

From One Man's Revolution

The Guru shuttered the lids of his eyes, leaving tiny slits of albumen white just visible. The effect spooked Jimmy, as the greying, middle-aged man in front of him began to transform into something much more otherworldly. 'Let us chant,' said Chandraram. '*Om mani padme hum ... Om tare tut tare ture soha,*' he began. His booming voice echoed around the sparsely furnished room.

'Om mani hum ... tare tut tut tut ...' Jimmy responded, then faltered, as Chandraram's one working eye glared at him.

'You have been at the temple – how long, now?'

'I've been visiting for a month, Guru-ji.'

'And you do not yet know the words of our sacred chant? You let others chant for you?'

Jimmy felt winded, as if the air had been sucked out of him. He bowed his head – Chandraram was right. Whenever they had been in the lounge, he had been miming the words to the chant. Everyone else seemed to know the words so well that he hadn't had a chance to learn. And he didn't want to stop a devotee mid-chant and ask them what they were saying just because he was afraid of getting the words wrong. So he had just mouthed and swayed, and clapped at all the right points, hoping no one would notice. Of course, it was only a matter of time before Chandraram spotted his pretence.

'The Om is a sacred word. It has to be chanted slowly and with emphasis,' said Chandraram. 'You must start to believe. Or nothing is real. Everything is an illusion. Me sitting here watching you is an illusion.' Chandraram lifted his hand and waggled his fingers slowly as if invisible sand was trickling through.

‘Everything you do must have emphasis. Otherwise what is the point? These clothes you wear’ – Chandraram clutched the material of the dhoti around his waist – ‘They do not say to me that you are serious about temple life.’

Jimmy looked at the smirched, muddy ankles of his navy-blue tracksuit bottoms and then at the Guru’s pyjama trousers as crisp and unblemished as a first fall of snow. He shrugged sadly. He had been failing at most things in life – almost going to university, almost a china salesman, was he about to fail at being a holy man too? Chandraram’s body relaxed. He sighed deeply and addressed Jimmy like a wayward student. ‘Look, let us practise chanting Om. First you take a deep breath ...’ Chandraram inflated his lungs, pressing his palm to his sternum. ‘And then you chant AAA–UUU–MMM as you release the breath slowly and gently. You do it slowly. *With meaning.*

‘The A represents the beginning of life’s journey, like spring – the buds on the trees and flowers unfurling. The U is those same leaves and flowers falling and fading away. And the M is the silence, winter’s rest. A time to rejuvenate; to renew. It is not the end. It is immortality, as the cycle of the seasons continues on and on forever, outliving mortal souls.

‘The chant should pierce your very soul. It should lift you to a higher plane. Your heart: the veins, the arteries should be engaged.’ Chandraram pressed his balled fist to his chest for emphasis. ‘It is the life force that is all powerful.’

‘Is this what gives you the power to heal, Guru-ji?’ asked Jimmy.

‘Yes and more. It gives me the power to rejuvenate, to live anew,’ said Chandraram, his working eye glittering. ‘Come let us chant.’

They began to chant. Jimmy’s voice sounded like a feeble echo next to Chandraram’s sonorous tones. He gathered himself, determined to prove his seriousness. He inhaled slowly and deliberately through one nostril, imagining that he was filling his lungs with air from the base to the top. He then exhaled slowly, trying desperately to hold on to the breath at the end, finally spitting the air out as if it was some contaminant.

However deeply he inhaled, though, he couldn’t keep up with the Guru, who seemed to hold in his breath for an inordinate length of time: his girth expanding all the while like a rubber inflatable; his cheeks puffing out like an aerated blowfish; the shorn white hair on his head bristling like

a hedgehog nudged from its winter slumber. At the point when it seemed there was so much air in Chandraram that he would actually levitate off the woven seat, it would hiss slowly out of him as if he had been punctured with a fine needle. Jimmy watched the display intently and tried hard to emulate.

They chanted for what seemed like an age. Soundwaves resonated around the room, trapping the Guru and his student in an aural whirlpool. The bed and floor and the wardrobe spun around at a dizzying pace. Jimmy felt nauseous, the ground underneath him melted away. The only thing steadying him was the auditory lifebelt of the chant. Time dissolved into the yellowish-orange haze of the room. There were no seconds, no minutes, no hours – just the chant. Jimmy felt overwhelmed as if some centrifugal force was ripping apart his very being and reassembling it anew. He imagined his skin and flesh peeling away, releasing his caged corpuscles. The borders between him and his surroundings were now obsolete, the outline of his body erased like a faint pencil marking. He gazed into the whites of Chandraram's eyes, surrendering to the Guru. He expected to feel lost in some way but felt strangely anchored, as if he had gone deep within himself and finally worked out how he was programmed.

With every renewed Om, the effect intensified, and his respect for the Guru grew. He looked at Chandraram. Was that a hint of a smile at the corners of the Guru's lips?

Eventually Chandraram clapped his hands. 'Enough! We finish!'

Jimmy fell forward, exhausted.

'Very good. Very good. You see effort takes pain. And without effort, no gain,' said Chandraram, wagging his finger. 'It is important to chant every day. Not just in the hall with the others but by yourself. It improves your focus.'

Jimmy rested back on his elbows, pleased that the chantathon was over. He felt drained; he'd exerted himself both physically and mentally. He studied the contours of Chandraram's face, wide and expansive like an Easter Island statue. Stray silver hairs sprouted from his nostrils and trickled out from around his nipple areola. Was he really 135?

'You were under the stars, thinking of her last night,' said Chandraram suddenly.

Jimmy's heart flipped. Again he felt that dizzying motion, the ground

shifting underneath him. How could the Guru have known he was thinking of his aunt?

‘She wants you to be at peace, she wants you to be happy, my child.’ Chandraram’s working eye pierced Jimmy like a laser.

Jimmy looked at the large man sitting before him. For the first time Chandraram appeared to him as a kindly presence – a man full of love and compassion for others. He scolded himself for doubting the Guru. The man was genuine. What had Maia said? ‘A true god among men.’ Maybe he could learn a lot from him.

‘There is a lot of kindness and good in your heart, but you have become confused by the West, by living in your ego. An ego based in fear. You have allowed your spirit self to become drowned in confusion. Just now you must have felt your spirit self reawaken. Tune into that feeling and hold that moment,’ said Chandraram clutching his hands to his chest.

‘Don’t get me wrong. Modern life infringes on everything, even on our temple. We are short of funds. People’s generosity last night didn’t help. Sometimes I think we would be better off relocating to India where life is much simpler, but we have work, so much work, to do here.

‘Have you ever been to India?’ asked Chandraram. Jimmy shook his head. ‘No, well we will go there one day. There are many beautiful places: mountains, jungles, forests, lakes, rivers – India has it all.

‘Now I want you to imagine the most beautiful Himalayan setting,’ said Chandraram, launching into storytelling mode. ‘Snow-capped mountains huddled next to a glassy lake, gazing vainly at their own reflection. A lush, green forest spread out at their feet. A *tahr*, a mountain goat, nibbling at the long grass beside a waterfall, which cascades through the rocks like a shower of diamonds. Butterflies of myriad colours with delicate, lacy wings alighting on emerald foliage. The only sounds the buzzing bees, the rustling leaves, and the trickling water. It is the most tranquil setting. A place to evoke the gods.

‘One day a monk visits the lake. His kurta is ashy and torn. A deep scar mars one of his cheeks ...’ Chandraram moved his finger across his face. ‘Like his skin had been crudely knitted together. That one side of his face is truly hideous, I tell you, it droops and sags, the stitches loose. He has the kind of face only a mother would love.’

Jimmy shuddered, as Chandraram smiled and continued. 'But the mountains do not see the scar, as the monk shields that side of his face. He sits on the soft brown earth near the lake's shore and carves a *linga*, a sacred pillar.

'He then plucks thick, rubbery leaves from the plants in the forest, orange blossoms and white petals,' said Chandraram, grasping at the yucca plant in order to enact his tale. 'He dresses the pillar with care, anointing the top with white rice from his pocket. The mountains are jealous. They watch the display yearning to be adorned like the sacred pillar. They whisper and mutter, shaking snow flurries onto the glassy lake.

'All of a sudden the monk stands in *tadasana*, mountain pose. His eyes are closed; his palms are facing outwards. He forces the mountains to look at his scar; the weals on his face are familiar. The mountains shudder as they recognise their reflection. The monk begins to chant, "*Om Namo Shivaya*". He chants till the sun sets and the deep night cloaks the earth. His chant continues like a wail of grief into the night, repetitive, deliberate. It drowns out the howls of the big cats and the squawking of the night birds.

'Come morning, a velvety dew glosses the leaves, the day starts anew. But still the monk persists with his chant. Brown earth wisps at his feet. Eventually columns of earth spiral around the monk as he chants his terrible penance. The ground itself boils with vengeance. By the heat of early afternoon, that tranquil, peaceful forest is choked with brown earth. The dust clouds roll across the glassy lake towards the mountains ...'

A harsh rap sounded on the door, it creaked open. Maia glided into the room, carrying a tray with a silver teapot and some sticky, spiralled sweets on a paper plate. She was dressed conservatively in her blue cape and long trousers, and she had rolled her hair on top of her head in a small, tight bun. She glanced briefly at Jimmy, her eyes narrowed as if questioning his presence in the Guru's den. As she walked past, Chandraram grabbed at a sweet greedily.

'Thank you. We were just finishing up here,' said Chandraram, biting into the crunchy sweet and squirting syrup on to his beard. 'Your *jalebis* are amazing, my dear.'

Maia placed the tray down and sat on the floor next to Chandraram's stool, elegantly folding her legs underneath her. The gesture initiated an

awkward silence – one that the Guru seemed oblivious to.

‘Please tell me what happened to the monk and the mountains, Guru-ji?’ asked Jimmy.

‘Another time, another time,’ said Chandraram, ushering Jimmy to leave. ‘You go now and remember to chant.’