

## **"From Here to Poland" by Nina Mehta**

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Once, quite a long time ago, there was a Danish sideboard that crossed three oceans. It had been purchased in Frankfurt, Germany, when I was two years old and my sister had just been born. My parents must have been in love then, because they had defied both sets of parents to marry, parents who worried that their respective child would wind up in the other one's country and would then, therefore, be lost to them. What the parents may or may not have known at the time was that both sets would eventually be proven right, but also that their children had already been lost to them before they met each other in an art store on East 53rd Street in mid-Manhattan, staring at a darkened arrangement of thin, erratic flowers in a painting by Oskar Kokoschka.

From Frankfurt, where we lived less than a year, the long Danish sideboard was shipped on ahead to central Bombay where it remained for seven years in the same prominent place, dusted and polished by careful servants who were all the more fastidious because they feared my American mother, and cooled by a large ceiling fan whose speed could at one time be accelerated and slowed only by climbing a tall ladder to tug at the dirty white string hanging from its belly. The sideboard stood implacably four stories up on Gamadia Road, between the dining area and the impossibly long living room, a false wall that escaped notice until it was sent across two oceans to New Jersey, to a town called New Providence, where it managed to sustain only a very short residence.

There, the sideboard was loaned a stretch of wall behind a beautiful second-hand baby grand that's now no longer in New Providence and that's hardly ever played. Some months passed and weekly piano lessons got underway, but eventually my parents decided to sell the sideboard because it was cumbersome and unnecessary and didn't go with the rest of the furniture. Though I had been a scowling, taciturn child who could not ask for anything directly, if at all, I suddenly couldn't help begging my parents not to sell the sideboard. I pleaded that the sideboard stay where it was, that it be rotated around to the other side of the piano, or that, as a last resort, it be given to me and moved upstairs to my bedroom. When no one else was in the house, during the hour I was supposed to be watching the music and not my fingers, I would drape myself over the edges of the sideboard and cry, always embarrassed afterwards that I could feel such strong

emotions about an adult piece of furniture, and embarrassed that I was not able to refrain from asking my parents for a sideboard which I knew did not belong in my room.

Over the years since then, there have been a small number of people who've occupied my life in the same way that sideboard did, over whom I've felt a halting, anxious sort of proprietary claim I couldn't often gauge, let alone explain, but for whom I could feel some simple feelings clearly and directly. One of these people has been my paternal grandmother, a woman with whom I'm unable to speak, though in recent years she has also become, perversely enough, as stolidly non-essential and baffling a presence as that futile length of furniture that disappeared when I was eleven.

My grandmother has always been an unremarkably ordinary part of the surroundings. She has a thick jug-like physical solidity and seems the incarnation of dutiful familiarity, though I've never known whether her familiarity grew out of her sense of familial duty or whether my perception itself resulted from the inevitable familiarity with which I saw my grandmother. Hers is an unassuming, absent sort of presence, not a crucial one that focuses expectations, and she has no more sought me out or managed to affect how I see myself than a loaf of bread can bend a hologram. On many occasions, I've felt very close to her. Yet in the end it's the rank impossibility of having a relationship with her, of having a relationship that sits deeply on its haunches and that's at least somewhat mutually comprehensible, that makes me wonder whether our relationship has all along been doomed in ways I should have understood better. And yet it has been through various conversations with her that I have been able to perceive certain family relationships more clearly. And it is at least in part because of her that I have also realized how ambiguous some of my ties to my past really are.

My grandmother speaks Gujarati and grew up in Bombay and Jamnagar, a small city in the northwestern state of Gujarat, though in those years (and even into my father's youth) India was not yet an independent country and Jamnagar was a princely kingdom ruled by the wealthy family of one of my grandfather's childhood playmates. My grandmother speaks some Marathi and Hindi as well as Gujarati, but no English, and since all my life I have spoken only English, for nearly thirty-five years she and I have never talked to one another without the aid of intermediaries. This is an awkward way to converse with a grandparent, especially one I've seen as frequently as my grandmother, but for a long time I wasn't aware of it. On the contrary, what seemed presumptively normal and natural when I was young was the notion that events around me, however slight or large, took place in a few different Indian languages, and that like instruments they often had to be re-strung in different alphabets and sounds. It seemed an ordinary matter of fact that conversations were complicated not just by who was present but by how they listened and what language they heard, and I got used to the idea that I was often privy to only part of a conversation, half an understanding. As a result, it came to seem inevitable that conversations either had to be accepted with all their ungainly, opaque areas, or else gradually deciphered.

When I was younger and lived in the Breach Candy section of central Bombay and my paternal grandparents lived in Sion, an area in the larger outlying city district, an established regimen of family

gatherings ensured that there were always lots of grandchildren puckered around my grandparents. Because my mother was the only American in the family, and because she was the wife of the eldest living son, almost all the relatives were aware of her needs, or at least what they knew of her needs, and treated her carefully, with what I came to see as candid gestures of deference. Everyone spoke English. I was never taught Gujarati and picked up only what a child needed to know in order to get by with relatives who preferred Gujarati to English when my mother wasn't around. Occasionally, my grandmother would issue short, laconic commands to me in Gujarati or ask household-type questions in broken English. My austere, antique-looking grandfather would combine the English and the commands, telling me to bring his spittoon from wherever he had last left it, a task made necessary by his emphysema and which I found unbearable. During meals my grandmother would nod her head approvingly, letting me know that it was good I sat on jute mats on the floor with my cousins and ate food without the aid of utensils, that no spoon was needed to lift food from my plate to my mouth.

My grandmother made it clear that if I stood in her doorway and stared at her long enough, I'd get hard candy suckers from the locked metal cabinet that stretched from floor to ceiling in the room by the verandah. She'd clap my back with her hand in a triangular wedge, saying something in Gujarati that wasn't important to understand, and give me ten *paisa* from the knot in her handkerchief so I could buy a black and white bull's eye from a store that sold mounds of open-air powders, digestives and candy. She moved with thick cautiousness, as if always aware that blood were coursing through her arms and legs, and when she walked her keys jittered at her huge waist beneath her sari. Sometimes, after her rest, she'd call me for my afternoon bath, a bucket bath I couldn't refuse but never wanted because instead of wetting my body, she'd wet her hands and the soap, which always seemed a dubious way of working a lather and which usually left me feeling chastised.

My grandmother is now nearly eighty-five, though she's never been wholly certain when she was born. She lost her sight in one eye half a dozen years ago and her hearing began to drift away slowly before that. She has had diabetes for most of my adult life and she lost all her teeth, starting with the four middle ones on top, in the early 1960s, around the time my father married my mother against the wishes of both families, shortly before we moved to Bombay, and long after my father's father had given up on his ambition to become a cotton broker. My grandmother is now on her fifth set of teeth. They get replaced every seven or eight years by her Bombay dentist who continues, inexplicably, to provide her with stark white dentures, making no allowance for her age and the state of the rest of her body. My grandmother, who is called *ba*, mother, by everyone in the family, as well as by people not in the family, now probably weighs about 170 pounds. And the name she answered to as a child is not the name she has had for the last seventy years since it was changed by her husband, as was a common custom, when they married. She was engaged without her knowledge at the age of fourteen, married at fifteen, and has now lived more than twenty years past her husband. And for many years, as my cousin Reema tells me, if there were a man in the house where she was living, she wouldn't remove her cotton sari when she went to bed, never mind that

the man was usually just one of her sons or her son-in-law. This for the sake of decorum, which was also what caused her to feel uncomfortable when one of her sons helped her into or out of the wheelchair she sometimes used.

A few years ago, quite some time after my view of New Jersey as one of this country's malign territories had faded, I decided to move temporarily to Princeton from New York. At the time, my grandmother had relocated to New Jersey to live for a few years with her youngest son and daughter and their families. Eventually she would go back to Bombay where she had other sons and where her living conditions were more cramped, but where, she was unbudgably certain, her health would be improved by Indian-manufactured pills and medicines and Indian humidity. But for some overlapping time we were both lodged in the once dread state of New Jersey. And so I decided to spend some time with her. I decided to try to talk to her since I had never attempted to do so seriously, since I felt I should make some kind of overture towards her before she died, and because my father had recently given me a sheet of paper that traced his family back patrilineally through sixteen generations and I had gotten curious. In the end, though, I never wound up learning much about my father's paternal ancestors, in part because my grandmother's memory only recognized a few generations and partly because all that began to seem remote and static once she started answering questions about her own life. Also, I asked questions because my grandmother seemed to like talking, because it enabled me to slip into an easy routine with her, and because she balked at my impolitic questions less than I sometimes balked at asking her to be a conduit to a past I had only suspicions about. And gradually, I also came to hope that talking deliberately and purposefully to my grandmother through family translators might give me a sharper, more angular perspective on her than what my relatives knew or imagined as a result of their more natural relationships with her. I thought I could interview my grandmother the way I sometimes interviewed authors for newspapers, and figured I could, if I were patient, slowly coax some understanding out of her. That these conversations dissolved into a morass of purposelessness now seems almost beside the point, however, since I did eventually realize a few things about my grandmother.

I'd detested New Jersey for a long time because moving to this country at the age of ten had been an angrily jolting experience and because it had unmoored me from everything I had known so comfortably and unquestioningly in Bombay. No longer was there anyone to play *carom* with, no getting bored watching milk get pasteurized in the kitchen with timers and cheesecloth and two-foot thermometers, no new habits that didn't automatically make me conscious of the differences between there and here. There were few friends here and none whose lives I properly understood, no thicket of relatives, no convulsively shifting relation between the sounds of outdoor noise and the time of day, no servants who weren't allowed to drink from the glasses we used at the table but who were much more central to me at the time than my parents, and no fans cutting apart the hot Bombay air after school as if this mechanical movement were the sole source of the motion needed to make afternoons disappear. Instead, there was, here, the straightforward sense of not belonging, of not having the right associations and memories, of not knowing

when and how to do things in this grassy new suburban life. There was the vague sense of trespassing across the lives of strangers and in particular on the neighbor's lawn next door, which their youngest son soon enough forbade because he observed that I was a mulatto. There were some eventual friends, tentatively made and kept, there were all sorts of new electronic gadgets and ready-made clothes and a dozen television channels providing constant motion, and there was the unquestioned need to avoid certain groups of boys when I walked home from school through a wooded area because they liked to throw broken glass and rocks. Because I was regularly called nigger, spear-chucker, jungle bunny and kike, I tried to rid myself of the Indian-British accent others heard, at the same time wondering if the boys cursing me really thought I was black, later wondering where they had seen a black close-up since there were none around, and wondering how they had heard I was Jewish and belonged to Temple Sinai in Summit. New Providence at that time was a racially conservative town, or at least a town with only three or four black families that never stayed long, and I never met anyone black in the ordinary course of things until I went off to college. But long before college, out of a lack of alternatives, I had begun considering what would be my near-decade in New Providence as a very lengthy cameo appearance.

During that cameo appearance, much time was spent in the unremarkable clutch of adolescence, worrying about the passing traumas which must have afflicted everyone around me as well, wondering why I had been born so dark, with dark hair covering a greater portion of my body than I thought natural, and withdrawing into books that provided some measure of escape but a still greater confirmation that strong emotions should be experienced privately, with a slow accumulation of words and sentences and, *in extremis*, an anonymous sort of empathy. Yet a few incidents from those cameo days still jut out with staunch familiarity, though probably less because of what happened than because my reaction descended so unusually into something like anguish. Once, a short while after I turned fourteen, I was walking across the parking lot of the New Providence Shopping Center with a friend, and a stone hit my back. It was nearing dusk at the time and we happened to be approaching an abandoned snow plow and I was suddenly crying--not because I had been hurt but because I wasn't alone, because Patti had seen this awful humiliation take place, because there was urine soaking my underpants, and because it had become so insurmountably, mortifyingly impossible to compose myself. The area where we were would later be dug up to build Burger Express, where I'd work at the counter as an "expediter" calling orders to people working the grill. But back then, when I finally stopped sweating and Patti stopped talking, I stood in the parking lot, distressed, trying to push the anger out of my head so I could decide whether to pick up the stones that had been thrown so no one would see them and wonder how they had gotten there.

That kind of confusion and anger about how I was seen as an adolescent has long since dissipated, but my relationship to my background became more ambiguous. The idea that my background, and my associations, like those stones in the parking lot, could be held and manipulated has remained compelling since then because it allows for the possibility of shifting theories about what things mean and what things can be made to mean. My connection to different parts of my past has grown stronger over the years, but it

has also grown less real as it became more conscious and more deliberate. Names, I think, can also be fickle, serving as weights that hold our sense of ourselves against the flatness of some idea we may not yet have decided what to do with. Since I don't have a middle name, there was a time long ago when I took on phantom names as the need for different backgrounds and affiliations arose. My father's mother's first name was changed entirely when she married, and few people now know her original name. And my mother's father changed his surname when he finished law school in the mid-1920s. My mother's grandparents had come to Brooklyn from lower-middle-class Austrian, English, and Byelerussian stock, and her parents always spoke Yiddish when they wanted privacy, which, when I knew them, was when they played cards and ate pears while my sister and I sat transfixed in front of the television screen in their spare room. My grandfather was autocratic, very particular about his immediate environment and the beliefs of those who passed closely through his life, and somewhat racist in his later years. On most days he smelled like witch hazel until lunchtime since he brewed his own aftershave lotion, yet long before he discovered witch hazel, and shortly before my mother and her sister were born, he filled out the official paperwork and changed his last name from Levine to Leonard. He explained much later that there had been too many lawyers in the phone book named Levine, though the women around him always believed this to be an assimilationist's claim, an effort to create an edge of uncertainty between his name and his Jewishness.

There were other experiences when I was growing up like the one by the snow plow, but against them I'd stiffen just as quietly, letting new incidents push away older ones as if they had been paltry, diminutive forces all along. My response to such besetting distress was consistent: I'd slip into a kind of detente and become impassive, and only later erratically argumentative. But even back then, when I tried to make sense of various conflicts, I generally believed that people's personalities were not very ambulatory, that they couldn't be hauled across great long distances, and that, unlike names, individuals could be altered only in bits and only under tremendous duress.

Instead, what I wanted was solemnly large ideas and throbbing, unifying principles to organize my life. I wanted to believe in something unimpeachable, maybe God, and to have certain faith that there was a kind of transparency all around me that required only unflinching belief to understand. In those years, the closest I ever got to anything spiritual was sitting by some creek and imagining for hours at a time that the entire planet was a falling particle in someone else's world and that what appeared to me to be tremendously long, sad afternoons were just instants to another person thinking inscrutable thoughts somewhere else. Or I'd imagine that the earth had been slid sideways inside a leaf and that stars were the pinpoint gaps and holes in a terrifically dense molecular leaf-world. I wanted my past to fit with my present, and my life in New Jersey to make more sense to me. Short of that, I wanted a clean break. Eventually, I realized that the kind of dramatic anonymity I sought could also be had, if somewhat deficiently, from theories about evolution. Evolution required taking a long view towards the surrounding world and remaining impersonal. The only other experience at the time that might have passed for something reasonably religious was when I drew on my occasional talent for shutting my eyes and

imagining I was heading across a sea to Poland. This went back to a mightily incorrect but firmly held belief I had when I was seven or eight that my entire class in Bombay International School had taken a long wooden boatripe across a dark, churning sea to the island of Poland, which was then located off the southern coast of India, where Sri Lanka, which was then Ceylon, now floats.

With time this faint aptitude for religion eventually turned into a low-key, desultory interest in Orthodox Judaism, though always at a bookish remove since proper faith continued to escape me. I wished for strong, unambiguous commitments to organize my thoughts. In lieu of my need for clear working certainties, my mother has fluid, tunneling ideas about human nature and psychology; and in lieu of that, my father has an expansive knowledge of clinical pharmacology and an awareness of the effect drugs have on the nervous system and on the body's general functioning. And my grandmother has a Jain cosmology that explains everything to a certain degree of sufficiency.

Of everyone in my family, my paternal grandmother is curiously the most existential. Or at least the doctrines of her religion are, since her own life has been limited by broad claustrophobic rules about how one should live in a social environment. Jainism came into its own in India in the sixth century B.C., at the same time as Buddhism. Both were reactions to the increasing ritualization of traditional Vedic Hinduism at the time, and to the stiffening of its social and religious hierarchy. There is no god (or pantheon of gods) in Jainism, no sovereign authority or omniscient anything that offers an explanation of the world or provides a sense of individual or communal purpose. Instead, Jainism is a sensationally individualistic religion centered around a number of logically related beliefs: that there are distinct, permanently autonomous souls in all things that are living, that reincarnation is the unmitigating way of the world, that one's life is the inevitable result of past deeds and karmic build-up, that actions beget consequences, that enlightenment exists and is self-generated, and that transcendence can be approached by following certain principles and by ridding oneself of the weight of attachment to worldly things. This attachment to kith, kin, material goods and ambitions, one's own desires and aversions, one's five senses, etc. is what condemns individuals to a bodily existence and what stalls salvation. In both lay and ascetic Jainism and among the various Jain branches of thought, knowledge can be pared down to recognizing the dichotomy between the soul and everything that's non-soul and therefore imprisoning. And enlightenment is an ultimately individual task that benefits only oneself.

There is no sense of awe when my grandmother talks about religion, and her main affirmations are promisory ones of denial and forbearance: to not differentiate between souls, to try to do no violence to things that live, and to practice non-attachment to anything that touches her senses, including memories that might gladden her, relationships with her children and grandchildren that might bring her comfort, feelings of happiness or regret about things she has done or omitted to do over the years, and anything else that brushes against or depends on the stability of worldly phenomena. Because of the overarching Jain principle of non-injury to all life forms, she is of course vegetarian, but she also doesn't eat root vegetables since the part of the plant that's consumed is the seat of its life. So she eats no meat or fish, no eggs, no

onions, garlic, potatoes, carrots, or anything that grows beneath the ground. And she eats after sunrise and before sundown every day to prevent micro-organisms from entering her mouth and thereby expiring. Many of the laws that she observes, like the laws of *kashrut*, trace back to sensible dietary prohibitions from ancient times that have long since become part of an observant religious life. Years ago, when my grandmother was much healthier, she also underwent occasional fasts for eight days at a time.

My grandmother and I have little in common, but when we both lived temporarily in New Jersey, I'd drive up to Maplewood, where two sets of my aunts and uncles then lived, and ask my grandmother questions. I'd often ask about religion since I wanted to know what the grandmother I felt oddly close to believed. I expected that because I didn't understand her beliefs all that well, I'd learn more about what she thought by entering this near-impenetrable thicket and trying to make sense of what I found. Perhaps I also thought that stray molecules containing some of her certainties, if not her beliefs, would fly off her body and settle comfortably on mine. In the end, though, what I was able to make of all these conversations was based almost entirely on the order I imposed on her comments from without, and on the complicated meanings I attached to her beliefs and descriptions of life, sometimes quite regardless of her own explanations.

Religiously, the person my grandmother gained the most sustenance from was a man who died in 1901 at the age of 32. His name was Raichand Mehta, though he's now known by the honorific Srimad Rajachandra. And while he was no relation, he lived for a time in Rajkot, Gujarat, where my grandfather's family was from, and in the 1890s my grandfather's father knew him and considered him a great religious teacher. Rajachandra is seen as a modern saint by many Jains now, and there are a number of temples in Gujarat (and a few in this country) dedicated to his teachings. This eventual saint had been a gem merchant before he decided to pursue enlightenment full-time, and some twenty-five years after his death by self-starvation, it was his sister's husband who arranged my grandparents' marriage.

When my grandparents married they were already related to one another by marriage since one of my grandfather's elder sisters had married my grandmother's brother. Before their own marriage my grandparents lived in the household of their married siblings, though at that time *purdah* was observed in many north Indian communities, regardless of religion, and girls past childhood were kept separate and secluded from the men. So although my grandparents lived in the same house as young teenagers, they knew one another only by sight. Eventually, my grandmother's married sister decided that my grandparents should marry, but since it was inappropriate for a woman to suggest such a thing, the husband of Rajachandra's sister, who knew and was close to both families, arranged the match.

My grandmother didn't always get along with her mother-in-law, with whom she and my grandfather lived. But at least, she told a cousin who was translating for me one evening a few years ago, she had a home and a roof over her head and her husband's family didn't throw her out. My grandmother did the cooking for the entire household, except for two days every month when she wasn't permitted in the kitchen. During those years my grandmother wasn't allowed to think of the house as her own. She was

expected to cover her head with a portion of her sari when her mother-in-law was present, out of respect, and she wasn't allowed to invite relatives from her side of the family into the house or give them even a glass of water since she herself was considered a visitor. If my grandmother wanted to go out, she had to request her mother-in-law's permission and then ask which sari she could wear. Then she'd touch her mother-in-law's feet as a sign of respect. On returning home, she'd again have to greet her mother-in-law by bowing and touching her feet.

My grandmother was also not allowed to speak of her six children as *her* children. If one of them got sick, she'd have to avoid the possessive pronoun and note, simply, that *this* boy needs medicine or *that* one needs food. Her mother-in-law sometimes said that just because a sack contains the grain, does that mean the sack owns the grain? In this way, my grandmother's five sons and daughter were not hers. They did not belong to her just as the grain did not belong to the sack.

My grandmother's mother-in-law lived for twenty-two years after my grandparents married, before breast cancer got the better of her. Her meanness was not especially more mean than much ordinary household treatment at the time, but her deep religiousness caused my grandmother to become more religious. My grandmother's devotion circuitously led her daughter, my aunt, to do the same, and as my aunt became more religious during the 1980s, she tried to bring her actions into greater consonance with the principles of non-injury, truth-telling, and non-attachment to worldly concerns. My aunt has never been as severe in her actions as my grandmother, but one expression of her concern for non-injury was that she stopped wearing silk saris since many hundreds of thousands of silkworms perish in the making of the silk she used to drape casually across her body. So the legacy that comes to me from one of my great-grandmothers, the one who sounds so bitter (but who is uniformly remembered by everyone besides my grandmother as pious and kind), is an utterly magnificent one: two drawers full of gloriously embroidered silk saris sewn with heavy gold thread. It's a legacy I should perhaps feel ambivalent about, but instead I am glad.

In the nearby Maplewood house of my other aunt, my grandmother's youngest son's wife, a photograph of Srimad Rajachandra used to always stand upright near an enormous religious book that my grandmother had been reading piecemeal for more than forty years. My grandmother prayed every day, and when she prayed the area around her bureau turned into a make-do shrine. Sometimes she intoned prayers and sometimes she chanted in a hoarse voice; all the while her hands made their habitual votive offerings. The photo, a black and white in an eight-by-ten frame, was occasionally garlanded with a string of marigolds. And it was garlanded on a Saturday morning a few years ago, an air-conditioned morning, when my mother and I walked into my grandmother's room as she was putting the lids back on various containers of vermilion and rice grain and whatever else she had been using in her *puja*. Her long grey hair still wet, my grandmother motioned to us to come in and sit. Patiently, she finished what she was doing. Then she lifted the photo off the dresser, ran a calm hand over it as if feeling for a heat source, and said to us in English, "*This, is, my-god. He, ba's-god. This is, god-photo.*"

A look of exasperation slid past my mother's face. All I could think about, though, was that through my great-grandfather I was connected to the person my grandmother referred to as God.

God was a stalk of a man seated in the basic lotus position, his thighs long and thin with not much flesh, his shoulders as compact as door knobs, and his ribs so defined that his body looked as if it had been superimposed over its own X-ray. My grandmother's emaciated, X-rayed God looked like many thousands of Holocaust survivors, though seated very erectly. He was wholly anonymous in body, wholly ignorant of his body's meagerness, and unaware that what the camera was capturing looked like only the bony template of a man. For Jain ascetics (though Rajachandra had not been one) who want to go the distance, the ultimate way for the ready soul to be released from the cycle of births and deaths is by starving oneself to death, by denying the body's needs and controlling its myriad appetites, including that of survival. This is the height of self-consciousness. Such a transcendence, a pointedly self-conscious route to physical death, is considered different from suicide since the latter is seen as resulting from passion and self-violence and moral cowardice.

So when my grandmother held out her god-photo of the man with the emaciated body and glaring ribs, my mother withdrew her attention. She heard my grandmother's simple words, repeated loudly as if we were the ones who were partly deaf, she saw me watching my grandmother's photographic presentation of God, and she left the room. For my mother this was a breakdown in conversation. When all understanding cocks back to one reigning idea, be it reincarnation or God or anything else, one large received idea that organizes behavior and funnels thinking through some single perspective, there is nothing left to say. But for my grandmother, praying to Rajachandra does not involve any beseeching or consolation, or a recognition of some untameable force at work in the universe. It's more a pledge to try to observe the principles of her religion, and her prayers are her way of offering daily respect to someone who accomplished this formidable feat. Her "god" was just a word that misfired.

But the kind of self-awareness that Jainism holds out to my grandmother does not work for me. I can't see such plain physical transcendence as the goal. And my grandmother's self-awareness isn't the sort that my mother has in mind. My grandmother thinks of shaving away the world, absenting herself from its material conditions and attachments. She lives by the positivistic assumption that there will be a reckoning for one's actions in the future (though with no sense of judgment), and she believes that we are the sum of our actions from many past lives and that no slates will ever be wiped clean once and for all. My mother, for her part, thinks about why people do and think what they do and what they think. Her understanding of relationships is lit by what she knows about psychology, about the fact that what motivates one person wouldn't be enough to motivate another, about irrational loyalties and mitigating circumstances. And by the mundane disappearance of time as one ages, the fear of leaving things unfinished, and the difficulty of having to make hard decisions and choose between commitments.

To my mother it's the prominence of conversation that's important, whether of politics or literature or opera. It's the working out of ideas that's necessary, and the disparate meanings that grow from those

ideas. These days, my mother regularly calls to tell me what she's been reading about Stalin's purges. Or to tell me about cyclones and murders in the news, or a lawsuit she and my father are engaged in over some property in Connecticut. Often, she calls to say that she's just finished a book and hasn't yet decided whether to start re-reading nineteenth-century Russian writers. She's been putting off the Russians for a long while. Occasionally, she asks if I'm happy, but usually she conveys whatever information is lurking about, and then inquires, lately for the third or fourth time, what kind of music the man I've been seeing listens to, whether he thinks about me the way I think about him, and whether we are discussing Israeli politics yet. And just as it's always been possible to assemble my mother's questions into a point of view, and to know something about her slowly shifting priorities on the basis of her questions, so I used to think it ought to be possible to find a slim path to what my grandmother thinks--and through her, to how I relate to components of my past--through these discussions about religion.

Once, I drove to Maplewood because my father had decided to visit for the day. I thought I'd be able to ask my grandmother questions for hours, and I looked forward to having as a translator the person who could best guess what I wanted from these conversations. So my father drove down from Connecticut and I came from Princeton, and when we arrived I was told that my grandmother had taken a vow of silence for the day. Since she had settled on this the previous night, there was no talking her out of it or postponing her silence by a day. My grandmother, it was explained, wanted to retreat into her prayers and religious thoughts, and focus on what was important. This process, as I dismayingly saw it, included affirming her non-attachment to conversation. Disappointed, I talked for some time to my aunt as she worked all the burners on the stovetop and both ovens, then went upstairs. My grandmother had just turned off her portable tape recorder and was laying it on a side table near her teeth. I sat cross-legged on the bed next to her, my father a few feet away on a chair. Pretty soon, my grandmother handed my father one of her prayer books. She looked at him expectantly, then gestured that she wanted him to read by lifting her hand, palm up, a few inches from the book towards my father's chest. My father's usual nonchalance gave way to sedentary reluctance, but my grandmother kept up her gesturing. Finally, after glancing at me, my father took out his glasses, coughed a bit, and began to make his slow way through chants he once knew by heart and used to recite every day as a child in Rajkot.

But my father's Gujarati had long since become an old man, stumbling and hesitating over words which once must have been as ready as the saliva that slicked them and separated one sound from another. Yet even after fifty years there were many phrases familiar to his mind, if no longer so recognizable on paper. I marveled that my father, a boundless, unquestioning atheist, was reading these prayers at all, that he hadn't refused the task and called for one of his relatives to do it instead. As I listened to his half-foreign voice, and watched him rub an earlobe and shift position for better concentration the way so many Indian men seem to do, I began to hear my grandmother correct him. Her cloudy eyes were closed, his open. But his pronunciation of her prayers was wrong, and his speech much too jerky, and so she periodically slipped out of her vow of silence in order to correct what needed correcting.

My grandmother's commitments to Jainism are fluid, and my mother is perhaps right when she says that her *pujas* and daily rituals are the background noise against which her deep affection for her family seems all the more devotional. My grandmother is bent on doing what she thinks is right, and proper, for her family, and it's always been the function we serve for one another that's important, never the motivation. Yet from my grandmother's conversation and disparate memories I can siphon out nothing that expands my basic self-understanding, or that intelligently complicates, or even simplifies, my relationship with her. And I cannot help doubting that I affect her life in any intimate way. Of course, it may just be the way of things that influence runs downward through generations and not the other way. For my grandmother, asking about my life or trying to understand some aspect of my life may be like walking backwards, or trying to understand *why* a ventriloquist would throw his voice from one side of a room to the other. My grandmother mainly wants to know that her twelve grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren are healthy and plump, comfortably married if they're old enough, and that there is no grief harming their lives.

Sometimes my grandmother calls me her daughter. Referring to me as her daughter, or calling her first great-granddaughter her "sixth daughter," may be just her way of speaking, her way of sweeping affection into as direct a statement as possible, or her way of claiming as much of her family as possible in defiance of her long dead mother-in-law. It's hard to know and my grandmother has no explanation to give since not all my questions even made sense to her. On the other hand, a sculptor-friend of mine who has lately been thinking about having a child says she cannot figure out whether love is automatic, or even whether there's any automatic adhesive between people in the same family. "You have a child who has a child," she says, "and where's the connection?" My friend and I don't agree on this since I see irrepressible, if often inchoate, bonds everywhere I turn, but the fact that my grandmother sometimes refers to me as her daughter still doesn't mean very much to me. The connection we have exists and is real, but it has never really developed. Whatever bond exists between my grandmother and me, I expect it probably has more to do with the sheer physicality of her presence than anything else.

Sometimes more than being alone I like to sit in a room with familiar people who are speaking a language I don't know, and be ignored. I'm content reading a book by Ivan Gold or stories by Isak Dinesen or a yet-unpublished novel I'm supposed to review, or sitting at a table plucking the stems off blueberries, while around me Gujarati words and sentences slip off the walls. Sometimes I can catch small words or latch onto a stream of English passing through a conversation, but it doesn't matter. I like listening to the inflection of my relatives' voices, waiting for the point in sentences where one person pauses in expectation that someone else will interrupt. And I like that most of the time no one bothers to explain these conversations to me because they've deemed it unnecessary to include me in a discussion that will only distract me from my book, or the berries. I suppose what I also like is that no one is deferring to me or making allowances, talking in a language that is somewhat slightly less natural in order to include me as a listener. Maybe, also, I know that the content of the conversation is likely to be less rivetting than what's in

my book. But I feel reassured, maybe mistakenly, in the presumption that people who understand what things mean in other languages and who care for me are guarding the conversation floating around, the same way I feel secure that when my radio is off the voices inside still continue their long conversations. But of course I also know that any conversation would be translated for me, if I asked.

The Maplewood conversations always followed the same general plot. My grandmother would put in her hearing aid, remove the cork coaster covering her water glass, take a long, noisy sip, and then sit up in bed and look not at me but at my aunt or uncle, waiting for one of them to translate the question I was about to ask. My grandmother used to look at me only when her answer was being translated into English, and I was never sure whether this was to see my reaction or to determine whether a follow-up question was coming, though I suspect now that it was the latter.

My aunt and uncle didn't always seem interested in my grandmother's answers. Sometimes they seemed to prefer speculating about what she might say, and they'd wait for her answers to see whose predictions were closer. Occasionally, my uncle simply answered the question himself, bypassing his mother-in-law altogether. Only after many weekends had passed, with them translating and untranslating conversations and exchanging what was being said, did it occur to me that I had been foolish to think that because of my questions my aunt and uncle were getting a qualitatively different account of my grandmother's life, or at least a fuller and more candid one, than what they already knew. I was extracting new and unexpected information from my grandmother because I was asking questions that hadn't been asked, either because they were too personal or too remote or otherwise inappropriate, but I was the only one clearly pleased with this information, and it was a yawning, disquieting realization that this was still all I knew of my grandmother. And that the answers I was getting didn't reveal much about what my grandmother thought. And were perhaps no different than what they would have been had it been someone else plying her with fresh curiosity. And I realized, too, that I would need to manipulate these stories and pieces of information into something that would do whatever work I had been expecting them to do. These conversations with my grandmother were a long-winded performance I had somewhat disingenuously organized for myself, and everyone involved was trying hard to get the details right.

Eventually, I suppose, I got what I wanted, though at the time I had no idea what that was. During many of our conversations my grandmother spoke in parables, compressing logic in half, segueing from fact to homily and from homily to non sequitur, establishing a view of the world which was clear and expansively disciplined but inevitably alien to me. Sometimes I just sat in her room, in whichever house she happened to be staying, and marveled that we were related to one another at all.

One afternoon she told me about something she had figured out. At some point, she had had a decent sum of money. She gave it to two people and lived on the interest they passed on to her. But after a while, when one of them stopped sending her the interest, she wrote to one of her sons in Bombay and urged him to get the money back from the man. My uncle tried and couldn't get it back. Eventually, the man wrote to my grandmother and told her that he was poor and had nothing left so the money could not be returned.

At some later date, she went to the village of Vavania, where there's a Jain religious center, and when the people there began talking about money she realized that the money she had wanted back was money she owed the man from a previous life. And if she wanted to get the money back so badly, she would be born in her next life as a dog because dogs take and take from the person who cares for them. And since she didn't want to be born as a dog, she stopped thinking about the money.

Had my mother heard this she would surely have dismissed the story as a skinny, ranting bit of reasoning, but she would have objected to the comment about dogs since she absolutely does not believe that dogs take and take without giving something back. Both my parents would have had head-shaking responses to many of the things my grandmother said, and while my own responses weren't always far from that, I can't help thinking that my grandmother simply deals in large-scale metaphors of causation, although for her everything tacks back to some very distant past that can't be accessed.

A long time after hearing this story, after I had given up trying to understand how my grandmother thought, I realized that she had in fact been answering my questions as straightforwardly as possible, and that she had done so with no embarrassment and much more frankly than any of my relatives or I would have done. My grandmother treated all information equally, without distinguishing between the questions asked: no information she conveyed seemed more significant to her than other information. Moreover, I realized that my grandmother had been talking mainly because I had been asking her questions. The conversations and memories didn't hold much meaning for her, even though she sometimes cried when she answered my questions. In fact, the main relevance her memories now had seemed to be that they enabled her to answer my questions.

And yet I got something of value from these conversations. We're born to particular parents and into particular families, my grandmother would often say through my aunt or uncle, because in our last life or four lives ago or a hundred lives ago, we had something to do with each other. Sometimes I'd ask my grandmother variations of earlier questions to make sure I hadn't misunderstood her, so another time she said that, yes, she knew she had had relations with people in her family in previous lives, though she didn't know what they were. She then explained that there was something Bharati *faiba* had to give to me and something I had to give to my aunt, something she and my cousin Rhushabh had to give one another, and so forth in a long process of reciprocal exchange that was true for all the myriad relationships we had. Because we had something we needed to give one another, we were born related.

Only once did my grandmother ask me a question. It was simple: "Will you be born in another life?" I hesitated opaquely when I heard the question, surprised by what was being asked and not really wanting to say no to the grandmother with whom I wished I had more in common, and the only reply I managed to get out was that I didn't know about being born again, but that I sometimes felt drawn to people I didn't know for no particular reason. "Sometimes," my grandmother replied to Indu *fua*, my uncle sitting on the floor next to me, who would die the following year of a massive heart attack, "you meet someone and he doesn't know you and yet he takes a dislike to you. Or there are two brothers with the same

circumstances and backgrounds and one becomes successful and the other fails miserably. You say it is luck. It is really just the result of your deeds from previous lives."

My grandmother is very adept at throwing everything back into the confusion of previous lives, answering every dilemma by shuttling back in time, smelting chronology, and so forth. And this I find terribly consoling, as well as anathema to everything I know and believe. When I was younger and my past in Bombay was a whole lot closer, I wrote letter after letter to a number of friends whose lives are now beyond the farthest reaches of what I know about them, but whose correspondence meant something important to me for a long while. These days I'm used to writing reviews of books and articles for anonymous readers, and a book I'm doing research for involves conducting a couple hundred interviews with Orthodox Jews and Indians. So I spend a lot of time with people whose associations with certain aspects of my past are, in many ways, stronger than my own. Compared to them, I am equipped with few unimpeachable beliefs. And compared to them, my commitment to components of my own history is fairly weak. But maybe the ruminative, vicarious relation I now have with my background is the only one that's possible, the only one that makes sense, just as the simplest, most unembellished relationship I can have with my paternal grandmother is the only one that's not impossible. Though in the end, it's still hard to be sure.