

Prologue: April 1971

The elderly Indian guru considered our question with what seemed to be equal parts gravity and amusement. “You do not speak the language,” he said. “Wherever you go, they will simply cheat you and steal your cameras.” His unique candor, far from what I’d expected or wanted, set the stage for a skeptical heart to stumble upon unexpected love.

My friend John and I were standing in the spotless master bedroom of an apartment on the seventh floor of the Akash Ganga Building, one of Bombay’s many high-rises. Outside, the sun blazed on morning traffic plying and honking along city thoroughfares while seagulls cruised overhead, calling. Inside, the walls, ceiling, and curtains were a creamy white; white sheets covered wall-to-wall cotton floor mats. The room’s two large windows, one overlooking the Arabian Sea to the west, the other facing a long stretch of beachfront high-rises to the south, were open, and a sea breeze billowed their gossamer curtains. The room’s quiet ambience, infused with the airy freshness and exaltation of the ocean, was full of expectancy and possibilities.

The only furniture was a rectangular coffee table. The guru, Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, sat behind it, cross-legged, on a mattress covered with a white cotton sheet. He relaxed against two large white bolsters stacked on top of each other next to the wall. On either side of him were similar bolsters, together making a u-shaped seat. Due to the heat, besides his wraparound dhoti, Prabhupada wore only a saffron cloth knotted over his right shoulder and falling under his left arm, leaving his left shoulder and part of his chest bare—a traditional style for a renunciant. I was wearing my customary thin blouse and slacks.

John and I were photography students at Rochester Institute of Technology in Rochester, New York—he a graduate, I an undergraduate. We'd set our hearts on creating a *National Geographic*-style photographic essay of a quaint Indian village, showing how villagers live without the complexity and stress typical of Western life. We envisioned lithe and healthy farmers guiding oxen that strained to pull crude wooden plows through fertile fields, lovely women weaving colorful cotton cloth on looms, organic stone-ground flour, pure well water, live dramatic performances under starlit skies and in general, an aesthetic, happy, technology-free life.

The difficulty was that we were new to India—John had been here five months and I five weeks—and we didn't know which of the thousands of Indian villages would be most suited for our purpose. So we'd come to ask someone who'd lived and traveled extensively in India, the resident of this master bedroom, Prabhupada.

As we placed our query before him, Prabhupada (pronounced Prabhoo'-paad) looked at us squarely and listened attentively. The time, the place, the circumstances under which the three of us were face to face in that room's buoyant light—the immediate prosperous career prospects that hung suspended on the words that would pass from him to us—the sense that our immediate and long-term future could be determined by the knowledgeable, cheerful gentleman who sat comfortably before us—whirled my thoughts.

For some moments Prabhupada considered our question—Which is India's most photogenic village?—and then replied with such a pin of realism that it instantly popped my bubble of idealism. Only a couple of weeks before on one of the jammed Indian third-class trains, John had been pickpocketed. What was I doing in this overpopulated, overheated, desperately poor, mismanaged, theft-riddled, very foreign country, anyway? Angst churned in me as Prabhupada continued.

“Best that you go to Vrindavan and do your story there.”



Vrindavan—an unusual sounding name I'd never heard before. Little did I envision this modest, historic town as a Waterloo for all my youthful schemes, a town that would change my life—create its whole purpose afresh, its hopes and fears, its struggles, its interests, and its sacrifices all turned forever to a new direction—this unseen possibility would later become as clear as the dazzling sun beyond those large windows.

CHAPTER ONE

Boots and a Kodak Brownie

Great Neck—A two-mile-wide, four-mile-long peninsula that juts north into the placid Long Island Sound, a backdrop for F. Scott Fitzgerald’s famed *The Great Gatsby*, the residence of magnate giants like Walter P. Chrysler, renowned entertainers like the Marx Brothers, and well-to-do Jewish families escaping New York City congestion—was home for my parents, brother and me.

We lived in ‘The Windsor,’ an expansive, tall, drab, rent-controlled brick apartment building that had the architectural flair of a cement block. When I was small, my Dad’s fur business was flourishing: our Pontiac was new, Mom had new mink and sable coats and valuable jewelry, and Beatrice was our full-time nanny. I used to watch as Mom prepared for the posh shows and dinners she and Dad went to. She’d sit before her three-sided mirror and apply a little makeup, especially her fire-engine red lipstick, with a cultured woman’s innate sense of how to make men’s eyes turn in respect rather than covetousness. Dad was proud of her.

My parents could have bought an upscale Great Neck house with its own yard and a German shepherd, but Mom (sensing coming troubles?) wanted us to stay put. Our apartment, she said, was centrally located, easy to heat and clean, saved money and, best of all for me, was directly across the street from Grace Avenue Park.

To a passerby, Grace Avenue Park was hardly noteworthy. A fenced-in, open, grassy square taking up half a suburban block, it boasted a slight hill leading up to its east fence, two separate playgrounds—on the north side for toddlers and the west side for youth—some wood-planked park benches scattered here and there, a paved walkway running through it diagonally, and toward its center, a shallow cement kiddie pool small enough to be confused for an oversized birdbath.

But *my* beloved Grace Avenue Park—the most unutterably fine and enchantingly graced place the world had ever known—boasted acres of open meadows, vales and hills for romping; magnificent sand, slides, swings, and seesaws to share and fight over with friends; colossal trees to climb; bugs, birds, and bushes to investigate; ever so many adults to wonder at; and a stern park custodian to tease. This glorious park encompassed my delightfully complete universe.

The park pool was my swamp and I was its alligator, quickly dashing at and encircling unsuspecting victims, stopping at nothing and for no one until a piercing whistle obliged all waders and an alligator to stand aside for five horribly long, dripping, goose-bumpy minutes while an attendant added chlorine to the water. Then we dashed in again, but now I was a deep sea explorer with full scuba regalia, searching for treasures at unfathomable depths.

In the fall, the fat-limbed oaks that arched over the playground were drenched in crimson-gold leaves that gusts sent spinning to the ground, falling in free-flowing flocks like exhausted ballerinas. The air had a tang; the cold of the stainless steel slide (fourteen steps up—it was like mountain climbing!) pierced my pants, and the coolness of the sand under the swings pressed through my sneakers. As I pumped the swing upward, my eyes smarting from bracing gusts, a crimson canopy danced around me.



At the end of one typically long park-filled day, Mom kissed me good-night and was about to leave my room, when I asked, “What will happen to me after I die?” I’d never asked such a question before, but after seeing a stirring, black-and-white photograph of an immense, rolling graveyard vanishing into the somber Manhattan skyline, it popped out.

Mom was surprised. Then a look that said, “Why don’t you ask me the color of vanilla ice cream?” swept her angular face.

“Nothing happens. You’re buried or cremated. That’s it,” she said.

That was not an adequate answer.

“There has to be more to it than that,” I said, upset with Mom for being un-understandable, and from under the covers kicked a box of tissues that was at the foot of the bed, sending it sailing to Mom’s feet. Mom glanced at the box, gave her insolent ten-year-old a “What’s your problem?” look, turned out the light and left the room, closing the door behind her and leaving her daughter securely tucked into wrinkle-free, floral-patterned polyester sheets along with her unanswered, pivotal question. At that moment life seemed flimsy and imperiled by emptiness. But by morning my question no longer seemed relevant, and over the ensuing years, death’s aftermath seemed more and more ungraspable, like the vanishing point of railway tracks.



As I was growing up, each year before the first day of school Mom and I would drive to personable, inviting downtown Great Neck. She’d park our olive green Pontiac in front of Abe’s Bakery; I’d get out and inhale the luscious smells of freshly baked bread as Mom came around from the driver’s side and joined me, enclosing my hand firmly yet kindly in hers. We’d cross the two-lane Middleneck Road, squeeze between parked cars on the opposite side, walk past the pungent smells of Homer’s Deli, past fashionable Betsy’s Boutique, popular Liz’s Hair Salon, dependable Irving’s Hardware and on to Brown’s Shoes. Shelves of children’s and youths’ footwear lined glass display windows at the store entrance. Inside, Stuart Brown, an affable man with anxious eyes, greeted us by name. It always seemed he’d been waiting for us. Mr. Brown knew our footwear preferences—practical, comfortable, hardy, earth-colored. His white shirt gleamed under the lights, and in moments he’d measured my small feet—length and width—pressing them firmly against his specialized foot-measuring device and remarking on their growth. Mr. Brown would disappear into the back and then emerge with an assortment of boxes of shoes for me to try. Opening a likely box, he’d remove the new shoe from its tissue wrapping and in one smooth motion whip out a shiny steel shoehorn from his back pocket, place it in the heel of the shoe and ease my foot effortlessly into it, casually returning the shoehorn to his back pocket as, with his other hand, he assuredly squeezed the sides of the shoe, checking its width against my foot, and then pressing the tip to see where my toes came. Once the second shoe was on, I’d caper around his small store feeling special, unable to take my eyes off

those spanking, ever-so-fine shoes. Their feel, their look, their sheer smell of newness made me euphoric. My mother, hardly speaking, would watch this procedure closely. When she was satisfied with the choice, she'd pay, exchange pleasantries with Mr. Brown, and we were on the street again, my year-old, outgrown battered shoes in a bag swinging from my wrist, destined for the Thrift Store where Mom volunteered every Thursday, the profits going to the local hospital. Mom strode along, head held high, not looking down at me but exchanging courtesies with acquaintances as we went. If she stopped to chat, I could wait patiently, gazing with contented joy at my new acquisitions, basking in their secure embrace, in the palpable satisfaction of having them, in being sheltered by my mother's care. I was ready to play hopscotch on the clouds.

Before my first day of high school, Mom and I went to Brown's Shoe Store as usual, where I got ankle-high, soft leather hiking boots with rounded toes, sturdy soles, thick stitching, and wide brown laces. Rugged and practical, they were meant for tramping out miles, for romping and roving, for protecting and supporting young, adventurous feet.

In school, under long fluorescent tubes in the morose, tunnel-like hallways lined with gray metal lockers that were always being banged shut or open, I noticed other girls wearing fairylike summer flip-flops with dainty golden straps and thin soles. Some had flimsy ballerina-type silver booties, stylish smoky wisps that hardly existed. The girls' condemnation of me started with my clumsy boots and went up—my frowzy clothes, my plain hair, my lack of makeup, my expressions, my interests. Clearly, I wasn't one of them. Swift scornful glances at me were promptly followed by superior young heads with Marilyn Monroe hairdos brusquely tossing away as if to say no one should see such a dreadful sight. I was in a blizzard of contempt, outclassed and outcast.

From day one I stopped liking my new shoes. I began scrutinizing my clothes and pondering their unsuitableness. Within a short time I'd realized that—shoes, clothes, and hair aside—the very words I spoke weren't right (how was it that everyone but me said smart things?). A dark cloud of poisonous gas gathered over my high school epoch. On the family front, Dad's business was starting to founder. To help pay the bills Mom stopped volunteering at the Thrift Store and became a secretary in a dental office. My brother Tony, independent and rebellious, would get into arguments

with Dad about his late nights out with his friends, sometimes resulting in Dad chasing him around the dining room table, Tony laughing.

If, from who I am now, I could have spoken to myself—a floundering and scorned girl—I'd have said, "You're miserable now, but don't worry."

Brewing with a struggling need to protect myself, in school I adopted a stoic shell as thick and impervious as I could fake it. Bearing my classmates semi-secret snide remarks, sometimes said just loud enough to hurt, with a stony silence, I became passive, letting the situation determine events by adapting and subordinating myself to others and saying what I thought they wanted to hear—most often lies that corroded my self-respect. The situation was sometimes unbearable but I knew it couldn't be changed. Any program of self-betterment was doomed—I was not about to become stylish and socially adept. Was it worth trying if I wouldn't succeed? And when I tried and failed, then what would become of whatever remnants remained of my self-esteem?

Unforgiving doors of conformity had slammed shut; the drawbridge was up. I was a banished, lone figure beyond the moat, looking up at impervious stone walls that blocked the sky, listening as gleeful party sounds drifted out. Later, I understood the social struggle that dominated my classmates' lives. A preoccupation with being accepted caused a meanness that flowed not only to me but between them as well. They'd abandon friendships unhelpful to their social progress, fawn before those higher in the scale, and have secret motives in almost every action. Competitiveness, selfishness, and class-consciousness made them as sad and confused as I was.

Fortunately, bitterness and resentment weren't part of my family heritage. My proper British mother harbored occasional disdain for the uncultured ways of Americans, and my work-forever-but-try-to-be-cheerful father was disappointed in his business; but neither was rancorous.

I accustomed myself to sitting in the back of the classroom and observing. The school building had only recently been carved out of acres of forest, and through large classroom windows I'd often see, beneath immense drifting clouds, a lone rabbit munching the short grass on the slope leading from the forest edge to the building. The rabbit was speckled brown, with a white belly and pricked ears and long, black, twitching whiskers. "This building has displaced you and me both," I thought. "You're vulnerable to predators, me to being left out." Yet the rabbit had advantages over me: it

had ready-made and unconditionally acceptable footwear and clothes, and surely, whatever sounds it made were all right with its fellows. Surely it didn't live with endlessly critical peers.

As the rabbit could retreat to a tangle of wild forest, so I also needed a sanctuary. Gradually, one emerged: photography. Aunt Ethel had given me a Kodak Brownie box camera when I was seven, and I began using it regularly. I became an avid recorder of tree roots, ducks, soccer games, buildings, boats, bicycle riders, my parents, the Great Neck population—developing and printing photographs in my bedroom-cum-darkroom. My fingers stank of photographic chemicals.

The saga of the following year was interrupted by John F. Kennedy's assassination. A dumbfounded thirteen year-old, I sat on my parent's bed staring at our black-and-white television: Lyndon Johnson sworn in as president; the accused, Lee Harvey Oswald, shot dead as I watched—so beyond belief it was surreal; slender Jacqueline in her black dress, her black veil hardly hiding her face, puffy with shock and grief; the solemn, leaden



procession through Washington, D.C., with Charles de Gaulle towering over the ninety other world leaders who accompanied the flag-draped coffin. America was traumatized. And so was I.

I was picketing for equal rights (“*We shall overcome someday ...*”) and protesting the Vietnam War (“*Give peace a chance ...*”). Our family dinners were quiet now; the talker, Tony, had gone to Princeton. Even our Christmas get-togethers had a pall over them: Uncle Steven had divorced Aunt Ruth. Half the family had sided with her, the other half with him, and both sides stopped speaking to each other.

The future seemed horribly bleak. And dangerous.



In later years I'd sometimes skip a day of school to catch the Long Island Railroad's 7:27 with Dad. I'd be the youngest person on the packed train, surrounded by shoulder-to-shoulder suited businesspeople, their heads swaying with the train's motion, absorbed in their precisely folded newspapers, hardly looking up during the twenty-four-minute ride past suburbs and dusty trees.

What did these people live for, I wondered. Around Great Neck on the weekends, I'd see them watching televised football, mowing their lawns, sipping drinks under their awnings, walking their poodles, driving with their families. They were coping and doing the needful, lost in a rational world. Did they ever consider shutting off the demands of normalcy to access their incomprehensible, momentous aliveness? What captured their hearts and made them insanely happy to exist? Would a deadening abyss of comfort and security also engulf me? Somehow, the cultural values and norms I'd grown up immersed in were not serving me well.

Before 8 o'clock, after much thumping and rocking and clacking, Dad and I, along with thousands of other passengers, would be streaming out of Manhattan's Penn Station like sawdust spewing from a spinning blade. In a gray stone building three blocks away, Dad unlocked his tired two-room office—Papert & Co. Soon, Sandra, Dad's indispensable secretary, would sit at her desk in the large outer room; a little later, Murray and Sydney, Dad's two problematic salesmen, would be at desks near hers. Dad's private adjoining office overlooked grimy 32nd Street. I'd sit and wait with the worn tedium those rooms seemed built of, until gigantic Willoughby's camera store, half a block away, opened. Then I'd shop for a new camera or camera accessories with my saved-up babysitting money.