

## The Guru

1.

The boy was eating a bowl of cereal in the cafeteria when he first saw the guru. He was the last to recognize what everyone else had already seen. Every head had turned -- his father's, his little sister's, the robe-wearing, barefooted people eating around them -- by the time the boy put down his spoon and followed their widened, adoring eyes to the stairway.

Having heard his father talk and talk of the guru, the boy naturally expected someone extraordinary. But the guru was was slight and ugly. He was big-nosed and long-haired and bearded, and on his face he wore the perpetual smirk of a beauty queen in a parade. He was barefoot like the rest of the people -- the boy, his father and sister seemed to be the only ones in sandals -- and a white-robed man holding an Easter basket dropped handfuls of rose petals at the guru's feet as he walked.

For a long moment the boy expected his father to elbow him and lean into his ear, the way he did at Yankees games when he wanted to share some insider information about an opposing batter. *This isn't the real guru. This guy's an imposter.* But no elbow came. And so the boy turned back to his father. Studied him. The wide smile. The wet eyes. He looked and looked, searching his father's face for what it was that the boy was missing.

2.

The boy liked their vacation to see the guru. He liked it because while his father spent the day at the ashram meditating with the guru, the boy was free to wander the grounds and play

with the other children as he pleased. They were in Canada, far outside the city of Montreal, deep in the woods. After breakfast each morning the father would hug the boy and his sister, the meditation mat beneath the father's arm, and the boy and his sister would walk the tall grass-lined dirt path toward the little green pond where all the children gathered to throw stones and swim.

It seemed everyday there was a new bug or animal that crossed in front of them as they walked to the pond, adding to the boy's wonder at the place. He had never been around so much nature. He felt he had been dropped into a movie set. Today it was a frog, thick and green and spotted. Hopping with no apparent coordination, flipping sidelong into the high grass, matting it in places with its ungainly body. The boy sprinted at it as his sister squealed, grazed the frog's legs with his hand before it somersaulted out of his grasp and into the denser foliage.

At the pond the boy sat back and waited. He breathed the Canadian air that even in the heat of summer carried not a chill but the promise of a chill, the sorrow of fall heavy in the smell of pond algae and distant burning campfire and floral blooms. Waiting was not something he was used to, and he didn't know why he waited instead of running like a fool into the water, or digging in the dirt with his sister the way he would have even last year.

What he knew was that Sabrina, the blonde girl with the deeply-tanned legs, the quiet, round face, would be here today. Sabrina from Montreal, who spoke only a little English. Who had put her hand on the boy's back once this summer, had pointed down the dirt path toward a wounded duck, its beak opening and closing in slow, soundless yawns. They'd watched it without speaking, the girl's sadness palpable, until the boy had sprinted back to the ashram to find help, his heart thudding in his chest as he ran not out of concern for the duck but in the

excitement of his own heroism. Of the delicious unexpectedness of the intimacy of the moment they'd shared. Of the feel of her fingers, light and tentative, between his shoulder blades.

But Sabrina did not come that morning. He waited and waited. His sister splashed into the water in front of him, built towers from sticks and smooth pond stones, until it was nearly lunchtime and the boy's disappointment was so profound he lied down on the dirt, the sun slanting over him through the canopy in freckled bars, and closed his eyes.

3.

The night before, the father had tried to explain to the boy the magic of the guru. They'd sat together on the floor of their hotel, La Florabelle, a two-story building a mile or two from the ashram that held a dozen or so outward-facing rooms. Their room was so small the boy and his father and sister had to sleep in the same bed, had to breathe the same linen-washed air. The boy picked at a bag of ketchup-flavored potato chips, rubbing their red dust from his fingers onto the bottom of his shirt.

"Some things are harder than others to understand, Dane," the father had said. "Ever hear the word 'enlightenment'?"

The boy had shaken his head.

"It means at peace. Guruji is at peace with himself at all times. He takes life in stride, no matter what. He's a wise man. He's made himself enlightened."

"Can anyone get enlightened?" the boy had asked.

"Not quickly, no. It takes years and years of study and discipline to achieve what guruji has achieved."

“Will you ever be enlightened, dad?”

The father had laughed. He'd punched the boy in the arm, reached past him to take a handful of potato chips for himself.

“Maybe. Not everyone gets there,” he'd said, popping a chip into his mouth. “But I think so, Dane. I really, really do.”

That night the boy had watched his father as he'd slept, on his back and gently snoring. With his eyes he'd traced the cut of his father's jawline, had lingered at the bulbousness of the nose. He'd pictured his father floating instead of walking, a haloed spotlight following him wherever he went. And the boy had tucked his head into his father's armpit, had pressed his ear against his ribs. He'd listened to the watery cadence of his father's heart, how unnaturally slow it had sounded, the silences in between beats seeming to stretch out further and further until the boy was asleep.

4.

The boy rose from the ground only when his sister's friends came into the pond clearing. They came in chattering and barely contained, their hands clasped primly before them like two red-headed altar girls. The boy's sister darted from her place at the water when she heard them, knocking over her sticks and stones tower.

He knew he shouldn't leave his sister by herself, even with her friends. Knew what he was doing was mean, but Sabrina's absence washed the boy in a sorrow that even to him seemed outsized. While his sister's back was turned to him, the three girls hugging and laughing, their high pitched sounds carrying far up the road, the boy snuck into the forest. Ducking beneath

branches, stepping over fallen limbs, avoiding any growth that looked like it could be poison, he doubled back toward the ashram, emerging onto the path only when he was sure he would be out of his sister's sight.

He listened to the pulsing hum of the cicadas, how they sang together all at once. He was struck by the emptiness of the place. Dozens of adults were here -- hundreds, even -- but not one of them walked the path. Not one of them left the ashram until the mid-afternoon, when they would trickle out onto the dirt road in search of their children, back toward their tents or cars, the boy's father included.

The boy climbed the path's steep hill with his head down, stomping on sprouts of reedy grass that dotted its midline. He heard the ashram before he saw it. Music and voices floated from it. Instruments the boy had never heard or seen cast out exotic sounds, thin and tinkling and pleasantly discordant. The boy looked up at the ashram. The plain whiteness of its siding, the unpainted wood of the window boxes and door frame. The boy could almost smell the newness of the wood, that sharp pine, from a hundred feet away. His father was inside. The boy felt the strangeness of this. High overhead a black bird swooped and turned, catching the boy's eye before he fitted his gaze back at the building.

A dangerous feeling impressed itself on the boy all at once, tingling at his guts. Children were strictly prohibited from the ashram during adult session. Yet hadn't he seen a boy, younger than himself, enter with his father only yesterday? What was the worst that could happen to him if he went up to find his father? Another adult might see him, might shoo him back outside. The boy envisioned himself standing with Sabrina, telling her the story of his breaking into the

ashram with the adults. He saw her mouth opening in admiration. Felt those fingers again between his shoulder blades.

The boy walked until he could no longer hear the cicadas, the ashram's music blotting out all other noise. His heart pounded as he crossed the threshold into the cafeteria, where he'd seen the guru that first and only time. He squinted and blinked, his eyes adjusting to the interior light. All of the breakfast items from this morning had been removed from the buffet table and the boy heard the metal clanging of pots and pans in the kitchen, adults preparing for lunch. There was no one in sight.

The boy's plan came to him only as he climbed the stairs to the meditation room. The music and singing and chanting was nearly deafening now as he ascended, its cacophony filling his chest with an otherworldly vibration, as if he were about to board an already-moving jet. He came to the top stair and stopped. He could hardly breathe. He craned his neck up at the opening to the loft, robed adults pressed against the railing, their backsides swaying in a way that would have made him laugh had he not been so terrified. His plan was to find his father, to watch him for a moment, and then to sneak back down. He just wanted to see. As he took the top step and peered through the railing, he realized that he *had* to see his father. Had to see what was so special about all of this.

Even with his head barely above the railing the smell intoxicated him: sandalwood and incense and soap and adult sweat. The smell and the music colored his impression of the cross-legged adults he saw through the bars of the railing. Dozens of them, shoulder to shoulder, pressed up against each other and bobbing, their eyes squeezed closed. Robed men and women, most of them light-skinned like his father, but some darker skinned like the guru. Many of them

chanted, their mouths opening to release words that blended into the soundscape of the loft, lost to their owners instantaneously. At the front of the room sat the guru, but from the boy's position he couldn't see, and he didn't want to risk standing up and outing himself. Instead, he continued to scan the faces, looking for his father.

When the boy saw him, for a moment he didn't understand what was seeing. His father sat off to the edge of the room. The teal of his meditation mat had caught the boy's attention. From the mat his eyes had moved up to his father's khakis, then to the white button-down he'd worn this morning at breakfast. Finally he'd seen his father's dark hair, combed straight back, thinning some at the crown, unmistakable. The boy's father was sobbing, his face contorted, twisted into a mask of anguish, his arms wrapped around his torso in a childlike self hug. He rocked back and forth on his mat, swaying as if to a rhythm separate even from the music that swirled all around them. And though the boy knew it was his father, he felt it couldn't possibly have been. He felt he was seeing some other man.

The boy had a sudden urge to call out to his father. To scream and break him from his present state. Involuntarily, caught in an instant of babyish fear, a yell cut out from his throat, high pitched and foreign sounding. But the noise of it was buried in the strumming of instruments and beating of tambourines and chanting, and no one heard him but a person so close to him the boy hadn't noticed her presence until just then.

A woman, his mother's age when she'd been alive. She wore a pink and white flower-spotted robe and had his mother's same dusty blonde shoulder-length hair. For a confusing, primal beat, the boy had the sense it *was* his mother. She turned in surprise, the corners of her eyebrows knotted inward. But when she saw it was just a boy who'd made the

sound, she smiled, flashed him a tight little wave through the staircase railing. Then she turned back to face the guru. Clutching at his chest to stifle his own sobs, the boy sprinted down the ashram stairs.

5.

The boy had been in the hospital the last day of his mother's life. The doctors somehow knew it was her final day and had called the boy's father, who'd taken the call in the living room as the boy had carefully watched. The crossed legs. The tightened lips. The head nodding seriously. As they'd packed what they needed to go to the hospital, the boy's father had been so calm, like they were on a trip to grandmother's house instead of to see the mother's last hours.

"Bring some comic books, Dane. We're likely to be there a good while," he'd said to the boy.

The father had talked a lot on the drive. Had talked about ordinary things, topics stolen from a world none of them belonged to anymore. He'd asked the boy and his sister what they'd be missing at school, what their plans were to make up the work. He'd seemed normal. It hadn't made sense to the boy, who'd only responded to his father's questions with one word answers, a medicine ball-like weight pushing down on his chest.

He'd stopped talking, though, when they'd gotten to the hospital. He'd led them through the emergency room double doors, a cold blast of air conditioning tousling the boy's hair as they skirted past the information desk and toward a set of elevators they'd never used before. The nurses had moved the boy's mother to a new room, the father explained. It was all the way up on



the fifth floor. The elevator doors closed and the boy listened to his sister's snuffling beside him, an undefinable distance opening up deep within him.

His mother's new room was big and warm, with a wide window that faced the highway far below. A nurse ushered them into this room almost tiptoeing, her every movement carrying an air of quiet that made the boy's heart stop in his chest. For a long moment before he was able to turn his eyes to his mother, the boy stared out the big window. Distant cars moving in slow motion, tiny specks of blues and tans and silvers. The boy imagined himself inside one of these cars, buckled in the backseat on his way to eat lunch at the burrito restaurant where his mother always took them when she needed to go out for errands.

The boy's sister went immediately to the mother. The boy watched her, not ready yet to approach the mother himself, envying the ease with which his sister grieved. The openness of it. Yet even she was past the deepest throes of grief. For six months they'd been expecting this, bracing against it, following the mother to the hospital for her consultations. Sitting in the living room with their parents for long, tear-filled talks, until all of them were exhausted. There were no hysterics left for this last portion of the journey.

The father squeezed the boy's shoulder, a tightness that made the boy more uncomfortable than anything in the room. It was their only genuine communication that day, the boy and his father. The only real thing the father said to him, those fingers digging into the flesh above the boy's collarbone. It was to escape this squeezing that the boy had stepped forward finally, approaching the gaunt form of his mother, who was buried up to her neck in the pure whiteness of the hospital blanket.

The boy had seen his mother sick, had seen her body deteriorate down to nothing, but there was something different about her now. He observed the yellowness of her face, the hollow cheeks, the sunken eyes. It was his mother's face and yet, somehow, it was not. The boy and his family were not religious people, but looking at his mother a spiritual idea occurred to him for the first time in his life. This was his mother's body. But it was not his mother.

He bent down to kiss his mother and as his lips touched her cheek he recoiled, springing back up into a standing position. Her cheek was cold. His eyes went to her chest, saw the shallow up and down of her breathing. The heart monitor continued to beep. He turned to his father. There he stood, his hair combed in the same smooth way, his eyes steadily fixed. He had nodded at the boy, the slightest of smiles upturning his lips, the reassurance the boy had needed. He'd bent down again, this time placing a kiss on her forehead. And when the father had put a hand on the boy's shoulder once more, the boy had leaned into it.

6.

When his feet met the dirt path the boy opened up his stride. It felt as if the whole landscape had collapsed down to a sliver of external sensations: the cloudless blue sky bouncing above him as he ran, the sharp, Canadian air sucking into his lungs, the tears stinging his nose and cheeks. The nature that had fascinated him before now seemed cold and foreign, and he felt as far from home as he ever had in his entire life.

As he ran, coming closer to the pond clearing, a little of his rational mind returned to him and he remembered his sister. Before he crossed the threshold into where he imagined his sister still played with her friends, the boy veered off the path and into the woods, crashing through the

bushes, thorns tearing at his clothes, ripping at his bare limbs. But he kept running, at a much slower pace now, pushing through brush and hopping clumsily over obstacles. Feeling as though the many small wounds from the thorns were vindication for his outburst, proof of his emotions. He ran this way, clambering deeper and deeper into the forest, until the fear of being lost forever stopped him and he sat atop a log.

Here, finally, in the cool semi-dark of the woods, the boy allowed himself all the feelings, all the thoughts, he'd previously denied. He wished for the ending of his own life, for his soul to reunite with his mother's in the afterlife. He wished to be someone else, anyone at all. In the heat of his grief the boy's mind tossed and lurched like a hummingbird in a windstorm. And then, with the boy barely even noticing, he stopped crying, listened to the calls of distant birds cutting through the continual whirl of the cicadas' song.

He listened for so long that the sounds lost their original meaning, became new to him, and he observed them as if for the first time. He imagined the guru sitting at the front of the ashram, staring out over the cross-legged people who adored him. Staring out at the childlike form of the boy's father, sobbing and hugging himself and shaking. The guru who his father believed held the key to enlightenment in life. The guru who the boy had seen and had felt nothing for. How different the boy was from his father.

The boy looked down at his legs impassively, as if they weren't his own. Dots of blood dried against his shins. It must have been after lunch by now. His sister would be looking for him. His father, too. The boy stood up, picked his way through the woods how he'd come. He walked back toward the ashram, cautiously stepping around the bushes he'd torn through before. In the years to come, fairly or unfairly, he would trace what had happened, what he would

become, to this moment. His father sobbing on the floor of the ashram. The boy outside of Montreal, in the woods, alone.