

Milk, Rice and Ten Rupees

The road curls around the corner like a cat's tail; a strip of tar running along the mountainside like a black felt pen outline. We rumble on, hiccupping at potholes and moving shiftlessly with the swerve of the jeep. The journey has been long, punctuated by playing cards and naps. Now, Mom cranks up the music. "Piano Man" blares from the speakers, we sing along to Billy Joel, flailing our hands and clutching our chests to every crescendo as per classic road trip ritual. Seven years ago, my parents felt an insatiable urge to build and own a house in the Himalayas and have been tediously piecing it together ever since with floors from Thailand, windows from the Baltimore, chairs from the shop we passed on our way up, the one with the dangling wooden ornaments on the front door. Their third child, a piece of art perched on the hip of a majestic easel, a culmination of childhood dreams and adult goals. We visit the cottage a couple times a year, on occasion we bring guests and drive up with a convoy of cars holding infants, toddlers, grandparents, employees, bosses, partners –business and pleasure, all rumbling down the same road, along the cat's tail.

Snow capped mountains protrude like shark's teeth from beyond the horizon. With mist dancing around the brows of the summits all year round, shielding them from mortal eyes, it must be the "abode of the Gods" the locals believe. Though, villages dot every hill and mountaintop with tiny winding roads like pieces of discarded spaghetti. The area around is rural, the closest town a couple of hours away

from us. I breathe in the thick mountain air, hoping to clear my cluttered mind. My phone lies lifelessly in my lap, the lack of connection allowing me much needed escape from an impending conversation. Too tired to lend cognitive strength to another break-up, I try to stop thinking about it. The road adjusts as the mountain terrain shifts ahead of us, the jeep tilts upwards and our backs hit the seats. I sit with my younger sister and two tiny cousins, who have not piped down for a single moment since we began our journey. My cousins, ten and six, tumble around me inside the car, giggling and squeaking in high-pitched American accents threatening to keel the jeep over with their relentless energy.

Pine scented wind sighs in through my mother's open window as she sleeps in the passenger seat. My dad hums privately as he maneuvers the car with one hand, watching the scenery shifts as we cross over to the other side of the mountain. I float in and out of sleep, listening to the road and car bicker over traction. The road goes from tar to dirt and we dive down towards the private compound, the jeep rocking as we fight hard to keep all four wheels on the ground. My eyes close just as Dad hollers, waking everyone to announce our arrival. Excitement ignites in the kids' eyes as they perch at the edge of their seats, clapping and chanting, no longer groggy from their naps. I feel a curious vibration against my ankle and reach down to find my phone gurgling with notification alerts on the floor. I sigh.

We dine as night falls elegantly, each cottage, hemmed with a delicate fringe of carved wood, retreats into the shadows. Under the dark sky we sit around a fire counting stars, the taste of smoke and

burnt sugar on our tongues – a rare incident for us, visiting from New Delhi. *Maasi, Maasa*, Mom, Dad, cousins and sibling huddle together against biting cold. The cook, Ramdev, a local, sits with us, conversing eagerly with whomever cares to listen. He talks in broken *Hindi* about the latest happenings in the area – a leopard was spotted on the dirt track to our private compound, he reports. My mother starts and glances wide-eyed at my father. He waves away the comment and proclaims his trust in the lamps and fences around the compound. The little boy jumps up with glowing eyes and gallantly announces he will capture the mighty leopard, then turns and sprints into the house, brandishing a marshmallow spoke. Giggles bubble around the campfire circle. The cook recedes into a deeper corner of the porch, I push in closer after him. Ramdev nods his head furiously at Dad, insisting that he saw the pugmarks with his own two eyes. He lowers his voice to stay out of earshot, there must be a spirit on the property that's luring the animal, he insists. I attempt to chug the lump in my throat. Leopards are rarely seen in the area, we knew that before buying the land. Mother, a *vaastu* architect, employed various means in order to get rid of any evil spirits, bad karma or ghosts before building the cottages. Rituals were held; *vastu shashtra* – Indian feng shui – was applied. I remember thinking it was silly. We aren't superstitious people but the workers were apprehensive, and the venture was a risky one so Mom took all precautions necessary.

Ramdev wears a solemn face as he continues; leopards never visit inhabited areas, they are rather timid creatures, he insists, venturing past staff quarters and into the main compound can only

mean one thing – supernatural intervention. His voice treads on eggshells as he speaks, the construction of the estate could've disturbed the spirits in the area, he concludes. His eyes are wide and innocent; he cares for nothing but our safety. Blood pounds like a gong against my temples, one hand grips the other as I listen to his tales. I'm a realistic person, but my stomach for ghost stories is poor. The wind picks up and a chill crawls up my spine, hissing past the hair on the nape of my neck. Dad snaps impatiently, leopards would do nothing to endanger themselves; they act only in self-defense, there was no reason to worry, he exits the group to refill his glass. The cook takes his cue and bows out; it's almost dinnertime.

My attention turns to my cousins, the little boy is bent over something on the floor, he's muttering to himself. The little girl is braiding my sister's hair, talking animatedly about a book they've both enjoyed. My mom holds her weak alcoholic drink in one hand and warms the other over the lively fire, while talking quietly with her sister and brother in law. I compose myself quietly and then leave to follow the cook to the grill where he is roasting chicken and kebabs. He sees me coming and greets me respectfully, *Madam*. His face is cluttered with lines, from his eyes to his hairline, around his mouth, his forehead. His wrist is the same with red and yellow threads, a holy man, I observe. He glances briefly at me and returns to twisting the spoke.

I dig the toe of my Uggs into the earth behind my left heel, meaning to engage in a lengthy conversation. He looks at me curiously, *tendua?* Leopard? I nod. He pauses. *Hai Ram, oh god*, and then

in hushed tones tells me about the history of the area, *Kanatal*, "Fairy hill", the name proclaims, an area blessed with good fortune and karma. It worries him that the leopard wanders so close, his guess is that the scale is being tipped; we are taking more than we are giving back. A temple. He speaks of it in awe, a sacred area that must be visited by all passerby's and visitors. His eyes are glazed; respects must be paid, he insists. A ball of light, he saw it trail down to the river at foot of the peaks, himself. The gods descend to bathe in the river, he explains, it could've caused the imbalance. Animals are inherently attracted to their creator. It is important to pay respects, he repeats. I feel myself backing away, nodding slowly. Our conversation ends abruptly, I hear a cousin calling and pay heed instantly. I thank Ramdev quietly and move back to the fire. Shaken.

My aunt beckons me as I pass and I sit down gladly. Her eyes beseech me, she saw me talking to the cook. A 'happiness coach' she calls herself; an interpreter of energy and vitality, a firm believer in the notion that good thoughts can change the course of the future. I repeat my conversation with averted eyes. She finds it interesting. The fire is waning; embers continue to glow as the flames falter. We extend our arms towards the coals, but the heat has faded. We call it a night.

The morning dawns with eerie coolness, the sky is clear for miles allowing the peaks to creep out naked, from under the mist. My aunt saunters out of the cottage, nestling a cup of steaming coffee between her palms. She looks freshly bathed; shoulders pulled back, damp hair trailing down her arched back, naked face and bright eyes. She catches sight of me across the lawn and makes her way over. For a

minute, we small talk - how did I sleep? Beautiful morning, isn't it? Then she makes her request, she wants me to come with her to the haunted temple, explains that she wants to study the energy. I pause. Hmm. I call Ramdev over and ask him to accompany us. He agrees and hurries into the house to pack things for the journey. A few hours later we set out.

The jungle feels almost sentient to walk through. The trees shiver in the wind though the day is bright and the light dances through a sieve of leaves like a thousand twirling fairies. The walk is not long, the temple is small and not far up a hill. The incline is slight but I still feel curiously heavy whilst climbing up to the top. The temple is drawing near. My aunt displays no expression but I can see her brain churning as it begins to apply all the theories and beliefs she knows to her surroundings. The trees above us suddenly seem to mesh together, creating a dark canopy over a little concrete structure. We walk a little way up the shallow trail and as we do, the light seems to filter out; the air feels colder in the dark. My aunt turns to me with a confused expression and describes a strange change in the air texture. I laugh nervously, trying to shake the pressure off my shoulders.

The wind seethes around us, my chest throbs with adrenaline. I look over to my aunt and who has her eyes closed in concentration, she insists she feels a mass pressing down on her back. I'm suddenly concerned for her health, I find myself trying to localize the symptoms of a heart attack in my head. The cook stops walking and stares with wide eyes, I can't understand their worry. My aunt looks perturbed, she recognizes the feeling she gasps; such heavy negative energy, she doesn't understand! I

look towards the cook and ask his opinion. Pay respects! He points timidly towards a tiny concrete cube.

My aunt nods breathlessly. They approach the temple timorously and I study the area from afar.

A flittering red flag stands on the roof and a dark figure peers out from within the confines of concrete walls. The idol is faceless except for obscure red dots and dashes scattered across the 'face'. It is shrouded in a tattered gold shawl and beady necklaces. There is a horrible smell emanating from behind the iron bars that separates us. In front of the statue lays a covered bowl, on the floor are symbols I don't recognize, they are haphazardly drawn. The grey cube is closed on all sides except for one, a concrete porch extends a couple of inches out on all sides, with more symbols on it. The grass stops a foot from the edge of the porch, leaving only black mud to border the temple. There are scratches in the mud. The cook kneels and begins to unfold supplies onto the ground, rice, milk, and 10 *rupees*. I stare at him bewildered. *Kya kar rahe ho?* What are you doing? The cook pours the milk in the mud; in the cavity created he sprinkles rice. He leaves the note on the concrete and then touches his forehead to the ground gingerly. I don't understand his gestures. Later I'll be told of the significance; milk as offering, rice as a token of appreciation and money as a personal sacrifice, all three in the mud to connect them directly to the earth. A gust of wind catches us from behind, a pat on the back? My aunt closes her eyes to get her bearings. When she opens them, her eyes are still glassy. We wrap up and leave hastily. My mind wanders for the first time that day to my broken relationship; I feel a tiny puff of

freedom in my chest. The walk home is quiet and pensive. We don't recall the story upon our return, it suddenly feels like days later. The night is restful.

We begin our journey down the mountains in the morning, Dad asks why I'm so quiet but I have no answer to give him. I look out towards the valley and the peaks and feel strangely asymmetrical to the landscape. My qualms feel trivial and I find myself wondering where my inherent pride really comes from. My phone beeps.

"So are we done?" the text inquires.

I can feel his frustration through the screen. I think about the way Ramdev worships the mountains. I think about his belief; the concept of ego, the idea of giving back what you take. I think about how these peaks are holy to some and worshipped by others, like grandparents, they teach and urge us to be reverent and gracious. I suddenly feel small, distinctly humbled by the might of my surroundings.

"Not at all, let's talk." I reply.