

Key to 1000 Doors  
a novel by Teri Ekland



Chapter 1: Rickshaw Incident in Kathmandu

*December 7, 1986*

*Gopan Subba*

When the first rays of light sweep across Kathmandu, veils of winter mist enshroud the distant Himalayas. In Durbar Square, I am sitting in my rickshaw cab fending off the morning's chill with the blue jacket I bartered from a tourist who wanted ganja. The aroma of frying onions, ginger, and chilies comes from a nearby food cart where a man is cooking dal bhat. I watch him toss scraps of puri to the stray dogs. Thousands of pigeons are already meandering across the plaza and a few cows are peacefully kneeling without thinking about their past or future. They don't consult a watch or calendar but merely go by their sleeping and waking selves. Sometimes I wish my life were that way but as my family's provider, I must know the time of day, the seasons, the holidays, and I must pay careful attention to the weather. Even on stormy days and in the foggy cold, tourists are looking for ganja and shopkeepers are hurrying to work. And when it rains, people are willing to pay extra to sit under my rickshaw's retractable awning with green fringe.

My name is Gopan Subba and I am the only child of a mortuary sweeper. My father named me Shiva Kumar Meelan Harijan but Aama has always called me Gopan after her father. Since early boyhood I have wanted to end the dreadful cycle of my heritage, of being born again and again as a Harijan, a Dalit, a nobody. People of higher status have always perceived me as unworthy of entering the Dakshinkali and Pashupatinath Temples on the eastern outskirts of Kathmandu. And if I brush against a higher-class man or he accidentally touches me, he believes I have defiled him. This is the plight of my birthright.

In 1955, three years before my birth, King Mahendra Shah banned the Hindu caste system in Nepal, like Gandhiji had done in India nearly ten years earlier. This does not seem to matter, however. People still behave according to their long-held traditions and I have little chance of escaping a fate of living at the bottom end of society. But I am a resourceful man always seeking opportunities to improve my situation in life and that of my family. This is why I am not a mortuary sweeper like my father and his father before him. I am the proud and distinguished owner of a bicycle rickshaw that Pashupati gave to me. Pashupati is Shiva as the Lord of Animals and the primary deity of our little Himalayan kingdom.

I call my rickshaw Nandiji after the sacred cow who pulls Lord Shiva's wagon. All cows in Nepal die natural deaths because no one kills or sacrifices a Nandi, not even at the Dakshinkali, the Temple of Mother Kali. To injure or kill a cow is a crime against Lord Shiva and only a person viler than the lowliest scum of this world would dine on the body of Nandi.

On my rickshaw I have painted colorful images of Lord Shiva, Mother Kali, Nandi, and Shiva's son Ganesh. For me, Nandiji is my Earthly wagon, my vahana. Like Nandi pulls the wagon of Lord Shiva, she transports me in this world away from demons and people who want to harm me or my family.

I never leave Nandiji unattended. When I am ready to sleep in my cushioned cab at night, I park her at different tourist sites usually wherever I have dropped off my last passenger. I never park beside other rickshaw drivers because I don't care to be around them when morning arrives and we all compete for the best fares from tourists or shopkeepers who need transport or rich Nepali children on their way to school.

At least twice a week I return to my one-room house beside the Bagmati River in the Bhimsengola slums. I constructed our little house from bamboo and mud, plastic tarpaulin, and corrugated sheets of metal which I retrieved 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 sell. Her heritage is beneath even that of my own. Geeta is two years younger than me; my sons Aftab and Hari are twelve and ten, and my widowed Aama is now forty-eight. My grandparents named my mother Lakshmi after the family goddess who brings rewards and riches. Perhaps they had hoped my mother would have a good life despite her lowly heritage. During my morning and evening puja, I ask Lord Shiva and Dakshin Kali to keep the Bagmati from rising in anger and destroying my little house and washing away my altar and my mother, wife, and sons. At times, worry consumes me despite my good karma and hopeful nature.

Geeta and Aama sell tea in the shantytown to help pay for extra food and clothes, but Nandiji sustains us with rice, dhal, and spices, and allows me to pay the slumlords for my piece of real-estate, and the moneylenders for the loans I have accumulated against my house. Any extra money I earn from a good fare or baksheesh, I store in a khutruke ceramic jar under my altar for my sons' education. Aftab and Hari are bright, obedient boys, but sometimes they must stay home from school to repair our house and help their aama and hajur aama. My hope is that

my boys will go to college and escape from this lowly station in life the gods have so unfairly foisted upon us, whether by karma or mere happenstance. It does not matter. When my sons are rich and well educated they will bring me prosperity and take care of me and Geeta in our old-age. Meanwhile, Nandiji provides enough money without my having to remove dead animals from the streets and temples and tossing them into the Bagmati like my father and his forefathers have always done. The whole point of this fucking rickshaw endeavor is to have a better life, if not for myself, then at least for my sons and their children.

The truth is, Nandiji probably entails as far as I will ever progress in this life. Except, sometimes I dream that Dakshin Kali and Shiva Pashupati deliver me from poverty into a life filled with rewards and respect. Sometimes I dream that I am Brahma thinking about his creation which has no beginning and no end. When I sleep near a Shiva temple or shrine, I dream about being a sadhu sitting cross-legged on a tiger skin. From the knot in my hair the Ganges flows to Earth and my wisdom spreads throughout this world. When I dream about Vishnu, I am sitting upon my eagle and Sarasvati is strumming her lovely veena. Sometimes Dakshin Kali appears in my dreams with hair of green vipers and a garland of human skulls dangling over her shriveled breasts. I watch her step down from her silver lotus, swish about her bloody sickle, and laugh at me like a roaring Bengal tiger. Then I wake up and remember who I am and where I have parked Nandiji for the night.

During my early boyhood I lived in my parents' slum house near the Bagmati. On Kali Puja holidays, when Hindus decorate all the Kali shrines of Kathmandu, I helped my father remove the remains of beheaded goats sacrificed to Mother Kali. But for most of my boyhood I helped my father sweep the crematoriums at the Temple to the Lord of Animals, Pashupatinath, which covers an entire hill with many spires, pagodas, and ghats along the Bagmati. My father

would tell me that Pashupatinath was the largest Shiva temple in the world and that Shiva himself had dedicated the ghats to specific castes. Because of our low status, temple priests forbade my father and I from sweeping the crematoriums reserved for the Brahmins of the highest caste.

I never liked helping Ba at the ghats. It was a grueling task and the mourners paid my father very little baksheesh for all his hard work. On the stone pyres, bodies were continually burning and the smell penetrated my skin. As if to make me feel better about the task, Ba would say that those who die in Pashupatinath are reborn into wealth regardless of any previous misconduct in this life or in a past life. I had trouble believing the things that my father told me and his beliefs and opinions did not make me feel better about my lowly heritage. I did not want to die before I had achieved better circumstances because I have always wanted to have a better life in the life I am presently living.

When I was not helping Ba sweep up the ashes at the crematoriums, I liked to gaze at the golden spires and the huge statue of Nandi or watch the monkeys grab cameras from the tourists. When I could, I would play in the river among the goats, dogs, and cows, and the devotees praying for the corpses of their loved ones burning at the pyres. The sadhus sitting on the ghats and temple steps fascinated me. They wore only loincloths and had long matted hair and thin bodies painted with the marks of Shiva. Ba said that these wandering hermits lived in tiny caves in the forests of Pashupatinath with the deer and monkeys. He claimed that they had rejected their heritage for their own path to liberation away from the cycle of rebirth. I told Ba that I wanted to be a sadhu and escape from my impoverished life. This angered my father and he walloped my head and said, "You must never go against the will of Lord Shiva. We are born into this life because of our past karma. To break our destiny is to destroy the threads of Indra's Net."

No matter how hard I tried, I never understood my father's philosophy and I always hated feeling so worthless. By the time I was eight I refused to help him sweep at the ghats. He beat me then threw me onto the streets where I had to beg for food and sell hashish to hippie travelers on Freak Street. Along the canals I slept hidden under trees and bramble brush. To keep warm during the winter months, and for protection against night robbers and murderers, I slept with street dogs that were loyal to me because I brought them scraps of food each day. Other homeless boys urged me to sniff bags of glue, but I kept to myself and fought hard to survive. Lord Pashupati teaches this virtue even to the lowest person on the social ladder.

At age 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 of my father. I worried that he might reincarnate at the birth of my son and I did not like my father. I did not respect him because of his low status and strict behavior toward me. But I have always loved my dear Aama and I immediately moved myself and Geeta into my father's house in the Bhimsengola slums along the river.

At the crematorium designated for Dalits, in the hazy smoke, I tossed marigolds onto my father's burning pyre, used a pole to crack his skull, and repeated after the Brahman priest *Agni, ancient god of fire, release the spirit of Meelan Harijan from the realm of the living into a better world and a better life*. That was my prayer but I doubted its meaning. My father was destined to be reborn into poverty but I swore to my gods and to my father's departing atman that I would break free from the bondage of his lineage. I sensed that my words angered him on his way to a new birth.

After the cremation, my father's shanty house officially became mine to keep, sell or mortgage. Without discussing the matter with Aama or Geeta, I mortgaged the house to a moneylender and bought my bicycle rickshaw Nandiji. It was a good investment because the tourists who flock to Kathmandu love to take pictures of themselves riding in bicycle rickshaws.

Aama did not know about the mortgage until I failed to make a few payments and new tenants moved in and kicked my mother onto the streets. She became a homeless widow dressed in a white sari and was forced to beg for money and food and sleep with me, Geeta, baby Aftab, and the dogs. It was a terrible time and Aama was furious with me but I promised to provide her with a new home one day soon. I explained my need to make investments to earn a better living. When Aama argued that I must follow the ways of my gods, my ancestors, and my dear Baba, I told her *I am now the man in charge of your welfare. And I will not take over my father's position in life. You have no choice but to let me provide for you while you sleep among the poor until I can repay the mortgage. This situation is only temporary.*

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

In the cool morning air, I am standing beside Nandiji and watching Nepalis place sweetmeats, rice, lentils, and red hibiscus flowers at the Kala Bhairava Shrine in Durbar Square. They give dakshina to a Brahman priest; he is chanting to Shiva and Kali who are dancing to keep the universe at play. Kala Bhairava is black and wears only bells at his waist. Dakshin Kali is his consort, and like her, Kala Bhairava has protruding fangs, green snakes as hair, and wears a garland of skulls. For this reason, tourists often believe his shrine is Kali's but I explain to them

that Kala Bhairava is Lord Shiva as a fierce sadhu who destroys bad thoughts and actions and protects even lowly people like me. Kala Bhairava guards the key to Shiva's Temple and one day I plan to take it from his shrine and enter the temple forbidden to me and ask Lord Shiva himself to bring me and my family good fortune and respect.

After the morning passes and I have had a few local fares, I eat a bowl of dal bhat and look for more passengers. A tourist couple is wandering around the red brick Jagannath Temple. From their clothes and by the way they walk, they look American. The man carries a backpack and has a blond, neatly trimmed beard and long hair gathered with a kerchief at the back of his neck. He is lanky, pasty white, and about 40. I imagine he is carrying all their souvenirs. The middle-aged woman with him has flaming red hair that hangs nearly to her waist like Gita's hair does. She wears a long flowing skirt and carries a large cloth bag and a bulky camera bag with a tripod attached to the bottom. I wonder what she might be lugging around in her cloth bag.

I understand and speak a fair amount of English, German, French, and even Italian because I have learned the languages of tourists. They usually provide me with a good source of income and often give me valuable things they no longer want, such as clothes, bags, and jewelry, mostly in exchange for ganja. Ignorance is bliss, people say. But that is such a lie. Ignorance offers no one a bright future or strategies for prosperity.

As the couple nears me, I hear the woman complain about walking with her heavy bags in the midday sun. *Typical American hippies*, I think to myself. *They come to Kathmandu looking for a good high*. I prefer rich Europeans who give me plenty of baksheesh beyond my standard fare. Hippies are cheap.



For a moment, I ignore the lady's nagging voice and scan the square for a better prospect. But she speaks even louder than the bicycle bells, traffic horns, and backfiring trucks. *I doubt they have any children*, I am thinking, *because they probably don't copulate*. But I see no one else in the vicinity and I want to keep my day going in a prosperous direction.

I approach the weary couple. The woman looks especially exhausted. Her bags are nearly touching the ground.

"Rickshaw, Madam?" I ask. "I take you anywhere in the city. Nice photo. My rickshaw has colorful pictures of Shiva, Kali, Ganesh, and Nandi the cow, Shiva's wagon."

While I am trying to impress them with my knowledge of Hinduism, which tourists like to hear, a dozen other rickshaw drivers suddenly approach the same American couple and clamor for their patronage.

"No!" I holler in my native Nepali. "This is my fare! I saw them first!" I keep yelling at the other cabbies until fist fights ensue all around me and the American couple.

The lanky man pulls the woman from the huddle. I hustle them to my rickshaw. "I take you away from here, quickly, Mister. My rickshaw has an awning for your comfort."

The couple toss their bags and backpack onto the floor of my cab and sit back in the cushioned seat.

"Where do you want to go?" I ask as I peddle them away from the mob and beyond Durbar Square toward New Road.

"Take us around the city," the man suggests. "We are tired and want to sit back, relax, and take in the sites."

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

"Yes, Madam," I say. "I can take you there. You can see many Hanumans."

“Will you watch our bags while we climb to the stupa for pictures?” the man asks.

“Of course, Mister,” I say as I am peddling toward the Bagmati River.

The man seems satisfied and falls into conversation with the woman.

While we are crossing the Dallu Bridge on the way to Swayambhu Road, I am wondering if I correctly heard the man say *Get us out of here and I will give you fifty dollars.*

*Of course, he said that,* I tell myself as I huff along. I clearly remember responding *Yes Mister, come on. Let’s go.*

I begin thinking about all the things I can do with such a large fare. *I will save a good portion for my sons’ education then buy Geeta and Aama pashmina shawls. With the rest I will make payments to the slumlords and moneylenders.*

To avoid the main roads with heavy traffic, I peddle along narrow lanes that pass by old, three-story buildings with open front shops displaying saris and kurta surwals in striking turquoise, pink, yellow, and forest greens. Some shops have white faceless mannequins that look like tourists to me. I circumnavigate food stalls, parked cars, and several stray dogs. Many are sleeping on shop stoops. They remind me of the dogs that kept me warm during my boyhood years on the streets. I respect them and detest anyone who does not feed a hungry dog or who kicks him aside. I am sure such people accumulate the worst kind of bad karma. Perhaps it is as bad as consuming a cow.

As we move along, Nepalis on motorcycles squeeze down the lanes and narrowly miss the strolling tourists. Nepali women in kurta surwals are carrying shopping bags and holding umbrellas to shield themselves from the sun. I pass a woman sweeping the street outside her fabric shop and begin eavesdropping on my passengers’ conversation. The man says, “While you were enjoying the highlife in Hong Kong, I retrieved the relic in Shigatse . . .”

The hippie couple probably think I don't understand what they are saying but I know of the places the man speaks about and surmise that he has just returned from Tibet. The Chinese have only recently opened the doors to the great Himalayan country north of my kingdom and I have transported many tourists who were about to go there or had just returned.

Looking to the distant mountains and puffy clouds, I peddle up a narrow cobblestone lane with potholes and pass small shrines, stupas, and residential buildings behind brick walls and locked iron gates. Between the buildings hang Tibetan prayer flags printed with mantras. People claim that the breeze recites the mantras as the flags flutter.

The red-haired hippie woman begins to chatter like a monkey. She does not like Nepali food and she did not like the mob of rickshaw drivers who grabbed her arm. "This will take us forever and I'm hot and feeling sick," I hear her say. The man says nothing and I continue huffing up the hill. My legs are strong and so are my lungs even though I smoke bidis as often as I dream about a better life.

At the top of the hill, we arrive at a cobblestone plaza with parked cars around a large jacaranda tree with a Ganesh statue at its base. Marigolds and red and yellow powders adorn the elephant statue. I ask Ganesh to assure me a good fare from my passengers. Then I turn to inform them that we are near the Monkey Temple and to be friendly, I ask them where they are staying.

"We met up this morning at the Shringar Hotel," the man tells me.

*Perhaps they do have some money,* I am thinking. But then the woman, not the man, tells me she wants to catch a taxi the rest of the way. "I'm tired of this grueling rickshaw ride. This cab is cramping my legs."

"You can pull over," the man says to me.

I peddle over to the Ganesh tree shrine and get off my bicycle in order to receive my fare. I am disappointed that the woman does not like my rickshaw but am also relieved to be done with her complaining voice.

While the couple remain in the cab, I watch the woman dig in her camera bag then hand me a five rupee note and say, "Here you go, little man."

I peer at the torn and filthy note in my hand and say, "No Madam. Twenty-five dollars for each of you. Woman, man, and bags. No five dollars. No five rupees. Fifty dollars, your man has told me."

The woman grows hysterical. Obviously, she is menstruating. This is why Geeta hides herself away during such days. The lanky man suggests they pay me what I want. But the woman insists on not paying me anything more. "You can't let these people get away with badgering tourists. They need to learn."

"No, Madam," I insist, "I agree to fifty US dollars. I struggle when I take you up the hill."

"You said no such thing," the woman exclaims with hatred. "You said five rupees."

The man takes five dollars from his money pouch and is ready to hand it to me when the woman stops him. "Don't give it to him!" she screeches like someone has yanked a donkey's tail and the man puts the money back in his pouch. He is obviously under this woman's hex.

I try to say "fuck you" in clear American English but I am so upset "*fa ooo*" comes out of my mouth.

Suddenly, before I even realize what is happening, Nandiji begins to slowly wobble backward with the man and woman still in the cab. They are unable to jump out because their backpack and bags are blocking their exit.

The woman shrieks and before I can do anything, my bicycle rickshaw, my livelihood and sustainer of my family, accelerates backward down the cobblestone hill.

I run after Nandiji, stumbling a few times, but the large wheels continue their downhill spiral toward a muddy canal across a busy intersecting street. Along the way, my rickshaw barely misses mopeds, other rickshaws, pedestrians, goats, and dogs. The wheels spin faster and faster and Nandiji knocks into souvenir booths and fruit stands, causing stacks of oranges and coconuts to tumble onto the street.

As I am running after Nandiji I see the terrified face of the hippie woman. Her long red hair flies in all directions like the green snakes of Kali and Kala Bhairava. From over her bags, she stares at me and screams louder than the traffic horns and clatter.

*Certainly, great trouble is coming my way, I keep thinking as I continue my pursuit. This is disastrous karma. I will have to pay for all the damage. And if these Americans die, their government will hunt me down like a mongrel dog and King Birendra himself will see to my execution and that of my sons.*

“Lord Shiva! Dakshin Kali!” I yell in my native tongue. “Stop the wheels from turning. Preserve Nandiji. Do not let my passengers end up injured or dead.”

At the bottom of the steep hill, I helplessly watch Nandiji plough across the busy street as motorcycles, autorickshaws, cars, and pedestrians dodge her. Then, in a split second, she hits the curb, is thrown into the air and over the grassy berm, and plunges into the muddy, polluted Ishu Canal.

I dash across the street, avoiding trucks spewing black exhaust smoke and cars blasting their horns, and clamber down the bank and jump into the muddy, cold water filled with trash and sewage. I wade over to my twisted rickshaw just as the American couple free themselves

from the cab. They are dripping wet and look like thawing Yetis from the mountains. They are upset but unharmed.

“My pictures! My cameras! Everything is destroyed!” the woman screams so loudly I think my eardrums will burst. Her muddy skirt tightly hugs her thighs and drips algae and sludge. “You’ve ruined my livelihood,” she screams as I stand helplessly in the muddy canal.

“Madam. You have ruined mine!” I can think of nothing else to say, I am so overwhelmed. “And you must pay for my rickshaw.”

A gathering crowd of Nepalis and tourists are standing at the edge of the berm and peering down at us. I do not care because now I have no money to fix my rickshaw. What money I do have is for my sons’ education.

“No,” the hippie woman shouts, brushing back clumps of wet hair from her face.

The lanky man digs a green bill out of the pouch at his waist. It looks like one hundred dollars US and I feel that Ganesh is looking after me and Nandiji after all. Perhaps this stingy man is trying to create good karma and he realizes his woman’s bad manners have caused this incident.

“Don’t give him anything,” the woman screams, quickly dashing my hopes. She is making me angry beyond my control. “I’m injured,” she yells. “I’ve a big gash in my leg. It’ll probably get infected. I’ll get flukes. Giardia. Gangrene. Who knows what microbes are living in this sewage?”

Beyond the chaos at the intersection, I hear a police siren drawing near. “Let’s get out of here, Sweetie,” the man says to the woman, trying to calm her. He hands me the wad of money in his hand, grabs the woman’s bags and his backpack, and leads her out of the canal, up the slippery berm, and off through the parting crowd.

Traffic horns and the siren intensify as I look at the money in my hand and count only fifty dollars and a few rupees, not even one hundred dollars US. In a last desperate attempt, I yell at the departing couple, "I want five hundred dollars for my rickshaw." But they keep fleeing the scene and I scream, "Fa yoo."

In the mid-afternoon sun, I stand in the canal waters and feel Shiva's sweat on my neck. The crowd gathered on the berm is laughing at me. *My gods are angry*, I am thinking as I wade deeper into Ishu Canal to further inspect my only means of earning money. Now I will have to beg on the streets and so will Geeta, my widowed mother, and my boys. My thoughts are as murky as the dank canal and filled with goop, sludge, and trash.

On top of Nandiji's fringed canopy, halfway submerged in the water, a gleam catches my eye. I quickly realize it's the zipper of a purse that the lanky man must have dropped. I pick it up and see that I am holding a money belt made of beige fabric.

I decide to leave Nandiji crumpled in the quagmire. I want nothing to do with the police who will soon be arriving. I cannot afford to lose my rickshaw license and pay for all the damage this unfortunate incident has caused. If I do not flee, shopkeepers will want money from me. The American couple are long gone and besides, the police are not likely to go after them. No. The police commissioner will see this incident as my karmic workings.

I scramble up the berm but fall flat on my face. Unbothered by the laughing crowd, I pick myself up and hurry ten blocks away to the moneylenders, hoping to obtain a loan so that I can buy a new rickshaw this very day.

All the moneylenders I approach turn me down and I am left to return to my house by the Bagmati a broken man. My wife is not expecting me and I worry she will ask endless questions

before I even catch my breath. I fear today will only grow worse and Mother Bagmati will flood my home tonight and take away all that I have in this miserable world.

When I enter the one room hut with mats on the floor for sleeping, I push Geeta aside and ignore her questions about my unexpected appearance without the rickshaw and head straight to the corner altar to perform puja to Shiva and Kali. I light a candle and incense, chant to Ganesh, and then peer at the soiled beige pouch the lanky tourist apparently left for me. Perhaps fortuitously.

I breathe in the scent of sandalwood, ring the puja bell, chew bitter neem leaves, and open the money belt. I find a few hundred dollars that I put with my sons' education fund in the khutruke under the altar. It is not enough to buy a new rickshaw, which I do not want anyway, and my sons' education is foremost in my mind.

Deeper inside the beige money belt is a small pouch made of red Chinese silk with yellow dragons. After struggling with the zipper, I open it and pull out a business card which probably displays the name and address of the lanky man, maybe of the woman too. I am not an educated man and can only minimally read my own language and the few English words that my sons have been teaching me. When they return home, I will ask them to tell me what the card says. I place it on the altar hoping it will somehow bring me good fortune.

The pouch also contains an object in a white silk cloth. When I unwrap it, I discover a bronze relic about the size of my palm and quickly realize it is a khadga, the sword of either Kali, Kala Bhairava, or Manjushri. Although I was born a Hindu and worship Hindu gods, both Hindu and Buddhist Nepalis worship Manjushri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom who sliced the Himalayas with his Prajna Khadga, his Sword of Wisdom, and allowed the Bagmati to flow through Kathmandu Valley. Throughout Kathmandu there are statues of Manjushri sitting on his



lotus throne with his right hand brandishing the flaming Prajna Khadga and his left holding the Prajnaparamita, the Book of Divine Wisdom.

I place the relic next to the stone Ganesh on my altar. Deep in my heart I know that this relic is my payment for the loss of Nandiji and I believe it will somehow change my luck and bring me good fortune.

That night, I lie next to the altar barely able to sleep and when I do, I dream about a moneylender giving me a satchel of cash for the Prajna Khadga. But then, in the same dream, moneylenders are forcing me and my family from our home to make way for new tenants and we must beg and sleep on the streets with no other means to survive.

I jolt awake with the thought that I am a man deeply burdened.

“Lord Shiva,” I pray at the altar, “God of Many Forms, Destroyer of Emotions, Wandering Sadhu, lift me from my shame. Dakshin Kali, She who was born before light, grant me a boon. Shakti Lakshmi, bring me good fortune. Ganesh, son of Shiva, scribe of the Mahabharata, help me find a new way to prosper. Kala Bhairava, give me the key to Shiva’s Temple.”



## Chapter 2: The Election Night Party

*Two Years before the Rickshaw Incident*

*November 6, 1984*

*Professor Sid Lees*

“Do you have any antihistamines or something for this allergy?” I ask Maureen.

Six Stanford colleagues, including me, are sitting at the Ethan Allen table boisterously playing Truth or Dare Scruples, a game Jim invented for our get together parties. Tonight, Maureen and Jim are hosting an election party. Because Reagan is beating Mondale by a landslide we are more or less ignoring the TV.

Maureen teaches photography at Stanford and Jim is a full professor in my department. At nearly sixty, he is twenty years older than Maureen. Jim has been my best friend since I took his Introduction to Buddhism class nearly twenty years ago when I was a freshman at Stanford. We hit it off. I became his assistant and from there we collaborated on projects related to our shared interest in Asian religions and democratic politics.

I am Sid Lees, Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Stanford. At only thirty-eight, I consider myself an expert in Tibetan Buddhist relics from the 9th century to the present day. I am chair of the Ho Center for Buddhist Studies and co-director of the Department of Religious Studies. My highest hope is that the Chinese will grant me access to study the remaining relics in Tibet but the world is very political and my academic dreams may have to wait. Reagan visited President Li Xiannian earlier this year. They deadlocked on the issue of Taiwan and relations between China and the US remain tense. Still, I am as eager to visit Tibet now as I was when a boy growing up in a very good home in Sausalito.

My birth occurred a year after WWII ended and my parents no longer covered the windows of our house for fear of a Japanese invasion. Both of my parents were chemistry professors at Stanford and they structured my childhood and that of my five siblings with guidance, discipline, and a moderate amount of Christian morality. I felt no upheavals in my

psyche until I was seventeen and bound for Stanford myself, rather than the pestilent war in Vietnam.

On June 11, 1963, my life's direction changed forever when I saw the picture of the Mahayana Buddhist monk Lâm Văn Túc setting himself on fire at a busy intersection in Saigon 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. Five months after the monk's public death, the communists assassinated Diệm. That same month, Oswald killed Kennedy. When LBJ escalated the Vietnam conflict, the world became political for me. I also became interested in Buddhism and sought to learn what drove the monk to such a torturous suicide.

As an undergraduate at Stanford, I studied civil engineering and ancient religious philosophies while reading about Zen and listening to Alan Watts on the radio. 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 really appreciated the concept of blind faith anyway. It simply made no sense, logically. At the same time, I never attached myself to any one sect of Buddhism and never took up chanting, meditation, or maintaining an altar. I appreciate the art and the teachings of nearly all Buddhist traditions and my offices at home and at Stanford have large collections of Buddhist thangkas, brass bells, and stone, bronze, and wooden Buddhas and Buddha heads of all sizes.

Maureen stands across from me at the Ethan Allen table and replies, "I believe there are some antihistamines in the guest bathroom. I'll go fetch one." She raises her voice above the laughter of my colleagues who are caught up in the last truth or dare question. Jim has asked Susan whether she would tell her husband about having adulterous thoughts. "Like Jimmy Carter," he says, and we all laugh. Susan and her spouse David are both professors in the

Department of Economics. Reaganomics and his “trickle down” theory is a big topic with them and I doubt either one of them ever thinks beyond their academic and political pursuits. They just do not seem the type to play around.

*Always quick to do something for others*, I am thinking as I smile at Maureen, my best friend’s wife. It is no wonder I am wrapped up in her every word and gesture. Or is it rapt up? Yes, I am rapt by her beauty and her long flowing red hair which she manages to keep as shiny as Chinese silk. I cannot help but watch her full red lips as she jovially speaks while her penetrating green eyes sparkle with delight. Maureen loves being with people and she makes me feel as if nothing matters but her warm companionship. And I am crazy about her slender waist, long legs, full breasts, and perfect hands with long fingers and neatly polished nails.

I have felt this way about Maureen since she first married Jim five years ago and I was best man at their wedding. But not until tonight have these feelings taken me as far as I am planning to go. “That’s okay,” I say to Maureen. “I’ll help myself.” I get up to leave the table and look at my wife Mary. Maureen’s Napa Valley wines, which are always plentiful at her parties, have sent Mary into hysterics over Jim’s last comment. I am glad she is preoccupied and not focused on me. There was a time long ago when I felt passionate about Mary--when she was my classmate at Stanford and when we wed in 1968. However, we both knew that I had my career in academics and she had hers in medicine and that we were not the center of each other’s universe. We have been together sixteen years and apart only during the four years I lived in Asia studying Sanskrit and Pali. My wife never visited me during that time because she was preoccupied with her career in microsurgery. This is the story of our marriage. No children and very little passion. Perhaps this is why I am so enthralled with Maureen’s flamboyant personality and stunning looks.

I see that Maureen has already headed to the guest bathroom down the wide hallway of her duplex in the Victorian house. I hasten to catch her, fearing I will lose my nerve if I do not act quickly on my impulses. Nobody at the Ethan Allen table seems aware that I am following her. It appears normal, casual. Something old friends hardly notice. Everyone knows and trusts one another at this small, intimate, get together of university professors.

My heart is pounding against my chest as I review, once again, the script I have rehearsed for days, perhaps years. I pass the portraits on the hallway wall of the McCreedy wedding with me as best man. No children are present, except for nieces and nephews. I doubt they will ever have children. Maureen is nearly forty which makes her even more attractive to me. She is so unlike Mary, I often think. I love my wife but she is goal-oriented, business-minded, and not as spontaneous as Maureen who is always prepared to fly to LA or Las Vegas with her husband, at the mere suggestion.

*I love my wife* I keep thinking as I head toward the bathroom at the end of the hall. *It's just that I can no longer suppress my longing for Maureen. I want to hold her and let her spirit fly into my heart. She is Tara of the Pure Land who has released her Tantric powers over me.*

The bathroom door is open and Maureen is searching through drawers, unaware of my presence. I look behind me. No one is in sight. My actions are risky, I know. I am gambling on losing my best friend, my wife, and even the woman of my deepest affections. If she rejects me, I will be devastated. But I have reached a point in my life where I would almost rather die than not take this chance to feel the farthest reaches of happiness. I will venture forth, challenge myself, and take all or lose all and end up with nothing. I am ready for this.

"Maureen," I softly say as I step into the bathroom and quietly close the door behind me.

“Oh! Sid! You startled me.” She looks up from the drawer into the wide rectangular antique mirror before us. Behind her reflection is a tall man of modest build with a fair complexion, a neatly trimmed blond beard, and dark blond shoulder length hair tied back in a rubber band. My blue eyes are taunting hers.

Thus far, I tell myself, this is not too odd. We have touched before, even hugged quite often. Maureen is a hugger, so unlike Mary. *But doesn't Maureen find it strange that I followed her into the bathroom and closed the door? Yes. I had better act quickly. It is now or never.* I place my hands on her slender shoulders and squeeze slightly.

“Sid,” she says, shakes herself free, and returns to her search through the drawer. “I can’t seem to find any antihistamines. I was sure a former guest left some.”

“Never mind.” I grasp her upper arms and delight in the fragrance of her apricot shampoo. She doesn’t pull away. She knows what is happening. Perhaps she has been expecting this all these years. Maybe she has been wanting me, too.

“Can I call you tomorrow?” I whisper in her ear, knowing she must now realize my advance is not merely a playful tease. Jim is leaving town in the morning for a week-long business trip to Boca Raton, Florida. Everyone at the Ethan Allen table has just talked about what a pity it is that Maureen is not joining him. She claimed to be too busy with her 101 and 202 photography classes.

“What?” Maureen replies, as if she isn’t sure of my meaning. But she must be, I feel certain. Too many times I have caught her staring at me and brightly smiling or touching me in a special way while we are discussing something. Long ago I convinced myself that Maureen must have feelings for me beyond mere friendship. Otherwise, I would never have summoned the courage to go through with something like this.

“I promise I’ll only ask you this one time.” I squeeze her arms while looking at her lovely green eyes in the mirror. Her stare makes me shiver. I pause and begin to feel deflated. *Have I suddenly trapped myself in a rancid lie? Am I displaying nothing but my own foolish vulnerability? What am I doing? Is it too late? No, it isn’t. I can wink and pretend this is a joke.* I try to convince myself. Deep down, however, I know I have already crossed the line.

Maureen is not angry. She does not push me away. Instead, she continues looking into my eyes and smiling as if we are bantering.

Suddenly, the laughter of my colleagues returns. They had disappeared momentarily, including my wife. “What time can I call you?” I ask, now feeling frantic to end this situation, one way or the other. I am hoping it will be the way I long for.

Maureen pulls from me and her smile becomes a look of concern. My heart pounds so hard it pains me. She then steps to my side and opens the door to leave. But she turns, smiles, and says, “Call me at noon if you like.”

After she is gone I stare at myself in the mirror. *Not a bad looking man* I think as I feel the rough texture of my beard. I think about Maureen’s soft hair which I felt with my lips. Her apricot scent lingers. I feel myself harden at the thought of her and what I am boldly embarking upon. My fantasy is finally materializing. I close my eyes to imagine what lies ahead, perhaps tomorrow, and I reach to touch myself. I really do not want to hurt my best friend and certainly not Maureen. What about Mary? I ask, restraining my physical feelings. *I must keep control*, I tell myself, *if this is going to work.*

My wife’s face suddenly appears in the mirror with a look of dismay. During the past few years, we have lived busy, separate lives except for occasions such as parties with friends or events at the university or hospital where Mary works. But the idea of an affair with Maureen has

been all-consuming since I was best man at her wedding. Mary has never come close to the exuberance and sex appeal of Maureen. *Mary is such a good companion. Why do I want to betray her trust?* I cannot explain it. Perhaps after all these years of marriage I want more from life than the woman I married.

*Besides, I don't believe that we humans are truly monogamous creatures* I am thinking as I lean over the sink to wash my face before nonchalantly returning to the party. In a little over a year, I will be forty which is a startling thought. How did it happen so suddenly? Just yesterday I had turned thirty and was making retirement investments with Mary. The plans seemed logical, essential, the correct thing to do at the correct age. Still, something is bothering me and I cannot quite explain it. *Perhaps this all amounts to a man's instinctive attraction to an appealing woman.* It is a simple enough explanation, at least for the moment.

At 12:30 PM the next day I summon the nerve to call Maureen after sitting at my Stanford office desk all morning unable to concentrate on anything but my encounter with her the night before. I am haunted by the thought that she was toying with me while we were finishing the game, especially when the election night party ended with Reagan the sure incumbent. *Am I just a Mondale loser? Did she enjoy tormenting me? Could she really be so cruel? Certainly, she would have told me not to call her if she had no intention of going through with what I obviously intend to do. Or am I even really that obvious?* I wonder. *Have I been filling my mind with a sense of self-grandeur, convincing myself that she wants me, if not as much as I want her then at least in some small, sensual way?*



*No, I will not stop now.* I pick up the phone for the fifth time as my heart races with anticipation. Even if I do not call, our relationship will never return to the way it once was. I have corrupted it forever.

I dial her number and try not to think about Jim whom I call at this number all the time. I am only thinking about Maureen.

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

“Hi,” I finally utter, feeling a resurgence of courage. I will manage all right. “How are you?”

“Oh? Hi, Sid. Well, I haven’t changed much since last night? How about you?” I detect playfulness in her melodious, caring voice that sings like Carole King or Carly Simon.

“Did Jim leave for the airport?” I immediately feel absurd at having asked the most obvious question, one that positions my next move. She must think I am ridiculous!

“Well, yeah. He left at seven. Hey,” Maureen cuts in as if tiring of the charade and wanting to get straight to the matter. “Have you had lunch? I just put on a fresh pot of coffee and could certainly have a snack ready in ten minutes. Do you like cucumber sandwiches?”

Maureen is making it easy for me. It is just like her to think about the other person and make the situation as comfortable as possible. It is a woman’s nurturing quality and she doesn’t even have children.

“Sounds good. I needed to run a few errands anyway. I’ll see you in about fifteen minutes.” I hang up dazed with happiness. I can hardly contain my emotions for her. *She will be everything for me. Just as I have imagined.* I lean back on my office chair and look around the room at the peaceful, mindful, and enlightened Buddhas. I smile and imagine who will make the

first move feeling certain it will be me. *Although, maybe Maureen will find great pleasure in surprising me!*

“Come on in,” I hear her yell from inside the old Victorian house as I stand at the left front door. She and Jim live on the first floor of the condo and the other family lives upstairs.

Before entering the McCreedy unit I take one last look around the neighborhood of stately, turn-of-the-century houses converted into condos. I worry that perhaps Mary, Jim, or someone else might be watching me. Then I reassure myself that there is nothing abnormal about this visit, especially if I am dropping by to pick up the sunglasses that I had strategically left behind the night before. Of course, my friend’s wife would ask me to stay for lunch. We are all such good colleagues and friends.

I open the door and hear Maureen nonchalantly singing in the kitchen. Yes, her voice is like Carly Simon’s. The aroma of fresh coffee eases my tension and so does the scent of the camphor and sandalwood candles that Maureen always has burning. And her *Opium* perfume lingers throughout the condo.

“Sid, your glasses are on the dining table,” Maureen calls. “Grab them now so you won’t forget them later.”

*Always so organized* I think and toss the glasses in my briefcase which I brought along to make my visit appear more official.

In the large, remodeled kitchen, beside the JennAir island, I greet Maureen.

“There you are,” she says as she shuffles through the cupboard for two coffee mugs.

“Have a seat.” She indicates a stool at the kitchen bar.

*Maureen looks somewhat nervous*, I think as she places on the bar before me a plate of neatly cut cucumber sandwiches on wheat bread with olive oil, pepper, and salt. Her sandwiches are as delicate as her long graceful fingers. When Maureen married Jim she did not give up her Protestant heritage and become a Buddhist like her husband but she did adopt a vegetarian diet. Occasionally, Jim and Maureen taunt me for not being a practicing Buddhist and vegetarian. I have always enjoyed Maureen's teasing and flattery.

Concern creeps into my thoughts and I wonder about the night before, about Maureen's reaction to my flirting with her. It had been somewhat confusing, despite her poised efforts to play the scruples game after our encounter in the bathroom. She had acted as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening. *And now, why doesn't she look at me? Where is her bright cheery smile?*

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 tell myself, and I approach her. "Maureen," I say. She is ready to pour two cups of coffee when she quickly sets the pot back in the coffee maker and turns to me. We silently stare at each other for a moment; neither of us is smiling.

Maureen warmly says my name, inviting me to draw her near me. I do so and have never imagined such soft, sweet, moist lips caressing mine. I feel like a boy on my first date in high school, learning the splendid magic of the opposite sex and embarking on a mysterious, enchanting journey. In her warm embrace, I am the hero who has made his conquest, I am the man who is fulfilling the vision of who he wants to be.

Maureen holds me tightly and explores the contours of my back beneath my shirt. She seems aggressive and skilled. I cannot contain the throbbing in the very center 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 pure excitement of a new beginning, a rejuvenation of our lives. A resurrection into ecstasy.

Her head finds the pillow, my lips find hers. I am a sea captain in the salty air with seagulls cawing at the bow of my ship . . .

"Condoms?" she asks, awakening me from my reverie.

Then, when my body meets hers I am thinking *she is aged like a fine Napa Valley wine*.

After we finish making beautiful love we lie back on the commodious bed to rest in each other's arms. I can hardly breathe from sheer exhaustion. I am not a very athletic man. Rather, I am a scholar who has never felt so spent, so drained, and I realize that sex with my wife has been nothing but plain and ordinary and very routine like an old-fashioned computer punch card.

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

I can't help but wonder where we stand with each other now that we have made the final leap. *Oddly, we have been intimate but we are like strangers* I think as her slender, naked body slinks away from the bed and leaves the finely furnished room. She seems somewhat shy. I certainly am. I have never imagined this part of making my fantasy a reality. We have always been so natural around each other but that was when we were two different people. Now we are Sid and Maureen, lovers, adulterers . . . What are we to each other? I want to pass through this stage quickly, almost desperately, and reach a time when we will know exactly who we are together. A time when we will feel as natural in our new relationship as we had before when we were merely best friends and colleagues. *When will that be?* I keep thinking as I rest on the pillow, my hands behind my head, waiting for my new lover to return. *How will we fit in with our friends, with Jim, with Mary? Who have we just become?*

*Splash!* I abruptly awaken from my thoughts. Maureen has poured water and ice cubes on my chest. She laughs uproariously, freeing me from my inhibitions and making me laugh as well. I then grab her affectionately and we wrestle on the bed. She and I cannot stop laughing until I kiss her warmly and feel tenderness for the new woman in my life.

“Let’s talk,” I say and sit up to quench my enormous thirst.

“About what?” Maureen snuggles under my left arm. “Do you have to return to work?”

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

Smiling, she reaches to close my lips. “Hush, Sid. Don’t call me any such names. We must be careful. We aren’t playing Truth or Dare Scruples. We are playing real life.”

“I know. How do you feel?”

“Happy. But let’s not talk about how we feel. Not now. Don’t you want your cucumber sandwiches?”

“When will I see you again?” I change the subject. “Tonight, I hope. I can’t get enough of you.”

“No, I’m visiting my sister.”

“When?” I ask, anxious to schedule her into my planner before I leave her condo.

“Call me,” she says as she slips into a kimono robe that Jim brought her from Indonesia. “What about Mary?” she asks. “Don’t do anything to make her suspicious. I’m not in this to hurt anyone. Especially not her.” Maureen and my wife are merely occasional friends, although a bit more than acquaintances because they drink wine together with their husbands who are best friends.

“I know. I don’t want that either,” I admit, feeling modest all of a sudden. “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 quite right loitering about the house like this.”

I dress and tell Maureen that I am heading straight to work because I haven’t attended to much of anything this morning. Maureen smiles and wraps the cucumber sandwiches in foil to take with me. I feel like we are newlyweds. It is a peculiar feeling and one I vaguely recall from my own honeymoon with Mary when we spent a week at a cousin’s resort in Dana Point. Our only common interest then, and now, was our curiosity about each other’s professions. But Mary was academic in the bedroom. And so was I, until now. Maureen has set my heart and mind ablaze like the flaming, ever-burning sword of Manjushri.



### Chapter 3: Gopan and the Key to a 1000 Doors

*Day after the Rickshaw Incident*

*December 8, 1986*

*Gopan Subba*

A New Road

Where am I now?  
I've ventured far.  
A new road  
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 is that, Gopan?” Geeta asks, interrupting my prayers at the corner altar. She knows better, but women are nosey, especially wives.

“It was a gift from an important American,” I tell her.

“Who?” she asks.

“I will tell my story when I am ready,” I snap because I do not want to explain about the rickshaw incident. Geeta stops chattering probably hoping for me to calm down. But I merely leave the altar to eat my mother's dal bhat and chapatis by the charcoal brazier at the kitchen end of our little house.

That night, while lying on the floor mat, I am feeling both elated and disgusted. Elated about the Manjushri sword and what it might bring me. Disgusted because I have lost my

livelihood and do not know how I will support my family. I refuse to use the funds I have been saving for the education of my sons Aftab Ram Kumar and Hari Shiva Shankar.

For the following several days I remain in bed for most of the day except when I am praying at my altar. Geeta and Aama continue to sell tea and rummage for valuables at the dump but I know it is not enough to keep us in the house. They feed me, do puja at the altar, and do not ask me why the rickshaw is not outside the front door on the tiny dirt alley. I do not care. I am preoccupied with the gift from my gods. I must understand what they want me to do with the Prajna Khadga.

After four days, Geeta can no longer hold back and when I finish my morning puja at the altar, she exclaims, “Gopan, whether you want your wife’s opinion or not I am going to give it to you. You must rise to your duties and provide for us. Stop being a lazy donkey and tell me what has happened!”

I sit on the floor by the brazier to eat my mother’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, of playing children, and the cawing crows at the trash piles 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, everyone starts roaring with laughter and Geeta says, in exasperation, “Such a funny story!”

I do not find my story amusing and it feels as if they are laughing at my folly. After I tell them I am glad I have entertained them, my family falls silent and I say no more about the incident. Neither do they.



The next morning, I sit before my altar and hold up the Prajna Khadga and silently ask Shiva to grant me a boon. Then I place the sword relic on the altar, between the lingam and Ganesh, and head out the door to look for work or 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 locked box at the dump. I brought it home and guess what?”

“What Geeta, what?” I am rather annoyed because my day did not go too well. I found no opportunities.

“Somehow, in my heart, Ganesh or maybe Shiva instructed me to touch one end of the Prajna Khadga to the lock and the box popped open!” she says. “Just like that!”

At first, I am furious that she took my relic from my altar without my permission. But when she tells me that the relic is some kind of magical key, my anger swiftly vanishes and I say, “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 practically shouts with excitement. She pauses a moment to assess my reaction and quickly adds, “If that is what we must do with the money. Or perhaps it is enough for a new rickshaw if that is what we must do instead.”

“No,” I say and kiss her forehead. “I do not wish to resume that crusty old job. I am tired of being pegged to a poor man’s station in life. I am much smarter than that. Therefore, I will use the money to look for other opportunities.”

“What kind of opportunities?” my mother now asks, as if I am intending to be shifty. She then adds, “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 plead to my gods. All the while Geeta’s story stirs in my head and I cannot concentrate on my prayers. Instead, I am thinking, *I’ll sell this magic key for more money than a bag of gold and gems. All I must do is convince an antiques dealer that the relic possesses supernatural powers.*

Early the next morning, I stop by an antiquity 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. “I believe it comes from ancient Tibet,” I add, remembering that the lanky tourist had just returned from Tibet. “It must be worth a fortune!” I add, anticipating that the jeweler will offer me a great amount of money.

The man glares at me soberly and then examines the Prajna Khadga with a magnifying glass. “No sir. It does not look like a Tibetan relic,” he tells me. “To tell you the truth, I do not know its value.” He hesitates a moment and then turns it around in the sunlight streaming into his stuffy shop. “No sir,” he says at last. “I doubt you can sell this relic for very much.”

“But it is some kind of a key that possesses magical powers,” I insist and tell him the story Geeta related to me.

“Here, here, let me try it then.” The jeweler touches it 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 another, “Maybe it is 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 “donkey’s scrotum,” and leave his shop. But I am still hopeful as I walk down the street toward Durbar Square. Suddenly, I remember overhearing the American man saying to his hippie woman, “the relic key can only be given.” *Surely, the American couple were obligated to pay me for my rickshaw. Yes. Of course.* I quickly conclude. *They gave me the Prajna Khadga and what is mine belongs to my family. This is why it worked for Geeta and not for the miserly shopkeeper.*

Before I test its powers for myself, I hurry home, sit before my altar with the key in my hands, and silently pray to Shiva *I have never stolen anything in my life and I believe You placed this key in the cab of Nandiji as my reward for all my hard labor in life. I know its magic will work for me.*

From that day forward, I begin carrying the key in my pocket, wrapped in its white satin cloth, while looking for opportunities to use it. The money Geeta found in the locked box sustains us for a few months. My wife never asks about my intentions for 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 relic with me as a lucky ritual object.

I begin walking around the streets, alleys, and plazas of Kathmandu, searching for ways to use the Prajna Khadga. From time to time, I rub it in my pocket and wonder *How can I be so bold when all my life I have been humbled and underprivileged? Undeserving of anything. The fact that the gods gifted this key to me is almost beyond my comprehension.*

One afternoon, while I am 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

affluent Nepalis and is in a part of town away from touts selling trinkets at the tourist sites. It presents a perfect opportunity for me to begin using 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 had called me, and I decide that when I do make some money, I am going 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 I 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 that no one is watching me, I enter the shop.

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

"Manjushri, Lord Shiva, Mother Kali, and 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 look too obvious, at least not when the jeweler first enters his shop in the morning. I am not sure why I feel this way. Maybe I am thinking it gives me more time to get away. For now, I need only enough money to see me and my family through another few months and to buy myself that fine suit of clothes. *I do not believe that Lord Shiva condemns me*

*for what I am doing* I tell myself as I go about my business. I pray my gods see me as a humble, simple man who is trying to correct the wrongs the world has forced upon me and my family.

“What a remarkable key,” I say aloud and close the last cabinet with the silk cloth while imagining how I will hawk my loot to tourists and moneylenders. Suddenly, my eyes catch sight of a beautiful red beaded and gold tilhari necklace and I think about how nice this would look on Geeta and how happy she would be to receive such a gift. She would feel like a legitimate and privileged married woman. Then I think of my poor widowed mother who has never received any kind of gem or jewel in her life. I grab the tilhari, a silver bangle studded with diamonds and sapphires for my 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 seems to be 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 has been robbed, I will be long gone and no policeman is going to look for a thief in the Bhimsengola slums outside Suraj Junkyard and Dump. Besides, rain is in the forecast for tonight so if I did leave any fingerprints on the padlock or door, Shiva’s sweat will wash them away.

When I return home, I am quiet, not wanting to disturb Geeta and my mother who are cuddled together and snoring. And my boys are lying soundly at the foot of their mat. It is a good sign that my family is well. I place the key on the altar where I keep it when I sleep.

Early the next morning, I am sitting with my family by the clay brazier, eating a breakfast of potatoes and chapatis that my wife and Aama have prepared. When I finish my last bite, I reach in my pockets for the gifts for my family. The rest of the loot I have hidden under a stone by my altar that covers a secret hole in the dirt floor of my little house. It is where I store the money satchel from the American tourist and the khutruke jar for my sons’ education. Today, I

plan to take the loot to moneylenders in a shadier part of town. I cannot take it to legitimate jewelers; not even I am that brazenly stupid.

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

Geeta and my mother are elated with their jewelry, something neither has ever possessed. They have never found anything like it at the dump. My sons are equally happy with their watches.

"What is this all about?" Geeta asks.

"These are gifts from Lord Shiva," I say, proud to have pleased my family.

"But how?" my mother asks. "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 need not tell you anything more. Be grateful to both Manjushri and Lord Shiva for what I am now able to provide my family."

Of course, everyone knows better than to interrogate me and they happily 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 would like to, they know they cannot wear such jewelry in the shantytown or they would be robbed and possibly killed.

As they are leaving, I tell them that one day soon, they will proudly don these gifts. I then gather my satchel of loot and leave the house to go about my own business.

During the next few days, I sell all of my loot for a fraction of its value and amass enough rupees to keep me and my family afloat for the next several months. I am able to put part of the money in my stash pot for my sons' education which convinces me that the gods are truly

blessing me and my family with a promising future. Kala Bhairava himself has given me the key to Shiva's temple.

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 am quite handsome and debonair, like a rich Nepali man. While I am at it, I buy beautiful saris for my wife and mother, and shirts and slacks for my sons.

For the next six months, I continue to 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 am left alone in the vault room, prepared to open dozens of the 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 and I know my magic key has disabled it. I quickly open as many boxes as I can, take what 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 that he forget me and my face. I do not know why I think to say this except that the gods are guiding me to do what I must do.

In addition to opening accounts and boxes at the Kathmandu Bank, the Himalayan Bank, Nepali Bank, and Central Bank International, I begin taking taxis 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 am certain that all Hindu gods, Buddhas, and the gods of Christians and Muslims are blessing me with these gifts because I deserve them. I am not a lazy laggard. I am an enterprising man who has worked hard all his life to break the chains of a dismal heritage. And I am better than a lowly street ragamuffin rickshaw man or a sweeper of the ghats. I have stepped up from humble beginnings and am using the key to promote my sons so that they will never feel debased and ashamed of their heritage. Surely, this must be good karma.

I never reveal to my family exactly how I am acquiring 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 never asks 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 alleys and that they can afford to make meat curries, salads, and include yogurt with our meals.

Eventually, I move my family to a two-story furnished house in the city's north section. It has a flat rooftop patio for plants and flowers, a maid's quarters, and a separate garage. I enroll in a driving school and buy a turquoise Mahindra car. I also buy a big screen TV and a VCR and radio for the front TV room, computers for each of my sons, and new clothes for everyone. 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 am also now 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. However, they smoke only two cigarettes a day after the meals prepared by their new maid, a Hindu woman from Bali named Ni Dewa. Often, we go to restaurants or have food catered to the house. Ni Dewa also



does our laundry using a new washer and dryer. I never dreamed of such luxuries and neither have my mother and wife.

At every sunrise, both Geeta and Aama do puja on the rooftop. I am usually lying in my bed, on an actual mattress, thinking about everything that I have 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 do not leave the house every day. Instead, I enjoy watching TV and Bollywood movie videos with Geeta and Aama who are also relishing their new idle and pampered lives. Generally, I leave the house only when I need more cash or when I want to buy something new for my family. Several times each day I sit in my puja room and thank Lord Shiva and Mother Dakshin Kali for all these gifts. *All is given to me I say. I am stealing nothing and am not misusing the Prajna Khadga. I am simply pleasing my wife, Aama, sons, and myself while escaping from a dismal fate.*

One day, after I present Geeta with a Gucci purse that I found in an airport locker, she asks, “How has such bounty come to us?” We are 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. My mother is watering her potted gardenias, snap dragons, and philodendra lining the rooftop’s ledge. And she is trimming her sacred basil plant which she uses to make a tea remedy for her old-age ailments. She is also seeing an Ayurvedic doctor who helps her naturally ease her several conditions.

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

“Doors?” Geeta asks with perplexity. For some reason, she is persistent with questions tonight. Presumably she is nearing menopause and cannot help herself.

“Yes, wife. Doors,” I say and 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 smiles, sips her chai, and asks, “Are you talking about your Manjushri Prajna Khadga?” I smile and nod. Then she says, “I have noticed that you no longer keep it on the altar when you leave for the day.”

“That is not your concern, Geeta. I am only asking what you would wish for not for your opinion.”

A cooling breeze scented from Aama’s basil wafts over the rooftop. We are well away from the terrible smog and congestion of the bustling parts of the city. Geeta nibbles at her fried rice then says, “I would release all the zoo animals. I did not like seeing Lord Pashupati’s children locked behind bars.”

I know why she makes this request. The other day I had taken both 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 I took them paddle boating on the lake, something they had never done before. And ever since then, Geeta and Aama have not stopped chattering 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 I call for a taxi to take me to the gates of Jawalakhel Zoo in the southeast section of the city.

With the use of my magic key, it is a simple matter to open the rusty revolving gates and enter the compound. Because it is the middle of the night, no one is around. With a torchlight, I enter the large iron gates and walk down the dark narrow dirt paths dimly lit by streetlamps. Monkeys begin screeching as I pass their cages and then the elephants loudly trumpet their long trunks. I believe Hanuman and Ganesh are calling to me. 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. Then the large male named Zambu lets out a terrific roar. I hear no other sounds, no human voices, no birds. They are all asleep. It is 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 or monkeys.

On behalf of my wife, I pray to Lord Pashupati then place the Manjushri key against the lock at the cage. I hear it clank but do not open it because I fear for my life. I only want to give these precious 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.*

After leaving the tigers, I walk from cage to cage, exhibit to exhibit, and release as many locks as I can. It becomes 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 am glad. I have 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 is her time to rise for morning puja with Aama. I tell her I am 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!” she yells. “What have you done, Gopan?”

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

“The zoo tigers are loose!” she again screams.

As I slowly sit up, trying to recover from the shock of her shrill, I say, “That is what you wished for.”

“Yes, but I was not serious, husband,” Geeta says as she sits on the bed. I see her tears.

“And what is the problem?” I ask, ready to lie back down and continue with my dreamy sleep.

“The news just announced that three tigers wandered into the 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 cannot be true,” I say and 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 how the zoo gates and cages were unlocked* the newscaster exclaims.

I am beside myself. Geeta joins me on the sofa, leans against my shoulder, and cries uncontrollably. “No,” I finally say, pushing her away. “You did this, you foolish wife, with your

silly request. You have 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 becomes 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,” she says. “Tell Mother Kali and Lord Shiva about your regrets. Beg them to take away your key. It has 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?” I ask.

“No, Gopan . . . but . . . Please make this promise,” she rises from the sofa and re-tucks her new turquoise 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,” she then says, “To never use the key again for such ignorant reasons. No matter what someone asks of you.”

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

*1996, ten years after Gopan finds the Prajna Khadga*

Aftab and Hari are 22 and 20 and are studying business management and computer science at the newly opened Kathmandu University. I have 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 am hoping that they will study in England or America.

I am very proud of my sons. Both are studious but quite different from each other. Hari is very focused on his computer work and he has strong Hindu beliefs. He is short and thin, like I was when I peddled my Nandiji. Because Aftab is my firstborn, he is 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 am dismayed that he admires the Communist Party and their philosophy of ending the monarchy. He believes that when there is class division there is class struggle. Despite the fact that I have spent my entire life fighting against my caste status, I do not argue Aftab's point because I am not a political man and I love King Birendra. He is 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 is righteous and just in our little Himalayan kingdom. Unlike Hari, my eldest son becomes quite heated about his beliefs. However, I do enjoy conversations with Hari concerning his interests in religious philosophies.

On one particularly auspicious day, Hari approaches me while I am in our front room 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. Recently, I had asked them to search the internet to see what they could learn about the man.

I am very excited to read the 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 does not restrict a person to a lowly social status. I underline the passage I especially like.

*At age twenty-nine, Siddhartha left his father's kingdom to discover the meaning of life. As a mendicant, he accepted the Hindu principles of rebirth and enlightenment but he rejected the caste system, attained enlightenment, and became Shakyamuni Buddha, the fourth Buddha of this era. In Deer Park, Sarnath, 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 am finished reading Mr. Lees' article, I declare to my wife, Aama, and son, "This is my final step away from my inherited caste. I hereby sever my ties to my father and ancestors and to the Hindu religion. I am now born into a higher station in life. This is where and when I become 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 father's house and she was forced to live on the streets.

"I am not forsaking Mother Kali or Lord Shiva," I stammer in my defense. "I will still invoke them in my puja room, like every Nepali does. However, you must think about our good fortune. We no longer sort through the dump for a livelihood or sweep trash off the streets and

remove dead cows from the canals. You no longer must cook because Ni Dewa cooks for you. And she does your cleaning and laundry. Now 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 have done all this for you. You speak of our gods. Well, Aama, Geeta, Manjushri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom brings us his magic key. He is my god now. Our god!”

After some persistence, Aama tells me that she understands my desire to become something better than a lowly man of no worth and she goes to the rooftop and waters her potted plants, trims her sacred basil, rings her puja bell, and lights incense. I am happy Aama is content and no longer bothering me with the nonsense that I owe allegiance to my forefathers and their gods.

I go to my puja room and chant the one Buddhist chant that 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. My own religion will no longer treat me as an outcaste, a tourist forbidden to enter the sacred domains of the gods I worshipped. 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.

### *1997 Everest Legendary Thangkas and Statues*

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 occurred to me. Because both Aftab and Hari are good at building websites, I have 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 will not 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 good karma and justifying my actions.

Within a month I open a shop and office in the Thamel tourist district, off New Road, and I 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 “ruffian charlatan” has no idea that I am that same lowlife street mongrel who came to his shop ten years before to sell the relic key. His name is Mr. Thapa and we quickly become well acquainted friends.

Over the next several weeks, 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, thangka paintings, and other objects, 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.

When they are away, I conduct business at the shop and practice using the computer. It does not 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. It is my job to take care of the Nepalis and tourists who enter our shop to browse around or purchase a particular item.

On most days, I share my 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 have become. It is just something to discuss although sometimes we get carried away and talk about women we would 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 Muni Mahamuni Shakyamuni Saha* while holding the Manjushri 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. Then I sit in my little shop surrounded by the deities of Nepal--the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, gods, goddesses, and protective saints. I believe they are 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 tells me *I promise you success and a long life*. Around me are fat and regal Jambhalas, the Lion Kubera, the god of wealth, Vishnu-Lakshmi, Nataraja, Krishna, Ganesh, and Sarasvati--one of my favorite statues because she is 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 is 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 that the bodhisattva 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 of becoming. I have escaped the bondage of my lowly heritage and taken control of my fate by way of 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 would feel vulnerable to evil spirits, to female demons and male dakas, and to Mara himself.

*July 1997*

Today 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 that our Nepali princess followed 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 monarchy.”

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 have removed them from a lowly heritage and that is all that matters.

Later that afternoon, I meet with my friend 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 antiques 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 am somewhat embarrassed to tell my good friend about Aftab's affiliation with the Maoist party. I do not like getting into politics because I am a gentle, simple man who enjoys discussing matters that do not stir up rash emotions. 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.

Today, as Mr. Thapa and I relax in his back office, sitting at his old wooden desk, he tells me, "I have heard that your son Aftab attended a public meeting of the United People's Front."

"Who told you that?" I say, 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 tells me, as if I should know this.

I take a long drag off 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 that Geeta and I are planning 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 right. Something has been going on between her and Aftab and I am the last person to know about it. I am 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 friend," Thapa asks me directly.

I light up another cigarette, take a drag, and then remark that 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, "Have you ever been robbed?"

"No, but my associate on New Road, old Mr. Tharuni, was robbed about ten years back. The police never found the culprit and no one understood how the thief entered his shop without breaking the lock." Thapa glares at me, like he knows about that ragamuffin thief who robbed his associate's shop, as if he suspects me. 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 believed my shop would get robbed as well. But it 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 confront Aftab and ask if he is interested in Mr. Thapa's daughter. "Of course, I am, Ba," he tells me. "I am a man and Binsa is a beautiful woman."

"Chora," I say, "It is my wish that you keep your attention on our business goals until Everest Legendary really takes off. Please do not get distracted with these Maoist ideas or with Binsa's beauty. Focus on what we are doing, like your brother Hari." Both of 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 the tiger killed that little boy.

I suddenly feel overcome with love for my boys and have this urge to give them whatever they desire. "What would you wish for if you could have anything you wanted?" I ask.

"Like a genie from Aladdin's lamp?" Hari remarks and both of my sons chuckle then return to their work. Obviously, they are not taking me seriously.

"I mean it," I say and 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 asks, pausing from his work and looking at me. Aftab and Hari know about the key although it is a matter I have not discussed with them but Geeta has whenever she recounts how she discovered its powers. Women love to boast and gossip, especially women from the lowliest of classes. It is just their

habit. Anyway, my boys know the topic became taboo after the tiger incident and they deeply respect me and all that we have accomplished and they never question me, except concerning business matters.

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

I join my sons in their laughter then turn my attention to my oldest son. 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 am with Hari. I will open my own doors after our business reaches the Moon. Besides, I have already found my own bride.”

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

Later that evening, well after sunset, Hari leaves the shop to fetch us a late dinner from a nearby food cart. While he is away, Aftab approaches me and says, “Yes Ba, I do want you to grant me a wish. I just did not need my *holier than thou bhai* knowing about it.”

“What is it, Chora. Tell me,” I say, looking 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 have recently become a member of the Communist Party,” Aftab admits.

I nod, concerned about what he might have in mind, then I say, “I really want nothing to do with politics.”

“You asked me what I would wish for and I am telling you. You did not say it had to be something you fancied.”

“What is it then?” I ask and turn off my computer. “After Hari returns with our snack, I am ready to go home.”

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

“No, Chora. I do not know about this fellow. Such matters are of no interest to 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? How 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 class.”

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

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

“You are treading on dangerous grounds,” I say, practically standing 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 the Buddhas.”

“Well, I guess you are a liar and are not going to take my request seriously,” Aftab says and scoots his chair back prepared to return to his desk. “Do not ask me what I wish for if you do not mean it.”



“Please stop speaking to me this way,” I stumble to say, trying to take my oldest son seriously when I am fully aware that he is trying to manipulate me. “What is it you wish for?” I ask, feeling 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 am not sure. I feel queasy in my stomach and ruptured in my head.

“Can you use your magical key to release Shyam from Central Jail?” my son asks.  
“Tonight, in fact. I hear they may be moving him to a prison in Pakora, tomorrow.”

I feel my brow and palms sweat as I look closely at my son. His request is rather dire and rings like Geeta’s wish for freeing the Bengal tigers. My mind is reluctant but my heart is weak. He is my firstborn and I do want to grant him his greatest desire.

“You asked, Ba, and that is the door I would open. I would do it myself but you forbid anyone else use 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 cannot sleep because I am thinking about my favorite son’s passionate wish. By two AM I roll out of bed while being 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.

*December 19, 1997*

The next afternoon, Aftab is overjoyed when the news breaks online that five Maoist prisoners, my son’s “freedom fighters,” have somehow 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. “I am 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 are businessmen trying to build an empire. We have no space or time for trouble.”

“Are you sorry for what you did?” my son asks me.

“Only if you get yourself in trouble.”

“I won’t, Ba. You are right. I am too busy with Everest Legendary. And I do have an eye on Binsa. That leaves me little time to stir up trouble. So do not worry about me. I am certain that Shyam and his men will be hiding deep in the outer mountains and valleys.”

“Thank you,” I say, logging off my computer. “I cannot stop worrying that I may have 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. I want to be alone in my temple room and tell Hari to go back and work at his computer while I finish the pricing.

As I look at the Manjushri bronze statue in the center of my shop, and the White and Green Tara thangkas on the walls, I keep 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 will not 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, gods, and saints, at the detailed thangkas, and I offer gratitude for my prosperity and for my brilliant and capable sons. I am happy to have pleased Aftab but deep inside I worry about what will become of these men I released. I only meant to free this Shyam Bhandari but when I unlocked his cell door, I found five prisoners inside and wasn't sure which one was Shyam and so I had to let them all freely walk away.

I gaze upon Manjushri, the Great Saint of Wisdom, and silently pray, "Please see that these recalcitrant men return to the mountains and do not stir up trouble in the city. Do not let me be the cause of another unfortunate incident because I have misused your key."

#### Chapter 4: One Year before the Rickshaw Incident in Kathmandu

*November 1985*

*Sid Lees*

Even after a year of sleeping together, Maureen and I have never really talk about sharing a future. We seem to be momentary lovers, living in the present without any plans. This arrangement had seemed all right and very Buddhist. Until today. I have decided to entice Maureen to leave her husband and travel with me in Asia for six months while I am on my sabbatical researching for my book about Buddhist relics and sutras that ancient Indian and Chinese monks brought into China and Tibet. My own divorce is nearly finalized. It was a relatively simple matter because Mary and I have no kids and we have always kept our assets separate.

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

“It will be our one-year anniversary celebration,” I tell Maureen as we relax on my queen futon bed after an hour of passionate love making. She is as stunning now as the day I was the 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 that she leave Jim and marry me. I really don’t want to spend any time away from her. Besides, I am afraid that if I leave her for six months and head to Asia alone, our secret, forbidden love affair will somehow come to an end. She will move on or cement her marriage to Jim.

“I will take you to Singapore, Borobudur, Bali, Vietnam, Bangkok, Hongkong,” I say while blowing kisses in her ear. “You name it, my sweet darling Maureen. In Asia, we will freely be a couple in love instead of paramours sneaking around.”

“How am I going to get six-months off from my job?” Maureen asks, shredding my fantasy with the most obvious question, one I have already considered and worked out in my mind.

“Maureen, since your classes ended last semester, you have 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 I reason that now is a perfect time for you to break away from the fray and join me on this trip to Asia.”

“And just what are we going to 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 will help me document the relics in the different museums throughout Asia. You are an excellent photographer. This will make perfect sense to Jim. I have faith in that.”

“What?” Maureen acts surprised but I suspect she has been contemplating this notion since I first mentioned my trip. She probably hasn’t suggested it because of her marriage. I rarely ask her about Jim because if I do, I am plagued with guilt about betraying my best friend with his wife. But I cannot help having these feelings for Maureen. She draws out the most pleasurable parts of my being and takes me to esoteric places that I have only read about in tantric literature. 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 cannot 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 accepts my job offer and agrees to go on the trip. “But Sid. I am not going to divorce Jim,” she insists, leaving me discouraged. She leans on her elbow and props her head to look at me. “I will tell him you hired me to take pictures for your book,” she adds. “He won’t suspect anything. You know Jim.”

I was afraid she would say this and I was hoping for a clean break for the both of us; a new start and an end to all the secrecy about our love. I am wondering if I should insist that she divorce Jim. But I do not feel like I can pressure her. Maureen is a strong-willed, determined woman who speaks her mind, and that is part of why I am so utterly enthralled with her. Mary has always been a bit demur, caving into whatever I might suggest or decide. Not Maureen. She is a hard nut to crack once she has made up her mind about something.

And I do not like to argue with her. I am used to being with Mary, a woman who goes along with what I say.

“That’s just it, Maureen.” I finally confront her. “I am tired of lying to Jim. It is driving me crazy. Your husband has been my best friend since I was in college. I cannot 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 are causing too much grief otherwise. Even if he doesn’t realize it. One day he will. I know it and I hate myself for causing pain and suffering.”

“Whose pain and suffering, Sid?”

“My own, for now.”

“I don’t know, Sid darling. Jim is a good provider. A stable man. I have always liked being his wife.”

“I am stable too,” I say, propping my own head up and looking at Maureen’s beautiful face. “I will 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 own life. So, we can, too. As a couple in love. A couple meant to be together.”

“I will 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 would love to take pictures of the Taj Mahal and the Great Wall of China.”

“No, darling. You cannot go to Red China with me,” I tell her emphatically. “I do have some research in Beijing. But I am afraid the Chinese will not grant you permission to

travel into China with me. Not on this trip. You are not yet my wife and we have no time to finalize our divorces and marry. The Chinese gave me a selective visa because I am a Stanford professor and I told them I was going to write good things about the New China.”

“Will you get to see the Great Wall?”

“Look, I will 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 is 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 she takes the ferry to the other islands. It will be a good month-long respite for you while I am conducting my research in China. We can meet up in Kathmandu, the gateway to the Himalayas. There 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 illustrious British colony and read all the novels I have 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 say and smother her with tickles and kisses, something she has always liked.

Over the next few weeks, as we prepare for our journey through Asia, I am relieved Maureen doesn’t ask me anything more about China because I cannot explain to her my real purpose for the trip. Yes, I am writing a book as I have been telling her and everyone else, but I am really going to China to travel to Tibet and meet with a monk in Shigatse Prefecture. It is a secret mission and I have promised this monk not to tell anyone about it,

including the dean at Stanford and my best friend Jim. And certainly, I cannot tell the woman I love because I do not trust her gregarious nature. It has been a task to keep her from revealing our affair because Maureen loves boasting to her many girlfriends from several different groups and organizations. As far as I know, I have kept her under control.

This mission came about a year before, around the time I first started sleeping with Maureen; an abbot who oversees the Shakya Monastery near Shigatse had written me a long letter. His name is Khenpo Trizin and his letter addressed me as “the Esteemed Professor Lees of Buddhism at Stanford.” He wrote me because of an article I had written about Buddhist relics. Throughout my career I have written five books and over fifty articles about Buddhism and its spread throughout Asia. My articles are far reaching and I receive letters from around the world, from religious academics in Asia as well as religious leaders and practitioners. They ask me many questions about Buddhist relics, monuments, and the texts of Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana, the three major traditions of Buddhism.

A tourist had secretly given Khenpo Trizin the periodical containing my article. Then another tourist smuggled his letter from occupied Tibet and mailed it to me care of Stanford. The abbot asked me to come to Tibet to retrieve an invaluable relic. His letter said, “Ancient Chinese monks kept this relic in the library vault at the Magao Grottos near Dunhuang, China until a monk from the Song Dynasty brought it to a convent near our monastery. His name was Fa Wong and he documented the history of the relic to leave with the nuns at the convent. I am providing you with a copy of that history which includes Fa Wong’s own journey from Dunhuang to Shigatse. Perhaps you can tell the Chinese that you wish to follow in this monk’s footsteps and travel from Dunhuang to Shigatse but please do not reveal the existence of this relic. Instead, tell the Chinese that this monk traveled to Shigatse to retrieve Buddhist



manuscripts from our monastery. I am asking you to take this priceless relic to the 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso. Tibetan people consider His Holiness to be a living incarnation of Avalokitesvara, the bodhisattva of compassion. I am sure you are well aware that in 1950 China invaded our nation and the Dalai Lama escaped to Dharamshala, India where he remains as our spiritual leader. Professor Lees, my biggest fear is that 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 in a campaign to destroy our religion. They believe our way of life contradicts their own values of a classless society without religion. They fail to understand that we are a nation devoted to peace and compassion.”

I was already aware that the Chinese occupiers had 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. Without hesitation I decided to retrieve this relic. The first thing I had to do was work out the permits for visiting China and Tibet. The Chinese government wanted a precise itinerary from me and I provided one without revealing my intent to retrieve the relic. I explained that I was researching for a book about a Song Dynasty monk's pilgrimage from Dunhuang to Shigatse to retrieve Buddhist texts. The Chinese had never heard of Fa Wong and their scholars had read all the scrolls from the library vault at the Magao Grottoes in Dunhuang. I had also studied the documents that the Chinese had made available to the academic world. The library vault of Dunhuang had been an important discovery in the history of Buddhism. It came about at the turn of the nineteenth century when a Taoist monk opened a cave that had been sealed since about 1000 AD, the time of Fa Wong. Now referred to as cave 17, the

vault contained textiles, scriptures, and manuscripts written in Chinese, Tibetan, and other languages that monks from the Tang to Song dynasties had copied and stored in this vault.

I explained to the Chinese that I knew of this Song Dynasty monk from a manuscript found in Tibet, one hundred years before. I asked for their permission to make the overland trek and follow in this monk's footsteps. I assured the Chinese that I would give them full credit for making my book and research possible and I promised to comply with their rules and restrictions for this trek.

After a few months of back-and-forth negotiations, the Chinese granted me one week to study tantric documents at the Shakya Monastery but insisted on escorting me during my entire trip. This is the official account but I have my own itinerary in mind. In Shigatse, I plan to somehow evade my Chinese guides and escape to Nepal. I already have the necessary Nepali visas and permits which I plan to stash in a money belt. I am aware that if my plan is successful, the Chinese will never allow me back into China which is an academic tragedy for me. It will be *so long* to my dream of becoming an expert in Tibetan Buddhist relics. I will be the only buffoon in the crowd of experts banned from Tibet. However, I am doing something bigger than my academic pursuits. I am performing a service in the name of Buddha and in the name of Lâm Văn Túc, the self-immolating monk on the streets of Saigon in 1963. I am going to Tibet to receive the sacred relic and then give it to a living Buddha.

## Chapter 5: It Heats up in Kathmandu

*Fourteen years after the Rickshaw Incident*

*January 2001*

*Gopan Subba*

They're tearing down  
The shanty town  
Along Ishu Canal  
I am alone 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 our back office, Aftab confesses that he has proposed to Binsa. "I already asked Mr. Thapa for her hand," he says from behind his desk. Hari is smiling at his computer, presumably aware that Aftab and Binsa have secretly been together for the past several months. "Ba," Aftab continues, "Thapa is reluctant to give his blessing. Can you please convince him that I am a good man with a good education and a promising future in business?"

"I am sure he is reluctant because of your affiliation with the communists," I say to Aftab.

"I love Binsa," Aftab exclaims. "And that is all that matters. I am not an activist, only an enthusiast, an educated man interested in the stability of our Himalayan nation."

"My friend Mr. Thapa knows about your political activities," I say. "He has seen you at public rallies with Maoist men and women."

When Aftab continues to argue his case, I walk over to him to speak my mind outside of Hari's earshot. But I suspect Hari already knows what I want to say. Although my sons are not extremely close, or very much alike, they are still brothers and probably keep very few secrets from each other.

I lean into Aftab and whisper, “If Shyam Bhandari ever gets caught, you had better hope he does not mention your name.”

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

In the end, later that day, I arrange to have lunch with Mr. Thapa. By the time we finish our meal and make innumerable toasts with our brass bowls of beer barley chhaang, Thapa agrees to the union of our children. “Then, dear friend, we will be family and I will expect several thankas from you,” he says in halfhearted jest. Thapa has already purchased many sacred items from my shop, mostly for his wife Tila who is deeply spiritual.

Late that afternoon, I go to an astrologer to establish an auspicious date for the wedding then I 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 has happened the night before at the south gate of Narayanhiti Palace and killed two royal guards and a woman and her child who were standing near the guard station. I purchase a Kathmandu Post and begin reading the news at the kiosk. Directly after the incident, to my horror, the royal police apprehended Shyam Bhandari, the man I freed for my son. “Bhandari,” I read, “had mysteriously escaped from Central Jail two years earlier with four other Maoist terrorists. 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 have never told anyone, including Geeta and Aama, that I had released the Maoist prisoners. My eldest son had been 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 had brought such contentment to my son. Now I am appalled with myself. Rather than creating opportunity and happiness, the Manjushri key has led to death and destruction and I am miserable and unable to tell anyone about my anguish. I cannot talk to my good friend Mr. Thapa and I will not discuss anything with Aftab, certainly not this tragedy nor his wedding. In fact, I am 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 do not want him to know anything about this whole mess. Aftab ignores my stare, gleans over the article, then behaves as if the worst thing that has happened is that the police have recaptured Shyam Bhandari and he faces execution by the king’s firing squad. “This will be the end of the Maoist party,” Aftab laments.

I walk away to the front room and sit by the cash register. I cannot be around my eldest son and we still have a business to run and grow. I am a sick man, sick about my very self. All the good intentions I have ever had, have ended. Everything has changed.

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

“No,” Aftab declares in his defense. “You did this! You are 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 am afraid Thapa next door will hear me.

“You asked me what I wished for, and I told you. That is all. I play no other part in this matter.”

I am so outraged that I leave the shop and return home only to find my wife and Aama arguing over the wedding plans. I cannot listen to their complaints so I take a walk down to New Road and am unable to think about anything. It is 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 has been agreed upon and arranged. Hajur Aama and I have already ordered new saris for the wedding.”

Aftab sits beside his mother, almost in tears. From my parlor chair, I glare at my son who has 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 is beside the point,” Aftab says.

“Oh, I see,” I exclaim. “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 am hoping divine intervention will clean up the mess I have made, purge me of my bad, bad karma, because of my son.

Over the next several days, however, matters only grow worse. My accountant tells me that Everest Legendary is losing vast sums of money. With a little investigating, and by thoroughly questioning both of 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 is a good son who has 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 and say, “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.

“I don’t trust you anymore,” I say.

“Ba, I suggest you use your magic key to pay our creditors.”

“Haven’t you caused enough harm to your family, to your own life?” Furious, I scream.  
“The key is a curse.”

“Only if you let it be,” Aftab remarks from behind his computer. He is as calm as a glacier, unperturbed by the dilemma he has created. And he speaks this way to me, his father, who now carries the burdens of the entire world, 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 am too near the edge of the walkway. As it passes me, it belches black exhaust in my face. But somehow the incident revives my spirit. Suddenly, I cannot help but think that my only motivation for what I have ever 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 for my family and keep Everest Legendary afloat. I do not want to move to a

less expensive home in a shanty neighborhood. I have 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 is looking. But in the end, it is not enough to maintain the business and keep my family's luxurious lifestyle.

Although a rift has occurred between Aftab and me, because of what has happened and what he has done, I cannot kick him to the streets like my father had done 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 that he has found a great opportunity for us to make the equivalent of two million US dollars in Indian rupees. "It is the answer to our prayers," he says. His enthusiasm disturbs me. I do not like it when Aftab, or anyone else for that matter, is overly zealous about anything. Hari is away for the afternoon. Aftab knows I do not want his brother to know about my use of the key. I want Hari to continue working hard, like he does, 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 have 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 ask Aftab and then light a cigarette as I sit before my computer.

He 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 says, "I have



recently met with a wealthy man from New Delhi, a Mr. Raja Balakrishnan. He supports the communist movement in Nepal because he is 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 is nothing like that. Hear me out. I am telling you how we can make everything work.”

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 say, relenting as I did when he was a boy and I considered my firstborn as 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 do,” I say. “I intend to take your mother and Hajur Aama there as soon as we get Everest Legendary out from under this mess 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 mind?” I stand from my desk and yell. I can feel my face redden, my neck veins pop out, and my blood pressure soar as if I am elderly rather than middle-aged. Only recently has my doctor advised that I keep stress and anger to a minimum or I will grow old before my time. He also reminded me, knowing of my religious affiliation, that it is the Buddhist way to always keep calm. But my eldest son tries my every nerve.

“Listen Ba, take it easy,” Aftab says. “It is a brilliant idea. You simply join a tour group and enter Narayanhiti Palace and then you hide out with your magic key. During the evening,

after the public tours have ended, you sneak back into the display room, retrieve the queen's jewels, and work your way from the palace by using the key's magical 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 are 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 we have 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 Narayanhiti Palace."

"Don't worry about that either. Use the power of your key and I am sure 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, it isn't a suitable gift."

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

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

“Ba, with the money we make on this heist we will 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 on 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 agree to Aftab’s caper because I am a desperate man in a tight bind. We set the date for the upcoming Friday when Crown Prince Dipendre is hosting the bimonthly gathering of the royal family.

“That way,” Aftab assures me, “No one will be around when you appropriate the crown jewels.”

## Chapter 6: From Dunhuang to Shigatse

### *Five Weeks before the Rickshaw Incident*

*November 1986*

*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.

My large daypack is the only luggage I am bringing on this side trip into China and Tibet. I left the rest of my luggage with Maureen in Landau and sent home the souvenirs we

had accumulated thus far. Maureen will have lots of luggage to take when she flies to Kathmandu to meet me, but she says she'll manage with the help of taxi drivers and bellboys.

During my three-hour China Air flight to Beijing, I pull out my research notes about the Manjushri relic I am about to retrieve and begin re-reading the relic's history that Khenpo Trizin sent me, now that I am away from Maureen's prying eyes.

*History of the Manjushri Key of 1000 Buddhas*

*I am Fa Wong, Master Librarian at the Mogao Grottoes and Monastery currently under the rule of Zhenzong, third emperor of the Song Dynasty in the year 1000 AD. I am keeper of the depository cave of records, scriptures, documents, and sacred relics. For thirty years I have 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 am now 55 and wish to live a long life so that I may continue to spread kindness, mindfulness, rationality, and resourcefulness--the teachings of all Buddhas.*

*Merchants from the caravan road stop at our grottoes and tell me about their kingdoms and I tell them about the 1000 Buddhas of this era. I permit scholars, diplomats, and monks to view the frescoes and statues in the grottoes and to read our books on religion, astronomy, and diagnostics and remedies from the Sui and Tang dynasties. Most scrolls in my library cave date from the Tibetan occupation of Dunhuang, after the reign of Empress Wu.*

*Early each morning, I am in the caves contemplating that all names and forms are empty of meaning. Then I practice a qi gong exercise monks developed at the Shaolin Temple. The breathing, tapping along 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. They also give us litchis, loquats, longans, and pomegranates. According to the rules for monks, I never eat after the mid-day sun and never prepare my own food.*

*Three hundred years before, in the year 705 AD, the Heavenly Empress Wu Zetian brought to our grottoes a sacred relic key dating from the time of Shakyamuni Buddha. The Empress requested that our monks use the relic's supernatural powers to keep her sacred scrolls and treasures safely locked inside our library vault and away from her enemies. She called this relic "the Manjushri Key of 1000 Buddhas" after the Buddhas of the present era. It is a small bronze-casted Prajna Khadga. The sword of Manjushri slashes away greed, hatred, delusion, and evil intentions to bring about clear thinking and compassion to the unenlightened.*

*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.*

#### *Maha Prajapati and the Manjushri Key of 1000 Buddhas*

*Over one thousand-four-hundred years ago the first Buddhist nun Maha Prajapati received the relic key from an iron smith and follower of the Buddha. Maha Prajapati was the Buddha's aunt and surrogate mother. She had raised him soon after his birth when his mother died. Maha Prajapati was devoted to her nephew's teachings. By the time she turned sixty she wanted to form an order of disciples for women. Three times, the Buddha refused her request to ordain women but finally agreed if the nuns lived in subordination to the 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 the cremation the Buddha and his followers found the relic intact and they soon discovered that it possessed supernatural powers from Maha Prajapati's wisdom and determined spirit. Buddha gave the relic to his aunt's 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 and that the powerful relic can only be given and received and never lost or stolen.*

I set aside the history, look out the window at the vast expanse of freshly planted rice paddies, and think about how things have been going between Maureen and me. She is working out as my assistant and photographer, and my passion for her has not waned, however, I am discovering that she complains about every inconvenience. I have never seen this side of her and am tired of explaining, nearly every night, that we cannot 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 truth, I finally admit to myself, Maureen is getting on my nerves and I am glad to have this break from her.

In my money belt I have been hiding from Maureen my stash of a few thousand dollars that I am reserving to bribe the Chinese, if need be, and to donate to the Buddhists in Tibet. If Maureen discovered I had this cache, she would want me to spend it to keep her in luxury. I know this. She is used to her wealthy husband and I am realizing why she doesn't want to divorce him. She is probably hoping to inherit his family's money, since Jim comes from wealth. Not me. My family is strictly academic and not rich and I must budget, but

Maureen is too flighty to budget. Additionally, I am discovering that she goes to great lengths when arguing inane points, such as who used which bar of soap. Lucky for Maureen, I have absorbed many Buddhist qualities. Patience, for one thing. Maybe compassion. I am 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 and Tibet.

After a day trip to the Great Wall and then a night at the Friendship Hotel in Beijing which, incidentally, had human feces on the toilet seat when I occupied the room and moisture seeping from the walls, Mr. Yi and I are on the crowded train to Dunhuang. Mr. Yi 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 clichés that he has 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 to Dunhuang, I watch the 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 delineated by murky irrigation canals. When it comes to the sleeping arrangements at night, I am 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 even missing Maureen and her stubborn arguments.

Because I am away from my Chinese monitor, I decide to pull out my notes again and re-examine Fa Wong's history of this supernatural relic key.

*Queens Bhrikuti and Wencheng and the Manjushri Key of 1000 Buddhas*

*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 and he developed a Tibetan script to translate these sutras into his own written language. He expanded his empire into Nepal and married a royal Nepali princess named "Bhrikuti Devi" 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 the Green Tara, goddess of compassion and the mother of Buddhism. To house her many relics, Songtsen Gampo built a great temple he called the House of Wisdom. But Princess Bhrikuti did not reveal to him that she possessed the relic key with supernatural powers. She kept it hidden 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 arranged to marry 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 a*



*white Guan Yin. The Tibetans loved Princess Wencheng and called her the White Tara, goddess of love, health, and longevity.*

*The two queens became sisters in their efforts to promote Buddhism and 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 Bhrikuti built a shrine to safely keep the relic Prajna Khadga. The sister queens recruited fifty women from Great Tibet to surrender their lives as daughters and wives and live peacefully in the convent they named the Temple of Illuminated Long Life. The queens also 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 nuns used ayurvedic rasayanas and Chinese herbal medicine to gain longevity and they used the supernatural powers of the relic Prajna Khadga to preserve their bodies for immortality.*

Before Mr. Yi joins me in the dining car at about five AM, and as I hear the other passengers waking up and hawking out the windows, I quickly put the history away in my pack. Otherwise, I know my Chinese monitor will want to read my notes and ask me about my research. Although no one has told me this, I know it is Mr. Yi's job to keep me under strict surveillance.

On the second day of the journey the train crosses the Yellow River which the Chinese call "the Sorrow of China" because of the many 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 has not changed since the time of Qin Shi Huangdi, the first emperor of China. When my train passes the gray and barren Qilian Mountains and at the southern edge of

the Tibetan Plateau, I watch wild horses gallop across the red and gray pebbly plains and woolly Bactrian camels graze at 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 is nothing like the famous portion near Beijing, in Badaling, although both sections date from the Ming dynasty. In places 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 am bundled in a blanket back in the dining car and gazing at the sky above the Gobi Desert. Unopposed by any other source of light, the stars radiate like crystals on black velvet. I stay up all night and again examine the history of the relic and take notes. I want to thoroughly be prepared with questions when I meet Khenpo Trizin in Shigatse.

### *Xuan Zang and the Key to 1000 Buddhas*

*Four years after Songtsen Gampo married Wencheng, news reached Great Tibet that the monk Xuan Zang had returned to China with relics and 657 Sanskrit texts after a fifteen-year journey to India. Many murals at our grottoes depict his epic journey that happened sixty years before I am recording 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 from India, the birthplace of Buddhism. "Each step is extremely difficult," he taught our monks at the Mogao Grottoes. "And each step becomes increasingly weaker. But you must manage to push on with your journey."*

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

*Songtsen Gampo dispatched an envoy to the Tang court to retrieve copies of the 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. **For the nuns at the Temple of Illuminated Long Life, Wencheng took the relic Prajna Khadga to Mount Wutai to receive Manjushri's powers of longevity and immortality.** But before Wenchang left China, Emperor Taizong fell ill and she gave him the relic key to ensure his complete recovery. Taizong lived in good health for another four years but then died the same year as Songtsen Gampo.*

Late in the afternoon on the third day, 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 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. Scads of flies are hovering around the meat and everything else including me. I am hoping Mr. Yi doesn't suggest we eat at one of these eateries. If he does, I am prepared to claim that I am vegetarian, as a Buddhist. This is partly true, but I do eat meat from time to time, except with Maureen. She is a full-fledged vegetarian and I again am missing her and her strong will. Why? Because this forsaken town makes me feel desolate and 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, the traveler came to the Gansu Corridor, and leaving it, he encountered the Taklimakan Desert, one of the most inhospitable regions in the world.

Mr. Yi registers me into a room at the Dunhuang Guest House and I am 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 hot water thermoses colored red with pink roses. The room is scented from the chrysanthemum tea that the hotel director serves when I first arrive and am seated 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, the esteemed American professor, 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 am afraid to ask about the meat dishes and am sorry I failed to establish with Yi that I am a strict vegetarian. But I didn’t and so I feel obligated to try each dish.

My guest room has twin beds with padded white slipcovers over green silk sheets embroidered with yellow dragons that have a ball in each talon. The room smells of stale cigarette smoke which comes from the constant smoking habit of most Chinese men. There is no getting away from it like the spitting on the streets.

I am not sure where Mr. Yi is staying because he never tells me. I believe my Chinese monitor stays in special accommodations for cadres, perhaps where he reports to the central authority about his day with the *wai gua ren* as the Chinese call foreigners. I

don't know and don't ask questions that may be sensitive. In fact, sometimes everything seems sensitive and I restrict my inquiries to my research concerning the Song Dynasty. Mr. Yi is proud of his country's long history and he has endless facts to share with lots of his cliches. Of course, his facts are never anything negative about his illustrious New China. I am certain that forbidden topics include anything about China's occupation of Tibet--to the Chinese it is not an occupation, and anything about the Cultural Revolution's fiascos that included making scientists and scholars work in the fields as peasants to create an idealized classless society.

Every chance I am away from Mr. Yi, I pull out my notes and continue to scrutinize the relic's history. I do so in the guest room while lying on the narrow twin bed on top of the dancing twin dragons.

*The Heavenly Empress Wu and the Manjushri Key of 1000 Buddhas*

*Now comes the part in this history when our Heavenly Empress Wu received the relic Prajna Khadga and used its supernatural powers to become the first and only Empress of China. 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 to serve 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 with 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 the relic which she kept hidden from everybody else, she replaced Gaozong's lead wife and became First Queen. She used the relic's powers to promote the Buddhist philosophies the monk Xuan Zang had taught her but when her husband grew*

*sickly, she did not use the relic to cure him. Instead, she became a co-regent with her ailing husband 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 which she 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 the Manjushri key.*

Early the next morning, Mr. Yi wakes me with a phone call. I eat dumplings in the dining hall 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 the caves where Mr. Yi forbids me to take pictures but does not mind my writing notes as long as he can glance at what I am writing, from time to time.

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

The mountainside has five levels of stairwells and walkways leading to the 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.

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 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. The Thousand-armed Thousand-eyed Avalokitesvara. Two of his hands are folded in namaste, two are resting in front, two hands 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 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 mission. For me the mantra says, "Great Compassionate One, grant me a successful journey for the sake of others in this troubled world."

### *Journey to Lhasa, Tibet*

On the evening of my last day in Dunhuang, the thin Mr. Yi escorts me on a flight to Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province. The city is known as the "gateway to the Horse Tea Roads" named for the routes used when Tibet traded its prized horses for China's valuable Yunnan tea.

At the Friendship Guesthouse of Chengdu, Yi introduces my new monitor and driver, Mr. Xiao. He is in his thirties and a bit chubbier than Mr. Yi. Xiao is also a constant smoker

and greatly appreciates the carton of Marlboros I buy him at the Friendship Store outside the Guesthouse. As a parting gift, I also give Mr. Yi a carton. He wishes me “Happiness, Long Life, and Good Health,” we shake hands, and he symbolically hands me over to Mr. Xiao.

Before leaving Chengdu in a green Jeep Cherokee, Xiao has me purchase two crates of bottled water, portable oxygen containers, and high-altitude pills. Xiao fills several five-gallon containers with gasoline and we head down Friendship Highway 318 which the Chinese built soon after they occupied Tibet. “It spans nearly 3000 miles to Lhasa and traverses over ten mountains and crosses three rivers,” Mr. Xiao tells me. “It will be a difficult drive through drastic changes in altitude but you will see the most scenic nature in the world.”

Mr. Xiao is right. The landscape of this high plateau is exquisite. On the two-lane highway to Lhasa, snowcapped peaks and tall brown, gray, and green variegated mountains surround us. Ice cold streams often flow beside the road and from time-to-time herds of black wooly yaks and their herder cross the highway and remind me of Alexandra David-Neel using yak wool extensions in her hair to disguise herself as a beggar during her journey to Lhasa. When the clouds are gone, the sky is the bluest I have ever seen and when the sun nears the evening horizon, it bursts like a supernova as if the world is about to end.

### *Lhasa*

It is late afternoon when Xiao pulls into Lhasa. I am 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. Xiao at my side, of course.



“The Forbidden City of Lhasa is only for the initiated,” Xao tells me, although I am not quite sure what he means. Through my open window, I deeply inhale the thin chilly air which faintly touches my lungs. I feel a shortness of breath, my heart is thumping, and I am constipated. We are, after all, twelve thousand feet above sea level. In comparison, Mt. Everest is twenty-eight thousand feet and my hometown is at sea level.

The first thing I notice 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 atop this hill but it was the fifth Dalai Lama and leader of Tibet in the 17<sup>th</sup> century who constructed the Potala as it stands today. Before the occupation, the Dalai Lama used the thirteen-story palace as his winter home but these days the Chinese are using 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 are tall and most 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 the other pulls a rope attached to the shovel's bottom to help with the task. Before the Jokhang, the main Buddhist temple of Tibet which Songtsen Gampo first 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 are circumambulating stupas. "They are making what the Tibetans call *kara*," Mr. Xiao tells me.

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's nature is to be happy 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 have never felt more filled with spiritual energy than now.

Then, for some strange reason, I begin thinking about Maureen. *Do I wish she was with me now?* I am not so sure anymore. She would probably complain that the high altitude gives her a headache. *Yes*, I chuckle to myself, *if Maureen were with me now, I would 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. Xiao, making him chuckle. "I don't think I'll eat sausage tonight." I hold my stomach and slink further back onto the passenger seat.

"No problem. Professor Lees," Xiao 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. Xiao checks me into the Lhasa Drepung Guesthouse, I freshen up in my room, then meet him in the lobby where he 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 is smacking gum which I find more annoying than Xiao or Yi's chain smoking. I assume she is Tibetan although she is acting very Chinese and has a "by the party line" demeanor.

"Miss Jamyang will show you the sites of Lhasa then take you to the Shakya temple in Shigatse," Xiao says. He then tells me he is returning to Chengdu tonight and that he wishes me success. I am surprised by his sudden departure because he hadn't mentioned it until now. But I am also becoming used to not asking questions about anything personal or related to the Chinese unless my monitors prompt the question. I simply roll along and allow them to lead the conversation, rather like a submissive woman, I imagine.

That night I have trouble falling asleep on the hard mattress of the twin bed in my room. I keep thinking about how I am going to evade my new monitor Jamyang.

To help me fall asleep I pick up my notes and continue studying Fa Wong's history about the Manjushri relic, most notably, about his decision to take the key to the Temple of Illuminated Long Life near Shigatse, Tibet.

## Chapter 7: Fa Wong and the and the Manjushri Key to 1000 Buddhas

*Circa 1000 AD Song Dynasty China*

Now this history comes to the part where I take my journey to Great Tibet to return the relic key to the nuns at the Temple of Illuminated Long Life. But first, allow me to paint a picture 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 the 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 the 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 did not 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 he paid the 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 Dynasty took power, bad times fell upon my father's little country estate. A drought came along and my youngest brother starved to death then 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 that 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 forced me to serve time in jail. I escaped my confinement but could not 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 bloody 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 other 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 would shoot and kill even the youngest deserter. *This is the way of Sun Tsu* our commanders would tell 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 would not eat the rabbit I had cooking so 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 could not take the money but he ate the rice. I could see he was near starvation, something I had experienced and seen on the face of my younger brother who had 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 the bodhisattva 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 I felt overcome with a spirit of hope and goodness. I no longer wanted to rob pilgrims with my comrades which is why I was alone that morning. I had distanced myself from

them believing it would only be for a day or two. I had been trying to hunt and feed myself without thievery but from a farmer's silo I had stolen the rice I shared with the nameless monk.

I decided to trek up the mountain to speak further with him about the philosophy of Manjushri. At twenty, I was in trouble and could not afford to be caught if I wanted to live a long life which I did then as much as I do now. I knew my only escape from this peril was to join a Buddhist or Taoist monastery on Wutai Shan. I had heard that army patrols do not search for deserters among devout and religious men.

I never located the starving monk at any monastery but in a matter of days I was living at the Heavenly Monastery where, because of my literate abilities, 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.

### *My dream about 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 have 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 my 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, 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 did not tell Master Badhir that I knew about this temple and these nuns who practice methods for longevity because I never reveal to anyone the powerful relic I am obligated to safekeep. If others learned of its existence, they would attempt to steal it and render the relic powerless because it can only be given and received, never stolen or lost. I admitted to Master Badhir, however, that I knew nothing about this shrine to the mummy of longevity.

That night in my dreams the spirit of Empress Wu appeared wearing a golden crown with 1000 specks of shimmering light and holding 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 resumed the Tang Dynasty. They also write that she died at age eighty-one and lies buried at the Qianling Mausoleum beside her husband Gaozong. But 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 and that after she left our monks with the relic key, she traveled 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 then asked me to return the relic key to the nuns at this temple. She said that Princess Wencheng had planned to retrieve the relic key from Emperor Taizong but then he and Songtsen Gampo died, political alliances changed, and she could not return to China. The spirit of Empress Wu then

proclaimed that when I deliver the relic to the nuns and honor her at the shrine, 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 and he 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."

When he returned from Chang'an, Master Badhir Amu provided me with two chestnut mares in exchange for a relic from the depositary, 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. I thought such auspicious names would ensure their survival during the long trek to the Temple of Illuminated Long Life where 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 wore, 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. I keep the Manjushri key of 1000 Buddhas on a linked chain around my neck. During this entire journey, I wore it under my robes, never removing it day or night.



My first stop was in 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 the town's shrines, stupas, and cave murals. Monks from nearby monasteries and Buddhist pilgrims traveling the caravan road were also circumambulating the shrines. The outpost had one inn where I resided for nearly a week. The innkeeper was an astrologer and soothsayer. One evening, I sat with him in his tavern and he foretold my fortunes concerning my upcoming journey. His name was Ehmet. His father was a Uyghur man also named Ehmet. His mother was a Chinese princess named Ma Lian and she had taught him his divination skills. But on the caravan roads I have found that I can never be certain about what men claim as factual. Wayfarers and Innkeepers tend to exaggerate stories in order to make impressions.

I told Master Ehmet that my aim was to reach a mummy's shrine to ask for a long life. I did not tell him that I was delivering the relic key although I mentioned that I was gifting the pugs to the nuns who worshipped the White Tara Guan Yin at this shrine. For a long moment, the soothsayer studied my face then he gave me a clay vessel of Yunnan tea to drink. When I finished drinking, he tapped my cup and studied the tea leaves. He asked me my age, I said 55, and he said, "You shall live at least another fifty-five years and you will see an exploding star in the White Tiger of the West constellation Xi Fang Bai Hu. For two years, you will watch the star brighten in the sky and then you will die. This much I can predict concerning your longevity. This is what I see it in your tea leaves and in the wrinkles on your face."

### *The Capital of the Khotan Kingdom*

Master Badhir Amu 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. I found Khotan to

be a thriving Buddhist center. The monks informed me that emissaries of Ashoka founded the city over one thousand years before. When I arrived, mudbrick walls fortified a city with many parks plush with Tamarisk and Mulberry trees and flower gardens; travelers, merchants, and Buddhist pilgrims crowded the streets, plazas, and shops. To avoid the searing midday sun, caravan travelers depart during the darkness of night.

In the markets, merchants were selling medicines, foods, brocaded silks, felt boots and hats, salt, rugs, and green and white jade collected from the Black and White Jade Rivers that flow past the city and originate in the Kunlun Mountains. One merchant and healer I met grinds his jade pieces 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 by Buddhist monks. They exalted the Chinese monk Faxian and discussed how he had passed through Khotan on his way to and from India nearly six hundred years before my time. They also talked about our patron at the Mogao Grottoes, Xuan Zang and his stay in Khotan during his epic journey. The Khotan monks were deeply concerned about the increasing number of Turkic Muslims populating the city. They feared the Caliphate would soon arrive and destroy their Buddhist temples and statues because it is well known that followers of the Prophet abhor idolatry or any religion other than their own. For this very reason, I myself had sealed the depository cave with the powers of the relic key before I departed on my journey. I had also heard about the rapidly expanding Caliphate and feared they would reach our grottoes during my absence and destroy our precious scrolls, paintings, and treasures.

*Caravan onto the High Plateau*

When summer arrived, I joined a caravan of ten Tibetan traders traveling to the kingdom of Guge on the high plateau. They rode magnificent horses decorated with turquoise beads and blue, red, and yellow tassels. They adorned their herd of seventeen yaks in the same manner. The yaks carried their tea, tapestries, and bags of jade that they planned to sell in Tsaparang, the capital of Guge. These men wore yak wool robes that they pulled 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 beads called malas and followed the ancient religion of Great Tibet that worships the spirits and gods of the high plateau and not the Buddhas.

These days, most caravan roads are well traveled, except for the road that my companions and I took from Khotan to Tsaparang. Only traders who can withstand the extreme altitude follow this road. To keep from getting sick in the mountains, 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 and seemed aware of their dutiful 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 Manjushri relic at my heart, recite mantras to Manjushri and Avalokitesvara, and dream about

Taoist Immortals and the 1000 Buddhas of this era. The mountains bring vivid dreams and at times I could not distinguish a vision from what was really happening. One night 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 on will give you the elixir of longevity so that you can bring serenity to this world.”

### *The Bandit Attack at Pangong Lake*

After many months of difficult travel, we arrived at a saltwater lake called Pangong. It appeared out of the hard sand and rock tundra like an enormous sapphire 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 ceremony. In goat skin flasks, they collected the lake’s salty water and established a ceremonial altar at a large boulder between two cone 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 their 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 their sacred fire and the flames sparkled blue and green and plumes of black smoke rose toward the two cone

mountains. Their songs grew louder and my body quivered from the sound they made. Then I grew concerned for Ganesh and Parvati and spotted them playing at the lakeshore.

A distant noise came from down the ravine between the cone mountains. At first, I assumed 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 began to echo like thunder.

My companions exclaimed that the spirits of the lake had arrived but I knew they were wrong. 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. They said that bandits lurked 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 innocent travelers.

I was correct to worry because maybe five-hundred men dressed in yellow and red brocaded robes, felt boots, and tall cone hats, suddenly appeared from down the ravine. Each was brandishing 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 my pugs. Then the demon bandits caught my friends, one by one, and slit each man's throat until all ten of my companions lay dead and bloody on the sandy earth.

I stood frozen by the lakeshore, holding my pugs in one arm and the Manjushri relic in my free hand. I called upon the bodhisattva and his protective warriors to descend from the sky and save me and my dogs. The demon bandits seemed to realize I was a holy man and they did

not approach me with their daggers. Instead, they proceeded to rummage through the merchandise carried on the caravan's yaks. I watched them slit the throats of the animals while laughing and screaming as if intoxicated from barley malt.

With both dogs and the Manjushri key tight in my grip, I called Manjushri by name and said, "Great illuminator of wisdom, emancipator of ignorance and evil, guardian and protector, save me from this devastation."

Lightning bolts began shooting from the relic I upheld, then the clouds above me parted and heavenly warriors appeared with Manjushri wielding his iron Prajna Khadga tipped with raging red flames. With his sword of wisdom and transcendence, he began touching 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 my dogs high above the sapphire lake and snowcaps. I do not 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 with all my comrades lying 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 that the pugs and I had survived. The Manjushri Key of 1000 Buddhas that Empress Wu had brought to our grottos, had pulled my dogs and I from the foray of fallen demons and out of the fires of the four hells.

### *The Road to Tsaparang*

*Danger lurks everywhere on the mountain road but many years ago I too was a bandit. I know what it means 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 upon the road offered me and the pugs whatever food he had to spare. Whenever 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, a kingdom that arose after the fall of Great Tibet. In the middle of a desolate landscape surrounded by snowcaps and in view of Mount Kailash, Tsaparang was a city on a fortified rock mound. The Guge emperor lived in a palace on top of this mound. Pilgrims on their way to Mount Kailash stopped in Tsaparang to pay homage to the emperor with coins of gold and they stayed in caves at the base of this fortress along with merchants, foot soldiers, and caravan traders. In the Tsaparang market at the bottom of this mound, traders bought and sold skins, wool, and sacks of salt. The citizens of Tsaparang drew their 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. Before long, I met a monk who had just been 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 began my trek on the road between Tholing and Shigatse which was well traveled by pilgrims and patrolling soldiers.

For many weeks, I walked barefoot and my feet became raw and sore. During the last few days to Shigatse, a large, healthy young monk named Chodha carried me on his back while I

carried his pack on mine. To avoid the intense sun and winds of mid-day, we walked by moonlight as Ganesh and Parvati happily pranced beside us. Chodha 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 I wanted the struggle to end. As Chodha carried me, my eyes carefully watched the road ahead and I kept wondering *When will we reach Shigatse?*

Finally, two hours before dawn, 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 I was thinking this, Chodha suddenly said, "Shigatse." The word resonated mystically in 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 my 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 whom I call Guan Yin. I asked her to grant me a long life and before I embarked on my return journey to the Mogao Grottoes, I finished this history and am leaving it with the abbess and nuns.

## Chapter 8: The Temple of Illuminated Long Life

*One Week before the Rickshaw Incident*

*December 1986*

*Sid Lees*



When I finally do sleep, I have an unusual and colorful dream that is probably like an acid trip. I see hummingbirds fluttering from the walls and growing larger and turning into abstract Aztec designs. When I awake, the brilliant Tibetan sun is high in the morning sky and penetrating my room, even with curtains closed. I am feeling slightly congested from all the dust on road trip from Chengdu.

After a quick 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 who was born in Tibet during the 1970's but her parents are Chinese. I dare to ask her if she thinks the Tibetans deserve their own country and she says, "What about the Chinese who have made their home in Tibet? Or the South Africans, Russians, and Latvians who work here? Should the Chinese pull out when we are 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, shrines, 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 a crane. It appears as if these debaters are about to fight but they are 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 wrote commentaries and treatises that investigated the nature of reality, rather like quantum physics. Buddha himself told his disciples not to accept his teachings on mere faith but to question with a reasoning mind what makes sense. It's a philosophy I have always appreciated. *So why in the hell* I ask myself *did I ever fall so hard for Maureen?* Something else must be going on in the nature of my reality and I am 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, ornately decorated pillars, and thangkas on the walls. Over two hundred monks in red robes are sitting in lotus postures and chanting in deep voices that resonate in mesmerizing unison. They are holding prayer beads and facing a golden Buddha at the altar. The higher lamas in their 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 who is 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 would get in trouble if he took 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 that I take a catnap for a few hours before the night's banquet in my honor. "Catnapping is a Chinese tradition," she tells me and adds that she catnaps for about an hour each day.

I agree to her suggestion and claim to be tired, but as soon as she leaves me at the door to my room, I decide to seize the opportunity to slip away.

I place important 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, but arranges to meet me few blocks from the hotel. He seems to understand the need for discretion even though I tell him I have arranged for this trip with Jamyang and her cadres.

On the way to Shigatse, Zhang skillfully navigates the van on curving, narrow, concrete and muddy roads, often barely missing ancient tractors hauling dozens of people in wagons 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 cannot help but feel that each stone and tree we pass is somehow sacred to these people living in the world's highest altitude.

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 alit by glowing lamps and the Full Moon. Some of the buildings have roof walkways that appear like the

torrent of a castle. 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 had fled to India and other parts of the world where they established new monasteries. I am curious to learn why Khenpo Trizin didn't leave with the other lamas.

Zhang pulls the van onto a flagstone plaza that is 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 who I am, 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 then introduces himself as Khenpo Trizin, the head lama who requested this visit. He is 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 am used to feeling.

“And you must call me Trizin, brother Sid.”

I suddenly feel deeply connected to this monk and my mind contemplates the notion that we shared past lives. If nothing else, our present lives are enjoined through this meeting and the assignment he is 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 do not practice Dharma and if you cling to your own interests, then you will never awaken your mind, and if you hold a point of view, then you do not have the correct position.’ This is also a teaching of the great Tibetan 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 am intrigued, brother Trizin. Please tell me more, if you can. 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. I believe the books of Dunhuang are very similar to the ones in our secret library hidden behind a wall. Like the books found 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 the scrolls come from Nalanda and date to 1073 when our monastery started as one repository building. Since then, it has grown to over 100 buildings although many were destroyed by the Red Guards.”

“Can you show me this library vault?” I ask. “I would 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 do not want the Chinese to learn about its existence. We cannot trust them. Only ten years have passed since the Red Guards tried to eradicate our way of life.”

“I cannot begin to tell you, brother Trizin, how much I admire your dedication in the face of such devastation.”

The Khenpo says, “You see, brother Sid, the Buddhists of Tibet, China, and Mongolia are historically connected, despite what the Chinese are currently embracing. Now China conquers us, but during the Tang dynasty, Tibet conquered China, and two centuries after the founding of our monastery, Kublai Khan also conquered China. Like his grandfather Genghis Khan, Kublai was a practitioner of Vajrayana Buddhism. That 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 smiles and touches my hand resting on the tea table. “What is your practice? Brother Sid. Are you a follower of a particular Mahayana school? Or one of our Vajrayana traditions?”

I run my hands along the silk khata at my chest and say, “To be honest, Khenpo, I am only a scholar of Buddhism. I find that all Buddhist paths are rich and rewarding. I read the sutras, the tantras, and am an expert on Buddhist relics, but I am not much of a spiritual practitioner. I rarely chant or meditate. However, I must admit I felt a spiritual connection to you when I entered your room. I immediately sensed that 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 forms of medicine. Not one pill cures all diseases. This is the parable of the Lotus Sutra. The wealthy man had to use necessary action to save his sons from his burning mansion and he promised them different gifts to lure them to safety. This is the Buddha’s dharma. There are many paths to Buddhahood, many Medicine Buddhas.”

“Well put, brother Trizin,” I say and 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 is no need to be ordained. We believe that the nature of each human is to become a Buddha. 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 am a novice and he is my guru master. I feel empowered in the presence of a spiritual master. He lifts me far above all worldly concerns and thoughts. And I cannot 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 will become a practitioner who chants mantras and meditates on mandalas. I namaste and say, "I am enthralled to be in the forbidden Himalayas with a Master Lama."

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

I explain how I slipped away from my monitor. "Who knows what Jamyang will do when she discovers I am gone? She may call in the Red Guards." I regret my quip as soon as I make it. It is a careless, insensitive joke and I am embarrassed. But Trizin grins, as if silently amused. "From reading the history by Fa Wong," I then add, "I wonder if the relic really has supernatural powers. I am not one to believe in magic but it was a wonderful history."

The Khenpo sips his tea and says, "No one has used the relic for its powers since the monk Fa Wong left it at the Temple of Illuminated Long Life. The nuns who received it locked it away 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 do believe it is true.”

“Is the relic with you?”

“No, brother Sid,” the Khenpo says. “We must drive into the mountains on the road to Lhasa, not far from our monastery. The abbess at the temple keeps the Manjushri Key of 1000 Buddhas in the mummy’s shrine. The nuns have always honored the White Tara Buddha of Long Life. 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 are nearly helpless under the current occupation. What do you say, brother Sid? Shall we go retrieve the Manjushri key of 1000 Buddhas?”

It is just before dawn when a driver in a Cherokee Jeep takes Trizin and I about sixty miles deep into the mountains. When we arrive at the convent the early 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. It 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 will 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 Master Trizin and I with namastes; they have been expecting my arrival to retrieve their most precious relic.

Trizin introduces me to a nun in her sixties as the convent's abbess. Her head is shaved and she wears a rusty red jacket over her orange robes. “She speaks very little English,” the Khenpo tells me. “Her name is Opane 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, 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 tells me.

At the end of the courtyard, the abbess escorts us into a large hall where about thirty nuns are sitting before wood framed easels and painting thangkas. Trizin and I walk among them to view the many colorful depictions of Shakyamuni, famous lamas, Manjushri, Amitabha, the Medicine Buddha, Tara, Avalokitesvara, and the Wheel of Life Dharmachakra. Now that I am 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 meditate by visualization so we can become as calm as a pool of crystal-clear water unagitated by outside atmospheric forces.”

The abbess says something in Tibetan, a colorful language that I have studied and listened to innumerable times. It has tonal characteristics that make me think of the rabbits hopping around the high plateau. I am not fluent in outlying dialects and Trizin translates. “She says that the thangkas are our guides and protectors. They bring health and clarity to our minds.”

### *The Shrine House*

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 seem to bother the abbess or Trizin but I am feeling lightheaded as I struggle up the slope for about half an hour until we reach a small structure built into the cliffs like the entry into a mineshaft.

“This is the Shrine House,” Trizin says. “Now we take you to 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. Both are draped with white khatas and mala beads. 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 is female or male even though Trizin assures me it is 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 have seen in Japan and the pictures of the 2000-year-old Chinese mummy known as Lady Dai of Changsha. The Chinese had discovered the Han dynasty noblewoman during the Cultural Revolution but only recently has she been featured in archaeological magazines. I also recall articles about 2000-year-old Caucasian mummies found in the Taklamakan Desert. To determine this mummy’s sex, age, and year

of death would take scientific study which I am sure the nuns would never allow. “Was it 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 that they found. In reaction, 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 she places the Manjushri sword snugly inside. She zips up the pouch and hands it to me then namastes.

As I take the red pouch the abbess says, “All the Buddhas and deities surround the flaming sword of Manjushri.”

Trizin smiles and adds, “Please keep it safe until you give it to our spiritual leader, and 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 Dalai Lama. Then I remove an envelope with one thousand dollars. I bow and give it to the abbess. She namastes back. I also give Trizin an envelope with my donation for his monastery.

As we leave the shrine, I feel even more humbled than before. It seems Avalokitesvara touches me with his brilliant light and grants me the task of enlightening the world. It is a daunting endeavor, as if I am carrying the atomic codes to annihilation. The fate of the world seems to rest in my money pouch and I cannot let humanity down by failing in my mission.

## Chapter 9: Day of the Palace Robbery

*Nearly Fifteen Years after the Rickshaw Incident*

*June 1, 2001*

*Gopan Subba*

On the day of the royal party, Aftab drops me off at the south gate of the palace. I approach the guards who wear green uniforms and red berets. I am wearing my finest suit and am carrying an expensive jewel chest with the Manjushri statue inside, according to Aftab's instructions.

The guards ask to look inside the chest. I show them the statue and say, "It is a gift for the queen." They check out 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 am betraying my beloved Nepal. I have nothing against the monarchy. I am not political like my son. I am 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 inherited the throne and tried to modernize Nepal as a democracy but the People's Movement of 1990 forced Birendra to form an elected government. Then, the year before I

opened Everest Legendary, the Maoists rose to power and 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 inside the chest and he escorts me to a small chamber with plush chairs at a table with a tea set. The guard offers me tea then instructs me to wait until two hours after sunset. I surmise he is one of the Maoist infiltrators but I am too nervous to ask any questions and I certainly do not want to affiliate with this political cause, in any fashion. I am only concerned about Everest Legendary and 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 the 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 the sightseers. At the room's large wooden doors, I touch the key to the lock and they open. 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 penetrates the atmosphere like a light show but I know this is only a mental illusion. It is dark in the room except for the cabinet lights. The glass cases at Everest Legendary are minuscule in comparison. I can only imagine how enchanted 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 feel like I am stealing the treasures of Vishnu and his queens 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 up and continue with this elaborate heist foisted upon me by my son. All the while I am thinking *dear Vishnu, please bring me success, dear Manjushri, Kali, Shiva, give me the queen's jewelry so that I can restore prosperity to Everest Legendary and my family.*

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

Suddenly, the sound of distant gunfire shakes me to the core. At first, I rationalize that the Crown Prince is on the palace grounds shooting birds as I have heard he is prone to do. Maybe he is showing off at his royal get together. Then the gun shots grow louder and I am certain my presence has somehow alerted the 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 am 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 and the Manjushri statue.

Outside the large wooden doors, I see no one around but again a gun is rapidly firing. Chilled with fright, I rush from the palace and jump into the first car I see, a royal Rolls Royce parked by the vestibule doors. No one is around and 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 starts asking me questions but I hold up the key and suggest that I am 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 and probably thinking I am 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. Because I have a bad feeling about the night's events, about my fumbled robbery, I don't want even a lowly rickshaw man to remember me or Everest Legendary. After about 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.

That morning I am up early. I hadn't slept during the night because of worry 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. Arya Bimal, 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 have only just left my home and had no time for TV or the radio. I am in a hurry this morning, Mr. Bimal, 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.”

Suddenly, the gunfire I heard at the palace begins ricocheting in my head and I cannot fathom what Bimal 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 am driving along the early morning streets, my car radio confirms the tragic, unbelievable news of the royal massacre, repeatedly. 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 is now the king.

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

In respect for the royal family, my sons and I shave our heads like all Nepali men except perhaps the Maoists hiding in the 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 that 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 that the royal curse has come to fruition and that the monarchy will soon collapse.

From every corner of the kingdom theories about the massacre resonate. First, the palace claims that Dipendra's guns accidentally 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 the drugs he ingests and he thought he was safari hunting when he executed everyone. He thought he was seeing vicious tigers and Yetis.

Some people claim that India and even the CIA had roles in the massacre because both countries have been wanting 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 royal 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 then I only miss the Manjushri statue that used to be the centerpiece of my temple room. Often, I am arguing with my sons about the different theories for the royal massacre but then I grow angry with Aftab who placed me at the palace when this horror unfolded. Hari doesn't even know I was at the palace. When I am alone with Aftab, I don't tell him my own theory, that I caused the massacre because I was 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 again use my key in thievery. I am cursed. Chora. Probably by your birth. And by your political affiliations. I believe your Maoists played a part in the massacre.”

“It’s Birendra’s own fault if the Maoists had anything to do with it,” Aftab brazenly insists. “Honestly Ba, 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 is secretly meeting with his Maoist comrades.

One afternoon, about a week after the tragedy, I am sitting in the back office debating with Aftab and Hari about their theories concerning what really happened that fateful night, when the shop bell rings and I hear a great commotion. Five royal guards in blue uniforms and maroon berets enter my shop 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. It is the one I took to the palace with the ornate chest and Manjushri statue. I wrote on the back of it, “Manjushri, a gift for Queen Aishwarya.” Until now, I hadn’t realized that I dropped it and my heart starts racing in disbelief.

“Yes,” I say, while feeling my brow and palms sweat. There’s nothing else I can say. “I am Gopan Meelan Subba, owner of Everest Legendary.”

The guards then 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 have ever given in my life. Not even Kali could gaze more fiercely upon my firstborn son.

## Chapter 10: Back to Kathmandu

### *One day before the Rickshaw Incident*

*December 6, 1986*

*Sid Lees*

I have a quick meal of tea and tsampa then the nuns carefully hide me and my pack under straw in the back of the “WWII GMC” utility truck now 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 must have felt when he and his fellow lamas escaped over the mountains to freedom from oppression.

After a few hours on the bumpy road, in the cold of morning, the truck begins to reek of straw dust, paint, turpentine, and glues that, along with the high altitude, are making my head spin. I am cramped, claustrophobic, and unable to see anything. I cannot 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 always 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 cannot. Then I start regretting that I won't be able to return to this wonderfully spiritual country. Once I escape from occupied Tibet, I will be out for good. I am sure my monitor Jamyang has already reported my absence to her cadre and she is probably in big trouble. Oh well. To calm my nerves, I visualize Tara with her hand gesture of fearlessness and I chant *Om Tare Tuttare Ture Saha* and 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.

After a few hours Jampo finally stops along the roadside and opens the back canvas. "Master Lees," he yells. When I peer from my hidey-hole, he tells me I can get out and stretch my legs, urinate or do whatever else I need to 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 cannot 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 am able to see during this harrowing journey to Nepal.

While Jampo smokes beside me, he says that we are only a few miles from Nyalam. "Soon we cross the Friendship Bridge into Nepal, Master Lees."

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 truck bed, for a brief moment. Then I am back hiding in the cargo bed and constantly checking my watch to see if two hours have passed.

After two and a half hours 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 am wondering if Jampo stopped to talk to the Chinese or purchase some gas but I can only keep still and wait.

Then, above the truck's rumblings I hear a commotion of voices. The smell of exhaust is overwhelming me 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 is happening. Obviously, he cannot. Voices continue to resonate outside but I hear no other traffic or idling vehicles.

As calmly as I can, I wait, drink sparingly from my bottle of water, and keep looking at my watch but nothing happens except for the sound of men calling out commands or directions. Finally, after two hours I can no longer bear my situation and I get up and open the canvas covering enough to peer out.

Behind Jampo's truck I am astonished to see a line of buses, vans, trucks, and cars unable to move. It is 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

suspicious Chinese around and in fact, no one is looking my way or paying any attention to Jampo's truck. It is 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 with protection 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 is holding everything up and what I see astounds me. Because no one seems to care about my presence, I touch the relic key and ask the Bodhisattva to make me unnoticeable and I jump into the passenger seat of Jampo's truck. Then I help myself to a cup of tea and watch the drama unfold.

Three trucks ahead of me is an old blue utility truck upon a cargo platform outside a concrete building. Its cargo bed is teeming 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 contracted Russian or Romanian who was driving back to Nepal because European and American tourists are restricted to tour groups. Fortunately, I don't see any Chinese around, not even the police.

I watch the drama for a while and nothing budes. 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 but then they realize that the loaded truck is too wide and 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 puzzling senseless riddle intended to bump me into enlightenment.* No, my mind tells me, this was 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 is astonished to find me in the passenger seat but I reassure him that I am safe. "I don't see any Chinese around and I have the power of Manjushri's protection."

Jampo gives me a questioning look; he is obviously unaware of the relic key. My driver only knows that he is 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 me 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 is better we cross the Friendship Bridge in darkness when not so many are making the crossing."

Later that evening, Jampo parks the truck 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 am 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 cannot get enough of them. They are delicious and I don't even care what kind of meat was used to make them.

In the darkness, a truck passes and I grow concerned about my escape from Tibet with the relic. Jampo notices and says, “Now you must hide again and be extra quiet until we cross the Friendship Bridge.”

Reluctantly, I clamber back into my hidey-hole, hoping this will be the last time. Jampo takes off and we soon reach the high mountain town Zhang Mu. From where I lie hidden, I can feel 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 are at the Friendship Bridge. I listen to the Chinese border guards asking Jampo questions and presume he is showing them his permits and offering them commissions.

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. But I don’t panic. Instead, I deeply inhale the thin air, touch the Manjushri key and make a mental prayer to Vajrapani, Sarasvati, and Ganesh. *See me past this obstacle and carry me unimpeded across this bridge.*

Suddenly, I hear the Chinese argue with Jampo. I cannot tell what they are saying but my heart drops. Then, above the wind gusts and raging river, I hear footsteps and 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 that 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.”

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

“Hao, hao,” the guard says and is about to close the back panel when my bowels expel a loud burst of air. I am instantly relieved of the pressure but know I am now in big trouble.

*What’s that? Who’s there?* I hear the guard exclaim 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 will detain me? Most certainly they would confiscate the relic despite Trizin’s assurance that the key cannot be stolen or lost. It can only be given. Under no circumstances would I ever freely hand over the relic to my captors. Besides, I suddenly feel under the protection of all the Buddhas of all the Buddha worlds and epochs. They will not let me fail in my mission.

While the Chinese guards are wildly yelling, 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, perhaps like a blind person, every nuance of sound is exaggerated in my ears.

*A pop, pop, pop* suddenly explodes and I imagine the guards are firing shots. But it is 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 are in Kodari and the Chinese can do nothing about it.

The Nepali customs presents no problem because I already have a multi-transit five-year visa for business purposes. In less than half an hour, I am sitting in the front passenger's seat of Jampo's truck and traveling down the Araniko Highway to Kathmandu. It is wonderful to talk freely with Jampo without worrying about getting caught. But I am concerned that I have caused him to lose his career of transporting thangkas out of Tibet to Nepal.

"I know I probably won't be allowed back into China or Tibet," I say. "Unless Tibet becomes independent. I am 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 and then go back 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 are reluctant to report border incidents. They will think a lama was escaping to India and they don't like the publicity."

"Oh?" I say, feeling quite relieved and certain that Manjushri has carried me into Nepal without my causing someone else harm and creating bad karma. I have made it to Nepal intact with the Buddhist relic firmly concealed inside my money belt.

*December 7, 1986*

*The Day of the Rickshaw Incident*

*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 and 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, she opens the door, we fall into each other's arms, and embrace for a long while. The apricot scent of her luscious hair drives me crazy. It is like I have arrived home after a lengthy tour in the Vietnam War, or like I have 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 but she is too wrapped up with complaints about Agatha Weatherby. "She was a rude old British Bitch," she 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 have 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. Tomorrow we will go to Durbar Square and the Monkey Temple . . ."

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

“What?” Maureen asks, puzzled. She wasn’t expecting this and now that I am safely out of China with the relic, I need to tell her the real reason for my journey to Tibet.

“Listen, darling, it’ll be a quick two-day trip. Then I will come back and 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 say and 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 anything 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 have looked at the relic since it lay on the altar before the white Tara mummy inside the shrine house. And although I had 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 tomorrow night. 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 have been through the most agitating 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 am 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 and says, “That’s an incredible story, darling Sid. But you can 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 want to make you happy, but I am in a hurry to deliver the relic,” I say, feeling in a bind. I’m afraid that if I don’t make Maureen happy, she’ll start complaining. “Okay. I’ll take you to the Thangka House this morning. But first, I must arrange for our flight to India.”

“I don’t want to go,” she says.

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

“Because Jim said he was calling me tomorrow and I want to tell him you are in India. I want to prove to him that we aren’t always chumming around together. He never needs to know about us. After I am divorced, it won’t matter. He can believe we just got together, nonchalantly.”

“Of course, we have already discussed this. Upsetting Jim is the last thing I want to do. I am hoping he’ll never know the truth about our betraying him.”

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

“Why?”

“Because he asked me 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 am your photographer and assistant. While in Hong Kong, I had phoned him daily. He knew you and I were apart, that you were in China. But I don’t know darling. He didn’t sound right. I am afraid he might be 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 will understand that we are not always together. I really do care about his feelings and our betrayal would kill him. He trusts us both implicitly.”

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

I have said this same thing, many times before but now I am not so sure about my relationship with Maureen. While in China and Tibet, I rarely thought about her. I was simply too preoccupied with my quest. Now she tells me she has missed me and I tell her the same but in truth, I don’t think I missed her at all. Except, I am happy my love life is blossoming again after a month of living like a celibate monk.

*Durbar Square*



We sleep for about an hour when Maureen wakes up eager to buy souvenirs for Jim and her friends. “It’s 8 o’clock,” she says. “Let’s get started. I have plenty of film for pictures.” She practically drags me into the lobby where I phone the airport and arrange for my flight to India for 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 in my backpack. We then grab a tuk to Durbar Square to look for Tibetan bells and religious statues.

The square is crowded with tourists, Hindu and Buddhist devotees, and merchants selling their wares on blankets spread upon 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 am 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 am trying to catch my wind from a night without much rest. “At least breathing is easier than in Tibet,” I finally say. “Despite the bad air quality, we are 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 to the interloper. They are a common feature of the city and I find that ignoring them 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 dog 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 are 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 is taking pictures of me before the temple. "These guys persist until I weaken. Why don't we head back to the hotel?" I add in exasperation.

But Maureen is 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 say when I catch up with Maureen who is on her way to the Hanuman statue on a pilaster under a red parasol. A crowd of Hindus are doing puja before him.

"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 tout 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 get ready for tonight?”

“But darling,” she sets aside her Nikon SRL and pays full attention to me. “You are leaving me tonight and we just got back together. Let’s take a rickshaw to the Monkey Temple. I can take lots of photos of us on the rickshaw. Come on lover,” she pulls at my hand. “It will 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 have no time to run back to the hotel.”

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

## Chapter 11: Under House Arrest

### *Fifteen Years after the Rickshaw Incident*

*June – November 2001*

*Gopan Subba*

At the Interpol section of police headquarters, 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 will go 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,” I say, feeling my throat buckle with dryness in the stuffy room. But I am too intimidated to ask for water. I clear my throat while aching for a cigarette to calm my nerves. “I am just a simple businessman,” I say. “How could I manage to open the case without breaking the glass? I went home after I left my gift. Ask my wife,” I tell the constable, certain that Geeta will confirm whatever I say. “I don’t know how my statue got inside the cabinet.”

“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 don’t want to expose the relic so I ask for a solicitor.

“No need,” the constable says. “For now, you are free to return home where you will remain until further notice from me. We are 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 intend to remain until their replacement arrives.

Later that evening, my family and I are sitting in the TV room watching a local drama which doesn’t interest me. I don’t want to do anything but quietly sit and think over my helpless situation. Aftab has nothing to say because he already knows everything. But Hari, Geeta, and Aama ask me endless questions about what is going on. I try to tell them as little as possible. “It’s a big misunderstanding,” I say. “The entire country has been thrown into chaos.” As usual,

they seem to 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 go nowhere, not even to my shop. No one can visit me and the police confiscate my home computer and cell phone and they place a listening device on my house phone. Even my wife and Aama, and especially my sons, must tell the officers where they are going and why.

My sons are running Everest Legendary but I know it will soon falter because we aren't making a profit and I can't use the Prajna Khadga to bring in funds. I am 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, my dear Aama takes her last breath and expires on a rooftop chair while she is napping in the cool morning air. In her hands are trimmings from her sacred basil plant.

I am beside myself now. I cannot even attend to 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 force myself to 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 have just provided me with a way out of my dilemma. Somehow, I know Professor Sidney Lees will get me out of Nepal and the calamity engulfing me. I only need to contact him and explain my situation. He will understand and sympathize with me because the whole world knows about the massacre and that our little kingdom has been plunged into turmoil. And he will certainly help me if I tell him I will return the relic key he lost during the rickshaw mishap that occurred over fifteen years before.

I quickly go to my home office and compose a letter. In it, I remind Mr. Lees 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 provided Mr. Lees with the URL to my website [everestlegendary.com](http://everestlegendary.com) so he can view the statues and confirm my credentials. I want him to know that I am somebody now, a man of means, not a lowly rickshaw driver. I also brag about my sons and write, "They are well-educated men and have taught me to use the computer and to read and write in English. Together, we have made Everest Legendary prosper."

With this being said, I then explain my situation. "You see, Mr. Lees, I am currently under house arrest because of the terrible misfortune that has befallen Nepal. I am begging 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? I am but a simple man who has only tried to be enterprising in business, for the sake of my family." I end the letter promising to return the Prajna Khadga in exchange for his help. "I have always presumed that you gave me the relic as payment for the destruction of my

rickshaw, those many years ago.” I add this because 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 and I dread the thought that he is 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 that she is simply writing to her friend in America. She sends it priority first class, using what little funds I have stashed in the pot beneath my altar. She doesn’t question me about the letter, she cannot read English anyway, but I tell her it is to a man who can help me and my family out of our current situation.

“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 by 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 residence every few days to ask me more questions.

Just when I think I’ve convinced the inspector of my innocence, a superintendent named Mr. Niraj Asha Shahi arrives at my house. 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 has learned new information and that the government is clamping down on Maoists. “We are

concerned they have infiltrated the palace and played a role in the royal massacre on the night of June 1<sup>st</sup>.”

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

Shahi helps himself to a cigarette from a wood box on the coffee table. One of his officers lights it and Shahi takes a drag then says to me, “Mr. Subba, we have found pamphlets in your shop connecting you to Mr. Shyam Bhandari and his escape from Central Jail.”

“No! That cannot be true,” I protest, leaning forward while wondering if they found something Aftab had left in the back office. “This is preposterous. Someone planted the brochure,” I insist, but then realize that this must be Aftab’s doing, but I cannot betray my son and 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 is 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 found no evidence against them. But we have all the computers from your shop.”

“You will find nothing on our computers,” I say with confidence because I know Aftab kept his political views off his business computer. At least that is what he has always claimed. Now I question why a pamphlet was in the shop and reason it was planted to trap me. “Besides,”



I say, “Everest Legendary is up for sale. I cannot sustain the business while I am on house arrest. My world is falling apart, Superintendent Shahi, Sir. Have some compassion. I am just a simple man trying to provide a better life for my family. I am 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 is out the door. “Understand. You are still under house arrest.”

The very next day something miraculous occurs. Geeta arrives in my puja room where I am at the altar. She eagerly hands me a letter, post marked from Colombo, Sri Lanka and addressed to Geeta care of my neighbor Mr. Arya Bimal, as I instructed Mr. Lees to do. The police oversee the mail that arrives at my house, especially if it is addressed to me and concerns Everest Legendary.

Mr. Sid Lees writes, *“Dear Mr. Subba, Stanford forwarded your letters to me, which I received just 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 have been teaching Buddhist culture and history to both local and foreign students, laymen, and members of the sangha.”*

*“I remember you very well because I had lost the Prajna Khadga relic that day and I was duty-bound to deliver it to the Dalai Lama. I did feel badly about your loss and I’ve always regretted that my companion had so rudely refused to give you the fare you had asked for. In this way, I understand how you might assume that I gave you the pouch of money with the key. Perhaps it was a kind of karmic act that you received the key from me. In truth, Mr. Subba, I*

*failed in my mission to deliver it 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.”*

*“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 am going to schedule a flight to Kathmandu for the end of October. Sincerely, Sid Lees.”*

When I set the letter aside, after reading it four or five times, I take 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 am no longer on house arrest, even though I am. But now I have a way out of the entanglement I have 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 cannot, I have Geeta go to the neighbor’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 will simply say “To do puja before Kala Bhairava.” Hordes of American tourists wander about Durbar Square and if the police should follow Geeta, Sid Lees will merely appear as an elderly tourist who is asking Geeta about the shrine and temples.

On the afternoon of the meeting, Geeta returns home and greets me on the roof where I am 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 is very kind and quite handsome for an old gentleman. Tall, thin, and with a very 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 know you own a turquoise Mahindra. I suggested he could use 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, like they are yours.”

“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 am not on house arrest,” she says, hesitates a moment, then adds, “and I don’t want to go with you. Hari and Aftab will take care of me. They have already agreed to this and they don’t want to go with you either. We are happy in Kathmandu and will survive on our own. I don’t understand what mischief you have 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 I 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 and I had cared for her as best as 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 who is really the creator of all this trouble I am in and I really don’t want to start a new life with him in my presence.

*Ghatasthapana, October 17, 2001*

At the Kala Bhairava shrine, Sid Lees meets with Geeta one more time to finalize his plan. He tells my wife that he will 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 have sent Geeta away. I simply don’t want her around to listen to what I have to say to my boys. “And you will do so without my help or the use of any magic key. However, because I have helped you both become educated businessmen, I know you will succeed.” I then look at Aftab who sits on the sofa, and I emphasize, “As long as you keep away from politics and Maoist comrades of ill repute!”

My planned 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 this day, which is 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 the pocket of my slacks. I've decided not to mention it to Mr. Lees. We are 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 and I imagine 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 have provided my family.

After forty minutes or so, Mr. Lees says, "We are 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 are driving straight to Patna, India." Mr. Lees says as he hands me a bottle of water. "You must be thirsty." His kind eyes glance at me. He is 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 am on my way to a new life, away from all that I have ever known. How can I possibly part with this magic key which has elevated my status in this world? I will need its powers when I reach this new land. No!* I practically yell in my head *my situation is so utterly precarious; I cannot surrender my key!* "What's in Patna?" I ask, to distract Mr. Lees from asking about the key, at least for now. I look outside the window and see that we are well on our way south to the border with India.

“Why, Mr. Subba, I would say that 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 again glances at me. I nod and smile while thinking *this man is indeed an esteemed professor filled with knowledge he loves to share.*

As Mr. Lees skillfully drives in the dark on the mountainous, two-lane highway named after Birendra’s grandfather, he talks about Patna and the history of Buddhism and he has my full attention. “Were you aware that Shakyamuni attained enlightenment near Patna?” he asks as a freight truck passes us on its way to Kathmandu.

“Yes, Mr. Lees,” I say. “Under the Bodhi tree. In fact, after I became a Buddhist, I made a pilgrimage to Lumbini and Boudhanath Stupa. Do you think we can we go to Bodh Gaya?”

“No, I’m sorry. Wish we could but we will be rushing off to the airport as soon as we reach Patna.” Mr. Lees flashes his headlights at a passing van, letting the driver know he has cleared our Toyota. He then 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. It explained that 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 say as I gaze out the passenger window at the narrow berm.

“Yes, Gopan. Shakyamuni teaches us not to live by extremes and to control harmful emotions like anger, hatred, and greed. He teaches us how to develop clarity of mind by eliminating conventions that cause delusion and ignorance.”

“Yes, yes,” I say. “Very true, Mr. Lees.” I cannot call him Sid and I am glad he doesn’t ask me to. I simply respect him too much for such informality.

“Throughout Bihar and northern India,” Mr. Lees continues, “Buddha spoke about the Four Noble Truths. 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 reach nirvana. 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 and the only outcome was to be reborn and reborn into the same dreadful station of life.”

“But most Buddhists believe that by performing good deeds they accumulate good karma and are reborn into a better life or a better world.”

“Yes, Mr. Lees. I completely agree with all that you say. I am a follower of 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 will be able to share your knowledge of these many icons of Nepal. Gopan, are you familiar with the history of India?”

“To a degree. I mostly know about Nepal’s royal history up to the terrible, terrible massacre.”

“Two centuries after Shakyamuni’s passing, Ashoka became king and embraced Buddhism. From Pataliputra, he sent envoys to teach the dharma in the nine edges of his empire, and he 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.

“Now here’s an important story for you to know now that you will be living in Sri Lanka. Two of Ashoka’s children brought Buddhism to Sri Lanka. His favorite son Mahinda converted the Sri Lankan king to Buddhism. The king’s sister-in-law 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 Pataliputra to bring Ashoka’s daughter to Sri Lanka and ordain the queen and 500 women. Sanghamitta brought with her twelve other nuns to help perform the ordinations and a sapling of the Bodhi tree. After 23 centuries, this tree still thrives at the temple in Anuradhapura.”

“I hope to see such a tree,” I say, leaning against the door, growing 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 ask and think about Princess Shruti who was killed 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 will never share with Mr. Lees, no matter how much I admire him for his compassionate nature. I cannot tell him about my use of the Prajna Khadga, his sacred relic.

“Sanghamitta ordained 1000 women,” Mr. Lees continues, awakening me from my troubled thoughts. “She never returned to Pataliputra 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 cannot 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 is 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 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 is 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,” I say with my eyes still closed; I take a deep breath and exhale. I wish for a cigarette but I know Mr. Lees is not a smoker. “You are my Bodhisattva,” I add. “And I owe you my life. Thank-you.”

Mr. Lees says nothing in response and seems to understand that I am exhausted. In less than a moment, I fall into a dreamless sleep that lasts until we arrive in Motihari, India. Mr. Lees already has a visa for India and as a Nepali citizen, 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 turquoise Mahindra

We arrive in New Delhi early in the morning. This is my first visit to the bustling capital of India but my sons have flown here 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. As I relax in my middle seat, 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," he tells me. "Soon you too will understand Pali and Sinhalese. After we establish your residency, you can remain in Sri Lanka for a year. Then it is simply a matter of renewal. I have already contacted the ministry of higher education and have written letters 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 am sure you will fascinate the students who are mostly followers of the Theravada tradition."

"Is that your tradition, Mr. Lees?" I ask.

"Yes and no. No, because I am an academic Buddhist interested in all Buddhist traditions and the history of Buddhism in general. But yes, Gopan, because these days my focus is on the Pali traditions which you will 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 am glad because I do not want to have a conversation about Mahayana bodhisattvas that will involve his asking me about the Manjushri key.

I lean back and doze off for perhaps an hour. As soon as I wake up, Mr. Lees sets aside his papers and directly asks me about the Manjushri relic. “Let me see it now. I would like to put it safely in my money pouch.”

Cramped in the middle seat, I am feeling half asleep then suddenly plunged into reality. Flustered, I awkwardly say, “Yes. The relic Prajna Khadga of Manjushri. Well, Mr. Lees, I didn’t mention it during our escape from Kathmandu because it had been too wild of a time. But I have been meaning to tell you this . . . By the way,” I fumble to change the subject, even though I know I cannot. “What happened to that lady you were with all those years ago? I thought she was your wife. She was a bit of a chattering monkey.”

Mr. Lees pleasantly chuckles. “Her name was Maureen,” he says. “By the time we returned to the U. S., I had 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 left me and returned to him. As for me, I focused on my work at the university and swore to remain a bachelor for the rest of my life.”

“A splendid idea!” I laugh and add, “Mr. Lees, I am 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, smiles, and looks at me. “As I said in the letter, I did feel badly about Maureen’s behavior toward you. That is why, long ago when we had that rickshaw accident, I believed the key gave itself to you. That I did not 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 now. The relic.”

“To be honest, Mr. Lees. I am 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 is not a man who becomes angry, like a practicing Buddhist. He is 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 is passed on. It is given. This is what a Tibetan Master 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 dearly departed mother’s spirit, I cannot 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 will have to return to Kathmandu and fetch it from her,” Mr. Lees persists.

“I’ll get it back, Mr. Lees. I promise. I am forever indebted to you for all that you are doing for me,” I feebly say.

Mr. Lees smiles, leans back, picks up his document, and continues reading 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 is snoring. I have 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 will come off as 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 will use the key only for a short while and only for good things. After I prosper on my own, then I will return it to Sid Lees. That cannot 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 are watching me and offering their guidance and protection or, perhaps more likely, they are evaluating my karmic acts like a classroom filled with clever and curious students.

## Chapter 12: At the Buddhist Pali University

*November 2001 – June 2002*

*Gopan Subba*

When Mr. Lees and I arrive at the Bandaranaike International Airport outside Colombo, it is a Full Moon and a 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 accosts me as we step outside the airport doors. It is so unlike the cool mountain air of Kathmandu and I quickly start sweating. Mr. Lees hands me a kerchief bandana and I wipe my brow. He seems unbothered by the tropical climate, rather like someone acclimatized to the high altitudes of the Himalayas. Already I am missing the mountains but not

my family. They betrayed me and I am not sure how I feel about any of them, except Hari. He has 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 Colombo 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 where young male students are rushing to their 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 tells me that I will be sleeping on the couch in his flat for the time being. I am 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 to me and now he seems like my dearest and oldest friend.

The flat is quite modest, especially compared to the two-story house I have just abandoned to my family. It has only one bedroom, one bath, a tiny kitchen, and the sparsely furnished front room where I am 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 seems to be using 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.

“They are antiques from a temple in Thailand,” he says as I set my satchel beside the sofa.

“Who are they?” I ask.

“Buddha’s chief disciples. Sariputta stands on the right and Moggallana is on the left. You might not recognize them because on Mahayana altars the Buddha usually sits between his disciples Ananda and Mahakasyapa.”

“I am 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 is all so unfamiliar, as if Buddhism is now a foreign religion. Please tell me more about Buddha’s disciples.”

“In the Pali traditions, Sariputta is highly regarded. He was instrumental in organizing the Buddha’s teachings and explaining 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 ask while I closely examining the standing Sariputta. He seems to be speaking Mr. Lees’ words to me, at least in my mind.

“No, not karma,” Mr. Lees says. “We are 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 sitting on the coffee table before the sofa. “Now, friend Gopan, make yourself at home. Familiarize yourself with our television channels. It will help you quickly learn to speak

Sinhalese. Take a shower if you like. I will get you some fresh clothes from my neighbor. He is about your size.”

That night, while I try to fall asleep on the sofa, I sense Shakyamuni and his disciples staring at me as if asking what I am intending to do. It feels like I am back sleeping in the cab of my old rickshaw Nandiji. But now I am 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 is younger than my youngest son Hari.

As the weeks pass, I am busy filing notes and keeping 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 to students who are studying Nepali. 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, 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 am 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 never need to investigate my background.

Each night when I am back at Mr. Lees flat, after a meal in the student dining hall, I watch TV and try to forget about my new restrictive life and the fact that I am unable to fully use the powers of my key. Most evenings, Mr. Lees brings up the matter of how we are going to retrieve it. 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 and the key's powers of suggestion have diminished or they are ineffective when it comes to Mr. Lees. I still don't want to return it, at least not yet. Besides, I cannot suddenly tell him I have found it in my pocket or in my meagre belongings. He would know then that I am a liar. Usually, I tell him that I am trying to call my wife to ask her to look for it but she is refusing to take my calls. Then he offers to call her and I beg him to let me get him the key.

"I know she admires you for what you are doing for me," I say. "But my wife is a stubborn woman and I doubt she will even tell you if she has the relic. Geeta knows it is a treasure and she is quite greedy when it comes to what valuables she has, especially now that I am gone." I do my best to circumvent the whole issue. But I know I cannot keep lying. Mr. Lees is a brilliant scholar and I am sure he has only so much patience with my foolishness.

This exchange between us continues for several days, weeks, and then months. His persistence burdens me with guilt because I did not 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 would

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 giving lectures at monasteries, other universities and secondary schools, or he is 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 the teledramas.

It doesn't take me long to fall in love with one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen. Her name is Nakshatra Sabapathi and she is 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 have 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 then a film star in Bollywood." Nakshatra was Miss Teen Sri Lanka for a year before she began acting in commercials then landed her present heroine-vixen role in *Aaliya Dharana*.

At 23, Nakshatra's quite a few years younger than Geeta whom I don't miss at all. In fact, before I left Kathmandu, Geeta had become rather bothersome which reminds me of a poem by the Tibetan mystic Milarepa who was featured in some of the thangkas hanging in my shop. In particular, I remember the line *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 begins to plague me with dread and I become more determined to use my magic key and somehow win over Nakshatra. I begin to 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 am able to sleep like baby Krishna.

I decide that I must somehow meet her and that when I do, she must see me as somebody powerful. I cannot be a shipping magnate because I don't know anything about the industry and Mr. Lees assigns me too many tasks and I have no time to investigate the topic. Besides, the shipping industry is boring to me, a simple man from a landlocked kingdom in the Himalayas. After a few days of serious contemplation, a brilliant idea occurs to me. I will present myself to Nakshatra as a Bollywood film producer who could make her the star she aspires to be. 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.

*June 24, 2002*

The perfect opportunity arrives on Poson Poya, 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, a group of students, and fellow professors are traveling to

Anuradhapura to give lectures and join the festivities at the famed Bodhi Tree. I decline Mr. Lees invitation to join them, claiming I have dyspepsia and need to rest. As soon as he departs, I prepare to leave the flat and establish myself in Colombo. I quickly gather up my clothes, all the money I have saved from my menial job, and the laptop the university provided. I am hoping Mr. Lees assumes I believe the laptop is a gift from him and mine to keep. But no matter, it is a tool I now require 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 am traveling to Tamil Nadu and then on to Patna to meet my sons and retrieve the key.

*“You are the kindest, most gracious person I have ever known and I want to make things right. Long ago, you so generously gave me the key as payment for an unfortunate accident and I am 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 have done for me. I promise to return with the key as soon as I possible. Forever your devoted friend, assistant, and servant, Gopan Subba.”* I weigh down the note with the Sariputta statue so that Mr. Lees will be sure to find it.

In Colombo, I find a hostel on Hospital Street and stay in a dorm room filled with backpacking Europeans, a few Americans, and several Sri Lankan and Indian men who appear 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 I do what I can to avoid conversations especially with the Sri Lankan men. They expect me to speak Sinhalese fluently, which I do not. 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 are ready to communicate with 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 will land in trouble themselves. “Don’t call us again, Ba,” he 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 has the impudence to reject 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.*

### Chapter 13: Heavenly Creature of my Affection

*August 2002 – September 2004*

*Wilson Yapa, aka Gopan Subba*

My first course of action is to take a Sri Lankan name. I don’t want Interpol of Nepal or Mr. Sid Lees to discover what I am doing. When I win over my teledrama starlet, certainly she and I will be featured together in the press.

Online, I locate the names of several recently deceased Sri Lankan men between ages 40 and 50 and I quickly 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 around I locate what I want and 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 contemplating my next move. I realize that when I meet my Sarasvati starlet, I will need to explain why I am not fluent in Sinhalese when I am supposedly a Sri Lankan. Easily enough, I will say that I was born in Colombo in the year 1958 which is the year I was born. Then I will claim that my mother was Indian and we only spoke Hindi when I was growing up. Then I will claim 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 will ask me. *Yes*, I will reply. *But it was called Bombay during the years of my youth, before you were even born.* I will tell her I did not 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 will tell her. *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 will ask her and she will say yes and melt all over me and I will hear the veena of Sarasvati play in my head. *Yes!* I tell myself as I leave the café and head for the Bandaranaike International Airport to find some cash.

Over the next few weeks, I buy a nice suit of clothes and open safe deposit boxes at five different banks. As I did in Kathmandu, I use the key's power to open the boxes and take any

cash and valuables I find. People in Sri Lanka are wealthier, it seems, and I quickly have enough reserves to move from the shabby hostel 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 without rain. 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 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 is all.

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. Accordingly, I tell them *Yes, it was lost and I need a replacement*. Next, I go to the Immigration & Emigration Department and ask for a replacement passport. They tell me it seems I have never had one and I say, that is what I meant. I grew up in Mumbai . . . Then the passport clerk tells me I will need a permanent address and professional passport photos and that I 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 then 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 is 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 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, “When we die, we take only good and bad karma with us, not the wealth and material things we accumulate. 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 be wholesome somehow 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 am sure to be watching *Aaliya Dharani* on ITN. I relax on my blue suede sectional, have my stereo quietly play a Bollywood sound tract, and I 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 am 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 consider the questions she is apt to ask me. What if she wants to see my passport to confirm I have made many trips to Mumbai and back? Well, of course, I will simply 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 will say I have taken a strategic pause in my career to relax and enjoy my native country. Or, I will say 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 am still young, I tell myself. My age will not deter her. It fits my profile and I am sure 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 is 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 is 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 is not for a vast publication but for my own personal use." Kusal even puts together my curriculum vitae as a Bollywood producer. I am 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 am using my magic key when making the suggestions that he willingly go along with my concocted credentials.

"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 . . . 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 will either give her this car or I will buy her a Rolls-Royce.*

While I am 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 that Nakshatra won’t believe that I am wealthy and I will lose her 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 the 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. **The fact that Nepal was never colonized makes me, and every other Nepali, very proud.**

After I finish my research, and before even driving to Galle to check out 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 am 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 and 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 Galle Dutch Fort. At every niche in the stone ruins, young couples are cuddling under umbrellas. They make me miss Nakshatra before I have 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 quickly leave. I am 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. I have become quite skillful at my job.

When the Full Moon approaches, I 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 number for me.

A man answers on the second ring.

“Hello Mr. Ratnam?” I ask over the phone.

“Yes,” the man says.

“I am Wilson Yapa, an independent producer of Bollywood films. Perhaps you have 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 are 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 am not too concerned that Mr. Ratnam won’t recognize my titles because there are too many Indian films for any normal person to recount, except perhaps me. I have spent years viewing them and months studying about the actors, actresses, 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 am speaking English with a few random words of Sinhalese and Hindi. I relate the story that I plan to tell Nakshatra, and then say, “I am a big fan of your teledrama, Mr. Ratnam, and would like to meet with you on the set of *Aaliya Dharani*. I am 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 are 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 is most certainly sitting at his computer, Mr. Ratnam warmly invites me to his set at the ITN studios the

next morning. “We will 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 say. “I am 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. It is rather ludicrous, I suppose, but a typically captivating Bollywood scene meant to draw-in viewers like me.

I return my focus to Mr. Ratnam and say, “I am quit 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 will have a pass waiting for you at the gate. We begin rehearsal at eight AM. Filming starts at ten.”

The next morning, I am at the ITN gate by nine AM dressed in my best suit and carrying a Versace briefcase with all my credentials and photos that Kusal has compiled for me. In some, I am posing as a Bollywood producer with famous directors, stars, and producers. 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 is an excellent forger and he doesn’t even need a Manjushri key to work his magic.

A security guard escorts me to the teledrama set where the actors are rehearsing the drama. Cameras, bright lights, microphones, and sound boxes embellish the set centered on a penthouse suite with an expansive entertainment system, wet bar, sectional sofas, plush carpets, and a wrap-around window with a view of the Port of Colombo composed of photographs. The room is fragrant from incense burning at a Buddhist shrine on the wall and from the perfumes and colognes of the crew, actors, and lovely actresses. The spectacle takes my breath away, as if I am high in the Himalayas.

Ashoka is a short man with prominent brows and a mustache. He is 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 continues to prompt the action. Two actors are seated at the sofas before a huge coffee table with two opened laptops. They are 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 myself, with graying sides to his thick black hair which is so unlike my thinning hairline. I have never bothered looking him up because I do not care about him. 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 as he gestures a gripper to bring me a bottle of water from a refrigerator.

I take a drink and watch the drama unfold. It is fascinating. I am in a setting where I never imagined being, not in my wildest dreams. In fact, it is just like being in 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 again 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 take a hold of the key in my pocket and silently suggest I wish to meet her. But 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 leaps as I watch her glide over to Dinesh who is standing in anger. She yells at him, slaps him, and tells him he is a cad. As I watch this take place, I cannot still my heartbeat, but I desperately try to keep my composure so Ashoka won't again ask me if I am all right. I breathe deeply and place the key, hidden in my fist, against my chest and actually do 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. *Will I be able to pull this off?* I ask myself and place the key back in my pocket, rise, and shake hands with the teledrama star.

"I am an independent producer of films," I correct the director and then reach in my pocket and hold my key concealed in my fist, and say to Ashoka, "I would truly like to meet Miss Nakshatra." I see her standing by the sectional prop, casually talking to the other actor, a young, very good-looking man of perhaps 25. They seem to be flirting and jealousy surges through my blood like a tidal wave. I feel an urgency to 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.

Then Nakshatra glances my way and smiles, brilliantly. My heart throbs like I am having a heart attack.

Ashoka calls Nakshatra over and introduces her. “Mr. Yapa,” her voice wisps like veena music chanting *Amitabha*. She shakes my hand, softly, delicately, as if not to bruise her beautiful skin.

“I am a fan of your work, Miss Nakshatra,” I stutter. She doesn’t hesitate to ask me many questions about Bollywood. I am 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 is over, I approach Nakshatra, my key in hand, and suggest she join me for dinner at one of Colombo’s finest restaurants. I also invite Ashoka and Dinesh, but they are busy for the evening and I am 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 and 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 ambitions to go to Bollywood. I assure her I would love to place her in one of my feature films, then she explains that her contract with ITN doesn’t end until January 2005. As we watch the sunset over the sea, and listen to cawing crows and gulls, I cannot believe my good fortune and I thank Manjushri himself that I didn’t return the relic to Mr. Lees. And from what Nakshatra just tells me, I now have a year and a half to figure out how to make her a Bollywood star.

After our first dinner together, 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 am quite pleased with myself. I have convinced her of my legitimacy as a big shot producer.

We spend the day touring Galle then I take her back home because it is too soon to suggest we spend the night together. I cannot be so presumptuous, and besides, it seems she is merely enjoying the luxury of my company. We have not even kissed or held hands. I want her to flirt with me first because I do not want to ruin my chances of completely winning her over. Besides, I am not as handsome or debonair as Dinesh or Akshav Kumar and I do not want her to think my offer to make her a film star involves a casting couch. I refuse to use the power of my key to suggest we share intimacies. I respect her too much for that. But if she doesn't soon indicate an interest in me as someone more than a social friend who offers her stardom, I will push harder to reach the next level in our relationship.

### *August 2003*

In August 2003, Nakshatra asks me to take her to the famous Perahera Festival in Kandy to see 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 relic and believed it gave them the power to reign. It is an easy notion for me to believe because of my own powerful relic. The relic 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 she 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 am inclined to tell Nakshatra that I possess such a powerful relic but I have enough restraint to control that impulse. I am but a persona now and the relic key is my only means of earning a living. Maybe later I will use its powers to help establish another business, hire Kasul Kumar as my assistant, and prosper without Manjushri's help. At that time, I will 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* several times. At the festival's highlight, several monks parade through town with an elephant carrying the relic tooth.

After we return to Colombo, I bring 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 that we will 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 will 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 am 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 have actually been doing since I left his flat.

Soon after we are 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 14: A Tsunami in Sri Lanka

*September 2004 – September 2005*

*Wilson Yapa*

As the months pass by, I am constantly promising to take Nakshatra to Mumbai when her contract ends. Somehow, I know that I will 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. Then 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, then I will 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 do not want Mr. Kapoor to find it online. I am sure he is 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 am 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 for his expenses. I cannot 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 have always wanted to visit the beaches of southern Sri Lanka, especially under the Full Moon."

I do not tell Nakshatra about the meeting because I want to surprise her and, perhaps even more so, I do not like to get her hopes up. She tends to become too passionate about matters and I am 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.

At a table on the verandah, during an exciting cloudburst of cooling rain, I reveal that tomorrow we will be picking up the famous Bollywood director Mr. Rajkumar Kapoor at the Koggala airport in Galle. "He has a scriptwriter in mind," I say 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 have been discussing. “And they become torn apart because of me . . .”

“Yes, yes,” I tell her. “That is the storyline I have 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 do not want to dampen my fiancé’s enthusiasm.

“And we shall call our movie *The Endless Path to Mumbai*,” Nakshatra says, taking a sip of her wine. She is becoming tipsy and I am envisioning a very pleasant night in our bed.

“That is what I told Mr. Kapoor,” I say. “Just as we have discussed.”

“This is all so wonderful, darling,” she tells me. “But I want Dinesh de Silva to play the part of the brother in Mumbai.”

This takes me by surprise because she 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 am getting the feeling you are 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 have 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 has agreed to place you in the starring role, after all.”

“No! You are lying. This is *your* production. I am *your* star and I want to act beside m Dinesh. If you are jealous and insecure, that is *your* problem.”

I am prepared to take out my key to make her acquiesce but I don't. Instead, I decide that if I must, I will persuade Mr. Kapoor with my key.

On our way back to the penthouse, while I am maneuvering through traffic in one of Colombo's fiercest thunderstorms, Nakshatra continues to argue and call me an old man and 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 are both uninjured although quite shaken up and 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 him in the middle of the night. From this point forward, the evening drags on and on and we do not return home until well past midnight. After we are finally in bed, I am too exhausted to make love and even if I could, I doubt my fiancé would allow me to even touch her.

“We will 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 will drive me down to Galle to pick up Mr. Kapoor and take him to the estate. We will 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 am forced to agree with her plan. It seems that even a magic key is powerless against a stubborn, pampered woman, once she has made up her mind.

*December 26, 2004*

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 am 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 overhead storage racks. Everyone seems anxious to get home for the big holiday after Christmas that marks the date that Mahinda brought Buddhism into Sri Lanka.

I sit comfortably beside the window with one hand in my pocket touching the Manjushri key and the other 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 am almost sorry that I haven't taken the train until now. Driving can be taxing, especially when I am with Nakshatra. She tends to bicker and when I am behind the wheel, I like to keep my thoughts inside my head. Besides, I cannot pull out my key to shut her up which is what happened last night, I reflect, when I demolished my Mercedes in darkness and rain. I had been reaching for the key.

As a refreshing ocean breeze blows through the window slightly cracked open, I am feeling relaxed with a thought-free mind like a meditating Buddhist. I am not thinking about my big Bollywood production based on a scam and I am not obsessing over my beautiful Sarasvati Nakshatra like I have been doing since before we even got together. Lately, in fact, she has become a bit of a nuisance rather like my former wife Geeta and even my old mother, bless her resting spirit. *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 are passing through *Waskaduwa, Kalutara, Galpoththa*. By the time we reach Serendib Beach, I begin thinking about my fiancé's insistence that she speak to Dinesh in person. Then waves of suspicion invade my tranquility. *Something is going on* I finally admit to 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 obsessive love for her made me blind?* I ask myself.

By the time the train leaves Telwatta Station, after two hours of travel, I am furious with Nakshatra and with myself. While I have been trying to make her dream come true, she has been playing me for a fool and meeting with Dinesh de Silva. I look at my watch and see that it is 9:30 when the train pulls into the village of Peraliya, about 116 km south of Colombo. Now I am prepared to tell Mr. Kapoor to turn around and go back to Bollywood and forget about this whole deal.



To gain my composure and settle my mind, I look out at the vast ocean. Something in the distance suddenly catches my eye. At first, I am thinking my mind is playing tricks with my sight because of my anger but then people in the aisle are beginning to rumble in awe at the sight of a tremendous wave approaching the shore. All at once, everyone starts to panic. *What is it?* they are saying. *What can we do? What is 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 am filled with panic along with everyone else. *The coach will become our tomb. We are all doomed to die.* 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 landlocked kingdom in the Himalayas. But we all know more waves will follow and I am as aware of what is happening as everyone else. We have all been taken off guard, bamboozled like fools, and I cannot help but wonder *Is this 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 body. I make it to the door only to discover, to my horror, it is 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. But 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 the projectiles. I look around and see bodies floating face down. They are 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 people. We tumble into the raging ocean among the debris of 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 is aching 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 am alive than by the tsunami that has 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 anything in its path. Before I black out, my mind tells me that there is nothing in this world more powerful than the ocean, including my Manjushri key.

*January 7, 2005*

*After the Tsunami*

“Authorities couldn’t stop the train,” I read aloud the headline of the Colombo Gazette. I am sitting with my fiancé on the sectional in our penthouse. It has 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 tickets 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. The waves reaching Colombo were nothing but harmless ripples.”

“But you are a 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 have lost my amorous urges as if the ocean cleansed me of such desires. Sexual union with a goddess is not all that fantastic, I keep telling myself. And besides, Nakshatra was never really enjoying 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 am a national hero,” I reply and sip the tart sweet palm drink. After soldiers had rescued me, I spent nearly two weeks in the National Hospital. I do not remember anything before I woke up in a hospital bed hooked to an IV while reporters were flashing pictures of me. It was then that I learned that Sri Lankans considered me a hero because I had miraculously opened the carriage door and allowed ten people to swim safely ashore.

But I did not 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 I threw them out. They did not 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 had destroyed my house in Galle and the entire banana plantation along with all the valuables I had accumulated. And that was 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 all my affection, has vastly depleted my resources.

During my hospital convalescence, Mr. Kapoor had sent me flowers and a note expressing how deeply sorry he felt for what had happened to me and to Sri Lanka and that he was very proud to know me because of my heroism “in the midst of tragedy.” He offered to continue with the film project after my full recovery but suggested that I come to Mumbai because of the distress he had suffered on the day he arrived in Galle. He felt his return to Sri Lanka would somehow bring him more bad luck. “I am a Hindu,” he added in his note, “and sometimes that makes me a very superstitious man.”

The day I returned to my apartment, Nakshatra had encouraged me to call Rajkumar and continue with her film project because 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 because he had read newspaper accounts of my heroism with Nakshatra quoted as saying that I am 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 had said over the phone. "Let me tell you, Mr. Yapa. I know all of today's Bollywood producers and all 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 and said, "Look, Wilson. I do admire your heroism. But I am 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 left the room to take a hot spa bath and ease my aches and pains and settle my nerves.

*September 2005*

*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 also had to fabricate how I was able to open the door of the flooded coach because I cannot reveal my magic key. As it is I am constantly worried that 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 I usually 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 am caught red-handed opening a locker. The owner, a tourist from Denmark, suddenly appears and shouts, "Thief! Thief!" Before I can calm him with my key, the airport police arrive and take me to a security room. Nobody recognizes me as the national tsunami hero because of my disguise and I am able to quickly wiggle from the situation by using my key and suggesting that the police free me because I did nothing wrong.

After that, 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 is our tsunami hero doing after the train disaster?*

Nakshatra and I have not yet married although we remain engaged and she still lives in my penthouse. Neither one of us feels like rushing into marriage. She is very disappointed that circumstances crushed our film project but believes that after I am fully recovered from the trauma, I will 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 am a wealthy producer who

lived in Mumbai. I am 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 is free to come and go as she pleases.

Since the disaster, I do not really know what I want. I am 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 am staying with Nakshatra. Most likely, it is because I do not know what else to do or where to go. That is what living through a devastating trauma will do to a person no matter how strong he once thought he was.

In truth, my world has fallen into a 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 who died in the tsunami. Somehow, I have caused all the calamity that occurred around me just as certainly as 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 have 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 me primarily because the tsunami didn't wash away my thoughts about her having an affair with Dinesh. If nothing else, my suspicions and jealousy have intensified. When I look at her, I see a woman who has caused me to invest all my resources in her stupid, selfish, egotistical dream. I don't know what I have been thinking all these months. I am so ashamed of myself and of who I was trying to be. Nothing but a fake.

## Chapter 15: Full Moon Night at the Temple of the Buddha's Tooth

*One Year after the Tsunami*

*December 15, 2005*

*Wilson Yapa*

“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 be presentable.” It is noon on December 15, 2005, a Full Moon night at the end of the monsoon season and I am still in bed.

“I do not want to see any more reporters,” I say, pulling the covers over my head as if this will make all my troubles go away.

“But you are 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 am 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 has always been with me even while I was in the hospital.



When I first woke up 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 power any more. 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 Mr. Sid Lees at the Buddhist and Pali University. I am hoping he is still working there because I am completely fed up with my life and I want to return the relic Manjushri key.

Nobody answers my call and I leave a message. "Mr. Lees. This is Gopan Subba but I am now going by the name Wilson Yapa. I am sure you have heard about me. The tsunami hero. Anyway, I am 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 Sid Lees? What is 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 and I feel foolish, although it is hard to feel any more foolish than I have 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 want to tell you 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 is not angry. A man like Mr. Lees, a life-long Buddhist, does not allow anger to overtake him. I believe that in his heart he is 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 has taken me so long to retrieve the key.” I pause a moment then say, “Actually, I did not retrieve the key because I have had it all along and have not been completely honest with you. And you have been nothing but a bodhisattva to me.”

“It is not necessary to explain anything, Yapa Subba. I will come to your place, now, if you like.”

“Please let me explain. I have been carrying a lot of guilt, perhaps for years, certainly since I left BPU two and a half years ago.” I take a breath then describe how I have been using the key since I retrieved it from the Ishu Canal after the rickshaw mishap. “At first, I did not 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 and I continue to describe how I had tried to sell the key but could not. “Then I discovered the relic had 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 and by rebirth and 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 for a moment to catch my breath and look at Nakshatra. She is 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 cannot. For one thing, she would not obey me unless I used the key and I have vowed to never use it again. Additionally, she would become furious if I forbade her from listening-in because we are engaged and are not supposed to have any secrets between us.

I continue and say, “At first, Mr. Lees, I really tried to use its powers to please my first wife and sons by granting them whatever they wished for. My efforts led to the deaths of people, including children. I believe I am responsible for the massacre of my kingdom’s royal family. I was in the palace when it happened, with the key. This cannot 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 could not let go of such a powerful relic when my future was so uncertain. I just could not.”

“I see,” Mr. Lees remarks, but that is 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 could not 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 was my Sarasvati, my goddess of beauty and grace,” I say still looking at Nakshatra. She is now frowning in a way I have never seen before. It is 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 will ease the blow that I am no longer going to make her a Bollywood film star. That illusion is completely shattered.

“I told my fiancé that 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 him 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 does not trouble me anymore. I am unloading a great burden. It feels like I am 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 am 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 is just that I am so ashamed I would 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 is too powerful for a man such as myself.”

Mr. Lees agrees to drop his planned lecture for that afternoon and drive straight to my apartment.

As soon as I hang up, I look at Nakshatra, wondering what she will do or say. Suddenly, she slaps me so hard I think my jaw is broken.

“Nakshatra Sabapathi,” I say, “It was all because I loved you more than any man should love a woman.”

“You cad. How dare you? You are 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 college at Cambridge. Like you, he had big promises. Wanted me to become something special. But he committed fraud, like you. That 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 deceptions.”

Now I realize why I have never met her parents or why she has never said much about them. She is 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, a 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 am 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 will have to resurrect me, you bastard! I hope you die and are

born endlessly in hell for what you have 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 she starts clawing at me and reaching for the key which I am holding up high. But she is relentless and I must 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 to her after she moved in with me.

Like a maniac, she starts swinging it in front of me as if she is back in her teledrama acting role. I scramble for the door to flee for my own safety, and hers, but I sense her right behind me.

Suddenly, a sharp excruciating pain explodes at the back of my head and I see sparks and strobing lights. Then the world turns black.

When I wake, my head is spinning and throbbing. I feel moisture at the back of my neck then see blood on my hand. “Nakshatra,” I feebly call as I pull myself up feeling weak and queasy. But she is gone and so is the Manjushri key.

I call the front desk. The concierge tells me that Nakshatra left in my car about fifteen minutes before. “She was in a hurry, Mr. Yapa,” the man exclaims.

I frantically telephone Sid Lees, thankful that he has not yet left his apartment. “I am certain that Nakshatra has gone to Kandy with the relic key. She as much as told me this. She has an insatiable desire for fame and glory and now she is 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 is going to use the key to gain powers from the Buddha’s tooth. Mr. Lees. I am so sorry. I am on my way to

Kandy now after I borrow a neighbor's car because she took mine. Please hurry. It will be dark by the time we arrive. The palace will be locked and guarded, but I know she will 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 am dizzy and probably have a concussion, I rush from my apartment to borrow my neighbor's Suzuki in the basement garage. Then I rush off to Kandy desperate to rectify the biggest mistake I have 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 to Mr. Lees. My foolish behavior is beyond my own ability to comprehend.

By the time I am leaving the outskirts of Colombo, it is eight o'clock and the 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 silver Suzuki in and out of traffic and past villages and dense jungle foliage. I can think of nothing but 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 a half-hour ahead of me. But she is 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, lighted 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 the rains.

It is midnight when I find 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 is 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 am drenched. 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 Sri Dalada Maligawa, I cautiously enter the open-sided lower floor and approach the main altar platform near the entry tunnel. I quickly notice that someone has pulled aside the red velvet curtains that cover the ornately carved ivory doors at the back of the platform. Beyond these doors rests the sacred 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 of Kandyan style upholding a terraced ceiling; among the pillars are eight enormous elephant tusks curving toward the path to the relic.

Outside the temple the thunder is booming as the rain continues pelting the ground. Lightning suddenly flashes and illuminates the altar and Nakshatra. She is standing beyond the tusks, before the ivory doors, dressed in her 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 is upholding the key and gazing at the doors like a wrathful dakini from the cremation ghats. She seems 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.” Her voice is horse and raspy, demonic.

“Give me 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 did not give you the key.”

“You owe me this key for what you have 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 will use its powers to stop me. She is 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 is 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 rains bombards the stone pavement outside the temple 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 doors and infuses the air with a stench similar to the rotting animal carcasses my father used to remove from the streets of Kathmandu. The odor infiltrates my clothes, skin, and my very essence. My mouth begins to taste bitter and putrid.

From this foul vapor, diaphanous demons begin to 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 seemingly uncertain about what to do.

Lightning strikes and illuminates the platform. Then a gust of wind from behind the ivory doors hurls 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 have seen renditions of 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.

“Nakshatra,” I scream, desperate to save her from a terrible fate.

She silently remains where she has 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 as if she understands what is happening. As if she knows she has 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 cannot help my poor Nakshatra. I do not possess the powers of Ashoka’s daughter and cannot 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 mouths 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 does not reach me or destroy the temple platform 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 had once been Nakshatra. Then I notice a glimmering 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 and pillars and the elephant tusks. But that 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 is wearing a white shirt and tweed slacks and carrying a satchel over his shoulder.

“Are you all right, Mr. Subba Yapa?” He asks, but does not address what has just happened. He does not need to, I imagine. He knows. He is 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. And I am 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 do not think either one of us can explain this without revealing the Manjushri key, and that is not something I wish to do. I am eager now to return to Colombo to catch the next flight to Dharamshala.” He takes hold of my arm and helps 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 then we both slowly drive away from the Palace of Kandy, under the light of December’s Full Moon.

## Chapter 16: A Sadhu in Mumbai

*2006 -- 2021*

*Sadhsariputta aka Wilson Yapa*

Before I can retrieve my Mercedes outside the Kandy palace, the police go through it and find Nakshatra’s purse. Then their crime lab discovers fragments of bone among the ashes. After a DNA analysis, they determine that Nakshatra had been incinerated but they cannot 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 am 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 had killed Nakshatra because she was a famous teledrama starlet and the fiancé of the national tsunami hero and because 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. 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 somehow connected to my bad karma from misusing the Manjushri relic key.

*July 2006*

After the commotion dies down over my fiancé's tragic death, I am left alone in my apartment on Marine Drive wondering what to do now that I don't have the magic key and the proceeds from the books about my heroism are quickly diminishing. My bodhisattva, the venerable Mr. Sid Lees, has offered me my old position and a place to stay at BPU. I thanked him and explained that my penthouse is pre-paid for another six months and that I needed to gather my wits before deciding about my life from here on out. "But please let me keep the option open," I added. Mr. Lees said he understood.

I don't ask Mr. Lees about the key, even though it is the whole reason for my present malaise. Without its powers, I feel like I am 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 cannot make things right. I only want to be alone in my apartment with my bronze Buddha, his disciples Sariputta and Moggallana, Tara, Manjushri, and Shiva who are sitting on my console gazing at me. After washing away my blood, I gave the Sarasvati statue to my neighbor for allowing me to use his car. I could no longer gaze at the beautiful goddess playing the veena on her lap because she reminded me of the woman who had captured my heart but ended up being my victim. The demons of hell destroyed her, I am now certain, to destroy my own heroism. The wheel of life is baffling and demoralizing, at least for me.

*January 2007*

By the end of January 2007, I am 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 do not know what I might do or where I might

go. I cannot return to Kathmandu and I hesitate to return to BPU and resume my work under Mr. Lees. I do not want to further burden him with my pitiful self. But no other option presents itself to me except to live homeless on the streets of Colombo like I did in Kathmandu as a boy.

When I am about to call my bodhisattva and suggest my return to BPU, the phone next to my sectional sofa fortuitously rings. I am astonished to hear the voice of Rajkumar Kapoor. He offers to buy the rights to my life's story for a Bollywood docudrama. I am 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 would hope to tell. "It will include my undying love for the teledrama starlet Nakshatra Sabapathi and my persuading her that I am 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 was not even supposed to be at the temple. It will make such an excellent movie and a bestselling book."

Mr. Kapoor offers me one million dollars for my story and suggests I fly to Mumbai as soon as I can. "I will arrange for your ticket from Colombo," he says.

"Can you do so within the week?" I ask, "That 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 seem to be telling me that, even though I do not have the key anymore, I do have an accumulation of karma, my past actions, thoughts, and decisions, that are part of my present condition, that what I have done in my past, both good and bad, will eventually catch up with me, somehow, some way.

By the end of February 2007, I am living in a one-bedroom rental in Goregaon which is in the central district of Mumbai near the 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 am flattered he does not choose to cast the part of me as middle-aged, pudgy, and balding man, which is what I am. In 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 do not mention her father's fraud, out of respect for my fiancé, or because I myself committed abundant fraud and I do not 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 am quite glad that Rajkumar really does not 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 are hoping fans will vote online and select *A Hero Returns from the Dead* for the coveted and recently launched 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 am nervous about all the terrible tragedies of my past repeating themselves. And I am 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 I have sitting on the altar in my apartment, a simple 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 Muni Mahamuni Shakyamuni Saha*, I chant what means to me, "Great teacher Shakyamuni, help me understand the wisdom of your dharma." *Om*

*A Ra Pa Ca Na Dhih* I chant to Manjushri to help me slash away my ignorance, negativity, and delusions and find the source of my Buddha nature. And to Green Tara I chant, *Om Tare Tuttare Ture Saha* to help me pass through this difficult stage in my life and overcome what impedes my good karma.

*September 2008*

After a year in Mumbai, my spirits have greatly improved. Nothing tragic has happened. I am 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 has been over six years since I have heard from them and I want to learn what they are now pursuing. Maybe I am 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 find both Hari and Aftab online, on the newly established Facebook. On Aftab's page, I discover that he is married with twin baby boys named Padma and Rajneesh. I do not 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 that he is working at a Software Internet company based in the Netherlands and is married to a woman named Isha Saleem. My heart is throbbing when I see pictures of their two little daughters, five and six. They are named Girvani and Surangana after the daughters of Princess Shruti who the Crown Prince killed during the gunshots that I had 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 am blessed with four grandchildren. I want to know everything about my grandchildren 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 am 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 is 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 he has reformed and that I can resume a relationship with my firstborn son. Unfortunately, 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 told him I wanted 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. He was even part of the Maoist emissary that called on India for support by denying they were waging a terrorist war. My brother met with other party leaders and established a coalition against the monarchy. Two years ago, Gyanendra attempted a coup that merely enraged Nepalis. Essentially, the king had to end the monarchy. Aftab was overjoyed."

“Yes, Chora. I heard about it. What is your brother doing now?”

“I do not 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 really care about. I suggest you give him a call.” Hari gives me Aftab’s number, tells me he is 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 I do not reveal that my money comes from the proceeds Rajkumar paid me for my story. I do not want them to even know about my alias Wilson Yapa, perhaps so they will not know that I had pursued a young woman who tragically died. I want only to be with them, as my family in the past, present, and always.

Even after I boast about Mumbai being the financial capital of Asia, I cannot dissuade Aftab from leaving his political post. Hari hesitates to leave his job for a startup endeavor with me but he agrees to visit me with his family and Geeta during the fourth week of November, when he will have two weeks of accumulated holiday time.

“That is the best time of year to see Mumbai,” I tell him with excitement. “It is after the heat and monsoons and before the cold of January.”

On November 20<sup>th</sup>, 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 do not want to show them my apartment. It is 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 will inevitably learn that I am Wilson Yapa of the docudrama. Even though the movie is not the biggest Bollywood feature film to ever hit the video stores, I am sure that somehow word about my past will leak out to them. It always does. But I will 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 book them a sixth-floor suite with two bedrooms, one for Geeta and the girls, the other for Hari and his stunning young wife Isha 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 am initially reluctant, worried we will come across 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 lost her puppy on the Mumbai streets, and they want to see Binya and her blue umbrella. I am 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 and Isha Saleem is constantly telling me, "Baaji, you are spoiling your nati-natini." But they are more precious to me than any crown jewels or treasures.

We also take a taxi to Juhu to play on the beach until sunset. In 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 are 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, Isha 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 in a taxi and show them the sites of south Mumbai which I have not seen myself because I have been too preoccupied with avoiding the world. Now the world seems unleashed to me with marvelous sites and experiences because I am reunited with my family. I have never known such a feeling of love and of loving, mostly from Girvani and Surangana whom I call 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 and I tell them 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 is wife of Brahma and brings harmony to our world through her veena music." Of course, I do not mention how I

worshiped a living Sarasvati as the object of all my affection, that is something I will forever keep to myself.

On the morning of November 26<sup>th</sup>, 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 are now grandparents. But it's more than that. She has become very attractive in her maturity, not the old hag Milarepa described in his poem, and I feel a love for her that is even stronger than what I once had for Nakshatra. I desire Geeta now, 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 is 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 Isha Saleem and Geeta boxes of mango candies and spray bottles of jasmine perfume. At the elevator, I ask Geeta if she would 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 am feeling quite certain that my family will be permanently moving to Mumbai.

*Mumbai 2021*

Thirteen years ago, after the bombings, I gave my savings and all that I owned to the people of the slums and 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 as my guru. He introduced me to Shakyamuni's disciple Sariputta which is why I decided to take this name. I am now sixty-three and wear an orange dhoti, shawl, and sandals. Unlike a typical sadhu, my head is shaved but I have grown a long grey beard. I have no interest in having a following or accumulating wealth. I live freely each day by moving about like a spindle of fire burning 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 to me. I do not know him now, or his fate. He would be very old and very wise, if he is still living in this defiled world. I used to wander the boardwalk along Marine Drive to watch the sunset each evening or I would 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 should cherish no thoughts," I would 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. “When we play no part in the world’s tragedies.”

“Because we cannot separate ourselves from what surrounds us. From all that exists.”

Most tourists would agree and then they would buy me a chapati and dal bhat from a local food cart, or a piece of mango fruit, and we would smoke ganja together.

At the Mahalakshmi Temple, I would sit on the steps and contemplate Kali, Lakshmi, and Sarasvati as well as my existence in a suffering world. I would go to the Siddhivinayak Temple and call upon Lord Ganesh to help everyone overcome the obstacles that he or she faces on the path to liberation from suffering. When I engaged someone in the crowd of devotees, I would say that I am personally asking Ganesh to grant all his or her wishes. On a few occasions, I visited the newly opened 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.

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 reminded 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 and listen to my teachings. I would say to 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 the hospitals. The funeral pyres are constantly burning with hundreds of corpses at a time. Now, I cannot 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 do not count time. I merely go by my sleeping and waking self. Of course, I cannot help but wonder whether I will 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 am Brahma who is dreaming about my creation, the air I breathe, the ground upon which I walk, 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 am the preserver riding an eagle. Like the many buddhas, I have lived many lives in this world. I am a fish, turtle, dwarf, hero of an epic (I have been to Sri Lanka). I am the dancing shepherd boy who seduces the Gopi maiden with my magic flute. I am 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 am 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 am 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 am Mother of the universe, my dance becomes so passionate that I lose control but my Shiva aspect throws himself at my feet to stop me from destroying a world that is 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 world heritage 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 do not know if the quake killed my son Aftab and his family because I have not heard from him for thirteen

years. The rest of my family, my son Hari, his wife Isha 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 28<sup>th</sup>, 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 would say. “All you need to do is receive it with an open heart and mind, without hatred, greed, or delusion. But do not use it foolishly in the ways I have. Use it for deeds of compassion for those who are suffering because of their tainted desires.”

I remember speaking these words to a tourist from Denmark just before the pandemic. 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 is nothing more to make us suffer. We are liberated.”