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Writer/s: [Lucy Broome](#)

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'I am intending to visit Babaji's cave tomorrow, would you like to come?'

Mr Lali Bhatt is shouting to be heard over the music. He looks at me in earnest from behind large spectacles that magnify his eyes. A handkerchief is tied around his balding crown to keep out the mountain chill. It makes a floppy triangular point at the back of his head like a comical pirate. He's about 50, tallish and comfortably overweight, in the fashion of a good Indian businessman.

I remind Mr Bhatt that there is a visit to the same cave planned for the day after tomorrow, already scheduled in the retreat program.

'I want to feel the vibrations of that place without the rest of the group,' he explains, reverently. 'I have been a devotee of Babaji for over ten years now and this might be my only chance to go there alone. I don't care what this Guruji says...I definitely must go there alone. Will you come?'

The last dance begins. More urgency from the loudspeakers now as the night draws to a close. Mr Bhatt shouts that he has hired a car and will pay all expenses. We haven't spoken before but I have sat behind him on the first night of the retreat. During that first evening's satsang a request was made for a volunteer to go to the market to collect various items to decorate the altar for the following day. There was a moment of silence as 150 people considered the request. And suddenly from the front row, a blue and white checked handkerchief head had stood up, raised its hand and called out in a deep voice,

'I will go sir. I will do it.'

'And what is your name sir?'

'Mr Lali Bhatt from Bombay, sir.'

Mr Bhatt wore an expression of sacred responsibility.

That same expression, oblivious to the whirling dance around us, faced me now.

'Okay,' I nod, 'What time?'

The next morning we're sitting in a four wheel drive, winding around mountain roads. I'm in the backseat and Mr Bhatt, in the passenger seat, has become increasingly animated. His voice is as deep as his faith in the miracles of Babaji, who is reckoned to be over 1500 years old. He is a Christ-like, immortal saint still living in the Himalayas and only revealing himself at chosen times to those who are ready. There are no known photographs of Babaji, and the most popular depiction of the saint shows him to be young and attractive, bearing the youth and vitality of a twenty-five year-old man.

'He has appeared before me twice,' Lali Bhatt announces, turning in his seat and facing me.

Lali's baldness shines, like the halo of excitement that surrounds this excursion. Unlike the evenings, the days are warm in the mountains and there is no need for makeshift headwear. It is an auspicious day for my travelling companion. He is convinced that today he will

meet his sacred Babaji for the third time.

'We must be very careful, very on the alert, for otherwise we shall miss him,' Lali Bhatt lowers his voice reverently, 'He could appear in any form, you know. I have asked him to show himself again. This time I am sure I shall know him. This time he will introduce himself.'

I look out at the steady white peaks of the Himalayas as cedar trees blur past in the foreground. Lali continues his whispered account, glancing at the driver as if to check that he too is listening.

'Last time the Mahavatar Babaji appeared to me, he came with his sister. They manifested themselves as a pair of German tourists. They came to my shop. And the second time he came to me alone, disguised as a beggar. But both times I was unable to recognise him. Only after he had vanished did I know that it was him.'

'I'll keep my eyes peeled,' I reply.

We pass a woman carrying a load of cut grass in a woven basket on her head. I peer at her passing face. She spits a bright red stream of beetle nut juice onto the road.

We stop, park the car and set off on foot. Lali is a slow walker and we pause frequently on the trail as it begins to ascend. Each time we do, his breathing becomes more laboured.

'I have a heart condition,' he confesses. 'I'm on medication. My wife begged me not to do this. I might not make it.'

I encourage him to sit down and take more rest. We drink water and admire the view before proceeding slowly.

As we turn the next corner, a boy is standing on the path carrying a scythe. His hair is dirty and his thick feet are bare, caked in dry mud and cow dung. Lali is visibly nervous and immediately tries to hand him a few coins but he shakes his head, as if confused. He doesn't speak but communicates with a moaning series of vowels and gestures. He points in the direction of the cave and we nod. He has beautiful eyes, the blue-green of a Kashmiri lake.

We start to walk again and the villager ambles after us. Suddenly he disappears into the bushes. He returns with a branch and passes it to Lali as a staff. Then he points at Lali's bag of fruit and insists on carrying it.

I walk on ahead and each time I look back I see the villager gently leading Lali along the trail, patiently waiting each time the struggling man stops to catch his breath; holding his hand, passing him the bottle of water, making him drink.

Lali finally arrives at the cave, breathless and elated. He enters the cave on his own. I sit outside slowly cutting fruit. After a few minutes I turn to offer some to the boy, and find that he has vanished.

Inside the cave, Mr Lali Bhatt is sitting in the dark, smiling.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Lucy Broome.*