

“Guru Simha”

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Fiction

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Open your third eye...

See with your mind...

Breathe in...

Breathe out...

Burn the veils of ignorance...

Banish the illusion of this world...

Inhale deeply...

Exhale fully...

Sense the hidden reality...

Elevate your consciousness...

Absorb the purity...

Expel the pollution...

In a park near the Fuller Avenue entrance to Runyon Canyon, Simha facilitates a mindfulness session. The group, thirty-two souls, sit cross-legged in a double semicircle around

him and, eyes shut softly, imbibe guttural yogic breaths as they listen to his voice. That voice – dulcet but masculine, resolute and entrancing.

Separate from the material world...

Shed the dirt of human existence...

Ommm...

Ommm...

Connect with the universe...

Resonate with the vibrations of eternity...

Ommm...

Ommm...

They all wear orange clothing in one form or another. Simha dons a loose tangerine frock over camouflaged cargo shorts, a sand-colored bandana around the crown of his head, wrangling his unruly locks, hemp bangles up his left wrist. His feet are bare, as are those of his students. He sways as he intones the mystical directives of the cleansing session. He hums the mantras, his chest undulating, his torso precessing in a circular motion. Finches and sparrows chitter and dart from branch to branch in the leafy canopy overhead. Clusters of hikers, dogwalkers, joggers pass along the nearby path and cast inquisitive glances toward the color-coordinated flock. The canyon is busy, as it always is on Saturday mornings in Hollywood.

The members of this group call themselves The Horizon and they are, by at least some definitions, a cult. Simha, previously known as Charlie Holloway, is the adored founder and guru.

The Horizon has not always been a cult, however. It was something else at first: something... simpler. Its genesis can be traced back more than a decade to the period shortly after Charlie's high school graduation in 2000. He had attended Riverside-Brookfield High School in the suburbs of Chicago, finishing with a middling GPA, very limited extracurricular credentials, and an acute lack of direction. He was a stoner as a teen and little interested him beyond fishing, horror movies, and the occasional house party. He was raised by a single mother, Kendra, who was perpetually frazzled and only seventeen years Charlie's senior. She and Charlie's father split when the boy was three years old, at which point his father relocated to Dallas and ceased contributing to Charlie's upbringing aside from inconsistent child support payments.

What the boy did have going for him were his looks: slender but broad-shouldered, taller than average, with an unblemished almond complexion and compelling eyes that exuded both wisdom and a sort of seductive energy. Thus, he never had a problem finding a girlfriend or a warm body for the weekend. Cognizant of this distinction, he chose to relocate to Los Angeles after graduation where, he believed, people with similar aesthetic appeal tended to congregate and live their best lives.

Unlike most of the young people Charlie encountered out west, he was not particularly driven to make a career in entertainment. Nonetheless, he enrolled in acting classes soon after he settled into his studio apartment in Los Feliz. It just seemed to be the thing to do and, to boot, fertile grounds for harvesting lady friends. As it turned out, Charlie was an exceptional thespian, a trait which would pay dividends throughout his life. At the snap of a finger he could fully immerse himself in a character, be it a bank robber or an alcoholic priest or a cyborg. His peers

were uniformly impressed by his natural ability and stunned to learn that he had not studied acting previously.

However, in the year that Charlie participated in these classes, he did not go out for a single audition. Not for a short film nor a commercial. He was disinclined to participate in the demeaning rat race to which virtually all aspiring actors were subjected. Furthermore, deep down, despite the affirmations, he seriously doubted that acting was his calling. He enjoyed performing for the sake of performance, but that is where it ended.

Rather, what really appealed to young Charlie was the general obsession with fitness and wellness in Southern California. He fell in with a group of friends who, every weekend, surfed in Venice Beach or hiked in the Santa Monica Mountains or drove up to Big Bear for skiing or to Yosemite for camping. He had hardly experienced anything of the sort back in Chicago. There, he had always been a kind of housebound hermit. But, here, on the west coast, he blossomed, he metamorphosed into a new creature, one which craved companionship and camaraderie and thrived in the rawest of natural environments.

Charlie's first job, in those days, was as clerk for a film equipment rental house, where he worked from 7 AM to 3 PM Monday through Friday. He had the afternoons and evenings to do with as he wished and, by the Spring of 2001, he was practicing yoga after work almost every day. A sweet girl from Las Vegas, an acting classmate named Keeley, with whom Charlie had an ongoing casual sexual relationship, had first convinced him to dip his toe into the ancient spiritual discipline. Charlie got hooked. Not only did he benefit from the meditative aspect – the focus on controlled breathing and body positioning seemed to temper his generalized anxiety disorder – but he derived great satisfaction from the communal aspect. He felt energized, exhilarated even, by the experience of flowing through an hour of yogic contortions in a hot,

humid room with two dozen sweaty comrades – most of them attractive and fit – who were, likewise, pursuing no small degree of physio-spiritual elevation.

Charlie also enjoyed the metaphysical aspects of his yoga practice. He was attracted to the idea that all human beings, indeed all living entities, are connected through a vibrating, energetic medium – that we can commune with the spirits of the universe by looking inward, through mindfulness and self-knowledge. These notions spoke to him far more than any subject – scientific or humanistic – that he had studied in high school. They were ideas that, at long last, resonated.

At first, Keeley and he attended regular yoga sessions at a quaint place in Silverlake known as the Chakra Cabin, which was run by a Wyoming transplant named Hunter. However, when their affair ended with some acrimony, Charlie was compelled to seek out a new studio. He settled on a larger, though seemingly authentic, donation-based studio called Hanuman Yoga, which was on the border of East Hollywood and Los Feliz. The owner and lead instructor was a striking Lebanese woman named Zaina who had trained for two years at an ashram in Goa, India. She was lithe and athletic and sensual and seemed to be, at all times, in a state of Zenlike equanimity. Charlie found her demeanor to be simultaneously soothing, intimidating, and arousing.

So when, soon after Charlie began practicing at Hanuman, Zaina announced that she was coordinating a week-long yoga retreat on Catalina Island, the young aspirant jumped at the opportunity. The cost was fifteen hundred dollars, which he, by no means, could afford. But Zaina agreed to finance his participation; he would repay her three hundred per month for the following five months.

Each day of the retreat featured vigorous vinyasa sessions, a nature walk, a group arts and crafts project, and a gourmet dinner. The participants, most in their thirties and forties, were a fascinating mix of accomplished professionals and working artists, including one man who was the bassist in a rather famous pop-rock band called The Sycamores. Charlie thrived during virtually every minute of the retreat and, by the time he returned home, had decided upon his life's mission. He, too, would train in India, and he, too, would become a sought-after yoga specialist.

To that end, he took on a second job as a high-end landscaper's assistant on the weekends and, by the summer of 2002, had saved enough to spend at least six months in Goa. With Zaina's encouragement and guidance, he ended his lease and booked his journey.

Life at the ashram was more spartan than Charlie had imagined. The daily regimen featured two, obligatory, two-hour yoga sessions which were each arduous and severe in their own way. These were interspersed with communal meals, guided meditations, and property upkeep, along with a few hours of free time in the afternoon. The ashram was located on an idyllic seaside plot in Goa, which suited Charlie quite well. However its wooden structures – a main building with a large yoga room and meditation room, Guru Chandio's quarters, two barracks-style dormitories, a dining hall, and a tiny Hindu temple – were decades old, worn and wobbled by the seasonal monsoons and the incessant spray of sea salt. Charlie slept in the men's dormitory, which featured two rows of ten thin cots, almost all of them occupied during his entire stay. An even more crowded women's facility was situated across the hallway. There were clean toilets, but no showers. Residents (*sadhaks*) bathed in the Arabian Sea and boiled great pots of water each morning for tea and hydration purposes.

Guru Chandiok was younger – perhaps fifty – and taller and more muscular than the scrawny and wizened Gandhi lookalike Charlie had envisioned in the leadup to the journey. He spoke no English, so Charlie found himself floundering a bit at first. However, at least half of the sadhaks were non-Indian and most were English-speaking, so, with their help, he soon got his bearings.

Charlie, like the other sadhaks, was afforded only limited direct interaction with the guru during his stay at the ashram. Generally, the guru would arrive for yoga sessions once the practitioners had taken their positions and quietly waited for five or ten minutes. During the sessions he would, at times, meander among the contortionists offering gentle, soft-worded guidance or using his hands to make a physical adjustment to one's positioning. Then, after the final invocation of *om* at the end of the session, he would quickly get to his feet and exit the room. He also led a *satsang* – a formal question and answer session – each afternoon, but that was with the entire group. Occasionally, Charlie would spot the guru on the grounds of the ashram, but then only in passing. The spiritual man neither fraternized nor took meals with the residents. His two doting servants, Shreya and Ashali, brought whatever he needed directly to his quarters.

However, on a first-come-first-serve basis, the residents could request a private audience with Guru Chandiok. These each lasted fifteen to thirty minutes, and the guru entertained only two or three per day, often taking days off. As virtually all of the residents partook, Charlie secured only five such audiences during his entire stay.

The first was brief. At the appointed time, Ashali ushered Charlie into the guru's sitting room, which was a small, candle-lit space with sliding wall panels that opened to the elements, a small shrine against the wall, and an arrangement of floor pillows. The guru was there, seated

cross-legged, sipping tea, his eyes flickering, waiting. The caramel-spice aroma of incense pervaded the room. Charlie took a seated position opposite him while Ashali sat off to the side. In the soft light, she appeared more beautiful than in the bright sun, her red and yellow sari wrapped tightly around her petite frame, her hair long and braided. Glamorous, in a way, Charlie thought.

Without a word, the guru poured a cup of tea for Charlie and handed it to him.

“You may offer a question,” Ashali said.

But Charlie froze. Although he was certain that he wanted the guru’s guidance, he had not come prepared with specific inquiries. He sipped his tea, which was piping hot, while Guru Chandiok eyed him patiently and magnanimously. When nothing came to him, Charlie closed his eyes and rubbed his temple with his free hand and racked his brain. Finally, a simple query bubbled to the surface: “Am I special?”

Charlie felt embarrassed almost as soon as the words left his lips.

But Ashali nodded respectfully and translated this to Hindi, causing the guru to smile brightly. He then responded with a rather lengthy commentary. Charlie listened carefully, although the foreign words were entirely unintelligible.

Ashali’s translation: “Guru says every human being is special, but that answer is not sufficient for you nor is it what you meant by your question. Your question, properly asked is, ‘Am I special enough to change the world?’ The answer, again, is that all human beings are this, but only few realize it. However, Guru adds that he sees something in you that he does not see in many sadhaks. You are very young. You are very alert. You are exceptionally devoted.”

At this, she paused.

Charlie opted to bow slightly and say thank you.

Guru Chandiok then spoke again, this time more briefly. “However, you are attached to the things of this world, the things that are irrelevant to your happiness and your enlightenment. You must renounce what is impermanent. You must reject that which weighs you down. You must set loose the anchor if you are to rise.” He raised a hand and added one more comment: “Until then, you will not be as special as you would hope to be.”

The message was rather straightforward. Detach. Abjure materialism. Charlie understood this, and had anticipated that this would be a crucial step on the path to spiritual elevation. However, he wondered why the guru had been so certain and forthright in this diagnosis. What about Charlie indicated that he was preoccupied with earthly possessions? He hardly had any money to begin with. He had in no way indicated aspirations toward wealth or status. Hell, he had sold almost everything he owned in order to make this pilgrimage. He was tempted to talk it over with other sadhaks, but the guru had made clear that his private consultations were to remain confidential. Charlie, somewhat cynically, worried that this was because Guru Chandiok offered the same advice to all who came to him for an audience.

Ashram life was peaceful in those early months but, for Charlie, a bit too austere. Whereas the Catalina retreat was an all-inclusive vacation, this experience was more akin to work. With increasing frequency, he found himself craving creature comforts and debating internally about the marginal value of remaining in Goa. At the start of his sixth week at the ashram, just as he was beginning to really question his capacity and doubt his resolve, an Australian girl named Jessie arrived. She was nineteen years old and was undertaking a “gap year” prior to beginning her studies at the University of Melbourne. There was an immediate attraction between the two young people that, in Charlie’s view, was not only sexual. They sat with each other at all meals and took many an opportunity to wander the grounds together. They

discussed spiritual issues: the purpose of life, the origin of the universe, the nature and essence of love. But, just as things were heating up, one of the older sadhaks, a serious German woman, warned Charlie that Guru Chandiok was very strict about the prohibition of sexual activity at the ashram. “He has sent people away for breaking the rule. I have seen it myself,” she said.

Nevertheless, late at night the following week, Charlie stepped out of the dorm and walked to the sea, where he found Jessie at the water’s edge, staring at the galaxy of stars. They ambled up the shoreline hand-in-hand then, confident that no one was watching, went skinny dipping and had sex. When they finished, they curled up in each other’s arms on the beach.

At dawn, Charlie awoke by himself in the cold, damp sand. He hurried back to the complex to join the early-morning yoga session. Jessie was not in attendance. Charlie assumed that she had overslept, but she was also nowhere to be found during lunch. In the afternoon, he inquired with Shreya. She explained that Jessie had departed on a morning bus. He pressed, but could extract no additional information. The several sadhaks he checked with, acquaintances of the girl, could offer no additional insight either.

Three days later, Charlie had his second audience with Guru Chandiok. After the tea was poured, Ashali invited Charlie to propose a question. This time, the young man had come prepared.

“Did you send Jessie away from the ashram?” he inquired bitterly.

Ashali’s expression did not change. She translated the question for the guru, who, likewise, did not react. After a moment, he spoke: “You are attached to the things of this world, the things that are irrelevant to your happiness and your enlightenment. You must renounce what is impermanent. You must reject that which weighs you down. You must set loose the anchor if you are to rise.”

It was, verbatim, what he had advised at their first audience. Charlie felt his blood pressure spike and his jaw tighten. He took several deep breaths before responding. “You said the same thing last time. Is that what I’m paying for? A cliché? I want to know what happened with Jessie.”

The guru sipped his tea quietly, nodded, then offered a terse reply. The translation: “It is true that I repeat myself. However, the soul who strives to attain the shores of the ocean of truth, if he listens carefully, will understand my words differently each time.”

Charlie burst to his feet and left the room with tears burning beneath his eyelids. He went straight to the dorm and angrily packed his things. Then he lay on his cot and covered his eyes with his forearm. Unexpectedly, he fell asleep.

When he opened his eyes, it was almost 9 PM. He had missed sunset yoga as well as dinner. Some of the men had returned to the dorm to wind down for the night. Charlie left and followed the stone path to the seashore.

He sat in the sand and considered the night sky, which was clear and alive with starlight above the black and silver of the sea. He felt terribly lost and confounded. Why had he reacted so acutely to Jessie’s departure? For all he knew, it was of her own volition. They had not pledged their hearts to each other. They were bound to go their separate ways soon enough, and that sort of entanglement was at odds with Charlie’s reason for coming to the ashram in the first place. Perhaps his emotionality had something to do with a need for control or with the lingering trauma caused by his father’s abandonment, but those were inchoate and nebulous theories.

He had been sitting there for at least an hour when he sensed a presence elsewhere on the beach. Looking around, he spotted a lone figure not far away, sitting in the lotus position, apparently meditating. Charlie squinted and, in the moonlight, was able to discern that it was

Guru Chandiok. Charlie grew angry again, popped to his feet, and stomped over to where the man was.

“I’m leaving tomorrow,” he declared.

The guru remained in his state of meditation, his eyes closed, his breath even.

“Listen to me!” Charlie bellowed, his voice carrying out across the water.

The guru was unperturbed, but after a moment inhaled deeply, opened his eyes, and gazed at Charlie. The gaze did not express anger, or even irritation. It expressed nothing, as far as Charlie could tell.

Guru Chandiok gestured for the young man to take a seat. Charlie protested for a moment, but when the guru persisted, complied. The guru then indicated, without speaking, that he wanted Charlie to assume the lotus position and close his eyes. Charlie was inclined to rebel, to tell the guru that he was a crank and a fraud, but, in a moment, felt oddly compelled to do the man’s bidding.

He sucked air in through his nose and expelled it through his mouth, resonant breaths that originated deep in his diaphragm. Within moments, his anger had dissipated and his heartrate had dropped. He felt a mild pressure in the middle of his forehead. The guru was pressing his thumb there. The sensation was unusual – not uncomfortable but a bit unnerving. It tingled as if there were a slight electrical transfer occurring, like the static between two swatches of fabric. In time, Charlie’s forehead grew warm, his head buoyant and numb. He kept his eyes closed and continued to meditate. His mind went blank. His surroundings disappeared. There was only his breath, hissing as it passed between his tonsils and over his tongue.

Suddenly, he recalled a rather mundane moment from his childhood. He was young, perhaps three years old, and his mother was teaching him to swim. Her arms were hooked under

his horizontal body as he paddled clumsily and kicked his feet. The memory came to him vividly, in living color, in true sound. It was in a public pool, a shining afternoon. The water was crowded with children splashing and calling to each other. Mother was laughing delightedly and her body was warm against Charlie's as he struggled to stay afloat. Then she let him go and instantly, he plunged down below the surface. He dropped all the way to the bottom of the pool, which, only a few feet down, seemed immeasurably deep. Surrounded by a turquoise, underwater forest of legs and thighs, he began to panic and flail. He kicked off of the bottom of the pool and surged toward the sunlight, and just when he seemed he would not make it, his head burst through the surface and into the air. His mother scooped him into her arms and pressed him to her bosom. He wanted to cry, but there was a bright smile on her face and he immediately felt safe. "You did it, Charlie!" she cheered, holding him tightly. "You're alive!"

Sometime later – seconds, minutes, Charlie did not know – he noticed that the sensation in the middle of his forehead was no longer there. He continued to focus on his breath for a few more minutes, then slowly opened his eyes. He felt disoriented, loopy and loose, as if he were awakening from a deep slumber. In a moment, his nocturnal surroundings came into focus. Guru Chandiok was no longer present.

Charlie remained at the ashram for another seven months. He devoted himself to his mastery of his yoga practice and to his spiritual awakening. He grew stronger, healthier, more focused. He began reading. There were shelves of books contributed by sadhaks over the years, and many of them were in English: *The Lord of the Flies*, *The Celestine Prophecy*, *1984*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, among many more contemporary titles. In his final months at the ashram, Charlie was rarely without a tome in hand. He marveled at the fact that he made it through high school without reading a single book in its entirety.

Charlie attended his private audiences each month, but the guru's guidance hardly wavered: detach, detach, detach. Yet, much as the guru had described in their second session, the student's understanding of his teacher's words evolved markedly and rapidly. At first, he understood the directive to mean that one should not obsess about wealth and status. But, over time, he realized it described a much more profound and far-reaching ideal. To detach meant to be always at peace, to be unmoved by both misfortune and providence, to live in a state of meditation. It meant to decouple not only from external conditions, but also from one's mind and body, to renounce one's desires both physical and psychological. It meant to exist only from moment to moment, independently, a lifelong spiritual journey of the self, through the self, to the self. *Be still like a mountain and flow like a river*, Lao Tzu had said.

Charlie's final audience was during his last week at the ashram. When he entered Guru Chandiok's quarters, the spiritual leader smiled broadly. He said something which Ashali translated to, "The baby bird is ready to leave the nest."

Charlie laughed good-naturedly at this. "Now what?" he asked the guru.

The older man grew serious, then responded, "I will speak of something quite different this time: connection. Now that you have a nascent understanding of detachment, you are ready for this new concept. Connection is not the opposite of detachment; it is the complement of detachment. With your looking glass polished, you may begin to see clearly. And to see clearly is to recognize that all things are connected. All that is in the universe is tied together in the way many threads make a string. The people and animals, the plants, the minerals, the stars and moons, the molecules and atoms. This may seem to be easy to understand, but it is not. Connection is the essence of the spirit. Give your life to discovering this every day. You are nothing, but you are also everything. This is my final advisement for you."

When Charlie returned to Los Angeles in Spring 2003, his mission was clear. He began teaching yoga classes at Zaina's studio, five days per week, three sessions per day, and on the weekends at a retreat center in Malibu. In his free time, he read voraciously, primarily about spiritual topics, and wrote deeply considered essays on the ideas he encountered. By the end of the year, he had made his way through the *Bhagavad Gita*, *The Life of the Buddha*, Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, a few Deepak Chopra selections, and even the New Testament.

Charlie rented a guest cottage in the Hollywood Hills and hiked through Griffith Park almost every morning. He befriended many of his students and some of them joined him on his hikes, during which they commonly engaged in probing conversations about concepts such as the cyclical life of the universe, the nature of love, and the collective soul. Charlie's companions also began to look to him for personal and spiritual guidance. He became well-versed in Buddhist, Hindu, and new age ontologies and cosmologies and could apply those ideas to worldly concerns with impressive deftness. Within two years, he had such a fervent and devoted following, inside and outside of the studio, that the only logical next step was to strike out on his own. It was Zaina's idea. "It will be a tremendous loss for our studio," she said after Charlie had concluded yet another packed hatha session. "But people such as you and I have a special purpose, which is to give birth to a spiritual revolution. And to do that, we must soar without inhibition."

Charlie developed grand plans. He did not want to simply open another urban yoga facility. He wanted to establish his own, full-service ashram right there in Southern California. For this, he needed a substantial property, which would require resources far beyond what he had available to him. But things quickly fell into place. One of his students, Omar, managed his family's portfolio of real estate, which included a one-acre parcel in Eagle Rock on which there was an aging but sizable Tudor-style inn. Omar had been toying with the idea of tearing down

the structure and replacing it with an opulent, multi-million-dollar residence. However, he was disinclined to obliterate such distinctive, historical architecture and Charlie's vision provided a suitable alternative. Omar proposed an arrangement under which Charlie would fully renovate the property to meet his needs and pay thirty percent of his gross monthly operating income as rent. Zaina, who also was the heir to a substantial family fortune, agreed to finance the redevelopment.

Charlie, along with a crew of contractors, combined eight of the ten guestrooms into separate men's and women's dorms, opened the kitchen to the dining room to allow for a more communal feel, repurposed the study as a meditation and prayer room, and built an eight-hundred-square-foot yoga room off the back of the inn that doubled as a lounge and library when not in use. For his own quarters, he consolidated two of the guestrooms and the office. He relandscaped the front and rear yards, laying out lush gardens and privacy hedges along the perimeter. The whole project totaled nearly three hundred thousand dollars, but, in its new incarnation, the property could accommodate twenty residential sadhaks at a time along with a few dozen additional yoga drop-ins per day. Charlie calculated that the operation would throw off thirty-five thousand dollars a month, more than enough to cover his debt service and expenses and modest lifestyle. Ultimately, he underestimated the revenue potential by approximately forty percent.

Initially, Charlie offered one-week, two-week, and four-week retreats at the ashram, which he named The Horizon, along with a daily schedule of vinyasa, ashtanga, and hatha classes and guided meditations that were open to the public. However, almost immediately, guests began requesting to stay for longer periods of time. Charlie was happy to accommodate them as it meant consistent income and fewer bunk vacancies. That strategy, was a welcome

slippery slope. By the end of 2006, three of the bunks were occupied by permanent residents who paid \$3,000 per month, which included all yoga classes and groceries. They, of course, like all sadhaks, were obliged to partake in daily cleaning and property upkeep.

Eager to provide diverse offerings, Charlie initiated a lecture series in 2007. He invited spiritual thought leaders from throughout the region to come to the ashram and speak on issues that were near to their heart. The honored guests included Rampal Baba of the Hindu temple complex in Calabasas, Nabil Kline of the L.A. spiritual assembly of the Baha'i Faith, psychologist Alexis Somerville, and even Zen Master Hsuan Sun of the Temecula Buddhist Monastery. Except in the case of inclement weather, the lectures were staged on the rear lawn of the property, which could comfortably seat one hundred people. Charlie often set up a projector and speakers for the screening of movies after the lectures, films with topical themes such as *Seven Years in Tibet*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, even *The Matrix*. Individuals and groups came from far and wide to enjoy these evenings, towing packed picnic baskets and portable lawn chairs. The events regularly sold out.

Occasionally, Charlie himself gave the lecture of the evening. He would select a topic – the link between meditation and physical fitness, for example – research it for a few months, then compose a detailed PowerPoint presentation. He even hired a graphic artist to create accompanying illustrations and diagrams. Soon, he garnered notoriety, at least regionally, for his engaging style and unique insights. Other spiritual organizations and retreat centers on the west coast began booking him to speak.

It was at this time that Charlie became known as Simha, an abbreviation of Narasimha, which is Sanskrit for man-lion and also the name of an avatar of the Hindu god Vishnu. Once again, the idea did not originate with Charlie. It was his assistant, Yonnus' idea. She contended

convincingly that the name “Charlie” did not connote an elevated level of spiritual understanding and that it would be better for both Charlie’s personal brand and for The Horizon’s brand if he were to take on a more honorific title. In consultation with a few of the long-term residents, she proposed the new moniker. Charlie adopted it immediately and within a year, there was not a single person within his sphere of influence, aside from his mother, who still employed the name Charlie.

As the months and years passed, the ashram grew more popular and prosperous. By 2009, Simha had built another addition to the compound, an outbuilding which housed two more dormitories, bathroom facilities, and a proper library. There was now space for forty sadhaks, twenty of whom, at that time, were permanent residents. Somewhat naturally, Simha began to operate The Horizon much the way that Guru Chandiok operated his ashram in Goa. He hired an additional assistant, Parvati, and generally avoided fraternizing with the guests. He also prohibited unannounced visits to his quarters, replacing them with an audience-by-appointment system. He simply did not have time for that much social activity. He needed to set boundaries so that he could continue his own spiritual and educational journey. He devoted at least five hours per day to reading, researching, and writing. Simon & Schuster had made a substantial offer for Simha’s first book about mindfulness: *Connecting With The Self*.

After returning from Goa those years ago, Simha abstained from sexual and romantic relationships for a period of almost two years. He wanted to be certain that he had mastered the discipline of detachment to such a degree that engaging amorously would not deter him from his path. However, he and Yonnus began sleeping together on occasion shortly after he hired her. It was evident that they were not soulmates, but they enjoyed each other’s company, the sex was out of this world, and the expectations were clear on both sides. They had only the rarest

moments of friction and they gave each other all of the room and freedom they needed in order to mature and develop as each saw fit. Months later, Simha also began an affair with one of the permanent sadhaks, named Aly. It did not appear to ruffle Yonnus' feathers, but she soon made the decision to leave The Horizon to attend nursing school. Thereafter, she infrequently responded to Simha's subsequent text messages and emails, and he never again saw her in person.

Soon, Simha was engaging in dalliances with four of the female residents. And remarkably, for a time, it was not disruptive. The women decided upon a schedule for their visits to Simha's quarters – which they dubbed “sessions” – each afforded one night per week. They purchased distinctive amulets, which each woman hung on Simha's doorknob at her appointed time to indicate that his quarters were occupied.

Simha knew he was playing with fire, but the experiences were uniformly wonderful and the regular tantric exercise seemed to be enhancing both his life and his work, or, at least, to be coincidental with that enhancement. There was so much demand for The Horizon's offerings that he felt compelled to raise prices repeatedly. He ended the class drop-in option in favor of a monthly membership program, which booked up immediately. Meanwhile, at least once per month, he was flown somewhere in the world to give a presentation or participate in a conference. New York City, Costa Rica, Dubai, Stockholm – in the span of two years he delivered addresses in eighteen countries around the world. His time away from the ashram required him to hire two additional instructors, both who had studied for extended periods in India.

The sadhaks and yoga students began to regard Simha with increasing deference, which evolved into reverence. They spread flower petals on the floor outside his door each morning,

memorized and recited passages from his book, hung portraits of him in the meditation room and on the studio walls. They became territorial in regard to the ashram. Only on rare occasion did a membership slot come available, at which point it was awarded to a friend or family member of an existing sadhak or monthly member on a lottery basis. The consequence was that the community grew increasingly insular and increasingly fanatical. It was then that Simha's followers began distinguishing themselves by wearing orange articles of clothing at all times.

A milieu of paranoia developed at The Horizon. There had been several instances of vandalism, including when someone spraypainted "Death to Communists" across the driveway asphalt. Twice, the community was subject to a "swatting" prank, in which an unknown miscreant called the police and claimed that The Horizon residents were planning a mass suicide. Both times, half-a-dozen squad cars showed up in the middle of the night. And once, a group of sadhaks was viciously harassed by a gang of teens on Sunset Boulevard.

Simha did not leave the compound often, and, when he did, he was always accompanied by at least one assistant and one sadhak. They did this in order to attend to his needs and to provide him with companionship, but also to ensure his security. Simha accepted the arrangement because his followers insisted upon it, but he was compelled to formalize a strict no-weapons policy when he discovered that one of his chaperones was packing a pistol during a visit to the natural grocer.

In 2010, The Horizon celebrated its fifth anniversary. The sadhaks decided to book a banquet room at a hotel in Pasadena for a catered commemorative dinner. Inclusive of monthly members, significant others, privileged friends, and special guests, one hundred and eighty people attended, all dressed to the nines. Parvati served as master of ceremonies. Several notable figures gave speeches, including Zaina, who had since expanded her yoga empire to a total of

four locations; Lia Howard, a prominent motivational speaker and podcaster; and Leonard Walsh, the Director of Center for Religion and Spirituality at Loyola Marymount University. A few of the guests performed, including Meegan Culver, a featured member of the LA Opera company. Simha, in a black tuxedo with orange bowtie, closed the show with a speech about manifesting love with humility.

Although alcohol was prohibited on The Horizon premises, the organizers opted for an open bar at the anniversary banquet. After dinner, the DJ kicked off his set and the guests let loose. Even Simha had a few cocktails and joined the dance party. He was encircled by well-wishers, and enamored devotees, and others who desired a special moment with the reclusive guru. One young woman, in particular, a monthly member named Addison, rarely left Simha's side during the festivities. Simha hardly knew her, but every time he turned around, there she was smiling and laughing and cutting a rug. A few times she grabbed his hand for a twirl or a dip. Simha found her spunk and beaming smile irresistible. Toward the end of the night, as he was readying to leave, he grabbed her hand and whispered into her ear.

One month later, Addison moved into Simha's quarters. Parvati communicated to all of the sadhaks that Simha had taken a vow of loyalty to his new partner and that all other amorous "sessions" were to cease immediately. This caused quite the upheaval. Three of the women that had been romantically entangled with Simha moved out immediately, along with four other sadhaks who believed that Simha's new exclusive partnership was a betrayal of the ideals of the ashram, particularly that of nonattachment. Simha never publicly addressed his relationship with Addison, but he did present a lecture in the following weeks about the true nature of detachment, specifying that love, in its purest form, uncorrupted by jealousy, is wholly compatible with and

integral to the concept, and that finding a partner is an admirable ambition which, for many people, is essential to attaining their highest selves.

Alas, the Addison relationship flamed out almost as suddenly as it started. Three months after her settlement at The Horizon, the young lovers had a rather severe disagreement about her role within the community. She believed that, as the guru's paramour, she deserved an elevated rank, which would afford her a certain degree of authority and exempt her from the various duties and chores assigned to the rest of the sadhaks. Further, she insisted that Simha appoint her as a full-time instructor at the ashram despite her lack of credentialing and experience. At first, Simha pushed back gently, explaining to her that, although the sadhaks were generally trusting and obedient when it came to his mandates, the overall dynamic at The Horizon represented an equitable balance between his vision and the wants and needs of the residents. He described that this dynamic evolved over a period of years, the result of an ongoing culture of compassionate consultation. And he expressed concerns that sudden changes, especially favoring a single member of the community would be poorly received and have unforeseen ripple effects that could irrevocably disrupt the community.

Addison, did not accept this reasoning and began asserting herself in ways that Simha, and many others, found unacceptable. Almost immediately, the complaints started coming in from the sadhaks. When a loud quarrel erupted between Addison and one of the yoga instructors, Simha realized that the situation was untenable. That evening he broke up with Addison and instructed her to move out of the ashram as soon as was feasible. She locked herself in the bathroom, threatened to slit her wrists, and refused to emerge until police arrived and advised her that they would be compelled to commit her to a psychiatric hospital if she did not surrender peacefully.

The following day, Parvati was able to reach Addison's parents, who then flew in from Ohio to help resolve the situation. The father was absolutely outraged. He cursed out Simha in front of a roomful of sadhaks, denounced The Horizon as a cult and Simha as a charlatan, and threatened to bring a lawsuit that would bankrupt the ashram. He dragged a blubbing and hysterical Addison from the property. Simha never heard from her or her parents again.

Simha has not taken on a partner in the four years since. He anticipates that he will, one day, be in a position to forsake all else in the name of monogamy, but, for now, he must continue his work at The Horizon, he must continue his spiritual learning and teachings. The sadhaks who angrily departed when Addison moved in may have been astute in their analysis of the situation: the dynamics of the community are at odds with a guru whose affections are monopolized by a single individual. Simha has not taken a vow of chastity, but he has decided to abstain from dipping his pen in the ashram ink: no more romantic commingling with the residents. On occasion he meets someone at a conference or a retreat center who is unaffiliated with The Horizon and who is open to a no-strings-attached rendezvous, but quite rarely.

So, today, as he leads the mindfulness session in the park at Runyon Canyon, Simha contemplates the future of The Horizon. Perhaps he is the leader of a cult. But is it possible that it is a *good* cult? One that provides invaluable communal resources to individuals who are seeking meaning and understanding and purpose? Of course, all cult leaders likely believe that their intentions are *good*. Yet belief may not make it so and intention does not always correspond to consequence.

Simha opens his eyes and gazes at his assembled followers, whose eyes remain closed, who focus on their breathing, who are filled with hope and potential. He wonders, as he often does, whether he and his community members are closer to the ideal than other spiritual factions.

Are they closer than *anyone* else, for that matter, or do all human beings have equivalent access to Truth? Does the Buddhist monk fly nearer to the sun of reality than the nihilist? Does the yoga guru tap into the latent energy of the universe? Or is he just going through the motions?

The sun speckles the green grass. The leaves shimmy with the breeze. The canyon yawns and the clouds float eastward.

Simha looks up between the boughs at the cerulean sky, inhales and exhales, inhales and exhales, inhales and exhales.