



TWO

# sacred love

Just before I turned forty I felt a strong urge to go to India for my birthday. It was persistent, omnipresent, and so strong that I began dreaming about India, fantasising about the place. Everyone I attracted into my life at that point seemed to have just returned from India or had lived there and wanted to talk to me about it.

Mostly I wanted to go to the Khajuraho erotic temples where, as it turns out, I had an experience that transformed my life. The temples are legendary. Built in 950 AD, they are home to some of the most exotic and erotic artwork ever created. These Hindu monuments are covered in relief sculptures depicting daily life and spirituality in India a millennium ago, but two motives predominate: women and sexuality. *Apsaras* or dancing, celestial maidens appear on every temple alongside the *mithuna* or erotic figures depicted in a host of *Kama Sutra* positions.

The Tantrics who helped build the temples believed that the path to spiritual enlightenment was through sexual love. The teachings of the sculptures and, indeed, the sacred *Kama Sutra*, concern the elevating of

our primal needs to something holy and luminous. Rather than repress the lower human functions as most religions do, pleasure is depicted as a vehicle to self-realisation and finally godliness – a transcendental state where after having savoured earthly delights we finally let go of cravings, attachments and worldly things.

As portrayed in the film of E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, these sculptures disturbed the British sense of propriety when they first arrived in the country, for they completely contradicted the Victorian notion of women as submissive, non-sensual beings; instead all humans were portrayed as free-spirited, erotic creatures. When knowledge of the temples came to light, and after the famous explorer Sir Richard Burton translated the *Kama Sutra* (on which many of the sculptures were based), and brought the book back to England, it changed the way a generation thought about themselves, their bodies, their souls.

As I walked around the temples with my husband and my daughter on my actual birthday, I kept thinking about what turning forty meant to me. Forty for women is not a time to be underestimated. It goes right to the heart of our femininity and sexuality. It is the beginning of the body's last hormonal surge before menopause, our last chance to have that baby and fulfil our biological, maternal purpose. It also represents a real threat to our womanhood and sexual power as we watch our fertility fading, along with the hormones that keep our bodies juicy and sexy.

And yet there in the reliefs above and around us was a different depiction of femininity. It was Mother, Goddess, ripe, beckoning. The top strata of the temples were resplendent with full-bodied women, who seemed to have transcended base sexuality and merged with the great Shakti goddess to become 'Love' itself. No longer caught in *samsara*, the great suffering cycle of existence, they had eaten of the abundant fruits of the flesh – as depicted on the pornographic and mundane lower levels of the reliefs – and moved beyond the confines of physical pleasure into a deeper innate sexuality to become the great lover of all Mankind –

Devadasi, the sacred prostitute, beloved of God.

I understood this at an intellectual level as I studied the sculptures, all the while thinking about my life and how to catapult myself from the mundane to the sublime. For there was not just pornography but daily life on the lower friezes – the washing of dishes, fighting between partners, child-bearing, child-rearing, all the earthly stuff of existence including battles and processions comically depicted alongside threesomes, orgies and homoerotic love. These symbolised the trials that have to be lived through in a state of devotion, before mortal man and woman can begin rising to more lofty pursuits.

But I was about to get more than an intellectual understanding. The Khajuraho temples comprise a cluster of various buildings like diamonds on a ring, each devoted to various facets of life. I could feel a temple in the distance beckoning. From my guidebook, I read that the temple was a special place of worship devoted to Shiva and his consort Shakti, and particularly famous for its portrayal of sacred female rituals.

At first we all went into the temple as we had with the others. But suddenly my husband doubled over with pain. We thought it must be something he'd eaten and yet we'd all had the same thing for lunch. He went running outside to be sick, but the minute he stepped outside the temple the pain and nausea miraculously stopped. So he came back in again and the same thing happened. After two more attempts, he took my daughter's hand and said: 'I'm getting out of here. This is not a place for men. You stay here by yourself!'

I was alone in the temple and walked around, feeling a rush of strange energies. In the centre of the sacred, female space was a giant *lingam* or penis, symbolising the male God Shiva – Shakti's consort and partner. I sat in front of it for a while and then felt the urge to go deeper into the temple, guided by some unknown force. I knew something special was happening because there were thousands of tourists visiting the site that day and each temple was

crammed. Yet this temple was silent. Not a person was in sight. As I ventured behind an ornate sculpted wall, I discovered a huge hidden *yoni* or vagina sculpture in the folds of the walls.

Immediately, I got a vision of water pouring down, though there was none. There was a giant basin beneath the relief to hold the symbolised female juices. I began trembling though I didn't know why, and could suddenly see visions in my mind of women anointing themselves with this water in a purification ritual. Which is when I had a strong desire to sit down and take hold of the basin. As I did I felt a powerful sexual energy surge up my spine. And I knew from my yogic training that I was experiencing some measure of unlocking of my dormant *kundalini* energy, the sacred life-source emanating from the lower chakras, legendary in esoteric Hindu and Taoist philosophies. It is depicted as a great serpent uncoiling and rising.

The great Tantrics and yoginis who practise around India and the east believe that this energy – unlocked through certain devotional practices – creates a mystical, powerful force that can heal, purify, transform. In Tantra it is the meticulous journey of *kunda* through disciplined breathing and exercise regimes up the chakras that is the means to enlightenment and God. Any sexual practice combining *kundalini* movement and spiritual devotion – marrying Heaven above and Earth below – can take and shake the practitioner to the core of unspeakable bliss.

I had experienced some unleashing of primal energy with my world-renowned Taiwanese *chi gung* master, who taught students to release *chi* (the Chinese word for life-force) from the lower spine and navel regions. I had gone further through my reiki practice (the word *ki* being the Japanese version of *chi* or *kundalini*) and witnessed my energy channels open to a powerful tingling through my entire body and to the energy surrounding my body. In yoga I found inverted postures and back bends had further stimulated certain energies, as had the rigorous breathing and meditation regime my teachers had put me on.

But never before had I experienced the degree and potency of such liberation of *kundalini* as occurred on my fortieth birthday. I was clinging to the basin, electric charges rushing up my spine, the top of my head feeling like energy was spurting out like firecrackers and the bottom half of my body vibrating. In Tantra this is called a full-body orgasm, as sexual energy takes on a life of its own and begins circulating through every nerve and every blood vessel for limitless amounts of time, no longer anchored in earthly pursuits or limited biology.

‘Breathe,’ I heard my mind tell me, as the journalist inside my head was trying to offer rational explanations. I knew I had to ignore my western mind and work with the energy, not deny or block it.

‘Let it go,’ I told myself, surrendering to the ecstatic rush and praying that no one would walk in. Having attempted this for many years with partners, I was blown out that my initiation was happening in this setting, in this way, linked only to the Divine.

When it was over, I sat in front of the great Shiva *lingam* statue in the centre of the room and offered thanks. I knew that something had been set free in me for a reason. That there was a journey of self-growth that I was about to embark on and a message to convey. For such bliss is not about bodily pleasures alone, rather it is the beginning of an emotional and a spiritual consciousness.

As I sat in reverence, I heard my husband and daughter standing behind me. I got up, dusted myself down and the moment I stepped outside of the temple, a hundred people come flooding in, jabbering noisily. It was unbelievable to think that I had had over an hour alone in this sacred space. I knew I’d been given a profound gift.

But despite this awakening, when I returned to Australia, I once again became consumed with normal, mundane relationship dramas in my partnering, mothering, domestic life and friendships, as I describe in this chapter. Some days were transcendent. On others it felt as if nothing had changed. And yet, isn’t this the duality of being a mortal after all?

We humans glimpse greatness while continuing to project our romantic illusions, expectations and needs on to another. But what else can we do? The great Persian poet and mystic Rumi believed that all our efforts at finding a beloved were really just our poignant human attempts to connect with the Divine.

Brilliant Jungian psychoanalyst Marion Woodman agrees that instead of going within or to Source, we go looking for an archetypal container to contain our God–Goddess projections. ‘Too often that target is another stumbling being who seems to embody all that was, and all that is, too perfect to be . . . until the human warts become visible.’

She says women may project their King–God desire on to a simple man – ‘crown him with light, invest him with their own intellectual and spiritual potential, and then wonder why he isn’t big enough to fill his royal vestments’. The king, too, may project his fantasy of perfect femalehood on to his queen, finding an infantile replica to make himself feel powerful or choosing a mother figure who sees him as her ‘golden boy’ while he struggles with his terror of being consumed, and yet has a deep desire for it.

The emotionally charged, co-dependent male–female dance is a ritual doomed to failure unless we liberate ourselves from psychic struggles and go deep within. Unless we go to a place where our inner king and queen, the animus and anima of Jungian philosophy, our internal Shakti–Shiva, marry and live happily within our bodies, the temples of our soul. *Kundalini* can guide us to the Divine and to a greater love of Nature, friends, a leaf on the ground – to a love that can permeate our entire beings and thus lift us towards enlightenment.

By clawing back our romantic projections we become free of the gilded cage of expectation to become our own Christ, Krishna, Buddha, Shakti.

For me, on my journey, I am at conflicted points. I am still at the lower levels of the Khajuraho relief, debating with husband and friends about responsibility, monogamy and sacrifice, and exploring

the mundane realities of personal love. And yet I am on a higher trajectory upwards, trying to find my way out of the mire of unresolved Oedipal projections and emotional dependencies, towards bliss. Towards playing with 'Love Itself', 'Love Impersonal' in the energy field of friends and in the teeming world around me.

By finding love in all things, I am becoming the great, full-breasted Shakti goddess who needs no one human being to give her total sensual, fulsome pleasure. Whose mantra is '*I am the Goddess, I am the Mother, all acts of love and pleasure are my ritual*', as she spills over with grace.

## Language of Love

The table is filled with food. There are baskets of bagels, slices of meat, plates of fetta cheese, artichoke hearts, pickled cucumbers, rye bread, pasta salads, dolmades, cold cuts, warm spinach tarts straight from the oven, there is roast chicken being cut by someone on the kitchen bench.

But wait, there's more. Someone is carrying out smoked salmon, someone is walking around with a moussaka. Someone is desperately searching for space on the huge, wooden table for the rice salad.

'Welcome home,' says my mother, as I drag my suitcase into the centre of the room and glare at the spread.

'Mum . . . who's coming for lunch?' I marvel, gaping at the table laden for a party of hundreds.

'Oh just us,' she smiles, referring to my husband, my child and my immediate relatives. At best there'd be eight to ten of us.

But to my mother, who has spent days shopping and chopping, dicing and slicing, strategising her early morning dash to the bagel shop to get the freshest and the best, this is not about numbers. It is about pure, unadulterated love. It's her way of showing me how important I am to her. How happy she is that I'm in Melbourne for a visit.

'Come,' she beckons, leading me into the kitchen where she brings a spoon of white-wine coloured soup to my lips. 'I've been cooking all day,' she says, which is 'I love you' in mother-talk.

I never saw it until recently. The strange languages of love. I have complained bitterly over the years about not being validated by this person or that, only to discover that the love was there, but expressed in a foreign language. For instance, I experience love in French but my mother speaks Japanese.

My late father spoke a Zulu dialect. Growing up I rarely experienced any compliments, or direct words of love, for he was simply unable to verbalise such feelings.

Instead, when he saw me, he would wrap an arm around my neck in a strangle-hold from behind, and attempt to drag me backward a few feet while rocking me from side to side, thus almost dislocating my neck from the top of my spine. A move taught in self-defence classes to crush your opponent. It took me years to work out that this meant 'I am overjoyed to see you' in his native tongue.

My husband and I spoke our words of love in different tongues for years too, until I read international linguist Deborah Tannen's 1990's classic *You Just Don't Understand*, which was instrumental in helping me translate his intent.

For example, one night we had a fight. I was in tears. My husband barricaded himself in my office for hours. When he finally emerged, I expected him to gush forth words of remorse. Instead he proudly led me to my bookshelf where he'd organised all my books by author, from A to Z.

I grew even angrier. 'You're shutting down. You don't care about my feelings,' I insisted. Then I remembered Tannen's book. He was expressing true love in his language, the language of a book-loving intellectual, just as my mother expressed love through food, and my bearish father through rough play.

We've all had fallings-out because of the language of love. If someone experiences love as sex – which is very common – and the partner won't make love daily, then that person can unconsciously feel unloved and invalidated, even though their partner may be speaking fluent Cantonese, providing care for the family or time and emotional support.

Not that these other gifts are not appreciated, but they are seen as second-rate displays of love.

If a person equates love with being listened to and verbally validated with such words as ‘Oh really . . . that is so interesting’ but instead they’re given a plate of moussaka, well you can see where the discrepancy lies. Which makes the giver feel hurt, confused, taken for granted.

Predictably, I experience love through deep communication. I once had a girlfriend who would rarely talk to me about anything significant but often sent me miniature tubes of beauty products through the mail: samples of night-creams, cleansers, eye-creams.

I broke off the friendship before I realised that she was telling me she loved me in Latin. I guess she never understood why I’d insensitively ask her about her soul, rather than whipping out a toner.

So I sit down with my family and break bread. There isn’t a huge amount of verbal communication going on, but lots of slurping, munching and gobbling. These are the sounds of love, of a family telling me they care. And I lap them up though my internal translator which has learned, through patience and pain, to become multilingual.

## In Essence

John's place is rather empty. An old lounge suite in the corner without its mate. A dining table without chairs in the centre of the room. These are among the few things salvaged from his recent separation. The casualties of emotional war.

On a recent trip to Sydney, I visit him to offer support. We sit on two remaining kitchen chairs. The cupboards are bare. I settle for a glass of wine instead.

'I can't work out what went wrong,' he says, as the alcohol takes effect. Around the room are photos of his kids. I try not to look too long, try not to remind him of the sounds that would normally be filling the room at this time of night.

John is in his forties, professional. He began his adult life with a dream and spent two decades working towards it. Recently his wife walked out, taking the furniture and their three children and moving temporarily to their holiday house on the coast.

He is a man in shock. He never saw it coming.

It's cold in the harbour-side house tonight. His wife took the heaters too. The huge lounge-room he built for his family feels like a mausoleum as our voices bounce off the lifeless walls. I take his hand in mine.

'I stopped turning her on,' he says. 'She said she didn't find me interesting any more.' His shoulders are slumped over, his lips quivering. It's a hard thing for a man to hear. Harder to admit.

There's nothing for me to say. I allow silence to sit between us. He runs his hands through his hair. 'I don't know what to do. I don't know what happened. I don't understand,' he says, finally getting up and wandering about.

I'm so filled with pity my heart hurts, searching for something to say to make it better. My words are clumsy, patronising. 'You are a great guy. There will be other women. She doesn't know what she's missing.' All clichés uttered repeatedly to friends going through the

ugly ritual of divorce.

And what can one really say anyway? In many long-term relationships, boredom is par for the course.

And suddenly in the painful silence I get a flash of intuition. A flash so bright, I feel my body perk up. 'John, what did you keep for yourself from the separation? What is the most precious, personal thing you own?'

John disappears into the bedroom and emerges with a big box and a bigger grin. 'My rock collection,' he beams, looking like a boy of ten. He opens the flaps and starts to lay out the most amazing array of stones I've ever seen. There are crystals, opals, rocks from volcanoes, rocks with veins of precious stone running through them. And each has a story. Each was collected from some wild adventure years before.

'This is from the time I travelled in the Outback,' he says, sitting down and telling tales around the camp fire of his mind: the time he spent in an old mining town, the months spent sleeping under the stars, floods, rescue attempts, *that* girl.

The rocks and their stories fill the room like big, bright canvases, resplendent with colour.

'John, this is your essence,' I say to him, squeezing his hand. 'And no woman or man can take it away.'

Through all the years of being a good husband, good father, good provider, John had buried his rocks, his soul, under the bed. The same place that I kept my paintings, half-finished poems, and guitar – symbols of my own essence, hidden from view – until my recent commitment to open the boxes of my creative soul. At any cost.

For it's the trap of every relationship. We end up domesticating and killing off the very essence of ourselves, the essence that made us attractive in the first place. Our sexy, untamed, creative aspects get stifled and lost beneath layers of mundane dross. And once they are buried, we fall out of love with ourselves – usually well before our partners fall out of love with us.

‘Let’s put them out on display,’ I say, and we begin arranging the rocks into a giant circle. A sacred altar.

‘I think I might travel for a while,’ says John thoughtfully, staring at what American Indians would call a healing medicine wheel in the middle of his lounge. His shoulders are no longer slumped. He is handsome and bold, probably the man his wife fell in love with.

There is magic embedded in us all. But it’s not for others to mine. It’s for us to keep unearthing in the humdrum of daily life. For how can our partners see the precious stones we keep locked away from ourselves?

# Trash and Treasure

My girlfriend rang the other day. She was exhausted from a garage sale she'd just had. I asked her what she was selling.

'Terrible things. There was an old suitcase, an electric organ, moth-eaten lampshades, a carved, wooden thing from Indonesia, Mickey Mouse figures bought in Disneyland, plaster angels we found at a garage sale, lace curtains I hated that someone thought were wonderful, vinyl furniture, an old Playstation . . .

'I don't understand how we made \$400 from bits of rubbish,' she said.

'I guess buyers must see something in an old thingo that the former owner can't see,' I said. 'That moth-eaten lampshade may seem like a priceless antique to new eyes, or the perfect thing for that corner. Maybe the new owner has the exact piece of material to patch up that side, or cover that stain.

'You know the cliché. One man's trash is another man's treasure.'

And suddenly she started laughing. 'I guess it's a bit like relationships isn't it? Look at Bob. When I met him he was pre-loved, second-hand goods. A bit shop soiled, a wheel or two missing. His ex-wife had given him up for broken. I thought: "I'll just dust off the cobwebs. Cover the broken bits. Put the stuffing back in." And I've had a good decade out of him.'

We laughed and laughed when we thought of the world as a 'garage sale of the human heart'. After being in long-term relationships, some people end up very threadbare, falling apart, knobs off everywhere. And yet often a shopper with a keen eye, or one who's been single for too long, will see value: 'I need one just like that for my house.'

And they'll be happy to put in the effort: 'I'll just cover that hole there with a bit of Freudian therapy, whack a pair of designer jeans down there, fix his hair, and he'll be as good as new,' they say, snapping up 'a real bargain' while the ex-wife looks on in shock and

asks ‘What does she see in him?’

Similarly, a man I know was mortified to discover that the wife he left after twenty-three years of marriage, had become an object of lust for a gorgeous man ten years her junior. Firstly, the woman got such a shock on being abandoned that she finally went on that fitness regime. Secondly, and most importantly, contrary to the stereotypical view of life, it isn’t beauty or age that really counts in the ‘garage sale of the human heart’.

It’s timing and fit. Rest assured that your old, discarded thingo will fit perfectly into someone else’s home, without rhyme or reason to you who no longer has need for it. It isn’t personal. It’s just in keeping with another adage I love: ‘There’s a lid for every pot.’

There are nostalgics who love things from the 1970s, sentimentalists who loved my friend’s Mickey Mouses, someone who even wanted her lacy-metal garden furniture with chipped, white paint.

Meanwhile a woman I know took up with a man who had the deepest lines etched into his face. ‘You should have seen how handsome he was when he was young,’ the ex taunted her. But the woman only ever adored the maturity and protection that came with men who reminded her of daddy.

Another interesting observation is that the new owner brings out facets in the thingo that the old owner couldn’t. A good polish with the right, tender-loving hands can make a thingo shine. In the film *The Accidental Tourist* the ex-wife keeps saying: ‘You always’ and ‘You never’. The new owner sees the leading man a different way, and so he opens up and becomes different just because someone believes he is.

That’s the profound power of new love. New owners are circuit breakers, they change the thingo’s focus, heal the wounded bits, mend the broken bits, cut off the dead bits, recondition, renovate, do a makeover. And suddenly the broken thingo is rollerblading with his new girlfriend while the ex shakes her head in disbelief.

Partly it's the alchemy of having an exciting, new owner that does the trick.

But it's also to do with the effort that an optimistic, new partner will make which we don't make as we tire of our dear, old things and leave them atrophying in a dusty corner of the relationship while dreaming of a hot, new thing that will make our hearts beat faster – which is probably just someone else's old, worn thing.

My friend with the garage sale said she had one huge lament. 'I was actually very sorry to see the two Mickeys go. I should have realised their sentimental value.'

The lesson she offers to all my readers: Look again at your junk, and try to look through new shopper's eyes. Then put effort into your old thing before it's too late. Pre-loved things go fast in the garage sale of the human heart.