

ALL IS GIVEN

Linda Neil

Prologue

The woman with the blood-red lips stood in front of me, hands on hips, blocking my way into the kitchen. I didn't feel like talking. At least not till after I'd eaten. And I usually didn't eat till after I'd finished singing. As my house concerts sometimes ended at 11 pm I often didn't begin dinner till just before midnight.

It had been one of those evenings and I was starving.

The woman looked colourful and determined. Her voluptuous, well-nourished body was draped in crushed velvet, her earrings were shaped like pink cherries, her hair was the colour of chocolate. In my famished state I could've taken a bite out of her.

I leaned forward, squinting at her necklace, which consisted of tiny lettered cubes strung together. They spelled out a name: Luciana.

Tell me about your lovers, Luciana purred. Your many, many lovers.

The host of that evening's concert waved a drink and a plate of food at me from across the room. I nodded gratefully, wondering how I could politely excuse myself, find a quiet spot and stuff myself with food.

Your Indian lover, your Jewish lover, your French amour. Luciana ticked them off like items on a United Nations shopping list

I could tell she wanted to start an in-depth conversation. But I'd been singing and telling stories for nearly three hours and I was exhausted.

Concerts can be like that – they can leave you spent, but at the same time energise the people who've listened to you. The intimacy of house concerts, what I call loungeroom concerts, heightens that relationship. Without a stage or a microphone to separate the singer

from the audience, a concert of love songs can particularly feel autobiographical. Less a performance than an embrace.

My host finally came to my rescue. He introduced me to Luciana – *no*, she laughed, *that's not my real name* – who hugged me and thanked me for the concert.

Mind if I sit with you while you eat, she asked. *I want to find out the real stories behind the songs.*

We found some cushions and lounged on them beside the glowing fire. In the orange light I noticed that Luciana had the kind of beauty that once would have made me collapse with envy. But since I'd started writing my own songs, my own music and lyrics, I'd realised that beautiful things also came from within and it was better to spend time excavating those things than dwelling on what I lacked. In that way making music made me move easier in the world.

I prepared to offer excuses as to why I didn't feel like giving any more of myself while I ate. I needn't have worried though. It wasn't discovering the details of my life that Luciana was interested in, but the telling of hers. What I had shared had only temporarily focused attention on me and my stories, which had in turn stimulated her memory and self-reflection.

It was one of the gifts – and surprises – of these concerts: to experience the spirit of another as it wakened and found a way to be articulated. So as I munched on garlic bread and a variety of dips and spreads, Luciana shared with me the stories of her life, her travels, her growth and transformations and all her lovers, as if she were the singer of a hundred marvellous songs and I were her hungry audience. I never thought to ask her if all her stories were true. I just enjoyed the pleasure of listening to her pleasure in their telling.

People often think songs, especially love songs, are autobiographical. In my experience, they are often inspired by real people but the form of a song means that, from this

basis of fact, changes might need to be made. A bass line is added perhaps. Something high is included. A man becomes a woman. A five-letter name expands to eight, night becomes day. A memory becomes a melody, a moment of potential becomes a love song.

As my wise friend Sophie says, the facts may not all be true but the feelings certainly are. And if some events depicted did not happen the way they are described, perhaps they should have. A fantasia and a theme and variations are other musical forms that improvise and embellish simple melodic phrases. JS Bach did it most famously in the *Goldberg Variations*, and he was also famous for his prowess at royal gatherings where he could improvise a dozen variations on a theme designated by his royal host – in record time.

So think of this collection of stories as a book of songs that contains improvisations and variations on themes of truth. If you listen closely enough you might even be able to hear the fabric of facts and fiction as they are stitched together. What they create when integrated may not be entirely facts or fantasy but something exploratory and hybrid – factitious or fictual – and writing them has been as delightful as making a song. I hope you can listen as you read and hear all the harmonies and overtones that surround music, the same way I have listened as I write.

Spike and Me: A Fantastic Adventure

Reading out loud to the blind old man was a curious experience because, even though I felt, with some effort, in control of the tone and pace of the reading, it was nevertheless Borges, the listener, who became the master of the text. I was the driver, but the landscape, the unfurling space, belonged to the one being driven.

– Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading*

It all started in Brisbane and ended up across the other side of the world. Stories can be like that. If you wait long enough, they start to unfurl with the rhythm of Greek myths. If you look closely enough you can almost see the paper they're written on as a map of words; one tiny scratch marks the humble beginnings of a long, sometimes magical tale that traverses countries and oceans. Journeys always seem to take you out of the small, into the large, and then back again. Not that I thought Brisbane was small – well, actually I did; everyone did at one time or another. But these days I like to sing its praises; to see, in its tiny, seemingly insignificant local events, the roots of greater, more fabulous possibilities. That's how it turned out in my life anyway.

I once read to a blind person. She lived down the road from us during my last year at school. Her name was Mrs Featherington, although, in the teenage tradition of shortening everything, I referred to her as Feathers. Feathers was studying law at the University of Queensland and also learning singing from my mother.

One summer, during a particularly vocal discussion with my siblings around the dinner table, Mum suddenly leaned towards me and said: *If you like the sound of your own voice so much, go down the road and read to Mrs Featherington.*

I found out later that Mum had already volunteered me as one of Feathers' small band of readers, who called at her house to read law books, legal briefs, university texts and the Bible.

Oh God, I remember pleading. Don't make me read the Bible! I'll do anything, just not the Bible!

So I was put down on the list marked *miscellaneous*, which meant I was reading for entertainment and not educational or religious purposes.

My father suggested I choose reading material with *some* literary merit and handed me a book by Katherine Mansfield. Mum countered with the offer of a biography of Dame Nellie Melba (or was it Joan Sutherland?), which she assured me was a *jolly good read*. But I rejected any notion of highbrow pursuits during my holiday and chose instead a copy of *Adolf Hitler: My Part in His Downfall* by Spike Milligan.

I can't say I looked forward to visiting Feathers in my allotted time. She'd always struck me as a crabby sort of woman. And even though Mum would ask me how *I* would be if I couldn't see, when it was hard to get a civil word out of me even with all my faculties intact, I still thought it was a tiresome chore. The milk of human kindness didn't exactly flow through my veins. So I rocked up to Feathers' doorstep and entered her dark but tastefully furnished residence, with a great dollop of resentment and very little hope of having a good time.

Two pages into Milligan's book, though, Feathers and I were in fits of giggles. By the fifth or sixth page, the giggles had turned into guffaws and snorts of laughter. This symphonic hilarity continued throughout Spike's story. I can't recall much about the content of the book now, or even the tone. What I do remember is that by the time I had finished reading the book, which coincided with the completion of my rostered duty as a volunteer, Feathers and I had bonded in a way no amount of talking one on one could have achieved. It was as if our

shared laughter had bridged the chasm between our personalities. As if every time Feathers had stopped me mid-sentence and spluttered *no, no, read that bit again* because the sound of her giggles had drowned out the previous words, we had become members of some secret society of laughers.

A few years later, while I was living in London, I switched on BBC Radio and suddenly there was Spike himself, or should I say Spike's voice itself, on a program called *In the Psychiatrist's Chair*. I'd never heard Spike speak before, except for the old *Goon Shows* my dad used to chuckle over on Saturday afternoons. I was surprised by the sadness and resignation in his natural voice. And if, as the cliché says, your heart can go out to someone, that night my heart went out to Spike as he talked about his breakdowns, his manic episodes, the catastrophic effect his illnesses had had on his family and his ongoing problems with medication.

I don't know whether it was the mood of the midnight hour or just the pain in Spike's voice, but I found myself in the early hours of the next day writing him a letter about my reading adventures with Feathers. I remember stumbling over some strange observation about how books are sometimes more than just formations of words organised into coherent communication, and can become things that pass between people, like happiness or love.

The next day, still buoyant from the previous evening, I walked down to the post office, happy that I had enough follow-through to finish *and* mail Spike's letter. The London sky, usually threatening rain, was startlingly blue that day; it sent down through my body that little ache which coldness and brightness can produce in Antipodean flesh.

I'd addressed the letter to Spike care of the BBC and released it to the Royal Mail with little expectation that he would ever receive it, let alone read it, but satisfied that I hadn't left

my thoughts unsaid (or unwritten) as I had left so many things undone in my life up to that point.

For some reason, I wasn't surprised or even that excited when, two weeks of London life later, I received Spike's reply. There was a sense of *fait accompli* about my reaching out to Spike and his replying. The tone of the letter was one of kindness and a sort of exhausted gentleness. He said how much my letter had meant to him. Not just that I'd written it, but *how* I had written it. Not as a fan, he said, but as another human being, responding not to his achievements but to his suffering. I wasn't aware that was how I had responded to him. I think, looking back, that Spike was looking for something and he thought, through my letter, that he'd found it, no matter what my actual intent was. Perhaps I was looking for something too: a connection with someone I admired – a writer, a comic, an inventor – whom I never dreamed it would have been possible to meet back in Warren Street. Receiving Spike's letter seemed to signal a change in my destiny and I was ready for that change.

Further correspondence followed. Our contact seemed natural to me. So when he suggested we meet for dinner, the only counter-suggestion I had was that, as my experience of eating in London was limited to the cheapest, nastiest, greasiest takeaway available, namely the Chinese diner down the road where you could still get egg fried rice for one pound, we rendezvous at a restaurant of his choosing.

We met at one of Spike's favourite Indian restaurants, a little out-of-the-way diner in a side street of Notting Hill, called The Tandoori Traveller. During dinner, where we shared dishes of rogan josh, chicken korma and dal saag washed down with Heineken and Foster's lager, our conversation ranged over a wide variety of subjects. Spike himself had made some

kind of list on his serviette, to which he referred every now and then. I don't know why he felt the need to refer to notes, although once or twice he confessed to a fear that he was a potential candidate for Alzheimer's. This, he conjectured sadly, might have been due to the large amount of antidepressants and alcohol he had consumed over the years. But to me, despite, or perhaps because of, the small quantity of food that he spilled onto his chin during dinner, he seemed as carefree and buoyant as a young man. In fact, at times I found his dishevelled appearance, even his sadness, strangely attractive.

From what I can recall, here is a small list of some of the topics we covered during our spicy dinner.

1. The Goons
2. Goonishness
3. The listing of Goonishness in some future dictionary
4. Some future dictionary of Goonishness
5. Dirty English cutlery
6. Woy Woy
7. Wyong
8. Woop Woop
9. Doo-wop
10. Doolitde
11. Do as little as possible
12. Doing too much
13. Breakdowns
14. Things that make Spike sad
15. Things that make me sad (which included things making Spike sad)
16. The erotics of strong curries

17. Cricket
18. Things that aren't cricket
19. Stiff upper lips
20. Rogan josh
21. Things that make you go *gosh!*
22. Past life experiences
23. The difficulty of sending books through the post vis-a-vis sliding the packages through the slits on the Royal Mail boxes
24. Highbrow
25. Lowbrow
26. No brows at all.

Spike told me that he had no brows at all. They'd been singed off permanently in a small house fire that he'd started during one of his hallucinating periods. The tangled white bushy things above his eyes looked real enough to me. But every time I threatened to give them a good pull and prove his story wrong, he would shake his head and mutter sadly:

Once I had high, magnificently arched brows. People said they were a real feature of my face. And now look at me. Nothing. Nothing left at all!

By the time dessert came around he seemed almost completely drunk, even though the waiter had assured me during one whispered consultation that Spike was mostly drinking ginger beer. Apparently Spike's doctor, an Anglo-Indian called Dr Hyderabad, had enlisted the help of most of Spike's favourite restaurants in cutting down his drinking. He had since discovered, with the covert assistance of some of Spike's most sympathetic head waiters, that years of the hottest rogan josh had so severely burned Spike's palate that now he could hardly tell the difference between the stiffest hard liquor and weak apple cider.

Apparently Spike's drunkenness, the waiter informed me solemnly, was all in his mind.

Did you know, Spike divulged to me between dessert and coffee, that Groucho Marx and TS Eliot were pen pals?

No, I didn't, I replied, knowing that, in inimitable Spike fashion, I was about to be relieved of my ignorance.

Now, you'd think, wouldn't you, that Groucho would have been the pursuer in this particular case, genuflecting at the feet of such towering genius. Oh, shake your head if you want, but we're like that. We always think the serious minds are more important than the comic ones. Even most comedians themselves aspire to tragedy. Anyway, to get back to the story, one night they finally did meet. Eliot was over in London to give an important lecture at a university that had just given him an honorary PhD. After dinner, Groucho takes Eliot into his library and prepares to acquit himself well in any literary discussion that might take place. When they get in there, Eliot, with a conspiratorial whisper, says: 'Thank goodness we're alone. Now we can get down to business.' And what do you think happened next? Mmm? Can you guess? Well, all Eliot wanted to talk about was what he said he'd been waiting years to talk about: Animal Crackers and Duck Soup. You see my point?

As far as I could tell he had more than one, but by then I was getting used to his lateral narratives. So I was happy to just nod my head and let him keep talking while we sipped coffee. I had a sense that he was telling me something important, profound even. But my attention span was short in those days. As he continued I was restlessly glancing over his shoulder to where I could see, outside, a little English snow starting to fall.

Me and George Borges used to write, you know.

Who? I swallowed abruptly.

Apparently, he was a fan of the early Goon Shows. He used to get tapes sent over from friends in London. Evidently, he was somewhat of an Anglophile.

I didn't have a clue who he was talking about. Naturally I assumed he was raving.

Borges, as in Jorge Luis Borges, the South American writer, who would start with a real event and weave a fantastic invented story from it. So convincingly that his readers couldn't tell where the truth ended and the fantasy began. Like life really. Just like life.

For a second I sensed he was sniping at me for not knowing about Borges and his storytelling techniques, even though my father used the same method to draw his audience into his fantastical verbal inventions. He did it for his amusement as much as for ours. Some might have said he liked the sound of his own voice. But I think, rather, he liked the sound of his own imaginings. Just as Spike did. So I knew how to be a good listener to stories that skirted the edges of credibility. And to understand the need for their creation – how they brought pleasure, solace and challenge to their inventors.

But then I realised there were probably other reasons for Spike's impatience. Perhaps he'd reached the age when you expected – or hoped for – less ignorance from those around him. Or perhaps he realised he was running out of time.

Apparently, just as Eliot had written to Groucho, Borges had written to Spike, sending him long, beautifully penned letters about cricket, polo and Robert Louis Stevenson, full of humble requests for packets of English breakfast tea from Selfridges and shortbread biscuits from Harrods.

I drew the line at getting him cotton singlets from Marks & Spencer though. The bugger never sent me a cent for everything I shipped over to Argentina. So I'd be damned if I was going to go underwear shopping for him, no matter how bloody famous he was. Talk about your English eccentrics. He was more English and more eccentric than the worst of them! A bloody good writer though. And you know why?

I knew he'd tell me eventually. All I had to do was sit back for a moment while Spike swallowed the last of his enormous cup of black coffee.

Because no matter how much you analyse him, his stories refuse to be known or be pinned down. Like they reinvent themselves over and over, according to whatever information you've got in your head at the time. I like stories like that. And I like life like that too. I like it when the line between truth and invention is permanently blurred. Sometimes that's the only way I can bear it.

He burped, excused himself, said he was experiencing a caffeine rush and lay down on the floor under the table. I smiled brightly at the waiter, who seemed to understand what was going on. This was Spike's world, after all. Wherever he was he made it so, reinventing himself like a Borges story, from one moment to the next.

Later, after helping him out to the footpath, where we stood in lightly falling snow, he asked me: *Do you think that we come back?*

Come back where? I wanted to ask him, tempted to keep playing along with this most playful of men. But I said nothing, only hoisting the collar of my coat up over my ears and rubbing my gloved hands together.

Reincarnation. Death and bloody rebirth. Karma. Karma Sutra. The whole circle-slash-cycle of existence. Yes, indeed. I've come back so many times, yet sometimes I feel I'm having the same experience over and over. Except that each time, someone's saying to me, 'Okay, Spike, old friend. This time you've just got to look a little closer.' Problem is, I always want to look further rather than closer. So they keep sending me back. You know what I mean?

I knew what he meant. In a general sense. In the general sense that I could feel what he meant by the way he said it. But as for *knowing* what he meant, no. His brain, smashed up, reassembled so many times, seemed beyond my comprehension. Some people, I thought, reduce themselves so they only have to look at easily comprehensible things. Others, like Spike, their brains just expand and expand, because they want to exclude nothing, because they want to experience the hugeness, not the smallness, of life.

Next thing I knew Spike's red face was right in front of mine. I remember noticing how his capillaries looked like threads woven through the material of his skin.

I don't suppose there's any chance of you coming to work for me?

At any other time I wouldn't have thought twice. But at that moment, outside The Tandoori Traveller with a London winter seeping slowly into my bones, I knew that I was standing at some sort of crossroads. And not just because Spike and I were standing where the roads to Camden and Notting Hill crossed and diverged. Besides, I didn't know whether I needed a mentor just then. Or a father figure. Or, I thought, looking at the boyish twinkle in his eyes, a spring-winter romance. The last time I'd accepted an invitation like this one, from a Viennese conductor, I'd ended up being a reluctant muse for almost a whole year, before I'd realised I needed to find some muses of my own.

Can I call you? I said.

You can. But you won't, will you? He was smiling into my eyes and I could see he wasn't drunk or crazy or insane. He knew exactly what he was doing and saying. And he had from the moment I'd met him.

You know, he continued, when you've been alive a long time, it's only your body that gets old. Everything else just gets fresher and fresher. That's the irony of it all. Just when you could really enjoy yourself the most, when your spirit is free and you've got your bloody mojo back again, you look down at your flesh and ... well, you realise that to anyone else you just seem old. That's the illusion. That's the utter absurdity of it, you see.

I did see. I saw in his eyes that in non-physical time he was years younger than I was. That if life was circular and non-linear he was way ahead and way behind all in the same moment. He suddenly picked me up and whirled me around. I grabbed onto my hat with one hand and steadied myself on his shoulder with the other. And then he was laughing and laughing. No, not laughing. He was giggling. Like a kid. Or like they reckon a Buddha

giggles. Lightly. As if all the cares in the world would fall onto his shoulders like raindrops, dissipating as soon as they touched anything solid.

And then you see, suddenly your flesh isn't as weak as you think it is either, he said, hardly winded at all, as he gently put me back on my feet. And then with a bow he was away, walking, no, striding up the street, arms swinging by his side, calling back to me: *Don't worry, we'll stay in touch no matter what you decide to do.*

I wondered if snow was starting to fall again as I saw little white fragments float down to the ground around him. But as I began to run after him, calling out with sudden urgency – *Spike. Spike!* – I saw it wasn't snow, but pieces of the white serviettes he had written on all during dinner, and which he was now systematically shredding as he disappeared around the corner.

I called out again. *Spike! Spike!*

I don't know why I ran so desperately, why my heart was pounding, except that all of sudden I felt an overwhelming rush of love for the crazy old guy, despite the fact he had forgotten to pay for our dinner.

Spike, Spiiiiike, I yelled. *How can I reach you?*

He had given no indication, during the few hours I'd spent with him, that he was capable of walking as fast as he did. Maybe his entire persona, the whole mad-old-guy bit, was an act, a fantastic coat of armour that made his movement through the world a little safer.

I stumbled after him, picking up and stuffing into my pocket the shreds of serviettes he'd left like a trail behind him.

Back at my flat, I found it hard to fathom if the whole thing had been a dream, a fantastic invention of the mind under lamplight. As I laid out the tattered scraps, I could see their tiny words here and there, faded by moisture, and little phrases torn in the middle, out of

sequence. I heaped the bits into a pile and stared at them; they seemed to form a pile of hopelessly disconnected things, an impossible puzzle.

Somewhere in London, Spike was laughing at me, and I was determined to get in on the joke.

There were numbers, prepositions, Roman numerals, small verbs and one or two nouns. *Moment* appeared twice. The figure 2 was there, either as part of a list (*I* was included as well) or as a substitute for *to*. Or perhaps *too*. *Contained* appeared in large well-defined letters. The Roman numeral *V* was there as well as *II* and *CX*. Where they fitted, to this day I still don't know. The word *all* was there, as well as the Italian *tutti*, which I think Spike may have included just to mess with my head.

As I arranged and rearranged the words, I had no idea how many vital clues I'd left lying in the gutter. Maybe it didn't matter. Maybe that was the point. To use just what I had to make whatever sense I could.

Finally, some possibilities presented themselves.

All moment is contained to moment.

This:

All is contained moment to moment.

Or my personal favourite:

Moment to moment all is contained.

I didn't really know what any of it meant. There were no particular conclusions I could draw. Somewhere in London, Spike was laughing. I don't think he was laughing at me. Or anyone in particular. I think he was just laughing.

Bahut Achhaa in Bharatpur

I

Like the travel agent in New Delhi, I'd expected The Bird Lover's Inn in Bharatpur to be no more than a one-star hotel. These had become depressingly familiar on my travels through India, and I knew by heart the grim reality of such places: a sparse room with a dusty fan, a tap with a bucket in the bathroom, a bed with a thin foam mattress, a dusty lamp. This time, however, the brochure hadn't lied; the hotel really did offer a 'newly appointed room, off the well-beaten road close to the bird lover's paradise', though it was dark when I arrived from Agra, so I didn't know if the road was well beaten or close to any kind of paradise. But I was charmed and relieved by the attractive freshness of the new rooms at The Bird Lover's Inn, the marble floors, the blue linen curtains and matching bed covers. And especially by the size of the bathroom.

My eyes watered when I saw the deep bathtub, the shiny new faucets, the stand-up shower. After two months in India I could smell my own hair, knew the weirdly acrid scent of the dust and grime that had settled in its thickness, the premature greyness suggested by the layers of mist and smog. The usual hand-held showers never offered enough pressure to properly penetrate my thick curls, so I couldn't ever really wash my hair. For a month I'd relied on surface moisture, perfunctory cleansing and leave-in conditioner. Subsequently, my hair had developed textures that had nothing to do with hair. It hung from my head now like a kind of matting: inorganic, hybrid, with smells and consistencies that changed its colour more than any dye I might have used.

The bath looked new. *Oh dear Lord*, my grandmother would have said. *How the marble gleams!* The showerhead was fixed high to the wall, meaning if I wanted to I could stand under its spray like I was standing in a waterfall. Two plump white towels lay neatly side by side on a bathroom rack.

The whole thing was a vision. For weeks I'd dreamed about lowering my body into a tub of water and washing off the grime that had accumulated on my skin. Even the colour of my eyes had changed, from a green to a muddy grey, and my irises were now lined with a ring of dark toxic blue. There'd be no showering tonight though. I intended to luxuriate in a long, hot bath.

On my way downstairs I could see, in front of the lodge, a fire burning. It was surrounded by people holding their palms towards its warmth. The owner called out for me to join them, but I declined – I was hungry after the long drive and kept walking towards the dining room.

The lights went off almost as soon as I reached the corner table in the dining room. This was also something I'd grown used to: the temporary nature of electric power.

The cook called out from the kitchen: *Don't worry, madam. We cook with gas!*

I was too content to be worried. In India I'd become used to things that would have irritated me back home. I liked the way my thoughts formed themselves dreamily in darkness, the way the lights went out unexpectedly all through the day and night. I liked the waiting, the empty quality of time that couldn't be ordered or controlled. It always brought me back to the languid days of childhood, when the slow unfolding of things was both exquisite and excruciating.

The cook called out again. *Don't worry, madam. We have generator.*

The dark lessened my gnawing hunger. I could hear myself breathe. I thought about the bath in my room, how the lack of something in one place intensified an experience that might be ordinary in another. *Oh dear Lord*, I whispered to my grandma's ghost, as I imagined heat on my spine, water softening the muscular ache brought about by hard beds, rickety buses, the incessant bruising crush of skin against skin.

I'll just have some dal, I called out.

Bread, madam?

I wanted bread without oil, cooked in dry heat, like the chapattis I bought in the street. There was something honest about fresh heat. I saw red, orange, a slick of blue rising from the centre of a furnace. Felt the quick sharp burning desire in my stomach.

Tandoori naan, I called back.

Had he heard me?

As I settled into my chair I recalled various facts about Bharatpur listed in the hotel's brochure that the travel agent in Delhi had assured me cheerfully were 'all lies'. The town was on the popular driving route from Delhi to Agra to Jaipur that took just over three days. Indians and foreign tourists came for birdwatching and to find accommodation when all the hotels in Agra were full in high season. Nearby there was a national park and a large number of local artists selling paintings of birds, from tiny studios dotted around the main hotels. Bharatpur, though, had something even more unexpected than bathtubs, stand-up showers and birds, something that the brochure neglected to mention and that I now discovered in a kind of ecstasy: it had silence. My ears searched out peripheral sounds, listening first for the honks and beeps of the never-ending traffic, the underscore of human voices speaking in multiple tongues, the glorious babble of India. But there was nothing familiar in the surrounding silence. Or in the soft aloneness I felt suddenly in the dining room of The Bird Lover's Inn.

The lights stuttered back on. A few seconds later my plate of dal arrived with a basket of tandoori bread delivered personally by the cook – a man in a turban, a Sikh perhaps. The dal was yellow and warm and perfectly arranged in a dish shaped like a boat. It had sailed across a vast distance to arrive at my table, gathering its lentils and spices from faraway lands. I pushed my nose down towards it; it seemed a gentle dal, not too oily, lentils lightly swollen in its juices. The cook waited anxiously at my side. I tried to remember how to say

very good in Hindi. Another cook, Rahul, from the Sanskriti Institute in New Delhi had taught me the word one evening in his kitchen.

Actually, Rahul had taught me three things in Hindi that night:

How to say *how are you?*

How to say *thank you.*

How to say *very good.*

They were useful words and phrases to know in a country where most people would ask me in English:

How old are you?

Are you married? and

How many children do you have?

The words for *very good* started with a b and sounded like a dance. Rahul couldn't read or write so I'd only learned to spell it phonetically. But for the moment I couldn't remember a thing Rahul had taught me. I nodded my head and gave the turbaned cook a delighted smile.

Okay, madam? Okay?

I wished he wouldn't bow. I couldn't let him bow to me without bowing back. I was the one, after all, who was receiving his graces, who should be bowing to him.

Where you from, madam?

I bowed my upper body and said: *Australia.*

Ah, Australia. Number one cricket team in the world.

Yes, but India very good too, I reassured him.

Australia: number one. India: number two. You like Sachin Tendulkar?

Not as much as I liked the look of this dal and bread, I thought, wondering why in this land of eternal things I'd had more conversations with Indians about Adam Gilchrist, Ricky Ponting and Shane Warne than I'd had about almost anything else.

I like Sachin and Sourav.

Ah, Ganguly? A very fine cricketer, but a bit, how you say, hoity-toity!

And also VVS Laxman, I enthused.

Who can forget his thrilling knock at the Sydney Cricket Ground in that memorable summer series of 2001? Double centuries in both innings. Supported by my personal hero, Mr Rahul Dravid. I was very proud to be an Indian that day, madam.

I always liked cricket talk. It seemed to distil centuries of cultural differences into some simple numbers and concepts: twenty-two players, two twelfth men, three umpires, four consecutive innings. You could hit fours and sixes and not have to run. You could run for twos, threes, fives and score incrementally numbered milestones: half-centuries, centuries, double centuries, triple centuries. You could be not out at stumps. Declare. Retire. Run with a runner. Not run with a runner. Run without a runner. Just run. Appeal. Bowl a yorker. A bouncer. A flipper. A googly. Hit to the boundary and over the top into the crowd. You could stand and field in slips. Hit to silly mid-on, be caught in leg gully, and bat before pad.

I'd met Indians who could recite by heart every score of every innings ever played by Sachin Tendulkar. And by Ricky Ponting as well. Children had been pushed forward to me at gatherings and they would list every wicket ever taken by Shane Warne since he began playing cricket. Hearing the numbers roll effortlessly from the lips of these children was like listening to music, like listening to something spiritual, intuitive, irrational, yet utterly logical in its simple and random incantations.

Caught behind 67.

LBW 44.

Stumped Gilchrist off Warne for 32.

Clean bowled for 10.

Out for a duck.

Out for a golden duck.

The cook continued, hovering, as the lights stuttered and went out again.

It thrills my heart that you love our cricketers, because you know, madam, Aussies are the best cricket team in the world. Second to none.

Outside, someone began playing a raga on a sitar. Not brilliantly, but not as clumsily as some westerners I'd heard, the ones who came to India for six months of lessons with a sitar master as a way of becoming *more Indian*. I'd met many of them along the way, in Delhi, in Rishikesh, heading to Varanasi or Kolkata, on their search for new sounds, new scales, new disciplines, and the surrender that seemed to come with it, entwined in the textures of the raga scales and their seemingly endless permutations.

Back in Brisbane, a composer who'd performed with Indians in India had told me more about those permutations: how Indian music did things in threes, unlike western music, which mostly did things in twos and fours. How it seemed to be based on three principles:

the principle of doing things in threes

the principle of making things grow

the principle of making them shrink.

He described it further like this:

They play three things three times that shrink while the rhythms inside them grow.

I'd been dazzled by all the talk of numbers and things growing inside shrinking things. I was intrigued by the circularity of it, the idea of things that mightn't have a beginning or an end. I thought of the mandalas from ancient India, the circles resting inside the squares, or vice versa. And the Christian writers, like Dante, who were obsessed with

numbers too, who imagined the divine ordering of the world by creating subsets of numerical symbolism – trinities, holy or otherwise. Indian music was driven by textural rather than linear imperatives, unlike the climactic impulse that propelled the cadences of western music. Did this lack of forward movement, this exploring of intricate detail in repeated things, signify a state of existence beyond ‘progress’, I wondered, when all possibilities of action had been exhausted and the only way forward was down and inward rather than up and on towards something – a conclusion, a cadence, at least some harmonic change? Was the zero that Indian mathematicians had first notated as a big round empty circle, with a balanced space inside and a vast never-ending space around it, the natural signifier of everything that their country’s repeated musical rhythms seemed to embody?

The raga melody stopped abruptly. The musician stumbled a few more times over the scale and then seemed to give up. I felt sympathy for them. I’d stumbled and given up many times too. But things would be different now. That’s what I always told myself anyway. Perhaps that was why I returned to places like India. To reacquaint myself not with the physical surroundings but with the feelings I experienced within them. To know that things would be different – that another tiny piece of my spirit had been liberated, like those tiny quarter-notes in an Indian scale, released from a dull melody and falling away to nothing.

Things falling away to nothing.

To the infinity of a zero.

India seemed to promise that.

Surprising India, the tourist brochures told me. *Magical India*, *Mystical India*.

When people asked me why I travelled to the subcontinent I never knew what to say. Was it the mountains, they asked, the seas, the deserts, the plains? Did I come for the gurus, the saints, the Brahmins, the pandits, or the gods or the goddesses? No. It wasn’t the

Himalayas, the meditations, or the old intelligence that, as Ralph Waldo Emerson had written, 'in another age and climate had pondered and thus disposed of the questions that exercise us'. It wasn't even for the music, which I always felt was a mystery that would be impossible to understand in one lifetime. So I didn't know why I came to India. Except that perhaps sometimes I imagined myself like the thing inside the music that shrinks inside the thing that grows. Perhaps while India kept growing in its chaotic, random, relentless way, while the pandits and sages and gurus kept pulling it back to its most ancient traditions, I'd keep shrinking until I was reduced to the mysterious zero entity that India had given to the world and now – in particular, in a dark dining room in Bharatpur – given to me, with all the infinite potential of nothingness contained by that most balanced and beautiful number.

II

Bahut aachha.

That was it.

The word for *very good*.

Very very good.

Bahut aachha.

A cha cha cha.

Starts with a b and sounds like a dance.

When I first learned the word from Rahul I'd laughed with delight and repeated the word over and over, like it was part of the lyric to a nursery rhyme. Rahul had thought I was being childish, as I think he secretly believed most western visitors to his country were. But he laughed along with me, flashing his incandescent smile in the candlelight of his kitchen, as if he had swallowed a mouthful of pearls. Later, I took my violin out and strummed a little song I wrote for him called 'Bahut Aa chha A Cha Cha Cha'. I sang my song for him. I did a

little dance for him. It had been a happy moment in Rahul's kitchen. A light, childish, perfectly empty musical moment.

Bahut aachha, I called as I felt my way towards the exit of The Bird Lover's Inn, stumbling like a blind woman through the silence that had suddenly descended, like something divine, onto my world.

The dal was bahut aachha.

Later, lying in a warm bath surrounded by orange candles, I felt embarrassed by how quickly I'd devoured the dal and bread, as if I were a living example of the phrase my grandma liked to say when we were eating too greedily: *Boy oh boy. You really wolfed that down.*

I wondered what the Hindi word for *wolf* was and if, in the warm kitchen of The Bird Lover's Inn, the cook had turned to his assistant near the shadows of the gas flickering on his big iron oven, below icons of the gods, goddesses and Indian cricket heroes that watched over them while they worked, and said in perfect lilting Hindi: *Oh my God. Those hungry western women! That one was famished. She really wolfed it down. Boy oh boy! She really wolfed it down.*