

Tracing the Moon

A Memoir of a Woman's Journey in India

Kumari Ellis



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Contents

Chapter 1	London.....	1
Chapter 2	In the beginning.....	7
Chapter 3	A hut in the hills.....	19
Chapter 4	Parvati.....	37
Chapter 5	Monsoon rain.....	47
Chapter 6	Calcutta.....	65
Chapter 7	The promise of paradise.....	75
Chapter 8	The Bodhi tree and the Buddha.....	89
Chapter 9	The orange flag.....	101
Chapter 10	Returning.....	127
Chapter 11	Babaji.....	133
Chapter 12	The Guru.....	155
Chapter 13	Ramana Ashram.....	167
Chapter 14	Arunachala.....	173
Chapter 15	The ashram.....	183
Chapter 16	The roof of the world.....	191
Chapter 17	The land of Ram.....	209
Chapter 18	The house of Shiva.....	249
Chapter 19	Guruji.....	267
Chapter 20	Winter in the hills.....	273
Chapter 21	The temple.....	285
Chapter 22	The Ganga.....	301
Chapter 23	Paradise lost.....	317
Chapter 24	Prayer.....	327
Chapter 25	ShivaShakti.....	335

CHAPTER ONE



London

'Since before time, I have been free. Birth and Death are only doors through which we pass. Sacred thresholds on our journey.' Thich Nhat Hahn

On a full-moon night I witnessed a death. Twilight had just given way, as if the hour herself supported this surrender. I entered Henry's room to change the morphine drip; I knew his life was drawing to a close. Always pale, his skin had a translucent glow, as if reflecting the angels already near.

At his bedside four friends chanted quietly. Henry was a Buddhist and his community kept vigil by his side. Melissa was there too, sitting by his side as she had over the years, his long fingers entwined in hers. Henry's persistent cough, five years earlier, had confirmed his diagnosis and revealed his preference for men. Their son was six years old. Yesterday Jack had sat on his mother's lap staring at his dad – his thin face so like Henry's, wet with lost tears. Now Jack was with his grandmother, who had once been Lady in Waiting to the Queen.

With each of Henry's admissions to our ward, this Buddhist community filled the room with ancient sound. When I first heard the

murmured cadence of ancient prayers, I had stood at his doorway with goose bumps rising up my arms.

Henry told me the Buddha taught that life is just a fleeting event, one blink among many as we journey through the worlds. Henry's surrender to his approaching death touched me deeply. None of the many patients I'd seen over the years had such a sure sense of calm acceptance.

'His breathing's changed. He just closed his eyes.' Tears spill down Melissa's face. I laid my hand on his heart that was still beating but erratic, a distant drum roll somewhere far away. His breath came in shallow gasps. I had made friends with death, working on this ward, yet when it was there before me I felt my stomach tighten, my own heart beat stronger. I wanted to be part of this moment too and ignored the phone ringing at the nurses' station just outside the door, and the beeping of a machine telling me that a drip needed changing.

'I just left. I had to get away, to find a meaning in it all,' Henry had told me when we first met, his eyes shining in a face stretched tight. 'I found a monastery in Japan after travelling the world. It was on an island and somehow that spoke so much to me. After a small boat delivered me to the shore, I walked through a forest then up a hill to the monastery. It was springtime and all the cherry blossoms were in bud.' He had sat on the bed with his eyes glazed over as if he was transporting himself back to that blossom-strewn monastery. And it may have been then that the seed took root in my own soul, as if I too knew there was more, that a journey awaited me, and my destiny included a spiritual search of my own.

'I found peace there. Peace for the acceptance of my diagnosis, peace in my sexuality and the sure knowing I would die. Judith, we all will die, every one of us. I have had to face it fair and square.' He had looked deep into my eyes. Henry was tall and thin and gave the appearance of already touching heaven.

Henry was not the first patient to challenge my beliefs about the soul and the mysterious journey of death. I'd seen dozens die, mostly young men, some of them afraid as they breathed their last. Yet Andrew, a committed Quaker, had held his partner's hand as he

passed, and journeyed with him towards the light until his breathing and consciousness was no more. Later he had told me that he too had sensed the light, a great white expanse, and felt that Tim, his beloved for many years, was at peace. And Andrew too held that peace even in grief. Belief seemed to me to be an important part in it all. Henry inspired me to inquire more deeply of the eastern religions I was already drawn to, the words of Thich Nhat Hahn, J Krishnamurti and the writings of Joseph Campbell.

As I read, I wondered what could be understood about death, except that it is our shared destiny – the one and only certainty from the moment we take our first gasping breath. It was the immense grief of those left holding thin entwined fingers as final breaths receded that affected me deeply. How would lives recover with the burden that grief seemed to bring? Mothers in shock and dismay, blank faces and forced cheeriness. Death insisted I search my own heart, my own beliefs, and I felt an urgency in me to understand what this life is all about. Before death comes knocking at my own door.

We became easy friends, Henry and I, as his admissions became more frequent. One day, he told me that he'd stayed six months in the Japanese monastery. 'We chanted for peace, within ourselves and for the whole world. The teachings of the Buddha were painted on the faces of the monks. Serenity surrounded me. For the first time ever I felt at peace.' And he fixed his wide blue eyes on me before his face erupted in a smile.

'Has that peace stayed with you?' I asked as I changed a bag of blood during a short admission for a blood transfusion.

'Yes. It is like the base line, the rhythm for my being. Sometimes the melodies become more of a challenge and then I practise more diligently.' He sat up and crossed his thin legs. 'I chant. I sit still. I remember again that peace is all around me, always, no matter what the circumstance. Life can throw many challenges – better to be prepared in your mind.'

As the admissions became more frequent and as he became thinner than I thought possible, he was calm, always ready with his gentle smile, sitting up cross-legged on the starched sheets until he no longer could.

Then it was his last day. After changing his drip I found another nurse to take charge of the ward keys and told her I wanted to stay with Henry as he died.

I returned to his room and slipped in as quietly as I could. Henry's pale face was ashen grey, his cheekbones sunken, his eyes slightly open. I wondered for a moment if he had already passed. I reached for his hand, cool and waxy. His pulse was a thin whisper. His breathing, a shallow rattle all day, now came in gasps with long pauses in between. The chanting continued unbroken. Henry's fingers slipped from Melissa's hand. After a few minutes he sighed deeply. It was the full moon in May.

As death reached down, a presence filled the room. Henry slipped free and life and death stood side by side. In that briefest moment, I held eternity. I felt a pure unadulterated love, and it was as if everything – thought, time itself – ceased to be. Consumed by this presence I found only silence. An absence of everything I had previously known. The sense of my self expanded to include it all – this body still warm but already vacant, other patients in nearby rooms, the flowers in the vase, and the oblivious world outside the window. Reality slowly returned and my feet again felt rooted to the floor, my hand heavy as it rested on the chair where I sat. I looked at his body, and the immediate absence of him seemed so sudden, so complete. What was it that gave Henry his soul, his life? Surely it was more than the simple act of breath? Perhaps the presence *was* God and it was his spirit I had felt so strongly. God's spirit, Henry's spirit, felt vaster than the world I knew.

* * *

I cycled home through London's streets. It was late but taxis swooped in to collect couples arm in arm and pubgoers mingled on the street. It was a warm night, with a lingering fragrance of summer. I rode my bike carefully, slower than usual, to savour every moment. The normality of life unchanged was poignant – rumbling buses, beeping horns, and a siren wailing in the distance. The night was clear and the full moon's brilliance fell all around.

My cosy houseboat on the Thames had never felt so welcoming. I lifted my bike over the steps to the floating mooring. The full high tide surged and as I paused a moment to find my balance I was struck by the illusion that we believe life to be stable, yet it is just like this: moving planks on a swollen river.

The other boats were in darkness. No cheery ‘hello!’ or offers of a tea from this little community of river dwellers. My boat was moored at the end of the floating jetty, furthest out into the river. I stepped across the gangway to the bow. Pots of geraniums and petunias trailed from the roof in the moonlight. Once inside the tiny living space I closed the door and put the kettle on the stove. I collapsed on the lounge, my thoughts utterly consumed by Henry and the wonder of his death. Melissa and I had bathed his body together and then zipped it tight in a body bag as the law required. Not much more than a bundle of bones stretched with skin. Melissa had been calm, her tears all spent. For many years she had known this moment would come but as she ran her finger along the zipper of the body bag, she said: ‘Nothing, nothing can prepare you for this. Jack now has no father.’ Her look of utter sadness brought my own tears. I made no effort to hide them. Now I wonder that perhaps I should have held them back and remained professional. But something had touched me in the moment of his death that gave me no choice.

The whistle of the furious kettle pulled me back to the present. I sat out on the bow with a mug of camomile tea. My boat bobbed with the swell as the last party boat passed by. The moon spilt molten white through the black water.

The brief meeting with peace I’d felt at Henry’s death was now distant and dilute but the flavour was still with me – a sharpening of the senses, a clarity and spaciousness in my mind. Later I would realise that in the moment of Henry’s death I had seen the landscape of God – the oneness where life and death play hand in hand.

* * *

God had been in my orbit ever since I spun to life in my mother’s womb. I was born in Sussex to missionaries recently returned from the

Philippines. Ours was a home of prayers at bedtime, church twice on Sundays and prayer meetings throughout the week. Family holidays to a seaside town in Wales where the church beach mission gathered on the sands. A born-again Christian household caught me in a web of rules. I prayed to God as if my life depended on his mercy. God was to be feared, Jesus the only way for redemption. Promises of heaven, threats of hell – we were sinners all unless we repented. But when my mother brushed my hair, hard so it hurt, I knew, with a certainty, that she had it wrong about God. I always knew. Then as I witnessed Henry – his graceful acceptance, his serenity in such suffering, his own belief far from that of Christianity – I knew again with a final certainty that the God of my childhood was not for me.

Stars breathed barely visible light and the moon hid behind patchy cloud. I threw the last of my tea into the river and retreated from the night. Sleep seemed far away. A subtle thrum of energy coursed through my veins. I had felt something extraordinary take seed in me and I wanted to know what it was.

I thought of the pilgrims I had seen when backpacking in India. I had stood on the banks of the river Ganges and watched them bathing as the sun rose pale and promising over their holy river. The image had stayed with me. As I climbed into bed I remembered the sound of temple bells and the mysterious holy men in their orange robes, gazing far away from the chaos of life all around them.

Six months later I handed in my notice at work, sold my boat, and in mid-January I boarded an Air India flight with a one-way ticket to Bombay.