

Prologue

IT HAD BEEN QUITE a game, and the boy was feeling rather proud of himself. He had reached base four times in six tries and had narrowly missed a home run in his last at-bat when his sharply hit line drive caromed off a tree and back to the outfielder. The tying run had scored from first on the play as he slid under the tag with a triple, and moments later he was crossing home plate with the winning run on a grounder up the middle.

As he turned the corner of Wisteria and Vine and headed down the final block to his house, he replayed that long line drive in his head, but this time the abandoned lot was replaced by a professional stadium, the fans cheering wildly as his rocket caromed off the third tier for a grand slam in the bottom of the ninth with two out and the home team down three runs. It wasn't the first game-winning home run he had hit while walking home after the evening pickup game with his buddies, but it might have been the most dramatic.

It was nearly nine and already dark when he entered the house through the back door and deposited his glove and bat in the corner. He peeked cautiously into the empty kitchen. Then, gathering his courage, he headed for the stairs as quietly as he could, hoping that his parents were already upstairs in their room with the door closed, watching TV or reading. His luck, however, did not hold. As he passed the living room, he noticed his father reclining in his favorite armchair, reading his business magazines.

"Isn't it kind of late to be getting home, buddy?" his father said, without looking up from his magazine. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but I thought we'd agreed that you're to be back evenings at eight?"

"The game went extra innings, Dad," the boy replied, trying to keep the dismay from his voice. "It wouldn't have been fair to the guys if I had skipped out with the game on the line. I had the big hit, a triple in the last inning."

The boy's father closed his magazine and laid it down deliberately on the coffee table beside his chair. "And that's supposed to make it all right to get home so late, that you won the game with a triple?"

The boy did his best to appear crestfallen. "No. I'm sorry. I should have paid more attention to the time. It won't happen again, I promise."

His father nodded. "See that it doesn't. Otherwise we're going to have to reconsider letting you go out after dinner to play ball. Isn't that right, Irene?"

The boy turned to find his mother standing at the top of the stairs.

"Absolutely. He's got to learn that life has consequences. You screw up; you have to pay the piper. It's as simple as that. Now get ready for bed, young man. You have school tomorrow, in case you've forgotten."

The boy scurried upstairs to brush his teeth and change for bed. A few minutes later his mother came into his room to say goodnight.

"So, you won the game with a triple, did you?"

The boy grinned. "Yeah. Well, I drove in the tying run with a triple and then scored the winning run."

She laughed and gave him a pat on the head. "Good work, slugger. Just try to get the game over with a little earlier next time so your father doesn't get bent out of shape. You know how he is."

"Don't worry, mom. I will."

"And don't stay up too late reading. You know how groggy you are in the morning if you don't get enough sleep."

She leaned down and kissed him on the cheek, and then left the room, shutting the door behind her.

Once the door was closed, the boy reached down to the bottom of his night table where he kept the book on the San Diego Padres that his father had given him for his last birthday. He had read the book cover to cover many times and could almost recite parts of it by heart, but that didn't lessen the thrill he felt when he read the familiar text and looked once again at the historic photos. As usual, he turned to the second-to-last chapter. Steve Garvey, the boy's all-time favorite player, was about to lead the home team to the 1984 National League pennant. As he looked at the pictures, he could hear the cheering of the crowd, almost as if he were in the stands with the rest of the fans—as he had been one year earlier with his dad for game four. Finally, he turned off the light and laid back on the pillow, still watching Garvey in his mind: striding to the plate in the ninth inning with the score tied five-five and the fans going crazy, the dramatic windmill swing, the collective-stopped breath as the ball soared toward the

stands, the explosion that erupted when it landed. The roar of the crowd was the last thing he heard as he drifted off into sleep, a deafening swell that seemed as if it were never going to end.

The boy's slumber was full of the usual dreams—family, friends, school—until early in the morning when he stepped into a landscape he had never seen before: a yellowed field of course grass on a night when the fog was so thick it threatened to swallow the earth whole. As he looked around, trying to peer through the milky envelope, a strong wind began to blow. It blew stronger and stronger until he felt it lift him up and carry him through the air, as if a tornado had swept down and plucked him up by the shoulders. He was scared, as any young boy would have been, but as he gave himself up to the sensation of flight, an unseen voice seemed to accompany him, assuring him that he was safe, as though a part of him were aware that it was only a dream. Sure enough, the wind began to die down. He felt himself being lowered down gently until his feet touched the ground. The mist began to thin and was soon blown away by a last preemptory gust.

When it cleared, he saw that the insistent wind had deposited him on the bank of a small slip of a river that wound like a ribbon through a dry, desolate landscape broken here and there by a few wind-scarred trees. It was a dark, moonless night, but there was starlight enough to see by. He glanced up and down the river, wondering where he was, until he noticed a dark figure sitting cross-legged on a boulder by the river's edge. As he drew near, he saw that the man was naked except for a loincloth and a necklace of thick, corrugated beads. His eyes were closed, he had long, matted locks that hung down to his shoulders, and his entire body was smeared with ash. When he got within a meter or two, the man opened his eyes and motioned for him to climb up on the boulder and sit beside him. The boy scrambled up and sat down facing the man, who was sitting on what appeared to be a tiger skin.

"Who are you?" the boy asked.

"I have many names," the man replied, his lips curving into a smile, "but you can call me Ashutosh."

"What is this place?"

"Don't you recognize it?"

"No."

The man laughed. "How quickly you humans forget! Look around you. This is not the first time you have been here."

The boy looked around. For some reason, the landscape started to seem

familiar, though he couldn't figure out why that should be, since he had never been there before.

"I see that you are starting to remember. Good. I chose this place to meet you for a reason, so that it might remind you of your purpose. But those memories can wait."

"To meet *me*?"

"Yes, I have been waiting for you. "

"For me? But how could that be? I don't know you."

"Indeed. And that is the crux of the matter. How can you hope to know who you are if you do not know who I am? But we can talk of that later. Now it is time. You have been asleep long enough."

"Time for what?"

"Time for you to learn what I have called you here to learn. Contrary to what you have been taught in the world in which you now live, it is magic that rules the creation. Everything that you see around you has been created by magic, and what I am about to teach you will give you the key to that magic. But before I can teach you, you must agree to two conditions."

"What are they?" the boy asked, his mind suddenly astir with the possibility that this strange figure could teach him how to harness the unseen magic that ruled the world.

"First, you must promise that you will never harm any living being, either by thought, word, or deed. Second, you must promise me that as long as you are in this world you will utilize all your actions for the welfare of others. Are you ready to promise?"

"Yes," the boy replied, his excitement mounting."

"Good. Then repeat after me."

The boy put his hand over his heart, as he did each morning during the pledge of allegiance, and repeated the oaths as the sage instructed him.

"Now, sit as I am sitting, with your legs crossed. Fold your hands in your lap, like this, and keep your spine straight."

When the sage was satisfied with the boy's posture, he closed his eyes, raised up his right hand, palm outward, leaving his left hand, palm upward, on his left knee, and began a slow and solemn chant that lasted for several minutes. His voice had a haunted quality that mesmerized the boy. Every drop of his attention remained riveted to the sonorous but unintelligible syllables that poured forth in a precisely modulated stream from the sage's throat. When the sage finished his chant, he opened his eyes and pulled a soft clump of vermilion paste from a small pouch. He smeared a bit on

his thumb and then pressed his thumb between the boy's eyebrows and twisted it back and forth.

"Now, close your eyes and visualize a point of light at the base of your spine. Surrounding this point is a golden square and around that square, four rose-colored petals..." For the next twenty minutes the sage taught the boy an intricate process of visualization, ending up at the spot between the eyebrows. Then he taught him a secret word—a mantra, he called it—that he was to repeat over and over again while visualizing himself as a point of light merging into an infinite ocean of light. He had the boy practice the technique until he was sure he had it right. Then he told him he could open his eyes.

"Now, listen carefully. I'm going to explain to you the real secret of life, the secret that is not a secret, no matter how well it remains hidden. Just as you can create a whole world inside your mind by thinking, the Creator of this universe does the same. He thinks of a tree and a tree appears. The difference between you and him is that you think the tree is real, while he knows that it is just a thought."

The sage tapped the boulder with his fingers. "This rock we are sitting on, you, me, the sky above us—all of these are just thought waves in the mind of the Creator, everything, from an elephant to a tiny blade of grass. We are all drops in an infinite ocean of consciousness. Do you follow?"

The boy nodded his head. He had never thought about the world in this way, but it seemed to make sense.

"The curious thing," the sage continued, "is that everyone thinks that this is all real, but they only do so because they can't see the person standing behind the curtain who is making it all appear and disappear. Have you ever watched a magic show?"

The boy told him about the shows he had seen on television and the book on magic and magicians that he had checked out of the library. He had even tried a few simple tricks.

"Very good. Then you know that the whole art of the magician is to make the audience believe in the illusion. As long as the audience doesn't know what is really happening, they believe whatever the magician wants them to believe. This world is exactly the same. We think that everything is solid and everything is separate, but that's the illusion. That's what the magician wants us to think. The truth is that there is only one Consciousness; this is all just a magic show in his mind. But if you can go behind the curtain and meet the magician and learn his secrets, then the illusion no longer remains an illusion. And that is the whole purpose of the game. It is a game

of hide-and-seek where the object is to find the Cosmic Magician. And the way to find him, the only way, is by meditating on him. The more you meditate, the closer you get, until one day you and he come face to face. When you do, you will realize that you and he were never separate. You are, and have always been, the one who is creating this magical universe. When you realize this, you will have the key to the magic of creation. Whatever you wish for will be yours. And when that day comes, I will come back and ask you the same question you asked me: Who are you?"

The sage laughed. At that moment the wind started picking up again, ruffling his matted locks. He picked up the trident that was lying beside him, held it upright, and stared intently at the boy with an amused expression on his face, his eyes glowing like two coals in the night. The mist returned and began to swirl around them, thicker and thicker, until the boy felt the wind lift him up and carry him away, the sage's laughter following him as he flew.

Then the boy woke up. For a few moments, he felt disoriented. He rubbed his eyes and blinked as he looked around at his surroundings, startled to see the four walls of his room illuminated by the dim glow of the night-light, his books on the night table, his clothes thrown in a heap on the floor beside his bed. At first, he had the feeling that the scene he was seeing was completely unreal—that this was the dream and that he had somehow fallen asleep. Then he remembered who he was, remembered his parents asleep in the next room and the baseball game that had ended a few hours before. He realized that he had been dreaming, and the moment he realized this he could feel the dream start to slip away from him, the strange image of the half-naked sage and the silver glint of the river growing more and more indistinct with every passing moment. But then he remembered that he had learned something, and all at once it came back to him: the odd ceremony, the oaths the sage had made him take, his enigmatic words about going behind the curtain to meet the Cosmic Magician. He remembered the process with its secret mantra, as clearly as if he had been practicing it for many years. Immediately, almost instinctually, he got up and went to the bathroom to wash; then he came back to his bed, sat down with his legs crossed, and began meditating. The clock on the night table showed four thirty. It was not yet five thirty when he finished, but for some reason he didn't feel sleepy. Rather, he felt alert and full of energy. He got up and went to his desk and opened his books, and he remained there until it was time to get ready for school.

In the days that followed, the boy went to bed each night wondering if he would dream again of the mysterious sage; and early each morning he was met again by the same great wind that carried him to the edge of the river, where the sage was waiting for him with the same burning eyes, more instructions, and a laugh that followed him into his room. On the seventh day the dreams stopped. Though he kept hoping each night that he would return to that desolate but magical landscape, his hope grew fainter with every passing day, until eventually he accepted that the dreams were part of his past. But what he had learned from the sage was part of his present, and he practiced what he had been taught whenever he had the chance: mornings when he woke up, at night before bed, even sometimes before dinner. He took care to hide this from his parents, suspecting that they might not understand—especially since he did not really understand himself. Gradually, his practice became as familiar a part of his daily routine as eating and sleeping. As he started to get good at what was to him a private game, he began to feel a mild intoxication whenever he experienced good concentration in his meditation. Soon he was looking forward to his practice as much as he looked forward to playing ball with his friends. He still wished he could meet the sage again and learn more about how to unlock the magic of the universe, but for the time being he was happy enough just closing his eyes and exploring the new world the sage had shown him.

One night, seeing the light off and thinking her son to be asleep, the boy's mother cracked open the door to his room to peek in on her little angel. She was startled to see him sitting up on the bed, his legs bound in the full-lotus posture, his eyes closed and his hands folded in his lap. She could see that he was meditating, but she couldn't, for the life of her, fathom why, or where he might have learned it. After watching him for a minute or two, she began to feel uneasy, as if she were spying on him, so she closed the door and went back to the living room to tell her husband. Her husband looked up from his magazine and arched his eyebrows. "Meditating? Are you sure? What is a nine-year-old boy doing meditating?"

"I haven't the foggiest idea, Ralph. I'm just as surprised as you are. But he's definitely meditating. There's no doubt about it."

Her husband frowned. "Okay, let's talk to him about it in the morning. Tomorrow's Saturday. I have to go into the office for a little while—this business with HP is really driving me up the wall—but it won't hurt if I go in a little late. We'll talk it over at breakfast. One of his teachers probably showed them in class—although what they're doing teaching something like that in a public school, I have no idea. Maybe it has something to do

with developing concentration so they can study better, who knows, but you can rest assured I'm going to talk to someone about it."

Irene felt calmer now. Ralph was right. Why worry about it until they had a chance to talk to the boy.

When the boy told his parents about his dreams, it did nothing to allay his mother's concerns. Both she and her husband had dabbled briefly with Zen while they were in college. It had been the sixties, and nearly everyone who considered themselves liberal minded had tried meditation at least once, in the same way that just about everyone had tried pot at least once. They still retained something of their liberal outlook, and because of this she felt hesitant to say anything negative to the boy. After all, she thought, it could be a lot worse. God knows, considering the things kids were getting into these days, even kids his age, they should be grateful he was taking this deep end to jump off of. But this matter of the dream, especially the way he referred to the figure in the dream as his teacher, gave her pause for concern about his contact with reality. Even then she hesitated to say anything to him, and Ralph was just as quiet. He had a line from Shakespeare on his desk at the office that he was fond of quoting—"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy"—and it was she who had framed it and given it to him as a birthday present.

Instead, she decided to consult with her elder sister, who was a professor of comparative religions at USC and a specialist in the esoteric disciplines of the East. Her husband wasn't crazy about the idea. He had always considered her sister a few face cards short of a full deck, but he didn't have any better ideas and didn't put up much of a fight. Her sister, to her credit, was considered something of an authority in her field. Her most recent book, *Surfing with the California Masters*, had come as close to best-seller status as one could reasonably expect from an academic study of esoteric movements in the California hinterland, and she had been a guest on regional talk shows on more than one occasion.

One evening Irene invited her sister over for dinner, having forewarned her about her nephew's dreams but without supplying any details. Her sister had sounded intrigued when they talked on the phone, but that was nothing compared to the obvious surprise that showed on her face when the boy described the sage and the initiation process and then steadfastly refused to share any details about the meditation technique he had learned. After dinner the boy went out to play ball, and the three adults retired to the living room with an after-dinner liqueur.

“So, Carmen, is my son going crazy, or is there a rational explanation for all this?” Ralph was smiling but there was concern in his voice. His wife gave him a cautionary look, but she was just as anxious to hear what her sister would say.

The boy’s aunt looked up from the goblet she was holding cupped in her hands, gently rolling the liqueur around in the glass to bring out its aroma. “Michael is most assuredly not crazy, Ralph. In fact, I suspect he may be saner than any of us in this room. What can I say? I’m stunned. Literally. This dream of his was an authentic spiritual experience—and a very powerful one, very powerful. There’s no doubt about it. No doubt, whatsoever.”

Ralph appeared startled by her answer. “How can you be so sure?”

“This is my field, Ralph. This is what I’ve spent my life studying. His description of the yogi he met, the ritual involved in the initiation, the invocatory mantra, the yogi’s teachings—it tallies far too closely to be anything but an authentic experience. Carmen placed her glass deliberately on the coffee table. “First of all, the place is India and the man he described is a Shaivite monk.”

“A what?” Ralph said.

“A Shaivite monk. There are many different orders of ascetics in India, and each has certain distinguishing characteristics. The Shaivites are followers of Shiva. The matted locks, the smeared ashes, the trident, the tiger skin—these are all symbols of Shiva, part of the Shaivite tradition. Shaivites practice Tantrism, and the ritual involved in Michael’s dream was his initiation into Tantric practice. Every detail corroborates this, right down to his reluctance to talk about the meditation process he learned.”

“Okay,” Irene interjected, “so it fits the description of a Shaivite monk. We’ll take your word for it. I don’t really see how that matters so much. After all, he could have seen a picture of a Shaivite monk in a book. What makes you think that it’s not just an ordinary dream that Michael is somehow confusing with reality? It wouldn’t be the first time that a nine-year-old boy overindulged in his fantasy world, you know.”

Her sister shook her head emphatically. “I’m quite sure that if you go through every book he’s ever been exposed to, you won’t come across such a picture. And even if you did, it’s neither here nor there, because there is no way he could have known about that initiation process. I would have known it was a Shaivite monk simply from the initiation ritual itself—leave aside the description. That’s what really surprises me. Even nowadays that kind of initiation is still very rare and very, very secret.

You won't find anything written about it anywhere in any kind of detail. Believe me, I know what I'm talking about. I've gone to a lot of trouble for a lot of years investigating these things, and I tell you, as sure as I'm sitting here, there is absolutely no way Michael could have learned what he learned except from a Shaivite adept. Allowing foreigners or even Indian non-practitioners access to this kind of knowledge has been taboo for centuries—millennia, in fact."

Ralph squirmed in his seat, looking decidedly uncomfortable. He glanced questioningly at his wife. Carmen didn't seem to notice. She took another sip from her liqueur and continued to stare into the glass, even after she resumed speaking. Her voice became softer, as if she were musing to herself rather than addressing her sister and brother-in-law. "Oh yes, it's an authentic experience alright. Quite extraordinary, really. I would scarcely have believed it if I hadn't heard it from Michael with my own ears. For a boy who's not ten yet to be initiated into Tantric meditation by a Shaivite monk in a dream? My word! And in Southern California of all places, nine thousand miles from the nearest practicing Shaivite. It's extraordinary, absolutely extraordinary, and not just a bit ironic also. I've been chasing down these kinds of things from Big Sur to Tibet, and here it happens in my own family."

"But what does it mean?" Ralph insisted. "If it is an authentic experience, as you seem so convinced it is, then why Michael? Why my boy? There has to be a reason. This is not India, you know. It's not Tibet. It's La Jolla, for chrissake!"

Irene fidgeted beside him and put her hand on his shoulder, sharing his discomfort.

Carmen looked up from her glass and stared at her brother-in-law for a moment, glancing only briefly at her sister. "Yes, Ralph, you're absolutely correct. There most certainly is a reason, though I'm not quite sure that I'm the right person to answer that question. My guess—and it's only a guess, mind you—is that the sage in Michael's dream is his teacher from his past life—his guru, I should say—and that it's time for him to begin his spiritual journey again in this lifetime. In other words—now don't freak out on me here—in his last life Michael was almost certainly a Shaivite, living in India, meditating in burial grounds and forests, the whole nine yards. And for him to be initiated in a dream, at such a young age—well, the only possible explanation is that he must have been a very advanced soul when he died. Otherwise this simply could not have happened."

"You expect us to believe—"

“Ralph, please,” his wife said, a pleading tone in her voice.

“Yes, Ralph, please,” Carmen continued. “Don’t be so quick to dismiss what you are not qualified to evaluate. You’re far too intelligent for that.”

She tapped her glass with her fingernail and set it down again on the coffee table. “And one thing more. I’m convinced that Michael has a very special destiny ahead of him.” An edge crept into her voice now as she pointed a finger at her brother-in-law. “As I believe I remember you saying one time, everything happens for a reason. Let him seek his own destiny. He is going to find it, one way or another, but it will be much better, for all of you, if you help him to get there. Or at the very least, if you don’t put any unnecessary obstacles in his way.”

Ralph kept stone quiet, visibly offended. A few awkward moments passed before Irene broke the silence.

“So what do you think we should do then?”

“I don’t think you need to do anything, really. This is between him and his teacher, or between him and his karma, if you prefer. If I were in your shoes, I would just accept it. Try to act as if it were something completely normal, like playing ball after school. However concerned I might be, I would do my absolute best not to let it show; otherwise, it will just make things worse, I guarantee it. And really, you don’t need to worry. He’s a bright boy with a unique destiny. He’ll be just fine. But . . .” Carmen began to rub her chin. “You might want to get a second opinion, so to speak. I can give you the number of an Indian guru who has an ashram in Topanga Canyon. He’s considered to be an enlightened being by people who know about these things. He’ll probably be able to tell more about what’s going on with Michael just by looking at him than I could after a year of research. If anybody in America can give you proper advice, it’s him.”

Two weeks later, Irene and her husband were waiting apprehensively by the living-room window when a black Mercedes-Benz 500 SEL pulled up in front of the house shortly after ten in the morning. Two men dressed in white opened the front doors and stepped out. One of them opened the back door and out stepped an attractive blond in a long white dress, followed by a dark-skinned man with a long graying beard, a receding hairline, and a full-length orange tunic.

“That’s a pretty fancy ride,” Ralph commented. “The guru business must be doing pretty well these days.”

“Please, Ralph, don’t start. Okay? This is not the time.”

“Okay, okay. I was just pointing out the obvious, that’s all.”

“Of course you were.”

Irene opened the door and showed their guests into the living room, where she had set out a pitcher of grape juice and a tray of crackers and cheese slices. She felt awkward at first. Neither she nor her husband had any idea what to expect from this exotic-looking Indian monk and his gleaming disciples, but she was soon put at ease by his effortless charm. Their visitor radiated such warmth and such a profound sense of repose that she quickly felt as if they were having a long-overdue chat with a favorite uncle. He asked about her husband’s business concerns and her classes and listened to their answers with such attention and interest that she nearly forgot about the reason for his visit, until the guru himself brought the subject up. He listened quietly to everything they had to say and then asked if he might have a few minutes alone with the boy.

“Of course, certainly,” Ralph volunteered. “There’s a deck out back with a nice view of the gorge.” Ralph went upstairs and returned a minute later at the heels of a slightly built but strikingly handsome young boy with wavy black hair. The boy glanced curiously at the guru and his entourage while his father introduced them, and then led the guru out to the deck where they sat down on a pair of adjacent lawn chairs that looked out on the gorge.

“So your dad tells me you’re quite a ballplayer,” the guru asked, once they were seated.

The boy shrugged his shoulders.

“What position do you like to play?”

“Centerfield.”

The guru raised his eyebrows. “I see. Important position. A lot depends on the centerfielder. Who’s your favorite centerfielder?”

“Kevin McReynolds.”

“The hometown favorite and a good pick, but if it were my team and I had my choice, I would pick Ricky Henderson. He has better range in the field, which is why he can play so shallow. And he has better concentration at the plate. That’s what makes him such a good clutch hitter. McReynolds has very good range, and he’s a better than average ballplayer. Plus he’s young; he can only get better. But Ricky will come through for you when the game is on the line. Concentration is the key, Michael, not just in baseball but in anything you do. The better your concentration, the better you will be at anything. That’s part of why we meditate, but of course it’s only the beginning.”

The guru now had the boy’s full attention. By the time they began talking

about his dreams, Michael was eager to hear what he would say. He even disclosed things he had kept from his parents and his aunt. There had been questions bubbling up inside him ever since that magical week and no one whom he could ask—until now—and he took full advantage of the opportunity.

As they were getting up to go in, the guru reached out and patted Michael on the head. For a moment the world seemed to grow hazy; his eyes clouded and his mind went blank. Then, just as suddenly, the world cleared. He reached for the chair to steady himself and found the guru smiling and patting him on the shoulder. The experience had been far more than he'd expected, it seemed, though he hadn't really known what to expect. As they walked back into the house, the boy still felt strangely disoriented, but even so, he decided he would ask his parents if he could visit the guru from time to time. He just wasn't sure how to broach the subject.

As it turned out, there was no need to ask.

"I realize how strange this must seem to both of you," the guru told his parents when they went back in. "Such occurrences are simply not part of the Western cultural experience. But I assure you, such things do happen and they are perfectly normal, rare though they may be. Michael is an unusual boy, but I mean that in the best of senses."

Ralph winced as he exchanged looks with his wife. "Then you agree with what my wife's sister thinks?"

"Your sister-in-law is a remarkable person and a wonderful scholar. She's done a lot to make esoteric matters intelligible to the academically trained Western mind. However, in this case, I don't agree with everything she said. It is not Michael's teacher from a previous life that he saw, but what he saw was heavily influenced by past-life memories. It was a dream, and in dreams the impressions stored in the mind can be woven together in the most fantastic of ways. But the source of whatever one sees is the mind itself and its stored-up memories. Nothing can appear in a dream that is not already present in the mind, no matter how hidden it might be. In this case, it was material from his past lives that surfaced, which is not as unusual as it may sound. Past-life memories often express themselves in the dream state, but they are almost always so well disguised that we never recognize them for what they are. What is unusual is the clarity and the nature of his memories. I can tell you for certain that the meditation technique he learned in his dream was the same technique he was practicing in his previous life. It is very unusual for such memories to awaken, but it does occasionally happen with advanced yogis, and in virtually all

cases it happens before they reach the age of twelve. Once the child reaches puberty, those memories become inaccessible—unless and until he attains a high state of spiritual elevation through his meditation practice.”

“I can’t honestly say that I believe in reincarnation,” Ralph said.

The guru nodded his head. “I don’t expect you to, but neither do I expect you to disbelieve it. It is not something that can either be proved or disproved by modern science. I will say, however, that it is the most logical explanation, not only of your son’s experience but of the workings of the world in general, and I’ll leave it at that.” Then he grinned. “Except to add that the reason I talk about reincarnation in such emphatic terms is that I remember my past lives, as does every yogi who reaches a certain level in their spiritual development.”

Ralph and Irene looked at each other for a moment and then broke into sheepish-looking smiles. They talked for a few more minutes about the differences between the Western and the Eastern worldviews, and then the guru invited them to bring Michael around to his ashram whenever they liked.

“There are always certain pitfalls associated with doing spiritual practices without a proper guide,” he told them. “The great sages of the past have always been quite firm on this point. You wouldn’t think of studying classical piano without a proper teacher; meditation is no different. I can promise you that I will look after Michael personally whenever you bring him by.”

Ralph and Irene discussed it among themselves for a few minutes, and Michael was thrilled when his parents accepted the guru’s offer. Ralph’s job required him to spend one or two Saturdays a month in LA, and from his very next trip he started dropping his son off at the ashram in the morning and picking him up in the evening, a routine that would continue until Michael was old enough to drive.

Part One

Topanga Canyon

MUKUNDA OPENED THE FRONT door of the Bungalow and stepped out to savor the freshness of the early morning air. He breathed deeply, drinking in the sweet, heady scent of jasmine and frangipani, the most potent of the flowering shrubs that made the courtyard of Gurudeva's compound an olfactory delight in the spring, when the perfumed atmosphere that enveloped the sprawling Spanish-revival-style ranch house seemed to announce its proximity to heaven. The sky was cloudless, typical for a spring morning in Topanga Canyon, an azure lake that flowed serene and stately over the receding hills until it merged into the distant haze that hung like an eternal backdrop to the City of Angels. Outside the compound walls, the musicians had assembled beneath the shade of the old tamarind tree, as they did every morning at this hour, seated in a semi-circle on the grass with their backs to the gnarled trunk, chanting their way into the heart of the universe while the arriving disciples gathered round, swaying to the hypnotic pulse of the tablas and mridanga. He could hear their low voices singing one of the ashram's favorite *bhajans*, the mystic syllables of the ancient Sanskrit chant rising and falling to the modulations of a harmonium, the familiar sounds muffled by the compound's thick adobe walls but still loud enough to tug at his heart with their rhythmic charm. He glanced instinctively at his watch—still a few minutes to go before he needed to see to Gurudeva's breakfast; time enough to enjoy a bhajan or two before his duty called him back inside.

He ambled up the walkway to the gate and exchanged smiles with the gatekeeper as he waited for him to nudge open the trellised doors. He passed under the stucco archway, crowned with bougainvillea, and paused to contemplate the sweeping expanse of the hundred-year-old tamarind on the other side of the gravel drive, stretching out like a bridge between

heaven and earth. Its vaulted crown towered more than sixty feet into the air, casting a gentle, unbroken shadow across the drive and up the compound walls. Bright yellow flowers streaked with red mingled among its intricately leafed branches, glowing softly in the morning light. This had been the first tree he had ever truly looked at as one living being looks at another—curious, respectful, open to the myriad questions and countless mysteries that such an encounter supposes. He had been nine then, awed by the sheer size of it, conscious of its foreignness in this sparse land of oak and sycamore. He was twenty-seven now and if anything even more awed by this majestic being who lived life to a rhythm so different from his own, a rhythm with stillness as its heartbeat. He had meditated in its shade more mornings than he could remember, looking for that heartbeat, searching for the same stillness inside himself, yet always thwarted in his efforts by the quicksilver in his veins and the dreams that ran him from one day to the next. His heart felt a twinge of sadness, as it verged on the murky shallows that had troubled him in recent months, but then the music slipped past the curtain of his attention and called him from his thoughts. The summons started with the syncopated glide of fingernails on nylon strings; it was followed by a voice—a vigorous, clear soprano that soared above the chords. The voice stirred the cauldron within and the quicksilver leapt from its bubbling froth.

He scanned the crowd until he saw Gita kneeling beside the tablas, strumming her guitar with her eyes closed, her ash blond hair flowing over her loose-fitting cotton blouse like molten gold down a white sand beach. Her voice called the disciples to a chorus of *Hari om, Hari om, Hari Hari om*. Mukunda sang softly along, tapping his thighs with his fingers as if he were playing the tablas, but his eyes remained fixed on the singer's form. He would never admit it to her, but she was his favorite singer. Not Deva Premal, not Krishna Das, not Jai Uttal. Ever since that evening, six months ago, when she had risen from the ashes of his past and materialized in front of the dais at Sunday *darshan*, singing with the ashram band. The sleeveless leather jacket and Rasta braids were missing, but there had been no mistaking her crystal blue eyes and feline grace, the impossible-to-counterfeit remnants of a girl he had once thought of as the anti-yogi, the epitome when he was growing up of everything unspiritual. For a fleeting moment, he remembered their fifth-grade talent show when she had belted out "They Built This City" in an ear-wrenching Grace Slick imitation. He had found it painful to listen to, though he could not deny the talent (his classmates and teachers had risen to their feet in a thunderous,

chair-rattling outburst of applause), but seventeen years later, and about as far as one could get from the smoke-filled bars and all-night raves that had been her usual habitat, her voice was as true as a precision-crafted platinum flute and far richer. She sang as if her soul were joined to the music, soaring heavenward with each succeeding, tear-inducing note. If ever there was a butterfly, he thought, poster child for the possibilities of transformation—

“Mukunda.”

He turned to see Rashmi—short and trim in an organdy sari and as always a tad too earnest for his taste—escorting a young, well-dressed couple up the drive. The woman wore a stylish black gown; the man, tailored slacks and a dress shirt—both noticeably out of place amid a sea of jeans, t-shirts, yogi pants, and tie-dyes.

“Mukunda, this is Jessica and Saul, from Santa Barbara. It’s their first visit to the ashram. Do you think you could give them a quick orientation before Gurudeva comes out?”

Mukunda stiffened, but he did his best not to let it show. For some reason, Rashmi still insisted on treating him like a pliant younger brother, even though he had been Gurudeva’s personal assistant for more than a year now, a position that should have exempted him from such requests. He mustered a dutiful smile and escorted the couple a few meters down the drive so they could talk without disturbing the singers. One look at their faces, however, made him forget his annoyance. Though they were dressed more for a dinner party than for an ashram, they showed the same slightly overwhelmed, self-conscious eagerness that he had seen so often in new disciples. He knew the symptoms and he knew the cause. The thought of seeing an enlightened being for the first time was enough to unsteady the ground on which you stood. There was nothing you could do to prepare yourself for it, no matter how many books you read or how many trails you wandered in the Himalayas with your backpack and your Sherpa. It was the ones who took it all in stride that made him wary. Time had taught him that they were either spiritual tourists, collecting darshans the way some people collected jade carvings and African masks, or else dull as a board.

Heedful of their uncertain smiles, he animated his voice as he explained to them about Gurudeva’s daily practice of going for a walk each morning with a small group of disciples in some scenic spot. These were intimate, informal sessions, he told them, during which the master would chat with his disciples about whatever was on his mind. He would ask them how

their spiritual practices were going, give advice and instruction, tell stories and crack jokes. Going on morning walk was one of the high points in a disciple's life, a chance to pass a couple of uninterrupted hours by the master's side—and waiting outside the Bungalow to see him off or welcome him back was the next best thing. Gurudeva would usually spend a few minutes chatting with the crowd and bestowing his blessings—sometimes as long as twenty minutes, especially if the bhajans were particularly strong that day.

Mukunda explained the importance of guru darshan, how the mere sight of a realized being brought unimaginable blessings to whoever was fortunate enough to have that opportunity. He quoted the same lines from Kabir he always quoted: “If God and guru are standing in front of you, whom should you salute first? You should salute the guru, because it is the guru who shows you God.” He could see the anticipation in their eyes as they listened, likely for the first time, to words that had inspired disciples for centuries, as potent as the day they first fell from the poet-yogi's lips. Taking that as his cue, he excused himself and went back into the Bungalow to check on Gurudeva's breakfast. He would have preferred to stay and listen to the bhajans a while longer, but as usual his duties left him little time for personal preferences.

As he entered the Bungalow, he saw Bhishma still sprawled out on the sofa at the foot of the stairs—his sentry box, as he liked to call it—deep into his surf magazines. Bhishma glanced up momentarily and then buried himself again in his maritime meditations. Mukunda was sure that Gurudeva was the first and only spiritual master in history to have a tank-topped Brazilian beach rat for a bodyguard, but then, as all good yogis knew, appearances were invariably deceiving. Anyone who had seen Bhishma go through his daily martial-arts routine made sure he stepped softly whenever he was within hailing distance.

Mukunda passed the foot of the stairs, where he could hear the TV going up in Gurudeva's quarters, and continued on into the immaculate, ultra-modern kitchen. Everything looked ready. On the counter was a heavily laden silver serving tray with buttered whole-wheat toast, a platter of freshly cut fruit, a glass of fresh-squeezed orange juice, a bowl of homemade yogurt, and several smaller bowls with Gurudeva's breakfast favorites: blueberry-almond granola, roasted cashews, and mixed dried fruits. Ganesh, Gurudeva's short, round, and ever-jovial cook, was humming along to a *kirtan* CD while he lifted the last of the banana-blueberry pancakes off the griddle with a spatula. He glanced over his shoulder at

Mukunda and smiled. “Just the way Gurudeva likes them. Golden brown with almond sauce and maple syrup on the side.”

“Smells great. I hope there’s some left over for us.”

Ganesh covered the plate of pancakes with a silver top. “There’s more batter in the fridge, enough for a battalion of hungry yogis.”

“My man. How about the maple yogurt and blueberries from yesterday, any left?”

Ganesh cocked a finger toward the fridge and turned off the gas flame. “Shall we?” he asked. Mukunda grabbed the serving tray and headed for the stairs while Ganesh followed with the pancakes.

They found Gurudeva in his usual morning mudra: leaning back in his plush recliner with his arms draped over the armrests, the remote firmly anchored in his right hand. He was staring into a state-of-the-art entertainment system with a sixty-inch wide-screen TV and five pro-logic surround-sound speakers. Onscreen the familiar face of CNN’s Peter Arnett was paying homage to one of the leading figures in American politics.

“Take a look at this.” Gurudeva motioned toward the screen with the remote while Ganesh and Mukunda deposited their trays on the teak coffee table and arranged the silverware. His gold Rolex and emerald and sapphire rings—gifts from his more affluent disciples—flashed as he moved his hand, reflecting the light streaming in through the sliding-glass balcony doors. To Mukunda he seemed the perfect image of an ancient Indian sage, with his flowing white locks and magnificent ochre robe. Had it not been for the house, they could have easily been back in the time of the Upanishads, two disciples harking to the words of an immortal *rishi*.

“Look at those fools,” Gurudeva exclaimed, “running after these politicians like they were gods. And what for? For spreading ignorance wherever they go and doing all sorts of nasty deeds when they think no one is looking. If they had any sense, they would avoid them like poison gas. Meanwhile, the Buddhas of the world pass by completely unnoticed. Tell me, Mukunda, when was the last time CNN reported what the Buddhas were up to? Eh? What do you say?”

Mukunda smiled but kept silent. He loved the sound of his guru’s voice, that melodious basso drawl with its lilting North Indian intonation. He loved to watch his movements, every gesture so graceful, so harmonious, so relaxed. The master’s prize piece of jewelry hung from a silver chain around his neck, a gem-encrusted medallion engraved with Sanskrit mantras that had belonged to Krishna, who had worn it around his neck thirty-five centuries earlier alongside the much more famous Koh-i-Noor

diamond, now on display in the Tower of London. Gurudeva had never told him how it had come to be in his possession, but it created an aura about him, a misty presence of centuries past.

The master muted the volume with the remote. He rolled up his sleeves, pulled up his feet into a cross-legged posture, and leaned over the coffee table to sample the different dishes laid out in front of him, attending to his breakfast with a connoisseur's single-mindedness. Mukunda stood on one side while he ate and Ganesh on the other, both ready to anticipate their master's slightest need. As usual, Gurudeva kept up a running commentary while he ate. He told a few jokes, compared Eastern and Western cuisine, and inquired about some of his disciples and the goings-on in the ashram. He ate leisurely, sometimes pausing for several minutes to better tell a joke or finish an anecdote, especially when he needed both hands to talk, which was not infrequent. When he finished eating, he wiped his chin and mouth with the cloth napkin that he had tucked into the neck of his robe, picked up the glass of orange juice, and drained it in one go. He motioned for his two disciples to sit down on the carpet, wiped his mouth again, and dropped the napkin onto the tray. Then he flushed a toothpick from a hidden pocket and began telling a Mullah Nasruddin story while he cleaned his teeth.

Mukunda could not resist a grin. He loved these Mullah Nasruddin stories. They never failed to amuse him, though there was always a message behind the chuckles and the tears. Gurudeva loved to make his disciples laugh and he was brilliant at it. As far as Mukunda was concerned, he was the world's greatest actor, a master of voice inflection and mannerisms, one whose panache and flair for the dramatic extended to each and every encounter with his disciples.

"Once the mullah went to Tabriz to pay a visit to some of his disciples. He arrived in the morning and decided to go straight to the market to break his fast, but when he got there all of the shops were closed, including his favorite sweet shop. Everyone he saw was hurrying in the direction of the Blue Mosque as fast as their feet could carry them. Nasruddin managed to stop one of them long enough to ask where everybody was going. Half out of breath, the man told him that the Sultan of Mashhad, reputed to be the world's richest man, was at that very moment in the square in front of the Blue Mosque; naturally all the shopkeepers had closed their shops and gone to catch a glimpse of the great man.

"This is bad, very bad, the mullah thought. All the shops are closed and it has been hours since I have eaten. Let me see what can be done."

As Gurudeva recounted the mullah's dismay, he added some righteous indignation to his voice and shook his head resentfully. Mukunda exchanged an amused glance with Ganesh, thoroughly enjoying the masterly dramatic touches.

"The mullah decided to go to the mosque himself. When he got there, he saw a huge crowd assembled around the sultan's caravan. Knowing the great affection that his people held him in, and the awe that his august presence generated, the sultan had deigned to step out of his canopied wagon and give his blessings to the crowd. People were praising his beneficence: 'Ah what a great soul he is. How lucky we are to have him among us!' When the mullah heard this, he started laughing in his booming baritone voice. Those within earshot became angry and tried to shout him down. 'Can't you keep quiet, you disrespectful old fool? Can't you see that the sultan is giving us his blessings?'

" 'I can't help it,' he replied. 'This is one of the world's great farces. It gets better every time I see it.' "

As Gurudeva dramatized the shouts from the crowd and the mullah's replies, he changed voices, from rank annoyance couched in a vaguely Persian lilt to something close to a British upper-class accent that reminded Mukunda of John Cleese. Gurudeva's mannerisms were so perfectly suited to what he was dramatizing, and his shifting voices so compelling, that Mukunda had to sit on his hands to keep from clapping. Suddenly Gurudeva lowered his voice and changed tone again, shifting back to the conspiratorial narrator, using his hands for emphasis with every modulation of phrase.

"Two city scribes happened to be standing nearby, and they were deeply offended. They recognized the mullah, whom they knew to be a great fool, and decided then and there that he needed to be taught a lesson. That evening a few of the mullah's disciples gathered together at the house of a local baker to hear some words of wisdom from their teacher. The two scribes also attended. They had prepared a few questions especially designed to show the mullah up in front of his disciples. They waited patiently until the mullah finished his talk and then they pounced. One by one they asked their questions, and one by one the mullah foiled their designs with his clever answers. But they had saved their best for last. 'Have you ever seen God?' they asked, thinking that if he said yes, they would accuse him of blasphemy, and if he answered no, then he would lose face in front of his disciples.

" 'Now it's funny you should ask that,' " Gurudeva had shifted back to

his venerable-yogi version of John Cleese, drawing appreciative chuckles from his two disciples. “ ‘Just yesterday God and I were having a long talk; he told me that two scribes from the city would be paying me a visit and that both of them were guilty of embezzling funds from the government exchequer.’ The faces of the two scribes turned beet red. They had in fact been embezzling funds from the government exchequer; and, as everyone knew, the offense carried a penalty of death.

“The mullah paused while he looked first at one scribe and then the other. Then he said, ‘God told me that he was sending them to me because he was busy with some other more important cases; he was leaving it up to me to determine their punishment. The only problem is that I am also very busy. A knotty problem, indeed. I am considering letting them decide their own fate. What do you two think?’ ”

Gurudeva extended his hands, palms upward, as if Ganesh and Mukunda were the two scribes and he were the mullah asking them to decide their fate. They kept silent, waiting for Gurudeva to finish the story.

“The two men gulped in unison and let out a couple of strangulated sounds that no one could understand. The mullah smiled indulgently. When no words were forthcoming he turned his attention back to his disciples. The next day public notices appeared on the city walls extolling the virtues and spiritual wisdom of Mullah Nasruddin; a small footnote was all that the sultan’s visit merited. Soon afterward, certain funds that had disappeared unnoticed from the government exchequer mysteriously found their way back into the government coffers.”

Gurudeva broke into an impish grin and signaled for Ganesh to remove the leftovers. As was often the case, Mukunda didn’t really understand the point of the story, but he didn’t care. The entertainment was an end in itself. The master could be so charming when he wished to be that Mukunda sometimes had to consciously restrain his smile to keep from getting a facial cramp. As usual, a few minutes with the master had been enough to banish his unruly emotions.

Ganesh scuttled away with the remnants of breakfast while Mukunda stayed to discuss the arrangements for morning walk. It was his job to choose the place and select which disciples would accompany the master. When he first became Gurudeva’s personal assistant—or PA, as everyone called it—he had spent a lot of time trying to find new and interesting places for the master to walk, but he soon found out that Gurudeva was happiest when he rotated between his dozen or so favorite spots, with no more than an occasional novelty thrown in. Mukunda had scheduled this

morning's walk for the hiking trails behind the Griffith Park observatory. It was a good ride from the Topanga Canyon ashram, but it had one of the best views of the city and Gurudeva never tired of going there. That was the easy part. Choosing who would go with him was a different story, a constant headache as far as Mukunda was concerned. A small coterie of Gurudeva's oldest and most trusted disciples had the rare privilege of being able to go on walk whenever they wished; this normally left only four or five additional spots in the two-car convoy. The competition for these remaining spots could be downright fierce. He remembered how he had resented it when Madalasa or Markandeya wouldn't let him go back in the days when they had handled the PA duties. Now he felt the same kind of subtle or not-so-subtle pressure, but being as young as he was, his fellow disciples were far more likely to voice their discontent. To shield himself from their criticisms, he had drawn up a set of fixed criteria—how long since their last walk, how active they were in ashram activities, and so on—and had it affixed to the office bulletin board along with a formal application system. It hadn't stopped him from hearing complaints, but at least no one accused him of playing favorites.

After the brief discussion, Mukunda went downstairs and informed Bhisma that Gurudeva would be down in a few minutes. From the window he could see the master's recently purchased silver Mercedes S320 parked just outside the gate, the latest in his growing collection. He continued outside to double check that everything was ready. As he approached the gate, he could see Sarathi, Gurudeva's personal driver, standing outside the passenger door of the Benz, assiduously wiping the side-view mirror with a cotton cloth. Quick-witted and easygoing, Sarathi doted on the cars he drove like an over-protective parent. They arrived in front of the master's gate freshly washed every morning, glistening with a sleek wax sheen that he seemed to be constantly polishing. As Mukunda passed under the archway, Sarathi gave him the thumbs-up. Both cars were in position and ready to go. The devotees had formed a tight ring around the two cars and down a good portion of the drive that led from the house to the main entrance. The musicians had left their seats beneath the tamarind tree and were now standing by the side of the master's car, stoking the devotional fervor with their pulsating rhythms. Some of the disciples were dancing with their arms raised to the sky, stepping from side to side and tapping the big toe behind the heel in the traditional kirtan step. Others were dancing free form, many of them with their eyes closed, carried away by the moment.

Markandeya and Madalasa, Gurudeva's senior-most disciples, were standing just outside the gate. Mukunda signaled to them, and they entered the courtyard and took up their positions outside the Bungalow door to escort the master to his car. Leela was already waiting in the courtyard, her eyes focused on the doorway as if the world for her would not exist until the master stepped through it. The three of them would go in Gurudeva's car along with Bhishma, as they usually did. The others who had been selected for this morning's walk were waiting near the BMW, ready to jump in once the master was inside the Benz.

His mental checklist complete, Mukunda relaxed and surveyed the scene. His gaze came to rest, as it often did these days, on Gita. She was singing in inspired abandon, her eyes closed, guitar strapped over her shoulder, leading the chant that would welcome Gurudeva to his car. He still found it difficult to get over the transformation. La Jolla's foremost teenage rebel, the queen of grunge rock and illicit drugs, thumbing her nose at the system every chance she got—and now here she was, about to go on morning walk with an enlightened master. How many times had he heard his folks discuss the grief she was causing her poor suffering parents? If anyone had told him then that one day she would be bringing tears to the eyes of the devotees with her devotional singing, he would have questioned their sanity. But karma was a strange animal. It made paupers of kings and turned sinners into saints. He thought back to that darshan six months ago when he had seen her sitting with the band and wondered if his mind were playing tricks on him. After he had escorted Gurudeva back to the Bungalow, he had gone out to see if he could catch her before she left. He found her waiting for him outside the Bungalow gate. His astonishment must have been graven on his face, because as soon as she saw him she said, "Well, you look like you've seen a ghost. Am I that scary?" It wasn't fright, of course; it was shock. They took a seat under the tamarind tree, on a crisp fall night studded with stars, and she started telling him the story of how she had turned up in his Topanga sanctuary after years of running in the opposite direction, while he looked at her as if the road she'd traveled had twice circled the earth after winding up the stone steps from Hades. By the time she finished her story, the moon was beginning its slow rise above the canyon, adding a golden shimmer to Gabriela's already golden tresses. Like everything about her, there was nothing ordinary about what she'd gone through to get here. She had survived things he had only read about or seen in movies, and somewhere along the way her lifelong passion for social justice had transformed itself

into a hunger for something she couldn't put a name to, but which led her slowly but surely into the world of spiritual ambition that raised its banners on the Coast of Dreams. As she began her fledging pilgrimage from one spiritual group to another, wary of charlatans and disdainful of the plumes of escapism that seemed to sully the New Age sky, she had wondered if she would see him in one of those events, if he were still sequestered in his ashram in the hills. Then one day she got a call from Kamal asking her if she'd be interested in singing backup on what turned out to be an ashram CD. When Kamal told her about the ashram one afternoon at the studio, her intuition went off like the warning light in the control room. She told him about her old friend and was not surprised to learn that he was living there. A few days later she accepted Kamal's invitation to sing with the band at Sunday darshan, knowing that the look on Mukunda's face when he saw her would go down with the best of her memories.

Smiling at his own memories, Mukunda looked again at Gita and was surprised by a flash of crystal blue. She had her eyes open now and was looking directly at him, as if she had caught him at his thoughts. He hoped his embarrassment didn't show. Fortunately, he was rescued a few moments later by a shout that went up from the crowd: *Gurudeva ki jai, Gurudeva ki jai*, victory to Gurudeva. He turned and hurried back to the Bungalow, where the master was standing in the open doorway in his elegant one-piece ochre robe, orange ski cap, and mirrored sunglasses. His hands were folded to his chest as Leela knelt down and devotedly slipped on his sandals. Markandeya put a conch shell to his lips and blew a long sustained blast that momentarily silenced the chanting. Setting down the conch, he opened an umbrella to protect the master from the still-weak sun, and Gurudeva began his stately march up the walkway to his car, where the thronging disciples had taken up a new chant, the one they traditionally sang from the time the conch shell blew until the moment the master's car disappeared out the gate: *gurudeva sharanam, sharanam gurudeva*, we take refuge in the guru, the dispeller of ignorance. Markandeya and Madalasa walked on either side of the master, with Bhishma and Leela flanking them and Ganesh pulling up the rear, carrying two thermoses with chilled juice and water, a couple of clean towels, and some light refreshments packed in a thermal shoulder bag. As Gurudeva passed under the archway, the chant softened to a whisper. Sarathi opened the rear door of the Mercedes and stood stiffly with one hand on the handle, hidden behind the same model sunglasses as the master. Gurudeva paused by the open door and started conversing with the crowd, looking around from face to face with

his charismatic smile, calling on several disciples by name and recounting a short anecdote about the Buddha's first sermon at Sarnath. Mukunda smiled as he noticed the couple from Santa Barbara struggling to shoulder their way toward the front, straining to hear what the master was saying, their earlier decorum entirely absent now that the master was in full view. It was a promising sign.

Finally, Gurudeva gave the crowd his blessing and climbed into the Benz. Markandeya and Bhishma got in on either side of him. Madalasa and Leela squeezed into the front seat next to Sarathi, who eased the car down the drive toward the main gate with the BMW and its allotted passengers following close behind. Many of the devotees ran after the car, jockeying to catch a final glimpse of the master, until the car exited the main gate and turned right onto Topanga Canyon Boulevard.

Once Gurudeva was gone, the crowd quickly dispersed. Most of the disciples wandered off in twos and threes and fours toward the Buddha Café or the ashram cafeteria. For Mukunda, however, it was going to be a working breakfast. He caught up with Rashmi and Ganesh, and the three of them went back to the Bungalow for their meeting. Mukunda and Rashmi laid the kitchen table while Ganesh heated up a skillet and prepared some fresh pancakes. Once the pancakes were on their plates, they settled into a light conversation, content to enjoy their meal before they took up the pedestrian details that awaited them.

"The kundalini's going to be jumping at this retreat," Ganesh remarked buoyantly as he dove into his breakfast with the steadfast gusto of a hungry man. Mukunda knew he was probably right; he also knew that it didn't matter much to Ganesh whether or not he felt that tickle in his spine. He was content to cook for his guru, to enjoy his food, and to tend to the hundreds of potted plants that spiced the veranda with their pleasing scents and made Mukunda feel as if he were in a jungle every time he looked out his bedroom window. Ganesh spent his days doing exactly what he loved to do, and he did it, moreover, while living at the center to which all paths led: the inner sanctum where the echoes of an enlightened master traveled down the banister at night and crept into the kitchen where he worked. But then, Ganesh also rolled on the ground in ecstatic trance during big kirtans when the energy swirled like an incipient hurricane. Mukunda would have given anything to feel his kundalini jump like that, but he had grown used to seeing other disciples fall to the ground or dance in wild abandon while he attended to his charismatic master and felt nothing, just a windless sea and empty sails. Even prim, oval-eyed Rashmi, whom

he rarely caught smiling, had her moments when the heavens opened: she was describing one of those moments now as she reached for the maple syrup. On and on she went as the last of the pancakes disappeared into her maundering mouth: how she had seen Gurudeva turn into Lord Shiva at the end of Sunday darshan a few weeks earlier; how light had poured out of the master's third eye and straight into her heart. The fervor in her voice and the tremulous excitement that radiated from her face made Mukunda long for the privacy of his room and the solace of a good book. Unfortunately, this was not an option. He forced himself to smile and nod appreciatively, and consoled himself with the thought that their meeting would soon come to his rescue. Not that he was jealous. He was glad, in fact, that someone was enjoying the spiritual waves that had left him stranded on the beach. But it was tiresome to be reminded all the time that what he most longed for in life—spiritual experience—was being handed out free of charge to everyone it seemed but him. It hadn't always been this way, and that only made it worse. There had been a time, not so long ago, when he'd been sure that he was one of the privileged few who would reach the shores of illumination in a single lifetime. For years he had found meditation easy, and whenever he had his doubts, Gurudeva would assure him that his future was already ordained: he had been born a yogi, and a yogi he would be. But somehow in the last couple of years the well had begun to dry up. His practice had grown mechanical, the respect he enjoyed among his fellow disciples had become a disquieting burden, and even the healthful balm of Gurudeva's smile could only sustain his spirits for short periods of time. When he remembered the times when his mantra had led him to the edge of an interior ocean where the silence was more beautiful than music, where clouds of understanding decorated the sky, he could see that the certainty that had once filled his life was gone. Those experiences were merely memories now, faltering images fading into a growing mist that made him question whether they had truly been as profound as he had once taken them to be, or whether the industrious hands of self-indulgence had built them up from molehills into mountains. His present (and his present now stretched well into his past) was a low tide in a marshland, obscuring the horizon with its murky vapors.

He was relieved when Ganesh reached for a folder that was lying on the counter and pulled from it a couple of typewritten sheets with his suggestions for the retreat menu. Mukunda helped Rashmi ferry the empty plates and bowls to the sink and shied her away when she volunteered to help with the washing. From there the conversation slipped into a pool of

mundane details: lists of what to purchase and where, how to divide up the *seva* volunteers for food prep, how much extra staff they would need, a long discussion on desserts, the ubiquitous questions of how to avoid going over budget. Mukunda felt himself on firmer ground now, glad for the chance to escape his thoughts. When he was done with the washing, he lent his attention to the few administrative details that required his input and trusted the rest to Ganesh's expert hand. Ostensibly, Rashmi was in charge of the ashram cafeteria, and she did fine when it came to the day-to-day affairs of running the collective kitchen, but all creative matters were still handled by Ganesh, who had trained her and still watched over her like a doting uncle, though he was a good ten years her junior. Outside the window, Mukunda could hear the sharp twittering of sparrows darting among the ordered battalions of hanging plants. He leaned back in his chair and sought the marbled streaks of blue that appeared in the spaces beyond the twisting stems and dangling, many-shaded leaves. While Rashmi and Ganesh bent their heads over the array of papers in front of them and pointed at figures and nodded, his mind drifted out the window and into the future. He pictured himself in the meditation hall, seated on the platform to the left of his guru, as insubstantial as a glint of cloud on a far horizon. In front of the stage he could see bright currents of energy coursing through the disciples, their bodies twisting like live wires flashing blue and white sparks as they jumped. He wondered if this might be his time to feel heaven's lightning in his spine, if he were finally ready, or if he would just continue to sit there: transparent, weightless, to the point where he could walk through himself and never feel his step.