

ESCAPE FROM KATHMANDU

Kim Stanley Robinson

I

Usually I'm not much interested in other people's mail. I mean when you get right down to it, even my own mail doesn't do that much for me. Most of it's junk mail or bills, and even the real stuff is, like, official news from my sister-in-law, xeroxed for the whole clan, or at best an occasional letter from a climbing buddy

that reads like a submission to the *Alpine Journal for the Illiterate*. Taking the trouble to read some stranger's version of this kind of stuff? You must be kidding.

But there was something about the dead mail at the Hotel Star in Kathmandu that drew me. Several times each day I would escape the dust and noise of Alice's Second City, cross the sunny paved courtyard of the Star, enter the lobby and get my key from one of the zoned-out Hindu clerks—nice guys all—and turn up the uneven stairs to go to my room. And there at the bottom of the stairs was a big wooden letter rack nailed to the wall, absolutely *stuffed* with mail. There must have been two hundred letters and postcards stuck up there—thick packets, blue airmail pages, dog-eared postcards from Thailand or Peru, ordinary envelopes covered with complex addresses and purple postal marks—all of them bent over the wooden retainer bars of the rack, all of them gray with dust. Above the rack a cloth print of Ganesh stared down with his sad elephant gaze, as if he represented all the correspondents who had mailed these letters, whose messages were never going to reach their destinations. It was dead mail at its deadeast.

And after a while it got to me. I became curious. Ten times a day I passed this sad sight, which never changed—no letters taken away, no new ones added. Such a lot of wasted effort! Once upon a time these names had taken off for Nepal, a long way away no matter where they were from. And back home some relative or friend or lover had taken the time to sit down and write a letter, which to me is like dropping a brick on your foot as far as entertainment is concerned. Heroic, really. “Dear George Fredericks!” they cried. “Where are you, how are you? Your sister-in-law had her baby, and I'm going back to school. When will you be home?” Signed, Faithful Friend, Thinking of You. But George had left for the Himal, or had checked into another hotel and never been to the Star, or was already off to Thailand, Peru, you name it; and the heartfelt effort to reach him was wasted.

One day I came into the hotel a little wasted myself, and noticed this letter to George Fredericks. Just glancing through them all, you know, out of curiosity. My name is George, also—George Fergusson. And this letter to George was the thickest letter-sized envelope there, all dusty and bent permanently across the middle. “George Fredericks—Hotel Star—Thamel Neighborhood—Kathmandu—NEPAL.” It had a trio of Nepali stamps on it—the King, Cho Oyo, the King again—and the postmark date was illegible, as always.

Slowly, reluctantly, I shoved the letter back into the rack. I tried to satisfy my curiosity by reading a postcard from Koh Samui: “Hello! Do you remember me? I had to leave in December when I ran out of money. I’ll be back next year. Hello to Franz and Badim Badur—Michel.”

No, no. I put the card back and hoisted myself upstairs. Postcards are all alike. *Do you remember me?* Exactly. But that letter to George, now. About half-an-inch thick! Maybe six or eight ounces—some sort of epic, for sure. And apparently written in Nepal, which naturally made it more interesting to me. I’d spent most of the previous several years in Nepal, you see, climbing and guiding treks and hanging out; and the rest of the world was beginning to seem pretty unreal. These days I felt the same sort of admiration for the ingenuity of the writers of *The International Herald Tribune* that I used to feel for the writers of *The National Enquirer*. “Jeez,” I’d think as I scanned a *Tribbie* in front of a Thamel bookstore, and read of strange wars, unlikely summits, bizarre hijackings. “How do they think these things up?”

But an epic from Nepal, now. That was reality. And addressed to a “George F.” Maybe they had misspelled the last name, eh? And anyway, it was clear by the way the letter was doubled over, and the envelope falling apart, that it had been stuck there for years. A dead loss to the world, if someone didn’t save it and read it. All that agony of emotions, of brain cells, of finger muscles, all *wasted*. It was a damn shame.

So I took it.



My room, one of the nicest in all Thamel, was on the fourth floor of the Star. The view was eastward, toward the tall bat-filled trees of the King's palace, overlooking the jumble of Thamel shops. A lot of big evergreens dotted the confusion of buildings; in fact, from my height it looked like a city of trees. In the distance I could see the green hills that contained the Kathmandu Valley, and before the clouds formed in the mornings I could even see some white spikes of the Himal to the north.

The room itself was simple: a bed and a chair, under the light of a single bare bulb hanging from the ceiling. But what else do you really need? It's true that the bed was lumpy; but with my foam pad from my climbing gear laid over it to level it out, it was fine. And I had my own bathroom. It's true the seatless toilet leaked pretty badly, but since the shower poured directly onto the floor and leaked also, it didn't matter. It was also true that the shower came in two parts, a waist-high faucet and a showerhead near the ceiling, and the showerhead didn't work, so that to take a shower I had to sit on the floor under the faucet. But that was okay—it was all okay—because that shower was *hot*. The water heater was right there in the room hanging over the toilet, and the water that came from it was so hot that when I took a shower I actually had to turn on the cold water too. That in itself made it one of the finest bathrooms in Thamel.

Anyway, this room and bath had been my castle for about a month, while I waited for my next trekkers' group from Want To

Take You Higher Ltd. to arrive. When I entered it with the lifted letter in hand I had to kick my way through clothes, climbing gear, sleeping bag, food, books, maps, *Tribbies*—sweep a pile of such stuff off the chair—and clear a space for the chair by the windowsill. Then I sat down, and tried to open the bent old envelope without actually ripping it.

No way. It wasn't a Nepali envelope, and there was some real glue on the flap. I did what I could, but the CIA wouldn't have been proud of me.

Out it came. Eight sheets of lined paper, folded twice like most letters, and then bent double by the rack. Writing on both sides. The handwriting was miniaturized and neurotically regular, as easy to read as a paperback. The first page was dated June 2, 1985. So much for my guess concerning its age, but I would have sworn the envelope looked four or five years old. That's Kathmandu dust for you. A sentence near the beginning was underlined heavily: "*You must not tell ANYBODY about this!!!*" Whoah, heavy! I glanced out the window, even. A letter with some secrets in it! How great! I tilted the chair back, flattened the pages, and began to read.

June 2nd, 1985

Dear Freds—

I know, it's a miracle to get even a postcard from me, much less a letter like this one's going to be. But an amazing thing has happened to me and you're the only friend I can trust to keep it to himself. *You must not tell ANYBODY about this!!!* Okay? I know you won't—ever since we were roommates in the dorm you've been the one I can talk to about anything, in confidence. And I'm glad I've got a friend like you, because I've found I really have to tell this to somebody, or go crazy.

As you may or may not remember, I got my Master's in

Zoology at U.C. Davis soon after you left, and I put in more years than I care to recall on a Ph.D. there before I got disgusted and quit. I wasn't going to have anything more to do with any of that, but last fall I got a letter from a friend I had shared an office with, a Sarah Hornsby. She was going to be part of a zoological/botanical expedition to the Himalayas, a camp modeled on the Cronin expedition, where a broad range of specialists set up near treeline, in as pure a wilderness as they can conveniently get to. They wanted me along because of my "extensive experience in Nepal," meaning they wanted me to be sirdar, and my degree didn't have a thing to do with it. That was fine by me. I took the job and went hacking away at the bureaucratic underbrush in Kathmandu. You would have done it better, but I did okay. Central Immigration, Ministry of Tourism, Forests and Parks, RNAC, the whole horrible routine, which clearly was designed by someone who had read too much Kafka. But eventually it got done and I took off in the early spring with four animal behaviorists, three botanists, and a ton of supplies, and flew north. We were joined at the airstrip by 22 local porters and a real sirdar, and we started trekking.

I'm not going to tell you exactly where we went. Not because of you; it's just too dangerous to commit it to print. But we were up near the top of one of the watersheds, near the crest of the Himalayas and the border with Tibet. You know how those valleys end: tributaries keep getting higher and higher, and finally there's a last set of box canyon-type valleys fingering up into the highest peaks. We set our base camp where three of these dead-end valleys met, and members of the group could head upstream or down depending on their project. There was a trail to the camp, and a bridge over the river near it, but the three upper valleys were wilderness, and it was tough to get through the forest up into them. It was what these folks wanted, however—untouched wilderness, almost.

When the camp was set the porters left, and there the eight of

us were. My old friend Sarah Hornsby was the ornithologist—she’s quite good at it, and I spent some time working with her. But she had a boyfriend along, the mammalogist (no, not that, Freds), Phil Adrakian. I didn’t like him much, from the start. He was the expedition leader, and absolutely Mr. Animal Behavior—but he sure had a tough time finding any mammals up there. Then Valerie Budge was the entomologist—no problem finding subjects for her, eh? (Yes, she did bug me. Another expert.) And Armaat Ray was the herpetologist, though he ended up helping Phil a lot with the night blinds. The botanists were named Kitty, Dominique, and John; they spent a lot of time to themselves, in a large tent full of plant samplings.

So—camp life with a zoological expedition. I don’t suppose you’ve ever experienced it. Compared to a climbing expedition it isn’t that exciting, I’ll tell you. On this one I spent the first week or two crossing the bridge and establishing the best routes through the forest into the three high valleys; after that I helped Sarah with her project, mostly. But the whole time I entertained myself watching this crew—being an animal behaviorist for the animal behaviorists, so to speak.

What interests me, having once given it a try and decided it wasn’t worth it, is why others carry on. Following animals around, then explaining every little thing you see, and then arguing intensely with everyone else about the explanations—for a *career*? Why on earth would anyone do it?

I talked about it with Sarah, one day when we were up the middle valley looking for beehives. I told her I had formed a classification system.

She laughed. “Taxonomy! You can’t escape your training.” And she asked me to tell her about it.

First, I said, there were the people who had a genuine and powerful fascination with animals. She was that way herself, I said; when she saw a bird flying, there was a look on her face... it was

like she was seeing a miracle.

She wasn't so sure she approved of that; you have to be scientifically detached, you know. But she admitted the type certainly existed.

Then, I said, there were the stalkers. These people liked to crawl around in the bush tailing other creatures, like kids playing a game. I went on to explain why I thought this was such a powerful urge; it seemed to me that the life it led to was very similar to the lives led by our primitive ancestors, for a million long years. Living in camps, stalking animals in the woods: to get back to that style of life is a powerfully satisfying feeling.

Sarah agreed, and pointed out that it was also true that nowadays when you got sick of camp life you could go out and sit in a hot bath drinking brandy and listening to Beethoven, as she put it.

"That's right!" I said. "And even in camp there's quite a night life, you've all got your Dostoevski and your arguments over E.O. Wilson... it's the best of both worlds. Yeah, I think most of you are stalkers on some level."

"But you always say, 'you people,'" Sarah pointed out to me. "Why are you outside it, Nathan? Why did you quit?"

And here it got serious; for a few years we had been on the same path, and now we weren't, because I had left it. I thought carefully about how to explain myself. "Maybe it's because of type three, the theorists. Because we must remember that animal behavior is a Very Respectable Academic Field! It has to have its intellectual justification, you can't just go into the academic senate and say, 'Distinguished colleagues, we do it because we like the way birds fly, and it's fun to crawl in the bushes!'"

Sarah laughed at that. "It's true."

And I mentioned ecology and the balance of nature,

population biology and the preservation of species, evolution theory and how life became what it is, sociobiology and the underlying animal causes for social behavior... But she objected, pointing out that those were real concerns.

“Sociobiology?” I asked. She winced. I admitted, then, that there were indeed some excellent angles for justifying the study of animals, but I claimed that for some people these became the most important part of the field. As I said, “For most of the people in our department, the theories became more important than the animals. What they observed in the field was just more data for their theory! What interested them was on the page or at the conference, and a lot of them only do field work because you have to prove you can.”

“Oh, Nathan,” she said. “You sound cynical, but cynics are just idealists who have been disappointed. I remember that about you—you’re such an idealist!”

I know, Freds—you will be agreeing with her: Nathan Howe, idealist. And maybe I am. That’s what I told her: “Maybe I am. But jeez, the atmosphere in the department made me sick. Theorists backstabbing each other over their pet ideas, and sounding just as scientific as they could, when it isn’t really scientific at all! You can’t test these theories by designing an experiment and looking for reproducibility, and you can’t isolate your factors or vary them, or use controls—it’s just observation and untestable hypothesis, over and over! And yet they acted like such solid scientists, math models and all, like chemists or something. It’s just scientism.”

Sarah just shook her head at me. “You’re too idealistic, Nathan. You want things perfect. But it isn’t so simple. If you want to study animals, you have to make compromises. As for your classification system, you should write it up for the *Sociobiological Review*! But it’s just a theory, remember. If you forget that, you fall into the trap yourself.”

She had a point, and besides we caught sight of some bees

and had to hurry to follow them upstream. So the conversation ended. But during the following evenings in the tent, when Valerie Budge was explaining to us how human society behaved pretty much like ants—or when Sarah’s boyfriend Adrakian, frustrated by his lack of sightings, went off on long analytical jags like he was the hottest theorist since Robert Trivers—she would give me a look and a smile, and I knew I had made my point. Actually, though he talked a big line, I don’t think Adrakian was all that good; his publications wouldn’t exactly give a porter backstrain, if you know what I mean. I couldn’t figure out what Sarah saw in him.

One day soon after that, Sarah and I returned to the middle high valley to hunt again for beehives. It was a cloudless morning, a classic Himalayan forest climb: cross the bridge, hike among the boulders in the streambed, ascending from pool to pool; then up through damp trees and underbrush, over lumpy lawns of moss. Then atop the wall of the lower valley, and onto the floor of the upper valley, much clearer and sunnier up there in a big rhododendron forest. The rhododendron blooms still flared on every branch, and with the flowers’ pink intensity, and the long cones of sunlight shafting down through the leaves to illuminate rough black bark, orange fungi, bright green ferns—it was like hiking through a dream. And three thousand feet above us soared a snowy horseshoe ring of peaks. The Himalayas—you know.

So we were in good spirits as we hiked up this high valley, following the streambed. And we were in luck, too. Above one small turn and lift the stream widened into a long narrow pool; on the south face above it was a cliff of striated yellowish granite, streaked with big horizontal cracks. And spilling down from these cracks were beehives. Parts of the cliff seemed to pulsate blackly, clouds of bees drifted in front of it, and above the quiet sound of the stream I could hear the mellow buzz of the bees going about their work. Excited, Sarah and I sat on a rock in the sun, got out our binoculars, and started watching for bird life. Goraks upvalley on the snow, a lammergeier sailing over the peaks, finches beeping

around as always—and then I saw it—a flick of yellow, just bigger than the biggest hummingbird. A warbler, bobbing on a twig that hung before the hive cliff. Down it flew, to a fallen piece of hive wax; peck peck peck; wax into bird. A honey warbler. I nudged Sarah and pointed it out, but she had already seen it. We were still for a long time, watching.

Edward Cronin, leader of a previous expedition of this kind to the Himalayas, did one of the first extensive studies of the honey warbler, and I knew that Sarah wanted to check his observations and continue the work. Honey warblers are unusual birds, in that they manage to live off the excess wax of the honeycombs, with the help of some bacteria in their gastro-intestinal systems. It's a digestive feat hardly any other creature on earth has managed, and it's obviously a good move for the bird, as it means they have a very large food source that nothing else is interested in. This makes them very worthy of study, though they hadn't gotten a whole lot of it up to that point—something Sarah hoped to change.

When the warbler, quick and yellow, flew out of sight, Sarah stirred at last—took a deep breath, leaned over and hugged me. Kissed me on the cheek. “Thanks for getting me here, Nathan.”

I was uncomfortable. The boyfriend, you know—and Sarah was so much finer a person than he was... And besides, I was remembering, back when we shared that office, she had come in one night all upset because the boyfriend of the time had declared for someone else, and what with one thing and another—well, I don't want to talk about it. But we had been *good friends*. And I still felt a lot of that. So to me it wasn't just a peck on the cheek, if you know what I mean. Anyway, I'm sure I got all awkward and formal in my usual way.

In any case, we were pretty pleased at our discovery, and we returned to the honey cliff every day after that for a week. It was a really nice time. Then Sarah wanted to continue some studies she had started of the goraks, and so I hiked on up to Honey Cliff on

my own a few times.

It was on one of those days by myself that it happened. The warbler didn't show up, and I continued upstream to see if I could find the source. Clouds were rolling up from the valley below and it looked like it would rain later, but it was still sunny up where I was. I reached the source of the stream—a spring-fed pool at the bottom of a talus slope—and stood watching it pour down into the world. One of those quiet Himalayan moments, where the world seems like an immense chapel.

Then a movement across the pool caught my eye, there in the shadow of two gnarled oak trees. I froze, but I was right out in the open for anyone to see. There under one of the oaks, in shadow darker for the sunlight, a pair of eyes watched me. They were about my height off the ground. I thought it might be a bear, and was mentally reviewing the trees behind me for climbability, when it moved again—it blinked. And then I saw that the eyes had whites visible around the iris. A villager, out hunting? I didn't think so. My heart began to hammer away inside me, and I couldn't help swallowing. Surely that was some sort of *face* there in the shadows? A bearded face?

Of course I had an idea what I might be trading glances with. The yeti, the mountain man, the elusive creature of the snows. The *Abominable Snowman*, for God's sake! My heart's never pounded faster. What to do? The whites of its eyes... baboons have white eyelids that they use to make threats, and if you look at them directly they see the white of your eyes, and believe you are threatening them; on the off-chance that this creature had a similar code, I tilted my head down and looked at him indirectly. I swear it appeared to nod back at me.

Then another blink, only the eyes didn't return. The bearded face and the shape below it were gone. I started breathing again, listened as hard as I could, but never heard anything except for the chuckle of the stream.

After a minute or two I crossed the stream and took a look at the ground under the oak. It was mossy, and there were areas of moss that had been stepped on by something at least as heavy as me; but no clear tracks, of course. And nothing more than that, in any direction.

I hiked back down to camp in a daze; I hardly saw a thing, and jumped at every little sound. You can imagine how I felt—a sighting like that... !

And that very night, while I was trying to quietly eat my stew and not reveal that anything had happened, the group's conversation veered onto the topic of the yeti. I almost dropped my fork. It was Adrakian again—he was frustrated at the fact that despite all of the spoor visible in the area, he had only actually seen some squirrels and a distant monkey or two. Of course it would have helped if he'd spent the night in the night blinds more often. Anyway, he wanted to bring up something, to be the center of attention and take the stage as 'The Expert.' "You know these high valleys are exactly the zone the yeti live in," he announced matter-of-factly.

That's when the fork almost left me. "It's almost certain they exist, of course," Adrakian went on, with a funny smile.

"Oh, Philip," Sarah said. She said that a lot to him these days, which didn't bother me at all.

"It's true." Then he went into the whole bit, which of course all of us knew: the tracks in the snow that Eric Shipton photographed, George Schaller's support for the idea, the prints Cronin's party found, the many other sightings... "There are thousands of square miles of impenetrable mountain wilderness here, as we now know firsthand."

Of course I didn't need any convincing. And the others were perfectly willing to concede the notion. "Wouldn't that be something if we found one!" Valerie said. "Got some good

photos—”

“Or found a body,” John said. Botanists think in terms of stationary subjects.

Phil nodded slowly. “Or if we captured a live one...”

“We’d be famous,” Valerie said.

Theorists. They might even get their names latinized and made part of the new species’ name. *Gorilla montani adrakianias-budgeon*.

I couldn’t help myself; I had to speak up. “If we found good evidence of a yeti it would be our duty to get rid of it and forget about it,” I said, perhaps a bit too loudly.

They all stared at me. “Whatever for?” Valerie said.

“For the sake of the yeti, obviously,” I said. “As animal behaviorists you’re presumably concerned about the welfare of the animals you study, right? And the ecospheres they live in? But if the existence of the yeti were confirmed, it would be disastrous for both. There would be an invasion of expeditions, tourists, poachers—yetis in zoos, in primate center cages, in laboratories under the knife, stuffed in museums—” I was getting upset. “I mean what’s the real value of the yeti for us, anyway?” They only stared at me: value? “Their *value* is the fact that they’re unknown, they’re beyond science. They’re the part of the wilderness we can’t touch.”

“I can see Nathan’s point,” Sarah remarked in the ensuing silence, with a look at me that made me lose my train of thought. Her agreement meant an awful lot more than I would have expected...

The others were shaking their heads. “A nice sentiment,” Valerie said. “But really, hardly any of them would be affected by study. Think what they’d add to our knowledge of primate evolution!”

“Finding one would be a contribution to science,” Phil said, glaring at Sarah. And he really believed that, too, I have to give him that.

Armaat said slyly, “It wouldn’t do any harm to our chances for tenure, either.”

“There is that,” Phil admitted. “But the real point is, you have to abide by what’s true. If we found a yeti we’d be obliged to say so, because it was so—no matter how we felt about it. Otherwise you get into suppressing data, altering data, all that kind of thing.”

I shook my head. “There are values that are more important than scientific integrity.”

And the argument went on from there, mostly repeating points. “You’re an idealist,” Phil said to me at one point. “You can’t *do* zoology without disturbing some subject animals to a certain extent.”

“Maybe that’s why I got out,” I said. And I had to stop myself from going further. How could I say that he was corrupted by the tremendous job pressures in the field to the point where he’d do anything to make a reputation, without the argument getting ugly? Impossible. And Sarah would be upset with me. I only sighed. “What about the subject animal?”

Valerie said indignantly, “They’d trunk it, study it, put it back in its environment. Maybe keep one in captivity, where it would live a lot more comfortably than in the wild.”

Total corruption. Even the botanists looked uncomfortable with that one.

“I don’t think we have to worry,” Armaat said with his sly smile. “The beast is supposed to be nocturnal.” —Because Phil had shown no enthusiasm for night blinds, you see.

“Exactly why I’m starting a high-valley night blind,” Phil snapped, tired of Armaat’s needling. “Nathan, I’ll need you to

come along and help set it up.”

“And find the way,” I said. The others continued to argue, Sarah taking my position, or at least something sympathetic to it; I retired, worried about the figure in the shadows I had seen that day. Phil watched me suspiciously as I left.

So, Phil had his way, and we set up a tiny blind in the upper valley to the west of the one I had made the sighting in. We spent several nights up in an oak tree, and saw a lot of Himalayan spotted deer, and some monkeys at dawn. Phil should have been pleased, but he only got sullen. It occurred to me from some of his mutterings that he had hoped all along to find the yeti; he had come craving that big discovery.

And one night it happened. The moon was gibbous, and thin clouds let most of its light through. About two hours before dawn I was in a doze, and Adrakian elbowed me. Wordlessly he pointed at the far side of a small pool in the stream.

Shadows in shadows, shifting. A streak of moonlight on the water—then, silhouetted above it, an upright figure. For a moment I saw its head clearly, a tall, oddly shaped, furry skull. It looked almost human.

I wanted to shout a warning; instead I shifted my weight on the platform. It creaked very slightly, and instantly the figure was gone.

“Idiot!” Phil whispered. In the moonlight he looked murderous. “I’m going after him!” He jumped out of the tree and pulled what I assumed was a tranquilizer pistol from his down jacket.

“You can’t find anything out there at night!” I whispered, but he was gone. I climbed down and took off after him—with what purpose I wasn’t sure.

Well, you know the forest at night. Not a chance of seeing

animals, or of getting around very easily, either. I have to give it to Adrakian—he was fast, and quiet. I lost him immediately, and after that only heard an occasional snapped branch in the distance. More than an hour passed, and I was only wandering through the trees. The moon had set and the sky was about halfway to dawn light when I returned to the stream.

I rounded a big boulder that stood on the bank and almost ran straight into a yeti coming the other way, as if we were on a busy sidewalk and had veered the same direction to avoid each other. He was a little shorter than me; dark fur covered his body and head, but left his face clear—a patch of pinkish skin that in the dim light looked quite human. His nose was as much human as primate—broad, but protruding from his face—like an extension of the occipital crest that ridged his skull fore-to-aft. His mouth was broad and his jaw, under its ruff of fur, very broad—but nothing that took him outside the parameters of human possibility. He had thick eyebrow crests bent high over his eyes, so that he had a look of permanent surprise, like a cat I once owned.

At this moment I'm sure he really was surprised. We both were as still as trees, swaying gently in the wind of our confrontation—but no other movement. I wasn't even breathing. What to do? I noticed he was carrying a small smoothed stick, and there in the fur on his neck were some objects on a cord. His face—tools—ornamentation: a part of me, the part outside the shock of it all, was thinking (I suppose I am still a zoologist at heart), *They aren't just primates, they're hominid.*

As if to confirm this idea, he spoke to me. He hummed briefly; squeaked; sniffed the air hard a few times; lifted his lip (quite a canine was revealed) and whistled, very softly. In his eyes there was a question, so calmly, gently, and intelligently put forth that I could hardly believe I couldn't understand and answer it.

I raised my hand, very slowly, and tried to say "Hello." I know, stupid, but what do you say when you meet a yeti? Anyway,

nothing came out but a strangled “Huhn.”

He tilted his head to the side inquisitively, and repeated the sound. “Huhn. Huhn. Huhn.”

Suddenly he jacked his head forward and stared past me, upstream. He opened his mouth wide and stood there listening. He stared at me, trying to judge me. (I swear I could tell these things!)

Upstream there was a crash of branches, and he took me by the arm and wham, we were atop the stream bank and in the forest. Hoppety-hop through the trees and we were down on our bellies behind a big fallen log, lying side-by-side in squishy wet moss. My arm hurt.

Phil Adrakian appeared down in the streambed, looking considerably the worse for wear. He’d scraped through some brush and torn the nylon of his down jacket in several places, so that fluffy white down wafted away from him as he walked. And he’d fallen in mud somewhere. The yeti squinted hard as he looked at him, clearly mystified by the escaping down.

“Nathan!” Phil cried. “Naaaa—thannnn!” He was still filled with energy, it seemed. “I saw one! Nathan, where are you, dammit!” He continued downstream, yelling, and the yeti and I lay there and watched him pass by.

I don’t know if I’ve ever experienced a more satisfying moment.

When he had disappeared around a bend in the stream, the yeti sat up and sprawled back against the log like a tired backpacker. The sun rose, and he only squeaked, whistled, breathed slowly, watched me. What was he thinking? At this point I didn’t have a clue. It was even frightening me; I couldn’t imagine what might happen next.

His hands, longer and skinnier than human hands, plucked at my clothes. He plucked at his own necklace, pulled it up over his

head. What looked like fat seashells were strung on a cord of braided hemp. They were fossils, of shells very like scallop shells—evidence of the Himalayas’ days underwater. What did the yeti make of them? No way of knowing. But clearly they were valued, they were part of a culture.

For a long time he just looked at this necklace of his. Then, very carefully, he placed this necklace over my head, around my neck. My skin burned in an instant flush, everything blurred through tears, my throat hurt—I felt just like God had stepped from behind a tree and blessed me, and for no reason, you know? I didn’t deserve it.

Without further ado he hopped up and walked off bowleggedly, without a glance back. I was left alone in the morning light with nothing except for the necklace, which hung solidly on my chest. And a sore arm. So it *had* happened, I hadn’t dreamed it. I had been blessed.

When I had collected my wits I hiked downstream and back to camp. By the time I got there the necklace was deep in one of my down jacket’s padded pockets, and I had a story all worked out.

Phil was already there, chattering to the entire group. “There you are!” he shouted. “Where the hell were you? I was beginning to think they had gotten you!”

“I was looking for you,” I said, finding it very easy to feign irritation. “Who’s this *they*?”

“The yeti, you fool! You saw him too, don’t deny it! And I followed him and saw him again, up the river there.”

I shrugged and looked at him dubiously. “I didn’t see anything.”

“You weren’t in the right place! You should have been with me.” He turned to the others. “We’ll shift the camp up there for a few days, very quietly. It’s an unprecedented opportunity!”

Valerie was nodding, Armaat was nodding, even Sarah looked convinced. The botanists looked happy to have some excitement.

I objected that moving that many people upvalley would be difficult, and disruptive to whatever life was up there. And I suggested that what Phil had seen was a bear. But Phil wasn't having it. "What I saw had a big occipital crest, and walked upright. It was a yeti."

So despite my protests, plans were made to move the camp to the high valley and commence an intensive search for the yeti. I didn't know what to do. More protests from me would only make it look suspiciously like I had seen what Phil had seen. I have never been very clever at thinking up subterfuges to balk the plans of others; that's why I left the university in the first place.

I was at my wit's end when the weather came through for me with an early monsoon rainstorm. It gave me an idea. The watershed for our valley was big and steep, and one day's hard rain, which we got, would quickly elevate the level of water in our river. We had to cross the bridge before we could start up the three high valleys, and we had to cross two more to get back out to the airstrip.

So I had my chance. In the middle of the night I snuck out and went down to the bridge. It was the usual village job: piles of big stones on each bank, supporting the three half logs of the span. The river was already washing the bottom of the stone piles, and some levering with a long branch collapsed the one on our shore. It was a strange feeling to ruin a bridge, one of the most valuable human works in the Himalayas, but I went at it with a will. Quickly the logs slumped and fell away from each other, and the end of the downstream one floated away. It was easy enough to get the other two under way as well. Then I snuck back into camp and into bed.

And that was that. Next day I shook my head regretfully at the discovery, and mentioned that the flooding would be worse downstream. I wondered if we had enough food to last through the

monsoon, which of course we didn't; and another hour's hard rain was enough to convince Armaat and Valerie and the botanists that the season was up. Phil's shrill protests lost out, and we broke camp and left the following morning, in a light mist that turned to brilliant wet sunshine by noon. But by then we were well downtrail, and committed.

There you have it, Freds. Are you still reading? I lied to, concealed data from, and eventually scared off the expedition of old colleagues that hired me. But you can see I had to do it. There is a creature up there, intelligent and full of peace. Civilization would destroy it. And that yeti who hid with me—somehow he *knew* I was on their side. Now it's a trust I'd give my life to uphold, really. You can't betray something like that.

On the hike back out, Phil continued to insist he had seen a yeti, and I continued to disparage the idea, until Sarah began to look at me funny. And I regret to report that she and Phil became friendly once again as we neared J—, and the end of our hike out. Maybe she felt sorry for him, maybe she somehow knew that I was acting in bad faith. I wouldn't doubt it; she knew me pretty well. But it was depressing, whatever the reason. And nothing to be done about it. I had to conceal what I knew, and lie, no matter how much it screwed up that friendship, and no matter how much it hurt. So when we arrived at J—, I said good-bye to them all. I was pretty sure that the funding difficulties endemic in zoology would keep them away for a good long time to come, so that was okay. As for Sarah—well—damn it... a bit reproachfully I said farewell to her. And I hiked back to Kathmandu rather than fly, to get away from her, and work things off a bit.

The nights on this hike back have been so long that I finally decided to write this, to occupy my mind. I hoped writing it all down would help, too; but the truth is, I've never felt lonelier. It's been a comfort to imagine you going nuts over my story—I can just see you jumping around the room and shouting "YOU'RE KIDDING!" at the top of your lungs, like you used to. I hope to

fill you in on any missing details when I see you in person this fall in Kathmandu. Till then—

your friend, Nathan

III

Well, blow my mind. When I finished reading that letter all I could say was “Wow.” I went back to the beginning and started to reread the whole thing, but quickly skipped ahead to the good parts. A meeting with the famed Abominable Snowman! What an event! Of course all this Nathan guy had managed to get out was “Huhn.” But the circumstances were unusual, and I suppose he did his best.

I’ve always wanted to meet a yeti myself. Countless mornings in the Himal I’ve gotten up in the light before dawn and wandered out to take a leak and see what the day was going to be like, and almost every time, especially in the high forests, I’ve looked around and wondered if that twitch at the corner of my sleep-crusted eye wasn’t something abominable, moving.

It never had been, so far as I know. And I found myself a bit envious of this Nathan and his tremendous luck. Why had this yeti, member of the shyest race in Central Asia, been so relaxed with him? It was a mystery to consider as I went about in the next few days, doing my business. And I wished I could do more than that, somehow. I checked the Star’s register to look for both Nathan and George Fredericks, and found Nathan’s perfect little signature back in mid-June, but no sign of George, or Freds, as Nathan called him. The letter implied they would both be around this fall, but where?

Then I had to ship some Tibetan carpets to the States, and my company wanted me to clear three “videotreks” with the Ministry of Tourism, at the same time that Central Immigration decided I had been in the country long enough; and dealing with these matters, in the city where mailing a letter can take you all day, made me busy indeed. I almost forgot about it.

But when I came into the Star late one sunny blue afternoon and saw that some guy had gone berserk at the mail rack, had taken it down and scattered the poor paper corpses all over the first flight of stairs, I had a feeling I might know what the problem was. I was startled, maybe even a little guilty-feeling, but not at all displeased. I squashed the little pang of guilt and stepped past the two clerks, who were protesting in rapid Nepali. “Can I help you find something?” I said to the distraught person who had wreaked the havoc.

He straightened up and looked me straight in the eye. Straight-shooter, all the way. “I’m looking for a friend of mine who usually stays here.” He wasn’t panicked yet, but he was close. “The clerks say he hasn’t been here in a year, but I sent him a letter this summer, and it’s gone.”

Contact! Without batting an eye I said, “Maybe he dropped by and picked it up without checking in.”

He winced like I’d stuck a knife in him. He looked about like what I had expected from his epic: tall, upright, dark-haired. He had a beard as thick and fine as fur, neatly trimmed away from the neck and below the eyes—just about a perfect beard, in fact. That beard and a jacket with leather elbows would have got him tenure at any university in America.

But now he was seriously distraught, though he was trying not to show it. “I don’t know how I’m going to find him, then...”

“Are you sure he’s in Kathmandu?”

“He’s supposed to be. He’s joining a big climb in two weeks.

But he always stays here!”

“Sometimes it’s full. Maybe he had to go somewhere else.”

“Yeah, that’s true.” Suddenly he came out of his distraction enough to notice he was talking to me, and his clear, gray-green eyes narrowed as he examined me.

“George Fergusson,” I said, and stuck out my hand. He tried to crush it, but I resisted just in time.

“My name’s Nathan Howe. Funny about yours,” he said without a smile. “I’m looking for a George Fredericks.”

“Is that right! What a coincidence.” I started picking up all the Star’s bent mail. “Well, maybe I can help you. I’ve had to find friends in Kathmandu before—it’s not easy, but it can be done.”

“Yeah?” It was like I’d thrown him a lifebuoy; what was his problem?

“Sure. If he’s going on a climb he’s had to go to Central Immigration to buy the permits for it. And on the permits you have to write down your local address. I’ve spent too many hours at C.I., and have some friends there. If we slip them a couple hundred rupees baksheesh they’ll look it up for us.”

“Fantastic!” Now he was Hope Personified, actually quivering with it. “Can we go now?” I saw that his heartthrob, the girlfriend of The Unscrupulous One, had had him pegged; he was an idealist, and his ideas shined through him like the mantle of a Coleman lantern gleaming through the glass. Only a blind woman wouldn’t have been able to tell how he felt about her; I wondered how this Sarah had felt about him.

I shook my head. “It’s past two—closed for the day.” We got the rack back on the wall, and the clerks returned to the front desk. “But there’s a couple other things we can try, if you want.” Nathan nodded, stuffing mail as he watched me. “Whenever I try to check in here and it’s full, I just go next door. We could look there.”

“Okay,” said Nathan, completely fired up. “Let’s go.”

So we walked out of the Star and turned right to investigate at the Lodge Pheasant—or Lodge Pleasant—the sign is ambiguous on that point.

Sure enough, George Fredericks had been staying there. Checked out that very morning, in fact. “Oh my God no,” Nathan cried, as if the guy had just died. Panic time was really getting close.

“Yes,” the clerk said brightly, pleased to have found the name in his thick book. “He is go on trek.”

“But he’s not due to leave here for two weeks!” Nathan protested.

“He’s probably off on his own first,” I said. “Or with friends.”

That was it for Nathan. Panic, despair; he had to go sit down. I thought about it. “If he was flying out, I heard all of RNAC’s flights to the mountains were canceled today. So maybe he came back in and went to dinner. Does he know Kathmandu well?”

Nathan nodded glumly. “As well as anybody.”

“Let’s try the Old Vienna Inn, then.”

IV

In the blue of early evening Thamel was jumping as usual. Lights snapped on in the storefronts that opened on the street, and people were milling about. Big Land Rovers and little Toyota taxis forged through the crowd abusing their horns; cows in the street

chewed their cud and stared at it all with expressions of faint surprise, as if they'd been magically zipped out of a pasture just seconds before.

Nathan and I walked single file against the storefronts, dodging bikes and jumping over the frequent puddles. We passed carpet shops, climbing outfitters, restaurants, used bookstores, trekking agents, hotels, and souvenir stands, and as we made our way we turned down a hundred offers from the young men of the street: "Change money?" "No." "Smoke dope?" "No." "Buy a nice carpet?" "No." "Good hash!" "No." "Change money?" "No." Long ago I had simplified walking in the neighborhood, and just said "No" to everyone I passed. "No, no, no, no, no, no, no." Nathan had a different method that seemed to work just as well or better, because the hustlers didn't think I was negative enough; he would nod politely with that straight-shooter look, and say "No, thank you," and leave them open-mouthed in the street.

We passed K.C.'s, threaded our way through "Times Square," a crooked intersection with a perpetual traffic jam, and started down the street that led out of Thamel into the rest of Kathmandu. Two merchants stood in the doorway of their shop, singing along with a cassette of Pink Floyd's *The Wall*. "We don't need no education, we don't need no thought control." I almost got run over by a bike. Where the street widened and the paving began, I pushed a black goat to one side, and we leaped over a giant puddle into a tunnellike hall that penetrated one of the ramshackle street-side buildings. In the hall, turn left up scuzzy concrete stairs. "Have you been here before?" I asked Nathan.

"No, I always go to K.C.'s or Red Square." He looked as though he wasn't sorry, either.

At the top of the stairs we opened the door, and stepped into the Austro-Hungarian Empire. White tablecloths, paneled partitions between deep booths, red wallpaper in a fleur-de-lis pattern, plush upholstery, tasteful kitschy lamps over every table;

and, suffusing the air, the steamy pungent smell of sauerkraut and goulash. Strauss waltzes on the box. Except for the faint honking from the street below, it was absolutely the real item.

“My Lord,” Nathan said, “how did they get *this* here?”

“It’s mostly her doing.” The owner and resident culinary genius, a big plump friendly woman, came over and greeted me in stiff Germanic English.

“Hello, Eva. We’re looking for a friend—” But then Nathan was already past us, and rushing down toward a small booth at the back.

“I think he finds him,” Eva said with a smile.

By the time I got to the table Nathan was pumping the arm of a short, long-haired blond guy in his late thirties, slapping his back, babbling with relief—overwhelmed with relief, by the look of it. “Freds, thank God I found you!”

“Good to see you too, bud! Pretty lucky, actually—I was gonna split with some Brits for the hills this morning, but old Reliability Negative Airline bombed out again.” Freds had a faint southern or country accent, and talked as fast as anyone I’d ever heard, sometimes faster.

“I know,” Nathan said. He looked up and saw me. “Actually, my new friend here figured it out. George Fergusson, this is George Fredericks.”

We shook hands. “Nice name!” George said. “Call me Freds, everyone does.” We slid in around his table while Freds explained that the friends he was going to go climbing with were finding them rooms. “So what are you up to, Nathan? I didn’t even know you were in Nepal. I thought you were back in the States working, saving wildlife refuges or something.”

“I was,” Nathan said, and his grim do-or-die expression returned. “But I had to come back. Listen—you didn’t get my

letter?”

“No, did you write me?” said Freds.

Nathan stared right at me, and I looked as innocent as I could. “I’m going to have to take you into my confidence,” he said to me. “I don’t know you very well, but you’ve been a big help today, and the way things are I can’t really be...”

“Fastidious?”

“No no no—I can’t be over-cautious, you see. I tend to be over-cautious, as Freds will tell you. But I need help, now.” And he was dead serious.

“Just giving you a hard time,” I reassured him, trying to look trustworthy, loyal, and all that; difficult, given the big grin on Freds’s face.

“Well, here goes,” Nathan said, speaking to both of us. “I’ve got to tell you what happened to me on the expedition I helped in the spring. It still isn’t easy to talk about, but...”

And ducking his head, leaning forward, lowering his voice, he told us the tale I had read about in his lost letter. Freds and I leaned forward as well, so that our heads practically knocked over the table. I did all I could to indicate my shocked surprise at the high points of the story, but I didn’t have to worry about that too much, because Freds supplied all the amazement necessary. “You’re kidding,” he’d say. “No. Incredible. I can’t believe it. Yetis are usually so skittish! And this one just *stood there*? You’re *kidding*! In-fucking-credible, man! I can’t *believe* it! How great! What?—oh, no! You didn’t!” And when Nathan told about the yeti giving him the necklace, sure enough, just as Nathan had predicted, Freds jumped up out of the booth and leaned back in and shouted, “YOU’RE KIDDING!!”

“Shh!” Nathan hissed, putting his face down on the tablecloth. “No! Get back down here, Freds! Please!”

So he sat down and Nathan went on, to the same sort of response (“You tore the fucking BRIDGE DOWN!?!?” “*Shhhhh!!?*”); and when he was done we all leaned back in the booth, exhausted. Slowly the other customers stopped staring at us. I cleared my throat: “But then today, you um, you indicated that there was still a problem, or some new problem... ?”

Nathan nodded, lips pursed. “Adrakian went back and got money from a rich old guy in the States whose hobby used to be *big game hunting*. J. Reeves Fitzgerald. Now he keeps a kind of a photo zoo on a big estate. He came over here with Adrakian, and Valerie, and Sarah too even, and they went right back up to the camp we had in the spring. I found out about it from Armaat and came here quick as I could. Right after I arrived, they checked into a suite at the Sheraton. A bellboy told me they came in a Land Rover with its windows draped, and he saw someone funny hustled upstairs, and now they’re locked into that suite like it’s a fort. And I’m afraid—I think—I think they’ve *got one up there*.”

Freds and I looked at each other. “How long ago was this?” I asked.

“Just two days ago! I’ve been hunting for Freds ever since, I didn’t know what else to do!”

Freds said, “What about that Sarah? Is she still with them?”

“Yes,” Nathan said, looking at the table. “I can’t believe it, but she is.” He shook his head. “If they’re hiding a yeti up there—if they’ve got one—then, well, it’s all over for the yetis. It’ll just be a disaster for them.”

I supposed that was true enough. Freds was nodding automatically, agreeing just because Nathan had said it. “It would be a zoo up there, ha ha.”

“So you’ll help?” Nathan asked.

“Of course, man! Naturally!” Freds looked surprised Nathan

would even ask.

“I’d like to,” I said. And that was the truth, too. The guy brought it out in you, somehow.

“Thanks,” said Nathan. He looked very relieved. “But what about this climb you were going on, Freds?”

“No prob. I was a late add-on anyway, just for fun. They’ll be fine. I was beginning to wonder about going with them this time anyway. They got themselves a Trivial Pursuit game for this climb, to keep them from going bonkers in their tents. We tried it out yesterday and you know I’m real good at Trivial Pursuit, except for the history, literature and entertainment categories, but this here game was the *British* version. So we get a buzz on and start to playing and suddenly I’m part of a Monty Python routine, I mean they just don’t play it the same! You know how when we play it and you don’t know the answer everyone says ‘Ha, too bad’—but here I take my turn and go for sports and leisure which is my natural forte, and they pull the card and ask me, ‘Who was it bowled three hundred and sixty-five consecutive sticky wickets at the West Indian cricket match of 1956,’ or whatever, and they like to *died* they were laughing so hard. They jumped up and danced around me and *howled*. ‘Yew don’t know, dew yew! Yew don’t have the slightest fookin’ *idear* who bowled those sticky wickets, dew yew!’ It was really hard to concentrate on my answer. So. Going with them this time might have been a mistake anyway. Better to stay here and help you.”

Nathan and I could only agree.

Then Eva came by with our food, which we had ordered after Nathan’s epic. The amazing thing about the Old Vienna Inn is that the food is even better than the decor. It would be good anywhere, and in Kathmandu, where almost everything tastes a little like cardboard, it’s simply unbelievable. “Look at this steak!” Freds said. “Where the hell do they get the meat?”

“Didn’t you ever wonder how they keep the street cow population under control?” I asked.

Freds liked that. “I can just imagine them sneaking one of them big honkers into the back here. Wham!”

Nathan began to prod dubiously at his schnitzel. And then, over a perfect meal, we discussed the problem facing us. As usual in situations like this, I had a plan.

V

I have never known baksheesh to fail in Kathmandu, but that week at the Everest Sheraton International the employees were bottled up tight. They didn’t even want to *hear* about anything out of the ordinary, much less be part of it, no matter the gain. Something was up, and I began to suspect that J. Reeves Fitzgerald had a very big bankroll indeed. So Plan A for getting into Adrakian’s room was foiled, and I retired to the hotel bar, where Nathan was hidden in a corner booth, suitably disguised in sunglasses and an Australian outback hat. He didn’t like my news.

The Everest Sheraton International is not exactly like Sheratons elsewhere, but it is about the quality of your average Holiday Inn, which makes it five-star in Kathmandu, and just about as incongruous as the Old Vienna. The bar looked like an airport bar, and there was a casino in the room next to us, which clearly, to judge by the gales of laughter coming from it, no one could take seriously. Nathan and I sat and nursed our drinks and waited for Freds, who was casing the outside of the hotel.

Suddenly Nathan clutched my forearm. “Don’t look!”

“Okay.”

“Oh my God, they must have hired a whole bunch of private security cops. Jeez, look at those guys. No, don’t look!”

Unobtrusively I glanced at the group entering the bar. Identical boots, identical jackets, with little bulges under the arm; clean-cut looks, upright, almost military carriage... They looked a little bit like Nathan, to tell the truth, but without the beard. “Hmm,” I said. Definitely not your ordinary tourists. Fitzgerald’s bankroll must have been *very* big.

Then Freds came winging into the bar and slid into our booth. “Problems, man.”

“Shh!” Nathan said. “See those guys over there?”

“I know,” said Freds. “They’re Secret Service agents.”

“They’re *what?*” Nathan and I said in unison.

“Secret Service agents.”

“Now *don’t* tell me this Fitzgerald is a close friend of Reagan’s,” I began, but Freds was shaking his head and grinning.

“No. They’re here with Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter. Haven’t you heard?”

Nathan shook his head, but I had a sudden sinking feeling as I remembered a rumor of a few weeks back. “He wanted to see Everest... ?”

“That’s right. I met them all up in Namche a week ago, actually. But now they’re back, and staying here.”

“Oh my God,” Nathan said. “Secret Service men, *here.*”

“They’re nice guys, actually,” Freds said. “We talked to them a lot in Namche. Real straight, of course—real straight—but nice. They could tell us what was happening in the World Series, because they had a satellite dish, and they told us what their jobs were like,

and everything. Of course sometimes we asked them questions about the Carters and they just looked around like no one had said anything, which was weird, but mostly they were real normal.”

“And *what* are they doing here?” I said, still not quite able to believe it.

“Well, Jimmy wanted to go see Everest. So they all helicoptered into Namche just as if there was no such thing as altitude sickness, and took off for Everest! I was talking just now with one of the agents I met up there, and he told me how it came out. Rosalynn got to fifteen thousand feet and turned back, but Jimmy kept on trudging. Here he’s got all these young tough Secret Service guys to protect him, you know, but they started to get sick, and every day they were helicoptering out a number of them because of altitude sickness, pneumonia, whatever, until there were hardly any left! He hiked his whole crew right into the ground! What is he, in his sixties? And here all these young agents were dropping like flies while he motored right on up to Kala Pattar, and Everest Base Camp too. I love it!”

“That’s great,” I said. “I’m happy for him. But now they’re back.”

“Yeah, they’re doing the Kathmandu culture scene for a bit.”

“That’s too bad.”

“Ah! No luck getting a key to the yeti’s room, is that it?”

“*Sbbbbh*,” Nathan hissed.

“Sorry, I forgot. Well, we’ll just have to think of something else, eh? The Carters are going to be here another week.”

“The windows?” I asked.

Freds shook his head. “I could climb up to them no problem, but the ones to their room overlook the garden and it wouldn’t be all that private.”

“God, this is bad,” Nathan said, and downed his Scotch. “Phil could decide to reveal the—what he’s got, at a press conference while the Carters are here. Perfect way to get enhanced publicity fast—that would be just like him.”

We sat and thought about it for a couple of drinks.

“You know, Nathan,” I said slowly, “there’s an angle we haven’t discussed yet, that you’d have to take the lead in.”

“What’s that?”

“Sarah.”

“What? Oh, no. No. I couldn’t. I can’t talk to her, really. It just—well, I just don’t want to.”

“But why?”

“She wouldn’t care what I said.” He looked down at his glass and swirled the contents nervously. His voice turned bitter: “She’d probably just tell Phil we were here, and then we’d *really* be in trouble.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I don’t think she’s the kind of person to do that, do you, Freds?”

“I don’t know,” Freds said, surprised. “I never met her.”

“She couldn’t be, surely.” And I kept after him for the rest of our stay, figuring it was our best chance at that point. But Nathan was stubborn about it, and still hadn’t budged when he insisted we leave.

So we paid the bill and took off. But we were crossing the foyer, and near the broad set of front doors, when Nathan suddenly stopped in his tracks. A tall, good-looking woman with large owl-eye glasses had just walked in. Nathan was stuck in place. I guessed who the woman must be, and nudged him. “Remember what’s at stake.”

A good point to make. He took a deep breath. And as the

woman was about to pass us, he whipped off his hat and shades.
“Sarah!”

The woman jumped back. “Nathan! My God! What—what are you doing here!”

Darkly: “You know why I’m here, Sarah.” He drew himself up even straighter than usual, and glared at her. If she’d been convicted of murdering his mother I don’t think he could have looked more accusing.

“What—?” Her voice quit on her.

Nathan’s lip curled disdainfully. I thought he was kind of overdoing the laying-on-of-guilt trip, and I was even thinking of stepping in and trying a less confrontational approach, but then right in the middle of the next sentence his voice twisted with real pain: “I didn’t think you’d be capable of this, Sarah.”

With her light brown hair, bangs, and big glasses, she had a schoolgirlish look. Now that schoolgirl was hurting; her lip quivered, she blinked rapidly; “I—I—” And then her face crumpled, and with a little cry she tottered toward Nathan and collapsed against his broad shoulder. He patted her head, looking flabbergasted.

“Oh, Nathan,” she said miserably, sniffing. “It’s so *awful*...”

“It’s all right,” he said, stiff as a board. “I know.”

The two of them communed for a while. I cleared my throat. “Why don’t we go somewhere else and have a drink,” I suggested, feeling that things were looking up a trifle.

We went to the hotel Annapurna coffee shop, and there Sarah confirmed all of Nathan's worst fears. "They've got him in there locked in the *bathroom*." Apparently the yeti was eating less and less, and Valerie Budge was urging Mr. Fitzgerald to take him out to the city's funky little zoo immediately, but Fitzgerald was flying in a group of science and nature writers so he could hold a press conference, the next day or the day after that, and he and Phil wanted to wait. They were hoping for the Carters' presence at the unveiling, as Freds called it, but they couldn't be sure about that yet.

Freds and I asked Sarah questions about the setup at the hotel. Apparently Phil, Valerie Budge and Fitzgerald were taking turns in a continuous watch on the bathroom. How did they feed him? How docile was he? Question, answer, question, answer. After her initial breakdown, Sarah proved to be a tough and sensible character. Nathan, on the other hand, spent the time repeating, "We've got to get him out of there, we've got to do it soon, it'll be the *end* of him." Sarah's hand on his just fueled the flame. "We'll just have to *rescue* him."

"I know, Nathan," I said, trying to think. "We know that already." A plan was beginning to fall into place in my mind. "Sarah, you've got a key to the room?" She nodded. "Okay, let's go."

"What, now?" Nathan cried.

"Sure! We're in a hurry, right? These reporters are going to arrive, and they're going to notice Sarah is gone... And we've got to get some stuff together, first."

VII

When we returned to the Sheraton it was late afternoon. Freds and I were on rented bikes, and Nathan and Sarah followed in a taxi. We made sure our cabbie understood that we wanted him to wait for us out front; then Freds and I went inside, gave the all-clear to Nathan and Sarah, and headed straight for the lobby phones. Nathan and Sarah went to the front desk and checked into a room; we needed them out of sight for a while.

I called all the rooms on the top floor of the hotel (the fourth), and sure enough half of them were occupied by Americans. I explained that I was J. Reeves Fitzgerald, assistant to the Carters, who were fellow guests in the hotel. They all knew about the Carters. I explained that the Carters were hosting a small reception for the Americans at the hotel, and we hoped that they would join us in the casino bar when it was convenient—the Carters would be down in an hour or so. They were all delighted at the invitation (except for one surly Republican that I had to cut off), and they promised to be down shortly.

The last call got Phil Adrakian, in room 355; I identified myself as Lionel Hodding. It went as well as the others; if anything Adrakian was even more enthusiastic. “We’ll be right down, thanks—we have a reciprocal invitation to make, actually.” I was prejudiced, but he did sound like a pain. Nathan’s epithet, *theorist*, didn’t really make it for me; I preferred something along the lines of, say, *asshole*.

“Fine. Look forward to seeing all your party, of course.”

Freds and I waited in the bar and watched the elevators. Americans in their safari best began to pile out and head for the casino; you wouldn’t have thought there was that much polyester in all Kathmandu, but I guess it travels well.

Two men and a plump woman came down the broad stairs

beside the elevator. “Them?” Freds asked. I nodded; they fitted Sarah’s descriptions exactly. Phil Adrakian was shortish, slim, and good-looking in a California Golden Boy kind of way. Valerie Budge wore glasses and had a lot of curly hair pulled up; somehow she looked intellectual where Sarah only looked studious. The money man, J. Reeves Fitzgerald, was sixtyish and very fit-looking, though he did smoke a cigar. He wore a safari jacket with eight pockets on it. Adrakian was arguing a point with him as they crossed the foyer to the casino bar, and I heard him say, “*better* than a press conference.”

I had a final inspiration and returned to the phones. I asked the hotel operator for Jimmy Carter, and got connected; but the phone was answered by a flat Midwestern voice, very businesslike indeed. “Hello?”

“Hello, is this the Carters’ suite?”

“May I ask who’s speaking?”

“This is J. Reeves Fitzgerald. I’d like you to inform the Carters that the Americans in the Sheraton have organized a reception for them in the hotel’s casino bar, for this afternoon.”

“... I’m not sure their scheduling will allow them to attend.”

“I understand. But if you’d just let them know.”

“Of course.”

Back to Freds, where I downed a Star beer in two gulps. “Well,” I said, “*something* should happen. Let’s get up there.”

VIII

I gave Nathan and Sarah a buzz and they joined us at the door of Room 355. Sarah let us in. Inside was a big suite—style, generic Holiday Inn—it could have been in any city on earth. Except that there was a slight smell of wet fur.

Sarah went to the bathroom door, unlocked it. There was a noise inside. Nathan, Freds and I shifted around behind her uncomfortably. She opened the door. There was a movement, and there he was, standing before us. I found myself staring into the eyes of the yeti.

In the Kathmandu tourist scene, there are calendars, postcards, and embroidered T-shirts with a drawing of a yeti on them. It's always the same drawing, which I could never understand; why should everyone agree to use the same guess? It annoyed me: a little furball thing with his back to you, looking over his shoulder with a standard monkey face, and displaying the bottom of one big bare foot.

I'm happy to report that the real yeti didn't look anything like that. Oh he was furry, all right; but he was about Fred's height, and had a distinctly humanoid face, surrounded by a beardlike ruff of matted reddish fur. He looked a little like Lincoln—a short and very ugly Lincoln, sure, with a squashed nose and rather prominent eyebrow ridges—but the resemblance was there. I was relieved to see how human his face looked; my plan depended on it, and I was glad Nathan hadn't exaggerated in his description. The only feature that really looked unusual was his occipital crest, a ridge of bone and muscle that ran fore-and-aft over the top of his head, like his skull itself had a Mohawk haircut.

Well, we were all standing there like a statue called "People Meet Yeti," when Freds decided to break the ice; he stepped forward and offered the guy a hand. "Namaste!" he said.

"No, no—" Nathan brushed by him and held out the necklace of fossil shells that he had been given in the spring.

“Is this the same one?” I croaked, momentarily at a loss. Because up until that bathroom door opened, part of me hadn’t really believed in it all.

“I think so.”

The yeti reached out and touched the necklace and Nathan’s hand. Statue time again. Then the yeti stepped forward and touched Nathan’s face with his long, furry hand. He whistled something quiet. Nathan was quivering; there were tears in Sarah’s eyes. I was impressed myself. Freds said, “He looks kind of like Buddha, don’t you think? He doesn’t have the belly, but those eyes, man. Buddha to the max.”

We got to work. I opened my pack and got out baggy overalls, a yellow “Free Tibet” T-shirt, and a large anorak. Nathan was taking his shirt off and putting it back on to show the yeti what we had in mind.

Slowly, carefully, gently, with many a soft-spoken sound and slow gesture, we got the yeti into the clothes. The T-shirt was the hardest part; he squeaked a little when we pulled it over his head. The anorak was zippered, luckily. With every move I made I said, “Namaste, blessed sir, namaste.”

The hands and feet were a problem. His hands were strange, fingers skinny and almost twice as long as mine, and pretty hairy as well; but wearing mittens in the daytime in Kathmandu was almost worse. I suspended judgement on them and turned to his feet. This was the only area of the tourist drawing that was close to correct; his feet were huge, furry, and just about square. He had a big toe like a very fat thumb. The boots I had brought, biggest I could find in a hurry, weren’t wide enough. Eventually I put him in Tibetan wool socks and Birkenstock sandals, modified by a penknife to let the big toe hang over the side.

Lastly I put my blue Dodgers cap on his head. The cap concealed the occipital crest perfectly, and the bill did a lot to

obscure his rather low forehead and prominent eyebrows. I topped everything off with a pair of mirrored wraparound sunglasses. “Hey, neat,” Freds remarked. Also a Sherpa necklace, made of five pieces of coral and three giant chunks of rough turquoise, strung on black cord. Principle of distraction, you know.

All this time Sarah and Nathan were ransacking the drawers and luggage, stealing all the camera film and notebooks and whatever else might have contained evidence of the yeti. And throughout it all the yeti stood there, calm and attentive: watching Nathan, sticking his hand down a sleeve like a millionaire with his valet, stepping carefully into the Birkenstocks, adjusting the bill of the baseball cap, everything. I was really impressed, and so was Freds. “He really is like Buddha, isn’t he?” I thought the physical resemblance was a bit muted at this point, but his attitude couldn’t have been more mellow if he’d been the Gautama himself.

When Nathan and Sarah were done searching they looked up at our handiwork. “*God* he looks weird,” Sarah said.

Nathan just sat on the bed and put his head in his hands. “It’ll never work,” he said. “Never.”

“Sure it will!” Freds exclaimed, zipping the anorak up a little farther. “You see people on Freak Street looking like this all the time! Man, when I went to school I played football with a whole team of guys that looked just like him! Fact is, in my state he could run for Senator—”

“Whoah, whoah,” I said. “No time to waste, here. Give me the scissors and brush, I still have to do his hair.” I tried brushing it over his ears with little success, then gave him a trim in back. One trip, I was thinking, just one short walk down to a taxi. And in pretty dark halls. “Is it even on both sides?”

“For God’s sake, George, let’s go!” Nathan was getting antsy, and we had been a while. We gathered our belongings, filled the packs, and tugged old Buddha out into the hall.

IX

I have always prided myself on my sense of timing. Many's the time I've surprised myself by how perfectly I've managed to be in the right place at the right time; it goes beyond all conscious calculation, into deep mystic communion with the cycles of the cosmos, etc. etc. But apparently in this matter I was teamed up with people whose sense of timing was so cosmically awful that mine was completely swamped. That's the only way I can explain it.

Because there we were, escorting a yeti down the hallway of the Everest Sheraton International and we were walking casually along, the yeti kind of bowlegged—very bowlegged—and long-armed, too—so that I kept worrying he might drop to all fours—but otherwise, passably normal. Just an ordinary group of tourists in Nepal. We decided on the stairs, to avoid any awkward elevator crowds, and stepped through the swinging doors into the stairwell. And there coming down the stairs toward us were Jimmy Carter, Rosalynn Carter, and five Secret Service men.

“Well!” Freds exclaimed. “Damned if it isn't Jimmy Carter! And Rosalynn too!”

I suppose that was the best way to play it, not that Freds was doing anything but being natural. I don't know if the Carters were on their way to something else, or if they were actually coming down to attend my reception; if the latter, then my last-minute inspiration to invite them had been really a bad one. In any case, there they were, and they stopped on the landing. We stopped on the landing. The Secret Service men, observing us closely, stopped

on the landing.

What to do? Jimmy gave us his famous smile, and it might as well have been the cover of *Time* magazine, it was such a familiar sight; just the same. Only not quite. Not exactly. His face was older, naturally, but also it had the look of someone who had survived a serious illness, or a great natural disaster. It looked like he had been through the fire, and come back into the world knowing more than most people about what the fire was. It was a good face, it showed what a man could endure. And he was relaxed; this kind of interruption was part of daily life, part of the job he had volunteered for nine years before.

I was anything but relaxed. In fact, as the Secret Service men did their hawk routine on Buddha, their gazes locked, I could feel my heart stop, and I had to give my torso a little twist to get it started up again. Nathan had stopped breathing from the moment he saw Carter, and he was turning white above the sharp line of his beard. It was getting worse by the second when Freds stepped forward and extended a hand. “Hey, Mr. Carter, namaste! We’re happy to meet you.”

“Hi, how are y’all.” More of the famous smile. “Where are y’all from?”

And we answered “Arkansas,” “California,” “M-Massa-chusetts,” “Oregon,” and at each one he smiled and nodded with recognition and pleasure, and Rosalynn smiled and said “Hello, hello,” with that faint look I had seen before during the Presidential years, that seemed to say she would have been just as happy somewhere else, and we all shuffled around so that we could all shake hands with Jimmy—until it was Buddha’s turn.

“This is our guide, B-Badim Badur,” I said. “He doesn’t speak any English.”

“I understand,” Jimmy said. And he took Buddha’s hand and pumped it up and down.

Now, I had opted to leave Buddha barehanded, a decision I began to seriously regret. Here we had a man who had shaken at least a million hands in his life, maybe ten million; nobody in the whole world could have been more of an expert at it. And as soon as he grasped Buddha's long skinny hand, he knew that something was different. This wasn't like any of the millions of other hands he had shaken before. A couple of furrows joined the network of fine wrinkles around his eyes, and he looked closer at Buddha's peculiar get-up. I could feel the sweat popping out and beading on my forehead. "Um, Badim's a bit shy," I was saying, when suddenly the yeti squeaked.

"Naa-maas-tayy," it said, in a hoarse, whispery voice.

"Namaste!" Jimmy replied, grinning the famous grin.

And that, folks, was the first recorded conversation between yeti and human.

Of course Buddha had only been trying to help—I'm sure of that, given what happened later—but despite all we did to conceal it, his speech had obviously surprised us pretty severely. As a result the Secret Service guys were about to go cross-eyed checking us out, Buddha in particular.

"Let's let these folks get on with things," I said shakily, and took Buddha by the arm. "Nice to meet you," I said to the Carters. We all hung there for a moment. It didn't seem polite to precede the ex-President of the United States down a flight of stairs, but the Secret Service men damn well didn't want us *following* them down either; so finally I took the lead, with Buddha by the arm, and I held onto him tight as we descended.

We reached the foyer without incident. Sarah conversed brightly with the Secret Service men who were right behind us, and she distracted their attention very successfully, I thought. It appeared we would escape the situation without further difficulties, when the doors to the casino bar swung back, and Phil Adrakian, J.

Reeves Fitzgerald, and Valerie Budge walked out. (Timing, anyone?)

Adrakian took in the situation at a glance. “They’re kidnapping him!” he yelled. “Hey! *Kidnapping!*”

Well, you might just as well have put jumper cables on those Secret Service agents. After all, it’s kind of a question why anyone would want to assassinate an ex-President, but as a hostage for ransom or whatnot, you’ve got a prime target. They moved like mongooses to get between us and the Carters. Freds and I were trying to back Buddha out the front doors without actually moving our legs; we weren’t making much progress, and I don’t doubt we could’ve gotten shot for our efforts, if it weren’t for Sarah. She jumped right out in front of the charging Adrakian and blocked him off.

“*You’re* the kidnapper, you liar,” she cried, and slapped him in the face so hard he staggered. “*Help!*” she demanded of the Secret Service guys, blushing bright red and shoving Valerie Budge back into Fitzgerald. She looked so tousled and embattled and beautiful that the agents were confused; the situation wasn’t at all clear. Freds, Buddha and I bumped out the front door and ran for it.

Our taxi was gone. “Shit,” I said. No time to think. “The bikes?” Freds asked.

“Yep.” No other choice—we ran around the side of the building and unlocked our two bikes. I got on mine and Freds helped Buddha onto the little square rack over the back wheel. People around front were shouting, and I thought I heard Adrakian among them. Freds gave me a push from behind and we were off; I stood to pump up some speed, and we wavered side to side precariously.

I headed up the road to the north. It was just wider than one lane, half-paved and half-dirt. Bike and car traffic on it was heavy, as usual, and between dodging vehicles and potholes, looking back

for pursuers, and keeping the bike from tipping under Buddha's shifting weight, I was kept pretty busy.

The bike was a standard Kathmandu rental, Hero Jet by brand name: heavy frame, thick tires, low handlebars, one speed. It braked when you pedaled backwards, and had one handbrake, and it had a big loud bell, which is a crucial piece of equipment. This bike wasn't a bad specimen either, in that the handbrake worked and the handlebars weren't loose and the seat wasn't putting a spring through my ass. But the truth is, the Hero Jet is a solo vehicle. And Buddha was no lightweight. He was built like a cat, dense and compact, and I bet he weighed over two hundred pounds. With him in back, the rear tire was squashed flat—there was about an eighth of an inch clearance between rim and ground, and every time I misnavigated a pothole there was an ugly *thump* as we bottomed out.

So we weren't breaking any speed records, and when we turned left on Dilli Bazar Freds shouted from behind, "They're after us! See, there's that Adrakian and some others in a taxi!"

Sure enough, back a couple hundred yards was Phil Adrakian, hanging out the side window of a little white Toyota taxi, screaming at us. We pedaled over the Dhobi Khola bridge and shot by the Central Immigration building before I could think of anything to yell that might have brought the crowd there into the street. "Freds!" I said, panting. "Make a diversion! Tie up traffic!"

"Right on." Without a pause he braked to a halt in the middle of the road, jumped off and threw his Hero Jet to the pavement. The three-wheeled motorcab behind him ran over it before the driver could stop. Freds screamed abuse, he pulled the bike out and slung it under a Datsun going the other way, which crunched it and screeched to a halt. More abuse from Freds, who ran around pulling the drivers from their vehicles, shouting at them with all the Nepalese he knew: "Chiso howa!" (Cold wind.) "Tato pani!" (Hot water.) "Rhamrao dihn!" (Nice day.)

I only caught glimpses of this as I biked away, but I saw he had bought a little time and I concentrated on negotiating the traffic. Dilli Bazar is one of the most congested streets in Kathmandu, which is really saying a lot. The two narrow lanes are fronted by three-story buildings containing grocery markets and fabric wholesalers, which open directly onto the street and use it for cash register lines and so on, despite the fact that it's a major truck route. Add to that the usual number of dogs, goats, chickens, taxis, young schoolgirls walking three abreast with their arms linked, pedicabs with five-foot-tall operators pedaling whole families along at three miles an hour, and the occasional wandering sacred cow, and you can see the extent of the problem. Not only that, but the potholes are fierce—some could be mistaken for open manholes.

And the hills! I was doing all right until that point, weaving through the crowd and ringing my bell to the point of thumb cramp. But then Buddha shook my arm and I looked back and saw that Adrakian had somehow gotten past Freds and hired another taxi, and he was trailing us again, stuck behind a colorfully painted bus some distance behind. And then we started up the first of three fairly steep up-and-downs that Dilli Bazar makes before it reaches the city center.

Hero Jets are not made for hills. The city residents get off theirs and walk them up inclines like that one, and only Westerners, still in a hurry even in Nepal, stay on and grind up the slopes. I was certainly a Westerner in a hurry that day, and I stood up and started pumping away. But it was heavy going, especially after I had to brake to a dead stop to avoid an old man blowing his nose with his finger. Adrakian's taxi had rounded the bus, in an explosion of honks, and he was gaining on us fast. I sat back on the seat, huffing and puffing, legs like big blocks of wood, and it was looking like I'd have to find a diplomatic solution to the problem, when suddenly both my feet were kicked forward off the pedals; we surged forward, just missing a pedicab.

Buddha had taken over. He was holding onto the seat with both hands, and pedaling from behind. I had seen tall Westerners ride their rental bikes like that before, to keep from smashing their knees into the handlebars on every upswing. But you can't get much downthrust from back there, and you didn't ever see them doing that while biking uphill. For Buddha, this was not a problem. I mean this guy was *strong*. He pumped away so hard that the poor Hero Jet squeaked under the strain, and we surged up the hill and flew down the other side like we had jumped onto a motorcycle.

A motorcycle without brakes, I should add. Buddha did not seem up on the theory of the footbrake, and I tried the handbrake once or twice and found that it only squealed like a pig and reduced our stability a bit. So as we fired down Dilli Bazar I could only put my feet up on the frame and dodge obstacles, as in one of those race-car video games. I rang the bell for all it was worth, and spent a lot of time in the right lane heading at oncoming traffic (they drive on the left). Out the corner of my eye I saw pedestrians goggling at us as we flew by; then the lanes ahead cleared as we rounded a semi, and I saw we were approaching the "Traffic Engineers' Intersection," usually one of my favorites. Here Dilli Bazar crosses another major street, and the occasion is marked by four traffic lights, all four of them *permanently green twenty-four hours a day*.

This time there was a cow for a traffic cop. "Bistarre!" (Slowly) I yelled, but Buddha's vocabulary apparently remained restricted to "Namaste," and he pedaled right on. I charted a course, clamped down the handbrake, crouched over the handlebars, rang the bell.

We shot the gap between a speeding cab and the traffic cow, with three inches to spare on each side, and were through the intersection before I even had time to blink. No problem. Now *that's* timing.

After that, it was just a matter of navigation. I took us the

wrong way up the one-way section of Durbar Marg, to shorten our trip and throw off pursuit for good, and having survived that it was simple to make it the rest of the way to Thamel.

As we approached Thamel, we passed the grounds of the Royal Palace; as I mentioned, the tall trees there are occupied day and night by giant brown bats, hanging head down from the bare upper branches. As we passed the palace, those bats must have caught the scent of the yeti, or something, because all of a sudden the whole flock of them burst off the branches, squeaking like my handbrake and flapping their big skin wings like a hundred little Draculas. Buddha slowed to stare up at the sight, and everyone else on the block, even the cow on the corner, stopped and looked up as well, to watch that cloud of bats fill the sky.

It's moments like that that make me love Kathmandu.

In Thamel, we fit right in. A remarkable number of people on the street looked a lot like Buddha—so much so that the notion hit me that the city was being secretly infiltrated by yeti in disguise. I chalked the notion up to hysteria caused by the Traffic Engineers' Intersection, and directed our Hero Jet into the Hotel Star courtyard. At that point walls surrounded us and Buddha consented to stop pedaling. We got off the bike, and shakily I led him upstairs to my room.

X

So. We had liberated the imprisoned yeti. Although I had to admit, as I locked us both into my room, that he was only partway free. Getting him completely free, back on his home ground, might turn out to be a problem. I still didn't know exactly where his home

was, but they don't rent cars in Kathmandu, and the bus rides, no matter the destination, are long and crowded. Would Buddha be able to hold it together for ten hours in a crowded bus? Well, knowing him, he probably would. But would his disguise hold up? That was doubtful.

Meanwhile, there was the matter of Adrakian and the Secret Service being on to us. I had no idea what had happened to Nathan and Sarah and Freds, and I worried about them, especially Nathan and Sarah. I wished they would arrive. Now that we were here and settled, I felt a little uncomfortable with my guest; with him in there, my room felt awfully small.

I went in the bathroom and peed. Buddha came in and watched me, and when I was done he found the right buttons on the overalls, and did the same thing! The guy was amazingly smart. Another point—I don't know whether to mention this—but in the hominid-versus-primate debate, I've heard it said that most primate male genitals are quite small, and that human males are by far the size champs in that category. Hurray for us. But Buddha, I couldn't help noticing, was more on the human side of the scale. Really, the evidence was adding up. The yeti was a hominid, and a highly intelligent hominid at that. Buddha's quick understanding, his rapid adaptation to changing situations, his recognition of friends and enemies, his *cool*, all indicated smarts of the first order.

Of course, it made sense. How else could they have stayed concealed so well for so long? They must have taught their young all the tricks, generation to generation; keeping close track of all tools or artifacts, hiding their homes in the most hard-to-find caves, avoiding all human settlements, practicing burial of the dead...

Then it occurred to me to wonder: If the yetis were so smart, and so good at concealment, why was Buddha here with me in my room? What had gone wrong? Why had he revealed himself to Nathan, and how had Adrakian managed to capture him?

I found myself speculating on the incidence of mental illness among yetis, a train of thought that made me even more anxious for Nathan's arrival. Nathan was not a whole lot of help in some situations, but the man had a rapport with the yeti that I sadly lacked.

Buddha was crouched on the bed, hunched over his knees, staring at me brightly. We had taken his sunglasses off on arrival, but the Dodgers cap was still on. He looked observant, curious, puzzled. What next? he seemed to say. Something in his expression, something about the way he was coping with it all, was both brave and pathetic—it made me feel for him. “Hey, guy. We'll get you back up there. Namaste.”

He formed the words with his lips.

Perhaps he was hungry. What do you feed a hungry yeti? Was he vegetarian, carnivorous? I didn't have much there in the room: some packages of curried chicken soup, some candy (would sugar be bad for him?), beef jerky, yeah, a possibility; Nebico malt biscuits, which were little cookielike wafers made in India that figured large in my diet... I opened a package of these and one of jerky, and offered some to him.

He sat back on the bed and crossed his legs in front of him. He tapped the bed as if to indicate my spot. I sat down on the bed across from him. He took a stick of jerky in his long fingers, sniffed it, stuck it between his toes. I ate mine for example. He looked at me as if I'd just used the wrong fork for the salad. He began with a Nebico wafer, chewing it slowly. I found I was hungry, and from the roundness of his eyes I think he felt the same. But he was cool; there was a procedure here, he had me know; he handled all the wafers carefully first, sniffed them, ate them very slowly; took the jerky from between his toes, tried half of it; looked around the room, or at me, chewing very slowly. So calm, so peaceful he was! I decided the candy would be okay, and offered him the bag of jelly beans. He tried one and his eyebrows

lifted; he picked one of the same color (green) from the bag, and gave it to me.

Pretty soon we had all the food I owned scattered out there on the bed between us, and we tried first one thing and then another, in silence, as slowly and solemnly as if it were all some sacred ritual. And you know, after a while I felt just like it was.

XI

About an hour after our meal Nathan, Sarah, and Freds all arrived at once. “You’re here!” they cried. “All right, George! Way to go!”

“Thank Buddha,” I said. “He got us here.”

Nathan and Buddha went through a little hand ritual with the fossil shell necklace. Freds and Sarah told me the story of their adventures. Sarah had fought with Adrakian, who escaped her and ran after us, and then with Valerie Budge, who stayed behind with Fitzgerald, to trade blows and accusations. “It was a joy to pound on her, she’s been coming on to Phil for months now—not that I care anymore, of course,” Sarah added quickly as Nathan eyed her. Anyway, she had pushed and shoved and denounced Budge and Fitzgerald and Adrakian, and by the time she was done no one at the Sheraton had the slightest idea what was going on. A couple of Secret Service men had gone after Adrakian; the rest contented themselves with shielding the Carters, who were being called on by both sides to judge the merits of the case. Naturally the Carters were reluctant to do this, uncertain as they were of what the case was. Fitzgerald and Budge didn’t want to come right out and say they had had a yeti stolen from them, so they were hamstrung; and

when Freds returned to see what was up, Nathan and Sarah had already ordered a cab. “I think the Carters ended up on our side,” Sarah said with satisfaction.

“All well and good,” added Freds, “but there I had old Jimmy right at hand, no yeti to keep me polite, and man I had a bone to pick with that guy! I was in San Diego in 1980 and along about six o’clock on election day me and a bunch of friends were going down to vote and I argued *heavily* with them that we should vote for Carter rather than Anderson, because Anderson would just be a gesture whereas I thought Carter might still have a chance to win, since I don’t believe in polls. I really went at it and I convinced every one of them, probably the peak of my political career, and then when we got home and turned on the TV we found out that Carter had already conceded the election a couple of hours before! My friends were so mad at me! John Drummond threw his beer at me and hit me right here. In fact they soaked me. So I had a bone to pick with old Jimmy, you bet, and I was going to go up to him and ask him why he had done such a thing. But he was looking kind of confused by all the ruckus, so I decided not to.”

“The truth is I dragged him away before he could,” said Sarah.

Nathan got us back to the problem at hand. “We’ve still got to get the yeti out of Kathmandu, and Adrakian knows we’ve got him—he’ll be searching for us. How are we going to do it?”

“I’ve got a plan,” I said. Because after my meal with Buddha I had been thinking. “Now where is Buddha’s home? I need to know.”

Nathan told me.

I consulted my maps. Buddha’s valley was pretty near the little airstrip at J—. I nodded. “Okay, here’s how we’ll do it...”

XII

I spent most of the next day through the looking glass, inside the big headquarters of the Royal Nepal Airline Corporation, getting four tickets for the following day's flight to J—. Tough work, even though as far as I could tell the plane wasn't even close to sold out. J—wasn't near any trekking routes, and it wasn't a popular destination. But that doesn't mean anything at RNAC. Their purpose as a company, as far as I can tell, is not so much to fly people places as it is to *make lists*. Waiting lists. I would call it their secret agenda, only it's no secret.

Patience, a very low-keyed pigheadedness, and lots of baksheesh are the keys to getting from the lists to the status of ticket-holder; I managed it, and in one day too. So I was pleased, but I called my friend Bill, who works in one of the city's travel agencies, to establish a little backup plan. He's good at those, having a lot of experience with RNAC. Then I completed the rest of my purchases, at my favorite climbing outfitters in Thamel. The owner, a Tibetan woman, put down her copy of *The Far Pavilions* and stopped doing her arm aerobics, and got me all the clothes I asked for, in all the right colors. The only thing she couldn't find me was another Dodgers cap, but I got a dark blue "ATOM" baseball cap instead.

I pointed at it. "What is this 'ATOM,' anyway?" Because there were caps and jackets all over Nepal with that one word on them. Was it a company, and if so, what kind?

She shrugged. "Nobody knows."

Extensive advertising for an unknown product: yet another Great Mystery of Nepal. I stuffed my new belongings into my

backpack and left. I was on my way home when I noticed someone dodging around in the crowd behind me. Just a glance and I spotted him, nipping into a newsstand: Phil Adrakian.

Now I couldn't go home, not straight home. So I went to the Kathmandu Guest House, next door, and told one of the snooty clerks there that Jimmy Carter would be visiting in ten minutes and his secretary would be arriving very shortly. I walked through into the pretty garden that gives the Guest House so many of its pretensions, and hopped over a low spot in the back wall. Down an empty garbage alley, around the corner, over another wall, and past the Lodge Pleasant or Pheasant into the Star's courtyard. I was feeling pretty covert and all when I saw one of the Carters' Secret Service men, standing in front of the Tantric Used Book Store. Since I was already in the courtyard, I went ahead and hurried on up to my room.

XIII

"I think they must have followed you here," I told our little group. "I suppose they might think we really were trying a kidnapping yesterday."

Nathan groaned. "Adrakian probably convinced them we're part of that group that bombed the Hotel Annapurna this summer."

"That should reassure them," I said. "When that happened the opposition group immediately wrote to the King and told him they were suspending all operations against the government until the criminal element among them was captured by the authorities."

“Hindu guerrillas are heavy, aren’t they?” said Freds.

“Anyway,” I concluded, “all this means is that we have a damn good reason to put our plan into effect. Freds, are you sure you’re up for it?”

“Sure I’m sure! It sounds like fun.”

“All right. We’d better all stay here tonight, just in case. I’ll cook up some chicken soup.”

So we had a spartan meal of curried chicken soup, Nebico wafers, Toblerone white chocolate, jelly beans, and iodinated Tang. When Nathan saw the way Buddha went for the jelly beans, he shook his head. “We’ve got to get him out of here *fast*.”

When we settled down, Sarah took the bed, and Buddha immediately joined her, with a completely innocent look in his eye, as if to say: Who, me? This is just where I sleep, right? I could see Nathan was a bit suspicious of this, worried about the old Fay Wray complex maybe, and in fact he curled up on the foot of the bed. I assume there weren’t any problems. Freds and I threw down the mildewed foam pads I owned and lay down on the floor.

“Don’t you think Buddha is sure to get freaked by the flight tomorrow?” Sarah asked when the lights were off.

“Nothing’s seemed to bother him much so far,” I said. But I wondered; I don’t like flying myself.

“Yeah, but this isn’t remotely like anything he’s ever done before.”

“Standing on a high ridge is kind of like flying. Compared to our bike ride it should be easy.”

“I’m not so sure,” Nathan said, worried again. “Sarah may be right—flying can be upsetting even for people who know what it is.”

“That’s usually the heart of the problem,” I said, with feeling.

Freds cut through the debate: “I say we should get him stoned before the flight. Get a hash pipe going good and just get him *wasted*.”

“You’re crazy!” Nathan said. “That’d just freak him out more!”

“Nah.”

“He wouldn’t know what to make of it,” Sarah said.

“Oh yeah?” Freds propped himself up on one arm. “You really think those yetis have lived all this time up there among all those pot plants, and haven’t figured them out? No way! In fact that’s probably why no one ever sees them! Man, the pot plants up there are as big as *pine trees*. They probably use the buds for food.”

Nathan and Sarah doubted that, and they further doubted that we should do any experimenting about it at such a crucial time.

“You got any hash?” I asked Freds with interest.

“Nope. Before this Ama Dablam climb came through I was going to fly to Malaysia to join a jungle mountain expedition that Doug Scott put together, you know? So I got rid of it all. I mean, do you fly drugs into Malaysia is not one of the harder questions on the IQ test, you know? In fact I had too much to smoke in the time I had left, and when I was hiking down from Namche to Lukla I was loading my pipe and dropped this chunk on the ground, a really monster chunk, about ten grams. *And I just left it there!* Just left it lying on the ground! I’ve always wanted to do that.

“Anyway, I’m out. I could fix that in about fifteen minutes down on the street if you want me to, though—”

“No, no. That’s okay.” I could already hear the steady breathing of Buddha, fast asleep above me. “He’ll be more relaxed than any of us tomorrow.” And that was true.

XIV

We got up before dawn, and Freds dressed in the clothes that Buddha had worn the day before. We pasted some swatches of Buddha's back fur onto Freds's face to serve as a beard. We even had some of the russet fur taped to the inside of the Dodgers cap, so it hung down behind. With mittens on, and a big pair of snow boots, he was covered; slip the shades onto his nose and he looked at least as weird as Buddha had in the Sheraton. Freds walked around the room a bit, trying it out. Buddha watched him with that surprised look, and it cracked Freds up. "I look like your long-lost brother, hey Buddha?"

Nathan collapsed on the bed despondently. "This just isn't going to work."

"That's what you said last time," I objected.

"Exactly! And look what happened! You call that *working*? Are you telling me that things *worked* yesterday?"

"Well, it depends on what you mean when you say *worked*. I mean here we are, right?" I began packing my gear. "Relax, Nathan." I put a hand on his shoulder, and Sarah put both her hands on his other shoulder. He bucked up a bit, and I smiled at Sarah. That woman was tough; she had saved our ass at the Sheraton, and she kept her nerve well during the waiting, too. I wouldn't have minded asking her on a long trek into the Himal myself, really, and she saw that and gave me a brief smile of appreciation that also said, no chance. Besides, double-crossing old Nathan would have been like the Dodgers giving away Steve Garvey. People like that you can't double-cross, not if you want to look yourself in the mirror.

Freds finished getting pointers in carriage from Buddha, and he and I walked out of the room. Freds stopped and looked back inside mournfully, and I tugged him along, irritated at the Method acting; we wouldn't be visible to anyone outside the Star until we got downstairs.

But I must say that overall Freds did an amazing job. He hadn't seen all that much of Buddha, and yet when he walked across that courtyard and into the street, he caught the yeti's gait exactly: a bit stiff-hipped and bowlegged, a rolling sailor's walk from which he could drop to all fours instantly, or so it seemed. I could hardly believe it.

The streets were nearly empty: a bread truck, scavenging dogs (they passed Freds without even a glance—would that give us away?), the old beggar and his young daughter, a few coffee freaks outside the German Pumpernickel Bakery, shopkeepers opening up... Near the Star we passed a parked taxi with three men in it, carefully looking the other way. Westerners. I hurried on. "Contact," I muttered to Freds. He just whistled a little.

There was one taxi in Times Square, the driver asleep. We hopped in and woke him, and asked him to take us to the Central Bus Stop. The taxi we had passed followed us. "Hooked," I said to Freds, who was sniffing the ashtrays, tasting the upholstery, leaning out the window to eat the wind like a dog. "Try not to overdo it," I said, worried about my Dodgers cap with all that hair taped in it flying away.

We passed the big clock tower and stopped, got out and paid the cabbie. Our tail stopped farther up the block, I was pleased to see. Freds and I walked down the broad, mashed-mud driveway into the Central Bus Stop.

The bus stop was a big yard of mud, about five or eight feet lower than the level of the street. Scores of buses were parked at all angles in the yard, and their tires had torn the mud up until the yard looked like a vehicular Verdun. All of the buses were owned

by private companies—one bus per company, usually, with a single route to run—and all of their agents at the wood-and-cloth booths at the entrance clamored for our attention, as if we might have come in without a particular destination in mind, and would pick the agent that made the loudest offer.

Actually, this time it was almost true. But I spotted the agent for the Jiri bus, which is where I had thought to send Freds, and I bought two tickets, in a crowd of all the other agents, who criticized my choice. Freds hunkered down a little, looking suitably distressed. A big hubbub arose; one of the companies had established its right to leave the yard next, and now its bus was trying to make it up the driveway, which was the one and only exit from the yard.

Each departure was a complete test of the driver, the bus's clutch and tires, and the advisory abilities of the agents standing around. After a lot of clutching and coaching this brightly painted bus squirted up the incline, and the scheduling debate began anew. Only three buses had unblocked access to the driveway, and the argument among their agents was fierce.

I took Freds in hand and we wandered around the track-torn mud, looking for the Jiri bus. Eventually we found it: gaily painted in yellow, blue, green and red, like all the rest, ours also had about forty decals of Ganesh stuck all over the windshield, to help the driver see. As usual, the company's "other bus" was absent, and this one was double-booked. We shoved our way on board and through the tightly packed crowd in the aisle, then found empty seats at the back. The Nepalis like to ride near the front. After more boardings, the crowd engulfed us even in the back. But we had Freds at a window, which is what I wanted.

Through the mud-flecked glass I could just see our tail: Phil Adrakian, and two men who might have been Secret Service agents, though I wasn't sure about that. They were fending off the bus agents and trying to get into the yard at the same time, a tough

combination. As they sidestepped the bus agents they got in the driveway and almost got run over by the bus currently sliding up and down the slope; one slipped in the mud scrambling away, and fell on his ass. The bus agents thought this was great. Adrakian and the other two hurried off, and squished from bus to bus trying to look like they weren't looking for anything. They were pursued by the most persistent agents, and got mired in the mud from time to time, and I worried after a while that they wouldn't be able to find us. In fact it took them about twenty minutes. But then one saw Freds at the window, and they ducked behind a bus hulk that had sunk axle-deep, waving off the agents in desperate sign language. "Hooked for good," I said.

"Yeah," Freds replied without moving his lips.

The bus was now completely packed; an old woman had even been insinuated between Freds and me, which suited me fine. But it was going to be another miserable trip. "You're really doing your part for the cause," I said to Freds as I prepared to depart, thinking of the cramped day ahead of him.

"No hroblem!" he said liplessly. "I like these 'us trits!"

Somehow I believed him. I weaseled my way upright in the aisle and said good-bye. Our tails were watching the bus's only door, but that wasn't really much of a problem. I just squirmed between the Nepalis, whose concept of personal "body space" is pretty much exactly confined to the space their bodies are actually occupying—none of this eighteen-inch bullshit for them—and got to a window on the other side of the bus. There was no way our watchers could have seen across the interior of that bus, so I was free to act. I apologized to the Sherpa I was sitting on, worked the window open, and started to climb out. The Sherpa very politely helped me, without the slightest suggestion I was going anything out of the ordinary, and I jumped down into the mud. Hardly anyone on the bus even noticed my departure. I snuck through the no-man's-land of the back buses. Quickly enough I was back on

Durbar Marg and in a cab on my way to the Star.

XV

I got the cabbie to park almost inside the Star's lobby, and Buddha barreled into the backseat like a fullback hitting the line. While we drove he kept his head down, just in case, and the taxi took us out to the airport.

Things were proceeding exactly according to my plan, and you might imagine I was feeling pretty pleased, but the truth is that I was more nervous than I'd been all morning. Because we were walking up to the RNAC desk, you see...

When I got there and inquired, the clerk told us our flight had been canceled for the day.

"What?" I cried. "Canceled! What for?"

Now, our counter agent was the most beautiful woman in the world. This happens all the time in Nepal—in the country you pass a peasant bent over pulling up rice, and she looks up and it's a face from the cover of *Cosmopolitan*, only twice as pretty and without the vampire makeup. This ticket clerk could have made a million modeling in New York, but she didn't speak much English, and when I asked her "What for?" she said, "It's raining," and looked past me for another customer.

I took a deep breath. Remember, I thought: RNAC. What would the Red Queen say? I pointed out the window. "It's not raining. Take a look."

Too much for her. "It's raining," she repeated. She looked

around for her supervisor, and he came on over; a thin Hindu man with a red dot on his forehead. He nodded curtly. “It’s raining up at J—.”

I shook my head. “I’m sorry, I got a report on the shortwave from J—, and besides you can look north and see for yourself. It’s not raining.”

“The airstrip at J— is too wet to land on,” he said.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “but you landed there twice yesterday, and it hasn’t rained since.”

“We’re having mechanical trouble with the plane.”

“I’m sorry, but you’ve got a whole fleet of small planes out there, and when one has a problem you just substitute for it. I know, I switched planes three times here once.” Nathan and Sarah didn’t look too happy to hear that one.

The supervisor’s supervisor was drawn by the conversation: another serious, slender Hindu. “The flight is canceled,” he said. “It’s political.”

I shook my head. “RNAC pilots only strike the flights to Lukla and Pokhara—they’re the only ones that have enough passengers for the strike to matter.” My fears concerning the real reason for the cancellation were being slowly confirmed. “How many passengers on this flight?”

All three of them shrugged. “The flight is canceled,” the first supervisor said. “Try tomorrow.”

And I knew I was right. They had less than half capacity, and were waiting until tomorrow so the flight would be full. (Maybe more than full, but did they care?) I explained the situation to Nathan and Sarah and Buddha, and Nathan stormed up to the desk demanding that the flight fly as scheduled, and the supervisors had their eyebrows raised like they might actually get some fun out of this after all, but I hauled him away. While I was dialing my friend

in the travel agency, I explained to him how maddening irate customers had been made into a sport (or maybe an art form) by Asian bureaucrats. After three tries I got my friend's office. The receptionist answered and said, "Yeti Travels?" which gave me a start; I'd forgotten the company's name. Then Bill got on and I outlined the situation. "Filling planes again, are they?" He laughed. "I'll call in that group of six we 'sold' yesterday, and you should be off."

"Thanks, Bill." I gave it fifteen minutes, during which time Sarah and I calmed Nathan, and Buddha stood at the window staring at the planes taking off and landing. "We've got to get out today!" Nathan kept repeating. "They'll never go for another ruse after today!"

"We know that already, Nathan."

I returned to the desk. "I'd like to get boarding passes for flight 2 to J—, please?"

She made out the boarding passes. The two supervisors stood off behind a console, studiously avoiding my gaze. Normally it wouldn't have gotten to me, but with the pressure to get Buddha out I was a little edgy. When I had the passes in hand I said to the clerk, loud enough for the supervisors to hear, "No more cancellation, eh?"

"Cancellation?"

I gave up on it.

Of course a boarding pass is only a piece of paper, and when only eight passengers got on the little two-engine plane, I got nervous again; but we took off right on schedule. When the plane left the ground I sat back in my chair, and the relief blew through me like wash from the props. I hadn't known how nervous I was until that moment. Nathan and Sarah were squeezing hands and grinning in the seats ahead, and Buddha was in the window seat beside me, staring out at Kathmandu Valley, or the shimmy gray circle of the prop, I couldn't tell. Amazing guy, that Buddha: *so cool*.

We rose out of the green, terraced, faintly Middle-Earth perfection of Kathmandu Valley, and flew over the mountains to the north, up into the land of snows. The other passengers, four Brits, were looking out their windows and exclaiming over the godlike views, and they didn't give a damn if one of their fellow passengers was an odd-looking chap. There was no problem there. After the plane had leveled out at cruising altitude one of the two stewards came down the aisle and offered us all little wrapped pieces of candy, just as on other airlines they offer drinks or meals. It was incredibly cute, almost like kids playing at running an airline, which is the sort of thought that seems cute itself until you remember you are at seventeen thousand feet with these characters, and they are now going to fly you over the biggest mountains on earth in order to land you on the smallest airstrips. At that point the cuteness goes away and you find yourself swallowing deeply and trying not to think of downdrafts, life insurance, metal fatigue, the afterlife...

I shifted forward in my seat, hoping that the other passengers were too preoccupied to notice that Buddha had swallowed his candy without removing the wrapper. I wasn't too sure about the two across from us, but they were Brits so even if they did think Buddha was strange, it only meant they would look at him less. No problem.

It wasn't long before the steward said, "No smoking, if it

please you,” and the plane dipped over and started down toward a particularly spiky group of snowy peaks. Not a sign of a landing strip; in fact the idea of one being down there was absurd on the face of it. I took a deep breath. I hate flying, to tell you the truth.

I suppose some of you are familiar with the Lukla airstrip below the Everest region. It's set on a bench high on the side of the Dudh Khosi gorge, and the grass strip, tilted about fifteen degrees from horizontal and only two hundred yards long, aims straight into the side of the valley wall. When you land there all you can really see is the valley wall, and it looks like you're headed right into it. At the last minute the pilot pulls up and hits the strip, and after the inevitable bounces you roll to a stop quickly because you're going uphill so steeply. It's a heavy experience, some people get religion from it, or at least quit flying.

But the truth is that there are at least a dozen RNAC strips in Nepal that are *much worse* than the one at Lukla, and unfortunately for us, the strip at J— was at about the top of that list. First of all, it hadn't begun life as an airstrip at all—it began as a barley terrace, one terrace among many on a mountainside above a village. They widened it and put a wind sock at one end, and tore out all the barley of course, and that was it. Instant airstrip. Not only that, but the valley it was in was a deep one—say five thousand feet—and very steep-sided, with a nearly vertical headwall just a mile upstream from the airstrip, and a sharp dogleg just a mile or so downstream, and really, nobody in their right *minds* would think to put an airstrip there. I became more and more convinced of this as we made a ten-thousand-foot dive into the dogleg, and pulled up against one wall of the valley, so close to it that I could have made a good estimate of the barley count per hectare if I'd been inclined to. I tried to reassure Buddha, but he was working my candy wrapper out of the ashtray and didn't want to be disturbed. Nice to be a yeti sometimes. I caught sight of our landing strip, and watched it grow bigger—say to the size of a ruler—and then we landed on it. Our pilot was good; we only bounced twice, and

rolled to a stop with yards to spare.

XVII

And so we came to the end of our brief association with Buddha the yeti, having successfully liberated him from men who would no doubt become major lecturers on the crank circuit forever after.

I have to say that Buddha was one of the nicest guys I've ever had the pleasure of knowing, and certainly among the coolest. Unflappable, really.

But to finish: we collected our packs, and hiked all that afternoon, up the headwall of that valley and along a forested high valley to the west of it. We camped that night on a broad ledge above a short falls, between two monster boulders. Nathan and Sarah shared one tent, Buddha and I another. Twice I woke and saw Buddha sitting in the tent door, looking out at the immense valley wall facing us.

The next day we hiked long and hard, up continuously, and finally came to the site of the expedition's spring camp. We dropped our packs and crossed the river on a new bridge made of bamboo, and Nathan and Buddha led us up the cross-country route, through the forest to the high box canyon where they had first met. By the time we got up there it was late afternoon, and the sun was behind the mountains to the west.

Buddha seemed to understand the plan, as always. He took off my Dodgers cap and gave it back to me, having shed all the rest of his clothes back at camp. I had always treasured that cap, but

now it only seemed right to give it back to Buddha; he nodded when I did, and put it back on his head. Nathan put the fossil necklace around Buddha's neck; but the yeti took it off and bit the cord apart, and gave a fossil seashell to each of us. It was quite a moment. Who knows but what yetis didn't eat these shellfish, in a previous age? I know, I know, I've got the timescales wrong, or so they say, but believe me, there was a look in that guy's eye when he gave us those shells that was ancient. I mean *old*. Sarah hugged him, Nathan hugged him, I'm not into that stuff, I shook his skinny strong right hand. "Good-bye for Freds, too," I told him.

"Na-mas-te," he whispered.

"Oh, Buddha," Sarah said, sniffing, and Nathan had his jaw clamped like a vise. Quite the sentimental moment. I turned to go, and sort of pulled the other two along with me; there wasn't that much light left, after all. Buddha took off upstream, and last I saw him he was on top of a riverside boulder, looking back down at us curiously, his wild russet fur suddenly groomed and perfect-looking in its proper context; my Dodgers cap looked odd indeed. That yeti was a hard man to read, sometimes, but it seemed to me then that his eyes were sad. His big adventure was over.

On the way back down it occurred to me to wonder if he wasn't in fact a little crazy, as I had thought once before. I wondered if he might not walk right into the next camp he found, and sit down and croak "Namaste," blowing all the good work we'd done to save him from civilization. Maybe civilization had corrupted him already, and the natural man was gone for good. I hoped not. If so, you've probably already heard about it.

Well, things were pretty subdued in the old expedition camp that night. We got up the tents by lantern light, and had some soup and sat there looking at the blue flames of the stove. I almost made a real fire to cheer myself up, but I didn't feel like it.

Then Sarah said, with feeling, "I'm proud of you, Nathan," and he began to do his Coleman lantern glow, he was so happy. I

would be, too. In fact, when she said, “I’m proud of you too, George,” and gave me a peck on the cheek, it made me grin, and I felt a pang of... well, a lot of things. Pretty soon they were off to their tent. Fine for them, and I was happy for them, really, but I was also feeling a little like old Snideley Whiplash at the end of the Dudley Do-Right episode: left out in the cold, with Dudley getting the girl. Of course I had my fossil seashell, but it wasn’t quite the same.

I pulled the Coleman over, and looked at that stone shell for a while. Strange object. What had the yeti who drilled the little hole through it been thinking? What was it *for*?

I remembered the meal on my bed, Buddha and me solemnly chomping on wafers and picking over the supply of jelly beans. And then I was all right; that was enough for me, and more than enough.

XVIII

Back in Kathmandu we met Freds and found out what had happened to him, over schnitzel Parisienne and apple strudel at the Old Vienna. “By noon I figured you all were long gone, so when the bus stopped for a break at Lamosangu I hopped off and walked right up to these guys’ taxi. I did my Buddha thing and they almost died when they saw me coming. It was Adrakian and two of those Secret Service guys who chased us out of the Sheraton. When I took off the cap and shades they were fried, naturally. I said, ‘Man, I made a mistake! I wanted to go to Pokhara! This isn’t Pokhara!’ They were so mad they started yelling at each other. ‘What’s that?’ says I. ‘You all made some sort of mistake too? What a shame!’

And while they were screaming at each other and all I made a deal with the taxi driver to take me back to Kathmandu too. The others weren't too happy about that, and they didn't want to let me in, but the cabbie was already pissed at them for hiring him to take his car over that terrible road, no matter what the fare. So when I offered him a lot of rupees he was pleased to stick those guys somehow, and he put me in the front seat with him, and we turned around and drove back to Kathmandu."

I said, "You drove back to Kathmandu with the *Secret Service*? How did you explain the fur taped to the baseball cap?"

"I didn't! So anyway, on the way back it was silent city behind me, and it got pretty dull, so I asked them if they'd seen the latest musical disaster movie from Bombay."

"What?" Nathan said. "What's that?"

"Don't you go see them? They're showing all over town. We do it all the time, it's great. You just smoke a few bowls of hash and go see one of these musicals they make, they last about three hours, no subtitles or anything, and they're killers! Incredible! I told these guys that's what they should do—"

"You told the Secret Service guys they should smoke bowls of *hash*?"

"Sure! They're Americans, aren't they? Anyway, they didn't seem too convinced, and we still had a hell of a long way to go to Kathmandu, so I told them the story of the last one I saw. It's still in town, you sure you're not going to see it? I don't want to spoil it for you."

We convinced him he wouldn't.

"Well, it's about this guy who falls in love with a gal he works with. But she's engaged to their boss, a real crook who is contracted to build the town's dam. The crook is building the dam with some kinda birdshit, it looked like, instead of cement, but

while he was scamming that he fell into a mixer and was made part of the dam. So the guy and the gal get engaged, but she burns her face lighting a stove. She heals pretty good, but after that when he looks at her he sees through her to her skull and he can't handle it, so he breaks the engagement and she sings a lot, and she disguises herself by pulling her hair over that side of her face and pretending to be someone else. He meets her and doesn't recognize her and falls in love with her, and she reveals who she is and sings that he should fuck off. Heavy singing on all sides at that point, and he tries to win her back and she says no way, and all the time it's raining cats and dogs, and finally she forgives him and they're all happy again, but the dam breaks right where the crook was weakening it and the whole town is swept away singing like crazy. But these two both manage to grab hold of a stupa sticking up out of the water, and then the floods recede and there they are hanging there together, and they live happily ever after. Great, man. A classic."

"How'd the Secret Service like it?" I asked.

"They didn't say. I guess they didn't like the ending."

But I could tell, watching Nathan and Sarah grinning hand-in-hand across the table, that they liked the ending just fine.

XIX

Oh, one more thing: *you must not tell ANYONE about this!!!*
Okay?