

AN AFFAIR BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKE

By Samrat Upadhyay

The earthquake was yet to come.

She promised him before she left for America that she would return in two years and they'd be together.

“Will we marry?” he'd asked.

“That I don't know,” she'd said. “What good would that do?”

What good would marriage do! Well, marriage would keep us together, he'd thought. It'd tie us in an official bond, and never would we be apart! Or something like that. But he'd feel foolish uttering these words so he didn't.

When she first told him that she was going away he knew it was coming. They'd been walking in the city center, holding hands, moving from Thamel through Asan, then Indrachowk toward Kathmandu Durbar Square. Soon they'd pass the giant drums to the right, the statue of Hanuman the Monkey God to the left, then, to the right, figures of Shiva-Parvati leaning out of a temple window. On to the square and the nine-stage platform that led to the base of the Maju Deval temple, which was more than three hundred years old, where tourists and locals (now increasingly young lovers) hung out and watched the scenery. In front of the temple she'd say, “Shall we?” and they'd climb the steps, linger for some time as they watched the people below, then they'd come back down. The next stop was the Kasthamandap Temple, where they'd observe the Gorakhnath statue (both of them were not particularly religious), and she'd say, “This temple was made out of a single tree.” He was aware of the legend, of course, and he recalled that this structure was nine

hundred years old, serving as a resting pavilion, a sanctuary, for merchants who traveled the ancient trade routes. “Our city gets its name from this temple,” she said, every time, as though he was unaware of it. And he’d take note of “our city” because that meant that she considered the city to be theirs, theirs together. Our hearth, he thought.

They’d circle the small shrine of Ganesh, still holding hands, and he’d feel that they were consecrating their togetherness.

But she was a free spirit. He knew that. If he’d chosen to ignore it, how was she to blame? Before they became lovers, he’d watched her from afar, and he’d admired her and thought: now there’s a free spirit, and I’m not. It was strange, identifying oneself as an un-free spirit. But he’d felt a constriction inside himself ever since he could remember, since childhood. Shy, they used to call him, but he’d always known that it was more than shyness. He was trapped by his own thoughts, which, it became obvious to him by his teen years, went around in circles, or repeated the same patterns—which meant that his life followed the same patterns, over and over. He was free to go wherever he chose, and he traveled quite a bit in the early years of his profession—China, Germany, Australia—yet he was moving within this circle of entrapment.

But she was not restricted to her body, or her mind. Even her laughter (and she laughed often) came from a different, liberated place. She used to work at an INGO, in the same office building as his, one floor below, and her laughter reached up to him from her veranda, where she gathered with her co-workers for breaks. He would be on his own veranda, and he’d lean over so he could see her. He’d see her hair, the top of her head, a part of her face, perhaps the nose and a cheek, and she’d appear beautiful to him in this partial profile. He’d passed by her a few times on the staircase, and she was always with a co-worker, never alone, and she was always smiling or laughing. When their eyes met, he thought she acknowledged him as a person of interest.

For him she was more than a person of interest: she had become, by that time, his lover in his dreams. How could it be, he'd asked himself late at night in his apartment as he lay under his blanket. How could she become his lover so quickly? He didn't know her name, where she lived, whether she was a vegetarian, whether she had family here in the city or elsewhere. He didn't know—he bolted upright in his bed—whether she was married. Why had he assumed that she wasn't? Because she didn't look married, that's why. She didn't wear *sindur* in the parting in her hair, she never wore a *sari* (it was always *kurta suruwal*). Her face looked young: no blemishes, eyes quick and smiling. He reminded himself that there were plenty of married women who looked young, and that *sindur* and *sari* no longer signaled married women. In this modern city now many women who had husbands went to work in trousers and shirts and *kurta suruwal*, often without applying the red powder in their hair. Okay, he thought late at night. I don't know her name, where she lives, who is in her family, whether she has a husband or children, yet she is my lover. Good job.

She would come to him in his dreams. They'd hold hands and walk through the city center, the same path they'd take once they became lovers for real, the same path where she told him she was leaving for America. As dream lovers, they'd make bulging eyes at the fearsome Kal Bhairav statue, watch pigeons coo and flutter next to the Monkey God temple, amble to the main square where they'd climb up the steps of the Maju Deval temple and watch the action below.

She continued to be his dream-lover even after she became his real lover. And becoming her real lover also happened quickly, easily—too easily, he thought. But it all happened in the course of one afternoon and evening, so effortlessly that he wondered if he'd dreamt it. But one afternoon as he stood on his office veranda, leaning to catch sight of her side profile below, she looked up at him and with laughing eyes said, "*Hoina*, what is your name, Sir? I see you all the time but I don't know your name."

He'd shyly given his name, then she asked him whether the Lipton Instant Coffee Machine was working in his office, for the one in her office was broken and she was craving for some coffee. "Am I not?" she asked her two co-workers, whom he couldn't see but who he could hear were tittering. "Oh, yes, broken," her co-workers said, loudly. "Yes, yes, badly broken." He thought one of them said, "Broken like a heart that's broken," but he couldn't be sure.

The next moment she was upstairs and they were drinking coffee and swapping mobile numbers.

After they became lovers, their conversations from his dreams bled into their real conversations. When she sucked on a kulfi ice cream on the steps of Maju Deval, he wasn't sure if it was the dream-she who sucked on a kulfi or the real-she.

"I promise," she said, sometimes in his dreams and sometimes in the real world where the earthquake was yet to come. Sometimes just, "Promise." She loved using the word, as if simply saying it made her feel good about everything.

"Promise?" he asked. "We'll be together?" "I swear I promise," she said.

She liked to sing Nepali songs. She had a soft voice she used to her full advantage. She would start singing without a prompt. "Out of the blue"—that's how he described the abruptness of her singing to a friend to whom he'd confessed how badly he'd fallen in love with her. He'd gone to the friend's house after work, loosened his tie and paced the room, as his friend had watched him as though he were a performer auditioning for a coveted part. It had been an hour of nonstop confession.

“And she starts singing out of the blue,” he told his friend. “Out of the blue, I swear. We’ll be sitting on the steps of Maju Deval, and I’ll be talking to her softly about something, persuading her about something—it seems as though I’m always persuading her, pleading with her—and she’ll appear to be listening. I think that I’m beginning to make some headway when suddenly she’ll start singing. And it’s always a very Nepali song, often the oldies, from the previous generation, like Narayan Gopal, Aruna Lama, Gopal Yonzan, Prem Dhoj, sometimes even the oldie folksy ones like Kumar Basnet.

“Even the ploughing-on-top-of-the-green-hills guy, what’s his name? Yes, Dharma Raj Thapa. The surprising thing is that when we talk half of her words are English; she can barely utter one full sentence that’s unadulterated Nepali. But when she sings her words are so pure, so Nepali that it’s almost as if a different person is singing. What’s happening, you think?”

But he wasn’t really interested in an answer from his friend, and his friend knew this. The friend also knew what the answer was: she was a different person when she sang. Her singing was a deep, yearning subconscious desire to go back to a time when the Nepali identity wasn’t sullied by external forces.

“I’ll never meet anyone like her,” he continued. He was sweating, so he took off his jacket and went to the window. There was no breeze but he could now look out and talk. The city was crammed with houses. He thought of the phrase “packed like sardines.” In that moment, he knew that he wouldn’t get to share the city with her, even though she’d said “our city” when she’d talked about the Kasthamandap temple, even though it wasn’t until a few days later that she’d tell him she was going away. This is how he knew: when he looked out he saw only himself in the city. He saw himself walking the streets alone, sometimes late at night, perhaps after a rain when the air was fresh. He walked very slowly, pausing every now and then. He watched shopkeepers closing their shops. He moved through the center toward the Durbar Square. A lone woman was bent over the

Kal Bhairav statue, praying hard. A couple of drug addicts and drunkards passed him. He looked up at the Maju Deval Temple. In the darkness he saw two figures at the top of the platform—two young lovers. He knew they were looking at him, hoping he'd not come up so they'd remain undisturbed.

After seeing himself alone in the city after the rain, he stopped his monologue. "What happened?" his friend asked. "Go on."

But now the words didn't come. "Is something wrong?"

He shook his head. "It's time for me to leave now," he said. "But I thought we were going to do some drinking tonight." "I'm no longer in the mood."

A few days later she told him her plan to go to America, to a large university in the Midwest where there was a lot of greenery.

"When?"

"Next month. I'll return in two years. This degree is a must for me. I need to move up. I need to be the director of my company."

"But what if you change? What if you become like an American?"

She smiled. "How?"

"What if you start talking like an American? Acting like an American?" He talked to her in an exaggerated American accent, or what he thought was an American accent, with wide vowel sounds and hard consonants, all delivered in a nasal twang. She laughed like she was going to drop dead on the street.

He laughed with her, then held her arm and said, in a soft, persuasive voice, "But seriously, what if you change?"

At the top platform of Maju Deval, she began to sing. It was drizzling, enough to make people pick up their pace but not enough to cause panic, and it was nice to watch others hasten as they themselves were protected by the temple's awning that displayed erotic carvings. "Our ancestors were dirty, dirty folks," she'd said a while ago when they'd spotted a scene of bestiality right above their heads.

She sang an old Narayan Gopal song: *yeti chokho, yeti mitho, dulia timlai maya, birsanechan saraley purana premka katha*. Basically: I will give you such a sweet and pure love that people will forget the love stories of yesteryears.

He didn't hear from her once she left for America. He emailed her, called her, Skyped her, Vibered her, contacted another Nepali at her university and had his message delivered to her and received confirmation that his message was indeed delivered to her in person. Nothing. He came upon a photo of her at a university party that someone had posted on Facebook; she was holding a glass of wine, looking happy.

She didn't return in two years. Soon thereafter he too left, for Australia. So, he wasn't there when the earthquake struck and the Maju Deval temple came tumbling down. The Kasthamandap Temple, too, was reduced to a rubble.

Before he left for Australia, he took the route that they used to take, from Thamel to Asan, to Indrachowk, then on to Durbar Square past the ridiculously fearsome Kal Bhairav and the pigeons, the giant drums and the statues of Shiva-Parvati surveying the square from their tiny window. He carried imaginary conversations with her as they walked.

"You think it's going to rain today?" he asked.

"It always drizzles when we come here." She briefly squeezed his hand. "But I like light rains." She twirled in the middle of the square, watched by garland-sellers and rickshaw-pullers. To

his surprise, she sang an old Hindi number this time. *Aaj fir jine ki tamanna hai, aaj fir marney ka irada hai.*

Basically: Today I want to live again, and again today I want to die.