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# GONE GURU



BARTON  
FAMILY FOUNDATION

# GONE GURU

NADINE BROWNE



FREMANTLE PRESS

*For Danny Kronenfeld*  
1932–2019

*'I don't recommend this as a spiritual exercise,  
but if it does happen to you, a lot of very important  
information is delivered to your heart.'*

Leonard Cohen (age 72,  
after his manager stole his life savings)

# 1.

I'd been living in Harlem for two weeks before I realised my roommate was missing.

The day I met him—after I'd climbed the six flights of stairs to view the apartment—he stood at the open door smiling benignly, head shaved, a compassionate, almost too-attentive gaze in his eyes. I felt humbled and ridiculous in the face of such tranquillity and present-mindedness. He had a warmth and humanity which, upon my first week in the city, I had momentarily forgotten existed. It felt as if I should have brought some offering, a small bag of oranges, or some twigs of rosemary, perhaps. Instead, I took off my shoes at the door.

All that day, I'd had the worst jet lag and anxiety of my life; a whooshing sound kept building up in my head like I was stuck in the middle of a freeway with trucks roaring past my ears. Over the course of the morning, my heart had started beating further and further up in my throat, so when I got to the top of the stairs, it felt like I was going to vomit it up right there on the landing. I imagined it

flip-flopping on the floor in front of me, a goldfish that'd jumped too high.

'Welcome, Noni,' he said, as I entered the dimly lit kitchen. Incense was burning, Gregorian chants might have been playing. He wore some kind of robes. I couldn't tell if they were really expensive designer clothes or just sheets he'd found on the floor. The smell of sandalwood and lavender pervaded the room.

He showed me through the tiny apartment. His voice was a soft antidote to the banging and clanging that was New York City. 'I value peace and calmness,' he said. 'The home is a sanctuary, a place of grounding.'

He gestured for me to sit. The jet lag gave me an out-of-body experience, as if I'd bought my physical form off the internet and it was the wrong size.

'I teach nondualism online,' he added. 'At times, I go on retreats, anywhere between two days to two weeks, but I'll tell you ahead of time.' He had the limber body that teenage boys and cats often have.

I didn't ask what nondualism was. I had long fallen into the habit of hiding the gaps in my knowledge, even when it didn't make sense to do so.

I took the apartment that same day. It wasn't until the second week I realised I hadn't seen him for several days. He was just so quiet. He never slammed a door or coughed or sighed. I assumed he was meditating for hours on end, or had forgotten to tell me he was going away. His room was at the other end of the long skinny apartment, so I was never sure if he was home or not.

Plus, I was too preoccupied in those first weeks to think about anyone besides myself. I had to catch up on my coursework; I'd arrived in the country the day my two-semester fiction intensive had started. The program was half coursework, as in reading novels, and half craft, as in writing a novel. Needless to say, I was behind with both. Plus, I had to buy bedding and organise a bank account, and tick off the hundred and one things you had to do when moving countries. And I hadn't slept. Where I'd come from was the exact opposite side of the world; there was a twelve-hour time difference between Western Australia and New York. So whenever I was about to drift off, it'd be time to get up and start the day.

Mostly, I was missing my dog. I'd left my six-year-old Pomeranian-cross, Bob, with my Aunt Sandy for the year. From the moment I headed to the airport, grief swirled and landed on me, big and full as a flamenco skirt. I'd watched the squat, beaten-down houses of my aunt's suburb pass, opening my eyes wide to absorb the tears back inside them.

When I did sleep for my usual twenty to forty minutes, I kept dreaming I was snuggling with Bob. I'd wake up clutching the pillow, which I'd throw across the room in disgust. I was horrified I could miss an animal so much; no one told me. Everyone said I'd miss my friends and family, but I only missed the dog. I bought a notebook from a bodega with a picture of an orange Pomeranian on the front. It looked exactly like Bob and I thought having something familiar around would help me.

I guess it was for the same reason that I let Merelis in.

She just reminded me so much of my cousin Tamara. She had these long fake fingernails with diamonds on them; they were different shades of purple. Tamara always had nails like that, and she also wore about a pawnshop's worth of gold chains around her neck, just like Merelis.

In Australia, I wouldn't have let her in. I would have talked to her through my triple-bolt Crimsafe security screen. At home, I had all manner of criminals and glue sniffers knocking on my door day and night with endless tricks up their sweaty little sleeves. If you left anything on the back table for longer than three minutes—a bag of shopping, a bottle of beer, your car keys—it'd be gone. I'd worked for ten years in social services so I knew everyone by first name, which had its pluses and minuses.

But Merelis felt like a relief after my afternoon at the New York University's Graduate Writers 'meet and greet'. I'd stood in the corner with a jaded-looking Iranian poet and asked her: 'How are you meant to talk to these people?' I'd been so bedazzled by the confidence, the polished small talk, the energetic mannerisms of Americans.

'Don't worry,' said the poet, who'd lived in Manhattan for ten years. 'In New York, everyone is full of shit.'

If anyone was full of shit, it was me. I was the first person in my entire family to attend a university. I hadn't even finished high school and I'd never done well in academic settings. I was still in disbelief that my application had been accepted, let alone with a full scholarship.

Merelis sat down at the kitchen table, as comfortably as if it were her own house, which it turned out it was,

in a way; her mother ran the building. Merelis had on an auburn weave, which was slipping back so you could see her tight black curls under it. She wore leopard-print leggings and grey fluffy slippers. She had a whole list of rapid-fire questions, mostly about how much rent I was paying, how long I'd been here, and who had painted the walls.

'Haven't been up here for years.' She laid out her dazzling, jewel-encrusted hand and asked, 'Where's the guru?'

'Who?'

'Vincent. He's not paid rent. Was due last week.'

'That's the thing,' I said, glad to have someone to tell. 'I haven't seen him.'

'God, maybe he, like, meditated himself away or some shit, floated up into the clouds.' She waved a twiggy branch of a hand above her head.

'Maybe.' Everything was so upside down and opposite in New York, I thought it might actually be a possibility. Things seemed fifty years ahead from the backwater I'd come from. Perhaps transcendental meditation had advanced.

'Since when you seen him?' Merelis sniffed the air.

'Well, I saw him the day I moved in, that was two weeks ago.'

'You haven't seen your roommate in two weeks? Girl. You check the room?' She leaned forward to look down the hallway, towards his bedroom door.

'No,' I said.

'Ay, *chica*,' she clicked her teeth. 'He could be dead in

there, you know.' She looked at me disgusted, disappointed, as if we'd known each other such a long time that she only needed a quick mental flick through her list of resentments. 'What kinda person are you? You gotta check the room. Go! Check it!'

I felt pretty shitty all of a sudden; I assumed Vincent and I had just fallen into different routines. This was the New York lifestyle, I'd thought—the hustle, the ships in the night, all that. Merelis started to make shooing motions at me to hurry up and open his door. Then she did the breathing thing that my cousin Tamara did, where she put her hand to her chest and exhaled loudly like she'd just had a near-death experience.

I said, 'He goes on retreats. He runs meditation workshops. That's where he's gone.'

'Yeah, and he always leaves the rent money with my mom, and he always tells us.'

I walked down the hallway, feeling harried and confused about how this had all become my responsibility. I'd come here to get away from responsibility. Statistically, I remembered, men went for far more gruesome ways of killing themselves: slitting their throat or blowing their brains out. I started imagining things like heroin overdoses and suicides. I'd once seen a documentary where they found a woman in her apartment after she'd been dead for two years. The body turns grey-green after eight days when the blood starts to decompose. I thought I would have smelt a dead body, but there were so many new and revolting smells I'd been acclimatising to in New York.

I knocked feebly. I'd seen dead bodies before and I knew I didn't want to see another one. Some people were obsessed with true crime, some people were curious; not me. I wanted to stay away from anything that resembled drama or intrigue. I was thinking these things when I felt Merelis's acrylic nail dig into my side.

'Just do it already,' she hissed, sidling up beside me.

I turned the handle and pushed against the door. It was stuck in the frame, so it needed some force. When it burst open, the room was dark because the curtain was pulled, but I could see he wasn't there. There was only his signature scent of sandalwood and lavender which hung in the room.

'Wow, so creepy,' Merelis said behind me.

'Why?'

'Because it's so tidy, look.' She pointed to the desk by the wall. 'He even lines up his pens; ever-y-thing so symmetrical an' shit.'

I'd once worked in a rehab centre run by Catholic nuns and it reminded me of their cloisters: spartan, ascetic, no personal belongings, a grey blanket neatly folded over the thin mattress, a single pillow.

Merelis started opening all his drawers and then the closet.

'Stop snooping,' I said.

'I'm looking for clues.'

I tried to shuffle her out of there. I thought I'd come back later and look for myself. Merelis, I'd decided, needed to go. Now that I had opened the door for her, I didn't know

how I was going to get rid of her, and I was quickly coming to the realisation that Merelis was my *actual* landlord, the one I didn't know about, and the one I now owed a lot of money to—all the bond I'd paid and the month's rent had gone to Vincent, not her. My small scholarship stipend wasn't due to be paid until the end of the first semester, so all I had to live on was a maxed-out credit card.

'Well,' Merelis said, hovering at the door, regarding the glittering droplets on her fingernails. 'You better come pay my mother some rent money. I just moved back, so I'll be keepin' the wheels turning.' She made tight little circles with her pointer finger. 'My ma, she's too *vieja*.'

I had seen her mother on the ground floor; at least, I presumed it was her mother. She was the rotund woman with the life-support machine who was often yelling in Spanish at a tall, thin man.



That was how it began, two weeks after I'd arrived. I'd been so busy burying myself in the requirements for survival I hadn't taken a single peep at the reality around me. I soon discovered there hadn't been a new person in the building for eight years, since the day Vincent moved in. I'd realised this one day when three Latina women backed up to the wall as I passed—smiling and staring, yet quivering also, as if an exotic animal had escaped the zoo and they weren't quite sure how to handle the situation—a new person, a white person, and a foreigner on top of it all!

‘*Mira la rubia,*’ they murmured, ‘*yo nunca.*’ They shook their heads in disbelief at me—this tall, badly dressed, dishevelled woman with a jarring accent—and assumed, incorrectly, that I didn’t speak Spanish.

The building was an old tenement, a six-floor walk-up, with five apartments on each floor. Its halls had been painted over the years with fifty shades of beige, and some lacklustre renovations had been started and abandoned in an indeterminant year—a new doorframe, a sanding back of the stair rail.

I had been too stressed to notice much of my surroundings in those first weeks. I felt panicked, I wasn’t myself. The time jump of countries had messed up my ears, so my voice came out half yelling, half soft, like the volume controller was faulty. I hadn’t taken my antidepressants for two weeks either, partly because I’d forgotten, and partly because I always reverted to some ancestral hangover where I thought I needed to up my tolerance for suffering.



I was lying in bed staring at the ceiling the next day, after Merelis’s visit. I was all out of ideas, too tired to be proactive. I’d just spent two hours googling words like ‘co-op’, ‘subletting’, and ‘tenancy rights in NYC’ (basically I had none). From what I could gather, I had unknowingly subletted off a subletter in a co-op where subletting was illegal.

I thought of the six flights of stairs, I thought of the thirty-six-hour economy flight. I couldn't bear the thought of moving again; my inertia felt debilitating. I thought, this was the kind of mess twenty-somethings got themselves into, not burnt-out youth workers in their late thirties who should have known better. Mostly, my thoughts came back to the Pomeranian: How did I feel so utterly alone without a five-kilo dog in my presence? What was this great need to prove myself that had pulled me all the way here? How had it been strong enough to take me away from all my comforts? I chastised myself for being so codependent, but I didn't think I could make it to my workshop with Joyce Carol Oates that afternoon. I especially didn't have the energy for any high-brow literary talk, although that was supposedly the reason I was here.

It was before eight in the morning and someone was playing a slow salsa beat outside my window, which made me feel nostalgic and whimsical about everything that had happened in my life, even the bad things. Amongst it all, I tried to focus on the question of Vincent; it was something to think about other than my own problems, I suppose. Back in Australia, I might have been concerned about a missing person, but here, I was so angry at that stupid hippy and the situation he'd now left me in. My manic, sleep-deprived mind kept following tragic scenarios: dead, kidnapped, a psychotic break. Maybe he'd been abducted by anti-nondualists.

I was trying to be more selfish, that was part of the reason I'd come to New York. I was never one to say 'not

my problem', and that had been *the* problem: being such a do-gooder was no good for me. Merelis cared about the rent money, and that too was all I should be worried about.

I got up and sat on the edge of the bed, almost knocking my knees against the closet. I thought back to the night I moved in, how sweaty and inconsolable I must have seemed to Vincent. Perhaps the look of horror had been evident on my face. I felt that Vincent had seen me somehow; he had unusual pale-green eyes, hooded in a Slavic sort of way. The apartment was minimalist to say the least, and I liked that the room he'd given me was empty of anything except a twin bed and the closet, that the bathroom had enough shelf space for my things.

'I made you a plate,' he'd said so casually as I passed the kitchen.

I'd stood before him, shocked, my ears whooshing, my centre of gravity feeling off, like I needed to shuffle myself sideways to make my bones fit properly in my skin. I thought my idea of coming here and writing a book was so utterly pie-in-the-sky stupid.

I sat down in front of him. He'd made some sort of vegetarian lentil dish. Cardamon and cumin pervaded the tiny apartment.

He talked and ate so slowly I thought he must have been from one of those slow places outside of New York City. But when I asked where he was from, he answered, 'Here.' His awareness was uncommon. I'd felt him observe me when I walked through the kitchen to put a few items in the bathroom. It annoyed me at first, but it was something

I realised I'd been after: attention. I didn't have enough of it; I didn't give myself enough of it. He explained pragmatic things, like how the trash system worked, that he always placed the mail key on a hook on the fridge, how he kept a block of wood wedged under the doorframe to keep the mice out. He said the building could be noisy on the weekends, as there were a number of large families who lived below.

Amongst the smell of the meal, he gave off a continuous waft of sandalwood and lavender, which made me breathe deeper around him, and in turn, the frantic vibrations of my body dissolved slightly.

Other than that dinner interaction, I didn't know him. I felt I had a right not to care regarding his whereabouts.

I opened my laptop, balancing it on my chest. Wikipedia stated: *In spirituality, nondualism, also called nonduality and nondual awareness, defines the nonduality of the seer and seen, or nondifference of subject and object ... the idea is a unified theory whereby all living things share a consciousness and are connected.*

In Oates's workshop that afternoon, I felt angry and guarded, altogether disconnected from any unified consciousness. I couldn't focus. I glanced down at the picture of the Pomeranian on my notebook. Vincent, I thought, could be floating in the Hudson right now, and all I could do was worry about money and think about my dog. But I was finished with my good Samaritan ways, I was doing away with that aspect of my identity, it was a hangover of my Christian past: *Let no one seek his own*

*good, but the good of his neighbour.* I was tired of all that. Mostly, though, I just felt disoriented because I was from the other side of the world, and I'd brought all the wrong clothes. I was sweating up a storm in my merino wool clothing.

In class, I kept missing all the jokes and laughing at things that weren't meant to be funny. It was difficult to follow anything; these Greenwich Village Americans had a different way of forming statements, talking in paragraphs rather than sentences, which I didn't have the attention span for. I looked around the ornate, antique-furniture-filled room in New York University's Lillian Vernon Creative Writers House. My classmates appeared buoyant, alert and eager to please the famous author at the top of the table. Behind them on the walls, Philip Roth and Susan Sontag, former alumni, were framed in black and white.

Joyce Carol Oates sat like an exotic bird at the head of the table, dropping names like she had too many to carry: 'Last week, at a dinner with the Obamas' or 'As I was saying to Sandra Oh at an event last week'. She wore a lot of 'evil eye' jewellery which I knew was meant to ward off jealousy, though I thought the name-dropping might make it obsolete.

At one point, Joyce was talking in a high-intellectual patter I hadn't been able to follow. It'd been established during the introductions that I was the only Australian, and she turned haughtily and asked: 'Does the Australian know who M.C. Escher is?' I thought to myself: *He's the*

*1930s artist who does psychedelic black-and-white prints.* But I was worried about my voice, the volume control. I shook my head. Condescending little smiles formed, which fuelled my old worry that I had some sort of learning difficulty. Growing up, my mother had thought Jesus was coming back any minute; she didn't see the point in formal education. On the rare occasions I did attend school, I was always relegated to the remedial class as I was so far behind. My main secular education had come from books I'd stolen from my grandmother's nursing home. Needless to say, my education wasn't well-rounded.

But the point of all this, of coming to New York, of having workshops with famous writers, was to write a book, or at least a first draft. We had two semesters, which meant less than a year, to perform this magic trick. Emma, a willowy, impeccably dressed student who was also an actress, shared her idea: a coming-of-age story set in the Hollywood Hills amongst the rich and famous. Because of who she was, or more importantly, who her father was, she already had an agent. Another student, a whip-smart, fast-talking Korean called Fran, had a novel set in near-future Korea about a murdered robot girl, which seemed to be pretty much in the Zeitgeist. A third student, Elizabeth, had a stolen-identity story, whose elevator pitch was the stuff of Netflix dreams. When she spoke, she had the assurance of someone who had never been unsure of anything in her life. It was a confidence I had never believed possible.

I had some rambly idea, based on reality, about how I left a Born Again Christian community, became

a kleptomaniac and drug addict, then reformed myself as a youth worker. In my head it had seemed a worthy idea, but amongst such educated and illustrious company, it sounded silly and far-fetched.

A rising panic loomed about the terrible mistake I'd made in coming here. I was reminded of what people had said to me, way back when I was eighteen and wanting to go to university: *Why make your life harder? Who do you think you are?* I felt out of my depth and it helped to think about people back home and how hard they'd find all this. My cousin Tamara had barely read a book. She'd tried to read the Bible from beginning to end, back when we were teenagers in the Born Again Christian cult and there was nothing else to read. I thought about my mum, who'd finished with school and was working by fourteen. My Auntie Sandy who was pregnant at sixteen. They all worked hard physically, and anything cerebral seemed mystical and out of reach.



Taking a seat on the subway on my way back to Harlem, I saw a guy who looked like Vincent: tall, lean in that vegan sort of way, wearing beige, which I thought is what Vincent would wear. I looked down at my phone and realised I had skipped the most obvious starting point in any missing persons situation. Calling the person.

I got his number from an email he'd sent me when I'd first made contact with him on Craigslist. I dialled the

number, willing him to answer so I could berate him. I needed someone to berate, and I didn't have many options. I'd thought about FaceTiming my Aunt Sandy, but she worked late and it was too early in the morning.

Vincent's phone rang out, so I texted, then sent him an email for good measure: *Hey Vincent, haven't seen you in a while. Merelis came by looking for you. See you soon, Noni.*

Keep it simple, noncommittal, I thought.

I took note of his full name at the end of one of his emails, and copied and pasted it into the browser search bar.

Then I looked up and saw the most beautiful sight in the world: a Pomeranian, so tiny and so perfect, staring at me, its sharp-soft head poking out of a lady's tote bag. My eyes glazed over with inordinate amounts of love and affection, then jealousy. I wanted to snatch the dog, I wanted to steal it and run, just to cuddle it, and rub my face in its fur. Tears started streaming from my eyes at this almost transcendent sight. I couldn't bring myself to pet it because I would have turned into a blubbering mess on the busy subway floor. I just sat there and stared, my face wet. Then it was 114th Street and the woman alighted, and I had to wipe my tears surreptitiously so people didn't notice.

People think Pomeranians aren't smart because they're small and fluffy and yap a lot. My friend tried to tell me that her bull-mastiff was smarter than my dog because its head was bigger, hence it had more brains. But it's not true, it doesn't matter how big the dog's head is, you measure

a dog's smartness on three types of intelligence: *instinctive*, *adaptive* and *working* intelligence. They have a list on the internet of all the dog breeds going from smartest to dumbest. Pomeranian is number 23, and bull-mastiff? Number 72.

At first nothing much came up. Of course there were about a gazillion Vincent Macleans. The first on the list was a child actor of the same name. I clicked on a picture. There was an unmistakable similarity to Vincent but it only served to confuse me; I wasn't looking for the child version of him, I was looking for the forty-year-old version. I kept scrolling. I got off at 137th Street station amid the evening stomp of rush hour, the station hot and claustrophobic. I walked through the tiny triangle of Montefiore Square and up Hamilton Place, and as I walked, I searched nondualism and his name in a few variations of it. A few pages later I found a link to a video which sent me to a YouTube channel with dozens of videos of a guy called Moksha. But it was Vincent—the same shaved head, serene look. He had over six million followers.

There were hundreds of hours of Moksha talking about nondualism, 'awakening' and 'letting go of your identity'. He did guided meditations, sometimes in front of a plain blank wall, and sometimes at a Buddhist venue in New Jersey called The Zen Center. Indeed, he was a guru, Merelis was right.



I stayed up late, falling into video after video. Moksha's voice was soothing as a cat's purr and took me into a kind of restful restlessness. It turned the sound off on my anxiety, which was still there, gyrating and colourful, just mute. I lay on the borrowed sheets looking at the ceiling; the banging and clanging of the New York City night had become a familiar hum. And while my body said yes to Moksha's call for 'letting go', my mind still rebelled. Not being able to sleep meant I thought about things like the money I owed, and how I'd already burnt through my savings like an Australian bushfire. I'd expected to go broke in New York, but not this quick. I started thinking about practicalities, like finding a job, fast.

That night, when I turned out the lights around my usual 3 am, Vincent's shaved head came into my mind. I kept wondering if all this couldn't just be some giant misunderstanding that I need not worry myself with. Maybe he was on a silent retreat somewhere, with no electronic devices. He seemed like a nice guy, perhaps he was blissfully unaware of the stress he was causing me. Maybe he'd just forgotten to pay the rent for the first time in eight years; surely he was somewhere, surely he was fine and I'd just been spurred on by Merelis's paranoia.