

Praise for *Born Longing*

"*Born Longing* is a deeply moving memoir. With honesty, humility and humour, Julia Arbuckle takes the reader on a wild, inspiring ride in pursuit of her heart's most abiding desire."

— Alissa York, bestselling author of *Effigy*, shortlisted for the Scotiabank Giller Prize

"A fearless memoir of wreckage, wrong turns, and the quiet grace that arrives when we stop chasing love and discover what it actually is."

— Kushal M. Choksi, bestselling author of *On a Wing and a Prayer*

"*Born Longing* is a profound exploration of the freedom that emerges when we realize love is not something to be found, but something that already lives within us. With stunning authenticity, Julia Arbuckle offers an uplifting reminder that the fulfillment we seek is ours from the outset. Deeply engaging and a true page-turner, readers will dive into her story and emerge with a renewed sense of hope."

— Emma Seppälä, PhD, bestselling author of *The Happiness Track* and *Sovereign*

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The author of this book does not dispense medical advice or prescribe the use of any technique as a form of treatment for physical, emotional, or medical problems without the advice of a physician, either directly or indirectly. The intent of the author is only to share her story to help you in your quest for emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being.

BORN LONGING

*from looking for love
to becoming its source*

JULIA
ARBUCKLE

“I am not memories, events or impressions,

I am peace,

Infinite Peace.”

—Gurudev

(An inspirational quote, a reminder, and a disclaimer all in one)

Contents

Author's Note	x
Introduction	xi
Prologue	1
1. My Thumbprint	3
2. The Karmic Delete Button	14
3. All the Wrong Places	29
4. When the Sun Comes	45
5. The Love Devoid of Imperfection	56
6. The Antidote to Loneliness	63
7. Or Has This Been Happening Inside My Head?	80
8. A Family of Priests and Seekers	101
9. Self-Anointed John the Baptist	106
10. Sitting on the Dock of the Lake	111
11. Not Even a Blemish	117
12. Take Care of You for Lifetimes	122
13. A Few Eggs in Another Basket	134
14. The Power of No	144
15. Bilocation	165
16. War Buddies	181
17. Burn the Connection	191
18. The Bicycle	201
19. The Open Window	225
20. Running Up and Down the Ganga	240
21. The Very Special Clay Pot	251
Gratitude	287
Next Steps	289

Author's Note

This is a work of memoir. It reflects my life as I experienced and remember it, though memory is, by its nature, subjective and imperfect. To protect the privacy of the people who appear in these pages, I have changed most names and some identifying details, including physical descriptions, locations, occupations, and other specifics. In certain instances, I have also compressed or reordered the timeline of events, and combined or altered some circumstances, for the sake of narrative clarity. Dialogue has been reconstructed from memory to the best of my ability and reflects the emotional truth and substance of these conversations rather than a word-for-word transcript. The people who shaped this story are real, and I am grateful to each of them, but the names attached to them here often are not.

Introduction

I almost never give advice directly. In over twenty years of teaching spiritual workshops and mentoring others, when it comes down to a one-on-one conversation, and someone asks me for advice, I usually tell a story from my own life. Storytelling is how I most lovingly and respectfully share what I have learned. It's also how I prefer to learn. I shut down when I try to read most personal development books and cannot abide being preached to even from the page. I wanted *Born Longing* to feel like a one-on-one conversation, so in the pages that follow, I crack open my life and let my deepest lessons pour out. I offer them to you not so much as a teacher from a podium, but as a friend speaking from hard-won experience.

Elizabeth Gilbert recounts an anecdote about a psychologist friend who volunteered to counsel Cambodian refugees. What did these survivors of genocide want to talk about in therapy? Not the war. They wanted to talk about heartbreak. One woman said something like: *I met a man in the refugee camp and we fell in love. I thought he really loved me, but then we were separated, and he married my cousin. He says he still loves me. I know I should tell him to go away, but I can't stop thinking about him. What do I do?* I remember reading this and thinking that there is nothing small or unimportant about our romantic longings. Even against the backdrop of unimaginable horror, love has a way of taking centre stage in our hearts.

So we look for love. But what if we do everything right and the partner still doesn't come? What if we find the partner, and then discover they were the wrong partner? Or we find the best partner, and then find that another longing is waiting just behind that one: a baby, a new career, more freedom, more meaning? What if the fairytale we've been chasing was only part of what we wanted? What if what we've been calling longing for love is actually longing for something deeper, something that only a spiritual life can truly fulfill? I have held each of these questions like worry beads between my fingers.

My story traces a journey fueled by deep longing. This driving force sent me across continents on spiritual adventures, but also into the arms of a married man, a Colombian congressman, and a husband whose secret resulted in a short but devastating marriage. There is a particular kind of devastation that occurs when you spend your honeymoon in a psych ward in Paris, or only one year later see your husband in an orange jumpsuit behind thick layers of plexiglass. Even as I grew to know better, it was hard to shake the persistent notion that the right love, if I could only find it, would finally make me whole.

The understanding that what I was looking for could never be given to me by another person did arrive, but not all at once. It came through years of practice and stumbling, and I continue to stumble and recover around this central lesson of my life. You might say this lesson began in 2002 when I sat in a crowd of strangers feeling isolated, watching as a woman walked on stage, took the mic, closed her eyes, and said with gravitas, "I was born with intense longing." At once I realized this was a sentence that was already inscribed on my heart, and as I looked up, I locked eyes not with the speaker, but with the man beside her on stage who would become my spiritual teacher. Through him I learned practices so powerful they released deep trauma without requiring me to relive it, and allowed me to bask in the quiet stillness below the surface of my mind. As I began teaching meditation, I discovered that serving others opened up an experience of giving love selflessly. And little by little, I came to experience myself as a source of love.

I was lucky enough to find a spiritual teacher to help me on this journey, a teacher whose love and light are so luminous they spill outward, making me realize we are all made of that same love. He didn't point me toward love. He reflected it back to me, and showed me it had been mine all along. My hope is that every reader finds a teacher or guide who brings them home to themselves, in whatever form that may take.

Because love is not something we earn. It is not something someone else gives us. In the words of my teacher, "love is our very existence."

With love, Julia

(For readers who wish to explore the themes more deeply, a companion workbook is available with reflections, prompts, and practices.)

Prologue

Toronto, 1992

My mother was away somewhere. Without her presence, our home that was nestled in a wholesome, affluent neighbourhood, was tense.

I was facing off against my father in the kitchen. My younger brother and sister were anxiously watching from a couple of feet away in the dining room, their heads reaching just above the countertop that separated the rooms. I don't remember what my father had said, but I remember that as we stood face to face, I was at least as tall as he was, if not taller.

Was there an unwritten rule against teenage daughters growing taller than their fathers?

When I was shorter, he had been a better dad. Full of life, humour, and amazing bedtime stories. Then when I was about eleven, my charismatic father left his job and became a change management consultant. Money poured in and we bought a gorgeous cottage in Muskoka and I started attending a private school. But while money was flowing toward us, even *more* money seemed to be flowing in my uncle's direction. He was involved in some kind of real estate investment group that he had started with a partner. My father, trusting his brother, borrowed a million from the bank (in the 80s we spoke about millionaires the way we now speak about billionaires). He invested that sizable fortune with my uncle, and a year later, maybe even just months later, when I was entering grade nine, the investment went bust. My uncle wisely claimed bankruptcy. My father thought he could pay all the money back to the bank.

You could say it ruined him. Ruined us. Slowly. I can't imagine what kind of stress paying \$10,000 a month to the bank put on my father who was self-employed. I know he lived in fear of losing the house. I know we got call display and screened our calls. I know his stress didn't remain within the confines of his psyche; it became the air we breathed.

Now he was standing in our kitchen berating us for something so small, I can't remember what it was. In such situations, I never failed to yell back, but it never ended well. At some point, what I said pushed him a little too far, and he went in for his power move.

This time I saw the slap coming and ducked my head backwards so he only ended up hitting the end of my nose. But because my nose had been dealing with the dry winter weather and had been a little bloody during the day, the tap to my nose caused blood to pour out like in the movies. I wasn't hurt, but the sight of blood was dramatic. My brother's small face collapsed in tears. My father's face went blank for a moment and then he walked away.

Normally after being slapped, I would start to cry. This time I was too stunned, not by the blood, but by my own instinct to dodge. I had never been so self-preserving. I was silent for a few moments.

I had grown up with *Oprah*, and had concerns beyond this immediate circumstance.

I called after him, "You are going to be responsible for my 1,001 divorces."

It was both a concern and a wry accusation; on no level did I consider it a prophecy.

But years later, I would pay some prophets in Delhi to tell me an Indianized version of these same words I threw at my father.

1. My Thumbprint

"You are afraid of opening your fists. What is there with you that you have to hold your fists? You have nothing with you. Open your fists. The whole sky will be in your hands."

— Sri Sri Ravi Shankar

2016, Delhi (24 years later)

I got out of a rickshaw and touched my sandaled feet to the dusty ground. I had arrived at an obscure little side street in Delhi. The pamphlet in my hand indicated that the shop would be next to the Mother Dairy Booth. The space next to the Mother Dairy Booth wasn't literally a hole in the wall, but it *was* simply a *door* in the wall. I paused. Beyond the door was supposed to be a kind of library that stored an unknown number of predictions written on ancient palm leaves. Officially, I had traveled to India to train further as a meditation teacher, and perform in a massive international cultural festival, but another part of me, a part that I was a little less proud of, had a burning secondary objective that had led me here.

I walked in.

I was wearing a simple Indian cotton outfit and had pulled my long blond hair (that was becoming increasingly straw-like under the tropical sun) back into a ponytail. I sat down on a plastic chair in a waiting room. Once upon a time the walls had been white, but now they were marked and greyish. A few minutes after I sat down, a man approached me with some paper and a stamp pad.

"I'm Julia, I have an appointment?"

"Yes, Madam. Your left thumbprint, please."

I knew about the thumbprint in advance. The pamphlet indicated that by using your thumb impression (Gents right, Ladies Left) they would be able to "predict your future, your family's future, and future ups and downs as per the chapters. Also information about marriage, when it will take place, one marriage or two, with whom, the nature of the bride or groom, from which direction the marriage proposal would come and at what distance." Oddly phrased, but nevertheless promising.

As much as I wanted to be a self-sufficient yogi, who needed no other love than the love already inside her, a yearning for a romantic partner seemed to be imprinted in my DNA. A voice inside me sang and screamed and sighed for a chance to love a person in a peaceful context. At thirty-nine, I was divorced (like my teenage self had predicted, but just *once*). And I had no desire to repeat any aspect of my marriage. You might say I was terrified. So I wanted assurances. My first preference would be for these assurances to come directly from God, preferably *not* as a vision or a dream, but as a *signed contract*, promising that romantically the worst was behind me and the best was yet to come. Given that I could not realistically get that assurance directly from God, I figured a secondary source, like these ancient palm leaves, or nadi leaves as they are called, might just do the trick.

I placed my thumb on the moist pad, made a dark blue print on the paper, and watched as the man disappeared into the back area of the shop, where he would be able to locate the section of the nadi library that stored the leaves matching my type.

On the table in the waiting room sat a printout about the history of nadi leaves. I glanced through it. I was familiar with the basics. These leaves came from the South of India, from Tamil Nadu. Thousands of years ago, Agastya Rishi, an ancient sage, would sit with his students, and tell them, "At such and such a time, in such and such a place, a soul will be born. Record the lifetime." Then, following their teacher's instructions, the students would enter a deep state of meditation, tune into a subtle space of vast knowledge, download the required information, and transfer it onto palm leaves, like little meditation Jedis. The nadi leaves held in this shop were really class assignments designed to help young sages tap into the subtle space of knowledge called the Akash. All the events, thoughts, and feelings of the past, present, and future are encoded there in a non-physical plane, and long

ago, spiritually gifted people were able to detect all this through advanced states of meditation.

At the gentle sound of bare footsteps, I looked up and the same man who took my thumbprint was now coming back with a cup.

"Tea, madam."

I put the printout down, and accepted the tea, smiling politely. As I sipped, I kept smiling to myself. Part of me couldn't believe that I had come this far in my journey to find my nadi leaf. I knew I was still not out of the woods. I had found a shop, but there was no guarantee that I would be able to find the leaf since obviously not *all* the lives currently on the planet were recorded, and if I went to one shop, it could be that my leaf was actually stored at another shop in some other town or city.

Once again I heard footsteps coming towards me and looked to my right.

"Come, madam."

I got up and followed the man into a second room even more spartan than the first with two men sitting behind a desk. It would soon become evident that one spoke English and was the translator of the ancient Tamil, and one spoke little English and read the ancient Tamil from the leaves. They were both roughly middle-aged. The man who read the ancient Tamil was a little portly and dressed in a white dhoti (a single piece of cloth wrapped skillfully into a traditional outfit); the translator was slim and wore a white shirt and pants. I sat down across from them and they got straight to business.

They had one long narrow "book" of leaves in front of them. One of the pages in those books could be mine. They looked at me intently.

"We will be asking you questions, and you only answer yes or no."

They looked at me for another moment to make sure I understood, and I nodded. They started, not with questions, but facts. For example,

"You are thirty-two."

"No."

Flip to the next leaf.

"You are thirty-nine."

"Yes."

"You own a property."

"Yes."

"You perform a government job."

This was the first of many statements that would confound me. While I had been a strong student, I was terrible at multiple-choice tests, and it appeared I wasn't well suited to simple yes/no answers either.

Even though I didn't think of myself as performing a government job, I was a schoolteacher, and technically I worked for the government. But right now I was in the middle of a one-year unpaid leave of absence, so I was kind of unemployed—though I wasn't twiddling my thumbs. I was actually living a long-postponed dream of teaching breathing and meditation full time as a volunteer. Volunteering meant I was living off a stipend so tiny, I could not blame it if it suffered from stipend envy. Though I hardly minded tightening my belt, or surrendering my house to incredibly messy theatre students to cover the mortgage, or moving into my parents' basement. Virtually homeless, almost penniless, and nearing the moment my shelf life as a woman would expire, I was more content than I had been in a long time. I was teaching techniques that had transformed my life at twenty-five, pouring all my energy into organizing programs and watching my students transform in front of me. It was thrilling. And I truthfully didn't know if I could go back to teaching high school after experiencing this new boundless existence. So was being a schoolteacher still my job? Not knowing if a wrong answer could somehow cause them to bypass my leaf entirely, I decided to reply with,

"Yes."

"You are divorced."

Even here I felt there was ambiguity. I was not divorced in an *Eat, Pray, Love* kind of way where you suddenly realize you don't want to be married anymore. In many ways, I felt more like a widow than a divorcee. But nevertheless,

"Yes."

"You are a lesbian."

I paused, thinking that sexuality was more of a spectrum and this binary question didn't quite capture the complexity of anyone's experience, but who was I kidding, the answer was,

"No."

Flip to the next leaf.

"Your father's name starts with ..." (and then several consonant sounds)

"No."

Onto the next leaf.

They actually went through one entire bound volume before disappearing to find another.

A few leaves into the second volume:

"You are thirty-nine."

"Yes."

"You own a property that provides you with some rental income."

"Yes."

"You are working in a government job as a teacher."

"Yes."

"You had a miscarriage."

"Yes."

"You are divorced."

"Yes."

"You have two sisters and one brother."

"Yes."

"Your father's name is Joseph Charles."

"Yes." *Astounding.*

"Your mother's name is Marie Therese Louise."

"Yes." *Astounding.*

"Your husband's name was Jeffrey John... Aki... Aki... Akimitsu."

"...Yes, Akimitsu."

I vaguely heard "Ok. This is your leaf," while they shuffled papers, preparing for phase two.

I hadn't heard my ex-husband's Japanese middle name since our wedding vows seven years earlier. Even though I had come here to look forward, the sound of the name was like a string that tugged me back to the past.

I recalled standing in the Eastminster church, my husband's face smiling at me as we promised to love each other in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer. He was glowing with happiness and had just a twinkle of mischief in his eyes. I thought he was perfect. He loved my family, he played sports, and as a social worker he handled teenage youth with the patience of Job. I chose him with all my heart, but I also definitely thought I was choosing *wisely*. I thought I had healed, put all the daddy issues, the years of kissing frogs behind me and finally kissed a prince.

Though by the time I was at the altar, I probably had enough information to realize I was walking into something dangerous wrapped in safe's clothing. But that information had come so late, I couldn't see through the haze of love. The picture became much clearer on our honeymoon in Paris.

On our second day in the City of Lights, we walked out of the Louvre and sat down to eat. Whereupon, he announced that he felt like fasting—something he hadn't done in all the years we had been together. After I ate our packed lunch, we began to walk towards Notre Dame. He looked at the streets lined with touristic memorabilia and he said with a snide intensity I had never heard before, "You know how I feel when I look at all this crap? I feel FREE. 'Cause I don't want any of it."

He was walking more quickly than usual, speaking more loudly, and there was an undertone of unpredictability to his whole demeanour. I felt that at any moment he might decide that what those tiny Eiffel towers really deserved was to be backhanded into the street and run over by a Peugeot. My brain shifted gears, and I became hyper-alert, the way I did when it felt like a fight might break out in my classroom and I was calculating my next steps.

When we reached Notre Dame, we joined a very long admission line that stretched out into the square, and he announced, "That church is such a con. People go in there and they think they are experiencing religious awe. God's awe. It's such a con. They're experiencing *architectural* awe. People aren't having any religious experiences in there. It's just architecture messing with their heads. You think those ladies from the Louvre are in there having their religious experiences? No. Those ladies are in the *woods*. They are in the *woods* having their spiritual experiences, not in some stupid church. You know what? Let's go in. Yeah, let's go in, and see if there are any ladies having religious experiences in that church!"

People around us had overheard and were now staring as he turned and strode forward toward the church like a military general whipping up his troops before battle.

This was not the same mild-mannered man who insisted we get married in a church and chose to work for a Catholic school board. His body bristled with suppressed rage, and without him doing anything overtly violent, I felt my body brace against it. I was careful not to make any sudden movements around this angry visionary who had hijacked Jeff's body, and locked the Jeff

I knew in a crate in some corner of his brain. I spent the day walking through Paris while the stranger beside me ranted and philosophized, and I agreed with every point, biding my time till we were back at the apartment and his medication would be on hand.

Things felt a little safer and calmer in the apartment, and I gently suggested that he take his medication. The calm in the apartment promptly disappeared and he replied flatly, "No."

Then he smiled slightly, and looked at me tauntingly from across the room, daring me to take him on.

I only had one card and I had just played it. I was out of my depth.

"I'm just going to call my mom," I said as I took out my cell-phone.

"You make that phone call and we are all going to hell."

I paused for a second and then asked, "Literally or metaphorically?"

"I don't know," he replied ponderously, as if either option was equally possible, but equally bad.

As I flipped open my phone, he stormed out of the apartment, slamming the door behind him, only to storm back in a second later. He launched himself towards me, ripped my phone from my hands, and hurled it against the wall, sending pieces flying.

Things devolved from there and culminated with both of us outside on a street corner where he told me, "You think I could ever love you? I could never love you," and then he literally ran away.

I knew the man I loved was still inside that body somewhere, so there I was, running through the streets of Paris on my honeymoon, chasing after my mentally ill husband. But he ran regularly and was also souped-up on whatever adrenaline accompanied this manic veer towards psychosis. He was much faster than me, and he got away. I could have gone back to the apartment, finished packing, and flown home to Canada. Instead, I filed a police report and spent three days looking for him.

By some miracle he showed up in a hospital. I sat in the sterile waiting room blankly watching the clock tick. They called my name and as I walked towards the exam room, I saw him standing in the hall looking skeletal, homeless, and fully psychotic. I would later learn that the skeletal appearance was because he had neither eaten nor drunk anything while walking all day and night in a heat wave. Through his bright sunburned skin, I could see his jawbone and eye sockets. He had exchanged all his clothes with various homeless people and now had on jogging pants that reached his calves, and

running shoes too big with holes in the top. He also shuffled more than walked because almost all the skin on the bottom of his feet had been worn away by three days of directionless walking that had still managed to circuitously bring him all the way to Villejuif, a town just outside of Paris.

A young doctor in a white jacket arrived in the hallway and escorted us to a room. After a few pleasantries he asked my husband, "What have you been doing these last three days?"

"I rented an apartment. I cooked some food," replied my massively sunburned, homeless-looking, emaciated husband.

I am not sure why the doctor thought these answers were normal or consistent with what was in front of him. After a few more generic questions, the doctor decided to release this incoherent man into my care. My inner voice said, "No," but disagreeing out loud with a mental health expert is much more difficult. When the doctor left us alone to get the paperwork done, my husband looked at me. He actually may have been looking at something quite other than me, but while looking in my general direction his eyes suddenly widened, and he breathed in sharply as though he had just had an epiphany. Then he gave a strange laugh with his mouth ajar, his shoulders shaking, but no actual sound. Finally, as though he were the second coming, he evangelically announced, "I'm going to heal the doctor. Yes, I am going to heal the doctor."

The first two sentences were warm-ups, because the third time he stood up and announced with full vigor, "I am going to heal the doctor!" and walked out of the room.

He got distracted on the way though, and struck up a conversation with a hospital worker that began like this:

"Are you a rapist?"

After he tried to physically attack the hospital worker, whom he had decided was indeed a rapist, five men in white rushed at him, held him down, and injected him with a needle while he tried to fight them off. I spent the remaining week of my honeymoon from nine to five every day in a psychiatric hospital. If I thought that incident was dramatic, things only got worse back in Toronto, and over the next three years of this marriage that I fought for, there were multiple hospitalizations, months of house arrest, and there were two months when he disappeared, and I thought if we found him it would be because I was identifying a body.

"Madam? This is your leaf," said the nadi leaf reader, yanking me back to the present moment. "Now we will tell you about your life, this lifetime, from this day forward."

He looked at me intently, and I once again nodded to indicate my understanding.

According to the nadi readers, I would soon be happily married. My husband would also be a spiritual teacher and successful in his career. We would be having, in their words, "good sexual relations" (they used this phrase several times during my reading to my initial surprise). A few years in, there might be a bump in the road—one of us might be unfaithful—but it would be resolved. I would stay at my job. I would have a child at the age of forty-two. My child would be beautiful, brilliant and talented. She would grow up to be top of her class, excelling at activities outside of the school curriculum as well, and would eventually work in a profession that combined art and technology. I interrupted them there, "My biological baby?"

They nodded, "Yes."

"Not my adopted baby?"

They shook their heads, "No."

More so than the pronouncement that I would stay in my job (which indeed surprised me; going back to my job and all the trappings of a middle-class commuter life had started to seem like putting on clothes two sizes too small and dripping wet), this baby shocked me. I had decisively crossed "Baby" off the to-do list, and had no real desire for a child anymore, but the baby they promised here was, well, perfect.

They went on. I would continue to teach spirituality and travel around the world to do it. Articles would be written about me. My husband and I would own multiple properties. I would go into politics. It was a beautiful life.

And then, they let me know that none of this would happen because there was some curse. Because of this curse, my life was apparently already ruined in every possible aspect. My career was going nowhere good. Because of other people's jealousy, I would always be torn down. People I supported would betray me and take credit for my work, and other people's mistakes would be blamed on me. And if I left my job and went to have some spiritual life, that would not work out for the same reasons. And a baby—that was also never going to happen either. There would be some problem with my ovaries or his sperm, and even if I did manage to get pregnant, there would

be a miscarriage. And marriage—this I remember exactly, "There will be many men, and they will be falling in love with you, and willing to have sexual relations with you, but no one will be willing to marry you, and even if they do marry you, that also will be ending in divorce, like that only."

And so they told me to avoid all this unpleasantness, and to attain the life that they had just described which was perfect in every dimension, I should just unlock the door to another chapter to discover what this curse was and the possible remedies. This unlocking, of course, would require additional money. I wasn't really surprised. I think it was in fact written on their handout, and I reasoned that, just because they had created a business model that broke down payment in a way that seemed a little manipulative, this was their livelihood, and there was no reason to assume that the actual leaf, and the information to be gleaned from it, was faulty. For the cost of a movie ticket, I could proceed. In fact, even if the information behind the locked door was actually completely fictitious, the way I saw it, all this thumbprint-and-yes/no business, during which they had produced my parents' actual first and middle names, was already *way* more fascinating than many of the flicks I had spent money on, so I agreed. Then they left, and I waited and waited, while they were presumably in another room yes/no-ing their way into some other person's future. By the time they came back to me, I actually needed to leave because my spiritual teacher, Gurudev, was meeting people in a private home in Delhi and I wanted to be there. Quite a lot. I had just spent three days watching my teacher on stage at a gathering of 3.75 million that had ended the night before. (Yes, you read the number correctly—it was not a small gathering, and my spiritual teacher was not exactly obscure.) Being able to meet my illustrious teacher in a home in the afterglow of that unfathomably expansive festival was not something I could just pass up, no matter how intriguing (and mildly alarming) this whole process with the reader, the translator and the leaves had been.

Thinking it might be impossible, given the rustic setting of the nadi office, I nevertheless asked them if they could record the chapter and send it to me. To my surprise they agreed. It was my last day in Delhi, and my spiritual teacher, the entourage, and I were on our way to Rishikesh the next day. It took a few days for the recording to arrive, so I was comfortably installed in the Rishikesh retreat centre, with my three roommates when I received it.

My Thumbprint

I could not have predicted how deeply that disembodied voice would get under my skin.