**Meenakshi**

The November full moon hung just over the jumble of gods, carved one upon the other, spilling off the turret entrance of the temple. Fading reds and blues, hints of former glory, detailed the fear and loathing, love and bliss of the Hindu deities that I barely knew. The moon looked different. It shouldn’t have. But it did. It hung almost lazily in the hazy, humid night in Tamil Nadu. I was sweating. I was always sweating in India. After two months on the road there, I knew that any chance of a cool breeze was in the future, not the present. In the center of the sprawling temple, dedicated to the Fish-eyed, three-breasted goddess, Meenakshi, was a deep pool. Inky black in the night and barely moving, the water blended with the slick air. I settled on the wide-sloped steps that led into the pool, listened to the priests drumming in the distance and let myself cry alone. There were so many promises I made to myself that I had not been able to keep. I had not been able to save my marriage. I hadn’t had a child. I had not figured out how to stay close to my twin sister. But I had, somehow, gotten myself to India.

 Growing up in a small town in New England meant a few things for a young kid in the eighties. I was going to walk to school. I was going to carry keys to let myself back in the house. I was going to study. And I was going to keep my head down. I did them all well, except keeping my head down. I couldn’t. I spoke with a loud voice. I sang at the tops of my lungs. Screaming and laughing came easily. And any excitement led to the adults around me to yell, “Keep it down” or more likely “Shut up!” But I couldn’t keep it down. I knew that whatever was coming for me wouldn’t meet me on the quiet, country roads of my small town. So, I set about leaving. At 18, I moved to Boston to study. And then Los Angeles. And then New York City. And then Bogota, Colombia and then as much of the world as I could see. I ran as far as I could to get away from where I was born and raised. Like so many others before me, I put on the best shoes I could find and took off.

But physical distance never felt like enough. I needed something more to start to define a life outside of the rigid boundaries of the puritans in bell bottoms that raised me. In college, I studied religion. More precisely, I studied the liberal arts version of religion. I hid behind terms like the “God Head” and the “sociocultural implications of faith” in my papers, but what I really wanted was a direct experience of the divine. I wanted transcendence. I wanted escape. Maybe I wanted these things because it is a human drive. Or maybe I wanted them simply because my parents thought they were frivolous. They were hungover from the sixties and their strict Christian upbringings and laughed over too many glasses of jug Chablis at people who believed in God. I dived into religious studies and learned new names, languages, and ideas. I clung onto the new gods as avatars of a future full of adventure and freedom. I needed to get away from where I was from and the beliefs of those who raised me. I graduated with a degree in religious studies and set off to make a new life.

 Although there were many ways that I excelled in normalcy, I never felt like I fit into the world around me. I figured if the world I came from didn’t have room for loud believers like me, I would see if the angels and Devis of the world religions could make space. After my first survey class in college on “Hinduism and Indian history”, I promised myself that I would, one day, somehow, get myself to India. Going to India was akin to going to the moon. I did not come from a traveling family. I did not come from a cosmopolitan family. The farthest we went was to my aunt’s house in New Hampshire. Despite this, my 20-year-old self, bent over books in the libraries of Boston, could somehow envision a hazy future that could lead to a life of adventure including traveling to India. Unsure how it could happen, I still made my youthful, innocent, and hopeful promise to myself: one day I will go to India.

 But I didn’t go. As a young adult, I made different decisions. I lived my youth in reverse. Starting serious and getting more and more reckless as the decades passed. I married, moved, worked, traveled, fought, and partied, but I did not go to India. In fact, I forgot all about my promise. After turning 40 years old, getting dumped by my husband of almost two decades, I was divorced and dismantling my life in the Bay Area. In an attempt to save myself from a pit of grief, I started traveling. With money in my pocket for the first time in my life, I went to Europe and pretended that I could fit in with the refined culture, epicurean cuisine, bordered fields, and orderly forests. I wore pink for the first time ever. I pretended to care about shoes. It was helpful, but it was not nearly enough. Europe gave me pleasure after a year of deep suffering over the end of my 17-year marriage, but it was too clean and proper to banish the demons that still gripped me at night. I had decided to travel to see if the world could hold me, could hold my grief and my sadness. After trying to place my grief in the hands of many unwilling people, I thankfully decided it was my job to manage it. But I needed assistance. That assistance, over the months and then years on the road, took the form of strangers and mountains, rented cars and weird beds, rushing rivers and flowers, fields, roads, and churches. I followed some inner compass towards the central part of my broken heart and the energies of the earth around me did the heavy lifting of healing me. It was slow and steady, but eventually it worked.

 Returning from Europe, I still had some time to kill and more grief to put down. I had no home and nowhere to go. I was waiting for my next project to start. Carefully chatting one night to my twin sister, she suggested I go to India. She had remembered my promise. I had not. She said, “Why not figure out how to study some Ayurveda and go to India?” The 20-year-old in me woke up and cheered. In less than a week, I had my plan. I was headed to Kerala to study at an Ayurvedic center for a month and then I was going to travel in Southern India alone. It was the farthest away from home that I had ever strayed. And I had strayed pretty far before. I took a 24 hour mostly empty flight, slept well stretched out across three seats and landed at the Trivandrum Airport. I stumbled out at 3 am and stood in line for the visa check. There was one immigration officer shuffling papers at an old wooden teacher’s desk set up in a corridor next to the baggage carousel. I stood in the short line, the man stamped my passport, yawning his questions at me, and let me through. Stepping out into the night air, I started sweating. It was 3 am. I would not stop sweating until I left ten weeks later.

 India was many things, but it was not at all what I expected. It was, above all else, very loud. Surrounding the Ayurveda hospital, three separate beliefs- Hindu, Muslim and Catholic- competed for the air waves in 24 hours cycles of clanging prayers played on loudspeakers strung up into the palm trees near their temple/mosque/church. The heat and luscious land shimmered in rhythm with the layered yelling to God in three different languages. At first, I bristled against the chaos. And then I realized that the yelling matched the same timber as the demons that slept with me at night. The fear and grief that still feasted on me, despite all my efforts, were as shocked by the raucous noise as I was. And it stilled them. They shut up. Finally. I met sweet strangers who kept me company, learned Ayurvedic massage from two incredible women in dark treatment rooms lit only by oil candles and filtered sunlight to manage the heat, and began a daily practice of yoga that continues today. After a month, I left my little Ayurveda school and headed into Kerala. I climbed mountains, crossing over tea terraces and plantations. Even at great heights, the sound of the temple drums floated up to meet me. I saw wild elephants, slept on a houseboat in sprawling, shallow canals, and rode bamboo boats through a tiger preserve. One afternoon, I saw the Neelakurinji flower that only blooms every 12 years in a park full of tourists and wild mountain goats. I drank a lot of chai tea and I shook out what was left of my grief.

 And then a few weeks before I left, I landed just over the Kerala state border in Tamil Nadu in the town of Madurai. It was a totally different place than Kerala, which was fairly calm and friendly. Shocked by the abrupt change, I ran through the streets towards the Meenakshi temple, jumping out of the way of cows and scooters and cars and carts and people. The tenor of the streets there was frenetic and wild, a mix of spice and sweat and diesel gas filling the air. I arrived winded at the temple doors and removed my shoes. I placed my phone in the lockers as directed by the large signs and armed guards. And then I stepped inside. And unlike the many empty churches of Europe, every square inch of the temple was covered with people. It was a Tuesday. It was not a festival day, but it was still packed. Oil candles lit the doorways. Priests covered in ash and chalk chanted and walked around blessing people. A Bollywood star, I was later told by a wide-eyed woman, walked through, and created a commotion. There were rites and rituals happening that I had no way of understanding, and I didn’t try. I just took it in. I paid to be blessed by the bejeweled and glittering temple elephant who looked at me with weary eyes as it placed its heavy truck on my back. I found Ganesh. I found Shiva and Lakshmi. I found Saraswathi. I lit candles at their feet and prayed to these Gods that were mostly strangers for any blessings they could spare. I roamed the temple for a few hours, realizing that what I studied in the cold halls of college was nothing like the actual lived experience of faith. I had no idea what I was talking about back then as I typed out my papers on a boxy computer.

 I sat down on the sloped steps surrounding the central pool and took a deep breath. I was in the middle of southern India in a temple. The full moon hung over me, slowly reflecting my inner world back to me. I had made so many promises to myself when I was young. I would be a success. I would find love. I would be happy. And mostly I had not done these things. I had certainly tried, but I was never quite able to cross the finish line. And here I was, 41 and divorced, no children, no real plans, not living the life that I had imagined. But I had gotten myself to India. I had found a way to keep that extravagant promise to my younger self. So, as I sat sweating, listening to the drums and murmuring of prayers, I feasted on the feeling of this one, small victory. Over the mountains and rivers of Europe and the rich Indian tropics, I finally started to put down many of the promises I had built my adult life around: children, family, safety, trust, friends, a husband. I had struggled to let them go and imagine a new way forward. But that night, in the temple of Meenakshi, under the late November full moon, I saw that I could keep some of my promises. In a roundabout and unexpected way, I had shown up for my younger self and honored her wishes. And that proof was enough for me to start building something new, something trustworthy and something even better than my many failed promises: a life of freedom.