

PART ONE

KALI

1

THERE ARE DREAMS THAT dance so lightly on the surface of our consciousness that they slip offstage without leaving any trace of their passage. Others remain to trouble our waking hours, though they be of little real consequence. Then there are the dreams that lead us inward, past the shadows thrown up by our present life, and into an encounter with the self that never sleeps.

It was the last of these that woke the sleeper that morning, though he did not know it, and turned his life in the one direction it was always meant to go. But for now, all he was aware of was an immense sadness at the end of a long and fruitless life for which he had no one to blame but his own wrinkled and tired face in the mirror. Still dreaming, he fought back the impulse to close his eyes, to look away, to do anything but acknowledge the face he saw and the silent recriminations that stared back at him from the glass. Then the shadow on his mind began to dissipate. A few fleeting moments later, his waking consciousness returned. He still felt the sadness in his body, a tightness in his chest that made it somewhat difficult to breathe, but the dawning realization that it had only been a dream brought with it a great measure of relief. He sprang off the bed and sat down at the small table where he had left his laptop, the only thing he had bothered to unpack before collapsing on the mattress, tired and aching after the long, uncomfortable bus ride from Dharamsala. He turned it on and clicked the file entitled “Dream Journal.”

Rishikesh

8/7

7:15 AM

I just had the most surreal dream—though no more surreal than spending fourteen hours in an Indian bus being tumbled like sneakers in a dryer. I woke up dreaming that I was looking at myself in a mirror, but in the dream I was an old man with dark, wrinkled skin and only a few strands of white hair to cover my bare, blackened scalp. As I stared at

that face—my face—I felt a bone-deep weariness, a kind of sad and bitter sense of resignation. Tragic is the word that comes to mind. At the same time, I was conscious that I had no one to blame but myself. I had thrown away my life, and now all I could do was endure the pain and wait for death to liberate me. The emotions were so strong they woke me up. When I opened my eyes I could hardly breathe. I had this terrible constriction in my chest, almost like I had a knife lodged there. It passed quickly, once I was awake, but I can still feel the aftershocks. In fact, I don't think I've ever had such a vivid dream. That's one thing Leiris mentions: your dreams become more vivid when you start writing them down—or rather, you remember them more vividly and more readily. Maybe my subconscious is finally starting to catch on. While I was waiting for the bus in Dharamsala, I was reading some of his *Nights as Day, Days as Night*. It struck me how mundane my own dreams were in comparison to his. I began to worry that I wasn't even creative in my dreams. But this was different. It was short but powerful, like a cameo appearance from some tragic figure hiding out in my subconscious. Who knows, I may even be able to use it in my book. Isn't that, after all, the whole point of this journal—to get material for my book? I have no idea yet where I might fit it in, but it's here if I need it. At the very least, it bodes well for the future. If my dreams start getting creative, then maybe my conscious mind won't be far behind.

Rodrigo closed his laptop, satisfied that he had gotten down the salient points of his dream. He opened his trolley bag, laid out some clean clothes, and went into the bathroom to take a shower. There was no shower stall, only a single showerhead protruding from the wall in one corner of the white-tiled room. Above it and to one side was an ancient, rusted water heater. A thin plastic strip glowed red next to the on-off switch. Who could possibly want to use hot water in this heat? he thought. Late summer in the foothills of the Himalayas might not be what it was on the plains, but it was still enough to make a body long for a cool shower. He unwrapped the bar of soap that he found lying by the sink, and turned on the cold-water faucet. The pipes creaked momentarily, and then the water came flowing out of the showerhead in a cool, refreshing stream.

As the water poured over his back, he became aware that the dream had not completely faded from his consciousness. The image of the old man's face still troubled him. Behind it lay a shadow, an uneasy feeling, not entirely vanquished, that he had willingly thrown away his life, a burden that tasted thickly of guilt. Funny how our dreams can remind us of things we'd just as soon forget, he thought. It was the same feeling that had assailed him when he'd finally signed the divorce papers some three months ago and slid them over to Beth across the kitchen table they had bought at the Salvation Army eight years earlier, both of them stunned to see a solid mahogany table wearing a fifty-dollar price tag. He remembered sitting there after she had gone out the door for the last time, feeling

precisely this same feeling: that he had wasted eight years of his life on a dream that had slipped through his fingers like water. By then she was already living with another man. He was angry about it, as by rights he should have been, but he couldn't free himself from the feeling that he had somehow brought it on himself. He had considered dragging her through the courts, but his guilt wouldn't let him. There were just too many times when he had said or done the wrong thing, fully knowing that it would add fuel to a fire that she had set blazing. Too many times when he had failed to recognize the warning signs and turn back. He thought he had put those feelings behind him, but obviously he hadn't. Some residue still remained in his subconscious. But what did it mean that he had dreamed himself to be an old man, still beset by the same unresolved feelings? Could he be afraid that he was going to carry this with him for the rest of his life?

"Probably gave it away because it didn't match their new marble countertops," Beth had said, as they laid their hands on the table to feel the grain. He had accepted her indignation as his own. A world full of greed, of crass consumerism and superficial pleasures, and only the purity of their art to save them. He shook his head at how naive they had been. There had been no guilt then. They had been soulmates, pure and simple. They had seen the world very nearly through the same set of eyes. The same ironic glances at the folly of humankind. The same aspirations to be great artists, her behind the lens of her Pentax D-50, he enveloped by the luminous aura of his iMac. The same certainty that the future was waiting for them to arrive—breathlessly, if the truth be told.

As he started soaping his shoulders and arms, he thought back to their very first conversation—in his office, one hour after she had walked into his English composition class by accident, sized him up with a single glance, and decided then and there that she was going to transfer into his section. They talked for nearly an hour, and he barely noticed a word she said, his senses numbed by her graceful, willowy figure, two inches taller than his own, and her impossibly round, impassioned, nut-brown eyes that cleaved through him like a finely honed blade. He signed her entrance form without a moment's hesitation, barely aware of what he was doing, though his section was closed and he had already turned away two students earlier that day. It was only when he got home that evening that he was able to clear her fragrance from his senses. "Cupid's arrows and Jupiter's thunderbolt, flanking me on either side," he wrote in his journal that night, but there was no ironic sleight of words that could downplay the volcano that had erupted in his soul, spewing forth its deadly lava, its fires fed by every romantic notion that had been planted in his febrile brain by the stories and songs he had consumed throughout his life like manna from heaven. She had arrived in his office with a China-crepe shawl draped over her bare shoulders and a wide, pleated cotton skirt that hooped as she walked like a dervish's, a throwback to the sixties who gave no hint of the goddess within who had swooped down from her Olympian perch to have a little Dionysian fun with an unsuspecting mortal. He resisted, of course, but how long can a mere mortal hold out when the gods are determined to have him as their plaything? His fledgling sense of professionalism held fast

for a few weeks, then wavered under the onslaught of her perfume and the artful lines of mascara that encircled her eyes, not to mention the snapshots she took of him coming in or out of class and then slipped under his office door with snatches of poetry scribbled on the back. It was abandoned altogether when she convinced him that his professional etiquette was not only boring—it flew in the face of everything a true artist held sacred. Not that he needed much convincing. By then, he had already painted her into his image of the ideal woman out of the fantastical colors supplied him by the architects of the Western literary tradition. She was his Isadora Duncan, the carefree, visionary artist, as graceful as a Nordic fairy, destined to be his muse, to open the door in his garden wall and lead him into the spirit land of artistic immortality. He was her Byron, the dark-haired, faintly myopic, post-romantic poet who was chosen by fate to sketch her portrait in words that would enable her to live forever. They both acknowledged the other to be their destiny, and despite the university's baleful frowning on college professors who got involved with their students, neither of them saw any point in making destiny wait.

Again he shook his head. Could he really have been that naive? But of course the answer was yes. He remembered the late nights talking about the books he planned to write, debating whether her photos showed more influence of Mapplethorpe, as he divined, or of Warhol, as she insisted. Year after year, locked into a dream, until the slow deterioration of their once beautifully scripted fairy tale became so obvious that even his obtuse eyes could see it. Long conversations about how much of his own life he planned to fold into his books somehow morphed into short diatribes about how he had sold out to the capitalist machine. Imagine that! Somewhere along the way, she had turned him from a Byronic figure into a pusillanimous university functionary who had become so enamored of his academic prestige, his fawning students, his faint but safe reputation as a literary critic, his tenure and the addictive pleasures of a regular paycheck, that he had forgotten the pact he had made before the sacred altar of everlasting art. How had they gotten so turned around? The easy answer was sabotage, the saboteur asleep in the bed beside him. In the last months, he had clung to that notion as tightly as he could; yet, while it assuaged his anger, it did nothing to stifle the sadness and the guilt, or hold back the fear he instinctively knew was at the root of the pain that had followed fast upon their separation.

No, there was no mistaking the source of his dream, no mistaking whose ancient face he had seen in that mirror. Not even two oceans and a foothold in the Himalayas could separate him from his failures. But why the aged wrinkles? Why the dark skin? Why the recriminations of a tired old man, instead of the fresh sorrows of his waking face? Could the dream be a message from his subconscious that he was afraid she might be right? That he might one day come to the end of his life without ever having set foot on the road he had always dreamed of walking? Was this the fear that was stalking him, the added knife that had made the pain of losing her so difficult to bear?

He took his loofah and started scrubbing vigorously his back and shoulders.

The course, fibrous matter of the natural sponge shucked the dead flakes of skin and sent them rushing toward the drain, along with the last of the dust and grime that had settled on him during the course of the long bus ride. He bent down to scrub his legs and then bent each knee, one after the other, and scrubbed the soles of his feet. Satisfied with his ablutions, he shut off the water and reached for the towel.

So what if it was? His subconscious was pushing him, that's all, the same old litany he had hoped to leave on the other side of the ocean. If so, then he would push right back. He had not come to India to run away. His marriage might be lost but he was not. The only image that a mirror in a dream can reflect is the ghost of a sleeping mind's fancy. He was flesh and blood and at the beginning of his road, not the end. He was thirty-five years old. Proust had been thirty-seven when he began work on his great novel. The past might be his enemy but the future was his friend. History was full of great writers who had begun their careers at his age or later. No one knew that better than he. He still had two years on Proust and every intention to live decades longer than the French master's fifty-one years. He may have had Proust's slight build and his jet-black hair, but he was healthy and took good care of himself. Who knows how much he might accomplish before he was through? He would make her see the day when she would tell her friends with pride that she had once been married to Rodrigo Arroyo. And if they hadn't heard the story already, they would gasp and beg her to tell them what the legendary master had been like when he was young.

As he stepped out of the bathroom and began putting on his clothes, he glanced at his watch. Breakfast was at eight, still ten minutes away. He took his small collection of books out of his luggage and placed them on the night table. Then he sat down on the bed with his back against the headboard and tried to picture *Le Gentil* approaching the shores of South India. The French astronomer would be feeling the spray of salt water in his face. The smell of approaching land would be in his nostrils. What emotions might he be feeling as he came within sight of Pondicherry for the second time? He would be hopeful, certainly—aware that finally, after eight long years and much hardship, he was in sight of his goal. He would have no inkling of the failure that awaited him and the severe depression that would follow as he saw his life literally be eclipsed by clouds. But that depression was coming. It was held in trust by his creator. Suddenly, Rodrigo realized that the dream and its tragic sadness was exactly what he needed for the scene that would immediately precede the climax of his book. It might well be that his subconscious was merely throwing back at him the despair he refused to acknowledge in real life. It might indeed be trying to frighten him with his unacknowledged fears of how he might end up. But what of that? Van Gogh had turned his despair into art that would vie with eternity for longevity. Proust had taken his emptiness and given it a voice that reached across continents and spoke for an entire generation. He would take his dream and his failed marriage and do the same. Let his fear come at him. He would turn it against itself and from that battlefield conjure forth the genie of transcendent, enduring art.

Rodrigo had little difficulty finding his way to the guest dining hall. There he found a buffet of steaming silver pots and three rows of low tables about a foot high along the other three walls with mats for the diners to sit on. He spooned out some porridge from one of the pots and helped himself to two slices of toast from a basket and a cup of tea from a large silver dispenser. Then he found a seat in one corner from where he could watch the other diners.

Almost all of the twenty-five or thirty people who came and went while he ate were westerners. He heard French, Spanish, German, English, and a language he couldn't place, but which, from the Latinate words, he guessed to be Romanian. How many of them had come to India on some sort of spiritual quest? All, most likely, after one fashion or another. What else would bring a wandering westerner to an ashram in Rishikesh? In this respect he was an outsider. His quest was artistic, not spiritual, but the milieu was exactly what he was looking for: a quiet place with clean rooms where no one would bother him. Where better than a Himalayan ashram? He had started his sabbatical in Dharamsala, to satisfy a long-standing desire to meet the Dalai Lama, whom he admired for his lifelong efforts to save a unique and endangered culture, but now it was time to immerse himself in traditional Hindu culture, knowing that it was the only way he could give his book the authenticity it would need. Pondicherry would still be too hot at this time of year—he had not planned to reach there before November. In the meantime, Rishikesh seemed a likely place to begin his quest: cool enough that he wouldn't be overly bothered by the heat; small enough that he wouldn't be suffocated by the crowds; and, most importantly, steeped in centuries of Hindu culture with only the barest contamination from the irreverent West.

He would have liked to sip his spiced tea a while longer, but they had asked him to register as soon as he was done with breakfast. He finished a second cup, savoring the pungent flavors of cardamom and clove, and walked over to the office, which was housed in the same building. As he entered through the open doorway he saw a thirty-something Western woman in a white sari sitting on a mat in front of a low glass-topped counter. She was talking on a cell phone and working at a computer with her free hand.

Rodrigo sat on a mat in front of the counter and listened curiously to the woman's speech. Her accent was unmistakably New York City, born and bred. Not only New York, but New York Jew, he thought, judging by the wavy black hair that hung untamed over her shoulders and her distinctly Semitic features. And yet she was speaking Hindi into the phone without any trace of hesitation or awkwardness. She even laughed at what might have been a joke she had made. Who could joke in a foreign language if they weren't completely fluent? Rodrigo was impressed. After a few minutes, she snapped shut her cell phone and acknowledged him with the same smile that had been present throughout her conversation.

"I was told to come here and register after breakfast?"

"Name?" she asked, glancing down at a typed list under the glass.

“Rodrigo Arroyo.”

“Arroyo. Here it is. American. Do you have your room already?”

“Yes. I arrived about four thirty this morning. They put me in room 242.”

Rodrigo showed her the heavy brass key with the room number engraved on it.

“Nice room, overlooking the Ganges.” She handed him a registration form. “Fill this out. I’ll also need to see your passport when you’re done.”

When he had finished filling out the form, she checked it against his passport and then turned back to the computer and rapidly typed in the information.

“I’m Bhagavati,” she said when she was done. “I oversee the office work and take care of Swamiji’s engagements and whatever else he needs me to do. If you need anything while you are with us, just come and see me and I’ll try to take care of it. How long are you planning on staying?”

“I’d like to stay a month, if that’s possible. I wrote that in my email when I made my reservation.”

“Ah yes, I remember now. You said in your email that you were interested in studying yoga and Hindu philosophy. This is your first time in India, right?”

“That’s right.” Rodrigo shifted his position, uncomfortable at the thought that his letter had been somewhat misleading. “I’m also working on a novel that’s set in India. I thought this would be a perfect place to get started.”

Bhagavati appeared intrigued. “You’re a writer?” she asked.

“Yes. I’m also a professor of literature at the University of North Carolina. I’m taking a year’s sabbatical to work on a book.”

“Really? How interesting. Well, there’s nothing like regular spiritual practices in a good environment to unleash the creative juices, and in my experience there’s no better place for that than Rishikesh. I’m sure you’ll get a great start on your book while you’re here. Anyhow, I’ll just run through a few things you need to know and we’ll be all set. The suggested donation is five hundred rupees for rooms overlooking the Ganges and four hundred for rooms on the inner courtyards. You’re welcome to change rooms at any time if you decide the one you have doesn’t suit you. Just let me know and I’ll arrange it. The donation includes meals, but we do ask that you let us know at least one meal in advance if you plan on missing a meal, so that the kitchen can know how much to prep are. We also ask that our guests attend the *arati* program at dusk.”

She reached under the counter and handed him a small folder.

“Here is a brochure that explains the arati and gives some more information about the ashram. The arati starts a little after five on the steps of the ghat—that’s directly in front of the main entrance. Yoga classes are at seven AM in the yoga center. That’s at the far rear of the ashram. Philosophy classes are at ten, also in the yoga center, but if the weather permits, Saraswati usually likes to teach her classes outside under the banyan tree. Let’s see. There’s chanting and meditation each morning at five in the main hall with the *brahmacharis* and the rest of the ashram residents. That’s right behind this building. There’s another collective meditation in the main hall after arati. You’re welcome to attend these sessions

any time you like, but they're strictly optional. When Swamiji is in residence he often leads them personally."

As she said this, Bhagavati pointed to a large portrait hanging on the wall behind him. A handsome, dark-skinned man dressed in orange robes and *rudraksha* beads stared out at him. He had long black hair, a thick black beard streaked with gray, red markings on his forehead, and a smile that seemed to grow out of the twinkle in his eyes. The picture felt imposing, perhaps only because it was so large, but the expression on his face made him seem immensely likable. He wouldn't mind meeting this swami, Rodrigo decided, whoever he was.

"Well, unless you have any questions, I think that's about it."

"No, no questions."

"Good then. Enjoy your stay. I think you'll find that the ashram is a very special place."

It could have been a conversation with the reception staff at a New York spa, if it were not for the sari and the fact that they were both sitting on mats on the floor. Bhagavati had that practiced, pleasant, efficient New York air that he had not failed to appreciate on his few visits to the city. Though it felt odd to meet with such a reception at an Indian ashram, it bolstered his confidence that this was a place where he would be left alone to write.

As Rodrigo stepped out of the office and into the bright morning sunshine, he took his first good long look at the place he had planned on making his temporary home. It had still been dark when he'd arrived that morning. All he had seen from the back of the rumbling three-wheeler that had taken him the two kilometers from the bus station to the foot of the Ram Jhula Bridge was a wide expanse of gray sand and dim boulders on one side, bordering the black waters of the Ganges, and the looming shapes of one- and two-story concrete buildings on the other, huddled tightly together in the dark. He had felt the mountains more than he had seen them, but even then they seemed to impose their will on the shadowy, desolate surroundings where everything appeared to be brooding motionless under the cover of night. The only sounds he'd heard, other than the discordant braying of the three-wheeler, were the wind whipping off the water and the lone bark of a dog, far in the distance, plaintive and mournful. They had gotten out, himself and the four other passengers, at the foot of Ram Jhula, a narrow, swaying, four-hundred-foot steel suspension bridge that hung over the shallow, rapid waters of the Ganges. As he crossed the bridge on its walkway of wooden planks, barely wide enough for two people to walk abreast, he had kept one hand on the wire-mesh siding to steady himself against the wind, which was strong enough, as it swept down from the mountains upriver, to chill his bones despite the balmy summer air. A young tout had accompanied them, diligently handing out hotel cards to each of the new arrivals. The boy had walked him to the ashram gate, some three hundred meters downriver, and then complained mightily over the ten-rupee tip, until another ten rupees brought a yellowed grin to his small, dark face and sent him scurrying off into the engulfing silence.

Now, as he looked around in the daylight, Rishikesh seemed anything but mournful. From where he stood, he could see the blue-tinted waters of the Ganges framed in the arch of the ashram entrance. Beyond the river rose the foothills of the Himalayas, green forested slopes glinting under the glare of the morning sun. He turned slowly and followed the mountains as they encircled the ashram on three sides, loosening their grip on the sky only in the direction in which the Ganges flowed, south toward the plains of Northern India. He could sense an air of quietude hanging over the grounds, a hushed solemnity that he hoped would favor the writer as much as it did the devout meditator.

Rishikesh, as he had learned from his well-thumbed travel guide, was a hill town, quiet, sturdy, industrious, but the ashram was not situated in Rishikesh proper. It was part of a separate enclave on either side of the river that consisted mostly of ashrams and temples. This small settlement began just south of the Ram Jhula Bridge, about a kilometer and a half from the edge of town, and continued up to the nearly identical Lakshman Jhula Bridge, two kilometers upriver, where, legend had it, the god-king Rama had crossed the Ganges in his flight from Ayodhya. According to the guide, yogis and spiritual seekers had flocked to this picturesque Himalayan setting for hundreds, perhaps thousands of years, to pursue their meditations and chant the holy names passed down to them by the sages of antiquity. Even today, few people came to Rishikesh who were not seekers of spiritual enlightenment or religious absolution, since there was little else to do in this graceful warren of spiritual ashrams, other than attend yoga classes or chanting sessions, visit temples, or listen to lectures by spiritual teachers. There was no cinema hall, no nightclub, no live music that was not devotional in character, and no restaurant that served non-vegetarian food, this mandated by local law long before the government had begun advertising Rishikesh as the world capital of yoga.

As Rodrigo stood there, drinking in the majestic sight of the encircling mountains, he heard the sounds of distant mantras carried to his ears by the wind that was gradually dying down, as it did each morning just about the time the town's residents were getting ready to start their day's activities. Feeling his spirits quickened by the music, he decided to make a short tour of the ashram before setting out to explore the town. As he walked through the grounds, it reminded him of an elaborate maze: compound after compound of colorful, two-story buildings wrapped around courtyards of various sizes, each of these crisscrossed by concrete pathways lined with well-tended shrubs, shade trees, and flower beds, one compound snaking into another through covered and uncovered passageways, then suddenly and unexpectedly opening up into a wide, two-acre lawn presided over by the spreading canopy of an ancient banyan tree. Most of the buildings had verandas on both floors where the residents could recline and gaze upon the mountains. The courtyards were decorated with meticulously painted alabaster statues representing scenes from Hindu mythology, carefully labeled in English and Hindi. Here and there a fountain splashed by the side of the statuary. Together with the abundant greenery, they served to lend the ashram a curious air of gaudy religiosity and understated beauty.

When he completed his round, he headed out the main gate and crossed the lane to the ghat that faced the ashram entrance. He entered through the small swinging gate and slipped off his shoes, following the protocol outlined in the pamphlet Bhagavati had given him. The ghat was built of marble—the smooth, polished, off-white slabs so closely fitted together that the ghat seemed to be fashioned from a single piece of stone. The spacious upper landing was some ten meters wide and forty in length. To the right stood a small temple, also made of the same polished stone, and to the left a gazebo. A series of wide steps descended to a lower landing by the edge of the river, followed by two final steps that the water lapped with a gentle scudding music. Some seven or eight meters into the river stood a beautifully sculpted statue of Shiva on a bed of stone and concrete boulders. Five meters high, its brilliant white surface reflected against the pale marble of the ghat. The crescent moon on his forehead glinted in the sun, and the look of profound contemplation on his face seemed so real, so sunk in eternity, that for a few moments he caught his breath and held it before he was aware of what he was doing.

A dark-skinned child was at the bottom of the steps, leaning out into the water. He extended a flower in his tiny hands and dropped it reverently into the steady current while his mother looked on solemnly a few paces away, wrapped tightly in the folds of her sari. Rodrigo took out his camera, adjusted the viewfinder, and took a picture of them. But when he looked up again, he felt uneasy, as if he were profaning a sacred moment by endeavoring to preserve what was both ephemeral and timeless.

From there he headed up the lane that ran alongside the river, walking in the direction of Ram Jhula, slowly enough that he would not miss anything. He saw mendicants and orange-robed sadhus huddled by the side of the lane, begging alms; others were walking along in either direction with their begging bowls and staffs. Several of them glanced toward him with a curious look of disinterest as he passed, then extended their begging bowls a few inches and intoned the ritual *hari om*. There were numerous westerners as well, ambling along in clothes that seemed to be a mixture of hippie and mendicant. He noticed one of them squatting on the ground next to a sadhu, sharing a cup of tea and a bidi cigarette. Bookstores, curio shops, and dingy restaurants with wooden tables and benches lined both sides of the lane. Flies darted around the baskets of fritters and sweetmeats, heedless of the owner's lazy attempts to shoo them off. Near the foot of Ram Jhula, a CD stall blared out Hindu mantras on a boom box, while just across the road pilgrims were ringing bells at a small temple. A little farther on, the shops ended and the path skirted above a large expanse of white sand that reached down to the edge of the graceful waters. On the far side of the river, the thickly forested foothills gradually gave way to taller and taller mountains, the colors shifting from greens to browns to grays as the vegetation became sparser and sparser, until they became blue, snow-capped shapes fading into the distance.

He spied a shaded empty bench overlooking the river and sat down to marvel

at the natural beauty that had so enchanted the British when they began making their summer homes in the hill stations of the Himalayas. How they must have felt like emperors, he thought, when they first came here, knowing that all this was theirs for the taking. Little wonder that so many of them balked at the idea of going home when their years of service were over. Where in Britain could they have found a place this beautiful, this peaceful, blessed by so hospitable a climate? How they must have felt the lure of these tranquil waters sliding underneath the bridge, lulling their minds to rest, and the sight of the mountains behind them, receding toward a sky so blue and so vast that it seemed only fitting to refer to it as the heavens. Yes, Bhagavati was right, he decided. This was the perfect place to begin writing his book.

As he sat and looked at the river, he mused about what it might be like to live in such a place for an extended period of time and write. Proust had spent almost all his productive years imprisoned behind the walls of his apartment. Imagine what he might have done had he been in Rishikesh, resting his eyes on this enchanted scenery, dipping into the springs of memory for his material. Certainly, he would have lived longer and been happier. An immortal work might have been made even richer, if that were possible. It certainly would have been longer.

For the last several years, Rodrigo had taught a class on expatriate writers in Paris in the 1920s, the so-called “lost generation”: Fitzgerald, Pound, Hemingway, Dos Passos, Gertrude Stein—all of them Proust’s contemporaries. The Paris of that time had been teeming with notable writers, not to mention the streams of painters, sculptors, musicians, and dancers from diverse countries who flocked to the city like pilgrims to Mecca, a list that began with Pablo Picasso at the height of his creative powers and ended with Isadora Duncan in the twilight of hers.

“There was a symbiosis between these writers and the city they had adopted as their home, between the artist and his environment,” he had lectured to his students. “By the time that *Swann’s Way* went to print, centuries of cultured aristocracy, revolutionary turmoil, French philosophy, and a blend of architectural styles had conspired to give birth to an artistic explosion that was uniquely Parisian, though its practitioners came from all over the globe. Without Paris, Hemingway would not have become the Hemingway that we know today; nor Henry Miller, the Henry Miller.”

Would Proust then have created such an enduring work of art had he been liberated from his Parisian apartment and transported by Scheherazade’s magic carpet to the banks of the Ganges? Undoubtedly, he reasoned, for Proust still would have been Proust, but the masterpiece he gifted to the world would have been a different masterpiece. It would have been more spacious, less Parisian, exhaling the clear air of these mountains by which its creator would have revitalized his spent lungs. It would have carried in it—hidden perhaps, but unmistakably present—the scent of Himalayan pine, the fragrance of centuries-old incense, the mystic overtones of a culture far older than his own.

As he had stood there in front of his students, exploring the ways in which a writer is shaped by his environment, thus making it the most important of the

conscious choices he can make, he had been dreaming of his own Paris, still unsure where it lay, that as-yet-unexplored territory where he could stoke the creative fires that were sleeping in his dormant soul. There would perhaps be many a Paris for him before he was through, as many as the different currents of his writing necessitated, but first he needed one, just one, before he could call himself a writer, rather than a literature professor who dabbled on the side. As he looked out at the river, he hoped that in some way Rishikesh might become to him what Paris had been to the lost generation, a spark to ignite his literary fire. The university was certainly not the place. That was one thing Beth could never understand, one of many. All she saw were the long vacations and the house in the suburbs. What did she know of teaching full-time to students who sucked your energy and distracted your attention? When had she ever had to go to war with the capitalist machinery that dominated every aspect of university administration and left him with headaches that it took all summer to get rid of? Every morning, she put her easel and her paints into the back seat of the red Dodge Neon he had bought her—a private dig at her loud and outdated apparel—and drove off to wherever her fancy directed her. Or else she took her cameras and spent the day snapping black-and-white photos of the shoppers strolling down Franklin for the Chapel Hill Magazine. Had he ever objected when she took off for weekend or even weeklong excursions to photograph seascapes or the march on Washington or the everglades? Had he ever once mentioned that she was free to follow her artistic dreams because he had struggled for years to establish a secure financial and professional base, starting in graduate school and then working toward his tenure? He had put up the money to have her first photography collection privately printed in a local press and had helped her with the text. And yet she complained that he was suffocating her with his bourgeois lifestyle, that he had sold out to middle-class complacency, that he was stifling her artistic aspirations instead of inspiring them as they had both promised to do years before, that it sapped her will to see him waste his talent like this. Had she forgotten Wallace Stevens? The Connecticut poet had spent nearly twenty years working his way up the Hartford Accident and Indemnity ladder until he became a vice president so he could then dedicate himself to his art without having to expend long hours and precious mental energy trying to make his two ends meet. Could she not have afforded him the same leeway? Granted, Wallace Stevens's wife never appreciated him either. No, Beth had never given him credit for having scratched and clawed to become a respected scholar, had never done anything more than turn up her nose at the regular paycheck and the faculty dinners—in between her expeditions up and down the coast where she stayed in chic hotels and ordered room service on his credit card. The woman could no more understand the writer's quest than a monkey read Shakespeare. And then to betray him like that with a no-talent capitalist because he promised to jump-start her career? It just didn't make sense.

He felt his heart tighten, a residue of the anger he thought he had put behind him. He blinked back the suggestion of a tear and pictured her walking up to

Quail Ridge Books with her no-soul, no-account lover, clutching her chest when she saw his book in the showcase window: *The Venus Transit*, by Rodrigo Arroyo, huge stacks of hardcover volumes on display, each one a weight on her heart. A pleasing sense of triumph eased the constriction in his chest. No great artistic journey is without its obstacles, he thought. This was part of the cross he would have to bear until he made it across his Calvary. He thought of Fitzgerald and Hemingway and how they had folded their personal setbacks into their stories, how their private tragedies had helped to give their work its universal character. He hoped to do the same. Certainly, he had Beth to thank for his being here. It was the disintegration of their marriage and the sight of her on the arm of Raleigh's most prestigious gallery owner that had convinced him to apply for his sabbatical, already several years overdue, propelled by an overwhelming urge to flee the scene of her crimes. How many times had he vowed to himself since then that he would show her? How many times had he envisioned himself coming back from India with a completed manuscript, his passport into the land of the immortals, knowing that it would prove her wrong every time she picked up a newspaper and saw his name in print? It was not the best of motivations, he knew, but it had gotten him on the plane to Paris. After that, a far deeper urge had taken over, the urge to prove to himself that he was indeed a writer, born to the noblest of callings, as he had always told himself he was. He had published a few short stories, to be sure, and a score of critical articles on his favorite writers, enough to earn him the reputation Beth had so facetiously derided, but the simple truth was that he had yet to embark on his true calling. He could not yet call himself a novelist, as he longed to, a practitioner of the one supreme art form that had commanded his undivided attention since the age of ten.

It was Beth, in fact, who had given him the idea for the book he had finally settled on to be his first after numerous false starts. They had been sitting on the back porch one evening in the beginning of June, two years ago, looking up at a sky studded with stars. It must have been close to the new moon since there was nary a whisper of moonlight, nor any hint of the usual haze that tended to contaminate the summer sky in the triangle area. She had bought a telescope the previous summer and set it up on a tripod behind the house. Every night without fail for almost a year she would go out there and spend at least an hour with her eye fastened to its lens, a development that never ceased to surprise him, given her incurable penchant for flightiness and her hitherto total disregard of any aspect of science that didn't impact directly on the creation of art.

"Are you aware that Tuesday is the Venus transit? There hasn't been one since 1882—122 years ago. Imagine that."

She was staring through her refractory lens at the glowing orb of Venus hanging low on the horizon, just above the trees that bordered the back of the property. He was grading papers, silently annoyed at the intrusion on his thoughts.

"Uh huh. And why exactly should I be interested?"

"Well, for one thing, the Venus transit was only the object of the single greatest adventure in astronomical history, that's all. I'm surprised no one's ever

written a novel about it. Maybe if they had, you might consider it worthy of your attention.”

“So enlighten me then, now that you’re such an accomplished astronomer.”

The look she shot him could have scalded milk, but it didn’t stop her from prattling on with a supercilious edge to her voice.

“In 1677, Edmund Halley—you may have heard of his comet; I believe it has appeared in a novel or two—yes, well, he traveled to the island of St. Helena to measure the Mercury transit. That’s the time it takes Mercury to cross the face of the sun. Afterward, he realized that if he could measure a Venus transit, then he could use it to determine the solar parallax—Venus being much closer to Earth than Mercury—and hence the geometric distance from Earth to the sun. Is that clear so far?”

“Okay, I’ll bite,” he said, setting his papers down on the recently oiled redwood planks. “And what would he stand to gain from that?”

“He would then be able to measure planetary distances in units of the Earth’s orbit. In other words, he would be able to accurately map out the solar system. This was the great pursuit in astronomy in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. The only problem was that Venus transits are very rare. The next one wasn’t going to be until 1761. Obviously, he wasn’t going to live that long, so he started working on a plan to send observers to different parts of the globe to measure the transit, the farther apart the better for their calculations. The entire international community of astronomers took up the challenge in the next century and dispatched expeditions to some of the most inaccessible places on earth: South Africa, the Indian Ocean, the South Pacific, Siberia, North and Central America. Remember, this was the eighteenth century; they couldn’t just hop on a plane. There were no five-star hotels where they were going and very few detailed maps. In fact, they had more chance of dying of disease or shipwreck en route than they had of getting back to Europe with their calculations. But that didn’t stop them. They went all over the world, funded by different governments. It was like a joint space program nowadays. With the help of the transit, they were able to measure the distance to the sun as 149.59 million kilometers, almost exactly what it was proven to be in the twentieth century with modern radar techniques and Doppler telemetry.

“There was this French astronomer, Le Gentil. He was sent to Pondicherry, but when he got there, Pondicherry was under siege from the British. The harbor was filled with British warships. He couldn’t get off the boat, so it was impossible for him to measure the transit. But instead of going back, he decided to stay in Southeast Asia till the next transit—they come eight years apart, you see, and then they don’t come around again for more than a century. He didn’t even know if the other astronomers had been successful or not, but he stayed anyways. Talk about dedication to science. So he goes back to Pondicherry seven years later, after exploring Southeast Asia, and on the morning of the transit it clouds over and he can’t see a thing. Poor guy. And that wasn’t the half of it. He had to wait nearly a year to get a ship back, and in the meantime he got sick and almost

died. Then, when he did finally get out of Pondicherry, his ship got wrecked in a storm; he had to find another one. That one also nearly got shipwrecked. In the end, he was gone almost twelve years, and when he finally makes it back to Paris, he finds that his relatives have declared him dead and looted his estate, and the French Academy of Sciences has given away his seat. He did marry a wealthy heiress, though, so at least he died rich.”

“Well, now I can see why nobody ever bothered to write a novel about it.”

And then that look of hers, as if to say, “Why do I even bother?”

But something about the unlucky Frenchman caught his attention. Maybe it was the fact that he was heading for his own shipwreck, his marriage at the point of splitting open on the rocks, and his artistic life floundering in the shallow waters of his comfortable profession. The next day, he went looking on the Internet for information about Le Gentil. He made no mention of this to Beth, of course. It would have only furnished ammunition for her verbal arsenal, and she had enough of that already. The truth was, historical fiction had always been his favorite popular genre, ever since he began reading Edgar Rice Burroughs’s Tarzan books as a child. When he graduated to literary fiction in high school, he was pleased to discover that serious writers favored the genre almost as much as popular writers did. The appeal of such a story was obvious. One need not look any further than Shakespeare. The scope it afforded to play with events already written by history was nearly endless. You could subvert their meaning or bring to light what the outward face of history had hidden. In popular historical fiction, if well done, an entertaining tale was lent added richness by offering the reader a peek into a bygone era, transporting him back in time to sights and sounds that were otherwise barred to him. But in the hands of a literary master, the retelling—or, more often than not, the reinvention—of history could open a window into the hidden meaning of the journey of the human race. It could lay bare the ancient prejudices, whether tacitly accepted or bitterly opposed, that have made us who we are today. There was no doubt that a literary mind had to truly understand the past before it could successfully point to the future. He had often thought of finding such a vehicle for himself. Two of his discarded ideas for a first novel had been modern deconstructions of historical tales. But one roadblock or another had always derailed him before he could effectively get going. Maybe it was just as well. When he first read Le Gentil’s story on the Internet, he was certain he had found the vehicle he had been waiting for. To be sure, it was only the skeleton of a story, but it was enough for him to strike his sails in a sea of possibilities. He saw Le Gentil immediately as a Tom Jonesian figure: the brilliant, good-natured rake and his comic misadventures, his mind so far ahead of his contemporaries that it laid bare the failings no one else could see. Then, as now, it was a timeless theme, ancient follies always being the antecedents of our own.

A flash of ochre distracted Rodrigo from his thoughts. He glanced downward from where he sat and saw a sadhu taking off his tunic by the riverbank. Tall and very dark, the sadhu stepped into the river in his orange loincloth and began splashing water over his dense matted locks. Then he leaned backward and started

floating on his back. The translucent waters lapped around his nearly motionless body, rippling his hair outward in the direction of the current.

Rodrigo had never seen a single bather in the Seine during the three weeks he had spent in Paris on the first leg of his journey. A century of pollutants dumped into the river from upstream factories had freed it of bathers. Here, however, the water was so clear, it was very nearly like looking through glass. The various shades of pebbles on the riverbed were visible even from a distance of twenty meters. He remembered gazing into the murky waters of the Seine and laughed. If ever a seat by the river afforded the poet a chance to look into his soul, as the common conceit had it, then what troubled waters the Parisian poets must have spied in the depths of their unconscious when they sat by the banks of that muddled river. Maybe that had something to do with the dark visions he had so admired in the poems of Rimbaud and Baudelaire without ever managing to feel comfortable in their company. Though he loved the Rive Gauche and his nighttime walks through the Quartier Latin where he had taken a room in a *pension*, pleasantly aware that he was just around the corner from where Henry Miller had shacked up for five francs a night while he poured his soul into the pages of *Tropic of Cancer*, in no place had he felt as at home as he had in the Sorbonne during those weeks of Parisian summer, leafing through Le Gentil's journals, his scientific writings, and all the biographical references to the astronomer he could find in that august institution. The Sorbonne housed the original handwritten copies of Le Gentil's journal that he had submitted to P. Sonnerat in 1781 for publication. An attractive, dark-haired librarian had waited patiently by his side one morning while he carefully admired the fourteen hundred immaculately penned pages. The same librarian had helped him in his research, patiently unearthing information on the intrepid astronomer that he never would have found on his own. It was she who allowed him to photocopy the library's priceless first print of *Voyage in the Indian seas, on order of the king, on the occasion of the passage of Venus across the Sun on the sixth of June, 1761, and the third of the same month, 1769, by M. Le Gentil, of the Royal Academy of Sciences*, a long-winded title characteristic of Le Gentil in his best moments. She had also brought him their best French-to-English dictionary so he could annotate his copy with translations of the unfamiliar words. He must remember to send her an autographed first edition of his own book once it was published.

His book! The monumental significance of the moment did not escape him. Tomorrow he would begin his life's work in earnest. A month or two in Rishikesh would see him well into the first draft. Then he would move on to Pondicherry, maybe find another ashram there to stay in. By the time spring arrived, his first draft would be finished. The second draft would take him back into summer, the draft that he would shop around when he returned to the states. One revolution around the sun. He took a long, deep breath, the pure mountain air as heady as any wine he had ever tasted. Suddenly an idea occurred to him. He rapped himself on the forehead. Of course! He needed something to commemorate the occasion. An image flashed in his mind of the Tibetan Buddhist ritual he had

witnessed in Dharamsala, the day after his long-awaited audience with the Dalai Lama, a privilege afforded him due to his work with the Chapel Hill chapter of Students for a Free Tibet. There had been fifteen of them ushered into the room by a small retinue of ochre-robed, shaven-headed monks. The Dalai Lama was no different in person than he seemed to be on TV: candid, personable, warmly effusive, to the point where it seemed like they had been close friends their entire lives. His Holiness said a few words about Tibet and their efforts to save its cultural heritage. He shook hands with everyone in turn, asking them their names and where they were from and thanking them for their efforts on behalf of his embattled country. Then he gave them his blessing—not from on high, like the pope might have done or a head of state, but more like a kindly, bright-eyed uncle, wishing you all the best from the bottom of his heart. Before they left, he invited them to the Tibetan ritual that would begin the next morning—the Kalachakra Initiation. They all went, along with more than ten thousand other residents and visitors. The Dalai Lama conducted the ritual, decked out in an exotic headdress and ceremonial robes. Rodrigo found it incomprehensible but fascinating: the chanting of mantras in those strange, guttural voices; the clouds of incense; the ringing of bells and the interminable bowing. His head was spinning by the time he left McLeod Ganj that afternoon to catch his bus, tipsy and disoriented from a long day of exotic sights and sounds.

Yes, considering where he was, there absolutely had to be a ritual. Nothing like what he had witnessed, of course, but one of his own invention. His gods were the gods of literature. Why not propitiate them before he started his book? What harm could it do? Who knows, one day a young professor might stand up in front of a crowded lecture hall and start describing how Rodrigo Arroyo had begun the writing of his classic first novel with an offering to the gods of literature in the foothills of the Himalayas. He might even try to point out to his students the influence of Rishikesh in the artist's work.

This last thought brought a smile to Rodrigo's face. Pleased by the idea, he lay down on the bench, crooked his arm to serve as a pillow, and decided to take a short and pleasant nap in the cool, leafy shade. Soon he was immersed in a daydream about his long-envisioned protagonist. He saw the French astronomer approaching the shores of Pondicherry for the second time, seven years after a spate of British warships had forced him to watch the first Venus transit from the pitching deck of a French frigate, despite the letters of free passage that he carried in his breast pocket, signed by representatives of both the French and British crowns. He pictured him standing in the foredeck, watching the same strip of land inch slowly toward him that he had failed to reach when it most counted. He heard him cursing that ridiculous war that had forced him to remain at sea where it was impossible to make any useful calculations. A string of French imprecations singed his ears. There was something defiant in the Frenchman's posture as well, a physical reflection of the undaunted spirit that had convinced him to remain another eight years in the South Asian seas without a moment's hesitation, refusing to accept his defeat at the hands of nature and mischance, and

with it the defeat of his race's efforts to tear down the barriers that stood between man and an unclouded knowledge of the universe he lived and dreamed in.

The Frenchman's vehement defiance was still fresh in Rodrigo's mind when he opened his eyes and bolted upright on the bench. He cursed himself for not having brought his laptop. Not even a notepad! Taking a cue from his soon-to-be-born character, however, he refused to let this little indiscretion faze him. He began reprising the daydream so that it would still be fresh in his mind when he had a chance to write it down. Plunging even deeper into his character's head, he parsed through Le Gentil's memories as he stood on deck, the hardships he had undergone while trying to make it to Pondicherry that first time with the sounds of warfare whirring in the salt air around him, the despair that followed on the heels of the realization that his long voyage from France had proved futile. Suddenly, Rodrigo realized that this was exactly what the opening scene needed. It was the obvious place to start filling in the events of the previous seven years: his decision to stay on and wait for the next transit in defiance of nature and whatever imaginary gods the Orient had thrown at him; selected images from his nearly five years in Mauritius, happily spent pursuing his secondary occupation as a naturalist, cataloguing the local flora and fauna; the failed trip to Manila and his run-in with the Spanish governor; the near shipwreck while trying to make it back to Pondicherry, which had recently returned to French hands. Chronologically, this was all extraneous to his tale, but the reader needed Le Gentil's memories to understand how important this second transit was to him. Without them, the climax would lose its emotional appeal. This was the perfect place to start introducing the forces that had led him to Pondicherry Harbor on this twenty-seventh of March, 1768. Let him review those seven years in brief episodes as his ship approaches the shore, the emotions pouring through his head as he realizes that he is finally drawing near his long-sought goal. Then, and only then, can the reader know and feel what is at stake when he reaches land and the untold story begins, the one Le Gentil left out of his journals, the one Rodrigo had come to rescue.

Tomorrow two quests would begin: his and Le Gentil's, creator and created. He would set out on the road to becoming a great writer—an immortal, if things went as planned—and Le Gentil would reach the shores of South India in his quest to solve the age-old problem of measuring the distance from the earth to the sun, thereby entering his name in the annals of astronomical immortality. They needed each other if either was to succeed, although Rodrigo was well aware that a fundamental divide separated him from his nascent character. Le Gentil's fate was already known to him; it had been two years in the planning. His own fate was much less certain, a fact that did not seem to bother him as he headed back down the Ganges toward lunch.

2

THE FIRST THING RODRIGO was aware of when he awoke the next morning was the sound of chanting floating in through the open window: *Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare*, the words faint but distinct. He listened for a few minutes without opening his eyes, his ears gradually differentiating the sounds of cymbals and hand drums marking time for the voices. The slow, steady pulsation had an almost hypnotic effect: for a few moments, he felt as if he were floating out the window, born aloft by the music to the other side of the river from where it seemed to be originating. Then thoughts appeared and began to drag him back to earth. Fragments of a dream surfaced. He reached for them anxiously but they slipped away, occasioning a brief gust of disappointment. He wondered if he might have lost something valuable for his dream journal. Then he remembered what morning it was. He sat up in his bed, instantly wide-awake. Today he would begin in earnest his journey as a writer, leaving behind all the disappointments and failed hopes of the past years. Today he would start bringing *Le Gentil* to life with his careful brushstrokes, leading him out of the depths of his mind to walk down the alleyways of Pondicherry and through the markets and fields of the world. Today was the dividing line that would separate who he had been from who he was meant to be. And it would all begin with a ritual, a symbolic beginning toward a very real end.

He got out of bed and walked to his second-story window. A slate-gray vapor was rising from the river, making it appear as if the statue were sitting on some Himalayan peak among drifting clouds. The sun had yet to crest the mountains, and the lane in front of the ghat was empty. Nothing was moving anywhere that he could see, other than the silent waters that glided steadily along without ever changing place. The only sound he heard was that of the pilgrims on the other side of the river sending their reverent mantras toward heaven. Heedful of the solitary setting, Rodrigo decided not to waste any time. He spent a few quick minutes in the bathroom and then grabbed the items he had prepared the previous night when he had designed the morning ritual. It was not much: an anthology of American poets; the five novels he had chosen to take with him to India, one each from his five favorite writers; and a single sheet of paper, blank except for

the words “The Venus Transit” written out in block letters at the top. He left his room and made his way to the ghat in the balmy morning air. He walked down to the edge of the flowing water and sat cross-legged on the marble step, thankful that he was alone, accompanied only by the sky, gradually turning blue as the mist thinned, and the mountains that sought their shelter there. He arranged the five books in a semicircle in front of him, touching each one to his forehead before setting it down, as he had seen the Hindus do on a couple of occasions. Then he picked up his book of verse and began intoning the poems he had chosen for the occasion, the spare and sonorous syllables of Wallace Stevens, a poet whom he had struggled with for years, never quite sure if the poet was mocking him for his lack of understanding or simply living in a rarefied air that few mortals ever visit. He began with his favorite modern rendering of an ancient tale, one he felt he finally had the right to claim as his own:

*Under the shape of his sail, Ulysses,
Symbol of the seeker, crossing by night
The giant sea, read his own mind.
He said, “As I know, I am and have
The right to be.” Guiding his boat
Under the middle stars, he said:*

*“If knowledge and the thing known are one
So that to know a man is to be
That man, to know a place is to be
That place, and it seems to come to that;
And if to know one man is to know all
And if one’s sense of a single spot
Is what one knows of the universe,
Then knowledge is the only life,
The only sun of the only day,
The only access to true ease,
The deep comfort of the world and fate.”*

When he finished intoning the eight long stanzas and six pages of this nearly epic poem in his best imitation of the Buddhist monks he had listened to in Dharamsala, he ended his sacred recital with the last stanza of “A Clear Day And No Memories.” He hadn’t originally intended to add this stanza to his long recitation of “The Sail of Ulysses,” but it had felt right the moment his eyes glanced upon the verse just before falling asleep. He wanted to start his journey free of the past—that was the whole point of the ritual—and he could think of no better poem to sum up that fervent wish.

*Today the air is clear of everything.
It has no knowledge except of nothingness*

*And it flows over us without meanings,
As if none of us had ever been here before
And are not now: in this shallow spectacle,
This invisible activity, this sense.*

When he was done with his recitation, he closed his eyes and rested his hands on his knees. Rodrigo had never practiced meditation before, but here, in this place and at this time, it was what the ritual required. He visualized himself floating in the middle of the cosmos and silently began invoking the gods of literature, offering them his obeisance and calling on them to fill him with their sacred fire. His book, and those that would come after it, would be his offering to them, theirs in perpetuity for the gift of making him their medium. For at least ten minutes, he repeated his silent prayers, gazing into the vastness within his mind and trying to feel the presence of the silent watchers who heard his prayers and received his offering and looked into his soul to see if he was worthy of the boon he was asking. Then he opened his eyes and looked straight into the dispassionate eyes of the statue. He did not know what kind of a god Shiva was, or what he represented in the Hindu imagination, but at that moment Rodrigo accepted him as the symbol of all gods—the gods of literature, the gods of creativity, whatever divinity, real or imagined, that humans prayed to and called upon for guidance. He lifted the single sheet of paper, blank except for the title of the book that was yet to be born, and offered it to the flowing waters, as he had seen the Indian child do the previous morning. The page was blank because he himself wanted to be empty, to let the gods of literature fill him with whatever words they willed. He set it in the river to let it merge in the current of all literature, offering it up to the river of life in whose waters his book would take birth and in whose current it would continue to flow long after he had passed away.

When Rodrigo returned to his room, he was still tremulous with emotion from the ritual, which had proved more powerful than he had expected. He spent the rest of the morning in front of his window overlooking the Ganges, staring into his laptop as if into a crystal ball, summoning forth the omniscient narrator that he had chosen as apropos to the period he was describing. It was slow work, almost painful at times, trying to find words to fit the pictures that flitted in and out of focus within his mind. Chapter one began as planned, with Le Gentil standing on the deck of the Portuguese ship that was bringing him back to Pondicherry, cursing the war that had kept him from recording the first Venus transit in 1761. As the astronomer came within sight of land, a surge of exhilaration coursed through him at the thought that the end of a long and trying odyssey was now in sight. The emotions of the moment sent his mind careening back through the previous seven years, revisiting the hardships and the sacrifices he had willingly endured in order to remain in Southeast Asia for the second transit, now little more than a year away, knowing that Venus would not return to visit the sun for more than a century. He had almost completely lost touch with Europe, apart

from a few letters and some unreliable tales that had reached his ears in the Isle de France and Manila. At times, he had lain despondent or angry in his bed, shaken by thoughts of the discoveries that might be passing him by, but he had known that this was part of the price he would have to pay for the greater glory of science and the laurels that would await him when he returned. It had been seven years since he had last seen the only French protectorate in these waters, and then only from a great distance as the missiles of war whirred overhead. Seven long years marooned at the edge of the world by his own volition, years that, nevertheless, had been anything but unprofitable, no matter how far removed he might be from the seas of civilization. Nearly five of those spent on the Isle de France. Five thick, hardbound journals filled with his observations of wildlife that he was sure had never before been studied, much less catalogued, by any civilized scientific eye. Hundreds of carefully preserved samples. When he arrived back in France, he would be bringing a new and unseen world with him, locked safely into his four felt-lined trunks and the folds of his brain, a world that was sure to dazzle the eyes of his compatriots, even if their only window into that world was through the spidery script in the pages of his journal.

One by one, Rodrigo sketched out the fragments that he drew forth from Le Gentil's memory: a shouting match with the Spanish governor, who accused him of being a French spy; his trysts with a Mauritian maiden who came to trust him enough to lead him to the hidden spawning grounds of the soon-to-be-extinct Rodrigues Giant Tortoise; the near shipwreck and near mutiny during the voyage from the Philippines. It was difficult for him to decide just how much of Le Gentil's ruminations to add. Too much and the reader would lose himself in the quicksand of the past, sacrificing his sense of the present moment and the all-important forward motion of the story. Too little and the reader would be just as much at sea as Le Gentil, lacking the necessary incentive to invest in the story. He had taught these concepts to his students in graduate seminars, but it was far easier to point out the adroit strokes of a Thomas Mann or a Gabriel Garcia-Marquez than to make those same brushstrokes yourself with an unformed story and no actual experience to draw upon.

By lunchtime, he had written over five pages, a feat that afforded him no small measure of satisfaction, though it was accompanied by an uneasy feeling that what he had written was far too unwieldy to pass for anything but a very rough draft. Even then, he knew that the gods of literature were smiling their favors upon him. He was on his way, as sure as Ulysses when the Argonaut weighed anchor and set out for Troy. Somewhere his single blank page was surging toward the Bay of Bengal, and in its stead, the gods were filling him with their written words. What was important was not how the journey began, but the very fact that it had. The gods themselves had planted the obstacles in Ulysses's path. It was thanks to those obstacles that Ulysses was able to prove himself worthy of his place among them, as the most immortal of the mortals. By calling on those same gods, those that walk untamed through the human imagination, Rodrigo had assured himself of tests no less trying. He knew he might get discouraged, as had happened with

the Greek hero on the isle of Calypso, but he would not lose faith. Minerva had not abandoned Ulysses and she would not abandon him, even if he had to call her into existence from the archetypal sea that swam within him.

After lunch he went for a short walk, making a note to himself to set aside some time to explore Rishikesh—"field research" was the phrase that came to mind—as well as time for studying Indian culture and Hindu beliefs. It was still monsoon season, the clouds thick against the mountains now, gathering with a rapidity that reminded him of battalions massing for an attack. He returned to his room when he felt the first drops of what proved to be a short but heavy shower and spent the rest of the afternoon navigating through Le Gentil's memories, accompanying him up until the point when his ship was about to set anchor and receive the governor's longboat that was to take him to his destiny. His eyes were tired by then. A long day's work had left him a little tense, but rather than relax, he took the time to read what he had written. As he suspected, it bore little resemblance to the prose of his favorite writers. The language was clumsy in places, stilted in others. The episodes from Le Gentil's seven years in Asia lacked the coherence he knew they would need to bring the character to life for the reader and create that sense of urgency and anticipation he wanted for his protagonist's quest. But the raw material was there. At this point that was all that really mattered. He would have time to shape it later on. For now, he would concentrate solely on getting the story down. At this rate, he should be able to finish the first chapter sometime tomorrow. Then he would move straight on to the second, in which Le Gentil would go ashore and receive his grand welcome from the French governor. The writing would no doubt get better as he got his sea legs, to borrow a phrase that had come out of Le Gentil's mouth a couple of hours earlier. Everything in its time. Somewhere his Penelope was waiting for him, but first he had a sea to cross.

Rodrigo leaned back in his chair and interlaced his hands behind his head. His unfocused eyes rested on the bluish haze hanging above the mountains outside his window. Relaxing now after the day's labors, his mind wandered down well-trodden roads to some of the favorite resting places of his imagination: the official book launching, which he usually visualized taking place in the Times Square Borders, unusually well attended for the work of a first-time novelist; the first magazine reviews—*Publishers Weekly* and the *New York Times Book Review*, of course, followed by the watershed review in the back pages of *Newsweek*; and his most recent favorite: his first interview on national television. He couldn't quite decide which would be better: a seat at Charlie Rose's round oak table involving a tasteful intellectual discussion about the social themes in the book and his primary literary influences, or a satellite relay on *Larry King Live* where he could talk from the comfort of his own living room about whether or not he planned on leaving his teaching gig for the life of a full-time novelist—this only after satisfying Larry's curiosity about the by-now-well-known ritual in front of the Shiva statue. The first would be more literary; biographers might refer to it someday and draw useful quotes. The latter would help sell more books, but as an interview it would be quickly forgotten. In the interest of thoroughness, he

rehearsed them both. Midway through the second interview, the unmistakable sounds of someone testing a loudspeaker intruded on his reverie. He straightened up and peered through the window. Down at the ghat, a group of monks and lay disciples from the ashram were setting up the sound system on the lower landing for the evening arati. Others were covering the marble steps with strips of thin red carpet. He remembered that he had not attended the program the day before, as was expected of guests. It would not do to create unnecessary waves. Semi-regular appearances were definitely in order. Moreover, this was part of his research. It was why he had come to Rishikesh in the first place: to have a chance to immerse himself in traditional Hindu culture without having to rely on the mediation of the written word.

Hurriedly, he closed his computer and got ready to attend the program. By the time he reached the ghat, the steps were teeming with people all the way down to the water. The air was fresh from the afternoon shower. A small group of instrumentalists were tuning their instruments in front of the microphones on the lower landing. To the right of them in a semicircle sat a large group of school-age monks in saffron robes, the youngest of whom couldn't have been more than seven or eight. The swami was sitting on the other side along with Bhagavati and several other Indian women in saris, each with a microphone in front of them. Rodrigo left his sandals just inside the small gate alongside scores of others and found a seat at the top of the steps at the far edge of the crowd. In the meantime, more people continued to arrive, searching for a place to sit. Across the river, the last rays of sunlight faded and the sun solemnly dipped below the horizon. He took a couple of photos, hoping that his camera would catch the fading glory of sunset, and then opened his notebook to add a few descriptive notes. The music started while he was in the middle of a sentence comparing the swami to the Buddhist lamas he had seen in Dharamsala. It was much louder than he had anticipated. He finished the passage with a cursory note about God not being deaf and turned his attention to the scene in front of him.

The music was similar to the other religious chanting he had heard since his arrival in India: harmonium, hand cymbals, and tablas; a syncopated, driving beat; and scores of people singing at the top of their lungs, often skirting a fine line between singing and screeching. The swami, who had a surprisingly rich baritone, was leading the chanting, accompanied by the Indian women seated next to him, their voices shrill by comparison. The young monks acted as a chorus for the traditional call and response. The swami would intone a line and they would repeat it, joined by those in the audience who knew the chant. Everybody clapped time to the music, irrespective of whether they knew the words or not. How could they do otherwise? The beat was hypnotic, irresistible. Rodrigo followed along, his loud, staccato thunderclaps clearly audible amid the controlled, zealous cacophony. He had no idea what the words meant but the tribal pulsation made him feel as if he were participating in a ritual that might be thousands of years old—if it were not for the intermittent static of the loudspeakers. When the first chant ended, he pulled out the brochure from his small

satchel and discovered that the chants were devotional hymns in Sanskrit and Hindi dedicated to different aspects of the Divine, such as Shiva, Krishna, and the Divine Mother. Here and there, he recognized a word from the examples in the brochure, but he needed no translation to understand the devotional fervor taking hold of much of the gathering. By the time the second chant was underway, most people had their eyes closed. Many of them were swaying from side to side, as if intoxicated; some were stretching out their arms toward the statue like a child toward its mother. It was quickly obvious who was a spectator and who was a devotee, a fact that made him thankful he was sitting on the outside of a circle to which he did not belong.

The chanting lasted about forty-five minutes, by which time darkness had fallen and the first stars had begun to appear above the mountains. After the penultimate chant, two middle-aged women stood by the water's edge in front of the statue. They held a large golden platter between them laden with burning incense and camphor that sent fragrant plumes of smoke into the air. As the music started up again, they began tracing slow, solemn circles with the tray, their eyes never wavering from the flames. The audience joined in for the singing of the final hymn, a steady, dirge-like chant that rose and fell like a boat making its way toward the horizon over a gently rolling sea. Rodrigo regretted that he could not understand the words. Again he glanced at the brochure and saw a picture of the ritual and a short explanation. The song, the brochure explained, was a hymn of praise and reverence to the Divine Mother in the form of the goddess of the river.

As the hymn continued, his eyes drifted to the deepening sky. A vague sadness began to rise like an invisible mist from the shadowed mountain peaks. In the midst of all these people, at the end of a sustained outpouring of devotion and reverence, he began to feel alone and adrift, disconnected from the world and its inhabitants. He noticed an emptiness in his stomach that could not be confused with hunger. The sky, slowly filling up with stars, grew cold and unwelcoming. It was a feeling he was familiar with, an old melancholy that in the recent past had come dangerously close to despair, but he was determined not to give in to it, despite the uneasy suspicion that not even India was far enough to get away from himself. He turned his eyes back toward the arati and made a conscious effort to focus his attention on the sonorous syllables rolling like a wave toward the shore.

When the chant ended and the crowd began to disperse, he opened his notebook and took up his best line of defense, the bulwark of words raised upon the empty plain of a blank page, a vantage point from which he could see his thoughts in relief and thus vanquish their power to creep up on him unnoticed in the night. With a few firm strokes of his pen, he began describing the arati, and along with it, the sadness and loneliness that seemed to trail behind it. By doing so, he gradually started to put some distance between himself and his emotions. As the people filed out, a sense of stability slowly began to return. A young monk, who was rolling up the carpet on which he was sitting, stopped just short of him and made a smiling, impatient gesture. Rodrigo moved aside and then sat back down

on the marble step, almost without breaking contact between the paper and the ball of his pen. He continued writing under the soft illumination of the lights from the temple on the upper landing, drawing strength by connecting himself to an unbroken line of great writers who had kept journals of their experiences, thoughts, and feelings, and turned those journals into literature.

A few minutes later, a shadow fell over his notebook; Rodrigo was interrupted by a female voice with a New York accent.

“Ever the writer at work, I see.”

He looked up to see Bhagavati smiling at him. The ghat was almost deserted now, apart from a few young monks sweeping off the marble steps and the white folds of her sari, ghostlike against the night.

“How did you enjoy the arati?” she asked.

“Very much; it was... very powerful.”

Bhagavati nodded. “Good choice of words.”

“I wish I could have understood the songs, but even then, I could still feel a little of what everyone was feeling when they were singing. Devotion, I guess you might call it.”

Bhagavati laughed softly. “That is what we call it. The Sanskrit word is *bhakti*. In Hinduism, *bhakti* is considered the best and the quickest path to God. The path of work and the path of knowledge, *karma* and *jnana*, are the other two principal paths, but the scriptures say that in this age of Kali Yuga, the age of spiritual darkness, those two paths are too difficult. Few people have the stamina or the mental clarity to be able to follow them successfully. But *bhakti* is easy. The mind naturally becomes concentrated when it’s filled with love. When we sing to the Lord and invoke his name through the sacred mantras, it becomes easy to feel that love. We automatically feel connected to the Divine Presence. Do you know Tagore?”

Rodrigo shook his head.

“He was a poet and a musician, among other things. He has one song that explains it better than I ever could.”

Bhagavati paused for a moment and then began reciting the lyrics in a slow, lilting cadence, no longer looking at Rodrigo but at the sky behind him.

“I know that only as a singer I come before thy presence. I touch by the edge of the far-spreading wing of my song thy feet which I could never aspire to reach. Drunk with the joy of singing I forget myself and call thee friend who art my master.

“Beautiful, isn’t it? For me it sums up the whole essence of devotional singing.”

“That is beautiful. Who did you say wrote it?”

“Rabindranath Tagore. T-a-g-o-r-e. It’s a song from his best-known book, *Gitanjali*.”

“I’ll have to read him.”

Rodrigo got to his feet and the two of them started walking back toward the ashram.

“Tagore’s poetry is a great place to start if you want to appreciate the beauty of Hindu thought. He was not only a great poet, you see, he was also a great saint, a great yogi. He used to meditate for four hours every morning before he started his day. What I love most about Tagore is that even though virtually all his poems are about some aspect of spiritual experience, you mostly wouldn’t know it unless you were doing spiritual practices yourself. You might think they were about nature or worldly love. It’s a little like Hinduism. You can understand it at different levels, depending on where you’re at. The arati, for instance. You wouldn’t know it, but every gesture, every word has a special spiritual significance. There’s a whole philosophy behind it. Some of the Hindu rituals may seem a little strange at first, especially to a westerner, but they’re actually a kind of symbolic language that the ancient sages used to describe the ultimate reality and our relationship to it. Once you understand them, you begin to see that they actually teach you how to tune yourself to the Divine, even before you realize that that’s what you’re doing. It’s a wonderful process—amazing, really. Everything in Hinduism has a way of pointing us down the path toward realization. The more you get into it and the more you understand, the more fascinating it becomes. At least that’s how it was with me. That’s why I’m still here after ten years. No better place on earth, as far as I’m concerned.”

“Really?”

“For a spiritualist? Absolutely. But Swamiji can explain these things far better than I. He has a gift for making even the most complicated philosophy seem simple. If you’re interested, there’s a group arriving from South America in a few days; Swamiji’s going to give a private talk for them about Hindu practice, arati, and so forth. You’re welcome to come if you like. It might even help you with your book.”

“Absolutely. I’d love to.”

“Good. We haven’t fixed the time yet, but I’ll let you know once we do.”

After Bhagavati disappeared into the office, Rodrigo took a seat on a bench in the courtyard outside the dining hall. Dinner was not due to be served for another half hour. He rummaged in his satchel for his notebook, but instead of opening it right away, he took a few minutes to collect his thoughts. Just in front of the bench there was another statue of Shiva. The great god was sitting atop a mountain peak on his favorite tiger skin. Water was running off the mountain and splashing down into a small pool. Rather than being immersed in contemplation, Shiva was looking out on the courtyard, just as Rodrigo was doing. What Rodrigo saw as he scanned the grounds reminded him of a sylvan bower from an ancient India that he had never seen but which must have seemed familiar to the god looking down from his alabaster mountain. The statuary glimmered in the soft light, looking like ancient Hindu gods walking through their celestial gardens. It was a balmy evening, the stars appearing and disappearing as thick clouds drifted slowly across the sky. A few people were moving along the path. The only sounds were the low murmur of their muted conversations and the steady splashing of the water. It was certainly beautiful, enough perhaps to still

his heart had he come here at another time and under other conditions. But on this evening, he could feel the loneliness pressing against him, haphazardly buried emotions stirred back into his blood by the pulsations of the music. For a few moments, he felt envious of Bhagavati's calm assurance and unquestioned convictions. He thought of Sartre's famous quote: "To believe is to know you believe, and to know you believe is not to believe." He wondered if this applied to Bhagavati or the swami or any of the closed-eyed, swaying devotees who were able to lose themselves in their devotion the moment the swami's basso voice rose up above the tablas in the religious fervor of his ancestors. Were they aware of the absolute and unquestioned nature of their beliefs? Were they in any way capable of stepping back and examining them with the dispassionate eye of an impartial observer? Did they have the courage to see those beliefs for what they were: artifacts of the human imagination? Or would that knowledge have stripped them of their devotion? "Every man is condemned to freedom," Sartre had said. Had anyone ever summed it up better, the unremitting loneliness that seemed to be the fate of any truly aware human being? In the final analysis, every human being is alone in this universe, he thought, face to face with the uncomprehending and the incomprehensible. Most of us do whatever we can to avoid staring down that cold fact. We run to our ideal lover and huddle up against the cold, as he had done. But in the end the cold bears down upon us, implacable and unfeeling. And if we reach for knowledge as a stanchion, or as a last resort, or even out of the sheer necessity of knowing, then we pay the ultimate price: We are condemned to awareness of our fate.

He opened his notebook and again made his best efforts to stave off his loneliness by forcing it into a prison of words from which it would be hard pressed to escape. "Was that what Beth and I were trying to do?" he wrote, his pen strokes far more confident than his words. "Trying our best to ward off the cold?" In the last months, there had been a touch of desperation about it, as if the closer they got physically and the more friction they created, the more the heat they generated would create an illusion of warmth. But no matter how much they clung to each other at night, during the day the cold seemed to seep back into their bones, and from there no amount of effort could keep it from their tongues. "So how much didn't you write today?" he remembered her saying one evening. "A whole chapter, part of a chapter? No, let me guess: The critical scene in which the heroine pledges her undying love to the hero after saving his ass from mediocrity. I'd share with you all the photos I didn't take today, but I have to get into the darkroom and develop the ones I did. Sorry." As usual, she sashayed straight from the kitchen to the converted maid's room under the stairs that she used as a darkroom without waiting for an answer, mostly because there never was an answer forthcoming. If she would have waited there for him to fetch a notebook and write down what he wanted to say, then maybe they could have had a truly creative argument, something straight out of *The Taming of the Shrew*. Perhaps then the raising of the bridge could have been arrested. The river that rushed between them could still have been crossed. But he could never come close to matching

her gift for caustic repartee. So he tried to pass off his silence as indifference, drawing it about him like a cloak to keep out the chill that followed her across the tiles. It never worked. He just slid deeper into the loneliness, and so did she. At night, they tried to claw their way out with passion, but whatever temporary relief it afforded could not withstand the glare of daylight. And so it had gone, month after month, until he found himself waiting for the dinner hour in the courtyard of a Hindu ashram while she was getting ready to open up her lover's gallery for another day of unsold paintings. Two blind travelers floundering in the dark. But were they so different from everyone else on this boisterous planet, whipping its way through an icy void? Were they not simply defending themselves as best they could from the onslaught of the unknown? That was what he wished to know as he perused the half smile that never lifted from the Shiva's blue-tinted face. Is it not the best anyone can do, to glide downward to darkness on extended wings? So much better than flapping furiously in a futile effort to stave off the inevitable, turning an elegant descent into a frantic, frightened fall. Could this be what the ancient Hindu sages had realized? Might not their colorful rituals and sonorous mantras, their philosophy and their symbolism, be nothing more than a concerted and fundamentally artistic effort to turn a fateful, fiery crash into a beautifully choreographed swan dive? Certainly Proust had something of this in mind when he chose the name "Swann" for his most important character. Unlike his fellow Parisians, bickering and backbiting their way toward the grave, surfeiting themselves on bourgeois prejudices and self-infatuation, Swann glided through a lifetime of disappointments and tragedies into the velvet shroud of a painful and premature death with the elegance of one of nature's most beautiful creatures. It was an artistic life, a life well lived, despite all its tribulations, despite the fact that its only certainty was that of a cold grave. Perhaps all this talk of devotion and enlightenment was just the ancient Orient's way of pursuing an elegant life by freeing it from the burden of consciousness, from the knowledge that we are alone in the universe. Was this so different from the artist's quest? Was this not the ultimate goal of Stevens's Supreme Fiction? As long as we are alive, there must be an art of living. Anything less would be unforgivably pedestrian. No matter how profound Sartre's philosophy, he was never a great artist. The darkness is still the darkness, Sartre might have argued, and he would have been right, but perhaps the flight is more important than the ultimate destination. He must take a closer look at what the Hindu sages had to say. Would they not have wanted human beings to live well, above all other things?

Rodrigo clicked his teeth on the end of his pen as his thoughts gyrated in the night air. He glanced at his watch and saw that dinner was only a couple of minutes away. He would have liked to follow his thoughts further to see where they led, but he knew he did not think as well without a pen in his hand and even less well on an empty stomach. He padded into the dining hall in his bare feet after parking his sandals just outside the entrance and helped himself to a generous serving of rice pilaf and curried vegetables. The dining hall slowly filled up as he ate, but rather than listen to the low conversations, he opened his notebook beside his

tray and busied himself with stray thoughts about the following morning's scene. Tomorrow his astronomer would go ashore; he would have his first real look at India. But after that, only the muse knew where the book would take him. A few ideas popped into his head and were scribbled down, but nothing solid enough to distract him from his dinner.

He was still musing over where his story might go when he drifted off into sleep that night. His last thought, however, before he crossed the border into the land of dreams, was not of his astronomer or where his adventures might lead him. His last thought was of the arati. He heard again the lilting melody, but this time his somnolent mind was pondering the words he had read in the brochure, wondering who might this goddess be whose hair flowed over her shoulders and down the mountains in rivulets that joined together to stream across the plains of Northern India until they emptied, serene and mighty, into the Bay of Bengal. *Jai Devi Ganga Ma*, "victory to the Divine Mother in the form of the river Ganges." To whom was offered all this adulation? This was the last thought that played in his mind before he was carried off by the eddies of forgetfulness.

3

R ISHIKESH
8/9
7:40 AM

Moments ago I was in the middle of a dream so vivid it feels like it's still going on, and so unusual I can barely believe I dreamed it. I can still feel the goddess's eyes on me, imprisoning my heart with her fathomless glance, telling me without words to be patient, to trust that she is guiding me, whether I see her or not. And yet, at the same time, here I am, sitting in front of my computer, moments after leaping from my bed, my forehead and neck covered in sweat. It is still relatively cool on this Himalayan morning, but in my dream the weather was oppressively hot. And still the sweat pours, like these monsoon rains that come like clockwork almost every afternoon. But I am forgetting my dream journal discipline. Let me first write down all that I can remember, before it disappears.

In the dream I was a priest, a Hindu priest. I was in a temple, kneeling in front of an ornate stone statue that was almost as big as I was. It was an idol of some Hindu goddess, a fantastic creature that commanded every drop of my attention. She was jet black from head to toe and had a bright red tongue sticking out, like a flame in the night, and four outstretched arms—not unusual for a Hindu goddess, from what I gather. In her upper left hand she held a bloody sword. I'm pretty sure she was holding things in the other three hands as well, but I can't quite remember what they were. She was decked out with an exotic headdress, something similar to the tall crown I saw the Dalai Lama wearing in Dharamsala during the Kalachakra Initiation. Around her neck she wore a garland of skulls that hung almost to her feet. All in all, quite fearsome looking.

The idol was standing on a marble slab in the center of an intricate

diagram. I remember now that I had drawn that diagram with some colored pastes when I entered the temple. It was a set of triangles of different colors, one inside the other. Around the triangles was a circle ringed with flower petals, then another circle, then a set of concentric squares. After I drew the diagram, I knelt down and offered the idol some food on silver plates: some lemons, I believe; some chili peppers; and some dark green leaves. I remember distinctly that I did this with a sense of reverence, which is what most surprises me, for I have nothing of the devout in me. She was real to me, not simply an idol but someone—or something—with whom I had had a long and profound relationship. I lit some incense and started waving it around. After that I offered her flowers—roses maybe, at least they were red. Then I started chanting in a low voice with a peculiar rhythm. It was some kind of mantra that I knew almost as well as I knew how to breathe. The words were so familiar, it seems like I should be able to remember them even now, but I can't quite catch them. Anyhow, I must have recited this mantra a few hundred times. Of course, dream time doesn't flow at the same speed as real time. I may have only recited it a few times. The point is, it seemed like forever. When I was done chanting, I showered the idol's head with flower petals; then I bowed down and touched her feet. After that I sat in front of her, cross-legged, and started praying. I don't exactly remember the words, but for some reason I was deeply frustrated. I was praying for the goddess's help in this matter—or rather, I was hoping with all my heart that she would be pleased with my efforts and grant me this boon in return. I had my eyes closed at this point (it was a kind of meditation, I guess). And then it happened, without a moment's warning, as if I had stepped through a magic doorway into another world: I saw the goddess appear within my mind, no longer an idol but a living, breathing presence, as if the statue had heard my prayers and suddenly come to life. I guess I was in some kind of trance. She was smiling, like she was happy with me, or perhaps amused. Then she began to communicate—not with words but mentally, as if our minds were linked, only hers was infinitely greater than my own. She was telling me to wait; she had something planned for me; I needed to be patient and let her guide me. When I heard her thoughts, I was filled with a kind of ecstasy, as if I were surrendering to some kind of benevolent cosmic force. Then the vision ended. She disappeared to wherever she had come from—the cosmos, I suppose. I opened my eyes and found myself back in the temple, sitting in front of a stone idol once again. Moments later, I was back in my bed, aware that I was waking up. And yet, I was still dreaming. Part of me was still in the temple feeling the shock of that vision, remembering how the goddess had come alive before my eyes, while the rest of me was lying in bed, knowing it was a dream and that I had to write it down. What a

strange feeling! Like I was alive in two places at once, in two bodies at once. It's gone now, but the thought of it makes me shiver.

Anyway, that's all I remember of the dream, at least its outer surface. There are still some inner details to add. During the dream, I was completely convinced that the goddess was real—strange indeed, since I have been irreligious since my mother died. I was aware that it was a stone idol, but even then I knew somehow that the image was a window to something beyond it that could hear me and respond to my prayers. It wasn't a belief or a hope but rather a kind of powerful certainty, maybe something akin to what the swami and his followers felt during the arati yesterday. There was no question in my mind about her reality. She was the goddess, as real in her incarnation of stone as she was in my vision. The only question or doubt in my mind concerned myself. Would I be able to communicate with her? Would she consider me worthy of her favors? I can still feel the emotions that I felt when the vision ended: exhilaration, because the goddess came alive in answer to my prayers; but fear also—or maybe anxiety is a better word—because I knew that whatever was going to happen would be totally out of my control. She was the puppeteer and I was the puppet, and it had always been that way. Indeed, what other relationship can a man have with the gods that rule our universe and our destinies? That was the feeling I had as I came out of the dream and woke up to my real self.

So, then . . . how do I explain this? I guess the arati must have had a stronger effect on me than I realized. That and the mere fact of being in India, surrounded by an alien culture thousands of years old. Perhaps I should avoid drinking the water. Who knows what these Indian goddesses are like? If they're anything like the Greek goddesses, then I could be in real trouble. Just look at what Ulysses had to put up with with Minerva, what to speak of Calypso. Of course, it may be only in our sleep that the mind is free to respond fully to its surroundings. Either way, this is exactly what I want—what I need—if Le Gentil is going to respond to the heady reality of finally being in India, a land more mysterious than his eighteenth-century mind can possibly imagine. There is no doubt now that this dream journal is starting to bear fruit. Some of this material is sure to find its way into the book, in one form or another. Venus is also a goddess. In a way, Le Gentil has dedicated his life to her—is not science a kind of religion and an astronomer a kind of priest?—and she is playing him like a puppet. Maybe I can work in these allusions as he gets exposed to Indian culture. She can become a nemesis for him as well as an objective, not just a planet or a scientific challenge but a worthy adversary that tempts him and taunts him from the heavens. A bit of the mythic imagination creeping in due

to the influence of his surroundings. East meets West and each leaves its mark on the other.

Rodrigo closed his laptop with a sense of satisfaction. He had gotten down the salient details of his dream in one sustained burst, and if he were right, it would add something new to the book. He had never thought about Venus as a goddess, never considered the possibility that Le Gentil could have a relationship with her based on anything other than the dispassionate eye of a scientist looking out on an icy orb shining from an unimaginable distance, a relationship built on calculations and observations, the cold facts of science. But the hero of his tale was to be anything but dispassionate. He would have read the Greeks and been far more familiar with them than an astronomer from our own time. Would he not play with the idea of Venus as his adversary, especially after that disastrous first transit, personifying her in his mind as a way of entertaining himself or spurring himself on in his quest? Would he not find her much more interesting and challenging in the robes of a Greek goddess, wearing a smile that both enticed him and mocked him? What could be more natural to his eighteenth-century mind, especially the longer he spends on Indian soil where everything in nature has a soul?

Noting that it was almost time for breakfast, he slipped off his pajamas and stepped into the bathroom. As he began his shower, he noticed how fresh the dream seemed. He could still recall the images almost as clearly as if they had been real experiences. This rarely happened. Generally his dreams slipped away moments after he was fully awake, resisting his best efforts to detain them. Since he had begun his dream journal, he had noticed that his ability to recall his dreams had increased, but even then the greater part of his nighttime voyages disappeared into his unconscious within seconds after he stepped away from the computer. This was different. Not only could he still see the image of the goddess in his mind—a living, breathing presence that was only human in appearance, if that—he could still feel the resonance of her thoughts. Something was about to happen, something monumental and unavoidable, subject only to her whims; and though he knew it was just the lingering aftereffects of the dream, he could not entirely shake that feeling. All he could do was remind himself that it was a dream, grist for the writing mill, an opportunity to take those emotions and transfer them to one or more of his characters. Suddenly he stiffened; his eyes lost focus and he became oblivious of where he was, of the water cascading down his back, of the soap waiting to be lathered. This was the challenge! How does one take an emotion from real life—or in this case, dreamed life—and write it into a fictional story with so much authenticity that the same emotion reappears in the reader, brought back to life by the power of the author's words and the magical spell of shared experience? That is the artist's Everest! From what other well could the writer draw the waters of emotion, other than from the well of his own experience broadened by the generous employment of empathy? His thirty-five years of experience was the book from which he must write. His imagination might shape it any way it willed, but at the bottom of that well lay the fruits of

his own living—all of it, dreaming or awake, for better or for worse. It may have been a dream but the emotions were real. They were his emotions, and now they were stored away in his subconscious, waiting to be resurrected at the appropriate moment. As were all his experiences, good and bad, mulching in the fertile soil that would give birth to his creations. A wry smile appeared on his lips. What would Beth say if she knew that at this moment she was busy being converted into fertilizer, pushing up the daisies of his first novel? At least she could say that she had played her part.

The aftereffects of the dream were gone now, turned to ash by a single flash of creative insight. This is what he had been longing to feel, why he had set his sights on becoming a writer: this surge of energy, this flood of life that comes rushing in when one pursues a creative truth down into the caverns of the subconscious. It was not that he had never come across this idea before. But it had been nothing more than that—an idea, a twitching of brain cells that had left no trace upon his life. This was his own blood coursing through his veins, heated to a fever pitch by the flames of insight. Suddenly he could not wait to get back to his computer and write. Take breakfast at a canter and let the adventure continue!

When Rodrigo sat back down at his desk and looked over what he had written the day before, he realized that he was going to have to do a better job of communicating Le Gentil's emotions. The man had spent seven years in the Indian Ocean waiting for the next Venus transit. Seven years away from his family, his friends, his colleagues, his native France. Imagine the emotions that would be running riot in his head as he got set to disembark, knowing that the end of his journey and the goal of his scientific aspirations was little more than a year away. As a writer, he must find those emotions somewhere inside himself and infuse them into his character. He remembered the exhilaration he had felt when the goddess came alive inside his dreaming mind. Le Gentil would be experiencing something similar—perhaps not as acute, but far less transitory. Seven years was a long time to nurse a single hope. There might be some anxiety also, well hidden, an indistinct presentiment that tempers his excitement with its uneasy hue. There is no guarantee that he will accomplish what he has set out to accomplish; subconsciously, he knows that his mission is subject to the whims of nature, of fickle Venus, just as he himself, disguised as a priest in his dream, knew he was subject to the whims of the goddess whose favors he was trying to court.

Working his way backward, he began revising Le Gentil's approach to Pondicherry Harbor, drawing upon the fresh emotions of his dream as a way to see and feel himself into the astronomer's state of mind. Some of these emotions he put into a dialogue with the ship's captain, adding a few important bits of information as he showed the astronomer's excitement bursting through his words. The remainder he put into his character's thoughts. By mid-morning, Rodrigo had reached the point where he had left off the day before, the dropping of the anchor a half league from shore. By this time, Le Gentil was already busy assembling his possessions on deck: the three trunks filled with the naturalist's

samples from the Isle de France and other ports of call; a fourth trunk with his astronomical instruments, diaries, and scientific texts; and three valises with his clothes and personal effects. Shortly thereafter, he spied a small boat approaching the ship containing representatives from the governor's office. He, the first mate, and several ship hands were the first to disembark. It was thus that at nine o'clock on the morning of March 27, 1768, Guillaume Le Gentil set foot for the first time in the land where he would be fated to etch his name into the annals of history.

His first act after stepping on land was to make the sign of the cross. Lifting his eyes above the silhouettes of the mountains far in the distance, he thanked God for his good fortune, grateful for the blessing of having been safely delivered to his destiny. He sent forth a silent prayer to the Maker of the lands that spread out before him, asking him to help him fulfill his purpose in coming here. At the same time, the beauty of the harbor did not escape him. Its pearl white sands traced a gentle curve against the blue lapping waters, lightly striated by the falling shadows of a wide ring of coconut palms. Even when he had worn the abbé's robes as a young man, he had been far more moved by the beauty of God's creation than by the words of praise and of menace that he recited each day in a forced voice during his theological studies. It was perhaps this, more than anything, that had convinced him to spend his evenings observing the heavens rather than adorning the benches of the theological seminary disputing vain arguments.

Satisfied that he had given his Maker his due and received his blessings by way of the spectacle of beauty that presented itself to his eyes amid the balmy tropical air, he moved on to more practical concerns. Judging from the costly cut of his Parisian-tailored waistcoat and his aristocratic bearing, the man who was now stepping out of the elegant open carriage was quite likely the governor, coming to meet the boat. After a whispered inquiry confirmed this, he presented himself to Monsieur Law, Governor-General of all French possessions on the Indian subcontinent, which at the moment was limited to Pondicherry and its immediate surroundings but would not remain so, not as long as the eye of Providence found favor with their efforts and their obeisance, and the French navy finally proved the equal of its infantry.

"Monsieur Le Gentil, savant of the French Academy of Science, I have been waiting a long time to have the honor of making your acquaintance. Your reputation precedes you, good sir."

The governor was a large, affable man with a healthy, well-tanned complexion whom Le Gentil immediately took a liking to. The governor gave orders to disembark the astronomer's possessions with the utmost care and carry them to his offices in the city. Then he invited Le Gentil to spend the day with him at his country estate so that he could get acquainted with the best that French India had to offer. The journey lasted the better part of an hour, during which the governor kept up a lively commentary that did not suffer in the least for the lack of space it afforded Le Gentil to join in, apart from a couple of brief questions that spurred the governor on to even greater heights. It was both entertaining and informative, and even had it not been, he would have forgiven the governor his effluence on

seeing a new face so far from the tides of civilization. It was a phenomenon Le Gentil had met with on a number of occasions these past seven years, though he himself found the company of nature to provide sufficient fellowship and the best of all stimuli for his imagination. Before the hour was up, he had acquired a thorough grasp of the uneasy accord with the British. “Bastards, all of them, except for that Henry Fielding—now he can turn a tale worth a best bottle of Bordeaux—but they rule the seas for the time being, no denying that—a pox on every British warship south of the channel—so until good King Louis empties more of the royal coffers into our shipyards, we’ll just have to live with the devils and like it. It’s enough to turn a young man’s hair gray, though, knowing they could swoop in with their forty-cannon frigates and take back Pondicherry any time they damn well please.” But what most interested Le Gentil was the governor’s intermittent description of the countryside they were passing through—a world of flora and fauna entirely new to him, waiting to be catalogued—and the natives who inhabited it, with their quaint superstitions and their ebony faces that stared out at him from the villages they passed along the way, half hidden among the luxuriant thickets and sculpted rice fields that decorated either side of the road.

Soon Le Gentil could feel his mind divided between the land flowing past his eyes as the carriage rattled down the packed-dirt road and the voice of the governor, bright and effusive in his ear. The governor’s voice spun a lively story in his head, replete with images that ranged backward to the founding of Pondicherry and out across the seas to Europe and the clash of cultures that he had embraced since his childhood, but the scenic pleasure of his eyes was even greater. The love of nature that had given him the brightest of his boyhood memories vied for his attention in a voice infinitely more seductive. His imagination raced far ahead of the carriage, spinning out images of the future: the year he would spend here feasting his senses and filling up his journals, the land by day and the sky by night. It was the renewal of a romance that had its beginnings in Coutances, when his father would take him to the seashore on Sundays after church, where they would wander collecting seashells and memorizing the names of birds from a copy of Buffon’s *Natural History* that his father carried in his satchel when they walked. Every summer they would go off by themselves for several weeks, exploring the hills and forests of Normandy, his father making up for his lack of money with an endless willingness to satisfy the boy’s curiosity about all they saw there. It was a love affair that was still as fresh as his first spring, forty-two years earlier. When his colleagues sometimes remarked that he had never taken a wife because he was wedded to science, or else that he had never really taken off his abbé’s cloak, he would tell them the truth: for him nature was all that a woman could be and more.

Rodrigo leaned back from his computer and furrowed his brow. But wasn’t his astronomer a rake? The imagined one, not the real one, who might have been but in any case had never mentioned women in his journals or his memoirs. What he had just written didn’t fit the image of the astronomer that he had set down

in his character sketch. But he couldn't bring himself to hit the delete key and hold it down until his fancy was erased. Could this be a side of Le Gentil that he hadn't seen before? Odd thought. What he meant was, a side of Le Gentil that he hadn't thought of adding before. He had wanted to give his character a decidedly romantic nature, but might it be that until this point in his life what Le Gentil's romantic predisposition best responded to was nature in its widest sense, not solely limited to a woman's form, even that of a Venus, whatever gallivanting around he may or may not have done when he was not observing the heavens? For his part, Rodrigo admired nature, though usually from the window of a book, but what he was sensing here was a finer sensibility that he had never devoted to nature, though he considered himself a romantic in both the modern and Byronic meanings of the word. His romantic sensibilities had been awakened by the best lyric prose and verse, and by Beth's willowy sensuality that had left him breathless during the first few years of their poetry-laden courtship. He remembered the impassioned journal entries he would pen in the morning while he watched her sleeping figure—Beth never rose before eight and he had to reach the campus by seven thirty to find a parking place and get ready for his eight o'clock class—and the notes that he would append to her easel on pink or blue Post-its, scraps of free verse that he never bothered to turn into completed poems, or aphorisms that he would copy from antiquity and then subvert to immortalize the tangle of her dirty blond locks sprawled across the pillow or the almost imperceptible freckles that hid in her face like grottos on the isle of Capri. Often when he came home, he would find the same Post-it as the subject of a watercolor framed by flowers, or in the center of a black-and-white print that she had propped up against his computer with the scribbled title "Post-it among roses." She would almost always be out when he came back in the afternoon, but the imagined fragrances of these tender missives would buoy his spirits until she came home in the evening to a meal that he cooked and served to her like an offering to a princess. He had even wondered sometimes if he were too much in love to be a successful artist, ceremoniously quoting Balzac's famous quip at the end of another amorous night: "Well, there goes another novel," a facetiousness that Beth did not always appreciate. Yet, no matter how developed his own romantic sensibilities were, they were not what Le Gentil was feeling as he looked out the window at the luxuriant wonders of the Coromandel countryside, though they could have been a close relation, perhaps sisters of different fathers.

For the rest of the morning, Rodrigo worked on Le Gentil's almost rapturous reaction to the vistas passing by the carriage. When he broke for lunch, however, he had a vague feeling that his character was somehow getting away from him. Amorous adventures with beautiful Indian maidens were what he had planned, if the unformed ideas that crowded his mind and his journal entries could be called a plan. Add in some intrigue with the French administration, encounters with wise old Brahmin astrologers who looked askance at his gallivanting about and warned him cryptically about unscrupulous relatives fleecing his estate, and other such spicy dollops, and he would have a modern-day *Tom Jones*, or something

very nearly like it. But would the Le Gentil of his second chapter be interested in those types of adventures? This Le Gentil seemed closer to the original in his passion for science and the wonders of nature, and different from any—real or imagined—in the subtle sensibility with which he greeted his arrival in Mother India. But wasn't that what all great writers had always talked about, that the unexpected was to be expected?

Rodrigo began his afternoon session with Le Gentil's arrival at the governor's estate—though by the astronomer's reckoning it was barely ten o'clock. It was a Sunday. The estate was full of guests who had arrived the day before to enjoy the governor's generous hospitality. Among them was a curate, a jovial, ruddy-faced man a bit younger than himself named Père Le Duc, but there was no sign of a Sunday service. Perhaps the good curate had already said a mass for the penitents before Le Gentil's arrival, to sanctify their day of leisure. As for himself, he was thankful that the ship's chaplain had held a short service just after daybreak from which he had emerged to find a distant coastline hugging the horizon. It was a revelation to find himself in the cultured company of French citizens after fifty days aboard a Portuguese ship, although among them were two Englishmen and a Spanish count who was on his way to Manila, the three of whom spoke near-perfect French. The governor set an excellent table, which the guests enjoyed not only during the early afternoon meal and a late dinner, but at every hour in between, since the governor's servants made sure its stocks of wine, confections, cheeses, and breads were constantly replenished. In the evening, a string quartet played the latest light dance numbers from France while the guests supped, and afterward, a trio of Rameau suites. It was as pleasant a day as Le Gentil had passed in quite a while, highlighted by the plentiful and varied conversation of a group that included not only a curate, a governor, and a count, but a shipwright, the city marshal, the owner of Pondicherry's one newspaper (also its local poet laureate), the four young musicians, a horse-breeder, who was founder of the Pondicherry hippodrome, the dean of the lycée, two military attachés, and a number of wives who had merits of their own, not the least of whom being Madame Law, who had been an opera singer in her younger years with a stout chest to back up her reputation of having been able to shatter glass at fifty paces. And yet, despite the patrician luxuries, the engaging company, and the fine music, Le Gentil could not help but feel that the bright gas lamps in the governor's garden were little more than a desperate attempt to ward off the encroaching darkness, to keep out the alien eyes of a land that would have engulfed them had they let down their guard, even for an instant. He remembered a story he had heard when he was young of an explorer in an African jungle huddled by his fire, wary of the savage eyes that watched him from behind the dense foliage, unsure whether they belonged to man or beast, or which he should be most afraid of. India, he knew, was still largely an unexplored continent, apart from a certain number of British, French, and Portuguese enclaves, almost all of them clinging close to the safety of the sea. It was inhabited by a mingling of races that all claimed to be far older than

his own. Its jungles boasted of elephants and tigers, some of which had made their way to European zoos, and other creatures that might yet be mythological, though his people had once thought that of elephants when the tales of these mythic beasts first reached their ears. Its towns and villages filled the holds of British ships with the finest ivory, whiter and smoother than porcelain and a thousand times as strong, a host of aromatic spices and perfumes that befuddled the senses, and enchanted jewels that ignited the greed of the crown heads of Europe. The sky above his head was the same sky that reflected its impassive beauty on the spires and cathedrals of Paris, but the world outside the walls of the governor's country estate was one that few men with his color skin had ever seen, and one which he might never see again once petulant Venus finished her transit across the sun and the billowing seas carried him and his eight years in the Indian ocean back to French waters. For all that he appreciated the governor's welcome and the ease with which he had passed the day in the fellowship of his countrymen, it was that world he now had his sights set on. What did Venus see as she gazed down on the Indian subcontinent? How many of its secrets would she allow her votive to discover in the coming fifteen or so months that she had consigned to him?

It was eleven o'clock when he made it back to Pondicherry in the governor's carriage, the plenipotentiary asleep beside him throughout the journey, dozed by the goodly port that had comforted his evening. Le Gentil spent the entire journey peering into the night, aware of Venus low on the horizon, teasing him with her soft, almost purplish light. He could hear drumming from a distant village, and now and then he caught the light of small fires among the trees or beyond the rice paddies. India! The name itself was enough to make him shiver. He had finally made it. The thought of the mysteries she would yield up to him lifted his spirits far more than the day's revelry had. The secrets of the earth unlocked by the man who sought the key to the secrets of the heavens.

Rodrigo looked up from his computer and gazed out the window. It was late afternoon now. The light was softening. The sun was edging past darkening clouds toward the tops of the nearest peaks. There was no jungle to be seen, only a stately pine forest winding its way up the mountains until it thinned and evaporated in the higher altitudes, but he could feel India looming nonetheless, as Le Gentil had minutes earlier in the warm forests of the south. The dream certainly had something to do with it. The water and the air had begun to affect him, dropping him in the temple of an Indian goddess while he lay defenseless in his bed. India was getting underneath his skin, and what was underneath his skin was bound to come out his fingers. When he read over his afternoon's work, he was glad for the dream and the overtones it had added to this, his second chapter. Though he felt unsure about the direction in which it was pushing him, the mere fact that he was being pushed seemed like an unexpected boon. This was to be a long journey he was embarking upon. He needed his subconscious if he was to avoid crashing on the rocks when he rounded the Cape of Artistic Aspiration and made his way for home.

He picked up his story the next morning in the governor's mansion in the city. At this point, Le Gentil's journals gave him little to go by. The only thing the astronomer had mentioned about that meeting was that the governor had told him to look for a spot to build his observatory and had promised to send him masons. Rodrigo was counting on his muse to guide him from there, but he was not yet sure what name to give her. Venus belonged to Le Gentil. Moreover, knowing what a fickle dame she would prove to be, he thought it prudent to choose another, more constant source of illumination. He thought momentarily of the Shiva who had presided over the inauguration of his voyage, but weren't the muses always women, and of Greek or Roman descent? Perhaps he didn't need to give her a name as long as he could hear her voice. But at this hour of the morning, that was precisely the problem. It was still dark in Europe and the goddesses of the Mediterranean isles had not yet deigned to put in an appearance. Other than a vague outline, dozens of possible scenes and subplots, and his character sketches, he had no idea what regions his book would travel through between its beginning and its climax—which was exactly how he had envisioned it. He wanted his writing to be a journey of discovery rather than a pre-planned trip to familiar tourist destinations, a prodigious outpouring from the creative fires within that would surprise and overwhelm him before he could give it shape and share it with his readers. The only problem with this, he realized, as he led Le Gentil into the governor's office and found both the astronomer and his host at a loss for words, was that he had no idea where to go next.

He slid his chair out and started pacing back and forth between the door and the window, the two opposite poles of his writer's hermitage, a distance of five meters that he covered with seven carefully measured strides. As he passed by the bed, he thought again of his dream and the direction in which it seemed to be pushing him. Could it be that his subconscious would not be satisfied if his book were merely a tale of Le Gentil's comic adventures in an exotic country during his quest for scientific glory? What if it were intent on adding a further modicum of depth, slanting it more toward his encounter with an alien culture that would work on his psyche and help him to see the world in a different, deeper, richer way? This would not obviate the need for adventure—the book would still need a surface means of capturing the reader's interest—but it would add a more meaningful substrata, flowing underneath the obvious like a subterranean river. A clash of cultures, then, a chance for Le Gentil to examine his core values and those of his race, to call into question the whole Western way of looking at the world. This would present a significantly greater challenge, but it would make for a more substantial book, and substance was what he was after.

The thought excited him. He quickened his pace, trying to catch a glimpse of the possibilities that seemed to appear before him like sails on a distant horizon. He glanced at his watch. Little more than an hour to go before lunch. There was no sense in sitting in front of the computer now. First he needed to settle his thoughts; he could return to his writing later. He needed some sky to help him think, space for his thoughts to roam. The four walls of his room were far too confining for

the rapid flights that his mind demanded. A walk, then, in the open air. Perhaps this was what his muse was waiting for before she would show her face. Instead of going down to the grounds, however, he decided to climb the single flight of stairs to the roof directly above his room. Like most of the ashram roofs, it was a flat concrete slab surrounded by a parapet, about forty meters long and a dozen meters wide, more than enough room for him to roam untrammelled and unheeded. One side looked out over the Ganges; the other kept company with the rest of the ashram, forming part of the outer edge of a small ocean of turrets, parapets, and platforms nested among the palm fronds and the leaves and branches of the larger trees, some of which towered well above the rooftops. As he crested the stairs, he noticed a small troop of monkeys gliding lazily along the parapet at the far end of the building. They looked at him briefly, with a largely disinterested air, and then sat up on their haunches and started grooming one another. He looked up momentarily at the ponderous, bluish-gray clouds that hid the sun and added a note of appreciation for the foresight of nature. It was hot on the roof at this hour of the day, hotter than a Carolina afternoon at the peak of summer, but somehow the veil of clouds and the breeze off the river made it reasonably comfortable, as if he were out strolling by the sea after an afternoon shower.

As he walked, his thoughts fluttered between what he remembered of his dream and the different paths that his story might take. He remembered the implicit faith he had felt for the goddess. If he had still been dreaming, he would probably pray to her now to reveal to him where the book should go next. If he were still a priest, then she would be his muse, the mother of all muses. But fortunately—or unfortunately—he was awake now. Reality, as he knew it, did not work that way. He changed his tack and tried to approach the problem analytically. If he were going to expose *Le Gentil* to Indian culture so that it could clash with his own worldview, then he would need one or more characters who could articulate that culture to him and argue intelligently their point of view when he challenged it. Somebody like Bhagavati, who could speak his own language and yet be a true spokesperson for an alien culture. Suddenly he stopped, opened his eyes wide, and sent a clenched fist soaring toward the heavens. Of course! *Le Gentil* would need an interpreter. Why not make her a woman? Beautiful, young, intelligent, proud of her culture, and out of bounds to him as far as his romantic conquests go. He could add an undercurrent of attraction, grab the reader's interest with the surface of her smile. Brilliant! So then, how to introduce her? Obvious. He asks the governor for a translator to help him with his work; or the governor suggests it, either way. A day or two later, the governor introduces him to the girl and explains why she's by far the best person for the job. Educated in a convent school, from a noble, well-connected native family, fluent in at least two native tongues. . . .

Rodrigo's mind leapt forward to possible scenes and backward to the character sketch that was now pending. Moments later, he took the stairs at a trot and raced back to his computer. When the lunch hour appeared on his watch, he was still typing his notes at a furious pace into a file that he had opened up for his

as-yet-unnamed interpreter. He closed his laptop but brought his notebook with him to the dining hall and continued scribbling as he ate, filling out the character between bites. If she had studied in a convent school, which would explain her fluency in French, then she should probably be Christian, a fact that would win the confidence and patronage of the governor. So she's familiar with Western culture, but she is still proud of her own, though she keeps that pride under wraps. She hides it from the governor and the other French officials, but she can't hide it from Le Gentil, not for long. And this will spur their discussions.

As Rodrigo ate, he was barely aware of the food, though the fragrant spices enriched his senses and made the act of writing even more enjoyable. His mind teemed with ideas, one leading to the other by an unconscious logic, cascading through the landscape of his story, outracing the rapid strokes of his pen. While Le Gentil is busy bedding the native wenches, he can unwittingly and unwillingly be falling in love with her—why not give her a mind the equal of his own, if not better?—and that impels him to actually listen to what she has to say. Through her, he discovers that Indian culture is not all barbaric superstitions and primitive rites. She can lead him into the soul of her people, thereby transforming forever his own soul. But if he were going to go in this direction, he would have to do some serious research. He would have to learn as much about India as Le Gentil does, if not more. This was the challenge. He had the girl but not the thoughts to fill her mind. Though he still had to find a body for her and a name, her thoughts and her words would make her who he now realized she was: the heroine of his tale.

Rodrigo decided to spend the afternoon browsing through the bookstores near the ashram. The closest turned out to be the best. Apart from a small showcase window by the side of the door, all four walls and the two center islands were crowded with books on Hinduism, Buddhism, yoga, meditation, Indian mythology, and so on, thousands of brightly colored volumes that drew him like a moth to a flame. It even had a small literature section to which he promised himself regular visits, as if he were a child with money in his pockets staring down an aisle of candy and cookies. He spent most of the afternoon scanning the titles, section by section, with methodical deliberateness and a great deal of stamina. Those titles that drew his attention, he pulled off the shelf, fingering the pages delicately after an informed glance at the back cover and the table of contents. He sampled the opening pages of several chapters to see how informative, well written, and well researched the book was. If it warranted a second and decisive look, he added it to a steadily growing pile on a low bench at the end of one of the center islands. Otherwise, he returned it to its native spot. When he finished his long sojourn through the titles of the relevant sections, he sat down on the bench and carefully winnowed his bulky pile down to an eclectic selection of twenty books that promised to provide most of the information he would need to make Le Gentil's encounter with Indian culture as authentic as one could hope for in a fictional encounter 238 years in the past. To this, he added one travel book by

a writer who had been on his reading list for the last couple of years, a literary wanderer through the Orient who had just come out with a book about the two months he had spent backpacking in India.

After he safely deposited his trove of treasures in his room, he set out to explore the town. He had already learned that Rishikesh's spiritual settlement was divided into two main enclaves, one on either side of the river, with most of the buildings lying between the Ram Jhula and Lakshman Jhula bridges. On the far side, a reasonably good road hugged the slopes well above the river. It ran past Lakshman Jhula and then wound its way north into the Himalayas. On his side of the river, a smaller, sparsely traveled road fronted the lower, forested hills that began behind the ashram; this road joined up with the river just before Lakshman Jhula, though the pedestrian traffic invariably kept to the dirt-and-gravel path that paralleled the river until it joined the paved road. Almost all the buildings close to the river were either ashrams, temples, or meditation huts, apart from a few shops and restaurants near the foot of either bridge, but the further one got from the water, the more one came across residential dwellings nestled among the trees.

Rodrigo decided to make a complete circuit of the settlement. He began by crossing the Ram Jhula Bridge. From there, he turned left and followed the river past a series of small shops that sold items of interest to spiritual pilgrims—beads, holy pictures, spiritual books—but also Ayurvedic and Western medicines and basic grocery items. After a couple of hundred meters, he came to the Muni-ki-reti taxi stand where he saw some cafés that catered mostly to westerners, just opposite the entrance to the huge Sivananda Ashram. From there he turned right and started walking up the road that led to Lakshman Jhula, resisting the urge to hop in one of the three-wheelers that ran up and down between the two bridges for a one-rupee fare. There were very few buildings along the way, for which he was thankful, since the view was stupendous. To his right, as he walked, the river snaked through its narrow valley some forty meters below, half hidden by the towering pines that bordered the road, its clear waters gliding past smooth gray boulders and stretches of immaculate white sand. The river's swift current trailed wisps of white foam at intervals like strips of tinsel in the goddess's hair. To his left, the forest sloped upward, an endless, undulating series of foothills that seemed to terminate at heaven's door where the distant snow-capped peaks shared their azure tint with the sky whose stately lower regions they inhabited. Behind him, toward the plains, he could see the heavy rain clouds gathering on the horizon, but when he looked in front of him, toward the upper Himalayas, the sky was clear and as iridescent as mother-of-pearl.

As he approached Lakshman Jhula, the buildings reappeared, clustered together. He was soon thrust into a bustle of activity: long rows of shops and restaurants; music blaring from CD stalls; groups of tourists and pilgrims with cameras slung around their necks, peering into the shop windows or eyeing the wares on the hawker's tables; the ubiquitous Internet cafés. To get to the bridge, he had to descend a long, narrow flight of stone steps. Near the bottom, he encountered

a gauntlet of beggars and mendicants squatting by the edge of the stairs, one to a step. Each of them held out his begging bowl to him as he passed, aluminum coins jingling faintly at the bottom of the metal bowls. He fumbled in his pocket for coins and dropped one each in as many of the bowls as he had coins for. When he ran out of coins and saw the angry looks on the faces of the last few beggars, he wondered if he had made a mistake by his unplanned generosity. He quickened his pace and felt better once he stepped on the swaying footbridge, some 150 meters long. The bustle behind him faded into a low hum as he hung suspended high above the river. It coalesced once again into a tapestry of voices when he approached the other side, fed by the pilgrims streaming in and out of the thirteen-story Trayambakeshwar temple that towered above the foot of the bridge like a conical wizard's hat of orange and white.

From there he turned back toward Ram Jhula. The shops quickly petered out and he entered the enclave known as Swargashram, heaven's ashram. Here he saw only small ashrams and hermit's huts half hidden by the trees to his left and an occasional stone pathway leading down to the riverbank to his right. There was no one else on the dirt-and-gravel path. Soon all he could hear was the breeze rustling the trees and the muffled sound of his own footsteps. Dusk was fast approaching. As he rounded a small bend shaded by trees on either side, he caught a glimpse of the Ram Jhula Bridge, perhaps half a kilometer downstream. Not far beyond it, the arati would soon be starting. He quickened his pace. A short ways ahead he heard the sound of low voices. When he passed the next bend, he saw a group of fifteen to twenty people dressed in white standing in a clearing. Only one of them was talking, a diminutive elderly woman in a plain white sari who was pointing through the trees to the river while her companions looked on.

Feeling slightly self-conscious, Rodrigo slowed his pace and walked as noiselessly as possible as he approached the group, his eye drawn by the elderly woman. Her hair was snow white and hung down well past her shoulders. Judging by the wrinkles on her face, she looked to be in her late seventies, perhaps older, but she exuded a surprising air of health and vigor. Her musical, animated voice sounded more like it belonged to a young girl than to a woman of her age. As he was about to pass the group, she said something that made everyone smile. Abruptly she turned around, looked directly at him, and addressed him in Hindi. He froze for a moment, aware that everyone in the group had turned to stare at him. Before he was able to apologize that he didn't speak Hindi, a tall, light-skinned woman in a saffron sari stepped to her side and addressed him in English with a light but distinct German accent.

"The Mother is asking if you are lost."

Rodrigo was startled by the question and even more startled to discover that there was a European in the group. He looked at the old lady, who was now grinning like a mischievous child, but for some reason he couldn't think of anything to say. Again she spoke to him in her high-pitched, musical voice.

"Mother is asking again if you are lost. She says that you should not feel bothered about being lost. It is a necessary condition for being found."

What an odd thing to say, Rodrigo thought as he recovered his composure. “No, I’m not lost,” he said. “I know where I’m going. But thank you for asking.”

The old lady smiled. Crinkles appeared around her eyes. Rodrigo realized that she must have been very beautiful when she was young. She began talking again, while the German woman translated quickly and effortlessly.

“Almost everyone is sure they know where they are going, but that doesn’t stop them from getting lost. If the path were so easy to walk, we would not need a light to guide us in the dark. Where are you from?”

“I’m from America.”

“You have come a very long ways to get here. May the Lord guide you and help you to reach your destination. In the meantime, if you do find yourself lost along the way, remember one thing: The road is always right underneath your feet and it leads in only one direction. God has given you two eyes in the front of your head so that you can look forward, not backward.”

The old woman’s gaze seemed to bore into him, as if she were looking through him to something beyond or behind him that he could not see. He felt his mind grow foggy, his vision hazy, as if he were slipping into a kind of confused suspended animation. When the old woman spoke again, her eyes half closed now, the sound of her voice seemed to be coming through the fog in his mind, as if from an unseen speaker whose distance cannot be determined.

“The Divine Mother has commanded me to give you a message. She says that you will not be able to find her by your own efforts, but do not worry, she will find you. She is walking the path beside you. First make yourself ready to receive her; once you are ready, she will appear. And do not delay. Though she has infinite patience, you have kept her waiting a long time.”

The old woman folded her palms to her chest. “Good luck to you, pilgrim. *Namaste.*” With one final smile, she turned away and started moving down the path toward Lakshman Jhula with the rest of her entourage. Rodrigo stood there transfixed, staring after her, unable to take his eyes from her small, ghostly figure until she disappeared around the bend and the muffled voices of her and her companions faded softly away. It was only then that the fog cleared. He shook his head, as if he were shaking off the aftereffects of a powerful dream. Yet this had been no dream. What had caused him to suddenly become so disoriented in that woman’s presence? What was there in her gaze that had transfixed him so, leaving him rooted to the spot until she passed out of sight? It was said that the holy men and women of India had supernatural powers. He could almost believe it. Undoubtedly, she was some kind of holy woman, out walking with her disciples. Now that his head was clear, he suspected that she possessed a kind of magnetic aura that he had never before come across in another human being. Perhaps some of the power these Indian fakirs were said to possess was the pure, hypnotic force of a powerful personality that attracted disciples to their side and left idiots like himself gawking on the road after a single glance. And yet he had looked into the Dalai Lama’s kindly eyes and seen nothing like this, for all their soulfulness and contagious warmth. What was it she said? She had asked him if

he were lost, and it was clear that she was not talking about whether or not he knew the way to his hotel. He had told her that he knew where he was going? Did he really? Wasn't he just as lost as everyone else, struggling to gain a foothold on this slippery planet? If this were not the case, Rishikesh would not be filled with seekers looking for a magic vial to rescue them from their existential angst. Neither he nor anyone else needed an Indian holy woman to point out this simple fact. It was the human condition and he was a human being. There was nothing more to it than that. You either stood your ground and got the most you could out of your life, or else you caved in and let the emptiness overtake you.

He started walking again in the direction of the ashram. The first couple of stars had already started to appear above the treetops, the blue of the sky now deepening its way to black. He might be lost, he thought, but at least he knew the road he was on, the one he had been waiting all his life to take. It was, as she had said, the one right underneath his feet. Perhaps he had dallied much longer than he should have. He had let too many excuses get between him and his dream of becoming an accomplished writer, someone whose words people would still read years after he was dead. So much time had been wasted in meaningless rituals, the hours slipping through his fingers so fast that he could not account for a fraction of the ten years that had gone by since he had received his PhD with distinction and accepted an associate professorship at the university. Too many mistakes to even bother trying to account for them all, too much heartache to waste time shedding any more tears. But that was all behind him now. He was certain of it, or at least as certain as he could be, even without the two chapters under his fingers as confirmation. There is a difference between being lost and not having any idea where you are going. He would admit to being lost but he certainly knew where he was going. It was only a question of finding his way. Could that be what she had meant by "being lost is a necessary condition for being found"?

He approached the foot of the bridge and thought again of attending the arati whose rollicking sounds he could hear rising above the river, but his encounter on the road had left him in no mood for the revelry of an alien culture. Instead, he turned left and ducked into one of the two restaurants that lay just up the road. He ordered a cup of spiced tea and some savories and climbed the stairs to the empty balcony seats. A young waiter in a white shirt and an old vest brought him his tea and his snacks a couple of minutes later. While he sipped the sweet, pungent brew, he tried to remember the rest of what the old woman had said, her words still tinged with the fog that had stolen over his mind. He remembered something cryptic about the Divine Mother waiting for him, that he would not find her, she would find him. He thought about it for several minutes, brief images of his dream that morning dotting his reflections. Finally he decided that if it did make sense, he was not the person to make sense of it. The only divine mother he knew was the one who had given him birth, with the possible addition of his aunt, her elder sister, who had taken over that role after his mother died when he was twelve. He could still remember the shock of her death after she had battled the cancer for six months, a hopeless campaign that the entire

family suffered with her. He had been there by her bedstead when she died, but he had been asleep. He remembered being swept up in a bear hug by his aunt, her tears wetting his cheeks as she pressed his face to hers. Then his father's hug, his eyes dry but full of scars. Sadness was too delicate a word for what he saw in them. Then he looked at his mother's inert form and realized what had happened. He, too, started crying. He had known that she wouldn't last out the day. Everyone had known. He had been preparing for that moment for weeks, for months even. They all had. But still, when it came, he was not ready for the pain that seared through him like a rusty sword, which, rather than cauterizing the wound, left it gaping open. From that moment on, his life was divided into two halves: the joyous, careless days before she fell sick, in which he could no longer find any difficult memories; and the painful days that followed, those bottomless days that seemed like they would never end. He had escaped into books after that with a vengeance that was almost preternatural. He sometimes liked to say that it was literature that cured him, but the truth was that his mother's absence was an ache that had dimmed but never completely faded. Was that why he had failed so miserably in love, why his marriage was a longer version of the failed relationships that preceded it? They say a man unconsciously searches for the image of his mother in his lovers, and, until he matures out of this infantile and illusory pursuit, he will never find true happiness in his conjugal life. It seemed to him that his problem was that he had never looked for his mother at all, but rather for an image from the books with which he had filled his teenage head to get over the pain of her absence. He couldn't think of anyone more unlike his mother than Beth. Where his mother was constant, she was fickle. Where his mother's feet never left the ground, Beth's feet never touched it.

"Do I remind you of your mother at all?" she had asked him on the plane when he took her to California to meet his father for the first time.

"Babe, you are from Venus and she was an Earthling. She would have died of asphyxiation in two minutes flat had she landed on your planet without a life support system."

"And what the hell does that mean?"

"Nada. I just mean that she was a traditional Mexican-American mom. Family first and family last and in between a steady job and lighting candles during *Semana Santa*. She would never have understood a free-spirited artist who doesn't want to have children before she's forty. She would have adored you, don't get me wrong, but I can just see her rolling her eyes and making the sign of the cross the minute you went out the door. *!Dios nos proteja!* She wasn't one to hang out with artists, my dear."

"But you're an artist."

"Ah, but I wasn't then. Remember, she died when I was twelve. Sometimes I think I got my PhD and my teaching gig just to keep her quiet in the hereafter."

By the time he went away to college, he had begun running from his mother's image, and the still-present loss it evoked, into the arms of whatever free-spirited girl would have him, the more unconventional the better. If he had actually found

someone like his mother, he thought, he would almost certainly still be married, though he doubted it would have saved him from the existential malaise that had not quit him since the moment he began to dimly realize that what he was searching for in books was truth. No matter how far he went in that direction, there was always a nagging suspicion that dogged his steps after he came back to earth from his latest mind-altering literary journey, a suspicion that the truth was, in fact, nowhere to be found. Kick as he might, that dog never left him alone. Whatever classical author he was reading at the moment would seem to him like the wisest human he had ever encountered, especially the further back in time he went. Who could argue with Shakespeare being the wisest of writers? Until you read the ancient Romans and the ancient Greeks and realized that his entire work was one long disquisition on ideas that had already been plumbed to their depths by the best minds of antiquity. And who knows to what extent their wisdom was molded by contact with ideas that had flowed into the Mediterranean from India and China? But even then, no matter how deeply he read, what he ran into at the bottom of all great works of art were questions—the greater the work, the more profound the questions. Was that not what Sartre had been driving at, the realization that staring into the universe was like staring at a question mark of infinite dimensions? Was this not the essence of the long history of the human race? Man goes searching for answers, but in the end all he finds are questions. It was why he found *Steppenwolf* more convincing than *Siddhartha*, and Mann more convincing than Hesse. Mann had the courage to end his greatest works on a question mark. It was this that he considered the hallmark of the race's greatest achievement, its literature: the courage to end the human quest at the place where it begins, with the only answer that a conscientious human being can acknowledge as the truth: I don't know.

Staring into his tea, Rodrigo was aware that he was in the land that historians readily acknowledged to be home to the planet's oldest civilization. If one wanted to come looking for answers, it stood to reason that this would be the place. The road to antiquity did not lead back any further than these mountains whose reflected light cast a faint, silvery shadow over one corner of his little table. Unless you wanted to believe in a mythical Atlantis that had taken the highest wisdom to the bottom of the sea with it, as Beth had claimed to believe ever since she underwent a past-life regression and discovered that she had been—what else!—an Atlantean princess with mystic visions and great artistic sensibility. At least she didn't believe she was from another planet, like some of her friends did—on loan to earth to help raise the consciousness of our otherwise backward race with their otherworldly vibes. He shook the last bit of tea in the bottom of his cup and drank it down. What else had she said about the Divine Mother? That she would find him when he was ready to receive her? It sounded like that line out of *Field of Dreams*: "Build it and they will come." The problem with being the world's oldest civilization was that it had thousands of years of easy answers to lull it to sleep, like a heavy soporific in the water. He could not let himself be taken in so easily. This was a choice that human beings had always

had to face, and most likely always would: accept the easy answers—and there were plenty of them at hand, whether your tastes ran to religion or to science or to consumerism—or take the high road into the mountains and come to grips with the unanswerable questions with nothing between you and the empty sky but your eyelids. And should you choose to keep them open . . .

Rodrigo was beginning to feel more confident now. Perhaps his chance encounter with the old woman was a simple test from the gods to see if he were willing to keep to his road. Minerva dusting off one of her old saris to make sure her acolyte was not getting cold feet. Or else an indication of what was up ahead. Perhaps Le Gentil would have his own existential angst, the natural byproduct of a young culture not yet put to sleep by old answers. The girl challenges that angst with the wisdom of a far older culture that has learned to be comfortable with man's seemingly ephemeral place in this world. Rodrigo reached for his notebook and started scribbling down some ideas. Almost immediately, the ground began to feel solid underneath his feet. The old woman and her cryptic words were soon forgotten. He pictured himself at his writing table the next morning, the mist rising off the river outside his window. The image brought a smile to his face.

As long as he was writing, all was right with the world.