



Natural Bridge

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NO SHOES IN THE ASHRAM

It was late afternoon and so still around the ashram that Swami Padmasan could hear the swish of traffic from the highway nearly four miles away, sibilant as prayer. This was the time of day he liked to spend in his vegetable garden. It belonged to the whole retreat community, actually, but no one cared for it like he did. He loved to spend an hour as he was, pulling weeds, inspecting the leaves of the carrot and potato plants, pinching back the basil.

The guests had free time now and were in their rooms reading or walking the grounds. The staff members, if they'd finished their duties, were napping or had gone in the ashram's van to the center of the tiny upstate New York town. In the kitchen, the cooks were chopping vegetables, cooking rice, preparing dinner.

A car bearing a lone young woman pulled into the parking lot. She carried two suitcases up the path to the main house.

The swami pulled the last weed from the potato patch. As he walked toward the main house, he was alarmed to notice a bee at his elbow. He swatted it toward the ground and stomped on it, grinding its remains beneath his heel. Just inside the main house, he rested his shoulder against the doorjamb as he took off his work shoes, then went into the bathroom to wash his hands. He leaned far over the sink to the left to wash the flipper at the end of his left arm. The arm was shrunken and ended about where the elbow should have been. The flipper, almost the size of a hand, had two wide, flat fingers. The defect was the result of his mother's thalidomide prescription.

My morning sickness was unbearable. I hadn't kept anything down for five whole days when I went to see the doctor, his mother had said at least once a month for his whole life. There's a great new drug for morning sickness, he told me. How could we have known?

Swami Padmasan bent over the sink, peered into the mirror, and wiped a smudge of dirt from his cheek. His stern jaw had been set slightly to the right since he was a teenager. It silently dared anyone to make fun of him.

The voice he heard out in the hallway made him turn off the water. The nasal hint of a Brooklyn accent, the rushed outpouring of words, were familiar. Could that be Carol? It sounded exactly like her. She was talking with Chandrika, a staff member. He caught his own eyes reflected in the mirror and shook his head, disbelieving. It couldn't possibly be Carol. But even the smoky, husky pitch was hers.

She'd ended their relationship just before he came to the ashram many years ago. They hadn't spoken since. He turned the faucet back on, finished washing his hands, then rubbed them on the towel until the skin was red and raw. He ran his hand through his hair and took a last look in the mirror.

When he stepped into the hallway, he saw Chandrika and the young woman coming toward him. The guest had shoulder-length brown hair, poker straight, and brown eyes that tended to dart nervously. She was an attractive girl, the swami thought, if maybe a bit overweight. She wasn't Carol. His shoulders sank in relief and disappointment and he sighed softly.

Chandrika was explaining the schedule of meals and classes. He noticed that the young woman was wearing sneakers and interrupted Chandrika. "We don't wear shoes in the ashram," he said, and pointed to a sign that read, "No shoes inside please."

The guest said, "Oh . . . sorry . . . I didn't realize." Her smile fell away.

Chandrika mouthed a silent "Oh" and covered her mouth with her hand. "Swami, this is Barbara. She's here for a week's retreat. Barbara, Swami Padmasan."

"Welcome," he said with a pinched smile. Chandrika scurried off in the direction of the kitchen.

"Nice to meet you. I didn't expect an American swami," said Barbara, folding her arms over her chest.

"Did Chandrika tell you? Asana class is at four in the old ballroom. Don't be late. Are you new to yoga?"

"No, I've been studying—"

"Good. I'll see you there." He turned on his heel and walked toward the back stairs, leaving Barbara alone in the hallway.

The swami arrived at the ballroom ninety minutes before his class was scheduled to start. The ballroom, with its picture windows that were taller than he was, was his favorite place in the house. He liked the view best during the eight a.m. yoga class, when the green foothills of the Catskills looked soft, and closer than they really were, as though he could reach his hand out and touch a mound of heavy green cotton.

He padded to the front of the room, humming a tune to himself. He unrolled his mat, humming a little louder now as he made sure that the end of the mat lined up parallel with the wall behind him. Before teaching, he always meditated, then practiced his postures for an hour. As the swamis who founded this sect emphasized in all their writings, even the most advanced teacher never stops being a student and deepening his own practice. He sat on his meditation cushion and closed his eyes.

Padmasan had learned years ago how to integrate his flipper arm into his practice. He couldn't do all the poses, but he had learned to teach them all. Sometimes when new guests walked into his class, he saw their faces drop before they could catch themselves. He knew that many of them wanted to learn a full arm balance, wanted to master the scorpion in a weekend before they went home. He could almost hear them thinking, *How the hell is this guy with a shrunken flipper arm going to teach me to balance upside down?* But during Padmasan's training in India, Swami Omkarananda had taught him, thoroughly and methodically, about the postures he was unable to do, and how he could instruct students in them.

Padmasan had been a deft student, learning quickly and masterfully. And now he knew that he was better at teaching those asanas than many of the swamis who could do them. For his own practice, he knew how to adapt poses to accommodate his left arm. He had been doing them that way for so long that, when he was alone, he didn't even remember that his body was different. Practicing made him feel strong and whole. That was part of what he loved about his life at the ashram.

When he was ready, he started with the warrior series, *virabhadrasana*. Padmasan moved into the third version of the pose: balancing on one leg, holding the other straight out behind him, looking out beyond his arms outstretched in front of him. He imagined himself the powerful Virabhadra for whom the pose was named. He ran through the story in his head: When Shiva's wife was killed, the grief-stricken god ripped a lock of matted hair from his head and threw it to the ground. From that lock, Virabhadra sprang up, created to kill the one responsible for Shiva's wife's death. Padmasan loved the story and felt invincible in the pose. He sustained it for several minutes.

He moved into *trikonasana*, the triangle pose, jumping his feet wide apart and stretching his arms out to either side. He exhaled deeply as he stretched over to the right and placed his palm on the floor behind his ankle. His left arm stretched toward the ceiling. He could feel his chest expanding and he breathed in, savoring it.

He came back to center, then stretched to the left. He couldn't put his palm on the floor on the left side, so he grabbed the back of his left knee with his flipper to keep his balance. He inhaled and closed his eyes, feeling his hamstrings lengthen and his balance become solid.

Matsyasana, the fish, was next. He sat on the floor and pulled his legs into lotus position, his namesake pose: *padmasan*. Lying back on the floor, he used his elbow on the right side and his flipper on the left to push himself up into an arch. He exhaled and rested the crown of his head on the floor, then wriggled his elbow and flipper underneath his back. He had to work harder with his flipper arm to make sure his back didn't sink on the left side. Omkarananda had stressed daily how important it was to be aware of asymmetry, especially in his case, and to work to correct it.

He breathed deeply and felt his spine lengthen, then pushed up on his elbow and flipper to increase the arch, moving his head in closer on the floor. As he moved his head, something caught his eye on the other side of the room. With the top of his head still on the floor, he turned to look—something he warned his students never to do. He felt a sudden stab of pain on the left side of his neck as he saw that a student was in the room with him. It was the new guest, lying on her back in the rear of the room with the soles of her feet facing him.

"Ouch," he said, startling himself with the loudness of his voice. He uncurled his neck and back and lay flat on the floor, his legs still in lotus. He rubbed his neck with his right hand. He'd pulled that same muscle countless times over the years. "What a nuisance," he said quietly. He liked to be alone in the room when he prepared to teach a class, before any of the students got there.

He sat up and unfolded his legs, still rubbing his sore neck. He looked over at the guest again. Her head popped up off the mat and she said, "Are you okay? Did you hurt yourself?"

He looked toward the door and flicked his hand dismissively toward her. "Yes, yes, I'm fine." His dark eyebrows came together in a V.

"Okay." She lay back down.

Then he said: "You know, it's bad form to talk to someone who's in the middle of asana practice." He looked back at her. Her upper body was slowly rising from the mat.

"Did you say, 'bad form'?"

"Yes." He nodded and winced at the pain.

Very slowly, she said, "I thought you had hurt yourself."

"Hmph. No. I'm fine." He knelt on the mat, sank his rear end down to his heels, and put his forehead on the floor in child's pose. He thought he heard a sibilant, whispered "asshole" from the back of the room.

Maybe she would go now. He still had a few minutes to focus himself for class. He stayed in child's pose and tried to do just that.

But it really was uncanny how like Carol's her voice was. The way she said "bad form" was just the way Carol would have, emphasizing the consonants as if she were unsure how to pronounce it. When he thought of Carol again, he felt his face flush red. He recalled his clumsy attempts to make love to her. She was patient with the fact that he was still a virgin in his early twenties—even a little charmed by it, he thought. But he couldn't seem to get an erection no matter what they tried. She, gamely enough, had stuck around for three months or so while he saw a few doctors, but he never made any progress.

After she left he had gone to a few prostitutes to see whether the problem was Carol. He'd never had a problem getting hard as a teenager, God knew, but those times he'd always been by himself. The prostitutes didn't help in the end. They just enraged him.

The first one was nice. She took his impotence as her personal challenge and patiently tried stroking him all over with hands, tongue, mouth, breasts, but nothing worked. He left her an extra \$50, crumpled it in his haste, and left quickly.

The second one was older and had deep wrinkles etched around her eyes. The dark skin around her mouth permanently sagged into a frown. He was with her in a dark, airless motel room with a floor of stained yellow linoleum. When she started undressing, he followed her lead, pulling off his pants and shirt and laying them on a folding metal chair. He sat down on the bed. As he looked up at her, he caught her glancing at the flaccid dick in his lap and rolling her eyes.

She left her skirt half unzipped and put her hands on her hips. "You're not one of those guys who needs to be dominated to get hard, are you? 'Cause I'm not into that."

"No, I just . . . I've been having trouble . . ." He trailed off. "Could we talk a little first?"

She looked at him and sighed, her frown sagging deeper. She thought for a minute, then zipped her skirt back up. "Yeah, well, I'm not a fucking sex therapist. Maybe you should see a doctor or something. I have to go."

She had her clothes on and was out the door before he could even get to his pants on the chair. His face was burning red as he put them on. The zipper stuck and he tugged on it, a low growl of frustration coming up from his chest. He gave the tab one last yank and it came off in his hand, the zipper stuck halfway up.

"Fuck!" He threw the zipper tab at the window and heard it clink against the glass. He picked up the folding chair and smashed it against the wall. It left a small dent and made a loud crash when it landed on the floor. It felt good. He stood glowering over the chair with his hands on his hips, then kicked it hard. He pulled on his shirt without bothering to button it and left.

He waited two weeks before he tried again. He'd seen an ad in a magazine for "beautiful, elegant girls, discreet locations," and called. The girl they'd sent had a terribly sexy body, he thought, and a delicate, pretty face. When he saw her he was hopeful and excited. She leaned over to take off her shoes and he thought he felt an erection coming on. He went beside her and rubbed against her hip. When she stood up he slid his hand beneath her blouse and cupped her breast. Her body was lovely. But still nothing.

He backed away, feeling his face and ears get hot. As he let her finish undressing, he sat on the edge of the bed and held his penis, stroking it up and down. She walked over.

"Would you like me to straddle you like this?" They both looked down at his limp penis. "Oh, well, we can fix that." She knelt between his legs and took his dick in her mouth. She licked and sucked it for a few minutes. Still nothing.

At that moment he felt like he had left his body and was watching the scene from somewhere above the doorjamb. He put his right hand on her shoulder. She pulled away and looked up at him, blinking expectantly. "Is something wrong?"

A roar filled his head from the inside and he shoved her back hard with his right hand. Her head knocked the corner of the brick fireplace and she pulled her knees up in front of her, holding her head and curling into a fetal position. He stood up. Disgust and rage welled up at once inside him. "Stupid bitch." He kicked her hard in the back then pulled on his clothes and left.

A few nights later, he was out for a couple of beers with a friend and told him what he'd done. He couldn't look at his friend as he told the story; he just stared straight ahead at the bottles behind the bar. His friend recommended that he try the ashram in the Catskills for a retreat. Mortified by his behavior and grateful for an escape, he fled there for a week and never left.

As it got closer to four o'clock, the room filled up with ten or twelve guests. At four precisely, the swami began the class, directing the students through breathing exercises, then a series of poses. When they got to the headstand, about half the class tried it, going up into the pose on their mats in the middle of the floor. The others, who weren't as advanced, did preparatory exercises.

"The back should stay flat, don't arch it like a banana," he said to the students who were in the headstand. He walked past Barbara. She was arching in the pose, not correct at all. He stopped next to her. "Straighten the upper back out. Don't sag into the pose. The spine is straight, straight, straight." He punctuated each "straight" with a slap to her upper back.

He looked around again. None of them was doing it correctly. "No, that's not it at all. You must keep the spine straight from the neck to the tailbone, or you may as well not even attempt the pose." He strode to the front of the room.

He pointed at Barbara. "Come here please."

She reluctantly walked up to his mat.

"Go up into the pose, please." She did.

He held her feet with his flipper hand and pointed down the length of her body with his other arm. "Do you see this arch? This is terrible. It puts too much weight on the head. A very lazy way to do the pose. And quite dangerous for the neck. If you don't have the upper-arm strength to do the pose then you must build it up before you try it again. Okay, come down. Back to your mat, please." Barbara's face was bright red. She did not look up as she walked back to her mat.

The next night was Sunday and many of the guests had left. There were so few people for dinner that the kitchen staff had set up only one long table where everyone could sit. The swami had been in his room after class and arrived to dinner a bit late. By the time he had filled his plate at the buffet line, the only empty place to sit was right next to Barbara. He put down his tray and slid onto the bench beside her. He glanced toward her with a pinched smile, nodded, and said, "Hello." She nodded at him and turned back to her soup. They ate in silence.

When she had finished she stood up. He heard her sigh. "I'm getting some tea. Would you like some?" She didn't look at him when she spoke.

"No thank you. But would you get me some more water?" He handed her the cup from his tray.

"Sure."

She returned with the water and put the cup down next to his plate.

"Thank you."

She took a sip of tea and slurped it. "Excuse me," she said. He fingered the bowl of his spoon.

"So . . . have you been here before?" he asked.

"No. Never."

"Are you from Manhattan?"

"Yes."

"What kind of work do you do there?"

"Publishing."

"Hmm. You know, we got this house from a founder of one of the big publishing houses. Which one do you work for?"

"Oh, uh . . . Penton."

"Hmm. Not that one. Well, this man's daughter had a terrible heroin problem. This was back in the '60s. The father had heard about Swami Sadasiva and the great work he was doing." He felt buoyant at the opportunity to tell this story. He looked at Barbara; she was interested.

"Swamiji's guru had just sent him to America a few months before. It was his mission to spread the message in the West. So the father took the girl to Swami Sadasiva and left her there, against his better judgment, he later said. But when he visited a month later, he almost didn't recognize her. His daughter, who'd been so angry and defensive, had turned into a strong, healthy young woman, nearly overnight, he said. That weekend he found and bought this house. Swamiji accepted it in the name of his fledgling sect, and we've been in it ever since."

Barbara mashed her leftover lentils between the tines of her fork. She scraped the food into a pile and curled her arm around the plate protectively. She pulled her tray slightly to the right, away from the swami, and slid after it on the bench. She knocked the elbow of the woman next to her, causing her to spill her tea. "Oh!" she jumped. "I'm so sorry," she said to the woman. She turned back to the swami. "That's interesting," she said, then paused. "So is she still here?"

"Who?"

"The daughter. Does she still live here? Is she still a follower?"

"Oh, no. She did stay a few years. But she eventually left. I believe she went to work for the publishing house, actually."

"Hm. Well, thanks for telling me." She stood up, took her tray to the sink, and washed her dishes.

As Padmasan climbed the stairs to his room, he remembered hearing about the house's history his first week at the ashram. Someone at the table had joked, "Couldn't the publishing magnate have found us a nice house in the Hamptons?" But Swami Padmasan, or William, as he had been known, took to upstate New York right away. And the longer he stayed, the more he loved it. The brutal winters and relatively few guests allowed him plenty of time to study his *Bhagavad-Gita* and all the writings of the founding swamis. He had devoured every book in the house's library, and in the springs and summers he expanded the garden from a few rows of tired tomato plants to nearly a half-acre of peppers, eggplant, zucchini, potatoes, and corn. He broadened it every year. Even the sect's vow of celibacy wasn't so much a challenge as a relief for his first few years. He didn't have to think about what had got him there in the first place.

Eventually—perhaps because he'd simply outlasted everyone else—he rose to the rank of swami, meaning that he was in charge of the Catskills center. It was just before his fortieth birthday.

But his elevation to swami brought another change he was wholly unprepared for. Now, like a sweaty adolescent, he was getting erections all the time. It happened by accident at first. The week after he got back from India, from his swami ordination ceremony, he was helping a guest up into her headstand. He crouched beside her, touching her sacrum as he reminded her to keep her spine aligned with her neck. As he stepped away, his hand brushed her buttock. He felt his penis get hard. He looked down, his mouth gaping, and fingered the front of his penis through his loose orange pants, to make sure. Then, remembering himself, he clamped his mouth shut, took his hand away, and surveyed the class. No one had noticed a thing, absorbed as they were in their headstands.

"Uh . . . I need to leave for a minute," he said. "Keep working; I'll be right back."

He stepped out of the room and into the bathroom across the hall, locking the door behind him. He took down his pants and looked at his erect penis. His pants around his ankles, he shuffled into a stall and latched the door. He stood facing the toilet and took his dick in his right hand. A shudder rippled through his shoulders, belly and groin. He closed his eyes and stroked himself. He turned slightly to lean against the right side of the stall and stroked more and more vigorously. The face of the last prostitute he'd seen, the beautiful one, flashed through his mind. He came quickly with one sharp gasp, then fell heavily against the wall. The bump released the stall door; it swung open and hit him on the left shoulder.

He shuddered again, then opened his eyes, grinning. Two thoughts floated up through his mind: *Did anyone hear me?* And *I don't care*, like two soap bubbles, rising in tandem until they hit each other and popped.

He wiped off the toilet seat, tossed in the toilet paper, and flushed. He sighed deeply, pulled up his pants, and tied the drawstring. He kept grinning at himself in the mirror as he washed his hands, smoothed the front of his pants, and ran a hand through his hair. He went back to class.

That night in his room, he prayed to Vishnu to help him harness the power of his newfound ability. He didn't tell anyone about what had happened.

He waited a week before he tried it again. He was helping a guest in fish pose. The lower half of her body and the top of her head were on the floor; her back was arched. Crouching beside her, he put his hand on the middle of her rib cage, saying "really let the chest open." He felt her take in an expansive breath beneath his hand. "That's it; keep breathing. Let your body open up." He backed away and let his fingers trail across her breast. As he stood up, his penis got hard again. He was confident that his baggy yoga pants hid the erection, so he simply kept teaching. He welcomed the physical feeling like an old friend. He walked among the yoga mats like a king surveying his principalities, smiling to himself at his secret.

Before long, he was doing it every day, at least once. He tried to plan it so it happened right before class ended. Then he could go in his room and masturbate. If any of the guests knew what he was up to, none of them had confronted him or reported him to headquarters.

The next morning the bell rang at 5:45, and by 6:00 the guests had made their way to the meditation room, an octagonal room surrounded on all sides by windows. On the way in, nodding sleepily to one another, they each collected a cushion to sit on and a book of Sanskrit chants.

This morning, as every morning, there would be a period of silent meditation. Then the swami, cross-legged on his cushion at the front of the room, would give a talk and lead the chanting, or a sort of sing-along in Sanskrit.

After the meditation and before the chanting, the swami motioned over one of the women staffers. She crouched beside him as he whispered something in her ear. She nodded once, then stood up and padded silently across the wooden floor. Seconds later she was back with a glass of water, which she carefully placed just next to the swami's right knee. She didn't look at his face. He whispered to her again and again she walked out, noiselessly. He ran a hand through his hair and gave a pinched smile to the guests, who were beginning to re-adjust themselves on their cushions and rustle the pages of their chant books. The woman returned with a wedge of lemon on a napkin in her right palm. She placed it beside the glass and bowed her head to the swami. He squeezed the lemon into the water, plopped the wedge into the glass, and took a sip.

With each chant the guests' singing got heartier and more confident. As the swami looked out over the nine or ten men and women in the room, he noticed that the young woman—Barbara was it?—had her nose in her chant book and was barely moving her lips to sing.

After the next chant he stopped and spoke to her pointedly, "Chanting is an important part of our worship here at the ashram."

She looked at him blankly.

He went on, looking straight at her, "The Sanskrit pronunciations are in the back of the book."

She began to blink hard and stammer, realizing he was talking to her. "I know. I was . . . I mean, I've been . . ."

The guests need to learn that true spirituality requires discipline and hard work, he thought, just as he'd learned from the swamis who came before him. "Maha Devi," he said to the staffer who'd fetched his water, "would you lead the next chant please?" He glanced at Barbara. Her cheeks were flushed and she glared at him darkly.

On the way back to his room, Swami Padmasan remembered the warning he had got from Swami Svarupa a few months ago to be less demanding of the guests. "They are guests, after all. We've received some complaints about your brusque manner," he'd said, over the phone from the center near Mumbai. When Padmasan had put his prayer books away, he went and knocked on the door of Barbara's room.

When she saw him she scowled. He smiled at her and said, "May I talk to you?" She turned to the bed and closed the journal she'd been writing in. Padmasan watched her lean over in her tight black leggings and felt himself get hard. Barbara turned back to him and silently stepped aside, arms folded across her chest.

"Are you enjoying your stay?" he asked. She rolled her eyes in response.

"Look . . . I . . ." he stammered. "I'm sorry if I've been hard on you. Sometimes when I see a lot of potential in a guest, I expect more. I can see that you're somehow searching for some truth . . ." Her scowl softened and she sighed faintly.

His fingers itched to touch her. No way to do it now without being obvious, he thought. He put his right hand on her shoulder. "It's good that you've come to the ashram. There's a lot for you to learn here." He looked at her eyes, then at her chest. He couldn't stop himself: His hand slid down her left breast like an iguana over a hot rock.

Barbara pushed him away with both hands, her face wrinkled in disgust. "Get the fuck out." She slammed the door.

An hour later, the swami was in his vegetable garden, hoeing a small patch of earth next to the carrot plants when he saw Barbara carrying her suitcases out of the main house and down the hill to her car. Suddenly she noticed him, dropped her suitcases, and strode over to the fence around the garden.

"You're full of shit, swami, you know?" She pointed her finger at him as he stood, shoulders sagging slightly. He had a spade in one hand and a bundle of long, feathery weeds in the other. "You think you're so holy, right? Don't think you're getting away with this. I'm calling the main office as soon as I get back to the city." She stalked away, grabbing her bags.

He watched her leave. He wiped his forehead with his good hand, which came back streaked with red. He took it for blood and breathed in sharply. He

reached up and gingerly touched his forehead as adrenaline tingled out to the ends of his arms and his legs. But he wasn't cut—he had only smeared his *tilaka*, the sacred red mark of distinction he wore on his forehead.

"Damn her!" he hissed, pounding his right thigh with his fist.

The young woman's car pulled away and he got on his knees to rip out the weeds between the carrots. "Stupid girl," he muttered. "What does she know?" He pulled more and more rapaciously, his body rocking in rhythm. "She runs away at the first little obstacle." He no longer saw what he was pulling and started ripping out the young carrot plants, then the tomatoes, then the basil, whatever he could reach. "Doesn't she see? Spiritual growth can be uncomfortable." He grabbed a squash plant, tearing it from the ground. Bits of dirt flew off its thick, ropy roots and landed in his mouth, turning to mud on his tongue.