

CHAPTER 1

My suffering left me sad and gloomy.

Academic study and the steady, mindful practice of religion slowly brought me back to life. I have kept up what some people would consider my strange religious practices. After one year of high school, I attended the University of Toronto and took a double-major Bachelor's degree. My majors were religious studies and zoology. My fourth-year thesis for religious studies concerned certain aspects of the cosmogony theory of Isaac Luria, the great sixteenth-century Kabbalist from Safed. My zoology thesis was a functional analysis of the thyroid gland of the three-toed sloth. I chose the sloth because its demeanour—calm, quiet and introspective—did something to soothe my shattered self.

There are two-toed sloths and there are three-toed sloths, the case being determined by the forepaws of the animals, since all sloths have three claws on their hind paws. I had the great luck one summer of studying the three-toed sloth *in situ* in the equatorial jungles of Brazil. It is a highly intriguing creature. Its only real habit is indolence. It sleeps or rests on average twenty hours a day. Our team tested the sleep habits of five wild three-toed sloths by placing on their heads, in the early evening after they had fallen asleep, bright red plastic dishes filled with water. We found them still in place late the next morning, the water of the dishes swarming with

insects. The sloth is at its busiest at sunset, using the word *busy* here in the most relaxed sense. It moves along the bough of a tree in its characteristic upside-down position at the speed of roughly 400 metres an hour. On the ground, it crawls to its next tree at the rate of 250 metres an hour, when motivated, which is 440 times slower than a motivated cheetah. Unmotivated, it covers four to five metres in an hour.

The three-toed sloth is not well informed about the outside world. On a scale of 2 to 10, where 2 represents unusual dullness and 10 extreme acuity, Beebe (1926) gave the sloth's senses of taste, touch, sight and hearing a rating of 2, and its sense of smell a rating of 3. If you come upon a sleeping three-toed sloth in the wild, two or three nudges should suffice to awaken it; it will then look sleepily in every direction but yours. Why it should look about is uncertain since the sloth sees everything in a Magoo-like blur. As for hearing, the sloth is not so much deaf as uninterested in sound. Beebe reported that firing guns next to sleeping or feeding sloths elicited little reaction. And the sloth's slightly better sense of smell should not be overestimated. They are said to be able to sniff and avoid decayed branches, but Bullock (1968) reported that sloths fall to the ground clinging to decayed branches "often".

How does it survive, you might ask.

Precisely by being so slow. Sleepiness and slothfulness keep it out of harm's way, away from the notice of jaguars, ocelots, harpy eagles and anacondas. A sloth's hairs shelter an algae that is brown during the dry season and green during the wet season, so the animal blends in with the surrounding moss and foliage and looks like a nest of white ants or of squirrels, or like nothing at all but part of a tree.

The three-toed sloth lives a peaceful, vegetarian life in perfect harmony with its environment. "A good-natured smile is forever on its lips," reported Tirlor (1966). I have seen that

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smile with my own eyes. I am not one given to projecting human traits and emotions onto animals, but many a time during that month in Brazil, looking up at sloths in repose, I felt I was in the presence of upside-down yogis deep in meditation or hermits deep in prayer, wise beings whose intense imaginative lives were beyond the reach of my scientific probing.

Sometimes I got my majors mixed up. A number of my fellow religious-studies students—muddled agnostics who didn't know which way was up, who were in the thrall of reason, that fool's gold for the bright—reminded me of the three-toed sloth; and the three-toed sloth, such a beautiful example of the miracle of life, reminded me of God.

I never had problems with my fellow scientists. Scientists are a friendly, atheistic, hard-working, beer-drinking lot whose minds are preoccupied with sex, chess and baseball when they are not preoccupied with science.

I was a very good student, if I may say so myself. I was tops at St. Michael's College four years in a row. I got every possible student award from the Department of Zoology. If I got none from the Department of Religious Studies, it is simply because there are no student awards in this department (the rewards of religious study are not in mortal hands, we all know that). I would have received the Governor General's Academic Medal, the University of Toronto's highest undergraduate award, of which no small number of illustrious Canadians have been recipients, were it not for a beef-eating pink boy with a neck like a tree trunk and a temperament of unbearable good cheer.

I still smart a little at the slight. When you've suffered a great deal in life, each additional pain is both unbearable and trifling. My life is like a memento mori painting from European art: there is always a grinning skull at my side to remind

me of the folly of human ambition. I mock this skull. I look at it and I say, "You've got the wrong fellow. You may not believe in life, but I don't believe in death. Move on!" The skull snickers and moves ever closer, but that doesn't surprise me. The reason death sticks so closely to life isn't biological necessity—it's envy. Life is so beautiful that death has fallen in love with it, a jealous, possessive love that grabs at what it can. But life leaps over oblivion lightly, losing only a thing or two of no importance, and gloom is but the passing shadow of a cloud. The pink boy also got the nod from the Rhodes Scholarship committee. I love him and I hope his time at Oxford was a rich experience. If Lakshmi, goddess of wealth, one day favours me bountifully, Oxford is fifth on the list of cities I would like to visit before I pass on, after Mecca, Varanasi, Jerusalem and Paris.

I have nothing to say of my working life, only that a tie is a noose, and inverted though it is, it will hang a man nonetheless if he's not careful.

I love Canada. I miss the heat of India, the food, the house lizards on the walls, the musicals on the silver screen, the cows wandering the streets, the crows cawing, even the talk of cricket matches, but I love Canada. It is a great country much too cold for good sense, inhabited by compassionate, intelligent people with bad hairdos. Anyway, I have nothing to go home to in Pondicherry.

Richard Parker has stayed with me. I've never forgotten him. Dare I say I miss him? I do. I miss him. I still see him in my dreams. They are nightmares mostly, but nightmares tinged with love. Such is the strangeness of the human heart. I still cannot understand how he could abandon me so unceremoniously, without any sort of goodbye, without looking back even once. That pain is like an axe that chops at my heart.

The doctors and nurses at the hospital in Mexico were

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incredibly kind to me. And the patients, too. Victims of cancer or car accidents, once they heard my story, they hobbled and wheeled over to see me, they and their families, though none of them spoke English and I spoke no Spanish. They smiled at me, shook my hand, patted me on the head, left gifts of food and clothing on my bed. They moved me to uncontrollable fits of laughing and crying.

Within a couple of days I could stand, even make two, three steps, despite nausea, dizziness and general weakness. Blood tests revealed that I was anemic, and that my level of sodium was very high and my potassium low. My body retained fluids and my legs swelled up tremendously. I looked as if I had been grafted with a pair of elephant legs. My urine was a deep, dark yellow going on to brown. After a week or so, I could walk just about normally and I could wear shoes if I didn't lace them up. My skin healed, though I still have scars on my shoulders and back.

The first time I turned a tap on, its noisy, wasteful, superabundant gush was such a shock that I became incoherent and my legs collapsed beneath me and I fainted in the arms of a nurse.

The first time I went to an Indian restaurant in Canada I used my fingers. The waiter looked at me critically and said, "Fresh off the boat, are you?" I blanched. My fingers, which a second before had been taste buds savouring the food a little ahead of my mouth, became dirty under his gaze. They froze like criminals caught in the act. I didn't dare lick them. I wiped them guiltily on my napkin. He had no idea how deeply those words wounded me. They were like nails being driven into my flesh. I picked up the knife and fork. I had hardly ever used such instruments. My hands trembled. My sambar lost its taste.

CHAPTER 2

He lives in Scarborough. He's a small, slim man—no more than five foot five. Dark hair, dark eyes. Hair greying at the temples. Can't be older than forty. Pleasing coffee-coloured complexion. Mild fall weather, yet puts on a big winter parka with fur-lined hood for the walk to the diner. Expressive face. Speaks quickly, hands flitting about. No small talk. He launches forth.

CHAPTER 3

I was named after a swimming pool. Quite peculiar considering my parents never took to water. One of my father's earliest business contacts was Francis Adirubasamy. He became a good friend of the family. I called him Mamaji, *mama* being the Tamil word for *uncle* and *ji* being a suffix used in India to indicate respect and affection. When he was a young man, long before I was born, Mamaji was a champion competitive swimmer, the champion of all South India. He looked the part his whole life. My brother Ravi once told me that when Mamaji was born he didn't want to give up on breathing water and so the doctor, to save his life, had to take him by the feet and swing him above his head round and round.

"It did the trick!" said Ravi, wildly spinning his hand above his head. "He coughed out water and started breathing air, but it forced all his flesh and blood to his upper body. That's why his chest is so thick and his legs are so skinny."

I believed him. (Ravi was a merciless teaser. The first time he called Mamaji "Mr. Fish" to my face I left a banana peel in his bed.) Even in his sixties, when he was a little stooped and a lifetime of counter-obstetric gravity had begun to nudge his flesh downwards, Mamaji swam thirty lengths every morning at the pool of the Aurobindo Ashram.

He tried to teach my parents to swim, but he never got them to go beyond wading up to their knees at the beach and

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making ludicrous round motions with their arms, which, if they were practising the breaststroke, made them look as if they were walking through a jungle, spreading the tall grass ahead of them, or, if it was the front crawl, as if they were running down a hill and flailing their arms so as not to fall. Ravi was just as unenthusiastic.

Mamaji had to wait until I came into the picture to find a willing disciple. The day I came of swimming age, which, to Mother's distress, Mamaji claimed was seven, he brought me down to the beach, spread his arms seaward and said, "This is my gift to you."

"And then he nearly drowned you," claimed Mother.

I remained faithful to my aquatic guru. Under his watchful eye I lay on the beach and fluttered my legs and scratched away at the sand with my hands, turning my head at every stroke to breathe. I must have looked like a child throwing a peculiar, slow-motion tantrum. In the water, as he held me at the surface, I tried my best to swim. It was much more difficult than on land. But Mamaji was patient and encouraging.

When he felt that I had progressed sufficiently, we turned our backs on the laughing and the shouting, the running and the splashing, the blue-green waves and the bubbly surf, and headed for the proper rectangularity and the formal flatness (and the paying admission) of the ashram swimming pool.

I went there with him three times a week throughout my childhood, a Monday, Wednesday, Friday early morning ritual with the clockwork regularity of a good front-crawl stroke. I have vivid memories of this dignified old man stripping down to nakedness next to me, his body slowly emerging as he neatly disposed of each item of clothing, decency being salvaged at the very end by a slight turning away and a magnificent pair of imported athletic bathing trunks. He stood straight and he

was ready. It had an epic simplicity. Swimming instruction, which in time became swimming practice, was gruelling, but there was the deep pleasure of doing a stroke with increasing ease and speed, over and over, till hypnosis practically, the water turning from molten lead to liquid light.

It was on my own, a guilty pleasure, that I returned to the sea, beckoned by the mighty waves that crashed down and reached for me in humble tidal ripples, gentle lassos that caught their willing Indian boy.

My gift to Mamaji one birthday, I must have been thirteen or so, was two full lengths of credible butterfly. I finished so spent I could hardly wave to him.

Beyond the activity of swimming, there was the talk of it. It was the talk that Father loved. The more vigorously he resisted actually swimming, the more he fancied it. Swim lore was his vacation talk from the workaday talk of running a zoo. Water without a hippopotamus was so much more manageable than water with one.

Mamaji studied in Paris for two years, thanks to the colonial administration. He had the time of his life. This was in the early 1930s, when the French were still trying to make Pondicherry as Gallic as the British were trying to make the rest of India Britannic. I don't recall exactly what Mamaji studied. Something commercial, I suppose. He was a great storyteller, but forget about his studies or the Eiffel Tower or the Louvre or the cafés of the Champs-Élysées. All his stories had to do with swimming pools and swimming competitions. For example, there was the Piscine Deligny, the city's oldest pool, dating back to 1796, an open-air barge moored to the Quai d'Orsay and the venue for the swimming events of the 1900 Olympics. But none of the times were recognized by the International Swimming Federation because the pool was six metres too long. The water in the pool came straight

from the Seine, unfiltered and unheated. "It was cold and dirty," said Mamaji. "The water, having crossed all of Paris, came in foul enough. Then people at the pool made it utterly disgusting." In conspiratorial whispers, with shocking details to back up his claim, he assured us that the French had very low standards of personal hygiene. "Deligny was bad enough. Bain Royal, another latrine on the Seine, was worse. At least at Deligny they scooped out the dead fish." Nevertheless, an Olympic pool is an Olympic pool, touched by immortal glory. Though it was a cesspool, Mamaji spoke of Deligny with a fond smile.

One was better off at the Piscines Château-Landon, Rouvet or du boulevard de la Gare. They were indoor pools with roofs, on land and open year-round. Their water was supplied by the condensation from steam engines from nearby factories and so was cleaner and warmer. But these pools were still a bit dingy and tended to be crowded. "There was so much gob and spit floating in the water, I thought I was swimming through jellyfish," chuckled Mamaji.

The Piscines Hébert, Ledru-Rollin and Butte-aux-Cailles were bright, modern, spacious pools fed by artesian wells. They set the standard for excellence in municipal swimming pools. There was the Piscine des Tourelles, of course, the city's other great Olympic pool, inaugurated during the second Paris games of 1924. And there were still others, many of them.

But no swimming pool in Mamaji's eyes matched the glory of the Piscine Molitor. It was the crowning aquatic glory of Paris, indeed, of the entire civilized world.

"It was a pool the gods would have delighted to swim in. Molitor had the best competitive swimming club in Paris. There were two pools, an indoor and an outdoor. Both were as big as small oceans. The indoor pool always had two lanes reserved for swimmers who wanted to do lengths. The water

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was so clean and clear you could have used it to make your morning coffee. Wooden changing cabins, blue and white, surrounded the pool on two floors. You could look down and see everyone and everything. The porters who marked your cabin door with chalk to show that it was occupied were limping old men, friendly in an ill-tempered way. No amount of shouting and tomfoolery ever ruffled them. The showers gushed hot, soothing water. There was a steam room and an exercise room. The outside pool became a skating rink in winter. There was a bar, a cafeteria, a large sunning deck, even two small beaches with real sand. Every bit of tile, brass and wood gleamed. It was—it was . . .”

It was the only pool that made Mamaji fall silent, his memory making too many lengths to mention.

Mamaji remembered, Father dreamed.

That is how I got my name when I entered this world, a last, welcome addition to my family, three years after Ravi: Piscine Molitor Patel.