

My mother ran through the Mumbai airport, checking each airline.

“Do you have any flights to Madurai?” Madurai was the nearest airport to Kodaikanal, where the guru, Sathya Sai Baba, resided only one hundred twenty kilometers away. There were no flights to Madurai.

Possessed with a mad sense of urgency, my mother’s next plan was to find a taxi. I was seven years old. She dragged me along as she approached taxi after taxi outside the airport and peered into each car to assess the driver. She wanted to confirm he was someone she could trust, someone who would not rape or rob us. She found a taxi *wallah*, a kind old man dressed in a tattered *lungi*. Inside, he warned us of bandits who kidnapped women during the night and stole from tourists. A long, clean machete sat next to him as he drove.

I curled my body onto the backseat, but I didn’t fall asleep during that entire twenty-four hour car ride. Instead, I watched the scenery of India pass us by as we drove north to south. My skin melted into the tattered vinyl, my sweat mixing with the heavy air. Every hour, I would carefully raise my face to the window and look at all the lorries that drove past us. I wondered if they were filled with men who might mutilate us with their long knives. I somehow knew that rape meant a violation of a woman’s skin. I imagined men taking my mother somewhere into the jungle and irrevocably harming her. I shook with terror.

I watched people on auto-rickshaws, men on scooters, the way all the cars and trucks kicked up dirt and formed a never-ending cloud of dust. It was so different from Pasadena, California, where we lived. The roads there were wide and evenly paved, and the white and yellow lines clearly demarcated where cars belonged, the sleek sedans and beat-up Camaros. In California, there were no lorries painted blue, red, and yellow, no automobiles recklessly weaving around one another, no trails of smoke and dust that illustrated which direction each car

was headed, as though writing the story of their vehicular lives. Later, I would realize that being in a taxi rather than a rental car made us safe; we blended into the local language of vehicles.

We had been going to see Sathya Sai Baba every year, but this particular trip was frenetic. While we were in Mumbai, an astrologist had told my mother it was an auspicious time, and we needed to get to Kodaikanal to see Sai Baba immediately. My mother believed that *this* was the time he was going to bless us—take us into his big home, answer her questions, yield a brilliant diamond, and grant her wishes. This was what fueled our trip down the subcontinent of India.

Our life of travel began after my father died. My mother used the inheritance he had left us to wander the world. I was her constant companion. We visited India to see my *dida* (my mother's mother) each year and hopped around Asia; my mother loved the constant movement of planes and trains, auto rickshaws and taxis. We spent long, tiring plane rides on Singapore Airlines. She always requested the row with no seats in front, just a plastic wall and TV screen. We slept on the floor nuzzled up together, wrapped in airline blankets, tiny pillows framing our heads—me, the baby spoon who fit perfectly into the crevices of her body as she held me tightly. I desperately desired these moments when her attention was fixed only on me. In-between spaces of movement and transit were times for intimacy, her wanderlust satisfied by the thrust of traveling to a temporary destination, a pause in her discontent.

When I was five years old, my mother became obsessed with Sathya Sai Baba, a philanthropist who claimed to be the reincarnation of Sai Baba of Shirdi. The original Sai Baba was a saint who lured in followers of both the Hindu and Muslim faiths by combining the teachings of both religions—a sort of peacekeeper in a nation that would become increasingly

contemptuous and violent toward its Muslim minorities. Sai Baba lived without worldly possessions, a true *fakir*.

Sathya Sai Baba did not live like his namesake. He always wore a full-sleeved, orange *kurta* that shimmered with cleanliness. His massive coil of hair pointed into the air like lines of electricity drawn by a cartoonist. His presence was loud and boastful. So was his lifestyle, with lavish homes in both Puttaparthi and the hillside tourist destination of Kodaikanal. A chauffeur drove him around in a Mercedes. His houses and cars were gifts from his many wealthy, white admirers in Western Europe and the United States.

Each visit was the same. He separated his followers by gender, with women and children huddled together away from the grown men. My mother and I walked into the enclosure that surrounded the guru's mansion and sat down. The hard earth beneath us bestowed a sense of stability that dissipated when Sai Baba arrived. Our bodies tensed with anticipation. I desperately wanted to see his bare feet approach us, to feel the stroke of his hand in my hair and receive his good tidings. My mother raised her hands in prayer. I copied her movements, lifting my hands in worship. We waited for his acknowledgement.

He walked around and waved like a beauty queen, his pristine *kurta* trailing through the dust and dirt. My mother always held a note in her hand, hoping he would take it. On each bit of paper, she asked a question or made a request:

Please keep us financially stable.

Please let Rani get a good education and find a husband.

When will I die?

Sai Baba randomly chose devotees to bring into his mammoth house, where he was said to perform small miracles. He produced fancy goods, like diamonds, emeralds, rubies, and

vibuthi—a holy ash that wondrously sprung from his palms. I never understood how he conjured these riches. I suppose he might have been performing a sleight-of-hand.

When my mother found a taxi *wallah* to drive us down the subcontinent of India on that frenzied trip, we eventually arrived at our hotel and met a white American couple. They were there to see Sai Baba as well. They had a baby—a little girl. She couldn't have been more than five months old. The wife wore a large emerald ring encrusted with tiny diamonds wrapped around her index finger. My mother looked at the ring, and the woman looked at her. The woman's blonde tresses stood in sharp contrast to my mother's black hair. The woman's blue eyes were piercing, my mother's dark brown eyes combusting with desire. The woman knew that the look on my mother's face was a question.

“Oh, this? Yes, Sai Baba made this for me.”

The woman explained how Sai Baba had brought them into his home and performed his small miracles, objects he miraculously produced: an emerald ring and a tiny figurine of some god. She pulled the statue from her purse, and we marveled at it. I held the idol in my palm and imagined it was a medallion worn by a superhero, that by holding it I would be granted superpowers. The woman told us how her family was chosen, how they had bought Sai Baba a car in return for his blessings. There was a hint of superiority in her voice when she narrated this story, glancing at my mother with what I can only describe now as pity.

Sai Baba was well-known for his philanthropy. He accepted money from his wealthy devotees and built hospitals and schools for the poor. An educated, elite class of doctors and teachers donated their services to him in exchange for his blessings. There were also rumors of sexual misconduct, of his erotic interest in teenage boys. But people seemed to ignore these rumors in order to maintain their belief that he was a god. I later learned that we did not have the

money to give to his charities; whatever we had was rationed for travel, and my mother carefully budgeted her funds for each trip. Perhaps she realized that eventually the money would begin to run out.

The next morning, my mother pulled my shivering body up a hill, five kilometers to Sai Baba's home.

"We must see him today," she said. "Today is the day. I know it."

I tugged the edges of my wool shawl to tighten it around me. I was weak, dizzy, and dehydrated from throwing up the night before. My mother didn't notice. I'd felt her anxiety before, her desperate plea for answers, her belief she was nearing an opportunity. Her hair stretched back into a messy bun, wisps of it defining her round face. Her eyes were a panorama of hope and wonder.

I gazed at the path before me. A canopy of lush, emerald green trees marked the horizon. Clusters of fog surrounded us. I reached out to capture a handful of the tiny droplets that waltzed through the air and they disintegrated into nothingness.

As I gathered the breath to continue, my mother grabbed my wrist.

"I'm trying, Mama. I'm trying," I said. I knew I had to follow her. There could be no childish resistance. She was the only thing I had. I was in love with her, attached to her mind and body, and I only wanted to please her.

I shuffled my feet forward.

"Mama, can we take a taxi? I don't feel good."

"Na, *sona*, the fresh air will be good for you," my mother declared, perhaps to convince herself that my illness might be cured by the journey to see Sai Baba and the consecration he

would grant us. She thought if we walked those five kilometers, we would finally achieve the benediction that she so vehemently believed Sai Baba was waiting to provide.

“We must walk. We must live minimally, the way Sai Baba has advised us.”

I didn't understand, but trusted that my mother knew best.

As we walked, I felt dizzier and dizzier from the elevation. I paused to regain my balance and tensed my legs to make them strong enough to carry me. A shiny white Hindustan Ambassador approached us and slowed its pace. The American couple and their baby were in the car. The wife turned to look at us. My gaze met hers and lingered on her face and that of her child. They both looked healthy and happy. Suddenly, I began to vomit, and as I did, they drove away.

When we finally reached Sai Baba's home, hundreds of people were entering the arched columns of his compound. I felt dizzier than before. Sweat trickled from my armpits and trailed down my torso. I was still cold. A chorus of men played *tablas* and carried Sai Baba in on a velvet throne. He was placed directly before us and assumed the posture of an idol, his hands clasped in front of his chest as if in prayer. Eventually, he climbed off his regal chair and walked around, pointing at those worshippers he wanted to bring into his house.

Sai Baba asked the white woman with her baby to rise up and join the chosen few. My mother looked at her with hunger, hoping the astrologer's predictions would come to fruition, and Sai Baba would gesture for us to join the woman so we could rejoice. He didn't pick us.

He never would.