



The Ghoul of Kathmandu

Autumn leaves, dried by the heat of late afternoon, gathered in heaps against the bike rack outside Junior's Tavern. I hooked my fingers around the metal lock in my backpack, scooping it out and securing my red Cannondale ten-speed to a grate next to the curb. From inside, a low quarreling rose above the sounds of a Stevie Ray Vaughn song. I leaned hard against the wooden door and entered the smoky darkness of the bar to see if Toady and Farhad had arrived yet from the office. The three of us were the advance party, and I wanted to get a few drinks in before everyone else from the call center showed up for our nightly carouse.

Every Thursday for the past two months we'd taken to storytelling over pitchers of beer. Each week, someone new would take their turn, weaving together a ghost story, and I'd spent the last few days working on a nasty little tale about a dead man, rotting undiscovered in the back bedroom of his single apartment, thinking back over the course of his life. A story about regret, but also about how death was not really an end.

As our drinking party assembled, we stood ordering Pabst Blue Ribbon from Greg, the somber owner who sat behind the counter tending bar in his t-shirt and long apron, the narrow room filled with the echo of pool balls cracking together against a backdrop of blues, broadcast through speakers connected to a CD player behind the bar. Maureen, who we'd taken to calling Army-Navy-Air Force-Maureen, stood near the pinball machine, gyrating her head and laughing in steady bursts as she recounted a

date she'd been on the previous weekend to Theron, whose eyes bulged out from his long gaunt face as his lips spread into a joker's smile. We were waiting on the last storyteller of our group, Bub, to arrive when I looked over Farhad's shoulder and into the booth next to ours

One of the other regulars at Junior's – known to us only as The Masher because of his habit of schmoozing, often unsuccessfully, every woman who entered the bar – sat in his tight denim jacket, cigarette tucked between an ear and the rippled waves of his sandy blonde hair. He nodded my way and raised a bottle of Budweiser. We'd never spoken before, but had that camaraderie of spirit shared by those who drink long enough in close proximity. The bar had been my nightly haunt since I'd turned nineteen two years earlier, and The Masher was here as often as I was. We'd sat within yards of each other hundreds of times before, slowly pickling ourselves, each in his own separate cell, to ward off the cold and boredom. *What the hell?* I thought, and motioned for him to come join the three of us.

"Hey there boys. How's it going?" he said, sliding along the black leather of the seatback next to Toady, "Got yourselves a story night again?"

"Yes sir, that we do," I replied, dodging the lit end of a cigarette that someone standing next to our booth had waved too closely in a wild drunken gesture, "You want to join in?"

"Me? Noooooooo," he answered, "Don't know that I really have anything that'd be of much interest to anybody."

"Aw, come on, man, everybody has at least one good story," shouted Farhad over a rise in Maureen's laughter, "The only rule we play by is that you have to include a ghost."

"A ghost?" At this, I could sense from a shifted cast in his eyes and the slight sideways tug of our somewhat stranger's lip that perhaps we'd found a willing new accomplice. "Well," he continued, and something about his countenance softened into wistfulness, "I guess we all have at least one ghost in our lives, don't we?"

"By the way," I said, wiping condensation from the beer glass onto my pant leg before stretching out my hand, "I don't think in all this time I ever caught your name. I'm Risko. This," I said nodding to my right, "is Farhad. And the one sitting next to you is Toady."

The new guy grinned, his teeth the color of camel's fur, as he grasped my hand in his. I could feel the lingering iciness from his Budweiser work its way into my palm. "Should've introduced ourselves a long time ago. I'm Kip."

"Hey," said Toady, "If we wait until Bub gets here, we're not gonna get started for hours." He turned to look at our guest and smiled broadly, "So I nominate the new guy to tell tonight's story." We all sat uncomfortably for a few seconds, Kip included. He had at least twenty years on the oldest one of us at the table, and there was a fear in everyone's faces that this could easily devolve into the long-winded ramblings of a geezer. Perhaps he'd serve up a poor-man's version of some hokey urban legend that

we'd already heard a hundred times before. To break the spell of the moment, I made the final pronouncement. "Alright, so it's been decided. Go ahead, Kip, give us something to remember."

Kip shifted in his seat and motioned for Greg to send over another bottle of Budweiser. He cleared his throat and took the cigarette, an American Spirit, from behind his ear. He flicked open a silver lighter taken from his denim jacket's chest pocket and breathed in deeply, narrowing his eyes before slowly exhaling the smoke in a fog that hovered above the table.

"There was a girl," Kip began. "Before the storm blasts and the shadows and the cold stole everything away, there was a girl."

It was the spring of 1973, the last of those days when you could still get away with things that are impossible to do anymore, right before the bill for all our collective national hotel damage was set to arrive through the mail slot. They were also the last days when Kathmandu was still a paradise, wild and unknown and darkly beautiful, before Kissinger, before the Marxist rebels began fighting in the hills, before King Mahendra sold everything out to travel agents and CIA goons and let his relatives and cronies take control of the drug crops.

But how I found myself in Nepal and what happened before I arrived? Well, that's another story. Two years earlier, I'd just turned eighteen. Lived in Pennsylvania then, grew up in Erie, and at the end of my senior year the draft into Vietnam was our rite of passage. By that point, coming from a steel town meant that every boy in my class took going into the military as the inevitable next stage in life before marriage. A few were gung-ho, but most of us merely resigned ourselves to it. When it came to my father, who served twenty-two years as a Marine, it didn't really matter how I felt about the situation.

Of course, me trying to skip the draft by finding a doctor who'd say I had ulcers was out of the question. If the old man discovered me doing that, he would have beaten me like a three-egg omelet. So I did something just as bad in the eyes of the old man, that cantankerous red-faced lance corporal. Three weeks after my eighteenth birthday, I showed up at the Army recruitment center in Erie and signed my papers, with the hopes that I'd get stationed stateside. When my father found out what I'd done, he was furious that I hadn't gone into the Corps, screaming until he was almost purple and coughing spit. He stopped talking to me after that. The morning I left for Fort Jackson for basic training, he just sat in his reclining chair in the front room like a low-rent Archie Bunker, smoking Pall Malls and staring out the bay window over the front lawn. Didn't even look my way as I walked out the door, so pissed off was the foul-tempered old bastard that I would dishonor him in such a way.

I thought that enlisting instead of waiting to be drafted would be my safest bet to stay stateside and avoid being shipped off to war. I was wrong. One of the only benefits of going in voluntarily was that I got my first choice of MOS – logistics and supply chain support – so when I was eventually shipped out of training school from Fort Lee, straight into the thick of the jungle, they didn't throw me into combat. To be in Vietnam in 1971, the most dangerous place on the planet for an American kid not yet nineteen, I can honestly say that the roughest action I ever saw wasn't on a

battlefield or in an ambush, but while I was sitting in the base canteen one hot Sunday afternoon, four months into my deployment. Corporal Spencer, some loudmouthed jackass from Boston, had gotten himself all hopped up on methamphetamines – where he'd sniffed the pills out from I have no idea – and was sitting around drinking whiskey and jabbering on about how he was going to deflower one of the village girls with his bayonet.

After about three hours of this bullshit, with Spencer getting more saucy as the day wore on, the screen door swung open so hard that it rattled the whole canopy of the canteen. It landed with the sharp crack of wood against metal, and there stood Staff Sergeant Choma with an MP right behind him. Choma was a big, quiet son of a bitch. Polack or Russian I think. After I first landed at base and settled in for a couple of days, he'd called me in to come meet with him when he heard I was from Pennsylvania. He came from one of those rinky-dink mining towns near Pittsburgh. Probably used the military as his way to escape the coal mines. He jawed at me for a while about what to expect and how to keep out of trouble, and then he turned the talk toward football, asking what I thought about the new guy, Bradshaw. When I answered, "Well, if he ever gets his arm under control, the Steelers are gonna have a whole hell of a lot better chance than they do with Hanratty," Choma cracked a big smile and said, "I heard *that*. That's for damn sure!" and that was my welcome to the base at Tan Son Nhut.

Now here stood Choma, almost bigger than the doorframe of the canteen, with a dead-on stare drilling right into Spencer, who turned around and said, "Awwwww, now what is this happy horseshit?" Choma walked over to him. When the MP took Spencer by his upper arm, he wriggled loose and shoved him off. Before Spencer could even turn all the way back around, Choma cold-cocked him hard, square on the jaw, like a white Joe Frazier, and knocked him right the hell out. As the MP scooped Spencer's scrawny body up and slung him over his shoulder to cart him away, I saw Choma snapping his hand up and down and wincing. "Aw dammit," the big sergeant bellowed, "they better give me a purple heart for this shit. Broke my goddamned finger."

I never saw a lick of action other than that, the whole twelve months I spent in Vietnam. When I went back to the States a year later, my old man was already near death. Lung cancer. It'd come on quickly my mother told me, and she didn't want to worry me while I was away. He lay there in the back bedroom for three weeks, bony and yellowed, scarcely a shadow of the fiery old sonofabitch I'd walked past a year earlier. Wheezing and coughing and speaking in a barked whisper to my mother, an oxygen tube sticking out from his nose. Every once in a while, my mother would look at me and nod her head toward the bedroom, and if only to mollify her, I'd go in and sit next to his bedside as he lay there, mouth hanging slightly open, staring at the television. We didn't speak a word in those few weeks, just sat uncomfortably together, until I woke to the sound of my mother's crying and looked in one final time at the husk of his dwindled frame, his eyes shut and his skin graying under the morning sunlight that shone in through the lace curtains of the window next to his bed.

Family trickled in from all the towns in western Pennsylvania and eastern Ohio where my aunts and uncles lived. At the funeral home, near the old man's polished coffin, I felt myself biting at the inner meat of my lips to keep from feeling anything. This tyrant who'd towered over me for as long as I'd had memory now lay prostrate in

front of me, his iron hair combed unnaturally, face caked with a sickening rose-tinged layer of makeup, mouth drawn in a stern frown. He was nothing anymore, almost literally, simply an embalmed and decaying bulk, no longer the menacing ogre of my boyhood, but a scarecrow. If whatever I felt in that moment could have conjured any tears to sanctify the occasion, they would have been ones of anger toward the crotchety old bastard, and of relief in knowing that I wouldn't have to hold onto any of that resentment much longer. I would make a point of forgetting him, and this was the last cut I needed to leave my miserable childhood behind. As an only son, the only times I wasn't the one facing the brunt of the old man's fury was when it was directed at my mother, and she had borne it dutifully with a saintly Presbyterian patience.

After we'd all departed the funeral and our requisite graveside weeping, everyone returned to the family home, all the aunts and uncles dressed in ill-fitting suits and somber polyester dresses, crowding into my mother's kitchen around a table laden with cold-cut trays and bottled beer. The nieces and nephews sat drinking soda on the front room sofa or walked about trading punches and playing at whatever games there were that wouldn't disturb the adults too much. I sat near the kitchen, watching the kids roam through the dark recesses of the living room behind drawn curtains, when I suddenly found myself cut loose from my body and observing the scene from another side of the room.

Sometime during my early teenage years, I'd developed a condition – to call it a talent or skill wouldn't be right – perhaps more of an uncontrollable ability. I would suddenly find myself outside my body, looking on the scene where I stood. I didn't float and I didn't feel shapeless. It was more as if I inhabited some other body, something with weight, and would lurk as an onlooker to my own life. I called this entity "The Gargoyle," because when I was absorbed into it, it would most often be tucked away, sometimes on a shelf or on the top of a cabinet, at other times peeping out from under the bed. And now I was inside the Gargoyle, perched atop the television set, watching silently over the lingering death watch of my extended family.

A week after the funeral, I took a Greyhound to New York and flew straightaway to England. One of my buddies from the service had told me about the bus tours to Asia that would leave from London, ferry over the English Channel, and eventually weave their way through Europe toward a final stop in Nepal. We'd talked about it nonstop during my last two months in country, and as he boarded a military flight back to the States a few weeks before my own tour came to an end, he turned around just before boarding. "Kathmandu, Kip. Come meet me there." The week before my father died, a brightly colored, dog-eared card arrived in the mail, stamped with a postmark from Nepal. "Hey Kip," it read, "Loving it here, you have to come. Beer (and more), girls, mountains. No stress!" There was no question about me going, just what I'd tell my mother. And so I told her nothing more than, "I need to go see the world. Don't worry about me, I'll be alright." Nothing more than a rucksack, some sturdy hiking boots, and a fur-lined denim jacket, and I was off. During my time in Vietnam, I'd socked away most of my monthly pay, and the \$2000 I had with me would last six months or more at wherever I decided to stay.

As soon as my flight landed in London, I hired a cab to the South Kensington bus park and boarded a double-decker, ticket in hand. Asian Overland travels. The further we motored, the more it felt as if every country we passed through found me

shedding an extra layer of my old life, discarding the baggage I'd been carrying with me since I was a boy. Zebrugge, Belgium. Istanbul. The beaches of the Red Sea in Jordan. Peshawar, Afghanistan. Lahore. The last winding stretch, through the southeast mountains of Nepal as we made our way to the capital city, was like torture. After two weeks of cramped living, I craved fresh air for longer than our occasional half-day stops allowed. I was dozing, my long legs bent at the knee and propped against the seat in front of me, when Billy, the tour operator, tapped me on the shoulder with his clipboard and waited until I opened my eyes. "Grab your stuff, man. We're here."

I heaved my rucksack from the overhead compartment and shuffled drowsily to the front of the bus. Descending the rubber stairwell, my feet landed on gravel and I looked around. The whole of my surroundings were tinged in blue, the late afternoon winter sun already hidden behind thick, low-hanging clouds that shrouded the valley-circling foothills. People darted in every direction, and it seemed as if everyone was a full head smaller than me, curly-haired American giant sticking out in the crowd. I walked to a nearby stall where I saw an older man ladling tea and sat on a squat wooden bench, ordering a cup to warm my already freezing hands. A younger man, Nepali, with short-cropped hair and round cheeks eyed me, his legs propped up on the wire metal table next to the tea stall. He saw me look at him and smiled. "You American?"

I smiled back, "Yeah. I just got here, man."

"Hmmmm, *ramro*. Jimi Hendrix," his smile grew bigger, and his feet came down off the table, "Johnny Nash. *I can see clearly now the rain is gone*" he howled, slapping his hands in time on his knees.

"So, you know your way around the city?" I asked, "This is my first time here."

"You go to Jhocchen Tole?" my new friend asked me. He stood up, no taller than me when I was fourteen.

"Yeah, man, I need to find a place to stay. What's your name, buddy?"

"Manissssh," he elongated the ending consonant through his front teeth, "Manish Lama."

"Lama? Great. Hey, you know any good hash shops we can visit on the way?"

The Lama giggled, his eyes narrowing to moon crescents above his chubby cheeks, "Yeah, plenty of shops in Jhocchen Tole."

And so off we trudged into the cold, wet streets of Kathmandu, the Lama hailing a tiger-striped taxi and holding me off at a distance with a motion of his hand while he haggled with the driver. This, he'd told me, would be the fastest, driest way to enjoy Nepal on my first day here. When I got in the beaten cab with its smell of seat leather, Manish half-looked to me and said in a conspiratorial whisper, "You give him twenty rupiya."

“What?” I asked, and could see the driver looking first to me in the rearview mirror and then to the Lama, his eyes half-narrowed in what looked like roiling anger.

“Twenty rupee, you have?”

“No, I mean I’ve got money, but only American dollars.”

“Hmm okay, you give him two American dollars,” the Lama stared back at the driver and narrowed his own eyes, then turned to look out the window, mumbling something in a low voice to himself. I looked back to the driver, who had now returned his focus to the road in front of him. An elephantine statue in a dancer’s pose sat perched atop the dashboard, festooned with folded pink and blue banknotes. I watched out the windows as we drove along rumbling streets, boys bundled in winter coats with long shirts stretching down to the knee walking half-huddled as the sky slowly darkened to a steely blue. Amber light shone out from store windows and nearby every tiny traffic roundabout, women waved sticks of incense around shadowy red stone temples. By the time we reached Freak Street, I already felt half stoned. The Lama looked back at me, puppy eyed and smiling, and thumped me lightly on my chest. “We get out here.”

We puddled out of the taxi, winter already having settled into the damp night air during the twenty minutes we’d spent inside the cab. I hefted my rucksack over my shoulder and heard the Lama snickering as he watched two foreign girls dance by him on the sidewalk.

“Come come,” he turned back to me, a wide cherub smile animating his face, and I followed him quickly through an intricately carved low wooden doorframe into the heat of a bustling café. As we reached one of the last empty tables, the Lama swung around and plopped into a chair, rubbing his hands together and looking about the room.

I sat down and surveyed the surroundings myself. Red letters accented with white paint formed a half circle over a set of hands pressed together in prayer, spelling “WEL-COME,” with black fields off to either side and chunky offset white font reading “Hotel Eden.” A man in a thin navy hat and blue suit coat walked over and handed us menus, and I felt drunk as I scanned over each listing: hashish milk coffee, hashish lemon tea, ganja black tea, hashish chocolate, hashish toasted cheese.

“Lama,” I said to my new Nepali compatriot, “I feel like this place is my destiny.”

“Haha, good!” he beamed, “They have rooms too. You stay here tonight. Too cold to look around for other places. Tomorrow I take you around and find another place if you want. How long you stay in Kathmandu?”

“To be honest with you, friend, I don’t have any other place I need to be. I’ll stay here as long as the staying is good or until the next place calls out to me, but if the whole country is like this, I could see myself sticking around for a good long while.”

“Really?” he said, and I watched as his brown eyes darted around, doing mental calculations, “If you like, my uncle knows a man who rents rooms near here for

monthly charges." The blue blazered man returned to our table, taking our order, and we feasted and drank tea, a dreamlike hash fog settling over everything, and we talked for an hour or more. He was my age, twenty-one, and lived with his family further into the city near Bhaktapur. His father owned a sweet shop that Manish worked at most days, but every evening he was back here milling about Freak Street, sometimes with local friends, more often with the crowd of expatriates who'd adopted him. An American who lived not far off near the monkey temple was helping him learn how to play guitar. All the while, there was a swirl of voices humming around us, some French, some with British accents, one or two Americans I spied in the crowd and waved to, and for the first time in all the years I'd walked the earth, I felt like I had found home. I thought back to the bleakness, the ice-coated wasteland I had been living in just a few weeks earlier, and it already felt a lifetime away. A clinking china saucer ferrying chocolate cake was placed in front of me and the Lama told me to keep eating while he went to ask the owner to arrange a room for the night. It was already nearing ten p.m. and Manish was expected back home.

As I lay down, my head touching the pillow in the narrow second-story room with a boxlike wooden latticed window looking out into the Nepali blackness, I waited for the shadows to come, my head still swimming, the sound of blood thrushing in my ears, and nothing else but silence occasionally rippled by a low echoing voice from the streets outside. Nothing came to me but sleep that night, and the brick-like weight of my past life lifted, not imperceptibly, from my soul.

The following morning, I awoke before sunrise and listened to the sounds of nothing outside. A hunger had fallen on me, subdued but pulsing, and I saw that I was still fully clothed, having cocooned myself in blankets to ward off the winter cold. The thought of running unheated water over my face from the faucet in the bathroom seemed perverse, so I lay there for another hour, only rising when I couldn't wait any longer to use the bathroom. My toes felt damp and frigid, even though they'd remained tucked away in woolen socks, and I moved to put my boots on, delicately walking to the door to avoid disturbing the holy silence of the morning. As I clomped down the tight stairwell, bent almost in half under the low ceiling, I saw the waiter from the previous night sleeping, arms folded over himself, in a wide-framed chair near the front door.

I stood at the foot of the stairs, unsure of what to do. After a moment, I edged my way around the man's outstretched legs and reached to push the door open, when he awoke and jumped up, pressing a brown hand to the door and waving me back into the dining area. "No, no, you sit," he insisted, pressing his shirtfront down and shuffling into the kitchen. I was famished, and after twenty minutes, he hurried back to the table with steaming mounds of potatoes, buttered toast, small sausages, eggs. Chopped melon and apples. A small basket of muffins. A steamy mug of spiced milk tea.

Manish returned to the hotel before noon and told me to get my rucksack and meet him out front. When I went to the street, he was there stamping his feet for warmth and speaking Nepali to the man selling shirts on the curbside, laughing and puffing clouds of steam out in short bursts. He spun around at the sound of the door swinging shut behind me and jogged over to my side, his hands buried somewhere under his coatsleeves, which hung down and swung wildly as he ran.

“Come on, we go now to my uncle’s friend’s place.” It was only two streets over, but I became disoriented as we wound our way through tiny alleyways. The landlord, a man in his sixties with oversized glasses and a crisp Nepali cap who stood the same height as the Lama sized me up. There was a ten minute back and forth between them, the Nepali words trickling into my ears like syrup and finally the older man went back inside his room.

“Says you can rent it \$50 per month.” The older man returned with a long iron key, like one that might open a castle’s main gates, and briskly waved for us to follow him up the narrow, warped stairs to the second floor. He opened the door to the room and motioned us both inside. It was small, with light pinholing into the room through the lattice of a carved wooden window in the main room. We moved to the bedroom, and the older man walked to a set of curtained French doors, pulling them inward to reveal a miniature balcony with a wrought iron railing that rose to just below my waist. A shared bathroom, explained the Lama, was on the ground floor at the foot of the stairs.

“Looks perfect,” I said, “Umm...uh, very ramro. Thank you,” and I performed, like a fool, a curt bow at the waist as if I were in Japan. I’d already counted out fifty dollars from my wallet and handed it to the old man.

“His name Mr. Bhandari,” said the Lama. The old man took the money, smiling, and walked out of the room without a word. “Hey,” Manish slapped me on the back, “Time to celebrate. What we having for lunch? Tonight we go to a party with my American friends. Stop by the temple at Swayambu before though.”

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“Hut!” the Lama barked, stamping his foot in an echoing clap on the cobblestone plaza. A horde of monkeys, reddish-blond fur trailing down from their legs, scrambled over and clambered at Manish as he threw small bananas to each one. One of the monkeys, half the Lama’s own size, leaped on his back and clung to the arm of his winter jacket as he spun around with a startled “Hey!” and flung the remaining clump of fruit off to the others. Just as quickly, the larger male who had grabbed hold of Manish spun and kicked off the Lama’s chest with his hind legs, hurtling him backwards, then scurried over to the discarded bounty. The monkey grunted in a baritone at the other beasts, who ran their retreat, screeching in dejection. The whole scene played out like a Saturday morning cartoon, an atmosphere of buffoonery that I’d begun to realize trailed along after Manish like dust off of Pigpen.

“Come on,” the Lama said, brushing himself off and rebounding into good spirits, “Party going to start soon.” He trundled back to the roadway and I followed close behind.

When we arrived, there were already dozens of young expatriates and Nepalis milling about in the front yard underneath a looming banyan, the sounds of rings clinking against glass and an ocean of murmurs stirring life into the otherwise still evening sky. I followed the Lama into the front room, warm and awash in scented

smoke from burning cones of incense, colored rugs of intricate design hanging from the walls and covering the tan wooden planks of the floor. Bodies were everywhere, widened eyes and flashes of laughter and amid it all I saw sitting, arms hanging loosely over knee-bent legs, his frame half resting against a set of plum-colored pillows propped behind him, an older American, wine mug in hand. He radiated a gentle charisma, like Jesus, long hair hanging down past a beard that rounded out his angular face. The Lama weaved through the crowd, gleeful, occasionally chattering something that was lost in the forest of voices. I saw that he was beckoning me to follow.

We entered a brightly lit kitchen, just as full of massed bodies talking of Everest and Wounded Knee and George Harrison and the royal palace, and the smell of warm cider filled the air. A round-faced woman of perhaps thirty, British from her accent, charcoal black hair flowing out in long tresses, stood holding audience with the younger freaks. She turned to look at us as the Lama and I edged our way into the crowded room.

“Manish, come here! My baby, where have you been? I thought you’d run off and gotten married on us.” She bent down and encircled him in a rocking hug, then looked to me with a magnetic smile. “Who’s your friend? Come here, come here.”

“This Kip,” said the Lama, and he too waved me forward, “He just came here for the first time last night.”

The woman, just as radiant as the man in the front room, extended her arm and looked to the others with broad amazement, “Really? Kip, come here and give me a hug. Welcome to the family,” and with that I was pulled into her embrace and felt steamrollered by a crashing tide of surrender, of release. The Lama, off to the side and grinning in delight, half-whispered, “That’s Hetty.”

“Oh, right!” she said, letting me go and giving a mock punch to the Lama’s shoulder. She turned toward the cabinets and pulled down two ceramic mugs, “Now I’m going to ladle you boys some mulled wine, then I want you to go out back and be social. Manish, dear, see if anyone out there needs a refill. You both come back in here when you get hungry.”

Cups in hand, we plunged back into darkness, the wide-open space of the back yard fringed with hedges and lit only by the yellow glow that shone out from the kitchen door and the moon hanging low in the sky. Bodies were here too, lounging cross-legged on the hardened soil or leaning against thick trees or sitting, feet swinging, on the low stone wall that extended from either side of the kitchen stairs. The man I’d seen inside was Angus, the Lama told me, the friend who was teaching him guitar. Hetty was his wife. He’d been in a famous band from New York years earlier but had arrived in Kathmandu, like me, and decided to stay. Every few weeks, he and Hetty would hold one of these soirees, poetry reading and singing under the starlight and drinking with an ever-changing crowd of vagrant hippies who circulated perpetually in and out of Kathmandu like waves on the sea.

We drank and ambled around, the Lama introducing me to the half of the crowd he knew, and we’d both return to Hetty’s dominion to fill our cups and devour

endless bowls of buffalo chili. At some point, the atmosphere of the night shifted and more bodies poured into the back yard, Angus and a retinue of men in formal Nepali wear soon appeared with handheld drums of various sizes and jangling tamborines that were distributed judiciously to some in the crowd. And then, just as the first patterings of drumbeats began to tock over conversations, I saw her for the first time.

I think occasionally, with enough time having disappeared into the blackness that stretches, ever insatiable, between then and now, that the memory of that night has become locked into a frozen photograph that isn't entirely accurate, that shows only an illusion of that which I believe it to be, layered over that which actually was. I remember the Lama and I, having reached a lull in our conversation, turning at different angles to look into the crowd, when I spied her beneath a light canopy of patterned silk. There hadn't been rain, as there was when I'd arrived the day before, and the night was much warmer. She was bare-armed and surrounded by a glow from the firelight of torches that bookended Angus's makeshift stage, the shadows of passing bodies dancing along the curvature of her face. Her eyes sparkled in flashes of green that would burn down like embers into hazel when the firelight glimmered away, and her face was framed by blond hair that curved along her cheeks and hung straight down over her shoulders.

"Who's that?" I nudged the Lama, a rippled staccato of fingerbeats on Angus's drums trilling along the boundaries of my words.

"Huh? Who?" he scanned the faces that now sat watching the figures sitting on the stage, only a few conversations ebbing away in the background.

"Her," I said, pointing with my mug toward the far edge of the stage, "The girl with blond hair."

I could see from the periphery of vision that he'd eventually spotted her, "Dunno."

"Come with me."

The two of us wended our way, bobbing around the bodies sitting cross-legged around the stage, and eventually reached her side. I stood there, looking down wordlessly as she turned to look first toward the Lama, then to me. There was a long silence, I'm sure more awkward for her than me, and from behind us I heard a whispered "Hey man, down in front." It broke me from my bewilderment and I crouched down to meet her at eye level.

"Hey," I smiled, her smile meeting mine in unison, "Mind if we sit here?"

She patted the ground next to her. I quickly corralled the Lama from rushing in beside her, shooting him a glance and pointing to her other side. I took a seat and followed her gaze as she looked back at the stage. I noticed that her smile hadn't gone away.

Seconds passed and I worried that I would miss my opportunity. I turned back to her, and moved in closer to her ear, “I’m Kip.” I looked back at the stage, then closed my eyes and waited, saying a silent prayer.

I felt her arm curling around mine and she rested her head lightly against my shoulder. “Nice to meet you, Kip,” she whispered, “I’m Sunny.” After the music stopped and the soft clapping died down, we returned to the kitchen for more mulled wine, talking until everyone else had left and Hetty tiptoed past us with a wink on the way to her bedroom. “Remember to shut the door behind you when you leave, my loves.” Hours later, not long before the sun would come up again, we crept toward the front door. I saw the Lama sprawled across large pillows near the fireplace, arms folded, snoring. Sunny and I walked to the foot of Swayambhunath and sat on the wide shale stairs, talking and laughing and watching the sun rise up over the valley, then headed back to my apartment hand in hand.

Those first two weeks in Kathmandu were mystical. Waking up and walking out in the cold dawn over dew-wetted cobblestone streets, wrapped in yak wool pashminas, puffs of steam clouding shrouds around tea sellers, old women bundled in winter clothes with baskets of flowers slung low over their hips, ambling toward temple steps where they’d sit and weave petaled garlands to sell for morning prayers. Low-ceilinged dark cafes where Sunny and I would sit and warm our hands around sugared mugs of masala tea and eat simple omelets with flat bread for breakfast. Bells echoing through city streets and wisps of incense smoke coming from narrow alleyways or open doors, the gonged musical chanting of “Om mane padme hum” coming from trinket shops where solemn-faced men flung water from huge bowls onto their dusty stone storefront walkways.

Perhaps three weeks passed in our discovery of the city, hikes with Manish along the winding foottrails between Nagarkot and the Changunarayan temple with the Himalayas poking out above clouds in the distance, rainy afternoon bowls of hot *thukpa* as we stared at the crowds spinning prayer wheels and circumnavigating the mammoth Boudhanath stupa, small pots of hash tea shared at the Hotel Eden while we huddled close together over our table and conspired. Late one afternoon, as Sunny and I and the Lama headed toward New Road, we passed a Nepali girl in a fringe jacket and high boots walking from the other direction, and Sunny immediately spun around with a “Wow, far out!” The girl stopped and smiled, looking at us one to the other, her face like a Hindu goddess, dusky and celestial, long black hair tied down in braids, eyes like an Asian Nefertiti.

“Oh my God,” Sunny squealed, “You’re *soooooo* beautiful. You look exactly like Cher, doesn’t she Kip? That’s so unreal. You know what? You’re going to be my new sister!” Sunny had already clasped around the arm of the new girl, whose eyes glistened in electric ecstasy. I recognized a familiar look that washed over the girl’s face – I’d seen it almost every time Sunny latched onto a fascinating new stranger – some bright surprise that she’d found her soul companion, had stumbled through a crowd of millions and accidentally bumped into her photo-negative doppelganger from the other side of the world.

“What’s your name, sweetie?” she asked as she tugged the new girl in closer, entwining her hands around her upper arm, “I’m Sunny.”

“I’m Nisha,” the new girl said, and they were already bounding down the sidewalk together ahead of us, having turned around to head back toward Freak Street.

“Means night,” said the Lama, looking at me with a wide-eyed expression that I’d have read as surprise if it came across the face of anyone but Manish. He always looked at me like that when he said even the most innocuous of things.

“Huh?”

“Her name means night.”

It was late spring when news of killings started in slow bubbling murmurs around the tea and hash shops, even before reports began to appear in the local papers. Someone was butchering young women and leaving them in the streets around the periphery of central Kathmandu, and everyone, from shopkeepers to our ragtag group of hashhead hippies, was quick to gobble up the latest tawdry morsel of gossip and then pass it on to the next set of ears. Most of the locals speculated that it was someone from one of the villages, newly arrived in Kathmandu and lashing out at these young Nepali beauties who dared to pimp themselves out to the *khaires* and *khairinis*. If the teller was Tamang, they’d claim it was one of the Gurungs or one of the Sherpas, and vice versa, the identity of the accused running the entire range of every ethnic permutation in the valley. Among our gang, the working theory was that it was likely some Nepali burn-out who’d hung around our scene too long and fried his brain on too much hash and LSD, tumbling into a drug-addled rampage. At the heart of both these tellings was the common thread of a Nepali driven to mayhem by the corrupting influence of all these Westerners. The logical cause and effect of this was that all of us realized we were now receiving harsher stares than usual, were being swatted away from more doorways when we went to visit local shops or temples, were no longer seen primarily as a source of amusement by our Nepali hosts but as the underlying cause of these new atrocities.

But god, the murders were brutal, and any mild annoyance we might have felt about falling out of favor with the locals was buried deep under a suffocating layer of our own fear and anger. All of us personally knew the girls who were being killed – had talked with them for hours and sang with them while drinking wine and put flowers in their hair. We’d first heard word of the killings from the shopkeepers. After the second murder, stories in the Nepali language dailies, which Manish would read to us in his slow mumbling cant, began appearing as front page news. Only a few of us knew the first woman, aged 26, from Lalitpur, who’d been discovered in the steep stairwells of Naga Pokhari next to the water’s edge. No details were provided in the *Nepal Bhasa Patrika*, but rumors began to drift in that she’d been cut open, her eyes removed. New butcheries were added as the story moved from teller to teller, and there was great difficulty determining from the embellishments what actually happened. Our doubts were removed by the time of the second murder. Brazen and grotesque, the killer had propped her body up at the base of the Pashupathi temple, mere blocks away from the heart of our little foreign commune near Freak Street, and when word spread, soon after dawn, a crowd of us gathered around as Nepali police officers sectioned off the area. The body had been covered by a thick yak wool blanket, but an older woman

milled about in the crowd talking rapidly, and one of the younger Nepalis began to question her, another translating for those of us who circled around.

The elderly woman had been attending to her morning puja, and had come across the girl's body. "Ripped apart," she kept repeating, "ripped apart." I couldn't understand anything of what she said other than what was being quickly translated for us, but I recognized a prayer chant she would occasionally pause to interject, and before any more details could be pried from her, one of the officers realized what was happening and quickly escorted her away. By mid-afternoon, we discovered that the victim was one of our own, a Nepali girl from Bhaktapur, no more than seventeen, who we'd all known from the parties at Angus and Hetty's. Aaditri was her name. The killer had, just as the old woman had said, cut her open and festooned her body with strings and strings of the same garlands sold everywhere in the temple district around Durbar Square. Just as with the previous victim, Aaditri's eyes had been removed and, in their place, one golden and one orange chrysanthemum. There was speculation, but more so disbelief at the ability of the killer to transport the body to a location so well-travelled. Gossip quickly turned to the possibility that it was perhaps some mad police officer who had access to a car. Terror seized us all that afternoon. Murder was no longer a faceless notion, but one of our blood sisters, left defiled on the front lawn of the family property. Movement ceased on Freak Street, and very few Nepalis, other than those who worked in the area, came to the once busy café district.

The afternoon after they found Aaditri, Manish came to visit us at our apartment, advising Sunny to stay indoors. This was his last visit for a while, he mentioned dolefully. His family wouldn't allow him to come to Freak Street anymore. And the girl? Hadn't she been from the same area as the Lama's family?

"Can't believe it, can't believe it," he muttered, his whole body drooping at the small kitchen table. "I know her cousins. Whole family is destroyed. How can someone do this? Horrible."

And so, for a week or slightly more, everyone on Freak Street stayed locked up in their rented rooms, taking meals from hotel kitchens, the only stir of life the sounds we could hear from outside our tiny balcony. Coughing. Low music played from inside some faraway room. The occasional bicycle bell and movement of the shopkeepers on the street below. Eventually, after seven days had passed, serving as our communal period of mourning, we began venturing outside again. It was the final week of May when Sunny and I finally went out for cake and tea. Nobody spoke of Aaditri's killing, fearing that to do so would perhaps invite the murderer back, but a sporadically printed local newspaper circulating among the foreign crowd, *The Kathmandu Express*, had given a name to the murderer, befitting the homespun tabloid nature of its expatriate reportage: the Ghoul of Kathmandu.

What impressions bubble up from below that boiling sea of unconscious thought, writhing with dark creatures, when the mind turns to death? Not death as an abstraction, but something that confronts you – a stony-faced sheriff who looms at the door? Beyond the shock and terror, there are petty guilts that follow, of bleak curiosity, of humor. I found myself, sprawled along the high-backed benches at the Snowman Café one morning, looking through the smudged front windows at the foot traffic that trickled along Phalchasa Galli, thinking about the girl we'd seen outside

the Pashupati Temple. *At least, my mind drifted unmoored, at least he has fine taste in women...only the most beautiful among them...must be handsome himself – these girls would run away if he were a hunchbacked maniac...yes, Casanova Jack the Ripper...dashing Ghoul of Kathmandu.* Unmoving, I passed my eyes over the three or four others who sat near me in the café. What if he were here?

There was a two week lull after Aaditri's killing, and perhaps it was the relief of realizing we'd all survived and the reaper had made his way off to some faraway land, that allowed for our mild and playful spirits to return. The late-night street revels resumed, we drank wine again after midnight, and eventually another poetry performance at Angus and Hetty's was announced, to be convened that night. At mid-afternoon, Sunny and I lounged around the bedroom of our tiny apartment. As I lay on the mattress reading a rat-paged comic, "Haunt of Horror," that someone from the States had handed off to me after arriving on the most recent tour bus, the same one I'd taken from England two months earlier, Sunny rose up and walked to our miniature balcony. I watched as she moved into sunlight, a small white cup of masala cha at her lips as she crossed the six pace length of the room, golden-haired lady of the manor.

"When should we go out, Kip? I want to walk up early and feed the monkeys."

"Hummm..." I gave a short cough and cleared the phlegm that had pooled at the top of my lungs, "How about seven? Won't be dark yet. Then we can watch the moonrise before the party begins."

Sunny turned back to look at me, her lips pulled down slightly into a pout. "Do you think it's safe enough to do that?"

I remained on the bed, the comic still in front of me, and shifted my eyes to look her way. "What? You worried about the killer, babe?" I sat up and swung my feet over the bed, leaving them to search the dry floorboards until they fumbled upon my sandals. "Didn't you hear? He's long gone by now. Ran off into the hills to carry off some village girls." I could see her lips turn back up into half a smile, so I committed myself to finishing her off. "Anyway," I tossed the comic to the blanket and stood up, taking a pugilist's stance, "If he pops out of the shadows, I'll beat him like one of Angus's drums."

"Beware the ghooooooul of Kathmanduuuuu," Sunny said, bullfrogging her cheeks and bugging her eyes out before grabbing herself in a hug and heaving with laughter.

"That's right!" I said. I walked to her and spun her around so that we both looked out over the balcony. I wrapped my arms around her, resting my chin on her shoulder.

There was no attack that night. Just an evening of listening to Hetty hold court in her kitchen, telling stories of Paris as she bounced her son Ossian on her knee, and then poetry and drumbeats, and a walk back down through the winding city streets with the Lama. We parted ways near our apartment, Manish continuing on toward the bus park, and Sunny and I slept until almost noon. Kathmandu returned, over those

next guileless days, to a sleepy late-spring serenity. It couldn't last forever, but we drank in as much as we could while the beauty remained. The spell, that false sense of safety, tumbled away, shaken by an angry jolt of the earth, three days later.

I'd been buried in a deep sleep, stretched out along the entire length of the mattress. Sunny must have gotten up before dawn that morning and walked catlike through the apartment so as not to disturb me. I woke to the sound of her screaming and bolted upright, running into the front room, where I saw her standing at the open door. One of her friends, Julie from North Carolina, a young hippie who'd found her way to Kathmandu a few weeks earlier, stood in the doorway, a look of deerlike incomprehension on her face.

"What? What the hell is it?" I asked, looking between the two of them as I fumbled to shake off the last spiderwebs of sleep.

"Noooooooooooooo! Noooooooooooooo!" was all Sunny sobbed, and she ran to me and clasped her arms around me, hanging onto my shoulders.

Julie turned to me, still the dumb look frozen on her face. "They found Nisha. She's over near one of the temples at Durbar Square."

"What?" I started backing away toward the bedroom, Sunny still clutching tightly, "Hold on, hold on! I gotta put on my boots." I whispered a low *shhhhhhhh* into the hair that lay over Sunny's ears, followed by a "Come on, okay, it'll be okay" and sat her on the mattress as I hurried to the closet and grabbed my boots and a long shirt. "Julie, come here!"

Julie now stood just outside the bedroom and I walked quickly toward her. She backed away two steps, her look of confusion shifting into a narrow frown. "Stay here with Sunny, would you please? I have to go out and see what's going on." Julie skirted past me into the bedroom. "Okay," I said, trying to gather myself as I secured three buttons at the bottom of my shirt, "Okay...hmmm. Okay. Don't leave here. Julie, lock the door behind me. I'll be back soon."

As I entered the street, the diffused sun of a morning twilight still in the sky, I saw a small group running around a corner to the north, and I picked up pace to follow them. I had caught up to Oliver, a college-dropout from West Virginia, and asked where we were going.

"She's near the big temples. God, I can't believe this is happening again."

The main courtyard of Durbar Square, with the tall white columns of the government house standing in silent judgment above us was, like most mornings, quiet. Pigeons pecked about, a lake of fluttering wings, the streets empty other than a few ancient men, sitting hunched at sporadic intervals along the steps of the grand temples. Ahead of us, near the Kali statue, we saw a large group swarming around two uniformed officers who were holding off the crowd.

Oliver and I arrived, and sweat from running the short distance in the June morning warmth had begun sopping under the pits of my arms and trickling in cold

drips down my back. There was silence in the air, although the crowd of young freaks had already reached perhaps two dozen, with older Nepalis pacing slowly around the perimeter. A stiff figure, crouched and sitting upright under a light bedsheet sat between the legs of the black figure of Kali, who danced and grimaced above the body. The bray of a cow clopping along the cobblestones sounded like a trumpet through the courtyard, followed by the loud fluttering of wings and angry coos as hundreds of pigeons swooped upward before circling around and alighting again. My stomach felt sour looking at the covered body – the entire torso wet with blood that had sopped into the bedsheet and spread outward like a macabre flower. The edges of the sheet riffled crisply as a gust of wind swept through the courtyard, the morning sky darkening again from an oncoming rain.

“Let us see her face, man. C’mom, we have a right to know,” were the first words that broke the eerie quietude. I looked over to see that it had come from Joshua, mop-headed with a bristled blonde beard, his mouth pursed defiantly. None of our Nepali friends were here to translate anything the officers were saying to each other, and as a third policeman arrived, he spoke briskly with one of the local fruit-sellers, who then hurried off, likely to summon more help. The youngest officer simply stood a few feet in front of the body, hands held in front of himself, palms facing outward, as he looked from the crowd toward the second officer and then back to us again. Another dozen freaks had arrived. A Nepali man in his twenties, suit coat over his dhoti, pedaled slowly past on his bicycle, craning his neck to look at the object of the crowd’s attention. Within minutes, angry cobalt clouds had further roiled in over the valley and pillars of wind circled, stirring up dust and scraps of discarded paper.

The last moment before I stepped outside myself for the first time since leaving the States was like a series of disturbing photographs flashing from moment to moment. The crowd had begun to murmur, sounding as a counterpoint to the agitated rumbling of the pigeons, as I felt the first patters of rain hit icily against my forehead. The officer who had most recently arrived blew shrilly into his whistle and shot a beckoning motion to someone at the far edge of the vast courtyard who jogged toward us. And then, a bellowing wind, stronger than before, like the invisible hand of some titan blew up from behind me, sweeping through the crowd and catching on the edge of the bedsheet covering the body. The sheet lifted upwards – just a peeking glance at what lie beneath – then settled back down in billows before changing course and gusting up again for long enough that all of us saw, if just for a second or two, the horror that had been hidden from us.

The body had been stripped of all clothing, arms and legs rigidly outstretched, as if inviting all who stood before it to gather in for a deathly embrace. If the body from the previous killing, less than two weeks earlier, had been despoiled as a flower offering to the god Pashupathi, the killer had become even more demented with this sacrifice. Beneath the black potbelly of the statue of Kal Bhairav, drenched as it was in its own painted blood, was the inverse image of the body before us, cut open. I recognized her face, I’m certain we all must have, such beauty in life now mangled into a horrid reflection of death, her eyes removed but still unmistakable. It was indeed Nisha, she who had been the dazzling new addition to our gang, Sunny’s shadow. Brutalized. Defiled.

And immediately, before the sheet could flutter back downward, as if I had been scooped up by an unseen eagle, I found myself staring down from the slanted pagoda-like brown tile rooftop of Hanuman Dhoka, swept into the Gargoyle, who perched, staring silently at the crowd stirring below. I could see myself among them, moon-eyed, my mouth hanging open as if I'd been frozen in mid speech, Oliver's hand resting on my tall shoulder. A low rumble had risen from the crowd at the sight of the body, and its chorus was met by a heavier mist of rain.

After the initial harsh slap of Nisha's death began to lose its sting in the days that followed, Sunny became messianic, insisting we leave the country. This was what the end of the dream looked like.

I had nothing left. That would be it. She'd leave and we would only remember each other years later as some long ago exotic spring-summer affair. Sunny had already gone to the bedroom and I could hear her tearing down clothes from wire hangers in the closet. I was desperate to keep her. I needed her here with me, and in that moment I grasped for the last thing I had remaining. I heaved myself forward to the bedroom doorway.

"Sunny." I spoke her name in such a calm, measured way that it seemed to catch her off guard. She dropped her arms to her side and turned to look at me. "Sunny, marry me."

And so it was arranged. What would ward off the shadow of death and gloom that had settled over Freak Street was a marriage. The tragedy of our late spring season would be ushered out with the staging of a comedy.

A few days before the ceremony, I made the winding hike up through the streets encircling Swayambhunath to Angus and Hetty's. The streets I knew, having lived in the valley for nearly three months now, as intimately as the ones I'd walked in Erie throughout my childhood. Late night roaming through shrouded alleyways, early morning jaunts past still-closed bakeries and dental surgeons, long stretches of wide abandoned roads near the city center, fringed with tall trees and dust-caked hedges. I made a game of trying to get lost and had found, by June, here on the eve of my collapse into matrimony, that it was impossible to do so for longer than a few minutes, even at evening when the city was enfolded in shadows and little more than tiny slits of light seeped out of shuttered windowsills. I crossed the narrow bridge over the low, foul-smelling waters of the Bishnumati and followed the steep zigzagging rise until I arrived at my destination. Sunny had gone off with Hetty to shop for a wedding dress, and I was to consult with Angus about the arrangement of the ceremony on the backyard stage. I walked in to see Angus and the Lama sitting cross-legged on the floor of the front room.

"I told you already! If you want to know who I think people are still going to be listening to fifty years from now, it's Badfinger. It's, like, not even a competition with the bands you're naming. I say Badfinger, and you say no. So who?"

The Lama looked at Angus with eyebrows arched over his widened eyes, "Gonna be Mouth and MacNeal."

Angus turned to me in smiling disbelief, a “can you believe this guy” look of amazement, before he focused his attention back on the Lama. “Okay, fine, Mouth and MacNeal. Listen, Manish, we’ve only got an hour before Hetty comes back with Ossian. Go back to your chords.”

The day of the ceremony, I dressed in a traditional Nepali wedding outfit, red and gold vest over a *daura saruwal* the Lama had tailored for me three doors down from our apartment on Phalchasa Galli. My blue blazer over this, combined with the thrumming of blood through my veins caused me to overheat by 11:00 am, my hair a tangled nest of wetness underneath my striped *dhaka topi*. Two Americans from Wisconsin who’d arrived in a dusty microbus a few days earlier, Frank and Carol, stood to either side of me, shading me underneath an umbrella, but the heat was unbearable and I felt as if I were going to pass out before the Catholic priest and the Hindu pujari would arrive to walk us through our marriage vows.

Hetty, seeing my discomfort, had some of the boys bring out one of the overstuffed chairs from the front room, and I was seated on the makeshift stage in the backyard, the crowd abuzz and electric with the excitement of the occasion, but all I felt was a nervous cyclone whirling above my stomach. At the front of the stage, the Lama sat, looking nervous in his white panjabi, tuning his guitar and occasionally darting his head back quickly to look at Angus, who sat behind him tapping his fingers lightly on a pair of squat banded drums, leather stretched taut over their surface, bound by tightly-woven strings.

The pujari arrived, followed soon after by the priest, a Nepali man, coffee colored skin contrasting with the white of his Roman collar. The Hindu pujari, bare-skinned other than the sash of white cloth looped over his shoulder and tucked into his *dhoti*, circled incense about me, saying a prayer in Sanskrit, eventually smudging a red paste onto my forehead, solemn-faced the both of us. He hung a string of chrysanthemums heavily around my neck, and I wondered if I’d be able to stand up again for the vows. Someone ran from the kitchen to the stage and whispered to the Catholic priest, who then turned to me, smiling. “She’s ready.” And then, following Hetty and two bright-faced girls strewing flower petals behind them, Sunny emerged – brilliant, golden – and descended the stairs like a fawn. Adrenaline shot through me and I bolted up, almost losing my balance before the priest steadied me and giggles rippled through the crowd. She came and stood next to me. Hetty was between us, tears welling in her eyes, and turned to me with a rising smile. She patted me on the shoulder, then turned and went into the crowd. I looked at Sunny, drunk from the clarity of the June afternoon sky, and stood there, dazzled.

There was then silence – as if Kathmandu had stopped spinning along the earth’s axis – and the Lama began playing, unsure and reedy, a second guitarist behind him, one of Angus’s friends, to round the notes more fully as Manish began to sing.

*“Well a man shall leave his mother,
And a woman leave her home
They shall travel on to where the two shall be as one.
As it was in the beginning, is now until the end
Woman draws her life from man*

*And gives it back again
And there is love.
There is love."*

After the ceremony, Sunny and I got far too drunk on red wine, and the evening came to a close with me throwing up in the hedges that ran along the far borders of the property, Angus heaving me cautiously back toward the kitchen and sending the Lama out for a taxi. He plopped me onto the couch in the front room and I watched as Sunny slept on the pillows by the fireplace, Hetty stroking her hair and telling me something about upstate New York. My head spinning, Angus helped Sunny and I to the car waiting at curbside, the Lama in the front passenger seat directing the driver back to Freak Street.

By the time we arrived at our apartment along Phalchasa Galli, I had my wits back about me and Sunny had woken up. Manish turned to confirm with me our plans to leave in two days with Frank and Carol. We would go farther into the interior of Nepal, to the lake city where the Lama's older sister and husband lived, for our honeymoon. I hoisted Sunny up, determined, drunk though I may be, to carry her on our nuptial evening over the threshold, doubly determined not to bang her head against the doorframe while I did it. As I neared the front door, I saw off to the side of the stoop a fat-bellied mongrel street dog, sow-teated in late pregnancy, that Sunny had adopted a week earlier and took milk and biscuits to every morning. She'd named the dog, she told me, "Sweetypie," and the foul creature bore me some causeless animus, snarling and baring her teeth every time I passed by. She did the same tonight. *Shut your damn snout*, I thought, *I'm the man of this house*. And with that, I carried Sunny upstairs. We passed out that night still dressed in our wedding clothes and woke up Mr. and Mrs. Kip Higbee.

I did love Sunny. I fell for her even harder that rainy summer in Nepal. Two days after the ceremony, we left with the Lama on the microbus that our new freak companions, Frank and Carol, had driven through eastern India on their way to Afghanistan and we rode with them to the frosty lake at Pokhara, where we spent our days roaming the hills and bumming change by the bus park. There was something about the light sour smell under Sunny's arms mixed with the baffling spices of franjipani oil that made me drunk when we made love in the forests, surrounded by the ice mountains that jabbed like arrowheads into the lapis sky above us.

Before we'd departed Kathmandu, we'd made plans to set out for the lake city before sunrise, leaving just after five a.m. I'd already packed our rucksacks the night before while Sunny drank rice wine and sang down to puzzled streetgoers from our cramped balcony. But wrangling Sunny that early in the morning was always a mammoth labor, like throwing all of my weight against a boulder. And yet I knew that I'd be able to relax once we met Frank and Carol near the gated pond at Kamal Pokhari, and Sunny could go back to sleep in the van once we started driving westward outside the city.

By four in the morning, I was already bristling to leave and looked back to where Sunny was still dreaming, likely that she was skipping through flower-perfumed hills. "Sunny, Sunny, Sunny...come on, come on, come on," I stood next to the door,

with its castle-key lock, and realized I would still be here twenty minutes later while she oozed into life and put on enough clothing for us to go outside.

“Nooooooooooooo. Kip, let’s sleep some more. It was raining last night. It’s too cold to go out now. Go tell Frank and Carol that we can go this afternoon.” I could already sense from her sulking tone and the shift of her body on the bed, though, that she’d surrendered to waking up, so I softened things by affecting a mock British accent.

“Sunny. Fair, sweet Sunny, *arise* and come along. Winter is over and the rains have stopped. The lilies of Pokhara awaiteth thee.”

An hour into the drive, as we finally breached through the valley and could see the cityscape drop away into pine-coated foothills, the Lama lifted his guitar and set the soundtrack to our journey. His idle noodling suddenly picked up into bouncing chords, a familiar song that I couldn’t quite place. Without lyrics, only his cheery *tra la las* propelling the song forward, I didn’t recognize what he was playing until he reached the chorus, announcing it with the same chord stroked in rapid succession, followed by off-key singing – *Me and you and a dog named Boo, travelin’ and a livin’ off the land, me and you and a dog named Boo, how I love bein’ a free man* – before he reverted back to his *tra la las*, staring down at the guitar and rocking his head back and forth in time to the music.

As the Lama repeated the chorus for the ninth time, something in Carol snapped. “Manish! For god’s sake! Enough with that song already!”

Frank looked halfway back around his shoulder, his wrist draped lazily over the steering wheel. “Yeah, why do you keep playing that over and over again?”

Manish widened his eyes and sat up, “What? It’s travel song.”

Carol turned and looked at him with a mixture of bewilderment and annoyance. “Are you kidding me? Please. If you want to sing a travel song, sing ‘Me and Bobby McGee.’”

Manish puffed his cupid lips out in a frown, then looked out the window over the slate rock shores of the river that traced parallel along the roadway where we drove high above. “Don’t know that one.”

The entire length of the drive to Pokhara began to drag, interminable, as if we’d entered some kind of wormhole. The front desk clerk at Frank and Carol’s hotel in Kathmandu had told them when they’d left that morning that the drive was no more than 125 miles. After driving nearly 10 hours, Manish finally spotted a distance marker indicating that Pokhara was still 28 kilometers away. Other than the occasional small market stops along the narrow two-lane highway, with their dusty rice and dal cafes, fruit sellers out front, rank urinal pit outhouses off to the side, we had passed no more than a handful of houses during the entire drive. Occasionally, we would see glistening children splashing in the green waters of a river in the distance, but nobody else. Now, as we neared our final stopping point, more balcony-roofed houses rose above lime colored grass, goats tied in the yard. Women in dusty

red skirts with blue blouses bundled straw, walking barefoot through a field while a wild-haired little girl played with a doll made out of hay. At the Lama's command, we moved off the main roadway onto gravel, and Frank slowed the microbus, cutting through the Nepali countryside.

We arrived in Pokhara shortly before eight p.m. and went to a guest house Manish knew. He would be staying at his sister's house further away from the lake. After ten minutes of arguing in Nepali with the wizened matron of the guest house, the Lama looked at me, his eyes wide and mouth slightly open, then turned and shot a blazing glance back at the old woman, who sat with a stern look and folded arms. "Come on, let's go. She says you can't come in at first."

"Why not?"

"She says you eat beef and they don't want to do special cleaning when you leave. But then she said you can stay here for a higher rate."

"Well, how much higher? I wouldn't mind getting a place somewhere before dark. I think we could pay a little more if they have to do this 'special cleaning' and all."

"No, no, she named me like double or triple price. She's not going to do any special cleaning. She's just trying to cheat you with her *sheyto chala kara*."

"Her what?"

"*Shey-to cha-la kar*," said the Lama in frustration, "White skin tax." He started walking across the street, swinging his arms like a little boy to build momentum, "Come on, we go to see another place I know."

We made arrangements at a much better hotel, our room replete with a balcony that overlooked Phewa Lake. Frank and Carol and Sunny and I made our way, the Lama having already departed for his sister's house, to the lake shore. The tiny trees that lined the lake were strung with red and white Christmas lights, the sounds of water lapping in the dark at the rocky beach. Along our walk, we found a bar that was open, perhaps the only one in the city, and went in to commemorate our arrival. The bartender, who looked to be seventeen, sat in silence with another boy, both of them half asleep as they watched us passing by the glass of the front window. They jumped to when we entered. "Namaste," the barboy offered, and his friend disappeared quickly below the counter. The Nepali folk music that had been playing on the stereo system abruptly cut out and was replaced with American rock. Frank and I grabbed beers and a celebratory bottle of Royal Stag whiskey, and we all huddled out onto the back patio looking over the lake.

After thirty minutes, the night, even in June, drew in like a curtain of ice and we moved back inside from the bleached wood deck. The orange light that filled the room gilded everything like fire and the sound system behind the bar started blaring out a Zeppelin song. The four of us danced into the room like serpentine, floating on a cloud of cheap beer and distorted bass, and we bellowed along with the opening verse, "Oh – oh, oh – oh, oh, ohhh" while the grinning barboy nudged his friend and gestured

in our direction. For a beaded drop of eternity, we weren't in Pokhara any longer, but back in some cellar party or dingy bar stateside, enveloped by the indestructability of youth. I spun in slow circles, my eyes on the ceiling, and imagined myself with Sunny back in Erie by summer's end. There would be hot dog picnics near a horseshoe pit, kegs of Genesee, kids running with sparklers as the fireflies came out at dusk, Johnny Nash singing through a transistor radio.

"Hot dammit, I love that song," I said as the music faded out. We had collapsed to reconvene our drinking at a small table, and I looked to the three of them, Frank sitting along the wall flanked on either side by both girls. "But I never understood the name. What the hell's a 'D'yer Mak'er'?"

There was an extended pause. "It's 'Jamaica,' Kip," Frank muttered, smirking as he hefted up his bottle of Star beer. Taking a swig, he looked sideways at me.

"What are you talking about? Jamaica?"

"The song title, man. Don't be a sap. It's a play on words."

"You're fulla shit, Frank. How exactly do you figure?" When I said this, Frank started chuckling, the smug son of a bitch, then stretched his arms out and put them around both of the girls, who looked at him from either side like doe-eyed bookends.

"Me wife's gone off to the Caribbean," Frank's words dribbled out in a bad English accent as he looked into Sunny's eyes. Then just as quickly, he spun his head around toward Carol. "D'Jamaiker?" he asked, his eyebrows thrust up over his widened black eyes. He turned back to Sunny with a cartoonish frown, "No! She *wanted* to go." There was a long pause while Sunny sat furrow-eyed, her head tilted back, her lips halfway open, her hand on Frank's shoulder. Then there was laughter from both girls and Sunny wrapped her arms around him and nestled her head deep into his chest.

"Ahhhhhhahahaha," roared Carol, "That's why we love you, Frankie!"

"That's right!" barked Frank, tipping his hand in mock salute in my direction, "And that's why Kip's the *fool* of Kathmandu."

I glared at Frank as he sponged up the adulation. I wanted to smack him across his smart fucking mouth, that's what I wanted to do. Instead, I just got up and walked over to the bar to get more beer.

The next morning, I woke up before dawn to go watch the last remnants of night blanketed heavily over the lake. I turned and walked quietly back to the side of the bed and sat down, resting my hand on Sunny's shoulder.

"Good morning, morning. Hello, Sunshine," I whispered to her, "Wake up, sleepyhead."

“Mmmmmmm,” her eyelids half-parted and she looked at me across the sheets, the hazed greenness of her irises like a sun-mottled forest, “Is it a skippidy-do-dah day?”

“You know it is.” We stayed together in the morning silence, looking into each other’s eyes. The sky outside still black and the birds not yet singing in the trees outside the window looking onto the balcony. “Come on, wake up. We’re driving up to the mountaintop before sunrise.” I stood up and walked to the side of the room, looking through the elongated narrow pane of glass and down into the parking lot. I could already see Frank’s shadow next to the minibus, pacing in a haze of faint smoke. I turned my head to look back at Sunny, who was still stretched out like a cat on the bed.

“Come back here, Kip. One more hug-a-doo.”

After our morning atop the summit of Sarangkot, watching the sun rise, a shimmering dance of gold and coral light against the snowy fishtail peak of Machhapuchhre not far in the distance, we returned to the city. My previous uneasy camaraderie with Frank had soured, and over the next three days spent in Pokhara, Sunny and I more frequently went off on our own, paddling boats across Phewa Lake, hiking up along the thin forest path to Anadu Hill and looking back into the city, lounging by lakeside and watching the other boaters as the sun went down. We’d go out to dinner with the other two, Frank holding audience and blowing our minds with his twenty-two year old wisdom while I sat and glowered and turned my fork nervously at the meal. Three days into our trip, I went to Frank and Carol’s room to ask when they intended to return to Kathmandu. There was no answer, and by midday, I had the boy at the desk take a spare key up to open their room. Nothing was there, their beds had been made. The manager, returning from a late lunch, told me that the key had been left at the desk before dawn, and he awoke to find it next to his head. Checked out already. I stormed back to the room and broke the news to Sunny.

“Come on,” I said, grabbing my spare pair of jeans and t-shirt from the closet and stuffing them into my rucksack.

“Well wait, where are we gonna go? Aren’t we going to wait and see if they come back?”

“They’re not coming back, Sunny. That guy is a prick. He already told me he had plans to drive to Kashmir with Carol. And they didn’t even have the decency to knock on our door or at least leave a note to let us know they were going to leave us stranded here. C’mon, we can just walk down to the bus park and get a ride back to Kathmandu.” The Lama, I reasoned, was resourceful. With no way of knowing exactly where he was in Pokhara, I left a note with the hotel manager for Manish and knew that he’d find his way back to Kathmandu the same way we would – on one of the buses that departed three times a day.

The morning after we returned, arriving late at our small apartment on Phalchasa Street, I woke up before opening my eyes and could hear the sound of Sunny’s feet, brushing lightly over the wooden floorboards in the front room, the smell of chamomile drifting in from the kitchen. I listened as she put a 45 on the record

player, the needle crackling in echoing circles before lifting into the sound of drunken horns drifting lazily around a martial drumbeat, then Merrilee Rush's voice rising like seraphim, reverberating along the ceiling rafters and rippling into the bedroom.

There'll be no strings to bind my hands, not if my love can't bind your heart.

"Kip, baby," she stood in the doorway of the bedroom, light from the open doors to the balcony shimmering through her long blonde hair, "What do we do now?"

"Well, Mrs. Higbee..." The weight of those two words caught me, made me feel as if someone had passed smelling salts under my nose – a rush of blood erupting into my brain, "Why don't we stay in Kathmandu? I can get a job at the Spirit Catcher. Angus told me they're in need of a printer's apprentice. He offered to vouch for me with the owner if I thought about settling down here with you. What do you say?"

"I say that sounds like a *wonderful* idea," and with that she leapt into the bed next to me and rolled over onto my chest, her clasped hands resting just below my neck. We could both do what had worked for Angus and Hetty. The two of them would probably grow old here together, raising their son. Sunny and I might just do the same.

And yet there was still a restlessness within me. Late night walks along gravel pathways, sometimes until two in the morning, sometimes until dawn. I struggled with the idea of suddenly being tied to a preordained future, and occasionally the thought of growing old would haunt me. There was terror within that I could turn into my father – whether it was here in this hippie haven or halfway around the world in the industrial towns of western Pennsylvania really made no difference other than to layer the scenery of a different geography over the same deathly routine. Sunny wasn't fond of my "midnight rambles" as I called them, when I'd only return to her after she'd slept in our bed alone again, but she let them roll off of her like rain from a lotus petal, explaining away my late-night forays as me simply getting through the last of my tomcatting ways before I was to start at the new job.

* * * * *

We had all forgotten about the Ghoul of Kathmandu, weeks having passed since the last murder, but then there was another killing, this time farther off than the previous ones, yet not by much. It was more unsettling in that the scene had been hidden from us this time, the police demonstrating an unexpected care in securing the roadside perimeter and gathering evidence rapidly, before even the locals began to walk about. A local girl, nineteen years old, found on the sidewalk along Kanti Path next to the wrought iron fencing that surrounded the military parade ground south of Ratna Park. Police had found the body early one morning before word got out, so we were left to read about it in the papers with Manish over slices of lemon meringue pie and coconut crème cake at the Snowman Café.

I was to begin working at the bookstore the following Tuesday – one more week of freedom before I'd settle into my husbandly responsibilities, and Sunny and I made the most of our long afternoons together. One of our local friends, Sushil, let me borrow his motorbike for a few hours, a tiny 150 cc model, and Sunny and I drove through the foothills north of the city, parking and walking through the streets of

Budhanilkantha, buying sweets and peering through the gates onto the reclining body of the giant statue of Vishnu, lying on his bed of snakes, suspended over muddy green waters at the Narayan temple. We walked up a narrow road that meandered through the terraced rice fields where wildflowers grew until we could look back down on the low clouds that hung like tufts of cotton over Kathmandu below.

That night, after Sunny had begun to drowse, the last shops long since shuttered outside, I lifted myself delicately from the bed, went to the closet and put on a light jacket and boots.

“Where are you going, Kip?” I turned to see that Sunny had propped herself up on the bed.

“Just out to walk. I can’t sleep.”

“Come back to bed. I don’t feel safe with you wandering around out there. I don’t feel safe for you.”

“What?” I said, smirking, “I don’t really think I’m the Ghoul’s type.”

“Well, then I don’t feel safe staying here by myself.”

We’d fought about this before, but with the most recent killing having posted its reminder that death still walked among us, I knew it would be impossible to argue my case. And so, disturbed though I was, I lay in bed next to her for another sleepless night. As my reward, I arose when I saw the first light of dawn coming in through the front window and went quietly down to the street below, eager to pad my way along the cobblestone walkways before anyone else stirred in the city. As I went out the front door onto Phalchasa Galli, I heard a low growling off to the side of me and turned to see Sweetypie looking up suspiciously. She was grotesquely fat, like an overstuffed piñata, and soon enough there would be a whole litter of her ratlike brood to contend with. Sunny, I was sure, would be delighted.

“Get bent, I already told you,” I muttered, and then walked off into the maze of narrow city streets.

When I returned an hour later, just before seven a.m., with sweet rolls from the German bakery, the only shop in perhaps the entirety of Kathmandu open this early, I turned back onto Phalchasa Street and could see Sweetypie now sprawled across the entire length of the front step of the apartment. *Wonderful*, I thought to myself, *just what I need on too little sleep*. All I wanted was to go inside and make tea, then wake Sunny for breakfast.

“Move!” I spat in a harsh whisper, and was immediately met with a high-pitched yipping snarl. The dog had barely lifted her head off the stone slab that rested below the front door.

“Fine, then,” I replied, and in that moment it felt like I was possessed by a black-hearted devil that rose within me. As I approached the doorway I swung my leg

back and kicked forward with all my strength. There was an instantaneous yelp of pain that felt deeply satisfying to the beast within me.

As Sweetypie limped off rapidly down a side alley, I looked up to see Sunny standing on the balcony looking down, a grimace of horror on her face. I stood there for a moment, staring dumbly up at her, bags of sweet bread hanging loosely at my sides. She turned quickly back into the apartment. I raced up the narrow stairway to the front door. As I entered, I could see Sunny already coming out of our bedroom, wrapped in a light pashmina over her pajama bottoms.

“How could you, Kip! How *could* you?” There was a nettling plea in her voice that only aggravated me further, and the irritation was mixed with the low settling anguish of having been caught doing something that would be impossible for me to explain away.

“Sunny, wait,” I stammered, but she was already moving past me.

“Don’t touch me,” she said, her voice distressed.

“Wait!” I could already see the last blurred glimpse of her as she ran down the stairs, dark purple of her shawl an undulating backdrop beneath her ashy blonde hair. A simple flash through the air in front of me, and then she was gone.

“Shit. Shitshitshitshit,” I said, the word rising out of me like gunfire, and I stood like a golem in the middle of the front room, bags of pastries still at my sides. I flung them onto the small kitchen table and went to the sink, looking out through the latticed window onto the street below. I couldn’t see which direction Sunny had run off to.

I reached into the small cupboard beneath the sink and grabbed a bottle of whiskey, pouring a quick three fingers into a teacup and sipping at it in sharp gulps. After ten minutes, I resolved to go find her and went back out into the streets of Kathmandu. How far I walked that morning, then into the afternoon, I couldn’t say. Sunny was nowhere to be found, in all our usual haunts, and none of her girlfriends at the Snowman Café or the Hotel Eden had seen her. It was as if she’d melted into the city. By late afternoon, I found myself at Angus and Hetty’s front door. Sunny hadn’t been there either.

By early evening, I was panicked. I’d returned at intervals to our apartment, three times throughout the day, and at no point did it appear that she’d returned. By nine p.m., I resolved myself to a rescue mission – this time my ramble would be one of mortal consequence. At midnight, I stood on the abandoned steps leading up to Swayambhunath, looking back over the dark full expanse of the city below me. The moon was out, casting a sick silver tint over everything, and I imagined myself a minotaur on the prowl. I walked back down, eastward through the labyrinth of the Kathmandu streets.

The air of the room when I awoke was thick and heavy, the late morning sun pulsing through the glazed window as a plump, jade-eyed fly buzzed onto the bedstand next to my head. I paused for a moment, a deep coldness settling in above

my stomach, a burrowing sense of dread, before turning to look beside me. Sunny wasn't there. I lay there for twenty minutes, thinking nothing. And then the whole day was spent waiting, for what I'm not really sure of anymore.

I remember at some point – was it hours later or just after waking? – I walked to the front room and grabbed the phonograph case, hauling it back with me to the bedroom and placing it on the nightstand. After laying back down, the pillow propped behind me, I realized I hadn't picked up any records, but didn't have the fortitude to rise again. I placed the needle on the same 45 I must have been playing late the previous night before I fell asleep, and reached over just enough to turn on the power. The muffled underwater echo of a listless drum pushed through the fuzzed strumming of a guitar, and then the words came. *Nights in white satin, never reaching the end...letters I've written, never meaning to send.*

I stayed there for hours, expending only enough energy to keep lifting the needle, placing it back at the beginning of the song, over and over again, glancing beyond the edge of the bed and into the other room, my eyes fixed on the front door. At some point, I realized my tongue was heavy and dry from thirst, but I couldn't bring myself to rise to get a glass of water. My eyes began to play tricks on me, seeing blurred movement in wavy streaks on the periphery of my line of vision. I glanced over, perhaps just one or two degrees to the right of the doorframe, and there I saw it. It was something I'd never caught a glimpse of before, almost imperceptible in the shadows, but there, perched atop the couch, was the Gargoyle staring back at me. I could faintly make out his hunched outline, a deeper shade of black than the darkness surrounding him, but I could clearly make out his eyes, shining like glazed phosphorus, locking in on mine. Five minutes may have passed. And then, without notice, my perspective shifted and I was now looking back at my own motionless body on the bed, staring back at me. The song came to an end and this time I could see that I wasn't moving to lift the needle again. We just sat there, staring at each other, for long enough that my sense of time vanished and there was only the dreamlike snow of dust motes falling perpetually through the beam of sunlight that bisected the room between us. Hours likely passed.

I'm not certain what eventually thrust me back into my body. Perhaps it was the muted sound of feet milling about on the stairs a floor below, inside the passageway that led out to Phalchasa Street. Back inside myself and looking toward the front door, I could no longer see the beast hiding in the shadows. The late afternoon sun, amber-toned, streamed through the heavy brown curtains. A triangle of light was cast across the other side of the room and slowly trickled up the far wall. Soon, darkness would fill the world outside. I lay there, silent, and listened to the bells from bicycles on the street below, staring blankly at the wall. A brief, muffled knock at the door caused me to jump. I got up, shirtless, passing through sunlight and into shadow again before opening the door and looking out into the hallway. A Nepali man, perhaps in his late 50s, stood there in a dark blue blazer. A patterned dhaka topi sat atop his ivory hair.

"You American?" he asked me. Without the customary, familiar *namaste, sir* I was confused for a moment, but then, behind him, I saw two officers, a man and a woman, both outfitted in tan uniforms and black berets emblazoned with the insignia of the Royal police.

I paused. "Yeah. Why?"

"Put on clothing, you need to come with me."

They bundled me into the back seat of their car, a pale turquoise late model jalopy. The sky had already taken on an inky cast, and we rode in silence through the roads I was most familiar with into a part of the city I'd only been to once or twice before. I didn't ask any questions. The older detective matched me by offering nothing in return. We arrived at a vacant lot, not far from the shops off the main road. Across the street, I could see starlight flickering along the waters of a pond recessed below a low stone barrier that surrounded it. Two additional officers, I could see, had been there waiting, standing at the far end of the lot.

The older officer opened the rear door and motioned for me to exit. I stood, looking first to him and then to the two officers waiting far off in the shadows.

"I understand you are married, sir?"

"What?"

"Do you have a young American wife?"

I paused. I could hear the dull humming echo of crickets chirping in unison through the blackness of the night. "Yes. But why?"

"This will only be a second. Mr. Higbee, is it?"

"Yeah...um, yes."

The older detective came to my side and placed his hand over my far shoulder. He turned and we began walking together toward the officers at the far end of the lot. "I must apologize to you, most sincerely. I do hope, however, that you'll understand why it is necessary that we have you here."

A few steps before reaching the two officers, he stopped abruptly and turned me to look at him face to face.

"Young man, again I am very sorry. You only need look long enough to be certain this is her." He placed his hands on my shoulders and gently turned me once again in the direction of the two officers, who parted and stepped off in opposite directions, like dancers on a stage. A realization had suddenly fallen over me and I closed my eyes tightly. The thrum of the crickets sang to me even louder, maddening, impossible for me to escape as I wanted to, deep within myself. The older detective patted me twice briskly on my shoulder and I unclenched my eyelids, slowly opening them to the ghastly scene that lay before us.

The police hadn't yet touched her by the time I arrived, and in the darkness, under the dim streetlights that shone down in patches around the shadows of the canopied storefronts, we stood over her white body and stared. I could already see the

scene from outside myself, from somewhere perched on a lopsided brick wall off in a garbage-littered corner of the lot.

I could hear a low sound, a whispered and stuttering moan, come out of my mouth. And then a hitching breath, quickly exhaled. "Yes," I said, finally averting my eyes from the pit, and then there came from me that rattling moan again. "Yes, that's her." One of the policemen put a rough hand on my shoulder and turned me back toward the car.

We drove to a station house not far from the scene, in silence. I stared out the windows as we passed Pashupatinath, where smoke from the evening's cremations had coated the air, and through the haziness, vague outlines of bodies dressed in white walked up and down the amphitheater walkways on either side of the Bagmati River.

There was crackling over the phone line in the station house, my mother's voice sounding as if it were coming from behind a closed door. "Hel-lo?" that quirky and familiar rise at the end of the word caused a flood of memory, and the weight of everything from childhood, everything American, from my country, barreled into me.

"Mom?" I said, my voice breaking, and I began to sob into the sleeve of my shirt. "Um...hmmm..." I coughed and pressed my eyes tight to stop the tears. "Mom? I'm in Nepal. There's been some...there's been some trouble here. I need to come home."

"Oh, Kip, baby. I've been waiting for you to call. You don't have any idea how worried I was about you." I began to cry again in short hitches that I tried to catch by pressing my fingers into my ribs and grimacing. "Where are you, Kip? Let me speak to someone there."

I couldn't say anything more. I pressed again at the tears with my wrist, feeling the wetness soak into the rough cotton sleeve of my shirt, and stretched the phone receiver forward with my other hand to the uniformed officer sitting beside me. Another policeman motioned for me to follow, and I was led to a chair in an accompanying room, where the older detective asked for my information and Sunny's as he wrote studiously on his requisite forms. As he finished, pausing once to apologize for the need to collect his information, he stood up and thanked me for my cooperation during what must be a most difficult time. He began walking away before pausing and turning his full body toward me again.

"Mr. Higbee," the older detective spoke, looking earnestly at me, his eyebrows tufts of white against the caramel brown of his skin, "Before you go, I need to ask you one more thing."

Something about his tone threw me into a fit of wild giggling. In the moment, I pictured Columbo in his beige overcoat with that quizzical, cross-eyed look, and the hurricane of emotions inside me fixated on the hilarity of the image. I realized immediately that the detective would think I was entirely insane, and I bit at the sides of my lip to suffocate the laughter, "I'm sorry...uh, hmmm. No, I'm sorry...I'm sorry."

"It's understandable. You have been under a great deal of tension today." He looked down into his hands as he spoke again, and I could see the whiteness of his eyebrows now pressing in and wrinkling his forehead. "My question to you is..." he looked at me, and his demeanor had smoothed over until all that stood out was the iron grayness of his eyes, looking into mine, "Did you know another American travelling here? An American named Franklin Devereaux?"

At the sound of Frank's name, I immediately snapped to and felt a surge of adrenaline quicken my heart. "No....um. No, I didn't." We both looked across the desk at each other, and the room was now oppressively quiet. "Why?"

"It's nothing," he said looking down again with a slight shake of his head. "No, I mean to say it is very *much* something. But then nothing of importance to you."

"Did he –" I stopped myself quickly and regathered exactly how I was to put it. "Did he have something to do with this?"

"Noooo. No," he looked back at me with his creased brows and then shook his head again. A troubled smile came across his face, "You know, this has been a season of death. Not just in Kathmandu, but all over the country it seems." He turned his head and looked as a male officer silently walked in, carrying a tray with two small cups of tea. The old detective thanked the officer before turning back to look at me. "Please," he said, nodding to one of the teacups and pushing the tray carefully in my direction. The detective sat again, and I watched as he lifted a glistening silver spoon and delicately ladled it full of sugar before turning it with a small, rapid flip of his wrist into his tea. As he stirred it, I could hear the gentle rhythmic scraping of metal against porcelain. "This American, Mr. Devereaux. The authorities found him deceased outside Pokhara. Do you know this place?"

I turned it over in my head quickly, weighing now whether I could sense anything from the detective's tone or the look on his face, but his whole bearing had hardened into something completely impenetrable. "I know of it, yes. But no, I haven't been there."

"All the better then." He took two light sips of his tea and placed the cup firmly back on the saucer with a clinking rattle before standing up again. He walked with efficient, measured steps toward the door before turning back to me one final time. "This American; his vehicle was found near the lakeside a number of days before he was. What remained of Mr. Franklin," and at this a look of great sadness, of disapproval, overwhelmed his face, "was eventually found some distance away."

After I left the station, with the older detective requesting that I remain in Nepal a bit longer so that he could deliver Sunny's effects to me, I returned to our apartment on Phalchasa Street and stood there in the darkness of the front room, numb and unmoving. Despite the detective's request, the next morning I packed the things I owned – a few shirts and pants, the little of what remained of our life in Kathmandu, whatever I could carry on my shoulder, and walked out, sliding the apartment key under the old landlord's door with a short note explaining that I would not be returning. I began walking toward Ratna Park. From there I could catch a bus heading to the airport. As I passed by the Snowman one final time, I paused briefly, looking in

through the open doorway. Past the bustling movement inside the café, I saw Manish sitting by himself on top of pillows placed along the far wall, looking down at his guitar as he weaved his way unsteadily around the chord changes of a new song. There was a moment of hesitation, a thought to go inside and say goodbye to the Lama, but I stood there instead, listening to him play – *I can't remember if I cried, when I read about his widow bride...but something touched me deep inside, the day – the music died.* As he continued playing, half buried in a mountain of blue and light green pillowcases, I turned and disappeared into the foot traffic that flowed along Jhochchen Tole.

Sunny still haunts me at night, still the same nineteen-year old she was when we were together. She doesn't speak, just stares at me, frozen, as if in a photograph. She doesn't move at all, just stares. But then I see her breathing and it maddens me. It had always been like that, when she looked at me, when I lost the ability to get outside myself because I knew that she saw me as I truly was. I know what she's thinking behind those eyes, with that look, and I feel sick because of it, feel a poison inside of me that I can't flush out no matter how hard I try.”

* * * * *

As he finished his story, Kip lifted a freshly uncapped bottle of Budweiser, sweaty from the heat inside Junior's Tavern, and put it to his lips. Leaning back, the bottle now completely horizontal, I watched through the hickory glass as the bubbling liquid inside swirled down into him in a matter of seconds, like water circling through a bathtub drain.

“Cold blooded, man,” Farhad muttered, his face gone slack, deflated. “You’re cold hearted.” With his words, I felt an inner trigger release of relief that I wasn’t alone in feeling the same, but this quickly shifted as he added, “I mean you just *left* him there in the café?” There was an immediate mirthful lift in Farhad’s demeanor as he reached across the table for a high-five and continued, “But I’ll tell you what, Kip. That certainly was a story. I owe you a beer, buddy.” Both of them stood and made their way to the counter, I the only one left behind.

I thought for a moment as the last images of Kip’s narrative lingered, then slowly melted away into the echoes and smoky backdrop of Junior’s Tavern on Fourth and Main. I turned the possibilities over in my head, inspecting each of them like shards of glass left behind by a vandal. I watched Kip, arching his shoulders at the bar and casting an index finger up as signal to Greg for another beer. The front door swung open, the November sky black and crystalline from a sudden freeze that had overtaken the air. Margot shuffled in, alighting on a barstool next to the pinball machine, the neon glow from a sign in the window casting a halo around her that shimmered off her auburn hair. As she snapped open her turquoise pocketbook and summoned from it a Marlboro Red, Kip scuttled over, flicking open his Zippo and extending his arm as she brought the cigarette up to her lips. She smiled.

Monster. Maybe it didn’t matter who the ghoul was in Kip’s story. We were all, in our own manner, monsters. Kip turned back from the bar and scanned the room, his glittering eye landing on our booth and fixing on me, the only one of our party who still remained. Frozen for a moment in a glance of mutual recognition, an instant as

brief as the last flash of light before the sun sinks below the horizon, the moment passed. Kip turned back to Margot, and the door into Junior's Tavern, temporarily blown backward by a draft of autumn wind, creaked slowly inward, sealing us off once more from the titanic blackness of night.