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BEYOND THE SKY AND THE EARTH

A Journey into Bhutan

JAMIE ZEPPA

"Zeppa's book suggests what other contemporary travel books do not: that there are still a few places left in the world so strange and wondrous that a journey there has the power to transform the traveler, even against her will."

—*The New York Times Book Review*

M. A. C. Sinha

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W. A. C. S.

You must leave your home and go forth from your country.

The children of Buddha all practice this way.

—The Thirty-Seven Bodhisattva Practices

A Remote Posting

The doors of the Paro airport are thrown open to the winds. The little building and its single stripe of tarmac are set in the middle of dun-colored fields dotted with mounds of manure. The fields are carved into undulating terraces edged with sun-bleached grass; intricate footpaths lead to large houses, white with dark wooden trim. A young girl in an ankle-length orange-and-yellow dress, two horses, three cows, a crow in a leafless willow tree. An ice-blue river splashing over smooth white stones. A wooden cantilever bridge. Above the bridge, on a promontory, a massive fortress, its thick white walls tapering toward the top, a golden spire flashing on the dark red roof.

All around, the mountains rise and rise, pale gold and brown in the February light. At one end of the valley, beyond a wall of black, broken peaks, one white summit shimmers; at the other end, the mountains grow tamer, softly rounded and turning smoky blue in the distance. On the slopes I can see clusters of prayer flags, long narrow strips of white cloth raised on towering poles, floating in the wind.

This is what I flew into, leaving behind the cities of India sprawling over hazy plains. At first, the mountains were far below, plunging into narrow valleys thick with forest, dense, impenetrable. "Ladies and gentlemen," the pilot said, "we have now begun our descent into Paro," and the little plane dropped suddenly, leaving me gasping as we skimmed over ridges and dropped again, into one of the few valleys in Bhutan wide and flat enough to land a plane in.

The sun slips into the crevasse between two hills and the afternoon is over. The line at the visa counter moves slowly. I am the last one at the desk. The visa officer carefully inspects and then stamps my passport. My

bags are lying alone on the tarmac outside, beneath furiously snapping flags. I haul them in. I have arrived.

On the shelf above the desk in my one-room apartment overlooking a strip mall in the northern suburbs of Toronto, there were two blue plastic trays, one filled with graduate-school application forms, and the other marked simply “other.” In the “other” pile was an article entitled “Working Your Way Around Europe,” a yellowing passport application form, and a newspaper ad: TEACHERS WANTED FOR OVERSEAS POSTS. It was 1988, I was twenty-three. Outside my one window, winter was melting into sludge. The ad announced positions in southern Africa and central America, but the one that caught my attention was for an English lecturer at a college in the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan. Two years of teaching and overseas experience were required for the position. I had neither, but I showed the ad to my boyfriend, Robert, who had once been to South America on an international development seminar. “Don’t you think it would be a great experience?” I asked.

“It does look good on a résumé,” he said. But I hadn’t meant that kind of experience. I wanted something outside of professional considerations and career connections, something that wouldn’t fit on a CV. Robert and I had decided to get married but that would be several years in the future, when we were both finished with our studies. I was supposed to be starting a Ph.D. in English. But I kept wondering if I should do something else altogether. I want to do something in the real world, I kept saying to Robert—to which I would invariably add, “whatever that means.” It wasn’t that my life felt unreal to me, it just seemed very . . . *small*. I was tired of reading theory and writing essays, and, except for a week on a beach in Cuba, I had never been anywhere.

A few days later in the library, I remembered the ad and looked up Bhutan. There were four or five books, thick-paged volumes with washed-out black-and-white photos, all published in the 1960s and early ’70s. I took notes in the back of my journal: *Bhutan, small Tantric Buddhist Kingdom in the Eastern Himalayas. Bordered by Tibet in the north, India in the south and east, Sikkim to the west. Entirely moun-*

tainous (altitudes ranging from 150 to 7,000 meters above sea level). Capital: Thimphu. Language: Dzongkha, related to classical Tibetan, plus various other dialects. People: in north and west, of Tibetan origin; in the east, Indo-Mongolian; in the south, Nepali. National sport: archery. Government: hereditary monarchy, established 1907, replacing dual system of government with religious and secular heads. Closed to outside world for centuries. Never colonized.

Modern economic development had begun in Bhutan in the 1960s with the construction of a road linking Thimphu to the Indian border. Until then, the economy had been based on barter; money was virtually nonexistent, and taxes had been paid in kind. Thirty years later, the feudal nature of rural Bhutanese society seemed largely unchanged. Virtually everyone owned land, but, except for the lowlands along the southern border, the terrain was too difficult to permit much more than subsistence farming. Buddhism permeated daily life, and many families still sent one son into the monastery. Relatively few foreigners visited the country; foreign aid was limited, and tourism discouraged.

I skimmed snippets of a British emissary's journey through Bhutan in 1774, and then studied pictures taken in the 1970s. Two hundred years had not made much apparent difference. The photographs showed mostly mountains, darkly forested, a few stone and wood houses planted along the edges of cultivated fields. It was like the Brothers Grimm. Bramble fences, stone walls, a woodcutter, a haystack. Fortresses on hillsides, overlooking narrow river valleys. An old man in a dark knee-length robe standing in a flagstone courtyard. A woman leading a small, stout horse, two young children following, bent under backloads of sticks. A boy waving a switch at a herd of cows. A barefoot, bareheaded king.

The deadlines for various graduate schools got closer, and the jumble of applications grew larger. I kept thinking of those pictures that were like certain poems that leave a little hole somewhere inside you. I called the World University Service of Canada, the agency which had placed the ad, and asked for an application form for the posting in Bhutan.

“Where the hell is that?” my grandfather asked when I told him on my next visit to Sault Ste. Marie, the northern Ontario steel town where I had grown up. My parents had split up when I was two, and in the ensuing turbulence, my father’s parents had ended up with custody of my brother and me. They had been caring guardians but overly protective, especially my grandfather. My grandmother had died of cancer the year before, and my grandfather, feeling his seventy-two years, was anxious to see my brother and me settled in our lives.

“What do you want to go Over There for?” he said.

The rest of the world was all one place to him. If you weren’t here, you were Over There.

“It’s the same Over There as it is here,” he said, and then promptly contradicted himself by asking what was I, crazy, did I want to get myself killed or something?

I told him that I would be going Over There with a legitimate, government-funded agency that had a long history of placing volunteers around the world, so there was no need to worry.

He named several causes for worry. What if I got sick? What if I had a terrible accident? What if there was an earthquake, a flood, an epidemic, a war? What if, what if. He came up with a hundred stories of people who went off and never came back, dead of unnamed diseases, lost in jungles, swept away by rivers, fallen off mountains, fallen in love, never heard from again. I should have known; I had been raised on tales of worry and what if. “Don’t take chances. Life is too short to live by your own experiences,” my grandfather had told us countless times. “Learn from other people’s mistakes.”

“What about school?” he said. “What about your Ph.D.?” The Depression had cut short his own education before he reached high school, and the value of education was one of his favorite subjects—“education” meaning knowledge that could be practically applied to save you from a lifetime in the coke ovens. I could see what he foresaw for me—the future opening up, the path leading over a low rise just ahead into an assured future, a secure career, a good marriage. He wouldn’t understand if I told him that my future seemed to be closing

in, getting smaller and narrower and more rigidly fixed with each essay I completed.

He had spent his whole life making his world safer, smaller, more secure. The basement pantry was lined with tins of food we would never eat, he saved bottles, nails, envelopes, old wrapping paper, broken toasters, bits of wire, cloth and carpet. “You never know when you’ll need it,” he said. Caution was his religion: you never know, you can’t be too careful, better safe than sorry. In his experience, change meant loss. His own parents had immigrated from Poland, making the dark, cold journey across the Atlantic, moving up through New York, Pennsylvania and Michigan, into Ontario. They settled in Sault Ste. Marie, in the shadow of Algoma Steel, but even after the Depression, when things got better, they were not at home in this harsh new unfinished world, this Canada, and talked longingly of Poland, in Polish, until they died. This is what happened when you uprooted yourself, my grandfather believed: you could not go back and yet you did not belong. He believed in staying put.

I sat in my old bedroom, looking out the small window at the steel plant, with its wire fences, enormous grids and towers, smoke stacks staining the sky all year round. We had grown up chanting the names of the mysterious places inside—coke ovens, coal docks, blast furnace, slag dump. We knew you could grow up and get a job there, make good money working three-to-eleven, eleven-to-seven. “Your father could have been making good money there now,” my grandfather said, shaking his head. “Would have made something of himself by now.” When my father went to Toronto after the divorce, we were in awe. If you grew up in Sault Ste. Marie, Toronto was the ultimate destiny. If you got all the way to Toronto, you did not have to come back. My mother was proof of this; after the divorce she had only gone to Europe, and then she had come back. We did not consider that she wanted to be close to her children, we thought she had just not gone far enough away. My father returned only for brief visits, his long hair falling down the back of his black silk shirt, hundred-dollar bills folded in half and clipped in his pocket. “Your father seems to have done well for himself in

Toronto,” people said, their admiration ending in a question mark. “He’s in the music industry,” my brother and I learned to say, “he’s a promoter,” but my grandfather was not impressed. “Working in god-damn barrooms. Would have been foreman by now.” Toronto meant nothing to my grandfather, and he would not allow us to visit there when we were children. Traveling was something you did because you had to—if you got a job in another city, a real job, not in the music industry, but, say, as a dentist, my grandfather’s dream profession—“Look at the Miller boy,” he kept saying, “he’s making money hand over fist.” Traveling was not something you did for fun or experience or love. “Waste of money, that’s all it is,” my grandfather said. It had taken quite a bit of work just to convince him to allow me to leave home to go to university, first in Ottawa and later in Toronto. And now I wanted to go to the Third World. The Third World! It was preposterous! It was for the birds!

“And what about Robert?” my grandfather demanded. “I thought you were getting married. What does Robert have to say about all of this?” My grandfather liked Robert: he was smart and dependable. I had met him at university. My grandfather said Robert was blue-chip stock.

“I’m coming *back*, Grandpa. And Robert thinks it’ll be a great experience.” I didn’t say that Robert’s initial enthusiasm was declining now that I’d actually applied. “I’ve never been anywhere,” I said. “This may be the only chance I’ll ever get to do something like this.”

“I’ve never been anywhere either and it hasn’t hurt me,” he said. “It’s just plain foolishness. Don’t take chances. Prepare for your future and forget about going Over There.”

“Well, I’ve only applied. Maybe I won’t be accepted,” I said, hoping to erase the fret lines from between his eyes, if only temporarily. I hated to worry and disappoint him but I could not lie outright and promise not to go.

The World University Service of Canada (WUSC) called me for an interview. The two interviewers, neither of whom had been to Bhutan, gave a short introduction to the program there. When secular education began in the country thirty years ago, with the help of a Canadian

Jesuit named Father Mackey, the Bhutanese government chose English as the medium of instruction. On Bhutan's northern border, Tibet had been annexed by China and the world had not even blinked. Bhutan did not want to suffer a similar fate; it was time to end its policy of official isolation and enter the modern world. The Royal Government proceeded cautiously, however, and the pace of development was kept deliberately slow. The education system, still in its early stages, was suffering from a severe shortage of teaching staff, which made it necessary to recruit foreign teachers. Although the vast majority came from neighboring India, there were about seventy teachers from volunteer agencies such as WUSC and the British organization VSO at schools and institutes throughout the country. WUSC had a total of fifteen Canadian teachers there, all placed in eastern Bhutan, where Father Mackey had helped start the first English-medium schools in the 1960s. These teachers were provided with accommodations and paid local salaries. Work terms were for two years, although teachers could and often did extend their contracts.

Conditions were very basic, sometimes in fact quite difficult, the interviewers said. Life at the college posting for which I had applied was a bit more comfortable, but it was by no means luxurious. There were few roads in Bhutan, and most of them would be closed during the heavy summer rain and the winter snow. There would be other Canadians, yes, but I would be several hours away from most of them. Basically, I would be cut off, immersed—how did I feel about that? How would I fill up my time? Did I have a boyfriend? How did he feel about my decision to leave him for two years? Did I realize that there were no phones in the eastern part of Bhutan? That most Bhutanese lived in villages and hamlets dotted across one of the most difficult terrains in the world? They proposed several situations—a serious argument with the principal, discipline problems in class, illness, cultural misunderstandings, an accident: what would I do? I constructed answers as best I could, trying to sound sensible and good-humored, ignoring the voice in my head that kept asking, “But what would you *really* do?”

Afterward, I went back to the library and flipped through the books again, studying the pictures, trying to place myself in them. I had a strange feeling in the pit of my stomach, like I was standing at the edge of a cliff.

The letter of acceptance from WUSC came in September of 1988, along with a Briefing Kit, a spiral-bound book of information on travel, health concerns, culture shock, and a list of things I should bring. I shoved my incomplete applications to Ph.D. programs into a file folder, restored several tomes of literary criticism to the university library and turned my attention to the list. The List! I could recite it in my sleep. I returned from daily excursions to hardware stores, sports stores, electronics stores, drug stores, grocery stores, mountain-equipment stores and the Tropical Diseases Institute, to count and organize items on the bedroom floor. There were piles of Warm Clothing (thermal underwear, flannel shirts in dark colors—winters would be cold, the Briefing Kit said, and the houses would be unheated); Medicines (Gravol, antibiotics, delousing shampoo); Equipment (hand-held water filter, Swiss Army knife, assorted tiny tools, \$50 high-tech flashlight with a five-year warranty); Other Useful Items (vegetarian cookbook, plastic containers with lids, Ziploc bags, lighters, packets of dried food).

Robert stood in the middle of the room, staring at the piles. “Surely you don’t have to take all this,” he said.

“I do,” I said, stuffing woolen socks, tampons, and *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* into a hockey bag. “It’s like preparing for a two-year camping trip.”

“It looks more like you’re preparing for a natural disaster. What kind of place are they sending you?” he asked, reading the instructions on the delousing shampoo.

“It’s a remote posting, Robert.”

“Well, maybe it’s too remote,” he said. “After all, you haven’t really

been anywhere before. Couldn't they send you to an easier posting? What about—"

I put my hands over my ears. "I don't want to hear it, Robert," I said. "I am *going* to Bhutan." I was suddenly overwhelmed by a desire not to go.

Robert spoke my fears aloud. "It's just so far away, and for so long. Two years—I won't even be able to phone you."

"You could apply too," I said. "We could go together." We had talked about this possibility before, but I knew that Robert had other plans for his life now. He had been a professional musician before I met him, but it hadn't paid off, and he'd given it up to return to university. It had been a sad and troublesome choice, to give up the thing he loved best, the music in his head, in order to have something more tangible, a degree in his hand, a guaranteed job in teaching or administration. My grandfather wholly approved, but secretly, I sympathized with the part of Robert that missed his music. He was rebuilding now, he said, putting the pieces in place, he wanted to have something when he finished. This was not a time to go anywhere.

I could call up the office in Ottawa, I thought, and tell them I can't go. I could cite personal reasons. I could still apply to graduate school. I could take a year to think about it. Two years was a long time to be apart—I *should* think about it. But I knew that if I didn't go now, I never would. And lots of people had relationships over long distances, I told myself. We knew several couples who had survived long separations.

I went back to the List. I would take my portable keyboard and lots of batteries, and books I'd always wanted to read: a collection of Buddhist readings, *Lost Horizon*, the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. I selected photos of Robert, my family and friends, a few postcards to stick on the walls of my new home, a miniature blue teacup I'd had since I was a child. My luggage grew heavier; I bought another hockey bag. This comforted me. I wasn't going out there with nothing. In between the shopping and packing, I argued endlessly with my grand-

father on the phone. We debated travel v. academic qualifications, the first world v. the third world, challenge v. goddamn stupidity, the chances of contracting dengue fever on the other side of the planet v. the chances of being run down by a milk truck outside one's childhood home, for the experience v. for the birds. Another letter came, fixing the departure date for February 16, 1989, several weeks away. I called my friends to say this is it, yes, I am going, goodbye.

A few days later, I got a phone call from the head office in Ottawa. The principal of the college in Bhutan, a Canadian Jesuit, had rejected my application. He wanted someone older, with more experience. Apparently, he was uncomfortable with the fact that I would be the same age as some of the students. The man on the phone was very sorry, but . . .

But nothing! I thought. I'm packed, I'm ready, I am *going*. I said, "I'm all ready to go."

The voice said yes, but . . . and I said yes, but . . . and this went on for several minutes until he asked if I would be willing to teach in a junior high school. Junior high meaning grades one through eight. In a more remote posting. There was still one position open, although it was, uh, quite different from the one I'd applied for. There was no electricity, for one thing.

"Yes, fine, grade eight in a more remote posting," I said.

"Well, you'll probably be assigned to grade two."

"Fine, fine," I said. Grade two in a more remote posting. Kindergarten on the Tibetan border. I didn't care. I was going.

"Jesus Christ, Jamie Lynne! I hope you know what the hell you're getting yourself into," my grandfather kept saying.

I said I knew. I had been to the library, I said, I had looked things up. I had seen the maps. I knew how far away I was going.

In truth, I had no idea.

People kept asking *why* I was going, and I gave the entire range of possible answers. For the experience, I said. I've never been anywhere. I'm tired of school. I want to learn about development, the Himalayas, Buddhism. I want to do something different. I want to travel. I don't

want to be a tourist. It sounds fascinating. I don't know. I knew I seemed a fairly unlikely candidate for an adventure into the unknown. And secretly I doubted that I had what it took, whatever it took, to head off alone to a country most people had never heard of. In light of this, my determination to go puzzled me. It was more than just growing up under the smoke stacks, dreaming the small-town dream of escape like my parents before me. And it was more than feeling that I was going to wake up one morning soon trapped in my future. For all my years of study, I wasn't sure I had actually learned anything. I had gained intellectual skills and tools, yes, but what did I know? I wanted to throw myself into an experience that was too big for me and learn in a way that cost me something.

I spent my last night in Canada with Robert, trying to forget that I was leaving the next day. I held his hand tightly long after he had fallen asleep, the names running through my head—Paro, Thimphu, Pema Gatshel, Bhutan Bhutan Bhutan.

He took me to the airport in the morning. We held hands, we kissed goodbye. It was only two years, we told each other, and we would be together again at Christmas. We would write. It wouldn't be easy but we would stay connected, because we loved each other, because we wanted to get married, because I was coming back. But on the other side of the security check, I sat and cried. I loved Robert. I didn't know why on earth I was leaving him.

Orientation

Mountains all around, climbing up to peaks, rolling into valleys, again and again. Bhutan is all and only mountains. I know the technical explanation for the landscape, landmass meeting landmass, the Indian subcontinent colliding into Asia thirty or forty million years ago, but I cannot imagine it. It is easier to picture a giant child gathering earth in great armfuls, piling up rock, pinching mud into ridges and sharp peaks, knuckling out little valleys and gorges, poking holes for water to fall through.

It is my first night in Thimphu, the capital, a ninety-minute drive from the airport in Paro. It took five different flights over four days to get here, from Toronto to Montreal to Amsterdam to New Delhi to Calcutta to Paro. I am exhausted, but I cannot sleep. From my simple, pine-paneled room at the Druk Sherig hotel, I watch mountains rise to meet the moon. I used to wonder what was on the other side of mountains, how the landscape resolved itself beyond the immediate wall in front of you. Flying in from the baked-brown plains of India this morning, I found out: on the other side of mountains are mountains, more mountains and mountains again. The entire earth below us was a convulsion of crests and gorges and wind-sharpened pinnacles. Just past Everest, I caught a glimpse of the Tibetan plateau, the edge of a frozen desert 4,500 meters above sea level. Thimphu's altitude is about half that, but even here, the winter air is thin and dry and very cold.

The next morning, I share a breakfast of instant coffee, powdered milk, plasticky white bread and flavorless red jam in the hotel with two other Canadians who have signed on to teach in Bhutan for two years. Lorna has golden brown hair, freckles, and a no-nonsense, home-on-the-farm demeanor that is frequently shattered by her ringing laughter

and stories of the wild characters that populate her life in Saskatchewan. Sasha from British Columbia is slight and dark, with an impish smile. After breakfast, we have a brief meeting with Gordon, the field director of the WUSC program in Bhutan, and then walk along the main road of Thimphu. Both Lorna and Sasha have traveled extensively; Lorna trekked all over Europe and northern Africa, and Sasha worked for a year in an orphanage in Bombay. They are both ecstatic about Bhutan so far, and I stay close to them, hoping to pick up some of their enthusiasm.

Although Thimphu's official population is 20,000, it seems even smaller. It doesn't even have traffic lights. Blue-suited policemen stationed at two intersections along the main street direct the occasional truck or landcruiser using incomprehensible but graceful hand gestures. The buildings all have the same pitched roofs, trefoil windows, and heavy beams painted with lotus flowers, jewels and clouds. One-story shops with wooden-shuttered windows open onto the street. They seem to be selling the same things: onions, rice, tea, milk powder, dried fish, plastic buckets and metal plates, quilts and packages of stale, soft cookies from India—Bourbon Biscuits, Coconut Crunchies, and the hideously colored Orange Cream Biscuits. There are more signs of the outside world than I had expected: teenagers in acid-washed jeans, Willie Nelson's greatest hits after the news in English on the Bhutan Broadcasting Service, a Rambo poster in a bar. Overall, these signs of cultural infiltration are few, but they are startling against the Bhutanese-ness of everything else.

The town itself looks very old, with cracked sidewalks and faded paintwork, but Gordon told us that it didn't exist thirty-odd years ago. Before the sixties, when the third king decided to make it the capital, it was nothing but rice paddies, a few farmhouses, and a *dzong*—one of the fortresses that are scattered throughout the country. Thimphu is actually new. "Thimphu will look like New York to you when you come back after a year in the east," he said.

At the end of the main road is Tashichho Dzong, the seat of the Royal Government of Bhutan, a grand, whitewashed, red-roofed,

golden-tipped fortress, built in the traditional way, without blueprints or nails. Beyond, hamlets are connected by footpaths, and terraced fields, barren now, climb steadily from the river and merge into forest. Thimphu will never look like New York to me, I think.

The Bhutanese are a very handsome people, “the best built race of men I ever saw,” wrote emissary George Bogle on his way to Tibet in 1774, and I find I agree. Of medium height and sturdily built, they have beautiful aristocratic faces with dark, almond-shaped eyes, high cheekbones and gentle smiles. Both men and women wear their black hair short. The women wear a *kira*, a brightly striped, ankle-length dress, and the men a *gho*, a knee-length robe that resembles a kimono, except that the top part is especially voluminous. The Bhutanese of Nepali origin tend to be taller, with sharper features and darker complexions. They too wear the *gho* and *kira*. People look at us curiously, but they do not seem surprised at our presence. Although we see few other foreigners in town, we know they are here. Gordon said something this morning about Thimphu’s small but friendly “ex-pat” community.

When we stop to ask for directions at a hotel, the young man behind the counter walks with us to the street, pointing out the way, explaining politely in impeccable English. I search for the right word to describe the people, for the quality that impresses me most—dignity, unselfconsciousness, good humor, grace—but can find no single word to hold all of my impressions.

In Thimphu, we attend a week-long orientation session with twelve other Irish, British, Australian and New Zealand teachers new to Bhutan. Our first lessons, in Bhutanese history, are the most interesting. Historical records show that waves of Tibetan immigrants settled in Bhutan sometime before the tenth century, but the area is thought to have been inhabited long before that. In the eighth century, the Indian saint Padmasambhava brought Buddhism to the area, where it absorbed many elements of Bon, the indigenous shamanist religion. The new religion took hold but was not a unifying force. The area remained a collection of isolated valleys, each ruled by its own king. When the Tibetan lama Ngawang Namgyel arrived in 1616, he set

about unifying the valleys under one central authority and gave the country the name Druk Yul, meaning Land of the Thunder Dragon. Earlier names for Bhutan are just as beautiful—the Tibetans knew the country as the Southern Land of Medicinal Herbs and the South Sandalwood Country. Districts within Bhutan were even more felicitously-named: Rainbow District of Desires, Lotus Grove of the Gods, Blooming Valley of Luxuriant Fruits, the Land of Longing and Silver Pines. Bhutan, the name by which the country became known to the outside world, is thought to be derived from *Bhotanta*, meaning the “end of Tibet” or from the Sanskrit *Bhu-uttan*, meaning “highlands.”

While the rest of Asia was being overrun by Europeans of varying hue but similar cry, only a handful of Westerners found their way into Bhutan. Two Portuguese Jesuits came to call in 1627, and six British missions paid brief but cordial visits from the late 1700s until the middle of the next century. Relations with the British took a nasty turn during the disastrous visit of Ashley Eden in 1864. Eden, who had gone to sort out the small problem of Bhutanese raids on British territory, had his back slapped, his hair pulled, and his face rubbed with wet dough, and was then forced to sign an outrageous treaty that led to a brief war between the British and the Bhutanese. Considering the consolidated British empire in the south, and the Great Game being played out in the north between the colonial powers, Bhutan’s preservation of its independence was remarkable. I am full of admiration for this small country that has managed to look after itself so well.

Sessions follow on Buddhism, Bhutanese Customs and Etiquette, the Education System, Village Life, Health and Emergencies. I take notes frantically, filling up page after page: *visiting someone for first time, always bring small gift, biscuits or juice, always refuse whatever is offered a few times before accepting. Visitors will do same in your house so keep insisting until they accept. Cup will be refilled three times. Arra = rice-based alcohol. Puja = religious ceremony. Lhakhang/gompa = temple. Never cross your legs in front of high official (bottom of foot considered disrespectful). La/Lasso La = respectful addition to end of sentence. Eat well-cooked meat only (pork = tapeworm, trichinosis).*

Buddhism considers all life sacred, therefore do not kill insects or rodents in your home in front of Bhutanese. Prayer flags usually found in high places or over water, wind carries prayers to heaven. Bacterial dysentery = diarrhea with blood & fever. Amoebic dysentery and giardia = diarrhea with mucus, no fever. Languages of Bhutan: Dzongkha, Sharchhop (east), Nepali. English = medium of instruction in school. Many other dialects throughout country. Very hierarchical society. Discuss everything with your headmaster first, do not go over his head, always go through the Proper Channels.

Someone asks about relationships. The group leader says that the Bhutanese are very relaxed about sex, especially the eastern Bhutanese. Usually, people get married by moving in together. They get divorced by moving out. There is no stigma attached to divorce or having children out of wedlock. “Now, out in eastern Bhutan,” she tells us, “you may hear the term night-hunting. This refers to the practice of sneaking into a girl’s house at night, which is a lot more difficult than you would imagine, considering that in most houses, the whole family sleeps in one room. Generally, the idea is, if you’re still there in the morning, you’re married.” We all laugh. She goes on. “You’ll find that if you do have a relationship with a Bhutanese, the village will be quite accepting of the whole thing. Just remember, they say there are no secrets in Bhutan, especially in eastern Bhutan, so you can expect everyone to know about it by the next day.”

She clears her throat. “Just don’t have a relationship with any of your students,” she says, looking straight at me. I glance around—no, she is definitely looking at me. I raise my eyebrows at her. “Are you the young lady going to the college?” she asks.

“No, I’m going to Pema Gatshel. Grade *two*,” I answer indignantly, thinking, well, now I know the whole story there. Too young indeed! The Jesuit principal thought I’d run off with a student.

We move on to other concerns. If you fall seriously ill, go to the nearest hospital. If there’s no hospital, go to a basic health unit. Send a wireless message to your field director. There are stories about teachers who had to be carried down mountains on makeshift stretchers by

their students. Our field director says they've been fairly lucky, though; they've had very few emergency evacuations. He reminds us what is meant by emergency evacuation: getting down from your village to a road, finding a vehicle, making the two- or three-day journey back to Thimphu. Someone asks, "So basically, if my appendix bursts out there in Tashi Yangtse, I'm a goner?"

"Well, yes," our field director says, and smiles apologetically. "Sorry, but it's not like you can call a helicopter." Everyone nods. Of course you can't.

I do not ask about those little yellow dial-a-copter cards that WUSC gave us in Canada with a phone number for medical evacuation. I carry mine with me, tucked into my passport. I seem to be the only one who actually believed I could call 1-800-GET-ME-OUT.

The other teachers, many of whom have taught in other developing countries, do not seem the least bit alarmed. Quite the contrary, they are having a wonderful time. Everything is funny to them. The power blackouts, the icy hotel rooms, the coxcomb in someone's chicken curry. They call the orientation itself "disorientation," the health session is dubbed "From Scabies to Rabies." The stinking local bus is the "Vomit Comet," the dubious-looking dumplings we eat at lunch are "Dysentery Danishes." Instead of a copy of *Where There Is No Doctor*, they call for copies of "Where There Is No Body Shop." They tell horror stories with glee. The man who loses all his bottom teeth after getting a simple filling. A woman with tapeworm cysts in her brain. Leeches in various orifices. A Canadian in Tashigang cracked up and was found running around the prayer wheel in the center of town, naked; he was taken out in handcuffs. Typhoid, paratyphoid, hepatitis A, B and C, TB, meningitis, Japanese encephalitis. They make up a little song. I try to join in but my laughter sounds loud and empty in my ears; I am steps away from a prolonged, hysterical outburst.

There are frequent power failures in the evening. We go to bed early, because it is too cold to do anything else, and there is nothing else to do anyway. I read my book of Buddhist teachings by candlelight. My first exposure to Buddhism came through Robert, who had practiced

Zen meditation in his days as a musician. I had never been at ease in the Catholicism in which I had been raised; it left too many false notes and dead ends in my head. The basic teachings of Buddhism stretch and trouble me, but they also ring clear and true. According to my book, this is the first of four degrees of faith: a feeling of mental clarity when hearing the Dharma—Buddhist teachings.

The historical Buddha was born a prince, Siddhartha Gautama, in northern India, in the sixth century BCE. A sage predicted that he would either become a great monarch or abandon worldly power altogether and seek enlightenment. Alarmed at the prophecy, Siddhartha's father created a world of rich comfort in the palace so that the boy would not be bothered by spiritual questions. At the age of twenty-nine, however, the young prince managed to get out of the palace, and was shocked at the suffering he found outside the walls. He was especially disturbed by the sight of an old man, a sick man, a corpse, and a mendicant. Realizing that his life was also subject to decay and death, he decided to leave the palace and seek the true meaning of existence. For seven years, he practiced rigorous asceticism until his body collapsed. Practice was no longer physically possible, and he still had not reached enlightenment. He understood then the truth of the middle way—that neither extreme of self-indulgence nor self-denial could lead to the realization he was seeking. After bathing in a river and drinking a bowl of milk offered to him by a village maiden, he sat under a Bodhi tree to meditate, and as a full moon rose, he came to understand the true nature of reality, and the way out of suffering.

The first of the Four Noble Truths taught by the Buddha claims that life is suffering. The second truth explains why. We suffer because the self desires, grasps, clings, is never satisfied, never happy, never free of its many illusions; we desire what we don't have, and when we get it, we desire to hold on to it, and when we are sure we have it, we lose interest in it and desire something new. In our constant, blind striving for something more, something better, something new, something secure and permanent, we act in ways that hurt ourselves and others, and create bad karma, which leads to rebirth and therefore more suf-

fering. Even if we manage to be content with what we have, we are still subject to old age, sickness and death, and so are our loved ones. The third truth says that we must end this ceaseless wanting and grasping if we want to end suffering. The final truth explains how—through the Noble Eightfold Path of Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration.

The Buddha did not claim to be a deity. When asked about the creation of the universe and the existence of God, he refused to speculate. He was not offering a new religion but a way of seeing and living in the world. For me, though, one of the most interesting things about Buddhism is not that there is no all-powerful God who we must fall down and worship, but that there is no permanent self, no essence of self. It isn't even clear among scholars if Buddhism accepts the idea of a soul, an immortal individual spirit. Separateness is an illusion. Nothing exists inherently on its own, independently of everything else, and a separate, permanent, inherently existing self is the biggest illusion of all. There is nothing we can point to and say, yes, this is the self. It is not the body or the mind, but a combination of conditions and circumstances and facilities. At the moment of death, these conditions and facilities break down, and only the karma generated by that life remains, determining the circumstances of the next rebirth.

This is a principal tenet of Buddhism, but the Buddha tells his disciples not to take his word for it. They are to analyze and search and test what he says for themselves. On his deathbed, he reminds them, "Decay is inherent in all compound things. Work out your own salvation with diligence." I am struck by this spirit of independent inquiry, by the fact that enlightenment is available to all, not through a priest or a church or divine intervention but through attention to the mind. In Buddhism, there is no devil, no external dark force—there is only your mind, and you must take responsibility for what you want and how you choose to get it.

I read until my eyes burn and my head hurts, until I fall asleep.

But my sleep is punctured by the barking of dogs and frequent

nightmares. I wake several times a night, and some nights merely float on the surface of sleep and anxiety, wondering if the other new teachers feel the same way, wondering what those goddamn dogs are still barking at, wishing for earplugs, wishing for Robert, wishing for home. I wake up exhausted. Even Lorna and Sasha, who have been completely unfazed by everything so far, complain of restless sleep and strange dreams. Someone says it is the altitude.

I send telegrams to my grandfather and Robert to say that I have arrived safely. What I do not say is that my body has arrived but the rest of me is lost, perhaps in transit. In my dreams at night, I have lost my luggage, my wallet, my passport. I cannot find a taxi, I miss the bus, I drive past the airport again and again. I have brought the wrong ticket, I must make a phone call but I cannot find a quarter. My suitcase is full of toilet paper, full of ants, full of Orange Cream Biscuits. In my dreams, I do not know where I am going: am I coming here or going home? It is more than just the altitude.

On Saturday morning, I go with Lorna and Sasha to the open-air vegetable market. Under roofed stalls, farmers preside over piles of potatoes, skinny green chilies, dried fish, unidentifiable roots and bulbs. Several varieties of rice, including Bhutan's own "red" rice, which turns a pinkish-brown when cooked, baskets of rice crisps, buckwheat, barley. Strings of dried cheese cubes, pungent balls of raw cheese, dried mushrooms and apples and fierce red chili powder measured out in blackened tin cups. The odor of the cheese mixes with the caustic smell of betel nut and the lime paste it is chewed with, and sends us scurrying away. In the handicraft section, we find religious books and ritual objects—little brass bowls, chalices, long musical horns, incense. Bamboo baskets and mats, twig brooms, a black yak-hair blanket. I run my hand over it and shudder at the scabrous texture.

At one end of the market is the meat department. Men with axes hack apart carcasses, hang up strips of red flesh. Legs and hoofs in one pile, intestines in another. "I grew up on a farm," Lorna tells us. "This doesn't bother me." It bothers me, but I maintain a grim silence. I'm trying to appear as imperturbable as the others. Three pigs, the color

of old wax, lie side by side, eyes frozen open. A man brushes past us, hoisting a bloody leg of something over his shoulder. “Yes, madam?” calls a boy with an axe in his hand. “Anything?” We shake our heads and move on.

On the way out, we pass religious men with prayer beads, chanting prayers, telling fortunes with handlettered cards and dice. One man has a miniature three-storied temple, called a *tashi-go-mang*, its myriad tiny doors open to reveal statues and intricate paintings of deities. People touch coins and bills to their foreheads and then press them into the doorways for luck and blessings. “Do you want your fortune told?” Lorna asks. I shake my head vehemently. That’s all I would need—confirmation of my grandfather’s predictions.

At the market, we see a few tourists for the first time, distinguishable from the resident expatriates by the cameras around their necks; the expats are carrying jute bags loaded with tomatoes and onions. Tourism is carefully regulated, we learned during orientation, so that Bhutan can preserve its culture. The number of annual visitors is kept low by a daily tariff of two hundred U.S. dollars.

After the market, we go to the bank to cash travelers’ checks into *ngultrum*, the Bhutanese currency. I feel I have walked into a scene from Dickens. In the gloom inside, dozens of clerks behind wire-mesh walls labor over massive, dusty ledgers, writing figures with leaky fountain pens, counting stacks of money, tying up sheaves of yellowed paper, seemingly ignoring the customers who are pressed up against the counter, waving slips of paper. I am required to sign my name an inordinate number of times before I am given a brass token and told to wait “that side.” I head in the direction of “that side” and wait for an hour, folded into the crowd at the counter, standing on tiptoe to see what the clerk in the cage is doing, straining to hear my number, irritated with the whole disorderly, inexplicable process. There’s no sign telling me where I should be, there’s no line, people push and press and squeeze in front of me, and the clerk is ignoring us all as he chats to a blue-uniformed guard with an ancient, rusted rifle. Do these people have all the time in the world *or what?* This is something I have already thought

a good number of times, waiting for breakfast in the hotel, standing at the counter in shops or offices, stuck behind a truck blocking a lane, wondering why the bakery isn't open yet when the sign says clearly OPEN 8 AM and it's already 8:20. Everything seems to take up more time, and the more time things take up, the more time people seem to have. "Doesn't this just make you crazy?" I ask Lorna.

She shrugs. "It's not like we have to *be* anywhere," she says. It's true. We aren't going anywhere. What is my problem? I have all the time in the world, and I am more impatient than ever.

After the orientation session, we begin a week of language lessons. For a small country, Bhutan has an extraordinary number of languages and dialects; at least eighteen have been recognized, some confined to a single village. Lorna, Sasha and I are to learn Sharchhog-pa-kha, which means "eastern-staying people's tongue," the main language of eastern Bhutan. Chuni, the pretty, soft-spoken young woman who is to be our teacher, says we can call both the people and the language "Sharchhop" for short.

Sharchhop has no script. We cannot hear the difference between b and bh, d and dh. I cannot pronounce *tshe* or *nga*. The grammar is incomprehensible, the verb must dangle its legs off the end of the sentence, and our progress is slow. After two weeks, I can count to eight, ask *where are you going*, and have two possible answers to *are you a cowherd*: *no, I am a teacher*; *no, I am a nun*.

I am learning another language as well: lateral road, hi-lux, land-cruiser; out-of-station, off-the-road, in-the-field; expat, consultant, volunteer; United Nations Development Program, Food and Agricultural Organization, World Food Program. *Are you a consultant? No, I am a volunteer. Where are you going? I am going to the field. Are you taking the Vomit Comet? No, I have a ride in the FAO hi-lux.*

I have stopped eating meat. I don't know if it was the trip to the market or the story of tapeworm cysts. In fact, I cannot eat much at all. I use bottled water to brush my teeth and wipe the droplets of unboiled, unfiltered water out of my glass before filling it. Sasha frowns. "I don't think we have to be *that* careful," she says.

“You never know,” I shrug. Anything can happen. You can’t be too careful. Better safe than sorry. Prevention is better than a cure. I have turned into my grandfather. Jesus Christ, Jamie Lynne!

Chuni tells us stories when we get tired of Sharchhop grammar. “This is a true story,” she begins, “this really happened,” and tells us of cloud fairies, wicked stepmothers, lamas who change into birds, prophetic dreams, a talking raven. A holy man throws his seven sons into the river to find out which ones are demons, and three turn into black dogs. “Be careful of poison villages,” she warns us. “Some villages are poison, especially in the east, Tashigang-side. You should never eat or drink anything there.” I want to get this straight, especially since we are all going “Tashigang-side,” but she has already begun the next story. Witches, a yeti, battles won by throwing hailstones back. All her stories have markers in the physical world. It happened there, at the rock by the river, she says. That is how the place got its name. You can still see the imprint his body left, the ruins of the castle, the burnt tree, it’s on the way to Paro, it’s near a rocky outcrop in Lhuntse, not even birds go there now.

Gordon drives us back to the Paro valley one afternoon for a picnic of bread, cucumbers and tasteless tinned cheese, past the airport, at a sunny clearing near the river, where we stop beside a *chorten*, a monument made out of whitewashed stones with a square base, a globular middle, and pointed top. Chortens are complex Buddhist symbols representing the body of Buddha, Gordon tells us. Inside there are precious stones, written prayers, relics. In Nepal, most chortens have been desecrated and robbed, but, in Bhutan, this is extremely rare. The Bhutanese still believe in the sanctity of these monuments, and would expect divine retribution if they disturbed one.

Across the river, hanging from a cliff is the monastery of Taktsang, the tiger’s nest, where Padmasambhava and his flying tigress landed. The flying tigress does not seem half as incredible as the monastery itself, which looks as if it has been glued to the cliff face. “Imagine,” Sasha says, “hauling up all the stones and wood, and then actually building it up there. A few people must have fallen to their deaths.”

Gordon says the only death he knows of is recent: a tourist supposedly fell trying to get a good picture.

Afterward, we drive to Drukgyal Dzong, built in 1647 to celebrate the victory of Bhutanese troops over invading Tibetans. In 1951, a fire started by a butter lamp consumed most of the fortress and now the dzong stands in ruins. The road loops around a stone marker and continues back to Thimphu. Lorna is singing some twangy country song about “the end of the road.” But the end of the road is the beginning of a wide footpath that disappears around the green bulk of a mountain. Beyond is a snow peak, the sacred mountain Jomolhari, home of the goddess Jomo, over seven thousand meters above sea level. Years ago, the Royal Government gave an international climbing team permission to ascend the mountain under the condition that they not disturb the goddess, and the team apparently kept their promise and did not set foot on the actual peak.

A man passes us, leading three ponies laden with sacks and bamboo baskets, their bells singing softly as they step carefully off the tarmacked road, onto the other, older road. Watching the ponies pass, I feel for a moment that I am an illusion, standing in jeans and a sweat-shirt outside a landcruiser, a camera dangling against my leg. What are you doing here, the landscape asks me. I don't know yet.

I begin to wonder what is happening beyond these mountains. I want the eleven o'clock news, *The Globe and Mail*, I want this program to be interrupted by a special bulletin. In Bhutan, news seems to be all word-of-mouth, what someone heard from someone else two days or two weeks ago, rumor and gossip and travelers' tales. News of the road conditions, for example, fluctuates wildly. We are told that the passes are blocked with snow, we will not be going to our postings for a while. But someone heard that the passes are clear. No, two passes are cleared, we can get to Bumthang. The passes are partially clear, the road is open to light vehicles, someone came through last night from the east. The passes are clear but there is no petrol. There is petrol but no diesel. No, there is petrol *and* diesel but all passes are blocked, all roads are closed. We will leave tomorrow, we will leave next month.

Lorna and Sasha and I are drinking Golden Eagle beer with Rita, a British teacher who has already been here for a year, and Wayne, an Australian engineer, in Benez, a little restaurant that draws a mixed crowd of foreign teachers and young Bhutanese in Western dress. Country music is leaking out of a speaker. Rita and Wayne are discussing various ways to walk from Tashi Yangtse in eastern Bhutan to Paro, a walk of more than thirty days. Lorna, Sasha and I have spent the day shopping for national dress and learning to put it on. The kira is actually a long rectangle of cloth wrapped around the body and belted, with an inner blouse and a jacket over top. The belt must be tight, or the whole ensemble begins to unravel. Lorna has been making us laugh all day with her down-home Saskatchewan expressions. She has one for every occasion. Coyote-ugly. It's as hot in the city as it is in the summer. "Doncha just hate getting gowned up?" she'd asked when we were dressed and standing stiffly in our kiras, trying to breathe. Now she overfills her glass and beer bubbles up and runs off the table onto the floor. "Wherever you go, there you are," she says, shaking her head.

We are tired of discussing the roads, the snow, the passes, our possible date of departure, our postings and what is available there, our nearest Canadian neighbors. I will be able to visit them if I can get on a truck carrying gypsum from the mine at the bottom of the Pema Gatshel valley and then a ride from the Pema Gatshel junction up the road five hours to Tashigang. Sasha will have electricity, Lorna and I will not. Sasha will be on the main road, I on a feeder road, Lorna will be off-the-road and will have to walk three hours up a mountain to get to her new home. Rita, who is posted off-the-road in Mongar District, has to walk six hours. Next year, she says, she wants to go to an even more remote place, three days off the road, deep into central Bhutan. I privately think that Rita is displaying alarming symptoms of dementia.

We order supper—*thukpa*, a noodle soup for me and Sasha, rice and chicken curry for Lorna, and for Rita, *ema datsi*, the national dish, a blistering stew of chilies and cheese. Wayne is drawing a map on the back of an envelope. The Eagles are singing "Hotel California." We

order more beer. And I think, sometimes it all makes sense: you are sitting in a restaurant with your companions. It could be a restaurant anywhere, it could be Sault Ste. Marie. Other times it makes no sense whatsoever. I don't know how this relates to the rest of my life. There is no link between my life on the other side of the planet, all those dark miles and starry oceans away, and me sitting at this table, tearing my beer label off in strips, no connection at all. Except for myself: I myself must bridge the gap, I am the bridge—although I feel more like the gap. All the experiences and achievements that defined me at home are irrelevant and insignificant here. There is just me, here, now. *Wherever you go, there you are.*

We are told to buy supplies in Thimphu, because “things” are not available outside the capital. I walk through the tiny shops. Things are not so available in the capital, either. We buy kerosene stoves, jerry cans, pressure cookers and hot-water flasks, noodles, cocoa powder, peanut butter. The shopkeepers wrap our purchases neatly in newspaper, and we carry them in our new *jholas*, handwoven cloth shoulderbags. Sasha, an artist and a vegetarian, goes off in search of sketch paper and dried beans. We both buy large square tins with lids against the rats. I spend the last day in Thimphu packing and repacking my luggage, transferring my most precious supplies from home—chocolate bars, raisins, and a sample bottle of Cointreau—into the square tin. But in the morning, we are told the passes are blocked again (or still) with snow and we will be not be leaving “for some time.” We will have more orientation in Thimphu, we will visit the temples, the National Library.

I do not want to have more orientation. I want to go home. I tell Sasha I am coming down with something, and lie in bed and wish for things: a *Cosmopolitan* magazine, a bagel and cream cheese, a grocery store, the Eaton Centre two days before Christmas.