



PERSONAL HISTORY

A VISIT TO MADAM BEDI

I was estranged from my own mother, so a friend tried to lend me his.

BY TARA WESTOVER

My friend Sukrit invited me to India.

His mother lived in Delhi. He said I should get out of England and give my eyes something new to look at. He wouldn't be there—he was trapped in a biology lab at Stanford—but his mother would look after me. I could stay as long as I liked.

The invitation confused me. I could not imagine why I would go to a country that was not my country, to live with a mother who was not my mother. I pawed at the idea, then dismissed it. I did not want to go east; I wanted to go west. I was waiting for my family to reclaim me.

I don't know where the hope lived

or what it lived on. I had been estranged from my father for a year by then, but I was still telling myself that the estrangement was temporary, that the breach would heal. My mother was key. I thought she would convince my father, soften his heart. That's how it happens in the Bible, when two souls fall out of kinship. God softens a heart. I wasn't religious, not the way my father had raised me to be, but I believed in the softening of hearts. So I waited. For a letter. A phone call. I imagined my father saying, "Come home." Of course I could not go to India. When my father called, I had to be ready.

Months passed. The seasons changed. I wrote my mother every few weeks

and she answered. She wrote as if everything were all right, as if we were not estranged. She told me about her days, her shopping trips with my sister, the steady expansion of her herbal business. From these lines of text, I extracted the sensation of being a daughter.

Then another year had passed with silence from my father. It was difficult, then, to keep believing that we would reconcile, but equally difficult to give up that belief. I did not know how to live with the loss of my parents, or the bitterness that the loss was introducing into my life.

I must have seemed bewildered. Somehow my friends knew. It must have been present in the tone of my voice, its vinegary flavor, because one night, when I was speaking on the phone with Sukrit, who was settled in California, whom I had not seen in the whole of that year, the conversation faltered and into the gap he repeated his strange invitation. He said I should go to India. And this time when he said it, without knowing the reason, I said that I would go.

I had met Sukrit three years before, at the University of Cambridge, where we were both graduate students. He was a biologist. I was a historian. It would be difficult to contrive two people with less in common. Sukrit was from Delhi, the eldest son of a grand Sikh family, with a royal lineage on his mother's side. His grandfather was an inspector general. His mother was a high-powered government official. Sukrit had grown up with guards and servants, and he carried himself like someone who had. Like someone who belonged at that school.

If Sukrit's presence at Cambridge had a whiff of inevitability, my own presence there was nearly absurd. I was out of context, a hayseed blowing among the Gothic spires and ornate marble statuary.

I had been born in Idaho, the youngest of seven children, and raised at the base of a mountain called Buck's Peak. It was a lonely upbringing. My father said that those who follow the Lord will be shunned. He said that it was our privilege to be shunned by the world.

He was an ideologue, a sectarian, wholly devoted to his singular religion.

The government was corrupt. Public education was brainwashing, a satanic instrument of a fallen world. Modern medicine—doctors and hospitals and pharmaceuticals, what he termed the “medical establishment”—was profane and godless. People of faith relied on herbalism, Dad said, so my mother brewed tinctures of black cohosh and blue vervain, oat straw and blessed thistle, what Dad called “God’s pharmacy.” He was opposed to antibiotics. Once, when I was seven or so, my father told me that if I swallowed a single tablet of aspirin, my children’s children would be deformed in the womb. “God visits the sins of the fathers on the children,” he said.

I don’t know what the source of my father’s paranoia was, only that it seemed to touch everything. Like most of my siblings, I was never put in school. I was educated at home, according to my father’s beliefs. I was also born at home, delivered by a midwife, and my birth was not registered. When I was nine, I was issued a delayed certificate of birth, but the birth date that ended up on the form was an approximation. We did not know my birthday. I still don’t know it.

When I was seventeen, I left the mountain and enrolled at Brigham Young University. It was the first time that I had set foot in a classroom, and immediately I dedicated myself to education. For the next decade I clawed at the world, trying to take from it what I needed to remake myself, to reverse the ignorance and vulnerability of my early years. My philosophy back then, my whole posture relative to the world, was one of discipline and self-sovereignty. I was a rationalist. I thought any problem could be solved by the application of will.

I climbed. I climbed from that mountain in Idaho to the University of Cambridge, where, one afternoon in my second year of graduate work, I met Sukrit, a princely Indian biologist who drank whiskey neat and laughed at his own jokes. We formed a kinship, us two. The bond was instant. Sometimes it happens like that. You meet someone, and for no obvious reason you both recognize something in the other, something beyond gender or nationality or class or race or religion. Within

a month, Sukrit and I were spending every evening together, with our small circle of friends, drinking whiskey and mangling philosophy and singing sea chanteys at three in the morning outside the resplendent Great Gate of Trinity College.

I don’t remember telling Sukrit about the mountain, about my father or the estrangement. I don’t remember telling him that my own mother had refused to see me. Back then I kept my secrets or thought I did. Still, it is apparent to me now that he knew, and that probably this was the reason he told me to go to India. I had lost my own mother. Perhaps he thought he could lend me his.

The carpet at the Indira Gandhi International Airport was varicolored and vaguely modern, an intricate pattern of quadrilaterals, shades of mustard yellow and marmalade. The arrivals hall was wide and packed with travellers. I moved through immigration and saw a man clutching a sheet of white paper on which a name was scrawled. I stepped forward and nodded at the paper.

“Madam Bedi?” he said.

“Yes,” I said. “Satbir Bedi.”

He dipped his head, then lurched forward and claimed my case. A moment later, he was charging through the busy airport. I tried to speak with him, but he merely shook his head and said, “Hindi.”

He deposited me near the entrance, with the driver of a white car. Then Delhi was outside my window. Horns blared—squeaks from mopeds and guttural blasts from black S.U.V.s. Rickshaws, lime green and banana yellow, weaved and jinked, inserting themselves into impossibly slender gaps. I stared out at the heaving city and felt far from myself.

I knew from Sukrit that his mother was important in India, a senior government officer. As a young woman, she had risen swiftly through the ranks, and was now one of only a handful of women in the country working at her level. A decade earlier, the United Nations had sent her to Afghanistan, to Kapisa Province, to oversee the first legislative election in three decades. When she returned home, she was

appointed the chief electoral officer in Delhi, one of the most prominent posts in the capital. I imagined her and felt a nervous tremor.

We arrived at the house, which was simple, two stories, with whitewashed walls and a small garden. The driver carried my case inside, up a flight of stairs and into a large bedroom. The floor was vitrified tile. The bed was very low. The driver said, “Madam Bedi will see you at dinner.” Then he was gone.

I explored the house, which was quiet. The shades were drawn, and the rooms were dark. I moved down the stairs, through the dining room and into the sitting room, whose furniture was covered in lambent silks that gleamed even in the low light. Everything felt unfamiliar, from the murmur of a language I didn’t know, in the kitchen, to a golden shrine in the stairwell, dedicated to an unknown deity.

I retreated to my room, felt a chill in my feet as they pressed against the cold tile, and wondered why I had come here. Then I folded myself into the low bed and slept.

Hours later, I awoke to the sound of voices. The sun was gone, and outside my window the sky was a deep purple. I went downstairs and saw that the house was lit and a crowd had gathered in the sitting room—a woman and six men. The men wore gray suits; the woman, a long sari, black as onyx, its edge embroidered in a geometric floral pattern of gold brocade. The golden threads flickered, illuminating her movements as she spoke rapidly in Hindi.

I hovered in the stairwell, unsure what to do. The woman saw me. She stood, crossed the room, and met me at the threshold. “I am Satbir Bedi,” she said. “Welcome.”

Her speech was fluid. I understood the words, but the rhythm and pitch were new, familiar lyrics set to an unfamiliar melody. She spoke differently than her son: Sukrit had lived for so long in the United States and England, he sounded more like me than he did his mother. She smiled, but I sensed that her mind was with the men. She asked me to wait while she finished her work, then she returned to the sitting room.

Sukrit had told me that his mother had faced down warlords, and seeing

did places, my mind returned to the house and the woman who lived in it.

After I had been in Delhi for perhaps a week, Madam Bedi took me to see her office. I travelled with her in the white car to an expansive plaza of civic-looking buildings. We stepped into her suite, and again I observed the gravitational pull of Madam Bedi, the way eyes were drawn in her direction, the way the staff fell into orbit around her. There were men and women both, but it was the behavior of the men that shocked me: when she stood, they revolved around her like satellites; when she walked, they trailed behind her in a comet tail. Never in my life had I seen anything like it, a woman waited on by a dozen men. I had not seen it in Idaho, and I had not seen it in Cambridge. Neither the religious nor the secular world had shown me the likeness of a female king. But here was one.

I wanted to live a grateful life. I wanted to love my mother and father the way Sukrit loved Satbir, without bitterness. I believed it should be possible to forge that love. I thought I could choose what to feel. I thought this was the meaning of self-mastery.

My second week in Delhi, I began a gratitude journal. The subject I chose was my father, because it was toward him that I held the most anger. I wanted to purge that anger from myself, so every morning for a week, in blue ink, I wrote out lists, thanking my father for his contributions to my life.

Dear Dad. Thank you for working so I could have food and electricity.

Dear Dad. Thank you for teaching me to be independent.

Dear Dad. Thank you for taking us to Arizona.

I remember the result of this experiment. It was a disaster. When I reread what I had written, I did not feel grateful; I felt enraged.

I remembered those trips to Arizona, to Salome, with its foreign landscape of red dirt and green saguaro cacti, where Grandma and Grandpa, my father's parents, fled each December to escape the Idaho winter. After one visit there, when I was nine, we crashed coming home because Dad had insisted that my brother Tyler, who was seventeen, drive our blue station wagon through

the night. Dad was tired. He wanted to sleep, so the car was silent. No one spoke, not for hours. Then, around six in the morning, after Tyler had been driving in silence for six hours, he fell asleep and the car drifted over the yellow line.

The station wagon left the road, smashing through two utility poles of thick cedar, one after the other, and snapping them. The poles collapsed,



dropping the power lines to the ground, and still the car kept going. It came to rest, finally, in a field, when it hit a row-crop tractor. Our mother was sitting in the front seat. On impact, she was thrown into the windshield. Hours later, two goose eggs had formed on her head, one above each eye, swollen and enormous, darkening from pink to purple. She was disoriented and seemed to have suffered a brain injury, but Dad didn't take her to the hospital because he didn't believe in them.

Four years later, again we drove to Arizona, and again we crashed on the return. It was January. There was a blizzard that night, a whiteout in southern Utah, the kind of chalk-white frenzy in which you can't see more than a few inches in the dark. The beam of our headlights reflected off the thick flurries, increasing our blindness. Every other car on the road pulled over, to wait out the storm. These were Utah drivers, experienced with snow. But they knew when to surrender to nature.

Dad persisted, pressing his foot down hard on the accelerator, shooting through the whiteout in our rickety old Astro van at sixty-five miles an hour. I was in the back, lying with my mother on a futon, because Dad had removed the seats and seat belts. From where I lay, I could see my brother Richard's left hand, clenching the armrest of the passenger seat. Later, Richard would tell me that it was a relief when the van finally left the road. "At least it was over," he said.

The van rolled, I don't know how many times or if it was just once. I was knocked out, my neck snapped backward, pushed sideways into some malefic diagonal so that some days later the vertebrae froze, and I could not turn my head either to the left or the right. My mother treated the paralysis with homeopathy and oils, blue tansy and German chamomile, but it didn't improve. I remained paralyzed—my brothers called me Popsicle—for some weeks, until one evening, when I was standing at the kitchen sink, washing dishes, one of my older brothers took hold of my head and wrenched it, cracking my neck. The treatment was harsh, frightening even, but it worked. The next day I could turn my head.

Dear Dad. Thank you for taking us to Arizona. I read the sentence again, reaching for gratitude but finding nothing in me that could be bent into that shape. Then I felt thwarted, a failure. I did not want to live an angry life. I did not want to be the hag, the ingrate, the twitching, bitter crow who never lets go of anything. I wanted a bigger life than that.

I wanted to love my parents. I knew, even then, that love is what brings a sense of expansion to life. I wanted a life of beauty and gratitude, arms outstretched and hopeful. Would this be forever out of my reach? How can a person transcend what has happened to them?

The car crashes were over, finished. They were in the past. Could I not now forget them? Be grateful for the good and bury the bad? Could I not choose a forgiving life? Sometimes, I thought I could forgive if the past could be acknowledged, even partially. But my parents denied everything. The isolation. The injuries. All of it.

I wrote the sentences again. Then a third time. And a fourth. I copied the page five times a day until the notebook was filled. I believed, truly believed, that I could make myself feel about the past whatever I wanted to feel.

What I wanted was to become a different person, who had lived a different life with a different father. I thought I could become that person through force of will. Happiness could be manufactured. Gratitude drawn from a schematic and replicated. *I will eradicate my*

rage, I wrote in my notebook. *I will write, say, and think grateful thoughts until the words become true.*

No one had ever told me that delusion is not a nutrient, that you cannot build a true future from a false past.

Madam Bedi had divorced her husband.

I knew from Sukrit that it had happened years ago, and that it had been both necessary and impossible. The marriage had been dismal and harsh, but marriage was inescapable for a woman at that time. An Indian woman, let alone a public woman, simply did not divorce her husband. Yet there was no husband living in that house.

One night, after I had been in Delhi for two weeks, Madam Bedi asked how Sukrit had been at Cambridge. I said that he had done well in everything except cooking.

“Once he tried to make biryani in my kitchen,” I said.

“I know,” she said. “He called to ask how much garlic. It was two in the morning in Delhi.”

“You told him three cloves.”

“I did.”

“You told him three cloves,” I said. “But you did not tell him what a clove is.”

Her chapati fell from her fingers and she looked at me, mouth sagging, eyes fixed.

I nodded. “He put in three heads of garlic.”

She laughed then. The sound was girlish, joyful, and I realized that her features, when at ease, were impish.

“He didn’t even peel them,” I said. “They went straight into the pot, skins and all.”

Now her head jerked back and she laughed with her whole self.

I told her that I had shouted at him for ten minutes. I told him that no recipe in the history of time, not in any culture, alive or dead, had ever called for three heads of unpeeled garlic, but he insisted that if the garlic needed peeling, his mother would have told him.

Madam Bedi was looking ahead now, gazing into nothing. She was smiling. She loved her son, and she loved poking fun at her son.

The next time I looked up, her expression had narrowed. She turned to-

ward me and finally asked the question that, later, I understood had been on her mind from the beginning. She asked if Sukrit and I were romantic. I said no. She was still staring at me, a sadness pulling her lips downward. This was the obstacle, the wall between us: she did not want her son to marry a white woman and disappear forever to America.

“I love your son,” I said. “But I love him like a brother.”

She peered into me and the knowledge seemed to settle. “Then you are my daughter,” she said, and picked up her chapati.

Our dialogue shifted after that. The wall had come down, and I began to feel at home there.

Days later, Madam Bedi asked if I would go with her to an engagement party. On the day of the party, she arrived home early to dress and waved me into her bedroom. Laid out on her bed were a dozen splendid fabrics, rich silks and soft chiffons, some embroidered with silk threading, others dense with beadwork. She insisted that I try each one and in the end selected for

I turned myself into myself and was Jesus.
I turned Jesus into a business and was
The pastor of a megachurch. I turned
The church out. I’m Whitney Houston.
I’m Sam Cooke. I got a squall on me.
You want to see where it comes from.
I am Black and comely. I am come
To send fire on the earth . . . not to send
Peace, but a sword. My sword. All
The myths are only as true as one woman
Can be to another. It’s true. I’m so fine
You already know what I look like naked.
You dream it every night. Everybody’s
A clock, but I’m Jesse Owens. I got
No respect for a stopwatch. I got no
Respect for a stop sign. I invented
The traffic light. I am the light of the world
When the sun shines and the people
Of California breathe air unsullied.
I invented the gas mask. I keep you safe.
I invented the home-security system so
You think you’re safe from me. I am

me a *lehenga*, which was a dense shade of marigold. The ensemble consisted of a long beaded skirt with a matching silk blouse, or *choli*, and an intricate shawl, which she folded into a neat drapery and pinned across my body. Satisfied, finally, with the shape of the cloth, she removed the earrings from her own ears, two gold shells, and folded them into my palm. Then she called to the driver.

The party was immense, hundreds of people pressed into a vast and glittering ballroom. The women shimmered; the men stood stoically. A path was cut through the crowd, through which passed Madam Bedi, nodding and smiling, wearing her elfin grin.

I remember little of the party. What I remember is what came after. There was traffic in the city that night, and for an hour we sat together in the back of the white car, waiting for the knot of tail-lights to unpick itself. While we waited, we traded stories of Sukrit. She never tired of these stories.

I do not remember how she came to tell me of her divorce.

She had chosen to get married

BLACK DICTIONARY

1943–2024

The sanctity of marriage for the man
 Black enough to have me. We take turns
 Turning each other over. I am broader
 Than any idea of myself and as specific
 As a word Nikki Giovanni wrote thinking
 Of me. She thought of me before I was
 Born and before she lie down like a road
 That turns away from us toward the hills
 Of Blacksburg and on into the mountains
 Where even literacy can get lost. What
 Am I to call myself now? Who has a word
 When I want to be what she saw in me?
 I turned myself into a question and
 Became an orphan in a black suit.
 I turned from my mourning to the pages
 Of our family's big black dictionary,
 Orphaned, too, now that everyone's got
 A smartphone. I turned my phone off
 So I could hear. She'd say I could walk
 Whatever. Go fishing. Be the black rod
 And the black hook that catches and feeds
 The multitude. She turned me into
 Jesus, but I can't seem to raise the dead.

—*Jericho Brown*

young, to a non-Sikh. Her father had opposed the match but Satbir, ever willful, ever testing the limits of her autonomy, had married the man anyway. Quickly the marriage had become deranged. Her star was rising, and her husband resented the steady accumulation of her successes, her recognition. Outside the home, she was powerful, but inside her status as a wife gave him absolute power.

Satbir told me that she had come close to breaking. The marriage had been unendurable. She had gone to her father and told him that she must have a divorce.

She loved her father; their relationship had been repaired since she had married her husband, had become something beautiful that she valued. She needed his approval to do this radical thing. But he would not give it. He said that she could not divorce her husband. She had a public name to uphold, a family name. She could not flout social mores so flagrantly. She would be pilloried in public, denounced in private.

She divorced her husband.

"How did you do it?" I said. I hadn't

meant to interrupt. "How did you know you wouldn't lose everything?"

She turned toward me, but her face was shadowed. When she spoke I could not see her. I heard only a clear voice in the dark.

"I didn't," she said. "I did not know what would happen. I only knew that I had to do it. The marriage was over. I could not live the rest of my life in its dead body."

She looked out the window, and I saw the lights of the city pass across her face. Her features were pulled downward, her expression doleful. She had suffered; I could see the suffering written on her face. But even as I watched her, and witnessed her remembering her misery, I felt the unmistakable presence of strength. She sat calmly, her hands in her lap, her eyes fixed on the outside world. She wore a simple white kurta, crocheted, a delicate textile, with an orange stole folded in precise lines over her right shoulder.

I thought of the life she had chosen for herself—of her ceaseless insistence on self-rule. Of her willingness to risk everything, even the bond with a father

she loved, rather than surrender herself to the rule of another.

I wanted to know how she had done it.

She said that she had travelled to visit a friend in Varanasi, the city in the north where the dead are sent to be burned. She had arrived in a weakened state, half wrecked, hardly able to hold herself together. But in that city she found strength.

"How?" I said. "How did you keep from breaking?"

There was tension in my chest. I needed an answer. My question was not about her, I knew that; it was about my own stuckness.

"I broke," she said. "That is how I kept from breaking."

She said that one night, sitting outside the city, on the banks of the River Ganges, watching the smoke rise, she had come to pieces in the arms of her friend. She had wept, bitterly and with such violence she thought her chest might tear open.

"I succumbed," she said. "I stopped denying the wounds and I felt them, felt their width and breadth. Pain can be clarifying. If you are able to feel it, the pain itself—the true knowledge of what doing nothing is costing you—will tell you what to do."

I looked out the window, feeling disappointed and empty. This was not the answer I had come for. I wanted something else, some other formula or technique, something more recognizable as strength. I wanted her to tell me how I could live my life and never succumb to anything.

We returned to the house and I went quietly to bed, where I lay awake, staring at the dark. I fell asleep remembering the story, the words and the way she had said them: *I travelled to Varanasi. I watched the dead burn and the smoke rise. I was destroyed by my life. I succumbed, and was destroyed.*

I dreamed that night and for many nights after. I dreamed of Satbir, and of myself. The dream was stylized, like a fairy tale or fable, in which the kingdom must be saved by a lone wanderer or journeyman, who voyages to faraway places, seeking wisdom.

In the dream, I travel to a distant land and ask the woman king: What is the source of your power?

Weeping, she says. The source of my power is that I weep.

She has given me the answer. But I do not believe her. ♦