

When my friend Kathy McAnally was in the hospital with late-stage cancer, I got to know some of her other friends. Cheryl was one. She and I bonded across Kathy's deathbed.

A few months after Kathy died, Cheryl flew to Nepal on a Fulbright Fellowship. Her car lived in my driveway, a constant reminder of faraway lands and fodder for daydreams. Eventually fantasy turned into plan. I booked plane tickets to Kathmandu and began to work on getting my half-century-old body in shape for a trek. I bought a treadmill, joined a gym and starting hiking up every steep hill I could find.

But you know what they say about plans. Mine were aborted when I screwed up my Achilles tendon and my heel — probably from all that exercise — so that it became painful to walk uphill: not ideal for a trip into the Himalaya. Heartbroken, I had to cancel.

A year later I tried again, and this time the Force was with me. After months of hiking and rock climbing, I was fitter than I'd ever been in my life, and my mind was primed for being opened by life in South Asia.

NINE THOUSAND MILES

As I got ready to leave for the plane I felt like my veins were coursing with battery acid and my nerves plugged into a 220-volt outlet as synapses fired and missed:

“Send 94th birthday card to Mamma Ginna. Vote. Water plants. No, get dressed, then water plants. Where's the card? Answer e-mail. Can't find address. There. Okay: stamped. Wait — 42 cents? Check USPS. Need melatonin? Call Mom. No, finish audio module functionality specs. And invoices. Need coffee. Lost the address. No milk. Vote. What's Prop 9? Call Larrygensky. That helped. Mail ballot. Q-tips. How can I— ? Batteries charging. Where's Eleni? Close suitcase. Can't. Oh, bank. Why am I... Shaking. Food. What is the... Gotta go. Where ... I forget.”

Thanks to my haircutting friend Dagny (proprietor of Dagny's Den of Exotic Beauty), I got to the airport very early, and managed to entertain myself a couple hours till the flight boarded for Hong Kong at 1:30 a.m. Next to me was a brilliant young man — Ph.D. in math from Stanford and another advanced degree from Princeton — who was heading home with, unfortunately for both of us, a bad cold. He told me that Hong Kong is 15

hours ahead of San Francisco time. I'd brought my late-father's big old watch, for good luck, and starting rolling the hands forward hour after hour until my seatmate stopped me: "Uh, you only have to move it ahead three hours." This is why he has a Ph.D. in math and I don't.

Shortly thereafter I popped one of my Ambien, and by the time my penne pasta with red pepper sauce arrived I was pretty zonked. My eyes wouldn't open so I blindly lifted the fork to my mouth, more often than not without food on it. At one point I had a frightening image of a field of crimson racing toward me, and realized I was going face-down into my plate. Gave up and went to sleep.

I dozed on and off and checked my watch between, seeing it go from 4:30 to another 4:30. Fourteen hours later we landed in Hong Kong. I'd been dreading this part of the trip: a twelve-hour layover in a city I never cared to visit. Though I was afraid to leave the airport, twelve hours in the terminal seemed untenable. Late last night I'd posted a status message on Facebook: "Ginna is wondering what to do with 12 hours in Hong Kong." Minutes later there came a detailed reply from a high school buddy, and from her ideas I picked as my destination the aerial tramway up to a Buddhist monastery on the same island (Lantau) as the airport. Hong Kong Disneyland was a close second, but I chose spirituality over surrealism.

Dazed from lack of sleep, I wandered through the terminal for a full hour-and-a-half, desperately seeking an exit. I found plenty of avian flu checkpoints and a currency changer, but no way out. I was about to give up when — like Lucy at the threshold of Narnia — I saw the double-door materialize before me, and I ran out before it vanished.

I'm not sure how I discovered that I needed the S-1 city bus, but I found one. The only English-speaker in the crowd, I had no idea what to do once I got there, so I kept plunking my Hong Kong coins into the money box until the driver motioned me to stop. The whole ride I leaned my head out the window, watching for wires and gondolas overhead, and managed to get off at the (unmarked) Ngong Ping Cable Car station.

Though it wasn't even 8 a.m., oppressively hot air blasted my face as I stepped onto the sidewalk. There wasn't a soul — tourist or native — anywhere. I saw the tram station, with

its gondolas clunking overhead, but every possible route there dead-ended. For half an hour I continued in circles, walking into empty buildings, creeping down abandoned hallways and banging into more dead ends.

In one of these lonely spots I finally encountered another human, someone who looked just as confused as I. It was a guy named Hendrik from Germany. It turned out we were seeking the same grail, so we stuck to each other. Still walking in circles, we spotted a solitary man sweeping a stretch of sidewalk underneath the stairs to the tram.

In theory, English is often spoken as a second language in Hong Kong, but it's taught mostly in its written form, which — if you've noticed how we spell things — has little to do with how it sounds. And often, the teachers are native Chinese speakers, which can add a layer of complexity to the pronunciation. So it's almost impossible for me to understand a Cantonese-speaking person who has minimal English experience; they probably have the syntax perfect, but I'm not getting the message.

So that's what happened with the sidewalk sweeper. He told us all kinds of things, none of which we understood. Still, through much arm-waving we finally learned that, despite the all the tram activity rumbling overhead, the thing wouldn't open for another two hours. "Bus up mountain. There." The sweeping man pointed, and seeing nothing there, we still headed off in that direction. At last we came upon a bus lot and somehow found the right vehicle just as it was leaving. Again, we were the only Westerners. Everyone else seemed to be heading to work as they disembarked along the way. After 45 stomach-turning minutes up the mountain on the Tung Chung Road, we reached a plateau and were plunked at the foot the stairs to the Tian Tan Buddha, a 110-foot tall bronze honker.

I expected Hendrik and I would part ways then, but our interests turned out to be identical. We explored all over the place, beginning with the "Wisdom Path" which wound up through forest, past unusual plants labeled with names and descriptions. One had a berry that was reputed to be extremely bitter. Hendrik confirmed this.

At the end of the wisdom trail was a narrow, rocky trail up Lantau Peak and a sign warning of the danger of dengue fever beyond that point. Having failed to gain wisdom on the path, we continued up, winding ever higher, breathless, each bend in the path calling us a bit further. Among my handful of essentially useless skills is the ability to spot insects, and I was thrilled to see a well-hidden giant walking stick in the dense shrubbery.

Having seen someone suffering from dengue fever, I finally decided it was time to turn back. Now we were in search of something we'd seen lots of signs for: "the first ever multimedia teahouse." Whatever that is. But all we found were some scruffy, dusty tea bushes and an equally scruffy café selling a type of water called "Hong Kong Sweat."

Thirst thus quenched, we went to find lunch in a restaurant under the feet of the Buddha, which required a 268-step climb. Allegedly this Buddha is third-biggest in the world and, according to promotional material, was "empowered in December 1993." Here and there in the dining area were signs advising, "No spitting." "Ha ha. How silly," I thought. But no: the signs were necessary, and mostly ignored.

Many hours later it was time to leave our mountain, and Hendrik and I finally got to experience our tram ride, reassured by the fact that only one of its cars has ever fallen off and plunged to the ground. For twenty-five minutes we floated over dry, mountainous valleys and high over Tung Chung Bay, past Hong Kong high-rises that shimmered in the filtered afternoon light. If it had been a clear day we would have seen the South China Sea.

We expertly found our way back to the airport via some city bus or other. Too soon, I bid adieu to my new friend as he headed toward Ho Chi Minh City and I toward Kathmandu. Later he sent an e-mail:

I must say that I regretted it a little bit that I didn't wait for the next train at the airport which kept our farewell down to about 10 seconds. But you know, it would have been the worst thing for me to miss that plane and I was kinda nervous and excited already ;-). But I also have to say that this day in HK was really nice, unexpectedly nice!

While waiting for my next flight I decided to jot down some notes about my day's adventures. I'd packed a brand new notebook which, on the plane last night, I carefully lettered with "Nepal" at the top and "2008" at the bottom. After writing a few pages of observations, I tucked it into the seat pocket beneath my calves, and promptly forgot about it until now, by which time it must have been winging its way to some other foreign land. Not an auspicious beginning to my attempt to keep travel journal. From now on I'm going to follow my mother's advice and move very slowly and thoughtfully. Instead of "I am putting my wallet in my pocket," it's "I. Am. Putting. My. Wallet. In. My. Pocket." It helps. Anyway, I have a new journal now. On the cover it says, "Is Pig Pig Note Book. Welcome to Pig Pig family. Let's have a funky party."

Never has a five-hour flight seemed like a mere hop, but the trip from Hong King to Kathmandu was over before I knew it. I told the Nepali man next to me about one of my missions on this trip: to deliver a present from my Nepali friend in the US to his father. My seatmate laughed. "That's how I met my wife."

Disembarking in Kathmandu, I pulled out Cheryl's detailed arrival instructions, reading as I disembarked. "Turn right at the end of the hallway," she wrote. "Fill out the customs form. Put your luggage over on the screening conveyer in the middle, and try to get the customs guy on the right because he's the nicest...." I paid \$100 for a 90-day multiple-entry visa, passed through the various checkpoints and x-ray machines, and charged out into the mass of people hawking rides. Luckily, within milliseconds I spotted Cheryl's friend Thakur, identifiable because he held my name in his hands. I raced toward him with relief and joy. As he began to lift his arms for a *namaste* greeting, I got confused, and shocked myself (and him) by throwing my arms around him in gratitude. He bore it rigidly but well.

By the time he got me to the Tibet Guest House it was around 10 p.m. and I'd been more or less awake for over fifty hours and traveling for 34. Once again I followed Cheryl's advice and ordered a pot of Nepali milk tea, an event that marked the beginning of a six-week addiction. In my stupor I filled out the application form to the Chinese government for a

visa to Tibet. There's a slim chance I'll be granted it, but it's unlikely these days from Nepal. The Chinese don't like Americans too much. Luckily the Nepalis do.

My room for the night was in a depressing, dark slum of a building across the alley from the main hotel, but I was too tired to care.

KARTIK 2, 2065 (OCTOBER 18, 2008)

The noise is like New York here, except louder and with roosters. I didn't mean to wake up at 4:00 a.m. At 6:00 I called to request my customary (as of twelve hours ago) Nepali milk tea, but they couldn't bring it because I'm in the low-rent district where the staff doesn't venture till it's fully light.

The headline in today's Kathmandu Times is *Man Kills Wife Over Facebook Status* and, only slightly less prominently, *Paris Hilton Hangs Out with Princes*.

At 11:00 a compact man named Bhim arrived, courtesy of Thakur, to walk me around town and get some errands done: buy rupees, get my bus ticket to Pokhara for tomorrow, try to fix Cheryl's cell phone. The last errand was futile because her phone is beyond dead, but Bhim was determined. I tried to keep up with him as he slid like silicone between rickshaws and motorcycles and taxis and buses, but I didn't do so well, precipitating squealing of brakes and horn-blowing. When he reached a giant street with about forty threads of traffic, I nearly panicked. Technically, I think vehicles drive on the left of the road, but you'd never know that by looking. *Don't leave me!* I begged him. If Nepali culture didn't frown upon public physical contact between men and women, I would have grabbed his arm, or better yet, tried to hitch a piggy-back ride from him, even though I'm about twice his height.

Last month while I was backpacking, my brand new polarizing filter fell off my camera and shattered on the rocks. Guess what happened to my *new* brand-new filter on the streets of Kathmandu within my first hour of my first day here? Yup. Another errand to add to the list.

I love some of the t-shirts Nepalis wear: mostly from China with confused English slogans. My favorite so far has a photo of a winged helmet emblazoned with “US Marines” and the tagline, “Made in Cowboy.” American macho is big here. And then there are the ubiquitous “North Face” products, not one of them actually a North Face product. The Chinese stitch the logo onto whatever will hold a stitch, and I learned that sometimes they even spell it wrong: “The Orth Face,” for example. Traveler’s warning: If you buy a “North Face” product here, it will fall apart within two or three weeks.

And speaking of shopping in Kathmandu: If I hear another *Om Mani Peme Hung* (that’s the Tibetan version of *Om Mani Padme Hum*) I fear I will go berserk. It’s piped into about every fourth stall throughout the tourist district of Thamel and beyond, and it’s all exactly the same recording. So when you go along you just crossfade from one chunk of the chant to the next. But I guess it’s better than what I heard later in the afternoon: those deplorable Swedes: Abba singing about how glad they are they have the gift of song.

After Bhim left, I did a little solo exploring. The air here is so foul that even locals wear facemasks. Here’s how Cheryl described the scene to me in a pre-departure e-mail:

“People will try to sell you things. I haven’t warned you about the beggars. There are crippled guys and lepers. I try to remember to keep small bills and coins in my pockets so I can give them some. I do not give money to the street kids. There are good organizations here working with them and giving them money just undercuts their work. It’s heartbreaking, but save your money. There are also mothers with babies and old people. It’s up to you...”

Dinnertime. Not quite ready for spicy Nepali food yet, I went to a nice Italian restaurant. The featured cocktail was the “Orgasm,” a blend of Cointreau and Bailey’s with crushed ice. I passed it up, and instead ordered spinach lasagna. It was delicious. I glanced out the window at a picturesque, elderly rickshaw driver, dignified-looking despite unmatched shoes and dirty clothes. “Wow, I’m really somewhere else,” I thought, whereupon he did a full-on air-blow of his nose, effectively bringing my mealtime to a close.

I elbowed my way “home” through an ocean of tourists, took one of my Ambien, and dreamed that my father came back from the dead, as he is wont to do in my dreams, and told me that he’s really happy I’m on this trip.

LONG AND WINDING ROAD

I awoke from a nightmare that Obama had been defeated in a landslide, led by Delaware. Coffeeless and in a groggy state of despair I started to gather my stuff for my river trip. At 6:30 Bhim arrived — again, courtesy of Thakur — and drove me and my heavy bag to the bus station. We found the big bus full, so I was assigned to a van designed for something other than comfort or safety.

While waiting, an ascetic with painted face approached a Chinese guy I was talking to, and smiled and offered him a miniscule orange flower, no doubt in exchange for a giant fee. The Chinese guy flipped out and ran off, telling me over his shoulder, “I’m **afraid** of that religion!”

Finally on the van, it was an hour of screeching brakes, choking fumes and toodlie-oodlie-oodlie horns before we got out into the countryside. A while later we rounded a corner and my heart truly skipped a beat when I got my first glimpse of the Himalaya: tall beyond imagining. Words and pictures won’t work here. Nor will they work for any of the other sights we passed. Rather than try, I’ll excerpt an e-mail I sent to a friend:

“It’s everything you’d expect — thatched houses on tree-limb frames, adobe houses painted with ochre skirts, emerald terraces of rice, live goats bouncing along on roof racks, brilliant tropical flowers, roosters pecking at trash in the streets, dusty people in bright clothes, and endless folds of mountains. What’s different is what happens when you step into that predictable picture. The tiny street kid in a dirty frilly party dress runs over to where you’re sitting and leaps without warning into your lap, sliding down your legs like you’re playground equipment...

“Passing by all this stuff that’s totally new makes me feel like a three-year-old, with little control over my fate and with endless “whys?” It’s good for me, I think, to have

such a different perspective. I don't understand much of what I see. Do people live in that building on stilts? Why are those boys holding a rope across the road so we can't pass? Why do people hang dried ears of corn like curtains out their windows? What crop is that on that cliff-side? What are those towering bamboo tripods for? Why are we stopping? Why are all those people running down the hill? What do those people who look like walking haystacks do with all those grasses they're hauling? What are those bright orange lacey things drying on people's roofs? Why is that crowd of forty men clustered around that car? Are Krazy Cheese Balls as good as the signs say?"

As we careened along mountain roads with precipitous drop-offs, I decided it best not to look. Our driver continually passed even the biggest buses on blind corners at top speed, oohing his horn as though that made a difference. At one point my seatmate gasped and I made the mistake of looking up. We were racing down the wrong side of the road directly at a speeding concrete truck adorned with colorful, glittering tinsel on its windshield. I read its brand — TATA — which might well have been my very last thought "Ta Ta" — had we not veered to safety with millimeters to spare. For a while we got stuck in a traffic jam in the wake of a bad accident.

For part of the trip I sat next to a Dutch woman who, when she learned I was American, told me stories of her encounters with my people. "Yesterday I met another single American woman, like you. She asked me to go with her to buy condoms." "I'm not that single!" I interrupted. Apparently this American had such an appalling lack of sense that she asked the Nepali salesmen to tell her which brands were more pleasurable. It can be embarrassing to be American, with stories like this, not to mention our current government's tendency to start wars. When people ask where I'm from — which is often — I almost cringe. Several Nepalis have tactfully commented, "Oh, very powerful country," to which I once responded, "Yes, we do like to invade people." Quite a few Brits have openly acknowledged the rudeness of Americans they've met in Nepal.

Finally, after eight hair-raising hours (the same as the number of legs I saw on the creatures suspended in air by the side of the road) we arrived in Pokhara where the usual cluster of

aggressive cab drivers waited to whisk the unwary traveler to hotels of dubious quality. I looked around futilely for my ride, which was supposed to be waiting for me. There was nobody except a miniscule man clutching a miniscule folded slip of paper to his chest. I caught his eye and he opened it. There was the tiny-lettered word “Jinna.”.

I put my bag into the June-bug sized cab and aimed toward the Hotel Raraa, which I can't help but pronounce like the “Siss Boom Bah” kind, which is not correct. It's a couple blocks from the end of Lake Fewa at the quiet end of the hopelessly touristy Lakeside district.

My room is clean and has the basics — a bed and a pillow — but lacks certain desirables like soap and toilet paper. I'm glad I thought to bring my own. But the view of the Annapurna range out my window more than dwarfs any deficiencies. It is overwhelmingly beautiful, and once again, my photos and words couldn't begin to capture it.

As instructed yesterday by my rafting company, I called their office in Pokhara to find the meeting place for our 6:00 gathering tonight, and raced through dinner to arrive promptly. No one was there, until eventually a Nepali man appeared, settled into the chair next to me. I was right in guessing he was an agent of the rafting organization. He turned to me, sighed, and asked, “So. How long do you plan to be in Pokhara?” Not a good question. As it turns out, he has delayed my trip by a day. That's okay, I guess. I just wish he'd told me sooner.

On the way back to my hotel, I think the jet lag really hit. I kept twisting my ankle in holes on the dark street. I craved chocolate so kept stopping along the rows of stalls to see what people were selling. They all asked exorbitant prices. “I don't want to bargain. All I want is a piece of chocolate,” I whined to myself. After haggling I finally secured a nice bar of Toblerone (still for too much money). Minutes later it propelled itself out of my pocketbook and into the gutter. Stupid tourists like me kept pushing me into traffic. I stepped in a fresh patch of sacred-cow shite. I was wearing sandals. I went to bed.

BAT CAVE & BEYOND

I woke up at 1:00 a.m. and every fifteen minutes thereafter with an increasingly sore throat. Up for good at 6:00, feeling horrible but thrilled with the view from my hotel room. The pointy peak toward the left is *Machhapuchhare* (a.k.a. Fishtail), which I'm planning to visit up-close in a month.

Wanting to make the most of my unexpected day in Pokhara I perused the guidebooks, but all the walks I chose had warnings: "Not safe for single women." So I hired a cab to take me around for some exploration — a bargain at \$20 for five hours.

My driver, Vishnu, took me first to a bridge over the Seti River Gorge into which people throw white garments once worn by their dead loved ones, and where a few people have thrown themselves, to ill effect. An 85-year-old woman there gave Vishnu and me *tikas*, those red blobs made of rice paste that they put on foreheads. I can't remember how much money I gave her in return. I was embarrassed because I'm too white and not new-agey enough to wear a *tika*. Do you know what's even sillier than a white woman sporting a *tika*? A white woman who has been wilting in humidity all day so that the *tika* melts and gathers in the wrinkles on her brow and down her nose.

While looking into the dense vegetation there on the cliffside, I learned my first Nepali word: *makura* (accent on the first syllable) which means spider.

We drove through the old bazaar where locals shop, and passed a wedding in progress. You wouldn't think it's anything other than a cluster of people in fancy dress, except for the blare of a dozen brass horns out of tune.

Most houses around here have prayer flags hung out front. When they're strung along a string like a banner, that means a Buddhist lives there, says Vishnu. When sewed end to end, that's a Hindu household.

We visited Mahendra Cave, named after the recently uncrowned king: a sacred place for Hindus, with little shrines tucked here and there into the dark recesses, with bells for ringing prayers Heavenward. As Americans name stalactites for Disney characters, so do Hindus for

their many deities. One protuberance might represent Krishna and another Lakshmi. As I climbed up over a shoulder of rock, Vishnu shouted with alarm, “Don’t step on Shiva!”

Nearby was Bat Cave, with tens of thousands of fat little black *tzameros* (accent on second syllable) hanging overhead, silent and still until someone fired off a flash.

We visited a Hindu hilltop temple where we were accosted by Vishnu’s noxious friend, who calls himself a guide. He did me the favor of getting my Stupid Tourist Experience out of the way early in my trip, by demanding way too much money for a touring service I hadn’t wanted. He walked us around places that I was perfectly capable of going with Vishnu. In one shrine there was a young girl who couldn’t have been ten years old, sitting on a stiff wooden chair in a diorama of sacred objects, the Hindu version of Mary in a nativity scene. My guide said she’d been there since before dawn and would remain till after dark. She was supposed to be meditating all this time, but after eight or ten hours already, the poor thing was intermittently squirming and dozing. Meanwhile, visitors and worshippers walked over and stared at her, made silent prayers and rang loud bells. Apparently this is standard part of the religious education of the girls affiliated with this temple.

My favorite part of the day was visiting Devi Falls, which is similar to Semuc Champey in Guatemala, where a violent river vanishes all of a sudden into a massive hole in the ground. We walked down fifty steps into another cave nearby, and I thought my lungs would explode on the trip back up. Doesn’t bode well for my trek 12,000 feet higher.

We also visited a Tibetan refugee camp, a relatively upscale place with cinderblock buildings and pretty grounds. In one large room a bunch of women wove beautiful rugs. One peeled a teeny potato and gave it to me. Several giggled at the appearance of this stranger. Another was absorbed in singing a lovely song in Nepali as she passed the shuttle between the strands of wool. I asked Vishnu about the lyrics. “She is asking for a boyfriend.”

Every Nepali I’ve talked to here, including Vishnu, has expressed resentment at the Tibetan refugees, saying that the Nepal government is helping them too much, that the Tibetans are

already “wealthy” from international aid, and that Tibetans are taking jobs that rightfully belong to Nepalis — echoes of our immigration controversies in the US.

We went to a small village that perches above the milky Seti River where there was, as usual, a cremation in progress.

Our scheduled stops completed, Vishnu asked me if I wanted to see where he lives. Reticent at first because I am suspicious—why would he offer this?— I assented. We drove out of town on ever smaller and funkier roads, finally parking on a narrow dirt-and-rock path. I was surprised when Vishnu locked his car even here. Then we followed a little trail between hut walls of corrugated tin. His house is a long narrow shed divided along its length into four rooms, the biggest about 10 x 15 feet. He and his wife and kids live in one, his father in one, and two of his brothers with families in the others. When we arrived, his father — ancient at only 58 and sick with all kinds of things including high blood pressure — was asleep on his bed wearing only shorts. But he soon joined us in the next room, fully dressed including *topi* (fez-like cap). In seconds the room was full with Vishnu, father, brother, brother’s wife and four kids, welcoming and curious about this visitor, who in turn had no idea what they were saying. One of the young boys spoke a little English so he translated. The little girl kept dancing around and climbing all over me. I had no intention of taking pictures in this personal setting, but when the girl saw the camera around my neck she insisted I document her as she brandished something small in her hand. “She wants her picture taken with the SIM card,” her cousin explained. I obliged.

Vishnu taught me one more Nepali word: *sapuna* (accent on first syllable) meaning a dream. People take them seriously in Nepal, he says. As we said farewell (and I’d given him the gigantic tip I’m guessing he hoped for, and which he earned) he asked me not to tell his boss (the manager of Hotel Raraa) that he had taken me to meet his family. I’m not sure why he asked, but I was happy to comply.

At six I met with my rafting mates (after a terrifying two-block ride on the back of the motorcycle), a lively bunch, none older than my children: 5 Israelis, 7 Brits, 2 Canadians and 7 Nepali staff. We discussed trip details and I found out the company provided fewer

amenities than I'd thought, so I ventured out in search of a sleeping mat. I wandered through the market stalls in the dark, past smoky little trash fires built against stone walls, again enduring traffic hazards, fumes, recorded *om* chants and cries of *namaste*. One guy caught my attention. "*Ma'am. Will you let me try to sell you something?*" I didn't, but I gave him a cheerful chuckle. Finally I paid too much money for a unpadded ground pad for my trip, bought chocolate, walked half a mile in the dark past my hotel just like I did last night, and finally made it back, cursing my lack of navigational skills.

THE GODDESS OF DESTRUCTION

Day One

At our rafting company's 8 a.m. rendezvous at the Busy Bee Café, I found it odd that the Nepali guides kept asking if we were sure we had enough rum. Once enclosed in the bus I realized that at least one had had ample quantities last night, if his toxic breath was any indication.

Our bus (a "video coach") was made of cardboard-thin tin and the kind of glass that shatters into daggers. The seats were packed so close that our knees smashed into the metal back of the chair in front even when we turned completely sideways. Worse, the bus was painted Barbie pink.

No, actually: worst of all was what was blasting from the TV screen up front. It was my first real introduction to Bollywood — inane Indian pop music sung by women with shrill voices and beautiful writhing bodies. The girls did their synchronized pelvic thrusts, as their clumsy male counterparts jerked their limbs around like John Travolta on Ecstasy.

We passed a head-on collision whose gruesomeness didn't put a damper on the driving technique of our captain.

I was sitting next to 18-year-old Simon from England and trying to tell him from which UK town my grandfather had hailed, but all I could remember was that it began with a W-A, and the only name I could think of was "*wanker*," which is not correct.

Speaking of “*wanker*,” this is the first group trip I’ve been on that didn’t have any. Except for the guides, I mean. The only weird thing was that my young companions, none over thirty, didn’t quite know what to make of me. They’d swear at something, and then wheel around and look at me, gasping and apologizing as though I were the Queen Mum, unaware that I’m probably the one who made up the word in the first place, before the dawn of time.

Lila, nineteen years old and from Canada, had just returned from the trek that Cheryl and I are planning to do next month. As she described ascending thousands of feet of stone steps, I expressed concern about my own ability. “Oh, don’t worry,” she reassured me. “There are people even older than you up there — I mean, *really* old, with grey hair and everything.”

One of the Israeli guys tried to teach me the two sounds of Hebrew that give the most trouble to native English-speakers. I could “ch” up a storm (that guttural, phlemmy one like in Channukah) but the “r” threw me. You’re supposed to stick the middle of your tongue against the middle of the roof of your mouth and roll off the “r” like so many marbles. My version sounded like I was drowning.

I also learned a Yiddish curse: “You should be a calendar so they hang you on the wall and each day they tear a little piece off of you.” Influenced by the Brits, I started saying “knackered” and “WICK-ed” and “innit” (as in “*There’s a lot of rum in there, innit?*”)

It took us two-and-a-half hours to get to our put-in spot where half a dozen starving dogs joined us on the beach as our guides laid out sandwich fixings. One sweet old rottweiler-lab found pleasure in our scrap bucket until one of our guides started throwing rocks. Apparently that’s typical here. Many Nepalis are not sentimental about animals, unless the animal happens to be one of the sacred variety, like the cows whose damned poop I keep stepping in. The poor hound yelped in pain and ran off, but hunger kept driving him back.

Our first rapid, Little Brother, was a Class Four+ and we aced it. Next was Big Brother, where six days ago an accident claimed two lives and badly injured fifteen. I was grateful our guides decided to portage that one.

We put in below it and waited in our raft for a bit, as local boys perched on a giant rock overlooking the rapid, observing us. One spoke sweetly to me: “Hello, tourist.” I’d thought they were cute until the moment a kayaker crashed out-of-control through the rapids just above us, floating upside-down, underwater for too many seconds, and then was catapulted head-first into a boulder, before vanishing completely under the waves. It was a horrendous sight, and the kids burst into wild laughter.

The guy lived but sustained significant injuries.

The Nepalis aren’t shy about staring, even when you’ve crawled way off behind some potty bushes, trying to be discreet. One English girl with me observed, “*This is a rather exposed wee, innit?*”

My Facebook friend Laura had warned me that the Kali Gandaki is icy. What I didn’t factor in was the wind-chill once you’re soaked and tearing down the deep and sunless canyon. By the time we reached our campsite a few hours later, I was tinged a shade of blue that went well with my eyes.

As I focused on getting warm, the guides pounded down bottle after bottle of rum and started hitting on all the girls — well, except for me, at twice their age. Actually, one was so drunk he must have been blind because he made a few feeble attempts on my attentions. Before they totally lost control they finished preparing excellent *dal bhat*.

My cold is getting worse. While the young’uns partied, I wandered off and explored the riverbank and the terraced hill above our campsite. There’s a farm just above us, with rice paddies and a couple oxen in a lean-to shed. On my way back down, I spied on three local woman, backs laden with giant, heavy bunches of green grasses, who were spying on our campsite.

Day Two

Particularly on the misty mornings you can see why places like this gave birth to Shangri-La legends.

When we broke camp, we found we'd been camped on the nest of a certain eight-legged creature of astonishing proportion and which Simon immediately befriended. He kept trying to throw it at me, but I can run faster than you think.

Unaware that the first few hours of the day would be the wildest whitewater, I innocently took my place at the front of the raft, jamming my toes as tightly under the tubing as they'd go. If you "know from rafting," you know this is where you sit if you like to spend most of your time eye-to-eye with roiling water into which the raft is either diving or which is crashing over you in a powerful wave. It's also where you get tossed around the most. Have you watched what happens when current hits the spiny creatures that are rooted on a rock in a tide pool? You know how they twist and stretch and tangle and generally look very uncomfortable until the turbulence stops? That's what my backbone did: whooshing in every direction with each plummet into or climb up a wave. I didn't realize how bendable and posable I still am at my age.

From morning to night we heard a steady shrill way up the canyon walls. It was like crickets but without the modulation, so it sounded mechanical. One of my Israeli companions maintained with absolute conviction that it was the sound of water whistling through pipes. Never mind that there are no pipes up there. Only at the end of the trip did he allow as to the possible flaws in his theory. It was crickets — just not very musical, creative ones.

Around lunchtime we pulled up to a beach where an enterprising woman was selling goods to the tourists. My team picked up another half-dozen bottles of rum. I bought two chocolate bars.

By sunset I felt like I'd spent the day in the heavy-duty cycle of an industrial washing machine. I hobbled off alone with my chocolate to explore the surroundings beyond the camp and, in near darkness, could just make out the silhouettes of three rhesus macaque monkeys frolicking along the opposite bank. I saw a single lightning bug and many drunken Nepalis hitting on 20-year-old women. Bored again and with my cold clogging my head, I went to bed. But some idiot had thrown my so-called mattress into the river so it was

drenched. I took an Ambien, tossed the mattress outside my tent, and slept an Ambien-blessed sleep on the hard, cold ground.

Day Three

Practicing patience, local boys eventually got the benefit of our breakfast leftovers.

It was a quiet day on the river with only three mediocre rapids and a few miles of paddling along flat, still water above the dam. Some school kids watched us from a high bridge and I was grateful they didn't decide to spit — or if they did, they had bad aim.

I swam the last few hundred feet to the confluence of a smaller river whose turquoise water interlaced with the Kali Gandaki's glacial turbidity.

Then came the inevitable five-hour bus ride, as hair-raising as all the others. Today's delay was caused by a likely-fatal accident involving a truck over a cliff. By the time we got there the truck was inching its way back up the embankment, pulled by primitive, hand-rigged contraptions. Nearby, a woman sat on a curb. The burlap sack next to her started to squirm and oink. A sari-clad mother lay dead-asleep at the edge of a street with her two infants pulling at her and sobbing.

Back in Pokhara the guides suggested we meet for a farewell dinner at The Love Shack, chosen, I suspect, as a final, subliminal encouragement to any of the girls who had not yet been won over by their libidinous charms. As my rivermates engaged with glee in drinking contests, I got to talking to the only guy who wasn't leering: a sweet young man named Ram whose life couldn't be more different than mine. He grew up with nothing in a tiny village on the Kali Gandaki. I grew up with plenty in an affluent city with potable water and filet mignon. So we spoke politely about nothing. But suddenly we stumbled onto a topic we both understood — something about with drunk guys who hit on people, I think — and went into uncontrollable laughter. Everyone at the table turned to stare as we started to go semi-hysterical. "What's so funny?" they asked. But we couldn't begin to explain. It was delight at the unexpected and unlikely intersection of our experiences.

Leaving my youthfully spirited companions to their competitions, I went back to my hotel, managing for the first time not to get lost on the dark walk, or to step in ungulate excrement. However, up in my room I tossed back the covers and found a stately cockroach resting on my pillow, upper legs crossed behind its head, cigarette dangling from the corner of its mouth. I evicted it. As I drifted off (after examining every square inch of sheet and pillow) I heard the screams of low-status dogs being attacked by gangs of superiors, a heartbreaking sound I won't get used to.

THE BUS TO NOWHERE

Get up at the crack of dawn and have my usual breakfast: five cups of Nepali milk tea and a white china bowl of granola globbed with yogurt.

Bidding a grateful farewell to Anil, the hotel proprietor, I hoisted my bag and began to struggle the half-block down to the Green Line bus station — really just a small trapezoid of broken concrete — but Anil came to the rescue and carried my things the rest of the way. Two buses were sardined into the lot, engines droning and fumes thickening. I had about a half-hour wait, during which time two or three vendors appeared, brandishing their wares. One played a tiny sort of crippled fiddle about the size of a loaf of bread, with a fat belly, crooked neck, and a single string stretched between. I believe it's called a *sarangi*. With an equally teeny bow he coaxed the most mesmerizing music from it — a feat I could never accomplish. “You want to buy this?” I didn't. “No? I give you good price? Here: I have a smaller one. You like? Only 500 rupees. No? I sell both for only 800 rupees.” Undeterred by my resolve, he put away the instruments and fumbled in his shoulder bag for an object the size of a can of cigarette tobacco. “Look! A chess set! Real sandalwood. Smell.” He popped the top off. “The pieces are all there.” I declined again, but each rejection seemed to inspire new enthusiasm in him, with a new object drawn from his satchel. He must have figured me hooked but not landed. He was like a magician and I nearly expected a rabbit from his hat, except he wasn't wearing a hat. Finally, I relented and bought a photo poster with panoramic views of the Annapurna range, the original of which glowed pink behind him in the early morning light, unfathomably tall.

Finally the waiting crowd climbed into assigned seats. Mine was the first comfortable one

I've had on a bus yet — and with no one next to me! Off we went, again at breakneck speed through streets filled with mothers and babies, and along the downhill side of precipitous cliffs. This was my fourth bus trip in Nepal. Looking out the window as usual, I caught quick little vignettes of some life-in-Nepal scenes: an old man asleep in the doorway of a rickety house, two women taking a bath at the roadside spigot, kids dashing through the street dodging chickens, motorcycles and our bus, a cluster of men hunched over a betting table outside a dusty shop. (Betting isn't legal here, but it's a Tihar ritual, and the law seems to look the other way in the weeks preceding and following the holiday.) My mind tried to crawl into these little snapshots: what are those people thinking, what must it be like to be them? Of course I'll never be entitled to that information, but still I wonder.

Because people don't have much private space here, much of their lives is lived in public by the roadside: washing dishes and teeth on balconies, picking lice off toddlers' heads on front porches, and ejecting diverse mucoid substances everywhere.

After a couple hours of window-watching, it was time for my nap ritual: inflate and position my neck pillow, drape one of my bandannas (this one was tie-dyed) across my face, adjust my air gap so I don't suffocate, and tuck in the remaining bits so a stray breeze won't blow the thing off to reveal my gaping, snoring maw. It's quite a production.

Minutes after I was all settled, I heard an Aussie voice from the opposite side of the aisle, one row back. "So, why have *you* been in Pokhara?" No answer. He asked again, but his rude neighbor made no response. By the third query I had the irritating suspicion that he was addressing me, even though I was obviously under wraps. Maybe in Australia a bandanna over the face signifies an invitation to be asked stupid questions by a stranger.

I peeked out and, sure enough, he was looking directly at me. He's one of those guys who knows everything and is able to express it only at the threshold of aural pain as he bellows about this and that uninteresting topic. He asked questions whose answers he talked over. He claimed to be an expert in bargaining in Kathmandu. "You just have to understand how these people work," he asserted as he explained his methodology: first you laugh at the Nepalis when they name their high price, and then shove them in the shoulder in a spirit of

jovial fun, and then name a price so low it would insult Buddha.

Finally I extricated myself and returned to solitary confinement under my bandanna. By then I was awake again and wanting to be looking out the window, but was afraid to take the chance, so I hid there for the remaining six hours of the trip, which was broken only by a 45-minute lunch stop.

Finally, back near Kathmandu, our bus rolled into a strange neighborhood I'd never seen. It pulled up to the curb and cut off its engine. The bus staff leapt out and began to toss our gear from the roof to the dusty, potholed, literally spit-shined street. I saw my heavy canvas bag hurtle to the ground. This wasn't supposed to happen. "Where am I? Where am I going? How will I get there?" Then I thought, "Just relax. These unexpected turns and moments of being lost are what travel is all about." Then I thought, "No. This sucks and I hate traveling."

In an instant we were surrounded by cabbies like hyenas fighting over carrion. All were shouting their fares and groping for us. One cabbie tore my duffel from my arms and started to squeeze it into the trunk of his tiny, beat-up car. "How much?" I ask. "Only 300 rupees." I was outraged. I don't know where I am, but that's a lot for a cab even if I were going across town. I grabbed back my duffel, stumbled under its bulk, and scanned the mass of grasping humanity that surrounded me. The money's not the object — they're overcharging by only a couple US dollars, which is little to me and a lot to them — but I hate being aggressed upon or taken advantage of. I declined one inflated price after the other until I ran out of patience. It'd been a nine-hour bus ride, I had too pee, and I just wanted to get "home." I walked over to a guy at the edge of the fray: "I'll give you 150 rupees. No more." He argued for a few seconds but my resolve was obvious, so he agreed. As I climbed into the back seat of the boll weevil-sized cab, the Aussie came dashing over and jabbed me in the shoulder. "Hey, I saw that. You learn quick. Great bargaining!"

Half an hour later I was in my new and improved room at the Tibet Guest House, with the roof garden right outside my door: a healthy, six-story climb. The only drawback was the pitch-black shower.

BABY STEPS

It's my first day truly on my own in Kathmandu. The city had an anticipatory feel as people dashed about buying dyes and presents and lights and dripping Day-Glo-colored pastries for *Tihar*, which officially started today.

In narrow shops along both sides of the alley-sized streets are silver, handmade paper, oils and perfumes, herbs and spices, and every kind of felted wool object you can imagine. Wait... I just imagined a felted wool object they didn't have. But they do have brilliantly colored felted slippers with curled toes, necklaces fashioned from colorful balls, cat toys, purses with daisies, hats with weird things hanging off them, and plenty of other impractical items.

Just out of the central tourist district of Thamel, the sights get more interesting. There are the stunning 1600s- and 1700s-built Newar buildings with their swoopy roofs and ornate, hand-cut wooden designs. The shops and roadside stands for locals are more interesting than the tourist ones, too. Instead of yak wool blankets and Chinese "North Face" and "Orth Face" gear, here you can buy animal guts, or dip into vats of ground spices, pristine vegetables and beans, or choose from a variety of honeyed sweets that draw flies from near and far, or little tubs of brilliantly colored dye powders.

Still too disoriented to attempt to buy anything I looked neither left nor right as I passed salespeople assuring me they had exactly what I need: a Ghurka knife, Tiger Balm, and more *sarangis*. I attempt to be as blind to tragedy and poverty as I am to items for sale: the guy on a wheeled platform with only a torso and one arm for propelling himself, the leper in brown rags crawling down the gutter on the calloused stumps of two arms that began at the elbow. Every few feet is another person in dire need, for whom a little small change from me could mean a longed-for meal. Most painful were the leper toddlers (an oxymoron, I suppose, since they can't toddle), lying dirty and expressionless, almost lifeless, on the sidewalk next to their mothers who hold out limp, open hands. All of these I passed without acknowledging, stepping over as though they're potholes. The pain of seeing was too great. But of course no matter how hard I tried not to notice, I did, and the images slid past my eyes into a dark spot in my heart.

I made several trips from my hotel out into the streets and alleys of Thamel, each time venturing just a bit further from the Mother Ship and then racing back like a rat along an alley wall. It's a very confusing city to navigate — the streets have no names and all look the same, laid out like tossed pick-up sticks. Dribbling along the gutters are all kinds of things you don't even want think about. It's also a very dangerous city for walking, as I've mentioned. Even in the narrowest alleys you're likely to pass five interweaving strands of motorcycle traffic. I nearly gave my life to one that emerged suddenly on a 1.5-foot-wide walking path. Elsewhere I nearly tumbled into a two-foot-diameter open sewer hole in the middle of the dirt street. When in Kathmandu, never walk and try to take pictures at the same time.

At noon I summoned the courage to find my way to Swayambunath Stupa, a particularly sacred Buddhist shrine also known as the Monkey Temple. To get there I meandered down nameless dirt streets through Thamel and Chetrapati until I reached a foul band of water that used to be a river but is now a fetid collection of trash and excrement. I held my breath as I ran across the narrow bridge. From there, it was easy. I was soon at a painted gate at the foot of a 300-foot hill where a stone staircase — hundreds of steps bisected by a metal handrail and flanked by vendors of unnecessary items — led to the temple. All around were statues of Shivas and Buddhas and Who-Knows-Who; there are many so deities in Nepal (Hindu and Buddhist, with many shared), that it would take a Westerner (at least this Westerner) years to learn them.

The begging at this temple was the worst I've seen. Filthy mothers sit drooping against the metal railings with their legs leaning out onto the steps. Their eyes are glazed and shadowed (malnutrition? drugs?), black hair matted and skin much darker than most other Nepalis, clearly a different ethnic group than one of the majorities. As I breathlessly trudged up what seems like a thousand stairs, the mothers extended their hands like tentacles and, when I didn't stop to give them money, grabbed at me. The whole time they make this eerie, unnerving, groaning sound. On their laps lie screaming, black-eyed infants, none more than a few weeks old. The mothers don't hold or comfort them. They don't touch them. They don't even glance at them as they howl. Instead, the babies — all 18 inches of them — are

draped loosely across laps like partially emptied sacks of rice. Once again, the sight went through my eyes and plunged into my gut. I found caring less about the mothers — their begging is slick, perfected and intrusive— but those infants ... what will become of them? I wanted to grab one and bring it home. Would the mother have minded? They seemed too out-of-it to care, but then again, I don't understand a bit about what I'm seeing.

A few steps up I began to see the rhesus monkeys swinging through branches, running across stones, fighting over scraps of food, climbing over Buddhas, and glancing at the humans with cautious bemusement. At the top of the hill are more religious structures than I could count — *stupas* dotted with butter lamps and stray dogs. Vendors sell an array of faux-sacred artifacts. The view of sprawling Kathmandu is expansive and must be spectacular on a clear day, but this day is so thick with toxins I can't see far.

I found my way back down with no trouble, except for the nightmarish sea of grasping arms. At the bottom a group of tourists asked me — *me*, of all people: the one who gets lost in Death Valley — for directions. I felt the ultimate in cool, and was even able to direct them accurately before aiming myself back to the stinking river. I tore over a different bridge, holding my breath, and then past a small Hindu temple. I can't imagine how the worshippers and the gods tolerate the stench there. In the central courtyard rose an old stone structure spray-painted with Nepali letters and this wisdom in English: "Life is uncertain. Be good. Death is certain. Do good."

Back in Thamel I visited Pilgrims Book House at a bend in an alley, where I was instantly drawn to a sign inside advertising Indian astrology readings. With a look on my face that tells observers, "I'm doing this for a friend; it's not for me!" I copied down the details. I've already had my kidney beans read in Guatemala so I may as well learn what the South Asian stars think of me.

I made an appointment for an hour later and filled the time with book-browsing. Pilgrims self-publishes all kinds of metaphysical things. There's **God the Astrologer**, and — not for the faint of heart — **Basic Self Knowledge: An Introduction to Esoteric Psychology Based on the Gurdjieff System of Esoteric Development with Reference to the**

Writings of Krishnamurti. My favorites were from their series of 3" x 4" books, haphazardly printed and bound in India. **The Pocket Guide to Fortune Telling** was lots of fun, and I couldn't resist buying **How To Select a Guru**.

My fortune-teller arrived and led me to the restaurant at the back of the bookstore. As he sat down at the table opposite me, I noticed a powerful urine odor. As I was wondering how someone could stink that much without apparent embarrassment, he reached across the table and lifted my right hand into his. "Let's begin with a palm reading."

"Well," I thought, "at least I'm washable." He cradled my hands, slowly tracing the lines of one palm and then the other. He turned them over, and back again, examining closely. I only hoped the future didn't also lie in the multitudinous lines on my face.

Gathering the usual astrological information, he noted my birthplace (Delaware) as "Dallover, USA." He drew two squares on a scrap of paper and subdivided each into twelve sections, giving an argyle-sock effect. Again he picked up my hands, and again — twenty-four times in all — scrutinizing each and then inscribing another number or Nepali letter into his diagram.

As he divined, I glanced around the room and suddenly spotted the true source of the stench: a bathroom a few feet away, from which vapors were seeping even through its closed door. My hands relaxed into his. No need for scrubbing with lye after all.

I was intrigued to learn that, in Nepal and India, universities teach astrology and Tarot and other psychic things as an academic major: not as socio-cultural phenomenon but as practical art. My reader has earned advanced degrees in the field.

Speaking of universities, my linguistics-major daughter taught me about Barnum Statements: "seemingly precise, they apply to almost all people," (see **The Skeptical Inquirer** [<http://www.csicop.org/si/2003-07/roorschach.html>]) But I still think some of his conclusions are interesting, such as:

- Intuitive [All healer-y dudes tell me this.]
- Healing power [Double-underlined, though I've never healed a thing in my life.]
- Upbeat; melancholic. [He pondered this contradiction, rechecking my numbers and palms to verify. "The two ideas don't go together. This is strange. I'm not sure I understand it." [But I did.]
- An affair is likely to materialize within six months. [It's been six months. I'm still waiting.]

He thought for a while before delivering his last observation:

- Health problems in the near future. [This is a first. Everyone always tells me how healthy I am.] He took up my hand again with an expression of concern and continued, "... Problems with your *mind*." [And you know what? He was right. But that's another story. Don't worry: I got much better after they took my gallbladder out last month.]

Bidding him adieu (uh, I mean *namaste*), I launched myself back into the madness of Thamel and elbowed my way to the hotel in the settling darkness, watching the sidewalk for slick spots. I think some Nepalis make a sport out of spitting just ahead of where a tourist is about step. I never got a direct hit, but there were close calls.

Some tourists don't know proper walking etiquette. In the middle of the bustle, they just stop dead at some novel sight, requiring that I suddenly veer into auto traffic to avoid smashing into them. "Damned *tourists*," I'm always grumbling.

REUNION

It's the first day of Tihar — The Festival of Lights — a major national holiday that lasts all week. It's an annual five-day celebration that pays homage to certain sacred forms of life: the crow, the dog, the cow and the brother. Today is dedicated to the crow (*kag*), messenger from the underworld. Hindu celebrants begin their day by leaving out plates of food for the crows early in the morning, before breakfast. This is how I spent the day:

8:00: Still asleep. Oops.

9:00: Drink a gallon of Nepali milk tea in the rooftop garden outside my room

9:30: Decide against field trip to Kathmandu Durbar Square, since Cheryl and trekking partners due to return at noon to pick me up.

11:00 Go to wait in the lobby in case they're early. Start talking to champion kayaker from New Zealand, who is also waiting for a friend.

12:30: Try to check e-mail from the Internet room, but power goes out because of load-shedding.

12:40: Back to lobby where, surrounded by giant *thangkas* and Tibetan statues of Buddhist deities, NZ guy and I start talking again.

1:00: Drink another gallon of *masala*

2:00: Overcome the urge to worry about wasted time; this trip is so blessedly long that it's not really a problem.

2:30: Still can barely understand my new friend. Never realized New Zealand English sounds like a different language.

2:45: NZ friend plants a kiss on my cheek, writes down his room number, invites me to get in touch with him, and leaves. I'm not that kind of girl — but sometimes I wish I was — so I never see him again.

3:15: Cheryl and pals arrive.

3:45: She and I hop into the waiting Land Cruiser for the ride back to her place, threading our way through a labyrinth of ever-narrowing streets, past garden plots, trash plots, a guy on a bike selling fruit, a "Hair Saloon," roadside shrines, market stalls and brilliantly flowering bushes draping over eight-foot brick walls. The alley gets so narrow that two cars can't fit side-by-side, so there's always a competition to see who can make the other back up.

Cheryl's apartment, a fourth-floor walkup, is full of light. It's a Hindu house so shoes stay outside. Don't tell Shiva, but I kept forgetting for the first few days.

My bed for the next month will be a futon on the floor of her office. On one end there's a door to the balcony, which I leave open to get plenty of Kathmandu's version of fresh air, since it's quite warm.

I haven't been able to empty my suitcases for ten days. Damp river gear has been mingling with my finery (fine blue jeans, t-shirts, hiking boots). So I hung clothes in the closet and tossed the rest of my possessions into a single drawer underneath: medicine, chocolate, travelers' checks, bras, camera, Hong Kong dollars, chocolate, maps, underwear, sunscreen, battery chargers, chocolate, tape recorder, memory cards, socks, tea bags, chocolate, photos, rupees, presents for friends, books. Needless to say, it's impossible to find what I'm looking for.

This neighborhood — Lazimpat — is genuine Kathmandu, unlike the tourist district where I've been staying. Here, it's mostly houses and three- or four-story apartment buildings, interspersed with closet-sized stores selling penny candy (rupee candy?), scoops of sugar from a sack, a few mangy fresh vegetables and a handful of other things. There's a pharmacy, three Internet cafés (rarely open because of frequent power outages), a sari shop and a place that sells chickens. For the most part the women here dress traditionally in *kortas* while most of the men and children wear Western attire. Few foreigners come here, yet the locals don't take much notice of me either, except when we make eye contact and exchange a *namaste*.

Once unpacked, my first order of business was to try to learn how to get around on my own without getting lost. Walking back to Thamel for dinner with Cheryl, I paid particular attention to every turn and every landmark, jotting voluminous notes on a scrap of paper while trying not to trip over the rocks and holes in the road: "Left after the wall with broken glass, right at the girls' school, straight at the three-way fork, left at the stone Ganesh, right after the guys gambling in the street..." If I reach the Tit Bits Café, I've gone too far.

BOW WOW

Although I'm no longer completely alone on this trip, for the first time I feel lonely. I'm doing my best to be an easy guest for Cheryl, but it's tricky because I do things like use more toilet paper than I should and forget to turn off the occasional light. I still have my cold, with a residual cough that's getting worse. My stomach has been iffy the past few days; I've been extremely cautious with food, but if there's even a droplet of tap water on your plate, you can get very sick.

On the bright side, today is the day I've been anticipating today for over a year: the second day of Tihar, called Kukur Tihar and the day the Nepalis celebrate the dog, symbol of loyalty. Few people here keep dogs as pets — they're not big dog fans here — so most pups (and there are hundreds) live neglected and abused on the street in varying states of disease and starvation. But today even the mangiest gets treated like royalty. By 10:00 a.m., every stray we passed was already adorned with a yellow *tika* on its forehead and a lei (*mala*) of marigolds around its neck. The luckiest had their ears dyed: one yellow, one green. And the best part of the ritual, as far as the hounds are concerned, is when they get a serving of English digestive biscuits.

Armed with burlap sacks, the volunteers at KAT harvest the city each day, looking for female dogs in need of spaying. They also bring in dogs with bashes and broken body parts and mange. They fix them up and return them to their neighborhood. They also have an educational arm that tries to teach young Nepalis that kicking and stoning dogs is not desirable behavior.

In addition to its short-term visitors, KAT is home to a number of dogs too disabled to be re-released into the street. The *puja*—ritual—involved anointing the dogs all over with sanctified water, adorning their little heads with a yellow and orange *tika*, sprinkling marigold petals across their backs. Dusting their feet and the tips of their ears and their tail with color. Normally only the male dogs can get this treatment, but I don't know why, except that Tihar focuses on honoring the dudes of various species, from crows to men, as you'll see.

LAXMI PUJA

Today is the third day of Tihar, Laxmi Puja, in honor of Laxmi, the goddess of wealth. There are candles and fires and lights everywhere. Now that I'm in a real Kathmandu neighborhood (rather than the touristy one I was first) I get to see the authentic celebration. A guy named Arjun owns our house. He and his family spent the whole day getting ready for the evening celebration. They painted a trail of small footprints out of mud- and blood-colored paint up all four flights of stairs to the roof where they've built an elaborate shrine to Laxmi. At the threshold of the front door, a young boy dripped fine sand in rainbow hues

into a swastika pattern. I don't know the origin of that symbol in Nepal, but Wikipedia says it's to honor the god Kubera, whom I've never heard of. The entire apartment building is curtained in color from cascades of small electric bulbs. People of more humble means put small bowls of fire on their hearth. Legend has it that Laxmi circles the earth seeking light, and if she likes what she sees, she will grace a family with good fortune in the coming year. From morning to night there is singing and traditional musicians and firecrackers in the street. Small neighborhoods have their own celebrations. In ours, a ragtag band of people of dubious musical inclination pounded out rhythmic tunes, as young boys and girls got up to do wild-armed, waist-wriggling dances. Much to my embarrassment, the kids forcibly yanked me up into the fray. I channeled my inner-hippie and flung myself around to the music. The children were amused.

SONG OF MYSELF

It's the fourth day of Tihar, celebrated by many as a day in honor of the Ox, and by Newars as an honoring of the self: a day of purification. I guess it's a private affair, because I didn't see any evidence of it on the street.

The really exciting news is that the Chinese government granted us visas to visit Tibet in three days. They're extremely hard to get now — everyone I've met who's tried has been denied —so we're lucky.

BHAI TIKA

It's *Bhai Tika* today, when girls and women honor the men in the family with gifts of food and flowers and blessings. (By the way, I learned that there is no reciprocal arrangement in their holiday tradition.) Cheryl's friend Thakur invited us to join in his family gathering, so we got ourselves dressed up as traditionally as possible. Feeling rather foolish, I allowed Cheryl to clothe me in a maroon *kurta* — a flowing three-piece ensemble with long, stretchy-waisted pants that let you eat endless *dal bhat*, long tunics to hide the newly-expanded stretchy waist, and a billowing scarf that falls into everything, from plates of food to the toilet. As we shouldered our daypacks and began our walk through a labyrinth of narrow

alleys toward Thakur's, Cheryl noted, "*We'd never be mistaken for Nepali women. They don't wear backpacks.*" I suggested there may be other ways for natives to make that discovery.

Thakur lives in a plain (but by Nepali standards, quite fancy) three-story concrete house. At the foot of the stairs were a few dozen pairs of shoes: tiny plastic flip-flops, flats with flowers, and a variety of other cheap footwear that may hold up for two miles at best. We added our sandals to the collection and climbed two flights, till we were nearly blinded by a whirl of reds.

Every woman wore brilliant shades of sheer, floating color, adorned by shiny bangles hanging off nearly every appendage and promontory: ears, shoulders, neck, wrists, hands — all the more striking against their long black hair.

Thakur's extended family of about 25 was there, including the matriarch, a 78-year-old aunt who watched over the proceedings with a practiced eye.

Though I didn't understand a word of what they were saying, I was thoroughly absorbed through the whole five or so hours, just watching the interactions between families, listening to the language, bathing my eyes in all the color, and participating in the ritual.

One little girl wasn't dressed up as boldly as the others, wearing only a simple, red-and-black-checked cotton *kurta*, while the other girls her age were sparkling. I learned that she is an orphan who has been taken in by the family, and in exchange helps with domestic chores. She was always washing dishes and sweeping by the sides of the adult women, while the other girls giggled and practiced painting *tikas* on each others' foreheads. Whenever the women were working, so was she. When they stopped, so did she.

Despite her labor, she was affectionate, full of laughter, with light in her eyes. I tried to learn more about the arrangement, but it was impossible without violating the code of my host's culture. It didn't seem to be a case of indentured servitude — though that is still alive in Nepal — but rather a charitable act on Thakur's part, and she seemed at least marginally a family member.

Those in attendance spoke English as well as I spoke Nepali (which is to say none) so I had to resort to wildly exaggerated gestures that brought doubled-over laughter from the other women, particularly the matriarch who was wearing traditional clothing over a plaid, flannel lumberjack shirt.

Let me tell you about using the bathroom while wearing a *kurta*. The standard toilet is a ceramic hole (if it's a nice establishment) flush with the floor, with grippy ridges at the sides for your feet. The surrounding tile is slippery with water. So there you are, clutching acres of fabric in arms that should be used for balance instead. I never could figure out which was the front and back of the toilet, and thus never knew which way to orient myself. For the sake of variety, I alternated. There is no toilet paper so, with yards of material still hefted, I slid unshod across the floor to the faucet. At last satisfied that I had completed my duties properly I opened the door. There, a herd of Nepali women covered their enthusiastic laughter with their hands as they watched me skid across the floor on water-slicked feet.

Though this is a day honoring brothers, Thakur decided to bend the rules a little. Not only did he symbolically adopt Cheryl and me into his family, but he proved adaptable about our genders as well. The showering of blessings and goodies normally reserved for the men were extended without reservation to us.

The ritual began at 11:30 sharp: the most auspicious time (the hour varies slightly each year). We all moved out to the third-floor concrete balcony where women and girls started snaking around the seated boys and men (and us, the faux brothers) enclosing us in a sacred ring of water poured from *akalash* (holy water vessel).

Then they ceremoniously hurled marigold petals on our heads, patted oil onto our hair and combed it through, and popped a slice of apple into each of our mouths. They circled around again and this time we got a spoonful of sweetened curd from a shared spoon and a *malla* (like a lei) of fresh orange marigolds and dried purple clover around our necks. Next they methodically painted a vertical *tika* on our brows with a rainbow of squares in brilliant powdered color.

Finally, onto each of our laps they lay a metal tray of theoretically edible presents that I hesitated to sample: stuff oozing oil and honey, of which the flies were fond, a few Cadbury's chocolate doodahs, and some mystery food products. The boys and men also got presents wrapped in plastic bags labeled "*Cow boy emotion*[®]."

Quite a long time after the women finished serving the men and us our mug of beer and multiple helpings of *dal bhat* (the *masa* variety, with goat meat), the men adjourned to a separate room where they began gambling and playing cards. Only then did the women sit down to eat. Afterwards they massed onto the deck and the outdoor faucet to wash abundant dishes. The women had barely started to tackle the stack of metal plates before the men were shooting dice and smoking lots of cigarettes.

I was worried that all my picture-taking would bug them, but it didn't. In fact, when I missed something or someone, they asked me to document more.

The whole thing was fascinating and touching. As an outsider, I am particularly lucky to have experienced it.

Oh, and I learned a new expression. If a Nepali calls you "420" (*char sei bis*) you should not be entirely pleased. It means a clever person who isn't as clever as he thinks he is.

The party finally over, we walked back to Cheryl's apartment. It's a solemn day for me, since Dad died five years ago today, and four years ago to the day, it was my beloved former mother-in-law, Helen. Their deaths had dealt me a punch that toppled me for a long time, and from which I'm still climbing back. So I decided it would be a brilliant idea to visit the Bagmati River, a sacred place where Hindus burn dead people and then sweep the ashes and marigold petals into the river that winds through India and into the ocean. But guess what. I couldn't have thought of a stupider idea. Instead of feeling a sense of connection with the dead, my heart only broke as I looked through the dusk across the river at a nearly-incinerated person with an arm flopped out to the side. Dad had been cremated too. I'd gone with my mother to pick up his ashes and was struck by how heavy they were. As we drove back into the farm in West Virginia where he'd lived and died, Mom lifted up the box

with his name on it, and showed what was left of him the hillsides that he'd loved. Anyway, I guess I'm still too raw from all that to memorialize him in such a graphic way.

I stayed till nearly dark. Monkey-covered Pashpatinath — a Hindu temple where non-Hindus are not allowed — was just a hulking silhouette with only its spires distinguishable against the sky.

Inhaling smoke from burning humans, I took a stroll down the foul and stinking river, past *ghats* (funeral pyres) and *Hanuman* (monkey god)-masked ascetics and a one-legged leper on a hand-hewn crutch and an eerie sight: a casket perched over the edge the river bank. I didn't stop to determine if it was occupied. A casket is not traditional there so it was inexplicable.

Reconvening with Cheryl, we wove through the streets looking for a cab to Boudhanath, the Tibetan Buddhist section of Kathmandu. After much negotiation we found a taxi that would charge a fair rate, so we settled into the back seat and the driver turned the key. Nothing. The engine coughed and died. He jumped out, popped the hood and started whacking around with his wrench. Eventually the car came to life, and continued to choke the whole journey, lurching us toward our destination. Our driver was even more suicidal than most, but we lived. At the temple we did the *kora*, circumambulating the *stupa* clockwise, spinning prayer wheels as we went. I hoped for Obama's election, peace, protection for those suffering, and other noble things. For myself I wished for love and some amount of contentment. Oh, and enough money to live. As a final spiritual gesture I paid twenty rupees to light four lamps — tealight-sized candles burning melted butter from a yak or other Nepali ungulate — each of which accepts a single prayer.

The only restaurant that was still open in the area was staffed by an attractive pair of Nepali Little People who raced back and forth to serve their many customers —in the dark. The dim candles didn't supply enough light to keep me from tripping on the steep stairs and the uneven stones on the floor, but this couple knew the pedestrian hazards by heart. The

reason there was no power was because of the frequent “load-shedding” in Kathmandu: outages lasting from a few to 18 hours a day.

Back at home we encountered the apartment’s security guard. He breaks my heart. He knows no English so whenever I see him, we just smile and nod and *namaste* a lot as he races to open the door for me. His name has too many syllables for me to understand. Around 60 years old, dressed insufficiently for the nighttime cold, he is alone and struggling. His wife died recently and he has no family. Nor does he have a job, being old and unemployable. For the moment he’s working as a doorman at the apartment but only on a trial basis, never knowing from day to day if he’ll still be employed, hoping not to lose his big opportunity. What hurts my heart the most is watching him repeatedly bow almost to the ground in his *namastes*, then looking up with eyes desperate to please.

THE BAT BRIDE

On our walk toward the American Embassy and the tourist district of Thamel, Cheryl and I passed under the towering trees that line the sidewalk in front of the now-vacant royal palace. Cheryl pointed heavenward toward the source of chattering and squeaking in the uppermost branches. Scores of giant fruit bats hung there like huge drops of dirty water about to plunge from a gutter. They were about a foot long, and with their khaki-colored leathery wings opened they were over two feet wide. I was mesmerized and impressed, and declared to Cheryl, “When I grow up, I’m going to *marry* a fruit bat.”

I believe the fruit bats heard me, and that, according to their species-specific marriage rites, they take a bride by pooping on her newly washed head from fifty feet up when she’s on her way to dinner. As you might infer, giant bats have giant digestive tracts. I was so shocked that I didn’t see the dead rat in my path until I almost stepped on it. At the restaurant I attempted, elbows akimbo above my head, to repair the damage with the aid of some purified ice water. It was neither graceful, discreet or successful.

I had yet another extended déjà vu today, my third in two weeks. I was looking at some women in saris walking down the street and they suddenly the whole scene seemed very familiar, as though I’d seen them regularly while growing up. But of course my comfortable

childhood couldn't have been more different. Cheryl says Nepal is strange that way, with the occurrence of unusual and even mystical phenomena. I wonder why it's happening. Am I going to become yet another American who vanishes into South Asia, lured by the power of Eastern mysticism? Will I start folding my hands and saying *namaste* to people when I return to the US? If I do, I hope someone clubs me over the head and makes me stop.

MY FIRST POLICE STATE

We're bound for Tibet! I don't understand the security system at the Kathmandu airport. First, you carry all your stuff to be x-rayed. Then you walk through the metal detector, and then they pat you down for good measure. You retrieve your bag and check it. Then you run your carry-on through x-ray again, and then they open it and ask you if you have any knives or lighters. You say *no*. Then they take your smaller bag out of your bigger bag and ask if there are any knives or lighters in *there*. You know how to answer. Then they unzip your smallest bag and point to a Tampax stuck in the side pocket. You blush. They pull the Tampax out of the side pocket and hold it high in the air in all its feminine hygiene glory for further inspection not only by themselves but by all those passing by. They look at you, they look at it, they look at you, they tap it back into its pocket and wave you on.

All that amused me, and seeing Mount Everest from the plane window was a thrill. The ritual on the ground in Tibet, however, was not a pleasure. Chinese sentries wearing firing-squad expressions took up their positions every few feet, re-screening our thoroughly screened baggage and examining our visa for a full ten minutes with disapprovingly furrowed brow. If we veered from the narrow path they had envisioned for us, they promptly pushed us back into line. They made us stand in an electronic box that took a "print" of our eyes. The most disturbing part came after we cleared all that, and they wanted to search my backpack. It was well established that I had no dangerous items in there, but the agent wasn't satisfied. She unzipped my bag and pulled out my books. One, called **Sherpa**, had lots of photos of Tibetans, which she examined one by one. As she continued to rifle through each of my other innocuous books—it took her ten minutes to get through my **Lonely Planet Guide to Tibet**—I inferred that the object of her security desire was an image of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama. It was my first close brush with censorship, and it was sobering.

COLTH AND SHOSE

I've never been in an occupied country before. Though I'm somewhat up-to-date on the tragedy of the situation here, I'm finding it much more upsetting in person than on paper. The Chinese have turned all but the heart of historic Lhasa into glitzy urban sprawl, with shiny stores selling useless and pricey Chinese trinkets. What remains of the old town is a few blocks' worth of traditional shops: brightly painted storefronts with far more goods on the sidewalk in front than inside: cloth sacks of produce, plastic cubes overflowing with spices and dried fruit, massive wheels of yak cheese, piles of sneakers. Steam rises from doorways of *momo* (dumpling) shops. There are no cars in this part of town. Abundant bicycles and foot traffic weave their way among the umbrellas and awnings that shelter the merchandise. A fair number of people wear white masks over their mouths. I don't know if that's to keep from getting sick, or to keep the sickness to oneself. I saw a number of children with a black smudge above their nose. These were ashes bestowed by lamas, at the parents' request, to help the children sleep that night.

The names of the shops are confounding. The Yuankelog Colth and Leatehr Shose Shop is as likely to sell bicycles as it is colth or leatehr shose. We passed Beam's Tip Store, Prayer Book Ordering Place, Cuiturai Antique Breach of Store, Para Dise Eye, Strange Magic Place, Satisfied Woolen Fabric Shop, Merit of Jewel, Peculiar Stove House and yet others. The Baby Carriage Shop seemed straightforward in purpose, but when I looked inside I saw it sold only TVs. As I passed by I heard someone call to me, "Looke-how-are-you-lookee!"

Every hundred feet, a cluster of very young and severe soldiers stands at attention with machine guns, or moves along the sidewalk in riot gear. As the Tibetans make their traditional counterclockwise stroll around the central *stupa*—a giant circular mound that holds Buddhist relics—the Chinese police elbow their way through in the opposite direction, with an icy inhumanity.

Our guide, Tenzin, is proving not to be particularly useful. I can't tell if it's a limitation in his ability to speak English or in his knowledge of life in Tibet, but we're thinking of contacting the agency and requesting a different guide.

AN AFTERNOON WITH THE SECRET POLICE

One of the hardest things about touring Lhasa is the bathroom situation. You need to drink a lot of water because the air is so dry, but the consequences can be dire. Many of the public restrooms smell so horrendous that they induce nausea from a distance of 100 feet. A required item is a bandanna to cover mouth and nose while using the facilities, such as they are. You might want to remember to bring your own toilet paper, since that's not a common commodity here. Some people don't even bother making it to the cover of the bathroom, squatting where the spirit moves them, so wherever you are you might encounter human waste. Sewage is carried along the streets in open troughs.

Our first stop today, accompanied by our guide Tenzin, was to Jokhang Temple. Outside the structure, hundreds of pilgrims gather from remote corners of Tibet, some in traditional yak fur garb and others in Western clothing. All facing the same direction, they prostrate themselves over and over again, bowing down to the ground and slicing forward on their knees, sometimes with little wooden shoes on their hands and mats under their bellies. Here, as elsewhere, many people wear white masks over their mouth and nose. The occasional merchant sells thermoses of yak butter for burning inside the temple. And on the rooftops: the Chinese police.

Our next stop was the legendary Pothala Palace, burial place for many of the Dalai Lamas and the last home of Number 14 before he escaped in 1959. After the grueling climb up hundreds of stairs, Tenzin asked to borrow 200 *yuan* to pay our admission. Cheryl and I raised an eyebrow, pretty certain we'd prepaid, but we complied. The entrance fees to these sacred Buddhist places, ironically, go to the Chinese government, not to support the facility itself. Likewise, if you want to take a picture, they charge you and the money goes into governmental coffers. For the time being, on principle I decided against snapping any photos. No sooner had we entered the palace than Tenzin explained that was sick and had to leave. We never did see him again.

Walking through places that once had been intimate to the current Dalai Lama was haunting: his sleeping quarters, the chamber where he had had a fruitless meeting with Chinese officials in 1957. Though I am familiar with the outline of the Dalai Lama's story, there was something about being there at his home that ripped my heart apart.

We wandered on to the tomb of the 7th Dalai Lama. There, we found a friendly man in saffron and scarlet robes who spoke a little English. I asked him if he were a monk or a lama. “Ohhh, just a monk. Big difference. Lamas start when they are very young.” He’d joined the monastery when he was the ripe old age of thirteen. We chatted for a while and I told him that I’d seen the current Dalai Lama speak in the U.S. He lit up. “You’re from the U.S.? Just a minute!” He vanished up some stairs into a chamber off limits to us and out of sight, and returned with two silky *katas* (neck scarves). He tied one around my neck and gave me a blessing, and did the same for Cheryl. I was deeply moved, for about thirty seconds, when my emotion changed to fear. It seems we’d been observed in our friendly interaction, and had uttered a forbidden name: that of His Holiness. As we moved away from our monk, we were joined, lockstep, by a member of the Chinese secret police in white shirt and dark pants. We walked a few feet and stopped. He walked a few feet and stopped. Right by our side. He wasn’t even trying to be surreptitious. Having never been tailed before, at first I thought it was coincidence, but Cheryl—and eventually the facts—swayed me otherwise. I considered removing the *kata*—an obvious symbol of my subversiveness—but that seemed cowardly. For a full two hours this continued, stop and go, until we left the palace and began the spiraling descent back to street level. Then he vanished as suddenly as he’d appeared, and I was washed with relief that I wouldn’t be spending the night in some jail cell.

I’m starting to feel unwell. I think it must be the elevation. I’m breathless and have a headache, and at 2:00 a.m. last night my heart suddenly started pounding. I took a Diamox.

TWILIGHT ZONE

The **Lonely Planet Guidebook** says, “Whatever you do, don’t even think about getting sick in Tibet,” or words to that effect. Why didn’t I listen? All last night I felt increasingly ill. The low fever I hadn’t told anyone about got higher, and my heart went through cycles of pounding so powerfully that it knocked the breath out of me. I had severe nausea and a paralyzing headache. I was too weak and dizzy to lift my head off the pillow. I drifted in and out of tortured sleep throughout the night until the black dawn of the Lhasa morning finally arrived. Whatever toxic stew is coursing through my veins is worse than anything I’ve ever known. If I’m like this in two days, I won’t be able to leave Lhasa as scheduled. All day, strong odors of incense and fried foods wafted into the room, at a time when even the

thought of a saltine threw me into battle with the nausea gods.

All day I lay as though frozen, unable even to twitch, I admit to being scared. I really wasn't in the mood for dying in Tibet. I was relieved at one thing: that Cheryl had obeyed my request and headed out to explore Lhasa. I'd not wanted her to be locked in there all day with me when we have so little tourist time. Midday, she came back and checked in on me, and then left again, returning within the hour with a man in tow. "Mima's here, from the travel agency. Can he come in?" (*Mima* means *Tuesday* in Tibetan, which is the day he was born.) I didn't have the strength or the dignity to object, though I must have been a sight. He took one look at me, my eyes glossy and at half mast, and suggested we go to the doctor. Visions of recycled hypodermic needles, stained gurneys and urine-scented hallways informed my abrupt answer: no hospitals! I just need to get well enough to make the five-day overland trip back "home" to Nepal. I popped some kind of pill—Cipro, maybe?—and waited for recovery, drifting into and out of feverish nightmares.

BACK TO LIFE

Is it another strange dream or could it be true: Barack Obama has been elected the 44th president of the United States!

As I rest, I'm watching snow fall on the desert mountains over yonder, and in the foreground the Chinese riot police are making their heavy-handed patrol through the Tibetan part of town. We've had no hot water for three days. The bathroom sink drains right onto the floor. The power is out. The toilet plugs up several times a day. Things that I normally take in stride are making me mad today. I haven't eaten anything but *chu* (water) for over 36 hours and my system is requesting that I continue at that pace until further notice. I was able to force myself into a sitting position in bed for 15 minutes, but attempts at walking have been less successful. I feel horrible, but it appears as though I'm going to live.

While my body said *Lie down now*, my mind insisted, *No. Need to get out*. So I summoned the strength to head out into the street and get jostled by vendors who were calling out something that sounded like *kookaloombaloomba*, but wasn't. I was so weak that I was tripping on the cobblestones while perusing yak-fur-lined clothing, fruits and veggies, candy, yak meat and yak butter, wool, and various kinds of entrails. As dark fell, the merchandise vendors started to load their voluminous wares into rusted metal carts welded to bicycle

frames, while the dinner purveyors arrived with their portable fires and all kinds of foods that might appear delectable to someone who didn't already feel like puking: skewers with chicken, veggies and yak, and abundant hand-made French fries and potato chips.

As my strength sapped and I got ready to go back to the hotel, I heard a Tibetan-accented voice over my shoulder. "Speak English with you?" Being of a suspicious nature, I wondered if this was a ruse; but also being of an adventuresome nature, I answered him politely. His English was poor but we tried. When he asked where I was from, I told him, and he shouted, "Obama!" Then he asked, "You come to my school?" I didn't know what he meant, but I said I was sick and was leaving Lhasa the next day. I asked his name—another Tenzin—and told him mine. He grasped my hand. "Thank you very much. I will always remember this." He won't, but I appreciate the sentiment.

I returned to the room for another long rest. I still feel horrible. Thirsty, I ventured back out into the street and bought water, all in Tibetan: *Tashi delek. Chu?* which means *Howdy. Water?* Then, to celebrate the election of Obama, I decided to take a spin around the Jokhang Temple, doing a *koru* with the natives, spinning the line of prayer wheels as I went. I heard a soft mooing sound at my elbow. I looked. There stood village woman in traditional garb, staring at me. She wore a fur hat, layer upon layer of moth-eaten sweaters, coarse grey skirt with an apron of once-colorful cloth, and red and green felt slippers. *Moooooooooooooooo*, she repeated, locking her eyes with mine. She moved closer, extended her hand and mooed even more meaningfully. I cocked my head in confusion. After one final *mooo* she gave up and joined the other hundreds in the crowd moving clockwise around the shrine.

OUT OF LHASA

We have an 825-mile journey overland ahead of us, across Tibetan highlands, past Everest and back down into Nepal. I'm still feeling horrible, but I'm going to shut up about it. I will prop myself up in the back seat of the car and rest as much as I can. Our new guide is Nima (*Sunday* in Tibetan, and by now you can guess why), who in a couple of hours has told us more about Tibet than our other guide did altogether, before he vanished.

Nima's personal story is haunting. He was thirteen in 1989 when the Dalai Lama won the Nobel Peace Prize. In Lhasa there were massive celebrations. Amid all this joy, there was

violence from pro-China forces. His father was fatally shot through the heart. Lhasa became too dangerous, so he, his mother and his two sisters were smuggled out of the city, from which point they began a 100-mile trek across the Himalaya, walking by night and sleeping by day. It was January: Tibetan New Year. Near the Nepal border, the army and police started shooting, so Nima's family started running across the snow and ice. Unbeknownst to Nima, his mother fell in a crevasse, with her baby on her back, and died. All he knew at the moment was that no one had told him it was safe to stop running, so he kept on. Eventually he made it across to Nepal, and then India. He learned English and studied Buddhism. Six years later, he fell ill with TB, among other diseases. Once recovered, driven by homesickness, he made it back to Tibet, where he was thrown in four consecutive jails as a political prisoner. When he finally got out, he had no money, no friends, no family and no home. He became a beggar, but his skills with English landed him a job at a restaurant, and then as a guide. It's not my story, but I believe it. I don't think it's a rare tale in Tibet.

With Nima riding shotgun with the driver and us in the back, we departed Lhasa in a dusty SUV. Not far from the city, the color seeps out of everything. The landscape is almost entirely shades of brown and grey, from pale (eroded sandstone formations, stubbly fallow barley and wheat fields, haystacks, ruined fortresses, frozen rivers) to dark (yaks, pony-pulled wooden carts filled with captive goats, miles of talus, bricks of peat and yak dung drying in the sun, shadows on slopes, and people). It's dry, windy and cold: vast miles of open, harsh terrain you'd never think people could live. There's not a tree in sight. The only color came from the yellow ducks on the Lhasa river. They're called *love birds* in Tibet because, the story goes, if their mate dies the partner flies around seeking, ever seeking, until it gives up and hits its little crowned head on a rock till it dies. *That* story smacks of folk legend, but I like it.

As we pass through this desolate yet oddly beautiful terrain, Nima fills us in on Tibetan history. He speaks plainly, without emotion or a trace of malice against the Chinese. 1959 marked the beginning of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, when the government systematically destroyed and looted a great number of monasteries. The officials knew to look inside the *stupas* (round, mounded holy structures) and sacred statues for the treasures that lay hidden within, and of course they grabbed the precious and semi-precious stones that adorned statues of Buddha and other deities. For good measure, they destroyed *thangkas*

(traditional wall hangings) and sacred books, and even the temples themselves were knocked down. After that, government agents captured and jailed the monks, or put them to hard labor building roads. More recently, the Chinese have removed Tibetans from their native land and homes, and built them tracts of cement block homes where they can no longer farm at a subsistence level or otherwise support themselves. Just a few months ago, on March 14, a controversial new law was instituted. Every Tibetan who wants to go to school or get a job has to take on a Chinese name. They are required to change their name legally from the lama-given name of their birth. Even still, their education is inferior to that of the Chinese, the jobs are hard to find.

Since that date, there has been a lot more unrest: more violence, more police presence, more arrests of monks for political reasons. The world has been giving Tibetans more attention as a result.

ACROSS TIBET

Tibet is not for the faint of heart—or stomach—and I'm faint of these and more. The filth and poverty and disease are sad and nerve-wracking, but I think the hardest to witness is the political situation.

The main focus of our trip has been the monasteries and other Buddhist sites, which have mostly blurred together in my memory into a sea of gold and maroon: the colors of the monks' garb and the decorative adornments on the rooftops. But I have to say, if I never see another 40-foot-tall Buddha, it would not cause me any pain. Of all the fascinating monasteries we visited, Ralung is the one that stands out clearly in my memory. To get to it, we had to cross at 5200-meter pass, where breathing was difficult. From the main road we took a spur route—a “good” road, according to Nima, but the worse good road I've ever seen, largely unmarked as it crossed deep, soft mud and snow, and wove around lots of things the car could have fallen into. We got stuck only once as we headed toward a densely snowy range.

At our destination we met a pair of monks, one young and the other a 72-year-old who had been at the monastery when it was ransacked in 1959. He was jailed for five years, but eventually got to return to his old life. Only the central temple has been rebuilt, and the rest

lies in ruins all around. Some rooms are still filled with the shredded remains of sacred books, written on black paper with gold lettering.

My favorite room in the temple was the one dedicated to protector spirits, fierce-looking creatures all. There was a painting of a ferocious yak chasing a human, and one of a horse bugging its eyes and wagging its red tongue at the bloody and eviscerated man who lay upside-down on its back. Shiny lacquered masks lining the tops of the walls showed human-like faces wearing grimaces of varying states of menace. In another room were dozens of clay urns, primitively hand-painted by resident monks. I asked what they were for. There are five types: for help with bad karma, crops, the elements, wealth and one other. Inside are objects placed there by a lama: stones from sacred places, maybe gems like turquoise and garnet, and prayers written on scraps of paper. I don't know what else is in there, but they're heavy. I knew I'd found the object I wanted to bring back from Tibet. Cheryl felt the same. We asked the young monk to pick ones he had painted himself. Each cost 60 *yuan*, or about \$9.

Before leaving Ralung, we met an ancient couple in the courtyard. With their permission, I snapped some photos. Nima lifted the hem of the woman's thick skirt for a little cultural lesson: "This type of skirt means she's married. Look at the rainbow colors." It was the most anemic rainbow I've ever seen, dulled by the years and the earth. As I left, she reached out her hand to me. "She likes me. She really likes me," my inner Sally Field thought. I took her hand warmly. She shook it loose and once again held her palm toward me. I graced it with five *yuan*. She pocketed it, walked ten feet away, lifted her rainbow skirts, and squatted right there in front of us.

Some Tibetans seem to love to play with English and its speakers. It is high entertainment. One day as we wandered through a monastery, I responded to a question from Cheryl. *Okay, okay*, I said, just at the moment an *om*-chanting monk passed. As he moved on, I heard his mantra change: *okayokayokayokay...* Men and kids on the street call out whatever nominal English they know—*hello, okay, hi*—and then burst out laughing. We visited a Tibetan carpet factory where lines of women sat spinning, weaving and giggling. As we passed by, a woman would overhear what we said and parrot us, at which the entire factory went into hysterical

laughter. They particularly enjoy playing with the sounds of English, making it much more musical. *Oh, wow* becomes *Oooaooobwooaooow*.

We are ready to leave Tibet. For all its harsh beauty, there is so much suffering. And our lodging has gone from bad to worse. Earlier, I complained about hotels with no hot water. Since then we've been in hotels with no water at all, with stains on the bed and one with traces of vomit on the wall. It's quite cold here but there's a lack of heaters. We had lunch on our last day at a place where I doubt a Westerner had ever been: A smoky, low-ceilinged room about the size of a pool table. Benches lined two sides, covered in grubby Tibetan carpet. About a dozen people cozied in, many in traditional dusty peasant garb. From outside the window three kids pressed their badly snotty noses to get a better look at Cheryl and me, and gestured to us, open handed, for money. A young man entered wearing a fresh sheep carcass across his shoulders like a shawl. In the corner an ancient man in traditional yak-fur clothing, his face a mass of crevasses like an icefield, wheezed and coughed and snorted. Our server scooped a load of yak droppings into the stove and then carried us our inexplicably skunk-scented noodles, as locals slurped their soup with the delicacy of so many Shop-Vacs. The tea tasted like wet yak's wool. I asked Cheryl if she'd brought in our Lonely Planet guide. "No, I left it in the car. There's nothing more I want to know now except how to get out of Tibet." I agree.

A VIEW OF EVEREST

At last, we're within striking distance of Nepal. We drove past Everest today, a magnificent sight. We saw a solitary red fox run across the barren, high plain. And we heard about the Yeti, which locals believe in. According to Nima, girl Yetis sometimes get amorous enough to steal a nomadic man from his tent and take him to live in a cave, where presumably they live happily ever after, never to be seen again by the human world.

The scenery was the epitome of bleak vastness and I really wanted to get a good picture of it, so I leaned up to the front seat and said, "Can we stop for a photo?" "Now?" Nima asked. "Yes, right here." There was an exchange in Tibetan as we started to move beyond the good vista point. "You want to take a picture here?" Nima confirmed. "Yes!" "Right here?" he asked. "Now," I begged. "You want to stop now?" "Oh, never MIND," said I in a fury. It had been a perfect photo. The Himalaya—craggy, heavily covered with snow, and

dominated by the triangular face of Everest—a backdrop for the snaking grey frozen river, strange towering eroded sandstone formations, and the broken outline of an 11th century Tibetan fortress. There was even a huge brown and white spotted eagle circling. “Never mind.” Just get me back to Nepal, I thought. It is time.

As we made the 5000-foot descent from the high plateau, we saw whitewashed houses, tents by the side of the road, voluminous waterfalls, and a lot of trash. Green started to creep back into the palette. A while later, we ran into a major roadblock, which we learned would keep us stuck for four hours, until 9:00 that night, preventing our re-entry into Nepal until tomorrow. Nima turned back to Cheryl and me and commanded us in hurried tones, “You sleep.” We instinctively obeyed, sliding down into our seats and closing our eyes as the car pulled forward. Nima got out and approached the head of the construction team, talking to him animatedly for a while. He climbed back into the car and off we went, past miles of waiting traffic. “I told them you were sick and had to get to the border quickly.” Whenever we encountered more workers along our route, Cheryl and I would have to slide into “ill” mode, which we did with theatrical skill, unless we caught each other’s eye. Then, for some reason, our charade sent us into hysterics. Maybe that’s because there haven’t been a lot of things to laugh about lately. Nima has become increasingly surly and impatient over the past couple days. I don’t know what’s going on with him.

The road was treacherous: narrow and undercut on the downhill side, which dropped precipitously to the river below. Fortunately, we had no trouble. When we arrived at the town near the border, which opens again at 10:00 tomorrow morning, we checked into the Sherpa hotel, opting to pay an extra 180 *yuan* for an in-room toilet and a hot shower, the best money I’ve ever spent. Though it’s only 9:30 p.m., it’s totally black out. As I write, I still hear the loud thundering of waterfalls plunging down the canyon into the river. It was soothing until a few moments ago when it was fractured by the aggressive cacophony of a Chinese army drill.

FUN AT THE BORDER

Bags packed and ready to go to the border, we found our driver but not our guide, who continues to become ever-more strange and withdrawn, bordering at times on hostile. I

don't understand. Half an hour later he popped out of a little green june bug of a car, with no explanation or apology. The reason for his tardiness became obvious as soon as we climbed into our own car. I had to roll down the window to keep from gagging on his morning-after (or maybe morning-of) booze breath.

Half an hour of narrow precipice-hugging brought us to customs. I gritted my teeth as the Chinese officials waved me away from the x-ray machine and directed me to a different area for a hand-inspection. "Do you have any rocks?" I said I didn't, but I did, in the urn I got at the monastery, which I was carrying on my back. "Do you have any books?" I allowed as I didn't think so. She pawed through my private things, eventually extracting my infamous **Lonely Planet Guide to Tibet** that seems to offend them so. For a full five minutes she flipped through it back and forth, and then checked the index. Usually I chat with people under such circumstances, but as one accustomed to my civil rights, I was so livid I had to turn away and take deep breaths, as my brain wrote the script for what would happen if she found my journals. She didn't.

Grumpily I shouldered my heavy duffel, barely giving a backwards glance at the well-tipped Nima, and started through the mash of bodies and trucks moving toward the bridge over the Bhote Khosi that marks the boundary between the two countries. Stumbling a little under the weight of my bag, I elbowed my way through the riotous throngs. The rest was easy. I had my multiple-entry visa for Nepal and we met with Ale, our wonderful driver, who deftly got us down yet more hair-raising cliffside paths barely wide enough for cars, following the Bhote Khosi and then the Sun Khosi down toward Kathmandu.

The drive took about four hours, the last one of which was in eye-burning Kathmandu traffic. It's great to be back at Cheryl's, where it's clean and I don't have to brace my senses before venturing into the bathroom. The night sounds are of human life: shrieking babies, barking dogs, coughing, clattering of pots, seemingly right in the room with me.

NO PLACE LIKE KATHMANDU

Ahhh, the Kathmandu alarm clock: promptly at 5:30, the high-decibel morning ablutions begin, with scores of strangers on nearby rooftops clattering and spitting and hocking. It's nice not to have to endure the early-morning darkness of Tibet on Beijing time. I kept very

quiet so I could use Cheryl's computer (on her recommendation, I'd left mine at home). I was happily writing e-mails when I got busted (she's an early riser) and had to give back her machine because she needed it.

Since my return from Tibet I've just been poking around Kathmandu and the outskirts a little each day, exploring and looking for presents for friends. Too bad my friends wouldn't like Ghurka knives or miniature one-stringed violins or watered-down tiger balm or felted wool slippers with turned up elf toes with bells or bamboo flutes or marijuana, since those are what's abundant on the street.

My spirits are flagging. Little things trouble me. I got an e-mail saying I'd been turned down for a grant I'd applied for, and a message from my mother chastising me for not cc'ing my brother on an e-mail I sent her and my sister. I spent three pages of my journal composing a reply to her. What for? It's painful to feel bitch-slapped in a place where even mundane tasks can take Herculean efforts. Trying to change money took more than half a day, along with several miles of walking and superhuman patience to navigate the seething ocean of humanity. When I first got here, I didn't love that aspect of life in Kathmandu, but my mind was open: it was all new, anyhow. Now I mutter under my breath, "Don't be getting in my way" as I elbow through hordes and dart between cars. I like the method I've developed for crossing the wide and treacherous avenues. I Velcro myself to an unsuspecting Kathmandu native and weave through seven or so lanes of speeding cars and motorcycles, glued to his/her side. It's like tandem skydiving. Before they notice that they have an American parasite, I've vanished into the crowds.

I went into a pharmacy today. Like all the other shops around, it was just an open storefront, with its wares on shelves facing the street. I was about to open my mouth to ask for what I wanted when my breath was taken away by the sight before me. There was a man, naked from the waist up, sitting on a stool with his back to me. There, I saw the foulest wound I've ever seen (admittedly, I haven't seen many): a three-inch wide, raging red, very deep and festering sore that looked like a several-day-old bullet hole. The store owner was digging away at it with some sort of tool, I guess trying to clean out the necrotic tissue. I sat and waited as crowds passed inches away, coughing and spitting, and then decided I didn't really need any products from this particular enterprise.

I do like walking through the Lazimpat neighborhood where I'm staying. It's a maze of look-alike alleys dotted with little corner shops, people playing card games, a mother picking lice from her child's head, vendors on bikes with flowers and veggies and cotton candy, and limping dogs. Tucked between the multistory houses—seemingly tossed about like random blocks—are small gardens, trash lots and walls with glass at the rim. Alcoves in the stone walls hold red-dyed Hindu shrines with little Ganeshes and Vishnus. On the rooftops, there are water tanks, and lots of family activity: washing, cleaning and milling about.

We went on a field trip with a group of expats from North America and Europe, almost all of them middle-aged women like me. Some were terribly judgmental about the actions of others, namely me. "Don't use those baby wipes. They're bad for the environment." "You shouldn't have patted that dog. Now he will never be happy without human contact again." The possibility that they could have been right was salt in the wound.

When I was in Berkeley, I met Debit, a handsome young Nepali man who wanted me to go see his parents on the outskirts of Kathmandu, and sent me off with me some presents for them. It was an hour cab-ride to get there; man, Kathmandu is huge. We were greeted warmly with Nepali milk tea and cookies, and showered with presents, including earrings that Debit's father Indra had bought in India. Then, though the sun had set and there was a power outage, we jumped on the back of Indra's and his son-in-law's motorcycles and toured the neighborhood, along dirt and rocky roads with lots of potholes. Wheee. I felt like a teenager again. At one point I felt Indra's butt vibrate and wondered if he had intestinal problems, but it was his cell phone which, despite the hazardous road and lack of light, he answered. He chatted for a while, driving one-handed. Aside from the dim light of the motorcycle, the only illumination came from the occasional candle on a doorstep, casting wavering shadows across the road. There were also cooking fires with big pots where night vendors sold *momos*. I leaned forward and asked Indra if they were good. "Some are," he replied.

In the dark we proceeded to Adinath, a temple where the annual festival was just concluding. A huge bus crammed with tired pilgrims careened past us. In the dirt courtyard was the

ceremonial aftermath: dozens of little fires and smoke so thick I couldn't take pictures. We stumbled along in the dark to a little outbuilding, glowing by candlelight, where a bunch of men were chanting in Newari. Copper cooking utensils were nailed all over the walls as offerings. The guidebook says these are taken down every year, but some of them were clearly quite antiquated.

We drove to an overlook across the valley and saw the winking lights of Kathmandu, Patan and Kantipur and surrounding hillside villages. Back at the house, we were treated to more tea, cookies and conversation. Debit's brother-in-law is in his third year of studying food science at the university. His recent project was to buy fruits and veggies on the street and test them for dangerous bacteria, in the form of "a little worm." One hundred percent had the bacteria. Soaking the produce in salt water for five minutes helps to kill them. He certainly picked a good country to study such things; I've heard that Nepal has the most resistant strains in the world.

It's nice that I'm here long enough to have done what I wanted to do, and no longer have to maintain a frenetic pace. We got our trekking permits so we're all set to leave. I'm excited, and also a little nervous about my capacity to trudge up thousands of feet each day. But maybe I've lost enough weight (despite eating lots of excellent Nepali and Indian food) that I'm hoping a strong breeze might propel me right up the mountain.

FOOTHILLS

Cholendra is Cheryl's young friend who began his mountain career as a porter for treks, hauling 50- to 60-pound packs. He's 21 by Nepali reckoning, by which they measure age from conception. He's so wiry I can't imagine him carrying heavy loads, at elevation, no less. Now he's a guide and gets to hire the porter, choose the route, and be responsible for everything on the trail. He's going to be our guide for our trek to Annapurna Base Camp. To get things off on the right foot, we gave him an Obama t-shirt.

At 7:00 a.m., Cholendra appeared with a cabbie and off we went to the Kathmandu airport, bound for Pokhara. The domestic terminal was chaos. There were huge vacuum-sealed bales of some sort of plastic that jammed the x-ray machine so our packs couldn't get through. Once that was resolved, we made for Yeti Airlines. Yeti was kind enough to give passengers

a piece of butterscotch and some wads of cotton for our ears before take-off. It was a quick flight (amazing, considering how grueling the bus ride is). Once airborne, they served coffee-colored liquid as we flew along the astonishingly massive spine of the Himalaya, past Langtang, Manaslu and toward Annapurna.

Outside the airport in Pokhara, taxi drivers were more like vultures than I've seen in any developing country, literally grabbing our duffels and naming exorbitant prices to our destination, the trailhead. Cholendra handled everything like the pro he is. He found us a porter, Subash, who is a bright and funny 25-year-old who even speaks a little English. We couldn't have better travel companions than those two.

Before starting up the trail, we stopped at a little 12 by 12-foot café perched on a riverbank. The food took forever to get, the staff was grumpy, the flies persistent and the proprietor unashamed by his act of staring. The tables were numbered from one to four, just so you and the waiters couldn't get lost or separated, I guess.

Finally on the trail—which varies from wide dirt avenue to slightly narrower road paved with local stone to human-wide mud path—we started up. It's the main thoroughfare for people in all the villages along the way, so there's lots of evidence of humanity: houses, dogs and kids playing, roosters clucking and water buffalo grazing. We passed a shed marked *Anugraha Church Pray House* with dozens of pairs of flip-flops outside, and the Tasty Tongue Restaurant up on stilts. Long strings of heavily laden mules stagger up the slope, some of them adorned with huge pompons, bigger than their heads, and fabric with holy designs on their brow. It was slow going because I stopped every few feet to take pictures of things I've never seen: oxen threshing grain in low pastures down by river's edge, wild marijuana plants, towering waterfalls, hillside houses cobbled together of available materials and with tin or thatch roofs, and other houses more substantial, of stone and slate. The towering hills are terraced from top to bottom, with rock walls encircling the circumference every ten or so feet, resembling a giant beehive. It's a palette of golden yellow and spring green—the unharvested grain—the white of the snowy mountains and the vivid blue of the sky. We can see the massive peak of Fishtail off in the distance: a beacon for the next week.

In the late afternoon, Cholendra raced on ahead, as he would do every day, to book us a teahouse for the night. “Teahouse” seems a misnomer for these overnight respites, with a row of bare, unheated rooms in a long, whitewashed outbuilding, and an eating area off the kitchen in the main house. There’s a faucet outside from which we can get water that has to be purified with iodine before we drink it. The bathroom is an outhouse, well populated with all kinds of creatures with six and eight legs. You *can* get tea, and delicious mealtime fare. The women cook on a wood fire, making everything from scratch when you order it: dal bhat, curry potatoes with rice and all kinds of local fare. And of course I continue to pound down the Nepali milk tea and my newest discovery, a sweet lemon tea.

ONWARD, UPWARD, DOWNWARD, UPWARD

I have a new notebook for my travel journal. It is a Classicality Office Notebook, purchased in Tibet, with this promise emblazoned on the front: *The best quality and design is just for you. You will feel like writing with it all the time. This is the most comfortable notebook you have ever run into.* I sure do hope so.

It was still full dark in the morning when I heard the gentle clattering of the copper dishes in the kitchen nearby. As I lay awake in my sleeping bag in the predawn grey, I also listened to the most amazing birdsong, with the melodic complexity of something like Für Elise, except it was more discordant and militaristic. Maybe it was more like the 1812 Overture, but without the clashing cymbals. As the sky went from monochrome grey to pink, another bird started up, this one in a higher register with equally complex musicality. It sang a tune quite like that awful song, “Someone left the cake out in the rain. I don’t think that I can make it... ‘cause it took so long to make it, and I’ll never have that recipe agaiiiiiin.”

In the first light, a woman was outside in a shawl with only her eyes peeking out, as she swept ungulate poop off the stone steps on the trail next to the kitchen, and decanted said poop in wicker baskets. Before she’d even finished, the parade of mules had already started clattering up the trail again. One mule driver dropped off a couple of woven plastic sacks, took some money in exchange and went on his way. The three-year-old daughter (*chori*) of the owners, clearly cherished by her parents, played imaginary jump rope. Her seven-year-old

brother is off at boarding school a full day's walk away. He started there when he was six, which is the normal plan for children beyond nursery school age.

We bade farewell to our hosts, and walked and walked and walked. Distances to destinations—painted on rocks by the side of the path—are sometimes noted in unique ways. At a crossroads, we were 8848 steps from Nayapul and 4252 steps forward to Ghandruk. If only that calculation included a sense of the elevation gain and loss, we'd know what we were in for, though it hardly matters since there's not much we can do about it. We passed through Ghandruk and Kimche and Kimrong, climbing and descending steeply on mostly stepped paths.

We passed a man with about three-dozen chickens in cages squawking on his back, attached by a tumpline across his forehead. We often see political slogans painted on the doors and sides of the battered houses: *It's a right to rebel. —Chairman Mao, and Long Live Peoples Liberation Army of Nepal.* Luckily, we're trekking this month and not this time last year, when the Maoists would often pop out and demand money from itinerant tourists like us. They stopped doing that so much once they won government seats in the election back in April.

What intrigues me most about what I'm seeing is the intersection of topography and culture, how nature at its grandest intersects with human life at its most adaptive. It is fascinating how people have made a life in such rough terrain, with efficient use of what's at-hand. Stepped paths up the mountain are, of course, from local stone. The oxen are ideal threshing machines. Rooftops are for drying produce. Aqueducts made of hollowed logs feed a water wheel to grind the corn in a miniature gristmill tucked under a waterfall. A handmade little hydroelectric station is inserted discreetly into a creek.

STARS AND SPIDERS

We're in a tiny Gurung village now. Gurung is an ethnic group, like Sherpa, that speaks a language that Cholendra doesn't understand. I think Subash knows a little. The locals were curious about us teahouse guests, so they came to stare at us without self-consciousness. As I was looking through some family photos I'd brought, an elderly woman came over to join me. She borrowed the pictures for a moment to get a better look, and then went back to her business.

The dining area here is a small square building up on stilts above a rice paddy. On the ceiling beneath the tin roof, there's a solid layer of golden corn in beige husks: hundreds of ears hung vertically. There's a cacophony of languages: Nepali, Gurung, English, Chinese and more. Bundled in down coats, we ate *momos*, soup, fried cheesy potatoes and spring rolls by candlelight as the Chinese contingent played Parcheesi. After dinner and gallons of lemon tea, I made my way by flashlight to the asphyxiating outhouse. When I shone my light on the latch to get back out again, I saw it was adorned by a glossy, long-legged spider. It was obvious what it was, but just to make sure, I checked for the red hourglass. Yup. With shaking hands, I gingerly reached around it, unhooked the door and ran out to freedom. Future calls to nature that night found me out in the marigold garden, nowhere near my arachnid foe.

Our stone-floored room here is the most primitive we've stayed in yet: three narrow plank beds in a row, with space for one sideways human between. The mattress is foam, ancient and decaying, overlaid with a bedraggled sheet. Two of the walls are whitewashed adobe and the other two are of wooden planks with wide cracks that let us peer into the adjoining rooms. A single, dim light bulb is stuck into the wall. We share a window well for putting our personal items like toothbrushes and tomorrow's clothes.

Exhausted, we retired to bed around 7:00 when it was already full dark. Suddenly we started to hear scraping chairs, shouts and then drums. All the villagers—about twenty of them, ranging in age from infant to ancient matriarch and patriarch—were gathering on yoga mats out in the chilly courtyard next to our room. They started to clap and sing songs with complex melodies, the women's voices high and shrill, the men's a mellow counterpart. They call such an event a "Mothers' Group Dance," or *Ama Sumuba*. According to Subash, the singers make up the lyrics as they go, telling of the day's events—trekkers coming through, and how good it is to meet them—and making gentle fun of each other, and of us. The men wore Western clothes save for their *topis*, the traditional Nepali hat. Women were dressed in brightly patterned skirts with scarves around their shoulders and over their heads, sometimes with a baby wrapped within. In the darkness, I could make out the men and women with their heads tilted back, eyes closed, as they sang. After a while some of the older women got

up and did a body-swaying, arm-waving dance, soon joined by Subash and Cholendra. At first the whole scene was fascinating but it became monotonous quickly, and it was freezing cold out there under the bright stars. The Chinese guests (one of whom we'd seen in Tibet) stayed in the stilt house and talked loudly throughout the whole event, without respect for the villagers' performance. At the end of the ceremony, the locals presented us all, including the rude folks, with handmade marigold *malas* (flower necklaces). We gave tips to the performers. The rude guests didn't.

After the show, we crawled back into our sleeping bags, leaving the light on as a black-widow-repelling measure. Some time after we fell asleep, there was chaos as the Chinese visitors came crashing into their rooms. They had neglected to bring sleeping bags or to ask for bedding on their arrival, so they were screaming and banging on the door of the room next to ours, where the blanket-custodian lay sleeping in a drunken stupor, unable to wake. Due to the structural issues of the place, it was as though they were pounding directly on my head.

RUST

There was no way I was going to use the outhouse last night because of the occupancy of my black widow friend, so despite a full moon that kept no secrets, and no visually sheltering bushes, I crept back out to the marigold patch for that purpose. But once day broke, there was no avoiding it: I had to go back and lock myself in with the arachnid. In my nervousness to reach around its fat and shiny body to open the lock, I slashed my finger on the rusty metal, spewing abundant blood.

This morning's climb was a grueling 1,000 feet in elevation gain along slippery, rocky switchbacks, as we ascended from the Kimrong Khola River Canyon, up above the landslide that took out the trail last year. We ran into a friendly Englishman who had an ugly, untreated gash on his finger. As a result of my encounter this morning with rusted metal, I had an extra Band-Aid and easy access to my antibiotic ointment, so I dressed his wound before we headed our separate ways, us down to Chomrong for lunch. My health fully restored, I'm sampling the *dal bhat* at every stop, where everything tastes like the wood smoke it was cooked over.

The afternoon climb was even more strenuous. I mounted and descended and mounted more steps today than I have in my entire life. According to our calculations, in total we went up 4,600 feet and down 2,300. My legs are now so strong you could pound nails with them. Our final push upward landed us in the clouds. It's intriguing to walk for so long, watching Fish Tail (*Machhapuchhre*) appear closer and closer as the hours and days pass. Each turn in the path gives us a slightly different perspective on it, as though we're turning a treasure over and over in our hands to admire its subtleties.

No matter how organized I try to be when packing—a pouch for underwear, one for dirty clothes, a third for toiletries—within a few minutes on the road, everything ends up jumbled together, and it frustrates me. Cheryl granted me first-shower rights today, but damned if I could find my soap. I found my gloves in the bottom of my pants bag, and the soap turned out to be in the pocket of my down coat which was stuffed in the bottom of my shirt bag, which was in my sandals bag. I swore at myself for a while, but felt better once cleansed in the moderately warm water.

The kids we pass on the trail ask us for treats: first, chocolate, then pencils, and finally money. In the cities they go right to the money. I learned something about the Nepali language today. There are four forms of the word *you*, based on level of respect, from informal to deferential. There used to be a fifth but it's no longer used; it was just for the king.

Everything we had for dinner was hand-cooked. We even watched them pick the tomatoes that became spaghetti sauce. Afterward, there was another Mothers' Group Dance tonight, this one with greater spirit, with more drums and whooping shouts than the previous.

KEEP THE MODI KHOLA ON YOUR RIGHT

Awake at 6:00, breakfast at 7:15 and on the trail by 7:45. I'm finding trekking to be more like Irish dance than hiking. With the latter, I just slop my legs around carelessly, but my method for trekking is much more slow, careful and precise. The trail is so rocky and steep that I have to pay careful attention to the form of each step, except when I trip, which I do often.

We've been winding our way up and down the valley wall on the west side of the Modi Khola River, along a trail that becomes a stream and across a stream that becomes a waterfall, through bamboo and rhododendron forests. With all the pounding on my joints, old injuries are stirring like angry grizzlies emerging from hibernation. Trekking poles, which I hated two days ago, are proving invaluable at sparing the knees on the downhill slopes. We walked all day until 5:00, arriving in time to watch the alpenglow electrify the peaks above Deorali.

THIN AIR

In my journal notebook for today, I see this small inscription: "bowling rats." I desperately want to know what I was referring to. Yet I am also tempted to fabricate a story, right here and now, about a seedy alley in which the Rattus Rollers meet up to practice for their weekly competition. Cigarettes slung beneath their furry, whiskered cheeks, they lean their elbows up against a trashcan and start drumming with their forepaws... parumpa pum pum... just looking for trouble.

But this is what really happened. After six days of hiking, we finally arrived in the shadow of Fish Tail (*Machhapuchhre*, pronounced *ma-chə-PU-chə-ray*), the peak that has been our beacon all along. This morning we climbed 560 meters (about 1,800 feet) to Machhapuchhre Base Camp where, at over 12,000 feet in altitude, it is getting increasingly hard for me to catch my breath. The weather is different from lower in the mountains. Balminess is a mere memory, replaced by winds so blustery that I'm chilly in wool hat, earmuffs and windbreaker.

We stopped at Machhapuchhre Base Camp (MBC) for lunch to talk about our plans. Last night we'd decided to hike another few miles up the trail to Annapurna Base Camp (ABC) today, come back down to MBC for the night, and start leaving the mountains tomorrow morning. But when we arrived into my dream of high Himalayan majesty, there was a big storm that blocked the view of the entirety of Annapurna's range. I couldn't see what I came here to see, what I've been dreaming about seeing for years.

During this whole trip I've been happy to let Cheryl make executive decisions about our itinerary. Whatever we end up doing, it's all new to me. Her insight into life in Nepal and her concern about my having a good time have made this a great trip, without my preferences gucking up the works. But today, for the first time, I had a strong opinion of my own, and I expressed it. I couldn't bear the idea of hiking in the Himalaya and not getting to see the highest part that I came here for, now buried under clouds, and hopefully unburied tomorrow. But we had a conflict: Cheryl wanted to stick with our original plan. We went around in painful circles, with no progress. It was like a couple deciding whether or not to have a baby: the answers are only "yes" and "no,"—stay or go—with no room for compromise. I finally gave up and, upset, walked off to be alone. The next moment was magic I didn't see coming. Cholendra, always eager to make everyone happy, materialized and somehow worked out a solution: he'd go to ABC with Cheryl today and with me tomorrow, before heading back down the mountain.

After lunch, despite feeling quite sick, Cheryl did in fact push on to ABC with Cholendra. Subash offered to keep me company but I declined, opting instead to explore the ridge that forms the rim of half of this natural bowl that we're in. It was a much harder hike than it appeared. I started up a short but steep and slippery slope spotted with tundra hillocks and ankle-grabbing bushes, and climbed to the top of a knife-edged, grassy hill that dropped precipitously on the other side in a fall of shale to a glacial valley. I hugged the hillside edge of the crest, except for a few spots where I had to dash across the only clearing at the very top. As I've learned to do from trekking and rock climbing, I took every step with total concentration and care, and thus didn't die. I found a lovely little cave-like niche on the exposed slope that I thought would make a perfect resting spot. As I backed myself into it, I noticed a man far below, methodically climbing straight toward me. Behind me I heard a giant *crack*—an explosive sound that echoed down the valley—and a rumble, and scanned the peaks above looking for an avalanche, but it was out of sight. There are fissures all across the face of the mountain, so I imagine there are probably many avalanches each day, especially once the snow starts, which it has.

Still in my cave, worried about how I would find my footing on the way back down, I noticed the man making slow but purposeful progress up the slope directly toward me.

Unnerved and irritated, I headed back to the knife edge. I took lots of photos, including one of a river that fell into a hole in the glacier and reemerged far below. I left the knife, and slid and tripped my way back to the guesthouse.

The people staying here are quite unfriendly, or maybe I'm just being oversensitive. I walked in to the "Dinning Room" and smiled at the entwined couple reclining along one of the benches by the window, but no response. Ditto another couple in equally intimate embrace, a display of affection that always makes me feel both lonely and embarrassed. Everyone's porters and guides, including Subash, were all together playing cards on the other window bench.

Cheryl and Cholendra aren't back from Annapurna base camp and I'm getting a little concerned because the temperature is dropping though it's only 3:30 p.m., and the mountain is now almost entirely obscured in white. I keep asking Subash—deeply enmeshed in his card game—if he thinks they're okay, as I watch the snow falling more heavily. He waves me off. "They're fine." Sitting there waiting to see them appear as toothpicks on the snowy horizon, I felt lonelier than I have on this trip. I made the mistake of pulling out pictures of my two girls and my dog Stella and my other family, which I keep tucked in the back of my journal. Looking at them all, I missed them so badly that it hurt.

Around 5:00, Cheryl and Cholendra emerged from the billowing fog. Strangely, Annapurna—which has been hidden under snow all day—cleared, as the tips of the neighboring peaks began to glow orange.

GLORY

Oh, *now* I know what I meant by "bowling rats." That refers to the overhead activity all night: rats or mice scratching and rustling, sounding as though they're rolling rumbling balls down an alley on the tin roof. At one point, something with multiple feet and a furry belly ran across my head.

I rose early for my longed-for visit with Cholendra to ABC, elevation about 13,500 feet. Cheryl had said it was an easy hike but she's a superwoman. I found it the most difficult yet, mostly on account of my being oxygen-deprived but also because of the cold and wind and steepness. The 450-meter climb along a frozen creek took us about an hour and a half, with multiple stops for photos, nose-blowing, glove-donning, coat-zipping, gasping for breath, and moving aside for the torrent of downward-flowing trekkers. I was so lucky: all the mountains had emerged in all their sunny, crystalline glory. Sitting on the crest of a cliff carved by the Annapurna Glacier far below, I reveled in 360 degrees of stunning wildness and beauty. We heard another few avalanche cracks on Annapurna South, and watched billowing clouds of snow steadily soaring off the crest as though it were a volcano erupting. There was an unearthly roar that I thought was a low plane, but it turned to be the gale-force wind blasting off of the summit. Words failed me when talking to Cholendra. All I could think of to say was, "It's just insane how pretty it is." I was happily soaking it all in when I started to worry that I should head back down to MBC, where Cheryl and Subash awaited. But wait a minute... what's this? A tiny human dot approaching directly toward us. The dot gradually took the form of Cheryl, who had decided to make a second trip up to the base camp. Superwoman.

The weather is definitely changing. By the time we all started down the mountain again, the Annapurna peaks had crept back under the clouds, the sky had gone steel grey and the temperature suddenly dropped. The fog became so thick that it turned the early afternoon into dusk, with an icy wind cutting into our faces. It was nasty, made worse for Cheryl and Cholendra because they both were sick with a stomach problem. It must be awful to hike like that. I don't want to find out firsthand.

On the way down, we frequently encountered fearless monkeys, beige-maned with black faces, gulping down red berries. We saw another sight that made me embarrassed to be American. Next to the Annapurna Base Camp sign was a group of about six young men, posing for a photograph. The problem was, they'd all dropped their pants for the shot, baring their youthful naughty bits. Sweet and quiet Cholendra became fierce and angry. He took off toward them as though shot from a cannon, and gave them a lecture they'll

remember. “This is my country. You are being disrespectful.” They pulled their clothes back on quickly. “Have a nice trek,” he added in parting.

TRAFFIC JAM

The first thing that Cheryl said to me this morning was, “What were you *dreaming* about? Was it a nightmare? I thought I heard you tell someone to fuck off.” Well, here’s what happened. Mom was getting married again, but Dad wasn’t dead yet. He was confined to bed and lonely, and she wouldn’t visit him, or even tell us where he was. She was proceeding with plans for an ornate wedding. She adored the children of the groom and was horrible to my sister and me. She had us under lock and key. I was trying to escape and spring my sis as well. There was lots of running and hiding, with policemen and secret agents trying to locate us. The whole town was out to get us. And then someone tried to befriend my daughter Molly and suck her into their evil sex cult.

For some reason, there are abundant blobs of spit on the trails, frozen hard in the mornings. Inexplicably, our trail has turned into a superhighway, with all the attendant menaces of a such a road: gridlock, and stunningly rude people like the jerk who came up and “tailgated” me for a few seconds, and then, before there was space in the path for me to move over for him, vigorously elbowed past me on a particularly narrow section of trail. Then he jammed on his brakes right in front of me to take a picture. I thought, *why don’t you go home and walk on your feckin’ treadmill, ya sack o’ shite*. I guess I just expect better trail manners, in such a beautiful place. As we moved along the path, Cholendra hummed Nepali folksongs, a comforting sound. There’s abundant water everywhere, pouring down in waterfalls and seeping out of rock crevices, running down to the roaring river below.

At first assessment, today’s walk didn’t appear to be too *tada* (far). Our destination, Chomrong, is just one valley over, through the villages of Bamboo and Sinuwa. But between here and there, there’s 840 meters down and 510 up. As we walked, an icy-winded storm whipped up where we had just been, and chased us out of the mountains. We stayed ahead of it, watching shorts-clad 20-somethings head unsuspectingly into the mouth of the stormy valley.

The highest, snowy Himalayan peaks behind us, we returned once again to the land of the wandering cud-chewers, the trail delicately dotted with dung and tufts of thick, tawny fur that had separated from its wearers. The occasional dog darted by us on the trail. From below the snow zone, I looked up at massive Annapurna South to see a giant avalanche billow down a few thousand feet. It's hard to believe how loud that first crack of ice was. Its power was terrifying, even though I was nowhere near it.

The view at our destination, Chomrong Hill, is spectacular. Looking out the window of the dining hall as the invisible sun sets and draws the color from the already grey landscape, it's like being in the center of a flower. The snow-tipped petals are the layers of mountains, the innermost folded in close and dark, the outermost much larger, and fading from grey to white against the snowy sky. Unseen at the base of each petal are rivers and waterfalls.

Tonight's lodging features the biggest rooms yet, at about ten square feet, and is the most crowded with other trekkers. The walls between rooms fail at sonic insulation. On one side of my bed my neighbor rattled his pill bottle and farted. On the other side, the guy doesn't know it, but he's whispering in my ear. Two doors down, someone is zipping and unzipping his sleeping bag, and around the corner, someone is peeing in the outhouse. A pair of noisy Canadians just returned to their room near us. Per our clever plan, we laughed loudly, to warn them that there is no sound barrier between us. They took the point, and lowered their voices. Then we had a little conversation through the wall:

Man: I apologize in advance if I snore.

Me: That's okay. I'm prone to nightmares. If you hear me yell, just bang on the wall.

Man: Do you wander in your sleep? Do I need to put on my pajamas?

Me: No, I don't prowl. I just scream.

I'm grateful for the Ambien that you can pick up in Kathmandu without a prescription. It's been a lifesaver on some of these recent nights.

As we reach the tail end of our trek, my colleagues aren't the least bit impressed by my hiking ability. They knew I could do it. What Cholendra, Subash and Cheryl do marvel at is

my chocolate consumption. In the last week I've had six Bounty Bars, seven Snickers and two packages of Toblerone Dark. I don't think that's so impressive, myself.

It's strange how Real Life has started nibbling at the edge of my consciousness. Till now, my attention has been consumed by what's immediately around me: my every step commands my concentration, every view my awe. But now, as I negotiate my way up and down the trail, my mind is working on things not-there: what awaits me in my life when I return to the U.S. in a few days: clean out my office, find a renter, dye my hair. The sensation is reminiscent of the last few days before a marriage splits up: a weird limbo between states.

CASTE

As I promised my Canadian neighbor, I did indeed have nightmares. My car got stuck on the precipitous, remote road at our farm in West Virginia, without enough power to go up the hills. Nearby cars could make it, but I was unable to move. A mechanic removed the three cans of cat food that were throwing off the electrical system and sapping power from the engine, but not before I rolled and ruined two of Dad's cars as I tried to fix the problem myself. I also dreamed that my sister Kate could make weather. She commanded a blanket of fog to roll in, but she didn't know how to control it, and thus froze the earth. Luckily, she found the "blowtorch" setting in the fog control panel and thawed everything out. Finally, I dreamed that Cheryl wrote a book and on the back cover was a photo of nothing more than her blue-jeaned butt.

Subash estimates that I weigh between 50 and 55 kilos. He bases his guess on the experience of carrying me around on his back for a while.

We passed through one particularly unappetizing village. There, the trail ran alongside three houses where, on the front porch, a mother was picking lice out of a child's hair. Dust-grey children, with pairs of dried booger trails beneath their noses, broke away and followed us, beginning for candy: little guys, only two or three years old, literally blocking our path, pulling at our trekking poles and trying to reach into my pocket for a couple hundred yards. Day-old lambs covered with streaming feces cavorted in the yard.

Today's hike has reminded me of hiking along a giant brain. We'd round a bend and see the trail straight ahead, but to get there we had to traverse in and out of all the folds. It seemed like the longest hiking day yet, but I suppose I say that every day. We're staying at the same place we spent our first night. The mother of the house had just returned from her monthly visit to her 7-year-old son's boarding school in Nayapul. Her eyes teared up when she talked about leaving him. Apparently, he too cried when she left. They talked a little about caste. The mother/wife is Tamang and Buddhist. The husband is Chetri, and with a motion of his hand he explained that his class is lower than hers. Caste is distinguishable in people's surnames. The caste system is still alive in the villages, but less so in the cities. In Cholendra's village, Subash wouldn't be allowed into Cholendra's family's kitchen.

CULTURE SHOCK

What a rotten sleep. I was wide awake till nearly 1:00 a.m., and then awoken at 5:30 by a clanging-bell-adorned mule train clambering up the stone path fifteen feet from my room. And then my mental gears started cranking. I'm experiencing Reentry Syndrome, whereby my brain is increasingly flooded with worries about the life that I'm soon to return to. It's like a viaduct, at first with only a trickle of random tasks and quandaries running through my brain. Now it's open full-bore, and the volume and associated detritus are flooding my consciousness. A week ago—the first day on the trail—those silly birds warbled “Someone left the cake out in the rain.” Now they're back at it, and this time I'm a little mournful, because it marks the passage of time. The trek, anticipated for years, is almost over.

As we walked toward civilization, our route changed from narrow stone-paved path to wide dirt avenue, and from quiet to frenetic. In a relatively short span we passed from beautiful nature to filthy humanity. At the trailhead Cholendra grabbed us a cab. We careened around bends and over potholes on ski-slick tires. Broken glass from recent accidents littered the highway every few hundred feet. Bearing four passengers sardined among our luggage, the car struggled up the hill, past a colorful street-side wedding and dozens of people on bikes selling produce. The driver barely slowed for a herd of mules sauntering down the highway. By the side of the road, kids leapt into a towering haystack, probably to the displeasure of the haystack's owner. Speaking of children, it seems that the youth of many cultures are given toys that prepare them for life as adults. In the U.S. we have Baby's First Cellphone,

for example. Here, I saw a pre-mobile baby playing with a miniature porter's basket for hauling stuff up a trail.

I've been in the Nepal countryside long enough that I finally understand the meaning of a little of what I'm seeing. The people with bundles of leaves on their backs are at their daily work of feeding their bovines. The giant red ribbons in girls' hair is a required piece of the school uniform. That sideways tilt and waggle of the Nepali head means, "Yeah, sure; whatever." The smoke in the air is from cooking fires. The drying husks hung vertically from ceilings are popcorn. One thing I don't understand is why locals spit so much.

We stopped at a Tibetan refugee camp—each camp has a population from a particular region of origin—and bought two miniature hand-woven rugs. Apparently, there is some resentment on the part of Nepalis of the immigrants from Tibet: the same old story.

In Pokhara we had a nice farewell dinner. I gave Subash my (authentic!) North Face jacket and Cholendra my extra pair of hiking sneakers. We did "blind pig drawings," which involved closing one's eyes and drawing a pig from memory. We had beer and *raxshi* (an alcoholic drink made from millet or rice). I wasn't drinking so I had a little nibble of valium, abundant here in pharmacies. For dinner, there was marijuana-seed *achar* (a pickled condiment that goes with *dal bhat*).

SUNNY

We boarded a big purple bus named "Sunny." Cheryl and I were the only gringos—I mean *bideshi*—aboard. Sun glinted off a sea of shiny black hair visible above the tattered seatbacks in front of me. The women's bright *kortas* and *saris* lent a festive air. Drooping grey-green curtains graced the windows and the pairs of seats tilted into each other like married couples that had had a drink or two. The top quarter of the windshield was covered with Buddha stickers and orange fringes. Who needs to be able to see out the front window, anyway? Bus-driving is all about the act of passing at top speed on precipitous, winding river canyons. It's luck, not visibility, that drivers rely on. For a few hours, we sped past laden banana bushes and orange trees, and round tapered haystacks ready for winter, and infinite roadside stands selling candy, drinks, dried fish and other goodies. Not surprisingly, poor Cholendra and

Subash became carsick. The masala-flavored fried things made by Fritos probably didn't help.

A couple hours from our destination, traffic came to a standstill, so we got out of the bus, picked up some noodle soup, and waited. Rumor was that there was a strike holding up traffic. We heard other rumors as well: a fatal six-car crash, and hit-and-run of a woman pedestrian and she's okay, a hit-and-run of a woman pedestrian and she's dead, the road is closed the entire 40 kilometers to Kathmandu. All we knew was that as far as the eye could see, there was a line of dead-stopped traffic. This is my fifth bus trip in Nepal and the fifth where there was been a serious delay due to unknown factors, probably involving an accident.

There was no chocolate anywhere in this roadside village, so I occupied myself by taking pictures of the hand-painted designs on the buses and trucks. Enterprising young men hawked nuts and fruits while prowling among stopped vehicles. Others, sheltered in the shade made by the buses, played cards.

Finally back on the bus after a couple hours, we made slow progress toward Kathmandu, never finding the reason for our delay. Back in the city, we had a Newari dinner: *paneer* (cheese) ravioli, *chiura* (beaten rice), *bhatmas sandeko* (soybeans roasted in garlic, chili, cilantro, salt, pepper, oil and vinegar), and *aloo achar sandeko* (potato curry stuff). Delicious.

It was sad to bid farewell to Subash. "I like you," he told me. "A lot." The feeling is mutual. I know I'll be in touch with Cholendra again, so that wasn't quite such a mournful parting.

YAK BLANKET

At 7:00 a.m. I had tea on Cheryl's terrace, just listening: pigeons chortling, small kids shouting to each other in the street, the tinkly bell of street vendors selling fruits, popcorn and roasted nuts, a rooster crowing, crows cawing, a woman's voice, high and nasal, a single airplane overhead, dogs barking, dogs crying, motorcycles, the rattling of metal dishes on a nearby balcony, the clatter of cart wheels over the bumpy street. Over yonder there was a man plucking the heads off of blooming marigolds, rather like Charles Addams' Morticia.

Today, my second-to-last day, my goal was to buy a yak wool blanket, but the shop owners must have taken me for a fool because they were all asking way too much. While I was out and about, I saw a motorcycle with 15 chairs stacked up behind the driver, and a van with five living goats reclining on the roof rack. I finally found a shop owner who named more reasonable prices. He took me up a dark, narrow, steep staircase into an attic to show me his stock, accompanied by his giant-eyed little daughter. Suddenly I felt fluent in Nepali. *Chaina pani*, I said. He looked at me as though a bat had flown out of my mouth. I don't know what I thought I was saying—it was something I'd heard before—but in fact I had told him, "No water."

FALLING

On this last day, my spirits are thudding downward. I awoke to Cheryl's watching the News Hour and a report on the dive that the American economy is taking. What will I do for work when I get home? I did a lot of errands—picked up the teal dress I'd had hand-made for me, paid Thakur (much more than I'd expected) for the trip to Tibet, and decided to accompany Cheryl to her jeweler where I'd bought a beautiful bracelet a few weeks ago. Big mistake. There, I looked at a pretty pendant that was too expensive for me, and tried several earrings, finally picking out a simple silver pair and asking the price. The proprietor, an attractive Indian man, told me they were 900 rupees. "Is that your tourist price or your Cheryl price?" I asked. One always asks a question like this when buying stuff in a place where bargaining is expected. The only exception is at the pharmacist. So I awaited his response. It was, "Give me back my earrings and get out of my store." My jaw dropped. "What? Really? What did I do?" I asked, tears springing to my eyes. "Just leave. Take your things and get out. *Now*." He started shutting off lights, his face placid but his manner livid. I tried to talk to him, to understand and even apologize for what I'd done, but he just edged me toward the door. The bracelet I'd bought from him is my favorite purchase on the trip. I told him so. "Get out." I looked at it on my wrist and unhooked the bracelet, doing all I could do to keep from throwing it on the floor in outrage. Instead, I shoved it, like something poison to the touch, into my backpack where I hoped never to see it again. There was something about that level of hatred directed toward oneself that was untenable—and the reason unknown, no less. He body-blocked me to the door and into a pulsing crowd that was watching a building on fire across the street. "What just happened?" I asked Cheryl. "I don't know," she said. "What did I do wrong?" "I don't know." "Are you going back there again?" I asked. "He didn't do

anything to *me*.” Oblivious to the crowds of people hawking flutes and tiger balm, I elbowed my way through the crowd, destination undecided. A mother holding a dirty baby shoved her empty baby bottle in my face. That did it. I dissolved in grief. All the uncertainties, disappointments and human tragedies that I’d encountered in the past six weeks had been neatly shelved in my psyche. Now everything came tumbling down around me. For a full hour I couldn’t stop the embarrassing, voluminous tears, emotion that even my proper Northeastern upbringing couldn’t control.

We caught a cab to see the sunset at Bouddanath Temple in a different part of Kathmandu. I didn’t care. All the things that normally spark my eyes and mind were still there, but my spirit was dead. We walked around the *stupa*, spinning prayer wheels as we went. It was then that I saw the dog. She was bleeding profusely from the mouth, in extreme suffering. Cheryl asked me to keep an eye on the dog while she called KAT, the animal rescue place where we’d celebrated Dog Tihar a few weeks ago. A policeman lunged forward with his riot stick drawn, as if to club it. I moved forward, between them. *Nooooo*. The dog shook its head violently, coughed blood, yelped. Once again I fell into copious tears and hid my face behind my bandanna. Suddenly a man emerged from a tire shop with a nasty-looking pair of pliers in his hand. He grabbed the dog, who cried out and struggled but never showed aggression, jammed the pliers down his throat as another man held the dog down, and pulled out a section of bone. The dog cried again and ran off. Red-eyed, I walked over to the man, who spoke no English, and bowed in the deepest *Namaste* that I could. *Thank you. You are a very good man. Thank you*, I said. He got the gist, I think.

My appetite and enthusiasm gone, I opted not to have my final Nepali meal in the country, which is a pity because I love that *dal bhat*. Cheryl is still on-and-off sick at her stomach, so we just schlumped around and waited till 7:30 p.m., when, thanks to Thakur, Ale arrived to take me to the airport.

Cheryl tied a yellow *kata* around my neck and I bid her a subdued adieu. Mulelike—with a pack on my front and back—and unmulelike, pulling a heavy suitcase with each hoof, I disappeared from her view and into the bowels of the airport.

[I could end it here.]

The airline ritual was confounding. First, I put my stuff on the machine to be x-rayed. Then I paid my 1,750 rupee exit tax. It was an hour-long wait to check into the flight. Then I got into the expected dispute with the agent about my luggage allowance. I won! Onward through immigration and another x-ray machine, and a full-body pat-down, which I kind of liked. By this time I had become attached to an Australian doctor who, having lived in Nepal for over 35 years, knew the drill. While people were being asked to relinquish their seat on an overfull flight (the next plane out was in two days), he led me to a secret door that only Nepalis knew about, and we boarded ahead of the masses of people like me. He used to be a pediatrician, then worked for the World Health Organization in Switzerland, and now is a leper doctor in the Terai region of Nepal. He told me all kinds of things about the disease which is even nastier than I'd thought. He said they're in need of hand- and foot-surgeons to reconstruct damaged nerves, and gave me his card, in case I should know someone like that, which I do.

The flight was easy, except the aisle seat I'd spent an afternoon trying to get in Kathmandu, turned out to be a middle seat. I sat next to an eye surgeon from the U.S. and a young Kiwi speech therapist. We had cheerful conversations about disease before we all fell asleep.

[There's another section about Hong Kong, but so what.]

When I returned from my trip, I fell into a deep clinical depression that all the SSRIs and Ritalin and even tricyclics and intensive outpatient programs couldn't help. In this state, I started a blog called Door of Death. [Here](#). Take a gander at the introduction, written a few months after I got back from Nepal.

When Pope John Paul II died in 2005, I read an article about the elaborate Catholic rituals for laying their supreme leader to rest. I learned that most pope-y sorts of people in the past few hundred years wanted to be buried under St. Peter's Basilica. After the funeral, their lead-lined coffins — bad for their health — were

carried through the “door of death” on the left side of the main altar in the basilica. Then a single bell tolled. The coffin bearers wore blood-red robes.

I was intrigued and immediately bought the domain name, Door of Death. Who wouldn't have done the same thing under the circumstances? I think the name has a disturbing yet enchanting power, and I figured that one day I'd find a use for it. That time has arrived. (I don't know yet what I'm going to do with bloodredrobe.com.)

My Door of Death has nothing to do with popes, unless they're depressed. This door has appeared vividly in my mind often over the past few months. It's not particularly inviting. In fact, it's terrifying. Yet there's a calm inside. The door is slightly ajar and all you can see is a vibrating sliver of black.

The image is haunting to me these days as I try to endure a critical depression. It's been over four months since life's simplest tasks — walking, talking, sleeping, eating — have been predictably manageable. I often look over at that door of death and wonder who goes there, and why, and what happens to them. I'm afraid because I don't want to go, but there are those times when the brutal pain drives me into a tight fetal ball literally for hours. It hurts like hell, and it's boring as hell, and embarrassing as hell, and dark and desperate and hopeless as hell. (Sorry about all those “hell” references, Pope Benedict.) Those times, all I can do is breathe, and even that is hard: my throat feels like it's closing.

A year ago I never thought I'd admit to any of this. But I guess when you're drowning you don't just quietly sink. I'm thrashing to beat the band.

And that's probably all I'll say about doors of death. The rest will be shite about a life lived half-dead, and attempts to regain myself. Every day of every week is seeded with appointments and lab tests — psychiatrist, psychotherapist, acupuncturist — so that all plans need to work around medical needs. This business of losing my mind is a full-time job.

This blog is dedicated to popes everywhere.

And the only thing that was in that blog was this one entry.

Just so I have something up here, I'm going to post the quick writing exercise I did during my brief foray into a writer's group. The teacher gave us a prompt "The Middle of Nowhere" and five or ten minutes to write something. This is what sprayed from my pen.

Many times I've thought I'd found the middle of nowhere: in the vast deserts of Death Valley, in a remote Greek town encircled by stinging nettles. But I think I truly discovered it a couple weeks ago, not long after I returned from Nepal.

It's inside me. I didn't go there by choice. I fell in.

At first it seems just like a well, with slick dripping sides and jutting limestone chunks here and there. There's moss at the top and the green light of the sun shining through it.

But it's hard to hold onto the edge, so I slid a few years ago, down to where there's nothing growing—just cold and wet and rock, with the faint circle of light from above. I can still hear people there and shout out to them. Many people don't even notice where I'm speaking from. It sounds like it could be across the field or inside a house: the usual distances between people when they communicate. Maybe there's a slight echo from the well, but few people notice it. Most of them think I'm someplace nearby. Except when they go looking for me, they can't find me.

A few weeks ago, when I wasn't paying attention, just going about my business of white-knuckling it through the challenges of life, I slipped. I don't know how. I didn't see where I misstepped. I thought I'd gotten so good at navigating that treacherous terrain. But there I was, down so far that the light above was extinguished. I don't know how far up the top is, or how far down it goes. I don't know how I got there and I don't know how to leave. No one else is here. It does, truly, feel like the middle of nowhere.

Was there a connection between my experiences in Nepal and my mental state? I have no idea. Certainly I saw the seeds of gloom in some of my experiences, and noticed a growing delicacy of spirit. Or maybe it was the anticlimax of returning to normal life. Most likely, it was neither of these, but rather a chemical flood in my system. After six months of this, I was scheduled to have a meeting with the psychiatrist who administers electro-convulsive therapy, a desperate measure driven by hopelessness. But the day before, I ended up in the emergency room with a gallbladder that was going kablooey. I had surgery the next morning. In that moment, the strangest thing happened: the depression lifted, just like that. The

doctors don't know why. Was it just the shock to the system? I don't know, but I was grateful.

The depression came slamming back a few years later, of course, as it does with people like me. That time, I did have electro-convulsive therapy, much to the detriment of my sense of self-respect and to my memory. But that's a story for another time—or not.
