‘The Golden Milkmaid’: a novel

and

‘Writing from the Gaudiya Tradition’: exegesis

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Volume One

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Abstract

My thesis, the novel ‘The Golden Milkmaid’ and its exegesis, comprise an original contribution to knowledge in that it is the practice-led research of a female Gaudiya writer analysing the process of writing bhakti (devotion to divinity) from within the academy. Gaudiya Vaishnavism is a significant strand of Hinduism liked in India, among the Indian diaspora, and beyond the Indian demograph globally. Yet inevitably, Gaudiya practice, process and aesthetics are being altered during transmission and now, time-honoured the traditions have become vanishingly rare. My work is a written record from an insider-observer perspective.

‘The Golden Milkmaid’ is an account of one young woman’s spiritual journey from Australia to India, to a hermitage of Gaudiya women, worshipers of goddess Kishori (the golden milkmaid) and her paramour, the god Krishna. One of these women becomes the protagonist’s spiritual mentor. The major part of the book represents the protagonist immersing herself in Gaudiya life. Celebrated Kishori-Krishna narratives embedded throughout the novel are re-presented as ‘real’, sacrosanct, and the very sustenance and sanctuary of believers’ lives. A retelling of asta-kaliya-leela (pastimes at the eight watches of the day) derived from the traditional Gaudiya narrative/literary/ritual/meditational scaffolding, is presented as a work that the characters are translating into English. The narrative flashes back to the protagonist’s relatives in Australia to reveal how they feel about her living in India and her new beliefs. An exchange of letters is also interleaved. When her mother is taken ill, the central character returns to her family, changed.

The exegesis is in three parts. Part I, Neti Neti (Not this, not that), compares and contrasts ‘The Golden Milkmaid’ to relevant works in the closest possible genres of contemporary Australian literature to put forward that the work stands alone. Part II, Devi (Goddess), explores the connection between believer, land, and sacred stories about the land; it describes the realities of the lives of the ‘widows of Vrindavan’ and it explains the kinship between the novel’s Gaudiya characters. Finally, it elucidates restrictions imposed on Gaudiya women and their creative expression through writing, thus presenting the case.
for ‘The Golden Milkmaid’ empowering its women characters through text in the midst of a patriarchal cult. Part III, Achintya-bheda-abheda-tattva (the actuality of inconceivable, simultaneous oneness and difference) backgrounds Gaudiya writing so elucidating the context in which ‘Golden Milkmaid’ was conceived. It is divided into five segments that together suggest that the work of a modern-day, independent, female Gaudiya writer both does and does not belong in a Gaudiya genre. This section reflects upon the living spoken and literary Gaudiya tradition in its setting of India’s vast and ancient religion; it acknowledges the rich tradition of Indian aesthetics; it addresses dilemmas in striving to amalgamate literary art and faith and it elucidates the key textual/meditational scaffolding used in the novel. The concluding segment is a reflection on a significant Gaudiya text, Bhaktivinode Thakur’s novel Jiva-dhama.
I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously written or published by another person except where due reference has been made in the text. Additionally, I certify that, in the future, no part of this work will be used in a submission for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the proper approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any particular institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

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Signed: …………………………………………………………………………. …………………………………………………………………………...
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Finally, in accordance with Prabhupada’s teaching (*Los Angeles, December 27, 1968*), I offer gratitude to Mother Cow for all she gives. *Radhe Radhe!*
The Golden Milkmaid
Chapter I
The First Ring of the Bell

Northern Territory, Australia, 1964

Sun-freckled infants faced their young teacher. She pointed to friendly writing labeling the curiosities on their nature table.

‘Sunflower.’
‘Pinecone.’
‘Cactus.’
‘Shell.’

Pearl loved it in the north. It was monsoonal and far greener than where she was from. She held the weight of the shell in one hand so that the children could see its long, spiral tail, and she traced the shell’s coil with a finger. ‘Do you see this long spiral? Most shells like this spiral to the right but this one spirals to the left. This sort of shell is called a lightning whelk.’ Pearl and the children listened to the sea in the shell. She taught them about a pattern that runs through nature and they each drew the Golden Spiral in their workbooks. They went outside and created helictical mandalas on the red sand with twigs and seeds and gumnuts, and then they photographed them from above.

Pearl had been hiking at Fogg Dam that weekend. It was a haven for herons and avocets and curlews. She had her khaki shorts on, sensible shoes, a seersucker shirt and a green felt cowboy hat that hid her wayward hair. Bull lilies sat upon the water, white and violet, their floating leaves some three feet across. But there were other flowers on the lake that day that Pearl had only ever seen in pictures. Huge, pink, vulnerable blooms quivering high out of the water on rigid stems and in their centres, seed pods like green shower heads, upside down. The silent azure sky and the gum trees watched all reflected in the still lake. Pearl

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slipped off her shoes and waded in. A jeweled dragonfly hovered around the flowers on invisible wings. Beneath the surface, below the silky mud, tangled roots squeezed between Pearl's toes. Something wriggled against the back of her knee. She snapped off a green fuses and scrambled back to the bank. Sitting cross-legged like an infant at story-time, she held the massive bloom in her open palms. Delicate veins traced through the translucent petals. Pearl breathed in. Sweet air flowed to the deepest trees in her lungs. She was inhaling universe. It was swirling inside her and was all around her too. Then, without her knowing where it came from, a long, low vibration drew itself as gently as a wisp of ether from the very heart of her being, slowly and softly. Lotus flowers, bull lilies, trees, lake, sky, earth, cosmos, time and energy were all already vibrating with the sound. The sound was a fraction of the fractal of time, but it was an eternity too. Pearl felt a curious joy. Every thing was one and yet differentiated. Her lips closed and the syllable sound ended with a hum.

‘Aaummm.’

She had had no conscious intent to chant a numinous mantra. She sat quietly, surprised, peaceful, glowing; as if having been reminded of something from long, long ago.
Winifred Green sat on the back veranda, a blue cardy over a cotton shift and a chiffon
scarf over her springy hair. She was eating buttered toast and listening to the wireless.

Koolandilli homestead perched on a hillock surrounded by majestic white-barked
eucalyptus trees. The garden was former-glory lovely. Thick wood grape vines climbed
along the bull-nose veranda and bunches of sweet sun-dried sultanas hung down from
them. Grape juice stained the ground below. Winifred slipped her boots on her old brown
feet and went out to the field beyond Pollywaffle’s little blue-painted wooden cowshed. She
rubbed Pollywaffle under her chin and cooed, ‘How now, brown cow?’ Pollywaffle
stretched her neck and dropped a pat.

Magpies warbled in the gum trees. Winifred called Hepsibah and the heeler came
lolloping out of her kennel, tail-a-wagging. Winifred and Hepsibah got in the ute and
Winifred drove into town, walked down High Street, bought a copy of the local paper, and
headed to the post office to check her mail. Her box was round the side of the Post Office
among rows of identical metal boxes. Most often it was empty, but not today. A sky-blue
aerogram lay in it like an egg in a nest. There was a peacock on the aerogram, there were
intricate patterns like the ones on banknotes, and in the postmark was a ring of Indian
writing. It was addressed in Pearl’s italics, to ‘Mum.’

Winifred Green was proud of her eldest. Pearly had always helped with the littley since
George had passed on. She’d been good at school and was making a good go of life. She
was good with money; the whole time she’d been working up north she’d been putting a bit
aside. Now she’d found herself a job she really wanted. She liked to travel and see new
places; Sydney, Melbourne, Kangaroo Island. She and Pearly had had the same golden
complexion. Mother and daughter. The littley was darker. Like Snow White and Rose Red.
They both had that same springy fuzz of hair as she did, but Pearly’s was bright and light
and she tamed it into two long, tight plaits secured at the end with a blue ribbon. Pearly had
been a regular little girl but when she started high school she had different interests from
the other kids. She used to kneel on the grass in the garden like some oriental warrior, eyes
closed and turned to the sun in rapture. She had started to read old books by nuns. She had
begun to create startling, enchanting, visionary watercolours of children and animals and
nature all translucent and aglow from the inside with pretty pastel-coloured lights. ‘No
harm,’ Winifred had thought. It had been as if there was something lying dormant in her

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daughter’s heart. Some sort of potential, waiting to burst free.

Last year, Win had gone to pick Pearly up from Darwin, and it’d hit home what sort of a spirit her eldest daughter really was. It was the last time they had driven down that corrugated track from Darwin to Alice. They’d stayed in Alice and taken one of those coach trips out to the great red rock the next day. It was first time Pearly had seen the rock. The coach bounced over the raw ground, clockwise around the hill, and then everyone got out to walk upon to the mysterious, hot red sand. It was coarse, but it was also soft and welcoming. From its dryness, exquisite tiny wildflowers grew. The silence of the place reached upwards into the sky. Pearl walked to where the hill rose from the dust. Win watched the way she held the flat of her hands on the hill’s rock flanks, not exactly stroking it, but as if listening to it with her hands. The others hung a shade cloth from the charabanc and lit a barbecue that gave off oily smoke. Pearl wandered away until everyone’s voices had soaked away into the wide stillness. She turned, wanting her mother to walk with her. The two were small as fairies, agile as birds. When everyone went to climb the side of the rock, Winifred and Pearl stayed back and walked, mother and daughter, both wearing Levis and Akubras, here and there round the base of the living red hump, pointing out eyes and noses and mouths in its face, spotting Spinifex pigeons, watching a red lizard, tracing patterns in the sand with sticks, making posies of dried bush flowers, collecting gumnuts and seedpods like shells on a beach, seeing stories, and taking everything in.

Win picked up a seedpod and turned it in her light brown fingers, saying softly to her daughter, ‘How a whole plant comes from this hard nut is a miracle we will never understand.’ Then she pushed her hat back, pointed in the distance at the line of tourists inching up the monolith and said, louder, ‘Your father told me why you’re not supposed to climb up there.’

Pearl said, ‘Because it’s sacred to the aborigines.’

‘That may be,’ Win said, ‘but that’s not what he said.’ Pearl reflected. Perhaps it was only for climbing at special times. Perhaps it was secret.

Win smiled now. ‘Your father told me, If ‘e move they all gonna come tumbling down!’ Pearly giggled.

That was the last time she had seemed like a little girl to Winifred. Because then, she had grown up.

What was it that Pearl wanted to tell her? Winifred knew her daughter well enough. They’d caught the Ghan down to Adelaide. The train rushed through the darkness. As

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Lake Eyre went past, somewhere off to the east, Pearl said, ‘Mum?’

‘Yes, darling?’

‘One of the teachers was telling me about a job overseas and I applied for it. A teaching job.’

‘I beg your pardon dear?’

‘Overseas, Mum. In India. They wrote back to me.’

*God almighty. If George was still alive. ‘India’*

‘A job in India, Mum. A year contract. I’m going... I’m going to live in India.’
Winifred waited and it was not long before she received her first letter from India. Standing right there under the Post Office porch, she ripped her car-key around the edges of the aerogram. She unfolded the tissue page and sensed something drift out, something finer than a fragrance from far, far away, undeniably exotic, something that reminded her, curiously, of Christmas.

Sunday, 31st February 1965

Dear Mum and everybody,

India! Arrived safely. Quite muggy here. Miss Doyle sent a car to the airport. The driver had a placard with my name on it. Thank heavens! It was absolutely hectic!

Believe it or not I started teaching the day after I arrived. My class has twelve kiddies — mostly English, one Canadian and two American boys, and a little girl from Canberra. Of course, most of the parents are on contract work and two will be leaving my class next week when their parents move to Hong-Kong. The accommodation the teachers’ quarters is pretty basic but it’s clean and safe. (There’s a guard with a rifle at the gate!) I can see the French Embassy from my window.

A little Indian lady comes to do my washing and another comes to sweep my room with a broom made from grasses. They both wear very lovely saris and glass bangles on their wrists. Yes, glass! They tinkle so prettily as they work and they are so fine! I cannot imagine how they do not break them.

There are quite a few interesting birds you’d like to see Mum — brahmini kites, owls, plenty of bulbuls and mynas (they seem more at home here!) I thought I saw a peregrine falcon, though I can’t be sure.

I hope to go out and see some of the sights during the Easter break. Some of the teachers and I are planning to hire a car to see a bit of the country. I’ve heard there are peacocks in the wild.

Well that’s all I can fit on this aerogram. Will write smaller next time.

Thinking of you all!
All my love,
Pearl.

‘Winnie! How y’going!’ Nobby Clark, George’s old workmate, was ambling towards the Post Office.

‘G’day Nobby.’ They shook hands, ‘How y’going? Just reading this from my oldest.’
‘Pearly still overseas Darl?’
‘India.’
Nobby thought Winifred had come over a bit shaky. He put a hand on her shoulder.

‘I know what it’s like, Darl’. My Sam’s still over at Duntroon. Military College. The wife’s going dead bonkers without him.’ He cringed at himself, worried he was saying the wrong thing, what with Winnie a widow, but he blundered on. ‘You know, back in forty-six I was in Bombay for a week with the Navy. Went right into the temples and saw the big gold Buddhas with the joss sticks and all the holy men. The women in their lovely saris, all shy. Monkeys. Elephants too! All of that. Lovely place. Change your whole outlook on life. How long is she going to be out there now?’

‘Her contract’s a year. She always was a one for a bit of adventure. Walked right off the property when she was seven, duffel bag of Weet-bix and a bottle of milk.’

Nobby laughed. ‘Too right. But they’re not little for long. Before you know it, it’s all winkle-pickers and Rolling Stones. And before you know it, they think they’ve fallen in love and flown the nest!’ Nobby gestured with his hand, like a bird flying away. He turned, still smiling, to unlock his own post office box. ‘She’ll be right, Darl’. She’s a sensible girl, your Pearly.’

Win nodded. It was true, Pearl was level-headed and she was bright, but she also had the heart of her father, a large heart, a heart that could melt and bleed and beat with the ferocity of a lion all at the same time. A heart that would certainly be needing some kind of protection. Win looked up into the backlit clouds and, probably for the first time since she was a kid, quite spontaneously, standing there right in the high street, and because she really needed to, she had a quick, quiet, secret, worried little pray.

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Abigail Doyle had been in India too long.

Her robust constitution had been a blessing and she was very glad that she had never had to go into one of those Indian hospitals like some of the other expatriate teachers when they had come down with jaundice or dysentery or malaria, all of which resulted solely from a lack of vigilance when it came to food or drinking water or mosquitoes. Abigail Doyle saw to it that every cook and cleaner who worked at The International School of which she was headmistress came with solid references and she personally directed their individual training. Beyond satisfying the patrons and the board with her service as headmistress, she also took upon herself the essential duty of providing guidance to the new teachers arriving in India too starry-eyed for their own good. It would not do at all to have them going native. Abigail Doyle told Pearl that she was glad to have an Australian on board. They were practical sorts. Pearl had only ever heard her kind of plumminess on television in the British comedies her mother liked to watch. Miss Doyle was a figment of the Raj.

The International School was a transit lounge of an institution; students came and went and were used to staff doing the same. But from the moment Pearl first set eyes on the white colonnades of the colonial school building set back in its grounds in the diplomatic enclave, she saw a place in which she would have liked to have lived for a long, long time. Accommodation and meals came with the job and so, as the terms went by, Pearl would be able to save most of her pay. The classroom floor was polished grey stone. Four lethargic fans churned the heavy air overhead. The student’s desks had lift-up lids and inkwells. Pearl moved her teacher’s desk from its place in front of the blackboard to the side of the classroom by a window overlooking a courtyard garden where an octogenarian gardener tended marigolds and chrysanthemums and mynahs squabbled in ashok trees. She put her dot-painting on her desk and her stationery from home in her desk drawer. The walls were freshly painted but they were institutional. Before she was going to think about a curriculum or progress reports or exams, she would have to get them covered with the children’s artwork; she saw hot pink and orange collages of domed turreted palaces against poster paint sunrises, tropical greenery with elephants and toucans and tigers, cut-out ladies in saris and men in turbans with ostrich feathers in them.

On their days off, Pearl and the other expatriate teachers went to see the sights of Delhi. They were driven by Mr. Singh, a gentleman with an arresting moustache and a magnificent
sky-blue turban, in the school Ambassador. The little group gazed awestruck at the soaring colossus of the Qutab Minar; they stepped inside the citadel of Mughal Shahjahan and marvelled; they they were sickened at the history of the Bloody Gate. In the narrow lanes of the legendary Moonlit Market of the old walled city they shopped for heavenly muslin scarves and hand-embroidered Kashmir shawls. At the pavement book-stalls of Connaught Place they delighted at the titles and the prices. In the Bengali Market they bought gold cardboard boxes of fried saffron flavoured syrup-soaked sweets. They climbed one of the striped marble minarets of India’s grandest mosque, The-Mosque-Reflecting-the-World, and far below, like a hazy panoramic map, a grid of streets stretched to the oriental horizon.

It was a juggernaut of a history lesson for Pearl. One Saturday, she went to the national museum alone. She walked through galleries where gods and demigods and curving goddesses stood within arm’s reach. She saw the actual clothes and jewellery that kings and queens had worn, all embroidered with real gold threads, precious gems, gold and rubies, rows of real tear-shaped pearls; the finest filigree necklaces, ear-ornaments and armbands for both men and women, frightful bejewelled hand-weapons wrought with tigers and snakes; miniature paintings of nobility, playthings of princesses, coinage and indecipherable scrolls. It was the stuff of fairy-tales. She bought a pamphlet on the textile craft of a disappearing mountain tribe and then went out to the museum courtyard to sit a while. She bought a clay cup of chai and a packet of five biscuits. There was a seat in the shade of an ashok tree. Green parakeets flashed through the trees. A striped squirrel came for crumbs. Beyond the museum walls the Delhi traffic ground along with a cacophony of musical horns.

Pearl knew that she had been here before. A long time ago.

She knew that she had come home.

Pearl located a library and went there one precious day off.

The books were all locked inside grim tin cabinets.

The pleats of the librarian’s sari were paper-cut sharp. She looked over her spectacles with mild disdain. Pearl enquired politely and was given forms to fill. She stood as the librarian painstakingly recorded dates, times, numbers, titles, authors and other numbers in a gothic ledger.

Oblivious of the heat or the hours, Pearl diligently wrote notes and drew sketches and
gradually her collection of ideas for art lessons grew. The children might make toy horses of clay and carts of wood. They might imagine they were in the employ of a patron of the fine arts, or even Emperor Akbar himself, and write about the characters in the Persian miniature portraits. They might paint miniatures of their own, tiny lockets, mixing colours in seashell palettes like the portrait-painters of yore. They might make block prints of flowers and plants. They might write their names in Arabic calligraphy. They might make masks and puppets and draw kaleidoscopic mandalas with compasses and colours. They might discover the motifs of tribal art and make murals. They would paper the classroom walls with their own version of the Ajanta murals. And when they had finished their maths or their writing, she would hand out pictures to copy and colour.

The librarian brought Pearl a volume with coloured plates. It was of the paintings of Orissa. Bold and clear, their outlines were filled with repeated motifs in vivid primary colour. They were framed with flowering vines and there were elements from nature in the spaces. Cows, flowers, trees with individual ellipse-shaped leaves, mothers with babies on their hips, and a tribal idol. Pearl thought he had a face like her childhood golly.

There was a picture of a couple of sweethearts ornamented heavily with jewelry, pressing together, surrounded by a snowfall of flowers and with little stylised cows in necklaces at their feet. The two were gazing into one another’s thickly kohl-rimmed eyes. The writing explained that the lady was Kishori, perfect goddess of the countryside, and the man was Krishna, Kishori’s scallywag love. Krishna was indigo. Kishori was the colour of a child’s painting of the sun. Both wore ankle bells and their feet were painted patterned in red. Krishna’s waist was narrow and his chest was broad and muscular. Kishori’s breasts were circles and the cloth covering them was patterned with dots. She was petite beside her lover and had a plait swaying with a beaded tassel at her knees. Her eyes were long and fish-shaped and in the parting of her hair hung a jewel encircled with pearls. God and goddess both wore necklaces, earrings, crowns, bangles, arm bands, earrings, toe-rings and nose-rings. On their plump chins and hands and around their eyes were flowers and paisley shapes, so that although they were sensual, they were doll-like too. Kishori’s left hand and Krishna’s right were holding a flute from which, on the end, poked the head of a fish with the snout of an elephant! Pearl tried to unravel the couple’s pose: each was standing with one leg wrapped around the other’s waist so that their toes met pointing neatly at the front. It seemed perfectly natural at first glance. Pearl had to look awhile to be sure. Hidden beneath their clothing, Kishori and Krishna were actually one. The image kept Pearl’s eyes
lingering about it longer than she felt they ought. It was a perfectly impossible position.

Without her knowing it, during the time that Pearl had been holding the lovely old book in her hands and gazing at the picture of the sweethearts, she had become infected. It was a serious contagion, as difficult to diagnose as it was exotic, and it would work itself into her system and take hold. It would spread throughout her being and when it became full-blown, her condition would become quite incurable. She would begin to let things fall from her hands, sensible things, and important things, everything that had ever made sense to her: family, friends, falling in love. Ultimately, the attachments she held in this temporal world, however emotionally binding they had all seemed at the time, would dissolve painlessly and irretrievably away.

The librarian came rattling her keys.

Pearl blinked in the sunlight and took an auto-rickshaw for the short ride back to the diplomatic enclave.
Persimmons appeared in the Koolandillli garden. Easter came and went. Winifred Green took Pearl's greeting card home before she opened it. She sat on the veranda and Hepsibah sat at her feet.

Monday, April 19th, 1965

Dear Mum,

Hope you like this card! The real thing is more beautiful than the picture shows. The Taj Mahal is like a huge glistening white tear dropping from heaven. It was like The Rock — I mean, everyone’s seen the photos, but you only feel this overwhelming awe when you see it for real up close. Four of us went in an Ambassador (very comfy!). Abigail and the math teacher and I in the back, and the deputy head in the front with Mr. Singh the driver.

Yes! We saw about a dozen wild peacocks! They were in ones and twos in the fields beside the road. (But not with their tails fanned because it is not rainy season.)

On the way back Mr. Singh took us to a holy town he thought that we would like to see, and so he drove us a couple of miles off the beaten track. It was an adorable village filled with pretty temples all carved in pink sandstone with flowers and foliage and with spires and ringing bells. There were devotees in white robes and forehead markings all chanting on their rosaries or bowing down to the gods. There were so many cows all wandering peacefully around, perfectly content and cared for. I went to the holy river and there were brabmins singing prayers and the ladies were going in the water in their saris! You would have loved to have seen all the water-birds and waders and they have sacred ibises and cranes the same as ours too.

It was all so breathtaking. I will go back there as soon as I can.

More soon. Give all my love to Aunt Grace and Lillipilli.

Your devoted daughter,

Pearl.

Winifred propped the card of the snowy dome of the Taj Mahal on the mantelpiece. She felt strangely stirred and wanted to recall something on the tip of her tongue. All she knew about Indian religion was what George told her. He used to read a lot. There were some verses. She tried to recall them. She was exasperated she couldn’t and went to the bookcase to see if she could find a volume with them in. They were in the Oxford Garden of English Verse. She sat in George’s armchair, plumped the cushion, and, as she read, she remembered.

‘The Golden Milkmaid’
They reckon ill who leave me out;
When me they fly, I am the wings;
I am the doubter and the doubt,
And I the hymn the Brahmin sings.
‘I am happy you enjoyed your visit to Swapnavan, Miss Green,’ said Mr. Singh. ‘As you are inclined to learn more about its m-eye-thology I shall recommend one or two decent books on the subject.’ He put pen to paper and gave it to Pearl.

‘I should very much like to go to Swapnavan once more,’ said Pearl.

‘It is written by the medieval sages of the area,’ Mr. Singh replied, ‘that if one desires just one time to go to Swapnavan, then their life is fully successful and perfectly sublime.’ He smiled before he turned to go, ‘And when one carries such a desire within the heart, it will be certainly be fulfilled.’
A venerable Parsee in his antiquarian bookstall knew the book for which Pearl was searching. He navigated through his forest of books, and located the volume at the centre one of the ceiling-high towers. He drew it out with panache and clouted it against another book, releasing a cloud of naphthalene-scented dust. It was a trim hardbound volume printed in Delhi in 1926. It was written in florid English by a Mrs. Violet Quinn, wife of the district administrator stationed, during that period, in Mathura. Pearl paid for it, clasped it to her heart, and headed for a park bench where she could sit and read her precious *Guide to the Land and Mysteries of the Swapnavan Region* straight away. A coloured plate was set in the opening pages, protected by a film of tissue paper. It was a brownish photograph of Violet Quinn posing in a pretty archway that was carved with parrots facing one another. She wore long culottes, a solar topee with a muslin scarf around it, and a necklace of marigolds. She seemed to be about Pearl's age and she gazed with pale eyes deeply into the camera lens. Pearl tried to make sense of the maps but Mrs. Quinn was interested in more than the mere geography of the Swapnavan region. She had also looked into its mystery:

Small temples dot the entire tract of land known as Swapnavan, and the locals treat natural features, such as a holy hill, a holy river, and several holy forests, with great reverence. These Hindoos perform a quaint and charming variety of idolatry. It serves as a distraction from worship of mammon and is surely less harmful. Locals and pilgrims venerate a god of love named Krishna, side-by-side with his counterpart, their goddess of devotion, named Kishori. In the temple of Kishori-Raman, an idol of Krishna in the form of a black babe is offered milk, flowers and sweetmeats several times a day, and he is put by the priests into a little bed and covered with blankets each night.

I call the religion of “the religion of kitchens” as the local inhabitants cook only for the pleasure of their gods....

Pearl could smell the fragrance of boiling milk. The sounds of the city faded away. She was in Swapnavan. Long ago, wrote Amelia, when India was a land of great forests, Swapnavan was a forest of Tulsi flowers. Tulsi was the forest’s goddess and she wore a dress of blue. She was head artist and she directed the sylvan sprites in their tasks; she was the choreographer of the furry and the feathered creatures and she oversaw the twining of the vines and the flowering of the shrubs and the movement of all the other plants. And yet Tulsi let the creatures and the flowers express themselves as well. She was the designer of sets for Kishori and Krishna’s pastimes and she saw to the adjustment of the colours and

‘The Golden Milkmaid’}

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lights of the seasons. She selected fragrances suitable to time and circumstance and bade them drift rich, deep and full on an evening breeze or bright and citrus at dawn to awaken the senses of the divine sweethearts. She directed the flight of birds so that they would catch the sweethearts’ eyes. She ensured peacocks practiced their dances during monsoon. She selected pretty cooings and warblings to appease or witty chitchat to entertain. She requested small creatures peep from the undergrowth and the hedgerows, their red and green eyes marking the path as Kishori’s long skirts swept by in the night through the trees. Tulsi’s pets were two green parrots and it was their task to carry hush-hush messages—details of Kishori and Krishna’s clandestine trysting place or an urgent change of plan. And Tulsi had other assistants too—they were fairy-like denizens of the forest. Pearl thought, *I wish I could get a job there.* Amelia had her reader gaze, rather than with the eye of the mind, but from the heart. She wrote, ‘The Hindoos believe that in eternal Swapnavan, there is no passage of time. Every perfect moment happens there eternally.’

When Pearl’s students were working quietly in their books, Pearl gazed through the window near her desk, daydreaming. She longed to return to the holy town. She imagined the turning off the Grand Trunk Road. She was at the riverbank near the people worshipping the river. She could hear the sound of temple bells. The air was filled with that textured fragrance of incense when it is burning outdoors.

Week by week, as Pearl’s students progressed through their syllabus, the walls became covered with the leaves and creepers and flowers of a forest-mural. The smallest children made leaf rubbings with wax crayons, flowers with finger-painted petals and mossy rocks of tissue. The bigger children painted cut-out animals — monkeys, cows, a peacock, some green parrots, a white snake, sugar ants, butterflies, fat black bumblebees and a flock of bluebirds. Pearl glued their handiwork into a forest of coconut palms and Christmas trees and stood back to admire their work.

They could walk right into it.

The next time she went to Swapnavan, Pearl went with Abigail. Mr. Singh drove his Ambassador away from the din of civilization to the raggedy outskirts of the capital and out along The Grand Trunk Road into a gentle golden countryside which was Mother India’s. They shared the highway with painted and betassled trucks, cyclists in hitched-up dhotis holding umbrellas opened against the sun, bullock carts, pony traps, cows, camels,
elephants and Royal Enfields. After two hours, the trusty car turned left and trundled along a farmers’ track through fields where ibises stood in ponds and peacocks fluttered. The track became a tunnel of trees which led into the heart of the ancient town.

It had only been a short while since Pearl had been to Swapnavan and, of course, nothing had changed there for centuries, but she had changed. She was not a outsider who had come to look at things. She was coming to a place she knew and loved.

Mr. Singh parked on the outskirts of the town and made for a tea-stall. Pearl and Abigail set off on a rickshaw. A small bird, clearly unafraid, alighted on the back of the rickshaw to give a welcoming serenade before flying off again on its own business.

As Pearl walked along, she smiled at the people on the street. Abigail suggested she avoid eye-contact and insisted they stick to the main streets. Abigail helped Pearl understand Hinduism: ‘We’re outside the caste system, you know.’ She plied Pearl with warnings: ‘Don’t drink that!’ When Pearl slipped off her shoes at the archway to a little temple Abigail drew back. She would wait outside. When Pearl slid a rupee into the palm of a beggar-woman, Abigail said ‘Don’t give to them.’

‘Oh! Why not? She’s so poor.’

‘If you give, you are supporting an ancient system of corruption. Besides, they see us as easy targets because we are white’

‘But she looked so saintly! I thought those old women came here to end their days meditating.’

‘They’re widows,’ Abigail said with an expression of dread so as to give Pearl an indication of the ghastly side of this seemingly quaint tableau of which the girl was obviously still quite naïve.

They arrived at a temple built in the style of South India. Outside it, a dozen old women sat in a line on the ground. Some were clad in layers of creamy mushroom-coloured cloth, others in a single piece of cloth drawn around their shaven heads. Some were so raggedy-mad they were unable to cover their wrinkly bodies.

‘They’ve nowhere else to go. Some are from quite highly regarded backgrounds, you know. They’ve hardly stepped outside their home before. Never lifted a finger because they had servants. When their husbands die, they have to leave home and travel here by train all alone with nothing just a bundle of belongings.’ Each woman had a kerchief spread before her, upon which passers-by were placing coins of the lowest denominations, small guavas
and grains of rice. Pearl awkwardly gave each woman a coin. Some smiled at her and she looked into their faces. Some were drawn with suffering, some were closed and inscrutable. One of the women was clearly in need of medical attention.

Chimes and women’s singing came from a hallway. Pearl gazed in. A hundred women in white sat crosslegged on the floor in rows. High in the tall walls were set frosted amber windowpanes from which sun-beams shone through rose-scented incense-smoke. Some of the women were leaning against pillars. Two were standing, moving about, apparently leading the song. Pearl recognised the words,

‘Kishori-Krishna ... Kishori-Krishna ...’

Abigail said bitterly, ‘They believe that if they die here, they will go to a Spiritual Sky where everything will be perfect and peaceful and lovely,’ and strode off.

Pearl muttered under her breath as she turned to follow, ‘Well, perhaps they will.’

Abigail led the way to visit a temple ruin set in its old, overgrown gardens. Monkeys were swimming in the green fountain water. Jasmine had long gone wild. Pearl was about to suggest a walk among the pillars of the old temple colonnade when a sort of priest came from them, heading straight for Abigail. He must have taken her for the superior and Pearl, the subordinate, for he insisted Abigail give money for their visit, finally clasping Abigail’s arm in an unseemly manner. Abigail was appalled and raised her voice. Two widows had appeared at the gate. They had witnessed the incident.

Abigail led Pearl out of the gate and back towards the town and the two widows fell in beside them.

One of them said, ‘You must not blame him. He is the higher caste of Hindu but he is very poor since he has been left behind in the industrial progress of our country. People are no longer willing to pay for his ministrations.’ Abigail walked ahead alone and Pearl walked with the widows. They were poor like their hundreds of sisters, but they did not speak of that. Instead, they softly told Pearl that Swapnavan was not as one saw it: it was not a town of people struggling for a living and covetous priests exploiting credulous pilgrims. No, they said, their eyes sparkling with wonder, Swapnavan was actually made of diamonds, crystals and pearls! It was the eternal garden wherein the divine couple played their beautiful games.

They said that very few could see this.

Pearl watched them walk away, shrunken figures, their aged faces illuminated by dignity.
The next time Pearl went to Swapnavan, she went alone. Abigail Doyle told her that her interest in the culture of Swapnavan was ‘unconventional’ and that the school would no longer provide a car or driver for her to go there.

She took a rickshaw to Nizamudin railway station, and from there she went by rail to Mathura Junction.

‘What is your country?’ the other passengers asked.
‘Australia.’
They beamed, ‘Sir Donald Bradman!’

She bought a fizzy drink and gazed from her window in a state of incredulity and delight. She was going back! A woman gave her fried flat-bread with pickle. At Mathura Junction, she changed from the main line to a narrow-gauge branch for the final dozen or so miles. This was the Swapnavan Express. She drank in the bucolic landscape of farmers’ fields and daub dwellings. From here, the Swapnavan Express went no further.

Back to the little holy town on the bank of the unhurried, brown holy river. Back to this town of a thousand carved arenite temples built hundreds of years ago. Swapnavan echoed with the carillon from countless pretty Kishori-Krishna temples. As Pearl walked the medieval streets she saw how every house had a courtyard with an inner sanctum in which Kishori-Krishna were standing in lit-up shrines. The people in their homes lived as if attendants of the holy couple. Poor people also had shrines in their rooms. Street-dwellers stood up pictures of the gods in frames. The permanent and uninterrupted worship of Kishori-Krishna was the very raison d’etre of this place. In Swapnavan, the phases of Kishori-Krishna’s worship gave every day its rhythm and the events of Kishori-Krishna’s life gave the patterns to the years. Time and place, here, were theirs.

In Swapnavan, all commerce revolved around the faith of the town’s inhabitants and her visitors. Grain and spice merchants, dairymen, grocers, greengrocers, and those who traded in the various types of sugars — all supplied the kitchens of the temples and their monasteries and the daily needs of the families who supported them. Perfumers here produced essential oils and incense of a quality unsurpassed elsewhere in India — fragrances to purify the mind and carry the worshipper far beyond base realms of sensual pleasure. Book-sellers sold only scripture or children’s picture books of stories of angels, fairies and giants who had built the place. Some tailors stitched sequined outfits only for temple gods and goddesses; others sold robes for different denominations of monks or

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priests. And there were merchants who sold cheap plain white saris for the widowed
women who, for some reason or another, had no sons or grandchildren and who had come
here to live in patience and prayer until the end of their days.

Now that Pearl she had learned the way by train to Swapnavan, she went regularly on
weekends and holidays. She walked the streets as the pilgrims did, from one temple to
another, slipping off her shoes at the entranceway, bowing down and joining her palms as
the others did. She wrote to her sister,

Dear Lillipilli,

I really wanted to tell you about an amazing place I’ve been going to. It’s a haven people go to just to
meditate and pray and it’s called Swapnavan. It’s a township on the bank of the Yamuna and it’s ringing
with the bells of hundreds (literally!) of little temples. The local people believe there’s another dimension
there where their god and goddess live. There’s no electricity! I wanted to tell you about the perfume sellers
— they make a high quality perfume oil that people buy to offer to the god and goddess in the temples.
You’d love it. Give my love to Maman and Aunt Grace and everyone and write soon.

All my love, as always,

Your big sister,

Pearl.

Swapnavan was opening like a lotus flower before Pearl’s eyes. Everything here ran at a
slower pace than out in the world, and Pearl had learned to sit and simply watch.

Flower-traders walked along quiet dust paths from their thatched homes on land striped
with rows of roses and marigolds. They carried wide basket-trays heaped with fresh flowers
covered in damp hessian upon their heads and at the gates of the temples, they set up stall,
balancing their trays upon bamboo tripods. They uncovered their flowers and splashed
them with water from copper pots and threaded them onto cotton string into garlands. As
pilgrims came by, the flower-sellers held up the flower-strings, displaying the freshness and
uniqueness of their wares, laughing and calling competitively, “Two rupees!” or “One rupee!”
Some garlands had lockets in the centre, others were especially long. There were cheap
garlands of musky marigolds, costly garlands of plump pungent blossoms, thin strings of
fragrant white jasmine, long wreaths of crimson roses, and pretty garlands of pale damask
roses strung with strips of tinsel to catch the sun. There were flowers Pearl had never seen
before, some, big ragged red and yellow daisies with centres as black as bumblebees, and
others, bright, dry, purple clover-like heads. Pearl spotted strange flowers from sacred
white-barked Kadamba trees — hard tight green balls maturing into delicate exploding
spheres of yellow and orange stars. She saw green garlands of tulsi leaves — Krishna’s
favourite, the flower sellers assured her — some six foot long, made of bundles of the
pungent herb knotted painstakingly along lengths of thread.

Pearl bought tulsi and rose garlands from a round-faced boy of about eight. The other
flower traders looked on kindly, resigning themselves that his cuteness was good for trade.
She slipped off her sandals and carried the flowers across a cool chess-board floor
towards the deities’ shrine. The courtyard was bordered with rows of delicate sandstone
pillars with lotus petals for their bases and carved stone foliage flourishing at their capitals.
Above the pillars ran a stone lattice balcony behind which were doors that led Pearl knew
not where. Above the balconies, a tarpaulin partially covered the thundercloud sky. Either
day of the sanctum hung old Art Deco rose-glass tulip-shaped lamps. A priest was moving
about in the inner sanctum, cleaning rose petals and incense dust, adjusting cloth and
ornaments and preparing a tray with articles of worship. His head was shaved but for a tuft
on the top and he had two white painted stripes up his forehead. He took Pearl’s flowers
up into the shrine.

Kishori and Krishna were standing beside one another looking out. They were both
already covered in flowers for after all, they were forest sweethearts. Kishori’s feet were
hidden beneath her embroidered skirt but Krishna’s feet, Pearl could see, had been painted
with paisley patterns in a paste ground from saffron and sandalwood. Krishna’s legs were
crossed and he was bending to the side at the waist so his hip was round as a hill. His arms
were raised and he was playing his flute. Kishori seemed to be swaying. Her dress was
embroidered all over with jewels and flowers. Krishna’s hair tumbled over his shoulders.
Kishori’s thick plait hung over her shoulder and reached her knees. She held a gold toy
lotus in fingers of her left hand. Krishna’s lips and eyes were handsome and captivating.
Kishori’s lips and jeweled nose and kohl-rimmed eyes seemed were more perfect than
perfection itself.

The couple were so alive it seemed natural to speak to them.

A mouse ran along the back of the altar — he must have been stealing crumbs from the
offerings.

The priest draped Pearl’s tulsi garland around Krishna’s neck so that it touched his feet
and he placed the rose garland between Kishori’s fingers as if she was to give it to Krishna.

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Then, he picked up flowers from the deities’ feet and placed them in Pearl’s cupped hands — their fragrance was intense in the warmth of the day. He performed an offering ritual with rice and rich food on silver plates; he placed mouth-freshening spices folded in intoxicating leaves before the divine sweethearts; then he lit a bunch of incense sticks and quietly withdrew, quietly closing the temple doors for the afternoon. Outside the temple gates, the flower-sellers had picked up their baskets and gone home until evening time when the temple gates would open once more and the next wave of pilgrims and townsfolk would come to gaze at their sweetheart gods.

Pearl was about to slip on her shoes, when a daunting voice hailed her. It was the priest. ‘Jolly good show! Kishori-ji has invited you to Swapnavan!’

He was on his way to his quarters carrying a fat tiered tiffin of consecrated food. ‘Thank you so much,’ Pearl said, ‘It is an honour to be here.’ ‘When did you arrive?’ ‘I’m just here for the day.’ ‘So you will be commencing your reading soon?’ He took his cue from Pearl’s baffled expression. ‘You will be reading Devotion,’ chortling at his own joke, ‘in the University of Swapnavan.’

He slipped his sandals on his toes and Pearl walked beside him through the outer courtyards. ‘For hundreds of years, we residents have sung of Swapnavan in the vernacular. Saintly scholars and poets have worshipped Swapnavan through formal Sanskrit. These narratives of Kishori and Krishna were carried by minstrels and orators across India.’ Pearl listened, shoulders bowed slightly, nodding politely, fascinated by his posh British accent. ‘These poets were describing an eternal Swapnavan — a transcendental land visible only to the eye smeared with the salve of love; a magical realm, one with the physical Swapnavan, yet different from it. Devotee poets wrote in ecstatic states, describing themselves in divine forms with Kishori and Krishna in the otherworld Swapnavan. Then they wrote with intense longing and lamentation when they returned to the earthly world.’

Pearl glanced through an open window. There were shelves of palm-leaf manuscripts — it was a kind of library.

‘Scholars discussed their masters’ interpretations of this sacred Swapnavan poetry, spoke their own realisations attained through entering the texts, and created lineages and schools to preserve and transmit the mysteries of devotion.’

Pearl enquired, ‘But please, how can I learn more?’
‘Your professor is expecting you,’ he replied enigmatically, stopping outside a blue-painted residence from which the voices of small children came, distracting him from his preaching. Resting his hand on his round pot belly said, ‘Your professor you will find before you know it. Farewell!’

The time between the school breaks seemed interminable. But, gradually, visit after visit, Pearl was getting to know her way around Swapnavan. Everything was becoming familiar: the pealing of the temple bells, the soaring melodies of devotional songs, the measure of mridanga drumming and the surcharged atmosphere at the times when the temples were all ringing their bells. Some of the locals were beginning to recognise Pearl. Shopkeepers and students, passers-by and priests all practiced their English on her. They were proud to welcome this newcomer to their fragile world and share with her its sacredness. Pearl was piecing together what she was reading, what she was hearing, and what she was seeing with her own eyes: this earthly Swapnavan was a sort of covering hiding the real Swapnavan.

‘The super-welkin abode of Kishori and Krishna’s eternal pastimes is visible only according to the faith of the believer,’ Amelia had written. ‘Those who lacked faith would pray fervently to develop it, that they might one day catch a glimpse, enter, and dwell in the divine Swapnavan forever, for once the soul had arrived, he would never be forced to leave.’

Clean white durries covered the sitting places. Pearl sat at the side of the temple courtyard listening to the worshippers singing, clapping. Some played bell-metal chimes, cha-cha-chinng, cha-cha-chinng, cha-cha-chinng. Monkeys and birds crawled over the wire roof of the temple. Clouds moved about a pastel sky and the magical merry-go-round of Braj turned around and around to its own music. Drummers drummed double-ended clay drums. They pressed the heel of their hand into the bass membrane and pushed along it, making it talk. Urgent flat-handed smacks and primal pounding booms reverberated from the deep end, ‘Who? You! Who? You! Ooh! Come! Home! Hooome!’ Intricate fast-paced treble rhythms pattered from the high end, ‘Ticky-tacky, rickety-tack, rickety-tack.’ Pearl’s pulse quickened. ‘Womma? Womma?’ The sounds touched her core. ‘Do! Do! Oh! Oh!’ Her heart vibrated and was turned to fluid. The music reached an unbearably sweet high-point that endured while tears rolled down some of the players’ and the listeners’ cheeks. Then, a graceful denouement and the people bowed their foreheads upon the floor and sat up smiling into
one another’s eyes.

One day, as the people talked together or got up to go, Pearl approached a grandfatherly drummer wearing gnarly beads the size of walnuts and, upon his forehead a tuning fork of two bold, vertical lines of white paint.

Pearl ventured, ‘Excuse me, what sort of drum is this?’

‘Mridanga,’ he replied, curiously amused.

‘Is it a special drum for Kishori-Krishna songs?’

‘Mridanga is eternal,’ he said with a sweep of his hand. ‘It is in oldest writing of Kishori-Krishna. It is Krishna’s flute come again to this world to be with the singing of holy names.’

‘Will you teach me?’ Pearl asked. The musician gave a nod. He took the drum upon his lap and played an impossibly flamboyant passage, gave a chuckle, got up, and walked off.

Pearl picked up the mridanga. She wrapped the strap around her waist, cradled its round clay body against hers and brushed the flat of her palm across the rough drum head.

She would find a teacher. She would learn this art.

At the close of each day, after she had wiped her blackboard clean, Pearl sat in her desk and looked at her dot-painting, sending a mental message to her Mum and her family. She would have absorbed herself in her teaching job completely for she loved it, had she not began to slip into that other irresistible world.

She was going to have to follow her heart.

‘Don’t run,’ rang the headmistress’s voice. The children skidded to a walk. She ushered Pearl into her austere office. Pearl stood until offered a seat. A peon brought a tray with two glasses of water.

‘We’ve been pleased with your service,’ the principal began. ‘Such a nuisance when teachers leave mid-term.’ She perused Pearl’s letter. ‘You say you’ll stay until the end of the year?’

‘I shall miss you all very much.’ Pearl said. It sounded limp, but she would.

‘Yes,’ said Abigail Doyle, not looking up; not saying aloud how she knew that the classroom Pearl was leaving would never look as lovely as it had then. ‘I shall have to advertise for a replacement. Such a job it is to find good staff these days.’

Pearl’s students painted ‘good-bye’ cards, some with pictures of aeroplanes as the little
artists assumed that if she was leaving, it was to go home, to Australia. She packed her
clothes and her guidebook and counted her savings carefully into wads which she hid in the
lining of her holdall, between the covers of her journals, and in envelopes of letters from
her family.

She was not afraid. She was cradled in the lap of a loving universe.

Her leap of faith landed her in a plain room in a pilgrims’ hostel. It was as hot as an
oven because it was on the top floor so that the sun beat on the ceiling which was the
underside of a flat flagstone terrace roof. She went up the stairway from her corridor.

From there, she could look out through temple spires across fields beyond fields of yellow
rai flowers attended by plump hovering bees.

Everything was just fine.
Main North Road was clear. It was Sunday. Winifred Green drove through old Salisbury town, past the drive-in cinema, and took a left turn at the church on the hill by which shipmen had set their sights in days gone by. She was going to visit her sister.

As always, Grace met Winifred at the front door, wiping her hands on her apron.

‘How y’going Win!’ Unchanging Grace, apart from the portliness.

Winifred had brought one of her ginger-cakes, as ever was. Grace made poached eggs, tea, sardines on toast. She lit the fire in the living room. The way she cleaned her grate first thing reminded Win of her George — layering newspaper, kindling and wood so efficiently that, in the evening, just one match would do the job. George had loved things to be just so.

Grace’s solid mantel was chock-a-block with objects charged with the vitality of souls who had given them: twisted shisham candlesticks, a brass bell, Three Wise Monkeys, a Neptune Toby jug, a cow-shaped creamer.

It was good of Grace to put Lily up, Winifred thought. Her youngest was only a teenager and it could have been difficult had she wanted to play loud music and suchlike. But things seemed to be working out quite well. Grace gave Winifred generously good reports. Lily was settling into her job at the chemist. The more down-to-earth of Winifred’s girls. The practical one. Slow and steady wins the race, George had always said. If only he’d been there for them. God, things would all have been so different.
The warm secret freshness of her first Swapnavan sunrise bathed Pearl with a glow that dissolved the dust of her trip from Delhi the day before and filled her with the feeling that all would be well.

When she woke, she knew that a girl who had been standing by the head of her bed had suddenly disappeared. The door was closed, and so she must have been in a dream. The girl had been wearing a lichen-coloured skirt, long and gathered, embroidered with weldwort flowers and tiny mirrors that flashed in the moonlight. Pearl had been about to speak to her when she had disappeared. Pearl longed to go back to her dream to see the girl once more, but of course, it is never possible to re-enter dreams. Who was she? Kishori come to welcome her to Swapnavan? Tulsi? Or perhaps one of Kishori’s youngest friends — one of a billion brilliant little girl maidservants who served Kishori in the wake of the senior-most girls in her transcendental hierarchy like angelic choirs. Whoever she was, Pearl was sure the girl had come to welcome her into Swapnavan, and she knew that she would see her again.

Pearl wrapped a shawl around her shoulders and opened the shutters of her glassless window. An stooping cow-herder with a stout stick was guiding his herd towards the riverside to graze. A milk-white calf ran and jumped after the herd with his tail in the air. Pearl wished she could hug her new home. This was not just India, she thought, and it was not just quaint countryside, but it was a sacred site, charged with centuries of mystery and meditation. During those first few moments, Pearl lapsed into a prayerful wish never to become accustomed to this place or to take these sights and sounds for granted.

Pearl would not be content to simply walk upon the surface of Swapnavan. She wanted to become a part of it.

Her room was barer than a prison cell. There was a hand-pump down in the courtyard and in her room was a drain in the corner where she could bathe. She would need to buy a bucket and a bathing jug and maybe a pillow and a floor mat. She splashed her face, twisted up her hair, and pulled on her khaki cotton skirt and blouse. Then she padlocked her room and went down the steps of the hostel to venture into the lane outside.

The houses here rose three stories on either side. It was so narrow that Pearl could have opened her arms to touch the damp, ancient walls. All the windows had bars to keep out monkeys. Pearl peeped in where she could: people were reading, eating, praying, and
arguing. Smells of scorched spices and incense leaked into the alley. A little monkey swung past, bouncing from window to window as if in its jungle home.

Pearl turned into a wider lane. It was lined with new temples with delicate pillars and pink balconies carved with foliage. A well-dressed gentleman and his wife stood on the threshold of their temple-home and in the street before them, women in white carrying battered tiffins pressed one behind the other. The wealthy woman filled each of the poor women's tiffins with scoops of hot rice and legumes. Her husband handed each woman a thick, homespun, cotton shawl.

Pearl stepped into a doorway to let a cow pass. She came to a wider street lined with temple-mansions and houses over shop fronts all open to the street, all made of the same carved pink stone. Shoppers were walking and cyclists were ringing their bells. Three bullocks were plodding by hauling three creaking carts filled with logs. Stray cows were begging from vegetable-sellers. A woman was living on a ledge in a wall occupying a space three feet by four feet covered by some sort of a stringed net. A rickshaw-wallah pedaled by on a rickshaw decorated with roses and pictures of Krishna.

‘Seven main temple tour?’

‘No thank you,’ Pearl replied in Hindi. ‘I will walk.’

A roadside peddler approached her and offered her a scoop of golden crunchy bits and chickpeas in a neatly folded newspaper cone. She ate it as she walked.

On the outskirts of the town, ran a pathway that enclosed a rocky tor from the side of which rose the striking silhouetted tower of an old temple. On its tip was a many-petal crown carved in the old style of Orissa. Pearl was drawn to gaze, magnetised. A pair of schoolgirls with looped oiled plaits were walking her way.

Suddenly, they shouted, ‘Monkey!’

The weight of a male monkey’s body pounded brutally onto Pearl’s back. Its brown fur brushed her cheek, her arm. It was soft and warm. She saw its canine teeth. Then it pushed away off her, causing her to sway with its force. It bounded off up the buildings, stuffing its cheeks and spilling snack on the road as it went.

‘Are you alright, Madam?’ the schoolgirls asked. Pearl’s heart was shaking and she realised she had forgotten to scream. The two girls took charge of her and walked her to the entrance to the Post Office. But now, a fleshy wall of bull stopped them. His horns were as thick as her arms, the hump on his back wobbled as he snorted, and he smelled of a curiously beastly sweet. He was dozing; his black-rimmed eyes half-closed.
‘Have no fear,’ the older girl said, taking a ruler from her satchel and tapping the bull on the rump, ‘he is gentle.’ The bull reluctantly heaved his body up and plodded off.

Pearl thanked the girls, looking into their wise and innocent faces. They lacked the weaknesses of childhood; they were little ladies. The littlest looked at Pearl and informed her seriously, ‘Here Kishori-ji is always taking care of you!’ And they busied away, prim and self-assured.

Inside the Post Office, rows of ceiling fans whirred and dozens of extraordinary millefiori paperweights weighed down tatty piles of papers. Documents tied with red ribbons in tilting stacks filled open grey metal cabinets. A mailman with white stubble on his chin sat smoking a beedi, crosslegged on the polished stone floor sorting mail from a sack, spreading it around him in piles. A pigeon nested in a high windowsill sending nest grass scattering beneath her.

Pearl bought six aerogrammes, enquired about the price of parcels and asked, ‘Could you tell me where the nearest international telephone is, please?’ She hoped it would be closer than Muttra town which was almost an hour away along the Grand Trunk Road.

‘Delhi.’

‘The nearest international telephone?’

‘Delhi. Delhi.’

She’d had no idea.

She prayed there might never be an emergency.

She walked across a sweeping maidan to a towering temple standing alone. It was built with the vertical lines of South Indian architecture covered with multicoloured statues.

A gatekeeper stopped her, ‘Non-Hindus not allowed.’

‘But I go in the other temples!’

‘Sorry Madam. South Indian tempol. Non-Hindus not allowed.’

She felt embarrassed and turned to go.

‘Madam!’ he called. ‘Please go here,’ he said, indicating a sun-faded curtain to the side of the gatehouse. Pearl did as she was told. It was a darkened room. In it was a diorama of a forest made of green-dyed sponge trees and satin flowers. A dozen mechanical dolls dressed in coloured tinsel were rotating and along a circular track. A mouse’s footprints ran around the dust in the exhibit, and the dolls’ dancing was jerky. On a motorised lotus in the centre spinning Coppélia-like was Kishori, goddess of the milkmaidens of Swapnavan. Krishna was by her side, a dancing doll as beautiful as any of the others, but as blue as a
sapphire, taller, and wearing a peacock feather that bent in the breeze of the overhead fan. A woman with glass bangles to her elbows came in with a child. Both stared at Pearl rather than at the magic forest.

Pearl smiled and pointed and said, ‘Kishori-Krishna.’

The woman nodded from side-to-side with joy, ‘Yes! Yes! Kishori-Krishna! Kishori-Krishna!’

What more was there to be said?

Here, Kishori-Krishna made people here smile.

Pearl loved shopping. She stopped at the chai stall downstairs and equipped with coins and notes and enough Hindi to get the job done, she set off jubilantly along a cobbled lane towards the main bazaar. At the front of his street-side stall, a sweet-cook turned a wooden paddle through milk at a rolling boil in a huge black karhai over a wild fire. Here, a lane led to the temple of Kishori-Raman past the walled grove of a thousand bent and twisted trees and the secret place where Kishori and Krishna sometimes slept at night. Pearl turned right where men were making nails at a forge and walked through a hardware bazaar. Stall keepers sat selling hemp rope and rough twines, lime for whitewash and blue for colouring it, saws and spades that were nothing like the ones in Australia, wood-handled scythes, hoes, and machetes. There were aluminium bucket-stoves, wide round deep-frying pans, wire, no-kill rat-traps, watering cans, chains, and tridents in several sizes for ascetic worshippers of Shiva. There were leaf-plates for sale, bound into bundles of hundreds for big feasts. There were wooden rolling pins, bookstands, breadboards and boxes. An arched entrance led to a vegetable market of bamboo stalls covered in sack cloth.

The next bazaar sold clothes for the gods like dolls’ clothes, only sparkling, tinselled, silky and embroidered with jewels. There were tiny dresses for Kishori, veils and golden sandals. There were knitted jumpers some only three inches across the arms. There were crowns and flutes, belts with pearl-drop fringes, turban cloths, peacock feathers, gold drinking cups, and little baskets for the goddess Kishori to carry flowers in. Pearl wished she could have some of these dolly-gods — they were standing in rows waiting to be taken to their new homes and loved. She would. When the time was right. They would decide when that would be.

First things first. She wanted to blend in. She needed saris. She slipped off her shoes and stepped up into a cloth stall. The floor was soft with durries covered in spotless white
sheets. She sat cross-legged.

‘Do you have a pink cotton sari, please?’

‘Yes, yes,’ said the stall-keeper, pulling scarlet, azure, emerald and yellow saris from his shelves and throwing them like streamers so they unfurled and in clouds of colour and design against the white. He watched Pearl’s dazzled eyes widen.

‘But these are silk. Do you have cotton, please?’ she said. ‘Pink?’

‘Yes, yes,’ said the stall-keeper and unfurled more: multicoloured, block-printed, paisley-patterned, flowered, striped, spotted, and zigzagged. There were recurring themes — the undulating creeper with its curling tendrils and limitless types of flowers and leaves; paisley, bold Celtic knot-like motifs; birds, trees, flowers and more flowers. Pearl was a good dressmaker and knew a thing about prints and patterns, but these were clearly divinely inspired. They were confectionery. At last, the smiling stall-keeper sold Pearl three: two plain pink cotton, not too thin, with block print borders of flowers the same but different, and one, a sort of pale aquamarine with a pattern of dull birds like sparrows that fascinated Pearl for their simplicity and their loveliness. She bought three white petticoats and three large, long, loose, ready-made blouses in pink, blue, and green to wear beneath her saris.

She bought an aluminium bucket and a bathing mug. She bought a woven grass floor mat and a cotton sheet with cows on it. She bought a single-burner paraffin cooker, a glass bottle of paraffin and a cooking pot. She bought two boxes of Elephant Brand matches, a packet of six candles, a packet of mosquito coils and a packet of incense. She bought a calico bag of popped rice, a jar of chutney, two packets of biscuits, some crystals of sugar like amber quartz and yoghurt in a plastic bag twisted at the top with a knot. The grocer packed Pearl’s shopping in a strong canvas bag from Taj Mahal tea, negotiated with a rickshaw-wallah and saw Pearl clamber safely in.

Home!

Late that afternoon, the old cow-herder walked his sixteen cows past Pearl’s window to their cowshed once more. Their hooves stirred a cloud of fine dust which rose in their wake and hung in the ginger glow of the setting sun. It would be like this every cinnamon-scented night, regular as clockwork. In Swapnavan, nothing had changed for five-thousand years.
By way of enquiry from shopkeepers and temple musicians, Pearl soon found a mridanga teacher. Malini lived alone in a brick hut on the silent sandy tree-lined path encircling Swapnavan. Her grey plait reached below her waist. She turned tulsi wood branches on her lathe into beads of various shapes and sizes and strung them for sale to pilgrims.

She fixed a strand round Pearl’s neck. ‘Wearing tulsi you are touching body of goddess Tulsi. She is purifying. She is giving devotion.’

Morning and evening, Malini played mridanga with groups of musicians at functions in temples and homes. Other times, she was absorbed in her meditation or studying the works of the bards in her line. Malini ordered a mridanga from her mridanga-maker for Pearl, and took Pearl to pay for it. Outside the mridanga-maker’s hut, freshly painted eggshell-fragile drum-shells lay drying on the earth. Across the heads of some, stretched taut translucent skins laced with thongs of red dyed leather.

The mridanga-maker sat on a mat. His hands were blackened with work and his teeth and eyes were reddened with intoxicants.

He spoke with Malini for a while then turned to Pearl and said in a reassuring tone, ‘Death is natural.’

Pearl was perplexed.
‘No cow is slaughtered for the leather to make these drums,’ Malini interpreted.

The mridanga-maker tightened the heads of Pearl’s mridanga, tuning them an octave apart. He rubbed circles of black tuning paste on them to give the sound an edge.

‘In hot weather,’ Malini said, ‘you are to put water here and here to maintain the drum sounding deeply. In winter, you wrap your mridanga in one blanket and the clay and the air inside will be warm.’ She gestured Pearl should pick up the drum. ‘You try.’

Pearl gently beat the heads of the drum and Malini and the craftsman watched her. Its vibration hung in the air long after she had touched it.

Offhandedly, Malini added ‘My students, they are practicing at least four hours per day.’

Each pristine morning when the shrubs and creeping plants were dripping with mist and women were picking jasmine for their rituals, Pearl walked out of town to Malini’s hut. Malini sat on a white cushion leaning back on a white bolster. Pearl rounded her shoulders, folded her palms, and sat crosslegged on the mat before her teacher.

Malini first taught Pearl a simple foundational exercise to strengthen her hand and loosen her wrist. She wrote the mantra of the sound of the beat in a notebook: tere kheta.
Pearl's first babyish banging made her heart leap with joy. She played slowly at first, paying attention to the action of her fingers and thumb as they struck the high end, and to the position of her left hand as it struck the deep end, flat-handed and firm, controlled.

Then, teacher and pupil played together, tere kheta, tere kheta, tere kheta.

‘Keep the te – re separate,’ Malini reminded her as they went faster. If Pearl rushed ahead of her skill her hands would slip and slide uselessly across the drumhead. That would not do. If she was to develop skill, first she would need strength.

Pearl fixed her eyes on Malini’s hands and rarely glanced at her face.

Malini demonstrated tere kheta, faster and faster like a train until her hands were a blur and individual beats were lost in a purr.

‘So you practice like this,’ she said and waved her hand towards the door.

For Pearl, it was as if she'd struck a vein of a familiar energy. Malini saw her raw sincerity. At first she overlooked Pearl’s awkward thumping and encouraged her patiently, but that passed. Malini began to work Pearl ruthlessly, altering the shape of her ego. Pearl was glad of it. She wanted a real teacher.

Finally, Malini said, ‘Your hand is ready.’ She gave Pearl her first real kirtan beat — a beat she could use to accompany songs. She learned ornamentations to go at the end of each musical phrase. She learned two-time and three-time. She learned beats spiced with syncopation and beats to urge listeners to dance.

Each lesson when Pearl sat before Malini, she took her mridanga upon her lap, folded her palms and recited a prayer of learning. Then, Malini nodded, ‘Show me the beat you have been practicing.’

Pearl played but Malini showed no expression. She nodded again. Pearl stopped and Malini demonstrated the beats effortlessly, sometimes reciting their mantras to elucidate their nature. There was no talking. Malini nodded again, Pearl joined in, and teacher and student played together faster and ever faster, with ever new and ever-complicated intricacies.

Lesson after lesson, week after week, Pearl built her strength and repertoire. Malini worked Pearl until she could play furiously fast, but never as fast or as well as her teacher.

Not in this lifetime.

Sometimes, by nodding and raising her eyebrows, Malini forced Pearl to keep playing when the muscles in her arms were burning and she wanted only to stop. Malini taught Pearl not to make faces while she played. She ought not screw up her face with effort or
emotion but maintain an expression of poise and dignity and pleasantness. It should be beautiful for the audience. Malini led and Pearl followed, responding to her tests and challenges and in this way, they communicated. The beating filled the courtyard, leaked into the canopy of trees and carried out across the riverbank where women bent washing, pounding wet saris.

Pearl looked for kindness in the eyes of her teacher but found it only in her teaching. She tried to reciprocate, repaying Malini by practicing hours dedicatedly so that Malini would be satisfied with her progress and be able to build on her lessons, rather than repeating them. But for all the months Pearl learned, Malini praised her only once, and then so slightly Pearl thought she had imagined it.

After two hours Malini would say, ‘Bas. Enough. So you practice this mantra, and show me tomorrow.’

Pearl practiced until the pads on her palms bled then developed calluses, until the muscles in her arms ached but then grew stronger, until the beat of the mridanga caused the ghosts in her mind to flee. She had begun to develop a fixedness of purpose, a focus she had never experienced before, a strength in the core of her being, a grace in her limbs, and a new expression of confidence in her face. She sat on a carpet on the rooftop terrace of the pilgrims’ hostel overlooking the townscape of temple spires and archways, singing a lilting Bengali song petitioning Kishori for her service.

It came to Pearl that Malini had not only taught her about music, but that she had also shown her what it meant to know that fabulous creature, a guru.

It meant more than she had thought.

Each day after her lesson, Pearl walked back to her room in the hostel through the marketplace. During her privileged days in the International School she’d lived on lightly-spiced meals provided for students and staff. Now she was buying takeaway snacks to eat in her room or quite often she’d stop on her way home to fill her belly with hot, dirt-cheap, street-food. She’d sit on the bench of a chai-stall with a clay cup of chai and bowl made of leaves piled with deep-fried battered vegetable balls doused in green chili sauce, crunchy savoury do-nuts, or stuffed fried pastries.

The cooking oil was an unknown quantity but Pearl trusted the men who cooked were all pukka. After all, they were inhabitants of a holy place.

‘Buy me one bowl of food,’ a ragged beggarman insisted, and she did.
‘Kishori-ji bless you,’ the beggar said as a passer-by with paan-reddened teeth spat in the gutter and a threadbare dog sniffed at Pearl’s feet. The green chilies began to take effect. Pearl’s constitution was being tested.

But she never got sick.
Winifred Green drove to see her sister again that week with a box of apricots as an excuse. Grace got straight to the point, ‘So, how is Pearly, Darl?’

‘I can’t say for sure, Gracey. She’s still in her holy town. Sounds all right from her letters.’

‘But what exactly’s she doing out there? Has she given up her job?’

‘Yes. She’s given up teaching. Studying music. And it seems she’s turned Hindu.’

‘Don’t you have to be born a Hindu?’

‘I think it’s just a kind of meditation they do.’

‘Fair enough. But is she safe? I mean, she’s a good looking girl. You can’t always tell from the letters what’s going on.’

‘ Seems she’s renting a room in some kind of hostel for travellers. I reckon that once she’s learned their ways, you know, how to act and all, she should be alright. I mean, she’s getting about in the local garb and she’s probably picked up a bit of the Hindu-lingo by now.’

‘Well, what if she gets taken for a ride?’

‘My Pearly? That’d be the day.’

Grace handed her sister a tea towel. ‘And what if she finds some Indian chappy?’

‘Salt’n’pepper!’ Winifred made a face. ‘What can you do Gracey? She’s going on twenty-four.’

Grace glared and lowered her voice — it was her way of shouting at Winifred. ‘What the dickens is the matter with you? What if she gets sick? There’s a lot of disease out there. Malaria!’

‘Not malarial where she is.’

‘Typhoid.’

Winifred looked black.

‘She could die, Win. What’s she eating?’

‘Listen Gracey. The girl’s got god. If he can’t take care of her, well, who can? And she’s got brains. What am I supposed to do? I’ve worried myself sick, but you’ve got to have a bit of faith. And I’ve got a feeling … ‘

‘Feeling schmeling! You’re a dreamer like she is, Winifred Nora Green. It’s a dangerous country with five-hundred-million darkies and a dreadful lot of disease and poverty. She could just disappear into it like a black hole and you’d never know what the heck had happened to her.’

‘The Golden Milkmaid’
Gracey had not come down in the last shower. She knew that somewhere inside her sister, a niggling terror hid, a twenty-four-hour fear for her little girl, a fear borne only of love that could never go away. Winifred avoided her sister’s eyes. She would see the worry in hers. She hung her tea towel on the range and smoothed out the creases.

‘No Gracey,’ she shook her head. ‘I’ve got a gut feeling my little Pearly’s going to be just fine.’
Occasions for celebration were so numerous in Swapnavan, that Pearl quite lost count of them. One summer day, Krishna in the temple appeared dressed in a royal outfit formed entirely sandalwood paste. Another unique day, Kishori had her feet showing and pilgrims rushed to the temples to see this rare sight. They were offered cold rose-water-milk free, a blessing in the intense heat. On the day of the annual festival of Kishori-Raman — Kishori’s Delight — Pearl took a rickshaw to the temple compound and let the crowd carry her along through an enclosure where squirrels, doves and parrots were hopping about and two young deer were grazing, through ancient painted courtyards where priests’ families lived, to the main entrance where a flower-seller handed her a garland of roses in a packet of leaves. People slipped off their shoes at the threshold. The worshippers brushed their fingers in the dust of the feet of countless decades of pilgrims before them and brushed it upon their foreheads. Pearl did the same.

It was a small temple. Not at all grand. Humble. And that overwhelming fragrance of flowers.

Surely there was no limit to the quantity and quality of flowers used for Kishori-Raman’s pleasure. Flower artists had trimmed the interior with festoons brought by the cartload. Marigold swathes looped around the walls, radiated out from the altar, and met in the centre overhead at an ornate floral chandelier dripping with pom pom blossoms. Around the altar hung lotus buds delivered by rail from the cool clean lakes in the foothills of the Himalayas.

Florists were putting the final adjustments to a flower palace for the little god. They’d threaded heads and buds of jasmine onto countless yards of string wound onto reels and then woven them in geometric lattice patterns onto wooden frames. Kites and diamonds formed neat mandalas, criss-crossed rectangles interlocked into log-cabin squares, triangles formed stars or nested inside hexagons or octagons, star polygons juxtaposed with complex stars and borders of zigzags layered with rows of chevrons. The air would move luxuriously through the trellises, cooling Kishori-Raman, and scenting the air around him.

It was so pretty.

At the back of the courtyard on a dais behind a row of slender pillars, Pearl found a place to sit. From here, she could gaze discretely into the temple hall. She tucked her feet underneath her and adjusted her shawl. Beneath the flowers around the five century-old carved sandstone walls hung cotton drapes appliquéd with turquoise and purple peacocks and lotus blooms. The inner sanctum where the flower palace stood was set upon a deep
stone stage before medieval silver doors and a huge burgundy curtain.

The crowd gathered, gentle and light-hearted. Some stood in groups conversing in murmurs as they waited for their moment of worship. A family — perhaps the people who’d paid for today’s festival — stood to one side: pale elegant ladies wearing raw taupe silk with gold filigree at their ears, wrists and necks; men wearing tight white trousers and long side-split shirts that glinted with diamond studs. The smooth sensitive feet of the wealthy trod the same chessboard floor as the cracked soles of poor mendicants emerged from hermitages in the wilds smelling of wood smoke. Old men left their walking sticks at the door and bowed pressing their foreheads to the floor before the high altar, then stood waiting for a view of the inner shrine. Old women lined the front of the stone altar just high enough for them to peep over so their eyes were level with the feet of the priests taking their humble offerings of sweets and flowers.

How was the course of their lives so very different from her own? Pearl wondered; here they were, she and they, together, all waiting to catch a glimpse of the same sweet Lord.

Of all the waiting worshippers, only one paid much attention to Pearl — a girl of around her age in a cream trouser-suit with a snakelike braid. She came and sat beside Pearl and without introduction as if there was some urgency said,

‘This is the festival of Kishori’s Delight. Are you knowing?’

‘Yes.’ Pearl could smell coconut oil.

‘So, just now, Kishori’s Delight, he is in the privacy of his shrine. He will be giving audience in fifteen minutes. So, this morning his attendants are bathing him and offering him new clothes and jewelry. All day, they are cooking finest ingredients in best quality ghee.’ She gestured through an arch toward a kitchen area in the compound outside. ‘So just now they are offering baskets of rich savouries and sweet pastries.’

Musicians arrived with dignity and stepped up to the platform. Pearl went to move away, but the singer gestured that she should remain where she was.

‘No problem,’ the girl physically pressed Pearl down. ‘Stay.’

The vocalist settled behind her harmonium, arranging her crisp sari around her and over her head. She handed Pearl a pair of small chimes. ‘Take,’ she said, indicating Pearl should play. A tabla player sat nearby.

Pumping the bellows of her harmonium with her left hand, the woman fluttered across the keyboard with her right and began to sing impossibly high.

Two boys with no more than fifteen years between them arrived and sat behind the
tabla-player and played the chimes, ringing them with so much skill and sensitivity that Pearl thought they must have been playing them since birth.

The handsome tabla player unfolded astounding intricate rhythms, thrusting his shoulders and tossing his wavy mane around his face. Pearl smiled inwardly — she could never be swayed — only the sublime moods and deep energetic force of the mridanga could call her heart.


There he was. The cynosure of all eyes. The cheeky god of sweetness. The mischievous; the adorable. Kishori-Raman stood two feet tall, elevated on a plinth inside his flower-house on a grand altar with a canopy fringed with bells all in time-greyed silver pressed with frost-like filigree. Upon his feet were rubies. His chubby legs were crossed. His little body was perfectly proportioned and his chest was broad and handsome. The tips of his bright, white, fish-shaped eyes stretched past his ears and his lips smiled alluringly. His crown of gold and emeralds glinted in the lamplight. There was a paisley drop upon it and a peacock feather that was swaying in the movement of the air created by the priests’ gigantic peacock-feather fans.

Old women rummaged in their hand-stitched bags or child-sized wicker baskets on their wrinkly forearms and brought out tins of ghee wicks, incense and matches. They circled the light of their devotion before their beloved child-god and in return, priests passed them sanctified tulsi leaves and condensed milk in walnut-sized clay pots. The crowd sang in unison and women rolled their tongues in ululation so shrill and with such gusto that Pearl’s very spirit jumped inside her. The bell stopped clanging. The crowd roared, ‘Joy!’ Pearl felt as if some kind of a binding that had been encircling her heart, restraining and restricting it for longer than she could remember broke apart. The priests lifted great silver-ended conch-shells to their lips and blew and blew long, low, very loud notes.

The crowd now hushed and the girl in the trouser suit slid through to Pearl.

‘Are you able to see Kishori-Raman’s orchid necklace from here?’ she asked as they bumped together in the gentle jostling. It was a deep, bright purple.

‘Yes!’

The girl leaned close to make herself heard. ‘For twenty years on this festival day, one businesswoman in Thailand has sent it. She flies it packed in ice and from Palam airport by private car. She has not missed one year.’
Pearl looked and then looked back to the girl, but she had gone.

The curtains closed once more and the crowd moved gently around within itself and gradually dispersed. Pearl was in no hurry to leave. She sat down again near the platform at the back where the musicians had been and a woman came and stood beside her. She was wearing white. Pearl stood up.

She’d spotted this woman around the town, walking with her eyes fixed, soft and low, ahead of her, so fast she seemed acutely aware of every second. People in the streets acknowledged her, but acquaintances didn’t stop her — they just nodded and briefly placed their hand upon their heart, smiling slightly.

The woman looked deeply into Pearl’s upturned face. It was uncommon to see foreigners in Swapnavan; rarer still a woman. And this one quite alone. The woman thought, this girl was not one of the German Indologists who came to study Sanskrit or sitar, nor a Russian engineer, wandering happily, as they did. This one wore a pale, neat sari.

She walked less like a foreign woman than any she had seen — they usually strode boldly like men, looking about audaciously. This girl prayed with folded palms before Kishori and Krishna in the temple, drinking in Swapnavan as if she wanted to realise her secrets. For a Westerner to cultivate the ways of devotion in the rarefied mood of Swapnavan, the planets must be in extraordinary alignment.

The woman spoke gently, ‘May I introduce myself? My name is Syrupy.’

_Can't be_, thought Pearl.

‘And what is your good name?’

‘My name is Pearl.’

‘I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Pearl. You are British?’

‘I’m from Australia.’

‘Austria.’

‘Australia.’

‘Australia! Goodness gracious.’ She seemed kindly. ‘And, you are alone? I believe you are as yet unmarried.’

‘Yes. I’ve been teaching at the International School in New Delhi. And now I’m here.’

The woman did not ask Pearl why she had travelled to Swapnavan. It was the same for anyone. They’d come expressly at the personal invitation of goddess Kishori. Even those who did not know it.

‘And where are you put up?’

*The Golden Milkmaid*
'Mahesh Guesthouse.'

Concern flickered barely perceptibly across the woman’s brow.

She and Pearl were of equal height. The woman was neither large nor petite and her features were neither fine nor coarse. Her forehead was high and wide. Her hair was as grey and short as a squirrel’s, her complexion tawny-gold and her eyes a surprising hazel flecked and strangely bright. Many of the old women Pearl saw here seemed to have lost their femininity and decades of harsh austerity had etched their faces with wrinkles. But this one was womanly and serene. Her sari was muslin and had an inch-wide border of tiny blue swans. It was draped Bengali-style and the headpiece was weighted over her shoulder with a silver key-locket and a few iron keys. Her long blouse was perfectly fitted with tight sleeves to her elbows. Her hands were expressive. They were not the hands of leisure but neither had they been disfigured by hard work. Her fingernails were short. They were clean. Around her neck, she wore five necklaces of shining pea-sized tulsi beads and her pendulous earlobes were pierced with tulsi twigs that joined polished tulsi beads on either side.

‘And how are you liking this temple, my dear?’

‘I’ve never seen anything like it! It’s fascinating! But ... your English is very good ... please ... could you tell me the story behind the statue of Kishori-Raman?’

‘Statue?’ Syrupy looked pained. The girl’s eyes had not yet become accustomed to the brightness of a place such as this. ‘Statue he is surely not! You are seeing here cent percent God himself!

‘I will tell you. Even so, how much you will be understanding I am not knowing.’

The temple had emptied apart from an elderly couple chanting on their beads and a girl sweeping flower petals. Syrupy sat down beside Pearl, straightened her back and took a deep breath.

_A sage had lived at this very spot some five hundred years ago. He was greatly devoted and pure. He kept one ammonite stone in a box and worshipped it every morning with offerings and water. Pearl had seen these sacred stones in street shrines. Some had painted eyes. This one came from a river that rose Tibet and was body of Vishnu himself. Secretly, the sage wished he could worship an icon of Krishna himself, not a stone. Syrupy leaned toward Pearl until Pearl could smell coconut oil and firdaus. He longed to be able to touch Krishna’s feet with his own hands, to look at his face and into his eyes. Pearl listened and a gecko chirruped on a wall nearby. One day, the sage went to worship his Vishnu rock, but it had disappeared and a figurine stood in its place. Syrupy mimed with her hands._

‘The Golden Milkmaid’

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The sage picked up the little god. He was perfect in every way. His fingers and toes perfectly formed, his ears were like a tiny child’s. His body was entirely of silken black stone but on his back, joined with his body, was a lump of stone like a popped kernel of corn. It was clearly the remains of the ammonite! And it is still there to this day! Syrupy waited for Pearl’s reaction.

Pearl smiled politely and folded her palms. ‘What a lovely story! Thank you.’ It’d take a while to make sense of it. The evening was drawing on. Pearl stood to leave. Syrupy halted her — perhaps she wanted remuneration for her story. Pearl would be happy to give her a rupee or so. She reached into her bag but Syrupy placed her hand lightly on Pearl’s forearm saving them both from embarrassment.

‘Young lady, please give me one moment of your time,’ Syrupy said. ‘I have come to beg your assistance. Kindly, do not be affronted at my request.’

Pearl listened.

‘A generous benefactor has recently donated one Godrej typewriter for a task I am, at present, undertaking. It is an important service to spread the mission of love. I am completing an English translation of Sri Saraswati Swamini’s Asta-kala-leela. This translation is to be entitled, Running with Eyes Closed. This brings me to the crux of the matter. If you would be so kind as to assist me in rendering my ungainly translations into intelligible prose, I would be greatly indebted,’ and, without pause, ‘Might I suggest every Tuesday and Saturday, for three hours? At my room?’

Pearl reasoned with herself, why not? She had time when she wasn’t practicing mridanga. And if things went wrong, she could stop. Besides, she quite liked the woman.

‘It would be an honour.’

‘Auspicious day!’ Syrupy glanced toward the shrine of Kishori-raman. As if in a hurry lest the girl change her mind, from beneath the folds of her sari, she produced a quilted bag the same washed-out hue.

‘By chance, I am carrying the first chapter of my manuscript. I trust my script is legible. It is a little cumbersome perhaps. Please,’ she placed the quilted bag into Pearl’s hands, ‘kindly borrow my book bag to carry it with you.’

It was late by the time Pearl got home. She slept, and woke in the morning to the sound of parakeets and Sanskrit mantras in the air. It was extremely early. There was the woman’s calico bag with her papers in it.

The woman’s name was on the front page of the manuscript. Of course, it was not
Syrupy. It was S-u-r-a-h-i. The sacred cow.

Surabhi’s slanting script was regular and easy to read.

A story peeled off the pages as if neither pen stroke nor paper could imprison it; as if it belonged in the ether beyond words.

Pearl took a pencil and swiftly and lightly began to draw arrows and circles and words on the document.

These were not words that belonged to a writer or translator or editor.

They were their own.
In the timeless land of Swapnavan it was nearly six o’clock in the morning. A maidservant moved soundlessly in the apricot light round Kishori’s room, picking up clothes Kishori had dropped two short hours before: a mirrored skirt, three gossamer scarves, clouds of tulle petticoats, and an embroidered blouse of the style popular with milkmaidens, short and short-sleeved and with tassels swinging from the sleeve hems.

Another maidservant tied back the curtains while a third quietly massaged Kishori’s small bare pink feet to rouse her from a slumber filled with dreams of lust and love lost. Kishori thought she was still walking along the riverbank with Krishna; her hand on his broad shoulder, his arm round her waist. In such a dreamy state, she was unable to do anything for herself.

More of Kishori’s maidservant friends arrived carrying warmed jasmine oil and jugs of bath water. They helped Kishori to rinse her mouth with cool spearmint-scented water and to scrub her teeth with a soft neem twig. They removed her nightdress, draped her in fine muslin and lightly massaged her legs, back, arms, hands and neck with oil distilled with flower essences. They carefully applied salves of herbs on the bruises and love-bites on her skin and even more tenderly to the scratches on her feet which she had gained running through woodland thickets in the dark, for her feet were soft and delicate as lotus petals and as sensitive as her lips. They poured warm rose water over Kishori’s back from a jug and washed her thick black hair with mud cream shampoo. They dried her locks with fragrant smoke from a thurible of beaten gold — one girl held the censer, another used a leaf fan to waft the smoke and a third untangled Kishori’s hair with a wooden comb carved with peacocks and set with emeralds and rubies. Kishori’s hair sprung naturally into ringlets. The girls stroked jasmine oil from its roots to its ends and plaited it securely into a long black snake.

The maidservants who were in charge of Kishori’s clothes opened a wooden trunk gaily painted with cows and perfumed inside with patchouli leaves. They took out some crisp white undergarments and several greatly gathered petticoats embroidered with deer and ducks and elephants, then they dressed Kishori as if she were a doll, from her lower half upward.
Today Kishori was wearing a layered skirt embroidered with long reddish purple paisley shapes against a background of jet-blue edged with a border of bimbafruit; and she was wearing a red chemise to match — for blue reminded Kishori of Krishna's dark skin and red of his lips. One of the girls suggested a gauzy veil in pink to compliment the outfit. She held it up against the light streaming in through the window — it was embroidered with tiny birds, and as she moved it, it appeared as if the birds were moving their little lacy wings up and down so that they were flying in a flock across a gossamer sky.

Kishori was still far away. She was remembering her and Krishna's secret tryst the night before, how Krishna had joked with her and made her laugh, how it had pained her heart to have to leave him. She ached with anticipation as she thought of their secret plans to meet again that day. The butterflies in her belly were driving her to distraction.

Some of the cosmetic girls brought freshly prepared aloe, coconut and cream sun-ointment and applied it to Kishori's limbs; other of them sat at her feet and painted red foot-lac around the edges of her soles in patterns like flower creepers and breaking waves. They freshened her nail-art and massaged her hands. They drew lines of black corrylium around her eyelashes, a pattern of minuscule dots above her strong eyebrows, a pretty dot of scintillating powdered scent in the centre of her brow, and a dot of blue scented musk on her chin.

The jewellery maidservant selected a complete set of jewelry to compliment Kishori's outfit for the day, her mood, and the position of the stars at that particular time of month. First, she directed her assistants to slip toe rings on Kishori's toes and fasten chains of bells around her ankles. They pressed the tiny bones in Kishori's hands and slid bangles over them in symmetrical arrangement: two dozen blue, some red, several gold, and two set with jewels in aurora borealis. They slipped rings onto Kishori's ring finger and little finger on her right hand and on every finger and the thumb of her left hand. They fastened Kishori's locket containing a painting of Krishna above her heart. They draped necklaces of seed-pearls around Kishori's neck and looped long matching earrings around her earlobes. They fixed studs to the upper part of Kishori's ears, with hair-fine chains joining diamond hair-grips in her hair, and hung blue jet jay-shaped earrings from her earlobes. They fixed sun and moon hair-brooches on either side of Kishori's parting, also in aurora borealis, and, at last, a gold and diamond tear-drop of high on her forehead where her brow met her hair.

Pearl gazed from her window across the rooftop terraces. A woman sat in the sun rubbing oil the length of her hair; a baby slept on a rope-bed; parakeets were making a din.

Malini had gone to see her family in Bengal. It would be alright to skip practice. Pearl could not put the manuscript down.
Not far from Kishori’s home, in the home of his father the village headman, Krishna slept. Birds flew through the windows of his perfect room and perched on the frame of his bed singing ‘Krishna! Krishna! Krishna!’ in exuberant harmony. Krishna sat up and stretched. His mother and grandmother came in singing prayers to the sun-god, and boy attendants brought warm fresh milk and condensed milk sweets golden with saffron.

As soon as Krishna heard his father calling that it was time to milk the cows, he shook off his sleep, jumped up, and ran outside to the milking barn. The flanks of Krishna’s favourite cows were whiter than powdered camphor and only their bumble-bee-black horns stood out in the light of the brilliant round early morning moon. The walls and the pillars of the barn were painted with murals of demigods set with jewels that sparkled purple and orange as the sun’s rays peeped above the treetops and across the pasturelands.

Krishna’s father employed many dairymen so there was no need for Krishna to milk, but he did so because he loved the cows. He spoke to each one with affection and each one responded, lowing with bliss. Some deep-voiced cow-men sang to the cows and as dawn progressed, more and more birds filled the rafters with song. Cowherd women came out of their houses singing to their babies and priests began to chant their morning mantras. The whole village filled with harmonious music which soothed the cows into contented lowing as they were milked.

When Krishna was happy, joy welled in the hearts of everyone around him: his parents, his family, his friends, his cows and birds and deer and all the calves nuzzling their mothers with love. Even the non-moving creatures like the trees and grasses felt surges of ecstasy when he was glad and the inanimate beings like rocks and crystals vibrated when he smiled.

Now Krishna’s mother sent a girl to bring Kishori to cook. Kishori left her palace and set off with her girlfriends along a footpath through the woods to the palace of Krishna’s parents, laughing and singing all the way.

The thought of Krishna milking the cows was forcing its way into every girl’s mind like a maddened elephant in a flower garden.

Repeating the lore of Swapnavan as spoken by her predecessors, this maidservant of Saraswati and Swamini aspires to realise it.
By Christmas, Winifred’s batteries had drained. It had become an endeavour just getting out of the house to drive to town. She had had a couple of bright letters from the relatives over in England, a bill, a seed catalogue. Nothing from India. No small, soft aerogram with Hindi writing, no rupee stamp, no talk of turbaned sages and roaming holy cows. It had been a while.

Sometimes, to save opening a tin at home, she’d have a bite to eat at the Old Spot. She’d eat at a table by the window facing the street. George’s table. If George were alive he’d have been appalled at her eating pub grub. But if George were alive, she’d have been cooking his dinner and they’d have sat down together. Anyway, it wasn’t such a bad pub and the landlord was a good sort.

‘How y’going young lady. Any news from your Pearly?’

‘G’day Walter. I’ll have one of your toasted sandwiches today. And a Woody’s with ice, thanks. Cheese and piccalilli. Yeah. Nah. Haven’t heard for a while.’

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'She still teaching? Bombay was it?'
'Delhi. Moved out to the country now. Living with the locals.'
Walter nodded and widened his eyes.
'Seems happy.' Winifred went on, 'Extended her ticket too. Don’t know when we’ll be seeing her back here.'
'Well, good on her, I say.' Walter pushed the toasted sandwich across the bar and moved the Rosella sauce closer. ‘Better living in some village in India than out in Vietnam.’
Winifred looked up.
‘You know Nobby Clark’s youngest is out there now.’
‘Not true! Fighting?’ It was inconceivable. He was just a lad.
‘Yeah.’
‘That’s rough.’
‘Yeah. Nobby’s real fretful.’
‘And his missus?’
He just shook his head.
‘You losing a bit of weight there, Winnie?’
‘Yeah, Walt. Been crook. But she’ll be right.’
George would have been upset to hear about Nobby Clark’s son. He’d have dwelt on it and worried. But he’d have wept and worried for his own girl more, gone to India, of all places. ‘Why India!’ he’d have said. He’d’ve said Pearly could’ve gone to England if it was travel she wanted. Could’ve stayed with the rellies there, found teaching work. Seen London. Gone to Europe. Paris even. Stayed for as long as she liked. Stayed forever. George would have understood that. But not India. There were still tigers in India.
In fact, Winifred thought, it would’ve broken George’s heart.
Suddenly, there he was, standing with the window behind him and an aura of light through the net curtains all round.
He would say, ‘You should be looking after her Winnie. What are you doing letting her go off like that? Why don’t you do something? Speak to her.’
And she’d say, ‘But Darl’, she’s grown up now. She’s got a mind of her own.’
‘Speak to her, Win. Call the embassy. Send a telegram. Do something...’
Then she’d say, a little more forcefully now, ‘Holy Dooley, George, have a little faith, will you? The girl’s got a good head on her shoulders, and she’s not a child any longer.’ She’d tell him Pearly had written some nice letters and she’d talked about the things she’d seen:
the Taj Mahal and the temples, the sacred cows and all the holy women. She’d tell him Pearly was broadening her mind seeing the world, seeing how other people live. And she’d be back. Pearly knew how to be careful because George had raised their eldest well, for after all, he was not only the most good-looking but also the wisest chap there was. She’d tell him not to worry. Pearly would be fine. George would stop his worrying and nagging and look down into her face.

‘Yes. Perhaps you’re right,’ he would say, ‘She’s going to be alright.’

‘And we’re all going to be back together again,’ Winifred would say. He’d hold her tight against him. And there was that smell of motorcycle oil.

She nodded at Walter and straightened her hat at the door.

‘Hit her bad when she lost her old chap,’ thought Walt.

There were clouds in the sky but the sun was behind them. Winifred looked at her watch as she walked and counted back the hours.

Out there, it could be dawn.
The termites in Pearl’s wooden guesthouse bed had never bothered her before, but this night the crunching seemed to be amplified in the silence as if through a sound box. She went to the rooftop-terrace and looked down into the alleyways surrounding the building. It was a dull damp day. Ferocious-looking wild swine, strange, skittish, long-tusked hogs with bristling hackles were running around in small packs helping themselves to the earthy debris in the gutters with their snuffling snouts. An emaciated bitch suckled her litter. One sweeper was squirting the road from a goatskin water bag and another was sweeping with a broom of branches.

Pearl went back down to her room. At home, when she had her monthly, she always had a long bath. Here, she just had a bucket and a jug. Her limbs ached. She put on a nice new sari. It might make her feel better. A dull ache throbbed below her ribs on her right side. She had to get to the chemist in the bazaar. She went down into the alleyway. A hog stood lurching out of an open drain and trotted past her before she could get out of its way, wiping excrement covered bristles against her beautiful sari. Everything was hideous. Dogs were barking. An ass was braying. She’d had enough. Her sari was ruined. She needed a shower. She’d have to bathe in that damn bucket. Have to go down to the pump to get water. Carry it up the stairs.

She turned back toward the hostel. A pressure cooker was whistling. A man was shouting calling a boy a thief and beating him over the head with a shoe. She had to get home. Women were jabbering, screechy-voice.

She needed to go shopping in a normal shopping centre. She’d get to Delhi, find a clean hotel, change her flight.

She needed her mum.

She’d have to go and see Syrupy to give her back the manuscript.

She got back to the hostel. There were monkey droppings all over the stairs. She lifted the hem of her sari with one hand and held the other over her nose. At least the monkey had gone. A monkey bite was all she needed. There was rubbish all over the place. Paper. Ripped and perforated with monkey teeth marks.

The door of her room was ajar. A stupid monkey had got inside! It had been eating her biscuits and chewed on her soap bar. It had spilled the milk and smeared toothpaste up the wall. Then, in among the horrid monkey-rubbish, she spotted a familiar picture. It was from her book. That demon monkey had ripped handfuls of leaves from her beautiful book.
She wrapped her arms around her knees and curled up in a ball.
She was sick.

For many mornings the old cow-herder and his multicoloured cows walked past her window, and back again for many nights. Pearl drank from the pump and splashed her face. She was queasy. She lost the desire to eat. She felt exhausted but when she slept spectral crones reached out their emaciated fingers towards her and touched her face and she woke with her hair and bedclothes drenched with icy sweat. She looked down at her body: her stomach had become hollow and her collarbones were protruding. She lay on her bed unwashed, sometimes burning, sometimes shivering, drifting in and out of sleep, thinking about death. When witches with ashen faces haunted her waking hours she thought she’d never now be free.

Leaving the body here, they said, was not the same as dying in the ordinary world. Devotees came in their hundreds to pass on here. Earthly Swapnavan was a portal to eternal perfect Swapnavan. On this numinous ground, even a hideous or tortuous death was auspicious, for it guaranteed transference to Kishori and Krishna’s Spiritual Sky. Even animals who died on this hallowed ground went straight the Spiritual Sky.

Pearl crawled on all fours, slowly, to the latrine and back.
The heat of the first few weeks of sixty-seven slowed Winifred down almost to a stop. Lily brought a basket with some groceries from Grace, a newspaper, and an aerogram from the Post Office. ‘Greetings’ it said in red printing with a picture of bells. It was late, but, for Winifred Green, it made Christmas complete.

Sunday, December 5th 1966
Dear Mum and everyone,

Christmas greetings to you across the miles. 1966 is almost upon us and so best wishes for a Happy New Year.

I haven’t heard from you for ages, so I was wondering if your letters had got lost in the post. Letters often get opened and lost here, and so aerogrammes are always the safest. If you write to the address on this aerogram, it should get to me alright as Mahesh Guest-house is a respectable place. Please write, I would love to hear from you. I think of you all often, but as you might imagine life here is absorbing and exciting, so, I have let months slip by without getting in touch. It was not from any type of spiritual or renunciation I neglected my family. Just absorption in everything here. There’s so much to get swept up in. Every second, everywhere you look there is something remarkable. Something to be written about or sketched. You hardly ever see a car here. So peaceful! I love it all passionately. The people are kind and open-hearted. Most people here live in rural areas and work on the land. They travel thousands of miles to go on pilgrimage. There’s a temple you would like — absolutely fantastic — all white marble like a wedding cake with its white icing in latticework, peacocks, lotuses, swans, domes. Inside is a courtyard with pillars and murals, a chequer board marble floor, elephants growing from the corners, carvings all around. And the atmosphere — bells ringing, parrots squawking, pilgrims chanting prayers.

In Delhi there were lots of crows, sparrows, pigeons and mynahs, but in Swapnavan there are bulbuls and rose-ring parakeets. At the river there are plovers and herons and I saw a pair of lovely kingfishers. I also spotted a koel and plenty of awful vultures!

By the way, Pollywaffle would love it here — the bulls are very docile! Did you get my peacock postcard? Your aerogrammes take two weeks to get here. Give my love to Lil and Aunt Grace and everyone. Please come and visit.

All my love,
Pearl.

Surabhi was concerned about the young Australian. She had heard nothing for over a week.
Perhaps she had misjudged her. Perhaps the girl was unreliable. Surabhi wanted her manuscript back. She went to the hostel and up to Pearl’s room.

It smelled unwholesome and the girl was a ghoul.

‘It is viral fever?’ she felt Pearl’s wrist. ‘You have loose motion?’ She held Pearl’s chin and gently pulled her lower eyelids down. The whites were yellow. She tutted, ‘Jaundice. Where have you been eating?’

‘At the tea-stall,’ Pearl confessed.

Surabhi made a louder disapproving tut and curled her lip.

‘But it’s vegetarian...’ Pearl said.

‘Most unseemly for a lady. Very low class. And so many flies.’

She went to the balcony and called, ‘O Ganesh! Come here! Quickly!’

The hostel manager scurried to her, shoulders drooping. Surabhi firmly admonished him. He had neglected his guest. And this, a vulnerable girl in a strange country. Fie on him. Then she paid Pearl’s bill and issued an order to have a rickshaw brought.

She gathered Pearl’s belongings saying, ‘There is nothing else for it, my dear. Your condition is dangerous. You will come to our enclave and take one cottages there. Kishori Bhavan is safe and clean. We will nurse you back to health.’

She helped Pearl off the bed. Pearl was in no state to protest or be afraid.

The rickshaw rattled through the laneways and as Pearl flopped Sideways in her weakness, Surabhi held her on with both arms. Minutiae of street smells filled Pearl’s senses and her skin follicles ached.

At last, the rickshaw passed through a gated archway into a leafy garden filled with birdsong. Surabhi called out to somebody — it was the girl in the cream trouser suit. She unlocked a tiny cottage door and helped Surabhi half-carry Pearl inside. The room smelt of phenyl. Pearl saw herself from above, sinking onto a string bed. Surabhi covered her with a flowery sheet.

A breeze crossing through the windows made a constant sound like a mystical vibration. Pearl heard little whispering voices coming as if from layers of time. She could not make out words, but she was sure they were in the room and she did not want them to stop.

Surabhi had brought the same rickshaw-wallah. He was waiting with his rickshaw inside the compound by the cottage in which Pearl had been drifting in delirious sleep.

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She said, ‘We shall go to the best healer of jaundice in the entire area.’ She shrouded Pearl in a soft shawl and helped her onto the rickshaw seat. The rickshaw plunged through a maze of painted walls and ornamental porches, lanes and patios.

Surabhi called, ‘Slowly! Carefully! Go Slowly!’

The physician lived and worked in a fine old Rajasthani temple with a fresh blue-painted courtyard filled with herbs and aloe-vera in terracotta pots, banana trees, and magnificent flowering tulis in marble columns at each corner. The physician looked like a housewife in a plain cotton sari and glass bangles. She was filling a brass bucket from her courtyard pump. She saw Surabhi supporting Pearl in the doorway and greeted them quietly, ‘Joy Kishori!’

There was a shrine at the back of the courtyard where a jeweled Tulsi goddess stood with her two pet parrots perched on one hand.

‘Gifted to my guru by the King of Rajasthan,’ the healer told Pearl proudly, ‘in gratitude for full recovery. Now you please remove your sari.’

Right there in the courtyard, Surabhi helped Pearl undress to her petticoat and tie it under her arms. The healer lightly rubbed Pearl’s skin with dry bark from a mango tree, and, with a curved copper pot, carefully poured water from the bucket over her body, catching it in a plastic basin.

‘Look,’ said Surabhi. ‘The water is yellow.’

It was carroty. Jaundice was washing out into the bowl from the insides of Pearl’s body.

With a knowing nod, the healer handed Surabhi a pop bottle of tonic for Pearl to drink. Pearl tried to ask what was in it but could not make herself understood. It was pungent and herby. The invigorating rush it gave her cleared her mind and lasted for hours.

Every morning for two weeks, Surabhi took Pearl to the healer. Each visit, the healer rubbed Pearl's skin with mango bark and washed away the yellow; each time the water washed away clearer. Every day, Pearl drank her bottle of bitter tonic, and every time she drank it, she felt a little bit better.

In her new clean bright room, Pearl lay on fresh sheets on her string bed, listless, grateful. Surabhi brought her tart buttermilk with black pepper and cubes of papaya in bowls made of leaves. She brought a string of meditation beads too and taught her a pretty mantra to chant while she was lying on her back with nothing to do.

At last, the healer looked into the water in the basin, satisfied, and nodded. There was not a tinge of yellow in it.
‘It is finished,’ she said, and tapped Pearl on the head with a bunch of peacock feathers. She placed one last bottle of her curious concoction into Pearl’s hands, then she took her payment and turned to her shrine to offer the rupee notes to her goddess.

That night, Pearl drank the last bottle of her tonic and once more asked Surabhi what was in it. Surabhi looked uncomfortable. Pearl had never seen her like this before.

‘The bitterness is the extract of certain herbs,’ said Surabhi, and then, looking into Pearl’s face as if to gauge her reaction, ‘but if I had told you previously, you might not have drunk it.’

‘So, these bitter herbs are some kind of drug?’

Surabhi wrinkled her eyes. ‘The efficacious curative properties in this medicinal compound derive explicitly from the fresh urine of a cow.’

She added reassuringly, ‘That does not taste at all unpleasant.’

Pearl convalesced much of the winter. Each morning, Surabhi walked paths of snow-cold sand to the dairy to purchase a superior quality milk. She turned the milk into soft white curd cheese for Pearl to eat with slices of Britannia bread toasted on a pan of hot coals set in the centre of her room on the floor. For days that turned to weeks Pearl nibbled that and nothing else, but it was delicious and it was nourishing. She bathed in her room with water heated on a bucket-cooker and sat in the sun on her veranda for an while in the middle of the day. Little by little, with the milk, the sun and Surabhi’s care, her strength returned, and with it came a new inner contentment, a feeling that inexplicably felt like a rare and wonderful wealth.

Each day, Surabhi came to Pearl’s room and Pearl listened to her read aloud from her book, first in round-vowel Bengali and then, her translation in English. She paused every now and again to ask Pearl about the English, and Pearl would ask about the Bengali in return. It was the most delightful language. It carried romantic visions in its cadences. It was beautiful like French, but richer and warmer, mysterious and oriental. It was high like Sanskrit but wild and exiting like jungle drumming.

It was like the language of a mother.

Pearl was indebted — she owed her health to Surabhi, and Surabhi had cared for her as if she was her own kith and kin. Every few days, she brought Pearl a bundle of pages of translations for her to correct. Pearl felt her small service an insignificant token of thanks. It was undemanding and it helped while away the time until her strength returned.

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'You have me captive,’ she complained, ‘to help translate your manuscript. You brought me here when I was helpless and now I’ve lost the desire to go elsewhere.’

‘Quite right, my dear,’ Surabhi bounced back, ‘we are conspiring to enslave you.’ The two chuckled.

‘I have no way to repay you,’ Pearl said, reaching to the bottom of her bag, ‘but here. They’re brand new,’ and gave Surabhi a pair of Red Robin socks and an unopened box of hankies.

Some mornings and evenings, when Pearl was well enough, she sat on Surabhi’s veranda and Surabhi introduced her to one or two of the other women. Twelve single women lived in Kishori Bhavan in two rows of cottages joined two by two. The land nestled on a good-sized plot on a path running beside the Yamuna. Pearl and Surabhi’s row of cottages backed onto a meadow of marigolds and rosebushes cultivated by one of the families who sold flower garlands at the temple gates. Surabhi’s cottage was on a corner where she had space for her garden of herbs. Around the edge of the flower-meadow was a healing arboretum of tall Indian-lilac, the bitter leaves from which Surabhi prepared healing tinctures. On the path to the gate was a curry-leaf tree whose leaves Surabhi picked to flavour fluffy wheat-meal with nuts. Wild peacocks came to the rose-garden and danced, turning slowly, tails fanning trembling. On the edge of the rose-garden was a wood-quince tree.

‘Do not walk near that tree,’ Surabhi warned. ‘One cobra is living there.’

Every morning, a greengrocer pushed his barrow to the laneway, loudly calling the names of his vegetables like a song. Surabhi purchased greens for the stray cows who came to the gate.

‘Cows are not visiting willy-nilly,’ she said and introduced Pearl. ‘This is One-Horn. One Horn — this is Pearl.’ One-Horn put her nose in Pearl’s hand and Pearl scratched her under her chin and her hand was sticky with lanolin and sand.

Surabhi scattered grain for parrots and striped squirrels, and poured minuscule mounds of sugar next to ant holes. Striped squirrels came to her courtyard for grains. Parakeets with grass-green plumage visited the garden screaming sharply on the wing. They clung to the walls of a ruined temple, two toes pointing forwards, two pointing back, balancing by flicking their long pointed tails, then flying off to find an orchard to maraud, gnawing with short hooked red bills, wasting more than they could ever consume.
A wiry cat lived in the broken wall behind Surabhi’s cottage — invisible in the light, he slunk out to prowl only at night.

‘I found him. He was sitting in the mud. Grey kitten, grey mud. His fur was spiking and wet. He was mewling, “Meew! Meew!”’

‘Where is his mother?’

‘Killed by a monkey.’

‘I brought him home wrapped in my sari. Now just see. He has become so strong on milk rice and white cheese.’

When she was better still, Pearl went to Surabhi’s room to help with her work. The cottage door was low, so Pearl had to duck to enter, where she had to wait while her eyes became accustomed to the light. It was just one room. An earthy perfume of sandalwood mixed with steam from cooking — ginger-spiced lentil-rice and saffron rich condensed milk. Surabhi offered Pearl a mat and as Pearl looked around, Surabhi gave her a little guided tour of her possessions. In one corner was a hob on a cow-dung bucket-fire. Surabhi’s valuable bell-metal plate, bowl, and cup, and a second set for a guest, glowed gold in the candlelight, propped on her kitchen trunk. She stored turmeric and coriander tight in metal jars, and rice, flour and sago in square biscuit tins purloined from a grocer in the bazaar — she would never kill a living creature, but neither would she allow one to nibble at her food store. Sturdy wood bookshelves she had designed herself had been made by a local carpenter, paid for by money from a pair of earrings. Sacred tomes lay stacked on the shelves, wrapped in faded flower-print and dull brocade. Below, was a trunk of the type sold in Bengal, its lid painted with a bunch of roses tied with a ribbon and framed with patterns made by drawing a comb through paint. It served as Surabhi’s writing table and she stored her writing materials inside — notebooks, German pencils, and a Made in England fountain pen with its nib worn to fit her hand. On the lowest shelf were pestle and mortar, seeds, powders, and oils in jars and bottles labelled in script — ingredients for ayurvedic medicines. Sparkling Swapnavan dust blew under the door and through the cracks in the shutters, so Surabhi sewed cotton curtains to cover the shelf where she kept her few clothes. Her grass sleeping mat was woven with patterns of parrots and peacocks. Her block-print quilt had cows walking around its border — she had had it made by the quilt maker in the bazaar, watched as he filled it with cotton, stitched it through, and beat it with a stick to flatten it.
Surabhi was a practical sort of woman who tallied every anna in a notebook, wrote lists on used envelopes and walked miles rather than take a rickshaw. She chewed a neem stick to scrub her teeth as people had done for centuries — why pay for Monkey Brand tooth powder when twigs grew free? Kishori-ji had blessed her with resources to live contentedly, but she hated waste and decadence. She was no saint — she had vices such as tea drinking and reading *Times of India*; and she had a lack of self-control when faced with a pot of Bengal date-sugar-sweetened yoghurt. Her most disconcerting weakness, she told Pearl, was to speak out vociferously at unfairness or hypocrisy among religious people of position, such as when she had spoken her mind and left the Society of Aspirants for Pure Devotion because of political dispute. That was when she had taken this cottage here, at Kishori Bhavan.

On Surabhi’s wall hung two dark wood picture frames containing time-yellowed prints labelled in Bengali script.

‘They are my windows to the spiritual world,’ she said. In one, Kishori was walking from the river carrying her water pot. Krishna was appealing to her flirtatiously. Kishori was looking away, hiding a smile behind a transparent shawl. In the other picture, Krishna was lightly touching Kishori’s cheek with his left hand and with his right, painting cosmetic flower-dots around her eyebrows to the tops of her cheeks. Garlands of shaved sandalwood-curl flowers, fragrant after years, hung around the pictures.

One night, Surabhi hosted a musical evening in her room for the women of Kishori Bhavan. They crowded in and sang together, their bodies taking up tiny amounts of space, a posy of bright and bitter herbs all bound together with one white ribbon. One little old woman was Krishna: she twisted a cloth around her head like a turban, threw back her head and flashed a wide smile, her eyes darted eyes restlessly from side-to-side as she mimed the playing of a flute. The women egged her on. And so the group sat singing and singing as if they had no care in the world. It was a luscious sound — a layered and gorgeous music of passionate intensity. But then, the women weren’t just singing, they were weeping in song. Real tears ran from their closed eyes like beads on a prayer chain and dripped upon their breasts, leaving their faces clear and radiant. Pearl was elated yet, somehow, she felt ashamed — it was as if their singing had taken her into the embrace of their most intimate love and sorrow.

Surabhi warmed saffron milk afterwards, and shared snacks of puffed pastries, semolina

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toasted with cashews and sweets from Swamini’s temple.

Ramani-ma lived next-door to Surabhi. Pearl had never seen a woman so old, nor so thin. Ramani’s forehead was high and ancient and stains of tiredness hung under her eyes. She opened her mouth like a turtle. Sometimes her eyes were dark, inscrutable and impenetrable; sometimes they sparkled cheekily. Sometimes her face was as open as an innocent but when she spoke she was wise. Pearl had imagined someone so old would be muddled, befuddled, the spark of her intellect buried in psychic clutter, but Ramani cut straight to the point. Her gentle expression revealed a lifetime of devotion. It was as if she could see far, far further from some vantage point of immeasurable tranquility.

Ramani-ma propped her body against a cushion with her legs stretched out before her with her little bare feet crossed and her body making an L-shape. When she stood her body retained its right angle and she hobbled along with a stick, the top half of her body parallel to the ground like grandmother ladybird, peering sideways to see where she was going.

‘Until four or five years ago,’ Surabhi said, ‘when she turned one hundred, she was filling her own bucket at the pump and carrying it to her room unaided.’

‘Is she really that old?’ Pearl asked. Perhaps she was just very worn out.

‘Indeed she is.’ Surabhi assured her with widened eyes. ‘She has papers.’

On the days Ramani felt strong, Surabhi would take her to one temple or another.

‘Just see! Spoiled for choice, I am,’ she told Pearl as Surabhi helped her onto a rickshaw. ‘So many temples to go to, I have. All special in their own way. Really, I am the most fortunate woman in the world!’ She leaned so close to Pearl that Pearl could see each wiry strand in the forest of her brows. She examined Pearl, rheumy-eyed and asked, ‘Do you not agree little Pearl?’

Humble, sage Ramani-ma embodied what she believed in. She was senior to Surabhi in many respects, but she had grown to appreciate Surabhi’s penetrating intelligence and refined sentiments. Aware of Surabhi’s deep realisation from decades of erudition, contemplation and good association, Ramani perceived how Surabhi yet kept her feet on the ground. The climbing vine of Surabhi’s devotion had gradually grown strong in the sunlight of Ramani’s affection. Surabhi learned from Ramani’s example, and in turn, Ramani had gradually allowed herself to become more dependent on Surabhi for her physical needs. Surabhi prepared Ramani’s meals and brought the things she needed from...
the bazaar: guavas and papaya, mustard oil for her winter massage, incense and sugar candy for the little Krishna doll she kept in a basket in her room. The two women worked to get along — they were too valuable to each other surviving in the world of rates and rupees and medical prescriptions to fall out. Fate had forced them to deal with each other’s physical, emotional, and mental pains; but Ramani especially liked Surabhi because she never wasted time in idle gossip.

‘When Ramani-ma planted this curry tree, it was a slender sapling’ Surabhi said, as she and Pearl stood on their flat rooftop picking its leaves. ‘At that time, the tract of land known as Swapnavan was covered in trees and was forest.’

‘Was that when Kishori Bhavan was new?’ Pearl asked.

‘Indeed it was. Ramani-ma also had this well sunk, these shade trees planted, and this high wall and iron gate erected. When she first hired Mansingh as gatekeeper, he was having a full black head of hair.’ Now, it was more bald than it was white.

Surabhi shook the dust from a grass mat, spread it out on the stone rooftop and sat down cross-legged, gesturing to Pearl to sit down too. The two gazed out across fields of yellow mustard-flower. Parakeets were squeaking in the neem trees.

‘When Ramani-ma was approaching sixty years of age, she founded one charitable institution. She travelled to America, England and France lecturing on women’s rights and the plight of our widows.’

Pearl felt ashamed. She had thought Ramani a rustic.

‘When she returned she had accumulated sufficient funding to construct Kishori Bhavan, one girls’ school, and one women’s clinic.’

Surabhi took Pearl’s amazement in her stride.

‘Besides the funds, Ramani-ma was gifted with one Ford automobile which her benefactor had shipped here.

‘Now our wealthy entrepreneurs in India are donating to Ramani-ma’s cause. She has overseen the construction of four more such facilities for the widows around Swapnavan.’

‘But this is the best one?’

‘Quite right, my dear. Kishori Bhavan is Ramani-ma’s home.’

Surabhi fell silent gazing across the yellow fields. ‘She was a famed dancer in her time too,’ she said, ‘but that is another story.’

Now Ramani-ma could hardly manage a jig.

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But her heart was full of grace.

Opposite Surabhi, lived Kubja. As Surabhi was gracious, soft and generous of nature, Kubja seemed angry, bitter, and miserly with kind words. She was skeletal. Her face was a mask of grimy wrinkles set in a frown and she smelled of mustard oil and smoke. Surabhi tolerated her gossip but kept the upper hand; she had no time for nonsense. Still, Kubja regarded Surabhi as a sister. Forty years before, at the prospect of a tortuous marriage, Kubja had run away to join the wandering minstrels of Bengal. Like them, she had worn tatters of dirty patchwork, hair matted into snakes. They sang of love of god, eyes intense, staring, and bloodshot from bhang. They claimed their madness was divinely inspired and they used dark rites to cultivate it. Kubja fell pregnant. When her child died in the great famine she came to Swapnavan — the railway clerks took pity on her and allowed her to travel without a ticket. Surabhi said she found Kubja in the market place, filthy and famished, babbling incoherently, wearing nothing but a shawl, and brought her home to Kishori Bhavan.

Surabhi said that Kubja was pure at heart. And that like any other human, she thrived on love.

A babushka had once lived in the end cottage, which was now Pearl's. She had spoken their languages fluently and sang all the songs along with them. All day, she had chanted devotedly on her beads and performed menial services in the temples. She was exemplary in her actions. But then one day, her daughter, whom they said was the wife of a diplomat, came and forcibly took her back to Russia. The women were devastated to see her go — leaving Swapnavan was unfortunate — and since she had left, her cottage had remained empty.

The elderly residents of Swapnavan refused to leave even if they were very ill. Even if they were wealthy they would refuse to go to hospitals in Delhi or Agra where they could be given proper care. The thought of leaving Swapnavan was unbearable.

Many pilgrims came and never left.

It was essential to live in Swapnavan. It was essential to die there.

Mousey lived three cottages down from Surabhi. Pearl never learned her real name; she was simply called Aunt, Mausi. Mousey was a tiny, unassuming women, and she had adopted

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the strictest rules of behaviours as befitted her condition as a widow. She fasted often and when she was not fasting, she ate the littlest amount of food. Every day, Pearl saw her leaving the compound to walk to her favourite temples with her rosary in its little bag on her right hand. One morning, Mousey became the centre of a hubbub. Pearl asked what the problem was and it seemed that, that morning, Mousey had travelled all the way to Mathura to visit a bank, but she had not been allowed to withdraw her savings. Everyone was astonished that she had been putting money aside for years and at how she had managed to live on her pittance. Be that as it may, the bank teller had refused to pay her on the ground that her signature was illegible. They could not recognise it. Poor Mousey had grown so old that she had forgotten how to sign her name.

Surabhi accompanied Mousey to Mathura by pony-trap and the matter was straightened out. Mousey had been saving to hold a feast in honour of her guru. She spent her money to buy food and hire cooks. Rickshaw-carts arrived piled with bags of potatoes, cauliflowers, tomatoes, aubergines, and greens; sacks of rice and fine yellow mung dal; and bags of sugar and spice. The cooks set up their kitchen in the courtyard. They dug holes in the earth for their fires and spread tarpaulins and set about pumping buckets of water. Pearl watched, and one of the cooks called her over to give her fine slices of cabbage stalk sprinkled with salt as if she was a child. At last, after chanting, prayers and blessings, each and every one several hundred guests were served to satisfaction. Mousey supervised the whole venture as if she was gracious royalty and the atmosphere was joyous. At the end, she carried a tray of delicacies around and when her guests were leaving, she stood at the entranceway bowing her forehead to everyone’s feet.

It was through encounters like these that the spirit of Swapnavan slowly became a part of Pearl. The people here were different. They shared a vision of the world that had the power to make life rich and overflowing with meaning. No-one questioned whether it had been worth years of hardship to feed Kishori-Krishna’s devotees as Mousey had done. And then, the courtyard returned to normal once more. Mousey continued on as she had always done, chanting on her beads, going out to her favourite temples every day.

Closest to Surabhi lived the girl in the cream outfit, Manjari. Her name meant flowering tip, the tulsi blossom.

Surabhi told Pearl, ‘Manjari left her parents’ home in her teenage years to live under the tutelage of her guru. His explanations of the inner meaning of scripture became her own.

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She was absorbing his most subtle emotions and transcendential moods.

‘While she was still a child, Manjari was lecturing in temple assemblies. She was proficiently answering all enquiries posed to her, quoting by rote extensive tracts of Sanskrit from a vast literature, complete with,’ Surabhi counted on her fingers, ‘textual reference, chapter, verse number, commentaries of masters of yore, date and place of her own guru’s quoting said passage and her guru’s commentary upon it.

‘At last, when Manjari’s guru prepared to expire, he called her to his side and told her to go to Saraswati Swamini and to serve her as guru. Saraswati Swamini was closely nurturing of Manjari’s further education. You have heard her speak?’ Pearl had seen Manjari in the courtyard telling a story about Kishori and Krishna to a circle of listeners, her face lit with drama, eyes melting with emotion. She nodded, and asked,

‘Is Manjari a sort of guru?’

‘She is having small following among Saraswati Swamini’s group only,’ Surabhi replied. Then she added, somewhat reluctantly, ‘Some politics were there. Certain people were doubtful due to her youthfulness and they were not wanting to hear from the ladies. Envy can be a knotty problem.’ Then she added with a breath of a laugh, ‘but some were attending her lectures anyway, hiding beneath shawls at the back of her audience like thieves.’

One morning, when most of the women were bathing or meditating, Manjari invited Pearl into her cottage and the two sat facing each other cross-legged on a divan covered in spotless unbleached cotton. It was a simple, immaculate living place. Manjari’s books were wrapped in hand loomed cotton. She always wore her loose ivory shirt and trousers; this day she was wearing a hand-knitted beige ballet cardigan, beige socks, and two fine shawls in different shades of fawn, one inside the other, cocooning her head and shoulders. She was petite as a child and her face was open and childlike. Her complexion was perfect and her irises were black. She could have been anywhere between fourteen and forty.

Pearl thought her the most unselfconscious person she had ever met.

‘We are meeting guru in meditation,’ Manjari whispered with conviction, speaking as if transmitting from a place beyond herself. ‘We are sakhis — dear-most friends — and we are serving Kishori and Krishna together. Sometimes preparing sandalwood paste, sometimes dancing, sometimes cooking. When we are cooking, guru-sakhi is taking and offering to Kishori and Krishna in their forest place. We are knowing guru’s eternal illuminated spiritual form. We learn guru’s hidden-most heart-kept secrets. We are knowing guru’s

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hush-hush name, colour of her outfit, all these things. We are assisting intimate service she is performing for Kishori and Krishna.

‘We assist her, you see, like this. You will also do like this.’

Pearl went straight to ask Surabhi about what Manjari had said.

Surabhi tutted and hid a little smile. ‘Once the nectar pot is cracked open, who can prevent the nectar from flowing?’

Surabhi’s typewriter was a grandfatherly contraption. She repaired it with her screwdriver and pliers. She took a pony-trap to Mathura town to buy new ribbons for it. And she covered it, when it was not in use, with a fitted quilted case.

Pearl’s fingers clattered over the keys as she worked from Surabhi’s manuscript. Word by word, a world emerged.
Chapter IV

Morning

It was twenty-four minutes past eight in the morning in the timeless land of Swapnavan. At this time every
day, Krishna’s mother waited at the portico of her house for Kishori to arrive. Krishna’s mother employed
Kishori to cook for her household. And for Krishna. Kishori came every day and every day Krishna’s
mother loved her more.

Kishori arrived accompanied by a few of her attendant-friends and Krishna’s mother embraced her
closely, looking into her golden face with far more affection than a mother could have even for her own child.

The maidservants of the household were waiting in the kitchens, all ready to help. They removed
Kishori’s jewellery and dressed her in white, laughing and chatting happily with Kishori and the others.

The maidservants of the household brought cooking ingredients, all scrubbed and peeled or chopped or
ground or grated, or sorted and sieved and ready for Kishori to use. That day, Kishori might have made
savoury toasted semolina with vegetables and cubes of cheese stirred in at last moment. Or she might have
made a light wet hotpot of rice with pulses and vegetables. Or curry leaf and peanut flat rice served with
burning, sugary tomato relish. If it was summer, she might have prepared a fruit compote with yoghurt
kept cool in a porous clay pot wrapped with a red wet cloth. Sometimes, there was even ice, brought in slabs
on a relay of bullock carts all the way from the mountains to the north. This, the girls sheared into flakes
and Kishori flavoured it with rainbow syrups made from mango, guava, or mosami fruit, or fruits brought
from afar such as pineapple, coconut cream, passion fruit, lychee, kiwi fruit, or sweetened condensed milk.

Krishna, the darling of everyone, his strong white-skinned brother, and their father the head of the
cowherders ate, preparing themselves for a day of work with the cows. Kishori prepared lunch snacks for
Krishna to take in his banana leaf lunch box out to the pasturing grounds to share — golden nut-stuffed
flaky pastries, muffins, turnovers, hearty lentil pies, fat cheese pasties or hot curry rolls.

Kishori and the girls peeped at Krishna from the door of the kitchen, watching expectantly to see if he
liked a certain preparation. Sensing Kishori was watching him, he bit into a cheese-ball and pulled an ugly
face, feigning disgust. Kishori’s face drooped with disappointment and her friends told her he was just an
imp.
When Krishna had finished his breakfast, he rinsed his hands and mouth and was ready to go out for the
day. He tied his yellow cloth around his waist, knotted his raven hair, and tucked his flute into his
waistband. His brother put on a long cerulean cloth and pearls as white as his own complexion, and be
slung his bugle over his shoulder. They embraced their mothers and called to their friends: the ultimate
sharply dressed teenagers, the dark and light-skinned brothers of Swapnavan, Krishna and Balram, were
going to pasture the cows.

They strode as if they owned the world, and indeed, they did, but did not know it. As they walked
along the riverbank, Krishna pointed out the beauty of Swapnavan to his brother — the bird-filled trees,
the cloud-bright sky, the antelopes and the bush-creatures, the living river and the Hill of Govardan, king
of mountains, nourisher of cows and cowherd villagers. The two boys enjoyed themselves to the full, believing
they were common village cowherd boys. They were served by the invisible goddess of illusion; they were gods,
but they wished to play as ordinary cowherd boys, and so they did.

Sometimes, when Krishna walked upon the sand along the bank of the River Yamuna, Yamuna would
cease flowing and her waves would become hands that threw blue river lotuses to his blue lotus petal feet.
When he started to play his flute, the cows would stand still in rapture, half-chewed grass and flowers
hanging from their mouths, ears cupped, drinking the melodies. Sometimes when Krishna stood on the Hill
playing his big, low-toned bamboo flute, the rocks at his feet would melt with affection like the hearts of the
milkmaidens, and when Krishna danced away, the imprints of the soles of his feet remained. These
imprints filled with water, and the birds who drank there became intoxicated with love's madness and soon
fell singing from the sky.

Repeating the lore of Swapnavan as spoken by her predecessors,
this maidservant of Saraswati and Swamini aspires to realise it.

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Chapter V
The Third Ring of the Bell

The woman in the cottage nearest the gate was grandmother to three small children whom she cared for while their mother taught in the local school. They lit the enclave with their shrieks and the women came out to their verandas clapping and laughing, toothless, bribing the children with sweets to do a dance. Kubja was always foremost lavishing attention upon the tots, clasping their faces in her skeletal hands and teaching them to repeat snatches of song like parrots.

She put her scrawny head close to Pearl’s and said, ‘When baby Krishna and his big brother were learning to walk, they were catching hold of the calves’ tails, pulling themselves up to standing. The calves shot off in alarm with those tiny boys hanging onto their tails for dear life, being dragged hither and thither. It was a ride for them!’

She cackled with glee. ‘They were covered in cow dung, so at last, their mothers had to rescue them and give them a good bath.’

Surabhi and Pearl sat side by side on a string bed on Surabhi’s veranda.

‘Some of them like only to think of Krishna as a baby boy,’ Surabhi said, indicating Kubja with a nod. Kubja was sitting on her own veranda, chatting with another woman.
‘They cannot envisage he grows up and meets Kishori secretly in the forest.’

‘How can god be a baby?’ Pearl asked plainly.

‘He just wants our love,’ Surabhi replied. She had spoken brusquely, but then she softened. In order to teach, she would have to present an exemplary character, for, to those with soft and pliable faith, unable to comprehend the inner moods of an adept, externals meant everything. Pearl learned as much by observing Surabhi’s manner and nature as she did by hearing her words; realisations came even when Surabhi was silent.

Surabhi sat straight and began to spin another strand of her story.

‘When Krishna was newborn, his mother believed she was loving him just as any other mother would love her baby. If she had guessed he was divine, she would surely have felt great awe. She would have bowed to him with reverence. That was not what Krishna wanted. He was wanting his mother to cradle him,’ Surabhi mimed the action with her arms, ‘and scold him,’ raising her index finger, ‘just like any ordinary little boy.’

‘Because he wanted to understand a mother’s love,’ Pearl realised.

‘Quite right.’ Surabhi nodded. ‘One day,’ she went on, ‘when baby Krishna was learning to feed himself, he filled his fatty little hand with mud from a flowerbed and pushed it into his mouth. His brother, who was not much older, ran to the dairy crying, “Krishna ate earth! Krishna ate earth!”’

‘At once, Krishna’s mother stopped her churning and rushed to the scene. There Krishna sat in the flower patch, mud on his hands and face. Feigning crossness, she swept him onto her lap and pried his mouth open with her little finger to see inside. But when she looked inside she was shocked!’

‘What was it?’ urged Pearl.

‘Inside her little baby’s mouth, Krishna’s mother was not seeing mud. She was seeing worlds suspended, swirling and spinning in harmony, and beyond them, more universes. She was seeing moons revolving around planets and suns moving grandly through infinite stars. There were planets with strange skies swept with currents of violent winds and worlds covered in oceans with islands like jewels and continents coloured with vegetation, ice-capped mountains with rivers snaking from them and rainbow lights dancing at the poles. She was seeing creatures: great white bears alone in the snows, herds of slow-moving bovines on the plains, small birds crossing oceans suspended on slender threads of instinct. She was seeing people dancing naked around fires and forest fires raging unchecked. She was seeing earthquakes, volcanoes, colossal waves and floods. She was seeing aromas, hearing
flavours, touching colours, and tasting sounds. She was seeing nature personified: lesser gods and goddesses of the elements, at work. She perceived waves in the subtest of energies: in ether, eternal time, consciousness, ego, and spirit.’

Pearl whispered, ‘Creation.’

‘Krishna’s mother began to see a forest and a river and a hill with which her heart resonated with affection. There was pasture-land dotted with countless cows and nestling within it was a village, and in that village there was a house, and in that house there was a courtyard, and in that courtyard sat a woman with a wheatish complexion.’ Surabhi mimed: ‘There she was with her hand upon her heart in a swoon, with a blue baby boy upon her lap...’

‘And he had his mouth open!’ said Pearl. ‘And in his mouth was the cosmos!

‘And another! Infinitely!’

‘Quite right. Inside the baby’s mouth was everything — the cosmos with all the planets and one special green planet with a village and a house and a courtyard with a woman with a baby on her lap, like a baby bird.

Pearl sat back, exhaling through her lips.

‘Krishna’s mother was fearing psychological infirmity,’ Surabhi looked into Pearl’s face, her eyes twinkling with discreet delight, ‘So the goddess of illusion came to lend a hand. She personally protected Krishna’s mother by concealing the overwhelming revelation. She made her forget everything she had witnessed.

‘Simply she looked down at her baby and nursed him to satisfaction.’

‘She thought he was an ordinary baby!’ Pearl sighed.

‘Quite right,’ Surabhi concluded. ‘And so did he! You see, despite his infinite cosmic potency, Krishna’s desire was to be a village boy. In order for him to enjoy himself, he had to forget that he was god. And so as not to spoil his fun, his family never knew his true identity.’

‘Are we in illusion like that?’ Pearl asked.

‘No. For us, it is opposite,’ Surabhi declared. ‘The illusion of the common man is causing him to believe that he himself is god.’

Most days and into the evenings, a dapper black-and-white magpie-robin with a white cap on his black head sang from the topmost twig of the peepul tree. He was a fine songster and his song was far-reaching; a few soft, shrill, high-pitched whistles, a little mumbling,
and then the high notes again.

He shot off as Mansingh crossed the compound with an air of importance.

‘Miss Pearl! Miss Pearl! Letter from Australia!’

It was from Lily. Pearl thanked him and took it to read alone in her cottage room with the window open so a breeze from the field of marigolds might blow in.

*Koolandili,*

*November 16th, 1967*

*Dear Pearly,*

*Thank you for yet another very nice letter. I can’t believe you’ve been away for nearly two years now! What a pity the umbrella couldn’t make the distance. I should think it would still be under guarantee. What poor quality it must be, or else Australian conditions are more gentle than we think.*

*Here is some family news. Uncle James passed away last year in New Zealand. He had a lady friend named Sarah, who is mourning him. Mum went over for the funeral with Jules and Linda. I don’t know how well you remember them. I’m sure I wrote and told you Tom died of a heart attack last year. Janet and the girls still live in the house in Semaphore. If I hadn’t told you or if the letter went astray I do apologise. Janet is nursing new babies and has some clerical work in the hospital. Jules and Linda, now have Thomas who has just turned one. Thomas took a long time to come about and he is much loved. Jules works in North Adelaide on a little newspaper. Linda is a graphic designer now. Now for the more distant cousins: Pol moved out of her mum’s house now she is thirtyish. No boyfriend, no marriage. Why, I don’t know but at least she’s moved out at last. Still a librarian. Roger in final year of Uni. Not keen on being only kid at home. Ran into Rachel the other day. Married someone from her church, big mistake, broke up the same week. Aunt Grace is still the same. Still in house in Enfield. Getting scattier. House just holding together, rooms full of old lady junk.*

*At last, Mum’s got round to doing up Pollywaffle’s shed. Wants to do the fence and gate next. Aunt Grace and I told her she should get rid of that old bike but she won’t.*

*Sorority about the smudgy pen. I bought a dozen for a dollar for a quiz night Aunt Grace was running. She raised $500 for a drop-in centre where they feed hungry folks on Saturday nights for free. If I don’t write before Christmas, have a lovely one! We’ll be thinking of you! Love Lil.*

Pearl saw Lily in her flowerprint shift, a lonely soul with a pure, bright heart. But the thread of love linking Pearl with her little sister had stretched as fine as a spider-web. What a

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distance. If only Lily could come to visit her, Pearl would take her to the places she loved — first to Delhi and then to learn the hidden treasures of Swapnavan.

Pearl had new kinswomen now, with subtler ties than flesh and blood. Surabhi had nursed Pearl through her sickness and given her a safe place to live, but she had also introduced her to Kishori and Krishna with her stories.

Pearl wanted never to leave.

Surabhi fetched Pearl to have her help prepare a meal. Pearl sat on the ground of the veranda chopping potatoes.

“So how is your sister?” Surabhi asked.

“Oh, she is well,” Pearl replied. “She was just writing about our relatives.”

“So you write your sister and tell her about Kishori and Krishna,” Surabhi smiled. “Like that you will be gifting the most precious gift.”

Pearl did very much want to share what she was learning and what she was experiencing, what was causing her heart to soar and what was deepening her vision — but Lily and her family were immersed in their own lives, getting on in the world in sensible shells of security. They were drifting apart like flowers in the currents of a stream.

So, this was what it meant to sever ties.

Pearl was mastering the use of a Bengali kitchen knife. She held the wooden base down with one knee and pushed a potato against the curved upturned blade with two hands, again and again, until her hands were full of neat, half-inch cubes. Of course, she was slower than Surabhi. She had been cooking like this since she was a child.

“Now the jackfruit,” said Surabhi gently. “Oil your hands or it will stick to your skin.” It was a delightfully ugly vegetable with bumpy bristly shell and coarse texture.

“This is a favourite preparation of Saint Chetanya,” Surabhi said as she sliced. “In my family home in West Bengal we are having so-o-o good jack-fruit. You will come with me there. We will go to the place where Chetanya was born on the bank of the Ganga. The neem tree under which he was born is growing to this day. It is five hundred years old.”

Pearl saw her change as she dealt with her nostalgia.

“We will purchase clay pots of yoghurt sweetened with date palm sugar and milk balls soaked in cardamom scented syrup and chom-chom. Oh! How you will love chom-chom!” Surabhi’s eyes rolled as if in ecstasy.

Pearl now knew that Swapnavan was not Surabhi’s childhood home: the language,
climate, food, and landscape were all different from that of Bengal. It was the same for most of the widows here. And the Swapnavan winters were bitter.

‘In Bengal coconuts and bananas are plentiful. Real bananas. Sweet. The music is sweeter still. And the stories of Chetanya are sweetest.’

Surabhi checked the pot of potato-rice was simmering properly.

‘River Yamuna’s sister is Ganga. She is flowing all year round.’

Surabhi took the last of the jackfruit from Pearl and dropped it into smoking mustard oil in a wide iron pan.

‘Do you think often of your family in your country, my dear?’

‘My father passed away fifteen years ago,’ Pearl said. ‘I missed him very much when I was young but I’m stronger now. My mother’s a wonderful person. I write to her and I worry about her. My sister’s pretty busy with her life. She’s working. She’s not married yet.’

‘It is natural for the soul immersed in this world to feel deep attachment for family members and home. For most, a sudden break can cause much paining.’

‘I really don’t miss them, Surabhi-di. I’m happy here.’

‘It is incumbent upon us to respect our parents, for they have given us this life and cared for us. Do you think it might be that you your mother misses you?’

‘Yes.’

‘You might have lost your heart in Swapnavan, but it is proper that we perform our worldly duties. We should do the needful. Writing to your mother is good. We must be kind to those who love us and want the best for us. You mentioned you had an aunt?’

‘Yes. My Aunt Grace.’

‘Grace?’ Surabhi contemplated the name.

‘Yes, Surabhi-di. Like grace-full.’

Surabhi closed her eyes as if remembering something, and began to hum, taking Pearl by surprise, ‘How sweet the sound; ‘twas grace that taught my heart to fear; and grace my fears reliev’d. I was convent-educated. We were learning by rote,’ she widened her eyes. ‘And is your aunt full of grace?’

‘Yes Surabhi-di. She is very kind. I suppose I do miss her...’

‘It would be a solid idea for me to pen your mother and your aunt a letter. Would you like that?’

‘To tell them I’m alright?’

‘To inform them you are healthy and eating well.’
‘And that you’re looking after me.’

‘I will assure them that Kishori and Krishna are taking care of you, cent percent.’

Surabhi placed a little of the cooked potato rice and jack-fruit in two tiny silver bowls before her Kishori and Krishna doll-gods, and moved her lips ever so slightly as she chanted their mantras of offering.

When she had finished, after a moment in thought, she said, ‘Generally speaking, people are believing attachment to family is topmost righteous principle. This type of love is centring on self. She pinched the flesh on her forearm and said, ‘First is attachment to body. Larger circle of attachment to those related to body.’

‘Family?’

‘Quite so. Then, is attachment to one’s tiny neighborhood and next larger circle is attachment to country.

‘Patriotism.’

‘Quite so. All these are temporary designations.’ She flipped her hand as if flicking away annoying misconceptions. ‘Who loves all humanity? Eh?’

Pearl listened and the more she heard the more questions she wanted to ask.

Surabhi continued ‘Soul is eternal. Water is to be applied to root not leaf.’

Pearl ventured, ‘Love of family is the first love we ever know...’

‘We have lived so many times we cannot remember,’ Surabhi countered, ‘and in each lifetime we have had family — human family, lion family, tiger family, mouse family, bird family, pig family. We have had countless mothers and fathers. We have been mother-father countless times.’

‘The soul lives in different bodies...’

‘Yes. Soul takes different body every lifetime just like you are changing your clothes. Mightbe last lifetime you were Indian girl; mightbe I was British. Soul is passing through so many bodies: sometimes male, sometimes female; sometimes black, sometimes brown or yellow or white; sometimes pauper, sometimes ruler; sometimes cruel, sometimes kind. Most all things you have done in your past lives...’

Pearl shuddered. ‘If we could remember all those lives, I should think we’d go quite dotty!’

‘Quite so, my dear. And so we cannot remember in our mind’s-eye. But soul can remember. All is recorded there. And so we progress according to our karma. According to how we choose to act. But that is another very deep subject matter, and we shall continue...’

‘The Golden Milkmaid’

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Surabhi sat back and closed her eyes, chanting on her beads. Pearl was learning to recognise her body movements: the lesson was over. She had given Pearl plenty to think about. Pearl went to prepare bell-metal bowls for the meal they were about to share.

Surabhi said, ‘Kindly pass my opticals, my dear, I shall write without delay.’
Hepsibah was moping. She had a three-cornered thorn stuck in the pad of her paw and it had become inflamed. Winifred Green dropped her off at the vet and went to the Post Office earlier than she usually did. Pearly should have received her letter by now. She opened the box. She had written. No: the address was not in Pearl's italics, but in graceful old-school lettering. She had to sit down. This might not be good. She took it to the ute to read.

Kishori Bhavan,
Near Photography Studio,
Yamuna Pathway,
Swapnavan,
Post Office District Area: Mathura,
Uttar Pradesh,
India.

March 11th 1968
Respected Madam Green,

Pearl had told me much about you and her home in Australia. No doubt, you are experiencing anxiety as to her well-being because she is so young. I am glad to inform you she is safe and well here at Kishori Bhavan and we are doing the needful and taking good care of her. That is to say, although some weakness is continuing due to jaundice, she is now recovering daily and regaining strength on a wholesome pure vegetarian diet and with traditional tonics. She is also taking regular walking exercise and good rest and rising early. But after all, medicine is not sufficient, only Lord God can help.

Kishori Bhavan is safe lodging. We have one guard stationed day and night, all modern facilities and sweet drinking water. We are surrounded with the pleasant uplifting ambiance of the flowers, trees and wildlife.

I understand Pearl has informed you she is studying classical literature of India and providing assistance with translations of said work into English for future publication. She is an intelligent girl and I cannot express my gratitude for her sincere efforts. I shall never be able to repay the debt. I can only pray that God bless her with advanced spiritual consciousness.

She is also progressing very nicely in her understanding of Bengali, Hindi, and Sanskrit and is learning our traditional music, philosophy and the culinary arts. As her mother, please give her your
blessings in this regard.

Hoping this finds you hale and hearty,

Yours, in the service of Kishori and Krishna,

Surabhi Devi Dasi
Pearl was reading Bengali aloud from one of Surabhi’s books, like a child following the letters with her finger. The milk-boy came to the door. Pearl took Surabhi’s milk-tin to him and he poured milk into it.

Surabhi gestured Pearl wash her hands. ‘Come. We are making sweets for Kishori and Krishna.’

She poured half the milk into a wide cooking dish, saying, ‘Mother Cow is caring for us. Her milk is the purest of foods. In your country, you keep it in freeze; in India we are regularly boiling milk to maintain freshness. We are doing just like Kishori’s milkmaidens.’ She scooped in sugar, splashed rosewater and counted five strands of saffron. ‘So when you are in the spiritual world serving Kishori you will do like this.’

She gave Pearl the wooden spoon and had her stir. Gradually, as the milk boiled, it thickened.

‘Milk is perfect in itself, but, like this it becomes condensed,’ Surabhi said, ‘just like your devotion.’

When the mixture began to coagulate and pull away from the sides of the pot, Surabhi tipped it onto a wooden board and had Pearl shape the mixture into balls. Then they pressed them with clay sweet-stamps of a conch-shell, a rose, and a lotus.

When the sweets were cool, Surabhi arranged them on a special silver tray with a tiny silver tumbler of milk and offered them to her doll-gods, Kishori and Krishna.

Surabhi had carried the carved shrine of her doll-gods’ all the way from Bengal by rail. Bunting of concertinaed leaves hung across it and a peacock-feather fan hung at the ready beside it. Crude clay smiling cows with calves stood before it and behind it was a most naïve painting of a herd of cows running on a hill.

This was Surabhi’s devotion. It was contagious.

Cheeky black Krishna grinned at Surabhi, holding his silver flute to his lips as if he were about to kiss it. Kishori’s complexion glowed pink-tinged mango and she wore star-shaped jasmine blossoms carelessly in her hair. Both were dressed in tiny fitted outfits embroidered with sequins; peacock feathers threaded into Krishna’s curls.

‘They are the centre of my world,’ said Surabhi, ‘They are the meaning of my life; my life-breath. I am theirs, but they are mine.’

Early one morning, when the days were getting cooler once more, Pearl went into Surabhi’s room before Surabhi had dressed. Surabhi was wrapped in a bathing cloth, squatting in the
corner of her room where the floor sloped to a drainage hole out to the tangled patch of yellow mallow, acalypha and frog-fruit weeds behind her cottage. She was chanting mantras as if to keep the cold at bay, pouring jarfuls of water from her bucket over her head and back.

As Surabhi rubbed her crew cut dry and re-wrapped her body with a dry cloth Pearl put water on to boil for fennel tea.

Surabhi possessed only one mirror. It was the size of a powder compact and was enclosed in wood with a sea creature carved on its lid. With it, in a pot, she kept a ball of clay scented with camphor and menthol — apart from her oils, this was the only cosmetic she owned.

When Surabhi had pulled her petticoat on and partly buttoned her blouse, she sat cross-legged before her Kishori and Krishna in the lamplight with her mirror before her and her ball of clay, handkerchief and copper pot of Yamuna water by her side. She dropped water in the palm of her left hand and rubbed the ball of clay in it until it formed a paste, then, holding her mirror between her left hand thumb and forefinger, she dipped the tip of her right ring finger in the clay and, lifting her hand above her head so her fingers pointed downwards, marked her brow between her eyebrows. She drew her finger up towards her hairline and pressed, so the white paste formed two immaculate vertical white lines linked at the base with a neat U. When this was done, she marked the bridge of her nose with the shape of a tulsi leaf — Goddess Tulsi had a place at Krishna’s feet, and so Krishna’s foot was upon Surabhi’s forehead. She marked this same symbol at her navel, between her breasts, on her throat, right abdomen, right upper arm, right shoulder, left abdomen, left upper arm, left shoulder, spine, and at the back of her neck. Each time she did so, she chanted one of Krishna’s names. When she had finished, she smeared the remaining wet clay on the top of her head — the spot from which the soul of the adept departs.

’Is it ash?’ Pearl asked, picking up the cosmetic ball.

’No child,’ Surabhi replied with patience. ‘This is tilok. It is special type of smooth clean clay.’

She mixed a little more and drew her ring finger upwards on Pearl’s forehead making the two fine white lines, finishing the tuning-fork mark with the little tulsi leaf. The clay felt cool and tickled slightly as it as it dried.

Surabhi whispered, ‘It is dust from the feet of Krishna’s milkmaidens.’

Pearl moved her head from side-to-side in understanding. The friends of Kishori were
symbols of selfless love.

‘And why do they love Krishna so?’ Surabhi asked Pearl with her eyebrows raised expectantly.

‘Because he is so beautiful,’ Pearl replied. That was easy.

Surabhi gave a tiny tut and shake of the head, ‘Because Kishori loves him!’ Surabhi peered over her glasses at Pearl, ‘And of all the celestial milkmaidens, who is most beloved of Krishna?’

‘Kishori.’

It was like counting gemstones.

Pearl never missed a day — she had volunteered her solemn promise. Every morning, as soon as she woke, she sat on her string bed, alone in her cottage room, purring mantras on her beads, simply listening to the sounds they made.

The rosary that Surabhi had given Pearl was of smooth, white, aromatic tulsi-root wood; one-hundred-and-eight beads tapering to a tassel like a cow’s tail. Pearl kept her beads clean and hidden in a cotton pouch on a ribbon round her neck.

Surabhi had said, ‘This mantra is special concession to suffering souls of this earth in its darkest age.

‘So pure and powerful a means of liberation is it, that denizens of the pristine pleasure-heavens pray to be born on this middling planet, that they might also join the singing and savour the transcendent bliss it brings.’

Turning each bead between her thumb and middle finger, inching her fingers along, bead by bead, in little more than five minutes, Pearl had completed one round of her rosary. When she reached the end she turned it around and went the other way, and again, and again. Every round she completed, she slid a pearl down a tasselled cord hanging from the pouch and in this way she counted four, eight, sixteen rounds of her beads. And later, perhaps, thirty-two then sixty-four. And one day, three-times sixty-four, like the adepts of yore. Quickly and clearly, she chanted, _bare krishna, bare krishna, krishna krishna, bare bare..._

It was as if her mother’s voice was coming to her muffled through warm womb padding, _pitter-patter, pitter-patter, bella, bella, chatter, chatter, bare rama, bare rama, rama rama, bare bare..._

The comfort of pretty, spoken, infant-hood rhythms surrounded her. ‘Bake me a cake as fast as you can.... Bake me a cake as fast as you can....; ‘The sheep’s in the meadow, the
cow’s in the corn...’; ‘Some in rags, some in tags, some in a velvet gown....’. A long
forgotten childhood love of song stirred within her:

Dark behind it rose the forest,
Rose the black and gloomy pine-trees,
Rose the firs with cones upon them;
Bright before it beat the water,
Beat the clear and sunny water,
Beat the shining Big-Sea-Water ...

The mantra rippled like patterns on borders of saris or classical lines of creeping flora
finely carved round temple eaves. Looping patterns of word and sound formed neat
undulations, predictable as pendulum or pulse. The oscillation became one with Pearl’s
breathing; a heartbeat that quickened with satisfaction and soothed into serenity.

The mantra became the eye of the mandala that was Pearl’s world — it was the locus
around which everything else revolved. It was the source of all circular motion — as
elementary as the invention of the wheel, as awesome as the orbits of the sun, the stars
and the planets, as ubiquitous as the travelling of wagons, as charming as the local meaning
of Swapnavan — that tract of land around which Krishna wanders grazing his cows.

Each syllable was laden with layers of meaning: Pearl tried to understand how it was the
sound — form of Kishori and Krishna themselves. Pearl pronounced the names of her
god and goddess and they danced, spilling and rolling, off her tongue. She allowed her
awareness of Kishori and Krishna’s existence to seep gently into her psyche, into her very
being. It was so simple.

hare krishna, hare krishna, krishna krishna, hare hare
hare rama, hare rama, rama rama, hare hare

Surabhi said, ‘When you are chanting your mantras purely your heartstrings will resonate in
a pure harmonic. At that time a spiritual sentiment will flow from your heart like sweet
water from a mountain spring. At that time you will weep in rapture.’

‘But Surabhi-di, I’ve been chanting for nearly a year and I never weep!’ Pearl said. ‘I
keep thinking about all sorts of things, shopping for saris and bangles and hairclips....’

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‘Your mind is restless,’ Surabhi said, ‘but all you have to do is hear.’ Then she warned, ‘beware of assuming an elevated stage of practice prematurely, my dear, lest you become a monkey jumping for fruit beyond your reach. For some it will take lifetimes.’

She leaned towards Pearl, widened her eyes and nodded. ‘In the market place, trinkets and charms are readily available; but few have sufficient legal tender to purchase the genuine diamond.’ She stood and left the room. Pearl contemplated what Surabhi had just said. When Surabhi returned carrying a dry sari in from the line, Pearl ventured, ‘So, how do you pay for the real thing?’

‘Hunger, my dear,’ she was glad Pearl had asked. It was the correct question. ‘Appetite and desire. Spiritual yearning. It is the only qualification. Just like, one famished beggar-child is hankering after a lovely big milk-sweet in a sweet stall.’ She opened her fingers as if to grasp a tennis ball. ‘She does not need to be told she is craving. Simply, she is knowing.’

Surabhi taught Pearl meticulously, so that when the time came, there would be no doubt in her mind: when the time came for the soul to soar on her devotional journey there would be no need to inquire whether she was ready or not. Such desires came naturally. She would be consumed by a beautiful, simple, and unalloyed hunger of the spirit. Awareness of this intense hunger was the only qualification for a practitioner such as Pearl to go higher. Those who asked if they were ready or not, were not. At the time of readiness, the fondness of the aspirant for the object of her devotion would become unfettered by convention and regulation. At such a level of love, trust would be complete. The desire of the soul would have the power of a small growing plant to finally split the solid rock.

‘But I’ll never perfect it. It’s going to take forever.’

‘Be peaceful. Remain undisturbed. Be steadfast. Be patient. Become one-pointed. Do not become discouraged that you are moving slowly towards the goal.’

‘But I’m a parrot, mindlessly repeating … ’

‘It is simple. As you cleanse your body by frequent bathing, cleanse your mind with the mantra. Keep your heart pure by bringing six enemies headed by lust under control and your mind will be attracted only to Krishna. We are conditioned to the ways of this world and the mind is juggled from one subject matter to the next: simply control it through practice and renunciation.’

Pearl looked down at her palms. She felt like a child waiting for Christmas. Surabhi encouraged her with yet another kind smile.

‘It is simple. Be patient. Fix your mind on the meanings of the names. Remember the
stories of Kishori and Krishna for they are all within the names. Remember Kishori and Krishna together and remember them apart.’ She chuckled inscrutably. Watching her was like watching the weather. Her expression now intensified, she straightened her back and became ancient and filled with power.

‘You take a vow of silence. This means, not that you never speak, but that you give up tittle-tattle gossip of the marketplace. Speak, by all means, but speak of Kishori and Krishna, of what they are doing and how they both look.

‘And remain with those who are of like mind.’

*Anything this lovely was worth believing in*, thought Pearl.

In believing, she was changed.
Chapter VI

Noon

A small guest arrived. Surabhi put some half-inch pieces of day-old papaya and grapes on her terrace as a gesture of friendship. From then on, the slender mousey bulbul came every day.

Monsoon arrived and the streets flooded. This was the time when the denizens of Swapnavan celebrated the festival of the swings for Kishori and Krishna.

Crowds moved from temple to temple to see the swings and to swing Kishori and Krishna upon them. From the tiniest child's string-and-box swing in the street, to great ones made centuries before from silver, to those woven from flowers by devotees in the forest, all were equally perfect for Kishori and Krishna.

Craftsmen came from Manipura to build a swing in Swamini's temple. It was many-tiered and suspended on chains from beams three stories above the courtyard so that when the great construction swayed back and forth, it moved so slowly and heavily that it appeared to be on rollers. Each section was painted and covered with green velvet like grass with sequinned satin flowers. Kishori and Krishna stood on a on a separate inner swing around which a dozen smaller swings moved back and forth independently. On each of these smaller swings stood a smaller Krishna, each with his own little milkmaid. The faces of the tiny milkmaids — lips, eyes, eyebrows, eye-liner and forehead markings — were all painted minutely in perfect detail. Their fingers were pointing here and there in dance, and they curved at the waist. Each milkmaid wore a tiny tinsel-trimmed skirt, minuscule plastic bangles on her wrists, and necklaces of neatly stitched glass beads.

Surabhi guided Pearl to the front of a haphazard queue of monks and children and women waiting to pull the flower-threaded ribbon moving the swing. As she moved forward, she let the multiplied swinging images of the divine couple fill her mind. She pulled gently on the ribbon. The swing was perfectly engineered to moved smoothly under the slightest touch.
Pearl spoke to the dancing gods, ‘My sweet Kishori, let me always return to your Swapnavan.’

From Kishori’s hair, a rose fell, tumbling and bouncing down from moving platform to moving platform as if in slow motion to Pearl. It landed in her upturned hand in her lap and the people who saw it started in surprise.

Surabhi raised her eyebrows nodding as if to say, ‘I knew it!’

Pearl had heard her Kishori’s reply.
Tulsi's taste was impeccable, her artistry unsurpassed. She drew elements of perfection together like a conductress — flora, fauna and weather all followed her instructions. She coordinated movements of every living being in the woods so when Kishori and Krishna walked along her paths everything around them served to heighten their love and elevate it to its topmost pitch.

Swapnavan was Tulsi's forest. If a petal fell from a flower in a tree and tangled in Kishori's hair, it fell because Tulsi had instructed it to do so. Krishna would move close to Kishori and lift his hand to remove the petal, brushing her cheek as he did so, and the petal and the flower and the tree would all become fulfilled and filled with joy.

This day, Kishori took permission from her elders to visit the temple of the sun god. She and her friends set off through the woods carrying all the paraphernalia required for worship on a silver tray: a peacock lamp with wicks soaked in ghee, jasmine incense, a small pot of Yamuna water, and bowl of rock candy. They left the tray at the temple while they went to pick the flowers Tulsi had prepared at Kishori's favourite private pond.

All morning, Krishna had been playing with his friends and the calves but now he was becoming unfocused. He had come across a flowering tree with a scent so headily sweet that it had completely overpowered him. Thousands of bees were attracted to the tree and they were madly suckling in the flowers so that the whole tree was vibrating with the sound. The fragrance of the flowers, the sound of the bees and the midday sunshine all acted together to become an intoxicant to Krishna. Krishna was like one of bees and he was thinking of a certain flower with an urgency which would not allow him to think of anything other. Balram noticed the way Krishna was glancing into the thicker parts of the forest in the direction of Kishori's pond. He knew his brother's mind well. He knew what to do. He blew his horn and shouted to the other cowherd boys to rally round, then he led them away, distracting and entertaining them, leaping and yelling and inventing exciting new games to play. That day, it might have been a competition of strength or speed or leapfrog, or swinging across the river on creepers in the trees like monkeys, or kick-ball or stick-ball or martial arts. He gave Krishna a sidelong glance; the boys were having such a great time they hardly

'The Golden Milkmaid'
noticed their favourite friend had disappeared from their midst.

When Krishna came close to Kishori's pond, he saw Kishori's beautiful figure reaching up to pick jasmine and then crouching down to look for violets. As he crept closer, he could hear her humming quietly and whispering thanks to the plants for allowing her to gather their flowers. His heart stirred. He hid inside the dappled green to watch her to his heart's content and plan his move.

Then, without warning, Krishna ran from his hiding place and planted himself in the path before Kishori with his hands on his hips and a scowl on his face.

"Who has given you permission to pluck my flowers? The forest is mine! I am sole proprietor and you are therefore a thief! You will be punished!" So saying, he stepped forward, thinking to grasp Kishori's little wrist.

Like birds, like forest creatures, from between the green of the glade, Kishori's friends stepped out and united round Kishori to protect her. They called Krishna a donkey and a bounder and argued that the forest belonged to Kishori's friend Tulsi. One of the pre-teen girls stepped out and snatched Krishna's flute before he could stop her. She handed it to Tulsi and Tulsi waved it triumphantly above her head. Krishna grasped in vain at the air as Tulsi passed the flute to another girl, and then it went behind the girls' backs, one to the other. Krishna was bamboozled. Did this girl have it? Did that one? Was it tucked in this one's long black plait? Krishna became more forceful: Was it hidden in this girl's bodice? Or in this one's petticoats?

The fighting group moved through the forest towards the edge of the pond and tumbled in. Kishori's girls splashed and squirted and submerged poor Krishna. Krishna valiantly defended himself to the end. The weapons of his adversaries were too powerful for him. He knew defeat and full surrender.

When Kishori and Krishna and the girls emerged, hair dripping, clothes clinging they flopped laughing on the shore. Some littler girls appeared on the shore carrying outfits that they had woven completely from flowers. They undressed Kishori and Krishna, put on their flower clothes, and decorated their hair with flowers too. Some of the most artistic girls had prepared a surprise for Kishori and Krishna that day; they had suspended a hammock-like couch from plaited lianas on a long high branch of a tamarind tree. They seated Kishori and Krishna inside it and began to push them, singing sweet swinging songs. As they pushed harder, they bade Kishori hold tightly to the flowering vines. The swing went higher and higher until Kishori's tummy began to float inside her. She called her friends to stop but they would not. It seemed the swing would turn right over the tamarind branch. Closing her eyes, Kishori screamed with fear, flung her arms around Krishna's hard chest and buried her face beneath his chin. It was just as the girls had planned.

The girls took Kishori and Krishna to a hidden woodlet where branches like weeping willows touched the ground forming a chamber, invisible from the outside with a curtain of flower-vines concealing the entrance.
It was lined with minutely flowering mosses and the girls had prepared a couch of rose petals inside it. They brought jarfuls of sherbet drinks and fruit cordials to refresh Kishori and Krishna and applied camphor and sandalwood paste to their bodies to relieve them from the heat of the midday sun.

Then, quietly, they left and merged into the forest outside.

When the flower curtain opened once more, Kishori and Krishna emerged blushing from the flower bower. The girls threw showers of flower petals over their heads and sung of their beauty and their perfect love.
They took Kishori and Krishna to a jeweled throne in the rocks and offered them a feast of forest fruits on leaf plates, laughing and joking to the accompaniment of birdsong on a gentle breeze.

But this bliss was not to last. It was nearly half-past three, and Kishori was yet to perform her worship at the temple of the sun god.

Repeating the lore of Swapnavan as spoken by her predecessors, this maidservant of Saraswati and Swamini aspires to realise it.
Chapter VII
The Fourth Ring of the Bell

After monsoon season, the air was cleaned of dust and dazzling. The land was emerald, and the hedgerows were jumping with life. Creamy-white, gently fragranced shiuli flowers blossomed and fell with the dew before dawn. Outside Pearl’s window, a tiny green bee-eater perched on a line, her sharp beak pointing in the air and her tapering tail twitching to keep balance. Her body was leaf-green and her jowls were the green from a children’s paintbox.

Surabhi and Ramani came to Pearl’s door.

“We are walking to the river. You will you join us, no?”

River Yamuna, Surabhi taught Pearl, was river of life, goddess daughter of the sun, sister of the judge of death. Her hair flowed as dark as a no-moon night and her form was as grey-black as the sand along her banks. She was divine and she was pure, for Kishori and Krishna played in the waves of her cool, dark, liquid body.

Yamuna changed her mood with the climate and the time of day. On some days she wore diaphanous mist, on others, diamante black. On some days she was earthy but today she flowed with bold sky-blue swirls. Brahmini ducks, bar-headed geese, spoonbills, and herons waded in the shallows of her wide sandbars. Pearl could hardly see her opposite shore far across her deep powerful watercourse.
The six bare feet crossed the glinting grey sand: Ramani’s cracked nut-brown feet as small as a child’s, Surabhi’s elegant striding feet, and Pearl’s numb pink feet. The three went to a place where massive stone steps lined Yamuna’s bank and sat there, gazing across the rippling surface of her depths toward her far bank covered with flora and filled with fauna. Large silvery fish rolled feeding on the water’s surface. Hunting kingfishers performed acrobatic dives.

‘Turtles!’ Pearl pointed. They were sunning themselves on the beaches. Her little sister would love them.

‘Pets of the river goddess,’ said Ramani.

Water buffaloes sauntered ever so slowly through the mud down to the river bank. A small boy with a stick and his friend trail them. One boy put his elbow up on the other’s shoulder and for a moment Pearl envisioned them as Krishna and his brother, out herding the cows.

Upstream near the palace, a bunch of noisy boys appeared floating on upturned clay pots. They got out and ran naked along the meditation platforms along the bank, and jumped shouting jubilantly, legs pedaling the air, into the water.

‘We are seeing Yamuna’s physical body,’ Surabhi told Pearl as she helped Ramani unwrap her shawl. ‘Her spiritual body is nurturing life and purifying sins.’

A woman in crimson slipped from her toe-sandals at the gently lapping river-beach. She crouched with her basket and placed red rose-heads and incense and a copper pot on the sand. With the palm of her right hand she scooped water from the river, took three sips and sprinkled the rest on her head. She called, ‘Yamuna! Yamuna! Joy! Joy!’ Then, with gentleness and absorption, gazing deep into the water, she poured milk into the stream and floated roses on the creamy swirls. She circled five sticks of incense toward the river, pushed them into the sand in the lapping shallows and knelt on the moist sand, pressing her forehead upon it.

Surabhi said, ‘Yamuna is no mere nature spirit. She has power to ensure birth after birth of pure devotion and admittance into the circle of Kishori’s friends in eternal Swapnavan.’

A clan of Rajasthanis riding long-legged camels bedecked with braids and bells and tassels rode across the sands. The camels lowered themselves for their riders to dismount at the water’s edge. Pearl thought even the oldest men among them handsome with their splendid turbans of turquoise and Indian pink, massive moustaches, heavy gold earrings and piercing gaze. Men and women both wore corrilyum. They were thin. The windswept

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women called and moved uninhibitedly. They wore fat anklets of silver, bangles of ivory from wrist to shoulder, embroidered blouses barely covering their breasts and gathered floral skirts exposing tattoos on their legs.

Surabhi gazed their way awhile then carried on. ‘Yamuna is girlfriend of Kishori. She experiences the deepest of loves and shares it with all who approach her with an open heart.’

On the far shore, was a straw hut high in the air on stilts in an enclosure made of plaited straw. A cluster of villagers were milling around beneath it.

Surabhi explained, ‘It is the hut of Bandhu-baba.’

Ramani-ma said, ‘He is the guru of my grandfather.’

‘Some said he is two hundred years old, some say three. Memory of his existence has passed on through generation to generation. He never leaves the riverbank and lives naked, in that hut built by his disciples. He needs nothing, but people bring fruit and sweets, even gold.’

‘Does he speak?’ asked Pearl.

‘He answers questions, whatever their nature, from those of a political minister to a humble seeker of god, and each take the living force they desire. He no longer follows rites or rules.’ She smiled sidelong at Ramani-ma, ‘He is having a jocular dialogue with the child-god.’

‘We will take bath now,’ said Ramani, and clambered sideways down the steps to the water’s edge.

The frail old woman, the middle-aged woman and young Pearl tied their long cotton petticoats over their chests, stepped into the water and dipped under three times. Each time the water closed over her head, Pearl opened her eyes. The water was dark with mud and shafts of sunlight caught sparkling particles floating around her. Her long hair flowed in the current like strands of seaweed and she imagined that she was one with nature and that she would be able to float away along the course of the sacred river without fear.

Pearl opened her heart to the river-goddess. Yamuna was one of Kishori’s friends, one of the brightly beautiful ever-youthful milkmaids. She could bestow a similar spiritual body upon anyone who bathed here with yearning in their hearts and words of worship on their lips. She prayed without words, trusting.
She asked the goddess if she was really there. And she asked herself, *how she could not be.*

When they came out dripping, Surabhi told Pearl to knot her long hair at the nape of her neck, joking, ‘To catch Krishna in.’ They dropped fresh petticoats over their heads, slipped on their blouses, and rewound their saris, bodies covered all the while.

They walked downstream and, at around midday, arrived at the sari tree. Ramani and Surabhi shared its story, reverentially, solemnly, gleefully, alternating seamlessly. Surabhi began, her hand on the bark of the tree, ignoring the ants running along it.

‘That Krishna is a *bad-mannered* boy,’ she glowered.

*Wicked,* scowled Ramani.

‘He was hiding in the branches here.’

‘Because this is where the milkmaidens were coming to take their bath.’

Surabhi widened her eyes. ‘Krishna’s eyes were big and round like the juggernaut-god.’

Ramani spoke like a child telling tales, ‘That wicked boy stole the clothes of the milkmaids and climbed into this tree like a monkey making noisy kisses and moving his eyebrows in a very crude way.’

Pearl asked, ‘But I thought the milkmaids were a match for Krishna.’

‘These were the *younger* milkmaidens.’ Surabhi explained. ‘That boy would never have played such a cruel trick on the *big* girls, for they could fight back and would defeat him with ease.’

Ramani said, ‘He well remembered the time the big girls ambushed him and his cowboy friends.’

Surabhi said, ‘The girls were waiting hiddenly in a hillside round a rocky narrow gap.’

Ramani said, ‘When the boys came along, the girls charged down upon them, wielding sticks and pelting the boys with stones.’

‘They captured the boys and tied them all to trees, and then they forced Krishna to carry a pot of yoghurt upon his head. How they taunted him!’

Ramani was positively cackling. ‘Such language those girls were using! One of them — probably Lalita, the bossy-bossy one — pitched a rock cracking Krishna’s pot so cold yoghurt ran all over his face and hair and inside his clothes.’

‘Then the girls ran away, heedless of the helpless boys’ threats.’

Ramani and Surabhi shook their heads, tutting at the pitiless girls’ victory.

All three women were distracted a moment as, in the garden behind the pavilion, some
partridges came walking through the undergrowth. Their black and white striped wings were closed. Their eyes were as if painted with long lines of black eye-liner.

‘Chakora birds,’ Ramani said softly as the three gazed. ‘They are so in love with the moon …’

‘… that they gaze at it constantly,’ finished Surabhi.

‘They drink moonbeams,’ said Ramani.

‘Just like we drink the stories of Kishori and Krishna with our ears,’ added Surabhi, and returned to the yarn. ‘So you see, yes, that is why Krishna was picking on the youngest girls — they were too innocent to outwit him and much more fun to tease.

‘They were wriggling and twisting in the water. One tried to cover herself with a lotus leaf but it was too prickly, another tried to conceal herself with her hair, some stayed under the water but it was crystal clear.

‘When the sun dipped behind the treetops the girls fell into chilly shadow. They began shivering and horripilating and their lips began to turn blue.’

‘They burst into tears.’

‘Feigning compassion for the blameless trembling girls, that wicked rogue called down, “You can come out now! No! Wait! I shall return your clothes only when you stand before me with your arms above your heads as yoginis. You will then bow to me and recite supplications and homage. One at a time.”’

Pearl clapped her hand over her mouth in horror.

‘Some people worship that blue boy as god,’ chuckled Ramani toothlessly.

‘But we,’ Surabhi continued, ‘we only give that rascal the time of day because our Kishori loves him.’

‘Cent percent,’ added Ramani.

Pearl frowned and nodded resolutely. That Krishna was not to be trusted. Some kind of god he was. She’d been warned. She’d be careful. Keep her distance.

But for Kishori, her heart softened.
The interview had gone well. Lily took off her shoes to cross the parkland, back to the train station. Now it was just the wait. She couldn’t say she wanted this position more than anything in the world; it’d mean coming in to the city every day. She’d have preferred something local. But Memorial was a good hospital, and the pay was nothing to sniff at.

The cathedral towered at the intersection. Lily argued inside. It might not hurt to say a prayer about the job, but there was no need to go into a building to do it. Botheration. She’d go in anyway. The interior was grey stone, cool, soaring. Light poured through stained glass. An English cathedral, here, where black swans nested.

She sat in the silence, and prayed for Mum, instead.

That she might see both her daughters together, once more time.
In monsoon season when the sky pulled on her darkest clouds, Pearl remembered Kishori’s favourite dress. It was thundercloud-blue like the skin of Kishori’s beloved. Kishori loved it because, when she wore it, she imagined the stormy blue was Krishna, and so she could feel him embracing her all over.

In spring, the mustard-flowers blossomed and the landscape turned the colour of Kishori’s face: molten gold with a touch of the crimson cosmetic powder.

Pearl had begun to see Kishori and Krishna everywhere.

In the bazaar, Pearl saw cosmetics and they reminded her of Kishori being dressed by her attendants in the mornings. The jewelry only reminded her of Kishori’s jewelry, her chinking anklets, her belt of shimmering bells that Krishna especially cherished, her sapphire bangles that reminded her of Krishna’s sapphire skin, her locket hiding her minuscule portrait of her beloved. The long black plaits of the local women reminded Pearl of Kishori’s knee-length braid swaying as she walked balancing pots of water, milk, or yoghurt on her head. When Pearl heard sassy teenage girls shouting, she heard Kishori’s friends.

A walk through the bazaar had become a stimulus for her contemplation, within.

One day, Surabhi sent Pearl to a workshop to pick up cloth for making clothes for Kishori-Krishna in Swamini’s temple.

Pearl went along a path between twelfth century walls and through an archway carved with peacocks into a cloth-covered courtyard filled with light. Eight teenage boys sat upon the floor around a huge, rectangular embroidery frame across which diaphanous aquamarine cloth was stretched, its surface patterned with rings as if pebbles had been thrown into a pond. Leaves appeared to be floating upon it, sparkling with droplets. The fabric was so gauzy Pearl could see through it — the tailors’ hands were underneath, feeding silver threads into hooked needles. They were fast. Pearl had never seen such workmanship. Chain-stitch spread across the surface of the cloth like a creeping plant.

They laughed to see this pink-faced woman at the door. Their superior stood, admonished them smilingly, and crossed the workshop to give Pearl the parcel of embroidered cloth and a selection of designs for Surabhi’s perusal.

‘Kishori-Krishna’s workshop,’ he said with a sweep of his hand. Lining whitewashed walls were narrow shelves stacked with jars of seed-pearls of all colours and tiny mirrors, reels of sparkling thread, and skeins of gold and silver ribbons. A child was sorting a pile
of coloured threads.

‘You are all so devoted to Kishori-Krishna,’ she said.

One of the boys pointed to squirrel nibbling millet on the windowsill, ‘He is devoted to Kishori-Krishna,’ and went back to his work.

Now and then, when Pearl was chanting, an exceptional lucidity came to her. She would close her eyes and, in her meditation, mentally inhale the honey scent of Kishori and Krishna’s eternal sylvan playground. It was not the sort of imagining that took effort; it was more like a restful daydream that knew where it wanted to wander, which fields of golden mustard-flower to run in, which bluebell woods to hide in. Butterfly-like, such moments were too fragile to grasp, but Pearl understood that this transcendent contentment was a taste of what would come if she continued as she had begun. When it slipped away and she returned to the external world once more, she lamented. When would she return to this state of mind? Of heart? She hardly dared think the word — it had been bliss. Meagre pleasure or ease paled beside it. If only she could return again and again until the feeling became familiar, second nature even, then, one day, it would never slip away.

Pearl lapsed into a prayer to the sparkling dust and trees of Swapnavan, ‘When will that day be mine?’ The tamal trees scattered tiny lightly scented blossoms in reply.

Surabhi spoke quietly, ‘The seedling of devotion is sprouting in your heart. Nurture it with utmost care, for it is at a delicate and vulnerable stage.

‘Cultivate it with the water of contemplation, the sunlight of hearing, and the fresh air of friendship of like-minded souls. After some time, it will begin to mature into a fine climbing vine.

‘Protect it from the nibbling animals of hatred and criticism.

‘Protect it from poisonous choking weeds that grow in the nourishment on which it thrives. You are knowing what they are?’

Pearl remained silent.

‘They are prestige, conceit and arrogance. They proliferate luxuriantly and can be indistinguishable from the vine.’

Theatrically, Pearl gulped.

‘But, above all, beware the mad elephant.’

Pearl was unsure if Surabhi was joking. She waited.

‘Just as mad elephant is entering one garden, causing destruction by trampling

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flowerbeds with its big feet, uprooting trees and smashing garden-houses, so mad elephant
offence it is the most dangerous offence of all. Mad elephant will destroy your devotion
and damage the devotion of those who hear it. And so what is it?’

Pearl knew but she stayed silent.

‘It is the criticisms of those whose hearts and minds are filled with pure love for Kishori
and Krishna. So, like this, you build one protective fence.’

Pearl nodded side-to-side.

‘The vine of your devotion will wind its way upwards, slowly, slowly, higher and higher,’
Surabhi raised her arm, twisting and rolling her hand as if it was a growing leaf, ‘until it
grows out of this world. It will penetrate layers covering this universe and grow through
the heavenly realms. It will grow beyond dull matter until its tip reaches the taintless river
on the boundary of the spiritual stratum, then higher and higher still, through the fields of
bright white light and far beyond the planets of Vishnu. At last, when it reaches the
topmost sphere in the spiritual sky, the sweet Land of Cows and kindness, buds will form
and blossom and their petals will shower upon the feet of Kishori and Krishna.

‘When Kishori and Krishna smile with happiness, those petals will scatter down, down,
down, and shower upon you, sitting here, or meditating in your room.

‘Then you will be knowing the real meaning of bliss.’

Pearl listened. A roller-bird with a perky black cap landed near the veranda. He took off
and his dull plumage became jeweled.
Lily, Grace and Winifred sat before a plate of cheese scones. Lily and her mother were at loggerheads. Smart of Lily to bring her mother here.

‘Engaged!’

‘Yes, Mum.’

‘How long have you known him?’

‘One year.’

‘But you’re way too young!’

Grace poured tea, careful as a Geisha. She’d always believed it had therapeutic value. One day the scientists would prove it. She pushed the cups before her sister and her niece. They drank. And calmed.

‘But Mum, you were much younger when Pearly was born.’

‘That was different. Things were different in those days.’ She’d been through the war. That’s how different it’d been.

‘But, love isn’t different, is it. I love Peter.’

Winifred softened. She looked up at Grace wringing her hands in her apron, and appealed with her expression for help.

Grace said, ‘Well, he’s certainly a decent enough young fellow. Why don’t you just give it a few months more, Lily? If you love each other that much, a few months shouldn’t hurt.’

Lily conceded. Besides, Peter was already like part of the family. She could wait. And he wouldn’t mind either. Lily thought, this sort of love was the very reason for being alive.
It was cold season. Surabhi and Pearl sat on the veranda, drawing what warmth they could from the weak sun. Surabhi tipped handfuls of dry gold moong-lentils onto bell-metal plates and she and Pearl sat cleaning tiny stones and twigs from it then tipped the cleaned lentils into a cooking pot. Surabhi’s fingers were deft. Pearl thought she was sensing the stones rather than seeing them.

One day Pearl asked, ‘Surabhi-di?’

‘Yes, child?’

‘Do you know anything about dreams?’

Surabhi raised an eyebrow, ‘Yes?’

‘The first night I slept in Swapnavan, I dreamed of one of the divine milkmaids.’ She described her. Surabhi was taken aback but she hid it. She told Pearl stories of masters of yore whose revelations came to them on the pretext of dream.

‘For you,’ she stressed, ‘better you keep your visions hiddenly.’ Pearl saw nothing but gravity in her face.

‘In time,’ Surabhi said, ‘you’ll meet your guru in meditation and the two of you will communicate in that state. Remember this as you chant your mantras. Everything will come in time.’

‘Surabhi-di? Aren’t you my guru?’

‘No, my dear,’ said Surabhi. ‘Well, I’m not your initiating guru, but I suppose you could say I’m your instructing guru. Teaching, I am, but relationship is informal.’ She gazed out into the branches of a tree. ‘A little bird can be teaching guru,’ she went on, ‘alighting on your window-sill, delivering a message — “Wake-up! Wake-up!” A tree can teach tolerance — it is standing all year in rain and sometimes a boy will cut his name in its bark — but it does not complain. A blade of grass can teach humility, how it bends beneath a footfall and springs back up. You can listen to the river. You can hear instructions on the breeze. Instructing guru is many.’

Pearl had not noticed that she had dropped a small stone into the pot with the lentils. Surabhi picked it out and said, ‘I am very good lentil-cleaning guru.’

‘But Swamini is your guru.’

‘Yes,’ Saurabhi replied. She bowed her head slightly whenever she spoke her preceptor’s name. ‘For me, Shri Saraswati Swamini is both instructing guru and initiating guru.’

Pearl could see the love Surabhi carried for Swamini. It was the sort of love that increased her love for everyone else.

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Surabhi looked closely at Pearl with her hazel eyes.
‘Little one, are you knowing what is guru?’


Surabhi gracefully raised her index finger so that her hand formed a position that had been carved for millennia on sculptures of saints and avatars. It was the gesture of instruction. It silenced Pearl’s chattering mind.

‘Guru is dear-most relative. Dearest to one’s own heart.

‘Guru is one’s closest friend.’

Surabhi lightened once more. ‘I can tell you stories about Kishori and Krishna until the cows come home but it would be rather a lot of responsibility to have you as my student!’

Pearl’s mouth set downward in disappointment at Surabhi’s joke. Surely, Surabhi was the obvious choice. Pearl was safe learning from her. She’d taught her so much already. Surely, Pearl thought, Surabhi must already be her guru. But she was telling her that she was not.

Surabhi put her hand on Pearl’s shoulder. ‘I’m sure you’d make a first class student, but I certainly wouldn’t want you bowing down and massaging my feet and fanning me and suchlike!’

She shook her head and lowered it, serious again. ‘Genuine guru is very powerful,’ she said.

She tipped the last of the lentils into the pot. Pearl took the pot from her and rinsed the lentils with water from the clay water pot. Surabhi lit the cooker and placed the pot on it to boil.

‘When time is right, guru will find you. There is no need to seek.’
It was the first time Lily had been in Elder Park at night. She had made a new skirt especially for going out tonight. The lights of the city and the riverbank walkway reflected like flickering flames in the pitch-black water. The fountain played multicoloured, lit from below. A band played dolefully in the wrought-iron rotunda.

The way Peter held her hand, he was so perfect. Looking straight ahead so proudly, he made her feel so important. Lily believed in love. It was what life was all about. It was the nearest thing to religion. She caught her and Peter’s reflection in the train station doors. They were perfect. Love was perfect.

But why did she feel so queasy?

‘Wait here while I get the tickets, Darl,’ Peter said.

Lily stood alone and in the neon glare and, looking down, noticed the muddy smear of a grass-stain on her skirt. It reminded her of rugby and advertisements for washing-powder.

She wished she could go to her big sister’s room like she used to. She really needed to talk.
‘Milk, poured into glass of ink is swirling and diluting the blackness,’ said Surabhi, whirling her hand. ‘Continued pouring will displace all the ink until the only remaining liquid is...’

‘Milk.’ Pearl responded as if by rote. ‘Just like, if we pour nectar into existence, materiality will dilute with spirituality and ultimately be fully washed away.’

If Pearl could have caught a reflection of herself, she would not have recognised the woman she would have seen — a thin brown lady in a milk-white sari walking in deep discussion with two other women dressed in a similar manner, one of them very old and bent.

They were going to an old sandstone palace on the bank of the river Yamuna.

‘This is your first Swapnavan drama, child?’ asked Ramani.

Pearl moved closer to speak as they walked.

‘Yes, Ramani-ma. Surabhi-di has read me the story of tonight’s drama, and explained it,’ she replied. ‘I hope I can understand everything.’

It was full moon night in the holy month of Damodar. The performance was going to be outdoors on pontoons moored at the sandstone palace on the riverbank, floodlit by paraffin lamps. Pearl knew that, when the boy-troupe came on stage, for Surabhi and Ramani, there would be no actors, no scenery — for them, Krishna the flute-playing prankster, darling of the cowherd folk of Swapnavan, would be there in person before their very eyes, and his eternal consort, Kishori the celestial milkmaid, would be there at his side. Pearl was confident she was ready to follow the dialogue and plot, but she prayed to realise the sentiments conveyed by the play — in her heart.

By the time the three women arrived, an audience of townsfolk and villagers had filled the amphitheatre of steps from the palace to the water’s edge. Folk leaned from balconies or lounged on mattresses on gently rocking skiffs moored alongside pontoons. The three found a place on a carved sandstone meditation platform with a good view. The moon reflected sharply in Yamuna’s black water. The music began. In a pool of lantern-light centre stage, Kishori was reclining on a royal divan, surrounded by her girlfriends. She was sulking. Pearl had heard about Kishori’s bad moods when she would refuse to speak to Krishna. Krishna deserved her anger, of course. On occasions, he arrived late at the trysting place he had arranged with Kishori. At such times he would turn up flushed and out of breath, one lip looking as if a parrot had pecked it and his hair dishevelled. Sometimes Kishori’s girlfriends smelled a perfume on him that Kishori never used. But other times, Kishori had no reason to be angry. That was her prerogative. Anyway, Krishna
found Kishori’s flower-like face quite fascinating when she was frowning with fury.

Ramani nudged Pearl and pointed. Her eyes must have been sharper than Pearl had thought. In the shadows behind stage-prop trees stage left, stood Krishna, downcast.

Kishori had been huffy for far too long and he longed to share and talk and laugh with her once more as they had always done. He had sent her forest flowers, poetry, promises, messages with birds, and a gemstone shaped like a heart. But nothing would appease Kishori. Krishna needed to see her once more and to feel her soft embrace or he would die. Kishori’s friends were wringing their hands, for Kishori’s happiness was their happiness. They were always happy when Kishori made up with Krishna and, besides, they loved entertaining the sweethearts with joking, singing and dancing; and they loved serving them pear-blossom and elderflower honey-wine, sweetmeats and sherbets.

Not one of the young players showed sign of turning teen. They had learned their lines well and projected their voices to the back of the audience. While they were in costume, their sense of duty and dignity transcended any childishness.

The audience gazed with love at their living vision. They knew the story by heart. This was an apparition beyond that which even the finest, most sensitively decorated temple images could convey. These were the gods themselves.

Surabhi leaned across to check whether Pearl could follow. Pearl moved her head in the affirmative, side to side.

At last, Krishna’s longing for Kishori drove him to seek help and he went secretly to one of Tulsi’s best and most intelligent friends, Kundalata. Kundalata listened to Krishna’s problem and then thought in silence.

At last, ‘I’ve got it!’ She had hatched a plan. She took him to her chamber, had him take off his clothes, and dressed him in some of her own clothes. Krishna was only fifteen, smooth of skin, a dancer, and an actor with skills that could bewilder any soft-hearted soul. His waist was strong, so (to hoots from the audience) Kundalata struggled to pull his petticoat string tight. She dropped a full gathered skirt on him and, while he struggled into his bodice, she picked two fat kadamba blossoms to push up inside it. She lightened his face with a powder-puff and dabbed rouge on his cheeks. She put on him toe rings, jingling anklets, glass bangles, pearl necklaces, earrings, a large nose ring, hairclips and a diaphanous veil of lurex lace. Krishna practiced his voice until it was sweeter and gentler than a cuckoo bird’s, and the two skipped off together, ankle bells tinkling like the springtime rain.

This dressed-up Krishna was far more beautiful than any of the girl characters except Kishori. Pearl thought, there’s a boy playing a girl with a boy playing a boy playing a girl. It was a quaint kind of ribaldry. The audience was agog.

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When Krishna and Kundalata arrived at Kisbori’s house, Kisbori’s maidservants ushered them to Kisbori’s presence.

Kisbori greeted Kundalata, ‘An unexpected visit!’ and embraced her. Then she smiled at the fascinating, attractive girl holding Kundalata’s hand, her doe-like eyes melting with affection.

‘Does she know who it is?’ Pearl leaned to ask Ramani. ‘Oh no!’ Ramani replied. ‘She has no idea!’

Pearl almost cried out like a child at a pantomime, ‘It’s Krishna!’

‘This is a minstrel-girl from the city of Muttra,’ announced Kundalata, ‘a highly qualified student of the celestial music-master himself. She gained the celestial music-master’s blessings when she memorised his divine song after only one hearing — every nuance of its melody; every detail of its complex, intricate rhythms.’

The minstrel-girl looked at her toes, the very picture of shyness.

‘The celestial music-master recognised her talent and the quality of her voice and although she was just a mortal, he took her under his wing, and for one full year, instructed her in the arts of the angelic musicians.’

Kisbori raised her eyebrows, impressed. ‘Please sing!’

The minstrel-girl asked Kisbori to select a raga, and say with which variations she would prefer it sung. Kisbori chose a twilight raga of a certain class from a particular school. She named a certain type of rhythmic cycle in which it should be sung, which notes were to be emphasised, which special ornaments were to be applied, and which type of improvisation the girl should use.

The minstrel-girl bowed her head and said to Kisbori, ‘I’m afraid I can sing only simple melodies,’ causing the girls to tilt their heads and clasp their hands at their hearts. In an angelic unbroken voice, the minstrel-girl began.

What a curious experience it was for Pearl. She knew she was watching a stage performance, but she was also hearing Krishna sing to Kisbori. It was as if there were two of her — one Pearl watching a drama and the other actually with the celestial milkmaids of Swapnavan. Stranger still, it made perfect sense.

The theatre backdrop was the far dark bank of the Yamuna and as Krishna sang the river-breeze accompanied him. Pearl remembered Surabhi’s rendition of the tale: When the peacocks, nightingales, and bumblebees heard the song, they fell silent, embarrassed at the sound of their own coarse voices.

Kisbori’s friends listened to the sweet singing, motionless, tears welling in their eyes. Their rapture and enchantment became such that even their tears stopped flowing. At last, at the end of the song, the girls’...
tears pattered to the ground like a shower of tiny pebbles. Pearl’s eyes tingled with tears.

Surabhi widened her eyes at Pearl and Pearl smiled back. This story, Surabhi had read her; now they were seeing it; one day they would all be in it.

‘Ah! That was beautiful!’ sighed Kishori, ‘Oh that you could stay here with us.’

Until now, Kishori’s anger towards Krishna had turned her heart harder than diamond. Now, without her understanding why, it began to soften.

‘But — I must reward you with something,’ Kishori said with charm, and went about unfastening a large jade and krisholyte pendant from around her own neck. As she did so, an older girlfriend stepped close as if to help with the clasp.

She leant towards Kishori’s neck, and, audible only to Kishori and the audience, hissed in Kishori’s ear, ‘Oh gullible girl! Look closely! There’s a love thief in our midst!’

Ramani’s toothless mouth hung open as she gazed in unselfconscious glee. Surabhi sat forward in eagerness and indicated Pearl should not miss what was to happen next.

Kishori’s moon-bright face lit up. She said aloud, ‘Thank you, bright one. You are right. A mere necklace could never be enough to demonstrate our appreciation. We will bestow many fine ornaments upon this lovely girl, and new clothes too!’ and she clapped her hands for the small girls to bring clothes.

‘No!’ stammered Kundalata, ‘She is so shy! Let her take your lovely gifts home to try on in her chamber.’

‘Certainly not,’ asserted Kishori. ‘We’re all girls here!’

The minstrel spoke. ‘Your kindness is sweet, but I don’t need your gifts. It is more than treasure enough to have pleased you. Kindly, give me your loving embrace and I shall be fully rewarded.’

‘You will not accept our gracious gifts? Then we shall dress you by force,’ said Kishori standing suddenly with her hands on her hips. ‘Look,’ she nodded and her girls stepped close, ‘I have many friends to help me.’

At that, two of Kishori’s milkmaid cohorts stepped forward and held the poor minstrel by her arms. One pulled her veil from her head. Another tugged the strings lacing her bodice. As the bodice loosened, the minstrel’s chest seemed to deflate and two fat kadamba blossoms flattened on one side slipped out and fell to the ground.

The silence was pin-drop.

Kishori cried, ‘Aha! What has fallen from her bodice?’

The smaller girls’ eyes widened and they stared in surprise. The older girls covered their faces with their veils, stifling their mirth. Ramani and Surabbi pressed their fingers to their lips. Kishori turned her back on Krishna.
Downcast and limp-bodiced, Krishna was defeated. The small girls’ giggles pealed. The big girls’ shrieks of hilarity roused the whole forest. Kishori kept her face hidden but her shoulders shook with mirth: Krishna had broken down the wall of her anger.

One of the smallest girls came forward picked up the kadamba blossoms, one in each hand, and addressed them exaggeratedly, ‘O blessed big kadamba blossoms! As sweet flowers from a tree, you naturally know no cunning, but now, because of your close association with this wicked boy you’ve become double-dealing! You are shameless in his hands! But all because of you our happiness is blooming — Kishori and Krishna are united once more!’

The audience were raised to a state of vibrant joy and finally dissolved in a sigh of happiness. Surabhi’s sari had slipped from her head and her face was wet with tears. Ramani turned to Pearl, moving her hand in a dancer’s gesture as if to say, ‘You see?’ The three rocked with mirth. It was a time for celebration.
Chapter VIII

Afternoon

‘We are halfway through the manuscript,’ said Surabhi. She and Pearl had carried their woven mats to the shade at the edge of the flower gardens adjacent to Kishori Bhavan. There, somewhat removed from the day-to-day sounds of pumps clanking, pressure cookers hissing and people calling to one another, they sat with their papers spread around them. Surabhi sat with her legs bent, one calf across the other leg, and was resting some pages across her lap. Pearl relaxed in half-lotus position.

‘So-o-o,’ Surabhi began, extending the expletive to three tuneful syllables, ‘all day long, Krishna was tending his father’s cows, calves and bulls, watching them graze, making sure they did not wander off.

The rocks of Hill of Govardan were giving red ochre and black manganese. In the fresh of the mornings, the cowherd boys were collecting these pigments and mixing them with cow’s milk and beeswax into siennas and umbers with which to paint their bodies. One of the boys was collecting indigo leaves in his cloth, to pound and grind with a stone on a rock to a smooth bright paste. The boys dipped twigs into these paints, and painted patterns of dots above their eyebrows and around their cheekbones — straight lines and arrowheads on their foreheads, and palm fans and drop-shapes on their chins. On the sides of their calves, they painted creeping plants and dragons, and on their upper arms, they were painting mandalas of snakes and flames and diamonds.’

‘They used henna, Surabhi-di?’

‘Quite right. Indigo too.’ Pearl made a note.

‘If the cows were grazing close to home on one particular day, Krishna’s mother and the mothers of his friends were sending servants with banana leaf lunch parcels of rice-balls with creamy yoghurt and sweet-balls to the boys.’

‘And pickle?’

‘And pickle. On days the cows needed to go further afield, such as to the Hill, the boys would take lunch packs from home in the mornings.’

‘They were sitting together sharing tiffin, swapping morsels among themselves, or stealing sweet-balls

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from one another. Sometimes Krishna and the boys were sharing tiffin sitting on a slab of stone at a stream. Sometimes one big boy would snatch a little boy’s lunch pack and toss it to a friend — the boys would throw the lunch-pack from one to the other, teasing that little boy, ruffling his hair and finally returning his beloved lunch pack.’

Pearl laughed at Surabhi’s storytelling and thought, ‘It’s the ordinariness that makes it miraculous. So simple you can miss it.’

‘The Hill was glinting with cinnabar and lapis. In the precipices were cool, hidden caverns curtained with silvery ferns and hanging mosses. Fireflies were illuminating the caves. Gemstones in the walls stored light and retracted it in kaleidoscopic rainbows. Krishna peered in, looking for a place to bring his sweetheart, Kishori.’

A cow plodded towards the flower garden and stopped, separated from the flowers by a hedge of prickle-bushes. She lifted her big head towards Surabhi and Pearl, gazed at them for a moment and mooed.

‘While the cows were grazing, the boys were playing games like wrestling, leapfrog, hide-and-seek, stick-cricket and tag. They were twirling their long cow-herding sticks in the air and whirling around to catch them under one leg or behind their backs. The big boys were teaching the small boys how to spin their sticks in martial style and younger boys were cheering as big boys engaged in combat amongst themselves.’

A bulbul perched in a branch overhead. He cocked his head, shook his tail and began chirruping. As Pearl turned toward it, Surabhi said, ‘Sometimes the boys were playing with the bulbuls. The bulbuls were enjoying themselves and were free to fly away any time they liked, but they were always coming back.

‘Sometimes the boys were imitating forest animals, dancing like peacocks or bunting and grimacing like apes. Those horizontal branches,’ Surabhi pointed, ‘the boys were walking along like wild monkeys. Small boys were picking berries to share among themselves and big boys were daring each other to climb up to collect dripping honey from beehives hanging in the highest branches.’

Pearl had tasted the local honey. A villager had come to the gates of Kishori Bhavan selling it from a bucket. There had been honeycomb in it.

‘They were swimming and splashing in Govardan’s ponds and lakes, hiding behind the waterfalls of her streams and diving from her high rocky cliffs into her turquoise lakes.

‘Govardan was vast at that time. Sometimes the boys were becoming quite lost among the ridges and valleys of her rolling green back. They were blowing on their leaf-bugles and bollering to one another and the cows were mooning in response to their keepers’ calls.’

A parade of monkeys came on all fours through the trees. Surabhi reached for her stick..."
in case they came close. Pearl picked up a stone.

‘As they were performing their daily duties, the milkmaidens were daydreaming of Krishna.’ Surabhi used a different, softer voice to speak of the girls. ‘They imagined him running in Govardan’s meadows enjoying the touch of grass under his bare feet and between his toes. They were longing to give Krishna pleasure as Govardan did.’

‘They are thinking like that?’ asked Pearl.

‘Of course,’ replied Surabhi.

‘Krishna’s big brother, Balram, was protective of Krishna.’ Surabhi lowered her voice conspiratorially. ‘Sometimes, while they were playing, some cows would wander away and Balram would rally the boys round shouting orders at them, and the boys would love it because it was all a game and a great adventure. Balram would lead them charging off across the Hill, booting and yodelling and blowing their horns to round the cows up again. While they were playing in this way, they hardly noticed Krishna had gone from their midst, but at last it would begin to dawn on the brighter lads that Balram was distracting them, and they’d begin to question him and call Krishna’s name into the forest.

‘When Krishna was returning, he was blushing and disheveled and his clothes were tied haphazardly. Krishna’s closest friends were exchanging glances and suppressing smiles. The smallest most guileless boys were looking into Krishna’s face asking where he had been and who had scratched his body, what had left bite marks and smears of colour on his cheek.’

Pearl paid careful attention to the adjustment of her sari headpiece.

‘In the afternoon when the cows became tired from standing with their great heavy udders, they were sitting down to chew their cud. The boys time-passed snoozing in the shade of the trees or playing some more before dancing home towards the village later in the afternoon.’

Then Surabhi fell silent and read through the pages before her. Pearl took Surabhi’s manuscript and picked up her pencil.

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It was three thirty-six in the afternoon in the timeless land of Swapnavan. When Kishori arrived home, she went straight to her chambers to briefly rest and to compose herself. Her maidservants bathed her once more, dressed her afresh, and took her to the kitchens to prepare sweetmeats to be packed in baskets and sent to Krishna’s parents’ palace.

Kishori’s father loved Kishori so much that he had built for her a little palace of her own with towers of chambers and balconies decorated with moonstone and crystal swans so lifelike that real swans landed beside them and fell in love with them and rubbed their necks against theirs. Each tower had arch-shaped windows with views far across the grazing pastures of Swapnavan, and in one of these towers was Kishori’s private kitchen. From here, as Kishori and the girls cooked, they could keep an eye on the path from Govardhan Hill home. When one of them spotted a wisp of dust on the horizon, she would call to Kishori. Kishori would leave what she was doing and rush to the window and gaze out in rapture. If she had been toasting flat-bread on a griddle or puffing it on an open flame, she would leave it, causing it to shout, ‘Hey! Don’t leave me!’ as it smoked and shrivelled on the hotplate. One of the maidservants would rush to rescue it and turn it and smear it with ghee. If Kishori had been heating milk when she ran to the window, the milk would become angry and rise in a froth of fury. One of the maidservants would catch it and calm it and cool it, reassuring, ‘Shhh, don’t throw yourself into the flames! You are to become beautiful sweets for the beloved of Swapnavan!’ and the milk would become happy, the purpose of its existence fulfilled.

As the cloud of dust raised by the hooves of the great herd came closer, Kishori leaned out of the window, trying to catch a glimpse of her heart-throb in the low, gold late afternoon light slanting between cows that were like gold statues walking through clouds. There, at the head of the herd, was Krishna with his brother, twirling their cowherd boy’s sticks in the air. Behind them marched all the other cowherd boys, singing, shouting, playing flutes, blowing buffalo horn bugles, walking with the bearing of homecoming soldiers, as theatrical in gait as jesters. The bodies of the boys were covered with dust from their day of work. It swirled with the sweat on their skin and the patterns they had painted on their bodies during the day. Their clothes were smeared with the juice of berries and grasses, and their top-cloths wrapped around their heads like turbans were stuck with feathers and sprigs of leaves and flowers. The bells on the cows’ necks clanged and rang out in a medley of different notes and pitches, and they all mooed and jostled together as they came to the village, filling the air with tumultuous sound.

Villagers crowded the street cheering and waving coloured cloths in the air. The mothers were in the fore, anxiously waiting to see their sons after a whole day apart.

When the procession came close to Kishori’s window, Kishori stepped back behind the jali trellises covering it and watched from seclusion. When Krishna came close, he could feel Kishori’s hidden gaze upon

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him and be looked up into the patterns of shadows in the window. Kishori’s friends held her hands as she swooned.

It would not be long before they could meet again.

Repeating the lore of Swapnavan as spoken by her predecessors, this maidservant of Saraswati and Swamini aspires to realise it.
Chapter IX
The Fifth Ring of the Bell

Surabhi and Pearl were on their string beds under mosquito nets on their verandas. The last of the peacocks fluttered heavily onto their favourite branches to roost. At last, the monkeys stopped prattling. Pearl heard a car engine approach and stop outside the high wall.

‘Tomorrow we shall go to Govardan,’ announced Surabhi, and turned over, apparently instantly asleep.

Next day before dawn, Surabhi woke Pearl by lightly shaking her calves then handed her a tumbler of chai. Pearl breathed the milky cinnamon steam. She had no idea what the day would bring. Surabhi went out to the parked Ambassador and woke the driver with another tea. He splashed at the pump, straightened his car’s interior, and lit some incense on the shrine on his dashboard. Surabhi and Pearl climbed in the back and Mansingh opened the ashram gate.

The Ambassador left the still sleeping town and followed dusty country tracks between dark fields. In the dim of dawn, low hanging mists became visible swirling in dips in the
land. The hidden sun coloured the sky. Branches traced the skyline. Pearl peered wistful through the car window as they passed fields where long stalks of feathery white plumes rose eight feet high out of the earth. A little girl was running in a long full skirt. She waved, and Pearl waved back.

The car drove on for almost an hour. It slowed, at last, on the outskirts of Kishori village in a dusty street of stalls and tiny temples, and then bumped into the entrance of a narrow lane. Surabhi and Pearl got out leaving their sandals and shawls in the back. Surabhi gave the driver rupees for his meals and he made for a chai stall.

It would take Surabhi and Pearl seven hours to walk round the Hill.

But here, there was no Hill to see.

Surabhi touched the dust of the land to her forehead. Pearl followed.

The film song piping from the chai stall radio receded as they walked, until only bird-warble hung in the air. Their feet made wavelets in the fine, fine sand. They followed the sandy path for an hour until pink rocks rose from the flat on their right. Some stones had smiling painted faces and wild-flower offerings lay before them. Some shimmered with milk from early morning baths and were reddened with kum-kum and dotted with sandalwood. Some stones were balanced in tiny towers.

‘What are these little houses?’ Pearl broke the silence, pointing to the verge where flat stones leaned together in twos and fours. It looked as if children had been playing there.

‘Homes for insects.’

‘The insects are sacred because they’re here?’

‘Quite right. People are building like this so that in their next lifetime, they will have home here at Govardan. Look at that one!’ Surabhi chuckled. Someone had used a dozen stones to make what was a mansion compared to the others. ‘Someone is wishing for material and spiritual both!’

Another hour, and Surabhi and Pearl were walking alongside a mound of rocks that might have tumbled onto the flat farmland from a giant wheelbarrow long ago, and had been slowly sinking into it ever since. On their right was the Hill; on their left were fields of mustard-flower, sugarcane, millet and barley. Tall, fair eucalypts lined the path in places, and, in others, candles of long-leaf ashok. Lofty pipal trees grew by shrines at intersections and turnings in the road. Their leaves brushed together and they whispered, ‘Hush!’ to Surabhi and Pearl as they passed.

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Another hour and the mountain had risen fully from the flat terrain. Without a doubt, it was alive. It sat, back humped. *You're just like our Ayer's Rock!* thought Pearl. But she'd been ant-small beside that looming red face — Govardan was not like that. Not *awesome*. Not at all. Just a hill.

Surabhi beheld Govardhan with rapt veneration. She walked like the wind, her feet silently splashing through the fine pink dust. Pearl pushed her body to keep up, and every now and again had to jog like a child beside an adult. Her sari flashed around her legs. She hitched it short, tucking the pleats firmly into her waist, and fixed her headpiece securely across her shoulder.

Now, as Surabhi walked, she spoke constantly, describing the places they were passing, reciting, almost chanting the story of the Hill. Arid scree strewn scrub surrounded stark schistic ridges. Sparse stunted trees clung on stony slopes.

‘*Long ago, one morning, when Krishna was about seven, he went to his father (who, as you are knowing, was village headman), and found him preparing paraphernalia for a festival of worship.*’

‘*Incense, ghee lamps, fruit and flowers.*’

‘*Quite right. Krishna ran round after his father, as young boys do, asking, “Why you are doing like this, Pita-ji?”*’

‘Krishna’s father replied, “We are preparing one grand ritual of worship for the god of heaven.”’

‘*Indra! Wielder of the thunderbolt!*’ said Pearl.

‘*Quite right. Krishna then addressed his father, “But Pita-ji, that is a waste of time. Why we are worshipping that proud in-charge of the heavens?”*’

His father replied, “It is our tradition. Now go play.” Pearl laughed. They were just like ordinary people.

‘Krishna persisted, “But Pita-ji, why we are not worshipping Govardan? Govardan is providing us with sweet spring water, wood, fruit and nuts, jewels, precious minerals, and sweet grass for our cows so they are producing endless milk,” for milk is the very life of the cowherd people.’

They stopped for a moment to pet a calf tethered on the path before a sadhu’s hut. It reminded Pearl of Pollywaffle when she was a calf, but this calf was delicate and milky-white and Pollywaffle was brown and stocky.

‘Krishna’s father pondered his small boy’s words — surely this was wisdom from the mouth of a babe. He summoned the villagers and spoke boldly, “We shall worship Govardan! We are cow-herders! Govardhan sustains our lives!”’

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This rocky hill was once covered with green grass and streams. Five-thousand years ago it must have been over a mile high.

'The ritual was proceeding smoothly with ghee-lamps, flowers and incense bundles, official oblations and opulence. However, when the time came to present offerings of foodstuff to the Hill, the ritual went awry. A gigantic jovial human-like form manifest from the rocks of the mountain! He reached his huge hands down and devoured all the grain and milk products the villagers had placed before him. Then he bellowed, “Bring me more! Bring me more!” The villagers were terrified. They ran frantically back and forth, bringing all the provisions from their homes and storehouses. At last, all their supplies were depleted. There was no more food.’

Pearl said, ‘Oh no!’

‘Krishna’s father felt terrible fear for his community.’

‘Then, his older son, Krishna’s brother, had an idea. He came running to their father with a solitary tulsi leaf, the symbol of pure devotion. Krishna’s father placed the leaf reverentially at the foot of the Hill and the Hill sat back replete and greatly satisfied.’

Pearl called, ‘Joy!’

A passing local heard Pearl and called to her and Surabhi, ‘Joy Govardhan!’

‘Joy Govardhan!’ replied Surabhi.

‘But,’ she had not finished the story, ‘that arrogant god of heaven was greatly displeased. He was enraged not to have received his worship and threatened to destroy the village and everyone in it. He summoned his darkest most brutal thunderclouds and had them let loose a deluge so forceful utter destruction was sure. His thunderbolts blast craters in the ground and the cracking noise caused cows and community to cry and cower in terror.’

Pearl walked close to Surabhi.

‘Krishna was needing to think darn quick. He created an umbrella so vast, the villagers could all run underneath with their livestock. Then, he clambered upon a rock and uprooted the Hill, wrenching it up in a shower of soil and stones,’ Surabhi mimed, ‘lifting it above his head as like a child picking a mushroom. Deer, blue cows, water buffalo, wild dogs, bhaloo-bears, squirrels, rabbits, leopards, jackals, porcupines, snakes, langurs, macaques, and all the other forest animals crept under it. There were even elephants and tigers. Peafowl, parakeets, kites, mynahs, quails, bulbuls, kingfishers woodpeckers and all the other birds flew in to perch shivering under the eaves of the giant umbrella; butterflies, ladybirds, beetles, and all the other crawling creatures came to shelter too. Water was pouring off the hill, roaring away across the land.’

Surabhi’s words connected the visible with an invisible object of longing. Pearl was
carried along with the march of her sentences with her language in time. Her narrative was an avatar of absolute time, subject to its own rigours, its own rhythms, rising and falling.

‘Many cowherd men were raising their staffs, pushing up the underside of the Hill, believing they were holding it up too. But it was Krishna’s doing alone. And only Krishna can balance a hill on his little finger!’

Pearl had seen pictures of the story — the hill’s boulders like footballs; Krishna standing among the people with his arm upraised — but they hadn’t meant anything to her. They’d been nothing but someone else’s remote, unheard of legend.

Now she was in it.

‘The young damsels of Swapnavan gazed at Krishna in adoration and longing. Normally, in the presence of their elders, they stayed behind veils and curtains, or flirted only, as timid young girls do, with their highly developed peripheral vision.’

Pearl laughed; Surabhi was perceptive.

‘You see, this was emergency state of affairs: the attention of the elders was on the Hill above their heads and the deluge all around. They were not noticing the girls staring face to face with Krishna in their presence.’

‘They were thinking, “Oh, how strong he is!”’ added Pearl.

‘Indeed they were! He was posing for them. His lips were bimbafruit red. His flute was tucked in a cloth round his waist fringed with tassels. His hair was caught with wildflowers. He stared back at the pretty faces of the adoring girls. Their hearts were heaving with passion beneath their wet saris, and suddenly! In his distraction he began to let the Hill slip! A cry of terror rose from the citizens. Krishna’s brother shot a glance at Krishna. Krishna was ashamed — his brother was knowing his mind — so he righted the Hill, all blushing.’

‘What a mix of emotions,’ thought Pearl.

Surabhi paused again to catch her breath. The pair walked in silence in the powdery sand.

‘For seven whole days, the god of heaven’s wrath raged unabated. Krishna raised a whirling disk of energy above the Hill to deflect the god’s weapons. Beneath the Hill, the villagers were warm and dry. The earth provided chambers lit by gemstones glinting in the walls. There were roots to cook and milk to drink and fodder for the cows enough for seven days. The villagers had no work to do so they sang and danced all the while.

‘Finally, the god of heaven admitted he had met his match and called off his thunderclouds. The citizens and cows came out from under the Hill and the animals and birds crept and fluttered out with

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them. Krishna carefully lowered the Hill back into place.

‘I think Krishna is the Hill, Surabhi-di.’

‘That might be, my dear. Indeed, it might.

‘Now, the god of heaven came to earth, humbling himself before Krishna’s feet. He was afraid, so, to ensure Krishna would show him mercy, he brought along a magic cow from heaven.’

‘Surabhi-cow!’

‘Quite right. The name of that cow was Surabhi.’

Surabhi chanted on her beads under her breath and hummed some Sanskrit verses, until they came to the Lake of Flowers.

‘This is a favourite place for Kishori and her friends. They are coming early in the morning gathering flowers for worship — beli and mallika, champak and rose.’

On the far shore, a Rajasthani garden palace rose against a backdrop of flower bushes, every detail of its domes, pillars, and lace-like pink stone latticework mirrored in the still clear water.

‘It is almost bottomless,’ Surabhi said as they watched a giant turtle flip at the edge.

‘Deeper than fourteen celestial elephants standing one upon the other.

It was as black and brilliant as polished jet.

‘This is where Krishna ambushed Kishori.’

Then, she whispered, ‘Blue cows.’ A herd of twenty antelope were wandering over the Hill. Two stags stood silhouetted on the sharp rocks at the top; proud beasts with pointed horns on erect little heads and powerful bodies sloping down to small tucked in tails. Part horse, part deer, they looked nothing like cows. Some females were grazing, their white socked hooves stepping delicately over the pink stones. Others reached up to the trees to nibble buds and leaves. They were beautiful and powerful.

‘Exceptional,’ whispered Surabhi. ‘A sign of great auspiciousness.’

Pearl had lost count of the hours. She wished she could sit down.

Then, a short way ahead, there was a park bench. Some pious soul had provided it for pilgrims. How funny! thought Pearl. It was the same as the ones in the botanical gardens in Adelaide.

Surabhi and Pearl sank upon it.

From her shoulder bag, Surabhi produced a fist-sized chunk of sweet that looked like
rock candy but was melt-in-the-mouth and juicy and scented with flowers.

She raised her eyebrows, enjoying Pearl's wonder, and said, ‘Candied musk-melon.’

She drew herself upright. As if reciting something learned long ago by rote, she began

‘Go-vardhan means nourisher of cows.

‘Krishna’s cows fall into four main divisions — white, red, yellow and black. Of these, there are twenty-five subdivisions, making one hundred colours. Apart from these hundred herds of coloured cows there were eight more — sandalwood-coloured, ash-coloured, speckled, patchy, those with stars on their foreheads, those with V-shaped markings on their foreheads such as devotees of Vishnu wear, those with lion-faces, and those with heads shaped like mridangas.’

‘Mridanga-head cows?’

‘Yes. Mridanga-head cows.

Surabhi gazed over the Hill, smiling. Her storytelling was the spilling of her joy.

‘When Krishna called the name of each herd leader a whole group of cows came forward. Krishna stroked the herd-leader’s nose and counted the herd on his rosary of gemstones.’

Pearl was in a triangular space between storyteller, place, and story.

‘Krishna remembers the name of every cow in his hundred-and-eight herds, so that, if any cow goes missing, he searches for her personally, calling her name. When the lost cow hears her name she bounds towards Krishna, front and back legs moving as one, tail high in the air, so full of affection for Krishna that milk is streaming from her udder.

‘Krishna’s white cows have names like Swanlike, River-foam and Ganga-silver-river.

‘Krishna’s red cows have names like Bimbafruit and Kumkumy-rouge.

‘Krishna’s yellowish cows have names like Mustard-flower and Haritaki-seed.

‘Krishna’s black cows have names like Thundercloud, Dhumala, which means smoky-purple; or Yamuna, after our dark-skinned river goddess. When Krishna quickly recites the names aloud, he performs poetry as beautiful as any other,’ Surabhi raised her voice so it carried across the silent countryside, ““O Panatashringi! O Manikastini! O Pingekshana! O Shobali!”

‘Surabhi-di?’

‘Hmmm?’

‘Is it true cows love music?’

Surabhi placed her hand on her heart, ‘Something moves within the heart of anyone

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who hears Krishna’s flute. When Krishna plays his flute his cows stand inert. They stop ruminating and grass and flowers dangle from their mouths. Their ears are cups, drinking the sound. Peacocks believe it is the rumbling of a monsoon and fan their tails. Birds and bees fall from the air. Plants stretch up like yogis to feel his breath through his flute.’

Pearl imagined a reedy flute-song in the wind. She looked at Surabhi — could she hear it too? Surabhi was gazing passively in the direction of the sound. It was coming closer. From behind the trees, and absorbed in cowherd boy dreams, strode a mendicant in patchwork playing a thin flute. The pied piper didn’t notice two women agog on a bench, and whisked past on his way.

‘Let us go,’ Surabhi said. ‘Are you alright? Come on.’ They pumped a water pump for each other, splashed their arms and feet and faces and set off once more.

A group of energetic city-dwellers came by — women with lipstick and bobbed hair and men in trousers rolled up to their knees as if they were at the seaside.

‘Joy Govardan!’ they all cheered as they went by.

‘Joy Govardan!’ Surabhi and Pearl called back.

Surabhi pointed to a tiny creek flowing from between the rocks.

‘Krishna’s cows drink crystal water from springs like this. In rainy season, sweet new grass sprouts and they eat to satisfaction and shine in tiptop condition. Their udders swell and overflow with more than enough milk for their calves — the villagers have milk enough for their own use as well as for cheese and sweets to barter.’

Another hour and Surabhi showed no sign of slowing. Pearl was acutely aware of the bones in her feet, jarring with every step. The tops of her feet had swollen and her soles had dried on the hot sand. A nerve in shoulder was pinching from the weight of her bag. She wished she were rid of it.

‘The spirit of Govardan follows those walk around her,’ Surabhi taught, ‘ready to fulfill their desires and spiritual aspirations.’

Pearl put her shoulder bag on the sand beside her and took out her notebook to press a lime-green parrot’s feather between its pages. A burly red-bottomed monkey hurtled from the Hill, snatched the bag and ran into an undergrowth of prickly-bushes leaving an irretrievable trail of ballpoints, pencils, Hankies, lollies, hair grips, coins, sticky plasters, phrase-book, soap-leaf book, mirror, antiseptic, and mosquito repellent.

What a mess.

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Now the women rested in the shade at the end of the long low Hill. From this furthest point, they would be walking back to the Lake. Coarse bougainvillea covered groves of fabulously gnarled black tamal and regal ashen kadambas. Two barefoot village girls in cotton frocks came and gazed silently at Pearl drinking from her water bottle and rubbing her feet. Squirrels quietly picked and chewed close by. There was a spell of silence, and even the birds were whispering. Pearl's mind was clear and her heart soared into an illuminated wide blue sky above the kind old Hill.

Surabhi gave each girl a chunk of petha and spoke quietly.

'This is the most beautiful part of the Hill. The Hill is long, and shaped like a peacock. This is its tail. Here kadamba trees and tamal trees alternate along the path.' She pointed. 'Just see. Gold and black, gold and black.'

Pearl would not have seen had she not been told. 'Kishori and Krishna!' 'Govardan is providing secret floral groves and gem-lit caves for Kishori and Krishna to meet in. She is so stunned to witness their sublime love-play she turns to stone, and because she is only stone, Kishori and Krishna feel no embarrassment in her presence. It is as if nobody can see them. 'Surabhi? What are you saying?' Pearl had only ever imagined Govardan as a boy. 'Listen. By providing the perfect place for Kishori and Krishna’s meeting, Govardan is best of all servants. When Kishori and Krishna meet, only their most intimate friends are there.' Surabhi was enjoying being mysterious. 'So that means, Govardhan is a...' 'Quite so, my dear. Quite so.'

In the sand at the side of the path, Pearl spotted a peacock feather and stooped to pick it up. It was just the right length for Krishna to stick proudly in his turban; it was as if he had recently passed by and dropped it. 'Again,' Pearl thought, 'Surabhi’s stories are alive.' A slender milk-white calf stepped into the path and bleated in agreement. Pearl pressed the feather in her notebook.

Surabhi nodded; it was time to move on.

The rhythm of their mantras was the rhythm of their feet. The stones of the Hill turned to beautiful thoughts and expressions of the love of Kishori and Krishna. The dusty track passed through a hamlet of flat-roofed dwellings smoky with cow-dung cooking fires.

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‘This is the village of Kishori’s mother’s mother,’ Surabhi explained. ‘Kishori’s mother’s mother was close friends with Krishna’s mother’s mother and when they were both new mothers, Kishori’s mother’s mother would sometimes give her milk to Krishna’s mother. As crones, they conspired to arrange Kishori and Krishna’s clandestine meetings against all social propriety and without the knowledge of the other villagers. Even Kishori and Krishna themselves were not knowing. These elderly women were understanding Kishori’s and Krishna’s love was sustaining the beauty of Swapnavan — only when Kishori’s golden effulgence and Krishna’s bluish aura merge do the forests become green and filled with wildlife.’

Surabhi’s story returned to the primal waters of language. She fell to chanting her mantras under her breath. The sun was high — high enough to slow them down. The last stretch was hardest. Hours of repetitive prayer pacing barefoot on sand patterned with prints of bare soles, dotted with stones, pushed Pearl into an altered state.

It was nearly dusk. Surabhi pointed to a bare patch of land behind a hamlet of huts. ‘This is where Krishna grows pearls to decorate his cows’

‘What do you mean, Surabhi-di?’

‘Krishna plants pearls and they grow into vines. When the season is right he picks them.’ All Pearl could see was a goat chewing a brier.

‘What is this story, Surabhi-di?’

‘Another day, my dear. Look! We’re coming to Kishori’s Lake.’ Their cycle was complete. They had returned to their starting place.

The lake was small and perfectly square. Clean stone steps on all four sides led down to her water. Roses and marigolds bobbed on her surface and floating in the corners were spots of bright pondweed. The sound of every splash, voice and bell-ring reverberated around painted sugar-cube houses surrounding her. A handful of monks in a temple with a spire at the water’s edge were singing lullaby-hymns to the Lake.

‘They are singing in shift-work,’ Surabhi said as she placed her folded hands to her forehead in greeting, ‘twenty-four hours, seven days a week. Singers are coming and going, but their songs are drifting across Kishori’s Lake for all time.’

A grey carp moved lazily in its green world.

‘But if you are seeing turtles and fishes, how you are seeing Kishori and Krishna?’ Surabhi asked. Pearl remained silent and looked across the lake. She understood. She was to see on that higher level — to remember Kishori and Krishna meeting here, eternally.
‘This is Swapnavan’s beating heart,’ said Surabhi.

‘Kishori’s heart,’ said Pearl.

They carefully unwound their saris, folded them quickly, and placed them neatly on the steps down to the water’s edge. Then they tied the waist-strings of their petticoats up under their arms to transform them into knee-length tent-dresses and they took off their blouses. They stepped down each step at a time to the water below. They sprinkled drops of water on the top of their heads and in their mouths. It was sweet and briny both. The steps continued down into the green water.

The last low sunlight gilded the ripples making moving, glinting patterns that momentarily hypnotised Pearl, altering her perception: beyond her ordinary old thought patterns was an exciting expanse, a plateau.

The sounds of the singing and the birds came to Pearl from another world.

It was like a lake of warm honey.
Winifred Green opened a tin of beans for breakfast. Or was it lunch? She liked a dob of butter on her beans. She dropped his plate in the sink. She was seeing an old friend today.

She unlocked the doors of George’s shed. There was a lot of old stuff in here! Leaning against the wooden wall, she pulled the tarpaulin off the motorcycle. Shining she was. Shining like the day George first brought her home. Winifred gave the motorcycle a drink, a brekky of oil, a puff of air, and they were both rearing to go. Red-backs in the helmet.

Never mind — leave it behind. Never mind registration. Never mind insurance. Too late for any of that kind of thing. Good Lord!

She kicked her over. First time she tried, second time she did: Blap-blap-blap-blap.

Hepsibah and Pollywaffle watched, perturbed.

George Cuthbert Green had been a proud man the day he bought his motorcycle home. Fastest in her time. Vincent Rapide. To him, she had been in every way perfect — the pulse of her V-twin, the way she handled, the finest detail of gold pinstripe on her matte cherry black.

It was a short ride to town. Winifred pulled up at the post office to check the mailbox. She could see it was empty but put her hand in to make sure.

Empty.

She rode out to the open road. Road under the wheels. Moving under her feet.

She opened the throttle hard for far too long, prayed there were no animals ahead, and let her fly past fields of cows, a mill, a river, all a glimpse and gone forever. A homestead gate with a kid upon it waving. She waved back — waving goodbye to the life she had known and the hopes and dreams she had nurtured and had to let go. Mile upon mile she floated. Wind chilled tear-wet skin round her eyes.

There was calm to this. She had not been to this place in her mind for a long time. She roared into Inchiquin town. Hadn’t realised she’d come so far.
Chapter X

Dusk

It would soon be twilight in the timeless land of Swapnavan. The cows and their calves were lowing with contentment as they settled in their barns after a long day in the sunshine, wandering the pasture land around Govardan.

It was milking-hour. Even though Krishna’s father had countless strong workers, Krishna loved to milk the cows. When Krishna came near the cows, they would greet him with pleasure and let down their milk for him as they would for their own calves.

Once, Kishori had seen Krishna milking the cows. In her shyness, she had tried to creep silently by, but Krishna had been fully aware of her presence. Without looking round, he pointed the cow’s teat at Kishori and squirted a white jet into her face. Sweet milk ran into her eyes and down into her mouth and inside her bodice. Krishna laughed boisterously at his prank but when he caught sight of Kishori’s full moon face he became enchanted in love. Her long eyelashes were wet. Around her blinking eyes, the milk had formed a delicate pattern of pearl-like dots following her eyebrows around her temples, in front of her ears. The lines of pearls culminated on each cheek with swirls like opening petals, a pointed mango-shape, and a milk star splash. Kishori was unaware of the way she looked and why Krishna was gazing at her the way he was. She frowned at Krishna, swung her veil crossly around her and hurried off.

Krishna’s father supervised the distribution and transport of his hundreds of milk urns across the town to the traders and sweet-makers, to those who needed free milk, and to the king in Muttra metropolis as tax. His men went home to their own families and he and his sons settled the cows for the night. Krishna was reluctant to leave his pets. He stroked them lovingly and spoke kindly and affectionately to every one. Finally, he went into the house to wash off the dust of the day and ready for the evening meal.

Maidservants from Kishori’s home had come with baskets of savouries that Kishori had prepared. When everybody was seated, Krishna’s mother and Krishna’s brother’s mother served. Krishna and his brother sat on either side of their father and listened to him conversing with the other menfolk: a bull calf had broken

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his rope; they were some potential new customers in a neighbouring hamlet; the seeds for winter feed were more varied this year; a particular brown heifer known for her good-nature was in calf. Business was perfect.

Krishna’s thoughts were elsewhere. As he tasted each morsel of food prepared by Kishori’s own hands, the flavours and textures swirled in his mouth, intoxicating his mind and melting his heart. In her cooking, Kishori was sending messages of love that Krishna alone could taste.

*Repeating the lore of Swapnavan as spoken by her predecessors, this maidservant of Saraswati and Swamini aspires to realise it.*
Chapter XI

The Sixth Ring of the Bell

The time came for the Great Festival of Govardan. Everyone connected with the temple of Saraswati Swamini would be there — monks, nuns, novices, lay congregation and fringe-folk. The best kirtan musicians in all of Bengal were coming to Swamini’s group. Swamini herself would lead everyone to a special Govardhan grove and there would be a wonderful banquet for everybody.

Hundreds of Bengalis came by rail, hundreds more travelled the thousand miles by charabanc along the Grand Trunk Road. Hundreds came from Delhi and Agra by rail to Muttra and, with hundreds of others from Muttra, by pony-trap to Govardan. VIPs and their families arrived in style in caparisoned Ambassadors. Scores of mendicants appeared from nowhere. Rural folk came in from the countryside in bullock carts or trailers towed by bright modern tractors, women glittering and colourful, men in their best bright turbans, cowherd smocks, and embroidered pointy-toed shoes. Pilgrims flowed towards their own temples, their own ashrams, their own gurus: as their hearts led them, they followed. Most
did this journey every year.

Tulsi carvers sold stocks of necklaces and meditation beads they had been making all year. Sweetshops quintupled their trade and then more. Cloth merchants sold shawls with Kishori-Krishna pictures and mantras as fast as they could have them printed. Caught up in the crackling atmosphere and the melee, canny barefoot children slipped agile among the throng, selling offerings of flowers and incense and wicks soaked in ghee for the gods, shouting with excitement at prospective customers and hounding them with their wares.

Surabhi ordered the Ambassador again, but this time her friends and neighbours climbed in too. Surabhi, Pearl and Manjari sat in the front next to the driver, four of the more robust women sat in the back seat with another two thinner women and Kubja, on their laps.

The crowd assembled. Ten thousand bare feet. The weak morning sun melted the mist and the air was pure. There was bird song and crowd murmur: everything was peaceful. The auras of the souls in that bright white and saffron assembly radiated pure and far. The ladies wore light cotton wraps. Many backs had bent with age and many faces were deep and inscrutable, like caves full of knowledge and knowing.

Saraswati Swamini arrived and stood in the midst of the seated crowd, looking bright and crisp wrapped in fine ivory cloth. With a dance-like sweep of her hand, she indicated the music should begin.

There were seven mridanga players, more than a dozen men and women playing bell-metal cymbals, and a bearded pot-bellied monk standing clashing whomper cymbals bigger than hubcaps. Sometimes the players made their cymbals peal celestially, or, at a nod from the leader, cupped them in their palms and made sounds like cows’ hooves clapping on a metalled road. The lead singer moved to the beat as he sang in the local language of this land and the crowd clapped along.

Kubja came through the crowd, pushing gentle souls aside, carrying a mridanga. She pressed it on Pearl, insisting she play. The other musicians encouraged her. Pearl took it and recited its prayer of invocation then hugged the drum, feeling its living body vibrating against her. She visualised Malini’s hand counting, tapping time, one two three four, kik — kbi nee dba / dee da dee da dbeve / ta uru te te ta. Pearl’s hands rolled and turned in smooth action quicker than the eye. And again. Malini’s regulative voice came to her, ‘Keep the uru sharp. Make the ta like a tight slap. Do not allow your right hand to slip on the head.’ And then all Malini’s teaching was coming to her all at once: she was really playing.

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Someone jabbed Pearl: everybody was getting up. The walk around the Hill was beginning. Pearl adjusted the buckle on the mridanga strap. She had never played walking along before. The drum was heavy. She fell in behind another player. The most expert musicians were at the heart of the party and set the pace, drawing those on the periphery along. It was more like dancing than marching. More like skating than walking. Pearl let herself be carried along by the people around her. She switched to a firmer, stronger beat:

\[
\text{dba ghee tete ta ke dhe na,} \\
\text{dba ghee tete ta ke dhe na,} \\
\text{dba ghee tete ta ke dhe na...}
\]

The singing of the walking crowd was tumultuous.

As the serpent mass moved along bystanders stopped with palms joined, smiling, waving, throwing showers of flowers over the walkers’ heads and the flowers fell, staining bare feet pink and releasing their fragrance.

The group passed through a narrow gap between rocks and trees and in the crush, Pearl separated from the nucleus of musicians. She tried to catch up by running off the path but thorns stuck in her soles and she had to hop and stop and pull them out and carry on limping a while. She had lost sight of Surabbi. The juggernaut crowd closed before her and then thinned again. Pearl saw Surabbi once more, with Swamini. They were speaking to one another, mouths close to ears.

Pearl ran forward until Swamini’s feet were before her, kicking up waves of powder as she marked her steps with her staff.

Surabbi nodded sideways in agreement with Swamini, barely perceptibly lowering her shoulders and bowing her head. The two moved apart. Suddenly, the surging singing crowd pushed Pearl to Swamini’s side.

Swamini turned, looking straight into Pearl’s eyes, searching, seeing, energising. Everything else receded. Without altering her expression, she held Pearl’s gaze and spoke clearly through her eyes, ‘You are here. Good. You have a lot to do. You had better get started.’ Pearl thought, I heard that! Can anyone else see what is happening here? But the moment she did, Swamini turned away and left her far behind.

The comet’s tail of singers and chanters moved fast along the path around the sacred Hill. Pearl had to jog to keep up, or she would be trampled or left behind. She lost count of

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The hours.

At last, the party arrived at an open garden surrounded by the sandstone colonnades of a palace temple built three hundred years ago by Manipuri nobility. They slowed to a standstill and sank on the coarse dewy grass.

The living Hill was to be fed.

Swamini stood on a dais, staff raised in the air, robes flying, theatrically shouting directions to her monks and nuns. They scurried to obey her orders, bumping into one another and laughing. The pilgrims and two hundred Govardan locals watched the fun in anticipation.

Within minutes, the monks and nuns had formed a human chain from the palace temple kitchens and had started to pass along big round baskets and unglazed pots painted with bright patterns and decorated with multicoloured cellophane, patterned foil papers, ribbons, mango leaves and marigolds. As each basket or pot arrived before Swamini, she lifted it onto the head of one of women queuing before her.

First there were baskets of rice. There was rice that was whiter than snow. There was buttered basmati. There was white rice scented with slices of limes. There was rice with a glimmers of yellow, and cloves and cinnamon and little black ajwan seeds. There was savoury rice containing peas, cashew bits, and green chilies topped with fresh basil. Pilaf containing dark fried cauli-florets and wet with coconut yoghurt. Rice with black purple aubergine, whole peppercorns, mustard seeds and ginger root. Almond rice containing potato cubes. Rice marbled with long flat shavings from toasted coconuts and carrots. Rice with ginger seasoned yoghurt, rice with mango, rice with cheese. And there was a basket of the best glistening aristocratic Bengali Royal Rice containing the most expensive ingredients in every colour of the rainbow. Next came hot soups, and everybody had to be careful, for a spill could cause a burn. First, came the plain light green pulses topped with fresh coriander, next came moong lentils sizzling with spices. There was a power-filled spinach moong lentil dish, a thin green pulse soup with tomatoes floating in it, and a rich thick soup of mixed pulses with aubergine cubes. There was a white pulse soup made with tomatoes and white pulse soup with white radish in it. There was a soup of red-gold split-peas and pumpkins, rich heavy toor lentils, and South Indian sambar soup, rich with vegetables. There were red aduki beans with apple cubes, chickpeas coated in dry curry spice, chickpeas glazed with tomato and fiery with chili, chickpeas mixed with coconut sauce and golden fried potato cubes, and chickpeas with sesame seeds crushed to a paste

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and sprinkled with salt and paprika. There were red kidney beans in thick sauce bobbing white cheese balls. There were baskets of badi which had been made by stone-grinding dal, dolloping it, sun-drying it and deep-frying it. These badi were cooked with tomato and chili, cooked with chopped vegetables, or mixed in a curry sauce. There were baskets of breads: flat toasted perfectly circular whole-wheat chapatis, soft white chapatis made of yoghurt dough, and chapatis made with coarsely crushed whole-wheat grains. There were chapatis coloured with papaya pulp. There were fried plain parathas breads, parathas stuffed with spiced potato, parathas stuffed with cauliflower, parathas stuffed with crushed fresh green peas, parathas that had been spiralled before they rolled so that they had become flaky and fragile, and parathas that had been folded before they were rolled so that they had cooked into neat flaking triangular layers. There were deep-fried poori breads that had puffed up during frying to become perfect, delicate spheres of golden pastry. There were more of the same but tiny, and green. There were pooris containing sesame seeds, squishy pooris made with mashed potato, and pooris made with bitter green fenugreek leaves. There were bread-ball nuggets, baked overnight in the glowing embers of neem-wood fires and simmered the next day in soup. There were brittle spice-speckled wafers and golden steamed sponge bread slices sprinkled with whole chilies and mustard seeds. There were oven-baked tandoori breads, some plain, some spotted with black nigella seeds and others — Pearl was surprised to see — like Chelsea buns. The dry vegetable preparations were piled on leaf plates lining the baskets, and the wet vegetable preparations were in clay pots. There was an especially large basket of potato dry-cooked with warm gentle spices, lemon-bright with turmeric. Another basket contained hot potato chunks crushed and pungent with mustard oil. There were whole new potatoes with fenugreek herb, and some with tomatoes. There were potatoes with eggplant, potatoes in yoghurt, and potatoes with peas. There was a basket of glazed carrots coated in cracked black cardamom seeds. There was a basket of white cauli-florets braised with warmly spiced tomato; cauliflower that had been sautéed with peas, mixed with sour cream and sprinkled with bright fresh coriander; curried potatoes and cauliflower; and a whole cauliflower drizzled in cream and sprinkled with crushed roasted nuts. There were wedges of aubergine fried with bitter neem leaves, warmly spiced whole pointed fingers of okra, and dry sliced okra stir-fried in coconut flakes. There were baskets of raw long white radishes, sliced lengthways and sprinkled in salty spice. There were wet-fried long green beans and green beans cooked on poppyseed sauce. There were green beans and badis, green beans
with coconut and green beans with water chestnuts. There was a basket of red bell peppers fried nutty with chickpea flour and sparkling with salt. There were baskets filled with golden fried snack-foods and finger-food savouries: bhajiyas or banana chips, cubes of mustard seed sprinkled dokla or golden kachoris, laddoo, namkeen, poha, or puffed rice with chips and peanuts in, folded pasties speckled green with coriander, some stuffed with sweet nut paste shining with syrup, and steamed white balls of ground white lentils drizzled with white yoghurt. There were baskets of fruit: lychees, chiku-fruits, grapes and mosami oranges peeled and sprinkled with caster sugar. There were pickles and chutneys enough to supply a village: date and apple chutney, sweet mango chutney, chunky mixed chutney. There was mango pickle, chilli pickle, mixed pickle, green pickle. All the time, clay pots of drinks were coming from the kitchen: rice milk and saffron milk, mango milk, and pink milk. There was rose and honey and sweet saffron water. There were yoghurt drinks, whisked to froth with sugar and cardamom, or salty and spiced. Only then came the sweets: cream cheese confections, white curd balls soaked in rose nectar, deep-fried batter pearls soaked in syrup, brown milk balls, coconut balls, ground cashew and pistachio squares, carrot candy, hard sticky nut chikki, syrupy pancakes, hot deep fried spiral tubes filled with syrup, condensed mango yoghurt, creamy rice puddings with caramel skin in clay pots, saffron and cardamom ice cream, tiny lime green dyed crystallised gourds split and stuffed with cream, rolled date sugar pancakes stuffed with dates and coconut cream, firmly pressed milk sweets moulded with lotuses, roses, conchs and mandalas, quartz-like rock candy and chom-choms.

Here at Govardhan Hill, Pearl wished that her sister could be here with her. She would love to see these women with their sparkling pots and baskets. They looked just like Kishori’s swaying milkmaidens or Krishna’s mother and her friends. She felt that, if her sister was here, her happiness be complete.

The women went to Swamini to collect their baskets and Swamini oversaw everything and directed everyone so that, what could have been logistical chaos was finely choreographed harmony. Song and drumbeat played on.

Now, one of the kitchen monks indicated Pearl should put her mridanga aside to go forward with the other women to get a basket of food from Swamini to carry to the offering site. The kitchen end of the human chain had begun to break apart as the last few preparations moved along it. Swamini gave the woman before Pearl a clay vessel of after-
dinner chewing-spice — betel-nut, cardamom pods, fennel seeds and cloves. The woman balanced it on her head with poise and turned to wait with the others for the walk towards the offering place. Pearl did what the monk had told her and went to where the queue of women had been.

Saraswati Swamini looked down at her with an expression of surprise. She called to the nuns and monks at the kitchen, ‘One more preparation for this girl to carry?’

They called back, shaking their heads, ‘No. There’s nothing left. Every last preparation has been taken out.’

Swamini looked at Pearl, opened her hands and shrugged.

Pearl felt shocked then disappointed then embarrassed. She’d felt a part of this beautiful ceremony, and now, she was going to have to sit the best bit out, an outsider. The only white person.

Suddenly, a young monk came running from the kitchen like a pantomime clown. He was carrying a pot of water.

Swamini opened her long arms with an, ‘Aaah!’ and dropped a tulsi leaf in it. She ceremoniously placed the pot on Pearl’s head, and smiled, saying, ‘Do not worry, little one, Kishori has a place for you.’

The procession set off singing, the knot of musicians playing, and the women carrying the beautiful banquet of Govardan in pots and baskets upon their heads. They followed a side path to a place where the Hill touched level land forming a cathedral of rock and trees. Everybody fitted inside. It was a perfectly natural place, but Pearl thought the rocks seemed to have been arranged by some marvellous landscape artist. Here was a tulsi garden. There was a little path between the rocks formed by the delicate hooves of blue-cows. Groves like shrines formed at the edge of the Hill. Some of the rocks had birdbaths in them and others had noses and eyes, profiles, and expressions.

The women placed their baskets on the rocks. Still holding her magician’s staff, Swamini turned to Govardhan and lifted her arms, loudly chanting mantras, offering the abundant food. Men and women sang and beat drums and cymbals and a hundred women started to ululate. Govardhan was consuming the colossal dinner.

Swamini’s monks and nuns unrolled grass mats in rows in the green shade for everyone to sit down and handed out plates of stitched leaves and terracotta cups. When everyone was settled, they they deftly dished the banquet onto everyone’s leaf-plates. Everyone had a taste of more preparations than they could count. As they savoured the sanctified food,
they discussed the ingredients and the methods of creation; they told nostalgic stories to do with certain preparations and called out compliments to the cooks.

These were the flavours of the gods.

Satisfied and serene, everyone rested in the large warm grove beside the bountiful living Hill, surrounded by chirruping rustling nature. When they were ready, one by one or in small groups, they stood up, helped one another splash with water from water-pots, and returned to the path — slightly rag-tag now — to complete their walk round the Hill.

Late in the day, footsore and blissful, the pilgrims returned to the place from which they had started. Swamini appeared at the shrine of her predecessor ahead of the walkers to welcome them as they arrived. Manjari stood at her side.

Dignified, Swamini led everyone to the little square Lake. For Pearl, seeing the Lake a second time was like meeting an acquaintance or a friend. Her water seemed bluer and many more pilgrims were meditating on the pink stone steps surrounding her, and dipping in her glinting waters.

Pearl wandered away from the crowd. She found herself around the world some three years back, at another sacred hill. She had been thinking about transitions and futures. She’d had a sort of premonition, a future déjà-vu, and seen herself here. She’d glimpsed this Lake by the Hill. She’d seen herself wearing this ruched ivory cloth, skinny and deep-eyed, brown and barefoot with a mark on her forehead. But it hadn’t occurred to her little vision might have been a Pearl of the future. She hadn’t recognised herself.

She had thought it was someone else.

A circle was complete. She’d arrived at a predetermined point in time. Now she had her bearings, she could move on.

‘My dear darling beautiful Lake,’ she whispered to the sky-coloured water, ‘Please never let me leave Swapnavan.’

She found a dark mossy tunnel of old stone steps, narrow, but just right for a girl to descend alone to a secluded, enclosed bathing place. There was a ledge at the water’s edge. It was a little stone cavern built five hundred years ago. The water down here served as an optic pipe, carrying sunlight in from outside and lighting up the underwater steps from below. Pearl crouched where the water met the steps. The sounds of pilgrims were muffled now. Fish flashed in the organic illuminated pool.

Pearl created a picture of Kishori’s Lake to carry with her wherever she went. It was

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hers, and it was a simple.

She saw the pond flecked with phosphorescence and the daylight in the cavern tinged green. Airborne dragonflies shone like brooches and jewelled green frogs jumped into the living depths. Tiny fish flicked in flowing pondweed like mermaids’ hair. A waterfall like tiny bells, like aurora borealis, like clear lemonade, splashed the mossy rocks. Birds dove through the shower, cooling their feathers from the summer heat. Great lotus leaves lay still on the surface, wide and strong enough for a child to sit upon. Blue lotuses rose proud from silken mud, diamante droplets running from their veined petals down their stems.

Kishori and her friends had been bathing and were sitting wrapped in dry white cloths on the rocks. They were all smiling and laughing. Kishori’s toes were touching the water’s surface. Water streamed the length of her hair and droplets bounced into the pond catching the light like crystals.

Pearl sealed her vision in her memory and dove gently in.
‘You did what!’ Grace glowered at her sister. ‘The state you’re in! All the way to Inchiquin town!’ She mashed a boiled egg as if she meant it real harm and tipped in a heap of curry powder from a tin. ‘You’re daft Winifred Green. You should be put in a home!’

Home. That was Winifred’s problem. Home wasn’t much of a home any more without George and the kids grown up and gone. She only had Pollywaffle and Hepsibah to talk to. Thinking of Pearly so far away in a strange land had triggered her to get on the road with the wind in her hair one more time. It had been a sort of an anger, but more like a wanting to fly.

Grace put a cup of tea before her and spoke kindly. ‘Do you want her home, Win? Do you want her to come back? You could tell her, you know. Write a letter. We all miss her you know. Her sister misses her too though she never lets on. She’d come back if you told her.’

‘She’ll come back when the time is right,’ said Winifred, ‘and not before. And that time is not up to me to force on her.’

Grace put curried-egg sandwiches on the table. Winifred helped herself and Grace hatched her kindly plan. She remembered a message on a card she had received from England once some years back: ‘If distance were measured in terms of the heart, we’d never be more than a minute apart.’

And as Winifred munched, Grace sidled nonchalantly to her writing desk.

‘The elderly are supposed to be wise,’ she thought, ‘so wise I shall be.’

She unzipped her letter-writing folder and took out some onionskin paper. She was going to ask Pearly to come home. Winifred was in no condition to do it. She might not even last until Christmas and there was always something to be said at the end.

When she got to the post-box, she paused. Her letter was going to, a place between Delhi and the Taj Mahal where hundreds of white cows roamed and people prayed to a celestial milkmaid and a roguish thundercloud-blue boy.

She held it to her heart a moment and let it fly.
Ramani-ma woke in the night at the sound of the watchman on his round of the neighbourhood, banging his stick on the cobbles, tapping away backstreet ghosts and warning off robbers come into the town from outlying hamlets. But in the dead of night Ramani trusted no other security than her small golden deity, her boy-god, Krishna. She had long trained her mind to flow back to him in recollection of his protection and his love. She rose, and when she completed some hours’ chanting on her beads, she bathed in the darkness and dressed. It was time to bathe and dress her boy-god too.

Most mornings, Pearl went to Ramani’s room to help with one or two odd jobs, and she took some of Surabhi’s sweets for Ramani to offer to her god. The little figurine stood no taller than Ramani’s hand and he stood on a lotus base. His form curved in three places: at his knees like a dancer, at his waist like a bend in a river so one hip curved round as a hillside, and at his neck, so his head tilted, coquettish. He raised his elbows in dance and pricked his index and little fingers like deer’s ears.

Pearl prepared copper dishes of powdered clay, tamarind paste and essential oils. Ramani dipped her parchment-skin fingers in the pastes and massaged the little Krishna until he was burnished to a shine from the soles of his bare feet to his twisted knot of hair. She poured water over him and dried him and he shone brighter than twenty-four carat gold. She put his minuscule clothes on and slid a gold flute through the O between his middle fingers and thumbs, its end almost touching his smiling lips.

All winter long, Ramani wrapped her Krishna in tiny knitted shawls of baby-wool edged with lace, offered him warming ginger-root and honey, and placed a single glowing coal in a doll-sized brazier upon his shrine. In summertime, she left him naked apart from his jewellery, offered him yoghurt and cucumber slices, and set before him a dish-pond of rosewater with cooling kusha and jasmine flowers floating upon it.

She circled incense in worship and prayed her most private prayers. ‘Where is your sweet Kishori? Your golden milkmaid dear? Where can she be? I know you will be with her once again. We will bring you both together. For you are already one.’ She leaned back on a bolster, watching patterns of morning light from her window dance upon her lonely dancing god.

It was four hundred and eighty one years since the birth of the great dancing saint Chetanya. The sun was in an especially propitious constellation. It was the holy month and everyone was eating just one small, salt-less, spice-less meal at noon each day. All month
long, troupes were enacting dramas of Kishori-Krishna and set up their theatres along the
banks of the river and in places where Kishori-Krishna had danced long ago. Each night in
every temple devotees circled ghee-lamps before their god, remembering baby Krishna and
his mother. In every temple, Kishori-Krishna were dressed in white wearing silver and
pearls.

Tomorrow night was the night Krishna danced with Kishori and her handmaidens. The
Swapnavan women would prepare pots of ambrosial milk-rice and carry them up to their
rooftop terraces. They’d leave them there, an offering to refresh Kishori-Krishna, exposed
to the rays of the full autumn moon.

A few days before, Pearl had gone to Ramani’s room with a tumbler of warm milk.
Ramani had beckoned to her to come close. She had given her an antique Kashmir shawl
and spoken quietly.

‘My dear, on Thursday morning, I shall be giving up my mortal coil. At a little after ten.’

Surabhi was in a state of shock. She had not slept. For a while now, she’d been Ramani’s
eyes. Now, Ramani’s whole body was shutting down fast.

Surabhi and Pearl had been fanning Ramani and stroking her brow all night long.
Ramani had been murmuring her mantras, lying on a thin mattress diagonally across the
earthen floor of her clean, morning-bright room. Pearl sat next to Surabhi, occasionally
squeezing droplets of water from a cotton ball onto Ramani’s parted lips. For hours,
Surabhi gently pressed an apricot-sized stone from Govardan onto Ramani’s forehead. For
hours, Ramani drifted in and out of consciousness, hovering. She seemed to pass on and
then return, rattling from her throat. Nuns who were her god-sisters brought garlands of
flowers from every temple in Swapnavan and some god-brother monks brought water
from Yamuna. When the time was nearing, Ramani asked quietly to be taken outside. Kubja
and Manjari picked up her child-sized body and took her to a grassy patch under the trees
beside the flower garden — a spot where Pearl had seen peacocks dance. At Ramani’s head
were flowering tulsis attended by bees. Ramani’s friends came to sing — they knew which
songs to choose for they understood Ramani’s spiritual mood and the longing she nurtured
in the privacy of her meditation. Neighbours from other cottages stood dolefully at the
garden gateway, palms pressed together. The milkboy came with his milk-can and simply
stood. By chance, three strangers, sages with matted locks, were passing the gate carrying
flowers from a temple at the Lake of Kishori. They had been attracted by the singing and
when they heard a saintly soul was leaving her body, they came into the garden too and proffered their flowers. Surabhi placed the flowers around Ramani's head, a halo of freshness.

Between the ancient nutbrown fingers and thumb of Ramani's right hand nestled her shining worn tulsi-wood beads. They had been there every day for the best part of a century. Swamini arrived. Surabhi gave her a dish of sandalwood paste; she dipped her finger in it and wrote symbols upon Ramani's forehead.

Women let loose an ululation so loud and shrill it soared above the treetops sweeping spirits from their hiding places, clearing the way for this moment, making sure all was right. Mridangas beat loud enough to shake the neighbourhood. One-Horn walked in through the open gate bellowing.

Ramani left.

The babajis from the hermitage across the way lifted the white-shrouded body onto a stretcher made from a bamboo ladder and carried it out of the cottage and fleetly through the streets of the holy town. The people in the streets touched their hearts and their foreheads or pressed their palms together as the procession passed them by. And, as if Ramani might still have been lingering around her body, the procession paused at the gates of her favourite temples one last time. The other women and neighbours turned to go home. What was to happen next was not for women to witness for it was said that they were tender and soft-hearted and vulnerable to hysteria and attacks from the ghosts who inhabited the cremation grounds. The babajis and monks stopped their procession, put the bier down, and cracked a coconut at Ramani's skull. Coconut milk ran between the cobbles. The babajis turned the bier around and lifted it once more, carrying Ramani's little body feet first the rest of the way quickly beyond the town and out across Yamuna's dull, wide, windy grey sands.

At the gate of the burning place, Surabhi rested her hand on Pearl's shoulder and Pearl supported her as they walked somberly home. Together, they swept up the flower petals like tears covering the floor of Ramani's old room.
In the days before she passed on, Ramani had insisted Surabhi take Pearl to Puri, to South India, and to Bengal.

‘The young whitey will benefit from travelling with you,’ she had said, ‘and she’ll assist you on your way.’

So Surabhi and Pearl set off by rail, first to the magnificent temple cities of South India: Vijayawada, Simhacalam, Visakapatnam, Kancipuram. The language here was strange and the writing stranger and the women turned to English to get by. Pearl helped Surabhi whenever she could, for she was young and Surabhi some four decades older. She relieved Surabhi of her knapsack when she let her and protected her physically when temple crowds pressed around them. She found good water to fill their drinking bottles and read guidebooks aloud when Surabhi’s glasses were packed in her bag. They stayed in pilgrim hostels, waking each morning to milky sweet coffee and breakfasting on spongy white lentil cakes, wafer-thin pancakes rolled round potato-fry, and burning spiced coconut legume broth.

This was not at all like Swapnavan — they were church mice going to see a king. Everything was big — the towns, their temples, the bellies of the brahmins and the diamonds in the brahmins’ ears. Gentle painted temple elephants blessed the women by touching their heads with their trunks. Pearl wore white flowers in her hair like the women who lived there.

At the massive ancient temple at Tirupati, they queued for tickets and then they waited two hours more. Tirupati Balaji was Vishnu and he was grand. The pilgrim queue wended along a maze of barriers on brass poles. Ushers guided the flow towards the heart of the living temple. The pilgrims filed patient, around the towering exterior walls, along interior walls, into an innermost layer, and then another. The stones of Tirupati temple were weighty with power. Heavier than rock. In the fragile curve of a pillar carving or the fine worn brushwork of a flower-patterned panel; in an embossed silver casket or the filigree etching of its gunmetal lock, solemn secrets whispered of millennia of rites. When Pearl gave up trying to measure time, at last, they had arrived at the inner sanctum.

It was said that Tirupati Balaji was the wealthiest deity in all of India, and so the world. He owned outfits of garments made wholly of diamonds, emeralds and rubies. His eyes were so dazzling they had to be shaded from the view of common people. He was powerful; he was unassailable. Pearl prepared herself. She was to behold a towering mighty-armed form. His fearsome countenance would be gazing down upon her. She would be
struck with awe.

But when the priests drew the curtain aside, she saw only the familiar face of that dark-skinned country boy she knew so well, smiling sweetly. Krishna, friend of the cows.

Surabhi and Pearl travelled north into Orissa where people spoke yet another language again and writing curled curiously and delightfully. Their destination was an ancient city on a long, wide beach of creamy sand and white horses. Nobody gave Pearl a second glance here, for the place was too large and too old to care that she did not look local. This was the home of Jagannath, thundering prime mover, gargantuan wood god. Jagannath was Krishna but his face was psychedelic and his eyes were googly and as big as suns. His temple was a sprawling complex of courtyards and layers built by a chain of pious kings and on the top of a towering main dome, long red pennants bearing suns and moons waved in the strong sea wind. It was said that when the British stole Lord Jagannath’s magnificent Koh-I-Noor diamond, British power began to wane, its burden of debt began to increase and its climate became even more dismal. It was said that, during the years Jesus of Nazareth was absent from his biography, he lived in Puri, learning at the feet of masters. It was said that once a year, when Jagannath came out of his temple to ride on his painted chariot towering above the rooftops of the city on sixteen ten-foot wheels and topped with canopies and golden orbs and long sparkling banners, everyone who saw his face or touched the ropes that drew the cart would be liberated. They would be freed from the cycle of birth and death and attain realisation of god. Every year, when he came out, he was be followed by a procession of millions.

Row upon row of reproduction Jagannaths’ round black faces smiled at Pearl from souvenir stall shelves. Some were too big to lift; most were just right for pilgrims travelling simply to take home; some sat in carved and painted altars smaller than matchboxes. Jagannath smiled from pictures and embroidered hangings and painted shop signs. Pearl whispered a prayer to his pervasive presence; she would not be able to go in the temple. Only Hindus were allowed.

Beneath an awning in a street at one side of Jagannath’s temple, was a spice stall with a wood bench. A grocer sat behind his sacks of spices. He nodded knowingly and gestured that Pearl could wait there, then he carried on his business with calm confidence. Surabhi handed Pearl her bag to hold and with an apologetic expression left for the steps of the temple gate. Young brahmins came from the temple to choose spices, glancing at Pearl
then ignoring her. They ran coriander seeds through their expert fingers, opened cardamom pods to press a seed inside, and examined the quality of saffron strands.

In the lane beside the spice shop was a mudbrick cottage with a bamboo veranda where a grandfather sat slowly grinding green ganja on a stone slab. A girl in a knee-length sari and ankle rings brought flowers in a bundle and placed them beside him. Dwarf cows moseyed by. A candyfloss-seller came with a tree of candy-floss. Parrots shrieked. A beggar approached the spice merchant and the spice merchant dropped a coin in the the beggar’s tin.

When Surabhi came out, she was flushed and filled with what she’d seen.

‘Joy Jagannath! Oh, I am sorry I was taking so long... there were many shrines compulsory to visit...

‘I have seen Jagannath! The inner sanctum was stone and dark as a cave. He was in his shrine, all lit by lamplight. Oh! What a grin!’

Pearl enjoyed Surabhi’s vision vicariously.

A lad was following Surabhi carrying a cane basket of earthen pots containing Jagannath’s consecrated food. Surabhi took it from him and she and Pearl walked to the beach to share a meal on the sand.

‘There are nearly one thousand cooks,’ Surabhi explained between mouthfuls of large-grain rice, buttery spice-free dal and stringy green drumsticks. ‘I mean to say, they are simply assisting goddess to cook.’ A milk-coconut boy came and Pearl bought two. ‘Their kitchens are lit by lamp-flame and they are cooking only on woodfire. Approximately fifty thousand meals per day.’

They walked across the clean deep sand to bathe in the churning sea. The undertow was irresistible, especially in a sari — Pearl dared go no deeper than her knees. They walked for miles along the shore past a fishing village where they found big pink shells and visited a lonely long-bearded sage named Mahanidhi — Ocean of Wisdom. He took the tiny package Surabhi had brought him from Ramani and, in return, blessed his late great-grandmother’s friends and gave them slices of papaya and pots of condensed milk. Then he sent them on their way with spiritual instructions that gladdened their hearts and lightened their step. They walked into night-time carnival crowds shopping for distinctive local saris with blurred geometric zigzag patterns created by skilful weavers who dyed weft and warp before weaving. Surabhi bought two, both white — one with a row of conch shells along a blue border, and one with birds woven along a green border. Pearl bought
three, coloured all over — a rich bottle green, a royal blue, a black and russet — one with peacock patterns, one with flowers, and one with abstract conch and mandala motifs alternating along its length. From that day, the enchantment of these saris upon Pearl increased with every wearing, so that, apart from in the Swapnavan summers when no woman wore anything but the finest kota muslin, she laundered them and wore them day after day. Pearl never parted these saris for the rest of her life.

Then north from Orissa, rattling six hours on wooden seats along a local line to Nadia through wet, green and ever greener countryside, until fluorescent emerald was singing all around under the ultra-violet West Bengal sun. Long ponds of floating amethyst flowers edged lush paddy fields where storks and spoonbills waded and brahmini ducks fished. Like Swapnavan, Nadia was a sprawling holy land dotted with temples at sacred sites, each site mirroring one in Swapnavan.

‘So, just see, Swapnavan and Nadia are non-different,’ Surabhi explained.

‘River Yamuna is in Swapnavan just as river Ganga is in Nadia. Krishna’s birthplace is in Swapnavan just as Chetanya’s birthplace is in Nadia. Five thousand years ago Krishna walked in Swapnavan, and five hundred years ago, Chetanya, his Golden Avatar, walked here.’ She gestured with a sweep across the land that was hers, ‘Chetanya was speaking here to his followers, running with arms upraised, swooning with rapture in love of god.’

From Nabdwip town they took a rickshaw to a bamboo pontoon on the bank of the Ganga. They climbed on board a skiff to cross the Ganga and travelled upstream along her tributary Jalungi. As the ferry putted between living water and sky the women pointed down in wonder — the demarcation between Ganga’s powerful coffee-coloured current and Jalangi’s gentle glass-green water was marked with a miraculous distinct line. Shining berry-brown boys jumped from mud riverbank cliffs shrieking with laughter. Water buffaloes bathed. A clay drum was beating.

Pearl stayed with Surabhi’s family in the hamlet of Godrum where the air was soft and thickened with the perfume of tuberose. Godrum nestled in irrepressible foliage jumping with life. Everything was as perfect as nature could possibly have made it — riverscape, trees, plants, stones flowers growing from riverbank slopes — all seemed to have been arranged neatly as if for a photograph. Surabhi’s family house was brick and had upstairs rooms enough to take in neighbours when Ganga flooded. Its rooftop terrace overlooked a neighbourhood of coconut thatch and banana matting homes in a landscape dense with

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ferns, coconut trees, banana palms and beyond, paddy fields.

Surabhi’s brother-in-law was a tall, thin, slow moving gentleman who greeted Pearl with courtesy. Surabhi’s sister was bird-like, smaller than a ten-year-old, with an oceanic smile and cool tiny hands. Between her eyebrows she wore a disc of crimson kum-kum as big as a rupee, and a streak of kum-kum ran along the parting of her snowy hair. She wore a swan-white sari with a red streak around the hem and beneath it, nothing. On her wrists were bangles of carved white conch-shell, dark red coral, gold, and fine black iron. She brought Pearl a bell-metal plate of fruits and sweets and a terracotta bowl of gold palm-syrup yoghurt.

The family sat on a circular bench around the base of a coconut palm in the courtyard garden laughing and chatting; Pearl sat with them and neighbours visited.

‘Would you like a drink?’ Surabhi’s brother-in-law asked Pearl.

He called to his nephew (or perhaps, Pearl thought, a second nephew twice removed), ‘O Bakul!’ Bakul was Pearl’s age. He was strongly built with a curly mop and a shy grin that stretched from ear to ear. He grabbed a machete and shinned up the trunk of a coconut palm into the sun.

‘This tree is producing one hundred coconuts every year,’ Surabhi’s brother-in-law boasted as she watched Bakul hack at the top of the swaying palm. Bakul shouted a warning and a coconut dropped into the softness of a palm-frond roof. He shinned down and brought the coconut to Pearl, chopping the top off with an alarming swipe of his machete and presenting it to her with a flourish. He watched Pearl drink the candy-sweet water while the family spoke of their good fortune at having such a tree. The coconut milk ran down Pearl’s neck into her blouse. Surabhi’s sister pointed into the hibiscus bushes — two doves were bobbing their heads together, making a heart-shape between them, cooing.

The family took their meal on banana-leaf plates and drank water from cups of hand-cast bell-metal. They sat in a circle on woven mats. They conversed softly and laughed as they ate — minuscule serves of fried eggplant, gingery mustardy pumpkin, spicy spinach, and mango pickle, all surrounding extraordinarily enormous heaps of coarse thick-grain rice drizzled with grainy brown homemade ghee.

After they had eaten, Pearl felt everyone watching her from the corner of their eyes as she went through the washing procedure: holding the pump with the wrist of her right hand and cleaning the left, then the right, then her mouth and feet. Then they nodded and were at ease. She hoped she had passed the test. Surabhi’s sister drew Pearl to her, sat her in

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the sun and massaged handfuls of sweet coconut oil onto her head, lulling her into a trance right there in the courtyard of their home with the family all around.

The night was sultry and moist with stars. Clouds were moving, backlit by a brilliant moon. Someone had floated a lamp with a single flame on the pond. A breeze was touching the palm fronds making them whisper. Fireflies illuminated the undergrowth with their glittering bodies.

Pearl’s bed was of dark wood, deeply carved with foliage and flowers. She fell asleep in Bengal and dreamed that it all was real.

In the calm, kind morning, she went to bathe in the pond. She waded through soft weedy mud until she was out of her depth then side-stroked to the far side. Bakul stood in just a check cloth, scrubbing his teeth with a neem twig, gazing her way with curiosity.

A group of giggling sisters led Pearl by the hands into their home which was a hut and had her sit on the bed that practically filled it. Its wall panels were woven from flattened slats of bamboo and papered with the pages of fashion magazines. They showed her their valuables — their best saris, cooking pots and tiffins put aside for their weddings, and hidden in a plastic powder-puff pot, an orange-gold chain, a gold butterfly armlet for the upper arm, gold dangling earrings, a diamond nose stud and a collection of thick, twenty-two carat bangles.

As the sun climbed, villagers came to work in long bamboo huts, clacking shuttles of wooden standing looms, creating the finest white muslin in all the world — gauzy saris with silken thread-work borders or motifs repeated from heavy elaborate headpieces.

Surabhi and Pearl were going to visit Malini at Malini’s brother’s home. At the bank of the river, some way from where the busy motor ferries came alongside, was a bamboo pontoon on the mud bank where roots were snaking and storks were wading, feeding on snails. Surabhi and Pearl climbed aboard a low skiff and its boatman pushed off. He sculled along the olive Jalungi and only dip of oar and the whistling of black kokils broke the wet silence. After an hour had passed, he moored between tree stumps among ferns and bushes of red, red hibiscuses with pointed tongues. Surabhi bade him wait. She led Pearl along the ridges separating fields and then into the clammy jungle along an earthen path past domes of terracotta temples caught in the aerial roots of banyans and peepul, between bamboos, mango and shiuli trees and up to the gates of a grey stone mansion left long ago by the British.

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The house was two storeys high and topped with a balustrade around its terrace. The front door was flanked with pillars. Its windows were etched with images of birds and foliage. A peepul tree was growing in the wall of an upstairs floor, its roots feeding on the bricks and the air. Near a gatekeeper’s hut was a shrine to Kali with blood-red flower offerings. Jungle consumed the gardens but someone had cut a neat patch and tended it lightly.

Malini came out to greet her acquaintances from Swapnavan. Her brother was a lean man with long oiled curls and bloodshot eyes.

Malini introduced him, ‘My brother is living in these gatekeeper’s quarters since nineteen-forty-seven.’

Under a thatched veranda crouched a girl, little more than a child. She wore the red and white of a married woman. Spread before her on the ground were little hills of vegetables and she was peeling on the upright blade of a standing knife. Rice was simmering. When she stood, Pearl saw she was pregnant.

Malini gave Pearl a tour of the abandoned house. British armchairs, a writing desk, a walnut cabinet, and in the bedroom, a great timber bed, a dressing table with a time-flecked mirror, chandeliers; it was all covered in sheets of white muslin. The punkas were still. A portrait of King George and Queen Mary was hanging in its place. They were were wearing their coronation robes.

As they emerged into the jungle daylight, Malini said to Pearl, ‘I am your music guru. I am pleased with your progress. You have been a good student. Now, my sister-friend Surabhi is teaching you more.’ But it was not only mridanga that Pearl had learned from Malini, beginning that moment she had folded her palms and requested Malini teach her. There was something else in every lesson which was not drumming. Malini had taken a risk; at first she had not known at first whether this whitey would be able to endure, but she had watched her, after all, unfurl like a fern-leaf from a ball, and it had been a wonder. From her, Pearl had learned something that applied to all art, all knowledge, and spirituality. She had taught her practice.

And Malini had given Pearl first lessons on understanding that ancient relationship: that of guru and student. She placed her hands on Pearl’s head and, as was the tradition among gurus in her line, she said, ‘Return one day to me and tell me all that you have learned.’

On the day of the full moon, Bakul took Pearl to the birthplace of Chetanya. It was an
unassuming daub thatched hut. A monk hobbled out and gave Pearl a clay pot of yoghurt sweetened with date palm sugar and a banana-leaf bowl of milk-balls soaked in cardamom-scented syrup.

‘Welcome to the land of Chetanya!’ he smiled, encouraging the young pair to sense the happiness of his faith. ‘Joy Chetanya! And Joy Nityananda, the brother of Chetanya!’ Pearl and Bakul laughed together.

They went by motorcycle to a metalworkers’ hut in the jungle. Pearl watched them cast hand chimes, tipping them from their moulds and burnishing them to a shine. They were small enough to fit the palm of Pearl’s hand, yet were so well cast that when she chimed their long high note it rang for a full thirty... fifty... sixty seconds.

The motorcycle bounced back through the jungle and Pearl held on breathlessly. Bakul remained silent as he pushed the motorcycle onto a skiff. He stood in silence as they putted across the holy tropical river. He remained silent as they rode through the shock-green countryside of Bengal back to the family home.

Surabhi’s sister pressed her teeth into the nail of Pearl’s little finger. It hurt like an electric shock. This was a ritual they did to immunise against danger on a journey. Surabhi’s family said good-bye unhurriedly. Bakul accompanied Surabhi and Pearl to the ferry to Nabadwip. They took a rickshaw to the railway station and Bakul stood on the platform as their train pulled out for Howrah.

The cathedral vaults of Calcutta railway station were haunted with Raj ghosts, floating up in white clouds billowing from the engines.

‘We shall time-pass in the ladies’ waiting room,’ said Surabhi and went up the same stairs prim memsahibs had used in the days of the Raj. Pearl pictured memsahibs’ spectres behind dusty standing mirrors or reclining on the carved loungers on the rooftop terrace. Surabhi and Pearl peeled crusty skins off litchis overlooking a Hooghly glittering with lamps of ferries and reflections of a throbbing city. They ate the cool round fruits and gazed at the plaited traffic on the busiest bridge in the world earth as amplified sitar, tabla and soaring singing reached them above it all.

They bore thirty hours on the appallingly slow Toofan Express from Calcutta back to the dryness of Uttar Pradesh and Mathura town. Then finally, an hour in the back of a pony-trap back to their home sweet home in Swapnavan.

It was dusk when Surabhi and Pearl reached Kishori Bhavan. They had brought canvas

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bags of gifts for the other women: blessed sweets from far-flung temples, tiny Jagannath carvings, twigs and soil from the holy places, sealed brass canisters of Ganges water, seashell ornaments, Orissan saris. During the party of gift-giving, Pearl slipped off to the Yamuna to worship and bathe in her gentle water. Huge fruit bats chased bugs as the faint yellow light playing on the water's surface faded.

Her small room was waiting for her, clean and neat. She sat on her bamboo bed and stared at her used railway ticket as if it was proof the whole journey had not been a dream. Was that the date? She’d forgotten her birthday! Three months had gone by since her own birthday without her even noticing.

The manuscript she had been working on before the journey was lying on her table.
Chapter XII

Night

It was almost half past eight in the evening in the timeless land of Swapnavan. Attendants carried censers of smouldering cow-dung piled with frankincense crystals and other fragrant resins through the halls of Krishna's father's palace. The perfumes purified the atmosphere ready for the events of the evening. It was time to relax and enjoy.

Krishna's father and all his brothers and their families came to the courtyard hall and Krishna and his brother sat on either side of their father. Sometime before nine, entertainers drifted into the hall, extravagant, extrovert, elegant.

Attendants held up a patchwork between them. Once the audience had hushed, they let it fall. Illuminated by five flames from a golden ghee-lamp, dancers turned slowly in the night. Their hands and fingers moved as if they were words. Their half-mask, half-greasepaint faces accentuated expression; their red-stained eyes moved exaggeratedly. They danced the story of the goddess Sita, kidnapped by a devil-king. Women came to that devil willingly, for he was powerfully-built and he was rich, but he could not win the love of Sita. She lamented alone in her orchard-prison, crying for her beloved. A magic monkey arrived and danced in the trees eating fruit, then flew off taking Sita's ring to Ram. Ram came to Sita's rescue and thunderous percussion shook the audience. Children clung to their mothers. Krishna's eyes welled with painful memory.

This was his past life.

Next came the acrobats, young travelling tribals in tight bright costumes with streamers and bells strung to their wrists and ankles. They danced on their hands as easily as their feet, jumped through hoops and balanced on poles. One teenager did a headstand on another teenager's head while he juggled ripe mangoes. A girl appeared high above the audience twisting her body down a silken strand from an unseen point in the dark night sky. A boy climbed a rope and disappeared. A girl in a harlequin suit juggled flower balls and fire. The acrobats formed a human pyramid and jumped apart with a shout and a shower of flowers from nowhere.

Then came the panegyrists and the performance poets. When the children were beginning to nod there...
were pyrotechnics — spinning wheels of sparks, multicoloured willows of light and electric chrysanthemums in the night-bue countryside sky. At last, it was time for Krishna to go to bed. His mother took him to his chamber, gave him a tumbler of warm saffron milk and kissed him goodnight.

Krishna lay listening to sounds of his family until the house was fell silent. When everyone was asleep, he crept from his bed, climbed out of his window, and ran into the woods.

In her palace, Kishori was doing the same.

Repeating the lore of Swapnavan as spoken by her predecessors, this maidservant of Saraswati and Swamini aspires to realise it.

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Chapter XIII

The Seventh Ring of the Bell

Pearl woke long before dawn, and even before she picked up her meditation beads, took pen and paper and wrote a letter that had been forming in her mind since Ramani had passed on. It was to Swamini.

Pearl expressed her appreciation for Swamini’s teachings and thanked her for her blessings. Then, she requested personal instruction. When she had finished, she folded the letter into an envelope and tied it with embroiderer’s gold to a sea-foam-white sari she had bought at the Jagannath town especially for her.

She walked to Swamini’s temple and went inside.

Next day, Manjari brought a reply, typewritten on parchment with a letterhead logo of Kishori and Krishna in a lotus mandala.

‘Swamini has requested you go to her rooms tomorrow,’ Manjari told Pearl, ‘morning time.’

Swamini had written,
My Dear Pearl,

I received your letter and became so happy to hear from you.

My advice is that you always remain in good association, especially while you are still living in Swapnavana with so many devotees of Kishori and Krishna. When you have the association of devotees more advanced on the path, and who are kind hearted and affectionate towards you, you will progress very easily.

You should come in my talks while I am in Swapnavana. Otherwise you can hear from Surabhi-didi and Manjari.

Though you have attachment to so many things, such as family, your life in Australia, and so on, by accepting this and at the same time going on with your activities in devotional life, very quickly you will receive pure loving devotion within your heart. When you return to your land, always study the writing of our teachers and remember everything you have learned.

I only want to help you in making your practice and meditation successful in this very lifetime. Always continue to hear my talks and serve the devotees of Kishori-Krishna according to your abilities, thus you will quickly go forward.

I am always praying to Chetanya-Nityananda and to Sri Sri Kishori-Krishna, the eternally youthful divine couple, that They will sprinkle Their mercy upon you.

My heartly blessings are always for you,

Your ever well-wisher,

Finally, in blue looping script, she signed her name as if it was a mantra in itself — *Vaishnavi-vaishnava sevabhilasini, Saraswati Swamini*. Surabhi translated for Pearl. It meant: ‘a woman aspiring for the service of the devotees of Kishori and Krishna.’

Swamini’s temple had nine spires of various sizes shaped like lotus buds pointing into the sky. Its entranceway was an arch surrounded by carvings in the traditional pink sandstone foliage and peacocks and flowers. The tree around which Swamini had had her temple built was the one under which Krishna had once sat waiting for Kishori. He had waited for so long and thought about Kishori so deeply that he had began to turn golden like Kishori. Just five-hundred years ago, Chetanya had sat here too. He had meditated so long and deep upon the story of Krishna turning mustard-flower gold that his own golden skin began to turn blue-black like a radiant thundercloud, like Krishna.

Pearl and Surabhi went up the temple steps and Manjari brought them into Swamini’s room. Swamini raised her right palm, her long fine fingers pressed together in blessing. Her
room was filled with the fragrance of tuberose and jasmine. She gestured, indicating Surabhi and Pearl should sit down. Marigold garlands hung from the armrests of a dark wood chair. An oil painting of Kishori and Krishna formed an understated shrine on her bookshelf. A stone from Govardan sat on a braid-trimmed cloth surrounded by flowers. Wood frames hung on the walls containing photographs, some sepia, some modern, of Swamini’s gurus and their predecessor gurus, alive in their images. Soft light filtered through a neem tree outside the open window and birds chattered close by.

Determined to make the most of her first meeting with the person who was going to be her guru, Pearl had prepared and practised aloud to herself a few carefully worded questions. They were about practical matters, the practice of her meditation, and in what way she could be of service.

Swamini shone with an aura of purity, contentment and comfortable renunciation. She wore a crumpled cream sari and a matching hand-loomed wrap. A light woollen shawl hung on the back of her chair and a pair of canvas slippers was on the floor before it. On her forehead Swamini wore a marking similar to Surabhi’s — two fine vertical lines in a U with a tulsi leaf spot — but where Surabhi’s was white, Swamini’s was blackish clay from the Lake of Kishori. Her tulsi neck beads were carved roughly so the bark remained. Hanging outside her sari was a tulsi-wood necklace shaped like tulsi leaves, each carved with a Devanagari character so she was encircled by mantra. Her complexion was gold and flawless and her wrinkles formed gentle patterns around her eyes. Her eyes were a brighter blue than Pearl had ever seen. They were a cool, crystal, purifying sea. Suddenly, Pearl realised all her intelligent questions had been trivialities. Ages of mental business stilled. She was seeing from a higher vantage point, and it felt very pleasant.

In the minute Pearl and Surabhi had been seated before Swamini, a dozen more people had pressed into the room behind them. Some stood along the wall, others leaned through the door. Some newcomers nudged Pearl to take up less space, and as Pearl made her body smaller she was humbled and at once proud to be among Swamini’s followers. Swamini spoke in Hindi. The guests held their breath to hear her for her voice was sweet, and they laughed uninhibitedly when she joked.

Swamini was mindful of every movement she made: when she turned the page of the book on her table her hand hovered unmoving like a dragonfly. As she listened to her guests’ questions, she moved her thumb-tip across her cuticles. When she described Kishori walking to meet her beloved through the forest at night with her thick black braid.
swinging like a black snake, her hand became a swaying cobra. Pearl imagined that when she closed her eyes, she was with Kishori and Krishna.

Swamini stretched out her hand to give Pearl a tuberose stem. As Pearl leant forward, she realised Swamini was wearing the Red Robin socks she’d brought new from Australia and given to Surabhi. She reached out to touch Swamini’s foot. It felt far softer than she’d anticipated. She touched her forehead to it. When she sat back cross-legged once more, she regained her composure, breathing carefully. She touched the flower to her forehead, imprinting the smell on her memory, and let it rest lightly in her hands on her lap. Swamini looked down at Pearl.

‘You will help your sister Surabhi with her publishing work.’

The other guests smiled benevolently to see Swamini giving attention to Pearl: Swamini was living proof the scriptures were true and that the teachings of Chetanya were for all humankind, even bœotians, those born outside the caste system, white women. Pearl nodded. She wanted that more than anything — she’d never been so happy as she was at the cottages, typing stories of Kishori and Krishna, but, an image flashed through her mind — her mother might be worrying about her.

With a flash like light, Pearl heard Swamini’s voice, kind and silent inside her mind. She spoke in words with perfect clarity.

_Do not worry about your family. All will be well._

Pearl flushed with shock.

_Are you happy with your new family?_

In that crowded room, Swamini was looking only at Pearl, talking to her heart, her soul, to the most sensitive part of her being. A glance of Swamini’s eyes spoke directly to Pearl and at that moment Pearl knew she could hid no thing from her and she felt blissful. It was a long, still moment. Yet all the other people in the room, even Surabhi and Manjari, were as if outside the membrane of a bubble. For that moment, Swamini and Pearl had been perfectly alone. Pearl sat still with her head covered, hoping no one would notice her starting to cry, but now her shoulders had begun to jerk with silent sobs. There was no explanation — it was not her monthly, she was not overtired, and it was not grief. She remembered how, when she was a child of two or three in nursery school she played quietly all the day, behaving nicely as was expected of her; but when her mother had come to collect her, these suppressed sobs rose from this same place within. It was a bursting of a dam. She remembered the warmth of Yamuna water. She felt all the pure things in life—

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sun, flowers, hope, dance—surrounding her; in her heart. Then, when the crying passed, those jerking hiccup things. She had no handkerchief, so she leaned forward surreptitiously and wiped her face in her petticoat.

Until Pearl returned to her own country, Surabhi was to teach her as much as she could, and during the next few weeks, Surabhi would prepare Pearl to receive her sacred mantras. Swamini could see Surabhi was fond of this waif of a whitey and that she had taken care of her as if she had dropped on her porch like a stunned bird. She could see Pearl trusted Surabhi. The two had become fond friends. The differences between them only strengthened their relationship, enabling them to focus on the task at hand-publishing the lore of the love of Kishori and Krishna. Pearl was neither infatuated with Surabhi, nor adoring. If she had have been, she’d have had to learn the ways of the cult elsewhere. Neither did Swamini love sycophancy.

Pearl began to see Swamini frequently now, but kept her worship for her new guru understated and restrained. She turned to jelly in Swamini’s presence — and understandably so, because, for all her gentleness, Swamini was an imposing and commanding woman. But Pearl was realising an affection for her new guru that was beginning to make sense over and beyond all the other relationships in her life; she was beginning to see all those other relationships as tributaries.

Surabhi spoke of Swamini with unflickering conviction.

‘So, how to obtain one hundred rupees?’ she asked Pearl with raised eyebrows. ‘Go to someone who is in possession of a great sum and enquire. Just like, how to experience the reality of Swapnavan? Simply locate one who is doing so and ask. For devotion can be obtained neither from books nor holy places nor mantras — but only from one who is possessing it in an unalloyed state.’ She moved her hand as if across the sky, ‘Soul has been drifting through more lifetimes than there are stars in the Milky Way’ and raised one finger as if making a point. ‘According to her desires and actions, she will finally make contact with such a person.’

‘But can’t anyone meet a guru like this?’ Pearl asked.

‘Such a guru is too, too rare,‘ Surabhi said. ‘Just like — among all the species upon the face of the earth — animals, birds, sea creatures, insects, trees, plants, microbes — human life is exceptional. Among humankind, devotion to any divinity is uncommon. Fewer still appreciate the loveliness of Kishori and Krishna, and of those rare souls, only a tiny

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fraction lives every minute in full consciousness of them.

‘Just like, if one turtle is swimming around in the oceans of the world, and that turtle surfaces for a breath once every hundred years, and, in one ocean, there is a log floating freely, and in that log is a hole, and our turtle surfaces with his head poking through that hole. That is how rare it is to encounter a soul with such pure devotion.’

Pearl laughed.

‘And such a soul in possession of the premier quality of sweet devotion to Kishori and Krishna can bestow a rare and subtle energy upon another. This is depending on the recipient’s qualification and their longing to acquire it.’

‘How does such energy transmit?’ asked Pearl. Was it light shooting from a guru’s eyes?

Carefully and gently, as if giving instructions how to cook or sew or repair a machine, Surabhi said, ‘Hear, and try to serve. Never imitate. Guru is conveying devotion directly into the heart through eyes, speech,’ and raising her palm outwards as Pearl had often seen Swamini do, ‘through eye-contact, touch, or loving embrace. Such pure and powerful souls are not of this world. They dwell in a realm beyond dull matter and the five material senses and they appear here as embodiments of Kishori’s compassion.

‘They are not ordinary people.

‘They witness the divine drama of the inhabitants of spiritual Swapnavan and enter it to meet their guru and serve Kishori and Krishna in their perfected spiritual forms.’

‘How can we tell if someone is like that?’ Pearl asked.

‘You cannot, my dear. Only one on an equal level can identify them.’

Pearl’s next step, therefore, would be one of faith.

For days and weeks, Surabhi prepared Pearl. Soon the time would come for Pearl to formally accept Swamini as her guru and receive seven sacred secret mantras.

‘All the mantras are to be recited silently with full concentration.

‘The first mantra you are to be given is purifying and powerful. The mantra is a goddess and, when you remembering the sound of the mantra, she will be with you so take care.

‘She flows like the Ganga and Yamuna from far above the heavens. She is a mantra for invoking deities who control planets and stars. She is mantra of twice-born priesthood. She is strengthening and focusing the mind firmly for rituals of worship for Kishori and Krishna.

Pearl had often seen Surabhi reciting her secret mantras. She’d sit for twenty minutes
with her shoulders and arms covered inside her shawl, silent and still as a statue. Once, the milk-boy had arrived early at the gates of the enclave and Pearl had tried to let Surabhi know; she’d spoken to Surabhi several times but Surabhi had remained unmoving, unresponsive. Only after she’d finished did she speak to Pearl. Pearl had seen the monks and nuns reciting their secret mantras too, and wondered where they were going in their meditation, what they were doing there, and with whom. Now, she was going to be given the mantras herself and she’d be vowing to recite them morning, noon and night, every day for the rest of her life. She’d be promising to act in a way conducive to devotion for Kishori-Krishna. She was going to vow to live in supra-cleanliness, as vegetarian and teetotaller, never taking intoxicants nor wasting the precious subtle energies of her being. The little she was renouncing was insignificant compared to what she was being given. Her new identity would be as an attendant of Kishori.

Surabhi walked ahead of Pearl to Swamini’s room.

The windows were curtained with thick cotton to keep out the heat. The clean smell of eucalyptus oil lingered. Swamini sat on her low divan, relaxed, with her right ankle on her left thigh. Manjari was hovering ready to do Swamini’s bidding. Surabhi and Pearl touched their foreheads to the floor. Swamini bowed back to them.

As she sat up, Swamini said quietly, ‘Dasi ‘smi. I am your servant.’

She asked Surabhi, ‘How is your health?’ and Surabhi spoke of the benefits of seasonal fruits. Swamini asked, ‘How is everything at the cottages?’ and Surabhi spoke about a teenage widow newly arrived from Bihar. Swamini’s face shadowed with concern as she gave directions for the girl’s care.

Then she asked, ‘On which publications have you been working?’

Surabhi replied that *Running with Eyes Closed* was progressing slowly but surely, for she was writing magazine articles and readying other works for publication too.

Swamini said, ‘Good. Good,’ and expressed her wish that another book soon be translated and published with her commentary. Their slow and careful words were few and gracious yet the love that flowed between them was palpable. They clasped each other in their gaze. At last, Swamini turned towards Pearl, chortling. She reached out two slender hands and patted Pearl’s head.

‘Ah! So here is my young Australian.’

Swamini looked at Pearl and smiled, ‘We have much work to do.’ She looked into Pearl’s

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face and as her eyes moved across Pearl’s forehead, Pearl felt her seeing across lifetimes of journeying to this point. She spoke aloud to Pearl and her words echoed layers of meaning, but when she spoke silently, she imparted her knowledge, clear as a bell, in a part of Pearl’s psyche that Pearl had been unused to using.

Swamini asked, ‘How are you liking Swapnavan?’

Swamini wasn’t referring to the materially manifest Swapnavan — the Swapnavan of crumbling buildings and wicked monkeys — she meant the real Swapnavan, the eternal starry Swapnavan in the Spiritual Sky where Krishna led his cows through divine pastures, where Kishori and the other milkmaidens danced in rhythmic cycles more heavenly than the planets, where sparkling desire trees dripped nectar and the caves of Govardan were lit by gemstones.

‘Oh yes! I love Swapnavan,’ she replied.

Swamini nodded, ‘Hmm,’ and returned to silently chanting, moving her lips slightly, rolling the beads of her worn rosary between her fingers, gazing down at Pearl for a while through old half-closed eyelids, then closing her eyes. The light in a white mosquito net behind her gave her an ephemeral aura. Surabhi nudged Pearl and indicated she should chant too. Fragrant jasmine overflowed between the porcelain wings of an opalescent swan-shaped vase. Manjari moved soundlessly around the room, lifting white cloth from a line and folding it, arranging pencils on Swamini’s desk, refilling a water jug, pouring a tumbler of water and covering it with a crocheted cover, occasionally glancing at Pearl. In the street outside children were playing. A calf was bleating softly.

Pearl’s wandering mind went to her translation work. She wished Swamini would be pleased with her for it. She wanted to tell her how grateful she was for the sacred privilege of working with Surabhi on the book. She longed to be able to speak to Swamini about the stories and the secret sacred land to which she had been granted entry; the sweet ecstatic plane of pure service to Kishori and Krishna. Swamini opened her eyes, immediately catching Pearl’s, and nodded in understanding.

Swamini said, ‘Actually, all these stories and all these conclusions are unfit to disclose in public.’ Pearl understood. Surabhi and Ramani had always been as if girls whispering secrets about the divine lovers. And then Swamini concluded, ‘But if they are not disclosed, no one will appreciate them.’

Swamini gestured to Pearl to come close and Pearl knelt on the floor beside her chair.

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Swamini leaned forward slightly and Pearl stretched her neck so that her right ear was beside Swamini's lips. Swamini murmured in a low, quiet voice. She moved her right hand like a classical dancer showing Pearl how to count the mantras on her fingers as she recited them in her mind. With her right hand forward, her palm upwards and her fingers together, she touched the creased lines inside her fingers with the tip of her thumb, one after the other, until ten places had been touched. She showed Pearl how to hide her hand from sight even of spirits, by tucking it under her shawl close to her heart.

The first syllable of the first mantra was the unseen thread running through all things. When Pearl had picked the lotus at the lake in Australia, it had drawn itself from within her and linked her to the lake, the lotus flowers and the sky:

*Aum:

*Earth, air, heaven
*Sunlight
*Divinity
*Enlightenment
*Worship
*Have enthusiasm!
*Unto my spiritual teacher who is blissful in awareness, obeisance
*Endeavor for realisation
*Meditate
*Have enthusiasm!
*Unto Chetanya, maintainer of the universe, obeisance
*Endeavor for realisation
*Meditate
*Have enthusiasm!

The rhythms of the mantras were irregular. Pearl knew she’d have trouble memorising them — it might have been easier if they had a bounce or were a rhyming poem. Swamini turned to Manjari and said, ‘Bring the paper.’ Manjari gave Pearl a sheet with the verses carbon-copied in purple ink. The original had been handwritten in Devanagari and was followed, in small neat capitals, by an English transliteration and then a translation. Perhaps she was not the first Westerner, Pearl thought. Swamini whispered the mantras and explained how to understand them, why they attracted their namesakes within them, and

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what to visualise during their recitation. Surabhi and Manjari sat still and listened afresh as Swamini gave Pearl the final two mantras: the secret mantra of the cow-herder and the mantra of desire. Pearl loved the mantra of the cow-herder, Gopal, dear-most of the milkmaids of the spiritual sky. She recognised it, perhaps from a previous lifetime. Her eyes moved over the paper and when she reached the seventh mantra they widened. She looked from the paper to Swamini’s face, and back to the paper. Swamini’s intonation of the syllables was precise. The moment was supremely sacrosanct. The mantra was beautiful and flowing, and Swamini murmured it as if she was passing on a secret about Kishori and Krishna’s love, for indeed she was. It was a mantra of pure preciousness. The final line was most secret of all. Pearl looked up at Swamini’s face and saw her eyes were wet with tears.

Pearl looked to Surabhi and Surabhi directed her attention with a nod back to Swamini.

‘It is possible to attain success by a single utterance of the mantra, but we do it frequently for the pleasure of the deity within.

‘Remember Kishori and Krishna’s meeting and remember their separation. Know the meaning of the mantra. Remember the qualities of the one you are addressing with it. Know your relationship with her, for she and her mantra are one. Maintain the conviction that, “She is my protector and the exclusive maintainer of my life.” Remember, “Everything I possess belongs to her, including my very self. I am an infinitesimal suffering soul and I surrender that self to my Kishori and Krishna. I exist to please them with my service as they please.” Do this, and quickly you will attain perfection in your meditation.’

Swamini fell silent. The teaching had been transmitted. She sat back from Pearl, adjusted the headpiece of her sari and relaxed a little. She spoke quietly to Manjari and then continued:

‘Your mantra encompasses everything, internal and external reality both. These mantras will be ineffective unless recited with the utmost humility. As you recite, you are to face east at sunrise, north at noon, and north at sunset. You are to recite in the evening after the sun has set and before the first star has risen. Your eyes are to remain closed. You are to sit upon a clean mat upon the floor. Never in a chair. Never in a vehicle. You are not to interrupt your mantras; neither if someone calls you nor if something happens around you. You are neither to move your lips nor a hair of your head.’ Pearl kept her head bowed reverentially as Swamini recited her catalogue of rules and regulations. What had she let herself in for?

But when she looked up, she saw Swamini, Surabhi and Manjari all chuckling.
She need not have feared. Theirs was a path of joy.
Chapter XIV
Midnight

It was ten forty-eight at night in the timeless land of Swapnavan and the moon was bursting. In a wide moon-cooled glade, girls were dancing in groups before Kishori and Krishna, competing for their favour. They praised Kishori’s beauty and grace with graceful dainty movements of their hips and hands and eyes; and they paid tribute to Krishna’s valour with mannish stamps of their feet and sweeping gestures. Some of Kishori’s friends gently moved the air around Kishori and Krishna with peacock feather fans. Kishori wore a lotus blossom behind each ear the sandalwood-pulp patterns painted around her eyes made them large like a possum’s. Krishna was sitting on a couch made of mosses and green chrysanthemums; Kishori was sitting on his thigh and his arms were wrapped around her waist. The two were cooing in the language of courting birds. Nightingale-girls sang of divine couple’s undying love. They sang that it was their love alone that made the cosmos breathe and the suns and moons in the heavens shine.

Gradually, in dance, Kishori’s countless friends moved into a massive, slowly-rotating mandala. Their whirling skirts sparkled, kaleidoscopic like the inside of a diamond. Their glass bangles and silver ankle-bells rang in tumultuous melody as they clapped and stamped their bare feet on the ground. Kishori and Krishna stood, letting flower petals fall around them and, with the languid gait of Oriyan dancers, walked to the hub of the circle. They were the whorl of the lotus and Kishori’s friends were the petals. The girls’ singing was thunder and their dance was snow; Krsna’s black body was a mountainous cloudscape and Kishori’s beauty flashed like lightening in a full moon sky. Krishna clapped and called in praise only for Kishori’s dance. The bells on Kishori’s belt rattled like rolling drums. Her earrings danced merrily. Her pearl necklace came alive in dance. Kishori raised her arms above her head and placed her hands on Krishna’s shoulders. In the warmth of his sandalwood aura, her hair loosened, flowers fell from it, and she forgot herself.

Krishna moved around the measureless mandala from one girl to the next, swinging the maidens around his arms faster and faster, sliding his hands around their waists, slapping his palms upon theirs in the air in a furious rhythm that forced them to respond in dance. He moved his smooth blue body so fast among the breathless girls that no one knew quite where he was at any moment. Each girl felt Krishna’s hand upon
her waist. Each girl felt his strong arm locking into hers. Each girl felt his cooling hand slide into hers and
the touch of his fragrant hair upon her face. He was there with each and every one of Kishori’s girlfriends,
and each one of the thousands of young girls thought, ‘Oh! How lucky am I, alone, to be dancing with
Krishna!’

In the sky, the lesser gods glided silently in their floating palaces to witness this mandala of dance of
love and pure loveliness. They hovered above the clearing in the forest and gazed down in rapture, for to
witness for even a moment, such a spontaneous artistry of music, colour and pure liquid overflowing
emotion was the very purpose of their existence. They showered so many flowers down to the dancers that
the sky became filled with floating petals. The dance was wild yet precise. It was spontaneous and yet perfect.
From their aerial vantage point the gods could see countless Krishnas all dancing with a different girl but in
the centre too. As Kishori was in the centre with Krishna, each of the other girls was a facet of her own
ininitely variegated nature too. The dancers were moving where their hearts took them yet they were creating
the precise patterns of an immaculate, vivid, living fractal. The gods looked down with a wonder that
increased and refreshed, moment to moment. The dancers’ bare feet pounded the flowers on the ground and
the perfume drifted high into the night sky.

At last, it was time for the sky-palaces of the gods to sail away above the clouds, back to the heavenly
planets.

The goddesses in their tiaras looked back longingly, ‘O! To be able to act as simple-hearted village girls
and take part in such a dance as this!’ But they could never come down to the level of uncultured cow-
herders. Theirs was a life of privilege and power. Theirs were the ways of opulence, high culture and
decorum.

And yet,’ O! To taste such sweetness! Perhaps some day!’

Kishori and Krishna entered a flower-bower and rested. They reclined on a bed of lotus buds and the girls
brought them outfits made of flowers and jars of orange-blossom honey-wine laced with herbal extracts that
made them both so intoxicated that Kishori lost all her shyness. Kishori’s closest youngest friends gently
massaged Kishori’s and Krishna’s feet as they drifted into sleep and when it was around half past three and
most of the other girls were dozing in their own private flower bowers hidden in the woods, they slipped
outside Kishori and Krishna’s bower. They stayed awake whispering and peeping in through the lattice of
leaves and flower vines making up the walls of the bower for the remainder of the night.

Repeating the lore of Swapnavan as spoken by her predecessors,
this maidservant of Saraswati and Swamini aspires to realise it.

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Chapter XV

The Eighth Ring of the Bell

A tinselly cow and her calf swung from the rear-view mirror. The driver’s wireless lay on the empty front seat beside him and a cricket commentary was going on in BBC English. Every swerve and horn-blast drove Pearl deeper into despondency as the road took her away from Swapnavan towards Palam.

The driver pulled over. Pearl paid him and he passed her holdall to a porter. The driver’s home was in Swapnavan among the temples and the cows and the songs of worship. He was impatient to get back there. The city was no place to drive in the dark and besides, he
was looking forward to the hot meal his wife would have ready.

Pearl’s bag bobbed away on the head of the porter and she jogged to keep up with it all the way to her departure gate. The jolly Air India Maharaja who’d welcomed her was now salaaming her good-bye.

Pearl flew through cloud towers which were the immaculate homes of angels. She spent a night in a punka-cooled Singapore hotel where the air smelled of wet bamboo. How terrifying aeroplane travel was — one moment she was embracing Surabhi, looking deeply into her eyes and holding her hands — the next moment Surabhi was out of reach and Pearl might never see her again. She flew through featureless darkness crumpled in her seat, arms locked across her chest. Under the Kashmir shawl Ramani had given her, her fingers gripped a pouch around her neck in which her Govardan pebble was hidden. As long as it was with her, close to her heart, touching her soul, she’d still be in Swapnavan. She drifted to sleep and heard temple drumming in her dream. She was on the terrace overlooking the wide Yamuna sands once more. Yogis were practicing and on the far shore, somebody was drying a sari overhead in the wind like a long red victory flag. The silver wing cut the air. Pearl woke above red, red sand and flew down. In Perth, the air was warm and eucalyptus-scented. The airport officials looked very comical with their muscled legs in short trousers and long socks. One stamped Pearl’s passport with a bullyish blonde-haired hand.

He said, ‘Welcome back to the real world.’

The final flight was short. Over more red lands and then down, floating slowly down over a beige-green patchwork peninsula and a strip of sea; over crushed-velvet hills and still lower over roads and rows of houses with roofs of corrugated iron and swimming pools in their gardens. Then over the crystalline city, gliding down past the cathedral spires and the pretty tree-rimmed cricket ground; out over the beach where early-birds dotted the sand; and back in, in a small circle so that the aeroplane could approach the airport runway. Cat’s claws drew from the wings, the plane came down, and the engines surged in reverse and exhaled to a stop. Pearl waited for the scramble for cabin-bags was over then bumped along the aisle to the top of the steps.

The morning air was champagne and eucalyptus. The hills were clean blue-green. But was this land of high wide skies still home?

‘Pearleeceey!’ Across the warm tarmac Lily was waving a floppy hat, squawking like a galah.
She had a posy of herbs and kumquats for Pearl and they hugged all their memories of each other and everything that they shared. Lily felt soft and smelled of washing powder. Pearl was a stick insect; there was no meat on her bones and her cheekbones stuck out. Her eyes were different too — they seemed deeper in their sockets but her irises were brighter as if they were lit up from within.

‘What’s that you’re wearing? It looks like something from Vogue! Is that hand-embroidery?’ said Lily. She swept up her big sister in a whirlwind of care, took her luggage, and guided her through the car park. What a silent empty space this was. There were so few souls. Gum-nuts and gum-leaves covered the asphalt. Rosellas darted in the gumtrees. Lily had a new teal Holden. Pearl put her bag in the back and jumped in the front beside her. It wasn’t an Ambassador.

‘We were worried about you,’ said Lily. ‘Especially when we heard you got sick. Oh! And Pollywaffle’s in calf! She’ll be so glad to see you!’

‘How’s Mum?’ Pearl asked.

‘It’s good you’re here, Pearly,’ replied Lily, suddenly needing all her attention to manoeuvre the vehicle. ‘It’s good you’re here.’

Koolandili had become more lovely. Mint and violets grew in patches between the eucalypts, banksia and the peppercorn tree. Irises grew in the shade and lemon geraniums and agapanthus reached to the sunlight. Hepsibah as clever as ever and it only took her a moment to recognise Pearl.

Pearl had fed langours in the jungles of Bengal; she had climbed the minaret of the biggest mosque in India; she had prayed in the prettiest temples in the whole of the subcontinent and she had dined with the gurus of kings. But her mother’s Australian kitchen was the same as when she’d left it. Anzacs in the bicky tin, koala tea-towels folded, Bunyips in the paper-rack.

Winifred Green lay hunched and shrunken in her pillow wrapped in a shawl of crocheted squares. On either side of her bed were vases of big yellow daisies.

Lily said, ‘You need to catch up,’ and went out.

Winifred Green opened her eyes and saw a woman in white. Then, it was her eldest daughter. Pearl wondered how well she could see her face. Pearl clung to her mother’s brown hand and held it against her cheek.

‘Pearly. You made it.’
‘Of course, Mum. I got Aunt Grace’s telegram. Miracle it got it through.’

They held hands silently until Winifred floated off in opiated serenity. Pearl counted her rosary and gazed through the window. The view across acres of eucalypts reached all the way to the distant eucalypt covered hills. A blue haze of eucalyptus-vapour hung above them in the heat.

Grace arrived and sat down to do the crossword with her sister as they had always done even though now Grace was actually doing it on her own. She refreshed the flowers and did a lot of knitting. Lily came home after work, timid, brittle, with more flowers. Pearl sang Indian songs about Kishori-Krishna and Lily sang them too.

The day Winifred Green passed away, Pollywaffle gave birth to her calf. When Pearl arrived at the shed Lily was already there. Pollywaffle’s flanks were heaving. Two tiny pointed hooves like fruits were poking out. When Pollywaffle tensed a nose appeared, then a mouth with a lolling tongue, a pair of closed eyes, and a perfect little face with folded ears all neat inside a taut, translucent membrane. Lily took hold of the creature’s forelegs and pulled. Pollywaffle moaned. Ribs, belly, and hind legs fell free but the calf fell to the ground like a black, dead seal.

It had become a natural reflex for Pearl to call out to Kishori. She did it now, neither with the wish of bringing the calf to life nor to protect her own heart from the pain of its dying, but with the hope of shielding her younger sister from more sadness.

Pollywaffle turned her heavy head to nuzzle her still calf’s ears.

And then, at last, the calf lifted its head and let out a hearty bleat. Lily and Pearl laughed with relief. Upon its head Pearl saw a cow-lick: a white double blaze running the length of its forehead and a neat white heart at the base.

This calf was one of Krishna’s.

Lily and Pearl crossed the hot sand to the shell-speckled shore of the beach. They waded in and floated on the crystal sea, gulping lungfuls of fresh air and staring up at the endless blue. They kicked cascades of diamonds towards one another and raced underwater. They walked along the shore, mostly silent.

Pearl told her sister, ‘The sound of the waves breaking upon the shore are the echoes of Kishori’s heartbeat, eternally longing eternally for Krishna.’
When Pearl was leaving Swapnavan, Swamini had told her that she was to carry everything she’d learned locked carefully in a casket hidden in her heart. She was to keep this casket safely and only open it once she was in her own room. She was not to leave the casket open for the contents would dissipate like camphor and become lost. She settled into a half-lotus and opened her holdall. Lily knocked and peeped in. Pearl beckoned, and in the stillness of the morning the two sat together in long white nightgowns and Lily watched Pearl unpack, rapt. Fragrances of incense and camphor and sandalwood flowed into the room. Pearl unrolled a chequered cloth and there was the golden milkmaid. Lily turned her around in her hands. Her head was slightly inclined, her elbows bending as she danced, one of her legs bent in step. Her little pointing feet had toes and ankle rings.

Pearl said, ‘This is Kishori, Krishna’s girlfriend. She should have a Krishna. One day I’ll find him.’

Lily picked up one of Pearl’s books and held it to her face: the printer’s ink smelled divine. Pearl took out her tulsi beads and nestled into the forget-me-nots of the old settee. A magpie warbled in the distance. Morning light dappled lace shadows on the walls. The invisible frequency of the mantras permeated Pearl’s thoughts and the vibrations of the world, making everything alright, allaying confusions, unravelling tangles. It was earlier in India. Surabhi would be awake in the darkness chanting on her beads, facing east, waiting for dawn.

The day of the family gathering arrived. It was also to be a good-bye. Pearl would be going back to her new home, her holy town, the world she felt she belonged in. Seventeen people would be there: Grace, Lily and Nick, Jules, Linda and little Thomas, cousin Janet with her girls, cousin Pol with her friend Paula, cousin Roger from the other branch, long-time neighbour Rachel and Nobby and Jenny and George’s old mate Bry. Pearl had said that everyone should give their blessings for the smooth journey of the departed soul. It was to be a celebration of love.

Pearl woke at three, did her meditation, showered and put on her forehead marking and went to the kitchen that had been her mother’s. She and Lily had spent the previous day buying vegetables and searching for spices. They had scrubbed vegies, cleaned the cooker, put beans in to soak, dipped tea-rose petals in syrup, sliced pumpkin, shelled peas, chopped cabbage, pared celery, broke broccoli into pieces, sliced string beans, and got all the pots and pans and everything else ready for the next day. Lily opened the windows and wiped

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Pearl folded her palms and prayed, ‘O Swamini! Kishori-ji!’

The sisters tied on their pinifores and covered their heads, looked around and opened the fridge door. They would have to move as if they each had four arms.

*There were only a few days to go before Pearl would see the Air India Maharaja at Palam Airport saying, ‘Welcome to India.’*

She put milk, butter, flour, fruit, veg, olive oil, lentils and grains on the counter top.

*From Palam airport, she’d take an Ambassador with a Krishna and a cow swinging from the rear-view mirror.*

She took a basket and filled it with herbs from the garden.

*There’d be that four-hour drive along the Grand Trunk Road with a stop at Hari Om’s roadside cafe for breakfast.*

She put a pound of butter on to simmer and clarify into ghee.

*The car would turn onto that dusty track into Swapnavan — it was like a tunnel through the trees.*

She boiled a gallon of milk, curdled it with lemon juice, and, when she’d strained the hard-soft white cheese with cheese-cloth Lily helped her press it beneath a breadboard and a bucket of water.

*She’d have to direct the taxi-driver to the ashram along the outer road past the temple on the crag towards the river.*

They peeled potatoes.

*One-born would be waiting at the gate.*

They diced the potatoes.

*Before she got out of the car, she’d open the door and stretch down to touch the scintillating Swapnavan sand. She’d scoop up some in her fingertips and smear it across her forehead and through her cropped hair.*

Pearl unwrapped the pressed cheese. It was a perfect consistency.

*Mansingh would grin as he opened the gate. Kubja might be at the pump. She’d stare.*

Lily plunged tomatoes into boiling water and slipped off their peels; Pearl cooked the flesh with spices and sugar into chutney that’d be too, too hot to resist and too sweet to bear.

*Surabhi might be there or she might be out.*

Lily boiled haricot beans and puréed them with finely grated carrot and cheese and baked them into a pâté topped with paprika.

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All around would be the sound of parrots and peacocks, monkeys, cows and temple bells. Sadhus would be singing Kishori-Krishna’s names as they passed by in the street.

She made a quick and simple cream of celery soup.

Her porch would smell of must and wood. Pigeons would be fluttering in the eaves.

They sizzled spices in the ghee and sautéed potatoes.

She’d wriggle her key in its padlock until it grated and clicked. She’d slide back the bolt and push the door. Gheckos would scurry across the wall.

They steamed pumpkin chunks.

Her wooden bed, her metal trunk, and her low table would be covered with a thick layer of dust, drifted through the cracks of the wooden shutters. It would sparkle as she blew it away.

They layered broccoli with white cheese and béchamel sauce, topped the dish with cheese and breadcrumbs and slid it into the oven.

Her mridanga would be as she’d left it, hanging on its wood peg in the wall, swaddled in its quilt.

Pearl filled a meaty pie with sage-flavoured lentils in browning.

She’d put her holdall down.

She shallow-fried a dozen small pasties stuffed with cauliflorets and peas.

Her belongings would be fresh with camphor and neem leaves inside her trunk.

They kneaded, rolled, and baked puffed pastry-breads and pressed cheesecake base into its case.

She’d open her shutters to a green quietness that would be messed by the call of fruit-thieving birds in the florists’ rose gardens.

Pearl curdled a little milk with lemon juice to replace eggs in Grace’s cheesecake recipe.

She’d place her golden milkmaid on her shelf.

They tossed salads and topped one with nasturtiums from the garden.

She’d go to her favourite temple...

Pearl simmered white rice with peas and fried ghee rice with spice.

...and offer macadamias and dried apricots from Australia.

She squeezed lemons for lemonade and floated mint in it.

She walked to Yamuna.

She topped the cheesecake with a layer of cornflour-thickened plum syrup and arranged sugar coated tea-rose petals in the centre.

Lily was there with her.

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As each preparation was finished, Pearl and Lily carried it to the dining room. By afternoon every available surface was covered.

The phone rang. They were on their way.

Pearl rummaged through heirlooms and detritus — tea-sets, fish-knives, sherry glasses, gravy boats, egg-cups, a cruet set, chopsticks, cocktail parasols, christening cake decorations — and found a silver and glass leaf-shaped sweet dish. She placed upon it a morsel of every preparation that they had cooked. She floated a tulsi leaf upon the white rice and then closed her eyes. She was making an offering in meditation to Kishori and Krishna.

Swamini was a milkmaid in Swapnavan. She was wearing a lichen-coloured skirt embroidered with weldwort flowers and tiny mirrors that flashed in the moonlight. She beckoned Pearl to follow and they set off through the woods to Kishori-Krishna’s hidden pergola among the blue hydrangea grove near the bank of the river. A dozen other maidservants were there playing music and laughing. Pearl knew them all well and they greeted one another in whispers. Swamini took the leaf platter from Pearl and examined it with a glance. She gave Pearl a smile and a nod and carried the platter towards the curtain of living vines covering the entrance to the flower-bower. A flock of blue wrens came and, taking leaves and flowers in their beaks, lifted the curtain aside.

When everyone arrived they breathed the subtle buttery fragrance saying, ‘Mmm! That smells goooood!’

There was the spread of dishes of folded pastries, puffed breads, cheesy savouries, steaming rice and colourful salads and a baked cheesecake with sparkling rose-petals on top.

Grace said, ‘You must have been cooking all night!’

Pearl said they had help from the faeries.

‘Is this spicy?’

‘Is this coconut?’

‘Are we supposed to eat with our fingers?’

It wasn’t rich or heavy. It was chewy, juicy, and satisfying. An indefinable, comforting, inebriating quality pervaded the whole meal. Grace sliced the cake and passed it around as if it was solidified love, licking her fingers.

Lily rolled her eyes and held her belly, ‘Pearly. If this is how you people eat in Swapnavan, I. Am. Coming. There. With. You.’

It was the first time since Pearl had been back, that Lily had really seen her smile.

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The other women had been asking Surabhi, *Would the little Australian return?* Mousey asked, *She has gone to marry?* Surabhi told them that Kishori knew the answers. She thought about the articles she had wanted Pearl to help translate. And there was still one more chapter of the book.

Surabhi tied a scarf around her head and draped the end of her sari around it. She wrapped on a shawl patterned in the muted palette of dried grass. She slid on her soft silent sandals and picked up her book bag.

And she strode, calm and dignified, into the ebullient throng.
Chapter XVI
The End of the Night

It was three-thirty-six before dawn in the timeless land of Swapnavan. The cooling moon was beaming her beams through the leaves of the secret arbour, dappling on the intertwined forms of the lover-gods on their lotus-petal mattress, layered and deep.

As they slept, Kishori and Krishna met in one-another’s dreams at a place where no restraint could be imposed upon their enjoyment. They soared the arcs of the cosmic rainbows and danced through the limits of time. They were invisible and yet they could be seen, moving across the skies.

Kishori nestled her head upon Krishna’s shoulder beneath his chin and onto his chest. Lighter than a rose petal, she laid the flat of one hand upon Krishna’s solar plexus. Her other hand curled like a vine at his side. Krishna’s one arm wrapped protectively around Kishori’s shoulders. His other hand enfolded hers. He held her so closely that their two beating hearts all but merged, but he held her as gently as if he was embracing a butterfly with fragile folded wings.

There was a whisper and a rustle outside the flower-bower. Perhaps it was some tiny night creature. Perhaps it was just the wind. Krishna awoke. His eyes wandered over Kishori’s limitless beauty, and, feeling her breath rise and fall in time with his own, he was moved to caress her like the wind in the treetops or the waves on the shore.

Kishori was drawn from her sleep. She wanted to go back there! Crossly, she pushed Krishna and, grasping a handful of petals from the lotus-bed, threw it at him. Krishna laughed and seizing more petals threw them at Kishori.

The battle had begun.

The lover-gods pelted one another and they were in a snow-globe of petals. Kishori pulled down a string of a flower-curtain and bound Krishna with it. Krishna laughed and broke free. He grasped Kishori’s wrist so Kishori was forced to use her other weapons. She wrested herself from Krishna’s grip and rose like a lioness. Back and forth the battle raged. At first Kishori seemed to be winning, and then Krishna and then Kishori again. But the weight of Krishna’s muscles and his thundercloud physique were no match for the effortless dancer’s agility of Kishori.

In love-battle with Kishori, Krishna’s supremacy always waned.

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The petals settled. Kishori and Krishna fell asleep once more in one-another's arms and as their breathing merged and calmed, the moon closed her wide bright eyes.

It was the end of the night.

Noisy birdsong ended the night-peace. Kishori turned, scattering flowers to the grassy ground. A strand of hair stuck wet to her cheek. She tried to wipe it off and realised it was not hers. It was Krishna's. Her gold nose-ring was tangled in Krishna's locks. She squeaked in pain. Chains of bruised flowers bound the pair like feeble dolls.

'Wake up!' the serving girls whispered, peeping through the leaves. They drew back the jasmine curtains they had made the day before.

Three girls entered singing a waking-lullaby with a long-neck lute.

A younger girl came carrying a pitcher of jasmine-sweetened water.

Another brought warm flannels.

An older girl brought breath-fresheners—stimulant leaves folded into cones with sugar, fragrant spices, coo-nut, areca-nut and candied rose.

Now, more of Kishori's maidens had come inside the bower. They moved gently — mopping spilt honey wine, wiping smeared cosmetics, searching for items of Kishori's clothing and repairing them.

Pearls lay scattered over the floor. One had rolled under the patchouli-leaf matting.

'Gather them quickly!' the older girl whispered, 'We cannot leave even one behind. Give them to Ramani to thread.'

Kishori's two closest friends were helping her up. The youngest girls gazed at them with awe for among all of Kishori's older friends, only her most cherished truly understood the secrets of her love.

In a tree outside the bower, a hoary she-monkey shrieked an alarm, 'It's morning! Morning! Late! Late! Late! Leave your lover! Your elders will soon be on the warpath!'

Daybreak glimmered. Kishori had to get home.

Kishori and Krishna hurried from the grove and stood holding hands, blinking and shivering in the predawn dampness, soft shoulders sensitive to the air. Fragrances of blooming bakul, gandaraj, and mallika saturated the four directions.

The twinned deities were anxious for one another's company. They walked together along the woodland path until they reached that accursed fork that would force them apart. Ever so slowly, their bodies separated until only their fingertips were touching, indigo and gold. At last, reluctant and full of worry, they walked away from one another, looking back, weeping bitterly.

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Kishori watched Krishna go silently, a shadow into the night, a blue cloth trailing behind him.

The old and young girls were all beside themselves to see the lovers part, for bringing Kishori and Krishna together was the very purpose of their existence. They held Kishori's arms and led her unwillingly away. Kishori stumbled, folding with grief. Over tree-roots in the path, across the stepping stones in the black river, into the sleeping village and across the courtyard of her own gaily painted house they guided her, and helped her steal inside her chamber. They steered her to her little bed and bade her rest while she had the chance. She was inconsolable.

To leave her beloved was to give up her life breath.

Kishori's friends tried to soothe her with comforting words: it would not be long before she would be united with her darling once again. It would not be long until tomorrow.

For in the timeless land of Swapnavan, the story of love moved in cycles like the planets and the stars. It flowed and ebbed like the waves on the ocean's shore. Every day was different and every perfect moment was eternal. And although the very stories of Kishori-Krishna's love cried, their laughter was infectious too and the sweetness and joy which was the meaning of their being was not their own, but their bearers'.

Tiny furry night creatures returned to their burrows to their babies and to sleep. The sky began to blush. As the sun's cheery rays reached into the forest, the forest changed her dress. Silently, like snakes of leaves, tendrils slid across the entrance to the flower-bower and matted.

A living green curtains had closed.

No forest wanderer would find this place.

No-one would ever know it was there.

Kishori and Krishna's flower-bower was as hidden as if it never been there at all, and yet, now, the forest was greener than it had been, the trees were more alive, the flowers were more open, the birdsong was louder.

There was a feeling in the forest that all manner of living creature felt and it gave them all peace. They knew would be well.

Thus ends one day of the sentient story of Kishori and Krishna.

May it bring peace and joy to all who remember it.

Repeating the lore of Swapnavan as spoken by her predecessors, this maidservant of Saraswati and Swamini aspires to realise it.