



The Nepal Chronicles

ALSO BY DAN SZCZESNY

The Adventures of Buffalo and Tough Cookie
(Bondcliff Books)

THE NEPAL CHRONICLES



*Marriage,
Mountains, and Momos
in the Highest Place on Earth*

Dan Szczesny

HOBBLEBUSH BOOKS
Brookline, New Hampshire

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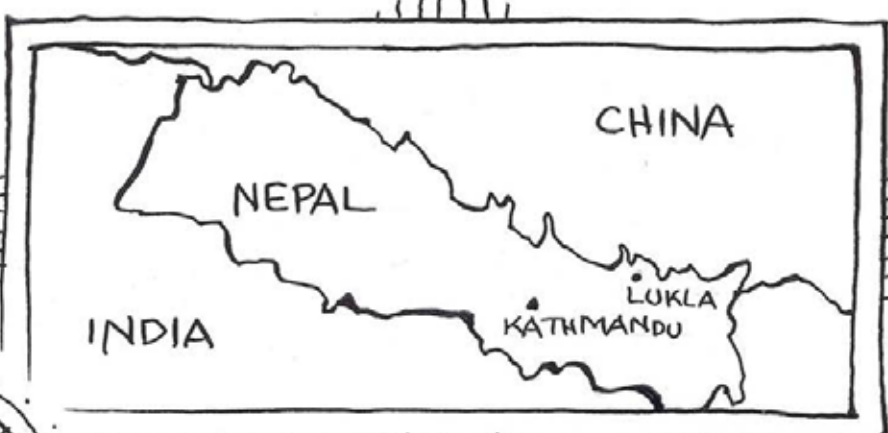
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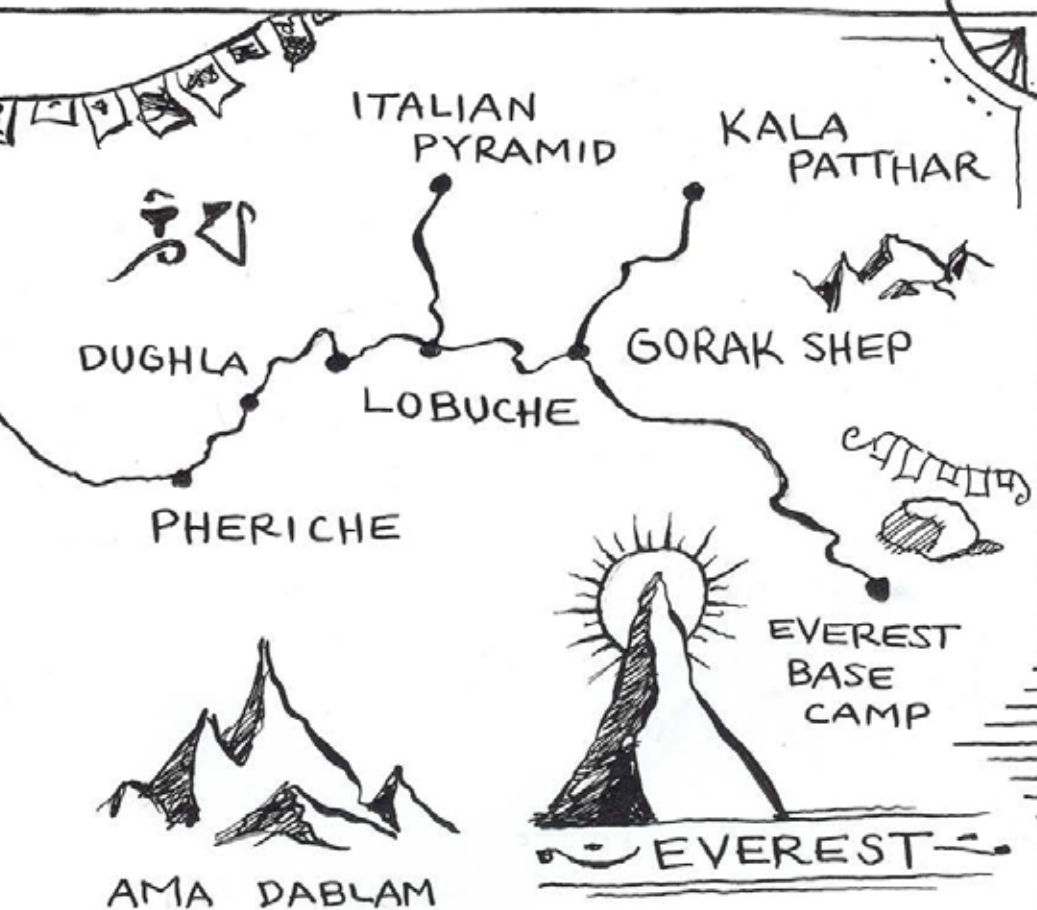
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The TREK to EVEREST BASE CAMP

PETER

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I'VE ALWAYS THOUGHT OF MY PATH AS ORGANIC. Around every turn is a new friend, or a new family, many of whom I never see coming. Looking back on this project—a project which is, in essence, my life—I am startled by how many people have helped and supported and eagerly embraced *The Nepal Chronicles*. And how many continue to do so. Thank you all!

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*To my Sasura Jyu and Sasu Jyu,
Kiran and Rita Gyawali
and to my father, Joseph*

Introduction

WITH LESS THAN FORTY-EIGHT HOURS TO GO before my wedding, instead of celebrating my impending nuptials with my soon-to-be new family in Kathmandu, I was climbing the 268 steps to Tian Tan Buddha in Hong Kong.

We could have used a little serenity right about then, and one of the largest bronze Buddhas in the world seemed like the perfect place to shed the bad karma of the previous day, when, after twenty-four hours of flying to Nepal, we landed in Bangladesh instead.

We were only an hour from Kathmandu, but we might as well have been on the other side of the planet. And then, six hours later, our pilots flew us to Hong Kong.

Amid the chaos of trying to get another flight to Kathmandu in time for our wedding, we did manage to secure a room at the airport Marriott, along with vouchers for all the food we could eat for the next couple days. We stayed in Hong Kong for free, and slept and ate in a place we would never have been able to afford.

Meenakshi and I did make it out of Hong Kong the next day. And our visit to the Buddha was remarkable.

But it occurred to me later that so much of our relationship on the path to Nepal had been and continues to be about great reward preceded by great discomfort, that reaching that Buddha seemed an appropriate metaphor for everything we've ever done together.

You must climb those nearly 300 steps to get to that place of serenity and wisdom. We had to sit on that plane, eating peanuts and water, in order to make it to those stairs. We had to train for nearly

a year, before getting on that series of flights that would eventually take us to Everest Base Camp. And before that, we climbed a mountain with a Justice of the Peace and sixteen bemused but willing friends in New Hampshire, our home state, on the day that a hurricane named Earl was visiting, to say “I do” from the top.

I met my wife years ago, when I was a lowly editor of a start-up newspaper and she was a city planner. For months, that paper ran story after story on city planning, all because the only thing I wanted to do once I met her was be near her.

Even then, every step forward in our relationship, in my courtship, was gained through sheer grit, or luck, or sacrifice. She is a native of Nepal. I was raised in Buffalo, New York. That might as well be the cultural equivalent of Mars and Venus.

She grew up in Chicago. I grew up in the suburbs. She had never been to Europe. I had never been to Asia. Her mind is a planner’s, calculating, reasoned, deliberate. I am a writer.

But we forged a relationship out of two separate worlds by strapping backpacks to our shoulders and hitting the trail: the White Mountains, where we climbed all forty-eight of the state’s highest peaks; the Dakotas, where we thru-hiked on the Centennial Trail, and the Grand Canyon, where we learned crucial lessons of patience and simplifying. By the time we decided to get married, it felt like we had nothing left to prove. We were not young. Our friends belonged to both of us. Our families appreciated us and loved us both.

But great discomfort to attain great reward came knocking again. Meenakshi’s father asked if I would be interested in marrying his daughter in Kathmandu in a traditional Nepalese ceremony. I would be on my own. I’d need handlers to walk me through the traditions and tasks. I would be asked to abide by cultural mores for which I had no frame of reference and in some cases no understanding.

I said yes instantly.

Meenakshi and I upped the discomfort ante by deciding, for our honeymoon, to trek to Mt. Everest Base Camp and climb an 18,000-foot mountain called Kala Patthar for the sole reason of getting a better view of the tallest mountain on Earth.

Discomfort followed by reward. Only this time, on the biggest stage and grandest scale we could find.

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So, that day, Meenakshi and I climbed those stairs and walked fully around the base of “The Big Buddha” passing by six smaller bronze statues known as the Offering of the Six Devas. These statues symbolize charity, morality, patience, zeal, meditation and wisdom.

In the days ahead—indeed throughout our lives—we would need to call on each of those Devas again and again. It wouldn’t be easy. Sometimes, it wouldn’t make sense.

But for all the challenge, for every moment where my legs betrayed me and the air felt like syrup in my lungs, and on the days when uncertainty clouded concentration, I knew—from experience and history—that the reward would always be great.

The lessons of our adventure are the same to anyone, on any journey great or small, and for any place. Put in the time. Say yes. And go with wonder in your heart. I hope you enjoy our journey, and I wish you many of your own.

Dan Szczesny
February 2014

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Prologue

To a westerner, Kathmandu speaks at one volume only, loud. But there's more to the city than the traffic and the people. Kathmandu rolls and boils and shouts in a cacophony all to itself: a symphony of chickens, goats and wild dogs; of bells around ankles and on bicycles and from temples; of the never-ending and unnerving static of motorbikes and the whiny hum of tuk-tuks; and of the sizzle and pop of roasted nuts and cart-side momos.

I allow myself to sink deeper into my barber chair and close my eyes as the boy works on my scalp. We don't understand each other anyway, so it is best to just give myself over to his attentions, come what may.

And slowly, as my hair comes off, so does my anxiety about this place. I begin to think that I can do this, I can walk among the chaos. Perhaps I won't understand it, but certainly I can accept it.

There appears to be no such thing as licensing here. The barber is also a masseuse, a stylist and a chiropractor. And since I had mentioned the name of my father-in-law, they were going to town on me. Once the hair is gone (a disconcerting feeling that takes me days to get used to) my head is thoroughly massaged and knocked about. He could be rubbing motor oil into my temples for all I know, but by the time he gets to the massage part of the proceedings I have stopped caring altogether and focus only on staying awake.

Outside the open-front barber stall, a happily clucking hen walks casually by, and I am happy as well.

The reason for the shave? Well, it does not take long in a place

like Kathmandu to roll with the culture. Either that or sit terrified in your hotel room until the taxi comes to take you back to the airport.

After our wedding, we missed our flight out of Kathmandu to Lukla, the fascinating town that sits at nearly 10,000 feet and is the traditional starting point for most Nepal-side Everest treks. We missed the flight because weather on the mountain was not behaving.

In the West, when you miss your flight due to weather, the airline is quick to rebook you. In Kathmandu, when you miss a domestic flight, you simply go home. We had a set window for our trek, and after trying several avenues to rebook the flight we were at the end of our rope. Then, Meenakshi got angry.

We tracked down the booking agency, the one that originally chartered our flight. In Kathmandu, directions to a business often result in an Indiana Jones-like journey of discovery through back alleys and neighborhood squares. Our agency was a tiny storefront. One long counter. Three stools.

Without fanfare, Meenakshi announced to the startled proprietors that she was on her honeymoon and was not going to leave their establishment until we had been properly rebooked. Five minutes later, we had new tickets.

But would the weather be clear? Would the mountains allow us passage?

Meenakshi's father—a great philosopher if ever there was one—just shrugged at my anxiety. “Sometimes, you need to make a sacrifice,” he said.

Of course! Not that I had much hair to give to the gods anyway, but by then I was ready and willing to take whatever steps might be necessary to get us on that plane. And with nearly 30,000 deities in Nepal, I didn't really even care which mountain god took heed of my offering.

The next day, we are on a plane and heading to the Himalayas. The flight is short, but long enough for me to consider the amazing path that had gotten us this far.

My wedding ride, a beautiful new Ford adorned with flowers, inches through Kathmandu traffic. In front of the car, a full-on wedding

band is walking; the joyous group—a cross between Bollywood and an American marching band—is putting down some amazing licks. They are blowing hard and bystanders are beginning to notice.

We are a wedding procession. This little row of cars and musicians is taking me to our altar, to Meenakshi. This is *my* wedding procession. In Kathmandu.

As we pass, people stop and stare. A whole group of construction workers stops pouring cement and uses my passing to take a cigarette break. I wave and they wave back. They laugh in the universal way that all men do when they see another male on the way to his wedding.

Poor bastard. Lucky SOB.

A tiny, older woman in a dirty shawl moves close to my window to get a better look. I hold my ground and smile. Satisfied, she turns and continues on her way.

Kids on rusty, aching bikes peddle along, and motorbikers slow down as they pass.

Somewhere on the route, we pick up a tall western tourist with a video camera. Imagine how lucky he must feel, being able to bring back a videotape of an authentic Nepalese wedding procession. Oh, the stories he'll tell when he returns home, but I wonder if he even realizes I am a fellow westerner.

I suddenly feel like a fraud. Should I even be here? Is this the worst sort of cultural appropriation—me, here in a Nepali topi, or formal hat, given to me by my father-in-law along with the rest of my wedding clothes? Am I being sensitive enough and is that even possible given the amazing circumstances of a Polish boy from Buffalo in his own wedding procession in Kathmandu? My heart starts pounding and I begin to sweat.

I become so distracted by the internalization of my perhaps overly politically correct thoughts that I forget Meenakshi's grandmother is sitting next to me.

She is the elder here. She came from India to be with her granddaughter, whom she has not seen in years. She hadn't even met me until yesterday. She could decide to be anywhere she wanted. But instead of being with Meena waiting for me at the altar, she chose to drive with me. She chose to break who-knows-what tradition to sit

in the back seat of the Ford with the nervous white boy who didn't speak Nepali. She chose to be here because, she said later, she didn't wish me to be alone.

And now, perhaps sensing my increasing discomfort, she reaches across the seat and takes hold of my hand, and squeezes. It is a gesture of such simple kindness that all I can do is say "thank you." She just smiles and nods, and I think to myself that maybe I'm going to be alright.

A couple years earlier, I attended the wedding of one of Meena's cousins in Massachusetts. Though being in an American reception hall is worlds away from being in Kathmandu, the traditions and symbols of the ceremony itself were similar to what I would now be going through.

At that wedding, Meena's dad stood next to me, quietly whispering in my ear the meaning of much of the ceremony as it was happening.

Now, as the car reaches the outdoor courtyard of the Russian restaurant where we are to marry, dozens of Meena's aunts swarm the parking lot, circling the car in dance and flinging marigold petals as a blessing and a greeting.

A traditional wedding can take a week or longer, but our condensed version will last two days. As I sit in the car and wait for the signal to leave, I watch, fascinated by the dancing women and men circling the auto. My father-in-law asked months ago if I wanted to ride to the wedding atop an elephant. I politely declined, but I have no idea if I was being teased or if I really could be sitting on an elephant right now.

We move into the stunning courtyard of the complex where the ceremony is to be held. My father and mother-in-law escort me to a seating area where I'm to await Meenakshi's arrival. I haven't seen her since she was whisked off in the morning. Meena was replaced by two English-speaking aunties from London who became my handlers for the day. They are my confidants and translators, giving me instructions and even helping me figure out how to tie the Daura-Suruwal, the traditional Nepali wedding suit that I am wearing, which requires a fair amount of tying and folding. They treat

me with amazing patience and kindness, like a mother would treat a son getting ready to marry. I am a bit sad when they blend back into the crowd once I have been properly deposited into the high-backed red wedding chair.

Guests arrive and photographers and videographers swarm, wishing me well and taking pictures. I wave and nod as best I can.

Suddenly the cameras begin shooting over my shoulder and I know the bride has appeared. Meenakshi floats in like some sort of red and green sparkling apparition. Two young cousins walk in front, sprinkling rose petals, while several aunts jostle for primary position near the lady of the hour.

She is a waterfall of sequins and red and gold thread, starting from a small crown veil on her head, pouring down past her waist. With her face covered, she can barely see, thus the close attentions of her aunts.

The tradition of Nepali weddings is for the bride to keep her eyes downcast and be demure toward her guests and new husband. But as soon as my wife is deposited next to me, she turns and her eyes smile.

“You look spectacular,” I say to her ear, likely breaking every rule in the books.

“I feel like a Christmas tree,” she whispers, and we both laugh and the wedding is on.

While much of the Nepali wedding ceremony is based on Hindu tradition, my adoptive family has tossed in some western flair—the rose petals, for instance. We exchange rings during the ceremony as opposed to the night before.

An enormous amount of time is spent giving all the guests a chance to come and stand behind us for pictures. Everyone gets a chance, from the closest family to distant cousins, often with Meenakshi whispering in my ear who they each are. I wish I knew them better, that I had more history with them. Though that will certainly come later.

Unlike a typical western wedding ceremony, this one doesn't require guests to participate or even watch, and off to the side as our priest speaks to us in Sanskrit there is a dance competition going

on among Meena's cousins. There are moments when even Meena needs to call out for someone to help with the translation.

There are offerings to the eight mountain Gods, including Everest (or Sagarmatha). That's a moment I try to pay close attention to given our plans for the very next day. There are games during the ceremony. During one, a coin is dropped into a big bowl of rice and Meena and I compete to fish it out. During another, there is a tug of war between cousins. Traditionally, these games are designed as ice-breakers because in arranged marriage situations, the two sides of the family may not know much about the other. There is a moment when I am escorted over an elaborately decorated stool by my father-in-law, a symbol of his welcoming me to his house.

My favorite moment is the tradition of moving Meenakshi from her house to mine, symbolized by my physically lifting her from her cushion to mine. And then my having to do it again because the photographer failed to get a picture the first time.

I move through these traditions not quite in a daze, but with something approaching ecstatic wonder. I try to be nonchalant, but fail terribly. Witnessing a Nepali wedding ceremony is one thing; it's something else entirely to be part of it. On one hand, I am completely entranced, fascinated and curious and eager to experience whatever peculiar custom comes next. On the other hand, I make a conscious effort to be aware that this day is peculiar only to me, and normal, perhaps even boring, to my new family.

And that I am lucky. Very lucky to be here at all.

Despite my attention, I don't realize until the end of the ceremony that the "I now pronounce you man and wife" part actually took place hours ago when we exchanged garlands. So now we're married.

Two months ago, we went to Buffalo to celebrate with my family. One month ago, we stood atop a mountain with a Justice of the Peace friend we call Farmer Bob and exchanged the words the state felt necessary. And today, we have been joined spiritually. In the days ahead, we will cement this series of "I dos" with our own personal quest for a mountain.

But today, we are the last in line for lunch at our own wedding ceremony. I have no shoes because part of the tradition is for

Meena's cousins to steal them and hold them hostage for money. My head and hands are coated thick with tika, the special rice paste used for blessings. Finally, on my wrist is tied a bright red slip of cloth, put there to symbolize my ties to this new family and new wife. It won't come off for months.

We are a couple. We are ready. There's just one more extraordinary obligation.

A couple hours later, at our reception, Meena and I stand alone outside the magnificent Hotel Shankar, guarding our gift basket.

The evening is warm and lovely and the elegant hotel grounds smell like summer grass and marigolds. We are in the heart of Kathmandu's residential neighborhood called Lazimpat, surrounded by hotels, restaurants and homes. The neoclassical Shankar is lit pure white, glowing in the night like an ice castle. I imagine you can see it from space.

Our guests and friends and family are enjoying our reception, and from the hotel grounds where we wait, we can hear the faint strains of Bollywood music. The electro thump of the popular Bollywood song "Desi Girl" crashes out into the night and I lean back on the bench and breathe in this night.

We ought to be in there, of course, and just a few moments ago we were. But we decided to take a walk out on the grounds and that's when we noticed our reception basket that contained all the kind gift envelopes from our guests was sitting on a table in the middle of the Shankar's garden. Somewhere in the barely controlled madness of the evening, when everyone was herded into the hotel from the grounds outside, the basket was left.

And now we're trying to figure out what to do with it.

"Well, Desi Girl," I say to Meena, "sounds like they're having fun in there."

She smiles. "Wait here, let me find my mother."

I sneak a kiss and watch her leave, marveling at the stunning reception sari she changed into after the ceremony. The glow of the hotel spotlights refracts off her sequins and as she moves the dress seems to spin like a brilliant red disco ball.

I'm alone now. I lean back and close my eyes, trying to remember

a moment in my life when I was happier. I am startled by the time and effort that Meenakshi's parents put into creating this wedding for us. It feels like a fairy tale here outside this amazing complex.

In a city this ancient, the Shankar is relatively young, built in 1894 not for royalty but for a general. General Jit Shumsher hired one of the first civil engineers in Nepal, Kumar Narsingh, to construct the palace in European style and it stayed in the family until 1964.

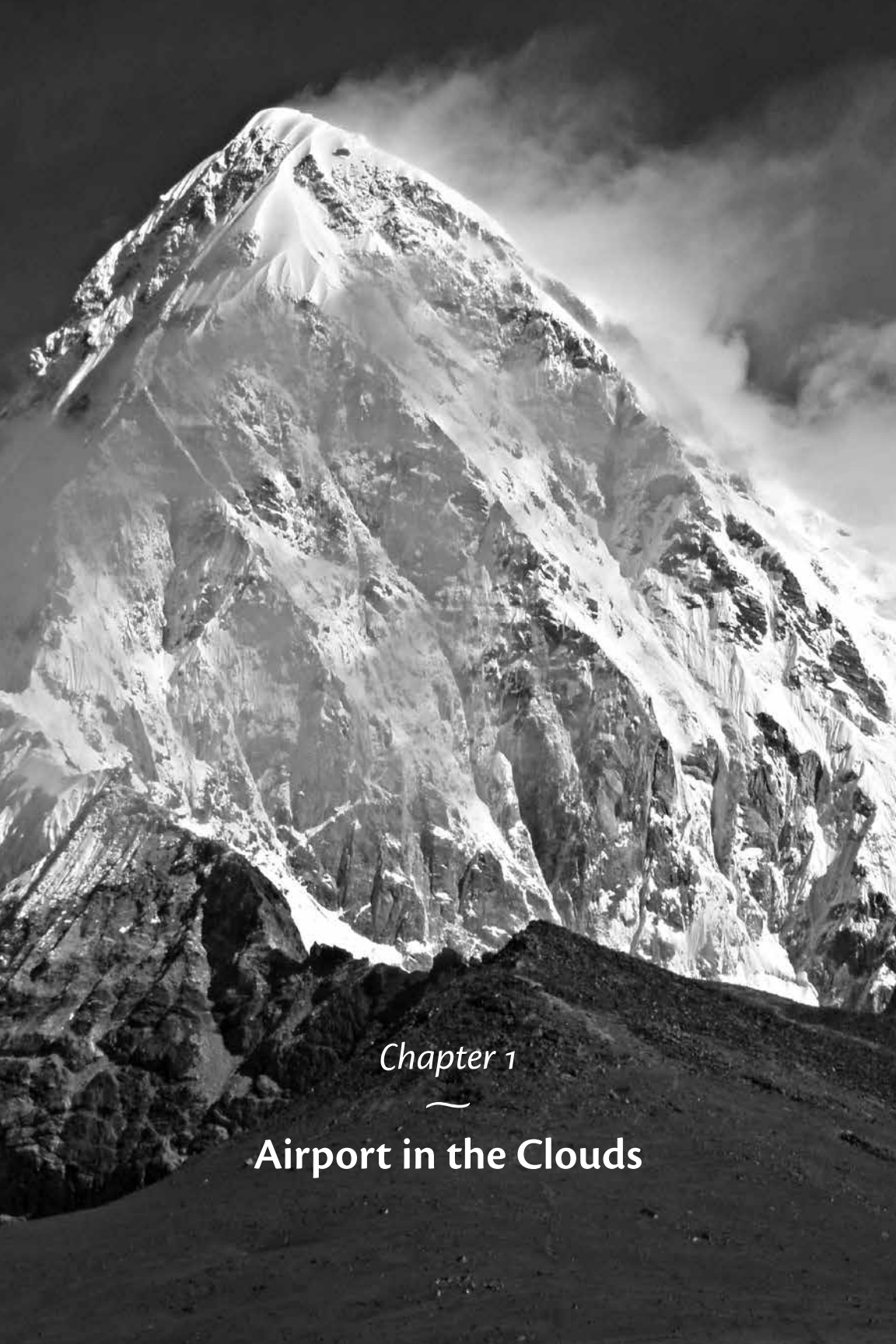
Now, as a gleaming, modern hotel, the Shankar has seen its fair share of celebrities, including the most famous Sherpa in the world, and a fellow whose footsteps we'll literally be following toward Everest tomorrow: Tenzing Norgay, who along with Edmund Hillary was one of the first people to reach the top of Everest, frequently stayed at the Shankar.

Meena finally returns with someone from the staff who takes our basket for safekeeping.

"Guess we need to dance," she says.

In the morning, we will begin the long, complicated journey to Mt. Everest and toward our own mountain, Kala Patthar. But tonight, we need to dance.

I take her hand and the two of us walk back to the reception hall, where the music booms and a fog machine has begun to push mist onto the golden dance floor. Tonight, we have a cake to cut. Tomorrow, we set out for the Himalayas.



Chapter 1



Airport in the Clouds

Wednesday, October 13, Morning

THE TWIN OTTER AIRPLANE pitches hard right, then levels off, and I peek out my dirty, scratched window to see a farmer digging in the soil near his stone home. The farmer is so close I can see the tears in his thin, fur-lined shawl. I check my altimeter: 9,900 feet.

The noise in the Lukla-bound plane is fierce, even through the cotton I stuffed in my ears thirty minutes ago as we sat on the tarmac in Kathmandu waiting for the copilot to eat a warm lunch.

“I’m not going anywhere without a warm lunch,” Meenakshi translated. So we sat there until his food was brought out to the cockpit, where he leaned back in his chair and took his time eating.

The copilot is young, late 20s maybe, wearing a crisp white shirt over perfectly creased dress pants and shined black shoes. His hair is dark and wavy. He wears Ray-Bans, of course.

The domestic pilots of Nepal are legendary. Like the bush pilots of Alaska, they fly old, beat-up planes over some of the most demanding terrain and weather in the world. Mostly, they do this without radar, by sight. There’s a saying among Nepali pilots that goes something like this: “Never fly into a cloud, because you don’t know what might be in there.”

They are, more or less, the only thing that works about domestic air travel in Nepal.

Tribhuvan International Airport in Kathmandu certainly does not work. There’s nothing that can prepare a Westerner for the mad chaos of the domestic terminal of Kathmandu’s only airport—there appears to be virtually no order, certainly no lines and even less system. Getting on your plane is like winning the lottery. Perhaps it’s no small irony that the airport is named after King Tribhuvan—who became king in 1911 at the prime-time age of five years old. Unlike