

The Reprimand

The reprimand was couched in Sanskrit. “Bernadette suffers from the klesha of thina midra.” The words floated dreamily on onion-skin paper. Emma and Bernadette, long-time neighbors and now members of the Ashram’s volunteer cleaning staff perused the dimpled paper as they finished lunch on a bench overlooking the verdant valley at the southern edge of the Adirondacks.

“What does that mean?” asked Emma as she finished up her last bite of cumin-scented bean something or other. The two friends had taken their lunches from the dining hall with its code of silence and sought out a bench in a sequestered part of the grounds where they might talk.

“In plain English, it means I’m lazy,” said Bernadette. “A guest reported finding me asleep in one of the bathroom stalls.”

Bernadette and Emma discovered the Ashram six months ago when Guru Devi, the Ashram’s spiritual leader spoke at the local college. They were impressed by the guru’s smooth brown skin, his open smile and the direct gaze he distributed evenly throughout the room. In just a few moments, he brought a velvety silence to the usually argumentative liberals that attended the free lectures. The entire group joined in as the guru directed chanting in call and response. “Alahsasya Kuto Vidye, Avidye Kuto Dhanam, Adhanasya Kuto Mitra, Amitre Kuto Sukhom’.” Later in the Q & A they found out that the words meant, “With laziness, there is no knowledge, with no knowledge there is no money, with no money there are no friends.” The audience

tittered uneasily, and it gave Bernadette pause. But by that time, she had fallen under the guru's thrall and the feeling of creamy equanimity the chanting had imparted to her jittery mind. So, when the assistant handed out brochures with the Ashram's program fees, some stunning photos of verdant hills and a statement written in small type at the bottom, "Volunteer positions are available on a limited basis," Bernadette stuffed one into her worn tapestry bag. She could not resist a bargain.

Three months later, the two friends received acceptance letters from the Ashram with instructions on how to prepare themselves for the rigorous withdrawal from materialism required to be a volunteer/resident. They were to bring modest clothing suitable for the work they would be doing, any necessary medication and that was about it.

Emma was emerging from an almost annihilating sorrow. Two years ago, her 22-year-old-daughter, Maggie, died of anorexia. Her husband, never one to dwell on life's difficulties could not bear seeing his wife's ravaged face, her sloping shoulders. He left her within a year. Bernadette left behind six children, but they were grown and could take care of themselves. Her husband, Peter was used to indulging his wife's eccentricities. Notwithstanding, he couldn't keep himself from voicing some concerns.

"Bernadette, you hate housekeeping," Peter said evenly one night in their kitchen. Bernadette followed his eyes to the dingy floors and upward to the cabinets smeared with greasy fingerprints. She breathed in the stale smell of a place that had once housed too many people. The phantom aroma of baby sweat and lysol tickled her nostrils and brought her back to those days when she spent mornings scrubbing burnt oatmeal from the bottom of a cast iron pot.

"I thought you were ready to be free of brooms and rubber gloves."

“It’s different. Housekeeping is a grind when you are alone with six kids. But in the Ashram, the housekeeping is not just a job, it’s a spiritual practice. You have to do it...” she remembered the words from the acceptance letter and intoned them reverently, “with mindfulness, joy and silence.”

Peter’s eyebrows shot skyward. “Eight hours of vacuuming and scrubbing out toilet bowls silently?”

“I can do it... and look at all the spiritual benefit, I could get out of it. Besides, it’s only three months... of course I could stay longer... if I want to.”

Peter smiled uncertainly. His wife was contrary, quick to form an opinion and quicker to change it. She loved poking holes in his Catholic beliefs and took a kind of manic glee in reminding him that she was not a believer. But despite all this, he still found his scattershot wife endearingly alive, open-hearted and stubbornly aware of life’s pleasure. And as each child departed their home, his admiration grew as with more and more quiet observation, he saw clearly all she brought into his life. His devotion was rock solid.

“What does the write-up mean?” Emma said blinking anxiously at Bernadette. Emma was thriving at the Ashram, melting into meditations so deep that when the gong sounded, she didn’t want to come out, but she still didn’t want to face life at the Ashram without Bernadette.

“I’m on probation! Isn’t that something! They could fire me!”

“No, they wouldn’t.”

“Fired from volunteering to muck out toilets!! I guess that puts me at the bottom of the karmic food chain.”

“Stop it.”

“You stop it. They have it in for me!”

“No, they don’t!”

“Easy for you to say. Radha loves you. Guru Devi loves you. Look at how he giggled uncontrollably when you ached a headstand in community practice.”

“He was laughing at how I turned purple in the face. They won’t kick you out.”

“Oh, wouldn’t they! Look at what happened with Keshava!”

“He had porn in his cubicle! That’s different!”

“Still...” Bernadette felt a wave of fatigue. Or maybe it was just the heat.

“Okay, you don’t want to feel better, I guess,” Emma said looking away from her friend.

“Why should I feel better? Just because you said so?” Bernadette said pushing her face closer to her friend’s.

Bernadette looked at her friend, her pal, her comrade-at-arms, her Ethel to her Lucy and for a millisecond she wanted to pick a fight right there in front of all the guests pouring out of the dining room and heading down the hill to the meditation hut. But when she saw Emma’s eyelid twitch, she thought better of it. Emma, after all was still carrying the loss of her only daughter, a girl so kind, so beautiful, so conscientious. How could she have borne such a loss with such grace, such equanimity?

“Come on. Lunch is over. Don’t mind me.” Bernadette took Emma’s plate and stacked it on top of hers, stood up and started up the hill to the Ashram kitchen. Emma trudged behind her. The day’s heat had started to encroach. The air shimmered ominously, the light refracting through layers of hot mist. Bernadette dreaded the hours of silent cleaning ahead. Just the idea of smelling cloves all day!

They entered the kitchen and waved at the dishwashers through the window where they dropped their trays. The dishwashers were under a code of silence as well but the two young

men in bandanas and Thai fishing pants beamed kindness at them and bowed as they wiped sweat from their eyes. They went back to the cleaning carts they had left outside the kitchen and Bernadette whispered,

“See you at dinner.”

Bernadette left her friend without looking back, her cart clattering down the wooden-floored hallways. She started up to Meadowlark, a wing of the ashram reserved for the Guru and important visitors. The halls were silent. Portraits of Hindu sages and deities lined the walls. Their eyes bore down accusingly on Bernadette as she steered her cart gingerly down a hall that felt like a whack-a-mole game in an arcade. A quote under the image of a sage named Sadhguru clobbered her. “One nasty thought in your head is enough to make it a bad day.”

She filled up her bucket in the utility room and added clove oil and vinegar. Propping open the door of a communal bathroom she pulled out a mop. The physical act of dipping a mop into a bucket and dragging it out of the water triggered a deeply encoded muscle memory. The difficulty of bringing up six children, the scrubbing, the washing of dishes, the preparation of countless meals, the unrelenting turf wars, all of it had depleted her body and spirit. Most of the time she overcame the fatigue with adrenaline-spiking fights with her husband or anyone else who took the bait. But at the Ashram, there was no such spontaneous drama to quicken her pulse. Every hostile impulse was watered down with the incessant breathing and the enervating corpse poses. And now as she faced this reprimand with its aspersions on her capacities, her ability to clean out johns, for Christ’s sake, a dull torpor made her want to simply lie down in the middle of the bathroom in the hope that the coolness of the tile and the unforgiving nature of its hardness might slap some life into her.

What was she doing here? Peter was right, she hated domestic chores, yet at 52 years old, now finally free from children and household responsibilities she signs up for more forced labor, up at 6 to meditate, eight hours of vinegar up to her elbows, just to finish the day doing yoga in stiflingly hot rooms. Although one might argue that she wasn't really doing yoga. She always heeded instructor's admonition to only do as much as the body wanted to do. Since her body never wanted to do anything after her housekeeping chores she simply slept on a pile of pillows and blankets while others sweated through the asanas. Sometimes a yogi found her still sleeping while they were rolling up mats and blankets.

And where was the leadership, the divine inspiration for Christ's sake? Guru Devi only showed up sporadically. He was always out drumming up money with speaking engagements. And when the Guru finally came back to the Ashram, she found the idolatry expended on the man distasteful with the showering of rose petals and the manic chanting. Bernadette had always struggled with authority from her early days at Catholic school when she would heckle the poor nuns with her constant skepticism about miracles and the virgin birth. She wasn't really a great fit as an acolyte of a guru or anyone for that matter. She had never had much faith in anything. She operated crisis to crisis.

Suddenly she heard someone humming. She looked out into the hallway and saw Guru Devi emerge from his private suite. She gasped sharply. Had he been summoned by her thoughts? He didn't wear the white shirt and linen trousers he usually wore. He had on khaki Bermuda shorts and a green La Coste shirt. But it was him all right. No one wore their beard with such authority. He smiled at her.

"Hello."

Bernadette started to put away her mop. When it dropped into the bucket, water slopped out onto her sandals.

“I haven’t met you, have I?”

“Not formally. Of course, I have heard you speak.”

“A lot of hot air,” he said laughing mildly.

“What?”

“Oh, never mind,” he said. “Make of it what you will.” He continued to smile. He looked much younger up close. “What is your name?”

“Bernadette.”

“Hmmm... I have heard your name. It’s a beautiful name. I believe one of the Catholic saints?”

“Yes, Bernadette of Lourdes.”

“Ah!”

“I was born on her feast day.”

“Bernadette!” He said fondly. His gaze lingered for a moment and seemed to course through her, down, down, down to a pit of loneliness she hadn’t even known was there.

“You are cleaning our bathrooms.” He reached down and put a hand on her head. “You are so dear, Bernadette! Do you know that?”

“I...” Bernadette wasn’t quite sure how to handle this declaration. Except for her husband, men kept their distance from her. She felt her eyes itch and her throat throbbed painfully. She was going to say something but he removed his hand from her head softly, turned and padded down the hallway in his carpet-soled sandals.

That evening the two women found each other in the dining hall. There was no code of silence at dinner. Emma reminded her that there was a special community meeting after dinner. It was the 10th anniversary of the founding of the Ashram and there would be people coming in from all over the world to pay tribute to the Guru.

“No wonder Radha was on edge with you,” said Emma. “That explains it!”

Bernadette knew her friend was trying mightily to protect her. She looked at Emma’s kind eyes, her grief-lined face, the hunch of her shoulders. Saw how the two years since her daughter’s death had changed her: the way she ate, how she walked, how she chose her words, the very architecture of her stance. Emma reached out and took Bernadette’s hand.

“My goodness. You are concerned for me. You needn’t be. I’m all right.” Bernadette pulled her hand away. Why did she feel put out by her friend’s concern? Emma was just trying to support her. Bernadette hoped that her pique didn’t show. But she noticed Emma’s gaze shift as she suppressed a sigh. She was about to apologize to Emma when Radha walked up to them in a flurry. She wore a red tunic and a sequin-encrusted shawl that swirled about her festively. But her face was grim and sweaty.

“Come on, you two. Dinner’s over. We need you in the temple room to set up chairs.” She stood there sullenly for a minute, while the two wiped their mouths and slowly stood with their trays of dishes. Radha knew that Bernadette was not one to fall apart because someone snapped at her but Emma was a different sort and she thought better of her peremptoriness.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to be short. We are all so excited!” Radha said with a benign smile. When neither of the two answered her, she turned abruptly and said, “See you downstairs. Don’t dilly dally, now!”

In the temple room, the Ashram's residents prepared for the celebration. Young women in fluttering robes draped orchid garlands on the pedestal where Guru Devi led meditations and offered talks, incense burners set out a heady mix of aromatics and musicians were setting up on a platform on the side. Two men tightened the skins on two tiny tablas and slapped the heads refining the drums' pitches. A thin older woman pulled stops on a droning harmonium and another player adjusted pegs and plucked strings on a sitar.

Emma and Bernadette started to pick up chairs and place them in orderly rows in the small remaining space at the back of the hall. When they could fit no more seats on the grey carpet, they took two spots near the back. Within 15 minutes, the doors opened to the paying guests staying at the Ashram and the honorary visitors who came to celebrate the anniversary, former teachers, administrators and benefactors. The lights dimmed and then the music started. The woman at the harmonium started a drone, pumping air into the bellows, and then with the other hand playing a musical figure over top of it. Gradually the tabla players joined in, followed by the sitar. Then a younger woman stood up to a mike and sang a Hindu phrase in a high voice that had a kind of electric buzz to it. She gestured to the audience who jumped in to reflect and improvise upon her motifs. The group had done this before. It was called a Kirtan, a kind of improvised musical group prayer. Sometimes it was a gorgeous swirl of melodic strands against a throbbing group hum. And sometimes it was like a musical brawl with everyone trying to grab control with evermore strident high-pitched keening, agitated drumming and bizarre vocal stylings. This particular evening's musical Kirtan fell into the latter category and Bernadette found ample justification for her foul mood in the cacophonous Kirtan that fell on her like an acoustic jack hammer. She leaned over to her friend and said loudly over the din.

“Why can't they just hire professional musicians!!”

Emma had been singing softly but with great intensity, closing her eyes and swaying, completely comfortable even delighted by the frenzied abandonment around her. The Ashram had changed her even in the short time she had been a resident. She came here after two years of just making it, just putting one foot in front of the other, never veering into anything unsettling, ever vigilant to keep the sorrow she was containing somewhat manageable. Now, in this unconventional setting she was starting to take baby steps toward the possibility of freedom and who knows, maybe a new life. Two weeks ago, she did a headstand in front of the entire Ashram. This was not something she would have done in her former life. But when Gita, the most revered yoga teacher at the place announced to the Guru and his disciples that Emma had just performed a perfect head stand in class, the Guru said, playfully, “Okay, Emma. Let’s see it.” Emma was dumbstruck, not happy to be called out in front of the large fervent group. But she headed dutifully to the empty carpeted area in front of the guru and after three or four attempts and a little hitch from Gita she pulled herself from a tripod into a shaky headstand before falling out a few seconds later, catching herself before she smashed her face into the floor. When the entire group erupted in joyful applause, she felt a lightness that she had never felt even before her daughter’s death. She had done it! But when she walked back to her spot next to Bernadette, Bernadette leaned over and whispered, “How condescending!”

“What?” said Emma softly.

“Well, you know, the age thing... They think it’s cute that someone our age could ever do a headstand.”

Emma was furious at the time but said nothing. But now just two weeks later, as her friend once more barged into her rapture, she felt her indignation swell.

The woman singing was starting to work the crowd, drawing them into a fiercer and more strident expression. Someone distributed tambourines and finger cymbals. People got up from their chairs and started to move in place raising their arms and waving. Emma and Bernadette remained seated in a bubble of privacy, covered over by the swarm of rapturous bodies.

“Bernadette, can’t you ever...”

“What?”

“Can’t you ever let someone have a nice moment, without spoiling it– “

“No one is stopping you enjoying yourself– If you like this kind of thing.”

Their voices grew in volume in tandem to the rising throbbing music.

“Just because you’re unhappy doesn’t give you license–”

“Oh, just go back to your hypnotic trance, sorry I knocked you back into reality!”

“What!!! Why did you come here if you wanted to just keep things as they are? We came here because we wanted to transform our inner lives. That’s what we said, right?”

“But not to become some Guru slave! Some brain-dead flunky scrubbing toilets!!”

“So, go home, if you don’t like it! I am staying here.”

“Maybe I will!”

“Go! No one’s stopping you!! Go ahead, pack your bags. No one will miss you.”

Bernadette turned to leave. She knew that she could say much more terrible things to Emma. She tried to muscle her way through the crowd and go, but there was a movement forward in the room as the Guru stepped through the double doors at the back of the room surrounded by a bevy of dancing yogis playing finger cymbals. As the crowd pressed toward the center aisle to see the entrance of the guru, Emma was pushed into Bernadette so that they were

locked in a kind of grim embrace. They struggled to break free of this involuntary clinch, looking away as they attempted to pry their torsos apart.

As the Guru passed bowing and smiling to either side of the aisle, the pressure let up and Bernadette was finally free to go. She moved to the center aisle and started down to the double doors. Two young people were standing at the door giving out cards. Bernadette tried to push past but they pressed one of the cards into her hand. She looked down. There was a picture of the Guru and a quote from the Bhagavad Gita.

“Whatever happened was good.

Whatever is happening is good.

Whatever will happen will also be good.”

She pondered the quote, resisting her habitual urge to engage in a mental debate with the ancient author. She felt her rancor subside. After a moment, she turned back to find her friend. She had some difficulty getting back because the crowd had begun flooding the center aisle. When she finally found her, Emma was sitting with her head between her hands. Bernadette sat back down slowly. She put her hand on her friend’s back. She traced her vertebra, discovering all of the indignities sorrow had carved into her spine. She felt the way despair had slackened the muscles between Emma’s shoulder blades, the way the shoulders folded inward. Bernadette thought she understood her friend’s loss but now she knew that she had not begun to understand Emma’s rocky and arid path, how she never would. But there was still a chance that she could begin to study it, to find in Emma’s forbearance a way forward for herself. Emma looked up at her. Her face was splotched with dark red.

“Forgive me, Emma. I’m the biggest fuck-up.”

Emma smiled with trembling lips. Again, such courage! So willing to give up the mantle of righteousness! What a woman!

In the front of the room, the Guru was starting up the stairs to the platform. He continued smiling and waving and for an instant Bernadette felt his eyes seek her out in the crowded room. Or maybe she just imagined it. The air was heavy with ecstasy and sound. He was almost to the top of the platform and he bowed to the harmonium player just off to the side. But just when he reached the final stair, just when it felt like the room could not contain another scintilla of rapture ... he tripped.

It wasn't a terrible trip. He fell against the stairs and as he did, his head got clipped on the harmonium which fell to the ground with percussive groan. A terrible collective gasp seemed to suck all the air out of the room. The musicians froze, as though a conductor had cut them off with a vicious swipe of the baton. And then silence as the Guru slowly turned over from his supine position and sat on a stair cradling his head in his hands. After what seemed to be an hour the silence was broken with little screams, people rushing toward the guru and waves of hushed commentary from the rank and file.

Bernadette and Emma stood up and strained to see the front of the room.

"What happened?" Bernadette said to a young man still recovering his bearings after halting a series of ecstatic pirouettes.

"I don't know, man! He tripped, I guess. Wow! That's not good," he said shaking his head, sadly.

"Is he okay?" Emma asked. But the young man walked out of the room joining a slow but steady exodus of others in the room.

“What’s happening? Why is everyone leaving? Is he terribly injured?” Bernadette asked looking around at the people leaving in stunned silence. Some held on to each other with tears in their eyes.

Emma and Bernadette continued standing there, waiting for the crowd to thin out so that they could make their way to the front of the room. But by the time, they were able to make a clear line to the platform, it was empty. The musicians were packing up. The Guru had disappeared. Some people swept up rose petals and unpinned the garlands festooning the platform. Emma and Bernadette joined the efforts, stacking chairs against the walls. But when Bernadette and Emma tried to pry some information out of one of the friendly dishwashers who was helping, he simply shook his head and put his index finger to his lips. That damn code of silence!

The next morning, they saw a sign on the community room that community meeting was cancelled so that the Ashram’s governing board could meet. When the two volunteers stood on line at the breakfast buffet in the silent dining room, people moved in a solemn line filling their trays with lentils and ghee.

They left the dining room and carried their trays to their accustomed spot down the hill from the Ashram.

“I would like to know what happened,” said Bernadette. “I clean toilets for this joint, for God’s sake. I think that I deserve a little information.”

“Yeah, look at all the people leaving.” Emma glanced up the hill where people were loading suitcases into cars at the receiving entrance. “I thought everyone was staying for the weekend at least!”

Radha was walking slowly up from the lake toward the dining room. When she saw her two volunteers, she started to change her course. But Bernadette called out.

“Hello... Radha, do you have a minute?”

Radha looked up at them. “Just a minute. What is it?” She asked walking toward them.

“We just want to know what is going on. Is the Guru all right?”

“He is fine. But the community is shattered. We are deciding if we will continue to follow him.”

“Why? Did he do something wrong? Did he violate someone on the staff? Take some money, what?”

Radha looked downcast for a moment. It seemed like she was going to cry.

Emma was embarrassed at her friend’s direct question. But also, a little glad and a little proud to be at the elbow of someone so pushy. Of course, she wanted to know too. What dark secret was creating this dull buzz in the dining room?

Radha sat down and swallowed hard. The two volunteers leaned forward.

“Well ... he tripped.” The two waited for further clarification. But it seemed like none was coming.

“What do you mean? That’s it? He didn’t hurt anyone?” Emma said her eyes widening.

“No. But the trip was significant,” Radha said significantly.

“Oh?” said Bernadette, her raised eyebrows demanding clarification.

Radha looked frustrated but shook her shoulders, took a big breath and launched into her tutorial.

“The Guru is known for his teachings on presence in the physical world, on adapting to surroundings, on navigating life with steadiness and gracefulness of step.”

They knew what was coming next but still they didn't believe it.

"When the Guru tripped, our faith in his authority was shattered, How can we follow a man unable to heed his basic tenets, who in the midst of a public celebration, in front of all the people who support us, important people who came thousands of miles..." Her voice cracked and she took a moment to compose herself. She lost the battle and her next words came out as a torrent. "He was distracted! He was looking around like a ferret! No wonder he tripped. He was drunk with all the idolatry! It's disgusting."

Bernadette couldn't resist. "Oh, come on, Radha. You throw rose petals at me, sing and scream like I was a rock star; I might get a little tipsy, too"

Bernadette's insubordination snapped Radha back to the grim stoicism with which she handled the volunteers. "And that's why," she said smiling grimly, "you are not a guru." She stalked away, her gossamer skirt floating behind her.

They waited till she was out of sight.

"Wow! The Guru's a klutz? That's it?"

"I guess so." Emma looked at the ground for a moment. When she looked up her eyes were clear. "Maybe we should go now."

Bernadette got up holding her tray.

"I mean leave this place. For good."

Bernadette made a decision. "I think I am going to stay. At least till my three-month term is up. I need finish something for myself."

"I understand. Do you mind if I go?"

"I'll miss you. But I understand. You're done. You did that incredible headstand."

Emma smiled. "Yeah. That was something, wasn't it?"

Later in the day, Bernadette was back at Meadowlark changing the sheets. She heard steps and when she stepped into the hall, she saw Guru Devi with a suitcase locking the door to his suite. He looked at her and smiled. He had a little band aid over the cut on his forehead where the harmonium clipped him.

“Ah. Bernadette, is it?”

“Yes, yes. You remembered! Are you okay?” she stopped, afraid to mention the trip that showed him as an ordinary, absent-minded, feckless human being. But she needn’t have worried.

He put down his suitcase and laughed mildly. “Oh, yes. The great guru took a little fall. What a firestorm I created!”

She thought for a minute. He watched her as she brought the words to the surface. He was patient.

“What had happened was good. What is happening is good. What will happen is also good,” said Bernadette solemnly.

He took a deep breath closing his eyes as though he was inhaling jasmine.

“Bernadette, Bernadette! How good you are. How wise!” He picked up his suitcase and walked toward the elevator. He pushed the button and then turned around. “Keep practicing your headstand.”

And then... he winked. If he had spit on her, she couldn’t have been more shocked. It did something to her system. This simple action in all its incongruity, reset a fuse box in her brain. After he disappeared into the elevator, she went into the bedroom, picked up a clean white sheet and floated it over the bed.