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The Dakini Project

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THE DAKINI PROJECT: TRACKING THE “BUTTERFLY EFFECT”
IN DETECTIVE FICTION

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Abstract

This dissertation merges creative writing with scholarship using the novel, *The Dakini Project*, to provide the subject matter to which the criticism applies. It will focus on the source of mystery format as that codified by Edgar Allan Poe that is later taken in hand by his fellows Arthur Conan Doyle, Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett (as novelists), authors of the hard-boiled American style, and it will use Chaos theory to assess to idea of catastrophe in terms of emergence rather than disintegration. Though the format comes from American beginnings, the scope of the stories discussed here are tangled around a kind of urban angst that takes place in any number of settings and countries. Crime in these stories is born on the ragged edge of modernity where societies in difficult transitions seem to be struggling with the notion of decency on many levels. The detective in these cases is a rule breaker and a systems expert who is tracking what is known as the “butterfly” effect, the small and undefined movements that grow and create the huge horrible storms. He is an individual who resolves, brings and rescues others from disorder which is a symptom, cause, and the result of crises, but he is also the disaster maker who will send his fellows whirling away into another kind of lost space. An individual who is himself a creature in disarray, this character is a citizen of the system brought to its knees by crime therefore he is as much a part of the confusion he has been tasked with resolving as any other character in these stories. He will solve the mystery, but his resolution will not be a return to a familiar stability as much as an emergence into the foreign territory of a brand new system which in itself will be recognizable as a platform that will not hold for very long because flux, not stability is the order of existence in these stories.

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Chapter 1 Literature Review

Chaos theory and complexity is already commonly used to reinterpret many traditional literary works for the purpose of building connections between fictive and real world studies and therefore deepening the connections between writing about what we know and what we imagine in an attempt to deal with the connections, differences and crossovers indicative in that kind of labeling of knowledge. Katherine Hayles has written groundbreaking essays in which she traces what she defines as the shifting meaning of chaos within the Western literary tradition. Her book of essays (editor and contributor) *Chaos and Order: Complex Dynamics in Literature and Science* is a collection that describes how complexity and emergence can be used to reexamine literary and non-literary texts, plot organization, narrative strategies (Kenneth J. Knoespel), metaphors (William Paulson), metafiction (Peter Stoicheff), audience response, and the process of interpretation. With this collection, Hayles also broadens the definition of an interdisciplinary field of chaotic systems that crosses over many fields of study not previously considered as bedfellows.

The works of surrealists, stream of consciousness authors and authors who use nonlinear timelines to advance their stories are regularly analyzed with the focus on the way perception in these texts is aligned with emergence, fractal imagery and the butterfly effect. Peter Mackey redefines the attention paid to randomness in James Joyce's *Ulysses* in terms of the butterfly effect. Thomas Rice uses the theory and James Joyce to build a bridge between scientific, literary and historical works. Determining that William Faulkner, Laurence Sterne, and Virginia Woolf are masters of what she redefines as turbulent narrative systems, Jo Alyson Parker makes connections between these kinds of

narratives and a real world understanding of chaotic systems. In her essay “Chaos Theory, Hypertext, and Reading Borges and Moulthrop” Perla Sassón-Henry analyzes Jorge Luis Borges's and Stuart Moulthrop's text in terms of bifurcation. Thomas Weissert, looking through the chaotic lens, finds chaos to be the center piece and not the central problem in Borge's labyrinthine garden. In his book, *Beautiful Chaos: Chaos Theory and Metachaotics in Recent American Fiction*, Gordon Slethaug applies complexity in a review of John Barth, Michael Crichton, Don DeLillo, Michael Dorris, Cormac McCarthy, Toni Morrison, Thomas Pynchon, Carol Shields, and Robert Stone and uses the theory to analyze these authors' use of chaotic tropes and nonlinear narrative forms. Harriet Hawkins applies the theory of strange attractors in an assessment of literature that runs from Shakespeare to Tom Stoppard. She also includes a short discussion of detective fictions in *Strange Attractors: Literature, Culture and Chaos Theory* that focuses on chaos to order via the butterfly effect). There are also studies applying Chaos theory to Science Fiction, specifically Asimov's Foundation series and Frank Herbert's Dune series (Donald Palumbo) with a focus on dynamic systems in process.

The range of literature now being reexamined in via the lens of complexity and emergence is growing in fact with international authors also being examined. This list includes but is not limited to Italo Calvino, Salman Rushdie, Jean-Paul Sartre, Al Hakim's and D.H. Lawrence.

There are many studies of detective fiction but they are still driven by social theory, racism, gender studies, classicism, Freudian psychology, urban angst and crime, rationalism, realism, and colonialism. As the genre starts to develop strong followings in different countries the stories are compared on a cultural basis. There are also papers

written on the problem of modernity but with the idea that the detective story works from disorder to order in an organized fashion. There are no studies that I could find that applied systems theory as it is applied here to the classic form of this genre as defined in this paper.

There are a few authors of detective fiction who have written stories ruled by the notion of Chaos theory, but with a few exceptions most authors in this genre have not worked primarily with complexity or emergence in order to craft their stories. Exceptions include the *New York Trilogy* by Paul Auster, *All Cry Chaos* by Leonard Rosen and *Wild Sheep Chase* by Haruki Murakami. These authors intentionally worked with the idea of the butterfly effect and fractals as they are discussed within Chaos theory and have on occasion, described these explicit intentions but they are, so far, the rarities.

Chapter 2 Chaos Theory and *The Dakini Project*

Dakini is originally a Sanskrit word that translates into sky-walker or sky-dancer. A dakini is an ever-active female spirit and a physical manifestation of a spirit that is ever changing. She is an evocative moment of energy that from time to time appears in certain shapes. She often appears in Hindu and Buddhist traditions as a wrathful spirit, but just as often she is the embodiment of dharma (the correct path, intent and action). She is a frightening force and shape, but because she is the essence of potentiality, meditation on her can be used to reveal the true condition of reality as assumed by Buddhists and Hindus. Given the truths she reveals, the fear of her and representation of her as vengeful can be interpreted as less of an experience of an evil creature and more of a demonstration of how realizations of absolute truths can be terribly disturbing. To one meditating on this figure, submission to the idea of a dakini could feel like a fall into an abyss even if the realization she brings is positive. This idea of transition in all its shapes is suggestive of Chaos theory's definition of turbulence and disaster and since Buddhism is featured in the novel, the idea of a dakini links well with the study of altering systems.

In *The Dakini Project* the protagonists who motivate other characters and drive the story to moments of understanding are female. They live in a Buddhist setting, and are part of a culture that is threatened by modernity, by invasion from outside cultures and by what feels like the extinction of cherished traditions. *The Dakini Project's* focus on the female element, initially recognized as diseased, is a reflection of the fear of constant motion as well as a fear of the need to make a valid assessment of reality. The detective (Jessie Harris), a proper Chaos figure that starts, sorts, and recovers others from necessary disaster comes to her conclusions and is able to accept reality, (the fact of her

inevitable death) when she solves the mystery of the killings. As a child of the invaded and invading culture Jessie will represent the fractal view of the difficulty of social evolution that is altering Nepalese society.

Because novel uses Chaos theory to assess to idea of catastrophe in terms of emergence rather than disintegration, the shape of the mystery is untraditional in that the answer to who the killer is will be less important than how each character's perception of valuable knowledge and necessary power is misguided. The aside moments in which characters describe their justifications will prove to be moments in which they have actually expressed how little they know and demonstrate that they are in reality, blaming the wrong butterfly effect. The murders, that seem to be unconnected events, are results of change that needs to happen as well as evidence of a rot in the existing social and belief systems that trained the killer in this story. The core mystery and the fact that the murderer is Marie, the detective's child who was raised in the living goddess tradition by her aunts, Buddhist nuns themselves, is meant to reflect on the Nepalese tradition of the living goddess, and the worship of Everest and other Himalayan aspects in the shape of goddesses. The inclusion of these ideas gives us supernatural forces that provide no certain recognizable structure unless one stops trying to cage the idea of the divine with ritual and a definite viewpoint. Buddhism dovetails easily with emergence. The idea of constant, seemingly brutal change, the idea of the karmic machine that redistributes good and bad results aligns with an idea of change in which rupture becomes a positive transitional mode.

This idea of feminine as divine is countered during most of the story by characters that believe they are following the old ways out of respect and that they are protecting

their culture from total erasure when they recognize the women as causes of rot or as rotten figures. The cast-off holy woman, Jane, is one of these as is Marie, the ravaging, aged-out living goddess. Characters who try to live according to rigid rules of order, Alex, Jessie's boyfriend, Jessie's parents, and Marie's accomplices Prakash and Amal will be revealed as individuals fighting necessary change because the demented states they know seem like stability to them. Characters caught in between, such as the Tahru tribe, will be visibly crippled and seemingly crushed by the transitions everyone needs to make in order to cast off the damage started with bad acts in the past that have resulted in a crippled hidden society that itself needs reinvention in order to thrive in the new world Nepal is becoming.

The urbanized element is not just Kathmandu where change seems to be destroying culture, environment and perverting traditionally nurturing relationships. The city making impulse is also evinced in the encroachment of cement and steel in the form of buildings, hotels, bridges, airports that are now sunk into the Himalayas from Lukla (the last airport between Kathmandu and the mountains) to Everest, and in the way traditional agriculturally based villages have been transformed into tourist stops. The setting in the edge of the world is also emblematic of a stepping off point into wild wide unknown areas that are psychologically and physically dangerous places.

Jessie, the detective, is not initially presented as the Chaos theory's cognitive intruder but intuitively she will develop. During what will be revealed as her desire to escape acceptance of death, she will drive towards a perfect understanding of emergence that will then affect other characters in her own "butterfly effect." She will follow the winding path toward revelation by tracking those tiny movements that tend to grow and

create the disasters she will be blamed for starting when she returns home. These disasters in their turn will be redefined as the transition moments that help the survivors bridge the gap between the dying past and the new social systems and belief systems they will need to accept in order to continue. Jessie, both the source and the interpreter of disorder, will be sent whirling away into the lost space she has feared for so long but with an understanding of the journey that allows her to transition into the unknown with a more commanding sense of peace as she heads to a place she now knows is not the end game.

Chapter 3 Tracking Chaos Theory in Detective Fiction

A certain type of detective fiction relies on deductive wizards, has plots that fester in the wounded ways of darkened city streets, and has stories that are inhabited by fractured and frightened people who play the roles of predator and prey in ethically messy worlds. The stories begin in disarray. This genre has Victorian founders, Poe's Auguste Dupin and Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes. Their descendants are the "hardboiled" American detectives, investigators coping in societies where urbanization and modernity contravene community. The settings are hard places that seem more like mazes than home and command spaces where changes seem to create societies where more people feel like cast offs than connected members of a comforting collective. This particular cluster of detectives is characterized by a profound and personal sense of absolute justice, rationally achieved and the sense that they are by nature, creatures in flux. These characters do not sit still well.

The bad guys in these stories are born in the city and work at the ragged edges of their societies' changing values that allow them the freedom to operate and sometimes to escape punishment even after they are known. Often they have been exposed to other worlds or classes of people that allow them to consider the stricture of normal behavior as frangible and so, examples of free spinning pieces of society they wheel about and create damage. In the Victorian settings the criminals tend to be vagrants, travelers and villainous outcasts who may not be recognizable as such depending on how well they can pretend to be civilized. Poe's criminals are a sailor's orangutan (maybe we blame the sailor too; he corrupted the ape in the first place), a corrupt political official and a set of skills that shapes a killer who knows his way around the docks. Doyle's villains run the

gamut from arch criminals, and well polished gentlemen with pitiless hearts like Professor Moriarty and Charles Milverton to men like Grimsby Roylott (“The Adventure of The Speckled Band”) a crude monster corrupted in India, Jephro Rucastle (“The Adventure of The Copper Beeches”) a smiling sleaze, and John Clay (“The Redheaded League”) a street thug. The hard-boiled villains from the American authors are a range of wealthy perverts, gangsters, corrupt politicians, bad cops and middle class losers falling further down the social scale when the dirty games they play backfire.

Though all these stories span a substantial period of time, they share a literary social moment in which their fictive societies shaped by a constrained sense of decency that applies differently to different social classes are being tested by periods of social transition in which bad behavior thrives and when social changes, perceived as evidence of impending chaos, are warded off in the name of order and traditional values. The Victorian Age and the hard-boiled novels describe times when many members of society are recovering from wars fought overseas and when home front social networks are being beaten about by industrialism. Peacetime or winning is being celebrated, while the needs of unhappy people who cannot recover from the traumas they have endured are ignored. In these books, to be out of step with the rules or, to be gay, the wrong ethnicity, promiscuous, drug addicted, or to have the wrong political sympathies can result in prison terms, death, or place someone in a category where they can be victimized without recourse. Order on the surface is served. A prevailing sense of law and order keeps the peace, but when the repressed darkness of citizenship bubbles up to the surface as criminal moments it raises questions about real decency. Further, the crime’s existence posits the notion that an orderly society is a kind of mirage and that actually crime

mirrors or uncovers the true nature of civilized existence as much as an orderly sense of justice does.

This legacy continues on in some of the modern fictions with the same lines being drawn particularly in the outskirt areas. These can be practically isolate places like in the Himalaya (Nepal and Tibet provide the backdrops here, as does a Buddhist sensibility) where enduring cultures being wiped out by modernity or a modern enemy intent on erasing old cultures in the name of progress and conformity or orderliness. They can also exist in the twilight zones of war torn countries where ethnicities and identities are in total flux in the aftermath. Post World War I and World War II stories in particular work in these settings. In the mountains, the invasive society claims territory by building over natural surroundings, cementing over the pastures and resurfacing if not tearing down ancient structures in order to build prison camps and cement block offices, bringing the city to the countryside. The resulting rupture creates nightmares that infect both the victims and the victimizers. It is the inevitability of tumultuous transitions the rules are trying to resist, the crimes are evidence that change cannot be totally controlled and that order is an indecent lie that corrupts everyone.

When the detective arrives on the scene, ¹he begins assessing the disaster by using what he already knows about human nature and extrapolating from the circumstances in view. Seen as someone who is meant to restore order, he is asked to find the disruptive villain, cage him or kill him, and then allow the rest of the pretty people to roll along the orderly well-trimmed path. He is a mindful character not just smart, but someone who is totally aware in the present and able to view crisis as dispassionately as humanly

¹ Until a better way appears “he” means to include “her.”

possible. Mining memory and imagination, the primary tools of his trade, he fashions patterns as he tries to understand behaviors and consequences that seem beyond comprehension and out of control. This mindfulness, used to create meaning, shaped by an impulse to reflect, collects and expands on information in an ordered manner and insists on order. The danger of this process is the detective's human tendency to create order where none exists. Further the detective himself is a source of messiness and intrigue. And because existence and the social fabric meant to keep disorder at bay in these stories is as chaotic as it is orderly it is necessary to investigate how disorder is part of order in order to fully understand what is happening in the murder mystery. If you envision the detective story as a study of evolving systems, of people moving from one set of circumstances and senses of self to another. If you see the societies in these stories as entities resisting transition that naturally occurs but that is also being promoted by the crime at hand, and the relationships in these stories in states of flux then a study of detective fiction in terms of dynamic system's theory becomes fitting.

The scientific theory has more than one name: Chaos theory, Complex Theory, or Emergence. It is a study of system dynamics in which chaos is defined as the link between stable states instead of a disruption. In his view chaos is how systems shape shift in order to survive in ever changing environments (Briggs and Peat, *Seven Life Lessons of Chaos 16*). So, a tornado is less the break between stable weather systems than it is the malleable space in between that allows for the alterations that permit stable states to convert. And according to Chaos theory, it is possible to track the dynamics of unpredictable events in order to locate their causes and results. By this standard, a murder in a mystery, though a sad event is also a break in a bad system that allows for the flux in which healthy change can occur. And as a result, individuals, smaller dynamic systems existing inside complex social systems, will grow because the trauma encourages healthy transformation.

This understanding of social and individual evolution is not new in the literary world. Development from an unruly state to another more compacted one (materially and ideologically) is the soul of creation myths. The Vikings called pre-existence the Great Abyss. Christian, Judaic, and Muslim traditions describe a formless void. Apache traditions call before-time darkness. Ancient Egyptians believed that Ra emerged from the primeval chaos (Nu) to create order (existence). Though these stories define chaos as the untamed, illogical space that should be avoided and contained, disorder can also be seen as the essence of unmediated disaster that occurs between creative moments. Therefore, in these stories death, the penultimate state of unmaking for mortals is also a necessary moment of change in the material world.

When scientists tried to tackle this ideological trend, they battled shadows. Chaos theory was not named as such until the 1960s when meteorologists and ecologists melded the concept of sensitive dependence² with mathematicians' problem of ³nonlinearity. (Both ideas depended on the notion that causation existed but could not as yet be tracked). The result was an understanding of systems that defined chaos as an unpredictable dynamic shift that was shaped by repeating and untraceable events. Because science requires that a valid theory be based on experiments that repeat results, the study of systems comprised of unpredictable events was relegated to an abnormal category and shunted away. Scientists who tried to publish papers on what came to be called the "butterfly effect" (Lorenz, Edward) found it difficult if not impossible to publish, but the theory never vanishes completely from consideration.

In fiction, chaotic aspects of human nature are usually described as destructive. Victorian monsters were human beings distorted by passions to a point of total dissolution. Addiction and insanity are failing aspects of weak people. Dishonor and failure to conform are signs of abnormal behavior. Anti-heroes and villains are individuals who have been destroyed by their inability to see past disorder and have fallen into sick mental states in which they commit the bad acts that cause more disaster. Inside and outside of detective fiction these characters abound. Because these mad/bad guys cannot get in synch with the positive aspects of ordered society, they throw their lot in with the view of total destruction and seek the order achieved by total erasure.

² A small change at one place in a deterministic nonlinear system can result in large differences in a later state. (Campbell, *Nonlinear Science from Paradigms to Practicalities*).

³ Nonlinear equations are difficult to solve and give rise to phenomena like chaos, where simple changes in one part of the system produce complex effects throughout. A nonlinear system is not random. (Campbell)

Twentieth century authors include the unconscious and psychological aspects of being alive in their understanding of human motives- aspects that make identity, progress, and purpose harder to categorize because knowing the human psyche requires an understanding of relationships in flux with other relationships. And, after Freud and his fellows make their ideological contributions, people become a sum of analogous connections that require the ability to judge human beings as creatures comprised of ordered and disordered elements. In terms of human development, the chaotic state is redefined as a positive state of change instead of an unraveling. It becomes the order of the day for creatures that need to evolve in order to adapt to the varying state of the world, society and self that are constants to existence. Chaos then becomes a state with rules of its own that makes it an interconnected part of existence as valuable as order and order, then becomes part of the state of flux we call disaster (Peat and Briggs *Seven Life Lessons of Chaos* 28). In sum, the study of Chaos says that complex systems shaped by forces within and without, require violent shifts in order to achieve stable structures. Forces encouraging stability and destruction and that drive systems to transitional points are called bifurcations. And so change that feels like destruction is really the continuation of a system in which forces are being realigned to suit a new environment (Peat and Briggs *Seven Life Lessons of Chaos* 28).

In terms of detective fiction the understanding that disorder is part of a positive state of affairs allows for the reassessment of the murder mystery and its protagonists. Detectives become the “cognitive intruders” in their stories. As individuals of complex vision, they step into story after death, chaos’ prototype, has been inflicted on what is usually a sickening society of individuals in need of assessment. Focused on the worst

mortal disaster (the absolute disintegration of the individual), detective stories seek answers to the disrupted order and stability of social systems. The detective seeks her/his answer in the form of a toxic individual who threatens other characters' sense of safety and who with her/his dastardly acts, has revealed failing aspects of system that are more unworkable than they seem. "Well," she said, exhaling a sigh capable of loosening decades of emotional knots, "now the voices are completely silent." She gave a short laugh as tears streamed down her cheeks. "The voices have ceased, they're gone," (Olsen-Adler, Jussi, *The Absent One*, p. 398). Kimmie is a wilding killer that the police been hunting for decades but once they find her they discover she is actually a means of purgation. She comes from a society of successful men who predate and destroy and seemed civilized. And it is not until this killer tears apart their world and the world of her victims with her bad acts that their reign of terror can be stopped. And so the mad voices in her head are echoes reflecting a bad world in which she only seems to be a vicious component sprung from a vacuum, while in reality she is the result of the ordered society that hid other crimes and made mangled minds like her own. In the hard boiled tails the villains hide everyone's secrets and spill them when they explode into violence. "The days were taking him apart and making him over...He had no idea how long this would take or what the whole experience would do to him in the end, but he was enjoying how his hunger was unmaking them all," (Idol, *The Dakini Project*, p. 267). The villain either coming into his own or unraveling unlocks the poisoned nature of all his companions.

The reason a detective story in particular demonstrates Chaos theory is its insistence on the view that without the preeminent question of solving death's questions, there is no point to human existence. In terms of emergence dynamics, the detective (an

intruder) will resolve mysteries of other human behaviors as he addresses the murder. He will come to understand the dynamic aspects of the human relationships being investigated and will reveal how they are shaped by interaction and environment. He will discover the attractors (that subset of states that encourage stability or force destabilization) and place them into a theory that fully describes the disastrous events at hand. He will recover knowledge that will force reconstruction and encourage understanding of the processes that drive characters within the text. An outsider from the start, this intruder will also further disrupt the sense of system stability by questioning all aspects of relationships between the characters he is investigating. This intruder will become her/his own type of strange attractor forcing changes within the lives of the people he is investigating in order to discover exactly what the limiting attractors of the systems are. He will be an intentional chaos bringer. “The way to solve it is to muddle around in it and disrupt everyone’s lives,” (Parker, *Paper Doll* 11). To this character, cognitive dissonance, belief in co-existing contradictions, is a necessary aspect of living creatures. When he introduces more dissonance into the system in order to watch it readjust, it is because he knows that disorder forces change. “All I have is a tin of ashes and a feeling like the world is going away if I don’t do something right. Something noisy” (*The Dakini Project*, p. 264). He will discover that death is in fact not a disruption of the system but a stabilizing aspect. He will see the city of souls he needs to understand from a multi-dimensional state. “They soon find out that I am aware of what every single unwed person knows—that the world is always a little out of focus” (J. D. McDonald, *Pale Grey for Guilt*, p.14). Substitute people for planets and you see J.D. McDonald’s detective (Travis McGee) looking at the mix of people and powers with a galactic view

of pleasant inevitability that only he sees after he solves his mystery. The journey often helps the detective grow too.

The girl as the cause and effect of disaster is a common trope, particularly in American detective fiction. She does not have to be evil, but she can be. In *The Dakini Project* the girls are the victimized children who won't disappear and so are further sources of disaster and many daughters in these stories are often twisted but not horrible human beings. Hammett and Chandler make her the mother, daughter or girlfriend who hates, who drags men into hell with her anger. Ross McDonald, another hard-boiled author, makes her the insane parent or lover who prompts her sons and husbands to commit mad acts they would never consider without her presence. Robert Parker the author of the Spenser series and a disciple of the Raymond Chandler style of detective fiction makes use of this trope himself.

“She was crazy when I met her, DeSpain said. “Only I didn't know it. She doesn't seem crazy, you know” (Parker, *Walking Shadow* 268).

“Yeah,” I said. “[And] she went through Port City like a virus” (Parker, *Walking Shadow* 280).

The girl starts ripples in the water that become tidal waves. Evidence that evil exists because one way or another she causes evil, she whirls through lives causing death and disaster like a hurricane. Sometimes the villainous source is a guy. Preston and Child's Special Agent Pendergast's brother is a super criminal. Auguste Dupin's killer is a sailor and an ape. Jacqueline Winspear's villains are mentally broken by war. In Eliot Pattison's Himalayan mysteries the killers are sometimes monks torn from their spiritual roots by violence who then roll malevolently through their own communities. One way or

another, killers are odd men out. The traditional view is that when scoundrels kill they force investigations that bring secrets to light. The investigations and the deaths cause trauma that make working social structures to fail and disrupt productive lives. But from another view there is an alternative interpretation. Like storms villains bring disruptions that cause pain, but they also root out what is already rotting inside the social structures that had existed previous to the murder. “The goddesses up high see this meanness...and sometimes send clouds down to fill the valleys with mists that can turn men into ghosts...To die? She asked. “To be punished or saved, [he replied] it depends on the story” (*The Dakini Project*, p. 88).

The resolution of a murder mystery is the birth of new awareness of self and society more congruent with reality. The new way or the new knowledge may not smell sweet, but it is solid ground for the moment. Disaster then becomes a necessary link in the chain of change rather than a bad break. The villains provide a community service and their existence can be seen as the result of a need for disruption without which society would fail and human beings would perish.

“I have guessed the plan of this chaos, I have re-established—I believe I have reestablished—the primordial organization... of a “complete but not false image of the universe” (Borges, *Garden of Forking Paths*, 1542). In Dr. Tsun’s mind, chaos has become essential in terms of moving forward. And in order to survive in a tempestuous existence one must develop a sense of storms. The better detectives learn to track the changing tugs of powers that form darkness and have a sense of storms that is organic and shape shifting. Dr. Tsun of Borges’ mystery discovers his salvation through a fractured view in which time moves in many directions all at once causing confusion and

resolution. It is a storm that causes disarray, but without it Tsun's progress is stymied. In the twenty-first century, chaos theorists refine this idea, but detective fiction has been working from these precepts of complex systems since its inception. This is because the detective story requires an interior, intellectual view of existence and a constant reassessment of identity. The point of story must align with the detective's spiritual and psychological growth in order to work, which requires a focus on the importance of subconscious territories that are impossible to control or completely define.

Dr. Stephen Jay Gould (an evolutionary theorist) once described the possibility of the creation of a theory that would describe what was often left out of traditional accounts of change. He offered the prospect of "A new and general evolutionary theory [that] will embody the notion of hierarchy and stress a variety of themes either ignored or explicitly rejected by the modern synthesis..." ("Is a new and general theory of evolution emerging?" p. 119). In other words, he described a study of existence that would reveal the connectedness between seemingly random events and suggest an end to, "the depressing notion that levels [of change], are fundamentally distinct and necessarily opposed to each other" ("Is a new and general theory of evolution emerging?" p. 129). This is an understanding of necessary change that occurs unpredictably in a predictable fashion instead of a view of progress based on a rigid sense of structure. Like a detective hunting a killer, Gould reflects on an ignored relationship between repeating patterns and random events. "You call on Mr. A. Nothing. You call on Mr. B. Nothing. You call on Mr. C. More of the same. A week later you find out it should have been Mr. D. Only you didn't know he existed and by the time you find out the client has changed his mind" (Chandler, *The Long Goodbye*, p. 111). Chandler's hero, Marlowe knows that he works

with causes and relationships he cannot pierce. Part of his gift is working with ignorance knowing that simple darkness is also a clue. He also knows that only disruption will bring the truth to light because patterns either replicate or fall apart when impinged upon.

...the visible ones act in erratic and inexplicable fashion. Their orbits are . . . warped, So you apply gravitational theory and a little geometry of moving spheres and you say, Aha, if there is a planetary body right there of such and such a mass and such and such an orbit, then all the random movements of the other planets become logical, even imperative

(J.D. McDonald, *The Dreadful Lemon Sky*, p. 95).

Gravity and geometry provide an understanding of hidden relationships that must exist. In essence, the detective is what Chaos theoreticians call the strange attractor, the catalytic agent that draws stable systems into disorder so that they may shift into new stable states (Waldrop, *Complexity*, p. 226). A strange attractor is like a marble rolling around in a bowl so fast and hard that it can never settle. It affects the paths of all other marbles. Gould was talking in terms of scientific history in his works, but the ideology he proposed, one that has come into its own in the twenty-first century has been at work in fictive terms, particularly in the detective story for a long time. All detectives seek other strange attractors who seem to be ruffling feathers because the answers to what causes chaos can come from those people who cannot settle down.

“I will, . . . assert that the higher powers of the reflective intellect are... more usefully tasked by the unostentatious game of draughts ... where the pieces have different and bizarre motions, with various and variable values...” (Poe www.poemuseum.org).

Here Poe’s detective is describing the difference between solving a puzzle’s

process by following a rigid design and by solving those that need a messier, more intuitive approach in order to be resolved. This line of the thought aligns well with the idea of emergence. Chaos theorists propose that the path from organizational stability to chaos follows an obscure, but definite process of change (Waldrop, p. 66). They posit that the new stabilities emerging from what looks like disorder would not have been possible without the attendant disarray. They also presume that comprehensive knowledge of a system requires understanding of the relationships between relationships within it. A detective can perceive the murderous truth only after he traces the spinning whirl of interactions between many variables of a social system that make it viable.

Robert Parker's Spenser thinks of them as "unsaid rules." Poe's Dupin calls them "bizarre motions." Both detectives understand that disruptions are essential features of human relationships and strangeness is only the case if you do not allow for the hiccups that are part and parcel of a human system to be aspects of normalcy. The human heart does not beat regularly. If it did the organ would cease to function, because the body it is in is run according to a range of altering rhythms. Odd beats, moments when the heart hesitates to function rescue it from sudden death and help to reassert positive patterns. Human society replicates this process. Without disaster it would often fail to continue because stasis is a non-adaptive state and therefore leads to extinction.

Detective stories are about the evolution of character and society perpetuated by disaster. The disaster, usually death, tears standing social, personal, and professional relationships apart revealing points of stagnation (at many levels) that have been causing decay that participants have been accepting. In most cases, alcoholism, addiction, abuse, unending grief, or hatred that breaks people and relationships have become inherent parts

of the structure instead of purged wrongs. The tragedy forces reactions and the results reveal necessary changes that had previously been constrained by human histories. As a result, the murder at hand becomes understood to have been neither random nor entirely wrong, but an act necessary to effect change that had to occur in order for those in the system to move forward or perish. Like Chaos theory, detective fiction is not necessarily focusing on finding the positive view. In fact, revelation usually results in dark prospects for its protagonists. The stories are about recognizing patterns. A common trope in multi-ethnic or generational tales is the fading out of a generation or of a type of people who once set the standards for order who are revealed in modernity as obsolete and decayed bits that need wiping away. Bitter patriarchs, out of place holy leaders, and ethnic groups described as dirty and primitive, often flicker out of view in these stories because they are evidence of bad patterns that need to go. Disaster is a bad thing and pain is a horrible aspect of life, but both have their place in the patterns of evolution, which the study of chaos or complex systems means to discover and which detective fiction constantly creates and employs.

Villains in a story are the bad guys because they cause harm. But, it turns out that while murder and dishonesty dampen decent behavior, they also force heroic acts. There can be no hero(ine) without a situation that demands (s)he exist. There are no clean souls without dirty ones. This is not to say that light and dark balance each other out, for that is a rigid view of a fluid structure. But, the machinery of existence cannot evolve without the active presence of antagonistic pressures to force growth. It takes study to reach such a conclusion and people with the ability to take on the task. It takes a creature willing to

constantly live in chaos or in a phasing state, one also willing to promote conflict in order to pierce the veil of chaos that seems to mock order.

"What is this... Some sort of secret society?" [Adele asked]

"Yes...that's exactly what it is [Susan replied]. Full of unsaid rules and regulations which none of them will ever admit to knowing"

(Parker, *Bad Business*, p. 240-241).

The detective is an intuitive creature as much as a rational one. He possesses the powers necessary to walk in darkness. But from Poe's prototypical Dupin to Jacqueline Winspear's more contemporary character Maisie Dobbs, these seekers may not understand or always be able to articulate what they know for they too are examples of systems in flux. Their strength is the ability to shift between stable and unstable states without changing much and while they do so they track changing social systems and help travelers pass through. They understand disaster as a cause and effect of stability. As Dupin states in a description of himself and his fellows:

He derives pleasure from even the most trivial occupations bringing his talent into play. He is fond of enigmas, of conundrums, hieroglyphics; exhibiting in his solutions of each a degree of acumen which appears to the ordinary apprehension praeternatural (Poe www.poemuseum.org).

To these characters, bad news is a sign of progress and they need to penetrate its mysteries. To them, killers are actors but also often creatures described as the result of unmaking forces that had been coalescing long before they killed. For the detective, the murderer creates the possibility of revelation and murder allows for understanding of how the ordinary world works that is not ordinarily obvious.

Detectives comprehend the meaning of storms that disrupt the lives of those they must investigate. They assign guilt to both the dead and the living. “Dead men are heavier than broken hearts,” says Phillip Marlowe (Chandler, *The Big Sleep*, p. 44). Stagnated and stunningly unchangeable people are useless to living systems and cause damage. Spade’s dead partner was a liar and a cheat. Spencer’s dead men are disloyal and incompetent and they leave broken people in their wakes. Caleb Carr’s killers in his novels, *The Alienist* and *The Angel of Darkness* are sociopaths who perceive themselves to be preserving order. Maisie Dobb’s villains are broken by old tragedies and spiritually racked by infections that need lancing. Ross McDonald’s deaths are caused by long kept bad secrets in failing families. Sherlock Holmes’ criminals are destructively selfish individuals feasting off the strength of healthy lives.

Both the victims and their killers are the diseased aspects of culture. Their existence is a rigid core in a society where stagnation necessarily leads to extinction. In Travis McGee’s words, [the] “deadening structured mess we have built into such a glittering top-heavy structure that there is nothing left to see but the glitter” (McDonald, *The Deep Blue Good-By*, p. 16). Only a terrible rending can salvage people and the cultures that have a tendency to freeze up around broken processes. Order often promotes too much stillness and in that light, a broken glass or car crash or terrible illness sometimes provides rescue. Crushing losses often help people realize that they are seriously off course. Travis McGee calls these victims the “forlorn rabbits,” those shattered people who do not know they are broken until disaster strikes and would therefore have never been rescued had not something very bad happened. In *The Dakini Project* though it seems the death of a friend causes the distress that kills the main

character it is in fact the darkness already available that kills her and the death of her friend only brings existing madness to the light and leads to acceptance of inevitable personal dissolution. In detective, stories crime occurs because the pressure of so many accepted little injustices builds forcing a system into such a warped state that murder seems acceptable too. The spoiled playboy kills the pregnant girlfriend because the life he has been leading allows him only to project darkly.

In Preston and Child's novel, *The Wheel of Darkness* a Tibetan monk tells Agent Pendergast that the monks released the great destroying mandala into the world in order to create the rupture that would result in the discovery of the next great "Rinpoche" (reincarnation of a spiritual guide) who could lead the isolated monastery and its denizens into the modern age.

"When the Agozyen walks the Western Sea, And the darkness upon
darkness wheel, The waters shall rise up in fury, And batter the great
palace of the deep, And ye shall know the Rinpoche by his guardian, Who
shall return with the Green Tara, Dancing across the waters of the Western
Sea, From the ruined place of the deep." (Preston and Child, *The Wheel of
Darkness*, p. 506-507).

The monk here is describing an idea of rupture as a link in the evolutionary chain rather than a purgation of sin. He denotes an understanding of history free of the fractured categories Stephen Gould discusses in his article on evolutionary theory where he suggests mechanisms of change that have long been ignored. *The Wheel of Darkness* provides an example in which the disarray circling the plot, rather than the plot itself, that cannot be contained in a story is the purpose of this tale. In *The Dakini Project* it is the

disruption of the temple ceremonies and the desecration of holiness that causes the most good and a possibility of return to faith at the story's end.

“Hammett took murder out of the Venetian vase and dropped it into the alley... [He] gave murder back to the kind of people who do it for a reason...with means at hand” (<http://www.en.utexas.edu/amlit/amlitprivate/scans/chandlerart.html>). In this critique, Raymond Chandler is not just describing a better way to plot murder he is talking using murder to bring life back to those who survive it. One cannot stare into the eyes of a corpse and not wonder how well that person used their time.

“You were dead, you were sleeping the big sleep, you were not bothered by things like that, oil and water were the same as wind and air to you. You just slept the big sleep, not caring about the nastiness of how you died or where you fell” (Chandler, *The Big Sleep*, p. 250).

In a detective story one cannot look into the eyes of a corpse and not ask, how well am I living my life? Or better, am I living my life? A disaster connotes a larger view. Without the death, there is no questioning because nothing looks out of place. The death causes growth, allows a shifting from one stable state to another. Chandler's operative is wondering about the quality of his own life decisions and will be changed by a dead gangster's murder. He is considering all the people and relationships that caused the man's death and about the determinations that will now force readjustments. A stranger's death will make this detective decide to leave the bad girlfriend unpunished, force her to take responsibility for her sick sister which will then rescue their father from a lonely death, and leave the police with information about crime they would not have known otherwise. Murder in this story creates positives though it will not stop crime.

Humans instinctively study storm states. Because order is the name of the day for creatures seeking to manage a world they will never control, human beings are always trying to calculate reasons for suddenness. In fiction surrealists and modernists grapple with what cannot be named by diving into writing modes that reflect an understanding that ideas and perspectives that tend to lose shape when you define them. Detective fiction is their legacy. Modern writers concentrate on the way the powers that run the world affect human beings. It is the way relationships change and the way they change people that reveal truths. Virginia Woolf proposed that a writer's task is, "to find the relation between things that seem incompatible yet have a mysterious affinity ("A Letter to a Young Poet," p. 22). Try to track aspects of consciousness that can never be completely defined nor predicted, she says. Borges tries to tell us this through his spy protagonist, Dr. Tsun who talks about the past, present, and future as items in current relationships with one another, existing all at once. "I have reestablished-the primordial organization... of a complete but not false image of the universe" (Borges, 1542). His understanding of life and motive is only true for a moment, because existence is comprised of too many patterns to track. Dr. Tsun's understanding will be only momentarily complete which is why he communicates it so those that follow will know that understanding is frangible, but possible.

"...fiction is like a spider's web, attached ever so slightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners. Often the attachment is scarcely perceptible" (Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p.43). Fiction can be defined as a manifestation of the need to understand disruptive forces of life as part and parcel of existence. What is the point, metaphorically speaking? Exchange the storming hurricane funnel for death, disease,

poverty, illness, cruelty and crime, and then the murder mystery in particular becomes not a calm puzzle solving genre, but a series of stories focused on what Chaos theoreticians call strange attractors or the union of an infinite collection of limit cycles (points of gravity and stress), where systems dramatically shift from one state or shape to another (Peat and Briggs, *Seven Life Lessons of Chaos*, 40-41).

For Special Agent Pendergast in *The Wheel of Darkness*, the attractor is the Agozyen (a mandala with magical properties); a thing that cannot be named or known that causes human ruin, but is a necessary aspect of positive change. Sherlock Holmes seeks it when he chases Dr. Moriarty, the master of mess. Raymond Chandler's man Philip Marlowe chases it when he seeks justice in a world where justice cannot exist. Abigail Padgett's bi-polar detective Bo Bradley seeks it when with a broken mind she attempts to save children who cannot be saved. *Dakini's* protagonist runs from it and hunts it down when she avoids pain that she cannot escape. Every detective steps in after the worst has happened, makes the result more painful for the survivors and stands at the end of the chaotic passage in what is the next temporarily stable platform when they leave a story. Whether the characters left behind are happy or sad, they will be standing at a stolid point of bifurcation, a fork in the road where choices must be made without full understanding because a new age is upon them.

For complex systems (social, human, ecological) irregularity and disruption is the way a system (or complex organism) patterns around change needed to keep the systems viable. In this view disaster is not a failure in system, but a necessary part of an organized overall process by which the creature or system adapts. A captured murderer stops the disruptive spinning for a moment, but what the murderers' survivors realize is that they

are changed after the killings are explained and stopped. Secrets that were causing rot are revealed after a murder is solved. Wounds that healed badly are reopened so that they may either heal properly or so that their victims fail out of the system allowing healthier individuals to succeed where they might not have otherwise. In Eliot Pattison's Himalayan tales where the invaders are destroying Tibetan villages, the ruined places become the new temples. In *The Dain Curse*, a drug addicted woman drowning in a bad family, the victim of a bad history, recovers. She recovers because an obsessed murderer created by a system that had been supporting the girl's mania destroys the structure that had doomed her. In post wartime novels from Winspear to Doyle to Hammett and Chandler, it is murder that frees or kills those who cannot recover from post-traumatic stress disorders. Lost in the social rendering that occurs in wartime these broken souls have suffered losses that destroyed their sanity and moral senses. Some are so fractured they cannot remember what they have done or in some cases who they are. Murder recovers them. Fighting to recover from the immediate trauma, they discover a will to live.

In this literature, deaths tend to illuminate the diseases in systems that seem healthy. Pendergast novels reveal rotten political structures that are not in danger of falling until someone is killed. Spenser stories tend to reveal the dank spaces in wealthy and well-educated societies where the helpless are expected to carry the damage done and are rejected when this state of affairs causes them to misbehave. Killings in Tony Hillerman's Navajo detective novels reveal the failures of racial integration in towns where citizens describe how well all have adapted to the loss of their cultural identity because it is politically correct to say so. Environmental disasters, common in the

Himalayan and Californian tales (Ross and J.D. McDonald, Chandler and Hammett books) read like the result of a poisoned group of people whose infection is spreading but still unnoticed. In each of these cases it is the disaster that saves what seems to be stable and healthy. A corpse draws out worse behavior, causes suspicion, raises questions, and makes criminals responsible. It makes honest women and men complicit and reveals the rot and the aspects of normal living that need to be changed as everyone scuttles about trying to distance themselves from the pit opening up below. Without the body, there is no screaming. Without the evil actor, sadness and rage, endemic and endurable in current systems, survives but once someone is killed a shift is forced. A broken boy, a crying girl, an unfaithful husband, a corrupt politician can be endured, but place these people in the same room with a killer and everyone needs to clean up their act. Systems and people that would never have been able to make the leap to health without murder are propelled to revelation and then compelled to change. In each of these cases, chaos causes evolution. Murder, a conscious abrogation of the social contract, becomes a natural means of maturation.

Another way to think of Chaos theory is to call it “conscious creativity” (Peat and Briggs, *A Turbulent Mirror*). A living system is so complex that one almost needs to reinvent a way to see in order to fully understand the patterns it reveals. “Chaos is nature’s creativity” (Briggs and Peat, *Seven Life Lessons of Chaos*, p.19). Chaos’ entities and actions cause echoes and throw shadows. Upon investigation, the line of a cliff can be visually broken down into a series of self-similar shapes, the shape of a tree is reflected in smaller iterations, in the way its branches split, in the way its leaves are veined, and in the way trees group in clumps. Human behavior in extreme disarray

reflects breaks and reacquisition of patterned societal actions. The damage in one human being is reflected in the faces of those around her/him as the ripple effect of her/his pain rocks those in proximity. A broken man breaks his family, a half mad leader bends good people into bad shapes, a bad act refracts in the way those standing near it behave, creating “the endless repetition of self-similar structures in different scales of magnitude” (brucelipton.com).

Complex theory calls these features fractals. In detective fiction fractals are patterns that propel the story forward. In this sense, patterns are important because often it is hard to separate the individual from the forces that move him. At least patterns allow us to track these hard to define forces because they are presentations of constant repetition. The most famous fractal in terms of science is called the Mandelbrot Set. Appropriately, for this topic, it is a repetition of what looks like the human heart recreating in an unending series of differing sizes. Human beings study history in order to learn from it. They hope to learn how to correct new mistakes before they happen by studying errors already made. A detective will tell you that history condemns rather than saves. It is his view because he always stands in the center of a disaster that could have been predicted. Families in these stories provide a great fractal view as they provide a network in which one generation looking like the one before celebrates and suffocates in the bindings of the way the known past destroys the shaping present. “It had not occurred to her that she was his history as was their child, or that the child would be a destroyed girl, and that when her father hurt that child that the destruction would be her fault” (*The Dakini Project*, p. 268). Because the duty of a detective is to backtrack, he can tell you people and society are not just echoes of history, but also echoes of one another. A

society reflects the behavior of a group driven by the same needs as any one individual in that group. A group is an individual entity in fact comprised of parts that behave as a group would when they are alone. Survival is the commanding code for the living and this code demands a great deal of secrecy in order to remain successful. Society like people is an entity that tends to put its head down ignoring what evils it can, living with what losses it can stand in order to move forward, but secrets are items in stagnation and items in stagnation rot. In detective fiction, the murder act is a reflection of the size and the shape of the secrets that caused it. Often the form of the killing even mimics the kind of hatred that caused it. Poisoners intend that their victims die alone and in agony. Those who stab drive home rage in a wrenching fashion. Snipers intend to effect an unseen unpredictable disaster winging in from the skies. Assailants and rapists torture their victims in order to drag them through unresolvable pain just before death at the hands of their tormenters. Then, the bodies, either hidden away or publicly presented, are used as expressions of distain for the societies that protected the victims and their acts in the first place. If the body is hidden, the effect is to mimic the depth of secrecy so ugly that there is no solution. If the body is left in the open, it accuses every one who by dint of being involved with the victim and the society that protected her/him and their bad act is also guilty.

The reaction to the body creates emotional tremors shaking the personal secrets free, which in turn reveals the sick machinery of the society that requires any secrets be kept at all. Every murder starts with the body and a dissection of a life that leads to analyses of the people who helped shape and were in turn shaped by the victim and his/her behavior which in turn were formed by both the society and larger events which

started the venomous chain of events that lead to violence. The presence of addicts becomes a reflection of a society that cannot cope with the length of days strung together that form a life. The existence of rapists is evidence of a collective that cannot cope with intimacy. Madmen mirror societies that can no longer live in ignorance and so construct weird reasons to justify bad values. All of the fractured people who become killers are simply fractals of the larger social gathering. In this view, killers are a result of and the cause of continued wreckage. They are butterfly wing beats that were caused by societal currents and that in turn cause ripples of their own. And only the detective who studies patterns notices these reflections.

It is no coincidence that murder victims tend to be individuals who were either obstructionists or people forcing change that was in some way untenable to their fellows. A victim's corpse, or the moments they are found, provoke circumstances in which everyone involved are forced to face two possible future paths without deterministic means of choosing. Murder forces active choices on the survivors without providing much information. The loss strips meaning from the accepted constructs of behavior and judgment. It disorients survivors.

Death ends and undoes, those left standing see their own reflections in a corpses eyes. "His long sallow face looked empty...his body was unnaturally motionless...I had a sudden vivid memory of going to a small zoo when I was a kid," (J.D. McDonald, *Darker than Amber*, p. 256). Standing in front of death reminds McGee about being a child, and, before he leaves the moment, he will track his history from that day at the zoo to adulthood. He will automatically reconsider all the missed opportunities. Prodded by the dead eyed corpse, a person without further choices, McGee will be led to an existential

moment that will require action lest he be trapped with the emptiness of choosing nothing. Dead men's eyes are doll's eyes, shark's eyes, soulless orbs, something shiny, mesmerizing, and still. What held meaning and expression now does not. The soul, the relationship, the goals of the (wo)man, or any difficulties anyone had with him/her before the murder are all turned into vanished points of reference. The willful killing of another for personal specific reasons changes what it means to be alive. The recycling of people [the victims] into a dark means of success changes what that success might be. Violence then becomes an unacceptable choice in civilized culture, because it voids the rules and mocks the notion of relationships. Murder leaves survivors with choices to make in a world where their judgment is now compromised. Trust evaporates and history, also a dead thing starts to become more important than the present requiring what in the vernacular is called "ass backwards" decision-making. Chaos theoreticians call these moments, bifurcations.

"Don't worry about the story's goofiness" Sam Spade counsels Joel Cairo in the *Maltese Falcon*. What he means is that the whole story at large is goofy and that a nonsense tale makes perfect sense in the larger story of their lives. Bifurcations are blank spots. Everyone has choices, but no one has the knowledge to judge, which is better or worse. Survivors of murder in a detective story have to choose what do to knowing they do not understand what they are doing. They must make plans after appreciating the fact that plans mean nothing. "I did everything I could, everything, but it never stopped! It should have been enough...But it never was" (Carr, *The Angel of Darkness*, p. 712). Carr's child killer is talking about working with what she knew and how making plans according to the rules caused her to become a killer. She is a woman turned into a chaos

bringer by choices she was ill equipped to make. Disaster always awaits the chooser. Even a detective in a mystery never knows the whole of the work he must complete. The murder victim cannot provide the information the detective needs in order to go home. The murder victim's survivors only know their connections with the victim, but not the rest of the secrets that made death necessary. Further, all suspects tend to be trapped in the swirl of the killer because there are deeper truths about themselves they do not fully comprehend that have lead them to be engaged in disaster. A natural pull to unraveling has led them to this critical moment where someone looks at them and wonders if the sum of what they are is an unmaker of minds, an eraser. Everyone is the killer until the story's end.

The detective himself is usually a creature in constant disarray and so he is part and parcel of this confusing critical moment. Involved in the most confusing moment of people's lives is the way he often exists. Detectives in these stories become the bridge between what life is and what life will be. They are flux embodied. "A vortex is a distinct and individual entity, and yet it is indivisible from the river that completed it" (Briggs and Peat, *Seven Life Lessons of Chaos*, p. 28). Drs. Briggs and Peat are talking about a moment in life when creativity is available. They are also discussing the sense of a creature that resolves, brings and rescues others from disorder that is defined as a symptom, cause, and result of crises. In accordance with proper Chaos standards, the detective steps into the vortex and is it as well. A detective is as much a part of society he investigates as any other character in a murder mystery. He is both an outsider and an insider because society is incomplete with those people who do not seem to fit. Detectives are the odd beats of the human heart that allow for a regular pulse. Robert

Parker's detective, Spenser often takes cases because he sees pieces of himself in turmoil in his client's faces. Sherlock Holmes recognizes brokenness because he himself is a creature always on the edge of self-immolation. Andrew Vachss' Burke hunts child molesters because of the damage done him. Bo Bradley sees through to the heart of her villains because the craziness required to hunt and kill is a quality she fights every day. Dexter of the *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* series is attempting to train his serial killing impulses by hunting serial killers. In these examples and more, the detective is just like the people he hunts and investigates. People can be detailed as pieces of one personality in essentials. Pieces of one soul linked into one society where the pieces must co-exist which means from time to time someone must die so that the whole structure can shift and survive in recovery. Chaos theoreticians will call this the paradox of individuality. Times when characters are aware of authentic personal truths and most subject to their worst weaknesses can also be moments when they are more cut off from everyone else and yet less able to see themselves as indivisible from the whole. The acts committed by these characters (good and bad) then become part of a single vortex, evidence of pieces locked together inside one storming system and existing in balance.

Relationships within relationships are the moving pieces of the world of the detective story. Analogous relationships are at the heart of crime resolution because a thorough understanding of a complex system requires investigation of these relationships. A detective must understand how connections among dissimilar items and people work in order to solve murders.

If all the scientists in the world were to focus on understanding one organism, they would fail because gaining deep knowledge about one organism requires an

understanding of all its connections with the rest of the world, with all of the history that came to make the creature and with all the relationships that spring from its taking its place on the landscape (Briggs and Peat, *Seven Lessons of Chaos*, p. 91). The above idea is again specifically talking about scientific study of the material world, but the detective in a murder mystery has been from his inception aware of these truths. “From what I have already said, you must know that I have had means of information about this matter-- means of which you could never have dreamed” (Poe, www.poemuseum.org). This detective is talking about the faculty of recognizing connections. The study of relationships between relationships is essential for this protagonist. Poe’s Dupin, Chandler’s Marlow, Robert Parker’s Spenser, Agent Pendergast, and Jacqueline Winspear’s character Maisie Dobbs; the list is incomplete, but each of these renown fictional detectives are burdened with the responsibility of determining how murder fits in the larger pattern of the lives they are examining. They start by examining a body, and then their focus spirals outward from the body to the personality that was housed inside the body giving them understanding that leads them to study those who were connected with the victim. The conclusions gained in this study leads them to knowledge about the ways in which those connected to the victim are connected with one another. This understanding offers critical insight in terms of motive. Detectives also require an understanding in the terms of physical environment in which the victim both lived and died. The detective again starts with crime scene and then looks at the physical pieces of evidence on the scene, recreating story for each item in the room. How hot was it when the victim died? Was the door closed? Did they just eat? Why is the bed unmade? Is the phone of the hook? Are there marks on the floor? Each of these pieces of data will be

examined and combined into a complex understanding of society; of local environment and of the way all things living and inanimate belong in the web work of the story. All murder mystery detectives know that disaster is both a cause and effect of histories and relationships. Ross McDonald's characters are aware of economy and environment and the way it connects to the cases they investigate. Dick Francis is the author of mysteries set in the horse racing world. His characters often base their investigations on an understanding of friendship and family that seems to extend beyond the scope of the life of the person who died. Agent Pendergast can find the answer to a death in New York several continents away. In the view of the detective story human beings exist as pieces of a large complex. The death of a man in a lab turns out to be the result of a marriage made a continent away. The death of a reporter is the act of a man who wants to buy a piece of property the reporter knew nothing about. A rider dies in a horse race because a glassmaker he barely knew forgot to return a package to a friend the rider had never met. A detective is a consummately wise individual who intuits systems better than others. He is a master of chaos who demonstrates an ability to uncover the fractal view. He recognizes the self-similar patterns of behavior and resolves the complicated issues at hand because he can weaving an infinitely complex broad view into the simple solution.

Further, the detective is not an entirely unalterable piece of the murder mystery. A creature that lives in flux is as alterable as any other aspect of story. His knowledge of self is either reaffirmed or erased by his journey. Knowledge that truth shape shifts is part of a detective's intellectual strength, but this knowledge also traps him in a moment of unresolved flux. Charting uncertainty as often as they do, detectives remain as lost as the people they investigate. Forced to face disorder in themselves, detectives are also forced

to constantly seek out mysteries. Detectives know how little they know. And, driven by the need to understand what they can never fully comprehend, detectives will also always stand on the edge of disaster. They will always remain perched at the barren edge of ignorance, always being the constant strange attractors incarnate causing, being drawn into and being a part of the flux between stable moments. They will also be the characters that step into these abyssal moments first.

Chapter 4 *The Dakini Project*

Prologue

There's no denying it. Reality is our construct. It comes to us in bits and pieces that we accept if they fit into a story, one with us cast as the hero. Time feels uncontained unless we break it into sections and even then it controls us the way wind rolls snowflakes bouncing us against a landscape too big for us to take in all at once. So in our stories about ourselves we fill the deeper, darker canyons with water, face the mountainscapes and shape the snowdrifts with plot and characters navigating the abysses with a tale about us. Though the story does not give us control over the journey or change what happens, at least it makes us important and lets us reject the fears that shape us until we have to face them.

I like detective stories. I tune the television to cop shows and I leave the set on all night long. I read mysteries over and over because I like a complete story but also because detectives find solutions that are true but always surprising. The end of the story comes to the detective the way life truths come to us, out of the blue even if we knew them all along in some sense. There is no way to prepare for loss for example, and no easy way to forgive yourself for your sins. You can only insert the specifics into your text and make it fit the story you mean to tell. The people you love become characters in your story and you use them, as you will to fill in the gaps.

I am Cherry and I always will be Jessie's friend. I am one of the few who knew what she was thinking. I knew that she saw her life as a string of failed promises and I think she mistook the breaks in relationships for tragedies instead of movement. I think that she thought the hole at her soul's center was a sign of disaster when in fact it was an

essence that kept her honest. Her preferred biography kept her from going insane when the person she wanted to be, the character she both hunted down and ran from all her life just never seemed smart enough or kind enough. My friend was a dreamer of the highest order and dreamers cannot seem to hang onto the certainty they obsessively seek.

Jessie's dreams were sometimes enchanting, sometimes horrifying and often clouded in violence. The best friend in her view was probably turned into a better person than I really am because her story needed a protagonist. The people she knew who could not keep her from feeling lonely became mad and bad in her hands because in the working out of her plots she needed antagonists with faces. Because she knew that there was a god out there somewhere her story also drifted into magical places. Because there were real people in her story she often had characters that did not always make sense but that represented her successes and fears nonetheless.

I was Cherry, her best friend in this story. Jessie cast me as the one she could not afford to lose and with that decision she gave me the power to tell the tale, as she would have it unfold, for as long as I was involved. I am the god's eye view, the mind's eye for my friend and as such I have done a little messing with the tale myself.

But don't concern yourself with that now. A tornado is not the break between stable weather systems but the malleable space in between that allows stable states to exist. God's eye is always the center of a storm. The thunder shakes us, and the rain blurs the view – but the story still holds. Even if the narrative shifts, it holds. If you are looking for a through-line, for the crime and the puzzle and, ultimately, justice, I may fail you. Justice is a lot to manage. But I loved my friend, and that will have to do.

1

Jessie followed the green stripe down the hospital hallways until she reached Cherry's room. A nurse was inside plumping pillows and straightening sheets and such, so Jessie stood just outside the door holding her crumpled jacket in her folded arms and noted the details in order to stop staring at her friend who was so flattened by illness that the sheets bunched around her body had more bulk than she did. White walls, yellow tiles, white sheets, frosted windowpanes, beeping machines, stacked chairs and hospital beds. No matter how old they got Jessie always most strongly pictured herself and Cherry as children, as they were when they first met. At six and eight years old they were cynical children who spent a whole lot of time together after that first meeting pretending they were someone else whenever possible. Cherry wore her hair in braids and Jessie kept hers short and both were used to making decisions for themselves.

Jessie took her place by the bed after the nurse left. After a few minutes Cherry opened her eyes. "Tell me about Nepal," she said.

"Looks like we're not going to get there," Jessie replied.

"So, tell me what it's like," Cherry said. So Jessie pulled a chair up to the bedside and took her friend's hand as she reached back in her memory for the best days and gave Cherry the picture in bits. "Nepal sounds, like bells, steel horns, hammering, people yelling, and bird calls. The mountains smell like sage, pinecones and yak poop. The cities smell like tar and spices and the traffic cops wear facemasks because it's dusty. It is so different from here that for the first few days you feel like there is a large weight hanging over your head that is mashing you into another shape. My sisters still live there." Tubes ran from Cherry's arms into plastic bags. Wired sensors were taped to her skin. The

details made Jessie lose track of her narrative. “You should have told me sooner that you were so sick,” she said.

“You were angry with me,” Cherry said.

“I had find out from someone else, over voicemail,” Jessie said.

“You’ll have to go soon. I didn’t want you with me for this part. I thought I could keep you from seeing this except I can’t do without you,” Cherry said.

“I can’t do what you want,” Jessie said. “We said no breathing machines and no more chemo, but I can’t do the other thing.”

“Stop thinking about it,” Cherry said, “Just sit here.”

Blue lines, evidence of fate running Cherry down, shaded paper thin skin as they tracked up her arms and fractured into odd outlines on her face. A thick bandage bulged over the lesion on her neck and different sized pillows propped up different parts of her body. Jessie brushed thin strands of hair off Cherry’s face. “It’s almost the same red as when we were kids,” Jessie said, “before we got to be our parents’ age.”

“Liar.” Cherry touched a bruise on Jessie’s cheek. “What have you been doing with yourself?”

“Old habits and all that,” Jessie said. “Some men are just mean.”

Cherry sighed and pulled her hand out of Jessie’s grasp so that she could take an identity bracelet off and hand over. “They’ll lose this,” she said. “I’ll tell you what you want to know and then you have to go and you can’t come back. But you have to listen to me now,” Cherry said.

“Why did my mother tell you what she wouldn’t tell me?”

“Your mother was a bitch. She had promised not to tell you but she couldn’t resist telling someone. I bet she thought it would make you and me less friends if I knew a secret and kept it from you too. She told me over dinners, those terrible tasteless stews and she would visit bringing me tins of those powdered cookies that I love so much.” Cherry held up her hand forestalling more questions. “They had to tell your daughter something when she got old enough so they told her all the bad stuff about you and then they said that you’d died.”

“So, she’d never come looking for me.” Jessie squeezed Cherry’s hand gently because she loved her and to remind herself that her rage was entirely her problem.

“Don’t go back to Nepal,” Cherry said.

“Once you die I’ll have no one left that I trust,” Jessie said.

“Leave it alone. Bury me here and leave the mountains alone,” Cherry said.

“I’ll have to take you there, at least once,” Jessie said. “I’ll release you at the top of the world. You’ll be free there.”

“That outdoor stuff,” Cherry said. “That’s all you. I’d rather be on a beach in Tahiti, six feet from the cabana and the bar boys.”

“You’re coming with me. I’ll introduce you to the Tahru. They live where no other tribe could survive. And you’ll be with me when I find what my family took from me, when I find my child.”

“That’s a mistake.” Cherry sighed again and against her will closed her eyes. Then they sat in silence. They had been friends all their lives; it wasn’t as if there were anymore unspoken secrets between them. Jessie eventually fell asleep on the bed and when she woke Cherry had died.

“We have notified the authorities of course,” the doctor who agreed to unofficially answer all the questions Cherry would not. They stood outside the hospital in the Santa Ana heat.

“For what?” Jessie asked. She clutched the last of Cherry’s belongings which all fit into a large *Ziploc* bag.

“Your friend was poisoned,” the doctor said. “Arsenic. She must have been suffering for a long time but didn’t go to a doctor until we could not save her.”

“I thought it was cancer. She said it was cancer,” Jessie said.

“Did she say that exactly?” he asked.

“I never exactly asked. Can you tell for how long?”

“Not exactly. I am very sorry. Why would she lie to you?”

“Because she knew who did it and why and she didn’t want me to go looking for them.”

“And you know too.”

“I know where to start looking,” Jessie said turning away towards the parking lot.

If you had asked the old woman she would have said that the sounds of Nepal, outside of the cities, were yak bells, the soft buzz of Buddhist horns, screaming drovers and the pings of hammers hitting stone slabs. She would have said that the air was infused with incense and mixed with the hints of sweet pine and yak poop. The old woman had daydreamed about Nepal constantly once she knew for certain that she would never return. Alone in her house she lived her life perfectly because in her last days she had nothing left to explain. She spent her days in her garden. Dressed in shorts and a tank top, she crept along the garden rows emptying her sack. She had only three small stupas left to build. They lacked the proper benedictions and the traditional shapes but for her purposes they would do. She knelt before the one she was building and pulled a keepsake from her bag and set it inside the stupa on a place she had flattened and washed to make mud and then flattened again so the memento would stand. Then she brushed the soil around the outside of the structure and scrubbed the pebbled walls with a stiff brush. When she needed more rocks she ventured into the desert and mined the ground for the proper shapes. She treated the stones with respect. Each was taken from the bag, dipped in water, and dried with the towel before it was placed. It took dozens to build even a small stupa, but she was patient. She worked every day until noon. And as she worked she thought less of what she was doing and more about where she had been. She had lately noticed that as her hearing and sight started to fail that the sounds of the past grew louder in her head. She didn't yet have the facility for peacefulness old age was supposed to deliver. She used the job of moving the stones to keep these sounds low so she would not go mad.

Jessie and Alex left for Nepal in May. They were cutting it close, monsoon season began in June, but the demonstrations in Kathmandu had delayed flights. Air India refused to fly in at all. Experienced trekkers would have come and gone by May. Only most stubborn ones still waited at the basecamp for a final shot at Everest. The couple had been on one plane or another for three days by the time their jet looped into Kathmandu airspace. Tribhuvan International Airport was named after a king. It was a grey collective composed of bricked spaces, misspelled signs and spiraling stairs that led to plain desks and tables manned by friendly men and severe women. Jessie and Alex were stuffed into the back of the plane so they disembarked behind two groups of middle-aged tourists that bogged up passage through customs. A monotone travel agent, brown hair, brown shirt, brown pants, and brown shoes brushed by them and scooped up all the remaining entry forms. Jessie considered slamming him with her duffle bag but the impulse was stifled by training and tiredness. She was damp all over. Kathmandu had doubled in size in the last ten years without the benefit of emissions standards. Hot air tainted by an oily stink drifted in from the streets and she felt as if she were coating her lungs with every breath. Sense-dulling sunlight streamed in through the windows making it necessary to wear sunglasses indoors, which Jessie could not do if she wanted to read the forms that she had received from a customs agent who liked Alex and her better than the band of tourists he was servicing. He gestured that they were to skirt ahead of the group and use part of his desk to fill out the forms while he continued to process the middle-aged Spaniards that flocked around the agent who had taken all the forms. Two older women stuffed into the middle of the group were being separated from the larger body and getting more care from the young men at the desks. Their bags, ten or twelve

were ferried through the lines by Sherpa guides. One of the guides, dressed in western garb herded them towards the counters. He cut through the crowd because it parted easily when he approached as if he scared people a little. Jessie noticed rather than saw him and would not have been able to pick him from a crowd if pressed. Because she was focused on her forms, she missed seeing the women at all. A lean platinum pair, they wore Buddhist habits, dark red wrap-around dresses, and were tall enough that they looked over the heads of those in the crowd. They squeezed through at a steady pace behind their guide. At one point one saw Jessie and stopped. She pulled her companion back until the man and his wife parted ways with theirs and whispered something to her friend. The man exited a side door where he was met by a jeep driven by another dressed in camouflage. He held its door open and gestured for the women to hurry. Changing course they took the path farthest from Jessie and Alex in order to exit the building.

“How are you filling this part out?” Alex asked Jessie as he was shoved aside by a boy forcing his way through.

“Figure it out,” Jessie said. “We have achieved that part of the trip where you’re whining and I am bitchy. So, figure it out over there.” She pointed to the opposite side of the desk and kept her back to the crowd that was forcing its way forward.

“You got a pen?” Alex asked from his side of the table.

“You can’t find a damn pen either?” He had in succession lost and found his plane ticket, passport and his customs forms as the plane was landing.

“Give me a break and get me a goddamn pen. You can list my failures later,” he said.

She located a *BIC* in her bag and resisted the urge to throw it like a rock. She was really tired and really hot now and the tourist just behind her was yelling at the customs officer. She and Alex had been forced to spend the night in the airport before the last leg of their journey and the layover had drained her. The Indian airline agents had designated them as “in transit” because their plane was delayed and had placed them in an “L” shaped hellhole to await what became the ten-hour layover between flights from Delhi and Kathmandu. She blearily recalled desultory foot traffic, yellow walls, ESPN, the reek of microwave pizza and instant coffee, and rows of plastic chairs filled with people trying to sleep. They had slept on the floor in shifts using packs for pillows and the jackets for blankets as Airline men walking through the room from time to time yelled out passengers’ names or flight numbers. After a while the outer door to the men’s room started to squeal becoming a sound that was hard to ignore as time passed. Someone lifted her jacket from the stall hook in the bathroom but when she raced outside to tell Alex she saw it lying on the floor. The only thing valuable about the coat had been a wristwatch tucked in an inside pocket, which is why she assumed she had gotten it back. From then on she wore the coat whenever they moved from place to place which currently made her hotter still.

“Jessica Healey,” the customs agent addressed her as he read and stamped her documents. “Does Jessica mean anything?” he asked holding onto the passport just out of reach and looking up.

“It means my mother was unhappy when she named me.” She reached for the passport but he kept it still. “My mother told me that it means, ungentle in Celtic,” Jessie

said. The word did not translate well enough. “Not like a lady should be, more like a boy than a girl.”

“Maybe you were an ugly baby?” Jessie suspected he was bored and did not feel like servicing another customer so quickly. “Or maybe they expected hardship from you.”

“Maybe they deserved the daughter they got,” she said.

“It is a beautiful country. You and your son should enjoy your stay,” he said finally relinquishing the book. He had the next passport in hand before she had moved away.

“What was that about?” Alex asked. She had lost track of him for a minute. Not easy to do. He was tall, blond and blue eyed and he stood out just about everywhere because he looked perpetually uncomfortable like a shy visitor at a family function. Dressed in a t-shirt and shorts he should have blended in with the crowd but heat profoundly affected him. He was reddened and wilted and reminding her of a shriveled sapling. She ignored him and led the way, which was always the way they traveled. She walked quickly and he walked slowly. Neither of them speeding up or slowing down to suit the other. The walking dance was reflective of them as a dating pair. They walked apart. She was disgusted with his usual dragging pace and he was annoyed with her failure to slow down so that they might walk together. The relationship had in truth been a series of small arguments for months prior to the trip but the trip was inevitable. She was going to hike the trail, to bury her friend and see her sisters and he refused to be left behind. They had agreed to put off facing the final disintegration until they returned home. The only intimacies they shared were in bed and since they were wordless she

preferred them to conversation. She outpaced him in the crowd and had to wait at the base of the stairs until he re-emerged behind another large group of people.

“You could not walk any slower,” she said.

“No point in walking faster when I didn’t know where the hell you were,” he replied. “Do your sisters know we’re here? We’ve been together 7 years and I’ve never seen them.”

She stopped short which made him stop short. “We might see them at the hotel. It’s one we all used when we first arrived here years ago but unless we walk through Temboche there’s no reason for them to know we are here unless they decide to trek to Everest.”

“Why are we here?” he asked.

“Didn’t you want to come?” she said.

“I wanted to see Nepal. I don’t know why you are here, really,” he said. “You spent some of your childhood here and you never speak of it well.”

“I am going to bury my friend and trek. I’m angry. I’m hurt. I need a very long walk. And we’re taking a guide so I don’t have to think about the details.” she turned away walking faster than necessary hoping to lose him this time.

“Christ,” Alex said as he hefted his pack into a more comfortable position and hurried after her.

A crowd of short people, taxi drivers and guides, pressed against a chain link fence that divided the terminal and the parking lot called to passengers as they stepped outside. The fence bowed from the pressure.

“Jesus,” Alex said. “The hoards.”

“Look for a sign,” Jessie said.

A large hand held board, “Uncia Trekking” designated their driver. Seeking new connections Jessie had found the company on the Internet. She had negotiated a price and itinerary, exchanged e-mails and had wired money to a bank in Nepal all from her laptop. The man holding the sign was a foot shorter and probably half Jessie’s weight. He flowed through a break in the fence along with dozens of other men, took Jessie’s pack, her duffle and then rescued Alex’s from another entrepreneur who was trying to wrestle it away. Then he led the pair to a small car of indeterminate color, model, or make. The bags fit in the trunk. Alex and Jessie barely fit in the backseat.

A dusky creature in baggy clothes stepped in between their driver and the front door and held its hand out. The driver shoved it away, said something ugly and got into the car.

“Tahru,” he muttered turning the car on.

“Sorry?” Jessie said.

“They come from India. They don’t belong here,” he said. “Old ones.”

He noticed that Jessie was trying to fasten her seatbelt. “Not in Nepal,” he said. He seemed quite solid on this point so she set the belt aside. After a bit more screaming at the cars ahead, he launched them into Nepali traffic, which included cars, motorcycles, overloaded scooters, dogs and pedestrians and melded into traffic streams that were manned by participants who were somewhat in agreement about the fact that the roads were divided. Nonetheless the notion of two-way traffic seemed to be more of a custom than a rule. Whenever traffic on their side of the street moved too slowly to suit their

driver he veered into the face of opposing traffic, swerving from time to time to avoid soft targets on the road. They pierced through an array of dusty people, battered and brand new structures, cobbled roads, newly paved paths and barbed wire fencing.

“I’ve never seen so many foreigners,” Jessie said.

“What do you mean?” Alex asked. The driver made him nervous so he welcomed the conversation.

“Nepal used to resist visitors. The men who measured Everest had to do it by triangulating from a mountain in India because they couldn’t get permission to come in.”

“What changed?” Alex asked wincing as they cut in front of an oncoming truck and cut back into their lane just in time.

She shrugged and watched a scooter carrying two adults and two children cut across the street from one sidewalk to another.

“Hillary climbed the mountain,” the driver said shifting into second. “Kathmandu is all the new and all the old together now.” They sped up and buzzed by sidewalk vendors staked on canted cracked sidewalks next to shiny office buildings next to shoddy hovels. Now and again a school, temple or museum cropped up, a presence announced by broad brick stretches that enclosed the prouder structures. They offered a view of the space and splendor that was also Kathmandu but they were set back from the street and patrolled by men in military uniforms. The car did not follow a single path as much as spin through big and small avenues. From time to time the driver turned down alleys that were barely wide enough to accommodate their vehicle. He preferred to accelerate around blind corners and often had to brake and swerve just in time to avoid collisions.

“Good horn, good brakes, good luck,” he laughed at one of these junctures. Dust rose head high in the streets meeting a tangle of phone lines that dipped to face level in certain spots. Blue skies were very far away in Kathmandu. The police were among many who wore facemasks outside.

“Dusty,” the driver said when Alex asked about the masks.

“Hellish,” Alex mumbled the way he did when he was exhausted. A six-foot three-inch sized man stuffed into coach for that long emerges from the last plane extremely cranky and disoriented. If he included the ten-hour layover in Delhi in his calculations, the journey from Las Vegas to Kathmandu had taken thirty-six hours.

“No, it’s something different,” Jessie said no less exhausted or overwhelmed but somewhat used to the sensory disarray that occurred at the beginning of every trip.

“The guy sitting next to me on the plane kept farting curry,” Alex replied, closing his eyes. “My throat is clogging up and I need a shower and a nap.” They darted out of a drive way onto a new boulevard, u-turned into another driveway and finally arrived at their hotel. The exterior was ratty and worn, but even from the street one could see that the inside was cool and well polished.

Jessie paused at the base of the steps to stare at a car across the way.

“What is it?” Alex asked too late for her to hear.

The blonds Jessie had missed at the airport were exiting their taxi, the taller one saw Jessie staring and stared back just as she was eclipsed by a jeep traveling so fast it took out part of the cement wall when it jumped the curb on the turn before dropping back on the street and speeding away. Jessie had time to see the driver, a lean figure was at the wheel was all she would be able to say later on. The woman was spun into the

street and tumbled into the lip of the hotel driveway where she lay still. A bystander rushed in to block the road and the second blond ran to her friend's side and tried to cradle her. Jessie joined them.

“Stop,” she said trying to pull the woman off. “If she’s really hurt, you could touch her wrong,”

“Bitch,” the woman screamed. “Bitch, back off. Get away.”

“Of course,” Jessie said standing and stepping away. She returned to the hotel steps, and sat in the shade with Alex until he convinced her to sit inside. She had drifted to a corner of the lobby by the time the police approached Alex. He found her standing by the door watching the paramedics carry the woman to their vehicle parked on the street. By the time the police arrived both entrances to the lot were blocked.

“She’s arguing with them,” Jessie said to Alex and indeed the woman was screaming at the paramedics as they lifted her friend into the back of their cab. The police finally pulled her away and she then turned and started screaming at them as well.

Traffic had returned to normal speeds by the time the police got to Jessie and Alex. They asked their questions in an air-conditioned hall that felt more like a vast marble vault than a room.

“Do you know her?” a policeman dressed in blue, asked Jessie.

“I saw her at the airport,” Alex answered assuming he meant the victim. “She came with the other.”

“Did we?” Jessie asked. “Is she okay?”

“The other what?” the policeman asked Alex.

“She is awake,” the officer replied folding his notebook closed. “It is a common accident. The drivers, they have no care.”

“She was looking at me,” Jessie said running her hands through wet hair. “On the street, she was looking at me. Can we go?” She stared at the floor and talked as if to herself. The cop nodded. “Please leave me alone,” she said, waving Alex’s away when he tried to guide her towards the elevator. Then she grabbed his arm and changed her tone. “I can’t sit still. I’ll catch up,” she said. “They have a garden here,” she added as if this fact explained her decision.

“Do what you want,” Alex said handing her a key. “Luggage is already upstairs.” She took the key and realized that she must have tranced or erased the amount of time they had spent waiting for the police. “You didn’t answer the cop’s question,” he said to her back.

“She didn’t want me here,” Jessie replied without turning around. She felt sorry for Alex but refused to explain her actions even knowing how angry this would make him. They did not hate each other yet but that day was coming. For her part, she still remembered a time when making him laugh was a success, but she was not trying anymore and she knew it. She wondered if she was ready to bear the cost of her decision but her behavior felt like an aspect out of her control. She had a feeling that she was watching rather than living her life.

It had taken all Alex's restraint not to scream at her at the airport, in the car, or at the hotel. And that business after the accident was weird and horrible. There was probably an explanation but she would die before she would tell him. The woman on the ground cradling her friend had wanted Jessie out of the way. So did he, come to think of it. Her home, her car, her money, her trip, he resented her every time she spoke. His mother had liked her when he had convinced her to visit his family on his birthday. In the four years they had been together they had visited his family twice. After that she would not consider it. He could, she allowed, visit his family but she would not.

"You hate spending time with your family," she had said. "And I don't like them, so why waste the days."

He did not hate his family and more than once he had intended to visit longer but she had a pull he could not buck. Where she went he followed hating his inability to break away. There was an unfair distribution of power between them. He had been finishing his degree and she had been holding down a job when they met so he had moved in with her. He could not find work after graduation and the longer he was without a salary the worse things had become between them. She did not complain about the money but she expected a kind of obedience for her generosity and the longer he remained unemployed the more she stopped trying to understand and the stronger her disdain for him had grown.

In his last months of school when he had finally realized that his degree would offer no jobs and that he was leaping into a post graduate wilderness of nothing to do he discovered that pills could offer him a calm place to stand. They made him steady and sleepy when he needed to retreat and happy when he was down. And once he understood

how to work the system the drugs were easily obtained. He learned how to answer the questions so that every doctor's appointment resulted in an unending array of monthly prescriptions and he was set. Jessie endured his weakness for only so long before she ejected him. Then she left him sitting in an emergency ward babbling paranoid fantasies to strangers, which earned him a bed in a county rehab. There the staff exchanged his clothes for plastic sandals and hospital gowns and weaned him off his prescriptions with liberal barbiturate doses. It took him a while to feel much. Jessie visited him on Sundays and shared his sloppy servings of starchy foods and fresh fruit while he tried to make her take him back. They kept him for two weeks at the end of which Jessie informed him that he still needed a place to stay. Hatred had launched him into recovery, and it had leveraged him through the worst of his loneliness. He had advanced through the months, collected the 30, 60, and 90-day chips and stayed sober. The sanctimonious bitch took him back after four months, after all their friends knew her side of the story. Initially the deal was that he could stay as long as he remained sober. But then he had not found work and the suffering days of failure and the enduring nights of her disdain made his rage fester. He supposed he could leave her. There were others who would take him in until he could find the job that would eventually come his way. But hate he discovered was as addictive as love. And then he starting getting part time jobs teaching English and parity occurred between them, but it was then too that he realized that he had no intention of leaving her until he had fixed the balance between them, righted some of the injustices.

He left the drapes drawn when he got to the room. His body clock was telling him that it was night, not day. It was a good hotel, but by American standards it was still a cheap one. The furnishings were spare and the finishing touches weary. He stripped

down, called down for overnight laundry service and finished the water set out in a pitcher by the bedside. They would be trekking through the city tomorrow. He had been reading about Nepal for months. Jessie did not like to read about the places they visited before she arrived. "I prefer to learn from personal experience," she said when he tried to share his research. Then she had noted how much time he had been spending buying books and reading instead of filling out employment applications which he could not do given that they were about to spend a month on vacation. "Where are you getting the money you aren't spending on rent or utilities?" she had asked. That fight lasted for an hour and resulted in an all night freeze out, which had been a relief. She had slept downstairs with the dogs and he had gotten the bed to himself. He disliked sharing his pillow with a dog's ass all night long anyway. When he could not sleep he found himself staring at his Buddha statue and noticing its flaws. He was afraid to meditate; his quiet space was no longer free of the details of his hatred. He wondered what had happened to the days when being less in control felt like freedom.

She did not hide her infidelities, refused to be ashamed of them. She even suggested that he entertain his own fantasies with other women but he did not have her love of the exotic. All he could do was wait her out and shut up when she returned home smelling of cigarette smoke and a mix of colognes. He had to be careful about prodding her. She could always throw him out again. He had a little leverage. She did not want to live alone. Cherry's death had magnified that fear. It was even possible that Jessie did not have it in her to throw him out again.

Whether she knew it. He would gain control of how miserable she could become. Eventually there would be a reckoning of accounts and all the days spent bent over

because she somehow had stolen his strength would be paid out. Cherry's death was a sudden boon. Though everyone who knew how close the girls had been, not even he had guessed what Cherry's death would do to Jessie. The girls had a shared history they never discussed with anyone else. There were no family pictures in Jessie's things. She kept no records of the people who had made her except for her own birth certificate. Frustrated for a time he finally realized that it was enough that he knew there were gaps and private places he could prod. He did not actually need to know if either of the women had done wrong to take either of them down and now that one was dead, the other was lost.

Their bedroom was cool and clean, the shower glorious. They did not have the water pressure he had dreamed of on the plane and the water was only warm, but the shower was perfect. Instead of dressing he turned the air conditioner up high and lay on the bed naked. The room service menu was in the same drawer as the television remote control. What the hell, a hamburger and fries, macaroni and cheese and a chocolate shake, he was starving.

At first Jessie had the garden to herself. A red brick wall obscured the view of the street and much of the street sounds. Newer than the hotel the bright bricking that contained the garden was crowned with steel spokes. The bricks were unscathed as if the wall had been built yesterday though the building they matched was corroded and crumbling. Pigeons huddled in crevices and crows hunted scraps, knocking one another off the thin ledges that ran beneath the windows of every story. The lawn was a thick mongrel surrounded by squat palms, bushy trees and flowers. Pale azaleas and yellow orchids circled the bases of young trees that had grown tall but had not yet gained mature girth. Since the city view was obscured the cool view of the sky and the shadows cast by the walls brought down the temperature in the yard, though it was still warm.

Tables and chairs set out on the grass were rusted but still serviceable. Jessie took a seat, put her legs up on another chair and closed her eyes. When her wristwatch vibrated, she turned the alarm off and dozed a little longer. When she did open her eyes again she saw two grey figures crouching in the foliage. She thought they were dogs at first but they turned out to be one-horned rhinoceroses frozen in place by some sculpture's whim. The statues reminded her of her dogs and she hoped they were well. The fact that she could only hope they were well worried her, so she closed her eyes again and tried to shut down the shit storm of anxious ideas whistling inside her head that had no business sitting center stage. Alex called her inability to settle "hamstering." She felt snared and frustrated and then finally angry by her own mind's whirring. She did not want to think.

The glass doors behind her slide open as another visitor stepped out into the garden.

“Namaste,” he said taking a chair at a table set between her and the rest of the yard. Too tired for pleasantries, she ignored the greeting. He was older than she was, but not by much, maybe in his forties. He was well pressed, tidily manicured and inserted into a pale linen suit. One side of his face was handsome and whole, but when he turned his head Jessie saw a torn ear and two striations tracking through dark skin that marred his features making the first questions she might have posed the rudest ones. Before long she had mentally placed him in the desert with a scimitar, then in an airport rescuing hostages, then taking part in a bank robbery. He looked angry until he spoke again and then he seemed extremely self-assured which annoyed Jessie and ruined her daydreams.

“You need ice tea after a long trip,” he said in a clipped British accent. Before she could ask, he pointed at the airline tag on the bag she had retained because it contained the box with Cherry’s ashes. Jessie kept them with her whenever possible, because as gruesome as it might have seemed to others, the idea of Cherry’s presence kept the part of her grief that resisted reality at bay. She also wore Cherry’s I.D. bracelet.

A waiter appeared and served the man a lowball glass filled with a healthy slosh. “It’s none of your damned business and you’re drinking scotch. So you’re an ass and a sexist,” she said.

“Adjusting to the altitude is not easy. It can make you irritable and rude,” he said spinning the ice in his drink with his finger.

“Tea without sugar,” she said to the waiter who then toddled off.

“Are you in Nepal only in order to be rude to strangers?” he asked.

“Not only,” she said sitting up. “Did you see the accident?”

“I was upstairs.”

“The driver didn't stop and it's cleaned up, like it never happened. She's not dead and there's no mark on the driveway.” Her voice was rising and so she stopped talking and focused on all the creases on the rhino statues. The artist had wanted to make aging animals. “Tried to help,” she said after a few moments of silence. “Why do people usually come to Nepal?” she asked.

“Tourists, businessmen, poachers and drug runners,” he said. “Fewer hippies than there used to be but more trekkers, mountaineers, and philanthropists. Wealthy Asian and European couples who wish to ride elephants in national parks. We see a lot of travelers from Dubai. Then there are the culture tourists who want to see the sadhus hoping the holy men will give them a blessing that they cannot get at home,” he said. “And then everyone wants to see the ghats where the quaint natives burn bodies and beg for rupees.”

“You don't approve of tourists,” she said.

“Oh, I don't care, but unless you live in a country you cannot value what you see,” he said.

“I don't know what squatting by the dirty river in an orange sari for months at a time teaches you, but I get your point,” she said. The waiter arrived with the pitcher and a second scotch. Joining Jessie at her table the man waved the waiter away and served her. She checked her watch again, then emptied the contents of a pill holder into her hands and swallowed them with her tea.

“The papers said that Kathmandu was in the middle of a revolt a few days ago,” she said. They told us, in-flight, that Maoist demonstrators had shut down traffic. Then they told us that demonstrators were letting tourists through and by the time we arrived in

India we were told that the Maoists would be dispersed by the time we landed,” she said.
“We get here and to my dismay I see no charred remains.”

“Revolutions are not what they once were here,” the man said. “This one was a small temper tantrum. The Maoists bus people in from the countryside to walk the streets in order to annoy the president who has in fact broken the law,” he waved a hand at the wall. “Then they disperse.”

“What law did he break?”

“He promised to leave office and he is now refusing to go.”

Jessie could see through the glass doors into the dining room and allowed herself to be distracted. The staff dressed in white and black uniforms tended customers dressed in floral prints. The staff all looked very young and the customers all looked old. She refocused and took the man’s drink from his hands and finished half of it before handing it back.

“I am American, but I am not a tourist,” she said. “My sisters live here. My father built a school and a temple, up in the mountains, by the time he died. The village loved him and loves my sisters.”

“You don’t contribute,” he asked.

“My sisters and I don’t love each other,” she replied. “My father and I hated each other.” She gulped the rest of the scotch and set the glass down hard against the tabletop and then knocked it against the table a couple of times. “Why are you here?”

“I am a trader. Anything you want moved back and forth I can get for you or get to you. My brother and I have a company and offices all through this part of the world,” he said.

“My boyfriend says that that poachers and drug runners in places like Nepal and India like to call themselves traders,” Jessie said.

“Americans tend to be our best customers,” he said.

“So you’re a criminal who does not discriminate,” she said. “You’ll sell to anybody.”

“You’re really very good at being really rude,” he said.

“I’ll buy you another drink,” she said. “We’ll toast the rhinoceroses, indoor plumbing, families, kids and friends. A blood oath,” The sunlight now angled in so that the animals’ happy faces were highlighted reminding Jessie more of pets than wildlife.

“I hope your buffaloes die of diarrhea,” he said taking the glass from her hand.

“I hope your sons are as ugly as frogs,” she replied.

“Nepalese curses all around then.” He laughed and ran his hand through his hair. “It’s hot out here,” he said. “Why don’t you have the drink sent to my room? We’ll work on your manners in private.”

He said his name was Amal. The business suit hid a rugged body the kind one gets from labor rather than exercise. The shirt also covered a scar on his shoulder that matched those on his face.

The first time he fingered her until she came and then they fucked. Then he rolled away and she pulled the sheets off the bed so they could feel the air conditioner working. “Wait a bit,” he said when Jessie started to retrieve her clothes. “Your boyfriend will not be missing you so soon.” She dropped the clothing and went to the window. She had not yet seen the city from a proper view.

“Don’t open them,” he said unnecessarily. The city was cloaked in an airy brown swill. The dirty sky engulfed the valley and intensified the sense of sheer density of the city below. Though Jessie could see to the city limits her eyes quickly got lost in the number of bodies and buildings one had to cover before you reached a calming glimpse of the farmland that once owned Nepal. Now it existed at the far urban edges of Kathmandu and was rapidly browning out.

He came up behind her and pressed her against the glass. “Does your boyfriend know that you can’t be trusted?”

“I don’t ask,” Jessie replied, omitting the fact that she did not ask because then he would know for certain that she did not care. “There’s a woman out there burning a candle in a hibachi,” she said as he grabbed her and turned her around. He was hard and she was already wet from the first time. She shoved him back and looked down. The plump old lady trailed a small dog. He tried to pin her down and she pushed back. Outside the lady hugged the dog and picked it up so that she could sit with it in her lap. A troupe of boys on bicycles pedaled by, circling a car that had darted out of a driveway.

Men in pairs and women walking under umbrellas skirted one another on the street. Ravens were nesting in the hotel windowsills and across the street beggars were harassing a tourist who had not known enough to keep his money hidden. The park was a lush affair surrounded by high walls that completely separated it from the dragging down reality of the streets outside.

She fought him when he tried to enter her again and the thing turned into a fight. He hit her in the face hard enough that she would have to explain the bruises later on. After it was done he released her and found his clothes. He tossed them on the bed and sorted out his shirt.

“I can’t breathe,” she whispered. When she returned to her room she realized that she had lost Cherry’s bracelet.

2

They decided to spend a day in Kathmandu. Jessie disliked crowds and cities, and shopping, but it had been so long since she had seen the city that it was almost brand new to her. To avoid bartering for taxis they hired a city guide from the agency that was supplying their Sherpas.

As was the way between them Jessie dressed quickly and Alex lagged. She donned what Alex referred to as her Jane Goodall outfit; all weather pants, a Sunblock shirt, a big brimmed hat and the blackest sunglasses she could find in the market across the street from the hotel.

As per his habit Alex did not start to prepare until Jessie had dressed. Once he was in gear he could not find what he wanted to wear although as was his want when they traveled he had obsessively packed and repacked his bags so that he knew at any given time exactly where every item was stored.

“You make fun of me and my duffle bag and my one change of clothes,” Jessie said, watching him paw through his bag seeking socks.

“Because it’s a chaotic hell hole your bag,” Alex said tossing one sock onto the bed and stuffing a plastic bag into a side pocket before tearing into his luggage again. “Do you know where your necklace is?” Jessie had a dragon piece she liked to wear when they traveled. She would lose more things as the trip continued, items that only mattered to her, but that she regularly lost track of nonetheless.

“No, but I am ready to go,” she said.

“And ready to say, I told you so,” he replied.

“Well sure, it’s the prize for being first.” She stood by the door as if they might be ready to leave, but realizing that she had been dreaming she sat down on the bed which reminded her to grab her watch and her pills.

“What the hell are those, anyway?” Alex asked when she pocketed the bottle.

“Supplements. Aspirin.” She touched her face where it was still tender. It had been a long time since she had been hit but she remembered the drill from childhood. The damage could be explained with the story of a fall on the steps if Alex wanted a story rather than an explanation that in truth usually eluded her. She had a superstition that the day he could trust her entirely was the day she might vanish for good, but that conversation would lead nowhere, so she kept her thoughts to herself.

A half an hour later Alex was ready. They waited for their ride in a lobby amidst tall statues of Tibetan gods and brass replicas of royal scepters. Alex sat on his luggage and watched a crowd of Japanese tourists that flooded the room while Jessie read tourist pamphlets. When that crowd finally filtered out and climbed into a bus Jessie who had wandered nearer the front door watched the bus pull away to reveal Amal slipping into the passenger side of a jeep. He seemed to see and then looked away. On the other side of this vehicle a small man standing next to a rusted hatchback waved a baseball cap at her.

“Take you to Durbar Square,” he said as she and Alex took their seats.

“Madam!” A desk clerk hailed them and ran over. “This is for you, Madam,” he said handing it through the window.

“What is it?” Alex asked as she opened the sealed envelope.

“It’s from my sister,” Jessie said. She crumpled the note and tossed it away as the car turned out of the lot. “She and Gabby will see us when we get to Temboche.”

“How do they know you’re here?” Alex asked watching the paper bounce away.

“They were here yesterday,” she replied feeling like a liar and a child as she tucked all the necessary explanations out of sight.

“You didn’t introduce us?” he asked.

“You’ll meet them,” she said hiding away by looking out at the street.

“I could have met them then,” he said.

“Sorry,” she replied. “I couldn’t.”

The ride was slower this time, the pace dragged down because the roads to the temples were narrow and cars, bicycles, and foot traffic shared the same lanes. Horns honked, bike bells rang to no avail as vehicles and people edged one another out of position on the way to the city’s ancient center. Cars and trucks slowly pressed through a river of bodies and streams of bicycles that parted often enough to allow them to pass. Women with umbrellas used them to create space. Men brushed by fast and hard. Their driver shifted in behind a truck full of chickens trapped in stacked cages, which Jessie tried to ignore.

“Cake shop,” the driver pointed it out. “American food,” another shop. More masked faces and no traffic lights. The stores were fronted with roll-up doors and rested on raised stalls that kept the proprietors out of the dirt. The smells of the city began to become shifting entities. Spices Jessie could not name and a sweetish sour smell of rotting garbage traveled on the kicked up dust at first. Eucalyptus bushes and Jacaranda trees in were full lavender bloom half way in and after a while pine trees began to appear emitting a powerful scent that cut through a heavy saffron tone that started to dominate at the end of their drive. An hour later they wheeled into a broad dusty space and parked

just outside Durbar's gates. Vendors recognizing Americans crowded them as they got out of the car.

"Keep walking," the driver advised. They tried but within a few feet the couple was encircled with women, men and children trying to hand them articles to buy.

"Keep your hands in your pockets. Don't look at anyone and keep moving," Jessie said to Alex who was looking everyone in the eyes.

"1.5 million people in Kathmandu," the driver said as he funneled them through the crowd.

"Are they all souvenir sellers?" Alex asked.

"They don't make things in Kathmandu, they trade them," the driver said as he pushed them towards the Durbar Square entrance. Jessie paid him half the fare and he agreed to wait for them by the car that he had tucked into a sun blasted narrow beside the gate.

"I can't imagine sitting in this heat," Alex said as the driver hopped onto the hood of his vehicle. Two other men joined him there and they began to talk.

"Do you get the feeling that every native knows every other native in Kathmandu?" Alex asked.

"That's the paranoia of the outsider taking hold," Jessie replied. "Hurry up before someone else closes in on us." She shunted him towards the ticket taker cart where a man who was plump the way a tomato gets, fingered three hundred rupees from her hand.

"All day," he said sliding two tickets toward her. The press of capitalism seemed to ease up once they passed the through gates or so they thought until they saw young men hiding from the sun in the higher temple tiers stand and head their way.

Alex's policy was to fend off offers by yelling. Jessie's was to say, 'No', and look up at the buildings. The plaza was a mess of multiple tiered, dark-eyed temples. Gods and kings stared out from the ledges threatening pedestrians with weapons, fangs and tusks. More like tapestries than simply buildings each façade and rooftop, dormer, and doorway was decorated with intricate carvings of hybrid creatures gazing down. From some doorways rows of carved elephants walked down royal steps towards the street.

"This was once the center of the town. Everything important happened here," Jessie said.

"That hasn't changed," Alex said. "There're just no kings here today. I do want to consider coming back as this fellow however." He pointed to a relief in a wall. The figure wore clothing made of skulls, had a crown on fire, and held six weapons in six hands."

"Kalbhairav, the god of destruction," Jessie said. "The statue is supposed to be a lie detector."

"Okay, in the name of Kalbhairav. How old were you when you first came here?" Alex asked.

"Twelve. My father arrived just after the Vietnam War ended and began to spend his money in Dinboche."

"Why?"

"Guilt."

"For what he did in the war?"

"My father was administration. He didn't fight. He was guilty of being an asshole to us. And he fixed that by remodeling a village. He also liked that he could do whatever he wanted here good or bad."

Jessie stopped in front of a museum that had once been a palace. It watched them with fifty-five shuttered eyes. Two human guards clutching guns sagged at their posts in the battering heat. To their left carved karma sutra figures crawled up the columns of the building. Young men too skinny for their clothes leaned against these and smoked. Next to them a monkey god bared his chest to an orange gate and a goddess, wearing a necklace of skulls stuck her tongue out. Growling stone dogs or lions with manes shaped like shogun helmets also guarded the entrance.

“Why do you need all this at your front door?” Jessie asked.

“What did your father fix?” Alex asked.

“He fixed it so that no one would believe us,” she replied.

A garden peeped out from behind the stone sentinels, a cool sanctuary thriving in the dust and the beating heat. Jessie had a memory of being dragged behind her parents through these streets. Her father had been pissed and her mother had been trying to calm him down. Jessie had been falling behind hoping to get lost in the crowd. She did not remember feeling as hot then as she did now. The heat infiltrated her. She pulled a bottle of water from her pack and resisted the urge to pour it over her head. She shared it with Alex who swallowed more than half before handing it back. In defense of the sun he had decided on a black visor and dark wraparound sunglasses that made him look like a communist.

“Can we go inside?” Alex asked. Jessie shook her head. “It’s the home of a living goddess; a little girl. She only leaves the temple riding in a golden chair until the day she gets her period.”

“How do they know that she is a goddess?” Alex squinted as the combination of a breeze and a passing group raised dust.

“There are questions and tests. It is a Vedic ritual from scripture. And then one day 108 cows and goats are killed in her honor and she has to spend the night with their severed heads to show courage. Prove her divinity.”

“Jesus,” Alex said.

An image of an old man falling through a glass door forced itself center stage in Jessie’s mind. A pool of blood. A figure finally stilled.

“They live good lives,” Jessie said, blood, scratches and shards of glass sticking to the doorframe battling with the present for pre-eminence. “She has to be perfectly healthy and perfectly beautiful and perfectly serene.”

“So no undershot jaws, no acne scars. No runts or cripples and no drama queens.” Alex said. “And no black eyes.”

“She should be brave, but not a fighter. She should have dainty hands and black hair.” Jessie stopped and shrugged.

“Also totally obedient, I’d bet,” Alex said.

“Her options because she’s a girl are limited anyway and it’s an honor for her and her family,” Jessie said.

Alex moved closer to the gate to read the inscriptions on plaques set into the walls at eye level. The guards’ eyes flicked over to him and away.

“What happens when she has her period?” Alex asked.

“They replace her,” Jessie said. “But they give her a place to go after if she does her job. If she fails, if she is shown to be impure they scar her, tear her piercings and

throw her away.” Talking and thinking about girls made Jessie take note. She realized that there were no girls in the crowd around them. There were no young women in fact with the exception of those who were part of a pale-faced group being steered through the temple site. Except for the tourists there were only boys and men but no brown girls or ladies sitting by their wares or wandering through the square. The dark buildings hunkered over a distinctly male presence, which began to feel unfriendly once Jessie paid attention.

“She is perfect and then nothing,” Alex said.

“The king kisses her feet when he visits,” Jessie said. A wave of tiredness washed over her as jet lag, allergies and some weird lethargy she could not shake drained her reserves and the more tired she felt the less she was able to focus; a million winding uncensored sets of ideas crashing around in her head kept drawing Jessie out of the present making where she and Alex stood less real than the places and people that were taking place in her mind. “She will have everything she wants. She will have servants and friends who give her whatever she wants whenever she asks.”

“They lock her up,” Alex said.

“My sisters and I used to pretend we had been picked,” Jessie said as she headed off into the center of the square. As a distraction she took out her camera and began snapping shots of anything and everything without deference to importance or composition. Hoping to stop thinking about the past that was battering its way into the present she kept them moving, edging just far enough ahead of Alex so that he stopped speaking to her.

She headed through alleys and passed buildings that were not set in synchronous patterns. They moved from one lane to another and kept getting lost in narrow places and had to keep finding their way back to the square center.

“Knock it off,” Alex finally said taking his stand in front of a shrine where a dancing Krishna decorated the door. Beneath Krishna a dancing monkey peered out from his frozen position in a recess between two solid square figures. Sitting next to the monkey two teen-agers split lunch and shared a bottle of orange *Fanta*. Alex took his hat off, wiped his forehead and looked for a place to sit. He found a spot in front of a stone image of Ganesha, his elephant head posed beneath a replica of an Ashok tree. “How long has it been since you’ve seen your sisters,” Alex asked putting his hat back on and squatting in the tree’s shadow.

“Twenty years for one, ten for the other,” Jessie said. Refusing to join him she took her position several yards away facing a wide square where thousands of pots of all sizes were drying in the sun. Statues of Hindu gods and a multitude of Buddhas were set in between the pots. Jessie fixated on their details noting the difference between one nose and another gauging on whether some fingertips were more gracefully carved than others.

“Why?”

“I broke a rule when I told someone what Dad had done and then I went nuts. I started drinking young and it went messy so they sent me away,” Jessie replied picking up a replica of Shiva and his wife. “She is supposed to rescue him from madness,” Jessie said.

“No one writes?” Alex asked barely turning his head to see what she held.

“No one does,” Jessie said. When the vendor approached she waved him away and put the statue back. The vendor picked it up as well as another and offered them for the same price.

“What the hell happened, exactly?” Alex asked contravening her impulse and agreeing to the sale.

“You already asked,” Jessie replied.

“I am hoping you’ll tell me.” He touched his face. “Can we get out of the damn sun?”

“In here,” she said entering a corridor decorated by a row of Vishnu’s, which led to another incarnation of the monkey-god and the skull goddess who now threatened from the entrance to what was an old palace pool, according to the plaque at the gate. The pool was popular and many tourists circled it as they ogled the massive stone cobras protecting its depths. The snakes’ bellies were golden and their hoods fully extended. One was stationed at the front of the pool and the other lay outstretched in the center of a bright green puddle at the pool’s deepest point.

Some stepped down into the pools depths as far as they dared. Where the concrete was still moist the surface was green and slick. Alex and Jessie broke apart because he wanted to look at the prayer wheels and inscriptions on the walls and she preferred to investigate the pool. Taking snapshots and backing up without looking she bumped into a stone corner. It stabbed a bruised rib. The pain surprised her. Her knees buckled and she sat down hard on the brick floor nearly dropping the camera. Angry at how bad the first thump and falling down hurt she closed her eyes and tried to ride out it out.

“You should be sorrier and you should go home,” a voice whispered to her just before she felt herself being shifted off the edge of the pool and pitched to the bottom. She dropped through several memories on her way down including broken glass and red puddles, and wondered at herself trailing behind the past instead of being ahead of it. When she hit ground after she got her breath she rolled over and vomited up nothing.

A hand touched her at the elbow. She looked up to see a young Nepali man who had lightly touched her and then quickly moved back as if he had been rude.

“Are you well, Miss?” he asked. He was dressed western style, blue jeans and a red checked shirt.

“Someone pushed me,” she said.

“What, Miss?”

“He said I should be sorrier,” she said.

“Are you hurt?” He said seemingly conflicted between helping her and keeping a polite distance.

She shook her head. “No.”

“You have taken a huge tumble into a sacred pool,” he said gesturing to the serpents.

She sat up and he stepped back. She looked at the great snakes, “If I were a kid I would have liked swimming around a cobra head,” she said.

“Being a child in Kathmandu has its pleasures,” he said. “Are you really alright, Miss?”

“Are you hungry,” Alex yelled from his spot by the gate. The driver stood by him. Jessie started to thank her stranger but he was gone. Propped up in the sun against a coil

of snake at the top of the pool steps she realized that she clutched her camera and that she was not hungry.

“Yes, I am,” she said.

“Let’s see the Thangka Painting School,” Alex said. “Then the driver says there is an Indian restaurant at a place up the road...Boudhanath.”

“The biggest stupa in town,” she said, tired of temples but knowing that she needed to rest and that lunch would be a good reason. She touched her face to assure herself she was sweating. After quickly scanning the area once more for a face she no longer saw, she gathered herself and stood. Then without really knowing why she took her camera and took pictures of everyone in view.

The school was an unassuming structure. If the driver had not pointed it out they would have missed the door altogether. The manager had his spiel down pat. Dressed in a dull yellow button shirt and grey slacks he seemed out of place in his traditional school. Where everyone had rolled up sleeves his were buttoned down. While everyone else’s pants were bunched and wrinkled his were sharply pressed. He led them up a dark stairway through a series of cloistered studios.

They stopped on a floor where a dozen large canvases stretched and tied to wooden frames leaned against the walls. Small men with tiny brushes squatted on the floor in front of the canvasses and worked.

“They began as icons that could be rolled up and easily transported,” their guide said. It is both Hindu and Buddhist. The subjects are mystic diagrams, mandalas.”

He then began telling them about the process of painting. Jessie found herself looking out the window for a face she could recognize. The two men let her go and

continued talking on their own. So she wandered down the lines of painters and paintings. The sketches were in various levels of completion. Some were still in the outline stage and others had already been filled in with an unending variety of color and what looked like strands of gold filigree. The portraits richly detailed, were so considerate of heft and intention that she could see how one could not understand all they were seeing in the pictures without spending hours studying them. None of the students looked up or stopped working when she passed by. Relieved at being delivered from the heat and the crowd outside Jessie suddenly felt the power of an impending headache.

A man older than the rest crouched on the floor and worked on his canvass with an implement the size of an eyeliner brush.

“*Twelve Great Deeds from Buddha’s Life,*” the salesman said.

“How much are they?” Alex asked, standing near a wall where completed works were mounted.

“It depends on size and the skill of the painter.” Our salesman said.

He led them to a table where several paintings were unfurled.

“What is this?” Jessie asked drawn to a huge wheel clasped between the talons and fangs of a happily demon figure. The wheel was divided into sections and filled with a variety of struggling figures.

“*The Wheel of Life,*” The salesman replied stopping to unfurl three more copies.

“The endless cycle of existence in the hands of Yama the god of death.”

Yama looked satisfied with his place in life. The wheel was settled in his lap. On either side of his head outside of the circle stood two Buddha figures also completely at peace themselves. In the center of the wheel the three cardinal sins, the ignorant pig, and

the lustful bird and the angry snake chased each other's tails. While Alex and the salesman talked money Jessie traced the descending and ascending trails of reincarnation.

"Evil in this part of the world is a happy guy," Jessie said.

"Do you believe?" She heard the salesman standing behind her ask.

"I do," she said. "But I am unworthy."

"Some would say that's not for you to decide," he said.

"Sorry?" she replied turning around but he was deep in discussion with Alex as if he had not addressed her at all.

A sintering furnace awaited them. The driver had the car door opened before they exited the square, but the car was just as hot inside as without and opening the windows was neither a practical nor cooling act. Resigned to the heat Jessie settled back, took off her glasses, and stared out at the impacted street. The pedestrians reminded her of paper boats turning the bends in a river. To the left two girls walked arm and arm through the crowd. She fixed on them. They moved as one, just fast enough to keep their dresses from being swept up in the roll of pushcarts bursting through the crowd at regular intervals. Then they dove through a hole in the crowd made when an old woman opened her umbrella. Their swathed figures bobbed in and out of view until they finally drifted out of sight in the currents created by taller people.

"Looks like someone decked you good," Alex said getting his first good look at her face, which had acquired another bruise. The car came to a standstill. The driver waited patiently while the car burped exhaust into traffic.

"Did you see me fall into the pool?" she asked. Fingering her camera strap she came to a place that looked like it had been partially cut.

“No,” he replied.

“It’s not that I don’t care what you think,” she said.

Alex was looking out the window before she finished her sentence. “Is this just going to be a terrible trip,” he asked. “Do I have to be around while you lie to me whenever you feel like it. At least at home there was more space between us.”

“You want a reward for cleaning up.”

“You want pay back for putting up with me until I got sober. But let’s remember that everybody has trouble staying clean.” They stopped talking but kept walking both thinking about the fact that they now both had jobs and school and different groups of friends. She liked sports but could not stand watching them. He bet on basketball and baseball games and watched the kinds of movies that bored her. He worked evenings and she worked days and was often asleep when he returned. They lived in her house, drove her car and waited for him to begin to make a real living.

“I miss Cherry everyday,” she said hoping to soften both the bad mood. Seeing an opportunity the driver hammered his horn and forced space between two cyclists. Dogs trained by circumstances hemmed the roads and dove into stores rather than risk the crush.

“You miss her all by yourself. I am not allowed to help,” Alex said.

“You didn’t like her,” Jessie replied.

“I put up with her, for you. There was no room for anyone else between the two of you,” he tucked his legs in and sat up straighter. The sun outside splayed across the road, no thin directing streams of light in this part of the world, just a blazing disparate

glow. In defense Alex located his glasses and put them back on. “What did the two of you have on one another?” he asked pushing the bridge up on his nose.

“My mother hated her too,” Jessie said. “She said that I could’ve done better.”

“That makes me like your mother a little,” he said.

“The ghats come first on the way,” the driver said breaking into the conversation. Jessie had to phrase her questions several ways before she understood what he meant.

The river stop was on the way to Boudhanath.

“What are the ghats?” Alex asked.

“The steps that lead to the river and cremation,” Jessie replied, closing her eyes and thinking of snakes and kings and monkey gods and endless circles. “When Cherry was a kid she wore pale blue shorts in summer and salmon *Keds* because that was as close to orange as she could find. She wore her hair in braids because it was curly and she hated it like I hated my straight hair. We like Abba songs and hula-hoops. She liked sailing, but hated being dirty. I hated boats, but loved sailing with her. We like to read. A rocking tide meant we slept on deck cause we’d get sick below. And she knew my father. And she made her parents take me in when my mother threw me out,” she said. “And when her father got sick, she called me. And when mine died we folded laundry and watched MTV together because I wouldn’t go to see him buried and she knew why.”

They stopped before a long dirty driveway that was protected by a thick chain. A scraggly lawn bordered the pitted drive. And a hint of moisture rising off the grass cut through the dust but also and stung their eyes.

Alex tapped on the window as he looked out. “You could have told me some of that while she was still around,” Alex said.

“None of your business to like my friends or not,” Jessie replied as the driver opened a back door for them.

“I sometimes wish that I had anyone else but you,” he said, before getting out.

The driver took them in piercing the cluster of vendors waving handfuls of jewelry. But they kept moving until through the pack until only two women who as it turned out were having a slow day trailed them. A working pair they kept pace while they displayed their wares exchanging one set of necklaces for another. Their final offerings were bunches of necklaces. Jessie, who had a weakness for charms, dropped back to let Alex, who was the better bargainer, take the heat. She watched him barter with the women for their pleasure as much as his. Though they were both dressed in saris they had no trouble keeping up with the guy who was walking just a little faster than he had to.

“Three thousand rupees,” the younger woman insisted trying to drop a bright white mandala into Sam’s hand. He made fists and shoved them into his pockets.

“I don’t need them,” he said shaking his head but slowing a little to indicate that maybe he did.

“This one is beautiful, you see.” She spun it so that he could see both sides and admire the craftsmanship. A patterned turquoise circle with an ivory background radiated to the edges around the mandala on one side and Buddha’s eyes stared out from the other.

“But three thousand is too much,” Alex said. He started to walk faster again, but she kept his pace walking just in front just barely fast enough to keep from hindering his progress.

“One for a thousand rupees,” she said, splaying three necklaces across her palm so that they glittered in the sunshine.

“Three for a thousand,” the second woman said. Her competitor snapped at her in another language and she shrugged. “It has been a bad day,” she replied in English. The first woman was fatter than the second. Her sari exposed happy rolls at her waistline. She dug into a pocket and pulled out three more. “These are not like those you will find once you leave, she said. “These three for a thousand.”

“Two for a thousand,” said the other. The women started yelling at one another until Alex resolved the issue by accepting both offers. Once those transactions were completed they vanished for a moment and returned with dragon shaped charms. But by then they had all reached the steps into the temples where the women would not sell their wares. Jessie dropped back to buy one of the dragons. Half way up the steps Alex took a mandala from the tangle in his hand and gave it to Jessie.

“What for?” she asked.

“I don’t know anyone who needs a good luck charm more,” he said. “And I’m sorry for the things I just said.” Then he passed between two great foundering structures and headed down towards the ghats.

3

The entrance to the river was a series of crumbling steps passing through towers so old and stressed they seemed to weep. The big ones shuttered against interlopers, were square. Some towers were white and some were brightly painted or had been once. The base structures supported multiple tiered tops that spread out like Chinese pagodas and were topped by rows of arches or steel squares that encompassed great porches. Many of the buildings were topped with a golden cones or yellow steeples. Red houses were narrower and supported wide drooping eaves. Where stone and cement filling had deteriorated to the point of destabilization steel grills and screens were inserted. Rust stains running from the windows and the rooftops demonstrated where large patches of cement had been shifted away by runoff. Older shrines some as large as elephants and some as small as men were backed up against the larger structures or were formed into separate rows so perfectly aligned that if you stood in the window of one you could see a mile down the river through the windows. There were stairs everywhere leading from floor to floor or from building to building. Incuts in the hillsides dropped down to the riverbank and led to lone huts in which statues, pyres and sadhus lived. Cement steps, or ghats, led from the buildings and offered access to platforms and from there one could walk down to the river's edge and wade in the dark green mire. Dark turgid water lazily rolled past carrying material and human waste. As Jessie stepped through the crumbling massifs and heading downwards she had the feeling of gently falling down the aisle towards the altars, which necessarily led one to the river where all endings dwelled.

“Bagmati,” their driver named the river.

“The Bagmati joins the Ganges,” Jessie said. “And like the Ganges it is holy and it is filthy.” She knelt and touched the ground and then put her hands together before standing.

Visitors lounged on temple steps and strolled along the river’s edge where bright green foliage poked out from cracks and rescued the Bagmati from a totally despairing tone. A rectangular board divested of its burden rested at a slant at the water’s edge. Shaded square pedestals were set at regular intervals in between the steps at the river’s edge. A boy dressed in bright a green t-shirt with the words “Death Note” on it stood ankle deep in the muck trolling the river with a bright blue line. A younger boy dressed in Salvation Army castoffs and blue Crocs stood three steps above him and watched intently.

“What is he doing?” Alex asked.

“The bodies are adorned with jewelry before they are dropped in the river,” the driver said. “They are trying to retrieve it.”

“And this doesn’t make people angry?” Alex asked.

“Why should something that can be put to use stay in the river?” the driver replied. He led them across an ugly bridge to the side of the river ruled by rows of small shrines. The second bank was higher than the first and so they were offered a better view of the group of men circled around a pallet on which rested a body covered with pink blankets and strings of bright orange flowers.

It was too hot for suits so all were dressed in jeans and t-shirts. They stood with their hands on their pockets talking and glancing at their watches now and again as if they had a schedule to keep but were not too worried if someone else had been delayed. Some

carried umbrellas and they all seemed as relaxed as men hanging around a coffee shop during a mid-morning break.

“What are they waiting for?” Alex asked.

“Brahmin,” the driver explained. “Priest.”

“Can I take pictures?” Alex asked already looking through his lens.

“Sure.” The guide did not hesitate. The officiator a man in baggy grey slacks and a cotton pullover finally strolled in followed by a boy carrying more flowers. The man addressed the mourners and gave the body its last rites. Then the group set the corpse on a pedestal and covered it with wood. One man torched the pile. The wood was dense and piled high. It took several moments before the flames grew mature enough to swallow the bottom part of the pyre. Hot flames burning high on a hot day wormed their way up a thick pile thick of grey pilings. Bright orange streams and curling black trails jetted straight up hit the metal awning and shifted towards the water.

“Who will move the body?” Alex asked.

“There are some to do that only,” the guide said. “It is holy and dirty to touch the body.” He reminded Jessie of the ashes in her bags. She would not pick them up so they had been mailed. Alex had opened the package because she would not. Then she could not look at the urn, and then she could not leave it out in the open but she also could not stow it away for long. At home she found herself constantly taking it out and shifting it around. She had come to Nepal in part to rid herself of it but was not certain she could and now wondered if the river should take her burden, then knew she had no intention of releasing herself that way yet.

“Is burning the only kind of funeral, here?” Alex asked.

“Sometimes bury,” the guide said. “And in the mountains,” he hesitated with the word. “Jhator.”

“Sky burial,” Jessie said. “The body is cut up for the birds and then the bones are destroyed so no one will misuse them in some weird ritual.

“Geez,” Alex said. “I could not. Could you? Even if you thought it was necessary?”

“I could not,” Jessie said. “But you might surprise yourself one day.” She walked closer towards the place where the boy still trolled for loot. Wet trash circled around his legs and he moved gingerly as if feeling through debris some of which floated.

“Our holiest Hindu temple,” the guide said pointing. Jessie looked up at the slumping cement figures across the riverbank. The guide spoke the temple’s name but her attention was flitting from sight to sight and she did not catch it. Tourists passed by the burning body as if it was just another building. They were on their way to lunch or trying to get snaps of themselves sitting with sadhus, men who pursued the spiritual life.

The rows of shrines behind them were gothic chambers with narrow arches. Stone holders on each wall held slouching candles. Stone figurines resting inside niches in the walls stared at one another across the candles. Perverted cherubs bulged from the overhead facades and peered downward. The heat of the day warmed the steps and the stupas creating overly hot spaces but Jessie noticed that she was not sweating and was not thirsty. Maybe she was a little dizzy. Unable to concentrate on any one item for long her attention drifted from object to object her interest fading as soon as she focused on a subject.

“What?” Alex asked. She realized he had asked more than once and also realized she had been staring at him.

“What, what?”

“What do you need?” There was moment of disjuncture and as if someone had skipped ahead in a movie and suddenly Alex seemed to be pointing at something that she was supposed to see. He finally grabbed her arm.

“What?” She tried to shake him off.

“You’ll be walking on them in a minute,” he said.

“What are you talking about?” She saw them just before stepping on the foot of the man sitting cross-legged at her feet. The sadhu smiled at her benignly and looked at her glossy eyed. The reek of hash accompanied the view and she thought she might be a little high herself.

“Namaste,” she muttered.

“Namaste, lady,” he replied which made her take a second look. “Lady,” was an unusual Nepali reply, it was a sign of the tourist trade reshaping the locals.

“You may take pictures,” the guide said pointing at the sadhus. She took a broader view and realized there were three very dusty brown skinned old men sitting cross-legged in and around a stone arch. She would have stumbled into their midst had Alex not grabbed her by the arm. They had brought a carpet to keep them off the dirty ground. Next to a folding edge of the fabric sat a silver cup, next to that a golden vase and what looked like a gigantic bright orange cue tip. It leaned against a sunny side of the shelter and emitted a heavy ginger smell. Only one of the men was small enough to perch inside the arch. Coated with chalk he wore the least amount of clothing, an orange length of silk

wound around his waist. His upper arms were caked with red and yellow dust, as was the portion of his face above a length of wispy beard that grew thickly to his chest and was twirled into dreadlocks. His hair was just as long and was rolled into buns that pressed against his cheeks. He had as little physical substance as a stripling and reminded Jessie of a chipmunk though she was not certain whether it was because the beard gave him pouches or because of the way his fingers linked together as if he was cupping a nut. Two bigger but very skinny figures sat on the ground just outside the hut. They were red-skinned and completely clothed in the same orange attire that fell about their bodies like soft summer dresses. One wore a necklace of coins around his neck and the other a medallion that dipped behind a fold of cloth. One had a grey beard and the other an orange one. Both had painted their faces with chalk like their fellow. Alex and Jessie took seats on the carpets in front of them taking care not to touch as this seemed rude. The tallest sadhu put his hand on her arm and spoke.

“He wishes to offer a blessing,” the guide said. The sadhu touched her again, made a gesture and spoke a few words after which she gave him money. He took it, but seem hesitant to let her stand. He grabbed her when she rose which turned out to be an act of rescue. A wave of nausea, took hold and she almost fell on top of the holy man. Alex and the guide dragged her into shade and forced her to drink a salty solution.

“Whole thing,” Alex said when she tried to hand the bottle back.

“It tastes like shit,” she said, then vomited the liquid she had already drunk and handed the bottle back. “No,” she said waving it away. “Stop. What is the gesture they all made when we took their pictures,” she asked the guide.

“Sorry?”

“They held their hands out, cupped them.”

“It is a gesture of submit,” the guide said.

“Giving up?” Alex asked.

“No, giving in to what will be.”

Jessie closed her eyes, then felt someone opening her hand. The sadhu had returned with a gift, a small orange necklace comprised of textured beads, the shape and size of berry pits, tied together with an orange twist. He closed her hand around them and nodded at her without smiling as if this was a charm she needed.

She raised them up to see them better.

“Radaskha beads,” the guide said. “He is being kind.” The guide was disturbed which somehow made her uncomfortable in accepting the gift.

“It’s just sunstroke,” she said and tried to give the beads back but without a word. The old man firmly closed her hands around the beads again and spoke to the guide in another language.

“He says that he cannot help,” The sadhu took her hand again, made another gesture she could not understand and then made one of regret that everyone knows and with that returned to his post.

The ride from the ghats to Boudhanath was along wide paved roads and was as chilling as their first taxi ride. The driver spun the wheel to swerve around a bus making the car bounce onto a curb in time to avoid a head-on. Then they dropped quickly back onto the street. Though even the dogs backed up onto the shop steps to avoid motorcycles using the sidewalks as shortcuts not one pedestrian looked up as traffic brushed by. A cop

in the middle of the street waved a column of cars forward and adjusted a medical facemask when it slipped.

“I have a theory about bad drivers and fatal accidents,” Jessie said.

“Lay it on me,” Alex said wincing as they taxied into oncoming traffic again before moving back into the correct side of the street.

“The fact we are not in control means that we will live. It’s how I get onto airplanes too.” She had been trying to snap shots of the city through the car windows but once they started bulleting through the bigger thoroughfares she had to use both hands to brace.

“Pictures of the car wrecks they showed us in Driver’s Ed. are flashing through my mind,” Alex said with one hand twisting the upper strap and the other wrapped around the seatbelts they were not supposed to use. Bumps in the road made the car buck and wheels screeched as it was forced into several erratic lane changes.

Boudhanath required another guide. Young men stationed just outside the walls that housed the great stupa and its attendant shopping mall inside introduced themselves.

“Some say a great sage is buried beneath it,” the guide said. “It was here before the city was built.”

“Know what Boudhanath means,” Jessie asked Alex, the reader of Nepal facts. She had walked up to the giant, whitewashed stupa.

“Nope, and if you look it up you won’t either. It’s Sanskrit and no one knows,” he said. “In most foreign countries you have to trust what people tell you. In Nepal even the Nepalese can’t be sure. This thing is hugely white.”

Boudhanath Buddha was decorated with long strands of prayer flags. Its steps were cluttered with pots and pots of pretty plastic flowers. A monastery on the south side confronted the massive white structure that was central to a mall that was comprised of shops, restaurants, a painting school and dozens of small stalls. Golden hinds, a gold shield and two royal figures on elephants waited at the gate that allowed egress to the platform directly below the dome. Buddha’s face, asking its eternal question, was painted on all four sides of a golden façade and peered over a massive white dome that led down to the flowered steps. The face was topped with a golden pyramid that supported a gilded canopy and a gilded spire. The eyes were shaded on all four sides by brightly colored drapes that fluttered in the wind creating rolling shadows. Gusts lofted the flag lines creating great wide arcs and rolled through the drapes over Buddha’s eyes making it seem as if the structure breathed. A whitewashed wall separated the stupa from the rest of the mall.

“Every time the wind blows it sends the prayers written on the flags to heaven,” the guide said walking closer to the wall that enclosed the stupa.

“Sixteen sides,” he said resting a hand on the wall. Out of habit Jessie took several pictures of the dogs hanging out in the circle before she began to photograph the people and the stupa itself. One bitch in particular took her interest and despite the warnings about rabies and distemper she began scratching her when it came near. Old enough not to have confidence and young enough to easily roll onto her back the dog accepted her due. And though she did not get up she continued to watch the pair from then on whenever they got close.

The sixteen-sided wall was adorned with frescos and niches. Wheels inside the niches were kept busy. Tourists and monks slowly circled the wall spun the wheels stepping around dogs lying in their paths that were neither inclined nor required to move when humans approached. “A prayer is made every time a wheel is spun,” the guide said as they watched a long line of wishes spinning skyward like seed heads blown off ten thousand dandelions.

The guide nodded and took the lead. He spun a wheel and muttered a mantra so fast that it seemed like one word instead of four. He offered to let Jessie and Alex try. Jessie shook her head and stepped away from the wall. The prayer the guide muttered was written over and over on rocks, walls and sidewalks all over the city.

“Om mani padme hum,” the guide said. “A prayer of well wishing.”

The wind had begun to pick up and was ruffling their hair and clothes. Alex smiled at the Buddha. “Gonna make a circuit before we eat,” he said. He stuck his hand

into the first niche and quickly disappeared around the corner leaving a row of spinning wheels in his wake.

The guide stayed with Jessie. “Excuse me,” he said once Alex had disappeared. “But if you don’t mind what is your and Alex’s relation?”

“He’s my boyfriend, not my son,” Jessie replied.

“I am sorry.” He was mortified. Then he looked the way Alex had gone. “It is better to be certain,” he said.

“You haven’t offended me,” Jessie replied. “Alex will not be offended either.” A line of monks dressed in orange appeared behind them and started working the wheels. A combination of the slow moving dance of hands reaching in and the swell and shifts of orange skirts drifting around their legs in walking rhythm created the impression of a single creature. Moving along like an undulating animal the supplicants had most of the wheels clacking by the time they reached Jessie and her companion. Most of them smiled as us as they moved through without haste. Many of the tourists stopped to watch and if one of them caught a monk’s eye they were invited to step into the line with the monks. And every once in a while an orange skirt would brush the face of a dog without making it stir.

“I could take your picture.” The guide gestured to Jessie to join in.

She shook her head.

“You do not pray?” He sounded slightly sorry and she felt responsible for a failure to perform to his standards.

“I’m not against it,” she replied. “But sometimes I can’t. Maybe that’s what the sadhu meant when he said he couldn’t help.” She pulled the charm out of her pocket and set it on the white wall.

The guide nodded as if he understood.

“I need a restroom,” she said and followed his directions to a stall. It was in an alley just off the main track. When she stepped outside again she was suddenly shoved forward then wrenched backward. Automatically grasping at her pack straps she realized that her assailant was attempting to remove it. She was quickly forced to her knees and felt the straps come off but the waist strap held firm. The attack stopped as quickly as it started and she was aware of a figure running off, but did not look up to see whom it might have been.

She made it back to common ground and sagged to the ground in silence hugging her pack. It was lunchtime. People were grouping around restaurant doors and the smells of curry and strong tea were filtering outward. Tourists grasping plastic shopping bags and queued up. Guides searched the crowds for their people and helped vendors bring out extra stools so that friends might sit and eat together. Jessie was still not hungry but looked forward to sitting alone, just her and Alex as the guides visited friends during mealtimes. She saw her guide.

“Are you alright, Ma’am?” he asked kneeling near but keeping out of touch.

“Day dreaming,” she said. The she realized that she was crying. She waved him off and he left her, returning with a bottle of water. She took it but just held it. So he took it back, opened it and offered it again, but it was not until he drank from it himself and handed it back, that she drank. So he squatted by her and shared the bottle.

“My father brought me here the first time,” he said as she drank. “My father, my two brothers and I came here when I was young. It was on the way to market. We would stop on the way back, say our prayers and rest until it was time to leave. It had fewer visitors then.” Jessie imagined three dusty boys rough housing around the stupa while their weary parent cooled himself in the long shadows cast by Boudhanath’s wall.

“Neither of my parents believed in church until later in life,” Jessie said. “My grandmother took us when we were young. And when we got home my grandfather would make breakfast.”

“Your grandfather did not attend church?”

“He said that in his faith someone needed to stay home and prepare breakfast.”

The guide laughed. “Here, he would have been chided for both avoiding prayers and then for doing his wife’s work. Your father would have been exposed for a failure to provide a decent upbringing.”

“My father was not a decent man,” she said, taking a swig.

“Kindness is not in every father,” the guide said.

“My father’s father was kind, but faithless. Now, I think that my grandfather had an argument with God and could not go to church,” Jessie said. “People in my family remember arguments best.” Jessie set the bottle down. “My stomach hurts. Could we sit in the restaurant until Alex...” She looked at the vast white wall. This think is huge.” she said, referring to the stupa.

The guide looked the way Alex should come. “Your boyfriend has certainly stopped along the way. There are many shops.” He knelt by her side wanting to help but still being careful not to touch her. “Being ill will make the trek to Everest very hard,” he

said returning the charm she had tried to abandon. “The sadhus have a way of seeing all kinds of sickness.”

“It’s just the heat,” she said it without thinking, rejecting the reality that she did not feel well. She yanked on her pack straps, checking them.

According to the books it was not his custom, but the guide put out his hand and helped her up.

The entrance to the restaurant resulted in another series of narrow turning stairways, but finally they were inside a cool white walled Indian restaurant by the time Alex returned. Jessie was enjoying tea and samosas by then. The waiters had seated them by a window facing the stupa. And somehow the heat did not enter the open windows. While enjoying it and the view she saw Alex sauntering into view carrying a small bag.

“Shopping has indeed occurred,” she told the guide who leaned out the window and called out.

After Alex sat down he immediately displayed three brass Ganesh figurines that he had bought for nieces who would not be able to keep them if they offended his Mormon sisters. Each piece had come carefully wrapped and therefore had to be rewrapped before they could be returned to their bags. Jessie examine the biggest. It was a fat bellied elephant man holding a broken tusk in one hand, a snack in another, a shell in the third hand and an object she did not recognize in the fourth.

“The Remover of Obstacles,” she said, handing it back.

“You look flattened,” Alex said, placing the bag at the end of the table.

“I promised my family that I would not come back here,” Jessie said.

“What, when you were twelve?” He picked up the menu and she realized that the waiter and guide were waiting, at a discrete distance, for them to order.

She waved the menu at them until someone took it. “Just pick something,” she said.

“Of course,” the waiter replied and both men retreated.

“We split the planet,” she said to Alex. “They could have here. I could go home.

Alex sighed. “Burying Cherry here is kind of snotty. If Cherry were alive she wouldn’t have come here.”

“No, she liked home. I liked new places.”

“So why are you hell bent on burying her here?” He leaned back in a chair that was too small for such a tall guy. The back hit him too low so he leaned forward again.

“My sisters are going to bury her. They are ordained.”

“Sounds like payback.” She reached for his shopping bag because it was the only thing she could fiddle with on the table. He pulled it away and put in on the floor.

“I had a baby. They gave it away here so they could save my father and sent me to the states to make it all go away.”

“You were twelve?”

“Older. My mother came with me but the whole thing soured her on me. I think she tried to forget it but I wasn’t like her. I began to stay at Cherry’s for longer stretches. Then my mom went through periods when she wanted me near. All hers. Dad came home every once in a while but he left me alone. Only Cherry was angry for me. I only ever told Cherry, so.” She stared outside at one spinning wheel, watched many hands keep it turning. “I’ve never told you either, so.”

“They should have put your father in a deep hole,” Alex said.

Jessie shook her head. “It wasn’t personal. He was a force of nature. It can’t control itself and it can’t be held responsible.”

Alex sighed and looked toward the stupa. The wind was up and the tethered prayer flags were rising, casting shadows against the bright white dome. And as the wind rose the sunlight became a series of extended afternoon angles and spread over the windowsills. “You think if you let go of the pain that you’ll lose Cherry completely,” he said.

He stayed with the flags while Jessie stared at the prayer wheels. The alley where she had been attacked was out of view, but not out of mind.

“You want me to accept what cannot be,” she said. The prayer wheels rolled roughly and often stopped too soon for her liking. She would have liked to see more supplicants, long lines of plaintiffs hoping to make something happen. She wanted every word on every wheel to keep rolling and she wanted to actually see the wind take the words from the flags and send the prayers skyward so she could see for herself what it looked like when promises were fulfilled.

“That’s nuts,” Alex said. To continue to stare at the flags eventually meant staring into the sun. As it dropped it took an angle that now began to cut straight into the room. He had to give up and look at her as they talked.

“When you meet my sisters. It’ll make sense,” she said.

“Are they just like you?”

“They’ll explain,” Jessie said. She felt for the dragon necklace she’d bought on the river and realized that she’d already lost another trinket.

“Explain what.”

“That sometimes its better to let the damage done, ride.”

During lunch they promised one another that they would only talk about the mundane for the next few days. The trip was too tight a space to hold all that she should have said and Alex now said he had his fill of surprising secrets. They were too unskilled in the art of sharing to work out the terms of recovery so they decided to shut up. Jessie kept the facts of the attacks to herself. She had not been hurt. She was going to close her eyes and wish the moments away by refusing to name them. Because she could not fathom finding the explanations Alex might need in order that he feel better she wanted to stop thinking about them. She was tourist; the pack looked valuable and the fall in the pool was an accident. She was happy with those answers and as long as she did not have to defend them, they would do.

They would spend six days trekking to the base camp on Everest and four days hiking back down to Temboche, but they did not know how long their visit to the temple would last. So they packed light figuring they'd rather buy or do without than take too much. They limited themselves to one daypack and one duffle bag apiece separating items into three piles; those the porter would carry, those they would haul and those things they would leave behind. Jessie simply stuffed both her bags until they were full while Alex folded items and used small packets to separate and stow all his items in an orderly fashion. Then they ate in silence and tried to sleep.

She woke in the dark feeling like a total stranger to herself. Looking at her watch, she saw that it was midnight. Nepal had always been her dream of the perfect place, but she had been gone too long. Instead of feeling revived now that she had returned she felt extinguished. Her memories of another home seemed more like scenes from a book she

had read a hundred times rather than her own ideas. Her American history was a script that she wanted to revise and her Nepalese narrative had too many gaps in it to fix. She wanted to shed some weighty shadows but failed to see how if her story kept rewriting itself every time she tried to pin down the details. She turned on the television hoping the small dramas would keep her imagination in hand. In a dozing state she watched a movie about a man being killed for killing a child. She recognized the stars and disliked them both but the drama was simple. It was that or *The Ramayana*, in Hindi. So she flicked back and forth between the two shows unable to stand one or the other for more than a few minutes at a time.

She drifted off near dawn and heard the station turned to static that kept her from sleeping deeply, but that also kept her from dreaming.

She got up at six. Their guide would meet them at nine and she wanted to spend quiet time sitting in front of a coffee cup doing nothing. She peered out the window before she left the room. Pedestrians were already stirring up the dust on the street and the old woman Jessie had seen through another window on another day was already lighting incense. Placing an eight o'clock wake-up call for Alex's sake, she went downstairs leaving him stretched out on top of the sheets, a long figure with cracked feet. Since she guessed that this breakfast would be their last big meal for weeks, she wanted to load up on butter and rolls before they were launched into the land of vegan stews.

She took the stairs. Normal sized elevators made her feel trapped and those in the hotel were as small as bathroom stalls. Each set of steps ended at a landing surrounded by tall windows where one could see clutches of grey-headed pigeons nesting on the ledges. Grey mothers fed pale pushy chicks and none seemed to care when Jessie stopped to

watch. The sky was a cloudless grey shadow offering no sense of space or perspective. It closed in behind the ledges so that looking past the windowsills was much like peering into a diorama. So much seemed staged and unreal.

The dining room had just opened. Under a high white ceiling, waitresses were setting out chaffing dishes and fruit trays on a series of tables that circled the room's central column. Doors and windows leading to the garden were wide open, but visitors were still protected from the street side bustle by the high brick walls and barbed wire. A slim woman with long hair, long fingers, and fine features made Jessie sign a check then left her to serve herself. Coffee and eggs were still being cooked so she busied herself with the rotation toaster and some sad bread slices.

“To your left,” a man said when it was clear that she was looking for the butter.

She fished out three sodden chunks from an icy melt before she looked at the speaker. Amal was also an early riser. She looked away, found and followed a girl passing through with a plate of scrambled eggs, then picked a corner table. Before she could pick up a fork, a quiet graceful girl brought a coffee mug and filled it without asking.

“The cups are small and the coffee will not be what you expect,” Amal said, setting a bowl of oatmeal, with the complements, on the placemat opposite hers. She dropped her hands in her lap and watched while he laced his cereal with butter and brown sugar. Clean and newly shaved he smelled of soap and aftershave mixed with sweat because though the doors were open and the fans were spinning the room was already heating up. Just as he was ready to eat he seemed to notice her paralysis. “They are terrible cold,” he said, pointing his spoon at her eggs. “You should really eat them now.”

“Too dumb to sit straight. Too weak to lift her own fork,” Jessie’s father had once said. He’d been angry at a failure to reply. It was a strategy that saved her time and again from the tunneling effects of regret and reduced her mistakes to sizes she could pretend to erase without examining.

She did not want a scene and because Amal showed no intention of leaving and because she felt that she could not force him to leave without raising a fuss, she sat still and mute pressured into her chair by a fierce sense of shame.

“My boyfriend will be down soon,” she said.

“What will you say to your boyfriend?” He ate heartily. And when he was finished he pulled her uneaten toast to his side of the table and began breaking it into pieces to dip into his coffee. In order to escape Jessie would have to stand without knocking anything over then weave her way through a slow moving herd of diners now circling the food in ever growing numbers. The room had filled up in the time it had taken Amal to eat. Elderly customers carrying fruit bowls and juice cups joined each other at tables reserved for the big groups where they talked about the bus and the guide and the length of their trips. The swell of conversation rolled through the crowd and became one shared event. One woman wearing her hair too big divulged an interest in Asian silks. Another with a bright red bowl cut discussed hunting down a particular kind of Topaz. The men were fatter than the women and seemed to draft in their wives’ wakes. They were nicely dressed men, tan tones, expensive haircuts, thick watches and big rings, and they seated themselves so that they could be near the women but could avoid the shopping talk. Some of the older clients were ordering the waitresses to serve them from

the self-service stations and no one stepped outside where cats were already crawling into the bushes to escape the heat.

Amal touched Jessie's hand. She jerked and pulled her hand away. In truth she was afraid that if she stood he would follow and she had nowhere to head but back to her room. She did not want him knowing her room number and did not know how to leave him behind. Trapped out in the open, she waited.

"My boyfriend will ask where your wife is," Jessie finally replied. Worried that Alex might come Jessie watched the lobby.

"I'll have to say that my wife is home where she should be," Amal said.

"Did I tell you my name?" she asked. Had she at least been that careful?

"You were smart enough not to do that," he said. Dressed to match the crowd he fit in better than she did given her tendency towards early hobo. His shirt was unbuttoned to his chest revealing a link necklace and his sleeves were rolled up to his elbows. A thick silver bracelet overpowered a thin Medical Alert I.D. on his left wrist and it occurred to her that the scar on his face looked like the results of an injury that had healed slowly and that the scar was a connected series.

"Skin cancers," she said. "You don't belong in the sun." His physical failure sickened her and started a series of jolting impression in her mind. Skin on skin, fresh graham cracker crusts cooling in the kitchen, the shock of falling into cold water, the sharp smell of a cleaned kennel and the way a man's hand tasted when it was forced against her face, machines beeping. "What, do you want to say to me?" she asked trying to stay in the present unpleasant as it was, it was better than daydreaming.

“I’m not a bad guy,” he said. “You’ll forget all about it and be in a bedroom with another stranger before the month’s out.”

She touched the prongs of her fork lightly pricking her fingertips. “I got what I deserved, you mean,” she said. First the index finger, then the middle finger, then the ring finger, to the pinky and then back up from the pinky. “I got what I wanted.”

He raised his hands in an imitation of a grown man dealing with an overly excitable woman. “I can’t be responsible for your bad judgment.” Coffee cups, forks and knives clinking against plates and a man trying to figure out how to work the juice machine backed up this impossible conversation she was having. A rising pressure in her ears counseled her to risk running off.

“If I get up and walk away will you leave me alone?” she asked.

He wiped his face with his napkin that he then carefully folded. Then he stood and brushed crumbs off his jeans. “I have to go myself,” he said standing in her way. “There is an equestrian event in town and my wife is an enthusiast.”

Alex was awake and hungry when Jessie returned. He handed her a newspaper that had been left on their step.

“She lived,” he said, pointing to an article about the car accident. “They are hunting the driver, but she will live. They don’t give her name though.”

She crumpled the paper and tossed it away. “You should order here. Room service is better than the buffet,” she said. “And the lobby is too crowded now.”

When the desk clerk called to say that their guide had arrived Jessie hurried from the hotel to the lot keeping her eyes straight ahead. She stood on the steps and fretted

among crowds of tourists heading out all at once while Alex who would not be rushed into the heat of the day waited inside.

“Ma’am.” He stood on the lot below the steps selecting her out by the process of elimination. “Are you Alex and Jessie?” Dumbar would do that for much of the trip defining them as a couple in his unique linguistic fashion. For once Alex took the lead shaking hands and making introductions. A small man named Dahn who for the rest of the trip would smile silently whenever there were women present, tossed their bags into the trunk and climbed into the front passenger seat.

They would fly to the mountains in a propeller plane. The drive to the airport was less stressful as morning traffic was headed in the opposite direction. After paying for the privilege of passing through the airport turnstiles a second time the travelers took a shuttle that winded around the airfield until the driver parked it behind a row of mid-size aircraft. Stewardesses unfolded stepladders and helped cram passengers, mostly men, into seats too small for corn fed human beings and shut the doors. Their plane held twenty and was small enough that Jessie could watch the pilot and copilot twisting knobs and flipping switches. It looked to her as if both men seemed to twist and flip the same knobs back and forth more than once reminding her of toys with knobs and switches that were just for show.

“Is this the only way to Lukla?” Alex asked.

“You can walk. It’ll take weeks or you can fly into one of the most dangerous airports in the world,” Jessie replied.

“Sorry?” Alex asked.

“It’s a steep climb at altitude into a short airport. Bad weather can come and go very quickly, high winds, changing visibility...it’s a party,” she said.

“Many accidents?” he asked.

“I don’t think so many given how awful the conditions are,” Jessie replied.

“And then?” he asked.

She had a bunch of names that meant nothing to him yet. “We will hike to Phakding, then to Namche, to Tenboche, to Pangboche, to Pheriche, to Loboche, to Gorakshep, to Everest Base Camp, back to Gorakshep, up to Kala Patthar at 5545 meters and then back down to Dinboche.”

“If we survive the flight,” he said, trying to make his seat fit.

“You’ll forget everything the but view in a few minutes,” Jessie said, a spark of the past reminding her of many flights before this one.

“It’s all that?” Alex asked.

“If I remember correctly, it’s perfect,” she replied.

It took thirty minutes to get the planes started and then thirty more to get permission to roll onto to the runway. In the meantime, a skinny girl with thick fingers passed around a basket of hard candy. The plan flew into the mountains keeping below the bright white cloud cover and staying lower than the green mountains that gasped at the base of the great rocks. Passengers could feel the plane being shunted by hard winds and see the pilots shifting directions in order to catch the best drafts. Finally they banked across a particularly steep outcrop and climbed to meet the first high peaks that beat back the ground and broke into the sky like gorgeous monsters. Some of the passengers took

snaps with their telephones. Alex clutched a vomit bag and Jessie forgot to take pictures because she did not want to take her eyes off a view that she had forgotten she missed.

They coasted across several villages denoted by clusters of bright green and bright blue rooftops. Forty minutes later the plane dropped and banked before taking a straight line into what looked like a flat blank granite wall. Just before it seemed the plane was going to slam into the rock the craft nosed up and dropped onto a runway so short that the passengers could count the bricks in the wall at the end of the runway. A dusting of claustrophobia hit Jessie as the stewardess fiddled with the latches and she had to resist the urge to force past other passengers blocking her immediate escape. Dumbar was easy to find. He had picked up a brown cowboy hat at the airport that was unlike any other. Jessie tracked its passage as he exited the plane and then lost him. The next time she saw him he had already located the luggage and handed the big pieces to Dahn and was waiting for them to claim their packs. They headed towards a fence bending under the weight of several dozen stick figures all dressed in grey.

“What are they doing?” Jessie asked.

“Porters and guides seeking customers,” Dumbar replied. The sea of entrepreneurs parted when the four passed through, but tourists without guides were politely stopped and gently questioned.

“So many?” Alex asked.

“End of the season. The rains begin next month. There are not so many waiting here at the beginning,” Dumbar replied. The cloud cover was thick and low, but the sun that seemed to burn at a hotter level at altitude, cut through the mist. They all shed their jackets within minutes of leaving the airport. Jessie walked to the edge of the trail and looked down. Lukla was a high peak. Below them in all directions vast green valleys, divided into farmed plots and scrub brush, rolled on. The scrub ran up slanting slopes that

took towards the sky at different levels of steepness. The beginning of the trail cut directly through Lukla. Rows and rows of stores offering the possibility of last minute mountain gear purchases closed in on the group. The custom was to hang the best items from hooks outside the store doors. Youngsters perched on the doorsteps to stop thieves. Irish pubs and American style restaurants advertised on blackboards. Thick-beamed wooded establishments they mostly offered an array of beer. Flags from different countries slanted out from this door or that. Because there were still a few details to verify, Dumbar suggested a final stop for sodas or tea.

“I guess I could eat,” Jessie said remembering her lack of breakfast. Though she was still not hungry she was aware of the amount of energy she was going to need just to acclimate to trekking. The pack was uncomfortable and her heavy-duty hiking boots made her feel like Frankenstein walking. She thought that a balancing intake of some high calorie shakes might improve her mood. She also began to remember all the things she should have done back home. She had neglected to buy medical insurance. The plane tickets were too expensive and she had paid for them twice. She had left town without being sure that half of the wholly borrowed money would be returned. The dogs were with babysitters and she would miss them. The house was in the hands of a friend. What did she know about that friend? She was leaving a job behind for a month. Why did she keep doing that? Would the trip be too hard? Would they have enough money, memory for pictures? All the items on some nebulous “to do” list that she had not attended started swirling in on her like smallish harpies.

They stepped inside a dark block of wood decorated on the inside with posters of the Dali Lama.

“Namaste.” A woman dressed in a t-shirt and shorts took orders from Dumbar who then excused himself as Jessie and Alex settled onto stools.

“Here,” Alex said, handing Jessie a stale *Snickers* and a cup of lemon tea. They sat in silence and ate while a wall clock shaped like a cat marked the time with a leg and a tail.

“Okay then,” Dumbar said upon returning. He tipped his hat to the owner and they hit the road. It first wound through Lukla on paving stones that poked up and out at odd angles as if they had been laid in a hurry. And after they passed onto the mountain trails the walk dipped and became a long series of uneven steps that wound around the hilltops. Within an hour Jessie had fallen three times and banged her knee so badly that she wondered if she had done serious damage. By the third time she fell the men had learned to let her fall as catching her caused her to swear.

“Slowly,” Dumbar said again as she sat on the steps, trying to get a grip. “We have many days to go and we must go slow, not only for this,” he gestured to her knee. “But also for elevation. Taking it slow is best.”

Sighing, Jessie nodded and stood, avoiding the hand he held out. She could hear Cherry, see her lying on a hospital bed, laughing and for once a memory of her friend made her feel better until it made her angry again. “It’s alright,” she said to Dumbar. “I’ll change shoes when we unpack and I’ll be more careful.” Though the foliage did not grow thickly it hid most of the activity going on below in the lowlands. But as they walked the valleys opened up to their left and a sound like buzz saws began to drift towards them. The sounds insistent and patterned got stronger the longer they hiked.

“The monks are practicing horns,” Dumbar explained as three long, ugly notes crawled up from the valley floor.

“Sounds mean,” Jessie said.

“It takes time to learn to make a good sound,” Dumbar said. “You will get used to it.”

“Meaning?” she asked.

“They practice several times a day and sometimes at night,” he replied. They outwalked the sounds of the horns when the roads headed through valleys too rugged to support agriculture or architecture and were passed by children in uniform heading to school and porters carrying impossible loads. The porters were spare figures carrying logs, grain bags and metal sheets, secured with woven baskets and leather straps. They sped passed the trekkers. Boys leading goad herds forced spaces on the path for a while and then for a while there was just the four trekkers, steps carved into the mountainside, sunshine and the kind of space that allowed for all kinds of daydreaming. Dumbar and Dahn, who was carrying their groups’ impossible load, walked ahead and chatted. Moving faster than his companions Dahn often hiked ahead and took the time for a “cuppa” as he called it, or a cigarette while he waited for the others to catch up. Dumbar alternated between talking to Alex and Jessie and talking on the phone taking advantage of the intermittent connections that he said he would lose entirely in a day or so.

“Does everyone have cell phones?” Alex asked.

Dumbar shrugged. “It is a good and bad thing,” he said.

“How is it bad?” Alex asked humping his pack into a better position on his shoulders.

A line of porters leaning against lowered loads shared cigarettes and passed telephones back and forth. Dumbar stepped up and after much conversation secured one for Alex to see. Making sure that Jessie could not see he held the phone out to Alex.

“Chinese porn. It is very popular,” he said then handed the phone back.

“Does your whole family do this work?”

“One sister is married and gone.” He sounded as if she had dropped into a well never to be recovered. Jessie started to ask about it but he seemed disinclined to explain so she stopped. “The other,” he pretended to type, “is learning computers in Kathmandu without a computer. She uses a paper like a keyboard at school.” Jessie looked for Alex and discovered that he was quickly outpacing his team. He seemed anxious to cover as much ground as possible and she was not sure in light of the fact of his speed if he was really aware of the scope of their trip. Head down, hands hooked into his shoulder straps he was hauling ass and turned a corner out of their sight, which displeased Dumbar. “He needs to go slow,” he said to Jessie.

“He has something to prove,” Jessie said. “He will settle and learn to walk slower,” Jessie said, before she stumbled over another step. She then watched Dumbar become torn between concern for the runner in front and the hedgehog in back.

“Brothers?” She asked grabbing a branch to help her balance down from one rocky gap into another. Because she would not be helped Dumbar resisted holding out his hand, but he also refused to move farther from her than an arm’s distance.

“He works in Dubai. I was just talking to him.” He held up his phone.

“Is he married?”

“Oh yes,” This was said as if she had asked if he breathed oxygen.

“You?” The trail leveled and they began to catch up to Alex who had pulled out his pocket camera and looked like he was taking pictures of the ground.

“For nine years. My wife has to live in town now.” All the travel agency’s staff came from the same village. Jessie had the impression that that each had apartments in Kathmandu but lived out of town.

“It’s not good to live in Kathmandu?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “There is work there. There are jobs there but we are at home in the hills.”

“Children?” she asked because knew that Sherpa were proud of their families and that for women children were a sign of complete success.

“No.”

“What does your wife do then?”

“She sells papers, not very many. My sister and I help.”

“Your sister lives with you?”

“She must,” he said. “My mother will not let her come home.” The last bit he said as if he should not say it aloud and already Jessie could see that he wanted to stop but she was not ready yet.

“I have two sisters,” she said sitting down. “I never see them. My mother died last year.” One of the tumbles she had taken had truly offended her knee and she was giving it a rest. She heard the jangling of a deep bell. She stood and tried to locate the sound. Far across the valley a thin brown line pierced the greenery, six yaks were walking in a line on a thin trail. Two boys switched at their behinds when they lagged and just to the left a dog perched on the trail high enough so the heavy group might pass. The yaks disturbed a

flock of crows that disbursed across the valley the way a dandelion loses petals with the wind. Big healthy birds they seemed more excited than annoyed and the sun shimmered off their wings. They flew the length of the valley and then broke into groups seeking another place to settle. As the walk was now passing by another village horns were calling out again.

“That is also not as family should be,” Dumbar said choosing to wait with her instead of catching up to Sam.

“You’re probably right,” Jessie said.

“Do you have children?” Dumbar asked and Jessie realized that he was trying to pull the conversation back onto what he considered solid ground.

“Once,” Jessie replied. “Like you say, not as family should be.”

“The trek will get much harder as we go. And there are many temples along the way,” Dumbar said, looking ahead to where Alex and Dahn for that matter had vanished. “He can not get lost, but he is moving too fast,” Dumbar said, referring to Alex. They heard bells ringing up ahead. “Near noon,” he said. “In two hours we will stop and eat. We will go as far as Namche, today, if we can.” he said, holding out a hand as if to help her up. She waved the offer away. “Go ahead,” she said. “I’ll be close behind.”

He hesitated then seemed to decide that catching up to Alex was more important and dragging her along.

“Are we safe up here?” Jessie asked, since he was about to walk out of sight.

He stopped and seemed unwilling to answer her. It occurred to her that she might have insulted his ability as a guide. “Like bad people, robbers, people who follow you,” she said.

“It’s not the way up here,” he said. “Alex.” It was a question phrased as a statement. When she nodded, he hurried up around a curve.

Grateful for the solitude, Jessie dragged a flat rock under a pine tree and sat down. The men would wait. A huge crow dropped onto a nearby tree shaking a big branch with its weight. It sidled to the edge of the branch it seemed, in order to get a closer look at her.

“How about you?” she asked it. Big enough to threaten a small dog, it was totally unafraid. When she opened her pack to get her camera it became particularly concerned and she realized that it had learned tourists carried food in packs. When she pulled the camera out she saw that the lens cap had fallen off. She focused on the bird and got a couple of pictures before it startled and took off. She tracked it, adjusting the focus so she could get action shots. Landing near a group nesting on another tree, the bird cried at them and they in turn cried back and then they all took off together quickly becoming targets too small to photograph. Since she had time Jessie altered the camera settings in order to view the pictures she had just taken. Flipping through she got to pictures she had not remembered shooting. She had been holding the camera when she had fallen into the pool and must have pressed the shutter button, must have been holding it down in fact. There were a series of shots. Because she had been falling and the camera was on a still shot setting most of the shots were blurred, just fuzzy stone shapes and a little sky, except for two clear shots taken at the end of the series. In them a man and a young woman were standing on the top steps of the pool. He was leading her away and she was resisting. They turned back towards Jessie on the last shot and the result was a fuzzy view of the girl shape, long dark hair and something that looked like a sari and a crisp view of Amal

holding her arm. The pictures gave the attacks purpose. And now that she had said nothing about the two attacks, both linked to the first in the hotel room, and there were three things she should tell someone. Leaving them on the camera meant Alex would see them eventually. She looked at the shots one more time and then deleted them and to cover the act no one else would know about she started shooting at birds again. The crows were back. The flock swung out over the valley and then dipped in one arrowed shape, heading towards the temple below rushing through the pines that commanded the view.

Because cameras only take copies, Jessie eventually stopped shooting and just watched, breathing it all in. The crows, the horns and the bells continued to caw, ring and chime at intervals as if each musician was waiting for his turn and the birds were not frantic and the horns took their time finishing notes and the bells died away only when it was their turn to do so.

Their first view of the higher Himalayas was from such distance that the peaks seemed spectral. White capped teeth poking past the slumbering hillsides they shaded the great valleys below. Clouds moving in and out at a fast pace turned the day from warm and bitter moments several times an hour. Layered clothing was alternately worn or tied around one's waist because the weather turned so fast. Using thin footpaths they trekked ranged across the slanted granite slopes and edged in just below harsh basalt hovering shapes that were impossibly vast. As they ascended the giant faces came into full view, blue-grey massifs composed of stark geometric shapes carved by thundering winds and monsoon seasons that the valleys uninhabitable for months at a time. The sky above the monsters was clean and blue. The villages below were small, scattered like scrub brush and run through by rocky lanes that lead to the prayer wheel or a pile of prayer rocks central to every village. It was expected that everyone who passed would circle them clockwise and chant. The men obliged. Jessie could not.

"The view runs through you," she said sitting on stone steps while the men prayed. The altitude, taking its toll, was already wearing her down. She drank from a bottle that she handed to Alex when he was ready.

"I read that they call Mt. Everest the third pole," he said capping the bottle and handing it back.

"To the natives she is sometimes a goddess and sometimes a place where the goddess lives," Dumbar said leading the way past the rest of their gear that lay on the ground just past a wooden footbridge. Dahn carrying at least three times what everyone else carried had arrived at the lunch stop thirty minutes earlier, had dumped his load and

was already up in the tearoom, three stories up and achieved by climbing three sets of blistered and twisted steps that swayed slightly when they were used.

The teahouse was more of a collection of window frames than a room. The exterior walls were plates of glass framed with thick blond slats. The wall between the kitchen and the dining area and the floorboards were solid, but the roof was also broken into framed glass panels. And through all this glass the high blue sky stared down at the tourists and the bright brilliant sunshine streaked through the top of the room bringing light without warmth.

“What's the name of this place, now?” Alex asked sliding onto a bench after Jessie. This stop was at a fork in the road, entry into a number of places, all bearing names that sounded the same and all ended with the “che” or “ong”.

“Phakding,” Jessie replied reading a sign across the way. Dunbar had led them to the only open establishment in the village. Phakding, two miles long and fifty yards wide, was closed for the summer. The three restaurants before this were boarded up.

“What does Phakding mean?” Alex asked Dunbar, who stared out the window for a moment, then shrugged.

“Must be crazy busy in spring,” Alex said, peering down at the street.

“It's supposed to be raining people then,” a young man said. One of a lanky pair that was demolishing pieces of fried batter that looked like pancakes except they were as thick as three and big enough to overlap their very big plates.

As he dipped it in what looked like apricot jelly, a Nepalese rider mounted on a mountain pony raced around the corner. The horse wheeled around the stony turns like a quarter horse and the boy moved with his mount as if they were one beast. When they

reached the footbridge the illusion was breached when the horse stopped and the boy was thrown forward in his saddle. The boy lost his temper and whipped his mount. The animal tensed against the blows but instead of moving across, it backed up and spun away from the bridge. It tried to wrest free of its rider's grip but the boy had a death grip on the reins and the strength and leverage to fight back when it tried to turn against him.

When forced back to the bridge the horse pranced in front it stepping backwards and twisting against its bridle while its rider stood in his stirrups and leaned over its neck and yelled. Finally both stopped struggling and stood in stalemate.

"They been at that for the better part of an hour," the pancake man said, swallowing a soggy bite.

"Whipping ain't helped," said his companion, who sat before an empty plate.

Jessie's watch began to buzz against her wrist. "Bathroom?" she asked the men.

"Up, up," a sticky fork pointed the way.

Their tearoom sat a little to the side of the rest of the structures that seemed lumped together into one place. It also lay at the bottom of a bunch of spiraling staircases. Bedrooms were achieved via a series of winding steps reminiscent of an Escher print. They rose steeply and turned according to some plan of their own, in several directions at once. Jessie quickly realized that because the buildings were built so close to one another it was not always possible to know which one she wanted even when the old man eating at the base of the lowest step pointed it out. The restroom was three flights up. The bathroom was one right turn and two quick turns left, but not too tightly to the left because then one ended up at a bedroom or back down on the other side of the inn. Jessie missed the proper door twice. A little man on the other side of the building finally led her

to the proper door. She had to climb knee-high tall steps several times, not an easy feat after the first day of hiking. She had to stop several times on her way up and down. They had arrived in early afternoon soon enough to eat and early enough in the day to keep climbing, but to Jessie's relief, Dumbar had judged his clients to be in need of rest. Once she returned to the table, he informed her and Alex that that they would stay for the night.

"Your things are already in your rooms," he said, handing them a key attached to a huge wooden fob.

"But it's only two," Alex noted. "If we eat and then go to bed, we will have to sleep fifteen hours to pass the time."

"I have the feeling," Jessie said, taking a menu and stowing the key, "that we might find fifteen hours will barely be enough." She herself did not feel tired as much as disembodied and she knew this meant that she was exhausted.

The tearoom had filled up while she was gone. A couple and an American family now occupied other tables. The couple was British and from Dubai. Both were plump and well trimmed. She wore thick rings and heavy bracelets and he reeked of aftershave. They and the Americans, a thin old man, his pushy wife, and their teen-age son were talking to the pancake men about the disadvantages of Diomox, a drug trekkers took to increase the amount of oxygen in the blood.

"It has terrible side effects and not good for you at all," one of the young men was saying.

"We are just taking garlic pills," said the woman from Dubai. Jessie had brought enough for her and Alex and six other people and kept out of the conversation. The talk angered her, she found herself wanting to scream.

“Are any of you doctors?” she asked. The pancake men raised their hands. “Do you know how to kill someone with Arsenic so they don’t know?”

“What a terrible question,” the Dubai lady remarked.

The men however, took the question in stride. One shrugged and considered his response. “You can hide the taste in food. Sugar, stews,” he said. “A doctor would find it.”

“If you went to doctors,” Jessie said.

“You’d be terribly ill,” he replied.

“My friend would wait a long time,” Jessie whispered.

“Hey,” Alex touched her hand, bringing her out of a fugue that she had sunk into.

The group was staring at her and she realized she had zoned out.

“I hate it when they stand in the hallways and talk,” she said. “What do they know?”

“They’re only trying to help,” he said, before she startled again and realized she had dropped into a dream again and neither she nor Alex had exchanged words.

“You order, I’ll take it to the kitchen,” Dumbar said handing her a menu. She heard laughing and looked behind him. Dahn was in the back talking to two fat women who were scraping the grills clean. When one of them realized that Jessie was staring at them, one spoke to Dahn who reached forward and with a smile closed the drape in between the rooms.

“I don’t know what any of this is,” Alex said.

“You’re not used to odd food yet,” Jessie said.

“I’m tired of it frankly,” he said.

“It is going to be the same menu all the way up,” she replied, looking at the sheet.
“Start from the top and just order down.”

“I already miss hamburgers.”

In the end they ordered Daal, which turn out to be lentils, rice and vegetable curry accompanied by a cup of strong black tea that always came well sugared. Milk was extra.

The conversation about the pills was over and now the American woman was complaining about the bedsheets. The room was such a small box that everyone, with or without intention, talked to everyone else in it. The American was making Jessie’s head spin.

“We don’t find that kind of problem at home,” the Brit was saying but his interjection was stalled when woman who sat between silent family members stated that she had already seen her room and hoped that the bedding would be sufficiently warm.

Jessie retreated from the conversation into the view. The window at her back faced the bridge but also offered a view of a set of chairs and tables set on a higher patio. Two monks and three very blond tourists presently occupied said chairs.

The monks, young men, wore the traditional red and yellow robes of their order. Bald but growing out the shave and they both looked very young and both wore spectacles. One was telling a story to his solidly built, sun burned companions. Hats, hiking sticks and jackets lay stacked in empty chairs dragged from a pile to hold the clothing. The men wore thick brown hiking boots the very same kind that threatened to cripple Jessie before the day was out. The woman wore bright red trail runners. Everyone was draped across the furniture looking the way clothing looks when you spread it out for

drying. Relaxed and warming under a perfectly temperate day they were ready to start off again but seemed resistant to the need to move on.

“What are you thinking?” Alex asked looking out the window too, but towards the horse, which stood stock still as the young rider crouched beneath its muzzle, tried to drag it onto the bridge.

“That the older I get, the more I think about how young I used to be,” Jessie replied.

“You’re thinking of Cherry.”

“I’m thinking,” Jessie said, “of sickness and families.”

The wind kicked up making shirtsleeves billow at the table outside. No one there was fat and nothing anyone wore fit too tightly. The monk telling the story stood and gestured to the sky, bringing his story to a close. His audience laughed and ordered one more round from the kitchen help some of whom had been listening in while they took a smoke break. Jessie wondered how certain collections, sizes and shapes of people could make her feel as if she was only a part of a whole person, as if she were missing some essential completeness.

“You mean that anyone can have either?” Alex asked.

“I was wondering about being remembered and whether that should matter so much. As long as Cherry was alive there was someone who might tell stories about me.”

“Jesus, you’re in a mood,” he said.

“I didn’t expect her to die first.” She touched his hand. “But, you’re right. I’ll stop.”

The drinks outside were being served from a monster thermos.

Alex nudged her. "After a while," he said. "Not everything in the world will remind you of her."

"I will not get used to her death," she said.

The people outside had turned their attention to the boy and his horse or, since the horse was winning, the horse and his victim.

"One tragedy opens the doors to others," she replied. "They all link together." She pointed at a poster pinned to the wall to the left of the Americans. MISSING since November 2009 was the title, and underneath a smiling young woman in a *Northface* jacket stared back.

"Avoiding the truth of one won't make all the others stop or save you in any way," he said.

"Now I am thinking of hospital beds and the machines and how they close the window drapes because if you could look outside the hospital you'd see that the view was terrible."

The horse was a small dark beast that if it was not now being loved, had been well tended. There was a special purpose to the trip it was resisting. Its coat was well brushed and its shoes shone. Wearing a gleaming saddle and a bridle decorated with red streamers, the high-minded creature, immune to the beatings and the threats, was also too smart to fall for tricks. Racing around alternate routes so that it might hit the bridge without time to stop was not working, and the horse was beginning to buck when it was whipped.

Jessie realized that she had stopped talking and that Alex was still waiting.

“After they took the baby, for a long time, Cherry was my only friend. The only person I could talk to and I don’t remember why that happened,” Jessie said. “She came every day and she refused to leave. My mother would tell her that I was too sick for visitors and Cherry would say that she didn’t mind waiting until I felt better.”

The Nepalese boy dismounted again and stepped away from the animal while holding onto its reins. The horse retreated from the bridge as far as he would allow and emerged from the shade of the trees covering the bridge. Once the sun hit its coat it was clear to see how much it was sweating and stressed.

A villager offered the boy a drink, which he took, taking the time to wipe sweat from his own face with his sleeve. Then he took off his hat, before he drank, to reveal the thick black braid curled up under the hat. Once it dropped down and the hat came off Cherry could see that they had all been mistaken.

“It’s a woman,” said one of the pancake men, who had joined her by the window to watch too.

“A girl,” Cherry said, for the rider was young and old enough to be both. Lean and muscled like the Sherpa she wore a loose fitting, white, riding outfit underneath a thick coat with wool cuffs. Her hat was a pale fur lined affair that almost completely hid her face unless you were looking straight at her. She took off the coat and secured it the back of her saddle and rolled up her sleeves revealing a fine golden bracelet twisted together on one wrist. Without thinking Jessie reached for hers. The girl was dark from living in Nepal and dirty dark from all the work of forcing her mount uphill, but she was a blue-eyed, brown haired white woman in disguise and an angry one at that. She handed the mug back to the villager and rejoined her battle with the animal by pulling the horse’s

reins as if she meant to drag it across the bridge. While the pair tangled a line of donkeys, driven by two Sherpa's approached, passed them, crossed the bridge without hesitation, and climbed uphill.

An image of Cherry in a hospital bed breathing to the tune of a machine that hiccupped each time it filled her lungs with air, burned another grieving hole in Jessie and suddenly the pain of seeing the animal in front of them being forced to cross a bridge was too much to bear. She took the stairs to the road. The girl was sitting on a wall by the Jessie arrived. Upon close inspection Jessie could see she was tearing up and ready to whip the horse again.

"Maybe it doesn't like that it can see through the slates," she said to the girl. Looking closely at the saddle she saw its brand, a D, lying on its back. The girl's riding boots, made of the soft leather Nepalese riders preferred were adorned with the same symbol.

"Maybe no one asked you," the girl replied. "You know anything at all about these shits?" She yanked the horse's head as she spoke. It turned its head away trying to free itself of her grip as if it was not yet ready to rebel again, but was considering it.

"I can't do worse," Jessie said. She approached and gently took hold of the bridle. The girl started to pull the horse's head free of Jessie's grasp when the horse bucked, pulling free of both woman and knocking the girl to the ground. Ignoring the girl Jessie took the animal by the reins and led it to the bridge where, as if it had changed its mind, it walked easily across the shaded bridge without instruction its hoofs beating out a sloppy diddle against the bridge's slats. She patted it, let it go and re-crossed the bridge to help the girl who was kneeling. "It didn't care about the bridge it only cared about fighting it

out with you,” Jessie said holding her hand out. The girl waved her off and stood by herself. Then she picked up the hat that she had dropped when she’d fallen and without a word walked past Jessie. The horse did not like it, but it let her climb aboard. She turned it towards the high paths leading from the village. Then she turned it back.

“Mero naam Marie ho,” she said.

“Namaste, Marie,” Jessie replied. “Mero naam Jessie.”

The horse now past its need to rebel was excited about continuing on and it pranced while Marie tried to keep it still. She dug into a pouch hanging off her saddle and pulled something from the bag that she fed to the horse and it seemed to settle.

“Marie was my grandmother’s name” Jessie said. “It means bitter.”

“You look like a tourist,” Marie said.

“I lived here when I was little. I’ve come to bury a friend,” Jessie said.

“I didn’t ask for your freaking details,” Marie said.

“You should work on controlling your temper,” Jessie said.

“You look sick and you’re not halfway to the top,” she said, looking up at Everest. Then she turned the horse away and headed up the road into a sky that was darkening.

“What did she say?” Alex asked, once Jessie returned to the meal that was waiting.

She picked up a fork and prepared to pretend to be hungry. “She told me to go to hell,” Jessie replied. The rode wound up into the hills so that though the rider would vanish, she would also reappear in between trees. They were taking their time. There was no use climbing above the tree line with a storm coming.

“No good deed,” Alex said.

“We will see her again,” Jessie replied.

“How do you know?” he asked.

“Her brand is a lazy D. My mother had it embroidered on tons of pillows and blankets,” she said.

“Hell of a coincidence,” he said.

“The Himalaya is a big place but there are few places where you can actually eke out a living here. People bunch up in fewer places than you think,” Jessie said.

“Why did you go out there in the first place?” Alex asked.

“I thought that it was something I could actually fix,” Jessie said. The rains began while they were still eating.

6

Grateful that they did not have to haul their bags upstairs, Jessie and Alex followed another of the many little men that peopled Nepal to their room, a shoebox with two cots and one window set into the slanting roof so that it looked straight up at the sky. The porter waved them inside and folded his tip into a tiny square that he stuffed up his sleeve. Both thought about brushing their teeth then remembered the walk down to the bathroom and gave that idea a pass, along with thoughts of washing. Instead they opened their bags and pulled out books. Jessie peeled off her jeans and propped her stiffening knee up on a pillow so that it stayed bent.

“It’s too early to sleep,” Alex said, closing a copy of Stewart Wilde’s *Infinite Self* after a few minutes. The action coincided with a knock on the door.

“Jessie and Alex.” Alex was the one with the key so he let Dumbar in. “Do you want to take a short hike?” Dumbar asked. “There is an abandoned monastery on the top of the hill, an hour or so hike.”

Jessie shook her head and Alex nodded. Before the men left Dumbar handed her a tube of ointment. “Try this on that,” he said pointing at her knee. “Let’s go,” he said to Alex.

Jessie could hear them clomping down the stairs, then heard their voices pass underneath the window and diminish. Relieved to be alone she put her book away and pulled Alex’s from its place and read the back cover. “Stuart Wilde, one of the most profound and original thinkers of our time, shows you how to consolidate your inherent power and transcend all limitations by releasing yourself from the constraints of the ego,” the critique was signed by Deepak Chopra. She tossed it back on the bed. A point of

contention between her and Alex was his insistence on tracking what she considered self-named, spiritual nut-jobs down their wacky, winding paths. For his part Alex constantly reminded her that no faith at all was a darker path than he intended to take.

“Whatever,” she lie back on her bed and took up with Raymond Chandler for about ten minutes before she fell asleep. It was dark when she woke. She found a note set where she would see it. “Downstairs.” She started to wind her way back down into the teahouse where all the same people who had been to lunch were already eating dinner. It was a pitch black night, but the light spreading out from the kitchen and the dining room almost lit the stairs well enough that Jessie could see where she was stepping. But after a few steps she found that she was too afraid to move forward. She was afraid of falling, afraid of not having the strength to stop a fall, and afraid of the shadows she was sure hid danger she could not define. Overwhelmed she crouched on the steps and waited for her unfounded fears to pass.

“It’s too cold to sit outside.” Dumbar always shepherding his clients, stood below. “Are you ill?”

Jessie shook her head. “It’s high up here and I’ve lost my bracelet,” she said, feeling distinctly stupid.

Dumbar took a seat on the lower steps. “They name the mountains after goddesses up here,” he said. “We have stories we are told as children about the white caps, the mountaintops are demon teeth poking up into the clouds.”

“Which are also haunted by gods and demons,” Jessie said. “This is not comforting talk.”

He shushed her with a finger to his lips. “The goddesses high up see this

meanness and cry tears that roll down the mountainsides and freeze into ice. And sometimes the goddesses send clouds down to fill the valleys with mists that can turn men into ghosts and take them away.”

“To die?” she asked.

“To be punished or saved, it depends on the story,” Dumbar said.

“Sounds like a way to scare children,” she said even though the dreaded fears in her mind began to lose hold as he filled the darkness with children’s stories.

“I don’t remember being scared. We celebrate their powers with the worship of the living goddesses. I am told you know about them,” he said standing and stepping closer to Jessie who though she was still clutching the railing, no longer crouched and was now seated on the cold, warped steps.

“I know a little,” she said. “Are those old or new stories you just told me?” she asked.

“Sorry?” he asked.

“Were those stories you were really told or stories you just made up,” she said.

“I have an advantage,” he said. “Our history is written in Sanskrit and so much of it is lost,” he said

“So you can say what you want?” she asked.

“I try to keep to what I know,” he said. “Very little embellishment,” he said.

“This could be a place you have to live or a place you come to die. You know, the end of the world,” she said.

He looked into the darkness beyond the pale cast of the lights in the tearoom.

“Nepal means “the foot of the mountains.” It is protected by its mountain ranges. They

kept outsiders away for hundreds of years. The first people were called Kirata, people with lion natures. Kirata also means people from the mountain. For some tribes the trip here took generations. And by the time they got to where they would stay they were quite different from the people they left behind, truly Nepalese.”

“Because the trip changed them,” Jessie said. He nodded.

“The mountains make the Sherpa,” he said. Most people came from Bhutan and Tibet where they worshipped wild spirits and ancestors. Then outsiders forced them to be Hindus. Then other armies came and everyone became Buddhists and built the great kingdoms. Then we had armies of our own.”

“And now what do you believe?” she asked.

He looked out into the darkness again. “That I enjoy many religious holidays and believe many things and that the mountains make us.”

“It’s hard to breath here,” Jessie said knowing she should shake off her mood and stand up.

“Altitude. There is nothing dangerous about that. We will trek upwards slowly. You need to eat now.” He backed off the steps. “Come,” he said.

She nodded and stood.

They had filled a central burner with yak paddies and petrol and lit it up. They lit one fire per day in order to make the fuel last as long as possible. Jessie was glad to be off the stairs but hesitant to enter the room. She did not want to hear the conversation and felt as if she needed to gear up for it. No one missed her company and she considered retreat. They seemed like a group all heading somewhere else and she felt as if listening to them talk would only intensify her sense of separateness. But Dumbar would not sit

until she did. All but Alex shared one bench and one long table. Lined up in their seats like people waiting in line for the bus, the groups all faced Alex and Jessie who sat alone on their bench with their backs to the three-story drop below.

When Jessie sat Dumbar tried to hand her a menu.

“What I had for lunch is good,” she said waving it away. Alex was in the middle of a stew and pancake dinner hacking at the cake with a knife and dunking it into the stew. The Dubai couple was trying to talk to the young men. The Americans were settled in between the two groups and as during lunch, the wife kept driving all conversation her way. A bony, greying maven, she was gesticulating with her fork and the drone of her tone indicated more of a monologue than a conversational stance. Not willing to be the other loud voice in the room Jessie sipped her tea and waited for a moment when she might ask a question of somebody else. The woman changed the subject when no one offered a counter point. As she talked the faded feeling Jessie had been struggling with came back full bore.

“We,” she said taking in Jessie’s presence, “were going to Europe, I don’t like to travel and Europe is so expensive. My son picked this trip. It’s a surprise, I like to be in charge of our trips, but,” she shrugged, “you just can’t all the time, can you? We saw those men in orange dresses by the river. I guess you want to see that once. How are you handling the altitude? Very high up here, hey?” she asked Jessie, who surprised to be addressed, had to be asked twice.

“I am taking my pills,” Jessie said.

“Oh, honey,” she said, “It’s better to be healthy but you can’t pick that either, can you?”

“Are we all heading the same way?” Jessie asked anyone.

No one answered her and then suddenly the young men were leaving and the maven quickly followed, taking her men in tow. They passed a porter bringing the meal that Jessie was not certain she was going to be able to eat. She started with the tea and more sugar.

“Take these,” Alex said handing her packets labeled *Natural Sugar*.

The maven’s husband stopped by the door and spoke. “The road heads towards Everest’s Base Camp but all the other destinations are places along the way to Everest,” he said. “We might run into one again depending on but how slow one walks or if one gets sick. We met an Indian gentleman yesterday who was walking up without the benefit of rest days. He said he was feeling fine without the pills.”

“Are you taking Diamox?” Alex asked.

“Oh no,” he said, now totally eclipsed in the darkness. “It’s horrible for you. It stays in your body.”

“Tomorrow will be longer and maybe harder than today,” Dumbar said from the table across the way.

“Sorry?” Jessie hadn’t realized that he had returned or that he had decided to eat with the tourists. Meals were times guides and porters could take breaks from being guides.

“It will be easy walking for two hours then we will all cross a bridge then there is a long climb to Namche Bazaar.” He thought for a moment. “Maybe two or three hours depending. It is the first move into altitude. We are at 2600m and Namche Bazaar is at 3400m, almost a thousand feet of gain. It will be the first hard climb, but not too hard if

you move slow. We should leave around eight.”

No one seemed to want to talk after a while mostly because suddenly everyone seemed to look and feel tired. Electricity was only available for two hours after dark and there were no heaters in the rooms so they finished their meal in silence and sat in their respective corners until the last of the fuel in the heater was burned out. When Jessie woke the next morning she had a feeling of having passed the whole night in her room as if she'd drunk too much. She rolled over and swallowed her daily dose and still had to wait to feel better in order to get out of bed and in fact arrived for breakfast after everyone except Alex and Dumbar were done.

The roads were busiest at the start of the day and looking down from the teahouse she could see many trekkers heading up.

“Does everyone leave at the same time?” she asked.

“Yes, but you will see that in short order all these groups will be spread out across the trails so far apart that they will lose sight of one another,” Dumbar replied. “Are you sure you are well?”

Jessie nodded. “Sorry, I don't know what happened. I fell back asleep.” Then she headed for the stairs in order to forestall more talk brushing by Alex who had similar questions.

The hike into Namche was the first hard hike, and as Dumbar said, it was part of a critical move into heights that would filter out the first of those who would turn back. The trail from Phakding strung along the last of the flatlands and paralleled a great white river. Water colored by minerals, looked like milk as it flowed down the steep washes. Hikes began after a big breakfast was served. Lunch was taken three hours into the hike

and dinner was usually served just before dark at most, three or four hours after lunch. Jessie and Alex had bought snacks but the meals at the teahouses, as basic as they were, proved sufficient. Aspirin and anti-histamines were daily requirements as was a need to constantly purify and re-supply water though the same people who refused to take Diamox usually also refused to use iodine or filters. Some got sick and some fared better. Jessie and Alex took advantage of all the modern conveniences.

Hiking up through the path that snaked through Phakding they passed a massive campsite where groups twenty and thirty strong were still packing gear.

“Will they make it up today?” Alex asked.

“It can be done, everyone has their own way,” Dumbar said.

They took a trail that cut its way on the shores of the swirling waters rushing down towards Kathmandu. They were still below the timberline and beginning to share the trail with yak hybrids. Bigger than cattle and sporting shorter hair than yaks the Dzo or dzomo worked the divide that kept the cattle below and the yaks above. They would work in the zone the neither the cows or the yak could tolerate, but they could only survive in that narrow zone. Bells made of brass and yak bone hung from the their necks and sent out a long slow beat that marked the passage of animal trains as the big beasts picked their way along trails so narrow that even the humans treaded them carefully. The rules of the road were yaks first, people second.

“They don’t fall?” Jessie asked as she, Alex, Dumbar and Dahn crouched on a hillside waiting for six heavily laden animals to pass.

“You will not see one fall,” Dumbar replied.

The day was warm but where path worked its way through big stands of pine trees

it was well shaded and chilly. Eventually everyone stripped down to t-shirts and shorts. Big brimmed hats and sunblock were also the order of the day. Porters carrying heavier loads, and moving more quickly, passed them on a regular basis. “Namaste,” which could mean anything from a more respectful, “I bow to you,” to “Hi,” was passed from group to group. Most trekkers used walking sticks. Those who were descending moved much more rapidly than those moving upward. Here and there porters would set their loads down on crude tripods while they rested, and shared a smoke and cell phone porn. As often or not though he never lost track of Alex or Jessie, Dumbar would stop and talk to Sherpa he knew. Vendors selling jewelry, masks, clothing, and snacks, hawked their goods on the paths, but the desire and the need to keep moving and to keep loads light kept most from stopping to buy trinkets. They stopped once because Dumbar had family he wished to see. And while he and his relatives chatted, Alex and Jessie shared tea with three crumpled Sherpa who filled the room with smoke while they watched T.V. and drank. Next to the set was a notice about another missing hiker.

“Some of them,” Dumbar said once they were back outside, “drink too much,” he said. “For some change is not good.”

“Hey, Dumbar,” Jessie asked. “I’ve seen two pictures of missing hikers so far. Is that common?”

“They are not like you. They hiked alone,” Dumbar said.

“But do you know what happened to them?” Jessie asked hefting her pack, which was half-filled but nonetheless beginning to bow in the middle and make her back cramp.

“No one knows. It is easy to get lost up here,” he said, heading off before she could ask more questions.

The trails followed the natural routes and wove through a complex collection of immense formations. After a time they dropped deep into narrow canyons crafted by eons of ice and water then wound their way back up into the light. Erosion and floral growth edited the milder faces widening and broadening the trails that crossed them, and an interlocking set of bridges jumped the gaps in between where nature had failed to provide passage from one mountain to another. The bridges were thin wiry affairs and looked far too fragile to carry traffic. Each had a dated plaque at one end or the other. According to the dates, a phalanx of engineers had descended on Nepal in the mid-1950's and cast thousands of steel webs in anticipation of the tourist trade that would arrive post the Norgay-Hillary ascent.

To Jessie the switchbacks looked like stitches sewing the valley together from end to end. She stepped out at jutting curl of a trail and took photographs of the vista that she knew would not do the view justice. Alex turning to see that she had stopped joined her.

“The bridges belong here,” Jessie said. “They look like parts of the landscape.”

“Only if everyone assumes that if one can do it, everyone should,” Alex said. Two bridges away a man and four yaks were making a bridge sway under their weight.

“How high can we climb if we want to? What will it cost if we fail? The bridges don't get us there they just let us try,” she said.

“You find hope in the chance that we could die here?” he asked.

“I like the fact that if we did die it wouldn't be because nature hated us,” she said.

“You mean it would be nobody's fault,” Alex said.

Jessie knelt as shifting mist brought another aspect to her shots. “It wouldn't be personal.”

“Do you think they are as enamored of this place?” Alex asked pointing down the trail where Dumbar and Dahn were perched on a rock. Dumbar was on the phone and Dahn was eating a whole pack of cookies.

“How the hell do they do get so far ahead?” she asked.

They had to cross into the Sagarmatha National Park proper and that required stopping at the gates where soldiers requested paperwork. A passport had to be issued for a specified amount of days, but getting it required no participation on Jessie’s or Alex’s part so they waited outside in front of the first of many startlingly ornate portals that stood at the end and beginning of most villages and certainly at the entrances of every park.

“A World Heritage Natural Site,” Alex read from the sign on the guard post. “It is both illegal and immoral to leave and burn your garbage in the mountains.”

“Okay,” Dumbar emerged pocketing the permits. “Your money will pay for conservation efforts. And this,” he handed an envelope to Jessie, “is for you.”

“What is it?”

“It is a checklist for women tourists.”

“How is the park endangered?” Alex, who had missed the exchange about the checklist, asked.

Dumbar counted off on his fingers. “The wildlife and the people conflict. Chopping down trees and trash. There is too much building. Monasteries are deteriorating. The glaciers are melting. They are making lakes that will overflow. And up here nothing recovers quickly.”

“Trees don’t grow very fast,” Jessie said, stuffing the warning list into a pocket.

“Exactly,” Dumbar said, tilting his hat to cover his eyes better. Although the sun was not getting warmer it seemed to be getting brighter. “Inside,” he gestured to the portal. Big enough to drive a van through the entrance was a squared brick structure with a multi-tiered, many colored rooftop. Nepali prayers were painted across the portal in gold. The walls inside were lined with prayer wheels and above these gods battling fierce creatures and a streaming background of brightness kept Jessie busy. The light was too poor to get great pictures but to her using a flash seemed disrespectful so she did what she could and prayed. The men moved through more quickly than Jessie even though they stopped to turn every wheel while murmuring the Mani mantra which Alex had insisted Dumbar teach him.

After the portal they entered a stretched that reminded Jessie of all the things she loved about the country and as they walked she began to fill her mind with the bright things that in the daylight had more power than her haunting nighttime fears.

“This is the real world,” she muttered to herself.

In the time between the portal and lunch they passed or were passed by the last of the donkey trains Jessie hoped to see because she had noticed that some were bleeding where straps crossed their bellies. And though she knew there was nothing to be done, the idea of untended pain hurt her. Hikers moving quickly cruised past them. Returning walkers moving faster still, buzzed by. Their group also crossed paths with pairs and groups of young boys and girls, dressed in school uniforms: pleated skirts, pressed slacks and sweaters. The cannier children posed for pictures and then asked for cash. Children too small to leave home were to be found rolling on the ground, playing or sitting in some

loved one's lap. The number of farms dwindled as they moved higher, cropping up when the geography flattened out and the ground supported enough fertile soil. Bearded barley fields ran up against walls of maize and clusters of lean rice leaves. Seedlings lying in bundled piles waited while women working in bare feet and rolled up pants tilled the ground. Jute plants, green flushes crowned with yellow petals were captured inside tidy compounds. Mustard plants with yellow blooms were divided into careful rows and sometimes placed in pots that were lined up on top of walls and set under windowsills. Flowers grew everywhere. Huge sudden washes of red, yellow and purple would appear around corners lining walls and walks or escaping taming hands, and ran uphill to where nothing could grow but trees. Crows, eagles and stripped, big beaked birds watched from perches and paid particular attention near benches and teahouses where tourists snacked. Dogs began to appear. A particular temptation to Jessie, they joined and left trekking groups as it suited them. She reminded herself not to touch and not to look too closely in case she saw they were hurt or sick. Cherry's dog now lived with Jessie. But since Nepal was not the place to pick up strays Jessie consoled herself with quick looks, a scratch here and there and the comfort the presence of a dog offers to those who love them.

They began to use the big bridges as they closed in on the Namche ascent. By then the metal passes spanned wide rifts over rushing rivers that became more commanding as the group hiked closer to the melts that fed them. 90 meters long and anywhere from 90 to 200 meters above the ground, the walkways were slatted and chain link contraptions that yaks, donkeys, dogs and humans all used. Each passage was embellished with thousands of prayer flags twisting around cords tied to, over and under the bridges themselves so that every updraft sent a thousand prayers sky high.

“The trick is not to look down,” Alex said.

“The trick is to not to fall,” Jessie said. Though they were solid structures, the bridges trembled and because they were so long the movement communicated across the bridge like a long wave crossing a molasses lake. Metronomic combinations rattling in from both entry points met in the middle creating a psychologically unsettling eddy. More bodies on the bridge created a stronger sway. Traffic was high at midday and though there was no danger it was difficult, as Jessie learned, for the uninitiated to blithely cross over.

“Grab the wire rail,” Alex said, resisting the urge to offer assistance.

“No,” Jessie replied when the rail swung outward forcing her towards the side rather than the center of the bridge. It was not so much the height that bothered her, as it was the trusting the men who had built the bridges. They crossed several that day and eventually she discovered looking ahead was better than looking down.

They stopped to fill their bottles at the end of one crossing where Dumbar made them all turn around. “It gets harder from here on. We will go back and eat there,” he said, referring to a sloppy stack of stone on the other side of the bridge. Surrounded with purple and yellow flowers it looked like a big bloom with a stone center. Lunch stretched out for an hour during which Jessie changed her shoes and Alex ate two lunches.

“The drinks and extra snacks are getting more expensive,” he observed while paying the tab.

“Eat less,” Jessie suggested.

“I’m getting hungrier. Why aren’t you?” he said noticing that she had not finished her noodle soup.

She did not have to answer because then Dumbar concerned with what he called, “the rise,” suggested that they get moving. After another hour of hiking the “rise” announced itself as a jagged trail winding across a heavily forested, ascending edge. It ended (as all the hikes in Nepal seemed to) in the clouds. Green water rushing around rocky flats and peaks below sounded like a hundred hushed tones trying to get away as it raced downhill. Big groups, serviced by a dozen Sherpas lunched at the base of this bridge.

“One more stop,” Dumbar said. “Before,” and he gestured upwards.

“Doesn’t look so bad,” Alex said. “How long?”

“Two or three hours,” Dumbar said nodding to Dahn who was already shouldering his load and heading across. “Slowly.”

While Dahn headed up the other three dropped their packs. Jessie who had been keeping a notebook, started writing and the men searched for rocks that they could use for pillows and foot rests.

Upon closer inspection the ascent seemed more extreme than it had from a distance. Because of this and because the sun was perfectly warm, they procrastinated. While they did different groups took advantage of the same spot, their numbers growing and shrinking as the groups heading up and down took their rest breaks. As at teahouses the ebb and flow of international polyglot took hold of the conversation, which was restful to the Americans. They could not enter into conversations they could not understand. Since Alex was shy and Jessie was anti-social the disincentive suited them both.

By the time they packed up there were no other hikers around but they had to wait

for a yak team to cross. The animals laden with huge jugs of liquid, mats, tents, spools of plastic sheeting and baskets filled to the brim and secured with burlap strode onto the bridge. It sank a little and adjusted as the beasts rambled rhythmically across until a young man from the other side who refused to wait walked on. A slight figure he seemed neither angry nor scared just obstinate. Sherpas on either side yelled at him but he ignored the sallies and walked until he reached the first horned head and was forced to a standstill. Like a slowing train the team stopped in stages. Each animal bumped the ass in front, tested the obstacle and then stopped. A yak in the middle tried to turn but his companions refused to budge and the rest of the beasts, unable to plan the next step, stalled. The danger to the human obstacle was the beasts' heft, their insensitivity to his small size, and their horns. A family's life's savings rested on the bridge in front of the obdurate boy who insisted on confronting about ten tons of forward motion. No one in these parts could have afforded one damaged animal let alone many, nor could anyone recover from the loss of damaged goods. The Sherpa behind the animal train yelled at the boy but did not urge his team forward. Trapped in place, all the Sherpa could do was yell. Prayer flags strung over and under the bridge snapped as the wind kicked up and the bridge began to sway more widely as the weight of the beasts in its center provided a fulcrum for exaggerated movement. Hovering more than a hundred feet over the river, the beasts waited and the men screamed. The boy stuck his fingers through the chain link and made fists. He was no match for the forces gathering in front of him but he would not budge.

“Why won't he turn back?” Alex asked.

“He's too angry to stop what he's doing,” Jessie replied. “He can't back away.”

“Will the animals hurt him?” Alex asked as Dumbar brought them back to safety.

“If the boy remains, they will crush him,” Dumbar said. “Yaks don’t stand still for long. They will become restless and move forward.” The Sherpa running the team seemed to plead with the boy. Then, as Dumbar predicted, the team edged forward. The boy tried to force his way past the beasts and as was inevitable, the animals brought him down. Then, as suddenly as he was in mortal danger, it was over as the animals sorted themselves out and started to skirt his body. The boy became a bump in the way that each animal in turn avoided. The Sherpa running the team passed the bump on the bridge without hesitation trying to contain the animals that were already heading uphill by the time the young man had recovered and moved off the bridge. The only evidence of the event was the whistle of the sticks whipping through air and the slap of wood against yak ass. Dumbar said spoke to the boy when he passed and the boy replied as he limped away. There was some blood on his face, but no expression. Dumbar said something else but the boy ignored him the second time. Then he was gone.

“Who is he? What just happened here?” Alex asked.

“He is Tahru. They are not respected.” Dumbar had to search for the last word. “They live separate from the rest of Nepalese, very primitive. For him to leave home means something very bad has happened.”

“Where is he going?” Jessie asked. He seemed so small and the Himalaya so vast. The bridge was slightly warped where the animals had fussed, and after the near tragedy the hillsides seemed dirtier and the sky a great deal colder.

“He doesn't know,” Dumbar said. “He has never been away from his home.”

“Won’t someone help him?” Alex asked.

“He would not ask and no one would offer,” Dumbar said. When neither Jessie nor Alex seemed satisfied he resigned himself to full disclosure. “He has no family outside a Tahru village. They live in places where no one goes anymore.”

“Wild places?” Alex asked.

“They are immune to malaria, they live in places where still exists, marshes. They were once slaves and are still not considered full citizens. He will not find help.”

“Will he die?” Jessie asked.

“He will disappear,” Dumbar replied. “It’s not our business. He is not where he belongs.”

“But no one will hurt him?” she asked.

“He will disappear,” Dumbar said, turning away and walking toward the dust raised by the yak team. When he realized that neither Alex nor Jessie followed, he turned back. “It is a hard trek ahead and we need to get to the top before the weather comes,” he said.

“It’s like shoving an old guy into the ocean in a kayak,” Jessie said, hesitating before stepping onto the bridge.

“Just be grateful.” Alex said.

After the bridge a short spiraling rock staircase connected to a sloping trail that crisscrossed over a broad, heavily forested arête. At points only a few yards of trail were visible and at other times an unbelievable length of road appeared. The trekkers put their heads down and quickly became enveloped in the exceedingly difficult process of climbing uphill into altitude. Soon all were sweating and stomping in a slow rhythm that spaced out steps so that all could catch her/his breathe in between. Jessie found her pace

quickly. If asked later she would not have been able to recollect the way the trail looked. If asked she might have been able to piece together a series of images but the whole idea of a trail would have been too much to contain if she was going to make it to the top of the mountain. She would have remembered the way pine trees shielded her from sun and then the way the wind and rain felt once she and her friends climbed high enough to meet the afternoon clouds. She could have talked about alternating patches of dirt and rock and the way patterns of the two ran across the trails making where she stepped critical because not every rock was stable and sometimes dust made the rocky steps slick. Only each step mattered after a while because energies waned and because each step was uncertain. Patches of pine needles also tended to clump in the shadows making slanted parts of the trail slippery and Jessie's vision became suspect once her glasses fogged up. Sometimes it was better to hug the wall to the left and sometimes it was safer to pick one's way along the slippery disintegrated edges to the right where you could fall off. They kicked up dust as they walked and their faces became caked with it. Dumbar stopped them on a regular basis and reminded them to drink and to "move slower." Alex who had yet to find his rhythm was slogged along and kept weighting his efforts by gauging how far they had yet to climb.

"Alex believes in yetis," Jessie said as she lay down next to Alex who was already stretched out.

"Sorry?" Dumbar asked.

"Alex believes in yetis," Jessie said.

"Well, of course he does," Dumbar said.

"Oh brother," Jessie replied shaking her head.

“Jessie doesn’t believe in god or miracles,” Alex said to Dumbar. “And I can’t keep my mind off getting to the top. It seems too far,” Alex said.

“You need something else to think about,” Dumbar said. “I have a riddle for you to figure out while you walk. There’s an island and on this island there are yetis, which are mean tempered man eaters, as you know.”

Alex nodded and offered him the water bottle, which he declined. They were one hour into the hike and while the break was good it also allowed them to cool down too much. Sweat that matted their shirts to their backs was making them uncomfortably cold. Sitting under a verdant sappy patch of tree Jessie remembered too late that sap dripped and that she had not bothered to check how much sap was on the rock she had selected. While Dumbar constructed their riddle, she changed shirts and with an eye towards the darkening sky, pulled out her rain gear and tied it to the outside of her pack.

“Yetis cannot swim so they are no danger to the humans who live on the bank across from this island. But the villagers are also isolated and hungry and the only food is on the island with the yetis. The trees they live in are filled with fruit. So how do the humans get the fruit?”

“Do they,” Alex started to ask, but Dumbar put up his hand.

“You know everything you need to know to solve this,” he said and stuffed his own water bottle away, an indication that it was time to get up and go.

Forty-five minutes later they had to stop again. Because of the steepness, the rising chill, the scattered showers, the thinning air and a heightening sense of mental and physical exhaustion. The higher they climbed the harder it became to continue.

“Okay, now I can’t stop thinking about it,” Alex said. “What didn’t you tell me?”

Dumbar smiled. "I have told you everything."

"Then..."

"Oh okay, Yetis love to imitate humans and remember that they have terrible tempers."

"Oh fine," Alex said irritated by the joke now.

"You piss off the yetis and get them to throw fruit at you," Jessie said standing as rain that had come and gone in gentle showers now began to pour down in thick, cold sheets.

"Cheers guys. Almost there." The threesome parted for a pair of stout hikers on the way down.

"I'll bet they're lying," Alex said sourly.

"God love them for it," Jessie replied, as three girls high tailed it upslope and vanished. But it was as predicted. They tromped around a final turn and followed a chicken wire fence wrapped around the base of a crumbling cliff. A second turn led them to a bright yellow sign that welcomed them to Namche Bazaar, noted the altitude, and presented them with more rules. While Dumbar stopped at a shack manned by three more military men, Alex and Jessie read the sign stating that poaching and trading on natural flora and fauna was illegal, unkind and immoral. And underneath this gentle reminder, the bitter truth spelled out in detail. 15 years in prison and 100,000 NRs were the penalty for ignoring these civil suggestions. Just passed the sign, they saw the valley that was the true beginning of their trek. It dropped beneath massifs that dwarfed all previous impressions of grandeur.

The idea of clouds drifting or floating was inaccurate so high up. In Nepal clouds controlled the view allowing or precluding an appreciation of form. Always on the move, cloud cover straddled vast granite rises and crept up into steep crevasses shaping the mountains with their enveloping powers. Clouds predicted weather. A thin mist meant that storms were scattering. Clouds that were impossibly thick or patchy up top meant the weather in the peaks, was in a furious state. Twice a day a veil descended into Namche. It covered the sun, erased the mountains and pressed up against windowpanes bringing a chill that settled in the bedsheets and rolled along the floorboards. Everyone gathered in common rooms in the early morning and just as night fell in Namche.

“Namche is the unofficial capital of the Everest part of the park. Everyone heading to Everest stops here.” Dumbar said as he guided his clients forward to the best vista spot. “It is the last town we will see until we return. It is also a tourist stop.”

The city was a sloppy triangle comprised of hundreds of buildings that were stacked up, backed into one another and shared walls with one another. Hotels were splashed across the landscape the way silt is arranged along an aging stream. Tilting structures filled every inch of the basin and stole up to the rim where urbanization was halted by a dirt road and steep hillsides. In empty plots men were chopping up rocks and handing the pieces to others who added the chunks to new walls. The ping of rock hammers rang throughout the dell as the Sherpa in a settled flow piled rocks, steadied studs and squared 4x4's on top of cement foundations. Every building was square. Every wall was a spare face with square eyes and blue lined frames around plate glass lenses. The roofs were constructed of corrugated metal (blue, green, or red) and slightly slanted.

Each tool, each piece of wood, and metal sheet had been hauled up the mountains on a Sherpa's back. Though the buildings had regular shapes no one had bothered to face them in any one direction. They seemed to face whichever way someone wanted so the back of one building could stare at the back of another, and maybe its western windows caught the sun or maybe not.

Namche was a cluster of monopoly pieces set in several levels. Dirt paths wound through the mess, high stone steps allowed access between levels. Yak hybrids and cows sat in the middle of the roads and stared into windows. Dogs roved the levels at will. They were all black and all the same size and shape as if they'd all come from Nepal's single canine strain. The dogs all looked healthy but then they also all looked young which meant none lived into old age. Clusters of shops and restaurants catering to European and American tastes bloomed in the levels beneath the hotels. Step into the shopping center and you entered a path carved by footsteps that crafted paths just like rivers did. The narrow paths were stooped in the middle, very narrow, and rose and dropped according to the hillsides intent. It was hard to give directions but if you joined the stream of pedestrians and kept in time with the traffic you would reach your destination eventually.

Shops sold books, handmade curios, jewelry, knives, carvings and blankets made of yak hair, toiletries, bottled water that was getting pricy, and cold medicine. Patios and porches jutted out from the restaurants that dominated the outskirts of the market center.

Because the town was multi-tiered every customer with a latte or a pastry had a view. Builders had solved the problem of building on uneven rises by cutting flat plots, the way one built risers, and so the town ascended in even layers. Paths radiated outward

and took off from all high sides of the valley, some leading to Everest, one leading past a museum, a military base, the local school, a monastery and towards the finish line for the Everest Marathon. Although some Sherpa lived in their shops, private homes were also built just beyond the valley rim on the high side. Vendors rotated family members in shifts. Some would work the shops for months to be relieved by others in their turn so they could go home for a while. Every Sherpa was in motion or absent. If there were no customers in a shop, then it was empty. If a customer entered a store, one Sherpa would send another to find the shopkeeper or keep customers busy with conversation or by showing off their own wares until the proprietor was located. No one seemed worried about theft. Fewer prayer flags per capita flew in Namche but they had a presence strung between buildings, swinging a little higher than laundry lines. Laundry could be sent out and retrieved in hours for a nominal fee and once one went to retrieve it they might find themselves in another kind of shop where it was easy to impulse buy because one had to wait for laundry to be folded and had time to shop. Internet access was cheap and in working order. Namche was the last place to buy the gear and clothing. It was also the last place to make a cheap phone call or exchange money which was done in the most unofficial looking places sometimes run by men who handed dollars or Euros off to young boys so they could run off and return with Nepalese Rupees. If the boys returned with the wrong amount sometimes the cashier would open his own drawer or ask a shopkeeper across to make change or make up the difference.

The storm that had been intensifying as Jessie and Alex had climbed now started to dissipate. Instead of glowering and spitting the clouds seemed satisfied with ferrying in a biting chill and a creeping mist. The town was busy, rugged and quiet but not still.

Hundreds of people were carrying on. Figures flitted between gaps or scurried around rising foundations of new hotels. Namche was an old address with new fixtures but a hard scratch existence still ground away at its people. And a place based on a tourist economy was still a begging zone.

The walk to the hotel wandered through a warren of dusty narrows; its end was comprised of several tiers of high stone steps. Neither Alex nor Jessie could have described the town after the walk as by then each was focused on single steps. They passed the same spot twice when Dumbar seemed to lose his way but he finally led the group up a slot lined with white brick, past an open wet trash heap, then hiked up a series of ledges cut into a dirt hill. The ledges led to a cobbled road that wound up and around a series of hotels until *White Yak*, yellow letters against a red background, appeared on a sign overhead. After looking down at a paper in his hand, Dumbar nodded.

“We are here,” he said. “We were going to stay somewhere else, but you will like it here. There are separate baths.” One more flight of stairs led to a first floor where the kitchen and dining area spread out to the right and left of the main banister. Dumbar got the keys while Alex and Jessie waited. Unwilling to shed their packs until they had reached their rooms and disinclined to walk any more than absolutely necessary, they waited in the hallway and stared at the floorboards.

“Prices are definitely on the rise,” Alex said looking into the lobby where water and candy were for sale. He took his hat off to run his hands through blond hair turned dark with wet, then had to wipe his hands on his soaked shirt.

“Why is everywhere here uphill?” Jessie asked. She leaned on the banister because sitting down entailed getting up.

“Has to do with the earth and all, I think,” Alex replied, wiping his face with his hat. “Bed and bath.”

“I was exhausted two hours ago,” Jessie said. “This feeling has no name.”

Dumbar and Dahn returned to lead them to their rooms headed upstairs. The banister shot up into a second floor that was decorated like an Austrian beer house. Big wooden beams supported the walls and ceilings. Red, yellow and white in bold strips raced down hallways and disappeared around corners. White flower boxes and ornate scrolls filled dark niches and there many of these because the naked bulbs hanging from the ceilings cast more shadow than light. The floorboards and the steps were plain and unvarnished as if someone had decided to stop pretending by the time they finished with the walls.

Dumbar opened the door and let Dahn in and out then stepped back. “Don’t get used to it,” he said. He meant a private bathroom with a shower. “This is a new place.”

“Excellent,” Jessie walked in and dropped onto the bed still wearing her pack.

Alex followed suit taking the bed nearer the window. “We could wash our clothes even,” he said.

“You could have it done,” Dumbar agreed and Jessie realized that he presumed they would never do their own laundry. “I will tell them to turn on the hot water for this room.” He stopped at the door. “So, is everything okay?” He was asking whether he could disappear for the night. Guide services included tours of the town if the customers wished.

“God, yes,” Alex replied. “Go forth and party.” Dahn freed of his obligations after dumping the big packs could already be heard clomping downstairs where a group of

Sherpas were gathered around a television set.

“Sorry?” Dumbar asked.

“He means we will see you at dinner.” Jessie replied closing her eyes.

“We will stay here for two nights,” he said. “You will take care of your knee.”

The falls she had taken seemed like a long time ago. Jessie nodded.

“We will take an acclimatization hike tomorrow, go the hotel up top and then to the airport,” Dumbar said.

“Ya, ya,” Jessie replied thinking that more walking was out of the question.

Dumbar left the key in the door on his way out.

Alex and Jessie lay on their beds, unloaded their packs and stared out the window at the town below. As everywhere else in Nepal people, cattle and dogs cruised the streets. Hikers could be visually separated into groups. Those who had been in town longer had a fluffed out, well-fed demeanor lacking in the flattened souls that had just trudged into town.

“Laundry,” Jessie said. “I only have two pairs of pants, two undershirts and two pair of liner socks.”

“Good luck with that,” Alex said rolling over as if to take a nap. He wrapped his pillow around his head, which meant a headache. Aware that his headaches often presaged snit fits, Jessie tried to find a way to make distance between them without leaving the room. He had shaken off a pill binge in the year before this trip but the wisps of mental unraveling, remainders of the nights spent raving about “the others” had never been completely exorcised. He was better company now that he was sober, but drug addiction had emphasized, not created his bitchy side.

She washed clothing in the sink and realized that there was no hot water when she showered. Her activity motivated Alex to follow suit. They moved around each other without speaking. Hoping to fall asleep, Jessie was back on her bed by the time Alex stepped from a shower stall built for people a full foot shorter.

“Town’s still open,” he said rubbing his hair dry.

“Good for it,” Jessie spoke into her pillow. “Too tired.” What seemed like ancient images drifted in the back of her imagination without taking shape and with a fleeting sense of panic she tried to distract herself, but she was too tired to do it well.

“I don’t want to talk to anyone,” Alex said, putting on a shirt and shuffling through his meticulously organized pack for a book.

“Bully for you.” She watched him move items from one side of a shapeless duffel to the other. He nudged her bag away from his while he worked. Horrified by the way she packed he would eventually attempt to tidy her belongings. A man with a messy mind apparently required an organized underwear drawer in order to cope.

“Your mom isn’t here, you know,” she said.

He ignored her and unearthed a book about Eastern philosophy.

Although he ate normally Alex always had trouble keeping his weight up and now after just a few days of lean meals and hiking Jessie could see that his normally stinky figure was looking stick-figurish. He sneezed. “Do you have any sinus medicine?” Meaning, “get it for me.”

“In my bag.” Meaning. “Get it yourself.”

“Well,” he gestured at her belongings as if he were hovering over something noxious. “You have to find it.”

“In a minute.” She knew she might have been more compassionate but he had inherited his mother’s preoccupation with his health. He considered himself to be physically delicate. And since his sensitivities often required that Jessie overlook her weaknesses she found herself caring less and believing him less often when he said that he was getting ill. Lately, his signs of sickness made her angry. Whether it was the room, the hike, the weather, or the strangeness of the new country settling in, she felt a tension without reason rising in between them. She was feeling out of place and he was feeling lonely. The success of their relationship was space. No one had to meet anyone else’s expectations. The failure of their relationship was in the lack of supporting connections. When each started to fall the other afraid of the feeling of falling too, stepped away.

Alex sniffed and wiped his nose with a Kleenex. “I think they think I’m nervous,” he said. Experience informed Jessie that he meant Dumbar and Dahn though neither man seemed to think anything at all about Alex as far as she could tell. Outside their window she saw cloud cover enveloping the town, cutting off the view yard by yard.

“You are ticky,” she replied, wondering why losing the long view was so frightening when the long view was often overwhelming.

“What’s that mean?” he asked.

“Did I say that out loud?” she asked. A flood of resentment rolled towards the man searching through Jessie’s bag for the decongestants she had remembered to bring because he always forgot. The anger rolled in much like the clouds outside rich in content and slow moving, but potent in terms of queering the view.

“You think I’m weird,” he said. The book in his hand was a Brad Warner novel.

“I know it,” she said.

His face was drawn and his hair clumped in the back of his head in a knot. What was worse, she asked herself, a man who did not meet expectations a woman claimed she did not have or the woman who accepted less than she needed.

He noticed the quickly evaporating landscape and would have drawn the drapes but they did not have window covers in teahouses. “Those people down the hill thought I was strange,” he said. This could mean anyone they had talked to in between Lukla and Namche.

“You get paranoid when you’re tired. Those people down the hill didn’t think about you that deeply. So stop it.” She sat up and prepared to fight.

“You mean I’m not important enough to be noticed,” he said.

“Please, you are going to piss me off. I’m tired and I also don’t feel well.” By now the view outside was completely obscured by an impenetrable mist.

He sat on the bed and peered out the window. “I hope we don’t have to talk to anyone else.”

“Travel to foreign countries and talk to no one. Jesus, that’s just stupid,” she said.

“Do you think they thought I was crazy?” Crazy was a memory of rehab and nights spent in Emergency trying to get him committed then taking him home because he sobered up enough to fool the nurses.

“Shut up.” She stood and grabbed her jacket.

“Who could I ask but you? You’re supposed to tell me?” he asked.

“I don’t fucking care what they think,” she said. A body passed by the window. Jessie saw it as a darkening patch and realized it must be a cow. It was colored like a Hereford. The animal breathed on the glass and moved away.

“So you think they think I’m strange?” Alex asked again.

She had it now. “They,” projections of the thoughts and feelings that he could not yet control and that he wanted her to manage. “I love you Cherry,” Jessie thought. The idea and the feelings that followed fueled a strong desire to know where the cow was headed. “I’m getting out,” she said.

Alex looked down and realized he was naked except for his shirt. “Wait for me,” he said.

“To hell with that.” She zipped up her jacket and headed for the door.

He started dressing quickly.

“Wait, wait,” he snapped at her as she took the key. She was on the outside stoop before he had left their bedroom. He would she knew be stalled by wondering how to lock the door. Alex was always afraid of thieves. She descended the first set of steps she came to, turned left, then kept walking and winding around until she was certain that Alex could not find her without incredible luck. By the time she was done winding the white mist wall had descended fully to the ground. Condensation pearly on all outside surfaces and she had to put her hands in her jacket pockets. From what she could see all the shops were closed. The only human sounds she could hear were those coming from the restaurants and the brightly lit dining room windows above her.

She could hear a set of hoofs walking on stone and tried to track the animal’s movement but the sounds echoed. Standing in the mist on empty streets she felt momentarily safe and the anger that had come to her so quickly vanished just as fast and she wondered if it been a genuine feeling or just some sly distraction.

She sat down on a stoop and watched the mist pass over the road and split around

the buildings. She realized that she was getting congested. "But not sick," she said aloud. She would get cold soon. Although since she was lousy company being alone was such a relief that she did not mind the cold.

They had just begun this trip and already she was counting how many days they had left and wondering how many of them would be as hard as today. It probably was not the trip's fault. They were barely a week out. It would take at least two to relax. She worried about the cost of the trip, about the days off from work, about the dogs, and the house. Thousands of miles from home and she had brought all the bothering details of her daily life along.

"You don't ever get off work really. You don't sleep. You don't relax," Cherry said to her once. Cherry's view of life differed from Jessie's. She had been saved, adopted, as a child and from then on whatever life gave her was extra. Sometimes it seemed that they had little in common. Jessie loved the outdoors, camping, climbing, and hiking while Cherry hated being dirty, cold and uncomfortable. But because they wanted to be together Cherry accompanied Jessie and her climbing friends on some of their trips waiting in shade with a folding chair and a book while the rest climbed.

The strangeness of nighttime in the mountains also bothered Cherry who was very much a city girl. Despite the thermal bags and the long johns she got cold at night and because she was restless her friend became restless too.

After listening to her friend toss and turn, Jessie turned on her headlamp. "It's a long time to daylight if you don't sleep."

"One wonders," Cherry said, struggling inside her bag. "Why anyone does this." The wind outside brushed up against the tent and wandered off and they could hear it

wash through the high dry grass outside as it headed for the river.

“It makes you feel free,” Jessie said.

“Free of all the comforts of home.” Cherry sat up.

“How about the fact that it makes you tough, then,” Jessie said.

“Look cowgirl, I’m already tough,” Cherry said.

In elementary school they kept their backs together in the playground, ate lunch away from the crowd and when possible, sat next to one another in class. It was a school principal who suggested to their parents that the girls were too close.

Then Jessie’s father fell and died and the world took a tumble. Jessie’s mother moved to another city. Both sets of parents assumed the distance would finish the girls’ friendship. Letters and phone calls shaped their union afterwards, despite parental protest.

“It’s too dark, too quiet,” Cherry had said about the mountains. “Reminds me of dying.”

“Say what, Daisy?” Jessie said.

“What’s that sound?” Cherry said.

“There’s a river behind the trees. If you follow the line of green it will tell you where the springs and rivers flow,” Jessie said.

“What about snakes, bears and wolves?” Cherry asked.

“Nothing to be afraid of at all out here,” Jessie said to the mist as the simple memory faded and it was suddenly too cold sitting on the stoop.

The funeral had been unbearable. Someone had stood next to Jessie and someone else had walked her from the car to the grave and back to the car again. On Cherry’s

instructions the ashes were delivered to Jessie.

Jessie suspected that Cherry's had kept her sickness secret to keep from sharing an awful experience with a friend who might have had enough. Her secrecy had been a matter of gratitude. Then too she had probably stuffed the matter of any serious symptoms she had been suffering under a rosebush in an imaginary garden. If she had been scared she probably had not wanted to know and this would have meant keeping secrets. Jessie's pain for her friend would have rolled back over Cherry in a fierce flow, another burden to bear when one was dying. So like a cat that drags itself under a bush to die, Cherry hid away until the last moments after it was too late, when she abruptly needed to tell her friend the truths she had learned.

What details, Jessie asked herself would she forget as time passed? Would she forget how her friend looked? Did her friend ever look the way she remembered her now? Jessie had hundreds of photos many of them copies. Copies or not she kept them all and when she looked through them she saw that she was already forgetting specifics. A crease over Cherry's eyebrow, a scar just underneath her chin pieces of Cherry combinations of being human no one else shared with her except for her friend who she was forgetting.

The cow she had seen earlier was back. It shifted into view, its shaped separating from a block of white as it paused and lipped a windowsill. It noticed Jessie, but barely.

"You seem immune to harm, but I am concerned that they leave you outside at night," she said. It was a black cow splashed with white, a broad streak of white led to a bright pink nose. Jessie could not tell if the animal was shod or not, but when it walked she could hear a muffled plonk.

It lowered its head and investigated her, but only for a moment then it looked straight ahead. “If someone gave me three wishes they would go unused,” she told it. “So either I have all the things I need or that I have no idea what I want.” She stood and petted the cow on the head. It let her, but did not respond. “Because of course,” she said, “you are not a dog.” The heft and gravity of the animal impressed her. This creature could not drift. Jessie had the impression that this animal was so securely anchored to the ground in all the ways you could define turf that it could never get lost. Always the rock in the center of the river, it would always define its surrounding. It remained unimpressed with her existence and finally turned and headed back towards Jessie’s hotel. “I am sliding away,” she said to its broad back just before it was sucked out of view by the wisping veil that had lately captured Namche. Two gunshots high above made her think of soldiers and poachers and missing hikers. “I think we need the Internet,” she said to the cow’s backside.

The shop was empty and they were already observing lights out, but the young woman arranging bottles on a shelf in the back pointed the way towards the four machines that made them an internet café. Jessie started by searching through news articles. Her father’s death had made the news in a small way in the states and the villagers had hosted a ceremony in Nepal. Snapshots of the buildings he had sponsored and the children his work had helped educate, including monks and Jessie’s sisters, pictured with him on the days both were ordained, were spaced in between the text of a story commemorating his death. In Nepal they listed the death by misadventure. In Los Angeles it had been called a domestic incident. She left the U.S. news alone and tracked

him back to pictures of his arrival in Nepal with her. Every photo op was also a fund raising op. She considered the dates she had left, the general years and found the temple in the village where she had lived and tracked the goddesses born to it. They had been taking in children and educating them. A baby born to the temple and then sanctified as a goddess was news and eventually there she was, Ann Marie as a child. And then there was a shot of her on display and a picture of her retinue that included the young Amal, before the cancer. A dark shape stirred in her. Something rolling in its sleep underneath a black cloak, but she kept at it.

He was named as a survivor of the fire and when she followed that track she learned about the temple burning and about the children who had escaped alive and the children who had died because the doors had been bolted for some. They shut the temple down for years and the children had been dispersed back to the villages.

“Tahru,” Jessie said. “Tahru children.” And the shape that promised no good stirred again.

“It was a bad thing,” the girl in the shop was reading her screen. Jessie looked up and saw that she had spent a couple of hours in her seat. She bet that the girl wanted to go home. There would be no more business tonight.

“You know about this?” Jessie asked.

“Temboche was empty for years after the villagers burnt the temple,” the girl said.

“To stop him.” Jessie pointed at the picture of her father. “Because of the children.”

The girl nodded. “They were Tahru. No one would stand up for them.”

“The children’s bodies could not be properly buried,” the girl said. “Every one

knows of this thing.”

“What about the children who lived?” Jessie asked.

“Outcasts,” the girl said.

“They still celebrated him when he died,” Jessie said.

“The government did. His family rebuilt the village and so the government did that,” the girl said.

“I think I knew what was going on,” Jessie said. “I was young, but I think I knew.”

“It would not have helped to say so,” the girl said.

“Guess I knew that too,” Jessie said, turning off the screen and paying for her time. “A thing like that, how can the temple be holy?”

“Nothing is holy or unholy forever,” the girl said making change before Jessie stopped her and indicated the Buddha statue next to the register. He was a skinny Buddha, Siddhartha as a young man. “Always the new. Always the old burning away,” the girl said.

“Not if the secrets are still secret,” Jessie replied.

She was not ready to go back but wanted to get off the streets. Pulling her jacket tight she thought she would find a place that served American coffee.

She returned to her room after dark, long after everyone had gone to bed. Alex was splayed out across his cot with his feet hanging over the edge. He was not snoring tonight but his legs were dancing. Little kicks. They rarely slept in the same bed because

Alex was an edgy sleeper and Jessie preferred to sleep on the floor a habit she had picked up as a child when she developed a preference for sleeping in the dog pens rather than in bedrooms. She had liked the way the dogs piled together when they slept and they never seemed to mind that she was not one of them. When she got older, beds never felt quite as safe and they never felt as comfortable as the floor. Sometimes her father would forget if he found her bed empty. No one bothered Jessie now of course, but she found that she still slept more soundly on the floor.

The dice rolled right tonight. Her companion this night was a saner man than the one in Kathmandu, just a friendly German gentleman. When she left his room the mist was clearing and the sky view was so crisp it was a crystalline prism. Light reflected off icy mountaintops and snowy terrain speared the darkness at odd angles.

“Apologize to Dumbar tomorrow,” Alex said, rolling away from her.

“For what?” she said.

“He’s responsible for you up here. I had to keep him from looking for you.”

“How did you do that?”

“I lied. I told him I knew where you were.”

“When we get home maybe it will be time to quit this,” Jessie said.

“You’ll wait until we get home and I’ll decide,” Alex said. “You owe me so much now that you don’t get to choose.” She could barely hear him. He had a habit of lowering his voice when he was angry, shielding himself from his own anger. She thought about apologizing but then realized that it did not matter. Still wide awake she pulled out another detective novel, this one was about a man who collected body parts and read books about people who got lost in the snowstorms.

8

They were only doing a day hike and would stay in Namche again. So the next morning Jessie quietly dressed and went downstairs leaving most of her things in a pile on the floor. She had not slept well. All her doubts had crawled out of their caves last night and insisted on attention so she gave up trying to sleep. She had also wanted to be out of the room before Alex woke delaying the inevitable wash of regret that their combined presence caused.

The dining room was almost empty. Sherpas and hikers with long days ahead were already up and gone and those who preferred a later start or were heading home and needed less time would sleep in. Jessie picked a seat that overlooked the valley. Children dressed in green and blue climbed the hill to school while their mothers hung laundry and swept up. Shopkeepers rolled out their wares hoping to sell one more jacket, water bottle or knitted cap to hikers who were scrambling up along winding paths. Dogs stretched out on doorsteps, cattle inspected windowsills for grub and ravens, waiting for bread scraps, stared down from rooftops. Pinging hammers and buzzing trumpets banged back and forth against the valley walls. Two men heading down one road changed their minds and locked the puppy inside before they went to work. A woman sitting on a stoop added to a pile of necklaces that would sell for thirty cents in Nepal and thirty dollars on eBay. Higher up a banner *EVEREST MARATHON* was stretched across a field next to a Red Cross tent. Organizers were setting up boundaries and arranging queues for the crowd to come.

She had learned how to order breakfast from people who did not speak English. The menus were all the same all the way up, had the same selection, were the same

shape, and were even written in same curly cue font trapped underneath a plastic coating. She could point as well as anybody else and the locals knew the English words for their specialties.

The Sherpas ate in the kitchen partially to give their guests privacy and partly to get a break from their guests, but also because the dining room heater was only lit at night. In the morning the Sherpa stood around the stoves and enjoyed the final moments of unadulterated familial companionship before they separated for their clients' sakes. She could hear laughter and high-pitched conversation bubbling up in the next room. Heavy metal spoons and spatulas grated against metal pots while the cooks prepared Dal bhat, potatoes, noodle soup, eggs, oatmeal and pancakes and huge pots of boiled water for tea. The smells never wafted into the dining rooms from the kitchen, only the sounds.

Condiments and silverware were delivered to tables in wire caddies only after one had ordered. Paper napkins too small to be of service were tucked in behind the forks, one per guest. Jessie sat at the head of a long empty table and picked up a napkin. This dining room was much bigger than the others they had seen and Jessie could imagine large groups steaming in after a long day. While most teahouses could serve a dozen people this room could hold forty. Shiny beams supported a high, varnished ceiling. Silk charms dangled over several pictures of the Dali Lama and Everest. Hardwood benches were covered with thick red blankets. Cupboards behind the dining tables were filled with blankets, hats, souvenir cups, maps, pictures and bags of travel snacks. A round filled with picture postcards sat in a corner. Blankets were free if you put them back. Feeling the chill Jessie pulled a blanket from a cupboard.

“One over here too, if you please?” The only other guest was seated in a shaded

corner. He had been talking to his Sherpa while his meal awaited his pleasure. The Sherpa did not sit beside his client and the man read from a map and spoke to his guide without looking up. Once they were done the guide nodded and bowed before he retreated. The client was a well-pressed Indian with a great haircut. Jessie could smell his aftershave. As if crafted by an artist with a mind towards both beauty and strength he had hard lean features that implied perfect readiness. He was also gifted with stillness his actions were clean and controlled. He had one adornment, a tooth carved from bone that hung on a gold-brushed chain.

“Are you alone?” Jessie asked, passing the blanket to the Sherpa who passed it to his master.

“Yes.” He did not invite more conversation. She was about to open her detective book when he spoke again.

“Did you just come in, then?” he asked, selecting silverware from his basket and placing it in formal fashion on the table.

“Yesterday,” she replied, stirring sugar into a huge cup of tea someone had just set down. “I miss the fact of an entire pot of coffee for breakfast,” she said. “Cups of tea are unsatisfying and if I want two cups I have to give them more money.” He did not look as if he were waiting for friends, so she voiced her assumptions. “I don't know if I could do this trek alone,” she said.

“I had little choice,” he said. “And you will find that they drink tea here because it keeps you healthy.” He used the blanket as padding, not for warmth, then leaned back against the window spreading his arms out on the windowsills as if he were in an armchair. “There were four of us from work, but each dropped out until I was alone.” He

shrugged. "My wife tried to convince me to stay but then my brother asked me to come. "

"He lives here," she said.

He nodded. "He has lived in both places. But trekking does not interest him. He comes along mainly to accompany me and it looks like we might make it up and back quite quickly so he can return to his wife more quickly. She is also local and also doesn't like to hike." He looked as if he were free of the same sickness Jessie endured, some of which she assumed was elevation sickness. She tried small sips of tea. The drink was strong and hurt her stomach if she drank too fast. Then her watch buzzed and she took her Diamox and a handful of pills that she had popped into her pocket before she had come down.

"You look well," Jessie said not certain that she liked the man but certain that she did not want to sit in silence. She found him somewhat threatening. He made her feel as if he did not belong indoors, as if there were not enough space in the room for them both.

"We came up from Lukla in one go and I feel fine." His breakfast arrived. It was comprised of an enormous pancake, a bowl of heated muesli, and eggs. He was a condiment man three bottles and two packs of sugar came out of the caddy. A thick dose of ketchup and hot chili was sloshed on the eggs, lots of honey was spilled onto the pancake, and about a pint of milk was mixed with the muesli.

Her meal, a bowl of oatmeal, arrived soon after his. She smelled it and pushed it aside for the moment. "The hike in Namche killed us," she said.

"It will separate the weak from the strong," he replied, spooning his way industriously through his cereal. "My brother is not doing well either. He is ill and though he's lived here for many years the extra altitude we pick up in Namche is slowing him

down.” His movements were unhurried and efficient. Though he used a spoon like everyone else there was something about the way he wielded it that seemed extraordinarily measured. Jessie bet his Sherpa was making no mistakes.

The clouds were vaporizing behind him and the mountaintops were rising to the fore. The resulting light backlit his figure and features so that she could see the shape of him better than particular aspects. He seemed to be made of clean lines and sharp angles.

“Less than half the hikers make it all the way,” he said. “Do you think you will succeed?” He finished his cereal and let his guide take the bowl away before he started in on the rest of his meal. Watching him eat was making Jessie ill. She looked out the window and focused on breathing through her nose.

“We are tired but we have time. We will wait here today,” she said.

“You look familiar to me,” he said picking up a fork.

“Did you see us coming uphill?” she asked.

“Maybe I saw you at the airport in Kathmandu, you and your son. Maybe at the mall when you bought the Thangka.”

“Boyfriend,” she supplied the term as a matter of clarity for he had now thrown her into a terrified state of mixed memories. “You saw us at the airport?”

“Sure.” He nodded and severed a pancake wedge from the whole.

“Did you make up with your wife before you left home,” she asked unable to fix whether she’d seen him as well.

“Sorry?”

“You said that she upset when you left?”

He shrugged. “In the end I was going. If this is your destination, you have to get

here. The newcomers have to see and the returnees can't get enough."

"Where are you from?" Jessie asked instead of, why are you talking to me?"

"New Delhi," he replied. "My home is near the airport. I travel quite a bit."

"What do you do?" she asked instead of, what the hell is going on.

"I trade resources or I transport them," he said.

"Under the radar?" She guessed.

"Now, that's not a polite question," he said.

"I saw your necklace and forgot my manners," she said.

He touched it. "It is a trophy. It is a rhino horn, set in a gold crown.

"I lived here once," she said. "People get hurt from poaching. People get killed.

Animals die out," she said.

He stopped eating and tapped his fork against his plate, as he seemed to consider his next words. "Have you been to India?" he asked.

"I am reading a detective novel set in Bombay. It's written by a journalist who lived there." A memory of a page from the book brought an image of bodies floating down the Ganges to her mind. "It sounds like an awful place."

He put down his fork and wiped his hands with his napkin. "What does your book say?"

"It says that there are bodies on top of bodies in the cities, that India is filthy, and there are shitty living conditions, horrible crime, unbelievable poverty and a deep rooted depravity that happens when too many people live in one place. It says there is extreme pollution, sickness, and a government that is corrupt beyond comprehension."

He nodded, "But Mumbai is filled with people because it is where you can find

great success. My home is a country of such variety there is no single way to describe it. India is ugly, vast, and various. Anyone, anything that cannot fight dies out. It is the same here. You earn your breathing room.”

“You were at the airport with Amal,” she said, whispering the end of the sentence. “The crowd didn’t know it. They automatically stepped out of your way, but they were scared of you. You were at the hotel driving a jeep.” She felt herself speaking whatever she thought without filter. Knowing the information felt like staring into the barrel of a gun. As it was she was skittering back and forth across the logic of the conversation hoping for an answer, wishing for none.

“Now,” he said. “Let me do you.”

Though she had stepped into a game she did not want to play, she shrugged, and let him to take his turn.

He spoke between taking bites of food. “You’re here because Nepal is filled with strangers. You sit at the end, not in the middle of the room. Pictures of this trip are taken with a camera that you just bought.” He gestured toward the case by her side that held ashes instead of her camera, “If you get home, they will become a book on the coffee table and you’ll paste the blog notes inside the front cover and set it underneath the statue of Buddha that you will buy in the square along with several t-shirts once you get back to the capital. When my brother and I see you again you’ll be dirtier certainly, but no wiser. And you will not admit this to your friends, but you will be glad to be shut of Nepal. You should turn around now, in fact. You must have enough pictures already.”

“I have ones of Amal,” she lied.

“My brother is sick,” he said. “It has made him feel urgent about many things. If

you go home now, it would be easier than continuing on.”

“I’ve already seen the girl,” she said. “And someone here killed my friend.”

The man’s guide came in and whispered to him. He nodded and stood to follow.

“It will take the entire day to reach our next stop,” he said. “Did you know they are bringing bodies down off Everest this week?”

“Maybe sometimes we have to finish whatever we start.” Jessie said. She thought of ashes and smooth wooden boxes, hair clippings, fingernails trimmed the way they had never been trimmed in life, sheets folded around bodies. Shards of glass, scars and diet sodas sitting on the floor while paint rollers remade a room. She thought of everything in pieces. She thought of six kinds of death and could not breathe for a second. Then she thought about stupas with hearts inside and kneeling before them and then saw that he was still standing by his table watching her and she knew only seconds had passed in the time she had spent fixating on her pieces.

“You’ll stop at all the memorials all the way up and wonder about the bodies in the ground,” he said. “You’ll wonder how it felt to die on the mountain. What was that last breath like, and still you won’t retrieve what you think you’ve lost up here.”

“I can’t go back without finishing this,” she said.

He stopped by her table as he headed out the door but then Alex entered the room and he had to step out of the way which meant he had to back away. “You should eat your food,” he said as was leaving, “You’ll need your strength.”

“Who was that?” Alex nudged her aside so that he could sit.

“Alex,” Jessie replied. “I need to tell you about the temple.”

She had not spoken loudly enough. He reached for a menu because he had not

heard her. The sun was fully out by now and the valley was suffused a warming glow. Jessie listened for footsteps heading out the door and went to a window that overlooked the stoop. Two men, her breakfast companion and his brother whose face was hidden by a broad brimmed hat were strapping on their backpacks. Afraid that they might look up, she came away from the window.

“I resolve to be nicer to you today,” she said to Alex. “That guy says they are dragging bodies down off the mountain.”

“As long as it’s not mine,” he replied, opening the menu. “Here,” he said, handing over something cupped in his hand.

“Guy was creepy,” she said losing her resolve to tell him another story she should have told him long ago. She reached out and he dropped her bracelet into her hand. She startled when he handed it to her. It was the one she had lost in Katmandu.

“I want a truce today,” Alex said. Dunbar poked his head in at that moment and gestured that he and Dahn would be outside when it was time to go.

“You were sitting outside on a bench in the cold trying to smoke a cigarette when I first saw you,” Jessie said. The clasp was not doing well. She put it in her pocket. She had been fourteen when Cherry had given it to her. It was a cheap thing bought at a *Pic N Save* during the days when they gave one another best friend trinkets on birthdays and such.

“It was the end of the semester,” Alex said. “I probably looked like hell.” The menu frustrated him. When the waiter appeared in order to refill Jessie’s up, Alex ordered the first three things on the list appearing to leave the results to luck. “I feel better today than yesterday,” he said. “Much better.”

“You started talking about Henry Rollins and I pretended I knew who he was because I wanted you to keep talking to me.” She shoved her cup over to Alex so they could share.

He took a sip, grimaced and took another sip then he looked at her. “Guy really wiggled you out.” Too late, he looked out the window where he might have seen both Amal and his brother.

“All kinds of freaks take this trip,” she said.

“What’s this?” he asked. Though he had already ordered he pointed out an item on the menu and so she tried to keep her word about being nicer and tried to pay attention. She realized that she felt very foolish for being upset about anything at all before today because now that she had truly been frightened all her old fears seemed small. The feeling she was left with now was that of being hunted. They were climbing the slopes today for acclimation purposes. She was looking forward to a hard hike that would clear her mind but felt too weak to leave the table. She had an idea that she wanted to give the men a head start.

“Will you be angry,” she asked, “if we don’t make it to the top?”

“Everyone makes it,” Alex said.

She did not argue with him, but the further they got from where she had once felt sad, but safe the more frightened she was becoming. The horns and the hammers still ringing now sounded like warnings and aware that they were steps ahead of the monsoon season and she was beginning to dislike the mist.

“Ready?” Dumbar asked, speaking from the doorway. “Dahn will be on his own this day. It’s just us.” Though he gestured that they could wait Alex folded his meal into

his pancake and made ready to bring it along.

“There is a small airport on our first stop,” Dumbar said heading down. “Then the trail leads to the hotel but it all begins on the opposite side of the valley so we will have to cut through Namche. It will be mild. A hat, water and sunblock, shorts, t-shirts and a windbreaker will be enough. Maybe, warmer items for the airport,” Dumbar said. As their warm items were already packed it was just a matter of heading for the door.

A desk clerk had returned Cherry's bracelet to Alex. It looked like gold and was probably plastic. He had no idea how it had survived all the years. It had a nameplate with Cherry's name on it and he supposed Cherry had one of her own with *Jessie* written across the golden square. Something so valuable to her and she had just lost it. He did not know why he had held onto it or why he had chosen to return it this morning except she had seemed flustered and the bracelet bothered her even more. She was probably wondering why she could not remember losing it. She was drifting off in so many ways. It was hard to keep her attention on anything for very long. Whenever he spoke she seemed to wait him out until she could divert the conversation. No matter what he was talking about, she was not interested. He did not interest her. He wondered how long he was going to stand for it and what he would do about it in the end. He was getting stronger as the days progressed and she was not. He was not happy she was ill but he was enjoying himself. He hated her but was currently just enjoying the feeling without intention. They were heading ever higher. Maybe it was just that he did better at altitude. Maybe they would finally separate.

9

The trail to Namche's airport squirreled up and away from the valley. The tree line and other paths leading upward quickly faded away until just rock and scrub was the face of the world by the time the one trail emerged. As it was common practice for tourists to spend a day in Namche acclimatizing the passage between the town and the airport had long been overmarched and mashed away by day hikers. Although the trio tried to keep to a single track, as Alex and Jessie began to tire they stopped trying to be kind to the environment and started trudging straight up into the brush. The hill they climbed was gentler than the hike into Namche but still steep enough to command attention. So they kept their heads down and as a distraction talked about mountains, religion, dogs, jobs and school. Once those topics were exhausted Dumbar finally began to talk about the mountains and then about himself.

That the mountains were eternal was a fact Dumbar never questioned; he and his friends were stunned when they saw that tourism could destroy them. He liked that his faith a Buddhist-Hindu hybrid embraced so many holidays and believed some but not all of the religious myths he knew so well. He professed a desire to improve his life, but stopped talking about leaving Nepal for a better job once he realized that his clients lacked connections or any information that might help him achieve this goal. He liked dogs, but they were just dogs and most Sherpa had other concerns although he confessed that particularly wealthy Nepalese treated pets like family. He had tried to get as much schooling as possible and if the opportunity arose he would get more. Part of the reason his sister lived with him was her desire to pursue educational goals beyond what was proper or necessary in their mother's eyes. He respected the achievements of his female

boss, who owned the company and admired the fact that her daughters were highly educated, but he also knew that what women wanted was never as important as what men did. Jessie said that she had read that suicide was the principal cause of death for Nepalese women of childbearing age and he refused to believe her. When she observed that she had not seen any women guides. Dumbar admitted that women guides were few but he was certain that the fact of a few overcame the fact that there were only a few. Alex, mentally and physically, drifted off.

It was not until they stopped to drink and looked up that someone noticed the view. The mountains were now a dark line breaking against a stark blue sky. The rocky profiles once distant strangers had now morphed into high jagged sisters that owned the view. Capped by swirling furies the huge dappled aspects were stippled with melding shades of grey. Snowfall sprays hissed down angled faces and piled up on vertical edges altering hardened profiles and creating blanketed trails that looked passable from afar. In many places the snow was cracking the rocks apart and washing the exposed talus downhill where huge stones packed up into rock piles composed of broken boulders and sandy pits.

“My sisters and I named the mountains when I was a child,” Jessie said while Alex took pictures.

“Every child dreams of climbing them,” Dumbar said. “Then of course you grow up.”

“Grow up or give up,” Jessie said. “We had great plans.”

“Change of plans,” he replied. “Thangka figures are often inspired by the mountains. Because the mountains should make you remember and remind you to forget.”

“To pass on,” she said.

He nodded.

“Not easy to do,” she replied, to which he had no comment.

Though an impossible idea, the notion of walking from Nepal into India along these high edges was inevitable. They also talked about failure.

“Almost everyone makes it to the top,” Dumbar said to Alex, referring to the warnings had Jessie had repeated. The men had stopped to eat a pack of lemon cookies. While Jessie hiked on they took their time, winnowing away at the contents.

“What about her?” Alex asked sharing his water bottle. Jessie was beginning to flag and watching her he realized that he was more tired than he thought. When he took another cookie he also realized that his guide had finally found a way to slow him down.

“She is too far ahead,” Dumbar replied. When he had rattled the package at Jessie she had claimed an upset stomach and kept walking.

“You ever tell a client to turn back?” Alex said.

“They have to decide alone,” Dumbar said finished the last cookie and folding the container so that it would not spill.

“Isn’t that dangerous?” Alex asked.

The container unfolded the moment Dumbar released it and drained crumbs into his pack. Because he was more like Alex than Jessie, he had to clean the mess before he

could move on. “You cannot choose for other people,” he said shaking out his pack.

“She may not be able to stop,” Alex said. Dumping the pack, Dumbar scattered the rest of the cookie bits on the ground. An easy breeze, bringing the smell of soap and lilacs with it, rushed upslope, and stirred dirt with crumble, and before Dumbar was done zipping up, a flock of small birds had landed and were pecking at the sugar bits.

“She will retire if she must,” Dumbar said carefully walking around the little creatures because they would not move out of the way.

Alex looked up and saw Jessie pass the crest of a small hill and drop out of view. “She’s not good at turning around,” he said.

“Is it her family’s way?” Dumbar asked hefting his pack onto his shoulders.

“Never met her family,” Alex said. “She doesn’t like them.”

“We will try to see that she gets where she wants to go and leave the rest alone,” Dumbar said.

Up ahead Jessie struggled with exhaustion and her backpack. The straps stretched as they weathered and so when she walked, they would loosen and the pack would slide backwards and ride up on her hips. She had to stop in order to rest and readjust the pack on several occasions and the effort was telling. Hearing footsteps behind she looked up and saw Dumbar pulling out another pack of cookies from a backpack that seemed too small to contain so many other little packets. She shook her head as he offered it and when he refused her refusal, she stuffed them into her pockets as the idea of eating was beyond comprehension. Then, trying to prove how well she was doing, she moved on before she felt well enough to do so. The airstrip was coming into view and Alex, inspired by the sight of satellite dishes, picked up his pace and passed them both.

“The airport is only halfway,” Dumbar warned him. “The hotel is farther.”

Alex waved away the advice and rushed ahead.

“Do all your clients ignore you?” Jessie asked.

“Until they learn,” Dumbar replied.

“The learning curve must be steepish,” she said.

“It is inevitable,” he replied.

It took them another half hour to conquer a rounding knoll that overlooked the unpaved airstrip and ten more minutes to navigate down into the field. Namche’s airport was basically a flat bit of grass on a mountaintop. Nestled inside a depression, it was hidden to those below. One cinderblock bunker squatted on a high point in the back of the field while four towers fanned out in front of the building. A rigid windsock snapped in the wind that was also trammeling a small plane and two parachutists fighting their way toward a group of land bound spectators.

The wind itself was a freezing force. More shadow and fewer windbreaks had turned the strip into a kind of chilling wind tunnel. Alex and Jessie pulled out windbreakers, caps and gloves while they watched. The crowd was divided. Some waited for the skydivers and some were gathered by two planes near the end of the strip opposite the bunker, where about thirty climbers, recognizable from their gear and their demeanor, hauled bodies from the belly of one plane and stowed them in another.

The bodies reminded Jessie of others and so she watched the sky. The plane in the air had pulled up and circled around and the divers seemed in danger of missing the airport altogether.

“They are breaking a record,” Dumbar said. “They have parachuted from,” he

started to say meters then considered his audience and recalculated, “29,000 feet.”

It took the skydivers twenty more minutes to angle in. As they neared the ground Jessie realized that her impression of drifting divers was wrong, they were hurtling to the ground beneath their chutes. As their bodies pulled against straining guy lines the men tugged on other cords forcing the chutes into circling descents. One man followed the other keeping a safe distance while the wind filled the chutes and flattened bright red jumpsuits to their bodies. The divers covered the last thousand feet in a rapid descent casting shadows that spun across the figures of the men and women shifting the body bags. The closer they got the longer the shadows became and the longer the shadows lingered. They made two low laps then dropped to the ground, each man expertly toggling himself to a soft landing and quickly bundled his chute lest the wind fill it and drag him down the mountain.

The pilots on the ground now boarded their vessels and remaining team members who would have to hike home began to collect their gear some of which was rolling away. A fat woman lifted a pack from the ground unintentionally freeing her hat that then shot towards Jessie who caught it and passed it back. The woman ran to her and was immediately followed by one of the ubiquitous black dogs that walked the trails. This one had a herding shape but was too solid to be called a shepherd; it almost had the heft of a Labrador but was too lean. Its coat was thick and wiry, its ears soft and triangular. It came to Jessie easily, without fear and moved in closer when she beckoned it.

The woman grabbed her hand when she reached out. “Don’t touch them,” she said. “They’ve had no shots.”

“They look healthy enough,” Jessie replied holding her free hand out to the

animal so that it could sniff her and be scratched. “Anyway I can’t help myself with dogs.” She had to pull her sleeve up and when she did her bracelet unclasped. She caught it with one hand and continued to scratch the dog with the other.

“I know what you mean, Dear, but don’t get attached and don’t feed them,” the woman said. “You’ll do them no favors.” She waved her thanks and turned away to join her friends who ready to go and when she left the dog followed her.

“Bet you weren’t allowed to have dogs as a kid,” Alex said, as Jessie handed him the bracelet and held out her wrist.

“I had them when I was a kid. My parents tried raising shepherds.” Jessie said. “Then my father decided one day that he was done with dogs and they were put down.”

“He was an ugly dude, your father,” Alex said.

“He was unbound, nothing mattered but what he wanted when he wanted it,” Jessie replied. “I try not to think of him.”

“You can get this fixed in Namche I bet.” Alex’s fingers slipped on the clasp and the bracelet fell. He succeeded the second time.

Once it was secure, Jessie automatically twisted the links so the nameplate was up top. “Cherry visited me once before I knew she was sick,” she said. “I told her that she looked bad. She didn’t tell me then and I was too stupid to guess.” Her windbreaker was doing its job against the elements but was useless in combating the chill from within. It was a drowning hollow and she did not want it to grow so she took a deep breath, and took a moment to notice the sun, the people, the two planes, their propellers and wings and wheels, the mountain tops, the dust, the cups, the cookies, the old woman’s hat, and the snow, the yellow grass and graying scrub resisting the wind. She realized that Alex

was waiting for her to finish her thought. “We were fighting,” she said, “I hadn’t figured out how to say I was wrong and I couldn’t admit that if I was right, I was at least sorry for being a bitch.” The fat woman and her friends were stuffing the last of the used cups and plastic cookie wrappers generated by their group into big yellow duffle bags. They were laughing at how hard it was to fit everything into the bag and yelling at their other friends to help. The sun was still at a shadow-casting angle. As the figures moved on the strip light and dark shapes shifted across the tarmac mirroring happiness or maybe just life lived.

“What was the fight about?” Alex asked.

“She’d lied to me,” Jessie said, still watching the reflections of the group on the ground. A shadow flitting long as an arm stretched across a gap in the dirt and then took on an impossible shape as it joined another.

Both planes began to wheel into position for departure. Like Lukla this strip was 1,500 feet long. Each plane would have to glide seconds after, and if, they achieved lift off speed against the wind. They could hear the winding up of the engines and the whine of the propellers spinning up to speed. The planes lined up at the point of the airstrip farthest from the launch point and revved. Inside the pilots checked whatever pilots were supposed to check against lists on clipboards.

“What was the lie?” Alex asked.

“She lied about my mother.” The planes were very small. Jessie could see the pilots pulling levers and twisting knobs through the windows of the front cabins. It was the kind of take off that would require no mistakes. Inside the bodies would be strapped tightly into place so they would not shift and throw the planes off balance when they

launched into that first drop off the strip hoping to catch the updrafts just right.

“I’d cut my mother out of my life. Once my dad died she and I didn’t even have arguments to keep us talking to one another. So I cut her out.”

The planes headed into the sun so that their shadows followed them and stretched out as they left the ground one by one. Each plane lifted off a few feet before the runway ended, dropped a little and then glided upward and off heading down the mountain.

“How’d your father die?”

“Stroked out. He fell on the floor through a glass door in front of me and died.”

She heard the buzzing of the planes and imagined them leaving the mountains and landing in Kathmandu where she supposed the bodies would again be shifted into other planes. “After that my mother and I had words, they just didn’t mean much and we didn’t have them often. Where’s the plane that hasn’t landed yet?”

“Screw the other plane,” he said, holding her arm so she would not walk off. She considered making him wait for no good reason except her stubbornness but it was too cold to be stubborn.

“I didn’t like my father, that was being disloyal. I hated my mother who didn’t like me and felt I owed her for making her return to the states. I didn’t talk to my sisters who were on her side and I saw her once just before she died, in a restaurant. She thanked me for a birthday card and I realized that someone had been sending her cards in my name.”

‘Not all along,’ Cherry had said. Jessie started fiddling with her bracelet lightly testing the links and twisting them.

“Cherry said that maybe someday I would want to know my mother even if she

was a bad mother and then before she died Cherry told me that my mother knew where my baby had gone.”

“I don’t understand,” Alex said.

“The girl is here. My sisters have her here.”

“You want to see her. But it’s likely that she won’t know you and she won’t need you. She might wish you’d never come,” he said. “She’s been raised by people who don’t like you.”

“I will bury Cherry in a stupa on a mountain top and I will find the girl,” she said.

“If it hurts her,” he said.

“If it hurts everybody,” she replied. “When they took that baby and then kept that secret all together they caused me pain.” Finally the bracelet folded under the pressure and the clasp that was already weakened snapped in two. Jessie held the broken thing in her hand and decided whether to throw it away.

“If you can bear with me, Alex,” she said giving him the bracelet. “I really have no idea what I am doing.”

He took the bracelet but he didn’t answer. And she had a feeling that she had not spoken loud enough for him to have heard the last bit.

After the airport the trails became even steeper and rougher. Then the dirt trail that had been diving in between and out of bushes and rock piles suddenly ran into a set of wide brick steps that cut through a patch of well-trimmed trees and ornate flower beds and ended at second set of stone steps and a sheltered porch. The building seemed to rise to the foreground as they climbed and even Dumbar was sweating by the time the peaked rooftops of the *Everest View Hotel* confronted them. Commanding the vast grey backdrop provided by the valley below its presence made Jessie feel as if she were on an island rather than a mountaintop. The porch introduced the lobby mastered by huge windows and dark paneling. Signed pictures of climbers and trekkers decorated the walls that were breached at five sides, by hallways leading to dining areas, other lobbies and a back porch.

As was his habit once they reached a place, Dumbar moved ahead and quickly disappeared into the one of the dim hallways while Jessie and Alex continued down into a restaurant where they found the entrance onto another terrace surround by a low rock wall and shadowed by a complex bracketed roof structure comprised of a sloping roof with upturned corners. Though the terrace was large enough to contain a dozen tables most visitors preferred to picnic on the walls rather than use the tables and chairs that were sitting in shadow. Constant exercise, open air and exhilarating height had made the trekkers restless. Most, if they decided to sit at a table, could not stay there for long and most of the tables supported trays and thermoses, but did not accommodate guests. If people were eating or drinking they tended to carry their consumables with them. Most of the tourists were smokers and almost all of the smokers were Asian or European. Everyone wore a hat and everyone smelled of sunblock. With the hotel to her back, Jessie

could see Mt. Everest and Mt. Lhotse on the left and Mt. Ama Dablam on the right.

“They all get climbed?” Alex asked.

“Yup. The other two are almost as high as Everest. The poster inside claims that this is the highest hotel in the world too,” Jessie said to him as he scanned the mountaintops with binoculars.

“Course it is,” Alex replied lowering the glasses. “Everything up here is “the highest one in the world.” He nudged her forward. She had the water and he still had some coconut cookies. They walked to the low wall and like everyone else, ate standing. “Dumbar says the snow is melting on Everest,” Alex said. They stepped up onto the short wall that separated the terrace from the slope. Across the valley another village on a flattened field lay below them. Well below the trail they would eventually follow, it was cradled in a smaller valley. A maze of thin trails cut downward from the village’s outermost buildings. Yak strolled among the trails and grazed. In the hills above the village a herd of wild goats perched the cresting hillsides and stared down at the yaks. “He says that the climb is more dangerous without the snow because snow is solid and can be climbed but the rock underneath is in bits and pieces.”

“Global warming kills climbers,” Jessie said.

“I am beginning to understand why you liked it and what a deal it was that you were willing to stop the trips for a while for Cherry.” He stepped behind her and she as reminded of the first time she had wondered what it would be like to sleep with him.

“It was probably not an easy thing to date with me when Cherry was always part of the package,” Jessie said. Alex moved away and the wind cut between them brushing some trash across the ground between their feet.

“She never liked me,” he said. “But I also don’t think that she cared one way or the other since I was always going to be less important.” It was an old accusation and he said it without much heat. On the day Jessie remembered, Alex had looked beautiful. He had been standing in the sun talking excitedly about Henry Rollins and smoking one of his badly rolled cigarettes. It had been a long semester and she realized listening to him how lonely she had been.

“She was the only family I had left,” Jessie said not bothering to deny a failure of loyalty she had never tried to fix. “I grew up with people who said I was a liar. She saved me.”

“Making it impossible for anyone else to be as trustworthy,” Alex said.

Movement in the hillside caught Jessie’s attention. She pointed at it. “What is that?”

A ragged spine of rock outlining the far end of the valley dropped to a low wall much like the one Jessie and Alex used. It looked old pieces of it had broken away making v-shaped gaps in its original stony line. Just behind it two figures, too far away to clearly identify, were struggling.

Alex looked through his binoculars. “A guy and girl,” he said.

The man grabbed the girl dragging her closer to the tilting wall. Just at the edge she pushed him back and swung at him. He grabbed her arm, spun her around and shoved her off the mountain. The slope was naturally terraced. She screamed in that second of being completely airborne then her body hit the series of terraces before it hit a gentler slope and rolled away out of sight below the village.

The man stepped to the edge and looked down. Then he quickly turned and

walked away taking a trail that dropped below the crest and led away from the village where there did not seem to be anyone outside to notice had just happened.

“He pushed her,” Jessie said.

“What the hell?” Alex whispered.

“He pushed her,” Jessie said looking around and realizing no one else had seen a thing.

“Come on off,” Dumbar said grabbing Jessie’s arm and she realized that he had just kept her from falling over their wall.

“He pushed her,” Jessie said to Dumbar.

“Pushed who?” Dumbar asked following her direction and seeing nothing except what he expected to see.

“Didn’t you see?” she asked looking to Alex for verification.

“You yelled,” Dumbar replied “and I saw you falling.”

“What the hell?” she said to Alex who shook his head. A yak bell clanked as the herd, displaced by rocks still shifting as a result of the woman’s fall, moved away. Apart from their movements there remained no sign that a woman had just died on the mountain. The scream if there had been one, seemed to have been gutted by the distance and turned into just another wild sound.

“She’s gotta be dead,” Alex said.

“Is that the trail to Everest?” she asked. They would be following the murderer up it if this were so. She had to ask twice before Alex shook his head as in, “I don’t know.”

“What should we do?” she asked.

“Shut up,” he said pulling her away from the wall.

“What if she’s alive?” She looked across the way trying to track where the body fell trying to discover where it might lay.

“No way.” Alex said trying to draw her attention.

“What if?” They were quietly struggling. Alex kept trying to turn her back to the mountain while she resisted.

“Did we see his face?” he asked. She stopped struggling and finally looked at him. She shook her head. “Do you think he saw ours?” She shook her head again. “Then he’s on this mountain with us and we have days to go of us hiking around strangers with nowhere to go if he saw us. Keep our mouths shut and maybe we will be safe.”

“Safer than she was.”

“She who?”

“You saw it.”

“I saw nothing. Like everyone else up here.” She looked around and saw that Alex was correct.

“Jesus. Did he see us?”

“He see us, what?” He shook her to make his point.

“I can’t breathe.” He held her up as she tried to sit down right where they stood.

“I can’t breathe.”

“Are you feeling well?” Dumbar asked.

“No,” Alex said holding her more tightly until she pushed him back so that she could find a chair.

“We could go back,” Jessie said. “Go back to Lukla.”

“I didn’t see him clearly,” Alex replied. “There is no way to hide from him except

to pretend we have not seen a thing.”

“So keep walking.”

“Keep walking as if nothing had happened.”

Not wanting to return alone, they caught up with the bigger group on the long walk back and stayed with them until they returned to Namche.

There was an envelope waiting for them at the hotel.

“From your sisters,” Alex said.

Jessie had gone upstairs and when she had returned Dumbar was holding an envelope and Alex was holding the contents.

“What is Mahaparinirvana?” Alex asked, reading Jessie’s letter.

“That’s right, it’s in May,” she said to Dumbar who nodded.

She could see through to the tearoom and then through the windows that expanded the view to that of the valley. The way the mountains cupped the village reminded her of the stories of gods. The way the prayer flags strung in rows rustled in the wind and drew her attention to the figures of soldiers and monks and children walking the villages trails their dark figures highlighted by the endless sky. It all reminded her of the stories she learned as a child and then the view brought her back to ground again and she looked down at the paper Alex was still holding. “It’s the month of Buddha’s birthday,” she said.

“A whole month?” Alex asked.

“Different calendars, Chinese, Gregorian, Buddhist. In Nepal the day falls at the end of the month but there are several remembrances. Mahaparinirvana is...” she could

not remember enough of the details and looked to Dumbar for an answer.

Dumbar feeling something in the envelope shook it and poured out a final object that he inspected before handing it to Jessie. “We celebrate Buddha’s Nirvana, his awakening.” Dumbar said.

Alex handed him the letter. “I can’t read it.”

“This asks you to attend the temple ceremonies in Temboche,” Dumbar said. “We will get there in time. But the sender, this is not a woman’s name on the envelope.” He handed it to Jessie and pointed out the name. “Prakash Patel.” It was a formal invitation and the letterhead had a logo of the lazy D. And this,” Dumbar held a charm with an eye in the middle surrounded by a series of coils, “is to ward off evil.”

“Can you ask, was this here all day?” Jessie asked Dumbar. He took the envelope and left to check.

“He left it this morning,” Dumbar said on his return. “We missed it because the clerk was not at the desk when we left.”

Jessie held up the charm so that Dumbar could examine it.

“It’s not right,” Jessie said, rereading the letter again. “A formal invitation is not like my sisters. And I don’t know any Prakash. So an invitation to come to a place I was coming to anyway and am not welcome, and a charm to ward off evil. Please come, but it’s bad here.” She dropped the charm into a pocket along with the letter.

“Do your sisters think you superstitious?” Dumbar asked.

“It’s been many years since I’ve seen them but they would assume I am still not a fan of magic. My lack of faith in anything that I cannot see for myself has always been a point of contention.”

Yelling from across the valley on the crest where the temple, the school and the base stood brought their attention to the door. Excitement was attracting the attention of the crowds below and the news was drawing a large number of people up the trail. Villagers headed up while tourists sat and waited for the news that would inevitably trickle back. Dumbar excused himself. He and Dahn hurried down through winding crumbling paths quickly getting lost in the warren of shops and below. Up top soldiers were already fending off the crowd. They stood in front of a truck where two men were unloading something from the back.

“A person,” Jessie said.

“A body,” Alex said. The soldiers carted it onto the base and closed the gates behind them after which people re-disbursed into the valley fanning out and returning to their previous occupations.

Dumbar appeared more quickly than Jessie or Alex had imagined possible given the distance traveled and the people he had to circle and cross on his way back and forth. “It is a young woman,” he said. “They believe she was riding and fell. She is dead. They found no horse, but she is dressed to ride.”

“Why the crowd?” Alex asked stepping in between Jessie and the door.

“She was a local. She was known,” Dumbar replied. Jessie pushed passed both the men and headed for the door.

“They will not let her see anything,” Dumbar said to Alex who shook his head.

“Do you have local police up here? The soldiers I guess,” Alex said to Dumbar.

“It’s best to stay away from them,” Dumbar said.

“We need to report a death,” Alex replied.

This one rock she had selected with care. It was to be the heart of the last of the stupas. It was green for the girl who loved summertime. Remembering that these were the places for all the trinkets she had collected over the years, she searched her pockets and found a coin she had picked up in Namche. There were also a handful of mandalas for the day at the river and lighters for all the times Alex had tried to quit smoking. She filled the hole with all the pieces and putting all the attachments away where they belonged. She also placed pieces of her childhood in one of the stupas so that memory would be put to rest. There wasn't one for the baby girl who never really belonged to her mother in the first place. To finish the job she smoothed the ground and felt nobs underneath the earth, rock pieces that she would need to dig out. This would leave holes and she would have to fill them in and pack them so tightly with earth that no one would ever be able to tell. She took her time making the ground perfect running her hands over the result making certain that the groundwork was perfect before she built on it.

"You're the child who never leaves home," Cherry told her. They were sitting on the roof playing cards. The hot summer made the rooftop inevitable. If there were a breeze, one could only catch it from on high. They could hear Cherry's parents below cleaning up after dinner inaudible pieces of their conversation drifting up from open windows hurried along by the fans set on window sills.

"I have left home and I was thrown out," Jessie said. They had been forbidden to climb to the roof but it was also the only place they could smoke which they had also been forbidden to do. Cherry liked it less than Jessie who in the service of excess was cultivating both a smoking routine and a serious coffee habit.

“No, you only moved. Home came with you. I see your sisters and your mother in your face all the time.” Cherry said moving so that she could rest her feet against the chimney and still get a clear view of the roads leading from Hollywood proper into the hills.

“I look like them,” Jessie said.

“You know what I mean,” Cherry replied.

“The losses pile up.” Jessie said. She distained the supposed safety of the chimney and was sitting closer to the edge of the roof. “They get connected. Like a lot of lives running together.”

“You can survive this,” Cherry moved a card from a pile into her hand and then let the hand drop because she was really too tired for the game.

Jessie took her hand and began playing hers and Cherry’s. “I get tired of trying too much. I get tired of getting up.” The sounds of the washing machine were low but the constancy of it emphasized Jessie’s sense of time winding down. She continued to play in order to keep her panic at bay so that her friend would not see. Aces over Jacks, but tens were an even stronger play.

“If you loved me you would stop talking this shit.” Cherry said putting her hand out to stop the senseless shuffling.

“If I didn’t love you I would died already.”

The old woman wiped dust from her hands. They were all mixed together now memories of the baby, the dogs and Cherry and Jessie; all the things she needed. The effort of finishing was too much for today. She suddenly did not have the heart to finish.

Suddenly she felt as if all the stupas were an extended keening as if she had been screaming all along the row. What would she do after? She wished she had not gotten too old for dogs. She missed the feeling that there was one kind of creature in the world that she could make completely safe.

10

They sold souvenirs at the military base, key rings, bracelets, and amulets that meant nothing to the natives but sold for ten bucks a piece. They also offered an array of commemorative coins with pictures of the royal family on them. The base stood at official start of the trail towards Everest where the marathon from Everest ended. Technically the trinkets belonged to an old man who sold them to people trying to get rid of their cash by collecting what he assured them were lucky bits for their way up. He sat amidst a circle of incense and claimed to bless the trinkets. Trekkers bought them because he was a poor old man and good luck could be bought by helping men like him. He also swept a portion of the trail and kept it free of trash. He kept his belongings in a hut that was nestled into the side of a hill near his vending post.

“He lives there all year?” Jessie asked the young soldier standing before her.

He was busy filling out a form. “When winter comes he retreats to Lukla,” he said. The old man was closing up shop for the night and was carrying his merchandise into the building that was empty except for Jessie, Alex and two other soldiers whose duties seem to be few.

“He can just leave his stuff here?” Jessie asked watching a soldier help the old man load these items just inside the stoop.

“It is good luck,” the soldier said.

“It’s nice helping him out,” Jessie said.

“We are Buddhist,” the soldier replied. “It is our obligation.”

Some of the old man’s wares had made it to the soldier’s desk. Jessie picked up a coin with the face of a presumptive prince and flipped it between her fingers until she

realized she was annoying the soldier. So she pocketed the piece and while he finished writing, she paid out. The story she and Alex had told was such that she was wondering if they were going to be arrested for being stupid. The guards at the gate had taken her after she reported what she had seen, as if she were captured, and led her to this room. It was not long before Alex was dragged into a nearby room. When she said she could prove she had seen the murder of the girl lying beneath the shroud they had also confiscated all her documentation, including passports before they would talk further. The man who interrogated Jessie was her height and what looked like two-thirds the weight though the long gun tilted to the side of his desk made up for the weight differential in her mind. He looked to be just out of high school to Jessie.

“You have a great haircut,” she said.

“You will go home now,” he said to her. It sounded like a statement but she suspected it was a question and that he didn’t know how to intonate in English.

“We will go on,” she replied.

“If we let you,” he said looking down at his form. He sat with his back to a window and looking outside she could see what looked like everyone in the town waiting at the gate of the compound again. It was a polite crowd. Whatever they wanted they would wait quietly to get even as the sun was setting, resulting in a precipitous temperature drop.

“If we are that lucky,” she replied, feeling in her pocket for the coin because tumbling it around in her hand soothed her.

“You seem guilty,” he said.

“Of what?” She had been looking at the faces in the crowd but as the light outside dimmed so did her ability to see.

“Did you see the body here?” He moved his pen as if to get her attention and she realized that she had completely drifted.

“You stopped me,” she said. He put his pen down and led the way. The body was by itself in a small room, one they could lock. They had not covered it up, but simply laid it on a table. It had taken a terrible tumble. And though she could tell it had been a young woman dressed as a Sherpa and she could see bad bruises it was with a mixed sense of sadness and relief that the face was too destroyed for her to recognize it or not. But she saw the soldier watching her and realized that he had brought her here to assess her shock level, not in order to see if she could give the girl, that once was, a name.

She stepped forward and picked up one of the girl’s hands. They were unmarked with long thin fingers. They were young but weathered and Jessie realized that they reminded her of her own mother’s hands. Several of the knuckles were markedly wider than the bones they joined so the fingers were crooked. The nails were torn but not ragged, a result of living a labored life. She turned the hands over and found the palms to be softer than she expected and the weight of them was a gentle reminder of how little it takes to be strong. They were a horsewoman’s hands after all. “Did she have a family?” she asked setting the hand down.

“She is known,” he said.

“You know who she is?”

“We can guess.” He pointed out the patterned jacket now hanging on a hook in a corner. “That jacket is familiar to us.”

“It still has lots of wear in it,” Jessie said about the jacket. “But she must have owned it for a long time.”

“Why didn’t you care enough to tell us she’d died?” he asked.

“I didn’t know,” Jessie said.

“You did not know what?” he asked.

“Does she have family?” Jessie asked.

Hanging onto his last question he ignored hers. There were no windows in this room, no sunlight at all, just a low yellow glare from a dirty bare bulb twisted into its socket behind a protective wire cage. “I bet they’re on their way. I would be on my way,” she said. “Do you have children?” she asked him, and again, he didn’t bother to answer.

The girl had been dressed to confront the elements and even without the jacket she was warmly clothed. Jessie laid her hand on the girl’s forehead. “It was a horrible thing to see,” she said. “So I hoped that it hadn’t happened.”

“You took liberties then,” he said.

“I haven’t seen many people die. It’s a shock,” she touched the girl’s face one last time before her companion pulled her away and led her back down the hall.

They returned to find that another woman had taken Jessie’s seat. Tall, with platinum strands sticking out of a grey Sherpa cap, she was dressed in the saffron robes of a nun. Time had treated her fairly and in the decades that stood between the last time Jessie and her sister had talked the one who had chosen to live the coarser life in Nepal had aged better. Where time had clearly rolled Jessie down making most of what she was a reminder of who she might have been, it had added to the sense of character to her

sister's face. Thomasina, for twin, because Gabby, the sister between them had been born on the exact same day a year later.

She stood when the soldier and Jessie returned and took her time looking Jessie over before she sat down again. The women did not speak but in the time it took Tommy to sit down all the sibling rage that Jessie had thought gone, recurred. She could not remember the last words she and her sister had exchanged but she realized that her hatred was as fresh as it had ever been. It was the kind that killed time making the impression of space between the past and the present vanish. She had also forgotten what it was like to be in the room with someone who looked so much the same. When the girls were small they looked unique but as they aged the stamp of their mother's lineage rose to the fore until by adulthood they all looked like slightly smudged mirror images of her. As for the differences, Jessie's sisters had larger feet, had grown taller, turned grey earlier, were right-handed, green-eyed, and hated spinach, bananas and peanut butter all of which Jessie loved.

"How do you do?" Jessie said to her sister, meaning, "go to hell."

Tommy ignored her. Instead she nodded to the soldier as if giving him permission to enter the room. And as if in response to this gesture he stepped around Jessie and headed back to his desk.

"Is that girl hers?" Jessie asked the man who had allowed the room to be filled with women before he entered.

"I intend to take the body with me. It's an accident, yes?" Tommy said to the soldier as he sat down.

“Witness statements are inconclusive,” he said. “However, as you are willing to accept the responsibility, we will consider it.”

Tommy’s robes were a gift from their parents on the day she was ordained. It was the same day Jessie left for the states. The plan had been to break the girls apart in order to unmake the damage done by disaster. The twins were sent on the straight way and Jessie was sent spinning out of view.

“I didn’t know there was a baby, still,” Jessie said to her sister’s back.

“Go home Jessie,” Tommy said.

“Mom told Cherry and she died, so I can’t just go home,” Jessie replied.

“You can do whatever you want,” Tommy said.

“I have Cherry with me,” Jessie said.

“I heard,”

“When you were in the states weeks ago.”

“And I am sorry for that. I didn’t like her, but I liked the way she kept you away from us.”

“She kept in touch with Mom.”

“Mom increasingly had trouble with knowing when to leave something alone,”

Tommy said. “Officer, when will I be allowed to take the body home?” she asked

“Who is she?” Jessie persisted.

“She is one of ours.” Tommy said.

“Like me? Family?” Jessie asked.

“Like us, nothing like you,” Tommy replied. “She took her oaths.”

“I will be coming whether you like it or not,” Jessie said.

“As always. Were I you, I would take the fact that none of us contacted you, even when mother died, to heart. But as always, you will do what causes the most damage,” Tommy said.

“I know why I hate you,” Jessie replied. “But what have I ever done to you?”

“You made a hole in my family,” Tommy said.

“Is that my child?” Jessie asked as a guard arrived at the door. At the request of the man at the desk he agreed to accompany Tommy down the hall and help her retrieve the body. Tommy stood and walked to the door without looking at Jessie but she stopped at the threshold. “Go home Jessie,” she said. “Even the mountains have forgotten who you are.”

“You sent me an invitation,” Jessie said holding out the charm she had received with the note at the lodge.

“Not me,” Tommy said stepping close enough to take the charm. “Your other sister still misses you a little,” she said, handing it back.

“Not you though.”

“It’s a warning, Jessie. Take it to heart,” Tommy said gesturing to the guard to lead the way.

They released Jessie and Alex together with warnings, but no official admonition. They took their time heading back choosing the lower, longer paths that wound through town bottoms where the mountains and sky were completely obscured by the press of hovels and awnings no one retracted because the snows were not a threat at this altitude this time of year.

They left Namche the next morning while it was still shrouded in mist and the acute sickness that had been dragging at Jessie, started to assault her more solidly. After a day of hiking they arrived at their night stop and Jessie, after resting and putting it off as long as she could, tried to eat dinner. Everyone else had finished eating by then and so the restaurant owner shared tea and a smoke with a group of Sherpas while he waited for her to finish and while he smoked his little boy wandered around the room seeking entertainment.

Jessie considered her state and compared it to the boy's. She was slathered in Bull Frog, wearing sunglasses and dressed in dirty layers. Her face was blotched with sunburned spots and clumps of dust. Her hair was matted, her teeth felt fuzzy and it had been days since that last bath because the water had been so cold she had abandoned the procedure altogether for the duration. She was filthy and sick. He was dusty but generally well scrubbed. He had disappeared but she could hear him giggling.

"I'm not acclimating," she said staring into a bowl of oatmeal that she had been working on for fifteen minutes. "The headache is worse, the nausea..." Alex handed her two aspirin. Since the idea of drinking was no more palatable than eating, she took the pills and set them by her plate. She then saw that the little boy had taken to crawling under the tables and was peeking up at customers. Eventually he peered up at Jessie who waved back. He had a round, burnished face, a homespun haircut and bubbled with possibility. He was wearing a man's hat pulled so low that it covered much of his face until he brushed it back in order to see better. Jessie waved her gloved hand at him and he pulled at her fingers.

"Try," Alex handed her a cup and put the aspirin in her hand.

She popped the pills and drank the water and immediately spit it all up. This was followed by a retching spasm. She spit up into her napkin and pushed the oatmeal away.

“Did you sleep last night?” Alex asked. In contrast to her he was getting stronger each day. The benefit of constant hard work for him was that he was getting fit.

“You were right next to me,” she said. Nepalese custom frowned upon unmarried couples sharing a room but the practicality of modernity allowed that they could sleep in rooms with two cots next to each other.

“Well, I was asleep,” he said.

She sighed. “I think I have some sort of a cold in my chest. It’s hard to breath anyway and it gets worse at night. If I sit up it’s easier and then I can’t sleep like that.”

“Your color sucks,” Alex said. “You’re yellow.”

“It’s just altitude sickness and we are nearly there,” she said, frightened no matter what she said by how badly she felt. She felt a tug on her jacket and looked down. The little boy was back sans the hat, but with a bride doll. He offered it for inspection. It was a young girl wearing a white scarf around her shoulders with a red flower in her hair. Then he giggled and asked for it back she assumed, because his words were garbled. When she resisted he crawled into her lap and located her oatmeal. She handed him a spoon and he began eating.

“That doesn’t help you much,” Alex said.

“At least he’s enjoying it,” she said. When he finished the boy giggled again, reclaimed his doll and crawled off under the table towards his father who had been watching to see that the child was not annoying the customers.

“The temple is at a lower altitude,” Alex said. “Your sisters are waiting regretfully, but still we could go down and forget the top of the mountain.”

Once he reached his father the boy was swooped off his feet and tossed into the air, which initiated another round of giggles.

“We might never be back here again,” Jessie said. “Let’s see how far we can get before we fold our tents up and go home. As sick as I feel, I still am not in any hurry. I want her to see this, to see what it’s like.”

“Cherry?” he asked.

“She’s dead I know,” Jessie said.

“Not as long as you carry that tin around with you,” he replied.

“Journey’s not over yet,” she said.

“Hers?” he asked.

“Ours. We aren’t heading to the top of Everest for Christ’s sake,” she said. “Go get into a game. Stop sitting here. Really.” Alex and Dumbar energized rather than worn down by the trek had gotten into the habit of gambling at pit stops. It turned out that Sherpas were great card sharks. Alex, raised in Las Vegas, had quickly learned the rules of the new games and since he carried U.S. dollars he was welcome. He tapped a man on the shoulder so that he would pull back allowing space for another chair. Jessie leaned back and listened to the men yell at one another as the stakes rose. This was another, many windowed room. Outside she could see the sharp rises that marked the very tops of hills and mountains they had been traversing at lower levels. The weather had gotten wilder the higher they hiked and the wind had become rough enough to carry off larger bits of debris, to sweep objects off table tops, and capable of stealing small items from

your grasp. As the air had also gotten colder and drier Jessie's cough gotten worse. They had arrived in midafternoon and the place had been fairly empty but as the evening fell larger groups had collected at this last pit stop. It was the teahouse everyone who climbed this far would use whether they were heading to Everest, a partner peak, or the basecamp. The rest of the travelers seemed excited about the next day's events. People who tracked their progress with maps brought them out and began calculating distances and altitudes, noting where they had been, where they were going, and how far, long and high they had gotten in relation to Lukla. Some used highlighters to mark their paths and the conversations that spun out from the activity were a low, satisfied hum. It was an international group, which meant that conversations were being carried out in a number of languages with those who were multi-lingual facilitating conversation between friends who needed the help. In one corner three German bruisers discussed soccer. Those who read took up positions in quieter corners of the room and directed their headlamps to the page. Some groups were arranging huge meals and jabbering about kids and books and other trips. Everyone who had reached this camp had been living outdoors for weeks if not longer. Rumpled clothing, dusty layers of *Northface* and *Kevlar* brand made every figure shaggy. Chapped, dirty faces, stringy hair and the waning look of people who had just lost a lot of weight also characterized the mix. Everyone who was still eating did so with a great appetite. The German's joined a table lumped with stews, flatbread and fruit that was being offered buffet style. Before they could load their plates they had to step back when a couple of Sherpa children raced through grabbing what could be had in a rush.

More decks of cards were opened after dinner. Still working on a glass of water and a second bowl of oatmeal, Jessie found herself staring at a blond with long braids who was knitting. Finally, disoriented, overwhelmed and distanced from the group by a weight she could not wave away, Jessie left the crowd behind. Stepping through a dark hallway made incredibly narrow by rows of fuel drums lined up along the walls, she located her cubbyhole, a room so small that the cots filled it, and crawled into bed with her clothes on.

She woke up in the dark in a room that reeked of petroleum. They had closed all the doors and windows when they went to bed and so the fumes collected. Panting and panicking she finally realized that she could not finish the climb. Trying to gain command of her fears and her sickness and without waking Alex, she rocked on her bed and imagined that she was somewhere safe while she waited for sunrise when she could tell Dumbar and Alex that she needed to descend.

She picked a cluster of images rather than one, the dog pens at her house, any summer day when she was young, afternoons spent laying by the radio and later by the stereo once they all got old enough to buy records, hot afternoons walking through the rainforests at lower elevations when one could still be scared of the wildlife, horse races higher in the hills where horseman trailed tufts and braided designs as they flew along the mountain trails, incense in the temple and the warmth of a cup of tea in your hands, mist when it's peaceful and not penetrating, some nights in the hospital with Cherry once they had gotten past the need to lie about anything and even an imagined life she'd never really wanted with houses, kids and husbands. Alex took a perfect shape in her head. The baby had never gone. Her sisters were sisters.

“What are you doing?” Alex asked. The darkness was so complete in the windowless nook that she could hear but not see him.

“I’m sick,” she said. The rocking had calmed her and settled her symptoms, but it had woken Alex.

“I’ll wake Dumbar.” He rolled off his bunk but kept his head low because the room was shorter than he was.

“No.” Jessie twisted her headlamp on and held it in her hand so that he could search for his.

“Why the hell not?” He felt under the bed.

“We can’t descend in the dark,” she said.

“Sure we can,” he said, still searching the floorboards.

“It’s fine,” she said. “We’ll wait for morning. We can’t go in the dark. I can’t go in the dark. I can’t go in the dark.” Finally hearing her fear, Alex sighed and put the found lamp into a jacket pocket. Then after a few moments because he was in truth, as exhausted as she was, he lay down and fell asleep.

Jessie guessed there were at least three long hours to go before sunrise. Since lying down made her feel as if she were choking and since she could only rock so long she decided on action. She decided to find the bathroom. As she was still dressed in her down jacket she only needed to pull up the hood up to defend against the cold she knew was waiting outside and stumble into the hall. The door closed crookedly and she left it slightly ajar because finding the keyhole seemed too complicated a plan.

The restroom was a corrugated rectangle perched over a hole just outside a side entrance. She had to cross the dining room to get there and step over sleeping Sherpas

who had camped out on the floor and furniture. The Sherpas had taken advantage of tonight's heated stove for as long as possible. They had also opened a bottle of J&B that was left unfinished on the counter. She grabbed it and took it with her.

The bathroom journey took her past a clock. Three-thirty. She could only see dim shapes as window shades blocked the moonshine outside. Just beyond the front steps yaks and dogs lay curled on the ground close together, but not touching. Mountains, graying shadows that looked like sleepers watched as she walked, if the legends were true. She located the front door to the teahouse because of the picture. A teenager and his dad were among the group that would summit this year. They were getting press. Too concerned with moving quietly she nearly stumbled off the steps outside. Then she took a moment to get her bearings and to take advantage of the fresh air. She unscrewed the cap to her bottle and sought Everest and found that it was completely hidden by the storms.

"The closer we get the harder it gets to see you," she said, saluting the goddess and swallowing from the bottle. "Course the closer we get the scarder I get too. What the hell, really, am I doing this for?" She threw up her first two swallows but managed to keep the third down. Then once it stayed she finished the bottle and set it aside under the steps.

She had almost put this trip off too long. Soon the last of the season's mountaineers would come streaming down joining trekkers, as everyone headed back to Lukla steps ahead of the monsoons. Then the hike that had taken two or three weeks up would be covered in four or five days of descent, barring accidents or detours. A campsite had been struck in front of the teahouse for those who left gear behind while they made final ascents and for those who preferred sleeping outside. Tents with shoes

left outside were filled with people. Jessie tried to move quietly in case someone was still asleep.

She had asked Dumber if he would ever attempt to summit. “No good,” he replied. “Those guys they can’t stop pushing.” They had been resting on a slope above the trail and Dumber had been naming the peaks for her using their Nepalese names.

“Don’t climbers die as heroes?” she asked scratching a furry companion that had joined their troop somewhere in between villages.

Dumber shrugged and pulled at the brim of his grey cowboy hat. “I leave it to them,” he said. “A longer life is plenty reward.”

Once the booze took effect she felt better but she also knew she took risks mixing it with her drugs. In her hurry she had left her headlamp in her room so now she had to pick her way across the camp to the bathroom tripping now and again over granite shards sticking out of the ground.

“DO NOT PUT PAPER IN TOILET!” said the sign on the bathroom door. The door was badly warped. She had to force it open before stepping down into a wet floor so that she could squat over a hole and watch her breath make fog as she did her business and tried not to lose her balance. The door made an angry sound when she forced it shut the second time. Then tripping over a big piece of rock on her return trip she fell and because the pain made her angry she stayed on her knees and silently raged for a few moments. It was then that she realized that she was staring at a body of a young woman. A pale grey form curled up on the ground that she had assumed was a dog. The mist made the body and the slim figure standing over it surreal. It bent down, hugged the body around the chest and dragged it upright. The arms flopped as the body was wrenched

about and its head lolled forward. In life she'd worn no gloves, had short, cropped hair, spiky bangs, pale features and a thick spray of freckles cast across Nepalese features. The body slipped downward and then was finally hefted up and away as the bearer got a solid purchase and backed away into the mist that turned them into ghosts before swallowing them up. Jessie heard his boots scraping against the ground and that was all. Afraid to make a sound and since it seemed that she had escaped notice Jessie waited until she could no longer hear footsteps before she stood, and because she could think of no other option, she made her way back to her room the way she had come, and crawled back into bed.

The nurses would come from time to time and shift Cherry's body. The presence of strangers stopped being intrusions after a while. So many strangers had a hand in Cherry's care that the two women now spoke easily in front of anyone. This night they were also changing the sheets. As two nurses prepared to roll Cherry, a third waited on the opposite side of the bed to unfurl the clean linen.

"Have you ever seen my baby?" Jessie asked Cherry.

"I've only told you because it's over," Cherry said. She faced the opposite wall as she spoke. One woman held her on her side and so the other two could spread and tuck in the new sheets. "Let it go. I thought you should know but it's best. She got hurt like you when she was little and it's best that you let it go." The machines set off an alarm. In the movement one of Cherry's leads had been disconnected. The nurse nearest the unhappy machine silenced it.

"Did my mother tell you that? When did you become more her friend than mine?"

“Bad men run in your family. But it’s better now.”

“What in the hell are you saying?” Lines and wires made the whole procedure more difficult and once they had resettled Cherry she grabbed the button to up her dose. It took a moment to kick in. One of the nurses checked connections one last time then she patted Cherry on the arm and left, leaving the door open because both women disliked closed doors.

“They saved her,” Cherry said.

“From what? I want to see her,” Jessie said.

“Not if you love her,” Cherry said.

“I don’t know her,” Jessie said.

“Less reason than ever,” Cherry said.

“And you always knew,” Jessie said.

“Not always. I kept the truth safe for you in case you needed it,” Cherry said.

“I needed you not to lie to me,” Jessie said.

“You needed a story you could live with. Leave it alone,” Cherry said.

“You let my mother use you.” Jessie had become too angry to talk much after that. Earlier in the evening they had agreed upon Boon Dock Saints. Jessie pressed the remote.

When Jessie had gone to bed earlier in the evening she had not bothered to take her shoes off. She had been too sick and too tired to care and she had judged it too cold to undress. Now she could not untie her laces because her hands were shaking. She hugged her knees to her chest for several moments before she tried again.

“You okay?” Alex asked drowsily. He had to ask twice because she did not know quite what to say. She had woken him again. He sat up. Too tall to either sit fully upright or lay fully stretched out on his bed he hunched and hung his feet over the edge of the bed. Jessie noticed that in between Lukla and here he had lost so much weight that he looked taller still. Sitting up in the dark he looked like a one of those stretched figures in a mirror house. “Do you need help?” he asked spacing out the words as if each were a separate sentence.

“I could use a beer,” she replied wedging her body into a corner so that if she fell asleep she would not lie down. He leaned in and smelled her breath and she realized belatedly that she was slurring a little.

“You make it a bitch to help you,” he said lying back down. “Let me know if you change your mind.”

“Alex?” she said.

“What?”

“I saw.”

“What did you see?”

“A fallen goddess.”

“Right.” He sighed and rolled over.

She did not fall asleep and she was not completely conscious. Sitting up in the dark she drifted from one hazy dream into another the subtle shifts broken by bouts of panting brought on by panic as much as physical discomfort. Alex got up after a time she had no sense of how long, and inspected her.

“We're done here,” he said shining a light on her. “You're fucking yellow.”

He returned with Dumbar and informed her that they had voted to forego breakfast and by six a.m. the group was descending. Dumbar carried her pack so that all she had to do was navigate slowly down the particularly steep incline that bridged the gap between 4200 to 4900 meters. The effort to continue took her attention but here and there wisps of ideas vanished and reformed in her mind like spooks. She could neither cage nor conquer them as they hovered just ahead. She thought of the bodies, and falling climbers, missing hikers and of the sound of gravel underfoot. She was afraid of so much that all her fears claimed priority as she descended in some places on her hands and knees. Eventually she lost track of anything but the need to keep going and to keep upright so the ghosts were diminished for a while but she could feel them biding their time.

“You have to stop,” she said to no one. “I don't know her face either.” The hangover had mixed with the pills and created a sludgy reality made messy by the fact that she was weak. The effort of making sense was too much and she found herself narrowed down to scrutinizing each rock on her path, which sometimes meant she drifted off course.

The men traded places moving in front and behind of Jessie as they walked. Alex was in the back at the moment. “You're thinking medical insurance might have been a good idea about now,” he said setting her back on course.

“I’m thinking that I should have married a rich man,” Jessie replied.

“You’d be an idiot to turn that down if he turns up. Keep me in mind though. I hire out as household help quite cheaply. Walk dogs, that kind of thing,” he said. Then he touched her arm, she nodded assurances and they kept walking.

They ate up the miles on the descent and reached their first rest stop before noon. By then Jessie had regained some equilibrium. She was still sick and tired but her breathing had improved and her color was better. She tried not to feel guilty that her weakness would compel Dahn to tote their stuff up and down the same trails twice. The men would have to backtrack after they dropped her off at a one of lower villages. The rest stop was a mesa where memorials for climbers, porters and Sherpas who had died on Everest ringed the plateau. Brilliant and faded colored squares fluttered in the fast winds. Stupas of several sizes were festooned with ties, scarves and flags; five colors arranged from left to right in specific order: blue for sky, white for water, red for fire, green for wind, and yellow for earth. Some stupas were more primitive, some had plaques, and some were rock piles with names scratched into granite.

“So many,” Jessie said. For she saw that they were in effect standing inside a flower with a granite center and flighty bright petals backed against a bright blue sky that intimated enough space and time for every soul to find its way out.

“Nepalese add flags,” Dumbar replied. “They never take any away.” The wind kicked up while they rested.

“They’re whole stories,” Jessie said. She had started reading the plaques. “He,” she pointed, “climbed all three poles?” She looked at Dumbar, but Alex provided the

answer. “North, South and Everest, the most right, the most left and the most up you can get on planet Earth.”

“I knew him,” Dumbar pointed out a superior concrete structure. “Until this season, he was the youngest Sherpa to summit. And this one,” He pointed at another plaque. “He summited twice in a week and climbed every season until he fell. Sherpas never thought to climb Everest until the Europeans came.”

“Maybe the idea didn’t occur to them until Hillary and Tensing but ever since don’t the Sherpas who climb want it just as badly?” Jessie asked.

“We have orphanages for Sherpa children now. Without a father there is no income,” he said. “How does that help?”

“What does Sherpa mean?” Alex asked.

“Sherpa is a human race and a job,” Dumbar said.

“A job without benefits or insurance,” Alex said watching Dahn, who was ready shouldering his load and getting ready to head downhill.

“Sherpa need work so they push harder, take bigger risks, carry heavy loads when they shouldn’t,” Dumbar said as we watched Dahn tromp away. “Sherpas don’t think they can get altitude sickness. Some will climb without training.”

The wind was starting to blow harder, it just about time for the morning mist to roll in. On cue, the winds brought in the white veil that would obscure the trail if they were not lucky and careful.

“We have more orphans in Nepal that have nowhere to go unless a temple will take them. It’s a job you leave as fast as you can.” Dumbar said, shouldering his and Jessie’s pack. “Let’s go.”

“Well now I feel guilty,” Jessie said to Alex.

“Save it for when you can do something about it,” he said. “Lunch is down there,” he said pointing out a cluster of bright green shapes. The men moved quickly and Jessie let them go. She stood for a moment wondering if she should leave Cherry here with the climbers. Yak bells rang below and she could see several pack trains moving uphill. Slow plodding bulks that stepped as carefully from rock to rock as cats, the yaks oozed past trekkers and dogs perched on the hillsides, while Sherpas bullied them uphill with switches and cattle calls. Jessie considered whether Cherry might be best served up here nearest the sky where all prayers were heard.

When they had arrived at the plateau there had been several groups. But now as usual Jessie was alone a fact highlighted by the sound of footsteps that could be coming from the path above or below. None of the sounds were distinct enough for her to tell. As the sunlight dwindled in the growing haze her feeling of being separate became more important. As if the white veil sweeping in had taken her to an uninhabited moon where the only thing grounded was her and the graves that ringed this spot. She thought that she should feel afraid and couldn't muster up the strength. If he were coming for her he would get her. If it was all in her mind then madness had already arrived. Jessie pulled her pack forward and pulled out the bag that held Cherry's ashes and hefted it. She walked to the first stupa she could find and then, to the next. No, she decided that she could not leave her friend here. “Not yet,” she said stowing the bag away. The twin realities of descending figures coming into foggy view and the sounds of someone calling her name from below got her moving. She made a careful circle and finally discovered

the path markers but before she could descend she was grabbed by a hank of hair and enclosed inside a hard embrace.

Lips at her ear, “Bitch, leave her be,” he said. She raised her arm and tried to free herself. Then she tried to spin around and got her legs tied up in his losing her balance and threatening his. He let her drop, then came for her again. Without thinking she dragged a rock off the ground and swung it at him. Small and sharp it gouged what it touched. She heard a grunt and when she staggered backwards and fell no one followed her. And when she stood and headed blindly down what she hoped was the correct trail no one stopped her. Toppling past the path she twisted her ankle and fell rolling a few feet before she stopped. The she held her breath as she heard what sounded like a search.

“Come on, lady. Time to finish it,” he said. She stayed curled up determined to remain where she had fallen until she stopped hearing movement. He was looking for her but without any way to see, he might have been searching the moon. She waited and shook. Then judging it safe to try, she reclaimed the path and picked her way down the trail that became easier to find because the mist began to clear appreciably as she descended. Even though she was driven by the urge to find her friends she overran her resources and had to stop on the trail and catch her breath. And as she did she realized she was grateful that she still had Cherry with her.

In the last days she often fell asleep in the chair by Cherry’s bed. There was no point in going home. There was nowhere else she wanted to be, nothing else she would be doing but thinking of Cherry and after a few tussles the hospital staff let her be. Cherry though she seemed more uncomfortable as time passed, as the drugs became less effective, also tired more easily. She seemed to give in rather than go to sleep for a time

giving Jessie moments of relief knowing that at least her friend was momentarily free from pain. In truth Cherry seemed to sleep better than Jessie who worried she might fall too deeply asleep and therefore not be able to respond should Cherry need her. Often after Cherry would doze off Jessie would move closer to the bed and touch her friend so that if Cherry just stirred she would wake.

“You can’t save me,” Cherry whispered one night.

“I know it,” Jessie said.

“You think you do, but really you’re still waiting for the cure.”

“The habit of never giving in is a hard habit to break so, until you die I guess,”

Jessie said looking up at Cherry.

“You and me both,” Cherry sighed as she drifted off again.

Jessie almost passed the men who were sheltering in a roofed wedge of rock.

“What happened to you?” Alex asked. When she shook her head he gently touched a puffy lower lip. “I fell, tripped,” she said, touching it. “I think.”

“You don’t know.”

“I knew this guy,” she said, “who was afraid of sharks in water, any kind of water, tubs, pools etc. He knew that he was nuts, but he said if he believed in sharks in pools meant he could dream himself to death by shark attack and so he even stopped taking showers because after a while all water was dangerous.”

“Watch out for sharks on Everest because they’ll hit you in the face?”

“I feel awful,” she said, “like the fucking sun is setting and so I fell. I don’t know where the sharks come into it yet.”

“Me either,” Alex said. “But I’ll keep the fish metaphor in mind. Because you do look like hell.”

“You should keep with us,” Dumbar said and from then on she would be sandwiched between the two men. They stopped for lunch at a place where they met up with the American family again. The old woman complained about the toilets, her son was looking more at ease and the husband who looked like he was prepared to cross continents alone, was seated at his own table. He nodded to Jessie and her friends but maintained his space. The woman who was now being fully ignored by her family complained to Jessie who stared at a bowl of soup until it was time to leave.

Jessie began to feel tremendously better as they hit lower elevations. She was keeping up by the time they crossed the last of the flats leading to the village where she would stay while the men hiked back up. Crossing what was probably a lakebed in the wet season they entered Pheriche, the typical Nepalese combination of slanting aqua rooftops, rock-lined passages and walled pastures. Thin steep trails made by the yaks cut into the hillsides and those animals that had not been loaded up this morning lead calves up onto spots where the green sprigs grew.

Namaste Inn, a stony, corrugated affair was their stop. Its caretaker was an old but very fit monk.

“What’s a monk doing here?” Jessie asked Dumbar as she took her larger pack back from the pile left in front. Dressed in jeans, a baggy cotton shirt and high-tops the old man looked nothing like a monk to her.

“His monastery burned down twice and though they rebuilt it he decided that two times down was a sign to continue his studies elsewhere,” Dumbar replied.

“He comes from Temboche, then,” she said.

“You know it?”

“I was here when it burned the first time,” she said. “There were people inside the first time.”

Dumbar nodded.

“Namaste.” The monk addressed them and gestured to them that they should enter the dining lodge.

“Namaste,” they replied but Dumbar stopped them from entering.

“Wait please,” he said then addressing the monk in Nepalese.

“What is it?” Alex asked Jessie.

She shook her head. “It’s dialect that I don’t know.” Then she saw movement out of the corner of her eye and turned towards it. About a hundred tiny heads peeked out from the spaces between the roofs and the walls of the buildings around them. Tiny dark-eyed, dark-breasted citizens of a gabled city the wrens were seriously curious about and equally wary of the big clumsy newcomers. They disappeared when Jessie pulled out her camera.

“He tends them and so they stay here,” Dumbar said returning with keys. “They do not gather in large numbers after the first visit. From now on you will only see them alone or in pairs staring down at you.”

“Why?” she asked.

“The monk claims it is because it only takes one glance to know all you need to know about a soul,” Dumbar said.

“Is there a problem with us staying here?” Jessie asked.

“I don't understand,” Dumbar said.

“He talked to you in private because he knew I might be able to understand,”
Jessie said.

“He thought he remembered you,” Dumbar said. “But I assured him that you were
a stranger here and he will let us stay.”

“You have not lied to him,” Jessie said.

“He will only say that he knows Temboche,” Dumbar said. “But you may stay
until we return.”

These rooms were as big as five man tents, contained the usual two cots, and
someone had stapled felt to the walls. Each was secured with padlocks that it did not
seem anyone used.

Alex tossed his things on the floor and dropped into his bed. “Better?” he asked.

“I feel see-through,” Jessie said, “But better. It's too cold in here. I'm going
outside.” Alex who wanted to clean up, waved her off. Outside the warming sunlight
made standing in the open all she needed. She picked a stoop and settled down. The
village was quietly busy. Old men talked, women shoed kids out of the way and a pack of
teen-agers were settled along the road outside were sunbathing though they were also
fully dressed. In a lower basin just outside the village wall yaks grazed. A woman and her
girl carried baskets and collected objects from the ground. Another watered her plot by
hand with a bucket. Beyond her other Sherpas were watering, digging and rooting
through wet rocky plots of land that were half filled with potato and barley plants. Where
the walls were fragmented dogs, horses and chickens seeking food crossed over. Up on
the hill behind teahouses two scrubby nags rooted through trashcans while keeping watch

for the men who would eventually come and throw rocks at them to drive them off. A crying girl fought her mother for the right to carry a basket bigger than she was.

The smell of incense prevailed and a small stack of burnt offerings charred the walls at each house.

Out of politeness Jessie bought an orange soda from a passing vendor and let her explain in broken English that each house had a spot, a pedestal or a plate on a wall in which green branches were smoked and in than in some homes were kept burning all day long.

“Where you born here?” Jessie asked. The old woman looked surprised. She shook her head and quickly left.

“Did you offend her?” Alex asked. He smelled like soap. Jessie looked up. He had braved the unbelievably cold water.

“A shave and a wash,” she said. “I am impressed.” She took a small sip of her soda that was stale and flat but tasted perfect.

“What did you ask her?” he said and she realized that she had addressed the woman in Nepalese and that this might have driven her off.

“Shit,” she said. “It was not what I asked, but how. Most trekkers don’t speak Nepalese. Now she knows that I know some words.”

“What does that matter?” Alex asked.

“They will be more careful about talking around me,” Jessie said. “They will have less privacy when I am around.”

“Do you speak it that well after all these years?” Alex asked.

“No, but they don’t know that. And they have an inherited suspiciousness. Most Nepalese even if they have lived here for generations are from borne from refugees, driven from their homes. Sherpas were willing to settle in one of the most hostile places in the world in order to be free, as they understood it. She does not know who I am and now knows she cannot speak too freely around me.”

“That’s sad,” Alex said.

“They’ll still be polite and they’ll still take our money.” Jessie handed him the soda. He took a swig and handed it back, then took it from her again and took another swig that reminded her to take her pills with her next swallow.

“Just altitude?” Alex asked.

“Probably a bug too,” she replied. “I had drinks at the hotel when we first got to town,” she said, looking back at the path everyone after them would follow.

“Where and when?” Alex asked counting change. The soda seller would probably not have change. Whatever he gave her would be the cost of the drink even if it were too much.

“First day in Kathmandu. It’s why what happened, happened. Why I didn’t say anything.”

“If you do it again, I’m leaving you wherever we are.” He stopped counting. “I owe you for the pills but I won’t pay you back in kind.”

“Well, I’m too sick now.”

“I guess that's good news.”

“What did you tell the cops in Namche?” Jessie asked.

“That I only knew what you said you seen. No one’s missing that they could tell and they found the girl on the hillside, not at the bottom of a cliff.”

“I read somewhere,” Jessie said, “That *Fanta* was developed by *Coke* to sell to the Nazis.”

“An *SS* soda?”

“The company didn’t want to be seen selling to both Axis and Allies so *Coke* for the good guys and *Fanta* for the villains.”

“How did you hurt yourself on the trail?” Alex asked.

“I got scared, couldn’t see in the mist and fell.”

“Maybe eventually you’ll tell me what else is going wrong,” he said. “If you think I can’t see it, think again.”

“I have a fantastic imagination,” she said. “And maybe...” A couple of birds on the roof moved closer. As Dumbar had said, they were in smaller numbers. She remembered laying her head on Cherry’s bed and dozing and then that memory mixed with stumbling in the mountains looking for the bathroom. A dozen machines ringing in her ears, dogs barking echoing down the canyon. Her story also had a man in pursuit for no reason. Loved ones fading off. She wondered if she kept herself from loving Alex too much so that he would stay.

“You gonna finish the sentence?” Alex asked, reclaiming her attention.

“Go get a soda before she goes,” she said. “Get a candy bar.”

“At this altitude they’ll cost me five dollars a piece, probably stale,” he said.

“Split it.” She shoved him off and then climbed onto one of the walls so that she could watch the trail they had just taken and watch for coming shapes.

11

They slept away the next few hours waking up in time for the midday meal. A group of teen-age boys had arrived in the interim. Gear piled in a cobblestone corner suggested they intended to stay at least for the night. They were all locals; dark haired, young men lolling in chairs they had dragged out onto the yard in between the huts and the dining room.

“I think I dislike young people,” Jessie said, accepting two of the chairs from one who recognized them as paying clients.

“Jealousy?” Alex asked.

“They have no idea what they need to know.”

“Are you that much smarter than you used to be?”

“It's worse,” she said. “The knowledge hasn't done me all the good I though it might and I still don't know what I need to know.”

“Doesn't make sense,” he said.

“Exactly,” she said.

Dunbar stepped outside. They had taken too long to come to eat.

“What are they doing here?” Jessie asked Dumbar.

He seemed surprised that she had noticed the group. “They bring gear off Everest.”

“Isn't it illegal for minors to go up there,” Alex asked.

“It is,” Dumbar said lifting the curtain to the dining room which was the usual dark den filled with carpet-covered benches and tables shoved up against the walls.

Feeling claustrophobic Jessie sat at the table nearest the door. All the teahouses they had

seen so far were like glass houses. Windows circled the perimeter here too but someone had covered them up with what looked like burlap. Flags, mandalas and vibrant depictions of Vedic and Buddhist tales covered every other inch. With barely a soul seated the room felt crowded as if all the illustrated history filled up the empty seats. A cold stove stood in the center of the room next to a box of yak chips. The old monk cushioned on a thick pile of pillows, sat across the way, quietly chanting and sipping Tibetan tea.

“He seems peaceful,” Jessie said.

“His house is burned down. He’s old. He works like a dog and his livelihood is completely dependent on strangers. I bet you can’t fuss when you’re where he’s at,” Alex said sliding over on the bench. “Then again, peacefulness is his job.”

“All I can think about when we hike is the next step and the next breath. It does feel pretty clean when it’s all uphill,” Jessie said.

“You could stay here forever if you wish. Help them scrub and stock yak herds,” Alex said.

“I’d miss my dogs,” Jessie said.

The old man chanted next to a dusty glass case filled with sweets, soft drinks and bottled water for the tourists. Filled to the brim with food items no Sherpa would consume, the case was also topped with condiments, battered salt and peppershakers, chili sauce, ketchup squeeze bottle, jam, dark honey that only outsiders would eat.

The bottles stood underneath a print of a Buddhist Wheel of Life. Kala peered wickedly at them while clutching the wheel in its clawed feet. Pretty though it was it only reminded Jessie of falling.

“G.O.D,” Alex said.

“God?” Jessie asked.

“The three gods of existence. Generative, Operative and Destructive.” He pointed to a watercolor of the Hindu Triad that was curling up on the wall next to the wheel.

Underwhelmed by the idea of another conversation about the larger view and because she could not sit still, Jessie left the table to wander the room nearer the door. While Alex studied the wheels of existence she located the contemporary posters. There were several “Missing Person” notices amid dozens of photographs signed by chapped faced trekkers and grizzled mountaineers.

“Do people disappear up here often?” she asked.

“Sorry, miss.” She was an old woman on the way from the kitchen to the courtyard and even in this odd place she stood out. Dark greying strands bound in a maroon scarf. Nose and ear piercings connected across her face, a thick black necklace hung from her neck and tattooed patterns curled at the backs of her hands and crawled up her arms. She paused when she bumped into Jessie. Then she touched a pink symbol etched into her forehead and made a gesture that seemed ritualistic before she backed up so that Jessie could pass. Then the door opened and a flashing bar of sunlight bathed the woman taking her from view. Jessie was forced back into the dining room in order to accommodate the stranger and the woman exited before she could get close again.

“Hey,” Jessie said, trying to follow the creature.

“No miss,” the stranger, another Nepalese, stopped her. “She is Tahru. Let her be.”

“We saw a boy, Tahru boy on a bridge,” Jessie said. “Does she live here?”

He shrugged. “They once all lived below in the swamps because they were the only ones who could, but when the mosquitoes were killed off others moved in and took their land. She should not be here. The Tahru live in the lowlands.”

“He said,” she said thinking of Dumbar without naming him, “that they lived in the mountains.”

The man was holding her by the arm as if she would leave before they were done. “He was wrong,” he said.

“Can I talk to her?” She said, pulling free.

“*Coke?*” Alex asked. Jessie turned at the sound of his voice and the stranger moved past. The monk understood what they wanted. He set his books aside, slipped behind the counter and bent down disappearing entirely behind the case. He took a long time finally straightening up and brandishing two big grey *Coke* bottles. Though the monk scrubbed them before he handed them over, they were gummy to the touch and cost eight bucks apiece. The end product was stale and slightly flat and exactly what Jessie’s stomach needed.

“Will you order now?” Alex asked handing Jessie a menu. Dumbar was ready as well already writing what Alex wanted on the order form.

“Not in this light,” Jessie said, handing the card to Alex.

“Rice and lentils, noodles, potatoes, curries, eggs, and yak cheese. Yak butter and peanut butter with toast,” Dumbar said. “The butter is yak butter and not the same as yours and the peanut butter and bread are different too.” As the potatoes, curries and eggs were heavy meals. Jessie opted for tea and ramen while Alex ordered another serving of lentil stew. With their order in hand Dumbar folded a curtain back dividing a small group

of children who giggled when he entered the kitchen and before the curtain closed Jessie saw them circling Dumbar and reaching for his pockets. The cookies he carried had many uses.

“How long do you think that will take?” Alex asked. Since May was off-season not all of the staff was available at every stop and therefore meals arrived at irregular intervals. Sometimes Dumbar helped cook and sometimes runners were sent to the other side of the village to procure ingredients. Their order could arrive in as soon as a half an hour or take a couple of hours to assemble.

“I feel watery,” Jessie said.

“Your color is still funky,” Alex said.

“We can rest here a day or two, yes?” Dumbar returned from the kitchen dragged a chair to their table. “More acclimatization and then we will try again.” He made a gesture like wiping away a bad pen stroke. “It will be fine in a day or two.” He glanced at the kitchen. “I will get the tea while we wait for the meal,” he said.

“Gonna take a while, I think,” Jessie said.

While they waited the monk finished his prayers, tucked his books into a cubbyhole, picked up a broomstick made of sticks and stepped outside. Jessie pulled a window curtain open in order to see what he meant to sweep. He attacked the dust in the courtyard chanting as he worked his way across. After he set their tea down Dumbar took another broom and joined him. They worked in tandem one figure following the other making the dirty rock dust free and collecting the remnants in a gutter that was then brushed clean as well. They talked as they worked, fast and breathlessly, as if there were things they needed to say to one another now that might lose their meaning after the floor

had been cleaned. Their audience was the boys, Alex, Jessie and the birds that perched on the lower sills darting to the ground and back up because the men stirred up seeds and crumble as they worked.

“We have only been here for days and I feel as if I have always lived here,” Alex said.

“The place takes hold of you,” Jessie said, stirring sugar into her tea. “Wears you down, makes you see something else. Whatever. It gets inside you.”

“And they made you leave?” Alex asked.

“When it turns ugly that gets inside you too. I didn’t have a choice. My parents divided the world up and sent us all to our corners. Bad behavior over and over again,” Jessie said. “Stop talking about it.”

“Sometime maybe you should,” Alex said but he obeyed her. And so they sat quietly by the window, drank tea and watched the men sweep and the teenagers gamble while in the kitchen the children giggled as they watched their parents cook.

It was a long high-pitched cry. They thought it was an eagle shrieking. Then the old woman screamed again and they recognized the sound. The old men who had been sitting in the road reached her first. The boys in the courtyard arrived next, scrambling over the walls after their elders. They found her in the meadow, the Tahru woman kneeling by the body, her dress tipped in blood. She would not touch the body, nor would she let anyone else approach and she kept screaming, holding her bloodied hands over the body as if she intended to contain the winnowing soul of the girl lying in Jessie's lap. The child was not yet dead. Jessie tried to staunch the wounds with her fists as the villagers pressed in, but she only made the blood flow faster. The old woman stopped screaming and started sobbing. When they tried to pull her away, she fought back. It was not until another dressed in yellow robes knelt by her side and murmured in her ear that she acquiesced and let her friend and the rest of the women lead her away. Two children detached from the crowd and trailed in the women's wake but most stayed back separate from the adults watching along with the yaks and the dogs that also waited just out of reach.

Then Jessie was alone staring at a body lying atop a small pile of prayer rocks. This girl's neck was broken, her face bruised and her mouth had been filled with dirt. The fingers on one hand were torn as if she had been scraping at a hard surface, maybe fighting the force that had pushed her down.

"A cursed child," someone said. Dressed in jeans, and a dark green pullover, the boy with the scarred face, looked at the sky.

Then Dumbar came at the head of the group of men who were meant to figure out what to do about the body. How to take it away from Jessie who now stood where the old

woman had stood, fending them off. As it turned out she was easily shoved aside and the body was hauled away. And the men and boys removed the rocks and tossed them away destroying the grave because its existence told a secret.

“Roka! maile bujhina. Stop, I don’t understand!” Jessie yelled more than once as no one paid her any attention. “I don’t understand. “Maile bujhina.”

She grabbed the monk who was among those carrying rocks. And then she could hear the baby screaming somewhere. Then she could not. The monk cupped his hands around hers and without words made her be quiet. “Maile bujhina,” she said repeating her words in Nepalese.

“Naramro,” he said. “Naramro.” He was not happy with the word. It was not exactly what he wanted to say.

“Evil,” Jessie said. He may not have understood the word but he seemed to agree. He released her then in order to follow the man who carried the body, and the men who followed.

“We need to keep strangers from seeing this,” someone said.

“They can’t just bury her,” Jessie said. She felt herself choking and woke up trying to breathe.

“Sorry?” It was Alex sitting up in his bed. They had gotten lucky, the moon was up tonight and it cast light through their window beating back the closed in feeling their felted box endorsed. No one else was sharing the guesthouse so it was absent the usual plonk of boots beating down on loose planking. The descent had improved if not resolved Jessie’s symptoms. Her mind was clearing because she was feeling better but now her

imagination was building weird dreams instead of shutting down. Sleep was easily achieved but less desirable in these lower elevations. She had a sense of time passing very fast and felt herself falling quickly towards a sharpening darkness that refused to be named. Death, sadness, sickness, loneliness seemed the result instead of the cause of her losses.

“She fell,” Jessie said.

“She fell from where?” Alex asked.

The three highest peaks, Ama Dablam, Lhotse and Everest, were visible outside their window, three sturdy heights rising above the storms that churned around them like weedy furies trying to bring them down. As always this time of night it was snowing at 6000 meters. Down in the valley it was just cold and pretty, every shape was thrown in sharp outline against an impervious background.

“I met a guy who summited once,” Jessie said sitting up and feeling wet and cold. “He said you get to the top because it’s all you want to do even when you feel that you can’t,” she said. “It’s why people die up there. It’s why they don’t turn back in time.”

“Would you want to?” Alex asked.

“Die or summit?” She replied.

“Bite me,” he said.

“It’s too cold to try to climb and too lonely a place to die,” she said.

He wanted to go back to sleep she could tell. He was fighting to keep his eyes open.

“I wonder what happens to the dogs here,” she said. “Who feeds them? Do they sleep outside all the time? When they get sick or hurt do they just drag away and die? They have horses grubbing through trashcans, how horrible is that? I can’t breathe.”

“Breathe slow,” Alex said. “You’re panicking.”

“Room’s too small,” she said throwing off her blanket so that he could see that she was sleeping in her clothes again. She was out the door and down the hall before Alex could react. Unlike her he had adapted to the cold and had been stripping down before he went to bed. He did not waste time looking for his headlamp and instead found his clothing and an extra blanket in the dark.

She had made it out to the road and was leaning against the wall of a part of the pasture that was cast in total darkness by a low mountain.

“Why are they sending boys up there to collect bodies?” she asked accepting the blanket he wrapped around her.

“I don’t think they’re boys like we think of boys,” he said.

The full moon was so bright that it seemed to provide an odd kind of daylight. The wall was a loose construct. In some places rocks teetered and the wall canted so severely in spots that the length of it seemed to waver down the road. It was a wall always on the mend and it was built without gates for there was no need. No matter how many times someone fixed a hole, another was in the making. Jessie gently balanced herself on top and then straddled the wall so that she could see both Alex and meadow. The trek was leaning them both out but Alex was also getting a layer of muscle he had not yet noticed, while she was looking more like a wraith with each passing day.

Because he had an eye for temples rather than empty places Alex put his back to the meadow and surveyed the village. The white washed walls glowed in the moonlight. Green and blue symbols traced their way along the walls, doors and windowsills.

“You really think it will get easier once you bury Cherry,” he asked, following the designs that all began on the doors and then spread to the walls. The patterns were all in the making and he suspected they were probably part of an ongoing ritual.

Jessie pulled her blanket more tightly around her. “When I was little,” she said. “I learned that a meteor killed the dinosaurs and I spent my next months freaking out every time night fell because I started to worry about other meteors.”

“Your Woody Allan mood,” Alex said.

The valley was lush by high Himalaya standards. Thick blades of grass popped up in healthy hanks in between rocky clusters. No one left animals out in the night and at this altitude, nothing that had a choice stayed out in the open after nightfall. Jessie realized how out of touch she was with her old home. City living had made her used to sounds and movements at all times of the night and day. A place as empty and quiet as this, even one this beautiful simply scared her.

“People can vanish here like small stones falling into a well,” she said.

“You’re a crazy woman stirring a pot of inedible stew,” Alex said. “And it's getting worse the closer we get to your family and worse the longer you take to make up your mind.”

“I had a dream the other night that it was me in the hospital and not Cherry and that I had died instead of her. Then when I woke up grateful to be the one carrying ashes around,” she said.

“You’d rather be alive, of course,” he said.

“I feel like I should have saved her,” she said.

“Cherry?” he asked.

“Everyone who needs to be saved,” she said.

“That’s just nuts,” he said.

“I’m only telling you what’s in my head. It’s buried beneath layers of stone. I can’t just furrow it,” she said.

“We are being watched,” he said.

She looked around and failed to see what he saw. “Dumbar probably. No one in his right mind sits up in the middle of the night around here.”

“I think he thinks we’re crazy. These people,” Alex pointed out the results of their labor, the stony garden patches, the warped and weeping barn walls and the tuck shops built of corrugated metal and stone, “work too hard to spend their nights wondering about forever problems.”

“You’ll have to go on without me tomorrow,” Jessie said seeing another figure peering through a window, the face visible but not clearly discernable. “Don’t waste the time waiting on me.”

“We’re here because you insisted.,” Alex said angrily. “We’re climbing this thing because you wanted to.”

“I’m wearing too thin too quickly,” she said. “I’m not going to make it up. It will get exponentially steeper and harder to breathe the closer you get to the top and I’m done now,” she said, ashamed to admit it. In fact, just the notion of going farther was too much. She even wondered if she was capable of the descent though she would not say so.

Forced to face the fact of her winnowing resources she was opting to ration them, save for the hike back down.

“I can’t make it,” she said again. “I’ll wait here. There are things to do here.”

Alex started to ask and she shook her head. “You’ll only be out three days then we can head down to Temboche, see my sisters, get it all over with and go back to the states.”

Alex agreed but Jessie knew it was only because he was convinced she would change her mind in the morning. But the fact of the matter was that if he had not insisted she would have remained out on the wall instead of dragging herself to bed because the even the idea of forcing herself to fall asleep was too much effort. She felt as if everywhere she turned she faced a wall of her own making that would take too much effort to overcome. She returned to their rooms because Alex needed sleep and he would not go without her. She wanted more space, she wanted more rest, she wanted to stop and she wanted all of that without having to explain any more of her fears to anyone. If the walk into the center of the meadow were not down right perilous in the dark she might even have considered heading there towards a particularly lush patch of grass where she might stay until a yak pushed her back. It was dozy thought weaving its way among several other ideas that streamed through her head in shapeless narratives that took her attention fully until Alex forced her off the wall and made her go to bed.

The next morning after giving what seemed like an extended set of explanations to the monk, Dumbar allowed Jessie to stay in the village. More pragmatic about her decision than Alex, he also managed to convince Alex to go on without her. The men left just before the morning mists swept in. Straddling the wall and drinking tea Jessie watched them go until they joined the line of others heading up. She felt better for being

at a lower altitude and with the men gone she relaxed. She was able to stop worrying about looking like she felt better than she did. Alone she was able to simply be and she realized that she felt like a building collapsing from within as if she were the superstructure and the solid stuff inside was dissolving. She had taken the opportunity of aloneness to up her pain pills dosage. They made her sloppy but she figured that she would stop a day before the men returned so that she would not be risking making any lazy steps up and down the trails they were taking. The pills made her dopey but not sleepy and she let that feeling guide her.

She hid out in the dining room at first, reading books she had already read until the sun returned. As the sweeping warmth took command, the village rearranged itself. Storekeepers opened doors in order to sweep floors then left their shops unattended, as most of their clients were gone. Old men settled in groups by the wall and watched the yaks while the young men walked into the meadow and gathered those they would load up for the day's trek. Cows and calves that were excused crossed the road and headed upslope. The dogs spread out. Those used to people quickly found Jessie who scratched and petted until every one found a soft spot in the rocky ground and stretched out to sleep. Mongrel horses, small and scruffy as street curs, canvassed the trashcans. People who were neither tending animals nor land, mended walls, fences and caved in roofs. Men in groups of three or four worked on several new teahouses that were going up. Voices were low and although everyone had a job, a lazy air contained the town as if everyone there was waiting for something else to begin. Feeling unable to plan Jessie read a little more until the stories started to seem staged. Then she walked the length of the village followed by the dogs that scattered whenever she crossed paths with other

villagers. Since she suspected that no one would tell her where the Tahru woman lived she thought she would wander. She found an Internet café tucked in the back of a European coffee shop. For the price of an apricot strudel she was allowed fifteen minutes on the Internet. The service was so slow that she needed to buy one more strudel and one cup of coffee to pay for the extra time it took to write and send letters to those at home who were tending her house and pets. One of her dogs had gotten lost for a day and had been found. She wrote about the storms and the yaks and the Sherpas and then signed off. Walking out the back door to avoid talking to the proprietor who was hungry for talk about Americans and the way they bullied the rest of the world she discovered that the village had a clinic and its own memorial for fallen Everest Climbers. The clinic was closed. Its front windows were plastered with warnings about altitude sickness. The memorial was set in the middle of the lane by the front door. A tall silver cone split in two with names, countries and dates in three columns etched down the centers of both insides. Jessie looked for the names she knew because of Krakauer's book and then noticed that as Dumbar had said, that most of the dead were Sherpa. Past the cone and the clinic a low hill with manmade incuts prompted her to climb to the patio of a larger hotel that was uninhabited, but open to visitors. She drifted through the lobby and ended out back where she saw a hot house with dirty windows and beyond it hillsides that were stitched up with many, many foot trails. Coming to a low point in terms of energy level she stepped away from the building seeking a patch of ground that was protected from the wind. And there, warmed by the sun, she fell asleep among a group of dogs that had known where the place was all along.

Really bad breath woke her up. He was kneeling by her side and leaning down. When Jessie started and opened her eyes he grabbed her by the wrist forcing her to sit up. The sun was behind him and she was not fully awake so that all she could see was a dark form.

“Time now,” he said. “Time now for all this nonsense to stop.” She started to say something, and maybe scream, but he slapped her and pulled her up before she could do either. She half followed, and was half dragged into the hot house where he hefted her onto one of the sagging platforms that ran the length of the room. Then he fished out a rope from an untidy pile in a corner and she realized he was the second one, for she thought of the two men as connected. This one, the man from the hotel and the man in the teahouse who had warned her that most did not make it to the top

“Amal and Prakash,” she said. “Little boys raised at the temple. You were there when it burned.”

“Prakash no longer,” He said as he began tying her hands together as she fought against him with all the effect of a kitten spitting at a dog. Once done with her hands, he did the same with her legs. Then he pulled a bag that smelled like dirt over her head and bound it so that if she struggled the bag would bunch up under its ties and tighten around her throat. She had a small thoughtful spot in the back of her mind that had no control at all over her actions and that spot allowed her to hear him say, “For the last time. You have to stop or I will not be able to stop her. She won’t come home with me as long as you are here.” Because she could not stop herself she became locked into struggling against the ties that cut into her skin and choked her. He picked her up and carried over

his shoulder. She felt like throwing up, didn't and after a period of time was tossed onto the ground and left in the dark.

She woke to realize that she had thrown up but as her stomach was empty, it was only a thin crust on her face. Perched in a corner, what had been Prakash resided, his head bent slightly back, his mouth open. The oldest brother who was no longer in command had been bested. Testing the limits of her freedom she could feel that her hands and feet were bound behind her and now tied with a single rope. She was free to roll and could sit up, but her movements were limited by how weak she was and how hard it was to breathe. She also could not fully straighten out. She was afraid of throwing up again, afraid of choking and afraid that if she started to pant she might suffocate. The adrenaline ran through her at intervals as her panic flowed and ebbed. She focused on trying not to hyperventilate or vomit. She drifted off several times and had no sense of another presence for the length of time it took for a chill to set in which eventually started to bring her body temperature down to the point where she was shaking. And then it seemed the shaking stopped and she felt if not calm, at least disinterested in her situation. A sense of total helplessness made that possible. Without the power to alter her situation, she could no longer make bad choices. She had an idea that she was wet and then a thought from far away came to her reminding her that maybe she should not fall asleep. This idea sparked a final fear that was surviving despite her growing lack of interest in her survival. She did not want to fall asleep and die and she believed that the only thing keeping her alive was the fact that she was still awake.

He checked on her once and she thought he had moved her. Her first berth had felt stony and now she felt as if she lay on dirt. She heard footsteps and felt him prod her

with his foot, she guessed. “When your men return they will ask questions but so what. It’s your very last chance to be scared enough to stop. To go away.” She heard something else heavy drop to the ground and then there were footsteps walking away. Soon after that, against her will, she fell asleep.

She was freezing cold when she woke and knew that if she did not move she would die of it. She thought about letting herself go. She could stop being frightened and suddenly being scared was a heavy load. If she just stayed and let the lessening occur she would be done but even as she considered it, the shallow sense of self she had left to protect strummed her fear of the dark. Her sense of it coming for her forced her to commit. She rolled from her side to her stomach. The effort took a toll and she had to rest with her head to the side so she could breath. She began to crawl in small increments, resting, forcing her body forward with a rolling motion that at least gave her the impression of forward motion. It was all she could do and so she put all her energies to edging forward in increments. She drifted at times and realized that she was nodding out in between efforts. She came to an obstacle that seemed to hook her jacket and for a time she could not break free until she tried rolling away and in doing so came to a kind of ledge that crumbled away when she rolled letting her drop hard enough for her to lose her breath. The fall rolled her into a puddle of cold mud and as her clothing absorbed it she felt a stunning chill that put her out again.

She felt a breeze on her face when she woke next and felt a hand touch her. Knowing that whoever had her was in control she let it all be.

“The dogs found you,” the old woman said. She was dropping chips inside a small stove set into a hollow incut in the floor. The room had no windows but the seal on the door was so poor and the door itself so poorly made that light seeping in through the cracks admitted daylight. The room itself seemed like a cave scooped out from the dirty walls that emitted a light dusty rain. A statue of a man on an elephant balanced on a mantle that had been cut into the wall behind the old woman. He was flat faced with a square body and straddled an elephant so strangely formed that it looked more like a bat with a trunk than an elephant. The old Tahru woman had put her scarves and outer garments aside. They lay in a pile at the base of walls into which someone had scratched the holy patterns of the temples. But the patterns were incomplete and made so crudely they were almost obscene. Without her scarves the old woman revealed long grey hair sharply streaked with black. It was a thin long mane and dropped down to her waist. She was not a pretty woman. Her skin was weathered and deeply pocked, her features were manly and someone had broken her nose more than once. What had seemed to be a pink tattoo was actually a deep scar in the center of her forehead, a hard twist of flesh. The mark was integrated into a large tattoo that ran down the back of her jawline, split down either sides of her neck and winded its way to her back where the two strands met in a kind of Gordian knot. The pattern ran down her arms and ended just at her hands. The pattern seen as a whole made sense to Jessie then. It was another of the weavings the Thangka favored.

“It’s Wheel of Life unwinding around your body,” Jessie said. “It’s the end of the cycle. I’m so sorry.”

The woman had removed the burlap hood and washed Jessie's face but left her tied up. She lay on a pallet on her side. She had thrown up on the blanket it seemed, and been washed.

"Let me go." Jessie said. Along with her other symptoms dehydration was taking a toll. A headache and a fuzzy view of everything made all her thoughts seem loosely connected. She had an idea of urgency and tried to hold to that abstraction against the tendency to remember other things. Like debris odd thoughts a day on a sailboat, being sunburnt on the beach, trapping bees in glasses fractured memories kept breaking into her fear in part because she was hazy and in part because she was indeed so afraid that she kept diving into the fractured view of the past to protect herself from the present on which she needed to concentrate. "You were one of the goddesses," she said to the old woman. "And they rejected you."

The old woman ignored her. "I will be perfect in this and I am sorry but you must be stopped." Finished with the stove the old woman began pulling a blanket out to its length on the floor next to Jessie.

"An orange shroud for burial," Jessie said, remembering that a ceremonial burial was an open air, burning. "Just tell me what it is I am doing and I will stop."

The old woman stepped back considering the best way to move Jessie from one spot to another. She was a slight figure but years spent at the hard labor had given her strength. She knelt and grabbed the edges of Jessie's clothes. "When we first received the child we washed her as if she were new," she said, grunting as she moved Jessie's body in stages. "Then we took the head of a snake, the sting of a scorpion, a tuft of grass and bound it all and burned it next to the child to protect it from enemies, from jealous ones.

She was a beautiful child from the first.” Satisfied with Jessie’s position on the blanket she began to arrange Jessie so she could be wrapped in it. Her muscles forced into curled positions were cramping.

“I’m already sick,” Jessie said. “There’s no need for this. I just want to go home.”

“You won’t stop.” The Tahru knelt and Jessie could see that she had once had pierced ears that had been torn free and that her nose had not just been broken but cut and scarred.

“Can you at least loosen the ropes? Please let me stretch?”

“You can’t have her back. It’s all gone.” Nestling Jessie into the blanket she began sewing it shut with twine forced through holes she pierced with an iron nail.

“Was she a pretty child?” Jessie asked.

The old woman stopped. “She was.”

“Tell me. You have time for that,” Jessie said.

“She was a devout child. She was a beautiful bride,” the old woman said.

“She can ride,” Jessie said looking for anyway to stretch out the conversation.

“Yes,” the woman shook her head and let the twine fall to her lap. “I didn’t like that but she loved it and my son loved to give her what she loved.”

“Is she dead then?” Jessie asked.

The woman remembered her chores and reaching around recovered what smelled like small bundles of sage which she began tucking into Jessie’s shroud, carefully depositing them so that once they set Jessie alight the incense would burn enough to cover the smell of burning flesh.

“Are you lighting the fire?” Jessie asked. “I will scream. They will find you.”

“The monsoons are coming. Rivers will be coming for us,” the old woman said, picking up her nail again and moving closer to Jessie’s face. The work took time as the blanket was shredding and sometimes the erstwhile thread tore the blanket as she sewed linking holes and making the thread useless as a fastener. She mumbled as she worked but the prayers were incomplete full phrases of Vedic rituals broken with common nouns that did not make sense.

“I have to take my friend to the temple,” Jessie said, “She has to have the rites.”

“She is here.” The woman stopped what she was doing and took the ashcan that held Cherry’s ashes from behind the man and his elephant.

“They killed her. She won’t have been blessed. She won’t rest,” Jessie said. “You will condemn her. You will condemn me. They will cast us out. Like they cast you out. My friend has done nothing.” This seemed to confuse the woman who stopped and stared at the ashcan as if it held her answers. And as she waited the sound of yak bells banged nearby. Not as if the animals were in view, but as if the road were close. The woman froze as if the sound indicated danger. She sat holding the canister and listening to the bells.

Jessie took a shot in the dark. “Is it your son out there? Are you waiting for him?”

“He loves her.”

“They didn't give my baby girl to Tahru. Tahru are filthy,” Jessie said. Although the sounds of the bells was tempting, she ignored the dream of a rescue and tried to focus on the conversation that was taking all she had to continue. The pain in her legs was particularly stunning. Pulling against the ties and not getting relief was making the muscles bunch and her arms were numb.

“I was Taleju,” the old woman said placing herself in the tradition of a thrown away girl. The piercings torn because she had failed and the tattoos signs of a goddess flung to earth.

“You are forgotten then,” Jessie said. They cut the eye from you.” She said referring to the scar that she now guessed was once was a holy third eye. “Santa,” Jessie said searching for the words. “Sanrakshak, santan,” they were wisps and she knew she was making no sense but the woman seemed to focus.” “Family, holy, we are connected.” Jessie said hoping to hit a note. “I sat in the temple once. Where the goddess sat.” Jessie could see that she has been trying to hold onto a perfect past with the inscriptions on the walls that she could not finish, never make whole again.

“Prakash comes, but Amal forgets me. My littlest boy, he won’t come back.” In a shift her mind moved from all who had thrown her away to the last one who had abandoned her.

“Prakash is dead, old woman. I have seen him. Take me back. I will make him come back to you,” Jessie said trying to shift in time with the woman’s sense of fears and defeats.

“I should help him. He is completely alone without his brother,” the old woman said looking at the twine and nail and seeing that the shroud was nearly complete.

“He should help you, Mother. I will make him come home. Once I take my friend to the temple.”

“Your friend she should be burned,” said the priestess who once was.

“She needs a blessing,” Jessie said.

“I cannot complete a burning anymore,” she said dropping the nail and the twine.

“Take me back and I will make him come,” Jessie said. “Take me back and I will finish it.” The woman touched her forehead and made the odd gesture again. “Yes, I should,” she said. “Maybe you along can save her. She is in trouble.”

The old woman kept changing her mind. Unloosed from all the things she should have been able to trust she leapt from one failure to another seeking purchase. Her connection with Jessie scattered from one minute to the next; her shape shifting relationship with the world around seemed to be guided by her fear of her youngest son.

“We have to hurry,” she said untying Jessie who by then hadn’t the strength to remain lying on the ground. “Parakash hid you, but if he comes and he sees.” She ran her fingers through her necklace and began to mutter. Then she looked out the door. “I have to get dressed,” she said. She worried her way around the room, picking items up and setting them down until she zeroed in on a pile of clothing. As she picked through the robes and faded dresses, Jessie not willing to spend another moment inside the defiled place made it out to the stoop outside where she hit her limit. She found herself staring at a series of stupas so crudely built that she did not recognize them, piles of whitewashed stone each resembling sandcastles made while the sand was too wet. Crabbing her way to the nearest one, she scratched at its surface with a rock until the top crumbled. She reached inside and pulled out a handful of crumpled pictures of missing hikers mixed in with pieces of stone and ash. Then the old woman closed her front door with bang while Jessie was still holding the picture and Jessie startled and stumbled until she hit a soft patch and fell. The ground felt odd so she rolled away taking much of the topsoil with her and in the process uncovering the face of the man she’d met at breakfast in Namche. Prakash’s eyes were closed, his face thickly dusted.

“Your son is out of control,” she said to the old woman. “Why does he kill?”
Jessie asked holding the photograph out to the woman who was now dressed in beaded orange robes. She took the picture from Jessie and put it back.

“Amal kills those from the temple. Those your father ruined. He believes he is saving her. If no one remembers, it never happened.”

“Why not kill me?” Jessie asked looking down at the body.

“Why didn’t you listen to Prakash? Marie cannot see you.” The woman reached for Jessie. Jessie grabbed at her, trying to push her away and got a handful of beads.

The woman pried her fingers off before she reached forward and put her hand around Jessie’s waist in order to help her stand. “What’s your name?” Jessie asked.

“Jane,” she replied shifting her balance in order to get a more solid stance. Though she was shorter and lighter than Jessie, a lifetime spent breaking rocky ground and hauling her own loads had taken what she had and turned it steely. Her tattoos were a vine that connected across her body leading to the dispatched blossom on her forehead and when she all but lifted Jessie to her feet the vines made whole by sinew, rippled.

“That’s not so Nepali.” Jessie said. The air was too cold and as she tried to stand it attacked her senses. She felt quite a victim to the processes that would keep her alive or not, despite the elements.

“They took my name when they cast me off. I took another,” the old woman replied skirting a patch of ice and stepping into a muddy patch. Jessie followed her lead with slower steps slipping a little in the mud. They nearly went down. The women shook Jessie. “Help,” she said.

“You could toss me over your shoulders,” Jessie said.

“Walk,” the Tahru witch replied.

“You could kill me,” Jessie said wondering if the old woman was walking her back to the hotel or over to a high ledge.

“I helped burn down the temple, but I cannot kill you, even for Amal and Marie,” the witch replied. “Prakash was his brother’s keeper but now his brother is without a guide and you should go home.”

“Why can't she see me?” Jessie asked.

“Without you she’s a goddess, she has no earthly mother. With you she is to blame too. She is not well,” the witch replied. “They gave her to us because she was ruined and we made her forget and you ruined that.”

The woman had no more to say and Jessie was too worn to continue questioning her so they stopped speaking as they stumbled towards the first of the hills they would have to mount in order to return to Pheriche.

The dogs that were supposed to have found Jessie were waiting at the base of the hill. They followed the women at a practical distance, back to the hotel where Jessie was dropped at the back door. Jane would go no further. She pulled a long white scarf from the folds of her robe and handed it in a bunched wad to Jessie.

“Bury your friend with the proper prayers,” she said. Jessie leaned on the door jam and watched her leave, then crossed through to the back of the hotel heading towards the series of tricky steps that led to the main road. She had been gone for two days. But no one had noticed, as no one was scheduled to show up for meals and because she now lived in a room alone. She had returned to her room and sat on the bed. A coughing fit left pink spittle on the scarf. She swallowed more pills and then went to the dining area

where the monk greeted her and told her that the storms she and Alex had seen the night before he, Dumbar and Dahn had left had swamped the heights.

“They will wait for the storms before they try to climb,” he said. “No worry. We would know if they’d fallen.”

“When do you worry?” Jessie asked. He had automatically brought her a cup of Tibetan tea in one of the mugs onto which an outline of a yak had been scored. And while she drank he took a seat opposite her in silence. “He can’t kill me for some reason, either,” she said to the monk as he poured another cup of an unpleasant drink that would have put her off any other time. “Did you see the temple burn?” she asked him. “Did you know why they burned it?” He nodded not as if he’d understood, but because it was the polite thing to do. “You’re a guardian, the guy that mans the front gates, aren’t you,” she said. He rubbed his hands clean on his jacket then, pulled a trinket from his pocket to give her. For a second she thought it was her bracelet but it was too small. The bracelet came with a set of beads. “A baby’s gift,” she said. He shook his head and separated the beads from the bracelet and held in so that he could show her each stone, one by one. He named each stone rolling through from the clasp and then back again until she began to hear him.

“Sunita,” a blue stone, “Nischa,” a white one, “Raju”, was red, “Shirisha,” yellow, “Bibek” was green, “Yash,” was blue again, until she began to see it as he continued to pray in the names of children.

“The colors of prayer flags,” she said putting her hand on his to make him stop. He shook her off and continued.

“Amal, Yangani, Bina, Malashree, Gagan, Parshant, Krishana, Amita, Puspika, Prakesh.”

“Names,” she said. “The children of the village.” She took the bracelet from him. “Marie, Jessie,” she said touching two stones on the bracelet. He nodded and let her have it. “Do you think I can fix it? Fix something this big and this fucked up?”

He didn’t reply one way or another. He just waited.

“Were you one?” she asked. And again he didn’t reply.

She put the piece in her pocket because the sight of it now reminded her of the home she had actually left behind as a young girl. And then he waited while she sipped and stared beyond him into a room watching the dust motes dancing in the sunlight shooting into the room through places where the window blinds did not quite fill the windows. If the light was not warming it was soothing, beams ran from the windows to the floors creating a still life. She found comfort in the way the light hit objects giving them soft edges because it could not light them up completely. “Call the cops?” she asked at last. “The last place I saw them was when we entered the park and that was days ago. Phone?” Carefully because she didn’t want to offend him she pointed at his jacket pocket and mimed using a cell.

He opened his to show that it had no service.

“Right,” she said. “But you must have a way to call for help.” Then, too tired and overwhelmed she drifted for a moment and had to follow a winding path back to her original thoughts. “You know what I think?” she said to him. “I think he keeps going home and then coming back to find me. But he needs to keep going home to take care of her.” She finished a third cup and waved away another. “I need sleep,” she said feeling her thoughts rolling to a soft stop until the world was really just a glowing undefined

thing. “And I need to be safe until the guys come back,” she said before falling asleep at the table.

She woke again and found herself in the same place. Sherpas and the teens that were working the mountain were gathered around the stove. She drifted away again and when she opened her eyes she saw two Sherpa women seated across the way playing cards. She shifted trying to pull a blanket someone had thrown over her up over her shoulders. Her sleeve dropped and she saw where her wrists had been bound. Then the blanket fell fully to the floor and one of the woman stopped playing and helped her sit and fed her a huge cup of tea that she drank before lying down on the bench. The woman spoke to her in a language that seemed mostly gibberish but that soothed her, and she fell asleep again. The next time she woke Sam, Dumbar and Dahn with faces chapped and burnt from exposure to the wet, the cold and the wind, were sitting at a nearby table eating dinner. They were jabbering excitedly about their trip. Alex was showing the pictures he had taken to other Sherpa and tourists when Jessie fell into the dream that took her then.

She dreamed of her sisters and the Tahru witch. “She has her version and we have ours,” Tommy said handing a cup to Gabby. Then the baby, not in evidence started crying and the witch produced a doll. Holding it by the feet she spanked it and shook it quiet. Then she handed it to the man behind her so that he could dispose of it. Jessie hiding in the front of the temple was too scared to do anything but hide. “She will have to come now,” she heard Cherry say. “She will have to settle it.” Then the room faded to white and Jessie was lying in a bed with her hands somehow tied to the mattress.

When Jessie woke the last time it was morning again and the monk was seated across the table. She sat up and nodded and he filled the cup and pushed it her way. She was still drinking when Alex came in for breakfast carrying her pill pouch that he slid her way. She took what she needed and zipped up the pack.

“Have you been sick the whole time we were gone?” he asked.

“You made it to the top,” she said swallowing a handful of red and brown pills, “to the base camp?”

“And made the hike back in one go after the storms parted,” he said. “I couldn’t stop once we got started home. Took a bath in that cold water once we got back too, had to.”

“I need one of those,” she said wondering if it were possible.

“Are you better?” He had returned as someone stronger. White goggle shapes cut through his sunburned face where he had forgotten to protect himself from the sun. He was ten pounds lighter than he had a week before and seemed more physically substantial despite the loss. He dug his hand into a pack of coconut cookie and ate them by the handful while he spoke. A plate of pancakes arrived before he finished the pack. He swapped one for the other.

“It was the right thing for me to stay back,” Jessie said, “but now we have to hurry.”

“Hurry to Temboche. Are we racing?” He didn’t bother with the silverware but used the bread and pancakes like scoops dipping them into his tea now and again.

“I feel like I’m being chased,” she said. “And like something will get away if I don’t run it down.”

“You need to be clearer than that,” he said, cleaning his plate and gesturing to the monk to take it all away.

“You just won your race. You’re not seeing things like finish lines,” she said. Just speaking was taking its toll on her. “All I have is a tin of ashes and a feeling like the world is going away if I don’t do something right. Something noisy.”

“Who, is she?” He pulled out a pack of local smokes and scratched a light off the tabletop.

“Sorry?” Jessie asked.

“You talk in your sleep when you dream and you dream all the time, now,” he said.

“We need to hurry,” she said. “It all happens when no one is looking.”

“Still not any clearer.” The opened pack attracted a Sherpa. Alex passed it over and waved it away. The man took the pack into the kitchen to share, the dining room started filling with smoke.

“You wouldn’t believe me,” Jessie knew that the Sherpa didn’t smoke like Westerners. Everyone would smoke a little then they would stub out the smokes saving the rest of the butts for a time down the road. If she waited the smoke would clear.

“You take a lot of pills,” Alex said handing the cigarette he did not want to finish to another and then waving away the smoke that seemed to bother him. Jessie could feel herself beginning to panic. She slowed down making measured breaths in order to keep from feeling like she was suffocating.

“I feel sick,” she said. “But I’m not high.” He took hold of her wrist the way one does when one is taking a pulse.

“I can tell the difference,” he said, “but you sound muddled.”

“I have to go home,” she said. “I’m running out of time.” She pulled away and he let her go. She looked for the dust motes that had earlier served to settle her mind and now she only saw what looked like the white stirring of ash raining down.

“Since when has here been home?” Alex asked and pulling her back from the dreamy breach.

“Since Cherry died.” And now she wanted to wail not for the loss but for the way she seemed to be skipping from one emotional extreme to another for no reason.

“Well, home is in the plan. Don’t know what you’re worried about,” he said.

“We have to hurry,” she said.

“They say you’ve been sleeping here,” he pointed at the bench, “for three days. Think you can make it to the temple?”

“I’m afraid to fall asleep now. And from now on we are hiking downward. It’s a day away if that.”

He brushed a hand across her forehead as if taking her temperature. “Dumbar was telling me about something he called the small deaths. You obsess too much about too much. But, maybe you do need to go home once more.”

“It won’t be easy. Someone there has been lying.”

“True wherever you go.” He stood and took her arm, helping her up from the bench. Someone behind him opened the door and the blast of air from outside scattered all the dust and smoke at once.

“Will you help me?” she asked

“Course,” he replied. “I think I, at least, owe you that.”

They used to play in the woods where he grew up. Alex's father was a military man, so after his mother abandoned them they settled in Virginia where the easiest way for the local kids to escape their parents was to head for the trees that were technically in wilderness areas. Once the sawmills finished off the forests they were legally allowed to harvest, the woodsmen logged in the places where the children played. At first the children were confronted with only small signs of disgrace, clumps of stumps appearing in the middle of what once was something vital. But the lumberjacks kept at it until one day he and his friends headed out into an area they knew well and after breaking through a row of trees on a hill they suddenly faced a totally harvested horizon. Hiding what they were doing, the lumber mills had left a lean line of trees standing that was just thick enough so that from the road it looked like a forest remained but once he and his friends crossed those few yards the truth of the matter became clear. They had killed the forest and left behind a cemetery that would not be retrieved in their lifetimes, or in their children's. He stopped going into the woods after that. They could no longer be trusted. In his mind the place had betrayed him.

It was probably his age at the time. He was just old enough to consider leaving home. He left soon after the shock of the phony tree line. He took a love of desolate places with him; one that he did not mistake for a love of open spaces. It was the destruction he admired, the ability to see the end point beyond which nothing else could grow. He was seeing it happen in her now. She was hollowing out and becoming easier to frighten. His rage surprised him. He had thought that he was just tired of being humiliated. Feeling tramped down by the details of living another life he detested he had forgotten how he really felt about anything and now that it seemed as if he might bring

the whole thing to an end he found that the source of who he was lay in an anger that had great depth. The heights at the top of the world were the perfect place to think about permanency. He thought that it made perfect sense that a faith that wondered about such things as impermanence would take root in the rock up here. No other kind of feeling could be absorbed by this landscape so well. The ideas and the real finding a perfect mating point here where the sky met the ground. And that she was suffocating was a perfect irony as well. He was indeed taking her breath away and all he had to do was watch. He was becoming someone new as the trip progressed. The transformation was something else he had little control over. The days were taking him apart and making him over. He felt like the warm rush that occurs just as a struck match flares. He had no idea how long this would take or what the whole experience would do to him in the end but he was enjoying how his hunger was unmaking them all.

Tengboche was in fact two days hike away. And after the night spent in a teahouse in Dinboche, the trail quickly dropped them back down into the tree line where Jessie began to feel even more comfortable.

“It doesn’t take much descent to feel better,” Dumbar said. Once Jessie began to improve he allowed himself to appear relieved and she realized how worried he had been. “You should say it sooner,” was all the admonition he offered when she admitted her weakness but though her strength started to return he maintained province over how fast she should hike and how much ground they should cover from then on. The stop at Dinboche was his idea and he did not ask his clients their opinions.

“You are better,” he allowed once they headed off the second morning. “But you are not good,” he said as he shouldered her daypack. She had finally been forced to admit that though she felt better, could breathe easier and could now keep water down, that the world still seemed to be a swimming moment. She found herself having to concentrate to keep track of what others were saying during conversations. The closer she got to home the less she wanted to feel or think. She felt as if she were leaving her skin behind and therefore her connections to the rest of the group. If they were heading for disaster then it was necessary, but she was not prepared for the results, only resigned to them. When her father had fallen in front of her and died she had thought that he would take their history with him. It had not occurred to her that she was his history as was their child, or that the child would be a destroyed girl, and that when her father hurt that child that the destruction would be her fault. She daydreamed on her feet and stared at the ground as they walked, forgetting now and again that she walked with the others.

Then the trees swooped in and she began to see the flickering movement of the smaller animals as they buzzed in and out of her view. Creatures rustled through the undergrowth or drifted in overhead until they were close enough to stop and watch the trekkers from above and below the foliage. As usual a dog found them after long and trailed them into Temboche.

“Many Buddhists believe that dogs are closest to humans in reincarnation. Some say they are monks reincarnated,” Dumbar said as he watched the animal settle in the dirt next to Jessie. They had stopped to change clothes, trading wet shirts for drier ones.

“But they’d be failed monks, right?” Sean asked, trying to decide which dirty shirt to wear.

“It’s not proper to judge what the lesson means or what the shape of the new life accounts for,” Dumbar replied.

“Being a dog might be a break from sweeping porches,” Jessie said.

Dahn laughed.

“He understands more English than we think, doesn’t he?” she asked.

“He understands enough,” Dumbar replied. “Will we find your family at Temboche?”

“Not on the temple grounds proper, but down on the hillside. There is a convent and below that a private hermitage. My sisters live there. Anyone they know lives in buildings scattered around Temboche and the convent grounds. Some people live deeper down in the valley,” Jessie said.

“Tahru?” Dumbar asked.

She nodded.

“Why did your sisters stay while you left?” Dumbar asked.

“Payment for damage done, maybe,” Jessie said.

“I don’t understand,” he said.

“We brought bad luck to the village and maybe they were meant to stay and fix it,” she replied.

“And you?” he asked.

“I was a sign of bad luck so I had to go,” she replied. “I’d rather we find rooms up near the temple when we get there,” she said.

“You won’t prefer to stay below?” Alex said.

“I don’t know what kind of reception we will get and I’d like to put it off,” Jessie said.

“After rushing us down here,” Alex said.

“I don’t claim that to make total sense. I just want to look at the sky a little bit before I face them. I need to talk to my sisters first before we see anyone else.”

They stepped out of the trees and into the clearing and faced the temple that predominated the village and indeed was the reason for the village’s existence.

Its portal was a brightly painted arch. Hinds and peacocks were carved into the roof. Stone dogs bristled on either side and a set of prayer wheels braced the dogs. The arch itself was a complicated transaction between flowers, checkered patterns and a series of heart shapes of all colors linked together by golden chains. Black circles each enclosing a god or a demon, were styled into the columns. Inside the arch flagstones, shaping the steps and the tiered levels led to the temple door and the unadorned structure that contained the temple. A grass field in front of the temple led to lodging and the main

teahouse. Tents were set up on parts of the field and tourists were cleaning up, heading to dinner or wandering. The only structure taller than the temple was the mountain behind it. A trail lead from the main gate down into more trees and was quickly obscured.

Jessie dropped her pack on the grass and faced the temple. She pulled a ring of beads from a pocket knelt and very quickly whispered some words while she worked the beads between her fingers. When she finished her prayers she leaned on her hands and knees for a moment before rising.

“Where did you get those?” Alex took the beads from her as she stood.

“The old man in the village.”

“And you’re praying?”

“I am respecting my hosts,” she said taking the beads back. “Don’t worry. I’ll remain the same godless girl you always knew.” She stood and picked up her pack, cradling it in her arms. “Technically it is called a gomba, a holy place for learning,” she said. “It is a refuge for wildlife. It is a sacred forest. It is a botanical preserve. It is where climbers receive blessings before they head up. It has been totally destroyed and completely rebuilt three times. Once an earthquake destroyed it and then, twice, a fire burnt it to the ground. They lost all the buildings, all their scriptures in the fires; everything material and holy was lost twice in this spot. And each time the locals rebuilt it. Local sponsors donated the funds. The dogs here are from a lineage of animals that have been here, more or less, as long as this place has existed. There are two packs and two territories, one around the temple and the other around the lodges. My sisters, Gaibriél, Tommy and I would pick favorites. They preferred the temple dogs.”

“And you grew up here,” Alex said.

“I came here as a child. My father found the place on his travels. For a while we came every year, which my father’s, father’s, money let us do. My mother moved us in full time for three years. I came when I was ten and left at thirteen with my mom and my Dad just before Dad died. My older sisters stayed.” They were standing at the base of the temple steps. “The stones have prayers carved into them. My sisters and I tried to sneak some into the stack,” she pointed at the walls and the steps, “with our prayers scratched on the back.”

“The monks allowed that?” Alex asked.

“No, the monks retrieved them and my mother was given the task of teaching us reverence. We each had to scrub a section of the steps one day a week for two months.” A gong was now being rung and the buzzing of the temple horns was rising from within.

“You liked being here,” Alex said.

“It was not all terrible,” Jessie said.

“I never got that idea from you before,” he said.

“It got ruined. I never wanted to come back after it got ruined.” She headed for the steps. Boys ranging in age from five to teen-aged years, dressed in robes to denote the fact that they were serviced to the temple, were now hurrying up to the door carrying, tapers, teapots and food for the praying monks. Others were watering plants that were lined up on the steps. “We can go in,” she said. “We can sit along the sides and listen. Dinner will wait.”

“How long are the services?” Alex asked.

“They can last for hours, but we leave whenever we want,” she said.

“We will come later,” Dumbar said, referring to him and Dahn. “I will see to our rooms.” He headed toward the teahouse, a pale grey heap with tiny windows while Alex and Jessie joined the other travelers who were funneling up the steps.

Shoes were left in an entryway. Hats and jackets were allowed but quickly discarded as the body heat of dozens raised the temperature inside. Dark wood floors met with three blond boxes that were aligned and covered with padded layers creating rows of seats that ran the length of the room stopping at the base of a multi-tiered alter. Each platform was ornately carved and inlaid with color and the boys had set out an array of icons, sacred items, specially prepared dishes, drinks and candles on the levels. Some levels were glass cases and the highest one held a gigantic Buddha statue that stood so high that its head was partially obscured by the high beams of a multicolored pagoda that enclosed the monks’ seats. The Buddha was a hearty golden figure, robed and serene, with long earlobes and was set inside a painted scene so multi-figured and multicolored that the effect was of a god sitting inside a forest of multitudes of creation. The walls in the gallery were covered with a series of interlocking murals depicting heavenly and hellish stories. Demons squatted over the demolished and gods sprang from the clouds, while hundreds of versions of Buddha peered out from all angles in every picture. The paintings were framed by red and green columns which themselves were decorated with silk and tassels. The total effect of color was a quilted feeling.

“Everything you ever need to know is painted on the walls, inscribed on the ceiling and written in these books,” Jessie said referring the tomes the monks were passing around as they chanted. One slim monk sat up front and faced the rest. An older man he read and drank from his cup which one of the boys immediately refilled. The

boys kept all cups topped off, brought blankets when necessary, and played in the back giggling so loudly at times that the monks noticed though none seem to care. The monks drank, turned pages and prayed. Some played instruments. They played drums and horns and gongs in between each prayer. Prayers were read and here and there instruments were played and sometimes all the monks stopped to page back and forth through the books as if selecting what might be read next. The boys were quiet but playful and the monks mindful and tolerant of the tumbling about that occurred in corners were the youngsters waited. Visitors sat on the floors along the walls and though a sign asked that no flash photos be taken, flashbulbs went off at regular intervals and again the monks did not seem to mind. Jessie and Alex took their seats and waited and after a while the sound penetrated. The sounds mixed into a prolonged hum that rang calm and clean and true and rose and fell like a gentle tide and offered entry by invading the senses with a gentle effect. Alex stimulated by his first time, watched it all. Jessie leaned back against the wall and closed her eyes.

“They allow nuns?” Alex asked.

“They do,” she said, opening her eyes.

They were up front kneeling in front of the monk who faced the rest. Tall robed Caucasians with cropped white hair. They both knelt quietly before the priest until he acknowledged them. Then one stood and offered him a piece of white cloth. When she stood the man who attended them was revealed, as was the young woman by his side, Marie. She seemed to need a steadying hand. She was dressed in a white robe that should have covered her face, but she shook off as if it bothered her. Pale and sweating she sat

by Amal's side and stared up at Buddha as Amal held her hand. When her hood fell he reached up to fix it.

"He was at the airport," Alex said stopping because he thought he heard Jessie cough. She was holding her mouth and bent over as if she was trying to keep the sound from carrying. One hand covered her mouth and the other gripped her pack. When she straightened up and took her hand from her mouth Alex saw blood. It was a small amount that she brushed away. When he reached for her to help she used him to help stand. The coughing got worse and they began to attract attention, which stopped the prayers and caught the attention of the family in front of the monk. Amal's view of Alex and Jessie was obscured at first. Then he leaned back and saw them. He grabbed Marie by the arm and began dragging her towards the door. She resisted, but did not actually fight him. Jessie stood, tripped up Alex then stepped on him in her frantic effort to follow. Brought down it took a moment for Alex to stand as well. He got up in time to see Jessie catch up with the running pair just outside the door that swung shut after them effectively shutting off whatever melodrama was in play. Most of the visitors stirred but no one moved as two of the monks hurried out the door while the rest returned to their ceremonies.

The doors swung inward after the monks' passage and three adults could be seen struggling and yelling at the top of the steps. The two robed women in front of the temple seemed conflicted between their conforming and controversial impulses. They froze in their seats for several moments before bowing to the monk in front of them, rising and hurrying out the door. Someone outside the door screamed and what sounded like rock shattering followed. The doors opened again to allow the monks back inside. One had a bloodied lip. He wiped it with his hand as he and his fellow rushed through the temple to

passages in back of the altar. They crossed paths with the women who reached the front doors and pulled them open so that they remained ajar. The crowd finally came too spilling out into the entryway where they all could see that someone had fallen the length of the steps. A crack in one showed where one might pitch forward and a trace of blood on a few steps farther down showed the possible trajectory leading to two pots that had been knocked down the steps and had landed at the base of the stairs.

“Jessie,” Alex yelled at the figure disappearing down the trail that headed towards the valley. A hand stopped him from following. She was strong. When he tried to pull away she held him fast.

“They can only be going to one place,” Tommy said.

“What the hell?” Alex said pointing at the blood and the trail of damage.

“He’ll have to beat them and they won’t let him take her away,” she said pointing at the group of young monks hurdling down the steps.

“He wants to take her?” Alex asked.

“He wants her for himself but she belongs to the temple.” Gabby said to Alex’s back as he had already pulled his arm from Tommy’s grasp and ran down after the pack that was rushing downhill.

13

The girls were set free from their chores because they had out run the range of their parents' voices. Knowing that time was short before someone caught them the three wiry red heads hurtled downhill towards the river that was thundering in the valley below. Fed by the Himalaya glaciers these waters would eventually become the three great rivers, the Brahmaputra, the Sutlej, and the Indus that flowed to the deltas below.

Like everything else the rivers have stages of maturity, mountain, plain and delta. The process of siphoning the water as it moves from one phase to another is called piracy as the shape of the valleys and gorges, crafted by the water in turn, decide how much water should flow one way or the other. The waters look like milk because currents grab and grind up a pale mineral as they head downward. The watercolor changes again as stones, created by the running waters, sift out the sediment. By the time the water reaches a well it looks nothing like it did and the history of the powers that made it is results in a clear confession.

As the glaciated mountains are considered gods so the rivers below are just as holy. The Brahmaputra runs cold at first. Flowing across southern Tibet it breaks through the Himalayas into great gorges and slides into India. Then it flows southwest joining and joining until it becomes part of the Ganges. Sutlej, sometimes called the Red River, is said to run through sands of gold in places. It enters India through the Shipki La pass, of Silk Road legend. In Pakistan, it waters the ancient and former principdom of Bahawalpur a state that never succumbed to British control. Indus the third sister runs hot. It flows into and creates a cradle of great empires. The girls were well aware of the history of water. As always they stopped just at the edge of a cliff that commanded river's edge and

named the piece of river that belonged to them, that piece of the world that made them goddesses.

“There’s mine,” Tommy cried thinking of India and of rose petals and flaming dishes floating down river.

“I see it,” cried Grabby referring the strands of water that were hers.

“And mine?” Jessie asked. Her sisters were the power players in their group. She could ask, but not claim. The twins were an exotic pair, already greying like their mother. Jessie who could not keep her hair combed wore a braid that looked more like a strand of knots. She was the only one who wore jewelry. A bracelet from a friend the family assumed she would never see again. Dressed in the local garb all the girls had the same stolid shredded look of the Nepalese farmers who peopled the lower regions of the valley, a people and a place the girls loved because both offered safety home never supplied. The warnings about the Tahru, from their Buddhist teachers came too late and in truth the children were running towards the sounds of the village bells that were calling the faithful to services. The girls had heard all the stories of the dying tribe from the world outside, but since the stories did not match what they knew and since the power secret alliances gave them was too compelling the girls played the valley whenever they could.

The girls had really been running free through the forest all morning. Their father was back and the better policy was to keep away.

“Let’s go see,” Tommy said, sticking out her arm to block Jessie’s progress.

“Someone is getting married.”

“Not for me,” Jessie knocked her sister’s arm away. “I think instead I will become a princess or a goddess and ride on my own river in my golden boat,” she said.

“Things,” the Gabby chided.

“I’ll buy you a piece of driftwood to float on just so you can be better than me,” Jessie said. Gabby mock slapped her and missed because Jessie had turned and was once again running towards the temple. Her sisters followed.

“I said no,” a voice called to the girls halting them. He came from above. How long he had been standing there no one knew. It was his habit to listen in and try to catch his daughters in lies. He came from the trees lumbering ever so slightly. Not off balance, but seeking it more rigorously than a sober man might even on rocky ground. “Or did you misunderstand me when I told you to keep away from that mess below?” The girls bunched up, but did not reply. Though silence could be construed as resistance they also knew that there was no safe answer. He moved closer to the girls who could, but would never run. At this stage of their lives the girls favored their father’s looks. It wouldn’t be until they were adults that time and maturity would sift out their father’s genes and establish their mother’s looks. They stared back at him with his eyes. “They are not even people, the Sherpas still use them as slaves,” he said. “You fuck one and it’s no harm, no foul.” He moved into dialogue that was understandable in tone if not content to the girls. Something had set him off. Whether it had to do with them running to the river or not was immaterial. The girls returned to the river’s edge with the twins standing slightly behind their younger sister. Their father reached for this girl, took her arm and squeezed it yanking her close. “I hate the shitty job your mother has done with you. All this native shit, playing like dung slaves. Think you’re Buddhists? That’s about the stop. Get you the fuck out of this place.” Jessie pulled away because she could not help herself and so he jerked her closer. “Hear the bells? Think you’re old enough? You’re probably out of luck.

Marriages are arranged at birth here but maybe we can still put together something for you.” He shook her, in fighting to keep to her feet, she bat him in the face. “Bitch,” he said setting his temper free and dragging her away leaving the twins standing by the river listening to the attack until they felt safe enough to run home. Months later in the searing moment of discovery when asked what happened they would decide to walk completely passed the moment and not remember it correctly, if even at all.

Five sets of runners met at the river's edge. Jessie, Anne-Marie, and Amal, were first. The monks tearing down a trail made slick with pine needles and shale arrive next. Alex worried about falling, came more slowly as did Jessie's sisters, Tommy helping Gabby who was still recovering from her car accident.

"Let her go, Amal," Gabby said to the man who had a tight grip on Marie who was screaming at him.

"She'll kill her and I don't mind, but do you?" He pulled his wife forward fighting her desire to run back up the trail after her mother who was bleeding from a head wound and finally stumbled to her knees once she hit the clearing.

"Stop her," Marie screamed.

"Jessie?" Alex asked kneeling by her side.

"It's just a cut," Jessie said. "I fell when I ducked." Amal kept a tight hold on Marie who kept fighting him reaching back for her mother who with Alex's help was now standing.

"Amal stop," Jessie screamed.

"Everyone, stop," Tommy yelled as the monks tasked with saving the girl arrived and moved to separate Amal from his wife.

Sliding to a stop a few yards from the lip of rock from which anyone could be propelled into the rocks and white water below Amal and Marie parted company. She picked up a rock and attacked her mother again. Jane emerging from a lower trail pulled the girl back. "Stop," she said softly to the girl who turned to hit her as well but stopped when she recognized her offender.

"She is here," Marie said as Jane fended Amal off with a look.

“Give it to me,” she said to Marie. Standing on the lip of some madness that owned her, the girl hesitated and then trembling gave her grandmother the rock. The brightness she had the day at the bridge while she struggled with the horse was gone, flattened by something senseless.

“Stop her,” said again and again but in lower and quieter tones as Jane who had burnt her hair off and shredded her robes in despair cradled her and knelt to the ground. The only object she seemed to have brought with her was the long nail, stuck in her belt and her beaded necklace. When Amal fearful of Jessie’s presence tried to move closer and Marie screamed and tried to burst free toward the mother she never knew. “Stop her, Grandmother,” she whispered. “She will make me his.”

“Hush, hush,” Jane whispered. “Don’t be rude to the river. Listen, it’s singing.” She ran her hands through the girls’ hair. “Hush, hush,” she said over and over rocking the girl until she stilled.

“I didn’t really believe she was real, I just hoped,” Jessie said to Amal who stepped between her and the pair on the ground.

“She’s not yours,” he said. Sliding in behind them the monks made a circle forcing the ending that had come.

“She didn’t drop from the sky or is that what you told her? You told her that she was something falling from the stars and not just who we all are,” Jessie said. “Who did you collect at Namche because I thought it was her,” Jessie said to her sisters. “And again, you made me think she had died.”

“She was one of ours and I wanted to keep you from coming,” Tommy said. “The dying would stop if you left, but you kept coming.” Tommy nodded to the girl on the

ground. "It's a failing of ours that we couldn't help her anymore than we could have helped you. Prakash and Amal saw you at the airport. They thought we asked you to come so the car accident in front of the hotel happened, and then the attempts to make you turn around."

"The woman on the cliff, the body in the mist? The attacks? I thought I was losing my mind," Jessie said. "Daddy raped the girls, hurt the boys until the villagers finally burned down the temple. He raped his daughters and his granddaughter and the women in his family keep fixing it all until he broke a girl who couldn't be fixed. Why not just kill me?"

"There was enough of that," Tommy said, "and you are my sister."

"Why didn't you just turn around?" Alex asked. "It seems like without you this all works. It only falls down when you surface," Alex said. "Maybe you are the whole problem. Your daughter is a goddess until you come home." He stood nearest the forest's edge than the rest providing the most foreign note to the field of characters gathered here at the edge of the river, wood and skylines.

"What did you know?" Jessie asked him.

"Towards the end your mother couldn't keep anything to herself. She felt cheated, wanted to share. Then she became afraid of who she'd told."

"She killed Cherry."

"Turns out," he said.

"You told them that I was coming home?"

Alex shrugged. "People need to be warned about you. You were supposed to be run down not your sister but then he hit the curb and hit the wrong girl. Then it became more fun to watch you suffer."

"I always hoped you were least like anyone else I knew," Jessie said. "I guess that you being like me is what we had in common. I won't miss you Alex," she said feeling all the edges of the structure of herself coming undone. "Where's Dumbar?"

"Back getting help," Alex said. "Then I will go too. Plane ticket already in my pocket."

"I don't think so," Jessie replied as the monks took both him and Amal in hand.

"I haven't broken a law," Alex said.

"Someone killed Prakash and I don't think it was his brother."

"He kept protecting you from her," Alex said.

"Where do you come from? The guys we pick?" Jessie asked speaking to Alex and Amal. "How did you know I was coming?" she asked her sisters.

"Cherry warned us," Gabby said. "Sitting in the shade of a tree where Tommy had left her she had managed retain the most composure. "We visited her in the hospital. She told us that you were afraid and that you would be coming home." She gestured to the monks who split into groups one taking Amal in hand and Alex away and one that tried to remove the girl from her protector's arms. The exchange failed with the girl as she slipped from her grandmother's arms holding the nail and stabbed her mother before she could be stopped.

They carried Jessie to the hermitage and laid her on the bed in Tommy's room. It was a room decorated with family photographs some of which contain shots of the girls together as well as of Marie. Tommy sat by her sister and held her hand while they waited. "A helicopter will come," Tommy said, but they will have to carry you back up to the temple."

"Why did the Tahru keep my baby?" Jessie asked."

"We thought that she would be safer in the village of forgotten people. No one knows them. They make up stories about them up here but they never come down to the valley," Tommy said.

"But Dad knew about the village," Jessie said.

"He violated the girls but he wouldn't go down into the village. He hunted in the temple," Tommy said. "Then he raped Marie."

"Starting the damage all over again," Jessie said.

"She became wild and Amal became fascinated with her. Between them they grew mad like Daddy. Gabby and I stayed here and tried to contain the mess. We sent you home to give you a chance, not because we blamed you."

"As a kindness," Jessie said. "I'd never thought of it that way once."

"It was all broken by one day, Jessie. Marie is mad, but we could tend her here. I don't know why Mom told Cherry. I don't know why Cherry told you, but once you returned things unspun," Tommy said.

"I'd always wanted the baby back. Cherry was my friend. You and Gabby were my friends once," Jessie replied.

"Until one day," Gabby said.

“We saw you at the airport not a coincidence, really. One comes when the weather is good and the tourism is waning and Amal told Marie and she has been hunting you. She found you at the bridge and Amal got her back then. He took her to Jane who has always been her guardian. She tried to keep her contained and Prakash, protector of his brother, tried to scare you home while those two hunted the trails,” Tommy said.

“I’m sick,” Jessie said. “And Cherry’s dead. You could not have turned me around if you’d had an army.” She looked at a picture of the girl riding in the spring competitions. In the shot her face was hidden but there was no mistaking the form. “You were so unfriendly down in Namche.”

“My last attempt,” Tommy said.

“It’s worked the first time you tried it on me. Where’s Marie?” Jessie asked.

“Police. It’s all done,” Gabby said.

“Bunch of madmen.” Jessie could hear the droning horns calling the faithful to prayer but wondered why sitting inside the temple muffled the sounds. And as she tried to listen more carefully the less she was certain she could hear anything at all for real.

“Of our own making,” Tommy said. “The mess will unmake us and make us again.”

“Is the old woman still here?” Jessie asked.

“She’s a repentant,” Tommy said. “She will stay.”

“Bury us in the river.” Jessie looked to the ashcan sitting by her bed.

Gabby and Tommy did not reply.

Jessie gripped Tommy's hand. "Do me a favor. Let us just be. I am finally not angry anymore. Marie could live with the intangibles: it was reality she couldn't take. It's just the opposite with me."

Then the ideas she had been pushing away rolled in as her idea of the rest of the world receded.

“Honey?” The hospital room reasserted itself. Cherry held Jessie’s hand while she shook off a wave of pain that the drugs no longer reduced. Weeks earlier they had inserted a morphine drip and though no one was considering giving a lethal dose it was understood that Jessie’s system was weak and what would not kill another might kill her. The nurse entered the room. She had two tattoos, Shiva on one forearm and Ganesh on the other. She gently prodded the prayer beads from Jessie’s hands, and handed them to Cherry so that she could take Jessie’s pulse. “You are Buddhist?” the nurse asked.

Cherry released her friend’s hand and settled back into her chair. “I am,” she said.

“From travel?” the nurse asked.

“From reading. I have been working on Jessie for some time but she resists. She likes the stories but she can’t quite believe,” Cherry said.

“What does she believe?” the nurse asked.

“She will be buried as a Buddhist,” Cherry said pulling a blanket she had brought and spreading it over the bed.

“It’s beautiful,” the nurse said. “Indian?”

“They are called the Four Taras,” Cherry said. “Female Buddha figures in a pattern from a painting school. The compassionate ones.”

“You are close?” the nurse asked.

“I will be in a world I do not recognize once she dies,” Cherry said.

Jessie had been strong and the battle had been ugly. A large tumor on her neck forced her head to one side. Her body was swollen with edema. She had fought off pneumonia on two occasions each time the fight took its toll without killing her. What remained on the bed was the misshapen shell.

On impulse the nurse paused and then brushed a hand across Jessie's forehead the way a mother will do for a child with a fever. "Does she have family?" she asked.

"She did once," Cherry said. "They lived in another country and sent her away. She always promised me that she would take me there but was always afraid to go. She grew up with my family but they too are all dead now. It's just her and me left, my child and the dogs."

Jessie twitched and muttered.

"She's slowing down," the nurse said. "Probably just a few dreams left."

"Mom?" a young brunette entered the room, her boyfriend a tall blond was with her. Cherry looked up. "Do you need anything? Alex and I are going to get dinner."

"No Marie. Come get me late, but take your time." The nurse left the room and Cherry pulled the chair close. "Good-bye my friend," she said. "Good-by and good luck." She leaned across the bed and kissed Jessie on the forehead then pulled the chair closer to the bed so that she could hold her hand until the end which was silent because as Jessie requested all the machines had been turned off long ago because they interfered with her dreams.

Cherry rose from her knees satisfied with the job done. She had built a stupa a year after Jessie died. Each anniversary required that she build one more than she had built before. Each one meant to hold the dreams she had wished for her friend. Each one intended to hold the hope of the years her friend should have had before the cancer came. One was for family. One was for the family she might have made. One was for the trips she never took and one for the dogs on which Jessie doted all her life. The stupas would stand for a day and tomorrow then Cherry would destroy them. They helped dispel her sense of regret that seemed to build this time of year but after a day they only seemed like tombstones and so she would wipe them away tomorrow but she would leave them up for a day just to consider. She had much to celebrate. Her daughter and son-in-law would return tomorrow. They would bring to new baby. The one they had christened Jessie in honor of her godmother. Cherry brushed the dust from her hands and started to brush the dirt from her knees until she realized that job was too much. It was time to go inside. She considered her work once more. "I love you Jessie," she said and went into the house leaving the dreams standing for the length of time they should until it was time for them to be wiped away.

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English 231: World Literature I (Also responsible for course development)

English 298: Writing Through Literature (Also responsible for course development)

English 102: Composition II

English 101: Composition I

English 101-231 Linked/Themed course (Also responsible for course development)

The Caring Place, Las Vegas

Mentor for participant writing projects

Work Experience

May 1998-Present

BBII

Data Migration Specialist: Using *SLATE*, *DOORS*, *Word* and *Adobe Acrobat* to format and integrate engineering and technical data into software to create information databases from which systems designers can analyze projects. Creating training manuals for staff and teaching new and updated applications. Analyzing new software and systems in order to debug them and to train them to users.

May 2002-2005

Manatt|Phelps|Phillips

Project and Information Specialist: Utilizing *Outlook*, *iManage*, *Word*, *Photoshop*, *Adobe Acrobat* and *HTML* to facilitate research and development of information management systems. Creating technical guides and quick reference materials to facilitate ongoing staff application and systems education. Research new applications and hardware devices (PDA's i.e.). Train staff in new software. Editor of on-line newsletter. Work with technicians creating and verifying systems and applications upgrades.

September 2000-May 2001

Cohen Brown, Los Angeles, California *Desktop publishing:* Working with *FrameMaker* updating existing documents, creating templates and glossaries for training manuals to accompany a video training program for the banking industry.

July, 1998-2001

Leonardo's Brain, Pasadena, California *Production Assistant:* CD-ROM production. Working with *Photoshop*, *Illustrator*, *Acrobat*, *Director*, *Premier* and various utilities required to insert and to alter materials in products requiring translation for foreign markets. Authored English versions and edited translated text in order to make it accessible to local markets. Projects include on-line products, technical manuals, tutorials for computer applications, interactive games, entertainment and educational CD's.

July, 1994-July, 1998

Berlitz Translations, Los Angeles, California *Desktop publishing/computer graphics consultant:* Composing document content and formatting graphics on translation projects regarding computer software. Authored technical and mass media products designed to engage a variety of users with different levels of understanding of the products. Worked with: *Framemaker*, *Quark*, *Pagemaker*, *Interleaf*, *Word Programs*, *PhotoShop*, *Illustrator* and various utilities required to implement new materials and make the translated software and manuals accessible to various computer operating systems.

Sept., 1993-June, 1994

Los Angeles Unified School District, Los Angeles, California *English teacher:* Teaching 8th, 9th and 11th grade literature and composition classes.