Key to 1000 Doors

a novel by Teri Ekland

Part I: Rickshaw Incident in Kathmandu

Chapter 1: The Incident

December 7, 1986. Gopan Subba

Morning light stirs me from sleep in the cab of my bicycle rickshaw. I smell frying onions from a nearby cart and see winter clouds enshrouding our mountain gods. Thousands of pigeons already scavenge for food in Durbar Square among the kneeling cows chewing their cud, unconcerned about the past or future. Why should they care about anything? No one in Nepal kills a cow. They are sacred animals. The bull Nandi pulls Lord Shiva's wagon. His vahana. This is why I call my rickshaw Nandiji. He's my Earthly vahana, my livelihood, the sustainer of me and my family.

When tourists ask my name, I say, "My father named me Shiva Meelan Harijan but Aama calls me Gopan. Maybe she hopes I'll dance through life like Gopan Krishna and amuse tourists with my magic flute." I try to make the tourist laugh so they'll ride on Nandiji and maybe give me a bonus. Alas, I'm not Gopan Krishna with a magic flute. I'm nothing but the son of a lowly mortuary sweeper. Of course, this isn't something I tell the tourists.

Since early boyhood, I've struggled to end the curse of my birthright, of being born again and again and again as a Harijan, a Dalit, a nobody. Hindus of higher status, the Brahmins in particular, think I'm unworthy of entering our temples. I can't even pray to Mother Kali or Lord Shiva inside the Dakshinkali and Pashupatinath temples on the eastern outskirts of our city. And if I brush against a higher-class man or he accidently touches me, he believes I've defiled him. This is the curse of my heritage. Of my life. I love Mother Kali, Lords Shiva and Krishna and other mountain gods that guide my days, but with all my heart, mind, and atman, I reject this unjust fate of living at the bottom of the social ladder.

Shortly before my birth, King Mahendra Shah banned the caste system in Nepal but people still follow their traditions. I'm a resourceful man, however, always looking for ways to improve my situation and that of my family. This is why I'm no longer a mortuary sweeper like Ba and his Ba before him.

Last night I parked Nandiji near Kala Bhairava's shrine in Durbar Square. Nepalis are now placing red hibiscus flowers at the shrine's feet. Tourists mistake Kala Bhairava for Mother Kali because he wears a garland of skulls and his face is fierce and menacing. I explain to them that Bhairava is Shiva's fierce sadhu avatar. "He destroys our bad thoughts and guards the key to Shiva's temples," I tell my tourist friends. What I don't say is that one day I'll take this key, unlock the temple forbidden to me, and ask Lord Shiva to bring me and my family a boon.

Twice a week I return to my one-room house beside the Bagmati River in the Bhimsengola slums. I built this little hovel from bamboo, mud and corrugated sheets of metal from Suraj Junkyard and Dump. My wife Geeta is also a child of the Bhimsengola slums. She comes from generations of people who rummage through the dump for things to use and sell. Her birthright is beneath even that of my own. This is unfathomable to me.

I'm two years older than Geeta; our sons Aftab and Hari are thirteen and ten and my widowed Aama is now forty-eight. My grandparents named Aama Lakshmi after the goddess of prosperity. They wanted her to have a good life despite her lowly heritage. During morning and evening puja, I ask Lord Shiva and Mother Kali to keep the Bagmati from rising in anger and destroying my little house and washing away my mother, wife, and sons. Sometimes worry consumes me despite my good karma and hopeful nature.

For extra rice, dhal, spices, and clothes, Geeta and Aama sell tea in the shantytown but Nandiji allows me to pay the slumlords for our little piece of real-estate and the moneylenders for the loans against our house. Any extra money I earn from a good fare or any baksheesh, I store in a khutruke ceramic jar kept in a hole under my altar in the corner of our house. This money is for my sons' education. Aftab and Hari are bright, obedient boys but sometimes they must stay home from school to help their aama and hajur aama repair our house. I want them to attend college and escape from this lowly station in life. When my sons are well educated, they will lift us all from poverty and take care of me and Geeta in our old-age.

In truth, Nandiji is probably as far as I'll ever go in this life. Except. Sometimes I dream I'm Brahma thinking about my creation that has no beginning nor end. When I sleep near Shiva's temple or Kala Bhairava's shrine, I dream of being a sadhu sitting cross-legged on a tiger pelt high in the mountain mist. From the knot in my hair the Bagmati flows to Earth and my wisdom spreads throughout this world. In my dreams about Vishnu, I'm flying across the sky on my eagle Garuda while beautiful Sarasvati strums her lovely veena. Dakshin Kali usually interrupts my sweetest dreams, swishes her bloody sickle, and laughs at me like the roar of a Bengal tiger. Then I wake up and remember who I am and where I've parked Nandiji for the night.

During my early boyhood I lived in my parents' house in the slums near the Bagmati. I helped Ba sweep the crematoriums at Pashupatinath, the temple to Shiva's other avatar Pashupati, Lord of Animals and father god of Nepal. Pashupati dedicates the ghats at his enormous temple to each Hindu caste. Because of our lowly status, Brahmin priests forbade Ba and me from sweeping the Brahmin crematoriums. This never concerned me because I didn't like helping Ba at the ghats. For all our hard work, the mourners gave us very little baksheesh. And the stench of burning bodies penetrated my skin. Ba claimed that those who die at Pashupatinath are reborn into wealth regardless of any bad karma in this life or in a past life.

I often sat on the ghats and gazed at the huge statue of Nandi and watched the monkeys grab cameras from tourists. The ragged and rumpled sadhus who sit on the ghats have always fascinated me. Ba said these followers of Lord Shiva live in the forest with the deer and monkeys and follow their own path to liberation. I told Ba I wanted to be a sadhu so I could escape from my unjust birthright. Ba slapped me and said *We are born into this life because of our past karma. To break from our destiny is to sever the threads of Indra's Net which holds the universe together.*

No matter how hard I tried, I had trouble believing what Ba told me. His opinions didn't make me feel good about my life. I don't want to die before I improve my circumstances because I've always wanted respect and bounty in the life I presently live.

By the time I was ten I refused to help Ba sweep the ghats. He beat me within an inch of my life then threw me to the streets. I begged for food in Durbar Square and sold hashish to hippie travelers on Freak Street. This is how I learned English and many other tourist languages. Along the canals I slept under bramble brush. To keep warm during winter, and for protection against night robbers and murderers, I slept with street dogs that were loyal to me because I gave

them scraps of food. Dogs are the vahana of Kala Bhairava and Mother Kali. By being kind to them, Shiva looks favorably on me. He detests anyone who doesn't feed a hungry dog or who kicks one aside. Such people accumulate the worst kind of karma, as bad as consuming or killing one of Shiva's sacred cows. Other street boys sniffed bags of glue but I kept to myself and struggled to survive. Lord Shiva teaches this virtue even to lowly people like me.

At fifteen, I changed my family name from Harijan to Subba. I wanted a more dignified name after Geeta told me we were having a baby. For several months, I had been sleeping with her in my secluded havens along the canals.

Shortly before Aftab was born, Ba died and Aama summoned me home to take care of her and perform the cremation. I worried Ba would reincarnate at the birth of my child and I didn't respect my father because of his heritage and cruelty toward me. But I've always loved dear Aama and moved myself and Geeta into my father's house in the Bhimsengola slums.

At the crematorium designated for Dalits, I tossed marigolds on my father's burning corpse. To release his atman, I crack his skull with a pole and repeated after the Brahmin priest *Agni, ancient god of fire, release the spirit of Meelan Harijan from the realm of the living into a better life.*

I doubted the words I spoke. Ba was destined to return to poverty but I swore to Lord Shiva and to Ba's departing atman in the hazy smoke that I'd break from the bondage of my birthright. I sensed my words angered Ba on his way to a new life.

Ba's house became mine to keep, sell, or mortgage. Without discussing the matter with Aama or Geeta, I took out a mortgage and bought my bicycle rickshaw Nandiji. It's a good investment because tourists flock to Kathmandu and love taking pictures of themselves riding on

a bicycle rickshaw especially one with colorful pictures of Hindu gods like I have painted on my cab.

At first, Geeta and Aama were happy about the new rickshaw and all the prospects it could bring us. I never told them about the mortgage. Instead, I claimed that a rich and compassionate Brahmin at the crematorium gave it to me as a gift from Pashupati. My family was satisfied with this explanation until I missed a few mortgage payments and new tenants moved in and kicked us to the streets. Aama, in her white sari of widowhood, was forced to beg for food and sleep with me, Geeta, baby Aftab, and the dogs. It was a terrible time and Aama was furious but I promised to provide her with a new home one day. I explained the necessity to invest in a better livelihood. Aama argued that I must follow the ways of my gods, my ancestors, and my beloved Baba. I told her *I'm now in charge of your welfare. And I'm not going to be a mortuary sweeper. Until I can repay the mortgage you must sleep among the poor. This situation is only temporary.*

That was thirteen years ago and since then I've modestly prospered and improved our lives. My sons are in school; my wife and Aama are in the house I built beside the Bagmati, and it's the dry winter season so the river is unlikely to flood.

The morning quickly passes. I transport a few locals and return to Durbar Square. Over a bowl of dal bhat, I survey the plaza and spot a tourist couple at the redbrick Jagannath Temple. From their clothes and by their stride, I believe they're American. The man carries a heavy backpack and has a yellow trimmed beard and long hair tied at the back of his neck. He's tall, thin, and pasty white. Most likely he's carrying all their souvenirs. His woman wears a long flowing skirt and her flaming red hair hangs to her waist like Geeta's does. She carries a large

cloth bag and a camera case with a tripod attached to the bottom. As they near me, I hear the woman complain about her heavy bags which are practically touching the ground.

I approach them. **"**Rickshaw, Madam? Nandiji will transport you anywhere in the city. You take nice photos. My rickshaw has pictures of Shiva, Kali, Lakshmi, Sarasvati, Ganesh, and Nandi, Shiva's vahana."

While I'm telling the tourists about my Hindu gods, a dozen rickshaw drivers appear from nowhere and wrestle for the patronage of the American couple.

"This is my fare! I saw them first!" I yell in my native tongue. Fist fights erupt all around me and I usher the American couple away from the mob to my rickshaw. They toss their bags and backpack onto the floor of my cab and sit back on the cushioned seat under the shade of a fringed canopy.

"Where would you like to go?" I ask as I peddle away from Durbar Square toward New Road.

"Take us around the city," the man suggests. "We want to relax and view the sites."

"No! I want to see the Monkey Temple," the woman demands.

"Yes, Madam." I peddle toward the river. "I can take you there. You can see many Hanumans at Swayambhu. And I'll watch your bags when you climb to the stupa for pictures. Be careful of the monkeys. They're tricky little fellows like young Gopan Krishna and will grab your camera." The man seems satisfied and falls into conversation with his woman.

While crossing Dallu Bridge on the way to Swayambhu Road, I wonder if I correctly heard the man say *Get us out of here and I'll give you fifty dollars*. Of course, he said this, I tell myself and huff along. I clearly remember responding *Yes Mister, come on. Let's go.* I think about what I'll do with such a large fare. I'll save a good portion for my sons' education and buy

Geeta and Aama pashmina shawls. With whatever remains, I'll make payments to the slumlords and moneylenders.

I avoid the main roads with heavy traffic and peddle along narrow lanes with many open front shops displaying saris and kurta surwals in turquoise, pink, and forest green. Some shops have white faceless mannequins that look like tourists to me. Between the buildings hang Tibetan prayer flags printed with mantras. The breeze recites these prayers when the flags flutter as we pass by.

I narrowly miss food stalls and stray dogs sleeping at the curbside then I overhear the man talking to his woman. "While you were enjoying the highlife in Hong Kong, I retrieved the relic in Tibet and escaped to Nepal. Unfortunately, the Chinese will never allow me back but I did something bigger than my academic dreams. I performed a service in the name of the Buddha and Lâm Văn Túc, the monk who set himself on fire in Saigon. I have to leave tonight and give the relic a living Buddha."

Although I can't understand everything, I assume he's just returned from Tibet. The Chinese recently opened the doors to this great mountain country north of my kingdom and I've transported many tourists either going there or just returning.

"This rickshaw ride will take us forever," the woman says, interrupting my thoughts and the tranquility of the moment.

The man says nothing and I continue peddling up a narrow cobblestone lane, passing small stupas and parked cars. At the top of the hill is a plaza around a large jacaranda tree with a Ganesh shrine at its base. Marigolds and red and yellow kumkuma powders adorn the shrine. As I near it, I pray to Ganesh for the fifty-dollar boon from my passengers. To help ensure this, and to be friendly, I turn to my passengers and ask where they're staying.

“We met up this morning at the Shringar Hotel,” the man politely tells me.

Then the woman suggests they catch a taxi the rest of the way to Swayambhu. “This rickshaw is cramping my legs.”

“You can pull over now,” the man says to me.

I stop on the plaza near Ganesh and dismount my bicycle to receive my fare. I’m disappointed the woman doesn’t like Nandiji and all my colorful pictures, but I’m more relieved to be done with her irritating voice.

While the couple remain in the cab, the woman digs in her camera case and hands me a five rupee note. “Here you go, little man,” she says with a deceptive smile.

I peer at the torn and filthy note in my hand then look at the woman with flaming red hair. “No Madam. Twenty-five dollars from each of you. Woman, man, and bags. No five dollars. No five rupees. Fifty dollars, your man told me this.”

The woman grows hysterical. I believe she’s menstruating. This is why Geeta hides herself during these days. The tall man suggests they pay me what I want but the woman insists they don’t give me anything more. “You can’t let these people badger tourists. They need to learn.”

“No, Madam,” I insist. “I agree to fifty US dollars. I struggle taking you up this hill.”

“You said no such thing. You said five rupees and you’re not even taking us all the way to the Monkey Temple!”

The man digs in his money pouch at his waist and is ready to hand me a wad of bills when the woman stops him with her long neatly polished fingers. “Don’t give it to him!” she screeches like someone has yanked a donkey’s tail. The man puts the money back in his pouch. He’s obviously under her hex.

I try to say "fuck you" in English but I'm so upset "*fa ooo*" comes out instead. At the same time, Nandiji begins to wobble backward with the man and woman still in the cab, unable to jump free because their bags are blocking the way.

Before I can react, my livelihood and sustainer of my family accelerates backward down the cobblestone hill. I run after Nandiji but the large wheels of my vahana continue toward the Ishu Canal on the other side of a busy street.

My rickshaw goes faster and faster, knocking into souvenir booths, nearly colliding with mopeds, pedestrians, goats, and dogs, and causing stacks of coconuts to tumble onto the street. From over her bags, the terrified woman stares at me with the fierce and menacing look of Mother Kali.

Great trouble is coming my way, I keep thinking as I chase after Nandiji. *Vendors will demand payment for all this damage. And if these Americans die, King Birendra will order me before a firing squad.*

"Lord Shiva! Dakshin Kali!" I yell in my native tongue. "Stop the wheels from spinning. Preserve Nandiji. Don't let my passengers die."

When Nandiji reaches the bottom of the hill, I helplessly watch it plough through the busy street, barely missing an autorickshaw. It hits the curb, flies over the grassy bank, and plunges into the middle of Ishu Canal.

I dash across the street, avoiding a truck spewing black exhaust and cars blasting their horns at me. I clamber down the bank and jump into the cold water that smells like an animal corpse. I wade to my rickshaw halfway submerged in the muddy canal as the American couple are freeing themselves from the cab. They stand in the mud, dripping wet, and look like thawing Yetis from the mountains. They're upset but unharmed.

"My pictures! My cameras! Everything is destroyed!" the woman shrieks. "You've ruined my livelihood, little man!"

"Madam. You've ruined mine and must pay for my rickshaw!" I can think of nothing else to say, I'm so upset.

A crowd of Nepalis and tourists at the edge of the berm are peering down at us. I don't care. I have no money to repair my rickshaw. What money I've stowed in my khutruke jar is strictly for my sons' education.

The tall man digs out a wad of bills from the beige pouch at his waist. *Ganesh looks out for me after all,* I think to myself. Perhaps this man realizes his woman's bad manners have caused this terrible mishap.

"Don't give him anything," the woman screams and dashes all of my hopes. She brushes back clumps of her hair and adds with frightful hysteria, "I've got a big gash in my leg. I'll get flukes. Giardia. Gangrene. Who knows what microbes live in this filth?"

As a police siren draw near, the man says, "Let's get out of here, Sweetie." He hands me the wad of money, grabs the woman's bags and his backpack, and leads her from the canal, up the slippery bank, and off through the parting crowd.

The siren intensifies as I look at the money in my hand and count only fifty dollars and a few rupees. Not even one hundred dollars US. I yell at the departing couple, "I want five hundred dollars for my rickshaw." But they're already gone.

I stand in the muddy waters feeling Shiva's sweat on my neck. The crowd on the berm is laughing at me. *My gods are laughing at me* I think and wade deeper into Ishu Canal to inspect my only means of sustaining my family. Now I'll have to beg on the streets and so will Geeta, my widowed aama, and my boys.

On top of Nandiji's fringed canopy, the midday sun strikes an object that catches my eye. I squint. The gleam comes from the zipper of the tall man's beige money pouch. I pick it up and leave Nandiji crumpled in the quagmire. The police will soon arrive and I can't afford to lose my rickshaw license.

I climb up the bank and hurry ten blocks away to the moneylenders, hoping for a loan to buy a new rickshaw this very day. But every moneylender turns me down—I'm already indebted to them all—and I return to my house beside the Bagmati, a broken man.

My wife and aama aren't expecting me especially without Nandiji and they ask endless questions before I even catch my breath. I usher them aside and sit at my corner altar. I light sandalwood incense to Lord Shiva, Dakshin Kali, and Ganesh, ring the puja bell, chew bitter neem leaves, and open the soiled beige money pouch for the first time. Inside are a few hundred US dollar bills that I add to my sons' education fund in the khutruke jar under the altar. It's not enough to buy a new rickshaw and my sons' education is always foremost on my mind.

Deeper inside the pouch is a small purse made of red silk with yellow dragons. After struggling with the zipper, I remove a business card that must belong to the tourist man. I can only minimally read my own language and the few English words my sons have taught me. When they return home, I'll ask them what the card says. For now, I place it on the altar next to Ganesh hoping it'll somehow bring me a boon.

The pouch also contains an object in a white silk cloth. I unwrap it and discover a bronze relic the size of my palm. It's a Prajna Khadga, the wisdom sword of the bodhisattva Manjushri. Although I'm born a Hindu and worship Hindu gods, both Hindu and Buddhist Nepalis worship Manjushri just as we both worship Bhairava, Pashupati, Sarasvati and many other gods. Nepalis believe Manjushri sliced the Himalayas with his sword to let the Bagmati flow through

Kathmandu Valley. Everywhere in my city are statues of him sitting on a lotus throne with his right hand upholding his Prajna Khadga and his left hand holding the Book of Divine Wisdom.

I place the relic sword between Lord Shiva and Mother Kali and pray that it will somehow improve the circumstances of my life.

Later that night, after my family is sound asleep on their floor mats, I lie next to the altar to sleep. I dream a moneylender hands me a satchel of cash for the Prajna Khadga. But before I take hold of the satchel, the man snatches it from me and roars with laughter.

I jolt awake with a sweaty brow and grasp the relic sword on my altar. I hold it to my chest and pray *Lord Shiva. Don't take from me all that I have in this miserable world. Don't let the Baghmati rise and destroy the home I've provided Geeta, Aama, Aftab, and Hari. Don't let the slumlords and moneylenders force me and my family to beg on the streets and sleep under bramble brush with the stray dogs. Kala Bhairava. Wandering Sadhu. Give me the key to Shiva's temple. Give me the key to 1000 doors.*

Chapter 2: Two Years before the Rickshaw Incident

Professor Sid Lees

"Do you have any antihistamines for this allergy?" I ask Maureen. She sits across from me at the Ethan Allen table. Six Stanford colleagues including me and my wife Mary are playing Truth or Dare Scruples, a game Jim concocted for our get-together parties. Tonight, Maureen and

Jim are hosting an election night party in their Victorian duplex. Reagan is crushing Mondale by a landslide and we're all pretty much ignoring the TV.

Maureen teaches photography at Stanford and Jim is a full professor in my department. At nearly sixty, Jim is twenty years older than Maureen. He's been my best friend since I took his Intro to Buddhism course nearly twenty years ago when I was a freshman at Stanford. We hit it off. I became his teaching assistant and from there we collaborated on projects relating to Asian religions and philosophies. Jim sponsored my position as Assistant Professor of Asian Studies based on my expertise in Tibetan relics from the ninth century to the present day.

"I think we have some antihistamines in the guest bathroom. I'll go fetch one." Maureen raises her voice above the laughter. Jim has just asked Susan if she'd confess adulterous thoughts to David. Her reply, *like Jimmy Carter?* launched everyone's laughter spurred on by Maureen's Napa Valley wine. Susan and David are professors in the Department of Economics. Reagan's "trickle-down" theory is a big topic with them and I doubt they even think beyond academics and politics. They don't seem the type to fool around.

I smile at Maureen and wonder why I'm so wrapped up in her every word and gesture. Or is it rapt up? Yes, I'm rapt with her slender waist, long legs, and flowing red hair. I can't help but watch her full lips as she jovially speaks. Maureen loves being with people and makes me feel like nothing matters but me. I've felt this way about her since I was Jim's best man at their wedding five years ago.

"That's okay," I say to Maureen. "I'll help myself." I stand from the table and look at my wife of sixteen years. Maureen's Napa Valley wine has sent Mary into hysterics over Susan's Jimmy Carter remark. I'm glad she isn't focused on me. But then, she seldom is. We aren't the center of each other's world although there was a time I felt passionate about my wife—when we

were classmates at Stanford and newlyweds in 1968. Over the years, we've grown to live mostly separate lives except for parties with friends or events at the university hospital where Mary works.

Maureen is heading to the guest bathroom down the hallway. I hasten to catch her before losing my nerve. Nobody at the table seems aware that I'm following her. It appears normal, casual. Something good friends hardly notice. Everyone trusts one another at this small, intimate, get-together of university professors.

My heart pounds as I walk down the hall reviewing, once again, the script I've rehearsed for days, perhaps for five years. I pass wall portraits of the McCreedy wedding. No children are present except for nieces and nephews. I doubt they'll ever have kids.

I love my wife I start thinking as I near the bathroom at the end of the hall. Mary's a good companion! But she never comes close to the exuberance of Maureen. Why do I want to betray her? Perhaps it's a man's instinctive attraction to an appealing woman. It's a simple enough explanation, at least for the moment. Besides, I can't suppress my desire for Maureen any longer. I want to hold her so tightly her spirit flies into mine. She is Tara of the Pure Land bewitching me with tantric magic.

The bathroom door is open. Maureen is searching through drawers, unaware of my presence. My actions are risky, I know. I'm gambling on losing my best friend, my wife, and the woman who drives me crazy. If she rejects me, I'll be devastated. But I've reached a point in life where I'd rather die than not take this chance to feel the farthest reaches of my being. I will take all or end up with nothing. I'm ready for this.

"Maureen." I quietly close the bathroom door behind me.

“Oh? Sid! You startled me.” She looks up from the drawer into the rectangular antique mirror before us. Behind her reflection is a lanky man with blue eyes taunting her eyes of emerald green.

Maureen continues searching through the drawer as if I’m not even present. “I can’t seem to find any antihistamines. I was sure a guest left some behind.”

“Never mind.” I grasp her upper arms and delight in the fragrance of apricot shampoo. She doesn’t pull away. She knows what’s happening. Perhaps she wants me, too. And has, for all these years.

“Can I call you tomorrow?” I whisper in her ear. By now she must realize this isn’t a playful tease. Many times, I’ve caught her staring at me or touching me in a special way while discussing politics, my travels in Asia, or her travels with Jim as his photographer. Maureen must have feelings for me beyond mere friendship. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have the nerve to do what I’m presently doing. Besides, Jim is leaving in the morning for a week-long trip to Dartmouth College in New Hampshire. Everyone at the table mentioned what a pity Maureen can’t join him because of her classes.

Maureen doesn’t push me away. Her stare transfixes me and I start wondering if I’ve trapped myself in a lie. Am I displaying my own vulnerability? Or is it vanity? What am I doing? Is it too late? I can wink and pretend this is a joke. But no. Deep down I know I’ve already crossed the line.

The laughter of my colleagues returns. They had disappeared for a moment, including my wife. “What time can I call you?” I’m frantic to end this situation, one way or the other. I’m hoping it’s the way I long for.

Maureen pulls from me and opens the door to leave. But she turns and gives me one of her luscious smiles. “Sure, Sid. Call me at noon, if you like.”

After she’s gone, I stare at myself in the mirror. *Not a bad looking man* I think and rub my beard. Maureen’s scent still lingers. I close my eyes and imagine what tomorrow will bring. I really don’t want to hurt my best friend and certainly not Maureen. *What about Mary?* I ask myself and restrain my physical feelings. If this is going to work, I must keep control of myself and the situation.

In the mirror, my wife’s face suddenly appears behind me with a look of utter dismay. Her image quickly fades and I whisper *Mary, I don’t believe humans are meant to be monogamous creatures.* I lean over the sink, wash my face in cold water, and nonchalantly return to the Ethan Allen table.

The next morning, I sit in my Stanford office unable to concentrate on anything but my encounter with Maureen the night before. I’m worried she was toying with me when we were finishing the game with Reagan the sure incumbent. Maureen had acted like nothing out of the ordinary was happening between us. *She didn’t even glance my way. Am I just a Mondale loser? Have I convinced myself she wants me when she really doesn’t?*

Finally, at 12:30, I pick up the phone. My heart races as I dial her number and try not to think about Jim. I call him at this number all the time. But now I’m calling Maureen.

“Hello,” she answers. My stomach churns. Why didn’t I eat something? Because I couldn’t. How silly. “Who’s there?”

“Hi. How are you?”

“Oh? Hi, Sid. Well, I haven’t changed much since last night? How about you?” Her playful voice sings like Carly Simon.

“Did Jim leave for the airport?” What an obvious question! She must think I’m ridiculous!

“He left at seven. Hey, I just put on a fresh pot of coffee. Do you like cucumber sandwiches?” Maureen is making this situation as comfortable as possible. It’s a woman’s nurturing quality and she doesn’t even have children.

“Sounds good. I need to run a few errands anyway. I’ll see you in about fifteen minutes.” I hang up, dazed with a resurgence of courage and hope. *I’ll manage all right and she’ll be everything I’ve ever imagined.* I lean back on my chair and look around at my collection of Buddha statues. Many come from occupied Tibet but I found them in places other than Tibet such as Nepal and Thailand. Since I started my career in academia, my goal has been for the Chinese to grant me access into Tibet to study the remaining relics that the Red Guards haven’t destroyed. The world is very political and my academic dreams have had to wait for many years. I had a glimmer of hope when Reagan visited President Li Xiannian earlier this year. But the two leaders deadlocked on the issue of Taiwan and relations between China and the US remain chilled.

I gaze at my statues of buddhas and bodhisattvas. Generally, these relics tell me to always be calm and mindful. But now only one thought fills my head *Who will make the first move*? I’m certain I will. Although, maybe Maureen will find great pleasure in surprising me!

Ten minutes later, I’m standing at the left front door of the old Victorian. I hear Maureen yell from inside. “Come in Mr. Lees.”

Before entering the McCreedy unit I take a last look around the hillside neighborhood of century-old houses converted into condos. I worry that Mary, Jim, or someone else might be spying on me. But then, there's nothing abnormal about this visit. I'm simply dropping by to pick up the office planner I strategically left behind last night. Of course, Jim's wife would ask me to stay for lunch. We are, after all, colleagues and such very good friends.

I open the door and the aroma of fresh coffee eases my tension. "Sid, your planner's on the table," Maureen calls from the kitchen. "Grab it now so you won't forget it when you leave."

Always so organized I think and toss the planner in the briefcase I brought along to make my visit appear official.

In the large, remodeled kitchen, beside the JennAir island, I greet Maureen as she removes two coffee mugs from the cupboard. "Have a seat." She indicates a stool at the kitchen bar.

Maureen places before me a plate of little cucumber sandwiches made of wheat bread with the crusts cut off. Her sandwiches are as delicate as her long graceful fingers. When she married Jim, she didn't give up her Protestant heritage and become a Buddhist like her husband but she did adopt a vegetarian diet. Occasionally, Jim and Maureen razz me for not being a vegetarian. I've always enjoyed Maureen teasing me.

All at once, I want to grab her and kiss the nape of her neck where her red hair tumbles down her back. I will, I must, I convince myself, and approach her as she's about to pour two cups of coffee.

She sets the pot back in the coffee maker and turns to me. We stare at each other for a moment. Maureen whispers my name. I draw her near me. Her soft, moist lips caress mine. In her warm embrace, I feel like I'm on a first date in high school, learning the splendor of the

opposite sex. Or maybe it's more like I'm an errant knight fulfilling the vision of who I want to be.

Maureen reaches beneath my shirt and explores the contours of my back. She seems aggressive and skilled. I can't contain how she makes me feel at the core of my being. Here and now, I want her and she wants me.

We find our way to the guestroom's canopied bed, undressing each other along the way, lost in the excitement of a new beginning, a rejuvenation of our lives. A resurrection into ecstasy. Her head finds the pillow; my lips find hers. Now I'm a captain in the brisk sea air with seagulls cawing at the bow of my ship.

"Condoms?" Maureen's sweet voice snaps me from my fantasy.

A few moments later my body meets hers and I think to myself *she is like a fine Napa Valley wine.*

When we lie back on the commodious bed to rest in each other's arms, I can barely breathe from sheer exhaustion. I'm not a very athletic man. I'm a scholar who's never felt so physically spent.

"I'll get some Perrier." Maureen reaches to kiss me, out of respect, it seems.

As I watch her slender, naked body slink away from the bed and leave the finely furnished room, I wonder where we stand with each other now that we've made this giant leap. I rest on the pillow with my hands behind my head and wait for my lover to return. Oddly, we've been intimate but we're now like strangers. I never considered this part of making my fantasy a reality. We've always been so natural around each other but that was when we were two different people. Now we're Sid and Maureen, lovers, adulterers. What are we to each other?

Who have we just become? I want to pass through this stage quickly, almost desperately, and reach a time when we'll know exactly who we are together.

Suddenly, cold water and ice cubes hit my chest and I see Maureen at the bedside laughing. She makes me laugh. I grab her and we wrestle on the bed until I make love once again to the new woman in my life.

Moments later, I sit up to quench my enormous thirst and say, "Let's talk."

"About what?" Maureen snuggles against me. "Do you have to return to work?"

"I have time. Especially to be with you, sweet Maureen."

Her delicate fingers close my lips. "Hush, Sid. Don't call me any such names. We must be careful. We aren't playing Truth or Dare Scruples. This is real life."

"I know. How do you feel?"

"Happy. But let's not talk about how we feel. Not now. Not yet. Do you want your cucumber sandwiches?"

"When will I see you again?" I ignore her question. "Tonight, I hope. I can't get enough of you."

"No, I'm visiting my sister."

"When? I'm anxious to schedule you in my planner before I leave. Under a pseudonym, of course."

Maureen rises from bed and slips into a kimono robe that Jim brought back from Japan. "What about Mary?" she asks. "Don't do anything to make her suspicious. I'm not in this to hurt anyone. Especially her."

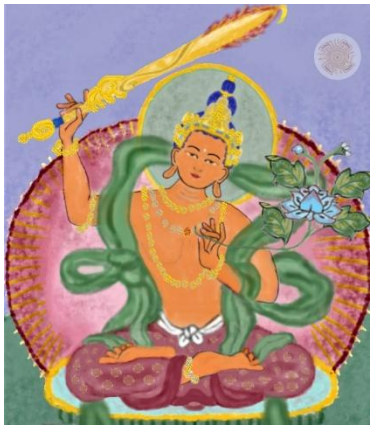
I'm a bit puzzled by her remark. Maureen and my wife aren't exactly best friends and really don't have that much in common, personality wise. They're merely occasional friends, a

bit more than acquaintances because they drink wine together with their husbands who are best friends.

"I know," I say. "I don't want that either. How about I stop by on my way home this afternoon? At least to talk. Mary gets home an hour after me and I can always say I had to work late."

"Sounds like a perfect alibi. Let's talk later." From the bedside, Maureen helps me up. "Come on. You need to get going. I don't feel right with you loitering about the house like this."

I dress while Maureen wraps the cucumber sandwiches in Saran plastic wrap for me to take home. It feels so sensual, as if we're newlyweds. It's a peculiar feeling and one I vaguely recall from my honeymoon with Mary when we spent a week at a resort on Dana Point. Our only common interest perhaps then, and certainly now, is our curiosity about each other's profession. I have my career in academics and Mary has hers in medicine. In fact, sex with Mary, all these years, has been plain and ordinary and very routine rather like a computer punch card. Perhaps this is why I'm so spun out over Maureen's flamboyant personality and flaming red hair. She sets my heart and spirit on fire like the ever-burning sword of Manjushri.



Chapter 3: Day after the Rickshaw Incident

Gopan Subba

A New Road—Where am I now?
I've ventured far.
Yet,
I've been here before.
A deja-vu?
Or is it true –
Have I been here before?

As silence shakes
A trumpet blows,
I know not where I'm bound to go,
But words I hold dear to me,
Travel back eternally.

"What's that, Gopan?" Geeta interrupts my prayers at the corner altar. She knows better, but women are nosey, especially wives.

"It's a gift from an important American," I tell her. I'm feeling both elated and disgusted. Elated about the Manjushri sword and what it might bring. Disgusted because I've lost my livelihood and don't know how I'll support my family.

"What American?" Geeta asks.

"I'll tell my story when I'm ready to tell it." I snap because I don't want to explain the rickshaw incident. Geeta stops chattering so I'll calm down and leave the altar to eat my mother's dal bhat and chapatis by the charcoal brazier at the kitchen end of our little house.

Over the next few days, I stay in bed except when praying at the altar. Geeta and Aama continue to sell tea and rummage for valuables at the dump but this isn't enough to keep us in the house. They feed me and don't ask why the rickshaw isn't by the front door on the narrow dirt alleyway. I don't care. I'm preoccupied with my divine gift and must understand what to do with the Prajna Khadga.

There finally comes a day when Geeta can no longer hold back. “Gopan,” she exclaims after I finish my morning puja. “Whether you want your wife’s opinion or not I’m giving it to you. You must rise to your duties and provide for us. Stop being a lazy donkey and tell me what’s happened!”

I sit on the floor by the brazier to eat Aama’s mint chutney, potatoes, and papads, and tell my family about the unfortunate rickshaw incident. Aftab, Hari, Geeta, and Aama intently listen, despite the outside shouts of arguing men, playing children, and cawing crows at the trash heaps along the river. In detail, I describe how the wheels of Nandiji let loose and rolled down the hill with the two foreign tourists.

All at once, my family erupts with laughter and Geeta says, in exasperation, “Such a funny story, Gopan.”

I don’t find my story amusing. It feels as if they’re laughing at my folly. “I’m glad I entertain you,” I say and my family falls silent. I speak no more about the incident. Neither do they.

The next morning, I sit before my altar, uphold the Prajna Khadga, and ask Shiva and his son Ganesh to grant me a boon. Then I place the relic sword on the altar and head out the door to look for an opportunity to garner some cash.

When I return home that night, Geeta is especially chatty as she greets me at the door, and so are my mother and sons. “Gopan!” Geeta exclaims. “I found an old lockbox at the dump. I brought it home and guess what?”

“What Geeta, what?” I’m rather annoyed because my day didn’t go well. Not a single opportunity came my way.

Geeta takes hold of my hand and practically drags me to the altar as she says, “Somehow, in my heart, Ganesh or maybe Shiva instructed me to touched one end of the Prajna Khadga to the lock. When I did, the box popped open!”

At first, I’m furious that she took the relic without my permission. But after she explains that the relic is some kind of magical key, my anger swiftly vanishes. “Go on wife. Tell me more.”

“Inside the old rusty box are enough rupees to pay the slumlords for our property and save our little shanty, for now.” Geeta pauses a moment to assess my reaction then quickly adds, “If that’s what we must do with the money. Or perhaps it’s enough for a new rickshaw if you’d rather do that instead.”

“No.” I kiss her forehead. “I don’t wish to resume that crusty old job. I’m tired of being pegged to a poor man’s station in life. I’m much smarter than that. Therefore, I’ll use the money to look for other opportunities.”

“What kind of opportunities?” Aama asks. “The kind that puts me and your family back on the streets?”

“What a pitiful time that was,” I say and retreat to my altar, uphold the relic key, and silently make puja. All the while Geeta’s story stirs in my head like a Himalayan snow storm. I can’t concentrate on my prayers. Instead, I’m thinking *I’ll sell this magic key for more money than a bag of gold and gems. All I must do is convince an antiquities dealer that the relic possesses supernatural powers.*

Early the next morning, I stop by antiquities shop off New Road. The jeweler inside is a middle-aged man dressed in traditional Nepali clothes with a gray suit jacket. I ask him the value

of my relic, anticipating he'll offer a great amount of money. "I believe it comes from ancient Tibet," I add, remembering the lanky tourist had just returned from Tibet. "It must be worth a fortune!"

The shopkeeper soberly examines the Prajna Khadga with a magnifying glass. "No sir. It doesn't look like a Tibetan relic. To tell you the truth, I don't know its value." He hesitates a moment and turns the relic around in the sunlight streaming into his stuffy shop. "No sir. I doubt you can sell this relic for very much."

"But it's some kind of a key with magical powers." I tell him the story Geeta related to me.

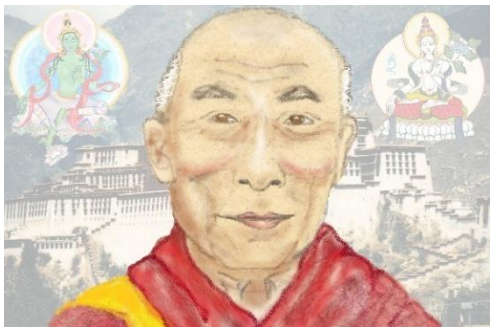
"Here, here, let me try it then." The jeweler touches the Prajna Khadga to one of his locked glass cabinets. Nothing happens. He tries another, and another, but nothing happens. The cabinets remain locked.

I urge him to try again. "Maybe it's too early in the morning and the key's powers take time."

The jeweler glares at me and wrinkles his brow. "Scram!" he says. "With your illustrious key! You ragamuffin charlatan."

I grab my key, call the jeweler a "monkey's scrotum," and leave his shop. But I'm still hopeful as I walk down the street toward Durbar Square. Suddenly, I remember overhearing the American man saying to his woman "the relic key can only be given and received." *Surely, the American couple felt obligated to pay me for my rickshaw* I conclude. *They gave me the Prajna Khadga and what's mine belongs to my family. This is why it worked for Geeta and not for the miserly shopkeeper.*

Before I test its powers again, I hurry home, sit before my altar with the key in my hand, and pray to Shiva. *I've never stolen anything in my life. I believe You placed this key in the cab of Nandiji as a reward for my hard labor and struggle in life. Surely, its magic must work for me.*



Chapter 4: One Year before the Rickshaw Incident

Professor Sid Lees

Even after a year of sleeping together, Maureen and I have never talk about sharing a future. We're momentary lovers, living in the present without any plans. This arrangement seemed all right and very Buddhist. Until today. I've decided to entice Maureen to leave her husband and travel with me in Asia for six months. I'm going on a sabbatical to research my book about Buddhist relics and sutras that ancient monks brought into China and Tibet. My own divorce is nearly final. It was a relatively simple matter because Mary and I don't have kids and we've always kept our assets separate.

I now live in a duplex in Palo Alto, a short walk from the university. It's where Maureen and I usually meet. Jim's never caught-on that something's happening between his wife and best friend and neither has Mary, as far as I know. This fact has never made me feel good about myself which is why I want to change the circumstances.

"It'll be our one-year anniversary celebration," I tell Maureen as we relax on my queen futon after an hour of passion. She's as stunning now as the day I was best man at her wedding and the day we first made love. Her long flaming hair falls across my shoulder. Her

lavender perfume infiltrates the air I breathe. Her very essence propels me to urge she leave Jim and marry me. I don't want to be away from her and am afraid if I leave her for six months and head to Asia alone, our secret, forbidden love will somehow come to an end. She'll move on or cement her marriage to Jim.

"I'll take you to Singapore, Borobudur, Bali, Vietnam, Bangkok, Hongkong." I blow kisses in her ear. "You name it, my sweet darling Maureen. In Asia, we'll freely be a couple in love instead of paramours sneaking around."

"How am I going to get six-months off from my job?" Maureen shreds my fantasy with the most obvious question; one I've already worked out in my mind.

"Maureen, since your classes ended last semester, you've been freelancing and Stanford hasn't renewed your contract."

"Yes, Sid. I know. Are you rubbing this in my face?"

"Oh no, darling. Of course not. But now is a perfect time for you to break from the fray and join me on this trip to Asia."

"And just what will we tell my husband? Darling Sid."

"That I want to hire you as my photographer to take pictures of the Buddhist sites we visit. That you'll help me document the relics in the different museums throughout Asia. You're an excellent photographer. This will make perfect sense to Jim. I believe this."

"What?" Maureen acts surprised but I suspect she's been contemplating this notion since I first mentioned my trip. She probably hasn't suggested she join me because of her marriage. I rarely ask her about Jim because if I do, I'm plagued with guilt about betraying my best friend with his wife. But I can't help having these feelings for Maureen. She draws out my most pleasurable parts and takes me to esoteric places that I've only read about.

Every evening before I fall asleep and every morning after I wake, I say to myself that no matter how wrong our love affair may be, I can't give up this woman. Despite the consequences. *Let be what may be, let happen what will happen. Maureen is my raison d'être.*

After less than a moment's reflection, Maureen leans on her elbow and props her head to look at me. "I accept your job offer, Sid, and agree to go on this trip. But I'm not going to divorce Jim."

I was afraid she'd say this and was hoping for a clean break for the both of us. I'm wondering if I should insist that she divorce Jim. But I don't like pressuring her. Maureen is a strong-willed, determined woman who speaks her mind. This is partly why I'm so utterly enthralled with her. Mary's always been a bit demur, caving into whatever I might suggest or decide. Not Maureen. She's a hard nut to crack once she makes up her mind about something. And I don't like to argue with her. I'm used to being with Mary, a woman who goes along with whatever I say.

"That's just it, Maureen." I decide to confront her. "I'm tired of lying to Jim. Your husband's been my best friend since I was in college. I can't keep this up, our secret affair. I want to make it right. Please, sweet darling. Ask him for a divorce. I know you don't love him anymore. You love me. We're causing too much grief otherwise. Even if he doesn't realize it. One day he will. I know it and hate myself for causing pain and suffering."

"Whose pain and suffering, Sid?"

"My own, for now."

"I don't know, Sid darling. Jim's a good provider. A stable man. I've always liked being his wife."

“I’m stable too.” I prop up my own head and look at Maureen’s beautiful face. “I’ll provide for you as well as Jim does. And give you everything you want or need. Please. Let Jim know you want a divorce. Let him down gently so he can pick up and move on with his life. So, we can, too. As a couple in love. A couple meant to be together.”

“I’ll think about it, my darling.” Maureen begins playing with my stringy hair, massaging my forehead, making me feel tantalized, ready to take her again. “I definitely want to go on your trip around Asia,” she says. “I’d love to take pictures of the Taj Mahal and the Great Wall of China.”

“No, darling. You can’t go to Red China with me,” I tell her emphatically. “I have research in Beijing. But I’m afraid the Chinese won’t grant you permission to travel into China with me. Not on this trip. You’re not yet my wife and we don’t have time to finalize our divorces and marry. The Chinese gave me a selective visa because I’m a Stanford professor and I told them I was going to write good things about the New China.”

Maureen gives me her pouty look enticing me to let her have her way, somehow. But it’s not possible and I can’t tell her why I’m going to China which came about a year before. Abbot Khenpo Trizin of the Shakya Monastery near Shigatse wrote me a long letter because of my article about Buddhist relics. Throughout my career I’ve written five books and over fifty articles about Buddhism and its spread across Asia. My articles are far reaching and I receive letters from around the world from religious leaders, academicians, and practitioners. They ask about Buddhist relics, monuments, and the texts of Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana, the three major traditions of Buddhism. But the Khenpo’s letter was very different.

Because of Communist China's stronghold on Tibet, a tourist secretly gave Khenpo Trizin the periodical containing my article. Another tourist smuggled Khenpo's letter from occupied Tibet and mailed it to me care of Stanford.

Khenpo has invited me to Tibet to retrieve an invaluable relic that monks kept in a library vault at the Magao Grottos near Dunhuang, China. During the Song Dynasty, the monk Fa Wong brought this relic to a convent near Khenpo's monastery. Khenpo provided me with a copy of Fa Wong's record of his journey from Dunhuang to Shigatse and suggested I tell the Chinese that I wish to follow in this monk's footsteps as research for my book.

Please don't reveal the existence of this relic Khenpo emphasized**.** *I'm asking you to take it to the 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso. Tibetans consider His Holiness a living incarnation of Avalokitesvara, the bodhisattva of compassion. When China invaded our nation in 1950, the Dalai Lama escaped to Dharamshala***,** *India where he remains as our spiritual leader. I fear the Chinese will learn about this sacred relic and destroy it. During the Cultural Revolution ten years before, the Red Guards sacked our temples, monasteries, and stupas. They want to destroy our spiritual practices because our way of life contradicts their value of a classless society without religion. They fail to understand that we are a nation devoted to peace and compassion.*

"Will you get to see the Great Wall?" Maureen asks, taking my thoughts from my true reason for traveling to China. I can't even tell her I'm going to Tibet. If I did, she'd insist on joining me and that would waylay my mission.

"Look, Maureen. I'll arrange to drop you off in Hong Kong where you can stay with a friend of mine on the islands. Her name is Agatha Weatherby. She's an old, widowed woman from England. I knew her husband Tony. He was a visiting professor at Stanford, in

Chinese languages. Agatha lives in an idyllic cottage on Landau Island and takes the ferry to the other islands. It'll be a good month-long respite for you while I'm conducting my research in China. We can meet up in Kathmandu. I'll fly there straight from Beijing. In Nepal you can take endless pictures of magnificent temples, stupas, and the Himalayas."

"Okay, okay. It sounds lovely as long as this Agatha isn't a complete drag. I could take pictures of the British colony and read all the novels I've been wanting to read. The classics by Jane Eyre, Jane Austin, Dickens and so on."

"There you go. You have the right idea. And don't forget Kipling, Forester, and *The Jewel in the Crown*." I smother Maureen with tickles and kisses, something she likes me doing.

Chapter 5: Looking for Opportunities

Gopan

Day by day I walk around the streets, alleys, and plazas of Kathmandu, searching for ways to use the Prajna Khadga before the money Geeta found in the lockbox runs out. My wife never asks about my intentions with the key because of my anger toward her for taking it from my altar to use for her own purposes. Most likely, she assumes I keep the relic with me as a lucky ritual object. I carry it in my pocket, wrapped in its white satin cloth. From time to time, I rub it and wonder *How can I be so bold when all my life I've been humbled and underprivileged?*

Undeserving of anything. The fact that the gods gifted me with this key is beyond my comprehension.

One afternoon, while I'm wandering along New Road, I happen upon a store called *Kathmandu Gems and Gold Jewelers*. From the west side of New Road, the sun brilliantly shines through the shop's front window and strikes displays of gold tilharis for rich married women, nose studs, earrings, and sparkling diamonds, emeralds, sapphires, and rubies. This shop is for rich Nepalis. It's in a part of town away from the touts selling trinkets at tourist sites. It presents a perfect opportunity for me to use my key.

Without entering the shop and drawing attention to myself, I casually walk past it while hearing the voices of Nepalis strolling down the street. I feel rather improperly dressed, like the ragamuffin the shopkeeper called me, and decide that when I do make some money, I'll go to the finest shop in the finest hotel and buy myself a Nepali businessman's suit, like King Birendra and Crown Prince Dipendra wear. But for now, I loiter near the shop until seven o'clock when the jeweler closes his doors and rolls down the metal security door.

By the dim light of streetlamps, I approached *Kathmandu Gems and Gold Jewelers* and behave as if the shop belongs to me, despite my shoddy attire. I look around and see no one in sight, then take the key from my pocket, unwrap it, and touch it to the padlock on the metal door. The lock unhinges with a clank. I carefully use the satin cloth to avoid leaving fingerprints and roll up the metal door. When I feel certain no one's watching me, I enter the shop.

All the glass cabinets inside have lights shining on displays of jewelry. I'm dumbfounded, unable to fathom what surrounds me. When I gain my wits, I set about touching the relic key to the cabinet locks.

“Manjushri, Lord Shiva, Mother Kali, Ganesh,” I chant as I open the glass display cases, one by one. A cold, prickly energy consumes me as I grab a few items from each cabinet. I don’t want to make the theft too obvious, at least not when the jeweler first enters his shop in the morning. I’m not sure why I feel this way. Maybe it gives me more time to get away with this caper. For now, I need only enough money to see me and my family through another few months and to buy myself a fine suit of clothes. *Lord Shiva doesn’t condemn me for what I’m doing* I tell myself as I go about my business. *He sees me as a humble, simple man trying to correct the wrongs the world has foisted on him and his family.*

“What a remarkable key,” I say aloud and close the last cabinet with the silk cloth while imagining how I’ll hawk my loot to tourists and moneylenders. Suddenly, a beautiful red beaded and gold tilhari necklace catches my eye and I think how nice this would look on Geeta and how happy she’d be to receive it. She’d feel like a privileged married woman. Then I think of my poor widowed aama who’s never received any kind of gem or jewel in her life.

I grab the tilhari, a silver bangle studded with diamonds and sapphires for dear mother, and two Rolex watches for Aftab and Hari. Then I hasten from the jewelry shop and padlock the metal security door.

No one is around and even if anyone sees me *what kind of thief would lock up the store when he leaves?* I ask myself. And by the time the jeweler realizes he’s been robbed, I’ll be long gone and the police won’t search for a thief in the Bhimsengola slums outside Suraj Junkyard and Dump. Besides, rain is in tonight’s forecast so if I did leave any fingerprints on the padlock or door, Shiva’s sweat will wash them away.

When I return home, I'm quiet, not wanting to disturb Geeta and my mother as they cuddle together and snore. And my boys are lying soundly on their mats. It's a good sign that my family is well. I place my bounty under the altar and the key on top where I keep it when I sleep.

Early the next morning, I'm sitting with my family by the clay brazier, eating a breakfast of potatoes and chapatis that my wife and aama prepared. When I finish my last bite, I reach in my pockets for the gifts. The rest of the loot is hidden under a stone by my altar that covers a secret hole in the dirt floor. It's where I store the money satchel from the American tourist and the khutruke jar for my sons' education money. Today, I plan to visit moneylenders in a shady part of town. I can't take my bounty to legitimate jewelers; not even I'm that brazenly stupid.

I hand the watches to my sons, the bangle to Aama, then I stand and put the tilhari around Geeta's neck as she holds aside her long black hair. "Now we're truly wedded," I say.

Geeta and my mother are overjoyed with their jewelry, something neither has ever possessed. They've never found anything like it at the dump. My sons are equally proud of their watches.

"What's this all about?" Geeta asks.

"These are gifts from Lord Shiva to please my family."

"But how?" Aama asks as she adds a spoonful of mango chutney to my plate. "Did you rob a bank?"

"Don't be silly Aama. These are gifts because of the Prajna Khadga's magic. Geeta can attest to this. I needn't tell you anything more. Be grateful to both Manjushri and Lord Shiva for what I'm now able to provide."

Of course, everyone knows better than to interrogate me and they store their gifts in safe hiding places before they set off for the day—the boys to school, Geeta and my mother to sell their tea. Although they'd like to, they can't wear such jewelry in the shantytown or some cad would rob and possibly kill them.

"One day soon," I say to my family as they're about to step out the door. "You'll freely don these gifts." I then gather my satchel of bounty and leave the house to go about my own business for the day.

Over the following days, I sell everything for a fraction of its value and amass enough rupees to keep me and my family afloat for several months. I'm even able to put part of the money in my stash pot for my sons' education. This convinces me that Kala Bhairava himself has given me the key to Shiva's temple and a promising future.

I never hear any news about a theft at *Kathmandu Gems and Gold Jewelers* but I avoid the area on New Road. With cash in my pockets, along with the key, my first order of business is to buy a suit of clothes at Central Department Store in Khichapokhari. The store clerk fits me with a gray jacket, a red vest, a white tunic shirt, and tight white trousers that are loose at the hips. To finish my new look, I buy a pair of brown loafers and a woolen topi hat. When I gaze in the department store mirror, I assure myself that I'm quite handsome and debonair, like a rich Nepali man. While I'm at it, I buy beautiful saris for my wife and aama, and shirts and slacks for my sons.

Over the next six months, I amass enough cash to pay off the slumlords and enroll my sons at the British School of Kathmandu. While wearing my fine suit of clothes and carrying a leather briefcase, I open a safe deposit box at Everest Bank. When I'm left alone in the vault

room, prepared to open dozens of boxes with my key, I notice a surveillance camera in the corner ceiling peering down at me. As if on reflex, I point the Prajna Khadga toward the camera and immediately the lens flashes bright red then turns black. My magic key has disabled it just as I thought it would. I quickly open as many boxes as I can, take whatever is valuable, close and lock each box, then summon the guard to let me leave. But before I do, it occurs to me to hold the key before him and suggest he forget me and my face. I don't know why I think to say this except my gods are guiding me to do what I must do.

In addition to opening accounts and boxes at Kathmandu Bank, the Himalayan Bank, Nepali Bank, and Central Bank International, I take a taxi to Tribhuvan International Airport to open the storage lockers for cash and other valuables. I never get caught and never hear any reports covering the thefts. I attribute this to my constant invocations to Lord Shiva and Manjushri. I'm certain that all Hindu gods, Buddhas, and the gods of Christians and Muslims alike are blessing me with these gifts because I deserve them. I'm not a lazy laggard. Rather, I'm an enterprising man who's worked hard all his life to break the chains of a demeaning heritage. I'm better than a lowly rickshaw man or a sweeper of the ghats. I've stepped up from my humble beginnings and am using the key to promote my sons so they'll never feel ashamed of me and our forefathers. Surely, this is good karma.

I don't reveal to my family exactly how I acquire my fortunes except to say that the key has afforded me several great business opportunities. In fact, I rarely discuss the key and its magical powers and Geeta doesn't ask about it. She seems happy with her gifts and new clothes and the fact that she and my mother no longer sell tea in the alleyways and can afford to make meat curries, salads, and include yogurt with our meals.

Chapter 6: Five Weeks before the Rickshaw Incident

Professor Sid Lees

After a month of rigorous sightseeing in Singapore, Indonesia, Bali, Thailand, and Vietnam, I leave Maureen with my friend Agatha Weatherby on Lantau, one of Hong Kong's 250 islands. Maureen is exhausted from our travels and talks endlessly about relaxing at Agatha's cottage, going on nature walks, shopping in Hong Kong, reading novels, and taking photos of the islands and the mega-metropolis that shines like a jewel at night.

I'm relieved Maureen hasn't ask more about China because I promised Khenpo Trizin not to reveal my mission to anyone, including the dean at Stanford and my best friend Jim. And certainly, I can't tell the woman I love because I don't trust her gregarious nature. It's been a task to keep her from disclosing our affair because Maureen loves boasting to her many girlfriends from several different groups and organizations. As far as I know, I've kept her under control.

My large daypack is the only luggage I'm bringing on this side trip to China and Tibet. I leave the rest of my luggage with Maureen in Landau and sent home the souvenirs

we accumulated thus far. Maureen will have lots of luggage to take to Kathmandu but she says she'll manage with the help of taxi drivers and bellboys.

During my three-hour China Air flight to Beijing, I'm almost shaking with anticipation for my upcoming side trip. My mission. Not only am I fulfilling a lifelong dream of actually going to Tibet, part of me is overjoyed to have this break from Maureen. Maybe she needs one from me. *This must be a good thing*, I've been telling myself because deep inside I'm conflicted about my relationship. Maureen is everything to me, I love her with mind body and spirit, but maybe I'm experiencing too much of a good thing.

I don't want my confusion over Maureen to hinder what I've come to China to do. Nor do I want to miss her so much that I'll not focus on this trip of a lifetime. To help settle my mind, I pull out my research notes about the Manjushri relic I'm about to retrieve. Now that I'm away from Maureen's prying eyes, I can freely examine the relic's history that Khenpo Trizin sent me.

History of the Manjushri Key

I am Fa Wong, Master Librarian at the Mogao Grottoes and Monastery currently under the rule of Zhenzong, third emperor of the Song Dynasty. I am keeper of the depository cave of records, scriptures, documents, and sacred relics. For thirty years I've lived at these grottos and learned to be of no threat. Is it a sin to take refuge from a brutal world? Do I take advantage of someone else by following the path of past, present, and future Buddhas? I'm 55 and wish to live a long life to spread kindness, mindfulness, rationality, and resourcefulness—the teachings of all Buddhas of all times.

Merchants from the caravan road stop at our grottoes and tell me about their kingdoms. In turn, I tell them about the 1000 Buddhas of this era and show them the frescoes and statues in

the grottoes. I allow traveling monks and scholars to read our books on religion, astronomy, and remedies from the Sui and Tang dynasties. Most scrolls in the library cave date from the Tibetan occupation of Dunhuang, after the reign of Heavenly Empress Wu.

Early each morning, I sit in the caves contemplating the emptiness of all names and forms. Then I practice a qi gong exercise monks developed at the Shaolin Temple. The breathing, tapping my meridian points, and mental concentration help me maintain equilibrium in my old age. I possess only the robes I wear and my alms bowl and monk's bag.

For our morning meals, people from town bring us tea and fermented mare's milk mixed with legumes, millet, and walnuts. Sometimes travelers give us litchis, loquats, longans, and pomegranates. According to the rules monks live by, I never eat after the mid-day sun and never prepare my own food.

Three hundred years ago, Heavenly Empress Wu brought to our grottoes a sacred relic dating from the time of Shakyamuni Buddha. The Empress requested our monks use the relic's powers to keep her scrolls and treasures safely locked inside the library vault away from her enemies. She called this relic "the Manjushri Key of 1000 Buddhas" after the Buddhas of the present era. It's a small bronze-casted Prajna Khadga. The sword Manjushri uses to slash away greed, hatred, delusion and all the poisonous thoughts of the human world.

Empress Wu related this history to our monks at the grottoes. I am now recording it for the nuns at the Temple of Illuminated Long Life.

The First Buddhist Nun, Maha Prajapati

Over one thousand-four-hundred years ago the first Buddhist nun Maha Prajapati received the relic key from an iron smith and follower of Shakyamuni Buddha. Maha Prajapati was the Buddha's aunt and surrogate mother after his birth mother died. She was devoted to her

nephew's teachings and when she turned sixty she wanted to form an order of female disciples. Three times, the Buddha refused her request to ordain women but finally agreed if the nuns lived in subordination to monks and followed one hundred additional rules. Under Maha Prajapati's guidance, thousands of women joined the order and achieved spiritual awakening.

When Maha Prajapati died at age one-hundred twenty, the Buddha placed her body on a funeral pyre with the Prajna Khadga at her chest. After her cremation, the Buddha found the relic intact and discovered it possessed supernatural powers from his aunt's wisdom and determined spirit. Buddha gave the relic to her disciples to keep within their order of nuns.

Some followers believe that the iron smith who gifted the Prajna Khadga to Maha Prajapati was Manjushri himself. They also believe that the powerful relic can only be given and received and never lost, stolen or taken by force.

Chapter 7: A New House and Mahindra Car

Gopan

In a matter of weeks, I'm able to move my family into a two-story furnished house in Kathmandu's north section. It has a rooftop patio for plants and flowers, a maid's quarters, and a separate garage. I enroll in driving school and buy a turquoise Mahindra car. I also buy a big screen TV, a VCR and radio for the front TV room, computers for each son, and new clothes for us all.

I use one of the five bedrooms as my puja room and buy new pictures and statues of various Hindu gods to place on the walls, shelves, and altar. We have whatever food we want to eat and I have a personal stash of alcohol, a luxury I could never afford until now. I'm also able to buy packs of name-brand cigarettes instead of rolled up bidis from wallahs who sell betel nuts as well.

Both Geeta and my mother take up smoking as part of our new lives. They smoke only two cigarettes a day usually after meals prepared by our maid, a Hindu woman from Bali named Ni Dewa. Often, we go to restaurants or have food catered to the house. Ni Dewa does our laundry using a new washer and dryer. I never dreamed of such luxuries and neither have Aama and Geeta.

At every sunrise, my wife and Aama make puja on the rooftop. I'm usually lying in bed, on an actual mattress, thinking about everything I've done for my family and for myself. Aftab and Hari are excelling in school and teaching me to read English as well as Hindi and Nepali. I don't leave the house every day. Instead, I enjoy watching TV and Bollywood videos with Geeta and Aama who are relishing their new idle and pampered lives.

Generally, I leave the house when I need more cash or when I want to buy something for my family. Several times each day I sit in my puja room and thank Lord Shiva, Lord Ganesh, and Mother Dakshin Kali for all these gifts. *All is given to me* I say. *I'm stealing nothing. I'm not misusing the Prajna Khadga. I'm simply pleasing my wife, Aama, sons, and myself while escaping from such a dismal fate.*

One afternoon, I present Geeta with a Gucci purse that I found in an airport locker. "How has such bounty come to us?" she asks. We're sitting on the rooftop, enjoying the evening air,

and eating a dinner catered from a neighborhood Chinese restaurant. The boys are in their rooms at their computers studying for exams. Aama is watering her potted gardenias, snap dragons, and philodendra lining the rooftop's ledge. And she's trimming her sacred holy tulsi basil plant which she uses to make a tea remedy for her old-age ailments. She now sees an Ayurvedic doctor who helps her ease her several conditions.

"Our good fortune," I tell Geeta while sipping chai. "Comes from Manjushri himself. He has opened many doors for us." I sit back and enjoy the pleasant evening and all the blessings of my newly established life. I'm now a man of worth.

"Doors?" Geeta is acting perplexed. For some reason, she's persistent with questions tonight. Presumably she's nearing menopause and can't help herself.

"Yes, wife. Doors." I look at her sternly. She knows not to ask anything more, but she has a disquieting glow about her and I suddenly feel like I owe her some kind of explanation. She is, after all, the mother of my sons and has been my loyal companion since we lived on the streets. And she did reveal to me the key's magic powers. "Geeta," I say. "What door would you open if you could open any door?"

She perks up and sips her chai. "Are you talking about your Manjushri Prajna Khadga?" I smile and nod. Then she adds, "I notice you no longer keep it on the altar when you leave for the day."

"This is none of your concern, Geeta. I'm only asking what you'd wish for not for your opinion."

A cooling breeze wafts Aama's holy basil on the rooftop. We live far from the terrible smog and congestion of the bustling parts of the city. Geeta nibbles at her fried rice and says, "I

would release all the zoo animals. I don't like seeing Lord Pashupati's children locked behind bars."

I know why she makes this request. The other day I took Geeta and my mother to the Jawalakhel Zoo to see the famous Bengal tigers and Asian elephants. They took endless pictures with their latest toy, a Kodak camera, and we went paddle boating on the lake, something we'd never done before. Ever since then, Geeta and Aama have been talking endlessly about the exotic Bengal tigers and Asian elephants.

It pleases me, more than anything else, to see the joy my good fortune brings to my wife and mother and I want to grant them both their every wish. And so, later that night, I slip away from the house while Geeta sleeps in our bed, and call for a taxi to take me to the gates of Jawalakhel Zoo in the southeast section of Kathmandu.

With the use of my magic key, I open the rusty revolving gates and enter the compound. Because it's the middle of the night, no one's around. With a torchlight, I walk down the dark narrow dirt paths dimly lit by streetlamps. Monkeys begin screeching as I pass their cages then elephants loudly trumpet their long trunks. Hanuman and Ganesh are calling to give me their blessing.

I follow the signs to the Bengal tiger exhibit. For a moment, I watch three tigers pacing behind the bars of their cage, like prisoners of war. The large male, Zambu, lets out a terrific roar. I hear no other sounds, no human voices, no birds. They're all asleep. It's pleasant to be alone in a refuge at night, away from human chaos. By day, the zoo is crowded with people chattering louder than the elephants and monkeys combined.

On behalf of my wife, I pray to Lord Pashupati and place the Manjushri key against the lock at the cage. I hear it clank but don't open it because I fear for my life. I only want to give

these animals the opportunity to leave their confinement, if they so desire. *Do animals desire?* I ask myself. *Of course, they do or they wouldn't be pacing at night. They all wish to live a free and natural life like their relatives in the wild.*

From the tiger cage, I walk from exhibit to exhibit and release as many locks as I can. It's intoxicating each time the wild cats roar, monkeys squawk, and exotic bird clatter. "Yes, Lord Shiva," I say aloud. "I release them all for my Geeta."

After an exhausting two hours, I leave the zoo compound. None of the animals are loose and I'm glad. I've heard many times about man-eating tigers, about elephants stomping people, and I want no part of that. I only want to tell Geeta that her precious animals had their chance at freedom because of me and because of her good karma toward them, in honor and respect for Lord Pashupati.

At sunrise, I crawl back into bed and kiss Geeta awake. It's her time to rise for morning puja with Aama. I tell her I'm exhausted and will sleep late. She asks no questions.

Several hours later, my wife jolts me awake with a screech. "The tigers have escaped from the zoo! What have you done, Gopan?"

"Why do you bother me, wife? I was having a pleasant dream about living in a palace filled with beautiful dancing women."

"The zoo tigers are loose!" she again screams.

I slowly sit up, trying to recover from the shock of her shrill. "This is what you wished for."

"Yes, but I wasn't serious, husband." Geeta sits on the bed. I see tears in her eyes.

"And what's the problem? I want to lie back down and continue with my dreamy sleep."

“The news just announced that three tigers wandered into Newali Primary School. Gopan, Zambu killed a child before the police arrived to stop the carnage. You fool. What have you done? A child is dead because of you! A little boy named Hari Shankar, the same name as our youngest son.”

“No, this can’t be true.” I leap from bed and run to the TV in the front room. It is true, the news reveals. And the police had to shoot all three tigers. *No one can explain who unlocked the zoo gates and cages* the newscaster exclaims.

I’m beside myself. Geeta joins me on the sofa, leans against my shoulder, and cries uncontrollably. “No.” I push her away. “You did this, you foolish wife, with your silly request. You’ve unleashed the wrath of Kali, not me. You made Joginee appear with all the female demons and male dakas. This is *your* bad karma!”

Geeta grows hysterical and I must pacify her and quit blaming her for what I did. I caused all this chaos and the death of that small boy with the same name as my dear youngest son. “No,” I tell my wife. “It is all a coincidence. I had no part in this. I was being playful, testing out the power of the key. We must not blame ourselves for what happened.”

In a moment, Geeta clears her thoughts and calms herself. “You must go to your puja room. Tell Mother Kali and Lord Shiva about your regrets. Beg them to take away this key. It’s become your curse. You must never use it again.”

I sternly gaze at my wife. Her nonsense is making me angry. “Do you wish to return to the shantytown?”

“No, Gopan. But . . . Please make this promise.” She rises from the sofa and re-tucks her new yellow silk sari that flows around her. She takes my hand and closely looks me in the eyes

as if trying to scrutinize my thoughts. “You must promise Manjushri himself to never use the key again for such ignorant reasons. No matter what someone asks of you.”

I squeeze my wife’s hand in reassurance. “I’ll never let anyone else use the Prajna Khadga. That much I promise you. And Geeta, if I ever use the key again, I’ll use better judgment. I give you my word on that. Now, I’m going to my puja room to tell Mother Kali and Lord Shiva how much I regret what’s happened. I’ll beg for my just atonement.” I say this to pacify Geeta, but know I’ll never give up using the key. It’s how I’ve escaped the bondage of my heritage, for myself, my sons, my mother, and my foolish wife.

Chapter 8: Train to Dunhuang

Professor Sid Lees

I set aside the history, look out the airplane window at the vast expanse of freshly planted rice paddies, and think about how things have been going between Maureen and me. She’s working out as my assistant and photographer and my passion for her hasn’t waned. It’s just that she complains about every little inconvenience. I’ve never seen this side of her and am tired of explaining that we can’t afford a two-hundred-dollar a night hotel room everywhere we go. “We have to rough it from time to time,” I started telling her. “And stay at budget hotels, not tourist resorts.”

In my money belt I've hidden from Maureen my stash of a few thousand dollars that I'm reserving for bribes to the Chinese, if need be, and donations to the Buddhists in Tibet. If Maureen discovered I had this cache, she'd want me to spend it on her, to keep her in luxury. I know this. She's used to her wealthy husband and doesn't want to divorce him. She probably hopes to inherit his family's money. Jim comes from wealth. Not me. I grew up in a very good home in Sausalito just after WWII ended and my parents no longer covered the house windows for fear of a Japanese invasion. Both my parents were chemistry professors at Stanford living on a professor's salary, not on trust funds and bond market dividends. I've also discovered Maureen goes to great lengths when arguing inane points, such as who used which bar of soap. Lucky for her, I've absorbed many Buddhist qualities. Patience, for one thing. Maybe compassion. I'm not sure anymore. Never before has a woman caused me such turmoil and confusion.

Outside the gate at the Beijing Capital Airport, a thin Chinese man dressed in a blue Mao suit that covers him like a tent, holds up a sign that reads "Professor Mr. Sid Lees." He introduces himself as Mr. Yi, my assigned guide who will make my travel arrangements for my expedition to Dunhuang.

The Chinese occupiers have only recently opened Tibet to people like me, a professor from a famous American university. Despite the upheavals of Mao and his Red Guards, China has a longstanding history of appreciating scholars. It's part of their cultural heritage embodied by the patriarch Confucious.

When I was working out the permits for visiting Tibet, the Chinese government wanted a precise itinerary from me. I provided one without revealing my intent to retrieve

the relic. I claimed my research was for a book about a Song Dynasty monk's pilgrimage from Dunhuang to Shigatse to retrieve Buddhist texts.

Mr. Yi escorts me on a day trip to the Great Wall and books me into the Beijing Friendship Hotel which, incidentally, has human feces on the toilet seat when I occupy the room and moisture seeping from the walls. The hotel staff rudely ignores my complaints. I decide not to tell Mr. Yi. I don't want to get off to a bad start with my Chinese guide whose job consists of more than making my travel arrangements. Mr. Yi is actually my Chinese monitor. That is, he's keeping an eye on what I do and making sure I don't deter from the itinerary and plan I gave to the Chinese when arranging for my permits and visa. I don't mind as long as I prevent Yi from learning what I'm really up to.

By eight in the morning, Mr. Yi and I are on a crowded train to Dunhuang. My monitor turns out to be a pleasant man who likes to smoke as much as he loves to speak English with a strong Chinese accent. He uses lots of American idioms and cliches that he's obviously learned from Chinese books on English. *Let me put on my thinking cap; don't throw me for a loop; I'll take it with a grain of salt*, and so on. Sometimes he misquotes the idioms and says things like "every caboodle and kit, kill a bird with two stones, or come high water hell."

Throughout the first day on the train, I watch passing green hills and rice fields. Here and there, the Great Wall appears clutching contours of land. By late afternoon, the air is hot and dry and the scenery changes to flat yellow plains with corn and wheat fields and murky irrigation canals.

When it comes to the sleeping arrangements at night, I'm quite uncomfortable trying to cram against the ceiling on the third bunk in the sleeper berth. I can barely breathe and end up spending the night in the diner car drinking jasmine tea and missing Maureen and her stubborn arguments.

Because I'm away from my Chinese monitor, and to take my mind off Maureen, I pull out my notes and re-examine Fa Wong's history of the supernatural relic key.

Twelve hundred years after the passing of Maha Prajapati, Songtsen Gampo unified the many small kingdoms of the high plateau and established Great Tibet. During his reign, he sent emissaries to India to retrieve Sanskrit Buddhist sutras. He developed a script to translate these sutras into the Tibetan language. After his empire spread into Nepal, he married the Licchavi princess Bhrikuti Devi who was named for the female Buddha, Tara.

A cousin of Princess Bhrikuti was a nun in the order of Maha Prajapati. She possessed the relic key that nuns had been passing down since the cremation of Buddha's aunt. The nun gave the relic to Bhrikuti to help her establish an order of nuns in Great Tibet.

Princess Bhrikuti brought many Buddhist sutras, statues, and sacred relics to Great Tibet and the Tibetans loved her and called her Green Tara, goddess of compassion and mother of Buddhism. To house her many relics and sutras, Songtsen Gampo built a great temple he called the House of Wisdom. Princess Bhrikuti kept the relic key hidden from the emperor so she could pass it to the nuns in the convent she hoped to establish in her adopted country.

Not long after his marriage to Princess Bhrikuti, Songtsen Gampo made peace with China and married Princess Wencheng, the niece of Emperor Taizong of the Tang Dynasty. Princess Wencheng was also a devout Buddhist and when she came to Great Tibet she brought

maps of the trade routes, Buddhist scriptures, medical books, and a large statue of Guan Yin. The Tibetans loved Princess Wencheng and called her White Tara, goddess of love, health, and longevity.

The two queens became sisters in their efforts to promote Buddhism. Together they established a convent hidden in the mountains outside of Shigatse. In the convent's temple, they placed the Green and White Tara statues and they built a shrine to keep the relic Prajna Khadga.

The sister queens recruited fifty women from Great Tibet to surrender their lives as daughters and mothers and live peacefully in the convent they named the Temple of Illuminated Long Life. The queens sent envoys to China and Nepal to bring back Buddhist nuns who could ordain the Tibetan women.

Under the guidance of the sister queens, the Green and White Taras, the nuns used ayurvedic rasayanas and Chinese herbal medicine to developed amrita, an elixir of immortality. They worshipped Dhanyanti, the Hindu god of healing and the Medicine Buddha and they used the supernatural powers of the relic Prajna Khadga to preserve their bodies for eternity.

Chapter 9: Ten Years after the Rickshaw Incident

Gopan Subba

Aftab and Hari are 22 and 20 and are studying business management and computer science at the newly opened Kathmandu University. I've been pushing my sons to study the latest technologies, learn all they can about the burgeoning internet field, and prepare for the international world. After they graduate, I want them to study in England or America.

I'm very proud of my sons. Both are studious but quite different from each other. Hari is focused on his computer work and has strong Hindu beliefs. He is short and thin, like I was when I peddled Nandiji.

Because Aftab is my firstborn, he's my favorite son. His appearance is more like I am these days, a bit pudgy, rather like Crown Prince Dipendre. Unlike Hari, Aftab is interested in politics and the government of Nepal but I try to keep him focused on his schoolwork. I'm dismayed that he admires the Communist Party and their philosophy of ending the monarchy. He believes that when there's class division there's class struggle.

Despite the fact that I've spent my entire life fighting the chains of my caste status, I don't argue Aftab's point because I'm not a political man and I love King Birendra. He's an avatar of Vishnu and his personal deity is Dakshin Kali who is my own powerful goddess. I equally love the queen and the royal family and all that they stand for and embrace. They are incarnations of the gods, keepers of our nation's flame, upholders of what's just in our little Himalayan kingdom. Unlike Hari, my eldest son becomes quite heated about his beliefs and I avoid discussing political matters with him. I'm a gentle, simple man who enjoys discussing matters that don't stir up irrational outbursts. I have to wonder where Aftab gets his passion for politics. Certainly not from me. I keep my emotions to pride for my family and business. However, I enjoy conversations with Hari concerning his interests in religious philosophies.

On a particularly auspicious day, Hari approaches me in our front room where I'm watching a Bollywood movie with Geeta and Aama. With great excitement, he shows me a print-out of an article he found off a website for the American University of Stanford. The article is by Sid Lees, the man who caused my rickshaw to roll down the hill ten years before. I had shown my sons his business card which I keep in my puja room in the money pouch that contained the magic key that has changed my life forever. Recently, I asked my sons to search the internet to see what they could learn about Mr. Lees.

I'm very excited to read his article, with the help of Hari. My English is good because my sons have worked hard to help me achieve literacy, and so have I. The article is titled *Compassion in a Casteless System* and it discusses how Buddhism doesn't restrict a person to a lowly social status. I underline the passages I especially like.

At age twenty-nine, I read, *Prince Siddhartha left his father's kingdom to discover the meaning of life. He shed his royal garments and became a sadhu. After Siddhartha achieved enlightenment under a bodhi tree, people called him Shakyamuni Buddha, the fourth Buddha of this era. In Deer Park, he taught his disciples how to control harmful emotions and achieve clarity of mind. He set in motion the Wheel of Law, the Dharmachakra, which has been in motion ever since.*

When I finish Mr. Lees' article, I stand from the sofa and declare to Geeta, Aama, and Hari, "This is my final step from my lowly heritage. Today, I sever ties to my father and ancestors and to the Hindu religion. I'm now born to a higher station in life because I choose to be a Buddhist!"

At first, Geeta and Aama grow furious. "Why would you forsake Lord Shiva and Mother Kali? Your Ba? Your ancestors?" Aama yells, and rarely does she become angry because of her

high blood pressure and other health issues. In fact, the last time I saw her this angry was when I had mortgaged Ba's house and forced her to live on the streets.

"I'm not forsaking Mother Kali or Lord Shiva," I stammer in my defense. "I'll still invoke them in my puja room, like every good Nepali. However, you must think about our good fortune. We no longer pick through the dump for a livelihood or remove dead cows from the streets and throw them into the canals. You no longer cook because Ni Dewa cooks for you. And she does your cleaning and laundry. Aama has her own health guru and my sons are educated men in a top college! And you want me to honor my past. Think about it. What you expect of me makes no sense. I've done all this for you. You speak of our gods. Well, Aama, Geeta—Manjushri brings us his magic key. He is my god. Our god!"

Eventually, Aama tells me she understands my desire to become something better than a man of no worth and she goes to the rooftop to water her potted plants, trim her sacred basil, ring her puja bell, and light sandalwood incense. I'm happy Aama is content and no longer bothering me with the nonsense that I owe allegiance to my forefathers and their gods. Respecting them is one thing, following their ways is an entirely different matter.

I go to my puja room and chant the one Buddhist chant I know *Om mani padme hum.* During this puja, I decide to make a pilgrimage to the Buddha's birthplace in Lumbini and start going to Buddhist temples throughout the city. No one will forbid me from entering these temples. No man will feel defiled if I accidently bump into him. My own religion will no longer treat me as an outcaste, a tourist forbidden to enter the sacred domains of the gods I worship. Not even Kala Bhairava could give me the key to the temple of Lord Shiva. The hypocrisy stands clear in my mind and the next day I go to the Boudhanath Stupa to begin my pilgrimage to the Buddhist sites in Nepal.

After a month of traveling alone in my turquoise Mahindra, I return home prepared to embark on a new path. During my pilgrimage, as I took pictures of the temples and stupas and bought Buddhist statues, religious objects, and paintings, a brilliant idea popped into my head. Because both Aftab and Hari are good at building websites, I've decided to remove them from their studies and open a business selling statues, thangkas, and sacred Buddhist and Hindu ritual objects, and even sacred objects from other religions. With the remarkable internet now a part of global commerce, our business will attract worldwide customers, not just those in Kathmandu. And with such a business, I won't have to rely on my magic key. The guilt of somehow being a common thief and misusing the key's magic powers is always at the back of my mind, despite my prayers and chants about the good karma of my actions.

Within a month I open a shop in the Thamel tourist district, off New Road, and call it *Everest Legendary Thangkas and Statues*. My shop happens to be next door to the antiquities shop where I first tried to sell the Prajna Khadga. The shopkeeper who called me a "charlatan" has no idea that I'm that same lowly street mongrel who came to his shop ten years before. His name is Mr. Thapa and we quickly become well acquainted friends.

Chapter 10: The Train Journey

Professor Sid Lees

Before Mr. Yi joins me in the dining car at five AM and as passengers start hawking out the windows, I put the history back in my pack. Otherwise, my Chinese monitor will want to read my notes and ask about my research.

During the long day I remain in the dining car. The train crosses the Yellow River which the Chinese call "the Sorrow of China" because of the historical famines and floods in the region. Within reach of the river, dabbled among green fields and willows and elms, are little tramped-earth hovels with tile rooves. Except for the television antennas towering above almost every dwelling, life in this region looks like it hasn't changed since the time of Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor of China. At the gray and barren Qilian Mountains at the southern edge of the Tibetan Plateau, wild horses gallop across the red and gray pebbly plains and woolly Bactrian camels graze at the oases.

When we reach the remote desert town of Jiayuguan, the Great Wall ends as a crumbling clay mound in an empty dry region. It's nothing like the famous portion near Beijing, in Bada Ling, although both sections date from the Ming Dynasty. Beyond Jiayuguan, not a single clump of grass exists and the afternoon temperatures reach 115 degrees. I keep the window open despite the silt that blows inside and makes breathing difficult and thirst a continual problem.

After sunset, the desert cools remarkably and by midnight I'm bundled in a blanket back in the dining car gazing at the sky above the Gobi Desert. Unopposed by any other source of light, the stars radiate like snow crystals on black velvet. I stay up all night to examine the history of the relic and prepare for my meeting with Khenpo Trizin.

Four years after Emperor Songtsen Gampo married Princess Wencheng, news reached Great Tibet that the monk Xuan Zang had returned to China after a fifteen-year journey to India

where he gathered relics and Sanskrit texts. Many murals at our grottoes depict Xuan Zang's journey that happened sixty years before my recording of this history.

Xuan Zang traveled to India because the Buddhist scriptures in China were incomplete and had many different interpretations. He wanted to learn the true teachings of the Buddha in India. Xuan Zang taught our monks at the Mogao Grottoes that "Each step you take on a long journey may become increasingly weaker, but you must always push forward one step at a time."

At the Imperial Palace in Chang'an, Emperor Taizong provided Xuan Zang accommodations to write a detailed book about his journey and translate the scriptures from India. It was during this time that this humble monk met the Heavenly Empress when she was a concubine of Emperor Taizong.

Songtsen Gampo dispatched an envoy to the Tang court to retrieve copies of these sutras from Xuan Zang. Princess Wencheng joined this envoy to personally ask her uncle Taizong for permission to build a Manjushri temple on Mount Wutai in Shanxi Province, the home of Manjushri.

Wencheng took the relic Prajna Khadga to Mount Wutai to receive Manjushri's powers of longevity and immortality for the nuns at the Temple of Illuminated Long Life. But before she returned to Great Tibet, her uncle fell ill and she gave him the relic key to ensure his complete recovery. Taizong lived in good health for another four years and died the same year as Songtsen Gampo.

Chapter 11: Everest Legendary

Gopan

My sons and I purchase several statues and ritual objects for our shop which we keep inside glass display cabinets. Some of the statues, Tibetan prayer flags, and thangka paintings are made in local factories, but the boys also fly to India, Tibet, and even Bhutan to collect some of the objects. I buy them a Toyota Hilux to use during their trips around Kathmandu, Nepal, and India.

While they're away, I conduct business at the shop and practice using the computer. It doesn't take long before I can do basic tasks but my sons handle the internet end of our business, the selling of items through our website. My job is to take care of the Nepalis and tourists who browse around the shop or purchase a particular item.

On most days, I share afternoon tea with Mr. Thapa. We enjoy each other's company and laugh about current events and politics in general. Aftab keeps me abreast of what's going on in the world and in Nepal, now that the internet has opened the globe to everyone who has a computer. Mr. Thapa and I discuss the tourists who come into our shops or we talk about making love to our wives and what we expect from a good lover. That's how chatty and chummy we've become. It's just something to discuss although sometimes we get carried away and talk about women we'd like to be with, such as a princess or a tourist lady who comes into our shops.

Before I enter my shop each morning, I chant *Om Muni Mahamuni Shakyamuni Saha* while holding the Manjushri relic sword in my pocket which I always carry around for extra good luck, except at night when I place it on my altar in the puja room. I then sit in my little shop surrounded by the deities of my mountain kingdom—the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, gods,

goddesses, dakinis, dakas, and protective saints. I believe they're looking after my welfare and I feel their divine presence.

My shop is a beautiful shrine room, my own private temple. On the walls are thangkas with Shakyamuni meditating in the center, sitting in a lotus posture, his left hand holding an alms bowl on his lap while his right hand touches the ground in the mudra that proclaims *Fear not. I have defeated the demon, Mara*. In many of my thangkas, Avalokiteshvara gazes at me and says *I offer you great compassion and boundless wisdom*.

Inside glass cabinets are bronze statues of Green and White Tara who tell me *I promise you success and a long life.* Around me are fat and regal Jambhalas, the Lion Kubera, the god of the arts and abundance, Vishnu-Lakshmi, Nataraja, Krishna, and Ganesh. Sarasvati is my favorite statue because she's both a Hindu and Buddhist goddess who plays heavenly music on her veena and brings poetry to my ears and joy to my heart.

My prized possession, and one I refuse to sell, sits on a table in the center of the room. It's a delicately crafted and detailed foot-tall bronze statue of Manjushri upholding the Prajna Khadga with red flames at its edges. From behind the counter at the cash register, I stare at this statue throughout the day and know he protects my shop and my business.

When the thangkas arrive at Everest Legendary, I take several home to hang on the walls or I donate a few to a school or monastery. I feel like the luckiest man in the world, more successful than I ever dreamed possible. I've escaped the bondage of my lowly heritage and taken control of my fate with the relic Manjushri provided me and my sons.

As soon as the business begins to prosper, I no longer use my magic key to procure cash but I keep it with me. Without it I'd feel vulnerable to evil spirits, to female demons and male dakas, and to Mara himself.

One day a British woman stops by Everest Legendary and I sell her a White Tara bronze statue at a top price. After the bell above the door rings behind her and she leaves as a satisfied customer, I return to my back office to tell my sons about the sale and the tourist. She had intrigued me with stories about Queen Elizabeth and Princess Di who is now a footloose and fancy-free divorcee.

"Naturally, I talked about our royal family," I say to Hari and Aftab. "I told this woman about our beautiful and intelligent Queen Aishwara. Then I talked about the king's daughter, Princess Shruti and compared her to Princess Di. I suggested our Nepali princess follows strict religious and royal protocols and would never *let go on the loose*."

"Sure Ba," Aftab remarks as he and Hari sit at their computers busy at work. "We know you love our royal family."

Despite Aftab's sarcastic remark and his anti-monarchy and pro-communist sentiments, I look at my sons with pride and feel satisfied with my family just the way they are. I've removed them from a lowly heritage and that's all that matters.

Later in the afternoon, I meet with Mr. Thapa to enjoy chai, a smoke, and good conversation. Thapa has three sons and two daughters, all are grown and educated. His daughters are working at his antiquities shop and his sons are studying in New Delhi. Naturally, Thapa and I enjoy discussing the accomplishments of our sons but I must admit, I'm somewhat embarrassed to tell my good friend about Aftab's affiliation with the Maoist party.

Today, as Mr. Thapa and I relax in his back office at his old wooden desk, he catches me off guard when he says, "I've heard that Aftab attended a public meeting of the United People's Front."

“Who told you that?” I ask, feeling defensive. How dare someone bring up such a delicate matter about my son. Thapa’s back room suddenly becomes even stuffier than the antiques at the front of his shop.

“My daughter Binsa,” Thapa says, as if I should know this.

I take a long drag on my cigarette, stomp it out in the brass ashtray on Thapa’s desk, and look over at his pretty young daughter working behind her computer on the other desk in the back room.

Suddenly, I realize that Thapa’s daughter and my son might be having conversations without my knowledge. Have I wrongly assumed that neither of my sons has a girlfriend? They know Geeta and I plan to arrange their marriages through the Post, as soon as our business takes off and not anytime sooner. I want Aftab and Hari to marry into an upper-class family. My dream is to find them brides related to royalty, either from the Shah or Rana families. However, I see from Binsa’s pretty smile, when she takes notice of my glance, that my hunch is probably correct. Something has been going on between her and Aftab and I’m the last person to know about it. I’m sure Hari knows, Geeta probably does as well and if Geeta knows, so does Aama. *What a silly fool I am* I think to myself, and then say, in an attempt to cover up my humiliation, “Well, Thapa, Aftab has always been interested in many things, including politics.”

“Does he discuss Marxism, Leninism, and even Maoism with you? Does he talk about class struggle and overthrowing the monarchy you love, my good friend,” Thapa asks me directly.

I light another cigarette, take a drag, and say, “My son loves the king and queen as much as I do. Aftab reminds me of this nearly every day.”

“Well, I hope he avoids trouble. The minister has imprisoned several of these Maoists rascals running around.”

To change the subject, I ask Thapa if he’s ever been robbed.

“No, but my associate on New Road, old Mr. Tharuni, was robbed about ten years back. The police never found the thief and no one understands how he entered his shop without breaking the lock.” Thapa glares at me like he knows I’m that ragamuffin thief who robbed his associate’s shop. But then he laughs uproariously and we talk about his friend’s robbery and wonder about the cad who never got caught.

“I feel lucky,” Thapa admits. “At the time, I was certain someone would rob me as well. But it’s never happened.”

I decide it’s time to return to my shop, away from the conversation that seems to be implicating me, somehow. It just feels that way. I wink at Binsa then walk out the door as the overhead bell rings.

Later that day, I ask Aftab if he’s interested in Mr. Thapa’s daughter. “Of course, I am, Ba,” he tells me. “I’m a man and Binsa is a beautiful woman.”

“Chora,” I say. “It’s my wish that you keep your attention on our business goals until Everest Legendary really takes off. Please don’t get distracted with these Maoist ideas or with Binsa’s beauty. Focus on what we’re doing, like your brother Hari.” Both my sons laugh and continue to pound away at their keyboards.

I sit back at my desk and watch my sons hard at work. My pride for them burgeons. The business is bringing in revenue above our expenses and I feel optimistic. I touch the magic key in my pocket and contemplate using its invigorating powers once again, despite my promises to Geeta after Zambu killed that little boy. I feel overcome with love for my sons and have this urge

to give them whatever they desire. “What would you wish for if you could have anything you wanted?” I ask them. “What’s your heart’s desire?”

“Like a genie from Aladdin’s lamp?” Hari remarks. Both sons chuckle and return to their tasks. Obviously, they’re not taking me seriously.

“I mean it.” I turn from my computer and give them my full attention. “What would you do if you could open any door?”

“Are you talking about your Manjushri sword, Ba?” Hari pauses from his work to look at me. Aftab and Hari know about the key although it’s a matter I haven’t discussed with them. However, Geeta often recounts how she discovered the relic’s powers. Women love to boast and gossip, especially women from the lowest social class. It’s simply their habit. Anyway, my sons know the topic became taboo after the tiger incident. They deeply respect me and all that we’ve accomplished and they never question me, except about business matters.

Hari smiles at me. “No Ba. I need no magic key or Aladdin wishes. I’ll be happy enough when you find me a lovely bride with royal blood through your own connections. In turn, I’ll open the door to my own mansion in Kathmandu and carry my beautiful Newar queen over the threshold.”

I join my sons in laughter and turn my attention to Aftab. He stops his work and looks at me. “And you, Chora?” I ask. “Are there any special doors I can open for you?”

“No, but thank-you very much, Ba,” Aftab tells me. “I’m with Hari on this and will open my own doors after our business reaches the Moon. Besides, I’ve already found my own bride.”

I say nothing more about it and return to my computer where I’m checking the inventory for Everest Legendary.

Chapter 12: Heavenly Empress Wu

Professor Sid Lees

Late in the afternoon on the third day of travel, the train pulls into the station at Liuyuan, Gansu Province. Liuyuan is a hot, humid, and desolate settlement where dust blows around adobe block hovels edging unpaved roads. It looks like an old Tombstone movie-set created at the edge of the Gobi Desert. The smell of raw meat permeates the air. Outside small eateries, men are butchering goats, prairie dogs, and porcupines. Flies hover around the meat and everything else including me. I'm hoping Mr. Yi doesn't suggest we eat at one of these eateries. If he does, I'm prepared to say I'm vegetarian. This is partly true, but I do eat meat from time to time, except with Maureen. She's a full-fledged vegetarian. I find myself missing her and her strong will. Why? Because this forsaken town makes me feel deprived.

Mr. Yi and I catch the local bus to Dunhuang, a town that originated as a Han Dynasty outpost between the Gobi and the Taklimakan deserts. Entering China, Silk Road traders came to the Gansu Corridor, and leaving it, they encountered the Taklimakan Desert, one of the most inhospitable regions on Earth.

Mr. Yi registers me into a room at the Dunhuang Guest House. I'm thankful the hotel is clean, airy, and with a modest number of frills. In the lobby are armchairs with antimacassars and wooden side tables with doilies. On each table are porcelain teacups with lids and large red thermoses with pink roses. The room is scented from the chrysanthemum

tea that the hotel director serves when I first arrive and sit on one of the padded armchairs. The Chinese are experts at making me feel like a welcomed and venerated guest.

In the evening, the hotel director again honors me with a banquet in the dining hall. The whole affair includes dozens of different delicacies and plenty of alcohol with lots of toasting "Gānbēi." I'm afraid to ask about the meat dishes and regret failing to establish with Mr. Yi that I'm a strict vegetarian. But I didn't and so I feel obligated to try each dish.

My guest room smells of stale cigarette smoke which comes from the constant smoking habit of most Chinese men. There's no getting away from it like the spitting on the streets. The room has twin beds with padded slipcovers embroidered with yellow dragons with a pearl in each talon. For the Chinese, the dragon symbolizes luck and fortune. The pearls come from an ancient fable about a greedy emperor who drives China into starvation. A farm boy finds a pearl in a field and realizes that the pearl is magic. To hide it from the tyrannical emperor the boy swallows the pearl and becomes a dragon who protects China and its people.

In a way, the pearl is like the Manjushri key of Fa Wong, the relic I'm retrieving to take to the Dalai Lama. Like the Prajna Khadga, the pearl represents wisdom—transforming a chaotic mind filled with the poisons of humankind to the awareness of one's true nature. I'm hoping the dragon and pearl bedspread will bring me a peaceful night's sleep but I doubt it. Of late, my thoughts are consumed with Maureen and her irritating behavior. Then I miss her again and the physical ecstasy she brings me. I'm also stressed about the mission I'm on to retrieve the key. And all the secrecy involved. I can't tell anyone what's going on with me and this just adds to my inner turmoil. In truth, I'm not being very Buddhist calm these days.

When I try to fall asleep my mind only races. I shut out thoughts of Maureen then start wondering where Mr. Yi is staying because he never tells me. I believe he stays in special accommodations for cadres, perhaps where he reports to the central authority about the *wei gua ren* as the Chinese call us foreigners. I don't know and don't ask questions unless it concerns my research about the Song Dynasty.

Mr. Yi is proud of his country's long history and has endless facts to share, with the use of his cliches. Of course, his facts are never negative about the illustrious New China. I'm certain that forbidden topics include anything about China's occupation of Tibet, which they deny as being an occupation, and anything about the Cultural Revolution's fiascos that included making scientists and scholars work in the fields like peasants to create an idealized classless society.

At 3 AM I give up trying to sleep, pull out my notes and continue to scrutinize the relic's history while lying on top of dancing dragons with magic pearls in their talons.

Now comes the part in this history when our Heavenly Empress Wu received the relic Prajna Khadga. She was born as Wu Zhao the year before Taizong took the throne from his father Tang Kao Tsu, founder of the Tang dynasty. When Wu Zhao turned thirteen, her father gifted her to the emperor as his concubine. Emperor Taizong called her Flattering Lotus Wu and she became his constant companion. On his death bed, Taizong gave Wu the Prajna Khadga and told her that through the relic's powers she would become the first female Emperor of the Sun.

When Wu was thirty-one, she married Taizong's son Emperor Gaozong and became Queen Wu Zhao. Using the power of her secret relic key, she became First Queen. She used the relic to promote the Buddhist philosophies Xuan Zang had taught her but when her husband

grew sick, she didn't use the relic to cure him. Instead, she became co-regent and eliminated any Confucian official who criticized her. She commissioned the building of Buddhist temples, promoted education and literature, and raised the status of women above the patriarchal traditions of Confucianism.

At age sixty-five, with the powers of the relic, Empress Wu took complete control of China and established her own dynasty called the Dragon Dynasty. It was at this time that she took the name Wu Zetian, the Heavenly Empress. When she was seventy our Heavenly Empress brought the relic to our depository vault at the Mogao Grottoes but she never returned to reclaim it or any of her other hidden treasures.

I dream of Heavenly Empress Wu

My journey into Great Tibet began after I had an interesting conversation with a caravan master named Badhir Amu. He and his team had stopped by the grottoes on his way to the markets of Chang'an. Master Badhir is a man from everywhere—from Persia, India, Bengal, and China and he speaks all the languages of the caravan roads—Arabic, Chinese, Turkic, and Tibetan, most of which I've learned during my years at the grottoes. Master Badhir is a most congenial man and rather rotund at forty years of age. He has a scraggly black beard and a mass of long tangles topped with a red turban. He wears the stiff colorful jacket of his native Samarkand and tight purple trousers tucked in high felt boots.

Master Badhir showed much interest in our murals and asked me what I was seeking from life as a Buddhist monk. I spoke about the teachings of Shakyamuni and he talked about the Prophet of Islam who lived at the time of Emperor Taizong. When I admitted that I wanted to live a long life so I could keep spreading the dharma of Buddha, he spoke about his adventures on the high plateau and claimed to have heard about a hidden mountain shrine with a mummified

nun who grants long life and immortality to those who bring her offerings. I didn't tell Master Badhir about the powerful relic under my care. I never revealed it to anyone who stopped at our grottos. If others learned of its existence, they would attempt to steal it and render it powerless because the relic can only be given and received, never stolen or lost. I told Master Badhir that I knew nothing about this shrine to the mummy of longevity.

That night as I slept in the library cave, the spirit of Empress Wu appeared to me. She wore a golden crown with 1000 specks of shimmering light and held one of the pugs from our monastery's kennel. Historians claim that after Wu had ruled for fifteen years as Empress of the Dragon Dynasty, her son seized power and resurrected the Tang Dynasty. They also write that she died at age eighty-one and lies buried at the Qianling Mausoleum beside her husband Gaozong.

In my dream her spirit told me otherwise. She said that a servant woman took her place at the Imperial Palace before she came to our grottoes to leave the relic key and journey to the high plateau seeking immortality. Her spirit revealed that she is the mummified nun worshipped as the White Tara Guan Yin at the Temple of Illuminated Long Life. She asked me to return the relic key to the nuns at this temple. Princess Wencheng had planned to retrieve the relic key from Emperor Taizong but after he and Songtsen Gampo died, political alliances changed, and she never returned to China. The spirit of Empress Wu proclaimed that when I deliver the relic to the nuns, the White Tara mummy will grant me a long life and immortality.

The next morning, I told Master Badhir that I wanted to make a pilgrimage into the high plateau to visit this mummy's shrine. Badhir promised that on his return from Chang'an, he would stop by the grottoes and escort me to the capital of the Khotan Kingdom. From there, he suggested I join a caravan heading south through the high plateau to Shigatse. "Everyone

respects a holy man," he assured me. "Even bandits won't steal from you and leave you for dead."

Upon his return from Chang'an, Master Badhir Amu provided me with two chestnut mares in exchange for a relic from the depositary cave, a Khotan jade dragon made during the early Tang Dynasty. Perhaps Empress Wu had brought it to the grottoes.

During the ending months of winter, we started the journey to avoid the searing heat of the Taklamakan and Lop Nur deserts. From the Mogao kennels, I brought with me a male and female pug descended from the royal pugs Empress Wu had brought to our monastery. I named them Ganesh and Parvati after the son and wife of Shiva. Such auspicious names would ensure their survival during the long trek to the Temple of Illuminated Long Life. I intended to gift them to the nuns along with the relic key and other treasures from our library cave.

With nothing but my monk's bag, alms bowl, and the robes that I wear, I rode on one horse with the pugs in a satchel. The other beast carried books that covered topics of astronomy, history, healing, and religious beliefs. During this entire journey, I wore the Manjushri key of 1000 Buddhas on a rope around my neck and concealed it under my robes, never removing it day or night.

Chapter 13: Freeing Shyam Bhandari

Gopan

Late in the evening, well after sunset, Hari leaves the shop to fetch us a snack from a nearby food cart. While he's away, Aftab approaches me at my desk and says, "Yes Ba. I want you to grant me a wish. I just didn't need my *holier than thou* bhai knowing about it."

"What is it, Chora. Tell me." I look closely at Aftab. Sometimes he has shifty eyes; he always has, but I attribute this to his having a sparkling wit.

"Well, as you know I've recently become a member of the Communist Party," Aftab admits.

I nod, concerned about what he has in mind. "I really want nothing to do with politics."

"You asked me what I'd wish for and I'm telling you. You didn't say it had to be something you fancied."

"What is it then?" I turn off my computer to give Aftab my complete attention. "As soon as Hari returns with our snack, I'm ready to go home."

"Recently, as you may or may not know, the government has unjustly imprisoned my mentor and leader, Shyam Bhandari. They're holding him in Central Jail without cause and unjustly claiming he was plotting to topple the monarchy and establish a government under communist rule."

My stomach sinks with dread. Or maybe it's my heart. "No, Chora. I don't know about this fellow. Such matters don't interest me. We have a business to run. A household to support. And now, evidently, you have a young woman to think about. Who is this, Shyam Bhandari? Why is he your mentor? Am I not your mentor?"

"Shyam oversees a splinter group in the Maoist movement. Listen, Ba, as long as there are class divisions, there will be class struggle. You yourself know this. You have fought all your life to break from your father's social chains."

I merely gaze at Aftab who has pulled a chair beside my desk. His eyes are still gleaming with mischief, even in the dimness of late evening.

"We must demand a complete end to constitutional monarchy," Aftab continues.

"You're treading on dangerous grounds." I stand from my chair. "I love my king, my queen. The royal family, I tell you. Perhaps as much as I love you and your brother. As much as I love my gods and all the buddhas."

"Well, I guess you're a liar and won't take my request seriously." Aftab scoots his chair back prepared to return to his desk. "Don't ask me what I wish for if you don't mean it."

"Please stop speaking to me this way," I stumble to say, trying to take my oldest son seriously when I'm fully aware he's manipulating me. "What is it you wish for?" I feel backed into a corner, something Aftab has managed to do to me all his life. Perhaps this is the reason I love him above all others in my family. I'm not sure. I feel queasy in my gut and ruptured in my head.

"Can you use your magical key to release Shyam from Central Jail? Tonight, in fact. I hear the king may move him to a prison in Pakora as soon as tomorrow."

My brow and palms sweat as I scrutinize my son. His dire request rings like Geeta's wish to free the Bengal tigers. My mind is reluctant but my heart is weak. Aftab is my firstborn and I want to grant him his heart's desire.

"You asked, Ba, and this is the door I would open. I'd do it myself but you forbid anyone else from even touching your Prajna Khadga."

I say nothing more and soon Hari returns but I no longer have an appetite and leave all the rice and dhal to my sons who eat everything up like growing boys. We then lock the shop and return home for a good night's sleep before another busy day at Everest Legendary.

That night, however, I can't sleep because I'm thinking about my favorite son's passionate wish. By two AM I roll out of bed careful not to disturb Geeta who is snoring on her side. I dress in my finest suit, to look as regal as the king, then, with my briefcase in hand and the Prajna Khadga in my pocket, I sneak from the house and summon an autorickshaw parked down the street to take me across town to Central Jail near New Road.

The next afternoon, Aftab is overjoyed when the news breaks online that five Maoist prisoners, my son's "freedom fighters," have mysteriously escaped from Central Jail.

"Ba, you really did this? For me!" Aftab exclaims. He sits before his computer. Hari is in the front of the shop marking prices.

"Yes," I say from my desk. "I'm your genie, Aladdin." Aftab grins rather smugly and I quickly add, "Please keep away from these Maoists, Chora. Don't get involved in any trouble. We're businessmen trying to build an empire and have no time for nonsense."

"Are you sorry for what you did?" my son asks.

"Only if you get yourself in a quagmire."

"I won't, Ba. You're right. I'm too busy with Everest Legendary. And I do have an eye on Binsa. That leaves me little time to stir up anything other than love. So don't worry about me. I'm certain that Shyam and his men are hiding deep in the outer mountain valleys."

"Thank you." I log off my computer. "I can't stop worrying that I unleashed more harm than good. But let's discuss this no more. And never say anything about it to your brother or anyone else."

I leave the back office and stand at the register near to where Hari is busy at work. To be alone in my temple room, I tell Hari to go back and work at his computer while I finish the

pricing. I look at the Manjushri bronze statue in the center of my shop, and the White and Green Tara thangkas on the walls, but I can't stop thinking about the night before.

It had been a risky maneuver. After I convinced the night guard at Central Jail that I was an official of the government, I gave him hundreds of rupees. Then I held up the Prajna Khadga and suggested he take me to the cell of Shyam Bhandari. I claimed to be investigating human rights violations and left it at that. With the powers of my magic key, my suggestions were enough to carry out the caper. The night guard won't remember me or my face and I pointed the key at the surveillance cameras and alarm systems and watched them blank out like the night. It had all seemed too easy and swift. Miraculous, in fact. And this is what concerns me.

I look around my shop at my brass and bronze buddhas, bodhisattvas, deities, and saints, at the detailed thangkas, and offer gratitude for my prosperity and for my brilliant and capable sons. I'm happy to have pleased Aftab but deep inside I worry about what will become of these men I released. My intention was to free only Shyam Bhandari but after unlocking his cell door, I found five prisoners inside and wasn't sure which one was Shyam so I let them all freely walk away.

I gaze on Manjushri, the Great Saint of Wisdom, and silently pray, "Please see that these recalcitrant terrorists stay in the mountains. Don't let me be the cause of another unfortunate incident because I've misused your key."

Chapter 14: Cave of 1000 Buddhas

Professor Sid Lees

Early in the morning, Mr. Yi wakes me with a phone call. In the dining hall, I eat dumplings then Yi and I catch the local bus to the Mogao Caves on the eastern slope of Mingsha Mountain. We spend the next three days visiting these caves but Mr. Yi forbids me from taking pictures although he allows me to take notes and make sketches as long as he can glance at what I'm doing.

The grottoes are called the *Cave of 1000 Buddhas* because monks decorated these caves from 366 AD until the fifteenth century, one thousand years, and because one of the earliest monks at the grottoes dreamed about the 1000 buddhas of this epoch shining brilliantly over Dunhuang and the entire Gansu Province.

The mountainside has five levels of stairwells and walkways leading to 492 cave temples. At the center stands a nine-story pagoda that Empress Wu commissioned perhaps through the power of the Manjushri relic, I wonder. Of course, I don't mention this to my monitor Mr. Yi.

Over the centuries, some Chinese emperors embraced Buddhism and others persecuted Buddhists but all the while the monks at the Mogao Grottoes were transcribing sutras and drawing the murals that portray Buddhist parables. Many murals are like wallpaper with row after row of small Buddhas seated in lotus posture. The golden age of Chinese Buddhism occurred during the Tang dynasty when monks at the grottoes began using printing blocks to copy the Diamond Sutra.

My favorite mural lies in a cave from the Yuan dynasty. It features the Thousand-armed Thousand-eyed Avalokitesvara, the past life embodiment of the current Dalai Lama.

Two of the bodhisattva's hands are folded in namaste, two are resting in front, two hold a Buddha in lotus posture above his pyramid of heads, and circling his torso like a chrysanthemum are 994 arms in seven rings. In each extended palm is an eye, rather like a peacock feather. The image means that when Avalokitesvara sees someone suffering, he lends a helping hand. *Om mani padme hum* Tibetan Buddhists chant when calling upon Avalokitesvara.

While at the caves, I've been silently reciting this chant in anticipation of my upcoming task. For me, the mantra says *Great Compassionate One, grant me success to receive the Manjushri key and give it to your Earthly incarnation, the fourteenth Dalai Lama*.

By late afternoon on my third day in Dunhuang, I'm back in my hotel room preparing for tomorrow's flight to Chengdu, the next leg of my journey. Before turning in for the night, I rest on top of my dragon spread and read Fa Wong's historic record of the relic key.

Now this history embarks on my journey to Great Tibet where I returned the relic key to the nuns at the Temple of Illuminated Long Life. But first, allow me to create a mural of my life before I became a Buddhist monk.

My Father's name and that of his father was Wong Shi and my mother's name was Shu Mai. I was born during Many Kingdoms when Emperor Yindi took power and ruled for five years until Emperor Guo Wei usurped his throne. This was over forty years after the Tang Empire collapsed. The turmoil of Many Kingdoms lasted until I was ten and general Zhao

Kuangyin seized power, established the Song Empire, and restored Confucian scholarship and order in China.

My family lived on a small farm outside Wuchang City beside the Yangtze River. I didn't grow up a Buddhist. My parents had Taoist and Confucian backgrounds and we worshipped our ancestors at a house altar. My father was an educated man who learned to read and write from his father. He had failed the examinations so he bought a piece of land with millet fields and paid serfs for their labor in food. My father taught me and my brothers the art of calligraphy and how to read the classics and Taoist and Confucian texts. This background has remained with me throughout my life.

When the Song emperors took power, bad times fell upon my father's country estate. A drought came along. My youngest brother starved to death and my parents sold my three sisters as house servants to rich estates in Wuchang. As the eldest son, I tried to help feed my parents and surviving brother by stealing a pig from a neighboring farm. I know stealing is a crime against the laws of the state and the three religions but in times of desperation even a small boy must make difficult choices.

My parents encouraged me to return the pig but the neighbor had already reported the crime and the town constable jailed me. I escaped but couldn't return to my parents' estate so I joined a militia during the campaigns against the Northern Han and Shu. I fought tooth and nail in skirmishes and battles. Our commanding officers followed the precepts of Sun Tsu's ancient classic The Art of War. *They preached that we must reach for courage and know the mind of our enemies. But foot soldiers follow their hearts and stomachs and after four years I fled my brigade with five young men. I was only fifteen and some of my companions were as young as eleven. We were boys filling the shoes of men. Our generals had no compassion. Without*

recourse, they shot to kill even the youngest deserter. This is the way of Sun Tsu our commanders told us.

My five comrades and I hid in the forests near Wutai Shan. To keep from starving we stole from pilgrims on their way to the holy mountain. Over a period of five years our band of thieves diminished and grew. I was disgusted with myself for becoming a thief but my fellow bandits and I were merely surviving and avoiding the cavalry patrols searching for deserters.

Early one morning I was alone bathing at a stream when a monk approached me and asked for some of the rice I had cooking near the edge of the stream. I gave him a fair portion in his begging bowl but he wouldn't eat the rabbit I had cooking. I reached into my bundle of stolen coins and suggested he take them and find food at the village down the stream. He thanked me and said he couldn't take the money but he ate the rice. He was near starvation, something I had experienced and seen on the face of my younger brother who died a painful death.

Before the monk departed, he gave me his blessings and told me he was traveling to the Wutai Monastery to worship Manjushri. I asked him about this bodhisattva and he described him as a powerful lord of wisdom. It was through this lone monk who never shared his name that a spirit of hope and compassion overwhelmed me. I no longer wanted to rob pilgrims with my comrades which is why I was alone that morning. I had distanced myself from them and was trying to hunt and feed myself without thievery. Unfortunately, I had stolen the rice I shared with the nameless monk from a farmer's silo.

I trekked up the mountain to speak further with this monk about the philosophy of Manjushri. At twenty, I was in trouble, a hunted man. I wanted to live a long life then as much as I do now. My only escape from this peril was to join a Buddhist or Taoist monastery on Wutai Shan because army patrols don't search for deserters among devout and religious men.

I never located the starving monk but in a matter of days I was living at the Heavenly Monastery. Because of my literacy, the master monk assigned me to the library even before I took vows to become a monk. I spent my days studying and copying the sutras that the monastery provided to pilgrims and officials who traveled to Wutai Shan. After five years of this, I met a traveler who told me about the murals at the Mogao Grottoes. I decided to travel there to see them for myself. That was thirty years ago.

Chapter 15: Fourteen years after the Rickshaw Incident

Gopan

They're tearing down
The shanty town
Along Ishu Canal;
I'm on my own to wander
In front, behind,
Beside,
I am a weary traveler
Alone, along, inside.

One morning, while my sons and I are busy working in the back office, Aftab confesses he's proposed to Binsa. Hari is smiling at his computer, presumably aware that Aftab and Binsa have secretly been together for the past several months. "Ba," Aftab says from his desk. "Mr.

Thapa is reluctant to give us his blessing. Can you please convince him that I'm a good educated man with a promising future in business?"

"I'm sure he's concerned about your affiliation with the communists," I say to Aftab. "Like me, Thapa isn't sympathetic to his political causes."

"I love Binsa," Aftab exclaims. "And that's all that matters. I'm not an activist, only an enthusiast interested in the stability of our Himalayan nation."

I look at my eldest son. "My friend Mr. Thapa has seen you at public rallies with Maoist men and women."

Aftab continues to argue his case until I log off my computer and walk over to him **to** speak my mind outside of Hari's earshot. I suspect Hari already knows what I want to say. Although my sons aren't extremely close, or very much alike, they're still brothers and probably keep very few secrets from each other.

I lean into Aftab and whisper, "If Shyam Bhandari ever gets caught, you'd better hope he doesn't mention your name."

"Please, Ba," my son persists, his voice loud enough for Hari to hear. "Convince your friend that I'll discontinue my political affiliations if this will help me win his approval."

Aftab's persistence wears me down and I arrange to have lunch with Mr. Thapa. After our meal and innumerable toasts with our brass bowls of beer barley chhaang, Thapa agrees to the union of our children. "Then, dear friend, we'll be family and I'll expect several thangkas from you," he says in halfhearted jest. Thapa has already purchased many sacred items from my shop, mostly for his deeply spiritual wife Tila.

Later in the afternoon, I visit an astrologer to establish an auspicious date for Aftab's wedding. I then place announcements online and in the newspapers.

Early the following morning, I drive to a shopping plaza on New Road, not far from Everest Legendary, eager to buy an English Language Kathmandu Post to show Aftab his engagement announcement in print. As soon as I near the news kiosk, Nepali, Hindi, Newar, and English headlines leap out at me. A bombing occurred the night before at the south gate of Narayanhiti Palace. It killed two royal guards and a woman and her child standing near the guard station. I purchase a Kathmandu Post and read it at the kiosk. To my horror, the royal police apprehended Shyam Bhandari, the man I freed for my son.

Bhandari had mysteriously escaped from Central Jail two years earlier with four other Maoist terrorists I read*. They reunited as a splinter group of the Communist Party and planned last night's attack. Witnesses saw Bhandari driving a motorcycle and tossing the crude pipe bomb at the palace gate. Fortunately, a quick-thinking guard shot Bhandari in the leg and he crashed into a parked car*.

Except for Aftab, I've never told anyone, including Geeta and Aama, that I released the Maoist prisoners. My eldest son was elated that his guru was free to provide momentum to the Maoist party. This disturbed me, of course, but I also felt proud that I brought such contentment to my son. Now I'm appalled with myself. Rather than creating happiness, the Manjushri key has led to death and destruction. I'm miserable and unable to tell anyone about my anguish. I can't talk to my good friend Mr. Thapa and won't discuss anything with Aftab, certainly not this tragedy nor his wedding. In fact, I'm not sure I can even look my son in the face.

When I return to Everest Legendary, I toss the newspaper on Aftab's desk and glare at him. Fortunately, Hari is away on a business trip. I don't want him to know anything about this mess. Aftab ignores my stare, gleans over the article, then behaves as if the worst thing that's

happened is that Shyam Bhandari now faces the king's firing squad. "This will be the end of our movement," Aftab laments.

I go to the front room and sit by the cash register. I can't be around my eldest son and we still have a business to run and grow. I'm a sick man, sick about my very self. All the good intentions I've ever had, have ended. Everything has changed.

Although I'm furious with Aftab, I force myself to confront him in the back office. While he's busy at his computer, I start yelling that he's at fault for this entire bombing fiasco.

"No!" Aftab has the nerve to say to me, his ba. "You did this! You're the one who released the prisoners. Not me."

I place my fists squarely on his desk and hover over him. "But it was you who wished me to do what I did!" My shout is so loud I'm afraid Thapa next door will hear me.

"You asked me what I wished for, and I told you. That's all. I play no other part in this matter."

I'm so outraged that I leave the shop and return home only to find my wife and Aama arguing over wedding plans. I can't listen to their complaints so I take a walk down to New Road unable to think about anything. It's as if my mind is cluttered with all the caustic debris and poisonous exhausts on the streets of Kathmandu.

That evening, Aftab returns home exclaiming that Thapa has made Binsa cancel the engagement. Geeta and I are watching a Bollywood video, smoking cigarettes, and drinking chai. "What are you talking about?" my wife asks from the sofa. "Everything is arranged. Hajur Aama and I have already ordered new saris for the wedding."

Aftab sits beside his mother, in tears. Crocodile tears! From my parlor chair, I glare at my son who's greatly fallen from my favor. "Why is this?" I finally ask. "Thapa believes you quit

your affiliation with the Communist Party." I set my glass of chai on the coffee table. "Haven't you?"

"That's beside the point," Aftab says as Geeta rubs his shoulders, trying to comfort him.

"Oh, I see. You haven't?" Unable to witness the spectacle of my firstborn son, I leave him with his mother and retreat to my puja room. I'm hoping divine intervention will purge me of my bad, bad karma, because of my son.

Chapter 16: The Forbidden City

Professor Sid Lees

It's late afternoon when Xao pulls into Lhasa. I'm exhausted despite having had very little exercise during the drive. In fact, I haven't done anything more than stretch my legs since I went for an evening stroll outside my hotel in Chengdu, with Mr. Xao at my side, of course.

"The Forbidden City of Lhasa is only for the initiated," Xao tells me. I'm not quite sure what he means. Is it forbidden to the Tibetans, the Chinese or to us lanky wei gua rens?

Through my open window, I deeply inhale the thin chilly air which faintly touches my lungs. I feel a shortness of breath, my heart thumps, and I'm constipated. We are, after all, twelve thousand feet above my sea level hometown of Sausalito.

The first thing I notice in the bustling city is the Potala Palace named for the mythical mountain home of Avalokitesvara. It looms high on a central hill with its red and white temples and golden rooves and stupas glimmering in the setting sun. Emperor Songtsen Gampo had originally constructed his palace on top of this hill but it was the fifth Dalai Lama who constructed the Potala as it stands today. Before the occupation, the Dalai Lama used the thirteen-story palace as his winter home. These days, the Chinese use it as a tourist museum.

Strings of white, red, green, yellow, and blue prayer flags hang throughout the city. Along the cobblestone streets, carts and rickshaws sit beside yellow, orange, and blue stucco buildings. In flagstone courtyards are large solar dishes used to brew tea under the high-altitude sun. Among the crowds of Tibetans, Chinese guides are escorting a few tourists like me.

The Tibetans themselves wear turquoise beads and clothes of vibrant pastels that offset the surrounding gray and brown mountains. Many young women have toddlers strapped to their backs and old women are spinning wool onto spools or collecting yak dung off the streets and plastering it on walls to dry for fuel. Tibetan men appear like mighty Mongolian warriors. They're tall and coil their long black hair around their heads like turbans with red and black tassels braided in.

We pass by a group of men and women gayly singing as they work on the street; one worker is spreading dirt with a shovel while another worker pulls a rope attached to the

shovel's bottom to help with the task. We stop before the Jokhang, the main Buddhist temple of Tibet that Songtsen Gampo built in the seventh century. Tibetans are kowtowing and prostrating to the Buddha and chanting *Om mani padme hum*. Throughout the city, men, women, and children are spinning brass prayer wheels to the right to symbolically recite the mantra or they're circumambulating stupas in what the Tibetans call *kara*.

I sit back and picture a brightly colored bird in full sunlight on a lush green tree singing loudly with a fully expanded chest. The bird is content with its life and that's how the Tibetans appear to me. If nothing else, the Chinese haven't suppressed the spirit of this remote and remarkable country. I've never felt more filled with spiritual energy than now.

For some strange reason, I start thinking about Maureen. *Do I wish she was with me?* I'm not sure anymore. She'd probably complain that the high altitude gives her a headache. *Yes*, I chuckle to myself, *if Maureen were with me now, I'd be suffering my own headache through hers!* I clear my mind of the woman I hope to marry, or at least I had hoped to do so before our trip to Asia.

"My stomach is spinning like a prayer wheel and so is my head," I say to Mr. Xao, making him chuckle. "I don't think I'll eat sausage tonight." I hold my stomach and slink further back in the passenger seat.

"No problem. Professor Lees," Xao replies as he turns at an intersection where a Chinese policeman stands on a platform directing carts, pedestrians, trucks, and a few motorbikes. "At the hotel, you take two Advil and a cold Tylenol. Have some barley wine. It isn't potent, if you don't like to drink, but it will cure the mountain sickness."

Mr. Xao checks me into the Lhasa Drepung Guesthouse. I freshen up in my room and take advantage of my alone time before a scheduled banquet to review Fa Wong's history.

My first stop on my journey into Great Tibet was the desolate town of Miran on the southern rim of the Taklamakan where the Lop Nur Desert meets the Altun Mountains. While in Miran, I paid homage to the Buddha at stupas and cave murals. Monks from nearby monasteries and Buddhist pilgrims were circumambulating the shrines.

The outpost had one inn where I resided for nearly a week. The innkeeper was a soothsayer. His name was Ehmet. His father was a Uyghur man also named Ehmet. His mother was a Chinese princess named Ma Lian. She had taught him his divination skills. But on the caravan roads I'm never certain about what men claim as fact. Wayfarers and Innkeepers tend to exaggerate stories to make impressions.

One evening, Master Ehmet read tea leaves about my upcoming journey. I told him my aim was to reach a mummy's shrine to ask for a long life. I didn't tell him I was delivering the relic key although I mentioned the pugs were my gifts to the nuns who worshipped the White Tara Guan Yin. The soothsayer gave me a clay vessel of Yunnan tea to drink. When I finished, he tapped my cup and asked me my age. I said 55 and he said, "You shall live at least another fifty-five years. You'll see an exploding star in the White Tiger of the West constellation Xi Fang Bai Hu. For two years, you'll watch the star brighten in the sky then you'll fade and die along with that star. This much I can predict concerning your longevity."

Master Badhir escorted me as far as the capital of Khotan at the southern edge of the desert basin then he and his caravan continued across the Taklimakan Sea of Death to Samarkand. Until the onset of summer, I stayed at the city's main monastery.

Khotan was a thriving Buddhist center founded by Ashoka's men over one thousand years before. Mudbrick walls fortified the city that had many parks plush with Tamarisk and

Mulberry trees and flower gardens. Travelers, merchants, and Buddhist pilgrims crowded the streets and markets where merchants sold medicine, food, brocaded silk, felt boots and hats, salt, rugs, and green and white jade from the Black and White Jade Rivers that flow past the city and originate in the Kunlun Mountains. One merchant and healer I met ground his jade into an elixir for longevity. When I mentioned I was traveling to the Temple of Illuminated Long Life on the high plateau, he gave me a sample to leave at the shrine of the White Tara mummy.

I attended many lectures at the temple. The monks were deeply concerned about the increasing number of Turkic Muslims populating the city. They feared the Caliphate would arrive and desecrate their temple and statues because followers of the Prophet abhor idolatry or any religion other than their own. I share this fear which is why I sealed the depository cave with the powers of the relic key before I departed on my journey. I worry that the rapidly expanding Caliphate will reach our grottoes during my absence and destroy our precious scrolls, paintings, and treasures.

Chapter 17: Matters Grow Worse

Gopan

Over the next several days matters grow worse. My accountant tells me Everest Legendary is losing vast sums of money. With a little investigating, and by thoroughly questioning my sons and their business habits over the past few months, I discover that Aftab has

been diverting our profits to fund his Maoist cause. Hari had nothing to do with the mismanagement. He's a good son who's been diligently working to please me, his father, and to provide us all with a bountiful future.

In the privacy of our back office, late in the afternoon while Hari is at the Thangka House negotiating the purchase of a new shipment, I confront Aftab. "Chora, you must somehow return our funds or make us a tremendous profit so Everest Legendary can pay its creditors and your mother, Hajur Aama, and I can maintain our lifestyle."

"I will." Aftab assures me while keeping his eyes on his computer.

"I don't trust you anymore." I stomp out my cigarette on my desk ashtray.

"Ba." My son looks at me like I'm his son. "I suggest you use your magic key to pay our creditors," he has the nerve to say.

Unable to contain my fury, I stand from my desk and scream, "The key is a curse!"

"Only if you let it be a curse." Aftab remarks as calm as a glacier, unperturbed by the dilemma he's created. And he speaks this way to me, his father, who now carries the burdens of the entire world, or it seems.

I have nothing more to say to him and leave the shop to stroll along New Road. I feel downtrodden and harassed by my precious son. *Is this karmic payback?* I ask myself. *Have I been a devil of a man up to no good? Will I die and become nothing but a hungry ghost!?*

An old cargo truck honks because I'm too near the edge of the walkway. As it passes, it spews black exhaust in my face. But somehow the incident revives my spirit. Suddenly, I can't help but think my only motivation for what I've done was to better my lot in life, and that of my family, and to make everyone happy with my gift from the gods. Now I must continue to provide and keep Everest Legendary afloat. I don't want to move to a less expensive home in a shanty

neighborhood. I've traveled too far for that. Unfortunately, Aftab is probably right about one thing. I must resume using the Manjushri key.

For the next week, I obtain cash and valuables from bank vaults, airport lockers, and department stores where I slyly open cash registers and grab the cash when no one's looking. But in the end, it's not enough to maintain the business and sustain my family's luxurious lifestyle.

Although a rift has occurred between Aftab and me, because of what he's done, I can't kick him to the streets like my father did to me. I can only urge him to work harder to repay the funds.

A few months after the tragic bombing, Aftab approaches me in the back office and exclaims he's come across a great opportunity for us to make the equivalent of two million US dollars in Indian rupees. "It's the answer to our prayers," he says. His enthusiasm disturbs me. I don't like it when Aftab, or anyone else for that matter, is overly zealous about anything. Hari is away for the afternoon. Aftab knows I don't want his brother to learn about my use of the key. I want Hari to continue working hard until Everest Legendary is successful again and I can think about arranging a good marriage for him. As far as finding Aftab a new bride, I've decided to leave that up to him and his mother. I no longer have the heart to look for a wife for my eldest son.

"And what kind of harebrained scheme are you proposing?" I light a cigarette as I sit before my computer.

Aftab takes one of my cigarettes and lights it with the Sandalwood incense burning on my ashtray. Burning incense in the back office is a habit I learned from Mr. Thapa. It keeps the room from becoming overwhelmingly stuffy from stale cigarettes.

“Ba.” My eldest son pulls up a chair at the side of my desk. “I’ve recently met with a wealthy man from New Delhi, a Mr. Raja Balakrishnan. He supports the communist movement in Nepal because he’s against the autocracy of our monarchy.”

“What?” I interrupt my son. “Is this Balakrishnan fellow planning to support you as a leader in his little game of politics with our nation?”

“No, it’s nothing like that. Hear me out. I’m telling you how we can make Everest Legendary right again.”

I detect a sense of urgency in my son’s voice, similar to the tone he used as a boy when he was trying to persuade me to let him have his way. And he usually succeeded. “Go on, Chora.” I relent as I did when he was a boy and I considered my firstborn my pride and joy and the pinnacle of my existence.

“As you know, the crown jewels are on display at the Narayanhiti Palace.”

“Yes, of course I know. I intend to take your mother and hajur aama there as soon as we get our business out from under this tar pit you’ve created!”

“Well, Ba. I suggested to Mr. Balakrishnan that I have a way to steal the crown jewels of Nepal and give them to him for the price of two million dollars US.”

“Are you out of your stinking mind?” I feel my face redden, my neck veins pop out, and my blood pressure soar as if I’m elderly rather than middle-aged. Only recently has my doctor advised me to keep stress and anger at a minimum or I’ll grow old before my time. He also reminded me, knowing my religious affiliation, that Buddhists strive to always keep calm. But my eldest son tests my every nerve.

“Listen Ba, take it easy.” Aftab scoots his chair so close, I smell the fennel seeds he’s been chewing. “It’s a brilliant idea. You simply join a tour group and enter the palace, then hide

out with your magic key. During the evening, after the public tours have ended, you sneak back into the display room, grab the queen's jewels, and work your way from the palace by using the key's powers."

"How preposterous! Do you think I can blind the palace guards with my key?"

"Well, you somehow blinded the guards at Central Jail, didn't you?"

I say nothing and Aftab continues outlining his despicable caper. "You can dress as the prominent businessman that you are and behave as if you're going about your business carrying an expensive ornate chest as a gift for the queen."

"Has this Mr. Balakrishnan masterminded your little plan? Did you tell him about the key?"

"Yes and No. He doesn't know about the key, but he has connections at the palace, secret Maoist loyalists, a few are palace guards, one works in the kitchen."

"What about video cameras. Certainly, everything is under surveillance in the palace."

"Don't worry about that either. Use the power of your key and the video surveillance will shut off, just as it did all the other times you used it."

"It seems the communists have infiltrated every portion of our society and that you have connections to everyone. But what about this chest for the queen? Surely, this is not a suitable gift."

"Inside the box you'll put your Manjushri statue which is magnificent enough to please Queen Aishwarya. You'll leave the statue in the display case and take the crown jewels."

"Are you completely daft, Chora? The statue is heavy. I'll look like a fool and besides, I love this Manjushri and don't want to give him up, even to Queen Aishwarya."

“Ba, with the money we make on this heist we’ll buy you ten such Manjushri statues for the shop, or one even larger and finer. You must look like an important man who has business with the monarchy. You can pull it off. You released comrade Shyam Bhandari by your own accord. And you released the Bengali tigers from the zoo!”

“And look what happened, both times! Zambu kill a child with you brother’s name. And Shyam Bhandari killed two palace guards, a woman, and her child!” I say this but in the end I agree to Aftab’s caper because I’m a desperate man in a tight bind.

Chapter 18: A New Chinese Monitor

Professor Sid Lees

In the hotel lobby, Mr. Xao introduces me to my new Chinese guide, a young woman named Jamyang Drolma. She wears a white windbreaker over a light blue turtleneck sweater, has a round face, bangs and a ponytail, and she smacks her chewing gum which I find more annoying than Xao or Yi’s chain-smoking habit. From her name, I assume she’s Tibetan although she acts very Chinese and has a “by the party line” demeanor.

“Miss Jamyang will show you the sites of Lhasa and take you to the Shakya temple in Shigatse,” Xao says. “I’m returning to Chengdu tonight and wish you success, Professor Mr. Lees.”

I'm surprised by Xao's sudden departure because he hadn't mentioned it until now. But I'm also becoming used to not asking questions about anything personal or related to the Chinese unless my monitor prompts the question. I simply roll along and allow them to lead the conversation, rather like a submissive woman, I imagine. Nothing like Maureen. Maybe a little bit like Mary my now ex-wife.

That night I have trouble falling asleep on the hard mattress of the twin bed in my hotel room. I keep thinking about how I'm going to evade my new monitor Jamyang so I can accomplish my mission. I feel slightly congested from all the dust on the road trip from Chengdu and when I do fall asleep, I have colorful dreams that are like a psychedelic acid trip. I see hummingbirds fluttering from the walls, growing larger, and turning into abstract Aztec deities. I finally forgo the night's sleep and study Fa Wong's history about the Manjushri relic. Maybe the story will provide me with a remedy for this high-altitude disorder.

When summer arrived, I joined a caravan of ten Tibetan traders traveling to Guge on the high plateau, a kingdom that rose to heights after the fall of Great Tibet. They rode magnificent steeds decorated with turquoise beads and blue, red, and yellow tassels; they adorned their herd of seventeen yaks in the same manner. The yaks carried tea, tapestries, and bags of jade that these traders planned to sell in Tsaparang, the capital of Guge. They wore yak wool robes to their knees and tied at the waist with sashes that held large, curved daggers. Each man tucked his trousers into knee-high felt boots and wore a red yak-skin hat with flaps. They usually held prayer malas and followed the ancient Bon religion of Great Tibet that worships the spirits and gods of the high plateau.

The road we took from Khotan to Tsaparang isn't well traveled. Only traders able to endure the extreme altitude follow it. To keep from getting sick, my caravan companions put special herbs in the yak stew they cooked each night. But I relied on the power of the Manjushri relic whenever the dogs or I struggled for a solid breath. When no one was around to observe me, I placed the relic on the dogs' chests and on my own, and we freely breathed as if we were at the river valley of my childhood home. The pugs were tough little dogs aware of their mission to begin a new lineage for the nuns at the Temple of Illuminated Long Life.

During the trek, we passed stupas, temples, shrines, settlements of nomadic tents, and a few small hamlets. Snowcapped peaks surrounded us and at places the only vegetation in sight was dry grass. Temperatures fluctuated from soaring midday heat to freezing cold nights when we slept in yurts made from yak skins. I covered myself and the pugs with a yak pelt and slept on the hard earth among the snoring, farting, and foul-smelling men of the caravan. I would feel the relic key at my heart, recite mantras to Manjushri and Avalokitesvara, and dream about Taoist Immortals and the 1000 Buddhas of this era. One night, Empress Wu as Guan Yin appeared to me and said, "I will carry you on a white lotus to the Pure Land of the West and the Moon goddess Ch'ang-o will give you the elixir of longevity so that you can bring serenity to this world."

After many weeks of difficult travel, we arrived at a saltwater lake called Pangong. It appeared from the sand and rock tundra like an enormous sapphire stone surrounded by snowcaps and a scattering of clouds. By this time, after spending hours at nightly fires and listening to the stories and songs of my companions and watching their dances, I considered these men my family.

They watered and fed their horses and yaks at a spring near the lake and then prepared for a Bon ritual. In goat skin flasks, they collected the lake's salty water and established a ceremonial altar at a large boulder between two snowcaps near the spring. At the base of the boulder, they built a fire from the droppings of yaks that grazed in the area. Upon the fire, they prepared a barley and yak butter tea using the lake's salty water.

When the sun neared the mountains beyond Pangong Lake, my companions gathered around the fire and placed feathers, jade stones, and clay vessels burning yak butter on top of their altar. They called to the lake and mountain spirits and asked for rewards at the markets of Tsaparang. Then they danced, poured the salty barley tea onto the fire, and sang like Buddhist monks chanting sutras. They started throwing yak fat mixed with a powder onto the fire. The flames sparkled blue and plumes of black smoke rose toward the two mountains. Their songs grew louder. I quivered from their sound and grew concerned for Ganesh and Parvati playing at the lakeshore.

From down the ravine between the mountains, a distant noise suddenly erupted. At first, I thought vulture spirits were responding to the men and their chants. But then I heard the kind of war cries I remembered from my soldiering days. The screams intensified and the clomping of horses echoed like thunder.

My companions exclaimed that the spirits of the lake had arrived but they were mistaken. We were hearing the battle cries of demons seeking to cause death and destruction. Or else, my mind told me, these were actual bandits. I felt cold and feverish at the same time while remembering a warning from the monks of Khotan, that bandits lurk everywhere on the caravan roads, even in the high plateau. I tried to assure myself that I was safe in the company of my ten

hardy companions and that bandits were nothing but rascal demons that the Dark Teachers of the Eight Caves of Hell were sending to torment us.

I was correct to worry because maybe five-hundred men dressed in yellow and red brocaded robes, felt boots, and tall cone hats, appeared from down the ravine. Each brandished a curved dagger as he rode a black steed that kicked up clouds of dust.

The men from my caravan ran in all directions away from their altar. Most headed toward the lake where I hurried to gather the pugs. The demon bandits caught my friends, one by one, and slit each man's throat until all ten lay dead and bloody on the sandy earth.

I stood frozen by the lakeshore, holding Ganesh and Parvati in one arm and the Manjushri key in my free hand. I called upon the bodhisattva and his warriors to descend from the sky and save me and the dogs. The demon bandits realized I was a holy man and didn't approach me. Instead, they rummaged through the merchandise carried on the caravan yaks. I watched them slit the throats of each animal while laughing and screaming as if drunk on barley malt.

With both dogs and the Manjushri key tightly in my grip, I yelled, "Great illuminator of wisdom, emancipator of ignorance and evil, guardian and protector, save me from devastation."

Lightning bolts shot from the relic I upheld, the clouds above parted, and heavenly warriors appeared with Manjushri wielding his iron Prajna Khadga tipped with raging red flames. With his sword, he touched the demon bandits, one by one, and each instantly exploded into a ball of fire.

Before I knew what was happening, Manjushri lifted me and the dogs high above the sapphire lake and snowcaps. I don't know how long we hovered above the carnage before Manjushri settled us back at the lakeshore.

Once I stabilized my foothold, the pugs still in my arms, I scanned the battle scene where all my comrades lay dead among the ashes of the bandit demons. My two chestnut horses from Master Badhir had run off. In their satchels and packs were the many scrolls I had brought as gifts for the nuns at the Temple of Illuminated Long Life.

I was forlorn over this loss but grateful the pugs and I had survived. The Manjushri Key of 1000 Buddhas that Empress Wu had brought to our grottos, had pulled us from the foray of fallen demons out of the fires of the four hells.

Chapter 19: Nearly Fifteen Years after the Rickshaw Incident

Gopan

Aftab sets the date for Friday when Crown Prince Dipendre is hosting the bimonthly gathering of the royal family. “This way,” Aftab assures me. “No one will be around when you appropriate the crown jewels.”

Late afternoon, Aftab drops me off at the south gate of the palace. I approach the guards who wear green uniforms and red berets. I’m dressed in my finest suit and carrying an expensive jewel chest with the Manjushri statue inside, according to my son’s instructions.

The guards ask to look inside the chest. I show them the statue and say, “It’s a gift for the queen.” They check my business card, nod at me, and permit me to join a tour group of Nepali citizens entering the palace.

As I follow the crowd of sightseers, with the chest and Manjushri statue firmly under my arm, I pass the display of crown jewels and feel like I'm betraying my beloved Nepal. I have nothing against the monarchy. I'm not political like my son. I'm but a simple man trying to make it in this world by moving beyond the restrictions of my birthright. I love our royal family, in fact, and feel connected to them.

Since the first Shah king, Prithvi Narayan, Nepal's royalty has struggled and suffered from curses and tragedies. For 100 years, the Rana dynasty made the Shahs into mere figureheads. Then in 1950 King Tribhuvan Shah returned to Nepal from his exile in India and became a national hero for restoring the monarchy to its present-day glory. His son, King Mahendra, was like Gandhiji himself.

When I was fourteen and homeless, our present king, Birendra, inherited the throne and has been trying to modernize Nepal as a democracy. But the People's Movement has forced him to form an elected government. The year before I opened Everest Legendary, the Maoists started a civil war that continues to this day. Many Nepalis have died or disappeared because of the Maoists and I feel defiled for partaking in this scheme to rob my beautiful queen of her finest treasures. But I forge ahead with my fellow Nepalis who are gawking at the jewels.

At the end of a hallway lined with portraits of Shah kings and queens since Prithvi Narayan, my tour group exits the palace. I stand aside for a moment and look around, unsure of what to do. Then a palace guard approaches and asks if I have a gift for the queen. I show him the statue and he escorts me to a small chamber with plush chairs beside a table with a tea set. The guard offers me tea and instructs me to wait until two hours after sunset. I surmise he's one of the Maoist infiltrators but am too nervous to ask questions. I certainly don't want to affiliate

with this political cause, in any fashion. My only concern is Everest Legendary and the wellbeing of my family.

I quietly wait while sipping tea, smoking cigarette after cigarette, and constantly gazing at my watch. At about eight o'clock I leave the room holding the chest in one arm. In my other hand I hold the magic key prepared to use it at any moment to open a door or cabinet or disable any surveillance equipment I come across.

I work my way back to the receiving room with the queen's jewels on display. The palace is now empty of all sightseers. At the room's large wooden doors, I touch the key to the lock and it opens. Once inside, I uphold the key and watch the cameras on the walls black out and stop swiveling around the room.

As quietly as possible I proceed toward the glass display case in the center of the room. Bright lights are beaming from each of its corners onto the queen's tiaras, brooches, necklaces, bracelets, and earrings, and the king's bejeweled sword, scepter, and spectacular crown of 730 diamonds, 2,000 pearls, precious rubies and other gems. The glimmer pierces the room like a light show in Durbar Square. Otherwise, the room is dark. The glass cases at Everest Legendary are minuscule in comparison. I can't fathom how enchanted, privileged and powerful I'd feel if each day I gazed at this inventory in my shop.

I place the ornate chest on a small table next to the display cabinet, one with pamphlets explaining each item in the collection. My heart is thumping and I'm trembling as if I'm stealing the treasures of Vishnu, Sarasvati, Parvati, and Lakshmi, but I proceed and open my ornate chest.

In the process, I knock pamphlets onto the floor but I quickly reach down to gather them and continue with this elaborate heist my son foisted upon me. All the while I'm thinking *dear*

Vishnu, please bring me success, dear Manjushri, Mother Kali, Lord Shiva, give me the queen's jewelry so I can restore prosperity to Everest Legendary and my family.

The Shah royal curse comes to mind. According to legend, Prithvi Narayan refused to eat the vomit of a mystic yogi and the yogi cursed his dynasty to tragically end with the eleventh Shah king. Ironically, Crown Prince Dipendre is tenth in line. But I discount my worries and reassure myself that superstition is a matter for my mother and wife. Still, I pray that my son hasn't somehow inflicted such a curse upon me as I reach for the diamond tiara. My every nerve is on fire. I worry the cabinet has invisible sensors that will detect my trembling hand.

The sound of distant gunfire shakes me to the core. At first, I think that maybe the Crown Prince is on the palace grounds shooting birds as he's prone to do. Maybe he's showing off at his royal get-together. Then the gun shots grow louder. Now I'm certain my presence has alerted palace security; that the cameras and surveillance beams are working despite my use of the key to disable them or that the wrong person saw me enter the room, someone who isn't a Maoist infiltrator.

The gun fires again and again, louder and louder each time. I stop everything I'm doing and freeze. After a moment, I have the presence of mind to make sure my most valued possession, my magic key, is securely in my hand and I flee from the royal receiving room leaving behind the ornate chest with my Manjushri statue.

Outside the large wooden doors, no one is around but again a gun is rapidly firing. I rush from the palace and jump into the first car I see, a Rolls Royce parked by the vestibule doors. No one's in sight. I assume the car's chauffer is away. With my key, I quickly start the engine and head to the front gates.

The station guard asks me questions but I hold up the key and suggest I'm a royal chauffer. He waves me on.

In the darkness of night, the Rolls Royce careens down the busy streets of Kathmandu. Everyone is staring at me probably thinking I'm from the palace. I leave the car near Durbar Square then wake a rickshaw driver and have him drop me off a mile from Everest Legendary, then I walk to my shop. I have a bad feeling about the night's events, about my fumbled robbery, and I don't want even a lowly rickshaw man to remember me or Everest Legendary. After an hour of nervously sitting at my desk, smoking cigarette after cigarette, I take a taxi home and fall into bed with the Manjushri key in my hand.

I'm up early worried that the video surveillance in the palace recorded my presence. When I start up my turquoise Mahindra, I have a sick feeling that something isn't right. The neighborhood seems unbearably quiet. Then my next-door neighbor, an elderly man named Mr. Varahi Bhumi, runs up to me. I unroll my window and the old man declares with urgency, "Have you heard the news, friend Gopan?"

"News?" I ask. "What news? I've only just left my home and had no time for TV or the radio. I'm in a hurry this morning, Mr. Bhumi, to get to my shop. Good day to you."

"No, no, you haven't heard." The old man hovers at my window, his hands gripping the rim of the door. His face is red and sweaty. "The royal family was massacred last night. King Birendra, Queen Aishwarya, the prince, the princess. . . All of them are dead."

The gunfire I heard at the palace ricochets in my head. I can't fathom what Mr. Bhumi has just told me. Without saying a word to him, or even nodding, I rev up the Mahindra, my neighbor pulls away, and I rush for Everest Legendary.

As I drive along the early morning streets, my car radio confirms the tragic unbelievable news of the royal massacre. The king. The queen. Their children. All dead. The king's elder brother who gave up the throne for Birendra. Dead. Nine people of the royal family shot dead. Several others wounded. Crown Prince Dipendra lies in a coma in the hospital. They say he's now the king but probably won't survive.

The news makes me shake more than I had the night before when reaching to nab the crown jewels. I'm certain the gods have placed a "Shah" curse upon me, perhaps it's the key itself. Somehow, I'm to blame for the worst tragedy that's ever occurred in my country, perhaps in the world since the slaughter of the Tsar and his family in Russia.

Chapter 20: The Road to Shigatse

Professor Sid Lees

After a breakfast of roasted barley porridge, tsampa, cheese, and tea with lots of salt and yak butter, the hotel provides me with a white van and a driver named Mr. Zhang. While constantly smacking her gum, Jamyang escorts me to the major sites of Lhasa. She claims to be a Buddhist born in Tibet during the 1970's but her parents are Chinese. I dare to ask if she thinks the Tibetans deserve their own country and she says, "What about the

Chinese who make their home in Tibet? Or the South Africans, Russians, and Latvians who work here? Should the Chinese pull out when we're simply living our lives?" I want to ask her, but I don't, whether she thinks the Chinese occupation is a good thing for the Tibetan people.

Later that morning, after huffing in and out of the Potala and seeing endless thangkas and statues of Buddhas and Dalai Lamas, Jamyang takes me to Drepung, the largest monastery in Tibet. The enormous complex of white rectangular buildings sits at the foot of Mount Gephel about five kilometers outside of Lhasa. Founded in the early fifteenth century, Drepung is one of three universities of the Gelug Buddhist tradition as well as its principal seat.

As we walk through the courtyard on our way to the main temple hall, I watch pairs of novices, dressed in maroon robes, debating precepts of Buddhism while holding their prayer beads. Typically, one monk sits on the flagstone plaza while the other slaps his hands, waves his arms, and raises his legs like the crane stance in karate. It appears as if these debaters are fighting but they're actually enjoying their learning method of logical inquiry about what is real and what is delusional. Tibetan Buddhism is primarily based on the ancient Indian Masters of Nalanda University who investigated the nature of reality, rather like quantum physics. Buddha himself taught his disciples not to accept his teachings on mere faith but to question every principle with a reasoning mind. Critical thinking is a philosophy I've always appreciated. *So why in the hell did I fall so hard for Maureen?* Something else must be going on in the nature of my reality and I'm wondering what that is. Love? Or pure animal lust? *Which is it, Sid?* I ask myself as we enter the great hall of the monastery.

Inside are colorful banners hanging from the ceiling and thangkas on the walls. Over two hundred monks in red robes sit in lotus postures and chant in deep resonating voices. They're holding prayer malas and facing a golden Buddha at the altar. The higher lamas in yellow shawls are leading the chants from platforms adorned with white scarves that the monks have given them as a form of respect. Jamyang allows me to take pictures but asks me to pay the abbot a few hundred dollars which I gladly do.

Before we return to the van, where Mr. Zhang sits smoking and listening to Chinese music on the radio, Jamyang circumambulates the prayer wheels in the courtyard and I slip away from her and retrieve a picture of the Dalai Lama from my daypack. I offer it to a monk lighting wicks in vats of yak butter. To my surprise, he looks at the picture, throws up his arms, and walks away with a frown so unlike the faces of the young novices during their debates. I imagine he fears trouble if he takes the picture. Jamyang had warned me that it's forbidden to give Tibetan people pictures of the Dalai Lama.

By mid-afternoon, we return to the hotel and Jamyang suggests I take a catnap for a few hours before the night's banquet in my honor. "Catnapping is a Chinese tradition," she tells me, like Mr. Xao had.

I agree to her suggestion and claim to be tired, but as soon as she leaves me at the door to my room, I seize the opportunity to slip away. If my mission is successful, the Chinese will never allow me back into China, an academic tragedy for me. So long to becoming an expert in Tibetan Buddhist relics. I'll be the only buffoon in the crowd of experts banned from Tibet.

I place essential items in my daypack, sneak from my room, locate the hotel's driver Mr. Zhang, and offer to pay him five hundred dollars to take me to the Shakya Monastery

outside of Shigatse. I also give him a carton of Dunhill cigarettes and a bottle of vermouth from the Friendship Store. Mr. Zhang agrees to my offer and arranges to meet me few blocks from the hotel. He seems to understand the need for discretion even though I tell him I've arranged for this trip with Jamyang and her cadres.

On the way to Shigatse, Zhang skillfully navigates the van on curvy, narrow, and muddy roads. He barely misses an ancient tractor hauling dozens of people in a wagon, like an old-fashioned hay ride. We pass barley fields and drive through many small villages where women are milking skinny cows and children with ruddy faces are waving at me. I can't help but feel that each stone and tree we pass is sacred to these people living in the world's highest altitude.

Despite the bumpy ride, I take time to finish Fa Wong's history. I plan to be well prepared for my meeting with Khenpo Trizin. And Mr. Zhang doesn't care. He's not an assigned monitor for the Chinese Communist Party. He's my personal hire.

Danger lurks everywhere on the mountain road but many years ago I too was a bandit. I know how to be cunning and deceitful.

Such were my thoughts as I walked alone with Ganesh and Parvati on the road from Lake Pangong to Tsaparang with nothing more than my robes. I had lost even my monk's bag with my begging bowl and chanting beads.

I walked through treacherous lands vast and varied, from settlement to settlement, monastery to monastery or from the bare earth under a shrub to the bare earth under a tree. When I slept at night, the murals from the Mogao Grottoes became my dreams. Any merchant or

traveler I met offered me and the pugs whatever food he had to spare. When it rained or snowed, kind people in small hamlets offered us lodging and fed us until the weather cleared.

After a month on the road, I reached the capital of Guge. In the middle of a desolate landscape surrounded by snowcaps and in view of Mount Kailash, Tsaparang is a city on a fortified rock mound. The Guge emperor lives in a palace on top of this mound. Pilgrims on their way to Mount Kailash stop in Tsaparang to pay homage to the emperor with gold and jade. They stay in caves at the base of this fortress mound along with merchants, foot soldiers, and caravan traders. In the Tsaparang market at the bottom, traders buy and sell skins, wool, and sacks of salt. The citizens of Tsaparang draw water through aqueducts connected to the Sutley River that flows outside the city.

I found lodging in the middle of the mound in a cave reserved for monks on their way to the holy mountain. It was here that I met a fellow monk who had traveled to Mount Kailash. I told him where I was going and he invited me to the Tholing Monastery where I stayed until the season changed to more temperate days. Then I trekked on the road between Tholing and Shigatse which is well traveled by pilgrims and soldiers on patrol.

For many weeks, I walked barefoot. My feet became raw and sore. During the last few days before I arrived at Shigatse, a large, young monk named Chodha carried me on his back while I carried his pack on mine. To avoid the intense sun and winds of midday, Chodha walked by moonlight as Ganesh and Parvati pranced beside us. He recounted his pilgrimage to Mount Kailash and I told him about the bandit demons at Pangong Lake. At times, I felt impatient with Chodha's slow pace. My stomach pained me, my feet ached and bled, and I wanted the struggle to end. As the monk carried me, my eyes carefully watched the road ahead and I kept wondering when we'd reach Shigatse.

Finally, we arrived two hours before dawn. At first, I saw a faint glow on the horizon. This is not moonlight I told myself. This comes from the fires and lanterns of a large city. As these thoughts filled my mind, Chodha suddenly said, "Shigatse." The word resonated through my ears as if Chodha had said "Amitabha" for the tenth time and I was in the Pure Land. I had finally reached my destination.

At the guesthouse of a small monastery in Shigatse, I met two fellow monks who escorted me to the Temple of Illuminated Long Life. I gifted the pugs and the relic key to the abbess of the convent. She took me to the mummy's shrine cut deep into the rock cliffs behind the convent. I honored the mummy of the Heavenly Empress as the White Tara of Longevity and I asked her to grant me a long life.

As I'm about to embark on my return journey to the Mogao Grottoes, I finish this history to leave with the abbess and her nuns.

Chapter 21: Respect for the Royal Family

Gopan Subba

My sons and I shave our heads like all Nepali men except perhaps the Maoists hiding in rural valleys. Puja flowers adorn the palace gates and walls. The government imposes curfews while foreign journalists flock to Kathmandu and tourists leave. All of Nepal watches on TV or

in person the royal cremations at the ghats. In our hearts we know Birendra rides a white elephant as he leaves our Himalayan kingdom.

After a few days in a coma, King Dipendra dies and Birendra's younger brother, whom nobody likes, becomes the eleventh king of the Shah dynasty. The people of Nepal know the royal curse has come true and the monarchy is destined to collapse.

From every corner of the kingdom people offer theories about the massacre. First, the palace claims that Dipendra's guns accidently went off, that the killings were entirely an accident. This theory is so preposterous that not even the lowliest and most ignorant cur of the city believes it. Then we learn that the Crown Prince went mad from drugs and thought he was safari hunting when he executed everyone. He thought he was seeing vicious tigers and Yetis.

Some people claim that India and the CIA had roles in the massacre because both countries want the monarchy to fail. But most Nepalis are convinced that Dipendra went berserk because his parents forbade him to marry the woman he loved, Devyani Rana. Queen Aishwarya disapproved of Devyani's lower status and her connections to the royals of India. The Crown Prince had been prepared to renounce his title but Devyani refused to marry him if he did because she wanted to be the future queen of Nepal.

Day after day I sit in my shop trying to find comfort from the sacred thangkas and statues. But I only miss the Manjushri statue that used to be the centerpiece of my temple room. Often, I argue with my sons about the different theories for the royal massacre. Hari doesn't even know I was at the palace. When I'm alone with Aftab, I don't tell him my own theory, that I caused the massacre because of my presence in the palace with the cursed key. Instead, I criticize him for enticing me to take part in such a foolish scheme.

“You didn’t even procure the jewels,” Aftab has the audacity to tell me about five days after the massacre. “None of this is my fault. You could have grabbed the Rani’s jewels and left, despite the gunfire.”

“Don’t even speak to me about it,” I yell. “Thanks to you, our business and livelihood is descending into the four hells unless I use my key in thievery. I’m cursed. Chora. Cursed like the Shahs. Probably by your birth. And by your political affiliations. I believe your Maoists played a part in the massacre, if you want to know the truth.”

“No Ba. It’s Birendra’s own fault if the Maoists had anything to do with it,” Aftab brazenly insists. “Honestly, if the Raja wanted to stop the People’s Revolution, he could have used his army.”

I start yelling at Aftab for his misguided political views and for insulting the memory of my king. He leaves the shop to take a walk, or so he claims, but I suspect he’s secretly meeting with his Maoist comrades.

One afternoon, about a week after the tragedy, the shop bell rings while I’m in the back. I hear a great commotion. Five royal guards in blue uniforms and maroon berets enter my office and ask for me by name. A guard holds up my business card with my name and position as proprietor and owner of Everest Legendary Statues and Thangkas.

My heart sinks because I recognize the card. I took it to the palace with the ornate chest and Manjushri statue. I wrote on the back *Manjushri, a gift for our beloved Queen Aishwarya*. Until now, I hadn’t realized that I dropped it.

My brow and palms sweat as I say, “I’m Gopan Meelan Subba, owner of Everest Legendary.”

The guards tell me to come with them to police headquarters for questioning.

"What is it Ba?" both my sons ask as they stand awe-struck by the cash register. Aftab knows what this is all about although Hari doesn't. As I exit the door and the overhead bell rings, I turn and give Aftab the most hateful look I've ever given anyone in my life. Not even Kali could gaze more fiercely upon my firstborn son.

Chapter 22: Gateway to Nepal

Professor Sid Lees

About one hundred miles southwest of Shigatse, on the road to Tingri which is my gateway into Nepal, we finally arrive at the Shakya Monastery an hour past sunset. Red and yellow buildings and white stupas carved into the gray mountainside, stand glowing from lamps and the Full Moon. Some of the buildings have roof walkways that appear like a castle torrent. This is the seat of the Shakya school, one of the oldest Buddhist traditions in Tibet. The Shakya followers believe their five patriarchs descended from Manjushri. When the Chinese occupied Tibet many of the Shakya lamas fled to India and other parts of the world where they established new monasteries. I'm curious to learn why Khenpo Trizin didn't leave with these lamas.

Zhang pulls the van onto a flagstone plaza that's deserted except for a few dogs sleeping on building stoops. He parks before two lion statues guarding the entrance to the main building. "We have arrived," he says to me. I ask him to delay his return to my hotel in Lhasa for as long as he can. I don't tell him why and he doesn't ask but he grins when I give him another hundred dollars.

I walk past the lions and encounter a monk seated in the vestibule. The aroma of burning yak butter permeates the air. The monk namastes and after I tell him my name, he leads me down a dark hallway to the Khenpo's private bedroom.

A middle-aged lama in orange robes opens the door, namastes, and invites me to sit on a padded armchair beside his cot. I look at the mandala tapestries hanging on the walls. They remind me of the frescoes in Dunhuang—the Buddha encircled by his Bodhisattvas, protective deities, arhats, dakas, and attendants. In my articles on Buddhism, I often described the mandala as a kaleidoscopic view of Buddhism.

"I've been expecting you, Professor Lees," the monk says and introduces himself as Khenpo Trizin, the head lama who requested this visit. He's thin, of average height, and bears a friendly, peaceful smile. He sits on the cot beside me and drapes a white silk khata scarf around my neck. "This represents the purity of our greeting, Professor Lees."

"Please call me Sid," I say, feeling emotional and humble, not something I'm used to feeling.

"And you must call me Trizin, brother Sid."

I suddenly feel deeply connected to this monk as if we shared past lives. If nothing else, our present lives are enjoined through this meeting and the assignment he's giving me.

From a ceramic pot on a table beside his cot, the Khenpo pours a cup of tea and hands it to me. I ask him what he does at the monastery. “I teach the young monks about separating their minds from attachments and destructive emotions. I tell them to live by tolerance, forgiveness, and compassion. We say, ‘If you cling to this life, you don’t practice Dharma and if you cling to your own interests, then you’ll never awaken your mind, and if you hold a point of view, then you don’t have the correct position.’ This is also a teaching of the great Buddha Milarepa. I also teach English in our schools.”

“You speak and write English very well,” I say.

“Thank you, brother Sid. You see, my father worked at an Indian mission where the wife of a British doctor gave English lessons to children of the hospital staff. I was a fortunate child from a wealthy family. When the Chinese occupied our country, I had been a novice for only one year. Many of the monks escaped and the population of our monastery dwindled from 500 to 36 elder monks and me. I was twenty when the Chinese forbade our practice and the Red Guards ransacked our temples. But I refused to leave because I wanted to protect our secret vault of books and treasures.”

“Secret vault?” I ask. “I’m intrigued, brother Trizin. As you know, I just came from Dunhuang where the Mogao Grottoes also had a vault of books and valuables that were hidden and sealed for nearly a millennium.”

“Indeed, I know about this cache of ancient scriptures. A Taoist monk discovered the cave at the turn of the nineteenth century. It had been sealed since about the time of Fa Wong which makes me think there’s a connection between Fa Wong’s journey to Tibet and the sealing of this library vault.”

"I've wondered that myself," I say. "But I never admitted any of this to my Chinese hosts, of course. I've learned over these past few weeks that the best course for navigating through this mercurial political country is to offer no information, ask no questions, and speak only when spoken to."

"So well put, Brother Sid. You're a true scholar of stanch Buddhist principles."

"You're too kind. The Chinese are rather like the child's game of 'Confucius say.' Whatever the Chinese party dictates, goes.

The Khenpo chuckles. "Yes indeed. You're also very clever, Brother Sid. I believe the books of Dunhuang are very similar to the ones in our secret library hidden behind a wall. Like in Dunhuang, our ancient library contains scrolls of literature, history, astronomy, mathematics, and of course, sutras written in Sanskrit, Tibetan, Chinese, and Mongolian. The scrolls have been untouched for centuries. I believe that some of them come from Nalanda and date to 1073 when our monastery was only a single repository building. Since then, it's grown to over 100 buildings although many were destroyed by the Red Guards."

"Can you show me this library vault?" I ask. "I'd love to take pictures."

"I am afraid we have no time. I must give you the relic immediately and you must hasten from Tibet and take it to His Holiness. We don't want the Chinese to learn it exists. We can't trust them. Only ten years have passed since the Red Guards tried to eradicate our way of life."

"I can't begin to tell you, brother Trizin, how much I admire your dedication in the face of such devastation." I sip my tea hoping it'll keep me from losing my breath in the thin air. I doubt I can ever get used to this altitude.

The Khenpo smiles and slurps his tea. “You see, brother Sid, the Buddhists of Tibet, China, and Mongolia are historically interconnected, despite what the Chinese are currently doing. Now China conquers us, but during the Tang dynasty, Tibet conquered China, and two centuries after the founding of our monastery, Kublai Khan conquered China. Like his grandfather Genghis Khan, Kublai practiced Vajrayana Buddhism. This is why Tibet and Mongolia share the same tantric traditions. In fact, Kublai traveled here and gifted a conch shell to the Tibetan king. When lamas blow the conch shell, it resonates the glory of the three Bodhisattvas—Vajrapani, Avalokitesvara, and Manjushri. And when we make kara, we circle right like the whorls of a conch shell. This is the direction of purity.” The Khenpo touches my hand resting on the tea table. “What is your practice? Brother Sid. Are you a follower of a particular Mahayana school? A Tibetan school? Were your parents Buddhists.”

“No. I grew up in a very good home in Sausalito. Both my parents were chemistry professors at Stanford. They structured my childhood with guidance, discipline, and a moderate amount of Christian morality.”

“I see. What made you decide to become a professor of Buddhism. There must have been some event in your life that shifted you away from your family religion.”

“The truth is, my dear brother, I felt no upheavals in my psyche until I was seventeen and bound for Stanford instead of the pestilent war in Vietnam. On June 11, 1963, my life changed forever when the newspapers published a photo of the Buddhist monk Lâm Văn Túc setting himself on fire on a busy intersection in Saigon.”

“Yes, I remember the picture very well. It was twelve years before the city fell to the Ho Chi Men communists. The monk was protesting President Diệm’s oppression of Buddhists in South Vietnam.”

“Then five months later, the communists assassinated Diệm the same month Oswald killed Kennedy. When LBJ escalated the Vietnam conflict, the world became political for me and I became interested in Buddhism to learn what drove that monk to such a torturous suicide.”

“This is a beautiful story. I believe in your heart and spirit you’ve always been a Buddhist perhaps for many lifetimes, like me.”

I run my hands along the silk khata at my chest and say, **“**The more I studied Asian religions, the more I appreciated the Buddhist mindset of attaining mental focus through rational inquiry. Without depending on a creator god to guide me. I never appreciated the concept of blind faith. The religion of my parents. It simply makes no sense, logically. But I must admit brother Trizin, I never attached myself to any one sect of Buddhism. I appreciate nearly all Buddhist traditions. I guess you might say, I’m only a scholar of Buddhism. I read the sutras, the tantras, and am an expert on Buddhist relics, but I’m not much of a practitioner. However, I admit to feeling a spiritual connection to you when I entered your room. I sense we knew each other in another era. A past life.”

“Perhaps several,” Khenpo Trizin suggests. “I sensed this myself, brother Sid, just from the article you wrote.”

We toast our cups of yak butter tea and the Khenpo says, “The many schools of Buddhism are like different medicines. Not one pill cures all diseases. This is the parable of the Lotus Sutra. The wealthy man had to save his sons from his burning mansion so he promised them different gifts to lure them to safety. The father wasn’t deceiving them or tricking them. He was saving their lives in the only way he could. This is the Buddha’s Dharma. There are many paths to Buddhahood, many Medicine Buddhas.”

“Well put, brother Trizin.” I namaste.

“When you feel pure Dharma, as I know you do, your mind and heart are purified as if by the conch music of the three Bodhisattvas. There’s no need to be ordained. We believe that the nature of each human is to become a Buddha. To become fully aware of one’s true nature absent all human nonsense and clutter. A clear mind has no delusions. Here at the Shakya Monastery, we are dharma practitioners for the sake of all beings. You are such a teacher, wouldn’t you agree, brother Sid?”

I nod and sip my yak butter tea, absorbing its powerful taste with his every word, as if I’m a novice and Trizin is my master. I feel empowered in his presence. He lifts me far above all worldly concerns and thoughts. And I can’t get over the feeling that we shared past lives, even though I generally don’t dwell on such matters. Perhaps this will change now and I’ll start chanting mantras and meditate on mandalas. I namaste again. “I’m enthralled to be in the forbidden Himalayas with a Master Lama.”

The Khenpo gleams with contentment. “Now we must get to the matter at hand,” he says. “The Buddhist relic you’re here to receive. Did you have trouble getting away from your Chinese hosts?”

I explain how I slipped from my monitor making the Khenpo chuckle. “Who knows what Jamyang will do when she discovers I’m gone? She may call in the Red Guards.” I regret my quip as soon as I make it. It’s a careless, insensitive joke. But Trizin grins, as if silently amused. “From reading the history by Fa Wong,” I quickly add to hide my embarrassment. “I wonder if the relic really has supernatural powers. I’m not one to believe in magic but it was a wonderful history.”

“No one has used the relic for its powers since Fa Wong left it at the Temple of Illuminated Long Life. The nuns who received it locked it in the crypt of a mummified nun, the very nun Fa Wong believed to be the Empress Wu.”

“Is the mummy actually the empress?” I ask. “I found that part of the history especially intriguing.”

“We really don’t know but I believe it’s true.”

“Is the relic with you?”

“No, brother Sid.” The Khenpo stands from the cot and extends his hand to help me up. His touch is electrifying, truly that of a master imparting his spiritual magic. It’s as if I’m within the flames that engulfed Lâm Văn Túc on the streets of Saigon.

“We must drive into the mountains on the road to Lhasa,” the Khenpo says. “It’s not far from here. The abbess at the temple keeps the relic in the mummy’s shrine. About sixty nuns live in the convent these days. They still practice healing methods, but mostly they create thangka paintings to support themselves. Our monastery helps them deliver these paintings to Nepal. The abbess fears the Chinese will discover their hidden temple and confiscate the precious relic key. Our monastery is their protector. But we’re nearly helpless under the current occupation. What do you say, brother Sid? Shall we go retrieve the Manjushri key of 1000 Buddhas?”

Chapter 23: Fifteen Years after the Rickshaw Incident

Gopan

At the Interpol section of police headquarters, in in a small room without windows, I sit at a table across from a constable dressed in a light blue shirt, navy blue pants and a red beret. "You'll be going to prison," he tells me.

"I simply left my gift for the queen while I was sightseeing," I insist.

"Then why, Mr. Subba, was the display cabinet open and your business card on the floor?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." My throat buckles with dryness in the stuffy room. But I'm too intimidated to ask for water. I clear my throat while aching for a cigarette to calm my nerves. "I don't know how my statue got inside the cabinet. I'm just a simple businessman, How could I manage to open the case without breaking the glass? I went home after I left my gift. Ask my wife." I say this with all the confidence that Geeta will confirm whatever I say. At least I hope so. Lately, I've detected a bit of irritation from her. But in my heart, I know no one in my family will ever let me down.

"Mr. Subba. Did I even mention a statue?" The constable looks accusingly at me, making my throat dryer and my brow and palms moister. I remain silent because I don't know what to say. Should I pull the magic key from my pocket and hope my suggestions will pacify my interrogator? I ask myself. But I don't want to expose the relic and I request a solicitor.

The constable looks my face over as if he believes I'm connected to the royal murders. It's unnerving. "For now," he finally says. "You're free to return home where you'll remain until further notice from me. We're placing you on house arrest, Mr. Subba. You can't go anywhere unless you clear it with us."

An hour later, my sons pick me up in my Mahindra and two police guards follows us to our house. They park their Rover on the driveway where they remain until their replacement arrives.

It's early evening when my family and I are sitting in the TV room watching a local drama that doesn't interest me. I don't want to do anything but quietly think over my helpless situation. Aftab has nothing to say because he already knows everything. But Hari, Geeta, and Aama ask me what's going on. I tell them as little as possible. "It's a big misunderstanding," I say. "The entire country has been thrown into chaos." As usual, they accept what I tell them and stop pestering me with questions. I couldn't tolerate them otherwise.

Over the following days, the Nepali police remain parked outside my house. Whenever their shift is over, another patrol car parks in their place. They are ceaselessly watching my house. I can't go anywhere, not even to my shop. No one can visit me and the police confiscate my home computer and cell phone and place a listening devise on my house phone. Even my wife and aama, and especially my sons, must tell the officers where they're going and why.

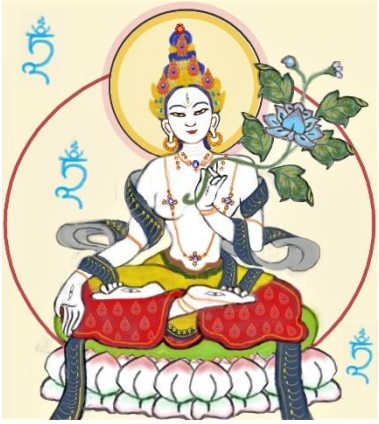
My sons are running Everest Legendary but I know it'll soon falter because we aren't making a profit and I can't use the Prajna Khadga to bring in funds. I'm powerless and can only wait for the inspector to show up, take me back to police headquarters, and interrogate me some more about that stupid business card and statue. Nothing would have come of it if the Crown Prince hadn't run amuck on the night of my caper.

After a few weeks of being pent up at home, Geeta begins to nag at me. She suggests her own theories about my situation and the royal massacre, even after I tell her to keep quiet. Then, after a few more weeks of this, dear Aama takes her last breath and expires on a rooftop chair while she's napping in the cool morning. In her hands are trimmings from her holy basil plant.

I'm beside myself now. I can't even attend my mother's cremation at the ghats. The police won't allow it, so my sons perform the duty and show me digital pictures of her spirit parting in plumes of black smoke. After viewing these pictures, I retreat to my puja room and sit before my altar where I have placed the key, and sob.

After a moment, I invoke Shiva and chant to Manjushri *Om A Ra Pa Ca Na Dhih* to calm my racing mind and heart. I put the key back in its original Chinese silk pouch, which remains stained from the muddy waters of Ishu Canal. As I do this, I see the laminated business card of Professor Sidney Lees from Stanford University.

Suddenly, a resurgence of hope fills the core of my being, as if the Lord of All Creatures and the Great Bodhisattva themselves provide me with a way out of the calamity I'm in. Professor Sidney Lees will get me out of Nepal. I need only contact him and explain my situation. He'll understand and sympathize with me because the whole world knows about the royal massacre and that our little kingdom has been plunged into turmoil. And he'll certainly help me if I promise to return the relic key he lost during the rickshaw mishap that occurred over fifteen years before.



Chapter 24: Temple of Illuminated Long Life

Professor Sid Lees

Just before dawn, a driver in a Cherokee Jeep takes Trizin and I about sixty miles deep into the mountains. We arrive at the convent as the morning sun illuminates three adobe and brick buildings recessed into a gray-brown desolate hillside rather like the Shakya Monastery. But the nunnery is much more modest and is painted white, red, and orange yellow, with wood framed windows, white awnings, and thick wooden doors that must have been built generations before.

Inside the compound, our driver parks behind an old freight truck with paneled sides and a dark-green canvas covering the bed. It reminds me of a WWII cargo truck which perhaps it is. About ten nuns in orange and red robes and with shaved heads are loading boxes onto the truck's back end.

"Soon the truck will depart for the border," Trizin tells me. "You'll be on it but first we must give you the key."

The driver of the Cherokee toots the horn and several nuns flock out the front doors of the convent. They greet us with namastes. "They've been expecting your arrival to retrieve their precious relic," the Khenpo remarks. He then introduces me to a nun in her sixties, the convent's abbess. Her head is shaved and she wears a rusty red jacket over her orange robes. "She speaks very little English," he tells me. "Her name is Opame but the nuns call her White Tara, Great Abbess of Longevity. She is keeper of the relic key."

The abbess leads us through a courtyard where nuns are growing potted begonias and gardens of healing herbs including garlic, green onions, ginger, and yarrow. A few nuns are gathering containers of water at a central well where four paths meet.

"Although ordained Buddhists vow to abstain from preparing food, these nuns are hidden away and must grow and prepare their own food," the Khenpo says.

At the end of the courtyard, the abbess escorts us into a large hall where about thirty nuns are sitting before wood framed easels painting thangkas. Trizin and I walk among them to view the colorful depictions of Shakyamuni, famous lamas, Manjushri, Amitabha, the Medicine Buddha, Tara, Avalokitesvara, and the Wheel of Life Dharmachakra. Now that I'm no longer under the scrutiny a Chinese monitor, I freely take pictures of the artists at work.

"Since ancient times," Trizin explains. "Thangkas have helped us visualize and become as calm as a pool of crystal-clear water unagitated by atmospheric forces."

The abbess says something in Tibetan, a colorful language that I've studied and listened to innumerable times. It has tonal characteristics that make me think of the rabbits hopping around the high plateau. I'm not fluent in outlying dialects and Trizin translates. "She says that thangkas guide and protect us and bring health and clarity to our minds."

From the craft shop, I follow the abbess and Trizin outside the main building and onto a trail up a steep ledge on the cliffs looming over the convent. The altitude doesn't bother the abbess or Trizin but I'm feeling lightheaded as I struggle up the slope for about half an hour. We finally reach a small structure built into the cliffs like the entry into a mineshaft, an adit.

"This is the Shrine House," Trizin says. "Now you receive the Manjushri key of 1000 Buddhas."

We remove our shoes and enter a twenty-by-twenty-foot cavern chamber that reminds me of the earliest Mogao grottoes except this room is lit by pungent yak butter lamps and has thangkas instead of frescoes on the walls. One thangka features Amitayus, the

Buddha of Limitless Light holding a red vase with the nectar of immortality. Other thangkas feature Avalokitesvara and the mountain sisters of long life.

At the back of the small chamber is an altar with brass bowls of water, rice, flowers, and fruit. Behind the altar are two bronze Taras about two feet high and seated in the lotus posture. Beside the Green Tara are bronze statues of two female deities.

"They are Tara's protectors Ekajati and Marichi," Master Trizin says. "Ekajati burns away negative thoughts. Marichi is goddess of morning light. She brings the promise of a new day."

Carved into the east wall of the chamber is a three by two-foot niche containing a contorted mummy with its knees to the chest. The abbess kneels before it, namastes, and chants *Om Tare Tuttare Ture Saha*.

"This is the White Tara of Long Life," Trizin says as he namastes his respect.

The mummy is dressed in fresh red robes brocaded with gold. Coral and jade mala beads hang around its neck, along with khatas. The unrecognizable face is pale white from barley power and the hair is covered with a crown of turquoise and silver. Before the mummy's niche is a small altar covered with a white scarf. On top lies a Manjushri Prajna Khadga about the length of an average man's fist.

As the abbess recites her mantra I namaste to the mummy and wonder if it's female or male even though Trizin assures me it's an ancient nun of an uncertain age.

"She is self-mummified," Trizin says. "The nuns have been worshipping her as White Tara since before Fa Wong delivered the relic key. She is their deity of long life."

I think about the self-mummified monks I've seen in Japan and the pictures of the 2000-year-old Chinese mummy known as Lady Dai of Changsha. The Chinese had discovered

this Han dynasty noblewoman during the Cultural Revolution but only recently have they featured her discovery in archaeological magazines. To determine this mummy's sex, age, and year of death would take scientific probing which I'm sure the nuns would never allow.

"Do you believe Fa Wong's story that she is Empress Wu?" I ask. "It's such a compelling idea."

"We don't know," Trizin says. "Perhaps we never will but we believe her spirit lives as the White Tara of Long Life. As you yourself suggested, maybe this ancient nun was a past life of the empress. It's possible. Many devout monks and nuns have self-mummified since Buddhism first arrived in Tibet. Perhaps even before, when people practiced the ancient bon religion. In any event, Fa Wong's belief that the mummy is Empress Wu isn't something the Chinese need to ever learn."

"Is it still common for the monks and nuns to self-mummify in Tibet?" I ask.

"In the mountains, Tibet used to have hundreds of mummified monks. But the Red Guards destroyed any they found. In reaction to this, we cremated many of our mummies to preserve their sacredness from the Chinese."

Abbess White Tara suddenly stops chanting, takes the Manjushri key from the altar and wraps it in a khata. From her jacket pocket, she pulls out a red embroidered pouch with yellow Chinese dragons and places the Manjushri sword snuggly inside. She zips the pouch and hands it to me then namastes.

As I take the red pouch the abbess speaks and Trizin translates. "All the Buddhas and deities surround the flaming sword of Manjushri. Please keep it safe until you give it to our spiritual leader. Remember, Brother Sid, the key can only be given. Never stolen. And never lost. Now you must leave this occupied country."

I place the red pouch in my money belt and promise not to take it out until I give it to the fourteenth Dalai Lama. Then I remove an envelope with one thousand dollars. I bow and hand it to the abbess. She namastes back. I also give Trizin an envelope with my donation to his monastery.

As we leave the shrine, I feel even more humbled than before. Avalokitesvara touches me with his brilliant light and grants me the task of enlightening the world. It's a daunting endeavor, as if I'm carrying the atomic codes to annihilation, as if the fate of the world rests in my money pouch and I can't let humanity down by failing in my mission. Whatever the case, I'm doing something bigger than my academic dreams. I'm performing a service in the name of Buddha and Lâm Văn Túc, the self-immolating monk on the streets of Saigon.

Chapter 25: Dear Mr. Sid Lees

Gopan

In my letter to Professor Sid Lees, I remind him of the unfortunate rickshaw incident and tell him about Everest Legendary and all the Buddhist and Hindu statues, paintings, and sacred items I sell online. I provide Mr. Lees with the URL so he can view the statues and confirm my credentials. He needs to understand that I'm somebody now, a man of means, not a lowly rickshaw driver. I also brag about my sons and write *They are well-educated young men and*

have taught me to use the computer and to read and write in English. Together, we have made Everest Legendary prosper. I then explain my situation.

You see, Mr. Lees, I'm currently under house arrest because of the terrible misfortune that befell Nepal. As a fellow Buddhist in a desperate time of need, I'm asking for your help. Can you please come to Nepal and arrange for me to leave the country before the police charge me with some kind of conspiracy connected to the royal massacre of which I played no part in? I'm but a simple man struggling to run a simple business, for the sake of his family.

I end the letter promising to return the Prajna Khadga in exchange for his help. *I have always presumed you gave me the relic as payment for the destruction of my rickshaw, those many years ago*. I don't want him to think badly of me for not having immediately returned the relic key.

I address the envelop care of his university, hoping beyond hope that Professor Sid Lees still works at Stanford and will receive my letter and answer my plea for help. The man must be about sixty now. I dread the thought that he's still angry with me, that he has always blamed me for the incident, or that he has retired from his position and is now living elsewhere, perhaps in a home for the elderly or on a tropical island like Hawaii and his university will have no idea where he now lives. Or worse yet, that Mr. Lees is deceased.

I give the letter to Geeta and she takes it to the post office telling the patrol officers outside our house that she's writing to her friend in America. She sends it priority first class, using what little funds I have stashed in my puja room. She doesn't question me about the letter, she can't read English anyway, but I tell her it's to a man who can help me and my family out of our current predicament.

"Does this have to do with the magic key?" she asks. I don't respond to her question but tell her to think only positive thoughts and ask Lord Ganesh and Buddha to grant us success.

Two months pass and I receive no reply from Mr. Lees. Each day I chant at my altar and ask all the gods for help, for me, my business, and my family. But Everest Legendary goes under and my sons put the shop up for sale. I write another letter to Mr. Lees and then the inspector starts arriving at my house every few days to ask me more questions.

Chapter 26: The Day before the Rickshaw Incident

Professor Sid Lees

I have a quick meal of tea and tsampa before the nuns carefully hide me and my pack under straw in the back of the "WWII GMC" utility truck loaded with crates of thangkas. As the truck leaves the convent for Highway G318 to Kodari, Nepal, on the other side of the Friendship bridge, I think about how the Dalai Lama felt when he and his fellow lamas escaped over the mountains to freedom from oppression.

Before long the truck is reeking of straw dust, paint, turpentine, and glues that, along with the high altitude and cold are making my head spin. I'm cramped, claustrophobic, and unable to see anything. I can't risk sticking my head outside the back canvas because I have no way of knowing if the Chinese are behind us. Before we left the convent, the driver, a

small man named Jampo, instructed me to wait for him to appear at the back end whenever the truck stops because we were going to encounter several Chinese checkpoints along the highway.

I try to sleep but can't. Then I start regretting that I won't be able to return to this wonderfully spiritual country. Once I escape from occupied Tibet, I'll be out for good. I'm sure my monitor Jamyang has already reported my absence to her cadre. She's probably in big trouble. Oh well. To calm my nerves, I visualize Tara with her hand gesture of fearlessness and chant *Om Tare Tuttare Ture Saha*. I touch the money belt against my waist to reassure myself that the relic is still with me. As soon as I detect its shape, my head instantly clears and I feel at ease. Tara works her magic.

After a few hours, Jampo stops along the roadside and opens the back canvas. "Master Lees," he yells. I peer from my hidey-hole and he tells me to stretch my legs, urinate or do whatever else I must do. He gives me a cup of tea from his Chinese Thermus and a piece of balep bread. I eat what I can but hesitate to drink too much tea because I can't tell Jampo to stop whenever I need to urinate.

As we stand at the back of the cargo truck Jampo lights a cigarette and offers me one. I tell him I don't smoke but am tempted to, in order to bond with him, the only person I'm able to see during this harrowing journey to Nepal.

"We're only a few miles from the Friendship Bridge into Nepal, Master Lees," Jampo says as he smokes beside me.

Gusts of wind begin flapping the truck's canvas. In the distance, before snowcaps and tall green mountains, a herd of yaks are wandering across yellow rapeseed fields that

shimmer under the sun. The scenery soothes my mind and I forget about being cramped in the cargo bed, for a brief moment. Then I'm back hiding and constantly checking my watch.

The truck abruptly stops in what I assume is Nyalam. For several minutes, the engine loudly idles and sputters. Unable to see what's going on, I wonder if Jampo stopped to talk to the Chinese or purchase gas. I keep still and wait.

Above the truck's rumbling, I hear a commotion of voices. The smell of exhaust is overwhelming and I dare to pound on the back of the cab. But Jampo doesn't respond and the truck continues to idle. I touch the key in my money belt and ask Manjushri to calm my nerves. After an hour, the truck engine stops running but Jampo doesn't appear to tell me what's happening. Obviously, he can't or he would. Voices continue to resonate but I hear no other traffic or idling vehicles.

I wait, drink sparingly from my flask of water, and keep looking at my watch but nothing happens except for the sound of men calling out commands or directions. After two hours I can no longer bear my situation. I get up and open the canvas cover just enough to peek out.

Behind Jampo's truck is a line of buses, vans, trucks, and cars unable to move, like a 240-freeway traffic jam. Tibetan people are standing by their vehicles along the road through a town of dingy and dusty gray-white buildings with colorful prayer flags draped among them. Dogs are sleeping at the roadside where boulders are colorfully painted with Buddhist inscriptions and pictures. These "mani stones" are another form of Tibetan worship like the prayer flags and prayer wheels.

I don't see any trees or plants in Nyalam but the valley beyond has square fields of green barley and in the far distance I see Mt. Everest, a spectacular sight. There aren't any

Chinese around and no one is looking my way or paying any attention to Jampo's truck. It's just one of many in the Himalayan traffic jam.

I must urinate, somehow. Not knowing what else to do I once again feel the relic key and beg Manjushri to shield me as I pull aside the canvas and jump down with a crash. My stiff legs explode with sensation from the abrupt movement. No one is looking my way. Everyone seems preoccupied with loitering around their vehicles. I urinate against the truck's muddy wheel and no one seems to notice this or if they do, they think nothing about it. Other men are doing the same thing. I wonder what women do. They seem to have no recourse but to hold their bladders! How does the opposite sex manage?

At last, I look down the road to assess what's holding everything up. What I see astounds me. Because no one seems to care about my presence, I jump into the passenger seat of Jampo's truck, help myself to a cup of tea and watch the drama unfold.

Three trucks ahead is an old blue utility truck on a cargo platform outside a concrete building. Its cargo bed is teaming with crates. Parked before it, blocking the only road through town, is another truck with an empty cargo bed butted against the platform. About ten Tibetan men, Jampo among them, are on the platform trying to push the loaded truck onto the cargo bed of the parked truck. Men on the road are directing them. I assume the one Western man trying to help is a Russian or Romanian contract worker driving back to Nepal because European and American tourists are restricted to tour groups or a Chinese monitor. Fortunately, I don't see any Chinese around, not even the police.

I watch the drama for a while and nothing budges. Behind Jampo's truck, the traffic line increases. Finally, the men on the platform succeed to get the front tire of the loaded-down truck onto the parked truck's cargo bed. Then they realize that the loaded truck is too

wide. They heave the truck back onto the platform and someone drives the parked truck off the road and unblocks the traffic jam.

Is this a Zen Koan? I ask myself, *a senseless riddle intended to bump me into enlightenment*. No, my mind tells me, this is a stupid waste of time because nobody used a measuring tape. Whatever happened to the Tibetan Buddhist use of logic, reasoning, and inquiry to establish the true nature of reality?

Jampo returns to the truck huffing and panting from hours of fruitless effort. He's astonished to find me in the passenger seat but I reassure him I'm safe. "I don't see any Chinese around and I have the power of Manjushri's protection."

Jampo gives me a questioning look. Obviously, he isn't aware of the relic key. My driver only knows that he's sneaking me out of Tibet for some reason. He grins and suggests that I return to my hiding place while he goes to a restaurant and buys some momos. "I'll drive outside of town so you can enjoy dinner in the fresh evening air. We wait until an hour past sunset. It's best to cross the Friendship Bridge in darkness when not so many trucks are making the crossing."

Half an hour later, Jampo parks next to a river blasting along the highway. I sit in the passenger's seat and enjoy the momos with salty yak butter tea. Because I'm famished, I eat the entire box of fried meat dumplings with tomato sesame and chili chutney. Jampo refuses any for himself. "I already ate my dinner," he insists. I don't argue because I can't get enough of them. They're delicious and I don't even care what kind of meat was used to make them. Probably yak.

In the darkness, a truck passes and I grow concerned about my escape from Tibet with the relic. Jampo notices and says, "You hide again and be extra quiet until we cross the Friendship Bridge into Nepal."

Reluctantly, I clamber back to my hidey-hole, hoping this will be the last time. Jampo takes off and we soon reach the high mountain town Zhang Mu. I sense the steep descent and endless sharp switchbacks down to the Friendship Bridge over the Koshi River.

When the truck stops, a gust of wind flaps the canvas. I faintly hear the rushing river and know we're at the Friendship Bridge. I listen to the Chinese border guards asking Jampo questions and presume he's showing them permits and offering bribes.

My heart pounds, my bladder is ready to burst, my gut swirls from the momos, and the stench of old paint accosts me once again. I don't panic. Instead, I deeply inhale the thin air, touch the Manjushri key and make a mental prayer to Vajrapani and Ganesh. *See me past this obstacle and carry me unimpeded across the bridge.*

The Chinese begin to argue with Jampo. I can't understand what they're saying but my heart drops. The wind begins to gust. I listen to the raging river and hear footsteps then a pounding on the side panels of the truck. My forehead and armpits are sweating even in the dry, cool air. And my gut is gurgling uncontrollably.

I listen intently as someone pulls back the canvas flaps while still arguing with Jampo. With my limited knowledge of Chinese, I understand the guards are concerned about illegal shipments of Buddhist relics leaving Tibet.

"No, no," Jampo protests in Chinese. "These are freshly painted thangkas for the markets of Kathmandu. I have proper credentials and permits."

From where I'm lying between two crates, I see a flashlight beaming into the truck bed surveilling the cargo in zig zags, like the switchbacks.

The guard's about to close the back panel when my bowels explode with a loud burst of air. I'm instantly relieved of the pressure but know I'm now in big trouble.

"Hao, hao?" I hear the guard exclaim in Chinese as he reopens the back canvas.

"Jampo!" I yell and pound on the cab. "Let's go!" I don't know what else to do. If the Chinese catch me, who knows how long they'll detain me? Most certainly they'd confiscate the relic despite Trizin's assurance that the key can't be stolen or lost. It can only be given. Can it be taken by force? I don't know and don't want to find out. Under no circumstances would I ever freely hand over the relic to my captors. Besides, I suddenly feel under the protection of all Buddhas of all worlds and epochs. They won't let me fail in my mission.

While the Chinese guards yell out commands and threats, Jampo revs up his old truck, breaks through what sounds like wooden barrios, and zips forward, presumably across the narrow concrete bridge toward Nepal. In the back of the truck, I see only darkness. But, like a blind person, every nuance of sound is exaggerated in my ears.

A *pop, pop, pop* rips through the air. The guards are firing shots. But it's too late for them, I tell myself while holding tight to my money belt and listening to the truck rumble foreword. In a moment, we're in Kodari and the Chinese can't do anything about it.

The Nepali customs present no problem because I already have a multi-transit five-year visa for business purposes. In less than half an hour, I'm sitting in the front passenger's seat traveling down the Araniko Highway to Kathmandu. It's exhilarating to talk freely with

Jampo without worrying about getting caught. However, I'm concerned he may lose his job of transporting thangkas from Tibet to Nepal.

"I know I won't be allowed back into China or Tibet," I say. "Unless Tibet becomes independent. I'm eternally grateful to you, Jampo. But what will you do now? Can you ever return to Tibet?

"Don't worry, Master Lees. I stay in Kathmandu six months then return to the nunnery for more thangkas. My home is Kathmandu. I work at Thangka House with my brother. He goes with me to get thangkas from nunnery, many times. Besides, the Chinese rotate every two weeks and they're reluctant to report border incidents. They'll think a lama was escaping to India and they don't like the publicity."

I'm relieved Manjushri carried me from occupied Tibet without my causing someone else harm and creating bad karma. I've made it to Nepal intact with the Buddhist relic firmly concealed in my money belt. My mission is nearly complete. Except, now I must face Maureen and tell her I have to immediately fly to Dharamsala, India for a meeting with the fourteenth Dalai Lama. I don't think she'll like this little surprise. I can hear her complaining now.

Chapter 27: Nepal Clamps Down

Gopan

Just when I think I've convinced the inspector of my innocence, a superintendent, Mr. Niraj Asha Shahi, arrives at my door. He carries a baton and wears a stiff blue dress shirt with many merit badges on the left breast and shoulder epaulets with three gold stars. He tells me he's learned new information and that the government is clamping down on Maoists. "We're concerned they've infiltrated the palace and played a role in the royal massacre on the night of June 1st."

"What does this have to do with me?" I ask. "I'm not a Maoist. I loved my king." We are sitting in my TV room, Shahi is in my chair and I'm on the sofa between the two officers who accompanied the superintendent.

Shahi helps himself to a cigarette from a wood box on the coffee table. An officer lights it, Shahi takes a drag then says to me, "Mr. Subba, we've found pamphlets in your shop connecting you to Mr. Shyam Bhandari and his escape from Central Jail."

"No! This isn't true!" I lean forward while wondering if they found something Aftab had left in the back office. "This is preposterous, in fact. Someone planted the brochure," I insist, but then realize that this *must* be Aftab's doing. I can't betray my son so I continue to deny everything.

"Mr. Thapa, in the shop next to yours, has informed us about your connection to the Maoists, you and your sons."

"No, this is a lie," I protest. "Hari has nothing to do with anything other than his work. He's not a political man. And my friend Mr. Thapa is only angry because my son broke off the engagement to his daughter."

“We have already questioned your sons,” the inspector says. “They aren’t accused of any crime because we have no evidence against them. But we have all the computers from your shop.”

“You’ll find nothing on our computers,” I say with confidence because I know Aftab kept his political views off his business computer. At least that’s what he’s always claimed. Now I question why a pamphlet was in the shop and reason the police planted it there to trap me. They’re desperate for a suspect other than Dipendre.

“Besides,” I continue to protest. “Everest Legendary is up for sale. I can’t sustain the business while on house arrest. My world is falling apart, Superintendent Shahi, Sir. Have some compassion. I’m just a simple man trying to provide a better life for my family. I’m not a criminal and certainly,” I rise from the sofa, filled with emotion. “I had nothing to do with the terrible, terrible massacre of my beloved king, queen, and the royal family.”

“Take it easy, Subba,” Shahi says as he snuffs out his cigarette on the coffee table ashtray. He nods to his officers and they head for the exit. “We’ll be returning,” he tells me before he’s out the door. “Understand. You’re still under house arrest.”

Chapter 28: The Shringar Hotel in Thamel

Professor Sid Lees

At nearly three in the morning, Jampo drops me off at the Shringar Hotel in Thamel, Kathmandu. On previous trips to Nepal, I had stayed at the Shringar and found it

comfortable and reasonable at fourteen dollars a night, including government tax. While we were in Hong Kong, I arranged for Maureen to meet me here the first week of December. I reserved the corner room on the fifth floor because it has two side balconies with views of the distant mountains at sunrise. A few days before, Maureen had checked-in under the name of Mrs. Sid Lees.

When I arrive, we fall into each other's arms for a long while. The apricot scent of her luscious hair drives me crazy. It's like I've arrived home after a lengthy tour in the Vietnam War, or like I've just escaped from the shores of Normandy and returned to my French lover in Paris.

Despite my weariness, we spend the next hour passionately making love. When we relax, I want to tell her about the relic, now that I can, but she's too wrapped up with complaints about Agatha Weatherby.

"She was a rude old British Bitch," Maureen says as we cuddle under the covers. "She expected me to do things for her without my even understanding what she wanted me to do. For example, I wanted to go to shopping but Agatha didn't want to leave her house. So, I went alone. Then, after I returned, she asked *Why didn't you post my mail*? *It was sitting on the table. Anyone would know I wanted these letters posted. Why didn't you bring me back a carton of Dunhill? You know I like to smoke Dunhill.* I tell you, darling, Agatha didn't like me and I didn't like her."

Because I don't want to argue, I don't tell Maureen that I've always liked Agatha and never noticed these rude peculiarities. Instead, I ask, "Did you tour Kathmandu?"

“No,” she replies emphatically. “I sat on the terrace reading Danielle Steel and Jackie Collins waiting for you to show me the sites. I want to go to Durbar Square and the Monkey Temple . . . as soon as we get up.”

“We can’t go today, darling. I’m rushing off to India to meet with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. I have an ancient relic to give him.”

“What?” Maureen asks with irritation. As I anticipated, she isn’t expecting anything other than my full devotion to her.

I kiss her delicate hand. “Listen, darling, it’ll be a quick two-day trip. Then I’ll show you all the sites of Nepal. We only have two more weeks before our scheduled flight home.”

“I know. It’s just that I’m so glad you’re here. I really missed you.”

“I missed you too, Maureen.” I look at her sorrowful pout. “Would you like to come with me to meet the holiest lama of Tibet, perhaps of Buddhism? I didn’t include you when I arranged the audience but I believe if you’re with me, as my assistant, you can meet him too.”

“What are you talking about?” Maureen asks with frustration. “Aren’t I more important than anyone else?”

I sit up on the bed, take my money belt from the night stand, and remove the Manjushri sword from the Chinese silk pouch. This is the first time I’ve looked at the relic since it lay on the altar before the white Tara mummy inside the shrine house. And although I promised not to take it out of the pouch until I gave it to His Holiness, I show it to Maureen and explain my intentions to leave by tonight. Besides, the Khenpo or Abbess hadn’t asked for that promise. I had simply made it as an expression of my humbled emotions.

“But you just got here. Can’t you go next week?”

“This is much too important to delay. Look, darling, I’ve been through the most harrowing experience of my life.”

Maureen takes hold of the small brass object. As she admires it, the relic seems to glow in her eyes. Perhaps its magic will soothe her spirit, I’m hoping.

“Where did it come from?” she asks.

“A Song Dynasty monk from the Mogao Grottoes brought the relic to an ancient convent near Shigatse. Before that it belonged to Empress Wu. That’s why I first went to Dunhuang and traveled across China into Tibet.”

Maureen touches my mouth with the key. “That’s an incredible story, darling Sid. But you must first take me shopping. This morning, after we wake up. I need to buy gifts for Jim and send them off post marked today or tomorrow. I promised gifts for several friends. Tara brass statues, Buddha bells, singing bowls, and thangkas. At least you can show me the Monkey Palace, Durbar square or the Shiva Temple and ghats.”

I’m pressed to deliver the key but if I don’t make Maureen happy, she’ll start complaining. “Okay,” I say. “I’ll take you to the Thangka House this morning. After I arrange for our flight to India.”

“I don’t want to go,” she says.

“Why?” I put the relic back in the pouch and money belt which I wrap around my waist. I don’t feel right unless I secure it in this way.

“Because Jim said he was calling me tomorrow and I want to tell him you’re in India. I want to prove that we aren’t always chumming around together. He never needs to know about us.”

“Of course, we’ve already discussed this. Upsetting Jim is the last thing I want to do. Hopefully, he’ll never know about us.”

“Look Sid. If you want to know the truth, my phone call with Jim yesterday depressed me.”

“Why?”

“Because he asked if you and I have become chummy.”

“What did you tell him?” I ask with concern.

“I explained, once again, that you and I are nothing more than professional colleagues and friends. That I’m your photographer and assistant. While in Hong Kong, I phoned him daily. He knew you and I were apart, that you were in China. I don’t know darling. He didn’t sound right. I’m afraid he’s suspicious after all. I want him to talk to me here in Kathmandu and then you give him a call from India. That way he’ll understand that we’re not always together. I care about his feelings and our betrayal would kill him. He trusts us both implicitly.”

“I know, but I’m telling you Maureen, it’s time we get this thing right. Divorce him as soon as we get back home.”

Maureen doesn’t respond because she still doesn’t want to take this leap. She gives me her pouty look and rolls over to catch maybe an hour of sleep.

I try but can’t fall asleep. I have too many conflicting thoughts on my mind. Perhaps I’m feeling distressed from my harrowing month in China and all the pressure I was under to achieve my mission while keeping it hidden from the Chinese. Or maybe it’s all the passion and emotion stirred in me from my reunion with Maureen. During this trip, I’ve pressed her to divorce Jim many times but now I’m not so sure about my relationship with

her. While in China and Tibet, I was simply too preoccupied with my quest to be obsessed with her like I've been for years. It's like an old habit has somehow died off or faded away. Now she says she's missed me and I tell her the same. In truth, I don't think I missed her at all. At the same time, I'm happy my love life is blossoming again after a month of living like a celibate monk. It's all so confusing, like I'm riding dancing dragons looking for pearls to hold.

Chapter 29: One Day, Something Miraculous Occurs

Gopan

Geeta enters my puja room and eagerly hands me a letter, postmarked from Colombo, Sri Lanka and addressed to Geeta care of my neighbor Mr. Varahi Bhumi, as I instructed Mr. Lees to do. The police intercept the mail that arrives at my house if it's addressed to me and concerns Everest Legendary.

Dear Mr. Subba Mr. Sid Lees writes *Stanford forwarded your letters to me. I received them this morning. I now live in Sri Lanka and head the Department of Buddhist Culture at the Buddhist and Pali University, BPU, outside of Colombo. Since BPU was established in Homagama four years ago, I've been teaching Buddhist culture and history to both local and foreign students, laymen, and members of the sangha.*

I remember you well because I had lost the Prajna Khadga relic that day and was duty-bound to deliver it to the Dalai Lama. I felt badly about your loss and have always regretted that my companion refused to give you the fare you asked for. In this way, I understand how you assumed I gave you the pouch of money with the key. Perhaps it was a karmic act that you received the key from me. In truth, Mr. Subba, I failed my mission to deliver this relic to the leader of Tibet. But I promise to help you and your family leave Nepal and move to Sri Lanka and will be forever grateful if you return the relic to me so I can complete my mission.

In Sri Lanka, you can obtain a resident visa as my assistant, because of your background and knowledge of Tibetan, Nepali, and other Buddhist artifacts. Please prepare for my arrival with all the business documents you have. I will schedule a flight to Kathmandu for the end of October. Sincerely, Sid Lees.

After reading the letter five times, I set it aside with a deep sigh of relief. Mr. Lees is coming to rescue me! I place the letter beside the Shakyamuni statue on my altar then take the magic key from its pouch, hold it up, and say, "Manjushri, you are my saving's grace *Om A Ra Pa Ca Na Dhih*." Instantly, a sense of freedom fills me as if I'm no longer on house arrest, even though I am. But I have a way out of the entanglement I've created and it's going to happen very soon.

In his letter, Sid Lees provides me with his home address and phone number and advises me to call him. Since I can't, I have Geeta go to Mr. Bhumi's house and place the call to Sri Lanka. When she returns, she tells me that on the day Mr. Lees arrives in Kathmandu, she'll meet him in Durbar Square before the shrine to Kala Bhairava where I suggested they meet. That way, if the police question my wife about where she's going, she'll simply say *To make puja to Kala Bhairava*. Hordes of American tourists are now back wandering Durbar Square and if the

police should follow Geeta, Sid Lees will appear as an elderly tourist asking Geeta about the shrine and temples.

On the afternoon of the meeting, Geeta returns home and greets me on the roof where I'm quietly enjoying my afternoon chai and a cigarette. She sits on her chair beside me and explains that everything went well with Professor Sid Lees. "He has a terrific plan to help you escape from Nepal," she says. "He's very kind and quite handsome for an old gentleman. Tall, thin, with a distinguished gray beard. He asked if we had a car he could use. I told him the police are watching your every move and that they watch your turquoise Mahindra. I suggested our sons' Toyota Hilux pickup. They no longer need it now that they won't be traveling to India or Tibet for thangkas and statues. And the police aren't watching their car."

"Geeta," I say with annoyance. "The Toyota is too small for all of us! What about you and my sons? Do you plan to ride in the cargo bed!?"

"Gopan, I'm not on house arrest and I don't want to go with you. Hari and Aftab will take care of me. They already agreed to this and don't want to go with you either. We're happy in Kathmandu and will survive on our own. I don't understand what mischief you've made for yourself but your karmic aura is a mess and I no longer want to be a part of it. Go on your own, husband. This is your chance to make a new life for yourself."

I sip my chai, light another cigarette, lean back to enjoy a late afternoon breeze, and don't argue with Geeta or try to pressure her into reconsidering her decision. The fact is, deep inside I want to leave on my own, leave my sons and wife behind. Aama is gone. I had cared for her as best I could and in the end gave her a good life away from the streets and out of the shantytown. My sons can take care of their mother, especially Aftab, the creator of all the trouble I'm in. I really don't want to start a new life with him in my presence.

Chapter 30: Day of the Rickshaw Incident

Professor Sid Lees

"It's 8 o'clock." Maureen wakes me. "Let's get started. I've plenty of film for pictures." She practically drags me into the lobby where I phone the airport and arrange for my flight to India tonight.

At the Thangka House, Maureen buys ten thangkas for Jim, her friends, and for my office at Stanford. In a large bag, she carries the rolled and packaged paintings and I carry about ten singing bowls and buddha bells in my backpack. We then grab a tuk tuk to Durbar Square to look for more Tibetan bells and religious statues.

The square is crowded with tourists, Hindu and Buddhist devotees, and merchants selling wares on blankets spread on the cobblestones before the temples, stupas, and monuments. Maureen takes dozens of pictures and I follow close behind her while thinking about taking a taxi straight to the airport to catch an early flight. I'm not fully into pleasing Maureen especially when she starts complaining. "This pollution is killing me," she says. "I need to wear a mask. Can't imagine why more people don't wear them, unless masks have no effect in all this smog . . . All third world cities choke on exhaust . . . No emissions control, especially with these trucks belching out black soot."

I don't respond to her rants because I'm trying to catch my wind after a night without much rest. "At least breathing is easier than in Tibet," I say. "Despite the bad air quality, we're over seven thousand feet lower in elevation!"

Maureen is about to make an offhand retort but before she can a tout approaches and offers to sell us hash or opium "at good prices." We say nothing. I find that ignoring these interlopers from the beginning is the only thing to do, unless of course we want drugs, which we don't. Once you show any interest, the tout latches on.

I approach one of the merchants selling brass items on a mat near the Shiva Parvati red brick temple. A large yellow cow meanders by as I asked the price of Tibetan bells.

"Too high," I say and walk away. But the merchant follows me and Maureen, pestering us to buy the bell while scarcely lowering his price. Finally, when we're near the gray stone Krishna Temple that towers like a pyramid, I buy the bell for five dollars just to get rid of the pesky man.

"We can't really shop here," I say to Maureen who's taking pictures of me before the temple. "These guys persist until I weaken. Why don't we head back to the hotel? I'm about ready to fall out."

I look at Maureen but she's distracted by a thin, photogenic sadhu sitting cross-legged on the platform by the stone lions. He has long curling nails and coils of matted hair, wears only a loin cloth, and his face is marked with white and red powders. Maureen tries to take his picture but he waves at her and insists she pay an offering first.

"No, that's all right, old man," Maureen says and walks away.

“It is only fair to pay him what he wants,” I suggest after catching up with Maureen who’s on her way to the Hanuman statue on a pilaster under a red parasol. A crowd of Hindus are making puja before the monkey god.

“I didn’t take his picture because I hate being such a tourist. I want only candid shots.”

We sit on the platform of the red brick Jagannath Temple where pigeons abound. A man approaches and says, “Hi, hello, where do you come from?” We talk a moment then he offers to show us around. We decline but then another tout approaches and offers his service. Unfortunately, I can never tell if someone is genuinely being friendly or simply wanting some cash. Exasperated, I again ask Maureen, “Can we go back to our room now so I can get ready for tonight?”

“But darling.” She sets aside her Nikon SRL and pays full attention to me. “You’re leaving me tonight and we just got back together. Let’s take a rickshaw to the Monkey Temple. I can shoot photos of us on the rickshaw. Come on lover.” She pulls at my hand. “It’ll be cozy and you can tell me more about this mysterious monk from Dunhuang.”

“What about all our bags?”

“We’ll leave them on the rickshaw. The cabbie will watch our stuff if we pay him. We don’t have time to run back to the hotel.”

Reluctantly, I agree to this one last indulgence but insist that at the Swayambhunath Stupa, we take a taxi straight to the Shringar so I can rest and prepare for the night’s flight to New Delhi and the connecting flight to Dharamshala.

Chapter 31: Gopan and Sid Lees Meet Again

Gopan

At the Kala Bhairava shrine, Sid Lees meets with Geeta one more time to finalize his plan. He tells my wife that he'll have to abandon my sons' pickup in Patna because we won't have time to sell it or arrange for its return to Kathmandu. When Aftab learns of this, he protests but I become furious and tell him he needs to consider this as his karmic payback for causing such harm to his father.

"Now you and your brother have to make it on your own," I exclaim to Hari and Aftab while we sit in the front TV room. I've sent Geeta away. I simply don't want her around to listen to what I must tell my sons. "And you'll do so without my help or the use of any magic key. However, because I've helped you both become educated businessmen, I know you'll succeed." I then look at Aftab on the sofa and emphasize, "As long as you keep away from politics and Maoist comrades of ill repute!"

Ghatasthapana, October 17, 2001

My escape takes place during the October New Moon when the fifteen-day festival of Dashain begins and commemorates Kali's defeat of all demons. After sunset on the day known as Ghatasthapana, Sid Lees parks the Toyota on the street behind my house. To distract the patrol officers parked in our driveway, Geeta takes them a meal of dal baht, dumplings, and curried

vegetables catered from a local restaurant. She keeps the officers preoccupied by placing red vermillion tikas on their foreheads and chanting, *"Durga, the goddess Kali, kills our enemy demons."*

While the officers happily eat their meal and listen to Geeta sing, I slip out the back door into the darkness, scale the back wall, and meet Mr. Lees for the first time since the unfortunate rickshaw incident. He seems happy to see me again, although he rushes me into the passenger seat where I duck down with my small satchel containing some of the money I've stashed away, my passport, my business documents, and pictures of my merchandise from the website. The Manjushri key is deep inside my pants pocket. I've decided not to mention it to Mr. Lees at least for the moment. We're in such a dither to leave anyway that he says nothing except "hurry, hurry, my friend."

As Mr. Lees carefully drives through the crowded city, I hear people singing and chanting. I picture the Nepalis waving colorful flags and adorning one another with vermillion tikas and marigold leis. I keep quiet, as instructed, and silently pray that the government won't go after my house and all the fine things I've provided my family.

After forty minutes or so, Mr. Lees says, "We're outside Kathmandu, Mr. Subba, on the Tribhuvan Highway. You may sit up now."

Feeling cramps in my legs and back, I sit in the passenger seat, stretch, and ask, "Where are we going? Sir."

"We're driving straight to Patna, India." Mr. Lees hands me a bottle of water. "You must be thirsty." His kind eyes glance at me. He's indeed a handsome and distinguished elderly gentleman clad in his white dress shirt and bow tie.

I feel an urgency to become acquainted. He is, after all, rescuing me from a dire situation. But I don't want him to bring up the rickshaw incident because I fear he might hold me at fault, even after all these years, and even worse, he might say he lost the key and had no intention of giving it to me.

I touch the Prajna Khadga in my pocket and think to myself *I'm on my way to a new life, away from all I've ever known. How can I possibly part with this magic key when it's elevated my status? I'll need its powers in this new land. No!* I yell in my head *my situation is too precarious; I can't possibly surrender my key!*

"What's in Patna?" I ask, to distract Mr. Lees from asking about the key. I look outside the window and see we're well on our way south to the border with India.

"Why, Mr. Subba, I would say Patna is one of the most historical cities in India. Like the Ganges herself, the very history of Buddhism flows through Patna. Have you heard of the Mauryan and the Gupta dynasties?" Mr. Lees glances at me. I nod thinking *this man is filled with knowledge he loves to share.*

As Mr. Lees skillfully drives on the mountainous, two-lane highway named after Birendra's grandfather, he talks about Patna and the history of Buddhism. He has my full attention. "Were you aware that Shakyamuni attained enlightenment near Patna?" A freight truck passes by on its way to Kathmandu.

"Yes, Mr. Lees. Under the Bodhi tree. In fact, after I became a Buddhist, I made a pilgrimage to Lumbini and the Boudhanath Stupa. Do you think we can we go to Bodh Gaya?"

"No, I'm sorry. Wish we could but we're rushing to the airport as soon as we reach Patna. Here's another historical fact about Patna. Two centuries after Shakyamuni's passing, Ashoka

became king and embraced Buddhism. From Patna, he sent envoys to teach the dharma in the nine edges of his empire and erected 84 thousand temples and stupas with Buddhist edicts."

Mr. Lees carefully passes a tour bus then swerves back to the left lane, just missing the headlights of an oncoming truck. The truck driver blasts his horn and Mr. Lees flashes his headlights, as a curtesy apology. It seems that everything about my rescuer is well thought out and with consideration. He puts me at ease. He knows how to drive at night on this winding mountainous highway.

After a few moments of silence Mr. Lees asks, "You were born a Hindu, weren't you? I remember Shiva and Kali painted on your rickshaw. Why did you become a Buddhist?"

"Because of you, Mr. Lees. My son showed me an article you wrote. You said Shakyamuni rejected the caste system and embraced the middle-way of living."

"That's right, Gopan. May I call you that." He touches his gray beard.

"Please do." I gaze out the passenger window at the narrow berm.

"Shakyamuni teaches us to control harmful emotions like anger, hatred, and greed. He teaches us how to eliminate conventions that cause delusion and ignorance."

"Yes, yes," I say. "Very true, Mr. Lees." I can't call him Sid and am glad he doesn't ask me to. I respect him too much for such informality.

"Throughout Bihar and northern India Buddha revealed his wisdom," Mr. Lees continues. "In Deer Park, he set in motion the wheel that represents his teachings, his Dharma Chakra. If a man carefully follows the Dharma Chakra, he'll possess a clear mind free from delusions and misinformation. If not in this life, then in the next one or the one after that."

“That’s the burden of the lowest Hindu caste, Mr. Lees. My birthright chained me to a lowly status. As a Hindu, my only outcome was to be reborn and reborn into the same dreadful station of life. This is what my father taught me.”

“Buddhists believe that by performing good deeds they’re reborn into a better life or a better world.”

“Yes, Mr. Lees. I completely agree with all this. I follow the Dharma Chakra, although I still pay homage to Mother Kali and Lord Shiva. I had many Hindu statues and sacred objects at Everest Legendary including Krishna, Ganesh, Hanuman, Lakshmi, and Vishnu, and so on.”

“And at BPU, you’ll share your knowledge of these spiritual icons of Nepal. Gopan, let me tell you an important fact now that you’ll be living in Sri Lanka. Two of Ashoka’s children brought Buddhism to Sri Lanka. His son Mahinda converted the Sri Lankan king to Buddhism. The king’s sister-in-law ANULA, NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH QUEEN ANULA WHO POISONED HER HUSBANDS TO RULE… wished to become a Buddhist nun but no one in Sri Lanka could perform her ordination. Because Mahinda’s sister Sanghamitta was an ordained nun from the order of Maha Prajapati, the king sent an envoy to Patna to bring Ashoka’s daughter to Sri Lanka and ordain the queen and 500 women. Sanghamitta brought with her twelve nuns to help perform the ordinations and a sapling from the Bodhi tree. After 23 centuries, this tree still thrives at the temple in Anuradhapura.”

“I hope to see such a tree, Mr. Lees” I lean against the door, sleepy from the many hours on the Tribhuvan Highway.

“I’ll take you there, one day soon.” Mr. Lees promises. “After you’re settled at BPU.”

“What happened with Ashoka’s daughter?” I think about how Dipendre killed his sister Princess Shruti in the horrific massacre after she and her mother Queen Aishwarya tried to calm

the deranged and drunken Crown Prince. The tragedy is never far from my mind, nor is my sense of guilt because of my presence in the Narayanhiti Palace with the Manjushri key. These are feelings I'll never share with Mr. Lees, no matter how much I admire him for his compassion. I can't tell him about my use of the Prajna Khadga, his sacred relic.

"Sanghamitta ordained 1000 women," Mr. Lees continues, wakening me from my troubled thoughts. "She never returned to Patna and legend holds that Ashoka died broken hearted. She was his favorite child."

"Our king Birendra was an incarnation of Vishnu," I say to keep from dozing off. I'm afraid to fall asleep in Mr. Lees presence. Although I doubt that he would, I can't help but think he might reach inside my pocket and discover the relic key. When one is placed under house arrest and feels the burden of a global tragedy, it's easy to suspect everyone, including a bodhisattva like Mr. Lees. "But I doubt the same is true for our current king," I continue. "People don't like King Gyanendra. Some say he played a part in the massacre to grab power." I begin to feel unsettled again and decided not to say anything more tonight. I close my eyes and lean on the door, strongly feeling Mr. Lees' presence.

He's probably looking at me when he says, "Sleep, my friend. It's been a long night and we have another five hours of travel. I tend to go on and on once I get started lecturing about a topic dear to my heart."

"No worries, Mr. Lees." My eyes remain closed; I take a deep breath and exhale. I wish for a cigarette but I'm certain Mr. Lees doesn't smoke. "You're my bodhisattva and I owe you my life." I hear myself mumble as I fall into a dreamless sleep that lasts until we arrive in Motihari, India.

Mr. Lees already has a visa for India and I have no problem crossing the border because of the 1950 India-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship which allows free travel for Nepalis and Indians into each other's country.

After another three hours we reach Patna where Mr. Lees drives directly to the Jaiprakash Narayan Airport. He parks the Toyota in the long-term parking then purchases two one-way tickets on Air India to New Delhi. I know my sons are angry about losing their vehicle but I can do nothing about it. Besides, they now own my shiny new turquoise Mahindra.

We arrive in New Delhi early in the morning. This is my first visit to the bustling capital that my sons have flown to many times on behalf of Everest Legendary. From the Indira Gandhi International Airport, Mr. Lees and I take a taxi to the High Commission of Sri Lanka on Kautilya Marg Diplomatic Enclave to arrange for my entry visa.

After a night's rest at a traveler's lodge, we catch a direct flight on Air India to Colombo. I relax in a middle seat and Mr. Lees sits along the aisle so he can stretch his long legs. During most of the flight, he quietly reads documents written in the Pali script.

"This is for my research," Mr. Lees tells me. "Soon you'll understand Pali and Sinhalese. After we establish your residency, you can remain in Sri Lanka for a year. Then it's simply a matter of renewal. I've already contacted the ministry of higher education recommending your residency as my assistant. Your knowledge will be a great addition to our department. You can lecture about the bodhisattvas of Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism, explain how bodhisattvas postpone their enlightenment to help others on the path to peace and wisdom. In contrast, the Pali ideal is the arhat who attains nirvana for the sake of himself. With your background, Gopan, I'm sure you'll fascinate the students who are mostly followers of the Theravada Pali tradition."

“Is that your tradition, Mr. Lees?”

“Yes and no. No, because I’m an academic Buddhist interested in the history of Buddhism in general. But yes, Gopan, because these days my focus is on the Pali traditions which you’ll soon come to know as well.”

I nod in agreement and call for the steward. “I need some water,” I say, and Mr. Lees returns to reading his documents. I’m glad because I don’t want to talk about Mahayana bodhisattvas that might remind him about the Manjushri key.

I lean back and doze off for perhaps an hour. As soon as I wake, Mr. Lees sets aside his papers and directly asks me about the Manjushri relic. “Let me see it now. I’d like to put it safely in my money pouch.”

“Yes. The relic Prajna Khadga of Manjushri,” I awkwardly say feeling half asleep and suddenly plunged into reality. “Well, Mr. Lees, I didn’t mention it during our escape from Kathmandu because it had been too wild of a time. But I’ve been meaning to tell you. By the way,” I fumble to change the subject, even though I know I can’t. “What happened to that lady you were with all those years ago? With the flaming long hair. I thought she was your wife. She was a bit of a chattering monkey.”

Mr. Lees pleasantly chuckles. “Her name was Maureen. By the time we returned to the U. S., I’d had enough of her and she went back to her husband.”

“Husband?” I ask. “I thought that you were . . .”

“Yes, I know. Maureen and I had a torrid affair. Her husband was my best friend, in fact. He passed away shortly after Maureen returned to him. She got all his family money so I’m sure she’s rich happy and still beautiful. As for me, I swore to remain a bachelor for the rest of my life.”

“A splendid idea!” I laugh. “Mr. Lees, I’m very sorry about the relic. All these years I really believed you left it for me.”

Mr. Lees gathers his gray beard at his chin and looks at me. “As I said in the letter, I did feel badly about Maureen’s behavior toward you. That’s why when we had that rickshaw accident, I believed the key gave itself to you. That I didn’t lose it. That what happened was what was meant to happen. By some kind of karmic fate. But now I want the key back. I want to fulfill my promise to Khenpo Trizin and the people of Tibet. I do need it back. The relic.”

“To be honest, Mr. Lees. I’m hoping I didn’t lose it in all the commotion of fleeing Nepal.”

“The key cannot be lost,” Mr. Lees says, matter-of-factly. He’s not a man who becomes angry. He’s calm in his speech even though I know my reply must agitate him.

“Then I must have left it behind,” I say, irritated with myself and maybe with my new friend. I’m beginning to feel flustered and confused. Sid Lees is an esteemed professor of Buddhism. How can I possibly lie to such a man?

“The relic can never be found. Never stolen. It’s passed on. It’s given. This is what a Tibetan Abbess once told me. She was the keeper of the relic and feared the Chinese would destroy it. Which is why the Master Lama of the Shakya Monastery enlisted me to take it to the Dalai Lama. Rather in the same way you have enlisted me to help you escape from Nepal, Mr. Subba.”

I feel terrible. Like a lowly ragamuffin charlatan. But upon my dear mother’s atman, I can’t surrender the magic key and forsake my future in Sri Lanka. “My wife has the key,” I finally say, after a moment’s thought. “And she wouldn’t come with me, at the last moment.

She's left me. Wants nothing more to do with me. It was a time of great confusion, that's what happened to the relic. I left it in her possession."

"Then I'll have to return to Kathmandu and fetch it from her." Mr. Lees persists.

"I'll get it back, Mr. Lees. I promise. I'm forever indebted to you for all you're doing for me."

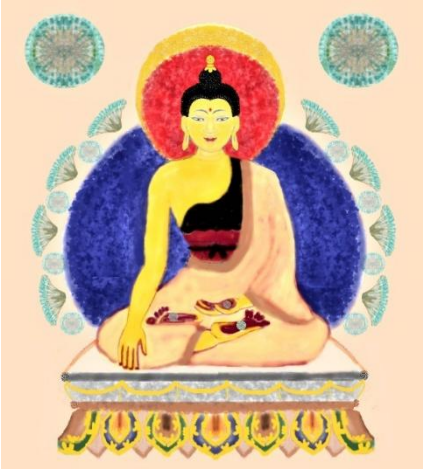
Mr. Lees smiles, leans back, picks up his document, and continues reading his papers in the Pali script.

I give up on the matter and fall silent while looking out the window across the shoulder of an old Indian woman who's snoring. I've never felt so conflicted in my life. I really don't want to work at the university for Professor Lees. I have no training in standing before a classroom of educated and religious students. I'll come off sounding foolish.

I lean back in my chair and pray to the many gods, saints, and spirits who have governed my life as a Hindu and a Buddhist. I ask them to take me to a new level of prosperity and promise myself and Manjushri that I'll use the key only for a short while and only for good purposes. After I prosper on my own, I'll return it to Sid Lees.

This can't be all wrong, I convince myself as I fall asleep dreaming of all the brass idols and thangkas at Everest Legendary. One by one, I see Manjushri, Vajrapani, Vajrasattva, Tara, Shiva, and the 1000-armed Avalokitesvara. I know they're watching me and offering their guidance and protection. Or, perhaps more likely, they're evaluating my karmic acts like a classroom filled with clever and curious students.

Part 2: A Tsunami in Sri Lanka



Chapter 32: At the Buddhist Pali University

Gopan

When we arrive at the Bandaranaike International Airport outside Colombo, it is a Full Moon celebrated holiday in Sri Lanka. Mr. Lees has no luggage except the pack he carries, so we quickly go through customs and hire a taxi to take us to BPU in Homagama.

The sultry and hot weather nearly knocks me over as we step outside the airport doors. It's so unlike the cool mountain air of Kathmandu. Mr. Lees hands me a kerchief and I wipe my sweaty brow. He seems unbothered by the tropical climate, rather like someone acclimatized to the high altitudes of the Himalayas. Already I'm missing the mountains but not my family. They betrayed me and I'm not sure how I feel about any of them, except Hari. He's always been an obedient boy, something I hadn't fully appreciated until my firstborn recklessly failed me in recent months.

As our taxi crosses the city, the contrast with Kathmandu strikes me. Instead of bicycle rickshaws, green, red, and blue tuk tuks buzz through the streets. Because Columbo edges the Indian Sea, a sea breeze flushes away most of the exhaust and smog. Unlike Kathmandu, the signs in Colombo are in English and neighborhoods appear more modern and less crammed together.

After two hours our taxi pulls onto the BPU campus and passes concrete buildings with lawns and gardens and flowering trees and palms. Between the buildings are stone pathways with young male students rushing to classes. Many are wearing orange robes with their right shoulders bare, unlike the monks in the cold mountain climates of Nepal and Tibet.

The taxi drops us off before the faculty hostel, a three-story, yellow, concrete building with wrought iron balconies. Mr. Lees says I'll be sleeping on the sofa in his flat for the time being. I'm uncomfortable with this arrangement but extremely grateful he has helped me escape from house arrest. Less than a month ago, Professor Lees was a mere stranger, now he seems like my dearest and oldest friend.

His flat is quite modest, especially compared to the two-story house I've just abandoned to my family. It has only one bedroom, one bath, a tiny kitchen, and the sparsely furnished front room where I'm to reside. Against one wall of this room are shelves with books on history, languages, and Buddhism. There are no thangkas on the walls, only a few pictures of the stupas around Sri Lanka, and instead of an altar, Mr. Lees uses a console table against the wall across from the sofa. On it, a brass Shakyamuni sits in lotus posture between two unfamiliar brass standing figures with their hands in namaste below their chins. I ask Mr. Lees about them as I set my satchel beside the sofa.

"They're antiques from a temple in Thailand," he says.

"Who are they, I mean?"

"Buddha's chief disciples. Sariputta stands on the right and Moggallana on the left. You might not recognize them because on Mahayana altars the Buddha usually sits between his disciples Ananda and Mahakasyapa."

“I’m really not familiar with Buddha’s disciples,” I say. “To tell you the truth, Mr. Lees, I haven’t read many sutras. My research into Buddhism was primarily for the thangkas, religious objects, and statues in my shop. In fact, your altar appears bare to me without Tara or Manjushri or any of the many other statues I had at Everest Legendary and in my puja room. It’s all so unfamiliar, as if Buddhism is now a foreign religion. Please tell me more about Buddha’s disciples.”

“In the Pali tradition, Sariputta organized the Buddha’s teachings and explained what it means to have the right view in life, to do wholesome deeds, and to cleanse the mind of harmful desires and delusions about reality.”

“About good and bad karma?” I closely examining the standing Sariputta. It seems to be speaking Mr. Lees’ words to me, at least in my mind.

“No, not karma,” Mr. Lees says. “We’re talking about cause, effect, and cessation. That’s all.” He then politely says he must check-in at his office but before leaving, he turns on a small TV on the coffee table before the sofa. “Now, friend Gopan, make yourself at home. Familiarize yourself with our television channels. This will help you learn to speak Sinhalese. Take a shower if you like. I’ll bring you some fresh clothes from my neighbor. He’s about your size.”

That night, while I try to fall asleep on the sofa, I sense Shakyamuni and his disciples staring at me, asking what I intended to do. It feels like I’m sleeping in the cab of my old rickshaw Nandiji. But now I’m even more uncomfortable because I know Mr. Lees will continue to ask about the key.

The next morning, Mr. Lees takes me to the Department of Immigration and Emigration in Colombo and I begin the application process for a resident visa. Later, he introduces me to

faculty and students around the university. He sets me up at a desk outside his office next to his secretarial assistant, a BPU graduate student named Riga who's younger than my youngest son Hari.

As the weeks pass, I file notes and keep Professor Lees' appointment schedule on the laptop the university provides me. I also use the computer to study Sinhalese and Pali and prepare my lectures about Mahayana and Vajrayana buddhas and bodhisattvas, and Hindu deities.

My lectures take place once a week in the language department for students studying Nepali languages and Tibetan. Some of them wear slacks and white dress shirts but most are ordained monks from Sri Lanka, a few are from Thailand, and one young man comes from Britain. There are no women. The students appear interested in what I have to say which encourages me to press on with the lectures. I make copies of the religious statues and objects of Nepal and Tibet so my students can understand who I refer to in the Mahayana and Hindu pantheons.

I enjoy discussing the beautiful statues and thangkas from my shop, although I never mention Everest Legendary because I don't want my students to know that my business failed and I certainly don't want one of these bright young men to investigate my past and uncover that I'm wanted in Nepal. I never speak about the royal massacre and possibly out of respect for me my students don't ask about it. Maybe Mr. Lees advised them not to. As always, I carry the magic key in my pocket which I touch from time to time during my lectures to give me confidence and to mentally suggest to my students that they shouldn't investigate my background.

When I return to Mr. Lees flat, after dinner in the student dining hall, I watch TV and try to forget about my new restrictive life and the fact that I'm unable to fully use the powers of my key. Most evenings, Mr. Lees brings up the matter of how we'll retrieve the relic. I touch the key in my pocket and mentally suggest he forget about it, but he doesn't. It seems to be foremost on his mind. Either the key's powers of suggestion have diminished or it's ineffective when it comes to Mr. Lees.

I still don't want to return the relic, at least not yet. Besides, I can't suddenly tell him I found it in my pocket. Then he'd know what a liar I am. Usually, I claim I'm trying to call my wife to ask her to look for it but she's refusing to take my calls. Then he offers to call her and I beg him to let me get the key.

"I know she admires you for what you're doing for me," I say. "But my wife is a stubborn woman and I doubt she'll even tell you if she has the relic. Geeta knows it's a powerful treasure and she's quite greedy when it comes to what valuables she has, especially now that I'm away."

I do my best to circumvent the whole issue. But I can't keep lying. Mr. Lees is a brilliant scholar and I'm sure he has only so much patience for my foolishness.

This exchange between us continues for several days, weeks, and then months. His persistence burdens me with guilt because I didn't keep my end of the bargain and am betraying a saint of a man, a bodhisattva looking out for my welfare. If it weren't for Sid Lees, I'd probably be locked away in Central Jail with radical Maoists accused of massacring the king, queen, and nine other royals, and no one would have a magic key to set me free.

Meanwhile, I keep busy helping Riga in the office and studying languages that are more difficult than Hindi and English combined. Whenever Mr. Lees is in a meeting or away lecturing

at monasteries, other universities and secondary schools, or he's taking his graduate students to Gangaramaya Temple in Colombo, I retreat to the flat to be alone and think about ways to start using the relic's powers. But mostly, I end up relaxing on the sofa and watching teledramas.

Before long, I fall in love with the most beautiful women I've ever seen. Her name is Nakshatra Sabapathi. She's a starlet on the ITN teledrama called *Aaliya Dharani* which centers around two shipping families in Colombo. In the serial, Nakshatra is in love with the most powerful shipping magnate of the drama. He lives in a mansion in Cinnamon Gardens, where I wish to live instead of on Mr. Lees' sofa.

Nakshatra has long flowing black hair, full lips, and eyes that sparkle with beauty. Her background intrigues me as well. From what I've read about her on the teledrama's website, she grew up in Colombo as an only child which is something we have in common. Her father moved to Sri Lanka from South India and become an executive at Ceylon Tea and Spices. Her mother was a Sinhalese woman from Kandy who died of leukemia at age 25 when Nakshatra was a toddler. Her father quickly re-married a woman name Nadeesha Madu. The step-mother entered Nakshatra in beauty pageants before Nakshatra was even five.

"Nadeesha gave me my drive to succeed and to always accentuate my natural beauty," Nakshatra is quoted as saying. "One day I hope to become Miss Universe and a film star in Bollywood." Nakshatra was Miss Teen Sri Lanka for a year before she began acting in commercials and her present heroine-vixen role in *Aaliya Dharana*.

At 23, Nakshatra is several years younger than Geeta. I don't miss my wife at all. Before I left Kathmandu, she became rather bothersome and made me think of a verse by the Tibetan mystic Milarepa. *In the end she becomes a toothless old hag and her fiendish look of anger prays upon the mind.*

As the days pass, my routine at the university plagues me with dread. I become more determined to use my magic key and somehow win over Nakshatra. It's all I think about, all I can hope for. I imagine making love to her before I fall asleep on Sid's uncomfortable sofa. I think about her beautiful face and svelte body dancing like a heavenly dakini. I hear her angelic voice singing to me like Sarasvati, maybe even Parvati. Then I'm able to sleep like baby Krishna.

I decide to somehow meet her but when I do, she must see me as somebody powerful. I can't pretend to be a shipping magnate because I know nothing about the industry and Mr. Lees assigns me too many tasks. I don't have time to investigate the topic. Besides, the shipping industry bores me. I have no connection to the oceans or seas. I'm from a landlocked kingdom in the Himalayas.

After a few days of serious contemplation, I come up with a brilliant idea. I'll present myself to Nakshatra as a Bollywood film producer who can make her dreams come true. I know all about Bollywood movies. Back in Kathmandu I watched at least two them every evening. I know the songs, the sets, the dances, and the plots of a great many films. My biggest concern now is how to slip from the confines of Mr. Lees.

The perfect opportunity arrives on Poson Poya, June 24, 2002, the Full Moon holiday that celebrates Mahinda's arrival in Sri Lanka more than two thousand years before. Everyone at the university has the day off and Mr. Lees and a group of his students are traveling to Anuradhapura to give lectures and join the festivities centered around the famous Bodhi Tree.

I decline Mr. Lees invitation to join him, claiming I have dyspepsia and need to rest. As soon as he leaves, I gather my clothes, all the money I've saved from my menial job, and the

laptop the university provided. Mr. Lees will assume I believe the laptop is a gift from him and mine to keep. But no matter, it's a tool I need almost as much as my magic key.

Before catching the bus to Colombo, I namaste to Shakyamuni and his disciples on the console altar, tuck the key deeply inside my pocket, and write Mr. Lees a long note explaining that I'm traveling to Tamil Nadu and then on to Patna to meet my sons and retrieve the key.

You're the kindest, most gracious person I've ever known I write. *I want to make things right. Long ago, you so generously gave me the key as payment for an unfortunate accident and I'm grateful for that. You placed me on the path of Buddhahood so I could permanently shed my lowly heritage. Thank you for this and for everything else you've done for me. I promise to return with the key as soon as I possible. Forever your devoted friend, assistant, and disciple, Gopan Subba.*

I weigh down the note with the Sariputta statue so that Mr. Lees will be sure to find it.

Chapter 33: Heavenly Creature of my Affection

Wilson Yapa, aka Gopan Subba

In Colombo, I find a hostel on Hospital Street and stay in a dormitory filled with backpacking Europeans, a few Americans, and several Sri Lankan and Indian men down on their luck. Everyone is chatty, wanting to tell tales and ask questions about the largest port city in South Asia. I find them all bothersome and avoid conversations especially with the Sri Lankan

men. They expect me to speak Sinhalese fluently, which I don't. Mostly, I keep to myself and contemplate my next step in creating a new life.

After a few days of this, I go to a Lanka Bell office and place a call to my sons. Six months have passed and I imagine the "heat" in Kathmandu has eased and they're ready to speak to me. I don't expect Geeta to even say hello. But when Aftab answers the phone, he curtly informs me that he, his brother, and mother can have nothing to do with me or they'll land in trouble themselves.

"Don't call us again, Ba," Aftab says. "Be glad you have a new life. Now I must live with the stigma that my own father had something to do with the worse royal massacre in history!" He then hangs up.

Aftab used to be my pride and joy. Then he caused all the mishap in my life, or at least most of it, and now he rejects me. It reminds me of another poem by Milarepa. *At first a son is . . . irresistible to the loving heart . . . as pleasing as a scion of the gods . . . Now this foe sprung of my loins . . . I have renounced such a worldly swill, and I do not want a son!"*

I leave Lanka Bell feeling dismayed, furious, and completely rid of my former identity and ungrateful family. *I'll start new family* I reassure myself. *After I win over Nakshatra Sabapathi—the heavenly creature of my affection.*

My first course of action is to take a Sri Lankan name. I don't want the Interpol of Nepal or Mr. Sid Lees to discover what I'm doing. When I win over my teledrama starlet, certainly she and I will be featured together in the teledrama tabloids. But it won't matter then because I'll have what I want in life and I'll be ready to give back the key.

Online, I locate the names of several recently deceased Sri Lankan men between ages 40 and 50 and decide to take the identity of a Mr. Wilson Yapa who died last year at age 44. In the

middle of the night, I sneak from the hostel, find my way to Pannipitiya Road, and use my key to enter the Registrar General's Department Office. With a torch light, I enter the offices, disable the security systems, and after several hours of hunting I take Wilson Yapa's birth certificate and destroy his death certificate. From the moment I exit the building, I renounce the name Gopan Subba and dub myself Mr. Wilson Yapa, Bollywood film producer.

The next day, I sit in a café thinking of my next move. I realize that when I meet my Sarasvati starlet, I'll need to explain why I'm not fluent in Sinhalese when I'm supposedly a Sri Lankan. Easily enough, I'll tell her I was born in Colombo in the year 1958, the year I was born, then claim that my mother was Indian and we spoke only Hindi when I was growing up. I'll suggest that when I was four my parents moved to my mother's home city Bombay because my father was a shipping magnate who moved his company to the main port of India.

Mumbai? She'll ask me. *Yes*, I'll reply. *But it was called Bombay during the years of my youth, before you were even born.* I'll tell her I didn't follow in my father's business but used the wealth he provided me to begin my career in the Bollywood film industry.

At only 21 years of age, about your age, I produced my first film, I'll explain. *Only recently have I returned to my father's homeland to buy a house on the coast and find a starlet, such as you, to become a Bollywood film star in my next production. Are you game?* I'll ask and she'll say *yes* and melt all over me. And then I'll hear Sarasvati play her veena.

Yes! I tell myself and leave the café for the Bandaranaike International Airport. I must start accumulating cash with the use of my key.

Over the next few weeks, I buy a nice suit of clothes and open safe deposit boxes at five different banks. People in Sri Lanka are wealthier, it seems, and I quickly have enough reserves

to move from the shabby dorm room into a suite at the Hotel Galle Face, one overlooking the Indian Ocean and the Galle Face Green where people fly kites on evenings it isn't raining. For several days I relax in luxury, swim in the pool, eat gourmet meals, sit in the sauna, have massages, and stay in my room to search online for new opportunities.

In the Colombo Gazette and Colombo Telegraph, I read that people are claiming their safe deposit boxes have been robbed but no one ever connects me to the robberies because when the banks contact me, I tell them my box was also robbed of all my valuables. Then the bank asks me to file a police report, which I do, but that's all there is to it.

While staying at Colombo's finest and oldest hotel, I work on establishing my credentials. I apply for a driver's license at the Department of Motor Traffic in Werahera where I learn Mr. Wilson already had a license. I tell the clerk *I lost it and need a replacement*. Next, I go to the Immigration & Emigration Department and ask for a replacement passport. The clerk says I've never had a passport and I say, *I meant I want to apply for one*. The passport clerk tells me I'll need a permanent address and professional passport photos and will have to present my National Identity Card with my birth certificate. I assume Mr. Wilson had such a card, so I head to the Department for Registration of Persons and get a duplicate National Identity Card. No problem.

I return to my suite and search for a nice apartment in Cinnamon Gardens but instead find a penthouse on Marine Drive, down the beach from my fabulous suite at the Galle Face. It's in an old, recently renovated building with a rooftop pool and patio cafe with Wi-Fi where I can enjoy the ocean view while working at my laptop and strategizing my next step in winning over my beautiful Nakshatra Sabapathi.

The apartment is furnished and has a 50-inch flat screen Sony TV and a top-of-the-line stereo system. I purchase several Bollywood DVDs featuring Aamir Khan, Shah Rukh Khan, Paresh Rawal, Irrfan Khan, Tabu, Sridevi, Rekha and I amass Sri Lankan, Hindi, and English music CDs including Whitney Houston, Michael Jackson, and Tony Benet. I try to imagine what kind of music a sophisticated lady like Nakshatra would enjoy when I bring her to my penthouse.

My front room has a console against one wall which I decide to use as my puja altar. I spend a few days looking for religious objects and find statues of Shiva Nataraja, White Tara, Manjushri, and the goddess Sarasvati whom I now think of as Nakshatra.

In the center of my console, I place statues of Shakyamuni, Sariputta, and Moggallana, just like Mr. Lees does on his console. I remember him saying, "Buddha and his disciples teach us to be patient, to do honest deeds, to purify our minds, and never hurt or harass anyone or seek to find fault." I want my new altar to remind me of Mr. Lees' words so that my use of the Manjushri key will somehow be good, right and just and I won't accumulate bad karma.

After I deplete most of my reserves, I spend several days replenishing my checking accounts. The relic key is now the only job I have but every afternoon I'm sure to watch *Aaliya Dharani* on ITN. I relax on my blue suede sectional, have my stereo quietly play a Bollywood sound tract, and drink a toddy, the traditional drink of my newly adopted country. Nakshatra's beauty graces my TV screen. Her flowing hair, her nimble movements, and melodious voice make me shiver. I'm deeply in love with this starlet. When her teledrama is over, I watch endless Bollywood DVDs as part of my research for becoming a noteworthy Bollywood producer and a suitable man of means.

I anticipate the questions she is apt to ask me. What if she wants to see my passport to confirm I've made many trips to Mumbai? Well, of course, I'll tell her I recently lost it and had

to get a replacement. *Why are you here and not making movies?* She may ask and I'll say I've taken a strategic pause in my career to relax and enjoy my native country. Or, I'll suggest my wife of twenty years recently passed from a tropical infection and I needed the hiatus. Yes! And my Sarasvati will feel sympathy for me. I'm still young, I tell myself. My age will not deter her. My profile and my maturity will appeal to her as much as the wealth I plan to accumulate.

To construct my internet persona as a Bollywood producer, I hire a website designer named Kusal Kumara. He's a teaching assistant in computer graphics at Colombo University as well as a player on the national cricket team. If I weren't alienated from my sons, they would travel here to help me. But that's out of the question.

As it turns out, Kusal is willing to create my website even after I admit my intentions are to win the affections of a young starlet. He knows of her but doesn't watch teledramas. For pictures, I ask him to be creative and pull them off existing Bollywood websites. "Be candid," I say. "Discreet but clever. This isn't for a vast publication but for my own personal use."

Kusal even puts together my curriculum vitae as a Bollywood producer. I'm thoroughly impressed with his work and pay him handsomely, in cash, of course. I trust him fully because of his forthright character but mostly because I use the magic key to suggest he go along with my ideas. "Would you like me to create spliced photos?" he asks at one point. "I can take your picture at my studio and place you next to famous people like Vajpayee, Putin, Bush, Blair. Or maybe with Dimple Kapadia or Anil Kapoor."

"Splendid," I say. "If you could do that, I'll pay you extra."

In order to really look the part of a big shot producer, Kusal suggests I buy an expensive Versace briefcase and colognes, expensive rings and gold chains, and a nice sports car. At Lanka Auto, I purchase a 2000 green Mercedes-Benz convertible. *After I win over Nakshatra* I think to

myself as I hand a bag of cash to the car dealer *I'll either give her this car or I'll buy her a Rolls-Royce.*

While I'm contemplating the film making profession and building up an impressive portfolio, it occurs to me that my apartment on Marine Drive isn't impressive enough. I fear Nakshatra won't believe I'm wealthy and she'll lose interest in me before I even gain her affections.

I decide to purchase a beach front mansion. According to my online research, Galle has the most beautiful coastline on the island. I spend a few hours studying the island's history, in case Nakshatra brings it up in conversation. In 1505, the Portuguese landed in Galle from the Maldives. Less than fifty years later, the Dutch destroyed their holdings and built Galle Citadel that now stands in ruins. Fort Galle was the main port of Sri Lanka until 1706 when the British seized the island for its spices and teas and made Colombo the main shipping port. The colonizers called the island Ceylon, a name people continued to use until Sri Lankans reclaimed their original name in the 1970's. My home country of Nepal has never been colonized which makes me and every other Nepali very proud.

Before even driving to Galle to investigate properties, I visit the Bank of Ceylon and inquire about repossessed estates for unpaid mortgages. My life is a vast contrast from twenty years before when I failed to pay moneylenders on my father's shanty house beside the Bagmati and my mother had to live on the streets.

The banker Mr. Fernando shows me several pictures of houses for sale through his bank. Kusal has helped me compile another curriculum vitae for my identity as "Mr. Wilson Yapa, shipping magnate." He provided me with forged documents and made some adjustments to public records by hacking onto pertinent websites in the shipping industry. With this CV, proof

of my savings in several Sri Lankan bank accounts, and my holdings in the Colombo Stock Exchange, which Kusal also helped me organize, I'm able to make a down payment and take over the mortgage of a 7000 square foot brick estate on a banana plantation hugging the seashore.

With the deed in hand, I drive to Galle and spend a week buying furnishings and decor from local establishments. Through a newspaper ad, I hire Mr. and Mrs. Cooray to live on the premise as my maid, cook, and gardener. Over the next two weeks, I relax in my new home and spend time getting to know the city. Each day I walk to the historic park of Gall Dutch Fort. At every niche in the stone ruins, young couples are cuddling under umbrellas. They make me want to cuddle with Nakshatra before I've even met her.

When my resources are nearly gone, I devise new uses for the Manjushri key. Dressed in my finest business suit, I visit several resort villas along the beaches, knock at a room or suite door, and call out "official investigation." If nobody replies, I swiftly enter the room, unlock the safe, help myself to the valuables, and leave.

I'm able to make six months' worth of payments on the mortgage at the Bank of Ceylon in Galle. The local newspapers report that tourists are being mysteriously robbed but the police have no leads because I've become quite skillful at my job.

Chapter 34: When the Full Moon Approaches

I leave Galle and drive back to my apartment in Colombo prepared to arrange my first meeting with Nakshatra Sabapathi. As my TV plays a DVD of Akshav Kumar in *Hera Pheri*, an interesting comedy about three men seeking ways to make money, I sit on my sofa and call Mr. Ashoka Ratnam, the director of *Aaliya Dharani*. Kusal was able to locate his private number for me.

A man answers on the second ring.

"Hello Mr. Ratnam?" I ask over the phone.

"Yes," the man says.

"I'm Wilson Yapa, an independent producer of Bollywood films. Perhaps you've heard of me or seen my work." I name a few titles in Hindi, names I compiled for my website with the help of Kusal. They're all concocted of course, but sound capable of producing Bollywood song and dance scenes: *Gangs of Mumbai, Magic of the Taj Mahal, The Song of Mother India, Like the Stars of Heaven,* and *Only on Black Fridays.* I'm not too concerned that Mr. Ratman won't recognize my titles because there are too many Indian films for any normal person to recount, except perhaps me. I've spent years viewing them and months studying the actors, directors, producers and so on. I now consider myself an expert on Bollywood.

"Well, no, Mr. Yapa. Bollywood? Are you a Sri Lankan? Sir," Mr. Ratnam asks because I'm speaking English with a few random words of Sinhalese and Hindi. I relate the story that I plan to tell Nakshatra, then say, "I'm a big fan of your teledrama, Mr. Ratnam, and would like to meet with you on the set of *Aaliya Dharani*. I'm interested in producing a new Bollywood film connecting the shipping ports of Mumbai and Colombo. Perhaps we could make some kind of business collaboration. I hope you're interested. You can check my credentials and projects on my website." I give him my web address.

After a long pause, perhaps enough time for him to look me up because he's most certainly sitting at his computer, Mr. Ratnam warmly invites me to his set at the ITN studios the next morning. "We'll be wrapping up the storyline for a character played by Dinesh de Silva. His contract ends next week. Then he begins acting in an evening primetime drama at Stein Studios. A very big move for our leading man, Mr. de Silva. This is a good time for your visit, Mr. Yapa. You can meet him before he departs."

"Oh yes. I'm very interested in meeting your actors playing shipping magnates. My mother was from such a family in Mumbai."

"How very interesting," I hear Ratnam say as I notice Akshay Kumar on the TV dancing in the night streets of Mumbai with hundreds of extras playing pedestrians and shopkeepers. The choreography is rather ludicrous, I suppose, but it's a typically captivating Bollywood scene meant to draw-in viewers like me.

I return my focus to Mr. Ratnam. "I'm quite taken by the talent of your actors on *Aalyia Dharani*. Both the powerful men as well as your young starlets. The drama speaks well of you."

"Tomorrow then, Yapa. We'll have a pass waiting for you at the gate. We begin rehearsal at eight AM. Filming starts at ten."

The next morning, I'm at the ITN gate by nine dressed in my best suit and carrying a Versace briefcase with all my credentials and photos that Kusal compiled. In some, I'm posing as a Bollywood producer with famous directors and stars. Kusal even has me standing with Princess Diana on her trip to the Taj Mahal and with India's PM Raji Gandhi. My friend Kusal doesn't even need a Manjushri key to work his magic.

A security guard escorts me to the teledrama set where actors are rehearsing. Cameras, bright lights, microphones, and sound boxes embellish a penthouse suite with an expansive entertainment system, wet bar, sectional sofa, plush carpets, and a wrap-around window with a view of the Port of Colombo composed from photographs. The room is fragrant with sandalwood burning at a Buddhist shrine on the wall and from the perfumes and colognes of the crew, actors, and lovely actresses. The spectacle stifles my breath as if I'm high in the Himalayas.

Ashoka Ratnam is short with prominent brows and a mustache. He's wearing slacks and a white dress shirt with the collar unbuttoned and the sleeves rolled-up. He shakes my hand and invites me to sit next to him as he prompts the action. Two actors are seated on the sofa before a huge coffee table with two opened laptops. They're involved in a deep discussion and each has a drink in his hand. Dinesh de Silva, the star of the drama, appears to be a few years younger than me. He has graying sides to his thick black hair which is so unlike my thinning hairline. I've never bothered reading about him in the tabloids because Nakshatra Sabapathi is the only teledrama star on my mind.

When I don't see my Sarasvati goddess on the set, I become worried and actually sweat. "Are you all right, old man?" Ashoka asks and gestures a gripper to bring me a bottle of water from a refrigerator.

I take a drink and watch the drama unfold. It's fascinating. I'm in a setting where I never imagined being. It's like a dream. The two men are contriving underhanded methods to takeover of an import-export business. They argue and Dinesh grows angry, ready to throw a punch. I begin sweating even more than I do outside in the tropical heat because the actors' scheming hints at my own capers.

Ashoka looks at me and signals a gripper to turn the floor fan in my direction. I relax and sit back, prepared to specifically ask about Nakshatra Sabapathi. I even hold the key in my pocket and silently suggest I wish to meet her. Then a side door on the set opens and Nakshatra gracefully enters the room dressed in form fitting jeans and black heels. Gold chains and rings adorn her and her glistening black hair falls over a low-cut, white silk blouse.

My heart throbs as I watch her glide over to Dinesh who's standing in anger. She yells at him, slaps him, and calls him a cad. As I watch this take place, I can't still my beating heart. I try to keep my composure so Ashoka won't ask if I'm all right. I breathe deeply and place the key, hidden in my fist, against my chest and relax. But the vision of Sarasvati before me never leaves my sight.

After rehearsal ends, Ashoka calls Dinesh over and introduces me as a Bollywood producer. Suddenly, I feel foolish and exposed. *Can I even pull this off?* I ask myself and place the key back in my pocket, rise, and shake hands with the teledrama star.

"I'm an independent producer of films," I correct the director. I then say to Ashoka, "I would very much like to meet Miss Nakshatra." I see her standing by the sectional prop, casually talking to the other actor, a young, good-looking man of perhaps 25. They seem to be flirting and jealousy surges through my veins like a tidal wave. I urgently must hook her affections before she ends up in a relationship with some other man and marries him. I can smell my own brow and armpits moisten.

Nakshatra glances my way and smiles, brilliantly. My heart leaps.

Ashoka calls Nakshatra over and introduces her. "Mr. Yapa." Her voice wisps like veena music. She shakes my hand, softly, delicately, as if not to bruise her beautiful skin.

“I’m a fan of your work, Miss Nakshatra,” I stutter. She doesn’t hesitate to ask me many questions about Bollywood. I’m well prepared for the encounter and she and I talk for the rest of the break. Dinesh and Ashoka end up talking to each other.

After the drama resumes, I sit back and enjoy the unfolding story. When it’s over, I approach Nakshatra, my key in hand, and suggest she join me for dinner at one of Colombo’s finest restaurants. To be polite, I invite Ashoka and Dinesh but they’re busy for the evening and I’m blessed to enjoy dinner alone with the object of my affection.

Later that afternoon, I pick up Nakshatra at the studio in my green convertible freshly washed and waxed. I take her to the Verandah Restaurant at Hotel Galle Face. Over a dinner of chili fish curry with beet chutney, kottu rice, and rotis, Nakshatra discusses her dream of being a Bollywood star.

“I’d love to place you in one of my feature films,” I suggest as the sun sets over the sea.

“How sweet of you, Mr. Yapa. Unfortunately, my contract with ITN doesn’t end until January 2005. If you can wait that long.”

Her beautiful brown eyes hold me in a trance and for a moment I can’t speak. A crow caws from a palm on the hotel’s lawn before the beach and I think to say, “Oh yes. That gives me plenty of time to make all the arrangements for a big production fitting such a talented and lovely starlet as yourself, Miss Sabapathi.”

She takes a sip of dark red wine the color of her lips and gazes at the setting sun like she needs to break her trance over me. “You’re too kind. Mr. Yapa.” She looks back at me. “I believe it’s kismet that you’ve come along to fulfill my dream. Our meeting can’t be a mere coincident.”

“Let’s make a toast to both of us,” I say as my mind swirls with romance. “To a successful collaboration in Bollywood.” The clink of our crystal glasses seals the magic moment. Or maybe it’s the key or, as the object of my affections says, pure kismet. In any event, I can’t believe my good fortune and thank Manjushri himself that I didn’t return the relic to Mr. Lees and that I have a year and a half to figure out how to make Nakshatra a Bollywood star.

Chapter 35: Nakshatra Sabapathi

I visit the ITN set several more times and begin taking Nakshatra to the cinema, to plays, and dinners. We go on drives to scenic places in the city, to parks and museums, the marinas, and eventually to Galle. I show her my estate where Mr. and Mrs. Cooray have been steadily tending the garden and house. Nakshatra is thrilled with the plantation and thoroughly impressed. I’m quite pleased with myself. I’ve convinced her of my legitimacy as a big shot producer.

We spend the day touring Galle then I take her back home because it’s too soon to suggest we spend the night together. I can’t be so presumptuous, and besides, it seems she’s merely enjoying the luxury of my company. We haven’t even kissed or held hands. I want her to flirt with me first because I don’t want to ruin my chances of winning her over. Besides, I’m not as handsome or debonair as Dinesh or Akshav Kumar and I don’t want her to think my offer to make her a film star involves a casting couch. I respect her too much to use the power of my key to suggest we share intimacies. But if she doesn’t soon indicate an interest in me as someone

more than a social friend who offers her stardom, I'll push harder to reach the next level in our relationship.

In August 2003, Nakshatra asks me to take her to the famous Perahera Festival in Kandy that celebrates the Buddha's relic tooth. Kandy is a three-hour drive from Colombo and sits in the central hills of the island. In the fifth century AD, an Indian princess hid the relic tooth in her hair and smuggled it to the island. Sri Lankan kings took possession of the sacred tooth because it gave them the power to reign. It's an easy notion to believe because of my own powerful relic. The tooth eventually ended up in the Kandy Palace, home to Sri Lanka's last ruling monarchy.

"My real mother came from Kandy," Nakshatra tells me as I drive through the hill country. "I never knew her because she died before I was three. But my grandparents used to visit me in Colombo and they always talked about the Perahera Festival and the Buddha's tooth as being the most powerful relic in the world. If only I possessed such powers. I would truly become Miss Universe!"

Nakshatra flashes a perfect smile at me as the breeze flutters her long silky hair about her face. Her passion and excitement make my heart beat like a Tibetan drum. In my mind I hear conch shells and the deep unison of chanting lamas. I believe Nakshatra would captivate me even if she wore the noxious smelling Noxzema face cream that Geeta began using just before I left Kathmandu, presumably to keep me away from her in our bed.

I'm inclined to tell Nakshatra that I possess such a powerful relic but I have enough restraint to control that impulse. In truth, I'm just a persona now performing a role and the relic key is my only means of earning a living. Maybe later I'll use its powers to help establish another business, hire Kasul Kumar as my assistant, and prosper without Manjushri's help. When

this happens, I'll gladly return the key to Mr. Sid Lees so he can at last deliver it to the Dalai Lama.

At Hotel Kandy, we check into two separate rooms. I desperately want to sleep with Nakshatra but she doesn't even hint that we might share a bed. We spend a week in Kandy, visiting the *Sri Dalada Maligawa* Temple of the Tooth several times. At the festival's highlight, a procession of monks parade through town with an elephant carrying the relic tooth.

After we return to Colombo, I take Nakshatra to my penthouse for the first time and we end up making exquisite love on my king bed. My wildest imagination never neared how I feel when the most beautiful creature in the world falls asleep in my arms. We stay in bed all day and I propose marriage. Nakshatra agrees but wants to have a large wedding at my estate in Galle and invite the crew and cast members of her teledrama, her family, and friends, and she wants the press to cover the event. But through the power of my key, I convince her to have a small civil ceremony after her contract ends.

"Maybe we can marry in Mumbai," I suggest, to further deter her from her grandiose notions. "Tomorrow we'll find an astrologer to pick an auspicious date for next year." Of course, I don't tell her that I must avoid publicity because I'm terrified someone will uncover my true identity and expose me as a fraud before I can actually produce a Bollywood film featuring Nakshatra. I still worry that Nepali Interpol will discover my whereabouts or that Sid Lees will learn what I've actually been doing since I left his flat.

Soon after we're engaged, Nakshatra moves from her apartment near ITN studios into my penthouse suite on Marine Beach Drive. She suggests that this will give us more time together to discuss ideas for a movie script.

Chapter 36: As the Months Pass By

Wilson Yapa

I'm constantly promising to take Nakshatra to Mumbai when her contract ends. Somehow, I know I'll achieve this because of my relic key. But I become so caught up in my love affair that I neglect to investigate ways to make anything happen until four months before Nakshatra's contract ends.

I call my friend Kusal Kumar and ask him to help me contact a Bollywood director. "Any director," I emphasize over the phone. "Just make sure he works in Mumbai." I plan to use all the money in my bank accounts to hire a director and scriptwriter and whatever else I may need to make Nakshatra a real Bollywood star. I want nothing more than to fulfill her dreams. And if I need more cash, I'll simply resume my job of obtaining finances with the key.

By the first of October, Kusal arranges for me to call an authentic Bollywood director in Mumbai, Mr. Rajkumar Kapoor. Before I place the call, Kusal disables my website with all the false pictures because I don't want Mr. Kapoor to find it online. I'm sure he's a savvy man who knows all the producers in Bollywood, independent or affiliated with a studio. With the powers of my key, I plan to keep Nakshatra from bringing up my false claims that she believes are true. I'm convinced that this whole enterprise will work as long as the right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing, as the Christians like to say.

When I phone Rajkumar I introduce myself as a wealthy shipping magnate interested in producing a Bollywood movie with a Sri Lankan teledrama starlet who happens to be my fiancé. At Rajkumar's request, I fax him my financial portfolio and fabricated credentials as a shipping magnate in Colombo. After I speak with Mr. Kapoor a few more times, and he has studied Nakshatra's work, he agrees to consider directing a film featuring my fiancé. I invite him to my estate in Galle after the Christmas holiday weekend and offer to arrange his travel and pay his expenses. I can't believe he accepts my invitation.

"Mr. Yapa," he says as we chat on the phone, like the old chums Mr. Thapa and I used to be back in Kathmandu. "I've always wanted to visit the beaches of southern Sri Lanka, especially under the Full Moon."

I don't tell Nakshatra about the meeting because I want to surprise her and, perhaps even more so, I don't like to get her hopes up. She tends to become too passionate about matters and I'm reluctant to use my key to quiet her down.

Christmas evening, the day before Nakshatra and I plan to drive to Galle to stay at the estate for a week, I take her to dinner at the Galle Face Hotel to share my big surprise and give her an expensive necklace with an emerald pendant, one I found in an airport locker.

At a table on the verandah, during an exciting cloudburst of cooling rain, I reveal the good news. "Tomorrow we'll be picking up the famous Bollywood director Mr. Rajkumar Kapoor at the Koggala airport in Galle," I say over dessert. "He has a scriptwriter in mind," I add after she calms down from her initial excitement. With crystal glasses of port wine, we toast to her upcoming debut as a Bollywood star.

“Are we making the film about brothers who own shipping companies in Mumbai and Colombo?” she asks about a script idea we’ve been discussing. “And they become torn apart because of me.”

“Yes, yes,” I tell her. “This is the storyline I’ve suggested to Mr. Kapoor. And he loves it.” This is all a lie, of course. Rajkumar and I haven’t even found a scriptwriter. But the evening is going so romantically well that I don’t want to dampen my fiancé’s enthusiasm.

“And we shall call our movie *The Endless Wake to Mumbai,”* Nakshatra says, taking a sip of her wine. She’s becoming tipsy and I’m envisioning a very pleasant night in our bed.

“This is what I told Mr. Kapoor,” I say. “Just as we’ve discussed.”

“How wonderful, darling. But I want Dinesh de Silva to play the part of the brother in Mumbai.”

This takes me by surprise because Nakshatra hasn’t mentioned using Dinesh before. “We shall see,” I say. “However, it seems Mr. Kapoor already has actors in mind for the leading roles. Big Bollywood stars.” I again lie.

“No!” Nakshatra becomes angry. “I want Dinesh to play the role of my lover.”

“And why is this, darling? I’m getting the feeling you’re too interested in Mr. de Silva.”

“Are you jealous, Old Man?” She looks off toward the sea dimly visible from the hotel lights. The sound of the pouring rain becomes almost deafening.

I know I’ve made her angry. She calls me an old man only when I disappoint her, which I hate doing. “But my queen,” I say. “My hands are rather tied with Mr. Kapoor. I have to go along with his judgments. He’s agreed to place you in the starring role, after all.”

“No! You’re lying. This is *your* production. I’m *your* star and I want to act beside Dinesh. If you’re jealous and insecure, that’s *your* problem.”

I'm prepared to take out my key to make her acquiesce but I don't. Instead, I decide that if I must, I'll persuade Mr. Kapoor with my key.

On our way back to the penthouse, while I'm maneuvering through traffic in one of Colombo's fiercest thunderstorms, Nakshatra continues to argue and call me an old man. I can barely concentrate on what lies ahead on Galle Road. Suddenly, my beautiful green Mercedes slams into a truck parked along the roadside.

The impact jerks Nakshatra and I in our seats where we quietly remain for a long moment. Then I jump from the car, in the pouring rain, and help her out of her seat, relieved that we're both uninjured although quite shaken up. But the entire front end of my Mercedes is wrinkled like a withered green melon.

The police arrive and I arrange for a tow truck to take my car to an auto body repair shop where the owner is angry because I've called in the middle of the night. From this point forward, the evening drags on and on and we don't return home until well past midnight. After we're finally in bed, I'm too exhausted to make love and even if I could, I doubt my fiancé would allow me to even touch her.

"We'll have to catch the early morning train to Galle," I say to Nakshatra as she lies in bed turned away from me. "And use Mr. and Mrs. Cooray's car to pick up Mr. Kapoor. His flight is scheduled to arrive at noon."

"No, *you* must take the train alone," Nakshatra exclaims. "I want to visit Dinesh at his apartment and convince him to join the cast of our movie. He'll drive me down to Galle to pick up Mr. Kapoor and take him to the estate. We'll meet you there."

I argue against her idea, insisting that we must take the train together, but my fiancé has her heart set on who will play top billing in her film. Even my Manjushri key, which I hold

concealed in my fist, fails to dissuade her. In the end, I'm forced to agree with her plan. It seems that even a magic key is powerless against a stubborn, pampered woman once she's made up her mind.

Chapter 37: The Tsunami

At four AM, I grab my already packed bags and take a taxi to the Fort Train Station without having had any sleep. Using the key in my pocket, I'm able to obtain a window seat in the second-class coach.

When the train leaves the station at 6:40, men, women, and children fill every seat and many passengers are standing in the aisles holding onto the overhead bars. They have tightly packed their belongings onto the storage racks. Everyone seems anxious to get home for the full moon holiday the day after Christmas that marks the date that Mahinda brought Buddhism to Sri Lanka.

I sit comfortably beside the window holding the early edition of the Colombo Gazette. But instead of reading, I spend most of my time gazing at the ocean waves washing onto long narrow beaches with coconut palms. Here and there are kiosks with palm frond roofs where villagers are selling fruits and vegetables, auto parts, or chicken and goat meat. I'm sorry I haven't taken the train until now. Driving can be taxing, especially when I'm with Nakshatra. She tends to bicker and when I'm behind the wheel, I like to keep my thoughts inside my head.

Besides, I can't pull out my key to shut her up which is what happened last night when I demolished my Mercedes in darkness and rain. I had been reaching for the key.

A refreshing ocean breeze blows through the window slightly cracked open. I'm feeling relaxed with a thought-free mind like a meditating Buddhist. I'm not thinking about my big Bollywood production nor am I obsessing over my beautiful Sarasvati Nakshatra like I've been doing since before we even got together. Lately, in fact, she's become a bit of a nuisance rather like my former wife Geeta and even my old mother, bless her resting atman. *Women do like to complain.* I smile to myself and continue watching the exquisite scenery while the train whistles, screeches, goes *clackity, clank, clank, clank,* and dissolves the chatter of the many passengers.

When we enter each station a woman's voice announces over the loud speaker the cities we're passing through *Waskaduwa, Kalutara, Galpoththa*. By the time we reach Serendib Beach, I begin thinking about my fiancé insisting she speak to Dinesh in person. Then waves of suspicion invade my tranquility. *Something is going on* I tell myself and start recalling the many times Nakshatra left me alone in the apartment while she went shopping or met with friends. *Who knows where she really went during these times?* Then I remember times that I had left her at the apartment to replenish my bank accounts and when I returned, she was gone. *Has my love for her made me blind?*

When the train leaves Telwatta Station, after two hours of travel, I'm furious with Nakshatra and with myself. While I've been trying to make her dream come true, she's been playing me for a fool and meeting with Dinesh de Silva. I look at my watch and see it's 9:30 when the train pulls into the village of Peraliya, about 116 km south of Colombo. Now I'm prepared to tell Mr. Kapoor to turn around and go back to Bollywood and forget about this entire deal.

To gain my composure and settle my mind, I look out at the vast ocean. Something in the distance catches my eye. At first, I think my mind is playing tricks with my sight because of my anger but then people in the aisle rumble in awe at the sight of a tremendous wave approaching the shore. All at once, everyone starts to panic. *What is it?* they say. *What can we do? What's happening?*

The wave approaches at a speed greater than that of the train. I stand from my seat and hold the key in my pocket. Before I can take another breath, people are screaming and scrambling about the compartment. Then the thunderous wall of gray water mutes their screams as it rams against the coach like a freight train in a head-on collision. Our carriage tumbles off the tracks and knocks everyone to the floor.

Water surges into our toppled carriage. I'm filled with panic along with everyone else. *The coach will become our tomb. We're all doomed.* People desperately open windows, crawl outside, and hover at the side of the coach, hoping it will shield them from the onslaught of another wave. Others climb to the roof for safety from a phenomenon no one has ever experienced. Especially me, a native of a landlock kingdom in the Himalayas. But we all know other waves will follow and I'm as aware of what's happening as everyone else. We have all been taken off guard, bamboozled like fools, and I can't help but wonder if this is my punishment for keeping the Manjushri key.

To reach the door, I struggle through the water rushing into the coach. Salt stings my eyes and obscures my vision. I taste and smell the acrid brine and feel it penetrate the pores of my skin. I make it to the door only to discover, to my horror, it's blocked and locked shut. Then a second wave slams against our toppled coach, rips it from Earth, and hurls it farther inland,

crushing all the people who sought shelter beside it and carrying out to sea those who sought safety on its roof.

Those remaining inside the tussled compartment are tumbling or grasping onto the seats, railings, and each other. Boxes, containers, and all sorts of debris are bombarding us from every direction.

I hold the key in my right fist while clinging to the door handle with my left hand trying to keep steady on my feet. The carriage suddenly slams against trees and jolts to a stop. I lose my balance but maintain my hold on to the door handle. I quickly get back on my feet as the ocean floods the compartment, dooming us all to drown or be crushed and hammered by projectiles. I look around and see bodies floating face down. They're the passengers who didn't have a chance against the monstrous sea.

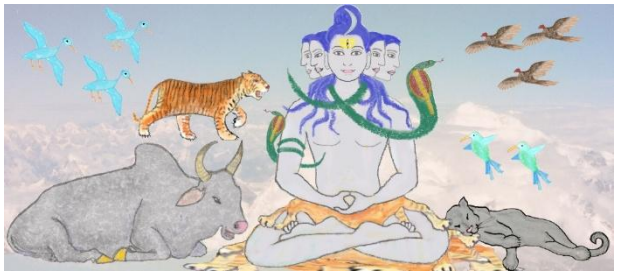
When the water is up to my neck, I scream at the top of my lungs that I can get the door open and that we must leave the train and swim ashore. With the Manjushri key, I struggle to touch the handle. The door opens and ocean water bursts outside the compartment carrying boxes, containers, dead bodies, and me with a few surviving passengers. We tumble into the raging ocean among trees, shelters, and cars. With all my strength, I keep hold of the relic key and swim toward dry land while barely keeping my head above the churning sea. I can see some of the train's coaches far in the distance, crushed against demolished homes or slammed against palm trees.

My head is pounding and my entire body aches from slashes and bruises but I keep swimming toward shore along with the other survivors from my second-class coach.

When my feet touch land I grapple as far from the ocean as possible, stunned more by the fact that I'm alive than by the tsunami that's just killed thousands of my fellow passengers.

Although exhausted and breathless, bloody and tattered, none of the survivors including myself stop running from the ocean until we are hundreds of meters inland.

I collapse onto the dry ground and watch another wave plunging ashore, re-burying the shoreline, and dragging away bodies, shelters, cars, and everything in its path. Before I black out, my mind tells me there's nothing in this world more powerful than the ocean, including my Manjushri key.



Chapter 38: Two Weeks after the Tsunami

"Authorities couldn't stop the train," I read aloud the headline of the Colombo Gazette. On the sectional in our penthouse, my fiancé sits beside me. It's been two weeks since the tsunami.

"The deadliest disaster in train history occurred in Peraliya Town, northwest of Galle," I continue to read. "The massive waves crushed 1500 paid ticket purchasers or carried them out to sea along with another 200 unknown passengers with travel passes and government permits. The killer tsunami took the lives of 35,322 people in Sri Lanka, both tourists and Sri Lankans. The beaches between Galle and Eden were the worst hit. By the time the waves reached Colombo, they were nothing but harmless ripples."

"But you're a national hero, darling," Nakshatra says as she hands me a fresh toddy. Her svelte body snuggles beside me. She smells of the camphor essence in her long black hair but after the tsunami I've lost my amorous urges as if the ocean cleansed me of such desires. Sexual

union with a goddess isn't that fantastic, I keep telling myself. And besides, Nakshatra never really enjoyed herself when we made love. She was only going along with it to make me happy so I could fulfill her dream.

"Yes, I know. I'm a national hero." I sip the tart sweet palm drink. After soldiers had rescued me, I spent nearly two weeks in the National Hospital. I don't remember anything before I woke up in a hospital bed hooked to an IV while reporters flashed their cameras at me. It was then I learned that Sri Lankans considered me a hero because I miraculously opened the carriage door and allowed ten people to swim safely ashore. The only ten survivors of the train calamity.

But I didn't feel like a hero then and now, as I sit recovered in my home with Nakshatra. I feel miserable. The doctors gave me antibiotics for my many abrasions and pills to help me recover from the trauma. I took them at first, in the hospital, but then threw them out. They didn't help. Nothing can help me recover from an upheaval that destroyed my world and the world of so many people.

When Nakshatra had visited me in the hospital, she told me that Mr. Kapoor had returned to Mumbai the same day he arrived and that Mr. and Mrs. Cooray had fortunately survived the destruction. However, the tidal wave destroyed my house in Galle and the entire banana plantation along with all the valuables I had accumulated. And that's the end of that. I have no insurance coverage. I owed on the mortgage and my recent investments in this Bollywood fantasy for the object of my affection has vastly depleted my resources.

During my hospital convalescence, Mr. Kapoor sent me flowers and a note expressing how deeply sorry he felt for what had happened to me and to Sri Lanka. *I'm very proud to know you,* he wrote and offered to continue with the film project after my full recovery. *However, may I suggested you come to Mumbai because of the distress I suffered in Galle. I fear my return to*

Sri Lanka would somehow bring me more bad luck. I'm a Hindu, and sometimes that makes me a very superstitious man.

The day I returned to my apartment, Nakshatra encouraged me to call Rajkumar and continue with her film project. She had just ended her contract with ITN and didn't want to delay the next phase of her acting career.

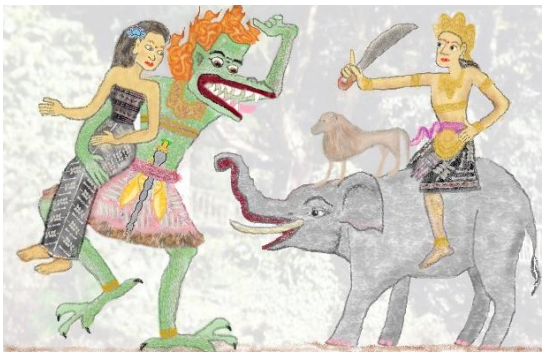
I did so but Rajkumar's tone was very different from his note. He had read newspaper accounts of my heroism with Nakshatra quoted as saying that I'm a big Bollywood producer from way back who promises to make her a Bollywood star.

"I thought you were a shipping magnate with large financial resources for this production," Rajkumar said over the phone. "Let me tell you, Mr. Yapa. I know all of today's Bollywood producers and those of the past, be they independent or part of our most prominent production studios. Which is it, Mr. Yapa? Are you in the shipping or movie making business?"

I really had nothing to say. I felt depleted anyway and didn't want to explain anything, to anyone. In fact, I no longer had the heart for a big movie production for Nakshatra, especially one based on my own lust and ego and a woman's persistent nagging. "Well," I said after a long pause.

Before I could say anything more, Rajkumar picked up the conversation. "Look, Wilson. I do admire your heroism. But I'm no longer interested in this film project because of your deception to me, or to your own fiancé. Which is it, Mr. Yapa?"

I could think of nothing to add so I hung up and told Nakshatra that Mr. Kapoor is very busy now and we may have to find another Bollywood director. Then I leave the room to take a hot spa bath, ease my aches and pains, and settle my nerves.



Chapter 39: Nine Months after the Tsunami

Over the past nine months three different authors have written books about my heroism and paid me handsomely for my story. Of course, I fictionalized my background but my account of the train disaster is as accurate as my traumatized mind can recall. I had to fabricate how I opened the door of the flooded coach because I can't reveal my magic key. As it is, I'm constantly worried Mr. Lees will recognize my pictures in the newspapers, online or in these three books. Or, even worse, the Nepali police will identify me as a fugitive and suspect in the royal massacre. Consequently, I avoid TV appearances or interview pictures and go out in public wearing a thick black wig and moustache.

The money I earn from the books, and from interviews, doesn't quite cover my comfortable and luxurious lifestyle and I again resort to using my key. At the airport, I'm caught red-handed opening a locker. The owner, a tourist from Denmark, suddenly appears from nowhere and shouts, "Thief! Thief!" Before I can calm him with my key, the airport police arrive and take me to a security room. Because of my disguise, nobody recognizes me as the national tsunami hero and I quickly wiggle from the situation by using my key to suggest the police free me because I did nothing wrong.

After this incident, I stop using the key for a while and enlist my friend Kusal to help me look online for international authors and journalists who might want to buy the rights to my story with a new angle. *What's our tsunami hero doing nine months after the train disaster?*

Nakshatra and I haven't yet married although we remain engaged and she still lives in my penthouse. Neither one of us feels like rushing into marriage. She's very disappointed that circumstances crushed our film project but believes that after I'm fully recovered from the trauma, I'll find another director and produce her film. She knows I lied to Rajkumar about my background but doesn't care because she hangs on to the story that I'm a wealthy producer who lived in Mumbai. I'm certain she stays with me because of what my fame brings her as the fiancé of a national hero. Besides, I give her whatever she wants, be it jewelry, clothes, or perfumes, and she's free to come and go as she pleases.

Since the disaster, I don't really know what I want. I'm just existing, doing whatever it is I need to do. Throughout each day I drink and smoke heavily. My life has become such a pretense that sometimes I wonder why I'm even with Nakshatra. Most likely, it's because I don't know what else to do or where to go. This is what living through a devastating trauma does to a person no matter how strong he once thought he was.

In truth, my world has fallen into shambles and I stay in my apartment like a hermit. The nation holds me up as a hero while I see myself as the cause of many deaths, including the royal massacre and the thousands of train passengers who died in the tsunami. Somehow, I've caused all the calamity around me like my actions caused Zambu to kill that poor boy with the same name as my youngest son. How can I feel like a hero when I've been nothing but a fraud, a thief, and a liar flagrantly misusing a gift from the gods?

At times, I don't even want my fiancé around because the tsunami didn't wash away my thoughts about her having an affair with Dinesh. If nothing else, my suspicions and jealously have intensified. When I look at her, I see a woman who's caused me to invest all my resources in her stupid, selfish, egotistical dream. I don't know what I've been thinking all these months. I'm so ashamed of myself and of who I was trying to be. Nothing but a fake.

Chapter 40: One Year after the Tsunami

"A reporter from the Gazette is scheduled to see you in an hour," Nakshatra reminds me as she stands at the door peering into our bedroom. "Please shave your scraggly face and try to look presentable." It is noon on December 15, 2005, a Full Moon night at the end of the monsoon season and I'm still in bed.

"I don't want to see any more reporters." I pull the covers over my head to hide from all my troubles.

"But you're still our nation's hero. And he wants to speak to you about a new book. You must see him."

"I said no, Nakshatra. I want nothing but peace and quiet. I want to be left alone."

"But you lost everything. And destroyed my dream for Bollywood stardom. You must take heart and make amends. You owe me this much." Her voice sounds like the drone of a bee hive.

“Owe you?” I ask. “What are you talking about?”

“Do you think I stay with you for your looks, Old Man? You promised to make me a star and I still want that. You have to pull yourself together. Get money from your family. Do whatever you have to do!”

“I don’t have to do anything, Nakshatra. Go to your lover Dinesh if you want to be this Bollywood star. I can no longer help you.” I sit up, light a cigarette, and think about having my first toddy of the day.

“Lover?” Nakshatra now screams. “Who do you think you are, talking to me like this?”

“I’m just a simple man, that’s all.” I drag on my cigarette and feel for the key in my pajama pocket under my lungi. It’s always been with me even while I was in the hospital. When I first woke from my coma, nearly a year ago, I thought I had lost my key but then I noticed it in a tray beside my bed and remembered Mr. Lees saying that the relic could never be lost. As it turned out, the nurse had found it in my pocket, thought it was my good luck charm, and graciously placed it at my bedside.

To stifle Nakshatra’s growing anger, I start to remove the relic from my pocket but then suddenly a force consumes me and I don’t want to use its powers anymore. Not even to stop Nakshatra’s nagging.

In the kitchen I fetch a toddy then go to the TV room, light another cigarette, and reach for the phone on the side table. I ask the operator to place a call to Professor Sid Lees at the Buddhist and Pali University. I’m hoping he still works there because I’m completely fed up with my life and want to return the relic Manjushri key.

Nobody answers my call and I leave a message. “Mr. Lees. This is Gopan Subba but I’m now going by the name Wilson Yapa. I’m sure you’ve heard about me. The tsunami hero.

Anyway, I'm trying to reach you because I now have the relic key and I wish to return it as promised."

When I hang up the phone, Nakshatra sits beside me and asks a string of questions. "Relic key? Gopan Subba? Who is this Professor Sid Lees? What's this key all about? Who are you, Mr. Yapa?"

I don't want to explain anything to Nakshatra and fortunately, before she plagues me with more questions, the phone rings. It is Mr. Lees. "Wilson Yapa, is it?" he says. I feel foolish, although it's hard to feel any more foolish than I've already been feeling. "I saw your picture in the papers and online. Hero of Sri Lanka? You have been a busy man."

"Yes, yes, I want to explain everything but foremost I must say I have the key and am anxious to give it back to you. Right away if possible."

"Fantastic, Mr. Yapa Subba." I sense that old Mr. Lees is toying with me, in a good-hearted way. He's not angry. A man like Mr. Lees, a life-long Buddhist, doesn't allow anger to overtake him. I believe that in his heart, he's simply grateful I called to return the key so that he can carry on with his original mission and take it to the Dalai Lama in Dharamshala, India.

"Mr. Lees. Please allow me to explain why it's taken me so long to retrieve the key." I pause a moment then say, "Actually, I didn't retrieve the key because I've had it all along and haven't been completely honest with you. And you've been nothing but a bodhisattva to me."

"It's not necessary to explain anything, Yapa Subba. I'll come to your place, now, if you like."

"Please let me explain. I've been carrying a lot of guilt, perhaps for years, certainly since I left BPU two and a half years ago." I take a breath and describe how I've been using the key since I retrieved it from the Ishu Canal after the rickshaw mishap. "At first, I didn't understand

its powers. I merely saw it as a beautiful relic, a Prajna Khadga, a spiritual sword that you left me as remuneration. But then my wife Geeta unlocked an old box in the city dump simply by touching the relic to its lock."

"Fascinating," Mr. Lees says.

I continue to describe how I tried to sell the key but couldn't. "Then I discovered the relic has the power to open any door and stop electronic equipment such as video surveillance which came in handy because . . . Well, yes, Mr. Lees, I began using the key to garner whatever I could to improve my station in life and that of my family. I know what I did was dishonest but I did it anyway. As you know, Mr. Lees, I was born into the lowest Hindu caste without any escape for me or my sons. The key gave me the power to become someone of stature and wealth. I had a business, as you know. My family and I prospered. Perhaps I got greedy. Especially after I realized that the key allowed me to manipulate whomever I spoke to as long as I held it up."

I pause a moment and look at Nakshatra sitting beside me wide-eyed and raptly listening. I want to tell her to leave the room and not eavesdrop on my private conversation but I can't. For one thing, she wouldn't obey me unless I used the key and I have vowed to never use it again. Additionally, she'd become furious if I forbade her from listening-in because we're engaged and not supposed to have any secrets between us.

I continue with my phone confession. "At first, Mr. Lees, I tried to use its powers to please my wife and sons by granting them whatever they wished for. My efforts led to the deaths of people, including children. I believe I'm responsible for the massacre of my kingdom's royal family. I was in the palace when it happened, with the key. This can't be a coincidence. I was trying to steal the crown jewels because of the harebrained suggestion of my eldest son. This is when you rescued me. I was ready to return the key until we headed to my new life in a foreign

land which is now my home as Wilson Yapa. You see, Mr. Lees, I couldn't let go of such a powerful relic when my future was so uncertain. I just couldn't."

"I see," Mr. Lees remarks, but that's all he says. He wants me to continue.

"To tell you the truth, I was very restless at BPU and anxious to use the key to win over a teledrama starlet that I couldn't get out of my head." I look at Nakshatra and see fury in her magnificent eyes, like a wrathful Ekajati with flames firing from her head.

"Nakshatra is my Sarasvati, my goddess of beauty and grace." My fiancé is now frowning in a way I've never seen before. It's not one of her pouty frowns. "That teledrama star is now my fiancé," I add for the benefit of Nakshatra's feelings. But she remains quiet, waiting to hear my entire story which she might as well know, I think to myself. Maybe it'll ease the blow that I'm no longer going to make her a Bollywood film star. That illusion is completely shattered.

"I told my fiancé I was a hotshot film producer who worked in Mumbai. And on and on I went. She believed me, but I really did line-up a director and was prepared to produce such a film, with all the resources I had acquired. In fact, I was on my way to meet this director when the tsunami hit. And well, Mr. Lees, you know the rest. Hero? I don't think so. It was the Manjushri key that rescued me and ten other people. In my heart, I believe it was me who caused the whole train disaster in the first place."

I look at Nakshatra. Her presence doesn't trouble me anymore. I'm unloading a great burden. I'm rectifying my bad karma. "Despite the devastation," I continue. "I was prepared to carry on with the film production but the director, Mr. Rajkumar, caught on to my deception and my life completely unraveled. Mr. Lees, I'm nothing but a simple lowly man, a thief and a charlatan. But I have the key and am ready to return it, today, if you can come to Colombo.

Otherwise, I'll drive to your flat. It's just that I'm so ashamed I'd hate to run into anyone on campus who remembers me."

I remove the key from my pocket and hold it up. Nakshatra sees it in plain view for the first time and her eyes become as wide as my mother's chapatis. "I must give you back the Manjushri key. It's too powerful for a man such as myself."

Mr. Lees agrees to drop his afternoon lecture and drive straight to my apartment.

As soon as I hang up, I look at Nakshatra, wondering what she'll do or say. Suddenly, she slaps me so hard I think my jaw is broken.

"Nakshatra Sabapathi," I exclaim. "It was all because I loved you more than any man should love a woman."

"You cad. How dare you? You're nothing but the scum off a muddy canal. A scammer. My father went to prison for five years for stealing from his company to pay for my tuition at Cambridge. Like you, he had big promises. He wanted me to become something special. But he committed fraud, like you. This is why I spent a year at Colombo College of Acting then went into teledramas to support myself and my step-mother while Daddy was in prison. I hope you go to prison too, for all your underhanded deception."

Now I realize why I've never met her parents or why she's never said much about them. She's as ashamed of me as she is of her father when in truth, we both were only trying to fulfill her dreams. Before she can slap me again, I stand from the sofa and say, "Forgive me. Let me make it up to you. Somehow."

"Give me the key. I want its powers. I want to take it to Sri Dalada Maligawa to receive the powers of the most sacred relic in the world. I will be Miss Universe, Queen of the World,

not just a Bollywood movie star!" She reaches for the Prajna Khadga in my hand. I jerk away from her.

"The Sri Dalada Maligawa?" Is all I can manage to say.

"Yes. In Kandy. Now, give me that key you fumbling old man." She manages to grab my arm. I pull free but her long manicured nails leave scratches like that of a Bengal tiger. "Why do you think I'm with you, old fool?" She screams. "Only for the money and your promises. Now you have nothing but the key and I want it. You owe it to me, Wilson Yapa, or whoever you are. I could have renewed my contract with ITN but didn't, because of your false promises. Ashoka Ratnam had me killed off. Now he'll have to resurrect me, you bastard! I hope you die and are born endlessly in hell for what you've done to me." She again reaches for the key and scratches my face in the process. I recoil in disbelief although I know she has every right to hate me.

In her fury, Nakshatra starts clawing at me and reaching for the key which I hold high above her. But she's relentless and I push her off with my free hand. She falls back onto the sofa then quickly leaps up and grabs the bronze Sarasvati statue on the coffee table. It was one of the first gifts I gave her after she moved in with me.

Like a maniac, she starts swinging it in front of me as if she's back in her teledrama acting role. I scramble for the door to flee for my own safety, and hers, but sense her right behind me.

A sharp excruciating pain suddenly explodes at the back of my head. I see sparks and strobing lights. Then the world turns black.

Chapter 41: Temple of the Buddha's Tooth

When I wake, my head is spinning and throbbing. I feel moisture at the back of my neck and see blood on my hand. "Nakshatra," I feebly call as I pull myself off the floor feeling weak and queasy. I soon realize my fiancé is gone and so is the Manjushri key.

I call the front desk. The concierge informs me Nakshatra left in my car about fifteen minutes before. "She was in a hurry, Mr. Yapa," the man exclaims.

I call Sid Lees and am thankful he hasn't yet left his apartment. "I'm certain Nakshatra went to Kandy with the relic key," I frantically say. "She as much as told me this. She has an insatiable desire for fame and glory and now she's craving the Buddha's relic tooth. We had a terrible fight, Mr. Lees. She knocked me unconscious with her Sarasvati statue and stole the Manjushri key. Can you meet me in Kandy, at the Temple of the Sacred Tooth? She's going to use the key to gain powers from the Buddha's tooth. I'm leaving for Kandy after I borrow a neighbor's car because she took mine. Please hurry. It'll be dark by the time we arrive. The palace will be locked and guarded, but she'll use the key to gain entry. She heard everything I told you about its powers."

"Mr. Subba Yapa," Lees says before he hangs up. "Just remember, the key cannot be lost or stolen. Only given."

Although I'm dizzy and probably have a concussion, I rush from my apartment to borrow my neighbor's silver Suzuki in the basement garage. Then I rush off to Kandy desperate to rectify the biggest mistake I've made in my foibles with the key. I should never have allowed her to hear my confession to Mr. Lees. I should have simply driven straight to BPU and returned the key. My foolish behavior is beyond my own ability to comprehend.

By the time I'm at the outskirts of Colombo, it is eight o'clock and monsoon clouds are obscuring the Full Moon. Only a few trucks, cars, and motorcycles share the two-lane expressway to Kandy.

Through churning rains, I weave the Suzuki in and out of traffic and pass villages and dense jungle foliage. I think only about stopping my fiancé from making a terrible mistake.

After I reach the hill country, the road becomes curvy and I slow down to avoid a fatal crash. I calculate that Nakshatra is at least half an hour ahead of me. But she's not a seasoned driver, especially in the rain. I always drove to the estate in Galle and she used my car only around Colombo.

When I reach Gannoruwa, the traffic increases and billboards, lit buildings, and large estates in the hills begin appearing. Finally, I arrive in Kandy, pass the tourist information center at the lake, and see the illuminated white palace through sheets of rain.

It's midnight when I spot my green Mercedes on the roadside outside the palace parkway. I pull up beside it then rush through the rain, down the brick path, toward the palace gates. No one's around because of the storm and because the tourist site has been closed for five hours.

By the time I cross the moat, pass the white octagonal tower, and reach the large iron gates which stand ajar, I'm drenched like a drowned rat, which I am. No guards are around

because Nakshatra was here. She knows how to use the key's powers of suggestion. This is all my fault, I keep thinking as I carefully run down the slippery stone path passing gardens, purifying fountains, Buddhist sculptures, and buildings with distinctive Kandyan wooden eaves.

At the two-story temple, the Sri Dalada Maligawa, I cautiously enter the open-sided lower floor and approach the main altar platform near the entry tunnel. At the back of the platform, someone has pulled aside the red velvet curtains that cover the ornately carved ivory doors. Beyond these doors rests the sacred tooth relic deep inside a stupa encased in a series of jeweled caskets.

Someone has also pushed aside the brass balustrade gate at the bottom of the four marble steps leading to the platform. On each side of these steps are stone lions and golden elephants. On the platform itself are wooden pillars upholding a terraced ceiling and among the pillars are eight enormous elephant tusks curving toward the path to the Buddha's tooth.

The thunder is booming outside as the rain continues pelting the ground. Lightning flashes and illuminates the altar. Nakshatra is standing beyond the tusks, before the ivory doors, dressed in heels, jeans, and a soaked and rumpled white blouse. The rains and winds have tangled her long black hair and smudged mascara around her wide eyes. She's upholding the key and gazing at the doors like a wrathful dakini from the cremation ghats. She's unaware of my presence.

"Nakshatra, stop!" I yell from the bottom of the steps.

For the first time she looks at me and says, "I left you for dead, Old Man." Her voice is horse and raspy, demonic.

"Give back the key," I shout over the raging storm. I step up the stairs but stop and retreat because Nakshatra points the key toward me and I fear what she intends to do.

“No, the key is mine now,” her voice screeches. “I alone possess its powers.”

“Nakshatra, the relic is not yours. You stole it. And the key cannot be stolen, only given. I didn’t give you the key.”

“You owe me this key for what you’ve done. Making promises you could never keep. Lying about your identity. You betrayed me. Destroyed my dream. I hate you with all my heart.” She shouts louder than the clapping thunder outside the open-sided temple.

“Nakshatra,” I plead, my hand gripping one of the brass balustrades pushed aside. I dare not rush her and grab the key from her grasp because she’ll use its powers to stop me. She’s a single-minded woman with obsessive desires. And now she holds powers that will destroy her. Destroy me. Maybe the most precious relic of Sri Lanka, perhaps of Buddhism. I climb the platform stairs and smell her damp clothes and camphor perfume or maybe it’s the ambiance of the temple.

“I want the power of kings,” Nakshatra screams, now focused on the ivory doors while holding out the key. “I want the power of this Manjushri relic to open the doors to my kingdom.”

Lightning flashes, thunder cracks, and the rain bombards the stone pavement outside as Nakshatra places the key on the ornate lock of the ivory doors. The lock sparks with blue light and the doors creak open an inch, then a gust of wind bursts through the gap and her stringy wet hair twists and coils around her head like tendrils of seagrass. Like snakes.

Before I can seize the key, green smoke billows from the ivory doors with a stench like the rotting animal carcasses my father used to remove from the streets of Kathmandu. The odor infiltrates my clothes, skin, my very essence. My mouth tastes bitter and putrid.

From this foul vapor, diaphanous demons materialize, one by one. Some appear like creatures from the sea, some form into ethereal men and women. They begin drifting around Nakshatra as she stands before the doors uncertain what to do.

Lightning strikes and illuminates the platform. Then a gust from behind the ivory doors throws Nakshatra to the floor beside one of the elephant tusks. The demonic spirits continue to circle above her head.

I understand who these creatures are. I've seen them in thangka paintings. They are fallen beings, demons, and hungry ghosts summoned to this world from the four levels of hell because of greed, hatred, and delusion. They are craving my fiancé's greed.

"Nakshatra," I scream, desperate to save her from a terrible fate.

She silently remains where she's fallen on the stone platform, unable to speak because the swirling entities are traumatizing her. But she hears my voice and looks my way. Her large beautiful eyes are filled with fear. She understands what's happening. She knows she's gone too far and is doomed to die a horrible death over and over again.

I clamber to reach her, to pull her from the cast of hellish beings who want to consume her essence. But before I take another step, each of the elephant tusks morphs into an enormous gray and yellow scaled cobra with its hood flared out.

"Nagas," I shout, paralyzed at the top step. They come from the world of gods and are the same creatures that threatened Sanghamitta during her sea voyage to Sri Lanka because they coveted the Bodhi tree sapling she brought with her.

As the Nagas slither toward my fiancé, I fear they are after the Manjushri key. I can't help my poor Nakshatra. I don't possess the powers of Ashoka's daughter and can't turn myself into a huge Garuda to scare them away.

The Nagas form a line, a fence between me and my fiancé, facing her. Thunder booms as flames shoot from the fanged mouth of each Naga directly onto Nakshatra and the circling demons and hungry ghosts. A roaring fire instantly devours the hellish beings along with my fiancé. The flames spindle across the ceiling and platform as the Nagas loudly hiss and roar.

The inferno doesn't reach me and before I have time to think, the Nagas transform back into the elephant tusks on pedestals. *Have I just witnessed a vision and nothing else?* I ask myself. I rub my eyes and see the gray pile of ashes that used to be Nakshatra. Then I notice a glimmer on top and see the Manjushri key, untouched by the explosive flames. I look around; the flames have burned away the red curtains at the ivory doors and singed the floor, pillars and elephant tusks. But this is all. Even the smoldering smoke has vanished.

I inch back to the bottom step and grasp the brass balustrade so tightly that my knuckles turn white. I remain there unable to move until I hear a voice from behind me. "Gopan. Wilson." I turn and see the venerable Mr. Sid Lees with his gray hair and distinguished beard. He's wearing a white shirt and tweed slacks and carrying a satchel over his shoulder. A buddha bag.

"Are you all right, Mr. Subba Yapa?" He asks, but doesn't address what's just happened. He doesn't need to, I imagine. He knows. He's my bodhisattva.

"Take the key, Mr. Lees. There it is, on the pile of ashes that was my fiancé. My Sarasvati starlet. I return it to you, forever. I'm sorry for not doing this sooner."

Mr. Lees says nothing as he walks past me and takes a white silk cloth, picks up the key, wraps it, and places it in his satchel.

"Let's leave now, Mr. Yapa. Before anyone comes around. I don't think either one of us can explain this without revealing the Manjushri key, and this isn't something I wish to do. I'm

eager to catch the next flight to Dharamshala." He takes hold of my arm and helps me walk away from Sri Dalada Maligawa.

The rain has stopped, the clouds are parting, and the Full Moon emerges west of zenith. Mr. Lees continues to hold my arm as we return to our cars. We say nothing to each other along the way.

At my neighbor's Suzuki, I thank Mr. Lees for saving my life many times and I wish him a safe trip to Dharamshala. He promises to call me when he returns and we both slowly drive away from the Palace of Kandy, under the light of December's Full Moon.

Chapter 42: The National Tsunami Hero

Before I can retrieve my Mercedes outside the Kandy palace, the police go through it and find Nakshatra's purse. Their crime lab discovers fragments of bone among the ashes. After a DNA analysis, they determine that something or someone had incinerated Nakshatra but they can't fathom how or why. The police try to connect me to the incident and question me for hours at their headquarters. It feels like I'm back in Kathmandu under house arrest.

Fortunately, Mr. Lees and I already planned for my alibi. I claim that Nakshatra had left home that night, without saying a word or leaving a note, and when I discovered that my Mercedes was gone, I borrowed a neighbor's car and drove to Mr. Lees' flat to give him a Buddhist relic I had intended to deliver to him that night. Mr. Lees confirms that I was with him

and because of the storm and darkness, no one saw me or Mr. Lees at the Temple of the Sacred Tooth, nor had anyone seen Mr. Lees leaving BPU. In the end, my story convinces the police of my innocence but as a precaution I file reports that my fiancé went missing and my car had been stolen.

Ultimately, both the police and the press conclude that terrorists killed Nakshatra because she was a famous teledrama starlet and the fiancé of the national tsunami hero. A civil war is going on between the Tamil Tigers and the Sinhalese government. The Tamils want their own nation in the north of the island and have committed numerous acts of violence during the past several decades. The year before the Manjushri key came into my possession, Tamil terrorists had driven a hijacked bus to the sacred Bodhi tree at Anuradhapura and gunned down 146 nuns, monks, and innocent pilgrims. But they failed to damage the tree. Like Nepal, Sri Lanka has Maoist terrorist who possibly launched the first attack on Sri Dalada Maligawa in 1989 when Sri Lanka was celebrating its fiftieth year of independence from the British Empire. During that attack, they crashed a truck filled with explosives into the Kanya Palace, killing a child and sixteen people. The year before the tsunami, the government executed three of the terrorists who organized this attack. In retaliation for these executions, the police believe that the terrorists executed Nakshatra at the holiest temple in Sri Lanka.

But I know otherwise and feel like every act of terror is connected to my bad karma from misusing the Manjushri relic key.

After the commotion dies down over my fiancé's tragic death, I'm left alone in my apartment on Marine Drive wondering what to do now that I don't have the magic key. My bodhisattva, the venerable Mr. Sid Lees, offers me my old position and a place to stay at BPU. I

thank him and explain that my penthouse is pre-paid for another six months and that I need to gather my wits before deciding about my life from here on out. “But please let me keep the option open,” I add. Mr. Lees says he understands.

I don’t ask Mr. Lees about the key, even though it’s the whole reason for my present situation. Without its powers, I feel like I’m dangling in an ethereal world. For nearly half of my life, the key has been a part of who I am. It formed my existence. Now my life is a preposterous sham. How can I face anyone? I can’t make things right. I only want to be alone in my apartment with my bronze statues of Buddha, Sariputta, Moggallana, Tara, Manjushri, and Shiva sitting on my console gazing at me.

After washing off the blood, I gave the Sarasvati statue to my neighbor for allowing me to use his car. I couldn’t gaze at the beautiful goddess playing the veena on her lap because she reminds me of the woman who captured my heart but ended up being one of my many victims. The demons of hell destroyed her, I’m now certain, to destroy my own heroism. The wheel of life is baffling and demoralizing, at least for me.

By the end of January 2007, I’m about to lose my penthouse on Marine Drive. The proceeds from my books have run out and I no longer want to give any interviews about Nakshatra, or the tsunami, or anything else. I still don’t know what I might do or where I might go. I can’t return to Kathmandu and I hesitate to return to BPU and resume my work under Mr. Lees. I don’t want to further burden him with my pitiful self. But no other option presents itself to me except to live on the streets of Colombo like I did in Kathmandu as a boy.

When I'm about to call my bodhisattva and suggest my return to BPU, the phone next to my sectional sofa fortuitously rings. I'm astonished to hear the voice of Rajkumar Kapoor. He offers to buy the rights to my life's story for a Bollywood docudrama.

I'm overjoyed to hear from him and we talk for hours. Rajkumar tells me he wants to create a tragic drama that will highlight both my heroism in the tsunami and my fiancé's kidnapping and bizarre death at the hands of terrorists. Then he patiently listens as I spin the story I hope to tell.

"It'll include my undying love for the teledrama starlet Nakshatra Sabapathi and my persuading her that I'm a Bollywood producer only to win her heart," I emphasize. "But in truth, Mr. Kapoor, I did try to produce a film with you for my beloved Nakshatra. And did you know, she died at the same age as her real mother? Her body was turned to ashes by an explosion when she wasn't even supposed to be at the temple. Yes. My story will make an excellent movie and a bestselling book."

Mr. Kapoor offers me one million dollars and suggests I fly to Mumbai as soon as I can. "I'll arrange for your ticket from Colombo," he says.

"Can you do so within the week?" I ask. "This is when my rent is due." Without hesitation, my good friend Rajkumar agrees.

Feeling relieved, I sit on my sofa and gaze at Shakyamuni with his chief disciples. They tell me *even though you no longer possess the key, your accumulation of karma—your past actions, thoughts, and decisions, are part of your present condition. What you've done in the past, both good and bad, will eventually catch you, somehow, some way*.

Part 3: A Sadhu in Mumbai

Chapter 43: Goregaon

By the end of February 2007, I'm living in a one-bedroom rental in Goregaon in the central district of Mumbai near Film City Studios. India's largest metropolis reminds me of Sri Lanka's capital although Colombo has less than one tenth of the population.

Rajkumar hires Shiv Kannan, an up-and-coming young actor from the TV series *Mumbai Police* to play Wilson Yapa in the docudrama. I'm flattered he doesn't choose to cast the part of me as middle-aged, pudgy, and balding man. To play the part of Nakshatra, he casts Dabria Madhavi, a stunning starlet from a Mumbai TV serial about good, evil, and murder called *Sitara Marjawan*.

On several occasions, I meet with Rajkumar and his scriptwriter Tadashi Din to flush out the story. We usually meet in my apartment or at a local café. The focus of the docudrama is my courtship with Nakshatra and my experience on the train to Galle when the tsunami hit Sri Lanka. I suggest that Wilson Yapa comes from a shipping family in Colombo but Rajkumar says my background is irrelevant. However, I insist they tell the truth about Nakshatra's life, about how her mother died and her step-mother propelled Nakshatra to teledrama stardom.

I don't mention her father's fraud, out of respect for my fiancé, or because I myself committed abundant fraud and don't want to make an issue of it. Of course, I never mention the

Manjushri key or my birth country Nepal or my former names Gopan Meelan Subba and Gopan Harijan. In the end, Rajkumar and Tadashi add a twist to the plot by having Wilson Yapa, as played by Shiv Kannan, rush to the temple to save Nakshatra from the terrorists, but arrive a moment too late. After thinking over several titles, Rajkumar, Tadashi Din, and I decide to call the docudrama *A Hero Returns from the Dead.*

The production lasts from March until November 2007 and takes place on two main sets in the Film City complex. One set re-enacts the train disaster and the other is a remake of the Temple of the Buddha's Tooth. Cinematographers travel to Sri Lanka to acquire footage of the coastal scenery to edit into the film. Except when I go to neighborhood shopping centers, or restaurants and bars with my friends Rajkumar, Tadashi, and other crew members, I prefer to stay in my apartment and watch DVDs, listen to CDs, or play poker games on the computer. I'm relieved Rajkumar doesn't require my presence on the sets during the filming.

From November 2007 until November 2008, Rajkumar and the stars tour India to promote the film. They're hoping fans will select *A Hero Returns from the Dead* for the International Indian Film Academy Awards, known as the IIFA, but I doubt that will happen. The docudrama is not a box office smash like most Bollywood productions with big stars and big dance and song choreographies. At least my docudrama has some modest success in the video stores.

Rajkumar, Shiv, and Dabria also hold radio and TV talk show interviews. I join them on a few radio interviews, but avoid TV appearances. I try to keep from being photographed because I worry that the Sri Lankan police might have changed their minds about my involvement in Nakshatra's death. Anymore, I'm nervous about all the terrible tragedies of my

past repeating themselves. And I'm afraid of riding on the success of this film and then facing yet another tragic collapse.

Of course, I keep these thoughts to myself or between me and the sacred statues sitting on the altar in my apartment, a coffee table against the wall of my TV room. I no longer ask my buddhas, gods, and bodhisattvas for great things to happen to me, for abundant success and elevation to a higher station in life. Instead, I chant short mantras while gazing at Shakyamuni, his disciples, Manjushri, Tara, Shiva, and even Ganesh, and my mind finds a certain amount of peace.

Om Muni Mahamuni Shakyamuni Saha, means to me, "Great teacher Shakyamuni, help me understand the wisdom of your dharma." My chant to Manjushri *Om A Ra Pa Ca Na Dhih* helps me slash away my ignorance, negativity, and delusions and find the source of my Buddha nature. And my chant to Green Tara, *Om Tare Tuttare Ture Saha* helps me pass through this difficult stage in my life and overcome what impedes my good karma.

Chapter 44: A Year in Mumbi

My spirits have greatly improved. Nothing tragic has happened. I'm maintaining a fairly good, quiet life. Last year, the government in Nepal abolished the monarchy and I feel certain that the heat has died down concerning my connection to the royal massacre or to the Maoists. This encourages me to contact my sons in Kathmandu. It's been over six years since I've heard

from them and I want to learn what they're now pursuing. Maybe I'm just lonely and feeling sorry for myself. I really have no one in Mumbai, except Rajkumar and associates from the film, and a few neighborly acquaintances. More and more, I miss not having a family, like I did in Kathmandu, and I miss not having an exciting fiancé or a bodhisattva friend like Mr. Lees.

I easily locate both Hari and Aftab on Facebook. On Aftab's page, I discover he's married with twin baby boys named Padma and Rajneesh. I don't post on his page because I still feel discord from our last conversation and from him pushing me into a ridiculous caper at the Narayanhiti Palace.

On Hari's page, I learn he's working at Software Internet, a company based in the Netherlands, and is married to a women named Isla Saleem. My heart skips a beat when I see pictures of their two daughters, five and six. They're named Girvani and Surangana after the daughters of Princess Shruti who the Crown Prince killed during the gunshots I heard the night of the royal massacre. Tears come to my eyes with love and emotion for my beautiful granddaughters and from realizing that I'm blessed with four grandchildren. I want to know everything about them and my sons, even Aftab and his family.

I post a message on Hari's page with my phone number and ask him to call me. Within a day, I receive his call at my apartment in East Goregaon. I'm overjoyed and ask him to tell me everything about his daughters.

"They both play with dolls," he says. "But they also want to be doctors when they grow up!"

"I would love to meet them. How's your mother?"

"She remains unmarried and lives with us in our apartment. Aftab lives elsewhere."

“Is your brother still secretly a Maoist?” I ask while hoping to learn that my firstborn son is reformed and I can resume a relationship with him. Hari’s news is disappointing.

“No, Ba,” Hari says. “My brother is now an outright Maoist. After you left and terrorists destroyed the world trade buildings in New York, King Gyanendra tried to eliminate all the Maoists in Nepal. Unfortunately, he only caused hatred and my brother swore to end the monarchy once and for all. Aftab helped resurrect the Maoist party and even tried to recruit me, but I want no part of his politics.”

“Good for you, Chora,” I say.

“Ba, Aftab became a leader in the People’s War between King Gyanendra and the political parties. My brother established a coalition against the monarchy. Two years ago, Gyanendra attempted a coop that enraged Nepalis and he had to end the monarchy. Aftab was overjoyed.”

“Yes, Chora. I heard about it. The Shah curse has come true, like many things. What is your brother doing now?”

“I don’t see much of Aftab and we rarely speak over the phone. Now that Nepal is a new republic, my brother has a Maoist seat in the first Constituent Assembly. This is all I know or care about. I suggest you give him a call.” Hari gives me Aftab’s number, tells me he’s running late for work, and suggests I call him next weekend.

During the next several months, I speak to both of my sons over the phone and push for them to move to Mumbai and start another business with me. I claim to have sufficient savings for such a project, but don’t reveal that my money comes from the proceeds Rajkumar paid me for my story. I don’t want them to know about my alias Wilson Yapa, perhaps so they won’t

know I pursued a young woman who tragically died. I want only to be with them, as my family of the past, present, and always.

Even after I boast about Mumbai being the financial capital of Asia, I can't dissuade Aftab from leaving his political post. Hari hesitates to leave his job for a startup endeavor but agrees to visit me with his family and Geeta during the fourth week of November, when he has two weeks of accumulated holiday time.

"That's the best time of year to visit Mumbai," I tell him with excitement. "It's after the heat and monsoons and before the cold of January."

On November 20th, at the Mumbai International Airport, I welcome my youngest son, his family, and his mother, whom I consider to be my former wife although we never officially married. In a taxi, I take them directly to the plush Taj Hotel in south Mumbai. I don't want to show them my apartment. It's too far from the main attractions, without any kind of view, not furnished with luxury, and I have copies of the books about me as Wilson Yapa and wall posters from *A Hero Returns from the Dead*. One day, if my family moves to Mumbai as I hope they will, they'll inevitably realize that I'm Wilson Yapa of the docudrama. Even though the movie is not the biggest Bollywood feature film to ever hit the video stores, somehow word about my past will leak out to them. It always does. But I'll cross that road when I reach it. For now, I want my family to enjoy the finest parts of Mumbai starting with the Taj Hotel where I reserve a sixth-floor suite with two bedrooms, one for Geeta and the girls, the other for Hari and his stunning young wife Isla Saleem.

Over the next few days, I show my family my newly adopted city by way of taxis. First, we join a tour group at Film City where everyone who comes to Mumbai wants to go, at least

everyone addicted to Bollywood films. I'm initially reluctant, worried we'll encounter a poster of the docudrama or some worker at the studios will recognize me, but my granddaughters insist. Besides, I did avoid having my photo taken as much as possible and Shiv Kannon is the star featured on publicity posters, not me—a humble, simple, middle-aged, balding man.

We spend a day touring the massive complex and my granddaughters speak endlessly about the cartoon movies featuring Hanuman and Ganesh as mischievous little boys. Both girls keep asking to see Halo the Puppy, a Bollywood kiddie film about a girl who loses her puppy on the Mumbai streets, and they want to see Binya and her blue umbrella.

I'm overwhelmed with love for these two beautiful little girls, my nati-natini, especially every time they call me "Baaji." I shower them with whatever trinket or toy, candy, snack or drink they want. Isla constantly tells me, "Baaji, you're spoiling your nati-natini." But they are more precious to me than any crown jewels or treasures or even a magic key.

We take a taxi to Juhu to play on the beach until sunset. At the food court we eat pani puris, pav bhaji, masala dosas, and have several falooda drinks. Girvani always requests a pink one and Surangana wants a blue one, like Binya's umbrella. They're more concerned about the colors than the flavors.

Mumbai enchants my little granddaughters and they want to come live with "Baaji." Only Hari had been to Mumbai before, on business trips for Everest Legendary. Geeta, Isla and the girls have never left the mountainous, landlock city of Kathmandu and they love viewing the ocean, the skyscrapers, and they relish eating all the new foods.

One day, I arrive early at their hotel to pick them up and show them the sites of south Mumbai which I haven't seen myself because I've been too preoccupied with avoiding the world. Now the world seems unleashed to me with marvelous sites and experiences because I'm

reunited with my family. I've never known such a feeling of love and of loving, mostly from Girvani and Surangana. I call them Gi and Gana.

The taxi takes us over Mahim Bay across the Worli Sea Link bridge, and then at low tide, we walk to the Haji Ali Dargah Mosque. "This is like the Taj Mahal," Gi and Gana exclaim. I promise to show them the real Taj Mahal one day soon and take their photo before the great mausoleum like the photo of Princess Diana.

We also visit the Mahalakshmi temple to see the three Hindu goddesses Lakshmi, Sarasvati, and Kali. Gi and Gana place marigold garlands and pink lotus flowers on the shrines at the crowded white temple. I explain that their great-grandmother was named after Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and beauty. At Lakshmi's shrine, we place a special garland in honor of my mother. At the Kali shrine, I explain that I grew up devoted to Mother Kali. "She helped me overcome the many difficulties I had on the streets of Kathmandu." When I point out the Sarasvati statue, I simply say "She's wife of Brahma and brings harmony to our world through her veena music." Of course, I don't mention how I worshiped a living Sarasvati as the object of my affection. This is something I'll forever keep to myself.

On the morning of November 26th, we take the hour-long ferry from the Gateway of India, near their hotel, to the Elephanta Caves of Shiva where Gi and Gana call each rascal monkey Little Hanuman. By late afternoon, we end up at Marine Drive exhausted but eager to watch another sunset in the Indian Sea. We eat Bombay masala sandwiches from the kiosks and the girls feed the pigeons.

As my family and I stroll along the boardwalk in the setting sun, Geeta and I hold hands with each granddaughter and sometimes I hold hands with Geeta. She and I have been pleasantly reunited during this visit. Our relationship is reinvigorated because we're now grandparents. But

it's more than that. She has become very attractive in her maturity, not the old hag Milarepa describes in his poem, and I feel a love for her that is even stronger than what I once had for Nakshatra. I desire Geeta in all ways. I want to share my life with her, be with her in our final years. And I sense, without either one of us discussing it, that she feels the same way about me. Her smile brings me joy and her pleasant disposition makes me feel focused and stable in my mind.

By the time I escort my family back to the Taj Hotel, it's 8 PM. In the giftshop, I buy Hari a bottle of Imperial Blue Whiskey, Gi and Gana stuffed Ganesh and Hanuman toys with balloons, and Isla Saleem and Geeta boxes of mango candies and spray bottles of jasmine perfume. At the elevator, I ask Geeta if she'd like to sleep with me tonight. She coquettishly slaps my hand and says, "Not with Gi and Gana in my bed!"

We hug, I kiss my nati-natini good-night, and return to my flat in East Goregaon as the happiest man on Earth. I'm quite certain my family will permanently move to Mumbai.

Chapter 45: A Sadhu in Mumbai

2021

Thirteen years ago, after the bombings, I gave my savings and all that I owned to the people of the slums. I became a sadhu, or more precisely, a wondering Buddhist monk, although no one has ever ordained me and no master gave me the name Sadhsariputta. No guru has

instructed me unless I consider Mr. Sid Lees my guru. He introduced me to Shakyamuni's disciple Sariputta which is why I decided to take this name. I'm now sixty-three and wear an orange dhoti, shawl, and sandals. Unlike a typical sadhu, my head is shaved but I've grown a long grey beard. I don't want a following and I don't care to accumulate wealth. I live freely each day by moving about like a spindle of fire burning away all of my fetters.

Before the illness that now devastates India and the world, I would visit the slums to share the dharma, as Mr. Lees taught me. I don't know him now, or his fate. He would be very old and very wise, if he's still living in this defiled world.

I used to wander the boardwalk along Marine Drive to watch the sunset or I'd sit in the rain and wind coming from the sea. It didn't matter. I engaged the people strolling past me, especially the tourists who like to share their ganja and discuss my philosophy, or more precisely, the teachings of Shakyamuni and the Asian yogic mystics.

"A bodhisattva cherishes no thoughts," I'd tell them. "He dwells on nothing. Not even his senses. Perceptions, labels, and concepts are meaningless and empty of true reality."

Tourists liked to ask me about past lives and I would tell them, "All past lives are the lives we presently live. All false and unreal conclusions are based on dreams and illusions. Like a shooting star, a dew drop, a mirage, or a lightning bolt. Unreality is fraud and fraud is the ignorance that manifests greed, hatred, and delusion. You can believe you lived before and will live again, or you can focus on this life and cleanse your mind of damaging thoughts about your good or bad actions in this tragic world."

"How so?" tourists liked to ask me. "We play no part in the world's tragedies."

"Because we can't separate ourselves from what surrounds us. From all that exists."

Most tourists would agree and then buy me a chapati and dal bhat from a local food cart, or a piece of mango fruit, and we'd smoke ganja together.

At the Mahalakshmi Temple, I'd sit on the steps and contemplate Kali, Lakshmi, and Sarasvati as well as my existence in a suffering world. I'd go to the Siddhivinayak Temple and call upon Lord Ganesh to help everyone overcome the obstacles he or she faces on the path to liberation from suffering. On a few occasions, I visited Vipassana Buddhist Pagoda but it's very far north of the city and difficult for me to reach. Because I no longer have an altar or a puja room, these temples and the world at large have become my altar.

Before the sickness came, I spent much time in the Dharavi slum which is a mesh of narrow alleys and lanes always teeming with commotion and noise. I offered well wishes to the workers at the fabric shops, the leather factories, and the shops that embroidered clothes or made pottery or soaps. I praised the industrious people who recycle papers, metals, and plastics that they retrieve from street trash. They remind me of Geeta and her family at the dumps of Kathmandu.

The people of Dharavi invited me into their modest homes to share their meals as they listened to my teachings. I would tell them, "Don't believe in anything but your own value. Don't accept the conventions and labels place upon you. You are not a Dalit. You are not this or that. You are only what your mind makes you out to be. When you reach your essence, you will find nothing but existence, a gift of life that we somehow have earned. If you need a god, pray for a good mind, a kind heart, and a healthy body. If you need past lives, future lives, pray to have the right attitude, effort, voice, and view. But most of all, don't allow the world to degrade you."

But these days, people are needlessly dying right and left. They have no oxygen and no remedy is available. They die breathless as they wait in crowds to enter hospitals. The funeral pyres are constantly burning hundreds of corpses at a time. I can no longer engage with people in the slums, at the temples, or on the streets. The tourists have stopped coming to Mumbai. I sit alone along the boardwalk, or in the parks, and contemplate the gods, the Buddhas, and my life. Each day I am born from a lotus blossom on a lake of purified water that is my mind. I don't count time. I merely go by my sleeping and waking self like Shiva's vahana Nandi.

Of course, I wonder if I'll catch the disease and die because of my exposure to people in the slums where nobody has protection. Then I remember Mr. Lees telling me, "If a battling soldier conquers a thousand times a thousand men, and you conquer only yourself; you will be the greatest of all conquerors. Greater than Genghis Khan or Alexander the Great." How then, does one battle and conquer a virus? By contemplating the non-duality of reality? Or not?

As I wait for the pandemic to pass, or for me to do so instead, I sometimes imagine that I'm Brahma who is dreaming about my creation, the air I breathe, the ground I walk on, the space around my body and mind, until the end of time. Although I attempt to describe this universe I perpetually create, words fall short and pictures are mere representations. Like every living human being, my overlapping qualities are not good or bad, happy or sad. This is my nature, the nature of Brahma and the many gods of my creation. In other words, my many aspects and avatars express who I am, the creator of all that exists.

In one aspect, I'm the preserver riding an eagle. Like the many buddhas, I've lived many lives in this world. I'm a fish, turtle, dwarf, a wild boar, and a hero of an epic (I've been to Lanka). I'm the dancing shepherd boy who seduces the Gopi maidens with my magic flute. I'm the avatar who promises to appear at the end of this world along with Jesus and Maitreya.

Sometimes I contemplate being the destroyer of misapprehensions, untruths, and the physical nature of being, like the bodhisattva Manjushri with his sword. In my ascetic form, I'm the color of lapis lazuli like the Medicine Buddha who cures all ailments. I sit in lotus posture on a tiger skin and from the knot of hair gathered atop my head the Ganges flows to Earth. I am as innumerable as the sands of the Ganges. The crescent moon in my hair reminds me that life phases through birth, growth, decline, death, and rebirth.

In my deepest contemplation, I'm of no one gender, of no one form, and of no one identity except for what I create in each of my aspects. When I'm Mother of the universe, my dance becomes so passionate I lose control but my Shiva aspect throws himself at my feet to stop me from destroying a world that's already destroying itself.

Two years ago in Colombo, terrorists attacked three luxury hotels and three churches during Easter Sunday services. The suicide bombers killed 267 people and injured more than 500 Sri Lankans, foreign tourists, and police officers.

Six years ago, nearly four years before the Colombo Easter bombings, a devastating earthquake demolished parts of Kathmandu, killing nearly 9,000 people and injuring nearly 22,000. The quake toppled several monuments in Durbar Square and damaged the Boudhanath and Swayambhunath stupas. It was the worst natural disaster to strike Nepal since the earthquake twenty-five years before my birth. The quake even caused an avalanche on Mount Everest that killed 22 climbers. I don't know if the quake killed my son Aftab and his family because I've not heard from him for thirteen years. The rest of my family, my son Hari, his wife Isla Saleem, my wife Geeta, and my nati-natini Gi and Gana were already gone. They had been dead for seven years when the quake struck Nepal. They died the night I left them at the Taj Hotel.

On November 26, 2008, nearly four years after the tsunami, ten men from Pakistan with hatred in their hearts and minds, highjacked an Indian trawler off the coast of Mumbai and floated in a raft to the Gateway of India. They carried grenades, guns, and arsenal. Within one hour, they attacked a Jewish Center, Leopold Café, the Cama Hospital, the Chatrapati Railway Station, and the Taj Hotel overlooking the Gateway of India.

On the news, I watched in horror as the hundred-year-old hotel erupted in flames and machine gun fire. Terrorists threw grenades in the restaurant and shot tourists and citizens of Mumbai without mercy. By the morning of November 28th, the police had secured all the sites except the Taj Hotel. The next day, India's National Security Guards arrived from New Delhi and in a maneuver called Operation Black Tornado, they killed the remaining terrorists at the Taj. These hateful and angry men had wounded 300 people and killed nearly two hundred, including my family. An explosion destroyed the sixth-floor room where they were hovering in terror.

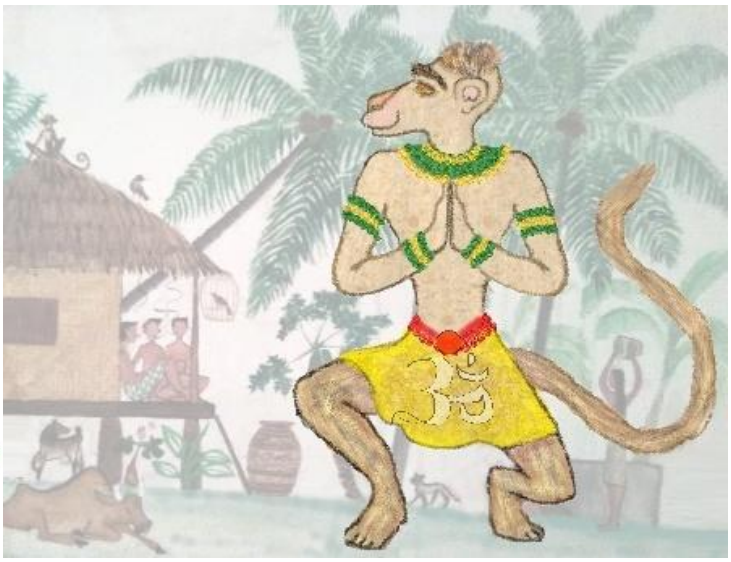
I oversaw the cremation of my beloved family at the Shastri Nagar Crematoria Grounds, not far from my flat. Then I carried their ashes on a boat into the Mumbai Bay in view of the Gateway of India and the historic hotel where they left this world behind, never to be reborn. I believe this because they were pure and filled with joy and love without any form of defilement.

Life is impermanent. What I was before is not who I am in this moment or what I will be or ever become. All that exists, all that happens in the past, present, and future, is interconnected. The identity the world gives me is not who I am. The perception I give myself is not who I am. I am formless. I sit and contemplate how I look, how I feel, how I view myself in comparison to others, and how others view me in comparison to themselves.

Lust and desire have caused me to be foolish and blind. This is what I tell myself when I sit alone in the wind and rain. The world is filled with poison that brings changes to the climate, brings pandemics, earthquakes, title waves, and terror in the hearts and minds of men.

I used to tell the tourists about the key to 1000 doors. “It exists,” I’d say. “All you need do is receive it with an open heart and mind, without hatred, greed, or delusion. But don’t use it foolishly in the ways I have. Use it for deeds of compassion for those who are suffering because of their tainted desires.”

Just before the pandemic, I remember speaking these words to a tourist from Denmark. We were sitting along the boardwalk of Marine Drive and sharing a ganga cigarette. The man asked me if I really had such a key and I told him, “Yes, I truly possessed such a relic key.”

“And it opened 1000 doors?” he asked.

“Yes,” I replied. “It opens the last door when there is no longer a need to open any door. When ignorance and all the poisons of a defiled world have vanished. When we walk through the final door, we suffer no more because there’s nothing more to make us suffer. We are liberated.”