

PART ONE

*Toronto and Pondicherry*





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 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 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 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 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.

#### CHAPTER 4

Our good old nation was just seven years old as a republic when it became bigger by a small territory. Pondicherry entered the Union of India on November 1, 1954. One civic achievement called for another. A portion of the grounds of the Pondicherry Botanical Garden was made available rent-free for an exciting business opportunity and—lo and behold—India had a brand new zoo, designed and run according to the most modern, biologically sound principles.

It was a huge zoo, spread over numberless acres, big enough to require a train to explore it, though it seemed to get smaller as I grew older, train included. Now it's so small it fits in my head. You must imagine a hot and humid place, bathed in sunshine and bright colours. The riot of flowers is incessant. There are trees, shrubs and climbing plants in profusion—peepuls, gulmohurs, flames of the forest, red silk cottons, jacarandas, mangoes, jackfruits and many others that would remain unknown to you if they didn't have neat labels at

their feet. There are benches. On these benches you see men sleeping, stretched out, or couples sitting, young couples, who steal glances at each other shyly and whose hands flutter in the air, happening to touch. Suddenly, amidst the tall and slim trees up ahead, you notice two giraffes quietly observing you. The sight is not the last of your surprises. The next moment you are startled by a furious outburst coming from a great troupe of monkeys, only outdone in volume by the shrill cries of strange birds. You come to a turnstile. You distractedly pay a small sum of money. You move on. You see a low wall. What can you expect beyond a low wall? Certainly not a shallow pit with two mighty Indian rhinoceros. But that is what you find. And when you turn your head you see the elephant that was there all along, so big you didn't notice it. And in the pond you realize those are hippopotamuses floating in the water. The more you look, the more you see. You are in Zootown!

Before moving to Pondicherry, Father ran a large hotel in Madras. An abiding interest in animals led him to the zoo business. A natural transition, you might think, from hotelkeeping to zookeeping. Not so. In many ways, running a zoo is a hotelkeeper's worst nightmare. Consider: the guests never leave their rooms; they expect not only lodging but full board; they receive a constant flow of visitors, some of whom are noisy and unruly. One has to wait until they saunter to their balconies, so to speak, before one can clean their rooms, and then one has to wait until they tire of the view and return to their rooms before one can clean their balconies; and there is much cleaning to do, for the guests are as unhygienic as alcoholics. Each guest is very particular about his or her diet, constantly complains about the slowness of the service, and never, ever tips. To speak frankly, many are sexual deviants, either terribly repressed and subject to explosions of frenzied lasciviousness or openly depraved, in either

case regularly affronting management with gross outrages of free sex and incest. Are these the sorts of guests you would want to welcome to your inn? The Pondicherry Zoo was the source of some pleasure and many headaches for Mr. Santosh Patel, founder, owner, director, head of a staff of fifty-three, and my father.

To me, it was paradise on earth. I have nothing but the fondest memories of growing up in a zoo. I lived the life of a prince. What maharaja's son had such vast, luxuriant grounds to play about? What palace had such a menagerie? My alarm clock during my childhood was a pride of lions. They were no Swiss clocks, but the lions could be counted upon to roar their heads off between five-thirty and six every morning. Breakfast was punctuated by the shrieks and cries of howler monkeys, hill mynahs and Moluccan cockatoos. I left for school under the benevolent gaze not only of Mother but also of bright-eyed otters and burly American bison and stretching and yawning orang-utans. I looked up as I ran under some trees, otherwise peafowl might excrete on me. Better to go by the trees that sheltered the large colonies of fruit bats; the only assault there at that early hour was the bats' discordant concerts of squeaking and chattering. On my way out I might stop by the terraria to look at some shiny frogs glazed bright, bright green, or yellow and deep blue, or brown and pale green. Or it might be birds that caught my attention: pink flamingoes or black swans or one-wattled cassowaries, or something smaller, silver diamond doves, Cape glossy starlings, peach-faced lovebirds, Nanday conures, orange-fronted parakeets. Not likely that the elephants, the seals, the big cats or the bears would be up and doing, but the baboons, the macaques, the mangabeys, the gibbons, the deer, the tapirs, the llamas, the giraffes, the mongooses were early risers. Every morning before I was out the main gate I had one last impression that was both ordinary and unforgettable: a pyramid of turtles; the irides-

cent snout of a mandrill; the stately silence of a giraffe; the obese, yellow open mouth of a hippo; the beak-and-claw climbing of a macaw parrot up a wire fence; the greeting claps of a shoebill's bill; the senile, lecherous expression of a camel. And all these riches were had quickly, as I hurried to school. It was after school that I discovered in a leisurely way what it's like to have an elephant search your clothes in the friendly hope of finding a hidden nut, or an orang-utan pick through your hair for tick snacks, its wheeze of disappointment at what an empty pantry your head is. I wish I could convey the perfection of a seal slipping into water or a spider monkey swinging from point to point or a lion merely turning its head. But language founders in such seas. Better to picture it in your head if you want to feel it.

In zoos, as in nature, the best times to visit are sunrise and sunset. That is when most animals come to life. They stir and leave their shelter and tiptoe to the water's edge. They show their raiments. They sing their songs. They turn to each other and perform their rites. The reward for the watching eye and the listening ear is great. I spent more hours than I can count a quiet witness to the highly mannered, manifold expressions of life that grace our planet. It is something so bright, loud, weird and delicate as to stupefy the senses.

I have heard nearly as much nonsense about zoos as I have about God and religion. Well-meaning but misinformed people think animals in the wild are "happy" because they are "free". These people usually have a large, handsome predator in mind, a lion or a cheetah (the life of a gnu or of an aardvark is rarely exalted). They imagine this wild animal roaming about the savannah on digestive walks after eating a prey that accepted its lot piously, or going for callisthenic runs to stay slim after overindulging. They imagine this animal overseeing its offspring proudly and tenderly, the whole family watching the setting of the sun from the limbs of trees with sighs of pleasure. The life of the

wild animal is simple, noble and meaningful, they imagine. Then it is captured by wicked men and thrown into tiny jails. Its “happiness” is dashed. It yearns mightily for “freedom” and does all it can to escape. Being denied its “freedom” for too long, the animal becomes a shadow of itself, its spirit broken. So some people imagine.

This is not the way it is.

Animals in the wild lead lives of compulsion and necessity within an unforgiving social hierarchy in an environment where the supply of fear is high and the supply of food low and where territory must constantly be defended and parasites forever endured. What is the meaning of freedom in such a context? Animals in the wild are, in practice, free neither in space nor in time, nor in their personal relations. In theory—that is, as a simple physical possibility—an animal could pick up and go, flaunting all the social conventions and boundaries proper to its species. But such an event is less likely to happen than for a member of our own species, say a shopkeeper with all the usual ties—to family, to friends, to society—to drop everything and walk away from his life with only the spare change in his pockets and the clothes on his frame. If a man, boldest and most intelligent of creatures, won't wander from place to place, a stranger to all, beholden to none, why would an animal, which is by temperament far more conservative? For that is what animals are, conservative, one might even say reactionary. The smallest changes can upset them. They want things to be just so, day after day, month after month. Surprises are highly disagreeable to them. You see this in their spatial relations. An animal inhabits its space, whether in a zoo or in the wild, in the same way chess pieces move about a chessboard—significantly. There is no more happenstance, no more “freedom”, involved in the whereabouts of a lizard or a bear or a deer than in the location of a knight on a chessboard. Both speak of pattern and purpose. In the wild, animals stick to the same paths for the same pressing reasons, season after season. In a zoo, if an

animal is not in its normal place in its regular posture at the usual hour, it means something. It may be the reflection of nothing more than a minor change in the environment. A coiled hose left out by a keeper has made a menacing impression. A puddle has formed that bothers the animal. A ladder is making a shadow. But it could mean something more. At its worst, it could be that most dreaded thing to a zoo director: a *symptom*, a herald of trouble to come, a reason to inspect the dung, to cross-examine the keeper, to summon the vet. All this because a stork is not standing where it usually stands!

But let me pursue for a moment only one aspect of the question.

If you went to a home, kicked down the front door, chased the people who lived there out into the street and said, “Go! You are free! Free as a bird! Go! Go!”—do you think they would shout and dance for joy? They wouldn’t. Birds are not free. The people you’ve just evicted would sputter, “With what right do you throw us out? This is our home. We own it. We have lived here for years. We’re calling the police, you scoundrel.”

Don’t we say, “There’s no place like home”? That’s certainly what animals feel. Animals are territorial. That is the key to their minds. Only a familiar territory will allow them to fulfill the two relentless imperatives of the wild: the avoidance of enemies and the getting of food and water. A biologically sound zoo enclosure—whether cage, pit, moated island, corral, terrarium, aviary or aquarium—is just another territory, peculiar only in its size and in its proximity to human territory. That it is so much smaller than what it would be in nature stands to reason. Territories in the wild are large not as a matter of taste but of necessity. In a zoo, we do for animals what we have done for ourselves with houses: we bring together in a small space what in the wild is spread out. Whereas before for us the cave was here, the river over there, the hunting grounds a mile that way, the lookout next to it, the berries somewhere else—all of them infested with lions, snakes, ants, leeches and

poison ivy—now the river flows through taps at hand's reach and we can wash next to where we sleep, we can eat where we have cooked, and we can surround the whole with a protective wall and keep it clean and warm. A house is a compressed territory where our basic needs can be fulfilled close by and safely. A sound zoo enclosure is the equivalent for an animal (with the noteworthy absence of a fireplace or the like, present in every human habitation). Finding within it all the places it needs—a lookout, a place for resting, for eating and drinking, for bathing, for grooming, etc.—and finding that there is no need to go hunting, food appearing six days a week, an animal will take possession of its zoo space in the same way it would lay claim to a new space in the wild, exploring it and marking it out in the normal ways of its species, with sprays of urine perhaps. Once this moving-in ritual is done and the animal has settled, it will not feel like a nervous tenant, and even less like a prisoner, but rather like a landholder, and it will behave in the same way within its enclosure as it would in its territory in the wild, including defending it tooth and nail should it be invaded. Such an enclosure is subjectively neither better nor worse for an animal than its condition in the wild; so long as it fulfills the animal's needs, a territory, natural or constructed, simply *is*, without judgment, a given, like the spots on a leopard. One might even argue that if an animal could choose with intelligence, it would opt for living in a zoo, since the major difference between a zoo and the wild is the absence of parasites and enemies and the abundance of food in the first, and their respective abundance and scarcity in the second. Think about it yourself. Would you rather be put up at the Ritz with free room service and unlimited access to a doctor or be homeless without a soul to care for you? But animals are incapable of such discernment. Within the limits of their nature, they make do with what they have.

A good zoo is a place of carefully worked-out coincidence: exactly

where an animal says to us, “Stay out!” with its urine or other secretion, we say to it, “Stay in!” with our barriers. Under such conditions of diplomatic peace, all animals are content and we can relax and have a look at each other.

In the literature can be found legions of examples of animals that could escape but did not, or did and returned. There is the case of the chimpanzee whose cage door was left unlocked and had swung open. Increasingly anxious, the chimp began to shriek and to slam the door shut repeatedly—with a deafening clang each time—until the keeper, notified by a visitor, hurried over to remedy the situation. A herd of roe-deer in a European zoo stepped out of their corral when the gate was left open. Frightened by visitors, the deer bolted for the nearby forest, which had its own herd of wild roe-deer and could support more. Nonetheless, the zoo roe-deer quickly returned to their corral. In another zoo a worker was walking to his work site at an early hour, carrying planks of wood, when, to his horror, a bear emerged from the morning mist, heading straight for him at a confident pace. The man dropped the planks and ran for his life. The zoo staff immediately started searching for the escaped bear. They found it back in its enclosure, having climbed down into its pit the way it had climbed out, by way of a tree that had fallen over. It was thought that the noise of the planks of wood falling to the ground had frightened it.

But I don't insist. I don't mean to defend zoos. Close them all down if you want (and let us hope that what wildlife remains can survive in what is left of the natural world). I know zoos are no longer in people's good graces. Religion faces the same problem. Certain illusions about freedom plague them both.

The Pondicherry Zoo doesn't exist any more. Its pits are filled in, the cages torn down. I explore it now in the only place left for it, my memory.

My name isn't the end of the story about my name. When your name is Bob no one asks you, "How do you spell that?" Not so with Piscine Molitor Patel.

Some thought it was P. Singh and that I was a Sikh, and they wondered why I wasn't wearing a turban.

In my university days I visited Montreal once with some friends. It fell to me to order pizzas one night. I couldn't bear to have yet another French speaker guffawing at my name, so when the man on the phone asked, "Can I 'ave your name?" I said, "I am who I am." Half an hour later two pizzas arrived for "Ian Hoolihan".

It is true that those we meet can change us, sometimes so profoundly that we are not the same afterwards, even unto our names. Witness Simon who is called Peter, Matthew also known as Levi, Nathaniel who is also Bartholomew, Judas, not Iscariot, who took the name Thaddeus, Simeon who went by Niger, Saul who became Paul.

My Roman soldier stood in the schoolyard one morning when I was twelve. I had just arrived. He saw me and a flash of evil genius lit up his dull mind. He raised his arm, pointed at me and shouted, "It's *Pissing Patel!*"

In a second everyone was laughing. It fell away as we filed into the class. I walked in last, wearing my crown of thorns.

The cruelty of children comes as news to no one. The words would waft across the yard to my ears, unprovoked, uncalled for: "Where's Pissing? I've got to go." Or: "You're facing the wall. Are you Pissing?" Or something of the sort. I would freeze or, the contrary, pursue my activity, pretending not to have heard. The sound would disappear, but the hurt would linger, like the smell of piss long after it has evaporated.

Teachers started doing it too. It was the heat. As the day wore on,

the geography lesson, which in the morning had been as compact as an oasis, started to stretch out like the Thar Desert; the history lesson, so alive when the day was young, became parched and dusty; the mathematics lesson, so precise at first, became muddled. In their afternoon fatigue, as they wiped their foreheads and the backs of their necks with their handkerchiefs, without meaning to offend or get a laugh, even teachers forgot the fresh aquatic promise of my name and distorted it in a shameful way. By nearly imperceptible modulations I could hear the change. It was as if their tongues were charioteers driving wild horses. They could manage well enough the first syllable, the *Pea*, but eventually the heat was too much and they lost control of their frothy-mouthed steeds and could no longer rein them in for the climb to the second syllable, the *seen*. Instead they plunged hell-bent into *sing*, and next time round, all was lost. My hand would be up to give an answer, and I would be acknowledged with a “Yes, Pissing.” Often the teacher wouldn’t realize what he had just called me. He would look at me wearily after a moment, wondering why I wasn’t coming out with the answer. And sometimes the class, as beaten down by the heat as he was, wouldn’t react either. Not a snicker or a smile. But I always heard the slur.

I spent my last year at St. Joseph’s School feeling like the persecuted prophet Muhammad in Mecca, peace be upon him. But just as he planned his flight to Medina, the Hejira that would mark the beginning of Muslim time, I planned my escape and the beginning of a new time for me.

After St. Joseph’s, I went to Petit Séminaire, the best private English-medium secondary school in Pondicherry. Ravi was already there, and like all younger brothers, I would suffer from following in the footsteps of a popular older sibling. He was the athlete of his generation at Petit Séminaire, a fearsome bowler and a powerful batter, the captain of the town’s best cricket team, our very own Kapil Dev.

That I was a swimmer made no waves; it seems to be a law of human nature that those who live by the sea are suspicious of swimmers, just as those who live in the mountains are suspicious of mountain climbers. But following in someone's shadow wasn't my escape, though I would have taken any name over "Pissing", even "Ravi's brother". I had a better plan than that.

I put it to execution on the very first day of school, in the very first class. Around me were other alumni of St. Joseph's. The class started the way all new classes start, with the stating of names. We called them out from our desks in the order in which we happened to be sitting.

"Ganapathy Kumar," said Ganapathy Kumar.

"Vipin Nath," said Vipin Nath.

"Shamshool Hudha," said Shamshool Hudha.

"Peter Dharmaraj," said Peter Dharmaraj.

Each name elicited a tick on a list and a brief mnemonic stare from the teacher. I was terribly nervous.

"Ajith Giadson," said Ajith Giadson, four desks away . . .

"Sampath Saroja," said Sampath Saroja, three away . . .

"Stanley Kumar," said Stanley Kumar, two away . . .

"Sylvester Naveen," said Sylvester Naveen, right in front of me.

It was my turn. Time to put down Satan. Medina, here I come.

I got up from my desk and hurried to the blackboard. Before the teacher could say a word, I picked up a piece of chalk and said as I wrote:

*My name is*

*Piscine Molitor Patel,*

*known to all as*

—I double underlined the first two letters of my given name—

## *Pi Patel*

For good measure I added

$$\pi = 3.14$$

and I drew a large circle, which I then sliced in two with a diameter, to evoke that basic lesson of geometry.

There was silence. The teacher was staring at the board. I was holding my breath. Then he said, "Very well, Pi. Sit down. Next time you will ask permission before leaving your desk."

"Yes, sir."

He ticked my name off. And looked at the next boy.

"Mansoor Ahamad," said Mansoor Ahamad.

I was saved.

"Gautham Selvaraj," said Gautham Selvaraj.

I could breathe.

"Arun Annaji," said Arun Annaji.

A new beginning.

I repeated the stunt with every teacher. Repetition is important in the training not only of animals but also of humans. Between one commonly named boy and the next, I rushed forward and emblazoned, sometimes with a terrible screech, the details of my re-birth. It got to be that after a few times the boys sang along with me, a crescendo that climaxed, after a quick intake of air while I underlined the proper note, with such a rousing rendition of my new name that it would have been the delight of any choirmaster. A few boys followed up with a whispered, urgent "Three! Point! One! Four!" as I wrote as fast as I could, and I ended the concert by slicing the circle with such vigour that bits of chalk went flying.

When I put my hand up that day, which I did every chance I had,

teachers granted me the right to speak with a single syllable that was music to my ears. Students followed suit. Even the St. Joseph's devils. In fact, the name caught on. Truly we are a nation of aspiring engineers: shortly after, there was a boy named Omprakash who was calling himself Omega, and another who was passing himself off as Upsilon, and for a while there was a Gamma, a Lambda and a Delta. But I was the first and the most enduring of the Greeks at Petit Séminaire. Even my brother, the captain of the cricket team, that local god, approved. He took me aside the next week.

"What's this I hear about a nickname you have?" he said.

I kept silent. Because whatever mocking was to come, it was to come. There was no avoiding it.

"I didn't realize you liked the colour yellow so much."

The colour yellow? I looked around. No one must hear what he was about to say, especially not one of his lackeys. "Ravi, what do you mean?" I whispered.

"It's all right with me, brother. Anything's better than 'Pissing'. Even 'Lemon Pie'."

As he sauntered away he smiled and said, "You look a bit red in the face."

But he held his peace.

And so, in that Greek letter that looks like a shack with a corrugated tin roof, in that elusive, irrational number with which scientists try to understand the universe, I found refuge.

## CHAPTER 6

*He's an excellent cook. His overheated house is always smelling of something delicious. His spice rack looks like an apothecary's shop. When he opens his refrigerator or his cupboards, there are many brand names I don't rec-*

*ognize; in fact, I can't even tell what language they're in. We are in India. But he handles Western dishes equally well. He makes me the most zesty yet subtle macaroni and cheese I've ever had. And his vegetarian tacos would be the envy of all Mexico.*

*I notice something else: his cupboards are jam-packed. Behind every door, on every shelf, stand mountains of neatly stacked cans and packages. A reserve of food to last the siege of Leningrad.*

## CHAPTER 7

It was my luck to have a few good teachers in my youth, men and women who came into my dark head and lit a match. One of these was Mr. Satish Kumar, my biology teacher at Petit Séminaire and an active Communist who was always hoping Tamil Nadu would stop electing movie stars and go the way of Kerala. He had a most peculiar appearance. The top of his head was bald and pointy, yet he had the most impressive jowls I have ever seen, and his narrow shoulders gave way to a massive stomach that looked like the base of a mountain, except that the mountain stood in thin air, for it stopped abruptly and disappeared horizontally into his pants. It's a mystery to me how his stick-like legs supported the weight above them, but they did, though they moved in surprising ways at times, as if his knees could bend in any direction. His construction was geometric: he looked like two triangles, a small one and a larger one, balanced on two parallel lines. But organic, quite warty actually, and with sprigs of black hair sticking out of his ears. And friendly. His smile seemed to take up the whole base of his triangular head.

Mr. Kumar was the first avowed atheist I ever met. I discovered this not in the classroom but at the zoo. He was a regular visitor who read the labels and descriptive notices in their entirety and approved