

An Atheist Walks into a Temple

The Temple with a Staircase

Hyderabad, 2007

After my swim team's abysmal failure at the state meet, our coach decided it was time for us to engage in more high-intensity cardio. He marched us from the sports complex we trained at to the Sri Ram Temple across the street, and then demanded that we run up its marble staircase.

While this feels like a vaguely sacrilegious act, our gaggle of tween-athletes-in-training has blended into the temple's landscape over time. This is a temple of moderate influence: listed on all the pilgrimage leaflets people hand out on Diwali, sought out by the ardently religious, but typically avoided because of the trek it takes to get to the top. It's vaguely unkempt, with rusted brass bells and dust-caked statues, and it stands atop a flight of one hundred and ninety-three stairs. This suits our coach perfectly.

We gather in the driveway at dawn, stretch, and then begin our ascent. By the time we're halfway to the top, the compound begins to stir—we hear the priests' footsteps, the sound of them brushing their teeth, gargling and retching so loudly, it makes me squirm. This is when the first devotees pull up in the driveway, hitch their sarees and dhotis to their knees, and inch their way towards us. A brass bell clangs and a chorus breaks into prayer: *Om jaya jagadish a hare, swami jaya jagadish a hare*. My Sanskrit is abysmal and I don't understand the words, but it's easy to breathe to their rhythm. Sometimes, I tell myself they're praying for me to go faster, willing me to keep up with the other girls when my muscles strain and I'm in danger of falling behind.

I try to keep up with the cool older girls, the ones that wear knock-off Adidas sweatpants and discuss boys every time they catch their breath. One of them remarks that Mohammed, who has run far ahead of us, is hot. She says it's a pity she can't date him.

Another says it must be weird for him to run up the stairs of a temple—is that even allowed? And I wonder if these girls would approve of my presence at the temple, because even though my extended family is devoted to Hinduism—with a zealotry that borders on cultish—my parents and I are the opposite. Atheist, perhaps. But that's not something we'll admit for a long time.

The girls shift their attention to Jayanth, a fifth-grader—and the youngest of the lot—who has caught up to us, heaving, glistening with sweat. His steps are long and springy, twice the length of mine, even though he's half my size.

“Why are you trying so hard?” one of the cool girls laughs. “You look ridiculous.”

“I'm trying so hard so I can be as strong as Hanuman,” Jayanth replies, puffing out his cheeks and flexing his forearm earnestly. He points to the stone railing that lines the staircase, to engravings I'd never noticed before. In one of them, the monkey god stands with one hand on his hip and the other holding up an unidentifiable triangle.

“Hanuman was able to carry Mount Dronagiri because he was magic, not because he was strong,” the girl scoffs. “And plus, you can never be as strong as Hanuman.”

I laugh along with everybody else, hoping not to be identified as the one person who doesn't know anything about Hanuman and the mountain. I Google it when I get home, and learn all about how Lord Hanuman saved Lord Laxman's life.

When Laxman was gravely injured in the battle of Lanka, Sushena the Monkey Chief examined his wounds and concluded that only the Sanjeevani plant, located on Mount Dronagiri in the Vindhya Hills of the Himalayas, could heal him. Hanuman, his friend, aide, and confidant, volunteered to fly to retrieve it. But when he reached Mount Dronagiri, he saw that it was overrun with plants, each one indistinguishable from the next. And not wanting to waste precious time, he put his life on the line by uprooting the entire mountain—which was over 20 times his size—lifting it over his head, and flying it back to Lanka; fatigued and in extraordinary amounts of pain. He risked his life and summoned strength he never knew existed to save Laxman.

Now, I think about Hanuman when we bound up the stairs; I think about the tenacity with which Jayanth-the-fifth-grader runs. As we finish our workout, ready to get into the pool, I watch cars pull up in the driveway. A little old woman with puffy cheeks and a scraggy grey bun gets out of an Ambassador, dressed in a purple saree that bunches at her creaking knees. She reaches into the car and retrieves a cane, with which she hobbles towards the staircase. I imagine her scaling the side of the temple, fighting the urge to rest as her legs give out, channeling every ounce of strength in her body so she can get to the top. So she can see her god.

The Temple with a Cow

Bangalore, 2012

We're in college; young and broke and in love, and very little makes us happier than free food. I tell you the story of my parents' courtship on our fourth date—how *their* parents didn't approve of their inter-caste dalliance and they could only spend time with each other outside their homes. They couldn't afford cafes or restaurants and it was too hot to sit in the park, so they resorted to spending their afternoons in the Leelavati Hospital waiting room, where air conditioning was

free and coffee was both tasty and cheap. You respond to my story by suggesting we go hang out at the temple your family would attend service at. So I don't tell you that my parents' marriage is now riddled with infidelity and resentment, held together only because they're both wracked with guilt.

"We'd go there from time to time when I was growing up," you say. "If you circle the grounds during service, you get prasad for free. And the tamarind rice they serve on Tuesdays is to die for."

I ask you if you identify as Hindu and you laugh in response; you identify as a lesbian, you say, as if the two are diametrically opposed. But I live in the college dorms where we're not allowed guests, and you live with your parents who probably haven't heard the word "lesbian" before, so we're in the same predicament my parents are in.

The priest welcomes you back when we enter the temple together for the first time, and you're surprised he remembers you. He asks how your parents and brothers are—if they've started attending a different temple or given up religion altogether. You lie, and I'm not sure why. "They moved away, but I stayed in Bangalore for college."

The priest leads us to a mandap where swaths of people sit cross-legged on a wicker mat. We join them and the priest begins to sing, "*Om jaya jagadish a hare, swami jaya jagadish a hare.*" His voice is coarse and phlegmy, and while it makes me cringe, I get to see you close your eyes and hum along with him.

We skulk away when service gets boring and our feet fall asleep; we walk along the perimeter of the temple grounds and you show me your favorite idols. We pause by Lord Parvathi. You're named after her, you tell me, one of her incarnations is called Aparna.

You're not very aptly named, I think as I take in the sculpture in front of me—Parvati rides a lion, sticks out her tongue, and holds the decapitated head of her enemy under one of her arms, like a biker holding her helmet. Two of her other hands hold weapons; in the fourth is a wilting lotus. Red silk drapes around her golden shoulders, and she bares her teeth in a vicious smile.

It's drizzling when we conclude our temple-tour, so we eat Prasadam on the covered patio, dry and warm and blessed by gods we don't believe in. This is how temple turns into a ritual.

Sometimes, I sneak you into my dorm room, where we huddle together, dressing in the kurtis and sarees you borrow from your mother. We braid jasmine into each other's hair and squabble over who gets to wear which bindi from our painfully limited supermarket bindi-sticker collection. We walk around the temple, hand-in-hand, when nobody's looking. We perch on the base of brass pillars in the courtyard, where we eat our prasad every Tuesday, and you tell me you think I'm beautiful.

The priest who serves us prasad, scooping mounds of tamarind rice into banana-leaf bowls from a vessel larger than himself, remarks how nice it is to see young people so wholly committed to the Hindu faith. We strike up a conversation with him and he tells us the temple has acquired a baby cow they're naming Asha.

Asha means Hope.

"Maybe one day we can name our daughter Asha," you say. I don't tell you that I detest children. Instead, I say we don't have to wait that long to name something Asha—"we can get a cat after we graduate." And then we seize to talk about children because we're both aware we're getting ahead of ourselves; this is not a conversation we should have at age twenty.

We stop going to the temple before Asha the Cow arrives. We've discovered community nights at the local theatre, which is also free and, according to you, much more my style. We sit in the courtyard outside the theatre after plays, where the lulls in our conversation are filled with rustling leaves and not brass bells. I stretch my legs in front of me, curl my toes and rack my brain for something romantic to say.

"I would lift Mount Dronagiri for you."

The Temple With a Funeral Pyre

Somewhere on National Highway 48, 2015

I can feel you pulling away when I give up my pre-placement offer in Bangalore for a job that pays better in Bombay. When I ask you to move there, you come up with excuses. You love Bangalore, you say, and that's something I've never heard before.

We're two months into long-distance, and I'm driving down to visit you when my phone beeps: "Hey, I want to preface this by saying I love you. But don't come today. Mom and Dad have introduced me to a boy I like. I'm sorry."

I resist the urge to throw my phone through the windshield. I press down on the accelerator and scream, drowning out the sound of A.R. Rahman on the radio, numb until I hear a squelch break through the cacophony. The car rises and falls, I brake, and it takes me a minute to register what I've done.

Through the windshield, I see the bloodied road in front of me. I didn't do it, I tell myself. I couldn't have done it. I didn't do it.

But the highway is empty, I realize. The highway is empty except for me. I steady my breath so I can get out of the car and confront it—a calf, barely two feet high. Roadkill now.

Barely recognizable as the baby cow it once was; its black-and-white spots stained red and smattered with gravel. “I’m sorry,” I shriek. “I’m so sorry.” I reach over, place my trembling hand on its face and close its bulging, beady eyes.

I sprint away, sweat seeping through the seams of my salwar-kameez, down the highway—an endless open road. I’m at the mouth of a by-lane when I see a swath of people, dressed in white and wailing under a curved archway. A blue and pink structure stands in front of them, creaking under its own weight. In front of it, a pyre cackles. I realize, slowly, that as I’ve walked towards them, I’ve blended in. I’m shrieking as loudly as the mourners, dressed in what could pass as funeral attire: a white salwar and beige kameez.

The priest chants, his voice hoarse and straining, reciting prayers in a dialect of Marathi that I can’t quite place. The man closest to the fire cups his head in his hands, with his fingers digging into the skin of his bald scalp, denting it, breaking skin, and drawing blood that trickles through slits of flesh like tears through eyelids. He screams an ugly, unintelligible sound.

I have never felt, never witnessed, grief so raw. I scream, too. I scream with him, feeling my throat tear apart from the inside, coarse and fraying, like threads of a mango husk coming apart. I scream for you. I scream for the cow. I scream for a cat named Asha.

The Temple with Americans

Jacksonville, 2018

The priest has a New Jersey accent. “*Om jaya jagadish a hare,*” sounds warbled and unsteady because of it. It makes me want to laugh. I don’t, though, because this Diwali celebration is Serious Business. My husband missed the last two Diwali events the Hindu Indian Association of North-Central Florida hosted. Two years ago, he was in Bombay, working as a visiting

professor at a swanky new liberal arts college outside the city. That's where we met. Last year, he took a sabbatical for a semester, to be in India. To marry me.

We've driven an hour to get here: from our house a stone's throw away from the University of Florida to a neighborhood in Jacksonville heavily populated by South Asian immigrants. I hadn't anticipated receiving any attention at the event, but people flock to our car when we pull up in the driveway, and I realize that, to the Hindu Association of North-Central Florida, my husband is a Big Deal.

"You must be the new Mrs. Roy," they gush, enveloping me in hugs. I don't tell them I haven't changed my last name.

"You're right," they tell my husband. "She's gorgeous."

To me they say, "It's nice to finally see you."

To him they say, "You've done well for yourself, eh?"

I focus on the idol in front of me when service begins the priest sings: Krishna sits, blue-skinned and cherub-faced, holding an earthen pot full of butter. Next to him is Parvati, riding a lion, with her teeth bared, taunting me.

I wonder if you're married now, too. If you've found yourself in a different continent, tethered to a professor of engineering, in a college-town where nobody looks like you and the sun sets later than you're used to. If you've learned to love men like you loved me, or if your love for your husband is as measured and tepid and lukewarm as mine.

When the pooja is over and my foot has fallen asleep, my husband takes my hand and we walk around the temple. The courtyard is a wide expanse of concrete patterned with fallen leaves and rangoli. On the far side of the compound is a mural of a giant hanuman floating through the sky—mace in one hand, a mountain in the other.

I wonder if my husband would lift Mount Dronagiri for me. If I'd do it for him. I wonder if I would lift Mount Dronagiri for you, still. And if you would have done it for me.