

About This Book

Emerging from the vortex of his '60s—sex, drugs, war—Guy is alive, yet to his roots quite beyond the pale. For Guy, society's mirror has cracked. How can he find suitable reflection, that image so necessary for self-understanding, in the confusion beyond? After a checkered career as combat journalist cum filmmaker cum drug smuggler, Guy's world disintegrates; his laboriously, if imperfectly, self-constructed image dissolves. Busted! Seemingly endless Prison, followed by even more interminable University, curses him with understanding of the illusion of being. But despite his constant struggle to remain outside the "straight" life, to remain in control of what he will be, he too must face that fault line where inner expectations collide with external reality.

Time is running out; few choices remain. Guy opts to return to the one place in life that he has ever felt balance. He sets out on, what he imagines to be, a final journey to the Himalaya. If Shambhala with its siren call, KaLaGiYa is his grail, NunKun, a high massif in the heart of Kashmir, is his lodestone. It is from this ultimate margin, caught in the grip of a ferocious storm, that the tale unfolds. Guy, however, is not alone. Nearby waits Mara, a local deity symbolic of the Void with whom he has long flirted. A final meeting with this protean God is distinctly possible. Ahead lies much exposure—a waiting crevice, avalanche, a torrent, or, most dangerously, his own mind.

In his past, war, drugs, sex, have offered but brief respite from the burden of being. Now, he ponders life's duplicity. While symbolic of release, Mara has three "daughters of desire," lust, hatred, ignorance, who keep Guy

bound to his existence. Haunted by these desires, Guy plans for that slim chance of survival—even as he dreams of Mara. If all else fails, there is always one last score of *charas* (hashish), even though this will turn the wheel back to what he has struggled so long to escape. Throughout the ensuing journey, these oppositions of release and being, vie for Guy's soul.

Beyond this internal conflict lie other insidious forces. Unknown to Guy danger waits, its terror even greater than the wolf that haunts his dreams. Gulam, faithless servant and police informant, tends him like a sheep, guiding along a path to a maw more fearsome than the deepest crevice. Gulam is not alone. As Guy journeys across the Himalaya, characters, both good and evil, past and present, continually plot to bend him to their will: Mei, true love betrayed; Morgan, crime-partner and Judas; Yusef, avaricious tourist-*wala*; Devara, spaced Hindu *sadhu*; Geser, wily *lama*; Tara, rekindler of dying passion; Ashraf, fanatical *mujahed*.

But are they real or only part of Guy's storm-locked dream? Mara calls out, "Let go from the *Maya* (illusion) that is your mind." It is a call most difficult to answer. Guy struggles to free self from himself and enter Mara's waiting embrace.

No journey is ever as contemplated. In passage, there is change! In change, there is hope. It is with hope that Guy, perhaps, can at last hear KaLaGiYa, emanating from his Shambhala within.

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Prolog

*...A voice, as bad as Conscience, rang interminable changes
On one everlasting Whisper day and night repeated—so:
"Something hidden. Go and find it. Go and look behind the Ranges—
Something lost behind the Ranges, Lost and waiting for you. Go!"*

—Rudyard Kipling: The Explorer—

LOOKING

Staring down from unknown heights, I struggle to know...the where. It comes, but ever so slowly, as if toying with my mind. Out of the murk rises rank upon rank of leaden waves, spindrift topped, marching to far horizons.

I grab at this, eager to reassure myself, desperate to stop this dizzy rush into the unknown. Yes! I'm somewhere over a storm-whipped sea. Be patient, I remind myself, and you will soon learn more. Yet, should I trust my senses?

"No!" the external world signs. Dawning over the earth's jagged edge, the sun belies my senses. Below are not ethereal whitecaps, but range upon range of corporeal mountains, locked in mantles of eternal ice. How high I must be to recast such giants into mere waves?

Yet along with truth comes beauty. Color ignites; air, ice, the blackest of rock flame. I soar, sailing over a dazzling plateau, the womb of Nagas, the life givers, then higher, among the seven ice-clad pinnacles, home to Mara, guardian of Beyond—a boundless realm of the unexpected and the unknown.

Instinctively I know that I belong to a more ordered world where Hunger, my master, draws me earthward from sky bound reverie. Skimming scree-covered slopes...movement? Yes! There is a line of those malevolent ones, so-called "humans." Why are they here? So weak, they always flee before the snow-bark leaves fall. Yet somehow these seem different, without the usual bleating, slavish hordes, stirring dust, and fouling water. These humans move quickly, purposively, each with a stick-like thing on his back.

Even with the sun so warm on my wing, I sense winter's approach. The angle of the sun cries, "departure is near." No worry for myself! I'll just fly some miles to the East, across the plateau that notches the mountain wall. But for these pitiful, flightless creatures...? What are they doing? It's time to shelter in valleys, not climb mountains. Human ways are truly strange, yet something here is familiar. They must be hunting. But what?

From the vantage of my aerie, I catch sight of another some distance ahead. Different from those who follow, its hair long and body covered in colors of a dying sun. A night-dark forehead bears three vertical lines, like streams joining into a river. This solitary creature climbs quickly, but without sign of fear, as if knowing where it goes. Is this what the others hunt? How could beings, even ones as troublesome as humans, hunt their own kind?

Sudden gust! The world careens; earth transforms to sky, sky earth. I'm used to such disturbance and quickly regain balance. On the horizon dark clouds gather, confirming earlier foreboding. The clouds send warning.

Storm sign! Leave now!

Circling, I witness the scene below. The humans halt. One points at the sky, towards the same clouds that trouble me. They make a great noise among themselves. Some continue to point toward the clouds, others toward what must be their prey. Suddenly, one who seems the leader makes a loud, ringing call. All sink to their knees and bow toward the place where the sun sleeps, rising and falling in unison. Their cries, which begin separately, join into one. They finish, and the leader barks a command. There is a moment of silence, then a collective howl, growing into a horrific wail:

*"AAALLAAAH-OOO-AAAKBAAAR!
AAALLAAAH-OOO-AAAKBAAAR!
AAALLAAAH-OOO-AAAKBAAAR!"*

Not a sound of peace, it's the cry before the kill.

In proof, they shoulder those sticks, pointing them at the hunted one. Many sharp popping noises erupt in a ragged volley; they join in a loud, thunderous roll that wells up the steep slopes. The mountains answer with a shattering explosion. Ice, snow, and scree

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tumble down, sealing the canyon, silencing forever these noisome creatures, no longer to disturb the peace.

What will the one no longer hunted do now?

Suspended in the wind, a perfect balance of time and space, I see from where this human comes and where it can only go. Retreat is impossible. Although the now-entombed hunters no longer threaten, a rising tarn seals the canyon. But from the human's vantage, can it know there's no retreat? Yet to go up over the mountain, in the face of the approaching storm, is sheer madness.

This horror recalls my own danger. Like all life, I too hear Mara's siren song. But unlike the humans, who seem most susceptible to its call, I've other concerns. Mara is the Lord of Passage from this life to an unknown—a destiny I've no time to ponder as do idle humans. I'm born to be and will soar through that span of years the Gods grant. I'll not look back to a lost past, nor fret over imagined future. Life is now. I know its purpose...to make more life.

An updraft seizes me; wings stretch to control the wind. My great frame wheels toward the rising sun, across the dazzling, snow-bound plateau, between the seven peaks, to the rain-shadowed lands beyond. Once there, I'll be safe.

Gliding over the crest, I look back, hoping to catch sight of that one. But, all is veiled by Mara's approach. The storm closes fast; an opalescent mist envelops the world. The one of many forms reclaims its realm, destined to rule till the life-giving sun again enters the northern sky. Only then will I return to learn of the hunted one's fate.

The wind rises. Thoughts of flight fill my mind. Intently, I listen to the whistle of the wind, the beat of strong wings.

Chapter I

*Door, always open
Only the blind eye is shut.
He fears to enter
Who does not know the inner way.*

—Rabindranath Tagore—

APPROACH

I awoke to that beating sound. But it wasn't of wings, nor was I flying to the safety of warmer valleys. Instead, I found myself firmly grounded; wings of dream giving way to the reality of flailing tent walls. The nylon shell was part of me, a second skin. I felt the cruel bite of the wind, exhaustion from the ceaseless whipping, but equally an exhilarating freedom—almost as if I was still flying so high, so free.

I fought to escape that bird, to remember where, and who, I was. Not that I had much hope of ever knowing the "who," but I knew I had better figure out the "where." If I didn't, "who" wouldn't matter.

My brain struggled, one part to regain the dream, another to discover the present. For a moment these forces were equal, canceling out thought. I was back, drifting high, suspended in an equilibrium of time and space. Yet when I looked down, I saw only impenetrable fog. I wonder, if that fog had lifted, would I have seen me?

This suspension lasted only moments. Facing survival, present need overtook past remembrance. Senses keyed on the few clues, those urgent flapping sounds, the silky feel of down, the stale stench of confinement. The present came flooding back, although I would have preferred to linger in that fleeting dream.

I reached this place in the waning moments of yesterday. It must have been yesterday...at least before now. The sky remains storm-dark and my watch long ago *kherab*, kaput, finished. For two days, I climbed alone the steep *nala* known as Sharfat. This precipitous cleft funnels NunKun's snow melt out onto the flood plain of Suru,

a long, north-south gash of a valley lying to the east. I was on my way to Kashmir—or so I thought—having reached Suru's wide and sandy plain after an arduous trek across Lahaul and Zaskar. There, at Rangdom *Gomba*, ancient monastery and Dharma's westernmost outpost against Islam, I paused to recoup my energies.

From the vantage of the *gomba*'s high ramparts, I turned to my host, a wizened ancient who served as the *Kaushak*, temporally the leader over a dozen or so *lamas*. I asked if there wasn't some quicker way to Kashmir than the road north to Kargil.

"Well Sahib," the *Kaushak* replied, "you could cross up there, but that means cutting through the very heart of the Himalaya, the 'abode of snows'. There is said to be a way across, although..." Suddenly, caution clouded his eyes. "So very high...it is also said that the Himalaya is home to more than snow. Some believe there *Mara* dwells, together with demon legions. Jealously they guard the heights, waiting to strike all enemies of Dharma. You know of *Mara*, Sahib?"

I glossed over his question with a slight nod of my head, preferring to ask my own. "Enemies?"

This *Kaushak* seemed a rational sort, a man of wide-ranging knowledge who would understand such mythical demigods as metaphor, not flesh and blood creatures.

"That is *Mara*'s purpose, testing each traveler to find what lies within."

"But sir, certainly you aren't such an enemy, you're Buddhist?"

"Yes, I am *Nang'pa*, what you call Buddhist, but I have never been that way," he replied without expression. Then seized by caution, "This *Mara* is most difficult to understand. So much has been ascribed to this God.... On one hand, as desire, *Mara* binds us to an endless cycle of being, but on the other...offers liberation...for those with the courage to face...."

"What's this *Mara* look like?" I broke into his almost trancelike monologue.

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"Oh, yes, please forgive! Life here is so easily lost in...shall we say...dream. Well, in our art, Mara has many forms, many names. It is only fitting that the perceived appears as perceiver...like a mirror...but within, not without. What you and I see in this mirror is different. So too is it different from one moment to the next, for we like Mara are in constant change. To know the real Mara, you must surrender mind to a higher truth, a truth beyond mind. It is a spirit some think lies above, or at least beyond."

He waved in the general direction of that looming massif. But intentionally, he made his movement an all-encompassing sweep.

"I think it lies elsewhere...in fact everywhere, if, my dear Sahib, you know what I mean. It takes great courage to see Mara, to see truth only found by not looking, not seeking, just being. I have not yet found that courage."

"I know what you mean *Kaushakji*," covering my uncertainty with the Hindi term of respect, *ji*, to the end of his name. Then to further mask that confusion, I probed, "but...I *think*...I've met your Mara before."

And I had, but at the time I was reluctant to elaborate on what I thought might well be a product of overwrought imagination or, the road, or the altitude...drugs. Besides, while I had flirted, even briefly communing with this awesome spirit, I was also a coward when it came to that ultimate embrace.

Our eyes met momentarily. I had to glance away, almost as if I feared prolonged contact might injure, like gazing into the sun. I felt the Kaushak was reading my mind. A gnarled hand emerged from the folds of his rough woolen *coss*.

"There! Back the way you came!"

He motioned up the vast, stony plain, stretching to the Pensi-la, the pass I had crossed into Suru. His fingers came to rest on two notches in the sandstone range just below the pass. These hills—high mountains elsewhere in the world—were fantastically layered in a palette of sedimentary colors: pale ivory, ash rose, a mahogany so dark that it appeared almost black. Once the beds of primordial seas, the layers were uplifted, fractured, and uplifted again by immense tectonic forces. Yet the mountains of this range

were only sentinel hills to the colossi beyond. On my map, a tattered U502 meant for aerial navigation, this beyond was marked "NunKun Massif." Even in the shallow dimensions of ink on paper, it seemed an insurmountable barrier—between where I was and where, I thought, I wanted to go.

As I gazed on those malevolent forms, I could well believe them to be a "Dark One's" home. I remembered an earlier time, long before I knew anything about Mara, except perhaps on some intuitive level, the providence of youth. I had fled, fearful of what I understood as "desolation." Now older, I welcomed this second chance to enter Mara's beckoning void. Memory, softened by the filter of many years, allowed imagination to take hold. Where before I fled loneliness and desolation, I now looked forward to annihilation's embrace.

The Kaushak interrupted my thoughts, sensing the dangerous ground they were entering.

"You see those two nalas? The closer one is Sharfat, the farther Chillung; both lead over the mountains. They say Sharfat is shorter...but maybe there is too much difficulty...the dragon is too strong, too clever."

"The dragon?" I asked with growing amusement at this educated man's repeated lapses into what I saw as superstition.

He beamed, as if sharing a joke, then excused himself.

"Ah yes, dragons, or at least that is how I have come to think about them. Here, the people believe what you call 'glaciers' are dragons, perhaps because the sound shifting ice makes...like a dragon's roar...or that glaciers look like giant serpents. I know in the West you fear such creatures...you think them evil. It is different here. Whether Nang'pa or Hindu, we respect the *naga*, the serpent...and the dragon is like a serpent, no?"

"Some fucking huge serpent," I thought to myself.

"Perhaps," he continued, "this is because much in our belief comes from an older time; a time before Lord Buddha brought the Way; a time when we felt at one with the earth; a time when our ancestors worshipped the Earth as a Mother, calling her *Amma*; a time when..."

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"I understand Kaushakji," I broke in impatiently.

"In that old religion," he continued without a trace of rancor, "people thought waters flowing from the mountains were nagas, or at least the nagas'spirit. It is most natural, for these streams form the lifeblood of our land. Is it wrong to see the nagas as good, as the givers of life? I believe this is different from how you think in the West. There, you set your life above all others. You throw down the loving Amma, and make your God an angry, distant father in the sky. The serpent, once the friend of Amma, a symbol of healing and prophecy, turned into a thing of evil—the tempter of your Eve—perhaps trying to recast Amma as a thing of evil."

My eyes drifted upward, resting on a serpentine icefall that dangled from a great gash on NunKun's flank. I needed to get the Kaushak back on the way across.

"Whether it's ice or reptile," I replied with a nervous laugh, "I'll have to conquer it."

"Conquer, eh? Maybe Sahib, maybe! Very big though, very hard to conquer." I got his drift immediately and felt a fool for giving him such an obvious opening. God! It is always a bitch talking to the cloth—Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, whatever.

To escape, my eyes climbed upwards, trying to see where Sharfat might lead. I followed its cut, up marbled foothills, soon lost in impenetrable mist. I continued my gaze higher. Finally, towering behemoths emerged; dark, brooding, gun-metal granite, sheathed in gleaming coats of eternal ice, edges fiery pink with backlit alpenglow—colors so like the cheap reproduction of Hokusai's Fuji that once hung on my San Francisco kitchen wall.

Yes, I had been here before. But in a time, more than a dozen years ago, when I still believed I could grasp my dreams.

* * *

I had just finished herding a gaggle of tourist across the mountains, but with their bitching and moaning, there was little time for my own spiritual needs—the "connection" that we who frequent these mountains tend to romanticize. I was obsessed with

the idea of going off and being alone with my mountains. A solo climb of Nun peak seemed just the thing, at least from the safety of an over plush houseboat in the Vale.

At 23,500 feet, Nun isn't so high as the Himalaya go, but this modest elevation is more than made up by an extremely lethal character. The western face, exposed to the full brunt of monsoon storms, is a sheer cliff almost a mile in height. A deep and highly unstable mantle of snow covers the eastern, more sheltered side. No one, to my knowledge, has climbed the cliff; certainly, it required technical skills and equipment beyond my energies. The eastern route, where luck and fortitude might see me to the top, was my sole option. Yes, the conquest of Nun would have put a sizable notch in my climber's belt. This wasn't just about ego, but might prove an asset, as I hoped to make my living peddling the "Himalayan experience."

I almost made the top, almost beat the Beast—was this categorization a self-fulfilling prophecy? But it was late in the season...just as now. A vicious storm caught me, maybe only a few hundred yards from this very place. I held on for several days hoping for a clearing. Finally, running short of all the energies necessary for survival, I had to retreat. Then came the real horror. I almost packed it in during the cold, wet week it took to get down. And it wasn't just the physical obstacles. In my rundown state and incredible loneliness, I saw ghost at every turn. At least I took them for ghost. Now I wonder, for on this trip I have seen them again — and I am no longer sure that "ghost" is the right term.

Let's not forget the bears or, perhaps, they too were ghosts. I had seen them in the distance, and their tracks were everywhere. Just a small family, a sow and two cubs, but the sow was huge. My greatest fear was that I had stumble between the mother and her babies. Rounding each bend of the swamp-filled valley floor, I held my breath. On one side was steep cliff, on the other bog, with only a narrow path to walk. There in the trail's soft ooze were clear tracks of bear. They were big, much larger than my own. How far was I behind? When would they stop to rest? My only retreat was the way I had come. Loaded down as I was, and on marshy ground, how fast could I run? I played out the meeting a thousand times. Would it be best to submit, just roll up into a ball and show the sow

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I was no threat? I had seen this work...but in a movie. And it would take courage I wasn't sure I had. Perhaps, knowing my weakness, the Gods had been kind and spared us both the ordeal.

If the bears had been unnerving, the river crossings were nightmares; waters so cold they burned like fire. These streams too had their own spirits—perhaps of nagas. In places the water moved with such force I feared being swept away. In places where the current slowed it was worse, quicksand.

But overwhelming all else—fear, hunger, cold—was loneliness. I was in a different space in my life and not prepared. The land was truly lonely; rock was king and an unknown force, sensed at that time as predatory evil, the only companion. I was so starved for the company of the living that I broke down when I reached the tree line. With tears of joy, I hugged the first birch like a long-lost love. I must have spent some time in conversation with that tree, stroking the smooth silver bark as a lover's skin. The isolation changed my understanding. Like all people living close to nature, I had entered a realm where everything—animal, vegetable, and mineral—was endowed with spirit, spirit with real consequences for me.

After walking a week, I reached the first outpost of civilization, a rag-tag hamlet called Metwan. The denizens wouldn't believe a human could come from the mountain so late in the year. They too lived in a world of spirits. Convinced I was a ghost, they shut themselves in their homes and offered no welcome. That was the most depressing moment, even more than when I had realized I wouldn't top Nun.

Below Metwan, the trail again climbs the precipitous valley wall. As I struggled along this track, etched on a cliff a thousand or more feet above the valley floor, I thought long and hard about just letting go, a little slip of the foot on the loose shingle and then.... But there was something still within, something that wouldn't let me write the end. It was two more days until I finally got down to the main valley at Yurod. There, I found shelter and a hot meal.

I have always looked back on that journey as a watershed. Oh, there have been many of these, but perhaps none more meaningful. Up to then, I believed I had only to imagine. It would simply be a

matter of seeing the dream through. Buying into my culture's myth, I thought it was only about will. Then I hit Nun—or, more accurately, Nun hit me—with the realization there were forces beyond my ability to conquer.

I imagined I knew Death well enough. Nam had seen to that. But there it had preyed on others, reinforcing my own sense of invincibility. Somehow, I was special; death, and its precursor, failure, weren't for me. Nun was mortality's final knock on that door of youthful folly, a door that up to then had shielded me. Nun not only knocked, but also kicked in the door, letting me experience for the first time what waited outside. When I got down to Yurod, I was no longer young.

* * *

"You used that word *conquer* my friend." It was the Kaushak's turn in our conversation, so recent yet so seemingly long ago. "It is true you can fight against your own fear. That is an enemy you can conquer. And, even though it is against our teaching, you can fight against another creature...human or otherwise. Against this nature...against a mountain, desert, sea, jungle...you might as well struggle against the air you breathe or the soil on which you stand. Life is life. When you try to divide into opposing elements what is one, you truly fall prey to Maya."

This last word caught my attention. Part of me wanted to inquire further, but I was too enmeshed in this very Maya, the webs of all that had gone down before. Here in NunKun's grasp, feeling Mara's icy breath through the chinks in stone and nylon walls, I begin to grasp its meaning. But in Rangdom, there were more immediate considerations. How could I winter in such desolation, even on the not so certain chance the Kaushak extended hospitality? I needed to move fast. Having been on the trail for many weeks, I was almost out of supplies and the means to buy them. Most importantly, I had depleted my *siddi*, that internal store of spiritual energy to do those things I thought I couldn't do—in plain English "balls."

Besides, I was still eager to get to Kashmir, though not so much as only weeks before. It was late in the season. The weekly bus service between Padam and Kargil finished. I had already decided against a lorry. Anything but a lorry! I knew that torture all too well. Being battered for hours, then suddenly a brief respite, very soon again the renewed battering, like beating your head against a wall.

I felt incredibly intimidated by what lay before me. Having just set my course, I found myself backpedaling, wracking my brain for some excuse to escape. Weakly, I asked the Kaushak for a guide. "Just up the Sharfat to the plateau, then he can come back down. I've been the rest of the way before." The Kaushak replied, with a trace of a smirk, that during his time at Rangdom no one had ever gone this way—and returned to tell the tale.

"A few foreigners have gone up the *nala*, but they never came back. Maybe they went on to the Marwa, to Yurod, across the Margan-*la* to Kashmir. I once heard of a man who came from that way, but then again maybe...." Then turning away, he excused himself. "Ah, it is time for pujah. I will pray that you decide wisely what you must do. Remember, is it not the wisdom also of the West...the shortest distance is not always a straight line?"

The call to supper broke my train of thought. I was in no hurry for my *tsampa*, even if it was served three different ways. Suru is a poor region, where little grows, and bazaars are far away. The ubiquitous staple of the Tibetan Plateau, roasted barley flour, was creatively served as both porridge and bread. The leftover bread was mixed with tea and yak butter into a nourishing drink—nothing wasted. Anyway, I had no right to bitch; the monks ate nothing after the late morning meal. Besides, I was reluctant to use my own dwindling rations. I only hoped my stomach would hold up, but this thought haunted me every time I ate anywhere in India.

I lingered on the rampart, filling my mind with the expansive panorama in the dying light. Just before I turned to descend the notched-log ladder, I caught sight of a Himalayan Griffin, soaring high toward the Southeast. Such birds were always a thrill to watch, so huge, yet moving with such effortless grace. What a lucky sucker, I thought. How easy for you to come and go as you please. If only I could fly over these mountains, if only....

Later that evening, in front of an ancient fresco, I meditated on my future course. Although this representation of mystical Shambhala was the principal art treasure of the gomba, I initially took little notice. The dim light and my own pressing problems reduced it to a mere backdrop. Yet ever so surely, my mind was drawn into the vision held by artists many centuries before. As I became attuned to the darkness, I noticed, while flaked and cracked the colors of ground mineral pigment remained distinct and vivid as when first painted. The long-forgotten creator had depicted Shambhala as a sparkling emerald of a valley, set in a seemingly impenetrable ring of snowy mountains. It is here, myth has it, that "Clear Light," the "Diamond Lotus," truth, reigns. Shambhala, according to the mysteries of tantric lore, is a paradise, hovering just beyond reach, attainable only in that third, ethereal eye, seemingly outside physical grasp. Except, I irreverently thought, in those fleeting moments where rationality is suspended by sexual orgasm or drug-induced ecstasy. Yet beneath this bravado, I knew it was my own slavish devotion to existence keeping me from Shambhala. The work of being "me" made it impossible to empty mind and allow Clear Light to enter.

In the dim glow of butter-wick lamps, I took off, not merely on but quite literally into, the fantastic vision before me. The atmosphere was intended to be conducive to mind tripping; there were no distractions. Every stone, every structure, every piece of art, was steeped in age-long meditation. Purposeful scents and sounds shaped even the air. The evening *pujah* was being offered in the nearby *du-khang*. Within this cloister, the lamas performed the ritual offering to the Lord Buddha—smoke from the sandalwood and jasmine incense combining with the buzzing vibration of the collective, throat-song mantras, prayers for the salvation of the world. No better score could have been composed to send me on my journey—the hypnotic male harmony, punctuated by drum, cymbal, and wailing, clarinet-like *shantai*.

I felt drawn to the wall, through the cracking plaster, into that ancient vision. What at first was two-dimensional, became three, and then four. I entered an island...no, better, a world within worlds. Ringed by snowy mountains was a valley of eternal spring, filled with waterfalls, green forest, flower-filled gardens, animals of every kind, a world of incredible peace, a world of harmony

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where all was one. This Shambhala was clearly a dream of those destined to live out their lives in Rangdom's arid desolation. How many lamas had labored how long to create, and then sustain, this marvel?

Behind me, the Kaushak quietly approached. His training made him hesitant to disturb my meditation. Yet he felt compelled to speak, determined as he was to dissuade me from my planned course. He coughed, and then as I turned, my meditation obviously ended, he spoke.

"A very beautiful painting is it not? Very, very old! From time to time we repair it, a little paint here or there, but much the same as when it was first painted, maybe three hundred years ago. At that time, two lamas went off to the West, over the big mountains to find Shambhala; they were supposed to have heard the divine call. I myself have never heard this, but the lamas are reported as saying it sounded something like 'Ka la gi ya'. Of course, that was only a way of writing what they reported of the sound. Anyway, the two lamas must have been mistaken for they had to turn back. One found his way to *avidya*...that passage between lives...through a hole in the ice. The other was just barely able to return. Perhaps, his life's dharma incomplete, he had remaining work. Supposedly, he was left with only two fingers; the others fell off from the cold. With two fingers, he painted on this wall what he had glimpsed through frozen clouds and ice-bound peaks. Have you heard of Shambhala?"

I told him what little I knew of the myth, trying not to appear too ignorant.

"Yes, always just beyond the next pass, like your Kashmir, eh? See, surrounded by the icy crests, such a lush valley, the likes of which those bound to this land have never seen. Is it not like Kashmir? Is this why, my Amrikan friend, you wish so much to go to Kashmir? Have you heard the call? Have you heard the 'Ka la gi ya'?"

I suppose in a way I had heard a call, but it was hardly divine, and most certainly had nothing to do with "Ka la gi ya." I told him of my great love for Kashmir, that for me it was the most beautiful of lands. What I didn't tell him was I had business in Kashmir. It was

a business that had nothing to do with beauty. But then business rarely does.

* * *

My mind filled with an image of that business. Nazir, the self-styled "Maharajah of the Water People," was the very opposite of beauty. I suspected it was this unctuous, obese son of a bitch, who had set me up for the bust over a dozen years ago. Oh, he was so good, the quintessential host, knowing all too well how to play to *Angrez* fantasies. But then there had been a rift, and all his venom toward the posturing *ferenghi*, so long suppressed, came spilling out. He had cursed me with what for a Kashmiri is the most terrible of fates, "You are finished in Kashmir!" This was followed by events that made his prophecy too prescient not to be of his own making. And then I had been wounded so deeply. I had to find something external to blame. It was on Nazir my rage fell. I wanted him to see it was in my power to return to Kashmir. It was a point of honor. After that, further payback would depend on my state of mind.

Or at least that had been my mindset in Delhi; one, over the many miles, I had almost escaped. However, just as I thought I was free, another finger of the same hand appeared, pressing down. How fond Kashmiris are of saying, "the five fingers are not the same," failing to add that those fingers, diverse as they may appear, work for the same master. This other, Gulam, or Gul as he liked to be called, was much younger, and innocent of his elder's misdeeds. But Gul was to prove a more dangerous foe. While Nazir was the past, Gul lurked in my future. No, I wasn't going to sink back into that mire. I had played it out on the Pensi-la, no more external questing for me. I knew where my demons....

Most thankfully, I drifted further back, past all that trouble with Gul, past Nazir, to more idyllic times spent in the Vale. And how like this picture of Shambhala it had seemed, even though at the time I had no real understanding, thinking Shambhala more like Hilton's Hollywood fantasy, *Shangri-la*. As foreign guests, endowed with all the privilege the *Amrikan* dollar could buy, we whiled away the days on Victorian houseboats. We dined on

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sumptuous *warzwan*, the feasting foods most Kashmiris enjoy only at weddings, or *Ids*. Occasionally out of boredom, we had stirred ourselves from drug-induced stupors, tripping to one of the many gardens, palaces, or handicraft "factories"—modern-day Moghuls.

The luxury of it all! Just to drift along in a *shikara*, being paddled aimlessly about the lakes, through huge stands of lotus and water lilies, watching the turquoise-throated *bulbuls* dive for their suppers. A young, kohl-eyed boy, perhaps the *shikara-wala's* son, would sit in attendance, preparing a pipe of *afyon* or a joint of *charas*. If I got hungry or thirsty, there might even be a cook who, on his stove behind my cushioned cabin, would provide *chai* and munchies like *pakhora*—the fritters, in this case made from lotus root harvested from the lake only moments before.

I had been of a different mind then, too many books about the Raj, too many fantasies about "the Great Game." We led life as we imagined had the Brits of old, but with only the pleasure, devoid of the responsibility that accompanies rule. In this waking dream, we were supported by a native caste of Water People, lake-dwellers like Nazir, who tended tourists much in the same way as did the mountain shepherds their flocks, or the valley farmers their fields and orchards. Kashmir was distinctly orchestrated into two worlds, the world of the tourist and the world of the native—fantasy and reality. But although divided, the Vale had been at peace. And I too had been at peace, until greed brought it crashing down.

* * *

The Kaushak continued, eager to prove he was a man of the world, despite his calling and the remoteness of its parish. "All of this has changed since the rising. *Mussalmen* have been much trouble since Independence. Be certain, they have always caused much problems for us Nang'pa. But this is something more. They felt cheated by the old Hindu raja, who went over to India, even though they wanted Pakistan. The *Mussalmen* ran him out, but it was too late, and they could not run out India. Then there has been all the fighting between India and Pakistan. After the trouble in Iran and

Afghanistan, the Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic revolution and the Rus invasion, many of the Mussalmen fighters, the mujahedin, came to Kashmir. They say they make jihad, holy war, as if war could be holy. They taught the Kashmiris how to fight. Oh, it is not only the Mussalmen's fault. On the other side, down in the cities, the Rsss, and other Hindu fanatics want India to be a religious, Hindu-only nation. Then on another side are the Sikhs. We poor Nang'pa are caught in the middle."

He paused, reflecting on his words and then chuckled, "Well I guess that is the place we are supposed to be, on the *Zhumlam*, the Middle Way. Yet it is so dangerous. Thank the most blessed Lord Buddha for these mountain walls and harsh land. It is hard to get here, and once here there is not much for the taking. Our land is only for those with little care for material life."

He paused again, perhaps struggling with the temptation to detour into deeper theology. Thinking better of it he continued in a temporal plane.

"Kashmir is gripped by brutal war. Imagine war in your 'paradise'. No longer are tourists lulled to sleep by cicadas or loons. Now the sounds of weapons too terrible to imagine rule the night. Each day the radio tells of new victims; several here, dozen there, rape, murder, burning, torture. A mujahed walks into a police station in Hazaratbal and shoots the local commander sitting at his desk. Out go the special police from Delhi. They call them "Black Cats" because of their black dress and stealth at night. Five students are dragged from their homes and taken to the old Rajah's palace. There they are questioned, beaten, and subjected to electric shocks—some say in the most private places. Then, because they are only youths and can give no real information, they are released. But now they are no longer boys; now they are angry men. They too become mujahedin who will ambush soldiers that in turn will.... On and on it goes. Scores are settled only to create new scores to settle...an endless cycle of pain."

Again, there was a pause. That old Kaushak had a vocation. He was eager to bring me into the fold. I was his guest; it was the least I could do to let him do his thing.

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"If you will forgive me, it is like the *bhavachakra*, the Wheel of Becoming, what some mistakenly call the Wheel of Life. Maybe you saw the painting outside the du-khang, and in many other gombas that you have been so kind to visit. It is the wheel that represents the stages of existence, held in the claws of the demon-god, *Saypo Kolu*. He is just a local version of Mara. Hindus say it is just an aspect of Shiva we stole from them."

He laughed, seeing confusion spread across my face. "It is true, my friend, there is nothing new. We even take the Gods of others. Oh, we may give them new names, even new stories, but they are the same. Are we not all the same within, same needs, same hopes, same fears? Just because we speak with different words, eat different foods, dress in different styles, does not mean that within our heart of hearts there beats a different organ or flows a different fluid. We may call Mara by different names, but in all life, there is Mara—that fear inside of what lies beyond. The only difference, how we picture, how we describe."

I wanted him to continue, for not only had his mention of Mara whetted my interest, but also certain events of this journey made me believe that Mara might be waiting somewhere above. However, one doesn't interrupt a Kaushak lightly. Instead, I was polite and let him go on as he quickly spun away into the "wheel."

"Regardless of the name, the artist put the figure there to symbolize the terror from holding too tightly to existence. We believe our existence...the wheel of endless birth and death...is driven by three evils: lust, hatred, and ignorance. We call these Mara's 'Daughters of Desire', Raga, Dvesa, and Moha. Our artists show them as a bird, snake, and pig. They are usually in a circle, one eating another's tail."

"But I thought you said that the snake wasn't an evil thing."

"That I did. Maybe it just worked out in the painting, you know I believe you call it...artist permission?"

"Oh! You mean artistic license."

"Yes, that is it! As I have said, everything does have both good and evil natures. These 'daughters' stand for the causes of continued existence, most certainly the problems of Hindus and

Mussalmen—lust for the other's wealth, hatred for the past, ignorance that they are one in the same. If they hold onto these 'daughters', they will go on as they have since Islam came to this land more than ten centuries ago. Kashmir will continue to revolve in endless cycles of pain.”

I was unsure if this was how the Kaushak had decided to dissuade me from my goal, or if he was just deeply concerned with Kashmir's plight. If all this was happening next door to me, I might be concerned too. Whatever the reason, he was getting agitated, and there was no diplomatic way to turn him off.

"As you may know Sahib, they once called Kashmir 'Switzerland' of India, 'Garden of Peace,' 'Happy Valley'. Now you must worry about 'crossfire'. 'crackdown' or 'curfew'. Those three Angrez words have become Kashmiri. The troubles close the entire city. The army occupies all hotels. The mujahedin order all restaurants, cinemas, videos, and discos shuttered. Between strike and curfew, the shops are hardly ever open. The poor tourists have no fun, no alcohol, and even, I am told, the charas you foreigners like so much is impossible to find."

Here I almost choked, for I had surreptitiously nibbled a generous hit just before he arrived. I knew most lamas disapproved of charas. Was this his polite way of chastising me? But then charas also makes me paranoid. The Kaushak, however, seemed more intent on his own thoughts than on any sin I might have committed.

"The situation is even worse for Hindus; they used to go to Kashmir by the *lakh* (hundred thousand). Very big was the *yatra* of Amarnath, to the cave in the mountains where they believe a giant pillar of ice is the penis of Shiva. Every summer at the full moon of their month of *Sawan*, tens of thousands of Hindu yatris trek through the high mountains. Many come from the South and have never seen ice or snow. They say many *sadhus* come with almost no clothes and without shoes on their feet. As you know Sahib, even in summer the mountains can be very cold. The mujahedin threaten to kill anyone who makes the journey. I do not worship Shiva either, but it is very bad not to let Hindus worship. A fortnight ago, All India Radio reported 'agents of Pakistan'...that is their code name for mujahedin...had attacked a large party of

yatris. I guess the *yatris* thought there would be safety in numbers and that the army would protect them. A few were killed, and others were scattered into the mountains. Even now they may be wandering, lost among the very peaks we have been speaking of...so close to our shelter, yet so very far away. How can they, equipped with so little, survive in such a place. Most are from the plains; they have no knowledge of mountains. I pray to Lord Buddha for their deliverance...even though they are not believers. Maybe their own God, Shiva, will protect them. They do so believe these mountains are his home."

A heavy pall must have fallen on the "Happy Valley". Of course, as elsewhere in India, there had been much poverty and some desperation among the locals, but this was kept beyond tourists' eyes—unless you looked for it. Now it would be impossible for even the most casual tourist, regardless of the drink or smoke, to remain aloof from the sorrow. No, Kashmir was no longer Shambhala, if it had ever been, except in *ferenghi* fantasy.

"How sad it will be for you when you finally arrive," he said with a deep look into my eyes, as if hoping to see my resolve waver. "But then that is life. One makes some dream to drive one on. Only to find, when reaching the place where the dream should be, it is only in one's mind."

But despite the Kaushak's best efforts, I was relentlessly being drawn to Sharfat Nala, and Kashmir beyond. My mind drifted back to the bird. How easy it seemed if you had wings, if you could fly.

Of course, I couldn't fly. On the map the Sharfat route was the most direct approach. But as the Kaushak had intimated, it proved more difficult than even I had imagined. An unheralded storm suddenly blew in from over the mountains. It made, what even under the best conditions was tough going, a sheer horror. Looking back on that short, but savage struggle, it seems almost a dream; that I did fly to this place, yet knowing I didn't fly. Rather than the dream of remembrance, it was an ordeal in doing. Every step I took, once I began to ascend the nala, required an argument with myself.

"This is crazy, the way too steep, and you don't even know if you are on the right track.... Look up there at that overhang, look at that jumble of ice.... What if the crevices are too wide and you find

yourself in a cul de sac? What if something happens, but you don't get finished off right away? What if death lingers? What if the walls of the crevice slowly crush you? What if...?"

Somehow, I could counter my arguments. God! The pack was heavy. It was, after all, filled with life itself, for at least a fortnight. The going got steeper. I had climb one hundred paces and rest. Then, as I went higher, and the way even more precipitous, it would be seventy-five paces, then fifty, then twenty-five.

Night fell. I wanted to go on, but I had come to the snout of an ice beast. There was nothing to do except wait for first light. The wind blew off the glacier, filling the air with a shrieking howl. It was so cold; everything wrapped in clammy mist, matting my beard with ice. I had no strength to build a fire or pitch my tent. I found a place or did it find me? It was relatively flat and sheltered by a big boulder. I felt so drained. It was all I could do to dig my bag out of the stuff sack, crawl in, and wrap the tent fly around me. Yet once done, I was warm and almost dry. For the moment, I had all I could hope for in life—to be warm, dry, and horizontal. This was truly heaven. Nibbling on a bit of dried *chapati*, that ubiquitous flat bread of India, I fell into fitful sleep.

Ahead lay the first of the guardian dragons. It loomed defiantly over the nala, its snout spewing not fire, but ice, rock, and a lava-thick mixture of silt and water. Had I known the creature's true nature—in my struggle every feature, rock, moraine, stream became a living thing—I might never have taken this path.

In the morning's light, I began to realize the enormity of my situation. Even from below the glacier's snout, I could see the route, a tortuous vertical climb, up the moat where ice met rock. Refreshed by sleep, I was up for the challenge. The unknown ahead seemed preferable to the struggle behind, even if the air smelled of snow. It wasn't a long distance, but with the pack and my weakened condition, it took the better part of the day to make the top. If matters weren't bad enough, by the time I crested the first icefall, the promised snow began—at first, just a tickle of flakes, then quickly becoming an almost impenetrable curtain. It would have been much easier to get out on the ice, but the blanketing snow made it now impossible to see the waiting crevices. This forced me to make the more difficult, hand-over-hand climb on

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the near vertical face. No longer did I argue with myself. If I didn't get off the cliff before nightfall, I was going to be in deep trouble. No, let us not mince words; the price of failure in that place was death.

Finally, I reached the plateau, a wide, snow-choked col between Nun and Kun. It is this place where I now record these words. A place not yet of death, but poised on a razor edge between known and unknown. I am still myself, suspended and sustained in webs of inescapable deeds done and choices made. Can I dare hope? After all, other dragons wait somewhere beyond in the mist. For the moment, exhaustion and fear keep me here, interning me in a limbo of what has been and who I have been. Yet freed from the certainty of death, I have still the chance for new experience, the chance to become another, the chance to hope.

Once I began to suspect I might survive, I had another inkling. My ears had been flooding mind with the sounds of struggle, storm, beating heart, gasping lungs. Yet underneath this barrage, another presence arose, the tentative suggestion of another being, someone with whom I would have to deal.

What would you do? Maybe your first thought is joy. Now you will have someone to share the time. Yes, a chance to assuage that gnawing loneliness. What if it is not someone, but something? Alternative possibilities rumble through your mind, chilling momentarily your joy. Such thoughts ran through mine. I knew I was too high for wolf or bear, no I was safe from those creatures. Was I too high for leopard? Could this sensed other be the rare snow leopard which in my years in these mountains has eluded me, except tracks once seen on Nanda Devi, several hundred miles to the East.

Despite the struggle, or perhaps because of it, some rationality still ruled. No, not even the leopard ranges so high, and in a storm like this. There is nothing for it here, except me. Then my mind went back to what the Kaushak said about Mara. But I was too pumped by my own achievement, my survival, to acknowledge the "supernatural."

No, this presence must be human. Only a human would be so foolish. Since it must be human, certainly it must also be...a man, I

thought with some regret. No luck in the world was going to bring a woman, and all the comforts that might mean, to this ever so remote world. God! I realized it had been some time, days even, since I had thought about that...about *woman*.

Apprehension reared its ugly head. There was a stranger somewhere close-by. I could feel it. Was he aware of my presence? I could picture him snug in his secure warmth, maybe even a down bag like my own, sipping chai, nibbling chocolate and glucose biscuits, lulled by the hiss of a kerosene stove, maybe even with a Walkman to while away the hours. I was cold, hungry, exposed, with only the meager provisions I carried. He might turn me away. For a moment, all those thoughts of a tomorrow, visions that with such difficulty I had regained, now took flight.

What if he was worse off than I? Starving, without shelter, he might see it as his life or mine. That would be justification enough in many men's minds. I felt around for a weapon. Ah yes, there it was, ready in my hand, so at one with me I scarcely noticed. The ice ax, with its serrated pick and razor-sharp adz would do nicely. Yet while I grasped the ax with renewed urgency, I knew I couldn't strike a killing blow. Maybe, I would defend myself if attacked, but even this was uncertain. I did know I couldn't force my way into this unknown's margin of survival. No, that is not my style. This was another's domain. I must bend to an external will.

"*Jule! Namaste! Salaam Alekwm! Hello, Hello?*" I hoped that at least part of this wide-ranging greeting—Ladakhi, Hindi, Urdu, English—would find an understanding ear. In the world below, such casual intermixing of religions and cultures could buy big trouble, but in this place, who could really argue God's name or form.

I thought I heard a reply. But just at that moment the wind began to rise, filling the air with its howl. For some reason, all my paranoia drained away. It was as if, just ahead in the fog and snow, some benign spirit guided me. Yes, there must be someone ahead. My earlier resolve took flight. In this realm, the reason of the lowlands became suspect. Then pumped or no, my mind drifted back to Mara. This was Mara's supposed home, and we had met in such wild places before. Yes, I was ready. Unlike all those other

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times, I would now face Mara—no fear, only acceptance, only surrender

Then, as if part of one great mind-fuck, I saw the pile of stones. After many days in the wild, my eyes had become sensitive to shapes falling outside nature's random structures, shapes more purposeful, shapes revealing a human hand. I told myself I was hallucinating, just seeing what I wanted to see. But as I grew closer, the stones increasingly took on structural outlines. Upon reaching the point where its reality was no longer in doubt, I saw it wasn't much, little more than an oval cairn of rough stones, with a roof and small entrance hole on one side. Yet in such a wild place, this rustic hut seemed a mightier feat of engineering than the Taj Mahal.

I strained to see a wisp of smoke, a flicker of light in the doorway. Again, I called out: "Jule! Namaste! Salaam Alekwm! Hello, Hello?" My call was lost in the wind.

Chapter II

*He answered, "Every one has departed.
They found more suitable sites for their dwellings.
They were strong and enterprising.
Something new attracted them.
But I knew that nothing new exists on earth.
And I did not wish to change the place of my death."*

—Nicholas Roerich—

SHELTER

As my world stabilized, hunger returned with vengeance. I hadn't eaten any real food since leaving the gomba—just that stale chapati under the glacier's snout, and the only hot food, Devara's chapati brew. It was just too much of a trial to get the stove up and running. I was entering the danger zone where calories expended were vastly exceeding calories taken in. My body had already begun to feed upon itself. Seeing hunger in my eyes, Devara again reached into the jhola.

"Devara plenty food having. Guy take food."

He produced a blackened pot of stale boiled rice, some more ancient chapatis, and a couple of crumpled boxes of glucose biscuit, adorned with the face of a chubby, cherubic baby, all dimples and rosy-cheeked.

"That's all you have?" I said with surprise outweighing my civility. "How in the he... in the name of heaven did you plan to stay alive?"

Of course, there was a lengthier explanation. Even an ascetic like Devara isn't so foolish as to go into these mountains unprepared. Some of his story had already come in foreshadowing dreams. The rest would wait.

In comparison to Devara, I was a wealthy man. When taking stock at the gomba, I worried that my provisions wouldn't last the fortnight or so I had estimated to Yurod. Now, next to Devara's, they seemed a treasure-trove: twenty pounds of *chaval*, rice; ten pounds of *daal*, lentils; two pounds of *chini*, sugar; an amorphous lump of yak *ghee*, clarified butter donated by the Kaushak; a half pound of chai; pound of powdered *duhd*, milk; a few ounces of *namak*, salt; and even *masala*, spices. Equally precious was my

supply of *machis*, matches, and *mytti-ka tel*, the kerosene for the stove. I was particularly concerned about this fuel. I had about three liters that, at a quarter liter per day, could last twelve days—assuming a day's worth of cooking in one hour. Descending into Kashmir, below thirteen thousand feet, I had first find stands of birches, then thick forest of *deodar* and pine. These will provide plenty of fuel. But as long I am stuck up on this mountain, I must depend on "kero." The tiny supply of charcoal that Devara had been so lucky to find is finished. Without the ability to cook, all the other supplies are useless. If my stove goes out, I only have the few bars of chocolate and packs of biscuit the Kaushak gave as a parting gift. Then Devara would have the last laugh, though it would never strike him to do so. He will just share his food with me, firm in his belief that Shiva will provide.

I showed Devara what were now our mutual supplies.

"Ah, Very good! Very much Sah...Guy...*saman* having. You *saman* understand? Forget Angrezi name."

Saman is a word I know well. It is hard to spend much time in these parts without running across this Hindi word for "baggage." How important, how inescapable, is *saman*.

I thought I had already shed most of it. I even reveled in this newfound nakedness, while at the same time fearing the raw exposure such nakedness would bring. How relative! I had felt so poor, my entire material world reduced to what I carried. Yet to Devara, whose possessions fit into his small *jhola*, my pack is a veritable cornucopia of worldly blessings.

Sensitive to any intrusion upon my hospitality, Devara quickly followed up: "But not to worry, Guy! Devara not much eat, very small man, not so big as Bhaai." He broke into a lilting giggle, then began to examine the stove quite closely, sniffing, rather strangely I thought, the fuel tank.

"Kerosene, Devara," I groped for the Hindi word, "mytti-ka tel?"

He nodded his head. "Ah yes, mytti-ka tel, in mountain very good, very hot burning."

"It's a big problem," I continued. "We have much food, but little kero...mytti-ka tel."

"Problem maybe not so big," Devara replied with a twinkle in his eye. "Devara find big bottle outside hut; it same mytti. Other men before bringing. Fire with mytti start."

Some previous expedition, not wanting the extra burden on the perilous descent, must have stashed their surplus fuel—often the case with big expeditions. They would bring all manner of supplies up to base camp, then send most of the porters home. When it came time to go down, they would stash any surplus. The more popular climbing mountains, such as Everest or Annapurna, are awash in such leavings. This isn't so much the case here, for few expeditions have visited these parts in recent years. The Vale's troubles put a halt to that. But this kero is more than careless litter. Perhaps, who had ever left it thought to aid unfortunates such as us—a propitiation to the gods of travelers. The politically correct dictum, "take nothing, leave nothing," doesn't apply in such a place, particularly when what is left is energy to sustain another's life.

Calories of heat to turn grains into food, which when eaten brings both warmth and strength to the body. Here existence is measured by the bare-bones equation of energy in equals energy out, and an extra pound of rice the difference between life and death. The math is quite simple. To climb these mountains, and not cannibalize your body, requires about three thousand calories per day. A pound of carbohydrates, such as rice or lentils, has about eighteen hundred calories. To survive you must consume at least a pound and a half of these staples daily. With the addition of a little ghee—three times the number of calories per pound—the amount of carbos can be reduced.

Somehow, I must stretch my supply to cover the two of us for as long as the storm lasts, with enough left over to get down to Yurod. At least while I am just sitting on my ass, I don't need so many calories. There is no question of excluding Devara, even though, by rights, he might be left to the providence of his God. What if I am that providence? It is doubtful, from his almost emaciated condition, whether he ever had three thousand calories in one day. But what should I do? I am living in his space. Am I going to sit here and eat my meal in front of him, letting him go hungry, as he soon

must? If the storm is over soon, no problem. But if it goes on for a week or more, which is highly possible, then...?

With several gallons of fuel, my reluctance to use the stove vanished. "A cup of chai, Devara?" Yes, I would make chai, and some fresh *daal-bhaat*, that highly practical mixture of lentils and rice. Soon the grain-pulse mixture was steaming away, the white-noise hiss of the high-pressure stove helped push the storm sound to the background. The terrors outside began to recede, and I was lulled towards contentment. Life was coming into balance; I was warm, dry, and soon my stomach would be full. I even had a companion, although I expected that, after our initial exchange, we would retreat exhaustedly back into the worlds brought with us.

"Guy Sahib, charas good? Very nice for cold. Very nice for meet with Mahadeva."

When taking stock of Devara's provisions, the one thing he didn't show me was his stash. I should have known it would be there; Shiva's quite a head. Nilkantha, "the blue-throated One," spends much time blowing herb in his mountaintop home. For all I knew, he might be up there on Nun this very moment, toking away, watching us for diversion. Devotees of Shiva also partake. While the Indian government, under pressure from the West, has formal laws against charas and ganja, it looks the other way when they are used for "spiritual" purposes.

"Guy likes very much," I replied. I had exhausted the last of my stash at Rangdom, before tripping out on the frescoed Shambhala. That wasn't an entirely satisfying experience. I had to hide my indulgence from disapproving lamas, who limit their escapes to *chang*, rough barley beer, and *arak*, a brandy made from any fruit that is handy. From the depths of his seemingly bottomless jhola, Devara produced a small pouch. Upon opening, it filled the tent with a pungent aroma.

"Devara cutting fortnight ago in Pahlgam. In Kashmir, much hard to find now. Crazy militants not like. They destroy everything they not like. This charas escape...like me. Much fresh, very nice, number one!" He meant that this pollen was from the first shake

of the plant, the most potent. This was confirmed when I saw the resinous ball itself, dark with oil, and pliant as silly putty.

Dynamite marijuana grows wild all over the monsoon side of the foothills. In India, the best is found at four to eight thousand feet. Now in late September, it would be at its prime. I had discovered this natural bounty on my first trip to Kashmir. Venturing into the hills outside Srinagar, I stumbled into a vast natural garden—forest is a better word—that bordered the grounds of a ruined temple. I freaked on this seemingly endless store—foxtails as far as the eye could see, free for the taking, free from all paranoia. It wasn't only the abundance, but the freshness, for cannabinal or "red oil," the active ingredient that gets you stoned, oxidizes rapidly.

Rolling the foxtails between my palms, I formed the sticky resin into small pliable balls. This was charas, so pure I could just pop a ball of resin into my mouth. It tasted like white pepper. But it wasn't for taste that I ate it. After a short while, the cannabinal hit the blood stream and the ride would begin—a rapid acceleration of pulse; followed by a growing hollowness, as if all the bullshit stored inside had drained away. My mind would disengage, floating free from its leather casing. The world skewed as senses kaleidoscoped. How dependent is our world on our senses. When incoming signals are altered, so too reality, cracking the mirrored-surface of illusion. Once the illusion fissures, it is only a matter of time before it falls away...if only to regroup in yet another illusion.

Again, Devara reached into the magical jhola, pulling out a rough clay *chillum*, the funnel-shaped pipe familiar to all ganja-walas and *charasin*. With long, hennaed fingernails, he incised a small bit from the ball. This he heated on the coals of the fire, drying it so that it crumbled. Then, mixing the powder with a pinch of rough Indian tobacco, he put a small measure into the cone. His callused fingers pulled a glowing ember from the fire and placed it on top of the mixture. Had this been my first time out, I might have been amazed he could grasp the cherry-hot coal so casually. But this was India where, for many, fire was the only source of heat and light; from an early age, you acquired the skill to handle it. He offered me the pipe. I deferred, a gesture that pleased him, for he

was a sage deserving respect. He grasped the thin stem of the cone between his ring and little finger. The result was a complete pipe, the circle made by the thumb and index finger forming the mouthpiece. With a deft movement proving long experience, he sealed the pipe with the other hand and drew deeply until his lungs filled. Then with a glazed expression, he passed the pipe. I joined him on the journey.

Almost as soon as I arrived at Rangdom, I had been consumed with dissatisfaction. I wanted to move on, be somewhere else, even just to let go and let the land devour me. Maybe I had been moving too fast, too much momentum without reaching that place in my mind's eye. Now after a draw from Devara's chillum, it was like parachuting—the rush of stepping out into the unknown, a dizzying spiral, then a brief hard snap, and float, float, float away. Of course, there is always the landing, but that would come later and, if I kept upping, later might be put off for quite awhile.

Whether from charas, my solitude, or some inherent magic of the Himalaya, I have never felt a greater love than when alone with these mountains. To have a human lover here can be just an annoying distraction—although I suppose that is true anywhere, if not the right lover, or if that "lover" stands between you and the greater love. In my case, it had been both. Although at first I had been eager to share my joy, the hardships of the life overwhelmed my companion. That I would go off for days to commune with the peaks, leaving her in camp, alone but for the servants, didn't help. She had retreated, both from the mountains and from my life, leaving me to that love which no human could rival. I was now overcome by this solitary love. It was so different from human love, always more disturbance than peace, lust-driven, tainted by desires of flesh and power. This love for the mountains is rooted in an overwhelming sense of submission, acceptance, faith. I told this as best as I could to Devara. I was just rapping, not really expecting him to understand

But he did understand quite clearly. "Ji Bhaai, this *bhakti*. You in this way Maya escape, like Devara through Lord Shivaji escaping. Whether Himalaya or Shiva, no difference. Love Lord of all."

Yet the love these mountains command requires more than just silent appreciation. The practice of true *bhakti* demands

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expression. Looking up some glacier-crowned nala, I feel compelled to shout my praise to the spirit living there. Don't ask me what spirit, for then I would have to think, create a name. My sense of that spirit doesn't come through mind, but through some other channel, perhaps one called heart, perhaps soul—what are these words, mind, heart, soul? Can we separate them?

Here, I feel so much a part of the whole, so connected, unlike that free-floating, particle-man of my native land. Each thing, no matter animal, vegetable, or mineral, has life and not only life, but also personality. It is no wonder the locals find God in every rock and tree. I too can feel this mystic presence—as in my hugging tree. The land wasn't just a backdrop, something to pass through. Rather, it is that which western psychobabble terms "significant other," alive and close.

We had been lying in our synthetic shell for many hours, thin air filled with kero, charas, and chai. Body needs overwhelmed mind. I had to go outside and whiz, must have been all the chai. I was getting sick of it. What I would have given...give...for a nice stiff shot of Mr. Walker, just to change the pace. But up here, the first rule is drink as much fluid as you can; the second, avoid alcohol at all cost. I hate going out. It means putting on so many clothes. Alone, I would just pee in a cup and toss it. But with company, it's just too cramped. Besides, he is a holy man and all the accompanying baggage that brings.

What a horrendous expenditure of energy to squirm into layers of poly-propylene, wool, down, and Gore-Tex, lacing up heavy boots then leggings, wiggling out the tent's opening, fighting to keep balance against the crush of wind just to relieve myself. It is tempting, from the warmth of the tent, just to bolt out in long johns—just out and in. But what if, once outside, something unexpected happens? What if the hut collapses or is buried in an avalanche? It has happened before. I need some measure of survival. With my full gear, I have a chance to get off the mountain, a slim one, but still a chance.

Once outside, it took all my strength just to hold on. The wind blasted my face, scouring and burning the small exposed triangle

of skin. The thinness of the air, free of smoke and kero fumes, made me dizzy with its freshness. As I crouched to release the long-stored chai, I was overcome by the invisible, yet keenly felt, presence of this great massif on which we precariously hang. Sheltering from the storm, I had put myself in a "Chinese box": inside the tent, in turn covered by the hut, retreating even further to a world inside me—worlds within worlds within.... I had almost forgotten where I was. Out in the cold, the wind, the ebb and flow of mist around ghostly crags, any lapse in awareness vanished. A sudden terror gripped me. It wasn't fear of death; I had already dealt with that. Rather, it was worse, loss of all orientation, both to the outside world and, more terribly, to the inside one as well.

Above, somewhere in the clouds, the mated spires of Nun and Kun sullenly wait, unseen yet all seeing. In this world dominated by vertical planes, it is hard to find shelter. Despite the local practices, the presence of this rocky cairn at almost twenty thousand feet is nothing short of a miracle. There aren't many pilgrims who pass this way; the plateau isn't meant for such delicate forms of life. In this aeolian wilderness only stone, ice, and the hardiest of lichens survive the eternal onslaught of wind and snow.

Tongues of ice spill from above, in places opaque black, in others translucent blue. Their deeply creviced surfaces lie bared by wind or, where sheltered, dangerously covered in deep snow. Earlier, during a momentary lull in the storm, in the west I could see all the way down to the Krash Nala. There lay a land still green, warm, untouched by Mara's wintry grip. I thought back to the fresco of Shambhala. If I was one of those great birds, like that griffin seen from the rampart of Rangdom. Was that what had sparked my dream? If I could only glide down to that beckoning land. Just a few flaps of my wings, then glide....

Suddenly, almost lost to this reverie, I sensed a vacuous presence, a black hole of the spirit drawing all life to its core. Was it...? Devara had warned of such beauty...of such love which the Shambhala-like land inspired. Yes, Kama, symbol of the very beauty and love...and temptation, is but the flip side of Mara. They work in tandem: Kama the bait, Mara the hook, lying in wait underneath. Were the Gods teasing me with such a tempting image, so close,

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yet so far? Was some unknown nemesis again throwing up an illusion to goad me on, thwarting my inward journey?

The clouds closed, revealing the Janus-nature of these Gods. Kama's invitation dissolved back into Mara's terror. But what is the reality? Is there any reality?

While the solitude allowed my mind to soar, it wasn't the same for my body. It had the cold and wind to deal with, and it set up a warning cry, "GO BACK, GO BACK NOW!" This is a serious place, and I was exposed to overwhelming forces. Reluctantly I returned to the hut and Devara's company. Reluctance, because it is with these environs I want to commune. This is much of why I am here. Alone in such overwhelming vastness, I can escape the boundaries that define me...this being known as Guy. I become one with mountain, with cloud, free from the reflection of myself, inescapable in the presence of another human.

Yet I am not a total loner. And there are advantages to company while traveling, particularly in such a lonely place as this. The cold, snow, altitude, wind...What is that sound? Is it just the wind, or the distant cry of some equally desolate creature—*rama hun*, the wolf; *haput*, the bear; or even that most elusive of all high mountain creatures, *chot suh*, the snow leopard? All these contribute to a consuming hunger for communion, heightening any available relationship. In similar places, I have held long chats with spiders...even once with a fly. If it is an actual human, who can talk as well as listen, then it is an experience to be savored. The opportunity shouldn't be spoiled by holding back. You put yourself out to the other in the hope there will be a return. After all, now isn't the time for pleasantries, for posturing, enjoying the momentary thrill of being someone else and getting away with it. Time is brief, and the seeming miracle of meeting takes on mystic proportions that demand truth. Also, there is a special, delicious urgency, for this may be the last confession, the final chance for absolution, to make sense of all that has gone before.

It dawned on me that, despite tempting the fates, I might survive. How embarrassing, as there was...is...no real plan for that eventuality. I still hold a return ticket back to the States, but except for a few thousand rupees, I have shot my wad. Besides, that fucker Gul took my future with him. The chances he will meet me in Delhi

are slim. Oh, he may be there. I can see him on Jan Path, hustling my load by the gram to cherries fresh off the plane at Palam.

"Best Manali lovely lady, number one, get you very high. Maybe we get high together? You love child, no? And such a beautiful one! I show you many magic things. We go to Taj, very romantic. Maybe you like I guide you to Kashmir?" That damn oily voice dripped in my ear. No, there was little chance I would be seeing Gul's sorry ass again.

As much as I love these mountains, winter approaches. What we are experiencing now is just a taste. It will get much worse, even in the sheltered valleys, in the villages, even in Srinagar. I have no desire to bum around India until my last rupee is spent—not that I have many left. I am just too old for that scene. It would be ridiculous.

My present circumstance might drive another mad. Isn't there some long forgotten Indo-European connection between the English "divine" and the Hindi "*diwana*," meaning foolish, mad? My madness is that the constraint, normally guiding life, has been stripped away. I suppose I have prepared well enough, having spent much time in the realms of altered states—war, prison, criminal enterprise, drugs have a way of doing that. Was it such fascinations that led me to this "edge"—the infamous self-fulfilling prophecy? Whether self-fulfilling or not, experience enables me to hope I can switch from external markers to my own internal reference. It will be a struggle, but to struggle is to be alive. Trying to capture my experience in words may help. It will keep me focused, even here where there is so little focus. Devara must have all sorts of tales, yet those nagging "who," "where," and "why" things keep at me. I am drawn inward to puzzle those questions against which I have procrastinated my whole life.

So, this is my last shot. How many of those have I had, always diminishing in expectable returns, the odds against success always growing. Yes, I will try to record the past, events that have brought me here and made me who I am. Once I hoped to do this with cameras, but along the way, my ample, if somewhat battered equipment, has been destroyed, bartered, or lost. For the first time in many years, I am cameraless. Thus, I must try a new way, words,

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the only tools available. It is such a big leap...from pictures to words.

Yet Yank that I am, I am a techno-slave. Stripped of my camera, I still seek refuge in my dwindling toy chest. WALKMAN! Will you walk with me Walkman? Will you let me spill my thoughts out to you? It is these thoughts, unexposed for so long, unexpressed, percolating over and over into an oppressive sludge, which threaten to engulf me.

In the dim twilight, I hope my preparations are adequate. I still have more than two dozen of the slender AA cells and a dozen empty cassettes. If that is not enough, I can always record over all those music cassettes, now lying half-forgotten. It is the batteries that worry me; the cold and the altitude give them a very short life. I grope in my pack for new batteries. I hadn't planned on this opportunity. But again, I am that American, of a generation for whom the Walkman is essential as a toothbrush. How could I be without my music? At times, it is truly wonderful to be able to listen to music in the wild. It gets you over those rough spots, particularly when the exhaustion of the trail, or the loneliness of the night, looms overwhelmingly large. I had come to India with a "desert island" potpourri typical of my time...and space: Fleetwood, Doors, Dead, Pink Floyd, Hendrix, Who, Wolf, Bland, Leon, Waylon and Willie.

I had splurged in Delhi—a fit of jungli? —asking the clerk for a dozen of the "best" Indian cassettes. She had warmed to the challenge and selected a wide range: classical ragas by *Ustad* Vilayat Khan, modern *gazals* by Pankaj Udhas. I even bought a tape of *bhajans*, religious hymns to Lord Krishna sung by Anuradha Paudwal who was, the clerk assured me with a trace of amazement at my ignorance, "very big Sahib, very big in Hindi film." As I moved deeper into the mountains, I no longer played *my* music; it sounded out of place. Instead I turned to the Indian, and for a while it carried me. But when I faced the real mountains, even the music of India became just irrelevant noise. It was as if the Himalaya had its own music, its own siren call—wind, water, the conversation of the life native to this place.

I mentioned this to Devara, rather off-hand, not expecting him to understand—for some reason, I never expect him to understand. He looked at me and laughed.

"Ji Bhaai, this you hear well known. *Anhad-Naad* its name. Lord Shiva hearing first when come to Himalaya...the music of God. It around us always. Much difficult to hear over Maya's noise, but as man become free of this world, more he hear...it peace bring...*samadhi*." Then, looking over my shoulder into the bag, he asked with embarrassed hesitation: "Bhaai, Pankaj Udhas hear sometime? He much music favorite for Devara. Long time Devara not hear. Devara once big drinker, much toddy, much rum, much listening to gazals. Gazals good for *sherabi*. Devara no longer *sherabi*," he giggled in an almost boyish fashion, giving my cheek a playful squeeze, "gazals good *charasi* also." As I took in another hit of the herb, I had to agree that most likely we were both *charasin*.

I explained to Devara that I needed my remaining batteries to record my thoughts. Perhaps out of politeness, he refrained from asking me the real question, instead opting for, "Ah, Bhaai, what cells machine using?" With some annoyance, I showed him an AA battery. Why in the hell would he care?

"Shabash! God with us Bhaai. We many cells have. Devara find under stone. He first much sad when find, no *transistar*. He feel much anger at Mahadeva. Maybe Mahadeva play with Devara? Not food, not clothes, only cells. What use? Now Devara understand this Mahadeva's plan."

At first I was incredulous. Then I remembered the kero, so why not batteries. There was a rationale; both were excess energy. He showed me the cache. There was maybe a gross in all, still fresh in their packets. They looked as if they had been stashed quite recently.

Well, I thought to myself rather impressed at the underlying unity, maybe I am getting some place. Ah, how a desperate man will grasp at straws.

The red light of the recorder glows in the tent's darkness. Despite its diminutive powers, the glow brightens until the entire interior is washed by its crimson glow. What little there is of the concrete

world dissolves in the light of this electronic ember. The recorder whirs, registering its own existence. The chillum passes back and forth—another kind of ember. The storm sound, the only reality beyond these walls, drives us inward, melding our minds, our energies melting into one, the boundary blurring between what is Devara and what is me. Difference is dissolving. I am beginning to grasp there are no boundaries, except, of course, ones emanating from my mind. We are becoming one. Such realization hasn't come easily. Perhaps, it is the mix of personality, the extremity of the situation, or both. If I was religious, I might ascribe it God. This would be Devara's explanation.

How I envy his faith in Shiva, his bhakti. It makes so much so easy. However, to my mind, demented by the scientism that is my heritage, does it really explain anything? How can life be understood by the "black box?" Isn't that what "God" really is, just a black box? But what is wrong with stopping there? Why must I know more than is knowable? Is it out of desperation that Devara, and all the Devaras of this world, attempt to put a face on the unknowable? Perhaps, if we can forget our own faces, put aside all those things that symbolize difference, and focus inward towards the unity. I am stripping away the coordinates of civilization. As layers of self peel away, I have begun to peek at the oneness, a oneness not only with Devara, but through him to all beyond.

At first I twist and turn, the Walkman unfamiliar in my hand. I am not yet ready to face a head-on confrontation with my true interlocutor. Instead I back in, questioning Devara about his yatra to the Amarnath Cave, filling out those sketchy dreams—how the mujahedin had attacked his party.

"Very bad, Bhaai! Many old men, women dying. Mussalmen wait in secret. They not men of Kashmir, but of Pakistan, from Peshawar...even Kabul. Then much noise of guns, crying of people. Devara never forget shout of 'Allah-o-Akbar.' Mad dogs! Shoot and more shoot, like time Angrezi leave India. How their God-name for such bad things use? We not bother them. We only to mountains come, Mahadeva worshipping."

Of course, this was just why they had attacked. While I am hesitant to prolong what must be painful memories, Devara seems eager to

unburden himself. I let him continue, even though I had already born witness in dream.

"After attack, Devara run...*chalo*, chalo. So fast not possible Devara think. Many crazy Mussalmen chase Devara. They have many guns, shooting and shooting. Men almost kill Devara, but great bird come. Even though Devara of Shiva, Lord Vishnu send his servant Garuda to save Devara. Most holy bird save with great wings from many bullets. Then Garuda send mountains down on bad Mussalmen. Vishnu give Devara back to Shiva's keeping. Shivaji take Devara in his hand, carry safe to this place. Then Shivaji bring Bhaai."

There it is! He is convinced I am an instrument of Shiva, as is all life, through which he has escaped certain death, at least for a time. Equally, I feel he is here just for me, that he can save me. From what, or why, I am not sure. Stop ego-tripping! For all I know, he is doing this out of boredom. Didn't I take similar trips with my own chelas, cherries to LSD, helping them get "experienced," guiding them to that much hyped "other side" — whatever, wherever, that had been. But still there are those tales. Is Devara one of those gurus living out his ascetic life in the mountain, storing up knowledge from his contemplation? Sensing his end is near, does he now seek a chela to endow with that learning?

I look across to Devara, so small a space, yet in spirit measureless in its immensity. I want to ask him questions, but his eyes mirror my thoughts. My questions become internalized, driving mind inward, past consciousness, into my soul.

"Devara, life slips by so fast. It seems only yesterday that I was in another world with what's called a 'normal' life...all the goodies. I've traveled so far to get this...." I gesture hopelessly around our tiny domain. "But with so very little to show for it. If I die today, nothing would mark I ever existed."

His answer is accompanied by an intensely pleasurable warmth. "Bhaai, thing on this earth standing, we call *sthavara*, it surely fall apart fall...dust become. You see the mandir of Mahabalipuram...my city...once long ago very splendid, now.... All things made...even man...must like mandir become. But thing that

lives, we call *jangama*, through life move never die. Devara once householder. He apart falling, rupees making, bills paying, debts growing. He no longer move, too many things hold to ground. He dying...not body...but thing inside...spirit. Then leave his city, his people, his things. He now little things. He find new life on road, life of sadhu, good life carry breath of God."

It is comforting to hear someone justify your actions, which previously earned only disapproval. "Guy, you need to modify your behavior," was a much-heard refrain. Whether Devara had just worked out an elaborate scheme to justify fleeing his responsibilities I can't say. Certainly, most of my Stateside peers would have offered up some such critique—lack of purpose, lack of commitment, or just plain "bum." At least that was how they had characterized me.

Devara wasn't finished. "Devara always moving. He to all holy places go. Not by bus or lorry, not by airplane or train...by...." He held up his feet. They were encased in thick socks of orange homespun wool, but I could imagine that underneath lay soles hardened by thousands of miles. "Last Spring Gangotri and Kedarnath!" These were two of the major *tirths* or places of pilgrimage for Shaivaites. Now he was coming from Amarnath, which meant he had one to go.

Taking pride in my slight knowledge, I asked, "And now Kailas eh?"

"Ji, Bhaai, now to Kailas Devara going. Kailas much sacred; more than other tirth, mountain most holy, Shivaji's throne. Maybe Bhaai go with Devara? We meet Mahadeva. We make bhakti. Ji, Bhaai, *chalo*, *chalo*?"

I have long toyed with the idea of a journey to Kailas. Considered the earth's "navel," it is the ultimate yatra for Hindus, Jains, Buddhist, as well as the ancient, pre-Buddhist Bon-pa. It is not that I am into making the pilgrimage, with all the spiritual saman. But it represents the epitome of the exotic—a real photo-op. As one guidebook described it:

Situated in remote southwestern Tibet, Kailas has drawn yatris for thousands of years, many performing *parikrama*, an arduous, ritual walk around its thirty-two-mile base, meditating as they

circle on the great wheel of becoming. Often a pilgrim will "turn the wheel" several times and some, seeking special blessing, will perform the parikrama with a mind-boggling series of prostrations.

"Maybe Devara, maybe," I responded, not taking the invitation too seriously, at the same time not wanting to appear to be shining him on. "That'll be a very long, hard journey. Kailas is...maybe...one thousand miles away, far to the East, over many mountains, many passes. I'm an old and weak Angrez, you might find me a burden, just another piece of saman."

"Ji, Bhaai, very long, very hard." His broad grin belied the true ordeal he had set himself. "This very good. Devara always move, on, on, always live, always learn, always love to Mahadeva in hardship last. It good this bhakti, It good life be in love, no?"

Lost in the thrall of charas, I let my mind go, playing to itself a drug-dream of the course of such a journey.

I'm a sadhu much like Devara, a sanniyasi devoid of all worldly possessions, I struggle bravely across high desert wastes. Suddenly, a mustachioed border guard invades my reverie. Dark eyes meet light. Neither sun-seared skin, nor dust-filled hair, can hide the inescapable brand of Angrez eyes.

"Where Sahib going?" says the officer with a polite firmness that bespeaks self-assured power. "Surely Sahib not try to fool an officer of the Government. No Sahib, this very serious matter! It must be Sahib not knowing past Inner Line. Here Sahib, Delhi permit only Indians, and then only local dwellers or those with official chit for yatra. Sahib, you must turn back at once, this track is for yatris only, not for sahibs."

It was all too clear, Devara's world isn't my world, nor his path mine, no matter how much charas I smoke, no matter how far I let fantasy fly. No, I must get back to my own thoughts, get on my track, and find my Kailas inside. Here is where I make my yatra. This story must be my story; it is the only one I know.

A wise old climber—and to be an old climber you must be wise—once said, if you go astray in your climb, you must either cover your trail or warn where it leads. It is impossible to go back and hide my tracks. Therefore, I take the later course, recalling how I

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got here, to this hut beneath NunKun...to myself. Whether this is a way onward or cul-de-sac, we both must wait and see.

Chapter III

"Mosafer aziz-e-khodast"

"The traveler is beloved of God"

TRAVELER

Every journey begins with a dream. The one that led to this pile of stone began long before I had heard of Shambhala, Ka La Gi Ya, even of NunKun, or the Himalaya...other than they were very high and very far away. I suppose could trace its origins as far as memory takes me, for I believe destiny drew me here. Yet to spare weighty detail, I will shortcut to a mind trip first taken on a remote beach north of San Francisco. It was a time when I was coast-to-coast commuting in the acid trade and really burned—too much concrete, too many airport motels and coffee shops, too much paranoia about the "Man," too much of my own product.

"You look fried dude," the local connect summed up my mood perceptively. "I know just the place to cool you out."

It is a wild beach, reached only after a long ride and hike, ending in a precipitous scramble down crumbling cliffs. Few people go there, even today—no stink of sunscreen, no volleyball, no surfers. Frigid seas, savage undertows, and Great Whites make the beach tourist free. I have kept returning—a private yatra, I suppose. The beach had no name, so I gave it one, "Spindrift"—for the sea foam that danced across polychrome sand. This came to be my domain, my kingdom, and it was a distinct sign of favor when I introduced another to its sacred precincts.

In this magical place I spent many hours, watching the sea eat at the shore, the shore drink of the sea. Sometimes high, sometime straight, it didn't really matter, for the very air seemed infused with mind-altering powers. I tripped on how life feeds on itself, surviving in an unrelenting recombination of energy. To my young mind, seeped in a culture of conflict and power, this was a battleground where the opposing armies, elements of water, earth, and air struggled, free from human constraint. I spent so

much time there—a timeless time of the primordial—sitting on a rock, or sea-fuzzed log, sprayed by icy spindrift, observing the interplay of life.

Because of this place and what I experienced there, I began to shed the cultural filters clouding my vision, and observe directly. I tried to get past who was beating or eating whom, instead trying to grasp that exact space and time where the elements found first balance then union. I imagined, if I looked very carefully, I could see the point where particles of light, earth, water, air converged. That point was elusive, and I can't really say I ever captured it. Certainly not on film, as I often tried, nor in my memory, although I might have in some unremembered, drug-aided moment of serendipity. But I did come to understand that what I had first seen as struggle was really an embrace.

It was only later, in answer to a much greater need, that I found the Himalaya, a great arcing edge of ebb and flow, a Spindrift writ on an incomprehensible scale—not only of water, air, and earth, but life and death. If on Spindrift I had glimpsed the unity of life, it was in the immensity of the Himalaya that I began to see a unity beyond life—that death isn't extinction but reunion. You might well ask reunion with what? Such a name or description is what religion is all about, putting a human face on a faceless infinite. But religion is for the lowlands and the human-centered universe that is dominant. Here, in the Himalaya, is the ultimate edge on Earth, where humans have no hold, no power, and survive only through submission of both mind and soul. Yet I am a creature of the lowland, only a tenuous visitor to these mountains. I need to put a lowlander's frame on the Himalaya's infinite abstraction. This glimpse of a beyond, and its consequent sense of imminent loss, causes me to wonder. Who is this Guy in whose Maya-cast persona I have sheltered for so long.

So much has transpired since my youth. I am not quite sure how to recapture those times, free of all the noise intervening years bring. Time colors past events so heavily, what was once black now white, white turning to black. Events in the interim unduly prejudice past acts, not only in your eyes, but in mine as well. Forces, once held in contempt, reasserted themselves, taking control not only of the present, but how we view our past. The

"Good Morning America" years brought to us by Ronald Reagan, George Bush, et al, proclaimed the '60s and '70s to be dim and dark, doomed to be torn from history as an aberration in the life and times of the eternal American Dream. Rambo, not Chomsky, is enshrined in our myth.

I knew how we had come to be viewed, my students let me in on that score: spoiled babies, weirdoes, greedy geezers, and of course the worst of labels, pinko, leftist...even liberal. My own images, drawn from long-dimmed remembrance, were highly colored—a purple haze—by stereotypes framed, after the fact, by ax grinding commentators. History was a morality play used to teach a rising generation. Just say "NO, Nancy!" What is left of my Sixties are short, drug-enshrouded fantasies, little films played in my head, but at least they are mine.

Like everything else, becoming an "outlaw" was unplanned. I just fell...jumped...into it. After dropping out of college, I moved with Stephanie, girl friend of the moment, to New York's East Village. At the time, I saw this as my great escape, although experience reveals it was only the first step in a journey that will take an entire life, or more in Devara's way of thinking. In the "Alphabets," or the "Soup"—those utilitarian named avenues, A, B, C, D—I first glimpsed a world outside the Establishment, which up until then I had thought was the world. This was a true demimonde, and like the "horse" that drove it, once tasted was hard to escape.

Stephanie was my first real relationship. Oh, I had fucked around like any red-blooded American college boy, but she was the first one I had lived with. She was in a word "artsy," a feature most intriguing at the time. In her I saw a means of shedding my uptight, prepster demeanor, useful only in the world I had rejected, a way of becoming bohemian, if only externally. According to plan, I quickly found myself submerged in a world of creative wannabes. After all, what other folks would live in that warren, except for junkies and Puerto Ricans and, of course, they were a most distant other for a gringo like me. I was the straight who Stephanie and her hip friends tried their best to reform.

And was I ever straight! While she was cruising the Village, I had been locked away in an all-boys boarding school in New England's boonies. Even after several years in urbanity, I still clung to my

country prepster image, tweeds, rep ties, lacrosse. I guess I thought it was my advantage, what set me apart from the mob. That was what they had drummed into my head.

The "pad" was a ratty little walk-up near the corner of Eleventh and "A." Its only attribute was its proximity to the *Psychedelicatessen*, a veritable corner drug store selling without prescription. This neighborhood had served as the gateway to the rapacious American dream for so many incoming generations. By the late Sixties this dream was drug induced, dealing a way of life and the financial mainstay for the neighborhood.

As might be expected it was a tough neighborhood, particularly the street where I lived—mostly Puerto Ricans, or P.R.s as we called them. There were some good lessons to be learned. A knock at your door! Hell, you are a naive country boy, so you don't hesitate to open.

"Hey white bread give it up...yo mofuck stash yo honky hippie baaastart!"

You see the knife waving before your eyes, your assailant's foot firmly in the door. Although he is thin and shorter than you, his eyes are filled with terrible hunger, a need that even you, the naive country boy turned "mofuck honky hippie baaastart," know all about—it hangs as heavy as the East River fog. You know it is a hunger that many have killed to fill. Yet you think to yourself, show no fear. That is what it is all about, fear. Whose fear will be greater? You fight back the welling fear that tells you to give it up, give him all you have and hope he goes away.

You hear your voice, desperately trying to reach the patois, saying, "Look dude, I'm just like you, I need it too and I'm busted." You are moving out to him, getting into his world, making him see himself in you. Then you hear, "Shit man, you know...man." He stumbles away. Had you given in to fear, you would have shown that you were weak, a mark. Every junkie for blocks around would be knocking at your door.

Despite all the horror stories that swirled around us—stabblings, muggings, rip-off of every kind, overdoses and other forms of suicide—Stephanie and I lived charmed lives. We tripped the neighborhood at all hours, both together and alone. Never once,

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except for that one junky, were we hassled in that hell hot summer of '67. We had our own little community, mostly middle class refugees like ourselves. Yes, white punks on dope! In our rush to escape from ourselves, at least that self our culture had crafted, we embraced what was the only real other we had ever experienced, Negro, Black, or in current parlance African American. Oh, we crossed over, casting ourselves as "white niggers." But it was a virtual existence that appropriated only the imagined joys—sex, drugs, and music—not the harsh reality of what it was to be Black in '60s America. We still had our white skins. Long hair could be shorn, clothes changed, behavior modified. It was the tone of skin, the texture of hair, the flare of nostril or the size of lip that were, in that not so far off time, the deciding characteristics. As long as ours were right, which of course meant white, then we could always return. Not that we really went too far afield, for aside from the trappings of "the life," we lived much in the same way as in the suburbs, absorbed with ourselves, into our own trips, ignoring the ugliness and desperation surrounding us. Maybe the gods do take special care of fools We the flower children, tripping amongst that human misery, playing at poverty then escaping to Connecticut or Long Island on weekends, were most certainly fools.

Most of the time we were higher than kites, acid, mescaline, PCP, STP, you name it—except heroin, which was even beyond our most liberal pale—and, of course, the herb in its many forms to mellow the high. There I was, still at heart the bumpkin, tripping around New York. Imagine riding the Lex zoned. We would do it at night when there weren't so many people. I never felt any paranoia, I mean, getting mugged or anything. They were expeditions into the unknown, each trip a journey to a new planet, though we covered the same turf time and time again. Going downtown late at night, we tripped to China. All those Chinese (then I would have called them "Chinamen") who worked uptown in the restaurants would get on the train heading for Chinatown. Eventually, it seemed as if the entire train was filled with Asians and that the next stop would be Shanghai, Hong Kong, or some such exotic port of call.

* * *

The white noise-hiss of the stove breaks as the pressurized kero flares and splutters into silence. The deep trance, cast by my stream of consciousness, shatters. I am back in the present, yet at the same time filled with erotic images that thoughts of Steph always bring. Looking across at Devara, I find the confines of the tent bring us an intense intimacy. The light flickers in the dying stove. I detect a slight flush of embarrassment sweep across Devara's now decidedly androgynous face. In this moment, as external forces drive us together, our minds coalesce. Do I read in his eyes that he wishes I was a woman? How much of this radiates from his desire? How much is the reflection of my own? He is, after all, a sannyasi, a renunciate. Even more, however, he is a man—or at least I am.

Maybe, Devara reads my mind. Maybe, he sees that this is the central puzzle of his belief, and perhaps for all. He is, of course, unable to articulate this directly in English. Yet how does this idea come to me? He worships a God who is both ascetic and voluptuary, a God driven to asceticism after being disappointed in love. According to myth, Kama, that most passionate God, continually tries to tempt Shiva from his meditation. Like most myth, this portrays a human struggle to control desires so basic to our very being. The eternal struggle isn't to conquer desire, nor to kill it, but to find balance. No matter how high-minded I wish to be, no matter how much the altitude saps my strength, Kama comes from time to time to awaken that self-minded creature between my legs. Again, I am flooded with desires my conceit has conned me into thinking I have escaped.

Whether it is our extreme exposure, the closeness of confines, the charas and altitude, or some more mystical bond, our communion runs to an intimacy no longer sustainable by mind. To go further, it needs a physical context, a touch, caress, kiss, actual penetration of one into the physical envelope of the other. But, I am not a woman, nor do I believe is he. I had always found this to be the great barrier to my own sex. It always comes down to this, words aren't enough, but to do more is taboo—heavy *saman*.

Devara looks deeply into my eyes. Yes, hunger is there. But again, is it like mine or just its mirror? Maybe it is only a hunger for lascivious tales to pass the time.

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"More charas, Bhaai wanting?"

"Ji, Devaraji, that's just what I'm wanting." And it is.

* * *

Up to then sex, in keeping with my state, had been a rather straight affair. After years of boarding school's imposed celibacy, I was so horny that when I got to the University I didn't need wild fantasy to get me off. I was none too artful either. Usually I would be drunk and so would the girl. In those days, some sort of excuse was required, and being drunk did nicely. There was little question of love either. Sex was purely a function of hormonal needs. Just get on top and rock n' roll.

Not that there hadn't been some outlet in those boarding school years. Rosy bared butts in the showers held a certain appeal when your "tube steak" was continually exploding, its only comfort your hand. Besides, the younger boys had such sweet, girlish faces. More than once, I had contemplated the feel of my cock sliding between some under classmen's youthful cheeks. More than once, I had been invited to shower by upper classmen with designs on me. Yet all these impulses were more of mind than groin, at least in my case, and only—I kept telling myself for many years thereafter—because there were no more appropriate objects of desire.

Stephanie had also been the boarding school route. She was tall, aggressive, and capable of commanding the respect of weaker girls. While I might have fantasized, she carried her desires far beyond imagination. Is there less constraint for the female? That certainly was the case for Steph. She was a switch-hitter, as I wouldn't have been with her without a mutual attraction. At first our sex had followed what was by then my all too predictable style. Only now, instead of booze, we would get stoned on more fashionable drugs. As we delved deeper into each other's psyches, the complexities of her desires started to hang out. Any doubts about the range of these desires were removed by the way she encouraged other women to join us in our play. She had so many

girlfriends. I am not complaining. I was in hog heaven. After years of an all-male existence, I hungered for women.

It was a warm, rainy night, almost tropical, the kind that really gets the libido raging, particularly if you are at the low end of your twenties. We had gone over to visit a neighbor, Paula. She was our age, another refugee from Suburbia. She was trying to make it as a model. Stephanie, who was trying to be an art director, met her in one of the photographer's studios. I think Paula was from the Midwest, Kansas, Michigan. It was all the same to me—a great unknown—like that cartoon of a New Yorker's view of America, the one with everything beyond the Hudson compressed into a short expanse of *terra incognita*, the West Coast a stone's throw away. Although I had been in town for only a few months, leaving Manhattan seemed like leaving the planet. That was my reality. Maybe just needed to feel I was from somewhere, anywhere except where I was really from.

As soon as we arrived, I could feel Steph's vibes rising. She was all over Paula from the start, telling her how pretty she was, how sexy. She even coaxed Paula into showing us some bare-all photos she had done for some sleazy, one-shot, counter-culture magazine. The spread was called "Masturbation in Space." And "spread" was an appropriate term for there was nothing left to imagine about Paula. This set the mood for the evening. After seeing those pictures of Paula spread out, her fingers manipulating the most intimate parts of her body in weightless orgasm, I was as hard as a rock. There was no question that Paula could provide some real pleasure, if she had the inclination. But would she? Even if she did, who would be the recipient of those pleasures?

There was a good chance one of us would score. Supposedly, we had gone over to cheer Paula. Her married boyfriend had just dumped her, after months of promising her a boutique of her own. Apparently, the old geezer, he was a professional baseball player of thirty-four, couldn't handle the "Masturbation in Space" thing. Or at least it provided the convenient excuse. What better time than this to score?

Steph came on just like a man, encouraging me to join in a mutual seduction. We had all dropped "window pane," LSD that got its name because it was formed into little translucent squares. While

we waited for the high, we smoked a joint and talked about the pictures, Paula's boyfriend, and the importance of grabbing pleasure when you can, a "love the one you're with" theme. Stephanie really belabored that one, all the time closing in on her prey. Then the acid took over, slowly creeping up so that, if you didn't move, didn't alter your sensory field, you might not notice. At least until those all too familiar jaggies danced up my spine, the acid spreading though the nervous system as it journeyed to my brain. It was a peculiar thing with acid and sex; you had to start with it right from the beginning, otherwise you would go off in a different direction, away from you body until you peaked or, more accurately, dissolved. In the thrall of such overwhelming dissolution, it was hard to get back to something as mundane as physical desire.

The pad was quite typical of the time and place: a railroad affair, the inevitable cracked and peeling walls covered with cheap Indian cotton prints. Brass cutout lamps threw us into a chiaroscuro thrall. A strobe light's jarring flash synched to the beat of the music, pillows on the floor, incense and weed clouding the air; not to mention the scent of collective lust. Yes, you must get into it early, and this was just what Stephanie did, power tripping, taking over the direction of the journey. This was a bit rude for experienced heads. You didn't want the karma of giving someone a bad trip, and there was no faster way of doing that than taking someone where they didn't want to go. Stephanie gave me a long deep look, one that told me exactly where she wanted to go, if not how. Slyly, I returned her glance, trying to express caution with my eyes—be cool babe, take your time.

She turned to Paula. "Hey puss let's dance." It was halfway between a command and a request. Stephanie was trying to feel Paula out. Would she turn onto the domination that really got Steph off? Was she the bimbo we both hoped she would be, a willing toy for our pleasure? Paula seemed to respond to the masculinity in Stephanie's throaty voice. As they danced, she fell readily in line with Stephanie's lead, letting Steph's hand run over her body at will. Without seeking direction, I made a beeline for the record player and put on a thick stack of LPs, an aural cocktail. I can't remember exactly, but most likely I played the things I was into at the time: Hendrix, Dylan, The Incredible String Band,

Kinks, Pink Floyd, Stones, Beatles, Buffalo Springfield, Iron Butterfly, Doors, Moody Blues, Richie Havens, Peter Walker. These were tracks that would set the perfect mix. Whatever I chose, it would begin ever so softly, oozing from the speakers like exotic love oil, only later building to a crescendo, which, if my timing was right, would sweep us away all together, followed by more oil to ease our way down. The acid hit. At least I was getting those jitters in my teeth, those tiny little chills, that telltale queasiness. I had to move into their scene, if I didn't want to get left out. Focus on something so that I didn't get hooked into my own body. That could be a bummer. If you weren't careful you could wind up spending a good part of the trip in the can. Things sort of tunnel; concentrate on what is before you, on your sensory array. Even within the array, it is usually one channel that takes over, one direction that trips you out.

Despite the chills, it was getting warm...no warmer than warm, real hot. Stephanie held Paula tight. In the background a guitar sobbed. Then, consoled by a sax, embraced by drums, it brightened, taking us all along for the ride. Looking over at the two women, momentarily I was inside Paula, all connection lost to anything but the hands that stroked, the mouth that sucked. It was no longer Stephanie's hand, or even a hand itself, it was just the pleasure Paula was feeling. Stephanie, as she was about to remind me, knew how to give pleasure.

I still had some control. I had learned the art of holding back, of navigating through the trip, at least until everything blew apart and there wasn't anyone, or anything, left to control. I kept wondering how I was going to make it through this night? Would I wind up alone in the corner, while these two went off to their own private Shangri-La? That might piss me off. Acid is not all peace and love, and if the beast is unleashed.... I went over and put my arms around both, half expecting to be rebuffed. "Hey, get your own action!" But that wasn't Steph's trip. She had it all planned, sort of her coming out party. She wanted to show me this other side of her, yet at the same time, reassuring me that it didn't have to come between us.

At first, we just held on to each other, making sure we all wanted to go in the same direction. Back within myself again, I savored the

warmth and safety offered by their velvet cream softness as the sharp, icy tentacles probed from within. I felt for Paula's mouth, probing with my tongue. She didn't resist, opening like a willing flower. She tasted like a flower too, all nectar, so willing, so compliant, as if she had been put on earth only for my pleasure. Trip, trip, wherever it takes you, it is only in your mind. But don't forget that the mind is part of the illusion, of no more substance than the spindrift of that far shore. Nothing is real, nothing only is...all will be well.

We were on the floor and groping beneath each other's clothing. I felt the silken coolness of naked flesh. It was hot; it was chill; it was Paula; it was Steph; it was Guy. I couldn't tell where one ended and another began, as if when Stephanie stroked Paula, she was at the same time stroking me. We giggled; we cried, everything fluid, moving, flux. We escaped from the bonds of our clothing. We were naked, both mind and body locked together, yet each traveling to different points in space and time. Then as one, perhaps sensing a common loneliness in the void, we needed shelter. I felt the nakedness and wanted cover, not the covering of my clothing, but of their bodies. Because I hadn't experienced Paula, I wanted to possess her. I groped for her. Instead I found Stephanie had already established her claim, my hand colliding with her probing fingers. I joined her, our fingers together searching out that node of absolute pleasure. One hand still worked along with Steph, the other carried Paula's essence to Steph's open lips. She licked my finger slowly sucking it deep into her throat. She savored the gift I had brought her and finding it to her liking went directly to the source. Paula's deep moans of pleasure proved Steph's skill, a skill that could only come from experience. For a moment, I flashed into fantasies of all those pussies she might have tasted.

Steph wasn't about to let me wander off on my own. Without disturbing the rhythm of her flickering tongue, she signaled me with her eyes to move behind her. She arched her back, a movement that spread the cheeks of her ass, giving me full entrance to her own seat of pleasure. I pressed my mouth to those vuvul lips, mimicking her ministrations to Paula. Steph was ready; the salty sweet moisture dripped into my mouth, the bud of her clit hard against the tip of my tongue. Again, I could have lost myself, this time to my sense of taste. I eagerly explored with my lips, my

tongue, the seemingly endless depths, the varied textures, contours, as if I was entering this passage for the very first time. Steph had other plans. She was out there, and determined to bring us along. I heard a voice that in its tone was deep, almost masculine, yet in its request most feminine, "No, not that way...with your cock, get inside me, deep, deep...fuck me, fuck me hard." She didn't have to ask me twice. I thrust deep into her, driving her even deeper into Paula. We settled into a smooth rhythm, my cock setting up a beat that she followed with her tongue. This was Paula's introductory ride; all she had to do was open wide and receive.

There was a period of seeming timelessness, measurable only by the pitch of mutual excitement. Then, time caught up with me, a time so primordial that there was no escape. I let go, filling Steph.

But Steph was far from satisfied. She slid forward, pressing her dripping pussy down on Paula's lips, demanding now the favors she had so willingly given. I recovered quickly at the sight of Paula. Now unattended, her legs splayed open ready for the pleasure which, I imagined, only a hard, male penis could bring. I rushed to fill the void; to give Paula in full measure what Steph could only foreshadow. A new rhythm was established. Paula was writhing under this concerted attack of pleasure and submission. Before my eyes smooth-fleshed mounds undulated, buttocks pressed against heaving breasts. My mouth hungered for flesh, and to explore the inviting crevices between. I bent forward, my teeth, at first content to gently nibble, then sensing such nirvana in the texture, sinking deeper. There was a moan, seemingly of pleasure, the pleasure of gentle, endurable pain. There was no resistance, only deepening surrender. Then, as I probed the cleft between cheek and breast, my tongue met Paula's; we entered Steph as one. That was the spark. I could see it; I could feel it; jumping between my cock, now embedded deep within Paula's body, to my tongue, and from there arcing across to Stephanie. Everything exploded. The atoms in our bodies flew apart into countless, unbounded universes. For a time, we ceased to be. What had been so recently divided into distinct entities now flowed into One. We were no longer unique, no longer things apart. We were transformed into undifferentiated energy, part of the great Cosmic Sea...or at least that was how we saw it in those days.

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After that first great melt down, my memories jumble, maybe they too melted into an irretrievable mass. Most likely we kept up our sex play. I was much younger then and possessed seemingly inexhaustible powers. Besides, when you come down there is always excess energy to burn away. That was the secret; unload, then crash.

It was over, nothing left to take or give. The rain had stopped; the dawn was breaking. We went up on the roof to watch the sun rise over the East River. It was a mysterious sunrise, the sky stained crimson by the lingering storm. In my semi-spaced state, I heard the sun calling me to find its source. Imagine, traveling across the sea, to Europe and then, perhaps, to those lands of mystery beyond, to Asia, to India. Those places, now like a second home, were so remote then, so shrouded in mystery and myth. I was caught on a crest of excitement, equal to any I had experienced in our nocturnal play. I thought hard on ditching my scene, on answering the sun's command. But then the veteran space voyager took control, reminding me, "It's just a trip Guy." Hell, life was good; the past night proved how good it could be. I lived in a world where the rules were few. I could travel in my mind to any place I wanted, without hassle—any place if I had the imagination...and balls. I thought that last night had been heaven. With luck I could go there again and again.

* * *

That was 1967. Aside from our own little zone, there was a world out there. On the other side of the continent, they were calling it "The Summer of Love." Maybe that was also just part of the illusion. But there were things happening that were all too real. Part of that reality, no less real for its remoteness, was an unknown place called Vietnam, or "Nam" as we Americans would come to demonize it. While the place, its people, and their culture seemed of little consequence to one so deep in the Soup, what was taking place there was heavy, so fucking heavy that it would soon reach out and zap me. It had been heavy for the locals since day one, but, because I had dropped out of school and was no longer protected from the draft, it now loomed large for me too. Besides,

the heaven I thought I had latched onto was rapidly falling apart. Steph was pissed and, in retrospect, I suppose for good reason. I had no job, no prospects, and my nascent dealings provided little more than a private stash and a rather erratic one at that. Also, there were those extracurricular explorations which inevitably, through some sixth sense, Steph would discover. Hell, I had a lot of time on my hands. It was okay in her code for me to screw around, but only when it included her. In revenge, she gravitated to Paula, increasingly on a solo basis. Our summer of love was over, and Steph moved uptown with Paula.

Then just in case I hadn't been paying attention, I got a real message. Uncle finally caught me. Maybe it was just as well, since I was surely headed for the street. He had been after me for some time. My number came up as soon as I dropped out of school, but lost in the Soup it had taken time to nail me. But Uncle, if nothing else, is persistent. He also had the help of Stephanie's mom, who was eager to have me shipped out of her darling's world. What a joke! She thought I had corrupted her pristine daughter. Well hardly! Little Miss Suburbia was entrenched in that world long before I came calling.

What a deal, FBI and all! They busted me early one morning, dragged me downtown as if I was number one on the most wanted list. What a relief it was only about the draft. When they came through the door, my first thought was DEA. I will never forget that trip "downtown." The agents taunted, "It's the big house for you Guy! Welcome to the belly of the beast!" They really laughed at that.

I had the last...well maybe just a subsequent...laugh. When I got to the office, I saw a faintly familiar name inscribed on the door. Todd Whelan...hmm...Todd Whelan? The wheels started spinning. All the drugs I was taking slowed my recall. I still didn't make the connection even when I saw him. He looked so much like my past self though, such a typical prepster, with those tortoise-shell glasses, prepster rep tie, button-down, oxford cloth shirt, Harris tweed jacket, surmounted by an oh so smug look on his overly soft, Anglo face. The agents, with exaggerated politeness, introduced me as if I was a perspective client come to make a deal, which I guess I was. Whelan gave no inkling of recognition, just another

piece of flotsam to be summarily dealt with. The agents made a big fuss about all the trouble they had gone through to track me down. I was a high flight risk. Since I was facing a five-year sentence, they suggested that my bail should be at least a hundred grand, which meant no bail. Then out of the blue, this scowling nemesis gave me a sly wink, thanked the agents and, much to their surprise, dismissed them.

"Well Guy, I always said you'd land up in some sort of mess."

It didn't hit me until I heard that intimate tone in his voice—that rang my bell. My God, it is a small world I thought. What the fuck! It was that cock-sucking House Prefect from my first year at boarding school. He had made my life hell then, and I expected no less from the bastard now.

Whelan just sat there gazing at me. In my mind, paranoid, and justifiably so, he seemed to be savoring the moment, like a cat contemplating the battered mouse, milking out the last bit of sadistic pleasure, before boredom set in and he went for the kill.

All pretense went out of Todd's act. It was as if we had been suddenly transported back to that distant time when we lived together in, of all things, a converted guinea-hen coop, actually called the "Coop." The school was located on several former gentry-farmer estates in the Berkshire, mostly relics of a couple of my ancestors, 19th Century robber barons. It was this connection that got me in. Berkshire winters were extremely cold, the snow deep. Across from the Coop was a barn. I was barely fourteen and full of shit. I had a real asshole roommate whose favorite pastime was to get me in trouble. His nickname, with some just cause, was Ape. Later I heard Ape was killed in Nam. He had given me such hell that a part of me thought, "what justice." There was a hard and fast rule about talking after lights-out. Invariably, Ape would do something obnoxious, shaking the bunk beds we shared, masturbating, farting. Oh, he could be a real pain. When I couldn't take it any more, I would whisper "shut the fuck up"—you had to keep your macho to survive—and sure enough from the end of the hall: "Guy get you running shoes on." This meant that for the next hour or so I would be jogging around the barn, beating a path in what seemed to be always freshly ice-crusting snow. You had to raise your knees high or your shins would take a licking.

Sometimes, when good old Todd got bored with my running, he would substitute calisthenics. Later, I had silently thanked him. I entered school on the fat side; after a year of that hell I was buffed.

"Look my man, you're in a bit of a fix here. Between you, me, and whatever, you're going to have to suck up to our old Uncle. I don't give a rat's ass, grease up the bum and let him have a go if that what it takes." The old prepster lingo took hold. "Don't quote me...uuuh...you know, I don't like what's going on any more than you, maybe even less. Why in the hell do you think I took this gig?" Yeah, Todd baby, get down! "My own arse could've been blown off by now. And after mon Pere sprang for *Harvard Law* and all."

The asshole made sure I caught those last words. How did a cunt like him ever make it into Harvard? But I didn't have to puzzle hard for the answer. I knew that all too well, that was exactly why—that and his old man's seat on the Exchange. Thankfully he wasn't privy to my inner musings, for he continued in an almost conspiratorial vein: "I'm going to let you out on O.R., but I want you to take care of this. You know, go over to Whitehall and do the drill. I'm sure you can figure something out."

He must have thought he had caught some question in my eye. "Remember Guy, if things don't work out, you can always put on your running shoes. I'm sure you remember that one." He gave me a conspiratorial wink and then turned his attention back to the folders stacked on his desk.

There are so many trips in life, so many ways to play the same game. Some went to Canada, others into the National Guard or Reserves, some even went to prison, a thought that scared the hell out of me at the time. I had heard tales of what happened to tender youths like me. Almost immediately after I left Whelan's office, the "movement" contacted me. They tried to enlist me in anti-war demonstrations that were just beginning to take off. These folks, although quite solicitous, had their own agenda. They were quite prepared to see me a martyr. I was equally solicitous and determined not to become one. "A nickel'll be the most they can throw at you Guy. You can do that standing on your head...for the cause man, for the cause." Yeah, sure! *They* could do it standing on *their* fuckin' heads. Thanks, but no thanks! I mean, I wasn't doing this because I was high-minded, or looking for a fight. Sure, the

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war was wrong; but even more it wasn't on my agenda; neither was five years rotting in a cell, giving up my sweet ass for protection.

I was by then a confirmed dooper, and my first thought of escape was through drugs. I reasoned if I was totally stoned for the "physical" (not only physical but "psychological"), then I would have a good chance of convincing them I was more trouble than I was worth. On the appointed day, I prepped myself with a handful of drugs. While I can't remember the exact contents of the cocktail, it did include hits of STP, PCP, mescaline, acid, and a lot of speed. By the time I got to the induction center, I was flying. When I think back on it now, I can't imagine how I handled the rush, let alone navigate. Even though incredibly distorted data overwhelmed my senses, I survived, muttering over and over the mantra, "It's the drugs Guy, just ride out the storm." The "physical" was held at Whitehall, a huge induction center in the heart of Wall Street. Talk about the "belly of the beast!"

As you might imagine, my recall of these events is scattered, just bits and pieces, a very spare montage. There were great stairways, and on those stairways, I saw thousands and thousands of people. That wasn't strange for New York, but these people dressed in fashions from different eras. Of course, this also wasn't so strange, because at that time people were wearing all sorts of things. Then the tip-off came. After catching my eye, one after another would, like goulish flashers, take off a hat, open a coat, to reveal terrible, certainly mortal, wounds. Weakly, I tried to remind myself I was tripping: They're only projections of your fears. They're not really there Guy?

How could I convince myself? Even now I wonder. Somehow, I believed those folks weren't just the products of fear. They were really there, apparitions of all those men who'd passed through this abattoir. They had been promised, cajoled, threatened into doing what they were told was their duty—kill the red man, kill the yellow man, kill the black man, and even, (yes, this was a little trickier) kill the white man too. Now they had their reward. Those ghost legions filled the building, serving warning to all who followed, all who would look...listen, of the motherfucker that lay ahead. It was as if only I could see them, or at least I thought so, until I caught the eye of another freak. I knew he could see them

too. We were on another plane, another perceptual dimension. Perhaps, there are such ghosts everywhere, ready to save us from some folly or other, waiting to guide us. Perhaps, they are equally ready to lead us into folly—angels and devils. Full of this world that we are, so taken by its illusion, we can't see these ghosts. If we do see them, we discount them as products of our own mind.

Then there were the other, more mundane experiences. A doctor, after examining me, grimly said, "Son, as soon as you leave here, do yourself a favor and get some professional help." I was trembling like a leaf, and he must have suspected I was zoned—imagine my blood pressure and pulse rate. That was heartening. I was beginning to think I had beaten them, or that was what I would have thought if I had been back on the ground, for by that time I was too high to focus on earthly problems. Next was the intelligence test, one of those multiple-choice things where you fill in the correct box. Instead, I connected the boxes, coming up with a faint likeness of Mickey Mouse.

Unfortunately, my effort didn't fool anyone. They told me to report the following day. I was still high from the effects of no sleep and STP residue, but I had long since peaked. That came during the intelligence test. I was undergoing an agonizing descent—psychedelics can be like the mountains, the retreat much more treacherous than the approach—and while I was mentally coherent, my body was near collapse.

The next day began with an address by a jar headed-looking Gunny Sergeant whose Bronze Star, Combat Infantry Badge, yellow and red-striped campaign ribbon, announced to all that he was fresh from the killing fields. God that bastard acted tough. He asked us if there were any faggots in the group. Then there was no worry about being politically correct, multi-culturally sensitive, or any of that "pointy-headed double talk." Most of the guys were young Blacks and Puerto Ricans. They seemed really impressed by this macho asshole, which was exactly why he was there. For them the Army represented a step up out of hell. No one was about to give it up...except, of course, yours truly. In filling out the medical questionnaire, I had checked homosexual along with all the other disqualifying "diseases." That son of a bitch immediately focused on me, not only with his own scorn, but that of the group.

KALAGIYA

"Hey you! That's right you freakin' asshole. They tell me you a draft dodgin son of a bitch, too chickenshit to serve you country. You think you too good you puke. Let all these other assholes do your duty for you. You fukin' little fairy! You gutless pervert cocksucker! My fuckin God, you not only queer you little bitch...you chicken as well."

I wondered which was worse for him, that I was queer or chicken? Probably the latter because, as I was to soon find out, many of these hard-on warrior types are closet butch gays themselves.

The Gunny went on threatening, shaming, working the audience trying to enlist the weight of their collective condemnation against me. "You faggot asshole, you never going to hold a decent job in you life. This will go in you motherfuckin' jacket, you motherfuckin' little worm. It'll stick to you like motherfuckin' shit."

It was Friday. They told me to report on the following Monday; again, the bullet-headed Gunny gave me the final benediction.

"Kiss you boyfriend bye-bye you queer little maggot an' bring you toothbrush, if you got one. Monday night, your sorry ass'll be movin' on to boot camp...or in the slammer, givin' it up to your new daddy. Damn! I hope for *my* Army it's the slammer."

Over the weekend I split for London, never looking back. Money was scarce. I had only enough for the ticket and the first couple of weeks. It was a rough flight, skirting the fringes of a hurricane and the eight hours seemed an eternity. Finally, we made our descent into Heathrow.

Chapter IV

*Step outside the narrow borders of what men call reality
and you step into chaos.*

—Ralph Ellison—

ABROAD

The spell breaks. Suddenly, I am back in this solitary world. But is it so solitary? What had been, only moments before, the flashing red light above my seat transforms into the Walkman's tiny eye. Another light draws my attention, its source the far corner of the tent. How minute the boundaries of my present world now seem. Only moments ago, I lived in the past, a world limited only by memory...and imagination. Where is Devara? It is so dark in here. I can scarcely make out any form. The light must come from him. Is it the glow of the chillum or his eyes? Has he been listening? Does he now wish to speak?

Silence!

I have begun to trip back in my mind, putting distance to this present, to Devara, how easy in the darkness, where we inhabit such disparate worlds. Even if we were equals in a common language, how many words, the spare symbols of far more complex images, could we share? How many can I share with you? What bold conjecture that two minds can share. What magic if they can.

Talking takes me back, almost as if I was in that 707 heading east for the first time; how like this trip, maybe the last such journey. In the intervening years, I have made so many trips, some with the possibility of no return. This last is the only one since that first intercontinental flight where nothing has been left behind.

Again, storm sounds push against the envelope. As I become more of this place and less of my memories, I begin to hear his voice.

"Much you say hard for Devara, but think right thing you do. It bad fighting, bad killing, like crazy *Mussalmen*. I hear this Vietnam. All

India Radio talk, say Amrikans there like Angrezi in Raj time. Very bad go another country...ruling...taking, how others live telling. No one another freedom give. Freedom only coming from spirit. Angrezi in Hindustan for peace try, not for the peoples, but rupees. Peace from gun, it much funny, if not so sad. When Angrezi leave...boom. Men like Devara, hunted animals. Bhaai, you right doing, not other people troubling. The God reward you with this holy journey."

Although I see a light, hear a voice, even in this world so small, where is Devara? I am not sure if the words come from lips, or if they are directly from mind. I am so disoriented. At times, I feel as if he is here, a distinct entity; at other times, he hides; still other times I think I am within him, seeing the world from his eyes. This has happened before when stressed. I feel totally alone in this Universe—everything just a projection of mind. Is this megalomania or some other aberration? In the past, I have always been able to retreat from the brink, but now...?

God, I wish the storm would end. I need to get down. My hands are as big as baseball mitts, my feet beginning to swell. I force myself to keep drinking, chai, chai, and more chai. Slow down on the dope, Guy...but what else to do? In the beginning with the dope, it was as if I had my own TV, just kick back and watch the past flash by. Everything was so flat, so two dimensional, so remote. But now these things in my head (are they just in my head?) gain other dimensions. What was fantasy becomes real. Am I here or in some lost terror of a dream gone bad? Will I wake in the familiar comfort of a bed and the arms of a woman I love? No, I am here, or at least I am not there. This is a journey where the tomorrows are completely unknown, where all that I know, all that I hold dear, is past. Yes, how similar were those two flights. Although one headed east and the other west, both were escaping worlds gone awry. There was one big difference, twenty-five years.

* * *

The trouble with escape is that it is always to somewhere, a scene that, as it grows familiar, proves as much a bitch as the one you have escaped. After all, you haven't changed, only the somewhere.

KALAGIYA

This was ever so true in London. I had neither skills nor connections, the only "work" I knew milking the great cash cow of drugs. To make matters worse, it wasn't even about going straight. For that you needed a work permit. And of course, it was the old Catch 22, without work....

Since, as they say, misery loves company, I began to frequent a seedy pub in Earl's Court. The area, then known as "Kangaroo Canyon" because of the large number of Aussies, was convenient to my own equally seedy digs—little more than a closet in the downstairs of an upstairs gone to ruin. The pub was a good place for cheap diversion. After you bought one pint, you could hang-out all evening, nursing your brew or conning someone a bit flusher to spot you another. Every night there would be brawls—drunken men far from home. In the otherwise grinding boredom of poverty, their stories of daring-do in exotic places helped pass the time.

The atmosphere captivated me filled, as it was, with all sorts of expat types, including freshly arrived survivors of Schramm's mercenary brigade in Biafra. For the price of a pint you could observe and even talk to characters that, in my naiveté, seemed right out of the pages of Conrad or Hemmingway, although on reflection, more like tawdry tales in *Soldier of Fortune*. Young and impressionable, I imagined this to be the last remaining den of those very pirates and freebooters who had figured so heavily in childhood's myth. Even the name of the place was apt, the "Ruddy Rogue."

When I walked through the doors, I left the world of the "suits" with all their hypocrisy, all their backstabbing greed. Equally, I left that virtual domain of peace and love, a place in which, if the truth were known, I had never felt entirely comfortable. The denizens of the Rogues might not have been nice men, many bragged of terrible deeds. Yet somehow, I imagined that they would be straight with me, if I was straight with them. If they took me as a friend, they would walk the fire with me. To be accepted by them was proof I was a man, a proof I sorely needed. I tried hard to be one of them and even, when pissed, considered taking up the life of a mercenary. "Join us my man, if Biafra flames, there's always Angola. It's a dirty job, but someone has to keep the Wog in line." So much for peace, love, and understanding. It was one of those

very male animal, bonding things, that on one hand I despised, yet on the other was strangely attracted to. I guess loneliness can play weird tricks. So can wishful thinking.

At the Rogue I met Ian, a strange little Anglo-Irishman. He seemed out of place in a world so overcharged with testosterone. Bellying up to the bar with great hairy men, scarred and grizzled by far-flung campaigns, little Ian, carefully attired, attentively coifed, held his own. Despite his Irish origins—or, perhaps, as he was from Belfast, because of them—he was no less in love with the fading institutions of the Empire than the most ardent Col. Blimp. He even carried a picture of the Queen Mum. To congenial catcalls from the more irreverent patrons, he proudly showed me the wallet-sized portrait on our first meeting, as one might show a picture of a wife or lover.

Ian introduced himself as an agent for a major British news agency. That was his entrée into the scene, as he knew many of the lads from his days in distant hellholes. Now, after nearly getting whacked in the Congo, he had earned a mundane desk job. Still, he liked the company of rough and ready types. For openers, I thought it was because they reminded him of his glory day—those times in harm's way whose glory grows with distance.

But it was more, and I must have been very naive not to get it immediately. I couldn't get past the manly atmosphere to see that these men gathered because they preferred the company, intimate company. This was certainly Ian's purpose, which was a bit dicey because, initially, he came on to me hoping to score. There had always been something in me that attracted my own, the mixed message of appearance. Years of school sports, not to mention interminable trips around that Berkshire barn, had turned baby fat into a hard, well-shaped, if not overly large, muscle; my hair was long and wavy; my complexion the envy of women friends. I guess it was a streak of lingering boyishness that, in its androgyny, was often mistaken for femininity. Not much to mistake now, this body battered, as it is, hair thinning, rose and cream complexion seared, scarred, lined, and bearded beyond all recall? At least I didn't go to fat, too much time on drugs, and too much time in low-rent places, to ever get fat.

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I had been in London for over a month and my funds were gone. In desperation, I almost agreed to shack-up with Ian. How I take refuge in that word "almost". I did have a certain ambivalence to sex. Though perhaps a little later in getting underway, I certainly I loved to screw the opposite sex. At the same time, I wasn't far away from an adolescent preoccupation with my own. While I might have acquiesced in fantasy, there was something inside that wouldn't let me go the distance with Ian, even though he could have solved my pressing financial woes.

We fenced a bit. I let him wine and dine me, even going so far as to frequent his flat, where he plied me with booze and dope. But despite my jam, I couldn't surrender to another man. I did feel a certain fondness for Ian, who being older had an air of worldliness? Certainly, it was confusing for a young man of twenty-one, particularly as I had spent my first rush of sexuality apart from women. Oh yes, there had been the odd Master's wife or daughter to languish over. But they were far too remote, and young boys had their own, more ready charms. Society, and the fear of its retribution, programmed me too much to feel comfortable with that feminine, dependent side which Ian brought out. I knew it was there, but I wouldn't, couldn't, allow it to surface, to take life, to take over my life. I feared if I went for it this once, I would be a goner. I was desperate, but not quite desperate enough.

Growing tired of my fencing he forced my hand. There was a humongous scene, and I almost whacked him. I expected that to would put paid not only to Ian, but to the food, booze, and dope he had so copiously supplied. To the contrary, Ian, quite apart from his predilection, had grown fond of me—or at least saw my potential. If I wouldn't play the role of paramour, then, perhaps, protégé?

"Not to worry dear thing," He said to me after a few awkward moments in the pub, the following day. "It's just not your cuppa. No harm in trying, is there love? After all, you've been quite close, up to the flat and all. And I must say, it was quite a rush, you know Guy. For a moment, I thought I was quite gone. Quite a tingle! Haven't felt that in years. Out there, eh?"

Yes, Ian took rejection well. "Perhaps, dear boy, there still may be a way you can earn your keep. Much more difficult, to my mind, but then given what you seem to be into dear chap. I mean all that delicious hostility, it should be more to your liking, at least for the time being, while you're young. Oh, a few years ago I would've jumped at the chance." Then in a more serious tone, "Look Guy, how would you like to work for the agency. Not here in London, I'm afraid, but over with your fellow Yanks, over in Vietnam."

Ian's offer might have been a form of revenge, for with no little irony it would send me as a photographer to Asia, to the very war I had tried so hard to escape. When you are hungry, and I was, even the prospect of war isn't so bad. As an outsider in London, I could better understand the eagerness of those PR recruits back at Whitehall. Anything was better than getting it up the old ass, or at least so I thought from the distance of London. It was either continue the adventure, hoping for the best, or return to the States, tail between my legs, to an even less optimistic future. Ian pointed out that at least I wouldn't be in the military. As a stringer, I would be my own boss—"just get the footage." I was soon to learn that the term "footage" was to have a double meaning.

At the time, I had only a self-inflicted grounding in still photography. Someone in the Alphabets traded a Nikon F for a few ounces. I shot many rolls playing Cartier-Bresson on the street of the Lower East Side—a modern-day *flâneur*, a man of the boulevard. Only I wasn't content just to watch the passing scene, but driven to capture it as my own. For Ian's purpose, this would suffice.

"Still or motion it's pretty much the same. We don't need anything artsy, just be sure it is action, in focus, and exposed proper."

This assignment was a natural for the young and foolish, with nothing to lose, in short, me.

Apart from the escape, there was another advantage to the posting, as Ian was all too quick to point out. We both had a liking for drugs. Ian already knew I had few scruples—evidenced by the quantity of his prize stock of Thai Stick I had consumed. He suggested we could do a "little business," boasting that he had already set up "others" in the trade—"quite profitable and safe,"

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he promised. Then with a cryptic tone, "You'd be surprised to what levels this business goes. With all the gear, not to mention the large quantities of exposed stock being shipped back through agency channels, it's easy to import a few goodies here and there."

I knew what Ian meant by goodies. It wasn't Thai Stick. Ian had openly shown a liking for China White, heroin refined from Lao poppies. Not that he overindulged, nor did he try to press it on me, once I refused. He was quite a gentleman, always in control. He just liked a sniff now and then. As he said, "It makes things more rational, dear thing...a fore taste of heaven to get us through this earthly hell."

* * *

I landed in the middle of deep shit, late January 1968, just before Tet, the Vietnamese lunar New Year, a time later described by that arch-fuck Kissinger as the watershed—the beginning of the end. But it was an end invisible to those caught in the muck. And muck it was, for the *crachin*, the northeast monsoon, which grips Vietnam in the winter months, was at its height, turning the landscape into a gloomy, slime-green morass of inescapable damp. As a newcomer, I quickly found myself out in the boonies. Khe Sanh was a fortified camp in the foothills of the Highlands up near the DMZ. This tangle of razor wire, sandbags, petrol drums, and bunkers, seemed so out of place. It could have been such a bucolic setting, a place of infinite peace. Apart from our presence, the valley was certainly heavenly, well watered, rich with fertile red soil, cradled in the lush, mist-topped hills that rose menacingly to either side. There had been ferocious battles for those commanding hills the year before. And the mist covered more than hills, for it was from those unseen heights that soon the NVA would rain down so much death...again.

Over the years my memory flick of Nam—that war-derived coalescence of Grunt Vietnam experience—has been cut over and over, edited into an ever-condensed version. Details, people, places, once so vivid, leak through the subconscious and into oblivion. Inevitably, some bits stick in memory, coloring the way I now see life. But mostly, Nam has sunk into the haze of lost

remembrance. All that is left is a distant bittersweet dream, a mixture of experience and fantasy. I try to recall what it was, what I know took place, but it is too distant, too abstract, too much of my own mind and too little of what really happened.

The thing I remember most from those first weeks is the mud. As a would-be cameraman, that all-pervasive ooze was my most immediate enemy. Sure, there was beaucoup John Wayne shit going down, but only now and then, and mostly at a distance where it didn't concern me, because I wasn't going to think about it, because I forced myself not to think about it. Or up so close that it didn't really matter whether I thought about it or not. What would happen, happened, and there was nothing to do. The mud, however, the wet, the damp, they were up in my face "sixty by sixty, twenty-four by seven," all the time. After a while, I learned the work arounds, little tricks to keep my gear operative. It was amazing how dirty a lens could get and still make passable pictures. In the first weeks, the gear was my refuge. I was so busy trying to look like I knew what I was doing that I had little time for fear, or at least real fear. I was more afraid to appear the fool, the cherry, the novice, who didn't know which end was up. The other fear, the real one, needed time to grow.

The level of tension was high. The VC had really whacked the South, infiltrating Saigon, Hue, and all. Our sector was relatively calm, albeit rather incessant shelling—the NVA's plan to divert Westy's attention. But if the South had gone, we would have been up a very long creek. Talk about between a rock and a hard place—VC to the South, NVA to the North. Just one big squeeze!

There weren't only Indians to worry about, for not being a true-blue member of the cavalry I had to worry about them too. Despite attempts to get in character, I was still cherry. Even worse, I wasn't a Marine and, therefore, untested in jarhead eyes, an unknown in a world where life depended on a trusted brother beside you. Many of the grunts wondered why I was there, just another rich, college-boy fuck, and what they imagined as a limey to boot. "The mo-fa must be a fag...or worse...maybe just crazy. Whatever...ya know d' mo-fa be out of his gourd. Man, this ain't his mo-fa war and the mo-fa asked to eat this shit? Too mo-fa weird!" Not a fellow grunt, or even an officer, I was fair game for their pent-up rage. It was a

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world where there were only combatants, where at any moment the "little fellows" might be over the wire and up close and personal. I had to prove I was no tourist just passing through. Khe Sanh was no place to be a loner, survival a collective enterprise. In the beginning I had been abused, threatened, maybe even close to frag-city. They had jammed on my buttons and see where I would go. Their lives depended on it.

I was in a constant struggle with myself. It was so easy to hunker down in my bunker, just suck a little "O," and all the shit would go away. Almost all, because a small voice would still be working on me.

"This is your chance asshole. Get off your butt and prove to Ian, to myself, you've got what it takes. Get his damned footage, and maybe, just maybe, he'll get you out of this motherfucker."

I was afraid if I didn't perform, Ian would bury me, forget I existed, until I was taken out, that is. Then he could ship me back the cheap way—bagged, tagged, and boxed. So, it was saddle up and wangle my way onto some patrol. God, I felt awkward, out of place as a nun at a stag party, with all that gear and an aging, mouse-eared Auricon so clumsy on my shoulder. I could see myself in those grunts' eyes, how ridiculous I was, how useless, how potentially disastrous.

After some time, when I had seen some action and not fucked up too bad, I began to make friends...no "military acquaintances" was the operative term. When that being next to you could instantly transform into nothing, you didn't really want to get too close, too attached. "But will you love me tomorrow?"

It helped that I wasn't just in and out like so many of the media types—in on a morning flight, out in the afternoon, clutching cans of 7242 reality. Oh, very soon I would be doing the same thing, but for the moment I was gung-ho. I had to prove to myself. Yes, I could face the same dangers as that grunt I'd refused to be—not to kill, but to take the chance of being killed. I was still uncertain why I had refused. Was it from noble purpose, or was I chickenshit? And if it was the latter, was it a fear of death, mutilation, or just winding up like my five-pack-per-day father? But all this soul searching wasn't forever, too heavy to keep it up for long. After the

initial rush that was to be cherry the drill became one of keeping your head down, staying out of the way, yet at the same time grabbing enough shots to keep Ian happy, in other words, I learned my job. I could fill can upon can with the "drama of battle": artillery barrages, mortar attacks, even night-time assaults—those tracer streams were far out if you pushed the stock—and, of course, bodies, lots of bodies, in bags or in the buff.

The biggest problem was getting the film back. That took a lot of cajoling. In learning my way around the supply side of the military, I got my first introduction to Nam's underworld, a world of corrupt Supply NCO's and their counterparts and operatives in the ARVN. Remember an army not only fights on its stomach's requirements, but on its other visceral needs as well.

As I acclimatized, I almost became fond of the place; in the same way, I had later become attached to a particular cell after an extended period of confinement. For a while there was no choice anyway, because the flights out were either nonexistent, or my juice was too low to rate a ride. Ian, however, was getting antsy for his other footage. He had sent me into Khe Sanh because that was where action was expected, and I was the only available body. By March, it was clear that this wouldn't be another Dien Bien Phu ("Diem Blew Who?"). With mixed feelings, I boarded a Huey and left the Quan Valley for what I hoped would be forever.

I quickly regained my senses. I'd had my universal military experience, enough at least that I had proven myself no coward. Oh, I had been scared shitless many times, but somehow crazed enough not to snap. Now the pleasures of Saigon waited. It was a city and no stranger in its ways than New York or London. There were insane moments, but they were brief and, I made sure, as infrequent as possible. I thought I had paid my dues. I learned how to get by, training eager—as in hoping for their own deferments— young Vietnamese to do my work, milking footage to keep London off my back, but no more. Increasingly, my time was spent in Saigon, not exactly a safe place, but one where the comforts were readily available. I sought out the company of the locals, patronizing the seedier bars, avoiding my fellow journalists like the plague. This was as much for necessity as taste; my questionable nationality made hanging out with the pack unwise.

They all hung in close and, by their very profession, were a curious bunch. "What about this chap Guy. I can't quite place it but something's queer...about his accent. I mean, where did he come from anyway?"

I wasn't about to raise any questions—out of sight out of mind. If this had been a station in the old Raj, my colleagues would have accused me of going "jungli," which was exactly what I did. I began to see a way to make my fortune, and like the Alphabets it was as a connection between two cultures.

At first I dealt exclusively with Ian, but he pressured me for the big time, for the rough No. 3 heroin that was available all over Saigon. He had a grand scheme to ship it to Hong Kong where they would kick it up a grade. From Hong Kong, this reconstituted No. 4 would then go to London—all in the film cans protected by the agency's logo. At this I finally balked. It was more than some recreational drugs, some weed or even opium sent for Ian's use. This was all about money, big money. There was just too much bad energy in that stuff, too concentrated, too much bad karma.... Besides, to be honest, if I was going that far, I wanted to do it myself, to make the big bucks, not be just a mule in someone else's op. Yes, it wasn't that I had any...scruples about moving white powder. I just didn't like the people who were in the scene. If I was going to do this, I would eventually lock horns with the local *paceri*, the gang chiefs, not to mention the *Chiu chau*, the big Chinese syndicate behind most of the O to horse chain. It was common knowledge that the big dealing went all the way to the top, and I don't mean just the gangsters. In Saigon, like elsewhere in the world, gangsters and government were hand in glove—if not one in the same.

If I am to continue to be honest, it probably was the fear of mixing with those dudes, rather than something silly like scruples. When you are in Hell, you are in Hell. What difference did it make what you did in a place where death, destruction, total wipe out were the main squeeze? Anything else, pussy, drugs, booze...it was just a place to get away to...an escape...for a short time.

In a way, it was self-indulgence that saved my ass, for there were many wars being fought in Nam. I made my home in Saigon's "Chinatown," Cholon. Not satisfied with mere exotica, I sought out the most infamous corner of that quarter, a warren of whores'

cribs and cages, and, of course, drug dens. It was known locally as "Serpent Alley," because of the numerous stalls selling snake cuisine—snake soup, grilled snake, fried snake, snake balls and rice. This fare was most appropriate for that neighborhood; snake was believed to enhance sexual performance and prolong pleasure. My pad was directly above a very popular "crib." What a ball-buster climbing those stairs, but at night, high up, I could catch the breezes—or at least that was what the landlord who rented the place promised. More real was the incessant Rock 'n Roll, punctuated by the dramatic moans and groans the girls employed to excite customers, making unaided sleep hard to come by.

I made friends with some of these ladies. Not for sex, as I preferred my own private squeeze, but when the girls were off-duty, they would come by to chat. I liked having them around. If I was between girls, they would cook and do little domestic chores in exchange for English lessons—the first glimmerings of my future profession. English was a great asset, for so many of the grunts just wanted someone to talk to, even more than they wanted sex.

Cholon was a natural for me, a fascinating margin, one of those world between worlds, I had a habit of falling into. With its own cosmopolitan Chinese reality, it was in many ways distinctly different from the rest of Vietnam. How could I have helped but be sucked in? The American presence was little felt there, except in the form of dropout GIs and occasional M.P. sweeps.

The War—since it was my war, it now was the War—receded into the background, like a natural disaster, an ongoing disaster that occurs but leaves you unscathed. More immediate were the mini-battles over local trade and turf. Oh, the War was always there, hovering, but in some "out there," not in with me. The real horror was just far enough beyond so that sometimes it could be forgotten. Maybe it was just the Alphabets all over. So much shit happening just beyond your door, yet as long as it isn't kicked in.... That was a big difference between the grunts and me. I had a hole to hide in. I was left with some control over my fate. They had none.

What that looming horror did provide was the perfect excuse for a total blowout. Indulgence numbed me to the horror, making it possible to go on. It also became addictive. Before long, I couldn't

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imagine a life where the future was known, where one lived for more than the now.

December 1969, the last few days of what now seems an almost mythic decade, and miraculously I was still alive. It seemed like forever since I had made that cherry landing at Tan Son Nhut. For the first time in my life, I felt established, a man of means, with an actual address, albeit in Cholon, and a couple of women waiting for me.

Even from this vast distance, in time and space, I can see that me. What an odd-bird, running straight for hell without the slightest clue where I was going. The time was rococo psychedelic, where the wonder had begun to be lost in elaboration. Just as now, I carried with me the sum total of my world.

Bundled against the Manhattan winter, I warmed my tropics-thinned blood with a flowing, white Turkish sheepskin. I was getting into Central Asia, having just shepherded my first load overland from Kashmir. I must have been crazy, all those borders, all those horrendous possibilities...if some custom wala had just been a little extra curious.... People said I looked like a Cossack. I didn't take affront. I reinforced that "fresh from the steppes" look with knee-high, Gokey snake-proof boots, hair half-way down my back, beard half-way down the front, Chitrالي *pakol*, pastel wool *shalwar/kameez*, the ubiquitous baggy pants and flowing shirt of Central Asia, not to mention my hand-made, white moosehide shoulder bag replete with gold buckle, holding samples of my wares. I was out so far, I didn't even notice the vibes when I swooped into the Plaza's Oyster Bar. For me it was the same as sitting down for a mutton kebab in the Khyber. Merchant prince fresh from the fabled orient, cool, or at least passable, in '69.

Then change reared its interesting head and knocked me completely off my course, a course that I see now could have led only to an early grave. It was a sea change and it required a miracle. Her name was Mei.

I first met Mei when I was picking up that white moosehide bag. The maker was an old flame from the Alphabet days. She was just becoming trendy in the high-fashion world. Mei, an inveterate shopper, had come to her loft to check out the goods. True to her

Chinese name, Mei was beautiful, drop dead beautiful, the kind of beauty that draws your eye like a magnet and won't let you go. Even when she was no longer there, her after-image burned in my brain. I started talking to her. She told me she was a model—no surprise—but being Asian jobs were few. I told her about a photographer friend who might find her some work. That was the beginning.

At the time I was blown away, so gone, that I couldn't even begin to understand the attraction—didn't care. All I knew was that here on this bloody earth I had finally found my guide to paradise. Looking back, however, I guess there was a more rational motivation. Mei was Asian, outwardly different from all those Anglo girls who could be my sister...or mother. She was a welcome reminder of the world beyond New York, beyond America. That was a world closer to the edge, closer to what I believed to be reality. It was a world, which in its distance became ever dearer. The thought of a mate from that other world really fit the image I was building. That is the weirdness of being outside normal life. In the real world, one constructed of ongoing social relationships, ordered rules, and set assumptions, it is society that defines, casting an increasingly inescapable mold. But in my bizarre, kaleidoscopic existence, I constructed, destroyed, reconstructed, who I wished to be...even if it was only me who could see it.

Although she reminded me of that other world, Mei was different from women in Cholon. Like many of them, she was Chinese, part of the post-Revolution boogie. But unlike them, mostly of southern, Guangzou peasant ancestry, she was a Mandarin with the all the refinement and tall, willowy figure of the aristocracy and the North. The events of '49 caught the family in Yunnan where her dad was fighting a rearguard action against the Communist. Seeing all was lost, they crossed the border and settled in Hanoi, then under the French. Of course, that was a short-lived refuge. In '54 the family again picked up, a KMT bigwig not too welcome under Uncle Ho, this time fleeing to Hong Kong. What a trip! Bailing out of the homeland at the age of three, only to have to bail out again five years later. Now it was another exodus, this time to the Big Apple. That sort of thing could put a spin on your perspective.

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And what a contrast to the women I knew in Nam, not to mention those R&R sweethearts in Thailand, Taiwan, or Hong Kong. They were, after all, working girls, transplanted from the village, shorter, darker, and coarser. Though many had adopted big city ways, the dirt of the rice paddy lay just below the surface. Mei was from another planet. Physically she was quite tall, with thick, straight black hair, long legs and slim hips—almost boyish in figure. In those days of Twiggy, it was her biggest asset. Mei's complexion was a clear, almost translucent, pale ivory, highlighted by several well-placed beauty marks. I have often wondered whether that early attraction to members of my own sex hadn't been echoed in the draw of her boyish figure. She formed sort of a halfway point between two desires—the best of both possible worlds.

I planned to return to Nam right after the New Year, but it was increasingly difficult to imagine life without Mei. Cholon was receding and could have disappeared from my life altogether, except that it remained so much of my life. I still made good money on my double duty for Ian, and even though branching out, was unwilling to cut my ties. For a time, however, I had enough money, and before me was Mei, the ultimate challenge. Despite the conditional quality of my life, I knew I must have her, even though, like Benjamin in the *Graduate*, I hadn't the slightest idea of what I would do once I got her.

In Mei, I imagined destined soul mate. Yes, I really believed in such a thing at the time. Not that I considered marriage. Such a formality wasn't part of my worldview: the demimonde of adventure-seeking globetrotters, shuttling between heaven and hell, always heading for the former, always in the latter. But I was gripped by an overwhelming need to possess Mei, to hold on to her and not let go.

Yet it was more than ego. I had spent considerable time beyond the constraints of the rational, and like many who find themselves in an unexplainable world, I fell deeply into the occult. I saw Mei as an incredible "lucky star," essential to going on. The idea began to obsess me, growing until I came to fear going back to Nam without the belief she would somehow be watching over me.

The "luck" thing started with a rather ridiculous mishap. We had been downtown, partying at a friend's SoHo loft on Franklin Street. It was late, maybe three in the morning when we finally left—blasted of course. I called a cab and we went up town. When we got to the Plaza, my pied à terre in New York, I reached down for my wallet. It was gone. In those days, I carried my entire stash with me, about ten grand tucked away in the tops of those snake-proofs. My whole life was in that wallet. Without it, I had no capital, no way to get back "home," no way to pay my tab at the Plaza. There was nothing for it but retrace my steps. On that cab ride back downtown, I was more terrified than I had ever been in Nam, even in the most unsecured LZ deep in the boonies. What hell to be in New York without a dime! Then the miracle occurred. As I stumbled out of the cab in a haze of alcohol and pot, there in the gutter, almost under my feet, was the wallet with its contents intact. That was the driver's lucky night. I gave him one of those pictures of Ben Franklin for the ride—those were '69 dollars. Mei brought to my life not only beauty but good fortune. I knew at that moment there would be no way I could let this talisman escape.

Mei wasn't about to give up easily. I was just one of the many characters who swirled through her life. Perhaps it helped my cause that she was in a rebellious phase. I certainly represented everything her tradition detested. But what kind of a jerk would leave ten grand lying in the gutter? Who, but a fool, would carry that kind of money on the streets of New York?

And like the fool she saw me, I almost did lose her. New York is expensive, even more so when your trying to win that most beautiful girl in the world. Time whirled by and so did my money. What I found in that gutter soon disappeared into the hands of waiters, store clerks, cabbies, bell hops. Once more, it was reality time, which meant back to Nam, back to tempt the fates for one more "last" time.

* * *

But those "last times" were running out. The war was winding down and the word was that the Americans would be leaving. Where would that leave me? I knew that this life couldn't last. Big

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changes were in the wind, not only for the South, for Saigon, but, more importantly, for me. Still, I prevaricated. Almost a year went by. I wrote Mei a few times, but there was no answer. Not easily put off, I decided to make another trip to New York. This time there would be no more mistakes. This time I wouldn't let her slip through my fingers—of course, after stopping on the way to score some of Mazar-i-Sharif's finest.

The year before, just before I had run into Mei...perhaps collided is a better word, I contacted Chad, one of the few friends I had inherited from Stephanie. He was the photographer I'd sent Mei to "go-see." He was also my connect, having done a good job unloading the Kashmiri the previous year. Chad made his own move in my absence, the go-see leading to much more. As I said, Mei was a beauty in anyone's book, and I really couldn't blame him. I wasn't so blasé at the time, however, and if I hadn't needed him to unload my goods, we might have gotten it on. Instead, for the moment, I swallowed the pain, silently resolving I would move on her at the first opportunity...by fair means or foul.

I must confess it was more than love lost that made me so determined. I was scared as hell. I had set Mei up as my lucky star. Now she was in the arms of another and

the luck would be his not mine. Wishfully, I sensed that all wasn't right between those two. One day I "ran" into Mei while she was out alone. After all, within a specific circle New York can be a small town, and I did know her haunts. I guess, I was subconsciously stalking her. Over coffee we chatted. I tried to appear casual, hoping she wouldn't guess my game. After a bit of fencing she loosened up, and I found, to my ever-lasting happiness, that her relationship with Chad was one more of convenience than eternal love.

"The deal was Guy, modeling too slow, too, too slow. Not much demand for exotica like me. And my family coming down on me, everyday a new doctor, dentist, or some other stiff suit...and Chinese of course...knocking at the door. So transparent! God, I thought I'd escaped all that ethnic stuff...my family's so straight...so Chinese. Then, just when I thought I couldn't stand it any more...just give up and marry one of those straights to shut up the family, Chad comes along. You know how it is all so innocent

at first. Yeah, he offered me a place to crash while he was away. Then he came back...and...well things...things just fell together. You know, I guess I'm not really unhappy...but...well Chad's been real sweet."

Those last words, and the slightest suggestion I caught in her eyes, were like a green light going off. If I had had any qualms of bird-dogging Chad before, now I had none.

I set up a meet with Chad to pitch my new load. There was a whole ritual of tasting, then barter. We were in a bar near Houston, the Buffalo Road House, drinking and rapping, you know, swapping tales of daring-do, an equally essential part of the ritual.

Purposely not rushing into the business, we talked around it. I asked him about the "away" Mei had mentioned.

"You know man, I've been trying to break into film. I mean, that's what's really happening, not this still shit. I gotta thank you man! It's you, dude, who put the buzz about Afghanistan in my head. You gave me enough palaver to bullshit my way into the job."

"What job was that?" I replied, really wanting to tell him that he had a lot more to thank me for, but I thought better of it.

"A big fucking Hollywood film...the big leagues...big stars...good bread. Real interesting too...about this Afghan dude who plays this game like polo only with the body of a goat—yeah, sort of a horseback rugby with a corpse. No rules, lot of blood and guts...*buzkashee*, they call it. I was only doing the stills, but I keep thinking, if they like my work, they may give me a shot."

I was about to reply, using this as the moment to spring into my own pitch. But he beat me to it. Switching to a more conspiratorial tone, "The thing is, man, the shit's the best. It's dirt cheap, a hundred a key for primo, hand pressed, first shake pollen...besides the place is bitching...like getting in a fucking time machine and going back two mother fucking thousand years. I kept looking for old J.C. to come riding along on a donkey or camel or something. Man, those dudes are out of this world—at least out of this time. Here, try some real shit!"

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I didn't have the heart to tell him that the real price was one tenth of what he had paid. Besides, this made it easier for me to charge even more.

The Buffalo was cool—I mean no Heat ever went there in those days, at least on duty—and as we were alone in a corner, I felt no qualms about lighting up. How different were those times. I took a long drag on his taste, but it was machine-pressed and stale. Diplomatically as possible, I eased him into my own, freshly harvested, hand-pressed product. You had to be careful; folks got real sensitive about the quality of their stash.

He took it well, maybe because he was running almost empty, and I had appeared just in time. After the smoke, we got to talking again, tripping out into this crazy idea. If we could make a film in Afghanistan, we might run an op like my scene in Nam. I had already told him what I was doing, about my uneasiness in continually walking the Cholon tightrope, and for someone else's profit at that.

Such openness seems strange today. But then, perhaps because we were so naive, perhaps just stupid, there wasn't the paranoia. For those inside the life, it was clear who was who; the lines were yet to be crossed. If you were among friends, you could be open about your business. That is how things got done and without violence. I was enthusiastic about the possibilities. This time there would be no boss, no more Ian. Just ship the dope back with the film. Chad would handle the distribution. We would split the take fifty-fifty—righteous dude! Of course, since Chad thought the price was a hundred, and I wasn't about to make him feel the fool.

Even more than profit, I saw in this project a chance to get to Mei. She dreamed of getting into film, and jumped when I offered her a "lead": the part of a Hazara princess—although doing what, at the time, I had yet to contemplate. It was sort of plausible. The Hazaras, descendants of the Mongol horde, had Asian features like Mei. Of course, Chad was most unhappy, but hip enough not to stand in her way. What guts Mei had just to pick up and go half way round the world. But that was Mei. She was no stranger to cutting roots, and it was this gypsy quality which drew me even closer.

I had gone to Kabul directly from New York. After several establishing runs, everything was ready for the "princess." Finally, Mei was in my clutches and Chad very far away. The predator turned suitor, my lust overcome by love. Her beauty caught my eye and, as I have confessed, my ego, but it was her courage that grabbed my heart. Here was a woman who was my equal, a partner to travel the world. It all came together in the deep snows of that Kabul winter. Separated from our familiar worlds, we struggled to survive in a totally strange one. We finally saw each other—she, not just the exotic, desirable trophy woman, I not the bizarre, drugged out, wannabe, but two lonely people each desperately in need of the other. It had to be fated. How else could two people, outwardly so different, born on opposite sides of the earth, find their way to each other? When the wall came down, Mei unleashed a flood of passion. For too long she had held back, suppressing those most natural desires. In a large, many windowed house that reminded me of Zhivago's Verikynoe, we retreated to a single room, Arctic cold driven back by the cherry red glow of *bukhari*, a wood stove made from a tin drum, whose efficient heat is often the difference between life and death. Mei, like that *bukhari*, radiated life, giving things, long locked inside.

Mei was so opposite from the creature I first supposed her to be. She was an emotional river, running deep and fast. She overwhelmed me, and I was lost totally within her. She became my sixth and most important sense. Through her I learned my place in the world. I was the man Mei loved. That was my crowning achievement, more than enough for one life—at least it seemed so for a very long time.

Although I had lured Mei to Afghanistan with promises of cinematic fame, there was of course, as in the case of all my films, that other, more pragmatic purpose. Of this Mei was blithely unaware, until she arrived and found our enterprise embroiled with the Man. The DEA almost nailed me in Kabul.

Chastened, I now looked for an alternative to the chaos that was my life. We fled to India, and there outside of Delhi, in the shadow of the Qutab Minar, we married. It was a Buddhist ceremony, attended by a legion of fellow freaks. Bedecked in jasmine garlands and clad in white *khadi*, the homespun pajama-like togs, the

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legacy of Gandhi's boycott of foreign-made goods. We mouthed, to the accompaniment of sitar, sarod, and tabla, cryptic wedding vows. It didn't matter; we were in love.

After a several months of struggle—the Kabul debacle left us broke—we returned to the States and parlayed a smuggled kilo of hash into a new stake. With it we set up a flat in San Francisco's Marina. Despite growing financial success, our needs were modest and, for a while, life was good. We lived on the edge of society, enjoyed its fruits, yet felt free of its constraints. To the straight world around us, we seemed the typical film freaks. In another milieu, we might have stuck out like the proverbial sore thumb, but in wigged-out '70s San Francisco, we were almost normal. The mysteries of film production provided an excellent cover for our far-flung travels and bohemian life. Whenever we felt too entangled in accumulating relationships, we would take off. The only constant in our lives was us. No desert island could have offered more seclusion. I can still recall the all-consuming passion...such passion. Even though we fought like hellcats throughout those years, we also loved with an equal fervor. We were inseparable, traveling around the world several times over. During those times when the exposure was too great for me to risk her, I lived only for the moment when I could be with her again. What more could love be than that?

And those times grew with increasing frequency. Bills to be paid! I was, after all, a combat photographer and, even more dangerously, a smuggler. Each time I set out on a journey, it was to the unknown. There was no promise of return, and it wasn't only that I might be KIA, busted, or murdered for my bankroll. The wars I filmed were in far away places, and so were the drugs I smuggled. The people in those parts had different worldviews. How easy it would have been for me to lose myself in some distant valley, to assume new identity, new life. I often fantasized on this. But my love for Mei was still too strong. She was the lodestone drew me back and, though unable to escape this pull, the differences in those distant lands continued to affect me. They reinforced my belief in the relativity of life and excused my failure to live by the rules of any one society. How could you make war for peace? How could a plant be illegal?

Back in San Francisco, our flat began to fill with mementos and film, miles and miles of film. If circumstances had been otherwise, I would have gotten off my ass and tried to market all that film and my career along with it. But I didn't bother. I was making more than enough from smuggling. Money allowed me the illusion of being an artist. I didn't need to test my skill in the marketplace, submit to its judgment and bullshit. Of course, this was just a cover for my own insecurity. Maybe, now looking back, that was my biggest curse. If I had faced that judgment, I would have woken up and become an insurance salesman, settled in the burbs and had kids. Sure!

Eventually, I got damn tired, even of the "righteous" charas business. As I grew older and began to lose my nerve—maybe just about losing nerve—I realized my powers weren't as great as once believed. To my friends, I was living an enviable life, but they didn't understand the cost. I had two distinct worlds: one, the "good life" of film projects, photography, the arts with which I came more and more to identify; the other was a malign, "anti-life," with all sorts of creepy characters that scurried roach-like in and out, hoping to feed on my excess energy. I lost my interest in the latter and began to feel I was somehow better than the rest of the insects, even though this association was what paid my bills. I wanted out, but it wasn't easy to leave such a world gracefully.

Paranoia was a constant. As there was always the strong possibility, that everything might quite suddenly vanish, there was no point in putting down roots. Instead, I had the feeling I was already too established, too fixed for that inevitable time when I must fold my tent and flee into the night. And I mean this quite literally; our only truly valuable possessions were things like rugs, jewelry, clothing, cameras, things that could be packed, things that could be folded. I loved the travel and other perks, but the paranoia wearied me. It wearied Mei too, but she just put it out of mind. Every time I heard a siren, a chill went through me—even though knowing that, when they came, there would be no siren.

Then I hit on the idea of trekking "expeditions." You know, so California, the natural beauties of the Himalaya, the colorful native cultures, with enlightenment optional. I saw this as a way to gradually transform my business from one of importing drugs

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to rich people, to exporting rich people to the drugs. What a brilliant idea! I could still travel, still return to the Himalaya and, overtime, wean myself from smuggling. To live in the demimonde, you needed an extremely well honed nerve. For the first time, I was acquiring things: a beautiful wife, a life, and then a fledgling business, things that were dangerous for a career where every venture was an all or nothing proposition. I was way out on a ledge, teetering over a bottomless abyss, but by then it was too late to climb back to the safety. I had to keep on in the hopes that the ledge would eventually widen, and lead to a habitable plateau.

Suddenly, I slipped. I went careening into the abyss. A three-month business trip turned into a thirty-two-month odyssey in Federal slammers, the "belly of the beast". It all came crashing down when several kilos of charas were discovered in my luggage on return from an expedition. It had been one last score—of course it is always the "last"—to carry us over until the business started to turn a profit. I really wanted to quit, but now it was too late. I was no longer in control of my own destiny.

Or was I? As I replayed it during the long months of incarceration, I realized there was a strong possibility that I had invited, if not engineered, my own fall. Didn't I notice a strong smell of charas at the shipping office in Delhi? Hadn't the freight people seemed a little weird? And then there was that strange warning call on my return to the States. "Meester Guy, those *carpets* you send back to Amrika, some problem, some *beeg* problem. You know *those* carpets!" The caller hadn't identified himself and, as I hadn't sent any carpets, I played dumb. But all of this was enough to make a more prudent smuggler cut and run. Where could I run? Anyway, I had developed a hard rule about that sort of thing. I knew paranoia. It was always greatest when I was back at home, sitting around, waiting for the shipment to arrive. My mind could play incredible tricks. No, once committed, I had to go through with it. There were always warnings, always omens—always some white dog lying dead on the road, like the time when I first crossed the border between Herat and Mashed with a death sentence-size load in the spare tires of my Land Rover. If I reacted to every omen, I might not ever get out of bed, let alone smuggle a load of *charas*.

About an hour after the freight forwarder dropped off the shipment, a swarm of DEA descended. This was one time when I should have listened to that inner voice of caution—I knew the driver was sweating too much in the cool autumn air. I had gone out for a jog to clear out all those bad vibes; they nailed me two blocks away, thinking I was making a run for it. Sure, in my running shorts, not a penny! But later, they offered this as evidence of my guilt. Mei was rousted and the flat occupied until they could get a warrant. Finally, after a frantic search, they found the stash. For some reason, they didn't want Mei. Maybe they believed me, for when they surrounded me, guns drawn, the first thing I had blurted out, reflexively, without thinking, "My wife has nothing to do with this." As you might imagine, my lawyer had trouble with that one. Or maybe there was a sense of chivalry in those boys. But what I like to think, believe, is that there was some God somewhere watching over us, because without her, I don't think I would have made it.

Sitting alone in the confines of a solitary cell, with murderous thugs on either side—oh, they had fun with a cherry like me—reality caught up. I found myself stripped of all previous identity. All those romantic images, adventurer, artist, entrepreneur, exploded. I had only to look in the eyes of guards and fellow prisoners. What truth they reflected. It hit me hard; just another loser, another creep, and for sure another con—this time I was really in the belly of the beast. Indeed, I was one of those roach-like characters I had grown to disdain. No longer need I work to be outside society; I was out permanently. The parole officer who filed my pre-sentence report, the document which told the judge just how bad a perp I really was, hit the mark: "The defendant seems to have lost touch with the moral reality of this society...He has somehow slipped into a crack between cultures."

After the wake-up call of this collision with the criminal justice system, I was predictably incarcerated. The months dragged by. The worst was in the County jails, sitting all day, trying to stay sane, fighting the chaos of dozens of TV sets all turned to top volume, all on different channels. They were, I think, the most noxious part of the torture. There we were in our little cells, peaceful and quiet...then...RUMBLE, RUMBLE...down the hall paraded the TVs, pushed by trustees on wheeled dollies. The place

turned into a mad house, as waves of distorted sound bounced off puke-green tile walls.

The real pen was like going to heaven. I could walk outside, see the sky, flowers, and look out at a bay—even if it was only San Pedro's. It was weird though...everything looked as if it was on a movie screen. I kept thinking...all I need to do is step through that screen and I will be in another world—but it was only a thought.

Then I wrangled my way to the "country club"...another world...heavy-duty ladies and lightweight men. The girls had mucho time, lifers, twenty years—murder, bank robbery, kidnapping, air piracy. The men—mostly "white collar" and drugs—were all counting months. The trick was to keep your thing out of the cookie jar...so to speak. That was the big NO. Some of the women made a sport of it. It was no big thing for them; they could find other ways. They liked to see how many dudes they could get shipped. When you got caught, you would be on your way pronto and to less laid back places. Even worse, they might put you on a bus, orbiting the country, touring county jails—no address, no visits, no perks, just a lot of fucking baloney and cheese sandwiches.

When I got out—and how I had lived for that moment—prospects were bleak, and friends melted away. Those who remained treated me differently than before. I was different, an ex-con with all that baggage. Mei was the one saving grace. By some unexpected miracle, she remained. At one point, in a moment of nobility, to which I regularly, if briefly, succumb, I "released" her. I can remember my very words, of course hoping upon hope that she wouldn't take me up on my "noble" offer. "Look Mei, things are fucked and they're going to get even more fucked. I'll cut you loose if you want, so you can start over with...someone else, no hard feelings." What a liar I was.

I couldn't imagine Mei on her own, unprotected by what I saw as my strong arms. This was still in a time when I thought of it as "a man's world." In assuming she would need a replacement, I underestimated her own considerable powers. She declined to leave me, so vulnerable, so alone. In the three years of separation, while I was in the suspended state of incarceration, marking time in the prison shuffle, Mei was in the World. To survive, she took on

a career, experiencing all the changes a new role in life brings. When I returned, it was to a different Mei, one who was now self-sufficient, having learned to live quite nicely without me. I had lost my power over her, and she had a new power over me. Our roles flip-flopped. I wasn't amused. Mei refused to dump me for another man. Instead, in a way, she dumped me for herself, and although, for my material well being, this was a comfort, for my ego it was worse than if she had gone off with another man.

I am not blaming Mei. The bust was possibly even more traumatic for her. All I had to do was sit there and take my three hots and a cot. She had to survive, no longer the jet-setting filmmaker, but the wife of a con. However, these weren't the real blows. Despite Mei's charms, her sheltered upbringing made her closed to the outside world. I had been her only real friend, as well as sole financial support, helping her escape from the world, offering a self-contained fantasy into which she fully bought. Then with crushing suddenness, she was thrust back into the hustle.

Prison also bought me back to that hustle. Only in my case it was superficial as the lesson came too late. When I got out, I found I was accustomed to "campus" life, perhaps even institutionalized. I had little taste for the type of employment available to ex-cons. Under my circumstance and supervision, going back to my old profession was most unwise. Therefore, I decided, like most of my colleagues long before, to finally "get it together." Where I came from, this could only mean going back to school for the BA I had earlier scorned. In my mind, it was all part of an unwritten social contract: just get your college degree, then the doors of opportunity will swing open. Oh, I imagined that in my case the doors would creak a bit, but nevertheless they would open.

Even in the seeming practicality of this act, there was that touch of the bizarre. I couldn't quite let go of those dreams of distant places, even though I had forfeited my US passport and needed the parole officer's permission every time I moved. I tried to reconstruct my image as a filmmaker and photographer, particularly as one who loved remote places. To do this, I decided to learn at least the basics of anthropology, so that I might accompany anthropologists as an expedition photographer. That was the plan anyway. Unfortunately, stripped of the ability to live

within the bounds of my current reality, I continued to build my future out fantasy. Just a little market research would have told me there wasn't much demand for such a specialty.

In consequence, with little other direction, I slid ever deeper into the bowels of academe. One scholarly hurdle led to the next, keeping my mind busy, so I could never grasp what might lie at the end. After the BA, I was accepted into a graduate program. Ivy no less! I thought I was on my way.

By that time, things between Mei and myself were rocky. She wanted a partner with equal earning power, not the forty-something, professional student. She wasn't about to put her own career on hold to go east with me.

Alone, in a strange world, I soon succumbed to loneliness, temptation, lust, weakness, Raga, forming, what at the time I thought was to be, a temporary alliance of convenience. This was with a young, fellow student, another Chinese, but from Taiwan. She was twenty years my junior, about the same age as Mei when we had first met. Was I trying to recapture the past? A reboot? Maybe! Certainly, I hoped to get back some of that passion. But could I start my life over? For two years, I served as this newcomer's mentor, not only in the culture of America, but in its ways of love—or more precisely my ways. She was totally untouched, open, innocent, and I trained her in my own brand of pleasures—desires that, over the years, moved beyond what might be considered the "norm." In my mind, I remade her as I wanted, even giving her a name to replace her own that stumbled on the American tongue. I called her Tara.

It was a name I had come across in prison in a book on Tantric Buddhism, a rather dry, scholarly tome, but its description of the Tibetan deity Tara, struck me. I don't remember all the details; she came in many forms, White Tara or Green Tara, each with distinct qualities. At the same time all these qualities, or aspects were part of a larger Tara. The Tibetan's Tara, like the Virgin Mary in the West, served to absorb all the pre-Buddhist, goddess cults—yet, in keeping with its eastern origins, allowing for more than one permutation.

My Tara physically reminded me of the book's wood-block prints of the goddess. The classic moon-faced beauty with wine-cup dimples and large almond eyes. Even her figure was like the goddess, narrow waist, yet full in the hips with ample buttocks that promised such pleasures. If Mei had been somewhat androgynous, Tara was excessively feminine. And how I hungered for that femininity.

The bust, and then prison, had stripped me of any semblance of power, real or imagined. The prospects of graduate study in an East Coast urban jungle was only slightly better. Then, from out of the blue, this young woman appeared, unspoiled by life's cares, eager to offer up her soul. It was as if she had said, "Here take me; make me what you want." And I had, testing her in various ways, seeing just how far she would go to fulfill my pleasure. Oh, I tell you what temptation, such a succulent morsel as you might imagine, putty in the clutches of the experienced seducer. Plucking her cherry was like taking candy from a baby. What man wouldn't have done as I? What profligate? She was so open, so in my power. Who was I to spurn such a gift? For in that moment I had forgotten karma. I had yet to meet Mara—who watched and waited.

* * *

From a great distance, I hear Devara's voice. God, I have been away...so far, far away, lost to all sense of the present. How real the past seems when the future is....

"Ah, ji Bhaai, we of Lord Shiva following, also know of Mara. Sometimes, we call him *Namuci*. The name meaning 'he who not let go.' He much to us offers, but always at big price. Like in *dhaba* or *chaikanna*. They offer big meal or fancy sweet. Later bill come. Other name Kama, God of body lust. In this desire, Kama work his magic, keeping men in wheel of life and death, life and death. Devara think it strange Bhaai escape Mara through this Tara. Better you naming her Maya. She most certainly illusion, like the *makri*...the spider, around you a web weaving. In this web, life death all same. All driven by desire. Devara of Tara not hearing, but know not saving Bhaai from Mara. All come to Mara."

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Yeah, Devara, now tell me something I don't know. I say this silently, reserving my feeble sarcasm for myself. But, almost as if in response, he gives me the oddest look.

* * *

Two years went by. I graduated, and returned to San Francisco and Mei. But Tara wasn't easily dismissed. She stuck in my mind, heart, and most certainly my loins. I knew I was playing with fire, yet I went ahead and persuaded Tara to follow me to the Coast, not of course to San Francisco, even I wasn't the crazy but South where I continued my study. It was one thing to have a lover three thousand miles away from Mei, but what I was about to do was to destroy my foundation. Shortly after Tara arrived, Mei decided to join me, unaware that I had secreted a lover nearby.

Time seemed to stand still. I delved deeper into my tiny corner of study, warding off boredom with this clandestine affair. It was almost like smuggling, those secretive rendezvous, covering my tracks, trying not to make any slips. It kept me on my toes. In bland academic world, she was my one flirtation with danger...a continuation of my walk along the razor's edge, a gauge of my own powers. Did I have the juice to pull it off? Two worlds! I needed more than one to shuttle back and forth so that I didn't have to become part of any one. Hadn't my mentor, that crusty old cynic, Professor Whistler, warned against dyadic relationships?

"Triangulation, Guy, that's the secret. Just like a ship, you need two or more points of reference to know where you are." What a clever piece of scholarly rationalization that had been for this inveterate roué.

Again, I found the feeling of power I had lost over Mei. That power for me was an aphrodisiac. Tara surrendered completely to my sexual whims and fantasies—nurtured over years of forced abstinence in prison—or at least for a while she could make me think she did. In this sensual abandon, not only her body, but also her mind, were tools for my gratification. I was able, at least for the moment, to find annihilation, to lose sight of myself. What she felt I am not sure. Perhaps, it was the dues she paid not to be alone,

but along with the company she got my read on life. Outwardly she showed almost filial devotion—almost too filial for comfort although appropriate to our ages. However, she too had her own, developing agenda, one in which I was to play no part.

Near the end, she gazed into my eyes: "Guy I don't see our future." For some reason, I became very angry. I don't know why, because I couldn't see a future either. I just wasn't ready to let go, not only of Tara, but also of that passion I equated with being alive, with being a man.

Just as the rewards of smuggling had crashed down, ending the career as filmmaker, those of betrayal ended my role as scholar. This was truly the work of those "daughters of desire," greed, passion, and ignorance, but of course I didn't see it at the time.

It was too cold. We acted out of desperation, one reacting to the outrage of the other. The point was reached where we could no longer continue the assaults. We both would have done anything to stop the carnage. We just escalated our attacks until any semblance of we exploded into oblivion, nothingness.

I had done one interview in Nam...must have been in the early days when I was still doing my own work...with a Grunt who had lost a leg. He told me that he could still feel it, sometimes itching, sometimes burning, sometimes worse. It wasn't doing him any goddamned good. But it sure gave him a lot of grief. His "ghost" he called it, torturing him because he had been so stupid to go there and lose it.

Tara was now my ghost. She was gone, I mean forever, but I could still...still feel her. Of course, she was still there, just in a different form. Love like all energy doesn't disappear, just transforms into another emotion, another form of the same energy.

In my forties, ex-felon, broke, failed in all my relationships, denied academia's security—I was in short, too fucked. I saw people only as nodes of potential pain, traps to fall into. In a very short time, I closed my contacts with the outside world. It was all too classic, avoidance and denial: avoidance of any reality except what I could control; denial of what I had failed to control. Mei, despite the difficulties, remained, but she too was changed. Although she refused to desert me, her anger now transformed

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into pity, she was betrayed. Mei had every right to react as she did, hating Tara for what Tara had done to our life, to the "us" that we had been and were now no more. Even more, she despised me for what I had become.

I had to get out. Being so long in the University was in many ways like being in prison. What better place to warehouse deviate minds? Scholars, though allowed expression, could always be marginalized by the irrelevant minutiae of their study. In the University, I had a life, tasks, duties, problems, and relationships that were real on the inside, yet untranslatable to the world beyond. If I wanted to make the years of experience count, I was locked into academe. But without the union card of a Ph.D., not to mention other baggage I did carry, options were extremely limited. I promised myself to take the first job, any job. After a seeming endless number of resumes, I finally "scored," teaching English at a college in Japan. Although I was to head west, I would wind up in the East, and this time about as Far East as one can go.

Chapter V

*If the one who is looked at looks back,
then the person who was looking
becomes the one who is looked at.*

—Kobo Abe—

TRANSIT

Polyglot pre-landing commands interrupted my airborne reverie. So much to remember! The plane touched down at Osaka Airport, gateway to Kansai and my destination, Kobe. Once more that thought when facing new reality, where in the hell am I? In a few moments I would be released, to what and to whom unknown. The new life before me gave hope that I had left all the pain behind. But I was too old not to recognize wishful thinking. In taking this job, I sought escape all those reminders me of what I had become. How could I move on to someone else, something else, if I was buried under all that baggage? I thought by getting on that plane I could leave it all behind. It had worked in the past. When things got too heavy, just get on board and head for new adventure. But that was awhile back, when my mind was still fresh and uncluttered, when I hadn't made the same mistake so many times that I had become resigned to its inevitability. By the time I cleared customs, it was the middle of the night. On the ride to Kobe enormous displays of brilliant neon loomed, touting the advantages of some product or service. Only in the soft light haze of early morning, did I begin to see that beneath the glitz this was a rather dowdy land.

Gripped by jet lag, I wandered down the maze-like mall looking for a place to eat. It was early morning, too early I guess, for to my horror I found the only thing open, an American fast food outlet, a place I studiously avoided Stateside. Trying not to display too much cross-cultural ineptness, I blithely pointed at a photo of a nondescript sandwich. The clerk gave me a knowing smile. A few minutes later, munching on my fish burger, I thought with some irony how appropriate was this introductory meal. Suddenly aware that I was slipping into depressive funk, I coned myself that this ugliness would keep me fixed on my goal, the journey back to what

I believed, in my hippie-trippy West-Coast way, was my "spiritual center." Even as I took my first steps into this new world, I was looking beyond, to a land further west, to the Himalaya so deeply etched in memory. Munching the cardboard-like sandwich made my resolve even greater.

* * *

Then another image drifted into mind. It was an image most unappetizing, an image that I had tried to dispel for quite some time. That it appeared just at this moment was, perhaps, the fault of that malodorous fishburger. It was a memory much less noble, yet equally ingrained. Within the folds of those same hallowed mountains lay Kashmir, and there was Nazir, that unctuous son of a bitch houseboat-wala. In my mind, it was to Nazir that blame for my bust fell, not to mention all the misfortune that followed. Over the years, I concocted wild schemes to revenge the pain Mei and I had suffered. Not that it had been only Nazir's fault. But the real rat, the one who did the actual fingering, that faggot Morgan, was beyond reach, either dead of AIDS or living dead in some Federal Witness Protection limbo. Nazir was another tale; through a few simple queries, I knew he was in place though suffering from the same malaise now endemic in the Vale.

Over the years much of my hatred mellowed; at least I no longer contemplated slow, mutilating tortures. God! Inside, I had thought up some good ones. But I still wanted to face that bastard. I wanted to prove, not to him, but to me, that I could overcome.

Memories of this kind should have cooled my ardor for further crime, for if not Nazir, there was always some Nazir-like character waiting to pick me off. But even with Nazir's bloated face so prominent, I had made sure to bring along the tools of my former trade. These were the smuggling boxes, custom-built plastic containers that fit snugly into the power supplies of my Graflex strobe—one in and one spare. In my more active days they had been only my "backups," the primary ones, the big Colortrans, fell to the Feds at the time of my bust. The strobe itself was old and bulky. If I packed the boxes carefully, I could get one and a half kilos of well-pressed charas in each box. It looked professional. I

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even rigged up a way so that the little red light signaling insufficient charge would glow if some overzealous customs lackey tried to test it.

"Oh! That must be why the light won't flash. Well, if we wait over night they'll charge up just fine." Just keep your cool; they wouldn't bother. "Have a nice day! Welcome back to the US of A!" What a clever lad I was.

* * *

Almost as soon as I arrived I began to anticipate departure. I had no illusions of this as a new life. If I had been out of step in America's relatively individualistic society, imagine how well I fit into Japan. The only saving grace was that, as a *gaijin*, a foreigner, I was out of the loop, and so wasn't expected to fit.

From my *gaijin* perspective, I was outside; race and culture put me there. I could never penetrate the barrier of their seeming collectiveness, to touch them as individuals. They had their own lives, their own problems. It is hard enough making it under one set of rules, let alone mucking it up with some other's set. Oh, they were quick to accept the paraphernalia, particularly those of American origin. You should have seen some of my kids, the "students," *Metallica* all the way. However, these were quickly co-opted into a Japanese context. Only in as much as I could become Japanese, think Japanese, see the world as Japanese, could I hope to penetrate their culture. The trouble was that most *gaijin* who tried ended up as stereotyped characters...like cartoons. I knew several this kind. They all were fucking cartoon sarariimen, Zen monks, or ninjas.

Perhaps if I had been younger, I could've taken the trip. At this stage in life, I had neither the time nor energy. What energy I possessed I wanted for the Himalaya, which after so long an absence was the most abstracted form of escape I could imagine. It was so distant and thus malleable to my fantasy. Japan was there and then, reality, something I couldn't assign to daydreams, to a place where I had absolute control. Rather, I had to deal with it as

it was. Also, I didn't like my role. In such a xenophobic land, there is nothing lower than a gaijin English teacher.

Buoyed by my growing dream, I formed an existence—life would have been too ambitious a term—considerably better than what I had originally envisioned. That this dream was still distant allowed me to escape into fantasy. I dialed out on all that was external in a very Nihonjin strategy for coping with the pressures of society. I always had a way of coming out in relatively good style and this was to be no different. Kobe for urban Japan was quite attractive. The city rose directly from the sea to lush green mountains of over three thousand feet.

Despite the endemic housing shortage, I found a small, but comfortable, flat in the desirable suburb of Rokko. It was quite a way up the mountainside, a stone's throw from the cable car, at the edge of the park. From the balcony of my bedroom, I could sit and watch the city below. When it rained, the stream running underneath the balcony would roar, recalling the sound of the Himalaya's glacier-fed torrents. This luxury came at a price. Although my rent was higher than I could afford, I was sure I could find someone to share the cost. Besides, I was lonely, and a flat mate, a female flat mate, might provide more than just financial relief.

Although I lived in relative comfort, the job was a bore. It was little more than glorified day care for maladjusted youth. Who wouldn't be maladjusted in that pressure cooker world? My co-workers were uninspiring, as you might imagine. I saw in them the same element of "loser" that, with horror, I had begun to suspect in myself. For a while, after the long period of climbing back from depths of incarceration, I looked with expectation to my future, preparing to join the community of my fellow beings. I willingly resigned myself to be someone they, rather than I, defined. Then somehow it all began to blur. Hopelessness now edged out hope. My new "colleagues" became the very thing I was trying to escape. The mirror, so painfully reconstructed, again began to crack.

It took a real jolt of fate to give up all that was native and throw myself on the mercy of an enemy. In my youth, there had been some rationale—get out and see the world, see how others live. But in these older "ex-pats," I saw only a menage of failure, escape,

and malcontent. What might be attractive in youth, the proverbial "angry young man," wore thin as the years went by. I struggled to avoid my colleagues, to make connections with the Japanese. I did share one common, inescapable trait with my peers; we were equally strange in a strange land. There was, however, one big difference; they had come to terms with it.

Each day I would scurry home as soon as my classes were finished. Climbing the hill to my sanctuary, I passed row upon row of *biru* dispensers, Kirin, Sapporo, Asahi—each brand had its own machine. Before the climb, I would say to myself, "Today, I won't drink. Today, I'll try to do something, anything, to get myself together, to get out of this space. Today, I'll...start to write." It would be hot and humid, and as I drew closer to the flat, I would think how nice it would be to have a cool one—just one to quench my thirst. Then, I would think about the long empty hours that stretched before me. Maybe one wouldn't be enough. Two would put me out, or better yet three. Invariably my pace would slow to a crawl. When I reached the last machine, the one that always got me, SAPPORO, I would be fingering the change in my pocket, trying to figure out just how many of those shiny silver containers I could afford—two half-liters, three three-quarter liters?

Occasionally, because behind the machine was a small but amply stocked liquor store, I would be tempted to go for a stronger jolt. The temptation had to be great because to go into the store meant the mortifying experience of attempting to converse with the owner. As I climbed, I would rehearse the few stock phrases that would get what I desired. But always it wound up the same way: silently taking a bottle from the shelves, wordlessly passing a large bill to the owner, trusting the correct change would be forthcoming, which, of course, it always was. I would mutter a hasty, almost incomprehensible "*arigatogosaimas*." Then I would continue on my way, trying to hide the bottle so the neighbors wouldn't think me another typical gaijin alcoholic. It was no wonder most gaijin seemed to be. This fear of my neighbor's judgment was strange. In my own world, I never gave a rat's ass about what people thought. But here in pressure-cooker land, my image in an unknown neighbor's mind suddenly became important. Was the collective force that drove this culture getting to me too? What a relief finally to close the door on that world and

retreat into a space I controlled. Then ever so slowly, I would pass through another doorway, into memory, content to linger for a while, pondering a life lost, what might have been, where I had gone astray, all that bittersweet idiocy. Finally, I would be released as I passed into the world of dreams, my mind no longer held prisoner by experience. I could travel to new worlds limited only by imagination.

As dull as this life was, it had one definite advantage. I was trying to save yen, money that would take me to the Himalaya. A few beers were the cheapest way to go...to get into limbo. Otherwise, any way you moved cost a lot of yen. I would get sick every time I went to the grocery store, five-hundred yen Fuji apples, and that sort of thing. It made me frantic.

Sometimes in a biru funk, I would watch the school children pounding up and down the steep street under my kitchen window. The young ones spilled down, the spirit not yet beaten out of them—plenty of time for that later. Their shiny black or red book packs, the color denoting the gender of the bearer, sparkled even in the smog-shrouded light. When it rained, as it did so often, all differentiation dissolved under bright yellow slickers. Older ones went the other way, making the grueling climb, great waves of blue and white, thin to the front, fat huffing behind, all with the worry of looming exams in their eyes. I knew my time had come and gone.

Tara's ghost remained with me. How curious she could affect me so deeply, that final momentary anger born of frustration, desperation. But those last moments and the twisted emotions they brought out found resonance in my own self-doubt. They were arrows loosed when I had been most exposed. Of all the beauty we had shared and all the ecstasy...given and received, it was...is...those final hideous hours that linger in my mind, blotting out all the rest. When I picture Tara now, it is at that moment, her face contorted with rage, words of hate hanging on scorn-twisted lips. That was the price I paid for loving her.

There on my perch, I pictured my fate if I remained. So little stood between me and the lonely, aged ex-pat schoolteacher whom I could become—perhaps, had already become. Better go out in a blaze of glory, or at least in a blaze, than to slowly wither away. In

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my mind, the Himalaya grew closer, more real, while the Japan that surrounded me became ever more remote.

On my way to work each morning, I was drawn to the tree-shrouded grounds of a local Shinto temple. This wasn't the most direct route, but the tranquillity of the temple's garden chilled me out after the trauma of the Hanku Railway's press. The detour also afforded a glimpse of young female attendants, who ceremoniously swept the temple grounds dressed in the traditional robes of office. I ached for a connection with a woman; I missed what I so long had enjoyed. Out of balance—a Yang without Yin! I sought Yin from outside because my conditioning constrained me from reaching within. Passing under a high stone arch, intricately carved with guardian dragons and lion dogs, I ritually petitioned unknown Japanese God. My plaint, although often rephrased, was, "Give me love or death." The operative word, however, was "give."

As melodramatic as I knew I sounded, I really believed I didn't want to live without love, for it was in love that I saw my reason for being. It wasn't so much I wanted to be loved; that required responsibility, but that I needed to love someone else again. How wonderful it was to throw my heart and soul away on another. Yet how easy it was not to focus on the need to love when I had it, like air breathed and water drunk. When it was all around, I had taken it for granted, as my birthright. Now that it was gone, I was thirsting, choking, filled with unquenched need. I needed a woman to feel complete, not necessarily there with me all the time, but another soul of whom I could dream, in whom I could escape the overwhelming loneliness, the infinite emptiness, if only for a brief while.

Then one day it seemed my whining was answered. I had advertised for someone to share the flat. In my mind, along with a host of other lonely gaijin, I hoped that a young, attractive Japanese woman would respond. Perhaps it was that celluloid fantasy, *Sayonara*, which triggered my fascination with Asian women. Today, I would most likely see it as a syrupy melodrama, but to a young boy in the clutches of puberty, it really tugged the old heartstrings. It was all so illicit, all that interracial business, even the viewing. Mother, good daughter of the South that she

was, would have never permitted such a thing. Not that the film is explicitly sexual, but imagine, a good old Anglo boy falling for an "Oriental." No way! I sneaked in a show on my way back to boarding school, a slight detour to Times Square between Penn and Grand Central Stations.

How I had thought about that exquisite beauty, promising all sorts of unspoken delights, even if the exact nature of those delights was an unknown. How I reveled in Brando's sticking it to that the straight and narrow Anglo world, even then beginning to suffocate me. Now, I had a chance to play that same seminal role. I was in Kobe, after all. I was American, and why wouldn't women, Japanese women, come flocking to my call.

In my mind, I already saw an "us" settled into our little nest high on Rokko. She would teach me the ways of Japan, as I would teach her mine. How hard it was to escape Svengali's shadow, how clinging the dream that had been Mei, in turn reborn as Tara. Despite the kick in the ass both had given me, I was left with hunger, still looking to find what I had found, then lost, in "her."

But I wasn't Marlon, and this wasn't post-war Japan. Initial responses were most unsatisfactory, mostly middle-aged, "American Woman" schoolteachers. In my scorn, I failed to see they were only female counterparts of myself, "American Man," also desperately trying to hold on. Then, just as I was about to give up hope and settle for one of the "harpies," a call came that I imagined might have come from those Gods.

It is customary in Japan, at least in gaijin circles, to meet guests at the train or underground station. It is an almost hopeless enterprise to give directions. I agreed to meet the caller outside Rokko station. I gave her my description, "Gaijin, bearded, wearing dark glasses and a neon green melon hat." I was still clinging to my SoCal surfer image. There wasn't much worry about her missing me.

When it first registered that this tall, frankly gorgeous young woman, who looked every inch as if she had stepped off the cover of *Elle*, was actually approaching me, I was almost speechless. It was just too good. "Guy?" she asked, reaching out to take my hand,

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"I'm Elizabeth." Yes, I thought, the Gods had answered me, not only answered, but blessed as well.

On the fifteen-minute uphill walk I tried, without seeming too rude, to take in the fullness of her beauty. More than just appreciating her for what she was, I was looking for flaws—she was just too good. Maybe, I thought, she is not a she? But although she could match my brisk pace, she was every bit female. The Gods were indeed kind. Or so I thought at the time.

At the outset of our discussion, I learned, while not the pure Japanese of my fantasy, Elizabeth had a Japanese father. Looking closely, I saw that this was a possibility, for despite her height, her face was extremely delicate, an oval framed by long, long jet-dark hair, balanced lightly on a swan's neck. Her complexion, a perfect pale in the Japanese fashion, had its pallor emphasized by deep, green-gold eyes and blood red, pouting lips. But there was a definite western streak, for she had a look I associated with ballerinas, except that she was so tall—had to be a model. Certainly, she was beautiful and even younger, I guessed, than Tara, maybe in her late teens or early twenties. Just the right age before experience brings bitterness and withdrawal. I was particularly happy she was so different from Mei or Tara. I didn't want a living reminder of those failures. While physically she was more like Mei, tall, with long, sensuous limbs, she was curvaceous where Mei was angular, more boyish. She was what we had once called a "real earth goddess"—maybe closer to Steph in body and certainly as worldly wise. Her personality seemed open, friendly, and most importantly, for the first time since my days with Stephanie, I was back with someone native to my culture.

Up in the flat, we talked further. It was a muggy summer day typical of Kobe. She was also from California, or at least that had been her last Stateside address. It was like meeting someone from my own tribe after years of wandering among strange peoples and places. It didn't matter that so many years separated us. While her body seemed young, her mind was experienced. In some ways, she took me back in time, a time before Mei, to those days of the drug culture, where much could be expressed with only the slightest communication. No arduous explanations needed. There was an intrinsic feel of family. Although she was an entire generation

younger, she had grown up as the daughter of what she described as "a real wiggled-out hippie woman," and had a command of the culture that far surpassed even what I could remember. Suddenly, I was back in the Haight's "Summer of Love"—I had been in London at the time. The conversation was all about macrobiotic foods, ashrams, yogis, rock 'n roll. After several years with Tara, where I had to explain every word, every phrase, where she was so straight, so ultimately bourgeois, it was refreshing to relate to someone who "talked the talk." Whether Elizabeth could "walk the walk" only the future would reveal.

In those opening moments, we seemed to take to one another. Was this the "romantic interest" I had been praying for? She was so good and, at the time, I was too mesmerized by the cling of her sweat-moistened "T" to notice how good she was.

The first night after moving in, she came to my bedroom, clothed in just a T-shirt and panties—long, exquisite legs rising into the fullness of buttocks very much open to my gaze. Well, now that I think back on it, maybe those upper thighs were in the American way a little too full...and there was a stretch mark here and there. There were signs that Elizabeth wasn't as young as I supposed, but I chose to ignore them. I wasn't about to let fantasy fall to a little cellulite. I wanted her...I needed her to be the most beautiful woman in the world, for if she was, and she wanted me, then.... That would show Tara who was too old! Right there in the heat of the moment, I was still thinking of Tara. I would send her a picture of my new wonder woman, younger, more beautiful than she had ever been. God! Why couldn't I get rid of Tara's ghost? It had been almost a year and the bitch was still with me.

Was this an invitation to dance? Had I been younger and more at the mercy of my libido, I would have acted, fearless of any rebuff. Age and all that gender-sensitivity training chipped away more elemental natures. And then there was the memory of Tara. Elizabeth seemed even younger and we had no history. Did she see me as a ridiculous old man trying for something far beyond my means?

I was no longer an animal driven by my appetites. I was civilized and forced myself to avert my gaze, to be cool, to remember she was just a flatmate, to whom I had promised, "no hassles." Maybe

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she was just testing how far that promise went? It was hard to be so hungry, yet to abstain from such a feast. And what a feast! I longed to sink my teeth into those milky white buttocks, to drink from the cup of youth-restoring nectar that lay within. When had I last sipped there? With Tara, of course, but it seemed so long ago, I had almost forgotten that salty-sweetness.

For a while we just talked. She was so young, and I felt protective. I knew my other side, the one with the nearly uncontrollable hungers, would soon emerge. I would...I must...have her. For the time being, however, I would take things slowly. That was my style; make them hungry; "make them want to be wanted." But Elizabeth was like no other woman that I had ever known—how often had I found myself using that phrase? She seemed to know just what was in my mind; she took control, pushing all the right buttons. As I said, she was good!

"Guy, you're too tense. I want to do something for you."

She spoke not as a lover, but as a therapist or, maybe, given her background, a shaman. This startled me. Always the male, I like being in charge, calling the shots, dominating my partner, bending her to my will. Not that I didn't want to give pleasure, but I could perform best only if I felt the master. Suddenly, it was Guy, almost always the seducer, who now felt seduced.

Yes, there was that *almost* again. Tara was so hard to shake. Perhaps that was because in that instance it was me who had ultimately been fucked, or so I thought at the time. How strange! There I was with this incredible piece of ass, and couldn't escape that bitchin ghost I had come to Kobe to forget. I couldn't get her...it...out of my mind. Instead of taking care of business I...

* * *

It had been all so goddamned symbolic: on a bridge in that tourist trap called New Hope. New hope on my bridge of the world, and for the first time in so long, I felt that entirely uncontrollable feeling, entirely independent of all self will, welling through my being, not

from my head downward, but upward from my heart —although in retrospect possibly from even further below. It reminded me of those first rushes of emotion I felt with Mei. In a moment, I was carried back almost twenty years. It can't be rationalized, it just was.

Yet there was a difference between that first and what, I guess now, is the last. With Mei, it had been a feeling of unbounded joy. All was right with the world; I had finally found my soul mate, that fellow entity to which we are drawn, lifetime after lifetime, our fates inextricably bound. But with Tara, joy was tempered by an even deeper sorrow. Driving back to the University that night, I began to cry. I blamed the mushy, romantic music that oozed from the radio, but I knew otherwise. A great wave of foreboding swept over me. It was as if part of me, an unconscious part, knew what was coming. It was trying to warn me, but in the grip of passion, I failed to listen. In accepting this new love, I was accepting failure with Mei. I no longer believed in soul mates or in eternal love, at least with another human.

Both in Nam and in prison —in many ways so alike —was heard the motto, "You come alone and leave alone." I have come to believe that is true for life anywhere. I knew at some point all the love between us would dissolve; that we would go our separate ways, perhaps regretting that we had ever met. And that eventuality came. Tara sent me packing with the final benediction: "Guy, you're too old...too fucked." This was doubly terrible, for I knew who had put such harsh words on such sweet, rosebud lips. It had amused me to teach her all those sort of words, the "fuck" I would have her cry out in a much different tone, in a much different context. Once it had been part of making love, now it was all about hate.

* * *

She...Elizabeth...started to stretch out, almost as if she was alone and not with me...an almost stranger. Her years...growing up in the ashrams...had made her an adept...very adept...*yogini*. With the most damnable air of innocence she assumed positions that defied the constraints of normal human anatomy. At times, her postures

seemed to offer her most intimate parts...I thought I was going to go out of my mind. I would have, if I had been ten years younger. She seemed to be taunting me from each posture: "Hey Guy can you do this?" She performed an extension, her leg raised into the air parallel to her body. Was it an invitation? "Here's my ass, take it, here I am spreading out my legs, take what lies between them. If you've got the balls that is?" I couldn't decide if it was in my head or something we shared between us. Maybe, I just no longer had the balls?

Resting on the floor after a particularly awesome contortion, she beckoned me to join her. She lay there, her chest rising and falling rapidly. Her all too brief "T" had crawled way up, exposing the slightly fleshy curve of her belly, flecked with beads of moisture from her labors. How I wanted to reach over and taste salty-sweet dew, to let my tongue follow to its source, and then drink the nectar deeply. She gave me a long, piercing look, then rolled over, raising her hips into the air, then lowering them in continuing undulations. The night had been cool before she entered the room, but now the sweat was building on my body; I could feel it rolling down my sides, down my neck.

Something inside me snapped. It was too fast. I wanted more than release. You know...that kind of thing was in my own power, my own two friends here, these hands. They could and did give me that often...as often as I wanted...I learned that long ago. What I wanted...desperately needed...from Elizabeth was more than a momentary release from lust.

I started talking, probably babbling is a more appropriate term. At least this is what Elizabeth, who by this time was fully aroused, must have thought. She was a young woman in the fullness of her sex. She wanted satisfaction, nothing less than a hard cock. Her readiness showed; she made no attempt to conceal the spreading dampness on the crotch of her diaphanous panties. In the tight confines of the room the smell of the tatami intermingled with the scent of sweat, dry sweet grass with the dampness of mutual lust. My cock was hard, swelling to fullness I hadn't experienced for some time. I knew that physically I was ready. All I had to do was slide off the futon, onto the floor beside her. One swift move and I would be in her, filling her emptiness with my need.

But I wouldn't be so rude. No, I could see myself not taking but giving, guiding us to a mutual pleasure, kissing first on the mouth. Later, I would wander over her body until my tongue could touch that so-sweet bud. I prided myself on my tongue as an instrument of love, for if it had a chance, I would always get the rest. Once my tongue got inside, it did things, touched places that no woman I ever loved in that way could resist. The problem, of course, was to get that far.

The moment came and went. There was always that moment ripe for action, when both partners' senses are honed to their sharpest edge, minds readying bodies for action, screening out all thoughts except for the desire to desire. She had been able to reach this place, blotting out the past, memories of pain, humiliation, guilt, all those things that inhibit, cripple, and ultimately kill the pursuit of pleasure; perhaps, even blotting out whom it was who would give her pleasure.

I didn't have such power. My ghosts were still too strong. To Elizabeth's disappointment, there was no tongue, no hard cock, not even a caress, only more of the interminable nervous banter. All she wanted was simple fuck, just a quick shot to know she wasn't alone. But I was unable to even give her that.

* * *

On first meeting, Elizabeth radiated youthful innocence and trust. As the weeks went by, closer inspection revealed this was a mask, hiding the deep scars of relationships that for her had been long and bitter. In our many long conversations, substitutions for the real communion we both wanted, I began to uncover her story. Married at seventeen, she was now in Japan because this relationship had become too oppressive. Marriage blotted out any chance for her to see who she was. She had been raised as a love child, where relationships were everything. This early experience overloaded her, and she went the other way. Yes, like so many others of her generation, the children of the hippies, she could talk the talk, but walked in a different way. She was on the make in a very material world, in a world where youth no longer aspired to peace and love, but to career and property, power and security.

Elizabeth wasn't looking for love, a fuck yes, a friend maybe. And there I was desperate for love, for the other half, for my Yin, or at least so I had convinced myself. I should have just taken her before we got to know each other. If I had done my part well, she might have wanted more—and I, perhaps, less. But as I came to know more about Elizabeth, I was almost glad I had not been so bold, for she held all the ingredients of one more tragic affair.

Elizabeth was another metaphor for my life...you know you are a goner when life is nothing but a fucking metaphor...all that initial, self-projected optimism, hope, joy, quickly falling away to the underlying reality that was the other—FRUSTRATION. Why was it always this way? Either I expected others fill my needs, as if they had been placed here on earth explicitly for me, or vice versa. I felt the need for some mystic hand behind all relationships; nothing was just random, dumb luck. Then I would find out otherwise and, in my disappointment, turn bitchy, vindictive. How could I wean myself of dependence on fate for life's meaning? How could I find purpose in what was so seemingly random?

Once rather drunk—I would have had to be in some way altered to make such a deep revelation—I told Elizabeth about my morning ritual, my prayers to the Japanese Gods, and how I saw her as an answer to those prayers.

Venomously she replied: "You don't need love Guy, you need passion. You feed on passion like a vampire feeds on blood. It makes you feel alive, doesn't it? Well?"

She was goading me, driving the knife deeper and deeper, all her venom towards the male gender spilling out over me.

"The only trouble is passion is like that cock of yours, it comes and then it goes." She laughed coarsely, revealing another side of her character, a side I somehow had missed in my initial observation. "Maybe down your leg, eh, old buddy?"

Late at night, after the effects of the booze wore off—I no longer even tried to make it past the biru—I would wake. Though giving up all hope of a relationship, I was still tortured by being so close to this beautiful creature. Elizabeth could have slaked my thirst, if she had been so inclined. I hated her for withholding.

Sometimes the Fates...the Gods...whatever...are there at work even though we can't perceive them. They protect us despite ourselves, and what at first disappoints us, turns out a blessing. Elizabeth was more than an American studying Japanese. When I first met her, she exuded affluence. This wasn't only in her accouterment: Armani, Cartier, Gucci, all so impressive in Japan, but in her demeanor as well. Despite the self-professed hippie background, I assumed that somehow there was money in the family. Obviously, someone was bankrolling Elizabeth. As the weeks went by, I began to observe that she consistently returned to the flat in the wee hours. Perhaps because of the alcohol, perhaps, hoping to recapture that lost moment of opportunity, I would regularly wake about midnight.

I tried not to get involved; her comings and goings were her business. However, as the tension grew between us, I got into the habit of...lying in wait. Finally, one night I got pissed and told her she was disturbing my sleep. This, of course was the truth, but for different reasons than any noise she made.

Tired and upset at having to deal with my anger, she defiantly admitted: "Look Guy what I do with my life is my...anyway I thought you said no hassles...that we're just roommates. I gave you a shot just to get it over with, but you had to be the asshole, get all serious and all of that gop. If I got involved with you, you'd just eventually run off with some *real* Japanese woman. I know you! You're just a butterfly."

She went on and on, really socking it to me. She was good at that. Just as good as when she wanted to stroke you, when you had something she thought she wanted—whip, stroke, whip, stoke, those were her special skills. She then let me in on her darkest secret. It was no accident that she had played me so well. The manipulation of the libido, male and perhaps even female, was her rice bowl. Her nocturnal habits weren't the result of the long commute from Kyoto where she was supposedly enrolled in school, but because of her job as a night club "hostess."

"This is my living Guy...this is the way I pay you my rent. If I'm such a whore, what does that make you? My pimp?"

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There was no wealthy family. She had run away from a suffocating marriage and, just as I had done, taken the first thing that came along. Without even a high school diploma, Elizabeth fell back on her more primal attributes, leading to recruitment as an "entertainer" in Japan.

Maybe you are wondering why all this hassle over a fucking job. But that is just the problem, it was a fucking job. The job had been titled on her passport "entertainer specialist," but quickly degenerated into nightclub hostess. Naively, she had fallen for an old ploy of the Yakusa, the mob in Japan. For years, they have recruited attractive women from all over the world, enticing them with visions of fortune and fame. The reality is much different. Once in country, the girls are essentially prisoners, both through intimidation and their isolation from Japanese culture. Apparently, it was very rough at first. Elizabeth's initial "booking" landed her in an S&M bar where she engaged in all manner of kink. Most of it was simulated, but it got the Nihonjin sarariimen off to watch this young, virginal-looking, gaijin angel virtually brutalized by their own.

Empowering the powerless through the spectacle of submission, Elizabeth allowed her body to be used in sordid ways, both on and off the stage. She had come to Japan with some great burden of guilt whose source she never fully revealed, although, I suspected it had something to do with infidelity. This was, perhaps her way of expiation. For though the actual physical pain might have been simulated, at least on the stage, the degradation was real.

She was, however, more than a piece of meat to be "poked and stroked," as she described it. Slowly, she had gained ground through judicious management of her charms, choosing the right protectors, giving of herself, but sparingly, and to her advantage. By the time she moved in, she was working in what, for that world, was a "respectable" club. The boss was a friend and looked after her interest. It was her choice who would receive her ultimate charms; for the rest, she would have pleasant conversation, a smile, and, perhaps, even a shoulder to cry on. Yes, Elizabeth was on her way to becoming a very good courtesan. The pay was excellent, and she learned the culture much faster than she could in any school.

Pragmatically, Elizabeth made the best of a rather nasty situation, but for me it was the last straw. All I could see was this lovely creature, selling herself to the highest bidder, some fat, old sarariiman...another wake up call for me. Hey...I was toying with fire. Those business types spent a lot of time in places like Bangkok, Taipei, or Manila. In Japan, AIDS was a taboo subject. But silence is no protection for the traveling sarariiman in a Bangkok hotel room—one night in Bangkok, the next in Kobe. You know...I have flirted with death for a long time, I hope I am not afraid. But I don't want to go like that...no, not like that.

Having come to this realization, scared straight so to speak, I rather piously vowed to investigate an all too elusive inner self. Maybe it was time to put aside those pleasures, those pursuits of youth, understand who I was and go from there. After all, I was in a land of the Buddha and, while I had flirted with Buddhist philosophy, my early aversion to religion kept me from any but the most casual acquaintance. Perhaps intuiting my need, Elizabeth told me about a Zen retreat primarily for gaijin—they spoke English—located in the rolling farm country west of Hiroshima, several hundred miles from Kobe. She was going and, if I wanted, she would be glad to take me along. Perhaps, she felt sorry for me, looking to break down the shell I had cast around myself.

Despite this new spiritual fervor, I regretted my earlier hesitancy. I felt burned by my own inability to take another chance on love, wondering if this could be an opportunity to regain lost ground with Elizabeth. How hard it is to let passion go.

The trip was a disaster. Perhaps a confusion of motive doomed it. We agreed on nothing and wound up taking different trains, sleeping in different rooms and, for that matter, barely speaking during, what was for me, an ordeal of physical pain and mental boredom. The regimen required three daily six-hour lotus-twisted meditations, or at least an approximation of one. The over-zealous dojo master would come around and whack me with a stick, if my posture deviated too much from his standard.

I knew the drill. I was supposed to drive all thought out of mind. If I could get the world out of mind, get mind out of mind, then and only then could I release. To get beyond Maya you need to see clearly. You don't need to think to see. For by thinking, you bring

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to the act of seeing all the accumulated shit of your experience; you just make seeing all that more impossible. But a clear mind isn't easily achieved—the Gods know I have tried long enough, certainly not in a weekend excursion. Despite the chanting and the dark, musty dankness of the temple hall, my mind raced with thoughts of this world.

To further my discomfort, Elizabeth took to the place like the proverbial duck (swan was more apt in her case) to water. She seemed to experience little physical discomfort in the meditations and during the breaks would dazzle the monks and visitors with feats of yoga. After the first day, she had become the center of attention. A wall of admirers surrounded her. It was almost as if she had planned it to keep me at bay, almost as if she wanted to punish me for my failure to fulfill her needs.

That evening, after dinner, we all went to the commons room where Elizabeth began to flirt with the dojo master, the very one who took such delight in correcting my posture. I saw the look in her eye and knew it was the same as that first night in the Rokko flat. She was up for it and had selected this monk, a very strong and virile looking fellow, to satisfy her needs. Unlike me, the monk obviously felt little constraint. Throughout the night, I could hear their passion through the paper-thin wall of my room. A flickering lamp left to burn in a corner projected their mingled forms on the translucent surface, like giant shadow puppets in a recreation of the *Kama Sutra*. My imagination supplied the more lurid details. The shadows became three dimensional, no longer just of light and the absence of light, but of flesh, hair, those most intimate recesses. The monk mounted Elizabeth in her many contortions. The visions of those postures, and the pleasures they promised, drove me almost to madness. I think it was the image of Elizabeth in a "plow" that particularly stuck in my mind. Let me just slide up between those long, marble white thighs. That would be Shambhala enough for me! That would clear my mind! DAMN! It was almost like being twenty again...I was so hot. I just wanted to burst through the goddamned rice paper wall and take my shot. That probably wouldn't have been too off the mark, but it was a threshold far beyond me.

I wanted so much to be that monk, to hold Elizabeth in my arms, to enter her and become one again with another human being, to lose in the release the lust searing my very being. Again, it was more than just the release; it was connection I needed. The desire to lose myself in the soul of another was my undoing. Both for Elizabeth and the monk, their coupling was no more than a form of yoga, a "left-handed" Tantric release of bodily desire, clearing the way for other things. A scroll on the commons room wall drawn in particularly beautiful, boldly washed characters summed up this master's philosophy nicely. Since this was a dojo frequented by gaijin there was a translation underneath: "As a washerman uses dirt to wash clean a garment, so with impurity, the wise man makes himself pure." I envied their casual, yet mutually beneficial relation. That was why I lay alone and they were together. Why, I thought to myself, do I have to carry so much baggage?

Now, I had to banish thoughts of Elizabeth, thoughts that I had taken on to drive out thoughts of Tara, who in turn had been undertaken to fill the vacuum left by Mei's drifting away. I was going around in circles, maybe vortex was a better word...spinning ever downward...replacing one with another, each time the quality of my relation dropping lower and lower. Mei had been the real one, but finite as are all things in this life. The rest were but echoes sent by the Gods to mock me for wanting life to be forever.

For a time, too long I realize now, I had been sparring with Elizabeth. In some contorted way, I thought I might find a life in Japan that someone, or something, had brought us together for a purpose and somehow, we would work it out. Those flights into order and purpose often seized me, but in the end leaving me to chaos. For the first time in weeks, the ultima Thule of my imagination, those great mountains of South Asia, the Himalaya, loomed large in my mind. Lying on that monastic pallet, I was a captive witness to heated chiaroscuro played out on the paper wall. This was heightened by an overwrought imagination, coupled with real cries of pleasure. To block these intrusions, I transformed them into the long-remembered sights and sounds of distant mountains; the rush of the wind through tall stands of deodars, the roll of thunder as it swept up a col, the cry of a marmot, the howl of the wolf.

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No longer would I seek human love, caught up in that hopeless trap of inevitable disappointment. I vowed to turn to one who could only be loved, from whom no love could be forthcoming. I had been burned too often to be attracted to any God bearing human form. Yet, I wanted something with a physical presence, something I could feel, taste, smell, something so large so powerful that I would feel no shame in my submission. This could be found in the Himalaya.

Without this refuge, I might have taken the more pragmatic course, returned to the States, apologized to Mei, and set out contritely to rebuild our life. Instead, I was desperate to retain that romantic image—death before anonymity or boredom, before what I thought of as surrender. I wouldn't let myself wind up as some lonely, impoverished teacher, surviving rather than living. Neither would I crawl back to Mei and the humiliation of some god-awful nine-to-five suburban existence, that familial specter which haunts me even now.

Even in such ethereal rapture, with thoughts of fate and religion dancing in my head, I revealed the duality within. I knew from hard experience not to throw myself completely to the mercies of my spirit-side. There was a chance I might not meet any "ultimate fate" in the mountains. That, instead, I would simply go up one side and down the other and, six months or a year later, be right back in a similar fix as now, if indeed so fortunate. This was the pattern: the dream-goal, the rush to achieve, pushing all else aside, burning bridges as I went, and then once reached, the long slide back to the reality of the outside world. Yes, I had to make some alternate arrangement, something to fall back upon, in case there wasn't that storybook ending. It was one thing to die in the pursuit of a goal; it was another to take your own life. Many times, I had contemplated such surrender. I knew it wasn't in me. But whether it was from nobility or cowardice, I wasn't sure.

In all those years since the bust, I had told myself I would never do what I now contemplated, making one last "run," a last chance where it would be all or nothing. Yet what did I have to lose? The prison experience had receded into "three hots and a cot." No hassles; I forgot about those. I wasn't getting any on the outside. When you're not getting any, it is almost better to be inside, then

at least you can kid yourself, "If only...." Besides, why else had I bothered to bring along those tools of my former trade? Such thoughts would have been unthinkable even a year ago; but then there was so much more to lose. I had no clear plan of where to cop, but I had gotten charas so many times before, in so many different places. Scoring wasn't a worry. And there was plenty of time before the unloading. Even though all my past contacts were gone, I had recently met someone, an old ex-pat gaijin, who offered me grams of charas for five thousand yen. If he sold the shit, then he must buy it. Even if he didn't, that he was offering it at such an outrageous price meant there was a good market in Japan.

Twenty-eight grams to an ounce, sixteen ounces to a pound, Man...that's over sixteen-thousand dollars a pound...a thousand an ounce. If I brought back a few kilos, I could live well. Just get rid of the shit in Japan, then go somewhere cheap and kickback...maybe some tropical paradise in Indonesia. I would be like a character out of Conrad, rule my own little world. I started to lay it all out. I would build my refuge...even surround myself with those lovely women...and when I needed more cash...just take a trip...like the old days.

If that was too farfetched, I could always take it back to the States. Of course, a pound there was nowhere near as valuable and it would be a little dicey. I wasn't sure how efficient those customs folks had become. From experience, I knew they were typical bureaucrats, spiders waiting for you to enter their web. Despite public posturing, they only went into action when the whistle blew, or they had a stroke of dumb luck. Yes, I kept telling myself, the DEA like the INS, or IRS, work in a virtual plane. Oh, if you made it easy for them, they would pop you. But their real deterrence was the fear they planted in your head. You were their best agent.

For some reason, I didn't even worry about the Japanese customs. They had been so accommodating when I arrived. Even though I had bulging cases, they didn't give them a glance. As a certified academic, I was outside the profile. I had an identity, a compartment where they could store me away. It is the anomalies that cause problems, the square pegs in round holes. The secret is to seem to fit. In any event, I wouldn't be greedy, just a few kilos,

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and I could start again. And I still had my trusty battery packs. They had never failed me in the many years of border crossings.

I understood, more clearly than ever before, the power of money, that this power was meant to be the natural substitute for youth. This may seem a given to you, but raised to scorn the material world, I was a slow study. As I got older, if I got richer, life would remain good, at least not too painful. Without money, without the wealth that signaled blessing, I would be cast among the damned, to be avoided and scorned. All this was a lesson learned perhaps more easily in Japan. I had come to the point where it didn't matter any more, I was over the edge, I was falling and there was no one to help. Only by my own strength could I forestall the inevitable. It was so tempting not to resist, just slide into oblivion. This, however, was the curse of my dual nature. On one hand, I knew what was right, what should be done and, on the other, I compulsively couldn't surrender; I had to go for it one more time.

There was only my personal energy, a power fast fading, with little hope for rejuvenation. Either I would save myself before the power drained or be lost. I knew I was getting softer, weaker. It might have been easier to end it at that moment. How simple just to slip in front of the train...just as if I was going to work...but...step out a moment too early...splaayat! No pain...no gain...it happened on an almost daily basis in that over-stressed country. But I wanted to see life played out to the end, to see what would happen, if I let fate carry through...whatever fate was...is.

Like so many times before in my life, I began to lay out a journey in my mind. It is not entirely true that the journey begins with a step, rather it begins with a dream. Each day I would scour the bookshops on my lunch hour, looking for books and maps on the mountains. I built my own mandala, made of pictures taken on previous journeys, and hung it on a wall beside my bed. At night in the luminescent glow of the twilight, my brain fuzzed by the nightly ration of alcohol, I would stare at the pictures trying to will them to life. They were well crafted, and their stark, deeply etched, black and white images took on almost a life-like dimension in the tatami's golden glow—in my mind they came alive.

I committed to this trip that night in the monastery, but the first physical steps were up the mountain on which I lived. To enter the

Himalaya, you must prepare. Rare for urban Japan, Rokko provided almost instant access to thousands of forested acres. A twelve-mile run from my flat took me to the top of Mt. Rokko. There on the rare clear day of the early summer, I could see the entire city of Kobe sprawling below to the sea. How many times did I make that exhausting run, alone on the winding road? Perhaps alone is inaccurate, for although alone on foot, there were sometimes a busload of incredulous Japanese tourist, who didn't know what to make of this aging, ginger-bearded gaijin, running where even Toyotas and Hondas had tough going. Let the world call me crazy. I had mountains, the real mountains, in my mind. Each step I took up Rokko was a step toward the Himalaya.

The school term was over at the end of July. What better time to make my escape, except of course, it was also getaway time for all Japan. Consequently, my first shock was in shopping for an air ticket. Anyone who could in Japan was flying somewhere, and the price of tickets skyrocketed. After exhaustive research, I bought the cheapest discount ticket I could find, almost half again a flight from LA to Delhi.

The gaijin's bleat, "it's sooo expensive!"

It was the same when it came to equipment. Wilderness outfitters were a rare commodity, even in such major metropolitan regions as the Kansai. After finally locating the principal retailer in the area, almost all items were double the price of the States.

Once more the bleat of the gaijin, "it's sooo expensive!"

I counted myself fortunate that I had brought much of the necessary kit along with me. What I needed was a good tent. The monsoon would be in full force by mid-August. The cheapest "mountain" tent was over four hundred US dollars. My budget forced me to make do with a humbler product; from its short dimensions, name "Sunrise," and colors, red and white, it must have made for the Japanese market. The price, about half of the real thing, together with its extremely lightweight, made me skeptical that it could survive the rigors of the Himalaya. Although I had been away from the mountains for years, I remembered how dependent the quality of life was on that of the "canvas." This tent would be my bubble of survival. When life became centered on the

physical dimensions of dryness and warmth, its reliability was all-important. In the heat of the Kansai summer, however, distant memories, and their lessons, were overridden by more immediate financial concerns.

Slowly, through the growing heat and accompanying smog, I passed June and July, the mandala of the Himalaya ever before me—both materially on my wall and spiritually in the deepest recesses of my mind. There was always something to do in preparation: visa, maps, shots, and the obligatory photo supplies without which none of my trips would be complete. Although it had been several years since I had taken anything other than snapshots, I couldn't possibly travel without my cameras, despite the ambiguity of return.

Then there was the daily ritual: rising and up the mountain before the atmospheric soup became too thick to endure. Each day got hotter, each trip to the top more difficult, no matter how early I would run. The hill seemed to get steeper, the miles longer. By the time I finished a run, I would be as wet as if I had been in the shower. I could wring cups of sweat out of my melon cap and my shoes, equally awash, would make squelching sounds as I climbed to my flat. What a sight I must have been to my perfectly groomed sarariimen neighbors—sweat isn't publicly displayed in Japan, at least not in upscale Rokko. I was getting to that point of diminishing returns. The runs weren't making me stronger, but, rather, breaking me down. It was time to depart.

The weeks went by to the point where I could rationally count days. My excitement grew into euphoria, drowning out the unpleasant past and present. Again, I had a future, a dream. True it was open-ended, leading to the unknown, but it still gave me hope, more hope than I had in many months.

In those final weeks, Elizabeth dragged in a young American student. He was contemplating his own Himalayan odyssey, but from the Tibet side. At first, I was less than enthusiastic, sure that he was doing to Elizabeth what I so wanted to do. Yes, even then, despite my pieties, I might have chucked it all, if she had given the nod. But as the young man unfolded his ambitious plan—to cross the Himalaya from China to Nepal on a budget of one thousand dollars—my initial annoyance evaporated. I remembered earlier

times when I too had been as bold, trusting my luck, entering the unknown with only a few bucks in my pocket. I loaned him a volume on Tibetan travel, the work of my friend, Paul Lowell.

Shortly after our meeting, I received a call from the student. Most casually he mentioned, "It's cold Paul died! He wasn't that old and with so many more passes to cross. To die from...Damn that fuckin AIDS! Soon there won't be anyone left."

He assumed I knew about Paul's death, but with all the shit of the past year, I had lost track. What a shock, for somehow Paul had seemed indestructible. He had gone through so much. We had history and, out of the blue, that history ended.

I first met Paul in Nam. He was doing "alternative" service as a teacher in a remote hamlet in the Delta. At the time, Paul had been naiver; he thought that teaching would be preferable to killing. His stint there made him see otherwise, (even more so after Phoenix swept through). Shortly after he arrived, it was made clear what was expected. Nothing heavy, just report occasionally on village affairs: who was seen with whom; who was missing; what strangers came to visit. That was the sort of thing, tidbits that helped the PRUs in their bloody work of covert assassination—"crowd control." A smack-happy Gunny who worked for G-2 put me on to him.

"If ya wanna know what's going on, there's this c.o. fuck...you know one of those Shak...no, it's Quakers. I mean...well I guess he's not that bad even though...a real odd one...but he's a goddamned gold mine."

Eventually, Paul got hip, and the reality of his role blew him away. Why did peasants, rice farmers, need to know English? Yes, Paul began to tune into certain aspects of cultural imperialism. He bailed as soon as his tour finished.

I lost track of him for some years, but when I started up the treks, our paths crossed again. Paul was trying to make a name as a Himalayan wala—he too had taken his R&R there. It was another case of once having been to those mountains, falling in love, and thereafter desperately seeking ways to return. He heard about my new company and contacted me for work as a guide. In the mountains, our separate adventures served as goads to one

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another—get back out there and cross one more pass, explore one more valley. After the bust, Paul went his own way—perhaps leery of being tainted by my own failure—carving out a niche through his writings. In Paul's travels, I found an alter ego and, as I spun my wheels in the pen, I could take imaginary furloughs in his words.

Paul once called himself the "Angrez Gujar," and I guess that is the side of him I would most like to remember. I only traveled once with Paul, to the Gharwal. We were surveying the route to the Nanda Devi Sanctuary, for one of our tours. There is this vision I have carried of Paul since that time. It is how I want to remember him—Paul the *sirdar*, guide, *mosafer*, my guru of the Himalaya. We took our picture in Auli, a place of pastures, high up on the mountain, looking out toward the Tibetan border. The panorama is a one-eighty plus sweep of ice peaks cut deep by green valleys, each rich with ancient Hindu tradition, a true land of the Gods. In the foreground of all that grandeur, Paul, tall, gaunt, sun-seared, and bearded, squats down on his haunches, clothed in the loose, *shalwar-kameez*, sharing a chillum with one of our Bhotia porters. I am there too, only slightly out of focus—I was rushing back after triggering the delayed release. In some ways we could be twins, at least physically, except I am a bit more robust, or at least I was. Paul looks every bit a Gujar.

Gujars! They were another of those memories, so real at the time and then lost in that sea of experience. They are still there, I can recall faces, remember names, but only when I happen upon a spark of association that brings them back. Gujars have figured on so many of my treks, their ponies contracted to carry my loads, shouldering the loads when the ponies could go no farther. They too were travelers, distinct from the local people. Wily and proud rogues, they would drive a hard bargain, but once a bargain was made, I never knew them to renege. More than I could say for many of the village men I employed; more than I could say even for myself.

Every spring they move vast flocks of sheep and goats from lowland plains to summer encampments, high in the alpine pastures of the Western Himalaya. Unlike much of the local population, Gujar men are tall and thin, with flowing turbans and

beards. Like the photo of Paul, they wear the traditional shalwar/kameez over which they drape blankets of patterned hues of orange, red, and brown. They speak their own distinct language and stick mainly with their own, traveling en famille, wives, children, old women and men. The villagers accuse them of all sorts of crimes, as settled people often do. But though the tent is home for much of the year, their enormous flocks attest to the great wealth some of these families possess.

Like the Gujar, Paul had a similar need to move, see new lands, meet new people, and lose himself in the Himalaya. Back in California, his Venice apartment was bare of all except the most necessary furnishings, the space given over to a vast collection of books, maps, and papers, all dealing with things Himalayan. Even his relationships were constrained by this passion. Most of his friends shared his love for the Himalaya—they had to if they wanted to be his friend. Maybe he feared putting down any real roots that might keep him from these mountains. When I heard Paul had died, not on some distant pass or peak, but in hospital with AIDS, my first thought wasn't, how sad he died, but how fucked he died that way. I mean, I don't know anything about his personal life...I have no idea how he got it. Yet after all the risks, the near misses he had met in his travels, with his love of the mountains, to waste away in a hospital bed.... Jesus!

As I made the final preparations, I pondered Paul's fate. In my first rush, I imagined my destiny was to continue Paul's work, to cross those passes yet to be crossed by Paul. In the news of his death was I being offered new purpose to rejuvenate my own life?

Alone, staring at the blank wall of the unknown, life has a way of speaking directly to you. This may seem irrational to those immersed in the full swing of a life, those who can relate to actual flesh and blood. But to the lonely, those living on the margins, there can only be this abstracted communication with life. Life no longer has individualized faces, Mei, Paul, Tara, Elizabeth.... Instead the dialog is with Life, faceless and impersonal as that abstraction may be. It was Life that spoke, but the language was difficult, and easily misinterpreted. Its text required many readings before the message could be understood. As I pondered, I became increasingly thoughtful of Paul, his dedication and how

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his life, except for those few who knew him intimately, now lives in what he wrote. Someday...no, right now in what I am doing here, I will set down my own experience...give meaning to all that I have done. Is that crazy? At times, I can accept all is chaos, that it is only our own affliction, our curse, to demand order. I envy those who can let go, if any such dudes exist. At times I am almost there, when I get high, when...but then you always must come down, back to this need to find meaning.

The many aberrant rays of experience finally coalesced into a distinct image, the romantic again ascendant. I was going to an unknown destiny, where kismet and karma would judge. I placed my life in the hands of abstracted fate, so much a human failing when overcome by uncontrollable forces. Yes, all ties to the past would be cut, and I would disappear, sky-clad, into *my* mountains. But in my mind, even more than on my back, was the accumulated baggage of years gone by. When the day of departure finally arrived, my burden was much greater than the baggage-counter scales revealed. I hoped that my journey would tear this saman away.

Chapter VI

The world is a bridge, pass over it, do not build upon it.

—Victory Gate inscription at Fatehpur Sikri by Moghul Emperor, Akbar the Great, 1580 AD—

BRIDGE

The black rubber ribbon of the baggage carousel slowly, haltingly, snaked its circuitous route through the cavernous hall. Anxious passengers stared numbly towards the entry door through which the first bags would appear. After more than a decade, I was back in India. Now it was only a bus ride to the mountains. I could walk if I had to. Overcome with happiness, I at first failed to notice the passage of time, lost in the wonder of reality so radically altered. One moment I was in Japan, a teacher, and a gaijin, with all the accompanying baggage. Then, with incomprehensible suddenness, I was in India, and being a foreigner wasn't such a stigma. By the simple act of boarding a plane, all the bullshit dissolved. After-images remained, ghosts remembered, but these were malleable. Over time, the demands of whatever present I was in would transform them. They had been consigned to that ever-growing store of short film clips, to be mentally trotted out, re-edited, rearranged, and thus given entirely new meaning.

After about half an hour my first bag appeared. Waiting for the other, a sense of time infiltrated my euphoria just to be in India again. Another hour went by, and still my second bag failed to appear. The "bag" was actually two Haliburtons strapped together in a futile effort to avoid paying the excess baggage charges, a tariff, which the ever-efficient Japanese counter person politely levied anyway. "Sumimasen, Guy-san, so sorry, sumimasen" —but take it in the ass you cheap gaijin rule-breaker. In these cases was all my photographic equipment, one for the cameras and one for those strobes, so essential if there was to be any return. The faint tingle of nervousness began to make inroads in my joy. How slowly it came, how stealthily, yet surely. My old friends, the cameras,

would be a bitter blow. But without those batteries, my proven generators of wealth, I must resort to cruder and potentially fatal measures.

Those damned posters seen a few hours before in the departure lounge of the Osaka Airport, floated before my eyes. At the time, I dismissed them as hokey effort to scare amateurs. Nevertheless, I took a long look at pictures of dazed "perps" in various stages of undress, exposing their feeble schemes to smuggle. What a diabolic plan, embed those images like a time bomb in the subconscious before a journey. If temptation later arose, those pictures might come back into mind. Stimulus/Response! Those poor perps were crass; maybe they weren't even real, just staged for the posters. Who would be so crazy as to tape the shit around waist or crotch, or absurdity of absurdities, in the soles of shoes. Yes, they had several detailed pictures of grim faced customs officers pulling apart the soles of some crude *chapples*, the kind of sandals you buy in the bazaars of Peshawar and Kabul with thick soles made from rubber tires. That was something out of the Sixties. How sophomoric! If these dudes were real, they deserved what they got.

I took some comfort that luggage from the flight was still off-loading—in agonizingly brief spurts. Also, the vaguely familiar faces of fellow passengers still filled the vast hall. They too showed signs of growing anxiety, particularly on the faces of the Westerners. I kept telling myself this was, after all, great Mother India. She moves methodically. Eventually, with patience, all things come to pass. Besides, I was in no rush to get anywhere. Just remain calm, old man! However, as time went by, staying calm became increasingly hard.

I found myself drawn into a mental battle, trying to beat back fears that my remaining gear was doomed to some Möbius-looped world tour. I even toyed for a moment with the paranoia that somehow, some way, this had to do with my past. After all, I had been busted with a shipment from Delhi. Suppose they were still watching me. Suppose, I was still in some DEA/INTERPOL/CBI net. Maybe, right at that moment, they were looking into the strobes, seeing the empty containers. I could hear the DEA trainer speaking to his Indian pupil.

"You see the perp is basically a creature of habit. He's too lazy to do honest work and this spills over into the crime. That's why we don't have to sweat it. Sure, he may get in one load, or even ten, but eventually he'll deliver himself to us. I mean, my friend, it's not as if we really want to close him down completely...heh! Don't quote me but you know how it is...that would put us both out of a job. No, it's all about body count."

Wait a minute! Reality check Guy!

It was more than twelve years ago since the bust. This is still pre-information age, pre-computer India where it is easy to get lost in the paper shuffle. Anyone computer-savvy has either emigrated or is working for Tata, or one of the many private IT sweat shops, putting ferenghi programmers out of work. No, this is still a country where Government filing cabinets keep lunches protected from cockroaches while papers are piled on the floor. Besides, the Indians have no love for Angrezi bureaucrats, whether British or American. Long ago they had learned to do just enough to keep the Sahibs off their backs, only that and no more. The saving thought throughout this time, now approaching four hours, was that this was wonderful preparation for what lay ahead, a perfect reintroduction to the rhythm of India.

In the past I had raged at Indian sense of time, often not realizing that the source of my frustration was lodged in a difference of understanding. But as the carousel ground endlessly around, I marshaled mental reserves, fought back the temptation to throttle the nearest airline employee, and waited. Finally, after a time almost equal to the flight, the Haliburtons lurched down the shoot and into my anxious hands. True, they were no longer strapped together and there was an ominous "X" scribbled across both cases, but at least I had them in hand.

Now that I had my bags, the next trick was to run the gauntlet of Indian Customs. The way to freedom lay through an adjoining hall, the Customs domain, where a small army of officials waited. From a distance, they all looked so efficient in their crisp white uniforms, but when you got closer the uniforms weren't so crisp, or so white, and boredom masked their faces. What were they really thinking about? "How about I have a little mind fuck with this Angrez. He looks tired from his journey...perhaps a few

buttons I can push." Well, maybe it wasn't that bad, but whatever they were thinking, it wasn't how to expedite my passage. The first officer I approached waved me through with a look of studied boredom. He was more interested in the overseas Indian couple behind me. Experience had taught him that they held much greater promise for that furtive hundred-dollar bill, sandwiched between the passport pages, the price to ignore madam's solid gold jewelry. Just as I was about to break free, a lower level minion spotted the chalked "Xs." The small fry had to make do with "second harvests" such as me.

"Eh, what are you doing, have you cleared with the officer?" The rudely barked question came rolling out sharply from the otherwise impassive face. "You must go back to that line."

If I hadn't been so dazed from my long wait, I might have slipped him a few bucks and thanked him profusely for his too kind directions to the nearest exit. That is what the old Guy would have done. But that was a Guy who had never been busted, a Guy who knew what he was about and how to manage the "wog." I was no longer that bastard. Besides, maybe things had changed? No point getting off on the wrong foot in the first hours. What infamy to be put on the next flight out, expelled for bribing a public official. No, I had been away too long and was filled with the West.

Back I went to stand before a succession of other white uniformed men. Each one gave me a rather quizzical look. It was a look that instantly recalled past confrontations with Indian bureaucracy too numerous to count—with bureaucracy throughout the world for that matter. No one could understand why I had come back. But since I hadn't been clever enough to bully or baksheesh my way through as any *burra sahib* would have done, then I must pay the price of having the equipment entered in my passport. While this might seem innocuous, it was a process that consumed over an hour. Several officers, having nothing better to do, engaged in the proceedings. It was a game for them, one or another taking my side while others would play aggressor. They meticulously examined the many pieces with bemused awe, theorizing what their purpose might be. They argued among themselves the value, as if they were haggling over a purchase in the bazaar. But most time consuming was the recording of the serial numbers which, after numerous

miscommunications, were written down in quintuplet—carbon paper still a luxury in India. Finally, they released me with the admonition, "Please to report all equipments, Mr. Guy. There will be much problem if equipments not leaving India."

The trip into Delhi was mostly a whirl, my mind too excited by the prospects before me. I did notice one major change. In earlier times, a living wall of taxi-walas and hotel touts greeted the arriving traveler, each trying at the top of their voices to persuade that their service was the cheapest and finest. Now the pavement was bare. Taxis were procured by purchasing chits from a booth. The twelve miles into the center cost one hundred and twenty-five rupees or about five dollars. Next to time, the value of money was the biggest shock, particularly after Japan. A taxi from Kobe to the Osaka International Airport, roughly the same distance, cost almost twenty times as much. True, in Japan you ride in a late model Honda or Toyota; here it is an ancient Ambassador kept going by the intercession of the elephant-god Ganesh, monkey-god Hanuman, or bird-god Garuda whose icon rests reverently on the dashboard.

Throughout the ride, I struggled to adjust to the new level of currency, as well as the change in the value of human labor and time. I knew that those first few hours could be inordinately expensive. The first day I might spend as much as in a week once adjusted to local values. I had to try to get down to the local level. If I held on to a Western sense of price, or tried to maintain its life style, I would not only be throwing money away, but missing India. The Brits had almost pulled it off, transplanting "Home" to this far away land. But look what happened to the Brits. Of course, I would never get to the level of non-consumption, which most Indians were accustomed. I tried once and got a raging case of hepatitis as a reward. I was too spoiled, too dependent on the insulation from the rigors of life that wealth brings.

Caught up in these thoughts, I almost missed the cargo elephants trundling beside the cab, loaded with exotic hardwoods for export, right off the elephant's back and into the plane. I thought back to my arrival in Japan; how on a similar taxi ride that overwhelming display of neon lighting and futuristic cityscapes had struck me. If the flight to Japan had transported me momentarily to the future,

then this flight took me to the past. Yet just as dawn had revealed Japan wasn't the future, I knew that daylight would show Delhi not to be of the past, but as a permutation of a global present. Sure, it was much more impoverished than Japan or the States, but still awash with the trappings of a modern existence.

The next morning brought this home. I rose with excitement to tackle the list of chores that needed to be accomplished before I could leave Delhi. I had to get out as soon as possible. Delhi is an expensive and unhealthy trap in the best of times, and even more so in the first days of August in a year with a late monsoon. It was imperative to get upcountry quickly. Topping the list was transportation to the North, to Manali, and the Himalaya beyond. I also needed to buy things impossible to buy elsewhere: medicine, toiletries, and some Indian khadi. I liked going "native," even though these traditional garments are much too expensive for the average Indian; they make do with the mass-produced polyester. The loose weave cotton was just the thing in Delhi's stifling heat. I was like a kid in the toyshop. The months of self-imposed penury had taken their toll. Now I could go out and spend without, it seemed, hardly denting my wallet. Yet most of the things marked as so necessary on my mental list would soon prove superfluous. Life, even my life, would go on without them. It takes time to adjust to India's more essential level.

After a breakfast of runny poached eggs, flame-blackened toast, and a rather large pot of instant coffee, all with that distinctive kero taste from the ubiquitous pressure stove, I was buzzing. By eight o'clock, I was out the door of my Connaught Circus digs into a rather empty world. It was the same old Connaught I had known a dozen years before but, like myself, it had aged and aged hard. The whitewashed buildings hadn't seen any refurbishment. The porticos of their neo-classical facades were crumbling a bit more since my last visit. While the old became older, it was now overshadowed by the new. The old circle stood, albeit precariously, but the focus had shifted to modern towers of steel, concrete, sandstone, and glass.

How typical this was of India, particularly Delhi. This ancient capital of many empires is a collection of cities, one supplanting the other. A new city arose and the old withered, not to be

remodeled or reconstructed, but slowly dying in sight of the succeeding generation of buildings. While some might wonder at the scant value Indians—a term itself of questionable reality—placed on the artifacts of their history, such artifacts were, more often than not, unpleasant reminders of past defeat, humiliation, and domination. Connaught Circus was no less a reminder than the Moghul tombs. It was, after all, a vestige of the British Raj and of questionable value as memorabilia. Of course, since this was India, there were the overriding philosophical considerations, at least for ferenghi.

Years ago, I had made the pilgrimage to the Taj. I photographed that sucker inside and out, in sunlight, twilight, and the obligatory moonlight. It was to be sure beautiful. Sitting back a little way with the help of a mind-altering substance, I could blur the harsh details of modern existence: taxis, mopeds, electric and telephone wires, TV antennas, signs touting colas, cigarettes, family planning. In my mind, I put myself back to those days of Moghul splendor when the Imperial Court at Agra was unequaled in the world. I disappeared into a world of silk and fabulous jewels; legions of warriors in gilded mail; bellowing war elephants; supplicant ambassadors from the distant corners of the known world; artists and artisans; learned scholars and clerics; the Peacock Throne, Shah Jehan, Mumtaz Mahal. These were only some of the things that made this the apex of 17th Century civilization. Although this world had ended so long ago, if I tried, if I stretched out the tentacles of my imagination very far, I could touch that ghostly dimension in which they eternally live.

During this reverie, an old Muslim approached. He suggested that, for a small sum, he had taken me to see something even more miraculous.

"Fatehpur Sikri, Sahib, lost city of Akbar Great. Very special place, out of way! Not for ordinary tourist! I see, Sahib, you special man, a Sahib most liking beauty of Fatehpur." Those were the days when I still believed in the mystery of the East and was always on the lookout for some fantasy of the miraculous.

Fatehpur Sikri was hardly lost, as the number of guides and tour groups clamoring outside its gates would prove. If it had been lost, it was only to my mind. Nevertheless, it was worth the few rupees

the old man extorted. Akbar had built this city in the open Moghul style, reminiscent of the tents under which this descendent of the Mongol Khans spent much of his time. Not a city in the sense we know that word to day, it is more of an extended palace composed of a mosque, shrine, public audience chambers, harem pavilions, horse and elephant stables, *caravanserai*, crafted of red sandstone and white marble. Fatehpur Sikri served as Akbar's capital for about a decade while under construction. Then after it was finished, according to my guide, they found there wasn't enough water to support the vast Imperial court. It was abandoned in favor of Lahore, far to the West in the Punjab, thus escaping the wear and tear of habitation, war, pillage, the fate of more enduring seats of power. Today it is almost as pristine as when Akbar ruled.

Although nominally a Muslim, Akbar was noted as an eclectic who tried to bring together all the religions of his far-flung empire into one called "*Deen Ilhai*." It was, perhaps, to encapsulate the underlying philosophy of this "One Faith" that at the entrance to the city on the *Buland Darwaza*, "the Victory Gate," Akbar had written: "The world is a bridge, pass over it, do not build upon it." Of course, that wasn't an original thought as the guide was quick to point out.

"These are words of great prophet Isa, may Allah bless his memory, Sahib, the one you Christians call Jesus, but most, so sorry, mistake to believe Son of God. We of Islam hold Isa to be a man, yet we much respect his teaching. As prophet, he brings love where before only law. But it was left to Mohammed, blessed be his name, to bring love and law to the one true faith, Islam."

My eyes must have glazed. I wasn't going to let this conversation go any farther. I wasn't in the mood for some clumsy attempt at conversion, no matter what it would have done for my guide's future status in his *Jannah*. All he achieved was to distract me from pondering the meaning of the inscription, other than to note the inherent irony. For this very thought was transmitted through the medium of building. It seemed a clear case of "do as I preach...." Besides it was hot and dusty, and I was more concerned about finding a cold drink, although I made do with a hot cup of chai.

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Yet as the years go by, I find myself revisiting that transcendental advice more and more. Is it that, as I draw closer to the end without building in this world, I find solace in Akbar's wisdom? Possibly! We all seek justification for our lives. Or is it that Akbar was offering a gentle reminder, of the greater realities that lie beyond our comprehension.

* * *

Connaught, despite the decay, was still the center of Delhi's tourist world. As I strolled through the arcades stepping over hawkers, beggars, and innumerable piles of refuse, a flood of sensory remembrances swept over me. It was the unmistakable odor of urban India, that unique mix of jasmine, diesel fuel, urine, and the clove-laced tobacco of *bidis*, the omnipresent fag of the Indian everyman.

My first day in Delhi was absorbed in rediscovery, small tasks of preparation, and, most importantly, the adjusting to the reality of what had been for more than a decade merely personal fantasy. That evening, restless and eager for adventure, I decided to walk from Connaught to the "Old City," about three miles.

Leaving the security of my hotel, I headed for the distant minarets of the Jami Masjid. This was the venerable Friday Mosque built by Shah Jahan, the grandson of Akbar. It has been the focal point of Muslim Delhi for over three hundred years. I was walking back in time, each step from the relative modernity of the Connaught area taking me back to more distant eras, ones I often thought would have been more suitable to my temperament. How exciting it must have been as an early traveler to the court of the Grand Moghuls, like Hawkins or Roe—the primordial Anglo buccaneer strained within.

As I ventured farther, fewer and fewer automobiles appeared on the narrowing boulevard. Initially, they were replaced by three-wheelers, maniacally weaving through traffic. Soon their numbers dwindled as the streets transformed into pathways, dominated by bicycles, rickshaws, and disordered throngs of pedestrians, all of who occasionally gave way in response to the entreaties and curses

of the drivers of bullock carts. Congestion was heavy, and often all movement came to a standstill, a pedestrian LA freeway. Somewhere ahead, two carters heatedly argued over who had the right of way.

My sense of smell was assaulted. Surprisingly, the increasingly close confines brought forth more palatable odors than the unpleasant intermix of diesel and urine dominating the supposedly more civilized Connaught. I thought that if all my senses were gone except smell, it was here I might most wish to live—not because it was uniformly sweet, but diverse and therefore extremely exciting. There were so many sources: from the spice merchants, the blenders of masala: saffron, turmeric, cardamom, cinnamon, cumin, garlic, clove, and bay; from the flower vendors: jasmine, rose, marigold. From the food stalls came the savory odors of mutton fat dripping on hot charcoal, sweets such as *gulub jamuns*, frying in vast iron pots of bubbling ghee; from the sellers of incense: sandalwood, rose attar. In one street, where women lurked provocatively behind their barred windows, came (or perhaps, aroused in me) the unmistakable scent of raw sexuality.

Everything funneled down to the most essential minimum. Streets gave way to alleys, alleys to pathways. I soon felt hopelessly lost. To most, I was just another soul awash in a turbulent human sea, but here and there, I caught a glance, quizzical, disdainful, sometimes...even touched with what I perceived as hatred. They seemed to say, "What's this Angrez doing here? This is our space. Are you here to view our poverty? Is this another stop on your tour—day four, 7 to 8 p.m., rub shoulders with the natives in their quarter?" The press and confusion caused by my loss of direction made me dizzy. Occasionally, a three-wheeler or motor cycle would careen noisily through the packed streets. A bullock cart would get stuck trying to negotiate a narrow alley, backing up traffic and generating a chorus of motorcycle and scooter horns, curses and catcalls from pedestrians. There were loud shouts from those trying to sell and equally loud cries from those trying to buy, both haggling over price.

I was caught between intense feelings of paranoia—I knew I didn't belong here and had come merely to observe—and an equally

intense desire to find the best of this, the beauty I wanted to believe could be found in even the most alien existence. How could this human morass function? How could people face this same struggle every day of their lives, keeping their heads just above the threshold of survival? Yet, I saw no desperation, or at least it wasn't the dominant theme. Rather, these were people going about their business and, in some, there was even a certain look of enjoyment: seen in the simple acts of securing another day's supply of food; buying bangles for a relative's wedding; obtaining a pressure cooker or new paraffin stove. Was their existence so unlike that of city dwellers anywhere? Was there less relative satisfaction in the successful pursuit of a long dreamed Rajdoot motorcycle, than for a Mercedes.

Suddenly, I began to feel a sense of panic. My tolerance for torment, of seemingly chaotic humanity, had been drastically reduced over the intervening years. For a while, gripped in the excitement of sensory renewal, I boldly strolled deeper and deeper into this swirling caldron of human endeavor. But as the excitement of rediscovery waned, it was replaced by fear. I had arrived in Hell.

It seemed as if all eyes were on me. My only thought was, rich Angrez being led to slaughter. What band of decoits or thugees would suddenly appear out of some dark recess? Only that afternoon, I had toyed with the romance of a painless, frozen death on some glorious, windswept Himalayan pass. There, my last sight would be an endless panorama of icy peaks. Here, death wouldn't be so grand, to die with my throat slashed in a shit-encrusted gutter wasn't in my program. Who would know I was gone? The hotel might notice; they might even notify the police. That would be pro-forma—the question about my luggage. Eventually, some desk bound office-wala would write me off with a quizzical shrug and a final shuffle of the official file, again, as with the Customs, in quintuplet. My disappearance, depending on the religion of the investigator, would be assigned to kismat or karma. Yet the instinct to survive was strong, even in me. Eventually, I stumbled onto a major street and hailed a three-wheeler. After a minimal dicker for politeness sake, I was carried, lurching and careening, to the relative tranquillity of Connaught and my hotel.

I had a way to go before I could embrace India. It takes time to adjust to India's more primal nature. No matter how much you hate India at first, given time, it inevitably grows on you. There is no other choice except to leave. India is too overpowering. It happened to me many times. After an initial revulsion, my western sensibilities would numb and the dirt would disappear, along with anarchy, poverty. Perhaps, India retained our natural rhythms? Perhaps, it was the over-stimulated West that doomed us to *koyaanisquatsi*, that "life out of balance?" Certainly, I had been out of balance for too long. But was the time now past where I could get it back? Had I gone too long? Was I now too old to get back down to the basics of life, having grown too accustomed to the prostheses of an over-stuffed civilization?

Wake up Guy! You have been around once too often to succumb to such ancient fantasies.

When I was younger and stupider, when I could see only what I wanted to see, even a shit hole like Delhi possessed certain magic. Now it was just another LA, another Osaka, London, New York. The architecture was a little different; it was certainly poorer, but equally rapacious, equally fucked. Delhi, urban India, or life anywhere on the overpopulated plains was as out of balance as the West. Underneath the poverty there was only desperation, no secret answer to life; one billion Indians saw to that. Delhi only reinforced my belief: we humans are the cancer eating away at the earth. MUNCH, MUNCH, MUNCH! Was this to be the new cosmic rhythm, our hideous, all-consuming cacophony drowning out the Anhad-Naad. I had come to India to hear the Gods sing, not excessive humanity. Yet how could I escape what was so indelibly etched into mind? My only hope was in the solitude of the mountains. There without the press of the hordes, I might find some relief. I resolved to finish my business the following day and get the hell out of Delhi...before its hell got me.

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A good part, of my desire to return to Kashmir had been to take care of my overshadowing nemesis, Nazir. At the very least to answer his challenge. Back in Delhi, I imagined that would have gone a long way to settle the score. I have been carrying this bit of saman for a many years, thirteen to be exact, since that last expedition to Kashmir.

I use the term "expedition" advisedly because it was one of those tours my travel business operated, a very controlled tramp through rugged yet, for these mountains, relatively easy terrain—no technical climbing, ropes, just strenuous walking. Nevertheless, such trips were still a challenge because most of the *membars* had little acquaintance with the outdoors, let alone a Himalayan "outdoors" where the average altitude was more than ten thousand feet.

We got some rather bizarre clientele for these treks. At times a real zoo! There was a gay couple from Manhattan, who had never spent a night under "canvas." Their first was at the foot of the Zoji La, a pass across the main Himalayan range between the Kashmir and Ladakh. For the life of me, I couldn't figure out why those inveterate city boys were making the trip, until they were caught trying to smuggle a bunch of *tangkhas*, religious scroll paintings, stolen—they claimed a lama had sold them—from a Ladakhi gomba.

Then there was a seventy-year old politician and his thirty-something wife, who were all over me to keep them in dope. Was I freaked when, days from civilization, at the top of a fourteen-thousand-foot pass, the old man had a "heart attack." I sent a runner who managed to get to an army post and at great expense finagle a helicopter. The trouble was that by the time it got to us, the old codger had fully recovered. His wife sheepishly explained this had happened before. Once, back home, he had taken LSD, then called an ambulance and was rushed to the local hospital complaining of chest pains. It had taken a lot of coaxing on her part to hush up the incident. What a field day the papers would have had with a congressman on acid. This time it was the gram of charas that aroused his specter of death.

While these circumstances were bizarre in themselves, such idiosyncrasies were commonplace. Most of the clients were taking

time out from some major life change, divorce, graduation, retirement. They weren't looking for the "Love Boat"—although some were looking for love—but a momentous revelation to give meaning to their existence. Weren't we all?

The native side of the business was controlled by the houseboat-walas who form a phenomenon unique to Kashmir. While tourism is a relatively new industry in most parts of the world, Kashmir has been at it for centuries. In an otherwise harsh and barren land, the Vale is an island of beauty and bounty. As such, it attracted visitors since the beginning of recorded history. Its fabled status as "paradise on earth" made it a favorite summer retreat of the Moghul Emperors, who would transfer their entire court to escape the hellish misery of the summer plains. Replacing the Moghuls, the British also adopted Kashmir as a summer retreat. However, because the British permitted Kashmir to remain an independent kingdom, they could never own land. Kashmiris, too poor to own property, had long lived on simple boats called *doongas*. The Brits followed this example, elaborating the style, building floating Victorian gingerbread palaces on the Vale's Dal Lake. Naturally, the entrepreneurial Kashmiris began to build their own boats, renting them out to infrequent or less affluent visitors. This became, over the years, a way of life for a growing community, distinct from the rest of the native Kashmiris.

For most tourists, the houseboat owner is "gatekeeper" to Kashmir. They orchestrate the Kashmiri experience and, in doing so, make their living by commissions on every transaction a tourist makes—from a rupee or two made from the sale of bottle of mineral water to thousands of dollars from the sale of an expensive silk rug. Therefore, you will rarely see tourist without a "shepherd" from the houseboat on which they are staying.

The houseboat owner assumes you are their private cash cow for at least the period of your stay, more hopefully for your life and, in the best case, for the lives of your progeny. It is considered extremely bad form for any other houseboat owner to try to lure you away.

When I brought my last, ill-fated tour to Kashmir, it was to accompany the Amarnath Yatra. This is the same yatra Devara undertook so recently—yet with such a different end. In those

more peaceful years, there was no hint of the communal strife that has brought such disaster to Devara and his fellow yatris. We all knew about the trouble between India and Pakistan. The Muslims wanted an independent Kashmir. But there wasn't the overt, one-on-one hatred. That year there were over twenty-five thousand yatris, hailing from all over India, all ages, all castes, all states of physical well-being. Many had never seen the mountains, the snow, or even felt the cold. It wasn't unusual to see bare feet scaling a rocky cliff or plodding across a snowy pass. In those more peaceful days, far from threatening the yatris, Muslim Kashmiris eagerly awaited the annual procession. After all, they made good money acting as porters, cooks, and pony-walas for their Hindu compatriots.

The trek, despite a few snafus, was successful, meaning we had all come back to Srinagar alive with relatively little loss of gear. All the times of doom and gloom, inextricably part of Himalayan trekking, would quickly recede, leaving only a rosy after-glow, reinforced in the telling and interminable slide shows. I had even found time for my own private doom and gloom, my aborted conquest of Nun. Yet though I had barely survived, I had no leisure to lick my wounds. It was time for the real business, scoring time. I asked my sirdar, the young Kashmiri who ran things for me, to score the charas. That meant he would go out to the farm and deal with the pressers, the guys who made the stuff in their spare time. I wanted about ten kilos, too large a quantity to press myself, particularly as I would consider only first quality hand pressings. If I was going to take the chance, I wanted the best. If I was caught, they would put me away based on weight not quality. It wasn't too wise to be seen in those districts. Out in the village gossip was rampant. They knew who was doing what, and the visit of a strange Angrez to some obscure village might be duly reported to the local constabulary. They would, particularly as it was harvest time, draw the reasonable conclusion that charas was being traded. Angrezi charas traders were a good source of baksheesh, big baksheesh. They would wait and nab you at the airport and then make the squeeze. If you paid, it was "Shokria Sahib! Thank you so much! *Khodaa haafez*, see you next time, Insha'Allah, Sahib." You wouldn't even miss your plane. If the baksheesh was big enough, they wouldn't even tell their buddies in Delhi.

I have explained how protective the boat-walas can be. I mean, they virtually own you. Nazir, the employer of my sirdar, was typical of the breed. He had already made so much money on my straight business and besides, I wasn't too sure how he would react...if I asked for help scoring. He was very sanctimonious with his Victorian Hindish and all—a cross between the Duchess of Duke Street and Jehangir. While he discreetly turned his head from my "recreational" use of drugs, which was a big part of Kashmir's attraction, commercial trafficking was another thing entirely. If there was big money to be made, he wanted in.

Somehow, Nazir found out about my little deal. He took me aside and thoroughly chewed me, issuing that prophecy, "You will never return to Kashmir."

I was eager to confront the bastard, disavowing his power to banish me from Kashmir. Nazir had taken on all the attributes of pure evil, and my duty was to bring this exploiter, this rat, to bay. Even more than the settling of accounts was my desire to take up the challenge.

* * *

Now, I had only to act on that resolve. Although Kashmir was my goal, and Srinagar its capital easily reached by air, I saw that as too easy a path. I had already drawn out on my beloved maps a circuitous route, one that entailed the maximum amount of pain. Instead of Srinagar, I set my sights on Manali, the major bazaar town of the upper Beas Valley, the traditional jumping off point for the passes leading into Lahaul, Zaskar, Ladakh, and the Tibetan Plateau.

Manali was the northern terminus of Kulu, whose ancient name was *Kulantapith* or "land at the end of the earth." An apt name as it was about sixteen hours away by "deluxe" bus. This was, of course, if the roads were passable and, as the monsoon was about to begin, this was in no way a given.

Still a creature of the West, I set out early. How foolish to think an early start would beat Delhi's heat. The monsoon had yet to break, and even at that hour the atmosphere was oppressive. The state

government of Himachal Pradesh (in which Kulu and Manali are located) ran a regular service of "deluxe" and "super deluxe" coaches; so, it was off to the H.P. tourist office. I was still out of sync with the local time, and the office was closed when I arrived. It was some time since I had lived in a world that opened at ten. As punishment for my temporal transgressions, I had about an hour to kill and decided to wander nearby streets. Luck, fate, or perhaps karma drew me towards an area where Kashmiri travel offices were located. I faintly noticed them, but before I could focus, a young man with sharp-eyed Kashmiri features confronted me.

"Excuse Sar, excuse very much. Thinking about Kashmir visiting? We have very best houseboats, very cheap price, very lovely this time of year, very cool, not like this bloody Delhi."

My long-honed reflexes kicked in. I was about to decline with my standard sing-song "noothaankyoouveerymuch," when something about the tout struck me, something familiar. Instead, I asked about transport to Manali. Almost as soon as the words came out, I realized the mistake. Now he had an opening.

"My name is Noor. Please, kindly come to my office, we take tea."

Nothing in Kashmir takes place without first lubricating the palate with innumerable cups of chai. Being newly arrived, and thus not yet hardened to be capable of a blunt refusal, I accepted. Maybe I was just lonely? Yet there was something in the cut of his features, the set of his hair, his manner, that carried me back. But though I racked my brain, I couldn't quite bring into focus what that "back" was.

The office was no more than a cubbyhole, one small room barely able to hold a desk, two extra chairs for clients. We had a long exchange of pleasantries. This was followed by a spirited resistance on my part to a program that would have "whisked" me away to the pleasures of Kashmir. All the old ploys came into play—bargains to be had, adventures to be taken. After probing a bit more, he realized I was too experienced to fall for a package tour. That would have been the ultimate insult. However, "Insha'Allah, Sahib requires a little help, perhaps in making meals." Noor just happened to have an "outstanding" *khaanaasamaa*, Gulam. "Number one cook. Just call him Gul, Guy

Sahib," who, "Insha'Allah," might be available, if the price was right.

"How much you like to pay Guy Sahib?"

Things were getting dicey. This was the standard opening ploy for a Kashmiri deal. After selling you on the quality of the goods offered, you were asked to set a price, a particularly apt strategy in dealing with the recently arrived. The difference in price is so vast between India and wherever you come from, that there was little chance you won't offer many times the actual worth. This is even more the case when prices in your head are in Japanese yen. How much is the labor of a skilled human being worth? Even in degraded status of a graduate student, I had always tried to get at least ten bucks an hour. But this was India, "Hey, how about ten dollars per day?"

Shock registered on Noor's face. This fellow was good. Although young, he had been plying his trade for several years, not to mention growing up in the deal-charged world of the houseboat trade. Shock was replaced, if not with anger, then agitation. The thought of how much I was belittling the honest labor of a hard-working Kashmiri was too much for my now outraged host. Again, experience came to my rescue and, despite Noor's agonizing, I held firm. This was no great victory on my part since, underneath his ruffled exterior, Noor was chuckling, and with good reason, for I was offering double the going rate. Even more important was the realization that, if the khaanaasamaa did his job correctly, he would steer me into the clutches of Noor's family in Srinagar where the real skinning process could begin. Besides, as cook Gul would be buying the provisions.

After an appropriate display of protest, Noor shrugged his shoulders, "Ji, as you wish Sahib. I won't charge a commission. Business very bad. Gul is poor man. This business being between you and Gul. If he agree, then I not stand in the way." Gul was off on some undisclosed errand, so we agreed to meet at my hotel later in the afternoon to complete the arrangements—if it was okay with Gul

I left the office with my head spinning. I had planned to pick up a cook cum guide in Manali, or even further up at the actual

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trailhead, the village of Darcha in Lahaul. If I took this Gul fellow, it would mean transporting him all the way from Delhi, providing food and lodging. What started out as a search for information about transportation, now took on additional complexities. Besides, did I really want to take a Kashmiri Muslim to Buddhist Lahaul and Zaskar where he would be less than welcome? Back at the tourist office, I found that the "last" bus to Manali was departing in two days.

"End of season! After roads no good! *Barsat* (monsoon) come, too much rain! Roads kherab, finish! Oh, Sahib, anything for selling, watch, calculator, VCR camera taking?"

Unsure whether I would go by bus or, as I was still in the flush of relative affluence, take a private car, I promised to return in the morning.

"Better come early Sahib, before bus full."

The freedom of unspent money and time was beginning to slip away. The meter was ticking! Just that morning, I could have gone anywhere with anyone. Now my options were reduced. The broad, seemingly endless reaches offered by my maps narrowed. Paths had to be chosen and that made me nervous.

Back in my room, I prepared for my visitors. I wanted this Gul to understand from the start who was in charge, and that this was no shepherding job. I knew where I wanted to go, and how I was going to go there. On my maps, bearing many colors of prospective and alternative routes, I "finalized" again *the* route to Padam, which as the only real town in all Zaskar was to be the first destination. Padam was a good week of walking from the trailhead at Darcha. After Padam, I decided not to make any further commitment. If things worked out well with Gul, then he might go on from there. If not, then I would pay him off and no hard feelings.

The route I envisioned would take us—God! Now it was *us*—first by bus, or car, to Manali. In Manali we would spend a couple of days acclimatizing to the altitude and buying necessary provisions. From Manali, again by some sort of motor transport, we would cross the Rohtang Pass into Lahaul and continue to Darcha where ponies were available. From there the journey would be by foot, over the Shingo-la and then down the Zaskar Valley to Padam.

This would take a week to ten days at the most, so I wouldn't be committing too much to Gul.

Almost too close to the appointed hour Noor arrived with Gul in tow. If Noor was smooth and self-assured, a child of the city, Gul was the opposite. Though garbed in western style dress, a rather battered T-shirt and tight fitting polyester bell-bottomed pants, he smacked of the village. Despite the clear peasant origins, he did possess a veneer of citified ways. His banter and constant use of Western slang showed he had plied the street tout's trade for some time, and he was used to hanging out with young foreigners. In his mid-twenties, wiry but seemingly strong, he did possess that faraway look of one who partook of the herb. He was there, but at the same time he wasn't. One thing that struck me was his wolfish look. With his huge mouth, sharp teeth, and long nose, I could see him gobbling up Little Red Ridinghood, or some unsuspecting ferenghi, basket and all. There was a hint of nervousness on his part, perhaps, because of the disparity in our ages; I was older than his normal clientele. Was it because he was contemplating me as his next meal? Or was he just wondering if I could make it over the hill? More likely in those lean times, he really needed this job and hoped that he wouldn't blow it. How much he needed the job, I would learn only later. After some pleasantries, and at Noor's urging, he began to tell me something of himself.

Yes, he was from the village, nothing more than a small nondescript collection of farmhouses on the western side of the Vale where it climbed into the Pir Panjal below Gulmarg. At the age of eight, a bear mauled his father before his terrified eyes. They had gone together into the mountains to hunt. It was important they succeed for there was no meat at home and the family was large. Suddenly, not only would there be no meat, but no provider as well. Gul returned alone for help to bring in the torn body. Mortally wounded, the father lingered for some time, only compounding the family's troubles. After he died, Gul was sent by his mother to work as a servant on a houseboat that belonged to Noor's Uncle, a man called Aziz.

Somehow this was vaguely familiar. Could it be? Aziz, Aziz! Didn't Nazir have a brother named Aziz? I almost asked, but something

cautioned me to hold back. I wanted to get out of Delhi quickly and saw in Gul a means to that end. Besides, when it came down to it, so many of the houseboat-walas were interrelated. They formed a caste and married their own. I let him go on uninterrupted.

For a period approaching twenty years, he had worked in the tourist world of Srinagar, learning the tricks of separating travelers from their wealth, while at the same time making them thankful for this separation. As we talked, I could sense Gul was trying to read me. How humble should he be? How revealing of his own character? Most importantly, would this Sahib allow him his vices? Vices that later events revealed as many.

It seemed his main credentials for this job lay in a previous journey taken a few years back with a single, young English woman. I could imagine the type, robust, plain, desperate to write a romantic novel-like adventure with her life before she returned to a humdrum existence in some Midlands burb. They traveled from Srinagar to Leh, the capital of Ladakh, from there to Padam and up the Zanskar Valley to the Shingo La—the opposite direction of the journey I contemplated. He professed to know the route, the camping places, and people from whom we could hire pack animals. He began to expound on his great love for the mountains and trekking. Noor showed great deference to this "master" of the mountains. They were good! They sensed what I wanted to hear, then served it to me.

This wasn't difficult. Many had come before with my same hunger. It was a meal they were used to preparing, if not in reality, at least in the mind. They were staging the classic bait and switch. Yes, let this *Sahib* have his fantasy, but then let the harsh reality of the mountains set in and, in the meantime, strip him of his worldly goods. So many coming from the outside had studied the maps in the comfort of secure, ordered existences. Bold strokes traced overly ambitious trails, crossing too fast flowing rivers, and passes too deep in snow. After all, what did this detour over that eighteen thousand-foot pass cost to the armchair adventurer. Suddenly, I found myself no longer in the armchair and each inch of colorfully marked trail, if it was to be traveled, must be translated into sweat, ache and pain, and most importantly, beating back fear—one

trauma at a time. While Gul knew to some extent what lay ahead, he had no idea whether I knew.

Somehow in all of this we struck a deal, agreeing to travel together as far as Padam, all expenses to be paid by me. At the end of the journey, I would pay Gul ten dollars for each day.

It was my last night in Delhi. Alone in my room I decided to have a final indulgence—it would be a long time, if ever, until I returned to such fleshpot. I went out on the prowl. In the twilight of Connaught's colonnaded walkways, boys and men of all ages sidled forward to offer the pleasures of Delhi. Charas was the major vice offered to the foreigners but, if pressed, there could be others. Getting high in Delhi was not that attractive. There was too much going on, too much paranoia. The herb is better left for the mountains where it grows. No, the charas could wait. I had other more immediate needs. It had been some time since I had been with a woman. At my present age, there was no longer the incessant craving there once had been. After all, I could take care of that need very quickly. I had learned that trick a long time ago.

After eyeballing several of the loitering cabbies, I selected one whose standards of morality looked particularly low, and explained what was in my mind. After a brief show of moral outrage, quickly dismissed with the offer of baksheesh, the driver agreed to give it a go.

The cab stuttered through the traffic taking me deeper into an increasingly desperate and ramshackled part of the city. It was neither old nor new, and in the darkness, it was hard to know once again where or when I was. This was the compelling character of such a foreign place, to erase all reference to time and space for those not native to its environs. This referential vacuum allowed my mind to drift back to a similar circumstance many years ago.

* * *

I was alone, killing some time in Bombay. This was at the height of my drug trafficking. I enjoyed what was for India almost unimaginable wealth, at least as far as ready cash was concerned. This made me extremely arrogant, and I delighted in the power

over fellow humans that wealth secured. What a gas to toy with their greed! I was on a "business trip," whose outcome could have been death or prison as easily as success. It was easy to justify a doctrine of self-indulgence. This was what made me high, feel life, living on the edge of the precipice. It gave license to almost any behavior imaginable.

Ahead loomed the void, the nothing, where there would be, I most fervently hoped, neither redemption nor revenge, just nothing. That is why I felt little except the anticipation of pleasure when I allowed myself to be taken to a nearby brothel. After a parade of women of diverse charms and talents, the former exhibited and the latter promised, I selected a tall, clear-faced, girl. She looked extremely frightened. Imagine the thought of giving up your body to such a weeded-out, ginger beard ferenghi. Despite the fear, or perhaps because of it, the girl stirred my lusts. Unlike the others who threw out their sexuality in well-worn invitations, this girl offered an unspoken resistance. She offered the challenge of a conquest and, with conquest, domination. She didn't yet possess the arts to deceive, to make her client believe what wasn't there. Any emotion elicited from her would have been from her heart. I longed to make her scream with pleasure, to feel and to make me feel.

"What's that one's name," I asked the boss of the house.

"Geeta, very new girl, just come, not experienced. Maybe not right for Sahib. Maybe not have the talents Sahib requires. We have no time to teach Sahib."

Clad in a simple T-shirt and wrap-around cotton *lungi*, barefoot and bare of make-up, Geeta stood out like pure angel among this well-worn group of trollops. Her skin was a clear coffee cream, suggesting high caste origins. Her limbs were well formed, with tight budding breast and a shapely ass neither too fat nor too lean, a rarity in malnourished India.

"She'll do, she'll do, if the price is right."

A smile cracked the pimp's pockmarked face, exposing those ubiquitous betel-stained teeth of the Indian underclasses. "Maybe, Sahib charge for teaching?" He thought that was the

greatest joke and so did the other girls, for they broke into howls of laughter.

The girl named Geeta stood apart, looking confused and afraid. That vulnerability only whetted my appetite even deeper.

There was no way I was going to pursue my pleasures in the squalor of that crib. The owner would undoubtedly be watching through a peephole, maybe charging others for the pleasure. I wanted this girl on my turf, in my power. There was a host of fantasies running through my mind, the hot twisted dreams of long lonely nights and brief masturbatory flights; I wanted the freedom to exorcise them without interference. I completed the business with the boss, agreeing to pay the equivalent of fifty dollars for the night and arranged that Geeta would come to my room at the posh Taj Hotel. This request only increased Geeta's worry. The Taj was the premier tourist hotel in Bombay and, in consequence, well scrutinized by the police to deter, or at least get their cut, from just this kind of activity.

Later when Geeta arrived at my door, she looked as if the demons of hell were pursuing her. As frightened as she was of me, she was even more frightened what might lie outside the hotel room. The police had the reputation of being rather callous to young prostitutes who fell into their clutches. They were known to take their own pleasures en mass on the poor victim, before eventually ransoming her back to her owner. While she had looked well-scrubbed and simply dressed in the brothel, she now wore thick make-up and a westernized shalwar/kameez, accouterment that her keepers must have thought would give her a better chance of breaking through hotel security. She did look older, by about ten years.

I was drinking heavily, in response to nervousness and anticipation, and much of my inhibition had disappeared. Clad only in a lungi, my cock was so hard it threatened to escape from the folds. Guiding Geeta firmly into the room, I reflexively offered her a drink. She refused saying, "No sherab, I Brahmin." That pissed me off. Here was this whore about to take my cock wherever I wanted to put it, but thinking herself too pure to share my sherab.

I pushed her roughly onto the bed. I heard myself mutter. "Okay, you don't want to drink sherab, I'll give you something else to drink." God, was I aroused. As I looked down, I saw before me, entirely within my power, this woman-child whose inherent innocence was only underscored by the garish mask of rouge and powder. Some primal button deep inside me was pushed. Sure, I like to try things, even if they are a bit odd. You know, just once to see what it is like. But this was something new for me, something I had missed during those years of lock-up in boarding school, when I should have been lusting after girls like Geeta instead of fantasizing over the younger boys. She was a little girl playing dress up, the opening of the bud. Never had I been with one so young. Even in Nam where anything was possible, I had stuck to more appropriate ages. Was this some new side of my sexuality, an unexplored dimension?

Geeta was in a state of terror now. She wanted to run, but was probably afraid that would be even more dangerous. If she split, she would have to face the gauntlet of hotel security and then, even if she made it, she would have to return empty-handed to her master.

"Ah, a Brahmin," I heard my voice grow callous, signaling that a darker being was now directing my actions. "You need to make pujah, my little Brahmin; you need to worship the *linga*."

With these words, I parted my lungi and pointed my cock squarely at those pouting lips. Then hurrying to get inside before I exploded, I grabbed the braided ropes of her hair and thrust into her soft, quivering mouth. She struggled a minute, caught by surprise. Then, as if suddenly remembering that this was what she had come to do, she resignedly lay back to let me take her. She didn't have the slightest idea about what to do with this male organ now deep in her mouth. She most likely thought this was the way Angrezi coupled.

Her ineptitude, together with the wooden way she offered herself, only increased my irritation. I felt the fires within momentarily flicker. Verging on drunkenness, I downed another shot. Then filling my mouth with whiskey, I roughly grabbed her, pried her mouth open, and forced the burning liquid between her struggling lips. If she would suck my cock, she would suck sherab, Brahmin

or not. Yes, this was going to be a rape, not only of body, but mind. I would leave the bitch with nothing.

I thought at the time that this would be a crime without consequence or retribution, a freebie at least for me. Geeta was bought and paid for, my purchase and property for the night. By God, this whore would do my will! This was all before I came to understand the immutable laws of karma, and how the evil I did that night was as much against me as against poor Geeta. Now I understand that in my lust for Geeta's youth, for her innocence, was the seed of karma that was to later bear a bitter fruit. It had been echoes of that same innocence which drew me to Tara. Was Tara the instrument of Geeta's revenge? What is it they say about revenge being best served cold?

While she struggled to swallow the liquor, my hands began to explore her body. There was no love in my caress, only the desire to possess. I was making clear to this girl that it was my body not hers; the breasts I now exposed to the dimmed light were my breasts. I could suck them, twist them, bite into them, as was my pleasure. She was crying now, not loudly, but with a soft whimper. This only inflamed me more. I struggled to remove her tight-fitting underclothes. My hands probing beneath the waistband of her panties, callously groping into the depths of her, searching for the wetness that would signal response. Fearing that her clothes would be ripped apart, she began to help me. Soon she lay completely naked, her body open to my will. Despite her youth, she possessed the promise of woman in the first flush of puberty, yet to my special delight she was almost hairless, revealing the perfection of her sex. Seeking to establish my complete domination, I rolled her over, exposing the lush flesh of her buttocks whose youth made ever so firm, ever so soft.

The combination of alcohol, soft flesh, and fear drove me near mad. I was drawn back into childhood again, staring at an untrammelled strand, an untouched field of snow and couldn't stand the perfection...her perfection. I had to leave my mark. Pulling her head into my lap and guiding her lips to my penis, I forced myself into her. This time I tried to show her what to do and she responded as a dutiful pupil. I bent over and gently bit into the flesh of her ass, kneading the soft mound with my teeth, teasingly

brushing her the lips of her sex with my tongue. Then I thrust my tongue inside, probing deeper and deeper, tasting the sweetness of the jasmine oil mixed with the moisture of her own essence.

The fires were again rekindled. My cock ached with hardness, on the verge of bursting. I swung around and holding her hips drove full force between her dimpled buttocks, brushing against the cleft of her ass, teasing what lay within. She protested, fearing what in India was an all too common practice between men and their whores: "not there Sahib, please not there." For a moment, I thought of the pleasure in doing just what she feared most; after all, she was my creature, at least for that moment—in such lust, only the moment was important. Then, sobered by the sense of impending explosion, I ceased my play and entered her "correctly," lifting her waist higher and forcing passage. The resistance I met only heightened my excitement. I now realized I had bought not just "pussy," but a virgin "pussy"—I had left my mark.

* * *

The taxi came to an abrupt halt. I was shaken out of my reverie, but in the fleeting moment it took to regain my present, I recalled the after-emotion of that encounter. It was enough, and I knew in my heart, whatever the momentary delight, this night's work would also leave the same bitter taste, the self-doubt, self hate, that comes from knowing I had used another.

"Forget it, my friend. Let s go back to the hotel." I told the driver.

"No fucky-fucky, Sahib?"

"No, not tonight."

"Ah Sahib, my Uncle having same problem. I take you tomorrow to good Indian doctor? He fix good."

"No, I don't think so...shokria, my friend."

To myself I thought, "Am I'm too old for this? I'm really losing heart." I was becoming too philosophical, thinking too much, going for it too little. I chuckled to myself as I thought of the ad

campaign that had been in vogue, just before I left the states, "Just do it." How great it was to be young, without the ghosts of past events and people. How great just to get your rocks off and not know the consequences. I would have given much not to have known the fate of Geeta.

But I did know. Several days later Geeta, with tears streaming from her eyes, had tracked me down. She sprang on me from the shade of the Gateway of India, that monstrous monument to the Raj, standing adjacent to the hotel. In tears, she told me that on leaving my room, she had been grabbed by the room bearers, gang-raped, sodomized, and brutalized. Her worst fears of me that night came true many times over. At the time, I cynically dismissed her plea for help as a ruse to get further compensation, probably put up to it by her pimp. I had heard tales of how such girls would attach themselves to sympathetic Angrezi. Later, after noticing the smirk on the face of my room bearer, I realized Geeta's story might be true. My heart went out to the girl, but then what could I do? I had, after all, a "real" life back in the States. Geeta was but a momentary reality soon to recede into the haze.

How much simpler it was to be unaware, to be free of all this self doubt crap, to be a barbarian, to take what you want and find justification in your success. Yet now, rather than move on to another whore, to another moment of release from all the madness, I am left limp dick in hand, pondering whether my own acts, though properly compensated and certainly more controlled, weren't in the end just as savage as the bearers. Who in the fuck should care about some whore in Bombay, where just to survive was a privilege. Was this the legacy of my tour in academe, my consciousness "raised" and sensitized? Had I now kissed my manhood good-bye? Sometimes, in such moments of inner torment, I longed for the simple, brutal reality of Nam. There morality was measured in survival. If you lived you were just, and anything you did to survive was justified.

I must have gotten older, for back in my hotel room, I felt a certain sense of relief, though tinged with an even deeper, bittersweet sense of loneliness. After the tangle of events and relationships in the past few years, there was a peace in being alone, yet I missed

the loving. This, however, was just the kind of thinking I was trying to escape—the endless self-dialog of recrimination, re-examination, conversations with ghosts. I had tried the various mind-trips, Buddhist, Hindu, even Sufi. It was these that were so much a part of India's allure. I had thought they might blot out the horrors of my "reality" in Nam, but those nightmares remained, indelibly etched. Only my own familiar standbys, drugs, sex, and rock n' roll, in that order, but preferably in combination, could do it.

To ease what I knew was going to be one more journey into the haze of yesterdays, I decided to order up a real indulgence—two pecks of Johnny Walker Black. This was an almost obscene extravagance, at three hundred rupees (at the time about US\$ 9.00) per peck, in a country where the average daily wage would be less than one-tenth that amount. I thought of that as the waiter, with almost awe-struck reverence, delivered the two fingers of amber liquid in a spotless glass. Struck by a sudden flash of guilt, I slipped this acolyte of Bacchus fifty rupees. It might take the man ten days or more of work to earn the price of the drink. Ten, twelve hour days, running up and down stairs, playing the game of humility that was important in prizing out baksheesh from the hotel's predominantly Indian clientele.

I settled into an overstuffed chair; the ceiling fans droned on, filling the cavernous room with a comforting envelope of white noise. The overzealous air conditioner chilled the air, reminding me of cool winds I would soon feel in the mountains. Should I worry about the fluorocarbons that were surely spewing from its ill-fitted joints? "Fuckit! And fuck that bastard bearer too," I thought to myself as the warmth of the whiskey caught me from the inside, radiating ever so pleasantly upward to the brain, numbing all that ingrained social consciousness bullshit. "You're in India Guy, you can't worry; you can't take responsibility; all you can do is pass through." My mind went to Akbar's dictum. The world was a bridge, to be passed over and not built upon. I had tried to build in imitation of my heritage, but what had I gained in that struggle—perhaps only the struggle. It was so hard to see clearly in the face of all our wealth, our plenty. Yet here in India, where Maya's veil had worn so thin, it became clear. There was no other

way to comprehend the madness, no other way to get to the other side.

I promised myself with courage borrowed from Mr. Walker; beginning tonight, I must fight back the ghosts, drive them back, leave them on the other side to make their own way. Stop thinking, Guy, or if you must think, fill your mind with those mountains that lie ahead. Soon you will smell their sweet breath, feel their strong embrace. Surrender Guy! Give up all those things that have come to be you—those things you believe to be you. They make no difference to the mountains. The mountains get only what they see. With that last line, I laughed myself into sleep.

Chapter VII

*Restless mind is, So strongly shaken in the grip of the senses:
Gross and grown hard with stubborn desire for what is worldly.
How shall it be tamed?*

—Bhagavad Gita—

HILLS

Thanks to Walker Sahib, the morning came without much of a struggle. I awoke to the intentioned bustle of the room bearer as he performed India's great morning ritual, bed chai. In this case, the "chai" was bed kofi in deference to my American tastes. Ah, the luxury! I had grown to love the intimacy of Indian service. Room bearers moved into the most private recesses of your life without the slightest hesitation, acting as if they were extensions of your body. God only knew what the servants really thought because most masked their own existence well. As far as you were concerned, their only purpose on earth was to make your life more pleasant.

It must be age that was getting to me; I was an extremely slow study. I had arranged for Gul to pick me up at 5:30 a.m. "sharp." By 6:15 I was getting antsy. Readjusting my sense of time was difficult, particularly in moments of stress when a baser response to anxiety replaced more normal thoughts. I didn't want to miss the bus. That would mean loss of the ticket money—throughout Indian if you snooze, you lose. I told the concierge to get a cab and left word, should Gul ever arrive, to meet me at the bus.

Life in India slowly, very slowly, chips away at the most deep-seated western paranoia. Things that seem to be falling apart somehow miraculously come together. Or, failing that, there is always sufficient time to realize failure is for the best. Anyway, I was rather ambivalent about Gul. I was more than willing to let fate play a role. If Gul didn't show up, then...? But it all came together. Just as I was pulling up to the bus stop, a car bearing Gul's wildly gesticulating form came into view.

When hired, Gul claimed to have all the necessary gear for the trek. Not that I expected it to approximate my own. Yet I was shocked that he planned to cross the Himalaya with only an extra pair of pants, T-shirt, socks, sweater, and an obviously exhausted pair of high-top sport shoes. Even his cap, with "Steinlager" emblazoned across, was of dubious value against the cold. Gifts from former clients and foreign, this pitiful collection of cast-offs seemed very modern to Gul. How much better off he would have been if he had stuck to his traditional clothing. I knew this was going to be a problem. I had been around enough to suspect a motive behind Gul's apparent ignorance of what was needed. Gul was too experienced. He had already scoped me out and knew that in my overstuffed bags would be sufficient goodies to spare. What better way to get them than by guilt tripping. Once on the trail, there were no longer servants and masters, employees and employers, but only fellow travelers. Certainly, Gul must have thought, I wouldn't sit by warm and dry while he froze to death. Once I gave him the clothing, how could I be so mean as to ask for them back? In all this Gul was on the mark.

The bus was relatively new and, as it was government-owned, devoid of most of the trapping that decorated private buses, such as shrines housing the patron God of the driver. On private vehicles, it was common to see a Ganesh, the immensely popular elephant deity of luck and wealth, with eyes that would light up every time the bus would brake. Sometimes, if the driver had a mechanical bent, the eyes would sync with the turn signals, the right or left orb, frantically winking according to the change of the bus's direction.

Despite its lack of ritual paraphernalia, the bus did come equipped with both video and "stereo" sound system. The former seemed to have died many journeys before, but the latter was still a highly functional instrument of torture. How functional quickly became clear. As soon as the bus left the streets of Delhi, settling into the long run across the open plain of Haryana, on came the first of many tapes of popular Hindi movie music. Now it is not that I have some cultural bias against this genre of music. There are times when I enjoy its raw emotional appeal, an appeal so blatant that it transcends the barrier of language. However, if as Marshall McLuhan claimed, the medium is the message, then what this

system delivered was a message straight out of Hell. Innumerable trips over the unpaved roads of the North had taken their toll. This, along with the noise and distortion inherent in Indian music tapes, blew every speaker on the bus. The extreme range of modulation was reduced to a hideous wave of distortion that put Metallica to shame.

Ahead lay a journey of sixteen hours. Like it or not, this was the only way to travel north and stay within budget. The only recourse was to do as those who spend their entire lives in this loop, dial out and endure. It was like any other form of pain. You could either flail hopelessly, or let it wash over you, eventually to pass on so you could resume your business. Resigned to this ordeal, I struggled to find some diversion. For a while I chatted with Gul, but this was a strain. On the surface, Gul seemed glib, yet his actual mastery of English was an unschooled amalgam of slang and boilerplate pleasantries; more than enough to perform his duties, yet in no way sufficient to keep me intellectually engaged. As I struggled to make conversation, I could see Gul's mind beginning to wander. A consummate street tout, who made his living bagging tourist for the houseboats or one of Noor's other tour offerings, Gul was constantly on the prowl.

Later, in the grip of charas, I caught a glimpse of that wolf hiding just beneath the surface of Gul's rather tattered human persona, the one he donned to hunt his prey. He really did remind me of a wolf: his long jowls, which over the course of the journey became increasingly bearded, flashing white teeth, a voracious, shifty leer always lurking in his glance. At times, I would catch him looking at me. It seemed as if he was almost salivating. Was this wolf man to become my executioner? How often had I casually sworn: "May wild dogs tear me apart if...." Was this to be my wild dog? Then control would return. The momentary flight into paranoia was— for a time—put to rest.

As I attempted to shift the conversation, Gul's eyes restlessly moved about the passengers. Most were from, what in India would be considered, the middle class. Of course, they couldn't be equated with Western middle classes. Recently this group had exploded in number, by as much, some say, as the entire population of the States. This was something new. During my last

visit, they had seemed only a small wedge-like buffer between a minute percentage who controlled India's wealth and the vast majority who barely survived. This growth was given as evidence of India's advance, but as I looked out at the already ravaged landscape, I wondered at the wisdom of unleashing such a huge group of potential consumers. But who was I to cast stones at these folks? After all, they only wanted what I took for granted?

The passengers were petty government officials, military officers on leave, shopkeepers, business folk and professionals, lucky to make over a thousand rupees per month. Several young couples were obviously making a post-nuptial pilgrimage to Manali. In the wake of Kashmir's turmoil, Manali had become the destination of choice for honeymooning Indians.

Gul's eye quickly assayed, then rejected, interest in his fellow countrymen—he did cast rather wistful looks to the young brides. Instead, he was homing in on the few ferenghi tourists. Across the aisle, and a row in front of us, was a character that would have been a familiar sight in these parts twenty years ago, a lone young Western female. Tall, thin, and strung out, it was obvious why she was traveling north. Kulu is more than an Indian holiday destination.

Following the course of the Beas River, Kulu stretches from southern slope of the Pir Panjal under the Rohtang Pass to the point where the Beas enters the plains at Largi Gorge. As throughout the much of the Indian Himal, there is a strong association with the mountains and the pantheon of Hindu deities. At its sangams, those confluences where the main stream of the Beas joins with the streams feeding it from many side valleys, stand temples to Shiva, Vishnu, Parvati, Ganesh and others. It is for this reason that this "land at the end of the earth" is also known as the "Valley of the Gods."

The remoteness, beauty, inherent mystery, not to mention its cash crop, makes Kulu a natural refuge. This was none the less true for remnants of what once was a great wave; no, not the Aryans, the Mongols, or even the Imperial Raj, but rather that exodus of Western youth who inundated India—hippies, freaks, heads, love children, whatever. In side valleys such as the Parvati, individuals and small groups drifted together, renting huts or rooms, enjoying

the isolation and, most importantly, the local cash crop. This was chillum country where charas was plentiful enough to allow its consumption in the cone-shaped, hand-held pipes, the mark of the true charasi.

With this knowledge, it wasn't too difficult to figure out where the woman was headed. Her nervous, chain-smoking, disheveled appearance, slightly swollen hands, betrayed her as a typical denizen of some high altitude charasi hideaway. My guess was that she had been down in Delhi to pick up cabled money. I could see her standing in the line at the American Express with all the other freaks, hoping against hope.

"Today will be the day the money arrives; no longer will I have to eke by on morning tea and a rupee's worth of samosa. I can pay the bill for that flea trap where I have been crashing, no longer sneaking by the manager in whose eyes I see that indelible question, 'Will you pay like a burra mem, or try to beat me, just another Euro-trash fucker?' Most importantly, now I can escape Delhi."

A few hundred dollars from a friend or relative, payment for a little charas sent through the mails, could last many months, if not years, in an up-valley village. It would be more than sufficient to supply real needs: shelter, firewood, matches, rice, daal, and chai. A year's supply of ganja could be harvested in the wild. If you brought enough clothing, only those optional wants would be missing, luxuries such as tobacco, sugar, or whatever other non-indigenous drug you preferred. Even at a most basic level, you could be sure of a better life than the locals enjoyed—at least you didn't have to toil in the fields.

Even for Gul, who liked his smoke as much as the next person, this woman was too far-gone. He tried to spark a conversation, offering to light one of her innumerable cigarettes, but to his chagrin she ignored him. I watched this with interest, both out of boredom and my need to understand this man with whom I would be traveling for the next few weeks. Finally, Gul saw that it was hopeless. His eyes, which only moments before radiated such intensity, now feigned an air of total disregard. Vindictively, he went even further, openly displaying disgust. This latter behavior was symptomatic of his ingrained Muslim understanding of a

woman's place. What kind of woman could this be? Is she one of those shameful creatures who didn't need a man; who preferred women? Didn't she prove this by her apparent disinterest in Gul? If Gul valued any quality in himself, it was his ability to attract and control women. Good Lord, I was already annoyed. This was rather worrisome. In the coming days, with the increasing stress of altitude, hardship, loneliness, where would this annoyance lead?

I suppose Gul was only acting as any young man, testing the limits of his physical charms, trying to overcome by his own will the inherent uncertainty of manhood. It is a curse that cuts across all cultural boundaries and doubly so for one trained to find women one way, but in experience finding them another. Not that Gul was innocent of women; he had been engaged at birth and married at the age of fourteen. He professed not loving his wife, despite—or, perhaps, in consequence of—having grown up with her. There had been no consummation, and he had divorced her, sending her back to her parents.

Working on the houseboat provided the opportunity to meet many foreign women. They were natural sex objects for the local men because, within Kashmiri society, social contact with the opposite sex was limited to immediate family, mother, sisters—only those who posed no normal sexual attraction. All Kashmiri men in the tourist trade had tales of foreign women. In many instances these tales, although in the local fashion intricately embroidered, bore some truth. Kashmiri men can be courtly, tall, dark, and occasionally quite handsome. They are also woman-starved. A foreign woman can count on making a connection. If lacking physical charms, she can always trade on her potential to fulfill what is for many men their greatest hope, marriage to a foreigner, emigration and citizenship in the world beyond the mountains.

Gul shared this common dream. He claimed he had almost succeeded with his English girl. She promised to return, and he had high hopes. But in the interval of separation, she had reconsidered and disappeared. This disappointment in no way made him lose hope. Every foreign woman, young or old, was a renewed opportunity. But Gul knew instinctively that this chain-smoking woman was not such a one.

A young Indian couple caught my eye. They were obviously newly-weds, probably strangers. Maybe this trip was the first time they had been alone, going right from the ceremony to the bus. Most likely they had met through a newspaper classified; this is how city people find suitable mates. They shared an aura of excitement, perhaps a virginal anticipation of the consummation that surely take place that night. But also because they were embarking on a lifetime relationship. Outside looking in, I envied them. For a long time, I gazed at those two young people, until finally the man caught my glance. Mistaking my intention for one more appropriate to Gul, he gave me an angry stare. How could he know that it wasn't upon the charms of his bride I mused? No, it was their undertaking that I pondered.

I couldn't help thinking back to when Mei and I had resolved to make our very different lives flow into one. Somehow over the years, our streams, once united in a single flow, diverged. The temple of our marriage, no longer marking that sangam of convergence, fell into dissolution. On this earth, the union we all subconsciously seek, that submergence into the One, the loss of self, is only an illusion. Marriage could be a precursor to the greater act, the first step in the loss of ego. With most it led to the creation of yet another generation, and the submergence of the parents' ego into the child. But that hadn't been our fate. We struggled back and forth, wanting, yet at the same time not wanting, to lose ourselves in one another. In our passion we got close, the boundaries dissolving between what was Mei and what was Guy. There were times, just as with psychedelics, when for a moment, we became drops returning to the ocean—how right the Chinese to describe the act of love as "clouds and rain." However, passion, like drugs, couldn't be sustained. We had to come down, struggling to regain our own identity, each one refusing to give the other the lead.

Suddenly, that grotesque distortion of noise, which some perverse twist of logic had deemed an advance in travel technology, shattered my reverie. The killer tape machine had been quiet for some time, but now we were entering the hills and, perhaps, the driver imagined this "music" would soothe our nerves on the twisting road. Yet it was a torture mixed with compassion.

Momentarily it saved me from that montage of memories, ever ready to play whenever my connection to the outside wavered.

The remainder of the trip was a test of endurance. The space between the seats grew ever smaller. Having been through the search for comfort countless times, I lost all hope of finding a sustainable position. My only solace was looking out the dusty, cracked windows at the increasingly vertical countryside. Although we were climbing, we hadn't yet escaped from India. The ravages of overpopulation, expected and thus less visible on the plains, were more apparent in this fragile place. Clear-cut of their trees, the hills were deeply eroded.

The monsoon was late, and dust filled the air. Ahead lay the lush green of the sub-alpine world, cloud forests with towering stands of deodar, rich grasses, rhododendron groves, and all the abundance which good water, virgin soil and, most importantly, lack of human presence could provide. But that place was still ahead.

Conversation ran out. Gul left his seat and was sleeping somewhere in the rear of the bus. It helped in passing the time to note that the hours were now dwindling, sixteen, had become twelve, twelve, eight, and now there were only a couple left. But this was India, I thought with misgiving. The clerk had said sixteen hours to Manali when I bought the ticket; that sixteen could easily turn into twenty-four or more.

We were now on a dirt or, as they say in India, "unmetalled," road. This was no more than a wide track blasted out of the side of a cliff, overhanging a steep-walled ravine; a torrent thundered a thousand feet below. Suddenly, as we approached a curve, a straggly, piebald dog came bounding from the opposite direction. The driver, who had been barreling along, saw the dog and slowed. At the reduced speed we entered the curve. Then right in front of us, to our collective horror, a huge Tata lorry also attempted to brake.

Brakes screeched, road dust, the smell of burning rubber filling the air. The bus careened toward the precipice's edge, toward what I thought was certain death. In the flash of events my mind raced. How early death had come. I had romantically imagined a casual

courting, approaching Mara, just as I had courted my women before, savoring the slow dance of increasing intimacy; where, only after complete satiation, would I find quick painless release. If death came on this curve, courtship would be only "slam bam, thank you ma'am."

The danger dissipated as quickly as it developed. We came to a halt inches from the road's edge. The ugly, half-starved dog had saved our lives. If she hadn't been at that exact spot, at that precise second, both vehicles would have maintained their speed, unable to brake in time. The forty-odd people aboard the bus would have certainly died—a normal occurrence on the "hill" roads of India. It didn't take much of a philosophical bent to start wondering. In the remaining hours to Manali, wrapped in the pitch-blackness of the outside world, I was reminded of the importance of life, not only human, but all life. That dog's life had been worth so many human lives, not only those aboard the bus, but all whom they touched. The dog had been like a stone tossed into the water. Her action, whether intentional or not, radiated out across time, giving life, changing life, ultimately making life.

I dozed. We passed through Kulu bazaar, a place that for many was ultima Thule—it was nearby that Alexander's armies rebelled saying, "no further." But it was my nature, and perhaps curse, that I always thought of what lay beyond. Before leaving Japan, I had laid out a grand plan to that fellow ex-pat, the one who had sold me the charas. After detailing all the places I planned to go, my friend, with a touch of mockery in his voice, suggested that for himself he would never get past Kulu.

Some could go to such a place and find a niche. Even though Kulu was filled with ostensibly kindred souls, escapees from the World, they represented tribes, each with its own hierarchy in which I could never find place. These were small, village-like worlds that, because they were made up of outcast, were extremely exclusive in their nature. It was a world where you had to have an identifiable role. Part of this came from a need for security. More than one INTERPOL/DEA/CBI type had tried to infiltrate. What a good excuse for an all-expense paid holiday! Besides, since these were folks rejected by their own societies, being human, they quickly formed their own, with a hierarchy and all, passing the shit down

the line. No, the only way I could have enjoyed that life was to be the one making the rules. Yes, then maybe I would have lived in such communion. But that is not really the case. I had tried it.

* * *

That was when I was (in what turned out to be) a final fling in Kabul. We called it something typical of the time, "Collective Mind Productions," very trendy, very communal. I guess I wanted everyone to think they had an equal say, of course wanting at the same time to be the central figure—it was either that or I would take my ball and go home. That had been at the start of the film in Afghanistan. I had that ferenghi-khanna, a rambling foreigner-styled house in the western quarter known as Shar-i-Nau. The quarters were quite large, and I was anxious to surround myself with courtiers. In those days people often lived out their drug-induced fantasies, and I began to be that merchant prince cum artiste of dream. I threw lavish parties and invited travelers whom I found interesting to take up residence. At first, I took in mostly women, but with the women came men and, at any one time, I might have had a dozen or so semi-permanent guests. They were more than willing to exchange temporary allegiance for a meal and a roof. This was particularly true when the cold winds began to blow across the Hindu Kush. Kabul turned into an arctic wasteland, where the wolves and brigands prowled. There was plenty of money after the first few runs—I kept telling Chad that he must reinvest—always hold out the hope for the big score, playing upon his greed. That he was investing in my lavish lifestyle, I made less clear. But what the hell, I was taking the big risks.

When Mei arrived, my seeming generosity appalled her. It wasn't long before my flock was reduced to include only the most useful—those who were willing to make the run back to NYC. For some reason, Mei didn't think providing sex a valid reason for staying. But even though I had tripped out, enjoying the rush of benevolent despot, I was unsettled, as well I might have been. Somewhere behind this pretense of power—the power over another to send them out to score and smuggle or to use them for my pleasure—there was an uneasy feeling. This was before I knew about Charley

KALAGIYA

Manson, Jim Jones, and before the Collective Mind freaked out. I had the fantasy and enjoyed it, as long as it was the stuff of my mind, just like the weird sexual fantasies I sometimes let myself take off on. Yet when I crossed the line from mind to matter, when others paid for my play, then I began to lose my nerve, questioning my right. My natural inclination for power was something to struggle against. It was a drive that disturbed all of my relationships, perhaps finding its ultimate excess in sexuality. Dredging into the dualistic beliefs of childhood—a world of struggle between good and evil—I considered my desire for power to be an inherent evil.

Therefore, unlike my friend, I couldn't contemplate hanging out, even in a place as beautiful as Kulu. Of course, none of this would have ever run through his head. He would just go, get high, and dig the scene. "You think too much Guy; you think too much."

* * *

We arrived in Manali after sixteen hours almost to the minute. Somehow in all the apparent chaos, which to a ferenghi is India, things did work. Only when you got out of the cities, and saw how vast the land, how huge the population, could you appreciate the Indian bureaucratic genius. Certainly, the mountain roads, such as the one I had just traveled, stood in testimony.

Night arrivals in strange places are always confusing. As we approached the main bazaar, I discussed with Gul what might be the best place to stay. I had my faithful Lonely Planet, but with our pile of saman its recommendations were beyond practical walking distance. Thinking Gul might have his own preference, I tried to get a suggestion, but he seemed reluctant. Whether this was from true ignorance or, more likely, a tendency not to take responsibility, I hadn't had time to figure out. The bus came to a stop, and everyone started to push out. When I emerged from the door, several card-walas immediately besieged me, each proffering the business card of the "cleanest," "most modern," and, of course, all around "number one" in Manali.

In the final hour of the ride I had been building, with the aid of Lonely Planet, my own vision of that "number one"—a rustic bungalow, warmed and scented by a roaring fire of cedar logs. Over that fire a kindly, gray-bearded chowkidar would prepare a simple but delicious chicken curry or, perhaps, a trout freshly caught from a nearby stream. This stream would then lull me into the deepest, most refreshing sleep. I would awake the following morning to the cry of an eagle or hawk. As I looked to the heavens, searching out the source of the call, I would behold a sweeping panorama of high mountains, their snowy peaks washed crimson and pink by the rising sun.

For this I had only the guidebook and a propensity for wishful thinking to blame. My fantasy quickly shattered when Gul reported back that there were no cabs to be found. He reminded me, "Dadee, Manali very small, not city like Delhi or Srinagar, after dark peoples in homes." Gul, however, didn't come back empty-handed. He was accompanied by a young man, raggedly attired, who looked as if he hadn't eaten for days. He carried a small loop of rope the symbol and essential tool of all who plied his ancient trade. And it fell to this porter to make our hotel choice. After hitting several nearby spots and finding them full, we finally secured a room in a half-finished building two blocks behind the main bazaar. It was most definitely not the stuff of fantasy, no fragrant cedar wood fire, no smiling chowkidar. The morning light wouldn't reveal crystalline peaks, only the adjoining wing still under construction. The hammers of the carpenters and the curses of the masons under loads of brick and mortar would drown out my eagle's call.

The dust of new construction lay thickly on the room's few furnishings, two beds, a chair, small table. Bare light bulbs jutted from walls unevenly washed with lime green. There was an attached bath with plumbing fixtures that, while new, looked as if they had been in use since the time of the Raj. A moat of leaking water surrounded the toilet. Despite all of this, it was by local standards relatively clean. Although there was cold, running water, if I wanted it hot, I had to order it by the bucket, which inevitably reached me luke-warm.

Curtains hung limply from a rope stretched across one window. Another window bare of curtains looked into the open door of an adjoining room, where at least a dozen young Indian men, students perhaps, had taken up occupancy. They were sitting in a circle on the floor deep in cards. They seemed to be enjoying themselves in the height of luxury. Manali, unlike much of India, wasn't dry. These fellows took full advantage, tying on a good one. They waved to me, offering a drink of some obscure brand of IMLF—the commonly used acronym for Indian-made foreign liquor. I was too tired for diplomacy and shined them on, perpetuating, I am sure, the myth of the uptight Angrezi. Momentarily affronted, there was much sideways shaking of heads followed by looks of resignation: "What could you expect from a stiff-necked Angrez?" Then they went back to their business, their drunken discourse the only babble that lulled me to sleep that night. I was much too exhausted to care.

If the dark hinted, the morning light revealed Manali's true character. Short of my expectation, it lacked the patina of those fashionable hill-stations gone to seed, those relics of the Raj, Gulmarg, Simla, Almora, Mussoorie, or Darjeeling. This shouldn't have been a surprise, for the town had grown from a motley collection of tea stalls to its current condition only in the past twenty years. While a few foreigners languidly strolled in the streets, most the tourists were from middle-class India, and the amenities were designed for their expectations. This hodge-podge of shops, restaurants of dubious quality, and hotels, which like flowers, "weeds" would be more apt, were either preparing to open, in a brief moment of bloom or withering away.

There was much to do to prepare for the trip. I wanted to put it all into Gul's hands, but quickly found that Gul was just as unwilling to take this responsibility as he had the choice of hotel. In the past, I had always relied on a local to do this type of preparation, buying food, equipment, getting transportation. But that had been in fatter times when rupees were like the rain. Now they were extremely finite, and much of my thought was devoted to preserving my rapidly shrinking nest egg.

I had arrived in India with several thousand dollars. By the time I left Delhi that had dwindled to twenty-two hundred in dollars and

five hundred more in rupees traded on the "black" with Noor. I had been in India less than a week and already a large chunk of my funds was gone. I expected this. Delhi was always a great drain; just being there made me nervous. I knew each day spent there would cost me a week, if not a month, in the mountains, most likely meaning off the rest of my life. This paltry amount was a fortune to most Indians, but they also had homes, families, and the means, however meager, to generate more. For me this money was the sand in the hourglass of my future. It was a measure of my remaining existence. When it ran out, when the last rupee was spent, my time would be up and...there was no further plan...except that vague charas thing. I was like the condemned man who, having days before his execution, steels himself thinking: "I still have some days for the appeal to come through." Then, even twenty-four hours before: "I still have some hours." Then an hour before: "I still have some minutes." You get the drift. In this way, I was setting myself up for what I couldn't do by my own hand.

* * *

Months ago, though it now seems like years, on that final day with Tara, I had taken her to a small beach near San Diego. Both of us were desperate to end the conflict our relationship had become. Tara had a new love in whom to retreat, but I had only myself, a self, "too old, too fucked up," that I wished desperately to escape. I had burned my bridge to Mei and there was no way back. I didn't feel strong enough to face the task of rebuilding.

The surf made an eerie hollow roar as it filtered through the storm-piled pebbles. Everything was out of whack, the scale all wrong. I felt as if I had suddenly become the Incredible Shrinking Man, that the pebbles making up the beach were grains of sand. I was disappearing out of sight. It was just wishful thinking. How I wanted to disappear, no pain, no horror of a grotesque mutilation of my body. I had seen too much of that; I knew what it was to have a bullet crash through your skull. For some crazy reason, I cared about what I would leave behind. I stripped off my clothes and slowly entered the water. Then I heard Tara's voice, "Don't do it Guy, please don't do it." I savored the drama, I could have done it

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with Tara watching, or at least thought I could. Sobs convulsed her small body. I had never been able to stand up to her tears, and she knew it. For the moment I thought, "REPRIEVE!" Maybe she did still care for me? The hesitation was just enough to break the spell, scattering my resolve. Yet I was in the same place, nothing had changed. Tara wanted me to disappear as much as I did; she just didn't want to watch.

There was a death on that beach, but it was the death of *us*, not of me. Later when she was gone, I realized I couldn't bring such irreversible closure with my own hand. I hated myself even the more for what I saw as weakness. It was then I saw my course. I could leave the world, at least the world of Guy, yet at the same time still live. An inner core of my being detached from its surface. If this shell, this Guy, existed in the reflection of others, then it would disappear, if there were no others to mirror its image. In rejecting this captivating reflection, I came to see it as alien distortion of a more essential me. To swim off into death would be too radical a measure; it would not only kill this alien being, but the essential me as well. Yes, the thing was to get out of the mirror's way, escaping its distorted image. I would begin again my search for self, only this time from the inside.

* * *

That wasn't the first time I had toyed with suicide, but it was the first time I had moved from my head to a conscious physical act. I can't remember a time when the thought of death hasn't lurked somewhere close by. Oh, there have been moments when I have driven back, set it aside, replaced it with some temporary high. However, it is always there, waiting to fill the void. I often think of death as a lover, as Death...now as Mara. Perhaps it first came to me on one of those Nam acid trips...so much had. Yet I had an ultimate distaste (a.k.a. lack of nerve?) for the violence required "to go for it." Was it that I wanted Death to seduce me, rather than be the seducer—catcher rather than pitcher? Perhaps that explained my entanglements with drugs, war, even love, and all the other exposure to which I gravitate. I always hoped that I would be taken, but no pain please. Then I could be free to start again,

although as I got more of life under my belt, even the idea of starting over lost its appeal. It wasn't that I didn't love life for I did, but I was too much of a realist not to see that in my current permutation, as Guy, there was too much against me. Yes, the money would eventually run out. But in the meantime, there was still life to enjoy and a challenge to travel as far as there was land...and mind.

At times Gul's English seemed quite articulate, albeit in a street-wise way. Therefore, I was rather surprised when, after much fencing over preparing a list of needed items, he confessed to being illiterate. Because he came from a small village, his schooling was limited to the rote reading of the Koran. It was true he had spent much of his adolescence near Srinagar, but then he was too busy, exploited by Aziz, his uncle and boss. Perhaps "exploit" is too harsh a word. Aziz, most likely, thought he was providing this young, fatherless boy with an opportunity to escape the village, learn a trade, and make a financial contribution to the fatherless family.

Gul's inability to read made it impossible for me to do what I most desired, walk off into the hills, poke around the outlying villages, photograph. Instead, the burden of gathering up the supplies must be shared. The length of the list was quite long. I was buying provisions for forty-five days. Manali is the last bazaar of any consequence until Padam. Even in Padam, the prices for the most ordinary staples such as rice or dal is many times that of Manali.

As I started to construct the list, my initial idea of simple subsistence on rice and dal quickly dissolved. One thing led to another and, before I knew it, the list had grown to alarming proportions, both in the number of items, and the quantities. It wasn't so much the money, but the sheer bulk of what would be carried. Bulk meant increased transportation; increased transportation meant increased personnel; increased personnel meant increased supplies—the "saman circle dilemma."

Rice	50 kg.	Tea	2 kg.
flour	15 kg.	Coffee (instant)	1 kg.
Daal	15 kg.	Onion	15 kg.

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Milk Powder	2 kg.	Garlic	2 kg.
Sugar	10 kg.	Chili	1 kg.
Salt	1 kg.	Potatoes	5 kg.
Cooking Oil	3 kg.	Vegetables (other)	10 kg.
Spices (for curry)	1 kg.	Honey	1/2 kg.
Jam	1/2 kg.	Butter	5 kg.
Chocolate (bar)	40	Cheese	3 kg.
Biscuit (packet)	40	Peanut Butter	1 kg.
Soup (packet)	10	Dried Fruit	5 kg.
Kerosene	40 lt.	Batteries	18
Matches (packets)	gross	Dish Soap	2 kg.
Waterproof Sacks	6	Kitchen Tent	1
Pressure Cooker	1	Pots (assorted)	4
Toilet Paper (roll)	6	Candles	2 dz.
Kerosene Stove	1	Rope	50 m.

And it was an inescapable dilemma unless I decided to tough it out with what I could carry. How I would have liked that. Later on the trail, I envied those travelers who could shoulder their own loads. How much freer were they than Guy. But it was already too late. I had hired Gul. My only course now was to rationalize. Would I be really free? To be really free, one would need to go naked, "sky clad" as the *melang*, or holy ones, those whom the spirit, diwana, possessed. And hadn't even these "naked fakirs," like one I met at Jam Minar in central Afghanistan, succumbed to the technological temptation of clear plastic raincoats. They too were imprisoned in hunger, and discomfort; it was hard to believe that any human could rise above the body's demands. Better to have the freedom of a good walk, the ability to put down wherever you wanted, and know that a good hot meal would soon be coming your way.

I had brought from the States my basic trekking essentials, sturdy but lightweight boots, down sleeping bag and parka, Gore-Tex rain gear, balaclava, and an assortment of high-tech polypropylene underclothing. To this I had added the tent and sleeping pad from Japan. Together with my photography equipment that filled one medium-size Haliburton suitcase and the strobes that filled another, I was already loaded. But this would be only a pittance compared to what I would now acquire. When I finished the list, it seemed rather overwhelming:

shuddered to think what all this would cost in Japan. Thanks to the convoluted Japanese distribution system, rice alone might be ten bucks a kilo. Luckily, this was India, and a kilo of rice went for six rupees, roughly twenty cents. For a long time, I had flirted with giving up meat, but found it hard when living with those who craved it; Mei claimed that it was hard for her "being Chinese and all." Rather than hassle, I had allowed her tastes to dictate my diet—she was, after all, the principal cook. There had been times, such as when I was in prison, when I would "veggy." I liked it, both for the discipline, and that it made me feel better—perhaps just an echo of a '60s mindset. Japan, was another one of those times—too expensive. Now it would be easy to continue, for here meat was sold not in the sterile plastic-wrapped form we know in the West, but on hoof or even worse, in chunks cut from fly-encased carcasses hanging in the open shop windows. There was no quality assurance, no guarantee of freshness. If you couldn't see the maggots or smell rot, then you assumed it was okay. Besides, maggots were a bonus source of protein.

Another problem with meat on our journey was that of religious custom. Muslims can only eat meat that is halal, much the same thing as kosher. The animal must be slaughtered by slitting its throat and immediately draining the blood. It is then halal. If not killed in this manner, but in the Hindu or Buddhist manner, then the meat is haram, or unclean. Although Gul was hardly a devout Muslim, when it came to the question of halal or haram he was scrupulous. This wasn't so much because of any fear of divine punishment, but his firm belief that unsanctioned meat was truly

unclean. This reaction wasn't peculiar to Gul, but shared by most Muslims.

Armed with the list and depending on Gul to do the actual haggling, we set off to the bazaar. The bazaar in Manali is a relatively large complex of shops, lining the main street for about a half-mile with the overflow spilling out into adjacent alleyways and lanes. Most shops are organized around one specific category of goods, grains, dry goods, vegetables, stoves and kitchenware, toiletries, etc. These are simple one-room affairs with an open side to the street, secured by a metal door that rolls down when the shop is closed. Since we were buying large quantities of goods, each transaction required a certain amount of etiquette.

You don't simply go in and order goods. First tea is taken, accompanied by pleasantries. This allows each party to present, what they hope to be, an advantageous persona, searching for clues as to how much they can charge or how little they can offer. "How long has Sahib been in India?" Of course, a wise sahib must have been here for a long time and should make every effort to prove it, even to the extent of attempting to employ the small arsenal of Hindi phrases. "Where is Sahib from?" It was smart to answer, Germani, for Germans, unlike Americans, were respected as shrewd traders. "What is Sahib's line of work?" Here I didn't have to lie, for teaching was a perfect answer; teaching in India, though respected, is as in the West a poorly paid calling.

The aim is to cut the best deal up to the point of insult—brinkmanship in its most elementary form—a balancing act between two parties with diametrically opposed goals: for the buyer, it is the cheapest deal; for the seller, it is the most profit. But more important than either is to make the deal. Thus, while at one level goals are in opposition, there exists another level where opposing goals became one.

This then is the essential understanding. Bargaining has less to do with business, as we might understand the term: to maximize profit, and more to do with creating a common understanding of the value of the goods at a particular place and time. To the Western mind, dulled by the material efficiency of bar code technologies, where the seller is unseen except as a cipher moving goods across a scanner, this may seem a complex and time-

wasting process. But what is missing in our system and present in the Manali bazaar is the glue by which a cohesive society is constructed. In the "haggle", the focus broadens from a purely material transaction to include human relations. How often do we Westerners mistake less technologically dependent societies as primitive? We fail to see the sophistication and complexity of the social relations, a scale upon which, if our own society was measured, we might find ourselves most primitive.

While such theoretical flights are good for ferenghi sahibs to while away the hours over chai, there was another, more elemental factor in the negotiation; there was Gul, now into his bread and butter, the commission. My limited knowledge of Hindi (or Urdu which in its spoken form is fairly similiar) which, along with English, serves as the lingua franca of India, wouldn't allow me to follow the discussion on actual prices. Gul was first a Kashmiri, and a card-wala at that. Commission was his middle name and, while I was paying him a healthy salary by Indian standards, to maximize this opportunity he had to make a profit on all my purchases.

If we had been in Kashmir, this would have been a done deal. There, the relationships would be in place, all merchants with a long history of doing business, either with Gul directly, or with the family that employed him. In Manali, however, Gul was almost as much of a foreigner as I. Perhaps more so, as Kashmiris weren't overly loved in other parts of India, particularly in an aspiring rival, non-Muslim place like Manali. Gul was taking a job that a local Hindu or Buddhist could do and do better. He had the delicate task of extracting his profit from the margin that lay between what I was willing to pay and what the shopkeeper was willing to take. On one side, he had to persuade me that the price was reasonable; on the other, he had to get the shopkeeper to allow him his cut.

It was one of those typical dilemmas that challenge the traveler, eternally a target in unfamiliar cultures. The question wasn't of paying; it was only to whom you would pay. If Gul hadn't earned his cut by keeping the shopkeeper in line, then most likely the shopkeeper would have gouged even more. My hope was that they wouldn't get together and skin me alive. My best defense was to make Gul believe in a bright future. This would hopefully limit his

short-term greed. Also, because he was still at heart a village boy with modest ambitions, he was to conceive a large rip-off. Let him rake off twenty percent, that was okay, just factor it in, but watch him.

After a full morning of shopping, I was several thousand rupees poorer. Gul had his cigarette money, plus a little extra, and most of the provisions were piled in our room. There was still one item, not on the list, but essential both to the short and long-term goals of my trip. Charas! In the coming weeks a small quantity, not more than an ounce or two, would be most useful. It made the long hours on the trail go by much more quickly, not to mention what it did for the nights; they were so long, and the altitude made it hard to sleep. Charas took away your pain and fatigue, allowing imagination to reign, fantasies and dreams to soar, heightening even the slightest of adventures. With this magic herb, you became for the moment whatever you could conjure. How like a muscle was imagination; it needed constant work. If neglected, atrophy set in, and that part of mind with the power to rise above material cares would slowly die and with it all chance of freedom. Then there was the other use, that future one. If there was to be such a thing as the future, I would need charas, and many, many ounces of it. This would provide that "fresh start" back in.... In Nam, we had thought of that other as "The World," refusing to accept the madness of the present as reality. But was there any less madness anywhere. It took a long time to learn I carried the madness in me.

On this earth, there are a few special places famed for charas, Mazar-i-Sharif in Afghanistan is one, Chitral in Pakistan and, of course, Kashmir—although from what Devara has reported, the militants have mostly wiped out the once plentiful crop. Manali is another. In Delhi, street touts approach travelers with the surreptitious whisper: "Manali hash Sahib? Very best, cheapest price." It was August, the new crop just beginning to be harvested. Mature, pollen-heavy plants choked the narrow side nalas feeding into the main Beas Valley.

Besides the need to secure a supply of charas, I wanted new lodgings. My initial haste to get on with the journey had been slowed by the delicious quality of the mountain air, the promise of the surroundings, and interesting handicrafts found in the bazaar.

This was my first time in Manali, and I found a range of local products unlike anything elsewhere in the Himalaya. Also, the small ball of charas that Gul had picked up in the bazaar held no small attraction. It had been sometime since I had smoked. Ironically, not since prison, where it was easier to get drugs than on the street. What could you expect when you put a bunch of druggies together? The shit knocked me down.

Once I started smoking, everything slowed. I took pleasure in the ritual of getting high, heating one side of the ball, causing the surface to dry and crumble into powder. I would mix this with tobacco emptied from a cigarette and then repack it. In my flush days, it had been first St. Moritz or Dunhill Menthol, then I got more sophisticated and moved to Balkan Sobranies and, on my return to the States, I found Shermans. Now humbled, I made do with domestic Gold Flake—still a luxury in Gul’s mind. The trick was to get the hash as powdery as possible. If lumps remained, they might fall out as miniature coals leaving telltale holes. How many poor hippies had been given up to the Man by little holes in their clothing. They are like a big sign, ME CHARASI, that and blood shot eyes. Not having smoked for some time, I got incredibly dizzy. A wave of dizziness swept through me, almost to the point of nausea. The first several times it was so intense I had to lie down. But that was only a temporary effect, and I knew from experience I would soon be able to scale a cliff with a joint dangling between my lips—well almost. In slowing down, I felt more into the rhythms of the place, less an outsider.

While the predominantly modern, bourgeois character of Manali frowned on the open practice of charasin culture, the nearby village of Vashist was another story. Up the road toward the mountain’s wall, Vashist is an ancient gathering place for sadhus. Blessed with a complex of hot springs, pilgrims and travelers have gathered there for untold centuries, both to bathe and partake of the herb which grows everywhere in great abundance.

While Gul was hesitant to offer advice in most things, when it came to scoring charas he took command. And why not, for here he really could make a commission. He had done this all before, or so he claimed. Vashist, Gul promised me, was the place to score any sizable quantities, and I needed at least two kilos plus enough for

the trip. This was peanuts, compared to past dealing. Yet it would be more than enough to fill the battery containers, and give me a stake, if I got back to Japan, the States, or wherever fate would take me. With this thought in mind, I set off with Gul on the three-mile walk up the road to Vashist.

As we climbed above the valley's floor, I comprehended for the first time the true magnificence of the surroundings. In the town, I had been only mildly excited. Now, I began to feel exhilarated. The clouds which every morning shrouded the neighboring hills cleared. With the increased height, I could see for the first time snow peaks lying immediately behind sentinel hills. It always amazed me how a small change in elevation could so radically alter the point of view. How easy it was to imagine such behemoths as the homes of the Gods, or even the Gods themselves, as they appeared so inaccessible. But these peaks, the convergence of the Pir Panjal and Dhala Dar ranges, are only precursors of the main Himalaya to the north.

Vashist was a typical shrine village, whose people, along with farming, depended heavily on travelers—whether they be freaks, sadhus, or vacationing office-walas—for their livelihood. This latter trade was old to these parts. Not only does the village possess a rather famous hot spring, but it is also the last settlement of note before the Rohtang, the first of many high passes on an ancient route connecting India to Ladakh, the Tibetan Plateau, Turkistan, and distant China. It is because of this relatively well-traveled highway that makes Vashist and its inhabitants more worldly-wise than their location might otherwise suggest.

On the outskirts of the town are the modern and ostensibly more respectable tourist amenities, hotels, restaurants and a recently constructed, government sponsored hot spring, with private, covered stalls. Entering the village, we began to see a growing number of sadhus, melangs, and other assorted charasis, some beneath their ragged and dusty exteriors hinting of European origin. Chillums were everywhere, and the pungent smell of charas and ganja filled the air. By the time we covered the short distance from edge to center, I must have counted at least one hundred religious mendicants of probably as many persuasions. In India,

there is great latitude for the expression of individual religious beliefs.

As we approached the sacred hot spring, the centerpiece of Vashist, one particularly distinguished individual caught my eye. He was quite tall and looked, from his light skin and sharp features, to be of high caste. His silvery-white beard contrasted with the deep saffron of his robe and matching turban from under which cascaded long locks of hair, again of that almost radiant silver-white. Around his neck the rudrakshi, like the one I would later see on Devara, proclaimed his devotion to Lord Shiva, Mahadeva. Again, like Devara, there was a large trident held upright, a red pennant flapping wildly in the rising breeze. He was with a small group of men of varying ages. Dressed in a range of saffron tones, they were a picturesque sight against the mandir's red and white vertically striped wall.

The sadhu beckoned us to join the group. As we sat down, he offered a large, rough clay chillum, the coal on top fanned to a cheery red by the mountain wind. One does not turn down such hospitality. Placing the cone-shaped bowl between my fingers, I took several deep draws until I was left, choking for air. My brain clouded momentarily, blotting out that present; Vashist, the sadhu, Gul, all went up quite literally in the smoke of the chillum. My consciousness turned inward, to those things deep within my mind. I stumbled on to the memory of my first trip to Afghanistan.

* * *

I was before another wall, this time the ancient, man-made crumble of Balkh, the ghostly, ancient capital Alexander had known as Bactria. It had been a strange day. The trip from Mazar-i-Sharif, the nearby provincial capital and place of pilgrimage (some said that the son-in-law of the Prophet, Ali, was buried there) had been in an old, cranky Land Rover over gutted dirt roads. Winter came early to these parts, and the sky was gray and threatening. The wind swept across the vast plain that stretches from the northern slopes of the Hindu Kush to the Aral Sea, the region once known as Transoxiana.

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It was still early in the morning, but I was already high. This wasn't unusual in those days, when I continually faced the unknown. If I didn't end up on a Pathan's knife in Afghanistan, I might soon be in prison. Even if all went well, it would only hasten my journey back to the craziness waiting in Nam. No rational being could have taken the strain of this continuous uncertainty, so I became irrational, and moved through life as if in a dream—minimizing my dependence on assumptions or expectations, those essential guides for more socialized beings. I would light up a joint with my breakfast chai and continue to re-up throughout the day.

Those mud ramparts mesmerized me. It wasn't that they were so high, maybe at the most only fifty feet, yet think what those walls had witnessed. This land was full of ghost, there to be seen by those who knew something of the history. Lines from Khayyam leapt to mind:

*Think, in this batter'd Caravanserai
Whose Doorways are alternate Night and Day
How Sultan after Sultan with his Pomp
Abode his Hour or two, and went his way.*

How many sultans, shahs, khans, not to mention ferenghi mosafers like myself, had passed this way for their hour in the sun. Here was evidence of the ebb and flood of civilization's tides. It reminded me of the futility of building on this life, preparing the way for a maturing philosophy that would find expression in Akbar's metaphor of the world as a bridge.

How brief the space differentiating now here from nowhere.

Within those crumbling, gutted walls once stood a thriving center of civilization. A New York, or at least a St. Louis, of its time, with several hundred thousand inhabitants—two or three times the size of a contemporary Paris or London. At its peak, it was one of the major cross-roads of the world, controlling much of the trade between Central Asia, the Sub-Continent, and West. It was a ripe plum and as such had paid the price many times over. I climbed the walls and saw the skeletal remains of thousands of dwelling, stretching to the horizon.

Who had lived there? How were their lives? What were their thoughts, their passions? How many conquering hordes, the

descendants of the great Mongol Khans had pillaged and destroyed? How many times had the citizens rebounded, burying their dead, pining for those taken captive. If I listened carefully, I could hear the battle cries, the screams of men, women, and children, the roar of the flames. Now all that remained were the mud walls, slowly melting back into the plain. Would some day our own great cities share a similar fate?

I tripped for some time, drinking in the fantasy that was Balkh, communing with ghost only I could perceive. But I hadn't gone there solely as a tourist. This was a business trip, and I had learned the discipline to mix business with pleasure and to do it well. It was with regret that I left the walls and my grand dreams.

In returning to my business, I soon found myself in an equally fascinating place. I was taken to the hujera of the farmer from whom I had come to score. Since women practiced very strict purdah, or separation, segregated quarters for male visitors were part of every household of substance. It was here, under the guidance of my host, that I had been introduced to the etiquette of the charasin. Being the honored guest, I was offered the hookah first. This was the famous hubble-bubble, the ubiquitous water pipe in use from Morocco to the Philippines—even, it was rumored, to have appeared in the shops of the Haight, the Village, and other such places of ill repute. Wanting to appear polite, I took a short, tentative draw, and passed it immediately to the host. This brought a din of good-humored disapproval from the crowd of village men, who had gathered for the occasion. The host then inhaled deeply, repeating the process until a fit of coughing consumed him. There came a murmur of approval from the men. Several of the others repeated this action and, when they thought I must have the message, they offered me a chance to redeem myself. After all, this charas was their product, carefully nurtured, then pressed by their own skilled hands. I quickly learned not to pass the pipe until I choked, or at least made the choking sound.

That early episode of getting down with locals had truly been a moment of wonder in my life. Oh, I was quite impressed with myself. How brave I was, sitting in that mud hut, alone, with several thousand cash dollars worth of Afghanis in my belt, facing a circle of rough-hewn Mongol faces, the savage-looking

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descendants of Genghiz Khan's invading hordes, the Hazara, the Thousand. There in the twilight of the windowless room, lit only by a small kero lamp, we passed the hubble-bubble. What had at first seemed like a babble of unidentifiable guttural noises as the pipe passed round and round, gradually become clear. First just a word, then a phrase, until finally I came to believe I understood and, moreover, participating in an intense conversation. After the fact, I couldn't remember on what weighty matter we might have communed, but I was certain that for a time we had transcended our difference and, with the help of the charas, made connection. It was from that moment I became a charasi—I believed in a certain metaphysical power of the herb.

Outside of cultures who revere nature and see its bounty for what it is, not how it can be turned into wealth, this connection between spirit and natural substance becomes lost. The plaintiff cry of "JUST SAY NO!" drowns out all understanding of purpose. Only in societies that understand labor as a commodity is there such an effort to control human spirit. The search for oneself is hard to translate into profit except for the individual. It interferes with productivity, with labor, and thus is seen by those who control labor as a threat to property. Outside the capitalist or materialist schemes, the use of mind-expanding drugs was understood in another light. As an Oglalla shaman once said to me: "How can the *wasicu* (the "fat stealers" or non-Lakota) outlaw a plant? It grows from the ground, a gift of Earth Mother."

* * *

The smoke from the sadhu's chillum was extremely potent and, combined with the thin mountain air, transported me into deepest reverie. This was harshly broken by the clipped, almost Brit sounding voice of my host.

"Ah, Sahibji finds the chillum to his liking."

"Ji, Babbuji, shabash, pukkah charas!" I replied trying to be as enthusiastic as possible, failing to notice there was no question in his voice.

"Now, perhaps Sahib, tell something about himself, shall we say as payment for..."

I thought, how typical. In caste-conscious Indian fashion, this devotee of Shiva was trying to locate my place in life within moments of meeting. Reluctantly, I introduced myself, sketching—as was my usual *modus operandi* when in such a situation—a character both real and imagined. Stoned as I was, I spilled out too much of the real, or at least what I imagined to be the real, going on about the growing purposelessness, of mid-life crisis...as if this sadhu could possibly know of what I spoke. But then I was so stoned, and talking more to myself than to him.

But this sadhu was more interested in talking than listening, perhaps taking pleasure in the impression he made on his companions at being able to speak with an Angrez, in my language, and on commanding terms.

"Ah, Sahibji, I think you and I may be here for same reasons. Though it may not be clear to you, I feel you too are, in your own way, sannyasin. As you may know, my good friend, we Indians have a different way of seeing what you call your "mid-life crisis."

Yes, I confess to revealing much of the sorry story.

"I have been seeing much of this 'crisis' in your films and magazines, even now it comes into our modern Indian life. Yes, we too having much the same feeling, but following the wisdom of the ancient sages, we can see this time of...uncertainty...as one of arrival, a time when one's accumulated life in this world begins to lose meaning. The pursuits of *artha*, material gain, and *kama*, love and pleasure, while useful earlier in life, become without purpose and need to be put aside...like the snake shedding his skin. So is it with all worldly purpose, even for the more noble works of *dharma*, righteousness, virtue, duty."

Here my face must have involuntarily registered surprise

"Yes, Sahib, it is true. Even the most noble work of this world must be ended, for it is the goal of all who follow Shiva to escape from rebirth. All believers must devote the end of their lives...after they have lived fully the material existence...to liberating themselves

from its grasp. This we call moksha, the proper ending to an individual life."

I thought, how lucky to live in a society that not only tolerates, but also venerates, such a logical closure. In the West, a man like Rajendra, as indeed had I, sought escape in the attempt to recapture the joys of youth—the kama and artha. Maybe it wasn't my youth, but one I would have liked to have. No number of red sports cars, young lovers, or whatever might fulfill my frustrated adolescent fantasy, could but for a brief moment fill the growing void. Though it wasn't apparent to many in the West, the crisis wasn't a need to return, to go back—how can you ever go back? Instead it is a signal that the stage of acquiring place and possessions was at an end. All this mid-aged syndrome was a warning, signaling time is growing late; it is time to turn inward, to prepare.

Wasn't this why I was in India? I had fought to get to this point and, in doing so, savaged both myself and those around me. The path hadn't been clear. It led to dropping out of the University, into my travels and pursuit of war, drug smuggling, prison, and later, through Tara and dropping out again. All those folks who had paid the price for my own struggle, couldn't they guess there was something off about me, that my goals in life weren't about security, acquisition, power? I suppose I too was guilty—of sending mixed messages? But I really didn't know for sure. One moment I wanted to be the ascetic, the next the sybarite. I too was an addict of the consumer society in which I lived.

In Tara, I imagined that I had finally worked it out. I piled on her all my visceral desires. Then, I destroyed them in an approximation of a great tantric bonfire made of our love. Through her, I attempted to bring an end to all my material connections. She was a sacrificial virgin—an offering of hope to a God I had thought of as Despair, but now see as Mara—who naively gave to me her youth and beauty, her innocence. It was such bitter irony; she made the gift to one who cared not to be. I thought only to escape the furies raging deep within; fury born in my inability to find satisfaction in a material world; fury at being suckered by the illusion of existence; fury that I was too weak to avoid Maya's seduction. Even though, all the while, I knew I was being seduced.

After a time, I got completely wasted. My head was heavy, and I couldn't focus on the humdrum patter that accompanied the passing of the chillum. Rajendra reached over and drew me away from the circle of charasis. "I have glimpsed your future, Bhaai, you are troubled and I wish you to know you are in God's good hands."

"Which God, Babbuji?" I replied with a reflexive undertone of sarcasm, but Rajendra wasn't to be baited.

"There is only one God for each, Bhaai, the God that you must seek inside, the God only you can find, must find, the God is..."

But he didn't finish, or at least my ears failed to hear his last word. Instead, he looked deeply into my eyes, taking my hand in his own. His stare was too intense. I looked away, downwards to our hands. The contrast of the light cradled in the dark struck me with unexpected force. Compared to Rajendra my hand appeared that of a baby.

"You still have much to do in this life and in the lives that follow. You must travel many, many miles, many, many years, to find what lies so close, yet so far away. We will meet again, but you will not know me. It will not matter, for each time you too will be different."

I looked up from his hand and saw that Rajendra's gaze hadn't wavered. Maybe it was the light, yet when I returned the glance, I couldn't see his eyes, set too deep within cavernous brows. As I gazed into this seemingly endless space, it was for an instant as if I had passed through a void, only to come out the other side, a side where I could look back and see only myself.

I am not sure, maybe it is only now, after the fact, when I can put past and present together in some ordered fashion. But for an instant I saw ahead in time, to that same unbounded void I find in Devara's eyes. They are both of Shiva, both in Shiva. Could it be that they are Shiva...that they are Guy? Am I some sort of freak or is this how it is supposed to be? Are we all alone, is there really a we? Or is that too part of the illusion, Maya. How can we know? If we are because we think, then doesn't it follow that what we think is what we are...is everything.

"Dadee, let's go! We need go to bazaar before shops close."

I looked over to the source of this most unwelcome sound. I saw it came from a rather sheepish looking Gul. Although he was far from an ardent Muslim, he still felt uncomfortable in such obviously "infidel" settings. There were always a few Kashmiris around. Anywhere tourists are found there are Kashmiris selling carpets, shawls, and assorted handicrafts. Their world is small. Gul didn't want word to get back to Srinagar that he was consorting with infidels, particularly of the Hindu variety. This would be serious if the militants wanted to mess with him.

"Let's go, Dad." By now Gul knew, or at least thought he knew, my number. He would play the solicitous son, looking out for his father's interest. At first this reference had amused me. I humored Gul, because of the story of his father having been killed by a bear, but at the same time I wasn't completely at ease with such a relationship. Part of the reason I was going through all this was to prove I was still young, and now this twenty-something punk called me "Dad." Wasn't that what Jim Jones was called by his followers? I once tried to explain the connection, but Jim Jones was incomprehensible to Gul. He had listened passively and then said, "Very interesting story, Dad."

I had yet to realize my arrival fantasy of a "room with a view," putting up with more practical bazaar-side location while in the throes of preparation. Now, since most of the things were bought, and it was just a matter of getting up my nerve, I wanted to make a move. On our way back down the hill, I saw the perfect spot. It was a new "high-rise" style structure of four stories which, though not even finished, was in typical Indian fashion already on the inevitable slide to ruin. Although made of the reinforced concrete, now prevalent in all parts of India, its steeply sloping roof, and well-cultivated garden, filled with marigolds, giant sunflowers, and heavily fox-tailed hemp, gave it a measure of quaint charm. Particularly impressive was the view from the rooms, all of which overlooked the valley from large private balconies. I could already picture myself in this aerie, taking chai, smoking charas, dreaming of the future travels.

If only I had a woman!

Where did this come from? That was what I was here to get away from. Tara's ghost still held on—the hole she tore in me screamed out to be filled. God! Couldn't I escape? It had been so many months; I was on the other side of the world, but that all consuming need was still there.

Who really was this Tara? She was only the latest permutation of my addiction to "her," to "she." There had been many candidates. Mei was the closest, but our enforced separation somehow set us on different tracks. Then I stumbled onto Tara, and for a while she filled the void. Yet could any real woman, any creature of flesh and blood, give me what I ultimately sought? Were they even real or just a figment of need? Rajendra was right...so far from moksha.

We examined the rooms and secured a close approximation of the image that had rooted in my mind. The only trouble was that, since there was only one bed, these lodgings seemed designed for honeymooners. For Gul, this was no problem; as a Kashmiri, he didn't share my almost neurotic sense of privacy. Despite, or perhaps because of, a somewhat ambivalent sexuality, which at times haunted my fantasy, I couldn't endure so close a contact with another man. Instead, I camped on the balcony. It was covered, had a fantastic view and, after all, would be good preparation for the upcoming journey. I was so eager to change rooms that I "ate" the one-hundred-and-fifty-rupee price of the night's lodging in Manali. With the help of two coolies and a jeep taxi, we transferred our ever-growing pile of saman to the new digs.

Chapter VIII

*It was as if I had ripped off the lid
from a seething underworld of greed and envy.
A hornet's nest—it was a miniature volcano I set in action,
and not so miniature at that!*

—Henri De Monfreid—

SCORING

When we checked in, only one other room was taken. The occupants were several unseen, but not unheard, young European travelers. They were enjoying their dope too, what was for that place, the most alien pulse of "hip-hop", discordantly echoing down the valley, "If it's too loud, you're too old!" How many times had I muttered that mantra when asked to turn down my rock'n roll.

This was a new breed, a new generation. Years ago, it had been all about folk tunes on local-made shanais, tablas, and sitars. Now it was rap and hip-hop on high-tech Japanese boom-boxes. Why bother coming all the way? But I knew that answer well. Charas!

Despite this irritant, I was content. The wonder of the Beas Valley lay at my feet. Perhaps this was what my ex-pat dealer friend in Japan had meant. With this view, all the dope needed, food on demand, I could hang for months. When the money ran out, just walk up the road. It would be winter by that time and I wouldn't last long. If I had really come here to end it, why go any further? Even the noisome hip-hop could be forgiven, since it was quickly overwhelmed by the harmonies of river and wind. Almost as if sensing this question, Gul appeared at the door. "Dad, I want take you to boy with good shit...the best in Manali. Very good boy, very honest, I deal before. Numbar one!"

Gul took me by the arm, and we started to wander up the road, back toward the village center, the bathes, and the crowd of sadhus. Maybe Rajendra was still in town? Gul, however, had no intention of another meeting with those infidels. He had business on his mind. About a quarter-mile from the hotel was a small tourist restaurant, a shack with an open-sided tent structure occupying

the front garden. A board offered up a long list of Indian and western-style treats from masalla dhosa to "chease boorgers", all foods appealing to munchie-possessed charasin. Two tourists, my "hip-hop" loving neighbors, were engaged in an intense conversation with a young local. As we entered the tented area, this fellow, who from the almond shape of his eyes could have been a refugee from Tibet, turned from the two tourists and warmly greeted Gul. I was then introduced to this "Manager," who proceeded to seat us with some ceremony in an incongruously grand naugahyde booth. With a leering grin the Manager asked, "Sahib liking to try best house chai. Making super numbar one from Manali's own...." I knew at once what he meant; it wasn't only chai he offered but bhang. It came quickly. While we sipped our "chai," the Manager excused himself and returned to the others. Both were typically disheveled in the manner of young travelers to India. Although they may have deserved to be characterized as "Euro-trash," they weren't overt freaks.

While Vashist had its fill of freaks, these buyers were something quite different. More likely they were students, or possibly computer programmers on holiday. They still wore European clothing, their hair short and demeanor, though softened by the effects of the hash they openly smoked, retaining strong traces of a Western compulsion for business. When they resumed conversation with the Manager, it was obvious they were dealing, and in this place, it wasn't about the price of masala dhosa. I could hear only traces of their muted discussion, but I knew all too well what was going down. How many times had I been in the same situation? Their transaction was sealed over a chillum.

One deal made, the manager returned to attend to our needs. Gul had intimated in a carefully non-explicit way, that he had had some business with this man in the past.

"Dad, if want any...any *stuff*...this Manager good boy, very honest, very safe."

Before I could get down to business, Gul excused himself, giving the proprietor a particularly acicular look that I interpreted to mean: "I'll see you later about my cut."

While there was little of the paranoia that would accompany such a transaction Stateside, it wasn't as if I could throw caution to the winds. In those parts the local Man shows a blind eye to casual drug use and dealing. Certainly, there is no interference when sadhus use it, as much official lip service is paid to freedom of religion. But the arm of the law is always there and, at individual discretion, can be applied. If for some reason the local authority needs a squeeze, or wants to punish a particular dealer for some unrelated indiscretion, then what better way than by making a bust. Maybe there is a push on by the Central Government and they need bodies. Maybe the Americans are fed up by what they see as overly relaxed attitudes and tie some pending loan or aid package to an improved body count—an echo of the Vietnam mindset. Therefore, while there is little actual fear associated with trafficking, the experienced know it is wise to always be a little careful. Also, it is useful for the seller to promote a sense of danger. In doing so he elevates his position, making his service, as well as the product, more valuable.

There we were, dealing in an absurdly covert manner. The only ones who could overhear our furtive dealing had just scored themselves and were well on their way to being stoned out of their minds. The price seemed to me to be astronomical—one hundred and fifty rupees per *tola* (.4 oz.). That was a whopping fifty cents per gram. When I first traveled to Afghanistan in 1969—that same journey to Balkh—I had been able to buy a key of the finest hand-pressed, black leaf "Mazari" for the equivalent of ten U.S. dollars, a penny a gram. The same kilo later sold in New York for over three thousand. Now a key of this Manali shit, much lower in quality, would cost around six hundred dollars. The kicker was that, if I wanted to sell it in the States, it probably wouldn't command a much higher price than twenty years before. No wonder the hash trade had been so appealing, and why those still engaged migrated to other, more profitable, commodities.

The new crop was just beginning to come onto the market, and the manager proudly declared he could sell the "first press." To underscore the pitch, he first showed me a sample of last year's, which by that time was dry and crumbly. Then with an exaggerated flourish he presented a resinous piece from the new crop, pliable as "silly putty," pungent with that unmistakable odor marking it

KALAGIYA

as, if not primo, certainly acceptable. In my heyday, I made a point of scoring only the finest—a matter of pride if not honor. It fitted with my sense of adventure and exploration, traveling to the ends of the charas-producing earth, ferreting out the best of the best. I had a reputation to protect. I also had my karma.

Although my anticipated score was trifling, compared to the real business going down, both the manager and I played out the ritual of dealing as if there were hundreds of kilos on the table. This made sense from the manager's perspective. He had no idea where this sale might lead. How often had a small transaction burgeoned into a large one? In this world where caution was king and paranoia a state of well-being, people tested the waters. On my part, it was an old game, and I fell into it quite naturally.

Maybe, it was the rush of the bhang. It had been a long time, and it seemed very, very strong. But I couldn't keep my mind from wandering. As I went through the ritual of bargaining, thoughts of other deals in far away places and times flashed through my brain. How fuzzy the details now seemed. Moments that once held an acute sharpness with, quite literally, life and death significance, now seemed so blurred.

* * *

The image of another nemesis, in my vernacular of the time, "a real motherfucker," even worse than Nazir, popped into my mind. It wasn't as I had first seen him, but the last time, bloated from incarceration, deathly pale, sweat pouring from his obese body as he spilled his guts on the witness stand. Morgan, my erstwhile business partner, was the closest thing I had to a male friend since leaving boarding school. I first met him in bar in Chiangrai, deep in the heart of the Golden Triangle; it must have been in the Spring of '69—a lot of karma was laid down that year, and most of it bad, really bad. In those days he was physically impressive, blond, blue eyed, decidedly Aryan in all the magnetic malevolence this term signifies.

How could I have known such a casual meeting would so impact my life? Maybe his gold-tipped Shermans should have made me

wise. For some reason that, knowing what I know now, I am most hesitant to contemplate, there was an immediate attraction. We seemed on the same wavelength, two swaggering merchant-princes—how I favored that analogy—meeting at different stages in our careers. I was the experienced international trafficker, overseeing shipments of weed and opium; while he was the small-time domestic dealer, on his first foray into the international scene, making his way to India and his fortune.

Morgan sucked up to me, stroking my ego. At the time I was flying, a real big op going, beaucoup shit back to the World. That was how I thought in those days...in Nam talk. When I was back in Cholon, I wished I wasn't, but when I was away, I wanted everyone to know Nam was home. I was high on myself, and so it seemed only natural that Morgan would be too. It was an intrinsic danger in the business. All that quick money goes to your head. Even more was the rush of beating the system. I seemed to be winning, misreading luck as evidence of my superiority. Later, in a more lucid moment, I realized Morgan's adulation stemmed from the belief I could help him make a buck, that and deeper reasons, which became apparent only later.

The meeting was brief and very soon we went our separate ways. Oh, I had some suspicion of what he was about. He had clumsily hedged around, asking me where to score, "no business, just for my head ya know." After getting my shipment off to Hong Kong, I went back to Cholon, forgetting all about him.

Then, as if fate was playing its hand, I ran into Morgan again, about a year later during the Collective Mind scam in Kabul. This was the height of the worldwide hippie explosion and drug-seeking overlanders flocked to Kabul. Strung out, often penniless, they were more than ready to join the magical mystery tour the Mind offered. And we did have our moments, behind the high walls and well-guarded gate. Some of those birds...they were so wild...just didn't give a shit, would do it anywhere, anytime, with any one, just like shaking hands, answering the call to make love not war. I even got one of them so spaced she screwed my poor old chowkidar, the watchman who came with the house for only an extra ten bucks a month. Babu thought he had died and gone to paradise. There was his houri. But we were all there too, a circle of

freaks watching him do his thing, then before he could savor his conquest, taking his *houri en masse*. How quickly paradise could turn to hell, but the bird didn't seem to mind. She claimed to have been out of body, watching the whole show like she was someone else. It really turned her on and led to her receiving the title of "Perpetual Motion Machine." We laughed our asses off over that one.

We were madmen, a Nam-influenced mentality coming through. Cholon was still my home, at least in my mind. My stuff was there. So were the people I liked to think I cared for and supposed cared for me. I knew I would soon go back. Yet what that back would be I wasn't sure. So, what the fuck! Whatever popped into my head, I went for it. "If I get away with it, so much the better. If not...." But I always seemed to get away. That was the case at least until Mei arrived.

My hospitality at the Mind wasn't solely out of generosity. It was from these guests that I planned recruit mules to carry the drugs back to Chad. It had become my *m.o.* to recruit others for dirty jobs. Hell! I had done more than my share. In the months of September and October, I had been practically commuting between Kabul and New York—too bad they didn't have frequent flyer miles in those days. By the time I transferred planes and all, the fight on Arianna/Pan Am one-way was thirty-six hours—Tehran, Beirut, Athens, Frankfurt, London, New York. I made four round-trips in two months. I was pushing my luck. Even the naivest of customs would begin to suspect. I had to get someone else to take up the slack.

It was quite simple; just find some Americans down on their luck, clean them up and hope for the best. Morgan, particularly as I already knew him—in those days even the most casual acquaintance seemed an old friend—seemed the ideal candidate. During the previous year, a bout of hepatitis had disrupted his plans for a quick return to the States and fortune. Instead, he blew most of his funds, including the refund on his return air ticket, and had no other choice except to try to get back to Europe overland. A month before arriving in Kabul, he had lost his remaining cash at the Wagah border, when he had to *baksheesh* his way out of a *charas* bust. The Paki customs inspector had taken one look in his

bloodshot eyes. "Charasi!" He was carrying a small amount, just enough, he figured, to buy the plane ticket when he got to Amsterdam.

Now he was in Kabul, penniless. One of a legion of foreigners waiting for funds from home, living on credit in some sleazy hotel, his passports held hostage. I had become somewhat of a local celebrity among the freak population—the Mind's parties were infamous—so it was only a matter of time before Morgan learned of this ferenghi filmmaker who might help him. Just the ticket, or so he seemed. He had come off clean from the bust—nothing in his passport or, more importantly, his jacket; at least I assumed as much since they took the baksheesh.

I offered him a run to the States, just a small stash concealed in the magazine of a camera going back for repair. If that worked, I promised a chance to distribute the tons of charas I was planning to export to the States. Chad, who was a major investor in the Mind, would have other thoughts on this matter, but it is my policy to always offer promise to those with whom I do business. That deterred any immediate profit taking by rip-off. Hey, all is fair in love, war...and business.

We spent those frigid, late fall nights gathered around the glowing bukhari. The rarefied air of Kabul, combined with chillums of oily-black Mazari and cheap local red wine, made for rich imaginings, at least for that brief high before faltering into stupor. The wine was an interesting oddity in what was then a strictly Islamic kingdom. It was produced by a minor war Italian criminal on the lam. He had made his way to Kabul in the late forties, surviving on his skills as a vintner, taking advantage of the abundant local grapes. As Morgan and I sat bullshitting, we conjured great plans of the scores we would make. It wasn't just for money we lusted, nor for the freedom money would confer, but even more for that feeling of beating the system, being able to survive, and to survive nicely beyond the systems conforming restraints.

Somehow things hadn't gone as planned. The day Morgan was to fly out, he came down with a fit of nerves. It was cold outside, but he was sweating. I could see this sort of thing wasn't his bag. Rather than risk the whole operation, I told him to pass. Maybe, he could do something for us on the distribution end when he got

settled back in the States. Always keep up that glimmer of future reward.

Many months later, after fleeing, first to Delhi, then to New York, I tracked Morgan down. To his credit, albeit from self-interest, it was his efforts that got me back on my feet. Even if that took the crutch of the "trade", it was better than starving in NYC. We began a partnership, paving the way for a move back to the West Coast. At first, Morgan was put off that I was no longer alone and was—which was true, I suppose—no longer the same person he had come to know. Already, I had begun to merge with Mei. We had weathered some hard times, the Mind thing exploding and all, and we were back in the States hungry. I was trying to scrape up enough bread to get back to Cholon. I knew how to make money there. Chad had practically put out a contract on me. Not only had he lost money on the Kabul fiasco, but Mei as well. He had kept his interest in Mei to himself, thinking there was always more time. Now she had slipped from his grasp, made doubly worse because it was to me he had lost her. He was, in a word, pissed. Thus New York was too hot. As big a city as it is, when you are in a tight circle, it can be incredibly small. Morgan bailed me, helping me peddle the few pounds of charas I had been able to salvage.

Although Morgan was unsettled by Mei's presence, he soon came around; she could be charming when it suited her, and he had a weakness for the exotic. Besides, I gave him what he needed—product. Eventually, Mei and I came to provide Morgan a sense of belonging, of family, for which he, like many in our generation, so longed. We took him under our wing, but more because of his value as a seller of our products, than from any feelings of affection. The plan was simple. In the future, I would bring back the charas and Morgan would sell it.

Being an introvert was one of the reasons I had been a successful smuggler. In my calling, I couldn't afford to have too many people know my business. Even a few friends were more than I needed. Besides, I have always favored a single intense relationship, rather than many shallow ones. For a brief time, there had been the beginnings of such a relationship with Morgan. As it turned out gender held no barrier for him. But the kind of intimacy I sought

was improbable, if not impossible, to find with another male—even if sex was excluded.

I had found everything I needed in Mei. Very quickly, I wanted no one else in my world except her. With Mei I had it all, a partner in business and pleasure, someone on whom I could rely, instead of just being relied on. Others, even Morgan, were business, people to put up with for the profit they brought.

But as dealer and smuggler, Morgan and I made an effective combination. As long as we stuck to our respective roles, we were charmed. He couldn't carry; that was my special talent. Maybe he just didn't have the *cajones*. For that you had to be kind of crazy—armed with the ability to let go of the future, to put it all into the hands of some obscure abstraction...like fate. I was that kind, at least for a while, but Morgan didn't even come close. Oh, he did turn out most useful at the other end. I didn't have the patience to deal. For that you needed those essential people skills to trade with small-time dealers, people I saw only as low-life. Morgan seemed to have an innate fascination for bottom-feeders and sleaze. He was a real networker and had a huge number of contacts. Once the shit was in country, he could move it. By divvying up the duties of smuggler and dealer, we could concentrate on the special skills each required. How different were the roles, introvert versus extrovert? But even more important was that in such division we were also able to husband our nerve.

And with that nerve we had gone on to other adventures in other parts of the world. Peru, with its Andes and cocaine, was a growing distraction. Both Mei and Morgan went along, but only for the thrills. Film became the focus for our trips, and we lost ourselves in it. We believed we were filmmakers, which though only self-delusion served to dissipate the tension and paranoia. We were so much into it that the dope part was just something tacked on at the end, almost an afterthought. In our heads, we were filmmakers; that our money came from the drugs was just a mild inconvenience—soon to be rectified by the sale of our first film. Yes, those were high times, happy times, but they were times clouded a reality, which even then I knew must eventually be faced.

Beneath Morgan's casual camaraderie were disturbing needs. Much to my surprise—I must have really been zoned for Mei

sensed it much earlier—I discovered that my macho friend was queer. It wasn't so much that he was homosexual, that I could handle if it didn't threaten me. As I have already intimated, there is within me a measure of sexual ambivalence that, if we are sensitive to it, lies within all of us, regardless of gender or overt sexual preference. We are just too close to being one another—a chromosome here, a bit of DNA there—for there not to be some leakage, some cross-over, some confusion. Of much greater concern was Morgan's psychological state. Whether because he was a closeted gay, or his gayness was symptomatic of deeper anomaly, he was prone to come apart under pressure. I mean, we were all fucked up, otherwise we would have been selling insurance in the burbs and raising kids; that wasn't Morgan's sin. It was okay to be as fucked as you wanted on your own time. But he let it get in the way of business; he let it come to the surface; he let it hang out.

There was that time in Pakistan, when we were sitting on our heels, waiting for the connect to arrive. Well at least I was waiting. Morgan went off, supposedly to meet with some local carpet dealer. We were both carpet freaks and took great pleasure outdoing one another in our acquisitions. I was a little nervous because Morgan was holding our stake, but even though I knew he could be a fuck-up, I didn't think he would be crazy enough to spend it on carpets. After an absence of several days, I went out to track him down. There were only so many hotels in Peshawar, and Morgan wasn't exactly an unnoticeable character. I finally located him in a particularly sleazy but colorful dive above the Qissa Khawani Bazaar. He wasn't buying carpets.

Morgan did like to get down. Entering his room, I found him hastily extricating himself from the embrace of one local Lothario, another sprawled half asleep on the far side of the bed. Both boys seemed nonplused by my arrival, perhaps anticipating they were now going to perform for this new ferenghi—an opportunity to make a little extra baksheesh. Morgan, after a momentary display of confusion, retreated into his all too familiar guise of pompous outrage, demanding I get out and quickly.

The next day he apologized, but feigned surprise that I hadn't known of his predilection. He was quite drunk and let it all hang

out. There was a part of Morgan that was turning out to be quite a monster. He wasn't only a fag, but a sadistic one.

"I want to fuck 'em hard, rough...take the suckers, force 'em to do what I want 'em to do...what they want, but only deep down in the darkest recesses of their desire. You know, my cock is the key, unlocking all that deep-down shit...yeah, if you get my drift"

He said all this getting close in my face, gazing intently into my eyes so as not to miss my reactions. I could smell the mixture of Chivas, charas, and tobacco on his hard, rapid breath. His eyes were red and glassy. Was he trying to gage my own deepest desires? I started to think we might have it out. He had the advantage of a natural tendency to violence, but I was in better shape. I knew I could take him if I had to.

"It's so much better when they don't want...think they don't want to...but have to all the same." His eyes bored into me in a way I had never seen before. It was almost as if he was fucking me with those red-webbed eyes.

"You know Guy, I keep having this feeling in my...gut...that you...you know...that part of you wants it too...to have that secret need unlocked, eh? That's what I mean, when part of them...you...wants it, and for a moment escapes from the control of that other part, just freaks out and opens up. Maybe you just haven't gotten there yet, but there'll come a time. Yeah, there'll come a time when you'll beg me...or someone...to take you...yes take you hard man." He was leering, the saliva forming on his lips as he spoke those last words. I thought he was going to try to bone me there and then. Visions of that fucking, queer-assed Ian flashed through my mind. It was such a little switch, just a flick this way or that. If it had gone the other way, perhaps that very minute I would have spread before Morgan—and loved every minute of it. There is a certain release in surrender. But it didn't happen.

Maybe Morgan had been snorting coke; it was as if he was possessed by all the demons in hell. His voice got real husky and sort of from on high. "You'll surrender and love it...for the moment. Then, that other you'll get back in control, but it'll be too

late. I'll possess you. Then what do you think...what'll Mei think, eh, bastard?"

The mention of Mei pulled me back. Panic seized me, a panic that made me want to strike out at Morgan as I had at Ian. Then, I realized how high he really was. This was his dark side, one that he would never have dared expose under normal circumstances. Now, perhaps, I held power over him, for he had opened to me, showing me what lay beneath that public facade. For Morgan, sex was an overt display of power, and the thrill he felt in fucking a boy was the domination. He believed he held power over the person he had fucked. For him sex was like counting coup in ritual battle. Leaving me, he returned to his boys, presumably to count some more coups. But it was they who would be counting, ripping him off and with it all our scoring money.

It was then that I realized he had to be cut loose. The problem would be when and where. Our lives had become so intertwined; we knew each other's secrets too well. Once I had gotten out of this mess, I vowed, never again to let a man so close to me. Strange how I thought it was different with women. But there I was thinking it was gender specific, that it was the maleness that was my enemy.

After the split, I tried to develop my own distribution, but it was just too crazy. I was used to dealing with men of honor like the Pathans. I found those dealing in the States were of another breed. Later, upon reflection—I had so much opportunity to reflect in those long days in the slammer—I realized that was only to be expected. After all, those Pathans were carrying on an age-old profession that, in their own world, wasn't nefarious, but well within the bounds of their social system—they were farmers selling their crop. They were breaking none of their own rules, although in theory they did transgress the rule of the distant Central Government. Ignoring the wishes of a faraway, alien power was part of the tribal way and looked on as a sign of honor. How different it was from the States where the drug trade fell between the cracks of social propriety, to the vermin who survived in that subterranean level.

I had been removed from such sordid reality for so long that I was caught completely unprepared. Ultimately, my naïveté was rewarded by a day of terror. Two thugs—they could have been

homies of Pacino's Scarface, replete with open-to-the-navel polyester shirts and gold chains, broke into my home, ripping off my remaining stash of Peruvian flake, less than a key, a mere remnant of the trade I hoped to escape. It sat in a big 16-mm film can in my basement for over a year—the Seal-a-Meal being such an indispensable invention to the trade. By this time, I had grave doubts as to the righteousness of the coke business, and I wasn't hustling to unload it. Yet it was one thing to recognize evil, another to flush it out. I even tried on several occasions, but the coke was my nest egg—there always seemed to be an excuse. The risk had been great. So, I thought I would be a fool not to try to cash in.

Mei and I had just returned from an extended, business-free trip to India. This journey inspired the adventure trek scheme, and I figured I better not jinx it with smuggling. After all, we had our nest egg. Having shot our wad on the trip, we were cash broke, and I decided to sell a couple of ounces from the stash, "just to get the business going." Although Morgan had long been out on his own, I still had one of his leftover connects. I thought this slime would turn the trick for me. I should have seen it coming, as our relationship was rocky. I had been his supplier, the main man. Then I took off, leaving him with nothing to move. He got very upset, and it became even worse when I made the mistake of telling him I was quitting. He went near crazy! Still, he needed the money. He then calmed down and said he would help me out. I needed the bucks too badly to worry about him. I wanted to believe all was well. Like the good Calvinist I had been trained to be, success in this world was a sign of God's blessing, proof—to use a most non-Calvinist term—that my karma was good. However, corruption once done is inescapable, and payback came to wreak its vengeance. The immutable law was evidenced again.

The doorbell rang, I thought it was my connect. He had called to arrange a pickup. God, was I naive...so unparanoid and, as was usual in those days, stoned. Not on coke, however, I only got into that in Peru where it was a throwaway, where you needed "incentive." No, I was just on some local sinsemilla, to calm me down, keeping me from getting too edgy. The front door was at the bottom of a flight of stairs. I buzzed it open from the top. When I saw *them*, my first thought was "the Man"—they looked like typical narcs, real seedy...polyester...gold chains on hairy

chests...maybe they were, but just off-duty. The next thing I knew, they bounded up the stairs and put a gun to my head. When I realized they weren't there to make a bust, it was already too late. My connect had set me up, deciding he might as well rip me off since there was nothing more to be gained by playing straight. That rat told them all about my place; who would be there and what the layout was. While one of these cretins had me, the other guy rushed into the living room, grabbing Mei. Cretin-looking or not, these guys were pros, initial shock, then assurance that, if I cooperated, no one would be hurt. I think what scared me the most was that the pistol was small caliber, .22 or .25 at the outside. A true hit weapon, deadly at close range, and very quiet. I kept thinking, just give them the blow, make them happy, and maybe that will save us. They were expecting only the amount the connect had ordered, just a couple of ounces.

As I said...I was naive...or maybe just too sloppy. I had been getting away with too much crazy shit for too long. I took my luck for granted. My entire stash was in that film can, out there in the back room for all to see. "Okay, big man," the pistol holder said—why he referred to me as big man I will never know—"get the coke and nobody gets whacked. That's the deal; all we want's the blow, no trouble. But...if you give us...." To reinforce the message his eyes shifted to the knife-wielding cohort who, grabbing Mei tightly, made a slitting motion across her throat. I would have done anything to keep her from harm...anything but go straight that is, which would have spared us from this in the first place.

With my head still jumbled by the pot, I mumbled, "No sweat man, I'm not into violence man...whatever you want man, just don't hurt her." My only thought was to give them the dope and get them out of there. I led my captor back to the stash. His eye widened. He couldn't believe his good fortune. After that they tied us up. The goon who had been with Mei kept holding the knife to her throat...sort of caressing her with it, mumbling obscenities in her ear. I think he was disappointed it all went so smoothly, hoping for a little fun. Maybe he wanted to kill us. I kept thinking, "Oh Lord"—yeah, I guess we all get religion when push comes to shove—"If you let us live through this, I'll never touch blow again."

It was all over. Mei and I lay, bound like hogs, on the living room floor—we were lucky they didn't slaughter us. Rip-off deaths were increasingly common in the mid-Seventies, a product of escalating profits and the subsequent heat. I took this as a warning. One minute, I had been sitting there zoned and happy, secure in my nest egg of almost a key of coke—at a thou an ounce, I had over thirty thousand. Then poof! It was all gone. What could I say? I had Mei to worry about. Quite naturally, she was freaked. It wasn't every day you stared down Death in your own living room. Only too soon the money thing would begin to sink in. We were no longer "rich hippies."

Later, initial thankfulness gave way to anxiety. The nest egg was gone. All my planning was based on that cushion. Now we were broke and there wasn't much of a profit margin in the travel business. I congratulated myself that I had sworn off only the blow, for I needed cash and the only ready source was my old standby charas, just something righteous—a few ounces like my old buddy Paul. It would be easy enough. When I returned from one of my tours, I could stash a few in the gear, just enough to get by until the business could turn a profit. There would be no more weight, and no blow. I had learned my lesson about that devil's brew.

And I stuck to my promise, until suddenly, like an evil ghost from the past, there was Morgan, begging me to get back in just one more time. I needed the money and a few ounces just didn't get it. Starting up a business as tenuous as adventure travel was tougher than I planned. Most of the people who went in for that sort of thing weren't the kind to pay top dollar. It was hard to find high rollers that wanted to rough it.

Morgan wanted to go south. That meant only one thing. Sure, I needed the cash, but not that badly. I would make one last run, but it would be for charas, and it would be big. I was tired, really tired of all this shit. I wanted to get back...get to a life. I had been out weirding for so long the straight world looked exotic. Just one more good haul and Mei and I would retire. Then we could buy a place in Humboldt, maybe somewhere up on the Rainbow Ridge, looking down on the sea...a whitewater view but through redwoods. I could still run my tours, take photos, and even grow my own—it

was real safe the hippie turned real estate agent assured us, "just do your planting on the adjacent Government land." That would be more than enough. I thought fate was again stepping in, taking us toward our future. This was most certainly the case, but where it was taking me wasn't as I imagined.

Morgan came wired—wired as in sound, wired as in SNITCH, RAT, wired as in SURVEILLANCE—a fancy little Nagra SN in the small of his back. He knew this recorder well; we had used several of them in our films—nothing but the best for smugglers...and the DEA. Mei had some intuitive suspicion. She drew me aside.

"Pat him down! I don't know why, but I think something is wrong. Why won't he take off his jacket?"

But I dismissed her, accusing her of paranoia.

"You know, the rip-offs screwed your head. Good old Morgan, no way! Maybe he's a little too kinky, a little too much a fucking flake, but we've been through a lot together. He can't be a rat. He doesn't have the nerve. Besides, this is the answer; one last score and we can kiss goodbye to our money woes. Humboldt here we come!"

I wanted to believe.

That evening drunk and high, I jumped headfirst into a heated discussion of old times and exploits. Morgan eagerly joined the exploration. Yet had I been more attuned, I would have realized he was only giving me the lead. We were talking about me, not him—that should have tipped me. We talked of wild escapades that got wilder in the telling. Oh yes, we had quite a run, young, dashing entrepreneurs making fortunes in the fabled East and South—that was how we remembered it. What went unmentioned was how things began to sour. Too many times Morgan had fucked up, giving into his weakness for young, dark skinned men, taking us to the brink, like he had with those Baluch boys in Peshawar. I didn't wish to dwell on that part, instead I reveled in the victories, the successful deals we had pulled off, the close encounters with the DEA—how stupid they were.

The Narcs weren't the only dumb ones, I later glumly thought. They had time on their side. Give us smugglers enough rope and eventually we would hang ourselves. Morgan skillfully

orchestrated the whole conversation, and I couldn't have laid out a more damning confession if I had tried. My big mouth visibly upset Mei, but I was too drunk and stoned to notice. It wasn't often I could savor those triumphs in shared conversation. They formed some of my greatest work, evidence of my courage and intelligence in the face of a powerful enemy, yet they had to remain buried, but not for long.

Why, at that moment, I trusted Morgan I will never know. The only answer I can find is that he was telling me what I wanted to hear, taking me where I wanted to go. In the end, the meeting produced an inescapable indictment. It was so damning that at the trial, many months later, the prosecution had only to set a stack of tapes out on the table to totally silence my defense.

* * *

While I was caught in a bhang-enabled split screen of consciousness, Gul retreated into the corner with the two travelers. His commission assured, he could afford to relax. Gul could never pass up a chance at a contact. It was almost an instinct. "Perhaps Sahibs want seeing Kashmir?" If they did, then it was their lucky day because he just happened to know.... "Very beautiful now being. Yes, some little trouble...not concern tourist...except," he laughed, "price now very cheap. My family having very beautiful houseboats on Nageen...far from city...far from trouble. We give double room with three meals, eggs in morning, meat for lunch and dinner...anything you...our cook very the best...only three hundred...no, you are now my good friends, only two-hundred and fifty rupees per day...each." (Double the going price.) "Just give Uncle Aziz this card and say, Gul send you. When at Srinagar, taking taxi to Nageen, tell driver only 'Moghul Delight.' Remember Sahibs; only this boat good; all others cheating you. In Kashmir five fingers not same, many men bad. Uncle Aziz giving best deal, honest deal."

"Well, Guy Sahib, what you think?" The cooing voice of the manager jerked me back into the moment. "Get a hold of yourself Guy," I thought, "this is the business." When I was in places like this so far away—but far away from where—I often found it hard

to focus on things which later would affect me so greatly. After all, this present was the "real" world. It was the past, not to mention the future, which was ever-increasing fantasy.

Struggling, I forced myself back into my smuggler persona. The charas was very dense, but not quite like the hand-rubbed Mazari I had favored in my Afghan days. Now that had been some exceptional shit. This, however, would carry well. Besides, it was the only game in town. I wasn't about to advertise my presence or interest. "All purveyors of charas are invited to tender sealed bids for three kilos to *Sahib Guy* c/o the Hotel...." I gueestimated I could get at least two and a half keys into the strobe batteries' innards, maybe a little more.

"If I buy three kilos, can you give it for ten rupees a gram?"

"So sorry, Mister Guy, this is *pukka*, *nup*, very finest Manali, first shake. Very scarce now, harvest just beginning. Difficult to find...even one kilo!" Somehow, I wasn't up to this crap any longer. There had been times in my life when I enjoyed, even savored, the haggle. Now I just wanted to be done with it, to retire with a joint or chillum, and return to what had increasingly become my principal preoccupation, the reordering the contents of my mind. I had devoted so much of the past year to this work. It resembled what I used to do with mountainous files of slides and miles of film, during the years I couldn't travel: rearrange, edit, recall, trying, above all, to gain some continuity, to make a sense of my past. Now I was putting into order all those memories. What excited me was that I could view them through a different filter. The tequila of SoCal, the beer of Kobe, the pisco of Peru only clouded the recollections. Perhaps, my old friend charas would give me a clearer perspective. Perhaps with its help, I could sort out the ghosts and move on.

Totally stoned, I reached into my fanny pack, my one concession to the newfangled tourist attire, and pulled out ten one-hundred dollar bills, still crisp and clean in the Japanese bank's sealed plastic wrapper—untouched by human hands.

"I have this," I said, gesturing to the neat package of bills resting on the table top, "you have that, plenty of that," indicating the charas. "With this you can fulfill many dreams, with that," I

laughed pointing to the chillum clutched in the traveler's hand, "you can only dream."

Despite the attempt by the manager to keep his cool, I knew the power of the US greenback. "You give me three kilos of this shit that grows all around here, and I'll give you all ten of these that come from far away," I raised my voice in emphasis, "lovely one hundred dollar bills."

There was a pause, and then my adversary shrugged with a pretended hopelessness. "No way, Sahib, so sorry. You want too *sastaa*...too cheap."

Yet there was something, a subtle intonation in the way he said it, that led me to believe the deal would be made and at my price. I would leave; there would be sweat, but in the end, I would get my three kilos for the thousand.

I shrugged and joined the other smokers. As I smoked, I thought about the deal I was about to make. Through it I was committing to a future, allowing for its possibility. One thousand represented more than a third of my remaining funds. That was a big cut. It would last many months, maybe years, if I wanted to hole up in some village. However, *if* I could get the shit back to Japan, and *if* I could sell, say twenty-five hundred grams at five thousand yen... The numbers mesmerized me.

It was hard to follow the train of mathematics. I had to start over several times. Finally, I got to the total yen figure. "One and a quarter million...hmm, no that can't be right...twelve and a half million yen! That's more like it! Let's see divide by one hundred and thirty...no that's too hard...divide by one hundred...if I divided by ten it would be one million two-hundred and fifty thousand...so by another ten it would be one hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars, US money. So, let's just call it a hundred thousand—a hundred to one, that's about right for shit". Almost like the old days, except the numbers have been inflated a hundred times over. I relished the thought of such profit. I could start a new life. Anyway, it would be good to have an option, another hole to hide in.

Once I reached the saturation point, both in anticipation of profit and consumption of the herb—I was dizzy—I signaled Gul that it

was time to go. Gul looked at me through those charasi's blood-shot eyes, and for a moment I thought I saw intense hatred. Flashing my money must have really shaken him. How long would it take him to put together such a roll? Gul also knew this wasn't all I had. In the black leather fanny pack, which I kept so close, were the means for Gul to change his life—much in the same way the one hundred thousand would alter mine.

Gul responded, "Ji, Dad." Again, I sensed a malevolent undercurrent in his voice, but tried to ignore it. My rational mind preferred to ascribe it to bhang-induced paranoia, while at some more primal level still wondering if it wasn't more. How long had it been since these folks ceased to be simply an exotic other, lumped together in my mind as Indians, Kashmiris, natives, wogs. That was an easier mindset. Stereotypes could be applied, replete with assumptions and expectations. Idiosyncrasies could be ascribed to cultural difference. I was well past that, and each "native" was an entity, making it ever so more complex. Was this because I now cared? Or was that too self-serving? Maybe it was just that I had crossed the invisible line and now was also a "native"—more likely "gone jungli" as the Brits used to say. But a native of what? That brief instant of resentment in Gul's eye lingered in my mind. I would have to watch that.

We were now about to enter terra incognita, a land where much could happen and few questions asked. Charas, if used correctly with discipline, could be a great truth giver. It could peel away the most artfully built facade. At the same time, it could allow the user's fantasy to come to the fore, taking over, covering with deeper illusion rather than stripping away. Which now was the case? Was I merely reflecting my own ill ease at being a boss, or was Gul not the faithful servant he pretended? Did he dare to dream? Did he dare to imagine himself better than this sahib?

Later that day, a Brit couple checked into the room next door. They were semi-freaks, on their way, yet still too newly arrived. The man had that typically urban English working-class look of our generation, modeled on what I have come to think as their style of rocker, sort of like Jagger or Richards, wafer thin, deeply molded and lined face—in a word, wasted. The woman was considerably younger and healthier, maybe from the country, of a higher caste,

very blond, with almost translucent skin. My imagination went to work: a runaway from the village parsonage, taking up with this rocker wannabe. Maybe this was her first trip to the East. Yes, she was a bored, blooded bitch looking for a bit of excitement before settling back into that morass of mediocrity from which she had come—that is, if she lived that long. Meeting her briefly in the hall, I coolly nodded, but the thought of her lingered in my mind—a little chunky for my tastes, but we were in the mountains and nights could be cold. I knew this woman would be warm, that she held the power to thaw even my frozen soul. But then that couldn't be; she did that for another man. The thought made me feel even colder, even more alone.

As I said, these Brits couldn't have been on the road for very long. Most likely they were in the business. Possibly they were "mules" sent out with a promise of a free adventure to fabled India, if only they would bring back a small package. It wasn't hard to find such volunteers on the lists of the dole. Maybe Ian had sent them. How crazy that would be, but it was a small world. Although this latter possibility seemed remote, that they were there on business wasn't. This was harvest time in Manali, and buyers from all parts of the world were beginning to trickle in—like bees coming for the nectar. It was nothing like in the "old days" of the late Sixties and early Seventies. But people still smoked, and someone had to fill the demand.

From the restaurant connection, I had acquired a rather ample ball of charas, supposedly as a taste, and was well on the way to euphoria. Yet, despite the welcome delirium, I had an uneasy feeling that something was off. My head was spinning on a different frequency than was usual to charas. I had been in India for one week and free of the infamous "Delhi-belly." Perhaps, this was because I had come to automatically avoid the more obvious sources of this "bug," the principal being contaminated water. But even the most careful traveler occasionally slips, and I was no exception. The vague feeling of being on the wrong wavelength was quickly transformed by more definite signals from my gut. After having made the journey to the toilet a half dozen times, I knew this was for real. All I could do was swallow Lomotil, curl up in my sleeping bag, and wait for the next wave that would send me scrambling back to the loo. Soon, it seemed as if I was nothing but

bowel. Outside of this sensation, I was lost to the world. Eventually the Lomotil kicked in, and I drifted into half-sleep.

Sometime later that evening—other than it was dark I had lost all sense of time—again my gut woke me. After gaining slight relief, I looked around the room and found Gul not there. The door was open to the hall and to the doorway of the Brits' room beyond. From under their closed door, smoke seeped out into the corridor; its pungent aroma easily betrayed its origin. The smell whetted my own appetite, and for the moment I felt good enough to contemplate smoking a joint. I searched around the semi-dark room for the makings, but found nothing. Then I heard Gul's voice coming from the other room. Though muffled by the closed door and obviously slurred by charas and God knows what else, I could decipher the words: "Shabash, shabash, good! That's really good!" Well, if it was that good, I wanted some too. Going across the hall, I noticed the door was slightly ajar. I decided to proceed native style, just enter, no knocking. That would mark me as being too Western, too hung up in my culture.

As I opened the door, a totally unexpected sight met me. It was "shabash," but not in the way I had expected. Instead of seeing three inert, stoned forms sprawled apart, the sight of Gul and the couple in the midst of a rather intricate ménage à trois confronted me. The man had his back to the door; the woman was on all fours facing him. It was obvious from his groans she was pleasing him. From her position, that pleasure could come only from her lips; occasional sucking noises, amidst their collective moans, confirmed this. At the same time, Gul was administering to her needs, kneeling stark naked behind her broad uplifted hips; the darkness of his hard, angular body contrasted starkly with the soft, pillowed mounds of her ass. He moved in and out violently; his hands punished the down-soft flesh with slaps and pinches; she moaned deeply with obvious pleasure. Gul answered her moans with a humiliating stream of oily curses.

This wasn't making love; it was something more primal. I can't even begin to guess what was in her mind, unless her submission was atonement for the sins of her forebears. Whatever it was, it was getting her off and, as Gul's brutality heightened, so did her cries of pleasure. Gul, no doubt, was working out all the injustice

he had suffered from Angrezi over the years, all the bowing and scraping. There was also that special injustice of that last Angrez girl, the one he had guided, the one who had promised him the world, only to be snatched from him by a power much greater than he could ever hope to possess. Now he had another Angrez woman, and he was making her submit to his will. That two Angrezi men witnessed his triumph only made it better.

Transfixed by the unexpectedness of the scene, I was immobilized. Gul was the only one who could see me. The others were too far-gone in their pleasure to feel my presence. With his eyes boring into me, Gul dug his dark, rough-callused fingers into the snow-white buttocks, spreading the quivering mounds further apart than even her most submissive posture offered. Without skipping a beat, a smirk crossed Gul's face, his mouth transformed into a wolfish muzzle. "See sucker, see what I can do. See how *your* women want me," was the message that spewed with silent venom from inflamed eyes. Was this the real Gul? Was this a momentary liberation from the crushing constraints, his culture's and those of an endless succession of tourist employers? This certainly was the living fantasy about which Kashmiri houseboys and mountain guides boastfully whispered.

Suddenly, as if carried over the edge, Gul's body shuddered. The woman groaned. Her disappointed tone belied any unwilling exploitation. Realizing Gul was momentarily out of the action, she leaned backward to allow her companion to continue Gul's work. The break in the rhythm shook me out of my stupor. Although my own cock was now erect, my stomach had other plans. As I retreated, I caught one last fleeting look. The woman was now bent back under the weight of the boyfriend. Gul roughly grabbed the long white-gold hair and pulled her head back, bending her neck to what seemed almost the breaking point. Gul caressed her lips with the tip of his cock, but she wasn't satisfied by such tentative contact. Her tongue lurched out as if to grasp the regenerating organ; her lips locked hard on its trunk greedily sucking the remaining fluid from its inflamed head. Gul's eyes flashed with triumph—"Who's master now?"

I fled. The only release I needed, or got, that night was on the john. Although momentarily excited by what I had witnessed, I was

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again totally captive to my bowels. As I strained to ease the wrenching pain, I thought, "Hadn't these people ever heard of AIDS." But I knew I was bullshitting myself. How I wished it'd been my cock and not Gul's working that night. In the darkened toilet, commiserated only by the release of gas, and the few odd bits of shit that had somehow evaded the dozen or so earlier visits, I realized I was growing to hate Gul. I hated him for his youth; I hated him because he could still hope to find release *in this life*.

Morning comes early when you sleep outside, even though that day was deeply overcast as if in sympathy with my condition. I knew from experience that the next twenty-four hours would be the worst—unless, of course, the "Delhi Belly" was something malevolent, like viral diarrhea—I kept looking for the telltale signs of mucous, and worse, blood, but they, to my relief, didn't appear. I resolved not to eat, and to drink as much of the new bottled water as I could hold. This bottled water was an innovation. In the past, there had been only tea or sickly-sweet Indian soda pop from which to choose. Now, in keeping with the trends of the West, "designer" water had suddenly appeared in the markets of India. At five to twenty-five rupees—depending on how far one was from Delhi, it was obvious for whom the product was intended. I lay there on the porch, gentle drizzle tapping on the galvanized roof above, the clouds cloaking all but the very depths of the valley below. I felt a gentle ache in my gut. As the hours passed, I moved in and out of a dream-like half sleep, where past, present and future became one.

* * *

Around me is a web and a spider industriously weaving. I struggle to sweep away a growing shroud of confining strands. I am both within and without, struggling and at the same time witness to my struggle. No matter how hard I try, the busy spider continues to work at even a faster pace, first walling out the world beyond, almost to the point where I, the spectator, no longer see myself. Just as I lose sight of my struggling form, to my horror, I realize that this wall is around me. TIGHTER! TIGHTER! I strike out, cutting through silken threads, only to see the spider replenish them faster than I can cut them away. The

spider's smile is not at all hostile. To the contrary, it is an open, comradely smile, as if we were engaged in cooperative effort.

Half awake, wondering where I had felt such threads before, I strained to think back over the pain as their glassy fibers scored my flesh so like...yes, that was what they were like...spun glass on a Christmas tree.

I was in the living room of that suburban track home, the ruins of Christmas around me. It was the last year that we had a tree, the year when, right after Christmas, Father took off to "the convention," soon to become "parts unknown." It was left to me, now "the man of the house," to take down the tree, the last tree. I remembered how that spun glass—"Angel Hair" they called it—clung to me, cutting into soft, chubby flesh, taking weeks to heal—the scars forever to remain.

In my struggle, I gain a momentary advantage. The webs fall away, permitting my eyes to regain that other, the witness, the spectator. Again, the spider gives me that encouraging grin, then redoubling its efforts draws me back into that captive self. I look closer, to see this tiny jailer. I make out on its spider's body a head masked with a most human face. My eyes focus; it is almost as if I know whom I will find. This isn't the first time I visited here. I expected it would be her, Tara. But then, just as I reach for that gestalt of recognition...I see what can't be....

The rain stopped. Clouds thinned to a mist by the strengthening sun, lifted curtain-like, revealing the incredibly lush green of the valley. I love to follow this lifting of the veil, to examine how the mist drifts in and out of the towering deodars, massed rank upon rank up the valley's walls. How apt was the expression "cloud forest."

As I looked down-river to the South, I could see the deep cut of the Beas, its bed strewn with mammoth boulders, as if the gods had engaged in some gigantic game of marbles. This brown-gray serpent, a true naga of Hindu lore, split the great U-shaped valley into two worlds. How many ancient kingdoms such rivers had defined? Each bank and all that lived there isolated from the other. Only in the most recent time, when humans came to master the art of bridge-making, had the inhabitants come to think of each other

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as one people. Yet even here, in what was only the shadow of the Himalaya, the forces of nature weren't to be mastered easily. Environment has great power to shape human destiny and, while this was ultimately true everywhere, how cushioned I had become by my culture. It was one thing to dominate a Sierra or Alps, and another the Himalaya. For unlike its North American or European counterparts, the Himalaya was on another scale, and its power beyond the scope of human coexistence, let alone control. At times, if it was willing, it might permit a visit, a pilgrimage, but any attempt at control would most certainly end in disaster.

The hours slowly passed, punctuated only by interminable journeys to the loo. These inevitably resulted in little, as I no longer possessed anything to release. Between the trips was time, gnawing, grating time. I became desperate to keep my mind under control. The only thing that could blot out the past was to concentrate on the future. I knew that as soon as this wave of illness was over—even though, at the time, I felt near death—I had to make my move.

As the morning wore on, and I began to tire of my mental struggle, I decided that perhaps a joint would be good for what ailed me. I was starting to feel better, and the trips to the loo were occurring with much less frequency. Relax my mind; set free my imagination; and all those sorts of hopeful expectations that offer up the excuse to escape from the straight and narrow. After a fruitless search for the hash ball, I yelled to Gul, who was still nodded out. Must be exhausted from last night's exertions, I thought with more than a trace of rancor.

After several minutes, Gul roused himself. With a sheepish grin, yet with no mention of the previous night's amorous adventure, he told me he had lost the ball of hash. This, I knew was a lie, but in my weakened condition I decided not to argue. I now realized Gul couldn't be trusted, but it was too late to replace him. The only thing to be done was to get out on the trail where we both might be released from our temptations: for me, the indulgence of thinking of past sins; for Gul, the indulgence of committing present ones. Even as I thought of this, I marveled at my own hypocrisy. Had I been fit and not haunted by a fear of AIDS, I would have been right in there, mounting and thrusting. I countered this thought with a

"boilerplate" piety that always provided a useful escape: "Yes, hard walking, clean air, simple food, and the company of the mountains might bring things right."

I instructed Gul to find transportation, oh...and of course there was that business at the restaurant.... Hoping Gul would carry out orders, I mercifully fell into a fitful sleep.

My prognosis proved correct. The following morning, I felt fit enough to eat some porridge and drink black tea. I was weak, but on the mend. Gul was out early. When he returned, he brought news of a jeep and driver that would take us the hundred or so miles to the Darcha trailhead in northwestern Lahaul.

To save money, I considered traveling by bus or lorry, at least as far as Keylong. Gul lobbied for private transport, which in a way made some sense, as we did have all that gear. And he knew who would be schlepping it from bus top to bus top. Also, I reasoned, Gul did have the legitimate concern for its safety. This wasn't Gul's country, and he distrusted the local Hindus and Buddhists as much as I was growing to distrust him. My weakened state made Gul's arguments for the jeep seem rational. After all, it would only cost fifteen hundred rupees, which at this stage of the journey was still a pittance. Of course, there was the other side; it was hard to make a commission on a bus ticket that was very cheap and had the value printed on it. The price of the jeep, however, could be easily inflated to accommodate Gul's "action."

"How about that other matter?" I asked.

"The manager said 'ji' Dad! Insha'Allah, he will bring your shit this evening."

"At the price, I said."

"Ji Dad, at the price you say, one thousand Amrikan."

"Well, well," I silently told myself, "my son, you must have made a killing." Little did I realize just how much of a killing was being made, or who was being killed.

That seemed to take care of the charas problem for the moment. Now I had only to decide about the transportation to the trailhead. After meditating over my map, seeing the distance and

envisioning the terrain involved, I didn't relish the thought of another bus ride. What if my stomach acted up? Also, I had to consider the ever-increasing pile of saman, now overflowing our room.

"Thik, let's go for the jeep. But fifteen hundred, no more, got it."

"Ji Dad," Gul said, trying to appear uninvolved.

I realized that, most likely, he had just put three hundred rupees into his pocket—smart boy Gul. But what was three hundred compared to what he would make on the charas.

Throughout the day, I felt my strength returning. Part of my recovery I credited to not smoking. My head was clearing along with my stomach, and that was good. It had been quite some time since so intense a bout with my old friend charas. Somehow, it was different now than I remembered. In the past, drugs had been a vehicle to unknown destinations, an adventure in uncharted lands, their power to distort brain and nerve turning the familiar into the bizarre. Now it was all changed, the adventure gone. It only made me feel weak and dizzy. What was wrong? Was it that I had outgrown drugs, or had my imagination so atrophied that there was no longer anything to stimulate. The "hippie" philosophy, or at least my read on it, always proclaimed dope, or at least the psychoactive drugs, to be neutral. Drugs only broke down the social constraints, releasing what was within. If this was the case, then maybe, just maybe, there was nothing inside.

After Gul left, I began to think about the charas again. A dialog arose in those seemingly diverse heads. How often I have cursed that old fart Whistler for planting the idea about multiple heads. It was a time bomb threatening to blow me into total insanity. But the son of a bitch had been right. We all operate with several different heads, or at least perspectives. The smarter we are, the more heads kick in. Yet when I tried to explain this idea to another one of the Profs, she had countered—they always have a counter—"In folklore, Guy, what is it that has more than one head?" I thought a moment, but she was impatient. "Monsters, Guy, monsters!" This was also the truth, but once the realization set in, once I became aware of my conflicting minds, there was no escape, monster or no. I did have more than one perspective, more than

one head. For a while I let, what I guess is, my "good head" take the floor.

"Look, old man, you've been down this road before. You know it's time to chuck it in. You must act, not just think about it. You're like a drunk reviving from a bad hangover. Let's not score that shit. Let's put that behind us. Yes, we'll enter the wilderness without a stash. Okay?"

But another, more malevolent head wasn't about to let things slide.

"Hey, asshole! What are you going to do after this grand tour is over, sell your photographs, write a book? Oh sure, I've heard that one before. Even if you could, what'll you live on till the money comes in? Even if you survive, what'll be the payoff? Chump change my dear, chump change for a chump! As if you'll ever even get that! No, forget that crap! Just one little score, and you can leverage it into something legit."

On and on went the debate. It was still underway when Gul returned; the "good head" had the floor, and in a desperate attempt to capture the high ground took control of my vocal cords. I found myself muttering to Gul that I was thinking about canceling the deal.

Surprisingly, Gul took this in stride. At least he didn't flinch when he heard the news. Perhaps, he too was suffering the results of overindulgence, or like me, he knew the dangers that lay ahead. But it was none of these. Gul wasn't about to lose his commission, nor as it turned out his potential catch. For despite all his faults, Gul was a good judge of character. That was his long suit; that was how he survived. He knew as soon as I fully recovered, I would be back to my old tricks. I am, after all a charasi—you know, "*Charasi combene marsi*"...something like old charasis never die...they just fade away. It was strange, if there was none around, no big deal but...hey...trail life was tough, walking for six, or eight, or even more hours a day, plodding, plodding, plodding. Even here in the Himalaya with its incredible challenges, mind-blowing vistas, and all that good shit, after the first rush it could get boring, just like anything else.

Yes, having a touch of the herb helped. It made things much more philosophical, so to speak. Every peak, every rock, every pebble took on a new complexity. Colors became more vibrant, people stranger. There was the dizziness, that breathless rush that overwhelmed you with the morning's first tote. I mean, there were times I just had to lie down and let it sweep over me. Gul knew I would want my stash.

Everything was in its place. My kit for this trip, including the burlap sacks of food and other locally obtained items, was securely packed in a half-dozen bags of assorted sizes. The largest was my own red expedition duffel, containing all my personal gear, tent, and sleeping bag. I could withstand the loss of any of the other pieces, but this was essential. In it were the things that would provide two of the three essentials, warmth and dryness. The third, energy or food, could be obtained along the way. All else, even my case of beloved cameras, with me since Nam—"Good God! That was over twenty years ago!"—could be lost and the trip still go on.

My eyes came to rest on the camera case. I realized, though I had gone to great trouble and expense to get this case and its contents to India, I' had yet taken a single photograph. In part this was to save film, but also I no longer felt the great fascination that once held me. I always needed the impetus of curiosity behind my photography. It was the tool for intellectual explorations. If something interested me, if I felt I wanted to examine it more closely, or thought I might meditate on it later, then and only then would I be motivated to take a picture. I had to feel a need to have the image, to want to hold on to it for future contemplation.

Urban India had become too familiar, presenting the same block to my photography I found in my back yard—perhaps because in my mind it has become my back yard. If I had an image ingrained in my mind, or if I thought I could always come back to it, then what was the point of photographing. While some photographers enjoyed making the usual unusual, to communicate their own unique perspective, or to proclaim some inner feeling, my work had never consciously been about myself. To the contrary, I studiously worked to avoid intruding into the image I produced.

Not that this was possible. I had wrangled with this for some time to the absurd point where I had subjected it to academic study. I posed the problem of how to visually portray another people, another culture, without obscuring the subject in the filter of reflexivity and reflectivity. I attempted to show the futility by extrapolating from thermodynamics the Heisenberg principle—that in an echo of Einstein's relativity, each observer brought change to what was observed—I warned you it was absurd.

During the mercifully brief period in my life when I had fancied myself a visual anthropologist, it sounded so much more intellectual than photographer, I became so obsessed with this idea that I gave up taking photographs altogether. Instead, I put the camera into the hands of those who would have been my subjects, allowing them to capture their own "realities," express their own feelings. But this, as I would find characteristic of most academic endeavors, resulted in little more than a masturbatory exercise, a hermeneutic vortex leading nowhere. My subjects were making pictures that were theirs and could signify only their own experience. I was expendable, at best a provider of equipment. This was a role I found completely unsatisfying, completely without gratification. It had been very esoteric, very intellectual, but in the end, totally devoid of any pleasure I had once derived from my "art." Would I eat the sandwich or only describe it? Again, I had thought too much. If only I could think less, thinking always led me into trouble.

Now I was going to try again. Just take pictures for myself and not worry about all the ramifications. There were no more papers to write, theses to propose, word-biased professors to please, no more justifications, no more analysis, no more bullshit. Just let the pictures speak for themselves, trust the pictures. I would still try not to be what I thought of as "artsy," letting the inner-self hang out, instead I would work toward a goal of documenting as "objectively" as possible the land and its inhabitants lying before me. I returned to an idea, once held so long ago, that what I saw was a fleeting way of life soon to be extinguished. It was valuable to record. Perhaps this wasn't politically or intellectually correct, but it was something that gave purpose and with that purpose came hope.

Well, if I was going to preserve this "fleeting way of life," it was time to get started. Tentatively, almost shyly, I picked up my well-worn tools. They were my oldest friends, some pre-dating my relationship with Mei. These old Fs and F2s—I was busted before the F3's took hold—had been with me almost from the beginning of my adult life. They had traveled as far and wide as I. Each nick, dent, and scratch recalled some moment of extremity: red-hot shrapnel in the siege of Khe Sanh; that rocky ledge on the western face of Nanda Devi; the twenty-foot fall when the porch collapsed from the weight of the Kalash wedding party in Chitral; a kick from a transcended Jivaro, high on *ayahuasca* in a jungle back-water of the Peruvian Amazon; the endless jolting from a Tuareg camel crossing the Sahara. These little black boxes with lenses, filters, and miscellaneous gear were the source of my magic. They enabled me to capture people, places, and events, separating them from the dictates of time, suspending them forever as they were when, by some act of fate, I met them with my camera. Film held the past fast for me.

I selected my longest lens, a 180-mm, and took the first pictures of the trip. Earlier, in the throes of my illness, the interplay of mist and cloud among the deodars had mercifully distracted me from the pain. Now, in some attempt at tribute, I suppose, I wanted to get it on to film. The choice of subject made me realize just how distant I had become from what had once been my chief means of expression—even at times superseding speech itself. When I was up to speed, I favored wide-angles, 35, 28, 24, 20 even 15-mm—I wasn't the spy-type of photographer—I wanted to get into the action and produce a perspective that would make my audience feel engaged. For the moment, I was content to stand back; the camera didn't feel comfortable; it had yet to become a part of me, as I knew it must, if I was to do good work. Now was the time of re-acquaintance after a long separation, and this needed time.

Even through a view finder well-worn and hazed by the dust of many continents, the scene appeared in great brilliance, enhanced as it was by the hallucinogenic filters of hash and sickness-induced fatigue. I instinctively knew this wouldn't translate well to film. As often was the case with this type of scene, I would eventually—if and when I got to see the results—wonder why I had taken the bloody picture. The things that made the scene so

beautiful, the interplay of light and shade, movement, the delicate gradation of tone and hue, were too subtle to be captured by the film. But anything to break the ice, take the first shot.

After a couple of exposures of clouds and rain—was this some trick of Freud translated through Chinese—I changed lenses. I went to wide, and took three shots of the surrounding valley. One was down towards the town. It appeared like one of those miniature villages seen in model railroad complexes. Another was to the West where the hills look like great, emerald-green breasts cleaved by the nala leading to Chamba. The last was to the North, to the serious peaks of the Pir Panjal, perpetually cloaked in ice and snow. Here, I suddenly faced a taste of what lay beyond—a warning to those who had no business to go on. The visible peaks were small when scaled against the true Himalaya. Yet looking at their jagged, ice-bound crest, it was certain that Death was no stranger. A perversely pleasurable chill went through my body and, for a moment, I longed for a tryst among those crags. I hungered to know. I yearned for the comforting finality of *her* embrace. Was it strange that when I envisioned Annihilation, I saw not the skull-crowned, snout-nosed, fanged horror of the tangkhas, but instead an unfocused "her?"

I knew I had better change channels. Thinking about death too much was obsessive, bad for the soul. I sensed that if I ever did conjure Death's face clearly, she would move from a fantasy locked in my mind to reality, an external power over which I would have no control. Instead, I forced myself to think about business. Yes, I told myself, I wasn't going to score, but just suppose I did anyway?

I tried to redirect my mind by focusing on details. If, just if, I decided to score the shit, then what things would have to be done? After all, this was no joking matter. Maybe up here in Vashist, high as a kite, fantasy could reign but, if it was a go, I had better check into reality quickly. Being able to regroup had always been my strength. It was the reason I had enjoyed a measure of success rather than being one more stoned-out junkie. I could break away and return to the world outside my head.

I thought about the immediate problem of storage. Out of old habit, I hid the method of shipment. After—if there was to be an "after"—the trip was over, once I got to the sanctuary of a

KALAGIYA

houseboat in the Vale, then I would complete the packing. This required caution, for odor was a big problem with charas, particularly with better qualities. The same resin that made the shit so potent also made it easy to be detected by dogs. I knew the Man was relying more on dogs, both real and virtual, but I could beat them. I would take my bundle, mold it into a shape that would fit inside the plastic battery liner, then cover it with melted wax. I had learned the trick early in my travels, and it served well. Once encased in wax, there would be no smell, even after baking in the Delhi warehouse, awaiting shipment. Sealed inside the liner, then placed in the battery, the chance of detection was remote. It always surprised me, but for some reason my own appearance never triggered any bells. No, I had little fear of a cold bust, I just didn't fit the profile. To get me you had to have a snitch; you had to be waiting.

* * *

Mei and I had returned from Chitral with four kilos of the best "honey oil." Chitral was one of my favorites. Lying in the extreme northwestern corner of of Pakistan, until the early 60's, it had been an independent kingdom. While tall, snowy mountains encircle it, much like an earthly Shambhala, it has served for countless ages as a meeting place of the three great Asian cultures—Chinese, Indian, and Persian. Like that mythic Shambhala, Chitral was isolated, cutoff for most of the year from the outside world. Or at least it was at that time, before the Shuravi invasion sent a Afghan refugees flooding over it's mountainous borders. It was a perfect hideaway and with a little money you could do almost anything. We had set up a small lab with Morgan in the former ruler's ramshackled summer palace, Birmogh Lasht, the "Plain of Walnuts". It was an incredibly beautiful place, perched on a wide plateau almost a mile above the main valley with an amazing three-sixty vista that included the monsters in the Tirich Massif, as well as lesser peaks of the Hindu Kush and Hindu Raj. I didn't have too much time to get bored with that view because for the better part of a month I was about the agonizing

business of refining. We cooked, washed, removing the solvent from the crude oil, and finally purified the mess until we had worked forty keys of Chitral's finest into four keys of clear, sweet, light honey oil.

The hardest part was getting the ethanol for cooking and the petroleum ether for the final purification, not to mention the ice. Neither was readily available in Pakistan; ethanol or grain alcohol was, in that Islamic country, worse than charas. Buying pet ether was like asking the CBI to bust you. I got around the first by having my Chitrali connect, the manager of the hotel where I stayed, work the previous winter moonshining the local mulberry crop. The only trouble was that the son of a bitch got into his own product—winters in Chitral were long and cold. If he hadn't turned sherabi on me, I could have doubled production. The pet I imported from Nam where it was no sweat. I could have bought the come of Satan in Cholon, if I had enough cash—and was gullible. It was no problem bringing the pet through Pakistani Customs, because they weren't really interested in what foreigners were bringing in, just what was going out. I had it bottled up like whiskey and, since I was there at the Government's invitation to make a film, all it took was a little baksheesh, one bottle of real Johnny Walker Black. Morgan and I played Russian Roulette that month taking turns at the distilling. You had to be careful when you cooked, otherwise the whole thing would blow. We could have used kero, ordinary petrol, or even wood or grain alcohol, but the pet was the only way to get the oil really concentrated. Those were the days before a/c electric of any kind reached Chitral. I had a generator hooked up to a jeep that gave us the juice for the hot plate, and for ice there was a glacier a half day trek away. I had four boys running ice.

Once I had solved the material problems, the refining went on without a hitch. It was just tedious and dangerous. Cooking with that volatile alcohol, and then that final stage with the even more volatile pet. After all that, I thought it was rather ironic that our biggest hassle came when we were packing in Pindi. God, that was close. We had placed the container of oil—a big ghee tin—into a bathtub of hot water to make it more fluid. Somehow, Mei spilled a little of the oil into the tub and, when the water drained, a thick film formed over the tub's surface. You can imagine. There we were, deep in the Man's territory, in Flashman's Hotel, a

Government hotel. Bearers were running in and out, and all we had were a few rags to wipe the tub. It was like blood at a murder scene, it just wouldn't go away. Finally, with the help of some rubbing alcohol, we got rid of most of it...but I always sort of wondered.

I wondered because that time we were stopped. Maybe it was all the stamps from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Peru, Thailand, Nam, and such, or the fact that we did look rather scruffy. Having just spent several months living in a remote corner of Chitral, we were well removed from the World. However, there was the chance that a bearer, chowkidar, or sweeper had detected something strange about the tub, some telltale odor and reported it. Whatever it was, when we arrived in New York, the custom agent politely, but firmly, escorted us to an isolated room, telling us to wait while they made a thorough search of our baggage.

The flight had been over twenty-four hours, we were exhausted and groggy from the Valium that I always used to calm myself for the ordeal of entry. Despite the fatigue my mind was racing. Was this it? Was this how it was going to end? How am I going to protect Mei? She was frightened. I could tell only because I knew her so well. Besides I was scared shitless so.... But she was quite a trooper and outwardly kept calm, feigning surprise mixed with outrage—not too much to signal guilt but enough to seem the proper response to undeserved prosecution. We sat there on those hard metal folding chairs in a bare, greenish room that seemed to scream, "Welcome to the belly of the beast!" There was a mirror, which I had to assume wasn't for our convenience. I resisted a sudden temptation to wave to the audience of Customs and DEA agents I knew must be on the other side. Then giving Mei a deep look—was this to be the last time I saw her? I started a patter of complaint while, at the same time, trying not to sound too nervous.

"Son of a bitch, why us? I hope this doesn't take too long or we'll miss our connect...er...flight." My God! I realized I had freaked on that telltale word. Then recovering myself, "Oh well, I guess they are just doing their job. I hope they don't break anything."

"Jesus, Guy, I've got to pee, I wonder where's the toilet?"

"Just try to hold it Mei. I'm sure this won't take long."

I wasn't sure at all, but we both knew our future depended on maintaining a collective cool. It was in moments like this, moments of extremity, which always proved the depth of our relationship. Being both of strong will, we bickered a lot about small things, but when faced with a crunch we became one mind, responding with single energy to the collective threat. We realized that, if things went bad, it would mean separation; we would each have to face a new, unknown reality alone. The thought was too terrible, and we pulled together with a supreme effort of will.

We kept up the whining patter of conversation, hoping against hope the nervousness—no, abject fear is more accurate—didn't show. I figured that those slugs were too lazy to go through everything, I mean we had mucho saman. I was sure they were listening, believing we would do their job for them. But we kept our cool and, after about an hour, a rather disgruntled agent told us to clear out. God, were we happy, like being strapped into the chair and then getting the call from the Governor. So much depended on just a little action or inaction. If they had dug a little deeper...? But they didn't. Maybe love protected us. We were so much in love. We were inseparable. Again, I would have killed to protect Mei...I would have given my life. Yet at the same time I put her through all that shit. I guess I figured it was my life, and she had "signed on" free and clear. I mean, that was her choice, she knew who I was before we connected.

* * *

Early the next morning, after the usual miscues on an early wake-up, we finished packing. Gul and the barely awake manager, temporarily seconded as a bellhop, carried the baggage down to the garden to wait for the jeep. Inured by now to "Indian time", I made only a mild fuss. But even this restraint didn't calm the manager, little used to early rising. As it turned out, there was no real need to hurry on our end because the jeep, in keeping with the general system, was also late. After a while, it dawns on the traveler to adjust to a perceived pattern of difference. Just as you think you have perceived such a pattern, it changes, the hour difference becomes two, or four, or time loses all meaning.

Eventually I worked it out. I wore on my left wrist, along with a cheap but useful plastic digital watch, a Rajastani bracelet. It was quite beautiful, massively made of woven silver mesh, adorned with flowered bas-relief medallions. At times, casual observers would ask, "Why two watches Sahib?" Then, I would first point to the watch, "This Angrezi time," and then to one of the round silver medallions on the bracelet, "This Indian time". I usually got a knowing laugh. It was as if the Indians also knew the frustration of not having a firm system of time to order their existence. But then such an order, who could impose it on cultures as old and set in their ways as those of India? The British tried and to what end?

Gul took advantage of the driver's tardiness. Had it been arranged? With seeming disinterest, he casually broached the subject, "Hey Dad, maybe you should get the shit, eh? Very good price, and we not see more until Kashmir...maybe not even there now those motherfucker militants run things. Even if we find, Dad, it cost much, much more."

Like a magnet, the case with the strobe equipment drew my attention. As it was, with its hollow battery, it was of no use. That extra case cost plenty to get this far. If this was to be a one-way trip, why bother with it, for that matter, why bother with any of it? It wouldn't take too much to reach the Rohtang...

"Namaste. Kyaa haal hay, Dadee Sahib?" It was as if almost on cue. I heard that dreaded word through a haze inhabiting my mind like the mist that clouded the forests. It was the restaurant manager, my connect.

"Thik, okay," I said reflexively, but thinking: Son of a bitch, now Gul has him using that fucking word. And now it has become 'Dadee.' Bloody fucking familiar, this wog! Then I caught myself. Where did that come from? I sound like the old days, when I was running with Morgan.

No time for wool gathering old man, I must deal with this, now, right now.

Under his arm the manager carried a bundle tied up in a piece of stained muslin—the charas. Gul stood in the doorway behind him, armed with what was now becoming an all too familiar smirk. Increasingly, I was reminded of Dirk Bogarde whenever I thought

of Gul. It was in *The Servant*, the film where a gentleman's gentleman manipulates his master, to the point where he becomes master. I suspected this too would be my fate, unless I was extremely careful. Perhaps by the end of the journey, it would be me, who was cooking, cleaning, and schlepping the bags, and me, who would deferentially seek Gul's pleasure.

At first I wanted to protest. Hadn't I told Gul it would be a non-starter? But I was too stoned to create waves; easier just to go with the flow and let fate take its course. The manager opened the muslin wrapping, and laid the great turd-like mound down on the tea table beside me, shoving aside the clutter of teacups, loose tobacco, maps, water bottles, and biscuit wrappers. It had been a long time since I had seen this much shit.

"Three keys, are you sure?"

I looked at the bundle. I reached down, touched it, then hefted it gingerly. It was soft and pliant. With little difficulty, I could break through the black-oily crust to the dark green gold that lay inside. The weight felt about right—I prided myself on my sense of weight. At least it was in the ballpark. What was more important, it seemed firmly packed; a fact that was quickly proved when I sliced through with my Swiss Army knife. That was the important test, that it was pure, no surprises lurking inside, no adulteration. How many times had I heard tales of pine resin, or even cow, yak, or camel shit, wrapped in a thin layer of charas, being fobbed off on some cherry smuggler. The exact weight wasn't important. I could tell it would more than fill my strobe's hidden compartments. No, it was the quality that counted.

"On my honor, Dadee Sahib. It three kaygee"

"Hey my friend, I am not your Daddy."

"As you wish Sahib," said the manager without any sign of offense.

"For one thousand, right?"

"As you wish Sahib, one thousand dollars Amriki."

Before I could grasp what I was doing, the deal was finished and the restaurant manager out the door. I was left holding my pungent bundle. All of a sudden, a delicious rush of fear swept over

me; it was a fear I hadn't felt for more than a dozen years. That fear of holding, of knowing that anytime, anywhere, the *Man* might suddenly step out of the unknown...BUSTED. Why did I enjoy this? Why couldn't I just sit back and enjoy the comforts of life, the beauties? On the contrary it was just those things that made me nervous—made me feel I was going soft.

No, it was good to be on the edge again. Motherfucker, it was good! I gouged out a rather large chunk and from that made two balls. One I passed to Gul, the other I put into an empty film can, surreptitiously storing it away.

"Here Gul, our ration to Padam. Use it wisely my son."

Reflexively, I underscored the last word with sarcasm. Yet I was feeling good. I had made, or at least had let be made, a decision. There was now an alternative. Another hole to hide in! That was what Mei used to say. I now had an alternative to inevitable closure. Life again was open-ended. Romantic though it might seem from a distance, as I approached my fantasized tryst, Death's distant beauty might take an unexpected, less pleasing form.

An aura of paranoia radiated out from that inert, pungent turd, sitting on the tea table. At the same time, it radiated hope.

The turd spoke to me, "Well big boy, Sahib Dadee or whatever shit-assed Angrez name that you go by! Do you have the balls to take me where I need to go? My devotees wait anxiously, ready to reward you if you are brave. But are you, Dadee Sahib?"

Months and thousands of miles from now this ball of resin would magically turn into piles of currency, maybe yen, maybe dollars. What did it matter? What mattered was that it would empower me, free me to make the next move, free me to build dreams—if I had the balls.

I wrapped up the bundled and called to Gul, "Here, stash this away."

"Stash, Dad?"

"Yes 'stash,' I mean pack it away somewhere safe."

Gul carefully wrapped the bundle in several layers of plastic and with marked reverence placed it in the large sack of rice. Gul had done well. Out of the thousand dollars, two hundred would be his. He had hoped for more, but I was no virgin and, rather than botch the deal, he opted for a more modest profit. Besides, there was another, much more important consideration, one that I would learn of only much later, but one I will share with you to now.

I wasn't Gul's only employer, although his work for me was an essential element of his other, more important duty. The boss to whom he owed his ultimate allegiance was V. I. Singh, Inspector of the CBI, the equivalent of the FBI or Interpol in India. How fortunate Gul had considered himself when he had first met the good Inspector. "Allah, blessed be his name, must have been watching over me," he thought, because now there was a way out of his troubles. He had been busted with a few grams of hash. It was no big deal, unless Singh wanted it to be one. Gul was, after all, a Kashmiri. However, it wasn't a street tout like Gul that Singh was gunning for.

Recently, the drug section of the CBI had been getting a lot of heat; the Americans were whining that there wasn't enough "interdiction." In this was an underlying threat that linkage might be made to future aid. The CBI. wouldn't want to disturb the large operators, those modern Moghuls of international commerce in Bombay, Delhi, or Calcutta for whom drugs were just another commodity to be moved in the world market—another source of that desperately needed foreign exchange.

There was another level in which the CBI could freely act. It didn't take much intelligence to know that the street touts, those working the tourist trade, and more specifically those of Kashmiri origin, had their hands deep in the trade. "Besides those Kashmiris are a troublesome lot, and it's a fact that much of their drug profits are going to arm those fundamentalist maniacs." The word went out to roust a few and then use them as informers. The Inspector's orders had been clear: "Use the touts to bag some of those hippie-traveler types, Euro-trash if you must, but try for Amrikans." The CBI-walas knew if they could throw a few bodies to the American DEA, their own masters would be pleased.

The Inspector had been more of a curse than a blessing. Gul made his pact with a devil and, like all such pacts, it couldn't be broken. He had to keep giving up bodies, ensnaring and then betraying. At least they would wait until the poor victims got back to wherever they came from before busting them. That was cleaner, no expense of trial or incarceration for the Indian Government, a body to count in the drug war for the DEA. What was equally important for Gul, no real worry about payback. By the time the poor victim got out of prison...well as one famous rebel chief had said: "Delhi is a long way away."

Gul was paid three thousand rupees for each body snared. He had already scored three times. How happy was his widowed mother when he sent her the money. His family, impoverished since his father's death, could now afford to build their own home. At times, he felt almost sorry for his victims. It had been particularly hard with that English girl. She had clearly been in love with him—his ticket out of India. He could almost feel the British passport in his hand. But then Singh had pressured him, and when Gul found that she wanted to take some dope back to a "cousin" in L. A., he knew he was going to have to sacrifice her—a bird in the hand. He had to think of his family first. They desperately needed the cash, and he knew he would have a devil of a time getting an exit permit to leave India without Singh's approval.

That had been almost two years ago. Ever since the troubles in Kashmir, business was slow. Besides needing money, a never-ending need, he also had the Inspector breathing down his neck. When I came along, it was like another gift from God of which Gul, in his youthful conceit, imagined he was the worthy beneficiary. The only trick would be to stick with me throughout my "program," to make sure, Insha'Allah, that I didn't get second thoughts, that I didn't lose my nerve.

The jeep-wala told Gul the trip would take about twelve hours. He didn't want to arrive in Darcha too late, since he planned to return the same evening. It would be quite a drive over the 13,000-foot Rohtang Pass, even in the light. But in the dead of night? The driver would really earn his thousand plus rupees. Despite the driver's self-avowed desire for an early start, he pulled up to the hotel shortly before eight—most likely, I realized later, through the

machinations of Gul. Aside from the lateness, there had been another change. Instead of the jeep, which in India meant a *jonga*, an Indian built Suzuki four by four, the driver appeared in an Omni, a micro-van that was another Japan-India co-production. The Omni, albeit new, looked rather dangerous, and for the life of me I couldn't believe it would have the power to make the long climb.

The driver, Dorje, whose central Asian features gave him away as one of the many transplanted Lahaulis living around Manali, excused the change as necessary because of the large amount of saman. Although dubious, I took heart in Dorje's seeming professionalism. Perhaps, it was his sweater, which in big, multi-colored block letters, had the word "STRONG" emblazoned across it. I mused on how the power of suggestion was known far beyond the precincts of Madison Avenue.

It would be another hour before we were off—only after taking chai, exchanging addresses, and a final group photograph with the hotel manager, Gul, and our new friend and co-conspirator, Dorje. Gul was equally anxious to get on the road. He had studiously avoided the Brit couple since the night of their debauchery. The charas and excitement brought on by the sheer carnality of it all had, for that moment, stripped him of his inhibitions. The cool, clear light of morning brought him back to his senses. Although he ultimately had a higher master, the Inspector, to do his work properly he had to psyche himself into working for me. It was through me he could get those things that he needed, money for his family, a body to count for the CBI, and ultimately his ticket to the World.

"What possessed me," Gul might have thought, "to give myself away." The cardinal rule in this business was never to tip your hand. No matter what you felt about a sahib or memsahib, about any of these ferenghi fuckers, only let them see what they want to see, the faithful bearer, ready to do whatever was their bidding. His revenge would come in the money paid and the gifts, the baksheesh, he would duly extract. If *they* wanted to make the mistake, if *they* wanted to smuggle drugs, then Gul would only be too happy to oblige. It would be, after all, their choice.

When he finally got the gear loaded, the good-byes said, and we were underway, relief filled Gul's face. The last thing he wanted

was to face the couple again. He had enjoyed the woman, for she reminded him of that other English girl. He even imagined he was in love. But there was no place in his plan for love; the road from the village was a long and hard one. Escape from the grinding poverty and oppression had long been his only goal.

Like other Kashmiris in the trade, he hoped to find someone who would take him from this nowhere, from these desolate mountains to the wonders of distant cities like London, New York, or Tokyo, places he had seen only in those big, glossy posters in the airline offices ringing Connaught. He often thought to himself, how crazy were these tourists who left all those wonderful places, spending untold lakhs of rupees to come to this wasteland, but then praise be that they did. If he could only make it to the West, there he could make his fortune. He heard that even the most common laborer made five dollars an hour. That was more than one hundred and fifty rupees. It was rare when he could make that much in a day. In his dream, he saw himself one day returning to Kashmir, loaded with all manner of ferenghi goods: color television, VCR—if those militant fuckers had been blown away—a good kero heater, fancy sport clothes. Maybe he would open a shop, or better, a string of houseboats. Yes, he would become a houseboat owner, an employer of other poor village youth who would serve him, just as he had served. Now, all these dreams were on hold, for he was in the clutches of the CBI. All he could hope for now was that someday, if he served well enough they would let him go.

Chapter IX

*Be In Peace
Not Pieces!
—Border Road Sign—*

LOOSE

Snaking up the valley wall, the road to the Rohtang makes a torturous ascent. The challenge is great; at thirteen thousand feet, the pass lies more than a vertical mile above Manali. For several miles, the going is straight enough as the smooth, metalled surface follows the boulder-choked bed of the Beas. It's ease is short lived.

Through a windscreen decorated with the distinctive decal "OM" in Tibetan script, I witnessed civilization slowly extinguished. Teeming roadside bazaars gave way to isolated, multi-storied, steep-roofed farmhouses, where human and animal shelter together over the long winters. These too soon disappeared as we climbed above the valley floor, beginning the rigorous ascent to the pass. We were entering territory alien to human life, where the road existed only by the incredible tenacity of the Border Road Organization, a paramilitary group responsible for building and maintaining some of the highest and most difficult roads on earth.

Manali, lying at well over six thousand feet, sees much snow in the winter, but at the altitudes of the highway there is snow, deep snow, for a much greater part of the year. As we rose, the thick stands of the deodar forest began to thin, gradually replaced by the sub-alpine scrub of birch, juniper, and rhododendron. It was past the time of blossoming, but from experience I could imagine these hillsides covered in the bright pinks of rhododendron blossoms.

We crossed one of those ubiquitous, iron "Bailey Bridges," a legacy of the Raj. Elsewhere these bridges would be used only in an emergency, but in this ever-shifting land they are about as permanent as things get. I asked Dorje to stop and walked back, camera in hand. I wasn't interested in photographing the bridge,

which technically was illegal, but what could be seen from it. The bridge spanned a narrow but exceedingly deep gorge.

I am always a sucker for such cheap-thrill shots. When stripped of the secure platform, on which I was lodged, I knew the resulting image would look quite exciting. Lying flat on the bridge, I edged to one side, pointed the camera down, and giddily recorded the tumbling mountain stream hundreds of feet below.

Another Omni, laboring just behind, lurched around the bend. Its Lahauli passengers looked startled to see my sprawled form on the bridge, but when I stood up, camera in hand, knowing amusement replaced fear—another crazy ferenghi.

Being out in the open, photographing again, brought great relief. I felt growing freedom from all those cares, ghosts that, even in the "end of the world" of Manali, I couldn't shake. It was as if this climb was taking me above the cares of a world increasingly distant. Yes, the Himalaya was beginning to take hold, reorienting me to another existence, another reality. I was moving farther away in both time and space from my past. Alone, surrounded by strangers who had no power over me, no shared experience with which to be bound. It was I who held the power to recast my being. My perspective was changing; I was climbing out of a valley, and from these new heights I began to see the distance again—a future. This was all happening quite imperceptibly to my mind. In my subconscious however, it must have had an effect. Why else did I feel so happy?

That I had entered another realm became even more apparent about a quarter hour later. As we rounded a hairpin turn, two lorries blocked the road: one painted in the bright robin's egg blue of the BRO; the other a commercial carrier, typical of the thousands which make the five-hundred mile run from the plains to the Ladakhi capital of Leh. Beyond these two, other vehicles were beginning to pile up.

While the BRO vehicle, aside from its bright color, was militarily austere, the private truck, following the fashion, was intricately decorated with paint, chrome, and brightly colored plastic knick-knacks. This truck was obviously Sikh-owned, for it carried the religious symbols associated with that religion: pictures of the

holy Gurus, swords, and pious aphorisms. Across the tailgate was boldly written: "IN THE SERVICE OF GOD." The left and right taillights were respectively labeled "Life" and "Death." These hard-drinking drivers were, because of the dangers of the profession, often very religious, or at least superstitious, men.

That their profession was dangerous was evident from the scene before me. A large crowd of coolies attached to the BRO stared over the edge of the roadway. They seemed out of place. Their dark complexions and thin bodies betrayed them as Southerners, most likely Bengalis, Tamils or Keralans, still wearing their simple cloth lungis despite the cold.

There were obviously fresh skid marks on the road, now no more than a muddy, rutted track. When I got to the edge, I saw what had made them. A lorry had gone off the road and down a drop of about one hundred and fifty yards, striking a ledge where it hung precipitously on its side. Parts of the truck and, what appeared to be, several bodies hung in macabre postures further down.

From the officer in charge, I learned the accident occurred in the early morning twilight. He said it often happened this way. The drivers kept themselves going by getting high on cheap alcohol, most likely some Army-only rum like "Black Dog," which soldiers sometimes sold to civilians to make extra rupees. The thousand-mile run to Leh and back was long and cold, not to mention that it traversed some of the highest and emptiest country on earth, so desolate that it often drove men mad. "I see ghosts, many many, on that road Sahib," one rather zoned-out driver told me. Making matters even worse was that the drivers had to fight the clock—the faster they got home, the sooner they could set out with new loads. Most had large families to feed. All these factors created incredible stress on both men and machines. A needed break or repair put off just a little longer; speed pushed just a little higher, until....

Before me lay just such a moment. Apparently one of the lorry's crew was still alive because movement had been seen in the cab. The problem was how to get down to the victim; there were no emergency services: ambulances, fire crews, medical helicopters. The Army, despite its heavy presence in this sensitive border region, had a few services, and these they reserved for their own

personnel. If you weren't part of their organization, or an extremely rich tourist who could pay, then you were, like these lorry-walas, in the hands of whatever God, or Gods, you ascribed to.

This wasn't the first time I had seen such accidents. The mountain roads claimed thousands in similar tragedies. Early on, I realized that the most dangerous part of mountain travel wasn't the ascent of a peak, the crossing of an icy torrent, or even threading a way among the deep crevasses of a glacier. It was the approach—exactly what I was doing now, traveling on the motor road to the trailhead.

The initial confusion began to subside. The lorries blocking the way had been the first on the scene and, although accidents such as this weren't unusual, they still were unnerving. Dorje, after surveying the situation, went back to the Omni to smoke and wait. He was unhappy, not so much because of the fate of the unfortunates below, but because of the disruption to his schedule. He was a local man, a native of these mountains. He had little sympathy for these flatlanders, these *Hindustanis*, who were invading his mountain home. Besides this was their karma. Who was he to question the will of the Lord? The officer, a young Sikh subaltern, only just recovering from the initial shock, began to organize a rescue. In this he was blessed with manpower but little else. The immediate challenge was to get down the hundred and fifty so yards to get to any survivors.

I didn't to witness this. A considerable number of vehicles were backed up by then. The drivers, seeing they could do little, began to think of their own schedules. In response to their complaints, the officer managed to clear enough of the roadway so that traffic could move. The air filled with the stench of diesel as black smoke belched from a dozen large Tata engines. Life was to go on; the road cleared, and the unfortunates quickly left behind. Perhaps, the horror lingered in the minds of the drivers for just a little while, making them a bit more cautious as they threaded their way up, or down, the slick switchbacks. But soon it would fade, the needs of the moment dictating a return to more reckless ways.

As we climbed higher, I had time to ponder what I had just witnessed. How quickly could such trauma be put aside. Perhaps it

was essential to do so. After all, how could the drivers continue plying the roads if they held onto images of death and destruction? Better to let it go and pretend it could never happen to you; it was the other guy's kismet or karma or whatever black box your brand of belief employed. Such disasters must result from something deserved, something that you, having led a more exemplary life, would avoid. I realized these mountains held no lock on this thinking. It was a universal response to the misfortune of others. Those people with AIDS, wasn't God punishing them? Those languishing on welfare, wasn't it because of their own laziness, their own moral turpitude? How comforting it was to see such logical causality, to envision such order. Yet what if you didn't believe in natural order? What if you could imagine, literally see yourself in the place of the other? What if you could look beyond the chimera of order to the true ruler of the universe—the God Chaos, the God Random Chance, the God Whimsy? *Jai Shiva!* That was the fitting response, perhaps the only response.

While traveling, I often get lost in abstract thought. The disconnection from any fixed reality helps free the mind. In the lowlands, the stimulus of alcohol or charas helped set the mood, blocking out the more mundane cares. Now, I was reaching altitudes alone capable of making me "high," disconnecting me from material constraints. But I am also a highly visual person, one who takes great pleasure in watching subtle changes in light, color, texture. As a photographer, I take pride in this.

The landscape changed again; almost imperceptibly we had crossed into an alpine zone. Grassy, flower-laden meadows, stretching carpet-like to the horizons, replaced scrub vegetation. A Gaddi's herd grazed on the lushness, filling the entire hillside with an undulating mass of sheep and goats. Here and there, small groups of ponies stopped to feed on the luxuriant flora, only to run again to another choice spot as if blown by the wind. We were high enough now to be among the clouds, remnants of the monsoon, which at this time of the year held the lowlands firmly in its grip. Yet in this high marchland, even the power of the monsoon was broken; its leaden cover fractured into diaphanous clouds that opened to the unrelenting cobalt blue of the sky, to the fleeting warmth of the sun. If one looked closely, intricate patterns of color radiated through the air.

We reached a plateau and the Omni picked up considerable speed. Looking ahead to our course across the rolling meadows, I saw that we would soon pass through a thin tracing of civilization—a line of shanty-like structures along the road. After this outpost, the way climbed abruptly and, on the horizon, I could just perceive the outline of the pass.

As we drew closer to the structures, I saw that they were a string of *dhabas*, shanty-like restaurants, serving chai, snacks and, if the *khaansaamaa* was agreeable, a light meal. Above on a small knoll, prayer flags whipped in the wind. These thin, cotton banners with prayers or teachings inscribed by laboriously carved wood blocks, transmitted through sight, sound, or even the feel of the wind, the blessing of the Buddha.

The *dhabas* are a welcome break for drivers from both directions, for this is the last place for chai or a meal on the southern side of the pass, and the first when coming from Kyelang. After a few minutes, we reached the line of shacks. This ramshackled assemblage can hardly be called a village as it is purely seasonal, depending on the short three month period the road is open for its existence.

Despite its temporary nature, the merchants try to make it as attractive as possible. Outside the shanties were tables and brightly colored umbrellas, almost as if the owners were imitating the feel of a Tyrol pension. But this was India not Cortina or Kitzbühel and, as a reminder, two cows and a yak grazed for tidbits among the few customers. For some reason, the merchants must have expected a large clientele. Dorje explained that occasionally busloads of Indian tourist came to romp in the snow fields and to peer out from the top of the pass at the snow-capped peaks of Lahaul.

I had Gul order an omelet, chapatis, and of course the ubiquitous Indian milk tea. For reasons I didn't want to explore, I felt more comfortable dealing only with *my* servant. It allowed me to retain a certain reclusiveness. "Make all the suckers deal with Gul." That made me feel special, recalling that wandering merchant prince fantasy of the past, a time when I believed I could cast my own reality. Perhaps, in those more surreptitious days, this feeling had evolved with some purpose; it was an advantage for a smuggler to

remain remote. I had worked hard to appear a patrician, a man of independent means, traveling for enlightenment and art—a man above suspicion. Sometimes in playing a role, I become possessed, mistaking fantasy for reality. If I am in control of the stage, then it is in my power to make others believe. In this sharing my fantasy would become reality. Like with the "Collective Mind"—until, of course, its collision with an even more powerful fantasy. Now my power was extremely limited, described best by ever-dwindling cash reserves. Two worlds, the internalized dream and the external reality, diverged widely. I needed no more evidence than that I now entrusted my well-being to a character like Gul.

While the meal was prepared, I wandered off to take a few shots. My Puritan ethos compelled me to find justification for such luxury, and it was to be free to do such "work" that I had hired Gul. Had I wished to probe, I might have found how hollow was this reasoning, for my "work" was no longer that. These pictures might never see the light of day and, if they did, only by a few others—who was left? Yes, I would have recognized my cameras for what they were: prostheses, devices I used to compensate for my own inability to deal with life. Through the camera, I could remove myself from life's ordinary flow; it was an excuse to set myself aside, remote, distant, always the observer.

Later while we ate, a young German back-packer approached. He was looking for a lift. For some reason I resented this tall, gaunt, sparsely bearded, fellow traveler trying to sponge a free ride. Oh, if he had been a foxy female, or at least accompanied by one, I would have granted the favor in a flash. But as he was alone, I had no sympathy. When I saw him approach, I instinctively knew he was going to ask for something—if it wasn't a ride, then a meal and, if not a meal, then money. Somehow, it seemed so much obscener for a foreigner to beg. I gestured with a shameless air of humility to Gul, implying that it was his call. Reading my mind well, he went dumb and pretended not to understand the German's request.

I was now reaching the full height of what might be called my "I want to be alone" frenzy. This didn't include locals, whose presence I enjoyed as long it was under my own terms. But the last thing I wanted was the company of fellow tourists. Oh, I knew this was a well-traveled route; I also expected to meet many

foreigners, in particular Europeans. Yet I wanted to pretend I was alone, crossing uncharted waste, stepping where no "white eyes" had stepped before.

Again, there was that need for the power and respect I derived from my "native bearers." It was a thing I could hardly expect from fellow tourists. At best, they would see me as an equal and, at worst, on one hand, "rootless wanderer," on the other, "capitalist exploiter." Besides, though I realized this was absurd, I did feel a certain noblesse oblige, surrounded by the "benighted heathen." I knew my Kipling; a complete, leather bound, gilt edged set of his works, a legacy from Grandfather, had been given to me as a child. I read each volume voraciously from cover to cover—and not just once either. When first setting out on my travels, I had fully expected the "wet and windy road," replete with all the ethnocentric trappings. Much of that has been beaten out of me over the years, both literally and figuratively. While intellectually I have moved from such beliefs, the glowing embers of tribal superiority still burn within.

Despite a veneer of sophisticated cynicism, I fantasized myself as a modern-day Younghusband, Burton, Lawrence, or any one of that mythic legion of Anglo-Saxon freebooters. Of course, they were of another time, a world long lost or, more accurately, existing only in story. But this was the stuff of my imagination, and from it I could pick and choose, make and break the rules. In this I resembled Eliot's Dr. Casaubon, "...a ghost of an ancient, wandering about the world and trying to mentally construct it as it used to be, despite the ruin and confusing changes." You had only look at my photographs, favoring timeless, ahistorical themes, attempting to excise all traces of modernity, to understand that I sought out worlds locked in musty pages of "Once upon a time."

Even though it was the second week of August, we were high enough to find patches of eternal snow. Climbing again, we passed a few outlying stalls offering winter gear for rent: rubber overshoes, a ridiculous assortment of ancient winter coats—most likely remnants of misdirected CARE or OXFAM shipments—and even a few skis, sleds, and snowshoes. These were for Indian tourists venturing up from Manali to see snow for the first time. Initially, this snow was limited to small, dirt encrusted patches,

but what a place this must be in the dead of winter: the snow piled a hundred feet or more, the wind whistling through the northward facing pass. This place would be serious. How many travelers had tried for some desperate reason to make the winter crossing? How many had failed?

To drive home winter's deadly potential, we suddenly came face to face with the awesome power of nature. A great snow field, born in ice-bound crags several thousand feet above, swept down a steep col. Where the snowfield breached the road, it had been cut through, forming ice-blue, translucent walls on either side, fifty feet or more. The road at this point traversed a rock, bridge-like structure that permitted the raging snowmelt to pass underneath. It was obvious that earlier in the season the road had been tunneled; there was still a large overhang offering the barest clearance to heavily laden lorries. I felt a surge of excitement. I knew I was finally in that raw aeolic realm, where the seemingly solid forms of mountains become plastic, constantly transformed by the incredible power of snow, ice, water, and wind. This was the zone of clearly visible construction and destruction, unlike lower regions where change came imperceptibly to human eyes, over centuries and millenniums. Here nature demonstrated the full potential of her powers.

The sight was too awesome not to take photographs and, to Dorje's obvious annoyance, I ordered a halt. I scrambled onto the downhill section of the firn; its rock-encrusted surface pocked what mountaineers call "sun cups." Walking gingerly across the dazzling sheen of the firnspiegel, I marveled at the field's cup-like texture engraved by the warmth of the sun.

It had been a long time since I had seen such raw wildness. Thus, I was rather startled to find myself suddenly facing "exposure"—a less intimidating term used in the trekking and climbing trade, soft-pedaling that you were risking your ass. Further down this steeply-angled chute, the ice and snow abruptly ended in a snout which spewed an icy torrent, certain death for anyone so unfortunate as to slip...it would have been so easy at that moment, so quick, so clean. "Poor Sahib, he was only just starting his program. But then it is always in the hands of God."

Why I didn't go for it then and there? I'd fantasized such a quick, clean ending so often before. But with it right there before me...I can't explain. Even though I was in no real danger, my mind, unaccustomed to such exposure, began to flood with an uncontrolled fear. I felt inexorably drawn towards the torrent's icy maw. The fear that my legs would give way, or my feet wouldn't find purchase, shadowed each step. Fighting back this panic, my initial bold strides quickly became timid, mincing steps, testing the security of each new foothold.

Moments before, standing on the firm ground, I had been of a completely different mind, a mind still entangled in those clinging webs of my past. Now, when I knew one false step could mean oblivion, all previous thoughts took flight. There was only the present because, if I failed, there would only be an end to all. The adrenaline of survival, that "lizzard brain", took hold. For that moment, there would be no self-pitying thoughts. Again, faced with oblivion, all my faculties went into action, struggling to contain fear, to overcome that dizzy giddiness, to conquer my own weakness. What a rush! What gratification to overcome so immediate a danger.

Just as I reached the safety of the edge facing the road, a lorry pulled into view, straining upwards under its heavy burden, a belching cloud of greasy black, diesel smoke violated the clear mountain air. Unfortunately for the lorry-walas, their load wasn't only heavy, but piled too high. With a resounding crunch the lorry, barely making headway, came to a complete halt. The walas waited to see if the whole overhang would come crashing down, but the snow was at least twenty-five feet thick at the point of impact. After a few moments, during which many a prayer must have been said, the occupants emerged to survey the damage. From my vantage, I could assure them that the collision had produced no apparent crack on the upper surface. While they were in no danger of cave-in, they were still wedged tightly. The lorry-walas huddled, discussion, and counter-discussion. Finally, they reluctantly decided to let some air out of the tires, a tactic that permitted escape, but doomed them to the hard work of manual pumping.

KALAGIYA

I have long admired these long-haul driver-walas. They brave incredibly bad roads and harsh weather in vehicles that, in the West, would be long in the scrap heap. I first took notice of this rare breed in Afghanistan, where I rode on trucks whose engines and frames were ancient British Bedfords. Lovingly, the Afghans took these utilitarian, vehicular bones, turning them into movable palaces, filled with mirrors, colored lights, brass, elegant Islamic calligraphy, sheep skins, even ibex horns, or an occasional yak tail. In Pakistan, I had seen drivers repairing broken push rods on high mountain passes—the engine neatly spread out on ancient *kilms* like one of those exploded diagrams in the repair manuals. I marveled at the ingenuity of my species to overcome. Though often drunk and wildly reckless, these drivers form a unique brotherhood that gives them the strength to cross this rugged land.

The pass was directly ahead. It forms a large grassy saddle, sloped upward on either side into two breast-round peaks, whose sides at that time were a patchwork of snow fields and scree. The final approach was so gentle that I didn't realize the top had been reached until suddenly coming upon the sign marking it. Nearby, another sign announced proudly the men "who bring you the pass, the BRO."

Such quaint missives were a predilection of the BRO, whose poetic wisdom appeared at regular intervals along all the roads. It was their way of keeping the drivers on their toes: "Attention driver your loving family awaits you. Keep alert! Do not disappoint them"; or in a more chauvinistic frame: "Dear lady do not nag your husband! Wait until he gets you home in safety."

To the north lay the gorge of the Chandra River, carving a deep "V" among a jumble of glaciated peaks whose ice-bound crests feed its waters. The sky was ominous pewter, the clouds obscuring the tops of the peaks. This was an apt reminder that, although it was the height of summer, it was also the season of the monsoon, of heavy rains, sleet, or snow at the higher elevations, even in such an arid land as Lahaul. The weather here is constantly in flux. When we reached the top, there had been only a light scattering of clouds; now we were soaked in. At thirteen thousand feet, without the sun it seemed cool, even at mid-day. What would it be like on

the Shingo-la, at seventeen thousand? I looked across the wide expanse of the pass to the cloud-enshrouded twin peaks of the Gyephang Massif across the Chandra Valley to the north. Beneath the mantle of gray, the line of permanent snow was visible. I tried to estimate the seventeen thousand elevation in relation to this snow line. It was well into snow.

The proliferation of prayer flags, snapping loudly in the strong chill wind, reminded that we were now in a Buddhist land. The flags marked the way of holy pilgrimage, the Middle Path, the Dharma. Not only the view mandated a halt at the top. For Buddhist travelers, this was also a place of prayer and thanksgiving, rooted in that near past when to cross this pass entailed real exposure. Across a snow-fed tarn lay a flowered meadow. There were large poles carrying what must have been telephone lines between Kulu and Lahaul. From guy wires supporting the poles hung thousands of prayer flags. The climatic extremes of the pass had torn many into shreds and these littered the ground. Irreverently, I thought how it resembled the work of neighborhood kids who on Halloween would cover the local school principal's trees with toilet paper. But this was more than unsightly litter for the locals. It was a record of the respect paid to the Buddhist pantheon, to the many Taras, for favors granted or wished—for safe passage across the pass.

The same Lahaulis who had laughed at my sprawled posture on the bridge, pulled up behind. They seemed very happy, as if they were on a picnic or holiday outing. The group was composed of several young looking, obviously affluent Lahauli couples. Perhaps they were representative of the local equivalent to Yuppiedom. They were modishly dressed in an eclectic mix of western-style sports wear—jeans, jogging suits, ski parkas, tennis shoes, and—what was for them the equally newfangled and foreign—shalwar and kameez, shawls, and intricate jewelry. As must now be apparent from my continued obsession with the opposite sex, I was starved for female company. I found these women to be strikingly attractive. Their Mongol features with rosy complexions, long black braided hair, and dark, piercing Tartar eyes only heightened the attraction—they brought back the past.

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Ascending a hill, the couples carried a string of brightly colored prayer flags that they attached to the legions already flying. As I followed them, I suddenly felt my breath grow short; my heart thumped noticeably in my chest, and for the first time I began to significantly feel the effects of the altitude. Up close, I could see that many of the older flags had once shared these vivid hues. But time and weather had turned them, like leaves on a tree, a ghostly pale before finally falling in bone white shreds to the ground.

The women climbed from the road and, running among a herd of grazing ponies, tossed brightly colored paper prayers into the wind. On the papers were images of *Lung-rta*, the wind-horse, which were sent out to less fortunate pilgrims to ease their journey. Reflexively, I recoiled at such "littering." The men hung the banners, then built a roaring fire with boughs brought from below, filling the air with the scent of cedar. Quickly, the offering of fragrant smoke billowed up to their Gods. I felt a familiar frenzy taking over—"photo-op." Tentatively, I shot a few frames, worried that these people might take offense. This, however, seemed far from the case. The Lahaulis continued to be all smiles. They made a game of it, watching me trying to capture their unpredictable movements. I must have been quite amusing, cameras clattering, gasping for breath, trying to anticipate what would come next, yet always being a few moments behind. They would assume some inviting pose. Then, just as I was lining up the shot, they would, with a teasing laugh, tear off to a new location to repeat the process.

After the flags, the littering of paper prayers, and the offering of cedar boughs, the men performed the final obligatory task of piling loose flat rocks into a small cairn that, as in the case of the prayer flags, joined a host of others. While the men had been rock gathering, the women picked bouquets of the golden daisies that carpeted the pasture. These they placed as a final offering on the cairn. It was to Lord Buddha for his protection during the rest of the journey. Finally, they addressed the Tara, the Goddess held in great esteem by those who follow the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. To this all-compassionate deity, they repetitively intoned the mantra: "*Om Tare Tuttare Ture Svaha.*" The surrounding hills joined them, echoing the prayer.

Walking back together to the road, I chatted with the men. They all had the equivalent of high school education and thus could speak some English, albeit the rather skewed "Hindish" variety. They told me they had small farms in the Chandra Valley where they raised potatoes on a government contract. While this trade was quite lucrative, they also ran a cooperative business of extracting oil from the root of a wild herb called *koot*, valued in India as a base for perfume. This enterprise allowed them to buy property on "Manali-side," where they spent their winters making handicrafts—shawls, knitted goods, and blankets.

Returning to the Omni, I found Gul and Dorje had disappeared. To avert my irritation—how could I let such a petty emotion take hold in a place like this—I resorted to my usual strategy of lighting up a joint. I knew with the first drag all problems would dissolve. My mind turned to the Lahauli farmers, about the lives they described, simple, physically demanding, yet so intrinsically satisfying.

While in Manali, I had seen and bought crafts like the ones they made—maybe the very ones. I particularly appreciated the skilled Lahauli weaving. This was manifest in the *gudmas*, blankets of thick wool, and *lohis*, slightly smaller but finer woven shawls. I bought several of the latter, but only one has survived the journey. This I have given to Devara. He must be enjoying it, for now he seems to never take it off. Of course, in this cold I don't blame him. This lohi is cross between a blanket and shawl, made of brown yak wool, soft and warm, so much so that even Devara found difficulty in believing it came from a yak. He was impressed, saying it reminded him of *shahtoosh*, or king's wool, found on rare occasion and at astronomical cost in Kashmir. I wonder how Devara, a sannyasin, knew about shahtoosh? This cloth, called *kail fhamb* in Kashmiri, was made from the chest hairs of the ibex, kail, or in Ladakhi, *skya*, an extremely rare wild goat with distinctive curved horns, inhabiting only the highest and most remote regions of Kashmir and Ladakh.

I once asked a Kashmiri merchant how he got the wool; the best quality could only come from a small patch on the neck. It was impossible to domesticate the ibex. If it had been, as it was with the Andean vicuña, where to obtain the wool meant killing, then the ibex would have been extinct ages ago. According to the

merchant—keep in mind these walas have developed a high art of intuiting what the customer might want to hear—the "harvesting" of the wool was done in a humane way. Shepherds build a circular corral of stones, topped by rough logs, or a woven mat of branches. They place fodder inside the corral. Being supreme athletes and sensing food, the ibex easily jump into the corral, eat their fill, and then leave. However, they earn their keep. Being filled with food, their exit isn't quite as clean as their entry. In escaping, they often rub against the rough upper surface of the corral, shedding some of their precious hair. This extremely laborious process of harvesting means that the wool is extremely rare, commanding over one hundred dollars per pound. Yet for the shepherds, who are the primary gatherers, this is an excellent way to pass the time and make extra cash.

As we began the steep descent to the floor of the monochromatic gorge, a wave of emotion swept me. Perhaps the ritual on the top had been, in some magical way, directed toward me. I was so ignorant of the customs of these people, I could imagine anything to be true. This was the point of departure I always anticipated in my travels—both inward and outward—the point where the known, the expected, was left behind. The Rohtang had been just such a point. If the land of Kulu was Kulantapith, the "end of the world", then here at its top, I had reached the final margin. Ahead lay the land beyond, another world, and with luck, another life.

The Chandra Valley is higher than the Beas, and snowfields stretched in patches all the way down to the river. As it is well above tree line, there is almost no trace of vegetation or, other than the roadway, no trace of human life. It was easy to envision what winter would bring; substantial remnants of snow bridges clearly remained. In the winter, the river would simply disappear under the snow as the valley turned into a frozen, white desert.

Unlike the wide, glacially carved, U-shaped Beas Valley, the Chandra is relatively narrow with high precipitous walls, evidence of extremely strong river erosion. The main valley has been down-cut at a much faster rate than the smaller tributary nalas, creating many hanging valleys perched on high. These create a profusion of spectacular waterfalls and steeply descending streams, all flowing into the Chandra. Later, after I became more accustomed to the

barrenness, such landscapes wouldn't be quite as awesome. At that moment, after the lush, pastoral beauty of Kulu, I was overwhelmed. For the first time on this journey, I felt as if I was back. All the years of separation, my seemingly endless sojourn in the uninspired drudgery of a flatland existence, dissolved. The stark beauty and tremendous scale kindled an awareness that I had returned—not only to a place, but also to a state of mind. This could be inspired only by such emptiness, a void of human presence found few places on this earth. I imagined I was where I was meant to be.

Reaching the bottom of the gorge, we turned west and picked up the road as it followed the Chandra's long torturous track to the plains. The valley opened and here and there were solid, rectangular farm houses built of stone and mud brick, green fields, and tall, silver-barked poplar trees. Despite the stark background of ice, rock, and snow, the farms and the few inhabitants appeared prosperous. Looking upward, great peaks drifted in and out of the mist, daring me to capture them on film. Out the window of the moving Omni, I looked up and saw an incredible play of light and shadow. Momentarily, I would become lost to a cast of shadow, whose shape or form took my mind to some remembered image, place, or time. But before I could stop, get out, and photograph, it would be gone. Was the sun, creator of all that my eyes could see, playing the same game as the Lahaulis? Was it whetting my appetite, only to snatch the plate from me when I began to eat?

Particularly spectacular were the hanging glaciers, ending in cliffs of sheer ice thousands of feet above; their melting waters cascaded down in precipitous falls. In America, any one of these would deserve to be a National Park. A whole industry would have sprung up, replete with curio shops, hotels, fast-food stands, and theme parks. Here, it was just one of many nameless wonders.

Occasionally, as if to guide us along the path of the "Middle Way," stood small white, hemispheric structures called a *chorten*. These symbolic representations of Mt. Kailas, that "navel of the World" to which Devara invites me to travel, contain relics of deceased saints and sages. *Mani-don* further insured that we wouldn't lose our way. These low, wide wall-like structures, running parallel to the road, were built of thousands upon thousands of piled *mani*,

each stone inscribed with the mantra of the multi-headed saint, the "lord of mercy," Avalokita, *Om mani padme Hum*—literally translated as: "Hail, thou possessor of the Jewel Lotus." Its deeper meaning Buddhists believe lies uniquely within each human, believer or not, untranslatable by external symbols such as language. The spoken mantra, the teaching proclaims, "...is like water for the thirsty, a fire for the cold." Inscribing a mantra in material such as stone or cloth perpetuates its efficacy. The walls are found indifferently on either side of modern motor ways whose courses follow the pragmatic demands of the land. On ancient foot and pony tracks, however, the walls stand in the middle. This allows pious Buddhist traveling in either direction to pass with the wall to their right—or in the case of the older, pre-Buddhist Bonpa, the left.

In mountainous lands such as Lahaul, the courses of major rivers dictate human habitation. Here are only three. The Chandra, along whose banks we were traveling, and the Bhaga that we were about to ascend, stretch like an encircling forefinger and thumb to the North. Both have their source on the slopes of the Baralacha La, which is the next great pass to the northeast, Ladakh, and the Tibetan Plateau. The Chenab, like an arm upon which the thumb and finger rest, issues from the confluence of the Chandra and Bhaga. The combined waters churn southwest through an incredibly deep gorge, spilling out onto the plains as one of the five life-giving rivers of the Punjab.

Life clings to the riverbanks in high altitude desert, but in Lahaul, unlike the wide neighboring valleys of Kulu or Zanskar, there is little on which to cling. Instead, villages and farms are built on the alluvial fans or remnants of glacial moraines that form plateaus high above the river's course. Water is channeled either from springs and tributary streams, or else brought from a point up the main river where the elevation is that of the plateau. It is reminiscent of Chitral, Hunza, or any one of the many Himalayan communities where life is so precariously carved from a vertical land.

We entered the Bhaga Valley and were driving at considerable speed. The road was now a bare gravel track, etched from the steep

scree-covered slopes, ending in a torrent some thousand feet below. The landscape was decidedly lunar. Without warning as we rounded a bend the stony waste became paradise. An oasis of green trees and purple-gold fields stretched for several miles on a plateau high above the river. This was Kyelang, the last major village and bazaar for some three hundred miles to Leh.

Dorje proudly told us that his family came from this town. It was, by far, the most important center in Lahaul, its inhabitants comprising half the population of the entire district. Thus, it wasn't surprising that Dorje welcomed the halt. He immediately took off on his own unstated business, telling Gul he would be back in an hour.

I sent Gul off to a nearby restaurant to order. He was none too pleased at my choice, a Lahauli Buddhist spot.

"Dad," he persisted, "Better dhaba down road! Kashmiri dhaba!"

"But do they have *mo-mo*?" I responded.

My heart was set on the delicious meat dumplings, a staple of Tibetan cuisine. He knew all too well that the Kashmiris wouldn't serve such a dish.

"Very well, Dad, I order *mo-mo*."

My needs under control, I took off for a short stroll through the bazaar.

It was easy to see that this village depended on the road. This, however, didn't mean it had only come into existence with the modern motorway. The route was the same ancient one, connecting India with Inner Asia. Traders, diplomats, soldiers, sages and saints had passed through on their way across the eight high passes, and near one-thousand miles, that separated the plains of India from the desert cities of Western China. The road was lined with stalls, jerry-built from the sides of tea boxes, sheets of plastic, pieces of old army tents. They sold things travelers might want: tea, prepared foods, cigarettes, and the locally produced woolen knit sweaters, hats, socks and gloves, whose bright fluorescent colors jumped out in an environment where natural hues predominate. Several local buses came and went, unloading and loading passengers. There was a small crowd of

would-be travelers who milled about the main street, hoping for a ride on a passing lorry.

The town was mildly interesting, but I had seen places like these countless times before. It was like any other provincial center. Perhaps with differing levels of technology and patterns of culture, but the cast of characters was essentially the same—officials, merchants, and clerics, all preying on the farmer folk.

A middle-aged lama walked across my path, hand-in-hand with a young, a novice of about fourteen. Now I don't wish to imply anything about their relationship, or the habits of lamas in general, or in Kyelang in particular—I wasn't there long enough to be able to say with any authority. It was just that the closeness of those two reminded me of life in Chitral. In some ways, Kyelang was similar, different culture to be sure, but the essential social functions the same. I had spent considerable time in Chitral and can speak on the nature of its ways. Of course, there was no place that could be quite like Chitral—unless it was in Lewis Carroll's dreams

* * *

How set people become in their ways. How strange and convoluted when juxtaposed one upon another over centuries. Chitral was a good example of the power of culture to create, what to an outsider might seem, an extremely deviant way of life. Yet because it had been going on for many generations, one pushing out a bit farther than the preceding, all sorts of oddities appeared, not the least being the proclivity of the local men for boys. This, I think, is some proof that as individuals we are ready to go any direction the group takes us, for to be otherwise is to be deviant. In the isolation of its mountain fastness, Chitral has evolved a whole way of life based on providing pleasure for the rulers—all the way down the ladder. The common people toiled for this elite and provided sons for their carnal pleasures. As an honored and wealthy foreigner, I was permitted to join the elite. Besides the drinking and gambling, that for avowed Muslims was sin enough, there were the *laalies*—the "rosy cheeked" *phonak daq* or dancing boys. On the trips when Mei didn't accompany me—she wouldn't have tolerated such

depravity for a moment—I partied with local functionaries—*shazadas* who once ruled, together with Government officials who now rule—and their favorite dancing boys. There wasn't much else going on in Chitral on those long, late autumn evenings. I always seemed to wind up in Chitral in the autumn.

A group would come to my rooms to while away the night, playing music with shanai, tabla, and sitar. Before a roaring fire, the singing would become increasingly lewd while we went to the heights, or depths, on sherab, charas, and afyon.

*Oh joy. On the far bank,
I see such an exquisite lad
His bottom is like a ripe peach.
Alas, the river is swift and deep,
And I cannot swim.*

One old *parashi*, the local term for faggot (with some mirth the others called him "Squadron Leader") would whip the boys into a craziness, both figuratively and sometimes even literally, and then they were used. Yes, the nasty old *barmakiri*, the Pathan word for "drilling"—or I suppose more precisely to use the local term, *parashtu dik*, to sodomize—took place right there in front of me. I was usually too blasted to care. Once, I must confess, I even contemplated "a bit o' brown" as they say, but was too stoned to get it up.

Later, I woke up with the *parashkoti*, the "pretty boy," curled up in my arms. The night before, he had seemed so feminine, so desirable with his blondish curls, deep gray eyes drawn large and deep with kohl, his skin creamy white with those famed rose-blushed cheeks—legend has it that Alexander's troops fathered many sons and daughters in this valley. This androgyny seemed most appealing in the dim firelight to a mind fuzzed by charas and Johnny Walker—at least to hold, a warm, compliant body against the cold. However, in the clear light of dawn, when reality overtook fantasy, he wasn't so seductive. I became the butt of many private jokes because, "Sahib, couldn't make it."

I was bringing to the act all my own cultural baggage. Doing *it* meant a whole different trip for me than for them. I wondered whether there was some underlying, universal prohibition based on a biologic reason that would supersede this cultural "anomaly."

While thoughts of "child molester" and "fag" raced through my head, it was for them a way of entering manhood, an initiation rite. The boys took pride in performing the most outrageous feats, as they did in whose patron was the richest and most powerful.

While this behavior is recognized as theoretically sinful—most definitely proscribed by the Koran—it is winked at as a social necessity. If these men directed their needs to the local women, all hell would break loose. In the West both sexes might find outlet in friends, lovers, or professionals, anything beyond the confines of all too stale marriages. In Chitral, women, along with gold and land, were property that was zealously guarded; mess with a woman outside the strict social conventions and lives would be forfeit. For Chitralis, as with their southern neighbors the Pathans, *badal* or revenge was both avocation and vocation. It was a way of life that, once initiated, would extend over many generations. No, it was better to use the young men; no honor could be lost that way—later their turn would come.

Does my belaboring of this subject give cause to wonder? Certainly, it puzzles me. I guess I have never really laid it out in my mind before. Oh, all these instances were in there, but as disjointed, disconnected events. I never wanted to explore them, analyze them for some possible pattern. It was all too taboo. There must be a reason I take such an interest in the "strange" sexual tastes of the Chitralis or, for that matter, wondered what the lama in Kyelang was up to. I have always had a curiosity about that fine line in sexual tastes, and how easily it could have been to go the other way. Or was my hypothalamus too large to ever allow that to happen?

It was perhaps early sexual confusion that turned me away from any lasting, non-sexual male bonds. I had always put it down to an early rejection by Father; perhaps it was more. While in boarding school, during the first rush of sexual desire, I had developed some close friendships. Later, however, I realized that those relations were substitutes for a male-female attraction denied. This was evident in...my closest relations were sort of... yes, they had sexual overtones.

These were limited to showering together, mutual masturbation, and fantasy. When things became too overt, and on several

occasions, they had, I lost my nerve and backed-off. Boys did serve the needs of other boys, and most were ready either to serve or be served. It was with no little irony that we viewed the school's rather pious motto, "*non ministari, sed ministare.*" And we joked there were more of the latter than the former. But the mores of the outside world were strong enough so that no one wished to be caught.

This was long before AIDS, and I wasn't yet aware of the public feeling toward attraction to the same sex: fags, fairies, and queens. Yet, something inside me made me back-off. To submit would have signaled more than a momentary physical submission. It would have also been a deeper psychological surrender. This was something I was unable to do. It wasn't so much the same sex bit, I mean if the dude was attractive. The most important thing was who was going to pitch and who was going to catch. That was the question.

Later, in that same all-male world, I developed deep, emotional relationships with younger, prettier boys, boys with smooth skin, deep blue eyes, supple limbs. I even fantasized how it would be to make love to them—although admittedly, my idea of making love was purely academic—the result of industrious, surreptitious study. But always I fantasized over younger, feminine boys, and always I thought of myself as the pitcher...not catcher.

* * *

"But Bhaai, you about this catching and pitching. These words like cricket game talking. Your meaning same?"

This jars me. His eyes bore into me; a mischievous grin flickers across his dark face. I used those terms so casually, in the same boy-man slang of youth. Maybe Devara is right to call me on this? Maybe they symbolize something deeper?

What about the "pitching and catching?" Aren't they just a young boy's metaphor for the two most basic forces of life, domination and submission. These two forces have struggled within long and hard, my sexual behavior only their most outward expression. As I attempted to construct a self, the dominant side came to the fore.

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But always, lurking in the background, was submission. It knew it could be patient and that, in the end, it would be to submission I would turn. Isn't that surrender to which I once toyed, just a harbinger of the ultimate surrender I now seek?

"Ji, Bhaai, you the idea have. In all men is desire for surrender. Only in fighting for control, man apart remains. In surrender we the One rejoin. We all someday what you say, 'catcher,' must become...Samadhi to find. Only Mahadeva is 'pitcher.'"

Now that I think back, Elizabeth told me she thought I might be a catcher. She had quickly assured me that it wasn't bad. "We all must become catchers Guy." Then she let it drop. I just assumed this was a continuation of her ball-busting assault after failing to please her. Now I wonder?

All that talking makes me thirsty and, almost as if he is reading my mind, I hear Devara say: "Guy, chai, want?"

"Oh, thik Devara, shokria. Just what I need I guess. I've been tripping out."

"Tripping out, you go somewhere Bhaai?"

"Only in here," I reply pointing to my head.

"Acchaa, Bhaai, Devara too such journeys making. Passing time, it very much help.

The break in my internal narrative, the shared joint, and the cup of tea jars my focus. Frankly, I am quite glad. All this soul searching about sexuality makes me nervous. Like most folks, I have a few skeletons in my closet. I think they might better be left there.

The steam swirls up from my chai, reminding me of the plate of mo-mo Gul brought. What I wouldn't give for some of those dumplings. Better yet for the ones that Mei makes. They were tastier with pork, cabbage, and fresh water chestnuts...not goat meat and barley. God! How long had it been since I had tasted Mei's dumplings?

* * *

Tentatively, I tasted the first plump dumpling. I was prepared for disappointment, but I wasn't disappointed. It was delicious. The first fragrant taste made me realize how hungry I was.

And, yes, they did make me think of Mei's dumplings. How she would labor over making the small round skins of dough, using whole-wheat flour in her "healthy" conscious manner. The vacuous fashion plate, the trophy with whom I had been first infatuated, turned out to be a very talented partner, good at anything she set her mind to—if she set her mind.

The mo-mo was order by the piece and, because the long ride had masked my hunger, I only asked Gul for a half dozen. But the walk stirred my appetite. I inhaled the mo-mo in less than a minute, yet was still ravenous. A sullen look from Gul met my order for more. I hated it.

"Dadee *needs* more mo-mo?"

He made me feel like a pig—although he was just disgruntled because he wanted to go to the Kashmiri restaurant to eat his halal food. Why did he always use that word "need" instead of "want"? Did he know the difference? Was it part of his diabolical plan?

While I waited, I had a chance to go up on the roof and take in more of the sights. Getting there was a trip. climbing a single log with shallow notches for steps. As I was loaded down with cameras, and stiff from sitting for so long in the lurching Omni, this ascent was a formidable task. But never one to back away from challenge, after several moments of uncertainty, I was on the roof.

Below me spread the entire village and beyond its satellite fields. Although at over ten-thousand feet Kyelang is too high for the cultivation of rice, it is still low enough to grow the more traditional barley from which tsampa is made. The favored form of consumption of tsampa is in *thuk'pa*—a porridge-like soup, a mixture of chai, yak butter, and salt—all that is needed nutritionally in the harsh Tibetan environment. The local farmers were skilled in this cultivation, proven by the lushness of well-ordered fields and the apparent affluence of the community dependent on their support.

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Kyelang is truly an oasis, a series of emerald terraces carved out of steep cliffs of folded rock, whose bared layers promise to reveal the history of the Himalaya—to those who know its secret code. The town itself is made up of flat-roofed adobe structures squeezed along the side of the road, preserving the maximum amount of arable land for farming.

Looking through my camera's viewfinder, my focus fell on the street below. I began to record the scene of human commerce, with buyers and sellers representative of the many races of India: Ladakhi, Lahauli, Zanskari, Punjabi, and Kashmiri, office-walas from Delhi and Bombay, Tamils from the South, Biharis and Bengalis from the East. Sprinkled among the citizenry were a few tourists both from the West and Japan.

From every roof, prayer flags snapped in the strong winds funneling down from high passes to the North. I could hear the distant moan of the mountain horns, rifle shots, and thudding drums. I wondered what was happening, but it sounded far away, far enough that my oxygen-starved lungs told me to pass on further investigation.

Liberated from their case, my cameras now hung suspended from my shoulders and neck—my three traveling companions. It was always a large leap to bring them out and get them going. At first, they would feel awkward, and shyness would constrain me from pointing them at people. Yet long ago, I had learned that the only way to make photographs was to put aside this sort of reflectivity, this seeing of self in my subjects' eyes. Such visions were quite frightening, the trick to become part of the instrument. I tried to transform into a mere synapse in a process that would bring what lay before me to some audience, distant both in time and location. I must forget myself, forget what others might think of me—"why is he pointing that thing at me?"—and take my best shot.

In Nam, I had succeeded. I really had to lose sight of myself, to be able to set my lens into a face contorted with pain, a face that possibly saw death hovering over my shoulder. I tried not to think how it must feel, knowing your last, agonizing seconds are being recorded for the evening news. Hell, I had been cursed, threatened, even spit on. There are some things better left alone, better left unrecorded. Somehow, I got the knack and, at times, could even

believe I was invisible. What a high, just move through all that horror, yet remaining untouched. At first it took some doing, but how adaptable we humans are. Once you go around a few times, it just rolls off. You start to believe in magic. It must be magic if you can walk through this brutal world and emerge unscathed. Then one day you wake up and realize: although your body is whole, you aren't unscathed; inside you are as much of a mess as that boy you photographed that morning, mashed by a direct hit from an RPG. They pulled the old zipper up on you too, only your bag was made from your own carcass, and what is inside, all that jumbled mess, is stuff you once thought and felt about the world. At least in Nam you could con yourself into thinking you had a mission. Oh yes, Guy, your photographs, your film, will wake up a sleeping world. Never again! Oh sure, what a joke that was. Oh, it would be never again! Next time when we came to the killing field, we would do it right by God! I could justify so much with that sense of mission shit. The only thought that woke up the folks back home was that, eventually, it would be their ass on the line or, if not their own, those they loved.

There were times when I wondered why in the hell I was still doing this. I had certainly lost the wake-up rationale. Yet here I was, dragging this equipment around, invading other folks' lives. This was no longer for the money, as it had been earlier in my career, when I traded in the horror and desperation of war, the ghastlier the photo, or piece of film the greater reward. These pictures weren't sensational; they didn't focus on subjects that had wide interest. Deep inside, that mission shit again was working, only this time it was all about, "recording a way of life before it vanished." What kind of conceit was that? How many ways of life had bought it before the photo record? Even after such endangered lifeways had been photographed, did we really understand anything but the shallowest surface of that life? Did we know the man Sitting Bull or Red Cloud any more through the work of Edward Curtis? Too bad Curtis didn't give the Indians the camera. But that also was tried. Fuck! I had tried.

In my own life, the only thing I have the right to express, I had no interest. I went so far as to destroy all my childhood snapshots—it was just too painful a place to revisit. I felt no special need to tell about my own life, how I lived. That is why I was reluctant to record

the more mundane aspects of life, the cities, my country, places, people, and things many others had and would photograph. Instead, I invaded other lives; my sole credential was possession of the means. I appropriated their experience into my images, my expression. I compensated for my own lack of a life by taking theirs. In a way, I was an image vampire sucking out a graphic essence of others' lives so that I might vicariously live in them. What we think as a primitive response to being photographed, that fear of being robbed of your soul, was perhaps not so off the mark.

The world is running out of such places. Everywhere, I found people of my own ilk, armed with equally massive amount of technological finery. Ordinary tourists now had the means in the palm of their hand. No longer did it suffice to simply be there; now it took special vision, a gift, a talent. Deep inside I knew I didn't cut it. When I was home—that place where I stored my stuff—I would look through the vast stores of photographs. Although technically correct—in focus, good exposure, meticulously framed—they lacked that special ingredient, that magic of universal communication I found in the works of my heroes: Cartier-Bresson, Wegee, and Eugene Smith. Perhaps, I thought, it was the level of my commitment; I always hedged my involvement, not letting the camera take over my life, somehow feeling it was too limited in its ability to capture my own inner thoughts.

I pushed the soft touch down...one more frame. Better to let the technological interface take over. Function, function, function, became my mantra. Go through the motions, maybe things will turn out. Insha'Allah, was an apt expression for such situations. It shifted the crushing burden of responsibility to a higher level, allowing human life to continue weaving the woof of hope on the warp of frustration.

"Hey, Dad, more mo-mo!" Again, I sensed a sarcastic undercurrent in Gul's persistent use of the word "Dad." Or was I just being overly sensitive? Anyway, it was time to come back down, in all senses. Gul assumed a solicitous air—as if he was helping his ancient grandfather—perhaps in response to the presence of an extremely attractive young Punjabi girl standing nearby, a presence that also fanned my indignation. Though some twenty-odd years older than Gul, I wanted to feel no less eligible

when it came to a pretty face. Yet I must have had some question. Why else would I take interest in such an extremely young girl?

In response to those doubts, to show my superior talents to this rude lackey, I photographed the girl. It was the first time on this trip I had taken a "one on one" picture. I caught her off-guard—yet unprepared to face another human, looking eye-to-eye as I snapped the shutter. That would take time. Slowly, slowly, I would remaster this skill—if such intrusion can be considered "skill"—but for the moment, this was a start. Later, in that long succession of lonely nights, I would think of her—tall and willowy in fiery vermilion chiffon, so out of place in the harsh land. Her long black hair was fashioned into a single braid with a matching ribbon, the brilliance further enhanced by a rainbow-hued *dupatta*, the long decorative scarf favored by Punjabi women, casually draped across her delicate shoulders. How could I not take notice of her? She was the stuff of semi-conscious, high altitude, charas-induced dreams.

After I "captured" her, I continued to gaze at this young girl, who was looking with wonder out over the valley. What was she thinking? Was she awed by the splendor stretching before her, or was she thinking about her home, in Amritsar, Chandigarh, or some obscure village of which I had never heard? Taking off on the fantasy, she might have been contemplating the marriage to which she was destined—after all, this was India and rural India at that. Marriage came young. Momentary desire surged within me. It wasn't the lust I had felt for Geeta, although they were most likely the same age. It was an entirely different need. One motivated by more paternal than carnal need: to embrace, to protect, particularly from cretins like Gul. That had been part of my feeling for Tara—father for the daughter I never had. But this was only the first stage; if there was a later, then lust would come. Had I ever been attracted to a woman for any other reason—no matter how I dressed up in the guise of noble ideals? Was I any better than Gul?

I was quite thankful to be back in the Omni and on the road again. How good it was to be moving. When I stopped, even for so short a while, it was as if my thoughts congealed, blocked, unable to go on. When in motion, it was easier to pass from thought to thought.

KALAGIYA

When my mind began to wander down a dangerous path, and by now I knew the warning signs, I could alter direction, and try to find a less perilous way.

The valley narrowed, its sides both closing and gaining in verticality, they towered higher and higher into increasingly exaggerated serrations; rocky crags interspersed with gray-white tongues of the hanging glaciers. We were well over ten thousand feet and, at this altitude, only imported and well-nurtured trees survive. To the right loomed the high ridge wall, separating the Bhaga from the Chandra Valley; its boulder and scree covered slopes threatening to engulf the valley. The road etched into a cliff whose insurmountable face rose to an ice-encrusted peak hidden some two miles above. Here, there was no question of who was master. Humankind was the supplicant, surviving only at the sufferance of the land.

This raw display of power drove us to seek each other's company. I asked Dorje what he had been doing while we had lunch. Trying not to appear nosy, I framed it with a feigned concern for whether he had eaten. Yes he had, but also he had done something else. His Uncle was severely ill, and the family feared death was near. Though the Lahaulis are Buddhist, they also possess more ancient customs, remnants of animistic beliefs held throughout the Himalaya, before the coming of Buddhism—Bon-pa. One of these beliefs involves the cheating of death. The ritual is performed with great ceremony in extreme instances, such as that of his Uncle, when modern medicine, or the ministrations of the *voids*, the traditional shaman, failed to provide relief. According to Dorje, this practice was extremely rare but, as his Uncle was very old and very traditional, the family decided it might have some efficacy.

What Dorje had been doing was to assist in a mock funeral where an effigy of the Uncle had been cremated and then the ashes interred. I looked at Gul glumly. I had explicitly instructed him to alert me to any such "photo ops." Silently, I cursed Gul and all his future generations. What a series of picture it would have made. I decided, however, to let matters slide for the time and pressed Dorje to tell me more. He was a bit embarrassed, and eager to show he didn't believe in such an old-fashioned custom; he participated only to humor his dying Uncle.

Reluctantly, Dorje began to describe the ceremony. He had joined at the last minute, so most of the preparation had already taken place. His family made an alias corpse out of wood and barley straw, dressing it in the Uncle's best *choga*, a dark red robe of homespun wool. Dorje had come along just as they were starting out for the burial ground—accompanied by the crashing of the kettle drums, the chattering of the cymbals, the wail of the long copper-clad mountain horns, this ancient cacophony punctuated by the more modern intrusion of gunfire.

This was the noise I had heard. Damn it, I complained bitterly, though silently, to myself, why didn't Dorje invite me along. This slip into past tradition just embarrassed Dorje. He was, after all, a modern man, a technological man, a driver.

The mourners, both family and hired hands, carried the decoy effigy to the cemetery. There, it had been cut into many pieces and ceremoniously burned with the aid of a local lama, who chanted an invocation to Lord Buddha—just as if these were genuine human remains. Later, Dorje reported, there would be further prayers offered over the real Uncle. It would be announced to Mara, the Herald of Death, that the Uncle had been long dead and thus there was no need look for a soul already long departed from this world. As I listened, it suddenly dawned on me the full extent of Dorje's reluctance. When this practice is contrasted with the orthodox Buddhist concept of death, which sees death as "the clear light" of rebirth, then it is easy to see that this traditional Lahauli concept, framed in fear and avoidance, is most different from what a true Buddhist should believe. Dorje, a pious Buddhist and schooled in modern beliefs, was highly disturbed by what he saw as a throwback to the fear and superstition of a darker age. Yet, he too was drawn to the practice, for in uncertainty the clever will please all the Gods, both old and new.

The shadows cast by the western mountains now engulfed the valley. After the Kyelang oasis, the wide valley becomes an increasingly narrow defile. Tiny villages, a few squat, stone structures, cling precariously to the steep, scree-sheathed slopes. Chortens and mani-dons invariably connect communities. Perhaps, these act as markers, reassuring the traveler that they are still on course. The coming of the road has somewhat mitigated

the need for these guides. Yet I could imagine this land in winter, when all was white, the road obscured under many feet of sand-dry, drifting snow.

How comforting in such a seamless universe to look ahead and see the contour of the beckoning chorten. "Yes come this way, there are humans here, there is shelter, hot chai and tsampa, there is life." On a higher, spiritual plane, they serve as essential guides in a world grasped by the eternal snows of ignorance, where all is undifferentiated, confused, and without direction. For the pilgrim, the chorten and mani-don point the way to the next gomba serving as a way-station of Dharma, the path of righteousness, ultimately leading to the mystic Vale of Shambhala.

Of course, I don't consider myself to be a "real" Buddhist. Having escaped the rigors of Christian discipline and loath to surrender to another, I merely dabble with Buddhist philosophy — perhaps just appropriating what catches my eye into my own understanding. I know that *Budh* means "awakening" in Sanskrit, and that to be a Buddhist at the most essential level is simply to seek such "awakening." I, most certainly, long for such an awakening. I like to think my own travel is a quest for awakening, and that I will someday, someday, find the Vale of Shambhala. Aren't I continually drawn to the next valley, compelled to cross that next pass, beckoning in the distance, in the hope of finding such a place? Yet I fail to move from symbol to what is symbolized. It is easier to wander in the material world, than to make the more essential journey within mind. Up to now I haven't been ready, I still hold too much fire, too much desire, I can't, despite the desire, just let go.

The Omni lurched along a worsening track, cut out of a solid rock, rising from the depths of a claustrophobic defile a thousand feet or more below. As I gazed out the window, I could imagine that at any moment the walls of this deep canyon might close like a giant mouth, swallowing us as punishment for our trespass. Nothing, however, remains constant in the Himalaya. Soon we were snaking down the cliff. Ahead, I could see the mountains spreading apart; the defile opened to the sky, again to become a life-sustaining valley.

"Darcha," said Dorje.

Chapter X

*Till you know and lose this knowing,
you have no way of knowing.*

—Mahadevi, 12th Century Indian bhakta (devotee) and vacanakāras (poet) of Shiva—

WALKING

We entered the Darcha valley. From a narrow cleft to the north, the main river spilled out across a rocky plain. It was August and the surge of snowmelt had ebbed. Only weeks before the river had been a raging torrent, filling the valley with churning, rubble-filled waters. Now much diminished, it divided into many smaller streams, intertwining countless, barren, boulder-strewn islets—almost delta-like in appearance. From the east and west, two tributaries joined the Bhaga. From the east flowed the Milang out a wide grassy nala. Its calm, pastoral character made it an ideal summer home for the Gaddis and their flocks. From the west, the Barai spilled steeply and violently from a rocky canyon. Our track to the Shingo-la would follow this less inviting direction.

We reached the bazaar by a spidery bridge over the Barai. The real village, Darcha-Sumdo, lies about a mile up the road and then eastward along a trail. But in this level space beside the highway, several dhabas, small shops, and hotels had sprung up. I use the word "hotel" in the loosest sense; flat-roofed, dirt-floored, stone huts, not one with more than two or three small, ill-lit rooms. Inside their dark, dust-laden recesses, *charpois*, rustically cobbled rope beds, occupied all available floor space. For running water, you needed only go as far as the irrigation ditch in the back; the fields beyond served as the loo. Amazingly, there seemed to be electricity, for a few light bulbs hung from dangerously bare wiring. These proved to be more for show than practical use as the generator providing intermittent power was perpetually "kherab."

As soon as we arrived, I sent Gul to find a room. Only one was available, so tiny that it was barely able to contain the double charpoi. Dust lay inches deep, and so were the cobwebs. One look sent a chill through me—my spider’s web nightmare come to life. I decided to test the tent.

Level ground was scarce, so I tried to pitch my tent on the flat hotel roof. Because it was self-supporting, I could set it up on the ground, and then, much to the amazement of some nearby Gaddis, pick it up and carry it up onto the roof. The only trouble was that pegging was impossible without holing the roof.

Exhausted from the journey and the high altitude, I didn’t press the issue. Instead, I casually wedged the tent’s stakes under small stones and bits of wood. This activity attracted several layabouts, who gathered to offer, what I interpreted as, advice—although in Gul’s absence, I couldn’t understand what was actually said. Much to my embarrassment I soon found out. With the approach of sunset, the winds picked up to near gale proportions. Suddenly, one gust caught hold of the tent and sent it hurtling into the air. After several uncertain moments careening in the updrafts, it finally drifted across the road and landed in a field of ripening barley. Priding myself on my outdoorsmanship, I was aghast. Even more irritating was the smirk barely hidden on Gul’s face—of course he had come just in time to witness the flight.

A deeper concern quickly replaced my wounded pride. The tent was to be my home, my bubble of survival. I depended on it for protection from the elements. What if it was destroyed at the very beginning of the journey? I ran across the more than one hundred yards separating the hotel from the tent’s resting-place and examined the fallen shelter. After seeing the poles weren’t broken, I gingerly checked for tears or holes. That was my lucky day, for this cheap little tent had withstood the flight. As silly as I knew it was, I couldn’t help feeling proud for my new friend. My earlier concern for this seemingly fragile structure evaporated. I now felt confident it could withstand the worst the Himalaya had to offer. Why I thought this little breeze could in any way approximate the forces ahead, I will never know.

KALAGIYA

After finding a new, more sheltered site a short distance up the Barai, I returned to the bazaar and took my seat on the patio of one of the several dhabas.

This roadside "Darcha" was essentially a truck stop and, as evening descended, a long line of lorries, those plying the route to and from Leh, halted for the night. Of course, Darcha was also the trailhead for the route across the Shingo-la, and Zaskar beyond. In addition to the lorry-drivers, there were many foreign travelers, both members of trekking groups, and more solitary wanderers such as myself. While I was aware this was a well-traveled route, I had no idea of the scale of that travel. The host assembled resembled a small multi-national army. Across the road from the hotels was a campsite. This had been empty upon our arrival, but while I was away pitching my tent, a busload of Euro-tourists arrived. Orderly rows of brightly colored tents now filled the camp. The bazaar that night took on overtones of an Alpine ski resort. Tourists dressed in the latest fluorescent-hued sportswear, loaded down with still and video cameras, mingled in the few chai stalls and mo-mo shops. It was as if suddenly space ships from all over the galaxy had landed, disgorging alien passengers, who went immediately about establishing their own little worlds.

Each group was a community unto themselves—French, German, and Italian. To them everything else, including me, was only a scenic backdrop to peer at, to photograph. The locals too were caught up in this voyeuristic obsession. In this land devoid of mass media, tourist must earn their way as objects of wonder, amusement, and, in rare instances, derision. After a hard day in the fields, small groups of local women, rosy cheeked, flashing eyes, dressed in heavily embroidered wool of earthy red and brown hues, drifted into the bazaar to marvel at the strange fashions and high-tech equipment of the foreigners.

Some of these women were quite attractive. Was it the "Black Dog" rum Gul had so solicitously provided? Certainly, they were more interesting than the Europeans, who exhibited the toll of the road in their generally bedraggled appearance. Unlike their counterparts in other Indian regions where the traditions of purdah prevailed, these local women were willing to stop and chat,

flirt, and tease, if given an invitation. This wasn't at all out of place this Tibetan-rooted culture. Women traditionally held a strong role, even practicing polyandry by taking two or more brothers as joint husbands. Polyandry, because of the increase in surviving female babies, has been in decline in recent years. However, the females of Ladakh, Zanskar, and Lahaul, appear extremely liberated. This was clear from the way they carried themselves, unabashedly making eye contact, evidencing a belief in their own equality, and lack of fear of the opposite gender.

How different this was from Muslim Kashmir. There, a woman was under constant threat in her relationships with men. Not necessarily from men themselves, but from how the society and, more specifically, how the family would interpret the relationship. If a young woman went anywhere with a man who wasn't a close relative, she was immediately labeled "whore." More than one young man had lectured me on the sorry state of modern women.

"They going with unrelated boys, cinema and shikaras. riding" It made no difference that this was quite out in the open, in a public place; they were, "...putanna, you know Sahib, in Angrez, prostitutes. Thanks be Allah for the militants! They close down cinemas; Insha'Allah they take care of any mens they see fooling around in shikaras."

Despite delusions brought on by the "Black Dog," these local ladies' bold behavior only demonstrated independence, and boredom, rather than any attraction to me. After all, these were unmarried village girls, who must ultimately guard their reputations—a difficult task in a small community. It was one thing to flirt, but a whole other realm to act on any underlying desire. I would have had better luck hitting on one of the trekkers. Feeling even more alone in the face of the general camaraderie, I let my imagination wander. Maybe there was one mem who, recovered from the Delhi Belly and not yet exhausted from the trail, might be up for a twirl. But though I reflexively thought in these terms—I was quite high—I realized that I wasn't up to it. Was it the altitude? Was I just getting too old for all that crap? I wondered if I had crossed some watershed. Would I no longer be able to act on my lust? Would my desires only play like a broken record over and over in the confines of imagination?

Grasping the remains of the Black Dog, I retired to the tent. Rum mixed with charas gradually guided me towards sleep. Again, I was thrust into the dream of the spider. It mattered not where I slept, for the spider was in me. Yet this time the dream changed.

Not only am I struggling against the webs, but also there is some other unseen force lifting me. I rise above the realm of the spider. The cruel, glass-like threads still cling to me, but somehow, I know they are stretched to the limit, that they will soon give way, and my body will survive. Then, as if a testament to my prescience, or to the power of prayer, one after another the strands begin to snap apart. Instead of being drawn back into the web-shrouded world, I break free. So strong is the exhilaration at being free that....

I awoke, anxious for the first luminescent glow announcing the dawn. Now that I was beginning to feel change, I was extremely eager to move. Darcha was a place whose curiosities were easily exhausted in several hours. Despite the beauty of its setting, the bazaar itself was a dirty, diesel smelling, bug-infested dump—a place to pass through, nothing more. I resolved to get ponies and make good my escape first thing in the morning.

Dawn came and went, but I had fallen back into a dreamless sleep. I only awoke when Gul brought the morning kofi, "Two spoons Dad?"

"Today, my son, we need to get the ponies. You find, thik?"

"Ji, Dad, no problem," Gul confidently responded, departing almost immediately, eager to get at that commission.

It wasn't that simple. The concentration of tourist wasn't only a problem of aesthetics; they also created a logistical nightmare in a region that could support few ponies. And it was essential to find good ponies, for the quality of the ponies...and, let us not forget, the quality of the pony-walas is the quality of the trip. Without ponies, there would be no saman, and without saman no food or shelter, no warm clothes, no anything. I envied those few brave souls who went with just a backpack...and their heart. Two Japanese had arrived, took tea, and then hit the trail. No hassle! All their needs they carried on their backs—not in those huge, high-tech packs of the Europeans, but in small, local-made jholas. I

flirted with this approach, but every time I got close to the doing, I found some bloody excuse.

Well, there is always someone faster, someone bolder. Today the back packers, tomorrow, someone without a pack; then, of course, there could always be the sky-clad beggar trip. What the fuck! I am getting old and need my few comforts. Still, I wasn't entirely at ease. I always feel guilt; it is part of me and, no matter how I reduce my load, it weighs heavily. I could always blame it on my need to photograph, but even this was becoming more of an excuse than a reason—and I knew it.

I settled into my roost outside the hotel, enjoying the sun and one of the innumerable glasses of tea I drink each day—at altitude it is important to keep up the fluids. Two young Zanskari boys approached. One, the more intelligent looking of the two, introduced himself in halting English, employing sweeping gestures to further understanding.

"My name Pal, Sahib, this boy Yosh. You need ponies? We having two. We...Padam to here last night come. Tourist-sahibs same same you bring. We much doing. We best guides, number one ponies, Zanskari, no Lahauli. Now we go home. You come?"

I liked Pal immediately, for though he seemed young, he looked honest, outgoing and, since he had just come across the pass, was sure to know the way. This was important, for a foot trail, unlike a motorable road, was easily obscured. Taking the wrong nala could, at best, entail a laborious backtrack and, at worst, end in disaster. Of even greater importance was that Zanskar was their home. This made me confident. Surely, they wouldn't turn tail when conditions became too rough or the trail too rugged, leaving me stranded in some remote location with a pile of saman. They, even more than I, had reason to go on. Porters and pony-walas were known to run-off, returning to the safety and warmth of their homes, while employers and their saman were stranded miles from the nearest civilization. While never deserted, I had been "shaken-down" several times: "Sorry Sahib, porters needing more rupees. Track too dangerous! Saman too heavy!" What could you do if you were halfway up the Baltoro Glacier, except pay? But this and much worse were the stuff of Himalayan travel.

Problem! The Zanskaris became extremely agitated after examining the saman. There was an intense discussion. Then Pal, gathering up his courage, sadly admitted there was no way their two ponies could carry it all. "No way, Sahib. Saman too many. Yosh's pony too young, only one year; no good for heavy loads. I regretted this decision, and suggested they try to find another pony. With renewed hope, they promised and set off to explore the possibilities.

For Gul, as promised, there was no problem, at least if I was willing to pay the price. A few hours later he returned with word of a pony-wala and four animals. This local had agreed to carry the luggage to Padam for one hundred and twenty rupees per animal per day.

I knew that three ponies could carry all the baggage and that a fourth pony was excessive, as was the price. After all, that would be four hundred and eighty rupees per day. This was on top of the two hundred and fifty plus I was paying Gul, not to mention the cost of the food. It was time to rein in spending which, because of my illness, had been going on almost unchecked. It wasn't too soon to begin to economize. One hundred rupees saved might lengthen my life another week. How odd it was. An extra week was becoming important...even an extra day.

Gul wasn't privy to my financial woes. I was just another over-rich ferenghi mark to be milked, then cut-loose into the CBI-DEA maw. It was preferable for me to spend as much as possible, as quickly as possible. In this way, he could maximize his commissions and minimize the time he had to invest.

Despite my reluctance to go with the four horses, Gul convinced me that this pony-wala was the only choice. He was insistent that the Lahauli would refuse to go unless he could take his entire string. "If not, Dad," Gul warned, "he deal with other group." Not wishing to spend the rest of my life in Darcha, I reluctantly agreed, with the proviso that if the Zanskaris came through, I would go with them. It was now Gul's man versus mine. Here was that *Servant* thing again. Was this to become my fate? Would I end my days taking care of my new "son's" needs? Luckily for me, my need for friendship hadn't completely blinded me to Gul's nature. Yet I was reluctant to make friction. Gul kept up the attack, insisting there was little likelihood of my pony-walas—they were

young and Zanskaris—finding any Lahauli who would cooperate with them.

Pressing his case, Gul brought the Lahauli candidate around, together with his ponies. This wala could speak no English, but both he and his ponies seemed fit for the work ahead. On top of his cash demand, he also wanted to bring his assistant. This set me off. It had been a long time since I had faced the realities of the trail. The thought of taking on an extra mouth to feed obscured the legitimate need for another pair of hands to control the animals and perform the necessary chores. The last thing I wanted was a huge train of men and beasts—I had enough of that in my forays in film and tourism. The rations taken on in Manali envisioned feeding three. Now there would be a forth and a pony which I felt we didn't really need. In all honesty, *my* Zanskaris were also two in number—but then they were *mine*. Although I was unhappy with the prospects, the thought of waiting around in Darcha made me even more miserable. So, reminding Gul I had given my word to the Zanskaris, I told him it would be a go...if the Zanskaris failed to come through. I could only hope that his Lahauli understood the situation.

To clear my head of all the maneuvering, I decided on a stroll to see a little of the countryside. It was hard to realize that while a few hundred rupees in someone's pocket was no big deal to me—at least not yet—it could quite literally mean the difference between life and death for a local. No, my head wasn't into that reality. I had made it to *my* mountains, and I wasn't going to waste my time squabbling over a few hundred rupees.

I wanted to test my muscles, be sure that they were still in shape to carry me over the next few weeks of hard walking. I hadn't done any real exercise in the two weeks I had been in India. Although I had trained on Rokko, I was unsure of my current condition. What a difference 10,000 feet made! I decided to walk up the valley, along the road toward the Baralacha, to a bridge that crossed the Bhaga. Maybe, if I had the juice, I could cross over to the nala on the other side. Paul mentioned there was a "valley of some interest" to the east—that same pastoral Milang Nala which caught my eye on arrival.

Darcha Oasis, the bazaar aside, is an extremely beautiful patch of earth. The many streams that feed into its central plain provide the irrigation for lush green fields. The colors of these streams reveal the nature of the land they traverse. From the north, rocky, falling precipitously from the Baralacha-la, the water is an icy, translucent aquamarine. From the west toward the Shingo-la it is a more ominous coffee brown, a testament to its power to tear the earth. From the east flows a crystalline, spring-fed water that sparkles briefly in the intense sunlight, before being lost in the overpowering murk of the west. At that time of the year, the waters were receding and scars attesting to its potential were everywhere.

In the spring, the valley takes on a different look, the melting snows swelling the rivers. The swollen rivers submerge the plain in a wild tumult of mud, rock, and icy water. Unimagined power is released, power to alter the entire valley, power to destroy all life within. But on this day, all was well: warm, sparkling sunlight, the chats, redstarts, and dippers carrying on their noisy communion among the stands of willow trees, the occasional shout of a pony-wala urging teams up the dusty rise. Above all was the roar of the river, punctuated by the staccato of prayer flags whipped by the wind. I felt at one with all. An illusion, perhaps, a dream, quite likely, but for a moment a sense of peace entered my heart. I was drained of all anger, all hate. In the face of that splendor, I could leave myself and all cares that had come to define me.

Walking along the path, I came to a curious structure astride an irrigation channel. At first, I took it for a mill. Then I saw a tangkha hanging on the side of the adobe structure. It was a mandala. Its circular structure depicted the bhavachakra, that "Wheel of Becoming" which the Rangdom Kaushak, so many weary miles in the future, would explain as a map of the human condition. For an instant, even without a spiritual guide, I somehow knew that locked within this most common theme was the gateway to that place the Buddha declared "is the end of pain."

But I was too much at peace to think long on such escape. Rather than continuing such a lofty train, I was suddenly overcome by the amusing thought that this mandala was some sort of spiritual pizza. Yes, it was predominantly dark tomato-red. Yes, there were the six slices; devils like anchovies, some slices with, some

without. God! How long had it been since I had a pizza? Thoughts of food, like sex, popped up at the oddest times, sparked by the most tenuous of associations. What a broiling pot of wants I was—and still am? All that shit, just below the surface.

I fought to bring my mind back, to focus on that present, to see what was before me, rather than what was in me. Although framed by extremely weathered and aged silk brocade, the vibrancy of the colors suggested that the artist had used pigments of powdered semi-precious minerals—lapis, turquoise, carnelian, opal, and gold. Although typical of Buddhist art's strict traditions, the detail of the characters spoke of both the skill and contemplative dedication of its creator. On the rim of the great wheel were twelve small scenes showing the twelve *nidhanas* or understandings. These begin not with birth, but ignorance, yet end in death. It is this cycle that gives cause to the various stages of heaven and hell depicted in the six larger scenes within the wheel itself—these scenes symbolically echoed that most ubiquitous mantra of "Om Mani Padme Hum." Though I had heard and seen this phrase time and time again, I didn't know its meaning until the Kaushak had translated: *Om*: rebirth as a God; *ma*: rebirth as a Titan; *ni*: rebirth as a man; *pad*: rebirth as a beast; *me*: rebirth in purgatory; *Hum*: rebirth in Hell.

The artist must have been particularly concerned with Hell. Its anguish was exquisitely detailed, in both hot and cold environs, with many sadistic tortures such as spread-eagled bodies flayed alive, pots full of human heads reduced to broth by demons skilled in the culinary arts. Most likely it was the result of too many long cold winter nights trying to fend off the calls of the flesh. Other segments depicted a world of animals, a milder purgatory, while on the top were more pleasant, heavenly views. In every scene, Lord Buddha hovered in the clouds, offering escape from the cycle, whatever the stage. On the hub of the wheel were Mara's daughters in the form of bird, snake, and pig, the root of all suffering—passion, anger, and ignorance. They were in the act of devouring one another. The phrase, "You are what you eat," echoed through my mind.

My eyes, wearying of the incredible wealth of detail, opened to a wider frame. It was then I saw *it*. I don't know why it took me by

such surprise; I should have expected it. Tradition dictates the wheel should be held by a terrifying beast, snout-nosed, fang-toothed, whose flame red forehead was surmounted by a blazing third eye. It was Mara, Lord of Death, tempter of Siddhartha, depicted here as a skull-crowned demon whose cruel talons grimly grasped the wheel.

This wasn't the only surprise, for then the strangest thing happened. Maybe it was the charas, or my old alibi of altitude, or just a chain reaction to the initial shock—so desperate to assign rational cause—but as I gazed transfixed by the horror of this apparition, its appearance began to change. As the creature, Mara, relaxed its grip, harsh lines began to soften, flaming red lightened to an infinitely more pleasing rose, bulbous forms, particularly in the eyes, reordered themselves into almost sinuous curves. Instead of a monster, I was now gazing into the face of a most beautiful...I suppose it must have been a woman, although at that moment gender, or even genus hadn't much bearing. Horror transformed to beauty, and somehow that beauty "spoke" to me.

"You see Guy! This is what happens when you release. If you hold too tightly...." Here Mara's grip began to tighten, and immediately the face began to contort into that former horror; then the grip relaxed, and beauty welled back. "I think you see my point Guy. Its so simple like riding those waves in your faraway homeland. How do you say it? 'Go with the flow.'"

She—for now the beauty was so overwhelming I can only think in terms of "she"—laughed with such a delightful tone. And for a moment, I found myself laughing too.

"You shouldn't try so hard Guy. You can't force that wave, can you? Its power is too great. Neither should you try so hard to hold on to yourself...or to find me. Ride life like that wave. Remember it is only one of an infinite number. If you fall, there is always another waiting just behind."

I kept looking, expecting to suddenly snap out of a dream. It must be a dream. The smoke, the exertion of the hike, the altitude, I must have sat down and dozed off. In a minute or two I will wake. There will be just the mill, the only Mara, that fearsome image conjured by the artist's imagination.

"Come on Guy...yes over here." God! Mara had moved, no longer just a two-dimensional figure on canvas. "You know Guy, we've met before. Remember back...near Angkor, in another land where I am known...by the Khmer, when that noisy thing in which you humans fly fell from the sky; you were thrown, just before all became flame. Don't you remember? You looked into my eyes?"

She was right, I had seen her before, only not as Mara. I hadn't really known her as anything other than a hallucination, but I wasn't about to give that up to this...whatever.

* * *

It was near the end, the autumn of '74. I had been looking for some work in Cambodia. It was only a matter of weeks, months at the most before the Rouge was going to kick our white-eyed asses. Of course, we never guessed they would kick the asses of their own even harder. For a long time, I had wanted to see Angkor Wat, the famed temple complex of the ancient Khmer dynasty. I was afraid this might be my last chance. The Rouge was closing in, and they had a reputation for being rather unconcerned about cultural treasures. What irony, it wasn't work, but a tourist trip that almost got me. I hitched a ride up on a government chopper ferrying troops in a last desperate attempt to defend Angkor. About five minutes after we lifted out of Battambang, we took some ground fire—I told you the end was near.

The pilot was killed outright. Then the tail rotor bought it, and we went down. I was sitting in the doorway, getting some footage even though I was on holiday—in those days I was always getting footage. Then after the hits, everything began to spin out in slow motion, just sort of looping round and round like a corkscrew then, there was this incredible rush, and I felt myself flying. Being in the doorway, that was what saved me. Slamming into the ground threw me clear. I came down on my Frezzi, it lay hard in my gut. I had just enough time to look down and see that the lens had broken off at the bayonet mount, then all hell broke loose. It was like the whole world exploded into flame, but as a series of still pictures, snap, snap, snap...at, at, at...the flames spreading out in staccato images. Looking back, all I could see was the flame, the rotors still

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twirling like a windmill in a fiery hell, even more demonic for exploding pops of 7.62s. I remember seeing in this inferno's midst a figure come running out, covered with fire. This demon thing—for by that time it was no longer human—came closer and closer to where I lay, all in the flash of frozen frames. I thought this hellish thing was going to leap on me. Its arms were outstretched, as for a final embrace. At the time, I was sure it was one of the Khmer troopers we were ferrying; That was the rational explanation. But as it came on, there was this strange mask-like quality to the face, and I remember thinking, God! I must be in shock. I can't quite focus. Does this dude have an extra eye? Then I passed out.

* * *

"Yes, Guy, now it's coming back to you."

Shit! She was still there. Somehow, I was expecting my flight into the past might recapture reality. But I was not to get off lightly.

"And there were other times." Remember on the mountain that's not far from here, the one that's home to the consort of Lord Shiva, remember when all the snow came falling. You saw me, but I went off with your companion."

* * *

Oh yes, I knew what that was all about. It was that trip with Paul—the one and only trip. There was a reason we had never tripped again. It was an impulse, just Paul, a Bhotia guide, and I. There were some porters to help us up to the Sanctuary, but from there, up on the most sacred body of Nanda Devi herself, we were on our own. It was just a small, impromptu expedition, three of us on the quiet, so we didn't have to deal with government permission, baksheesh, and all, not even planning to get to the top, just to see how high we could go. We had worked our way up to that great western face. Ahead at about 21,000 was a small col, really nothing but an avalanche chute, but it lay across the only possible route. If we were to go any higher, we must cross. True, there was this big

overhanging cornice of snow a couple of hundred feet above; true there was nothing below for a thousand feet or more. But it was only about twenty yards wide and, once across, a most inviting ridgeline promised an easy gain of at least a thousand feet. I was roped between the guide and Paul. Just as the Bhotia, who was leading, crossed the midpoint, there was a tremendous rumble. All hell broke loose! I don't really know what happened. It was all too fast. I felt a jerk. I dug in with all my might. It was as if some giant grabbed me and tore me off the face. I went flying and smashed back into the ice. One side of the rope, the one leading back was still taut. The other side was slack. Swinging pendulum-like across the jagged face, I looked down into that broiling, snow-filled chasm. I thought I could see the Bhotia slowly cartwheeling through space, But the oddest thing, he wasn't alone. Instead he seemed to be in the arms of another. For a moment, I assumed it was Paul; they had both bought it. That scared the shit out of me, for it meant I was alone. Then I heard Paul behind me call out and felt a gentle tug on the rope. "You okay Guy? Don't worry! Hold on. The belay's holding! I'll get you in!" At the time, I dismissed what I'd seen to the shock of the fall.

* * *

"I hope you weren't jealous."

Mara was still there. I kept wondering: How long can my mind hold this fantasy?

"It was his time Guy. Yours will come. It always comes. I thought that maybe it had come...in that place you call...‘NunKun’...the place that many think my home. What a joke, as if I was a mere mortal to need a ‘home.’ It seems like only yesterday. Do you remember? You thought you were so brave to come alone, to try for the top, to *conquer*. Yes, I knew was in your mind...it was that which conjured me."

Here this Mara gave forth a hideous gurgling giggle.

"Did you see me? Surely you felt my presence; I was watching you. Maybe...we'll meet again up there..." Her hand, rough nail-like talons now turned into the most delicate ivory tapers, pointed up

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towards the pass. But was it the pass or beyond? There were so many places to meet Mara in these mountains.

* * *

"Uuusht, uuusht!" The cry of a shepherd suddenly snapped back the external world, followed by the patter of many hooves and occasional bleat of complaint as the herder drove his flock toward that pastoral nala to the east, across the Bhaga. The flock was large and strung out for several hundred yards along the switchbacks below where I rested. When they approached the bridge, the flock funneled into a compact mass, the bleating becoming more intense, as if the sheep were unsure of the rickety bridge. They quickened their pace, churning up the dry soil into a cloud of choking dust.

I thought about walking down the hill, crossing the bridge, and following on with the flock. But the dust was thick and my breath, unaccustomed to the altitude, still short. The warm sun made me feel lethargic. Better go back and see how Gul was doing with the arrangements. I did want to leave in the morning.

On my return to the bazaar, I ran into Pal and Yosh. Pal had a big smile on his face and even Yosh, who was eternally dour, looked pleased. They had found another pony. Its owner, a young Lahauli Hindu, was in tow, and Pal eagerly introduced him as Ravi. Ravi spoke no English, but he looked squarely into my eyes and assured me, with the help of Pal's halting translation, that he too knew the Shingo trail well, "Ravi's ponies make trip much time."

"Ponies?" I asked puzzled.

"Yes ponies, Sahib," replied Pal with a sheepish grin.

The deal was done. The means to move my seemingly endless saman was in hand. Gul had no choice but to accept my will. We spent the remaining hours of that afternoon repacking.

That night Gul and I drank until we could drink no more. This would be our last taste of civilization for many days. We were sitting in ancient garden chairs, in front of what had become my favorite dhaba, aptly named (if somewhat incorrectly executed)

the *Monteen Veew*. A lorry pulled up, its diesel fumes pumping directly into our faces. I was too far gone to mind; so far gone that I was thinking that the fumes flavored the high. I was too much at peace or, perhaps, too numb to really care. It had been so beautiful sitting there, all thought giving way to the night's sensory embrace: the never-ending rumble of the river punctuated now and again by the clash of boulder against boulder, the sudden rush of the wind in the poplars, village dogs barking. In the far distance...was that the howl of the wolf? It had taken some time to emerge from the shell of civilization. I was only just beginning to live in the outdoors, braving the night's chill to view again stars, which only the clarity of the Central Asian sky can reveal. My thoughts drifted back to Afghanistan. In myth, it was the land of Cain's exile, but for me it was paradise.

* * *

I was on the hill behind my house in Shar-i-Nau. I often went there with Mei. During the days we would watch ragged, apple-cheeked youths battle with their fighting kites, their glass-encrusted lines seeking out an enemy, cutting its line, setting it free. And then there were the nights. What magic lay there. Stars, all the colors of a pasha's jewels, set in the obsidian of a winter night's sky. With the sparsely lit city beneath our feet, the moonscape of Kabul blanketed by snow, it seemed as if we could look down and see the stars, stars that shone as brightly on the horizon as they did in the center of the sky. You could reach out and pluck them, "Here Mei, this ruby is for you."

I felt that fuzzy, warm glow, the memory of a simpler time. It had been just us against the world. We lived by our wits, gambled, and usually won. Coming from opposite sides of the earth, somehow, we had connected in that most remote place. Bundled in down, we rubbed each other's face, feeling the inner glow of warmth that penetrated wind-chilled flesh. We had been so deeply in love, so focused, so removed from all that was ordinary. I was that wandering merchant prince and she my native princess. It was a fantasy, yet more than a film it was our life, and we willed it true.

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We felt the power that came from such creation. In our minds, there was nothing we couldn't do.

* * *

I picked up a torch and stumbled off to my tent. As I crawled into my bag, I felt contented. I was where I wanted to be, on the verge of what might well be a great adventure. That it might be my last only heightened the expectation. The air was chill, causing me to zip up my expedition-thick down bag. How long have I had this bag? Twenty years! A full generation! Though its outer purple and gold covering is stained and mended—so many little holes where the charas has burned through—the nylon is still shiny and smooth as silk, giving it a feel of opulence.

How I love this bag. Here it is today embracing me, warming me as I recount my tale. Even its scars are treasures. They record of some of my fondest moments—those burn marks on the bottom where I snuggled too close to the bukhari; the indelible stains of passion from the innumerable times Mei and I made love, our bags joined as were our bodies...and our heart. Yes, this bag is the closest thing to having a woman, perhaps even better in some ways. What more could I ask than to be warm, dry, and fuzzily high? Ahead, I knew there would be suffering, hardship, pain, but in this bag, I had a faithful friend, one to whom I could turn despite the rigors of the day. This was a friend who would keep me warm. This was friend who would keep me alive.

So much has happened since that night, only parts of the dream linger. Perhaps because they are those very parts which extend out from dream into the flow of my waking life. I do remember, as in my web world, I was able to see me. Too high on altitude, adrenaline, Black Dog, and charas, I drifted in and out of a dream, but now the dream, so long mired in those webs, was changing.

Emerging from the lair of that now familiar spider, I'm somewhere I can only describe as "above." A large silver-gray mountain goat, an ibex, to which I feel inexplicable connection, stands before me.

The ibex climbs, cavorting, leaping from rock to rock, celebrating its freedom. At first, bits of glassy strands cling to the ibex, but these are

soon left behind, caught on branches and rocks. The ibex moves up a steep, scree-covered incline whose heights are blanketed by an impenetrable cloud. Tara is here, driving the goat upwards, playfully she chases it. Behind her hovers a shadow...or apparition...that seems to encourage her to drive the ibex harder, drive it faster.

Suddenly I am the ibex. I look back down the slope to see a quickly receding figure that I know is me, soon lost in the mist. I am running upward. From the base of the hill I hear the voice of Mei, begging me not to go on. I look to where Tara should be, but instead of Tara there is a large white leopard. I look then to see what had become of the specter, but it too is gone. Now there is just the leopard and the goat that is me. I look full into the cat's face, but it isn't what I expect. Instead, surmounting the body of the cat, is a face that at first seems to be Paul's. But just as this recognition hits, the face transforms into a more skeletal being. Is it a presage to Devara? Finally, as if in a kaleidoscope, it changes into what I had seen so recently, the one who clings so tightly to that Wheel of Becoming...Mara!

Clarity seizes my mind. Like a Zen flash of realization, I hold the truth of this creature. Mara's hideous face is only a reflection of my fear. All I have to do is to let go—to not be afraid. But that is an understanding held only for an instant, soon lost in the rolling echoes of Mei's plaintive cry, "Come down, calm down! Come down, calm down! We must regain the way!" Yet I ignore her warning, climbing higher and higher, on my heels the huge white cat. So close is this creature, I feel its malodorous breath—so cold that it burns. I want to turn and look. But I am too afraid.

Momentarily I awake, or at least I think I am awake, because I am no longer in or with the ibex, but lying in my bag. It is so hot, and though below the freezing point outside, both the bag and I are mired in salty moisture. My mind struggles to hold on to the ibex, to get back to Mara, and the conquest of fear. But in the blackness of the night and the confusion, I have lost my way.

The warm dampness confuses. It is almost as if I am back in the...my God no, not that, not the jungle. Panic! Will I wake in some Nam hellhole, my life since that time, seemingly so distant, nothing but an epic dream?

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The sound of a zipper stirs new awareness, yet I am so fearful of what I might find that I struggle to see the ibex. But the sound of the zipper surrounds me, absorbs me. All I sense is that the zipper is closing me off from the world, consigning me to a bondage worse than any web the spider can spin, condemning me to an utter void. Fearing I am in Nam, I know such closure comes only from one source. I smell stench of neoprene baking in the hot jungle sun...the suffocating slickness of enshrouding damp.

"Dad! Dad...please wake!

Escape! No Nam, no body bag! Instead there was only Gul unzipping the tent to begin what was by then our morning ritual. Discreetly he slipped through the narrow opening an aluminum tray and tumbler, a packet of instant kofi, and the teapot blackened with the soot from the kero stove. I wondered, why he couldn't find a cup with a handle? It was always such a chore to hold onto the hot tumbler. Coaxing my stiff joints into a semi-erect position, I went about the business of mixing the morning brew. Drinking this magic elixir eased the stiffness and drove away the night's demons. I emerged from the cocoon. With my psychic strength renewed, I could face the day and deal with the work of departure.

"Do you want me to roll one Dad?"

I thought at first to say no; I wanted to be clean for the start. Somehow, however, I couldn't articulate this resolve.

"Ji, shokria, Gul. Make a couple for the road."

"Very good, Dad!"

Chapter XI

*The brain is no more coextensive with consciousness
than the edge is with the knife.*

—Henri Bergson—

EDGE

Departures have punctuated my life, the past year being one great black hole of a period, a departure from myself, or at least the attempt to do so. But it was more than the ending of a sentence, paragraph or even a chapter. It was the story of Guy I wanted to end. I had tried to do it on that beach near Encinitas, but nothing came of it. So I had taken a more measured course, slowly closing down all ties that made me who I was. Admittedly, these were few, for I had started late, perhaps too late. Yet they were the only things that held me to the life I knew as Guy. In Japan, I hadn't even tried to reconnect, except, of course for that feeble interlude with Elizabeth. I was in transit! Elizabeth sensed this "butterfly" quality.

The road had brought me to Darcha; the first great pass lay ahead. Would I put the final period to my story, or continue in never-quite-ending ellipse? As long as I could move, changing the scene, observing rather than acting, I was content.

I continued to shed my possessions and, in the doing, that self who those possessions defined. At Darcha, I believed I was on that true edge; from there on, terra incognita, not only of the land but also of mind.

Emerging from the tent, I saw my crew. How strange that I had put myself at the mercy of such young men. Gul was by far the oldest, the other three still in their teens. The ponies were otherwise, for except for Yosh's that was almost a foal, they looked as if this might be their last journey. I kept thinking, why am I taking this circus with me. I knew I didn't need all the saman, particularly considering all the others to take care of the saman, in turn requiring more saman to take care of the saman-carriers. Of

course, the locals made this journey all the time, like you or I might go to the supermarket. They would just get up and go. But in my head, I had built this up to be a big trip, and as a slave to material culture, I had to carry all of it with me.

After much raucous haggling among the pony-walas over the loading, each one trying to get the lightest load for his pony, we were ready. Yosh was particularly insistent. Now that the contract was assured, he wanted to spare his prize any undue hardship.

Despite the hassles, this was always my greatest moment—leaving it all behind, the open, unknown road ahead. I set off eagerly, even though I knew time was finite, there was still some left. Though I had already forgotten much of my dream, the enigma of Mara remained. Sphinx-like, this shape-changing specter posed the riddle of existence, a riddle I must confront and solve, if I was to bring closure to Guy.

"Okay, Dad all set. Chalo! Chalo?"

I'm going to have to deal with this 'Dad' shit sooner or later, I thought angrily. Why does there always have to be something, some fuck-faced fly buzzing around, blowing the old *wah* into a million pieces.

That day, even such a persistent annoyance could not spoil my joy for long. We were finally underway, free and clear, self-contained. It had been almost three months since I had committed to this journey. By force of will, I had nurtured the trek from a faint, mirage-like dream, making it survive, not allowing it to disappear into a nothingness of fantasy—as had so many of my plans. The first steps into this new reality led up the Barai Nala.

The temperature was rising; I knew it would soon be oppressively hot. Now well over eleven thousand feet, the thin air provided little insulation. Quite literally, we were entering the sky. During the day, the hot, mid-August sun scorched all that it touched, particularly attacking the sensitive skin of those accustomed to the denser, insulating atmospheres. Yet as soon as the sun set, or went behind the occasional monsoon-born clouds, the air chilled. On that day there were no clouds, and the sun beat down with its full fury. I came well prepared with sunscreen, glacier glasses, hats; but despite these protections, I would soon bear scars

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testifying to the strength of the ultra-violet. No wonder the local people were dark. Although a good part of the year found them holed up in their fortress-like houses, retreating against the cold to an innermost room, the intensity of the sun, even for so brief a period as the Himalayan summer, favored dark skin for survival.

The sun also worked the land, turning loose soil into fine dust. This intrusive substance quickly coated every surface, penetrating all but the tightest seals. In the beginning, I tried to protect my photo gear, but very soon a sense of futility, coupled with the lethargy that is endemic at such altitudes, put aside fastidiousness. It always surprised me how well my photos turned out, even in these harsh conditions—where the only thing was to use your bandanna, or finger, to wipe the layer of dust that coats your lens. I had gone through many filters, but my lenses endured.

Initially, the trail was steep until it joined a jeep track, gradually being scratched out of the nala's steep northeastern slope. Pal reported that one day it would cross the pass and extend all the way to Padam—"Insha'Allah" said Gul with a touch of mocking incredulity. Ahead, on the way to the top of the Shingo-la, we would climb another vertical mile. My lungs ached unaccustomed, as they were, to such altitudes. I knew this could be serious business. Acute mountain sickness or even pulmonary edema, scourges of mountaineers and trekking expeditions, randomly preyed at these heights. Despite all my preconditioning in Japan, either of these high elevation illnesses might strike. I had seen the ravages on earlier expeditions where some of the most fit had been struck, while others, older and much less fit, escaped.

* * *

There was that time on Tirich Mir in Chitral. It was one of those R and R things that kept me going during Nam; when was it? I am not certain of the year, for sure it was in the autumn. I was climbing with some Italians met down in the bazaar. Nothing fancy, just pick-up and go. We weren't really thinking of getting to the top—this was already becoming my style. Besides, that mountain is a real bitch. Not that it didn't warn you. From the safety of the Tirich View Hotel, I had clearly seen Death. The

mountain appeared like one great human skull, cavernous sockets gazing sightlessly toward the sky. At the time, I only thought it was the acid...but then why did I later see the same specter in my photographs?

We had worked our way up, what our maps called the Lower Tirich Glacier, making camp at the foot of Tirich's huge northern wall at about seventeen thousand feet. The main peak of that ogre rose almost straight above us, a vertical mile of sheer ice and rock. It was a monster, but a fascinating one. In retrospect, though I didn't know it at the time, Mara must have lingered there. Had this land not been once under Dharma's rule? We hung out for a couple of days, just looking around, trying to figure a way up that wall, trying to squirrel up our courage. I had my own tent, and the two Italians shared another.

About five in the morning...I will never forget it...the light was just coming up, striking the tops of the western faces above us, turning them to fire. We were right in the middle of a nest of peaks...incredible...like nestling in the cup of a God's hand or, maybe, claw. One of the Italians roused me, saying his partner wasn't feeling too well. We were all young and inexperienced, not really mountaineers, just city boys out for adventure. For more than a day the Italian had suffered from a severe cough. At first, we thought it was just a cold. City boy or not, this guy was buffed.

When I went to his tent, I saw he was in a bad way, breathing rapidly, unevenly, shallowly, not sucking in enough oxygen. Even through the thick cover of his down bag you could hear his heart beating. Incredible how quiet it was excepting for that heart, "ump, ump, ump." This sound, and the breathing noises, just took over. I say breathing noises because, besides the gasping, an ominous gurgle came from his chest every time he breathed. He was barely conscious, just enough to be scared. His friend was even more scared. As the light came up, I could see he was turning blue. By then I had seen a lot of death in Nam, but it was...I guess the best way to describe it would be...hot death; you know, violent, passionate—those that didn't buy it quickly got hauled away. You didn't have to watch the struggle. Here, it was something different. It was cold, incremental, without any passion, just

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creeping up slowly. The dude was turning blue. He was still alive, but a steely gray-blue.

We didn't know what was wrong. If we had, we would have carried him down to a lower altitude. Even at that late stage, he might have survived. But we didn't know. Instead we just sat there, hoping he would get better, trying to get him to drink chai, his friend giving him antibiotics...thinking he had pneumonia. Well, he didn't; he had pulmonary edema and drowned in the shit his own lungs produced. Yeah, he bought it.

At the time I thought, here I came all this way to escape death, and still I am in the middle of it. We weren't doing anything that we thought dangerous, just tourists playing mountain climbers—of course, that is the most dangerous thing of all.

* * *

I could feel the exertion taxing my body, and I made a mental self-examination, looking for the tell-tale signs. When I was younger...no, when I was young...I never had any real trouble, maybe some sleeplessness, maybe a headache. Now I was old, and with each leaden step, I felt that much older. How would my body react at 17,000 feet? That question plagued me.

Yes, the altitude was making itself known. True, I had been sitting on my ass for the past week, a couple of days lying on it, but the weakness felt during the steep climb to the road was more than expected. Part was the altitude, but part, I knew, was from the enormity of the adventure ahead. The dream had firmly planted Mara's specter in my waking mind. Oh, the details and their meanings were obscure, but I knew I would meet this shape-changer again, that, no matter in what form, this specter would be waiting...above. This thought was enough to tire anyone. I had to get strong; I had to have all my strength to be certain that now was the time...my time.

Equilibrium returned on reaching the road. The ponies stretched out behind, their presence marked by jingling harness bells, the low "uuusht, uuusht," that cry of man to animal ubiquitous in this part of the world. Here along this easy roadway, the tone of the

"uuusht" was reassuring, saying "you're doing fine, keep it up, move along." Later it would take on other, more urgent meanings. The nala, at first a deep-sided gorge, broadened, offering space for a few meager fields, willow trees, and boxy adobe dwellings. Yet these vestiges of human habitation were overshadowed by the mountains' immensity. Here, humans had sprinkled their sign on an otherwise barren sea of rock, a sea that lifted on either side into enormous waves capped in icy crests. This was truly a masculine world, not only in its Freudian verticality, but also in its hardness, its rawness, and its sheer domination. The great mountains, scored so deeply by the Barai and countless feeder streams, shared life grudgingly with intruders. With a growing feel for the topography, I could see the land rise like stairs before me. As if I was looking at a map, I saw myself as a tiny figure far below, winding my way upward. Upward, I wryly thought, to nowhere, yet to everywhere, to nonexistence, Mara's true domain.

Abruptly we came to the end of the road. Before us lay an area of landslide. Nepali coolies languidly chipped away at the rocky earth to resurrect the trail. After only a few hours of travel, we faced a major obstacle, a test for the heavy-laden ponies. We were at the first of many such junctures, where a misplaced footstep meant a disastrous end to the adventure. While there was footing for humans, it was questionable whether the ponies could get across. The hillside was steep, perhaps seventy-five to eighty degrees. A great piece had fallen into the rush of the Barai many hundreds of feet below. To slip was to tumble over a rocky precipice into the rage of this muddy torrent—to fall was to die. Pal went ahead to scout the trail.

"Sahib, trail this wide," reported Pal holding his hands about three inches apart. Thank God, he hasn't gotten into the "Dad" trip, was my first thought, but quickly I shifted focus to my real problem.

"Can the ponies can make it?"

"Not know Sahib. Before trail pukkah. Coolies say trail kherab last night. We try Sahib. Taking down saman from ponies, then try."

The ponies were getting a little antsy. They sensed something was very wrong; they were about to be forced to do something, which from their perspective was highly irrational. But despite their

superior grasp of the situation, the ponies were destined to succumb, for their fate wasn't theirs. The boys began to unload them, an operation the ponies unwittingly welcomed. Then, like the condemned going to inescapable gallows, they were led, one by one, across the precipitous trail. The operation went smoothly at first. Among the four ponies, as with their human counterparts, there was a pecking order, roughly approximating their age. The oldest and most stable went first. His passage without incident helped reassure the next to follow.

Those ponies weren't wimps. As mangy and scraggly as they looked—we are talking glue factory here—they were tough, real trekkers. It was only when the last one, the youngest, started across that trouble came. She was little more than a foal, maybe a year at the most—they were all so small that it was hard to tell. She was along to learn the ropes and to be with her mother. Pal had her lead and Yosh was holding on to her tail just in case. It was a good thing too, because just as she reached the halfway point, she freaked and shook Pal off. Then she started to turn back, only to lose her footing. Desperately she fought to regain it, Yosh holding on to her tail for dear life. Pal, seeing what was happening, slid down a little way—remember what was below—but these guys were only thinking of the pony. How were they going to explain to the family that they had lost her? I don't really know how long the struggle went—it seemed forever. The pony was screaming, struggling, but unable to regain her footing. The two boys continued to fight with all their strength. Below, the river was rumbling with a patient anticipation, waiting for all three to come tumbling down. After what seemed forever, they got the pony under control. It was a good thing the pony was so small, because they finally muscled her up onto the path and literally pushed her across.

Throughout the whole event I held back, camera in hand, shooting a rapid sequence of the near disaster, heart in my throat, knowing I must let the pony-walas handle their own business; it would have shamed them had Sahib been forced to interfere. Yet I was irritated that Gul refused to get involved. He walked blithely to the other side of the slide, then sat down on a convenient boulder to watch what might happen, as if none of this was his concern. Perhaps, it was a case of *Insha'Allah*, but it was almost as if Gul was enjoying

the show. "Dad" hadn't taken his advice. "Dad" had used other pony-walas. Now, anything that happened was "Dad's" responsibility.

The rest of the day we climbed the nala. The way was clear, although now it was distinctly a trail, passable only to foot and hoof: men, ponies, yaks, and the frequent herds of sheep and goats. We met many of the latter as there was only one human use for such high nalas. Among the rocks and ice lay patches of luxuriant grass, for which the flocks traveled great distances to enjoy. Though to the uninitiated this seemed a wild, uninhabited place, to the Gaddis who summered here it was well defined, each pasture belonging to families whose rights might have stood unchallenged for generations. Unchallenged that is except by the cancerous defoliation caused by their vast herds.

Traveling up valley, we passed through many huge flocks. It was nearing the end of the season; another few weeks and they would begin the journey down, crossing the Rohtang out of the high valley pastures of Lahaul. Some would winter in the milder climate of Kulu, while others would travel farther to the Plains.

It was a good, simple life, disconnected from the cares of those permanently planted—to the earth, village, town, or city. These shepherds live apart, and as the other, the outsiders, they garner a dubious reputation. However, in the brief encounters I had with them, taking shelter in their camps; trading for meat, cheese, and curd; employing them as guides or porters, they had always proven honest and forthright. They reminded me how easily evil is ascribed to the unknown, to cultures different from our own. Human failings are the same, even in the Himalaya.

That night we halted near a Gaddis' camp. While I waited for Gul to perform his culinary wonders, dal-bhaat and a fiery vegetable curry, I lay back, trying to absorb my surroundings. As always when first beginning an adventure my threshold to wonder was low. I was unaccustomed to this vertical world. My eyes wandered hungrily over the ridgelines towering above. My mind began to let go. As I released my grip on intention, imagination reasserted itself. In the fantastic shapes of the crags, I understood why shepherds, travelers, and mystic wanderers see within such contorted folds images of Gods.

KALAGIYA

Yes, I thought, this is what I need to break out of that cycle of shit. Get up to this place where the very scale of it all makes you, and everything about you, insignificant.

Was I now on the path to annihilation, liberation, or to use the Hindu term, *moksha*? I was game for anything that would kill the pain of what had been? My mind went back to similar circumstances, times when chemicals or mind-blowing reality had overwhelmed my ego. Only then could I begin to glimpse deeper levels of truth. This was for me the true high, the breakdown of individuated energy, distorted by my past into Guy. In its breakdown, the energy was cleansed and returned to the universal, homogenous sea—the One. It was a well-remembered, if not overly frequented, place. I liked to think that I had found it on Spindrifft, but I really...I mean really...got there with LSD. Conditioning—Father, Mother, School, Church, Community—so blocked my consciousness that I needed the power of acid to blast free. Yes, I had been "experienced." Having been there. I could revisit again and again, with or without chemical aids. Gul's call to dinner broke my reverie.

It might have been the spices Gul used so liberally that made for a restless night. I should have been extremely tired—the first full day of walking and the trail steep—but I was restless. As my body tried to find comfort in the hard, uneven ground, my mind struggled to return to the peace I had visited briefly that day. But despite my fondest hopes, I wasn't going to escape so easily. The voice of the past began its familiar segue, insinuating itself in slow, measured steps. At first it was barely noticeable, baiting my attention with a momentary vision of past pleasure. Then, once my mind tuned in, it hit me like an avalanche, taking me back to that *last time*...the last time Tara and I made love...or at least I had tried.

* * *

Besides, "love" wasn't really the word for that sorry incident. It was after Tara's kiss-off, after she had given up all hope for our future. It was out in the open. I still refused to believe it, and she had yet to steel her heart completely, yet to bar the door. I bullied her into seeing me, letting me into her apartment—talk about the

fox in the hen house. "After all, aren't we friends?" Then as had happened so many times before, we ended up in the bedroom, at first just talking. It was all so usual and for a moment time was frozen, no past, no future, only that moment. We still felt deeply for one another, despite all the external pressures that led to our break. I found myself on top of her, kissing her, running my hands under her clothing, just as I had done so many times before—it seemed so...natural. I felt her taut-budded breast, the familiar swelling nipples that signaled, at least to me, "Yes, take me, overwhelm me, take me hard, fuck me, fuck me, make me lose my mind" How often had I looked down to that face, watching it transform, innocent school girl into wanton bitch? How often had I mounted her and done her unspoken bidding? We rushed to get to that place where we would lose self in one another, her hands feverishly kneading her own breast, squeezing them, as my cock entered her, savaging her until we were both bathed in a commingled fluid of sweat, saliva, and released desire. At times our union was so complete that we passed through that boundary of self and entered one another. She felt my maleness and I her femaleness. Then even this was lost in climatic union.

But this time it was not to be. Perhaps, because to the outside world we were so far apart, we had tried too hard to become one. As I pressed down on her, I was convinced that if only I could make love to her one more time, I could possess her again. I could bring her back from that other world to which she had strayed, a world where I had no part. My mind silently screamed at her: "Come back, back into our private world within the touch of our bodies, within our kiss, our embrace." But it was a world that no longer existed, a world that now lived only in my mind.

I wasn't completely stupid. While part of me wanted to believe, another part was aware of the reality that what had been, that us, was now dead. I carried out this act with more rage than love. Outwardly, it was a rage toward Tara, the one that had killed our love. Yet it was a rage as much directed within as without. Reaching back to that New Hope Bridge, I had known this day would come. In my mid-forties, I was what I would be. But Tara, barely in her twenties, could only change. Her love for me was a trying on, a seeing how it would be, a costume, and not the practical uniform of life. Part of me always knew this, but it was a part no longer in

control. Raw, wounded ego now held sway. If I couldn't make love, perhaps I could inflict pain. How close was love and hate—just flip the coin.

With my superior strength, I easily subdued her. At first, she didn't resist, allowing me to strip the clothing from her body. I felt her cool flesh quiver as my hand slid under her panties. Much of our lovemaking had included domination fantasies. Measured, controlled violence always turned Tara on. She enjoyed submitting to sex as an inevitability for which she wasn't responsible. There was so much sexuality with in her, such strong needs. Yet she had been raised to repress this carnal side. It was through me, a totally alien creature, that she could find the freedom to explore this "darker" being. It had been this way from the first. She had resisted, but only to a point. Later she confessed she had wanted to be taken—if only to get it over with.

We delved deeply into the secret areas of each other's fantasies. She had a fondness for bondage—to be naked, bound spread-eagled across the bed. Yet now I wonder. Was this really her desire or her just her trade-off to please me? Was I just playing out all those Steph engender fantasies? After preparing her bonds, I would talk roughly to her, like to the most common whore.

I knew the talk well. How many nights had I lain awake in a sweat-soaked Cholon bed, sleep denied by the cauldron night, listening to my neighbors downstairs ply their trade with the Grunts? Those boys, pissed as all hell, directed their fury at the poor girls. Echoing those deeply etched phrases, I would tell Tara what I was going to do, letting fantasies fly as I never could with Mei. Was this why they said that the ideal wife was a whore? I never really hurt her, just a gentle slap on her ass, a gentle twist of the nipple, the pain more virtual than real—at least she rarely complained.

I found I didn't want to cause real pain, just take her to the threshold. But this was a very fine line, a line to be probed with delicacy, taking the sensation to the edge, then backing away. One game we played a lot was "waiting customers." She was the "dime a throw" slut, and I would play a succession of customers, each with increasingly weird demands. She might lie tightly bound, helpless and open to all that the "customers" would do; or following my commands bend her naked body into all sorts of

bizarre postures, her body surrendered to the tongue, finger, and cock of my imaginary clientele. I got off on the domination and she on the submission.

I moved from the cool exterior to the heated flesh between her thighs. Suddenly, as if coming out of a dream, she began to murmur, "No, Guy, don't, it's not right?"

Her voice was weak, questioning at first, as if not convinced herself. I tried to ignore this shift of mood. Desperation took possession of me. I didn't want this moment of fantasy to escape; I wanted to forestall the all too inevitable reality. If only I could get inside her, I would be safe. All would be well. I always felt so safe inside her. How strange that this small, young woman had such power. Did it lie in her, or in my own mind?

What started weakly soon gained strength. No longer was there any wavering or question in her demand. A new tone of determination seized her voice. I knew she meant what she was saying. Quickly the act ceased to be consensual. This was more about rage than love, a rage answered by fear. We had become enemies, our coupling transformed into struggle. By then my cock was hard and ready. Every muscle in my body ached to possess her, to subdue her, to make her submit to my will. As I straddled her thighs, my cock rubbed against the smoothness of her flesh. I could feel the surging inside. What if I came now without satisfying her? But the thought spun quickly away. Instead it was replaced by panic that blotted out all sensitivity to Tara's needs. As my excitement peaked, I was lost to the realm of the primordial, to a totality of physical senses, driving away all thought. It was no longer about love or hate, of tenderness or granting satisfaction. I was a man starved for the life-giving essence that lay between her struggling thighs. I had to possess this essence or die.

I roughly pulled the ribbon on the side of her panties—the sluttish kind I had persuaded her to wear. They fell apart, revealing the gentle rise of her pubis, the whiteness of the flesh showing through the black, lacy strands of hair. I could never get enough of the youth that lay in that down soft skin. Despite her mind's determination not to have sex, her body's needs took control. As I placed my finger deep into her, I could feel she was moist, terribly moist, her cunt tight, yet pliant to my explorations. She cried out,

this time not to dissuade me, but with that all too familiar sigh of surrendered. For a moment "no" had been lost in "yes".

Tara, like me, was susceptible to the senses. If the right button was pushed, she went into autopilot. She too lost her mind and surrendered to the passion lying just beneath her prim, public self. Once that button, a button I knew all too well, was pushed, then she no longer had mind, no ability to recognize whom it was knocking at the door. She only cared that the door be opened and entry made. Perhaps, just this one more time, I could pull it off, touch that button. I wanted to roll her over and take her from behind. She liked that, inviting entry, her slender fingers pointing the way as they spread dimpled cheeks, offering the paradisiacal rosebud that lay within. She knew, only too well, how that sight would madden me, and what in that madness I could do.

Now there was no offer. I knew that, if I was going to make it at all, I had to take her as she was and quickly. Splitting her thighs open with my knees, I drove my cock inside. She became fully conscious, the shock of penetration breaking the rhythm of what had become almost an automated act of stimulus and response. It brought her back to the new reality between us. She squirmed to one side, forcing my cock out unfulfilled.

Rolling to the side of the bed, she screamed, "NO!" It was a cry both of defiance and desperation, equally addressed to herself as to me. She bolted for the bathroom. The door slammed shut and through it I could hear her voice, trembling now with rage, telling me to get out. Panic completely took hold. I felt nauseated, trapped, mortally wounded. That was when I finally knew it was over. I realized my power over her was gone. She didn't need or want me sexually any more. Without the sex what was left? It had been my power. Now she had found it with another man. He had taken, not only my Tara, my pleasure, my joy, but as distressing as the thought was to me, my last vestige of power.

It was all so simple, so rational to anyone outside the emotion. Yet knowing she still held power, while I was no longer anything but an unpleasant memory, an embarrassment, was too much to endure. Even worse, was a growing awareness that my last aborted act of sex hadn't been about love. Perhaps, it was because the hate wasn't fully formed that I had been unable to take her, to force her

against her will, as a true rapist would have done. But that element of hate was there, lurking, ready to become full blown, ready to wreak havoc. I had to end this; I had to get away. I couldn't let what had once been so beautiful become so ugly.

I replayed that scene so many times, over and over and over...I was just getting sick of it. Again, Whistler's many heads were at work. They were turning me into that very monster against whom I had been warned. Like Mara, perhaps I too was a shape-changer. Perhaps, we are all shape-changers. I was struggling with one head to resolve my past, a past I had loaded onto its latest icon. It was Tara's fate to embody all my frustrations. While the past mesmerized one head, another knew it was time to let go...to move on.

* * *

At Darcha, I was concerned by what seemed to be many tourists. Part of my self-conceived treatment was to put as much distance between my past and myself. Most of the tourists were European, but they were still too close to home, too much reminders of whom I was and from where I had come. As a trailhead, Darcha was like the neck of a funnel. Once on the trail the funnel opened. While we occasionally passed groups, their intrusion was minimal. Had I my way, there would have been no tourists. Yet once I left the main drag to Zanskar, I was confident I would find myself alone with the mountains, my small band of servants, and the few locals who belonged there.

As we drew nearer to the Shingo-la another bottleneck developed. It had been fine until we reached the Jankhar Sangpo, the stream leading to the pass. The trail to the pass turned up the nala, but on the far side of its unfordable stream. The various groups, which had been spread out along the trail, began to collect for the crossing. People appeared seemingly out of nowhere.

Climbing for the past few hours had been very rugged, the trail snaking along precipitous, scree-covered slopes. It rose with lung-bursting steepness, then fell so sharply that I imagined every step to be my last. The verticality of the land became more and

more pronounced. The world turned gray, both the land and the sky. Even the torrent far below was leaden, so too the patches of rubble-encrusted snow. These were particularly troubling for occasionally they would lie across the trail. As this was the trip's beginning, I hadn't yet become accustomed to such exposure. Now, after all I have been through, it seems rather trivial, but at the time I continually fought against a sick, giddy feeling that rose from my gut. I tried not to look down; I tried to ignore what would be my fate if I slipped from the narrow path worn into the icy crust—the churning waters below.

The day before seemed so bright, so placid, flowers, a few trees, the grazing flocks, but now things were serious. I passed small groups of tourists, homogeneous cliques naturally formed out of the larger, heterogeneous groups. How odd they must look to the locals, decked out in the latest mountain gear, complete with iridescent goggles and the colored sunscreen they painted on their faces like a war party of Hollywood Indians. Most carried ski poles, which they used to coerce unsteady legs over the rocky trail.

As I studied these odd, brightly colored, tightly spandexed people—so much like neon sausages—I noticed that there was a definite change from our earlier meeting in Darcha. The exuberance displayed in the bazaar, the loud talk and camaraderie, was gone. In its place was exhaustion, and in some I thought I could detect the scent of a rising fear. That morning they had forged boldly ahead of their guides; now uncertainty gripped them. Was this the nala that led to the pass?

From information picked up at Darcha, I expected there would be a *garroti*, the primitive cable car device to cross the stream. It was one of those typical Himalayan affairs: pylons on both banks with cables carrying a box-like car, large enough to permit humans, sheep, goats, and even small ponies to be pulled across. But again, as is typical in these ever-changing mountains, while there were vestiges of the pylons, neither the car nor the cables remained. On closer inspection, Gul located the wreckage of the box wedged into boulders some two hundred yards downstream. There was no question of fording the river, for its strength and apparent depth would have swept to a quick death anyone crazy enough to try. I

had only to look at the remains of the garroti to see how certain that end would be.

After some minutes the ponies caught up, along with Yosh and Pal.

"Hey Pal, garroti finish! What now? I greeted him with a whining plaint

"No sweat Dad! Wire out before. We go up! Crossing place there!"

Without further elaboration, he pointed to some faint tracks etched into the steep hillside.

"Acchaa," I replied somewhat dubiously. Then selecting the most substantial looking of the tracks, about a hands-breadth wide, I began to climb. Soon I found myself inching gingerly along the top of an almost vertical rock precipice. One slip meant a drop into those death-laden waters. This was definitely not a pony trail, but a trail for and by goats, only suitable for their tiny hooves and nimbler climbing skills. Out of necessity and since, according to Pal, the distance wasn't far, we would try. Besides, Pal and Yosh had recently come this way, not to mention that two of the ponies were theirs. If they were willing to risk them, I couldn't bitch about risking my gear. The ponies had shown good heart and as there was no other way...Insha'Allah.

I felt deeply sorry for the ponies. They looked so small, so frail under towering loads. What was to pass as a trail was scored out of such a vertical that the baggage would continually brush against the hillside. Each time this happened, the ponies would have to fight to maintain balance. After a load scraped against the ground several times, it would invariably begin to shift and eventually snag. Then, one of the pony-walas had the delicate task of working up and then down to where the creature would stand trapped by the snagged load. Getting to the pony was one large hurdle, but redistributing the load was an even greater challenge. All the while, the roar of that savage torrent below filled the narrow defile, a constant reminder of how slim the margin between life and death.

The ponies were on an extremely narrow ledge, one thrown completely off balance by a skewed load. They couldn't move forward, and there wasn't any way to turn around. We had to keep

talking to them, calming them, because the difficulty of one freaked out the others. Not only the animals were tense. So were Yosh, Pal, and Ravi because they would lose not only a source of income, but friends for whom they had deep feelings. I was freaked—each load contained valuable supplies without which the trip would suffer. Gul was equally disturbed—he was afraid that a loss might cut short the journey and, in consequence, his employment. There were a whole lot of bad vibes up on that track.

We continued fighting our way up, trying to get past this ravine, hoping to see the valley suddenly open, the river broaden and become shallow. I pictured it that way, for Pal, spare with his words, said little about how we should cross. It was maddening. A hundred yards away on the opposite bank, I could see a safe, well-defined trail. That was the way of these mountains. What appeared on the map to be insignificant little blue line, a stream, could turn life into a nightmare. This was even more so when that little blue line had a stack of black lines on either side of it—contour lines that when close together signaled a steep rise.

After an hour, a welcome sight came into view. The nala didn't widen. Ahead, I saw a bridge made from a remnant of the ice and snow that filled this nala every winter. Equally important was that the track, on which we now so precariously moved, seemed to lead down directly to the up-stream end of the bridge. As I looked closer, I could see that the other tracks, crisscrossing the slopes above and below, converged on this bridge.

Snow bridges are a godsend, because they are features of just the terrain that offers the greatest obstacles—steep-sided nalas whose precipitous descents make their streams impassable. It is the very steepness and depth of these nalas that provides shelter from the sun. Along their bottoms, patches remain from the snow cover blanketing the nalas for most of the year. These aren't the dazzling white or crystalline structures their name might suggest, but deeply eroded, scarred, and filthy with the earth and rock debris. Although undercut by the rushing flow of the streams, they are often many yards thick in places and able to withstand the weight of humans and their beasts. A few are eternal, lasting throughout the summer until the snows of another winter replenish them.

As we turned into the nala the air chilled, the result of an icy wind blowing down from snow peaks of the pass. This was in harsh contrast to the heat of the Barai under which we had labored for most of the morning. Clouds that had been gradually building now closed, leaden gray replacing the incredibly deep cobalt blue, unique to those heights. So deep is this blue that often in my black and white photographs, especially since I favored an orange filter, the sky appears black. The sky's metallic hue completed the overall the mineral grayness that enveloped us.

I was glad it was cold. It would make the bridge more stable. This bridge was quite weathered with several gaping holes to broil below. Judging from the increasing steepness of the nala's walls, and the lack of tracks on our side beyond the crossing, it was here or never that a crossing must be made.

Above, looking down on the bridge, I could see that the trail descended to the upper end on my side and then snaked around the holes to the far lower corner. However, it was unclear what happened to the trail once it left the ice. From where I stood, it looked as if it abruptly stopped and then another trail appeared about fifty or so yards downstream.

Ravi moved ahead to examine the bridge. Unlike the two Zanskaris, he had been dubious about climbing the goat track and now was damned sure he wouldn't be bullied into risking his ponies further. After all, his home was in the opposite direction. If the trail was cut, he could just go home. By the time he returned the Zanskaris had brought the ponies down to the edge of the snow. With nothing better to do, I had lit up and was exchanging hits with Gul. Even though my dislike for him was growing, it was always better to share the joint—I was superstitious about that. The two young Zanskaris abstained as usual. They were good Buddhist boys.

When Ravi returned, he looked agitated and began a long explanation in Urdu, the common language between Zanskaris, Lahaulis, and Kashmiris. After about half an hour of deliberation, Gul came to report. Bad news brings no one any good, particularly the messenger.

"Big problem Dad. On far side, trail not go back to other side, ice broken. Big drop, maybe twenty feet, maybe more."

"Fuck it, man, Pal and I'll look," I replied, knowing that if there was a way this resourceful boy would find it. At the same time, I was regretting the joint. I felt dizzy and would have preferred to sit there, contemplating the scene until I regained my equilibrium.

Gingerly, I set out onto the bridge, testing the footing on the shelf-like projection where the ice overlapped the solid land. Got to clear my head, got to get it together. I was worried. It was just this kind of thing that could end the trip, seemingly so small, just some yards of ice, but if it couldn't be crossed then that was that. Back to Darcha, back to square one.

God, how queasy I get when I am out on one of those bridges. No matter how many times I have safely crossed them. It is worse than a glacier. The glacier is so big, so solid, compared to one of these bridges. All you must worry about on the glacier are the crevices. Oh, that is a big worry if there is snow cover, but if you can see the crevices then no sweat. On the bridge, it is a different tale. Any moment you think that sucker will give way or that you will lose your footing and tumble down...down the long slide into the freezing stream...and you know what will happen if you do. You are walking on a steeply inclined sheet of ice, just holding on with your ax. If I had crampons, it would have been okay...but not this time.

I kept thinking to myself: Why am I being so chicken shit? I came here to die, didn't I? But it was instinctual. It was something deeper than all the intellectualizing, all the flirting with the "romance" of death. It was real and, when face to face, the rules changed; it was all about survival. A different type of intelligence kicked in, taking possession of my body. Only through struggle could I overcome the fear.

I heard the crunch of my first step onto the bridge. It struck me that it was for this feeling I had returned to the Himalaya. It was to be exactly in such a place, a place where fear was in my face, that I had always sought. Oh, I won't pretend that, when faced by fear, I don't sweat and squirm; I don't mouth prayers to some unknown deity to save my sorry ass. No, I am like anyone else in the face of fear. Yet unlike others—maybe through some masochistic drive—I enjoy the feeling, thrive on the test. I had been introduced dealing out of the Alphabets, those sequentially named streets in NYC's Lower East Side, then addicted in Vietnam, re-upped in Kabul,

Beirut, Dacca, Lima, in all those high-risk ops. I got damn high on it. This was better than those past situations, danger here was clean cut; it was life or death. There was little risk of some horrendous disfigurement or the half-death of incarceration. It was all or nothing. In a few minutes, I would either be on my way, or it would be all over...yes or no, a binary fate with no shading in between...clean.

I talked myself through that first rush of fear, feeling my way out onto the scarred ice. The nala's narrow walls amplified the roar of the stream until it drowned out all other sound, even Pal's shouts from a few yards away. The bridge seemed to be a giant slide, tilting further with every step. The desire to hold on to something solid overwhelmed me; I wanted...I needed...to retreat to the near bank's safety.

The tracks Yosh made angled high up on the concave ice, trying to keep far away from that lower lip and the rush of the gray mud-rock-ice melt below. As long as I was high up, if I fell, I would have a chance—a chance to dig in with my ax, a chance to grab hold of one of the many rocks protruding from the surface. My eyes hungrily sought softer places where I could dig in the soles of my boots or, failing that, those spots covered with the scree and gravel that would support me, not let me slide down. Once, twice, my feet flew out from under me. The hard ice rushed up to slam against my body. Each time I expected to feel that slipping motion, the rough surface of the ice tearing at my clothing, my skin...and then out into nothing, followed by the sudden shock of icy water, maybe coupled with a blow as I slammed into a boulder before the onset of oblivion. Yet I merely stumbled, the surface far too rough for me to slide far.

By the time we had gone about half way, I was beginning to master my initial fears. I marveled how adaptable was the human mind, how carefully crafted for its own survival. Stepping out onto the bridge, this diagonal world of ice so hostile to human presence, all my survival mechanisms came on alert. Checking, testing, trying desperately to get information, to adjust, my mind struggled to get my body to survive.

What a rush! That moment when all the rules were unknown, where your mind had to race, strain its potential just for the

privilege of one more breath, one more sound, one more sight...this was really to be alive. How sweet those moments when all senses, all energies, focused on survival—when your only thought was just to be. No psychological claptrap, no questioning, no self-doubts, only total concentration on the immediate threat.

Such intensity of feeling couldn't last. To live in that reality was to live as the animals, or at least in the state we humans ascribe to those we think of as "animals." In very little time, I began to regain my balance. Once that adjustment was made, once I believed I would make it across, then all those alerted systems began to shut down. Now each step no longer seemed a life or death decision. Assumptions began to creep back in. I would make it to the other side. I would have to deal with the problem Yosh reported. I did feel a little hungry. Maybe Gul should make lunch before getting the ponies across. I was back on autopilot, that sweet, panicky feeling in retreat. Along with this change came complacency tinged with foolishness at having exaggerated the danger.

"Holy fuck," I said to no one in particular, "how in the hell are we going to get around this."

I was staring at a gaping chasm, between the overhanging edge of the ice and the riverbank where the trail was joined. This had been the one place where it was possible to reach the trail. Beyond, the bank became a rocky cliff above which the trail was forced to climb. Below, was the open gorge with its insurmountable torrent. At the bottom of the chasm lay the remains of the ice ledge, which only yesterday had safely bridged the now gaping moat. Had the strain of some unfortunate traveler's weight caused the collapse? What sort of karma would bring an unfortunate to just that point, at just that time, to be the straw that broke this beast's back? I scanned the rocks and ice debris in the swirling waters, but there was no human sign—no mangled body, no shred of clothing or equipment. The waters here were too powerful, anyone or anything that fell into them would wind up many miles downstream.

What to do? What to do? Mental wheels spun under the weight of the apparent hopelessness. While they were spinning, Pal was at work. His mind was native to these situations and not to be put off by "mere" forces of nature. It had to do with necessity as that

mother of invention. I had seen it at work many times before, technological miracles wrought to survive. If Pal wanted to get home, he would have to find a way. Ravi had been quick to concede defeat, because for him going back was to return home. All he would lose was some days pay, but that was infinitely better than losing a pony or two. The same principal was now at work as in the miracles performed by the lorry drivers, coaxing their antiquated vehicles over torturous routes. After much examination, including lowering himself part way into the abyss, Pal reported back.

"Chalo! Chalo! Much work Sahib, we do." Then grabbing my ax, he began to chip away at the lip of the ice overhang. "We break; cut down to water. See, water not so fast." I saw Pal was right. There was, behind a random arrangement of boulders, a less rapid side channel. It wasn't exactly a millpond, and certainly the water was cold. But at least here the ponies had a good chance, unlike the main channel where there was no chance at all. Tracing the path of Pal's hand, I saw the channel led to a place on the bank about twenty yards downstream. There it looked as if the ponies could climb out.

It was a long shot, but for Pal it was the way home, back to his family who would be anxiously awaiting his return. He faced two possibilities. He could take a chance and, if he succeeded, return home with his ponies and the profits of this journey—both ponies and profits were crucial to his family's survival in the coming winter. Or he could send the ponies back to Darcha, to be sold at bargain rates and return home with the meager funds. Pal had no real choice, and neither did I. We were both committed to this route; money and time were running out. Even if I could have afforded to regroup, the season was getting late and soon the snows would close the passes.

This was why I chose the Zanskaris, why, if possible, I always choose people who are going back...returning home.

I knew there would be hell to pay when we got back to the others. At first, Ravi didn't want to hear anything about going on. He had already set his mind on returning. Gul, despite all the reasons that would later come to light, decided to side with him. Perhaps the gloom of the nala overwhelmed him. He was very unhappy about

proceeding. Yosh, on the other hand, for the same reasons as Pal, was all for going on.

In the meantime, other parties were beginning to collect, both those of the locals and the foreign tourist. This trail, though passing through some rather forbidding country, was a main artery, by far the most direct route connecting Lahaul with Zanskar.

Now at least we had the hands to do the job. I had already decided, but had to make a pretense of a fair hearing. I listened politely to Ravi's entreaties, filtered through the sympathetic interpretation of Gul.

"It much danger for ponies Dad. Who pay if ponies die? How will Ravi live without ponies?"

Battle lines were drawn, Ravi and Gul versus the Zanskaris and me. The Zanskaris began to argue with Ravi, their tone becoming increasingly hostile. Since I knew I would ultimately prevail—as elsewhere, money talked loudest—I realized I must do so with diplomacy. Unless I was careful, Ravi and Gul would have ample opportunity for mischief down the road. I drew the Zanskaris aside. Giving them my ax, I told them to get the preparations underway. At the very worst, we could go it alone and leave the troublemakers behind. Then I turned to deal with Ravi. Speaking through Gul, I told Ravi that no matter what he decided, I was going on.

"If you want to go back on your word...on the deal...then that's your choice. You promised to go to Padam. If the Zanskaris go, why are you afraid? Are the men of Zanskar braver than those of Lahaul? Do their ponies have bigger hearts? If you will not go, then Gul will have to go back with you. There won't be enough food for him with only two ponies to carry the saman. Gul's business will also be finished, and he'll lose the chance to make many rupees."

This last part was, of course, directed as much to Gul as it was to Ravi.

All of this was too much for Ravi to counter. While he might have, for the sake of expediency, suffered a slur to his own honor—what did he care what this Angrez thought of him—he couldn't have the

quality of his ponies questioned. This was business. Zanskari and Lahauli pony-walas had long been rivals for the cross-border trade. If Ravi backed down, it would reflect on all Lahaulis.

"No, Dad, Lahauli ponies having very big hearts, very strong, very brave. Ravi's ponies first to go Padam."

The ponies weren't happy to step out on the ice. The lead gave out a sharp cry as he realized the intended route. By the time we coaxed them across, the Zanskaris and other pony-walas from the tourist parties had begun to cut a slide down to the water. It was steep and slide was just what the ponies would have to do. The work continued, many hands breaking down the jagged edges of the broken ice, filling in the gaps with snow, boulders, and jetsam from the great glaciers that lurked above. Unloading only increased the ponies' anxiety. They knew that out on this sheet of ice, with only apparent oblivion in front of them, they weren't halting for the night. They knew something was in store for them, and that it wouldn't be pleasant.

"UUUUSHT! UUUUSHT! UUUUSHT!" It was time to take the lead pony down. If he made it, then the others might take heart and follow more confidently. It was Ravi's pony, so it was up to him to take the lead. He grabbed the slight creature by its scraggly main and began to drag it to the edge. At the same time, Yosh got hold of its tail and together they took it down the slide. The trick was to get the struggling creature into the water without going in with it. Pal and several others were at the bottom of the shoot to break the fall. As the pony went down, it sat back on its haunches. Despite the danger, I couldn't help laughing; the creature looked like he was sledding.

The pony hit the water with a splash. The force of the slide carried him into the water. This was fortunate, because it would have been almost impossible to get him in on his own. The channel was deeper than it looked and the current strong. Ravi tried to stabilize the pony while hopping in and out of the boulders lining the bank. About five yards from the landing point, a large eddy almost carried the pony out into the main stream. The pony was flailing out with his legs, desperately trying to gain his footing. His cry turned into a terror-stricken shriek. Ravi realized this was the moment of judgment. He called on Lord Shiva to save him and

jumped into the stream. At first it seemed that both pony and man were lost, but somehow, maybe through the intercession of Shiva, Ravi found footing and muscled the foundering pony onto the shore.

Once they were both safe and the pony quieted, it was Ravi's turn to cry out. He unleashed a string of invectives, cursing the Zanskaris, tourists, and all the evil spirits who made the mountains what they were. The heat of his anger finally succumbed to the chill of his thoroughly wet clothing. Deep in the shadow of the mountain the air was cold. Ravi was trembling uncontrollably. Gul, by now had Ravi's firm ally, gave him his blanket and built a small fire. Was Ravi, perhaps, overplaying his hand? I wanted Gul back to the main work of getting the ponies across. Yet at the same time, I didn't want the others to think I was too hard-assed about their welfare. I decided to cut them some slack. The two huddled over the fire, commiserating one another on their kismat to work for so stubborn a ferenghi.

One pony across, three to go! The next in line was also Ravi's, and as the companion of the first it was important that she follow immediately. Ponies, like humans, form close relationships. Ravi, of course, was in no shape to oversee the operation, and the Zanskaris weren't about to take on the responsibility. This second pony was confused. Her mate was now about fifty yards away, occasionally letting out a plaintive call. But she could also see the route that lay between. She had heard terror in her mate's cries as he negotiated the slide and then the channel. Although she desperately wanted to be with him, she wasn't eager to go forward.

Pal told Yosh to move her to the end of the line. I had surrendered all control of the operation to the two Zanskaris. This was their business, the reason I was paying them. Besides, this was a "photo-op," one of the first dramas on this trip. As I started taking pictures, any thought of the danger posed by the bridge quickly subsided. A sense of excitement overtook me. Thought and feeling became constrained to that specific space and time, to the event I found framed in my viewfinder.

And "found" is a most appropriate word. Always passive, the observer, the seeker, the value I sought was the discovery of what existed independent of me. Photography was my connection to

that independent world. I guess Whistler—weird how I keep coming back to his read on life—was right when he said photography was prosthesis. Just about every photographer I have ever known was defective in some way; maybe the same is true for all artists—communication freaks, unbalanced having to hold onto some tool, some prosthesis to communicate, to relate to a world so distant. Maybe, the more defective, the more dependent on the prosthesis, the deeper is the art.

Rather than join in the work at hand, the survival work of moving the ponies to the far bank, I retreated into photography's abstraction. As I snapped away, I was transformed into an automaton. I composed, focused, and adjusted the exposure in some reflexive plane of my mind. Only later, when I saw the picture, would I know what I had taken. In many instances, I would be seeing the scenes for the first time. The camera wasn't only a tool to communicate, but to remember.

The Zanskaris, in the meantime, were getting their ponies down and across. The two boys performed efficiently with minimum noise and confusion. I found myself taking pride in their good work; they were my choice, my boys. It was time for the last pony and there was no way around it. Ravi would have to be roused. He had warmed a little with the help of some hot chai that Gul, reverting to his cook's role, conjured. What power it was to have a technical skill, photography, cooking, to escape the more mundane tasks in life.

Poor Ravi was caught in a bind. The last thing he wanted was to take another trip down that slide, but one pony, his best, was already across. To make matters worse, the Zanskaris had taken their ponies across with almost no fuss. It was now only his quivering beast who waited forlornly on the ice. It seemed that she was intentionally looking away from the moat, hoping in denial that something would happen to spare her.

Everyone waited for someone else to act. Ravi huddled over the fire. Gul tried to look busy with the gear. The Zanskaris settled their own ponies. I was suddenly confronted with a lack of action, nothing to capture or record. I returned to my senses. It was my party and, ultimately, I had to move when no one else would. I

called to Gul, loading my voice with as much authority as I could muster.

"Hey Gul! Gul! Get Ravi's ass up here. We have got to get this pony down and move up to camp."

Gul took no notice, nor did anyone else on the bank. Was the stream noise too loud, or was it the symptom of something more malevolent? No, my Zanskaris would have answered...if they could have heard me.

The poor pony was standing there, quivering, trying to ignore the inevitable ordeal that lay ahead. As I approached, it struck me that perhaps she was desperately wishing: "now he'll take me back down to my home, all this will be over. Soon I'll be safe in my familiar field with a bail of barley straw." I found myself often giving voice to these animals.

I grabbed hold of the pony's lead and, pulling her around, walked toward the edge. It was quite frightening at first because the drop was so abrupt. I kept thinking I was about to fall into the abyss. What made it even more frightening was the roar of the stream immediately below. I had lived with that sound many times before—it is the white noise of the mountains that never goes away. Before, I had never sensed that it was so threatening. The sound that day will always be with me, permanently inscribed in my mind by that moment's terror.

The pony by now was almost catatonic. I asked a boy who was serving one of the tourist groups to give me a hand. With his slight hands clinging tightly to the pony's tail, down we went.

When negotiating the slide, the other ponies had gone back on their hindquarters. This posture, while appearing ridiculous, also kept their weight low. But despite my attempt to hold her head up, this one for some unknown reason couldn't keep her forelegs extended. She stumbled. There was a muted snapping sound followed by a terrible shriek. I knew in an instant she had broken a foreleg, but was too busy trying to maintain my own footing. Suddenly the world was upside down. I was tumbling down towards the water with the flailing, shrieking pony. I reached out to steady myself, but all I grabbed was rotten ice that broke away in my fingers. I felt a sharp pain in my left thigh as it was caught

under the weight of the pony and crushed against the rough surface of the ice. I was no longer leading the beast, but tangled with it. Our combined weight sent us tumbling out of control towards that terrible river.

Is this IT? The thought of impending death flashed across my mind. Mara's many faces kaleidoscoped somewhere in space, indefinable except as "below." I had come here looking for IT, and now I was going to find IT. Faced with the imminent presence of Mara, I thought what an asshole I had been. No, I was...yes, an asshole plain and simple to court Death in this fashion, to meet it in such a place.

I was even deprived of that privacy, that intimacy, I had imagined death would be. Instead an audience of tourist were lined up readying to capture my ordeal on videotape and Kodachrome. I could see my death replayed over and over on VCRs and slide projectors throughout Europe, a spark in what otherwise would be boring vacation "highlights."

"Ah what a tragic moment! But see how the camera kept it all in such sharp focus and such good exposure. Marcel is such a good photographer, really captured that crazy Yank's last agonies."

I didn't have the luxury to wallow in these reflections too long. The bottom was approaching and with it a fresh horror. A new sensation quite literally flooded my mind. Unimaginable coldness, so cold that I felt my body was on fire. It wasn't only the cold, but the clawing wetness, fluid, yet at the same time almost solid in its power. Even though I tried to struggle, the stream quickly overwhelmed me with its serpentine embrace.

I remember looking up and seeing the horrified face of the boy whose aid I had enlisted. When we started to fall, he must have wisely let go and scrambled back up the slide. Now he was screaming at the top of his lungs, but the noise of the river was too great to make out his words.

All the tumbling with the injured pony had taken us off course from the slide. Rather than fall into the relative safety of the side channel, we were to one side of the main stream, half in half out, the pony wedged in among the boulders. The force that made the hideous, nala-filling roar was now tearing at us. Desperately, I

held on to the pony's mane. Had we been absolutely still and waited until help arrived, there would have been no problem, but the pony was in pain. Perhaps, she instinctively knew all was over for her. The sooner she surrendered to the icy waters, the sooner her agony would end. She was thrashing with such force that it was inevitable she would break free, taking us both to our doom. The only uncertainty was in whether we would drown, freeze, or be crushed among the boulders.

I looked to the far bank for help. I could see that Ravi was still wrapped up, trying to regain a normal body temperature, and the Zanskari boys were busy repacking their ponies' loads. Aside from the terrified boy, apparently only Gul was aware of my plight. He watched, surreptitiously at first, not wanting me to know he knew my danger. This way his options were open. "Insha'Allah, Dad will save himself?" It would be such a bother to have to renegotiate the slide, to risk what had happened to Ravi or worse. Then I caught his eye. He must have seen the fear in mine. Realizing I was in serious trouble, he went into action.

"Not good to have Dad killed," might have run Gul's thought. "Inspector Singh Sahib—may Allah curse him for the son of a sow he is—not happy about that. No, these days ferenghi drug smugglers are few. Singh can't afford to lose a fish like this one, and what is bad for Singh is very bad for me. I must save my fish from drowning."

It would have been in character for Gul to chuckle at his own wit. He was comfortable with that metaphor. Kashmiris, people of well-stocked lakes and mountain streams, prided themselves as fisherfolk. They often thought of life, of business, in terms of fishing. Hadn't Aziz, his boss and mentor in the tourist trade, always talked of the tourist as a fish to catch? "Play the tourist carefully. Each one's different, each will strike, but only at the right bait. Give them lots of line, let the hook work in firmly before you try to pull them in."

Well, this was the chance to embed the hook. Surveying the situation, he saw he would be little danger. From my perspective, things were quite extreme. I tottered between life and death out on the rocks, at any minute to be dragged into the maelstrom by the thrashing pony. It would be little trouble for Gul to throw me a line.

That was all that was needed. Once I had a firm grip, I could begin to extricate myself from the pony and reach the safety of the boulders. If worse came to worse, Gul could send the Zanskaris across to pull me to the bank—but not before he was sure I understood it was he who was saving my ass.

"Yes, let those fucking Zanskaris take the risk, but the credit to me. Make Dad trust me; make him owe me; all the better when later, sitting in some God-forsaken Amrikan prison, he puts the pieces ever so slowly together. Y'Allah, I wish I could see that, see the look on that sun-reddened, peeling potato, Sheytan-bearded face, when he figures how he was hooked, when he figures it all out..."

Now was not the time to savor such a victory. Gul, once he had decided a course of action, moved swiftly before opportunity slipped away. He rummaged among the burlap bags until he found the rope. I had nagged him to find a good rope. It wasn't the same as that life-saving kernmantle of my more affluent past. Instead, we had to make do with a thin, stiff, plastic laid line that, I knew from bitter experience, would rip my hands.

I heard Gul's cry and saw, out of the corner of my eye, the bright yellow line arching toward me. On the first try Gul's throw was short. The line splashed limply into the channel, separating the rocks from the bank. The second throw made the rocks, but fell where I couldn't reach it. Finally, after coming up with the bright idea of tying a stick to the rope's end, Gul got the range. The roped stick wedged itself among some rocks just beyond my outstretched arm, but with luck it was reachable. Trust that fucker to make me sweat, I thought.

Now that this path back to life was only a short lunge away, the shock my predicament began to diminish. My mind fought to clear away the confusion. There was no point in trying to save the pony. She was a goner, even if she could, by some miracle, make the bank. The way her foreleg flopped at such unnatural angles told all.

Just as I reached for the rope, I felt a violent shudder. My mind disengaged, unwilling to remain with a body facing such extreme exposure. Fear, survival, cold, pain, evaporated. I could only see, only think about that flailing limb and the pain it caused the pony. The cold took control. I drifted away from that awful present into

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a more comforting past. Yes, I thought, I must do something for the pony. I had seen other such unfortunate animals left to fate, their owners unable to bring themselves to do what must be done.

* * *

There was that big red Gujar horse some years back in the Upper Warwan—a valley just east of the main Kashmir Vale. It was late autumn, after the Gujarars had departed. I had been backpacking alone and seen no one for several days. Then in the distance, on a grassy meadow across the stream, I saw the red horse. How the Gujarars must have loved that horse. She was large for the mountains, well formed, and her rusty color was most prized by the Gujarars.

Although she breathed clear mountain air and nibbled on still lush grass, she must have known winter was closing in, and with it her end. Red—alone in the mountains you quickly become intimates—sensed my presence; she called to me with a loud whinny. Yet when she moved toward me, I suddenly realized why this valuable horse was here alone. She moved haltingly, hobbling on three legs, the forth, the right foreleg, hung limp and useless—she was doomed. At first she must have felt great pain, she must have cried, but as time past that pain became part of her; she learned to live with it.

There was no way Red could have made the journey down, yet her master couldn't put her down—the Insha'Allah syndrome struck again. I knew what her fate would be. Soon, the snows would come. Perhaps she would just succumb to the cold. Or to the hunger that would come when the snows covered the grass, and she no longer had the strength to burrow down to find the life-giving energy. Worse, cold would soon bring the predators, wolf, bear, and even leopard, down into this valley. She would be food for them and then, if anything was left, for the carrion-eating birds that prowled the skies.

My first thought was to go to her. I had no gun, only a knife to put her down. Not an easy thing, but it would have been quicker than starvation or wolves. The stream, however, stood between us, and

it was impassable at that point. Maybe the impossibility of action made me rationalize. Although at first I had been swept with pity, it was quickly replaced by overwhelming respect. Red quietly faced her end, surrounded by such infinite beauty, such peace, and such seeming union with existence, that even in death she would provide life for other beings—I too was succumbing to Insha'Allah.

This was her karma in the ageless cycle of life and death. How right it was for the Gods to place this river between us, to protect this beast from the intrusion of human emotion, allowing her to play out her own destiny. There in the mountains alone, the self-assumed superiority of the human way amounted to little. I looked across to Red, and she looked at me. There was a look of recognition in her eyes, a communication between equal beings that said, "Don't worry, all is as it should be. Don't be afraid for me. I'm not afraid."

You might say this was hallucination, or at least projection, perhaps brought on by my own loneliness...later, back amongst my fellows, I too had consigned it so. But in that moment, stripped of the mind-numbing illusion civilization brings, I was attuned to the equality of all life, to the wisdom inherent, not just in humanity, but in life itself. It was a truth...is a truth I believed then, as I now believe...it is always there before us, if only we can strip the veil away.

* * *

I forced myself back to the present, to the extreme danger I faced. "It's not over yet asshole, you've still got to get that rope," a voice inside goaded. But there was another voice that called, "Let go, don't to struggle, just surrender—like Red." The snaking, bright yellow slack of the rope only inches from my face jarred me from such thoughts. Come on, I thought, stop wool gathering...you're not escaping that easily. Pick up the rope and get yourself out of here. Then suddenly, without knowing quite how it came to be there, I had the rope firmly in hand. I had been right; it cut into my hands, but it was too late to worry about that now. Better a few cuts than to be battered to death or drowned among the rocks.

With a firm grip on the rope, my next task was to free myself from the pony. I forced any thought of compassion from my mind and edged the trembling beast into the current. If I could keep holding on to the rope, the current would do the rest.

My ears will always hear that streams malevolent roar. My eyes will always see that last look the pony gave me.

At first, it was almost as if she couldn't believe I was going to do it. Yet at the last instant, before she swirled away into the current, I thought I saw a glimmer of both resignation and understanding in her bulging, bloodshot eyes. It was as if she knew she had to die, that there was no other way, and she didn't want it to haunt me. It was much the same as with Red. Amazing, how we can come to believe what suits us.

I kicked out with all my remaining strength. The effort, although not great, was enough to dislodge the pony and send it tumbling into the waters. She cried once, followed by a hollow "thuumpp" as her head crunched against a boulder not five yards from where I lay. Then there was nothing but the sound of the river and the ever so faint cry from Gul: "Come on Dad! Come this way!"

It was over. Now it was only a matter of picking myself up, crossing the short stretch of outer channel to the safety of the bank. Gul was there to pull me up on the bank and to take the plaudits. Then there was Ravi to deal with. Gul, ever the one to make trouble, had alerted him to the danger. At first, he seemed almost a disinterested bystander, not really understanding that his own fortunes were so heavily at stake. Then, the finality of his pony's end began to penetrate his partially thawed consciousness. It was almost as if he had no knowledge of any of the events leading up to the tragedy. The only thing that stuck with him was the image of my final kick, sending his beloved beast to its watery grave.

The first thing I saw, after Gul pulled me up, was Ravi rushing toward me, his face livid with rage, a large kitchen knife clenched in his upraised hand. Luckily for me, Pal stood in Ravi's line of attack. Ravi was small in stature. Though no giant, Pal was big and strong enough to handle Ravi without too much effort. Ravi's rage did give him an added measure of raw strength, but it was an unorganized, uncontrolled energy he couldn't use to its best

advantage. Stepping deftly aside, Pal coolly tripped Ravi, sending him tumbling to the ground; the knife clattered into the channel, safe from doing any harm. He then squatted down on top of Ravi and, with Yosh's help, pinioned him to the ground.

Slowly, ever so slowly, Ravi calmed. His ranting ceased, and he began to speak coherently or, at least, he seemed coherent, for I couldn't understand what he said. It seemed as if the crisis had passed. Gul announced lunch was ready. The thick clouds that had been building all morning suddenly gave way to the sun's noontday heat. Gul spread a blanket in a rare spot where the sun's warmth touched the otherwise shaded defile. For a seeming eternity, I had ridden on the crest of pure adrenaline. As I sat down, my body felt drained, but soon the simple meal—chapatis, daal bhaat, strong, sweet, milk chai, capped by chocolate—brought renewal.

I lit a joint. After recovering from the usual rush, all those feelings, which only moments before held me captive, dissolved. Instead, I let the present enfold me, contentedly watching Pal and Yosh muscle the remaining saman across to the bank below. Yet in watching, I was reminded that the weight of all my past was also following close behind. Again, just like the ponies, I would have to resume my burden.

I started to drift off to those places and people I so often visited. God! I hadn't thought about Tara or any of that for hours. Amazing what a dose of reality would do. Then I realized the reality—the need to act on the immediate external threat—wasn't over. On the trail, the memory world served as sort of a TV set—an escape. As painful as many of those memories were, it was tempting to blot out the present by losing it in thoughts of the past. I didn't have to stick to any reality, even if that had been possible. I could just relive past events in any fashion that I cared to imagine. Yet as much as I was tempted to drift off into one of those other times and places, I realized that all wasn't well. The passage across this river cost something. Things were now different, and I knew I needed to reflect on what that difference might mean.

We were now left with three ponies. This would be no real problem in that we only needed three. Of course, the dead pony's mate was disconsolate, and there was no telling how he might perform in the

coming days, days that would require his utmost efforts if we were to get over the pass.

The real problem was that I now had working for me a man who, minutes before, had been angry enough to try to kill me. Ravi was quiet now and, according to Gul, contrite about the violence, although he wanted to know who would pay for the pony—translate "Dad Sahib will pay won't he?" I didn't want to think about this. How much would make him happy? At most, the pony was worth maybe fifty dollars U.S., but I knew what would happen. If I accepted responsibility, then Ravi would believe he was in control. He might demand one or even two hundred dollars. He certainly wouldn't be happy with the fair price, and it was to buy his happiness that was the sole purpose of paying him. Then I thought, what could Ravi do? Even under the influence of drug-induced paranoia, I could perceive little threat. Maybe the sun, so bright with such welcome warmth, overpowered any shadows of fear that lurked in my mind.

It was reasonable to doubt that Ravi would walk away now. The thought of recrossing the stream terrified him. If he was to hope for compensation, it would only come on successful completion of the journey. All I had to do was give him the impression some settlement would be reached, when—Insha'Allah—we got to Padam. Once there, I could just tell the little bugger to fuck off or, maybe, even turn him over to the local police.

As if to foreshadow trouble ahead, again the clouds blanketed the sun. With the sun's passing, the chill wind from the pass returned. Then momentarily the defile became radiant again. Sunlight danced on ice, water, and crystal-flecked rock, only all too quickly to be overcome. The gloom returned, turning the nala into gargantuan construction site where mountains were both rising and being torn apart, where life dallied at its peril and mineral ruled. I paused to take a photo, from a height, down across the length of the snow bridge to the stream as it disgorged below.

Although I was using Kodachrome, I knew the picture would appear only in grays. I marveled at the lack of contrasts, no pure whites nor blacks, only dirty metallic hues of uplifting bedrock being transformed into soil for the plains. How eternal this process seemed. Ancient seabeds torn asunder by black granite spires,

remorselessly upthrust by tectonic pressure to tower in the leaden sky. Slightly lighter were their lower slopes, fragmented with remnants of those solid peaks: first by boulders, then by scree which fell down the slopes onto an even lighter layer, brightened by an undercoat of ice and snow. Lightest of all was the liquid mix of gravel and water that formed the stream. This silt-filled torrent undercut the snow bridge as it made its way through the mountains whose remains it carried. The importance of Shiva wasn't lost, for destruction is such an integral part of creation—the recombining transform of energy. The effluent from these mountains, the water and silt, brought renewal to the plain far below. Quite rightly those tens of millions of plains dwellers venerated the Himalaya as the home of the Gods—the source and sustenance of life.

The trail sharply climbed the steep ravine. Following it had put all thoughts out of my mind, except for making it to the top without falling too far behind. Walking was harder, breathing harder. We were going up another of those narrow tracks, climbing above another sheer vertical face. This was supposed to be the main trail? Each step became a deliberate exercise in mind over matter.

It was important to me that my boys—well if they were going to call me "Dad"—perceived no sign of weakness. I did have my old ploy, stopping to photograph, as a cover. When thing got too strenuous, or dangerous as in Nam, I had that excuse. I found a comfortable outcropping of rock and while the others continued upward—"uuusht, uuusht"—I dropped down, snapping a few frames: wide-angles down the valley and telephoto close-ups of the peaks. The momentary rest allowed oxygen to reach my lungs, giving my mind the scope to move beyond its immediate confines.

Was I just out of shape? But then all my company looked strained. Perhaps the two Zanskaris were less so, but they seemed to be brave lads, not given to revealing their weaknesses. Gul was less reticent. Delhi had taken its toll and, struggling up the trail, he occasionally let go with a curse. Ravi, on the other hand, kept silent. He had much to think about, much to consider. He had lost a good part of his wealth. He was desperate to get compensation.

Gul assured him, "Dad make you happy. Just get him to Padam. Dad Amrikan, you know all Amrikans very rich, they have too

much money. No problem, you see, but in Padam." Both Gul and I knew humans believe what they want, and this is true in every culture. But this was India, where they have developed the art of telling each other the good news and suppressing the bad. The good, though polite in form, is nevertheless suspect. Ravi, despite his naive appearance, was aware of this stratagem. Ravi must have puzzled over his predicament as he drove his one remaining pony upward, "Uuusht, uuusht." He didn't want to believe, yet what other course was there than to trust this Dad and his Kashmiri dog.

"Hah! That fucker thought he'd fool me into believing he's my friend. I must watch him closely. The shepherd's dog may defend the sheep, but eventually he will bring them to the slaughter. It's one thing to get extra food and his Delhi-bought cigarettes are good, but he's Muslim and I'm Hindu. We can never forget how they gave up the true Gods to win favors from the foreigners. How they tried to steal our mountains, how they still try...to rob our Gods of their home—as if they could. No, I won't trust him or this crazy Dadee Sahib. How can I trust a man who comes into these mountains with no business, just for pleasure? Doesn't he know how dangerous this place is, how many die? Only these know-nothing foreigners, these 'tourists' who have no experience of this place, no sense of what these mountains mean to we who live here, would come for pleasure."

As I struggled with the physical challenge of the ravine, Ravi struggled with his mind, taking little notice of the difficult way. By the time he reached the top, he had reconciled himself to his current condition.

"I'll play along," he thought, "but if they try to fuck me in Padam, I'll make them pay dearly."

The top of the ravine was a welcome sight. After leaving the bridge, we climbed steadily for almost three hours. The trail followed, what to an aerial observer would have appeared, a large step, the nala rising sharply. In the past, during a colder age when the glacier extended much further down, this must have been the site of an icefall. Here, the rock was harder and resisted the cutting action of the glacier.

On the top of this step, the nala widened precipitously, taking on the U-shape characteristic of glaciated valleys. The stream, which below rushed with such malevolence, now meandered in multiple braids: its roar quieted into a soothing, almost congenial gurgle. The stream had so quieted that, for the first time since Darcha, I became aware that we were not alone. Neighbors called out, making themselves known: the screech of the marmot, the burble of the chikors, the caw of the ravens. But it was not only my ears that were invited to feast. Best of all, what had been the barest of tracks magically transformed into a veritable highway, bordered by patches of luxuriant grass, dotted with colonies of yellow buttercups, purple asters, gentians, and pink primroses. Overhead the ice-encrusted mountains still loomed, but for the moment it was as if I had reached paradise.

I had hoped to camp that night at a place the locals called Rumjack, which lay at the top of a wide, almost-level step in the nala. When we arrived, the camp was already overwhelmed by a party of Italians and another of mixed nationality. As I passed by this latter group, an English-speaking woman, possibly American or Canadian, invited me to take tea. A chill went through me as if shocked that I was still identifiable as a *fellow* tourist—just another day-tripper on a magical mystery tour.

The difficulties we had encountered, and the problems they caused, took me far away from any reality I might have shared with this woman. I knew what was coming. I had seen her likes before when guiding my own flocks—lonely, middle-aged professional women on the adventure of their lives, looking for change...maybe through romance. They were hungry. I was deep into my own crossover fantasy. I thought I had left her world far behind. I believed—wanted to believe—that I was now part of this land. The mountains had become as native to me as the hills of San Francisco or the beaches of SoCal. How could this woman, this Angrez memsahib, identify with me? Couldn't she see we weren't the same? I didn't want to deal with...I didn't want to be that person that she saw. I wanted to be the person that I believed I had become, the "man of these mountains" person inside. I was no longer an Angrez marked by pale skin, light eyes, cameras, photojournalist vest, or any of the other stigmata of the foreign interloper. I didn't want to deal with the assumptions I thought

she would make of me. Assumptions that would counter the new role I was assuming.

With a studied awkwardness, as if in the native manner shy of a foreigner's approach, I politely declined. Without breaking stride, I briskly moved on. A little farther up, I came upon Gul and the boys, kicking back in boulders that offered shelter from the rising wind. They had been waiting for me to give approval to this campsite before unloading the ponies.

Gul was, of course, eager to share the campsite with the throng of foreigners. He had arrived quite some time before and already surveyed the field. It had potential. The Italian group had a couple of young women who caught his eye. With his dark, roué looks, he could have passed as Italian or for that matter Arab, Jew, Spaniard, Greek, or any one of the Mediterranean peoples.

"Dad we make camp here? Gul asked expectantly.

"Too many folks," I replied, looking back on the throng of brightly colored tents. "Let's move on a bit."

"But Dad no more good camps until just before pass, four, five more hours, too far, too late."

"I'm sure we can find something just a little further up, Gul my son."

I had taken to adding sobriquet heavily touched with irony every time I answered to "Dad." I hoped that somehow Gul would pick up on my irritation, but of course he didn't, or at least he wouldn't cop to it. Was his mastery of the language too primitive to detect the meaning of the undertone or, perhaps, it was just this irritation he sought to create?

Gul must have wondered about my aloofness. "Why didn't this man want to be with his own kind? What was he running from? Maybe this Dad was one of those who came in search of boys, to do with them what normal men did with women? There had been many of those."

He and the pony-walas had already enjoyed some intense debates whether I was or wasn't. He had even suggested Pal offer himself just to find out the score. Pal, who was very innocent and very

straight, bristled at the suggestion. He had almost come to blows with Gul, even though Gul could have dealt with him quickly.

"These boy-lovers are always a source of gossip and derision among the tourist-walas. Almost everyone who worked the trade had at least one encounter. *Bismillah!* Preserve me from that perversion," and then chuckling at his own humor he added, "unless it can make my fortune."

Chapter XII

*There is an art of finding one's direction in the lower region
by memory of what one saw higher up.*

When one can no longer see, one can at least still know.

—René Daumal—

HEIGHTS

Above Rumjack, the nala narrows, then climbs in yet another vertical move. Boulders and scree litter the ground. After a weary hour picking our way through the boulders, we came upon some rock shelters locals use in times of emergencies. "Shelters" is a rather grand term, for these were nothing more than walls of rocks piled upon one another, anchored to some large overhanging boulder. I selected a ring that, with some minor reconstruction, had just enough space for my tent.

After arranging my gear, I went over to see how the boys were doing. They had built a crude kitchen tent by draping the ponies' saddle blankets between two boulders. This offered some shelter from the wind, but in case of rain or snow there would be little protection. It was getting damn cold, and they bundled up in their warmest gear, homespun sweaters, socks, and hats. Vying for the faint warmth of the kero stove, they eagerly volunteered for the various small tasks required to prepare the meal.

Guilt, that so Amrikan disease, came calling. While their spare bodies were exposed to the elements, there I was, sleek and secure in my down-filled Gore-Tex. I felt pampered, apart. There was a part of me that longed to shed my western luxuries, to really join these people, not only in fantasy, but also in the reality of life and the physical discomforts that entailed. Yet there was another part, whispering in my ear, telling me that I deserved my comforts. Somehow, I was superior to these natives, these callow youths. Yes, I had earned my luxuries. Again, so Amrikan!

Although I was aware of the hardships, the boys, even Gul, seemed oblivious. They had felt this cold all their lives and, while it was no

less cold for them than it was for me, it was expected. When they spoke, steam would accompany their words.

There was a new smell in the air, counter-pointing the more usual odors of the campsite: pony sweat, kero, tobacco, charas, and curry. Did the boys notice? Being no neophyte to these parts, I knew. It was the scent of impending snow.

While it didn't snow that night, the threat was in the air. I awoke to the news that the ponies had run off during the night. This would delay our departure for several hours until, finally, Ravi located them far down the nala. This wasn't the first time, and it wouldn't be the last. Those poor boys! How they had to run up and down like sheep dogs, covering many times the ground. It was all I could do to keep going in one direction. The ponies weren't fools. They had smelled snow. They were keen about such things and tried to go down. They were clearly unhappy as they were led back into camp, for the signs of snow were even greater.

As the day advanced, the clouds bowed to the power of the sun. Color infused both land and sky. After about two hours of trudging up through a monotony of boulders and scree, we came upon a large open bowl-shaped valley. Here many streams join the main river, a catchment for the glaciers and snowfields of surrounding peaks. Below, the magnitude of the mountains was felt but unseen. Now, as the valley opened, I could take in the magnificence of the Himalaya, the "abode of snow." My map showed that none of these peaks rise much above twenty thousand, a height that by Himalayan standards makes them minor league, not even deserving of names. Yet they were still magnificent with hanging glaciers, cornices, and crags. Anyone would be a serious challenge to a climber.

We were now at the foot of the pass, in an area known to ferenghi as "High Camp," because it is the last practical halt until the other side. I could feel the altitude. We must have been over fourteen thousand; every breath was labored. I also noticed my hands and feet were beginning to swell. We paused at the head of the valley where the stream rose sharply, making one last giant step to the pass. Tourists of some unknown nationality already occupied the best site. Grimly I thought that they were possibly American, as they were using North Face domes. My suspicions were further

supported as they were shooting the surrounding panorama with a large pro-looking video camera—and they weren't Japanese. Once, I would have been doing the same thing, and I would have felt their equal—more accurately their rival. Now, I had only contempt for what I saw, fools enslaved by their technology. Yet how could I square my own addiction? Wasn't I just a more impoverished version?

I knew I was a hypocrite. I envied their youth, enthusiasm, and yes, even their beautiful equipment. I wondered if they were even there at all or just part of my own Maya, an illusory reminder of how I had once been. There had been a time when money was no object, a time when only the best would do. I didn't want to dwell on that past, instead thinking only of the dreadful consequences of their work—work to which I had eagerly applied myself a generation earlier.

"Just what this place needs is a video," I mumbled to, or more accurately through, Gul, "promoting its splendors, bringing more assholes, fucking it up more and more."

"As you say Dad."

I suppose I was justified. The changes I had observed overwhelmed me. The noticeable decline in Delhi, the increased deforestation, and subsequent erosion in the foothills, not to mention the size and number of tourist groups and the scars they left on the land. In the past, I had always remarked on the absence of litter. Oh, there were tourists, maybe even more careless than the tourists today. But they were limited in number, and the litter they did leave was immediately picked up by the locals; bottles, plastic bags, just scraps of paper were rare and of considerable utility. Now, the litter had outgrown the locals' needs. I repeatedly saw reminders of the legions that passed along the trail: tin cans, candy wrappers, plastic bottles, film cartons, Kleenex, tampons, toilet tissue, and perhaps the most demonical of all, the plasticized cardboard containers of Frutti, a new soft drink—"certified 10% real fruit"—being sold to the tourist.

I viewed these "media-freaks," these reincarnations of an earlier self, with decidedly mixed emotions, which only reinforced their haunting quality. I was tempted to go down and talk to them—to

see if they really existed. Just as I was about to do so, Gul approached about setting up camp. It was still early, barely noon. I knew if we pushed, we could be over the pass by nightfall. I was even toying with the idea of spending the night on the top. In the past, I had made some great photographs, spending the night in places normally avoided, passes and mountain tops—capturing the edge between darkness and light was one of my passions. At least these were great photographs in my head, for as in the case of the clouds of Manali, the incredible subtleties of shade and hue were beyond the film's ability to capture. I discussed this idea with Gul, assuring him that he and the boys could go down and wait at a more hospitable place, but Gul was uneasy.

"Better make camp here Dad, the pony men not go tonight."

"I don't know about that, *my son*. It looks like snow will come tonight. I feel it."

Pal jumped in to the conversation. "No Dadeeji, no *barf*. It late now, ponies need rest, grass other side very far. Ravi's horse need new shoe. He need make before cross."

I bet them it would snow, but they were insistent about halting. I resigned myself to spend the night where we were. I had to admit it could have been worse. We were at the head of the valley rimmed by spectacular snow peaks, with an unobstructed three-sixty view of mountains. Before, I felt as if I stood before the mountains. Now, for the first time on this journey, I was in them. I could picture our tiny forms, perched on the southern flank of the Great Himalaya Range about to cross into inner Asia.

As the boys set up camp, I indulged in a joint. The beauty of the place was too much. The internalized artist soon felt the urge to respond. This I did in the only way I knew, pulling out a camera. Only a short time earlier I scoffed at the "neighbors" for similar urges. Now I realized we were both responding to the same inescapable call.

The sun was still shining, making the peaks dazzle against the thunder gray of building monsoon clouds. This was one of the rare instances when I used a telephoto. Normally I wanted to get in close and capture as much context as possible; approximate the human view; fill the frame with a multiplicity of images; provide

viewers with a wide range of information, not dictating what they should take from the picture. Here the peaks were so intricate, so overwhelming in form. I wanted to take them apart, abstracting them into light and shade.

Directly to the south, one steep granite ridge bore a dazzling blue-white mantle of encrusted snow. The wind had cut a sharp, knife-edged contour curving in a great "S" where it clung to the spine of black rock. It brought back memories of photographs made in the Sahara, of dunes with razor edges and sensuous, wind-scoured curves. In these mountains, the snow was very much like that desert sand, dry, hard, and granular. Unlike the desert, spectacularly uplifted rock underlaid the snow, causing even greater instability. As I photographed, several small, yet impressive avalanches sent their booming reports echoing across the valley.

Ravi began the work of shoeing his remaining pony. Ah, a photo-op, I thought. This would provide a point of interest, some human scale to the landscapes—the all-important people pictures. I had yet to relax to the point where I was comfortable sticking my lens in strange faces. That would come later. This was, however, one of my boys. It was a start, and there was no worry about raising his ire. That point had already been tested earlier, over a much larger issue, and wouldn't reappear over such a small thing as image taking. To the contrary, my attention seemed to calm his earlier anger, for he assumed artful poses, holding them until he heard the "thuuck" of the shutter. It was a safe shoot and how dramatic, the native at his labor against this incredible backdrop.

I happily set to work, forgetting the sense of economy that had previously ruled. I knew, at most, only one picture would be outstanding, but the best way to grasp that one image was by making many. "Don't edit with your camera," ran like a mantra through my subconscious. I was lost to the moment, "thuuck, thuuck, thuuck, thuuck." Then out of nowhere I heard another sound, similar "thuucks" but more rapid, each beat followed by the distinctive whir of a motorized film advance. I knew the sound of a Nikon motor drive well. In my flusher days, when the cost of film and equipment was no object, that sound would have come

from my camera. I turned to see one of the neighboring "media tribe" moving in on my prey.

That was a bit much! You should have seen this dude, right out of a North Face catalog...a mannequin in the adventure sport boutique...the latest multi-colored gear, bright primary red, blue, green, yellow...a goddamned beret, with cameras so new they looked as if they had just come from the factory. He even had this padded case from which he kept schlepping lenses, filters, and God knows what else in and out of. Had to be New York or LA Just went into the store and told them "give me everything for an EXPEDITION to the HIMALAYAS." Man, they loaded him!

Later, I realized I had been time-traveling, that at some past moment this mannequin had been me. I was now only a saltier, well-worn version. My clothes and equipment similar but scarred by a generation of use.

Damn, my cameras, even my sleeping bag, were probably older than this dude. When it dawned on me, I really got a shock. But that came later. For the moment, I was just pissed this cherry had invaded my space. With all that was going on in this huge place, he had to bogart my photo-op. Was this what it was like for my ancestors? You know the old saw about seeing the smoke from a neighbor's fire, knowing it was time to move on. There was something so wonderful about being alone *with* the wilderness....

I was getting hostile, but I was stoned, so that ruled out overt action. I mean, when you are stoned, it is hard to go over and kick the shit out of someone...even if it is just with words. Finally, I resorted to taking his picture, in the same way he was snapping my boys. He got the message, and without a word went off to his grand digs below.

To chill out, I went back to the peaks again. I had enough photographs, so I just gazed through the viewfinder, filling my mind with the wonder.

In a short time all thoughts of the neighbors vanished. God, how great to be alive! This was followed by the realization: how long it had been since I had felt this way? Yes, it was for such feeling that I had come here. Why I had saved and struggled through the bullshit in Japan, Delhi, all the way—one of those moments I will

always remember. In the world below, I avoid emotions, viewing them as weakness. Only in these heights, can I let go...feel. This surrender isn't to another, a human, who might manipulate me for selfish ends, but to an infinitely larger force, one with no interest in me, no purpose to exploit, yet who will still hold me. I felt gripped by ecstasy, libido and spirit becoming one. It was, after all, the first embrace after such a long parting—the embrace of Himalaya to her devotee. In this wild place I found the security of a lover's arms. I was where I belonged and, for a moment, heard the silence of the journey's end.

Of course, it wasn't the end, and the silence was momentary. The sparkle suddenly fled the mountainside. A solid gray wall advanced from the south, overwhelming the patches of blue that, only minutes before, had given life to the sky, transmitting the sun's warmth to the land. Sometime later, just as we finished making camp, the snow began to fall, the first flakes big and wet.

"Motherfucking BARE!" I said, glaring at Pal, "now we may be stuck here for God knows...."

Before long the flakes began to gain ground, the white mantle descending into the lowest visible reaches of the valley. A few local travelers passed by on their way down from the top. They were protected from the cold by outer clothes made from the local *puttee*, the homespun wool tweed in a bone-white, natural wool color. The wet snow clung to every surface, turning travelers into ghosts.

A lone rider on a white horse descended from the pass. He moved in and out of the drifting mist, the falling snow muffling all sound. I found myself wondering, was this really a man, or Mara in one of the infinite guises paying call? But the rider proved no phantom, for as he passed below the tent, he responded to the calls of Yosh and Pal. They went down and huddled with him for a time. His news wasn't good. The pass, already deep in snow, was getting worse. All sign of the trail was gone. In many places, everything was white—sky, ground. There was no horizon, no direction.

It was rapidly becoming the same way in the valley. The peaks disappeared. I could see at most maybe twenty yards or so. The pony-walas looked worried. Just then a long pony train went by,

making for the pass. From the brightly colored duffels it was clear it belonged to tourist. Again, the boys ran to get some news, and this time I joined them. These folks had started late. They were a large party on a tight schedule, a schedule that didn't include provision for a blizzard. Their program called for a crossing that day and that was what they would do. The tourists themselves were somewhere behind. They had been unable to keep up with the ponies, but the Indian guide, a tourist-wala from Delhi, thought that, if he sent the gear ahead, his unfortunate flock would have little choice but to follow.

Sure enough, about a half-hour later a rather bedraggled group, the Italians from below, emerged out of the mist. Looking as if on a death march, they continued upward. Several of the women were particularly unhappy. An older man plunked down on a rock, not ten yards from my tent, and sobbed into his mittens. Their leader, although elderly, was stamped by his burly physique and buoyant personality as a man at home in the mountains. He had already gone about a quarter-mile up trail but, alerted to the breakdown of one of his flock, returned to where the man was sobbing. The leader wasn't pleased. He signaled his fury with wild gestures, made even more intimidating by the sharp-pointed ski poles in his grasp. This was all he needed on top of the storm and general disaffection among his group. In a staccato of Italian, he berated his weaker countryman. The latter was so shamed that his sobbing abruptly ceased. Surely with visions of Death awaiting him, he began his struggle upward. Looking this group over, I realized that most of them had no business there. They were fresh from the *vias* and *palatazos* of Rome, Milan, and Genoa. It would have been dicey enough just taking them on a bus trip between Srinagar and Leh.

Ever since the troubles in Kashmir, tour operators resorted to bringing the tenderfoots here. In Kashmir, they would have sat in their houseboats, dickering with the hawkers, or taking shikara rides. Maybe, if they were really adventurous, they would have been sold a short pony trek in the high pastures around Kolahoi or Harmouk—a "turkey trot." But on the Kulu side, there wasn't much for it except to sit in the hotel or trek, and the European tourist wanted more than another Alps; that they had in their backyards. They wanted the exotica of a Tibetan Buddhist culture. To get that they had elected to cross the Shingo-la.

How simple it would sound in the itinerary:

Day four: Climb briskly for several hours to the top of Shingo-la (17,000 + feet), a beautiful snow-capped pass. Take lunch amid splendid views of both Zanskar and Lahaul. Descend to first camp in Zanskar.

Somehow, I doubted the Italians would be "taking lunch" on the top that day.

Shortly after their departure, another visitor appeared. This time it was someone with whom I could identify. A solitary backpacker approached out of the thick fog. Walking with the slow but steady steps of one used to these altitudes, he approached the cook "tent" where Gul huddled. For some strange reason, I felt compelled to call out to this man, to offer him chai. I say strange because for the past week I had done my best to avoid all contact with fellow ferenghi-log. Back on the Rohtang, hadn't I dispatched a similar traveler with a wave of my hand and a nod to Gul? Yet here on the trail it was somehow different. I admired this solitary wander, attempting the pass solo despite the growing storm. Was it that I wished the *huevos* to do the same, with just a pack on my back, no one to answer to, no one to manage, no one to cajole?

Chai was offered and accepted. We chatted briefly. I found out he was German, a schoolteacher in his mid-thirties. He had made the same journey a decade before. He was also dismayed at the proliferation and impact of tourists. Particularly irksome to him was the loss of camaraderie among travelers. This comment triggered the realization, followed by a flood of guilt, that he was the very same backpacking traveler dismissed on the Rohtang. He began to illustrate his point and, to my immense relief, didn't recall (or at least pretended not to) our earlier meeting. Instead he related how a few miles below, he had stopped and asked one of the groups for some hot water. The sirdar treated him like a beggar, driving him off with a curse. I expressed sympathy, while at the same time reflecting on my own meanness on the Rohtang.

In past days of youth and innocence, I had always enjoyed meeting fellow travelers, exchanging tales, getting tips on new places to explore, flirting with women, getting high and exhibiting my philosophical prowess with the men. Now things had changed. On one hand, there were changes in the perceiver; I was older, perhaps embittered by life's failures, seeking escape from myself. Seeing

fellow foreigners only brought me back to what I had become, keeping me from what I wanted to be. Yet on the other hand, there were definite changes in the perceived as well. Most were no longer seekers, ready for whatever the road had to offer, not looking back or thinking of return. Now they seemed just looking for a little organized diversion, something to enliven their conversations and reputations when they did return to their "real" worlds. For those of my ilk, travel was the real life, a taste of the infinite and a break with that finite existence of job, family, school back in the States or some European city. In some ways, we believed along with many Native Americans that the dream is reality

The thing was to stay in the infinite, in the dream for as long as possible. The lucky few never came back, floating in a constantly redefining space. They could last until the end of the journey, struggling not for control, but allowing the kaleidoscope of experience to wash over them, overwhelm them. Most, becoming exhausted from labors of an inherently eternal quest, would either return to a known existence, or construct a new one. Either way, it ended in the same cul de sac, a refuge of Maya from the terror of the unknown and seeming chaos of the infinite, that "black box" which Hindu philosophers call *Satcitananda*—being, truth, freedom.

Again, there was a breakdown between the *in* and the *out*, between self and other. Was the German real, or a projection of me? In that fog-shrouded valley it was hard to tell reality from fantasy. The falling snow muffled all external sound, even that of the stream passing not more than a hundred yards below. The only sounds were those bio-mechanical thumps, wheezes, and gurgles emanating from my body. How could I know if this specter had any substance, even if I touched it? The German would have no impact on the course of my life and, other than a cup of hot chai, neither would I affect his. In a few minutes, he would continue on his way, ascending into the thickening gloom to find his fate. Would he make it across? Or growing tired would he stop to rest, leaving his frozen remains for some later traveler to find, possibly even me?

For an instant, this spectral event gripped me. I saw myself coming over a rise and, there in the whiteness, seeing the anomaly of the German's dark shape lying half-buried in the snow. I approached

the body, the snow dry and dazzling, drifting like sand across the stiffened remains. I knew on first sight who it was, but something compelled me to turn the corpse over, to look at its face. Strange how there was such peace, such an absence of fear? No, I thought. The German courted Mara, just as I court her. This was our common bond; perhaps, the common thread between all who were compelled to return to the Himalaya—just like all "re-uppers" in Nam. Why else return to a land where death lay at each turn, under each step? Once you detached, which was the only way you could make it, how could you go back? What was back?

Was it the same for all who "survived?" I knew that Paul had traveled these mountains with such compulsion. He also courted Mara. Oh, he might not have thought of her as Mara, not even as *her*, not even as a thing. It is the nature of a shape-changer both to project and reflect. Maybe it was only as an end to something he had ceased to want to be. Once you get out on that ledge, apart enough, high enough, so that you can see both past and future, then there is no way back. Like Paul, for me Nam was only the beginning of an obsession, destined to be carried on over many years and in far-flung places. Outwardly we had survived Nam. Inside, we were as much in the thrall of Death as those whose bits and pieces came back in neoprene. Was it this way for all who glimpsed Death? For certain, Death was the real, everything else just an illusory preamble.

In my fantasy the German had come to journey's end on his own terms; he had made his union with Mara. I envied him, but it was an envy tempered by knowledge that Mara, unlike a mortal lover...one who could be possessed...is a cosmic slut, a whore...and here I mean no disrespect to her...God knows, I like a good whore now and then. A whore because she has room for all comers and the charm to please them, each and everyone. There are no favorites, all the same in her eyes. Eventually it would be my turn, no doubt about it. But it is important to meet Mara free from Maya. If Maya remains then your business is unfinished, yet another cycle to strive for liberation.

The German, like the ghostly rider before him, was quite real. Soon the chai renewed his spirit, and he was eager to depart. I watched as he struggled through the deepening snow to the slush of the

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trail. Quickly the white-gray wall of snow and fog swallowed him. There was only silence...

...and the overwhelming emptiness. The chill ran deep as thick, wet snow breached the aging defenses of my Gore-Tex parka. Underneath, the down sweater was soaked, allowing the moisture to seep through the final layer of polypropylene. My gloves also became wet, then grew stiff, encased in a thin film of ice. This was dangerous. The parka was old, almost fifteen years. I had counted on being able to get one last trip out of it.

Back in Kobe, I hadn't really thought too much about the extremes of the mountain climate. How could I? Oh, I had spent a much time in the mountains, and I knew snow in August was a distinct possibility at high altitude. But, it had been almost a dozen years. How easy to think that I would escape, that the weather wouldn't be so bad, that I could save my precious yen by getting one more trip out of the aging parka. Now reality arrived; the parka wasn't doing its job. In this valley, wetness, coupled with cold, meant hypothermia and when prolonged, hypothermia meant death.

I retreated to the tent. Its confining walls provided focus, the material reality jarring me out of dream. Inside it was still very cold. I watched the moisture rise from my body, crystallizing on the ceiling in a thin sheet of ice. A better design would have vented the moisture, but then this tent wasn't made for mountaineering. Carefully, with the movements of a contortionist, I removed my drenched outer clothing. The gloves were particularly difficult, for my hands had continued to swell. Edema, I recognized the first signs. In the hands and feet, it was benign, nothing to worry about, inconvenient, but not life threatening—if it stayed in my extremities and not in the lungs or brain. I began to have a terrible feeling that it all was beginning to unravel. I shook uncontrollably, chilled to my core.

The only thought on my mind was to get warm. Stripping naked, I bundled my wet gear into the far corner of the tent and crawled into the sleeping bag. The chill eased from my body as I snuggled into the soft down. "Better than a woman," I tried to con myself. How I love this old bag. It has been almost everywhere with me, a cocoon of security, an old friend—if it stays dry.

The flood of warmth lulled me. I began to relax. I realized I needed to dial out for a time. Later, I would worry about the cold, the parka, and all those reality things. I wanted to retreat to that world inside. I missed Mei. She had always bailed me out in the past when I went too far. Unlike Tara, who split when I needed her, Mei stood firm time and time again. There had been so many times, times of cold just like this.

* * *

We were taking that "French leave"—as an American embassy official had chronicled our flight. A big INTERPOL/DEA sweep nailed my operation along with a bunch of other "hippie" small fry in Kabul. Mei flew in the aftermath, innocent of all that had gone down, expecting to launch her film career. Imagine NYC to Kabul direct! I can still see that high fashion model, long legs tightly swathed in her Peter Max jeans and knee-high Maud Frizon boots, voguing down the steps of the Arianna 727, the mouths of the Afghans dropping. What a reality shift! But in those days, she was a trooper. It had been rough, in the middle of a particularly terrible Kabul winter. But then the climate wasn't the major problem.

When Mei arrived, I was already in the deepest of the deep, and as this wasn't Peru I don't mean snow. A month before, there had been big INTERPOL/DEA sweep—some sort of token attempt to stop the hash at its source. That was after they discovered a load in the King's plane on a trip to London. But he didn't take the rap. Token or not, they busted one of my runners at the airport. Then the shit hit. The runner was a young American desperado, a Vietnam vet who had drifted into my orbit out of nowhere—he took the place of Morgan. The fool was high and the custom-walas noticed his erratic behavior. When they asked for his papers, he pulled out his wallet and—you won't believe this—there, right next to his passport was a pungent leaf of the best hand-pressed Mazari. What can I say? My stash, the load he was carrying, was secreted away in the broken camera equipment that he was ostensibly returning to the States for repair. For a time, although the police held the equipment, the stash went undetected.

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The whole scene was so weak. Even the DEA couldn't believe the runner was a serious smuggler. Nevertheless, in the first rush of the bust he got scared and began talking. He tried to be clever; just give them enough to save his ass, but not cause any serious trouble. Despite his efforts, my name came up because he had been living in my house.

A month or so earlier, I had earned the U.S. Embassy's ire when a young American overlander—unfortunately with an influential father, a judge or something like that back in the Heartland—had the temerity to croak in the Mind's digs. I had been away at the time, but the Consul held me responsible. As my punishment, he told me to write a letter to the dude's parents, explaining the death. I refused, and to make matters worse, quite arrogantly, which was very much in character for me at the time. Of course, this was most foolish for someone in my line.

I told him, in barely veiled terms, to fuck off. "Look man, I can't be responsible for every junkie who wanders into my pad. I wasn't there, man! What in the hell am I supposed to say! Why don't you guys write letters to all the parents of the Nam babies you burn?"

That was the sort of self-righteous thing I would say in those days. After that, I was on the Embassy's shit list. It was only a matter of time.

The time had come. Armed with the runner's "confession," they decided to see if there was anything to it. The squeeze was on. For a while this meant taking up residence in the local cooler. I am talking about a dungeon, right out of the Count of Monte Cristo: dark and dank, inescapable cold. For a toilet, there was only a bucket emptied on not too regular intervals. To eat and drink there was only stale nan and foul water. And for company there were man-eating—or at least nibbling—rats...and don't forget the lice. Then, perhaps for recreation, there were the interrogations. Oh, they weren't too extreme since the Embassy called the shots. But they did try to put the fear of Allah in me. There was no pretense at rehabilitation in the Afghan penal philosophy, only shakedown. After all, the more unpleasant the conditions, the sooner the baksheesh will be paid. Well, that was the way I looked at it. The conditions were probably not much better for the average Afghan on the street, except they could split if they wanted.

Mei found a lawyer, which in Kabul meant someone with the right connections and savvy to pay the baksheesh effectively. But I was too sick from my two weeks in the hellhole to continue the fight. I would have done anything to keep from going back

A week after I got bailed out, some bright dude decided to check the equipment confiscated from the runner. They found the stash, about ten kilos. That was when I got the warning, just like a western movie, the Sheriff telling me to get out of town.

For some reason, maybe to get rid of me, the local DEA operative, a real cartoon character named Stony Brooks. He acted just like an character from Central Casting, belted leather coat, black gloves, and of course a perpetual expression on his face to match his name. Stony tipped me that the Afghans were coming.

"You're in for it now my man," Brooks said with that predatory glint in his eye. "Ya tried to fool em. Now its no longer about baksheesh, but that *nang* thing they're always goin' on about, ya know, *honor*?"

This last bit was said as if he thought honor might be an equally foreign word to me. He continued:

"This time, when they get their hands on you, it's all about their bloody badal, ya know, revenge for trying to make fuckin' fools of em. You my man are a big hassle. Uncle wants ya outta here, one way or another, if ya gets my drift."

I got it loud and clear. With little other recourse, Mei and I put our lives into the hands of a band of Pathan smugglers, relatives of my own supplier, a man named Akbar. He was from one of the most prominent families in Kandahar, who had no love for the central government or any Kabuli.

They were Waziris, one of the most notorious of the many Pathan tribes. I had read enough to know that once Akbar granted the sanctuary of *nanawati*, we had nothing to fear. If they betrayed us for the price on my head, they would tarnish Akbar's nang, causing him the most dreaded *peghor* or dishonor. If that happened, there was nothing for it accept *tarboorwali*, a permanent state of war that would exist between families until appropriate badal was extracted. With folks who claim that the value of a life, or at least

an enemy's life—and remember that the term for "enemy" is the same as "cousin"—is the cost of a bullet, badal is found only in the death of the offender or his kin. Of course, the avenging murder would require a further round of badal. This makes folks think real hard before breaking the *Pushtunwali*, the code by which all Pathans should live. They know not only they will pay, but also their family will pay, possibly for many generations.

In the middle of the darkest of nights, we made a move for the border. Waiting for a change in transport, we found ourselves in a ramshackled godown, a large tin roofed, adobe walled structure, where tons of melons destined for Pakistan were stored. They chuckled over the ingenuity of their plan. They put me, covered by a chador and sandwiched between the largest, most cutthroat fellows they could find, into a truck for a dash across the border wastes. What Paki customs-wala would have the courage to stop a tribal truck in tribal land? Even if by mishap some crazy had just been transferred and didn't know the ropes, even a madman would balk at uncovering a supposed female family member of those giants. My huge accumulation of luggage, mostly film gear, was placed under the seats of an empty bus that would latter cross at the official checkpoint with Mei.

"Yes, Sar, police look in trucks for luggage, buses for people," Akbar reported with a knowing air.

Unwanted by the authorities, Mei would have no problem. Just another hippie tourist traveling to Quetta. It had gone down as planned, except for the several hours that Mei was forced to spend with a desperately lonely Paki customs officer. He had been sent to that desolate outpost as punishment for some small slight to a superior. He kept pressing Mei with cups of chai until she thought she would drown.

Even now as I lie here writing these words, I can still see that circle of those fierce men, drawn even fiercer by the chiaroscuro of smoke and fire; faces deeply etched by their rigorous lives, wildly bearded and dressed in robes of earthen hues. Their only constraint from robbery, gang rape, and murder of the ferenghi-log was that ancient, unwritten, tribal code of honor, that *Pushtunwali*. Certainly, I was in no condition to offer resistance.

Weakened by the ordeal of the past month in Kabul, I collapsed, chills consuming my body.

Now in the shadow of the Shingo-la twenty years later, the same sense of unbearable cold brought all this back. It had been a long time since I thought of those times—thought on so many of the things that made Mei so much part of me—of who I was. Maybe if I had thought more often, I could have avoided Tara? Maybe, maybe...? Mei had been so magnificent then. Without fear, she had organized the men to build another fire, just for me, make chai, and then giving me our one remaining sleeping bag, the very one I now embrace. Suppressing her fear, she flirted with the customs-wala, not too much, just enough to get our saman through. Thinking back, I can't imagine from where she had drawn such courage or, for that matter, where it had gone.

How nice it would be to have that old Mei at my side. I had made many mistakes in my life, but mostly they were ones I could live with, learning mistakes. This one with Mei, when in my mind, I had tried to cut all ties, was one that had no upside. Sure, I needed my freedom—in the contemporary parlance "space." Sure, I needed to reassure myself that I wasn't over the hill, but there must have been another way. When I stumbled into Tara, I tried to recapture the past. It was futile from the start. Tara wasn't Mei, and I wasn't what I had once been. I thought I had lost Mei when I went away to prison, not fully grasping that, in many ways, I had lost myself as well. She went on with her life, changing, transforming, and aging as was natural. But I thought I had been put on hold. Old cons said that prison time didn't count. But then, what did they know? When I came out, I expected our relationship to be the same, Mei to be the same. But we had gotten out of sync. There was no way to go back to what had been. Perhaps what was worse, we couldn't agree on a future to go to.

* * *

"Dad! Dad, you there!" Gul's persistent voice clawed annoyingly at the sides of the tent.

"What is it my...son?"

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The sound of the tent's zipper ripped the silence; the chill air washed across my face bringing me back. What Gul now unloaded drove the chill even deeper, "Dad, Zanskaris go. Say ponies run away. Say if stay, die. Say ponies know best, big storm come, too much barf. We die if stay here. Ravi go too. He must find his pony. It too cold Dad, no kitchen tent, no warm bag, no warm clothes. What we do Dad? We need go down now!"

My first reaction was that ultimate disaster had struck. A wave of panic swept over me. Then, rather strangely, the panic subsided, replaced by such equanimity that even I was amazed. After all, I was warm and dry. I had plenty of food and, what seemed more important at the time, a big chunk of charas to keep the mental picture show rolling. It could snow for a week, and I would be all right—maybe? So what if the snow was building up on the slope above me? So what if our camp lay in its path? What better place to meet this Mara who increasingly occupied my mind.

All of this was fine for me, but I had a duty to Gul. As much as I had grown to dislike him, I didn't want his death added to my already overloaded karma. From the warmth of my bag, I saw Gul crouched in the tent's doorway. Poor Gul had only a sweater, a light parka, cotton pants, and those ancient high-tops, all of which were now soaked through and covered by clinging slush of melting snow. Gul, though trembling with cold, struggled to maintain his composure. Despite the years in Delhi, he was still a man of the Pir Panjal. He had shivered from the cold and wet many times before. Winters inherently meant such discomfort, such danger. Yet underneath his bravado, I sensed that he was scared.

I was still too fresh from too long a stay in my own culture. With western values, I prized personal space and was very reluctant to share it. After all, the tent was intended for one and a small one at that. More than a lack of physical space, I had no psychological space to share.

How my mind has changed, if this is any measure. Now, even with Devara lodged in opposite corner, the space is more than ample. But at that moment I looked forward to facing the storm alone. There was no room in my heart to share it, especially with Gul.

"What to do? No tent for me, clothing very wet, no wood for fire, very, very cold. Soon dark come. What to do Sahib?"

The mockery in his voice was gone, a respectful "Sahib" suddenly replacing the irony-laden "Dad." Yes, he must be scared, I thought with pleasure.

"Sahib, please, we go down to warm, down to Barai. Much lower, no snow. We leave saman. It safe here, no one crazy to come here now. Get new ponies at village and when storm over we come again."

He had done it; he bested me. My defenses were breached and, despite my desire to be alone, pity engulfed me. I offered him a place in the tent.

The bastard refused. Talk about eating shit! He had no more desire to share the tent with me than I did with him. All this time I had felt guilty and for nothing. Instead of gratefully accepting my hospitality, he coldly argued someone had to go down to get new ponies. The discussion went on. I didn't want to move. Gul was equally insistent about going down. Both of us had made up our minds, but were committed to the ritual of face-saving and responsibility shifting. If calamity befell the other, guilt would be expiated.

I wouldn't have felt so kindly had known what lay behind Gul's seemingly noble offer. While I had been drifting in and out of the past, the Italian party returned, its members making their way back down the mountain. Apparently, after getting close to the top, they had lost all direction. They decided to retrace their steps, not wishing to choose a path that might lead to a cul de sac, or worse, end in a crevice, a collapsing cornice, or an avalanche.

As cold as he was, the dominant thought in Gul's mind was to catch up with those Italians, specifically two young women he had met all too briefly at the camp below—they would drive the chill from his flesh. He was still angry with me for not halting there, depriving him the opportunity to ply his charms.

Gul most likely thought I was one of those men who likes boys or, maybe, that I was just too ancient to get it up. He was sure the girls were up for it. Ever gracious, he was even willing to share.

"Y'Allah! These foreign women are the same...maybe because their men have no balls. That's why they're such shameless sluts, if ferenghi men are all like Dad. Slut or no, they have such pretty faces, and even bundled up, I know that under, their bodies will give much pleasure."

Yes, this would be his chance. Allah was truly kind. What better way to warm up than pressing the flesh between those two ample beauties. He was getting warmer just thinking about it and, to his great pride, he felt himself growing hard.

"Ha, these women will soon know what it is to be with a real man, a Kashmiri man. No matter how high, how cold, we Kashmiris stand ready to do our duty."

Gul left, leaving me alone in the shadow of the high pass. Was my premonition of death to be fulfilled? What had hovered so long in the distance was suddenly now so near. It was difficult to believe it was really happening. Would I wake from the dream, only to find myself back in the States lying next to Tara? Or was even that a dream and Tara turn into Mei? That had happened anyway, real or imagined. Tara was Mei, or at least the feelings I had for Mei. Dreams within dreams! Yes, the mind is part of the illusion—particularly in the Himalaya. Did I really have the power to dream life? Alone in this mist-shrouded world, with all points of reference lost, there was no line between real and imagined. For the moment mind was all.

As so often happens in such self-absorption, my mind's eye soared from my body. I looked down upon myself, singularly colored and animate, in an otherwise monochrome and motionless world. I was filled with euphoria by the apparent romance of it all. My destiny was at hand. The great test from which I would emerge forever changed, regardless whether I lived or died.

I can only imagine what was going through Gul's mind as he trudged through the deepening snow. Superseding even the problems of survival—finding ponies and getting back in time to save his meal ticket—his mind raced with more pleasurable thoughts of young Italian breast, Italian thighs, Italian pussy. Who was crazier? It was hard to say. Was it Gul, obsessed with what lay

between his legs, with his desire for life? Or was it I, who would put all life aside to follow my abstract obsession with Mara?

Total solitude! No, solitude isn't quite right. I didn't feel alone, for I had the infinite reaches of the universe as my companion. Rather, I was free of the noise of my fellow beings, free of the reverberations of self-awareness that come from their presence. At last I could begin to hear the Anhad-Naad, the cosmic call. When Gul disappeared in the mist, he took with him the human mirror. It was now in the mountains, in the sky, that I would see myself, a self that had little in common with the Guy reflected in human eyes.

I had been aiming for this place for most of my life. Trying to become disconnected, trying to be free. Funny, I remember feeling the same way when busted. Lying in my slime-green cell, reminiscent of a public urinal, or, perhaps more accurately, an abattoir, I had reached a similar place. In that isolation, I believed my life was over. I had lost everything, every connection to the world outside; my reality limited to what was inside. It was a very small universe, but one entirely under my control. Oh, they controlled my body. No doubt about it! But to counter that, I detached my mind. A strange peace came over me; my struggle ceased.

It was something also experienced in Nam, if only in even more momentary flashes. Just for a few moments, when all hell broke loose and you knew your fate was no longer in your hands, when you could say, "What the fuck!" You could let go of life and all those things that made you want, like love for a woman, things that made you dependent on someone, something out there...everything that made you weak...made you chicken shit. For these brief moments, you could surrender to that unknowable, that thing that some call God...some call fate...and you as Guy, or whoever, would just dissolve. Of course, those moments were short lived and very soon, when the worst was passed, you realize, yes, I am going to make it. Then again, the outside world would begin to fuck around. I had a glimpse, however, and in losing my freedom to act, in losing my very identity, I had glimpsed that infinite, usually obscured by Maya's finite illusion—Devara's

Satcitananda. Ever since I have been searching. Sometimes I think I have found it, but it always seems to slip away.

I was tempted to sit down, there and then, and let the valley consume me, let the atoms of my body merge with those of the soil, the rock, the snow, the mist. I chuckled to myself at what Gul would think when he returned to find his employer frozen into inert statuary. Better yet, my mind expanding on the theme, would be the reaction of the tourists. It would give them something to talk about at home. They might even take a few snaps to liven up those slide shows: "...and here's Hilda next to the frozen American we found on the Shingo-la." Too bad they would move my body, probably cart it all the way down to Delhi, then to the Embassy and all the red tape to ship it back to Mei. Poor Mei, she would be so pissed at this final imposition. It would be so much better if I could just stay in the valley.

The light grew dim. While the snow still fell in scattered fits, the clouds were beginning to break. Mist rose, revealing the bowl-shaped valley transformed by a fresh blanket of snow. Here and there a peak would break through, bathed in the alpenglow of a sun quickly sinking to the West. Again, my inner peace proved as transitory as that sun. I felt empty and alone.

I was hungry, but there was no Gul to prepare dinner. I went over to the makeshift kitchen. The blanket covering had collapsed under the weight of the snow. Gul, at least, had covered up most of the burlap sacks with plastic sheeting, but it was nevertheless a mess. I found I was exhausted. I didn't have the strength to put together a real meal. That was why I had brought Gul along. I knew this would happen—missing meals, growing a little weaker, missing more meals, growing even weaker.

Somehow, I got the stove going and filled the kettle with fresh snow. The hot, sweet milk chai tasted good, even if the lumps of powdered milk hadn't all dissolved. The biscuits tasted even better, and there were plenty of those ever so sweet Amul chocolate bars. Not a good daily diet, but it would do until Gul returned, until life could get back to its normal rhythm. How peculiar, out for only a couple of days and already a semblance of routine had emerged. That was my nature. As strange as my life might seem within its bizarre frame, I too desperately needed

some order. I made a mental note to show Gul more appreciation, for despite his annoying character, he did what he was hired to do.

My eyes swept the valley for signs of life; perhaps one of the pony-walas would return. Long gone was that feeling of euphoria that had overwhelmed me on Gul's departure. How comforting it was to have another human near. Even if we couldn't talk, just the presence would be enough—enough to release that awful tension of feeling alone with...God? How strange it was; I struggled hard to come into that presence, yet in those rare times when the feeling came, it was too intense, too infinite. Anhad-Naad was truly the Sirens' song. When distant it drew me on, yet when close, when it overwhelmed my senses, I knew to linger would invite madness. Ego, that finite being packaged as "Guy," struggled to return. By reasserting its individuality, its separation from the infinite, confirmed my pain.

I stood beside the frozen ruin of the kitchen tent. The snow had almost stopped. The valley freeing itself from the muffle of snow and fog returned to its own sounds. The wind's sigh rose in pitch as it resumed its tedious work, prizing newly accumulated snow from the valley floor. The dull roar of the stream swelled as it emerged from the ice directly below the camp. Yet these were "white" noises, unmodulated, constant; after a few moments of adjustment they disappeared. It was so quiet, so white gray, that only the flap of my bright red tent opening assured me I hadn't departed from the sensory world. Amidst the peaks to the east, stars began to appear, bright, clear. I felt as if I was out among them. Of course, I was and always had been, but so often the artifices of human endeavor obscured them, the finite masking the infinite. Oh, how I wished at that moment to permanently throw down that mask, the protective buffer that separated me from the truth. Even as I wished this, I knew the price of its removal. The mask was my existence: *Homo sapien sapiens*, male, Caucasian, American, Californian, desperado—Guy.

Despite my tendency to despair, there was enough self-love, perhaps nostalgia is a better word, to hold the package of Guy together. This made me reluctant to tear off the mask and face the infinite where individuality held little reality. It was one thing to drop the mask momentarily, like sometimes looking for just an

instant into the full brightness of the sun. Yet who but a madman will look until their eyes melt. In my fantasy, I could court such acts of madness, but in the doing, the self-preserving force of sanity still ruled.

A long piercing howl shattered the stillness. Instantly, I recognized the sound, a wolf. "I'm not alone, after all," I thought aloud. Reflexively, I called back to the wolf using its Kashmiri name, "rama hun, rama hun." There was no fear of the wolf, for I knew that it would be infinitely more afraid. Then, as if in answer to both the wolf and my own call, I heard the distant, yet distinct, whinny of a pony.

Night descended on the eastern side of the valley, revealing the stars. To the west, where the sound emanated, the ridgeline still glowed in the ash rose backlight. I scanned this horizon and way up, it must have been several thousand feet above the camp, saw movement. Was it? Could it be the outline of a pony? I reached for the camera, still mounting a long lens from my earlier foray into peak detail. Using it as a telescope, I saw the dark form of a lone pony outlined against the dying light.

What I couldn't see in the dimness was the heavy snow slab several hundred yards from where the pony grazed. This mass, made increasingly unstable by the fall of new snow, had collected on a rock buttress overhanging the camp. Yet even the closest inspection would have failed to reveal deep cracks in the slab caused by the buffeting of the rising wind.

Tomorrow, I thought, I'll go on up there and get that pony...where there is one there may be others. Shit, I hope that wolf doesn't have his buddies nearby. At least the ponies are smart enough to stick together in times of trouble, not like us humans who scatter to the winds at the first difficulty...at the first sign of snow. The wolf must be why they went up so high, wolves prefer to keep down along the valley floor. I involuntarily shivered, as this last thought echoed in my head. Damn, down here with me.

But there was something more troubling than any instinctive fear of rama hun. Despite my bravado, the bitterness I felt at the desertion began to spill out, particularly of Pal and Yosh. Yes, that would be the thing, just the ponies and me. How surprised those

two little Zanskari fucks will be when I return the ponies to their village outside of Padam.

In this unfolding fantasy, I saw myself tracking down the two miscreants. Then I would take the ultimate revenge, the shame I would bring them by returning the neglected animals. The soft foreigner, the Angrez, achieving what they, the natives, had been unable to do. As for Ravi, that would be another matter. Too bad! He wasn't to blame; it was those lousy boys who turned-tail first. That they were "my" boys made it even worse.

It was totally dark. There should have been an almost full moon, so I realized it must have clouded over. The clearing just before sunset was only a momentary reprieve, a false promise. The snow resumed. Through its wetness the cold seeped into the deepest recesses of my body. I shivered uncontrollably.

Snap out of it my man! I goaded myself into action: This is serious shit, no time for spacing out. I was far from out of it yet, moving on, revenge, satisfaction in doing what natives failed to do, were still remote fantasies. That night would be a struggle. I must win if I was to survive.

Back in my tent, I went through the contortions of a yogi removing another set of wet clothes. This time I took the whole mess of wet down, wool, nylon and pushed it out the tent opening into the sheltered vestibule of the overhanging fly. Somehow, I had to keep the tent's interior dry. Particularly my bag must stay dry. As long as the down was dry, it would keep me warm; as long as I was warm, I would survive. How simple life had become. All I had to do was focus on one thing and one thing only. Dryness! I wiped my body as dry as possible with a damp towel, somehow found in the pitch black.

Every surface was clammy, cold, just like a grave. I needed warmth. Outside the snow was still falling, but unlike that afternoon the wind was rising with a particularly gut-wrenching moan, sweeping through the narrow defile, out into the valley. I kept repeating, mantra-like: "I've got to get dry and warm...dry and warm." I realized the temperature must have dropped, for now the snow blew against the sides of the tent like grains of sand. Earlier, when it was wet, it had made a softer "splosh," sticking rather

than bouncing off. I could better understand why those Arctic Inuit supposedly had several words for snow. There were so many forms, each with a message of what was to come, foretelling life, foretelling death. I lit a candle. Its sputtering light revealed my breath congealing into ice on the ceiling.

Despite the initial dampness, the bag began its work on my naked body; the insulating down trapped warmth, generating more warmth. I knew that soon I would be warm and with the warmth would come dryness. In the company of these two friends I could survive; I would survive. The tent shook as the force of the wind rose to a higher pitch. I amended my thought. I could survive if the tent could survive. Whole, it was a life-sustaining bubble but, if it succumbed to the storm, it could equally be my shroud. This synthetic womb and I were now as one, our fate irrevocably intertwined. I could feel my sensory system extending, virtual synapses forming on this outer surface, so that I was aware of every gust as if it were on my skin.

I wanted to sleep, letting the horror wash over me unseen. I wanted to place myself into the hands of some mythic Fate, some higher force that could shoulder the responsibility for preserving or destroying. I wanted to let what would happen, happen. Yet sleep doesn't easily come in high places, particularly if you can feel, however vicariously, the full brunt of the storm. I thought of the Valium in my pack. Two tablets and sleep would surely come. If I took the Valium and the worst happened, I wouldn't be falling victim to fate, but to stupidity for being incapable of dealing with the random and most certainly impersonal force of nature. How could I have bought into my own romantic nonsense? How could I have had the conceit to think some unseen hand was guiding me to this rendezvous with the storm? No, these storms happen often, and those who come here should be prepared to meet them. If there was anything preordained, it was only because I had conjured it, and only because I had made it happen.

Instead of the Valium, I reached for my stash. There was a weird sensation. I had a hard time articulating my fingers. It was only with great difficulty I pried the cap to the film can open and grasped the ball of charas. I then, with great difficulty struck a match. When I moved the ball close to a match's flame, I saw why

I had had such difficulty. My hands were swollen to the point they could no longer be recognized as mine. Normally well-defined, with bone, muscle, and vein, they were now ballooned and dimpled. With disgust, I saw the hand of a "fatty"—the one thing my vanity most dreaded. I could see stretch marks radiating out from my thumb and forefinger.

Once I was over the initial shock, I realized it was only increased swelling from edema whose initial stages I had noted earlier in the day. In the confusion caused by the storm, I had forgotten all about it. But now that I saw my hand, I began to feel escalating anxiety. It was a deeper fear than the vague threat of the wolf, or even the immediate, raging storm. This was something I couldn't fight. This was a threat from inside, a reaction to the hostile environment where I had no place. I remembered the Italians, I remembered that day of agony on Tirich Mir. I knew, if this got worse, if it progressed further into my lungs, or worse into my brain, my only choice would be to retreat or die. A retreat might save my life, but it would be no salvation. I couldn't contemplate another defeat. No, not now, so soon on the heels of so many others.

"Not to worry old man," I said aloud, trying to quiet my own growing panic. "What'd the book said: '...some swelling of the extremities was normal.'" I unzipped the bag just enough to work one of my feet out into the light. A little swollen, but not like my hand. Thank God! What if my foot swelled to the point where I couldn't put on my boots? What would I do then? Oh well, just as long as it stays in the extremities. But, man it looks bloody awful. Then, reflexively, I touched my cock. With some irony, I observed this was one extremity that had escaped the swelling. If anything, it was the reverse. It lay limp and shriveled, and ever more so when contrasted with the bulbous lump that was now my hand.

Somehow, with the help of the charas, I got through the night. I even fell asleep for a time after the winds died, the storm having spent itself against the mountains. I awoke to intense warmth on my face, the August sun radiating through the thin tent walls. I felt as if I would suffocate. The ice, formed during the night, seeped from limp puddles on the tent floor, soaking my bag. Sleep-fogged, I struggled to get the double flies unzipped, and was

rewarded for my efforts by a landscape transformed. When I arrived, the snow line had been much higher, leaving the nala's floor a patchwork of barren black rock and luxuriant green-gold pasture. Now, this world was uniformly cloaked in a brilliant bluish-white, from the banks of the black stream that snaked below, to the top of peaks seriating the unblemished sky. Its cold-fire iridescence made it easy to imagine that some profligate God had spilled a crush of diamonds. I was brought back to reality when, as I emerged from the tent's opening, the night's accumulation of those imagined diamonds came falling on my head from the roof, filtering down my neck to still-warm flesh underneath.

That must be how bears feel when they come out from hibernation. It was the struggle into consciousness, not wanting to let go of the dream world, not wanting to leave the snuggling warmth, yet slowly facing the necessity to wake, to deal with the inner stirrings. Once I overcame the inertia, I was rewarded. Outside the tent the air was crisp, the contrast making the sun's warmth delicious rather than stifling as it had inside. I luxuriated in it as if it were a tonic—the warmth of the sun, the freshness of the cool breeze, the incredible scene that was solely mine.

Yet as often is the case when I think I am alone, I wasn't. In keeping with Professor Whistler's dictum, my mind conveniently split, providing the dialectic so essential to being. I had become so adept at this technique that I could sometimes produce an entire symposium, each member with a differing point of view—each point of view supplying just that much more reference. Under the lingering fog of last night's charas, I struggled to create just one opposition. One mind arrogantly congratulated myself. "The others ran away, to lesser lands. This magnificence is my reward, the reward for my courage." Then that other side spoke out: "Courage my ass, just too stoned to move. Didn't want to carry my own load. As soon as the servants are gone, just shrivel up and surrender to so-called fate."

"Well today will be different," the other head replied. "Today go up and get to the ponies. Then I'll see whether I can survive on my own." I scanned the upper reaches of the slope that rose several thousand feet above the tent, trying to assess exactly where it was

I had seen the pony the night before. As my eyes swept the hillside, they came to rest on that large white mass blanketing the buttness. I couldn't help but notice that it lay in a direct line, many hundred yards above the tent...and above was the pony, no...now two...three ponies. They had made it through the storm. But I could readily see, if they came downhill much further, they wouldn't last the day.

I wasn't about to leave this to fate. I had planned the night before to go and bring the ponies down. Of course, I was stoned and in my comfortable bag. From such a place, it is easy to conjure up all sorts of brave deeds. This new awareness, however, put any thoughts of waffling quickly aside. I could see what would happen to the ponies if I failed to act. Before setting out I packed all the saman. If I could get the ponies down before noon, there still would be time to get over the pass and down to the warmer Zanskar side. I didn't relish any more nights in this exposed place. More snow might come at any time. Across the pass, I would be in rain shadow. I would wait there for Gul...if Gul came. That would be up to the Gods, God or whatever; in this part of the world with so many choices, you had to leave all your options open.

Insha'Allah, Gul my son, I thought as I finished packing, carefully stuffing my clothes, sleeping bag, and tent into the red duffel. In this bag, except for what I wore, were the material fruits of my entire life. Later, upon reflection, it might have seemed foolish to leave my sole possessions in plain view, yet thoughts of thievery didn't enter my mind. It was as if I was the only human, that this nala was my own private world. Besides, anyone passing would have had trouble enough with their own load and no interest in assuming mine.

The slope was steep; the fresh fall of snow made the going slow. With each step, I would sink knee-deep through the thin crust. Just prodding my own bulk upward would have been difficult enough. Yet despite my somewhat desperate straights, the panorama, which I imagined lay waiting from the crest, was too magnificent not to photograph. I could never forgive myself if I went up without the means to record. So there I was, laboriously climbing, burdened by cameras, lenses, and assorted paraphernalia.

I sucked in the thinning air, high to the point of being giddy from the lack of oxygen. Looking down the slope exaggerated its steepness. I swayed, the cameras swinging wildly, banging against one another—yet another brassy scar. I was too exhausted to care.

Above, I could make out the silhouette of one of the ponies. It was Ravi's black. It had to be Ravi's because I could hear the bell he wore. It made a dull, hollow: "thunk, thunk." Further along, I could see another...Pal's gray mare. As I moved up slowly, the ponies edged away. I hadn't thought about catching them, imagining that they would be glad to see me, their savior. No such luck! In their reality, I was just another man-creature who wanted to enslave them, make them carry heavy loads over ridiculous terrain. They wanted no part of me.

I found myself several hundred feet below the ridgeline, on a steep slope of deep, unstable snow at an altitude approaching 18,000 feet. To my immediate right lay the buttress and, on top of it, an immense cornice of snow. Now that I was slightly above, I could see deep cracks at the base where the cornice met the hillside. I knew it was only a matter of time before the heat of the sun would split the slab; gravity would take charge, sending tons of snow hurtling toward my camp. Worse yet, in my last move toward her, the Gray had bolted dangerously close to the slab. I would have left her alone, but the other two ponies clustered around. If I was going to retrieve them, I would have to go in that direction. Not knowing quite what to do, I took refuge in my picture taking. The ponies could wait. There was, after all, no sense in chasing them out onto the buttress. Maybe, just maybe, if I quieted myself and sat down on the clump of rock, so inviting just ahead...? I could take a break, have some chocolate, take in the scene and make photographs. Maybe then everything would sort itself out? Insha'Allah!

The late morning sky was clear, but I knew it wouldn't last. As the sun warmed snow-covered peaks, moisture would be drawn upward and new clouds formed. Of greater importance was that to the south, the direction from which the monsoon blew, the sky was clear, promising no more snow at least for that day.

I was high enough to look down on the world, as might those great soaring birds—of my dream. The main nala stretched before me, the dazzling sheen of fresh snow in the intense August sun,

gradually giving way to underlying rock. Great glaciers snaked down from jagged peaks, forming numerous tributary nalas. With the snow, it was easy to recast that time when the entire nala was one long river of ice, a frozen river descending all the way to Darcha and beyond—only the Gods and geologist knew just how far. Although the glaciers and their nurturing peaks were several miles across the nala, the air was so pure, so crystalline. I imagined I could reach out and touch them.

They were certainly close enough so that the 180-mm was sufficient to get details of the features. As I trained this lens on the more prominent peaks, I found myself tracing imaginary routes. This was the almost involuntarily reflex of one who loved to climb, one who would always look up, always look beyond. There must have been at least half dozen challenging peaks, all nameless on my map and most likely never climbed. Foreigners would hardly come all this way to climb such nonentities. The locals would have no reason to climb them.

Up on the mountain there was no worry over names, status, fame, all these abstractions belonging to the alien world below. This was a land where only the immediate, the tangible, held any importance: the next hand-hold, belay; working up the nerve to cross the ice-bound chute that suddenly appears in the way; getting over that crevice looming before you. Essentially, it was testing yourself repeatedly, pushing through a chain of fearful moments, moments when your body froze and your mind fought with ever-dwindling energy to overcome the new horror before you. I realized as I looked through the viewfinder that these peaks offered many of the same problems found on Tirich, Nanda Devi, or K2. The scale might be less, but it only took one misstep, one faulty placement of a piton, and the result would be the same.

When planning back in Kobe, I had no real aspirations for any technical climbing. Despite some mention of an "assault" on Nun, tossed out in a vain attempt to impress Elizabeth, I doubted if I could ever get up to giving it another try. Climbing was suicidal enough for a younger man. At my age, it was almost outright surrender. There were too many opportunities just to let go—too few reasons not to.

Yet now I was here, close enough to feel, taste, smell the challenge, the old bug began to gnaw on me. Just getting to where I rested was no mean feat. After several hours of steep climbing, I still felt strong. If I climbed just a bit further upward and then along the ridge, I would be within a stone's throw of crests equal to those that towered so impressively across the valley. Just keep going up, one goal at a time: first the ridge, then that knob, then.... All I had to do was do it. Forget the consequences. This was my chance. What better way to go!

Instead, I reached in my pocket. Swollen fingers—God, they were getting bigger all the time—fumbled, but finally worked a rather crumpled pre-rolled joint from the depths. Awkwardly, I smoothed it out, debating for a minute whether this was the time and place, but then, as I knew I would, giving in. Again, my swollen hands made it difficult to light, but after several tries, the strong mixture of charas and Goldflake filled my lungs. A wave of dizziness hit me—more from the tobacco, I liked to think, than from the charas. I gulped the thin air. Then slowly my system adjusted. I emerged from the disequilibrium to that place where mind floated free.

I was on top of the world. There was so much below, so much to see. The thought of going even higher became nonsensical. That is what charas did for me, letting me pause from that mad yearning to rush ever forward, pause to enjoy where I was, what I had, and what I had accomplished. No wonder Society frowned on the "herb." In a world predicated on moving upward and onward, of bigger and better, greater and grander, it would be economically unsound for people to be content with what they had. How could you sell travel, if people could travel in their heads? How could you extort excessive labor, if people had no desire for more than they already had? I chuckled to myself. Here was the answer to over-consumption, get everyone stoned. But then I was an old hand. I knew how and when to get high and when to back off.

The reality of the other wasn't long avoided, even here in my lofty aerie. At first it was only a distant thin line, undulating like a black snake up the white expanse of the basin. The charas stimulated my appetite. I nibbled on remnants of chocolate and biscuit, watching as the snake moved parallel to my perch. As the distance

diminished, the gestalt dissolved and the individual components of the "snake" became more apparent. It was the Italian party that had gone back down the night before. One of the dots broke out of line and approached my camp. I focused on the dot. Gul! Although initially the features were indistinct, I could tell from the wolfish gait, then from the hat I had loaned him. Yes, it was Gul.

"What the hell!" I whined to the wind. "Damn him to hell! I told him to go down and get fresh ponies, now he's back, obviously he didn't go down."

Then it dawned on me: if I was going to get out of this mess, I must do it. This jarring thought brought me out of the altitude-charas-incredible scenery-exhaustion induced euphoria.

"Guy, Guy," I mumbled chidingly. "Remember what you're doing here in the first place. The ponies dummy!"

I looked north, where the ponies had last been. They were still there grazing, or at least attempting to graze, through the fresh cover of snow. The Gray had moved almost to the edge of the slab. She kept looking in my direction, or at least it seemed to me she was. Yes, I had to get the ponies down.

They were about 300 yards from me. But the ground in between was steep and, with its fresh snow cover, posed high avalanche risk. It would be better to continue upward to the ridge, follow the spine to a point just above the ponies, then descend. If I could catch the Black, then the others might follow, Insha'Allah. Whatever I did, I must get the Gray away from that cornice.

I started upward. In the stillness, my own sounds dominant. Everything was magnified: the crunch of footsteps as they broke through the thin crust; the heartbeats magnified by charas-induced paranoia. God what if the old pump gives out on me now? I was swept by reflexive fear, quickly replaced by bravado. Hey, this is a bitching day to die, a fucking outstanding spot. As my labored breathing echoed in my head, euphoria welled. I started to think about Mara. If this enigma existed, surely it would be near. I imagined I was looking Mara squarely in the eye, without fear, without doubt, I was ready. Only for what was the question. How would this Mara be?

Almost as quickly as the question was posed, it was answered. Mara hovered before me, bearing the very countenance I had seen in the Darcha tangkha. Perhaps, because my mind was stressed, I resorted, not to my imagination, but memory. That image had seemed improbably cartoonish in the security of Darcha. Now, exposed on this wild, near vertical slope, it was serious, and very, very fearful.

Was it because I believed Mara to be of my mind, part of me, not some other, that caused such fear? Hadn't I traveled far enough to accept other than my own reality? The assumptions of my past, what was possible and impossible, still ruled. Yet change was taking place, for even though most of Mara remained imprisoned in mnemonic plane, there was a part that transcended, taking on life. The eyes! Yes, I will always remember their look; they held sort of an encouraging glimmer, reassuring. I was suddenly aware that there was no need for fear.

Once past the initial shock, there was certain allure in this bizarre apparition. It was the eyes, or more accurately *the* eye, for it was the extra orb that mesmerized me. Time stood still. I had the leisure to ponder what it would be like to have a third eye. I mean how that would affect vision...weird. For a moment I was looking, looking into a world through this strange vision. Life was beginning to reorder, but it was so new, so bizarre, it overloaded my mind.

This thought drew me out of body, out of the labor of the climb. I moved upward with a mechanical precision, slow, methodical steps, right, breathe, left, breathe, plant the ax, breathe, right, breathe, left, breathe.... The apparition drew me on, up, just when I thought I had no more strength, no more heart.

A danger signal went off. Get back! You're out too far!

Just as I was reaching out, just as Mara was about to move from fantasy to being, my mind responded to the warning call. I now looked out onto the world through my own two eyes. I was on top of a knife-like arête, a rocky spine free of snow. I saw what lay in that very next step, the step into Mara's waiting embrace. There was no more up, only below, and to the West, the direction I now headed, was a drop of several thousand feet into white mist. I

staggered, trying to halt the momentum that would carry me into the abyss.

In the slowed, staccato motion of my struggle, I thought I heard a voice calling, "Don't fight Guy, let go, just one more step, just one more." There it was, what I had come for, what I had imagined. It would have been so easy, so clean. But for some reason I couldn't willingly take that step. I regained balance. Mara disappeared.

As I picked my way among the sharp-edged shale, it struck me that I was now really on the razor's edge. What so often before I had applied metaphorically was now a reality. But now wasn't the time for "woolgathering." There had been far too much of that in my life, enough for several lifetimes. Life was here and now, measured by the next several hundred yards where to either side the ridge fell away in steep couloirs. I thanked my luck I didn't have to descend the western side, for it fell almost vertically to what appeared forever. The wind was rising.

Panicking, I grabbed wildly at an outcrop of rock, certain that I was about to be blown off the mountain. I felt the exhaustion squeezing the last energy from my body. But the gap was closing. Soon I would reach the next pinnacle. From there I could descend to the small plateau on the top of the buttress and the grazing ponies. The Black's bell was now distinct; its artless "thunk" joined with the "crunch", "thump", "sigh", that emanated from my movements. I knew, somehow, I had to reach within and find strength.

From the top of the pinnacle I could see the route to the ponies. It was a steep, yet relatively easy stretch down to the place where they grazed. Here the slope was fully exposed, the snow cover rapidly melting under the brilliant late morning sun, baring rock in many places. It would be a simple scramble down to the level of the ponies. The real problem lay immediately below them, for I could also see how perilously close the Gray was to the buttress. Out on the buttress, the snow had piled up in a heavy overhang. The melt from above sent a rush of water downward undercutting the slab, threatening its precarious hold on the rock. Loose shingles, fractured from the bedrock covered the way down. One slip, one small rock smashing down on another, might set off a chain reaction, sending the entire slab hurtling down the steep

cliff to the camp below, the camp from where I could now see Gul frantically waving.

For a moment, I was mesmerized by the power of life and death. Just toss a small stone down in the right place and bye-bye Gul, my son. Then what? Sure, Gul was a pain in the ass, but I would lose more than pain. All my kit, everything left in life, was down there. The charas! The batteries! Funny how I had blocked it all out of mind. That was whatever future I had. But all that seemed so far away, not as measured by time, but by things still to be done to get to a place where future mattered.

"Thunk! Thunk!" The dull, hollow sound of the tin bell forced my mind back to the immediate problem. I traced what seemed the most likely path down to the lead pony. The Gray, sensing my presence, gradually retreated onto the buttress. She was traumatized. There was no way she would willingly surrender to her taskmaster.

Going down was kinder on my lungs; my breath came easier. The legs were another story. Although my mind was determined, my legs had somehow lost connection. The noise of fatigue distorted the signal between brain and limb, and the legs would only partially respond to the brain's command. Slow down, it signaled, but gravity was at work.

I stumbled, then began to free-fall down the slope. Instinctively, I groped for my cameras, trying to shield them from the blows. I cursed myself for that last joint. It left my head reeling and disconnected from the reality my body must still bear. It was one thing to be out of body, yet it didn't mitigate the damage. A broken leg was still broken, no matter where your mind. Eventually, no matter how far my mind soared, it must return to my body...its pain. I had a fleeting vision of Mara, claws outstretched in a welcoming embrace, ready to receive both the Gray and me, forever into a tomb of eternal snow.

The Gray gave out a sound that bordered on a shriek. My tumultuous fall prevented me from seeing what happened next, but I could hear it all. There was a great rumbling noise, then another short scream from what must have been the Gray, answered by nervous whinnies from her mates. A cracking noise,

more rumbling, more cracking. The whole buttress exploded! It seemed as if the entire world had turned upside down.

A fine powder of snow infused the air. I breathed in and almost choked. It was as if I was going to drown in snow. I fought for air; I fought to break my fall as my camera gear swung wildly around me, flailing wildly at both the passing boulders and my body.

I was completely out of control, and for a frozen moment Mara returned. It was an entirely different Mara than on the ridge. In fact, it wasn't an "it" at all but, though still unfocused, distinctly "she." How strange it was that certain things would embed themselves in mind. But when the world has no up or down, when all senses are flooded by the most catastrophic noise, then rationality and logic take flight. The mind must rely on more primordial understandings.

How curious was this Mara? From afar, from that point where it was still a creature of mortal imagination, it appeared horrifying, hideous, the three-eyed monster of innumerable tangkhas. Yet when this shape-changer was physically near, when every atom of my being could sense Mara's presence, I saw not that monstrous "it," but a most comely "she." Perhaps this transformation was because my fate was no longer in my hands. Above, on the ridge, it had been my decision whether to take that final step into the nothingness. Now, I was completely within the grasp of an external force, a force hurtling me down the mountainside. I could look not on, but within, from the perspective of that third eye, and for the first time truly knew Mara. Rather, than beast, I saw the emanation of clarity, a glimpse through the veil of illusion to another side. Yes, this was the unknown lover for which I had prayed to those Gods in distant Kobe. It wasn't Elizabeth they had given, but one of their own. Through the snow, I reached out to see the face of God-sent love.

The shock and dislocation of the fall eased; my mind returned to the physical reality of the mountainside. In what seemed an interminable time, yet must have been over in a moment, mind rejoined body. As communication was reestablished, I found myself in a crumpled heap against an outcrop of rock, cameras tangled about me. I could feel a lens that had been in my vest pocket, knifing into the small of my back. With the well-honed

instincts of the combat photographer, my first concern was for my equipment.

Those worries quickly fled as new sensations cried for my attention. The dust-fine snow still filled the air; the roaring slowly subsided into a faint echo, reverberating in the peaks far to the East. Gingerly my brain began to send out signals through my nervous system. God, I'm in for it, I thought. I'm not going to get away easily in this one. Something is going to be broken for sure.

Electrical charges surged through synapses. Surprisingly, the return signals told me that, although badly shaken, my extremities were in working order. I could straighten out my legs, my arms, even wiggle my swollen fingers. All was well.

More important at that moment were my sensory organs. My hearing was fine, maybe too acute for the sound of heavy breathing almost overwhelmed me. This sound was accompanied by a "thunk, thunk" that in my confusion I first took to be my beating heart. My eyes fogged over, my first thought it was the fog of snow. Then I realized I had lost my goggles. Squinting, I could focus through the blinding glare and saw the "thunk, thunk" didn't come from my heart, but from a source directly above me. It was the Black's bell. He stood straddling me, frozen to the spot. As my field of vision deepened, I saw the pony's eyes bulging in terror. And with the deepening field, came an understanding of why the pony stood so still, why terror gripped him.

The place where I now found myself was at the very edge of the buttress. The snow-slabbed cornice that threatened the camp—the one I feared the Gray would stumble into, the one that had so recently rested on this outcrop of rock—was gone. Now, only the swirling updraft of fine powdered snow showed it had ever existed.

Enough of my wits remained to realize this was the time to grab the pony. Although I had no real idea of the extent of what had happened, I would still need the pony. It was to get the ponies that I had come to this precipice.

Around the pony's neck was a short length of rope. Its end dangled right above me. All I have to do is slowly reach up and grab it.

I felt movement in my arm, but wondered if I could control it. For a moment or two I fought a mental battle. I was afraid a false move would spook the Black, possibly causing him to pitch over the side of the buttress into what I didn't know. But I had to go for it.

"Slowly, slowly," I cooed to the Black. "Good pony, just be still a moment more, and Guy will get you out of here. Just be cool, there, there"

I felt the strangely foreign feel of those clumsy, inflated fingers as they grasped the rough cord. Could that really be my hand. The pony gave a slight reflexive lurch of resistance; then, as if remembering the fix he was in, resigned himself to human control. Using the cord, I worked my body into an upright position and looked over the edge of the buttress.

The sight was awesome. I knew the camp was directly below, but at first I couldn't see it for the snow cloud filling the air. Then slowly, as the snow began to settle, I began to orient myself through landmarks on the valley floor. Where the camp had been when I came up that morning was now one huge race of churned snow and rock. The snow carried all the way past the camp and into the river another hundred yards below. I could see the wreckage of gear caught in the rocks downstream. Then I remembered. The last thing I saw before falling was Gul striding up to the camp.

Without quite realizing how, I found myself plunging through the deep snow. With every step, I sank to my thighs. I clutched the pony's lead. Miraculously, the traumatized pony could follow. Not wanting to be left behind, the yearling had little choice but to trail after him. Occasionally, either the pony or I would stumble, but soon we reached the lower stretch of the hillside, almost to the basin itself, where the slope wasn't so steep and the snow soft and clinging.

Gradually, I was coming back. Control of my being passed from that most venerable guardian rooted in what the Hindus call *sat*, the one existence, the will to survive, lurking in the depths of all living things. A bit at a time, Guy the rational, romantic reemerged. This was the atomized creature of *asat*, rooted in illusion of the plural existence, of free will, a world of Maya.

"DADEE! DADEE SAHIB!"

KALAGIYA

I heard the cry and instantly recognized it could come from no other than Gul. For a moment, I was unsure whether to thank the Gods or curse them. Gul was such a hassle.

Luckily for Gul, the avalanche started at such a height, he had time to get to the edge of the fall zone. Just before, Gul had been following my progress towards the ponies. At first, he thought, what fun to watch this Angrez make a fool of himself.

"Insha'Allah, in a lakh of years that fucker will never catch the pony," might have run his thought. "Soon he'll be down here whining for me to get them."

As Gul watched my struggle, he suddenly had a premonition of what was about to happen. As a child of the mountains, he knew almost instinctively how to read the sights and sounds heralding trouble. As I approached the ponies, he saw that the Gray was edging away, heading right for the overhanging cornice. He realized if she toppled the cornice, it would come down and with it the whole mountainside, "Y'ALLAH! RIGHT DOWN ON TOP OF ME!" All smugness vanished. He heard the telltale sounds: first the slight cracking noise, followed by a low rumbling. By the time the big reverberating booms began, he was moving away, moving fast. It was fortunate the avalanche track was well defined, so well defined that Gul felt rather foolish for allowing the camp to be pitched in its path. "But that's where Dadee-fucker wanted it, so who could to argue with that crazy son of a sow. All he seems to care about is the view. Well, I wonder how he likes it now?"

As Gul scampered out of the way, he had visions of me sitting above, clicking away as he scurried for safety. "Insha'Allah, I will live to see those pictures," thought Gul as the crystalline cloud enveloped him.

It was sometime later, what seemed to Gul an eternity, when he managed to dig himself out. He was fortunate he had a head start. As he climbed onto the newly formed surface and looked back at where the camp had been, he saw only the jumble of snow and ice. His first thought was what had happened to me. Although he had no love, I wasn't only his current meal ticket, but his future freedom from Inspector Singh.

"Hadn't that fucker promised to let me off the hook if I could deliver this Angrez. What if my ticket to freedom is now dead? Is it the same?"

Gul didn't think so. Singh, and those he worked for, wanted live ones to show the American DEA they were doing their job. It didn't hurt that they were American, as long as they were little fish like me—those DEA were from another world; they would feel no kinship. Besides, busting an American would prove to the DEA that it was their people who were the problem. Yes, that was the only way they could get their foolish government to release the promised funds—body count. But dead bodies from the mountains were no good. They needed to be alive and reeking of smuggled charas.

As unsettling as this possibility might be, an even worse prospect struck Gul. "What if Dadee is dead, but buried under the tons of snow? Singh won't believe me. He'll think for sure I cut a deal with Dadee." It was at this point Gul started to call out—hesitantly at first, for he was afraid of bringing down another avalanche from above. He knew it might take some time, and though his call grew louder and more assured, he husbanded his energy, sending out measured signals like a foghorn.

"Dadee, Dadee Sahib!"

A series of weakening echoes answered his call:

"Dadee, Dadee Sahib!"

"Dadee, Dadee Sahib!"

"Dadee, Dadee Sahib!"

Eventually his strength faltered. Too much charas, too much sherab, he had no more breath with which to call. The noises of the valley returned: the wind, the stream, and the sound of his breathing, his heart, and that of the blood as it passed by his brain. He fought back the urge to retreat down the mountain, all the way to the warmth and comfort of the Darcha dhabas. What he wouldn't give for a hot cup of chai, not to mention a deep draw on a bottle of Black Dog.

He still had plenty of the rupees I had given him for expenses. Singh couldn't blame him for what was surely an act of God. Even

in these troubled times, soon another fly would enter his web. The main thing was to survive.

"God, I'm cold. Lying in all that snow put the cold deep into my bones. If only I had some of those fancy feather-filled clothes to protect me like Dadee. That damned ferenghi looks like a pillow when he's all dressed up. Yes," he chuckled to himself, "a soft warm pillow."

The thought struck him that maybe he should keep looking. If I was dead, he could take the clothes. No one would fault him; after all, I would be dead, and he needed to survive.

"But could I wear a dead man's clothes?"

He wondered if that wasn't haram. Although not particularly religious, Gul was ultimately a believer. When he died, he didn't want to risk that there might be a God to whom he must account. *Jahannam*, the hell he had learned of as a boy from the village mullah, was a nasty place. No, *Jannah*, the other place where virtuous believers went, that was more his style. He shivered at the thought of the *houri*, those promised women—maybe even better than he had imagined the two Italians would be—they would be his reward. The thought of spending eternity under the tender ministrations of such beauties had led him on occasion to ponder joining the *mujahedin*. Admittedly, this occurred only when he was stoned and for the briefest of time. But that was foolishness. This was different; he wanted those nice down clothes, but he didn't want to spend an eternity in *Jahannam* to pay for them. It was in times like this he wished he had listened more closely to the mullah.

Again, he called out: "Dadee, Dadee Sahib!"

This time there was a response. There would be no need to puzzle over the question of wearing the clothes of the dead; I was alive and returning his call from somewhere above. Following the sound of my voice, Gul soon spotted me. Though the snow-clouded air, his sharp, *tout's* eyes picked out my lurching progress down the mountain. He must have been surprised to see I had brought down the remaining ponies. I waved, signaling I wanted him to come up and help.

"Bismillah," Gul invoked the blessing of Allah as he started upward. Then thinking better of it, "I'll wait here till he gets down, might as well save my energy."

Now he knew I was alive, he needed time to make his next move. There were still many problems. A big one was the charas. It had been out of sight and mind for more than a week. There had been so much to deal with once we were underway, there was little time to think about it, there was also no need. All Gul had to do was get my saman and me to Kashmir and off on a plane. The rest would take care of itself. One call to Singh in Delhi and then that big international INTERPOL/DEA machine would lock on target. Eventually, at their discretion, I would face the consequences.

Gul imagined that it was like being a *drin*. "What was it Dadee called these creatures in his ugly Angrezi tongue, "mar mot"...something like that? These small, reddish-gold animals inhabited in the high valleys under the glaciers, living in tunnel colonies, making piercing screeches in times of danger. Drin could go about their lives as they pleased, except when they caught the eye of some hunter, hawk, eagle, wolf, leopard, or man. Then it would be only a matter of time until the drin were caught.

"Men like Dadee could carry on their trade, make a dozen runs without a hitch. But sooner or later, they will come under the eye of their own hunter, a Singh, or some other agent of the powers their actions challenge. Then, though they run, twist, or hide, it will be only a matter of time, for their kismet is inescapably cast. The hunter won't relent until the hunted is caught. Nothing personal, it's just the way of the world, a living to be made, the strong preying on the weak. How could this foolish Angrez think to make it on his own? No, one needs powerful friends to survive. Singh has power, or at least he serves those who have power. If I am connected, do my bit, then this power will be mine too."

When I came level with the floor of the basin, the adrenaline which had carried me through the morning, suddenly hit empty. It was all I could do to reach the place where Gul squatted. I was so drained, I didn't even notice Gul's reluctance to help with the ponies. All I wanted was to crawl into my tent, into the warmth of my bag, and sleep. But there was no tent, no bag, nothing for that matter. As tired as I was, my mind still worked.

"Motherfuck!" I said to no one in particular, except perhaps to some God somewhere who had brought me this misfortune. I would have liked to think it was undeserved, but down deep I knew it was. I was sure the journey was now over, despite all that planning and preparation. I caught a brief glimpse of myself straining on Rokko. The Japanese tourist who laughed from their chandelier-bedecked coaches had been right. What a fool I had been to try to turn back the clock, to get back to a time that had never been. Now everything was gone or, at least, buried under unknown tons of snow. How could I go forward without food, shelter, and—with an especially sickening realization—money? I had a few rupees, but the bulk of my currency, both local and dollars had been "safely stashed away." Up in the mountains there was nothing to buy, so no reason to carry your nest egg, at least I had thought so until then.

I stood there in quiet shock. I remember thinking, God, why couldn't I have gone over the edge with the Gray. It wouldn't have hurt much—too quick, the shock would have stunned me, even if I continued to live a bit. Now what am I going to do?

* * *

In the past, I could have somehow gotten to civilization and then called Mei. She would have solved my problem; like that the time in Pakistan when Morgan, quite literally, had screwed up. Why I had been such a fool to let him carry the stash, I will never know. Damn him! Damn me! I knew his proclivity. I had seen it up close and personal, the week before when I walked into his ménage à trois. That was a big reason why he liked Pakistan; they reminded him of the Mexican boys and his youthful forays across the border. Besides they were so submissive, so compliant for the right price—which in Pakistan was so little. All he wanted was get his cock up some brown asshole—that "bit o the brown." So hot to trot, he kept those two boys in his room for over a week. Oh, he fucked them all right, but then they fucked him.

Maybe it was still the shock at work but somehow the image of Morgan's once handsome, ever-so-Aryan face, ravaged by all sorts of vice imaginable, came into my mind. Well old boy! I haven't

thought about you for some time. Those boys made him pay the price, almost five grand—two-fifty per asshole. Too bad it was before AIDS. Now that would have been fitting! It was one of the troubles with the business; I couldn't be too picky about crimies. A rare bird it was who had personal integrity yet, at the same time, a willingness to break the law. It wouldn't have been so bad, if it was Morgan's money, hell I have paid for a bit of ass in my time, albeit the female flavor. The money wasn't Morgan's, it was for our score, fronted by investors who, in turn, held Mei as collateral.

That time seemed so long ago, so desperate. The three of us, Mei, Morgan, and I had moved to Tucson where Morgan grew up—in the loosest sense of that term. He had many contacts and said the pickings would be easy. Tucson was still relatively small, and those in the "scene" were willing to pay premium prices.

"Desperadoes waiting for a train."

To nowhere, I now realized, although at the time we thought we were going somewhere, our minds filled with things, places, and people that we would like to have or be.

Morgan fucked up, fucked up big time! Then I had to call Mei and ask for another five grand. I have always wondered how she persuaded those peckerwood dealers to come up with the extra loot. They were just some redneck longhairs, "dudes," more into speed than hash, but anything for a buck. These boys mostly worked construction and had pooled enough for us to trip in the style we were accustomed. They were an unknown quantity, a new breed coming into the business that, at least in my experience, middle class college-types dominated, even if we were the dregs of the class. Morgan, a prime example of such dregs, had—I was later to learn—quite literally penetrated this more rough and ready world in his hunts for sexual partners—the rougher and tougher his conquest, the greater the thrill. I hadn't yet totally escaped the illusions of class superiority to which I had been raised, which was quite ironic, for I was certainly by then a member of the very underclass I was taught to scorn. Though I had no qualms about taking money from these people, I tried, as best I could in that narrow circle, to have as little contact as possible. This was Morgan's world and his responsibility. I was the importer, Morgan the distributor. There was plenty of potential

profit there. It would have been difficult for those boys, used to paying fifteen hundred a pound, to believe we had copped at ten bucks per kilo. It was sweet. They put up five grand; I was planning to score five hundred kilos for five thousand and pay them in weight, ten pounds that is. I thought of it as a nice paid vacation.

Had I know those investors better, I would never have taken their money. Certainly, I wouldn't have left Mei behind. But that was Morgan department. I still trusted him, perhaps because I thought there was no other choice. These lads were fresh from Nam, and all that violence lay just below the surface. They were making money, giving them the feel of power, not real power, but the power to buy things like bikes and pick-up trucks, to score women, to be the big man on the block. Greed quickly turned these bumpkins into budding gangsters, for they were prepared to do what it took to hold on to what they had won. Power went to their heads and things became personal. The paranoia, always the outlaw's companion, haunted them. They weren't used to it, and that tended to get them crazy.

Mei now had to report to these wannabe gangsters: "There's a problem. If you don't want to lose your investment, then you'll have to front another five grand."

They weren't so philosophical. Five thousand in those days was significant bread. They had made plans, dreamed dreams, and were prepared to see them through despite the costs. Mei put her life on the line. They taunted her with what would happen if I didn't return with the goods. Young and beautiful, it wasn't hard to believe they would have gotten almost as much pleasure out of her as they would from the dope. After all, she was Asian, and those lads had a lot of hostility yet to work out. Later she told me that they had started off politely enough. Maybe, they couldn't quite believe there was a snafu. Maybe, they thought, we went to some sort of doper mall to score? When they could no longer hide in denial, things began to get ugly. All that pent-up rage came bubbling out. There had been a meeting between Mei and two representatives of the "investors"; they had names like Bo and Chuck or some such good old boy monikers. Little Mei faced two blond, beefy, long hairs, muscles bulging from a mixture of steroids, speed, and construction.

"If we give you this second five, it's on you, personal," said Bo still trying to keep it polite.

"No problem," replied Mei. "Guy's always good for his word."

Then the other, less friendly desperado broke in, this time no holds barred. We don't give a rat's ass about your old man. It's your ass that's on the line. Got my drift...bitch." He was getting nasty, and it excited him.

"Hey, you don't have to talk that way. This is business. You'll get your stuff...like Guy promised."

The two were now drawing closer. There was an increasing tension, sexual, but sexual as in aggression, not love. By some prearranged plan—television was, after all, a great part of their experience—they drew on some cop show, giving her the good guy/bad guy routine,

"Hey Bo, she just doesn't get it does she," complained Chuck, the bad guy. "Fuckin gooks can't understand plain American."

Bo still held himself in, trying to maintain the good guy role. "Back off Chuck! Look Mei, the deal's...if your old man don't come through, you owe. One way or other, you make good."

Chuck got this strange, faraway look on his face, like he was seeing something that was getting him real excited. There was no holding him back.

"Yeah, yo bet your sweet ass, yo'll have to work it off. There's only one way a slope bitch can, and I don't mean doin' laundry. Yo're going to work it off...a slant cunt like you...fuckin and suckin ain't much like work...yo better believe yo're goin' to sweat every dime! Yo ever here bout round the world? Sure yo did, that's one of yo slope's favorite tricks...just like the hoes in Cholon. Well, yo're going to be a fucking satellite, I mean, like yo're going to spin aroun' goddamn world." Here he grabbed his crotch and pointed with an obscene grin. "Here's that world bitch, yo goin' to know it real well, this and the whole line that's behind it. After that there won't be much left of yo sweet ass, not after all the boys get through workin' it. There will be only one place for yo!"

"Shut up Chuck! No need to be rude!" Bo's eyes suddenly steeled. "But you know Mei, he's right. This is on you. I can't hold the boys back if your old man doesn't come through. You'll get another goddamned five, but there's gotta be payback...guaranteed...like Chuck says...by your...ass, if nothing else. Maybe you think we're just a bunch of rednecks. Maybe you think you can come here and rip us off. But out here we've our own protection." He pointed through the picture window to the wasteland that stretched to the horizon. "Miles and miles of it!"

It was easy to disappear in the desert. Many a dealer gone wrong ended there. Alone, far from friends and family, weeks might pass before anyone missed her. She was frightened as hell, but she toughed it out. She could have split back to her own world, yet all she thought of was that I was in trouble and she had to get me out.

She was right! We were in a shit load of trouble. My Pathan supplier, Akbar, was the same Kandahar hotel owner who had smuggled us out of Afghanistan several years before. I'd already sent him a coded order. He and his one-eyed bodyguard, Iqbal, were somewhere on route. I could have made the trip myself except I was definitely non grata in Afghanistan. I wasn't about to risk falling into the hands of the authorities. My escape had been a personal affront—Afghans tend to take things personally and they have exceptionally long memories, a fact to which both the British and Russians can attest. I knew that if they ever got their hands on me, I could kiss my ass good-bye.

Akbar, our friendship aside, wouldn't have been pleased to make that dangerous trip only to have me say "so sorry, my partner got ripped off by two boys he was fucking." I could imagine Iqbal's grinning face as he drew his dagger across my throat. "Nothing personal, but business is business." Well, that is probably an exaggeration, but it would have been awkward.

Not that they would have any qualms about Morgan's sexual proclivities that would have been quite normal. But to be ripped off by mere boys and Baluch boys at that. After all, they had to bring the weight from Kandahar in Afghanistan, a rugged journey of over five hundred miles. Smuggling it across the Afghan-Pakistani border was a piece of cake—tribal land where a Pathan could freely pass. The trip by train from Quetta was another story.

There, they were in the domain of the police who would have loved nothing better than to catch this affluent Afghan khan with his highly incriminating stash. Though a man of substance in his own world, he was a chicken waiting to be plucked by the Punjabi overlords of the Pakistani CID. This, I suppose, was poetic justice since the Punjabis had suffered no small injury from Akbar's warrior forebears. The ransom they would have claimed was only a small payback compared to the ravages of Akbar's people on the Punjabis. In the East, collective memory is long, sustained generation after generation in the tribalized consciousness of its people.

The money arrived just about the same time as the Pathans, so all was saved. We scored and got the load back to Tucson. I paid off the boys, and Mei was spared the ravages of their revenge. That had been in the beginning of my life with Mei. My trust in her grew as the years went by, and she continued to come through, no matter what. At least until the thing with Tara. I knew I could still trust Mei, even though she no longer trusted me. I just couldn't bring myself to ask of her what I had failed to do—come through in the clutch.

* * *

Our eyes met. Gul wanted to look away, suddenly overcome by a mixture of anger and guilt. His anger was reaching a fever pitch, long fueled by hurts, real and imagined, at the hands of ferenghis like me.

"Now this crazy Angrez has almost killed me." Only a thin shield of guilt kept him from letting go, venting his rage on this icon of all that was unjust.

"That fucker Khomeni was right about one thing, these kafirs are the 'Great Sheytan'."

"Yes," he thought, "this particular Sheytan should be destroyed." But in his heart, he suspected he too was of Sheytan, and that, if he died at the Angrez hand, it would be an act of justice, recompense for his own deceit.

"What will this Angrez do? His situation is desperate. Will he strike out? Insha'Allah, I can take him. After all, he could be my father. But this Dadee is still fit and bigger than me. Better to placate the son of a bitch. Insha'Allah, I will get my revenge. Just bide my time and like *murgh tandoori*, better when cool."

"Dad, shabash, shabash, you catch ponies," Gul hoped that this would break the ice.

"Ah Gul you're back. I almost got you didn't I. Maybe I will have better luck next time, tik old man?"

Gul glared back, resentment flooding his eyes. I tend towards irony in times of stress, a subtlety that often doesn't translate. The thin wall of guilt controlling Gul's anger snapped. This coincided with an almost equal flood of resentment in my own mind. Simultaneously, waves of hate swept over us, sending us crashing into one another.

"Don't look at me that way you son of a bitch."

"Why not Sahib Kiss My Ass, you more man than me?"

Blame it on the altitude, on the shock from our near meeting with death, on the seeming hopelessness situation we now found ourselves. Gul's right hand went out and grabbed me by the down padding of my parka. I could read the blatant message in his eyes: "I'll pluck you just like the chicken you are. I know you ferenghis, I saw what kind of man you are last night."

But whatever Gul thought of foreigners, he was soon to find that it is dangerous to stereotype. I wasn't about to be intimidated. As tired and drained of energy as I was, Gul's assault renewed my adrenaline. Almost reflexively, I raised the ice ax. With a deft upward motion, I smashed it with all my remaining strength into the offending arm. Gul howled with pain and swung with his own right fist, landing a blow on my chin. Luckily for me, my beard and thick wool balaclava buffered the blow, but my body was cold and stiff and it stung. I struck back, dropping the ax and catching Gul full in the face with my fist. My hand, blown up like a boxing glove from the edema, encased in a thick mitten, could do only limited damage. The cameras were swinging wildly, hampering my effectiveness as I attempted to press home the attack. It was

almost as if I had two opponents, Gul and the cameras, both punishing my body. Then, after a brief exchange of blows, each one scoring with decreasing effect, we collapsed breathlessly on the snow.

The storm of hate, so quickly upon us, vanished. We were both hurting but, fortunately, only a little. Gul had a bloodied nose. I had a sprained left hand. We both lacked the strength to do any real damage. The clothing we wore to ward off the cold protected us from each other.

I recovered my senses first. I was overwhelmed by what had just taken place, for I had worked hard to make myself a man of peace. Sure, I had quite a temper. In my youth, it had been a real problem. Yet over the years, I mellowed, and it had been a long time, longer than I could remember, since I was in a fighting rage like this. Even in Nam, I had remained the passive observer—at least as much as it was possible to be passive and remain alive.

"Hey man want a joint?"

From Gul came a groan I interpreted as affirmative. From my vest, I pulled a crumpled joint, the last of several I had rolled before setting out that morning. After reshaping the limp number, I lit up and took a deep drag. I hoped the high would push away the ache that flooded my body.

"Here you go my son," I tried to make my voice as solicitous as possible. This wasn't hard as the first wave of charas immediately washed away the hostility. "You okay Gul?"

"Insha'Allah, I am still alive Dadee Sahib," Gul emphasized the last words to convey his own lingering irritation, but he too must have felt the anger seeping away as the smoke filled his lungs.

"Looks like we wiped out down here. I got the ponies or at least two of them...the gray must be a goner, but now we don't have much to carry."

"No Dad, not much. I dig where camp was. Snow very deep. Insha'Allah, we find saman."

KALAGIYA

Gul had no intention of doing any real digging, but he had learned long ago to how to keep Sahibs happy—just tell them what they want to hear.

"I guess they will be enough to get us back to Darcha. Were you able to get more ponies? Did you see those fuckers?" I was thinking of those faithless Zanskaris.

"Trail kherab Dad, much rain, big landslide, I not go down."

There was a puzzled look on his face. He was trying to figure out whether he should tell me how he had spent the night. Later I would get pieces of the story, but right then he didn't think it wise.

Anyway, it hadn't turned out anything like he had imagined. Instead of the embrace of those two Italian beauties alone, he had a dozen tourists, young and old. Most of their worldly possessions had gone ahead and were, by that time, somewhere over the pass. Their only shelter was a large, floorless dining tent and the odd bits of food they carried as snacks. Of course, they were lucky to have that; as Gul well knew, it was enough to insure their survival. However, the tourists were less optimistic. All night they huddled together for warmth convinced they wouldn't see the morning. The men wept as much as the women. What a scene! Gul pretended sympathy and struck a heroic pose as their protector and comforter—he might have a chance later with the beauties.

Denied the opportunity to satiate his lust, he tried to partially placate it with some opportune groping. "Come closer, we keep warm." As he let his hand play across a firm breast or a lush thigh, he could feel flesh responding, breath growing heavy. His being transformed into an organ of stimulus and response. He knew what they wanted. Even in the darkened tent, even with the heavy pall of fear so dominant in the others, he could feel the girls' desire, smell it. Or at least he thought he could.

"Foreign women were so easy, so shameless. They probably would give him what I want right here in front of their comrades.

"Just a little movement of my wrist, down with the zipper of the jeans, ease them and whatever lies beneath them—if there is anything at all, so shameless are these ferenghi—then on my lap, spreading out those soft, plump cheeks. They want me...wet and

inviting...yes, they drip with desire. How easy it would be to drive my manhood into such desire...yes, first one and then the other. I'm a Kashmiri, at my peak...one, two, the whole tent. I could do them all and more than once too."

This momentary flight of bravado came to an abrupt halt; the increasing wails, and not from desire, brought him crashing back to reality. He was in a crowded tent filled with terrified people in the grip of a high Himalayan storm. He knew that his fantasies would lead nowhere, at least for that night. Besides, the actual doing of such a private act in public was too much. He was tired anyway and needed rest.

Lust, set aside, was replaced by feelings of resentment. Inside, he despised these weak, city-bred foreigners. He knew that back in civilization, on the streets of Delhi, they would dismiss him with a wave. Now they were caught without the protection their money bought, true characters were revealed.

"Oh, it is to be expected from the women—even though a good village woman wouldn't behave in such a cowardly way—but, the men?"

"Trail kherab! Very bad Dad! Fall into the river. It much time taking coolies make new trail."

Even though I knew it was a stupid question, I had to ask: "How long is 'much time' Gul?"

"Maybe several days, maybe several weeks, only Allah knows. Men come from Darcha find trail broken. They tell local road superintendent and then coming coolies. Now too late in season! Insha'Allah, wait until next summer. Road closes soon anyhow. Maybe they say now close."

"Now we're really between the fucking cliff and the tiger," I replied. "We can't go back. If we go forward, how long before we'll find food or shelter?"

I tried to think back to the stages listed in the guide. Maybe it was two days to the first village where we might buy some food. But the onset of winter was near. People living in these remote hamlets, where food was scarce, would be reluctant to part with any, even for the most exorbitant price, especially if they heard that the way

to Darcha was now blocked. What could they do with rupees when the bazaar was so far away, when the snow was too deep for even the yaks, and the temperature sank to polar levels?

"What the fuck, we don't have a choice anyway," I continued, half to Gul, half to myself. "The only course is to move out, hightail it over the pass, and get down into the Zanskar valley where it'll be warm and dry."

Now that I had taken my fate firmly in hand, I felt invigorated; another layer of polluting civilization stripped away; another layer of Maya revealed. Like it or not, I was getting down, down to the bare necessities of existence. In this way, I could really feel the land, learn the life, be—or at least in the warmth of the midday sun it seemed this way. The warmth wouldn't last. We still had to go up the nala, higher to the top of the pass where snow and ice was eternal, where the wind blew hard and cold. I could only hope—yes, Insha'Allah—that we had at least the essentials. I was prepared to charge off up the nala, ready to trust Fate, Allah, Buddha, Shiva, or any other Celestial who might come to my aid. Gul wasn't as willing to write-off so much wealth without poking around in the snow a bit or, at least, organizing me to do it. There was too much there that would be useful. First in his mind was finding that big burlap rice bag with its charas stash.

I walked down toward the stream. As I scanned the rubble of the avalanche, out of the corner of my eye, I caught the sight of something red barely peeking out from beneath the snow. Immediately, I recognized the large red duffel, holding my clothes, sleeping bag, tent, and the most essential cash reserves. I pointed excitedly at the spot of red. Reprieve! I wasn't totally finished. With the clothes and cash, we could go on. After all, hadn't I met travelers without tent or sleeping bag? Many of the locals traveled this route, and they had only the clothes on their backs.

Just about the same time, Gul started wildly waving. At first, he also seemed to be celebrating the discovery of the duffel, for there was no other apparent reason for such bizarre behavior. Then I heard a faint "Namaste."

"Hey Gul, who's that?" I trusted Gul's keener senses, if he reported them accurately, which of course wasn't a given.

"I think Ravi. Small like Ravi, and...ji...Ravi! I see hat he wears, the one I give." Ravi was wearing a red and white "Steinlager" hat that Gul had bequeathed him.

"Damn it!" I muttered to myself. "It's Ravi back for his pony. Soon we'll be back to where we were before the storm—all that shit, all these assholes."

I was just beginning to get behind that feeling of liberation and now.... "Oh well, it's not yet time. I still have that business to finish in Kashmir. Anyway, we can use the extra hands to dig for the saman."

Hours later, with Ravi's help and Gul's encouragement, not only the red bag, but numerous other bits and pieces, including the sack with the rice, were salvaged. There was enough to load up both ponies and then some. The old frame pack I had brought for just such an emergency could handle the extra load. By this time, the sun had already set behind the same ridgeline I had scaled earlier in the day. Even though there would be several hours of twilight, no one was eager to set off for the pass.

For once I was thankful for their "unhurried" approach to travel. The climb, not to mention the scuffle with Gul, had further eroded my already reduced energy. The joint I shared with Gul, followed by the discovery of the saman, gave me a shot of adrenaline that, real or imagined, pushed back my fatigue, but only for a short time. The rescued equipment was neatly stored. An overly solicitous Ravi prepared my tent. I was apparently back in good graces for having saved his remaining pony. All I had to do was to crawl in my bag and bring closure to what had been an eventful day. Outside, I heard the comfortable sound of the rattling of Gul's cooking gear, the stove being pumped, then its hiss as it began its work. As he cooked, Gul gently berated Ravi, trying to get him to do work that should have been his own. Despite all that happened, we had survived. True, I had lost much, but life could go on without it. Later, I might have cause for regret, but for the moment I would enjoy. Life was returning to normal, the routine of the trail returning. Tomorrow we would be underway and, Insha'Allah, we would make camp under the clear Zanskari sky.

KALAGIYA

That night, exhausted as I was, I slept fitfully. My overtaxed muscles made deep sleep difficult and, more than once, I awoke from fitful dreams. Though many of those dreams were lost on waking, I did remember a face that seemed to be with me throughout the night.

It's the face of another, yet at the same time, a face from which I see the world and, in turn, myself. I think I'm waking, only to find that it's as if I'm not waking at all. I'm still inside the tent, but not alone. Across from me is a gaunt, dark bearded sadhu. I know him to be a sadhu by his dress and ascetic demeanor. At first I think it must be Rajendra, but with some surprise I find myself calling out to this specter an unknown name, "Devara." Who is he? Where is he? But these questions remain unanswered.

I struggle to gain some sense of reality, to put, as it were, my feet on firm ground. As I stare, I want to make out the face of Rajendra, I want to will it. But as I look into the dark face, under the white ash painted lines, my desire loses all importance. Deep sockets, mask specter's eyes, casting them into dark caves, caves with no bottom or end. These subterranean passages draw forth my energy, as if the force behind them knows just how to play on my spirit. On entering, I look even deeper into the dim, cobwebbed distance, into the future. I'm back in the web-world again. I'd thought it was past, that it was below, but I've been cheated. My soul remains caught in a spidery maze, endlessly twisting and turning to escape. As I break free from one passage, it's only to stumble into another, with more webs waiting to ensnare. Somewhere out there, unseen, but intuitively known, is that spider spinning, eternally spinning the confining strands. Escape is hopeless; this I know. Yet all the same, I struggle forward, compelled by some inherent need to regain the light I believe I'd known—believe lies...just beyond.

Chapter XIII

Mi-rtag-pa sdug-bsnal-ba, bdag-med-ba.

(All is transitory, painful, unreal)

—Tibetan Buddhist saying—

DEPTHS

Light exploded! The world spun. I struggled to grab the brass ring of consciousness, hovering just beyond reach. Eventually I caught it. I was still in my tent, but Gul called, not some prescient specter of Devara. Sun streamed from the tent opening over Gul's crouching form. Wolfishly grinning—"are you fat enough yet for the kill...oh burra Sahib!"—he handed me the steaming tumbler which, as usual, burned my hands.

Damn! Was I dreaming about the storm, the climb, the avalanche? It was as if nothing had happened. Yet as I gazed past Gul and focused on what lay beyond, I saw the avalanche rubble—snow, rock, and ice. I knew it was no dream.

"Dadee, salaam, salaam, take chai? So sorry, kofi no find! I make paratha for you soon...how many you *need*?"

Suddenly I realized I was ravenous, and answered, "As many as you can make my son."

"No problem Dad. I not wanting make too much...waste atta not good. I find atta bag, all dal, and most other food, but we must go very far. And so sorry, peanuts ghee gone, honey gone, biscuit and chocolate all gone, also box with medicine. No problem! We having all important things, all a Kashmiri need for mountains. You now real Kashmiri Dad, live like Kashmiri. Eat only simple food, best for mountains. Insha'Allah everything thik, but getting late, almost eight, we go soon. I make you four paratha. You not need more Dad!"

The words came spilling out, the oily solicitousness, missing for some days, back in place. Obviously, Gul was in a good mood. The news for me wasn't so joyful. Although all the most necessary

foodstuffs had been recovered, those goodies that made life worthwhile seemed to be lost. Particularly scary was the loss of my medicine chest containing, not only the iodine, Cipro, Valium, morphine, and other emergency supplies, but the vitamins.... How could I live without them? Paranoia took hold as I pondered just why only those things, which I alone used, were lost. Then I got hold of my senses, realizing this was just the luck of the draw. If planned, it wasn't by Gul, but by a much higher someone.

Sensing my worry, Gul tried to reassure me, "Oh, Dadee, things not bad! Bismillah! I find big sack with chaval. Rice Dad! With it is...you know Dad, shit. Roll down to stream, almost fall in. Some of chaval wet, I dry out when we get to other side. Most important, charas is thik Dad, very strong, I wrap very good. If keep shit, you do business you come here for. Ji?"

The importance Gul placed on the charas surprised me. Not that it was unimportant. But that was my life, what is it to Gul? Certainly, he had made his cut when we scored. Besides, if I lost that load, he might have the chance to score again and make his cut twice over.

Before I could work it out, Gul interrupted with further news. "Silver cases, no find Dad. Too deep, too much snow. Much looking, but no find. Lucky you carry most of picture making things. Others you not need. I watch. You never use. Other case, the one with flash lights, you open only once, in Manali. I think maybe Allah help us. Lighten load for pass. Finish things not needing."

Would Gul have been so sure, if he knew how important this case was to my plan? I still had charas, but no way to carry it.

It was almost as if Gul was following my thoughts. "Not to worry Dadee! Many Angrez come for business in Kashmir. Kashmiris have many tricks to hide smuggling things, sometimes in paper maché, sometimes in woodcarving. Kashmiris very smart in business. No problem! We taking much care in Srinagar."

Fuck! I was set back to the beginning, when I had to put the shit in the bottom of a suitcase. That might have flown twenty years ago. But not now, when the well-trained nose of Princess, Rex, or Fido—as in everything else, the Man had little imagination naming his dogs—lay waiting by the luggage carousel at LAX.

KALAGIYA

There was much to ponder. I struggled to put out of mind those pictures in the Osaka Airport, of the unlucky trafficker with drugs strapped to his waist. It was time to go. We had a window of clear weather. I wanted to get up and over before that window closed.

Activity helped clear my mind. I would worry about tomorrow, tomorrow. It was enough just getting through the day. I had to pack or, at least, make sure things were organized. Soon I would be back on track; my recent meeting with Mara more dream than real. Ahead, I might have to confront that dream again, for the moment there was only the pass.

But if the pass loomed large in my mind, the actual doing was otherwise. Compared to the climb the day before, the trip to the top was no sweat. This was often the case on these treks. Featured events like this pass weren't the most difficult part. The real difficulties came in unplanned side excursions or in those moments of unanticipated exposure when natural forces came into play. If I had thought about it, I would have realized this would be the case on the Shingo. Although the pass was over three miles high, and the guidebook waxed heavily on its terrors, it was a veritable highway. True, if you got caught on the top in a storm and lost your way, you could easily die from exposure—many had.

Sitting astride a saddle of shale, a remnant of lateral moraine crowning the actual pass, I rested and lit-up. How quiet it was. Just the faint whistle of the wind and the whip of the prayer flags that festooned a mani cairn close by. So many pilgrims had made this crossing; the accumulation of stones offered proof. The scenery wasn't as dramatic as on the ridge, not so awesome. Yet it held its own beauty, enhanced by the spirits of those many travelers who had passed in search of enlightenment. I tripped out on these ghosts, much in the same way as at Balkh, or even that most distant Whitehall. By knowing something of what had gone down, I believed I could sense—I could even see, if I was stoned enough—the spirits of the past. Sitting on the pass, I imagined ancient monks traveling from afar, perhaps as far as Imperial Cathay, pausing to make an offering to the Great Lord for safe crossing. I heard their chants, their drumbeats, their horns and cymbals, intertwined with the sound of the wind.

A high-pitched shriek of female laughter broke my reverie. I turned to the source, half expecting to see Mara. But it wasn't her. Instead, immediately below, was a large party of tourists. They looked like a group of college students, boys and girls, and they were bubbling with excitement. Coming from Padam, they had "conquered" the pass. Now their journey was almost over, or at least downhill. They were having a small celebration. I tried not to dwell on their presence, fighting back the resentment at having to share this moment with them—fighting back the jealousy for the companionship they shared.

Looking south, I saw peaks that, only yesterday, defined the boundaries of my universe. They had held me in their grasp for only the barest moments. Yet within those moments was an endless expanse, a time unbounded by Time. Those peaks carved their faces into the panorama of my existence in the same sure way as a beloved—or a nemesis. They will live forever in my mind. But from my position astride the Shingo, familiar forms transformed, skewed by new perspective, into alien contours. Was this what had happened with people I had known? Had I known only a perspective, a tiny slice, imprisoned in the dictates of a certain space and time? Spaces and times that could now live only in memory, and even there, so volatile, subject to whatever wind blew upon them.

The valley from which we had ascended was still mostly white, although the growing presence of black rock signaled the snow was melting. To the north where we were heading, the scale was immense, the vista seemingly endless. The mountain fell gently in large, snow-covered slopes until melting into poly-chromed rock. At this point, towers of eternal winter tumbled precipitously into a valley where summer lingered—if only for a few weeks more. Further in the distance, well into the rain shadow, stretched deeply scored highlands of varying shades of ocher, vermilion, purple, orange, coppery brown, and charcoal. Zanskar, according to my guidebook means, "copper mountains." This was a new land, distinct from the lush alpine of monsoon-favored lands. This was the desert "moon land," rising in graduated steps to the Tibetan Plateau. The land was changing. And change felt good. Soon I

would be free of the cold, the sun hot against my body. How I had been ready to bail such a short time before. If I had, I would have missed this moment.

In the distance, I could see a line of dots snaking their way upward through the snow. This was the northern side and the snow remained deep. As the caravan drew nearer, it was obvious from the lack of any brightly colored, high-tech gear that it belonged to locals. Whether they were monks, or farmers, made little difference. The thought excited me. Here were authentic natives engaged in activity that could have taken place a hundred, even a thousand years ago. It was a trip back into time, which I could grab hold and take away in my little black box.

Where to get the shots? That was the question. It was a bit after midday. The sun was high and to the northwest. They would cross on a west-facing slope. The light would be harsh and the dazzle from the snow would only make matters worse. I was zoned from the thrill of making my first major hump of the trip. Zeroing in on the technical problem, I entered that robotic state picked up in Nam. It helped to block out the craziness, enabling me to do something even crazier—record.

Light, angle, frame filled my mind as the local party approached. They were the prey, objects I would capture. They came closer. I started shooting, seeing the photograph, but not what was being photographed. Several rugged, Mongol-like faces—so like those Hazaras of Afghanistan—passed by, stolidly marching forward as if I didn't exist, their calls of "Uuusht! Uuusht!" uninterrupted by my presence.

In the past few years, so many tourists had passed this way that we were no longer out of place. Tourists were part of the expected, and what tourist would be without one of those strange little boxes of varying size and shape we invariably carry? To the Zanskaris it seemed our greeting—raising the little black box to eye, followed by the clicking sound. What was wrong with us anyway that we couldn't, from our hearts, make a simple, straightforward greeting? Instead we had a machine to do it. So much better the salutation: "May you never grow tired"; to which a civilized person must respond, "May you never be poor!" Yes, so much better than "THUUCK! THUUCK! THUUCK!"

I was unseen, an invisible man. How often I wished to be invisible, to see but remain unseen?

The ponies crunched through the crusted snow. I had made it! Now I was on the marches of the Tibetan Plateau where Lhasa and Kailas lay. Somewhere, not far from one of those holy places must be Shambhala. Yes, I knew it was so.

I used the 24-mm, close and wide. Suddenly, a rough woolen mitten arched upward from below the frame. I felt the hard edge of the viewfinder grind into the lens of my goggles, then the goggles into my eyes.

* * *

I smelled sheep. I heard a voice murmuring in my ear, its sickly-sweet tone belied the intent of its words.

"We're going to make you pay, Yanqui fucker, Gringo cocksucker! You pay big!" Where am I? WHAT IN THE FUCK IS HAPPENING! I felt the rage welling and, for that moment, I was no longer in the Himalaya, no longer confronted by hostile Zanskaris. Then with a sudden surge, anger fled before an onslaught of abject fear. What a rush! Physical fear was almost delicious after so many months away from Nam. Still, I almost peed my pants when I saw the shiny blade pressed against my balls. I was on the floor. I tried to edge backwards, away from that blade, but something strange cut into my back, blocking escape. With one hand, I reached back and felt the cold, smooth, moist surface, fleshlike, but at the same time rock hard. Despite being scared shitless, I struggled to orient myself, seeking out clues to what was. This was the only way forward, the only way to survive. To my horror, I found I was pinned against the skinned carcass of some animal; then from its smell, I realized...sheep.

Moments before I had been on the Shingo-la. Now...? My mind's eye searched beyond my captor's shoulder, through the orange-yellow "V" of the backlighting opening. I saw thatched roofs and adobe walls of houses bordering a dowdy, treeless plaza. God! This must be a remote village. I saw men wearing strange, brightly colored blankets. They were...ponchos! Yes, it was all beginning to

focus. Rather than on the edge of Tibet, I was somehow...half a world and lifetime away—in another high, barren land...the Andes. I pushed my mind hard to get back, to grasp the details...but how could this be? Why must I look to the past to locate my present? It was coming to me, spilling out after such long confinement...somewhere south of Cuzco, near the Bolivian border. In the distance, I could see a tiny, shimmering sliver—Titicaca. Earlier we had laughed, "It was 'tity' for Peruanos, 'caca' for the Bolivianos (and 'muerto' for you, Gringo motherfucker)."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Mei, her eyes wide with terror. She too had sipped the fiery *aguardiente*. Her face glowed from the liquor's unaccustomed strength. God! She was beautiful, even in the grip of fear. Her hair was a long, waist long, ebony vine...but that had not been since...God!

Somehow, I was back eighteen years or so in Ocongate, that miserable shit-hole up in the mountains. Food was so scarce that the pigs and dogs would knock you over going for your daily dump. We were on one of our film-fronted dope scams. Morgan was in country, but off trying to score—he was the supposed Spanish expert, as I the supposed Asian. This was my part, the film, and I was trying to be serious about it. Sure, it was a good cover, but remember, I hoped to escape the dooper cycle, and move on to being a real filmmaker, "real" as in making my living at it.

We had brought a large crew of *técnicos* up from Lima, maybe two dozen when you counted the groupies. They were mostly gringo-educated, upper class kids—who else could afford to be into film in Peru—who played at being Marxist. They were wannabes, sitting on the verandahs of their palatial Miraflores homes, or dancing on the disco floor of La Miel, pondering the intricacies of dialectical materialism. There would always be a servant on hand to serve hors d'oeuvres, booze, drugs, and even more. Today, if still alive, they are probably industrialist or members of El Sendero Luminoso. Back then, they were still young and uncertain as to which way they would turn. Ché Guevara, another scion of the upper-middle class, was their ideal.

Unlike Ché, these guys had gotten too deep into the local product. We were all getting high! It wasn't just a question of that, but it was one thing to get high for pleasure and another for need. As a

businessman, I had to control my intake. After all, I saw that as the difference between pro and mark. We had so much we could have easily drowned in it. Many did. Those Peruvians didn't need to worry; they had enough money to play full-time artistas. Getting strung out was the price they paid for their art—whatever that was.

We had been together for some weeks, trying to put together a coherent film, without script or any strong direction. Well, we were naive. The Peruanos wanted this to be an experiment in collective creativity, meeting long into the night to discuss the class implications of tight versus wide-angle shots or montage versus mise-en-scene. I had taken a lot of shit just trying to hold everything together. By the time we got to Ocongate my patience was wearing thin. Dreams of a successful film were fading. The only thing that kept me going was the knowledge that soon I would be out of it. Just a few more weeks for appearance sake, then I would be safely back in the States with enough coke to finance life and film projects for a couple of years...well at least a year. Anyway, it would be enough for that next *real* film project.

Yes, everything was going as it usually did. That was the problem with drugs. It was always there, lurking in the background, the bottom line. Rather than stick my neck out and go all the way with a film, I knew from past success I could count on the dope for my money.

We made a habit of having a social drink, or two or three, before dinner. Our usual cocktail was the pisco sour, that gringo-inspired Peruvian drink accompanied by ridiculously long lines of flake, drawn through straws made from one hundred dollar bills U.S. That night the pisco ran out, forcing us to switch to the local, and even more potent, aguardiente. We mixed aguardiente with Inca Cola, affectionately known as "llama piss," to hide the raw kerosene taste. Compared to the pisco, the mixture tasted lame. Nevertheless, we drank too much, and feelings began to spill out.

I am not an angel; I have already copped to that. I was there with mixed motives, not all for the film like the Peruvians. Even though their nose ran of flake or worse, they lived, breathed, and snorted film. Maybe, the Peruvians somehow got wind of our extra-curricular intentions? Maybe, it was just karma? Anyway, they

weren't about to let another batch of gringos rip-off *their* natives. Whether these were peons toiling in the fields of their ancestral *finca*, or peasant masses working to build a socialist state, it didn't matter. The ruling class by some name would remain. Membership might change, but the class would remain. These *artistas* were descendants of conquistadors, some only a generation away, some five centuries. They had conquered this land; it was their turf. Its native people were theirs to exploit—whether in the name of *capitalismo* or *comunismo*, it would be they who did it.

Well, that was my drift as we were ruminating in the cook tent—a bright yellow "made in China" tent, they had purloined from the Peruvian Red Cross. One minute we were sitting on our Inca Cola and Cuzquena cerveza crates, talking calmly, or as calmly as is possible when everyone's nose is running with coke, when everyone's eyes are afire from *aguardiente*.

One minute we were rapping. The next minute, one of the *gofers*, not too bright but lots of muscle, had me pinned up against a sheep's carcass, hanging from the crossbeam. I will never smell sheep without feeling that knife tickling my balls. The Peruvian *jefe*, an Ivy alum named Carlos—his father owned, among other things, Inca Cola—called the faithful together to try me for my crimes against the people. They had set up the whole thing in one of their late-night "cell" meetings—Dear God, those people loved meetings.

I too had done my share of coke that day and fantasy took over. I guess I was expecting a firing squad, or at least a quick bullet in the back of the head. I will never forget the venom that filled their faces, particularly the *jefe's*. He looked completely mad. His face, well-fleshed despite his enormous consumption of flake, was on fire with anger. He brought his bushy Castro-like beard within an inch of my face. It was coated with half-dissolved flakes of cocaine mixed with mucous that dripped from his nose.

"Yanqui motherfucker! You come to loot our country, thinking we're just stupid *cholos*! My ancestors were here, living like kings, when yours were plowing some shit hole in England. We've seen exploitation...we've profited from the misery of our *campesinos*. Now we've learned we were wrong. Now we're here to protect the

people from further exploitation. Protect them from scum like you!"

Having delivered this tirade, he paused and turned to the side. From where I was I couldn't see what he was doing, but I didn't have to. The deep sucking sound told me he was reloading his nostrils. When he turned, there was even more flake, more mucous, coating his beard.

"We are the Central Committee of Artist for the People's Liberation. You've been accused of grave crimes against the People. You'll be tried by the People...tried now!"

This was from the mouth of a Wharton grad whose education had been financed by the sale of Inca Cola. I was surprised, to say the least. It had to be a big joke. I kept expecting his facade to crack: first the smile followed by his big horselaugh. Could Carlos be serious? The night before, we had been comrades deep in our cups of Pisco Sour, deep in our lines of the purest flake. The man, who now held a knife to my balls, had given me a great *abrazo* when we said goodnight.

No *abrazo* now! They dragged me to a nearby hall, the headquarters of SINAMOS, a government organization supposedly carrying out socialist-inspired land reform. One of Carlos' henchmen had rounded up the villagers and packed the hall with them. I looked across the dimly lit room trying to gauge the mood of the crowd, wondering if they would tear me apart. It was strange, all their faces were covered by those bright neon-colored wool stocking masks, the ones the tricksters wear in the fiestas. Maybe this was in anticipation of the fiesta Carlos had promised—with free chicha—to celebrate the inevitable guilty verdict. Yet it was unsettling not to know what lay beneath those masks, as if I could have read the villagers' impassive faces anyway. Besides, I don't think they fully understood what was going on. It wasn't their business. But they were used to humoring officials. When I focused back on the "Committee," I was mildly surprised. They too had donned trickster masks, yet somehow in their radical terrorist attitude it made more sense. They had set up the cameras, *my* cameras and, under the glare of blinding halogen lights, they tried me.

Carlos was a good director, at least of low-budget melodramas such as this. The proceeding ground forward to its inevitable conclusion. Several of the masked Committee made long speeches of condemnation, charging me with every sin ever committed by the Yanqui—and this was a long list. They put Mei on the stand.

"Surely Señora, the Yanqui pigs have exploited the Chinese people just as the people of Peru. Certainly, we are all comrades suffering together the same yoke of imperialist oppression. Please Señora, tell us how this CIA running-dog has exploited you."

Mei wasn't about to cop to anything. For days, she had quietly—except, of course, when we were alone—fumed at how much these artistas were jerking us around and the mucho *soles* it was costing. Now, seeing me vilified, she lost it, launching into a bitter diatribe on the ungratefulness of Peruvians in general, and Carlos's betrayal which she took personally. That was Mei's style, bottle-up until she could no longer hold it, then explode, casting all caution aside.

It was futile. One of Carlos's cholo henchmen reinterpreted her words, using their numbers, if not meaning, to further indict me. From the feigned anger in the crowd's response, it was easy to see his spin was not friendly. Thankfully, their anger was only an act, for they loved my tormentors even less than gringos like me. Gringos were, after all, very rare and distant and had never done anything to them. Not unless you counted those crazy young men from the *Cuerpo de la Paz* who tried to keep the pigs from doing their sanitation duties. But these Spanish-speaking city folks from Cuzco and Lima, they weren't so far away and always wanted something. True, they promised much, but in the end, it was always the same. The campesinos knew the score. They knew who would be holding the reins of power long after I departed. If not Carlos, if not this "Committee," then some other Limaneanos, some other city devils, who used the ways of the gringos, even while cursing them.

In the end, my sentence was to give up half of the equipment and film stock to Carlos and his gang. The entire incident was just a little drama orchestrated to part me from the means of production.

"No hard feelings gringo," Carlos declared, that familiar cat-swallowed-the-bird smile returned to his face. "We leave you half the equipment and you will get the other half back when you send our *processed* film back to Lima. Just business! Eh? Like your Wall Street. Oh, one more thing gringo, we need a copy for the editing." His Wharton training was now coming to the fore. Hell, Carlos would have been more at home on Wall Street than I.

There was little choice. Loan them half the equipment—about hundred grand worth of cameras, lenses, lights, recorders, mixers, and mikes—and when they were through, I would take their footage back to the States, develop it at my expense, then return it together with a workprint to ransom the equipment. It might have been worse; they could have taken it all. Perhaps, Carlos was being wise not to push me too far. I was a gringo, and gringos had power. Maybe not in Ocongate, but back in Lima and, what was more important, in the world beyond. There was little point in messing-up future opportunities by getting his name on some American State Department watch list. Carlos enjoyed his visits to the States too much to chance that. No, there were limits to how far he would go. "Let the gringo carry out his business, that will keep him quiet. He'll have as much to fear from the CIA as I." With relief, I realized that Carlos had left me with the means to carry on, and this was certainly better than a slit throat or a bullet in the back of the head.

All of this had taken place long ago, but it was familiar ground. Then something strange happened, as if I had been in a dream, knowing that it was lodged in memory, but then the dream opened into a new, uncharted area, a place unvisited, where I could no longer anticipate what was to come. The appointed hour of the departure arrived. Like a movie inside my head, I could see Carlos and company loading into the small convoy of trucks. They were setting out for the jungle to document the exploitation of gold miners. Mei and I, along with a couple of loyal retainers, planned to return to Cuzco to regroup. The danger had passed. But then outside the expected script, Carlos got out of a truck and approached with his ball-threatening henchman.

"On second thought let's shoot this motherfucker and keep all the equipment." Damn! Carlos was jiving me again.

KALAGIYA

I heard a clicking noise. Then my head exploded.

* * *

I was fully awake. Somehow, I was no longer in Ocongate, even though the smell of sheep lingered. I was back where I thought I had been, yet instead of contentedly photographing, I found myself prone in the snow, a crowd of angry Zanskaris surrounding me. They shouted in a language I didn't understand, although it needed no translation to know their meaning. My first thought was that these folks sure didn't like to be photographed. Yet that didn't square with my experience. On earlier visits, I photographed Zanskaris without any complaints. To the contrary, I remembered that most were pleased with the attention. Maybe it was a case of overkill—too many tourists snapping too many cameras. Then in front of me were Pal and Yosh, pointing accusing fingers. I realized this wasn't about photography.

My face burned from the blow. I heard Gul's voice shouting, first in Urdu, then in English. They were holding me down, but I sensed their anger had peaked. Having subdued me, they might not strike again. Now that I seemed out of immediate danger, I grew more concerned with what was going on. One minute, I had been minding my own business, doing my own thing. The next, I was on my ass, looking up at all these hostile folks who materialized seemingly from nowhere.

In those few moments of unconsciousness, my mind traveled back in time, seeking clues from the past to explain my present. Again, I found myself facing angry locals. It was them versus me. I had something *they* wanted. There was Pal and there was Yosh. Yes, I had some business with them, but all those others? What grievance did they have? What had I done to them? Out of the din of incomprehensible voices, I heard Pal's voice again, this time in English.

"You bad! You ponies steal!"

Then he retreated into his native Zanskari.

They were still on me, roughly pinning me to the ground. Just then a small group of tourists trudged by. They looked at us unconcernedly, as if what was happening was just part of a show they had paid to see. Maybe there was one or two, whose interest piqued, paused to snap a picture or squeeze out a few seconds of video—"natives collaring aging freak wrongdoer." Then as if they had never been there, they vanished from my view. I was left at the mercy of my assailants. Gul was less indifferent. From my ground-level vantage, I recognized his badly worn white high-tops, fighting their way towards me. When he reached me, he roughly threw off the larger of my attackers, causing the rest to fall back. He started to speak in Urdu to the apparent leader of the group. Pal and Yosh edged to the rear of the crowd with growing looks of guilt.

After a long discussion, Gul turned to me. A look of utmost disgust crossed his face. "Pal and Yosh bad, very bad! This man," Gul pointed at the ring leader "is Pal's cousin. He big sheep wala below. Pal say to him that Sahib steal his ponies, try to kill him. Pal think ponies lost. He think Sahib go away, never come to this side, never get across pass. He blame Sahib so family not angry at him for lost ponies."

I looked at my attacker, Pal's cousin. He worked with sheep all right; he smelled just like one. That must be what triggered my dream of Ocongate.

In the mountains storms always threaten. No matter how fine the weather, any moment dark clouds may sweep up from behind a ridge. All hell breaks loose, rain, hail, thunder and lightning. Then as quickly as it comes, it leaves. So too was the anger of these Zanskaris. Seeing I was now helpless, they turned to find some resolution to the problem. What did Sahib have to say? Would I admit wrongdoing and submit to punishment? Their eyes clouded, not with revenge, but greed. They smelled profit.

The vigorous manner of Gul's defense surprised me. Later, in reflection, I realized this wasn't about me, but the ancient rivalry between neighbors. Kashmiris looked upon Zanskaris as unclean kafirs, barbarians beyond the pale. It was up to Gul to teach these "dogs" a good lesson. Also, I was Gul's sheep. It would be he, and only he, who would do the fleecing.

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Speaking first in English for my benefit and then Urdu, Gul related a fairly accurate version of what had taken place. "Sahib, not steal ponies. These two much coward. They run away when storm come, even though they take Sahib's money, eat his salt, even though they give word to Sahib. Sahib risk life, climb high on terrible mountain to bring ponies down. One pony fall and make avalanche. We almost killed. Camp buried, equipment costing many, many rupees lost, food lost. Who will pay for Sahib's loss? These ponies now belong to Sahib. He save from the death that these two cowards leave them."

Gul was putting it on a bit thick, and Pal and Yosh, though guilty as charged, were beginning to smart under so stinging a rebuke. Such excess was closing the door to any possible settlement. After hearing what Gul had to say, the Zanskaris started to look at each other nervously, particularly at Pal and Yosh. The man holding me let go. I got back on my feet, wet and muddy, but with no cuts or broken bones. I knew some accommodation must be made. All of us had to leave with some face, otherwise the police must intervene. The theft of a pony wasn't a light charge, nor was abandonment of one whose load you had contracted to carry, particularly in such extreme circumstances.

Maybe it was the charas, maybe the shock of being assaulted by a stranger, but I needed peace. Until the storm, both Zanskaris had acted well. They were so young that it was hard to blame them for their desertion. I grabbed Gul and with him went over to Pal. I could only hope he would understand.

"Look Pal," I said, "this whole thing's a big mistake. I can't help what happened to the Gray, that's her karma. It was an accident. I don't think you ran away. No, for sure you just went to look for the ponies—just the wrong way. You did what you thought you had to, but because it was the wrong choice you must suffer the loss."

With a sweeping gesture all could see, I scooped up the yearling's lead and handed it to Pal.

"Now at least you still have your youngest pony, soon she'll be fully trained, with much life and profit ahead. If you finish the trip and carry the load, you can make enough to buy another pony."

That last part I tried to give sotto voce, hoping he would understand I was giving him an out. Pal was a quick study. Relief flashed across his face. The Sahib had given him face. Later he was to repay this favor, but on the pass he still had to make it look good for his fellows. I played along, knowing that we must convince them it was all a big misunderstanding, and that there was no fault on either side. Finally, we gave each other a big hug; even the normally reticent Yosh shook my hand with a show of affection. Gul observed all this peacemaking with a look of utter disgust. He wanted to teach these kafirs a lesson by taking them to the police in Padam. Gul knew the officer in charge—how well I was to soon find out—a good Muslim Kashmiri. He would know how to deal with faithless dogs such as Pal and Yosh.

Everyone but Gul was relieved that this storm of emotion had past. He would have loved to get rid of the Zanskaris, putting me totally under his control. If the police were needed, that would be even better. It would mean hurrying on to Padam. Once in Padam, he could take the official aside and tell him what was up. That would result in an even quicker journey back to Srinagar.

But this didn't happen. My peacemaking was a complete success. Pal shouldered Ravi's pack. Yosh tightened their remaining pony's load. Together with the shepherd relatives, we began our descent into Zanskar. Gul's burden of anger was now even greater. He vowed silently, on the spirit of his departed father, that he would make those Zanskari scum pay, and pay dearly.

The rest of that day was spent in the descent to Lakong. It seems a bit strange now, but at the time I was rather insistent where we camped. I don't know why, because those places were just names on a map—totally abstract. Besides, all Gul had to do was tell me that this was Lakong, or whatever, and I would have been happy. Although I had long ago put aside my watch, there was still much of me that was linear. I still clung to my map and that orange line against which each day I measured our "progress." I had read the contours of the map. I could tell that this place called Lakong had a commanding view of the valley. As usual, imagined photographs filled my head. The only problem was that Lakong was also Pal's cousin's camp. Even though things had smoothed between us, I had come to know how Gul was with "kafirs". He saw himself

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infinitely superior. He couldn't wait for them to screw up so that he could sit in judgment. If we camped anywhere near those Zanskaris, there would be trouble.

How fine it was to be moving again. I trailed behind, having had enough human intercourse for one day. Now more than ever I wanted to break free. Hadn't it been enough to rid myself of family, lovers, friends, culture, civilization, all those human things that reflected self? As long as there was one other human about, the reflection would remain. If I could no longer see myself, perhaps, I would cease to be.

I paused often, wanting to absorb every contour, every color, and every texture in the panorama before me. Unlike the Rohtang, where a monochromatic, storm-beset Himalaya dominated the view, now I saw that vast maze of polychrome, sun-drenched canyons, stretching far to the North and East. The eternal snow of the Great Himalayan Range lay behind. Ahead there was snow too, but on peaks far removed from the canyon trail I was to follow. I could see that much of the way would be warm, dry, and dusty, at least until I could again face the Himalaya, waiting out of sight, many days to the north. I had just come into the mountains, now it seemed as if I was leaving. Languidly strolling along, I kept looking back up the nala, back into the land of the snows. How I like being high.

Then, as so often happens in the Himalaya, I rounded a corner and was blown away. Before me, at the head of the valley, was one of the most beautiful cirque glaciers I had ever seen. It wasn't the large, serpentine ice dragon you might find further north, just a little one, curled in its lair. From where I stood, its tumbling seracs reminded me so much of those spindrift crests, spilling from some great wave onto that beach half a world away. Only now time had slowed, congealing the spindrift into ice, and the wave into blackest rock. Destroyer and Creator were at work.

Moments before, I had been thinking only of progress, of moving down the valley, of being able to extend the orange line deeper into unknown areas on my map. How I relished drawing that line after a hard day on the trail. I still carried the saman of linearity. Get to the Shingo! To Padam! To Kashmir! Follow the line! The road! The

track! I thought in this way I could escape those last trappings of my past, Gul, the baggage, the ponies, and their walas.

But these were only the material trappings, for there was all that other saman as well. At the time, I failed to understand that, in the very plan of escape, I was clinging to what I had been, clinging to a way of understanding, sequence, progress, that had percolated down from the ancients, Mesopotamian, Phoenician, Greek. It is rooted in the very language that shapes my world. Yet as powerful as this logic, this system of organizing the world, the random call of that glacier was greater. To go there was irrational; it was out of the way and, as with all glaciers, fraught with danger. Yet in this very irrationality lay the attraction. Here before me was an immediate escape, however temporary, from the master plan. I made up my mind I would climb the glacier on the following day. It would be a respite from living for what would be. Tomorrow, I would live for what was, even if it was tomorrow.

When I made camp several hours later, all my fears about trouble vanished. Gul was in the thick of it, entertaining the Zanskaris with wild tales from exotic lands, Delhi and Srinagar, lands which for them were as much of myth as Shambhala was for me.

"Good idea I cook for Zanskaris? We make peace on full bellies." Gul gave me a conspiratorial wink, but at the time I ignored its warning. And it didn't even seem odd that Gul served the Zanskaris from a separate pot, knowing the men were of different religions. It was a good night, one of peace, except of course for the poor sheep to whose flesh we owed much of that peace.

Early the next morning I awoke to distant sounds of men in agony. The Zanskari camp was about two hundred yards down stream. As I looked out of my tent, I could see several figures, either squatting or on all fours, close by their tents. This was strange. These folks, who would remain in one camp for months at a time, knew not to foul their own nest. In my travels, I had found the desire for cleanliness is universal, its degree subject only to the environment. Naturally in lands of running hot and cold water, flush toilets, "pillow soft" paper, and even the occasional bidet, cleanliness is taken a bit farther than by people equipped only with small and, hopefully, smooth stones.

Both Pal and Yosh, who had spent the night with their cousins, lay gasping on the ground next to pools of their own vomit. Seeing their distress and knowing Gul's vindictiveness, it was clear that this was the classic khansama's revenge. The three of us, Gul, Ravi, and I, who didn't eat from the Zanskari pot were untouched. All the Zanskaris were in dire pain. The only exception was one young boy who had missed the meal because he was tending the flock.

"See, Dad, Zanskaris very haram. Not know how to be clean, how to eat clean things. Even if food clean, they so dirty. No matter, I make clean food. They put in dirty pots. Better keeping away from these people, not eating their food. Only Kashmiri food good, halal. Gul knowing best about these things."

Luckily for the Zanskaris, Gul hadn't done serious harm. Zanskaris have incredibly strong constitutions. Once the foulness passed through their bodies, they quickly recovered. In an hour or two the Zanskaris were back to normal. Luckily for Gul, they were unable, or unwilling, to confront him.

Crisis averted; I could now go for my little dragon. Camp was about three miles from the glacier's snout. It was a slow slog over increasingly dense mounds of rubble, standing as memorials to key points in the glacier's retreat. But there was another side to this land. Amidst the desolation of mountains torn asunder were moments of the most tranquil beauty, islands of lush vegetation in a granite and shale sea.

My progress continually slowed. I wanted to record the great peaks, the sweeping vistas, but also the life that dwelled within. I labored long over a colony of wildflowers. Many species were unique mutations found only in these tiny island worlds. Migratory life sealed in cul de sacs, changing over time to survive. They were natural bonsai gardens pruned by the harshness of the environment, perfectly formed, and yet sized in keeping with the limited resources. Among the treasures were swatches of garnet, gold, lavender and ivory. A flower like a miniature gladiola, a few inches or so in height, caught my eye. The bulbs of these plants lay dormant for most of the year, sleeping under the thick blanket of snow. Then for a few golden weeks they would spring to life. This was too heavy. I had to stop my recording; I had to think about what was before me.

I took a joint from its special preserve, my vest's upper left-hand pocket, and lit up. I needed additional power to block out the external buzzing confusion, the power to focus. After I recovered from the first dizzying rush, I must have used almost an entire roll on that poor plant. I got in close with the 24-mm, distorting the proportions so that the plant looked like a towering yucca against distant mountains which, because of the wide-angle, remained sharply in focus. A nearby Himalayan Blue Poppy received almost the same treatment, for it too was a rare find.

The dragon had prepared her defenses well. The way grew even more difficult. The only place I could find passage was beside the *chu* where I was forced to hop from boulder to boulder amid the swirling torrent. Along the banks was almost no vegetation. Again, I was in a world solely of mineral, granite gray and carbon black, covered by the cobalt blue of the sky. Occasionally, I met a side stream, brightly tinted green, orange, or purplish brown by metallic deposits through which it flowed. On entering the *chu* this unique brilliance survived even less time than the flowers, bright plumes quickly lost to the milky gray churn.

How far could I go? What appeared from the distance a cute little cirque glacier soon became ominous. A dragon, despite its size, was still a dragon. I approached the snout, that terminus where waters laid down generations before were now released. Drop by drop the melt forms a vast network of rivulets. These converge into larger streams, becoming first the Kurgiakh, next the Tsarap, then the Zanskar, finally merging with the Indus near Alchi, 50 miles northwest of Leh for the awesome journey to the great ocean.

The action of so much water, together with the grinding power of the huge ice mass, mills the rock into a fine silt-sand. The ice-melt streams continually cut new courses, braiding themselves across an almost level outwash plain as the strength of the flow rises and falls in response to the temperature. The result is a moat of icy water and quicksand before battlements of black, rock-studded ice. Though small and obviously in retreat, this glacier was still well defended. I must be careful.

There was exposure here, and each step upward offered only more exposure: rotten ice, a slide of loose scree, or just clumsy footing and a fall into the freezing waters. Above it would be worse. There,

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above the firm line, countless snow-covered crevasses waited. Once in their icy embrace, I would lie entombed until that day when it would be my turn to reach the snout. This world was so unstable that even the illusion of stability necessary for human sanity dissolved. I felt like a cat set down in a strange, open field—no place to run to, no place to hide. I don't mean that the dangers were so great; with care and luck I would be okay. But the possibilities were so numerous they crowded my mind. It was the same back on that snow bridge, a primordial response to instability. My system straining under the ever-present need to remain alert, yet I felt so alive. Had a chaotic normality so desensitized me that only on the brink could I feel alive?

I looked around, guessing that the lateral moraine, which skirted the north side, was my best path to the glacier. It was tough going. The stones were unstable, at least on the surface. I feared that the whole thing would come tumbling down...on top of me.

To distract myself, I started looking for weird stones, particularly quartz crystal that is often found in the wake of the glaciers. Yes, if I found a crystal, I would send it to Mei. Funny, I didn't think of giving it to her. I had this feeling that I would never see her again. She now belonged to a lost life, a life framed in the past with no present or future. If I did find one, I must write a note asking that it be sent to her. Yes, send the crystal, not my body. The Jains, one of the many offshoots of Hinduism, envision the spirit as a crystal, the purer the spirit the less color. I must try to cleanse my spirit in the time remaining; I must try to become that quartz, as colorless, as perfect, as the one in my mind.

With this preoccupation into piety, I suppressed fear and fatigue, soon finding myself on the ridge of the moraine. From there it was easier going, perhaps because the view was so spectacular. I stopped by a large boulder, maybe twenty feet high with an equal breadth. Weighing untold tons, it was ridiculously balanced on a small pile of rocks, looking just like a giant toadstool. Around glaciers there are always such erratics, large boulders torn from the bedrock that escape the milling process. They were everywhere in these mountains, sometimes the size of a house or barn.

As below with the flowers, I had the urge to really get disconnected. You might think I was well on my way, but the power

of the charas had lessened, even though I consumed more. It was as if I had finally arrived at that place where I needed to lose it, lose all control. Only in that way could I see if there was some plan for me, or if it was my fate to end here, just fodder for this ice dragon. Smoking a "J" just wouldn't get it. Besides, I had already used up my ration for the day. I did have a small ball of charas down in the corner of my pant's pocket. I had felt it, with pleasant surprise, earlier when digging out my lighter. As soon as my fingers touched the smooth ball, I began to think about eating it. That was a first for this trip. Up to now I had been content with smoking, but it was no longer getting me over the threshold. Eating charas was a whole different trip, almost like LSD. It took longer to get into your blood stream, yet once there, you would stay high for hours.

From the vantage under the rocky toadstool I began to take pictures—was there some invisible, hookah smoking caterpillar up on top deciding the meaning of my words? In my viewfinder, I saw an entire outwash plain, littered with the remains of ancient terminal moraines. At the turn in the bend, the nala leading to the Shingo-la angled sharply upward. Once that point must have been the confluence of two glaciers. Looking out from my vantage, I could grasp geologic time, seeing past and future in one. All of this had once been a massive uplift: the sea bed rising when continents collided, then sliced through by rivers, then enlarged by glaciers. Together, glacier and river worked to form that ideal slope for the water's trek to the sea. Tectonic plates rise and fall, glaciers wax and wane, temporary obstacles might appear, lakes and falls, but inexorably the water works, until at some point it achieves perfect flow. Water always seeks its own level—and seeks it most efficiently.

If I ever had doubts as to our planet being a living thing, all I had to do was come to these mountains where undistracted by human intrusion I could see the earth at work. In escaping the constraints of what is called time, those minutiae of tiny brains: millenniums, centuries, years, months, weeks, days, hours, minutes, seconds, milli-second, nano-seconds, I escape that path of endless reduction, blinding me to all but *my* self, *my* needs. It is a path inevitably leading to fragmentation, atomization, and ultimately to another cycle of self.

Yet even here, I was locked in that need to reduce—that craving to find my own relevance. I took a picture of myself, camera propped on a rock, 24-mm lens to capture the entire scene, even though I knew it would make my nose bigger. Only in my mind can I guess what I looked like, for the image sits in its undeveloped roll, deep in my rucksack. I hope this picture, along with the crystals I have since found, will somehow make their way back to Mei. What a sight I will be! Will she turn from this image, her rage at my betrayal still all-consuming? Or will she see me as I once was, alone in my mountains, holding her in my heart? How this expanse before me colors even my puny understanding of time. It makes things that have lasted important...no matter how imperfectly.

Here I am Mei, sitting on the ridgeline, above hangs the glacier's icefall, behind are those dancing diamond-dusted peaks. Somewhere Mei, on the other side of that wall, is the Baralacha-la. There, I could join the main road and a lorry back to Darcha, Manali, Delhi, a lorry ride back to you. But even if I made it, would you want me? It has been days since I have seen my reflection in a good mirror, but the distorted reflection in my Ray-Bans gives some idea. My hair is now quite long; beard bleached by the sun—or is it just graying—more every day as it makes its way toward my chest. My hands, although less swollen after coming down from the heights of Shingo, are now cracked so they bleed. My face is burned, accentuating deeply etched lines around my eyes; nose, as usual, cracked and peeling. Should I just go up and over, my darling, give it the old try? If I would have luck, and you would have me, I might be back with you in a fortnight's time.

What if you are no longer "my darling," the image I have of you from a distant past? Would your voice be cold and quizzical? "What is it you want Guy?" When you know very well what I want. What if you, the last human to whom—even if it is only in my mind—I cling, turn away? What if I come to know, as opposed to suspect, that I am beyond all redemption, that I am alone? I can stand the lack of human company here in these mountains; I welcome it. Back there in that sea of humanity, to be immersed, yet not a part, to see people chatting, planning, doing, loving, and to have no one, is worse than death. No, better to remain here or go north, away from the Baralacha-la and that lorry back to a place existing only in my mind.

I was retreating inside. I must get out. I started to photograph. I decided to make an entire 360 panorama. "Thuuck!" Against the Himalayan wall to the south rise ice-capped peaks of black rock, sparkling with the fall of water, the issue of glaciers precariously hanging from near vertical faces. Pause! Eye caught by detail; change lens to telephoto. "Thuuck!" Almost perpendicular to my glacier, high between two peaks, is a rocky cliff. This is the remains of an old terminal moraine, behind which another glacier now hides. That the glacier is still alive I was certain, for a large waterfall cuts through the cliff, joining the main chu below the outwash.

Change back! Don't forget what you are doing! The panorama! Moving the lens, more and more of my own glacier filled the frame. "Thuuck! "Move a small increment" Thuuck!" Another small increment. If I ever get back, I will blow up these shots and piece them together. Then I will remember, not only the place, but also what it did to me. My camera swung from the relative serenity of the valley below to the more rugged forms above. So did my thoughts. Is this what human attachment is all about? Is this why I cling to my memory of Mei? Is it to find connection with my species and through the species with life? I had long suspected that my relationship with Tara had been a frantic effort to renew a life beginning to wane. Now that hope for renewal was gone, I just wanted to cling to life, regardless of its lost vigor. The menacing forms of dark, contorted rocks, and jumbled ice, filling my viewfinder, also held the hint of another presence. I began to see faces of death, so familiar in Buddhist art, so often accompanying representations of Mara. There in a rock I saw those empty eye sockets, or in a chunk of ice, the upturned chasms of what had once been a nose. Why did I cling to life even though I knew it was but a passage over the bridge to...beyond?

Mara was close by; I could feel the presence. It drew me up the icefall, toward the same ridge that, earlier, I had seen as a way back to Mei. I was approaching an edge, that indefinable blur between the draw of life and the draw of death. Life, the known, still pulled stronger than death, the unknown. For much of my life, I had pondered death. The more I thought, the closer, the more familiar, death became. It was like the approach to a peak you want to climb. At first glance it promises so much terror. Then gradually, as you

study its surface, as you discover possible weakness in its defenses—how hard to escape the metaphor of conflict—it becomes less horrible. Ideally, the climber should know the mountain so intimately, go on to the mountain so free of fear, that the act of climbing, rather than conquest, becomes one of devotion and surrender. You become one with the mountain, moving with rather than against. This too was the way to meet Mara.

If I look back, I see that was the way I had loved Mei, Tara, and, I guess although it was long ago, others before them. They were my real grips on life; the times when I really touched what it was, what maybe I wanted to think it was. "Go man go, but slowly," was another one of those famous BRO signs. Think of Mara as a woman, think of "her" as you think of those you have always seen life through. After all, it could as well have been with men, but everything I had been taught was against that idea...even though it leads—doesn't it?—to the same place. No, in Mara's case it wasn't important to pinpoint the gender, for this was about journey's end, the final affair. There could be no issue from such a union, no profit. Instead, it is all consuming fire.

I had been meditating for some time. It always happened when I sat down for a break. Thin air, strong charas, the cumulative fatigue from walking six to eight hours a day, not to mention the immense scale of the world before me, drove me into myself. Got to get up and start looking again. I moved out onto the surface of the glacier. It was no big thing, like a tongue about a quarter of a mile long, protruding down the valley below an impressive icefall. I couldn't help but irreverently think of that poster of the Rolling Stones. This was the dying part of the glacier, losing each year more of its mass than it accumulated. It was well worn and its ancient ice so dense it appeared black. I was directly below the steep fall. Thousands of rivulets, born from the melt of the jumbled ice above, scored the gently sloping, rock-encrusted surface.

I brought my camera low onto the ice. Formations of miniature nieve penitentes stood like a crystalline crowd of tourists, mesmerized by the magnificence of the valley below. I wanted to capture this feeling, to show both the "tourists" and the scene they were enjoying. This was a job for the 15-mm. Getting in close to a foot-high tower, I could keep it in focus and yet, because the lens's

depth of field is so great, still keep all its companions and even distant mountains in focus too. It was quite an effort to mount the bulbous 15-mm lens, as my hands were still swollen and brain paranoid from the charas. I kept seeing the lens slip out of my hand and roll off into the chu. Eventually it all came together. I was down, first on my knees, then flat on my stomach. Oblivious to the wet and cold that seeped into my clothing, I was lost in a crystal world. The bright sun reverberated through the towers. They were in a magnificent communion, speaking not through sound, but color. I longed to join this chromatic chorus, to get in on their wavelength. "WAVELENGTH" Wow! I hadn't used that term for years. But then I hadn't been this turned on, this tuned in, for such a long time? At first, since I was so out of practice, all I could do was dumbly record.

It was only after I had been lying there for some time that I began to sync in. But, I could only understand one message; it was blunt and simple, "*CHARHAI JAO*," which I knew meant "UP, GO UP!" Over and over I decoded a repeated pattern in the colored light, "UP, GO UP!" I hesitated, thinking if I stayed longer, I could understand more. Yet I couldn't ignore such a clear command. Someone, something, was signaling.

To go up wasn't an easy task. Even getting up off the surface of the glacier took some effort. Down on that convex surface, I was a giant in a miniature world. I could see all the edges, all around the curvature of my earth. Everything else was off-planet, in space. If I stood up, I might slip or be blown off. Instinctively, I wished to cling to my earth's surface.

I had been prone for a long time, and the shadows were long. In the waning sunlight, the temperature dropped quickly. So dry was the air, so dependent on the direct rays of the sun for warmth that any shaded area was measurably colder. This was the case under my body. Sheltered from the sun, the water began to freeze. I found that bits of my clothing were frozen to the glacier. It was incorporating me.

Escape from this initial stage in the dragon's digestion was only a minor inconvenience. The icefall was the challenge. It towered several hundred yards above me, a giant flight of topsy-turvy steps. It was made even more malign by the many yawning

crevices and seracs, whose icy horns protruded every which way. What lay above and beyond the edge of this fall was a mystery. From below, I could see only the tips of distant peaks. My map back in the camp would have been little help, the scale too large for such close quarters. Even maps of the smallest scale, would have failed to place those most critical features: snow bridges, moats, crevices, and bergschrunds. But then they could never be accurately mapped, because they forever changed.

I almost ignored the command, arguing that I had come up here on a lark, just a little restful climb to get away from all the boys and the hassles of the camp. God! I kept reducing it, yet it remained a hassle. The icefall seemed insurmountable. Besides, it must be late, my shadow so long against an ever-deepening gold crystal. I took what I planned to be a final shot, a long shot of the upper edge of the fall, the 180-mm trying to compose a particularly bizarre clump of seracs with peaks behind—an abstract number.

There was more than inanimate ice and rock in my lens. There was a living form. Oh, I had seen this creature before, but mostly in my dreams. It was a rare sight, a lone ibex, large backward-curving horns attesting to its masculinity. For a moment, his eyes met mine in the finder, then they rolled back into his head. I heard a plaintiff moan and the image disappeared. Moments later he was back. Again, the intense stare followed by the roll of the eyes and the moan. The ibex vanished.

There could be no question. This creature, my goat-totem, called. It was one thing to disobey an ice crystal, another your totem. If the ibex came to me, there must be a purpose. This creature is part of my personal magic. He bears those primordial attributes to which I aspire, unlocking me from the prison of human ego, carrying me over the walls of disbelief. I entered a state where my puny experience no longer ruled the possible—my read on reality began to crack. Expectation and assumption were lost.

Had Mara next appeared, the dark, skull-crowned head peering down at me with three eyes, I wouldn't have been surprised. I rather suspected I might meet Mara that day, maybe somewhere on the plateau that surely lay above the fall. Yes, that was it! The ibex was Mara's messenger. I was certain. It had the highest logic. My brain raced. No real ibex would be found in such desolation.

There could be no other answer. Mara was waiting above for me. Those crystal channels were only a hint of Mara's desire. When hint wasn't enough, when I began to waver, a stronger voice spoke, the ibex. Mara was obviously going to some trouble, and if I didn't heed this command, the Shape-changer would be really pissed.

Dusk was fast approaching. Already in the western sky a sickle moon lay close to the horizon. Though only a crescent, it shone with brightness equal to the fullest moon in a lowland sky. Before me, my eyes saw pattern in random chiaroscuro. It was a path up the icefall.

"Come up, Guy!" the path seemed to say. "Here to there, there to here, see...step after step, all in place. Here to there, there to here. Piece of cake!"

Even the way was shown. There was no mistake. This was Mara.

I started climbing again, gingerly testing my footing as I went up among the seracs. What was I doing? Darkness was almost upon the valley. Soon its only illumination would be from the moon and stars, already spilling across the eastern horizon. It was so clear; I felt so at one with those stars, that shining crescent. But the warmth of the day rapidly yielded to the frost of the night. I was out of my mind.

Something drew me on. Whether the charas or some greater force, I was out there, totally consumed with the one who was above...who, I believed, must be above. Those first successful steps gave me the confidence to go on. The top seemed so near. Ahead was a large crevice. No problem! A convenient snow bridge arched across. I could almost see beyond the edge, over to the plateau. Then, caught in the starlight, I saw a face. Was it Mara? Yes, it must be; its tertiary eye sparkled even in the dim starlight. I forced myself not to recoil from such a grotesque anomaly. The depth of the shadows made it difficult to see clearly. I took several more steps until I was almost level with the creature. I could see the details. The eye beamed forth not from the fiery, skull-bedecked forehead of my expectation, but from the delicate, opalescent brow of a...woman. I looked again at the eye...at the eyes. They were

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those all too familiar almond shapes. Asian! Even in this extreme I couldn't escape my own predilections.

A crimson gown loosely covered her body. The cloth opened. My eyes saw breasts, cream ivory swells, capped by delicate, saffron-tinted nipples. Later I realized, I should have had more respect, but I couldn't resist looking further, past the slight rise of her belly, into a darkness whose mystery could only promise indescribable delight. I was transfixed in a state that knew neither space nor time. The world around me dissolved. There was only this radiant creature and me, sole occupants of that universe. My outer mind, still a creature of the physical world, could only wonder why this delicate lady didn't feel the cold. I wanted to rush forward and press my own warmth into those perfect orbs of flesh. I wanted to bring the warmth which flooded me into her and, for eternity, become one with her.

A deeper voice spoke to me. Instinctively, I understood she had no need for my warmth. Rather, it was I who needed hers. I reached out my hand. She seemed so near that I could brush her cheek. I wanted to touch her, to wipe from those coal black eyes her heavy tears. I was lost as to what I should do. Oh, how I wanted to grab hold of her, to wipe away those tears. But it seemed that as I grew closer those tears only increased, threatening to sheathe her completely in ice, turning her into just another of those crystalline nieve penitentes. She looked at me, not with my passion, but with compassion. What confusion! An outer part of me wanted her, the physical creature, the object of desire, of pleasure. Yet there was something else, stirring a deeper desire than of my flesh. I felt as if another cloth had lifted, this time not of crimson, but that very cream white flesh itself. I waited with fascinated horror. There was a cry and then a crack. I looked towards the source of the sound...and then I was falling.

Yet again, I was alone, no Mara, no ibex, no woman with dark, Asian eyes. Something else was wrong, my body aching gently but persistently. I was lying on my shoulders and upper back with my legs bent over, sort of a yoga "plow" position, only devoid of any form or grace. Despite the darkness and general disorientation, I knew this wasn't as it was supposed to be. The last thing I remembered was stepping out, reaching for the woman with Asian

eyes. I was so close; I could smell her sandalwood scent. Confusion! Time froze. Only after what seemed an excruciating forever did it begin to regain speed.

I tried to put it together. The woman must have been only in my mind. But the snow bridge, the footstep, the unseen fissure just below the surface of recent snow, had been all too real. I'd fallen into a crevice. How deep I couldn't say, for my contorted lower body blocked my view upward. I reasoned I must be near the bottom, my shoulders and back wedged against both walls. I could feel the walls sloping inward below. Gradually, I oriented myself, but only as a guess, based on extremely limited information. It would have to do for the moment. I pictured myself wedged laterally across the narrowing "V" of the crevice. What if I could somehow lift myself and twist my body perpendicularly? Then I would be lengthwise to the crevice and able to stretch out.

I was about to make the effort when another thought came. What if I am wedged in a narrow place high up in a very deep crevice? Crevices could be several hundred feet deep. If I freed myself here, it might be only to tumble down into unknown depths. This thought sent chills through an already deeply chilled body. Yes, I might be very near the top. Crevices are very irregular, opening and closing, then opening again. If I could just hold the plow, wait for the light, I could better gauge my predicament. Besides, the boys would come looking for me in the morning, if for no other reason than to recover my valuable gear. The sale of my cameras would more than make up for the loss of their ponies.

That was my plan, but like all plans subject to modification. The cold was working on my straining muscles, particularly those of my lower back and stomach. I was a runner, trekker. I prided myself on my condition, but now I was using muscles I had forgotten existed. For a while the after effects of the charas dulled the pain. Yet ever so slowly, my body's pleas for relief invaded consciousness. It started with just a whisper, progressing to a gentle nag, which grew more strident as the minutes went by. I tried to think of something else. I went through all those usual places of refuge, past moments with Mei, Tara. I thought about how each of them might take the news of my death, then how others I had known might also react. That was most depressing. I

knew for most it would be but an item of momentary interest: "Well he got what he was looking for," or "How nice for him; he got to go in that place he loved so much." It would be no more than a blip of curiosity, at the most tinged with melancholy for the passing of Life. That had been the case when I heard about Paul. We had been so close at one time. Then we drifted so far away that his death, his non-existence, held no reality. He had ceased to exist in my world long before, as I in his. Where did all those feelings go?

My death would trouble Mei. I still existed in her world, even though she might have wished otherwise. How could it not? We had parted too recently. Much between us was still unresolved. The years of living, loving, hurting, stretched out so far, it seemed as if there had never been life without her. Did we even know who we were apart, not as one—no matter how fucked up that one had been? Would she be relieved? Would she be sad? Perhaps she would feel a little of both. She would curse me, feeling I was duty bound to end together what we had begun.

For Tara, it would be different. She had already cut me loose, purposively, willfully. I was for her only a malleable memory, no longer anything to do with me, but with her state of mind. I was nothing more than an icon for a dim past, perhaps the good outweighing the bad—at least as the years went by and life took its toll. That remembered person might live on till she died, but the present me was long gone. No, I wouldn't be missed.

The pain was more persistent this time; no gentler ache, this was a burning agony. I tried to focus, not on the past, not on what I was leaving behind, but on the future, a non-existence, devoid of all pain. It surely must be near.

Mara, Mara, are you out there? Are you the woman with Asian eyes, dark eyes filled with tears?

The pain was unbearable. To make matters worse, I felt the walls closing in, pressing my body even further into impossible contortion. Soon, I would hear my spinal cord snap. With luck the nerves would snap too. But what if they didn't? What if I just lay there continually compressing, able to feel the destruction, synapse by synapse, neuron by neuron? I had asked for death many

times. I had courted Mara, but not in this way—not so slowly, so deliberately, with so much pain. What were my crimes to deserve such fate?

I lost all scale of time. It smeared like in a Dali painting. Was a minute a minute, or a second or hour? I had no idea. Time blew into spindrift soon to be lost on the beach of eternity. My senses ruled. All I knew was that it was dark; it was cold, yet my body burned with fire. At that moment I thought, better fall to a quick death

I went for it. Using all reserves of energy, I flexed my back, hoping that there was enough strength left to dislodge myself. By some miracle, that strength was still there. I arched upward. With a desperate scramble of hands and feet I turned to the length of the crevice. Slipping roughly downward, I struck a solid surface.

I remember waking and thinking, how much I wanted my kofi. Even though it was so fucking cold, it took a few moments to realize I wasn't in my down. The soft, blue-gray light helped to prolong the in-tent illusion. I cried out to Gul, not for help, but for that kofi I..."No, not want Gul, need!" In my mind a seed of dissonance took root. Perhaps it was the fruit of some sensory clue. The mental process had begun, an investigation underway. My fantasy gave way to the flood of new information. This was digested and to my horror.... No! It can't be...more information...Oh, yes it can! I was suddenly, but firmly, where I was. Almost lost to life, I clawed my way back. That was the first step.

"Dadee! Dadee! Dadee!"

The voice grew louder. For a seeming eternity, the loudest sounds I had heard were those of my heart and lungs, together with the background of muffled cracks and crunches as the sun-warmed ice began to stir. I thought of the *Pit and the Pendulum*, remembered from childhood campfires. Well, I was in the pit all right, and the walls might be closing in. At least, thank God, there was no pendulum. Maybe that would come later. At each crack of ice, I expected to feel the walls closing in. How would it feel, those icy walls squeezing me to death? I hoped exposure would get me first. It was supposed to be a gentle death, just the sleep of freezing....

Now, there was this new sound. What had once so irritated, now seemed the sweetest song. It reached out, reconnecting my mind to another layer of reality, lying beyond my immediate, ice-bound world.

"That's right," I muttered to myself. "There's something else beyond these blue-gray walls. Yes, it must be Gull!" Then I heard a second voice. "It's Pal!"

Another world begins to unfold—that world beyond these walls, beyond that curtain of sensory overload, a world that was before, my mind telling me, it can be again.

"GUL! PAL!" I shouted out. They must be nearby, very nearby the sound of their voices. Yet would they be able to see me? Their world, my old world, suddenly dimmed. That part of mind devoted to conjuring and predicting took over, projecting the worst possibilities. What if they passed by? What if their presence only prolonged my agony with one final glimpse of life, one final hope? I fought to escape this numbing prophecy. I needed action; I needed to move, to remake the connection. Struggling against a slide into entropy, I resumed shouting. Our voices brought us together.

I was only about fifteen feet down as it turned out. The crevice was old, more diagonal than vertical. All it needed was a rope and someone on the other end. Yet without these, escape was impossible. Despite the ease of the rescue, my condition was such that they had to carry me back to camp. I was quite numb, the collective effect of the fall, the cold, and the various contortions my body had endured.

I was relieved to know I would survive. But why that was so is hard to explain. Back in the crevice, the final scenario played in my imagination like a fantasy film. Mara's arm supernaturally extended beyond its feasible constraints, offering escape. I began to reach out, expecting to see Asian eyes peering down over the edge above me. Instead, it was the Mara of my tangkha, crimson-fleshed, skull-bedecked, hideous. Initially I thought it was a mask. Yes, that was the logical explanation. The woman with Asian eyes had just put on a mask. I forced myself to stare up into those three orbs. They were not plaster or paper, but living tissue. Then, as I

looked deeper, past my initial recoil, I saw the same compassion I had perceived in those Asian eyes, for within they were the same.

Again, I found myself in conflict. The part of mind tied to my physical being, the part that desired, filled with revulsion and horror. Another part, the one that saw through the desire to compassion, told me to reach beyond the surface horror. It had been one thing to accept Mara's hand; it was only normal to be drawn to such feminine beauty; that was a scenario for which I had been well trained. But to go with this other, this "hideous monster," was to irrevocably take another path, a course leading to the unknown. It is in choosing such forks that fate is built, like a map of my journey, real only as past, the future holding the multiplicity of the possible.

Gul's leering face just a few inches away brought the present crashing back. To his credit, he tended my needs, holding a hot cup of chai up to my parched lips. I suddenly realized how thirsty I was. When did I last drink? Yes, up under the icefall, I had scooped some water from a trickle of melt, maybe half an hour before falling into the crevice. After that there had been nothing for God knows how many hours, maybe even days. I lost all orientation. There was just cold and damp—now the face of Gul, now the hot chai. It stung my lips, and I could feel them recoil, as if they were some disconnected other.

"Salt chai, Dadee!" Gul was most solicitous, but he came across as an unctuous Lothario. "You very sick, Dad, too much cold, no food too long, no drink too long. You color very blue. I see before. When child...my Father...bear tear him bad...one arm gone, but I go back get other village men to get him...bring him back before he die. We have no doctor, no Angrez medicines. My father much like you, very cold, very still. Color like you, blue, like that kafir devil-god, the one they call Shiva. Mullah come...say we must keep warm...give salt tea. Say Allah do rest. Your medicine...so sorry lost. I can only make you warm, give you salt chai. Insha'Allah you getting better!"

Thinking back on the scene I could swear there were malicious twinkles in his eyes. Perhaps the events that followed color my memory.

If it wasn't bad enough for Gul to compare my situation to that of his long dead father, there was even worse news.

"Don't move Dad, something wrong with shoulder. It look kherab."

I was emerging from shock, and it was almost as if his words triggered awareness of that shoulder, my left one. No sooner was the word "shoulder" out of his mouth than I felt a dull throbbing pain—it was where I had landed when I flipped over in the crevice. As I tried to extricate myself from the bag, the dull throb turned into a fiery lance. After recovering from the initial shock, I gingerly touched the injured shoulder. Gul was right; my shoulder was "very kherab." The bones weren't where they were supposed to be. I never had so much as a broken finger, and now, here in this desolate spot.... It began to dawn on me I had a dislocated shoulder. Then I thought back to what he had said about being blue. That could mean only one thing, hypothermia. Again, I lost consciousness.

All of this must have been very perplexing for Gul. Was he tempted just to let me slip away? After all, I still had a lot of valuable belongings, all sorts of things he could sell in Delhi for many, many rupees. Yet, there had be questions. I had registered with the police before leaving Manali, telling them when I expected to arrive in Padam, and who was accompanying me. My disappearance would be a question the local police must eventually answer. Then, of course, there would be others interested, those of whom at the time I had no knowledge, such as Singh. He wouldn't be too pleased if Gul let me slip away—even if it was to death I escaped. After much thought, Gul realized it was in his interest to save me. Of course, it was still a case of Insha'Allah. He talked the matter over with the boys.

"Dadee very sick, too long in cold, shoulder maybe come in two, the bones apart from fall. Kherab! Kherab! Cold we treat. Yes, we make him very warm. Maybe we roast him a little like a sheep at Id."

Here he chuckled, but Pal and Yosh, now very contrite and filled with renewed loyalty, bristled at this ill-timed humor. Gul's eyes mocked their anger. He thought to himself, "How can these fools

feel any honor in serving the Angrez? It is the same as serving a sheep or a chicken. Allah brings here for our purpose, for our livelihood, for our use." Then brushing past their hostile looks, "We can do nothing about the shoulder. Now he is far away. He feels no pain. The cold makes him sleep. When warmer, he comes back to life. He feels much pain. Big problem to move him. Pal this your land. You know any doctor close by?"

"No doctor until Padam, Gul Sahib. Pal was smart enough to know he had a new boss. "But in Kurgiakh is lama. He know how to heal. Not modern way like Padam doctor, but old way, way of ancestors who came from Tibet even before Lord Buddha. Very strong his medicine. Very holy man, the Taras answer his call."

Despite his disgust with these Kafirs and their idols, Gul wasn't about to quibble over old or new medicine. Doing nothing would be the worst course. For that he could be blamed. At least if he got the lama, he could say he tried his best. "How far is village Pal?"

"Kurgiakh, not far, downhill, I walk fast, maybe three, four hour."

"Chalo, chalo! Say to lama, very important Angrez Sahib...very rich...make big donation to gomba. Tell shoulder maybe broken, maybe just out of place, we not know. He come, try best to fix. We pay...Sahib pay that is."

Pal nodded assent, keeping inside his contempt for this Kashmiri money-grubber. Didn't he know a lama was a man of God? He uses gift of healing not for profit, but as service to Lord Buddha. It was senseless, however, to try to teach these avaricious Muslims; they would never understand.

"Yes, Gul Sahib, I tell lama," and he was off down the valley.

Unfortunately, Gul's prediction came true. As my temperature rose consciousness returned, and so did the pain. What began as a distant throb, soon became deep, searing pain. Even Gul's bhang did little except lower my own natural defenses to the hordes of paranoiac fears waiting their chance. It seemed like an eternity, but just as the light was growing dim, I heard Pal's voice from what sounded like a great distance.

"Jule! Jule!"

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Then I heard answering voices, footsteps, muffled greetings, the sound of my tent fly opening and then...?

That was all until I awoke. I was lying on a blanket outside near a fire. I remember wondering, how could they have found wood, for no tree grew in this land. Then from the sweet grassy smell, I realized the fuel must be animal dung, maybe yak. Although I was stripped to the waist, the fire kept me warm. My injured shoulder was smeared with a greasy substance that had the same smell about it as the fire. Again, there was a face hovering over me. Only this time, Gods be praised, it wasn't Gul. Instead, it was the most benevolent countenance I can ever recall—Devara excepted, for he too has a similar inner glow of grace. It was the lama from Kurgiakh, Geser-lozang, the man who was to be my savior. His well fleshed, sun-seared, Mongol-moon face peeked out from under the maroon *sahru*, the conical hat with long earflaps worn by the monks in this district. He would have looked more comical elf than holy healer, except for the intense love that radiated from every well-weathered line and pore. Enveloping me, his chanted mantra tugged at my consciousness.

At first, the sheer physical power of the voice was overwhelming—in tone that is, rather than any meaning of the words. The deep bass modulations formed an aural cloud, floating me above the sea of pain raging below. Geser kept on with this sonorous chant, the gravely base somehow so soothing, so familiar. Yes familiar, for it reminded me of the Presidio foghorn that had lulled me to sleep so many fear-filled nights when still a smuggler. In those days there were always so many fears. They hung like great weights over my head, threatening to drop and crush a world I had so precariously constructed. Central to that world was Mei. Losing her was the worst of all my fears, for I loved her far more than myself. How I welcomed that low rumbling sound. For sailors, it warned that fog was entering the Bay. But for me, it was the signal of relief. I cloaked myself in those thick resonant folds, hiding from fears of bust, rip-off, or that most feared loss of her. Now, in this similar sound I could hide—not from fear, but from pain

How long it took I have no idea. I had lost any sense of time long before. Gradually, I began to hear intelligible sound within the stream of mantra:

"OOMTAARAANEETAARAAYAAOOMOCCAANEEEMOCCAAYAAO
OMOOKSAANEEEMOOKAAYAAJIIVAAMVAARAADDEESVAAHAA!"

Slowly this stream became clearer until I could hear distinct syllables: "OM TARANEE TARAYA! OM MOCANEE MOCAYA! OM MOKSANEE MOKSAYA! JIVAM VARADE SVAHHA!" Over and over, Geser chanted without pause, his eyes boring into mine. He was searching for something that wasn't yet there. After another of those intervals unbounded by time, I no longer heard just a string of unknown sounds. Meaning snapped into focus, just as when you rack the focus on a very long lens, from meaningless blur to sharply defined plane. Somehow, I understood what those sounds meant: "Save me, savior! Liberate me, liberated one! Free me, freed one! You give the highest gift of life!"

On reflection, I realize it wasn't the meaning itself—for the words were quite simple and certainly inspired no intellectual breakthrough—although the mention of "savior" piqued my curiosity. But this mantra wasn't addressed to the inquiring mind. Instead, the entire healing ritual was designed to raise the patient to the lama's plane of consciousness. Understanding served only to signal the moment of synergy had arrived.

Recognition ignited in the lama's eyes. At last finding what he had sought, the moment for action was at hand. Without a break in either tone or gaze, he quickly grasped my injured shoulder. I felt his strong grip and braced for the expected rush of pain. There was a loud snapping sound...then silence. There was no more pain.

The next day we traveled to the lama's gomba up a small side nala just below Kurgiakh. The village itself was little more than a few houses, although from the row of chortens guarding the approach I might have expected something grander. The dwellings housed both humans and their animals. Each was a fortress, not as protection from their fellows, as in Afghanistan or the North-West Frontier, but from the weather. In late August, it was cool except for the middle of the day. I could only imagine what the winter would bring.

I asked the lama about this. He pointed to the block-like adobe houses. "Don't they tell the story?"

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The mud brick and flat roofs reminded that I was now in the Himalaya's rain shadow. On the other, monsoon-visited side, where snow and rain were frequent, houses are made of stone and timbers with steep-pitched roofs. Here, thick, window-poor walls told of icy winds that sweep through the valley.

"I guess it gets pretty cold around here."

The lama chuckled and took me inside his own quarters. "See, inside is one central room surrounded by outer ones. In deepest winter, we live in this one room, sometimes for a moon or more. If it's not too cold, we keep animals in outside rooms. When it gets very cold, we bring them inside with us. Lord Buddha teaches that all life is of value, not just for us, but for God."

Despite the obvious preparation against winter's cruelty, nowhere could I see firewood. This was for the simple reason that there are no trees, native or transplanted, in these parts. On the South and West slopes of the Himalaya you see immense piles of firewood in outlying villages. Without such resources, Zanskari hamlets must rely on a twiggy brush, for which they must often travel many miles to gather. The rooftops showed the villagers diligence, immense piles covering the conveniently flat roofs. Together with animal dung, these twigs were the only fuel for fire during the long winters—the difference between life and death. The wealthier villagers could pack in kero, but that was expensive. Smoke and its related illnesses were always a problem. Remember that there were few windows, none on the inside rooms, and chimneys were rudimentary holes in the roof. Most of the dwellings' interiors were black from the soot.

Geser prepared some chai. Being a monk of some substance he had a kero stove. We sat in that central room by the hearth and talked over the salt, yak-buttered infusion of chai mixed with tsampa.

"Where are you going, No?" First it had been "Dad" and now, although Geser might not have been much older—this harsh world could age so quickly—it was to be "brother" and "younger brother" at that. Unlike the irritation I felt at "Dad," "No" didn't bother me. What worried me was the question itself. While it was quite innocuous from the mouth of a lay person, from a priest it had a deeper significance. It was a question that troubled me

before and still troubles me. I gave him my ready answer. "Kashmir!"

"To Kashmir? What an odd destination! Do you not know of the troubles in Kashmir?" He paused, laughed at his own thought, then catching the question in my eye.

"You know No?" He laughed again perhaps seeing that the play of the two languages could produce some interesting puzzles, sort of a Zanskari "Who's on first!" Tibetan poets were famous for this sort of word play. "The dragon is returning to Kashmir. The Saint who first brought Buddhism to that land predicted it long ago. Do you know the story?"

I didn't, but before I could say so he launched into the tale. Geser was an avid storyteller, and I a captive audience.

"Let me tell you. At that time, some say half a century after the departure of Lord Buddha, Kashmir was ruled by a dragon who, along with his tribe, lived in a great lake entirely covering the land. The Saint went to the dragon and performed a great feat, the exact nature has been lost in time. So impressed was the dragon that he offered to grant the Saint's deepest wish.

"I wish to spend my remaining days contemplating my existence in a lotus posture in this beautiful Vale. But because there is so much water there is no room for me."

The dragon was surprised by simple request and agreed. "I will gladly grant you enough land for your meditations."

Now the Saint was very clever. As the dragon began to draw off water to make room for the Saint, the holy one grew until, for him to fit, the entire lake had to be drawn off. The Saint then became ruler, since there was no more lake for the dragon or his tribe. The Saint being a compassionate man agreed to give back some of the land to form smaller lakes for the dragon family. The dragon was overjoyed and begged the Saint to remain in Kashmir forever. However, it was near the time for the Saint to ascend to Buddhahood. So instead, he installed his followers, who then built more than five hundred monasteries. Kashmir became a great center of Buddhism."

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"Yes I know, I've seen many of the temples, but now they're all in ruins. Many of the statues of Lord Buddha and the bodhisattvas have been defaced," I said trying to insert my own thought into what was rapidly becoming a lecture.

"Ah! That is of little importance. They are, after all, only wood, stone, and metals. Lord Buddha lives in our hearts. There he cannot be disfigured, if our hearts are pure. However, that is another matter."

Yes, I thought, but how many have such pure hearts? I feared for Lord Buddha's continued existence.

"Before leaving this Earth, the Saint said that Kashmir would remain as a land of humanity until the last Buddhist left; then it would be inundated and returned to the rule of the dragon tribe. Even in the time when the Hindu kings came back to rule, even under the Mogul, the Pathan, the Sikh, and then the Hindu again, some Buddhists remained. Now, however, the terrible wind of holy war blows from the West. These Mussalmen will not allow any others to live in the land. They say they want all for their Allah...for Islam. They think their own tradition the only one. They think, for some unknowable reason, that the face of God has been revealed to them and to them alone. Some Mussalmen believe all this to be true. I think, however, their leaders use this belief only to take the land. In the land lies power, and they want it for themselves. They say it is for the people, for Islam, for Allah, but they do not fool me. It is for their advantage, political, material advantage, that they struggle. Again, as always, it is the people who must pay. Leaders are always very greedy, maybe not for money, but for power. They're very crazy, very dangerous."

He was right there. No one could be more dangerous than fanatics doing "the will of God." What couldn't be justified? I had seen plenty of this in my travels...Hell, even more in my own country. How else could we have done, and continue to do, what we did to the people of Vietnam, El Salvador, or any one of a dozen places that our leaders wished to control—only we called our God, "Democracy," while for others it is "Communism."

"The dragon becomes restless because he knows his time is near. Not only Hindus, but also all Buddhist have been driven from the

Vale. It will become as prophesied, the land will again be covered by the water, and the dragon tribe will rule. Is it wise, No, to be planning to visit such a place? Each one of us has our destiny, our dharma, but it is of our own making; we have a choice. Kashmir is reverting to the realm of the dragons, it is not the place for men such as you or me."

This was a lot to think about. I had tossed that image of a past Kashmir out in front of me to guide me forward. I had never questioned the wisdom of such a choice. Now I was beginning to question. I searched the ceiling, trying to escape Geser's inquisitive eyes. He knew very well that he had gotten my wheels turning. It was so convenient to know where you are going, so disturbing when you don't. I fixed on a large patch of sooted ceiling; the flickering light of the medicine-bottle kero lamp—the lama was affluent—animated a dance of sculpted carbon forms.

Geser was droning on, overjoyed at the chance to speak English, a language he had labored so hard to master, but for which he now had so little use. The past day's stress was taking its toll. I tried to be polite and follow what he was saying. Shapes in the ceiling's encrusted soot came into focus, a gestalt taking life from the flickering kero flame. The sound of the lama's gravelly voice was fragmenting, transforming into the sound of drum and pipe. Then I heard shuffling feet. Those dancing figures on the ceiling grew near.

* * *

I was in that comforting refuge of the past. Smoke not only filled the room, but the lungs and eyes of all within. There was no outlet for the smoke to escape. The dwelling's owners feared what might come through these openings, even more than the evils such openings would dispel—chronic eye and lung disease. They had good reason to fear; they were Kalash, kafir, infidels, unbelievers, peoples beyond the pale, surrounded by Islam.

Talk about living on the edge, about surviving against all odds; these folks had been marginal for the last thousand years. As my guidebook would have it, *remnants* of a culture once found

throughout the highland regions of Eastern Afghanistan, Northern Pakistan, and North Western India—ancient Dardistan. The Kalash represent the closest approximation of what life was before the Islamic incursions, before the waves of invading Arabs, Turks, Persians, Mongols, and Punjabis. The guide unblushingly repeated the tale that they are the descendants of Alexander's armies, perhaps because a few have very fair skin, reddish-blond hair, and gray-blue eyes. From my childhood reading I remembered that they also figure in more modern myth, the people visited in Kipling's *The Man Who Would Be King*. Like our own indigenous populations, their once large numbers have been decimated through genocide, disease, and assimilation. The remaining several thousand now live in three very high and very remote valleys on the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan, an area designated "Kafiristan" by their dominant Islam neighbors.

I first contacted them back in...maybe '73...the dates sort of run together now. Yes, it must have been '73. It was my last "R and R safari." Soon after that I left Nam, for good. When I found them, they were just beginning to be exploited by the Pakies as a tourist attraction. I was in Peshawar, waiting for my connect. I had time to kill, and the resident government tourist-wala was overjoyed to have an actual customer—a cash carrying one that is. Most of the western travelers going through were strung-out freaks making the dash through the land of Cain to the Nirvana they thought they would find in India. I was more enthusiastic. Having grown accustomed to a world steeped in conflict and macho, the N.W.F.P. was just my thing. Besides, while living in Kabul, I had heard all about Chitral and the charms of the Kalash women. But they hadn't mention the laalies.

The tourist officer made the arrangements. Before I knew it, I was on a flight to Chitral, fighting back fear as the straining Fokker barely cleared the Lawri Top. My nerves were hardly calmed when my seatmate, looking for all the world as if he should be astride a camel rather than in a plane, pointed to the rugged ridge looming ahead.

"That, Sar, where old Mehtar (Ruler of Chitral) die when plane not making top. Insha'Allah, not to worry Sar, very old plane the Mehtar's being, only single motor, not two like this Pakistani one.

Thanks to God, we have new, stronger machine. We make over top. Insha'Allah!"

And with Allah's (or someone's) help we made it. Soon I was a bouncing over the rough tracks, which passed for a road, squeezed into the back of an ancient jeep with a dozen or so passengers. That had been an exceedingly dangerous ride with hairpin turns so sharp that the driver had to halt, back up, then go forward, often several times, to negotiate the bend. It wouldn't have been so bad, except those turns climbed cliffs dropping thousands of feet. Occasionally, one of my fellow travelers would point out the carcass of another jeep, sometimes in the river, sometimes snagged on an outcrop. "There Sar, fifteen mens die. There Sar, ten mens die." I welcomed the end of the track at a village called Guru in the Brir Nala, at the time the only Kalash village accessible by jeep. I have heard that now jeep roads penetrate all the valleys. I can only imagine what has become to a way of life so tenuous even then.

The news spread quickly, "Big-time tourist Sahib come, many rupees making. Get dancers, big baksheesh."

Finally, all was ready. In deference to my western sensibilities, I was seated on a rickety lawn chair. At my side was an equally rickety table, holding a formal, albeit heavily mended, china tea service—my cup had brass staples holding the many cracks together. In that land, they could put Humpty Dumpty together. Other than my cautious sipping, the only sound was the river's, its uniform roar punctuated by the occasional discordant cry of the great ravens raiding the nearby cornfields. Then, imperceptibly rising over the river, came a drum's hypnotic beat. A flute wailed, then the sound of shuffling feet filled the air. I could hear the excited chatter of women, many women.

Suddenly from behind a log house came snaking lines of Kalash maids in their loose *sangach* or *cheo*, a coal-black, homespun robe. I use the term "women" loosely, for they were of all ages from prepubescent girls to ancient crones. Intricate patterns of black dots decorated their faces, and their hair, braided in five pigtails, flew out from under curious hooded headpieces when they danced. This was the *kopsei*, the cobra-hood headpiece whose echoes I would later see in the Zanskari and Ladhaki women's *perag*. While

the perag was richly decorated in Tibetan turquoise and Indian coral, the kopsei made do with Chinese coins, cowry shells, mother of pearl buttons, and plastic beads bought from itinerant Muslim traders. Kalash women, in contrast to their Muslim sisters—in many cases they were quite literally sisters—were quite bold. They danced right up and greeted me as was befitting a patron. "*Eshpad!*" the lead shouted, then the entire company echoed her greeting

My Kohw driver turned to me, "See Sahib, Kalash womens *landi khar*, in Angrezi you say...?" Here he made a provocative wiggle of his hips that could mean only one thing.

"Sexy," I supplied the requested word.

Somehow this rag-tag assortment didn't meet my definition of sexy. But maybe I hadn't been there long enough. Maybe, my driver had been in the boonies too long? Or maybe, it was that in Pakistan, an extremely conservative Muslim society, a woman dancing in public was proscribed? However, what was unholy for Muslim women—whose proper place was proverbially the "house or grave"—was winked at in the case of these Kafirs. For although Kalash morals were no less than any others, they had quite a reputation among Muslim men. It was rather amusing to hear the tales.

These tales were so powerful that my aging Pashtu servant in Kabul knew them. Many of these centered on itinerant Muslim traders who were said to exchange beads or buttons for sexual favors—so that the kopsei was the material record of a woman's prowess. Then there was the "Bullmen" story. Rumor had it that every spring, according to Kalash custom, the most endowed young male would impregnate all the young women who had reached puberty in the past year. In this way, the strongest genes would be propagated, or so went the story. Such tales excited the imagination of sexually starved Muslim men. Many dreamed of someday traveling to Chitral to see these exotic creatures perform. Talk about furthest pastures.

They had been rather young, rather old, and not terribly clean, even though in all their finery. What turned me on was not their sexual charms, but the haunting quality of their music—voice,

flute, and drum. I had along my Frezzi, the camcorder of its day, and with it recorded the dance.

Sure, I was high, but the song, more of a repetitive chant that wavered up and down, bore a hole through me. It transported me, bringing to a door in my subconscious, which though unopened, offered a tantalizing hint of something beyond. Did I hear strains of some timeless, spaceless air to which my ancestors danced? I was overwhelmed by a gut feeling that here was my own history. Not that my roots lay in Chitral, or that my ancestors were Kalash, but that beside some Nordic fjord they had lived much the same. It was such a simple way of life, so rational a response to *their* world. I didn't see the Kalash as I had seen other "primitives," the Jivaro in the Amazon, or the Tuareg out on the Sahara. Those I felt *were* the "native" the "other," but with these Kalash, so "scruffy" by western standards, it seemed like coming home. Beneath the dirt, I saw familiar faces, in the language I heard familiar tones. It was a fantasy not beyond reach.

Somewhat later, I came to understand why they seemed so familiar. I had thought in terms of tribe because that was how I thought back then. I had been taught tribes and, even worse, "levels." I had yet to escape that teaching. Now, I realize, it was something more. My affinity wasn't rooted in some joined past, but in the present. We were similar because we both fought to be ourselves, fought to keep some greater other from defining us. What these Kalash do collectively, I do alone. For them other is Islam, Pakistan, modernity. For me it is everything beyond my own mind. If I had any doubt about their desire to remain a people, I had only to listen to one song—a song whose meaning I never learned. Yet it wasn't its meaning that spoke to me, but the way it was sung. An elder, who had committed the entire work to memory, introduced the first word or two of each new stanza; thus reminded, the junior members picked up the refrain. In this way each generation passed down ancestral songs to another—keys to the collective memory of a culture without literature. It was through song and story the Kalash passed on their traditions. All it would take was a break in this fragile oral chain, and the Kalash would be no more.

Everything was so damn slow! It had struck me on that first visit, and later in reviewing my film, how slowly the Kalash moved. If you saw the film without being there, you would swear it was slo-mo. Of course, living at more than eight thousand feet can calm folks down. After seeing the footage just once, I knew I would go back. I had to see what these Kalash were all about. Why were they so obstinately holding on to this ancient way of life, a way that made it so difficult when they moved out in the surrounding culture? What secrets did it hold? Oh! I guess to be totally honest, the local charas I smoked down in the Chitral bazaar was some of the best. This, coupled with the excellent price that the chaikanna-wala offered, had much to do with my decision.

I went back, yes, to score, but also to film. The footage I made earlier whetted my appetite to make an ethnographic film. I rolled that word "ethnographic" on my tongue. It sounded impressive, even if I didn't really know much about ethnography at the time. But I had money and equipment. I hoped that the rest would fall into place. It was the autumn of '75. The helicopter crash, the year before, finally got my attention. I had lost my appetite for Indochina. Not to mention, as of April, Saigon was now Ho Chi Minh City. I was under serious pressure to find new work. Somehow pictures of war and gore were no longer in vogue. The American public had their fill.

Kalashgram, at that time, was the most traditional hamlet in the three valleys, that is, where Islam had made the fewest inroads. Yet even there, a mosque and school were under construction. I believed it was only a matter of time before Islam became the life way, not by the sword as in the past, but by hard logic. Life would be better if you joined the dominant culture. The Paki Government made a big fuss over "preserving" their minority cultures. These were after all valuable tourist assets. But the geographic reality of Kalashgram was a fitting metaphor for the future of its culture. For the young men, there was little opportunity and even less land. What other choice would they have, but to migrate "down" to work in the cities? Once there in isolation, how could they maintain the Kalash ways?

Still at the time of which I write, the Kalash retained much of those old ways, at least enough to fool an outsider like me. The

geography was a big reason for their "preservation." Few of their Muslim neighbors coveted such a remote and harsh land. It was too high to grow much except a few scraggly ears of corn, although pumpkins flourished. Equally important, the nala backed on impassable mountain wall, the track to Kalashgram led nowhere. That was, of course, before the troubles in Afghanistan. Ten years later, Paul reported in a rare, rambling letter that Afghan Muslim refugees had flooded all Kafiristan, even Kalashgram, putting an unbearable strain on the remaining Kalash and any attempt by the Government to "preserve" their culture.

Rumbur nala ran in a northwest-southeast direction. By late fall the sun shone only a few hours when it passed over the canyon's narrow opening to the sky. It was cold in Kalashgram except for those few hours of sun. We soon shifted from our tent to the common room of our gracious host, the "Mayor." There was plenty of time to kill. Actual filming was infrequent because there was only a very short time during the day when it was light enough to film. I was using a low speed, fine grain, color film—ECO at 16 ASA—that I, quite naively, hoped eventually to blow-up to a 35 mm for theatrical release. Also, we were many days from any electrical power so we had to use our store of 12-volt battery belts most judiciously.

This meant spending a whole lot of time indoors around smoky, soft wood fires, filling our lungs both with wood smoke and charas. The Kalash had neither those Chinese kerosene lamps nor the pump-up stoves, common throughout Muslim Chitral. Such modernity was beyond the reach of all but the most affluent Kalash, and these, being quite orthodox, would shun them as untraditional. All light was from deodar torch, and all cooking on a simple open hearth with deodar, pine, or cedar wood, very soft, very combustible, very smoky. As I said, traditional houses had no windows or chimneys. Not because there was any longer a danger from their Muslim neighbors. From this they are relatively safe; it was in the new, government-built mosque, school, and health clinic that they now faced Islam's major threat. No, it was for the simple reason that Kalash homes didn't have windows or chimneys, plain and simple. That was what made them Kalash. If they modernized, despite all the efficacy of a smoke-free life, they would be Muslim houses and their inhabitants less Kalash for it.

Smoke filled the temple room. I was choking; my eyes so filled with tears that I had given up trying to focus. On went the 5.9-mm Angenieux. Its almost unlimited depth of field took care of focusing worries, but not my breathing. I wanted to leave, yet to do so before the grand finale of the wedding would have been very rude. Besides, this wedding would be the high point of my film and the sacrifice, the climax of the wedding.

I had paid for the damn goat in any case. That was the fine when Mei climbed on the roof to get a better view of the dance. Seems it was big-time taboo for women to be on roofs—"mens only Sahib." It caused a big brouhaha. A lot of the graybeards got together and, after much heated discussion, demanded payment of a goat. "Needs blood price to make roof clean Sahib." I should have been happy it wasn't Mei's blood they were demanding, but at the time I was pissed—just a set up so they would have a free sacrifice for the wedding. What the fuck! I was going to get the footage, make my million on the film, (or at least many thousand on the dope) so I shouldn't mind the hundred rupees cost. I just hated to be an easy mark.

Finally, the moment came. Before the altar of the Goddess Jestak, an *on-jesta-mosh*, a virgin boy of fifteen or sixteen—the future "Bullman" if rumors were correct—who acts as an acolyte for the *utah* or shaman, decapitated a goat and sprinkled the blood on the bride and groom. Then with a flourish, he tossed the head onto a blazing fire of holly branches.

When the goat blood hit the flames, it made a vile stink and even more smoke, if that was possible. That was it for me. Many of the other guests thought the same thing and, almost as one, exited to the porch. This was a crude affair, a few rough-hewn boards resting on log beams that extended from the dwelling. A notched log ladder some fifteen feet high was the only other means of coming and going. Paranoia runs deep in Kalashgram.

I was out at one end of the porch, standing on a board where it straddled the supporting log beam. Without warning the support log at the other end of my board gave way. Affas, a *Kohw*, or Muslim Chitralli, who was acting as my personal guide cum servant, went slowly sailing through the air. Why was it always in slo-mo? He should have fallen much faster, for he was carrying

four Colortran batteries—the same ones destined to make so much money and then, later, so much time. Those suckers weighed about twenty pounds apiece. Not that I had much time to contemplate their weight. I was poised at the other end of the board, trying to balance on an extremely uneven teeter-totter. After more fantastically stretched milliseconds, I too tumbled toward the distant rocky hillside. With the same reflexes that had saved both my ass and equipment in the copter crash, I cradled the camera, hitting the ground where it would do the least damage. I was young and still flexible; the camera was hard and survived. Moments after the fall, Affas ran up, cutting a narrow swath with the tightly snooted movie light in the otherwise pitch-dark melee.

"Filim lamp thik Sar, filim lamp okay!"

The fall had its cost. The light revealed this as it played erratically over the traumatized guest. I remember the air was full of cries and groans. Occasionally, the hot quartz glare caught a face contorted by fear, pain, or both. It was almost as if Affas was expecting me to resume shooting. Yes, that was it, he was lighting the scene. Reflexively, I was about to respond, but there was another crash. More bodies and debris hurtled down. The remaining party having heard the commotion came out to see. In the darkness, they suffered our fate. Something hard and heavy hit me. I must have lost it.

The next thing I knew I was lying flat on my back on a rickety charpoi, staring at the smoke-encrusted ceiling of my host's common room. I had a bad concussion. For the next several days, while on the mend, I became very acquainted with every nook and cranny of that besooted surface.

* * *

I emerged from the lama's house into near *deja vu*. A party of women passed in front of me. Much like the women of the Kalash, they wore the black, homespun robe; on their heads was the familiar shape of the cobra-hooded headdress. This Zanskari *perag* was more lavish with its turquoise and coral. This made sense, for these Zanskari were wealthier than the Kalash; their

valley was broad; their pastures rich for the great black yaks the village depends on for survival. Unlike the Kalash their way of life is relatively secure. They are the dominant culture, protected from encroachment by a harsh and remote land. But then so it had been with the Kalash once upon a time.

The women were out in force to greet their returning men. They had been away for some days in the high pastures. Because of the lack of trees, we could see them from a great distance, slowly making their way down the valley. The giant yaks were kicking up a small cloud of dust, the universal call of "Uuusht! Uuusht!" mixed with the thunder of hoofs. The women giggled among themselves, and the bolder ones called out to their men.

I didn't know it at the time, but the course of my journey was about to change. I had begun with much saman, and I still had plenty of it—even after the loss to the avalanche, even having after coming so close to losing it all...even me...in the crevice. It was with no little irony that, in attempting to unload, my burden only increased. For I had come to believe in Mara, that this Shapechanger drew me inexorably onward, that our destinies were linked. In Mara, I saw annihilation, the way to escape.

But escape from what? Certainly, it wasn't that moment. In the present I was supremely happy. The tragedy was that I didn't confine myself to the present, Kurgiakh, Geser, ladies who flashed shy, friendly smiles, great black yaks. I was looking forever backward—some might even crudely put "up my ass." I just couldn't let go. But could I carry the burden much longer? It was time I was free. Geser looked at me, at the possessions, and the people who accompanied me. Not that he saw Pal and Yosh as any problem, they were compatriots, good boys, who showed their respect and did his bidding. But Gul and Ravi were beyond the pale, hopeless as converts, unacceptable as equals. I think that Geser, having saved me, if not from death at least great pain, decided he must try to save my soul.

For the first time since leaving Delhi, Gul wasn't my principal companion. Geser took me completely under his care, cooking my food, seeing that my clothes were washed, and messaging my miraculously recovering shoulder. We even played chess. It had been years since I played my last game. He put me to shame. The

most important thing was that he spoke much better English than Gul and, for the first time in weeks, I could have a conversation about something else than the necessities of life. Gradually, he began to draw me out. I told him about my "flirtation" with Mara, and that I knew, at least intellectually, this life was but the web of Maya. I was quite proud of my insights and eager to show I had solved the puzzle. I had gotten the proverbial "it."

I was cruising, and I hadn't had a joint all day. Not the day before either, nothing since I had fallen into the crevice. It wasn't that I had turned over the proverbial leaf or anything. Rather, Gul was making himself scarce, and he had the stash. Besides, I was afraid smoking would offend my host. In my newly found state of sobriety, I thought I was being so profound, but that profundity was met by gently laughing eyes—eyes that said, been there, seen it, now how about another way?

"So you seek annihilation, Nirvana, my friend? You seek to undo what you are? When I was young, I went to the government school in Dharamsala. There I learned this English we now speak. I also learned something even more useful, my favorite, Physics. Of course, it was your western version of the study, even though we have our own tradition, much older than yours. Do you know the Greeks had commerce with our ancients? You of the West think we of the East have no practical, material science, but only because much of our science was lost in the age of darkness when you invaded our lands. The strong always define the terms. But if you look hard behind the terms, you find that what we have thought for thousands of years is much the same as what you have thought...what you now think. Maybe the symbols are shaped differently, like our alphabets, but the interior meaning is the same. Have you ever been to Mehrauli, to the Qutab Minar?"

* * *

Damn! There goes the bell again. Just when I am ready to move on, leave that baggage of the past behind, there it is again waiting. Whoever had envisioned the past as behind was certainly wrong. It was everywhere front, back, even to the side. Well I said I might come back to this.

KALAGIYA

Yes, I knew Mehrauli well. It was where Mei and I found refuge after our flight from Afghanistan. There in the vihara, a Buddhist teaching monastery, the Head Monk married us. This wizened, expat Vietnamese, who styled himself as the Hinayana Pope, had been a big political honcho in the Fifties back in Hue. He became too outspoken for the then ruling Diem family, audaciously pointing out their corruption. Diem gave him the choice of prison or exiled priesthood, so he took the vows and went off to India to study. Things became worse in Vietnam, and he never went back. Instead, he received the position as head of the vihara and, because of its proximity to the capital, gained some international renown.

I had been turned on to him, several years before my marriage, by his relative in Saigon. She learned I was traveling to India and asked me to see if the monk could help the family; they were trying to flee the country too. Anyone with an ounce of sense, and enough US dollars to do something about it, could see what was coming. The monk had a major money changing operation with foreign tourist who flocked to the vihara. He was doing well for himself and agreed. Subsequently, I smuggled dollars back to the relatives on several occasions, and the old monk became co-conspirator and friend.

* * *

I told Geser about this experience—although not about the money part—and it turned out he knew this monk well, having spent time in the vihara. He was studying the Hinayana traditions, thought to be closer to the original teaching of Buddha than his own Mahayana beliefs.

"If you know Mehrauli, then you must know of the Iron Pillar?"

I did, and I knew his meaning. The Pillar was an ancient technological marvel, over twenty feet tall and weighing several tons. No one has ever been able to figure out how it was made, or why it never rusted, even though it is estimated to be over two thousand years old.

"Imagine, No, the knowledge of the culture that produced this column. However, I learned much from the course...if only how

correct were my own traditions...how once your philosophers thought of light as particles. Then later, someone came along and said, 'That is not right, it is made of waves.' Only recently have your scholars considered they might be both particle and wave. That life exists, not as one or the other, but of all that flows from our consciousness. You think because you have discovered that life is an illusion, a veil, yet have not seen beyond the veil, you can now go through it. What if the veil is part of the illusion, part of Maya? Where is the end to this thought? You must let go of your mind; you must accept the power of God, the power that is God's alone to lift the veil. All of life, my life, your life, should be spent in preparation for that which lies beyond. But what is the point of this preparation, if you do not make the journey. Why bother, if you only jump to one side before the journey is complete. If you lose your nerve, if you jump, it is as if you had never started out. You must go through it all over again. Again and again, you must go on, until you find the heart to complete the journey."

Geser paused, looking deep into my eyes, measuring the impact his words were making. Perhaps, he saw the hurt that lay within, hurt that my heart was in question. But then I too had come to question my heart. I have been many things, but I always prided myself on having the heart, having the courage to throw away my own interests and do what was right.

"No, it's not that you have a small heart," Geser continued. He was trying to hold on to me, trying not to turn me off by affront. "It just that you have too much saman. You carry too big a load. If you wish to complete your journey, my friend, if you wish to find the heart to do this thing, you must cast off your load."

Chapter XIV

*...the task of shaping all the senseless
and dizzying stuff of dreams
is the hardest that one can attempt—
much harder than weaving a rope of sand
or coining the faceless wind.
—Jorge Luis Borge—*

UNLOADING

Geser went off to his secular duties. In addition to nocturnal vigils for universal Dharma, he had myriad responsibilities in this remote hamlet—doctor, teacher, judge, counselor, and civic leader. If there was a problem, Geser must provide the answer. Beyond his immediate aid, what was there except the benevolence of God? Padam was many days away, and even there was very little.

I climbed to the roof of Geser's small gomba. This was a fortress-like structure set on a steep ridge, which afforded it a commanding view. I stared out at the land, passed through but in my delirium not seen. I was greedy. I didn't want to miss an inch.

The valley is wide, guarded by towering walls of soft sandstone, muraled with bold patterns of color. I chuckled, recognizing how trendy were those colors back in the States. So Southwest, how *en vogue!* But then, when you thought about it, this was the Southwest, only of the Tibetan Plateau, only of Central Asia, only of what, for an Angrez like me, was the most fucking exotic place on the face of the Earth. Far up the valley, where the chu branched, was a giant pillar of rock. Had I been conscious on the journey down, it would have seemed just another parallel ridge. From my present vantage, it appeared as a giant monolith, knife-edged by the confluence of two streams.

I sat mesmerized. I thought on the forces that had carved such a monument. But without precise knowledge, I could only guess—where the tectonic shaping ended and the glacial began or where the glacial ended and the riverine did the finishing work. Had it been created in only one cycle? I was unsure. Having failed to unravel this geologic mystery, I relaxed my mind, letting it space

out in the transformations of shifting light: hot oranges into cool purples, gargoyles into soaring birds, the light made the rock a living thing—a living mandala, drawing out my confusion.

Gradually, as the thrill of the view wore off, I returned to my central problem. How to dump all the accumulated garbage? It wasn't just Gul, or the cameras, the still plentiful foodstuffs, or the ponies. It was all the shit in my head. That was the crippling load.

"What are you thinking No? The scene is quite beautiful; is it not? Geser returned from his round of worldly duties. "No, is it this scene on which you think or something else, something not of this valley, something beyond the mountains?" It was as if he could read my mind. Even if he couldn't, I imagined he could. At that point I really needed to open up.

"Ji, Geserji" I heard myself say. Then I spilled out my mind.

Geser listened patiently to my self-pitying litany, part confession, part justification. Then taking advantage of a pause in my monologue, he replied, "Acchaa No, acchaa! Many pilgrims come to this place. Like you they carry great burdens. The stones they leave by the path represent those burdens. Before they enter, they cast them off. You too must add to that pile, make your contribution. The tradition, our tradition, says man must live many lives, child, student, householder, renunciate, teacher. From one life to the next you must not carry the burdens of the old."

"What you say is true, Geserji. You have spoken many wise things but, with all respect, I too know these things. I know I have to put the past aside. But Geserji, knowing and doing...knowing and doing! Big problem Geserji!"

"Do not worrying too much No." Then he chuckled mischievously, "Geser with Lord Buddha's blessing, and that of the Holy Savioress, will help you to find the way. Is this not why we met No? Is this not why you were called to this place? Is this not why I am here? So many forks in the road. But we have made the choices that have brought us...to this place...at the same time. With your kind permission, I am going to take you to another gomba. There, are many monks of all grades with much knowledge greater than I possess. It is not far from here as measured on your map. Yet in the going, you will travel far on your path."

And what a path it was! The chu cut deeply into the valley shortly after leaving Kurgiakh. This was no longer the pleasantly wide, glaciated "U," but the precipitously sloping "V" of soft sandstone sliced through to the bowels by a mighty river. The trail was little more than a scratch in a wasteland of scree, sloping almost vertically maybe half a mile to the chu below. As we walked, we had to continually dodge showers of ragged shale from above. So sheer was the drop, so unstable the footing, it was all I could do to force one foot ahead of the other. I fought the desire to look down, afraid the very sight of that awful chasm would immobilize me. The miles went by, and I gradually adjusted to the unrelenting exposure. As one addicted to the visual, I had to look, had to photograph. Occasionally, there would be a side trail downward. Following the trail with my eye, it would zigzag back and forth maybe a mile or more down to the chu. While there was little floor to speak of, the slope dropping in most places right into the stream, amazingly at times there would be a patch of green with a few dwellings. On rare occasions, this patch would lie across the stream connected to our side by a three-wire bridge—one to walk on and two to hold. What would it be like to live in such a place, so far away, so deep?

Despite its risks, the trail was quite a highway. There was a small but steady stream of locals traveling up valley. Winter was fast approaching, and they were bringing in the supplies, wheat and rice that the government provided at reasonable prices. Long trains of ponies trudged by, bulging, homespun sacks of precious grain swaying with their struggling gait. Each train was destined for some desolate outpost. With these loads the inhabitants would be able to survive the long winter. If a load was lost so might a life or lives. I understood why the boys had been so upset about their ponies. It was more than just the loss of a friend, as we would mourn a dog or cat. That was bad enough! But here a pony was the means of life, a way of transferring energy needed to survive. If you had a strong, healthy pony, you too could be strong, healthy. The pony was an extension of its owner, a tool by which he lived or died.

KALAGIYA

The trail led to Padam. Gul, Ravi, even Pal and Yosh thought I was headed there. Gul threw a mild fit when I told him that Geser would be accompanying our party for some of the way.

"Dad, food not so much. We lose much in avalanche. Ponies tired. Only two now and young one not carry so much. Everyone tired, trail too hard." His plaint seemed endless.

"But why does that matter, Gul my son? Geser carries his own weight and brings his own share of food. No problem, eh?"

And, of course, none of it was the problem. The problem was control—of me. Gul saw his power slipping, just when he was getting close, the dangerous pass crossed, and only a few days away from some semblance of civilization. Oh, it was still Zanskar, but at least in Padam there would be other Kashmiris, plenty of them, and in charge. All Gul could think about was getting to Padam.

"From Padam it'll be easy to maneuver this Angrez to Kargil, the quickest route to Kashmir...if the buses still run. Once in Srinagar, it'll be first into the hands of Uncle Aziz for the plucking...then on to Inspector Singh and those invisible ones Singh serves. The final kill!

"Yes, in Padam no problem! Dadee will be tired. Just bribe the tourist officer to tell him that the foot passes are closed. Imagine the fool! He is now talking about crossing over by the NunKun. How much worse than Shingo? So bad even local people don't go that way. No way...Insha'Allah...I'll risk my neck going there. Not even for Inspector Singh! Not that I care about that Sikh bastard. If he didn't have me by the balls...No, Insha'Allah, let me get this ferenghi cock sucker back to Srinagar quickly."

Gul wouldn't have been so smug had he known of my true plan. Geser had given and I accepted an invitation to the ancient gomba of Phuktal, two days down valley and then another half day journey up a joining nala to the south east.

"I am going there for darshan with my superior, the venerable Yeshe Rinpoche," Geser explained. "He is the *Shushok*—what you call a...bishop, the head lama for the entire district. I would like you to come along. This Shushok is very holy; he is one born, not made,

what we call *Tulku*. We believe that many lives ago his being attained liberation, nirvana. Ego, the result of our karma, destines lesser men, such as you and me, who have yet to grasp enlightenment, to the cycle of rebirth. The Shushok, free of ego, returns only by the power of his dharma, the desire to do good on this earth."

This seemed rather contradictory. "But if he's free from the cycle, why come back at all...why having once penetrated the veil of Maya...why knowing that all this is an illusion?"

"Because No, he has great powers and with those powers come a great responsibility. Having reached the "far shore," he must help others also to reach it...much as did Lord Buddha, only he did this in one life. This Tulku is a much-respected scholar, not only a *Geshe*, but a *Rabjampa*, what in the West you call 'Ph.D'. In his current existence, he took his degree in Lhasa. That was many years ago, many years before the godless Chini destroyed the land. It is the Shushok's dharma to share his powers for the good of the people. He may be able to help you with your problem. I must warn you. You may find his methods are...you know he follows tradition of Tantra...what some call the 'way of the left hand'...you may find him to be...I think the word is...bizarre?"

Geser's mention of Tantra caught me hard. It was another of those terms bandied about in "New Age" circles so prevalent back home. Not that I sought out those crystal-worshipping freaks, but my interest in the Himalaya drew us together. If I had been taking one of those association tests, the kind I so frequently faced behind the walls, the first word that would have popped into my brain was sex. Tantra, according to my limited understanding, was about losing it all by doing it all—or something like that. I was quite fuzzy about the whole subject. Just one more bit of esoterica that someday—"when I had the time"—I would investigate. Now apparently, the time had come, and it wasn't through a book I would expand my knowledge.

"I think you will find Phuktal a very interesting place, No. Many seekers come there, from many places." Then again that mischievous grin flickered across his face. Sometimes these seekers are not only men, sometimes women too, sometimes very beautiful, very desirable...even for an ancient monk such as me."

Women? Desire? What had that to do with renunciation, with holiness, with finding my way? This sounded more like a place for Gul than for me, the new, spiritually enlightened Guy. Even the name seemed most inappropriate, for the way Geser pronounced "Phuktal," registered in my ear as "fuck it all." How quickly those old desires resurfaced. Who was I kidding? How easy to be dry in the desert or wet in the ocean, how easy to put aside lust when there was nothing but sheep and goats—but then, as many shepherd would reveal, even that wasn't so easy.

Despite my newly acquired ascetic airs, there was too much promise of lascivious pleasures to decline Geser's invitation. I pressed him further, hoping that he would...flesh...out his intimations. Teasingly he declined.

"Soon you will see for yourself, No. Soon you will know for yourself, not as Geser sees, not as Geser knows, but as only you can. For each one, Phuktal is a different place, a different experience." He paused a long moment, looking intently into my eyes, making sure his connection. "Just as life!"

It was getting on in the day, shadows long, the canyon's depths already lost to the twilight. Ascending a particularly steep grade, we found ourselves at the edge of a broad plateau. Now Zanskar is a very sparsely populated land, but not because of a lack of potential inhabitants. Remember it lies sandwiched between the two most populous lands on earth, China and India. Despite its vastness, there is little arable land. Wherever there is chance for life, people gather. This plateau was a good example. Days from nowhere, well-tended fields of purple gold barley appeared, a matrix of irrigation channels delineating individual plots. These carried the waters of a distant glacier or snowfield to bring life to what would otherwise be a barren land. Beyond the fields stood clusters of houses, the fruits of the fields.

As we approached through those fields, figures of women popped up from their stoop labor. They were uniformly clad in the sack-like, homespun coss common to the entire Tibetan culture and much of the indigenous Himalayan population. While the coss itself was austere, they wore considerable jewelry: bracelets, necklaces, crowned by the intricate perag, that cobra-hooded

headdress heavily laden with turquoise. They were extremely friendly, no doubt because I was with Geser whom they knew well.

"Jule! Jule!" Their greeting was followed by offerings of freshly harvested tsampa, which had a pleasing nut-like quality. One of the women with a particularly elaborate perag came forward. The headdress must have weighed several pounds, for it was covered with rows of large spider-web turquoise from distant mines on the Tibetan Plateau. She was rather disheveled, straight from a day of backbreaking labor in the fields, her face as lined as the turquoise on her perag. From her rough coss, she produced a *kata*, a prayer scarf of diaphanous white cotton, and placed it with much show of affection around Geser's neck.

Everyone was in high spirits. It was harvest time, the time of festivity, the time of marriage. As we entered the village, I believe its name was Testa, a delegation of local worthies greeted us. To be precise, I shouldn't say we, for I had little to do with their appearance. It was Geser whom they honored because he had done them many favors in the past. His *sman*, a mixture of ancient and modern medicine, had saved their lives, as his pujahs their souls. Even here in this ragged corner of the universe protocol was valued—perhaps even more so for its remoteness. The elders approached with beaming smiles, intoning deferential blessings. In their hands were more of the diaphanous cotton prayer scarves. One by one they piled them around Geser's shoulders.

They ushered us to what must serve as the town square, a small bare field on the side—this was a very poor hamlet. We were seated with another group of villagers busily sorting dried tsampa. They kept pressing us to eat. Following Geser's lead, I kept declining. They kept pressing. Finally, after the proper show for politeness, Geser accepted a small handful and I—with the fervent prayer that the uncooked grain would not bring on a reoccurrence of my travail in Manali—followed suite. The offer of food, even symbolically, was a high honor in a land where the demand "Kharu!" ("GIVE ME FOOD!") is often the greeting. Even though well-formed sheaves of ripe barley filled the fields, even though before us was a great pile of golden grain, there was hardly enough to get the village, its people and animals, through the long winter.

KALAGIYA

It was a winter that, despite the warmth of the sun, might come within a few weeks and last for six months or more.

A small child sat on the lap of a man. I judged him to be the child's grandfather, but in that harsh land he could have easily been her father. She had wide, dark eyes, made even more so as they had been carefully outlined in kohl; her pink knitted suite accentuated the rose on her wind-chapped cheeks. Pinned to her miniature jibi was a medallion bearing a picture of the Dali Lama. Never have I seen a greater love for a child than that displayed by the beaming man. Holding her up for my inspection, the man whispered into the child's ear. The child shyly reached out with one grubby hand. In it she clutched a small amount of grain, "tsampa-don, tsampa-don" said the tiny voice. The company of gruff, well-weathered men broke into chuckles. We had broken that barrier formed by language. Through the act of a small child, a common bond was formed. We could all see ourselves through the eyes of that child, reaching out to give this strange, bearded outlander, the handful of life. Reflexively, I reached for my camera. The shutter snapped, and an image of the child went into the black box. Would I ever see that image reborn? But God! Who cared at that moment? At first I thought I had spoiled everything with my typical tourist response.

Earlier that day, a farmer had cursed me when I snapped him as he milled his tsampa. He didn't know me. I was just another tourist passerby, like a fly buzzing in and out of his life, giving nothing, not even a "Jule," just standing there with that demon box poking in his face, grabbing his soul.

Here, it was different; here I had a place, through the good offices of Geser. The thought that my black box would immortalize this beautiful child pleased the men. Too soon her beauty would wither into one of those leather faces seen in the fields. Babies and work wrung out physical beauty soon enough. How lucky, they might have thought, that in this moment of budding perfection, I had come along.

How lucky for me to arrive at such a rare moment of harmony, at a time when the crop had been successfully nurtured, but yet to be consumed. Yes, the winter, the time of hardship, was just around the corner. Yet as it was around the corner, it was still out of sight, still out of mind. Life was so good. The sun was warm, but not too

warm. There was pleasant company, there was food, and soon chai would arrive. It was moments such as this that made all the hardship of the trail worthwhile. It was a simple moment, simple people doing simple things. It was a moment to be savored.

The following morning, we departed along a trail marked by a long row of chortens. These seemed newly built, the gleam of the fresh lime made even more brilliant against a backdrop of black scree slopes. I asked Geser when they had been constructed, thinking the answer might be one or two years.

"Many hundreds of years ago No," was his answer. "Too long for the people to remember just when. They mark the way toward Phuktal."

Incredulous, I asked him how this could be. I knew the dry desert air tended to preserve things, but these looked too fresh, their angles too square to have weathered many Zanskari winters.

"Very true No, very true. Recently the villagers perform acts of dharma; they repaired the chortens giving new life. The cores of the chortens, remain the same, remain very old. They say within lie the hearts of bodhisattvas...those who died making yatra to Phuktal. They died here when a *buchal* struck. It shook the ground so hard that the mountain gave way, spilling the earth from very high down onto the way. Many years later, in another time of *buchal*...it happens so often in these mountains...again the mountain fell, but this time it opened the place where the saints were buried. All that was found were some bones and eleven perfectly preserved hearts. The villagers of the time constructed this shrine, placing a heart in each of the eleven chortens."

Past the chortens was a small ramshackled farmhouse, its wall and roof in obvious need of repair. At first I thought it was deserted, but passing through the courtyard, I saw an old man lying on the ground. His head was resting on a rock, facing down-valley. On his head was the traditional jibi, around his neck a roughly made necklace of seashells—a reminder of the impermanence of this land. In his hand, he clutched a mani wheel, a brass cylinder inscribed in Tibetan script with the familiar OM MANE PADME HUM, revolving around a stick. When twirled by the wrist, with the help the off-center weight of an attached chain, the cylinder would

spin. A prayer for the world would be broadcast with each revolution. A yellowish cur near the man growled at our approach. The man took no notice, continuing his work.

"He's an old shaman," Geser explained. "Once he had much power, but before my time. Then he lost his sight, and the people lost faith in his power to heal. They reasoned if he could not heal himself, how could he heal them. Now he has very little, yet he still feels the call of Dharma. Since there is little else he can do, he sits here most of the time, spinning the mani wheel, building karma for the world.

I couldn't help it; I had to take his picture. "Thuuck!" I felt very guilty, almost as if I was picking his pocket. Geser sensed my embarrassment.

"Many pictures, many pictures, always taking pictures! But it's good No that you make these pictures. This man is most holy. Perhaps your pictures will capture a small portion of his spirit, and give it to those who see them. We believe that spirit is for all to share. Not to make this man more holy in the sight of God, not so he can have special favor. His spirit is a gift that Lord Buddha grants to him and through him to the world. With the wheel, he spreads that spirit. Perhaps, through your photographs, this spirit spreads even more."

That night we made camp at Pune, near the confluence Kurgiakh and the Niri chus. The latter is a large river, leading to Phuktal and a vast system of nalas beyond. To cross the Kurgiakh, we made a long descent like those I had seen up-stream at other cross-river villages. After about an hour maneuvering countless switchbacks, we finally arrived at a rickety suspension bridge. This was an important crossing and therefore received more than the usual three strand "V," but only a little more. Here, three strands were stretched in parallel with boards placed across so that those on four, as well as two, legs could pass. I waited until the others crossed before I took my chances, making my standard excuse that I wanted photographs. I just didn't believe this feeble structure could take our combined weight. Even when I crossed alone, the bridge swayed with every step. I had visions of a cable or plank breaking, my flailing body hurtling down into the broiling, mocha-frothed chu, terrifyingly evident through the gaping

openings between the planks. When I gained the far bank, I caught looks of amusement on the faces of my companions, and even Geser had a twinkle in his eye. My excuse fooled no one. They knew all too well, the reaction of a tenderfoot ferenghi to, what was for them, a most modern convenience.

Several impressive chortens suggested Pune might be a village of substance, but it soon became apparent they were guidepost to Phuktal itself. As we topped a small hill, Pune lay unimpressively at our feet. Instead of the village I had expected, it was little more than one very large farmhouse with a few outlying buildings. To one side was the most recent addition, a camping ground for foreign tour groups. It was from this field that the farmer now made his greatest profit. Pune was a natural halting place for groups en route either to Padam or Darcha. Not only was it flat, a rarity in these parts, but it had the added attraction of the day's side trip to Phuktal Gomba. When we arrived, the campground was already filled with what seemed like a battalion of tourists, their uniform, bright blue tents set up in disciplined rows. How would it be to travel like that with such order, such regimen? I couldn't help wondering whether they were sent to bed with a bugle call.

Again, I wanted to distance myself. All the difficulties of the trail made me forget I was just another tourist. I had come to believe I was, if not of this land, at least here for a purpose. What did I have in common with these well-ordered sheep, who moved nervously through the land, waiting for that glorious day when they could return home and show their chromes and tapes to envious friends and neighbors?

Geser went off to make his rounds. Out of sight, secreted in the many tributary nalas that joined the Niri, were other houses. Each contained an isolated family with some urgent need for his service. After several days of subordination, Gul now saw his chance to reassert control.

"We get early start tomorrow Dad. Insha'Allah we make Padam in two days...so many photos maybe three. Food short, kafir priest eating too much. I not trust Zanskaris. Now in their home, now they having power. If something go wrong again, maybe I not save." With this last comment, he looked intently to see if I was buying his pitch.

Oh, I thought, so that is how it is supposed to be remembered. Gul saved my ass from the Zanskaris. Well, I suppose in a way he did, but it struck me that Gul was leveraging his advantage. He was posing that well-tested choice: the old, trusted friend versus the new and untried. Hadn't he proved his loyalty on the pass? Was I going to throw that away for the promise of some new acquaintance, for Geser? It would be impossible for Gul to understand Geser's importance to me. While in Delhi, I had rejected the need for a guide. Now finally, here was a man to whom I could unhesitatingly entrust my direction.

"Look Gul, I'm not so sure I want to take off for Padam tomorrow." For some unknown reason, even though I had already decided, I was unwilling to confess the finality of my plan. "I've been thinking of going to this Phuktal place. It's only a couple of hours walk, a day there and back. Geser says that..."

"Fuckit Dad, fuck the bastard Geser! He just fool you. It good for him to bring rich Angrez tourist to gomba. There he make you pay many rupees to see those old things of Sheytan. It big scam, I see many times. Maybe try sell you statues or paintings...then big trouble for me. I hear what happened with other sirdar. Much talk about that in Srinagar. Sirdar innocent, but Ladakhi walas want to make Kashmiris look bad, make us look like thieves. Now maybe Zanskaris try same to me."

* * *

But Gul didn't know quite the whole story. It had been Nazir, not the Ladakhis, who had set up the Sirdar. Then a thought hit me. Kashmir was small, and even smaller was the caste of Water People, but those events took place over a dozen years. Gul was too young. In the all those years, why was this event so well remembered? Why, unless Gul was connected to those for whom it had personal importance? Someone who knew my history intimately must have briefed him. What was that "uncle's" last name? Back in Delhi, there had been something vaguely familiar about Noor's family and the houseboats he described in such glowing terms. Now that I thought on it, Nazir had a brother named Aziz, a bother who owned several houseboats on Nageen. It

all came together. That same goddamned hand still clutched me. The Khonnu family of which Nazir was patriarch still had me at their tender mercy. Does he know I am coming? Is he sitting on his great, oily ass, in his overstuffed houseboat, waiting for me as the spider waits for the fly? Was this Gul just his shepherd boy guiding me, the sheep, to the slaughter?

Nazir was extremely devious. He had demonstrated his power when he orchestrated the Sirdar's bust. He felt honor-bound to show the upstart who was boss. How dare he do business with Nazir's customer? Oh, Nazir was too clever to nail the poor bastard in Srinagar, or over charas. That would have been hitting too close to home. Instead he chose Ladakh. Somehow, he discovered that the Sirdar was helping two of my clients, the two little queens from NYC, to score antiques.

After the trek, while I was off getting my balls busted on Nun, the couple had secretly contracted the Sirdar to go back to Ladakh. With me they had just been scouting, now it was time to conduct their real business. They knew only too well the prices the ancient statues and tangkhas would command back in their Christopher Street curio shop—I wasn't the only one with a hidden agenda. The big problem for them was that the Government had recently gotten wise to the value of all those goodies lying unguarded in the gombas. Priceless treasures were piled knee-deep, tangkhas, statues, reliquaries—out there in the open, gathering dust. Ladakh had been recently opened to foreigners, and it was only outsiders who could see profit in what the locals saw as Dharma, the labor of artists and artisans in devotion to God. To halt the illicit exportation out of Ladakh, the Indian Government instituted a policy of stamping the most valuable objects.

Somehow Nazir got word to the police. They were waiting when the trio, the Sirdar included, went to catch a flight to Delhi from the Leh airport.

"Excuse me Sahibs, anything to declare, maybe old things?" The question came from the Sikh custom-wala with a studied air of innocence. "No? Please be forgiving, but my duty to see what Sahibs have in bag. Oh, tangkhas! Oh, only souvenirs, gifts? So many souvenirs! Sahibs must have many friends? May I look Sahibs? In such things having much interest. Since posting to

Ladakh, my own collection making, but very small, very poor. It helps passing time while far away from my loving family. Hmm! My poor collection has nothing of these qualities. Pukkah, first class painting! But this not so new. Work today making for tourist not so fine."

Then with a sly smile, the officer turns the tangkha over. He already knows what he will find.

"But what is this? Sahibs, this very serious; this property of gomba. It cannot be sold. It must be stolen. You must come with me."

Of course, already primed, it wasn't on the tourist that the blame fell. How were they to know?

In the small, ramshackled office of the Chief Customs Inspector, a higher authority put the question. "How did you come by these valuable antiques Sahibs?" "You bought them from this Kashmiri?" Spittle formed in the corners of this honcho's mouth, as if even the term "Kashmiri" was distasteful.

As preordained, the blame fell on the Sirdar. While the couple was put on the flight, chastened but otherwise intact, the Sirdar, after the requisite preliminary beating, was whisked off to jail. It was a long, cold Ladakhi winter for the Sirdar behind Leh's prison walls. Far from family and friends, he barely survived. It took them more than six months to scrape together the cash to bail him out. What a mess! He wrote to me, asking for help, but, by that time, I was in the belly of an even more voracious beast.

I have always wondered; was that the full story? Maybe the Sirdar rolled over, giving me up to save his sorry ass. But then, Morgan had already bleated loud and clear. Whether I had been set up, set myself up, or whatever—it doesn't really matter. We get set on our little trips in life and, when they don't pan out, look for someone to lay the crushing burden of failure. It seems all so immaterial now—who did what to whom? We were all just trying to survive.

* * *

At Pune, I began to get an inkling of what lay ahead. I sensed, perhaps wishfully, that Geser was sent as a guide. It is not that I imagine Shiva, or some such deity, sitting up on his or her mountaintop, orchestrating my way. But through a scheme, far beyond my ability to comprehend, things were logically falling into place. Within this scheme, I saw my deliverance in Geser, and my damnation in Gul.

Gul did have some strange power over me. Despite my inherent dislike, I wanted to like him, and felt guilty for not liking him. As the land I so loved was his land, I should love him as well. But it was hard for me to love a Kashmiri. That would have been an unnatural love, like a fish loving the fisherman.

"Look Gul, I know I promised we would go the distance...to Padam. But this is an opportunity I don't want to blow."

"Opprotunaty, Dad?"

"I mean a chance to get some good photographs." I wasn't about to explain my real agenda, doubting he would understand. I wouldn't have at his age. "So far, I've been just shooting landscapes, not enough people or people things. I need something that says Zanskar, something special, otherwise these pictures could be from anywhere." Why did I bother, I belatedly asked myself? Did I imagine Gul could in any way grasp what I was on about—it was hard enough for me, the author of that Mad Ave glibbery.

"Maybe we go to Phuktal, just for day, Dad. I wait outside. Lamas not like...not like Muslims, not like Kashmiris. They have bad hearts, think all others bad. Better you go quick, just take pictures and leave before big trouble."

"I don't think so Gul. I have a better plan. You and Ravi go ahead and wait in Padam. Take Ravi's pony with the food and kitchen gear. Geser says we can eat at the gomba, so I'll not need. I'll take the Zanskaris with me. They'll have no trouble with the lamas. Insha'Allah, I'll meet you in Padam as soon as I finish at Phuktal."

"What about shit, Dad? What should we do about *stuff*? You carry or me?"

Was I hearing correctly? Was Gul just going to roll over and give it up without a struggle? My only thought was he must have some plan. I was beginning to let paranoia take over, wondering whether I wasn't just fitting into his master plan. Without giving me time to answer his own question, Gul continued. "I think I better take shit Dad. Maybe sheytan lamas look in saman, maybe when you go picture taking. They look for things of value, instead they find shit. They tell police you carry charas. They take reward."

Reward? I thought silently to myself. Then without thinking I pressed him, "What reward's that, Gul?" For some reason, which I couldn't figure out at the time, a quiver crossed Gul's face.

He stammered out, "Oh, oh, I...I...not know Dad...not for sure...but...but many times..." Then, after several moments of struggle, Gul seemed to grasp the thread of what he would tell me. "Everyone knowing in Srinagar, Dad. Lamas, in Zanskar, in Ladakh, not like charas. When finding tourist with shit, it very bad. Lamas not want shit in Ladakh. Before, too much charas here! Very big business! Number one business in Leh during Angrezi time! Much come from Chini side through Leh. Some grow there also. Lamas come together to stop the business. They afraid it make people dream, forget their foolish, lying teaching about Bud Sheytan. They want thoughts of lama always in people's mind, not people having own thoughts, free — like you and me. Eh? You know when smoke, how it is?"

This surprised me. It was the first time I had heard Gul voice concerns beyond his wallet, stomach, or balls. He spoke with such conviction that he almost carried the moment. Was I being foolish? After all, these lamas weren't some mystical force, the guardians of some higher truth, any more than the mullah of Gul's village or the parish priest of my own native town. The lamas were just men, and men who survived manipulating, for good or evil, the heads of those who supported them — like clerics throughout the world.

But then I rejected the cynicism that, heretofore, I would have quickly grasped. I was expecting the lamas to show me the way along a new, uncharted path. It was through them I hoped to dump those last remaining bits of accumulated saman, and try something, which in my wildest fantasies, until meeting Geser, I had not considered.

So now it is out in the open, I thought. This is Gul's real bottom line. Just as long as he controls the charas, he has little concern for me. In a way I was right, but only to a point. It was only the dope that held his interest. With me out of the way, he could sell it again. This time of year, there were all sorts of desperadoes flocking to Delhi. They would pay a lot more than I had for the load. But that Gul had no intention of parting me from my wares, would soon become apparent. On the contrary, he would be its faithful guardian. Gul thought he had my number, having learned not to fight my wishes openly, but rather to let me feel I was doing things my way. All he had to do was take charge of the dope, and I would be back.

"This Angrez will follow me to Jhana, if I hold his dope. I know a real charasi when I see one."

Despite my misgivings, or perhaps because of them, I agreed to let Gul take the charas. It was, after all, a huge part of my saman, if not physically, certainly mentally. I had thought so much about lightening the load, about committing myself to this new life, or at least ending the old. With the dope gone, there was absolutely no way for me to return. I had seen what happened to freaks with nothing, ferenghis without the means to get a toehold on the struggle that is life below. I determined not to reduce myself to panhandling in some urban jungle, whether on Janpath or Union Square. That would be my just reward if I chose to cling to life. Now it was in my grasp. All I had to do was say, "Ji, i'nok, yes."

That night we had a "farewell" dinner. Geser was still away, and Gul prepared a modest feast.

"Maybe you not eat so good for much time Dad. Lamas not know how to cook, food poor, food dirty. I make proper food. Kashmiri way best."

From the farm he bought a chicken, slaughtering it himself in the halal manner. In a gentle, almost seductive killing, he stroked the victim until it calmed and then, with the victim's fear gone, slit its throat. Before the bird could know what had happened, it was no more, lifeblood draining into a pan. I fought the temptation to see my own throat in the place of the chicken, to imagine Gul's soothing stroke followed by nothingness. Was he just taunting

me? Then I realized it must be the joint we had smoked a little earlier, the first one in several days. With it all those fears returned.

The next morning, we got an early start. Gul seemed in good spirits. With my morning chai—how I now regretted the loss of my kofi—he brought a ball of charas, maybe a tola. With a conspiratorial wink, he slipped it to me. "Here Dad, for your journey. Remember what I say about lamas. Don't smoke, eat! Then no one know."

With our reduced load, packing went quickly. Most of the things were to go with Gul. I vacillated over the tent, but in the end let him take it. What use would I have for a tent at the gomba? For at that moment I believed the gomba would be the end of my journey. The ponies were loaded. Pal, Yosh, Geser, the yearling, and I stood on the low, chorten-lined ridge. Looking down on the bridge, we watched as Gul, Ravi, and the Black made their way across and began the long climb to regain the main trail. Each one of us said good-bye in our own way. In a land of such few living beings, good-byes are always bittersweet, even if it was to one for whom you didn't particularly care. We watched until we could no longer hear the dull thunk of the Black's bell. As we turned eastward, Gul's party had been reduced to tiny multi-legged insect climbing the nala's wall.

Heading up the Niri, we entered canyon lands reminiscent of southern Utah. While before we had been high above the chu, able to take in the vast scale of the land, now we were down beside the river, walled in by cliffs of ochre, magenta, crimson. The Niri was a much larger river system than the Kurgiakh. Following its course to the source a traveler would arrive on the northwestern side of the Baralacha-la, close by to the Leh road. If I wanted, I could just disappear up the nala, get on that road and be in Delhi in a matter of days, or at least it looked that way on the map. Then the joke would be on Gul. Of course, he had a little insurance in that thousand-dollar ball of charas.

The trail was dusty, and as the day progressed it grew quite warm. Occasionally at strategic places we came across a chorten or mani-don. At each of these reliquaries, Geser and the boys halted to perform some dharma-driven landscaping chore: replacing a

missing stone, or picking up trash left by tourists less devout to either the cultural or ecological sanctity of the nala. I considered myself lucky, because on that day no large party headed off in the same direction. The farmer told me there was still one small group left at the gomba, but that they would be back, "Maybe, tomorrow." As it was late in the season, without further bookings, he believed no other groups would follow. Only a small group? I wondered. But from the size of the camp, with all those blue tents, how small was small? Anyway, they would soon be leaving; perhaps even now they were winding their way down the trail. Yes, if luck was with me, I would see them for a few painful moments as we passed on the narrow trail. "Good morning!" That would be sufficient, pleasant but curt. I wouldn't want them to think me just another tourist. Yes, they would wonder who is this strange American, who comes to this place without other tourist companions, who travels with a lama and two local boys. Oh, they would think I was an odd bird all right. I enjoyed the idea that I would linger in their minds—an enigma. After about two hours on the deserted track, rounding a corner, I came upon the first of the group.

It is bizarre how their presence lingered in my mind. It was that Spindrift thing again, the thought of others invading my feeling of oneness. Humans were noise clouding the channel of direct communication, their presence returning me to the bounded human I was, rather than the unbounded universe I wished to be. Perhaps they too felt the same. Weren't they strung out either singly or in pairs? Even though they had come in a group, it was the nature of the land to cause one to seek solitude. The land demanded your attention. It wasn't to be relegated to a mere backdrop for human discourse, but for direct, uninterrupted communion, each one with nature.

There were muffled acknowledgments, and then we each went our own ways, retreating into our separate communions. Somewhat self-consciously, we might even use the Hindi greeting, "Namaste." Yet, as ferenghis, we wouldn't truly see that "Godhead." How strange that we all sought the Godhead, listened for that same Anhad-Naad, yet we were so jealous of one another. Unlike the Gods of this land, we couldn't grasp our connection in that One. It was our curse to see diversity where there was only

One. But then at the time, I too couldn't see. The doorway to this understanding lay ahead—the fullest of that understanding even further beyond this now.

It seemed we descended deeper into the heart of the Earth, the arterial crimson coloring our passage only reinforced this illusion. We were climbing, however, going up what was a rather steep nala to judge by the flow of its chu. It was just that those crimson walls were also growing higher. At times they threatened to close, blocking forever that reassuring ribbon of cobalt above. If I could see the sky, I still grasped some reality. I fought suffocation, of being enfolded within the womb of Mother Earth. As a man-child, I had spent my entire life escaping the womb. Birth was only the initial spasm of the struggle for independence. Yet while part of me struggled to be free, another part struggled to return—that vaginal fascination? But that was also only one aspect. Ultimately, it was the mystery of what was beyond, deep within lay the inexplicable riddle of life to which that orifice was only the opening. So much of my thought, my energies, had been directed to that mysterious cleft.

I panicked. I saw my companions traveling, as if nothing was happening, as if making an everyday journey. I was going mad with these esoteric thoughts. In my desperation to move beyond, I had loaded so much meaning onto this excursion that I felt certain hesitancy, if not foreboding, to proceed.

For the novice tourist, there would be no such hesitancy. With a suddenness that belies its possibility, the nala opens into a wide arena, again revealing snow-capped peaks long hidden. Oh how excited the tourists must be! Finally, they have a chance to see a real gomba, the first of any importance on the journey north. With images of Shangri-La echoing in their brains, the neophytes look expectantly upward. Will the sight equal those brazen brochure promises? They aren't disappointed: "A towering, fantastical structure that seems to spill from the mouth of a great cave, Phuktal monastery is many centuries old." Perhaps the tract went on to tell that this mystic complex houses a large group of lamas; that they belong to the Gelug-pa order, one of the four major sects of the Vajrayana, or "Diamond Vehicle"—along with the Sakya-pa, Kargyu-pa, and the most ancient Nyingma-pa. Not wishing to

bore readers with too much information, the blurb probably didn't mention that Gelug-pa means "Followers of the Virtuous." Only the more scholarly tourist would be aware that this order has a special relationship with the Tara, considering itself to be the principal guardian and teacher of her traditions, believed to be the embodiment of the Buddha.

The tract will, however, surely mention: "In a small red building within the mouth of the cave, your climb will be rewarded by the sight of ancient frescoes, statues, and reliquary. The door is usually locked, but for a small donation a lama will willingly open it for viewing—but no flash photography please." Since my last visit to a gomba, the lamas had become sophisticated to the dangers of modern tourism. Then, I had been able to roam at will, setting up powerful strobes and flashing away. Maybe that was what had led to my troubles? I wouldn't have been the first ferenghi who tried to unlock the secrets of the "Diamond Vehicle," only to meet with disaster. Of this the brochure will not speak. After all, the physical dangers of the trip already weigh heavily upon the perspective customer without introducing any metaphysical risks. The brochure might give one admonishment, the sacred spring flowing within the cave must not be approached by women—how quaint those lamas in their naive superstitions.

The brochure wasn't overblown. Just as I thought I was entering the very mouth of Hell, those tightly enfolding, red-walled lips opened into a lush valley. Maybe lush wasn't the exact term, but after all the crimson rock, a patch of grass, or a few trees, seemed paradise. For a moment, the sudden enormity of the natural vista engulfed me. Then slowly a row of chortens stretching up a steep path came into focus. The sky clouded, and the chortens took on an eerie, pale ivory glow, as if the light came from within, beckoning me on.

My eye followed the direction of the chortens; they met with the gomba. There it was, just as I had imagined, only more—the great, gaping black mouth of the cave, the towering, lime-washed buildings tumbled out like teeth of some fantastic monster. It was no puzzle as to why this monastic retreat had been established here almost a thousand years ago. The cave with its spring was an ideal place to escape the cares of a secular world. Founded in a

tumultuous era, the difficult approach provided security against any invader—Arab, Turk, and Mongol. Across from the cave is a tributary nala where, with diligence, the monks fashioned terraced fields from the rocky hillside. An intricate system of irrigation made the fields flourish. From the strength of the stream that fed this system, I could only imagine that some great glacier lay around the bend.

Geser explained that an itinerant lama had stumbled into this valley and sheltered for the night in the cave. There he heard Tara's call, "Remain here and worship me for in this place I dwell." Half a millennium later, the rustic cave was organized by the emerging reformist Gelug-pa order, an order with secular as well as spiritual ambitions, into an official gomba.

It was a long climb up to the gates of the gomba, but filled with so much expectation, I felt as if I was flying. At the gate, I received a mild shock. Pinned to the wall were carcasses, heads, hooves, tails, and horns of many animals, a wolf-like dog, a large feline carcass that might have been a snow leopard. I didn't wish to examine them too closely, for despite an attempt at preservation, the corpses gave off the unmistakable stench of decay. Directly above the gate was an intricate web of string, framing a brooding ibex skull. I looked at Geser with questioning eyes.

"The animals scare away the armies of Mara. The string emblem snares any that might try to enter. You think this primitive, eh No? But after a winter here, you too will believe such spirits."

We talked of Mara as an abstraction, a symbol, but I had yet to tell him of my experience, or that a real, material Mara loomed large in my mind.

"When the cold wind howls from the mountains, it's the signal that Mara marches. The walls of your heart need to be as thick as the walls of these towers. It's no wonder the lamas will try anything, even the old ways. What's the harm?"

This was puzzling because I had come to believe Mara wasn't wholly malign. Didn't Geser see the same duality, the same capacity for a reflective good and evil. Why would the way be barred? Why not embrace Mara? Sudden pride surged through me. Perhaps I was privy to an understanding beyond even these holy

men. Tentatively, yet with the sly conceit of one sure of some great truth, I mentioned this to Geser.

"Remember No, our tradition is collective, going back many thousands of years. As such it incorporates, what some might call, 'superstitions' from the past. Much of what we outwardly signify is an expression of this tradition, its most deep hopes and fears. However, that's only the outward expression, a simple, clear light for a humankind too absorbed in life's struggle. Life is very hard in this land No. It requires a division of duties. Most must go about the business of making food, building shelter and raising future generations. It is only for those few with the fortune...ah sometimes I think it a curse...to go deeper into the mysteries; who can learn the light is not so simple, that it's made of many energies...many frequencies, many particles as your physicist would say. It is only for those blessed few who've been given the power to master this confusion that the light returns to one clear, all-illuminating radiance. This is what we all seek, the Diamond Truth."

The gate was wide open. Apparently, Mara and the army of goulsh spirits weren't expected that day. Once more we climbed; the walls of individual towers formed a maze only those who knew the way could penetrate. This was Geser's "home" gomba, for though he practiced with some independence in Kurgiakh, it was to the Shushok of Phuktal he must periodically report.

Hoping to impress Geser with the little I knew about Phuktal, I ventured, "I've read that this gomba belongs to the Gelug-pa."

"Ji, No. This is as it should be since the Gelug-pa is the official order of Tibet." Then with unaccustomed gravity he added, "it is the order of the Dalai Lama."

"Oh, then you too must be Gelug-pa, Geserji?"

Geser looked rather noncommittal. Then almost with a sigh, "I suppose that is true, No, but the color of the hat is of little importance. It's the mind inside the hat that must find the way. Because I was trained Gelug-pa my hat is yellow. The color of my brain, however, is still the same as my brothers whose hats are red or, for that matter, the black of those who follow the more ancient

ways." Geser had been out there, alone and independent in his remote posting. He had gone his own way.

"All these things are our feeble attempt to comprehend what's most likely incomprehensible. What does it matter how we call what we see, if we have faith that we are seeing, feeling, living the same thing? You see the color of this building. You Angrez have one name for it; you call it 'white'. One who speaks Hindi would call it '*safed*'. When speaking in my language, I call it '*kharpo*'. Three different words from three different traditions, yet we who use those words see the same thing. If I point to the wall and say '*kharpo*' you may not understand at first. I might mean 'wall'; I might mean 'building'; how can you tell? Yet if I keep pointing to many things, all of which have the same *kharpo* color, you will eventually come to know its meaning. This is because you believe in your heart that we see the same thing. Is this not the way of religion? If we believe in our heart it's all the same, then it's only a matter of time...a matter of patience...until we can get past the difference in words and understand that we feel the same. This does...I must admit...take much more time than a simple color. But then No, in this place is much time to think on these things."

As we progressed, we began to pick up a string of young chouts, shaven heads under the tall Gelug-pa yellow caps, their gaunt frames covered by threadbare, crimson robes. They greeted Geser as one would a beloved elder brother. The older boys met him with an embrace, walking with him hand-in-hand for a few paces before giving up their place to another. The smaller boys would just grab on to his robe. Pal and Yosh were also getting their share of attention. Zanskar, though vast in land, is close-knit in population, and at least several of the boys were relatives or neighbors. There was a steady stream of chatter as boys asked about the outside world, of family and friends.

Most came here at the age of eight and were taught to read and write the Tibetan texts and, a select few, the intricate rites of Tantra. This teaching requires strict adherence to a guru; its powers too awesome acquire casually. No amount of reading or other second-hand techniques will suffice. The adept must bestow directly the power to a successor. Any attempt to short-cut this laborious regimen is destined to end in disaster. These were a

group of boys like any in the world, some boisterous and aggressive, some shyly demure as young girls. If they hadn't been dressed in their robes, there would have been no way of telling them apart from a gang of village rascals.

One particularly bold fellow, he couldn't have been more than fourteen, latched on to my hand and with great pride half-asked, half-demanded: "You take picture, Babbuji. I very beautiful boy. You take picture." He wasn't too far off the mark, for he was quite handsome, almost feminine in his beauty, the deep red of his robe bringing out the pink blush on his cheeks. Unlike the other boys, his large camel-lashed eyes were gray rather than black, his nose drawn fine while theirs were flat and broad—this was a border land with many races and mixtures. He emitted a cascade of giggles whose timbre sounded more feminine than masculine.

For a moment, like a jolt of electricity through my body, I felt stirrings of desire. Although the feeling was well known, I was confused. Where could it come from? This was the feeling I had with Tara, with Mei, and not a few other women before. Now there was only this...boy.

My mind drifted back to those laalies of Chitral...then even further back...to one or two of those beautiful underclassmen with whom I had once been so enamored. God! Was it coming back to this? After all the years of pursuing women, was I going to spend my last emotional energies on this boy? There had been the excuse of sexual awakening in those first stirrings. At least that was how I had always rationalized...excused it. But what if that was what I had wanted all the time? What if this was what I really sought, but substituted women in response to social dictates? Besides, what is the difference now? That lamp was surely empty. Hadn't I committed? Hadn't I played it out in my mind, to become sannyasin, to renounce the pleasure of this life? Somehow, I thought by accepting Geser's invitation I was now on some magic carpet ride to nirvana. What was this sudden glitch in my plans? Why this stirring when I no longer wished any?

Geser broke the spell. He launched into, what was for him, an angry tirade. Tears welled in the eyes of the boy, and he fled into a nearby doorway, buffeted by the echoing chortles of his comrades. Just as he was about to disappear in the darkness, he turned and

looked at me. Hurt filled those large gray eyes. It was as if all the hurt I had ever given had collected there. I thought I heard his voice cry out.

"This is your chance, your last chance to comfort me."

It was a different voice, not the Pidgin English squeak I had heard moments before, but a voice that seemed to incorporate all the voices within me—those near to my heart and those long forgotten.

"That Atisa is always trouble, so strange, so strange." For a moment, a wistful look clouded Geser's face. Then he snapped back, his eyes sparkling with amusement, and he began to tell me something of this boy.

"A year ago, a tourist lady fell in love with him, like a son, that kind of love, or at least so she led us to believe. She was alone in life and had no son...very sad. She wanted to adopt Atisa, thinking she could give him so much more than he already had...Western learning and all the material comforts that people of your lands possess. She was a very rich and used to having her way. She couldn't imagine why the Shushok would refuse the chance for this boy to get "educated." Of course, that was the last thing the Shushok would want, but he is a very good man, a very fair man. He told the woman, if she really wanted the boy, she should stay here a while and learn about the boy's culture, also really get to know him...I mean...past those rosy cheeks and clear, long-lashed eyes."

Here Geser's voice took on a trace of huskiness, as if the youth's beauty had bewitched him too. He collected himself and continued, his voice now back into its familiar tone.

"For an entire summer the woman remained. It caused quite a stir among the younger monks, for she was not yet old and young men are...no matter how spiritual. It was all quite upsetting. She began to teach Atisa some English.

"The Shushok ignored the unrest, thinking that with so many tourist, it might be useful for Atisa to learn the foreigners' language. The woman, trying to gain Atisa's favor, kept telling him how beautiful he was. It was she who taught him those very words

he spoke to you. She thought it would be amusing to surprise arriving tourist. This happened almost a year ago, and it was very unpleasant. Atisa wasn't the only one receiving the woman's attentions. She had an affair with two brothers from Zangla...at the same time. It seems she read about our old tradition of a woman taking brothers as husbands. The idea sparked her imagination, and she could not let it go. Anyway, it's an old tradition. Only people in the remote villages follow it today...and then only when there is need."

He laughed with this last thought.

"It sometimes takes more than one man to keep a woman happy, eh No?"

Unfortunately, I knew only too well that this was true. But I thought better of interrupting. I wanted to hear the entire tale.

"The brothers didn't even know about the situation at first. What they were doing was strictly against their vows, being with the woman that is. So each went about it in a very secret manner. Then one brother caught the other deep within the woman. He went crazy and almost killed his brother. It was a very big problem for the Shushok. He was very unhappy because he knew it was his fault. He had placed the temptation there and for a wrong purpose. If he had not wanted Atisa to learn English, to extract more profit from the foreigners, then the souls of the brothers would have never been at risk. The first thing he did was send the woman away, then he banished the brothers to tiny hamlets at opposite ends of Zanskar. But he too felt much guilt and went away for many months to do penance. Now all is well, the brothers have reconciled, both to one another and to their vows. Even the Shushok is back to himself. Only Atisa is left to remind us of temptation's visit. You see No, there are evil spirits at large in this world; we picture them as armies doing the work of Mara, the Dark Lord. It is only through the intercession of Lady Tara, who carries the torch of the Diamond Truth, that we can be protected. Sometimes the guardians placed at the gate are not so watchful...sometimes Mara's agents slip through the most elaborate defenses. I fear for Atisa because, I think, some of the evil has entered his heart. We must be diligent with him, both for himself and others. He has the mark of Kama. It was his beauty that

snared the woman, and it was the woman who almost tore the gomba apart. That beauty lies still with him. Perhaps it will vanish as he grows to be a man, but for the time being, we must watch him, watch him closely."

I had only been in the place a few minutes, and already embroiled in the battle of good versus evil. How simple it is to be alone. Then it isn't about good or evil, it only is. But when others come, then the One dissolves, clear light fragments into a spectrum of competing desires.

As I made the climb to the cave opening, I carried a new burden. In my mind was an image of Atisa, infinitely more attractive than the reality I had met on the stairs. It insinuated itself inside of me, grasping the part of mind that is curiosity. I had this terrible need to feel the press of his cool, delicately wrought hand, to stare once again into an imagined exquisiteness of kohl-drawn, purple and gold flecked gray eyes. I told myself it wasn't a sexual attraction...at least overtly so. Yes, it was his sheer physical beauty, a beauty making gender or age irrelevant. That is what captivated me. Just to have that beauty in my presence, just to gaze on it was enough. For such a seemingly endless time I had been in male company. I hungered for the softness and beauty found only in the female—or the very young. Now for a moment, I felt it in my hand, a reconnection to part of life grown remote, so much the stuff of dreams. Yet, instinctively, I knew I was in deep shit.

What in the hell was happening? Where was my head that, in such a fleeting moment, this young punk could touch me so? Atisa was just the distraction I didn't need. Was this a desperate attempt by my mind to maintain its individuality? Somewhere in that gomba was the door to the One. In stepping through it I would find liberation from Guy. Was it Guy who now fought with such desperation? If he could find an object, a being to justify his existence, then he could live on. That was what love had been for him...for me...a justification for being. This attraction for Atisa, then this feeling he needed me, that was enough to keep Guy going. The thing I desired least of all.

The strenuous climb left me gasping, giving momentary respite from thoughts of Atisa. As we climbed higher, the sound of chanting, drum, cymbal, and shanai, grew louder. The lamas were at their pujah in the du-khang, explaining why I had seen only the chouts. We waited in the courtyard below until the pujah ended. Word of Geser's arrival quickly reached the Shushok. With a fanfare of long brass and copper horns, followed by the blowing of a conch by a tiny chout, the Shushok appeared on the porch. We were summoned forward. It was only because of my connection to Geser that I was included, for meeting this luminary was an honor not every ferenghi received.

I must say my first impression was slightly disappointing. I had been expecting some awesome, spiritually radiating divine. Instead, before me was an old man, short in stature and almost as wide in girth. Like all the lamas, his head was shaven, and he wore thick spectacles. At first, I thought him to be the quintessential jolly friar. But then looking closer, there was something, just a hint in his eyes, that suggested great wisdom—together with the power such wisdom conferred. This was a man quite literally born to his position. He had learned from an early age, if not an earlier life, how to wear this heavy mantle, and he wore it effortlessly.

There was ceremony in the exchange of greetings between the Shushok and Geser; they were master and subordinate, and others were watching. Apparently Geser had been a particularly favored chout, for despite the outward show of formality, there was an undercurrent of deep affection in their greeting. Geser pulled out from his coss a diaphanous white kata and, with great show of humility, hung it about the Shushok's neck. It was one of the scarves Geser had received in Testa. Using my own logic, I would have thought this rather humorous—the cheapskate recycling gifts. But from Geser's perspective, his act was most natural. The kata holds a blessing to be shared. The material itself is of no value. It is the spirit that is symbolized. That spirit can't be owned, only passed on.

After the required courtesies, the Shushok looked over at me with shy curiosity. He spoke in Ladakhi, his lips smiling, but his eyes boring into mine. Geser translated the meaning of those smiling lips, "The Venerable Shushok welcomes you to Phuktal. His

Holiness is most sorry; while he speaks many languages, English is not one of them...although he understands a little. The Venerable Shushok always regretted not having the opportunity to learn more." There was a moment of embarrassed silence, as if Geser realized he might have reopened last year's wound. Recovering, he continued. "The Venerable Shushok hopes you will enjoy the hospitality of the gomba and that you may find something useful for your journey."

While the Shushok's words seemed pleasant enough, his eyes were less welcoming. It was as if they were trying to reach inside me.

"Who is this stranger? Why has he come to this place? Is he yet another of Mara's legion, like that ferenghi woman last year? Yes, the guise of the chela is a good one. We open our hearts, begin to give them our knowledge, and then they strike."

We were strangers, meeting in the middle of separate journeys, trying to decide whether we should let the other enter our hearts. The Shushok was a leader and, if you believed the party line, one for many lifetimes. The events of the previous year had undercut his confidence. He had fallen short. True, it was for the good of the gomba, but a false good only to increase material well being. The price paid was a spiritual one. He couldn't afford another mistake.

All of this transpired in less time than one can think. It was sort of our own little confab, held on a channel privy from everyone else—a momentary flash of understanding. Then, as if there had been nothing but unadulterated warmth, he grabbed my hand and, with awkward enthusiasm, shook it up and down—unaccustomed, yet eager, to perform this curious Angrez greeting. The meeting was quickly over, and some lower ranking lamas escorted me to a room where I could eat and rest. Geser and the Shushok had much to discuss.

I had a fitful night. I was again quite high—in altitude. We had climbed the nala at quite a steep pitch, and we must have been over twelve thousand feet. That I wasn't alone, but in the company of numerous minute bed mates, didn't help matters either. I suspected the lodging would have fleas, but to have refused the gomba's hospitality was the equivalent of spitting in the Shushok's face. In the middle of the night, after many failed

attempts to con myself into sleep, I rummaged around in my kit looking for a chocolate bar, a biscuit, anything sweet that might settle my nerves. Instead the first thing my fingers came upon was the charas ball. Earlier, in the rush of newfound spirituality, I had made a silent vow that I wasn't going to indulge. I guess, if I had been serious, I would have chucked it. But a charasi is a charasi, or as they say in Kabul, "charasi combene marsi." Not one for half measures, I took a rather large bite, perhaps too large, for soon I was off into a world that was most inappropriate for a sannyasin—either real or wannabe.

The room they assigned was the official "hotel" for the gomba, a place they stashed unexpected visitors who weren't part of the religious order. The lamas had gone out of their way to make it bright, covering the walls with a riot of multicolored flower prints that made me think of a seraglio rather than a monk's cell. The bed was equally sumptuous, filled with feathers of some unknown origin and age, but lending itself to the general aura of overstuffed indulgence. Perhaps, this was their subtle way of pointing out the difference between worldly visitors and their own austere selves. I stared out the window and saw what was now an almost full moon, casting its silvery glow on the ridge to the east. The gomba was fast asleep. Except for the lamas who, to the beat of the pujah drum, sent out their prayers into the night. The mantras echoed briefly then were lost to those eternal Himalayan sounds—wind and water, punctuated by the staccato snap of the prayer flags festooned beneath my window. Now and then came the unexpected...the howl of a wolf, the snarl of the leopard...the snow leopard? Possibly, but when the hour is late, the mind seeks exotica. More likely it was the bark of dogs and the wail of the gomba cats, fighting over the carcass of some rodent victim. I stared at the moon for some time, time enough for the charas to enter my blood, to feel it grab hold of my nervous system, twisting sensory organs, as one would turn the wireless dial. I felt my heart growing large. My mind lost touch with what, only moments before, had seemed so real.

Having traveled to the moon and back to lands it so delicately painted, I now was completely disoriented. I imagined I had returned but with no clear idea to what I was returning. There was a knock on the door, or was it on my skull, or my soul, at the time

it didn't matter. I saw a figure enter. It was still in the shadow, I couldn't make out who or what it was.

"Who is it?" I asked, my voice rising with some instinctive fear. "Is that you Geser...Pal...Yosh?"

At that hour, they were the only ones I could think would disturb me. Without a word the figure slipped down beside me on the bed. The moon cast light directly across the area the figure now occupied. I saw the face of Atisa, but it was an Atisa unseen before. While the features were familiar, where there had been reddish stubble was now covered by long curling locks. Skin that had been marred by the rough and tumble life of a young chout was now alabaster, almost translucent in the moon glow. Lips were painted in the shape of a budding rose, the darkness of the red almost black against the pure white. Camel-lashed eyes were accentuated with kohl. What had been childish pretty was now ravishing beauty. Had I never been able to do more than look into that face for eternity, I would have been a happy man. There was no need to do more, for such was the satisfaction this Atisa's beauty gave. But what was behind that face had deeper plans. It wasn't content to captivate my gaze; it wanted more. From Atisa's demeanor, if it was Atisa, I could tell it wasn't a photograph or English lesson.

"I know Babbuji, I know what is in your heart of hearts. You think you can find happiness in some place not of this Earth, in the Shambhala that these foul old monks prattle about. You think you can follow the Shushok to Shambhala, but how can that be Babbuji? If Shambhala lies within, how can you follow the Shushok to its gates? Even the Shushok, whose powers are great, cannot enter you, and you cannot enter the Shushok. Well...I suppose you could...even if that old fart can't get it up any more."

Here this Atisa-like creature gave out a wild cackle, as if some other malevolent voice had slipped through.

"You ought to see the way he looks at me," the voice was hissing almost catlike, "If he could, he would." Recovering, Atisa continued in that soothing, childlike voice. "You can find Shambhala, Babbuji, you know you can find it in that same place you found it before. It was only for a moment, an instant perhaps," another howling cackle "but that was only because of *them*, not

you. You were ready, but they were not. I am here now Babbuji, the road has been long, but you have finally arrived where you belong, you are before the gates of that which you have always sought. I am the gate. Enter! ENTER ME!"

My head was spinning, the room was changing, it was as if I was within a three dimensional—no four dimensional was more accurate—kaleidoscope, where a panoply of boudoirs, backseats, bordellos, cribs, cages, through every place of sexual encounter I had ever known, or imagined, confronted me. As those environs changed, so too did the form beside me. Before my eyes flashed faces long forgotten, faces that had for moments brief or long meant so much, only to be so quickly replaced by another. What was this all about? It was a stream of all that love, that lust—I had never pinned down the difference, never known quite how to separate the two—swirling into an ever-tightening vortex, a vortex which, as I gazed down, fell into that rosebud-rimmed darkness, in that...

"Dadee want breakfast now?" I fought back that external noise, I fought to see further down into the vortex, to see more fully the nature of those pursed, pouting lips. But they were gone. Instead of exquisite beauty, I awoke to Pal's pleasant but plain face. Instead of the answer to my existence, I got only bed chai.

As so often happens in my life, dream and waking became one. Senses groped in an attempt to locate mind, but there were none of the familiar markers to make me think I had returned to some "reality." True, in the full light of the morning sun, all the room's finery was a bit faded, a bit tattered, the voluptuousness of the bedding revealed for what it was—a jumbled pile of quilts, not that silk covered pavilion of unending delights. True, my body bore scars of the attentions of my night's companions, but though my seraglio was tarnished, it was nevertheless totally bizarre. In the next room, I could hear the chatter of the chouts as they prepared breakfast, their words totally incomprehensible. I saw the window and, for a moment, had no idea either in space or time what lay outside. Had I awoken in the gomba of Hilton's Shangri-La, I wouldn't have been more surprised. At that moment, anything was possible. In addition to environmental disorientation, the charas still gripped me, tweaking all those sensory channels necessary for

navigation. Had I reached that point where life and dream become one? Had I reached down within myself to the point past all duality? That point where *I* existed independent of all—dream or reality.

Breakfast brought everything quickly back into order. No doubt, I was now awake. There is nothing like Zanskari *solja*—a mixture of chai, yak ghee, salt, and crumbled barely chapatis, to make me realize that this was no dream. How could I dream up such a brew? This wasn't *amrita*, ambrosia of Gods and dreamers. This was the stuff of physical life and, after several deep draws from the brass cup, I was back to it.

"Geser send Dadee message. He want show gomba. All famous things and their story he tell. You get up. Geser come soon."

No sooner had Pal said those words than Geser appeared at the doorway.

"Did you have a comfortable sleep?"

He looked at me with an uncharacteristic troubled glance, as if he already knew the answer to his own question. Of course, I wasn't about to give up the all too revealing contents of my dream. I had only just come out of it myself and, to say the least, was troubled. There was much to think about. I wasn't even sure it was a dream. The presence of Atisa, or what appeared to be Atisa, had been so real. I thought I could still detect traces of rose attar that had wafted across those few inches of space between her...his... face and mine. God! How reluctant I was to say "his." How I wanted "his" to be "her." How much more comfortable I would have been.

"This morning you will make pictures? I spoke to the Shushok last night. He is very eager for you to make good pictures so we may have a record of gomba. He hopes when you return to Amrika, you will send him copies. Maybe you can also show the pictures to others, to others who are interested in spiritual things—not like that woman. I have told the Shushok that you are such a man...let me tell you...I mean a man of the spirit. He is most interested in you and promises to give you a darshan later."

Here it goes, I thought. The crafty monks always find some use. But then survival was always a given, no less for religious than for laity.

"Chalo! Now you will see the gomba. The Shushok was most explicit how I should show you, I mean, in what order. First, I must show how a lama lives—his living quarters. Most buildings have such cells...for the lamas...then the place of work. Here all lamas work from lowest to highest at some householder chore, cooking, cleaning, farming, record keeping."

Geser face took on an unaccustomed look of pride. "In this gomba is the special craft of bookmaking. These are not books as you know them, but stacks of paper which we wrap between boards. We Gelug-pa are famous for scholarship. Now lamas work on a Ladakhi translation of the Tibetan text of the sermons of the Buddha. We already have such books transcribed from the writing of Ananda many centuries ago, but these are in Pali, the old language of the Nang'pa. It is said that when the Lord spoke these words, all living creatures heard them and understood them in their own way. But that was in a more enlightened time, when humankind was less burdened with karma. Now the sacred words must be put in local languages so people may understand. All Nang'pa hold these texts to be sacred. Often the most venerable objects receive our *monlams*, prayers."

For a moment, a lost look seized Geser's face, as if he had forgotten where he was going.

"The books, you were saying Geserji?" I asked trying to bring him back on track.

"Acchaa, the books! Where was I going with this? How can I guide you if I cannot keep on the way? Ji...this is why the library is such an important part of a Gelug-pa gomba. In this gomba we make many books. They are sent out to gombas all over Zanskar and Ladakh...before, even to Tibet. You have already seen much of the domestic work, so I will not belabor that. The Shushok always likes to stress that part, wants to make sure that people coming here do not think...how do you say it...the ride is free. We will first go to the place of the books. There you can see the making of the books and the quarters of the librarian. After this, we will go to the du-khang,

and you may observe our *yang*...the ritual prayers. Finally, I will show you the center of this gomba, the *lha-khang*, where the holy images are stored. There you can see the material remains of many centuries of artistic meditation, how lamas of this gombas saw the Gods. Do you like the program, No? Please bring much film. There is much to photograph."

Passing through the kitchen on our way out, I smart-assed myself with the thought, so this was the first step on the path to Enlightenment. I caught a glimpse of Atisa, scrubbing a large iron pot in the corner. An uncontrollable chill went through me—from fear or pleasure I wasn't sure. Then I looked closer. Far from the vision of my dream, Atisa's hair was back to its proper stubble length, and the ever-so enchanting face, soot covered. He was turned to his work, and our eyes failed to meet. I wondered at my desperation. How could this ragged urchin have disturbed me so?

The library and adjacent print shop were several levels away. The sound of a booming drum and the chant of one particularly deep voice, whose overwhelming bass vibrated the air, drew us onward. On entering the shop, I saw several monks engaged in the printing; while in one corner by a large window was the source of the chanting. As he was in the direct sunlight, my eyes and camera were first attracted to him.

He was an ideal subject. Motionless, his body locked into the *vajra*—the cross-legged meditative posture, symbolizing the eternal nature of reality—except for a slight motion of his wrist as he banged with a great sickle-shaped stick upon the drum. To one side a butter-wick lamp flickered with the vibration of the drum, struck at the end of every line. That deep bass sound seemed to come from a source much deeper than the lama himself, his mouth was slightly open, but I could see no movement of his lips or tongue. I moved in closer. Or was I drawn?

The scene held such a wealth of detail that it needed some cutaways, detail shots of all those elements: lamp, drum, leaves of the book; the gnarled hand clutching paper or drumstick, ancient brass cymbals lying expectantly in front; the Chinese silk brocade book-wrapper carefully folded to one side, a battered pewter tea pot sitting at a convenient distance on another; the grain of the rough wood floor; the texture of the mud-plastered walls

underneath fading, yet still colorful, frescoes; the intricately carved beams of the ceiling; and then into the other nooks and crannies of the room; from the bookmakers and their materials to the wall hanging with a museum's worth of paintings and reliquary. Yes, if there ever had been an instance of a picture worth a thousand, this was it. There was such little motion, I almost believed I had wandered into one of those dioramas seen in natural history museums—the wax or plaster figures carrying out the daily routines of some remote place and time.

I was using up a lot of film. By the window the light was quite bright, but in the corners I was winging it with long exposure, hoping against hope that somehow my hand would be steady. Before, I had been so frugal with my film; now I just let go. Finally, all the clicking and scuffling began to break through the praying lama's wall of concentration. His eyes moved from the page toward me. The drum missed a beat. It was time to back off.

I turned my attention to the papermaking. When I entered, the slow movements of the lamas seemed almost frozen, now as I adjusted, I saw it was just that their work required the same meditative concentration of the drumming lama. I fingered one of the coarse sheets. Its aroma was familiar. I looked to Geser questioningly.

"We make paper from hemp fibers, not so fine, but very long lasting. Some of the books in our library are more than five hundred years old...some older, maybe. I think you Angrez use the plant too, but not to make paper, for some other purpose?"

He looked at me with a mixture of amusement and question. Could Geser tell? I hadn't smoked in his presence, knowing it might offend him—Pal had been quick to warn me about that, and there was that lingering paranoia Gul had planted. But what I hadn't smoked, I had eaten. My eyes were most likely bloodshot; maybe I stumbled a bit more than usual. I was sure that if Geser suspected, he could see the signs. Charas was no stranger to Zanskar. To cover my growing paranoia, I resumed photographing.

The process of the printing is as simple as it is crude. In round stone mortars the size of large cannon balls, the vermilion ink is ground and mixed with water. Then it is brushed onto the wooden

blocks of text. Some of these blocks, Geser assured me, were as old as the gomba, if not older. Finally, a sheet of the hemp-fiber paper is flattened out on a low table, and the wooden block pressed down. This is done repeatedly until the requisite number of pages are completed—in this case they were producing 108 editions—a propitious number. A complete volume can have over a thousand pages and the entire work over a hundred volumes. Luckily for these publishers there was no deadline, no screaming distributors, no anxious editors...no starving authors. What did it matter if they finished the work in their lifetime? There would always be another generation of lamas to take up the load. It was the process that was important, the magic of continuation of Dharma. My eyes conflicted with my mind. The former wished to see more; there were so many objects with which they had no familiarity. My mind wished to linger, to think upon the flood of new information the eyes were collecting. In league with my camera the eyes triumphed.

The altar—every room seemed to contain an altar—was an ornate affair. A seemingly hopeless jumble of figures, pictures, and other symbolic paraphernalia vied for space on the altar. It was as if the lamas sought to please all the gods and spirits. What appeared to be the centerpiece was a miniature chorten, about three feet high and covered with gold, turquoise, coral, pearls, and lapis. Geser explained it represented all the elements of the universe—those to which the body is returned in death: the squared base, the earth; the inverted bell-shaped dome, water; the spire, fire; the crescent moon, air; and the final leaf-shaped ornament that tapered into space, ether. On its sides were numerous tiny doors behind which stood figures of the Taras—Geser wasn't sure how many. Most of the doors were closed. The few that were open revealed exquisite statuary, accoutered in what looked like finely crafted jewels.

I guess the spirit was still not with me, for I can remember thinking how easy it would be just to slip in here after hours and make off with this priceless treasure. The biggest problem would be in knowing what to take, because this was only one of many such treasures. Perhaps the tangkhas, which in places hung a dozen deep, were even more valuable, or the ivory statues, or the three gilded Bodhisattvas even more heavily jeweled than the chorten. My camera was smoking from taking so many

photographs. I mentioned to Geser the vulnerability of such valuable pieces. "I mean with all the tourist coming through." As usual he found my thinking hilarious, but then with an unexpected suddenness his joviality disappeared.

"There is much in this place that is unseen, No. Perhaps you think these things are just symbols, that they are empty shells. We believe otherwise. Inside, the spirit of God can be found; inside is a power waiting to be tapped. You have no knowledge of this, either of the power or how to release it. For this takes many years. The power is very dangerous to those who have no knowledge. You must first receive *kalung*, or permission, to study the power, to come to know of its existence. Then and only then, after long study, can you earn *wang*, the right to use that power."

I didn't quite see his point. "All of that's just great, but what will keep some Euro-trash from ripping off the place. Back in the States, I would be set for life with what these things would bring." Of course, there was always the chance of ending up like those two little queens from New York, but they were just in the wrong place at the wrong time and all they lost was...

"No, I still do not think you quite understand. These things have power inside. It is a power both for doing good and doing bad. Those who pay respect are rewarded. Those who seek evil earn the fruit of such deeds. This we believe, not only from faith, but also from what we have seen. It is said that many years ago, in the time when the Angrezi ruled the lands below, one Angrez came pretending to find the Path. He pursued his studies well, received *wangkur*, and began the journey into the deepest mysteries of Tantra. During the time of training, his brother lamas noticed that this Angrez was constantly writing down things in his own language. They did not remark on it as they thought that in this way he might be furthering his study. Oh, he was furthering it all right, but not for what they thought. One day he disappeared. Several years later word came that a book had appeared in the Delhi bazaar, written by one who used the name the lamas had given, Tanana, under an Angrez name. The book told of his adventure among the 'Lamas of Little Tibet.' It purported to reveal the secrets of the Tantra.

"This was very upsetting to the entire order, for to have power, without the knowledge to use it, is most dangerous—something like that saying of yours, 'A little knowledge is a dangerous thing.' This Angrez had learned some of the outer rituals, but nothing of what was within. Several more years passed, the book sunk back into obscurity. Then a traveler, another Angrez came to the gomba. Since he was Angrez, the lamas asked him about this Tanana, if he knew about the book and the fate of its author. As it happened, the traveler knew both book and Tanana. After an initial publication, the book was bitterly attacked as a fiction, the author had gone into seclusion and died of some horrible 'wasting' disease."

Geser looked at me knowingly, satisfied he had made his point.

"But Geser," I reminded him, "we were talking about these precious things, these antiques of gold, silver, and gems, not just ideas."

He looked at me with pity. Was I really such a bad chela?

"It's all the same No. There are no lines to be drawn. The spirit we seek is everywhere, in everything. The power is in the mandala, in the mantra, in the hand of those that grasp the sacred object, in the mind of those who grasp the sacred word. Yet it all comes back to how power is used. Through many lifetimes of sacrifice, the Tulkus have earned their power. Through the compassion of The Great Lord, they have been returned to this earth to liberate the less fortunate. This is the proper use of power, there's no other. There are great forces at work here. The power is here to help us in our own struggle for liberation, but only to help. If that power is abused then...then there is always your Mara."

This was no simple tour, but the beginning of a long process of indoctrination. Geser, though he tried to appear otherwise, was most transparent. I was warned. I wondered if this Angrez lama had ever been or was just a horror story to dissuade any like-minded ferenghi

And hadn't I done much the same? Oh, not about tantric secrets or Gelug-pa rituals, for of those I had little knowledge, but about the Himalaya itself—my Godhead. While I hadn't written, I had photographed the most intimate moments of my communion and, worse, attempted to sell them through my tours.

Paul came to mind; perhaps it was the mention of the "wasting" disease. Had that been his punishment for opening the mysteries of these mountains? I was equally guilty. Wasn't I also locked into a "wasting" disease—if not of the body then of spirit, of heart? Perhaps, our sin was that once coming here, we still couldn't let go of the past. We had to keep shuttling back and forth, refusing to buy into the illusion, but at the same time without sufficient courage to let go. We clung to the known and thus were its slaves. Paul had come to the end of an existence. No, it wasn't as punishment. Perhaps, it was that he was spinning his wheels, going neither forward nor backward. It was time to recycle into a fresh entity, with energy to make the wheels grip the path again, with the energy to move on. I felt that my energy too had ebbed. Yet there must still something left, something I must expend before I too can be reborn.

We were now in a rather dark interior chamber. There were no windows; the only source of natural light was a deep-shafted skylight. As my pupils adjusted, a gaunt form emerged from the shadows. Geser said something to the apparition. A greeting came back, "Jule, Sahib, jule!"

"This venerable lama is the librarian. It's his duty to care for the holy texts."

To underscore what texts he was talking about, his hand pointed to the walls. He needed to point; if I hadn't seen similar manuscripts in other gombas, I would have had little chance of identifying the silk wrapped bundles. These sat in neat rows within red painted cases lining the walls. The entire effect was more reminiscent of a catacomb for infants than a library. The librarian began muttering a long monologue which, by its tone, I knew must be a scholarly lecture. Finally, he came to the end and looked toward me expectantly

"He says many of these books are older than can be remembered. Some have been printed. Many more have been copied from even older texts by hand. They are very powerful. In them one can find the way to great powers. With these powers one can do great good, go very far to bring Dharma to the people. But like all power, its blade is double-edged. With it, one can control others for whatever purpose one desires. That is why it's most important the student

of the way learns purpose first. Power without the wisdom to use it is like the wild elephant raging, his supreme strength able to destroy, but not to build."

"Ah i'nok, Sahib, i'nok." The old monk shook his head vigorously. Then from the text laid out before him he began to read.

"This lama says that the whole point of the magic is not to have power over this world, but to have power to...."

There was a moment of intense discussion between the lamas as if they were collectively seeking just the right words.

"Yes, I think my brother says it best... 'To be delivered from the *self* which binds one to this world.' We come to this world full of the knowledge of the truth. Over time, we fall into the web of Maya. If we accept that illusion as truth, if the web becomes our world, then we are lost. But within everyone, there is some memory of that truth before birth. The more one remembers, the less is the harmony between what *was* known and what *is* known, then the more chance there is to escape the web. Yet this individuality is not the end, but only a tool to regain that original truth. Otherwise, we go from life to life, from web to web, the prisoner of whatever Maya rules. There would be no way out, no way back to that ocean of diamond bliss from whence all life comes. Do you understand this No?"

Both lamas looked at me with questioning eyes, at once hopeful for some miraculous breakthrough, yet at the same time patient, knowing all too well that such miracles rarely occur.

"This lama says not to worry if this teaching seems, like the fish, too slippery to grasp. Fishing in the ocean of truth requires even more patience than fishing in the stream—even more than in our poor Zanskari streams where in these days there are almost no fish at all."

Geser must have added the line about fish, because he translated back to the librarian, and they both had a hearty laugh. Again, the librarian face grew serious.

"This lama says most truthfully," Geser continued to translate. "One cannot come here, read texts, and find truth. There is more to it than words; words can have many meanings. Before reading,

a master must read the texts. Then the student must recite with the help of the master the words many times over. Only then can the words be read from the texts. In this way, the word has come directly from the Great Lord. If one was just to read the words, how could he be certain of the right meaning, for to the words each brings his own understanding. Yes, it is very important the student knows what was intended. Only the master can tell...only through the unbroken chain of all the masters that went before. You see No, here it is not as in the West, where each new student contributes, adds a new layer of meaning, a new interpretation. Here we try to strip away time's residue, to reach back to the words of the Great Lord as best we can. To reach the truth as was first given more than two thousand years ago is most difficult. The truth is the truth No, it is absolute, unchanging. It does not fluctuate according to change in this world. That change is Maya. Just as the human carries the truth into this world, only to lose sight of it in the grip of Maya's web, so is a civilization closer to the truth in its beginning, than in its middle or end. Humans were truly blessed to be given this precious gift, this Diamond Truth. It is an insight easily lost. It is our dharma to keep the flame of this truth alive. With the Tara's help, we'll continue in this duty until Dharma has been made know to all."

As we left the library, I snapped off a couple of frames, hoping to take away a small bit of its power. In the viewfinder, my eye suddenly met the stern gaze of an exquisitely modeled Tara. Her gilt covering must have been recently reapplied, for she shone with brilliance in the dim light of the butter-wick lamps. The old lama muttered again. Then he was lost to the darkness.

Back in the blinding, midday light, I asked Geser what the lama had said.

"He said that when you glow as does this Tara, then you will know it is time to receive the power." I must have looked puzzled for he continued, "It's true No, the Tara is quite famous for this shining. They say that, even in darkness, the light comes from within. There are so many things that do not fit into Western logic. I told you that I studied your system, the way you believe the universe is ordered. It's a very good story, very complete. Many have devoted entire lives to build its edifice. But remember No, it's no more than

a story, no more than one way of explaining the unexplainable. Perhaps our story is the same, just another way of putting words together. I have seen many things your story cannot explain, not by Galileo, not by Newton, not even by Einstein...You look surprised No, but we in Zanskar have heard of this great man. In many ways, he has brought your way of thinking so much closer to ours. But, I think, you still have some way to go...just as we."

I must confess that, as he was saying all this, I was trying to think just how the light could come from a decidedly opaque object. I believed, even then, that there were no questions for which some "rational" explanation could be found. After all I had been through, even though I half-believed in the existence of Mara, there was a part of me that refused to accept an alternative physic. I could not imagine a glowing Tara, any more than I could accept a weeping Madonna.

Just as we were about to go on, I heard someone cry out Geser's name. A chout approached and, after a brief discussion, Geser turned to me.

"No, I must go to the Shushok at once. He has urgent need of me. I want you to go on and see the rest of the gomba. All other lamas know of your purpose here, and you may wander freely. Places where you should not go will be locked, so you should not worry. As soon as the Shushok is done with me, I will return. I am sorry No. I wanted very much to show you the gomba, but the Shushok is my guru. What can I do? I must go to him when he calls."

"Which way should I go Geserji?"

"Just follow the sound No, follow the sound, and you will find all that you need."

I was about to ask what sound, for at that moment those ubiquitous wind-river noises dominated. But before the question could escape my lips, a new sound came to my ears, very faint at first, yet rapidly growing. It was the low growling throat-song of the lamas at prayer.

One minute, I had been puzzling over the glowing Tara—yes, there was some sort of light leak, or, perhaps, there was an intentional fraud, something to dazzle the peasants. The next, I found myself

invaded by what, at first, was nothing more than a super-bass buzz. It was as if the ensembled voices were reaching out, drawing me into their consciousness, the same as when first meeting Geser. My rational self, the one puzzled over the Tara, momentarily resisted this magnetic call, but the power of the tone was too strong. I fell into, what I can only describe as, a hypnotic trance, although I have no certainty that was what it was. Consciousness took flight, traveling alone into a time and space, a journey to which my memory is not privy.

Oh! I have some fleeting recollections. I remember entering the du-khang and seeing opposing rows of crimson-robed monks bent over low tables. The air was thick with incense. The flickering of the butter-wick lamps syncopated with the beat of the drum, only heightening my loss of control. I kept telling myself it was the charas, but I knew it was more. Then I resorted—much in the way I had learned to control myself on acid—to tell myself, it is all just a mind-fuck; just let it wash over you. Soon it will be over. Along one wall was a series of niches, much as in the library. However, these, instead of housing texts, held figures of hundreds of bodhisattvas. As I looked closer, it was as if these saints were also chanting. How else could I explain the immense volume of sound welling inside. I thought I would drown in that sound:

"OOOMYAAAMAAANTAAATAAAKAAAHUUUMPHAAAT
OOOMYAAAMAAANTAAATAAAKAAAHUUUMPHAAAT
OOOMYAAAMAAANTAAATAAAKAAAHUUUMPHAAAT."

Over and over and over! Unlike before, when the unintelligible flow had cleared into separate words, drawing me from my unconscious state, the process now reversed. Soon any human intelligence that might have been conveyed in the syllables was lost in a sensory jumble. Swirling in a mighty vortex, my previous explorations into psychedelics seemed like a trip to Disneyland. To hold on, my mind grasped at any straw.

What had been that childhood mantra? *Ohhwata-gooo-siam!* *Ohhwata-gooo-siam?* You said the syllable over and over, faster and faster, then.... Maybe that was what this was all about. Yes, it would turn out to be just some sort of childish initiation ritual. Finally, I would get the message. The joke would be on me, but nevertheless it would be a joke, something rational, just a good-

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natured trick the lamas played on visitors, a little fun to get them through the long days with no telly.

I felt pressure, like a firm hand grasping my shoulder. The force was pushing me out the intricately carved doorway of the dukhang. The din was now almost too great to bear. I wanted to scream. Maybe I did, so great was the press.

A voice so familiar in tone, yet so strange in demeanor, spoke, "Now I will take you to the innermost lha-khang. Here you will meet our Master face to face. These foolish lamas hide this place, they think it is only for them, for those trained in their mumbo-jumbo. But I will show you anyhow...if you have the balls. Do you No?"

I looked toward the source of that voice, but it came from impenetrable shadows at the end of the corridor. Maybe it is Geser? Yes, that must be it! It is just that, after the long climb, he is out of breath that is why he sounds so strange. How at that moment I needed to see his pleasant face, those twinkling eyes. That would put things right, bringing it all back to what I knew. But there was no smiling face, no twinkling eyes. I saw movement in the shadows. God! What is it? If it was Geser, it was a Geser, aged a thousand years, his skin drawn tight on fleshless cheekbones. As I looked towards him, he spat at me with a furious hissing noise and hurled me through another door, breaking through the ornate brass chain that barred entry. As I flew through the air, my entire temporal frame seemed to expand. Was this just denial? That was how the Western mind would explain it. Whatever it was, my flight seemed endless, providing the luxury to minutely examine the intricate carvings on the doorway through which I flew...no, floated. At least at first I thought they were carvings. Then as I drifted by, I could see movement among the fantastic shapes...they were alive. Yes, it was those most ancient guardians of this land, the ones who watched in the absence of the Gods—dragons. The dragons were uncoiling. Down they came from their doorway perch, slithering through the air to join my flight. I could feel the heat of their breaths, smell the stench of some sulfurous brew. One got hold of my leg, coiling round it. This slowed my progress even further, letting another, then another, grab hold.

No! This wasn't happening to me. It is just the charas, just some mind-fuck initiation these monks cooked up. I had been through worse than this. Besides, all they could do was kill me. Then this motherfucker would be over. It would happen eventually anyway. I wouldn't surrender to fear. It was a good day to....

Then the most sickening thought struck me. Maybe I am already dead.

Almost in confirmation, I landed in a limp heap on the hard-planked floor. I must have been before an altar, for above the ubiquitous butter-wick lamps were the forms of large, grotesquely shaped figures, each with more than their share of arms. I would have liked to think they were statues, but the evidence presented by my eyes belied this. Like the dragons, these figures were also animated. Not that they were jumping up and down; there was a quiet, living motion about them. Perhaps "living" isn't the precise term for there was the certain smell of death about the place. It was a smell I had known long ago, that smell of the field morgue, the place where they gussied you up before they boxed you for the ride home. The altar itself looked more suitable for an abattoir than temple, a functional chopping block affair. Above the block were two horrific masks, one white, one black, both crowned with skulls. When I looked closer, I could see that the theme of skulls continued upward. While the part of the room in front of the altar was relatively low, behind it the ceiling gave way to a loft-like extension. There, towering over the skull-festooned altar was a central figure, covered by faded crimson silk. Whatever lay beneath must have been truly horrible, because, on either side, were two revealed figures, so lifelike, they caused my already incredulous mind to tremble with fear. From the sides of the hidden figure sprung horns of a great bull. What could lie behind that blood-hued shroud? I could only think of Mara. This must be a statue of Mara, perhaps as Yama the God of Death, who sits in judgment on every soul, assigning it to its proper place in the myriad hells.

I was starting to calm down. I just must have grown dizzy. I hadn't been eating enough, the altitude, and my old scapegoat, the charas. Just as I thought I was coming back around, my eyes began to perceive, just as with the dragons, movement in the figures.

"Stop it!" I commanded myself out loud. "It's just the light, and you're still dizzy."

I heard footsteps. Yes, I thought, now I will come back to reality, back to life, I will turn and there will be Geser. A smile will be on his face and he will launch into a small lecture on the nature of these deities—how old they are, what they symbolize, all those things of touristic interest.

It wasn't Geser, but Atisa. He came not as the scullion of the morning, but as the vamp of the previous night. Atisa was dancing across the floor, feet barely touching, if touching at all. The sight was of such incredible beauty, made even more so in contrast to the hideous pall filling the room. So beautiful was Atisa that it was a stretch to believe its form could belong to one of my gender. Yet there were no female markers, protruding breast or elaborated hips, yet the limbs were so delicate, so well crafted....

As if Atisa read my mind, I suddenly felt the press of a cool-fleshed hand. The same energy that had coursed through my body at first touch now surged through me again. I looked closer; there was the long gold-flecked hair, the huge, depthless, gray eyes set within cheeks so smooth, my teeth ached to bite into them—"like a peach," that bawdy Chitrali refrain echoed in my mind. I felt my lips brush against Atisa's. I felt the warm moisture of the breath, the flick of tongue against teeth. I heard a gentle, yet compelling laugh.

"Come Angrez, come into my arms. What does it matter Angrez?" Then more sternly, "You know what I mean Angrez Sahib, you know. You wonder whether I am man or woman. You wonder too much! You think too much! Why does it matter Angrez? Why does it matter whether we are alive or dead, up or down, in or out?"

Atisa's gentle tone became tinged with urgency, as if there was job to do and little time.

"Feel my lips!"

Momentarily I was lost in them, lost in the moist, languorous pleasure. Then there was an agony of loss as the lips pulled away.

"Will there be any difference in my touch if you now find out my gender? How can a moment that was, be changed by what will be—

by what could be? Oh Angrez, it will be changed, but only in your mind. It will be changed, not by you, but by Maya. Come closer Angrez, feel the smoothness of my cheeks. Are they not perfection? Have you ever beheld a fruit as ripe as this? There is no stream between us now Angrez."

With a hard laugh, this creature grasped my hand and directed it, not to the face's rosy alabaster, but below, to what lay beneath the silken robe. "You must release the desire which clings inside. You must free it so that you too can be free."

Yes, I thought, readily giving in to the suggestion; this is what I must do. It wasn't a novel thought, for I had often sought to exorcise those inner devils by giving them free reign. I firmly believed restraint led to frustration. It was this frustration that distracted me from where I wished to go, from doing what I wished to do. My hands found deliciously fleshed buttocks, even smoother to the touch than the cheeks above. My fingers pinched the compliant softness, at first tentatively then, receiving no rebuke, more and more firmly, as if testing the threshold between pleasure and pain. Encouraged by Atisa's submissive moans, I worked downwards, kneading the inner flesh between opened thighs, cupping fleshy hillocks, my fingers delighting in the exquisitely contoured hollows. Then underneath, I found to my pleasant surprise a cleft, moist with lips open and ready, just like the mouth.

"Ji Sahib, I am yours. Do with me as you will. All that is pleasure for you is ecstasy for Atisa. Take me! Take me!" Atisa moaned.

By then I was mad with desire. It seemed like it had been years since I had any real release—apart from those self-induced ones that were only half acts. I pressed Atisa's small body close to me, so small, so compliant. Then like a cat springing out of the shadows, there was the image of Tara—not that mysterious, glowing representation of the Savioress in the library, but *my* Tara. All that pent-up sex, more rage than love came spewing out. It was just like on acid. Once headed in a direction, I went for it the whole way.

For so long my rage had been a smoldering fire. Suddenly it was freed from constraint. A blaze of hatred consumed me; the fires

made even more violent by their long containment, so long blockaded within by that "better" self, that more noble self. I would show this bitch what was what, who was boss. Female or male, I would make *it* scream before me; scream for me to stop; scream for me to continue; scream just as a steam engine screams or it explodes. For a moment Atisa was Tara. Briefly my cock was reborn and in charge of my being. I spun Atisa around, bending the supple body over. I would take this bitch from behind, just as I had first taken Tara. There would be no pleasure for this creature, only submission to my will. Now the venom in my heart poured forth. Myriad devil armies danced in the air—perhaps those very ones that the lamas hoped to expel. It was as if I had been thrust into the fiery hell of the bhavachakra, the "Wheel of Becoming." Was this not fitting? I was, after all, in the presence of Yama the judge of all mortals. My cock was a glowing lance before me—the great thunderbolt with which I would explode all illusion. Atisa bent over on the floor. Slowly the robe was rising, like a curtain revealing all I desired, hated, all that held me to this earth.... The figure, the flesh, the desire, writhed wildly to my touch. The robe was now fully raised. Atisa's white flesh lay a ready sacrifice to my pleasure. All my senses focused on that rose-rimmed pool, a place of nothingness into which I would pour the poison, all the corruption within.

Gone was any thought of propriety, right or wrong, moral judgment, eternal damnation. I was already in fucking hell and determined to make the most of it. When I had seen this bliss before, I had thought of lips, vagina, now I thought of something else. I knew it was a place I had to go, I knew that my cock would lead me. I was entering. I could feel the down-tufted dampness encircle my cock, grabbing at it, sucking it in and me along with it. I heard Atisa moan, but not as I wanted, not with pain, but with pleasure. I wanted it to be pain, for only in this other's pain could I be free. I hate! I hate hate! I want to be free of this hate. I want to give that hate to this flesh beneath me. I struck out, invoking only further pleased cries. "Ah ji Sahib, punish Atisa, Atisa bad, very naughty, do many wrong things, punish, punish if you *need* Sahib!" I knew I was being goaded, but by then I couldn't help myself. All those devils locked inside strained to open the gates. There would be no respite until they were all free. I groped

underneath the robe, seeking a breast to squeeze, a tit to pinch. Oh, how I would make this bitch howl. Instead my hand found something quite different.

How long had it been since I had fantasized such a moment? It had started young, in those early moments when the thing between my legs first grew hard. I learned quickly that this wasn't the way society wanted me to use it. And while the fantasy lingered, I soon learned to block it with what was approved — women. Now after all those years, I found myself fulfilling that pubescent fantasy. In my hand wasn't a soft breast, nor a firm tit. Oh, it was firm; it quivered to my touch, but it was what I too had, it was Atisa's cock. What horror, yet a delicious horror, for part of me was lost in the most indescribable pleasure. After breaking every other taboo, I was finally throwing off the remaining shackle. "A hole is a hole, eh old man. This is better than your hand, and the bitch digs it." But that was only one part, only one head. Another writhed in confused pain. "My God, I am just a faggot, probably a molester too. Atisa couldn't be more than fourteen." Revulsion struggled with pleasure. All that bullshit of conditioning tried to keep me from going on. I threw myself to one side, but only partially, for my body continued its measured strokes; deeper, deeper they penetrated Atisa, until I thought I might fall completely within.

Enough! My mind screamed. For the time, all that conditioning this world had given me again triumph over my own desires. I withdrew, falling in a heap to the floor. Atisa's cries of pleasure became a hissing snarl. Straddling my prostrate body, this thing spewed venom.

"You and I are not through! We will join as one! I will have you!"

Then the raging voice sank into lower and lower modulations until it was no longer human, but more like the moan of a wounded animal. Dizziness! There was a dull pressure on my chest. Oh my God! Is this how it is going to end? Am I going to have a fucking heart attack here at the foot of this Devil God? Are they going to find me with my pants down, a shit-dipped cock dribbling with come? What will the monks make of that?

KALAGIYA

I felt the cool silk of the shroud. I must have died. The fucking heart got me. That bitch Atisa got me. But this death dream was interrupted by Pal's voice,

"Dadee Sahib, get up! Lamas no find you here. This most private place, no for *Chi'pa*, no for outsiders, only for Nang'pa with wang. What happen here Dadee?"

It was Pal with Yosh standing timidly behind. He seemed greatly agitated. Gone was the normally obsequious tone. I had committed a grievous offense and he, as well as I, would be held accountable. After all, I was an ignorant *Chi'pa*, while he, even though not of the clergy, was Nang'pa, within the fold. He stood in the doorway, calling and calling. Finally, in desperation he entered the chamber. Yosh, less bold, was content to lend his moral support from the doorway. Pal yanked the red silk off me just as I was pulling up my pants. I hoped against hope he didn't notice. As I looked up, the terrible form of the great Devil-God suddenly confronted me. What I had supposed as my shroud was the cloth that had shielded the figure.

"Dadee, not look at Lord Vajra-Bhairava, very bad, very terrible luck this bring. Even worse for Pal. He Nang'pa! He know better!"

But I couldn't help looking, for there in all his hideousness was the great Lord of Death, his wild bull face, fully revealed. He was no longer alive, very much a statute. Yet on those cruel lips was a smile, not of evil but joy. As I looked closer, I found the reason for his joy. Locked in his embrace was a beautiful woman, her submissive body totally open to receive Death's seed. Somehow, I already knew whose face I would find, but I had to look. I got up and, despite the frantic pull of Pal, went over to where I could almost touch the statue. At first my mind wandered from its mission; there was so many strange things to see. Then I remembered my purpose. My gaze fell upon the face of the consort. As expected, it was the face of Atisa, wrapped in utter ecstasy. A dizzying rush swept over me. I slumped to the floor, tangled in the enshrouding veil.

A scuffling noise came from the hall, sounds of shouting and running feet.

"Dadee, Lamas come. We must go! They not find us here. Very bad! They very angry!"

It was too late. The pujahs were at an end, and the few lamas who were fully initiated had come to perform further rituals. The first thing they had noticed was Yosh lurking in the open doorway, then the smashed lock and broken chain on the outer door. Roughly shoving Yosh out of the way, they entered the chamber. A lama bent over, picking up something from the floor. It was one of the carved dragons, now looking as if someone had pried it from its roost. The lama muttered unintelligibly to the others. Collectively their eyes fell on Pal and me. Still tangled in the veil, I tried to get up. Whether magic, a spell, another greater reality, it was now lost. The Vajra-Bhairava, the "Diamond Terrifier," Yamantaka, "Slayer of Death," Mara, or whichever one of the myriad personas this shape-changing enigma might assume, was now naked; the terror cast by its mystery stripped away. Instead, it was a just another touristic curiosity, all sixteen feet, thirty-four arms, and nine heads, including that most fearsome one of the bull. What had seemed, only moments before, to be so real, so part of my being, was now reduced to a rather naive work of art. The whole chapel had the feel of a tawdry carnival concession house of horrors. Perhaps that was why the lamas were so angry. I had fronted off their God, exposed this supposed terror for what it really was, just the work of some imaginative wood carver which needed dusting.

The senior of the lamas approached and barked at Pal harshly. At the same time, he gathered up the red cloth, dispatching the others to rehang it.

Pal looked ashen. "Sahib, you must go to room. Lama say you stay there until Shushok decide what to do. This is much bad thing Sahib. Lama says your life in great danger. My life, unless God decides better, kherab. Only those with wang go into special house of Lord Vajra-Bhairava. I know this. You do not. No matter, I see Dark Lord. We believe, if Nang'pa look at statue of Lord Vajra-Bhairava, soon we meet for real. You must go room now. I must go, make much pujah, ask Lord Vajra-Bhairava forgive."

To make sure I wouldn't argue, two very strong looking lamas flanked me. Together we made the short journey to my room. Once

inside, the door was closed, and I heard the distinct click of a bolt being drawn.

It was late in the afternoon, the nala below already deep in shadow. The door opened and Geser entered. He looked extremely upset.

"What were you thinking?" he asked. "Why did you go into a room that was locked? Was it to try to take those dragons, pry them off the wall? Do not deny this No. The lamas found them on the floor. I warned you all things in this gomba have power. Therefore, we have no guards, no worry about the sacred things being stolen."

I tried, with some desperation, to convince him I had no intention of stealing anything. On the contrary, it was I who worried that others might steal. At the same time, I wondered. The mind could play such tricks; denial was strong. There was nothing I could remember to suggest I had any guilt. But what was more absurd: to think that somehow, I had tried to steal the dragons, or that the dragons could come to life?

"Are you so sure that was why you mentioned it? Are you sure you did not want to find out how the holy treasures were guarded?"

I could see doubt was writ large in his mind.

"The Shushok is much disturbed. First it was that Angrez woman, now you. He says it is impossible to trust Angrezi. It is all too much for him. He thinks this is punishment for wanting to make profit from foreign visitors. Now he thinks better to close the gomba to all outsiders."

"Please Geser," I now found myself pleading. I had such high hopes when I came here. Yes, after my arduous travels, all my difficulties were with purpose. Here was my destiny; here was the order, in a chaotic universe, giving purpose to life. At last I had arrived at Shambhala's gates, and I was certain I would find the way in. But how premature all that optimistic woolgathering had been. In less than twenty-four hours, I was already in the deepest shit. It was as if my past was hurtling me forward, a karmic whirlwind that wouldn't let me rest. Such was its force it blew me by Shambhala's gates, turning promise into mirage. All I had now was a posse of angry lamas nipping at my heels, and this horrible

feeling I had done what I couldn't recall—what was too terrible to recall. But I wasn't about to cop to this with Geser.

"Geserji, I didn't try to steal anything. I swear to you this is the truth. I don't have the slightest idea how I got into that room. One minute, I was with the lamas in the du-khang, listening to their pujah, the next, I was in the temple, and things were alive."

Geser's eyes narrowed. "What things, No?"

"The figures...oh, you won't believe me. I don't believe myself. It must've been a dream...but then what about the dragons, what about the veil?"

At this point my brain was racing overtime, trying to put it all together. While I was talking to Geser, I was thinking to myself, what in the fuck really happened? Maybe I had some adverse reaction to the shit? You know, sort of freaked out or something. That was one answer. Or maybe I did want to steal the dragons. Had some other unknown self taken over? Couldn't I face that on top of all my other crimes? A thief as well! Maybe they had caught me; the whole thing was just a smoke screen my mind had thrown up. There was another possibility...no that was too bizarre. But was it any more bizarre than the others? For thousands of years, humans toiled to create an understanding, a cosmic scheme of how things were and why. This wasn't just a hollow myth, but endowed with energy of its own—the energy each believer contributed. That energy was power, and power ruled the mind. Why wouldn't I fall before such a force?

Geser had been thinking, and thinking hard. He looked searchingly into my eyes. "I think I believe you No. I think you did not try to steal. I think the power in the pujah led you to the chapel of Lord Vajra-Bhairava, I think you had some business there, some purpose. It is very, very dangerous this business. Men must not deal directly with this Lord until they receive the *Lam-rim*, what in our order we call the way of the "graded path." This is what being a Gelug-pa is all about. We study all our lives to learn *ta-wa*, this insight. As the librarian said, this teaching has come down the long centuries from mouth to mouth, from master to pupil. The powers involved are so great that to control them requires precise knowledge."

Feeling Geser had turned from inquisitor to friend, I went on to describe exactly what I remembered of the happenings in the room, things I have now told you; although, I wonder how much has changed in the telling?

Geser became serious again. He asked me to repeat the part about Atisa. "The foreign woman, who showed great interest in Atisa, she had ideas of this nature involving him too. That was why she turned to the brothers. Lust gnawed at her. Lust consumed her. Yet because Atisa was even younger than now, and because she need to receive rather than give...if you get my meaning...he was not a suitable mate. It was Atisa, however, that planted the desire. She confessed this to the Shushok before he sent her away. I'm not sure if I can help you No. The Shushok might know a way, but he is too troubled to think clearly. Atisa has made so much difficulty. Yet is it of his own making, or just that he is the object of another's evil? Some of the lamas wanted to send him away. The Shushok disagreed. Maybe because he is strangely fond of him. The Shushok said Atisa is too young and that the crimes were not of his doing. He is such a beautiful child. It's almost as if he has some power over the Shushok...maybe, over all of us. Of course, I could not suggest this; to question one who is Tulku, one reborn, is impossible. You know, Vajra-Bhairava, the one you have called Mara, despite his terrible image, is not evil. He is not like the Devil to you *Nazrani*...eh, Christians. He is terrible only to the enemies of the Dharma. He is not Death but the destroyer of clinging existence, the same as the Hindu god, Shiva. Some say that he and this Shiva are the same God. The consort, the one that you say had the face of the boy Atisa, even though so beautiful, is not free of evil."

"Can you tell me the meaning of all this, Geserji"

"I cannot. No! To tell you more would be against my own sacred vows. When I brought you here, it was with the hope I could introduce you to our order, that you would leave the saman of your life outside the gomba gates, remain here, and learn from the Shushok the Lim-rim, just as I. It seems this is not your path. You have brought that saman of yours to this very room. Even now as we talk, its weight is crushing you. I will never be able to help you until you yourself can get free.

"Tomorrow you must go and go quickly. The Shushok has ordered me to visit the Changpa, shepherd people who live up the Niri and beyond to the Rudok Plateau. I will first travel to Tantak Gomba, a day's journey. It is a miserable little place...in even more miserable village. The Shushok says this is my punishment for bringing the evil to Phuktal. By the evil, he means you No. He has ordered me to take you with me, to make sure you leave. From Tantak, I am to see you on your way. If you want to keep on going to Padam, you must cross the Thonde-la. It is a hard way, but a way that may be of help in your struggle. Please don't argue! I can do no more for you. The Shushok has decided that we must leave at first light. I have already given orders to your servants.

"Tonight you must try to stay awake. You must fight against the demon who comes in the form of Atisa. If I had more time, I could help you turn this demon to your advantage; you could learn to use it to draw out the poison that lies within. But that time is not here. Beware my friend, for the demon will come to you again. It has tasted the poison within you and found it like amrita."

There was silence. Then with a nervous plaint, "What about this other way, Geserji. I know you say it's dangerous, but what if I'm willing?"

"It is much too dangerous No. You are not prepared. The demon wants to drink of your poison. If you let it drink freely, it may not stop with the poison. If you cannot control it...if you cannot get power over it...this demon will drink until you are no more, until what was you becomes the very demon. It is your choice No. But I cannot accept responsibility. My advice, remember, is to stay awake. Keep the demon at bay. If you choose the other path, the responsibility must be yours. Either way No, we will leave at first light. This is the Shushok's command. It is a command that all in this gomba must obey. Jule!"

He was gone. Pal came with chapati and thuk'pa. That I was no longer an honored guest was evident in the quality of my food—more fitting for a prisoner. "Pal with Dadee stay tonight?" Obviously, he was most concerned. Perhaps Geser had asked him to watch over me, thinking that, if I had to release my baser desires, better with a mere mortal than a demon.

Pal held no attraction for me, at least in that way. He was real, flesh and blood, with pimples and cuts, dirt, and hair. It was fantasy that was my turn on. Besides, it was more than that. I knew that eventually I would have to face this anyway. Why not now? Also, despite the confusion and that my brush with this demon should have chastened me, there was still that old inquisitiveness, that urge to push the limits, to walk on the edge. What I really wanted was to face the demon one more time—to see if it really existed, to see if it was part of me. I wanted to get it on.

"I don't think so Pal. You sleep with Yosh and the other boys...get some rest. We'll need it tomorrow."

"Ji Dadee!" Pal looked somewhat relieved, but the tension quickly returned. His pride had bottled up all the accumulated fear. Suddenly the pressure was too great, and it spilled out with a rush. His words tumbled like boulders in an early summer chu.

"Dadee, Shushok order us go by Thonde-la. He say we pay for making angry Lord Vajra-Bhairava. He say Lord Vajra-Bhairava special mad at Pal. Pal Nang'pa, Pal know better. His Holiness think only chance for Lord Vajra-Bhairava forgive Pal, and Dadee too, is follow the God's command. But Dadee, way hard, not long, but much danger. Nala much steep, much narrow, much rock falling, many time mountain come down on trail. Trail much narrow, sometimes much high above chu. Yosh afraid, he say not his business. He say he not enter God's room. He not anger Lord Vajra-Bhairava. He not must pay. Pal tell Yosh he come, not run like before. He say 'no!' He take pony, down to main trail way we come. Pal not change his mind. Pal very sad! Yosh like brother, we in life together, never separate. Pal come with you Dadee Sahib. It my duty. I say I serve you. Someone need carry things, someone need make food. You not good in those things. Picture taking your work. I much afraid, but go. Tonight, make big pujah for safe journey."

I looked at my U502 map that, though of dubious accuracy, did give some indication of the terrain. From the contours, I saw the way to Tantak offered little difficulty. Geser seemed right. This was often not the case when estimating time based on the reports of locals. A day of hard walking would see us there—even at my pace. It would be only after Tantak, on entering the Shingri Nala, that

things would become tense. Seven small, cirque glaciers feed the chu, giving it the great force to carve this deep nala. These glaciers cling to the sides of a steep, ridge-like massif, stretching southeast all the way back to Phuktal. A series of peaks, some almost 20,000 feet, cap the ridge. The pass itself is well over 17,000. There are some particularly nasty-looking sections immediately after Tantak. There, I could well imagine, sheer canyon walls squeeze the track up against a tumultuous chu. In that place, the river is in control. If the waters are low, one can pass, if not the way is barred. The signs of trouble were there, including that little word "fords" which promised a host of potential horrors.

Psychologically I wasn't prepared. Crossing a high pass takes some pumping. I had done a lot for the Shingo. Now without warning, I was deep in it again. I had to face unknown terrain where even my guides were of little use. The Thonde-la was purely a track for locals, and even they avoid it, believing it to be the home of demons. At best, it was a last-ditch shortcut for the natives of the Niri to get to the main Zanskar valley. Like all such short cuts, it promised to be frightful. As elsewhere, here is no free lunch in the Himalaya.

I had been lost in the map for some time. Only the failing light signaled the lateness of the hour. My meeting with Atisa was approaching. I had put it off, thinking about the next stage in the journey. After that night, there might be no traveler to take the journey.

There was a gentle stirring. How silently it came, slipping up with so little fanfare. Or that drumming I heard in the distance, was that the fanfare? That wasn't for me, just the lamas beginning their evening vigil. All night they sent out their prayers. While the lay world slept, they would intercede with the One Lord or his many manifestations, beseeching for mercy and compassion.

"OOMYAAAMAAANTAAATAAAKAAAHUUUMPHAAAT
OOMYAAAMAAANTAAATAAAKAAAHUUUMPHAAAT
OOMYAAAMAAANTAAATAAAKAAAHUUUMPHAAAT."

Then on to more complex and involving mantras, words, syllables which held no specific meaning, yet in this very absence of

specificity held all meaning. The entire nala reverberated with their throat song. Lower and lower went the modulations, the air pulsed with deep bass frequencies, the windowpanes rattled, the walls hummed. I was lost in an aural sea, where all else was emptiness, nothingness, only the deep, deep, deep embrace of sound without meaning.

There was a knock on the door. I didn't wish to be disturbed, but before I could send the intruder away, the door rudely opened. There in the light of a butter-wick lamp was Atisa.

"I bring lamp, Sahib. It dark, I think you need light. Can I get other, Sahib? Sahib need else?"

"Shokria!" I replied instinctively, wondering if I was being set up, while at the same time feeling this little flicker in my heart. Perhaps it came from somewhere else? Then I looked closer at the bearer of the light, and the flicker vanished. Oh, to be sure, this Atisa was a handsome boy, but he was a boy. And just as with Pal, I felt no attraction, at least not the kind I had fantasized. Atisa showed no expression. He was merely carrying out his duties, and if the Sahib had no further use of him, so much the better. He could go about his own business, catch up on his sleep. Tomorrow would be here soon enough with its interminable grind of chores. Alone again in the cozy glow of the butter-wick lamp, I congratulated myself. I wasn't a pederast after all. There had been no attraction.

With the luxury of light, I gazed about the room. The dim glow renewed its opulence, so many colors and patterns draped the walls, the bed; even the small wooden chest in the corner was bright with florid designs. My eyes fell on a calendar hanging in the corner. It was a gaudy affair, typical of Indian commercial art. Above the pitch for a popular ghee was a picture of Vajra-Bhairava, most likely the reason it now graced this wall—it was for the year 1983. Having received so much trouble from a similar image, I hesitated to look at this one. I struggled with my eyes, first asking them, then ordering them, and finally, as I was losing the struggle, pleading with them, not to look closer. But my eyes seemed to have a will of their own. I knew what they were looking for, even as they began to turn towards the picture.

There was such a pantheon of Gods from which to draw. Why did it have to be this image hovering before me? Why not Ganesh, a jolly fat elephant god to bring me luck or wealth? Why not one of the myriad bodhisattvas, or Taras, why...? Instead there was Vajra-Bhairava in all his hideous splendor. Not taken in this time by the wealth of detail, my eyes made a beeline for that one fearful spot, that one spot depicting the face of Vajra-Bhairava's consort. It was just about this time I noticed a strangely familiar scent filling the room. The scent of dried sweet grass mixed with a more primordial odor seemed to emanate from the butter-wick lamp—it was that smell of unfinished business, the smell of tatami mixed with desire. It seemed as if centuries had passed since that moment in Kobe.

I looked with anticipation to see if it would be Elizabeth's face that graced the calendar, but as my eyes tried to focus in the dim light, all they could see was a rosy rimmed darkness where a face, any face, should have been. Closer I came, but instead of eyes, nose, and mouth, arising in definition, a ring of fire leapt forth, reaching out with flickering tongues, teasing me, drawing me inward. My eyes were transfixed to the black depthless hole within the ring. Suddenly, it was as if this void was turned in upon itself, becoming all; the all outside transformed into the void.

"OOMYAAAMAAANTAAATAAAKAAAHUUUMPHAAAT
OOMYAAAMAAANTAAATAAAKAAAHUUUMPHAAAT
OOMYAAAMAAANTAAATAAAKAAAHUUUMPHAAAT."

The mantra was all, driving thought from my being, opening me to the rage of my senses. Too long had they been suborned; too long had they been slaves to the rational master. Within this darkness, now shining brightly as any mirror, came a sequence of faces. Some lingered only a fraction of a second; some seemed to remain much longer; some were clouded in forgotten obscurity, while some I recognized all too well; some remained two-dimensional as in a photograph, others jumped out at me as living beings. They were all faces that in some way had touched my passion—love or hate, joy or anger. With each face came a wave of associated emotion. My body responded, tears following hysterical laughter, heat, following cold.

Just when I thought I could no longer stand it, that I must at all costs escape this emotional roller coaster, I heard a rustle behind me. I turned and saw Atisa. It wasn't the Atisa who had brought me the lamp. Rather it was the Atisa of long hair, the Atisa of the night and the temple chamber.

"I told you I would come back, Sahib. You told that chout you had no need for his service. But I think you lied Sahib, I think you have a need, a burning need." Atisa moved, blocking my view of the calendar. "I am not a chout, Sahib. I do not take orders. I serve, but only those truthful needs, the needs that lie within the heart, not just on the lips. I think now we finish that business we started earlier. I think you will now see where it will go. Am I not beautiful Sahib?"

As Atisa said these last words, the robe opened, the figure inside exquisitely delicate, sensually beautiful. My eyes probed to discover the sex, but before they could be sure, Atisa turned, letting the robe fall, exposing flanks of flesh that glowed with the same gold-translucent radiance as the Tara. This must be a demon, this thing so malevolent as to entrap me so, to bend my desires, to take me where I had no wish to go. This was pure evil.

I felt my cock rising. How could that be? I didn't want it so. Why wouldn't it do my bidding? Atisa fell onto my bed, peach-smooth bottom offered, blushing cheeks spread coyly apart, not too far, but just enough to express welcome. Perhaps it is a woman, I told myself, again wanting desperately to believe. Yes, it is a twin, a sister. That explains it! That was all I needed, my license. Armed with this hope, I launched myself into the void between those beckoning cheeks.

In the time that followed, a time without frame, everything within flowed into this darkness. It was as if there was something inside Atisa, inside the depthless orifice that sucked out all within me. I was emptied, but then with an equal force refilled. I had found a point of equilibrium. For the rest of that night I slept in peace.

Chapter XV

*I had been aware of a sense of fellowship
with the flow of life and with all the forms in it,
but now this feeling disappeared.
The world had been cast away into relativity
and only time was moving.*

—Yukio Mishima—

SHATTERED

The light from the stove strikes the crystal, glimmering rays dance among the facets. "Please, Devara seeing!" I am startled. I had almost forgotten Devara, almost forgotten I am still in a world bounded by shared space and time. Without another, without something outside of me, there is no need for time, no need for space. I and I alone is all. I recover and hand Devara the crystal, about the size of my thumb. Devara holds it to the stove's thin flame. A rainbow appears on the sloping tent wall. Devara giggles from the joy this simple act brings. It is as if he uses the crystal as a key, unlocking the many colors from what appears to be devoid of color. Once again Devara grows fainter, as does *our* world, a world cast in shared awareness. My mind reaches out along crystalline frequencies. I hear life's song. After all, when it comes down to the essence of life, it is all vibration, visual, aural, tactile, all vibration.

"Stone *swndar*, very beautiful!" Devara won't surrender easily. "Many soul as this stone. If soul pure...clear and without color. If color or cloud, then from bad condition in soul coming...so much Maya, so much illusion, so hard telling true from false. We of all things being, yet pure remaining, if keeping in balance. Ji, Bhaai, the thing...the balance. Within stone are all colors, when light shining through, colors come forth...not within, but without. In looking at stone, we not see separate colors, only all of colors equal...this all colors...for no color makes. Very strange, ji?"

* * *

Just before leaving Phuktal, Yosh approached, eyes downcast. He made a short speech, which Pal translated: "Yosh much sorry, he not with us coming. Pony now only pony. For family Yosh must go home in safety." He went on to explain that the way to Thonde was hard enough for humans, but impossible for ponies, especially for one so young. Yosh's plan was to catch up with Gul and Ravi, then meet us in Padam. Just before he turned to go, Yosh pressed a small object wrapped in an oily, well-worn scrap of paper.

"Yosh say he look hard for what Sahib Dadee ask, stone that light shines through. He want to find for rupees Dadee promise. He very happy when he find, but think he keep longer, to see if Dadee give more rupees. Now Dadee and Yosh go different ways. Yosh not know the will of the Taras, what they have for Dadee, what for Yosh. Yosh once see Dadee for rupees only. Now he feel more. He give clear stone. He want no rupees. Zanskaris also know power of clear stone, power to heal heart, power make owner strong. Yosh hope strength come to Dadee Sahib. If all meet in Padam, then it good to give Yosh baksheesh."

During Pal's explanation, my first thought was that this son of a bitch had copped out again. Anger surged, but then almost as quickly subsided. Chill! After what just happened, it is foolish to be angry with Yosh, no matter his earlier flight. Yosh never signed on for this excursion. From reports of the terrain ahead, I knew he was right not to chance the life of the pony. Things were happening to me that were beyond my grasp. Yes, what ever happened now was for definite purpose. I could see it all clearly. The plan was to unburden me, and I must trust the plan. How much better it would be, if I could rid myself of Pal as well. If only my kit was smaller; if only I could carry it myself. But I still had my cameras and that, together with sleeping bag, clothing, and other "essentials," required at least one other back. I was getting close, but close wasn't enough.

We trekked to Tantak in silence; each lost to our own thoughts. Perhaps Pal was worried about the physical dangers ahead, Geser, the spiritual ones. Suddenly freed from the worry of where I was going, I had the luxury to look elsewhere.

The walls of the nala seemed even darker, crimsons turned purple-black. Occasionally jagged bolts of orange, yellow, and green-

tinged browns shot through. The change came in part from the diminishing light, the sky far above, a thin, metallic blued-silver, squeezed between distant ice-clad rims. What sort of world must spread out unseen beyond those ragged lips?" From the map, I could imagine a world of ice and snow spilling down from those seven dragons, a world that, even in summer, could quickly turn into one of the Wheel of Becoming's frozen hells. It would be a world unseen, almost until I reached the Thonde-la. Only then would I be able to look across to the great ridge, stretching for the sky while those dragons gnawed greedily the razored scarp, working to form a future line of mighty peaks.

I had been lost in thought between Phuktal and Tantak. But now, seated in the courtyard of ramshackled Tantak Gomba, the magnificence of my surroundings returned overwhelming all introspection. My hand awkwardly searched the vest's many pockets seeking the crystal. Finally, recalcitrant fingers found the prize. The late morning light was intense, but I savored it, even more in the knowledge of its transience. I played with the crystal, brushing the rough lime-washed walls with spectral colors. If I could get lost in those colors, I would forget my bitter disappointment.

It wasn't that easy. Tantak was the point of departure, the place we would say good-bye to Geser...and all the hope I had loaded on him. And what hope! Yes, everything had seemed to be falling in place. Back in the chasm of the crevice, I was so close to Mara, straddling the fiery and frozen hells, waiting to pass judgment on my life. Yes, I was strangely at peace, though with little doubt as to how that judgment would proceed. Then, unexpectedly, I had been saved. And not only my ass, for there was Geser to save my soul. And again, it made such sense. The pieces fit.

But from the vantage of Tantak, I could see it was just another strand in Maya's web. I had been saved, not because of the machinations of some God, fate, or destiny, but because Gul wanted to pick my bones. Once again, I was saying good-bye to fantasy. Again, betrayed by the driving force between my legs, a force I often mistook as from my heart. I had wanted to fuck Atisa, plain and simple. There was no magic. I was just horny as hell, despite all that flighty, self-righteous posturing. So horny that,

when it came down to it, I cared little whether I was sticking it to man or woman, adult or child. All I sought was just a warm, fuzzy depth that would accept me and rid me of my burden. Now I must pay, once more cast adrift in a hostile world.

Our paths diverged. Following the Shushok's orders, Geser continued up the Niri to the camps of the Changpa. As so often happens in this land of steep-walled canyons, his best route wasn't along the river bottom, but up in the highlands. Pal and I headed in a different direction following the Niri, until it reached the Shingri Chu. From there, we would turn and climb the Shingri to its glacial source just west of the Thonde-la. We would also have a choice of routes: the highlands, or following the course of the streams. Because we still had considerable saman, I planned on the latter. It was early September, the time just before the snows and near the end of the melting. The river would be at its lowest. I decided not to be overly concerned by an insignificant notation on the map, "fords."

I waved my final good-bye to Geser from the other side of the chu. I paused by the "V" bridge, snapping pictures of a lone monk, wending his way upwards through the wilderness until he was lost in the sea of scree and boulders. I thought if I could keep him in sight, there was still some hope of redemption. Then he was gone, and I was alone with Pal.

"Dadee we must go! Food finish! Men in Tantak say Changpa camp where Niri meet Shingri. If camp finished, no food until Thonde Gomba...two, maybe three days away, on Thonde-la other side. Ahead, before Changpas, Shadi Gorge. Much steep, much rocks come down, best go early before rock heat in sun, before snow above being water. Many men, many animals lost in Shadi."

We set off. I was already sore from carrying the unaccustomed weight. It was surprising; no matter how well my legs were conditioned, it was entirely different carrying a pack, even a relatively small rucksack. Mine couldn't have weighed more than thirty pounds, an unfamiliar weight in a land where every ounce matters. The straps cut into my shoulders; circulation slowed in my arms. Hands, already swollen from the altitude, ached from the pressure. No matter how I squirmed, I couldn't find a comfortable position. I was amazed at how so much stuff remained. Gul had

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taken most of it, but I was straining. It wasn't out of vanity that I hired my train of servants. Only a masochist would willingly carry loads. Pal, who was burdened with at least treble my load, didn't seem to mind. True, he had my fancy, high-tech pack that distributed the weight "scientifically," but I used that as an excuse to load him.

Breath came harder. From the intensity of the river, I knew we were climbing. The track became faint, lost in the scree and boulder talus that continually trickled down from above. At times, we were forced into the stream, picking our way among the boulders. To escape what was becoming a painful ordeal, I began to scour the ground for interesting rocks. I fantasized I was a geologist seeking fame and fortune. Just around the next bend lay a mother lode: diamonds, sapphires, rubies, and gold, these mountains held them all and more. It was only a matter of finding them.

The "clop-clop" of a single rock bouncing down the mountain shook me from this reverie. It rolled right in front of me and then into the chu. As I looked up to its source, I saw something that, in all my years in the Himalaya, I had never seen. It was a large herd of ibex, maybe three dozen in all, leaping headlong from rock to rock about five hundred yard above us. I had seen the beast before, but in small familial bands. I reached for my camera, the one with the 180-mm, but it was wedged under the strap of the pack. By the time I got the pack off and the camera to my eye, all that remained of the herd's passage was a lingering cloud of dust. I looked over at Pal. He seemed upset.

"Not good Dadee! See how skya run down nala. Not good sign! This time they high in mountain, not come down, and not so many together. Too early coming down! Something make them...aaah...ahfraid!"

The nala walls grew increasingly vertical. Occasionally more rocks would roll past, some the size of large watermelons, some with frightening velocity. We made a turn in the canyon. All those gorgeous colors found below were muted into tans and grays. Completely empty of vegetation, the landscape was decidedly lunar, yet at the same time fragile. Any minute, all that lay above might come tumbling down.

"This Shadi! It like Geser say Dadee. Much bad spirit here! We must keep going. We must not stop until bend."

It was only with the greatest difficulty I could make sense of what Pal was saying, for we were close by the chu. The reverberating walls magnified its considerable noise. Pal pointed to a jutting black basalt prominence. It was less than a mile away. Less, that is, if we could have flown over the huge pile of boulders crowding the narrow valley floor. Without wings, there was no other course except to find a way through that maze—on one side the sheer rock wall, on the other the raging chu.

We had covered about a hundred yards, when I felt the first of the tremors. It was just the slightest of shakes, hardly noticeable on this already unstable ground. Being a Californian, I wouldn't have thought much about it, except that Pal's face was deathly pale.

"BUCHAL! BUCHAL! Cow, cow is moving. Many die! We die!" He was really weirded out. I had no idea what he was saying, until I remembered that many in India think a giant, subterranean cow causes earthquakes. I went over to him just as several large boulders came bouncing by. Minutes before they had come in a trickle; now they were a stream that threatened to become a flood. Pal was exposed and frozen to the spot. Just ahead was one of those house-sized erratics. It looked like good a place to find refuge. Somehow, with strength I thought long gone, I half-pushed, half-pulled Pal into a cleft under the boulder. It was none too soon, for just as we reached safety, another tremor hit, followed by such an avalanche of rock that we never would have survived in the open.

Great rocks, some a ton or more, came rushing down the slope, bouncing up in the air when they struck something more massive than themselves. All I could think of was a mortar attack. Fuck! How I had hated that. No matter how deep you dug, no matter what you put up in front of you—especially those big mothers, 120s, coming straight down on you, fragmenting all over hell; just a distant pop, then coming at the speed of its own sound. You hardly heard it until that roaring freight train was right on....

Dust fogged the air. The rain of boulders gradually receded, but the nala continued to reverberate with a terrible roar. I looked over at Pal and saw fear-filled eyes through a mask of caked gray dust—

just like one of those demon masks worn by the lamas at festival time. I am sure I must have looked the same, heightening Pal's terror. Was he thinking he had died and now was coming to the Great Judgment? Was I a demon, leading him to Lord Yama? Before this I had seen Pal only as a man, young perhaps, yet a man in control of his destiny. Now he was revealed for the boy he still was. No bravado could cover his terror.

"Ay-ee this my end like Shushok say. He say Lord Vajra-Bhairava punish Pal. Great Cow is wife of the Great Bull, do what Dark One say. Now Lord Vajra-Bhairava punish!"

In his horror-filled face I glimpsed my own terror. I too must be on Vajra-Bhairava's hit list. If Pal was to pay, why not me? Vajra-Bhairava was an everyday reality for Pal, but for me he was still half-fantasy, a creature clothed more in psyche's ether than physic's flesh. Again, I had come to the brink, yet rather than step out and over, I hesitated.

We just sat there and waited, another timeless time—there are so many in the Himalaya—knowing that the next moment might bring yet another wave of terror. This was the punishment Islam accorded adultery, death by stoning. How ironic if that was to be my fate. How would it come, quick, squashed to an unrecognizable pulp by a big one, or slow, a "death of a thousand cuts," buried under a pile of scree?

Something was very odd. The stream was rising at a very fast pace. When the tremor struck, we had been some ten feet from the bank. Now it was almost at our feet. Somewhere below, the falling rock must have dammed the chu. All that water, rushing down from above, quickly filled the nala. Things could happen fast—one minute a broiling stream, the next a lake. In this vertical world, there could be no retreat. More than a dozen glaciers were feeding this chu. The volume was immense, even in this the driest of the seasons. How crazy it would be, drowning in the Himalaya. For what sin had drowning been the traditional punishment? I could only think of sorcery, and I didn't think I was guilty of that—unless photography qualified. No more woolgathering! We had to get higher. We had to move and quickly.

Pal had yet to notice the water. He was too scared to do any thing but commune with his special patroness, Dolma, the White Tara, Savior from Death. Over and over, he kept chanting a mantra, so fuzzed by fear that it came only as a buzz. I tapped him on the shoulder.

"Jao, Pal, chalo!" He looked at me as if I was a raving lunatic, then returned to his mantra. "Pal look, we must go. Let's get the...the fuck out of here."

I pointed down to the water, by now at our feet. Seeing the water snapped him out of whatever place he had been. Pal now realized this wasn't a refuge but a trap. The fall of big rocks subsided and, though small trickles of scree continued, the rising waters were now the more immediate threat. I looked up the surrounding walls for some escape—a track we could take. Instead of relief, I found what only increased my horror. High on the wall were tell-tale horizontal lines, showing that these waters had visited those parts before and in the not too distant past.

What a joke that for some the mountain symbolizes stability. Mountains, and these are beings as alive as you or I. Life is change and never more than here—from below constant upthrust, from above downthrust of equal power. Earth reaches into the air. The air in turn, allied with water, answers back. At least that is how it seemed in Shadi Nala.

We ran for it, aiming to make the next bend. But what would be there? I could only hope that, as so often occurs in these highlands, narrow gorge would give way to open valley.

"Dadee, I much afraid. I much young life to finish. I must karma making."

"Fuck your karma," I heard myself say, in a harsh, seemingly alien voice. "Pal if you want to see Yosh again, you'd best get your ass up out of here." I doubt if he understood the words, but my meaning was clear. If I had used Swahili, it would have been clear.

"Ji, Dadee, ji, we go, chalo, chalo" He chanted his impenetrable mantra one more time, got up, and set off for the bend at a trot. Pal was a young man, and I had a hard time keeping up. The pack and cameras kept warring with each other, not to mention what they

did to my body. My chest was heaving, and again I felt pressure. Was this a signal of something about to burst, or just normal reaction to altitude and exertion? This was a new worry, something else I now carried that I hadn't before.

There was little choice but to go on. We climbed the rock debris, higher and higher, to the bend in the canyon. The Shadi wasn't only narrow, but steep. It was here in a colder time that an icefall had stood. This was a good sign, for surely not far ahead would be another of those level places where the great glacier had rested—a place we too could rest.

By the time I got to the bend, I was covered in sweat; every muscle, every joint cried out in pained exhaustion. My hands were bleeding, scored by jagged rocks. I reflexively checked gear and saw to my horror that one of my cameras had fallen, unnoticed in the melee. God! It was such an old friend, and my 180-mm too. My first thought was to go back. That camera and I had been through so much, so much worse than this little jaunt. How could I leave it there alone, forever destined to remain in this hellish place? I got up, ready to go down, but from the elevation of the bend, I could see that where we had taken shelter was now deep in water, the top of the huge erratic barely breaking the surface. Even if I had had the balls to go back, there was little chance of finding my lost friend.

How fast the nala filled! It became deathly still; life was no longer dominated by the chu's roar. Instead there was the rumble of a few falling rocks, the squawking of the ravens as they tried to settle themselves, the whistle of the rising wind. What had been a lean, fast-flowing stream was now a fat, sluggish lake. Far below, where the lake ended, I saw the tops of great boulders forming a natural dam. Soon the water would crest the top, reestablishing the flow as if the dam had never been. Sometime in the future, maybe near, maybe far, there would be another quake, just the smallest of tremors was all it would take, just enough to tip that equilibrium, and then with a tremendous rush the waters would descend, a moving wall that would sweep away all before it. How fortunate Phuktal was high on the cliff. But then no one in their right mind would build near the bed of a chu.

It was better than I could have hoped. As we rounded the bend, the narrow walls gave way to a wide valley, the meeting place of three major chus. Herds of great black yaks, sheep, and a few ponies grazed in lush pastures on distant, gently sloping hills. Well, maybe the pastures were not quite lush, nor the hills so gentle in their slope, and the herds moved restlessly, fearful of another quake. But compared to the rigors of Shadi Nala, this was a bucolic paradise. The valley reminded me of the one below Shingo-la, but bare of snow. The only snow in the immediate vicinity was to the southwest. There, rising above lower hills, was that great ridge with its seven dragons, the peaks between capped with snow.

"Look Dadee, look so many yak, so many *luk* (sheep), *ra'ma* (goats) *sta* (ponies) too!" I could see tears of joy welling in Pal's eyes. He had been convinced his time had come. He was but a step away from Lord Yama and an icy or fiery hell. Yet now, instead of hell, he was in a place of earthly beasts, yaks and ponies, sheep and goats. What could be more heavenly for his Mongol heart? We looked for signs of Changpas, for where there were animals there would be men. On a hillock directly ahead, overlooking the confluence of the three streams, we could see a dark *rebu*, the coarsely woven yak wool tent. A curl of smoke evidenced habitation. This was surely a Changpas camp.

When we got to the *rebu*, we found it occupied by one old man. His face was creviced with wrinkles as deep as the *nalas* of this land. His teeth were all but gone, as his was hair. Yet oddly enough his black eyes had somehow kept their luster, shining clearly like a youth's. I was surprised to find only him, since the tent was huge, made of many yards of black homespun yak wool—quite a large family could have called it home. The old one's name was Dug. After some time, during which Pal labored to convince Dug I was neither demon nor thief, he finally revealed the others were away in the hills with the herds—those herds we had seen in the distance. The *buchal* had greatly disturbed the animals. Many had run away. Now the men were trying to regroup them. Dug said, with much show of regret, that he was too old to range with the herds anymore, but that his sons and grandsons brought him along to cook the food and cure their ills. Maybe the others would be back later that night or, if the animals had run off too far, maybe

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in several days. Time was of little matter. Only food supply and weather were important.

Dug told Pal that the animals had been acting strange for the last several days. As he was old, he had seen this many times before. Strange behavior always occurred before the great cow inside the earth moved. He wasn't sure, but since they were fellow animals maybe the cow warned them. Anyway, they were still acting strange, the nearby ones all hunkered down, refusing to eat. He was convinced there would be more trouble, that what we had felt was only a warning rustle. Soon the cow would want to stand; she had been resting much too long. When she stood, we would know it.

After much further talk, during which we greedily consumed a great quantity of the old man's solja, Pal suddenly let out a great sigh.

"Dadee, Dug say no one come from Thonde all summer. Other Changpa go up Shingri part way, but then come to very narrow place, more close together than Shadi. Dug call Copper Gate. He say gate keep back spirits who live beyond. This lama say, but his idea this gate save spirits from lamas, from us too. Many rocks fall on this place. Maybe pushed by demons, maybe by saints. He say what matter? It same same. It death. Other Changpas much afraid. Changpas not want die. They turn back. He think not so good going there. He say to them not go. They not listen. Now he say we not go."

"But we can't go back Pal. Tell him about lake. Tell him there's no way down until the lake is gone."

"I say Dug, Shadi nala kherab. He know because here chu quiet, not like before. He say we lucky. Now cross over easy...go up Niri. That way Changpa come, from Rupshu far to east. On top is track, not to Rupshu, but Zanskar Valley and Padam. I think he right Dadee. Cow move again. This time maybe Dolma Tara too busy, too many other peoples watching, she not see Dadee and Pal."

Pal looked nervous. I thought this was because of Dug's warning. A few minutes later the true cause became apparent.

"This Dug, very dangerous man Dadee. We not stay here long. He Bon-pa...he of old way...he have old power, power of darkness. Lamas warn. Lama say they too much in service of Mara, trade soul for evil power. Power not do good, not bring other men Dharma, but for own need. Power of Dug real Dadee. Bad but real! No problem if Dug like, but big problem if not like. We not go against Dug."

Geser's last missives rang in my head: "Remember No, cross over at the Thonde without fail. Whatever may happen, you must cross at Thonde, no matter how difficult. If you do this, then you will have all the protection that the Shushok can give...the Taras will be with you."

This had confused me. I replied, "I thought His Holiness was angry with me? Why would he want to protect me?"

"The Shushok cannot be angry, No. It is impossible for a Tulku to be angry. He feels only love, only compassion. However, to achieve his purpose, he must assume more mortal emotions. Now that you have left the gomba, I am free to tell you. His Holiness knew you did not try to steal. Things happen that cannot be explained in terms of human understanding. The world, the real world, is not confined to such limits, just as it is not confined to Newton, or Einstein, nor to their successors. Those are only feeble attempts—just as our own Gelug tradition. Whatever happened to you in that chamber, and later in the visitor's room..."

How did he know about that?

"...happened. The truth of it is not important, except in how it shapes your journey. When I met you, I saw your pain. I saw you had lost your way. I thought it a good idea for you to come to the gomba, to study our ways, to perhaps even become a lama. The Shushok, however, possesses greater wisdom, greater clarity of vision. He saw that in you is too much fire, a fire only you can hope to control. If this fire was controlled from without, it might be smothered, and with it you too. His Holiness, in great wisdom, knew the discipline of the gomba might kill the fire, but there is also the chance it could burn the gomba and all within. Better, he said, to put you back on the path, to free you from those things confusing you, to make you truly free."

God! I wanted to believe Geser. I wanted to believe I hadn't blown another chance—perhaps my last—at being. But suspicion is a habit, and I was unable to free myself completely. I couldn't accept that these men, holy or not, were acting free of personal interest.

"Why Thonde-la, Geserji?"

"Why not, No?" Then he had chanted a farewell mantra and without further words was off.

All that seemed ages ago, before the great cow shook the earth. Yes, it was becoming more comfortable to think of dragons, great cows, and all those life-drawn images that come to those who wander the land instead of books. Cows, even dragons, were something believable. They had their counterparts in real life, much more than continental plates floating on a sea of molten rock. Now that was a stretch.

Darkness fell. Pal and I were exhausted. Despite Pal's misgiving, we accepted Dug's hospitality. I thought it was a good thing, because we had no tent, and only a pot to cook over a dung fire—as if there had been anything to cook in that pot. After filling up on solja and rough barley nan, Dug showed us to an alcove where we were to bed down. He muttered something to Pal. Then, with Dug listening intently, Pal passed it to me.

"Dug say here drum not sound so loud. All night he hit drum; all night he pray. It same as lamas, but not same. Dug talk to old spirits in this land before Dharma. He say Sahib sleep, but he must speak to spirits. He must ask for watching us, not harm us, make the Great Cow sleep, not wake and shake ground."

I still had my sleeping bag—I would have sooner parted with my life—and I gave Pal my overstuffed down parka. I made sure there was plenty of space between us. Since that unsettling business with Atisa, I was uncertain whether to trust myself with Pal. After all, in the middle of the night when bodies huddled against the cold, when mind fogged and gender dissolved, wouldn't those same demons arise. I took solace in the remaining charas. Now that I was free of the disapproving cleric, I could smoke to my heart's content. I had much to ponder, much to decide. Should I do as the Shushok commanded, or should I listen to Pal, who was only voicing the immediate experience of this strange shaman?

Shaman or no, who would know better, some distant monk, or a man who knew the ground ahead most intimately? It would be foolish not to take expert advice. Now that I think back, it is most amusing that I thought I had a choice.

Cushioned by my bag, I sat up, watching Dug across the fire. He was beginning to set up for his nocturnal vigil. How similar were his ritual preparations to other shamans I had known—that ancient Utah of the Kalash, the ayahuasca-tripping Jivaro in the jungle near Iquitos, or Crow Dog, the Oglalla healer of the South Dakota plains. They all radiated a sense of being a part, an extension of all that is. Around him, Dug gathered elements of nature, fire, water, earth, air, bits and pieces of totemic creatures. I could only wonder at the coincidence when I saw the ibex skull with great curving horns.

"Dug believes he of skya people. He lama of skya family. All Zanskaris have some animal inside. Those with skya must follow Dug. It old way, not Dharma. In Dug is skya, he say. Skya give power for sman. I too have belief. Lamas not like, but I not help. It part of me, like bone, like hair. I sta! When born, my mother bring shaman. He make ceremony. He tell mother, Pal of sta people. That why pony and I close. We talk...we understand each other talkings."

"What does Dug think I am, Pal? What's my animal?"

After some animated conversation, I got my answer. "Dug say he not yet know. Very hard tell ferenghi animals. Not knowing what animals live in Sahib's land. Maybe Sahib no animal spirit. Maybe Sahib not from earth. Why else ferenghi sahibs treat earth so? Dug hear much what ferenghi do. Hear about great wars, machines killing crores of people. He to very far away...to Leh go. See how land for many lifetimes the same, now not same. He hear stories from Lhasa people, what Chini do to land, to people, even animals. How can one born from earth do such things to earth? Earth is *Amma*, our Mother. Even Nang'pa believe this true. All animals know earth Amma. All care for Amma, love Amma. When kill, they eating only what need, never more. Men from south, men from west, men from east, men from north, none have love for Amma. Maybe, because they go far from Amma—even say to moon. Only people here in center, near place of birthing, only people holding

inside animals, have love for Amma. It because Amma's heart here under land. Soon great storm come. All not close to Amma die. Only here safe. Outside, storm sweep from Earth all who go too far from Amma's heart. Dug survive, as all people not losing animal heart, not losing love of Amma. All others winds blowing off, for nothing hold down. This, Dadee, what Dug say. I not know what true. No matter what lama say, I glad am sta. I glad see through sta's eyes, see earth as sta, have sta in heart. Maybe, I not blow away!"

There was no smirk, even in Pal's eyes, to betray any hint of irony. Yes, here again was proof religion was like all collective knowledge; the longer we are at it, the more twisted our scheme. Yes, this Dug was a direct link, cutting through all the detritus of superstition, theology, philosophy, science, or whatever that keeps us from being in balance with life. Wasn't this connectedness once the universal belief, a true extension of life writ large, only to be limited in civilization's elaborations, traditions and rituals which only cloud reality? Dug's simple approach echoed a time when to be part of life was enough; to breathe, to eat, and to be warm were wonderful blessings. Somewhere along the line, we got the idea there could be more. To get more, we power-tripped over all other life, symbolizing our supposed superiority in the shift from nurturing Earth Mother to the illusory power of a distant and abstract Sky Father. Rather than look to that place, from which we came, we began to look to where we might go. Rather than know what could be known, we sought the unknowable. Dug represented an older way, a way that, like the ice of the glaciers, had been many years in retreat. Yet like those glaciers, it is a way that must return, must that is, if life on Earth is to survive. The signs were everywhere in this land, proof the ice is like the sea. Its cycle of ebb and flow may be slower, measured in millennia rather than hours, but nevertheless certain.

I located the remaining Gold Flakes. I had almost forgotten their existence; the pack lay crumpled in one of the more remote pockets of my vest. Gingerly, with an almost equal reverence as a shaman, I performed my own ritual of emptying the cigarette, then mixing in the charas. After all, I too had once thought of myself as a shaman, a high priest of Psychedelica. I had learned,

however imperfectly, the power of holding something others wanted. All you have to do is make them believe you have it. Dug's eyes went wide. I thought he was going to reproach me, but he only giggled and, through signs, let me know he wanted to join in.

Pal looked at me with annoyance, as if to say, "Isn't the situation bad enough? Does Dadee have to make it worse, blowing devil weed with this crazy sorcerer? I'll never make it out of here alive."

I read his meaning and, for a moment, was almost intimidated. Then I thought fuck it! Who is the master and who the servant anyway? If I want to smoke with my new friend, why not? I really wished I could talk to this man, I mean direct, no filter of Pal between what he really thought and my understanding. How easy it was to dismiss such a mind, encased as it was in the feeble old man's shell. Yet what wonders he had experienced in his long life. What truth he had found in his lonely vigils in these mountains. Yes, this man might be that door. Through Dug I might find escape from Maya's veil.

I was getting to that place and so was the old man. Oh, for you skeptics, I am not suggesting we were communicating in the accepted sense of that term. It wasn't that the sounds exchanged had precise, intentioned meaning. But there was little need for exactitude, for we were reaching the point when ideas are but noise obscuring a greater empathy lying in tone. I recalled that Balkh hujera with the charas pressers. I didn't understand a word; yet when I listened *through* the words, I understood the meaning. It had been much the same with the wailing chant of the Kalash maids or those bhajans to Lord Krishna which I continued to play on my Walkman, long after tiring of the others. The feeling in Anuradha Paudwal's voice, despite the abysmal quality of the recording, transcended all need for meaning. This was how I imagined Devara's Anhad-Naad. The music of the Gods would need no translator. Its meaning is beauty, love, and surrender. These are understood by all life.

I really thought I was in Dug's head. Life suddenly was so simple, bifurcated only into now and not now. Now was high; now was warm and dry; now was a full belly; now was good. Not now was only fantasy. I could trip on it if I wanted, but only in my mind. Only now was real.

Pal was getting increasingly annoyed. If heads were coming open, then I imagined he too had entered mine. Pal had life before him. He had family and friends waiting just over the hill, albeit a rather large one. I didn't want the responsibility of dragging him down the same hole I was headed. I had lived life with more than my share of memories. I could sit in my cave, or wherever, and fill my hours with all those people and places of my past. Pal had little past and, in consequence, a burning desire for a future. His dream was to travel, to Leh, Manali, perhaps even to fabled Delhi. The present for him was just waiting for tomorrow—a few hours on hold before he could get going again.

Trying to divert Pal, while at the same time giving some hope, I asked whether we could obtain enough food from Dug for the longer journey. He could have quite rightly demanded that I ask my new buddy, since I now was able to communicate, but politely he relayed my question to Dug. That was fortunate, for while Dug and I could commune on topics of great emotion, the exchange of mere domestic detail was beyond either of our abilities.

Pal reported, "Food on trail. Many big Changpas camps on Niri, many yaks, many sheep and goats. We find *sha* (meat), *zho* (yogurt), maybe *churpe'* (cheese), much *oma* (milk), much ghee. Even if this old man lie, even if no camps, way not long Dadee."

The smoke hit me and with it all that accompanying paranoia. I kept staring into Dug's incongruously young eyes, looking for the dilemma's answer. Come on old boy, I thought, give it up. I believed there must be some great storehouse of wisdom under his deeply etched brow. But Dug had already given it up. He had told me what to do. Now it was up to me to act on his wisdom.

All those "what if," "then if," "but if" postulations circled like vultures waiting to peck apart my brain. The argument went back and forth. My problem was I could see all sides, all points of view. In the end, it was just too confusing. One thing I did know was I didn't want to die under a pile of stones, almost anything was better than that.

Dug got up. Waving a three-fingered benediction in our direction, he retreated to a far corner of the tent. It was a curious gesture; his three middle fingers extended like a trident, the thumb and little

finger circled below. Was this symbolized trident a clue to an ancient connection to Devara's Shiva, or just his way of telling us to get stuffed? He sat down cross-legged on a ragged orange and pink Yarkandhi rug and began his ritual drumming. His back was to me as he faced the crude altar now adorned by the ibex skull. Light flickered from raw lumps of yak fat, the pungent smell only partially masked by musk-like incense. A small brazier of dung coals glowed between Dug and the altar, providing both spirits and devotee warmth. My brain swam in the unfamiliar rhythms and aromas. All that energy burned running for my life finally caught up with me. I still hadn't made my decision. Better leave that for the morning, I thought, when your head is clear. You have other things to deal with tonight.

Morning came. Once my eyes closed, I had drifted off into deep sleep. I awoke with vague dream memories which, like receding water, clung in odd droplets to my mind. But I couldn't quite put it all together.

There is an ibex, a horse, a wall of water and the sensation of drowning. Another ibex, one whose long white beard and immense horns tell me it's very old. This image captivates me. There's something odd about that creature. Its face is too extreme, too mask-like. Then, as my memory's eyes gaze from mask to body, I see below aren't four, but two legs. For a second the mask slips to one side, revealing a third eye, an orb so fiery it can only belong to Mara. Total disorientation! The earth beneath is no longer solid, nothing solid, even my body. I feel a heavy foreboding, a warning? I'm supposed to do something, but what? In the distance, I hear a mantra's hum, a drum's punctuating boom. The shrill squeal of a thighbone horn shakes out the last droplets.

Briefly I struggled to get the dream back, to find out what I was supposed to do. It was too late. I was awake and the dream gone. Now fully awake, I turned toward the source of the noise that had awakened me. It was Dug ending his nocturnal vigil. He turned, noticing I was now awake.

"Jule Sahib, jule! Solja don, Sahib? Solja don?"

Although this ancient had been up the entire night, he looked none the worse. When I nodded my head, he sprang to his feet and went about the business of preparing solja.

Pal's body was comforting and warm curled inside mine. Momentarily, the anxiety of the previous night returned, driving out further attempts to recapture the dream. Then with great relief, I realized he was lying outside my bag, fully clothed, and wrapped in the parka. The night had been cold, the condensation from our sleeping breaths forming a sheet of thin ice on the rebu's roof. Apparently, there had been no reappearance of Atisa. Perhaps, I did feel some sort of love. I know I was starved for its giving. With Pal, however, it wasn't the love of desire, possession, or any of those fucked emotions that reveal the truth of "friendship"—as it had been with Tara when I no longer possessed her. In this moment, so far from anything I might have once called reality, there was something beyond desire. Eros, Kama, whatever name you gave it, was only the snare. The essence of love was to love life, to see that life in another, and to love just because that other was alive.

I was overjoyed to find my release was real, desire gone. This might be temporary...that I had shot my wad as they say. Perhaps in a few days—or hours for that matter—those old urges would come calling. I wouldn't worry about it now. I would savor this victory over myself, lasting or not. Then, for the most fleeting of moments, the dream, or more precisely its ghost, came back—the ibex that I saw as myself, the horse that was Pal, the water and terror.

Dug shook Pal awake, saying something to him in a scolding tone, that I could only interpret as kicking his ass for sleeping too long. Realizing where he was and what he had to do, Pal quickly came around.

"Dadee, Dug say go quickly. Now before sun too high, before ice above melt, before river go to deep." Then with a look of expectation bordering on despair, he asked, "We go east, yes Dadee? We go up Niri like Dug say?"

At that point, I had yet to make up my mind. I just wanted to go back to the dream, knowing that somewhere in all the jumbled images, emotions, sensations, was the answer. The answer was in me. I would know the right thing to do. But how to get down there to me, to hear me, through all the noise and confusion?

"Please Dadee, choose way. Dug say once cow moves, he move very big. Dug say, in night he feel cow move. Just little, not too big, but remember this like before, little move before waking. Dug say cow soon wake. Spirits talk in night."

We stood before a wide marshy place, the result of the braiding of many streams as they disgorge from Shingri and Niri nalas. The way Geser ordered lay on this side of the river, into the ever-narrowing gorge which Dug referred to as the Copper Gate. Across the wetlands and braided streams lay the other trail, the one up the Niri. A little earlier, when we had gazed down on this scene from the hillock vantage of Dug's tent, he voiced surprise at how low the waters were, even at this early hour.

"Dug say Amma be with us." Then Pal flushed. "Dug say, she opens private woman place; she give us way. He say, most time, stream much hard crossing, run very strong, even in time of little water. All places now land, before covered...to man's chest...many places over head. Dug say, even for big Sahib like you. Many time Dug lose sheep, pony, even once yak. Dug right Dadee...only Lord Buddha and the Taras...not his Amma, protect."

There was just too much going for the Niri route. In the face of this blessing from the Gods, regardless of name, I thought I had little choice. The way looked easy enough, just cross the few ankle-deep streams. We could almost hop from one stony island to the next, all the way to the far bank several hundred yards away. At the place Dug identified as a ford, the bank was steep; the river ran a good twenty feet below. There were signs of heavy traffic. The opposite bank was much the same. Our survey from Dug's camp was correct; it was no illusion. The water had receded to the barest trickle and, since the Changpas were willing to risk their precious herds, there could be no danger of quicksand.

Pal was overjoyed. He took off down the bank. Out of character, he gleefully splashed in the icy water. We were now buddies, and rightfully so; we shared the dangers of the trail equally. Once we were "back", wherever that back might be, we would revert to those roles society cast. Out in this wilderness there was no one looking, no face to maintain—no one except Dug, who from his tent watched our progress intently.

Inside, there was this strange voice calling—traces of that dream perhaps. Outside, there was Pal frolicking in the waters, his love for life so evident. In a short while, maybe only a couple of days, he could be home, surrounded by friends and family, telling tall tales of his adventure with the crazy Amrikan Sahib.

From somewhere inside, the voice crossed the threshold of sensory awareness and grew increasingly louder. I knew something was wrong, but what it was I couldn't tell. Yet because I sensed it, my curiosity was piqued. Maybe this caused my body to quiet, to listen more closely to the sounds I heard, or was it that the voice itself grew louder? The frequency was low, like a rumble. I seemed to hear the word "BEWARE." As I stepped forward, toward the edge of the bank, the rumble became slightly louder, imperceptibly moving past the boundary of my being.

Yet as I looked out over the valley any sense of apprehension subsided. The sun was just cresting the eastern ridges; a blue-lit world suddenly came alive with the sparkle of gold. I felt the sun's welcome warmth on chilled skin. Yes, even the sun was beckoning me forward. Pal turned, flashing a smile with near perfect, white teeth. I smiled back. Truly this was one of those savoring times, a time that gave meaning to every trek, a time when all was right, everything in balance. It was moments such as this that made all the hassle, all the sweat...yes, and all the pain seem worth it.

Pal opened his mouth to say something. There was only the most terrible roar.

The ground shook beneath me. I thought I saw the distant peaks sway. I looked down. It was another of those stop-motion moments when denial takes precedence over reality. Not in a fluid motion, but in a series of jerky individual exposures; joy morphing, AT-AT-AT, into horror on Pal's face. It was more than the shake, for out on the open plain there should have been no danger. And while for me there was none, Pal was in a quite different place, down the embankment, out in the stream. I turned to see what was so terrifying to Pal. A wall of sound hit me. To my horror, it wasn't just sound, but a solid wall of water. It rushed out of the gorge's mouth, spilling onto the flood plain between the banks. It must have traveled at a tremendous speed. Pal was only able to cover several feet before it engulfed him.

That was it. One moment Pal was with me, a companion, a buddy, a fellow human for whom I was developing deep feelings, the next he was gone. The mixture of mud, water, boulders, and silt carried him away. What had been nothing more than a rubble-filled riverbed, with only the slightest suggestion of a flowing stream, was now a raging torrent threatening to engulf the banks. Only a minute more and I too would have journeyed with him.

My mind raced with what to do. I wasn't so quick to write off Pal. Dropping my pack, I ran along the bank. How could I run as fast as that water? Even though I was in little danger, out in the open and well above the flood crest, I was terrified. The ground continued to reverberate, the after-shocks pulsing through the alluvial fill. I had to save him. He couldn't be gone, not just like that. For most of the time Pal had been with me, he had remained on the periphery of my awareness. Oh, I had thought about him on the Shingo, but not in the way I was coming to think of him now. Then he was just a bad servant, a hassle, a problem. I knew little about him, other than I had hired his ponies to carry my saman. Now I had come to see him not only as pony-wala, but also as an equal. Pal was someone on whom I could depend, and not just for service. Without quite realizing it, I had come to look on him as a friend as well. No, he couldn't just disappear.

Slowly it hit me that he had done just that. Had Nam receded so far into my past that I had forgotten this was life; one moment a living breathing, feeling being with memories, desires, plans, ideas, a being that could see beauty, know fear, give joy, inflict pain, then wasted, an inert pile, puddle, or just nothing at all. Where had Pal gone? I collapsed on the ground. A big bubble of grief burst inside. I was no longer terrified, although the ground continued to shake. I was too filled by sorrow. I could no longer hold back. Tears came, as had the waters from above. They flooded over me, blotting out all.

I had spent a lifetime extricating myself from things, from people. I had conned myself into believing I needed nothing, no one, yet a big part of me knew it was a shuck. I had been conditioned from childhood, that moment when I heard Father wasn't coming home, to expect such abrupt endings, to expect the worst and not build on others. How readily I had seized upon a philosophy of

"coming and leaving alone," of a bridge-like world. In shielding myself from what I saw as inevitable, I forgot all the time between the beginning and the end. Now I had to face up to my own self-fulfilled prophecy. Now I was alone, with only what my two legs, my back, my shoulders could carry. Oh yes, and then there was that load in my head, the biggest burden of them all.

I picked myself off the ground. You are too old for tears now my boy...things to do, things to do. Orienting myself, I found I was directly below Dug's hillock. I looked up to see his trident-like wave. "Jao, Sahib, jao!" He had that big toothless grin which threatened to crack wide his withered face; mirth filled his clear eyes.

"Jao, Sahib!" he repeated pointing neither east, nor to the narrow opening of the gorge, but to a faint track that rose almost vertically over the western ridge.

Why hadn't he shown us that way before? My mind was reeling. I could have believed anything. What was that old saying, whom the Gods wish to destroy they first drive mad? Was this some sophomoric plot by minor deities to slowly strip me of life—like children picking the wings and legs off a fly? Pal had warned of Dug's powers. I had seen only an old, half-crazed man. Could he possess the power to bring down the flood?

I freaked, to say the least. But any temptation I might have had to remain, to collect my wits, was gone. I feared what might lie ahead no more than I feared this man who, I now believed, was a sorcerer. A great cackle came from Dug. It was strange, and though I expected it to be malicious, it wasn't. Rather, it was marked by innocence, like a child who seeing the foolishness of others laughs freely, unconstrained by propriety. Though he was some distance away, I thought I could see my very fear come true. The grin continued to spread across his face, stretching so wide it split the parchment like skin. Underneath was revealed a hideous demon visage, complete with the third eye and tiger fangs, that fearful depiction of Mara. There was no romance now, no longing to meet. A great wave of fear washed over me, as surely as the flood had Pal. I wanted desperately to go back, to Geser, to Phuktal, even to Gul. Yet the way to those refuges was blocked. Then I remembered what

I was supposed to do, what the dream had ordained. Fighting to ignore the Dug-Mara devil above, I fled toward Thonde-la.

In the lowest sector of the bhavachakra, portrayed to either side of Lord Yama, are two hells. In one, the sinners suffer the tortures of fire, in the other those of ice. I had already visited the former in Phuktal, so it was to the latter that I would now go. Yet even my way to that hell wasn't to be easy. As I approached the mouth of the Shingri gorge, Dug's Copper Gate, I saw to my discomfiture that there was no way. The swollen river now coursed through vertical rock walls. The track along the riverbank was deep under water. If the gate was locked, the only recourse was to scale the wall. I remembered those talon-like fingers of Dug, pointing up over the ridge. At the time, not all the hot hounds of hell nipping at my heels could have driven me to take *his* route. Remember that, at the time, I fully believed his machinations had caused Pal's death.

But was it Dug's fault? He had warned us not to continue on our way. What if we had continued? What if we had both entered the Gate just at the moment of the flood? If I looked beyond my immediate sorrow, I could see that Dug had saved my life, but at such a price. Pal had his whole life before him. I had spent most of mine. After all, I had come here to die—despite my procrastination. Why didn't I go first into the riverbed? I liked to lead. I wanted to feel I was breaking new ground. That is hard if you are looking up someone else's ass, eating someone else's dust. But at that very moment when Pal went ahead, I had been overcome by such harmony that I lingered, only if to savor the pleasure a moment more. That moment made all the difference.

The ridge formed one of the Gate's flanking walls. I had to snake back and forth up the steep incline, making the climb extremely tedious. This was a "four point" trail, where hands, as well as feet, were required. After about an hour of climbing I hit snow. Thickening clouds now covered the sun, which earlier had shown such promise. The air was cold. I saw my breath and felt ice on my beard. I regretted I hadn't brought more clothing. Much of what I had went with Pal. Then a great guilty feeling went through me. How could I snivel over this when Pal had lost his life?

All the signs were in place. You could smell it in the air. STORM! SNOW! BARF! It was going to be the Shingo-la all over again. I began to think some storm god must protect these passes, for it seemed a storm hit every time I got close to one. Lower on the trail, I had seen the track take a definite turn down—local folks don't climb higher than is absolutely necessary; they know who dwells on the mountaintop. But I couldn't see the bottom or the trail's condition once there. Therefore, I decided to continue on what had dwindled into the barest goat track.

I climbed for the rest of the day. There was no choice, but to keep moving. My ultimate pass, fantasized in Kobe, was getting close, but as before I just couldn't let go. Oh, I kept thinking, how about this spot, old man? This is a good place to put down. Something kept goading me upward, conning me into wanting to go just a little higher before I gave in. Every time I reached what I thought would be the crest with view I could go out on, it was only to see another rise before me.

Finally, I reached a point where, without wings, I could go no higher. It was near sunset. As I crested the ridge, a rose-tinted panorama lay before me. For a moment, the magnificence of the scene drove out all the horror of the day, all the cold, all the fear. I forgot I was on an exposed ridge, without food or shelter. I forgot night was near, and that I might not see tomorrow. Instead the awesome beauty of a moonscape painted with ember-glow ice and snow overwhelmed me. I could see forever, with wave after wave of peaks stretching to all points of the compass. The monsoon-driven storm hadn't yet blotted out the northwestern sky, and between two peaks the sun was setting, forming a trail of molten gold up the Shingri. It was there, in this notch at the top of that radiant trail, the Thonde-la lay. The sun set directly behind the pass teasing my mind with yet another possible omen. There are so many omens when you are in extremis. My eye traced the thin shimmering stream downward into a bowl-like valley. This bowl was the work of a great glacier that once dwelled there. Now this giant had shrunk and splintered, retreating into the seven small hanging glaciers I had seen on my map. On paper they seemed so insignificant, little blotches of blue-lined white in a sea of browns. Now in the backlight of alpenglow, they appeared like a flight of fiery, winged dragons, hovering over the purpled valley. They wait

for a destined morrow to leave their frozen aeries and reclaim the land.

The view hit me like a Zen master's knock, blasting apart the Maya and granting, if only for the briefest of moments, a glimpse of reality. All those bits and pieces I had been struggling with throughout the day suddenly came together.

I realized what had happened. The lie of the land, and my experience of the day before, made it clear. It was neither Dug's witchcraft, Vajra-Bhairava, Yama, nor Mara that caused Pal's death. The cause was very natural to these mountains. Earlier tremors must have closed the bottleneck formed by the gorge, loosening the debris from the steep nala walls, dumping it by the ton into the gap. Then the big tremor, the one which had struck that morning, released the whole mess and.... Of course, that didn't explain why I was here and not some piece of flotsam down the Niri.

It was cold as all the frozen hells that night. I lucked into a natural cairn of stones. After some rearranging, I could construct enough of a wall to partly shield me from the ferocious wind. There was no question of food. Dug's benefice, the stack of chapati and rough lump of churpe', had gone with Pal. Grim images of where that food and Pal might be filled my mind. No matter how bad things were for me, at least I was alive, at least there was a chance I would see the sun rise the next morning, watching its light play on the snow-covered hills. Then it came to me again, that queasy, disorienting feeling, my dogged companion since those first cherry weeks in Nam. How could I be so sure I was alive. Maybe, I too had died. I no longer had any familiar point of reference to locate life. It was dark, cold, only the wind was living, only the wind could serve as another.

I thought myself lucky it didn't snow, but I might have been warmer if it had. Hunkered down among the rocks, I gathered my down bag around me, partially covering it with a now near-useless rain parka in an attempt to block the wind. At first I shivered violently, but gradually, trapped by the down, the slight warmth in my body began to accumulate. If I could keep the down dry, preserve its insulation, then I would get through the night. I found a half bar of Amul in the depths of my pack. Even more welcome

was the half-full package of biscuit. There again was that rosy, plump-cheeked baby, staring out at me from the wrapper. Had this savage land ever seen such a child. I ate half the chocolate and a few of the biscuits. These supplies would have to last until Thonde Gomba, and there was no telling how long it might take to reach there. Although I had seen the pass at dusk, it was still many, many weary hours away. Refueled by the sucrose and comforted by the down, my shivering diminished to a point where sleep came.

I was awake...but was I? All about me was white fog. The wind had died; all was still. Morning was fast approaching. When I fell asleep, there had been total darkness. Now, although I could still see almost nothing, the air glowed with a misty whiteness. Clouds, which yesterday were building to the south, finally caught me. The night before I had thought, if only I can make it to the other side of this darkness, if only I can make it through until morning. Then it will be just a walk up the col and over the ridge down to Thonde Gomba. I knew it would be a tough climb, but nothing more than a bit of sweat. I could see the route to the top; it promised little exposure. But I hadn't figured on whiteout. It could last a few moments, hours, or linger for days. The moments I could spare, the hours maybe, but not the days. The remaining chocolate and biscuit were hardly a breakfast, let alone enough to carry me more than a day. I could go quite some time without food, if all I had to do was exist. I had before, but sitting on my ass in a prison cell or a flophouse in Delhi was much different from this. There was also a water problem. I was thirsty as hell. Up on the top there was no water, except for a dusting of snow. I had to move.

I am prone to trust my judgment when it comes to direction. I thought I could figure out the lie of the pass from the orientation of nearby stones. Yes, it is that way, over the big gneiss with the sparkles of mica. If I headed in that direction, I would eventually come across the Shingri. Then it would be a simple matter of following the course of the stream. By the time, I got up the slope, the fog will have cleared away. Besides, this was a track others had taken. There must be some trail sign, some indication of human passage.

The fog didn't lift as quickly as I had hoped. At times, I almost packed it in. I couldn't see more than a few feet in front of me. If I

had felt lost the night before, I felt even more so now. There was only this cold, damp clinging whiteness. I was soaked through, both from my own perspiration and the mist. If I stopped to rest, uncontrollable shivering soon overcame me. I had to keep moving, but no idea where. I began to feel I was playing hide-and-seek with Mara. Sporadically, from behind this hillock or that rock, I would see a face, a hand, shoulder, leg, something just enough to let me know I wasn't alone.

I chalked this up to hallucination. It was, after all, the first time on the trek I had been really alone. There was no one expecting me, no one who would come looking for me. Oh, there was Gul and Ravi, but what could I hope from them. After a few days, Yosh would reach them. They would wait a few more days; I still owed them money, and that was with me. Eventually, they would grow impatient. Then they might come looking. And there was also Yosh's love for Pal. He wouldn't let him just disappear, would he? Yes, he would come, even if Gul refused. But most likely Gul would come—if nothing more than to pick my carcass. That is what they would find. Yes, they would all come, no one wishing to miss out on their share.

I was totally alone. My mind reacted, denying solitude, creating this malevolent playmate to goad me on. That was all. It was nothing but a hallucination.

As the day wore on, the fog showed no sign of lifting. I became increasingly desperate. I reached the nala's bottom. Now I had to choose the direction for my next ascent. I made several false starts, stumbling on small streams ending in springs. I kept running a mental overview of the terrain, seeing those seven glaciers with their seven streams. The most northern, the one on the right, was the source of the Shingri; it was up this chu that the path to the Thonde-la lay. I had no idea, however, where I was in this valley. If I went up a stream, I had six out of seven chances of being wrong, more if you took the springs into account. Worse yet, not finding the real pass, I might out of desperation force my way over a false pass, into the vast mountain wilderness lying beyond the ridge.

Had I been equipped, as I should have been, it would have been a simple matter of making camp and waiting for the fog to lift. Just brew a nice cup of chai, maybe a little rib-sticking dal-bhaat,

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smoke a joint to relax, and crawl into the tent for a nice snooze. But I wasn't. Cold, wet, hungry, and alone, I had absolutely no idea which way to go. Time was running out. My mind was losing all grasp. The only way I knew there still was a mind, that there was still a me, was from the fear and discomfort. I exist because I feel; I am because I fear. It was then those illusory hints of Mara became all too real.

"Hey! Yes, you! I told you we've some unfinished business. Wasn't it your idea to come here to visit me? Didn't you do everything you could to make this possible? Look how far you came and not only once either. Each time you've come closer, closer, each time squirreling up your puny little courage, almost ready to let go, then running back to what you think is your life, to what you think is reality. Don't you know I'm the only reality? I wait for all to come to me. How many have you known that have come to me? Pal came, even though he wasn't ready. But then you know all about that. You tangled your web with his, and he took the fall. If it hadn't been for you, would he be where he is now?"

For the briefest of moments, the mangled body of Pal lay before my eyes, lying crushed and bloated among the rocks, half in, half out of the water. Then with a start, I realized it wasn't Pal, but a memory locked away in some inner recess for so long.

* * *

I saw it so clearly, as if the quarter century, separating this now from that then, had evaporated into nothingness. It was a mutilated body, but of another young man, maybe even younger than Pal. There was even a resemblance, the same thick black hair, high cheekbones, the same Asian eyes. I had been in country for several months—long enough at least so that I was beginning to be salty.

One night, out on some godforsaken firebase's perimeter with nothing better to do, I got blasted with some grunts. I mean really stoned on a combination of J. Walker and some die-no-might weed. This, of course, wasn't uncommon. There were so many similar nights—in between rare moments of wacko were lifetimes

of boredom. The combination of weed, booze, and bottled-up fear can make for a devilish high. We had one of those ancient fifty-caliber jobbies, efficient relics from Father's war. It spit out a hard one the size of your thumb for a good mile or more, if the angle was right. When we loaded it up with tracers...what a show! Anyway, that night we decided to play, doing a great job chewing up the neighborhood...and any neighbor in it. What a gas! Watching that stream of light reminded me of headlights on the Golden Gate. How many times had I driven up on the Headlands with some bird, staring at the lights while my hands engaged in that age-old game? But that is another tale. Anyway, I just got firing, and all the shit I was in dissolved; I was back in San Francisco. Man, I didn't even hear the sucker—and it was loud.

The next morning, I saw the results of my handiwork. There in the reeds, on the bank of the Quan's muddy ooze, were the twisted remains of what had been just a few hours before a young man. In that crazy world, he could have been a farm boy, VC, or even NVA regular. Was he sneaking up on our position or just returning home after work in the fields? I will never know. What he had been, or what he had done, was of little matter. Now he was only a mangled, waterlogged leather sack. He was as I now imagined Pal to be. Of course, there had been no inquiry, nothing to inquire into. Just another dead Slope, a body for the count! I guess I hadn't even inquired into my own guilt. I mean, he could have been VC; it could have been my life or his, you know, all that good shit we rationalize. But something...karma...was watching, recording, storing up information inside. Maybe I didn't have to answer the question at the time; maybe I didn't have to come up with a reason why this fucker should buy it. But one day I would. I was wrong. I hadn't "left the Quan forever." How could I? The Quan was in me; its ooze will flow through my veins as long as there is a "me."

Had the time now come to answer what had remained unanswered so long? How many more such ghosts lurked inside? How many forgotten wrongs? How many forgotten crimes lay in wait for revenge? If revenge is best served cold....

* * *

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Yes, it was cold and seemed to be getting colder. At times, the enveloping fog teased, lifting the veil to show a glimpse of an unknown peak, a distant pasture, a stream. Even the sun penetrated for brief moments. Yet without an idea of the time, I couldn't guess its direction.

After that image of Pal...and the subsequent trip down memory lane...I tried not to think. Just keep going. Put all energy into moving one foot in front of the other. My goal wasn't so much to get somewhere, but to stop and rest meant only another interlude with Mara. The ground was so barren, scree dusted by snow and ice, treeless, scarcely any life at all. This was truly a high desert. Maybe, I was now higher than 16,000. All I knew for sure was that it was getting mighty hard to breathe. Keep going! Keep going! The air was so dry; the snow like sand, blowing in little whirlwinds, swirling up into the white nothingness.

I grew even more tired. My guard began to slip. Again, I heard that voice.

"This way Sahib, just keep climbing. Remember what you saw on the ridge. Why else climb high if not to see what lies below? Remember how the land lay. Just take those bits and pieces I show you. Put them together into a picture, into a map. Just trust me! Just trust yourself! Don't worry about what you lack. Use what you have. I'm not here to harm you."

Should I trust this voice? It seemed friendly enough. But was it guiding me across the pass, or into to another cul de sac of past misdeeds? The truth was I had nothing left to lose. If not the voice then what? If I didn't get over the top by nightfall, it would make little difference. Okay, I thought, trying to calm myself, I will do as the voice says. I will think about what I have seen, about those glimpses of peaks and streams, that glacial snout, that odd clump of boulders. I had seen all of those from the ridge. If I could just get back to that view, just remember exactly what was where. That would be better than nothing, better than hopelessness. No, don't seek what isn't there, just trust the old Gestalt, let those bits and pieces float before your mind, let your subconscious find the pattern. Trust yourself! Trust Mara!

Gradually, my mind accepted the burden, giving relief to my legs, lungs, back, and heart. I would will myself over the fucking mountain. There was no other choice. No choice except to fall to Mara's embrace, to surrendered. Yet I was still unready.

There were many more such moments, mind struggling with matter, Mara lying somewhere just outside, just beyond, just enough to nudge me onward. Finally, by late afternoon a wind rose from the West, driving the clouds before it. I found myself about a quarter mile from the pass, high up on the slope, near the final bend of the Shingri. There was no question it was the pass, for there was the pile of mani, complete with dozens of ragged prayer flags, snapping in the rising wind. As I looked down slope, I could make out part of my trail, a thin line that wandered drunkenly across the valley. I must have covered at least twice the distance needed, but in the end, I hadn't done too badly. Despite the approaching night, my goal was in sight. I was almost at the same height as the pass itself. All I had to do was walk across the slope to the notch and down the other side.

I made top just at sunset, just in time to see the entire Zanskar Valley lit by the slanting light. It must have been another one of those mind-blowing vistas, except my mind was already so blown I can't recall much. Somewhere I found the strength to take a picture. I was down to two cameras, still fastened securely around my neck. But all those things that had been in my pockets? Somehow the vest felt lighter and, as I checked, I noticed that I had lost more of my old friends. They were, most likely, lying back along the trail, maybe not far, but they might as well have been on the moon. I do remember looking out to the northwest and seeing the arc of the Great Himalaya with peaks like Brahma, Sickle Moon, Nun Kun, standing in the distance, great white sails against the purple and pink-slashed mackerel sky. Despite all these beauties, the most lasting thing remembered was looking down to see the gomba perched above the distant plain...then the feeling of my heart leaping into my throat when I saw the trail downward. The way to the Thonde-la from Phuktal had been long and gradual, like a staircase. Now the all that altitude fell abruptly away to the plain, a vertical mile below.

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Although this part of the trail was well marked, so tired were my legs and so dark the night, I must have rolled half way down. Once I had left the pass, Mara disappeared. It was as if the pass marked a boundary, beyond which this deity couldn't go. It was gravity, not Mara, which now guided my way. Despite my earlier optimism, I didn't reach the gate of the gomba until shortly before daybreak. I was so tired, I just crumpled into a ball, trusting I would soon be found—perhaps not caring if I were.

Chapter XVI

*We opened our eyes from eternal sleep,
awakened by the din;
But it was still an evil night,
and so we slept.*

—Samad—

CAUGHT

But I was found, this karmic cycle yet to be fulfilled. A chout on some errand stumbled across my huddled remains. Summoning help, I was taken to a room where I spent several days drifting in and out of consciousness. The lamas saw to my needs, but I was kept in almost complete isolation. Three times a day food was brought—basic nourishment of thuk'pa, chapati, and solja. Several times a lama came to see how I was progressing. Otherwise, I was alone, confined to a room, which unlike Phuktal was most Spartan. It was as if a warning had been sent ahead of me. But how could that have been in a land without electricity—carrier pigeon or maybe...Geser had kept talking about "special powers." Anyway, I had plenty of time to ponder, for if not imprisoned, I was at least quarantined.

Weakened by my ordeal on the pass, the days of confinement didn't weigh too heavily. I lay on the hard pallet, thrilled that for a time I wouldn't have to take another step. Stoned only by exhaustion, I was satisfied to watch the waning autumn sun play on rough adobe walls. The nights were different; a real bitch. There was no more charas to get me through. When I did finally sleep, it was to dreams of adobe turned to water.

Pal swims in and out of the watery wall. He tries to enter the room through the water, only to be sucked back into its maw, again and again. My mind struggles to deny the horror. It looks for an escape and finds it in a memory of better times, surfing back in SoCal—a dream within dream. I see Pal as my partner, far out on a reef, maybe at Swami's or Black's, someplace where you can find the big winter rides. Bitching sets swarm from the Southwest. It's all nectar when you find the groove. Suddenly, the spume-frothed blue-green turns an angry blood red. I'm no longer in SoCal, no longer with Pal, contentedly

waiting for the next big one, the sound of the chop rhythmically striking his stick. There's no board, only a mangled body bearing another chain of dissolving faces. The tip of the wave slaps the body, the water mindlessly plays with it—slap, up into the air, then letting it fall, only to slap it up again.

The water wall becomes alive, a feline creature, toying idly with its prey before the final kill. My perspective shifts, closer and closer to the faces, the only common denominator being that they are all frozen in fear...crystallized in agony. Sometimes I recognize a face as one out of my past, sometimes not. I try to place the face, try to remember what I'd done to that particular victim. I keep getting closer until the face is just an eye, a mouth, or nostril. Now I'm inside that face. The face becomes mine. I hurtle through the air, only to slam down into the depthless murk. I'm choking, gagging. I can't breathe, my lungs bursting...pressure too great to bear.

I awoke back in the cell-like chamber. Why hadn't Mara taken me? Why Pal and not me?

Finally, after several days, measured only by the cycles of meals and the rising and setting of the sun, a lama came.

"Sahib, lorry from Padam come. Sahib tomorrow morning go." This was neither a question, nor suggestion, but uncharacteristically in this land of excessive politeness, it was a direct order. "When you get to Padam Sahib, you must report to police. You tell truth about boy Pal. His family must know. They must have blood price. You much foolish, Sahib to try to come this path without proper guide. Pal was young boy. He never go this way. I ask all lamas and local people too; they not see Pal before. Sahib, all know the place above is Mara's home. This gomba, here to guard against that demon, to keep from coming down the mountain into the land of the Nang'pa. When you come, we not sure you ferenghi or demon. That why we lock room...we watch you day and night. Only later we find out about Pal. We find first from your mouth, when you talk in dream. Then a messenger comes from Phuktal. Then we know you speak of more than dream."

He walked over to the wall and, lifting a diaphanous prayer flag, pointed at a small crack in the rough plaster. It was a spy hole. I had been under observation the entire time.

"It is our duty to guard against spirit evil. We see you not demon, now free from our charge. It police duty guard against human evil. They must judge you."

As the lorry rumbled over the dusty, rutted streets, I wondered what was waiting. Would I be cleared of human evil? Would I find Gul, the faithful servant, waiting patiently, or would he have run away with my gear and remaining provisions? What about the charas? Two weeks! God, had it only been two weeks? I tried to count the days, but time was elusive. The charas and all it represented was so far from my mind. There had been no place for the future in the intensity of that so recent past.

The matter with the police was troubling. I would need Gul to settle this mess. Even though I felt innocent of Pal's death, I was vulnerable to suspicion. Weakness made me open to all sorts of extortion. The wheels would be spinning in the police's mind, "Ah, rich Sahib, no protection, milking time." That was if I was lucky. It also could be plucking time, skinning time, or throat-cutting time. Without doubt, I would have to pay something. The only questions were, how much and to whom.

I looked with bewilderment at the rough and ready scattering of low adobe houses dotting the almost treeless plain. There was a new mosque. Its minaret, rising over a green dome, announced that I was now on Islam's marches. A few poplars, imported and nurtured with great care, struggled to survive. Despite the altitude and harshness of the climate, the profuse fields of purple-gold barley proved that with care the land can be productive.

It was well over a month since I had been in anything like a town. I felt like a bumpkin in the town for the first time. There seemed to be such a bustle...look, actual shops where for money you could have mo-mo, chai, nan, even curry. To my palate, conditioned to watery thuk'pa and bland dal-bhaat, these were luxuries beyond imagining. I could hardly wait to get off the lorry and dive into a steaming plate of mo-mo.

The police matter could wait. Besides after that business, I might not have the means for a descent meal. I fingered my fanny pack. In the journey down to the gomba, I had lost most of my gear, but that little leather sack remained. Inside was still over two

thousand U.S. in both rupees and dollars. Why was I worried? I was a rich man. I could eat as much mo-mo as I pleased.

I dreamed of eating, eating, and still more eating those plump, meat-filled dumplings. More than once, as I negotiated the snowy wastes trying to find Thonde-la, I had thought of those delicious morsels, last tasted in Darcha. The desire only grew in the stark confines of my Thonde cell. I fantasized the meal, tasting rich meat for the first time since that last supper with Gul. How succulent would be those dumplings, how rich the broth with globules of goat fat floating on the surface. Yes, I would eat my fill, and then eat some more. I would eat until I could eat no more.

The lorry put me down at the edge of the bazaar. I asked the Kashmiri driver where was the best place to eat.

Without a second thought he answered, "The Shalimar, Sahib. Shalimar is only clean dhaba in Padam. Owner, my friend Selim, number one cook. Tell him Ali the Driver send you. He fix pukka meal."

But the Shalimar was Kashmiri and Muslim, and as the sole such dhaba in town, it was the only place he could possibly recommend.

I was severely disappointed when I found no mo-mo on the menu. Selim, the owner, introduced himself, a scrawny little fellow with short, salt and pepper beard that, trying to appear younger, he had hennaed into a garish multi-toned orange. As if to underscore this sorry attempt, he sported atop his skull-like head a ratty karakul cap, hennaed in an equally uneven fashion—perhaps he had envisioned a matching ensemble as Kashmiri men are noted for fashion flair. He came forward to greet me, nervously rubbing his hands. "Salaam Alekwm, Mosaferji, good day, good day! Welcome to my humble restaurant. Sahib likes *rogan josh*?" There was something vaguely familiar about this man, but at the time my mind was slave to a stomach, only concerned with seeing its needs fulfilled. Selim poured a pot of *kehva*, that refreshingly clear chai, spiced with cardamom, cinnamon, and ginger, so favored in Kashmir. Momentarily refreshed, I found the courage to ask about Gul. While one of my heads hoped he was still in town, the other hoped he had split, closing out any return to that self of old, Guy the Smuggler. Yes, I wanted to go on and see where this new road

would lead, free of my past and all its attendant saman. Yet there was still the matter of Pal. Once that was settled, I would truly be free.

Despite its overwhelming presence to one long in the mountains, Padam is, as you might imagine, a small town. Not much goes on that doesn't get quickly around. This was even more so for the Kashmiris; as a minority holding the reins of power, they band together.

Selim gave me this sly, conspiratorial look, "Acchaa, Sahib, this Gul come to dhaba often. Take all meals here. We are halal, best food in this stinking Jhana. Not like Srinagar, Sahib. *Gosht*, (meat), *sabzi* (vegetable) not good here. We do best with what here, but these Zanskaris, even if of Islam, very ignorant, not know how grow good things. Land much high, much dry, much...."

I had to interrupt him. If I let him go on, I would have been there for hours, listening to the exiles lament. There is only one Paradise on Earth, which is how all Kashmiris think of their valley home, even more so when they are far away.

"Yes, but what about Gul? He works for me. Where can I find him?"

"Y'Allah! You must be Guy Sahib. Gul talk much about you. He say he your sirdar, ji? You big man from Amrika. Ah Sahib, he say you very rich. I not know you. I must prepare something very best for you, special Kashmiri food. I send boy to fetch Sirdarji Gul."

Oh, I thought, so its "Sirdarji" now.

"Insha'Allah he come...."

Before the Selim could finish his thought, Gul walked through the door. A man, obviously Kashmiri from the sharp-nosed, round-eyed Dardic features, accompanied him. It was still bright outside, so it was hard to see when entering the cave-like dhaba. Gul, intent in conversation with his Kashmiri friend, failed to notice the disheveled traveler, just another bit of Euro-trash flotsam with little chance for profit. Gul's companion seemed older, some sort of a bureaucrat from his office-bound look. He was important, if you could judge from Gul's obsequious demeanor, even more evident than usual. The dhaba-wala started to tell Gul of my arrival, but then with logic typical of Kashmiris, decided to wait,

watching this little play, enjoying the diverting speculation on how long it would take Gul to spot me. For his part, Gul was much too intent ordering a big meal for himself and his companion—a meal like many others, I would later find out, charged to me. Two Gul's were at work here: one most obsequious to the honcho, the other haughtily condescending to the dhaba-wala.

After relaying Gul's order to his khaansaamaa, the wala came over and whispered in my ear. "Sahib with Gul, important man, big policeman, Subedar Rashid of J&K police, Padam. Gul much friend with him. This strange for businessman like Gul, having friendship with policeman."

This last remark troubled me. What did he mean by businessman? What had Gul, my khaansaamaa, been saying?

I didn't have long to ponder because, finally, Gul noticed me. Oh, did he milk the scene. He was all over me with great hugs, treating me as if I was his long-lost friend, rather than the employer he so greatly resented.

During all of this, Subedar Rashid sat impassively, the only sign of life was the sweep of his long black lashes and the twitch of his little Hitlerian mustache. This Subedar was a man used to power—how to work under it and how to manipulate those under him. He would have served well in a mediaeval court, whether for the Moguls or the Borgias it would have made little difference. If Gul was the wolf, then Rashid was the fox. Yes, this Rashid was a cool customer, but he seemed to be close, albeit superior, to Gul. That was a good sign for me. Insha'Allah everything was going to work out just fine.

"Dadee, we hear you at Thonde, we hear you have great trouble, Pal have terrible accident. I want to meet you, but Rashid Sahib say no. Lamas not happy with visit of Kashmiri. He say it make trouble only worse. If you not come today, Rashid promise go tomorrow. He big policeman. No matter he Kashmiri, lamas must listen to him."

News traveled fast in those parts. Having waited long enough, Rashid, control freak that he was, decided to enter the conversation.

"Ah, Salaam Alekwm! Since this rude villager has no manners." Here the functionary darted Gul a look as if to say, "Remember boy, I have your number." "Let me introduce myself! Rashid Asmar, head of J&K Police in this *tehsil* (county). If you have problem, Guy Sahib, Insha'Allah, I am the man to fix...ha, ha, the oil to make the wheels turn." What an understatement, I thought to myself "This Gul is a good man. I know his employer in Srinagar. In fact, Aziz and I are cousins. That makes Gul also my relation. You know what they say Sahib...about the blood being thicker than water. We Kashmiris are few in this place. We must all stick together, and friends of Kashmir too...eh? I believe you are a friend of Kashmir?"

Behind those long, luxuriant camel lashes were the intense eyes of a ferret. I knew those eyes well. They were Stony Black's eyes, the eyes of the Afghan police, the eyes of those FBI agents in that draft business, the eyes of innumerable customs agents, the eyes of the DEA who had finally brought me down. They were eyes that hunted and haunted me throughout a good part of my life. Yes, they were familiar eyes.

While Rashid's ears listened, those eyes looked for deeper signs, signals which good policemen around the world are trained to read. While the lips and tongue can be controlled, a nervous tic of the ear, sweat or crease forming on the brow, a twitching of some extremity, even the blink of an eye, all tell their own tales.

"I hear from Kaushak at Thonde Gomba there was an... 'accident?'"

Just the way he pronounced the last word made me nervous. Why was there that questioning rise to his voice? Wasn't it clear what had happened? If worse came to worse, they could always go and get Dug. He would tell them. He had seen the whole affair. If, that is, there was a Dug. Everything that happened since I had last seen Gul was now up for grabs, I mean the reality of it all. There had been a passage of time for sure, but what had happened during that passage was less clear. Oh, in my mind was this little film of what went down, but there had been so much that was bizarre, so much against my own understanding of reality, that if my remembrance was challenged, it threatened to dissolve. If memory was the foundation of being, then mine was now built upon quicksand.

Rashid was quick to size up my uncertainty. Most likely Gul had already prepped him. "This Angrez is weak, cousin. Here is a chance to skin him alive. All we have to do put the heat to him, and he'll spread open his wallet like a putanna spreads her legs." Gul had a good idea how much money I had. He would know just how far to go in the skinning.

"Eat your food Guy Sahib, then Gul will take you to the Rest House. There is plenty of time. Tomorrow, when you are rested, come by *thana* (police station). Not to worry, we will solve this problem for you."

The rest house was a remote attempt to duplicate the amenities of an American motel; individual rooms, each with its own private bath, could be accessed from a central courtyard. Thank the Gods, I thought upon first seeing a bathroom, flush toilet and shower, a real shower. On closer inspection, I discovered that while the fixtures were in place, the plumbing had yet to be hooked up. However, I wasn't to be denied. On the trail, when my filth got the better of me, my skin feeling greasy and itching, I had made do with a small pot of hot water or a quick dip in an icy chu—all that was needed in the infinite space of the wilderness. Now I was back in civilization, even if it was only Padam. Space was finite, enclosed within walls covered over by roofs. People came and went. There were certain proprieties to which I must conform. After almost a month on the trail, I finally had a hot shower that night. Not with running water mind you, but a still-steaming bucket. What a luxury to feel the tingling rush of hot water over chilled skin. Up on the Thonde-la, I had thought I would never be warm again. But as I poured the bucket over me, Mara's chill began to dissolve. That night, for the first time since Pal's death, I slept through without waking.

"Come in Guy Sahib, how kind of you to come." It was Rashid at his most courteous. "After all, maybe this Angrez knows the drill. Maybe there won't have to be any of that unpleasant heavy-handedness. He must know he's at my mercy. I am not an unreasonable man. I just want my due."

I knew what must be going through the fucker's mind. I had known too many of these types not to be able to read them as they were

surely reading me. We were both pros, on opposite sides of the table, but nevertheless pros.

"There's someone who wants to see you Guy *Sahib*?"

God, I hated the way he was stressing the "*Sahib*." There was a slight commotion, and a small figure stormed through the office door. It was Yosh. Anger contorted his face. I don't think I had ever felt such hatred—certainly I had my share. He was shouting in Zanskari and, over his shoulder in the anteroom, I could see several other Zanskaris, both men and women. They were unknown to me.

"This seems to be more trouble than I thought, Guy *Sahib*. You told the lamas Pal died in accident. Correct? Something about a *zelzeleh*, the shake of the earth, then a flood of water. Pal was carried away by the chu. Ji?"

I nodded in confirmation. Yes, that was what happened; that was the truth.

"But *Sahib*, this boy tells a different story. He says you were very angry at Pal. You thought he run away, that he deserted you when he only went to get ponies. He says that you are very crazy. Maybe only when you go up high...get high...but then very crazy. He thinks you killed Pal, maybe for what happened at the Shingo-la, maybe just so you don't have to pay what you owe. I guess why doesn't really matter, *Sahib*. The problem for me...and for you...is that all these people think you killed Pal. This makes much difficulty for me, *Sahib* Guy. I am Kashmiri and this is Zanskar. These people are Zanskaris; they must be satisfied. I must live among these people. They must not be angry with me. If it was an accident...not your fault...then only a little compensation is needed. But if it was your fault, or worse, if you killed this boy Pal, then it will take much *baksheesh*, maybe more than you have? If this is so, then I have no other way but to send you to Leh. They will decide what is best."

I was stunned. In my wildest dreams, I had never expected this turn of events. To the contrary, I had envisioned a tearful meeting with Yosh. We would both cry over the loss of so dear a friend and comrade of the trail. Yes, it was supposed to be all so touching. Then I would have given Yosh a big *baksheesh*, maybe even a hundred dollars U.S. for the family. We would have parted, after a

final embrace, each wishing the other well. That is what I had expected...not to be accused of murder.

I turned to Gul, proving the extremity of my need. In the face of the most awful prospects, he was the sole resource. My fear increased immeasurably when I saw that no shock registered on his face. He was in on it. Something had been planned, and he was a part. Maybe it was his plan?

"This very bad Dadee. I know you very angry, but I not know you go so far. If I know, I stop you. I not let you go with Pal."

Son of a bitch! They had already tried and found me guilty. I was about to protest, but a great shout of anger came from beyond the room, beyond the anteroom; it was coming from the outside. Even Rashid was a little startled. He went to the window and, after a moment, called me over. What I saw was most unsettling. Yosh hadn't been content just to drag in the grieving family. What must have been his entire village ringed the Police station. Several held banners in Tibetan and Urdu script. I could only imagine what those banners said.

"Two years before, Guy Sahib," said Rashid, "other mob like this almost kill BRO superintendent. They say he used money meant for building roads to make a fancy house and buy a jonga. Government gave him both as allotment. But the mob burned the jonga and nearly killed the man before my policemen saved him. Very close! I ordered a helicopter from Army. They fly him out. Otherwise, maybe Zanskaris kill him. Normally, they are very timid, slow to show anger. They are Bud and want to be at peace, hold anger inside. But when anger becomes too much, it is like an explosion. Very hard, very hard to stop!"

I wanted to pinch myself, thinking this was just another one of those weird dreams. Rashid was just another manifestation of Mara. But I knew it wasn't a dream, and Rashid was most real. After all the shit I had just gone through, was it my fate to be lynched by an angry mob of Zanskaris?

Reason returned; there was no other course. I asked Rashid, "How can they be so sure I'm guilty? There's no evidence, no body. If I wanted to kill Pal, why would I report his death? I'd just say he

chickened out...again...and went back the long way. If he didn't show, then it would be his problem."

"Yes, this is true, Guy Sahib, very true. But you did not actually report. Besides these Zanskaris are very backward, very superstitious. Even though they say they are Bud, they have older beliefs, of magic spells and powers. This Yosh, he says he had a dream. In dream, an old man of the Changpa, a witch priest of ancient ways, told him you killed Pal. He said that when you crossed the river, you struck Pal with your ice ax. Pal fell under water and died. Yosh, like other Zanskaris, believe such dreams come from their so-called God. They think it brings truth of wrong doing. One who has such dreams must avenge. If they do nothing, then they will be punished. This Yosh believes. He has no other choice. You must be punished, if he is to be free of the dream."

"Very bad Dadee, I not know what to do." Gul now joined our conversation. I could only think about how he was enjoying my predicament.

"This man Rashid my kinsman, he good man and help...if he can. But he is one man...Zanskaris many. There too much trouble in Srinagar this time, too busy to bother with small thing like this. You are only one Angrez, not even real Angrez, but Amrikan. Amrika not so popular with Government. They telling Rashid take care or send you to Leh. There martial law...there Army judge you. They worry more about politics than truth. They want Zanskaris to be happy, not cause problems like Kashmiris. What is one Amrikan tourist compared to entire tehsil."

These last words he spoke with discernible disdain. The wolf was finally shedding the human clothing. I had seen hints of what lay underneath ever since we had left Delhi, now nothing was held back. Gul was on the side of power. I was at his mercy, and he savored the moment. My mind flashed back to the room in Vashist. There was the same defiant look on his face when he had savaged that English woman.

Meanwhile, the crowd was growing. Curious passerbys would stop to find out what was going on. Angered by the story they joined in. Things were getting ugly.

"Insha'Allah, we must do something Sahib, before they tear the thana apart. Listen! They are already beating on the doors. I have only two men here. If they are not satisfied, they may kill us all."

Now it was Mutt and Jeff time. Gul eased his way forward between the hostile crowd in the anteroom and me.

"I see Dadee, what being done. These Bud fuckers must want something...besides your head." With that he giggled. "Don't worry Dadee, these people very poor, very ignorant. They not knowing how much money is worth, easy to impress. For them quarter lakh is like Maharaja. Ji, I think if you give 25,000 rupees all trouble finish. I make offer to family?"

I wasn't about to quibble over rupees. My outlook was grim. Twenty-five thousand rupees was half my cash reserve. Half my life would be snatched from me, but better than the whole nine yards. At least, if I paid the money, I would have enough left to choose my end. Otherwise, it might be there and then in this stinking little office. With my eyes, I signaled agreement. Gul and Rashid huddled with Ravi for an all too moment, then they all went into the ante-room, leaving me in the care of one rather large Sikh constable.

On their way out they closed the door. I could only guess what was to be my fate from the sounds of the negotiations. The shouting and arguing went on for several hours. The chai tray went back and forth several times. This gave me time to think...to sweat. Was this their plan? I looked around the small soot-blackened room, out the crudely crafted windows whose few remaining glass panes must have traveled many miles. Over in the corner, the oil drum bukhari radiated a meager warmth, barely pushing back the autumn chill. How familiar it seemed. For a moment, I was at a loss, then, as I looked down on the desk and saw the glass top, I realized it was Kabul all over. How alike was this Rashid to my Shuravi-trained Afghan interrogator. Maybe Rus had trained him too? No, that wasn't it. Black, all those DEA/FBI whatever goons, were all the same. It was more just the nature of the beast when it cornered its prey.

* * *

KALAGIYA

The glass on the desk was what brought it all back. Whether in Kabul or Padam, glass was a rare commodity. There was no local manufacture. In the case of Kabul, it came all the way from the Soviet Union, by road over the Hindu Kush. In Padam it had to come from India, an even longer journey. In either case, such a luxury on your desk top was a sign of high status.

I had been in and out of the Afghan interrogator's office for several days. I was getting to know him, so much that I even remember that bastard's name, Hotaki. He wasn't the biggest of the honchos, but on his way, a little Tajik, with oil-slicked hair. Now that I think about it, he had one of those little mustaches too. In Afghanistan, Hitler was still a popular dude. After all, he made them honorary Aryans. And as one Afghan once said to me pointing at an engraving on a Mark note of Schiller, Goethe, or some such Germanic luminary, "Hitler good man, good man, kill Jews." The amazing thing was this same Pashtun had boasted to me that his people were descendents of the lost tribe of Israel.

They had take me from my cell at all hours, night, day it didn't matter. The whole idea was make me lose any sense of time, any connection with an external reality. The Shuravi trained Hotaki well. I was completely lost, yet unbowed. No fucking wog was going to have the better of me. I figured I had experienced just about all the hell that could be doled out to the living. What could these fools do? The fact I had a steady supply of Valium and charas didn't hurt my feeling of invincibility. This may seem strange, but they too had rules. Valium was a legit medicine, and I had gotten some Afghan quack to write me a script—a hundred Afghanis went a long way those days. Charas was just part of a normal prison ration. Keep the prisoners quiet, besides in Kabul charas was almost like bread, a necessity.

My script called for ten mikes of Valium and they were giving up only five. By this time, I was thinking I had the upper hand. I mean, despite the foul conditions and everything, the interrogations had been almost civilized. Oh, there was a lot of shouting and posturing, but no one resorted to actual physical violence. This, judging by the state of other, native prisoners, wasn't the norm. No, those wogs wouldn't beat me. I was an American and, no

matter my crimes, they would have to be civilized. I can only blame youth and the dope for this delusion.

I remember standing in Hotaki's office, a tough Hazara guard on either side. I argued my case about the dosage. Hey, the dude didn't have a sense of humor. With a bang, he brought down his fist onto the glass tabletop. There was a smashing sound, followed by the tinkle of glass falling to the floor. Then a bellow of surprised anger as he looked at his bloodied hand and shattered desktop. To this day, I have no idea which was the greater injury.

Enraged, Hotaki muttered something to the guards. In lock step, they closed on me. I could see from their eyes the work was distasteful. As Hazara, they had no love for this Tajik, and I certainly hadn't done anything to them. If the truth was known, they were probably laughing their asses off inside at the boss's discomfort. But duty was duty, and it was their duty to do what Hotaki ordered. They held me, and he beat me. For some reason, he had enough control not to mark me—that might make for some embarrassing questions—and I was too stoned to feel the blows.

* * *

Pain or no, I had little taste for replaying the Kabul experience. The thought that I might have to place my fate into the hands of the Indian criminal justice system gave me a chill, a chill so cold that, even standing next to the bukhari, I felt again as I had up on the Thonde-la.

My mind drifted back to the hubbub outside. The voices of the two Kashmiris dominated, Rashid's in particular. With domination came control, with control order. Finally, an agreement was reached. A short cheer went up; word passed to the outside throng. A louder cheer!

"Dad, Dadee," Gul swept breathlessly into the room, his wolfish fangs bared wide in a grin. "No more problem Dadee, problem finish. Rashid very clever man. He make all problem go away. It good, Dadee, I here, for Rashid my kinsman. Insha'Allah, otherwise, he not work so hard for your safety, otherwise, he giving you to Zanskaris."

"Gul, what do you mean, 'no more problem?' These people are screaming for my head."

Gul looked at me as if he was lecturing a small child. "These people very poor, I tell you Dadee. They love Pal much, Mother love much much, yes. But Pal gone, only God bring back. They say maybe you guilty; maybe you kill Pal, but also maybe not. What is sure, you have many rupees, and they not having. They want rupees, but not sure what to do. Yosh big problem! He have dream, he hear priest of Sheytan say you kill, say Pal must have revenge. If Yosh do nothing, he afraid what come. He say to family you must punished. At least must go prison in Leh many years. Very bad place Dad! Many going in...few coming out. Your sirdar go. He lucky! Family work to make free, bring food and medicines. You no family Dadee! Who help you?" A look of infinite sadness masked Gul's face, as if his heart was breaking. "Dadee, I try help you, but Gul have no power, no big family, no rupees. When I finish business here, I go back to Delhi, I find more tourists, I work or no food—poor mother no food. I no go Leh to help you. I want go, but not possible."

I was being set up for the kill. Gul fell silent, giving me time to absorb the grim news. It was almost as bad as I feared. True, I wouldn't be stoned to death, or drawn and quartered, but spending the next few years of my life in the Leh gaol was only a slower death. Now was the time for the final blow.

"No problem, Dadee! No need prison going. Rashid find way. He get Pal's family take rupees."

Hope was reborn. I really thought I had bought it this time. In Kabul, the border hadn't been so far away. I had friends, and most importantly, I had the strength and optimism of youth. Now there was no place to run. India wasn't Afghanistan. Escape could be found only through Kashmir, and that was under martial law. Now Gul, Rashid, or whoever was offering a way out. The 25,000 would hurt, but I would still have something left. There would still be time.

"Look, Gul, 25,000 is almost everything I have"—yes, I could lie too—"but if that's what it takes then I'm willing to...."

"So sorry, twenty-five not possible. Family say 50,000 rupees, not less. They say Pal young man, long path before him. Parents old."

Pal only son. They need him for living, food, clothes. Without Pal, they have no life. Rupees give back life. With 50,000, they put in bank, live on money bank pays." Then with the greatest enthusiasm he added, "This super deal Dadee, Pal's family pay baksheesh to Rashid. You only pay the fifty, they pay all commission."

It had come down so quickly. I descended the Thonde-la, thinking I had made it. I had survived that frozen hell, that land of demons. In the valley, I expected assistance, comfort, commiseration, replenishment. I had been dreaming of hot bathes and plates of steaming mo-mo, not hostile monks, angry crowds, and conniving policemen.

Nervously, ready to do or say anything to get out of that room and away from the hostile crowd, I agreed, theoretically, to the payment, saying I would try. I wasn't sure how much cash I really had, and I needed some time to figure it out. "No problem Dad, we have much time. Dadee, if you not having enough rupees, I help. I have friends in bazaar, merchants. Maybe they buy your things, cameras and other...camping things." This wolf was out to skin me alive.

Back in my room, now guarded—"For your protection Sahib Guy!"—I inventoried my wealth. I had it, just barely: a little over 5000 rupees and two thousand U.S. There was no bank in Padam. The nearest was in Kargil, at least two days away by grueling lorry ride. There, I wouldn't get the "black," but the official rate. If I changed everything, my total worth wasn't more than 60,000 rupees.

Okay, Guy, okay! Be calm, you have been in a lot worse fixes. At least this time you are innocent; at least this time you have done nothing wrong...well almost nothing... I was trying to convince myself, but had yet to drive home my case. There was a part of me, again one of those quarrelsome heads, that was suspicious. Was I truly innocent? Hadn't I in some way contributed to Pal's death? There must have been some guilt, for I kept seeing his face as the muddy wall engulfed him. The sight of those terror-filled eyes, the sound of his scream cut-off as he choked on the water, played over and over, and it was getting worse. I believe in karma, that everything that happens is caused by what has gone down before.

Now this horror was engulfing me. I could only look to karma...just another way of looking at past choices.

I was back in civilization. Again, it threw up a reflection of a self I scarcely dared to contemplate. Somehow, I had to escape the reflection, whether by fair means or foul. I wouldn't worry about the future. If I could, I would pay these fuckers their blood money, if not, I would do as I had so many times before—cut and run. The one thing I knew was that I wouldn't go willingly to their prison. This would be no Federal country club. No, this would be like Kabul, only now I knew where I was going. I had been there before, and rather die than go there again. They left me alone, letting isolation weigh on my mind, knowing what its effect would be.

"Let the Sahib stew awhile. Soon he would beg us to take his money."

There was a knock on the door. Selim entered. Miracle of miracles, he carried that plate of steaming mo-mo of which I had dreamed so long.

"Salaam alekwm, Sahib. Last night at the dhaba you wanted mo-mo, but I have none. Tonight, I make special for you. I use good gosht; halal, not dirty like Zanskari way."

In the trials of the day I had forgotten my hunger. But before the sight and smell of this delicacy, it flooded back.

Selim drew close to me and, after several nervous glances toward the door, half-whispered, "Sahib, I wish speak with you. I much to tell. You eat mo-mo. I speak. I tell police guard, I stay until you finish. I tell him plate valuable. I not wish to lose. Sahib do you not remember me? I remember you. Oh, not at first, I old man, mind too full of old thoughts. But I think and think, then remember. It long time before, but I serve you. I was servant of Nazir...not so many wrinkles, not so thin, not have face covered with this *rish*."

It all came back. He was right; the years had taken their toll. When he had introduced himself, there was something that stirred in my memory, but I thought it was just that this Selim looked like someone else I had known. Sometimes, in backwater villages where the gene pools were small, there would be a limited number of physical types, the members of each type strongly resembling

each other. Now that I looked closer, I remembered Selim. He had been my khaansaamaa and served well, never complaining, no matter what the conditions. So well in fact that I had asked Nazir to give him to me again when I went commercial. Yes, Selim had been a good trekker, and I now told him so. It wasn't his fault that he had worked for Nazir. Besides, after all the shit Nazir pulled on the Sirdar, Selim quit and went out on his own.

"Shokria, Sahib, shokria! Only my duty. I remember Sahib as good, very gentle man. Sahib do much for Selim. After Sahib left Kashmir, Selim get much work from Sahib's kind letter. Sahib saying many good things in letter, other people believe. I make much money, build dhaba in Srinagar. Then trouble come, tourists go away...no more business. I come to Padam. Here tourist still coming. But Sahib, this my trouble, it small. Your trouble great. Sahib, I hear much in my dhaba. People eat...people talk. This man Gul who works for you, I know very much. He work for Aziz, brother of Nazir...you remember that dog, Sahib. Gul come every day to dhaba. He saying we friends, saying we brothers because I work long ago for his 'Uncle.' He spend much time with big police wala. They talking much. Gul say you very rich man. No worry of money, spend time walk through mountains where no right-minded man go, doing nothing but click, click, click with the black box, take pictures of common things: rocks, trees, water, ice. He say such a foolish man need not so much money."

There it is, I thought with grim satisfaction. All my suspicion wasn't too far off. The fucker was setting me up. He had orchestrated the entire affair, perhaps even paying Yosh or, more likely, intimidating him to stir up Pal's parents. After that it was only a matter of sitting back and letting their wrath take its course. Maybe, it wasn't about karma. Maybe, it was just about robbery and blackmail. I couldn't fight karma. It was just too big. But a rip-off I could fight. I was getting pumped, indignation bursting from my pores. Suddenly an entirely new scenario was before me. I would call their bluff. Let the matter be turned over to higher authorities. They would quickly see what was what. Justice would be done.

"Then they talking about other thing Sahib. That you not just picture making, that you have some other...more dangerous

business. You buy charas, not just for smoking, but taking. Gul say he hear about you before. This not first time you take charas. That before with Nazir, the man he calls 'Uncle,' you get caught in Amrika. You go to jail. Gul brag to Rashid that he also work for police, not small police like the Subedar, but big police, C.I.D. in Delhi. He tell Rashid they work together. Take away Sahib's money, make Sahib go faster to Srinagar. He say he catch many smugglers before, making big baksheesh."

How fast emotions can change—one minute the scared dog, the next an outraged lion, then back to dog again. Fuck! I wasn't expecting this; it was all too bizarre. Never in my wildest dreams could I have expected Gul to be with the Man. But then I hadn't thought it of Morgan either. Real betrayal, I mean the real motherfucker that catches you, must be this way. It must come up from behind, completely unexpected. Otherwise, it isn't real.

"Sahib, I want help you like before you help me. This Rashid, he policeman yes. But he not friend of Delhi, he not dog of kafir cow-fuckers like this Gul. Rashid good Mussalmen, good Kashmiri. He works, like much J&K Police, for *azadi* (freedom) in Kashmir. Insha'Allah, your problem not with Rashid. Oh, he make you pay; he needing money to buy guns for the mujahedin. They get from Tibet-side. Chini sell, making trouble for India. But though Chini help, Chini still Chini. Must profit make. Ji, you pay Rashid, but, Insha'Allah, he let you go. Business with Gul finished. He not only take your money, he wanting your life too. He no longer Kashmiri. He in Delhi too long, his soul selling to Government-walas, to Hindus and Sikhs, to unbelievers. He want money like Rashid, but for own profit, not for *azadi*."

This was an entirely new wrinkle. Now I was being asked to trust a new set of characters. From almost our first encounter, I had my suspicions about Gul, suspicions that were born out over the following weeks. Although, I must admit, I never suspected him to be so foul. Now, on such short notice, could I place my head into Selim's hands, although we went back a way? Rashid was even more of a question mark. I didn't go back with him at all. He was a cop, and I never had much luck with them. Yet, he was a cop with an agenda. It was one not in conflict with mine—although it would cost me a bundle. But in Padam, money didn't seem to have the

same importance it had in Japan, seemingly centuries ago, even though only months. Somehow, during those intervening weeks, money—dollars, yen, rupees—just disappeared into meaningless baggage, a precious cargo perhaps, but quite useless in the moment. I still had some food, or at least Gul was supposed to be holding some for me. As the world about me grew increasingly out of control, that vision of Mara, quiescent since the Thonde-la, came bounding back.

I kept thinking, yes, just give them the money, that is all they want. When there is no more money, no more anything, then they will leave me alone. Then I can climb off into that never-never land I have been wet dreaming over so long. Selim offered the way. Finally, I could dump the last vestiges of my saman. At that moment, I truly believed Selim was my *new* guide out of Maya. How a desperate man will grasp at any straw.

"Okay Selim, I think I understand. If I work with Rashid, he'll get me free and clear, and all this shit will go away. Just give up the cash, right?"

"Sh...? Oh, right! That's it Sahib. When Gul brag about his work for CBI, Rashid get angry—inside not open. He India hating very much. He hate what doing to Kashmiri people. Rashid say, if Gul betray employer, he betray all. If he work with Delhi on your case, maybe he work for Delhi on other things. Maybe, working against own country, own kin. He making sure Gul no problem. He even so kind leaving you some money. He making sure you get to Kashmir. There you contact family. They send you more money. You rich Amrikan, no problem more money getting, eh? You take charas. That your business. Rashid no caring. When return to Amrika, you sell charas...make much money. Money lost not important. In Amrika, I hear, one *sigaret* of charas many rupees, more than one Kashmiri make in week...maybe month. Most important, Gul go south to Cow-fucker land. Insha'Allah, not so far. Insha'Allah son of bitch get lost in mountain, Insha'Allah, never make Darcha. Much dangers in mountain. Many people lost, never seeing again. Insha'Allah, same happen to Gul as Pal. Rashid come tonight. Sahib, you give him two thousand US dollars, Gul say you have in small leather bag. He big thief man. He count when you sleep. You keep rupees. For this, Insha'Allah, Rashid see you no more

problem, Pal business or Gul. Insha'Allah you no more problem in Padam.

Despite the profusion of Insha'Allahs, calm was returning. Even Selim's next words, as unwelcome as they were, couldn't dampen my rekindled hope.

"Oh Sahib, one last business. In past, you very good to Selim, now Selim, thanks God, chance to pay back. All expense Gul charging to Sahib at dhaba, Selim discount fifty percent. No profit, just paying for expenses to Selim."

I had felt cornered, so trapped, that all this seemed a miracle—even if the miracle was slightly clouded by the fifty percent of Gul's tab. The sea suddenly parted; the way of escape made clear. Now I had only to trust Selim and Rashid, and my last view of the world wouldn't be through the bars of the Leh gaol. Yes, but it was a humongous *only*.

Rashid came as promised. With him were several men whose full beards, crossed bandoleers, and AK-47s betrayed them as mujahedin. Those faces, so young in seasons, yet so old in the horror of what man can do to man, watched like hawks as I turned over the remaining dollars—two sealed plastic envelopes, fresh from the Japanese bank, untouched by human hands—\$2000 exactly. Rashid took little notice, but one of the others, a big, rude-looking fellow, obviously from some remote mountain village, grabbed the envelopes and roughly ripped them open, almost tearing the bills.

Rashid turned to me, "Bismillah! May His blessings go with you Guy Sahib. Your donation to our cause, the cause of the Islamic Republic of Kashmir and the Jamiat Islami, is a gift to the work of Allah here on Earth. You are an unbeliever, but you are of the *Ahl e Ketab*, a fellow believer in the Holy Books...therefore, Insha'Allah, you may receive His blessing.

I attempted an equally grand reply. "I can only thank Allah, and you his faithful servants, for allowing me the privilege of contributing to such a great cause."

Pleased by my response, he continued. "The day after tomorrow police lorry goes to Kargil. You ride along. From Kargil take the bus

to Srinagar. My friends here deal will with Gul." Here there were some gleeful murmurs from the warrior band. Unfazed the Subedar continued, "Tomorrow, we'll collect your saman, *all* your saman. Don't worry about that *thing*, Guy Sahib, your secret is safe with us. We have no deal with the Amrikans. The Ayatollah was most right; they are the Great Sheytan. Not the people mind you, but those that use Amrika's terrible power to do evil. Pious men make no deals with Sheytan. We hope you'll go and make big profit in your homeland. Maybe when Amrikans are charas smoking, they will be making less trouble for us."

Here he couldn't resist stopping to translate his witticism. The mujahedin, perhaps just from politeness, feigned great amusement and the proceedings were momentarily disrupted by uproarious laughter. That one or two had smiles on their faces, even before he translated, should have alerted me that they too knew some English.

"Insha'Allah," he continued, after giving them time to collect their macho facades, "then you come back to Kashmir, and we get more for you. We have much of this charas in Kashmir, too much. It is not good for our people. It clouds mind, makes crazy and lazy, makes people forget the Prophet...blessed be His name...also they forget Jihad, and the work of Allah. You give again small money. Then you go again and make big profit. This way, Insha'Allah, we all profit. In this way, you too become a mujahed, you too make war against the unbelievers."

He was putting it on thick, and I could easily imagine I wasn't the target audience. Those mujahedin were a tough looking bunch, more like Pathans than Kashmiris, a fact soon revealed when they began a conversation in Pashtu among themselves. How close I had been to Kabul without even realizing it. These were warriors fresh from killing Shuravi, men knowing nothing but war, seeking further enemies of the One and Only God in far off Hindustan. I had been right that they were from the village, but villages in the shadow of the Hindu Kush, not the Pir Panjal. I looked at Rashid and then to the mujahedin. He caught my glance and returned it with another. One that seemed to say, "You see how it is. We are all captives in one way or another." At least that is how it struck me at the time.

The faces ranged before me, unreadable and hard as distant mountain crags, attested to the Afghan's ability to survive. If their survival depended on slitting Gul's throat, then there would be no hesitation. Just like the slaughtering of chicken or goat, it was a job to be done.

Again Selim heralded the morning, bursting in with the news that Gul was nowhere to be found. Earlier, Rashid and the mujahedin had gone to the room Gul shared with Ravi.

"They were going to get Sahib's saman," Selim reported breathlessly, "and then send Gul on his way. They should know he slippery dog. Y'Allah! Sleeping in the same room with a Hindu!"

For Selim, such a domestic arrangement was Gul's worst sin. Selim continued, taking great delight in detailing how those big, mean mujahedin had scared the shit out of poor Ravi. "Y'Allah, how quickly the dog bark, Sahib. He say Gul go away at first light, and taking his kaffir pony too."

Oh, how Selim reveled in being in on the news.

"Rashid say they search room. Not find that *thing*...you know what I mean Sahib. Telephone to Kargil out of order. Police lorry not back until tomorrow. If Rashid send word to other police, Insha'Allah, they stop Gul. They also take that thing. Not worrying Sahib. If wanting back *all* saman, best plan go after Gul and take from him."

Right! Now I was almost broke; my extra food gone, along with that ball holding all future, at least my future in the material world. To make matters even more absurd, my newly rediscovered buddy, Selim, was suggesting I hunt Gul down on his own turf, a turf where all hell reigned. How easy it would be to pick me off. "Ah, poor Guy Sahib, another victim of 'cross-fire.'" Every Kashmiri man worthy of the name prided himself on his hunting skill. In Srinagar, I would be the prey.

My head swam with alternatives. Each one competed for control, pulling my mind, first this way, then that. Go after him, he can't have gotten far. Maybe Rashid will lend you a Pathan or two. Are you out of your mind? Do you think those mujahedin have nothing better to do than settle your score? They have got their blood

money, now they will be off to score guns or whatever. You are on your own. What if you do catch up with Gul? Not only does he have your dope, he has your balls. What good is the shit, if you can't take it out of country? You know the first thing he will do, if you make trouble, is rat. You wanted to get rid of all your saman. You have constantly whined about it. If you are honest with yourself, you will have to admit you orchestrated this whole thing to get here.

This last argument might as well have been underscored by diabolical laughter, for it had that sort of chilling effect. Was this "head" right I wondered? Did I really maneuver events to get to this place? Was there another part of me, a part I couldn't acknowledge, seeking my destruction?

I had to act. It was always the case in such confused moments. If I sat and thought, I had just endlessly circle deeper and deeper, the vortex ending in nothingness. In action, there would always be a reaction, something outside myself to which I could respond. Anything was better than to be trapped in my own infinite loop, a closure fated to total entropy.

Before I could decide, there was a knock on the door. It was the manager of the rest house.

"So sorry to bother you Sahib, but I hear *your* sirdar check out early this morning. He told me before...when coming here...that you pay for him. He *your* servant."

Oh, shit! I knew what was next. Fuckers like Gul, always leave a legacy of pain.

"The Sirdarji here for fortnight, he run bill not so much, eat here not much, most time at dhaba. Double room costing only 150 rupees a night, then breakfast...and some other meals...when too much smoking...other small service. All costs including other pony-wala and Sahib...up until noon today is 4565 rupees. Would Sahib please like paying now."

This last sentence wasn't a question but a demand. I knew, without looking, I had little over 5000. That was it, after that nothing, and I still owed Selim several hundred for Gul's indulgences in the Shalimar. Before the manager appeared, I had been in a quandary, but at least armed with the power to deal with it. I still had five

thousand rupees, no insignificant sum in this place. After all, Selim would be lucky if he could clear that much in a year.

The manager looked at me with an impassive, yet unflinching stare, as if he had just stoned out, frozen on the spot, until I freed him by paying the bill. I retained a stubborn trace of bourgeois pride that wouldn't let me be a piker—at least if under scrutiny...at least if I had no choice anyway. It was a macho thing. Before these two men, I couldn't let myself appear weak. I paid, giving the man several more hundred as baksheesh, noting I had little over one hundred rupees left. Selim, looking over my shoulder, noted this too. He must have been wondering how he was going to get his.

"Ah, shokria! Sahib staying more days?" There was a nervous smile on the manager's lips.

Now I knew what had to be done. Free will had long ago been turned over to the spinning out of fate. Too many choices already made, and now there was nothing left but the consequence of those choices. I could stay on, running up a tab, cabling for non-existent funds, until finally, one after another of my keepers would give up on me, refusing to put further good money after bad. I had seen it all before—strung-out freaks unwilling to give up the good life, overstaying their welcome and funds. They always ended up in the same place, the street. If they were lucky they made it to an embassy, if not....

"I think I'll be moving on." I put on my bravest face. "I sent the Sirdarji, ahead, Insha'Allah, I'll join him tonight."

"Acchaa, Sahib knowing best. Reports of barf on Pensi-la. Good to cross before barf too deep, before road kherab."

The manager left, and I began to gather my remaining gear. Lucky for me, I had my basic kit. I had even, on some unknown impulse, retrieved my tent. With what was left I could still be warm and dry, but from where would the energy come. All my remaining food stores were with Gul. The hundred rupees would buy some food, but scarcely enough for the days still needed to reach Srinagar. And then I remembered Selim. Even from across the room, I could see his anxious, questioning eyes. I couldn't be angry with him. I knew well what the loss of several hundred rupees would mean.

My two remaining cameras lay on the bed. When I looked over at those two old friends, it was almost as if they knew my intention, burrowing down into the folds of the covers, hoping that out of sight they might be out of mind. These, two extra lenses, and some spare rolls of film, were all that was left of photographer Guy; this equipment was that identity. Now it seemed so pointless, but they were my friends; we had gone through so much. I was thinking that, if I could get them to Srinagar, I could sell them. The cameras weren't the only ones reading my mind.

Selim gently murmured, "Sahib want sell camera? Many tourists come to dhaba, many more than Srinagar now. Sometimes camera kherab, trail very hard, camera kherab easy. If I have extra camera, Insha'Allah, I sell, make small profit. Tourists want picture very much; show friends and neighbors how far they go. I buy from you best price. You trust Selim."

How could I say no? I owed him. Besides, after some short dickering, I was able to get Selim to offer me 5000 rupees—minus my debt of course—and some food, nothing fancy, just the trekking basics such as chaval, dal, *alu*, and chai, but that would be enough. Well good-bye my friends, my black beauties. What we have seen together, been through together. But better this fate for you than to wind up deep in a crevice, or smashed at the bottom of some rocky defile. With luck, you may start a whole new life with some nice Italian or German tourist, someone who will give you the proper respect that, perhaps, I was lacking.

I was ready. There wasn't much; it all fit into the rucksack I carried on my back. Selim walked with me to the edge of the town. This was quite a distance since the town was widespread. The sky was overcast, but the clouds were high; you could see the mountaintops. The air, even though it was approaching mid-day, was chilled. I could still see my breath. What had been a road in the town now turned into a deeply rutted track. There was no motor traffic, for the whole town had heard, "Barf on Pensi Top."

A Gujar shepherd came from the other direction, driving a huge flock of thickly fleeced sheep. "Ussht, ussht!" It was the sound of the trail. The Gujar stopped and chatted for a moment with Selim, bribed for his time by the proffered cigarette. After a few moments, Selim caught up with me.

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"Gujar say much snow up valley. Three days ago, he cross pass. He late and camp near top, at place great glacier fall into Doda. There he hear many rama hun, many...wolf. They take three young sheep and kill one dog. This Gujar very upset. He say too early for rama hun coming down. This sign of long, cold winter. Many terrible storms come. You must take care. You alone, and rama hun bold."

Selim turned back to the Gujar and, following a short exchange, began again to translate. "Sahib, Gujar say he tell same story to man, maybe Gul, maybe five hours before. Gujar has no watch. He only guess time. He say man with pony moving fast. He not to worry about rama hun. Gujar say he must have something more terrible than wolf chase him. This man with pony go, not along road, but on track at foot of western hills. He say way faster if travel on foot. Road only good for lorry, and not too good for that."

So the bastard was ahead! At least now I was sure of his direction. Perhaps I hadn't lied to the rest house manager; maybe I would be meeting Gul that night. As desperate as my situation seemed, I was glad to be moving again. As long as I moved, if I was under way, life was good. It was only when I settled down that things, unpleasant things, began to happen. Insha'Allah, I could keep moving, moving until I could move no more, until it mattered no more.

Selim pulled up. He had gone farther than he planned, but he had a good heart and was loathe to leave me. He gave me a great hug and then, pressing a small, ghee-spotted paper-wrapped bundle into my palm, he said good-bye.

"Khodaa haafez, Guy Sahib! May the Prophet, blessed be His name, protect you. Insha'Allah, in paper you find comfort. Masha'Allah!"

Taking the proffered bundle, I replied, "Khodaa haafez, Selim, and may His blessings be on you too."

Chapter XVII

*...but death when life is exhausted
is like a lamp whose oil is used up:
there is no way to avert it with a substitute
so one should prepare to depart*

—Bardo t'ödrö (The Tibetan Book of the Dead)—

PASSAGE

I was pursuing Gul, but only in mind. It was my past or, to put it into terms more fitting to this setting, my karma, that drove me on. Where earlier the hills had worn festive array— oranges, yellows, vermilion's— icy, funereal grays now ruled. This gloom wasn't just on the land, but echoed up into the leaden sky. Snow squalls continually attacked the upper reaches of the valley, texturing the landscape with even deeper desolation. That is where I was heading, to a land of snows, biting winds, and dreadful cold. Squalls of despair played over me as I wandered along a narrowing valley floor. Despite the directness of my plan to find Gul, my path would have been quite aimless, if it hadn't been for the intrinsic draw of the valley—a trough between ice-plumed waves—to the head of the valley where the Himalaya and Zanskar Range collide. I had nowhere to go except onward, up and over that snow-covered crest.

I should have been happy, returning to a beloved alpine world, away from humanity, the mirror of my failure. How wonderful was the silent companionship of the land, too big to trouble with one so insignificant? I could pass untroubled. Yet such a tumultuous place surely must harbor dragons, great dragons. Looking at my map, I saw one named DrungDrung, whose enormous length snaked a long, circuitous route from the deep within the heart of the Himalaya. I remembered this DrungDrung.

On my last visit, I had been awed by this dragon. It was so spectacular, uncoiling from its mountain lair, that for a moment I could set aside the torture of that jostling, coffin-like lorry ride. DrungDrung is truly awesome, at least a mile across where it disgorges into the Doda. At its throat, like a necklace of sapphires, lies a string of tarns. In a time so distant now, I was tempted to

jump from the lorry and set my tent on their rocky shores. I fantasized the weeks I could spend exploring the DrungDrung's rubble-ravaged course. But I didn't. I was burdened by plans to be kept, people to be met, commitments that kept me on my way. How different this place looked now that I was in it, of it, at its mercy, rather than just passing through. Was I fated for this place? Am I not fated for some place beyond...even if this one I know as Guy must remain?

Despite the valley's strong draw, there was opportunity to go astray; rare is that time in life when there is none. To the west are breaks in the mountain wall. Ascending the nalas that form these gaps are difficult tracks, leading to high passes with names like the Umasi and Hogshu. From the floor of the Doda the tracks look promising. With little difficulty, I could imagine any of these as that illusive gateway to Shambhala. Why I didn't just start up one? I am not certain. I thought about it. Yes, I thought, up there must be the place. All I have to do is just walk up the nala. But I couldn't believe my own con.

Perhaps, I just didn't hear the call. "Ka la gi ya" didn't ring in my ear...not even whisper. I was still listening to the song of those "daughters." Perhaps Rava, "Lust," had been left behind. But revenge still filled my mind, binding me to the company of Dvesa and Moha; "Hatred" and "Stupidity" remained my ever-faithful companions.

Instead of relying on what was within, a dimension where "Ka la gi ya" might be heard, I looked outward to my map and, if even remotely correct, then climbing those nalas would have resulted in much the same as my present circumstance. The map fails to mention any Shambhala, shows no hidden valley; there is only a jumble of contour lines in brown, black, and pale blue, lines that signify not the valley of "Diamond Truth," but jagged peaks, deep ravines, lairs of those dragons of ice and snow.

Yes, I would have found much the same as I face here. Only the end would have been quicker, for most likely there wouldn't have been a hut such as this. Without refuge, there would have been no Devara, nor the temptation to dig in, to fight for survival. Instead, I would have just kept moving, until that faltering step, that

unstable slope, that unseen crevice or flight of will, finally put paid to Guy.

My mood was somber and for good reason. I had struggled for some time to strip away the bullshit of my life. Now I thought I had almost reached my goal, free and clear. But first there was that business in Kashmir to put to rest. Perhaps without Gul, I could even let that go, but he had compounded the affront, and now my private badal drove me to reach across the generations. It was this need, this hate that made me look to the map for Shambhala, even though I knew it wasn't there. It was what kept Guy alive. Without it I would have been sky-clad. Those remaining "daughters" held me in their arms, the illusory beauty of their song drowning out the call of "Ka la gi ya." They kept me on course up valley, towards the Pensi-la, towards Kashmir, on the trail of what had gone down long before. I was at the center of my own Wheel of Becoming, circling my tail, forever to be reborn, until I could escape from hatred, and, stupidity, as I thought I had from passion.

It was almost as if I was clinging on to Guy through this one last vestige of what I had been. As long as I hunted for Gul, as long as I fixed that ball of charas before me, then Guy would survive. It seems so simple, now that I no longer have choice. Why didn't I just cut those ties, forget Nazir, forget Gul, forget that ball of shit? I had spent my entire existence in a womb of material culture. Now, birth was painful, and I was so accustomed to the sack, the nourishing cord, that the final cut appeared catastrophic.

There are many small hamlets all along the upper Doda. The warm glow of kero lamps in tiny windows, smells of cooking, and sounds of music drifted through the night air, tempting me to enter. Instead, I chose to camp out alone. I found a shepherd's track skirting the base of the hills, far above the road and its scattering of hamlets. Maybe, Gul was in one of the hamlets. Maybe, he was sitting in warm comfort on the other side of a glowing window. Yes, I could picture him, cooing in the ear of a Zanskari beauty, just as Dvesa surely cooed in mine. Yet to my surprise, I found that while one part of me wanted to catch up with him, there was that other, equal part which feared such an encounter. What would I do? What would I say? Gul would most certainly have an explanation. He always did.

"Ah, Dadee, so happy to see you. I save things for you Dadee. I know you smart. You get out of Padam. I making sure you have things needed when getting free. Gul take good care, Dadee."

Yes, he would have a ready explanation. He would coo in my ear too. When he wanted, he was an artful seducer.

* * *

Things are getting to that most infamous point of no return. I want to finish this, to tell you of all those things right to the last. I worry that the moment is here. At any moment those last sparks of energy, connecting my mind to this swollen hand, will vanish and with them the end of my tale. I still must figure out this puzzle or at least give enough information so you may put the pieces together. Last night the storm was worse than before. Any number of times I thought we were goners, doomed to be blown off, or crushed, under the mountain. Part of the stone wall did come crashing down. Sharp shards of rock ripped through one side of the tent, engulfing us in snow. Everything is covered. I don't have the energy to wipe it away. I am lucky it is so dry or this notebook would be paper mâché. The inside of my bag, the envelope I have so relied upon to keep me dry, is moist and clammy. I feel the warmth fleeing my body. I can think of no way to call it back. Where is the warmth of those women I have known? How casually I used it, only thinking it my ration, my just due. Instead of a warm-fleshed woman, it is Devara who draws close to me. I can feel his bony frame, his faint breathing, and the thump, thump of his heart. It seems like days since words have escaped our lips, yet I feel that we commune in a way I have never known. It is as if we have become one, that there has always been one, that Devara and I have no boundary between us.

I am torn between two desperations: fear of staying, fear of leaving. If I...we...whatever it is, for I am no longer sure...remain, it is certain death. To survive takes the strength to replenish. Little by little that strength, that will, is dying. It starts with small things, skipping a cup of chai, putting off making dal-bhaat for a little longer. It goes on to bigger things, like failing to go outside to repair the storm's ravages. That was what happened last night,

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why the wall fell, why the tent was torn. It was so much nicer inside the bag, so warm, so secure. All I had to do was will the storm away. Or at least that is what I thought, until the sharp edge of the rock came crashing through and with it the snow. I cursed Devara, but it was only to curse myself.

It is so cold, so cold. I am past hunger, I don't really remember when I last had food, if only I could work myself up to get out there, to get the stove lit, to make something, even if it is just chai. But I feel so weak, even hunger has left me. I must use the little light left to write. When it grows too dark, then I will cook something. Yes, I will make us that nice pot of dal-bhaat I have been putting off; there must be some makings left. That will set the world right! Then, if I am finished...I must finish. I have been here far too long. Sthavara! Devara warned of the fate of immobility, if I stay here any longer.... Yes, I must become jangama. I must keep moving, swimming through the sea that is life. That is when I am alive, that is when mind grows in response to the shifting phantasmagoria of stimuli. I will finish with my story. I am almost done. I will tell you about the night on the Pensi-la, the night when I thought those last shards of Guy had finally fallen away, when in losing all that was past, I no longer worried about the future.

* * *

It took longer than the guidebook's three stages to reach the Pensi-la. Part of me, one of those heads, was in a hurry. Get that fucker Gul! Catch the rat and make him pay! The other, or to be precise, another, was in no hurry, as if this head intuitively knew what lay ahead—and who. In consequence I dawdled, camping early, rising late, enjoying Selim's parting gift. Yes, he had remembered my fondness for the herb.

I dreamt a lot, again that mutating, episodic dream, where people I had known transformed in and out of various animal personas. Strange how I dreamed of animals so much ever since returning to the mountains. Had it been that way before? I can't remember. It was as if I had returned to childhood, for then I dreamt about animals too. That night back in Darcha...God, how distant it now seems...how at one I felt with the animals.

I'm with the ibex; a wolf lurks nearby. High overhead a dot in the sky draws closer. As it approaches, I see it's an eagle, griffin, or some other great bird native to this place. This bird causes some confusion, for though I know the ibex and wolf, the bird is unfamiliar and I don't know what to expect.

And then there's that other, the same ghostly specter which followed Tara. What was before only shadow, now assumes material form, part human, part animal, yet of no familiar species. It's a crazy-quilt character made up of odd bits and pieces, which, just as I grasp its form, transforms into yet an even more outlandish beast. Yet as I ponder its identity, I find a revealing clue. Despite its transitory nature, one feature is constant; embedded in this kaleidoscopic creature's forehead is that telltale orb, the third eye, telling me this is Mara.

In what, for a better word, I will call my waking state—it had become increasingly difficult to know awake from dream—I tried to puzzle out the meaning of the dream. In doing so, I only continued the dream, interweaving its threads with an open-eyed world. I did see myself as an ibex, and Gul, from the very first, reminded me of a wolf...but then it might just be residue from that Gujar's warning to Selim—rama hun on the Pensi-la.

My solitary ibex leaps among the rocks. At first glance, it looks as if it's just playing, going about the normal exhilarating business of being a magnificent climber. Now I focus on the ibex's face, on gold-green eyes I remember as mine. In them there is...if not fear...perhaps expectancy. This confuses me. Everything seems so tranquil, even the sun give warmth as it peeks in and out of fluffy white clouds, easily mistaken for a herd of sheep. Sounds reinforce this feeling: plop, plop, plop as the ibex jumps, the sound of a stream. The cause of the eye's disquiet comes into focus. The wind rises. I wonder why the ibex is so...expectant. In answer, I hear a faint howl carried by the wind.

The first time, I awoke to that howl bathed in sweat. But not remembering why, I was doomed to begin the dream all over. Is this what the cycle of life is all about? If I fail in my lessons, if I fail to carry them into my next life, then I will be left defenseless before those Daughters of Desire, dragging me back to start all over again. Somewhere deep within, I possess that thing Devara calls "Sonam," those karmic lessons learned in earlier lives.

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Finally, the ibex stumbles. Snagged in the talus, its foot is caught. There's a sharp snapping sound, like a twig breaking. From the ibex's mouth comes an unvoiced howl. A dark shape lurks in the shadow, then from some unknown source a distant, but distinct cry. Unlike the ibex's silent moan, which only my eyes perceive, my ears hear this one, but I'm at a loss to place it. It could be rama hun; it could be Mara. In this place, it could be anything.

After the first night, I awoke while that dark shape was still indistinct. Oh, I had some idea of what the snorting, snarling, crouching form was. My waking mind filled in all the dark places, giving vivid details. I just didn't see them distinctly in the dream. How strange my sweat; it was freezing outside. On succeeding nights, I would pick up the dream again. I was scared, but still wanting to see what would happen, even though I already knew. The dream was so simple, hard to read in any other way. It must be a warning. The ibex, damaged by his climb, was in danger from the...? To my waking mind it was a wolf, which I rationalized as the symbol for Gul. I was damaged by my own climb and in danger from Gul. To the mind within the dream, it was more. Symbol rooted in the world outside my mind had no bearing. The dark form was one I had courted so long, and though I had yet to see clearly, I knew that in those shadows lay Mara.

I felt Gul near. I was closing. Despite my dawdling, somehow we were fated to meet again. Because imagination tends to the dramatic, I assumed our meeting would be at the valley's head. I had to focus, at least enough to understand what I wanted from him. Was it the charas? What could I do with it now? If he was the rat I believed him to be, even if I got the goods, his masters would be waiting. He must have already given enough details before we left Delhi. My name might be enough. The CBI would be there, watching for it to turn up on some airline manifest. Then it would be a simple matter of lifting the phone and calling the DEA contact. A fax or two back to the States and...POW! What if I didn't go back to the States? What if I just went to Japan? Yet though I twisted and turned, I knew I no longer had the will to go through with it. The game is over old man, unless of course you want to go down in flames.

No, there wasn't any point in taking the charas back. Gul was doing me a favor, saving me from myself. But then what? How about killing him, or at least marking him so he would remember me the rest of his life. I toyed with this idea for many hours. Where before my mind had been filled with the glories of the Himalaya, I now passed the time thinking what I would do to the bastard. How outstanding it would be to cut off his balls. I would make some delicious dal-bhaat *con huevos* and serve it up to him. Oh, how fine that would be. How would the wolf enjoy that delicacy? I wasn't alone as I thought. Dvesa and Moha were still my companions, carrying *me* along the trail, keeping *me* alive.

Not that Gul needed to worry. I have a quick temper, but a temper that cools as quickly as it boils. I knew, even as I devised the most exquisite horrors for Gul, I would never carry them out, for in this imagination was larger than will. It had been the same with Morgan. What tortures I promised to wreak on that fat fuck from the safety of my tiny cell. When I got out, the world was just too overpowering. I'd made some half-hearted attempts to find him, but I was just too busy surviving.

The land rose in a series of narrow step-like plateaus. I was quite exhausted. No sooner had I coned my way up one steep grade than I had to rejoin the struggle again. Just one more! When you get to the top of the next rise, you can stop. Have a joint if you wish. Maybe if you look hard in the pack you will find a bit of chocolate or an odd biscuit. I used all sorts of strategies to move my carcass forward. Then, in the distance, on the top of the next rise, I saw what distinctly appeared to be the outline of Gul.

"Son of a bitch! I got you cock sucker!" I screamed to the unhearing wind.

Moments before climbing the rise, I thought I had run out of steam. Weeks of cumulative abuse were taking their toll. Now a great wave of adrenaline surged through my body. There was no plan, no idea what I was going to do or say when I caught up with him, but...man...I went for it.

What a sight I was, running up that hill, in the middle of such a total wilderness. I must have been shouting Gul's name, but I am not sure whether the sound escaped my lips. One thought

possessed me: Get that bastard in my grasp! By the time I got to the top, the reality of my body overtook my will. I was gasping for breath. Within my chest wasn't a heart, but an alien lump. When I last saw the figure, it was well ahead and, while I had been climbing, it had been traveling over a relatively flat plain. When I reached the top of the rise, I could see what had been invisible from below. Instead of Gul's solitary figure, I saw a man with a large herd of great black yaks. This wasn't Gul, but rather some local yak-wala, trying to get his herd over to Suru before the pass was too deep in snow.

The exertion of the run was too much. Even if I had wanted to go after the distant figure, I didn't have energy left. As if to dissuade me further, that stranger in my chest now felt like molten lead. With an awful suddenness, the entire left side of my body transformed into a pain-numbed mass. If there was any question of how close the edge, I was now on it, I mean right on, looking down into the abyss, down into darkness, the blackest black I had ever known.

It was still dark, but I knew I still was—at least if not as a physical entity, then somehow holding on to the mental construct of what I had been. I knew this because I could make out the line of peaks I had followed earlier in the day. The sky remained overcast, but the moon was full and some of its light filtered through the clouds. This gave a slight luminance to the ice-tipped crags, arrayed like teeth on the valley's crocodilian jaws. How long had I been lying there? I tried to think back to that place where my memories kicked out. It couldn't have been much past noon when I crested the hill. Now I could see a faint glimmer of the moon settling into the western peaks. It must be early morning. My body glowed with a coating of frost. I brought my hand to my beard. There was a crackling sound, my beard stiff with ice; the hand that groped it no less stiff. It was tempting just to lie there, to drift off into that sleep from which there is return. Don't worry, don't think, just let it all embrace you, engulf you.

I heard a distant howl. Was it in my dream or in life? How could I say? How can I say? Dream and life no longer had boundaries. Instead they converged into an indivisible amalgam...as once, now so long ago, did the air, sea, and sand. No longer could I say: "I'm

now awake," or "I'm now asleep." It didn't matter; I just was. I had reached such extremity that it was only the continuity of experience that mattered. If broken, I would be no more. If I could remember a past moment, leading to another past moment, like frames in a strip of film, then I existed. I was no more, nor less, than those frames. It mattered not whether they were images of a shared experience or solely of mind. Dream or reality, the wolf, if that was what was howling, came ever closer. I looked to see the ibex, but couldn't find him. I was alone with whatever out there made those cries. I listened, closely, carefully.

Even when the will signs off, how the body struggles to survive. In my growing attention to the cries, I sought information. The instinctual chill rippling through my body quieted. Thought came into play. Perhaps I could learn something from the sound. Just because there was a wolf, or even wolves, was no cause to panic. This is a large world, and even though seeming desolate, there was much prey. The drin, thick with their pre-winter fat, have more to fear. This isn't about you. These rama hun are just speaking among themselves, letting each other know that they are here, that they are not alone.

The sun was shining for the first time in days. Yet when its unaccustomed warmth woke me, I was annoyed. I longed to return to sleep. It was there I learned those things which, heretofore, I had purposively ignored.

I was in a bad way, and it was good the sun had come. Without its warmth, I wouldn't have awakened. Even then it was a struggle, and I was losing. But a lorry blew its horn incessantly as it crawled up the switchbacks, ascending the final steep grade to the pass. The disturbance was just enough to push me back into the outside world. The contrast of the warm sun against the cold of my body made me realize how close to freezing I had come. Involuntary chills wracked my frame, forcing blood to circulate. Survival came to the fore.

"Get moving Guy! Chalo! Chalo."

I was in motion and with it—that interaction of the body to outside forces—came a return to some semblance of reality. There was no longer the goal of bringing Gul to bay. After my experience of the

day before, I realized how futile that was. Oh, I don't mean in catching up with him, but rather in what I would do if I did catch him. I was much better off here alone. If I put Gul out of my mind, then perhaps I could be alone; perhaps the "daughters" would release their grip and go another way.

I was fitting in, I was surviving, I was becoming at one with the land. I no longer had any goal except the most abstractly based desire to follow the course of the chu to its source. As I came over a slight rise, I could see my destination. The chu made a gradual turn to the West, ending in a sheer, blue-green ice wall, the snout of the DrungDrung. The lorry track, which had faithfully followed the stream, now climbed above it, scaling the large moraine forming the actual pass. Although the fresh snowfall blotted out all sign of the road, I could still see the top. It was marked in the local fashion for this very eventuality. Piles of mani supported poles that flew hundreds of prayer flags snapping in the wind.

All I had to do was head for the flags. Once there, I would be pointed back toward my world. The way might be long and would require many days, yet it was there, in that direction, just over the rise. I could almost imagine my world—"The World" as we once termed it—like a giant troll, waiting beyond the pass. I could see its eyes peering over the top, looking for me, its fingertips gripping the ridge as it waited for the chance to reach out and grab me. Maybe, I could even catch up to the lorry. It would halt at the top to let its engine cool, and provide time for the passengers to give the obligatory prayers. Even when underway, it would crawl through the snow. I hesitated. The top formed the boundary—between present dream and a past and future "reality," a world of confusion and pain, alive both in memory and expectation. In the few days, I had been climbing the Doda, I was getting back to those halcyon times before Phuktal, feeling at one with the land, in the moment, learning the ways of the local creatures. I was overcoming my humanness, that unique separation from all that was the world; I was losing myself and returning to the One. I wanted to meet that creature in the shadows, regardless of whether it was rama hun, or Mara. The song was so seductive. It called out to me, to my most basic fear...and greatest fascination...the unknown.

I thought back to my brief encounter with Dug, of his belief in the earth as living Mother, as *Amma*. How I longed for the embrace of his Amma, to live within her harmony, not apart in some futile attempt to bend Her to human will. In my mind, that harmony lay on this side of the pass. In going over, in following the lorry back to its home, I would be returning to those who live apart, who build their own world. It was a world lost in the webs of Maya, webs spun by our very selves.

The mouth of DrungDrung nala was extremely wide, the land directly below glacier's great snout a maze of braided streams, quick-sand bars, terminal and lateral moraines, giant erratics, and tarns. What had once seemed from the jostling lorry to be of touristic interest, now on foot assumed a more ominous nature—another of those giant excavation sights whose scale was comprehensible only to the Gods. This didn't make for easy travel. Here the road though deeply rutted provided an easier route. But I stuck to my shepherd's trail, for I had come to see the road as a festering wound, the result of humanity's assault on Amma. I wanted to forget I belonged to that outcast species. Better to be of the drin, the rama hun...or ibex. The only alternative to the dreaded road was climbing onto the glacier and crossing its talus lined, black-ice expanse.

Flashes of Morrison's *The End* filled my ears. I was riding the snake, a serpent old and cold, whose lair lay in the West. But I was less than certain that the "West is the best."

Up on that dragon's back there were, of course, many crevices, but as the snow wasn't yet deep enough to hide them, they posed no threat. Yes, I was an ibex, I had only to think it, and it would be true. Who was to tell me differently? Certainly not the mountains, nor the icy dragon on whose back I walked. I thought that if I could avoid the mirror of my own kind, I could be what I wished. I wished to be an ibex. I wished to understand the wolf's cry. I wanted to look that dark one in the face, not with fear, but with acceptance.

Dusk was near by the time I crossed the glacier. I wasn't sure how many days had passed since Padam—there were some rather large gaps in my memory—but my food was almost gone. A night or two of dal-bhaat and chai, and that was it. I set up camp in a large cave overlooking the valley. The location of the cave, so close to the

pass, made it a natural resting-place. But, as it was late in the season, it was empty when I arrived. Inside, there were signs of long-term human habitation, fire pits, stones piled as wind breaks, graffiti, all those rudimentary markers of human presence.

Crossing DrungDrung exhausted me. My mind, energy-drained, sensed the end was near. The entire trip, passage, adventure, whatever you want to call it, was ending; if not here in this cave, then on the pass itself; if not in that pass, then the next. I was nearing my old nemesis Nun, the place where I had learned will isn't always equal to dream. Perhaps in the morning, if it was clear, I could see Nun's brooding top as I crested the pass. I tried to remember the view from before, but it was lost in the mist of too distant time. As I ate my ration of dal-bhaat, a wolf called in the distance. The day's exertions, coupled with the heavy meal, carried me quickly into sleep.

I'm among the rocks, one of my legs caught. The thing, until this moment only a dark shadow, scurrying through the talus, is almost on me. I hear it talking excitedly to itself, "Yip, yap, yop." The language is hard, guttural, and though I cannot understand precisely, I know well its meaning. It's predatory, the language of death.

The thing now comes out from cover, fully revealed for the first time. Yes, rama hun! Or at least that's what it seems to be. It's large, decidedly "he." His gray silver coat shines in the moonlight with an eerie luminescence. I see blood-lusting eyes, gaping fangs, drooling with anticipation of my flesh. I wonder if I'll feel much pain as those teeth rip my body. Maybe it will be quick? This rama hun isn't here to punish me, to right my wrongs. That'll come later. Yes, this great beast only wants nourishment. He's a pro, well skilled in this business, efficient by nature. He'll know how to take me. There'll be little pain.

In my mind, I've already surrendered. That's the best way, to struggle against such overwhelming inevitability will only cause needless agony. But as I wait, I see hesitation in the wolf's eyes. I look again, not quite believing that his fangs aren't already in me, tearing away.

Then it comes to me, he possesses that other, all-seeing eye. A tuft of hair had, perhaps, hid it from view. Now it's there, centered in the forehead, wide, gleaming. While the two lower eyes fix on mine, the third looks skyward. I hear an angry screeching cry and look for the

source. Again, there's that huge, eagle-like bird. It descends, its talons splayed wide, a predatory stare in its eyes. I'm captive to those onrushing eyes, eyes which, like the wolf's, become three where there'd first been two; its nature is the same, as if this extra organ had leapt from the wolf's forehead into the bird's. I want to look back to the wolf, to see if it still possesses the eye, but my gaze is locked to the aerial orb. Its utter darkness, utter emptiness, sucks in my universe. Wolf, ibex, rocks, everything lost in that eye; even memory of what next transpires is lost within its all devouring void.

I felt a sharp blow on my ass. From within the dream, I must have thought it was the bird attacking, everything happened so fast. Then I heard "Salaam alekwm, Sahib Amrikai!" I awoke.

There followed other guttural sounds, gradually becoming more human, less wolf-like. Perhaps it was the laughter. The language was vaguely familiar and, as I focused on its source, I quickly realized why. Instead of that great bird's all-devouring eye, I was looking into that of a large bearded man—not some celestial mind's eye but an all too human one. It belonged to the leader of those mujahedin with Rashid in Padam. He would have been hard to forget for he had only one eye, his other closed by a hideous scar. He made no attempt to hide it, wearing his disfigurement with honor.

After that meeting, Rashid had told me this man's story. He received his wound while ambushing a Shuravi convoy. During the battle, fought in the pitch black of the Salang Tunnel, he was hit in the eye by a ricocheting bullet. Almost without pause, he ripped away the dangling dead eye, roughly bandaged the wound, and then rejoined the fight. "Don't worry brothers," he had reportedly screamed in defiance, "what need for eyes have we in this darkness. With Allah's blessings, these Shuravi are so foul we can fight them with only our noses." Later, he took his revenge on the Shuravi prisoners.

Rashid had ended the tale with the comment, "All People of the Book believe the same, is it not so Guy Sahib? An eye for an eye! Only this Afghan believes a Muslim eye is worth many godless Shuravi's."

"Good evening Sar Amrikai!" There was nothing obsequious in his greeting. "*Che hal dared* (how is it)? Remember me, with the Subedar in Padam. That Kashmiri cur did not have manners to introduce us. Now I will introduce myself. I am Malik Ashraf Durrani, headman of my village."

"Acchaa," I replied most truthfully, wondering to myself how it would have been possible to forget him. Then diplomatically, I tried elaborating on that memory, "Subedar Rashid said you had most secret business, that it was better not to know your name, but that you are a courageous fighter and great leader of the mujahedin."

"Not so great Amrikan, only a humble warrior for God, and a battered one at that." Here he rubbed the empty socket. "I come to fight enemies of Islam. For many years, I fight cursed Shuravi. After we destroy in Afghanistan, I answer Islamic brother's call. I come on *lashkar* to Kashmir. Before, many generations ago, my ancestor win this land, this Kashmir, for Islam. Now, my brothers and I fight to bring it back to Allah."

"So, you are Afghan," I said knowing well the answer.

"Hah! What else could I be," His look grew even more menacing, his tone laced with a most sinister sarcasm. "Do I look like Kashmiri dog. Or perhaps you think Punjabi?" There could be few more serious insults for one of his ilk. Then softening slightly, he explained, "My home near Kandahar, only rifle shot from what Pakistanis call the border. Hah! As if they could make a border! All Muslims are brothers under Islam. Only Islam, not so-called nations made by Godless Imperialist. Only believers and cursed."

He glared at me, his single eye making his righteous wrath even more so. Then as if remembering his manners, a smile crossed his lips, the eye softened. "Oh, please no offense Sar. You Amrikai follow Issa, even Yahudin...if not so troublesome, we tolerate; after all, you are Ahl e Kitab, believers of Old Book. Insha'Allah, you will come to see full light of Prophet's, blessed be His name, word." But the respite was short lived and his wrath returned. "For *marate* (slaves) of Sheytan, these Hindu, Sikh, and Bud, there can be no compromise, like Shuravi learn, no mercy for defamers of One and True God."

Ashraf suddenly caught himself again, realizing he was going too far. After all, he wasn't some mad mullah come to convert me; he was an urbane man of the world, and more importantly a man on a mission.

Softening even more, he said, "We both far from home Amrikai, both mosafer, both beloved of God. Do you miss your home as I, Amrikai?" We were back on an equal plane, one human to another.

I remembered him so well from our earlier meeting. How could I forget? His face wasn't that of the wolf, but more the eagle, made all the sharper by his one good eye, deep-set and flashing in the recesses of his cavernous brush-bearded face. He was a man who lived for violence, not because he pleased in it, but because he had no memory of peace. Violence for him was as natural as the air he breathed, the water he drank. After all, he was of that proud breed found strutting the streets of Peshawar, Kabul, or Kandahar with tribal names like Durrani, Afridi, Mohmand, Mahsud, Ghilzai, Orakzai, Yusufzai, those the world outside calls "Pathan." In those unflinching eyes, I saw a man whose entire life had been a struggle for nang and azadi. This honor and freedom he valued even more than *zamin*, *zar*, and *zan*—land, gold, and women—for which his race, like all others, was doomed to forever struggle. I had known men like Ashraf before, knight-errants of Islam, ready to lay down their lives for an ideal. Yet, at the same time, totally without mercy or scruple toward those whom they saw as beyond the pale. It was to such men I had entrusted my entire capital, giving thousands on a word and hand, knowing that, at the promised time and place, they would come through with my load. And when those dealings had gone awry, it had been to such men, perhaps Ashraf's very kin, that I had turned to save Mei and me. Soon, I would realize Ashraf was also like the men who hunted Devara.

But Ashraf wasn't hunting for Devara. That unflinching eye was trained on Gul. Was my incessant dream hope, fear...or prophecy? Was I even now awake or had the creatures of reverie transformed? Perhaps now I only understood the representations more clearly? I saw them for what they were; the humans no longer hiding in animal guise.

Ashraf spoke: "Rashid and I think not good for you to look for bastard Gul alone. We have no great love for you, Amrikai...tu

fahmidi (you understand). You help us in Afghanistan, but we know why. You Angrez, Shuravi, *hamma baraaabar*, all equal! Work for self profit.”

Here he broke into a wide grin and chuckled. “Just like us, eh ferenghi? Even though Rashid is with us, he must look like he serves Srinagar and the real bosses in Delhi. If Gul go back to Srinagar, maybe he sing a sweet song. Rashid send word to Kargil, but maybe this bird sings before he reach there. Maybe at first checkpoint.” I wanted to tell Ashraf that it was he, not Gul, who was the bird, but then thought better of it.

I doubted that even Gul would sing. Not because he held any loyalty to the cause but, if he ratted, he would be a dead man in Kashmir. At the very least he would have to spend his life in exile. Even that was no guarantee. Pathans have long arms and were known to have settled scores as far away as the streets of L.A. or London. Besides, for a Kashmiri, exile was worse than death. Yet there still was a chance, and one that they couldn't afford to take. Too much was at stake. This connection with the Chinese was just beginning. Although a promising of future arms, the Chinese might bolt if Delhi got wind of it. Worried by this possibility, Rashid and Ashraf decided to act. Ashraf was perfect for a hit; as an outsider, he would feel no compassion for the Kashmiri, nor need to worry about revenge from Gul's family.

From the mouth of the cave I heard a whimpering. It sounded like a frightened, a wounded animal. “Sahib Amrikai like this to see. Like to see a dog die slowly, Sahib?” The voice moved aside and now I could see the wolf. It was snarling, not as in an attack but the whimpering snarl of a cornered, wounded animal. It was not the four-legged wolf of my dreams but the two-legged one that I knew all too well.

It was Gul all right, lying on his side. He was hog-tied; his hands tight behind his back, his feet loose so that he could walk but not run. His eyes, crazed with fear, met mine.

“Dadee, now you help Gul. You like my father, you call me ‘son’. A father must help the son, Dadee. I help you always. I save the shit for you, even though that pig police, Rashid, try to steal from you.

I not save money, but I save *stuff*.” Even in such extremis, Gul could not help taking on a conspiratorial tone when talking about charas.

“What’s that package for Jhana talking now?” Ashraf asked as he walked over to the trembling form and planted his boot squarely into the side of Gul’s head. This was answered with yet another round of howling that only inflamed Ashraf further, goading into a series of savage kicks.

“I would kill the marate this minute, but it’s the holy day, *juma* (Friday), and it is good, even for a dog like this, to have time to pray. I caught this bastard just below. Not fifteen minutes before. He was crawling like a snake...trying to surprise something in cave. After I take him, I see that that something is you! This dog not your friend, not faithful servant like say. He your *dushman*, your bad enemy Sahib. He have way, Insha’Allah, you dead now.

Ashraf turned back to the cringing Gul and said what must have been an order to pray. Obediently, Gul wiggled to his knees and began the ritual obeisance of Sunni prayer. Clearly for my benefit Ashraf admonished him. “Better ask Allah for mercy than Amrikai. What he do for you, dog. You must go to be judged. You must pay for your badness. You must pay for dealing with the kafir who fight against the Truth of Allah.

I saw that Ashraf was eyeing my stove. Since I was there first, perhaps he was expecting hospitality from me. Besides, he was the one who was packing. Although he did not flash a weapon, it is always wise to assume that one was close at hand when dealing with any of his race. And he did have a large bulge under his thick wool choga.

“*Bekhor dal-bhaat! Bekhor chai, Malik Ashraf.*” I made a mental note to use his title in the future, even if among the Durrani every other man seemed to be a malik. “*Bisyar tashakor,*” Ashraf responded politely, unconsciously slipping into Dari in response to mine. Yes, I thought, better to keep on this dude’s good side. Give him the old *melmastia* (hospitality), then he would have to be good for it would destroy his honor if he were to wrong his host. Even though I was almost out of rice and dal, not to mention kero, I knew it was in my interest to cook him a meal.

“Dadee, Gul not drink for many hours, not eat since before a day. Dadeeji, please give me chai” I looked over at the huddled body; he was bloodied, the parka I had given him badly torn. Well, you sure have made a mess of it, my son, I thought to myself with no small sense of satisfaction. If Ashraf hadn’t come along he might have killed me.

“Shut up bitch!” Ashraf snarled in English...as much for my benefit as for Gul’s.” You are finished. When the sunrise lights the sky, you will be on your way to Jhana. What need for chai...for dal-bhaat. That is better left to the living. You no longer live bitch!”

As I began cooking, the wheels inside my head began to spin. Why was it that I wasn’t content with the obvious explanation? Why did I have to puzzle away at things? But why would Gul want to kill me? After all, he had a greater plan and the idea that I was on to him. It was possible that part of what Gul said was true. He was trying to save my stash; of course, not from a sense of loyalty, but rather because he needed me for the CID’s body count. He knew what he could expect from his own Kashmiris. If this Pathan assassin didn’t finish him, then there would be most certainly others waiting when he got off the bus in Srinagar. His best bet now was to please his Indian masters. If he was good, they might keep him alive.

Ashraf, the resourceful warrior, found some wood, very rare in those parts, and soon had a modest fire going. I had another pot of dal-bhaat bubbling, and except for Gul’s occasional moans, all seemed right in the world. We needed more water for chai. Ashraf, now in a more amicable mood at the thought of the upcoming meal—or was it anticipation of the forthcoming execution—volunteered to go. Before leaving he methodically tightened Gul’s bonds, taking added insurance by sedating him with several well-placed kicks to the head. Only then did he begin the trek to the spring about a quarter mile away.

Much to my surprise the savage blows had failed to knock Gul unconscious. If nothing else he was a tough boy with a skull of granite. As soon as Ashraf was out of earshot, Gul’s voice came hissing through the night air, his nervous pleas tumbling out after another, desperately trying for the right line that might save his ass.

“Dadee, Dadee, for the love of Allah, you must help me. Remember Dadee when I save from crevice. Remember how I find all saman after avalanche...after you almost kill me. Dadee, Ashraf bad man, say bad things against me. I take saman, Dadee. Safe down by road. I hide before coming here. I have pony too. Rashid give me. I come for you, to take you to Srinagar, not to kill you like Ashraf say. Acchaa, I am tout. Sometimes truth not exactly saying, but I not killer. That is business of Pathan, not Gul. Kashmiris like business not blood. We deal, not fight! Gul poor man. They take advantage. Dadee, I do only good for you. Please Dadee, if I die, my mother no one to feed her. She alone in village, waiting for rupees I send. If rupees not come, mother starve.”

He was pulling out all the stops, but I couldn't blame him. How I had come to hate this sniveling bastard. Yet at that moment, seeing him totally helpless, facing what seemed as inevitable death, it was as if all the hatred in my heart took wing. It was as if the hatred, not Ashraf, was the eagle of my dream. As long as it hovered over me, there was the wolf. As the bird became more distant, the wolf began to change, transformed into this man-boy of the Pir Panjal, just another ill-equipped human, trying desperately to survive in a hostile world. I wanted to hate this pile of flesh that quivered before me. I wanted to be able to go over and, like Ashraf, kick that bastard in the head.

I even tried. I wanted to prove to myself that I could hate—no holds barred no equivocation, just plain remorseless hate, no worries about karma. As I pulled my foot back for the strike, I made the mistake of looking into his eyes. It was at that moment I realized: this thing I wished so much to destroy was not Gul. Despite all the dirt that lay upon him, he only mirrored that which I hated most. It was not Gul but me. I could have kicked him, mutilated him, or even killed him. That might have shattered the mirror, destroying the reflection but not its source. At that moment, I realized I would have to save him. I couldn't accept the responsibility of such a final judgment. I couldn't accept playing a part in his death, even that of a passive onlooker.

“Gul,” it came forth weakly, tentatively; I was uncertain that I was even speaking, that I could put voice to what my mind wanted to say. How long would that “good head” remain in charge? How long

before the evil return. "Look Gul, just try to keep your mouth shut. I'll figure something out. I don't want your blood on my hands." I thought to myself how much there was already. Then again to him, "you're not worth it fucker." My gorge was rising, signaling the approach of that other head.

Ashraf returned. He was whistling a cheery, if incongruous, tune, some Bollywood pop tune he had heard on All-India Radio. As he passed Gul, he gave him another kick without missing a note. Compassion wasn't a developed attribute in the Pathan cultural tool kit. Though most generous to friends, to enemies they showed relentless hatred. This made sense for in honoring friends, they honored themselves, but to those beyond the pale, beyond nang, there was no more care than to vermin.

In the distance the wolves were howling again. Ashraf laughed, "They're waiting for our friend here. It's such a shame to make them wait so long. Maybe we let them eat warm meal. Dead meat is so cold. If we roll him down the hill...then wolves can feast tonight, feast on warm, living flesh. Good idea! Eh, you *bizhra* (coward)? Bekhor rama hun! Bekhor gosht i Gul!" He fell into a fit of raucous laughter. There was another whimper from Gul. Ashraf rewarded his fortitude with a few more kicks. Gul was silent.

I watched silently as Ashraf ate. What was I to do? My mind raced with thoughts of how to overwhelm him. He was a warrior, and not an ancient one either, but one who was still fighting his wars. No doubt he would be fit. No doubt there was that internal mechanism ready to spring into action at the slightest threat. That was what being a warrior was, and though I knew combat, it was only as an observer, yes, a voyeur.

Then I thought that I might get him stoned. I still had that packet of charas that Selim had given me. I rummaged in my pack and found the bundle. As I untied the greasy knot, several pink tablets fell onto the ground. Son of a bitch! Valium and ten mike doses at that! A plan began to form. It must be a gift from that god who was playing with my fate. Keep on drawing it out, giving me just enough to survive. The chai was almost ready; the pot was boiling. All I had to do was stir those tablets into the brew. Ashraf would never know until the next morning when he awoke to find Gul gone. By then it would be too late. I would fake it, pretending

innocence. After a decent interval, I too would leave. This time I would stay on the road, where there was always a chance of an Army patrol. Even if Ashraf finally put the pieces together and came after me, he wouldn't be so crazy to go there. This was, after all, very unfriendly territory as the Zanskaris had no more use for a Pathan warrior than did the Army. I counted the pills, one, two...there were a half dozen in all. Allah bless Selim! Even this hombre wouldn't hold up against such a chemical assault.

Ashraf had finished his dal-bhaat. Putting down his bowl, he got up and walked over to me. "What have you got there, Amerikai?" With long unused skill, I deftly palmed the pills and held up the bundle of charas. "Ah, you are a charasi, eh! This is the stuff of Sheytan. Before we smoke much. We become weak; we forget our duty; we forget Allah. This stuff no good, and like wine it puts you out of mind. The blessed Koran says that it is haram— forbidden. Put it away Amrikai, or I will throw it in the fire. What you choose to do alone is your business...you are not of Islam...you will go to Jhana no matter what you do—unless of course you come to submit to the will of Allah. But do not use this filth in my presence. Tu famedhi?"

Then his orthodoxy was confronted by the even deeper codes of his tribal ways, "*Bubakshed* Sar, excuse me Amrikai! *Bisyaar afsos*, I'm very sorry! I have eaten your food. I am your *mehman*, your guest; I should be more polite. But I am muhahed and I must follow the code of Jihad closely. I must not turn from the course Allah has set before me."

"*Man famehdam*, Malik Ashraf," I replied, amazed that some small shreds of Dari still lurked in the deepest recesses of my mind—those days in Kabul seemed so far away.

I did understand. However, that did not keep me from giving him the Valium that would put him even more out of mind. Ashraf, now embarrassed, turned from me to face the fire. My grip, turned frantic by Ashraf's approach, had pulverized the pills. I quickly stirred the resultant powder into Ashraf's chai.

After chai, it was time for prayers. Despite Ashraf's earlier outrages against Gul, when it was time to face Mecca, they did so as equals. With a gentler kick, in keeping with the nature of the

activity, he brought Gul into an upright position. He untied Gul's hands. "Prayer time! Even for a bastard like you! I would never make a man, even a low one like you, face Allah tied like a sheep. If you want to test your luck, Kashmiri, now is the time. Even if I miss...and I never do, my friends are out there waiting for you." As if to support what Ashraf was saying there was another chorus of howls. I could see fear on Gul's face as I had never witnessed before on any man. But then he wasn't really a man anymore, just a mass of quivering, sweating flesh and shaking bone.

The prayers were lengthy and I settled back, snug in my silken cocoon, waiting to see what effect the Valium would have. Yes, I was trying. I had set things into motion and now it was up to the Gods. Insha'Allah, Gul I will save you. Insha'Allah the drug will do its work. Insha'Allah, you will be free. I have done all that I can, and the rest is in the hands of whatever you believe in...if, that is, you believe in anything.

I watched Ashraf intently, looking for tell-tale signs that would betray the action of the drug. Ashraf was big, well over six feet and maybe more than 200 pounds. I had used sixty mikes but in the rush of slipping them into his brew at least a part had been lost. Still whatever had wound up in his system would be a heavy hit, even for a big man. Besides, Ashraf must have been already quite exhausted. He had been walking since early morning, probably double time, and after the heavy dal-bhaat, even without the Valium, he would have slept.

I wanted him to pass out before he retied Gul. In the meantime, I would pretend to be asleep so, if Gul escaped, Ashraf could only blame himself. I only hoped he wouldn't wonder why his mouth was so dry or why his head had a fuzzy feeling. If Ashraf figured out that I had drugged him, chances were slim that I would ever leave that place.

They were coming to the end of their prayers, back on their knees, hands uplifted to their God. Suddenly, Ashraf slumped forward. Gul was motionless for a minute or so. Perhaps he had been silently beseeching Allah for just such deliverance, never dreaming that it would come. Now that it had, he couldn't quite believe it. I too waited, wanting to make sure the Pathan was out. His breathing

became heavier and more measured, finally settling into a loud, steady snore.

“Gul,” I hissed, wanting him to snap out of it and get going before Ashraf came around. “Come on Gul, wake up! Ashraf had the drug not you.”

“What happened Dadee? What’s going on?”

I quickly told him what was up. Gul was transformed. Minutes before he had been the doomed dog, now again he was the wolf, ready to take revenge.

Giving his tormentor a kick, he spat out, “I kill this bastard Pathan. First I teach big lesson, then kill. You help me get gun, Dadee, then we have some fun, no?”

“Fuck no, Gul! That’s not what I had in mind. No one’s getting killed here, except maybe you if you don’t get your shit together fast. You’ve got to get the hell out of here right now. Now or never, *my son!*”

“But Dadee it’s dark...the wolves! And look, this fucking Pathan is out cold. If I kill him, we have much time, no worry.”

“You said the saman is down by the road. Go that way and get it. The wolves are higher up; they are afraid to go by the road this time of year. If you stay here any longer, maybe I will kill you myself.”

“Oh Dadee, you save my life. How I can pay you back? My life is yours. I owing you. For this I must do as you say. We go now Dadee?”

I had no intention of going. If I had gone with Gul, Ashraf would have tracked us down within hours of waking. Tracking Gul was just business, but if he suspected me, it would become personal. There would have been no excuses. There would have been no mercy. Pathans didn’t look kindly on hosts who play tricks on their guests. That would be a big breach of their code, the *Pushtunwali*, a breach that must be punished in the only way they knew.

“No Gul, I’ve done all I can do for you. You must go alone. They will be waiting for you in the North. If not in Kargil, then in Srinagar.” I went over to my pack and pulled out my map. North and South were blocked to Gul, and then to the East there was only China.

There was no other way but to the West and that meant crossing the spine of the Himalaya. It was a long shot but the only chance. Grabbing a burning stick, I held it closely to the tattered paper and traced on what I thought was Gul's only option.

"If you go south, back to Padam, Rashid will be waiting. Your only hope is to go back downstream to the Bardum chu...here...at the where its waters enter the Doda...here, near Phe. You see this place?" Gul looked at the paper blankly. I had forgotten that he couldn't read and that the map for him was just a bunch of jumbled lines.

"Look," I continued. "We are about here. This blue line is the Doda, the chu that you followed from Padam." Gul looked at me intently, now the dutiful student. "Go back here, where this other blue line comes into the main valley. Go up this nala and you'll reach the Umasi-la."

"But how will I know Dadee? How will I know the right nala?"

This was getting hard. I was tempted to go over to Ashraf, get his gun and blow Gul away. Just looking at him all friendly and everything was triggering all the hate again. I had to get him out of there before that other side of me took full control.

"Look at the map Gul!"

Then I started counting off the lines that ran into the valley from the west. "One, two...nine. There are nine nalas. When you get to the ninth, just start climbing. It's a hard way, maybe too hard, but if you get across, you can reach the Pardar Valley, then the Chenab at Atholi. From there it's just a bus ride to Kishtwar and then Delhi."

"Ji Sahib, this Pardar I hear...for its *nilam* (sapphire) mine...famous all the world. Insha'Allah, I find nilam."

Then as he stared at the map with growing intensity, there was a spark of recognition in his eyes, as if suddenly the lines, if not the words, made some sense. "Dadee, look at this line, it same broken one like go over Umasi but only three nalas not nine."

I looked more closely and saw that he was right. It was the Hogshu-la...a Class A son of a bitch, to say the least. If Gul tried

that one, it would be the same as if I had left him to Ashraf's tender mercies.

"I don't think so Gul. The Hogshu-la is very difficult, very high, like climbing a mountain. You need crampons...you know like nails on your shoes, and rope. Also, you need very warm clothes. The Umasi is tough enough, and you will need the help of Allah to get across. On the Hogshu, I don't think even Allah can help you."

"*Acchaa*, I understand Dadee...much difficulty. I go Umasi way. Insha'Allah, then to Delhi. There I wait for you. You know how find me. Just go Noor's office; he know. I will take *stuff*. It safe way. Too many police on way to Srinagar. Airport there much danger, checking always. This my duty. Insha'Allah, it'll be safe with me. Trust your Gul. I'm forever your faithful son, Dadee."

That bastard was unbelievable, but I couldn't help admiring his panache. He was on the edge, just inches away from his executioner, facing at best an arduous flight with no provisions, yet his bravado survived. That was what it meant to live—to struggle to survive up to the last, no surrender, no submission. That was Gul; he was, if nothing else, alive.

It was time for "*khodaa haafez*." With profuse promises of undying loyalty ad nauseam, Gul slipped off into the night. Snow was falling again and, for a moment, I was back on the Shingo-la watching Gul head down the valley. He had made promises then too. Now I had little faith that I would ever see him again, even if I wanted, which was doubtful. When Ashraf awoke, Gul's tracks would have long disappeared. Ashraf would have to give up the chase or assume that his quarry was heading north and follow in that direction. It would be impossible for him to think that Gul would head for the Umasi. Only a fool would attempt that route so late in the season...or one so desperate that there was no other choice.

I was tempted to split myself or, even as I became more anxious, to kill the Pathan while he slept. The act itself would have been easy, just a few blows from my ice axe, a knife across the throat, or even a rock to the head. He was out cold; most likely he would feel no pain. But while the physical act would be straightforward, the mental state necessary to commit such an act was light-years

away. I dreaded the morning when he would awake, but I could not bring myself to think that he would really be a threat. Maybe if I had, maybe if I had thought myself in extreme danger, I would have struck. Somehow, I believed it would be all right. Perhaps it was the confidence of the righteous, for in abetting Gul's escape, I imagined I had ascended to the moral heights. I had cast off another of those "daughters", and I wasn't about to do something that would return me to her embrace.

It was so cold, the fire dead, the wood finished. Outside the moon struggled against the snow-laden clouds. Occasionally, for a moment, it would shine through, casting a phosphorescent glow on the world beyond the mouth of the cave. I turned to look at life, not as shadows on cave walls, but as directly into the light. But that light was so dim, the world so uniform in dull whiteness.

I fell back into a deep sleep, or at least I thought I had on awakening. The one I had known as Ashraf was gone. There was no sign that he had ever been present, nor for Gul. Even now as I write these words, I am uncertain of their presence in the cave. Were they there? Was that moment now lodged in their memory as it was in mine? Excepting that actual moment of the present, an edge so fine that we have already departed as we begin to comprehend, what is its reality...its shared experience? Moving past that edge, it all becomes a memory. What is memory if not dream?

Mei is sitting on the other side of the world. We had shared so much of the edge, but now that edge was past. We were somewhere beyond, poised on other disparate edges. What we remembered, was it any more than a dream, each of our memories shaped by different presents, each reconciled to present needs?

The "reality", the actuality of it all was not what was important. What was important was that I come to grips with all that rage inside. It had been with me all my life, waxing and waning according to my current fortune. When things were good, the rage subsided; when times were tough, back it would come, latching on to some unfortunate who got in my way. I would manipulate that person; use them to soak up my rage. If it was not for them, the rage must come back against me. Sometimes there was no one. Those were the toughest times for then there was only myself.

It had been like that this time when I came to India. Oh, I was flying with all that sanctimonious seeking of enlightenment. Underneath I was just fleeing my own rage. Perhaps that was why I had hired Gul. I saw at once that he was going to be a problem. I wanted a problem, for then I would have a target for my anger.

I came to this there in the cave. I had in my grasp the one who held all my remaining hatred. With only the slightest encouragement, I could have seen him flayed alive or, at the very least, put down with a bullet in the back of his head. Yet, I had turned to face the truth, not in the illusion that is outside, but the truth of myself. Killing Gul would have been no answer. There would have been no satisfaction in killing the messenger—the shattering of a mirror that just reflected me. Satisfaction lay only in destroying the hatred inside; hatred only reflected by Gul, by Tara, by Morgan, by Yusef, by even Mei, all those nemeses I had constructed, all those symbols now living only in my mind.

The snow had stopped. There had been a heavy fall and the ground was an even white. For the first time in days the sky was a deep cobalt blue. The air's clarity was fortunate for it revealed the outline of the surrounding peaks, which along with the direction of a rising sun formed the only clues as to the direction I must travel.

I looked for signs of life, of traces of that life's passage, but there were none. Even my own footsteps to the cave were gone. The air was still, the only noise that of the chu tumbling somewhere below. I scanned the horizon, trying to remember which peak had been where. I saw a dot in the sky. It was so distant that I probably wouldn't have noticed it had the field not been so uniform. The dot came closer. There was a "whuump, whuump, whuump," faint at first, but as it came closer, it grew to a malevolent, throaty, staccato-pounding roar. I should have recognized that sound; it had once filled my life. In fact, my life more than once had hinged on its presence. Yet because of this place, my mind was in another frame. If I had looked up and seen that mythic bird-steed of Vishnu, Garuda, I would have been less surprised. Instead it was for that place something much more fantastic. It wasn't Garuda, not even the great eagle-like bird of my dreams, but a helicopter, a Soviet-made MI-8 to be precise, ferrying Indian army troops.

How ironic for Ashraf. Even here he was still up against Shuravi deviltry. Maybe this ship was looking for him, but I doubted it. The Indian army couldn't afford such a luxury. The chopper flew low, almost level to the cave, straining to find the altitude to clear the pass. Quickly it reached the rise at the top of the valley and disappeared taking its "whuump, whuump" with it.

The brief presence of this messenger from the other side, the world beyond the rise, shook me. I had to get moving. My food supply was almost exhausted. When I arrived at the cave the night before, all I wanted was to stay there forever, bounded by those mountain walls, safe and secure from the artifice of humanity. But even there I hadn't been safe. I too was part of that alien, human world. Wherever I went, so did the evil. How could it fail to do so, being inside? In freeing Gul, I had tossed off yet more of my burden. Now with a lightened load, I could continue on my way.

Looking at the map, I saw that over the crest of the pass lay Rangdom gomba. A day's walk across the gently descending valley floor would get me there. At the gomba I would be sheltered and food. The lamas, by their creed, couldn't turn away one as seemingly destitute as I. Besides, I still had my rupees, and even the lamas found these of value.

My heart was light. Once again, I was heading back to "the World", the place of humanity and all its creations. True, it was a world with which I had been at odds. But that night I would have a warm meal and a dry bed. For those things, at that moment, I might have killed.

After many hours of walking, I was getting quite tired. I was tempted to halt short of my goal and camp for the night even if it meant going hungry. Then coming over a rise, I saw at my feet the plain of Rangdom. There on a hillock, in the middle of that desolate valley, was a squat, fortress-like structure. From the roof of this fortress rose a single golden *serto*, the spire-like tower symbolizing dharma's victory over evil. My eyes followed its course upward into the sky. It was then I saw them, those ultimate nemeses. Towering above the gomba were those giant peaks, Nun and Kun. The sun was setting and it was as if those peaks were one great bonfire. A chill went through me. My body shook with its force. I was staring straight into Mara's fiery eye. I had to have

human company. Out in the open I couldn't escape the eye. I felt naked and terribly alone. With an energy I couldn't believe I still possessed, I ran down the slope, across the rocky plain, and through the gomba's open gate.

* * *

I find the circle is now all but complete. But in doing this I hope that I haven't, as in the case of those "daughters" of the Bhavachakra, doomed my soul to a continued existence. If you eat of yourself, are you what you eat?

For some time, I have been using this telling as a shelter from the world. Lost in these pages, in the memories that they record, I have put off the world outside, so filled with terror and hardship. It's safe to live in that controllable, malleable past, where all characters and events jump to my command. The time has come, however, to leave the world of what was and set about the business of what will be.

Time has not stood still and change has been at work even in one so lost in remembrance. I came here still haunted by purpose or what I thought was purpose. Old habits of thought linger on and new revelations, no matter how seemingly profound, need their time to settle in. My journey to this place, the physical one, has been hard and it has hit me hard too.

Until I came here and had time to think—all of what I've written is nothing more than the material residue of that process—I couldn't clearly understand what had happened. There has been so much silence here; the noise of the storm becoming anti-noise, cancelling out the whirring inside. Now I have had time to listen, to hear the call of Shambhala. It is not that I can yet say, "Yes I hear it. I hear that 'Kalagiya.'" Perhaps I am destined never to hear that cry distinctly. Yet, I hear...no feel I think is a better term, the...pull towards something that lies outside me. I have begun to believe it is possible to hear the cry.

Devara, while we have been here, talked much of the wondering life—going from place to place, not to get somewhere, but to be in motion. The holy places for him—the tirths of Amarnath,

Badrinath, Kailas, are but lodestones drawing him onward...inward...out of the material entropy, into the energy of his heart and mind. I must go, but where? Like Gul, my options are limited. Where I have come from are only those things I wish to leave behind. If I return, I'm afraid that I struggled to be free of, will again ensnare me. That's what, Insha'Allah—it was always Insha'Allah when I thought about Gul—would be waiting in Delhi. Even if all was well, even if I made it, what would be that "it"? The profit would just buy another round of the same old...another Tara, another attempt at reconstructing life. I could see Gul waiting, the wolfish grin wide on his maw. But where else to go? Maybe I have freed myself from Lust and Hatred, but there is still Ignorance that holds me tight. Besides, if we live, can we ever be free of those "daughters"? They are always there, just beyond, waiting for a moment of weakness to slip back and take hold again. As human I am destined to struggle until I am no more. That's what it is to be—struggle.

I waited, as even now I wait, for enlightenment, expecting some "Clear Light", some "Diamond Truth", to leap from these pages. It's all so perfect, a set piece--the mountain aerie, the wise sadhu, the deprivation. I mean man, like it's the Himalaya, mind blowout and all that good shit. It was a natural if not here then where?

But that blinding flash, the opening of some mythic third eye hasn't come. I still must struggle with imperfect sensors as before. Moha, the pig-daughter of ignorance still blinds me and binds me to maya of world illusion. Yet perhaps this hasn't been totally futile. I have learned to cope with my blindness, for I have learned that I am blind. In a world devoid of any sign, any marker, any point of orientation, how can I know which is the way. I can't see perfection with imperfect eyes, yet I can still strive to see. I must move on; I must not worry; I must entrust the way to fate. It is only in motion, in the flow of life, that bumping, smashing, and crashing, although painful, is the only way I can hope to see. Place one foot in front of the other, then another, then another. This will take me onward, across the bridge. The sooner I get moving, the sooner I will reach the other side. "Come on Devara, chalo, chalo! Let's move on. *Borou Bekhir!*"

Epilog

*To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower.
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour*

—William Blake—

A WORLD REGAINED

The air was raw, but in it a hint of warmth and the promise of the countless wildflowers now budding from underneath the melting snows. It had been a hard winter as was usual to this place. Mara has much time. But now, just as there is that time when mortals must depart, so now was the time for Mara's retreat. For many months, Mara had been free to range over this land. The strengthening sun shrinks the Death Lord's realm. Soon only those seven pinnacles would remain, so cold, so under Mara's spell, that even the might of the sun failed to warm them to bring life.

As she crossed the ridge dividing fertile lands from barren, the bird could mark Mara's gradual retreat up the nala. In the far distance was panoply of color signaling life, green grasses, purple, gold, red, white flowers marched upward. The bird was hungry; she hadn't eaten for many days. It was good to leave the high desert lands to the east. At this time of the year all that could be eaten had been eaten, and only the richness of the lands west of the mountain barrier could save her.

She wasn't disappointed for now was the time when the young drin first emerged from their holes under the great ice wall. They were so ignorant and foolish as to the ways of the world. The bird almost felt sorry for them, but of course could not. Why were they there after all if not to give her sustenance? She had her own work to do. She must build a new nest for it was that time to replenish her kind.

There was something that she held in that place behind the eyes with which she saw the world. It was a vision, but while it was like when she looked at something with her eyes, it remained even when her eyes were shut. Yet it was so dim, that even though she tried, she couldn't quite focus on it. "Maybe later it will come," she thought. "I have so

much to do to get ready. Soon the other one, the one who is my mate, will arrive. I must be ready."

For several days the bird labored, burrowing through the snow in likely places to find bits of material for her nest. Down below in the valley where the two streams of water flowed together was the nesting place of the human. It was still too early for their arrival, so the bird could wander freely, taking twigs, bits of string and thread from their dome-shaped nests. "How strange were the human's nests," the bird thought, "almost like my own but much larger and upside down. How strange to want to hide from the sky. No wonder humans were such miserable creatures."

Somehow, in all the thinking about the nest building, trying to remember what place might have the best materials, trying to figure out the safest site, that unfocused vision began to sharpen. Perhaps what brought it back was the swath of orange flowers, appearing one morning on the hillside, poking out from the melting snow.

"That human! Yes, the one I saw just before the storm; the one whose color was like the flowers below. It must be here; certainly, it cannot be alive." Images from that time came flooding back. She remembered seeing that one, climbing, climbing, and then disappearing into a small pile of stones in the level place where the glaciers meet. "I will fly there and see what happened," she thought. But first she needed more strength. "Is that the squeal of a young drin?"

It was several passages of the sun and moon before the bird could carry out the exploration. Storm returned and she was forced to find shelter. She wasn't surprised for such weather could always come to the high nala, even in the time when the sun was strongest. For the bird, it wasn't much of a problem. She could fly in that direction taken by the sun, down to where the air was warm and the hillsides green. True, that was the place of the human and there was much foulness and danger. But the bird knew it would be for only a short time.

While she was in these warmer parts, she saw that the humans had already begun to move. There were long lines of them moving like the creatures with no legs, coiling along the contours of the earth. Not only were there humans but their four-legged slave creatures as well—the thunder of their footsteps filled the valleys, choking them with dust.

"I must get back, back to the high nala. It is only there that the human halt; it is only beyond the meeting of the two water streams that I can be free of this pestilence." The bird took wing. As she was returning to her nest in the shadow of the seven pinnacles, she saw more humans coming up the nala. They were past the place of the meeting waters and thus had left the slave creatures behind. They did carry those sticks as the ones before the snows—the same sticks that had made the noise that brought down the mountain.

The following morning was clear. The bird was well fed from her foray below. The nest was complete and it might be days before her mate would appear. What better time to check on that pile of stones. "If the human is there, I can cut up his carcass and bring the pieces one at a time to my nest. These rocks will hold the joints quite nicely. By the time the chicks arrive they will be well thawed."

It was quite some work to rise to the heights. "This must be the place," she thought, "yes, just below the ridge where the two ice rivers divide; there is the slight hillock; there peeking out from the snow must be the rocks." Inside the rocks was some strange flapping thing, like the stuff humans cover themselves with but different. It had a strange, unnatural taste. Whatever it had been, it was now ripped into many pieces. The flapping thing scared the bird, but from the stench inside she knew there was promise. That smell was human, and although it was almost too much to bear it also encouraged her. She knew from experience that where there was this smell, there also might be food.

Yet all she found was inedible—all those human things that, for the life of her, she couldn't understand. The one thing that did catch her notice was a pile of snow-bark like things. They were thin, like the leaves on trees, but unlike the things of the gods with pleasing rounded, unpredictable lines, these had those squared, even lines favored by humans. On these leaves were all manner of dark scratches, as if some other bird had marked them. About these the bird did not mind thinking that the leaf-like things would be useful for making her nest warm.

She was about to take the in her beak when she heard the crunching of snow, the shout of the human. There was an explosion, first in sound followed by one of pain. She struggled to escape, escape the rocks, the human stench, and the pain that throbbed so in her breast. She thought of the sky and of how free it was to soar above the land.

"Oh, how I wish just once again to feel the wind. Oh, how I wish to see that sea of mountains just one more time." In her mind was that sea, stretching to all horizons, North, South, East, and West, in endless waves. She was flying now, so high, so fast, the vast crag-flecked sea far below. She saw that, though seemingly endless, it was not. There was a world beyond the icy crests with great waters, verdant jungles, and sandy wastes. Far out on the edge of a vast, tawny moonscape, she saw an almost perfect ring of snowy mountains. These rose like sentinel towers, guarding a valley of deepest green, set like a sparkling emerald within. Despite the valley's great distance, a call-like sound floated up to where she drifted so effortlessly among the clouds. It was light and lilting.

But if it emanated from a crystal bell, golden horn, or angel's voice, the bird couldn't tell. Yet somehow, perhaps through some innate understanding, she knew the call's meaning. Within its sonorous modulations, comprehensible only to the bird, it held that most elusive of invitations: "KaLaGiYa, KaLaGiYa, KaLaGiYa," over and over until the bird was no more.

Glossary

*"The question is," said Alice,
"whether you can make words mean so many different things."
"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty,
"which is to be master—that's all."
—Lewis Carroll—*

MEANINGS

CODE:

(A)—Arabic; (D)—Dari; (H/U)—Hindi-Urdu; (J)—Japanese (K)—Kashmiri; (Kl)—Kalash; (Kw)—Kohwari; (L)—Ladakhi; (T)—Tibetan; (P) Pashtu; (Q) Quechua; (V)—Vietnamese.

accha—(H/U) good, great.

afyun—(D) opium.

Ahl e Kitab—(A) "People of the Book" (Bible), Jews and Christians.

Allah-o-Akbar—(A) "God is Great!"

alu—(H/U) potato

amrita—(T) ambrosia, nectar of the Gods.

amma—(L) mother.

Angrez—(H/U) English person but used for most European-looking persons.

Anhad-Naad—(H) "music of God" heard by Shiva in the Himalaya

arak--(A) Strong alcoholic drink.

artha—(H) material gain.

asat—(H) opposite of *sat*, illusion of a plural, disconnected world.

Avidya—(H) unconscious will: initial stage of twelve that Buddhists see as the stages of life

ayahuasca—(Q) drug made from bark by Amazonian Indians.

azadi—(D) freedom.

badal—(P) revenge.

baksheesh—(H/U) gratuity for some service.

baraabar—(D) equal

baradar—(U) brother.

barf—(D/H/U) snow.

barmakiri—(P) slang for sexual intercourse.

barsat—(H/U) monsoon.

KALAGIYA

Behesht—(A) Paradise

bekhor—(D) take (food).

bhaai—(H) brother.

bhaat—(H/U) cooked rice.

bhajan—(H) religious hymn.

bhakti—(H) concept of total devotion for God and, in turn, God's love for the devotee.

bhang—(H/U) *ganja* tea.

bhavachakra—(H) the Buddhist "Wheel of Becoming."

bhuchal—(H) earthquake.

bidi—(H/U) cheap native cigarette made from rolled -up tobacco leaf.

biru—(J) beer.

Bismillah—(A) "In the name of God." A pious invocation before or after an action or prayer.

bisyaar tashakor—(D) thanks very much.

bisyaar afsos—(D) I am very sorry.

bizhra—(D) coward.

Borou bekheir—(A) Muslim invocation before an undertaking: "Go with a blessing!"

bubakshed—(D) excuse me.

bukhari—(D) metal stove.

burra—(H) first class

caravanserai—(D/H/U) traditional resting-place, inn, for caravans.

chador—(D) all-encompassing cloak worn by women in *pardah*.

chai—(D/H/U) tea.

chaikanna—(D/H/U) teahouse

chalo—(H/U) term for "let's go."

chapati—(H/U) unleavened, flat wheat bread.

chappal—(D) heavy leather sandals favored in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Changpa—(T) Tibetan nomadic shepherd.

charas—(H/U) hashish.

charasi—(H/U) person addicted to hashish.

charhai—(H/U) uphill.

charpoi—(H/U) rope-strung, wooden frame bed.

chaval—(H/U) uncooked rice.

chela—(H/U) student, pupil, follower.

chicha—(Q) home brewed beer.

The Call of Shambhala

chillum—(H/U) cone -shaped pipe.

chini—(H/U) sugar.

chi-pa—(T) non-Buddhist, outsiders.

choga—(Kw) robe-like overcoat.

chorten—(T) Buddhist monument (*Stupa*).

chot suh—(K) snow leopard.

chout—(L) novice lama, or lama of lowest rank.

chowkidar—(H/U) watchman.

chu—(L) river, stream.

*churpe*¹—(L) cheese.

congai—(V) woman who becomes mistress to a foreigner.

coss—(L) maroon home-spun wool robe.

crachin—(V) rains of winter monsoon.

crore—(H/U) ten million.

daal—(H/U) lentil.

darshan—(H) religious audience.

decoit—(H/U) bandit.

deodar—(H/U) Himalayan cedar.

dhaba—(H/U) tea house, restaurant.

dham—(H) abode of a God.

dharma—(H) duty.

dojo—(J) Zen teaching monastery.

doonga—(K) houseboat.

dorje—(T) enlightenment symbolized by the lightning bolt.

drin—(K) marmot.

duhd—(H/U) milk.

du-khang—(T) meeting room or cloister for Buddhist monks.

dupatta—(H/U) long decorative scarf favored by Punjabi women.

dushman—(D) enemy.

diiwana—(H) foolish or mad, linguistically connected to English word divine.

fahmidan—(D) to understand.

fána—(A) annihilation of self, giving of self over to God.

ferenghi—(D) foreigner.

ferenghi-khanna—(D) foreigners' house.

KALAGIYA

- firnspiegel*—iced surface on snow formed by thawing and freezing.
Gaddi—(H) nomadic shepherds found in valleys of the Pir Panjal.
gaijin—(J) foreigner, non-Japanese.
ganja—(H/U) marijuana.
garroti—(H/U) primitive cable car used to cross rivers in the mountains.
gazal—(U) love song.
geshe—(T) teacher.
ghee—(H/U) clarified butter.
godown—(H/U) warehouse.
gosht—(H/U) meat.
gomba—(T) Buddhist monastery.
gudma—thick wool blankets of Lahaul.
Gujar—(U) Moslem nomadic shepherd s who ranges from Eastern Afghanistan through Kashmir.
gulub jamum—(H/U) deep-fried sweets.
guru—(H) Hindu religious teacher.
halal—(A) all things pure, Muslim equivalent of "kosher."
hama—(D) all.
haput—(K) bear.
haram—(A) all things impure.
hujera—(P) men's guest house.
IMLF—Acronym for "Indian Made Foreign Liquor."
Insha'Allah—(A) used throughout Islam: "if God wills."
i'nok—(L) yes.
Issa—(A) Jesus.
jai—(H) victory.
jao—(H/U) get going!
jangama—(H) moving, moveable.
ji—(H/U) yes.
jibi—(L) high-topped hat.
jihad—(A) holy war to establish the way of God.
Jahannam—(A) Hell
Jhana—(A) Heaven.
jhola—(H/U) small shoulder bag.

The Call of Shambhala

jonga—(H/U) Indian-built, jeep-like vehicle.

jongli—Anglo-Indian term for European gone native.

jule—(L) greeting, "hello."

juma—(D) Friday.

kafir—(A) unbeliever, non-Muslim.

kail fhamb—(K) ibex wool.

Ka la gi ya—(T) call to Shambhala heard only by the anointed.

kalung—(T) Buddhist term for permission to study; e.g., certain mantras or texts.

kama—(H) love.

kambal—(H/U) blanket.

kameez—(H/U) Punjabi shirt.

karma—(H) fate deriving from a person's actions.

kata—(L) prayer scarf

kaushak—(L) head lama of a gomba.

kehva—(K) spiced tea.

khadi—(H/U) home spun cloth.

khaansaamaa—(H/U) cook.

kharpō—(L) white.

kherab—(H/U) broken, finished, ruined.

Khodaa haafez—(D) parting phrase: "go with God."

kismet—(A) fate, destiny, or fortune.

kofi—(H/U) coffee.

koot—(H/U) wild herb valued in India as a base for perfume.

kopsei—(Kl) women's hooded headpiece.

Kulantapith—(H) ancient name for Kulu: "land at the end of the Earth."

kyaa haal hay—(U) greeting: "how are you?"

la—(T) high pass.

laajward—(D) lapis lazuli

laalie—(Kw) dancing boy

lakh—(H/U) one-hundred thousand.

lama—(T) Buddhist monk of *guru* status, used loosely in this text for monks of all grades.

lam-rim—(T) Gelugpa *ta-wa* of the "graded path."

lashkar—(P) war party.

lien—Form of "face" in Chinese that indicates moral character of an individual.

KALAGIYA

- lha-khang*—(T) chapel or literally "house of Gods."
lohi—Lahauli for "woolen shawl."
luk—(L) for "sheep."
lungi—(H/U) cloth worn by men in South India in place of pants.
lung-rta—(T) symbolic horse figure found on paper prayer flags.
makri—(H/U) spider.
mandala—(H) Buddhist symbolic representation of the world.
mandir—(H) temple.
mani—(T) stone inscribed with Buddhist prayers.
mani-don—(T) wall made of *mani*.
marate—(P) slave.
masala—(H/U) pre-mixed spice.
masala dhosa—(H/U) South Indian crêpe-type dish.
masjid—(U) Muslim place of worship, mosque.
maya—(H) Buddhist and Hindu concept for illusion that the human world is the reality.
mehman—(D) guest.
melang—(A) Sufi hermit.
melmastia—(P) hospitality.
Memsahib—(H/U) honorific for woman, equal to Ms.
metalled—British-era term: surfaced road.
mianzi—form of "face" in Chinese equivalent to American reputation or success.
mo-mo—(T) dumpling.
moksha—(H) retreat from material to spiritual life.
monlam—(L) prayer.
mujahed—(A) warrior for God in *Jihad*.
mullah—(A) Muslim religious leader or teacher.
murgh—(H/U) chicken.
mytti-ka tel—(H/U) kerosene.
naga—(H/U) serpent.
nala—(H/U) canyon, side valley, stream.
namak—(H/U) salt.
Namaste—(H) greeting: "I salute the Godhead within you."
nanawati—(P) sanctuary.
nang—(P) honor.

The Call of Shambhala

Nang'pa—(L) Buddhist.

Nazareni—(A) Christian

nidhanas—(H) Buddhist term for twelve division of knowledge depicted on the outer rim of the *bhavachakra*, "Wheel of Becoming."

Nihonjin—(J) Japanese people.

nilam—(H/U) sapphire.

Nirvana—(H) total escape from *samsara*, the cycle of reincarnation.

no—(L) younger brother.

nup—(H) charas made from first shake of pollen, best quality.

oma—(L) milk.

on-jesta-mosh—(Kl) virgin boy who serves as a religious acolyte.

paceri—French term used in Vietnam for gang chieftains.

pakkaa—(H/U) well made.

pakhora—(H/U) fritter.

pancaksara—(H) "five syllable" mantra.

parash—(Kw) male homosexual, the anus.

parashkoti—(Kw) catamite.

parashtu dik—(Kw) to sodomize.

paratha—(H/U) chapati refried in oil.

parikrama—(H) act of circumambulation around a sacred object, e.g., Mt. Kailas.

peghor—(P) dishonor.

perag—(L) women's headdress.

phonak daq—(Kw) term for dancing boy.

pisco—Peruvian grape brandy.

PRU—acronym for Provincial Reconnaissance Unit

pujah—(H) prayers, worship.

Pukhtunwali (or *Pushtunwali*)—(P) the way of the Pathan.

pukkah—(H/U) good, first class.

pardah—(A) practice of seclusion of women.

putanna—(P) prostitute, whore.

puttee—(U) native wool cloth

raga—(H/U) formal Indian music compositions.

Rabjampa—(T) Buddhist title equivalent to Doctor of Divinity.

Raj—(H/U) empire, era of British rule in India.

KALAGIYA

- ra'ma*—(L) goat.
- rama hun*—(K) wolf.
- rebu*—Changpa term for tent.
- rish*—(D) beard.
- rishi*—(H) saint.
- rogan josh*—(K) dish of mutton curry thick with ghee.
- rudrakshi*—(H) rosary-like beads worn by devotees of Shiva.
- sabzi*—(H/U) vegetable.
- sadhu*—(H) ascetic, mendicant holy man.
- sadja*—(A) token of submission at the end of Muslim prayer by touching forehead to floor.
- safed*—(H/U) for white.
- Sahib*—(H/U) honorific meaning Mr., Sir.
- sahru*—(L) monk's conical hat.
- Salaam alekwm*—(A) greeting: "peace be with you."
- Samadhi*—(H) awakening in cosmic order and super conscious state.
- saman*—(H/U) baggage.
- samosa*—(H/U) deep-fried, dumpling-like, pastry filled with curried vegetables or meat.
- Samsara*—(H) cycle of reincarnation.
- sangam*—(H) confluence of rivers considered sacred by Hindus.
- sannyasi*—(H) religious term referring to one who renounces the material world, sacrifice and work, and strives for austerity.
- sarariiman*—(J) salary man.
- sastaa*—(H/U) cheap.
- sat*—(H) unity of all, ultimate reality.
- Satcitananda*—(H) being, truth, freedom, the essence of all life.
- serac*—ice towers found in an icefall.
- serto*—(T) spire-like decoration on roof of gomba.
- sha*—(L) meat.
- shabash*—(H/U) outstanding, well done.
- shahtoosh*—(K) "king's wool," the finest quality of Kashmiri shawl made from ibex wool.
- shalwar*—(H/U) Punjabi-style pants.
- Shambhala*—(T) mythic valley in Tibetan Buddhist lore where truth prevails.
- shanai*—(H/U) flute-like instrument.
- shari'a*—(A) Islamic law.

The Call of Shambhala

- sheiks*—(Kw) Kalash who convert to Islam.
- sheytan*—(A) Devil.
- shikara*—(K) gondola, or water taxi.
- shokria*—(H/U) thank you.
- Shushok*—(L) title for high lama of many reincarnations.
- sidi*—(H) spiritual energy of body and or mind.
- sigaret*—(H/U) cigarette.
- sirdar*—(H/U) guide.
- sitar*—(H/U) stringed instrument.
- skya*—(L) ibex.
- sman*—(L) medicine.
- solja*—(L) salt-butter tea.
- Sonam*—(H) karma accumulated over a series of lifetimes.
- sorkh*—(D) red.
- sta*—(L) pony.
- sthavara*—(H) word meaning a thing that is immovable.
- sumimasen*—(J) please excuse me.
- swndar*—(H/U) beautiful.
- tabla*—(H/U) small Indian drum.
- tambuu*—(H/U) tent.
- tandoori*—(H/U) a clay oven or to be cooked in a clay oven.
- tangkha*—(T) scroll painting.
- taqdir*—(A) destiny, fate.
- tarboorwali*—(P) term for enmity between families or clans.
- ta-wa*—(T) Buddhist term for mystical insight.
- tehsil*—(H/U) administrative district.
- thana*—(H/U) police station.
- thugee*—(H/U) bandit.
- thuk'pa*—(L) soup.
- thik*—(H/U) okay.
- tirth*—(H) place of pilgrimage.
- tirthayatra*—(H) pilgrimage.
- tola*—(H/U) 11.664 grams or .4 oz.
- tsampa*—(T) roasted barley flour.

KALAGIYA

Tulku—(T) title for reincarnate lamas.

Utah—(Kl) priest or shaman.

vaid—(H) the traditional healer or shaman.

vibhuti—(H) white ash markings made on foreheads of devotees of Shiva.

vihara—(H/U) Buddhist teaching monastery

wala—(H/U) expert at something, e.g., pony-*wala*, taxi-*wala*.

wang—(T) Tantric empowerment.

wangkur—(T) ritual granting *wang*, empowerment.

warzwan—(K) f east of traditional foods for important occasions such as weddings or to indulge wealthy tourists.

wog—British slang pejorative: "Westernized Oriental Gentleman."

wuzu—(D) Muslim ritual of absolution before prayer.

Yakusa—(J) organized crime mobs.

yatra—(H) religious pilgrimage.

yatri—(H) religious pilgrim.

yang—(L) prayer ritual.

yogini—(H) yoga practitioner.

zamin—(P) land.

zan—(P) woman.

zar—(P) gold.

zelzeleh—(D/U) earthquake.

zho—(L) yogurt.

Zhumlam—(L) middle way, middle path.