

NEXT
STEP

SOL WISHER



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KATHMANDU

Tamar. The moment of parting. Was that the moment against which all others had to be judged, I wondered, as the time drew near? Perhaps the essence of our travels, the threads binding them together, could be taken in only on the day, at the very moment, of our separation.

This, I can vouch for. The day she left Kathmandu marked the first of many national strikes in the weeks to come. It was a day of upheaval. Reprisals aimed at strikebreakers brought answering violence with the desperate poor tossed in as the gel in the political petri dish. Fortunately, foreigners were not considered part of the strike, and on both sides there was no wish to destroy the scant but much-needed tourist trade. So restaurants stayed open, but warily. They kept their shutters up, their tables and chairs out of the way.

As this was our first visit to Kathmandu, it took us a while to grasp how bad things were. Tamar comes from a war-torn country, and I have seen many places where heavily armed men stand on street corners to keep order. And yet, it was not until we spoke to a Canadian International Aid worker that we took account of the risks confronting us.

We had chanced upon him in a cafe down one of

the cobbled alleys, a little den overshadowed by ancient buildings. ‘Wise move,’ the Canadian declared, when he heard Tamar was leaving.

When he asked about me, my next step, I hesitated. I had to answer his question with a shrug.

Anything could happen.

We had been staying in a reasonably priced hotel because Tamar was ill, although with remarkable resolve still bearing up. But one thing was now clear: I would have to find another, cheaper room right away. So we left the Canadian, and began edging down to Durbar Square to look for a cheaper place — somewhere for me to hole up in once Tamar had gone.

Kathmandu that morning was filled with the honks and beeps of busy cars; the distorted quacks that are the call of the three-wheel motor-powered tuk-tuk. The hubbub of the rushing traffic and the yells and the noise of the crowd came together in a charade of normality. Hawkers plied their trade in the usual way as young street children chased each other with shrieking joy through old pagodas and dark lanes, the alleys feeding like cool cloying forest streams into the hot frantic flow of the main thoroughfares. Here and there, in the cobbled ways passing beneath overhanging eaves — corridors littered with piles of rubbish — tantalising glimpses were on offer, illuminations of the maze presented through ornately carved doorways, revealing the secluded lives of the Nepalese inhabitants.

“A walk in a medieval city” is how I thought of it, shaping Kathmandu’s filthiness and poverty into a cultural memory to which I could adhere, and try to understand; the thought becoming especially graphic when a bucket of slops was tipped into one of the alleys, raining down on where

we were about to pass, drenching an unfortunate dog, who managed to slink off into a shadowy doorway, eating the scraps with which it was covered, before a vagrant cow could do the same.

Kathmandu in the monsoon season is a magical and majestic place. Pagodas and temples lie in wait down the narrow winding alleys and around every corner. It doesn't matter where you walk for all directions lead you somewhere interesting and special. Thousands of multi-storied wooden houses canopy towards each other overhead; the courtyard-glimpses hint at well-kept family secrets, fascinating tales.

The lack of tourists in this season adds to the feeling of ancient history, of mystery and of awe. The foul air and the damp worn stone speak of long-standing habitation, the human mark of time. Kathmandu is a place of struggle and of desperation. For local people, the lack of tourists means financial and physical hardship. Shop dealers' desperation is manifest in the way they almost forcibly drag any passing tourists into their dens, or stand in the street vainly calling: 'Hello sir, very nice, cheap price, come look, yes please.' The deaf, receding backs of the tourists are usually numb to the shop dealers' ploys.

The hot moist air that hangs broiling over Kathmandu periodically bursts into torrential rain that brings illness with each downpour. The rain streams off the surrounding mountains, and gathers in the valley. Crap and rubbish pile up in the gutters, reduced only by the recycling efforts of the cows, dogs, rats and flies. Now and again, an over-grown heap of rubbish will be set alight by a concerned resident.

In monsoon season the pounding rains that fall with biblical strength dilute the gutter crap with rising floodwaters.

This redistributes the waste evenly across the city, and thus the streets are not cleansed in the morning but seem filthier than ever. A process of this kind must have been happening since the first ancient buildings were erected on these fertile valley flood lands. They comprise a natural meeting place, a coming together of varied far-reaching trading routes; from Burma, Afghanistan, India, Tibet, Bhutan, and many lesser cities, between and beyond.

Yes, the steamy air carries numerous infections for sinuses, throats, eyes, ears and lungs. Most tourists quickly fall ill in varying degrees and remain that way until after their departure. There are, of course, the stomach problems that plague everyone, so that the state of your faeces becomes a common dinner table topic, being elevated on occasions to the role of a phatic greeting.

Many of the tourists are hippies and wanderers from India who have come to Nepal to renew their annual Indian visas. The contribution they make to the local economy is minimal and mainly in the hands of the drug touters who range the streets of Thamel, the busy area that lies between the so-called 'freaks' accommodation zone in the old city and the Indian embassy. The gem and jewellery dealers come and go, plying their trade, buying, and selling the coveted raw materials. Deep green Tibetan turquoise was the stone of the moment.

The country was straining under political pressure when we arrived, and this worsened. The royal family was standing back to see if the communists would be voted into power, and the possibility of a coup was being whispered about in the marketplaces and other corners of the city. For the Nepalese, the feeling of discontent was well-fermented, although much of what was being talked about mattered little

to the mountain peasants who were farming at impossible heights. Whoever was in charge was bound to have no use for their subsistence lifestyle and they seemed destined to remain grindingly poor. In Kathmandu, the dusty mote-filled air was sizzling with tension. Foot-soldiers tramped through the city streets, reinforced occasionally by crowded troop carriers, rattling to and fro.

Tamar was returning to Jerusalem. I had met her when she was selling junk in a market stall in Perth and soon discovered that, like myself, she was a dedicated traveller. My interest had been captured from the moment we had first spoken. She had bobbed, slightly curled auburn hair, a fairy-saddled nose and spoke English well but with an endearing rich lilting Israeli accent. I could easily imagine her, sun-glassed, bikinied, on a yacht in the Mediterranean, involved in international espionage of some sort. I had lived for two years in Israel but she was a sweet mixture of intelligence, curiosity and the exotic, all of this being combined with a generous heart of a kind I had not previously encountered. We had spent a marvellous year studying at the same university and journeying through the dry rugged Western Australian landscape.

I had just finished a couple of years studying anthropology, history and archaeology and felt ready to resume the drifting existence that had marked my late teens and early twenties. So the day after my last university exam I packed up my apartment among the experimental artists, alcoholics, junkies and prostitutes who swirled around in my block of flats, and left for Bangkok with Tamar, en route to Nepal.

Now, on our final day together, it was borne into me

once more that in addition to being the main marketplace, Durbar Square was the spiritual heart of Kathmandu, a place for reflection. Four pagodas, each of different height and varying design, raised their stepped presences, of aged red-brick glory, among the cobbles, street vendors and fruit over-ripening in the hot sun. The market ladies sat on the cobbles under tatty umbrellas arranging their goods in tidy piles and tossing the rotten food on the ground beside, where passing cows, dogs and beggars would avail themselves of a feed.

The pagoda rooves, tiled with light red and black geometric patterns, towered sentinel-like over the hustle and shove of the market stalls. Durbar Square was a major thoroughfare and tens of thousands of people passed through each day. Blue smoke perpetually drifted up from the shops, chai stall fronts and small charcoal fires on which widowed Nepalese women, some quite young, surrounded by their children, tried to eke out a paltry existence by selling freshly roasted corn.

People lived on the lower tiers and at the feet of the ascending temples; others sporadically used the upper levels as sleeping berths. Tourists in bands, or in twos or threes, were in the habit of entering the square, determined to capture the scene with their mega-dollar cameras. Many were skilled at hiding from the beggars and trinket sellers behind the flashy lens of their cameras, as they set out to snap the same scene in the same way as ten of their predecessors. They popped up on the well-worn vantage point atop the corner of the largest of the pagodas, day after day. A photographer's multi-pocketed waistcoat (cheap at one of the local stores) was enough to proclaim a fussy, professional pretension. Was there something in that pedestal view that unconsciously attracted these obsessive tourist types, I wondered, watching

them lock in the scene of ‘eastern ambience’ with a sphincter-like click of the camera lens, determined to retain whatever they saw?

But trinket sellers and beggars are not so easily avoided. They scrambled and clustered around, shoving hands and Gurkha knives and chessboards into the foreground. They knew that a lens-barrier could not be kept before the face forever. They were always on hand, waiting to pounce, the moment the lens was lowered.

We found an ancient wooden hotel, empty, save for the family living on the lower floor. The side of the building facing into Durbar Square was a ground-floor general shop and the other side had a small dark entrance on the street that led to the bridge over the Bagmati River. I had just made out the faded sign “Kumari Guesthouse”, which was almost lost on the grimy wall above the shop. When I enquired we were directed around the corner to a small door under another old and weathered sign. Here, I knocked, and soon the door was opened by a dark brown boy who spoke no English. His blank, impassive gaze was unsettling, so I told Tamar to go back to Durbar Square and to wait for me there.

I stepped in through the tiny entrance. A traditionally attired middle-aged lady stood in the gloomy background of the dusty, cement-floored room, holding a candle before her. The sunlight from outside, although bright, did not seem to penetrate far down the narrow passage into the room.

I introduced myself, and spelt out my name, slowly, so that she could take it in — Sol Wisher. I asked about the price. It was reasonable, and the woman’s tone of voice was reassuring. This, I quickly decided, was the place for me. It had the right atmosphere, and I was extremely pleased to find

that I would be the only guest. The Kumari Guesthouse had five tiny floors set like a square tower, so naturally I requested the top floor room and asked for a viewing.

I trailed behind the boy. In wavering candle-light we climbed high, thin, spiralling wooden stairs, past habitation entrances and showering alcoves. The top room had the space to itself as the other half of the area was used as a patio, with shoulder-height walls and a few flowerpots. The bedroom was tiny, barely bigger than the makeshift double bed, but at its foot was a wooden, ornamentally carved shutter, a window that looked out onto the Market Square and the Temples. From the patio you could watch all of the eight entrances into Durbar Square, and the smaller one on the road to the river. A perfect people-watching vantage point, I concluded. It would be an ideal place to hole up while I worked out what to do next.

To me, Tamar's departure seemed like the end of everything, the last of a strange but powerful love. I did not fully understand or trust the reasons for our separation, although I had drawn upon whatever eloquence I had to alter the course of our future. She was by no means the first woman to have left me for reasons not made clear to me. I had sometimes wondered whether my way of looking at the world disconcerted my companions and left them thinking of me as little more than a passing curiosity.

Tamar. She was a complicated person seeking salvation in simplicity. She enjoyed travel, as if it were the study of anthropology, but her constant and friendly interaction with all people, a characteristic that I greatly admired, led to her gathering up fragments of foreign culture, scraps with which she could embellish her time-honoured, but rigid, Jewish traditions. These held her in a vice-like grip,

a work in progress on the bench of the Jewish community. Only by returning to the bosom of mother Israel could her collection of exotic scraps become meaningful. This was the unsettling paradox. She trod the paths of tradition, but at the same time she was attracted by the bright, slippery stones found in exotic places. And yet, to me, she was the “exotic”. But I was gentile, and not a scrap that would be accepted at home. I was a piece she had to leave behind, and although I had tried all rational arguments, I was faced with the irrationality of religious belief. I had to accept the ancient barriers that she so respected. Indeed, I had almost managed to persuade myself that to let her go was a sign of my enduring love for her.

But would our respect for each other be enough to spare us the embarrassment of a tearful ending, a mawkish final moment? We had come to Nepal for a month together so that we could separate with grace, in style, but the numbing instant of parting would not be easy, and would certainly be made no easier by a commotion in the streets, the beginning of a national strike.

I hurried back to Durbar Square, and having found Tamar settling up with a money changer, stood there, beside her, as the last of the notes was counted into her hand. ‘You will need them,’ I said. She smiled faintly, and at that I knew the time had come to return to the hotel, and to help her with her bags. I had sorted out my accommodation, and there was nothing left to do.

It was a grey, melancholic moment, that final packing up: the end of it all. We took a last glance at the room, embraced awkwardly, and went down. Out in the street, beneath the

overhang, we exchanged our hesitant farewells. We had, in truth, been rehearsing this moment for many weeks.

To summon a rickshaw wasn't easy, not on the first day of a national strike when the city was gripped by a mood of unease. Perhaps only a desperate rickshaw cyclist could be persuaded to take her to the airport. The small rickshaw that finally appeared was soon piled high with her trunk of artefacts and souvenirs. We touched hands, and that was it. The rider strained under the weight of his load, and as the archaic conveyance squeaked off down the deserted road, I was left behind to watch sadly as she went. Her mind on the future, she looked ahead, and did not turn round, or wave, or make any other insincere offering to the past. I silently thanked her for that small tribute to all we had shared. She had always known how to leave with style.

She would make her way safely through the city, I felt sure of that. The strikers and the communists were not likely to hassle rickshaw drivers as they were already so desperately poor that they could not be expected to pass up a foreigner's fare. But the journey would still be a struggle.

So that was it. Tamar's departure; the unbearable serenity of that final moment, her floating away from me, into the throng. There was nothing left to do but haul my bags slowly down to Durbar Square, heading for my new, inglorious abode — the Kumari Guesthouse. I was in no rush. I felt like simply living through a fallow patch of time. I did not expect to see Tamar again and I was dimly aware that there was a grieving process that had to be undertaken in order to liberate myself, for love can be as hard to lose as it is to gain.

There were very few people about as I edged towards my new lodgings. The shop fronts remained closed. Some of

the small, cubby-hole shops would have one shutter open, in which would sit the owner of the shop watching the world go by and maintaining the pretence that he wasn't selling any thing. These owners live in their tiny shops and so don't have much choice but to sit at their counters. I have never seen Nepalese turn a sale down, they can't afford to, especially not in monsoon season when even few country folk travel the treacherous roads to the city. So a few clandestine sales continued to take place.

I was certainly in no hurry, feeling subdued, somewhat melancholy, but not depressed. Women have come and gone in my life, different personalities, different nationalities, and I have sincerely enjoyed my time with each of them. I felt alone, but rather free, adrift in the Third World again. This was a new subcontinent, and therefore a further filling in of my mental atlas. It seemed that I might get caught up in a historical moment. Nothing gives me greater joy than stumbling into obscure pockets of history, if I have the time to enjoy the experience.

I knew then as I shouldered along what was usually a busy thoroughfare that I would stay at least a couple of weeks more. I had some entry visa permits to Tibet to finalise. I knew how long and confused bureaucratic processes could be when it comes down to an official stamp, a blob on a hiking pass.

I had shaved my head. It helped my growing feeling of passing from one era of my life into another. I had previously had long hair and had cut it on the way to Durbar Square the previous day. Tamar didn't seem surprised, for she had become exceedingly self-absorbed during our last few days, but it made me feel quite different. It was energising, like a snake shaking off its old skin.

I threw open the shutters of my tower room and flopped down on the old creaky bed. Across the way I could clearly see the red-tiled roof of the largest pagoda. The day was bright and breezy and in the skies above the temples I could see many small brightly coloured kites, diving and swooping. When the wind was right the children flew them from the rooftop patios, which was often in this warm, windy season. I got out a block of hash, rolled one up, and opened up a large book of political theory that I was determined to read, perhaps as a distraction from the sadness of the hour. Then I gratefully lay back against the wall, stoned, reading, watching the kites flit and dash about in the skies.

I felt as though I was literally on top of the world. My horizons seemed as broad as the view from my window that stretched to the hazy green mountains. I had no definite plans in mind, except that I had decided to hole up in this room for a week. It would be enough just to sit by myself, stoned, watching the world go by.

I often sat on the windowsill of my room, smoking joints occasionally. On strike days I watched the communist supporters march in long, loose formations down the deserted streets, iconic red banners flapping above them, fists raised in the air. They hollered; they yelled. Shrill mega-phone speeches were aimed at and soaked into the following crowds. Sometimes troop trucks would pull in or follow behind.

Occasionally, one would hear a shop-front being smashed — caught open. Other times the crowds would come stumbling by, streaming away from some action just out of sight around a corner. Kathmandu is full of corners; dangerous cul-de-sacs. I read in the daily paper that a couple of German tourists had got belted by the police when taking