Radio Shangri-La: What I Learned in Bhutan, the Happiest Kingdom on Earth

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For Kinga Norbu and all the children,
may they find a happy path in a peaceful world

For my friends,
may they feel as much love and support as they’ve given

For my parents,
who taught me that family doesn’t have to be biological
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Grant your blessings so that confusion on the path may be eliminated.
Grant your blessings so that confusion may dawn as wisdom.
Please bless me so that I may liberate myself by attaining realisation.
Bless me so that I may liberate others by the strength of compassion.
May all connections I develop be meaningful.

—His Holiness the Twelfth Gyalwang Drukpa,
The Preliminary Practice of Guru Yoga

We are the station that makes you smile.
We can help you walk a mile.
And even when you stop and think
We can make you dance and sing.
Always do your thing, on Kuzoo FM.
Always do your thing, on Kuzoo FM.

—Kuzoo FM Promotional Jingle
The approach to the most sacred monastery in the Kingdom of Bhutan is steep and winding and, especially as you near the top, treacherous. You are sure with one false step you’ll plummet off the edge. Had I been here during certain times over the last few years, I might have hoped I would. It is a cold winter’s Saturday, dark and overcast. Misty gray clouds, pregnant with snow, hug the mountains.

My companions are several of the twenty-somethings who staff the new radio station in Bhutan’s capital city, where I’ve come to volunteer. Kuzoo FM 90: The voice of the youth. Pema is wearing jeans and a sweatshirt and flat white dress shoes, the kind you might put on with a demure frock for a tea party. Ngawang’s wearing the same stuff on top, but she’s got sneakers on her feet. Each woman carries a satchel stuffed with her kira, the official national dress, requisite attire for Bhutanese who reach the summit. Kesang is already wearing his gho, the male equivalent. Over it, he’s carrying a backpack filled with ten pounds of oil to fuel dozens of butter lamps, offerings to be left for the gods. Me, I’m twenty years older, and practicality reigns: I’ve got on my thick-soled boots, an ugly long black down coat with a hood, and six layers of clothing underneath.

So much for the strength I’ve gained from my daily swimming regime; I am huffing and puffing against the altitude and the intensity of the climb. My new friends modulate their sprints to let me keep up.

Bhutanese are hearty in many matters—they are used to living off the land, the hard lives of farmers—but they are particularly strong when it involves making the trek to this place called Takshang, built on a sheer cliff that soars ten thousand feet into the sky. The depth of their devotion becomes abundantly clear when, out of nowhere, a radiant twelve-year-old boy scurries down past us, stark naked, completely unaffected by the temperature and the incline. He’s trailed by a solemn entourage of grown men. Not one of them misses a step. Later, we learn this beatific adolescent is a reincarnated lama on pilgrimage from the remote eastern reaches of this tiny country.

A pilgrimage to Takshang is the highlight of a trip to Bhutan, but it is commonplace for the Bhutanese. They are carried here from babyhood. Slight, frail seniors navigate the twists and turns and inclines deftly from memory, in a fraction of the time it takes foreigners half their age. Tales are told of people with physical disabilities who labor for twelve hours so they might reach the top, where a cluster of temples awaits. The most sacred of the altar rooms there is open to the general public only once a year.

It is believed that meditating for just one minute at Takshang will bring you exponentially greater blessings than meditating for months at any other sacred site. If you travel here on a day the calendars deem to be auspicious, the merit you accumulate will be even more abundant. Ngawang tells us that the first time she remembers visiting was two decades ago, when she was four years old; her mother had died and the monks sent her here to pray.

What Takshang promises all who visit is cleansing and renewal. Into this valley in the eighth century a sage named Guru Rinpoche rode in on the back of a tigress. Then he retreated to a cave for three months and, with the most powerful weapon there is—his mind—swashbuckled away evil spirits. In so doing, he persuaded the Bhutanese to adopt Buddhism as their guiding light. Hundreds of years later, to mark the feat, a colony of structures was built in this precarious location—testament to how the people of Bhutan have long revered him, this being they consider the Second Buddha.

As we climb higher and higher, and as the gold-topped Takshang comes into view, I can feel Guru Rinpoche’s strength bolstering my own, diminishing demons, softening my heart.

This is the story of my midlife crisis—and how I wrestled with and then transcended it, thanks to a chance encounter that led me to a mysterious kingdom in Asia few have visited. In the march of years leading up to my fortieth birthday, and on the rapid ascent into that menacing decade, I’d found myself Monday-morning quarterbacking every step of my life, haunted by the revisionist history of regret. A near-continuous looping chorus of “what ifs” and “if onlys” became my soundtrack:

Why had I failed to have a family with a man I loved?
Why had I squandered my youth so haphazardly?
Why had I stuck with a profession that infuriated me so intensely?
What could I do with the second half of my life to make it more meaningful than the first?
Inhaling the cold, clear air on that trek up to Takshang, on the other side of the world from home, the pain and noise of those questions began, finally, to melt away. To morph into a sense of acceptance and peace. No longer did I feel stuck on a treadmill of emptiness; now my life story read as full, exciting, wondrous—with limitless possibilities for the future.

And we hadn’t even reached the most sacred spot on the mountain.

The groundwork for this awakening had been laid months earlier, when I had only the vaguest of ideas where this place called Bhutan was on the planet.

Every Wednesday evening, I headed west on the clogged I-10 freeway in Los Angeles for an experimental workshop in positive psychology. In classic therapy—where you endlessly review all your personal history—you work to gain a better understanding of why you are the way you are, have done what you’ve done. But it isn’t necessarily designed to help you move forward, much less reframe the way you look at the world. By now, with the help of various counselors, I’d navel-gazed a giant gaping hole in my belly button, dissecting my own personal history the way a Proust scholar did Remembrance of Things Past. And yet I still found myself swirling in a vortex of despair.

I summoned a sense of optimism about this “happiness” class and hoped that it might at least be a salve, if not a cure, for how poorly I’d been handling the approach into middle age. It seemed unlikely, though, that a six-week class could possibly jolt me into contentment, or anything approximating “happiness.”

Since the workshop wasn’t yet fully developed, the teacher, Johnny, asked for our patience. We’d be acting as guinea pigs for this program, he said, and there wouldn’t be any charge. A romp into positive thinking—gratis? I couldn’t resist.

One of the first things Johnny taught us was a Zulu warrior greeting. Everyone paired off, standing an arm’s length across from his partner. Then we looked deep into each other’s eyes. When you felt a connection, you were supposed to say, “I have come to see you.” The other would respond, “I have come to be seen.” The gazing would continue until that person felt the click and proclaimed, “I have come to see you.” Then, you moved on to the next classmate. Each session began this way, to affirm that we were here for real, pure, honest interaction, heart to heart. You weren’t supposed to say you had come to see and be seen until and unless you really meant it.

Doing this exercise made me want to stare right into the eyeballs of every single person I encountered, to make up for all the times I’d distractedly engaged in “conversation.” Gazing intensely at people I hardly knew reinforced how rarely I looked directly at the people I did know. We were all perennially distracted, attempting to triage the various competing demands on our time, multitasking our days away. Almost worse was communicating with the family and longtime friends who lived in other zip codes and time zones altogether. Static-filled cell phone conversations and emails were the hollow tools that connected us, eye contact sorely lacking. I craved meaningful human contact.

Other simple assignments from Johnny were crafted to help us discover what we appreciated in ourselves, and what inspired us about others.

“Describe in detail a person you love—and why”; “Write a toast to four difficult periods in your life, and how you handled them”; “Summarize your life story as if you were ninety and telling a child.”

The themes were the same for me each time. I could see that it was a triumph to have made my way in the world, despite various misguided choices with men, the random steps that comprised my career, even an act of violence I’d experienced as a young woman. I saw how fortunate I was to have been cloaked in love and support all along. How, in the absence of creating a traditional family for myself, I’d cobbled together an army of dear friends around the world with whom I enjoyed rich, textured relationships. It moved me how many of the people I knew ended our conversations with the words “I love you.” That counted for something. It counted for a lot.

No, it wasn’t perfect. What was that, anyway? No one I knew would say their choices had yielded an ideal existence. Maybe my life wasn’t conventional, by some old-fashioned definition of convention. The years had been flawed, but they had been leavened with much good. Such were the ingredients of a life.

At the end of the third session, almost as a throwaway, Johnny assigned an exercise that really started to bring the jumble in my brain to order. It was a simple nightly ritual, and it taught me how to appreciate life in the most basic terms.

“I want you to keep a notebook by your bed,” he said. “And every night, before you go to sleep, I want you to review your day. Make a short list of three things that happened that were good.”

“What if three good things didn’t happen?” several of us asked in unison. Clearly, we weren’t naturally wired
with a positive way of looking at the world.

“Well, that’s the point,” he said. “This exercise challenges you to find three good things in each day. They don’t have to be big things. In fact, most of the time they’re not going to be big things. Big, important things don’t happen to us every day. Winning an award, getting married, starting a new job, going on vacation. It’s the big spaces of time in between those monumental events that make up life. Right? The idea here is that little things have power. An interaction with someone in an elevator, or a clerk in a store. Small victories, like fixing something that’s been annoying you in the house. Going for a really long run. I want you to see that every single day, three good things do happen. It will help you discover that goodness exists all around us, already.”

You could feel the more skeptical of the class participants sigh. They wanted a different formula for happiness than that, the equivalent of a diet pill for the spirit. A “do this, do that, don’t do this” list of action points, where they could just fill in the blanks and come out on the other end in a matter of weeks, angst-free—blissful. But what Johnny said resonated with me, immediately. An image of my UPS man popped into my mind’s eye, one of the few consistent characters in my life; each day, he delivered packages to both my apartment building and the office complex just across the street that housed my employer, a public radio show. Even though our exchanges rarely amounted to anything more than pleasantries and chatter about the weather, his kindly presence was often one of the day’s highlights. Especially when I was working the graveyard shift and trying to adjust to sleeping during the day, he was often the most pleasant human interaction I’d experience.

People wouldn’t be all I’d consider for my three good things. Since I’d moved to Los Angeles, no matter how uneventful or difficult the day had been, I’d marveled at the dance of light at sunset from my apartment on the eighteenth floor. That would undoubtedly make it onto my lists.

One of the more optimistic in our group asked, “What if you have more than three good things?”

“Lucky you!” said Johnny, laughing. “Well, write them all down. But try to pick the top three. Over time, you’ll start to see which things make you happiest. It probably isn’t what you think.”

That night, I couldn’t wait to go home and go to bed with my notebook.

THREE GOOD THINGS

1. Chris the sound engineer saying he was looking forward to working with me again
2. My friend Michael, who I never get to see because of work schedules and L.A. geography, taking me to a pre-birthday lunch
3. Happiness class

Throughout the next few days, I found myself taking mental notes of the interactions and experiences that might make my written list each night. There were many bedtimes when I had to search for the good things, when the three items of note might simply be my daily swim, the Goodyear blimp gliding by my building on its way to nearby Dodger Stadium, and the taste of a pork chop I’d fried up.

Food items, the glow of the magnificent Southern California “golden hour,” and quick, often silent exchanges with strangers frequently made my lists. So did shared meals, especially shared lunches, which I got to have only when I worked those overnight hours. Writing down that the food and the friend I’d enjoyed it with were great countered all that wasn’t about having to get up and go to work at one in the morning as often as I did.

And, of course, this was the point. Something good actually happened, even on the crummiest, hardest days. And those good things, the simplest things, were the most nourishing.

The ritual of this nightly exercise worked like a gym for the brain; over time, the lists started to strengthen me, to reverse my march of distress. I began to reframe the way I’d been thinking about life the past few long, heavy years, excavating the positive developments that had come out of it: How, after a painful end to an engagement when I was thirty-seven, I’d learned to swim, and now made the activity an essential part of every day. How, during a long period of unemployment, I’d taught myself to make soufflés, so I could continue hosting friends for dinner while not breaking my very tight budget.

Most important, I was learning to slow down, to sit with myself and the uncertainties of the future. To enjoy not knowing what was next, instead of fearing and panicking over what might be. To appreciate the successes I’d had, instead of dwelling on my failure to have accomplished more.

As I sat in bed each night with my notebook, I didn’t completely understand what was happening. I didn’t see that I was making peace with myself, relaxing after a long war. Then came that day on the mountain in Bhutan, when my fog began to lift, and my life began to focus.
THE THUNDERBOLT,
PART ONE

Harry said he’d be at the cookbook party by 7:00 p.m., which gave me an hour to hang out with him there before I headed uptown to have dinner with another old friend and his family. The party was a bit out of the way, and I almost skipped it, but since I was only in my hometown, New York City, on rare occasions, I figured I might as well get out and see as many of the people I loved as I could. What had brought me here from Los Angeles was the chance to fill in for a month at the New York bureau of the radio show where I was on staff as a reporter. I bolstered my energy for a busy evening of flitting around the city in hyper-social butterfly mode—a way of life I rarely indulged in anymore.

The walk from the office on East 47th Street to the party on 66th Street filled me with wonder and made me wistful for this place I loved so dearly. In early autumn, twilight in New York is magical; the sky glimmers and there’s energy in the streets. You feel powerful, invincible, as if every gritty bit of the city is yours. I found myself doing a mental trick I hadn’t done since I’d moved away: reciting the address of my destination while I walked as if it were the lyrics to a song. Two-three-four / East Sixty-sixth Street, I sang to myself over and over again this September evening, the clunky tune mingling with the click-clack of my bright pink “comfort” high heels. Inevitably, after all that repetition, I would muck up the street number, and I did this time, too. But there was such a crowd in front of one particularly gorgeous old brownstone, I didn’t need to check the little slip of paper in my purse to know I’d arrived.

Crazy busy. Some swanky food magazine editor was debuting a new cookbook. Harris had long been a foodie, and in the last few years had broken into writing about all things gourmet. Good for him to be mingling in such well-fed company. Now it seemed I’d have to fight a dreaded crowd to find him. How could I be a city person and hate mob scenes?

As I made my way to the front door, I took a look up the staircase. It was packed with a crush of people. In the thick of it, facing in my direction, was the most handsome man. He had a shock of brown hair and big brown eyes to match. I know it sounds ridiculous, but in that instant, the mob seemed to disappear. Much to my surprise and delight, I saw him looking right back. Not just in my direction, but at me. Our eyes locked, and, even from a distance, I could swear a sort of chemical reaction erupted between us.

I’d read about these celebrated coups de foudre, thunderbolts, where people met and fell in love at first sight. I knew from experience that an instant attraction could be intoxicating—and dangerous. As was the impulse to imagine that a momentary connection was something larger. But this thunderbolt felt different. This was a beautiful, instant intensity I’d never, ever experienced.

Practical me prevailed: I had to find Harris. Time was tight. I peeled my eyes away from the handsome stranger and pushed through the thicket of people. After a series of wrong turns, I spotted him holding court in a corner of the room, smiling and gesturing as if he owned the place. Harris was so good at making people feel welcome, connected. Everyone clutched goblets of wine—no disposable plastic cups for this crowd. My friend did a round of introductions, and as he got to the end of the group, I was happily surprised to see the man from the staircase.

“Lisa, this is my friend Sebastian I’ve been telling you about, who I’m going to Asia with next week. You know, for that story I’m writing for Gourmet magazine. And Sebastian, this is Lisa, my friend who works in public radio out in L.A.”

He was better looking now that I could see him up close, and there was a warmth about him, an easy friendliness. I felt a bit self-conscious and suddenly a little off-kilter in my pink shoes.

Long ago, I’d been one of those kids who hid under her mother’s armpit to avoid looking at strangers. Then I went into the news business. Earning my living posing questions to people I didn’t know had cured me of my innate shyness. Confidence was a good quality, one I was happy to have cultivated—especially now faced with this handsome man. Right at this instant, though, I found myself feeling unsure about how to proceed. I wanted to say something clever and prophetic, but I couldn’t find the words. So I stuck out my hand, and he stuck out his, and we shook. Sebastian asked if I wanted a drink, and I said yes, and he said he’d get me one from upstairs, and I said I’d go with him, and there we were, presto, in our own conversational bubble. We talked a bit about public radio—
always reliable upscale cocktail-party chitchat. With everyone captive in their cars, and smart programming in short supply thanks to budget cutbacks and media consolidation, the public-radio audience tuned in with almost cultlike devotion. Personally, I was sick of the news, and tried to avoid it as much as possible. At the same time, I appreciated the attention those commuters paid our show, and was grateful to have a job at a news outlet that had such an enormous, attentive audience. Better than having no audience at all. I’d been out of work a number of times, and underemployed, so I knew well what that was like. I also was very aware that in situations like this one, my profession converted into useful social currency.

Once we had my wine and a refill for him, I started plying Sebastian with questions about his upcoming trip to Asia. He ticked off the itinerary: a swing through Hong Kong, a few provinces in China I had never heard of, two places in India whose names I knew simply because of their tea—Assam and Darjeeling—and, for a few days, the tiny neighboring Kingdom of Bhutan.

“Ahh. The happiest place on earth,” I said. I hoped my being dimly familiar with one relatively unknown country in all of Asia—and knowing the factoid that it was purportedly filled with blissfully happy people—might impress him. Although I’d never come anywhere close to the continent. I wasn’t even certain just where on the continent Bhutan was.

“Yes,” he said, smiling. “Exactly.”

“I’ve always been curious about this happiness thing and Bhutan. It has to have something to do with the fact that television is banned there, right?” I’d now exhausted the extent of my knowledge about the obscure little nation.

“Right, although His Majesty did let TV in a few years back,” Sebastian said, his smile broadening and his eyes intense. “But it’s still a very happy place. Hey, get a visa and come with us. Harris and I will be your guides.”

What I wanted to say was that I would have driven to the airport and boarded a rocket to another galaxy with this man, whether or not my dear old friend Harris came along as chaperone. We kept talking, but I really don’t remember what we said. I was lost in Sebastian.

Then, a sort of internal alarm rang and jolted him into remembering he was looking for quarters for the parking meter. After I dug a bunch out of my purse and handed them over, I asked the time and discovered that the clock was ticking for me, too. I needed to head to the other side of town for dinner.

A quick good-bye, and off I ran. The friend I was meeting turned out to be running very late; I sat at the restaurant with his family as he called every five minutes with updates from the traffic jam. Ordinarily this would have annoyed me, but not tonight. Just knowing Sebastian was out there in the world improved my disposition immeasurably.

THE NEXT DAY, I sat in our midtown offices trying to motivate myself to research a story about rich young couples who were trading the plush suburbs surrounding New York City for a new crop of multimillion-dollar kid-friendly condo complexes being built right in the heart of Manhattan. With enough money, you could now have a family without disrupting your metropolitan lifestyle. Among other luxuries, like on-staff dog walkers and a wine cellar, these buildings offered concierges to assist the nannies. An email popped into my inbox and saved me from my internal rant about conspicuous consumption and the decline of civilization. The very sight of the man’s name made my heart beat faster.

Dear Lisa:

It was great to meet you last night. I owe you a drink for all that change you dug up for me. When can you get together?

—Sebastian

Sebastian and Harris were leaving on their journey in just a few days, and by the time they returned, I’d be back home in Los Angeles. I could find a way to see him tonight. My calendar was totally open after work. I liked it that way, and this invitation reinforced why: The most interesting experiences seemed to happen spontaneously—just the opposite of how most everything worked in New York City, where every moment had to be planned by the quarter hour, lest you felt as if you might be “wasting” a bit of your precious time.

And yet I found myself hesitating to accept this invitation. I’d witnessed many a friend as they sabotaged or just plain avoided opportunities out of some sort of unexpressed fear that success or happiness might result. They became riddled with anxiety and self-loathing before they’d even sent in that cover letter or gone on that date. Now here I was, similarly paralyzed.

The voice of this other me politely declined. It was easy to justify not seeing him. We lived on opposite sides of
the country; launching into a relationship that was destined to be long-distance was preposterous, a mistake I’d made in the past that I’d vowed not to repeat. My, I was getting way, way ahead of myself.

Of course, none of this meant I just forgot him. Clicking out of the Web sites about yuppie family-friendly condos, I did what any smart, savvy person in the age of the Internet would do. I Googled him.

He appeared, from what I could deduce, to be about my age. He had been in the tea business for a decade. He had been going to Bhutan, it seemed, for twenty years. It looked like he’d started as a guide, leading people there on exotic treks.

Exhausting what I could dig up about him, I then searched for “Bhutan,” and realized his offhand comment about my tagging along was a joke. There was no just “getting a visa” to this remote Himalayan nation. Tourism to Bhutan had been permitted only since the 1970s, a time when the nation began to step out of its long-imposed isolation. An airport hadn’t been built until 1984, and even now there were many restrictions; the government-run airline owned only two planes. You couldn’t just tool around the country unescorted; you had to hire a guide to travel with you, and some areas still remained off-limits. To keep out all but the wealthiest visitors, a $200 per person, per day tourist tax was imposed.

Other colorful, curious facts unfolded: Bhutan was considered the last Buddhist kingdom, as others around it like Tibet and Sikkim had been swallowed up in political battles waged by giant neighbors China and India. Little, independent Bhutan had been known as the Land of the Thunder Dragon since the twelfth century, when an important religious man heard a clap of thunder—believed to be the voice of a dragon—as he consecrated a new monastery. The nation had long deflected colonization and outside influence. Christian missionaries had come calling in 1627, but the only lasting legacy of these Jesuit priests from Portugal is a detailed written description of their travels there and the hospitality they enjoyed from the locals, who politely resisted conversion.

Today, the majority of the people subsist by farming. There isn’t a single traffic light anywhere in the country, not even in the capital city, the only capital in the world without them; instead, a uniformed police officer directs cars at a handful of particularly tricky intersections. As part of a campaign to preserve the culture, citizens are obliged to wear the traditional dress—intricate, colorful hand-woven pieces of cloth called kira and gho.

The reigning king had married four sisters simultaneously—the queens, they were called. Among them they had had ten children—eight of them born before an official marriage ceremony had taken place in 1988. There was a surreal portrait of the women standing shoulder to shoulder, wrapped meticulously in brightly colored kira, perfect as dolls, each one gorgeous and just slightly different from the next. What was that family dynamic like? Multiple simultaneous marriages weren’t reserved for royalty, it seemed; this practice was allowed for all the citizens of Bhutan. Men and women, both. An Internet search didn’t reveal how common this was.

King Jigme Singye Wangchuck and his father before him had been progressive in a variety of ways: They’d been responsible for nudging, then catapulting Bhutan into the modern world after years of seclusion. Hard currency, roads, schools other than that of the monastic variety—all had been introduced in only the past forty years. Since Bhutanese would now need to study abroad to become doctors and lawyers and scientists necessary for the health and measured growth of the nation, the native tongue, Dzongkha, was replaced by English as the language of instruction. The ability to speak English was perceived as a passport to almost anywhere, a vital connection to the outside world as Bhutan moved into an era of progress and relative openness it had previously worked to avoid.

Despite its isolationism, Bhutan had been at the vanguard in other ways. Long before the rest of the world started flaunting environmental concerns as a trendy marketing strategy, Bhutan’s king had been winning awards for his genuine commitment to conservation. Clear-cutting was not allowed, and if a single tree was chopped, three had to be planted in exchange. By royal covenant, he had committed that 60 percent of Bhutan’s forests would always be preserved. Unlike many Asian countries, Bhutan had not been transformed into a giant pollution-generating smokestack, nor was it overpopulated, with only 650,000 citizens. It was poor, but it prided itself on the fact that no beggars were on its streets. Babies weren’t left on the doorsteps of orphanages; such institutions didn’t exist. Everyone had roofs over their heads and something to eat. The people took care of one other. A royal form of welfare called kidu allowed citizens in the most dire circumstances to petition the king for help.

Perhaps the most unusual and intriguing aspect of this Land of the Thunder Dragon was its attitude toward development and consumerism—the policy that catapulted Bhutan to the formidable (if unqualifiable) distinction as a place populated with supremely happy people. Instead of measuring its economic progress by calculating the gross national product—a complex matrix detailing the monetary value of what a country churns out—His Majesty created a different scale. He proclaimed this philosophy, ironically, poetically, “Gross National Happiness.” Economic progress at any cost, went the thinking, was not progress at all. Any force that threatened Bhutan’s traditions or environment was cause for concern—and not worth inviting into the country. The well-being of the people was to be considered before the sheer generation of goods and cash, before rampant growth just for the sake of an upward slope on a graph. Quality of life was to take precedence over financial and material success.
Compassion toward and cooperation with your fellow citizens was fundamental, essential, rather than mowing down
the other guy with abandon so you could succeed.

Social scientists and economists around the globe curiously studied GNH and this place that because of it had
been dubbed “the happiest place on earth.” What would the New York City couples buying $2.7 million apartments
with nannies to assist their nannies think about these ideals? How about the audience and staff of the radio show
where I worked, where the theme was money and business? Being, not having. Happiness above wealth. It sounded
great to me; Bhutan certainly appeared to have its priorities straight. At least, it seemed to have the same priorities I
was craving more of in my world.

Could it be real? Or was it brilliant sloganeering, a marketing mirage? Maybe I’d figure out a way to get to
Bhutan one day, to find out for myself.

THREE WEEKS LATER, I’d returned to Los Angeles. One particularly frustrating day at work, I was sitting around, trying
to invent some idea for a fifty-second story that would please the editors and fill the news hole in the next morning’s
show. Once the idea was approved, I’d begin chasing down sources by phone and begging for just five minutes for
an interview. At least this wasn’t one of the weeks where I had to go to work at 1:00 a.m. That shift required a
different sort of madness than wrangling sound bites into radio news blurbs.

Sebastian’s name in my inbox provided relief once again. It was ridiculous how excited I got just seeing an email
from him. I didn’t think I was capable of being so smitten.

Hi Lisa. How are you? Hope all’s well in L.A. Harris is being an excellent sherpa on this trip.

How would you like to go work for a start-up radio station in Bhutan? If so, let me know and I’ll make an
introduction to a friend of mine here who knows someone who needs help. Seems like a good way to get to
Bhutan and up your alley, too?

—Sebastian

Was this for real? He couldn’t be making up this kind of offer just to impress me. Could he? Suddenly, an exotic
foreign experience seemed the antidote to my malaise; without thinking it through I wrote back and said yes.

As soon as I hit Send, the questions surfaced: How would I take more than a week off? I was constantly reminded
at work that younger and therefore less expensive talent lurked in the wings; I’d been unemployed for so long before
taking this job, I couldn’t just frivolously run away. Besides, impetuous work-related decisions weren’t my style.
And yet, even though I had no idea how it would sort out, I didn’t worry for long. The possibility that my few skills
might be useful to people in this faraway “happiest place on earth” warmed me.

Sebastian virtually introduced me to a Mr. Phub Dorji and we began an email correspondence. He asked for my
résumé, inquired how soon I could get to Bhutan, and told me that if I paid my own way, the station would cover the
cost of my room and board. A plane ticket seemed a small price for this kind of experience; who knew what it might
lead to? Mr. Dorji sent along a list of goals he hoped I could achieve: taking the station national, improving the
professionalism of the on-air talent, figuring out how to better report on and deliver news, creating and selling radio
advertisements.

The station was called Kuzoo FM. Kuzu zampo was Dzongkha for hello, which is how in truncated form it
became the name of the radio station. The accompanying Web site, Kuzoo.net, looked to be a kind of social-
networking hub for Bhutanese kids—as if that would cordon them off from everyplace else on the Net, keep them
from interacting beyond Bhutan’s borders, I thought cynically.

“Kuzoo was started by the crown prince for the young people of Bhutan,” Mr. Dorji wrote.

Naturally, I thought, in this happy kingdom, the royalty would be in touch with the youth. When I asked him his
exact role at Kuzoo, he was elusive: “I will keep that a mystery until you get here.”

As I worked out the details with this mysterious man on the other side of the world, a steady stream of
communication with Sebastian erupted. He became my live human resource for all things Bhutanese. Was there
really a radio station? Had he heard it? Were women respected? Was it safe for me to travel to Bhutan alone? While
he patiently reviewed my many questions and offered as many answers as he could, I got the sense that he didn’t
understand what I was worried about. When you’ve been visiting a place for so long, very little about it seems
daunting.

One query Sebastian didn’t (or wouldn’t) answer was how he first got involved with Bhutan. Becoming a tour
guide in Bhutan twenty years ago wasn’t like picking up and heading to Tahoe to be a ski instructor. You had to
have an in. “Ask one of these guys to tell you the story when you get there,” he said coyly, and he attached to his
email a list of people to look up when I arrived.

Soon, our trip consultations graduated to the telephone. We were talking practically every day. He’d call with a quick thought or reminder. Like the importance of bringing long black socks as gifts for the men I’d meet; Sebastian said this leg covering was essential not just for warmth in winter but for style.

“Buy half a dozen pairs, or more. They prefer the Gold Toe brand, because they stay up better and last longer. Get them in solid black. Bring lip gloss or boxes of tea for women.” Not fancy Asian loose tea, he added. Plain old tea bags from America would impress. I trekked to Target and loaded up on a dozen pairs of Gold Toes, boxes of Celestial Seasonings, and various lipsticks.

Finally, the most important detail of the trip had been arranged: I had in my hands a faxed copy of my visa from the Royal Government of Bhutan permitting me to enter the country. Now it was official. That’s when I marched into my boss’s office to propose an unpaid leave of absence of no more than six weeks. I was surprised at how easily he said yes. “Isn’t that the place where there’s a two-hundred-dollar-a-day tourist tax? And you don’t have to pay? Go for it. What an amazing opportunity.” Then he muttered something about an old acquaintance who’d visited the place a decade before, and how while I was there I should try to file some stories for our shows, before he swung back around to his mound of paperwork.

The only not-so-smooth part of the plan came from my father, who couldn’t quite grok the adventure I was about to have:

YOUR GOING TO A THIRD WORLD COUNTRY TO DO WHAT FOR FREE? he wrote in an email, which, given the block letters and misspelling, conveyed the concern he felt about his dear and only daughter going off to a foreign land he’d initially thought was in Africa. (As did many people, although most were too timid to even venture a geographic guess.) What had happened to me as a young woman years ago weighed heavy on his heart. The fact that he’d read online that the United States didn’t have a diplomatic presence in Bhutan made this already faraway place seem even riskier. I assured him I wouldn’t be going if I didn’t feel safe.

But my safety wasn’t what I was thinking about. I had absolutely no idea what I would find on the other end—and that was the point.

A FEW WEEKS before my departure, I did a routine online check of the government-owned Bhutanese newspaper Kuensel. It published in hard copy twice a week, but new stories were added online every day. In anticipation of my trip, I’d taken to looking at the Web site every morning while my editors decided the fate of us reporters for the day. I hadn’t read the news in my own country so closely or with such interest in years.

Even for a newbie to “Bhutanalia,” the enormity of the newly published lead item was evident.

“His Majesty Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck becomes the fifth Druk Gyalpo,” read the headline. Druk Gyalpo meant “Dragon King.” The tone was so subtle, it read like a whisper. No New York Post–style fanfare trumpeting this news. The matter-of-fact report detailed how the fourth king had announced his abdication during a speech to a group of yak herders in a remote village. By handing over the throne now, he would allow his eldest son to reign for a few years before democratic elections would be held.

A constitutional monarchy, the king rationalized, was a more modern form of government, one he wanted to gift to his people during a peaceful time. He’d been slowly giving up power over the last two decades, establishing councils of advisors for various matters. Now, he said, was the time for his son to lead, and he was confident that under his guidance, “the Bhutanese people would enjoy a greater level of contentment and happiness.”

The newspaper described the reaction of his subjects as “stunned.” They wanted nothing of this, no dilution of power for their monarchy. They weren’t ready for this ruler to step down yet, either. The king was only fifty.

The only person I could talk to about this—the only person I knew who would care—was Sebastian. He wasn’t a slave to a computer all day and probably hadn’t seen the news, so I called him. My hunch that this was big and unexpected was right.

“What?” he exclaimed. “Can you read that to me, please? Every word!” And I did.

“I just can’t believe it,” he said.

“But it’s not that big a surprise, is it?”

“Well, yes, in a way. Everyone loves the king.”

I imagined Sebastian shaking his head, stunned—the same reaction as the people of Bhutan. “But, no, of course we knew this would happen eventually,” he said with a sigh. “Now it’ll be impossible to see him anymore.”

“Him, like the new king?”

“Yeah.”

“You know the crown prince?”

“Yeah, he’s a nice guy. I’ve known him since he was a kid. But he’ll be off-limits now. Wow.”
My curiosity intensified. Sebastian knew the crown prince. The crown prince had founded the station where I was going to work. Now he would rule as king. Was this who had asked Sebastian for an American radio volunteer? Was Phub Dorji connected to the king? Maybe Phub Dorji was a pseudonym for the king! Of course, that was ridiculous. But who knew? There were so many vagaries, so many dangling threads. These speculations made me even more eager to go.

And so, in January 2007, I embarked on my journey to Bhutan. Where I would be working with the eager young staff of newly launched radio station Kuzoo FM. Which I took on faith actually existed. To do what exactly wasn’t clear. All because of an email introduction from a devastatingly attractive man I’d met once, for twenty minutes, at a party I almost didn’t bother attending.

It all seemed completely strange, and yet, completely normal, the way huge, life-altering experiences can feel almost like an invention, or a dream. Except that never in your wildest imagination could you have made them up.
**WELCOME, JANE!**

Ngawang Pem took her assignment to fetch me from the airport in Paro very seriously. If the threat of security guards tackling her hadn’t loomed, she probably would have made her way out onto the runway so she could hold my hand and escort me the second I stepped off the plane. Despite the regulations, she got pretty close. As I walked across the tarmac to the terminal entrance, there she stood, *kira* crisp, her long, thick black hair piled on top of her head, cell phone in hand, neck craned expectantly.

“Madam Jane!” she said as I walked past her into the customs area. When she got no response, she tried again. “Lady Napoli?”

“You must be from Kuzoo?” I said, reaching out to hug her. I was so happy someone knew who I was, even though we’d never met. I didn’t know how to pronounce her name, which had been sent to me in an email a few days before I left on the three-day journey. And I was too exhausted to correct her about mine; I figured she’d assumed my middle name was my first. I liked the mistake.

“Yes, and I recognize you from your passport photo,” she said, and giggled. She sounded like a teenager, and didn’t look much older than one. “I was in charge of getting your visa. Welcome to Bhutan.”

She said I could call her Ngawang—*Na-wang*, we practiced saying together. It was much easier to pronounce than I’d feared. Or I could use her second name, Pem—whichever I preferred.

With the pluck of a New Yorker navigating the subway, Ngawang whisked me into the line marked “diplomat,” reserved for those with official visas; tourists used another line. The airport held a handful of Westerners, who emitted that eager and bewildered look vacationers have when they’ve just arrived at their destinations, and several people who were clearly Bhutanese. Like Ngawang, they wore the official national dress—the kilt/bathrobe-like *gho* for the men, a belted neck-to-floor swath of beautiful fabric called a *kira* for the women, accentuated with a bright blouse and color-coordinated silky jacket. *Kira* are colorful and elegant, simpler than a sari and more practical than a kimono. This formal wear left me feeling underdressed.

“They can be difficult here, especially with foreigners, and I didn’t want you to get stuck,” Ngawang said, smiling with the knowledge of her conspiracy. “So I used my connections.” She gestured toward someone behind the stalls where passports were being checked as a way of explaining how she’d talked her way back here. “See him? He’s my brother.”

I wasn’t sure if she meant one of several men wearing military gear, or a man who was wearing what looked to be a police uniform, or, for that matter, whether she was pointing toward an older gentleman clad in a dark-colored *gho*. I had arrived safely in Bhutan to a warm welcome, and that was what mattered. Soon I’d learn that Ngawang knew someone everywhere we went, or anywhere that I needed anything. This made her not only an excellent candidate for her job in radio but an indispensable guide for me.

The hours of endless travel had addled my brain. Instead of being elated about this adventure, I had succumbed to the perilous trap of feeling sorry for myself as I trekked around the globe alone. What was I doing? Where was I going? Why was I headed to this strange little country most people hadn’t heard of and couldn’t find on a map? Shouldn’t a woman in her early forties be doing something normal, like taking her kids to Disneyland? Or enlisting the grandparents to babysit, so she could steal away on romantic trips with her husband? Or, if the husband and kids had been around for a while, plotting spa getaways with her similarly beleaguered girlfriends?

This grand adventure seemed, all of a sudden, pathetic and sad and a bit rootless. To be running to the other side of the planet at age forty-three to volunteer with a bunch of people I didn’t know, in a country that had fewer people than there were students in public school in Los Angeles—all in the hope that the experience might justify my
existence, fill the emptiness in my heart. A normal single woman would have met a handsome man at a party and been whisked off on an exotic whirlwind affair. Wouldn’t she?

Every step of the long journey here, I was regaled with a chorus of “if onlys” and “what ifs” I thought I’d silenced. My trusty exercise of making a list of three good things only briefly helped halt the noise: (1) Lunch at the airport with my friends Hal and Phil; (2) Seeing The Darjeeling Limited and Into the Wild on the plane; (3) The surprisingly lovely airport hotel in Bangkok.

Ngawang snapped me back to the present with an offer of a stick of chewing gum. The sweet, fruity taste felt good after days in transit, hours cooped up on a plane. Wasting time wallowing, here, was just dumb.

In addition to her work as a radio jockey at Kuzoo FM, Ngawang had also been assigned the important job of watching over me during my stay, helping with whatever I needed. After I presented my visa papers to the customs official, ponied up the $20 fee I’d been told to expect, and officially entered the country, we made our way toward the baggage claim. The airport was so tiny it needed just one carousel. Even though she was clacking along in her heels, Ngawang insisted on grabbing my bag, as well as the heavy backpack I was carrying, and wheeling the load outside.

Ringed by mountains, Bhutan’s only airport has been called the scariest in the world. Only eight pilots are certified to navigate it. The runway is narrow and visibility is often a problem, apt metaphors for the official and cultural barriers that make it difficult for a person to enter Bhutan’s borders. Once you’re on the ground, peaceful simplicity reigns. With just two planes in the Druk Air fleet, there’s little danger of collision when an aircraft, after it lands, does a one-eighty to move closer to the terminal.

My travel began with an eighteen-hour flight to Bangkok, a brief overnight layover, a five-hour delay due to fog hovering over the airport in Paro Valley, and a four-hour flight that hopped through India. That allowed for the plane to be stuffed with Indian businessmen, their eyes dark and expressions stoic. Besides being an economic necessity for the airline, this brief layover served another, unintended purpose, at least for me. A glimpse from the tarmac of smoggy, congested Calcutta raised the prospect of the stark, empty landscape of Bhutan to an even higher level of mystique and otherworldliness.

By the time we landed, I was so blind from the overstimulation and exhaustion, I couldn’t keep track of what hour it was or how long Ngawang must have been hanging around. I apologized for keeping her waiting.

“No problem,” she said. “We went into town to my sister’s place when we heard you would be delayed and ate breakfast.”

A sister, a brother. I wondered how large Ngawang’s family was. As we approached a tinny white passenger van with the orange Kuzoo FM logo painted on the side, it became apparent who she meant by “we.” A handsome gho-clad young man with a Kennedyesque square jaw hopped out and bowed slightly. I felt like the newest member of the royal family.

“Madam Jane,” he said shyly, averting his gaze. My eyes were drawn to the black socks that covered his calves. I looked forward to fishing out a few pairs from my Gold Toe stash and presenting him with them.

“This is Kesang, the Kuzoo driver,” said Ngawang. “But he doesn’t understand English. I made him practice your name.”

“Kuzu zampo,” I said. My first attempt at speaking the only words I knew in Dzongkha was easy. I’d been thinking this word Kuzu for months; now here I was saying it out loud, to someone for whom it actually had meaning.

He smiled, whisked my bags into the back of the vehicle, and hopped behind the wheel, as Ngawang installed me in the front seat next to him. It was a British-style vehicle, driver on the right. It had been ages since I had ridden as a passenger on the left side, but I was so disoriented that it didn’t feel as off balance as it otherwise might have.

“We have to go now or else we’ll get stuck on the road,” Ngawang said, sliding the van door shut. “If we can get behind Her Royal Highness, we can proceed on to Thimphu. If we do not, we’ll have to wait for the go-ahead. Maybe a few hours, even.”

She explained that construction was under way to widen and smooth the forty-mile stretch between Paro and Thimphu, the capital city. Paved roads were chief among the modernization plans launched forty years ago, yet still only six main arteries traversed the entire country. Though they were called highways, this one resembled a rocky country thoroughfare you hoped lasted only a few miles. Improvements to this essential stretch of road were among the projects in anticipation of the coronation of the new king; the date had still to be determined, as the royal astrologers hadn’t yet weighed in on the most auspicious moment for the occasion. But in anticipation, and to meet the country’s growing dependence on motor vehicles, traffic was stopped for several hours every afternoon in order for the work to proceed. Of course, royalty would not have to be subjected to this inconvenience.

“How do you know a queen is on the road?” I asked, bewildered by the thought of being so close to royalty—I, who didn’t even notice or care about the inevitable celebrity sightings that occurred at various spots around Los
Angeles.

“Not one of the queens. A princess. Elder sister to the new king. She was on your plane.”

Which of the Bhutanese women on that plane could have been a princess? I mentally ticked through the few passengers stuck in the waiting area in Bangkok. Ngawang read my mind.

“A lady with a baby, wearing kira,” she said. “And several ladies helping her.”

I had seen a baby being passed among several bored Bhutanese ladies. We waited at the gate for so long I was surprised I didn’t play with the kid myself, much less memorize the face of every single passenger. Much of the delay I’d spent talking to a physical therapist named Beda, who was returning home to her husband and two kids after six months of study in the United States.

We’d met before dawn at the Druk Air check-in line at the edge of the vast departure area in Bangkok’s brand-new billion-dollar Suvarnabhumi Airport. Both of us were crossing our fingers that our baggage didn’t exceed the allotted thirty pounds each. When Beda’s did tip the scales, we pretended to be traveling together and I took up her slack. Between that and the cappuccinos I bought us with the little bit of Thai currency I had in my purse, my first attempt at Bhutanese-American relations proved a resounding success. Together we kept each other company in the gleaming glass-enclosed terminal D. The airport was so new that the water fountains and televisions in the waiting area still bore labels. We picked at the free lukewarm Burger King sandwiches the airline had provided as an apology for the inconvenience. And we used my laptop to check for more information about the weather. Since I had no idea how long it would be before I got online again, I fired off an email to my nervous family, too. *Almost there,* I wrote.

Though the longest leg of the journey was over, I didn’t realize the most dangerous part of it was ahead.

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**The Rickety White Kuzoo Van**

Kuzoo van was making its way onto the “highway.” This thoroughfare was the automotive equivalent of the approach to the airport: simply treacherous. The difference was that the pilot took great care to steady the plane as it wobbled in the wind; the drivers here seemed to fancy themselves participants in a demolition derby. Immediately, the need for widening the road became obvious. Instead of two lanes there was a slightly wider-than-average one-lane sliver of bumpy pavement. Making it all the more precarious was the fact that every other vehicle was a giant brightly colored truck that looked like it had driven out of a Bollywood-style cartoon. Hand-lettered words on the fronts ironically proclaimed, *Long Life;* the bumpers admonished *Blow Horn.* Blowing a horn wasn’t going to do a thing to facilitate passing, since the oncoming vehicles were obscured from sight. Still, Kesang impatiently—but expertly—barreled past every vehicle in our path. Cars precipitously hugged the road’s edge. And that edge was unprotected by guardrails to keep you from careening off and dropping hundreds of feet, straight into the valley. Just when it seemed the road might go straight for a bit of a reprieve, on came the snakiest S curve. Without exception, all the vehicles were traveling at high speeds. No ride on the autobahn could match this. I was happy the passenger-side safety belt worked. But as we kept moving, it hit me that even being straitjacketed to the seat wouldn’t help a bit were the van to slip.

I fought the urge to bite my nails; I wanted nothing to dwarf my absorption of the scenery and the feeling that I’d landed on another planet. Bhutan’s tourism industry sold the place as the last Shangri-la, and it became clear from what I saw out the van windows that this was indeed a land that time and rampant development had forgotten. Rolling hills punctuated by spectacular mountains, vast expanses of meticulously terraced land and the clearest river rushing through, interrupted only occasionally by a cluster of unusual-looking houses. Within the array, a tiny store, marked by a simple blue sign bearing white hand-drawn letters, provided a hint of commerce: **Kuenga Wangmo General Shop Cum Bar.**

All the signs were in English, topped with the squiggles of Dzongkha letters, painted in royal blue with white, and they all looked the same. The buildings themselves, too; every structure had sloping roofs and ornately carved orange wooden frames around the windows. They weren’t ugly in their uniformity, nothing like a Levittown suburb or subprime development might be, but rustic and charming—like Asian-infused Swiss chalets. The view repeated itself over and over again so that it began to feel like a driving scene from a *Flinstones* episode, in which an occasional variation pops up every tenth frame to remind you there is indeed forward motion. Every mountain and valley was so picturesque I half expected Julie Andrews to emerge, singing sweetly about the sound of music. Except that there wasn’t a blonde as far as the eye could see. To my American eyes, the ethnic homogeneity of the people was as unfamiliar as the houses, an endless chorus line of humans whose heads were topped with thick, shiny jet-black hair, close-cropped even for the women, longer for the children. From babes in arms to barely school-age kids all the way up the generational line to weathered old men and toothless old women. Regardless of their age, each was wrapped in colorful variations of the national dress, in bright blues and oranges, yellows and pinks.
The erratic madness of the road didn’t seem to cause concern; kids sat at the edge of it, older people meandered across it, cows clustered serenely in the middle of it. Even as we whizzed by and stirred up dust and pebbles, both the human beings and the animals went about their business, undisturbed.

And then there was a visual punch line, adding a bawdy comic-strip-like touch to the landscape: Houses were adorned with giant, brightly colored paintings, sometimes of a rooster or a lotus flower or, occasionally, a ten-foot giant winged phallus, wrapped sweetly in a bow. When I’d found pictures of these online, they’d appeared humorous; here, they seemed ordinary, just part of the scenery.

As we drove, Ngawang was like a windup doll, chattering from the middle row of the van. She narrated the sights: Animals lived on the ground level of a house, she said, and the people one flight above. You could tell we were in Paro, and not Thimphu, because the houses had three rows of windows, not two. From the license plates, you could distinguish whether a vehicle belonged to the government, was a taxi, or was a private car. She had earned a tour guide license, she explained, so if I had any questions, she was equipped to answer them.

I had one. “What exactly is the meaning of the giant penises?” There had been various discussions on the Web about their meaning. They weren’t fertility symbols, nor were they indicators that prostitutes were available inside, as was the case in other countries. It had something to do with a bawdy mystic named Drukpa Kunley, also known as the Divine Madman, who tamed demons (and just about everyone else he came into contact with) using his abundant sexual powers. But the reason for their prominence on the sides of houses hadn’t been properly explained on the Internet.

Ngawang deciphered the mystery. “We believe it is wrong to envy what someone else has. When you have a phallus painted on the house, people will be too ashamed to look and to covet what they don’t have,” she said. “In this way, the phallus wards off evil spirits.”

This had to be the most beautiful circuitous logic I’d ever heard.

“I imagine a lot of visitors ask that question, huh?”

“Yes,” Ngawang said, giggling, lingering on the s for emphasis. “They think it’s strange. For us, it’s just a part of Bhutan.” Then she explained that having to answer the same question over and over showed her that a career as a tour guide was not for her, which is why she was so excited that she’d been hired at Kuzoo. And when she read my résumé, she decided she wanted to learn everything I knew.

“I want to be the best radio jockey ever,” she said. “Please teach me how, Madam Jane.”

Kesang interrupted the flattery, the pitch of his voice indicating it was urgent. Ngawang translated that we had indeed gotten stuck in the roadblock.

For the next ninety minutes, parked on the side of the very scary, very narrow road, surrounded front and back by several dozen other vehicles, and in between the almost constant trill of her cell phone, I learned a lot more about Ngawang.

Her mother had died when she was four. Her father proudly served in the Bhutanese army. It seemed a curiosity that a peaceful Buddhist nation would require a military, but perhaps that was how the country had avoided being annexed by neighboring China or India. Since her father was stationed in the west at a military base on the border, Ngawang had been living with her uncle and aunt in Thimphu. She had attended college in India. In her large extended family, she had many, many “cousin brothers and cousin sisters.” She was twenty-three. She dreamed of visiting America. And of having a baby.

“Oh!” she exclaimed, interrupting her autobiographical monologue as if she’d remembered something more important. “How did you come to know about Bhutan?”

“I told the story of that fateful night in New York. “Do you know Sebastian? He’s in the tea business.”

“American?”

“Yes, yes. Tall, thin man. American,” I said hopefully. I imagined Sebastian must be a revered figure here.

“Nope,” she said, as if she were flipping through mental images of people he might be. “Don’t know him.” She paused for a moment. “So it was your karma that brought you to Bhutan. That’s cool.”

“No, it …” As I disagreed, I understood. “Yes, it must be because of my karma that I came to Bhutan.”

“What do people know about Bhutan where you are from?”

“Well, I knew about Bhutan because I heard you didn’t have television,” I said, refraining from launching into a rant against the evils of the boob tube. It didn’t seem good form to introduce myself in this way, particularly given the reason for my visit. “But honestly, most people don’t know very much about Bhutan.”

I also didn’t mention that several family members were concerned I might be held hostage here simply because they worried about everything. Or that my father had warned me in his bon voyage phone call that I’d likely have to carry my own toilet paper, as if that were the most barbaric proposition. There wasn’t any need to tell Ngawang, either, about how one of my more sour coworkers deemed Gross National Happiness “old news,” and “a gimmick.”

Ngawang laughed. “We have television now!” she said. “The fourth king allowed it. I love watching TV!”
That’s what I was afraid of, I thought. “The fourth king?” I asked.

“The father of the new king, who is Bhutan’s fifth king,” Ngawang explained. “Our monarchy is one hundred years old, and His Majesty is the fifth in his family to serve.”

“Do you like the new king?”

“Oh, yes, very much. Everyone loves our king. He is a man of the people and devoted in his service to Bhutan.”

The words sounded as if they’d been lifted from a brochure, and yet the tone was heartfelt.

Her scattershot line of questioning continued. She brimmed with the energy of a teenager. How big was my family? And oh, did I believe in God?

My parents were both alive, I told her, and I had a younger brother with whom I was close. We had lots of aunts and uncles and cousins, but none of us saw one another much. As far as what I believed, I wasn’t sure, but I liked the idea of believing in something. What little I knew about the Bhutanese faith, Buddhism, seemed to make a lot of sense to me.

“What about you?” I asked. “Do you believe there is a God?”

“I don’t know what I believe, either,” Ngawang said. “But being raised Buddhist, I follow what my family tells me. If it’s an auspicious day and we have to make offerings, I obey. So have you ever been in love?”

That’s complicated, I thought, glad she hadn’t asked if I’d been married, because I hated answering that question.

“In love a thousand times with silly infatuations, but for real, yes, twice. And you?”

Ngawang said she’d had a boyfriend who’d taken up with her best friend. She didn’t believe in love anymore. What mattered to her was having a baby.

“Well,” I said, “you’ve got plenty of time …”

At last we were moving again. It seemed that each time Ngawang’s cell phone trilled, it played a different tune; now it was playing “Hotel California,” and I wondered whose ringtone it was. The interruption saved me from being asked about my interest in children, which was even more complicated to answer than the love question.

On the phone Ngawang was speaking in her native language, but every so often I’d make out a reference to me, “Madam Jane.” Listening to the cadence of her voice and trying to discern the tone provided further welcome distraction from the terrifying roller coaster that passed for a road. As did more unusual visions punctuating the landscape: groups of monkeys skipping alongside the river that ran below, a gold-topped temple emerging from the side of a mountain, clusters of skinny cows sunning themselves.

“We’re coming to the checkpoint,” Ngawang said.

The government kept track of who traversed these roads, inspecting whether visitors were in possession of the proper permits. Bhutan had opened up, but that didn’t mean total freedom of movement. Thanks to the government’s increasing engagement with the outside over the past few decades, including the introduction of modern air travel, and, apparently, my karma, here I was in this faraway kingdom. With each passing kilometer, it became more evident just how distinct this universe was from my own.

Gazing out at the foreign landscape dissolved my worries, my failures, my triumphs. I was humbled by all that surrounded me. What difference did it make what I had and hadn’t accomplished, under what circumstances I had come here, or that I had come here alone? I was here. I was fortunate to be here, to see how other humans lived in a place unlike anywhere else in the world. I had the chance to interact with people from an entirely different culture, on this planet we all shared. My world had simultaneously become infinitely larger and smaller, and the very anticipation of what lay ahead drowned out my usual litany of concerns and self-criticisms. Worries petty and large began to shrink away. No longer was I some burnt-out career journalist with no idea how to escape the grind. No longer would I see myself as a failure as a woman, either, for not having had a successful long-term romantic partnership that yielded a happy home filled with children. This long-crafted definition of myself, of a nice gal who had made a mess of her life, started to melt away. Replacing it now was a new vision of me: one part proud ambassador from the United States, one part curious anthropologist, 100 percent human. I resolved to be the best person I could be—and to stay alert to the possibilities before me.

TWINKLING LIGHTS ACROSS the landscape signaled that we had entered the capital city of Thimphu. It was dusk now. A cold gust of wind blew through the valley, as if to welcome us and remind us it was winter. Eight hours later than our anticipated arrival, the Kuzoo van drove through town and up a short hill to the Rabten Apartments, a small two-story building that was to be my home.

Ngawang let us in with an enormous brass key, and Kesang hauled my suitcase up the steps and into my apartment, then downstairs to the bedroom. Ngawang plugged in the space heater in the living room, the only source of heat. As the sun set, the air cooled fiercely. She asked how I liked the place, was it okay? As long as there was a bed for me to collapse into, I was sure it was.
I did a quick survey of the accommodations. The focal point of the living room was the television set. Pushed up against the wall to provide the perfect line of sight was a worn old wood-framed couch, two matching chairs whose cushions had seen better days, and a wall of mostly empty bookcases, fringed with colorful, ornate Bhutanese woodwork. All that sat on the shelves was a pamphlet from the Center for Bhutan Studies explaining Gross National Happiness and two old Bhutan Telecom phone directories, neither volume thicker than an inch. So accessible was the royal family that the king’s private phone number was said to be listed; I’d have to take a look for that later.

“I picked out this apartment for you,” said Ngawang with pride in her voice. She clunked around in her heels, flipping switches, and determined the TV remote control was dead. “That’s bad. We’ll get that fixed.” Then she hurried out the front door while dialing her mobile phone, explaining that she was off to fetch the landlady to bring me tea. “Sir Phub Dorji asked me to call as soon as we got here,” she added. The twin impact of jet lag and bewilderment weighed on me now that we were “home.” As eager as I was to meet my official host, with whom I’d been corresponding almost daily for months, I couldn’t imagine having to talk in a professional or formal way at that moment.

A young lady carrying a tray filled with steaming cups entered the front door. Ngawang talked to her urgently in Dzongkha as she served us. I could tell the faulty remote was at issue; I didn’t confess that I wouldn’t need it, certain that when I bothered to turn on the set, I’d keep it glued to the Bhutan Broadcasting Service. The warm cup felt good in my hands and I wandered into the tiny kitchen. No oven, just a two-burner hot plate fueled by a propane canister, the kind you might find attached to a barbecue grill. A worn-looking half-size fridge by a window, and a rice cooker sat on the counter. In a plastic dish drainer were a couple of plates, a few forks and bowls, and some unmatched glasses. Ngawang watched me drinking it all in.

“You have a geyser in your kitchen—that’s very fancy!” She meant the sink, which hardly seemed fancy until she said her place didn’t have one. For many Bhutanese families, even in the city, she said, their water source was outside. What seemed very modest to me was very lavish to her, which made the gift of this apartment all the more grand.

Down a short flight of stairs was the bedroom and bath, and they were simple, too: A blanket covered twin beds pushed together to make a king. A tired old cabinet resting against the wall served as a closet. A stall shower covered by a moldy plastic curtain, two thin white towels, and a sad wooden shelf made up the bathroom. This is fine, I thought. I can live anywhere—as long as there aren’t any mice, or worse, rats. Everything seemed too tidy for that.

A tall, slender man in his late thirties appeared in the doorway, a commanding, if solemn, presence. If his dark gray gho had been a suit, he could have stepped out of a bank in midtown Manhattan. It was Sir Phub Dorji, my benefactor. He had an air about him of a grown-up choirboy. Innocent, sincere, earnest, strictly business. After a flurry of greetings, he asked Ngawang to please make sure the landlady got me something to eat now—and to be certain she brought breakfast in the morning, too. With the plane arriving so late, we hadn’t had time to go shopping for kitchen provisions.

“We are so grateful that you are here,” he said. His tone wasn’t warm as much as it was serious and matter-of-fact, the same as in his emails.

“I can’t quite believe I am.”

“It’s a very exciting time for us right now. Kuzoo FM is causing quite a sensation. But we really could use your professional guidance.”

“I’m ready to help, however I can.” I sat straight up in my chair, thrilled to be of service to these kind people in this unusual place.

“I am sure this is quite modest, quite simple, these accommodations, compared to what you have back home,” he said. “My wife watches Desperate Housewives, and I’ve seen the kitchens. I hope this will be suitable.”

“This place looks to be about the same size as mine in Los Angeles,” I said. “Including the kitchen. Trust me—most of us don’t live like you see on television.”

The look on his face suggested he didn’t believe me. Or that I didn’t quite understand the extent to which daily life here was different from that in my world.

A plate of pinkish rice arrived; alongside it was a little bowl of what looked like stewed vegetables. They were fiery hot, and a bit too gloppy for my taste—covered in a runny, oily cheese sauce. So I concentrated on the grains.

“Let me tell you the story of Kuzoo,” said Phub Dorji. “It was a pet project of His Majesty the fifth king, created when he was crown prince. What happened was this: The youth wanted a radio station, and they approached him. He had been given the gift of a BMW car. He sold it at auction to raise funds, which he donated to start Kuzoo. And that is how the station began, as a gift from His Majesty to the youth of Bhutan.”

He paused. This was all so radically different from the big media universe in which I’d been dwelling for over twenty years. The media here seemed pure, neat, a public service—not another quiver of power for a mogul like
Rupert Murdoch. Providing a voice for the people, plumbing the depths of the community, that was what newspapers and radio and television were supposed to do, what had attracted me to the news business in the first place. “Remember you asked my specific role at Kuzoo, and I said it was a surprise I would reveal to you when you got here?”

“Oh, yes, I do.” I put down my teacup and moved forward a bit in my chair.

“Well, the secret is that I have nothing to do with Kuzoo.” Phub Dorji smiled a bit, the most I’d seen of his teeth so far.

I was intrigued. “I don’t understand. You sent me all those documents about what you needed … and you said you oversaw the station.”

“Yes, I do. But from a distance. It’s okay. You are in very excellent hands. Mr. Tenzin Dorji will be here in a few minutes to say hello. He is a former high school principal now in charge of Kuzoo. No relation to me. You won’t see me every day, but if you need anything, I insist that you call. Or have Ngawang call me.”

Phub Dorji motioned to a piece of paper taped on the wall near the phone. “Ngawang, can you write down my mobile number for Lisa? Can you lend her a mobile phone so we can reach her?”

“Yes, sir,” said Ngawang, with her head bowed respectfully, before I could refuse the offer. I’d been looking forward to not having a digital leash during my time here, but I supposed a cell phone wouldn’t be a bad tool to have.

Just then, the front door opened, and a cyclone of energy in the form of Mr. Tenzin Dorji entered the room with his eight-year-old son and a little white Maltese in tow.

“Welcome, Jane!” he bellowed.
A radio station may seem quaint and retro, an old-fashioned medium in this age of all things digital and pod. But in the last Shangri-La, it proved to be an invention as modern as a spaceship.

As soon as Kuzoo FM started broadcasting on September 28, 2006, the entire population of Thimphu tuned in. That’s not an exaggeration. The few stores that carried radios promptly sold out their stock. Farmers in the nearby valley twisted the angles of their antennae in order to tune in a signal so Kuzoo could keep them company as they worked the land. Drivers of the kingdom’s growing number of motor vehicles (up from just under four thousand in 1999 to well over thirty thousand less than a decade later) were happy to have Kuzoo’s radio jockeys entertain them as they cruised the capital city. Many of the cars proudly displayed Kuzoo bumper stickers in enthusiastic support of the new station.

Before Kuzoo came along, there wasn’t much else to listen to. Recorded music—if you could even get your hands on it—was far more expensive than modest Bhutanese incomes would allow. Up until Kuzoo, the only sounds transmitted over the airwaves had been the dull news and announcements, punctuated by the occasional music program, churned out by the government-launched Bhutan Broadcasting Service. It didn’t even broadcast all day. The rest of the dial was filled with static.

Suddenly, a radio was a hot item, and Kuzoo FM was a real station, playing all kinds of music that most Bhutanese hadn’t heard before: the saccharine epiphanies of pop divas, the aching twang of country music, the interlocking rhythms of rap, rock, hip-hop. All presented by friendly, if inexperienced, Bhutanese radio jockeys, who shyly stumbled through their pronunciation of English words, making it clear this was not some slick feed imported from afar.

Even so, the capital city was a world away from the rest of the country. Villagers might visit Thimphu once in their lives—and only then for formal business or to be tended to at the hospital. Travel in Bhutan had long been utilitarian, not for pleasure. Leaving home to scratch through forest paths in order to venture to the next town meant time lost working the land, which yielded the food and other necessities that sustained the community. Only in the last few years had the beginnings of a leisure class blossomed.

That the citizens of Bhutan could now be connected to one another through radio, without actually going anywhere, was nothing short of magic. This eager audience immediately began to phone in to give thanks for the music, and to chatter on the air—simply because they could. To dedicate songs not just to their friends and family but to fellow callers whose voices they’d found pleasing. When nature intervened and the signal was temporarily disrupted, Kuzoo fans called and begged so plaintively in despair at the interruption that you’d wonder what they’d done before the station existed. “Please, my wife has stopped eating because she’s so sad without Kuzoo,” implored one man after a storm knocked the station off the air. “You must repair it.”

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the Kuzoo experience—the quality that endeared it to its audience above all others—was that listeners were allowed, even encouraged, to participate on-air. Besides making dedications, they could sing songs and talk to friendly radio jockeys. Or ask questions about Buddhism on a weekly show called Dharma Bites, hosted by two young self-styled “spiritual jihadis.” Disappointed that their fellow youth were becoming less engaged with the national religion and showing more of an interest in the trappings of the material world, they’d cooked up the idea for this program and showed up at the Kuzoo studio one day to ask for airtime. Like legions of evangelists around the world, they saw the power of the medium to educate and persuade.

The excitement wasn’t just because media in Bhutan hadn’t been interactive before. For generations, the tiny, landlocked Himalayan kingdom had practically no media at all, and very little in the way of modern
communications. It had been literally sealed off from the rest of the world, and virtually sequestered, too. TV had long been outlawed, lest the insidious forces of the outside infiltrate and pollute the minds of the people—dilute their unique culture, intoxicate them with images of an outside world to which they’d yearn to belong.

Some of the bolder and more affluent citizens hooked contraband televisions up to video recorders, traded taped films they managed to smuggle into the country, or slipped cash to enterprising Indian businessmen who smuggled dismantled satellite dishes across the border and reassembled them, discreetly, around their customers’ homes. The number of people who could afford such a luxury was few. Even as the burgeoning World Wide Web had been taking root most everyplace else, it had not been allowed to make inroads into Bhutan. Not that every person in every corner of the nation could have availed themselves of the service even if cost weren’t an issue. A quarter of Bhutan’s villages still lacked electricity—and half the population had to walk at least four hours just to get to the nearest all-season road. When mobile phones were introduced in 2003, the number of houses with landlines totalled in the hundreds.

On the morning of June 2, 1999, King Jigme Singye Wangchuck issued the decree that would change Bhutan indelibly. At the silver jubilee celebration commemorating his twenty-five-year reign, he delivered a speech in which he bestowed several gifts on his constituency. Roads and bridges, he declared, would be built in the remotest corners of Bhutan, to give the people greater mobility. To accommodate a larger plane for the nation’s airline, a new airport terminal would be constructed—another enticement to would-be visitors. As part of Bhutan’s continuing environmental stewardship, the king announced that plastic bags would be banned—for the good of the planet and, ultimately, all people.

The bombshell of His Majesty’s address that day, the revelation that elicited cheers from the otherwise solemnly reverent assembled guests, was this: After years of self-imposed isolation, of gently dipping its toes into the outside world, of carefully restricting which foreigners entered the country and which Bhutanese left, the almighty superpowers known as television and Internet were to be permitted into the happy kingdom. With that, the switch was thrown on the brand-new televised Bhutan Broadcasting Service, which would run alongside a selection of international channels. From that day forward, the BBS television signal—transmitted, like its radio counterpart, for just a few hours each morning and evening—would mix with the pristine air and low-lying clouds of the Himalayas. Cable television would render those illicit satellite dishes obsolete; now they would perform another function as a handy surface on which to dry the nation’s staple food, chili peppers.

In his speech, the king acknowledged the Pandora’s box he was unlatching, the effect media might have on his carefully crafted policy of Gross National Happiness. Television and the Internet, he reminded his audience, possessed both positive and negative qualities. Their use required good sense and judgment. When it came to their consumption, the king trusted his people to deploy what the Buddhists call the Middle Path: moderation. He believed firm religious footing would ultimately hold more sway than the mesmerizing power of the screen.

Whether that made the king an idealist or simply naive would be revealed soon enough.

The notion of Bhutan as Shangri-la has to do with its unspoiled landscapes and striking views of stunning Himalayan mountains, believed by some to be the dwelling place of the gods. Adding to the mystique is its fierce commitment to the preservation of age-old traditions that are the mainstay of the country’s cultural heritage. Western Buddhists plan once-in-a-lifetime visits to worship at the hallowed historic monasteries scattered throughout the land and soak in the energy of the country’s storied religious festivals, called tsechus.

None of this was what drew me to Bhutan.

For me, the prospect of a relatively media-free universe was as close to utopia as I could imagine. No wonder the country was considered the happiest on earth! The promise of a place where life was simpler—unsaturated by the menacing forces of mainstream media, which had kept a roof over my head for years but which I found increasingly noisy and bothersome to consume—appealed to me. That Bhutan was guided by intense spirituality, by connection to home and community, held great allure. I was tired of sleep-deprived, stressed-out, too-busy people who shirked downtime in the service of making money so they could buy more stuff; tired of it taking months to see dear friends who lived across town because traffic and overcommitment made it impossible to coordinate a shared meal. It felt like some people stuffed their calendars full so they could seem important, or at least, not have to face themselves during unplanned moments. In Bhutan, I suspected, human connections were more important than how many digital pals you racked up on Facebook. Rather than passively consuming depictions of the world pumped out to them on various screens, the Bhutanese, I imagined, must savor their lives, really live them, thoughtfully and yet spontaneously.

It seemed unlikely that the Bhutanese swirled about busily through the days, never quite triaging their to-do lists, assaulted by the modern scourge known as multitasking. Surely life wasn’t marred by such jarring interruptions as
call waiting, and the disorienting phenomenon of barely audible cell phone calls made to “check in” with friends and family and give the illusion of connection. Thumbs weren’t maniacally text-messaging so the humans they were attached to could “keep in touch” while averting their gaze from others in their paths.

I longed for a way of life in which people made it a priority to look into each other’s eyes and communicate, soul-to-soul, uninterrupted, like in that Zulu warrior greeting we’d practiced in happiness class. I yearned for meandering conversations about all things important, all things banal. Bhutan, I imagined, might be as close as you could get on earth to what I’d been craving—a real, live, actual community, where being wired took a backseat to being present, face-to-face, experiencing the here and now.

After more than two decades of reducing even the most complex issues down to a thousand words or less, I was tired of observing life from a distance, of synthesizing and distilling data with little time to process meaning. I’d long considered myself fortunate to have made my way in a cutthroat profession; when I was a kid growing up in Flatbush, Brooklyn, the news business promised glamorous access to a world far different from my own. Being able to ask questions and tell stories, much less getting paid for it, had long felt like a tremendous privilege. And yet, over time, the warping nature of the business was clear: Every experience could be spun as an item, and human relationships existed to serve the demand for news and information. The rushed conversations to facilitate deadlines had left me impatient in normal interactions; why couldn’t people get to the point faster? Quick, clipped scripts punctuated by quick, clipped communiqués via email seemed to be impacting my ability to think more deeply, to respond with the slow deliberation necessary for life’s bigger decisions. I felt like I was rushing, reacting, all the time.

Most of the jobs in journalism today are like information-factory work—Lucy-on-the-assembly-line style—or eating a steady diet of dim sum. You’d sample many items every day, fast, then gorge on the morsel assigned to you, trying to digest it as quickly as possible. A few hours later, you were expected to spew it out to the world in the form of a “story.” And on this particular radio show where I was currently employed, it had to be a very short story: ninety seconds or less, for the most part. Even though you probably couldn’t fake your way through a debate on the subject, you were suddenly an authority on it because millions of people had heard you talk about it on their commute home. The aftereffects were the same as an unsatisfying meal. Bloated, hungry—I felt hungry for knowledge, deeper meaning, time to synthesize the world around me.

I also worried about the effects of the news on all who consumed it. For all the good the global village had achieved—exposing us to other cultures we’d never visit, making us aware of strife in other parts of the world, educating us about important issues in our communities—it also was making us info-zombies. Just because the images are constantly beamed into our lines of sight in our living rooms, at the grocery store, while we were pumping gas, we live with the delusion that this virtual ringside seat to the action equals a real understanding of the world at large. Stuffed with factoids about the stock market and electoral college and weather patterns, the general public believes they understand these complex systems, when in fact they can’t adequately be boiled down to sound bites.

Context isn’t modern media’s strong suit, and the broadcast media in particular; raw data and pictures and sound are. The gray areas, the nuance, rarely get explored. Wars and starving children become images on the screen that you can turn off at will, not real, live complex problems. Bad things happen to other people. Thank God that didn’t happen to us, honey. Change the channel, please.

Now, my media malaise wasn’t simply a result of my midlife disillusionment. It had been brewing for ages. Since not long after I’d started working, in fact.

When the space shuttle Challenger exploded, I was a young copywriter at CNN Headline News. A tape editor and I were locked in a tiny room for the twelve hours afterward, charged with crafting half-hourly updates that incorporated into our report whatever information ticked off the AP news wire. I watched the shuttle blow up so many times that day, I knew in graphic detail how it had broken apart. The impact of seeing that horror play over and over led me to do exactly what you’re not supposed to do in a workplace, particularly in a newsroom: break down and cry. I couldn’t believe we were repeatedly watching people dissolve before our very eyes without pausing for a second to think about them. (It turned out later to be even worse: They hadn’t exploded; they had sunk to the bottom of the ocean.) Thankfully, my colleague was also a friend, and he didn’t blow my cover. He put his hand on my shoulder, sent me to the restroom to wash up, and told me to come right back to the edit room to keep working. Afterward, I got promoted for doing such a fine job turning around first-rate updates on deadline.

Years later, during the standoff between cult members and federal agents in Waco, Texas, my dissatisfaction reached a new intensity. I was field producing for another network, and after sitting and staring for weeks at the embattled compound from the safety of the media village a mile away, my colleagues and I watched through high-powered telescopes as federal agents stormed in. Flames shot high, engulfing a building that had people—children—inside. We members of the media diligently trained our cameras on the action, shouting to one another about the
logistics of “going live.” Reporters in the foreground of the action boasted that their network was “at the scene.”

At the end of the day, when a friendly woman knocked on the door of the news truck to tell me she’d been dispatched so I could take a break, the tears flowed yet again. The presence of a new person jolted me back to the reality of the day. There were humans dying yards away as we frantically broadcast the disaster to the world.

September 11, 2001, did me in. Mercifully, I wasn’t even working at the time. A month earlier I’d lost my maddening job as “Internet correspondent,” which meant reading viewer email aloud on cable TV. I’d been axed in a round of cutbacks after the dot-com bust. As the mayhem of the terrorist attack unfolded several miles south of where I lived, I couldn’t bear the thought of watching it on television. The analysts, the experts, the pundits, the din of the speculative commentary were all being doled out before there was actual information to convey. I didn’t want to follow along with this packaged-for-TV disaster, as each gruesome detail was revealed. All I wanted to do was be silent, meditate and pray. I wasn’t conscious of ever having wanted to do those things much before, but it seemed a more productive course of action than staring zombielike at the television, wallowing in the unfolding chaos with a remote control.

It was then I decided to turn off the news, in every medium, and instead deploy my own Human News Network. For weather reports, I stuck my hand out the window or chatted with neighbors. For hard news, I listened to and asked questions of friends; everyone loved to share opinions about stories they’d read, heard, or seen. If an item piqued my interest, I’d seek out more about it. It was like having my own personal clip service. I studied what I needed in order to write freelance news articles to pay my bills while I looked for full-time employment. There was room now for books, research on topics that interested me, conversations with friends. Downtime to just think. More time to walk and cook and swim. I felt liberated, smarter than ever, genuinely in touch with the world around me. The real world, not the mediated one.

Except, I hadn’t really cut the cord, not entirely. Like someone trapped in a bad marriage, I concocted an ironclad excuse for why I wasn’t getting out. I needed a job to support myself, and what else was there that I could do after twenty years of little else but the news business? And after being out of work for so long, I considered myself very fortunate when I landed the gig in Los Angeles, in the vaunted medium of public radio.

Besides Bhutan’s undeveloped media culture, my other attraction to the country was its almost institutionalized resistance to conspicuous consumption. That shopping was a pastime for so many people in the United States distressed me. I was hardly an ascetic, or the type who makes compacts not to buy anything but toilet paper and food. I was simply trying not to suffocate under mounds of belongings: trying to live as simple, uncomplicated, and uncluttered a life as possible. There was enough extraneous junk and chaos waiting for you once you stepped outside.

Finding pleasure in giving things away was a developing habit for me. I’d taken the once-unimaginable step of donating my twenty-years-in-the-making collection of five hundred books to the public library. This occurred after I’d paid several thousand dollars over two years for a storage closet in New York, indecisively letting them collect dust. (“Should I move them West, or should I hedge my bets that I’ll move back East?” I mulled each month as I wrote the check.) Until one day I made the call and begged for the cartons to be hauled away, aware that for many educated people this was an action tantamount to suicide. Or, at least, cause for institutionalization. One dissenting alleged friend dubbed my action, simply, “idiotic.”

My coveted collection of books really wasn’t necessary anymore. I felt secure enough in my intellect not to have to flaunt my impressive personal library in my tiny apartment any longer. I could get most anything I wanted to read, reread, or simply fondle for sentimental reasons in practically an instant at the spectacular public library located two blocks from where I lived in downtown Los Angeles. And I could support a vital (if, to some people, arcane) public institution in the process: With the money I’d saved not buying more books, I started making an annual donation to the Los Angeles Public Library, stoking my middle-age ambitions to be a patroness of worthy causes.

As for my television, I’d hung on to that only to watch the very occasional DVD or videotape. I’d long ago ditched the cable. Until the rare occasions when I wanted to turn it on, I obscured the screen with a painting.

And yet, I continued to be a hypocrite.

Not only did I keep working in the news business, I had just arrived in one of the last places on earth to be corrupted by media and consumer cultures. My mission was to teach them how to “professionalize” this new radio station they’d just begun, which I suspected was code for “make us sound like every other radio station in the world,” instead of letting it grow organically to become its own sort of Radio Shangri-la.
Ever since television arrived in Bhutan in 1999, more people have been opting out of the agrarian lifestyle that supported their ancestors and is still the mainstay occupation. Now young people flock to Thimphu for their education and a chance at jobs that promise plush benefits (like working behind a desk, with a computer, and not in the fields). No one has officially drawn the connection between the introduction of mass media and the swelling of the population in Bhutan’s capital city. But no one can deny it, either. A generation ago, it wouldn’t have occurred to young people to leave their families and their villages.

Being wired to the outside world, of course, doesn’t make Bhutan any less geographically remote, or any less costly to leave. It still requires days of travel to get in or out. Besides, most people in Bhutan don’t have much cash, and credit cards don’t exist. No matter how rich you might be, there is just one airline and one airport. Permission to travel in either direction is meted out with great deliberation and is typically granted to the lucky few who win scholarships to colleges and universities outside the country.

But thanks to the wonder of satellites and a vast network of interconnected servers, you can more clearly see what it’s like out there in the world without having to go. And that window to the world changes your perspective. As fiercely, traditionally Bhutanese as you might be, as much as you might vow you’ll never leave, those other ways of life depicted on TV look mighty tempting. When television beams a window on the world—the possibility of other—right into your home, it’s hard not to become enthralled. Or, at least, intrigued. Those images sure get you thinking about what you have, and what you don’t.

In 2006, the king allowed media infiltration to reach another milestone. Two private weekly newspapers were licensed to compete with Kuensel, the once-government-backed paper that had long been the only game in town. Its founder had been primed for the job with an education at the finest schools. These new rivals, the Bhutan Observer and Bhutan Times, hired young staffs with no training or experience, and who flirted with the promise of press freedom guaranteed in the not-yet-signed new constitution. But only a bit. Free speech, Bhutan-style, still did not extend to criticism or examination of the monarchy—a line few would dare to cross even if it weren’t forbidden. Most stories involving the royal family still had to be run through government censors, no matter how benign. And if they involved His Majesty, it was implicitly understood that they’d receive the most prominent placement, no matter how banal his actions. Nevertheless, the mere existence of competition began to transform Kuensel from a polite, deferential organ to a more solid, inquisitive journalistic news organization.

And then came this new entry: Kuzoo FM. Tenzin Dorji was plucked from the ranks of educators to manage the operation. A staff of nine twenty-somethings was hired. Anyone with time and curiosity was encouraged to just show up and volunteer, particularly if they were in high school. Kuzoo was a youth-focused station, after all.

At first, the station broadcast from an old closet in a government building that housed the youth sports department. A few months after its debut, Kuzoo moved to another structure on the property, which long before had served as the residence for the foreign minister. It was a two-story building with a narrow staircase, a warren of rooms, and worn burgundy carpet. The building’s two most charming features were a front porch on the second level that offered a lovely view of the grounds (although the floorboards wobbled precariously if too many people stood out there) and the sky-blue-tiled kitchen designated as the studio.

The space wasn’t converted as much as it was adjusted. Heavy white cardboard was laid over the sink to discourage anyone from turning on the faucets. A plastic tarp taped over a hole in the ceiling kept a flock of cooing pigeons from landing on whoever sat at the mixing board.

Several old computers were set up on battered school desks in the adjoining rooms, and the young staff began waiting their turn to “prepare their shows” (which meant downloading music illegally off the Internet) and adding whatever few CDs they might own or could borrow to add to the library of on-air music. Not that the library could ever grow very large. The average middle-class teenager in the United States had an iPod with a bigger hard drive than the one that engined Kuzoo.

As local radio stations and newspapers in the West downsized and dissolved in a rapid death-spiral—victims of media consolidation, the Internet, and the bottom line—Bhutan’s media landscape was expanding with abandon. Media were seen as a crucial component of the impending democratic elections, and afterward, a force to keep watch over the newly elected government. The king knew that for democracy to take root in this long-standing monarchy, a competitive news landscape was a critical part of the equation.

What he didn’t factor in is how much the kids loved their music.
Kesang, the Kuzoo driver, looked concerned; his lips were pursed and he was shaking his head disapprovingly. After driving Ngawang and me to the store, he was now in charge of holding the basket while I stocked my kitchen, courtesy of Kuzoo. He appeared to be unhappy with my selections. Ngawang had taken us to a little grocery on the lower road, across from Changlimithang Stadium, where the coronation celebrations would be held sometime in 2008.

“My auntie owns this place,” said Ngawang, waving to the woman behind the counter.

The shop was the size of a small convenience store, but more chaotic in its inventory; floor to ceiling, every shelf was covered with all manner of packaged goods, from shampoo to potato chips to tea, side by side, in varying quantities. Two of these, ten of those, all teetering on top of one another. One abrupt move and it could all come crashing down. Nothing was organized in any particular way; it was as if each item, as it arrived in the store, was shoved into whatever sliver of free space was available. A few of the packages looked familiar, like Lay’s Potato Chips (although I had never seen the Spicy Indian Masala flavor in Los Angeles) and, not surprisingly, Coca-Cola. (An attempt to bottle Pepsi in Bhutan had recently gone bust—because of a management issue, the newspaper reported, not a shortage of fans of carbonated beverages.) “Those are from India,” said Ngawang, seemingly unaware that the origin of these big brands was, in fact, the United States. Giant next-door neighbor India was the closest and most important source of all things shiny and refined.

At least a handful of items in here were unfamiliar to me, and several dry goods like lentils were unlabeled. No matter who was buying, I preferred to consume food that hadn’t traveled from so far away.

It was my second full day in the Kingdom of Bhutan. I was so hepped up on caffeine and adrenaline, I hadn’t had the chance to succumb to jet lag. At every turn, one of the Kuzoo staff was offering, “Tea … coffee, madam?” (By coffee, they meant Nescafé, which appeared to be the only kind to be had here, and the presumption was that most Westerners preferred that as their hot beverage of choice.) Even after I reached my limit, I kept saying yes—the prospect of a warm mug was so inviting.

The message behind the repeated gesture was clear: I was a lady; I was senior to them; I had come from quite a distance to help; and this was the simplest form of welcome. And I did feel welcomed, despite how nervous most people seemed to be about striking up conversation with this curious visitor who’d dropped into their orbit.

I hadn’t been alone for a minute since I’d arrived, except when I slept. The first day had been a blur, a whirl of introductions, new faces, a busy lunch with Sir Tenzin at Plums Café right across from the traffic circle in town. He knew practically everyone in the restaurant, and they all heartily welcomed his foreign consultant.

Kesang and Ngawang had shown up at my door again early this morning, just as I was getting dressed, to squire me to the studio. I hoped to persuade them that, really, making it the half mile down the hill and around the corner to the station would be a pleasure, not a hardship. As long as I could fend off the stray dogs, I’d love that walk each day.

They seemed to be enjoying the responsibility of taking care of me. On our drive to the store in the late afternoon, Ngawang appeared a bit exasperated, though, by my stream of questions.

“What is it Mr. Phub Dorji does, since he doesn’t run Kuzoo?”

“He works in His Majesty’s secretariat.”

“But what does he do there?”

“I’m not sure, really.” I didn’t want my curiosity to be mistaken for rudeness, so I dropped the topic. I was starting to detect that short, vague answers were typical here.
“Is that marijuana growing over there?” From the window of the van, I’d spotted blankets of pot erupting on either side of the street, an occasional flower peeking through.

“It grows wild all over,” Ngawang said, in the same “visitors are so predictable” tone in which she’d decoded the phalluses. “We feed that to the pigs to make them fat.”

I hadn’t caught sight of any pigs yet, but I sure hoped there were chickens. I could live without meat, but I couldn’t live without eggs. As I searched for them in the tiny store, I wondered aloud what was bothering Kesang.

“Is everything okay?” I asked. A nervous look had come over him after he’d whisked a half-pound bag of rice out of my hands and into the basket. I hoped I hadn’t done something to offend. I wasn’t accustomed to food shopping with an entourage. Back home, my neighbor Bernie and I would embark on weekly grocery expeditions together, but we typically maintained our own carts.

“Kesang’s worried about what you’re buying, Lady Jane,” Ngawang said.

“Why?”

“You don’t have enough rice.”

“This is plenty of rice for just one person,” I said. I’d picked up rice only because the most prominent appliance in my kitchen was a rice cooker. Besides, it was becoming clear that I’d get plenty of the grain whenever I ate outside the apartment.

“Oh, that wouldn’t be enough for us,” she said. “We each eat four plates of rice a day. That bag over there”—she pointed to a twenty-five-pound satchel on the floor—“would last my family about a week.” For the exact same reason that people in the richest parts of the world chose to eat little starch, people in the poorest ate a lot of it: It filled you up. Only the wealthiest could indulge in a low-carb fest like the Atkins Diet, because they had the luxury of plentiful, lean meat to fill them up instead. That the Bhutanese smothered their unpolished, pink rice in a yak-cheesy, fiery-hot chili stew called *emadatse*, and savored it three times a day, was testament to how they’d ingeniously discovered a way to live off, indeed enjoy, a low-cost food.

“Are there any eggs here, do you think?” I asked. I kept peering under every well-stocked shelf and table, and still hadn’t found any.

“Eggs are very hard to find right now. Bird flu. No eggs coming in from India,” Ngawang said matter-of-factly. “The eggs that are around are very expensive.” The prices had shot up to the equivalent of a quarter apiece.

Oh no, I thought, as I grabbed several rolls of crepey pink toilet paper tucked beside some beer. I’d noticed with a measure of defeat that my father had been right; this bathroom essential didn’t seem to be provided in the Kuzoo restroom, or any of the places Sir Tenzin had taken me to so far. Best to carry my own.

“If we can find eggs, I’d be happy to pay for them myself,” I said, and then I immediately regretted it. I didn’t want to sound like some swaggering rich American, but I was beginning to worry a bit about the food situation. At lunchtime again today, I’d stuck a fork into a bowl of *emadatse* and thought I might die—both from the spicy heat of it and the runny processed cheese of it. Perhaps I’d fall in love with Bhutan and its people, but I was fairly certain I would never become a fan of *emadatse*. Locally grown foods, good; local cuisine, beware. I really needed an egg.

“Nuts. What about nuts?” I asked, ticking through a mental checklist of my staple foods. Then I spotted another necessity, a couple of dusty cans of tuna fish, and grabbed them, greedily, though there wasn’t another shopper in the store. The label declared Thailand. I figured I could bring that down to Kuzoo for lunch, once Sir Tenzin tired of trotting his new American volunteer/consultant around town during the midday meal.

“Nuts are also very expensive,” said Ngawang, and then walked over to a package of cashews that looked pale and crusty, like they’d been sitting around for a couple of years. They were even pricier than they’d be back home; $1.50 for what amounted to a large handful. In a country where per capita income was $3 a day, of course no one had indulged.

“Peanut butter?” I asked hopefully, and Ngawang held up a dusty yellow plastic tub of the stuff, from India, and handed it to Kesang. That would be useful. Then she displayed a loaf of white bread whose simple wrapper announced it was from Norbu Bakery in Thimphu. “You’ll need this, too. You Westerners like bread. Nobody eats this stuff here.”

“Someone must,” I protested, “if they make it.”

Ngawang’s aunt shouted to her in Dzongkha. “My aunt says the cornflakes are in the back here. She says the Westerners always love cornflakes.”

I started to say “I’m not a big cereal person,” and in truth I wasn’t a big milk fan, either, any more than I was of white bread. But then I found myself savoring the idea of nice, mushy cornflakes. Though I hadn’t had any in years, the memory of the familiar comforted me. Having a box on the shelf would probably be a good idea.

Kesang drove us back up the hill to the Rabten Apartments and carried in our purchases. Ngawang immediately began unpacking them all, and while she was organizing the kitchen, managed to turn on the hot water boiler and
“Don’t worry about the eggs,” said Ngawang, putting some rice in the cooker so I could have something to eat later on. “I’ll find you some.”

And I had a feeling that if anyone could find me anything in all of Bhutan, it was Ngawang.

Almost on cue, as soon as we’d finished our tea, Sir Tenzin arrived to take me on a promised twilight drive of the city. He’d been enjoying playing tour guide, showing me around and bragging to whomever saw us that he had an American consultant at his disposal. Since we were about the same age, I figured I wasn’t obliged to refer to Sir Tenzin as “Sir.” But I did so anyway, partly to dispel any notions that Americans were boorish, and equally, perhaps, because of his commanding and intimidating presence. Had he learned this from being a school principal, or was this innate? He was taller than most Bhutanese I’d met so far, about six foot one, and his personality filled up the room. He seemed as quick to anger as he was to laugh or smile, switching from garrulous to silent in an instant and staring into space, as if he’d tuned out you and the world around him so he might collect his thoughts. Except that his demeanor didn’t seem meditative as much as distracted.

I wondered if this had anything to do with Sir Tenzin’s affinity for doma, the Bhutanese equivalent to chewing tobacco. Doma was a curious, tacolike packet made by slathering a leaf with lime paste (not the fruit but the acidic residual of boiling limestone) and wrapping it around a small brown nut called an areca. There couldn’t possibly be any positive health benefits associated with sucking on this “delicacy.” The trio of ingredients emitted a smell worse than the stinkiest cheese. But what magnetized its users was the warming effect it reportedly had on the insides, the way it lightened the head—the same impact as a shot of whiskey, people said. Those who indulged in doma insisted the high did not impede their ability to work. They also had convinced themselves that the lime paste wasn’t eating away at their guts, even as doctors diagnosed a growing number of cases of stomach cancer and gastritis. (The spicy food was believed to be a culprit in those conditions, as well.)

On the matter of this addictive substance, there seemed to be two types of people: those who refused to touch the stuff, and those who did so with great frequency and gusto. Sir Tenzin was in the latter category. The two camps were easy to identify; the teeth and lips of doma users were stained, to various degrees, the color of blood. A light sheen of red seemed to be the mildest of the side effects. This scarlet mark did not deter doma users in the slightest; they would congregate the way cigarette smokers might outside an office building in New York, furtively rushing together for a quick hit. The king had banned the sale of tobacco products several years ago, but had he attempted to ban doma, his obedient subjects quite likely would have staged a revolt.

Doma wasn’t to blame for Sir Tenzin’s momentary pause at the first stop on our twilight drive. We were pulling up outside a little place in the center of town when he fell silent. The sign outside the shop was unlike any other I’d seen. In pretty cursive script, it announced, The Art Café. It was the first shop I’d seen that looked as if it could have been located in other parts of the world. A couple of cute tables were arranged out front, and at one of them, two young men sat talking, with big colorful mugs in their hands.

“No, no, just give me a moment, please,” he responded distractedly. I hopped out of the passenger door. After a minute, he stepped out, too, without a word. And as he approached the café, he swept down in a long, elegant bow.

“Your Majesty,” Sir Tenzin said to the two young men. They said not a word in response, simply stopped for a moment to receive the greeting, and then kept talking. Unsure what to do, I smiled lamely, curtsied, and followed Sir Tenzin into the store.

Pretty photographs of prayer flags and mountains hung on the walls of the shop, a mini-exhibit. I noticed salad advertised on the menu board, and in the corner by a woodstove sat the first other non-Bhutanese I’d encountered, two women chatting away in German. From a small selection of fresh baked goods, we ordered a couple of cupcakes to go. Sir Tenzin asked for a bottle of Coca-Cola. I was dying to know who those two guys were, but I knew I shouldn’t ask until we were alone.

Back in the car, under my questioning, Sir Tenzin explained that one of the men was a prince, the younger brother of His Majesty the king. After spotting him, Sir Tenzin had paused to prepare himself to give a suitably formal greeting. It was clear he didn’t want to talk about this encounter very much; he was far more interested in talking about his plans for Kuzoo.

The car radio was tuned to the station. RJ Ngawang introduced a song by Akon, the Senegalese-American hip-hop sensation. It was probably the dozenth time I’d heard “Don’t Matter” in the few days I’d been in Bhutan.

“Terrible pronunciation,” said Sir Tenzin, shaking his head. He had just a bit of a British lilt in his voice, acquired during his days at a Jesuit school in India.

“Akon, or the radio jockey?” I hadn’t exactly expected Kuzoo, in the hands of the first generation of Bhutanese to
grow up with television, to be playing a bunch of traditional Bhutanese music and public-service programs, but I was a bit surprised by just how much pop music from my side of the world cascaded over the Kuzoo air. Because of the cost of production, there was little in the way of modern recorded Bhutanese music. Music from neighboring India and Nepal was banned from the airwaves, though it wasn’t clear whether that was an official edict issued from on high or a decision made by the radio jockeys themselves.

He laughed. “That radio jockey. All of them. They mumble a lot. That girl in particular. They get nervous.”

“We all do,” I said. “I can help you with that, sir.”

Sir Tenzin’s car chugged up a winding road that promised a sweeping view of Thimphu Valley, and led to the broadcast transmission towers for both the Bhutan Broadcasting Service and Kuzoo. The city was cast now in a twilight golden hue, the same light we’d have this time of day in Los Angeles. The insistent longing of Akon was a discordant sound track for this magnificent vista, as discordant as the presence of this city in such an otherwise starkly undeveloped country. From up here, the sprawl of the growing capital was evident. Buildings in various stages of construction emerged in the embryonic skyline, pushing the boundaries of Thimphu farther out from the center—a sure sign development had come to this place where electricity hadn’t flowed until a quarter century ago.

Off to the left, the majestic structure known as a dzong gleamed in the light from the setting sun. Each district had a dzong that served as central administration for government and clergy; this particular one in Thimphu was called “the fortress of glorious religion.” A golf course wrapped around the grounds, and I asked Sir Tenzin how Bhutan came to feature a game associated with rich people, and which was considered an environmental blight.

“The third king loved to play golf.” Sir Tenzin smiled, as if that was all there was to say about the matter. “It’s not my game, though. I haven’t got time for sports.”

He pointed to the spot straight ahead, way across the valley, where land had been cleared for the construction of what was to be one of world’s largest statues of Buddha—170 feet tall. A band of light shone down on the area where the giant Buddha would eventually sit, almost like a spotlight. I squinted to be sure I wasn’t imagining the gleam.

“One day, maybe in my lifetime, Thimphu will have a skyscraper,” said Sir Tenzin, and he laughed at his own suggestion, for it seemed so impossible. Buildings were forbidden from reaching higher than six stories, for reasons both practical and aesthetic; nothing could tower over a region’s dzong, for one thing. For another, modern conveniences that made taller buildings possible, like elevators and escalators, were costly uses of power. Regardless of their size or function, all structures were mandated to be built in traditional Bhutanese style; even the most recently constructed buildings—like the airport terminal—were fringed with ornate, colorful woodwork and sloping roofs. This ensured a fleet of artisans work, and at the same time flaunted the national heritage.

“This is the fastest-growing capital in Asia, after all. I still can’t quite believe how big we’ve become in just the last few years.” Sir Tenzin waved his hand at all the construction.

“Imagine the Kuzoo studio in a glass building. Topped with the traditional Bhutanese structure, of course.” He laughed again.

Even from high above the city, I could see how unlikely a proposition this was. The thought of modern buildings popping up high above the traditional ones, disturbing the order of the cityscape, was unsettling. Yet if Akon and Christina Aguilera could dominate the airwaves—if cupcakes were being baked and Coca-Cola swigged and a person like me had been allowed in—anything was possible. Just as Bhutan was undergoing a cultural invasion that threatened to erode its unique foundation, its capital city might someday, not very long from now, look like any other.

Watching Bhutan change over time would be like watching a baby grow, I thought. I already felt a little maternal and protective of this unusual country, worried for its future.

Sir Tenzin continued. “You know, I wanted Kuzoo FM 90 to be Kuzoo 108,” he said. The number 108 was sacred in Buddhism. It was the number of volumes in the Kanjur, the Buddhist scripture. Sir Tenzin’s innate prowess for marketing was admirable, given that he was trained as an educator and raised in a country whose very foundation was anti-materialistic. “The Ministry of Information and Communication wouldn’t let me have it, though. The planes use the frequency 107 to communicate. Too close on the dial, too much chance for interference.”

He shook his head, then looked out the windshield. “I love the BBS logo,” he declared, crumbling bits of his cupcake into his hand so as not to lose a single bite. “The conch shell.” He motioned toward the sign near the transmission tower. Little squiggles denoting “transmission” radiated from the sides of the shell. It was at once cute and elegant.

“How did that get to be the symbol of the broadcaster?” A conch shell seemed a peculiar icon for a landlocked country.

“The conch is one of Buddhism’s eight lucky signs. It is believed to awaken sentient beings from their sleep, their state of ignorance,” Sir Tenzin said, licking his fingers. “Also, back in the villages, the conch was how people used
to make announcements.”

“Before BBS, and then Kuzoo, of course.”

“Yes.” Sir Tenzin smiled and washed down his last bite of cupcake with a swig of soda. A combination of the sweets and the excitement of his new mission gave Sir Tenzin’s face a look of contentment. It was clear he believed he had the best job in the world.
If you walked into any village in all of Bhutan and shouted “Karma,” a quarter of the heads would turn. There are only about fifty names in the whole country. A monk blessed a baby with a duo of them shortly after birth. There are no familial surnames, and most names are unisex. So it is entirely possible that a family could be made up of a mother named Karma Wangdi and a father named Karma Lhamo, a child named Karma Choden, and another named Lhamo Wangdi. It is only in the last quarter century that birth certificates have been kept; many Bhutanese older than that don’t know their exact date or even year of birth, another reminder that even today in the bustling city of Thimphu, a simple, rural life isn’t so far away. As Bhutan becomes more modern, some of the more daring Bhutanese parents break tradition in order to distinguish themselves, altering the spelling of familiar names or abbreviating them. Or by forgoing the monk and choosing the names themselves.

Tsheten Denkar was the monk-given moniker of the Kuzoo radio jockey who’d since adopted a sexier handle: Pink. Her new name had its roots in her work as a DJ in Thimphu’s blossoming party scene. Even as she juggled her ever-changing shifts at the station, she continued to work the booth at Club Destiny on party nights: Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday. Her long hair was permed and highlighted with streaks of brown and blond, her lips perennially glossed and pouty. Pink had carefully crafted her image as a Bhutanese disco kitten. The name was an invisible but key part of her transformation into a sensation in the club and on the air.

Off air and out of the nightclub, things were not going well for the twenty-five-year-old woman formerly known as Tsheten. After seven years, her marriage was unraveling. Marriage had long been a very casual institution in Bhutan; a couple declared themselves married when they started living together, and unmarried when they stopped. Now, the ways of the West were imposing on this tradition. More elaborate ceremonies were becoming common, as were more acrimonious, complicated divorces. Pink’s situation was so strained that her mother had sent for the family’s monk for guidance.

The family was also facing another life-changing issue they wanted the monk to address. Pink’s sister, Tshering, had prayed and prayed she’d get a job as a flight attendant on Emirates airline. Her fervent appeal had worked. Like Pink, Tshering had one leg in the modern world. But only one. Like many single Bhutanese women, she still slept in the same bed with her mother at their shared apartment. Now she would be moving to Dubai and flying to exotic ports heretofore accessible only in her dreams. No more tediousness of going back and forth, day in and day out, serving on the only flight the Bhutanese airline ran daily: Bangkok to Paro. Paro to Bangkok. As an exotic and costly tourist destination that attracts the famous as well as the rich, Bhutan ensured the staff of Druk Air the occasional celebrity sighting—Matt Damon, Orlando Bloom, Bette Midler, and Demi Moore had been among the recent stars to visit. Better still was the honor of serving members of the royal family who might happen to be on board. Relocating to another country and going to work for a foreign airline would expand Tshering’s world, and the idea of living away from family for a while was alluring—even if to do so for anything other than education was considered by many to be very un-Bhutanese. The pay would be exponentially better than what she earned now, more than enough to allow her to save money, which would never be possible at home.

The monk determined that both sisters needed to be cleansed so they could proceed. A series of pujas was in order to ready them for the immediate futures they faced. He’d be in town for several weeks to accomplish his plan. Pujas are special prayers performed by holy men to give additional heft to a message you want to transmit to the gods. These holy men have the expertise and wisdom—the divination—to know which gods need to be sought out, which chants are necessary to best help remove whatever obstacles are in the way.

The intensity and length of the puja—how many monks are needed, and for how many days—depends on the
the robes, he looked like a hipster thirty-year-old, with spiky black hair and a confident strut—a guy from town

helping them with simple problems like English pronunciations, and answering questions about my life back in the

It was my second week in the office, and I'd been spending my days talking to staff,

Rinpoche, which means "precious one," and most with that name are recognized as reincarnations of lamas. They're
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Others come from the outlying areas to stock up on supplies.

delivering the message that spoke to me, a decidedly lapsed Catholic.

What you possessed and achieved wasn't what was important. These were the principles I’d learned in happiness

interconnectedness of everyone. The ideals of wisdom and knowledge. Self-reliance. Acceptance and forgiveness.

Animals cannot be slaughtered during certain holy months, but it’s acceptable to purchase and stockpile meat in

advances to consume during that time. If meat is consumed, it is preferable to choose cow over chicken, for chickens

bad karma from killing is lessened when more people benefit.

You might also carry printed prayers in your pocket or your purse, for extra protection.

advises against travel, but there’s no way around making the trip, you pack your suitcase early and leave it outside

accumulate merit. Circle on this auspicious day, and your merit will be doubled. If your family’s monk or astrologer

Cultural, Bhutan-style Buddhism is ubiquitous, embedded in daily life. There is absolutely no separation of

church and state in Bhutan; the lower half of the country’s flag is orange to represent the religion. The government

funds many of the monasteries, and each district’s administrative seat, the dzong, also houses monks.

Virtually every home features an altar, housed in a room of its own if space allows. A step at the bottom of every
doorway trips up unwelcome spirits. Old men and women walk the streets spinning handheld prayer wheels, lost in

the murmur of their chants. Even television programming is infused with the religion; every morning at 6:00 a.m.,
the Bhutan Broadcasting Service kicks off its day with prayers chanted against a backdrop of scenic video clips of

the country’s spectacular landscape.

New construction—schools, residences, a government-sponsored park— isn’t inhabited or put to use until it is

consecrated by monks. Religious holidays, such as the First Sermon of Lord Buddha or the Birth of Guru Rinpoche,
dot the official calendar. Specially trained monastic astrologers are consulted about virtually every aspect of life—

illness, marriage, trouble that befalls a family, major decisions.

Draped across the landscape of Bhutan are endless ribbons of color, bright prayer flags hoisted as protection

against certain gods, to coax others forward, and to repel bad spirits. These fluttering squares, in various states of

fade and tatter, are almost as plentiful as the trees the king has enacted laws to protect. They’re hung in places that

seem impossible for a human to reach; it’s believed that the closer they’re raised to the heavens, the more effective

they will be. The flags fly until they disintegrate, which can take years. Their tattered remnants are lingering

reminders of the human call to a higher power—and of how this religion pervades the very air.

To the uninitiated, the rules and rituals associated with Buddhism as practiced in Bhutan might seem absurd—
elaborate and colorful and rife with inexplicable superstition. Circle a religious structure three times clockwise to
accumulate merit. Circle on this auspicious day, and your merit will be doubled. If your family’s monk or astrologer
advises against travel, but there’s no way around making the trip, you pack your suitcase early and leave it outside
the door to trick the spirits. You might also carry printed prayers in your pocket or your purse, for extra protection.

Animals cannot be slaughtered during certain holy months, but it’s acceptable to purchase and stockpile meat in
advance to consume during that time. If meat is consumed, it is preferable to choose cow over chicken, for chickens
feed fewer people, and the bad karma from killing is lessened when more people benefit.

Most compelling to me were the underlying principles of the religion: Compassion for all beings, and the
interconnectedness of everyone. The ideals of wisdom and knowledge. Self-reliance. Acceptance and forgiveness.
What you possessed and achieved wasn’t what was important. These were the principles I’d learned in happiness
class, writ large. Most religions espoused similar values, but there was something about the Buddhist approach to
delivering the message that spoke to me, a decidedly lapsed Catholic.

The holy men and women roaming the streets of Bhutan’s capital city reinforce the messages of the faith. They
wear burgundy robes and sport close-cropped hair; they usually travel in clusters. Some live in the monasteries or
the sole nunnery in the hills above the city. Others come from the outlying areas to stock up on supplies.

While monks are as common as birds, a special kind of monk always commands particular attention and respect: a
Rinpoche, which means “precious one,” and most with that name are recognized as reincarnations of lamas. They’re
distinguished by a ribbon of gold fabric worn around their burgundy robes.

So it created quite a stir when the Rinpoche who’d traveled to Thimphu to attend to Pink and Tshering walked
into the offices of Kuzoo FM. It was my second week in the office, and I’d been spending my days talking to staff,
helping them with simple problems like English pronunciations, and answering questions about my life back in the
United States. Rinpoche held himself like a man who had been told from an early age that he was special. But for
the robes, he looked like a hipster thirty-year-old, with spiky black hair and a confident strut—a guy from town
stopping in to guest host a show, or say hi to his friends.

When I spotted him in the hallway outside the Kuzoo workroom and studio, I waved hello, then immediately hoped I hadn’t offended him with my casual gesture. But he waved back, sweetly, undisturbed, as I was obviously an outsider and not schooled in monastic protocol. Beside him was a dumpling of a lady who, judging by her features, had to be Pink’s mother. She beamed proudly, delighted to be seen in the company of someone so holy.

The arrival of a person of seniority typically compels Bhutanese to rise and politely but cursorily bow their heads and say, “Kuzu zampo-la, sir.” But when the gold-fringed Rinpoche stepped into the room, the young Kuzoo FM staff immediately stopped what they were doing, rose, and approached him, single file, heads bowed. Mechanically he reached inside his robes, produced a handful of thin silk cords, and placed them on each head that paraded by, every gesture accented with a little hum of a prayer. It was a simple blessing, as reflexive as genuflecting and crossing before you entered a church pew.

After receiving the blessing, the staff returned to their seats and proceeded to continue whatever they were doing, appearing now completely unaffected. I was rapt. I couldn’t take my eyes off Rinpoche. He must have felt my stare, as he soon motioned in my direction, while he addressed Pink in Dzongkha.

“Oh, that’s Lady Jane, from California and New York,” she told him in English. People seemed more familiar with my home state than my adopted one, so I’d started answering the question “Where are you from?” with a dual response.

“New York,” said Rinpoche. “That is a great country.” He paused, as if he was imagining the distance. “My father went to New York once.… Come here.”

I accepted the summons and rose from my chair. As he’d done with the others, he adorned me with the red silk cord. Mimicking the other Kuzooers, I bowed my head, low. But I’d failed to notice the second half of the ritual—pulling the cord forward and tying it around my neck. Rinpoche laughed kindly as Pink intervened, completing the task.

With barely a move of his arm, Rinpoche then pulled a three-foot fringed white silk scarf from inside his robes and threw it around my neck with a nearly invisible flick of the wrist. A standard greeting for an honored guest. He looked toward Pink and murmured in his native tongue.

“He says that’s because you did many good deeds in a former life,” Pink translated.

I smoothed out my hair from under the red silk blessing cord and adjusted my scarf. I found myself considering the idea of past lives: I liked this notion that it wasn’t only cats who got nine chances. That whatever goodness we might accumulate in one lifetime would influence where we went in the next. But what about the bad things we’d done? Was it possible to transcend them? Were our next lives determined by a median average of this life’s actions? Maybe in my next life I’d have a talent for speaking other languages, or a gift for playing guitar. Maybe, in the next life, I would get it right: enter a profession where I did some good for humanity—become a teacher or a scientist or a social worker. Or fall in love with a wonderful man and be a full-time best-mother-in-the-world to our many adopted children. Dangling in this fleeting daydream about the laments of the past and unknowable future, something occurred to me: This life right now, as a forty-three-year-old woman from Brooklyn, New York, who had moved to Los Angeles for a job in public radio, who was temporarily residing in a remote kingdom in the Himalayas, with all the strange, wondrous, and sometimes awful chapters that had led me here, was pretty okay. With each passing day, a little more than okay.

I sat on a rickety chair right next to Rinpoche, hoping that a little of his spectral radiance might wash over me.

Sir Tenzin entered the room and the staff rose to greet him, as if they were addressing the teacher in grade school.

“Hello, sir.” Sir Tenzin didn’t respond, but started speaking to Rinpoche in Dzongkha, as if he’d been expecting him to be there.

Rinpoche didn’t engage in formalities, either. “I need some rice,” he said in English.

Sir Tenzin rushed back out as quickly as he’d rushed in. In moments he returned with a small bowl of uncooked grains, from which sprouted four sticks of incense. Sir Tenzin presented this offering, formally, with both hands. Rinpoche accepted it and rose. He walked to the other side of the room, lit the incense, and sat down near the transmitter that beamed Kuzoo’s signal out to Thimphu Valley, the technical heart of the station.

Some of the Kuzooers who’d been glued to their desks now stood. A few others remained seated but turned away from their computers to watch. Pink’s mother giggled a bit, like a teenager, her cheeks flushed red. Sir Tenzin stood proudly next to Rinpoche, who closed his eyes and began to chant, presumably for the station’s well-being and success. It was a murmuring hum; it sounded like a longer version of the blessing that accompanied the cord. The incense burned bright and strong, wafting around the room with its powerful, earthy smell. Every few measures, Rinpoche would toss a few grains of rice in one direction, then the next, as if to scatter his prayers evenly around the room.

Though I didn’t understand the words, I felt moved by the ritual, by the power of Rinpoche.
The prayers continued for about fifteen minutes. A few of the Kuzooers impatiently stroked their keyboards, eager to get back to work. The station phone rang, and Pema scurried over to answer it in a whisper, lest it keep bleating in interruption. At last Rinpoche gave a final bow, indicating he was through. Grains of rice were strewn across the tattered burgundy floor covering. I had just witnessed my first puja.

As everyone resumed their positions at their keyboards and settled back into work, Rinpoche crossed the room and addressed me solemnly.

"Is everything okay?" he asked in perfect English.

What do you say to a holy man when he asks you that question? Did he want a real answer, or was this the Bhutanese equivalent of the empty American query “How are you?” Could he tell I’d been struggling? Someone with the spiritual powers of a reincarnated lama could likely feel from a distance that I’d had a disastrous few years. I didn’t know what to say. We were in a cramped room, surrounded by young people I was supposed to be teaching. How much did I want them to know about me?

To answer Rinpoche honestly, I mustered up something to the effect that I was okay, yes, but “searching.” I’d never used that word before—I thought it vague and pretentious—but now it felt honest. What exactly I was searching for I couldn’t quite say. A plan for the future? Cleansing? Peace?

For a moment it wasn’t clear if Rinpoche had understood me. Then he called out for a piece of paper and a pen. “Call me if you’d like to talk more,” he said. And slowly and deliberately, he scribbled down his cell phone number. In case I forgot whose number it was, he added above it in block letters: RINPOCHE.

Later that afternoon, Kuzoo still basked in the glow of the blessing. Pema and I sat in front of our respective computers researching information for a new show that would begin that night. It was to be called The Doctor Is In. Sir Tenzin had run into one of Bhutan’s two psychiatrists the day before and, visions of CNN in his eyes, had corralled him into visiting the Kuzoo studios to cohost a weekly call-in show.

“We can be like King Larry,” Sir Tenzin said brightly.

Or rather, Pema could be. Because she was so diligent and productive and interested in being all over the airwaves, I’d taken to calling her Oprah, even though she couldn’t have been more physically opposite than the superstar. Pema stood no more than five feet tall and weighed perhaps ninety pounds. Her cheeks were freckled like a midwestern farm girl’s, and her long hair hung down past her shoulders with a slight wave. She frequently fiddled it all into a bun as she stared at the computer. Maven of popular culture that she was, she didn’t have to ask who I was referring to. Early yesterday morning, I’d caught her surfing the Neiman Marcus Web site for Burberry pocketbooks. Even the tiniest cost triple her monthly salary.

“Where did you learn about Burberry, much less Neiman Marcus?”

Pema turned in her chair and looked at me as if I were a clueless idiot.

“Sex and the City,” she said. “A friend brought the DVD from India.” She didn’t believe I’d seen the show only once; she seemed to assume that on the series’ native soil, each home would be blessed with a continuous feed of episodes.

In a country where many preferred to be treated with the holistic and spiritual tradition of Bhutanese medicine, psychiatry was an alien concept. Bhutan was still a place where people actually talked to their families and friends about the trials and tribulations of daily life, and trusted that whatever haunted them would somehow work itself out. Saddled by worries or problems, they’d deploy the monks and Rinpoches. Radio was the perfect medium for the psychiatrist to make his services known—to explain how therapy worked and what kinds of issues it addressed. As was the case with all health care in Bhutan, traditional and Western, visits to doctors were free.

“Let’s see,” said Pema, orderly and matter-of-fact. She’d already chosen the theme music for the show, Michael Jackson’s “Heal the World.” (Presumably for the title, and not because she saw the pop singer as a paragon of mental health.) Now she was plundering the Web for background information to explain the first topic Dr. Chencho wanted to address: anxiety.

“This says there are five main types of anxiety disorders.” She was reading from the Web site of the National Institute of Mental Health, the first thing to come up on her Google search. “Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, Panic Disorder, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and Social Phobia.”

None of these seemed to be an affliction with which Pema could have been personally familiar. She was magnificently confident, the type of confidence that could edge into bossiness.

“Do you know what any of that means?” I asked.

“Yes, it spells it out right here,” snipped Pema, who I feared would read on the air the whole list and their descriptions word for word.

Across the room, Pink sat absorbed in a musical otherworld, headphones pressing down on her long wavy hair,
scanning tunes for her next show. This didn’t keep her from hearing her cell phone chirping, a special ringtone I’d not heard it play before. She answered, then walked over to me.

“It’s for you,” she said, as if I got calls on her number all the time. I took the phone, surprised.

“Hello?” I said.

“Let’s have dinner tonight.” The gravelly, accented English of Rinpoche was commanding. “Pink will bring you to my hotel.”

The prospect of a private audience with this monk intrigued me. Maybe he’d had a vision he wanted to share that could shape my future. I wasn’t sure I even believed in the idea of a vision, or even of healing prayer. I had no idea what I would ask or say or expect. But I figured you should never refuse the attention of a holy man—especially when he calls you.

From the backseat of Pink’s little car, I witnessed dusk sweeping over the skies. Ngawang had also come along for the ride. I liked these two women so much, even though I didn’t really know them yet. The streets of Thimphu began to bustle as day turned into night, filled with life. Shops were full, and business was particularly brisk at the snooker parlor, where players wagered on their games, eagerly leaning across crowded tables. As we navigated the streets on our way to meet the mystic, I allowed myself a moment of pride for my adventurousness. When I was about the age of my companions, something happened to me that could have convinced me never to venture out again. When I stopped to consider what had happened, it astonished me how far I’d come.

I

IN THE SUMMER of 1981, when I was seventeen years old, a chance discussion with a friend on a subway platform tipped me off to the existence of a brand-new cable channel called CNN. The outfit was new and so small-time that simply by making a bold phone call to the number listed in information, I landed myself an internship at the New York bureau. That led to another, and another, and finally, when I got out of college, it was by default the place where I sought full-time employment.

For the princely salary of $11,000 a year, I moved to Atlanta to work at the network’s world headquarters. I’d never been to the city, so I relocated there sight unseen, as there wasn’t time or money enough in the fledgling network’s budget, or mine, to first check the place out. Back in its early days, CNN didn’t wield enormous influence on the world stage as it does today; then it was disparagingly referred to as Chicken Noodle News.

Most everyone at work turned out to be just like me—young, ambitious, from somewhere else, not long out of school. Our jobs and hours were constantly changing, but in spite of the flux, we cobbled together the kind of accelerated support system that develops when you’re in an intense and demanding situation. Drinking beer at eight in the morning, after slogging through exhaustion on the overnight shift—both are excellent bonding rituals.

One June night, about a year after I’d started working there, I returned home from a birthday party for my friend Michael. It was after 1:00 a.m., quite late, considering that I had to report to work at 8:00 a.m. for the day shift. Just a few weeks prior, I’d moved across the building’s courtyard to my very first apartment without a roommate. The place wasn’t fancy in any way, but it was all mine—a sweet little studio with a claw-foot tub and French doors that separated the living area from where I slept. It was cheap and close to work, even if the neighborhood was a bit so-so.

The landlord had yet to unstick the windows, which had been painted just before I moved in, so they were stuck open a few inches. My several attempts to push them down failed, but it was hot enough that I hadn’t called again to complain. Those cracks kept me from suffocating in the oppressive summer heat, as a window-unit air conditioner was beyond my means.

Exhausted from a long night, I stripped off my clothes, collapsed naked onto the futon on the floor, tucked my eyeglasses underneath the edge, pulled up the top sheet, and fell right to sleep.

I’ve never been able to calculate what time it was when I was wakened by a loud thud. At first I was certain the noise was from a picture falling off the wall. I’d hung a framed poster of chili peppers in the kitchen and it had fallen in the middle of the night the week before, too. I hadn’t quite gotten the hook in the wall right. So I shifted my position on the futon and figured I’d rehang it in the morning. Then I heard another noise.

In that instant, I became aware of movement across the room. It sounded like a window being forced open. No, that couldn’t be. Blind as a bat, I fumbled in the pitch dark under the futon to excavate my eyeglasses so I could confirm that this was my imagination at work. Where had I put those specs? No way, that couldn’t be a person. My heart and stomach felt it before my head accepted the fact. An intruder had entered the room and was now headed toward me.

A scream emerged from my throat, so loud, just a pure scream, no words, no “help me.” The paralysis of terror took hold. As I write this, I can feel the wave of adrenaline rushing through me, hear that sound I made so long ago. It was more of a reflex, a reaction, than a cry for help. A hand locked over my mouth to silence me. I felt a pointed
object against my neck, and the man reinforced this action with words.

“Shut up,” he said firmly, quietly, “or I’ll kill you.”

Even if I’d been bold enough to defy him, I didn’t have the capacity to continue making any sound. My nakedness, my impaired sight, the fear that I might die all combined to render me silent, terrified, incapable of movement.

I wished I could be dead, that this man would kill me, so I wouldn’t have to live with this memory. The only act of self-preservation I could muster, as he raped me, was to beg him not to ejaculate inside me. To please not make me pregnant. There was no retribution for my daring to speak; he complied with my request. When he was done, he apologized. As he pulled up his pants and zipped them, he said he was sorry we had to meet this way, sorry if he hurt me, hopeful we might see each other again.

Then he left through the front door, as if he’d been an invited guest.

WITHIN A YEAR I’d accepted a position at a television station in central North Carolina. Moving to work in local news in a midsize market wasn’t exactly the career trajectory I’d intended. Yet a smaller city, a new city, a city that didn’t remind me of that night—all seemed like a good idea. My new job involved producing the eleven o’clock nightly newscast, which meant leaving the studio at just after 11:30 p.m. for the drive home. Perhaps it would kick-start me into making peace with the dark.

It was easy to walk to the parking lot with my coworkers, without seeming needy or explaining why I didn’t want to go outside at night by myself. But at midnight as I pulled into the parking space at my apartment building, the stillness, facing the quiet of the night on my own, would make me sweat. I’d dart out of the car, heart beating fast as I sprinted inside. Once I got safely inside, I’d turn on every single light and keep them burning until dawn, as if electricity would shield me. I’d rationalize: Wasn’t there a zone of protection offered from above to people who had been through a trauma? Just one trauma per person per lifetime, right? I couldn’t fully convince myself that this was the case.

As the months passed, I continued on with my double life. Most people around me saw a confident young woman, even if they couldn’t understand why I’d left a national network—CNN was starting to gain notoriety, by now—to work in this small city in North Carolina. One weekend night, I needed milk from the grocery store. I grabbed the keys, ran down the steps, and got into the car. On the quiet road that connected my street with the one leading to the shopping center, I stopped for a traffic light. At that instant, the magnitude of this simple act occurred to me: I did it! I left the house! It’s dark out, and I left the house! When the light turned green, I was so happy that I was crying. In the aisles of the grocery store, I didn’t even try to conceal my tears. I was reclaiming my life, my confidence, that feeling of normal we take for granted before the unexpected turns us inside out. That night before bed, I gleefully switched off every light in my apartment. I fastened the chain locks, but didn’t stick chairs under the doors. As I eased into sleep, I breathed steadily, softly: Now I could get back to life.

And twenty-two years later, here I was in a car in Thimphu on the way to meet a holy man, the Rinpoche. And in some strange way it is because of that night, not despite it, that I could be here.

Pink navigated into the rocky parking area, stopped the car, and we emerged into the darkness of the winter evening.
didn’t know what to say. Now that we were here, I didn’t want to tell him anything. Whatever mystical air Rinpoche had around him, whatever I had hoped he might imbue me with or chase away, the mood was broken by his demeanor, the surroundings, this sad little room. That finger-snapping incident revealed him as a boor, not the paragon of kindness, compassion, and understanding I’d imagined a monk would be.

Here we were, though, across from each other, his expectation building. I spoke, but not as openly as I had planned.

“It’s a very difficult time for me. I feel like everything is up in the air, in transition. Like I’m in transition.”

Rinpoche spoke in Dzongkha, and Ngawang interpreted.

“He says it is clear you have many obstacles facing you back home,” she said. “Particularly in your work. There is someone there who is working against you. You cannot move forward with the current situation.”

“Okay,” I said. What he was saying was true. My job and the nature of the industry were wearing on my soul; several coworkers were obstacles, too, and the on-again, off-again overnight hours were physically exhausting. But those weren’t the problems. Time hadn’t healed all wounds, but it had smoothed them out a bit. It was up to me to do what I’d done all along, just keep moving forward and being open, aware. Kind.

The only thing holding me back was me.

I had answered the call of this holy man, seeking salvation, explanation, or a road map for my life. But as I looked into his eyes, I saw a clear message. Even if it wasn’t the one he was trying to convey. He wasn’t the answer. He didn’t have the answers. Ngawang broke the silence. “He says right now there’s a puja taking place in Sikkim where there are many monks.”

The Indian state of Sikkim was hours away. Could a puja be conducted remotely? When you needed to be cleansed, didn’t the monks come to you—pray and chant in your presence? Or was it simply enough to trust in their power?

Ngawang’s voice was tinged with skepticism as she obediently filtered Rinpoche’s words.

“He says the intensity of your obstacles requires that you hire seven monks and a lama for three days. You will also have to pay for their meals.” She glanced down at her cell phone, which was buzzing with a text message.

Rinpoche scolded her in Dzongkha.

“That sounds pretty expensive,” I said. “How much?”

“He says it will be three hundred ngultrum a monk each day, plus eight hundred for the lama.” Ngawang seemed to possess a great faculty for numbers, especially when it involved currency conversion. She stopped to calculate, and to glance at Pink. Both girls looked surprised. “Eight thousand seven hundred ngultrum.”

I’d just cashed $150 worth of traveler’s checks at the Bank of Bhutan in the center of town and had received 6,500 ngultrum. Pink and Ngawang each earned just 5,000 ngultrum every month for the long, erratic hours they logged at Kuzoo. Sir Tenzin counted it out in cash to each employee on the first of the month.

Eighty-seven hundred ngultrum was a lot by any standard, even for salvation. What would this puja cost if I were Bhutanese? I wondered.

The girls seemed keyed into this—embarrassed, even. Just because Rinpoche smelled a rich American didn’t mean they did. I was their coworker, their friend.

“You can think about it,” said Pink sweetly.

“Well, I don’t really have to think about it. That’s quite expensive.”

Rinpoche chattered a response in Dzongkha. Ngawang relayed, “He says if you pay a hundred dollars, that will be okay.” Her smile told me she was on to the extortionate monk.

For a split second, I worried this Rinpoche might pray to the wrong deities if I refused. Make my obstacles more intense. Then I remembered that I didn’t believe in spells. Superstitions weren’t the parts of this religion that made sense to me. What I’d been discovering, ever since that happiness class back home, about self-awareness, self-reliance, and compassion did.

I looked straight into Rinpoche’s eyes, and smiled. “Thank you very much for the consultation.” I said politely. “But I’d like to offer you something for your time and just go have dinner now.”

Eyes wide, Rinpoche spat out some words in disgust.

“He says he is not a businessman,” Ngawang said, looking up from her cell phone as if to punctuate Rinpoche’s displeasure. “He doesn’t want any money.”

The air in the seedy hotel room was thick and tense. I wanted to leave, but out of respect for my friends, I decided to swallow my frustration. I rose tentatively, afraid of seeming too abrupt, and the girls got up, too. Rinpoche collected his cell phone, a sleek Motorola RAZR like the one I had back home. He commanded us to wait for him outside.

At the noodle shop just behind the sole movie theater, in the center of town, Rinpoche slurped at his soup while watching cartoons on the television that bleated in the corner of the restaurant. Like an insolent little boy ignoring
the grown-ups at the table, he fiddled with his cell phone. I made small talk with the girls. And when I asked the
waitress for the check, Rinpoche waved his hand at me dismissively.

“You pay next time,” he said clearly in English, and reached into his robes for his wallet.

A week later, Ngawang and I snuck out of the station before the afternoon hip-hop show that she hosted to visit her
older sister, a doctor, at the hospital. The biggest workplace problem in Thimphu wasn’t yet that people surfed the
Net instead of doing their jobs. There weren’t enough computers, and online access wasn’t reliable enough for that
to be an issue. What chomped into the meat of the workday was the inevitable, interminable family visit. All day,
every day, mothers, sisters, cousins, and boyfriends would just stream into offices, schools, and shops to say hello,
drop off lunch, have a cup of tea, or just hang out. Because of this, I had met more family members of coworkers in
Bhutan in a few weeks than I had in three years of working with the crew in Los Angeles.

The fact that one of Ngawang’s sisters was practicing medicine didn’t mean she was off-limits. Someone would
bring us tea in the examining room while she was seeing patients, Ngawang assured me. She did it all the time.
There wasn’t a sense of modesty or privacy in Bhutan; everything was communal. And there certainly weren’t any
doctor-patient confidentiality laws.

About three quarters of the way to the hospital, we came to the National Memorial Chorten, at the confluence of
the upper road and one leading into town. Every day, hundreds of people flocked here, from dawn till well after
dark, to circumambulate this enormous and sacred religious structure—a form of walking prayer that accumulates
merit with the gods. Ngawang guided me clockwise around it the requisite three times. Sometimes, she said, she
prays simply because she knows it will make her father feel better.

“I don’t believe in it,” she said. “These things are just part of who we are. It’s just what we do. My father asks me
to pray to the god of the night, so I do. He believes that the soul leaves the body when you sleep, and if you don’t
pray, it might not return.” She paused as we made our way around for the third circle. “That’s what happened to my
mother.”

I grasped Ngawang’s arm.

“Do you miss your mother, Lady Jane?” Ngawang asked.

The screen saver on my laptop was set to a smiling and gorgeous thirty-year-old image of my mother that my
father had dug up and digitized not long ago. Ngawang loved learning that “Jane,” my middle name, was also the
name of the lady in the photo, the woman who had given birth to me. The original Jane, I told her. Of her mother,
she had just one tiny black-and-white shot, only an inch square—smaller than a passport snapshot. Twenty years ago
in Bhutan, photographs had been as unusual, and as dear, as electricity and telephone service. The young woman in
the picture looked identical to Ngawang. There wasn’t any money in her wallet, just her national ID card and this
memento.

“She is the same age in this picture as I am now,” she said.

I could feel my heart tweak for how much she missed the woman she never got to know.

“I do miss my mother,” I said as we made our third round, surrounded by other worshippers. “But I haven’t seen
her in a long while. I can see her only a couple of times a year.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, she lives three thousand miles away from where I do.”

“You don’t live with her?” Ngawang sounded very surprised. Though the Bhutanese knew from the movies that
many Westerners didn’t live with their families, it still surprised them to meet someone in person who was a case
study in this curious way of life.

“No, I don’t. I haven’t lived with my family since I was sixteen years old.”

I explained that in the United States, kids often couldn’t wait to leave home, and I realized how foolish and sad
that must have sounded. Especially to someone who had lost her beloved mother so young.

“You must get very lonely,” Ngawang said. “If you ever get lonely here, you call me and I’ll come stay with you,
okay? I’ll keep you company, my sweet Lady Jane.”

I promised I would, even though it would be impossible for me to convey what a triumph it was that I could not
only stay alone but actually enjoy it. The god of the night could have captured my soul, but he lost.

Ngawang pointed out a shop I hadn’t noticed before, tucked off the street across from the chorten. It was one of
the few shops on the upper road, and one of the only places in Thimphu where you could find fresh baked goods—
like the ovens they were baked in, a luxury in Bhutan. We darted across the traffic and made our way into the shop
to get a snack. A nice-looking cookie for me. An enormous bear claw for Ngawang.

And so, two new friends chomped on sweets. It felt like the right time to ask the question I’d wanted to ask for
days now.
“What did you think of that Rinpoche, Ngawang?”
“He was really handsome, wasn’t he?” Ngawang said, perking up as if she had a crush.
“Handsome? He’s a monk!”
“Some monks can marry, though.” Ngawang smiled, and stuck another piece of pastry into her mouth.
“Well, I hope you don’t marry that monk. Do you think I made a mistake by not letting him do the puja for me?”
“No way,” she said, wiping powdered sugar from her mouth with the back of her hand. “You did the right thing. That didn’t seem right, what he was asking.” She took another bite, and some crumbs fell to the floor. Her phone trilled after being silent for a long while. The James Bond theme song, which meant her father was calling. “You know. You can’t trust all the monks just because they’re monks.”
A CITY IS AT ITS BEST, ITS PUREST, AT DAWN. EMPTY, raw. You can see the veins of it. Before the rush of the day begins, it seems more Hollywood set than reality.

In the slow pace of morning, Manhattan is almost quaint. Bleary-eyed dog owners, some wearing pajamas, sleepwalk as their charges take care of business. The stillness punctuated by the whine and whirl of a steady, slow parade of garbage trucks or the squeal of kneeling buses. Washington, D.C., even at its busiest, is slow by comparison. But its scrubbed-clean, stately charm takes on a special sort of majesty in the early morning light, as if the buildings were preening for admiration. Downtown Los Angeles is more alive at 6:00 a.m. on a weekday than at most other times; cars streaming into parking garages, suited throngs marching to their high-powered jobs in international finance and law. But on weekends, when it’s early, the streets are so empty it feels as if there’s been an evacuation. At dawn any day of the week, eighteen miles away in Santa Monica, the beach is desolate, too, but for determined joggers and the homeless men still sleeping beside the trees.

As the sun rises in Paris, the scent of freshly baked baguettes fills the streets, although no store is yet open so you can enjoy one. The canals of Amsterdam are still and shimmering in the early hours, and the houseboats rarely look so inviting. Once, as I wandered aimlessly, wired by jet lag, a crazed man chased me through the streets of the Jordaan district, shouting at me in Dutch, the only sign of life I’ve ever seen in that neighborhood so early. In Greece to attend a very special anniversary party, my mother and I meandered through Athens in search of an early breakfast, the smells from the fishmongers assaulting us as gulls hovered overhead. Bangkok never seems to slow. Even at the airport at 4:00 a.m., the twenty-four-hour massage joint is as busy as a nail salon in New York on Saturday at noon.

And then there is Thimphu, the capital city of Bhutan. A city in a country so remote, so undeveloped, that it isn’t quite sure what to make of cities. A city whose population has quadrupled in the past ten years. Even as it grows exponentially, and especially in the early light of morning, Thimphu feels a bit like a gangly village, rather than the bustling hub it becomes once the day is under way.

It is six thirty in the morning, in the dead of winter. It’s chilly, but not as cold as this season could be, high in the Himalayas. Six scraggly stray dogs wander aimlessly in a pack, crisscrossing the street, oblivious to what little traffic there is. A lone luxury SUV rumbles past, probably a dignitary being driven to the airport or his office. As part of their compensation, ministers are given these fancy vehicles, which only a handful of private citizens can afford.

A truck barrels by. Twenty Indian men stand close together on the flatbed, being driven to a construction site for the day’s labor. A few Nepalese ladies stoop to sweep the street with short-handled brooms made of straw. Their eyes are heavy, as if they’ve already logged eight hard hours, even though they’ve just begun the day. A baby strapped to one woman’s back somehow manages to doze through the action.

The sidewalks are pockmarked with infinite cracks and holes and splats of bright red spit, remnants of the ubiquitous doma. It’s a risk to walk almost anywhere in Thimphu and not fix your gaze downward to watch your step. But if you do, you are robbed of the vista of the most lovely Himalayan sky. Clouds hang low like tufts of cotton candy, hugging the mountains and giving the valley the air of a fairy tale.

There are no traffic lights in this city. The starched cop who directs the cars with his tai chi–like moves is not yet on duty. There’s no need. This early in the morning, you could walk in the center of this street fearlessly. The snooker parlor, jammed with agitated players well into the evening, is shuttered now, as are the fabric stores, bars-cum-restaurants, beauty “saloons,” and the shoe shops all selling the exact same merchandise. In an hour, crossing
any of the streets will require patience and skill, like navigating a chase scene in a video game. Children and dogs will clutter the sidewalks then. Weathered ladies peddling bright red chilis and rice will pour them onto the filthy, uneven pavement, an ad hoc display that doesn’t seem to deter most buyers.

At this time of day, I’ll be lucky to find an open shop. The only place where it might be possible is on the main strip, Norzin Lam. Midway down the block, I see a sign of life. There’s an open door at the Zeeling Tshongkhag, a place that’s becoming one of my usual stops. I poke my head in.

“Can I come in?” I ask.

I’m always polite to people in stores, but in Bhutan, I am hyperaware that every place I go I am representing not just Kuzoo FM but the United States.

The proprietor, Pema, welcomes me with a shy smile. “Yes, madam.” I have learned I am madam not by virtue of my age but as a sign of respect. People with less experience using their English nervously call me “sir,” aware only that it is an honorific, not one that is gender based.

“I need some cookies. To bring to Kuzoo, for the Early Bird show,” I say, somewhat apologetically because of the early hour. As it would be with most merchants on the planet, why I need what I need isn’t as important as the fact that I am here to buy. But I also announce this to remind him that I’m not some random tourist. Not that many tourists are typically on the streets of Thimphu, at any time of day. But here, as in other places around the world, if you look like an outsider, prices can rise quickly.

“Of course, madam.”

I’ve been stopping in nearly every day for weeks now, and usually buy from his sister, who hasn’t yet arrived. There are no fresh baked goods in this store. None of the few venues that do bake are open yet. So I choose a package of peanut-butter-filled cookies from India. The radio jockey hosting the Early Bird show today loves those. I need a snack to soothe my stomach, so I grab some plain digestive biscuits. I buy a box of tea bags, black, just in case the studio’s supply of tea is locked up. I hand the man a 100 ngultrum note, a little over $2 with the current exchange rate, and get back 40 ngultrum in change.

The streets are coming to life. Some passersby return my smile warmly, if shyly. A few—the minority—don’t look so happy that I’m here, and glower a bit. Most children see me as an excuse to practice their English, and they giggle when I respond to their spirited shouts of “hello.” After I’d been here a week, a few kids who hang out near this particular store started running after me whenever I walked down the street, shouting “Kuzoo FM, Kuzoo FM.”

There is a slight hill up the road a bit, and a steeper one when you turn at the Dutch-sponsored dairy station, the only place in town where you can buy fresh milk—if you bring your own container. Men and women and kids leave clutching Coca-Cola bottles filled chalky white. Dogs roam this side street, as if the gates of the pound have been busted down. (Soon I learn there isn’t a pound, and that’s part of the problem. Stories abound about people being swarmed or bitten by the strays.)

As I make my way back to the upper road, I’m breathless, both from the altitude and from the steep incline. On the far side of the street, directly across from the Bhutan Chamber of Commerce and Industry, adjacent to the Danish embassy and in front of Bangladesh’s, sits the place where I spend my days.

By the time I march up the narrow flight of stairs to the studio, I’ve had quite a workout, and I’ve walked only about a mile. With the cookies in hand, I feel suddenly aware of the sensation I’m experiencing. I’m falling in love with Bhutan.

The Buddhists would say that everything you need is right here, within you. There’s no need to seek outside yourself for the answers. Nothing—no place, no person—can complete you or make you happy. The longer I live, the more I see and experience, the more certain I am that this is true. And yet, occasionally, a shakeup in location, or in the company you keep, can touch you in just the right way, awaken something inside you. At precisely the moment you need it.

Timing and circumstance collided to ignite this love affair. It didn’t hurt that I had a lifelong fascination with anyplace in the throes of evolution. The college I’d attended had been around for only a decade when I first enrolled. The most exciting work experiences I’d had were with start-up ventures, companies where we made it all up as we went along. In many ways, Bhutan was a start-up, too—an ancient, once-secluded kingdom transitioning now at warp speed. A new king, a new democracy about to dawn, a new constitution. The twin cultural influences of technology and media were spreading rapidly, challenging and eroding Bhutan’s very foundation. It would need to quickly adjust to interruptions from the world outside its borders, the world that had been blocked out for so long.

Being in Bhutan today felt like taking a ride back in a time machine, to that transformative era that much of the rest of the developed world had experienced a hundred years prior, before trains and cars and electronic communications changed how we were connected to one another, and so, the very rhythm of life. And yet, this
moment for Bhutan was entirely different. This never-colonized kingdom was geographically landlocked, but given its skill at isolation, it might have been a remote island; the changes and developments here, now that they were permitted, were accelerating at a frenzied pace.

There was another, more important reason I’d become so enamored. It had to do with the people here: the cadence of their speech, their wry sense of humor, their odd brand of innocence, and their newfound worldliness spurred by the infiltration of their borders. The fierce pride they had in their history, in their kings. The pace of their days. The superstitions and deep spirit of Buddhism that informed everything they did. Everyone here knew everyone, or at least knew how to find the person you were looking for. Each person had a unique role. Karma was the artist and Kinley the newspaperman and Pema the head of the environmental group. There was a feeling of interconnectedness, a sense of community, a camaraderie I’d experienced only on a college campus.

The non-Bhutanese I’d been meeting were a key factor in my reaction, too. I’d never met such adventurous souls, people so committed to living life outside the sphere of comfort and routine most aspire to have. I’d become friends with a handful of other outsiders: a divorced nurse from Canada who had hit the road once her daughters were grown, volunteering her skills in countries that needed it. A midwestern couple about the same age as she, committed to doing the same. They and the others I met were active participants in the world. People who went out of their way, really out of their way, to meet other humans unlike themselves, and see how they really lived. Not from a hotel or a tour bus, and most certainly not on a screen. No View-Master living for them.

As a member of the demographic majority in the United States, I also appreciated the bizarre, humbling wonder of being a minority in Bhutan. A minority most people here had trouble identifying. I liked it, even in the rare times it was uncomfortable. The better-educated citizens know about the United States, and a subset of those know it well enough to identify specific, obscure locations, often places they’d gone to study. But the majority of the people know only that you look different—that you aren’t Bhutanese. Being there put the United States in a completely different perspective, the way staring into the vastness of a natural wonder like the Grand Canyon does. The United States may be the superpower, and the center of your universe, but it isn’t the center of everyone else’s. More reminders that the world does not revolve around one way of eating, thinking, being.

Loving Bhutan is, like so many love affairs, complicated. It’s not like becoming a Francophile, or a fan of Hawaii, or using every vacation to visit all the national parks or Major League Baseball stadiums or NASCAR racetracks in the United States. Bhutan is not a checklist kind of vacation on which you hit the hot spots, not an easy place, not a luxurious place to adore. It has many flaws, and it is rife with contradictions. It doesn’t boast the typical assets common to vacation destinations, such as plentiful sunshine twelve months a year, or expert chefs who avail themselves of the bountiful fields (if you happen to be a fan of chanterelles and fiddlehead ferns, time your visit during the short summer season when they are as plentiful as kudzu). Bhutan may be simple and unspoiled, in the way rural America might have been at the turn of the twentieth century. With a tour guide beside you, it may seem like the promised Shangri-la, some sort of fairy tale, with endless miles of untouched land and vistas of mountains and trees so lush it’s hard to imagine they’re real. But it is poor. It is rough. And the sum total of the good and the bad and the strange combine to render Bhutan captivating and magnificent.

The April 1914 issue of National Geographic magazine is filled with advertisements for modern innovations that herald an era of convenience and speed and eroding boundaries: motorcars and tires, round-the-world steamship vacations, newfangled conveniences such as vacuum cleaners and electricity-powered refrigerators and canned soup. But the eighty-eight-page photo-essay that is central to this particular issue is the Rosetta stone for an odd chapter in Bhutan’s history. It offered the magazine’s 330,000 subscribers the first-ever introduction to the kingdom, a place only a handful of outsiders had seen with their own eyes and few others had even considered.

The title of the story was dreamily evocative: “Castles in the Air.” Its author was a British political officer named John Claude White, commander of the Indian Empire. White had initially been assigned to oversee neighboring Sikkim, and participated in the failed 1903 British invasion of Tibet, euphemistically referred to in the history books as the Young-husband Expedition. It was during that mission that White met Ugyen Wangchuck, a powerful Bhutanese figure who had managed to unite his people after years of internal strife. Wangchuck wanted to ensure his country remained independent of its powerful and enormous neighbors. Keeping the peace with the British agent for India was one way to maintain sovereignty. When Wangchuck was installed as Bhutan’s first king in 1907, White was his invited guest dignitary.

In the article, White details how with an entourage of “coolies, elephants, mules, ponies, donkeys, yaks, [and] oxen,” he traipsed around the region that India had dismissed as a “tangle of jungle-clad and fever-stricken hills,” “a region not sufficiently characteristic to merit special exploration.” He found plenty to explore—and document. With a thirteen-by-ten-foot camera rig that took three mules to carry, he exposed dozens of plate-glass images of pristine
mountain vistas, as well as of the king and his subjects. Many of these delicate negatives improbably survived the rocky months-long journey around and out of the country.

His descriptions of the untouched land before him read like a dispatch from another universe, as if he were observing another species: “The Bhutanese are fine, tall, well-developed men, with an open, honest cast of face, and the women are comely, clean, and well dressed and excellent housekeepers and managers,” he wrote. “It is impossible to find words to express adequately the wonderful beauty and variety of scenery I met with during my journeys, the grandeur of the magnificent snow peaks, and the picturesqueness and charm of the many wonderful jongs, or forts, and other buildings I came across; but I hope my photographs may....”

No doubt his haunting images of frozen waterfalls and water-propelled prayer wheels; of a smiling, barefoot, ghoclad king; and of an odd, rare goat-antelope called a takin captivated many an imagination. They certainly caught the eye of a National Geographic reader in El Paso, Texas, a woman named Kathleen Worrell. And they might have languished collecting dust on her bookshelf had the Texas State School of Mines and Metallurgy not burned down a few years later.

Mrs. Worrell, wife of the school’s dean, had noted a resemblance in the photos between the landscape of her city and this country called Bhutan. And so in the aftermath of the school’s destruction, she convinced her husband that the college should be rebuilt to reflect the style of the kingdom’s unique structures.

Now, in modern times, no one could possibly mistake the Franklin Mountains for the Himalayas. The rugged rockiness of the El Paso landscape and the lush Kingdom of Bhutan bear almost no resemblance to each other—except for the fact that each shares borders with an enormous neighbor. The mountains that cut through El Paso are grayish brown, rough like elephant skin, and rarely see snow. They’re tiny in scope—just twenty-three miles long, with an elevation at its very highest of just around eight thousand feet. The majestic white peaks of the Himalayas tower to twenty-nine thousand feet and span six countries—nearly fifteen hundred miles. Not to mention they also play a critical role in nature: They feed three major water sources that support more than a billion people.

But in the year 1914, with black-and-white still photographs the only window on the world, large-scale commercial air flight but a dream, and no cameras perched on satellites providing vistas accessible from your laptop computer, it is possible to see why Mrs. Worrell saw a connection between these two places. Why she felt compelled to encourage the recreation of a land she had never seen and would never get to is another matter, a mystery that can never be answered, since little else is known about her, and no heirs exist to convey any legends.

The commissioned architects took their cues from the only source they had, all that existed in the world at the time: Mr. White’s photographs of the landscape and his accompanying descriptions in “Castles in the Air”: “This view gives a very good idea of the sloping architecture of the walls and the projecting roofs made of split pine,” he wrote, never realizing this detail would later help when blueprints for replicas would be drawn. “All the walls have a distinct camber, and ... the windows are of a peculiar form, with the sides sloping inwards. Each building is two stories high and is painted ... a dull light gray on the lower story, with a broad band of madder red above.”

The drawings rendered for the creation of the buildings in El Paso look very much like the real thing; they were likely also the first of their kind ever drafted. The Bhutanese themselves, to this day, work from memory, not blueprints. Another major difference in the El Paso construction was the use of nails. No such hardware was used in Bhutan at the time; roofs were kept in place with rocks, doors hung on sturdy wooden hinges. Traditional Bhutanese structures didn’t have glass in the windows, either.

The reconstructed Texas State School of Mines and Metallurgy debuted in 1917, with sixty students and perhaps the most unusual architecture of any school in the United States. Over the past century, the name of the university has changed twice, and its size has ballooned, but its looks have become increasingly Bhutanese, except for one brief period: After a new building emerged from the wraps of construction in the late sixties to reveal its discordantly modern style, one local wrote to the paper expressing concern about the departure. It was so out of place that in 1971 it was “Bhutanized” to better fit the landscape and ease critics. Never again would the university’s administrators allow such a deviation to occur.

As a result, the school now known as the University of Texas at El Paso is an acid-trippy agglomeration of ninety buildings spread across a 366-acre campus, each building a slightly different interpretation of Bhutan’s architecture. Even the 1,600-car parking garage and the guard shacks at the entryways to campus are housed in Bhutanese-style sloping-orange-roofed structures. So are the automatic teller machines—an unintentional bit of irony, since only a handful of ATMs exist in Bhutan, and most people don’t use them. A Hilton Garden Inn built on the edge of campus continues the theme.

This modern Bhutan is punctuated by occasional flourishes of authenticity. A twenty-foot imported altar and a twelve-by-sixteen-foot religious scroll known as a thangka provide a colorful display behind the espresso bar that greets you in the lobby of the library. Bhutanese prayer flags flutter behind the campus’s Centennial Museum; the front of the building is flanked by enormous urns styled to resemble Bhutanese prayer wheels. Right across the
street, on off-campus soil, the suburban-strip-mall style that dominates so much of the American landscape resumes.

For the most part, if you stop someone in and around the campus and ask why UTEP looks the way it does, they’ll look at you as if that’s the most spectacularly odd question. As far as they know, it just does, that’s all. Some are aware of the university’s connection to Bhutan, but most have no idea, really, where that is—or why a tiny Asian kingdom they’ve never heard of happened to influence and infiltrate the school’s architecture.

Decades after the death of Mrs. Worrell, one curious member of the university’s administration took it upon himself to delve into the aesthetic roots of the campus. It was the sixties, a time when Bhutan was still shuttered to the outside world. Before Internet connections allowed speedy research, this man, Dale Walker, obsessively sleuthed addresses, packed up photographs of the university buildings, and sent them along with queries to people around the world who might authenticate the look of the school. His most important correspondent was the queen to the third king. Her response arrived on stationery as fine as tissue paper, a year after Mr. Walker had first sent his letter.

“Dear Mr. Walker,” she wrote, in her letter dated December 4, 1967. “It is thrilling and deeply moving to see a great new university built in faraway America inspired by Bhutanese architecture. Only the topmost windows are unlike Bhutanese windows, as here they are made entirely of carved, painted wood. I think your new university buildings are beautiful, combining modern design so harmoniously with ancient Bhutanese architecture. I wish our new buildings in Bhutan could be so finely built.”

In later correspondence, the queen expressed hope that Bhutan might someday work more closely with the university. She even asked if they might enroll a student. The answer was yes. Jigme Dorji, nicknamed Jimmy by his classmates, became the first student from Bhutan sent to study in the United States. He graduated with an engineering degree in 1978.

Mr. Walker also solicited validation from the few other Westerners who had traveled to the country. Burt Todd was the first American to visit Bhutan, in 1949, after befriending the soon-to-be queen while they were students at Oxford. He confirmed for Mr. Walker that the forts of Bhutan were “almost identical” to the buildings in El Paso. In 1959, journalist Desmond Doig was the first allowed to report from the country. He told Mr. Walker he had believed the pictures he’d received were of new construction in Thimphu: “When I was told they were American campus buildings, I was genuinely amazed.”

John Claude White most likely never knew what he inspired, for he passed away in 1918—just one year after the first Bhutanese-themed buildings opened in El Paso. Kathleen Worrell could never have imagined just how much she did make her corner of Texas resemble the Himalayan kingdom she admired but never got to see. But because of them both, and the power of the press that invisibly united them, Bhutan and El Paso are forever, indelibly, linked.

The links grow ever stronger. Over the past twenty years, the university’s president, Dr. Diana Natalicio, has cultivated the school’s relationship with the kingdom, welcoming more students from Bhutan each year. UTEP has even started to market its unique identity with brochures that proclaim it “Bhutan on the Border.” The kingdom’s own borders have been penetrated by a growing number of characters, and among this diverse constituency, one thing is certain: Anyone who comes close to the kingdom falls under its spell.

Some of those who have become enthralled have gone on to play a critical role in Bhutan’s history. A Jesuit priest named Father William Mackey created the first high school in Bhutan in the sixties, and began a long friendship and study exchange between Bhutan and his native Canada. The late Michael Aris, who as a young man tutored members of the royal family, published several important books on Bhutanese history at the behest of the third king. Controversial insights into Bhutan were revealed by Nari Rustomji, an Indian advisor to Sikkim. His book was long banned in the kingdom for its controversial frankness about a dark aspect of Bhutan’s history: the plot by the mistress of the third king to claim royal power for the children he’d fathered with her. The mystically inclined actress Shirley MacLaine made a trip to Bhutan as a guest of the starstruck acting prime minister in 1968, and wrote about her spirit-seeking adventures in Don’t Fall Off the Mountain, another work long prohibited in the kingdom.

Since Bhutan opened its borders, stories have abounded about alliances great and small, between outsiders who befriended the powerful of Bhutan and those who connected with regular people. Bhutanese love to tell stories about single, careerist Western women who visit on vacation and fall for their tour guides—suggesting that they couldn’t find men back home and couldn’t help being swept off their feet by the chivalrous Bhutanese. This kind of forbidden love affair is the basis of a book by a Canadian woman named Jamie Zeppa, who worked twenty years ago as a teacher in eastern Bhutan and fell in love—and had a child—with one of her students. After a stint as a golf pro at the Royal Thimphu Golf Course, Rick Lipsey returned home to create the Bhutan Youth Golf Association, which for years dispatched two pros a year to the kingdom to teach kids—and adults—the game. So inspired was digital photography expert Michael Hawley by the visual splendor of the country, he published a book of photographs about it that’s also the world’s largest, at five feet by seven feet and 133 pounds, and costs $10,000 a
Among many of the modern fans of Bhutan there is something of a competitive spirit to prove one’s devotion to the place—and one’s power to access members of the royal family and other VIPs. A kind of “My Bhutan is bigger than your Bhutan, my attachment greater.” These boasts have to do with not just the desire to help the Bhutanese but the fierce need to stay connected to the land and its people after leaving it, wanting to attach somehow to Bhutan rather than just love it purely and wholly—allowing that love alone to be enough. Bhutan gives you so much, makes you aware of all you have, that it inspires you to somehow mark the territory, claim it as your own.

With each incursion, each friendship, each exchange, though, a tiny bit of the old Bhutan melts away, and a new and different one emerges. Each of us who loves it—no matter how that love is manifested—permanently changes it.
Ngawang, Pema, and Pink were bickering and giggling conspiratorially in the center of the Kuzoo work area. Each had a piece of paper in hand; it looked as if they were working on a script. Their idea of sophisticated audio production was to divvy up the text and record tag-team, one line each.

“Herpa-tett-ez B,” said Pink, struggling with the words in front of her. “Herps.”

Word was out that Kuzoo would run free ads to show potential advertisers the power of radio, in the hope of one day attracting paying customers. The initial funding from the sale of the king’s BMW gave the station a cushion of security, so making more cash to pay the bills wasn’t yet an urgent necessity. Which was a good thing because the bulk of the “ads” on the station still came from the government ministries, with announcements about holiday closures and requests for bids on projects. None of the businesses in town were used to advertising, nor did they have the budget. Just putting a sign in front of the store was considered a frivolous investment, and even those signs that were installed were more about function than about competition. Proprietors hoped people stopped in, but if they didn’t, no problem. Such was life in a Buddhist kingdom where Gross National Happiness, and not a grab for cash, was the guiding principle.

A messenger appeared at lunchtime from the Health Ministry to deliver the script for the new ad. Valentine’s Day was looming and schools were out on their two-month winter break. This meant extra nights of parties for kids with time on their hands, and the potential for hormones gone awry.

“Sexually transmitted diseases exist among us,” Pink read slowly, deliberately.


“So romantic!” cackled Pema.

“CONE-dom,” Ngawang intoned. “These infections are all passed through sex without a CONE-dom.”

“No, no, no, CAHN-dom,” insisted Pema. Her love of reading, or perhaps it was her encyclopedic knowledge of Sex and the City, made her proficient with the script: “Gonorrhea, syphilis, and HIV/AIDS are all around us.”

A cell phone rang. The tune was “Summer Nights” from Grease.

“These infections are all passed through sex without a CONE-dom,” Ngawang tried again, her voice tentative. Her struggle with the word made rubbers sound very formal.

“CAHN-dom,” shouted Pema, even though the girls were sitting right next to one other. She was impatient, and a much quicker study than just about anyone else at Kuzoo.

“How do you say this word?” Ngawang asked me, pointing to the script.

“Pema’s right,” I said. “Cahn-dom.”

“Herps,” repeated Pink.

I walked over and peered over her shoulder. “Okay, no, it’s HERP-ees,” I said. “And that other word is hep-a-ti-tis.” No one asked what these afflictions were, which might have been because they knew, but could also have been mere disinterest.

“You cannot tell whether someone has an STD by looking at them. That is why you have to use a condom EVERY TIME,” proclaimed Pema, her tone that of the smartest girl in the class. “Happy Valentine’s Day!”

“Happy Valentine’s Day,” Pink and Ngawang echoed the last line of the script, which they would all read in unison. The three of them burst into laughter again. Then they shut the door and shushed me so they could record.
quiet room. That was about all Kuzoo had, along with a couple of faded Backstreet Boys and Spice Girls posters taped up on the walls, and an on-air sign mounted outside the studio. Its lighting mechanism worked about half the time, but almost everyone ignored it anyway. They’d just barrel into the studio regardless of whether someone was transmitting live.

Kuzoo FM was what most radio stations in the United States hadn’t been for a very long time, an anything-goes bullhorn to the people. A core staff of paid radio jockeys kept the station going, but anyone who was interested could just show up and contribute, however they wished. You could bring in music. You could hang out in the studio with whoever was hosting the show (though eventually there were rules prohibiting that). You could answer phones. Volunteers weren’t just welcome; they were encouraged. Even the typical college station in the United States had long ago ceased to be so egalitarian.

A highfalutin promotional campaign hadn’t been necessary to clue everyone in on the existence of Kuzoo. People started stopping by the compound that housed the station as soon as it launched, hanging out to see how things worked, answering phones or otherwise inserting themselves into the free-for-all. What might have been transmitted around the town or the country by word-of-mouth just six months earlier could now be communicated instantaneously, thanks to the magic powers of broadcasting. And just as the citizens of Thimphu or any village in Bhutan helped out one another, without question, the people of Kuzoo unfailingly broadcast whatever messages came their way.

“Folder with important papers lost by the Hong Kong market,” read the message submitted by a worried-looking man who showed up on the grounds one day. “Reward. Call 17-27-15-98.”

“Floodwaters rising near the dzong,” said the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs. “Please leave the area immediately until further notice.”

“Little boy lost by Changlimithang Stadium,” the police called to report. “Please claim him at the satellite police office in town.” Twenty minutes later came word that the child had been picked up, and a follow-up on-air announcement ensued. Being comfortable with writing copy quickly wasn’t a bad skill to have around here.

Doing quick bits of rewriting, helping with the pronunciation of English words, and sharing midday meals with Sir Tenzin were shaping up to be the mainstays of my contribution to Kuzoo. As each day passed, it became more apparent that I was little more than an accessory, not expected to do much in particular, really, besides be exactly who I was: the experienced volunteer consultant from afar. Any hope I might have had of inspiring these young broadcasters to use their new radio station as a tool to prepare for their impending democracy was folly. Of far greater interest to them was where to download Destiny’s Child and Alicia Keys on the Internet, especially given the slow connection speeds and dearth of computers.

To give myself a mission, I’d assumed what I saw as an equally important role: Kuzoo den mother. Lacking any formal duties, I’d sit around the station from very early morning till early evening, observing, offering suggestions, reading what came in over the fax, and making sure everyone ate, even though what I was feeding them was hardly food. Apart from spicy yak-meat pizza and cookies or chips, there wasn’t much in the way of take-out, not to mention common culinary ground—the pizza was only a slightly older and less exotic presence in Thimphu than I. I could educate by osmosis. Most of the staff—indeed, many Bhutanese—hadn’t interacted much with anyone from so far away.

My lunchtime discussions with Sir Tenzin about copyright violation, music royalties, and licensing fees proved futile. He was convinced, no matter what I said, that international laws could not possibly apply to Kuzoo.

“Who would bother coming after us here in Bhutan, anyway?” he’d counter dismissively.

While I suspected he was right, and that only a chance luxury vacation by a music industry executive who happened to turn on a radio might bust Kuzoo’s illegal goings-on, I felt it my obligation to point out the importance of respecting intellectual property.

Kuzoo’s desire to become more professional and its decision to import an outsider to help make that transition was understandable. It wasn’t uncommon for the radio jockeys, none of whom had appeared live on the air before, to forget the basics, such as turning on the microphone. A few, racked by nerves, compensated on the air by sounding a bit comatose when they spoke—a strange contrast to the bright bits of music they loved to play.

These kinds of mistakes could be easily solved with a little adult supervision and cheerleading. And in addition to providing both in person, I convinced Pema to ration a piece of printer paper from her Fort Knox of a supply cabinet, typed out in giant, bold forty-eight-point type a list of recommendations to get them started, then posted my rules inside the studio:

Before you go on the air, please remember to:

♦ Take a deep breath
CHECK that the microphone is on
Remind listeners that they’re tuned in to Kuzoo FM 90
Encourage listeners to email us or call in or come volunteer—it’s THEIR station
Have fun! Enjoy yourself while on the air!
(After all, this IS fun, isn’t it?)

All of these were reminders I often needed myself back home, as did my beleaguered colleagues there. But at work in Los Angeles, we didn’t get the pleasure of playing Foo Fighters and Jay-Z.

ONE OF THE GOALS on the list sent to me before my arrival, to inspire staff and volunteers alike to be interested in reporting news, seemed simple enough. Given the impending democratic elections, it also made sense; the intent of this station was to give the youth of Bhutan the tools to examine and monitor their government-to-be. So far, that had translated into a five-minute “newscast” each evening, which amounted to nothing more than the rewriting of items from the newspapers and the Bhutan Broadcasting Service. With Sir Tenzin wrangling everyone he could find into the conference room, I conducted my first—and last—formal workshop at Kuzoo.

“WHAT IS NEWS?” I scrawled on the giant whiteboard I’d asked Sir Tenzin to buy for the workroom. It was there to encourage people to share their ideas. (To date, I seemed to be the only person using it.) Twenty participants were dutifully in attendance. Perhaps fearful there might be a quiz later, they wrote down every word I uttered about the Five Ws and H that were the foundation of journalism.

“Who. What. When. Where. Why. And How,” I explained. “These are the elements of every story. Your job is to ask the questions and find out the answers.”

No one said a word, and even when assigned the task of telling a story, the only person who seemed to understand, or be interested in, the exercise was Sir Pema, Kuzoo’s second in command.

He was a shy man with a round face and glasses; his bookish demeanor, not his looks, made him seem older than thirty-five. Sir Pema had come from a remote village in the far east of Bhutan, and had been chosen to attend a Jesuit school in India where the best and brightest of Bhutan got sent for their educations. He had gone on to earn a master’s degree in education in Canada. His curiosity had been aided and abetted by new technologies that fueled his quest for news and information. He’d wax poetic about James Bond, the X-Men, or Johnny Depp and seemed shocked when I couldn’t converse about the latest Hollywood blockbusters. First thing every morning at the office, as soon as he could get online, he read the New York Times; at home at night he was glued to CNN with near-religious fervor. (The fact that I’d worked at both places upped my street cred with him.) He’d quote Maureen Dowd and “King Larry” as if he’d been hanging around at a bar with them the night before.

“Who? Stray dogs. What? How many of them there are. When? Right now. Where? Thimphu. Why? No family planning. How? That’s the problem,” he said. Sir Pema appeared to possess the keen powers of cultural observation necessary to succeed in the news business, powers that were otherwise lacking among the Kuzoo staff. Daily life was something they took for granted; the ongoing battle with strays wasn’t really an issue to them. It was just the way things were. This had to do a bit with the Buddhist belief that things simply are the way they are, and a lot to do with the unwavering Bhutanese devotion to authority. Reverence for that seemed embedded in them genetically, just like the adoration of spicy hot food.

It was also, I was learning, considered rude to ask too many questions. Other than Sir Pema, my pupils appeared utterly disinterested in the idea of taking out a microphone and questioning the world around them. It was clear they were present only because they were told to be. My news session wrapped up with a thud. I decided that during the rest of my days here, I’d resort to subtler teaching methods than the classroom.

The next afternoon, the utility of the radio station for something other than the transmission of pop music became very clear to all. Sir Tenzin walked into the station with a thick document tucked under his arm.

“Class Ten results,” he announced, and he dropped the document in front of the female Pema with a hot-off-the-presses flourish. “Announce on the air that they’re here.” The day the scores were released was one of the most important of the year, even if it did fall square in the middle of winter recess.

Pema, aka Oprah, obediently stepped into the studio, faded out the music that was playing, and, in her best “breaking news” voice, informed the people of Thimphu that the all-important test scores had been released. And that Kuzoo would be happy to give callers their results.

Class Ten grades determined whether a student could continue high school for free. Those who failed had to pony up close to $1,000 a year to finish their degrees at one of the handful of private schools in Bhutan, or had to study across the border in India, a more common fate. Given that the average midcareer civil servant took home a salary of $350 a month, coming up with the cash to pay for an education was simply out of the question. Failing Class Ten
could decide your fate forever. Those who couldn’t complete two more years of education could never hope to get a modern job, behind a desk. Perhaps they’d even have to stay in the village to work in the fields. And with a population of children that swelled each year, competition for slots in schools as well as for employment was intensifying. The sweet Kuzoo driver, Kesang, must be from a particularly poor family, I deduced; since he didn’t speak English, he must have had to drop out of school very young to work.

Instantly, the phones lit up. Students—spared the trek to their schools to find out their scores—jammed the lines. Tiny voices identified themselves and asked to learn their fate: “Wesel Wangmo, la. Motithang High School. Did I pass?”

For two days, the staff and volunteers of Kuzoo fielded nervous requests for results. Kids even started calling in from outside the broadcast area; word had spread that Kuzoo had a copy of this important document.

But that wasn’t the only thing keeping Kuzoo busy.

As in so many places, February is a dreary time of year in Bhutan. The difference is that the skies, when the gray does melt away, are perfectly blue and framed by snowcapped Himalayan peaks that make you feel as if you’re in a heavenly dream sequence. Assuming heaven also features tooting horns and foul emissions from the cars that jam the streets below. And thousands of those scruffy, barking stray dogs.

One thing bolstering winter spirits in Thimphu this particular February—aside from the first measurable snowfall in the city in two years—was Kuzoo FM’s Valentine’s Day contest. The young volunteers behind the effort had dubbed it grandly: the Symphony of Love. Two free dinners for two at the only hamburger joint in town were offered as a prize. Listeners were asked to call in and sing love songs on the air, then vote on their favorites. The meals would be awarded to the two most popular singers. It was the first time a contest of this kind had been held anywhere in the kingdom.

To build excitement, a taped announcement, recorded by Pema in the supply closet, ran a dozen times a day.

This goes out to all the LOVE-birds who are planning to go out on Valentine’s Day. Boy, do we have a treat for you! All expense paid for two couples at the Zone. You heard it right! Show your love how much you care. The person who gets voted the most wins. Call us. Text in your votes. Or express in words by writing a poem to us—we will be waiting!

Every night at 7:30 p.m. for the three weeks leading up to February 14, listeners transformed Kuzoo into a public karaoke bar, crooning and croaking their renditions of love songs over the airwaves. The irony of a bunch of Buddhists celebrating a holiday that started in honor of a Christian saint was completely lost on the city. Listeners didn’t seem to care, either, that each evening’s serenade was generally more cacophonous than symphonic. Kuzoo’s two phone lines jammed up immediately with singers and voters alike.

A ratty old notebook, pages shy of being completely covered in ink, was used for the tabulation. Whoever was hanging around would answer the phone and strike a tally beside the number assigned to each contestant. The question of accuracy wasn’t an issue. Everyone trusted their system—and one another. PricewaterhouseCoopers would never have approved.

The idea for all this was, of course, firmly rooted in that fine import called American Idol. Bhutan was not immune to the fever for Idol that was consuming the rest of the world. People rushed home each night to see the latest installment, beamed into Bhutan on a time delay via satellite on an Indian TV channel. In this country where television was still a relatively new phenomenon, any show that even appeared to be a live broadcast whipped the public into a frenzy. And when it had to do with the glitz of a Hollywood so far away, allowing for discussions over people with very un-Bhutanese names, such as LaKisha Jones and Jordin Sparks, all the better.

No less popular this February was the subject of who had sung on Kuzoo. In shops and offices and on the main street in town, everyone buzzed about it, bragged in the morning if someone they knew had been heard on the air the night before. As a representative of Kuzoo, I’d be offered unsolicited commentary on the previous evening’s callers anywhere I went. “The man from last night, not very good. The girl, excellent,” one man told me. “And that fellow who dedicated his song to both his girlfriends—very funny!”

The Symphony of Love ratcheted up to another level the already feverish adoration of Kuzoo.

The contest, predictably, had its scolding detractors—chief among them one of the elder advisors to the station. Madame Carolyn was a sixty-something-year-old woman from Britain who had been imported decades earlier to tutor members of the royal family. She was one of a handful of outsiders on whom Bhutanese citizenship had been bestowed—an honor of which she was understandably proud, and which she flaunted to each newcomer she
encountered. Madame Carolyn declared modestly that she didn’t understand why “HM”—cheeky, irreverent shorthand tossed into conversation by those privileged few who had personal access to His Majesty—had asked her, an “old hag,” to have anything to do with the station. In fact, she took quickly to the microphone, zealously taping segments about classical music, and little educational bits about English grammar and vocabulary. “Word of the day: unreconstructed,” her voice would trill, and then she would go on to recite the dictionary definition. Hers was the “eat your vegetables” portion of Kuzoo. Well-intentioned, definitely; necessary, perhaps; but nowhere near as fun as the PussyCat Dolls and Jack Johnson.

When visitors to the station assumed I must be the Madame Carolyn they heard on the air, I was surprised and a bit disturbed to be mistaken for this legend. It wasn’t so much that she was twenty years older than me; I didn’t want to be associated with such prim behavior. What the confusion of identity underscored was the fact that to many Bhutanese, Brits and Americans are indistinguishable—no matter how different we think we sound.

The idea that Kuzoo resources were being dedicated to something other than the celebration of Bhutan disturbed Madame Carolyn.

“We should be doing a call-in show to honor His Majesty’s birthday,” she scolded, lips pursed, to no one in particular. This February 21 would be the first time the nation would celebrate the new king’s date of birth. “Or to mark Losar.” Losar was the Bhutanese New Year, which this year landed just before the royal birthday. Both merited national holidays that would shut down the country for days. Madame Carolyn insisted she could not understand how young people could prefer serenading one another with silly love songs over honoring their king and their national heritage.

**Two Nights Before Valentine’s Day, the Kuzoo volunteers gathered in the room adjacent to the kitchen-studio to prepare for the finale. They’d taken to shortening the contest’s name: “SOL” they called it, unaware of the decidedly unromantic usual meaning of the acronym. A giant bag of Lay’s Spicy Indian Masala potato chips was passed like a football around the room. Several people flipped through the notepad, filled to the edges now with strike marks. Close to two hundred people had sung on the air. Scores of text messages carried votes to staffers’ personal cell phones—everyone in town knew someone who worked at Kuzoo. Their choices had dutifully been recorded on the pad.

This was also the time of day when the newscast got prepared. Since it was a Monday, a day when none of the newspapers published, Ngawang had to rely on the BBS as her sole source of information. This involved transcribing, by hand, what had made the news that evening; the margin for error here was high. I had tried to convince Sir Pema, Sir Tenzin’s deputy, that if all we were going to do was crib from other media, the way broadcasters back home plucked the majority of the stories they reported from newspapers, we should just halt the effort entirely. This was not a Western convention we should emulate, I said. But the fact that this was how it was done in the West made it all the more enticing. Sir Pema was dedicated to the idea that there needed to be at least the essence of news on Kuzoo. In his mind, it somehow offset the pop music and gave the station at least the illusion of seriousness. But he stopped short of pushing the Kuzooers to go out and report for themselves.

The items that Ngawang had transcribed from the BBS newscast at the top of the hour included: a forest fire; the naming of a panel of government officials to oversee next year’s elections; a hike in the price of Indian cars to twelve thousand ngultrums—about $250 each—and the revelation that the availability of low-interest auto loans had swelled the number of vehicles in the kingdom to thirty thousand. After Ngawang had transcribed and then reworded these stories, I helped her comb through the copy and do a practice read. Like anyone just starting out in radio, she was self-conscious on the air. Especially since everyone you know becomes your biggest critic when they listen in. One of her uncles had ranted about her recent past performances, saying that her English was poor, while a friend had complained she was sounding “too American.” I’d hoped that wasn’t a dig at her affection for me.

A public service message had been faxed in, too, from the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs. It tied into the car stories we had to report. We changed its dreary bureaucratic-speak into zippier language:

If you’re listening to Kuzoo in your car … hear this:

Starting next Tuesday, you might get stopped for a random emissions test. The police want to crack down on people who are not getting their cars tested for emissions. So they’re going to randomly stop drivers as of February 20. Air pollution is on the rise here in Thimphu. So we hope you’ll get your car tested for the sake of our air … and also to avoid having to pay hefty fines. This has been a public service announcement from Kuzoo FM 90.

A pretty sixteen-year-old volunteer named Lhaki piped up as she heard Ngawang rehearse.
“So glad about that,” she said. She was sitting on the floor with her legs crossed, holding a guitar, long hair hanging past her shoulders, bangs brushing into her almond eyes—a Bhutanese Joni Mitchell. “My parents both bribed the emissions inspector to lie about their cars so they could pass. So selfish.”

Disaffected teenage angst oozed from Lhaki’s every pore. The week before she’d shown off a few sketches in her tattered notebook, each as intricate and bizarre as one of the omnipresent religious scrolls—the sacred thangka paintings depicting various Buddhas that hung in virtually every room in Bhutan, not far from the requisite photo of the king. Each had a Hieronymus Bosch–like quality to it, complex and colorful, playful with a tinge of sinister. One of Lhaki’s drawings depicted her interpretation of Hell, accompanied by a simple declarative caption in cursive writing: Life sucks. On another page, in the same style, was a happy valley of love, filled with flowers and rainbows and suns, and dozens of tiny babies floating gaily around the landscape like cherubic angels floating in an Italian Renaissance painting. I wondered if she’d ever seen one or if she’d simply pulled the images from the recesses of her dark, complicated teenage brain.

“I don’t want to get married or have my own kids,” she said with such conviction that I wanted to fast-forward into the future to see what Lhaki did, in fact, do with her life. “Just take them in when they have no parents.”

Lhaki and her constant companion, TT, were the nightly hosts of SOL. TT was a gawky, sweet boy who’d collapsed his Bhutanese name, Tshewang Toshi, into the much hipper moniker. He and Lhaki made quite a duo. Without a hint of guile, together on the air they embodied a bizarre fusion of the sweet funniness of George Burns and Gracie Allen, the edgy familiarity of a PG-rated Howard Stern and Robin Quivers, and the goofy sarcasm of Beavis and Butt-Head.

“So,” I asked, “who is winning SOL at this point?” I hadn’t been paying very close attention to the competition. Usually by the time it started, I’d been at the station for a dozen hours and was leaving to have a beer or dinner with one of my other expat volunteer friends. People I’d met literally on the street, simply because we looked the same. We were thrown together by fate in the same strange land at the same time. These new friends gave me a sense of what was going on in the rest of Thimphu. We all faced similar challenges, and it helped to hear that Mark the physical therapist from Nebraska and his wife, Penny, an English tutor; Pam the nurse from Toronto; Ed the golf pro from Nova Scotia; and Mayumi the Web designer from Queensland, Australia, were experiencing their own workplace challenges. We also provided an excellent support system for one another regarding an equally important matter: where to find palatable, chili-free food, which we often consumed with one another. Mostly we talked about how we felt we were taking more from Bhutan than we could ever possibly give.

Lhaki was nonchalant as she ran through the front-runners in the Symphony of Love contest. “Well, there’s me, there’s TT, and there’s a little girl.”

“Wait,” I said. “Run that by me again?”

“TT got the most votes, I got second most, and a little girl from Motithang got the third most. So we go on tomorrow night to play again and see who the top two winners are. I’m taking TT out if I win, and if TT wins, he’s promised to take me. And if we win first and second prize, we’ve promised to take Thujee and Khandu along.”

I had to stop for a second to make sure I’d understood Lhaki correctly.

“So you and TT have actually been competing in SOL? While you’ve been hosting it every night?”

“Yes,” said Lhaki, strumming on her guitar, oblivious to my tone of voice. “Well, the other night Thujee hosted, but mostly it’s been me and TT. People seem to like the live guitar.”

“Does that seem right to you? That you’re hosting the show and can play the guitar while you sing? You’re on the air all through the evening . . .”

Lhaki looked up at me now, her eyes widening with confusion. It was clear she didn’t understand my inquisition.

“Well, sure. We’ve worked hardest on the contest, so it is only fair that we get the hamburgers.”

This had the makings of a public-relations disaster. Sir Tenzin had convinced the newspapers to cover the overwhelming success of SOL, including the grand finale. When the reporters found out that the winner and runner-up of the contest actually worked at the station, the credibility Kuzoo was establishing would go down the tubes. Or maybe I was projecting. Maybe no one would notice or care. That possibility was even more distressing.

My already queasy stomach interrupted this stream of worried thoughts by announcing its distress with a loud burble. This had been a “bad food day.” What I needed right now was the comfort of my home bathroom, not the closet-size commode at Kuzoo with the toilet that rarely flushed.

Ngawang asked Kesang to give me a ride home in the Kuzoo van. As we drove, I frantically dialed Sir Tenzin’s mobile number with the cell phone she had scrounged up to lend me. No answer. There is no voice mail in Bhutan, so leaving a message wasn’t possible. Just moments after Kesang dropped me off, Sir Tenzin materialized at the door of my apartment, entering the room with his swirl of urgency and drama.

“They tell me you’re sick. What do you need? Do you need to go to hospital?” I wondered if news of a sick person had traveled as quickly here before the mobile phone. Most likely, yes. A sick person was always cause for
concern, particularly when it was a guest from afar.

“Thank you, sir. Really, I don’t need anything. But that’s not what I was calling you about. There’s a problem with the Symphony of Love …”

“I’m very busy now, Jane,” Sir Tenzin said as he carefully began to wrap up an afternoon hit of doma. I braced myself for the awful smell that was inevitable once he started sucking on it; I wasn’t sure my stomach could stand it just now. “Can’t you just take care of it?”

Sir Tenzin was like a lot of men I’d met over the course of my career, one of those “big picture” thinkers. Details were not his strong suit; ideas were. So was tossing out those ideas and commanding the staff to execute them. He loved the buzz the Symphony of Love was getting, loved the kudos around town, but had little interest in or worry about its execution. Unless he happened to tune in and hear someone say something he didn’t like—at which point he would roar into the station, yelling, correcting someone’s grammar or on-air performance.

“No, I’m worried about something and I need your help. I just found out that two of the three people in the finals for SOL … work for Kuzoo.”

It didn’t immediately register for Sir Tenzin that this posed any sort of problem. He looked like he was about to shrug and say “So what?” But my demeanor forced him to pause. He nodded for me to go on.

I reminded him of the series of anticorruption spots the government had been running in the newspapers and on the BBS, encouraging citizens to report any cronysm or swindling that appeared to be taking place.

“Sir Tenzin, they could make an example out of Kuzoo. Maybe the stakes aren’t as big, but the principle’s the same. And we’re going to look awfully stupid if the Bhutan Times takes issue with our own people winning the contest.”

The Symphony of Love, to no one else but me, was a living metaphor for the upcoming parliamentary election. (Whose exact date, like the king’s coronation, was still under review by royal astrologers.) A time to teach the youth not just about self-expression—creative and democratic—but also about right and wrong. If they thought it was okay to stack the deck in a contest involving love songs and hamburgers, well, who knew what would happen when they went to the voting booth?

Sir Tenzin understood. “Okay, okay, let’s have a meeting. You can explain.”

“But I need you to be there and back me up, sir.” As a volunteer and not their real boss, my reprimand might not hold as much weight. As soon as Sir Tenzin agreed, I excused myself so I could run down the stairs to the bathroom.

LATER THAT EVENING, the SOL team was shuttled into the conference room that had long ago served as a living area. That this building had once housed the foreign minister might suggest that it was once grand. There was, however, no indication that this was true. It was hard to imagine this was ever anything but a rumpus room for a youth-oriented radio station. Taped onto the wood paneling, opposite the portrait of the king, hung a giant yellow poster declaring Kuzoo’s mission statement. Its hand lettering added to the dorm-room feel:

We, the youth, must keep ourselves informed.
We should arm ourselves with the knowledge to make our own futures brighter.
Youth is temporary and fleeting but the foundations we build today will decide how bright the prospects will be for the rest of our lives.
Kuzoo aspires to be the voice of the youth of Bhutan.
Kuzoo aspires to inform the youth of Bhutan.
Kuzoo is the youth of Bhutan.
Kuzoo is ours; the future is ours.

A taped recording of that message, read by a sampling of Kuzoo’s most youthful volunteers, ran at the start of each broadcast day. No one seemed to be able to name the author of those words. I suspected it was the handiwork of Madame Carolyn. It didn’t seem likely that anyone else, particularly a young person, could possibly have written it.

“Okay, okay, everyone, thank you for coming,” Sir Tenzin said, standing before the group. Fearful of his notorious temper, everyone quickly quieted down. “I need your attention to an urgent matter.”

Watching him work the crowd, I wondered whether he would get the political bug and run for office when the time came for elections. Sir Tenzin was at his most charming when groups of visitors toured the studio. If he could
sit still long enough, he’d have made an effusive on-air personality.

“Madam Jane here is going to make an important announcement.”

I stayed seated on one of the frayed upholstered benches in the room, to appear casual, to defuse my message. The room was so silent that when my stomach gurgled loudly, I wondered if everyone in the room could hear it.

“First of all, I wanted to say how great it’s been to see all of Thimphu get so excited about SOL. The whole town’s been talking about it, as you know, and that’s a great sign of how successful you’ve made Kuzoo. So congratulations for that.”

Thujee led everyone in a cheer: “S-O-L! S-O-L!”

He’d just graduated from high school and was anxiously waiting to see what kind of scholarship he might get for college, his sights set on the United States or Europe. It was becoming vogue for young Bhutanese to save up so they could sit for the Test of English as a Foreign Language, administered in India, and then hope to find a scholarship or private sponsor so they could be educated in the West. For each student who got to study abroad, five more got the fever. To pass the time, Thujee had been hanging around the station a lot lately, picking up slots as a volunteer deejay. With his cheerful demeanor and sense of confidence, he was a born leader as well as radio announcer—more poised and eager than most of the paid staff. Beside TT and Lhaki, he was the most popular of the volunteers—on the air, and off.

“Quiet, please,” Sir Tenzin shouted over the din. Years of being a high school administrator made him deft at teenage crowd control. He nodded for me to continue.

“You’ve all heard me talk about what a huge responsibility it is being on the air. You probably know that Sir Tenzin used to be a principal.” I paused for dramatic effect, looking out at the group so they could nod their yeses.

“Now, what if he told you that his daughter was going to win a big prize at his school, simply because she was his daughter? Would that seem fair to you?”

I knew no one would answer. Bhutanese didn’t like to call attention to themselves in a crowd. So I called on Lhaki, who was sitting on the floor up front. She was still clutching her guitar, suppressing her strum.

“Umm, well, I guess not.”

“Right. Even if she was really, really, really great, and really deserved the prize, that wouldn’t seem right, would it?”

Thujee spoke up. “No, it would seem corrupt.”

“Exactly, Thujee, And it would be hard for you to trust Sir Tenzin if he told you his daughter had to win, even if he truly believed that she deserved to win.” A few heads timidly bobbed in agreement. “Well, that’s what I wanted to call your attention to today. You have all worked incredibly hard for the past few weeks on this contest, and you’re the reason why it’s been such a huge success. But you’ve also worked hard to gain the trust of the audience. And how do you think they’d react if the people who won the contest also ran the contest?”

“But we deserve the hamburgers,” chirped Khandu from the back of the room. “It doesn’t seem right that we don’t get to win. We’ve worked so hard on SOL.”

“But don’t you see? You do win. You get to be on the radio. You got to make up the contest. That’s the most important part about this station, you know. You have this amazing way to communicate with the entire city—soon the entire country. People depend on you for information and entertainment. That’s your reward.”

Remorse washed over the faces of the Kuzoo youth. Lhaki, TT, Thujee and some of the others looked as if they were about to cry.

“So, knowing all that, what do you think we should do?” I continued.

Lhaki shifted her guitar and sat up straight. “I think we have to take ourselves out of the competition. It wouldn’t look right if one of us won.”

Sir Tenzin stood to the side, fidgeting. I was pleasantly surprised I hadn’t needed him to back me up.

“That’s great, Lhaki,” he said, and I was even more surprised that he’d been listening closely. “Really great. Thujee, do you have the list so we can call the new finalists?”

“Yes, Sir Tenzin,” Thujee said, “I’ve got it. We’ll start calling now.”

The crowd dispersed, launching into action. The evening’s Symphony of Love was to begin in just fifteen minutes. Lhaki stood up, smiling to no one in particular, and strutted her way around the room, as if nothing had happened, as if this was the way it was supposed to turn out all along. A few minutes ago she’d been upset at the mere suggestion she shouldn’t win the contest, yet now she was fine with having lost her chance at victory and hamburgers.

As I watched her, I considered Valentine’s Day and loss. The mysteries of the brain and emotion, of letting go, of moving on. Maybe it was her short lifetime of Buddhist education that allowed Lhaki to snap back so quickly. The topic of the last episode of the Buddhist-themed Dharma Bites show had been “impermanence,” one of the fundamental beliefs of the religion. I’d listened intently as the hosts explained the concept: Everything is always in a
state of flux. Nothing lasts forever—no triumph, love, no happy feeling, no state of sadness. Clinging to a person or place or moment in time was futile and unwise and led to suffering; so did wanting things to be different than they were.

Maybe it was, in fact, simple teenage rebound and not her religious upbringing that was making the outcome of the contest sit well with Lhaki. Still, I liked considering this concept of impermanence. “Youth is temporary and fleeting,” the Kuzoo manifesto declared. Babies didn’t stay babies forever. Our bodies changed and grew old. Feelings morphed over time.

Impermanence wasn’t a word you’d ever want to associate with Valentine’s Day, as silly a Hallmark holiday as it was. Love was supposed to last forever. And yet, anyone slightly older than the typical Kuzoo volunteer knew that was a fairy tale. So why did we insist on pretending that it did, and that it should? It seemed to cause us nothing but misery, in exchange for a momentary feeling of pleasure, comfort, the illusion of safety.

Once, I’d been proposed to on Valentine’s Day by a man I adored; a year later he’d run away, with no explanation. Four years after that, the improbable occurred: As I meandered alone through Central Park on a snowy Valentine’s Day, I spotted him on a romantic walk with a beautiful red-haired woman, who I later learned was his new bride. Thrown into turmoil by the emotion of the coincidence, I found myself settling into acceptance, even feeling pleasure for him, over his new life. Right now, as another Valentine’s Day approached, I could acknowledge that it was okay that my fiancé had left, fine that he had—maybe, in fact, even better that he had. All these years I had believed that everyone else commanded stability, while I floundered about. That was ridiculous. How many loveless marriages had I witnessed, complicated relationships including children and tangled finances that made it difficult to escape? How many unhappy single people did I know who were waiting around to be rescued by someone, anyone before they allowed themselves to start living? Who did I know who had anything without compromise? Existing involved compromise. Life, particularly a love life, was far richer and more complicated than a fairy tale. Sometimes—more often than not—love came to you in a short fit of wonder, warmed you, enthused you, and then vanished as suddenly as it had arrived. And that was okay, too. Sitting here in this faraway radio station, where I’d just won a small victory, I could see now that I had it good in my own unique way. I was living a rich, full life. What more was there, really?

Kuzoo’s devoted listeners had a soft spot for the youngest contestants in the Symphony of Love. With Lhaki and TT disqualified, two little girls emerged as the top vote-getters: a ten-year-old named Kiba Yangzom captured first prize, and an eleven-year-old named Kinley Choki Dorji placed second. Kinley said she’d bring a friend to the Zone as her “date.” Kiba brought her big sister. The Bhutan Times headline that week proclaimed “Two Little Kuzoo Idols Are Here!”

Sir Tenzin decided that, under the circumstances, a celebratory party for all of the Kuzoo staff and SOL volunteers was in order. He cut a deal with the owner of the Zone to serve up Cokes and snacks to all Kuzoo volunteers who stopped in on the evening of Valentine’s Day. In the end, everyone did win.

A culture of dining out was uncommon in Bhutan, particularly among young people, who rarely had much pocket money. The Zone was a treat for all, and it was the only place in town where you could get a real hamburger, with fries. (The Swiss Bakery sold small, spicy meat patties on rolls and called those hamburgers, but that was a Bhutanese interpretation.) At night, the owners of the Zone dimmed the lights and illuminated the disco ball for those who might be inspired to dance. The establishment’s crowning feature was its karaoke machine, one of only two in Thimphu.

Thujee emceed the evening as if it were a live broadcast on Kuzoo, working the room and sounding a bit like Phil Donahue, though he’d have had no idea who that was. He had the hyperbolic phrasing of broadcast down cold. “Let’s give a hand to our generous sponsors here at the Zone,” he announced. “The Grammy this year shouldn’t go to anyone from Hollywood. It has to go to the young ladies who are singing here today. Give them a big hand!”

The disco ball sparkled; hoots and hollers and clapping hands egged Thujee on.

“And now, everyone, give a warm Kuzoo welcome to Kiba Yangzom, winner of the grand prize of the Symphony of Love. She’s going to entertain us with the hit ‘Where Is the Love’ by the Black Eyed Peas! Take it away, Kiba!”

Thujee handed her the microphone. The karaoke machine clicked into gear, and the tiny girl shrank into her chair, overwhelmed at having an audience. Someone behind the bar trained a spotlight on her. Once she started singing, her confidence grew, her voice becoming a bit louder. Soon, everyone at the Zone joined in. From the corner of my eye, I spotted one of my expat friends, Ed, the golf pro from Nova Scotia, searching the darkened room to find me. I waved him over to join me at my table and as I did, as the whole room swayed to the music, my heart swelled.

I might never see any of these people again after I left Bhutan and I wasn’t likely to accomplish anything grand during my time here. Or anywhere else, for that matter. I might not ever find the big love that had eluded me, and by
now, it was pretty clear I wouldn’t have kids of my own; raising a child alone was out of the question, financially and logistically. But here, all around me, was love. Nothing mattered more. Not the romantic kind—that was nice, but it wasn’t forever. What was important, and abundant, was the love that filled the room right now. No Valentine’s Day I’d experienced had been as wondrous as this, so full and beautiful.

In a corner, Pema, Ngawang, and Pink sat sipping sugary wine coolers. They’d gone to Pink’s apartment to change after work, and were heading next to Club Destiny, the nightclub where Pink moonlit as a deejay. This was the first time I’d seen them out of their national garb, dressed up for “party night.” They looked like pretty twenty-something gals anywhere who were ready to hit the town: tight T-shirts embellished with bling, low-rise jeans, smears of unnecessary makeup on their pristine skin.

Despite their festive getups, they radiated glumness. I knew the syndrome: on this couple-crazy holiday, neither Pema nor Ngawang had boyfriends, and Pink was going through a divorce. The last time they’d gone out dancing, they complained the next day at work that there weren’t even boys they wanted to flirt with at the bar.

I considered giving them a big-sisterly lecture about how Valentine’s Day was just a silly marketing conspiracy to convince you that without a “special someone” you were inferior, incomplete. I thought of doing the “girl power” thing, telling them how lucky they were to be beautiful and young and employed in a profession people clambered to work in back where I was from. How they were lucky to be alive at a time when their country was opening up in new and exciting ways. To please not make the mistake I’d seen so many women make, delaying life while waiting for a man to ride into the picture so they could be half of a couple and not need to find themselves. I even contemplated telling them my own Valentine’s Day stories.

But all of this was talk, and talk they didn’t really want to hear. I myself couldn’t have appreciated this when I was their age. You had to suffer through a few Valentine’s Days before you could understand what really mattered, anyway. So I ordered the girls up another round of wine coolers, got myself a shot of Bhutan Highland whiskey and Ed a Coca-Cola. Together we swayed to the music of the karaoke machine. A little while later, we would all head over to Club Destiny to go dancing.
THERE ARE A FEW VERY IMPORTANT THINGS TO know about the Bhutanese New Year, in addition to the fact that shops, schools, offices—almost everything except Kuzoo FM—shuts down for three days in celebration. For one thing, slaughtering of animals is prohibited. By government decree, the butchers remain closed throughout the first calendar month. Killing is never good for one’s karma, but it is seen as a particularly inauspicious way to launch a new year. That doesn’t mean eating meat is forbidden; merely the act of slaughter and the sale of meat are illegal.

For another: Drinking as much alcohol as possible is considered an essential part of the celebration. The drunker you are, the thinking goes, the happier you are, and the likelier you are to remain that way for the rest of the year. Thankfully, this holiday is traditionally marked at home with the family, so the roads in town aren’t necessarily glutted with “happy” drivers. In fact, on this particular New Year, the streets seemed emptier than I’d seen them yet. Even the five or six stray dogs that escorted me down the hill to Kuzoo each day appeared to be taking a holiday. Perhaps the fact that it arrived just before the first-ever celebration of the new king’s birthday in February was contributing to the serenity in the streets.

The salient points about this holiday called Losar were conveyed to me by Tenzin Choden, the radio jockey at Kuzoo with whom I’d had the least interaction. She was the quietest of the bunch, so soft-spoken that in person as well as on the air she was barely audible; she also had a husband, so she felt less compelled to hang around the studio before and after work. She’d show up at the appointed time to host whatever slot she was responsible for and then leave. Strictly business.

Then there was her general suspicion of me, a foreign interloper. This had much to do, I inferred from her comments, with the way I dressed. Since I had been told that it wasn’t disrespectful for a Westerner to wear Western clothing, I opted not to outfit myself in the Bhutanese national dress. As a newbie and an outsider, I felt like a clumsy poseur in the beautiful, brightly colored ensemble. Plus, it was nearly impossible to put it on properly without the aid of a fleet of assistants. The national garb consisted of layers of wangju (shirt), kira (dress), and tego (jacket) cinched with a stiff, wide fringed belt, and with a simple broach at the breastbone. Like an old Bhutanese house, it seemed to be held together magically, with nary a nail or screw. Struggling to assemble this outfit, neatly, I thought, must be what it’s like for a man the first hundred times he ties a necktie, only far worse because the entire body is involved. The day I’d tried my hand at draping my body Bhutan-style, total strangers, male and female, rushed up to me on the street to smooth me out. “You look beautiful in kira,” they’d say disingenuously, their tones making it clear that I might look beautiful in kira if I’d only learn to put it on correctly. Then they’d tug and pull and adjust to restore my honor. I was surprised my regular pack of stray-dog escorts hadn’t chimed in with their opinions, too.

Tenzin Choden was always meticulously attired in the national dress, including perfectly matched, dainty three-inch heels, which Bhutanese city women wore as evidence they’d successfully moved beyond the farm. The limousine shoes did not stop her from jauntily making her way up the steep hill and narrow staircase to the kitchen studio as casually as if she donned flip-flops. It was hard to imagine the starched twenty-four-year-old Tenzin ever dressing down. I imagined she must have a special kira, even, to sleep in.

“When you want to wear Bhutanese, you tell me,” she said disapprovingly, as she gave my all-black getup of turtleneck, stretchy pants, and clunky walking shoes a once-over. “I’ll come over to Rabten Apartments, and help you get dressed. You will look very nice.”

For all the self-assuredness I’d detected in the Bhutanese ladies I’d met, Tenzin in particular seemed to possess confidence in abundance. Her family was in the construction business, several Kuzooers had whispered, which was
polite shorthand to disclose that she was wealthier than most of the others. This explained the fact that she owned her own personal laptop, a luxury everyone at the station coveted most (having an iPod ranked second). Because of this possession, she had the freedom to work on her reports from home.

Given all this, I was surprised when Tenzin asked for help on a special project she’d assigned herself, a taped report on the meaning of the Bhutanese New Year, Losar. Why Tenzin chose to sink her teeth into an additional bit of work wasn’t clear; in the back of my head, I allowed myself the fantasy that my failed workshop and ongoing casual talks in the workroom each day might actually have sunk in, but I knew in my heart that that probably wasn’t the case. Whatever it was that had inspired Tenzin, I was happy to help.

To begin gathering interviews for the report, we walked down to the row of meat shops near the vegetable market, below the lower road where the bloody carcasses that hung in the windows would make even the most devoted carnivore commit to tofu and kale forever. They looked like Upton Sinclair’s nightmare incarnate, flesh dangling, flies swarming, the occasional stray dog panting and droolooing nearby. Tenzin whipped out a little minidisc recorder that she’d borrowed from the Kuzoo supply closet and interviewed a handful of shoppers (in Dzongkha) and butchers (in Nepali) as if she’d been wielding a microphone for years. Since most Bhutanese didn’t want the job of slaughtering animals at any time of year—very bad for the karma—Tenzin explained that the majority of the meat proprietors were immigrants. When she was done, she announced, “Okay, we can go now,” and marched us back up the half-mile hill through the center of town to the studio.

Now it was midway through the holiday, and Tenzin was finally ready for feedback on her edited segment.

The only other person in the studio was RJ Kinzang, a sweet, eager young man of twenty-three who came from more modest means than his colleague. He was the eldest of nine children; his family ran a tiny general shop off one of the ratter siide streets, and they all lived above it. He was there hosting the country music show. What better way to ring in the Bhutanese New Year than with a little twang? More than anyone, Kinzang loved working at Kuzoo, and loved being on the air. He was the guy everyone asked to cover for them when they didn’t want to come to work, which usually had something to do with their staying out too late the night before—or being slotted to host the country show. Kinzang didn’t drink, couldn’t afford to party, and never complained about doing the country show, the early bird show at 6:00 a.m., or anything else, for that matter. He was the only one of the radio jockeys who had any sense of Kuzoo mania or his growing (and polarizing) celebrity in the community. The audience either loved the way he spoke English, or they mocked it wickedly, but they all knew who he was.

Tenzin turned down the Garth Brooks playing on the workroom monitor so I could hear her opus free of distraction. I wobbled in the rickety desk chair, and braced myself.

The piece began with a short burst of traditional Bhutanese music, and after a few seconds, Tenzin’s voice mixed in underneath. Her read was clear and deliberate; I’d never heard her speak that way.

“Losar, the Bhutanese New Year, is considered a very auspicious time, marking the beginning of a very happy and prosperous new year. People believe with the starting of the new year, all things will go well and prosper. So to celebrate the special occasion, government offices are closed, shops are closed, and people stay home from work to be with their families.”

I reckoned I was one of five people who’d tune in who didn’t already know everything Tenzin was reporting.

“To know more about Losar and the change in the year, which is the Hog year, I interviewed Sir Lugtaen Gyatso, principal of the Institute for Language and Cultural Studies at the Royal University of Bhutan, which is located in Semtokha, Thimphu.”

Informing listeners that Semtokha was in Thimphu was the Bhutanese version of “Who’s buried in Grant’s Tomb?” The music swelled a bit, and Tenzin posed a question:

“What is the significance of Losar, and could you explain about the origin of Losar, la?”

The la was the most charming of the Bhutanese verbal tics. It was frequently tacked to the end of a sentence, usually a question, to soften it. Often, it was deployed deferentially, by younger people talking to elders, or anyone to an authority, as a sign of respect.

Sir Gyatso responded:

“Well, Losar is New Year. Its significance is very straightforward, because it’s the beginning of a new calendar, the beginning of a new time that everybody wishes to see unfold. So many wonders. We Bhutanese, being religious, we believe in spiritual power, and therefore we Bhutanese strongly believe that a good beginning is a sign of a good conclusion. I think the significance of Losar is to begin with a good start that will last until the last day of the year.”

From there, Sir Gyatso got a bit more technical. This New Year, it seemed, wasn’t the only one in Bhutan. There were actually nine different starting points to the year. Each had a different name. After letting him ramble on for a few minutes, Tenzin asked what was in store for this year of the Female Fire Hog.

Sir Gyatso sounded apologetic, as if it were his fault that the heavens were delivering a clunker:

“This is not going to be a great year. After every nine years comes a year that’s considered to be a bad year. And
every tenth year is supposed to be the worst year of that decade.”

Whether this was the ninth or tenth year in the cycle, I couldn’t quite glean from his comments, but the underlying message was clear: Things were not going to be good, not for a while. I understood why the coronation of the newly anointed king and the democratic elections had to wait until 2008.

Tenzin asked what could be done given the dire astrological predictions.

Sir Gyatso’s response was very Buddhist, very wise. Big tasks would have to be tabled out of respect for misaligned stars, but life had to go on, despite the astral challenges.

“I think there is no timing for good things. We can always try to be good human beings, do a little bit of soul searching, ask ourselves, ‘How good a human being am I?’ We can still try to do something good, and avoid doing something bad.”

Now Tenzin introduced an interview with the proprietor of the Wong Meat Shop, who said he’d been mobbed with customers in the last few days before the meat ban took effect. Excerpts of Tenzin’s interviews with the shoppers followed, and she translated that they were saying, basically, they couldn’t live without meat. After all, eating well and plentifully at the beginning of the year was another way to ensure it would be a good one.

Sounds of a giant vat of liquid sloshing about for a few seconds mixed together with her next narration:

“Drinking is part of our celebration for any occasion. As the celebration nears, Karma—name changed—is busy helping her mother make ara.”

Ara is a clear wine, distilled from rice. A Bhutanese friend plied me with several large glasses one night. It left my head thick and cloudy. It was delicious, but it wasn’t something you’d drink if you were hoping to do anything productive the next day.

In this place with so few names, and where everyone could identify a person with only the vaguest description, I loved that “Karma” had felt compelled to conceal her identity. Whatever her real name, she sounded as sweet as Goldilocks making porridge.

“I’m making ara for Losar celebration, la. People should be very happy, and in order to make my family intoxicated and happy, I’m making ara.”

“Can you consume all you are making, la?”

From the background audio, one suspected that Karma either had an enormous family, or was running a distillery. She responded, matter-of-factly:

“Somehow we have to make money. We will sell half of what we make.”

The Bhutanese music mixed in again, and our intrepid reporter returned for the finale:

“All will be busy preparing for their Losar. Some will be frying snacks, some will be decorating their altar, some will be practicing for the archery tournament, and so on. That is all for now. I hope you enjoyed listening to the Losar program. Until then, on behalf of Kuzoo FM 90, it’s Tenzin Choden. For now it’s bye and Happy Losar.”

As the Bhutanese music trailed to a close, Tenzin looked at me, her eyes wide. It was clear that she was pleased with herself. I wanted to say so many things, helpful suggestions and edits to make it a “better program,” at least to my ears. Had she shown me a script beforehand, I would have felt freer to contribute them then. Of the many editorial tweaks I might have suggested, though, none mattered quite so much as the fact that she’d taken the initiative to prepare the report in the first place.

Back home, a story tied to a holiday would have been prepared weeks in advance and aired the day before. Though the piece wasn’t terribly illuminating, it was perfectly fine. In fact, by the standards of Kuzoo, it was quite an achievement. She had collected sound and edited it, and mixed in music and recorded a narration. So I resisted the urge to criticize, and said, sincerely, “Good job, Tenzin”—praise she didn’t seem a bit surprised to hear. She flashed a big smile and scurried into action, copying the audio onto her thumb drive, marching into the studio without knocking, and uploading it onto the playback computer. When she was ready, she hit Play, and her Losar segment was beamed out to all of Thimphu, probably halfway through a nice fresh batch of ara now, anyway.

A FEW MINUTES LATER, the Kuzoo phone rang. Madam Kunzang Choden (no relation to Tenzin) was calling to tell me that her husband was on his way over to pick me up. I’d almost forgotten I had a Losar lunch date with Bhutan’s first female novelist, who also happened to be, along with Madame Carolyn, the other half of the king-appointed Kuzoo board.

Madam Choden was a tall woman with a sweet, round face, her thick hair pulled back into a bun. She looked like a cross between an earth mother and a kindly, youthful grandma; there was an air of formality about her that was almost regal. The Kuzoo staffers told me she was a descendent of a prominent religious family from central Bhutan. She was held in such high regard that most people called her “Ashi,” an honorific usually reserved for the queens. I
myself called her Madam, and she didn’t correct me.

Long before she started writing, Madam Choden had lived a life that read like fiction. Like a handful of
Bhutanese of her generation—though most of them male—she had traveled at age nine to next-door India to get a
proper education that could not be had at home. Schools were scarce in Bhutan in the 1960s, mostly reserved for
monks, and construction of the roads was just getting under way. To get to the convent school where she’d been
enrolled, Madam Choden had ridden on horseback for twelve days with an entourage of attendants.

She went on to earn two bachelor’s degrees, one in India, the other in Nebraska, and, for a time, had been a
teacher. Now she was one of a handful of authors to have emerged in the kingdom. She had published several books
of Bhutanese folktales, as well as a novel, which happened to be about a girl from a remote part of Bhutan who,
premodernization in the sixties, yearns to explore the world.

Madam Choden had just returned from a visit to the United States to see her children, who were studying there,
and had brought home a fever for American public radio. When I told her I worked in radio, I could feel her
brightening. And that’s when I’d been invited to lunch.

Promptly at noon, a little white car sped up the hilly driveway to the Kuzoo studios. Since I’d arrived in Bhutan,
it was the first time anyone had shown up at the exact moment they said they would. A gray-haired European
gentleman emerged, strode to the other side of the car, and opened the passenger door, all with a flourish of
chauffeuresque formality. He introduced himself as Walter, stuck out his hand to shake mine, motioned for me to get
in, got back in the car himself, and sped down the hill and onto the road, as efficient as a Swiss timepiece. Madam
Choden was so quintessentially Bhutanese that I had forgotten she was married to a native of Switzerland. He was a
handsome complement to the good looks of Madam Choden. Several of the more erudite Bhutanese had spouses
from outside the country, a fact I’d observed with curiosity.

Around a few corners, past my apartment, and left, right, left along a winding road, up a driveway to a house
hidden on a hill. We stopped in front of a little country cottage I never would have found on my own. The branches
of the barren trees blew in the wind; the air felt empty and quiet, as if the whole city were inside today. It wasn’t as
cold as a February day might be in New York, but it definitely felt like winter.

A yapping little white dog served as welcome committee—a house pet as opposed to a stray—followed by an
elegant Madam Choden, who accepted the box of cookies I handed her. The bakeries had been closed and I’d had to
resort to Indian imports. She announced that Rinchen, her maid, had just pulled the pesto pasta off the stove.

"Pesto from my trip to the United States. Trader Joe’s," she said proudly. "I also have crackers and anchovy
spread from Paris."

My stomach danced with pleasure at the prospect of such delicious food.

"And since it’s a holiday, we must have some of this wine, too," Walter said, pulling a bottle from a cabinet. I
squinted to read the label on the sly, as if I were looking at a mirage in the desert. Wine was very hard to come by in
Thimphu, except for ara; at the watering hole in town frequented by expats you had to order an entire bottle,
because demand for imported wine was so low that it wasn’t cost-effective to open one to sell by the glass. Since the
local microbrew called Red Panda was available for only twenty-five cents a glass in most bars, spending $15 for a
bottle of whatever wine was in stock seemed not just decadent but wasteful.

Walter caught me staring and kindly indulged my curiosity by holding up the bottle so I could get a better look. It
was my favorite, Shiraz, from Australia. "We get it at the duty-free shop. It’s the best they send us here."

As he poured three glasses, I heard noise at the door, and Madam Choden left the room to tend to it. She
reemerged into the dining area moments later, followed by a very tall, distinguished-looking Western man, fortyish.
Her introduction was as formal as if she were debuting him at court.

"Presenting Martin Gallatin, Thimphu’s newest and most eligible bachelor," she said, though she finished with a
giggle.

Dear God, am I being fixed up? I wondered as I savored the spiciness of my wine. Was he widowed, divorced;
was she a Bhutanese lady; were there kids? Half the generous glass Walter had poured for me was already warming
my insides.

Martin, whose name isn’t really Martin, looked my way and said a lukewarm hello. Perhaps I was as much a
surprise to him as he was to me. He handed over a pot of jam to Madam Choden.

“Here’s all that’s left of Claudine,” he said, smiling, and I supposed this Claudine must not be deceased. If she
were, this Martin was pretty crass.

Walter led us out to a beautifully set table on a glass-enclosed patio filled with plants. A cat lay wrapped around
a lamp, her stomach rising and falling peacefully with each breath. We could have been in the French countryside, or
in a cabin in North Carolina, or in a thousand other charming places on a quiet day. But where we happened to be
was in a pretty cottage in the capital city of Bhutan at the dawn of twin holidays.

“I can’t place your accent,” I said to Martin, as Walter poured him a glass of wine and refilled mine. I felt a bit
greedy, but it was delicious.

“You can’t? Well, guess.” I was trying to be charming, but Martin didn’t seem to bite.

“Well, hmm, are you German?” Swiss-German, I figured. Maybe that’s how he knew Walter.

“German, la.” He looked at Walter. “Dear God, no. I’ll try not to be insulted. Germans, la.”

I couldn’t tell if Martin was trying to be funny in mimicking the Bhutanese way of talking. I was getting a bit drunk, and I feared I’d made an ugly American mistake by remarking that someone who was likely trilingual had an accent. Unilingual me was the one with an accent. I wished I were back at the station drinking watery instant coffee and listening to the music, helping RJ Kinzang line up country songs.

Casting about for a way to save face, I said, “Okay, I think I’ve got it. Thai! You’re from Thailand, that’s it!” Walter and Madam Choden were generous enough to laugh at my effort.

Martin looked my way and smiled; I hadn’t offended him terribly, after all. “Yes, la! That’s it!” He sipped some wine and patted the little white dog. “Actually, I am Norwegian, by way of Switzerland.”

With that settled, the conversation somehow turned to potatoes. The United Nations had announced that the next year would be “the year of the spud.” The tuber was so abundant in central Bhutan that there was talk of opening a potato chip factory. Both Walter and Martin were integrally involved in agricultural development in Bhutan, and they extolled the virtues of the vegetable as an important cash crop for Bhutanese farmers. I shared my anecdotal market research about the preference among the Kuzooers for imported chips in flashy packages over my preference: the tastier, fresher homemade kind.

“Packaged goods,” chimed in Madam Choden. “There’s a fascination here for packaged goods, because people never had access to them before. They’re seen as a sign of affluence, worldliness. That’s why we have so much litter. No one knows what to do with the wrapping, because few food items before ever came in wrappers.”

Circuitously, we moved to a discussion of Martin’s time in another part of Asia, where Walter and Madam Choden had lived for a while, too. He related a lengthy tale about an American girl with whom he had become smitten. She later published a story in a prestigious literary journal about the circumstances of their meeting. Martin found this very impressive, but it also left him with a measure of defeat. He had written his own interpretation of the events and hadn’t managed to get his into print.

I shifted uncomfortably. Martin was dominating our Losar lunch, when I’d been hoping to learn more about Madam Choden and her writing, and about the library in town where she was a volunteer, the museum she was building on her ancestral land, what her home district of Bumthang was like, and whether Bhutan was ready for its first democratic elections next year. Not about a strange man with a crush on some younger woman he’d never see again.

Eventually, under my persistent questioning, Walter and Madam Choden pulled out pictures of their kids. We feasted on the crackers and anchovy paste, and the pesto pasta was served up. When the requisite pot of emadatse arrived, I quickly passed it on without taking any. Another bottle of wine was opened. Martin grabbed my camera and snapped some photos of us all.

All of a sudden it was 3:00 p.m. and Martin had to go wrap up some things before the holidays continued with time off to honor the king’s birthday. Everyone insisted he must drive me down the hill, even though what I really wanted to do was walk down and breathe in the quiet of the new year, work off some of the wine, savor the most delicious meal I’d had since I’d arrived. But Walter and Madam Choden were emphatic, and they waved gaily as we pulled out of the driveway.

In the privacy of his car, one on one, Martin dropped the annoying theatrics, and his vulnerable side emerged. He suddenly became a more enjoyable companion. As the car chugged down Norzin Lam and approached the studio, I popped the question I’d been dying to ask.

“So what exactly happened to Claudine? And when?”

“She left, with our kids. Seven months ago.”

“Where did she go?”

“To Switzerland. She’s at her family’s place.”

“How old are the kids?”

“Eleven and nine.”

“How long have you been here?”

“Six years.”

I imagined, in my limited experience of Bhutan, and without knowing a thing about Claudine, that it might be a particular challenge for outsiders to raise a family in Thimphu. There appeared to be a small community of expats who were here through various nongovernmental agencies, and they were said to be fairly tight-knit. But it must have been hard to be so far away from familiar territory and the creature comforts of home, especially when you had kids. There had to have been other factors contributing to Claudine’s departure, though. Marriages didn’t just
dissolve like that—particularly when there were children involved.

“Have you looked up that writer woman you keep talking about? You still seem kind of obsessed with her…."

“I’m not obsessed with her.”

“But she’s about all you talked about at lunch. Besides potatoes.”

Martin pulled up in front of the old foreign minister’s house-turned-radio station and stopped the car.

“Probably because you remind me a bit of her, la.” He laughed nervously, as if he knew what he was saying could get him into trouble. “But yes, yes, I have looked her up, and she’s married. They both are rather well-heeled, if you know what I mean.”

“Ahh. It helps to be if you’re going to be a writer. Maybe she really loves you and is waiting for you to confess.” I looked him in the eye and smiled, to make sure he could see I was teasing. “Send me the story. I’m curious.”

I found myself flattered that Martin had made a comparison between me and this literary prodigy he admired and, suddenly, irrationally jealous that this invisible woman had captivated him.

“Her story? Or mine?”

“Well, I’m more interested in yours. But sure. Send both.”

“I will. Let’s have dinner this week?”

“Yes,” I said without hesitation.

THAT NIGHT, I sat in the quiet of my little apartment, tethered online with the dial-up connection and listening to the Bhutan Broadcasting Service news on TV. It was rare for me to be on my own in the evening here, and I found myself liking this self-contained multimedia bubble. It felt different in the Himalayas than it would have back in Los Angeles, less like a lonely way of killing time; television, in particular, was a fun curiosity here rather than a droning nuisance. But why? In the end, news was news and commercials were commercials, weren’t they? Even the Indian channels piped in on cable were screeching dreck; the only difference from home was the looks and the names. The BBS still had a rough, homespun edge to it, more utilitarian than glitz, which somehow made it more palatable.

“We’ll bring you the international news after this short break,” announced the kira-clad anchorwoman from behind the news desk, which looked like any other news desk except that it was adorned with the signature Bhutanese woodwork. She had just shown pictures of a roadblock due to a landslide on the highway near Bumthang that had stranded hundreds of people. One road being shut down could immobilize much of the country.

An animated clock with a second hand that was rapidly flying around the dial flashed on the screen, and an announcer declared: “Time to file your PIT. Time to file your PIT. Time to file your PIT. Time is running short! File your personal income tax now.”

Beauty shots of flowers and birds, set to lovely music, flashed on the screen, and after a few seconds, a woman read in Bhutanese-accented English, as if she were reciting poetry: “Wherever you are, whatever you do, when you think of refreshment, think of ice-cold Coca-Cola.”

A static shot of a shop downtown, crammed with merchandise: “Kidsy, your exclusive kids store, announces Losar sales…”

Photos of a newly relocated gym: “Sakten Health Club and Saloon are pleased to announce Relax and Recover and Rejuvenate…”

Commercial break over, and back to the studio, where the anchorwoman informed the people of Bhutan about a stone-throwing mob attacking the deposed Nepalese king as he embarked on a pilgrimage. Of a court in southern India sentencing three members of a regional political party to death for killing three female students in 2000. Of the death-by-remote-control bomb blast of a key Pakistani health official, who was leading a polio immunization drive. In comparison to the outside world, little Bhutan lived up to its reputation as the last Shangri-la, peaceful and serene—not its reward for being long sequestered. What would a villager in the remote reaches of the country think of these reports? News of a world beyond in strife, bracketed by simple commercials offering consumer goods. It was a good thing the government was committed to Gross National Happiness, because that philosophy seemed a crucial necessity to offset the effects of a few hours in front of the television. “Happiness with what you have” wasn’t exactly the backbone philosophy of advertising and media and news.

An email from Martin popped into my inbox, inviting me to dinner. “I have fresh greens here,” he wrote, knowing how enticing that would be to a nutrition-starved visitor; good-looking fresh vegetables were hard to come by in winter in Thimphu. His story was attached, and he insisted I didn’t have to read it.

I opened it immediately. It was beautiful, and funny, and long—an account of running into this woman and her friends as they toured a village. In the story, Martin confessed to what I suspected might be true: He turned on the sarcasm in the face of attractive women to mask his insecurity. An introspective scientist whose third language was English and who could write very well. This Martin was intriguing.
Tuesday Around 5:30 P.M., I heard a chugging noise in the driveway outside my apartment. Martin had arrived to pick me up. When I got in the car, I noticed he was more relaxed, and more handsome, than I remembered.

I didn’t usually leave Kuzoo so early, but everything was so quiet, what with the holidays, which would keep schools and offices shut a few more days. The ride to Martin’s was comically short, just a quarter of a mile. All this time I’ve been here, I thought, this man has been around the corner and I had no idea.

The side door of the house opened into a lovely, homey kitchen. A dozen pairs of shoes of various sizes sat neatly lined up just inside the entryway. Martin offered me a pair of floppy women’s slippers in exchange for my boots; Claudine lived on. Blue glass bottles of filtered water and colorful Bhutanese thermoses, used to carry food on picnics or to work, lined the windowsills. A shopping list lay on the table: prayer flags, TP, salt. Martin motioned for me to sit and offered me a choice of a Red Panda or a bottle of the same wine we’d had with Walter and Madam Choden; I opted for the latter, since the taste of the red we’d enjoyed was still fresh in my memory. Besides, the birth anniversary of the king seemed to merit a more formal beverage. A cork was popped, two glasses poured, and Martin started cooking.

While he fixed the meal, he asked with a keen interest about my work and my life. He refilled our glasses, lit a candle, and served us, never interrupting the flow of questioning or my responses. This was how I’d often prepare dinner for a friend back home, and I was enjoying being the guest. The wine was a truth serum, and I felt comfortable giving in to the gently somber mood of this house and of the holiday. I could tell this man everything, and he wouldn’t care or judge me; we were strangers thrown together in an odd place at an interesting moment in time, and we weren’t likely to ever cross paths again beyond the borders of Bhutan. And so I poured out the highlights of my life as if I were in a confessional—the good, the bad, the ugly, scenes from my life I hadn’t shared even with people I considered good friends. I ended with how now, in my forties, I couldn’t help wondering “if” about everything.

Martin looked straight at me, the glow of the candle all that was lighting the room. The only light outside the kitchen window came from the waxing moon; everything around us was perfectly still. Every once in a while, one of the house dogs dutifully guarding the front door would yawn, as if to remind us we weren’t alone. I had this hunch Martin would understand the notion of loss, since he’d experienced such a profound one himself. He had on his face an expression of pure empathy, and I wasn’t ashamed of anything I’d said. Or anything that had happened in my life.

“I think everyone, if they’re paying attention, asks the ‘if’ question,” Martin said, breaking the silence. “Sounds like we’re both in a state.”

“Well, I’m in a different state, of course, than you.” My losses were ephemeral. He had a longtime partner and children somewhere else in the world.

“Yes. It never occurred to me this might happen.”

“It must be very hard not to see your kids.”

“Eight thousand four hundred and seventy miles,” he said without a second of calculation. The light from the candle flickered in his eyes; I could feel his sadness and the purity of his emotion. “It is very difficult.”

I breathed deep and steady. I wanted to thank Sebastian or karma or whoever it was who’d led me here to Bhutan, to this place where the people, the conversations, everyday life was what I hoped it could be. I felt better here, freer than I ever had, more me than ever before.

Abruptly, he stood up and cleared the dinner plates, poured two glasses of port, and said, “Let’s go to the living room.”

To do that, you had to walk through a formal dining area; I squinted to see if in the darkness I could make out a picture of his family, but I couldn’t. Walking into the living room was like landing in Narnia—a magical, dictionary definition of a family room, hidden, beautiful, warm. I wondered: What had happened here in those six years? The life that had unfolded in this house was still so present. A child’s drum set in one corner; several plush couches inviting you to sink in; enough books, CDs, DVDs to stock a small public library—fiction, science, Asian themed, Euro themed—kid’s stuff everywhere. The moon shone in from one of the windows, and the stars were bright; I was drunk from the wine and getting drunker just smelling the port. Here I was in Bhutan in this beautiful space with this complicated man, and I never wanted to leave.

But of course, I had to. At some point—some point very soon, in fact. The clock was ticking toward the end of my stay. And that was okay. It was more than okay; it was perfect, actually. The Himalayan air, the very notion of Gross National Happiness, and the exercise of the three good things—the cocktail of them had convinced me to embrace the moment before me, now, to appreciate it for what it was, but not to hold it so tight that I never let it go. For another moment would occur, and then another.

As content as I felt right now, I felt heartbroken, too. Imagining the loss and sadness and confusion of Martin’s situation conjured up all the loss and sadness I had ever felt; Martin had managed to have a family, and even though it had fractured, it was sacred. I tried to manage this realization as we relaxed into the room. He positioned some
pillows so he could lay out on the floor, and I chose a particularly inviting chair across from him. Using his computer as a jukebox, he played songs for me as we talked—unusual music: ballads and vocalists I’d never heard before.

On the occasion of His Majesty the king’s twenty-seventh birthday, I was about to be seduced by a tall, recently separated, clearly heartbroken scientist in the home it seemed his family had evacuated in an instant and which he preserved as if they were coming back the next day. I wanted to know everything that had happened for Martin, everything about him; I wanted to understand everything about Claudine and the children. Even though I couldn’t possibly. And then, as he worked his way through his musical collection, Martin said the words that broke the spell, that he had to have known would break the spell.

“My French lover adores this song.”

It hadn’t disturbed me to be on the brink of an embrace with a married-but-separated man whose estranged wife’s slippers I was wearing while I lounged on Thai silk pillows they’d probably bought together in a fit of long-forgotten domestic bliss. Well, it didn’t bother me that much; I had taken it on faith that I wasn’t interfering in an active marriage, but you never really know, do you, what’s happening beyond what someone reveals? They themselves might not really know. But this casual mention of the “lover” changed things. Was this lover the reason Claudine left? Did she live here in Thimphu? If she didn’t, where could they have met and how could they possibly carry on an affair? I tried not to act surprised at Martin’s revelation, as ham-handed as it was.

“French lover. Obviously she has good taste. Someone in Bhutan?”

“No, no, French lover in France.”

“Where did you meet?”

“I met her in Europe. She’s very young.”

By now I had determined that Martin was a year older than me, forty-four.

“How young is very young?”

“Twenty-four.”

“Ah. Ridiculously young. But not quite fifty-fifty young.”

“What’s that?”

“Literally half your age.”

Martin smiled.

“You’d better be careful,” I said, trying on the role of advisor. “Someone that age is bound to want to have children. Eventually.”

“I wouldn’t mind having more children. But I don’t think this will come to that. I don’t know why she has anything to do with an old man like me.”

“Well, I do. Men are tedious until they hit forty.”

Some sense overtook the wine and the port and the exhaustion and the dashed desire to get closer. Martin had revealed that there was a woman in his life; I had misunderstood the cues. Even though I was unlikely to see him again, I couldn’t be a part of this. It was time to go back to my little place in Rabten.

“You know, I’m really exhausted. It’s probably a good time for me to head home.”

Now Martin was the one trying to mask surprise, and he started to stand up, as if he were expecting this. “I’ll drive you down the hill, of course.”

“No need to.”

“Yes, if the dogs don’t get you, the rats might. I insist.”

Small talk was punctuated by dog howls as we wended our way out of the driveway. Had someone pushed the car, he wouldn’t have needed to turn the ignition on to get me home just down the hill. None of the houses we passed showed any sign of life. As we entered my driveway, the two resident chubby Rabten dogs hovered anxiously around Martin’s car. We sat and talked for so long that Martin finally turned off the engine so as not to disturb my neighbors. Without the heat of the engine, I got so cold I folded my coat around my knees, but we just kept on talking.

Finally, I said, wow, it’s really freezing, and it’s late, and thank you for a wonderful meal—God, real green things, delicious, how wonderful—and thanks for all the music. And I leaned over to give him a good-night kiss on the cheek, because I meant it. It had been an amazing night in what had been a month of gorgeous days and evenings halfway around the world from any world I knew. And my attempt at a sweet, polite thank-you morphed into an embrace, and all the tension of the evening was poured into a very long, very beautiful kiss.

Morning arrives and I walk into town; the streets are as empty today as they’d been the night before. The ridge that juts out from the mountain, where a line of cypress trees are perched on the edge, grabs me every time. Just the right
distance between them, as if nature had intentionally yard-sticked the arrangement. Their simple beauty looms high above the city; just looking at them makes me happy. They would make my list of three good things almost every day.

Except I haven’t done a list in weeks now. I’ve been so caught up in the richness and fullness of every minute here, I haven’t even remembered to make lists. I haven’t felt the need. It’s become second nature just to look at each day, even when it was ordinary or even when something was going wrong, and find the goodness.

Today, in honor of the twin holidays, three of my expat friends are celebrating with a special lunch. Today’s gathering will be much different from our usual appointments to drink Red Panda beer in my apartment or grab enormous plates of fried rice for $1 at the restaurant Chopstix in town. Instead we are heading up to the fancy resort, the Aman.

I spot Ed near the long line of prayer wheels on the square. He’s all spiffed up today, wearing a sports jacket. The attire seems perfect on him, but out of context given the surroundings. Too country club. Several Bhutanese stand around him, smiling, grinning. They are wearing woven triangular hats, hats I haven’t seen before.

“Nomadic yak herders,” he explains, gesturing toward them, clearly confused about what to say. “They don’t speak any English, but I think they want money. I gave them some.…”

They also want to stare at him. Likely they’ve never seen a tall, light-haired Caucasian man dressed in casual business clothing. I step into sight, and they want to examine me, too, a short lady covered in black clothing. I wish more than I have the entire time I’ve been here that I could speak their language, so I can ask what they’re thinking. I’d heard stories from Bhutanese who were my age and had grown up in the villages, without seeing paper—paper!—or wristwatches until they were teenagers. As much as I think I comprehend the magnitude of the changes here in recent years, as compassionate a student as I may be of the impact media will have on the people, I am aware that I don’t really have any idea what it’s like to be Bhutanese.

Pam arrives. She’d come from the hospital, where she’s preparing medical equipment to take to the remotest reaches of the country. Ever since her divorce, she’s been running around the world to volunteer as a nurse in different countries. Most of the villages here in Bhutan that she’ll visit have never seen Western medicine of any kind.

“Good day.” She nods, even though she knows they don’t understand. “Have a good day,” she says, and moves us toward the road, politely and firmly. Ed and I obediently trot along behind her.

Yet I find myself magnetized and looking back. I don’t have a nursing degree like Pam, but there must be something useful I can contribute out here in the world, out from behind the desk to which I’d long been tethered. Face-to-face with the most traditional Bhutanese I’ve met, I want to know more. Not just about Bhutan, although there’s no question I haven’t had enough time here. These nomads inspire me to want to see more of the world, experience more of it. To become a bit more nomadic myself. To help the world somehow, instead of chronicling its demise from a journalist’s perch and a newsroom. I believe I have just made a Losar resolution of a sort.

Our friend Mayumi rushes up from the street with a wave. My three companions peel me away and into the taxi, and we start the drive out of the center of town and up, up the winding road. The resort is built on land owned by one of the queens and attracts the kind of tourist any country would love: The price for a room is a thousand dollars a night. And it’s as beautiful as it should be for that much money, a Westerner’s fantasy interpretation of Bhutan. It evokes the kingdom, but it is nothing like it, with sophisticated muted tones, instead of the local brightness; plush furniture, instead of the hard-backed utilitarian fare in most places. Giant picture windows to showcase the view. We are enjoying lunch here at a reduced price, the local’s discount no real local can afford, $50 a head. As nice as it is to eat a lovely meal in luxurious surroundings with good company, I wish we’d given the nomadic people this money and gone to my place, where I’d have made us spaghetti from the Swiss Bakery.

“Here’s to the new year,” we say, hoisting our glasses. “Here’s to the king and a long, healthy reign. Here’s to all of us in Bhutan.”

Ed’s face twists with tears; he doesn’t even try to conceal his emotion. Mayumi is leaving in a week, and that’s when Pam is going on the road. And I will be gone not long after. Our shared meals and confidences will soon be history. We are like four whirlpools that have run together for a while, Ed declares poetically; these weeks we’ve had together have felt like years. When time is limited and the environment is so different from your own, relationships skip the “how do you do” phase and go straight to the heart of friendship.

He’s right, I think, as we toast again, but surely not just any environment could conjure these feelings. There’s something about Bhutan, even in the language. Kuzu zampo means hello in Dzongkha, but there isn’t a word for good-bye.
ON THE MIDDLE FINGER OF MY LEFT HAND IS A circle of hammered gold, topped with a large, tear-shaped oval of turquoise. I got it at the shop across from the bank on Norzin Lam. There are five or six such stores up and down the main strip that sell the few items you can take home to remind you of your visit, as if things could possibly do justice to an experience here. The stores sell beautiful handwoven textiles, many of them purported to be relics from the shopkeepers’ family trees; in an age of inexpensive machine-woven copies imported from India, it’s better to turn grandmother’s handiwork into cash. Little statuettes of various Buddhas, jewel-adorned prayer wheels. Prayer flags that couldn’t possibly look the same when displayed in one lonely string anywhere other than in the magnificent open landscape of these mountains.

The only souvenir I wanted was this ring. The yellowness and the heft of its matte gold, and the simple, brilliant blue of the stone, drew my eye when I’d seen it on the hands of men and women around town. The question was where to buy one for myself.

A tiny, hunched old lady guarded the entrance to one particular shop. Day in, day out, she stood out front with a cat curled by her feet, its stomach rising and falling softly with each breath, the two of them a still and quiet duo. Occasionally the lady’s face would brighten into a smile in response to a passerby’s “Kuzu zampo-la.” But this wasn’t tourist season, so buyers were scarce.

After careful consideration, I decided this would be the place where I would spend my money. The shop was a bit run-down, and might not have had the selection of the others, but I preferred it to the shinier outfits on the other side of the traffic circle, over near the tourist hotels.

The lady seemed surprised as I made my way through the door. She’d probably long ago given up hope that I might make a purchase, for I passed by the shop at least a few times each day. She motioned for me to stay by the counter as she walked to the back, I supposed, to fetch someone. A woman about my age, who identified herself as the lady’s daughter, emerged. She could help me, she said, since she could speak English. She asked where I was from, what had brought me to Bhutan, and when I was leaving. I told her that I was headed home tomorrow.

“So sad that you have to go. Will you come back to Bhutan?”

“Oh,” I answered, “I hope so. I hope so.” Her mother returned to the counter and handed me a cup of tea. As I often did in Thimphu, I felt like an honored guest, and not in this case simply because I held the promise of a sale. A visitor from so far away was still a special occasion.

“May I see that ring, please?” I pointed to one of three similar rings in the jewelry case, the smallest among them. The lady complied, and slipped it onto my hand without effort. It fit perfectly. I held out my arm, wrist pointed up, and admired the adornment. It looked as pretty as I’d hoped.

“So sixty-five hundred ngultrum today is about …” I tried to calculate out loud, looking at the tiny white label of a price tag. The exchange rate changed daily and the ngultrum, pegged to the Indian rupee, had been rising in value lately.

There was no need to be approximate. The lady whipped out a calculator from under the counter and started pressing the keys.

“A hundred forty dollars.”

“Hmm. I’ll have to go get some money across the street …”

I didn’t even bother to ask about credit cards; only one shop accepted them, and with a steep surcharge, to boot. Plastic was still the domain of visitors. Most Bhutanese used only cash, though printed currency had been introduced only forty-odd years ago. The couple of automatic teller machines at the bank weren’t designed to work with anything but a local account.

“Traveler’s check? We can take a traveler’s check.” First I’d heard of that here. As I pulled out some checks and endorsed them, I joked that I was “getting married to myself.” The old lady smiled broadly, wanting to be agreeable, but not understanding. Her daughter took my words literally.

“Yes.” She smiled, and then she told me what I already knew. “That is a wedding ring here in Bhutan.”
The next day, I admire my Bhutanese jewel while I wait to check in at the Paro Airport ticket counter. I love this portable souvenir, and I love the significance I’ve ascribed to it, too. I am married to myself. Who else do I really need? It has taken me forty-three years to feel whole, to believe that nothing, really, is missing. Now is what matters; I have all I need. What’s important isn’t some promised future event, relationship, or achievement. The world is smaller now, and larger, filled with possibilities. Every time I catch a glimpse of my hand, I have a tangible reminder to celebrate. And to thank Bhutan for havingPinched my feelings tight.

Right this moment, I am exhausted with the emotion of leaving and the prospect of going back to my job and to Los Angeles. Sir Phub Dorji stopped by in the afternoon to bid me farewell; it was the first time I’d seen him since the day I arrived in the kingdom. After our tea together, I stayed up all night dancing at Club Destiny with the Kuzoo gang, and then at Benez, a bar near the traffic circle. There, a Bhutanese patron told me in his drunken haze how, after finishing graduate school in journalism in the United States ten years ago, he came back to Bhutan and quit his job at the newspaper not long after. “Everything about the job—and me—was different,” he said. I already suspected that my reaction to home would be the same. The question was whether I’d allow myself to do something rash.

Once we closed down the bar, Andy, one of my younger expat friends, walked me through the empty town and up the hill to Rabten. I wasn’t afraid of the dark, desolate streets as much as I was worried about going back into the apartment. Earlier in the week, I’d spotted a rat while I was getting dressed in the morning and couldn’t handle the idea of coming face-to-face with this new roommate. “So, you have a Bhutanese boyfriend,” Sir Tenzin had joked after I’d rushed into Kuzoo in a panic. Rats, indoors and out, are a part of life there and no one fears them.

It was around two in the morning. Since I didn’t have an actual alarm clock, Andy said he’d be my human one—the idea being we’d stay up until dawn, when I had to leave for the airport.

For the next four hours we drank tea, trying to work off the beer we’d been guzzling. The colorful silliness of a Bollywood movie flickered in the background as we talked about the future. After he got back to the United States, Andy planned to pack up and move to Montana to go to vet school. He’d been adrift since dropping out of college the year before. He had that sweet brand of earnestness men often grow out of as they get older and goals get dashed. As for my intentions, I knew better than to plot them out. This whole Bhutan experience had dropped in my lap; how could you ever force a plan? Life just evolves around you, presents opportunities for you to reject or seize.

By 6:00 a.m., we were sprawled across the couch and chairs in the living room, fighting drunken exhaustion. I turned on the television to get one last glimpse of the morning prayers that kicked off the broadcasting day. The throaty chants of the monks had soothed me each morning, even though I never learned what they were saying. I would miss them. Now they were being drowned out by the sound of the car that had arrived in the driveway to take me to the airport. I said good-bye to Andy and left him to get some rest.

Blinking back sleep on that scary drive to the airport in Paro, I marveled at the sky as it turned from black to gray to blue in the sunrise; I didn’t want to miss a sight or a sound in my last few hours in the kingdom. I needed to sear as much of this landscape as I could into memory. There would be plenty of time to rest on the seventeen-hour flight home from Bangkok.

There’s a tall blond woman ahead of me in the line at the ticket counter. Draped over her right shoulder is one of those tote bags you get when you give money to a public television station. Hers says KCET, which happens to be in Los Angeles. A fair-haired person alone would have caught my eye, much less one carrying a bag with a logo from back home. Friendly chitchat follows, the “where do you live” niceties that happen when you find something in common with a fellow traveler, far away from home. She points to a cluster of people across the ticketing area and tells me she’s been here on vacation with her husband’s family for the last two weeks. Seven of them, staying at the swanky Aman where I’d had lunch on the king’s birthday. I fire up my mental calculator: Four rooms at a thousand dollars each, times fourteen days … $56,000 would construct an entire village.

It wasn’t till I learned about this family that it occurred to me—really hit me—just how different the experience of being a tourist in Bhutan would be from mine. Particularly if you traveled deluxe. Just to get there you have to be moderately well off. The plane ticket from Bangkok to Paro alone isn’t cheap—around $800 round-trip. Of course, you have to get to Bangkok, too, although flying in through India might shave off a couple of hundred bucks. The $200-a-day minimum “tourist tax” on each person is the kingdom’s way of deterring an onslaught of budget tourists and backpackers on spiritual quests, like the people who swarm to neighboring Nepal and India. Bhutan doesn’t mind spiritual seekers; it just wants to attract a higher grade, and discourage them from staying too long.

The blond woman’s sister-in-law winds up sitting across the aisle from me on the plane and she’s excited to show off her pictures. She’s a good photographer and has a serious professional camera, not one of those point-and-shoot pocket-size digital things I own. For the past two weeks, she’d been squired around to splendid sights, and pulls up evidence of her travels on her state-of-the-art Mac laptop. Monasteries gleaming in the sun, portraits of stately dzongs set against spectacular mountain vistas that I’d gone nowhere near. Gorgeous portraits of smiling Bhutanese
of all ages; exotic flowers captured close-up in supersaturated colors. The promised Shangri-la has been served up to this group on a beautiful, hand-carved platter. The pièce de résistance is the family portrait: all seven handsome adults, wrapped up in the finest and brightest hand-woven kira and gho, purchased on the trip—not a tuck of fabric or belt fringe out of place. The lady whispers to me that that was the day they met His Majesty. I wonder to myself: When someone drops that kind of money in Bhutan, is a royal welcome part of the deal?

When she finishes, she asks to see my photos. I warn her: My Bhutan is very different from your Bhutan. Yes, please, she says eagerly: I want to see. She has Bhutan fever, that mesmerized glow. She also possesses the breezy self-confidence of a person who has lived a privileged life and who is not used to being told no.

Taking pictures has never really been my thing. But I had to take photographs during my time in Bhutan—how often would I travel across the world? Though I carried my little camera with me every day, I had to constantly remind myself to remove it from my purse and use it. Once, while I was in college in western Massachusetts, a friend and I stopped to admire a gorgeous sunset, an enormous orange circle descending across the valley. At age seventeen, having hardly been out of New York City, I’d never seen anything like it. I wished out loud that we could preserve it on film for future enjoyment. My friend admonished me. “Just enjoy this moment, the light. Don’t feel like you have to take it home with you. You can’t.” From then on, anytime I saw something beautiful, I resisted the urge to look at it through a lens, challenged myself to just enjoy it. Let the camera in my brain make a record, if need be, and enjoy the feeling what I was seeing evoked.

Fighting back the fatigue of my sleepless night, I decide to indulge my travel companion’s request. I lean over the aisle, cradling my laptop, so she can get a good look at my impromptu slide show. Every once in a while, Pink’s sister the flight attendant—days away from leaving for her new job on Emirates—interrupts us to make her way up and down the aisle.

This is the first time I’ve looked at my snapshots. Here is the Kuzoo studio, I narrate, perhaps the only radio station in the world that broadcasts from an old kitchen. Here is my apartment, and under that chair in the living room is where I saw the rat I suspected all along was sharing my space. He was this big, so huge, like a cat.

Here are the kids at the golf course, I say. I explain to my seat mate that, no, you wouldn’t necessarily associate golf with a poor Buddhist kingdom, but an Indian military officer convinced the third king to build the course behind the Thimphu dzong, and a generation of players was born. Only nine holes, though, and the canteen at the course serves up pretty good Chinese-style fried rice.

Here’s Pema and Ngawang of Kuzoo recording sound with a minidisc player. They were taping Ed’s demonstration of a game he made up called gol-chery, which fuses golf with archery. Clever, no? The kids loved it.

This is Pema getting her hair curled and Pink getting her eyebrows threaded at a beauty “saloon” before a night on the town. That flight attendant who keeps passing us? She’s the sister of this girl in the picture.

This is our boss at Kuzoo, Sir Tenzin, up by the BBS broadcast tower. This is Sir Pema, the second in command at Kuzoo. What he really wants is to be a philosopher. That’s the Kuzoo van. And Kesang, he’s the driver.

Here’s a group shot from our trek up to Takshang, Tiger’s Nest. It was right before a naked young Rinpoche ran down the trail. Yes, it’s magical there, isn’t it?

The collective effect of my little slide show is like seeing this latest chapter of my life flash before my eyes. My heart is swelling. Had I really been living in this place that these people spent thousands of dollars to see? Me?

No matter how dear you are to them, there are two things your friends are unlikely to do for you in Los Angeles. Helping you move is far and away number one. But an easy number two is picking you up at the airport. Which is why the various offers to drop me at LAX when I left, and to fetch me on the evening of my return, surprised and flattered me. They also made me feel a bit ashamed. I hadn’t missed a thing about home, with the slight possible exception of the grocery store. And my swimming pool. The sole swimming pool in Thimphu had been under repair for several years, with no opening date in sight. If it would open back up, and if I could avoid the Bhutanese cuisine, I believed I could live in Bhutan very happily for a long time.

The person I chose to welcome me back from this adventure was my friend Sarah, a world traveler who lived in the neighborhood next to mine. Of her many good qualities, her greatest is that she is always game for just about anything. Almost more than anyone I knew, Sarah loved that I had made this trip. She had lived in almost as many exotic places as she had visited, and I knew she would be sympathetic to the jolt experienced by a returning traveler.

My suitcase had literally fallen apart as I pulled it off the baggage carousel, so I was wheeling it carefully to keep it from disintegrating before I found her. I considered just leaving the whole mess right there and rushing back upstairs to departures to board the next flight back to Asia. As a testament to the magnitude of this journey I’d just completed, Sarah had actually parked her car and come into the terminal, so she was waiting for me as I spilled out in the exodus from the baggage-claim area. Action-oriented person that she is, and knowing how exhausted I must
have been, she insisted on hauling the enormous bag all the way out to the parking lot and hoisting it into her trunk. Then she produced a bottle of water and an apple. “You probably need this,” she said. How fortunate I was to come home to the care of such a kind person.

A wise older friend had warned me that most people wouldn’t know how to ask about my journey. “People will say, ‘How was Bhutan?’ but they won’t really want to know,” he had said. “They won’t know what kinds of questions to ask.” I knew that worldly Sarah wouldn’t fall into this category; instead she posed almost too-specific queries about the service on Thai Air and Druk Air and currency exchange and the layout of the new airport in Bangkok. About the food I’d been eating, and the people I’d met. We agreed there’d be plenty of time, after jet lag wore off, to get into that.

She wrestled the mangled suitcase out of the car and upstairs, without my help. We sat and drank some tea, and I was thankful not to have to come home to an empty apartment. It was a Sunday night, and we both had to go to work the next day. I’d booked the return ticket with as little time as possible between my arrival in Los Angeles and my return to work. My instincts must have told me that if I’d given myself a minute to consider it, I might have thought better of it and not gone back.

The pictures I showed the lady on the airplane came in handy. They were like having a secret friend. They jogged

Everything at work was exactly the same as I’d left it. There was little to no fanfare at the office. It’s not that I expected or wanted any, but I also didn’t expect the utter indifference. “You’re back already?” asked one of my more harried colleagues, a woman slightly older than me who ended nearly every conversation we had with, “Well, of course you can do that. You’re single.” Most of the others were too busy to notice I’d been gone, much less returned, with the exception of the few dear people I considered friends. Maybe, I suspected, nobody wanted to hear about an adventure they didn’t get to have.

The scramble of the day felt even more hurried than usual. I was constantly on the phone, all in the service of getting the sound bite. Everything moved like clockwork, on schedule, not a moment left to chance. Inside the office and out, it all was too fast, too large. The streets were too busy, the pavement too smooth. As grateful as I was to have more plentiful choices of food, the enormous grocery store overwhelmed me. Everyone took the shiny comforts, the ease of everything around them, for granted. Didn’t they know how charmed their lives were? Even that magnificent view out my apartment window that I used to treasure—now I just wished those San Gabriel Mountains would morph into the snowcapped Himalayas, and that a pack of stray dogs would crowd my ankles every time I stepped out the front door to walk to work each morning.

It’s not that I suddenly hated Los Angeles. I could see more clearly than ever that my life was good, really good. There was an endless parade of guests through my apartment. I’d built a fine community over the years by hosting a party every Friday night. The enormous pool behind the building was huge and beautiful and just the right temperature, and every day I got to see my fellow swimmers there. Two blocks away was the gorgeous, well-stocked public library that had been my ultimate inspiration to part with my books for good. A couple of farmers’ markets set up downtown each week and allowed me to enjoy California’s abundance of fresh produce without getting in the car.

The only easier commute than mine would be to work in my living room; I didn’t even have to fight traffic to get over to the office, thanks to a pedestrian walkway that connected both sides of the street. I got to sit in climate-controlled splendor all day, in front of a computer, and interview leaders in their fields. My stories got beamed out on a show that was heard by millions of devoted listeners. The rotating overnight hours were like living in a constant state of jet lag, but nothing about my days was very exacting. In fact, life was very pleasant.

And that was the problem. It was all too easy. Too civilized. Too flat, colorless. I couldn’t just go back to a world of work, leisure, and consumption. That would feel like going back in time, living on the obvious, predictable path.

The reactionary thing to do would have been to renounce it all, to pack it all up and just leave for somewhere, anywhere—to change my landscape before my mangled suitcase cooled. But my return was my endurance test of all I’d been learning. I fought the tendency to think another location, other people, another world, would be better and yet to accept that the way I’d been living wasn’t right for me anymore. There was no better place. There were no better people. All I really needed was here inside me. The answers would follow in due time.
my memory as the vividness of Bhutan began to fade. I had some of the better shots blown up and posted them on
the wall at work, in my line of sight. Right on the edge of my cubicle, I hung a giant picture of the king, attached
to a calendar from the Bhutan National Bank. My coworkers would walk by and say, laughing, “Wow, is that the Thai
Elvis?” And I would laugh back, and then answer, defensively, protectively, as if he were mine, “No, no, that’s His
Majesty, the king of Bhutan. The youngest monarch in the world. He presides over a land that’s going through a sea
change, a transformation.”

What I didn’t add was: so had I.

THE DRIVEWAY TO Sebastian’s off-the-grid cabin in western New England goes on forever. It’s rocky and, remarkably,
even bumpier than that terrifying Bhutanese highway. After a while, there isn’t a pretense of pavement. Dense
woods in every direction obscure the sky. Sebastian had promised that when we got to the end, there’d be deer and
turtles and a lake. This property has been in his family for decades, so this similarity to Bhutan, this roughness,
couldn’t be by design. Now I got a hint, though, of how he could feel so at home in the wilds there.

There were supposed to be four of us here for the weekend, but the patron saint of our friendship, Harris, along
with his new girlfriend, bowed out at the last minute—too busy, he said, to get out of the city. It was all very natural
and ordinary, as if my going to Sebastian’s, much less alone, was no big deal, as if we saw each other all the time.
When I’d laid eyes on this man only once before.

Since before I’d gone to Bhutan, we had kept in touch by email. Each time we’d communicate, once a week or so,
he’d invite me to his cabin, as if he forgot I lived clear across the country. “You’re welcome, anytime,” he’d say. A
visit east for a family reunion meant I’d finally be close enough to take him up on the offer.

In the hours before he picked me up in the Upper West Side of Manhattan for the drive north, I felt a strange
sense of anticipation and nerves, as if I were a girl with a movie-star crush about to meet her idol. Who was this
man, really? What was he like? What would it be like to see him again? There was no way this second meeting
could match the intensity of the first. Imagination in these matters could get you into trouble, I knew well from
experience. Charming, witty emails and phone calls were not accurate measures of how you would get along face-
to-face. I was about to get an intensive crash course in the reality of Sebastian.

FOR HOURS WE TALKED and cooked and laughed and ate and drank, starting with tea and graduating to wine and then a
special whiskey he’d been given as a present. We moved from the kitchen to the porch to the kitchen and back
outside again. We covered everything and nothing in particular, like old friends who’d been reunited after a long
separation.

Bhutan was a part of the conversation, of course, but it wasn’t the only topic. We got done with that at the
beginning. He explained the little mystery I’d been unable to solve, that his ties to the kingdom were through an old
friend who helped him to become a guide many years ago. After he’d led trips for several years, Bhutan had become
something of an addiction. The connections continued back in the New York area, particularly with the handful of
Bhutanese dignitaries and students who traveled through and temporarily resided there. He felt a deep love for the
country and its people, and an attendant sense of obligation to help however possible.

I told him about my visits with the friends whose names he’d given me, and how they’d welcomed me warmly.
And how every time I gave him credit for connecting me to Bhutan, I was corrected that it wasn’t Sebastian, but
rather my karma that had united us.

We discussed his business at length, for it was at a crossroads, and my own personal crossroads with my work. I
teeded him that since he’d hooked me up with Kuzoo, perhaps he could come up with what it was I should do next.
He teased back, wondering how it was possible for an East Coast person to love Los Angeles. We stared at the
lumbering turtles, and even spotted a deer, and as the sun began to set, a chill infused the night air. I excused myself
to get a sweater from inside the cabin. And as I stood up, Sebastian reached over and grabbed me, kissed me hard
and long, and held me tight.

FOR MANY PEOPLE, the happiest end to this part of the story would be to tell you that this magical weekend never ended.
That I eloped with Sebastian to Bhutan in a fit of passion, where a venerable lama presided over a ceremony uniting
us forever. That we returned to New England and I helped run his business, eventually growing it into a mighty
empire as our love deepened and matured. How, with all these riches, we eventually adopted several Bhutanese
children and sent piles of money back to build schools for the kids we couldn’t take in. A fairy-tale romance that
swept across international borders, born out of a single chance encounter. Cue the music; get Hollywood on the line.

What actually happened was this:
On Sunday afternoon, Sebastian drove me back to a town just outside New York City, where he was scheduled to
deliver a lecture on tea. My childhood friend Liz, who lived right nearby, picked me up so I could spend the night
with her family. When we got to her house a few minutes later, she said I seemed a bit out of it. “I feel dazed,” I
explained. “I’m not quite sure what just happened.” Sebastian had, on second inspection, been as wonderful as I’d
imagined he would be. We had gotten along famously. What I knew for certain was that Sebastian and I would be
friends, always, that we’d forever be connected because of Bhutan. But in those forty-eight hours, I had also learned
enough to know that this time we were spending together could never be anything more. Shouldn’t be.

Now I had new photographs to add to my collection. One is a shot of a bale of hay on a dairy farm we visited that
belonged to Sebastian’s friends. It resembled one of those oversize Claes Oldenburg sculptures, like a giant piece of
shredded wheat, the gold of the sunset shining brightly in the corner. That magic hour of light in the early summer as
it starts to dim, the temperature readjusting to cool.

The other picture is of Sebastian, a few minutes later, sleeves rolled up, a big grin on his face, mugging for the
camera, eyes wide, the gray flecks in his hair catching the sun, the sky bright blue behind him. Reveling in the
beauty of the twilight. I knew I couldn’t freeze the clock right at that instant, and even if I could have, it would have
been futile. But my resistance to forward motion was for good reason: When this weekend was over, a piece of who
I used to be would be finished, too. Now I understood what that thunderbolt I’d experienced when we first spotted
each other was all about. I had mistaken it for romance—true love, even. But in Bhutan, the Land of the Thunder
Dragon, a thunderbolt literally signals a roar of power. A moment of enlightenment.
THE PEOPLE OF BHUTAN WERE NOT SORRY TO SEE the year of the Female Fire Hog come to a close. It had been an astrologically sour one. Arbiters of the skies had warned that it would be a bad time to do just about anything: get married, have a child, start a job or project, begin new construction. Judging from the nests of bamboo scaffolding rising above the streets of the capital city, and the numbers of babies slung over the backs of women as they trundled around doing their chores, activity in the capital had hardly come to a screeching halt. Life had proceeded—but with many extra prayers and cautions. To combat the misaligned stars, the official astrological calendar of Bhutan had recommended “appropriate preventive religious ceremonies.” Maybe you went ahead and moved a few things into the home of the person you intended to marry, but delayed the complete union of possessions until 2008. In the meantime, you were well-advised to deploy a bunch of monks to make things right with the gods.

Leaving the year of the Female Fire Hog behind didn’t mean the Bhutanese were any less wary of the coming one. The dawn of the year of the Male Earth Mouse also meant the dawn of democracy in Bhutan—and with that, the formal diminishment of the all-powerful monarchy that had reigned for a century. Bhutan’s king would continue to lead, but no longer would he possess absolute power. A year into the king’s tenure, Bhutan was still adjusting to this new, young monarch, and the absence of his beloved father on the throne. No one was terribly keen to elect the parliament he’d insisted they create, or to see him give up power.

Getting citizens to the polls on December 31 posed a challenge, and not because the date marked the Western New Year’s Eve. It had to do with a higher power. In the weeks in advance of the election, official notices had been placed in the newspapers:

REQUEST TO TEMPORARILY POSTPONE ANY PILGRIMAGE PLANS

Bhutan is a Buddhist country, and annually around this time in winter, everyone wishes to pay homage to holy places in the neighbouring countries. Nevertheless it is essential for every citizen to be present in the country and be able to serve our homeland when such a historic event is taking place. At this time, National Council and National Parliament elections are in progress. Therefore, we suggest that every citizen should by way of voting contribute toward the country’s prosperity. When this is done we will have enough opportunity in the future to pay homage to holy places.

Nothing less than a royal edict would convince the devout Bhutanese to give up their sacred annual treks. Though voting was not compulsory, the official Bhutan Voter Guide did declare it the moral responsibility of the people to cast ballots. If they did not, it continued, they ran the risk of being “guilty of letting a less competent political party or candidate come to power.” If the menace of moral failure didn’t compel a proud citizen to the polls, what would?

Lest the people be overwhelmed with too many decisions and campaigns at once, the election board had decided to split the daunting responsibility of choosing a parliament into two dates. In the first round, this New Year’s Eve, ballots would be cast for a National Council, with each district (or dzongkhag) electing a single representative. A few months later, at a date still to be determined by astrologers, the Bhutanese would be asked to vote for a slate of candidates affiliated with one of two newly formed political parties.

On December 31, 2007, voting commenced across the tiny kingdom.

IT HAD BEEN just under a year since my first trip to the kingdom, and time had done nothing but intensify my curiosity about the place, my craving for more—the landscape, the people, the feeling of calm that had swept over me while I
was there. The serenity had mercifully remained, but I wanted a booster shot. I needed to see this place again. I
knew I’d never completely solve the riddle of Bhutan, never really “get” it. I also knew the way I felt during my first
visit, the richness of experience, could never be duplicated. All I was sure of was that I needed to return.

Back in Los Angeles, I’d entertained any Bhutanese visitors I could and met anyone with even a remote
connection to the place. A local couple who had collected photographs of Bhutan by the explorer John Claude White
and published a book of them? Let’s have tea. The labor minister’s wife and children, whom I’d met through our
mutual friend Sebastian? You are welcome to stay with me. A friend of a friend who’d returned from a trip? Let’s
drink some wine so you can show off your photos. My friend’s daughter had heard me talk so much about the
country, she’d written a report about it for her fourth-grade class. (“Bhutan is the happiest country on the face of the
earth …”)

In the spring, just weeks after I’d arrived back in Los Angeles from that first trip, a twenty-five-member
Bhutanese trade delegation mining California for business opportunities jammed into my tiny apartment for a pizza
party. (To make the slices more spicy-palatable, the ladies in the group discreetly pulled hot chili sauce from their
purses.) I gave them a tour of the studio where I worked, encouraged them to help themselves to the stacks of free
books we always had on the shelves to give away, and helped mitigate disappointment over their lack of sales. Their
intricate handwoven items just couldn’t be mass-produced on the necessary scale for the U.S. market

The trade visit had unintended consequences: Because of it, I met the small but close-knit community of
Bhutanese living in Southern California. (One of them became the recipient of my dusty old television set, which I
was delighted to finally give away.) And my connection to the group motivated them to offer me a visitor visa for a
return trip to Bhutan. After I’d put in for vacation time, I had bought my plane tickets and stuffed my suitcase with
Gold Toe socks and a hand-me-down Burberry purse for Pema, courtesy of my stylish friend Barbara, and the royal
astrologers made my return an even more auspicious one. My arrival would coincide with the first stage of the
election.

KUZOO WAS PREPARING to perform its most important community service yet: beaming out the results to the people as
soon as the votes had been tabulated. The news would be revealed simply, by reading a fax from the election board
on the air as soon as it chugged over the line to the well-worn machine in the workroom. News coverage had been
suspended at Kuzoo not long after I’d left. Someone in His Majesty’s secretariat had reportedly yanked the puny
daily news report off the air when a newly hired radio jockey had committed a transgression; she chose to lead a
newscast with a story about taxi fares, rather than a routine item about the king visiting one of the dzongkhags.
Even though her news judgment was correct by journalistic standards, her respect for the monarchy as a Bhutanese citizen
was in question. So much for the freedom of the press guaranteed in the as-yet-to-be-ratified constitution. I
wondered if the kindly, generous king himself would have interpreted her action as a slight.

In the fourteen months since the station had launched, there had been other, more sweeping changes for Kuzoo.
Sir Tenzin traversed Bhutan’s rocky terrain with an engineer, rigging up repeaters so that the signal could reach
beyond Thimphu Valley. Now all but five of the remotest districts in Bhutan could tune in. Second in command Sir
Pema stepped in to run day-to-day operations.

There had been another, formative development: Kuzoo’s transmission frequency had been moved, and alongside
it, a new one had been added, this one broadcasting in Dzongkha. So passionate and devoted was this new crop of
listeners that they decided to throw a party to thank the staff. Perhaps for the first time ever in the history of radio, a
fan-appreciation day was orchestrated not by a radio station itself but by its listeners. They proudly called
themselves the “Kuzoo family.” From hours away, from every direction, several dozen of the most ardent audience
members trekked to the modest Kuzoo studios, decked out in their finest kira and gho—with their similarly attired
children and colorful thermoses of tea and food in tow. The first to arrive, at 6:30 a.m., was the man who’d
appointed himself “Kuzoo gup,” Dzongkhga for mayor. He proudly greeted partygoers who descended on the
grounds as if he owned the place.

A crowd of more than a hundred people assembled; it was a chilly winter day, my first back in the country. Sir
Pema and I stood on the front steps with Ngawang, marveling at the “family” members who squealed with delight
upon meeting one another in person for the first time. Word was a marriage had even occurred as a result of two
frequent callers taken with the sound of each other’s voice on the air.

“I had no idea how many people loved Kuzoo,” Ngawang said, shaking her head. One of the fans passed a basket
of cookies, and we all each grabbed one.

“I knew they were enjoying Kuzoo,” said Sir Pema, “but I had no idea this much!”

The main radio jockey for the new Dzongkha station emerged to make some announcements to the crowd, which
he’s like a Buddha,” said one of our mutual acquaintances. In Western clothing he looked like a handsome college
much an asset as was his résumé; he radiated a calm, quiet demeanor, a commanding presence. “Lyonpo Ugyen—
country, including nine years as Bhutan’s ambassador to the United Nations. Lyonpo Ugyen’s personality was as
asset. He was descendent of a family that had served the king honorably and he himself had given his career to his
lock on a win.

campaigning. Though the PDP had an edge because of its royal connection, no one presumed that meant they had a
election. In the end, the deciding factor would be the popularity of each party’s members, and their tenacity in
disputed Bhutanese citizenship. (The refugees claimed to have been tossed out because they weren’t ethnically pure;
controversial, most notably the refugee camps over the Nepalese border, filled with a hundred thousand people with
philosophical differences between the two groups, and neither touched on any subject that could be construed as
ignoring the reality that by their very existence, they would be undermining it. There weren’t any major
accomplished. And each promised, first and foremost, to uphold and further promote the beloved monarchy,
protection of natural resources. Each offered only vague suggestions about how these formidable goals would be
installation of roads and electricity for the remote areas still unconnected, access to education for all, continued

person close to him for the crucial job of leading the first democratic government.

that the uncle of the king was at the helm. A citizenry that revered its monarch seemed quite likely to choose a
smacked of a high school campaign promise: “Service with Humility. Walk the Talk.” Their decided advantage was
National Happiness” proclaimed their campaign literature.

slogan they crafted wisely incorporated an important piece of Bhutan’s national identity: “In Pursuit of Gross
Druk Phuensum Tshogpa, or DPT, which translates loosely to mean Party of Blissful Harmony. The campaign
conflicts of interest and allow the candidates to focus on this important election. This group dubbed their coalition
political party and run for office. Leaving one’s job was a prerequisite for tossing one’s hat in the ring, to avoid any
roles. He and seven other king-appointed ministers had resigned their posts earlier in the year in order to form a
unscheduled phase of the election.

I was torn over where to spend this historic election/New Year’s Eve. Despite my allegiance to Kuzoo, I knew my
friends at the station would understand why I chose to accept another invitation, one that required my being across
town.

The pair of pimply faced military guards who man the entrance to Villa Italia look barely old enough to carry the
machine guns they have strapped to their sides. The property they are securing is an oasis just blocks from the center
of Thimphu, but it’s one particular resident who warrants their presence.

Carefully trained vines soften the concrete walls that separate the property from the noise and imposition of the
busy, narrow street just outside. Apricot and apple trees dot the yard. Despite its name, Villa Italia’s exterior
architecture is typically Bhutanese, trimmed with the colorfully painted, ornately stacked wooden edging that adorns
every building across the land. The interior of this apartment building, though, lives up to its title; richly tiled
bathrooms and terrazzo floors lend an air of understated European elegance. Modern Italian fixtures and appliances
distinguish the villa from the handful of other fine homes in Thimphu that are also inhabited by VIPs.

The gathering I have decided to attend is on the topmost floor; during this trip, I was staying at a borrowed
apartment on the ground level. About half the guests focused on the fact that 2008 was about to begin, their sights
set on the clubs they’d visit after a fusion meal of breaded chicken cutlets and emadatse. The other half was more
concerned with election coverage—including the host himself, for he was to be a candidate in the second, as-yet-
unscheduled phase of the election.

Lyonpo Ugyen Tshering—lyonpo being the Dzongkha word for minister—had ably served Bhutan in a number of
roles. He and seven other king-appointed ministers had resigned their posts earlier in the year in order to form a
political party and run for office. Leaving one’s job was a prerequisite for tossing one’s hat in the ring, to avoid any
conflicts of interest and allow the candidates to focus on this important election. This group dubbed their coalition
Druk Phuensum Tshogpa, or DPT, which translates loosely to mean Party of Blissful Harmony. The campaign
slogan they crafted wisely incorporated an important piece of Bhutan’s national identity: “In Pursuit of Gross
National Happiness” proclaimed their campaign literature.

It almost didn’t matter that the rival People’s Democratic Party (PDP) had chosen as its theme a phrase that
smacked of a high school campaign promise: “Service with Humility. Walk the Talk.” Their decided advantage was
that the uncle of the king was at the helm. A citizenry that revered its monarch seemed quite likely to choose a
person close to him for the crucial job of leading the first democratic government.

Each party published manifestos that promised lofty improvements for their countrymen: help for the poorest,
installation of roads and electricity for the remote areas still unconnected, access to education for all, continued
protection of natural resources. Each offered only vague suggestions about how these formidable goals would be
accomplished. And each promised, first and foremost, to uphold and further promote the beloved monarchy,
ignoring the reality that by their very existence, they would be undermining it. There weren’t any major
philosophical differences between the two groups, and neither touched on any subject that could be construed as
controversial, most notably the refugee camps over the Nepalese border, filled with a hundred thousand people with
disputed Bhutanese citizenship. (The refugees claimed to have been tossed out because they weren’t ethnically pure;
the Bhutanese government maintained they had illegally immigrated.) But issues weren’t really the point in this
election. In the end, the deciding factor would be the popularity of each party’s members, and their tenacity in
campaigning. Though the PDP had an edge because of its royal connection, no one presumed that meant they had a
lock on a win.

For the DPT to boast important civil servants like Lyonpo Ugyen among its roster of stars was a tremendous
asset. He was descendent of a family that had served the king honorably and he himself had given his career to his
country, including nine years as Bhutan’s ambassador to the United Nations. Lyonpo Ugyen’s personality was as
much an asset as was his résumé; he radiated a calm, quiet demeanor, a commanding presence. “Lyonpo Ugyen—
he’s like a Buddha,” said one of our mutual acquaintances. In Western clothing he looked like a handsome college
professor, with dark, thick hair that was graying just enough to give him a further sense of gravitas, while his
friendly, bright eyes shone with a youthful gleam. A serene sliver of a smile graced his face almost always, and he
was quick with a joke or turn of phrase. Outfitted in his Bhutanese gho, he was a man you’d comfortably entrust
with a giant sack of cash or a newborn baby.

Like most of the elite citizens of Bhutan, Lyonpo Ugyen had begun his studies with the Jesuits in India and had
gone on to attend fine universities in the United States. He enjoyed a long marriage to a formidable Italian beauty,
and the magnificent Villa Italia was her creation. It was a testament to Lyonpo Ugyen’s standing in Bhutan, where
cultural preservation and ethnic homogeneity are highly regarded, that this “mixed marriage” hadn’t become a
political liability.

As would-be politicians go, Lynopo Ugyen was as Teflon as Reagan, as charming as Clinton, and as wise as
carter. To the people of Bhutan, he possessed the quintessential qualities of a modern steward: humility, worldliness,
and reverence of the homeland. And because of this, he could very likely be Bhutan’s first elected foreign minister.

The decor of the Tshering family living room was, like the evening’s menu, a museum to the merged cultures of
its owners: At its center sat a large, brightly decorated Christmas tree, its colorful lights reflecting in the glass
covering the prominently placed portrait of His Majesty the king. The living room also boasted several more
personal photographs of the revered monarch at various stages of his life, posed with Lyonpo, his wife, and their
children. As a young man, His Majesty had been educated in the United States, which had coincided with Lyonpo’s
service as UN ambassador in New York City.

Guests crunched on Bumthang-made potato chips, and the Bhutan Broadcasting Service played in the
background. The BBS was doing its best impersonation of CNN, even if it had neither the budget nor the worldly
reach.

“This is a historic evening for Bhutan,” declared the anchorman, Tshewang Dendhup. “You are watching history
being made.” Such a declaration was very un-Bhutanese, but if ever there was a time for drama, this was it. And
Tshewang was the perfect person to utter it. He was perhaps Bhutan’s best-known export, having appeared as the
star of the film Travellers and Magicians, and as the real-life love interest in a book by the young Canadian teacher
who had, for a time, become his wife.

The coanchor, Dawa Sonam, was Bhutan’s answer to Anderson Cooper, his demeanor the perfect broadcast blend
of serious and convivial. He chatted with reporters stationed at various polling places across the country, as slides
with their pictures and the names of the districts they were calling from appeared on the screen. Only one live video
shot was possible, since the BBS owned only a single microwave truck—a donation from Japan. That was parked at
national election headquarters, just about a mile up the street from the BBS studio. Even if there had been more
trucks available, the ability to beam live pictures across the rocky Bhutanese terrain would have posed a challenge
for the most experienced engineers, for mountains would have obstructed the signal.

Although the simple phoned-in reports didn’t exactly make for lively imagery, viewers were ably regaled with
tales of their fellow citizens who had dutifully made their way to the polls. Despite educational initiatives in advance
election day, not everyone understood how the voting machines worked. A seventy-eight-year-old woman
confessed, “I pressed the first. Did I vote for the right candidate?”

A forty-four-year-old yak herder trekked four hours from his village to his local polling station, and declared that
he’d cast his vote for the eldest candidate in his district. “The old are always wise,” he said. “Elderly people will
know the difficulties and problems we face and be able to raise these issues in meetings.”

National law prohibited knives in polling places, which caused confusion among men in the remotest regions,
who were not accustomed to leaving home without them. “We didn’t mean to be disrespectful,” one man said after
having his machete temporarily confiscated. “The knives are just something we men carry with us always.”

The ballots featured thumbnail photographs of the candidates. This served two purposes: to assist the half of the
population that was illiterate, and to help distinguish among contenders with identical names. In one of the races, for
instance, four people were vying for the area’s National Council seat: Jambay Dorji, Sherab Dorji, and two Ugyen
Tsherings—neither the one whose living room I was sitting in.

“Look, I won and lost in Paro,” joked Lyonpo Ugyen as the results flicked up on the screen. One Ugyen Tandin
had received 2,886 votes. The other got 1,883. Sir Dorji and Sir Dorji trailed behind.

Of the four female candidates in various races across the country, three had claimed victory—a fact both news
anchors mentioned several times, clearly impressed that their fellow citizens were willing to allow the fairer sex to
govern. By 10:00 p.m., all victories had been announced. Attention and the television set were then turned to the real
CNN, so that the guests could witness fireworks displays and other celebrations that marked the arrival of 2008
around the world.
ACROSS TOWN AT KUZZO, the radio jockeys performed their national duty, reading the names of the winners before resuming the music and their on-air party. A little before midnight, exhausted from the twin forces of a long journey and a week of overnight shifts back home, I turned the electric heater in the bedroom of my borrowed apartment on full blast, quickly stripped off my clothes, jumped into my pajamas, and crawled into bed with my little portable radio.

Three of Kuzoo's new radio jockeys were leading the on-air party in the kitchen studio: Namgay (female), Namgay (male), and Choki.

“The phones are jammed with callers,” announced Choki. “Who’s this on the line, please?”

“Hi, guys,” the voice said. I recognized it immediately as Ngawang.

“Hey, it’s Kuzoo RJ Ngawang. Wow, great, how are you?” her colleagues responded.

Ngawang sounded as if she was a combination of glum and tired and was a bit hard to believe when she said, “Actually, I feel great, because my friend Lady Jane is here in town and that’s so good. I’ve missed you, Lady Jane, and I’m glad you’re back.”

The three radio jockeys sounded, in contrast, a bit too happy. I wondered if they were tipsy.

“Yes, yes, Lady Jane! Welcome back to Bhutan. Yes, yes, Ngawang! Happy New Year, everyone! You are listening to Kuzoo! Is there any other message, Ngawang?”

“Umm, well, I hope to see you more in this new year, Lady Jane. And I hope my dreams come true this year. Best wishes to everyone.” Ngawang sounded as if she might fall asleep.

“What song would you like us to play?” the female Namgay asked.

“Your choice,” said Ngawang.

And without the radio jockeys saying another word—thus a quicker return to their bubbly—the music started. The song they’d chosen was “Complicated” by Carolyn Dawn Johnson, a Kuzoo staple. It had to be the twentieth time it had aired that day.

Shortly after midnight, the Kuzoo radio jockeys took a break to run what they described as a very important New Year’s announcement. It had been recorded by the shy Sir Pema. The staff adored having him at the helm; he was studious and quiet, the temperamental opposite of Sir Tenzin, as well as a kindly, paternal advocate who listened to their hopes and aspirations. Sir Pema’s own long-term dream had just come true: He’d not only been accepted to a philosophy course in Bangkok but he’d been awarded a scholarship from the king’s office to subsidize it. Perhaps because of his imminent departure, he was willing to boldly transmit his voice across the land.

“After the partying and drinking,” he said in a quiet, noble voice, “Kuzoo would like to wish you a happy New Year with a poem by Alfred, Lord Tennyson. Ring out the old, ring in the new.

Ring, happy bells, across the snow:
The year is going, let him go;
Ring out the false, ring in the true.

He continued with a slight modification.

Ring out the grief that saps the mind,
For those that here we see no more,
Ring out the feud of rich and poor,
Ring in redress to all mankind....

Ring out false pride in place and blood,
The civic slander and the spite;
Ring in the love of truth and right,
Ring in the common love of good....

Ring in the valiant man and free,
The larger heart, the kindlier hand;
Ring out the darkness of the land,
And ring in Gross National Happiness.

With only the slightest wink in his voice to his having modified this great poet’s work for the youthful Bhutanese audience, Sir Pema concluded his greeting:

“Kuzoo’s New Year’s mantra: ‘Let bygones be bygones.’ The year 2007 is behind us, and 2008 beckons us. Warm wishes to all our listeners. May you have a really bright and prosperous New Year.”
With one election down and one to go sometime this coming spring, soon the new constitution would be adopted and the new king officially installed. For Bhutan, the year of the Male Earth Mouse would indeed be a historic one.

The next day, I do something I haven’t done much of yet in Bhutan: play tourist. I’m going on a field trip to a place all tourists go, about an hour outside Thimphu. It’s called Dochula Pass. It is the site of a memorial built for Bhutanese who died in a conflict with Indian separatists in 2003. It’s also a perfect vista for one of the most magnificent confluences of mountain ranges on the planet.

My companions are a fresh crop of Bhutanese tour guides who I am tutoring in English. It’s sure to be an informative trip, with one visitor (me) and forty accomplices trained to explain the landscape. As a thank-you to the trade department for inviting me here, I offered to help out however I could, and I’d been assigned to help the guides practice talking to foreigners. They are undergoing a special hospitality training course in preparation for the king’s coronation.

Sitting in a room and asking these shy young Bhutanese to speak English in front of their friends hadn’t worked very well. I’d sliced paper into strips and written topics on them I knew tourists, particularly American tourists, would be most likely to ask about. I’d call up a guide and ask him to choose one, and have him riff on it with me: “Why are there penises painted on the houses?” “How come the king has four queens?” “What will the new democracy mean for Bhutan?” “Why is Bhutanese food so spicy hot?”

The pupils clammed up under pressure to speak to a chatty foreigner in front of a group. The best way to warm these guys up, I figured—and most of them were guys—was to get them out of the dank, dark conference room. I asked the course leader if we could take a short field trip, to Kuzoo, a long two-block walk on the upper road. They all knew where it was, of course; everyone knew where everything was in Thimphu. They’d all just been too shy to go in for a visit—these same hardy young people who can set up and break down elegant campsites with ease in hours, and deftly navigate the bamboo woods and ancient trails of the most remote locations in their country simply by looking at the sky.

“Who wants to go to Kuzoo?” I asked. All hands flew up, and the enthusiasm wasn’t just because it meant getting outside. Our mob moved as a unit out to the street, and as we walked I made a couple of cell phone calls to be sure arriving en masse would be okay. “Five at a time,” I said, and I took them in, in small groups, doing my own best impersonation of tour guide. “You’re about to see the world’s only radio station in a kitchen.” I’d still not confirmed this to be true, but my pride in Kuzoo allowed for this reasonable conjecture.

Ngawang happened to be behind the board in the blue-tiled studio, and before I opened the door, I told the guys who we were going to see. “RJ Ngawang? That’s Radio Jockey Ngawang?” they exclaimed. And as they crouched against the tile in the studio while she introduced a song, they were all gaping like awestruck teenagers. Ngawang was just as shy as they were. She deferred to me to explain how the studio worked.

“Are you really here at the station all night long, la?” one of the guides asked shyly. Ngawang giggled; no one at Kuzoo liked to admit that the station ran 24/7 thanks to a computer. It seemed duplicitous somehow. “Virtually,” I said, pointing to the computer, and we left it at that.

The trip was so successful, I suggested another. “Let’s go somewhere in the area, so you can show me something,” I said. The course leader saw my point. There was a tour bus out back and a driver at the ready.

It’s a beautiful, cloudless winter day. The guides are bursting with energy, thrilled to be out of the conference room again. We drive into the parking area at Dochula, and they all gasp in unison. We have hit the equivalent of the view jackpot; it’s one of those days when all the mountain ranges are perfectly visible from this spot. In the foreground is the Punakha Valley, and off in the distance at various points are spiky, soaring snowcapped peaks. There isn’t a sign of man-made life as far as the eye can see.

Everyone rushes off the bus. Suddenly, I’m a schoolteacher with a classful of star pupils.

“Madam, that’s Gangchenta, the Tiger Mountain.”

“And that there is the highest peak in Bhutan.”

“Madam, look over there. That is China, there. Can you see?”

“In that direction, see? You can see Gasa, the only district in Bhutan with no motor roads. It takes five days trekking and you can get to the most beautiful hot springs.…”

Now my guides insist we walk to the maze of 108 religious structures, chortens, that form the memorial portion of this stop. Again I am bombarded with factoids.

“The number 108 is symbolic, madam, for it is the number of volumes in the Kanjur. That is the Buddhist scripture. And that is why there are 108 chortens here.”

“They were built thanks to Her Majesty the queen Ashi Dorji Wangmo. This is a memorial for fallen soldiers.”

“Yes, la, the soldiers died in 2003.…”
“Up there, over there. See, Her Majesty is giving us a sacred temple. See? Over there? It will be opened soon, madam.”

A few of us stroll among the statues. They’re at different heights, and as beautiful and impressive as they are, as sacred as they may be, they’ve got nothing on the view, the endless ridges of mountains. The afternoon wind is picking up now and most people aren’t wearing overcoats on top of their national dress. Soon we are gathering near the bus, where the coldest of the group are huddled together, a few of them grabbing a smoke, a few others continuing their discussion of the spectacular view. A transistor radio has materialized; it must be Kuzoo playing.

The group is being corralled for a picture, and they insist I must stand in the center. Several cameras are passed down to the front. “Emadatse,” shouts the photographer, the Bhutanese equivalent of “Say cheese.” And as we smile and pose for the shot, some of the guys are singing along, and I make out the song that’s wafting out around the country, and entertaining us here on this fine winter afternoon. It’s the old hit by R.E.M. “Losing My Religion.”

When I had only a couple of days left in Bhutan, at the station, Ngawang asked for a favor.

“Would you call me there?” she asked. “To the United States?”

“What does that mean, exactly? To call you? What do you need to be able to visit?” I had learned from this trip that Bhutanese citizens could only “call” foreign visitors if they could explain to immigration authorities the favor that had been performed for them, or establish the existence of a long friendship. This was to avoid skirting the payment of the tourist visa. The challenges of “calling” a visitor to the United States were different, of course.

“I think you just have to write a letter.”

“What about? Work?”

“Sir Pema would let me take leave. Especially if I was going to come to work with you. I could do an internship!”

I tempered my natural instinct to automatically say yes and considered the proposition. I loved having houseguests; even though my apartment was tiny, people crashed in my living room all the time. I wished I could afford a bigger space so I could offer a bit more comfort and privacy, but for most visitors, the blow-up Aerobed was perfectly suitable for a visit of just a couple of nights. An appearance by Ngawang felt heftier, though; it introduced larger concerns than my usual worries about the size of my bathroom or the lack of a private space in which guests would sleep. The trip would be long and expensive. Could I offer to subsidize it without offending, or would I be expected to subsidize it, which would be offensive to me? Ngawang would be more of a responsibility than a typical visitor, and I’d be working and not able to squire her much. And yet the prospect of showing her around Los Angeles and where I worked was exciting. It was bound to be educational and eye-opening, and for Ngawang, maybe even life-changing—the way visiting Bhutan had been for me.

I couldn’t stay in Bhutan, I rationalized, so I might as well at least bring a bit of Bhutan to me.

So I said yes. And as soon as I got back to Los Angeles, I grabbed a piece of letterhead at the office and composed an official invitation.
The International Terminal at Los Angeles International Airport is the winged, modern version of Ellis Island. Of course, the mode of transportation is plane, not boat. And there are just as many people leaving as there are arriving. Here the stew of nationalities that comprise the United States is starkly evident: People of every imaginable skin color, mingling, hopefulness in their eyes, some carting boxes and bulging suitcases of items they’re transporting to make there a bit more like here, and to replicate here what they’ve left behind there. For every five pieces of luggage, there is one box containing a flat-panel TV.

The Friday night Ngawang was to land in Los Angeles, I was so excited that I got to the airport an hour and a half before her plane was due. This was one guest I would, without hesitation, not refer to a taxi or shuttle. I didn’t expect her plane to arrive early, but I did want to ensure a prominent place in the receiving line of eager friends and family and bored-looking car-service drivers. On my way, I stopped at the supermarket to buy something I’d never bought before: a corny welcome balloon, visual reinforcement of my excitement over this important visitor. It seemed the least I could do. The trip Ngawang had just made was numbingly long. To shave off a bit of the cost, she had traveled a more arduous route than would a typical visitor to Bhutan: seven hours in a car out of Thimphu, three days on a train across India to Delhi, then nights of bunking at the Bhutanese embassy to wait for a call from the American authorities to see if she’d even be granted a visa. My personal invitation was no guarantee. U.S. customs agents are wary of allowing in another inevitable nanny.

“This will be a kind of mini-internship,” I had told Ngawang after sending the letter, “for you to see how media companies work here. But it’s a closed invitation. You can’t stay forever.” Because my apartment was small, my job and hours ever-changing, I explained, I couldn’t house her for more than a few weeks. While it felt rude to emphasize, I knew it was necessary to be clear. As far as the Bhutanese were concerned, it was your obligation, if someone came to visit, to put them up for as long as they needed or wanted to stay. Bhutanese living rooms were lined with couches, bumped up arm-to-arm and pressed against the walls, at the ready for whoever needed to sleep on them. Ngawang assured me that she understood, that she didn’t want to leave her family or her country permanently.

The day the phone rang with news from Delhi, Ngawang’s excitement practically pulsed through the lines: “They said yes! I can come there!” Now the travel details had to be arranged. A day and a half later, another call came through informing me that she would arrive on Friday night. I felt a tiny bit like prospective parents I’d known, waiting for the fateful, life-altering call from the adoption agency. Of course, this was very different. But having Ngawang in my orbit turned out to be more like having a child around than I’d imagined.
“How was it, how was it?” I asked, hugging her tight, aware that I was completely incapable of imagining what it would be like to land in the United States for the first time. During college a friend from Switzerland had come home to Brooklyn with me for Thanksgiving, her first trip to the New York metropolitan area. When she caught a look at the lower Manhattan skyline, she’d gasped, loudly, at the live vision of a vista she’d seen a thousand times in the movies. From her, I learned the wonder of seeing for real a place you’d long imagined, and how perceptions rarely matched reality.

“Okay,” said Ngawang, who wasn’t nearly as demonstrative. “Long. What day is it?”

“It’s Friday evening.”

“I left on Friday evening. Wow. That’s cool.”

The elasticity of time as it relates to world travel was just the beginning of a series of events that would elicit that exclamation. The next phenomenon was the five-story parking garage, crammed with cars of all shapes and colors and sizes, far more varieties than the five types of vehicles that roam the streets of Bhutan. Despite the cool, nighttime desert air, I flipped down the top of my dusty old two-seater convertible; Ngawang had never been in, much less seen, one before. Out of the airport and onto the eight-lane freeway we went, weaving through the balletic tangle of traffic. Cruising sixty-five miles an hour on a straight open road was as much a thrill for her as riding the Cyclone at Coney Island would be. Especially when we ascended the long arc of a ramp to exit the 105 so we could spill out on the even wider 110. I could feel Ngawang gasping for breath with the speed, motion, and height.

We were surrounded, in every direction, by twinkling lights.

“There aren’t this many people in all of Bhutan.” Ngawang sighed.

She was right. If you drew a circle on a map around downtown Los Angeles, it was likely to contain the equivalent of the kingdom’s population—around 650,000 people. The Los Angeles school system had more students in it than her entire country had citizens. Ngawang’s sensory overload reached a new dimension as we neared the towering buildings of downtown, shimmering in the distance. As we got closer and closer, they commanded the sky, stern and intimidating. The modern, manufactured version of that spectacular range of mountains I’d visited with the tour guides.

We drove inside another parking garage, this one with a remote-controlled electric gate. An elevator transported us to the eighteenth floor, a height she’d never experienced from inside a building. The floor-to-ceiling glass windows in my apartment offered Ngawang a panoramic view of twinkling lights flickering in every direction. The centerpiece was the stainless-steel Disney Concert Hall, a structure that resembles a silvery spaceship and dazzles even those who haven’t traveled from a place where every building is the same general shape and color. It dazzled me, and I had been gazing at it every day for years now.

Ngawang planted the welcome balloon in the bamboo vase that sat where the television I’d given away used to be. Then she slumped onto the sofa, conceding defeat to exhaustion. She had arrived, and soon she would conquer America. After a sip of tea and a glass of water and oohs and aahs at the UFO-like building and the magic of the blow-up mattress unfolding into a comfy bed at the press of a button, she fell off to sleep—exhausted by the jet lag and travel and the overstimulation of the sights and sounds of the country she had longed to see. And she hadn’t even seen it yet in the cold light of day.

BEFORE HEADING WEST on the freeway the next morning to go to the beach, I detoured to a nearby Jack in the Box. Every young Bhutanese was intrigued by the idea of take-out food. They thought Americans ate McDonald’s three times a day, the way they ate three plates of rice and chilies and cheese.

“Ngawang, what looks good on this menu?”

The number of options on the enormous board at the drive-through was too much for her.

“Egg kind of thing, or sweet kind of thing?” The only food I’d seen Ngawang eat besides emadatse and mounds of rice was the occasional slice from a pie I’d picked up at Druk Pizza. And sweets.

“Umm, sweet?”

Her brow furrowed, and I could see she was studying the prices, deploying her internal currency converter to calculate dollar to ngultrum.

“This is my treat,” I said. “Everything is my treat, okay? You are my guest, and it’s my pleasure.” I pulled up to the ordering station, and a voice squawked through the display.

“Thank you for choosing Jack in the Box. May I take your order, please?”

Ngawang burst out laughing. “Who is that? Where is he?” She craned her neck out my window. This had to be a practical joke.

“You’ll see in just a minute. Two coffees, please, large, cream and sugar, and an order of French toast sticks.”
The box talked back. “Thank you. Please drive around.”

The young guy at the window took my cash, and I explained that my friend here had never been to a drive-through before.

“She’s from Bhutan,” I said, forgetting that that wouldn’t really mean a thing, since most people I encountered seemed not to have a clue what Bhutan was, much less where it was.

Ngawang snapped a photo with my digital camera with the aplomb of a budding paparazzo.

“Bhutan, wow. Where’s that?” The guy’s lip was pierced, and both his arms were covered with sleeves of angry-looking tattoos. His friendly demeanor offset the menacing body art.

Ngawang was too shy to respond to this illustrated man.

“It’s a tiny kingdom between China and India,” I said, playing spokeswoman. “My friend is a famous DJ on the radio there.”

The guy smiled. “Wow, that’s so cool! No drive-throughs there?”

“No fast food there.” Surely an even more preposterous concept for this guy.

As was this entire transaction for Ngawang. The taste in the tiny container of syrup and the breeze in her hair on the open road soon replaced the oddity of it with sweeter sensations.

**THE CLOSEST STRETCH of beach accessible to downtown Los Angeles is just north of the famous Santa Monica Pier. The misty, cool early morning didn’t deter Ngawang. The second I stopped the car she jumped out onto the sand, dug in her toes, then, without a word, rushed over to the ocean to wet her hands. This citizen of a landlocked country could now say she’d touched the Pacific.**

“Ahh, the beach!” she shouted, and I’d never heard her sound so happy.

“Does it look like you imagined?” Although she hadn’t had to imagine it. She’d seen it a thousand times, just not in person. That made her completely different from her father, who was exactly my age. Growing up in an electricity- and television-free Bhutan, not long after formal education in the country had begun, he probably had no idea what a beach looked like when he was the age his daughter was now. TV had provided my friend a glimpse of all manner of places and people that her older family members hadn’t seen until much later in life. By the time she was a teenager, with the introduction of broadcasting into the kingdom, the need for imagining almost anything had vanished. This fact seemed to tantalize me far more than it did Ngawang, who was caught up in the vast expanse of ocean before her.

“It’s even bigger than it seems on television!” Ngawang picked up some sand, gently, as if she were handling a precious flower. “Is this where Baywatch happened? Every teenager in Bhutan knows Pamela Anderson!”

This was almost as good for Ngawang as an actual celebrity sighting. She spun around in a circle, soaking it all in.

Across the Pacific Coast Highway, she spotted something else, a sleek modern structure, all glass, windows tinted dark. “Up there, look!” she said. “That’s my first black house. I’ve never seen a house that was black before.”

**IT WAS 1:00 A.M. Monday, time to report for work. Though these overnight hours were punishing, they had their advantages: They kept me out of the politics and manic deadlines that were the hallmark of working dayside. An added bonus was the occasional turnaround day off to adjust to the new schedule. Working the graveyard shift meant a different sort of rush, putting together and then delivering three seven-minute live newscasts, with several hours’ break in between each one. It was pleasant enough, and fun, too, though the dulling effect of the inverted hours was a bit like having a straitjacket on your brain. Whenever my head really hurt from the flip-flopping schedule, I imagined what it was like for my grandmother, who’d logged overnight shifts at the Brooklyn Navy Yard while raising nine kids in a three-bedroom apartment. That put nuisance into perspective.**

Taking Ngawang to the studio in the dark of night made sense; this way she could ride out her jet lag, the office was less busy and therefore less intimidating, and with fewer people around, there was less chance she’d get in the way. There wasn’t really anything for her to do but observe. Just seeing how we worked, the pace, the intensity, the fixed deadlines, would be shocking, and unlike Kuzoo FM in every way.

We entered the back door using the special after-hours code, and snaked around the maze of cubes to my show’s area of the building. She thrilled when the automatic lights popped on as they sensed our presence. Imagining it through Ngawang’s eyes, I felt embarrassed by the largesse, the plushness of it all. Even the oldest computers were three years newer than anything in Thimphu, and there was one on every desk. Without people behind them at this hour they seemed like even more of a luxury, machines standing by, just in case.

There were other, even more wondrous visions: the office kitchen, with its dueling microwaves, toaster oven, dishwasher, and a cabinet stuffed full with mugs. The plentiful supply of tea and coffee and sugar and little coffee
creamers in different flavors. Milk was far too dear back in Bhutan to waste in tea; instead, caffeine was whitened with milk powder. And at Kuzoo, the small stash of beverages was kept under lock and key, reserved for special guests.

“Free?” she asked, amazed, and then she saw the pharmacy cabinet, which momentarily trumped the drinks supply. “Free meds, too?”

The five coworkers who shared these miserable hours welcomed Ngawang warmly, and sleepily volunteered to help explain their particular jobs on the show. While I went about putting together the first newscast of the evening, Ngawang meandered around the office, snooping at the colorful pictures and artifacts that decorated each cubicle. That each person had his own dedicated desk was another curious luxury.

As we walked to the studio to go live, Ngawang asked, very loudly, the name of one of my coworkers who she’d been talking with earlier. “That fat girl,” she explained. She was having as hard a time with our names as I had, at first, in Bhutan. I told her she must not, under any circumstances, refer to that woman that way within earshot of anyone else.

“But why not? She is fat.” Ngawang wasn’t being rude. She was just being descriptive.

“Well, I understand that she’s, well, overweight. But … it’s just not polite. It would hurt her feelings.”

“Back in Bhutan, they call me Bunny.” Ngawang smiled and pointed to the gap between her teeth. “Look, just like a rabbit. It doesn’t bother me that people say that, because I do look like one!” Then she patted her belly. “Plus people make fun of my weight, too. I’m not exactly skinny. Doesn’t—how do you say her name again?—doesn’t she know she’s fat?”

“No, I get the honesty of it,” I said. “I appreciate the honesty. It’s just that here, that kind of honesty can hurt a person’s feelings. It’s just not cool.”

By dawn, Ngawang had bonded with the woman whose name she couldn’t remember, and with Jeff, the friendly, patient engineer, who generously offered to mix taped promos for Kuzoo that Ngawang could take home. Another engineer, Erin, invited Ngawang to speak at an audio production class she taught at a community college. When the IT crew arrived in that morning, I asked them to show Ngawang their work area, since she loved computers so much. She charmed them, too. Everyone seemed to want to be friends with the woman from the exotic place they knew only from the pictures on my desk.

While much about life and work in Los Angeles dazzled Ngawang, there were many things she didn’t like or understand. How I could not have a television set, for one. The self-flushing toilet in the office bathroom “freaked her out.” So did the size of my apartment. Though I had shown her pictures of my lovely but compact one-bedroom, it didn’t compute that I had so little space, and no lawn. She’d imagined, she said, that everyone lived surrounded by the flora seen in one of her favorite movies, Edward Scissorhands, with a grand, sprawling house alongside lush, plentiful greenery. We had discussed at length the fact that I didn’t live with my family, yet Ngawang kept wondering where they were. That the other cities where I’d told her they lived were in other states and the states were on the other side of the country confounded her; a young Bhutanese woman could no better comprehend the distance between California and Florida any more than I could have understood how far Haa was from Trongsa. Showing her on a map hadn’t helped.

While Ngawang absolutely loved the dishwasher, she was disturbed that I didn’t have a live person to load it, or to cook and clean for me, as she and most of her friends did. Why didn’t we rich Americans have at least the same—or better? As for the absence of a television, I explained that was a lifestyle choice, but why I would want to make that choice made no sense to her.

The idea that we had to call friends before showing up at their houses was also unsettling. “In Bhutan, you would just stop by,” she said, “and if they weren’t there, the maid would give you tea while you waited.”

Over the years, I had entertained dozens of guests of different ages and nationalities, but never like this, a visitor bewildered and enthralled by the simplest experiences. Her very frame of reference was fundamentally different. With every step and around every corner, I felt Ngawang exclaiming, pulsing with surprise, even if she didn’t say a word. Often, she didn’t; but almost every waking minute, she wore on her face an expression of pure astonishment, a combination of overwhelmed and startled and thrilled. And it was different from the startling exhaustion for me of processing Bhutan for the first time—exactly the opposite, in fact. There, you react to the absence of development, the quiet of the landscape. In the United States, you are assaulted by how everything is enormous and paved and polished. The culture shock I’d experienced when I returned from Bhutan was dwarfed by watching Ngawang react to the overdeveloped world for the first time. I felt a larger sense of investment in her exposure to the world beyond her own, a responsibility, even. A collision of sensations, the big sisterly and maternal, overwhelmed me. I didn’t have a sister, and I wasn’t likely to have a child, but I had this woman in my life now who filled those roles in her
Of all the good and bad and strange and wonderful things Ngawang was observing, it was a knock at the door one afternoon that undid her. There stood the uniformed UPS man, wielding a package and a wireless tracking device. After I signed my name and closed the door, Ngawang literally fell to the floor in the hallway in astonishment, shaking her head. There are no street addresses in Bhutan. Mail, if you get it, is delivered to a central postbox in town. To have a package appear at your door—that was pure magic.

“In my home village, I am modern and learned because I now work in the city,” she said. “I can explain technology to them that they don’t understand. Here, I am seeing so many things I did not know about. Here in America, I am a dumbo.”

“You are not a dumbo,” I said, crouching down to hug her. “You’re from a different world.”

I couldn’t dispute that, on balance, most Americans had more stuff or more money than the average Bhutanese. But beyond the material, were any of us richer, really? Everything we owned, the way we lived, came with a price.

“Okay, Ngawang, so I have more cash, and don’t forget, I’m twenty years older than you. But look at what you have, at your age. Your family owns a house, and several plots of land, free and clear. You are all close by and help each other out. My family lives across the country, and my parents still have a mortgage. It costs half of what I earn every month to pay my rent, and then there’s everything else.” I picked up the pile of that month’s bills: home phone, cell phone, Internet access, YMCA. My car, I explained, was older, and owned by me outright, so I had no car payments, but then there was the cost of gas and insurance.

“And medical care. If I get really sick or have an accident, I could go broke. And I’m luckier than most people, since I have some health coverage.” Ngawang’s eyes widened as I explained our medical system. Health care in Bhutan was free, and so were medications. And because of that, Bhutanese in Thimphu went to the hospital for the slightest cough or bruise.

My standard of living, I explained, was far better than that of many of my family members, of many Americans. That had something to do with the job I had, with being cautious with money, and with not spending what I didn’t have. It also, I said, had to do with the fact that I didn’t have kids.

“Do you get it, Ngawang? Yes, we make more money than you do, but as you can see, we spend almost all of it, too. And everything costs more, too.”

Ngawang patiently listened, but I knew she wasn’t hearing most of what I said. She was intoxicated by the land of plenty, even if the land of plenty had proven to be more complicated and confusing than she’d anticipated. For my young friend, the view from the eighteenth floor, and that snazzy little car, was pretty enthralling. We shared a craving for worldliness; our birthplace and generation altered our vision of it.

I could see subtle signs that homesickness was encroaching on her spectacular odyssey. “The next time I come to the United States, I want to bring my family,” she declared as we meandered around downtown’s Broadway after work one day. Mine was a household more subdued than any she’d inhabited; absent a crowd of people. And she missed her cell phone trilling twenty-four hours a day. Not that she was without callers here. They included a young Indian-American student at UCLA named Milloni, who had stayed with Ngawang’s family in Thimphu the year before while she did field research. A young Bhutanese woman living with her aunt in Queens, New York, who had married one of the American golf pros and found marriage and the United States not to her liking. And a Bhutanese man who was finishing his master’s degree at a university just outside Tokyo. He’d never met Ngawang in person; they were virtual friends, from Kuzoo.net. He liked her enough that he called her almost every day in Bhutan, where the cost was a steep fifty cents a minute. With the per-minute charge to the United States far cheaper, he’d been calling twice a day.

“Mr. Japan is on the line for you,” I would announce before handing over the phone. Each time they talked, I’d tease her about her boyfriend.

“He’s not my boyfriend. I’m not even sure I’ll ever meet him in person,” Ngawang would protest.

“Aren’t you curious, after talking to him all this time?”

“We’ll see if he deserves to meet me,” she’d tease back.

The one person who wasn’t calling was Ngawang’s sister in Nebraska. Which was where she was supposed to be headed next.
Friday arrived, and our week of overnights was through. To celebrate, we headed to the hot tub behind the apartment building, hoping to beat the intense sun before it broke through in earnest. Ngawang sat perched on the edge, too modest to wear even the one-piece bathing suit I’d loaned her; her feet dangled in the water, her pants legs rolled up modestly to mid-calf.

“So, Ngawang, I heard you tell someone at the office last night that your visa lasts for three months.” It was curious that she hadn’t mentioned that to me. “What are we going to do about your sister in Nebraska, and your going to see her?”

“She hasn’t gotten back in touch with me.” Ngawang looked down at her toes in the tub.

“She knows for sure that you’re here?”

“Yes, I wrote to her. And I sent her your phone numbers.”

“I don’t get why she hasn’t been back in touch. Wasn’t she expecting you?”

“She must be very busy.”

Bhutanese often explained away a lack of communication with “I am very busy.” But what could this lady be so busy doing that she was avoiding her sister?

“So let’s talk about what you want to do. Remember I said it was great for you to visit me here for two weeks.”

“Well,” Ngawang said, splashing her feet in the water, trying to play down what she was about to say. “I was thinking I would get a job.”

For a second I thought the splashing had mangled her words. But I could tell by the look on Ngawang’s face that I’d heard absolutely correctly.

“Ngawang, getting a job in radio is hard for people who have lived in this country forever.”

“Not in radio. I was thinking maybe at a hotel or something.”

“You’re going to give up working at the radio station, and leave your family, so you can clean rooms at a hotel?”

The tone of my voice was the same as a mother whose fifteen-year-old daughter had just come home with a tattoo.

“Not clean rooms. I don’t want to do that. I figured I could work in accounting or something.”

A blinding glimpse of what should have been obvious struck me. When Ngawang said I’d made her dreams come true, I thought she was talking about her dream of visiting America. Now I understood that she had meant her dream of stowing away in America. How naive she sounded. How naive I had been to issue the invitation for her to come here.

She continued. “I know some Bhutanese girls in New York are babysitters, but I don’t want to be a nanny. I want my own kids, but I don’t want to take care of someone else’s.”

I took a deep breath. “Ngawang. Do you understand why they’re nannies? It’s not because they want to do that. It’s because they can’t get other jobs.” My voice was very loud, and I stopped to compose myself, even though no one else was around. It was, after all, only ten in the morning, and most normal people were at work. “You can’t just walk into a hotel in Los Angeles and get a job as a bookkeeper. You have to get a work permit before you can even think of trying to get a job, and that’s incredibly hard. Not to mention expensive. Maybe even harder than if I was to try to stay in Bhutan and get a job.” Assuming I’d have the temerity to overstay my visa there, I could live very nicely for half a year on just a few thousand dollars. Ngawang had three hundred bucks in her wallet. And, like most Bhutanese, no credit card.

“What about that man at the airport when I got here? I spoke English better than he did.”

“What man at the airport?”

“The guy who asked me questions when I got here. He was Chinese, an old guy. I spoke English better than him! He can’t be American. How did he get that job? And that guy in your office, David; he’s Chinese. What about Milloni? She’s Indian, isn’t she?”

The fundamentals of the melting pot that make up these United States had completely eluded Ngawang. That kind of information didn’t get transmitted on Baywatch, or Sex and the City, or Friends.

“I don’t know anything about the Chinese guy at the airport, but trust me, if he was working in customs, he’s a U.S. citizen. David is Korean, not Chinese—and he’s Korean-American. He happens to have been born in Texas. That’s in this country! And Milloni, I’m not sure where she was born, but she was raised here, too. America is made up of people from all different places.”

“That’s not how it is in Bhutan. I thought everyone in America would look like you,” she said, eyes glued to her feet, the splashes intensifying. During all those years Bhutan had sealed itself off, people from virtually every other part of the globe had been migrating from their hometowns, establishing roots in new places that promised greater potential, intermarrying. In Bhutan, a mixed marriage was when someone from the east of the country married someone from the west, a fairly new phenomenon given that for years few had even left their villages. Cross-cultural unions like the few I’d encountered in Thimphu were rarer still.

“I know it’s not like that in Bhutan. I’m very aware of that. The United States is a very different place than
Bhutan wasn’t perfect, any more than any human was perfect. It was greatly imperfect. And it had produced legions of young people like Ngawang, modern Bhutanese who loved their country but, unlike their parents before them, yearned for more. Bhutan’s pride and joy, its unadulterated culture, was in danger. The connection to the world beyond was to blame. The minute tourists came in and students went out and television took hold of the people’s brains, there went the Buddhist precepts and the cultural tradition and the status quo. Everything in Ngawang’s line of sight conspired to make her feel that if you could only get your feet onto American soil, piles and piles of money could be excavated from the streets or would fall from the heavens. And that money would buy things, items that were the keys to happiness. That message was conveyed in television shows and movies, which Ngawang watched in a near-continual feed at home. And it was enhanced by the tales of the few Bhutanese who made their way to the United States and sent back stacks of cash. Somehow, they managed not to explain how hard they had to work to earn that money, what kinds of jobs they had to do, the cramped dorm-room-style living conditions they had to endure to be able to save even the few dollars a month they wired back home. How they lived with the constant fear of being found out and deported. Then there were those lucky, supersmart people who won scholarships. They lived under the nurturing gaze of an academic institution, and while life might not have been cushy, it was rarely the grind of an illegal immigrant. (Economics were not the only category warped by the media. At that training session I’d done for the tour guides over the winter in Thimphu, one of the young men had whispered to me: “Are the women in your country really as, umm, sexy as they are in the movies?”)

There was another enormous problem: Most of the foreign tourists Bhutanese do come into contact with, if they come into contact with any, are fantastically rich. They’re spending thousands of dollars to get to Bhutan, and at least several thousand once they’re there. Everyone had a story about some guide who’d been “adopted” by a wealthy Western visitor who’d “sponsored” him for a trip or even through college. Or a visitor who’d fallen in love with Bhutan and decided to, oh, subsidize the building of a school or a dormitory or to help support an entire family. The families for which Bhutanese served as nannies in New York or elsewhere in the world, well, they were wealthy enough to have nannies!

And I was part of the problem. Breezing into Thimphu, twice over the course of a year. It was not that much different from wearing enormous diamonds and chartering a helicopter into a famine-stricken area. I might think I lived simply, with my one-bedroom apartment and six-year-old car, but the very idea that I had taken the planes to get there, that I possessed what I did and had paid for it by myself, was utterly amazing and lavish—even if it was also a little bizarre. What Bhutanese saw as evidence of the outside world was not representative of the day-to-day life of the average American citizen. Much less a stowaway.

A plane flew overhead, and appeared to skim the fifty-five-story Bank of America office building two blocks away. When I’d first moved to Los Angeles, I’d sat in this very spot and worried about the flight pattern before I realized it was an optical illusion. I wondered where this jet was going, and wished I could pack Ngawang and me on the next flight out, so I could march her safely back to Bhutan, where she belonged. Where she could flourish, if she put her mind to it. Where she could be surrounded by her loving family, always.

“So have I made it clear how it’s not going to be possible to get a job here, or at least the kind of job you think you’d want? How living here is not what you think? And how if you take one of those other jobs, and work illegally, how much trouble you can get into?”

Ngawang looked right at me, steely, and didn’t say a word as I continued. This is what I’d been spared in not having children, I thought: denying a person you loved something they wanted dearly but that you knew wasn’t in their best interest.

“Let’s discuss what we’re going to do. I’m not sure I understand why your sister hasn’t written back to you. Why don’t we try calling her?”

Upstairs on the eighteenth floor, Ngawang’s virtual entourage came calling—her girlfriend in New York on the cell phone, Mr. Japan on the house phone. When both conversations ended, Ngawang tried reaching Nebraska again, with no luck. We agreed that who she really needed to talk to now was her family back in Bhutan. With the fifteen-hour time difference and the absence of voice mail, it took us two days to reach them. Though the conversation was conducted entirely in Dzongkha, I didn’t have to understand the language to grok that the discussion was contentious. She revealed no details except that her family was angry with her.

But she said, conceding defeat, “Okay. I will go home.”

The ticket on Air India was confirmed. Since I had to be at work, Ngawang’s friend Milloni agreed to transport my charge to the airport the next day. I had met her and felt I could trust her. She appeared at the appointed time in my
driveway in a late-model Audi, a far fancier car than mine. We loaded Ngawang’s luggage into the back; with all the presents she’d been given on her visits to my friends’ various newsrooms, her luggage had doubled to two bags. We said our good-byes quickly, because we were blocking traffic. I felt relieved as much as I did sad to send her on her way.

The next morning, Ngawang called me from Milloni’s cell phone to wish me well. By that night, I assumed she was in the friendly skies, well on her way home. By Monday night, I figured, she’d at least be back in Delhi.

It was only about three weeks later, when I hadn’t heard from her online, and no one at Kuzoo had reported seeing her, that I started to worry.
A month after Ngawang went missing, the Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT) swept the National Assembly election with a landslide victory. Even the founding members of the DPT party were surprised. Just days before ballots were cast, polls showed it to be running neck and neck with the People’s Democratic Party, the coalition led by the king’s uncle. Because of that royal association, it was assumed the PDP would easily emerge victorious. In the end, though, with 80 percent of the population voting, the DPT swept forty-four of the forty-seven seats.

This was not in any way interpreted as a condemnation of the beloved monarchy. It was seen as a rejection of the king’s family. Since His Majesty had insisted that democratic rule was the best form of government, armchair political analysts interpreted the landslide in favor of the DPT as evidence his subjects understood the importance of electing a slate of candidates who were less tied to him.

The members would serve for five years. The DPT chief Jigme Thinley was appointed prime minister, and my Villa Italia host Lyonpo Ugyen was indeed installed as foreign minister. Immediately, the new lawmakers got down to work. Viewers who tuned into the BBS in the middle of the day no longer saw a placeholder camera trained on Thimphu Valley; they could witness the nation’s first-ever parliamentary proceedings, live as they happened. The democracy that had been foisted upon them was to be as transparent as possible, and there was no better way to do that than to telecast the governmental sessions each day.

One of the first acts of business of the new parliament was the ratification of the years-in-the-making constitution. Monks chanted as Bhutan’s fifth Dragon King signed three copies of the historic document—one in English, two in Dzongkha, one of those inscribed in gold—to enact it officially. The forty-seven National Assembly members and twenty-five representatives of the National Council then each solemnly approached the throne and added their signatures, a long process broadcast to the people to remind them that they now had a voice in their governance. (Even if it was a responsibility they hadn’t requested.) The sacred documents were immediately put on display for the people to behold. All who visited were given bound copies to take home, as well as little juice boxes and a coin as tokens of appreciation. Heavy rain and a flood marked the day, which some interpreted as a sign that even nature was shaken up by the occasion.

This unprecedented document spelled out equality for all; the rights to vote, to life, liberty, and security; and to freedom of speech and religion—although Buddhism was still classified as the official religion, and criticism of the royal family was still verboten. The majority of the assembled citizens who braved the rain to attend the ceremony were actually there for another reason: to gaze at an enormous, sacred, century-old religious scroll called a thongdrel, unfurled in commemoration of the historic event for a rare public display. It is believed that those who stand in the presence of this tapestry will accumulate much merit. One woman said she had trekked for hours from a faraway village in order to see it and soak up the karma it offered. She hadn’t been aware—until a reporter told her—that the reason it was being exhibited was because of the new constitution. Another woman, a farmer, had asked her husband to accompany her into Thimphu to see the king because she had heard that his powers had been diffused. She was very sad about this development, and wanted the chance to see her beloved monarch in person.

In that summer of 2008, constitutional freedoms were still less important to many Bhutanese than their devotion to Buddhism and their king.
by her disappearance. No one at Kuzoo FM back in Thimphu had seen her or heard from her. There was no activity on her Facebook page. Calls to her friend Milloni went unreturned. No one on the other end of the numbers she’d dialed in New York returned my calls, either, nor had the mythic sister in Nebraska ever materialized. I had no number for the faraway Mr. Japan. I considered calling Ngawang’s father, since his number was recorded in my Skype, but decided against it. After all, Ngawang was a grown woman—checking in with her friends was one thing, but calling her parents was another. My instinct told me she was somewhere that was safe; the mystery was where she was.

And then one day, her name appeared in my inbox:

    hey hi sweet lady jane
    well am fine n am with my cousins out here at new york
    sorry i didnt check my mails
    will be going home may be after two weeks
    how is everything going out wit you
    keep in touch

“New York?” I wrote back. “What the hell are you doing in New York? How did you get there? What’s your phone number so I can call you? Would you please call me? Does your family know where you are? Do Sir Pema or Pema?” They had both just written again that she still hadn’t been seen.

My mind started racing: Just how long did Ngawang intend to stay in the United States? Forever, or till the expiration of her visa? Where was she staying? What was she doing all day? Had she planned this all along?

Frantic, I considered hopping a plane and scouring Jackson Heights, Queens, the neighborhood with the largest population of Bhutanese in the United States, but wrote that off as folly. I didn’t hear back from her.

The month of May arrived and went. By now, Ngawang’s visa would have expired. I had succeeded in liberating myself from my job in Los Angeles and was making plans to go back to Kuzoo to volunteer for the summer. But before that, I’d visit Washington, D.C., as a volunteer at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, where a faux Bhutan was being raised. The largest delegation of Bhutanese ever to leave the country at one time, 144 people, were headed to the American nation’s capital to set up a living museum exhibit about their culture. Monks would bless visitors in an authentic Bhutanese temple that had been constructed on the National Mall; archers, including the king’s brother Prince Jigyel, were to demonstrate the national sport; a weaver would sit at a loom creating a colorful cloth and wrapping those who wished in kira and gho.

One afternoon in the days before the festival began, I spotted Madam Kunzang Choden, the writer and Kuzoo advisor, over near the Metro with her husband, Walter. (I wondered if they knew about my dinner with Martin, who had emailed me earlier in the year to report that his work had relocated him to Thailand.) Madam Choden was to be one of the main speakers in the foodways tent, to discuss the curious culinary customs of her people, including and especially their devotion and addiction to fiery hot chilies. She had just published a book on the subject.

We said our Kuzu zampos, and commented on the magnificent location and the weather, and Madam Choden then said, quietly, as if she’d been waiting to clue me in, “I hear you sponsored Ngawang to come to the United States. She’s always been dying to go. I thought you knew she’d been trying to get here for a long time....” And then she shook her head, disapprovingly, too polite to say another word. She didn’t need to.

Later, another Bhutanese friend revealed more details. He said Ngawang had boasted that she was working in New York in a shop belonging to some friend. Right after he started spilling the story, he clamped himself down and refused to say any more. And then Sir Pema let slip in an email that he had known all along Ngawang was in New York. He’d been sworn to secrecy, but eventually caved to my persistent concern.

Now, I thought darkly, I had another dubious connection to the Kingdom of Bhutan, besides going to help start a radio station whose mainstay turned out to be illegally downloaded Western pop music. I’d been an unwitting accomplice to the illicit plan of a young Bhutanese to explore her American dream.
taken to calling Mr. Japan. He’d just wrapped up his graduate studies outside Tokyo and was himself returning to Thimphu. Once they were back on Bhutanese soil, their yearlong phone friendship morphed quickly into romance. Both families had blessed the union. They were waiting for the monks to give the go-ahead about which day was most auspicious so they might officially move in together and consider themselves married.

And when I read that, I knew she must be pregnant.

I knew what it was like to have a whirlwind courtship that led to marriage after a life-altering experience. Mine had happened exactly twenty years earlier, back when I was Ngawang’s age, in fact. My husband-to-be and I had met when he came to work at the television station in North Carolina. Not long after, I’d had that epiphany on the way to the grocery store. This liberation from my fear of the dark, I assumed, meant I was now healed and ready to join with this wonderful man. United from a point of strength, not weakness. Running off and getting married in a fit of passion, after just several months, felt like my way of declaring to the world, “That rapist didn’t ruin me. See?” It was the first impetuous act of my short life thus far.

And then, my new husband lost his job at the station in a management shakeup. He got an even better one—in, of all places, Atlanta. The scene of the crime was the last place I ever would have chosen to move, but in the media business, you went where the work took you. I rationalized: It wasn’t Atlanta’s fault that I was attacked; it could have happened anywhere. If I could survive returning there, I believed, I’d be demonstrating my capacity to adapt to anything, to show how unflappable I was. It would be an illustration of my boundless ability to forgive—to transcend geography. People who refused to leave a certain location or go to another were histrionic, inflexible, oversensitive. I was not going to be one of those people who let history get in the way of progress.

Even the best intentions can be fraught with delusion. I had greatly underestimated how hard it would be to settle into the place where this horrible thing had happened, perhaps even more than I’d underestimated how complicated it was to be married. Within a year, another job offer rescued us, and back we went to North Carolina. I found myself felled by a mysterious lethargy that I first attributed to moving. In the course of trying to determine what was wrong, the doctor I visited offered a prescription: counseling.

Everything is fine, I insisted. That’s all in the past. Still, I obeyed and found a therapist. I was tired of being tired all the time. As we talked, a diagnosis emerged. It wasn’t fatigue; it was depression. I was consumed with doubt and anger. Here I was, barely a quarter of a century old, connected to this man, moving around for his work, depending on him for financial and personal security. How did I get here? This wasn’t how I imagined my life to be. I believed I loved him, but what did love mean, exactly? My problem was this sinking feeling that I was ill-equipped and unprepared to be a wife.

Almost as if to prove that I wasn’t really an adult, I found myself stymied in how to confess my misgivings to my poor, sweet husband. To say “I’ve made a mistake, there is something wrong, I don’t quite understand, please forgive me. Would you mind, please, if I exile myself to a room, and let some time pass, so that when I emerge I’ll be healed, recalibrated—and then we could just skip happily forward into the future?” If I had had the courage to ask, he would likely have said yes.

But instead of speaking my doubts, I shared my deepest fears with a notebook. I wrote down every bit of it. How I felt trapped, how much I doubted it all, how I hated everything, including my poor husband, how I wished we both were dead. I didn’t mean it. I didn’t know what I meant, how I felt. I put my confessional notebook in a drawer in my desk and left town for a few days for work. And when I’d returned, my husband was waiting for me at the door, his face washed with devastation. In his search for clues to my distress, he’d read what I had written.

Not long after, my whirlwind marriage was through.

It wasn’t until I was forty—thirteen years after the split, in the throes of my life review—that I began considering what a mistake it had been to let that marriage go. Over the years, I’d rarely discussed it, even with people who knew me back then. The whys and particulars of how it came to be and how it came apart were easier not to reveal to newer people in my life. To say, “I got married in reaction to having been raped,” required the disclosure of layers of personal history, and now I wasn’t even sure if the way I’d interpreted my history was true. What a good and patient partner he was; what an excellent father he would have been. I was wiser than I’d realized in having chosen him.

But I understood now the youthful haze of mistaking desire for love and the foundations of a lasting partnership. That eagerness to move on with life, to rush into the future, lock things down, the false sense of feeling that by moving quickly, you’re taking control of your destiny.

And so I understood as I watched Ngawang rush into marriage. She’d gotten her American adventure out of her
system; it hadn’t quite worked out the way she’d planned. Perhaps in uniting with Mr. Japan, she was reacting to the disappointment of not having achieved one of her dreams. Now she was ready for the next thing. I hoped her impetuousness would yield a different outcome than mine had.

Ngawang has commandeered her fellow radio jockey Kencho to pick me up at the airport in Paro. Kesang the Kuzoo driver is busy, and Mr. Japan is at work. I know I must be an honored guest because Kencho and Ngawang hate each other, so I’m flattered that they’ve made peace long enough to take this drive together, all because of me. Arriving in Bhutan for the third time in a year and a half now seems ridiculously normal. I remind myself not to mistake the familiarity for true understanding. I have a much better sense now of Bhutan, but I still know better than to presume I really understand this place. The mystery keeps me coming back.

Ngawang has in her hands proof of their baby, a snapshot from the ultrasound. A tiny little sprout of new life inside my young friend. Her excitement feels almost childlike, while Mr. Japan has the demeanor of a mature father-to-be, not shocked by the immediacy of the prospect at all. He says, with confidence, that he is very ready to start a family. One day, maybe I’ll get the details on Ngawang’s New York adventures from him—assuming he even knows.

“I hope it’s twins,” Ngawang says hopefully, the way you might say you wished for snow.

“I hope it’s not twins,” I say, remembering the time I was in the delivery room to assist a single friend, almost forty years old, who’d visited the sperm bank. Just seeing two babies delivered at one time gives you a glimpse into what caring for them each day might be like. One baby at a time is all a girl Ngawang’s age should have to handle.

“Well, I hope it’s a boy,” she says.

“As long as the baby’s healthy,” says Mr. Japan, patiently. “That’s what matters.” This guy is all right by me. For a minute, I try to imagine how different my life would have played out had I stayed married. Would we have had children? Would we have lasted these twenty years? The only thing that’s certain is that I would not have had the experiences I’ve had, and most definitely not this connection to Bhutan. In my forties, I understand how each decision has consequences. I also see the preposterousness of thinking you can have it all, much less trying to.

When Ngawang asked if I would be her baby’s godmother, I didn’t hesitate to say yes. I understood my being so anointed had nothing to do with my perceived competence to care for this impending child should anything terrible befall her or the baby’s father. After all, between their extended families, there are enough guardians to care for all the students in a small school. And as much time as I’d spent in Bhutan over the last two years, I still technically
lived too far away to do much practical good.

Besides the love that propelled this gesture, I knew this honor had been bestowed on me for two other reasons, reasons that were inextricably linked: I was American, and because of that, I offered access in the future to opportunities the baby’s blood relatives could never provide.

Charged with the responsibility of godmotherhood, I could one day invite Ngawang’s child to the United States. I’d feel invested enough to pay, perhaps, for his education. In a modern Bhutan, it was simply better for a new baby and his family to know they had a friend on the other side of the world. Even without the formality, I’d be happy to be there for this child, to help however I could. By the time he was old enough to travel by himself, maybe I’d have more than a blow-up mattress in the living room to offer. But in giving me a title, Ngawang knew she was giving me a responsibility—and she knew me well enough to know I wouldn’t take that responsibility lightly.

As many pregnant friends and new babies as I’d been around, I’d never been offered an official role. (I’d mercifully never even been a bridesmaid.) The closest I’d come was that time I’d witnessed the birth of those twins born to my single friend. But that was more about attending to her than to the babies. I liked the idea of being a godmother. Even if, in Bhutan, virtually any woman who comes into contact with a child is called “auntie.” It filled me with delight to know that across the planet, in this country I loved, there would be a little Bhutanese baby who would grow up learning he could count on me.

Is it possible that the royal astrologers in Bhutan knew, when they had divined November 6 as the most auspicious day for the coronation of the fifth king, how important a week it would be for the rest of the world? Astrologers may not possess crystal balls, but perhaps a scan of the heavens foretold a volatile time of unprecedented change. Or perhaps it was all a happy accident that the world’s most envied and reviled democracy and the world’s newest happened to close out 2008 with back-to-back milestones. And that at the helm of those two democracies were two men who, while they had had vastly different upbringings, shared oddly similar philosophies.

King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck was formally coronated as king of Bhutan just hours after the landslide election of Barack Obama, America’s new president-elect. Though King Jigme had attained his position purely by dint of birth, he was, in his own way, a living symbol of global interconnectedness. He’d attended prep school (Phillips and Cushing) and college (Wheaton) in the United States, then studied for a master’s in England (Oxford), and preferred basketball to the national sport of archery. (Teams of tall strapping players would be summoned to the court in Thimphu when His Majesty wanted a game.) The fifth king of Bhutan might not achieve the greatness of his father and grandfather and great-grandfather before him, for history would show they had brought their country into the modern age. But the mandate before this king, during a time of unprecedented change, was no less critical. While Obama’s election was still dominating world headlines, Bhutan’s fifth king addressed a crowd at the Changlimithang Stadium, where thousands had waited in line all night to ensure they got inside:

Ultimately, without peace, security and happiness, we have nothing. My deepest concern is that as the world changes, we may lose these fundamental values on which rest our character as a nation and people. The Bhutan we see is vastly different—unrecognizable, even—when compared to the Bhutan in the time of our first king. As long as we continue to pursue the simple and timeless goal of being good human beings, and as long as we strive to build a nation that stands for everything that is good, we can ensure that our future generations for hundreds of years will live in happiness and peace.

Three months later, we are on baby watch in Thimphu, awaiting the arrival of one of the next generation of Bhutanese. The ultrasound long ago revealed the baby would be a boy. To bide the time, Ngawang visits monks, drinks vanilla milkshakes from Karma Café, overdoes it on the chilies because once the baby comes she’ll have to dial down the culinary heat for a while. Uncomfortably large and more impatient and uncomfortable, I invite her over for a sneak peek at the baby gifts I’ve brought; Ngawang’s not allowed to take them into her home until a healthy baby has arrived. No showers in this
culture, at least not yet; purchasing items in advance is seen as a jinx. Ngawang particularly loves the stuffed bear sent by friends of mine she’d met in Santa Monica. “This is for me,” she says, and I know she isn’t kidding. She oohs and aahs at the little hats and bibs and onesies, all from the Gap, a very exotic American brand, though much of their stuff was made in factories closer to here than to the United States. I’ve brought along a stack of kiddie books, too, about things this baby isn’t likely to see much of until he leaves his homeland: One’s about trains, another about boats, another astronauts, none of which exist in Bhutan. Maybe Ngawang is done with adventure, but that doesn’t mean her baby has to be.

While we wait for his arrival, I fill the time by stopping by Kuzoo; Radio Jockey Kinzang loves having guest hosts with foreign accents, and by now the listening audience has heard me yap on the air on many occasions over the past two years. I also find myself enjoying long lunches with friends, where other friends happen by and hours elapse, filled with meandering conversation. Thimphu is changing, but the rhythm of life here for me is still a delight.

One afternoon my dining companion is Phuntsho, a woman about my age who is divorced with three children, two studying in India and one at the Bhutan on the Border, the University of Texas at El Paso. We are discussing how, in the second half of our lives, we want to change professions. Phuntsho says she’s thinking about becoming a nurse. I reveal my recent, very peculiar recurring dream.

“It is a gigantic room, filled with babies. There is a long line of bassinets, all in a row. It is up to me to take care of all of them, just me. And I work my way down the line, pick up each baby, and kiss him on the head. And all of a sudden they are all cooing and crying, and I am falling asleep.…”

Phuntsho smiles slyly. She knows how outrageous a fantasy this is, and I do, too. I take this dream as a sign of my morphing ambitions, to figure out how to help children who have no one else.

To do this in Bhutan would be impossible; there are no orphanages here. There isn’t even a formal adoption policy. The maternity nurse at the hospital keeps a list of prospective parents, and calls them when a mother wants to give up her child. There just aren’t that many unwanted babies, Phuntsho says. After spending time here, I wonder if this is denial speaking, or a matter of resources and culture.

Close to 40 percent of the population is under fourteen years old. And a growing problem is that kids born “without fathers” are lost in the system. Without proof of both parents’ citizenship, the child is forever in limbo, denied the rights of a full-fledged Bhutanese—meaning, most notably, that the child can’t enroll in school. Many of these children—no one knows just how many there are—are the result of a long-standing village ritual called “night hunting,” where a man crawls through a window into a woman’s bedroom and sleeps with her. When I first heard about the custom, I was startled by its similarity to my own experience. Only now is anyone in Bhutan openly beginning to call this rape, but it happens with enough frequency that the parliament has been grappling with a law to ban it.

When a “fatherless” baby was born on the farm in the days before modernization, the additional hands were welcome; but as subsistence farming becomes less common, a whole new class of children is growing up who have no prospects for the future. One of the four queens of the fourth king has been an active proponent of family planning, but it’s believed that only 30 percent of Bhutanese use birth control. Among young Bhutanese, the issues are becoming the same as anywhere else: a growing demand for the morning-after pill, available over the counter for a little over $1.50; a spate of botched abortions in clinics across the southern border in India; paternity tests to determine the father of the child. The ways of the Western world encroach.

Like it or not, perhaps an orphanage in Bhutan is inevitable.

The day after we share this discussion, Phuntsho calls me on the phone.

“Actually, I thought about it and there is something here that is close to an orphanage, where they could really use your help. You will find it interesting,” she says. “We leave tomorrow at ten a.m. Prepare to fall in love.”

She picks me up near the traffic circle in the center of town, and we make the trek toward Paro on the upgraded highway. After an hour or so of driving from city to city, we turn onto a rough unpaved road that climbs high up the mountain. Up we go through a small community of a dozen or so houses called Shaba. Monkeys are swinging in the trees, and our vehicle kicks up dust as it rumbles over the rocky terrain. It feels a bit like an Asian safari.

“This is much improved since Rinpoche,” says my friend reverently, as if we were driving on smooth glass. I’m happy to have missed what it was like before. This particular Rinpoche, she explains, is the ninth reincarnation of the mighty Guru Rinpoche, the saint credited with introducing Buddhism in Bhutan. Just twenty-eight years old, Rinpoche is revered for his tremendous compassion. For three years now, this good holy man has been taking in boys whose families can’t care for them, or who have no families at all, providing them food and shelter, and educating them in the monastic tradition.

After the last hairpin turn we emerge at a magnificent spot. The crystal silence of isolation; an unseasonably warm winter day in the age of global warming. Right next to where we park sits a small chorten, a row of tall prayer flags,
and the Neyphug Monastery, a large structure built in 1550 that has seen better days. Its exterior is literally crumbling. Phuntsho points to two hermitages that can be reached only by walking through the forest, a three-hour trek from here.

Off to the side, a dozen tiny boys wash themselves in a makeshift outdoor shower. A few larger kids are tending to chores; the rest are crowded in a small room to watch a cartoon—thanks to the one evident luxury: satellite TV. Forty children clad in red monks’ robes gaze intently at an old television set. Absent neighbors, this is their lifeline to the world.

If I hadn’t just been told they were orphans, I probably could have guessed. These kids may be lucky to be here, but these are hardly deluxe accommodations. Filthy, threadbare bedding lines the floors of several packed sleeping rooms; shabby posters of handwritten ABCs are taped up for decoration and instruction. A fraction of the belongings in the average American kid’s room would go very far here.

“You can come teach the boys English,” says Phuntsho. “They don’t learn much of it, for their monastic studies are in Dzongkha, but these days, everyone needs English.” A more immediate and urgent need is for futons, pillows, blankets, so the kids get more cushioned sleep. I make a mental note to investigate how to send them some.

Rinpoche is away, trying to raise money from supporters in Taiwan to build a dormitory for the kids. His eighty-year-old father, Lopen, greets us warmly. He wears the red robes of a lay monk, a gomchen, and he’s as round as a teddy bear. A sweet boy with a slightly crossed eye smiles at us as he serves us tea and lunch; it’s an honor to be so close to the visitors. I eat my red rice, politely, and pass my bowl of emadatse to Lopen, who appears only a bit surprised that I won’t eat it. Then he digs in himself. Afterward, he gives us a tour.

We walk the dark, dusty, cold rooms of the monastery. All the religious relics have been restored, Phuntsho says, but the building, like the living quarters, direly needs attention. A life-size statue of Guru Rinpoche fills one shrine; an enormous Buddha sits in another. There are wall paintings by a revered lama, images of a thousand Buddhas; the largest of them is believed to once have spoken. It’s opened to the public just once a year. All these relics, Phuntsho tells me, possess great power and many blessings. At each stop, she prostrates herself three times, and we tuck money on each altar as offerings. I say a silent prayer for a healthy and happy life for Ngawang, Mr. Japan, and their baby.

Back inside the small residence we have another round of tea; Lopen doesn’t want us to go just yet. He fumbles for his reading glasses and settles in to study the thick, bound astrological calendars Phuntsho has brought. The start of the Female Earth Ox year is a week away. Phuntsho pulls up her purse from the floor and takes out a four-inch-thick stack of cash. It’s money that’s been sent for a series of cleansing prayers, a puja, to be conducted for a boy back in the United States who is ill. After consulting the astrological tables for information about the boy’s birth year, Lopen asks when I was born. Squinting through his lopsided spectacles, he nearly presses the forecast book to his face.

Phuntsho relays his prediction in a serious tone: “It is not going to be a good year for you. Watch your health. Wear red every day, preferably under your clothes.” I take a mental inventory of my closet at home, scanning for red clothing. “They really need to do a wind horse puja for you. You have to be very careful,” she says. This puja will rebalance my energy and ward off illness.

In my purse, I happen to have a crisp $100 bill. A friend in Thimphu has repaid me for books I’d brought from the States. I fish out the other cash I have on hand, dollars and ngultrum. All told, the sum that other Rinpoche wanted from me two years ago. I press the money into Lopen’s hands.

“It’s for the boys,” I tell Phuntsho. “For the orphanage.”

“They will say prayers,” she says, and she translates after he begins to speak. “Lopen says they will do a puja.”

I don’t argue. If they feel the need to do a puja, so be it. The mental power of sixty young monks, with Lopen at the helm, can’t be a bad idea. I’m happy to accept the prayers. Yet happier still not to be looking for answers anymore.

Ten days later, Ngawang gives birth to a healthy baby boy. Eight pounds, eight ounces. Right out of the womb, he resembles a tiny version of Mr. Japan, with the same sweet face and a generous pile of hair. His entrance into this world is thirteen days after his due date, which happens to be a year to the day after Ngawang arrived in Los Angeles, and two days into the year of the Female Earth Ox.

The monks anoint him with a beautiful name. Kinga Norbu: precious jewel, loved by all.

The astrological forecast for the new year is terrible in almost all regards. Rain will be scarce, food in short supply—economically difficult, all the way around. There’s one exception. They say it’s a particularly lucky year in which to be born.
NOT LONG AFTER I RETURNED FROM MY INITIAL trip to the happiest place on earth, I had lunch with an acquaintance who posed a question I’d never asked myself, much less another person.

“What would you like to be doing five years from now?” she said, leaning in, Oprah-style, across the basket of bread-sticks.

My God, I thought. Who knows?

Five years. Five years ago I could never have imagined jetting off to a Himalayan kingdom and finding my entire perspective of the world, and myself, turned upside down. Why would anyone want to imagine the future, much less plan it? I didn’t say that, though. I didn’t want to make her feel bad, since she seemed to be one of those people who liked plotting her life. I just knew you couldn’t do that.

So I gave her as vague an answer as possible: “I really have no idea.”

“But,” she insisted, “do you want to be married? Do you want to move out of Los Angeles? Do you want to keep doing the work you’re doing?” There was a sense of urgency to her line of questioning, as if my entire future rested on the words I now uttered.

“I really, honestly have no idea,” I said. “All I know for sure is this: In five years, I would love to feel as great as I do, as strong as I do, right this minute.”

My lunch companion looked at me expectantly. She seized on the word “great,” and she wanted to know more, the specific things that were causing me to feel so good. I told her there wasn’t anything specific to add. That was the triumph, I told her. I didn’t feel good because I had a new romance, or a new job that paid tons of money, or anything visible or measurable. None of those things that usually set people to the “Yes” gauge on the happiness scale had happened to me. I didn’t feel good because I expected nothing bad ever to befall me again; instead, I trusted that I could handle whatever came my way.

Best of all, I told my dining companion, was that what I wanted from life had changed. I wasn’t waiting for something to fall into place so that life could get started. Life was brimming all around me. And now I understood that what I gave was more important than what I got.

It was Bhutan and the three good things that helped me arrive at these conclusions, I told her, and I explained how the exercise worked. I could see the skepticism in her eyes.

“Try it, if you’d like,” I said. “Maybe then you’ll see.”

MY PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE isn’t all that’s changed since my first trip to Bhutan in the winter of 2007; so has much in the kingdom.

In advance of the coronation in November 2008, a dog pound was temporarily erected and a new sterilization program launched. Of the estimated 1,200 strays in the city, 360 were spayed or neutered. As a consequence, the canine population has been seriously reduced, and it is now possible to walk the street without being mobbed. Although at night it’s still common to be serenaded by the howls of both strays and house pets.

Despite the cries of the existing papers that there was not enough advertising to go around, three new papers were granted licenses to operate. The kingdom’s first daily, Bhutan Today, began publishing in time for the coronation in November 2008. One eight-page issue in early 2009 was crammed full of reports that illustrated the impact of Bhutan’s association with the outside world. A cover story, in English, lamented the continuing demise of the main language, Dzongkha. One student was quoted as saying the influence of Western movies and fashion and the “coolness” of speaking English leads people to be uninterested in speaking the native Bhutanese tongue. On page two, an editorial lamented the same concern raised by the Kuzoo advisor Madame Carolyn the year before, that more Bhutanese celebrate Valentine’s Day than Losar. The same piece railed against the hypocrisy of the national ban on the sale of tobacco and how it made smoking seem even more alluring. In an editorial titled “Professional Fools,” the writer deemed “weird” the recent announcement by the government that there was room for only 40 percent of the Class Ten students to continue their studies, and wondered, “Where will the rest go?”

In 2008, an enterprising Nepali tailor began an alteration service to make it easier for foreigners to wear the Bhutanese national dress without an army of assistants. For about three dollars, she’ll custom alter a half kira so that
it wraps easily around the middle and is fastened with Velcro and hooks that adjust to your inevitably changing waistline. It falls exactly like a half kira would if you put it on the traditional way.

There are now infinitely more karaoke machines in the capital city than the two that existed in early 2007. The most interesting is at the Tiger Bar on Norzin Lam, for it allows you to sing along in Dzongkha.

Toilet paper is now a far more common amenity in various public restrooms than it was during my first visit.

Evidence of a growing leisure class abounds. Shades of Starbucks are evident in coffee shops that debuted on opposite sides of Thimphu in the fall of 2009 and have created a market for what had once been a rare find in the capital city: brewed, takeaway caffeine. There’s also now a wine shop, which features a small selection of French, Australian, and even a couple of California vintages in addition to several from India. The first fast food to come to the city is also an import from Bhutan’s giant neighbor; it’s a franchise called Hot Dog. (Which happens to have been launched by Pema from Kuzoo, along with her entrepreneurial Indian boyfriend.) A second, called Tsab Tsab, Dzongkha for “fast fast,” is modelled after McDonald’s.

Not long after the two-lane Thunder Bowl opened for business in a subterranean location in the center of Thimphu, a second movie theater debuted in a rapidly growing area at the edge of the city. This one boasts a state-of-the-art sound system. (The run-down theater in the center of town is still mobbed, despite the fact that it hasn’t been cleaned in thirty years.) Each theater plays only Bhutanese films. The number of movies being produced is declining, though, as filmmakers encounter the difficulties of recouping their investments.

The grand $450-a-night Taj Tashi hotel debuted in the center of town in the spring of 2008, and though it mirrors the Bhutanese-style architecture around it, its stateliness is a bizarre contrast to the rest of the buildings nearby. It caters mostly to visiting dignitaries and, at mealtime, an occasional sampling of the city’s small expat crowd. It features a spa, a pricey bar called Ara where you can order martinis, and a swank Sunday brunch buffet, not unlike any other elegant tourist hotel in the world. Critics have wondered if it is sacrilegious for the hotel to have used common Buddhist religious artifacts as hardware throughout the grounds, such as horns for door handles.

Sometime in 2010, the Bhutan Post intended to begin delivering mail residentially, after assigning the city’s first-ever street addresses. A postal code was also in the works; the absence of one can make sending packages from outside the country a challenge. FedEx now delivers to Bhutan, but posts a long list of restricted items.

There continues to be some confusion over how to refer to the four queens now that their husband is no longer king. Specifically, should the honorific Queen Mother be used for all four wives, or should that be reserved only for Ashi Tshering Yangdon Wangchuck, since she is the one who actually gave birth to the man who now reigns over Bhutan?

Rumors that the new king ordered the removal of painted phalluses from the sides of buildings throughout the country because some tourists found them offensive turned out to be unfounded. The phalluses remain.

And the authentic Bhutanese temple built on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., in the summer of 2008 for the Smithsonian Folklife Festival was acquired by the University of Texas at El Paso. UTEP’s president has been advised to check with astrologers about the most appropriate location on the grounds, as well as the most prudent date for the work to begin.

As for Bhutan’s new democracy: Their first session saw heated internal debate about sitting fees for members, what they should be paid over and above their salaries for the days they must appear in session. After criticism in the media, the idea of the fees was dropped, but the elected officials awarded themselves a car allowance, as well as a subsidy to pay for a driver.

A year into the first term, the National Assembly banned television cameras from covering their deliberations live. They argued that the complexity of the discussions confused the citizens. One critic said the parliamentary members’ real concern was that they themselves don’t really understand the issues and didn’t want their constituents to see. The National Council immediately reversed course and said they would continue to allow live coverage of their proceedings. Even in its infancy, democratic governance appears to be disappointing, if not polarizing, the people. “I didn’t expect they’d do anything except look out for themselves,” one young man said to me in the winter of 2009. “Only His Majesty has our best interest in mind.”
THE BRIGHT SUN DOESN'T QUITE OFFSET THE CHILL in the air, but the incline of the walk up to the giant Buddha statue makes it feel a bit more temperate. It is a few weeks before Kinga Norbu’s first birthday. He’s home with Ngawang, sick with a ferocious cold; Pema and I decide to take this Saturday jaunt anyway, even though they can’t come along. She’s wearing sweats and carrying a backpack, and we’re both wearing sunglasses and jabbering our way up the hill like the two old friends we are by now. We discuss Pema’s new job at an organic products manufacturer, men, the state of the world, and gossip involving our various mutual friends. Pema’s thrilled with the latest gift I’ve brought, a little Louis Vuitton purse. It’s another hand-me-down from my friend Barbara. Pema can’t believe how kind this woman she’s never met has been to her. I can’t believe I keep aiding and abetting Pema’s brand-goods addiction, even if all it involves is being a Sherpa.

A group of boys passes us; they make a disparaging remark about the two chilips, which is rude slang for foreigners. Pema is flattered to be so incognito that she’s unidentifiable as a Bhutanese, but also wants to put the boys in their place, so she starts nonchalantly speaking to them in their native tongue about the weather and where they’re going. Turns out they’re headed to the Buddha, too.

Though they climb up through the woods and we stay on the paved road, built in anticipation of the carloads of visitors who will one day make this voyage, we arrive at the construction site at about the same time. A caretaker allows us in, breaking the rules since there’s no work taking place today. When I was here last year, there was just a clearing; now the Buddha has begun to take shape, and the distinct gleam of the 140-foot structure peeks dramatically through the mask of scaffolding. I wonder if when it’s complete it’ll look majestic or Vegasque or a bit of both. The boys are taking pictures. We do, too.

“I love you, Lisa Jane,” shouts Pema, as she snaps away at the Buddha; then she trains her point-and-shoot camera on the ever-widening footprint of the Thimphu Valley below. There are so many cranes and construction sites mirroring the one before us that it looks like a giant game of SimCity. “I love you back, Pema Lhamo,” I say, and for a minute I forget how odd it is that I have this lovely friend, all these lovely friends on the other side of the world from my home. It feels less odd, really, than it does lucky.

IN THE WINTER of 2010, three big things were occupying the minds of the people in Thimphu. The first was the premier occupant of a new six-story structure next to the clock tower. As weary Indian laborers frantically tacked on the roof, curious customers packed the ground floor of Druk Punjab, Bhutan’s first commercial bank, sipping the free tea and eagerly signing up for new accounts. The bank was an outpost of an Indian concern, and it promised a critical link to the outside world that neither the established government-owned banks, the television, nor the Internet could: ATM cards that would work in India and in Bhutan, making it possible to travel for business or pilgrimage without wads of cash. There were other enticements, too: lower interest rates on loans that made it easier to build a new house or to buy one of the new cars from the fancy showrooms cropping up on the outskirts of the city. All this was big news in a place where just forty years ago there wasn’t any cash money and where the idea of institutional lending to the masses was still a cutting-edge concept. The pièce de résistance was the bank’s promise to introduce in a few months the ultimate trapping of capitalism: credit cards.

As if to tamp down the encroaching acquisitive spirit just a bit, and remind the Bhutanese of their Buddhist roots, a series of meetings was being held by educators during the annual winter break to discuss exactly how to introduce the fundamentals of Gross National Happiness into the school curriculum. Lately the Bhutanese elite had begun to feel that outsiders were doing a better job of examining and practicing the national philosophy than they were themselves. A lama was deployed to teach meditation skills to the assembled principals of the schools; by taming their minds, the thinking went, they’d be better equipped to help their students tame theirs. The prime minister graced one of the sessions with a four-hour speech that summed up his concerns:

Our challenge is that schools [should] not produce selfish economic animals who are only motivated to succeed at the cost of relationships, environment, and family. We have to convince the children that what parents have has nothing to do with who they are. Our little country, once so blissfully isolated in a remote corner of the
Himalayas, seemingly protected by high mountain peaks, wisely and peacefully governed by a lineage of great enlightened monarchs, is now buffeted by powerful forces we could not have imagined or conceived just a generation ago. Though some have brought benefit, those powerful forces are not always benign, and some of them threaten not only our profound heritage but even our lives and land.

What the prime minister didn’t mention was that the latest powerful force to ruffle Bhutanese prayer flags had come at his invitation, in the guise of the international consulting firm McKinsey & Company. This merry band of bright-eyed young MBAs, dispatched from McKinsey’s offices in next-door India, had been hired for $9.1 million. Their mission was to evaluate the nation’s inner workings and mine them for greater efficiencies and value. After a months-long inquisition at each of the ministries, the McKinseyites had handed down a wide-ranging series of observations and recommendations about how to better “brand” Bhutan. Chief among them was a push to monetize the GNH thing, for GNH was seen as Bhutan’s most alluring (and therefore its most marketable) asset. To achieve this, the McKinsey team proposed nixing the tourist tariff and allowing guests to book directly with hotels; there would be no more wiring thousands of dollars to tour operators you’d never met in order to secure your visa, guides, drivers, and Druk Air tickets. The idea was to make it as easy as possible for tourists to enter Bhutan and ramp up the number of annual visitors to the country from 27,000—the high to date—to 100,000 a year.

Those in the travel industry expressed fear that by eliminating the barriers to entry, the mystique of Bhutan as an exclusive, elite destination would be damaged. What they really feared was that the government was trying to put all but the best-established travel professionals out of business. Others worried that Bhutan might someday soon resemble Nepal, jammed with spiritual-seeking backpackers. Still others snarked that what McKinsey was recommending was simply not possible: If filled to capacity for 365 days, the two jets owned by Druk Air would hold only 93,000 humans. It seemed delusional at best and irresponsible at worst to imagine that a place that had worked feverishly for so long to keep the world out could possibly consider allowing so many people in. And more practically, they lacked the infrastructure to accommodate them all. Besides, how would those who did venture to Bhutan deal with the cult of spicy hot chilies? Bhutan was on the brink of yet more change, this time at the hands of highly paid advisors who wouldn’t have to live with the consequences of their recommendations.

I’m not sure I’ve ever been so cold; I don’t remember it being this frigid here in the winter. I’m in bed under the covers in a not-shabby hotel, far better than the guesthouse where my hosts first stuck me when I arrived last week, where the only thing covering the window in the bathroom was a sheet of newspaper and fleas danced off my suitcase. This room’s a suite, and boasts a modern convenience not widely available in Bhutan: a wall-mounted electric heater. Not that it chugs out any measurable warmth—the room’s too big, and the draft seeping in from the half-inch crack in the patio door is too ferocious. Central heat and insulation are inventions that haven’t quite made their way here, much less the luxury of a warm bathroom. Even locals grit their teeth through their wintertime ablutions.

All the clothing I’ve got on isn’t offering much protection. Two layers on the bottom, four on top, a huge scarf from Bumthang that Ngawang gave me when I arrived, and a Yankees World Championship 2009 skullcap covering my head and ears. Oh, and fluffy pink chenille socks. I just took my hands out from under the three blankets to grab my cell phone and text in my vote for singer number 6 in the Druk Star contest the Bhutan Broadcasting Service has been running. Her shy smile and sweet trill captured my attention. From my woefully inadequate understanding of Dzongkha, I deduced that she’s from a tiny district in the eastern part of the country, and that made me root for her all the more. For twenty seconds, number 6 diverted my distress over my frozen nose; plus she drowned out the cacophony of howling dogs—soprano, alto, and baritone—outside my window. At least this time, by overdosing on Cipro and carefully policing what I eat, I’ve managed to stave off that awful affliction of the stomach, euphemistically known as “loose motion.” Which is, come to think of it, the best way I can think of to describe the changes that are unfolding so rapidly here in the so-called last Shangri-la.

What I’m wondering at this moment (besides how I’m going to scurry to the toilet in this cold for the inevitable middle-of-the-night pee) is what to make of this McKinsey recommendation. My predisposition was to mistrust the suits. But maybe something positive would emerge from this odd marriage. For one thing, what purpose was that long-standing $200-a-day charge for all outsiders serving, really? The government took $65 off the top; the leftover $135 had given a generation of Bhutanese the illusion that they could become rich as tour operators, even if they had no interest in that kind of work. Even without the tariff, because of Bhutan’s size and location, it would be difficult for it to become as jammed with visitors as Nepal or India. Wouldn’t it? Besides, the Bhutanese were doing a fine job of polluting and littering the landscape themselves. An animated commercial on TV implored youngsters to stop tossing trash on the streets, and a recent report showed ten new cars a day entering Bhutan’s roads. Just the other day
I spotted a woman drinking from the first disposable cup I’d ever seen here.

The government argued that expanded tourism would lead to more jobs, which were necessary to employ the growing population. Sixty percent of the residents were under the age of twenty-nine. They were better educated than the generations before them and had been watching TV for a decade, acquiring sophisticated wants and desires that could no longer be fulfilled on the farms and in the villages. Every day I heard another tale of another nanny crammed into a New York City apartment and supporting four Bhutanese back home. These incomes funded the purchase of apartments, cars, and siblings’ educations back on the other side of the world, and fueled the aspirations of an alarming number of young people in Bhutan, too. Buddha, schmudda: In the front window of the public library hang children’s drawings of Santa Claus. “I wish we had Christmas in Bhutan,” reads a caption, “so we could get presents.” Bhutan is facing a dilemma that belies the premise of Buddhism and of Gross National Happiness: It’s human nature to want an easier way of life. And more stuff.

Maybe the MBAs from McKinsey could impose some order on the chaos of Bhutan. Case study: The circumstances under which I’d come here this time would make even the most junior of strategic consultants’ heads spin. The woman who invited me to make this trip, a high-level official at the Tourism Council—arguably the most powerful agency in Bhutan given that it brings in tens of millions of dollars to the country each year, which is second only to the revenue from hydropower exports to India—has gone missing. A friend of hers had told her I was looking for another volunteer gig, and she had written to say she urgently needed my help, for six months if possible. To my surprise, I found myself balking at that kind of commitment but agreeing to a two-week trip so that we might at least get acquainted. I confirmed the dates of my stay with her, and her assistant arranged the visa and local travel. When I arrived after my long journey—familiar, but no easier now that I’ve done it five times—my hostess was mysteriously absent. And no one who works for her quite knew what to do with me.

Almost a week after I arrived in the country, the mystery was solved. A friend in the States wrote to tell me of a report he heard on public radio that mentioned that the queen of Bhutan (the reporter didn’t get into the minutiae of how this particular queen was actually one of four) was appearing at the renowned Jaipur Literature Festival in India to promote her book. My would-be hostess, a woman charged with helping revamp the entire nation’s future, is also expected to attend to her queen; when the queen goes on a trip, this woman is expected to accompany her. No one considers that her two roles might create a conflict. No one thinks it strange that I schlepped around the world, at my own expense, to find no instructions have been left for me. (I wonder what the McKinseyites, who preach the language of efficiency, must think of the idea that the royal family still takes precedence in this democracy. I also wonder how long it is before anyone—at the newspapers, in the private sector—openly starts investigating the finances of the royal family. Even in the burgeoning age of investigative journalism, that would still be unthinkable now.)

Royalty has back-burnered my purportedly urgent mission. I know better by now than to be surprised by this. And yet, this time it annoys me. A lot. I don’t want to be here, a chilip in the land of chilies. I want to go home. I love this city, even if it is becoming ever grittier and more congested; the streetscape of Thimphu has infiltrated my dreams. For so much, I owe Bhutan an enormous debt of gratitude. But this is not where I belong.

The view of the valley out my hotel room window is the same angle as that of the live shot on the BBS after-hours filler. I squint and wish I could transform the twinkling lights of the city before me into what I can see from my apartment window in Los Angeles.

It occurs to me that if I shift the bed away from the wall and in front of the heater, I might soak up a bit more of its warmth.

For a few days now—without much else to do and after hanging out with the staff of the new weekly newspaper, Business Bhutan, and running into old friends—I’ve been trading text messages and emails with the opposition leader, Tshering Tobgay. He’s statesmanlike in an Obamaesque way, supersmart, direct, striking, and accessible to the people through various channels: his blog, Facebook, Twitter. I met him briefly two summers ago in a shop in Thimphu, where I was buying a cell phone recharge voucher and potato chips on my way back to Kuzoo, and he breezed in to pick up a snack for his daughter, who was waiting in the car.

“Hey, I just saw you on TV,” I said. This was before the National Council voted to prohibit televised proceedings of its debates.

“Yes.” He smiled. “And who are you?” I explained that I’d been volunteering at Kuzoo. It turned out he’d heard my reports from the Smithsonian Folklife Festival and was a fan of public radio from his time at Harvard. That radio job may have driven me a bit batty, but it sure offered street cred.

Now, a couple of years later, here we are on a windy winter afternoon at Karma’s Coffee, sitting with our dueling Mac-Books over a series of hot brewed coffees, commiserating about Bhutan’s future like two old friends. I share
what I’ve managed to glean about the McKinsey plans, how the MBAs are making lists of sacred sites and landmarks around the country and figuring out how to rank them as “products.” The various districts of the country are being broken down into “circuits.” “The Eastern circuit,” as the young, smiling McKinsey lady describes it, will be where meditation centers are developed for Westerners who wish to travel to the “spiritual heartland” of Bhutan, as if there is such an actual location, and pay thousands of dollars to live authentically through homestays with the locals. Meditation centers in the last Buddhist kingdom? Isn’t that like building igloos for Eskimos? Land is currently being claimed under rules of eminent domain and regional airports are being developed so that future visitors won’t have to suffer through the rocky, undulating, death-defying twenty-four-hour drive across the country on the national “highway.” Soon the previously underexplored side of Shangri-la, home to unspoiled natural wonders and simple farm people, will be more easily accessible to the outside world. How simple and unspoiled would they remain as a consequence?

Tshering Tobgay is worried. He also knows that the widely held belief by Bhutanese about how rich outsiders are is a myth. “People here think you all have weeks and weeks of vacation time, too,” he says. “As if you can just dash around the world for a few weeks with kids.” Another thing that disgusts him is the business of “teaching” GNH in the schools.

“Not everything is demand and supply,” Tshering Tobgay says, lifting his fourth cup of coffee. “You can’t teach Gross National Happiness and inner peace. Next thing you know, McKinsey will be recommending that we buy an ad in the Super Bowl, like we’re Coca-Cola.”

With that, he lifts up the lid of his MacBook and whips out his cell phone. “Have you been reading the blogs? People are so angry about all of this,” he says. “Now, if you will please excuse me for a few minutes while I conduct a little business.” I rise to leave, and he motions for me to sit down. First, he calls his webmaster, and then makes a series of calls to the media outlets to alert them to a press release that has just this moment been posted to his blog. In between, he directs me with a grin to his site, where he says what practically everyone I’ve been talking to, including my tourism department hostess, has been saying—but won’t say publicly. The new constitution offers freedom of speech, but that document doesn’t trump the hidebound tradition of loyalty to the state:

The Opposition Leader called on the Minister of Economic Affairs … yesterday to express the Opposition Party’s concerns on the Royal Government’s recent policy decisions on tourism…. Liberalizing the tourist tariff will undermine the positive brand image that our country has carefully cultivated and enjoyed over the last three decades…. A target of 100,000 tourists per year by 2012 may be unsustainable and undesirable, given the country’s existing absorptive capacity and small population base of barely 600,000 people, most of who still live in scattered communities.

The opposition leader takes his title very seriously. As he works the phones to drum up a little media attention, I savor my ringside seat to the new democracy in action. Maybe next time I see Tshering Tobgay he’ll be Bhutan’s second elected prime minister.

THE NEXT DAY, I’m waiting outside the offices of the Tourism Council of Bhutan for a friend to pick me up for lunch. A man passes by and asks where I’m from; even in Thimphu, it’s still not common to see foreigners, especially at this time of year. “Los Angeles,” I say. “California. United States. And you?”

“Luentse,” he says wearily. It’s a remote district in Bhutan’s untrafficked northeastern corner. I had just read about this corner of the country in the travel materials last night; there are hardly any roads there, the residents are unfettered by modernization, and few outsiders have trod the pristine, undeveloped terrain, which offers spectacular flowers and natural beauty. Just the kind of place the McKinseyites are working to commoditize.

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“I would love to see that,” I said solicitously, although I wonder how my stomach would handle the food. “I hear it’s very beautiful.”

“To you it may sound beautiful.” He smiles as he gets into a Toyota Land Cruiser. “To us it is backward.”

ON THE LAST NIGHT of my stay, Ngawang and Mr. Japan stop in to say good-bye. They are coming from the hospital; the baby is better, home with the mother-in-law, but now it’s his father’s turn to be ill. He’s availed himself of the free health care, as many people do, to make sure his flu is really just a flu. No wonder the McKinsey report has declared this system financially untenable in the long term.

As we sip ginger tea made by Pema’s new organic-products employer, we discuss the frustrations of my visit, Ngawang’s displeasure at the ratty guesthouse where I was first housed, and how upset she is that while I volunteer and pay my way here, $700-a-day consultants are deployed for events like the GNH conference, which she’d
covered for her new weekly show on the topic. I shrug and say it’s okay, really.

“Money is important, especially now, so I can buy things for Kinga Norbu,” Ngawang says, “because if he’s happy, I’m happy.”

I tsk-tsks Mr. Japan looks at her sideways. He smiles his thoughtful smile, amused by his wife but not annoyed by her.

“I used to think money mattered more than GNH,” he says. “But now I’m not so sure. I see those poor African people on television, and they seem very happy, even if they don’t have much.”

He looks weary; I know it’s far colder in their house than it is here in my hotel room. No wonder they’ve all been sick. I ask him if he’d like my Yankees cap, and as he takes it, he gives me a warm hug. So does Ngawang, apologizing that we’ve not been able to spend more time together on this trip. They both remind me of their standing offer to visit their family in the countryside. After they head out into the darkness, I turn on the BBS and slip under the covers. I want to fall asleep to the sound of my friend Namgay reading the newscast, and wake up in the morning with the chanting monk who begins each broadcasting day.

THREE WEEKS LATER, I’m back in Los Angeles, recovered from the jet lag and the bone-chilling cold, and I happen to check Facebook in the middle of the day. There’s a recent posting by Aby, one of the editors at Business Bhutan:

Tourist tariff to be $250 a day 365/7 as of 2011.

The simplicity of the sentence urgently conveys “breaking news.” I start searching the Net for more information but can’t find any. Then I call up the opposition leader’s blog. At about the same time as Aby’s post, Tshering Tobgay has tweeted this: Travelling back to Thimphu. Heard the good news that govt has decided to scrap its plans to liberalize tourist tariff.

It isn’t until the next day that I get more information from another Bhutanese friend, in the form of an email. He tells me that the buzz of dissatisfaction on the streets led the prime minister to sit down with members of the tourism industry; as a result of the talks, the tourism tariff liberalization has been declared dead. Indeed, the government decided it shall be raised. That doesn’t mean the hope of attracting more tourists is diminished; that goal remains the same, but a commitment to tourism that also preserves Bhutan has been made. A victory for free speech and public outcry.

In the same batch of email, I receive two other Bhutan-related messages. One is from the friend of a friend of a friend, a retired high school principal in Canada who wants to “step out of her comfort zone” and volunteer in the kingdom, a dream she’s long had. Can I help her find a way? The other is from a Bhutanese friend’s eighteen-year-old daughter, who has been granted a scholarship to a college I’ve never heard of in remote Minnesota and needs to come up with $12,000 in boarding fees. Can I help her get a job? “An old-age home, a nanny, anywhere,” she implores, and I know she really doesn’t understand what Anywhere, USA, means or how hard it is to make and save that kind of money.

I find myself inclined to help the first lady and to question and lecture the girl. But first I decide to go for a walk outside in the California sunshine.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Life is a series of random events that thread together in ways that lead to sometimes sweet, often spectacular, perhaps transformative, experiences. This book could not have come to be were it not for myriad fortuitous meetings over the course of my decades, several of which collided over the last several years to lead me to Bhutan.

To that end, I must first thank my old dear friend Harris Salat, who introduced me to my new dear friend Sebastian Beckwith, who introduced me to the country that captured my heart. (That chain of connections traces back to when I was a teenager, when our family friend Adam Cohen introduced me to Hampshire College, where I met Mary Batts, who later insisted I meet Harris.)

Jeffrey Tuchman introduced me to Barbara Osborn, who told me about her husband, John Drimmer, who led the happiness class that helped me begin to see the world more positively even before I ventured to Bhutan.

Had Merrill Brown not gotten me hired at MSNBC a decade ago, I might not have met Bob Sullivan there, who introduced me to Jill Schwartzman at Random House, who then connected me to Dan Conaway at Writers House, who prodded my unformed musings about Bhutan into this book and became a dear and trusted advisor and friend, whom I can never adequately thank. Dan’s assistant, Stephen Barr, is the epitome of a positively wired human with whom it is a delight to interact.

Tina Constable, Kristin Kiser, and Heather Jackson at Crown invested in the project, and in me, for which I am eternally grateful; Lucinda Bartley, and ultimately, Sydny Miner, deftly shepherded the project to its end state and out into the world. Thanks to the entire Crown team for their enthusiasm and support.

To the many people who make me feel welcome in Thimphu, among them: Ngawang Pem and Sonam Penjor; Pema Lhamo; Phub Dorji; Sherab Tenzin; and the original staff of Kuzoo FM, particularly Sir Pema and RJ Kinzang; Choki Wangchuk; Ian Alexander-Bell; Patrizia Franceschinis and Lyonpo Ugyen Tshering; Choeki and Ugyen at Rabten Apartments.

Hans Keller, Penny Siekfer, Mark, Kat and Andy Schiffler; Ed Hanzcaryck; Pam Maruoka; Mayumi Futamura; Kunzang Choden and Walter Roder; Peter Hansen. Sandee at Seasons fed me when David Havens wasn’t hosting meat night at his apartment behind Villa Italia. Ugen Choden, Kuenga Gyaltser, Dawa Sherpa, and Bruce Bunting at the Bhutan Foundation, along with Preston Scott and everyone involved in and around the Smithsonian Folklife Festival.

A special thanks to KB Lama for being such a dear and frank friend.

In the United States, I am grateful for Rev. Kusala Bhikshu at the IBMC, all my teachers at the Ketchum YMCA, and to the Bunker Hill swimming pool (in particular, my neighbor and fellow swimmer George Moore). And for my friends and former colleagues at the public radio show Marketplace. A special hug to Bill Slemering for his support.

The resources and support of the Library of Congress (in particular the Asian Reading Room), the University of Texas at El Paso (Special Collections Library), and the Los Angeles Public Library proved invaluable. Willie Quinn, thank you, and the same to Dr. Diana Natalicio. Pam and Kurt Meyer clued me in to the very existence of UTEP.

I am blessed with an abundance of dear friends, but there are several in particular who slogged alongside me patienty during these last several years: Matthew Mirapaul, Bernie Woodall, Liz Dubelman, Paul Slansky and Grace Slansky, Alistrone Berger, Katherine Stern, Preston Wiles, Elizabeth Kaplan, Brian Averna, Jimmy Suskin, Barbara Rybka, and Maggie Curran. Joe Hutsko has long been my chief writing cheerleader.

And to all my family, including and especially my parents, Vince and Jane, Aunt Kay, and my dear brother, James.

Last, thanks to everyone who has ever graced my home on a Friday night, particularly the regulars ... but especially to the greatest surprise, who appeared at just the right moment, namely Ted Habte-Gabr, and the Wagner family conspiracy to connect us.

Speaking of which, here’s to believing that the next person you meet could very well be a source of adventure, if not an agent of change.
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY:  
IF YOU ARE INTERESTED IN  
LEARNING MORE ABOUT BHUTAN …

This is a selection of books, articles, and Web sites about Bhutan. On the list, I’ve included an indispensable volume about Buddhism written by a Bhutanese, along with a movie made by that book’s author that was filmed in the kingdom.

It is by no means an exhaustive bibliography of all that has been written about Bhutan—there are certainly others in the relatively small collection of published material about the place. And over the last two years, in conjunction with the centennial of the monarchy, many photographic and illustrated books have been released by small presses.

What is listed here, however, would provide the curious student of Bhutan as much as he or she could possibly learn without moving there. Links to these materials can also be found on my personal Web site, www.lisanapoli.com.

NOT ONLY HAS Bhutan never been colonized but Christian missionaries have not had much luck there, either. In the seventeenth century, two Jesuits made their way in. The account of their interactions with Bhutan’s then leader, the Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, is on the Web, here:


**WEB SITES**

**Media**

- KUZOO FM
  - [www.kuzoo.net](http://www.kuzoo.net)
- CENTENNIAL RADIO
  - [www.thimphu101.blogspot.com](http://www.thimphu101.blogspot.com)
- BHUTAN BROADCASTING SERVICE
  - [www.bbs.com.bt](http://www.bbs.com.bt)
- KUENSEL
  - [www.kuenselonline.com](http://www.kuenselonline.com)
- BUSINESS BHUTAN
  - [www.businessbhutan.bt](http://www.businessbhutan.bt)
- BHUTAN OBSERVER
  - [www.bhutanobserver.bt](http://www.bhutanobserver.bt)
- BHUTAN TIMES
  - [www.bhutanetimes.com](http://www.bhutanetimes.com)
- BHUTAN TODAY
  - [www.bhutantoday.bt](http://www.bhutantoday.bt)

**Nonprofit Organizations**

- BHUTAN CENTRE FOR MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY
  - [www.bhutancmd.org.bt](http://www.bhutancmd.org.bt)
- BHUTAN FOUNDATION
  - [www.bhutanfound.org](http://www.bhutanfound.org)
- CENTRE FOR BHUTAN STUDIES
  - [www.bhutanstudies.org.bt](http://www.bhutanstudies.org.bt)
- TÂRAYANA FOUNDATION
  - [www.tarayanafoundation.org](http://www.tarayanafoundation.org)
- VAST: VOLUNTARY ARTISTS’ STUDIO, THIMPHU
  - [www.vast-bhutan.org](http://www.vast-bhutan.org)

**Government**

- NATIONAL PORTAL OF BHUTAN
  - (OFFICIAL GOVERNMENT SITE)
    - [www.bhutan.gov.bt](http://www.bhutan.gov.bt)
- THE CONSTITUTION OF THE KINGDOM OF BHUTAN
  - [www.constitution.bt](http://www.constitution.bt)
- TOURISM COUNCIL OF BHUTAN
  - [www.tourism.gov.bt](http://www.tourism.gov.bt)
BEFORE LISA NAPOLI fell in love with Bhutan, she chronicled the dawn of the Internet era as a reporter and columnist for the first Web site of the New York Times, and later as a correspondent and columnist for MSNBC. She most recently worked as a reporter and fill-in host for the public-radio show Marketplace.

Earlier in her career, Napoli directed two short documentaries about southern culture and field produced coverage of the 1992 Clinton presidential campaign and the Waco standoffs.

A native of Brooklyn, she is a graduate of Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts. You can learn more about Bhutan and the author at www.lisanapoli.com.
What I Learned in Bhutan, the Happiest Kingdom on Earth

Radio Shangri-La

Lisa Napoli