have come. They will be running the government Islamic schools from now on," the sheik said.

"What? This complex once rang with the sound of prayers. How can they muzzle us like this?"

"It will reopen in weeks, but it will be under new administration. They gave us an ultimatum," the sheik said.

"An ultimatum? I do not understand. What has occurred?"

"It is nothing that the Truth cannot overcome, Rashiq. We will not compromise the principles of the Sufi School. We will not encourage a foreign militancy."

"Militancy?"

"There are Muslims, and there is Islam," said Sheik Abdul. He looked to the ominous clouds. "They will teach passages of Islam with strictness, and they will give the student no room to interpret for themselves that which is relevant, and that which is truthful."

"Why are the foreigners doing this?"

"What better way to control the people, than through the children and adolescents. Mark my words, one day the new militancy of the *madrassas* will be used against our own people."

Taking control of the Islamic schools and the Sufi *madrassa* would breed the education of Muslims against landowners of Kashmir.

Sheik Abdul felt defeated, but he knew relocations of Sufi orders had occurred for centuries since its creation. Since the first days that a dervish would spin to Allah, the exile had begun.

"Follow your path. Follow your heart. Follow the Truth," his mother's words passed in his head.

Despite his pursuit of Truth, Rashiq also felt defeated. He wanted the choice. He wanted to make the choice for himself to leave the *madrassa*, but he also wanted the choice to return to a place to freely interpret his religion. His desire for a choice burned within him and left an impression in the layers of his mind that would not die.

Rashiq looked at the cracks on the wooden doors.

At that moment in Nurla, Zackir Kardal waited by candlelight for his son to return. Zackir knew the wedding had changed Rashiq into a man of the world. He remembered what he said.

"You see, Rashiq, the trading post at Khalsi needs our presence."

"But what do I know of trading?"

"You will learn who the key players in the trade are. Each man must go out into the world and take his place in society."

Rashiq had made contacts for his *pashmina* shawl trading business, which had doubled in orders since the Sattar family had made contacts in the East India Company.

The *jagirdar* Muslim landlords were growing weary of the British influence because their property rights were slowly sinking into higher tariffs. A British alliance was crucial to the Kardal shawl business, and Rashiq knew he had to make his presence known to the East India traders.

His father looked out into the distance. He waited for Rashiq to return

from his meeting with the East India Company traders at the Khalsi posts.

When his father Zackir Kardal presented him with the task of running the family business in Khalsi, *pashmina* shawls were the furthest things from the forefront of his mind. Rashiq had learned Yoga from his teacher in order to prepare his body for meditation. Rashiq had gone through a change that at one point was unattainable.

But Rashiq did as his Sufi masters taught him, and interacted in the 'Outside World.' Through the process of vaccination, he would face the outside world. He was devout in his resolution to make the *haj* to Mecca and to fulfill a pillar of Islam. He knew that in order to fulfill his Sufi path, he must do as his master prescribed, no matter where he was located, no matter where he chanted the *samas* of exhalation. Like the resilience of the mustard seed itself, Kardal grew stronger every day.

The father waited for Rashiq, but he did not return to Nurla.

As the strands of his mind came together, Rashiq had become proficient in the *Tadasana* Standing Pose. He knew it well and was ready for poses of more difficulty. He had begun his journey on those riverbanks, but he had not progressed to learn the Yoga poses of greater difficulty. In this lifetime, he had not progressed to learn the difficult poses like that of the *Garudasana* Eagle Pose.

At the Khalsi *madrassa*, Rashiq looked at the wooden cracks on the closed doors. He remembered another wooden door he could not enter. He thought about the arm that acted as a barricade and starved him inside. Layered in his mind, he had a deep-rooted desire to enter the ashram on his own. He longed for the choice.

With his whole body, from his stomach to the mouth, he took a deep breath.

She was the apparition by the river. Like the plumage of birds in a tree, her white *salvaar* shirt flapped in the wind. His meeting with the young woman was a meeting by chance, but their interaction was not. The young woman showed him the Yoga path. She taught him with care. She tried to temper his impatience.

She was more to him than a friend. She talked of the humility of the grass gracefully. He remembered when the water splashed on him as she pushed down the lotus flowers in the pond. She had once stood across a lake, enigmatically. Together they breathed the sweet, refreshing and nourishing Vital Breath.

He was drawn to her, but she warned him of alliances. He wanted to share the fire inside him. Haunted, scared, restless, he wanted to share something inside of him. Perhaps her background was too different. Perhaps their union was only possible in the vacuum of space they formed in the Yoga state. The cravings left impressions on his soul. That day, looking at the wooden cracks on the closed doors, Rashiq wanted to see Asita again.

Rashiq left for the river at Khalsi.

The river waters rose higher. The rains of autumn had come early. In the

midst of small droplets that passed before her, Asita knew she was part of love. He entered her thoughts and did not exit. He developed into a longing when he was not around. Adam to her Eve, from his rib did she form her Yoga *asanas*, he was inside her breath when she breathed.

"How can I indulge in my desires and yet train to be a Brahmin teacher?" She knew her indulgence and thoughts of lust would cast indestructible impressions that would not die. She felt like the fog that rolled over the rainy hills. She was about to cry, and she knew her tears would return to the river.

At that moment, the river waters were unusually high.

They longed for one another. Passing through their minds were Hindu and Muslim, caste and shadows, Brahmin knowledge and Sufi reunification. A relation had changed, of those who had loved and those who were loved had become a union.

But Rashiq never went to their spot of the river. Instead, he went to the Khalsi trading posts to meet the East India Company traders. He had arrived early and thought of a way to impress the traders.

The alpine dampness awoke her sense of self. She felt wet. When he did not return that morning, she knew which alliances he had chosen. She walked on the road that had turned to mud and slid with force. She knew very little of the downstream section of Khalsi, but the commerce congregated by the tributaries.

Asita knew she would find Rashiq.

The waters were increasing at dangerous levels when the rains started to fill the layers of her mind with haze. Asita could not escape in the cyclic currents of the river waters. Her fear of immersion in water passed through her mind. The storm came through the valley with fury.

She walked above the river waters that churned in anger. She walked away from the familiar trees. She left the vision of the ashram's triangular roof. For many miles, she weathered the storm until she saw torchlight from the colony of houseboats in the haze. She went towards the light.

The British Commanders were inside the new hill station and looked down at the houseboats in the river.

"Chief Commander DuMount *Sahib*," An Indian servant boy announced. He brought them tea "We have news that all the *pashmina* shawl traders have reached the East India Trading boat. Is this all the news you request?"

The second lieutenant Blake opened the drapes of the houseboat and looked down at the congregation on the docks.

"That will be all," Chief DuMount said. He dismissed the servant boy and waited until he was out of sight.

Lieutenant Blake looked out the window of the army hill station, "The Muslim shawl traders have come to the trading dock. They will all be witness to the 'accident'."

DuMount looked at the picture of his expecting wife. On the side table, the front pages of the newspapers reported the uprisings against the colonial

families throughout India. "A united Kashmir cannot be ruled," he thought.

"Have the English representatives greeted them yet?"

Lieutenant Blake peered a little upstream.

"They are approaching now," he said.

"No one will get hurt," said the chief officer. "Let the valley feud without English blood on its hands."

The officers' scheme was flawless. With pounds of gunpowder inside the boat's trading cartons, a single spark would provide evidence to the Muslims that the Hindu were plotting against them. All the unfair practices of the Brahmin landowners would no longer be tolerated. No one needed to get hurt, but the rift in the Kashmir Valley would last for generations.

Lieutenant Blake looked down to the river again. He turned around and asked the chief army commander, "Who is that woman that has come to the posts?"

Asita walked through the fog onto the docks where the houseboats were stationed. There was a crowd of traders that stood under an awning of the dock. Thick hats, burly wraps, and sandals absorbed the rain that came down in a heavy, sustained pour.

Outside the life of her student world, she felt uneasy with the novelty of the world of the traders. A grizzly chatter waited indefinitely for the English East India representatives to join them.

"Excuse me," Asita announced herself.

The burly men looked at the young woman with gawking eyes.

"I am looking for Rashiq Kardal."

"What's your business, Madam?" said a *pashmina* trader in a thick accent. He had an obscured beard and a black wrap. She felt uneasy but continued.

"I need to speak with him," she said.

"Ladies shouldn't be around these posts, Madam," the obscured face was terse.

She took a breath to herself, conjuring strength in her voice.

"Which boathouse is he on, sir?" she asked again.

"The one on the left, don't let the rudders hit you," he said.

Fourteen set of eyes followed her through the docks onto the boathouse.

The rain came down in sheets outside. Inside the houseboat, she looked for Rashiq. She thought about how she had come to see him once before and had watched through the wall erected for non-believers. She thought about how he had come to see her in her ashram, in her sanctuary. He questioned her to the very core of her existence, "I will not breathe until you tell me...Do you believe in the equality of the human soul?"

The waters rose and the rapid undercurrents took hold. Asita realized she knew his different paths. She knew his path of *pashmina* shawl traders, the path of preparing the body through Yoga, and the path from the Sufi *madrassa* to Mecca.

"Rashiq!"

A young man emerged from the changing curtains. He had boarded the boat to change his clothes to impress the businessmen. With a heavily-embroidered *kurtha* shirt, a well-groomed head, and gold Kashmiri slippers, he left an impression on her. He looked up, stunned. The apparition through the trees and across from the lake now stood in front of him once again. Her *salvaar* shirt was wet and clung to her body. She dripped on the rich carpet of the houseboat.

"Asita?"

He stood across from her in disbelief. The layer of his mind came to understand all she came to represent. In front of him was the teacher he once sought out, who now came to him. She shivered. His verdant eyes pierced her once again. It was her choice to come.

He was not obligated to wear the regal trading clothes, but he did. Her clothes were dripping from the torrential storms that took wrath on the Kashmir Valley.

"I have come, Rashiq."

He looked at her sweet, wet face.

"I have come to take responsibility for my actions."

For that moment, the oak walls of the houseboat provided them shelter. He picked up one of the shawls he had brought to show the East India representatives.

"You are shivering," he said.

He placed the shawl over her shoulders. She took refuge in his wrap. As he wrapped the cloth over her shoulders, she felt a comfort that left a lasting impression.

"I know it was wrong," she confessed. "I was unsure at the time, Rashiq."

She put her arms into her elbows to capture the warmth.

"You spoke of fire, I..." she waited.

"I was not fair, Asita," he admitted, "There was something that came over me, it was..."

"It was the vision of fire," she said. "It was my fault."

"Your fault? It was I who was distracted."

Rashiq put his arms over her wrap. They were silent for a moment. He could hear her breathe in unison with him.

"Yes, my fault," she finally spoke. "I did not explain what happens if there is an interruption in the Yoga path."

He still held her and asked, "What if there are interruptions?"

On the sheltered houseboat on the torrents of the violent river, they felt safe. In his arms, they renewed their bond between student and teacher.

In the army hill station, Lieutenant Blake looked over to chief commander DuMount.

"The English representatives have all assembled," said the lieutenant.

"This 'accident' will divide Kashmir," DuMount said. He looked at the picture on the side table. "But it is the only way. Let them know its time," he said.

On the houseboat, Rashiq held her even tighter.

"What are the interruptions?" he asked.

"According to the *Yoga Sutra*, there are nine types of interruptions to developing mental clarity."

"Nine types of interruptions?" he asked.

Although dressed like a regal *pashmina* shawl trader, he was a student in his truest form.

"There is illness. There is mental stagnation," Asita said.

She started to shed a tear.

"There are doubts," she listed. "There is lack of foresight," she continued.

They did not know of the arrangement of dynamite and gunpowder throughout the cabin and in the hull. Outside on the docks there was a commotion. The Muslim traders would only meet the East India representatives on the boat, but they started to board the ship.

"There is fatigue. There is overindulgence."

She looked down to rich Kashmiri carpets of the houseboats.

DuMount had sent a messenger to the houseboat to delay the English East India representatives from leaving the docks, but the chief army commander was unsure if he could prevent the mishap.

"There are illusions about one's true state of mind," the young Brahmin woman said.

She looked up to the Muslim man dressed to the nines, who looked back at her with great magnetism.

"There is lack of perseverance."

As she stated the eighth interruption, Rashiq thought about the Sufi path he took. Originally propelled by the death of a loved one, he explored his mind, his body and his soul. No locks or blockaded entrances could deter him.

"And finally, the ninth type of interruption is regression," she said.

The rapids of the river's waters turned to floods.

In Rashiq's arms, she thought about her question reposed to her guru.

"What prevented man from flowing into the Mighty River Source?"

"As long as the Tree of Life exists, so does the source of desires, the Ego," her guru said.

She looked up to him in his eyes and concluded, "The more we are vulnerable to these interruptions, the more difficult it is to reach the Yoga state."

After all the longing, desires and cravings, they had returned together. At that moment, in his arms, both Rashiq and Asita took a breath. The student and teacher had attained a change that was previously unattainable.

They wanted to return to the Yoga State. They wanted to return to the ashram in space where their minds were clear and intertwined. They wanted to return to each other's arms and feel love. They wanted to return and take

responsibility for their actions and their consequences.

They wanted to return to the Vital Breath.

The Explosion!

With the order executed, the boat's bottom hull blew off in the loudest explosion ever heard in the Kashmir Valley. In the Khalsi ashram, Swami Vunde felt the interruption.

"*Divide and Rule!*" he thought.

Kashmir felt the rift in the lotus for generations.

The fire engulfed the roof of the houseboat. The explosion tore the ship's sides, like a contract between Hindus and Muslims broken in two.

Another Explosion!

Episode XIII

Thirteen Resurrection

Then and now reflected back in a mirror.

Water splashed in her eyes. Later that Sunday night, Sarita washed her face and dried her wet skin.

In the mirror, first there was a disciple, now there was a teacher. First there was learning, now there was discovery. First there was an interest, now there was reciprocity. Josiah was first an intrusion into a life, and now there was a subtle longing.

Contrary to popular belief, longing was never sweet. In the place of sweet longing were beautiful, caring and life-affirming flaws that grounded into the skin granules and made one frustrated. She scrubbed her face, and then changed into her pajamas. The evening had fermented into an oaky, dry, tannin-filled melancholy. She thought of her student's question, "*What is the Connection to the Vital Breath?*"

On the phone, Mira Steinbeck interrogated her.

"So what did you say when he asked you?"

"I didn't know what to say. He had all this curiosity, but I didn't know how to answer him."

"Well, what's he like?"

"He's such an interesting person. He's had a lot of life experiences. He's very passionate, and definitely has his viewpoints. There's something about him, though," she paused.

"'Life Experiences' as in the been-to-prison-and-back way?"

"No, nothing like that," Sarita said. "*At least I don't think so,*" she thought. "He seems very familiar, like we met before. I just feel connected to him somehow. Is it too soon to feel this way?"

"You never know what *lurks* these days," Mira said. Her outlook was a culmination of one too many Internet matchmaking experiences, of which, some should never have made it offline.

"No really," Sarita said. "He has a real charm, and passion, but he's still refined. I don't know. It's hard to pinpoint."

"So what's the deal with his dead wife?"

"He seems to be okay. Actually, I am not sure." She thought for a second

before she said, "Finding someone for the second time is difficult."

"So, is he going to call?"

"He already left me a voice mail."

Later, Sarita listened to the message for the third time.

"Hi, Sarita, this is Josiah. I just wanted to let you know I had a great time at brunch, and I wanted to know how you are doing. I'll see you at the next class after the long weekend. Take care."

Over the long weekend that year, Passover and Easter overlapped. In New York, the Christians and Jews prepared for the upcoming holy holidays.

That Wednesday after work, Josiah returned to his childhood synagogue in Brooklyn. At sundown, he joined his mother on the comfortable wooden pews. Inside the Orthodox synagogue, the Star of David framed the windows. As an adolescent, Josiah remembered looking up to the Star. During most of the services, he spent his time trying to figure out from what page the rabbi recited at super fast rates.

One thing in the world upheld an ethnic culture more than scriptures, priests or rabbis. It was the mother. At early age, Josiah's mother ingrained a resistance to the wrong *type* of woman. When he met Erica Lieberman, he remembered his mother's disapproval.

"I think she's a gold digger."

"But you don't even know her?"

"At least she's not a shiksa."

The thought of a Gentile daughter-in-law horrified his mother. But when he married Erica, Josiah thought he had fulfilled his mother's wish to find the next 'Mrs. Tamarind.'

When his wife died, he started to question what being an Orthodox Jew in New York really meant. On his 40th birthday, the age of wisdom, he realized he had never really broken the code of his well-protected jewelry safe of Jewish identity.

Like the Hebrew letters in which he found new meaning, from beginning to end, and everything in the middle, he embarked on a search for the code.

While different ancient impulses competed within the American Jew, there was less dialogue amongst the Orthodox Jews than the Conservative and Reform Jews. The ancient impulses reflected the rabbinic and prophetic, legalistic and mystic, particularistic and universalistic tendencies that competed for the soul of Judaism.

The services started and the rabbi began to speak.

"In the five thousand years of the Jewish struggle, there has always been sadness in the eyes that carry the Jewish name. On this first day of Passover, we observe the freedom and exodus of the Israelites from Egypt."

Josiah thought about the persecution of European Jews in the Holocaust. The cycle had continued.

"With blessings from Jerusalem, blessed are the Chosen Ones."

"Who are really Chosen people though?" he thought. This strand of identity bound the Jewish culture.

His mother leaned over to him on the bench. She whispered in his ear, "Always remember, you are one of the chosen people, Josiah."

The rabbi started reading from the Haggadah.

"And does that mean there are people who are, by exclusion, not chosen?" he thought.

Josiah had the choice. The *Torah* not only contained words. It also contained the choices of the people who lived by these words. He had the choice to uphold his Jewish heritage. He wondered if he had the choice to uphold the duty that had become inherent to the Jewish struggle. That day, Josiah wondered what would happen if he were to choose a Gentile.

Somewhere in the inner layers of his subconscious mind, he asked a question.

"Do you believe in the equality of the human soul?"

He was not consciously aware of the question, but he felt a longing desire for the choice.

The next day at work, his mind wandered for a few moments. He did not think about the financial statements and company valuations. Looking at the blinking cursor on his computer screen, he thought of the choice once again.

The late days of April always brought him solace. Josiah always remembered his late wife. He remembered how she would call and leave him post-it notes on the microwave for things to pick up after work. She brought him his favorite rye bread from the Jewish deli.

That night, turning off the lights on the nightstand, he remembered how she read aloud from the spirituality books before. He practically felt her presence on the pillow next to him. He wanted someone to lie next to once again.

On Good Friday, Josiah took the train downtown to the Kabbalah Center. He believed in his choice. On the subway, his thoughts vacillated. He remembered remaining items on his to-do list. Somehow in layers of his mind bordering the subconscious he heard, "*Each man is his own river.*"

He was a particle in the underground train and coursed through the network like a river current. At the subway stop, the doors of the train opened from the connecting car, and the Subway Beggar made her entrance.

"You Can't Hurry Love!"

She sang about the one thing impossible to accomplish in a New York minute. With her discordant pitch, she wailed. In her poverty, she reached out her coffee-stained cup with divine hands.

"No, you just have to wait..." she sang. "...It's a game of give and take."

Attached through non-attachments, the Subway Beggar called out cacophonously rendered Motown songs like liturgy prayers in Josiah's heart. She saw no difference between the past and the present. She perceived the impressions of a man's soul.

Josiah got off at 48th and Lexington. He ascended the steps of the Kabbalah center and went to the second floor. Alone, fulfilled, curious, he sat on the bench by his own choice.

Something deep inside him compelled him to return to a place where he could interpret his religion freely.

"The students of Kabbalah learns to take responsibility for their actions."

The rabbi spoke a different sermon than the one he heard as a child. But the words struck something sweet inside him.

The rabbi continued, "If he did not have the opportunity to study before, he returns now, to study the code of the Torah. What was not learned in the previous lifetime pushes the student back to the *Gilgul*, the wheel of Reincarnation."

He looked at the electric candles on the menorah in the middle of the room. It drew his eyes to the light. Sitting on the bench alone, Josiah no longer wanted to condemn himself to solitude.

"By opening our hearts, by receiving the light," the rabbi continued, "the actions the student of Kabbalah takes on in this lifetime will have an effect on the universe tomorrow. This special relationship of the past molds our present and shapes our future," the Rabbi said.

Josiah thought about the past and present, and took a breath to himself.

"Kabbalah has its own love potion," said the Rabbi. "Kabbalah teaches us that soul mates are found not only in love relationships, but also among family, friends as well as teachers."

Josiah then listened to something he had never heard before.

"The unique energies of this day have the power to renew every relationship and to draw our soul mates into our life," the Rabbi concluded.

He realized that the obstacles in life and love were now his responsibility to overcome. In a change that was previously unattainable, Josiah knew he was responsible for drawing the relationships he wanted to rekindle into his life. He took a breath to himself and thought of Sarita Rena.

"*Could there be more than one soul mate?*" he considered to himself.

Perhaps the answer to Josiah's thoughts dated back to the central ideal in Greek thinking. The concept of soul mates arose from Greek mythology. According to a myth, man's ancestors once had two heads and four arms. The two-headed, four-armed ancestor did something to offend a god, and the god punished the creature by splitting him down the middle, resulting in the creation of mankind. As a punishment, all people were condemned to spend the rest of their lives searching for the other half, their soul mate.

Hundreds of years after the myth, Plato wrote about the interpersonal relationships called the 'shared life'. He wrote about the characteristics of achieving a partnership, which were a way of re-creating our 'original, natural state.' His ideals implied that man shared his finite life with another individual.

Two days later Josiah checked his voicemail, and the 'shared life' search

continued.

"Hi, Josiah. This is Sarita calling you back. I got your message, I'm doing well. I'm actually headed out the door to meet my family for Easter Sunday. I hope you're doing well and keeping up with your practice," she said. "And I'll talk to you later."

On the morning of Easter Sunday, St. Patrick's Cathedral looked like a rock concert.

The line stretched around the corner and each visitor needed a 'reserved ticket' to proceed. An umbrella salesman across the street was sure to make a big profit as the cloudy skies approached. Sarita showed the Christian 'bouncer' four tickets and entered the hall holding the arm of her grandmother.

Inside, the Cathedral was light in full luminosity from chandeliers and candles.

"Section 2, Row 91, this is it, Gram," Sarita directed her grandmother.

The flying arches and sturdy columns soon resonated with the sound of the regal organ in the back of the Cathedral. Men dressed in light suits and woman in hats obscured the view. White gloved ushers showed the last set of people to their seats. Sarita's grandmother sat to her left, her parents on the right. Sarita looked over her parents' shoulders to watch a young lady praying.

"Such a nice girl," the grandmother said. The elderly grandmother placed her withering hands on her granddaughter's dress. "She has such a good heart."

"Happy Easter, Gram," she said.

"If she will just take control of her life," her mother said. There was nothing like a good holiday to bring out the best in passive aggressiveness.

"Not now, Jillian," her father said.

"Anthony, if not now, when else is she going to listen?" her mother persisted.

"Jillian, let's just enjoy this time as a family," he said.

Her mother leaned forward on the wooden bench.

"She's not getting any younger. I don't know much about all this Yoga business, but I know it can't help her with that."

"Actually, Ma, I feel more fit than ever," Sarita said.

"I just don't understand." Jillian Rena sighed with frustration. "The DeLuca family is so wonderful, and warm. Our parents both grew up in Naples. I just don't understand."

"Just think of all the free meat," her father laughed.

"Ma, of all the days, do you have to advocate the lamb butchers now? You're no better than the Romans."

"I don't like your tone," her mother scoffed. "You can't just keep doing those stretches all the time. How are you going to meet anyone?"

Sarita felt a piercing in the center of her palms as her mother persecuted her single New York life. Her grandmother defused the tension by stroking her hair.

"What a pretty thing."

"Will you talk to them, Gram?"

The Sunday morning with her family was especially slow without her morning latté. Sarita was a single soldier without any caffeine armor.

"You know, when I met your grandfather, no one in the family liked him."

"Gramps used to say he was welcomed with open Italian arms," Sarita recalled.

"That's what he said, and eventually he was, but not at first."

"I loved your grandfather dearly. I still do," her grandmother smiled.

Sarita smiled as well.

"But how did you know he was right for you, Grams?"

"Sarita, when you meet your soul mate, you just know. And it doesn't matter what anyone else says."

The elderly woman laughed with delight.

Sarita looked up to the stone blocks that formed the clover leaf pillars of the Cathedral. She looked up to the lotus flower shaped windows, and the kaleidoscope of colors that filtered the light.

"I think the service is going to begin," Anthony told the family.

"Jesus Christ is Risen Today," the choir began singing the hymn.

The audience stood as they looked towards the man in the white robe. He took his place on the pulpit.

"Good Morning," said the presiding Cardinal. "Can I get a round of applause for the choir to your back in the upstairs."

As the applause started, the golden ornate doors of St. Patrick's Cathedral opened in Christian splendor. The procession entered to the sound of "Alleluia!"

The alter boys carried incense and an ornate cross through the aisle. Cameras flashed over the sounds of the drums. The choir sang, "Jesus Christ has risen today!"

"Welcome to Easter Mass," the Cardinal said. "Today is a day of great happiness. Welcome to this congregation of happiness."

Sarita rubbed the gold cross on her necklace and exhaled to herself. The Cathedral brightened with anticipation.

"Let us ask forgiveness of our Lord for our failures, as we honor the Holy Spirit that delivered our Savior, Jesus Christ," the Cardinal continued.

"*Yoga teaches us to take responsibility for our actions,*" passed through her thoughts.

A deep reverence for the cross was ingrained in Sarita Rena, Yoga Instructor. In the age of real time, the cameras zoomed into a set of candles and displayed the image on mounted televisions. She thought of how she opened her class by lighting a candle. The class would focus on the flame to channel their concentration.

"Raise your head to the eternal life, Let us celebrate the Spirit, as he granted us Jesus Christ. Welcome this day of Easter."

The audience rose and the choir broke out in the hymn, "Praise to God." When the Cardinal began again, he said, "Be reverent today and remember His persecution by the devil."

Sarita heard a harp from the choir. Sarita noticed a little girl in a frilly dress on her father's shoulders. The cardinal spoke, "If you were raised with Christ, think of what is above, not down below."

She listened.

"...For Jesus delivered mankind from his sins, and, whether living or dead, led those who believe in him to the Holy Spirit," the Cardinal continued.

"Feast in the Joy of the Lord," he preached, "For there is one God for everyone."

"*The Paths are many, the Truth is One,*" Sarita thought. When Sarita looked up to the Cross that graced the central nave, she thought beyond doctrines, beyond the Papacy and the orders.

"On this Sunday," the Cardinal spoke, "When the stone was removed that enclosed the cave in which Jesus was buried, we see the burial cloth that had been worn, and we seek to understand. For it is the Gospel that said the Lord has risen from the dead. 'Jesus Christ was resurrected by the Father.'"

The crowds of women in veils and hats obstructed Sarita's view of the pulpit, so she looked to a higher plane where the arches closed in and expanded out. She appreciated the grandeur of the Cathedral, as well as the simplicity. Her senses were overwhelmed on the day of Christ's ascension.

She took a quiet breath to herself.

"What are the reasons for celebrating Easter?" he asked the crowd. "It is the Resurrection. The Resurrection is central to the faith. It is the Central truth. If Christ is not Risen..." the Cardinal had continued.

"*The Truth is One...Yoga teaches us to see the truth in others,*" the thoughts went through her head.

"It is the central authority of his teachings," the cardinal said humbly. "For, to understand the death of Jesus Christ is to understand the Resurrection. To have the joy and optimism is to have chosen to die himself. To understand Easter, is to understand the whole story."

As she looked up to the buttressed ceilings, she felt a Catholic longing. She rubbed the cross on her chain. The Cardinal continued,

"If we do not know his teachings, the end of the story has no meaning. We understand all that has led up to Resurrection."

She looked towards the familiar sculpture of the *Pieta* on the side once again. In her lap, the Virgin Mary held the dead body of Christ, whose breath was no longer.

Like a synergy of her Catholic faith and the Yoga philosophy under which she was trained, she thought, "*His breath was no longer...in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit.*"

"Compassion for everyone," the Cardinal told of one of the teachings.

"Love for everyone."

Sarita listened. The tenets of the eight limbs of yoga practically echoed from the pulpit.

"Blessed are those who know," concluded the Cardinal.

"The aim of Yoga is to know the truth which is oneself. This knowledge alone can help us to get out of all turmoil and petty-mindedness," she thought.

"This is what brings to Easter the greatest story every told," the Cardinal continued the sermon. "Here's the resolution I propose. Make the commitment every Sunday, the Seventh Day, to meditate on the story, and listen and remember the story, in its entirety," the Cardinal suggested.

"To prepare the body for meditation," she thought.

"Blessed are those who know. For who is more precious than they?"

Somewhere in the inner workings of her mind, in her super consciousness, the more precious question went through her mind.

"Do you believe in the equality of the human soul?"

"This is the magnificence of Easter, as a part of his life is left behind, and the other part will be met in the Holy Kingdom," the Cardinal preached.

She wondered where the soul went. "Is the Holy Kingdom free of anger, greed and desires? Does the soul immediately leave the earthly plane, or does it migrate to a place that was better than once before?" she thought.

Sarita pulled down the velvet wrapped knee rest. She bent down with her hands together in prayer position. As the participants knelt, she felt as if her class were starting. With an incantation to gain control of the breath, she found a sacred place, beyond physical location, in which she inhaled.

The Holy Kingdom.

...where death and deathless have the same source...

...the Mighty River...

"The Christ, the Lord, is Risen today," the choir sang.

There was a surreal vibration in the Cathedral. Sarita felt a chill from her feet to her spine. Sarita's Yoga center had aged with her in time. Her Holy Spirit transcended the mortal and the immortal. Sarita felt the restoration through Yoga every day. She understood her religion. The Yoga guru maintained her tenets.

"Yoga transcends religion," went through her subconscious.

"Rising he restored His life. Take this bread, and this cup of wine." The voice was amplified on the speaker as she took communion.

"Jesus is Risen," the Choir sang.

For she had her Seventh day each time she took a breath. The crescendo in the Cathedral echoed with Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus" from *Messiah*.

Yoga was her Resurrection.

"Receive the Holy Spirit."

The spirit of love simply breathed.

"Amen."

The din of Easter moved in the crowd. Sarita exhaled.

The crowds left the Cathedral and walked their separate ways on Fifth Avenue. Sarita walked with her family, feeling rejuvenated. She was born again to a new understanding of her self. As families made their way to their respective brunches, Sarita affirmed what she had to do.

The weekdays returned to a fast pace. Sarita went back to her job in corporate America. Her phone continued to accelerate her life to the speed of microchips. Her Yoga practice and Don's studio had sparked the idea of a new how-to book series. She was preparing materials for an idea she wanted to pitch, entitled "*How-To-Practice-Political-Yoga (Ahimisa)*."

Later that week, Sarita went to her Wednesday night session. She saw a light on in the backroom of the office. Don talked to her about scheduling and the weather. He noticed her eyes seemed distant. She looked outside the window onto Broadway.

"Are you doing okay Sarita?"

"I think so," she sighed. "I've just been feeling a bit torn about things of late."

"In what sense?" Don asked.

"I don't know. I feel like I've come to this point where I question every action."

"It happens to the best of us, Sarita. Just the other day I was grocery shopping at the West Side Market. I bought some oranges and then remembered I was going to be away for the long weekend. So I gave them away to a homeless person on the street."

"Interesting. Why didn't you just take the fruits with you?"

"I just instinctively want to give," he said.

"I sometimes question whether I should stay in corporate America or work for the Palestinian non-violence advocacy fulltime. I feel like Yoga has connected me towards something greater. It happened for a reason."

"There is something Gandhi would say that still sticks with me." Don said. She had become familiar with his quotations, but appreciated their appropriateness.

"I know I may sound like a broken record," he said, "But whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you may have seen, and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him."

Sarita was moved by her teacher's words. She wondered how she could be of any use to the poorest face she saw. Don had led her to the Yoga path. At the Yoga center on Broadway, seeds grew according to the person, place, and thing with which she associated.

"I had this debate the other day with someone over the Palestine-Israeli Conflict. I think I understood the pro-Israeli point of view, but I felt like he didn't understand the Palestinian plight."

...Partition...

"Well, that is the purpose of the practices here at the center," Don said. "Perhaps you are not seeing his point of view. And perhaps he's not seeing yours. But remember that we are not talking about political parties and platform agendas. We are not talking about two peoples in a land dispute gone sour. The ultimate goal is Peace."

He stopped when looked at the front paper of the newspaper. He continued, "Not the success of one party or the other."

"I agree, but I feel the pro-Israeli," she started.

"As long as peace is the goal, terms like 'pro-Palestinian' or 'pro-Israeli' carry connotations that tie the user to a people, neither of which is making successful steps towards peace. Believe it or not, though peace is the stated goal, both sides' actions are through violence, which eliminates peace," said the Don.

She felt familiar around Don. She noticed the gray sideburns with white streaks of wisdom. In both her personal life and for nations as wholes, she realized how easily the goal got lost.

"Peace will only happen when both countries decide that the alternative—continued conflict and a rising body count—is unacceptable," Don said. "As long as the Israelis and Palestinians combat with resistance, this peace, this change that was previously unattainable, will never come to the Holy Land."

Sarita thought about the unrest in the Holy Land.

In the years following the Second World War, territories across the world were divided into countries that now competed for the line of divisions.

In 1947, the partition of India and Pakistan put a rift between Hindus and Muslims. At a mosque in Ayodhya, the site of an ancient Hindu holy site, civil wars and riots ensued for years. In the following year of 1948, the creation of Israel brought great unrest to the Middle East. Decades later, on the sacred site of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, confrontations ensued between the Israeli Police and the Palestinian demonstrators. Palestinian worshippers at the Al-Aqsa mosque showered stones and rocks on Jews praying at the Western Wall.

"Divide and Rule" was rooted in a demon that caused one partition and surfaced like the demon of another.

"Yoga is a coming together"

Explosion!

She thought about the physical sanctum of the Cathedral where she felt sacred. If a mosque, shrine, temple, synagogue and church all stood at the same location, would the beliefs of each respective institution advocate the destruction of the others? And ultimately, would they discover the sweet, refreshing, and nourishing Vital Breath.

Love Thy Neighbor.

She thought about the mission of the Missing Peace Yoga Center, and then looked at the clock. She was ready to start the Wednesday class.

The midweek rush took its toll on the Yoga class participants trickling into

the class. They took their seats on the fleet of blue mats. Surrounding mirrors reflected their anticipation, as well as their fitted jogging suits and tight tanks. The Missing Peace Yoga Center's sticker logo wrapped around the \$3.95 water bottles. The army of water bottles lined the windowsill. Sarita entered from the back room and put her towel on the wooden ballet bar of the old dance studio.

Sarita took her place at the front of the class. The receptionist dimmed the lights. She folded her arms together and welcomed the participants.

"Namaste" she said to the class.

Sarita anticipated Josiah's participation in the class that day. "He must be late," she thought.

"Stretching is important for health and well-being," she said. "It should be carried out quite smoothly and slowly, and not jerkily."

"He is always late," she thought.

"This routine will tone the nerves and muscles, and improve the circulation."

Josiah ascended the steps of the *Missing Peace Yoga Center*, an institution that had committed its profits to the Palestinian plight. After his brunch with the instructor, he now had a better understanding of the Center's mission. It was as if he had approached those doors so clearly in the past. But something had changed in him.

Josiah, part of the 'Chosen People', now had a choice. Josiah's journey, his search for the code, "the fruits of the tree," now led him to the Yoga center. If he knew the essence of a sacred, physical location, would he enter? In the inner workings of his mind, beneath the many layers of his consciousness, he yearned to return to the place where he could prepare his body for meditation.

Lifetimes reflected when Josiah twisted the round metallic doorknob. That day, the soul of the yoga student returned to the ashram.

He arrived just in time.

Josiah had a tote bag slung over his shoulder and made his way to the side of the changing room. He changed out of his designer clothes. He took off his shoes and socks, and changed into drawstring pants and a tee shirt. He emerged from the thick drapes of the changing room like an actor taking a bow in front of the stage. Ten Yogi participants stood on their foam mats in *Tadasana*, Standing Pose. After the lights were dimmed, she started the class.

"The *asana* postures of Yoga consist of both flexibility and strength," she told the class.

She watched how Josiah took his position in the class. "I must admit, that even I encounter difficulty in balancing flexibility and strength."

She spoke her words softly. She held something back she wanted to reveal.

"I was always very flexible, and I could move my body with agility," she said. "But sometimes I encounter an *asana* pose that is aimed to build strength. I find myself compensating the pose with my flexibility, when really," she took a

pause. She looked at Josiah. "When really, I should be building strength."

She demonstrated to the class the Simple Tree.

"Place one foot on the opposite knee..."

The young woman appealed to Josiah. He thought about their encounters and the second chance that presented itself.

With all the complexities he now felt for her, like a seed of impressions from the past, he associated with the beautiful Yoga instructor. Once clenched like a tight fist, he opened in his palm and stood like a tree.

"Place your hands together on your chest, and close your eyes."

He held the pose for what felt like an eternity.

"...and release," Sarita instructed.

With her command, he let go.

When Sarita looked at Josiah, she started to hear the sound of water again in her head. She could not understand her reaction. She saw something special in Josiah. She just knew.

"You see, the Simple Tree is a good example of how flexibility can overwhelm strength, if not done correctly."

She adjusted the posture of a student in the front.

"This is true even in our own lives. Sometimes we bend to people, when really we should be strong. And sometime we put up barriers when really, we should let them in."

Josiah inspired her to reveal herself to her class.

"How can we expect to resolve the conflicts and pain in the world, if we can't even resolve our own. The change starts with the individual and emanates out," she said.

Josiah looked at the young woman. He was closer to her than ever before. He relaxed on the mat. Sarita was more than just familiar. She was the feeling of home. As the class went through their warm-up routine, the Yoga instructor continued talking.

"I have been reflecting on all my past relationships. We learn in Yoga that you have to prepare your body for mediation. Well that's not the only thing you need to prepare. Just like you won't reach the perfect pose at first, relationships are similar. Well, eventually you get closer and closer."

Josiah had joined the class during the warm-ups. He could not wait for the class to end to ask about her comments.

"Isn't that pertinent to all things though?" he asked in front of the other participants. He had one arm stretched over the other.

"Sure," she said comfortably. "It appeals to global conflicts, where diplomacy may initially fail. But just like attaining the perfect pose for your body, eventually, through an accord or compromise, the lines of control settle for those nations. A position becomes comfortable. Through understanding, nations become closer."

Sarita realized she had never attained one of the greatest *asana* poses, love.

Yoga was simply a medium to bring about a change to the commitments with which she struggled.

"As we all continue in our practice, there is a philosophy that was formulated by the ancient sages. It is known as *ashtanga*, the eight limbs of Yoga."

Josiah listened to her, captivated.

"If practiced astutely, the eight limbs will lead to liberation," she clarified.

The cars on Broadway halted as the eight tenets unfolded.

"The eight limbs are moral principles, observances, posture, breath control, withdrawal of the senses, concentration, meditation, and pure contemplation."

"The undertaking of the first limb, moral principles, consists of many things."

She annotated. "It consists of nonviolence, truthfulness, not stealing, celibacy, and refraining from greediness. It is the great vow of Yogic practice."

Thoughts raced through both their heads.

...Emerging Alternative Activity...Sarita Rena...five years...navy blue yarmulka...Breast cancer treatments... "These must be yours"... "Find out for yourself the fruits of the tree"...

"The second limb consists of observances, observances through bodily purification, contentment, austerity, study, and dedication as we cultivate attitudes towards others..."

... Yoga Instructor...Yogaville...'Tree of Life'...'these nodes, are branches for something greater to ascend..."

"The third is the physical practice of the postures, with awareness of the balancing effort and comfort..."

...The Tadasana Standing Pose...Gaurdasana Eagle pose...

"The fourth limb is breath control. It is the practice of breathing techniques that leads to the enhancement of subtle energy flow, and gives energy to the body and mind..."

...Partition...'Divide and Rule'...'Oh, this is interesting, the Hebrew word for breath is ruach...It is the same word for spirit' ...Peace is the ultimate goal... "Its like a circle"

Sarita continued, "The fifth limb is withdrawal of the senses, as the education of the senses allows for withdrawal to achieve goals..."

Coffee on Sunday?... Menus crumble...Surrender... Conquer...your Ego...

Sarita thought for a second before she continued. "The sixth limb is concentration. Concentration is important because it is the beginning stages of learning, as you begin to focus your mind..."

Stained glass window...the gold cross...Resurrection...'to sit beside a teacher to learn'...to attain a change that which was previously unattainable...

"The seventh limb, which is mediation, we will talk more of this in class," she said,

...Explosion! ...cobblestone divider...

“...And finally,” Sarita said, “there is pure contemplation, as we get absorbed. We become absorbed in the complete union, when that attention overflows from the object and absorbs the subject, resulting in unity instead of duality.”

...The Untouchable Presence ...eight limbs...ten nodes of the ‘Tree of Life’...indestructible impressions...

... Garudasana, the Eagle Pose...

...The Vital Breath...

Sarita stood like an ancient tree.

Her arms were branches that bloomed with Yoga seeds that dispersed in the class.

As she closed the class after the series of *asana* poses, she told the class.

“The Buddhists used the circle as a focal point for meditation,” she said.

“Look out for different circles in your daily life.”

...the Judaic term *Gilgul*, the *Wheel-is the cycle of life* ...

“Next class we will work on the more advanced poses, like *Garudasana*, the Eagle pose.”

As the class concluded, something more than the joints and sebaceous glands awoke in Josiah.

She had left an impression on him that was uncanny. Perhaps the impression was an interest in exploring his religion. Perhaps the impression was to prepare his body. Perhaps the impression was a healing. That day in the yoga studio, Josiah Tamarind felt an impression from Sarita Rena that no one else could see.

If a relationship between Josiah and Sarita could not come together because of the depths of the human ego, then a two-state solution to the half-century Israeli and Palestinian conflict was nearly impossible.

Yoga class sycophants circled around the instructor after the class, and he waited for them to clear out. Josiah waited for the receptionist to turn on the lights. He waited for the students to pack their duffle bags. He waited for the moment when only two people were left in the old dance studio.

Josiah and Sarita had left the only two mats in the middle of the hardwood stage. She waited for everyone to leave for their play to resume.

Josiah wanted to preempt any awkwardness.

“I enjoyed the class,” he said.

“I’m glad,” she said. “I enjoyed having you,” she paused, “here, that is.”

She was unsure if she wanted her student to be a greater part of her life.

“I had done some poses this morning, before I shaved, as per your instructions,” he laughed. “It woke me up.”

“Oh, good!” Her new friend made her smile. Her face was elated with the thought of her influences affecting someone. Conscious of making her class a positive experience, detached from the results of her teaching, Josiah was the link between her efforts and her intentions. But she knew Yoga was a practice of

non-attachment.

Josiah was overwhelmed with her smile. Sarita’s lips were supple and inviting. Her body was her temple, and he mentally bowed to the lotus feet. She illuminated the room when she shared knowledge. Between student and teacher, Christian and Jew, man and woman, they both looked for the ‘shared life.’

“I felt my body tighten and my tension disappear, and I felt connected,” Josiah revealed.

He noticed the receptionist went home for the day. The lights dimmed to a slight strain on the eyes. The candle in the middle of the room was nearly down to the wick. Barriers melted and dripped down.

“Yoga is a coming together,” she guarded herself.

The definition had become sensuously real in their relationship. Josiah had a different appeal at first, today, and now. She felt it in all her senses. Her toes curled on the hardwood floor. She got a sensation up the nerve of her leg. Her fitted cotton stretch tank top revealed her taut navel and concealed her goose bumps. She looked up to the piercing eyes that saw right into her. She started to hear the sound of water. Every impression she had ever had was in front of her.

“I definitely felt the effects of it during the day,” Josiah remarked.

He looked into her light eyes that spoke to him with honor, valor, and a type of encouragement he had not felt in a long time. She was a simple tree that stood with one foot rooted into the ground. She grew with fruits and seeds.

“Yoga teaches us to take responsibility for our actions,” she reiterated once again. She hid her emotions behind the phrases she had come to live by. The integrity Josiah saw in her held him back, made him think of the responsibility for his actions.

“You see,” Josiah paused. She looked back with no judgment, no reservations, nothing but a will to understand, “It is similar to the union of the Jewish mystics.”

Sarita looked up to his broad shoulders, his tall physique,

“Mystics?” she asked.

“Not like that,” He hesitated. “Well, not in the spacey way.”

“It’s okay Josiah, what are you trying to say?”

Sarita was comforting, as he knew she would be.

“In the *Torah*, in all of its different influences, there is the underlying thought that every action should be done for the union,” he paused to explain, “A resurrection.”

His words touched her.

“...A union,” he started.

Sarita listened and completed his words with her repetition, “A union with the Truth...”

Yoga was her personal Resurrection. In the Missing Peace Yoga Center, a synthesis occurred, as personal truths came into question, as personal truths were understood, as personal truths came together. They attained a change that was at

one point unattainable.

A conversation Josiah had never had played out in the consciousness of his mind.

"What does it mean to be a Sufi?"

"The substance of Sufism is the Truth and the definition of Sufism is the selfless experiencing and actualization of the Truth."

"...Just the Truth...?"

"There is nothing trivial about the Truth, only that it is Just. Sufism is that you should be...without any attachment..."

"Absolutely," Sarita confirmed. "It absolutely is a union. It is a union of many paths, many religions, but they all lead to one source."

Sarita was equally excited as their minds connected, once again. Sarita and Josiah came together on the hardwood floors.

Had a meteor flown through the window of the American Yoga studio and destroyed them both into a millions of pieces, the impressions left from their mutual cravings would have returned to one another somewhere else in the galaxy. Their minds expanded to encompass an attraction.

"As your Yoga practice will progress, you come closer and closer to that union. You prepare your body, and you grow through the *asanas* poses. The poses reveal the body's changes, and ultimately, the mind's..."

"...changes," Josiah completed her.

"Yes," she paused.

"I want you to teach me something," he said.

In the layers of her mind, she remembered, *"A teacher must not only teach by their words, but also by their silence."*

She looked at his sharp nose. He was so familiar.

"What could I teach you?" she asked.

"The Garudasana Eagle Pose."

His request was sudden, without warning, albeit random, but seemingly appropriate.

"We will cover it in the next class," she said quietly.

"I know, but I would like to learn it now," he said. Josiah looked into her eyes and said, "With you."

He opened a vulnerability that he thought had died. He took a deep breath to himself. He looked at the lovely woman. She too was sudden, without warning, albeit random, yet seemingly appropriate.

"All right," Sarita searched for the words, "Let's see."

The foggy windows of the Yoga studio refracted the light from the street in halos. The Yoga studio had transformed into an ashram, a sacred enclosure, and a second opportunity.

"Stand in the *Tadasana* Standing Pose," she said.

Josiah took his place on the mat. He felt a strange feeling. He knew the beginning pose very well, but now she showed him how to advance. As he raised his arms, his well-defined muscles branched toward the ceiling. He ascended to

become the tree.

He saw the diminishing flame from the candle in the middle of the room. The focal point brought him the image of a flame. He thought of many candles, an engulfing fire, *Explosion!*

She narrated the pose.

"Step 6: Inhale and hold the posture for the duration of the inhaled breath..."

On the Day of Saturn,

Love transforms into belief.

Question the gluttonous hunters,

if bleeding birds experience life after death?

Inhale and hold the posture for the duration of the inhaled breath.

Personal Management,

In a cosmic love affair,

Do you know who you are?

Explode the desires of an avaricious Star.

...Inhale and hold the posture for the duration of the inhaled breath:

Step 6"

He stood with his feet facing outwards. His chest moved up and down.

She placed her hand gently on his rib cage. She was part of his breath. Her touch was healing to Josiah, she could have cured a leper in that instant. She calmed his nervous tension and regulated his breath.

He felt the small impression lines of her hand along his torso. She had left indestructible impressions. He exhaled slowly.

In the hidden layers of her mind, she heard her guru once again.

"Each man is his own river water. It is those impressions, which we sow now, in this life, in this time, which will blossom in the next. It is with these steps with which we flow towards the Mighty Source."

She showed him the pose, lost in his body and his mind. Sarita heard the trickle of water again. Josiah whispered, "How am I doing?"

"I know I am your Yoga Instructor," she whispered back, "But I must confess. I am absolutely..."

She was interrupted. He did not hesitate. She was a source of light. He looked to the woman who met his gaze with understanding. She trusted in Josiah, with no judgment, no reservations, nothing but a will to understand. Their eyes connected, and his head moved towards hers, and the piercing eyes melted like the candle on the middle of the floor. His hand slipped to the back of her neck and their barriers disappeared. He pushed away the wisp of hair away from her face. Her lips tasted the salt from the tears of a lifetime ago. Their kiss was 'a coming together', and it tied the strands of their minds together, the balance of the bodies, as the cyclic currents reunited two breaths into one. In their kiss, they attained the Vital Breath.

"...absolutely breathless."

Episode XIV

Fourteen

A Return to the River

"I chatter, chatter, as I flow
To join the brimming river,
For men may come and men may go,
But I go on forever.

The Brook

- Alfred Tennyson

The river flooded as it did every year. When the heat built up from the summer months and the clouds collected between the tallest mountains in the world, the rains fell down. The tension, aimed at one party, blamed on another, exploited a rift and unleashed a storm.

The Explosion!

The impact of the explosion instantaneously killed two of the seven Muslim shawl traders. Shredded to wooden planks, the houseboat became a sinking ship. As fire engulfed the ship's deck, Rashiq realized his vision of flames. Asita and Rashiq were thrust into the river torrents, and the undercurrents took them downstream. Rashiq was lost in the flooding rivers. He could not see Asita anywhere. "*Sometimes I compensate my flexibility for my lack of strength,*" the conversation went through his head.

He swam to find her in the rapids. The gray sky sunk into the frigid waters. In the floods, Asita was nowhere to be seen. Rashiq struggled to stay afloat, drowning in the waters that he knew Asita could not survive.

Rashiq looked downstream as the apparition in the white *salvaar* struggled to stay afloat. The rains poured and swallowed the young Brahmin woman.

"It's not that I fear water, I fear immersion. I cannot swim..."

Rashiq swam with his muscular strength and forced his way through the undercurrents. As if the Destroyer Shiva himself struck down on the Kashmiri hills, the violent rapids impeded him. He saw Asita's head a little downstream and swam to her.

She struggled to stay afloat. She gulped furiously for air and consumed large quantities of water that weighed her down. She could not gasp for air, and

she held her breath in the immersion of water.

The Hindu woman remembered that life was cyclic. All her desires were drowning with her. As her breath ceased, the water around her body rose.

Rashiq grabbed her from under the surface of the water. She passed in and out of consciousness. There was a resolution in her struggle. She gulped for air. Rashiq struggled to bring her to the surface. She resigned not to latch on because she feared drowning them both. Asita knew to fulfill his duty to the righteous path, Rashiq would have to fulfill his pilgrimage to Mecca. The teacher wanted her student to fulfill his duty to Allah without interruptions. She pushed away from the forceful young man. The rain pushed them both down and away. Asita knew Rashiq could survive. He had the strength where his flexibility was not. She struggled to leave him, but they were taken down stream, struggling to take their final breaths.

Like two seeds taken to a distant field to pollinate again, the Hindu and Muslim flowed downstream in the churning rapids. Memory was a conscious experience that encompassed the different layers of their minds. Rashiq knew of the duty of the young Brahmin teacher. He had experienced her teachings. He had learned so much, and he wanted her to teach again. In the waters, he grabbed on to her arm. She tried to pull away and save the young man who had once questioned her very core. She would not allow him to drown alongside her hypocrisy.

By the riverbank, a lone tree stood, surrounded by low-lying grass. The violent winds swept through the valley, and the humble grass stalks bent with the wind. At that moment, the trunk of the chenar tree resisted the weather changes and split. With the fatal pride of a Shakespeare character, the chenar tree fell into the river and created a dam.

Rashiq grabbed on to the branch of the fallen tree. As he did, he felt the backlash of rapid currents that assaulted him. His chest compressed into the tree, but his hand kept hold of the young woman.

The forces of the rapids were too great, and he could not secure them both to the branch of the tree. If he could maneuver her to the side, he could suspend her on the branch. The cyclic waters ran their currents against his back. Against his strength, he needed the flexibility to reach over and save himself as well as Asita. He looked at the face of the young Brahmin woman, who passed in and out of consciousness. She struggled to hold her mouth above water. Rashiq looked at the eyes that were half shut.

In an ethereal lesson they would never have, they breathed. The layers of their minds interconnected. They thought of the sublime union they once had. In their minds and souls, they found their way back to their ethereal ashram. In the Vital Breath, they conversed in an ethereal lesson they never spoke.

"This is real, Asita. We are to each other the fruits of the tree."

"This lifetime has become hard to bear. Forgive me, Rashiq."

"I am the inhale. You are the exhale."

"I see life in your eyes, Rashiq, please don't conceal them."

"I breathe for you. It is you I breathe, Asita."

There was silence in their pain as Rashiq secured Asita on the tree branch above the river waters.

"Rashiq, every action that you do produces a two-fold effect. It produces an impression in your mind, and when you die, you carry the Samskaras impressions. It produces an impression on the world and does not die. Please, for me, we must be careful, Rashiq. Be careful with your desire,"

"You are my breath. Yoga is a slow and constant change. And the change is right here, in front of you, Asita."

It was her choice to drown, so that he could swim.

Non-spiritual desires bound man to the wheel of Reincarnation. It was an ardent duty ingrained in her memory, as their sublime conversation revealed.

"I wanted to bring water from the river. Each man is his own river waters, each to flow his own course."

"We are the lotus flower, Asita... impermeable to life's poison."

"We will join the Mighty River Source...together...one day."

"Just close your eyes. Just breathe slowly, you must teach again."

"Rashiq, I learned once, 'When your love sheds a doleful tear, you taste the salt for lifetimes to come.'"

"I taste it now, Asita. I taste you now. You are my breath."

"I will taste for you, Rashiq. Do not save me and risk your life."

He did not see her eyes, but in his mind, he kissed her lips.

"You are the river, Asita, in all its beauty."

The kiss resonated in her soul.

There in the Kashmiri Valley, amongst the alpine trees, a student rested and connected her lessons. From the *Bhagavad-Gita*, she remembered the teachings, *"At all times constantly remember me. With your mind and understanding in Me, you will surely come to Me."* It was there in the river that a student would continue to learn the Grace of Allah.

Asita wanted Rashiq to make the journey to Mecca. She wanted to see him fulfill his path, but she also wanted to fulfill her own. If she did not survive, she knew she would leave the earthly plane with her desires bound to the cycle. If they both died, they would search for one another until they finally reached the Vital Breath.

A force of omniscience heard the inner thoughts in Asita's soul. He had seen the chaos down below. The Untouchable had watched from the side. He knew he had to reach the river in time. When he did, he opened his hand and dropped the marigold head between his fingers.

In the violent waters, Rashiq secured Asita to a precarious tree branch, but he did not have the flexibility to reach for a branch to save his own life. Rashiq Kardal would be fated to live out his path in another cycle and drowned in the rapids.

Asita did not have the strength to withstand the river force. She was about to drift away to a similar path when the hand of some unknown god intervened. The Untouchable reached over and pulled Asita out of the river.

Asita lay unconscious. He placed his hand on her throbbing side. He had been so removed from human contact that the touch stimulated nerve sensations in his fingers. She lay with her eyes closed.

The touch of his hand would echo in the Yoga teacher for lifetimes to come.

She stirred from her position. She was not sure if she was drowning or breathing. Her memory retained the ethereal lesson.

"I will taste for you, Rashiq...Rashiq!"

Laid out on a bed of yellow marigolds, she moved her hand. When she finally awoke, she looked around the riverbed at the marigolds everywhere.

She had never seen the Untouchable.

Death and rebirth were part of the river's currents. A river that made a man wet from the inside. The leftover debris of a lifetime washed away in the waters. Its currents formed a body of water that had the ability to teach man. There was a clarity only seen while standing in it, and nowhere else. Asita's roots were the river, the essence of her mortality.

She was drenched to the soul. The water had taken her will. The rapids had taken her ethereal lover. Rashiq Kardal drowned that day in the pouring rains. The skies shed their tears. The river rapids coursed at the surface and evaporated into the clouds, only to fall again one day as the rains returned to the river.

In her straw cot, she cried for days. Her guru could not comfort her. In the ashram, she lit candles and prayed. Tears rolled down her cheek. She would taste the salt on her lips for lifetimes to come. She would never be the same. It was a previously unattainable change. Asita was heartbroken. Mourning in her longing, miserable in her space and time, she walked outside the ashram. There was so much longing and so many questions unanswered. Asita placed her hand on the familiar ashram doors. The doorway that had once stood as a barrier between Asita and Rashiq, between Hindu and Muslim, was now a portal to their past.

She entered again. Guru Vunde was positioned in an inverted *asana* pose. His head touched the ground, and his feet soared like the beams of the ashram. He sensed his pupil's presence. It was a presence that had endured an interruption. He returned to seated position and greeted her.

"You have come, my Yogi. You have come at last," the guru proclaimed.

"You know why I have come, Guruji."

"Tell me, my student," he said.

"It is so hard Guruji. I have so often rebuked your offer. I have been unready for so long that I did not know what readiness was," she lamented.

Something changed about Asita that day. She had become an incarnation of a former self. She looked towards her guru for a sense of divinity. She knew

that her attachments to Rashiq would bind her to the cycle of lifetimes. Swept away in the cyclic currents, she too was bound to return to earth. But that day, Asita asked for the knowledge her guru had been waiting to impart.

Swami Vunde knew she would come. It could be tomorrow, or lifetimes from now. But the guru knew his student would come to him to ask for the divine knowledge to relinquish them from the cycle. It was a change beyond the scope of a student and her guru. But the guru knew the real change would come when mankind took responsibility for its actions. Until then, more storms would come and many more explosions would be felt.

She stood in front of him. Asita's soul was still drenched with the angst to know what her life was intended for. She was ready to ask.

"You have come here, today of all days, Asitaji, to ask for the knowledge."

"Yes, Guruji. I have come here to know how to dissipate the impressions of desires. That which has death, and that which is deathless. How do I conquer the source of desires, the Ego?"

"First Asita, let me ask you a question. It is a question that presupposes and proposes all in one," he gave his prelude.

"Yes, Guruji."

"Who is the poorest man in the world?"

"The poorest man, Guruji? The poorest man without money?"

"No," the Swami Vunde answered. "The greatest poverty is not the type of poverty found in the lowest beggar."

"Then who is the poorest man?"

"The greatest poverty is the poverty of the mind. He who is closed to the world and himself," he paused. "He with a closed mind is the poorest man of all. That is the poverty of the Ego."

With a perpetual lump in her throat, she was barely able to articulate. She took her seat by her guru. He was her awakening from darkness.

"You are ready then, Asita?"

"First, I have one more question," she said.

"Proceed," the guru instructed.

"Guruji, do you believe in soul mates?"

"It's almost not the right question to ask. Whether you believe or not is of no concern. The question is more around our responsibilities toward each other's souls and their migrations."

"What then," she paused, "Is the responsibility?"

"If we treat all the souls we meet along the way with an understanding that their successes and their struggles shape our own self, and we in turn shape theirs, then where is the room for disbelief for companionship of the soul?"

She thought of Rashiq. She thought of his path and her binding desires at the present moment. Asita did not know if the choice was actually hers, but she asked.

"Then Yes. I am ready to ask for the knowledge of the Divine. The total knowledge," Asita replied.

It was the essence of Yoga.

"Then, let us not waste any time," the guru said. "Let us start the breathing."

That day, Swami Vunde taught Asita the deep breathing technique.

He started slowly. The breath pumped through her nostrils as he instructed.

"Inhale...and exhale...in repetitions," the guru said.

Slowly, she followed. Through circular breaths, she paused each time. Seconds became minutes, and great lengths. She started to feel light-headed, as she slowly inhaled and breathed out. Soon, her head started to feel the oxygen levels in her head. Slow in and out breaths led to faster breaths at her guru's instructions. She wanted to stop because of the feeling in the head, but she continued. She breathed deeply for many minutes. She developed a hammering headache. She thought she may pass out at any second. Detoxifying, slowly, breathing, she continued the cycle. She thought about breathing out all the *Samskara* impressions that haunted her. Blissful toxins leaving her body caused her pain and peace. Low-frequency waves passed through her mind. Her system was relaxed and simultaneously alert.

She reached a state of clarity and heard her guru finally speak.

"There is love and there is the lack of love. There is light and there is lack of light. Darkness does not exist."

The guru accompanied his pupil on her journey in the mind.

"The death and the deathless stemmed from the same one, timeless, un-cyclic, constant Mighty Source."

She knew she would one day return, but she would continue to purge through the breath. In her ashram that was both physical and ethereal, Asita learned that Knowledge and the Knower all became seamlessly one in the Vital Breath.

From of the hillside below the ashram, the Untouchable looked on, waiting, like a mute messenger god for something greater. The divinity in the hands of the Untouchable realized the essence of man. He placed a marigold into the river.

Returning to its source, the marigold floated along the river surface.

Months later, settlers would write letters back to London of the quiet state of the Kashmir Valley.

"It is a quiet Utopia filled with hidden treasures."

The English reference never mentioned the paradise lost. Commander DuMount and Lieutenant Blake were never accused for the murders they incited or the rift they helped to ignite.

An independent India ruled by Hindus was doomed. Muslims were no longer allowed to be feudal lords. Muslims began to fear that they would be

treated as second-class citizens in India and there would be discrimination on every step.

The fire that would burn the soil of Kashmir and the souls of its people was ignited, as the rains washed away their tears and revealed their scars. Coagulated from the bloodshed, the 1857 Indian Mutiny engaged British operations to suppress dissent. The desperate struggles at Delhi, Cawnpore, and Lucknow occurred over the rest of the summer. The operations continued at Lucknow in the winter of 1857-58, and finally the "mopping up" campaigns began in early 1858.

Ferocity accompanied the mutinies through out India. Mutineers commonly shot their British officers on the rising and were responsible for severe atrocities. The murder of women and children enraged the British. Some British officers began to take severe measures before they thought it was too late. Second Lieutenant Blake ordered the firing of British cannons on Nurla and took vengeance.

It was 4:00 a.m. in Nurla when nineteen British soldiers ransacked the town looking for mutineers. Mr. Sattar was asleep with his new wife Henna when the creaky wooden door broke open with the wooden handles of English rifles. The same handle was used to pull the trigger when the husband struggled to defend his family. In her first trimester of pregnancy, Henna put up a struggle empowered by maternity. The forces were too calculated, and the soldiers dishonored the expecting mother.

Divide and Rule!

After 1858, the constant heat of the increasing chaos began to radiate at the seat of the British Empire. Incited by the rape of a local Brahmin virgin by some out-of-control soldier in the District of Saharanpur, riots erupted, leaving many soldiers dead.

The higher ranked British officers in Delhi or England would not tolerate the "Chaos out of Control," as reported by the papers. 10 years after Akbar Sattar was slain and his pregnant wife was dishonored, a dozen such fires engulfed over the Northern India.

Brigadier Hastings, a retired senior officer from the Royal Military Academy, was summoned to Delhi to reinforce administrative intellect. If the British were to make India one of their permanent homes, expending the highest level of administrative brains was imperative. Commander Blake, supplemented by Brigadier Hastings' skills and brains, created a Training Advisory Group. Three hundred senior officers were selected from all over India for their apprenticeship. A class that many began to call *Divide and Rule 101* was now in session. On October 1, 1869 the first program of its kind was held in the village of Begum Pur in South Delhi. Brigadier Hastings's apprenticeship program became an annual program for many years to follow.

The next day, October 2, 1869 in Porbander, Gujarat, Mohandas Karamchand, *aka* Mahatma Gandhi was born. Years later, Asita read about his

publications in the *Indian Opinion*. He wrote about duty, the path of action, and Karma yoga. She taught in the ashram for many years, and when Asita died in 1898, the publications left impressions on her soul.

The fracturing of religious groups in India heightened in the 1930s. With the groundings of Thoreau's civil disobedience, Gandhi brought about an independence movement with the principle of *ahimsa*, non-violence. The limbs of yoga endured bloodshed and resolve against a British monarch.

Divide and Rule!

Ninety Years after the event, when India became independent, leaders decided to call the Indian Mutiny of 1857 "The First War of Independence." But a Hindu rule over a Muslim majority caused power struggles in the Kashmir Valley and elsewhere.

Despite the ousting of the British government, the seeds of the separation were planted decades before. 1947 marked the partition of India and Pakistan and left a missing peace in the Valley of Kashmir. Waters of turmoil fell back to the ground. Piercing Kashmiri eyes of Hindus and Muslims filled with blood and rage. The divided Lotus continued to wilt. Violence, bombings, and hatred marked the line of control through the Kashmiri Paradise and barricaded the entrance into the Vital Breath.

At the root of the 1857 Mutiny, the 1947 Partition, and the Kashmir conflict, something deeper fueled the explosions.

"Yoga teaches us to become more aware of ourselves. When you become more responsible for your actions, you become more prudent of your choices...And ultimately, by the prudence in your choices, you will overcome the source of desires, the Ego."

The year following the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan, the world saw the incarnation of another division. The 1948 post World War II creation of the state of Israel ignited a flame that burned in shifting lines of control. Jews, Muslims, and Christians fought for their own barricades, and the cyclic waters of the torn Kashmiri Valley fell on the Promised Land.

The Untouchable's presence was everywhere and saw into the history of man's soul.

"Flowers will always fall, but the thread that binds them will always remain."

Episode XV

Fifteen

Recognition

The Manhattan skyline at dawn was the awakening of the universe. Tall buildings pierced the lighted haze and looked down on the inhabitants, protecting them like mountains. It was a new perspective in New York. From the late 1800s to the present, the city's buildings had been through cycles of construction, planning, and repairs. New York was the city that spread the use of the light bulb across America. The invention of the elevator sparked the first skyscrapers, and throughout various times in the 20th century, New York held the record for the tallest buildings.

Explosion!

Yoga had exploded across America. Yoga classes were scheduled in every gym and could be accessed through online virtual classes. In reality though, Yoga had always had a trendy history.

In 1919, in New York City the 22 year-old Yogendra Mastanami represented the first *asana* practice in America. Although he returned to Mumbai after just three years in America, his impact was profound. By the 1930s, the diaspora of Indians taught Hatha Yoga at large public demonstrations. Americans realized the physical benefits of the practice through the efforts of the Russian-born yogini Indra Devi. She opened her clinic and greeted her class,

"Breathe in, America..."

Indra Devi opened a Yoga studio in Hollywood in 1947, where she taught stars like Gloria Swanson, Jennifer Jones, and Robert Ryan. She also trained hundreds of teachers.

In the mid-1950s and early 1960s, following the trend of *asana* practice inspired by Indra Devi, Yoga became a popular form of exercise taught at the local YMCA. The explanations of the origins, however, were not always given as much detail.

In 1964, Sri Brahmananda Sarasvati founded the Yoga Society of New York and the Ananda Ashram. Before turning his attention fully to the Ashram, he was a medical doctor and surgeon. His background aided his objective of integrating the ancient teachings of Yoga and Vedanta with his medical and scientific knowledge, and he bridged the traditions of the 'East' and the 'West.' Brahmananda emphasized the unity of consciousness, the freedom of the

individual to discover the true Self, and the universal harmony of the spiritual, physical, and mental Self as expressed in Yoga and Vedanta philosophies. By the 1970s, Yoga practice was so mainstream that a counterculture set out to reclaim the spiritual roots of Yoga and reconnect asana practice to its roots.

The East Village in the 1980s was tattooed and pierced. The streets were painted with blue-and green-haired nonconformist artists, poets, and musician friends. Inspiration was everywhere and nowhere. The scratchy audiotapes filled with a look back to the music of the Beatles, Van Morrison, John Coltrane, and Bill Laswell. Gannon and Life used these modern icons' spiritually uplifting lyrics and fusion of 'Eastern' and 'Western' influences together with their recognition of the "essential, idealist nature of the United States...freedom, liberation through unity in diversity." The New York City of the 1990s ushered in a slew of health clubs and fitness awareness. Low-fat, exercise bunnies and the resurgence of Yoga studios followed. What did the twenty-first century offer to the movement of Yoga?

'A coming together.'

Yoga hybrid gym classes then combined *asana* poses with diverse, hip themes. Consumer culture represented some of the misappropriations of the ancient breathing traditions: Power-Yoga, Aqua-Yoga, Disco Yoga, Yogilates...Nude Yoga!

All recently evolved into species of American Yoga. The results were apparent in the media, publishing and on the rear end. Somehow, the transformed Yoga hybrids had inspired the universal, existential, and divine search for the quintessential "Yoga butt."

And while not all individuals were aspiring to develop a "Yoga butt", the cosmetic goals provoked the question of whether the practice was worthy of the title "Yoga". What strands of the original Indian conception were left in the modern America Yoga center?

The next morning, Josiah Tamarind rode to work on the subway. The cars swayed side to side, and he thought about last night's 'event.' He was absolutely enamored with Sarita Rena. He left the Yoga center in utter silence. In the steel subway car siding, he looked at himself and thought of her.

"...Absolutely breathless..."

It was a kiss that was both passionate and restrained. It was like the *warrior* Yoga pose, as his legs were taut and his mind was loose. He remembered her body as they came closer on the blue foam mat. His arms were taut and strengthened. He looked at her eyes, and their lips came together.

They tasted the salt from lifetimes of tears.

As they came together, their breaths became one. Josiah thought about the Kabbalist idea of the 'cosmic kiss.' In the *Torah*, the Creator initially formed Adam's physical body and then *breathed* into him. The cosmic kiss was innate in all creatures. It filled all voids. Like a meeting of the creatures face to face, the cosmic kiss was the breath that passed between. The 'cosmic kiss' was when the

soul merged with the divine flow of history. Breathing consciously, Josiah became truly aware and reclaimed an inner balance and personal equilibrium.

As he arrived at his office in the big finance firm, Josiah thought about the day that lay ahead. He would soon become vice president of the branch. As he realized that late nights at the office would soon become even more the norm, he could not help but wonder, "*What am I working towards?*"

"Where were you this morning?" Martin called Josiah, who had become a truant racquetball partner.

"It's just been very busy recently," Josiah defended, "It has been really crazy at work. I'll catch you for racquetball early next week."

"You are burying yourself in your work as an escape," Martin said.

"It's not an escape. There are projects I can take on."

"Yeah, fine, but don't bail out on me next week."

"I won't, I promise."

As he hung up the phone, he started to think about the projects on his desk. The forty-year old Josiah was at the age of wisdom. He had acquired material wealth and status, but the void in his life remained. That is, until he discovered the 'cosmic kiss.'

It had been a disorienting morning, but he took the moment every so often between cups of coffee to focus on his breath sitting there in his Wall Street office. It was comforting. His cell phone rang. It was his sister-in-law Rebecca. He recognized the number because he had left her a message early that morning.

"Josiah," Rebecca summoned.

"Yes, I'm here," he realized his distances.

"You left me the most unintelligible message, something about feeling guilty about something you did last night?"

There was silence on his side of the phone line.

"Did I understand you right Josiah?"

"I could have said something. I don't know, I've been distracted," Josiah said.

"Well whatever it is, you shouldn't feel guilty. My sister wouldn't have wanted that, Josiah."

"What is it she would have wanted?" Josiah asked. He wanted to hear her say it.

"She would have wanted you to go on, Josiah," Rebecca said.

She was the one person who truly had understood his loss, and understood how important it was to find a way to overcome the void.

Somewhere in the layers of his mind, he heard an old, friendly voice. "*Yoga is a way to bring about a change, a slow and steady change that was at one point unattainable.*"

"She would have wanted you to share your happiness with someone," Rebecca said.

"*What is the Connection to the Vital Breath?*" he thought.

Josiah's exploration was a search that started more than five years ago. It started before the books on the nightstand, and before a cancer patient's last days. The questioning dated back ages, and Josiah found himself in need of a balance of the mind, the body, and the inner self. He thought about words in the Torah, and the thoughts of his late wife. *"The Hebrew words for 'Breath' and 'Spirit,' they are the same..."* Full of questions and curiosity, something deep inside him urged him to discover a truth behind the words of his orthodox religion. An errand, and then a desire to discover, brought him to the Kabbalah Center, where he learned about a liberation within his Jewish faith. In doing so, he asked the questions that tried to tie together his body, mind and faith.

As the loyalties towards his synagogue shifted, so did his opinions of the actions taken by the state of Israel. A business card may have led Josiah to Sarita in their *second* collision, but his confrontation with her was rooted deeper than he could have ever imagined. Her instructions sparked in him something uncanny, a sense of déjà vu he had never experienced, but the political views of her center questioned the core of his alliances. She was more than a chance meeting. She was something all together familiar, strange and real. He breathed differently with her around. She was a connection to something deeper. Despite objections of his Jewish mother towards *'shiksas'*, he wondered if *'Chosen Ones'* and Gentiles even existed. Was there a deeper equality? Was there someone out there that could be the *next Mrs. Tamarind*?

That morning, the Pakistani newspaper stand owner presided over his periodicals. The back wall displayed magazines with black strips covering the fronts. The immigrant worker had thick lenses in his glasses, and with his magnified eyes, Abdul looked like a caged bird in his booth. He observed the daily routines of those that passed in the day.

Sarita picked up her paper and continued on her morning commute in the labyrinth below Grand Central Station. When she got into the office, she settled in at her desk and turned on her computer. She saw an email from Alice Parker, who had also gained rank in the company.

She read the email, "We may consider gathering more data on the consumer preferences of Yoga participants. Spikes in enrollments around the country have caused second issue publications of *How-To Yoga* books, and may be a tie-in to your pitch of *How-To Practice Political Yoga (Ahimsa)*."

The marketing scheme that once drew Sarita into the Yoga path was now aimed back at Yoga participants. After studying the tenets and performing the *asanas*, she had walked on the eight-fold-Yoga path, and was still trekking along. Perhaps American consumerism was distorting the original Indian conception, in favor of a marketable, revenue-generating, cosmetic goal. But that day, something struck her that provoked the question of whether the practice was worthy of the title "Yoga." She could not help but wonder, *"Could the breathing of Yoga save the world?"*

That evening, Sarita came home to a quiet apartment. She put down her

black leather planner, which had many appointments. She saw the message blinking on her answering machine and got excited.

She pressed the play button to hear the voice of her Italian mother. As if the wavelength of her voice triggered a childhood smell of pasta, bread and wine, she heard a universal complaint. *"Sarita, this is your mother, why don't you ever call me?"*

Sarita walked around the apartment as she heard the message.

"I wanted to let you know that next Sunday we are having a family brunch with the DeLuca family, and you know who is going to be here. Sarita, he's a nice guy. I'll let you know the time. Take care of yourself and don't wear yourself down with all that stretching and breathing you do, for Christ's sake."

Sarita thought about bringing a non-Catholic into her childhood home. *"Wouldn't that be my sacrificial rite!"* Sarita thought.

She walked through her apartment and looked at the photos on the mantle. Her childhood seemed so long ago, and she had been through so much. After sitting for so long at the computer at work, she wanted to stretch out her back, and she opened her mat. Sitting on the blue foam mat, she thought about the Catholic doctrines with which she was raised, and remembered her childhood.

"What is the difference between a Christian and Jew?" she once asked. *"Why did Jesus die for our sins?"* she once questioned. But the priests discouraged her from asking questions.

"Say ten Hail Marys," the priest always said.

As she stretched out her leg on the Yoga mat, she thought about the difference. She knew that both Christian and Jew believed in the *'fall of man'*, the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. For Catholics, it was the *'original sin'*. As she sat up on the mat, she took a breath. She straightened her back and thought, *"But what does the original sin essentially represent?"*

In the sub-layers of her mind, she remembered an answer.

"The source of desires, the Ego."

As she came to prayer position on the Yoga mat, she put her hands together. She bent her knees and felt like she was praying. As if St. Patrick's Cathedral had come into her tiny uptown apartment, she felt at home. She thought about why Jesus died for mankind's sins. In the Bible she received on her first communion, she learned about his compassion, his love, and his Resurrection. As she stood on the mat, she remembered a tenet she had learned, *"Yoga teaches us to see the Truth in ourselves, and in doing so, we see the Truth in others."*

She rubbed the cross on her neck and thought about that day she received the Bible. She remembered walking down the aisle of the cathedral on her first communion. It was the day she acknowledged the difference between sacrificial bread and ordinary bread, the day that marked the beginning of her spiritual journey. She then remembered tripping on her white patent leather shoe. Sarita

fell to the floor.

...Falling...

She lay unconscious, until a hand of Divinity helped her from the danger. The touch resonated in her soul, and she owed the untouchable presence so much.

That day on the concrete island of the subway platform, her journey as a Yoga teacher began with an interest in a how-to book. On her first class, she felt transported. Yoga was her portal, and she performed the *Garudasana* Eagle pose remarkably well.

Sarita remembered how Don had recognized the potential in her. Like a seed that was nourished, her interest grew into a commitment, something that was previously unattainable. He saw the truth in her, and, like the leaves on a tree that developed into branches, her commitment developed into a cause. In her mind, she thought of her teacher's words.

"In education, the first requirement is the teacher, the second is the student; what occurs between them is learning."

Each day, Yoga had become her personal resurrection. Then came the day she had her second collision with Josiah Tamarind. Had he arrived at any other time, she may have looked the other way. She would not have been able to teach him the way she did at his first class. He would not have been open to perform the *Tadasana* standing pose. It was the building pose of something greater. At brunch, she remembered how he made her laugh, and made her think. He was like an old friend. More than the fruit on their plates, she fulfilled her cravings through him. When she divulged the intricacies of the Missing Peace Yoga Center, she met his resistance. As if he had done it before, he questioned her purpose to the very core. But somehow, she was able to answer him.

When Sarita moved her arm back from the saltshaker, she allowed Josiah to enter her world. He may have been late to her class, late to meals, but with his visit, teaching him, she realized he had come into her life at just the right moment. Yoga transcended religion. They breathed a breath, interconnected the strands of their mind that was absolutely...

"... Absolutely breathless..." she said.

"You said this to him?" her friend Mira Steinbeck asked on the phone, "Oh, that's incredible."

"I know. It was like something in both of us was sparked."

"Whoa. That is so hot. What are you going to do?" Mira inquired.

"I'm going to go on. It can't happen again. He's my student...he's..."

"Sarita, what if he's the One? What a story to tell the grandchildren!"

Beneath the journalist's inquisitions, Mira's little girl dollhouse tendencies sprouted.

"I will just confront him, and tell him that I can't see him as my student."

"How lame, tell him to switch classes, Sarita. God, this sounds so amazing."

"It was amazing...is amazing."

She looked at the Yoga mat laid out on her apartment floor.

"When are you seeing him next?"

"We haven't spoken, since," she paused. "I assume he'll come to the next class. He mentioned he has a new project starting at work. But, we are working on an advanced *asana* he was interested in."

"I bet he was!" Mira taunted. She then asked her friend that was lurking in her mind, "So, his being Jewish is not going to be a problem?"

To Sarita, it was something more and more immaterial, and less and less ignorable. There was silence on Sarita's end of the line. In a change that was previously unattainable, she finally said,

"No, I guess not."

Sarita thought about Josiah in the week that followed. On Friday evening, she left her office to teach her night class.

She walked to the subway to catch the uptown train to the Missing Peace Yoga Center. On the way, she stopped at the neighborhood market to pick up some food. After she paid, she realized she should not really eat until after her Yoga session. With her food in her hand, she walked down the steps to the subway platform.

The local train came, but she was waiting for the express. When the doors opened, she heard the voice of a familiar stranger. The Untouchable presence in New York City shrieked lyrics that Sarita yearned to hear.

"If you want to know, if he loves you so, it's in his kiss..."

The Subway Beggar stepped out of the train with her coffee-stained cup. Sarita finally saw her savior. The two entities had come together once again. Through her limited repertoire of 1960s musings, she sang the words she felt in her heart, and saw the inner history of a person's soul.

"It's in his kiss...yeah, that's where it is."

Through the non-attachment of her nomadic subway car performances, the Subway Beggar channeled the perceptions and patterns of the soul.

At that moment, Sarita had the power to help the poorest person she knew. She remembered Don's quotation,

"Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you may have seen, and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him."

As Sarita saw the Subway Beggar standing on the subway platform, the sound of water returned to her head. Somewhere in the layers of her mind, *"The poorest man is a man with a closed mind...That is the poverty of the Ego."*

Sarita took a breath, and she came into the present moment.

The sense of inequality she had felt in the Palestinians' plight was transferred to the homeless woman singing in front of her. Jesus Christ stirred a huge controversy when he reached out to the lepers and healed them with his touch. Sarita Rena barely disturbed the crowd when she reached out to give the Subway Beggar a bag of apples and a sandwich.

"Here you go, Ma'am. This is for you."

Sarita handed her the food. Their hands connected with a lifetime of gratitude.

"That's where it is," the Subway Beggar whispered. Never did the crowds ever reach back to her. For the first time, the Subway Beggar was quiet.

It was a coming together of years and souls. In a small act of kindness, in a large cosmos, two women stood hand-to-hand. It was the last step of the Yoga pose Sarita sought to teach lifetimes before. She understood a deeper sense of equality between them.

The Subway Beggar took the food and left the platform. She entered the subway car and continued to channel the histories of people's souls. She continued to perceive the truth in others.

She was the aim of Yoga.

Sarita wondered.

Could the breathing of Yoga path heal the world?

But the rift in the lotus was alive and present. The broken skyline of Manhattan encrusted ideas of tolerance. In a paradise of cultures, New York created a milieu of acceptance but also social hierarchies.

...*Divide and Rule*...

...*Partition*...

Perhaps there could be a compromise.

If Sarita and Josiah could question the seeds in their lives, perhaps others could as well.

Of the 1948 British-mandated Palestine, Israel took up three-fourths of the land. Since 1967 Israel had occupied the other portion which Palestinians had laid claim to as their homeland. Palestinians live in the West Bank, Gaza, and neighboring Arab countries. Some have left the region entirely. The refugee population numbers were in the millions, and varied in degrees based on who was taking the census. Their leadership was unreliable, and their lives were unsure. The untouchable presence of the Middle East held out their coffee-stained cups.

Explosion!

The jihads of suicide bombings continued to terrorize the innocent Israelis. Each bomber was a result of the seeds of violence that sprouted before. The terror of the peace was an illusion. As another bus blew up and killed four, what would Allah abhor? And what would make the front pages of the newspaper? The UN Security Council had said time and again that the settlements Israel had built on the lands it captured in the 1967 war were illegal, as was the barrier wall being built in the West Bank. However, it was almost inconceivable that an Israeli government could survive the upheaval necessary by a return to the borders before the war. Had the Arab states not refused for so many years to accept the existence of a Jewish state, would the Israeli government even still be in these territories? The points and counterpoints of scholars, commentators, diplomats and publishing houses continued. In the meantime,

Jewish mothers mourned for their Israeli sons. At the Western Wall, the horror of the Holocaust was still in the newspapers, on their buses, and in their breath.

At that moment, everyone in New York City took a breath. It was one, single, controlled and previously unattainable breath.

"End the violence," thought Sarita.

"End illegal Jewish settlements," thought Josiah.

"End the suicide bombing," pleaded Sarita.

"Find the Peace," Don intervened.

Was a 'coming together' possible?

The layers of politics were deeply rooted in the world's conscious mind. The seeds flowed like the cyclic currents of the sacred river. The seeds, the impressions of peace and violence, grew and flowered according to persons or administrations with which the countries associated.

"Breathe in," Sarita instructed the class. "It is a 'coming together.'"

Uptown in the modern Yoga center, on 1750 Broadway, the student and teacher returned to the Vital Breath.

The puck lights were dim, and a candle lit the room.

"Open your arms, up to the sky," she instructed.

As she opened her arms like a windmill, the mirrors on both walls reflected her infinitely. Josiah peered through the door and saw her reflection. He arrived late, but seemingly at the perfect moment. Sarita smiled inside.

He put his bag on the side and found his place on a mat. The sounds of Broadway subsided. Cellular phones and pagers were turned off. The only sounds in Yoga sound were the participants' breaths.

As Josiah joined the class in their repetitions of sun salutations, she thought about their 'cosmic kiss.'

She continued to instruct the class through the repetitions. She taught the class standing poses and backward bends. She weaved through the fleet of mats and adjusted her participants' posture. She adjusted Josiah's hips in the Tree pose and smiled.

He tried to focus his mind, but he was anxious for the class to end. He bent and twisted as she instructed. He was under her spell. The clock advanced and there were only ten minutes left in the class.

His knees propelled him forward, and she kept an eye on him. Finally, Sarita stood in front of the class and taught a pose she had been waiting lifetimes to complete.

"Today we're going to perform a pose that we started last class. It is an advanced pose, and we shall take it slowly," Sarita said.

She demonstrated the pose. The twists in her body caught the light of the candle and reflected in shadows on the floor. Josiah watched as she reflected into infinite images in his conscious mind. His mind intertwined with hers.

That night in the modern ashram, the Yoga teacher taught the final step of the *Garudasana* Eagle Pose.

“Step 7: Exhale and return to standing pose, Tadasana....

*On this Day of the Sun,
Love remains a steadfast conviction.
As the sin of Pride,
Leaves you broken on an eternal wheel.
In the nanosecond of a universe’s day,
Humanity persists to find its stride.*

Exhale and return to the standing pose, Tadasana

*Creative compulsion,
Ever lasting silence,
There remains an earth spinning out of control.
Ethereal lovers left best of friends,
Who knows oneself enough,
To Find the Truth in the soul.*

...Exhale and return to standing pose, Tadasana: Step 7.”

She ended the class with a moment of silence.

Then, all had returned to the room.

After the class, the participants circled around Sarita, and she answered their questions. He watched her smile and laugh. As he watched her address her Yogis, something deep inside Josiah felt fulfilled. Sarita had become the student that went on to teach others.

Josiah waited for the crowd to disperse. The lights were still dim, and no one else was in the room. They were both nervous but calm. There was no one else they wanted to see. There was no one else they wanted to call.

Sarita and Josiah thought about all that had happened. They thought about all that had come before. They were impressions in each other’s lives.

Collision!

Was there a conscious recognition that they met before?

She smiled to him. He came up to her mat.

“Josiah,” she said.

“Yes, Sarita.”

She felt like she was in a Cathedral. He felt like he was in his Synagogue.

Her voice quivered and she spoke, “You once asked me a question, and I could not answer it at the time.”

She looked down and away from his piercing eyes.

“But now,” she waited. “What is the Connection to the Vital Breath?” went through her thoughts.

“Now?” he asked.

“Now, I think I have an answer for you.”

He stood tall with strength, and she felt comforted.

“In the last of couple weeks, I have been able to understand your question,” she said, “and where you are coming from.”

Sarita finally looked up. He had a strikingly familiar quality to him. She was absolutely enamored by Josiah Tamarind. She took a breath to herself, and said,

“The Vital Breath is the power to face each day as it comes.”

She released her breath, and said, “But there is so much more.”

“I know,” Josiah replied.

Something deep inside her wanted to answer the question of her Yoga student.

“The Vital Breath was used in the first creation. It is the origin of man and woman,” she relayed to him. “When we get distracted, we separate our breath from our body, and our mind. The Vital Breath brings us together.”

Josiah admired her in silence.

“The Vital Breath is the part of us that is indestructible. The Vital Breath carries with us...”

She stopped speaking when she heard a quiet trickle of water in her head. Then a question went through the layers of her mind, “What then prevents man from flowing into the Mighty Source?”

She continued, “The Vital Breath is the realization that we are human, and we have the desires that preclude us and inhibit our happiness.”

She was his muse.

“The Vital Breath is the realization of this source of desire, this Ego, and the power to overcome it.”

Josiah’s search of lifetimes twined together. He became excited, yet calm. He wanted to speak with his heart. Sarita continued,

“The Vital Breath is the power to understand the religious convictions with which we were raised.”

“Yes,” he said. He continued the voice matters of his teacher. “It is the Vital Breath that gives us the curiosity to question the doctrines of religions, and find out for oneself the fruit of the tree,” he said.

She looked at him with admiration.

“The Vital Breath is the Tree of Life, and the ability to ascend the nodes,” he continued.

Their eyes met.

“It is the Vital Breath that gives us the breath to connect,” she said.

At that moment, Josiah tasted the salt on his lips of the tears that his ethereal lover had shed lifetimes ago.

“The Vital Breath,” Josiah spoke, “Is the breath to let go of grief, and return to the source.”

“The Vital Breath is a Mighty Source,” she said.

He looked at her soft face. The two were enchanted with the way they were talking to one another, and did not want to stop.

“In the Vital Breath there is no Resurrection,” said Sarita. “Every day is a resurrection.”

"In the Vital Breath there is no Chosen One," said Josiah. "Everyone and no one is Chosen."

Josiah knew Sarita was the one for him.

He continued, "The Vital Breath is the power to move on, and to take responsibility for our actions."

"The Vital Breath is the different paths that lead us to one Truth," Sarita completed him.

They came together on a blue foam Yoga mat.

"The Vital Breath is the shared life we are lucky to figure out," Josiah praised. "The Vital Breath understands the roads we traveled."

In a change that was previously unattainable, as the two souls came together again, she finally answered her student's question.

"The Vital Breath is the equality of the human soul."

As though a flash of impressions from all their lifetimes surged through both of their conscious wavelengths, they felt something change.

The search had ended.

The sound of water in her head went away.

He no longer saw the image of fire.

Sarita knew his inner core. Josiah Tamarind was her river current. Sarita Rena was his seed.

"The Vital Breath is the greatest metaphor," Sarita said.

At that point, Josiah had the most intense feeling he ever had in his lifetime. He asked, "What is the greatest metaphor of the Vital Breath?"

"The Vital Breath," she paused. All the axioms of Yoga were fulfilled, and she had to keep going. He was the one for her, and rid her of every impression in her body, mind, and soul.

"By knowing the truth in oneself, one comes to know the truth in others," he thought.

"The Vital Breath is Love."

There was no explosion. There was no shattering of pottery.

In the Missing Peace Yoga Center on Broadway, Josiah knew all that had come before, and all that would come to be. She was the one.

Josiah took a deep breath. For the last time in the subconscious layer of his mind, he heard the words, "Follow your path. Follow your heart. Follow the Truth."

As they came together on the blue foam Yoga mat, the Yoga instructor whispered to her student,

"Love is like breathing. You just have to do it."

In the second-story yoga studio on the Upper West Side, another longing question remained. Was there a conscious recognition?

Was there a feeling that existed for some people that was lacking for others? Was there familiarity in some, but distance in others? Why did random particles scatter throughout one's life? Why did the encounters and relationships throughout one's lifetime resolve themselves in love and joy, or anger and regret?

Was there a conscious recognition of a previous incarnation?

Would there be a conscious recognition for lovers that were separated for lifetimes? Would Cleopatra recognize her Marc Anthony if they met in a bar, and would he buy her a drink? Could Shah Jahan recognize his beloved queen, the inspiration for the Taj Mahal, if he were to meet her over the Internet? What if two warring Northern Ireland families kept Apollo from his Venus? What if a Bosnian refugee fell Juliet to her Serbian Romeo?

Here was a thought. What if a saint were reincarnated as a criminal? Or, a criminal reformed into a saint? Could the rich be transformed into the poor, the poor into the rich? Could the soul of Machiavelli live in the modern congressional candidate? What if a man were reincarnated into a woman, or a woman into a man? Could the modern theories of homosexuality revert back to the seeds, the impressions that grow and flower according to the persons or places with which one associates? What would form the basis of mankind's personal attractions, and ultimately, would it matter?

Would Asita Mandiran recognize Rashiq Kardal? Did the "seed from India" Tamarind, Tamar Hind, have enough of the Kardal mustard seed in him to recognize her, across the space of lifetimes?

"May I ask you something," Sarita spoke. "This may seem strange, but something inside me wants to ask. I can't explain why, but I must ask."

"Sure," Josiah said.

"Do you believe in soul mates?"

The question echoed through the cosmos. He took a breath, and thought about the journey his life had become.

"I believe certain people, certain forces, come into," he paused, "as well as out of one's life for a reason. When my wife died, I wondered if she was my soul mate. If she was, then was I just supposed to wait around until I died, or was I supposed to move on?"

"And?"

"And I realized that a soul mate is someone who nourishes your soul, on the path to something higher."

And as they came together, the Vital Breath had become attainable on the earthly plane, as well as beyond.

Closing her eyes with a sense of determination, she breathed in slowly. Each breath brought the patience to understand. Her mind cleared. Air expanded in her lungs. Their souls flowed. She breathed in...

"...That which has death and which is deathless have the same source..."

...The Mighty Source...

In a global community connected by inbound flights and outbound stories, the world's population expanded to take on the many seeds. With all the impressions one faced and created at every waking hour, *could* there be a conscious recognition?

As for society's lost cases, from the Untouchable to the Subway Beggar,

their presence was felt in omniscience, but what song would the marigolds sing?

"Flowers will always fall, but the thread that binds them will always remain."

In the modern Yoga center, the Vital Breath took its shape. The winds blew around the globe, and the cycles of sunspots generated wavelengths and disturbances passing throughout time and space. The skyscrapers of New York soared to their great heights. The triangular rooftops look down in protection on the student and teacher.

In the modern Yoga Center, Christian and Jew came together. They found their way back to the sweet, refreshing and nourishing breath. The two souls stood in the shadows of the greatness that before, and together, they trekked further on the Yoga path.

"Breathe in," Sarita said.

She lifted her arms above her head. Like Indra Devi that had taught decades ago in Hollywood, and Yoga gurus that had come centuries before, Sarita Rena would go on to teach others how to teach Yoga.

"Breathe, in New York! Breathe in, America!"

In the Missing Peace Yoga Center on 1750 Broadway, Sarita stood in the middle of the empty room with her beloved. On the Yoga mat, the 'Next Mrs. Tamarind' held Josiah's hand.

Breathe in.

Breathe in 'Taking responsibilities for one's actions.' Breathe in the grief and the pain, and all the consequences that were once overlooked.

Breathe in the insecurities that occur on a daily basis in crowds of people. Watch the *Walk* and *Don't Walk* when paths overlap and meet in the center divider. Feel the ruby red taillights on one's face that glow when stages of life begin and end.

Breathe in the nature of cyclic rivers that flow. The river waters evaporate in the steam above the surface. The waters go to the sky, only to fall to the ground as rain. Breathe in the river waters.

What prevents each man from reaching the River's Mighty Source?

Breathe in the morning commute, as the newspaper stand owners and *Dhobi* washer men observe our inconveniences. Breathe in the people that observe them.

Breathe in the Subway Beggar's pleas when she holds out her stained coffee cup. Breathe in the Untouchable outcaste. Breathe in the grateful hands of Divinity.

Breathe in the desires when impressions are first formed. Breathe in the cravings that are deeply imbedded in the layers of one's mind. Breathe in the tendencies that form one's habits, which form a person's character.

Breathe in each rock thrown across the Line of Divide that forms an impression.

Explosion!

Breathe in each bomb that goes off to form tendencies. Breathe in each

territorial acquisition that forms habits. Breathe in the cycle of unrest.

Breathe in the Palestinian plight. Breathe in the Israeli suffering.

Breathe in the partitions of human history. Allow for the menus of the world to crumble and the walls of partition to no longer divide.

Breathe in Divide and Rule!

Breathe in the forgotten *madrassas*.

Breathe in the torn Kashmir Valley.

Breathe in the superiority and failed compromises.

Breathe in the Missing Peace.

Breathe in the source of desires, the Ego.

Breathe in the humble grass and hubris of the tree.

Breathe in the Tree of Life.

Breathe in the barriers of cracked wooden doors around the world.

Do you believe in the equality of the human soul?

Breathe in the grief that has put up those barriers, and the choices that have tarnished one's character.

Breathe in bedside discussions.

Breathe in telephone conversations with friends.

Breathe in joy.

Breathe in her smile.

Breathe in his piercing eyes.

Breathe in Love. *"Love is like breathing..."*

Breathe in a deeper understanding of love. Two breaths came together in the blink of an eye.

Breathe in the tears shed by one's ethereal lover, whose mouth tasted the salt for lifetimes to come.

Breathe in the impressions of all that was set into motion in a time before.

Breathe in the seven lotus flowers that floated back to the surface, impermeable to life's changes.

Breathe in the 'shared life' that binds us to one another, as we seek the original state.

Breathe in your soul mate.

Breathe in the Mighty Source.

Breathe in the Vital Breath.

"And release."

Epilogue

The Timeless Eagle ...

Garuda is Sanskrit for Eagle.
King of Birds He transports Time,
Symbol of Courage and Justice.

Breathe in,

Intertwined.

Come together

In the Vital Breath

And fly away,

In the greatest Love

...Of The Timeless Eagle