

Second Chances

Mondays I walk to the British Council Library on Lazimpat Road to return books and magazines. I often read late into the night, in restful solitude. Mornings I read in bed, drinking tea, sometimes until noon when the house warms up and I will myself to dress. Five kilometers into town, and five back; I exercise to delay deterioration of bone and flesh.

The road begins as a bumpy dirt track, occasionally intersected by slimy trails of giant snails and always strewn with clusters of sleeping dogs. Rice terraces stretch to the northern foothills, hazy with summer heat, but vegetation disappears as the road turns south through the maze of clay-bricked shops. Sidewalk vendors stationed on plastic tarpaulins, islands of provisions, display baskets of spinach, peppers and beans, cans of lentils and rice. An old bull hobbles down the middle of the narrow pavement, delaying chaotic traffic. Cinnabar paste stains eroded features on stone gods at myriad shrines surrounded by drying shirts and faded cotton saris stretched over every piece of empty ground. There is no retreat from odours of rotting garbage, smouldering charcoal fires and open latrines.

These sensations anchor my new reality. I pass the legless beggar who sits on a wooden wagon and waits. I pass the palace walls, under the eucalyptus trees draped with sleeping bats. I discreetly examine the pillars and struts of wooden temples decorated with the copulating bodies of gods. Like acrobats they stretch and coil their limbs around one another. They bare their teeth in grimaces of pleasure. They seem to proclaim, *everything is possible*.

I am breathless by the time I reach the library. Behind stained Corinthian columns, the deep verandah leads to an imposing carved wooden entrance. Inside, it is crowded with bookshelves and people browsing. It smells of mildew and perspiration.

I check the periodical rack for new copies of *Lady Fair*. This is the only place where I can find Western magazines. When I show my tailor pictures of models in styles I prefer, he duplicates the designs inexpensively using local silks and cottons. *Lady Fair* features clothing and makeup for the *mature* woman. She is usually framed by a loving family sitting in a tastefully decorated living room brightened by the presence of flowers. The devoted husband's arm rests on his wife's shoulder. The children, arranged on hassocks, lean into their mother's embrace. Everyone smiles. Such images once seduced me. Though I acquired the dresses and the furniture, contentment eluded me. My reality failed to approach the printed image.

This is how I met Mr. Karmacharya, the chief librarian: I had to appeal to him for special permission to borrow magazines to take to my tailor. On the grounds that it would be a benefit to the local economy, Mr. Karmacharya allowed me to remove one magazine at a time from the building but with the condition that I would always sign it out and return it to him personally since he bore the responsibility for this unprecedented concession.

When I first submitted my plea, Mr. Karmacharya invited me to join him for a glass of tea in his office, a spare room with wooden chairs and half a dozen filing cabinets. Stacks of papers, journals and dark ancient tomes obscured a table set on an uncarpeted floor beside

uncurtained windows. Mr. Karmacharya spends most days conducting research into the history of royalty in this mountain kingdom. He unveils princes and warring tribes, treachery and palace intrigues. The library itself was once the home of a prince, as were many other similar structures now used as government offices throughout the capital. Behind pillars, mosaics, and stained glass windows are rooms with leaking roofs and damaged staircases. A regal atmosphere persists in a crumbling domain.

As a reciprocal courtesy I asked about his manuscript. He was delighted by my interest since he hopes to be published in English and was concerned that his use of the language might not be accurate. After that day, each time I borrowed or returned a magazine, we drank tea, discussed the progress of his research, and then I spent the morning reading the latest installment of his work while he pecked away at an antique Smith-Corona. Eventually, a rattan armchair with cushions appeared so that I spent those useful mornings in some comfort.

Mr. Karmacharya always welcomes me with *Namaste*, the word used at meeting or parting; hello or goodbye. Head bowed, hands pressed together I mirror his greeting. With his thick grey hair combed back from a fine, gentle face, he is a distinguished-looking man. He holds his glass of tea in a delicate, almost feminine clasp. His graceful brown fingers, with neatly trimmed nails, glide from key to key across the typewriter and lightly brush the pages of his books. Our conversations are tentative and self-conscious. Like travellers without an atlas, we retreat to the safety of ordinary landmarks- childhood, school, the climate in our native lands.

We meet now in a nearby tourist guest house on Friday afternoons. He tells library staff that he is working in government archives. We occupy a modest room furnished with two wicker chairs on a faded wool carpet, a small table, and a bed covered by a plain cotton spread. The shuttered window opens onto a garden with a lily pond and a variety of flowering shrubs. I would like to sit with him on a bench beneath the rhododendrons, to breathe in the fragrance of flowers, but we must remain secluded. Our conversations are conducted in a dialect of yearning for the possibilities surrendered with the years. In our intimate moments we speak to each other from the distance of a time when life was still a promise. We embark on a journey to redeem what is left.

Dry, hazy weather gives way to brief torrents of rain during monsoon season. Then the ceiling fan creaks as it stirs the saturated air. The crisp days of fall offer ghostly views of the snowy peaks beyond the valley. Because it is chilly in the winter months, I have found a portable kerosene heater to warm our room and the proprietor stores it for me in his office when I go to settle the bill. We make each afternoon an indoor picnic. I bring imported cheese from the foreign currency store, croissants, tart green apples or grapes and a large thermos of Earl Grey tea flavoured with slices of lemon. I pack two china cups and silver knives wrapped in linen napkins with the food inside my shopping basket. Sometimes I buy small cream cakes from the bakeshop beside the international hotel and we save these to enjoy at the end of our time

together.

Once, he brought samosas, still warm, wrapped in kitchen paper spotted with grease and rolled up in a tea towel. A woman in his household must have prepared them. Mother, daughter-in-law, wife? I did not ask. He did not bring samosas again.

One afternoon I saw him stop to read the menu outside a cafe where I sat drinking coffee. With him was a woman, younger, carrying an infant. I noticed her varnished toe nails, like red jewels trimming the edges of her sandals. She was petite, delicately wrapped in the transparent layers of a gilt-edged sari. Was this a daughter with his grandchild? Could she be the widow of a younger brother? Could she be his wife? She had the self-contained, satisfied look of a new mother, a look that excludes the world. I remember that feeling of starting something new; an innocent smugness. I was too young then to imagine endings; children growing into their own lives, a husband disappearing day by day, each new year wearing away everything.

Near the guest house, temple carvings depict Shiva and his consort Parvati; the ideal man and woman, entwined like serpents. Shiva grins in contentment. Parvati throws back her head in rapture. Yet so many more temples honour Vishnu, an incarnation of Shiva, who brings death. His blue, stone body is dappled with yellow marigolds scattered by women who press themselves against his face and limbs, embracing the belief that all things eventually come to an end but, paradoxically, every end leads to a new beginning. The legless beggar by the palace wall endures his current misfortunes almost indifferently; once the flames of the ghat consume his

body, he will be free to start again. If there is no end there can be no beginning. I want a new beginning at the end of my youth.

Today I shopped at the market in grey drizzle. I carried my handbag beneath my waterproof poncho and its bulge made me look pregnant. In reality I never achieved such an ideal look, a firm roundness on a trim body, back when I actually was pregnant. Instead I ballooned into a shapeless mass so that it was not clear for months whether I was pregnant or merely fat. Other shoppers reacted to my possibly expectant condition; they scrutinized my face, for it was obvious that I must be too old to bear children. Two young boys, behind a row of fruit baskets, giggled as I assessed the ripeness of the mangoes. In the next stall, my lady of the papayas stared in barely disguised disbelief.

The progress of aging reveals itself with many small surprises. Just this morning I dribbled tea over the front of the sweatshirt I wear over my flannel nightdress, but I did not realize I was dribbling until I felt drops of liquid hanging from my chin. Sometimes I drool in my sleep or even as I sit with a book. I snore. My hands, with prominent knuckles and dark spots on pale crepe-like flesh, are becoming the hands of an old woman. I clutch my change purse in both fists as if unsure of my hold.

The leper who begs outside the palace has no hands at all, unless you consider the stumps where once his fingers were attached. At the post office, the dwarf who counts out stamps has an extra thumb on each hand; it seems an advantageous mutation since each auxiliary digit acts as a catcher for the sheets he rapidly flicks with his real thumb and forefinger. Parvati's son, the god

Ganesh, has a normal human body with the head of an elephant. He appears to be happy and unaffected by his strange deformity and is welcomed by mortals as a bearer of good fortune. What if I still harboured a rogue egg and brought forth a new, unexpected creature? But no; such a beginning would also deliver an ending.

Parvati's other incarnation, Kali Durga, dominates the main public square. Human skulls garland her black, bloated body. Her bloody lips leer cheerfully. If her cravings are satisfied, she will continue to spawn new life but sacrifice is necessary. Am I, after all, no better than destructive Kali Durga, flourishing anew with Mr. Karmacharya my sacrificial victim?

But I like the two of us together. We linger. We speak the language of skin, eyes, breath. Time slows, then flows in two directions; past and present coexist in symmetry. I remember who I was and I wonder who I might become. When I lie on my back, Mr. Karmacharya rests on one elbow quietly observing me. Sometimes his tears flow into my eyes. Do I colonize his dreams? I do not risk exploration in the secret country of his life; it remains a landscape that I visit but cannot inhabit.

When I am with Mr. Karmacharya there are no boundaries between us. I do not worry about the skin that sags on my belly or the veins on the backs of my thighs. I am not concerned with the folds that ripple his knees or by the loose flesh under his chin. He does not fall asleep or leave quickly when our time draws to an end. There is still much to do. We have many pages of his manuscript to review and it will take many more meetings to reach a conclusion. Will the

journey end when all is told?

Mr. Karmacharya wraps a length of plain, white cotton around himself so that it hangs elegantly from his waist. His one gift to me has been a matching *dhoti* to wrap around my body when we huddle by the heater drinking our last cups of afternoon tea. For now, this much is enough. I shed expectations like a serpent's skin. Mr. Karmacharya always leaves me with *Namaste*, saying *goodbye* with a word that contains the chance of another *hello*.