

The Sadhu
Michelle Cahill

Sundeep's real name was James. He was from Dublin, but he'd spent two years backpacking through Asia.

His room adjoined Sarita's at the Hotel Buddha in Kathmandu. They met on the terrace one evening, the sky a luculia pink. Sarita had stepped out to witness the view as clouds dissolved to unveil the subtlety of snow-covered Himalayas. Black crows wheeled above. They perched on the railings while Sundeep and Sarita spoke.

Below them was the colorful activity of the street with its organic blend of bicycles, rickshaws and pedestrians, its maze of alleys and medieval arches, while in the distance were the Himalayan foothills. In almost every direction triangular Tibetan flags criss-crossed the skies. These windhorses reminded Sarita of childhood. Faded by rain, their primary colours left a Buddhist insignia on the landscape. She was momentarily empty of the past, or the idea of Darcy. She was completely absorbed by the impressions and presences of this ancient city.

The door to Sundeep's room was open. Inside there was a dispersal of books, clothes, boxes, empty soft drink bottles, a waterjug, a teapot, and other bric-a-brac. Sundeep had offered to make chai. He rummaged about, whistling a tune. Sarita sat down on one of the deck chairs, trying not to seem too obvious as she observed him. Presently he emerged carrying a walkman.

'Would you like to listen to some music while I make the chai?' he asked. Though it was nothing flash, she accepted the offer of Sundeep's walkman.

Sundeep's body floated in a loose crumpled shirt. He kept a small fold-out portable gas stove in his room. Sarita could hear the hiss of the gas flame as the tea boiled.

When he served the chai perhaps a quarter of an hour later it was thick and milky. He'd used a concoction of spices: cardamom, cinnamon, ginger, aniseed star. The tea had a spicy tang. He threaded his fingers through the handle of a teacup, wrapping them to warm his hands.

'So where do you come from?' he asked, leaning forward from his lotus squat.

She'd been asked this question by most of the local shopkeepers. Some thought she was a Nepali. Others guessed locations varying from India to America. Being of mixed ancestry, Sarita was hard to label. She was an outsider returning to explore her grandfather's home. In the streets of Kathmandu the touts tested her nerves. But Sundeep had nothing to sell her.

As she spoke about Dee Why, Sarita began to feel homesick. She missed the beach, the surf. She missed her friends.

'I've heard Sydney's a beautiful city,' Sundeep said.

Their gaze touched briefly.

That evening they ventured out through the slinky streets of Thamel. They ate in one of the vegetarian restaurants recommended in Sarita's Lonely Planet guidebook. As they sipped their mango lassis, the conversation turned to spirituality. Sarita described her retreat at the forest monastery in Thailand, aware that it might have sounded like a New Age cliché. Asia was replete with dreamy-eyed itinerants on

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some quest to find a haven from the havoc of the past, or from the responsibilities of the present. Sarita was trying her best to forget Darcy. He was her addiction, a drug she carelessly swallowed for nightclubs and dance parties. But what had Sundeep been escaping? He'd lived in a Hare Krishna ashram for two years. During this time he'd lost contact with friends and relatives, and with his life in the first world. But the community disintegrated when the guru was imprisoned for sex offences.

'He was sitting on an incredible amount of energy. It was a pity, really.'

Sundeep said.

'What do you mean?'

'I saw what he could do for people, the way that he could influence their lives.'

'And what about you?'

'I admired him. But I never really felt accepted. In the end it was quite estranging. But that's another story,' he said, with a laugh.

Sundeep had a knack of evading questions.

'Do you think too much power was his undoing?'

'I'm not sure really.' He looked at her squarely, 'It's such a fine line to walk.'

She was interested in the Buddha's teachings. At university she'd stopped going to the temple with her family for puja. She had a healthy scepticism when it came to gurus, swamis or cults, yet she could fall in love with a regular misogynist like Darcy.

There was something gracefully roguish about Sundeep's demeanour. He combed his fingers through his hair and swivelled his body towards her.

'Did you get your name in the ashram, then?' Sarita asked.

She watched how the smooth skin around Sundeep's eyes puckered at the mention of his past.

Sarita had lost her orientation as they walked back to the guesthouse through a scrawl of alleys, dimly lit by gas lamps. Sundeep spoke of visiting Baba, a sadhu who lived by the river; someone whom he believed was enlightened. By now the bustle of the day's tourist frenzy had settled. Young boys loitered about, talking in Newari dialect. The smog was cloaked with a darkness, in which the shape of a boar could be traced as it sank in rubbish near an ancient shrine. Sarita and Sundeep stepped through the shadows cast by dogs, rickshaws and tardy pedestrians.

Early the next day Sarita left the hotel to get breakfast and browse through the bookstores. On the dusty, noisy chaos of the street, with its beggars and pedlars, she ran into Sundeep. Straddling a motorbike he appeared out of nowhere, his anaemic stare quite inscrutable.

'You surprised me,' she admitted.

'I'm going to visit the sadhu, my friend,' he said blandly. 'You're welcome to come along. Maybe you should meet him, especially with your interest in meditation.'

She'd seen sadhus covered in ash, with their hair matted like Shiva wandering about in temples and bus stops. Not the saintly milk drinkers, nor the legendary babas who wore chastity belts and langotis for almost a lifetime, the ones she'd seen smoked hash by the banks of rivers polluted with human and animal faeces. Still, to be introduced to a holy man, a jivanmukta, was something that roused her curiosity.

Steadying herself on the back of Sundeep's bike, Sarita clutched the bar beneath the passenger seat and they set off, zig-zagging through the narrow streets. It was easy to dodge the rickshaws and pedestrians but they were stalled for a good five minutes by a retired cow. The cow was at liberty to wander the streets because she no longer produced milk. Someone had made her an offering, adorned her with bright yellow garlands. While she sifted through mini mounds of trash, Sundeep spoke of how Lord Krishna was the first bala-gopala, 'the child who protects cows.' Krishna he proselytised, was the first teacher, in the guru-shishya tradition. Sarita had read the Bhagavad-Gītā. There was nothing special about Sundeep's observation. Still, she placed her arms around his waist while they waited.

They took a route passing the Royal Palace, several parks, and colourful markets on the outskirts of the city. From here the road led to a more industrial zone, to half-constructed building sites. Dark, muscular women dressed in chapels and dusty sarees carried heavy loads of bricks in cane baskets. The housing estates became more sparse as they journeyed further. Sundeep stopped at last, to park his bike. Crossing a reserve, they approached a narrow bend in the river, the water a murky sepia. The opposite bank formed an island overcrowded with monkeys.

'Where are we?' Sarita asked.

They were downstream from Patupatinath. Sundeep pointed north in the direction of the temple, explaining their bearings as they walked towards the house.

It looked more like a dug-out on the side of a cliff. Even by Nepalese standards it ought to have been condemned. The facing wall sloped as if the footings had slipped badly and the roofing was rusted through.

Sundeep knocked on the wooden door. There was no response. He craned his neck towards a window and called out. When the door opened a beautiful young girl, perhaps sixteen or seventeen years of age stood gracing the entrance. Thin-boned and fine-skinned, she introduced herself as Gabriella. A slender ray of light caught her blonde, tousled dreadlocks and the gold nose ring she wore, but there was something about her that lacked vibrancy. She greeted Sundeep in Nepali, bowing politely.

Sarita exchanged smiles with Gabriella who beckoned them inside. From the narrow, dark hallway, they climbed a spiral staircase up to the main abode. Sarita had no idea what to expect from this encounter with the sadhu. As a child she remembered sadhus lying in the midday heat on the cool verandhas of mandirs while their perpetual fires to Agni or Shiva burned. Pilgrims came with their offerings for the divas, leaving the holy men to their solitude.

The room upstairs had a low roof held in place by timber lintels. Baba sat between bronze murtis of Shiva and Ganpati, behind a pyre of smouldering coals and incense. The space was flagged by a three-pronged spear and traced out in red resin, the kind used in Hindu temples. The sadhu was young and handsome. Half naked, his oiled body was magnificent, his hair or jata the consistency of coir. It was tied in dreadlocks and wrapped in an elaborate heap above his head. Vermillion paste was brushed thickly over his brow. Sarita thought his eyes were like water.

She knelt by the window overlooking the river while Sundeep spoke to Baba. Her interest turned to a series of drawings that decorated the wall. Geometric designs and whirling spirals were etched in charcoal in a kind of spiritual notation that invited her curiosity. She sensed intuitively that these were the work of the girl. Gabriella remained silently attentive to Baba the whole time.

Sarita asked her if she spoke English.

‘A little.’ Gabriella said, with a brief smile. ‘And of course I’m learning Nepali since I’ve been with Baba.’

‘Where are you from?’

‘Italy.’

Gabriella was from Rome. She was a recluse in the squat, though once a week she would leave to buy provisions at the market.

‘Have you been here long?’ Sarita asked.

‘For nine months now I’ve been here,’ she replied with an air of vacancy.

The opposite side of the room served as a kitchen, which opened out to a landing. A tribe of monkeys were scratching, wrestling, and peering curiously inside. Their raucous noise interrupted the conversation. Baba soon turned his attention to Sarita. Where had she been travelling, he asked. She spoke of her venture into meditation at the forest monastery in Thailand.

‘We, too, learn from the Buddha.’

It was a gentle reminder that the Buddha was a reincarnation.

‘That is what we all are,’ he said, ‘We are born and we die.’ He spoke quietly, with measured calmness, and Sarita felt herself drawn, even against resistance, into his aura, by something difficult to overcome.

‘All we need do is let go of everything.’

If she could have let go of Darcy, months ago, when she was caught – if it was that easy. She asked Baba if he was referring to desire.

‘Yes, but that does not mean we should always be passive. It is also good to be daring.’

Baba’s eyes intensified. Sarita sensed the magnetism of his body, relaxed and strong from the yoga prana.

‘But doesn’t that flare our desire?’

‘Desire is always there,’ he said, ‘... just let it be.’

When he spoke, he scarcely moved or gesticulated, as if he had nothing to qualify or compare. Sarita felt as if he could see right through her and he was addressing her fear.

‘I sit here by the river, everything comes to me. I have no need to go to the town, to have a car or drive. People come. I am always here. Lord Shiva teaches us to be bold ... but never be afraid of desire,’ he paused. ‘Be full of Love that is everything.’

She listened thoughtfully.

The sadhu seemed to forestall her doubts. He opened an album of photographs from his annual pilgrimage to Mt Kailash in Tibet. The journey through north eastern Nepal was taken by bus and by truck to Nyalamu, and thence to Barga from where he’d travelled arduously for weeks on foot. She could see how visibly gaunt and ethereal he appeared in these mountain photographs, standing alone by the lake. A phantasm of his present self, he was spiritually realised. There were photographs too, of his teacher, an Indian guru who’d taught him in Haridwar.

‘Will you be going to Kailash this year?’ Sundeep asked.

‘Maybe not this year, because of the child.’ Baba placed his hand on Gabriella’s belly.

The girl had not, for one moment, taken her eyes off the sadhu.

Outside, the monkeys were making a racket. One had stepped into the room shaking its head and bouncing about. Gabriella stood up and threw them some bananas.

‘The female is pregnant,’ Baba explained. ‘It makes them more irritable. But I like to see that we are having a family around us. It is good. It is nature.’

When Gabriella returned to her cushion on the floor, Baba craned towards her, whispering in her ear. She brought him a small clay pipe, which he packed with ganja and smoked. He passed it to Sundeep and the girl who reluctantly drew back a few times. Sarita declined. She’d felt a benefit from the sobriety of not drinking or smoking. In the monastery, she’d tried to quit all her habits and addictions.

By now, Baba had tired of counselling. Like many sadhus, he was a devotee of the smoking Shiva, the Lord of the Yogas and the Lord of the Hash, forever intoxicated. Sundeep and Sarita took their blessings. Gabriella accompanied them downstairs and farewelled them formally, her face expressionless.

On their way back to the hotel, Sundeep and Sarita stopped at a teahouse for chai, partly to share their impressions of this meeting with Baba. Sarita felt an urge to see him again. She was concerned for the girl, Gabriella.

‘It’s as if she’s stranded here, alone.’

Sundeep wasn’t perturbed in the slightest.

‘From what I know of the story, she came to Nepal with an Italian guru from the sect in Rome, and decided to stay with Baba. She’s had some problems, of course, with her visa, but if she has a child to Baba, then I think it’s no problem for her to stay indefinitely in Kathmandu.’

It was noisy and hot in the tea room with its low ceilings, its crowded benches. At a nearby table a group of novice monks were chatting boisterously. Sarita snacked on a momol. She was musing about the girl.

‘How can she be confined in that small space, constantly with him? Remember how Baba said she only leaves once a week to do shopping? She’s like a slave. I think she’s depressed. And besides, what about the pregnancy ... does she ever get to see a doctor?’

‘Well, that’s her choice. No, I don’t pity her, Sarita. I’m sure they have a loving, healing relationship. It’s something I’d wish for myself. Besides most sadhus like Baba would practise tantric sex.’

Sarita had to admit he would be well rehearsed.

‘He has an incredible energy about him, it just sucks you in.’

‘Yes, and I forgot to warn you not to look into his eyes.’

‘Why?’ Sarita asked.

‘They say with sadhus that if you look at them directly you can fall into their power.’

She smiled facetiously, ‘You don’t believe all that crap, Sundeep do you?’

Sundeep seemed to lose his usual air of grace.

‘It’s not crap,’ he protested. ‘All that time spent in meditation does take them to a higher plane.’ His eyes rolled upwards, as if he were thinking aloud.

‘I’d say it would be an amazing experience. I’ve never been there before myself, but I’ve seen the maps ... ’

She strained to hear as his voice lowered.

‘I know it’s possible to cross that boundary, to reach that territory.’

She barely grasped his meaning; a shared confidence of something visionary and tender. What could she do, after all, about the girl? The whole worship thing was complicated, risky. Gabriella was as vulnerable to Baba as Sarita had been with Darcy, the politics and faith dangerously entangled.

That evening Sarita and Sundeep strolled through the gardens of Patupatinath. Leaning against a stone wall, they overlooked the river, where children swam naked. Sundeep pointed out the body of a woman. She was being dressed in a white saree in preparation for her pyre. Her flesh and bones would combust with flowers, sandalwood, with rice and butter. Fig trees formed a giant tapestry with their twisted, hanging vines and their buttressed roots. Monkeys swung from the shutters of temple windows. Sarita thought of the pilgrims worshipping in those candle-lit rooms as they had done for centuries. She thought of their families and the villages they’d left behind. She thought of the journeys they’d taken by rail or bus or on foot. A breeze carried tabla rhythms, and the sound of rickshaws to her foreign ears.

The day’s pollution had washed the sky. Away from the noise and squalor of the city it was possible to enter something nameless; a human stream of worship that flowed from the temple to another space.