

# one story

## The Six Poisons

Dani Shapiro

ISSUE NUMBER 69

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Emma is on her third chaturanga dandasana of the morning, hovering in push-up position an inch off the floor, when Guruji and Sharath enter the shala. It must be about five-thirty, judging from the thin, gray light seeping through the curtains that separate the shala from the waiting area. It's already uncomfortably hot. Didn't the guidebooks say that February in Mysore is usually mild—even chilly? A heat wave has been hanging around for weeks. Just standing in tadasana, sweat pours down the sides of her face, drips off her chin, pools between her breasts.

“Chanting now,” says Guruji. The ten students in the shala stop what they're doing and come to sit on their mats. Guruji tucks his tree trunk legs into lotus position. His brown belly puffs out, as hard as a turtle's shell, above his black Calvin Klein briefs. His grandson, Sharath, settles next to him and closes his eyes.

“Om astoma sadgamaya,” begins Guruji. Emma knows this chant from her classes in New York. Lead me from the unreal to the real. “Tamasoma jyotirgamaya,” the whole room fills with the sound of

the Sanskrit words. From the darkness to the light. The skinny guy next to Emma with the rust-colored dreads rolls his r's perfectly. He's a rolfer from Salt Lake City—this, she discovered last night, when a group from yoga student housing went to dinner at Auntie's.

The chanting continues, a repetition of the two phrases. Emma is the only one in the room with her eyes open. She feels guilty, peeping Tom-ish. The faces—so earnest, so intent. A pretty, dark-haired girl sits near the curtains. She has a tattoo of a goddess on her bicep, and another tattoo of a mandala on her sacrum. Next to her is a very tan guy with dirty feet. His hair is bleached almost white from afternoons spent hanging out at the Southern Star pool. They look like newborns in a nursery, all of them: the Australian book editor in the front row; the ex-lawyer from Los Angeles near the wall. Swaddled, eyes glued shut, minds clear and drifting.

This is her second week in Mysore. She has been here just long enough to settle into a routine: up at four-thirty, at the shala by five, waiting in the darkness with the others for Sharath to open the gates. She has figured out where to buy the best coconuts and good hot chai. She has learned the hard way that aryuvedic sun screen does not work. Her hips have begun to open—this helped along by daily adjustments from Sharath, who pushes down on her knees when she is sitting in lotus, forcing her legs to flatten on the floor in ways she hadn't known were possible.

The hips: those boney, painfully tight keepers of emotional history. Standing guard over the past. She has been told that backbends are about the releasing of fear. Twists wring out the internal organs. But the hips are where we carry our whole lives. It amazes her, what she holds in her body. Yesterday, one of her housemates, a Belgian masseuse, showed her two pressure points,

just to the side of each armpit, where we are said to store our grief. Each time Emma touches herself there, tears well up in her eyes.

The chanting comes to an end, and the tan guy rolls up his mat.

"One more now," announces Guruji. The shala is always full, each of the ten spaces taken up. As soon as one student finishes, another student, who has been waiting behind the curtain or along the stairs, quietly pads in and takes that spot.

A small woman with long wavy hair falling over her face parts the curtains. Emma sees her—she should not be seeing anything, her gaze should be soft and unfocused, but soft and unfocused are not her specialty—and feels an electrical ping, a shock shooting up her spine. For a moment, she thinks she is hallucinating—the chanting has released a vision—but no. Now, the vision is bending over, unrolling her mat. The vision's hair—that unmistakable hair—brushes the floor like a dust mop. A thin red string encircles her wrist; one of those Kabbalah bracelets you're supposed to wear until it falls off. It would be just like Rebecca to wear a Kabbalah bracelet.

Emma and Rebecca both live on the Upper West Side of Manhattan and have managed to avoid each other for the last ten years. They take the same subways, shop at the same grocery stores, browse the self-help section on the second floor of Barnes & Noble. Once, a few years ago, Emma thought she saw Rebecca in line for the cashier at Citarella. Emma quickly put her basket full of vegetables and pasta down on the market floor and fled the wrong way, through the entrance.

Emma's body knows before she does. What were the fucking chances? A very un-yogic feeling. And suddenly her heart starts beating fast, too fast, and the sweat along her brow becomes cold, clammy. She keeps moving, though, through the series of

Surya Namaskar B's, riding a long breath from forward bend into chaturanga and then into upward-facing dog. Her eyes drift to the spot where Rebecca now stands, head bowed, hands in prayer over her heart. Emma watches as her lips move, as she makes some sort of silent affirmation.

Each practice begins with a dedication, an intention—Emma's intention has been the same each morning since arriving in Mysore. She has closed her eyes and prayed to a God she doesn't even believe in, begging really, offering up one single word: peace. By which she means nothing so noble as peace on earth. Peace within herself—that is what she has been longing for. That's why she's here. And now—well, now, forget about it. Her whole body tenses, her muscles harden in anticipation. Rebecca's here. Here in Mysore.

Emma rolls up her mat as mindfully as she can. Usually, this moment is as good as it gets for her—at the end of her practice, her mind as pink, clear, and untroubled as a baby's. She stumbles out of the shala, sidestepping her neighbors. Guruji glances her way, but doesn't stop teaching. He nods slightly, as if this is the usual course of a morning at the shala. "One more now," Guruji calls.

A young man wearing a Speedo bathing suit takes her spot. Emma sits on the stairs that lead up to Guruji's office and buries her head between her knees. Everything is light and shadow, pinpricks of pain behind her eyes. What if she's really getting sick? What would Rebecca do? Would she help? Would she push to the front of the crowd? Or would she pretend that they were strangers. Fellow Americans. Nothing more.

"I saw you leave class," a voice next to Emma pipes up, startling her. It's the pretty, dark-haired girl with the tattoos. She's maybe

twenty-three. She's adjusting the very low waistband of her yoga pants, her belly ring glinting in the early morning light. "Are you okay?" the girl asks, lightly touching Emma's wrist.

Emma nods. She's afraid, if she speaks, she will say too much, unloading a truckful of problems onto the girl's toned, tanned shoulders.

"I'm a teacher? From the Bountiful Buddha? In Malibu?" The girl does that thing—phrasing each sentence as a question—that drives Emma's husband Ben crazy when his students do it, and separates her from Emma by at least a generation.

"I'm not a teacher," Emma says. But she does take note that the girl is reaching for a deeper level of intimacy. Here in Mysore, all anyone talks about—to the degree that anyone talks at all—has to do with how many rupees their hotel costs, or the state of their intestines, or which asanas they're working on. They speak of these things in low, reverential tones, as if they were revealing something about their true nature.

Emma glances at Rebecca, who is visible through the wooden screen that separates the stairs from the shala. Rebecca is now in deep lunge, the cords of her neck straining, her hands clasped in reverse namaste behind her back. If Emma is thirty-four, Rebecca is...what...forty-five? They are getting older. Rebecca's body is remarkably agile, but her small, heart-shaped face has taken on a permanently-worried expression as she has aged, and her neck is wrinkled and fat. She looks rather like a sad sharpei.

The tattooed girl looks expectant.

"That's my sister," Emma says. "In there."

"Yeah? Cool. You guys travel together often?"

"Um—no."

The tattooed girl keeps looking at Emma, with that clear gaze Emma has come to recognize as a byproduct of doing a lot of yoga. She seems to be waiting for Emma to tell her more, like a child all cozied up under a quilt, ready for a bedtime story.

"She's my half-sister, actually," Emma says. Her voice sounds strangled. "Same father, different mothers. We just ran into each other here."

"How excellent!"

"Not excellent. Not exactly. We haven't spoken in years."

The girl shakes her head. Her forehead is amazingly unlined. Emma wonders whether her own forehead was ever so completely without a trace of worry.

"Then this is an opportunity," says the girl, without missing a beat. "You were meant to find each other here. After all, God doesn't give us more than we can handle."

The morning air is thick and wavery with diesel fumes that spit out the back of passing rickshaws as Emma makes her way across the road to the coconut man. She is drifting, paying no attention. A boy on a bicycle wobbles by, narrowly missing her. His handlebars are draped with a wreath of jasmine. The coconut man slices open a young fruit for her—*better, yes, not so rich for beginner*—and as she stands across from the shala, drinking the milk, she thinks that God has most certainly given her more than she can handle. If she was a believer, she'd have to have a little talk with God about that. But for now, she'd settle for a talk with Ben.

She flags a passing rickshaw, and gets in without negotiating the price—a big no-no, but she doesn't care, at least not right now. She needs to get away from the shala, far enough away from Rebecca so

that she can catch her breath. The Net Corner, an Internet café in Gokulum, is the only place she can think of where she might be able to find a cell phone that actually works. The rickshaw spits out black smoke as it bounces along the rutted streets. All she can do is hold on and try not to throw up. Emma closes her eyes and tries to bring the chanting back—*lead me from the unreal to the real*. She pictures Ben, asleep in their bed, high above Broadway. He is the realest thing she knows. When she blinks her eyes open, she sees an elephant on the side of the road, his trunk buried in a bucket of water.

Melissa Manchester is singing "Do That to Me One More Time" over the stereo speakers at The Net Corner. A Tibetan monk is hunched over a computer. The place is nearly empty. The owner of the café speaks no English, but she hands him a wad of damp rupees, and he hands her his cell phone. She may have given him the equivalent of one dollar, or five. She has no idea.

"Hello?" Ben's groggy voice. Emma pictures him sitting up in their bed, fumbling for his glasses. She hears the rustling of sheets. The sounds of late night city traffic twelve floors below. How is it possible that her husband—the only family she has—is so far away? Her father is dead. Her mother is dead. And she has taken herself halfway around the world. For what? Hip openers? The power of pranayama? She needs to crawl next to Ben's warm body. She needs to be suffocated by love.

"It's me." She can barely speak.

"What's wrong?" His voice is suddenly alert.

"Nothing." She starts to cry. "Everything. Rebecca's here."

She chokes it out. The whole story. Are you sure? He asks twice, three times. When she finishes, there's a long pause. Emma begins to wonder if they've been disconnected.

“Hello?”

“I’m just thinking.”

“Don’t tell me that this is an opportunity. I’ve already received that piece of wisdom from a twelve-year-old yoga teacher from Malibu.”

“Well,” Ben begins slowly. “What I’m thinking is that it took a lot for you to get yourself there.”

That much was true. Emma had very nearly not been able to make the trip. Even after she had non-refundable tickets, she almost backed out.

“You and Rebecca—in that environment—maybe if you have some time together—”

“She wants nothing to do with me,” Emma blurts out.

“How do you know?”

“I just know,” says Emma. After their father died, how many times did they say they’d get together, that they’d talk the whole thing through—as if talking could ever make right all the wrongs in their shared family history? They made vague allusions to ambitious plans: a weekend at a new-age health spa, a few days in the country. Nothing so simple as lunch. They left messages on each other’s answering machines when they knew the other wouldn’t be home. They sent emails that remained forever unanswered.

“But what about you?” asks Ben. “You should be asking yourself what you want.”

Emma stares at the foam on the top of her hot chai. A fly makes its way around the perimeter of the cup, then falls inside, tiny legs flailing. Somewhere inside herself—buried in the muscle, the sinew, the pressure points where grief is stored—five tiny words dislodge themselves. She’s all I have left. The thought tumbles through the darkness until it reaches the outer edges of Emma’s mind.

“Eight thousand rupees more,” the owner of the café taps her on the shoulder. She won’t have enough money for a rickshaw back to her house. Emma hangs up feeling homesick in a way she hasn’t felt since summer camp.

Two days pass. Then three. It may have been the coconut, or the gobi manchuri she bought from a roadside tea stand, or even, somehow, a single drop of the dreaded tap water finding its way into her digestive system. Or maybe it has been none of that. It has been years since she has laid in bed. But here she has stayed, in her small room in the four-bedroom house she has rented with the British dentist, the rolfer from Salt Lake City, and the Belgian masseuse. The masseuse, in particular, has been very kind to Emma. She has brought her bowls of plain rice, ayurvedic oils. She has lent her the latest Tom Clancy novel. But mostly, Emma has been still. On her back. Alone, watching her mind gallop so hard she wonders if she’s losing it. She keeps trying to slow down. There’s time. She has nearly two weeks left in Mysore. There’s no reason to rush. In fact, there’s no reason to do anything at all except sit up in bed, drink hot chai, eat spoonfuls of rice, and flip through two-year-old copies of *Yoga Journal*.

She tries to meditate—something that’s hard for her even under the best of circumstances. A series of images flip through her mind like a well-worn deck of cards. Her father, dead ten years. Her mother, who only died a few months ago. Until now, Emma has only been able to picture her parents as they were when they were dying: her father with tubes coming out his nose. Her mother, wasting away, her bald head tufted with bits of hair, like a baby chick. But now, in her narrow bed—so like her girlhood bed—she sees them as they were. Tall, elegant people—you never would have suspected how clueless

they both were—taking their best, useless stab at a happy life. Seeing Rebecca in Mysore has unleashed the past. Rebecca, whose visits home from college were like points of light in the otherwise dark-gray universe of Emma’s childhood. Rebecca, the big sister who Emma longed for, with the fierce, blind love of a little girl’s crush. Emma digs her fingers into the grief points, just inside her armpits, and doesn’t stop until her pillow is soaked through with tears.

On the fourth day, Emma returns to the shala. Her insides have been emptied out. She feels new—washed clean. She walks along the bayan tree-lined streets of Gokulum in the dark before dawn, accompanied by the rolpher from Salt Lake City, who is also in the five o’clock class. At this early hour, before cars and rickshaws clog the streets, the air smells of jasmine. She is ready to see Rebecca. Not ready like a boxer girding up for a fight. No—she is open and willing. She has chanted and meditated, anointed herself with the appropriate essential oils given to her by the Belgian masseuse: violet for the heart, white birch for clarity, black cumin for strength. It can’t hurt. We should talk, she is planning to say. There must be a reason we’re both here.

A small group is waiting outside the shala gates. There is the Australian book editor, and the tanned guy, who is wearing an Amherst sweatshirt, even though it must be ninety degrees outside.

“How’s it going?” the tanned guy asks the book editor. “Seems like you had a pretty intense opening during yesterday’s practice.”

“My shoulder released during parkavonasana,” says the book editor. “I’ve been soaking it all night.”

Emma has noticed that, here in Mysore, there are no injuries—only openings. There is no pain—only release.

Emma sees a small figure far off in the distance. Rebecca. She is lit by the moon as she walks alone down the wide avenue leading to the shala. Emma recognizes her by her gait: flat-footed, like a duck, Emma’s mother used to say. As Rebecca draws closer, her face—so much like their father’s—comes into focus: the roundness of her cheeks, the gray-flecked hazel of her eyes. She has had a henna bindi painted on her forehead. She is wearing layers of cotton yoga clothes, her drawstring pants dragging against the heels of her Birkenstocks.

The tanned guy and the editor are in deep conversation about their aches and pains. The rolpher is leaning against the shala gate, half-asleep. Somewhere above them all, a lone bird screeches. Rebecca joins the group, her eyes all the while on Emma.

“Hey, Em,” her voice breezy, as if they had just seen each other last week. “Where have you been? I saw you in class a few days ago, and then you disappeared.”

Emma scans Rebecca’s face, searching for any signs of tension: the slight widening of her forehead, the bindi flattening against her third eye. She is cool, all right. As cool as cool can be. But Emma is not bothered. She inhales deeply, breathing in the violet she rubbed beneath her nose this morning. Be love. That’s what the Belgian masseuse had said. Was it that simple? Could she be love?

“Becky.” Emma moves to hug her. Rebecca stands still, allowing Emma’s arms to go around her.

“I didn’t know you did yoga,” Rebecca says. She makes it sound like an accusation.

“Well, it’s been a while,” says Emma. “There are probably a lot of things about me you don’t know.”

Rebecca gives Emma a little half-smile and shrugs, as if to say that it doesn’t really matter.

"So—what brings you to Mysore?" Emma asks, now trying to match Rebecca's no-big-deal tone. She cannot smell the violet. She feels herself plunging, a free-fall.

"Guruji," says Rebecca. She caresses his name, even using a slightly Indian inflection. "I come to Mysore every February."

One phrase has claimed it all—claimed Guruji, Mysore, India, the entire Eastern hemisphere.

"I'm sorry—" Emma stammers. She's not even sure what she's apologizing for. She feels suddenly like an interloper. "Well, do you want to—I mean, do you think—as long as we're here—"

Rebecca just waits her out. She's always been very good at this—Emma now remembers—but in ten years she's gotten even better. Rebecca is a psychoanalyst. She spends her life sitting back and waiting. Sifting and weighing her words carefully. Making sure her expression never gives her away.

"Sylvia's dead," Emma blurts out. The words seem to fly from her mouth. Oops, there they are. Sylvia's dead. She had wanted to call Rebecca a few months ago, when it first happened, but she never quite managed to pick up the phone. She didn't want to hear Rebecca's reaction. Would she even have tried to stifle her delight?

Rebecca stares at her. She says nothing, but in the way that her eyes don't blink, in the way that her pupils don't contract, Emma realizes: of course, she already knows.

"I saw the obituary," Rebecca finally says. And then, after a too-long pause, during which Sharath opens the gates to the shala, she says something Emma knows she can't possibly mean: "I'm sorry. I'm sorry about your mother."

Surya Namaskar A, five times. Surya Namaskar B, five times. They

are next to each other, their mats lined up side by side on the floor of the shala. Rebecca's arms quiver in warrior one, her gaze soft and unfocused as if the very movements of the sun salutations are capable of transporting her into a zone where the present no longer matters. Emma burns through each pose, fueled by the rage she has been trying so hard not to feel. Rebecca knew. She knew. Wouldn't she have wondered how Emma was doing? Couldn't she have written a note, goddamn-it? Yes, yes, Rebecca hated Sylvia. That was a well-documented fact. Sylvia was the evil-stepmother—the one who took Rebecca's father away. Emma and Rebecca used to joke, years ago, about how if you looked up Evil Stepmother in the dictionary, there would be Sylvia's picture. Emma sided with Rebecca back then. But still—Sylvia was Emma's mother. And she had died. She was dead.

"Breathe," Guruji walks past, his toes gnarled like the roots of a tree, nails thick and yellowed. "Breathe, and all is coming."

"What about forgiveness?" Emma mutters under her breath. She is in triangle pose now, so she says this, more or less, into Rebecca's armpit.

Rebecca wheels around into reverse triangle, so that she is face-to-face with Emma. Her face is flushed; a vein has popped out in her forehead. "Who am I supposed to forgive?"

"I'm your sister. I'm the only one left," says Emma. "Can you forgive me? Can we somehow move on?"

"Sshhhh," a loud hiss from the back row. The ex-attorney from Los Angeles does not look terribly pleased.

"I have moved on," says Rebecca. "Believe me—I've done a lot of work on this."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Emma pictures Rebecca waving a smudge stick in the air, doing an exorcism, sticking pins into a wax effigy.



Rebecca shakes her head, as if she is genuinely sad for Emma. “You’re obviously stuck,” she says.

“You don’t even know me!” Emma’s voice raises. “The last time you saw me, I was still a kid!”

“Take it outside!” The ex-attorney says loudly.

Guruji looks up from across the room, where he is adjusting the tattooed girl into a reverse triangle bind. “Two more now!” he calls out.

Rebecca stands and puts her hands together in prayer.

“Guruji, I am sorry—”

“Two more now!” Guruji repeats. His brow furrows. For the first time since coming to the shala, Emma can see that Guruji is human. He has an ego. They have shown him disrespect, and he is pissed off.

Without a word, Emma rolls up her mat. Out of the corner of her eye, she sees Rebecca walk over to Guruji, frantically whispering. He shakes his head hard and points his finger to the curtain, banishing them both from the shala.

Outside, the dawn sky is streaked pale pink, and steam rises from puddles on the road. The coconut man hasn’t even set up shop yet. It’s too early. No one should be leaving the shala for at least another hour. Emma doesn’t know where to go, or what to do. Rebecca has stayed inside the shala, probably hoping to have a word with Guruji after he finishes class. Rebecca will explain that the crazy American—her half-sister, she will gesture with her hand, like chopping something in two—was the cause of this morning’s disturbance.

Emma begins to walk slowly down the road. The whole day stretches before her, unbearable. She is stuck—Rebecca is right

about that. For years now, she has been stuck. Ben wants to start a family, but she isn’t ready to have children. Absurd, not to be ready, at the age of thirty-four. If she keeps this up, her inability to make a decision will become its own kind of decision. How can she guarantee that her own children will not end up like her—alone, isolated within themselves, ashamed of the family they came from?

Emma has tried to stop wondering whether her parents were lazy, hapless, or actually ill-intentioned. She has tried to stop wondering, because she will never know for sure. She does know this: they treated her and Rebecca very differently. Emma was the golden child. Rebecca was the appendage, the annoyance, that thing left over from her father’s first marriage. And when their father died, he did not provide for Rebecca in his will. He left everything to his wife—Sylvia—who in turn, at the time of her death, left everything in a trust for Emma, in the hopes that someday there would be grandchildren. Fair? No. But there was nothing to be done about it. A few million dollars—a lot of money—sitting in a fancy bank, accruing interest, waiting for children who had not yet been born. Emma couldn’t touch it, even if she wanted to.

Lawyers—Emma pictures them as a flock of gray pigeons—have been waddling through her family’s life for a decade. They have pecked at the crumbs, charging their four hundred dollars an hour. For every grievance—for every private sadness or intimation of unfairness—there was someone to call, someone to take up the cause, to attempt to even the score. Your sister is contesting your father’s will. Your sister believes there have been certain misappropriations. Who knew how many specialties existed? Family law. Trusts and Estates law. Sub-specialty in step-family law.

Emma stops at a roadside tea stand across from the yoga

student housing. Her legs are tired, shaky from the heat. She wonders where Rebecca is staying. The Southern Star? Kavali Lodge? She guesses that Rebecca's probably at the Green Hotel. A restored palace, the Green Hotel is the poshest hotel in Mysore, at about thirteen hundred rupees a night. If Emma had to do it over again, that's where she'd be staying. She lets herself into the house, then slowly climbs the stairs to her room. It's only seven o'clock in the morning. Through the thin walls, she can hear the British dentist, still in his room, his bed creaking as he tosses and turns.

Her room still smells of the essential oils that she used this morning. So stupid, so painfully innocent, to think that oil from a flower, or from a tree, could possibly make a difference. She feels inside her duffel bag for the one thing she is looking for: buried under her dirty laundry, a single sock, into which she has stuffed her watch, along with the few pieces of jewelry that she was wearing when she came to Mysore. Her fingers light on the ring—her father's ring, which she has worn on her middle finger every day for the past ten years. It's heavy and gold—it's never been her taste, and people always seemed surprised by it—but it's the one thing of her father's that she has been able to keep close. She changes out of her yoga clothes and into a pair of shorts, then stuffs the ring into the front pocket.

Emma knocks on the British dentist's door. He opens it, rubbing his eyes.

"Sorry to bother you, but could I possibly borrow your scooter? I'll have it back in an hour," she says. She's breaking one of the unspoken rules of yoga student behavior. Don't ask for anything. Take care of yourself. Allow everyone to float along in their own separate bubble. But she doesn't care right now—she needs what she needs.

He sleepily agrees, and she's off. When she first got to Mysore, Emma swore she'd never ride on one of these motorized contraptions. But it's too far to walk to the Green Hotel, and she can't face another rickshaw. She whizzes along Honsur Road, her damp blouse billowing against her back. The diesel smoke on this busy road is making her light-headed. She feels stoned, euphoric, almost. This is something, at least. She's doing something. You're obviously stuck, Rebecca's voice echoes in Emma's head. All these years—all this stored-up pain—she needs to find a way to let go of it. This is such a small gesture—a baby step—but she has to start somewhere, doesn't she?

She rides the scooter up though the lush gardens leading to the Green Hotel, then parks it near the entrance, where other scooters are leaning against a putty-colored wall. The lobby of the hotel is ornate, the domed ceiling covered with mosaic tiles. Somewhere, the sound of running water. Rebecca might not even be staying here. She could be staying with friends. She could be staying at Guruji's house, for all Emma knows.

She approaches the front desk. What name does Rebecca go by, she wonders. She could be married. She could have taken her husband's name. Anything is possible.

"Dr. Aronson?" Emma asks the man behind the desk. She is tentative. Aronson. A name she no longer has any cause to say out loud. A name that is dead and buried along with her parents in their side-by-side graves.

"Ah, yes. Room fourteen," says the desk clerk in an elegant, British-Indian accent. "She is out now."

Emma eyes the row of wooden mailboxes behind the front

desk. Room keys dangle in some of them, and the occasional message slip is folded into others.

"I'd like to leave something for her, if I may," she says, feeling the weight of the ring in her pocket. "Do you have an envelope?"

She leans on the desk and writes Rebecca's name on the front of the envelope. Should she write a note? Say anything more?

"Ah—what luck—" the desk clerk says, looking at a spot behind Emma's left shoulder. She turns to see Rebecca, marching through the lobby.

"What are you doing here?" Rebecca folds her arms, standing several feet away from Emma.

"I'm sorry," says Emma. "I thought you might be staying here, and—" she digs into the pocket of her shorts, "—I brought you something."

Emma opens her palm. Their father's ring sits there, looking small and dull. It's an antique ring that he and Sylvia bought on a trip to Europe, and has a delicate design of two clasped hands etched into the gold.

"You're giving that to me?" Rebecca asks.

"I'd like you to have it." Emma feels a small splinter of hope.

"You think," Rebecca begins very slowly, reaching over to Emma's palm and touching the ring, "that I might like to have this?"

Emma should know these warning signs. She should know, but hope makes her dumb. She is stupid with optimism. And so she nods, smiling. It's a little thing, obviously. But maybe it can be a beginning. Maybe they can move on from here, move out of the stuck-ness. She can already feel her hips loosening in their sockets. She is ready to reach out and greet the past, to make friends with it. To have a sister.

"You think you can give this to me?" Rebecca bites off each word.

Even though she is speaking quietly, the words seem to bounce off the domed ceiling. "Who are you to give me anything?" she asks, her mouth quivering. "This is mine to take—but it isn't yours to give."

Emma starts to back away. She remembers the way Rebecca used to look at her when she was a little girl—with a deep, painful suspicion, as if she was certain that Emma, if given the opportunity, would do her wrong. It's just me, Emma wanted to say to her, back then. She was certain that if only she was kind enough, good enough, charming enough—if only she distanced herself enough from Sylvia—her own mother!—her big sister would stop distrusting her.

But now Sylvia is dead. And no amount of goodness or kindness or, God knows, charm, is going to make the slightest difference. Emma's fist closes around the ring so tightly that the edges dig into the soft flesh of her hand. She doesn't turn around. She just takes one backwards step after the other, all the while watching Rebecca standing—a mighty tower of rage—in the middle of the lobby of the Green Hotel.

Tonight there is a lecture at the Mysore Mandala. Ramesh, an ashtanga teacher who has opened a popular studio, is giving a talk on eight-limbed yoga. Emma tells herself to go. It's her last night in Mysore. She has changed her ticket home. Tomorrow morning she will take a taxi three hours to Bangalore, then catch the twelve o'clock flight to New York. She feels dead inside. Like something has been killed. All is empty, dizzy, careening space. Mysore isn't big enough for the both of them. And so she will bequeath it to Rebecca. It will be her sister's inheritance. Emma's small, useless gift.

It is dusk. The full moon is rising, enormous and yellow, above the open roof of the amphitheatre where Ramesh will speak. At

once, a flurry of huge bats appear out of the haze around the moon—there must be hundreds of them—and fly westward, across the low rooftops of the city. Emma takes a seat near the platform at the center of the amphitheatre where she assumes Ramesh will speak. The chairs are so uniform—leg against leg—that when she sits down, the seat next to her moves. She bends over and notices that all the chairs are, in fact, meticulously hooked together, like links on the chain of a long and intricate necklace.

The Mandala is filling up quickly. The rolfer from Salt Lake City is here, the British dentist, the ex-attorney from Los Angeles. Emma sees Rebecca walk in. She is with Guruji's entourage, the in-crowd of the shala. She walks alongside Sharath, her head held high. They take their seats in the row just in front of Emma, which has been reserved, a small square of paper on each seat.

"Do you mind if I sit with you?"

It's the tattooed girl. She's looking very pretty, with her dark hair pulled into a loose knot at the nape of her neck.

"Please," Emma pats the next chair.

"Have you heard Ramesh before?" she asks.

"No, but I'm sure he's awesome."

"Oh, he is," she replies.

"What's your name?" Emma asks. She needs to stop thinking of her as the tattooed girl. No one says their name here, as if that information is too personal.

"Shanti Shakti," says the girl. Then she whispers in Emma's ear: "Alice, actually. Johnson. But don't tell anyone."

"Your secret's safe with me, Shanti. I'm Emma."

The girl grasps Emma's hand and gives it a squeeze. "How'd it go with your half-sister?"

"Not so well."

"Emma, you look like you need a hug," she says.

And so Emma lets herself be hugged. Shanti's arms—strong from ten thousand chaturangas—wrap around her and hold tight. Emma lets out a little sigh. When Shanti lets go, Emma looks into the clear, unlined planes of the girl's face; her eyes are shining the way the surface of a pond might shine in the sunlight. Emma begins to weep—just as a hush comes over the Mandala, and Ramesh ascends to the center platform.

"Namaste. Tonight we are going to explore the true nature of Ashtanga yoga, through the eight limbs. The first four limbs involving internal cleansing practices—pratyahara, dharana, dhyana, and samadhi—bring the mind under control," Ramesh begins. He is a slight man with a very youthful face, and his voice is soft. A hundred chairs creak in unison as the audience leans forward.

Emma's breath is ragged, tears stinging her sunburned cheeks. Get a grip, she tells herself. She feels like she's climbing up the side of a wall. There is nothing to grab onto—nothing to keep her from falling.

"But we cannot achieve mind control until we have first explored the four external limbs—yama, ni-yama, asana and pranayama—that bring clarity of the mind, steadiness of the body, and purification of the nervous system. It is not possible to practice the limbs and sub-limbs of yama and ni-yama when the body and sense organs are weak and haunted by obstacles."

"Ssshh," murmurs Shanti. "You're safe."

How can Emma possibly explain to her how unsafe she feels? Or how haunted by obstacles? Shanti couldn't possibly understand. She probably has a big, uncomplicated family somewhere in Nebraska.

On a farm. With braided rugs and rocking chairs on the front porch.

Ramesh paces the platform. “When purification is complete and mind control occurs, the Six Poisons surrounding the spiritual heart—*kama*—desire, *krodha*—anger, *moha*—delusion, *lobha*—greed, *matsarya*—sloth, and *mada*—envy—will, one by one, go completely, revealing the Universal Self.”

Emma has a perfect view of the back of her sister’s head. Rebecca is sitting ram-rod straight beside Guruji, her legs crossed in lotus on her small metal folding chair, her thick, dirty-blond hair pulled into two pony-tails. She is nodding slightly. Emma can’t see Rebecca’s face, but she can imagine it: rapt, carnivorous, swallowing Ramesh’s every word whole—as if the words themselves will save her.

Ramesh continues to speak, but Emma can no longer hear him. She watches his mouth move. Her shoulders are shaking, her whole body trembling, which causes the rest of the row of folding chairs to also shake and tremble. People are shifting in their seats, casting glances her way. She is aware that she’s creating a small commotion, but she can’t seem to stop. She leans forward and taps Rebecca on the shoulder.

Rebecca doesn’t move—as if she didn’t feel Emma’s touch.

Emma taps again, harder. This time, Rebecca slowly turns in her seat and looks at Emma with a studied, clinical concern, as if Emma were a stranger to whom she might offer psychological assistance.

“I’m so sorry,” Emma whispers. The words come out in great big gulps. “I wish I could change things.”

Rebecca looks at Emma, and something forces its way through her implacable façade—the tremulous, mute outrage of a toddler.

You hurt me, says her sad, crumpled face. Just the fact of you. And then, just as quickly, it is gone.

Of course, Emma knows this. The six poisons have been a part of their family for as long as she can remember. Desire, anger, delusion, greed, sloth, envy—they are their inheritance, along with the art, furniture, jewelry, stocks and bonds. They have accrued and compounded over the years. Wherever they go, the six poisons float in the very air surrounding them, hovering over their heads like flapping, rabid birds.

Emma squirms uncomfortably in her seat, trying to gather her breath, willing her body to stop shaking, the row of chairs to stop creaking.

Shanti leans over and whispers in her ear: “Your chair.”

“What?” Emma whispers back.

Shanti gestures to the small hooks aligning each of the chairs to the next, connecting all of them.

Emma looks at Rebecca again. She’s never been one for visualization—she can never manage to see people’s auras. But tonight, in the middle of the Mysore Mandala, Emma sees the birds—six of them, one for each poison—fluttering over her half-sister’s head. They circle for a while. Slowly, one by one, they settle on Rebecca’s shoulders. Then they fly over to Emma, as if they can’t quite make up their minds. One perches on Emma’s lap. Another on top of Rebecca’s head. As if they are statues in a park. Emma sees that this is what they have been left with—their impossible legacy.

“Unhook your chair,” Shanti repeats.

It’s so easy. She reaches down.

ONE STORY  
PO Box 1326  
New York, NY 10156  
WWW.ONE-STORY.COM

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Dani Shapiro's most recent books include *Family History* (Knopf, 2003) and the best-selling memoir *Slow Motion*, for which she co-wrote the screenplay, along with her husband, screenwriter Michael Maren, for Sony/Phoenix Pictures and Reese Witherspoon. Her short stories and essays have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Granta*, *Tin House*, *Elle*, *Bookforum*, *Oprah*, *Ploughshares*, among others, and have been broadcast on National Public Radio. Her books have been translated into seven languages. She lives with her husband and young son in Litchfield County, Connecticut. She's just completed her new novel, which will be published by Knopf in late 2006.

To read an interview with Dani Shapiro about "The Six Poisons," visit the stories section of [one-story.com](http://one-story.com).

USPS (021328) *One Story*, Volume 4, Number 15, January 30, 2006. Copyright 2006. All rights reserved. *One Story* is published monthly except biweekly in January, March, May, July, September, and November for \$21 per year by One-Story LLC, 425 Third St., #2, Brooklyn, NY 11215. Periodicals Postage paid at Brooklyn, NY and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *One Story*, PO Box 1326, New York, NY 10156.

PUBLISHER: Maribeth Batcha  
EDITOR: Hannah Tinti  
MANAGING EDITOR: Pei-Ling Lue  
DESIGN AND PRODUCTION:  
Matthew Fetchko, Nora McCartney  
WEBMASTER: Devin Emke  
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