

The Peace Outside

- Raelee Chapman

Before the Beatles and Maharishi Yogi, my mother's only connection to India was a Punjabi man. My mother said that's why my skin was the color of coffee stirred through with cream.

It was the year 1969, the 70s loomed bright and promising. Sometime before, my mother had declared 'The Beatles' as her official religion on the census form. We knew all their songs and sang them together, she with her guitar and me with my tambourine, a little rusty from when I had taken it into the bath with me.

Paul McCartney was her favorite; and she carried a photo of him in her wallet everywhere. My mother said she needed no higher form of divination — until the Beatles became followers of Maharishi Yogi. I was seven when she pulled me out of school, and we went to India.

I clung to my mother's skirt as we padded through Delhi's main bazaar in our flip-flops. My hands bunched the crushed velvet fabric into my fists to keep a grip. She dragged our old leather suitcase behind her with a strap. My tambourine strapped on my back, created a gentle racket. The marketplace was deserted; decaying odors clung in the cool night air. On the shops' front steps, I made out lumps under plastic and blankets.

"There's nowhere open, Radha," my mother whispered, as she looked for a lit-up sign or inviting doorway that might be a hotel. My mother swore under her breath and I pushed out my bottom lip, ready to sulk. I began to imagine the lumps under the blankets and plastic were dead bodies, and we would soon be sleeping with them.

"I'll have to wake someone up," she said, climbing the steps to a dark doorway. She tapped softly at first but soon was banging and screaming that we needed a hotel. Finally, the door opened. Holding a squat candle, a boy with a patchy mustache led us in from the darkness.

Our motel was called The Shanti Palace. It wasn't a palace, but *Shanti* meant peace, and my mother said we had come to India for 'Inner Peace.' Whenever she said that, she did so with solemn eyes and a soft voice, placing her palm on her heart. I'd nod obediently.

The boy who'd opened the door for us was named Papu. Every morning, he would bring pancakes to my room. He was only twelve. I was in awe of him. He seemed to have a lot of responsibility in the hotel, and everyone gave him money when he did a job for them. He said I could help him for the day, so I went to ask Mum.

She sat cross-legged on the roof, her notebook open and sweet milky tea beside her. It was very noisy outside as car horns blared endlessly. Traffic moved at a snail's pace, through narrow lanes riddled with cows and people. Motorbikes, motorized rickshaws, touts and screaming sellers, added to the deafening hum. The smoky sky shaded us from the sun's eye but not the heat. The soles of my feet seared on the rooftop. Mum stared into space not even noticing me until I was right in front of her. She blinked suddenly then picked up her pen and started scribbling in her notebook.

"There!" She threw down the pen, satisfied, and read:

*A burning stench inhales me
The doe-eyed cows eat garbage in gutters, while
The children, never innocent, thief streetwalkers*

"How does that sound, Radha?"

"Why are the children never innocent?" I asked.

"Because they are pushed into work or begging at an early age. They miss out on their childhood, unlike you," she said.

On hearing this, I decided I didn't really want to help Papu anymore; I would keep my innocence instead.

Later, my mother and I shopped in the market place. She was looking for fabric to make cushions. My mother told me Maharishi Yogi was going to give us each a special word, called a *mantra*, meditation. I nodded, thinking it didn't sound very hard to get 'Inner Peace' if all you had to do was sit on a cushion and think about a word. She must have known what I was thinking, because she said, "It's a very serious matter Radha. Very serious indeed."

Flashes of multi-colored saris surrounded us. Children roamed, parentless. Men stood smoking, occasionally spitting in the dirt. Touts and sellers screamed at us from both sides of the street, hawking their wares. My mother marched past them all, head high. My flip-flops kicked up dust as I tried to avoid cow pads. The cows were everywhere, eating garbage.

When mother finally found a fabric shop, I decided to wait outside.

Across from me, a lady sat with a small child in her arms. She reached up to adjust her veil. When she reached up to adjust her veil, I stared at her hands. The skin was pink and puckered from burns. She lifted the little boy, who was naked from the waist down, and gave him a gentle shove in my direction. The little boy started to cry as a motorbike passed. Crouching down, I held out my arms. His nose was running.

"Come here," I cooed.

Just as I scooped the little boy into my arms, my mother came out of the shop.

"No, Radha! No!"

"But the mother told him to come me," I said.

The child's mother walked over to us with her burnt palms out. "*Munee munee, baksheesh,*" she said.

"No," my mother said, her cheeks red, eyes irritated. I put the child down.

"Baby sick, munee, munee."

"No, sorry." My mother grabbed my arm and yanked me forward. The woman followed us, pleading all the way.

"Next time you touch a beggar child, I will leave you with a beggar family!" Mum snapped. "And I mean it."

I hung my head in shame at a cruelty I didn't understand.

In the afternoon I decided to sit in the kitchen and watch Papu make *chapattis*. His long black fingers kneaded the dough, then picking it up to slam it down on the bench, sending clouds of flour in my face.

"How come your skin is so dirty?" he asked.

I giggled. "It's not, silly! It's like yours. My dad is Indian."

"Oh," he said. "Little bit Indian, little bit white makes very nice huh?"

I held up my arms, looked at their coloring and shrugged. He grinned and threw me a bit of dough to play with.

That day Mum had met a man named Jed who had wild curly hair which he tried to tame under a purple bandanna. Jed said 'peace' a lot. Mum said we were going to Jed's room that night for a sing-along, and I could bring my tambourine. We went up after dinner. His room was lit with candles, and people were already there with percussion instruments. Mum sat on a cushion with Jed, so I sat next to a lady holding a triangle. People were passing around fat cigarettes. I shot Mum a questioning look to see if she was going to smoke any, but she didn't see me. She was looking at Jed.

We sang 'Yellow Submarine' first, then 'Can't Buy Me Love.' I tried to sing loudest. After that, there were Bob Dylan songs I didn't know, so I sat and waited for an appropriate cue for my tambourine. Thick clouds of smoke wafted from my mother's mouth, and her singlet straps had fallen down. Jed rubbed her bare shoulders. I got up and walked over to her.

"Mum, Mum!" I shouted over the music.

"Oh, hi, Radha. Having fun?" Red swirls swam in her eyes. Jed looked at me and said, "Peace." I gave Jed a fierce look for touching Mum's shoulders like that and eventually marched back to our room without saying goodbye. I scrambled onto the bed and found Mum's wallet. I wanted to tear up her photo of Paul, knowing how much it

would upset her. I stared at the photo. Paul's hair fell into his droopy eyes. I decided to make a small tear in his left ear. Satisfied, I put the picture away and climbed into bed. I fell asleep trying to imagine what special world Maharishi Yogi would give me.

My mother didn't come back to our room until morning. When she saw Paul's photo, she looked at me but didn't say a word. Still, I could tell by the curt way she said goodbye to Jed later that day that she felt she had strayed from her path of 'Inner Peace.'

We were going to Rishikesh in the Himalayan foothills. I said goodbye to Papu, then we boarded the bus. There were no seats, but a heavy lady in a purple sari patted the edge of her seat where I could sit. Mum sat in the aisle on a sack of grain. Delhi's smoky sky stretched for three hours before it became blue.

In Rishikesh, a boy threw our suitcase down from the roof of the bus. Mum grabbed the suitcase strap to drag it to the narrow wooden bridge across the Ganges. Sun skimmed the water, which was pure there at its mountain source and clearly reflected the blue and green of the hills. The sandy banks glittered with mica. Shirtless children played in the shallows under the bridge, shouting for us to throw them a coin. Red-faced monkeys sat on ropes, screeching.

Mum and I walked in silence along the river banks; the streets were wide and empty. Holy men in orange robes sat reading scriptures in the sun. We followed faded signs pointing to Maharishi Yogi's ashram. We walked until we found a concrete path leading to dome-shaped huts made of stone, scattered in the forest.

"This is it," my mother said.

The forest floor was littered with cigarette butts, broken bottles and plastic cups. The huts were empty. "Maybe he moved," my mother said faintly. I pointed to a tiny pair of slippers outside one hut. We saw a flash of orange through the trees. In a clearing, an old man sat in the sun. His grey beard hung down over his orange robes to his lap. He held a string of prayer beads in his hand.

"We're looking for Maharishi Yogi," my mother said as we neared.

"Gone, all gone." he said with a wave of his hand.

"Where?"

"Holland. Someone gave him big money, now gone to Holland, make big ashram there," he said.

My mother's shoulders slumped. "When did he go?" she asked.

"Few months."

I saw a fallen tree and many flattened bushes and shrubs in the clearing. The old man's eyes followed my gaze.

"Elephant," he said. "Come crashing in the night."

My eyes grew wide.

“Also tiger comes night time, too. Must be careful.” He gnashed his teeth for effect. I sat on a rock beside him. He told me he lived alone in one of the huts. My mother sat on the ground and began to cry. I stared at the old man’s prayer beads.

“You know Hare Krishna?”

I shook my head. He placed the first bead between his thumb and forefinger and began to sing in a deep, rich voice that seemed to emanate from somewhere near his heart.

*Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare
Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare*

Then he shifted his finger to the second bead and began again. I joined in, singing loudly. I sat on the edge of the rock, occasionally looking over my shoulder for elephants or tigers. Eventually Mum lifted her head and joined in singing, softly at first. The music seemed as pure and real as a Beatles’ song, and our voices soared over the forest canopy. When we reached the last bead on the string, we stopped singing. My mother’s eyes were now dry and bright. She looked so at home sitting on the forest floor, that I thought she might want to stay. She leaned forward, looking up at the old man, and said, “OK, now we’ll teach you something. Do you know ‘Let It Be?’”