



# AN OFFICER AND A GNOME

The Indian sun struck fiery glints from the train tracks, the wind sent dust devils whirling down the street, my father glowered, and my mother prayed. I plunked down on a suitcase and began reading *The Blue Sword*.

It was my eleventh birthday, and we were on a relaxing vacation.

“What was it that guidebook of yours promised?” asked Dad. “‘Charming hotels?’ ‘Delightful old-fashioned hotels?’”

Mom’s eyes shut and her head bowed in prayer. Her lips parted and closed in tiny silent movements, like a goldfish.

Dad yanked a copy of *Lonely Planet* from Mom’s bag, opened it to a dog-eared page, then brandished it like a prosecutor displaying a blood-stained knife.

“Quaint Raj-era hotels,” declaimed Dad. “Do you see anything ‘quaint’ around here? Anything ‘Raj-era?’” He ostentatiously peered around the desolate landscape. “What about anything ‘hotel-like?’”

“Please don’t be sarcastic, Joey,” said Mom, without opening her eyes or moving her hands from the prayer position.

“I tell you what, Da-nonna. I’ll stop being sarcastic if you stop praying.”

Mom’s parents had wanted a son named Daniel. When they got Mom instead, they vengefully named her Dan-Anna. Unsurprisingly, Mom hated her name. But she didn’t like any other enough to change it. So she compromised by pronouncing it Da-nonna.

“Beloved Baba,” implored Mom, turning her face to the sky and squinting against the glare. “If it’s your will, please send us a way up the mountain. Pray with me, Mani,” she urged, prodding me with a sharp elbow.

“God must have more important things to do than call us a taxi,” I muttered.

“Mani!” exclaimed Mom, jabbing me again. “Don’t say such things. Beloved Baba cares for each and every one of us, and he will always look out for us, no matter what.”

Dad said, “So where’s Baba’s taxi?”

We all glanced around, just in case. No taxi.

If only I’d stayed in Los Angeles, I thought, we’d be in a place where shops were decorated for Halloween with witches and pumpkins. When we’d lived in America, I’d loved having my birthday fall on October 29th. I could pretend the holiday preparations were just for me. But Halloween wasn’t celebrated in India, and I was apparently here to stay.

I blamed my parents for this state of affairs. Also Baba.

Baba was an Indian guru whom my parents believed was God. Outside of India, he is probably best known for having been Pete Townshend’s guru and thus inspiring a number of songs by The Who, including “Baba O’Riley.” He’s also moderately famous for keeping a

vow of silence for forty-four years and for coining the insipid motto “Don’t worry, be happy.”

Like The Who, Baba’s heyday had been in the sixties, which was when my parents had discovered him. Mom and Dad had given up tie-dye and pot with the change of the decade, but they hadn’t abandoned their guru. In 1980, when I was seven, we moved from LA to Baba’s ashram in Ahmednagar in order to worship him full time.

Ahmednagar is an obscure backwater town in the west-central state of Maharashtra, India. Its residents usually explained where it was by saying, “Get on a train in Bombay, and go east for nine hours.”

The Ahmednagar ashram, or spiritual commune, was located in what I had previously thought of as the most desolate place in India. But this expanse of brown-baked weeds about a hundred miles west of Ahmednagar was giving it some serious competition.

Ahmednagar was even hotter in October than LA in August, so my parents had decided we should take a vacation in the hill-station called Matheran. Hill-stations are resort towns built atop hills that rise above the heat of the plains.

The procedure was to catch a train to the base of the hill, transfer to another train that climbed the hill to the outskirts of town, then take a tonga, or horse-drawn carriage, to one of Matheran’s quaint Raj-era hotels. But when we arrived at the train station beside the hill, which was situated in the middle of fifty miles worth of barren plains and the occasional crow, we discovered that the train to Matheran only ran on Tuesdays. It was Wednesday afternoon, the daily train from Ahmednagar had already left, and the nearest hotel was in Matheran.

“Is there a taxi?” Dad had asked the train station’s only inhabitant, a bored clerk lounging in an office knee-deep in dusty papers and empty teacups.



“Driver is out of station,” the clerk had replied. That was an Indianism that meant that the driver wasn’t around, was off-duty, or didn’t feel like driving.

“Is there any other way to Matheran?” asked Dad.

The clerk shook/nodded his head. The shake/nod, a side-to-side tilting of the head, is an all-purpose Indian gesture that can mean “Yes,” “No,” “Maybe,” “I don’t know,” or “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Where’s the stationmaster?” demanded Dad.

The clerk yawned. “He is out of station.”

As my parents accused each other of failing to check the train schedule, I immersed myself in a Robin McKinley fantasy novel. The novel’s heroine, Harry, was a foreign girl who gets kidnapped by desert nomads and learns to ride bareback and do magic.

Certainly I could identify with the “kidnapped and taken to a foreign desert” part, though I wished I were enjoying my experience as much as Harry was enjoying hers. I also wished three of her magnificent desert steeds would appear, so we could ride them up the mountain.

Mom poked me. “Don’t just sit there with your nose in a book. Pray with me.”

On second thought, perhaps only one steed.

“Excuse me.”

We all jumped. A leathery little man had appeared out of nowhere. His diminutive stature, wizened face, and pointy white beard reminded me of a china figurine I had of a gnome riding a pig.

“I have jeep to Matheran,” announced the gnome. “One hundred rupees.”

“Oh, thank Baba!” exclaimed Mom. “See, Joey, I told you Baba would provide.”

“Where’s the jeep?” asked Dad.

The gnome beckoned. We picked up our luggage, which consisted of a suitcase for Dad, a suitcase for Mom, a bulgy cotton bag filled with

leaking fruit for Mom, and a tote bag of paperbacks for me, and followed him.

The path went along the train tracks, winding past a lone acacia tree and stopping at an asphalt road that began abruptly in the midst of a thistly field. A jeep was parked in the middle of the street.

“Jeep,” explained the gnome.

We piled in alongside an Indian family. Two teenage boys were eating sandwiches, and their parents were sharing a newspaper. They seemed to have been there for some time.

The gnome removed a can of gasoline from under the seat and tipped it into the fuel tank. “I get driver,” he said, and then vanished.

After about half an hour he returned, accompanied by a man carrying a metal tube contraption. The gnome opened the hood of the jeep, while his companion positioned the metal thing that resembled a welding arc but couldn’t possibly be one, because no one would weld a fueled and working engine, especially when there were people inside the vehicle.

The man fired it up and began to weld the engine. Blinding white sparks fizzed out. I looked at my parents for guidance.

“Baba, Baba, Baba,” said Mom.

Dad was silent.

“Um,” I said, “That guy’s welding the engine, right? Isn’t that dangerous? Shouldn’t we get out?”

“Baba, Baba, Baba,” said Mom.

Dad shrugged.

Just then the man working on the engine turned off the welding arc, slammed down the hood, and walked off.

“Hey, isn’t that guy the driver?” I asked the gnome. “Where’s he going?”

“Not driver,” he replied. “Is engineer. Driver will come.”

Again we waited. Fumes began to issue from under the hood of the jeep, and the gnome hurriedly opened it to release the vapors.



Another jeep came rumbling up, one painted in camouflage blotches. An army officer got out and marched over to us. I couldn't help ogling the officer.

In India, the army is not a dumping ground for people who can't function in civilian life, but a quality career path. Officers tended to be polite, helpful, and good-looking. This was not universally the case—the border state of Kashmir, which is the site of a low-grade perpetual war, suffered from anti-civilian violence and looting by Indian soldiers as well as the Pakistani guerillas they fought, but we were far from Kashmir, and all the officers I'd ever met were perfect gentlemen.

This one was slim, dark, and handsome, with a neatly combed moustache and wire-rimmed glasses. I could tell that he was going to get a starring role in my daydreams for months to come.

Over the gnome's protests, the officer peered at the smoking engine. I noticed that he stood as far away as possible and seemed poised to run. His eyebrows shot up, and he scolded the gnome in Hindi. Then he came around to the back of the jeep and addressed the Indian passengers, who seemed to disagree with him. Finally, he turned to my parents.

"I have examined this jeep," said the officer in English. "It is very unsafe. You should not ride in it."

"Is there any other way to Matheran?" asked Dad.

"There is Matheran train."

"That only runs on Tuesdays."

The officer shook/nodded his head. "This jeep is unsafe. The engine is very bad. Better to take train."

Dad said, "Thank you, sir." He sounded sincerely appreciative, if you ignored the fact that he'd clearly never had any intention of taking the officer's advice.

The officer got back into his jeep and drove away.

Mom turned to Dad. "Joey, maybe we shouldn't take this jeep."

"You're the one who wanted to come to India," replied Dad. "Well, this is India."

“But he said the jeep wasn’t safe.”

“What else can we do? You notice the other family’s not getting out.”

As Mom and Dad quarreled, a third party arrived. This time, a dwarf.

I don’t mean that he resembled a dwarf, as the man I thought of as “the gnome” resembled a gnome: He *was* a dwarf, a pudgy man with stubby arms and legs and an elongated torso, an inch or two shorter than my 4’ 4” self.

“Is driver,” announced the gnome.

We all stared at the dwarf. A slow grin spread across his face, widening and widening until all his teeth were showing. It was a smile of utter vacuity, the sort of blandly demented leer that generally heralds drooling or gibbering or claims to be the Easter Bunny.

“Heh, heh, heh,” he chuckled, staring at Mom’s breasts.

Mom folded her arms over them.

With the empty smirk still plastered over his face, he clambered into the driver’s seat and slid down to reach the gas pedal. That put his head beneath the steering wheel. He then tried sitting on a pillow, which proved that if he was high enough to see over the steering wheel, he would be too high to reach the pedals.

“The driver is a *dwarf*,” I informed Dad.

“I noticed,” he said.

“Well, how’s he going to drive when he can’t see over the steering wheel?”

In case this sounds implausible, I note that although my parents’ memories of the driver are not identical to mine, to this day they agree on the crucial issue of his height relative to the steering wheel.

Mom recently e-mailed me, “As for the story of the trip to Matheran, you are absolutely correct in that it appeared that the driver was a midget—well, whether officially he was a midget by height or just a very very stuntedly short person is debatable.”



Dad's recollection is that the driver was short because he was a twelve-year-old boy.

The dwarf slid down, his feet barely touching the pedals and his head level with the hub of the steering wheel. The gnome hopped into the back of the jeep. We all squeezed over to make room for him. But rather than sitting down, he stayed where he was, clinging to the door frame, his feet on the running board, and his body hanging out the back.

"Neutral!" called the gnome.

The jeep leaped forward. My neck snapped back.

"Neutral, neutral!" shrieked the gnome.

The dwarf turned all the way around, still grinning. "First gear?" he asked.

"Second gear, second gear!"

The dwarf's head disappeared from sight, and the jeep slowly rolled into a fence post.

"Watch the road!" shrieked Mom.

"I am watching," he replied from somewhere beneath the dashboard. "What gear?"

"Reverse!" yelled the gnome. The engine made a horrible grinding noise. "Clutch!"

Mom turned on him. "This driver of yours doesn't know how to drive."

The Indian family, urgently speaking to each other in Hindi, had evidently come to the same conclusion, but seemed no more willing to leave the jeep than we apparently were.

"He knows *automatic*," explained the gnome. "Jeep is manual. Second gear!"

I nudged Dad and whispered, "Why doesn't the other guy drive? He obviously knows how."

Dad gave me a withering look, one clearly polished and refined from years of practice. In response, I cringed.

"*Obviously*, he's teaching the young guy," Dad told me.

“Oh.”

The gnome continued to shout instructions, and the jeep shuddered into motion, bouncing up the winding mountain road. As we climbed higher, the ground fell away on the left and rose on the right.

Soon we were weaving and jolting along a narrow road between a vertiginous cliff and a granite hillside. There was no rail, but the drop side was lined with rocks painted white, so drivers could see where the edge was.

The dwarf turned around, leering. “What gear?”

The jeep drifted to the left and knocked a white rock over the cliff. The rock tumbled down, down, down, thousands of feet down, finally disappearing from view.

“Look out!” screamed Mom.

“Watch the road!” shouted Dad.

“Third gear, third gear!” yelled the gnome.

“Lean to the right, the right!” I shrieked, and pushed all sixty of my pounds into the right side of the jeep.

The dwarf turned back around and wrestled the jeep into the middle of the road.

“Baba, Baba, Baba,” chanted Mom.

I fatalistically decided that if we were going to die, we were going to die, and somehow began to see humor in our situation. Certainly Harry would have faced death bravely, I thought.

“Along the Cliff of Death rode the ten of us,” I declaimed. For the first time, I saw the point of my school’s requirement that we memorize epic English poems.

“Be quiet,” said Mom. “Baba, Baba, Baba.”

“Death to the right of us, death to the left . . .”

“Clutch! Clutch!”

“Baba, Baba!”

“Lean! Lean!”

“Watch the goddamn road!”



“Baba, Baba, Baba . . .”

“A *dwarf* is driving us, safety now is lost to us, along the Cliff of Death rode the . . .”

WHAM!

As the dwarf turned away from the road, apparently to inquire about the gear, the jeep slammed into the cliff side at about twenty miles per hour. I dropped *The Blue Sword*.

“You goddamn moron!” yelled Dad. “Idiot! Idiot! Idiot!”

The Indian family began congratulating each other on their lucky survival.

“Oh, thank Baba we’re alive!” said Mom.

We had been packed in so tightly that despite the lack of seat belts, nobody had even fallen out of their seat.

I picked up *The Blue Sword* and clambered out of the jeep. Mom was right behind me.

“You are leaving?” said the gnome. “Paint only is damaged.”

“I want my money back,” said Dad.

“Is agreement,” said the gnome. “Jeep is not damaged.”

“The jeep crashed. The driver doesn’t know how to drive a stick shift.”

“Is agreement. We drive up hill.”

“He can’t even see over the steering wheel.”

“Twenty rupees return.”

“We have to walk fifteen kilometers uphill with all our luggage because your driver is a defective midget!”

“Fifty rupees.” The gnome held up a wad of bills. “I pay petrol . . . I pay driver . . . I pay engineer . . .”

Dad grabbed the fifty rupees. “Fine.”

The Indian family stayed in the jeep. With the dwarf at the helm and the gnome clinging to the back door, the jeep lurched ahead of us and vanished up the hill. We stood and contemplated our suitcases, bundles, and tote bag, and the vast length of the road ahead.

“It’s Baba’s blessing that we’re alive,” said Mom, a little doubtfully.

Dad made a snarling noise.

I picked up my tote. Dad balanced the suitcases on his head. He looked like a coolie. I was tempted to snicker, but feared the Wrath of Dad. We began the six-mile trek uphill.

From a loop of the road high above us, a faint voice drifted down. "Second gear!"

