

Heroes

If I let myself slip back to my teen years in the early 1980s, I can get overwhelmed with memories of music. At first it's just a hint—a few lines of lyric or an instrumental riff—but then, rushing headlong, there comes a whole synesthetic embodiment of vibe and emotion, an endless loop of colors and lights sliding by like the reflection on the inside of a windshield, car in motion, heading slowly back up the Garden State Parkway from the shore. I hear the sweet, sweet piano and harmonica opening of Bruce Springsteen's "Thunder Road" and I am there again, in the back seat of some friend's vehicle (American-made muscle, two long heavy doors, sticky vinyl interior—borrowed from an older brother or maybe a mother who will spend the day holding her breath until we all get home in one piece). I am gritty from hours at the beach, comfortable in my heat-soaked skin, reaffirmed for a moment in my shaky sense of belonging, as I and my girlfriends all smile and wave out the windows at some cute older guys in a Jeep stuck in traffic next to us. Under the highway lights their smooth tanned hides shine like diamond dust.

A chasm as big as the Atlantic Ocean opens up inside my skinny little ribcage.

The whole world and everything I want is right there in front of me.

David Bowie's "Heroes" pipes in from the way back. Instantly I'm happy. For a time it was my personal anthem. Whenever I visited the great island Manhattan, the mecca I intended to conquer one way or another, I'd hear its corkscrew-y synthesizer intro playing in my head. I would look down at my groovy white retro boots on the sparkling GlassCrete sidewalk and imagine my eyes were a movie camera. This was my heroine's quest, my warrior woman's journey, or so I wanted to believe. In the actual world I was insecure and unstable, a jittery

jangling thing, easily swayed from one idea of myself to another, one ambition to another, one group of friends or another, always unsettled, never committed, rarely assured that I was in the right place at the right time. But somehow I could envision a future me as reliable and solid as a union-made airliner. I believed in my eventual ascendance.

Back home in the New Jersey suburbs, my enraged mother and disconnected father lived in an entirely different time and place, a warp, a wormhole. In their distant universe my dreams of future glory didn't seem to matter. Family mattered, allegedly. Obedience mattered. Duty, God, Jesus mattered. (Unlike most of their fellow South Asian immigrants, my mother and father were Christians from generations back: a minority within a minority, displaying all the defensive arrogance that position entailed.) *Rules* mattered, especially for girls. To defy these things, to refuse to listen to your family or do your generational duty, was to be *willful and disobedient*, to invite correction. When tiny I was made to cry and told to stand in a corner; when as tall as my parents I was screamed at and had my clothes thrown down the basement stairs. My parents were from a faraway land where middle-class comfort was not to be taken for granted, where the value of a child was directly proportional to her ability to extend the family's status and fortunes. So they expected adherence to their practical visions, their paycheck-obsession and their professional snobbery. They railed against my kaleidoscopic boho daydreams.

You will do what we tell you. You will go to medical school. Become a doctor. That way you will never be out of a job! (The subtext I heard was: *You will be stressed and miserable like us!*)

I'd snap back at them: *THIS IS AMERICA!* It was a one-line instant refutation of all their misguided third-world beliefs, a useful gloss on a whole dissertation's worth of meaning. *This is*

America where the pursuit of happiness is enshrined in the founding document which means I'll do whatever the hell I want with my life, and then, if I get bored or frustrated or burnt out, I'll just apply to grad school and do something else. Without this fervent belief in the endless American vista, I would be lost, enchained in my parents' unforgiving hierarchy of values, in their cramped and linear vision of life's purpose. They had no idea who I was. I was not their prissy little Indian daughter. Fuck that. I was "Free To Be You and Me." I was "Don't Dream It, Be It." I was "I Am Woman (Hear Me Roar)." Hear that? Me: roaring. I'd write in my journal: *I will succeed despite them!* I'd scream in their faces: *I'm gonna succeed despite you!* My little sister says she remembers me constantly yelling, constantly fighting to assert myself, a loud-mouthed drama queen. And yet when I look back on those years I can only recall feeling scared—quietly, subcutaneously scared all the time, shivering and small like a tiny furry mammal with a racing heart. I am sure we are both right.

My parents were presumably the protagonists in their own epic quests, but I could not see it that way. To leave the land of their birth in their mid-twenties, married, educated, yet still mere babies in terms of life experience; to arrive here in the turbulent early 60s when assassinations and uprisings and riots dominated the nightly news—I've never had to do anything as traumatic or brave. My Gujarati mother and Tamil father immigrated in 1963 via Idlewild Airport in the same year as MLK's "I Have a Dream Speech and JFK's assassination, and I was born two years later, the same year that federal immigration laws were finally changed to stop giving overt preference to white northern Europeans. We belonged here.

During the hostage crisis I received a few anonymous phone calls in the middle of the afternoon, a young man labeling us *Iranians* like it was a cuss word and threatening to bomb our

house.

Let my people go, he said.

Flummoxed, I took a beat or two to respond.

But we're Indian, I protested.

I suppose the very slight possibility that he might have an actual bomb kept me from adding, *you idiot*.

This may have been one of the only times I'd said those three words—*we* and *are* and *Indian*—in the same breath, rather than cutting my forebears loose and insisting I was just another American kid. Burgers and fries. Pop and rock. Boys and cars. *Where are you from?* people would frequently ask. *New Jersey*, I'd say, in a tone halfway between smart aleck and playing dumb. *Oh, you mean, where are my PARENTS from? That's a different question.*

I must not have taken the anonymous caller's threats seriously. Suburban New Jersey was not known for its tribal violence. I figured he was a neighbor or a kid from school or church, with access to a private phone listings, for like all doctors' households we kept our phone number out of the White Pages. My sister and I secretly mocked the caller's ethnic-geographic ignorance.

Despite moments like this, I thoroughly believed in a welcoming, progressive, metropolitan, neighborly America. The one so convincingly modeled on Sesame Street and The Electric Company, my two most influential nannies. I loved my melting-pot country and thus I *hated our President*. It only made sense. He was exclusionary and nostalgic, king of the ignorant hicks, when the America I knew was destined to be inclusive and forward-thinking. One day in tenth grade I was in rehearsal for our high school production of Cabaret when Regina Carver—a tall, narrow-waisted, always elegantly dressed black girl from the junior class who was

determined to get into Harvard—bounded into the auditorium to tell us Reagan had been shot. I

was sitting on the lip of the stage, with my legs dangling and my hands tucked beneath my

thighs, between the soft comforting corduroy of my pants and the solid wood of the boards. I was

the precocious star of the show and I sometimes behaved accordingly. Reagan had been shot and

I blurted out, *Is he dead?*

People gasped.

What did I know? I was a flat-chested fifteen-year-old virgin getting gussied up to play

Sally Bowles—the comic-tragic sexpot of the impending Nazi disaster—and I had no real clue

about mortality. *Is he dead?* I asked. I didn't mean to sound gleeful. Or maybe I did. Brown-

skinned girl in a white-and-black world, I was not the intended audience of the President of the

United States, no matter that I was every inch a loyal citizen and knew no other country except

that faraway place my parents still called “home” (which I had visited with great curiosity but no

magical sense of belonging).

I and my family were not the white people to whom Ronald Reagan spoke, to whom he

pandered, but we were also not the black people whom he routinely maligned through code and

innuendo. At many a stump speech Reagan (who chose to begin his campaign in the very town

where three young civil rights activists had been murdered, famously) trotted out the case of that

wildly exaggerated “Welfare queen,” with her jewels and multiple Cadillacs, and never once had

to mention her race. His fans and detractors alike just *knew*. But people who looked like me or

my family were beyond consideration, neither subjects nor objects, neither insiders nor outsiders,

simply unseen. There was no dog-whistle frequency that signaled us, no strategy Southern or

otherwise that pertained.

I hated our President—and yet for all my oppositional posturing, was I not deeply invested in the very same secular theology that he peddled so well, the belief that we lived in the greatest, freest place on earth, where our visions would come to fruition if only we dreamed big dreams and applied our talents judiciously? We were all the heroes and heroines of our own lives. Each of us alone determined our own value. A very wise-seeming man named Joseph Campbell had come on the television and told us so. *Follow your bliss*, he said, and this dictum sounded like nothing less than our birthright in this late-twentieth-century meritocracy.

Fresh off my high school star-turn, I informed my parents I wanted to become a professional performer, a Broadway diva like my idols Patti Lupone and Liza Minelli.

My father was exasperated. *Who is going to hire an Indian girl for any parts?*

In retrospect, this was a perfectly rational question circa 1981, but in the moment it felt like a crushing threat. So I was ready with my defense.

THIS IS AMERICA!

Actually, I'm not really sure I ever said those words out loud. Maybe I didn't even respond at all, so shamed was I by my father's question, by the secret knowledge that he wasn't entirely wrong to be skeptical. But it's what I wanted to scream with my entire being.

THIS IS AMERICA!

It was the one self-evident truth. It was the air I breathed, the ground I trod, the water I drank. My coming-of-age movie, the movie of my life, had already begun. I was the camera, but I was also the one in front of it: writer, director, and star all in one. *Auteur*. My soundtrack was the radio, filled with implicit battle cries. Any bittersweet, ironic, or cynical messages in the lyrics were overwhelmed by the liberation found in those driving grooves. The songs said one

thing but meant exactly the opposite. In the same way, I wore teen cynicism like a costume but beneath I was all about American Exceptionalism. I was a squealing high-pitched girl but my inner voice possessed Katherine Hepburn's gravelly, uncompromising timbre: *Go West, young woman, or wherever you daaaaaaamn well please*. I turned on the radio and heard ambitions launched and fulfilled. I heard the relentlessly kinetic synth intro on "Heroes" like a rotary engine winding up, and dreamed of lift-off. I heard Clarence Clemmons' poignant yet triumphant saxophone on "Thunder Road," that big breathing sound, and took it as a call forward. *THIS IS AMERICA!* I didn't need my parents or anyone else telling me who I was, or where I should go, or what I was worth. I was going to bash around out there in the broad world and figure things out for myself. It was my birthright, my citizen's entitlement. I was going to crank the radio full-blast and sing my Self into being.