

The Diviner

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LORI MCNULTY



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NEW DELHI IN SEPTEMBER LEAVES ME FAMISHED FOR RAIN. HUMID AIR, A thick pill on my tongue. Too hot for sleeves. As the parched city chokes, the heart craves monsoon they say. But my mind is on the mountain.

Nisha and I scoop up spicy moong daal with dosas we curl like tongues in our mouths. Her aunt Vasanti sweeps in from the kitchen, maneuvering a bowl of curried vegetables to the table. “Do you have enough to drink?” she gestures at my silver cup. “Shall I make you a sandwich?”

Nisha and Karthik, friends from Canada, have invited me to join them here on a military base where Karthik’s uncle Rajkumar lives with his wife in a boxy two-bedroom apartment. It has concrete floors and two house servants who roam in from kitchen to dining room wearing fine-trimmed moustaches and cuffed, long sleeve shirts.

We’re not mountaineers, not one of us, but tomorrow we set off on a three-week trek to the Garhwal Himalayas, a mountain backbone stretching across the northern Indian state of Uttaranchal. Run your finger north from Delhi on a map and you’ll brush the region’s 100 summits, each towering over 20,000 feet. On these peaks, snow never melts. Air thins.

There is a height at which gravity stops counting, where a woman loses place and proportion, where time is a foothold for fools. I want to climb there, to disappear for a while.

Radiant in her hemlock-green sari, Vasanti piles another paratha on my plate. “Did you know Garhwal is the land of gods?” she says, in her schoolteacher’s lilt, the one that savours its secrets. Up in the trees, along the village paths, are bells. Low hanging, moaning bells Vasanti tells me. “Ring brass bell to tell Lord Shiva you’re coming,” she says, like a warning, her gold bangles tinkling where she touches my hand.

For centuries, Hindu pilgrims have journeyed to the sacred lap of Garhwal through the Valley of Flowers, famous for Blue Poppies and carnivorous Cobra Lilies. They chant hymns of the Vedas, ancient Hindu texts embodying divine knowledge and wisdom, the truth of the Eternal. Where pilgrims walk, the mountains are bless-giving gods, an immortal eye that watches over the souls of the dead. When the valley is asleep under blanket of snow, Goddess Nanda is awake, and watching.

After dinner, we abandon talk of ancient shrines and pilgrim paths to step onto a second story terrace shrouded by bamboo trees. The night feels metal heavy on my shoulders; you can almost taste the stars. After more tea, we return to a bedroom to stuff our backpacks with dry-fit shirts, zip-off pants, wool socks, and snap-together provisions. Karthik informs us that Amit, our mountaineering guide from Mumbai, will pick us up at 6:00 a.m. sharp the next morning. Then the phone rings. It is Nisha's father. He says, simply, "New York is burning."

A house servant wheels a television across the cement floor. We stand in a semi-circle, eyes fixed to the screen.

Steel wings pierce glass, sure as a slit throat. Smoke. Fire. Two towers, the pierced lungs of a city, collapse. Oh my god. A stone in my throat. God. People stream and stumble down ashen streets, dust coating the camera lens. Now the deep-throated BBC announcer's voice has gone dry...

No one can say how...it appears to be...under attack...we're hearing reports...debris coming down...sky filling with smoke...terrible accident...collapse.

By the time word reaches us, the event is a story. Falling, the sky. A man. His arms clasped behind his

back. A woman leaning out a broken window, waving. No words for the way down. Now Vasanti and Rajkumar shake their heads, shifting from side to side, as if they almost see...

Mumbai...border war...bloody massacre...hail of gunfire...260 dead...synchronized bomb blasts...retaliation...firebomb...bleeding city attack.

They know intimate geographies, can place faces on a map. Nowhere, nothing safe. The announcer speculates in his grim, sum-up-the-facts way. Damn it. Say it. Tell me. Is this how it ends? Is this how the story ends?

The next morning we pile into Amit's truck on the road out of New Delhi. We pass tin shantytowns on the city outskirts, then motor up, up through crowded villages reeking of tar, thick-coated in soot. Men along the roadside sit on their haunches, keeping the heat at bay. For the next three weeks, we know nothing of fear running ragged on broken streets, of debris piled high enough to tower over truth. A feeling alone survives. Something in me has gone missing.

Less than a year ago, my mother lay beneath white sheets in a private room of a palliative care hospital. Eyes underwater, she floated past the blunt mist she no longer tasted. I gripped the tide of her bed, fastened the blue smock that billowed from her hollow ribs—a riptide, a shipwreck. How the hull still heaves.

When she died, she left barely a ripple in the sanitized sheets where hunger had pooled in her sunken chest. Her body, at 57, was an old wound, one lung cut away, eleven brain tumours swelling in her skull, crippled by bowels so burned by radiation she was vomiting bile. And when she died, I ran away from her cracked, brittle lips, the stone-eyes, rocked to sleep in the back berth of a mud-spattered white Toyota

truck, headed 322 kilometres northeast of Delhi.

Wedge between the window and Karthik, I ricochet left to right, up and down, we swerve to dodge the spill of landslides. The truck lurches, intractable as an ox. Amit turns to see me jostling in the back seat, his red felt beret tilted at a jaunty angle. Deep creases fold around his mouth to the curve of his cheeks when he smiles. A bushy moustache burdens his upper lip. I trace the fine grooves around his mouth again and again as he speaks Hindi. Imagine climbing them.

Oxen crowd the twisted roads ahead. We stop for lunch in Nainital, known as the Lake District of India, tucked in a valley ringed by seven mountains. The large freshwater lake winks at us like an emerald eye as we drive on. A former hill station, Nainital came under British rule during the Anglo-Nepalese War of 1814-1816. Later, a wealthy British sugar baron constructed the first houses here in 1839, enticing colonial officials to dig and take refuge from the heat.

Back in the truck, our stomachs churn as we take on more twisting height. The villages spread further out along the rutted roads. After four more hours of corkscrew turns and rumbling, silent stretches, the driver rolls to a stop. Weak and tense, we step out to touch solid earth.

Only nothing feels solid.

Mountains wreathed in mist soften the furrowed landscape below. Along a stone path, two small village girls play cricket, using a tree branch as a bat. They shuffle along in oversized black leather shoes, laceless, worn at the heel. When we pass, they tuck turtleheads under thick green sweaters, their branch hands swaying through lime trunks.

The trees are perfumed strangers, cypress and chir pine. Waterfalls drizzle from sheer rock faces. We unload the truck and haul our gear up to the rest house to meet our trekking group: a cook, assistant cook, two muleteers, and Kuari Ram, a local guide. We are now a

family of nine, plus four restless mules. The men play cards and laugh in the night, all eager to set off on foot at dawn for the promised peaks.

As the sun slips below horizon, I stand on the porch and look out far above forest, into the vast Himalayan heart. The silent peaks, fathomless and steep, leave me breathless, like holding midnight in your mouth. One more night. Hold on. I will leave behind suffering, free myself from the shape of things: Nisha's hand steady on Karthik's arm, my mother's body, broken like the wings of an unfinished book. Standing next to my mother's tiny frame, her round eyes look up at me, wide as a child, her hollow cheeks powdered red. You must be sisters, the nurses said.

Tomorrow, we will march along ridges that slope through rarefied air. Locals call it the last link before the loneliness.

"Stay mountainside," Amit calls from behind, planting each English vowel firmly before placing the next, each phrase clamped tight before fastening another. We're in line formation, Kuari Ram leading the way along a slate path, me following directly behind. Amit brings up the rear.

Kuari Ram stands five foot three and has the sturdy build of a Bulgarian gymnast. When he laughs, coffee-coloured skin ruffles along his neck like a spent accordion. Tufts of jet-black hair curl beneath his blue woolen cap. Elbows high, he grips the steel head and wooden handle of a pick-axe he keeps balanced across his shoulders.

For hours I watch Kuari Ram's blue plaid shirttail flap beneath his orange sweater, thick-cabled, ripped at the elbow. Up the narrow ridge we climb, my eye on his torn elbow, mesmerized by his easy rhythm. Kuari Ram is our local guide, historian, and mythmaker.

Today, he teaches me to walk.

Along a rain-slicked path of crumbling slate, his foot hovers above the ragged surface, wavers a

moment—hold.

Shift, glide, hover, hold—step. Shift, glide, hover, hold—step.

I can keep time to his step.

Side-to-side he sways, sure as a dancer, his pickaxe poised as a plank, blue cap bobbing in air. We sidle on in afternoon shadow.

Lost for hours in this easy rhythm, I pick a point in time. Drift back to the baggy boulevards of Delhi where men in motorized tuk-tuks dart past, pass supplies from raging diesel trucks. Chug, chug, chugging along, shuffle, shuffle, shift. Kuari Ram kicks up dust. We cut switchbacks, scatter shale. My prance high, like some Hollywood cowboy, water bottle swinging dangerously at my hip. Ankles fattening in tall boots. Tall boots biting ankles.

Slate passes through the soul first, he seems to say, without turning back. Shift, slide, stutter-step, shift—but anyway, plant. Shift, glide, hover, hold, I am held like this. The ground disappearing beneath us.

By afternoon we are ready for the long incline. Sky slips from the horizon the way a portrait recedes from the painting, form, figure, soft strokes, line dissolves, the moment you look. Down. My desire pinned to Kuari Ram's step, his steady gait.

He stops and plucks a handful of indigo berries from a leafy bush and holds out a few for me. Root beer, I say, biting down hard. They taste like root beer. We grunt at each other, smiling. He kneels to inspect a cluster of tiny wildflowers at my feet. I reach down, and pinch a perfect bouquet between my thumb and forefinger.

My palms blossom as we begin our descent.

The horizon vanishes. We drop through cedar forest, earthy pulp pounding bones. Stay close. Kuari Ram slips further ahead of me, sinking into dew and moss, mingles among stumps, trees. He drifts down, down.

Away, he slips—

My eyes grow roots after him.

Vultures circle us when we reach Wan, a village folded inside a lush Himalayan valley. Nisha's hand rests on her stomach, her body curled like a comma. Karthik's stride shortens to meet hers. She pauses, out of breath.

A sweet-faced girl, no taller than a low garden hedge, plods down the trail, a massive bundle of branches strapped to her back. Wisps of hair tangle about her neck as if the girl had just been swept in from the sea. I bow to her, say Namaste, my prayer hands tucked under my chin. She drifts past in bare feet. Maybe a smile crosses her face. It might have been the wind.

A break in the trees reveals a field of *Marcha* flowers. The tall, burgundy blooms stretch out in perfect rows; form a ruby blush across the mountain face. Nisha's face is ashen. Her body slumps. Amit moves up from the rear to meet her. She pitches a leaden foot forward while her arms drop, lifeless, at her side. The effects of altitude are sinking in early. I can't bear to watch Nisha's unsteady walk, so I keep my distance.

When radiation struck my mother, snug as a cement slipper, she felt the ground forever fall from her. Her swollen right foot lagged behind when she walked, scraping the ground. Unable to feel the stairs, she tumbled down them, breaking her left arm one morning, opening a gash across her skull. We did not know then that tumours were swelling her brain, disrupting her balance. All I remember is washing dried blood caked in her stitches, my mother's frail body draped over the bathroom sink.

Nisha tries to pick up her pace. Another five kilometres ahead up a steep vertical slope, where oak and pine trees thin out. One last push. We rise above the tree line, then, after a few switchbacks, Kuari Ram disappears in a haze of fog. When the curtain lifts, my eyes swim slopes into sky, until the day draws red, gold, green, purple hues. Until there is only blue. So pure you could hide it in your pocket. No other blue.

At the end of a rolling pasture, Trisul and Nandha

Ghunti peaks pierce the sky. I am a child eager to climb their massive shoulders. When they shrug, cool winds shiver up my neck. We set up camp in Bedni Bugyal, a stunning alpine meadow where our tents look like cut sapphires in steel mist. Above us, hundreds of sheep jostle together like black and white marbles on a field; they bleat and moan while lambs gambol and break free. Guyan, our cook, prepares chai he makes with whole cloves, cardamom pods, and Carnation evaporated milk. He pours the tea in a silver cup and hands us a cinnamon stick to stir the soothing mix. After two delicious cups I return to my tent to pull on a pair of clean wool socks. When I emerge, a hooded figure approaches.

His glassy eyes are dark, partially obscured beneath the umber hood of his robe. Absently, the man pats his stomach. He gestures to his mouth then his hand disappears inside a pouch that's turned-up and pinned to his chest. Inside, two baby lambs curl together, one licking the other's pink nose.

Then another hooded figure approaches. I try but can't form words they can understand. I gesture toward Guyan who is in the kitchen tent and the hill men turn away, their smiles swept by the wind. Karthik tells me afterward they're looking for medication to ease stomach pain. Amit invites the two shepherds to join us for afternoon tea. We gather in a circle, the muleteers, Karthik, Amit, Nisha, and I—and two guests sitting cross-legged, sipping tea. Cataracts cloud their blue eyes. I watch their faces unfurl, fold back in time, pulling me back to a sudden sea, where I am still scared. I clasp my hands tight in my lap.

My fingers caressed the bridge of my mother's hand, tried to unfold the outcome, make a new map. Nowhere safe. I daubed a sponge to her lips, then she drifted back to sea.

When the tea has been savoured, the shepherds sweep up from the ground, vanish into the high hills. It might have been a rumour.

Shivering in my quilted orange sleeping bag, I pull the lumpy torso of my backpack next to me, hugging it tight. That evening falls like a swollen lid. Heavy, dark. Mule bells chime in the distance, punctuated by the thud of their stomping feet. I crave corners, a soft touch.

The world is wide open. Towering mountain ridges, their icy peaks forever frozen. Forever. If I follow Garhwal's rippling tributaries, they'll lead me all the way back to the holy Ganga River where pilgrims immerse the ashes of their kin, bringing their spirits closer to nirvana.

All of this space, then the night cold comes crawling in, and a man falls from a burning sky, and a woman won't yet rise in my dreams.

The air is thin with souls.

As long as I keep moving along these scarred paths, the mountain barriers will cover me. The peaks are my armour now. Listen, Vasanti whispers to me. Listen. Shiva is standing on the mound of creation looking over us, while the world lies submerged and wanting beneath the ground, heartsick with yearning souls. Nowhere, nothing safe.

Tonight I am counting down the days, counting on leaving this world behind, no courage for looking back. Time is serrated and stinging in me. It cuts and scrapes across my throat. Why do we go on, and on?

In a few days, we'll reach the rocky ledge of Kuari Pass, a panoramic window to the high Himalayan range. If you spread your arms wide enough at the tip of the trail, you can reach out and touch the twin peaks of Nanda Devi, while the ageless goddess smiles back, ferocious, fearless, and kind.

So what happens when the trail ends?

Look up in the sky.

Ring the brass bell.

Tell the one who watches, I'm coming.