

Spring 2010

Running into a US Education

Tulasi Prasad Acharya
Kennesaw State University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/etd>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Acharya, Tulasi Prasad, "Running into a US Education" (2010). *Dissertations, Theses and Capstone Projects*. Paper 145.

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations, Theses and Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu.

Running into a US Education

By

Tulasi Prasad Acharya

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Professional Writing

In the Department of English

In the College of Humanities and Social Sciences of Kennesaw State University


Kennesaw, Georgia

2010

College of Humanities & Social Sciences
Kennesaw State University
Kennesaw, Georgia
Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of
Tulasi Prasad Acharya
Has been approved by the committee
For the capstone requirement for the Master of Arts in
Professional Writing in the Department of English
At the Spring 2010 graduation

Capstone committee:



Member



Member

Chapter 1

I landed at Miami International Airport, where my cousin, Cheban, who had been living in America for three years on a student visa, came to pick me up. He hugged and kissed me. We had not seen each other since he went to the US from Nepal to further his education.

He was married the year, before when, he was 30. He looked like an inhabitant of Lilliput, short and slender, but he absorbed anything he saw or read so meticulously that it would remain in his memory forever. Although he was a math student, he could deliver lengthy speeches on Plato, John Wycliffe, Fidel Castro, Jacques Derrida, Pablo Picasso, and Angelina Jolie.

As we were landing, I looked out of the plane's window; I thought that the airport parking lot was a car dealership. In the distance beyond the parking lot, I saw a highway where cars were speeding. To me it looked like a river flowing down a steep slope.

"Wow, many cars!" I exclaimed.

"Life is difficult, brother, without a car," Cheban said, "You need a car to go to Publix, Wal-Mart, and even school in the US."

"What are Publix and Wal- Mart, brother?" I asked.

"They are grocery stores."

"Really?" I said with my eyes and mouth wide-open. "In Nepal, we don't need a car to go to a grocery store."

“This is America. What are you talking about?” I had no idea how to respond to him. The silence prevailed for a while.

“Let's carry the luggage,” he said, breaking the silence.

We came out of the airport and walked toward where he was parked. I saw skyscrapers surrounding the airport. I looked up and around. The more I looked, the bigger the buildings became. Most of the buildings were skyward as if they were touching the blue sky, piercing the clouds. They reminded me of the Twin Towers and September 11. I felt that nowhere in the world was safe. However, America was my dreamland, the land of opportunity. The event of September 11 had not deterred my strong desire to come to the US.

As I was walking with Cheban towards his parked car, I dreamed of furthering my education in the US, then working as a professor in a renowned university and earning a lot of money. “I can make a fortune for myself in this big city,” I whispered, and chuckled silently. The luggage pulled me back when one wheel of fell off of my suitcase, interrupting my future dream. “I have no idea how I am going to make a fortune in the US,” I murmured, trying to fix the luggage's wheel. I was not strong enough to pull even the forty-pound suitcase. My body was sweating and my hands were tired. The only thing I was strong enough for was to struggle with my strong determination. “Will that be enough to make a fortune?” I questioned myself. The other thing I could do was write poetry. I was not sure whether I could make a fortune writing poetry in the US or not. At 27, I had a master's degree in English literature from Tribhuvan University in Nepal, and my ultimate goal was to earn a doctoral degree in creative writing. By profession, I was a lecturer of English literature and journalism at a few colleges in Nepal, and had also authored a few textbooks. I frequently spoke with my hands. The more trouble I had

expressing myself in words, the faster my hands moved. Some might have realized what I meant from my hand gestures if they couldn't figure out what I was talking about. I knew that I sometimes sounded bizarre in my expression and diction when I tried to sound intellectual and academic.

While in Nepal, I was very bored with my routine life, like teaching the same materials to the students of literature every day, or teaching the same method of reporting to the students of journalism. I was tired of teaching every day the same thing, the same students, in the same classrooms. I had a motorcycle that I had bought on installment, which was my vehicle to carry me to the part time job from one college to another college. I used to call my motorcycle *my horse*. In the past, rich or prestigious people, especially *Rajas* or *Maharajas* used to ride horses to travel from one place to another. So my motorcycle was my horse. I could hardly pay for the gas even if I worked from dawn to dusk. I also had to support my parents from the money I made. I could not even buy a pair of new pants for me because of my responsibility of taking care for my parents. Individual happiness could be shared only with the presence of family. Although I didn't make enough money, the prestige and my position had given me a sense of satisfaction. However, a sense of satisfaction was not enough. I also needed to earn a handsome salary. My parents insisted that I get married, but I could not imagine doing so unless I earned a lot of money and built my career. I knew that mostly Nepali women depend on husbands' jobs and that I would not be able to get a good education, earn money, and marry a wealthy and decent lady if I didn't leave Nepal.

Politically, my country was undergoing a phase of transition: the abolishment of a 240 year-long monarchy and the establishment of a democratic republic. I realized that I was not going to meet my goal while the country was undergoing the phase of transition. Although many

Nepali people were happy about the abolishment of monarchy and the establishment of a democratic republic, they were not sure of their future because the country in the phase of transition might take a long time to build the nation. I also could not see my future until I my country reconstructed completely as a prosperous nation, so I decided to leave Nepal for the United States.

I remembered what I had read in my text-books. The United States had opened its doors to welcome those seeking political and religious freedom. It had also opened doors for the adventurer, the wanderer, the persecuted, the fortune seeker, and others. The wanderers had become the founders of America. Around the beginning of the 16th century, the great European migration had begun. Many settlers from Europe and Asia had come to seek their fortunes in a new country that was thought to have unlimited resources. All of them had come full of hopes and dreams. Since my childhood, I had a desire to visit the United States once in my life, and that dream was about to be fulfilled.

I could not afford to pay for my education in the United States. It was hard for poor students from developing countries who came to the US for education to pay tuition. However, I had taken out a loan with a high interest rate, and had come to America with zeal and optimism.

Before I got into the car, I remembered all my relatives gathered on the eve of my flight to America. My parents cried tears of joy. My sisters' cheeks bloomed like orchids, and my other relatives were amazed that I had got a US visa. Some gossiped and said that I was going to buy a five-storied mansion from the money I would earn in America in five years. I would start sending American dollars back to the family. I would be a multimillionaire. I remembered what some women in my village asked me, "Hey, Rames, are you going to America?" and "Oh, my

God, you are going to make your fortune.” I didn't know why everybody thought that anyone going to America was almost sure to make a fortune. Most of them had only one expression “Wow, America! Congrats Rames!” For them, going to America was a matter of pride. Everybody would think that the one who would come back to the country after finishing an education in America would get a good job and a beautiful lady to marry. After I got a visa, some of my friends were proud of me, and my foes had fits of jealousy.

“Hey, Rames what are you thinking?” my cousin, Cheban, interrupted my reverie. “Let's put your luggage in the car.” We got into the car after putting luggage in the trunk. I fastened the seat belt. As the car moved, I looked around. I wondered whether or not there would be any change in my life after setting foot in the US. I examined my face in the rear view mirror of the car, and found nothing changed. The same hair grew on my head. I had the same nose, sunken eyes, high cheek-bones, and dry, pale lips. “Can I make my fortune in the US?” I questioned myself again. I blinked my eyes at the reflection in the mirror. I also saw in the mirror skyscrapers passing behind the car, and the river-like rushing vehicles passing in opposite directions. One after another, cars merged from different directions on the highway. The faster the cars moved, the slower they seemed to move as a group. The five-lane highway turned into an eight-lane highway. The number of cars increased, and so did their speed. “When did America progress in such a way?” I questioned, looking out of the car. “But our country is not even progressing even if it has a lot of natural resources.”

“Yes, I know. It is all because of the politics of Nepal, you know,” Cheban said.

“Yes, I know. These politicians never thought about the nation's future,” I said, rubbing my eyes and looking outside of the car's window.

“Nobody can say Nepal is not beautiful. The game of dirty politics is the main cause.”

Of Nepal, I was always impressed with the scenic beauty: beautiful lakes reflecting snow-clad glittering mountains, and birds always twittering and chirping and dancing, flying over the sky just above those beautiful lakes. Amazing and beautiful gorges, caves, and springs were always facing the azure sky to receive rain from heaven.

The lakes felt like they extended beyond the horizon, and they gently rippled by the breeze that blew from the western side, giving a chilling sense to visitors' ears. When the turmeric-colored sun shone, water in the lake glittered like the snow-clad mountains, turning everything silver and gold. Machhapuchhre Mountain showed its face in the mirror of the lake; it put a spell on every visitor, giving the impression of a giant shark undulating in the lake.

Anyone would be overwhelmed by the beauty of my country. I could never quench my thirst for beholding it. However, the politicians who fought for petty interests robbed me of the pride I felt in my country, despite it being the place where Mount Everest stood and the place where Gautam Buddha was born.

“Yes brother, I agree with you. But...”

“Why, but?”

“Isn't it also our responsibility to think about nation?” I asked him.

“What responsibility are you talking about? I don't blame anybody else, but motherfucker politicians who turned the piece of paradise into the piece of hell,” he said. His face blushed, veins bulged across his neck, and his eyes became red.

I fastened and refastened the car's seatbelt. I felt uncomfortable because I had never used a seat belt before in a moving car. My nose itched, and I sneezed. "Bless you," Cheban said, glancing at me while he was driving. He leaned forward as he slammed on the brake when a traffic light turned red suddenly.

"Oh, my gosh!" I said as my head lurched forward.

"Sorry for the inconvenience," he said.

I was tired from the twenty-four-hours flight. I yawned and tried to relax as we waited for the traffic light to turn green. I looked up and down, right and left, and saw a caravan of cars passing from another lane. I put my chin under my palm and kept on looking at them. With the green light, the car moved. I put my hands back, resting my head on them and closed my eyes. However, many questions came to my mind.

"Why is my country poor?" I remembered the last time when I surfed the Internet and read the introduction of Nepal in Wikipedia. It said that Nepal was one of the poorest countries in the world. "Why is Nepal considered one of the poorest countries?"

I was looking out of the window of the car. I saw eight lanes of traffic and the speeding vehicles at high velocity. I turned to my cousin, who was concentrating on driving the car. He was oblivious of what I was thinking.

"Is Nepal really poor, brother? What do you think?" I asked him.

"If it was rich and it has a lot of opportunities why in hell would you come to this place?" he said without even looking at me. I didn't respond to him.

Nepal was not a poor country. It had many possibilities to be developed. It could stand like one of the European countries. Why did the politicians in my country fail to realize this? Why was the system not working? Why was the economy of my country so weak? Why did we feel proud of visiting any developed country? Why did we not think of making our country more developed?

I spoke to myself silently and gazed over the vehicles running along the highway. My dreams and imagination flooded like the rushing of the vehicles I saw on the highway. My mind whirled for a moment looking at the network of roads and highways. To me, they looked like a cobweb. "Amazing!" I exclaimed. "Will I make a fortune for myself?" I questioned. I looked at my cousin who was driving the car. He smiled at me, and I returned.

"I should go back to my country after I graduate and should contribute to my country as much as I can," I murmured.

"What are you thinking about, Rames?" Cheban asked me.

"Nothing brother," I stammered, "I am feeling great to have come to the US."

"That's cool," he said, veering the car from the highway, and taking another street that led to the apartment where he lived.

"You have been here for three years, right?" I asked him.

"Right."

"When will you go back to Nepal, brother?"

"Never."

“What?”

Before he responded, we arrived near the apartment where he lived with his family. He parked his car in front of the apartment and helped me carry my luggage. He opened the door and walked into the room. Pabitra, Cheban's wife, was waiting for us in the living room and singing a lullaby to her seven-month-old son on her lap. She was twenty-four. It was the second time I saw her. I had seen her only in their wedding, then after she had come to America with my cousin. She looked beautiful with large almond-shaped eyes and black hair. Blouse and a white sari she was wearing made her look like a nymph. She was very slim before she came to the United States, but now she looked plump after bearing a baby.

“*Namaskar Bhauju,*” I greeted her in our language.

She looked very happy that I had come to the United States.

“*Namaskar, Babu,*” she said, returning my greeting to her.

“You look different, *Bhauju,*” I said.

“You might be right, *Babu,* now I am a mother,” she said, “I started taking care of my baby rather than being myself on a diet.” She seemed very polite in her manner.

“You are absolutely fine, *Bhauju,*” I said. “You should be proud of you being a mother.”

“Oh, yes,” she said in a low pitch sound. Her voice rang very melodiously. “I have realized the importance of being a mother.”

“Great! It's the matter of joy to see all of us in the US,” I said, trying to change the context of the conversation.

“I am feeling like we are going to celebrate *Dashain*,” she said, putting a smile on her face. *Dashain* was the greatest festival of Hindus.

“Me, too. I feel as if I am still in Nepal though I am in America now,” I said, sitting in a chair next to Pabitra.

In Nepalese culture, one should give something, such as money or clothes to a recently born baby before he sees the baby's face for the first time. I took out some baby clothes I had bought in Nepal, from my luggage and gave them to the baby. And only then I did look at his face. “What a cute baby!” I exclaimed.

“Thank you,” Pabitra said, looking at the clothes I put near the baby.

The spicy smell of the food in the kitchen was wafting through the air, which reminded me of my sister in Nepal who used to cook for me all the time.

“What's that smell? It smells so good. What are you cooking, *Bhauju*?” I asked. *Bhauju* was the way the wife of a cousin or a brother was addressed in Nepal.

“Nothing, just food for you,” she said, putting the baby in a cradle and going to the kitchen.

I still wondered why my cousin didn't want to return to Nepal. I was bewildered. I returned to him and said, “Why don't you return to Nepal?”

Cheban looked toward his baby in the cradle, took him in his arms, and said, “I will bring up my son and stay here. My country gave me nothing but mental torture. I could not earn money for bread and butter. I applied for jobs at many institutions and offices while in Nepal, but to no avail. Here, America has given me many opportunities. If I have a good credit history, I can buy

a house, I can run a business, and I can have a comfortable life.” I was surprised with what he was saying and felt sorry for him. “Another brain drain,” I said and sympathized with him silently.

“Have you ever thought of what you have given to your country from which you are expecting those things in return?” I asked him, though I was really too tired to argue.

“I did, but I could not find the suitable environment so I could contribute to my country. Rames, I didn't like Nepal's freaking politics and the politicians' dirty game. Those fucking people without vision and policy ruled my nation. Lust for a petty interest and power corrupted my country,” he said. He looked at his baby. The baby had fallen asleep. He put the baby back into the cradle and sat on the couch.

“That means you have not thought of returning to your homeland, right?” I asked him again.

“Sometimes, I have a desire to go back to my country eventually, but again I don't like to go. However, I would like to die in my country. The beauty of my country is still in my heart. It is awesome when I remember. I cannot forget the place where I was born and brought up. Those happy moments run through my veins. Every beating of my heart pushes me toward a flood of nostalgia. Fuck the politicians. I cannot say right now whether I would return to my country or not. Let's see,” Cheban concluded.

It was already dark. Pabitra called us to have dinner.

Pabitra said with the same smile on her face. “You might be too hungry.”

“I am more tired than hungry. I would rather sleep,” I said, stretching out my body.

“No, you should eat at least something light before you go to bed. Otherwise, you might have gastritis. You should take care of your health,” she said, looping the top of the sari she was wearing back over her shoulder.

Cheban and I ate the mutton, rice, and pickle she had made. “Let’s eat together, *Bhauju*,” I said to her.

“I will eat later. I would rather help the baby drink milk,” she said, and she went with a bottle of milk in her hand to the cradle where the baby was sleeping. “Take it easy, though the food is not delicious,” she said, smiling.

“It’s very delicious,” I answered, chewing a piece of meat.

After we finished eating rice, Pabitra brought a mattress and blanket to the living room and spread them on the floor and told me to sleep. I lay down on the bed and fell asleep immediately.

Chapter 2

The next day, I woke up at 3 am. I tried to go back to sleep, but could not. Many thoughts haunted me. I thought about my future, my goals, and my aspirations. I was not sure whether I would achieve my goals though I was determined that I would. "I think I will; therefore, I will," I resolved silently. I tossed and turned in bed, thinking about the challenges I had to confront. I sighed and turned over. I remembered my parents, my friends, my relatives, and my days with them. The room was being slowly anointed with the light as the day broke and the sun rose, illuminating the map of Nepal that was pasted against the wall opposite me. I looked out of the window and saw the lines of clouds in different shapes wandering over the sky. I heard birds' chirping, and dogs barking. As I turned over the bed, I saw Cheban coming out from his bedroom with his son in his arms.

"Are you awake?" he asked me.

"Yes, brother, since 3 o'clock," I said.

"Why so early?"

"I don't know. My eyes opened," I said, getting up from the bed and arranging the bedcover.

"Maybe it is because of the geographical difference. You have come from one hemisphere to another. That's why you feel sleepy in the daytime and awake at night. Don't

worry, after one day or two, your body will be used to it, and you will not have that problem anymore.”

“Maybe,” I said, sitting on the bed and staring in the corner of the living room.

“What are you thinking?” he asked looking at me.

“Nothing, just thinking of taking a shower,” I said, taking a long breath. “Where is the bathroom?”

“Don't take a shower now. We are going to Atlantic beach to swim in the ocean.”

“Swim in the ocean?” I said, puzzled. “Won't its waves take us away?” I had never been to the shore of the ocean.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Cheban laughed at my question and said, “Don't worry. There are many people from young to old swimming. It's a matter of fun, man.” Cheban looked at the baby in his arms and saw he had already fallen asleep. He put the baby in the cradle and went to the kitchen to make some breakfast. He brought two cups of milk-tea and biscuits on a tray. “Let's eat, and we gotta go to the Atlantic beach,” he said, dipping the biscuit into the tea and nibbling it from one side.

In the afternoon, we headed to Atlantic beach. It was a summer day. The scorching sun burned my exposed face and hands. The sun was shining so brightly that I almost expected to see a dozen suns in the sky. I started sweating and I took off the long-sleeved shirt that I had been wearing in the apartment. I could not feel heat in the apartment even if it was scorching hot outside. I realized that Cheban had an air conditioner.

“It was much cooler inside the apartment, but outside it is too hot,” I said, fanning my hands in front of my face.

“We are not in the apartment, man, and it is summer. In summer, it is hotter. Basically, Florida is warmer than any other state in the United States. In winter, many people from other parts of the United States come to this state to pass the winter season. Even in winter, it is not that much cold here. Snow hardly falls,” Cheban said.

“Only the wealthiest people in our country have access to air conditioned apartments. But here, rich or poor, everyone has air conditioning. There is no discrimination or hierarchy in terms of haves and have-nots,” I said.

“Yes, you are right. That's why it is America,” Cheban said.

We reached the Atlantic Ocean, and I saw it was gargantuan and gorgeous. I looked up, and saw many balloons fluttering through the sky. Many people of all ages were swimming and frolicking at the shore. Young women in skimpy bikinis were being lifted by their boyfriends on the surface of the waves near the beach. As they were swimming, the tide that came in very gently pushed them toward the shore, and I heard their raucous laughter.

It was a sight I had never seen before. A woman wearing a bikini was never seen in public in Nepal, except for the photographs printed in a few newspapers and magazines. Those kinds of photographs had at times tickled and titillated me.

The young women swimming at the shore were beautiful. My eyes and the water were touching the breasts of the young women. I was at a loss for words.

“Brother, This is the first time I have seen young women wearing bikinis just showing their big buttocks and half naked breasts, that too, playing with their boyfriends in public, except for a few photographs in adult magazine. If our grandmother found a girl and a boy walking holding hands together, do you know what she would call them? ‘Immoral.’ She didn’t like boys making their hair long and girls making their hair short, or wearing miniskirts, or showing their armpits.”

“Don’t be biased, man. This is not a big deal here. And also, this is not the time of our grandmother. It is our perception, the way we think. We have biased thoughts and therefore we interpret things with what we have already in our minds. You have to be able to understand the culture and the lifestyle of the place where you are. They use swimming suits while swimming which is very natural and acceptable here,” Cheban said, unbuttoning his shirt. “Unbutton your shirt too and be ready for swimming, dude.”

“Maybe, but it is a big difference anyway.” I said, unbuttoning my shirt.

“Let’s swim,” Cheban said, pushing me. Both of us stripped down to our underwear and jumped into the Atlantic Ocean.

Cheban reminded me of our early days, “Do you remember how we used to swim in a rivulet in our childhood?”

“Yes, brother, but those days are no more. We are grown up. The time has pushed us to this shore of the Atlantic beach. We used to play making sandcastles. We used to play the game called ‘Chor and police’ and have our lunch from the same plate. We used to visit most places together. But those things are only in memory now. We can do nothing but cherish those moments in the past.”

“Don't be sentimental, bro. We are the puppets of time,” he said, swimming and dipping into the water. “Tell me how our neighborhoods are doing? Did you meet them before you left Nepal?”

“Yes, they are good. All the ladies of my age are married. Some of them have already delivered a couple of children. Those small kids who used to sit in our laps have already entered into adolescence. They have got breasts; the color of faces is changed. Now, they feel shy to come to our laps. Homnath, my math teacher and also a janitor at elementary school, married another wife 10 years after he could not father a baby from his first wife,” I said, dipping my half body into the water and remaining motionless.

In Nepali culture, if the first married couple could not bear a baby, a husband would think that he should marry another lady so he should be able to father a baby, no matter whose problem it was: the problem of the husband or the problem of the wife. I always wondered why basically wives were blamed even if there is something wrong with the husbands. Sometimes I think how patriarchal the Nepali society is. In some areas, a tradition prevails that the wife is supposed to pour water on her husband's feet and drink it as it drips off as a matter of reverence to him. However, Nepali women are becoming educated and aware these days.

“Oh, my God! A lot of changes,” Cheban said, surprised. “I didn't know that. And what about Kunti, your elementary school's classmate, who showed you her private part when she became mad with you by saying ‘kiss my ...,’ that is what you told me once?” Cheban laughed. Those were the days of mischievous acts. God would redeem our faults.

“Yes, I ran into her two months before I came here. She was married. She looked like a lady in her forties, having half a dozen children around her. Looking at her I felt I was very old,” I said. My tone was serious.

“Time is not in the grip of your hands,” he said. “Sometimes I hate this fucking time. It does not pause. If I could stop the motion of the earth by merely holding the hands of a watch, I would do that throughout my life.”

Both of us came out of the water and slept on the sand facing the sun. Some young women were using lotion on their bodies, almost naked, while others were kissing their boyfriends. The Atlantic Ocean reflected the azure sky. The gentle breeze blew with the waves of the Atlantic Ocean. The more I looked into the ocean, the bigger it looked. I remembered my geography teacher, who had said that the part of the world water covered was three times greater than the land covered. I had doubted my geography teacher until I came to the Atlantic beach, and it now became clearer. I, who came from a landlocked country to see the Atlantic Ocean, had an incredible new experience.

“Really brother, time is not in the grip of our hands. Otherwise why would W.B. Yeats write ‘The Lamentation of an Old Pensioner’?” I said, sounding like a thinker.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“It’s a poem by an Irish poet,” I said, grasping sand in my fist and throwing it away. I had read this poem many times while teaching my undergraduate students back in Nepal. So I recited the poem for him;

“There is not a woman turns her face

Upon a broken tree

And the beauties I loved

Are in my memory;

I spit into the face of time

That has transfigured me”

We fell asleep for a few minutes, relaxing, and we went back to swimming. After a half an hour swimming, we returned home, tired and excited. It was already evening.

As we reached home, Pabitra *Bhauju* had already prepared lunch for us. The baby was playing with a doll, smiling and cackling. The baby looked like an angel. He kept on smiling, even if the mother left him alone. He did not cry, even if he was hungry. He seemed to be perfectly happy with any person or any situation; He smiled at everyone. “Where does this beauty, innocence go after a child becomes a grown up man?” I asked myself.

“The lunch is ready. Please come eat,” *Bhauju* told me and Cheban. She had made tomato pickles, which I liked very much, okra curry, and lentils. She served us the food and went to take care of the baby.

“Hum, very delicious,” I said after taking a bite. “*Bhauju*, you are a very good cook.”

“No, I am not. You are just kidding,” she said, putting the baby on her lap and letting the baby suck her breast. The baby plugged his mouth to the mother's nipple and sucked the milk while the mother was closing her eyes in a sort of pleasure, clasping the baby close to her breasts. The baby was grunting as he nursed. This scene is rarely seen these days. I have hardly

seen a mother breast-feed her baby in the US, though I desired to see it. I had heard from somebody else that they do not let their babies suck the breasts because they would lose the beauty that their breasts would maintain.

“*Babu*, tell me if you need anything more,” she told me.

“I am fine *Bhauju*, thank you for your delicious food,” I said as I ate the last morsel. Then, I went to the sink to wash my hands. I was not used to eating rice with a spoon, so I ate with my hands, while Cheban ate with a fork and knife. “God gave me two hands; I need to use them,” I thought.

“Why don’t you use a knife and fork to eat rice?” Cheban asked as he held a spoonful of rice near his mouth.

“I am not comfortable with a spoon while eating rice, and I also cannot enjoy eating rice with a spoon as much as I do with my hand. Shoveling rice with my hand and gobbling it has a different taste,” I said, laughing.

“Yes, *Babu*, you are right. I also eat rice with my hand,” *Bhauju* agreed with me. The baby had already fallen asleep. “The baby might have peed in the diaper,” she said. She changed the baby and put him in the cradle. She went to eat rice after Cheban and I finished eating. After eating rice, she washed dishes in the sink and came to the living room.

“*Hajur*, my dear husband, would you not take Rames *Babu* to a few places, so he would see some new things?” she asked her husband. “He is very new here. Take him somewhere else and let him enjoy himself at least during his stay with us.”

“Would you like to go to Key West?” Cheban proposed.

“What’s the importance of the place?” I asked, leaning against the couch. I had never heard that name before.

“It is like a paradise. There is plenty to see and experience. Key West has lots of history and many museums to see. You can get a ride on one of the tour trains or trolleys; the conductor will tell you the stories related to local people and places, and you will get an idea of places you will want to revisit. Going to Key West is to have a lot of fun, man. Coming to Florida and not going to Key West will be a great regret, man.”

“Awesome!” I stood up. “I would like to go right now. I love it.”

“Wait, wait. I have still one more thing to say to you,” Cheban said, gesturing for me to sit on the couch for a while.

“What’s that?” I asked, sitting on the couch again.

“You also can see Ernest Hemingway’s home which has been converted into a museum. You had once said to me your favorite author was Ernest Hemingway, didn’t you?”

“I know. I know.” I again stood up from the couch and sat again. “You know, brother, I got a visa at the American Embassy in Nepal because I said my favorite author is Ernest Hemingway.”

“Oh, really!” he exclaimed.

“Then, you are a writer, huh?” the counselor had asked.

“Yes, sir.” I had responded.

“Who is your favorite writer?”

“Ernest Hemingway.”

“Tell me the name of one of his books?”

“The Old man and the Sea.”

“Why is he your favorite writer?”

“I like his simplicity and clarity in language and his rhetorical strategy.”

“Do you know, bro, what I answered at the American embassy in Nepal when he asked how I would pay tuition fee, just to get a visa?”

“What’s that?” Cheban asked.

“I said I earn one thousand dollars royalty a month from my books. I will have no problem to finance my education. I showed him my four books published in Nepal.”

“You, liar,” he said, laughing out loud. “I don’t think you earn that much money even in a year.”

“You are right, brother,” I said. “I earn around two hundred dollars per year, I guess. The visa councilor was convinced though.”

“That’s awesome, man,” he said. “You are silly.”

“Yes, I am. But he was impressed, you know. And he congratulated me while accepting me for a visa.”

“You got it, bro!” he patted my back.

“When I was accepted for a visa, I jumped for joy. I felt lucky. I got stuck with my own emotion, intellects, and feelings because of the happiness. I became expressionless and everything got stuck on my tongue with a perfect joy. My voice stammered with pain and pleasure. I could not move my feet toward my home. I sweated.”

“You are really lucky anyway,” he said. “It is so difficult to get a visa for the people of developing countries, but you got it.”

When I had gotten a visa, I shouted aloud. I entered into the coffeehouse, lit a cigarette, and smoked over a mug of coffee. Streams of tears rolled down my smiling cheeks, and they dropped off my chin. I silently wiped them so nobody could see.

“Hey, what are you thinking about?” Cheban asked me, interrupting my stream of consciousness. “Anyway, do you like the idea of going to Key West?”

“Sure!”

“Then, let's go tomorrow morning, so we will have enough time to return home,” Cheban said.

“That sounds great,” I agreed with him.

Chapter 3

I woke up rubbing my eyes. It was a beautiful morning; the sun showed its yellowish-red color in the horizon. I looked at the clock; it was seven. "Oh, my God, It's going to be late to go to Key West," I thought and went to Cheban's bedroom to knock at his door. "Brother," I called. "Are we not going to Key West?" But he came out and said, "We gotta postpone." I didn't even know why he changed his mind. This surprised me.

"Why?" I said.

"Pabitra is not feeling well. She has fever."

"Oh, I am sorry. She was safe and sound yesterday. What happened to her today?" I said, taking a long breath.

"I don't know," he said, sitting on the couch and looking sad.

Pabitra was sleeping in the bed with the baby next to her. She opened her eyes while the baby was snoring rhythmically. "*Bhauju*, are you not feeling well?" I asked her.

"No, I am good. It's going to be better. This fever does not go for a long time," she said, trying to put a smile on her face. Her face was red with fever, and her lips were dried. She looked frail.

Looking at her face, I could see that she was seriously ill. "You look very sick that your face is telling," I told her.

"I am going to be okay, *Babu*, don't worry," she said in a small voice, turning to another side on the bed. "Did you eat breakfast?"

“*Bhauju*, I will eat. Don't worry about me. We have to think about your health first.”

“This is not serious,” she said, trying to tie her head with a scarf. Maybe her head was also hurting. “We could not go to the Key West because of me.” She turned to Cheban and said, “Or you can take Rames *Babu* to Key West. We will have enough time to go there later.”

“No, no. Absolutely, no. I won't go until we all can go. We all can go after you are recovered,” I said.

“Have a rest and let me know if you want anything,” Cheban told her, patting her head, and he and I came to the living room. We sat on the couch.

“Okay, tell me how the political situation of Nepal is,” Cheban asked.

“There is nothing good to talk about the politics of Nepal. Democracy is just for the sake of democracy. Politicians use the name of democracy just to fulfill their personal interests,” I said.

“Hold on a second,” he said. He stood up and walked into the kitchen, opened the refrigerator, took a cake and came back to the couch.

“Would you like one?” he asked, showing the cake he had nibbled.

“No, I am good. Thank you,” I said.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I am. I am not hungry.”

“Yes, I know, brother. So I don't like to return to that country,” he said, nibbling another bite of the cake. What about the freedom of expression in media in Nepal? Aren't journalists detained for their writings about freedom? You must have known very well about that because you worked in media for a few years, right?”

“It's all right until or unless you write against the government,” I said, taking a sip of tea.

I didn't like to lecture him even if I was used to delivering a lengthy speech which might bore people. It was my bad habit, but it was also good for me because I needed to talk a lot while lecturing at the academic institutions.

“It's still more like the time of Rana regime, when you were not supposed to write against the government but praise it,” he said.

“Exactly,” I said.

I heard Pabitra calling Cheban from the bedroom to help with the baby.

“Wait for a second. I will be right back,” he went to the bedroom and came back with the baby. “He crapped in the diaper. I gotta change it. Yes, I am listening to you. Go on.” he said while changing the diaper. “What about the organizations working for the welfare of the people in Nepal?”

“Don't ask about them anymore. They are profit seekers. They are the opportunists.”

“That's why I don't like to go to this fucking, stupid, bullshit country, you know?” he said in a high pitched sound, putting the baby in the cradle. “Then, why should I go to this asshole country?” he said, jumping up from the couch. He walked a foot away from me, and again came back to the couch.

“However, we should not hate our country, brother. We are also responsible for making our motherland a beautiful land in the world. Don't you think so?” I asked him.

“Fuck it. Only yours and mine effort will not make Nepal beautiful until we all are abiding by the system, and until the politicians think of the future of Nepal and Nepali seriously.”

“It starts from one person, brother. You say the same, and the others say the same. Then, who is going to think of the future of Nepal and Nepali?”

“Kiss my ass,” he said, and he walked to the cradle where the baby was sleeping.

Nepal had only been democratic for a very short time. It was ruled for 104 years by the oligarchic Rana clan. Then sixty years ago, Rana regime ended, and Nepal became a democracy. However, the young shoots of democracy had been plucked by the Royal regime. They ruled the country for 30 years, depriving people of their basic human rights. As the culmination of cruelty and severe brutality reached its peak, Nepali people came to the street protesting the tyranny of royal regime, and that was the first Nepali people's movement to establish the democracy. However, this establishment of democracy could not last long. Time and again the King thwarted democratic practices, taking advantage of blunders made by political leaders.

Cheban looked at the baby and said, “I will live with my baby.” I knew he meant he was thinking of living in the US with the baby. “Yes, baby?” he asked the baby. The baby looked back and laughed, as if he understood what Cheban meant to say, and kicked his feet and cackled.

Pabitra's fever was not showing the sign of abating. Her eyes looked red. "*Bhauju*, do you really have a severe pain?" I asked.

"No, *Babu*," she said, closing her eyes. Cheban walked into the kitchen and came back with cold water in a bowl. He dipped a swatch of cloth into the bowl until it was completely wet and squeezed it. He put it on her forehead. He also put it around her feet, neck, and armpit, so she might be slightly relieved.

"What would you like to eat?" Cheban asked Pabitra.

"I have no appetite," she said. Her lips were dried, and her eyes were almost completely red.

"Why in the hell are you saying this? You have eaten nothing since the morning, and it is almost evening. We have already eaten two times. Tell me what you would like. I will make something for you." But she hesitated to eat anything. She turned her head to other side saying, "The baby might be hungry. Let him drink milk from the bottle in the refrigerator. Please warm it up before feeding the baby."

"I am taking care of the baby. Don't worry," Cheban said. "I am worried about you at this moment."

"I think we have to hospitalize you, *Bhauju*," I said.

"It will be okay, *Babu*," Pabitra said. "It is just fever, nothing else."

"Treatment and medication are very expensive in the US. We can't afford them, brother. Let's wait and see for a few days," Cheban said, sitting next to Pabitra's feet.

“In the US? Such a developed country!” I said, surprised. “How can that be?”

“Yes, you have access to any kind of medication, but paying for it is very expensive

“Oh, really?”

“Last year my friend was hospitalized because he got a severe stomach pain. Do you know how much he paid just for video ex-ray and medication?”

“How much?” I asked.

“Two thousand dollars.”

“TWO THOUSANDS DOLLARS! Oh my gosh!” I gasped. “That would cost no more than one hundred dollars in our country.” I said.

“It's America, man.”

“I wish I could be sick only when I go back to Nepal.”

“Yes, the money you spend here in the US all the time for your medication might be enough for you to go back to Nepal, do the treatment, and come back.”

I laughed at his sarcasm.

After a week, slowly and gradually, Pabitra's situation started improving. She also started eating foods and walking a little by herself. The fever had lessened.

I had a few days before leaving for Georgia where I was enrolled at one of the universities. I had no idea where I would live and who I would live with. I sat on the couch, staring blankly at the ceiling.

“Will you live on campus or off campus?” Cheban asked, bringing a bottle of Coke from the kitchen.

“What’s the difference?”

“If you live on-campus, you gotta pay more than what you would pay while living with a roommate off-campus.”

“Oh, I see. I would prefer off-campus. I don’t have money, brother. I would like to cut corners.”

“Then look at the Craigslist. You can find the cheapest apartment, or find a roommate who is looking for another roommate.”

“Oh, really?” I said, putting my hands at the back of my head and stretching my body.

“That’s a good idea. But where would I find a roommate?”

Cheban advised me to get the email addresses of the international students from the university where I was admitted. I could email them, mentioning my interest in sharing an apartment, and see how many of them would respond to.

“Wow, that’s a wonderful idea!”

I did exactly what my cousin advised.

I emailed more than one hundred international students mentioning my problems and my interest in sharing a room with them. I gave them my phone number to contact me if needed. Some students were looking for a female roommate. Most of them had a car, and they lived ten miles away from campus. Some students who wanted to share a room with me were from

Sweden, Peru, India, Kenya, and Nigeria. But I had never lived with a person from a different country. Ridiculous ideas entered in my mind. I wondered if that guy from Sweden would choke me at night while I slept simply because he was a person from a different land. I thought about the students from Kenya and Nigeria, but I was scared of their terrific muscles and pitch-black color, their large thighs, big asses, and large noses more than double what I had. At first, I was scared when I had seen them in a movie. Back home, I had called African people *Habsi*, a derogatory term, which was used to refer the African people with big and black muscles and large thighs.

“Can't I find a person from Nepal as my roommate?” I asked my cousin.

“Man, you have come to the land where humans from all around the world are treated equally except for a few exceptions. People from other countries might be better than people from Nepal,” He tried to convince me.

“Do they have the same feeling as we have?”

“What the hell are you talking about?” he said. “Better than yours.” I wondered how people from other countries might have feelings better than mine because they do not speak the language I speak; they don't think the way I think. I could not convince myself.

The next day, Chux, a student from Nigeria, called me. The same mental picture of *Habsi* came into my mind: large muscles, big nose, and black color.

“Are you Rames?” he said. “I am Chux.”

“Yes, I am Rames, and I am looking for a roommate who can share his room with me.”

“I have rented one bedroom apartment and it costs 700 dollars without utilities,” Chux said in his accent, which sounded funny to me. It occurred to me that my accent was also funny to him. “Can we share that?” His pronunciation was a bit hard for me to understand since I was not used to the accent of other non-native speakers. I liked Chux, his generosity, and his willingness to share the room with me. The way he conversed with me was amicable and sociable. I felt humiliated for discriminating against his people. Maybe it was because of being fixed in one location and not coming out to see the people from other places; I was biased. Coming to the US must be an opportunity to know the people with different cultural backgrounds from all around the world, to recognize them humanly, to respect them, and to learn a lot of things from them. It could be a transformation in my life. It might be the land of exuberance of ideas and experiences.

I could not live with Chux because it would be more expensive than living off campus, even if we shared the rent. I did not have enough money to pay. The money I brought from home was from a loan, and that would not help me pay more than a month's rent. Different international students who were in the need of a roommate started calling me, but I could not live with them because of different difficulties, mainly because the rent was too expensive. Eventually, a student from Sweden called me.

“Hey, Rames, I am Patrik Konat,” he said. “Would you like to share the room with us? It is a 10 minutes' walk from campus.” His English was perfect, and the accent was very similar to native speakers.

“Yes, yes,” I said. “How much should I pay?” Money mattered more to me than the type of room.

“It is a one bedroom apartment. We gotta pay seven hundred dollars per month. I am living with my girl friend from Peru, but I can manage a room for you in the living room which will be big enough for you to stay in. Wireless internet is free and you need not pay for laundry and also for utilities.”

“Then how much need I pay?” I was more curious about the rent.

“You can give me just \$350 a month.”

“Three hundred fifty dollars for a living room!” I was taken aback because \$350 means more than 25000 rupees, which was a great amount of money. Only high ranking Nepali government official might earn that much money per month.

“Yes, man. Now I am paying like \$800 all together. If you pay \$350, you would also be helping me out. I am also looking for such a roommate who will keep the room clean and tidy because my girl friend does not like an untidy room,” Patrik said.

“But I cannot pay more than \$300 at this moment.”

“Let me talk to my girlfriend and I will let you know,” Patrik said. He hung up and a few minutes later he called back and said, “It's okay. My girlfriend said it is okay. You can be our roommate. When will you come?”

“As soon as possible. Maybe within three days,” I said and put the receiver down. I took a long breath. At least one of my problems was solved.

Chapter 4

It was the first week of August. The weather was scorching outside, though the air conditioner made the apartment cool and comfortable. I was preparing to leave for Georgia. A sort of sentimental atmosphere prevailed around us, all because I was leaving my cousin and Pabitra *Bhauju*, and I was not sure when I would reunite with them. I put my clothes and other things into the luggage. The baby was in the cradle playing with a doll. Pabitra was sitting in a chair waiting for my farewell. Cheban was ready to drive me to the airport.

“*Babu*, I have made yogurt for you, please eat it before you leave the house,” Pabitra said.

In the Nepalese culture, eating yogurt before leaving for a journey is believed to bring good luck.

“Okay, *Bhauju*, I will do that,” I said.

By that time, Pabitra's illness had abated though she was not fully recovered. I was happy that her situation was improving. At the same time, I regretted not visiting Key West because of Pabitra's illness.

“We are sorry, *Babu*. We could not go to Key West because of my illness,” Pabitra apologized.

“It's okay *Bhauju*. It is not your fault. One day I will come back here to see you, and we will go there too.” However, I was not certain when I would come back to Florida.

“Life is struggle and struggle is life,” she told me. “Be bold to accomplish the goal and never be tired until you reach your destination.”

“Okay, *Bhauju*,” I said. My eyes were almost teary. I once again remembered why I had come to the US, my goals. “To achieve the desired fruit, I should suffer,” I said silently. Once again Pabitra’s words reverberated into my mind. “Rames *Babu*, study hard and get to your destination.”

I put luggage in the back of the car. My cousin got into the car and said, “Hey, it’s gonna be late. Come on, get into the car. Otherwise, you might miss the plane,” He wanted me to rush into the car.

“Did you eat yogurt?” Pabitra reminded me.

“Oh I forgot,” I said.

She rushed to the kitchen and brought the yogurt back to me. “Eat it first and then get into the car,” she said, giving me the yogurt. I quaffed the yogurt. Pabitra was standing near the car to wave at me. The baby was looking at me with his innocent eyes. I kissed the baby on his cheeks, saying “goodbye” and got into the car. The baby cackled and jerked his two tender hands as an indication for “goodbye.” I could see the baby interacting with the world, touching a doll, licking it, hitting it on his hand, and shaking it and listening to its jingle sound. Everything unfamiliar in this world was becoming familiar to him. I wished that good parenting would make responsible in the future, I thought and smiled, looking at the child. The car went out into the road as Pabitra was waving her hands and saying “goodbye.” Her eyes were slightly teary too at that moment of departure.

“You look sentimental, brother,” my cousin said to me.

I looked at myself in the mirror as the car moved along the highway. "I am a very sentimental person, brother. I can't hide my feelings from those closest to me," I said.

"Hey man what are you thinking about?"

"I am missing my family," I said. I wiped my eyes and looked at the cousin who was still concentrating on driving the car.

"Don't feel like that. It will hurt you more," he said, swerving the car into the second lane of the highway.

"I don't know. I feel like something's missing, like my family, friends, and something like that," I said, rubbing my face with my hands.

"That usually happens to everyone who comes to a foreign land from their motherland. I had also the same feeling for first three months. I wept a lot, man. What are you talking about? Everything will be okay, sooner or later. Don't worry, brother," he consoled me.

"Yes, I know. But it's still difficult."

"You have to think of your future, not present, and be happy," he said.

"Yes, brother, you are right," I said, looking out of the window toward the opposite lanes where vehicles were passing by. My eyes were teary. The scene outside looked blurry.

"Missing family is nothing. You will have a harder time than that. I don't know how you gonna face it." I could not understand what he was talking about. However, I was scared.

"What do you mean?" I asked him.

“How will you pay the tuition fee, because you are not given a scholarship or any kind of assistantship?” Cheban asked.

“I had never thought of it before I came to the US. I had thought that everything would be perfect if I got a visa. My first effort was to get a visa and come to the US.”

“Paying for tuition and room and board is the hardest part of student life in the US.”

“Yes, I know,” I said, inhaling deeply. “I think I should work on campus.”

“Are you sure to get an on-campus job?” he said.

“I don't know,” I said.

“Even if you get on campus job, that's not gonna help you pay the tuition fee, house rent, and other miscellaneous expenditures.” I wondered what the hell he was talking about.

“What I'm saying is the truth,” he said.

“If so, I will work off campus,” I responded to him.

“I have seen many international students in the US who had suffered a lot for not having enough money to pay the tuition fee and other expenditures,” he said.

“That's why I'm saying I will work off campus,” I said.

“How will you work? It is risky.”

“What you mean? Why is it risky?”

“It is because you are on a student visa. If you are found working off campus, you will be deported to your home country. Have you ever imagined that?” Cheban asked.

I could not think of being deported. My dream was to graduate from a US institution. Although it was mentioned in the I20, I had not read it carefully. The only thing I had read was the signature that showed I was accepted into the program. I was thrilled, so I didn't even bother with reading the whole thing.

“You want to read a lot and be knowledgeable, but you are not a good reader, man. It is a kind of contradiction in you between your desire and the performance,” Cheban pointed out.

“I also think so sometimes,” I said.

“How are many of the international students, like me, paying the tuition fee if they are not allowed to work off campus?” I asked him, changing the subject. I opened my eyes wide and furrowed my brow.

“They might be doing off-campus job at their own risk.”

“I also have to do like that.” There was no other way for me besides working because I had no money to pay the tuition fee. If I couldn't continue my education, I would not reach my destination.

“God bless you,” Cheban murmured.

By the time we arrived at the airport, my body was sweating, my head was dizzy, and my hands were shaking, not only because of leaving Cheban and his family, but also because of my uncertain future. “I don't know how I will mobilize my life in the US,” I thought. I didn't know whether I would be able to continue my studies or not because of my finances. Cheban stopped the car near the entrance of the airport. He helped me take my luggage from the car. “All right.

Now, show this ticket and enter this way," he said, pointing in the direction that I should go.

"You can go yourself, I think. I should not go in with you, should I?"

"Yes brother, you need not to go in. I can go myself," I said. My eyes were still filled with tears. He also looked sentimental. He hugged me and said, "Okay, brother, you take care. After you land at Atlanta airport, give me a call."

"Sure, I will," I said, wiping my tears with the back of my mind.

Cheban got into the car, and he stepped on the gas. I kept on looking at his car until its license plate disappeared from my view. I wiped my eyes and entered the airport with my luggage. After finishing check in at the entrance gate, I sat in the waiting room until the flight time, looking at different people from different countries with different visages. They all looked like strangers, and people from different worlds whom I had never seen except on television. Some were as black as coal with large muscles and huge arms. Some were as white as snow with red noses and blue eyes. Some had blond hair and some had black hair. Women wearing mini-skirts, no matter how old they were, looked very sexy. They were busy hugging, kissing, and talking. They were new worlds, new things, and new experiences for me. I stared at them until my flight time.

Chapter 5

I started living in a one-bedroom apartment with Swedish-Peruvian lovers, Patrik, twenty-one and Mariella, twenty-six. They had been living in the apartment for a few months. Although Mariella was five years older than her boyfriend, she and Patrik fell head over heels in love when they met in Hawaii while both of them were there for a week's visit.

“This is the living room where you would be living,” Patrik gestured. “We can separate if you want.”

“It is okay,” I said.

The living room was a mess. Books were scattered on the floor. Dishes were left in a sink unwashed. A dilapidated bicycle was abandoned near the corner of the main door. Half a dozen kittens with their mother were mewling. “How can I live in such a filthy living room?” I wondered.

Patrik and Mariella were undergrad students in the same university where I was studying. I had to speak with them in English. It could not convey my pain, pangs, and deepest feelings to the level of my satisfaction, since English was a second language for me. It was not only my problem, but also a problem for my roommates, since English was their second language, too. At least English helped us understand each other.

“Thanks to English language for connecting the world and people from the world who speak different languages,” I thought. I wondered how life would be among people who speak different languages.

In the living room, I did not have privacy. I felt as if I was living under the open sky where every passerby could see me. Nonetheless, I had to pay three hundred dollars rent per month even for a living room. I could not rent the apartment alone because its cost would be double what I was paying.

Patrik and Marriela had been sharing the same bed for four months, even though they were not a married couple. In my culture, boyfriend and girlfriend living together before marriage was considered immoral. The society would ostracize them, or they had to marry within a day or two. Here, having a boyfriend and a girlfriend might be a matter of pride, I guessed.

“A boyfriend sleeping with a girlfriend in the same bed or vice versa is not a big problem, but the problem is to sleep with the partner of the same sex because you are supposed to be either gay or lesbian,” someone told me later.

“How could it be?” I had questioned silently.

I could not believe my ears at first, though slowly some of these new things became natural for me. I remembered I always used to sleep with my male friend while in Nepal. We never became gay although we slept in the same bed, but only we talked about marrying a beautiful girl with whom we could live our whole life forever. We imagined a girl who would have a good mutual understanding and be honest, loyal, and respectful of her husband. We also resolved to respect and love our would-be wife. A year before I left for America, my friend had married a beautiful girl.

A kitten mewed, breaking my chain of thought. “Why do you take care of so many kittens?” I asked them.

“Patrik is a cat lover,” Mariella said, massaging the mother cat's back.

“No, no. Actually, we had only one cat. She went outside and had sex, so she delivered many kittens,” Patrik answered immediately. I laughed silently at Patrik's answer.

It was 8 o'clock in the evening. It was my time to go to bed in my country. I felt sleepy.

“I'm feeling sleepy, guys. I think I need to sleep,” I said.

Mariella walked into her bedroom and came back with a mattress and pillow. “Okay, Rames take these and lay down on them,” she said, handing me the bedding.

I thanked her.

“Good night,” they said. Mariella held Patrik's hand. Patrik lifted her up saying, “My cookie.” She giggled, and both of them went to their bedroom.

I unfolded the mattress that Mariella gave me, spread it on the floor and lay down like a stranger who was passing his night in an inn.

“Oh, I forgot to call my cousin and let him know that I already arrived,” I murmured. “My cousin had told me to call him as soon as I landed in Georgia.”

Before I went to bed, I called my cousin, Cheban. I apologized to him for waiting so long to let him know.

“It's okay,” he said. “Keep in touch. Always feel happy.”

I could not sleep well. I remembered my family, friends, and well wishers in my country. I had come a long way. At that moment, I would have flown back to my country if I had wings. I

would tell my parents how America was, and how much I missed my family. Tears filled my eyes. "Let it go," I whispered. I wiped my tears with my palm. I remembered my goal and mission to graduate, and I concluded that I had to miss many things to gain something important in my life.

I tossed and turned on the mattress, but I could not sleep. It was a completely new place, new people, and a new environment. Different feelings played hide and seek in my mind. I thought what my future life would be like. I spread my dreams in front of me and did the math about how many of them would be fulfilled. I shifted in the bed on side, then I got up from the bed, walked into the kitchen, and drank a glass of water. Then I lay down and tried to sleep again.

It was already 6 in the morning, and I still had not slept. Everybody around me was still in a deep sleep; silence prevailed. I realized that the world was sleeping. Life was different here than in my country. People in my village used to go to sleep earlier and get up earlier. Here in America it was just the opposite, except for those who had to go to their offices on time.

I took a laptop and read my emails. I found ten messages in my inbox, and most of them were from by my friends in Nepal. I read them with tearful eyes. My heart melted as I saw that all of them had written, "We miss you, Rames."

I remembered my sister, who had cried at my departure. I remembered my parents who had a lachrymose tone while I left for America.

My tears wet the laptop. I could not read the emails anymore. All letters on the screen blurred with the tears in my eyes. I wiped them away with my sleeve, but again tears rolled down my cheeks like the Bagmati River. I tried to control my emotions, but I could not. The tears

flowed like a flood breaking the dam uncontrolled. I hiccupped and thought that my mother perhaps remembered me. Folks in Nepal said if someone hiccupped, he might be remembered by his nearest and dearest one. At the same time, Patrik came into the kitchen to get some breakfast, and he saw me sobbing silently.

“Hey Rames, what happened?” he asked.

“Nothing, just I remembered my parents,” I answered.

“Be brave, man,” he said.

“It's okay. I am good,” I said, trying to hide the pain.

I entered the bathroom and washed my face, trying to get in a better mood. However, my swollen eyes were apparent. I felt hungry. I remembered my sister, who used to cook something for me in the morning and bring it to me in bed. In America, I had to cook for myself and eat alone without the presence of any family member. I could not share the food with Mariella and Patrik because the Nepalese food was completely different from the kind of food they cooked. They cooked beef, which I could not think about. In my culture, the cow is a national animal worshipped once a year in the special occasion of *Gai Tihar*, the festival of the cow. Foods like *Dal, Bhat, and Tarkari*, pulses, rice, and curry were my favorites. Mariella and Patrik ate cheese, lettuce, canned foods, ham, turkey breasts, and beef.

“Do you eat beef?” Patrik asked while he was cooking beef in the oven.

“No, I cannot even imagine eating beef,” I said, “The cow is supposed to be the goddess of Laxmi in the Hindu religion, so to eat beef is to have committed a great sin never to be cleansed again.”

“Oh, I am sorry about that,” he apologized.

“It’s okay, don’t worry,” I said. “It is all cultural matter. I understand.”

Patrik walked into the bedroom with a plate of beef in his hand, saying “Talk to you later.”

Chapter 6

It was my second day in Georgia. It was drizzling outside. A gentle flash and thundering through the sky seemed like music that the god of nature was playing. The leaves of poplar trees fallen on the ground had completely hidden the earth underneath them, and squirrels were running about that seemed like they were dancing in the music produced by the sky.

My fall classes were about to start on August 15. It still had three days to go. I was excited to take my first classes. The first day classes in the US was going to be the most memorable and exciting day ever in my life. I was curious to see the university where I was enrolled.

“Hey, Patrik, would you not show me the university?” I asked. Patrik was in the kitchen, washing the dishes in the sink.

“Sure, would you like to go to the university?”

“Yes, I am dying to see it,” I said.

After Patrik finished his work, we headed to the university.

“How much bigger are the universities in your country, Rames?” Patrik asked me in his light Swedish accent.

“Not so much bigger. Some of the universities in major cities in Nepal are bigger,” I answered.

“What about your country itself?” I asked him. “Sweden is also supposed to be one of the developed countries. Many students also go to Sweden to further their studies. Why did you come to the United States?”

“We also do have bigger universities. But, here, America has a liberal kind of education system which I like. Here is the competitive education system that will get results,” he said.

We reached the university, and I liked it. It had large and separate buildings for different programs. It had enough infrastructure and facilities for all students, such as computers, email and the Internet, and the library with sufficient books. I realized I was deprived of all those facilities at the universities in my country. “I am so unlucky to be a citizen of a developing country,” I murmured. “There are not sufficient Internet facilities in the so-called biggest universities of Nepal, even today.”

“Do you like this university?” Patrik asked, distracting me from my thought.

“Yes, definitely, I like it very much,” I answered. Patrik showed me different buildings which housed different academic programs, the tennis court, the theatre hall, and the recreation center.

It was still drizzling outside. I opened an umbrella and told Patrik to come under it.

“I don't need an umbrella. I like rain,” he told me.

“You may catch cold,” I said.

“Hey, man, don't worry about me. I love rain,” he said. “What are you talking about?”

He was a “not-willing-to-obey-others-easily” fellow. He was of the mentality that he had to argue and try to win over anyone. And if he succeeded in it, he would say, “Look how smart I am!” He was a brawny and brainy fellow. He had no problem financing his studies because he had received a loan from the Swedish government, but that opportunity was not for me. “*Thukka, Bullshit,*” I expressed my anguish by kicking up dust on the ground. “I am unlucky to be a citizen of a developing country,” I thought again.

“Why do you look sad, man?” he showed his surprise looking at my face.

“It’s nothing, I am alright,” I said, trying to put on a brave face.

“Let’s go home now. We will be coming to the university after class starts in a few days,” he said. “And you will be very familiar with the university and its buildings very quickly.”

We returned home.

Sitting on the floor of the living room in the apartment, I remembered my past in Nepal. I was an established teacher and also a writer in my country, acclaimed by many people of my generation. I had lied to everybody that I got a scholarship for my study in the United States. All of them had trusted me because I was known to be a capable and genuine fellow who could get a scholarship.

Actually, I had not received any scholarship, because I had not even tried for any scholarship or any kind of assistantship. My friend, Kumar, who had come to the United States one year before on a diversity visa and had been living in New Hampshire, had promised to finance my education just for the first semester.

Kumar was my good friend since childhood. We were also classmates for five years at an elementary school. We used to play together, eat lunch in the cafeteria together, and go to parties together sometimes. After Kumar graduated, he continued his studies as a business major while I continued with a major in literature. We started studying at different colleges. We were such good friends that if we had been a boy and a girl, we would perhaps marry. We lost track of each other for eight years. Then, we met coincidentally while both of us were riding the same bus. I figured out the person sitting next to me looked familiar, and I recognized him.

“Are you Kumar?” I asked.

“Are you Rames?” he immediately questioned me.

In the reunion of friends after eight years, I was in bliss. He was always a happy guy. “Be happy,” he used to say. “Life is very short; enjoy it as much as you can.” He always looked slightly plump and happy, and I skinny and unhappy. And still we were good friends.

“I will help you. Your responsibility is to try to get a visa and that’s all,” he had told me.

It took me a long time to realize that a friend’s good intentions were not enough. After I came to the US, Kumar told me that he was able to pay only half of the tuition fee, even for the first semester, because he had to send some money to Nepal for the treatment of one of his relatives who was seriously ill. It became like a stone to my jaw; I was beside myself. The money Kumar gave me was not sufficient even if I was waived from the full load course. Even if I paid the tuition for the first semester, to pay tuition for the second semester was beyond my capacity. The tuition for the second semester would be about \$8000, which was more than my total property back home. Before coming to the US, I should have realized that a friend’s help would not be enough forever.

My days in the United States became harder than the days back in Nepal.

“Now, I should go out looking for a job,” I murmured. “But who would give me a job?”

I walked across the living room, and looked out of the window, and saw children playing on the patio. “I need to find some Nepali people who might help me out,” I thought, walking into the kitchen. I was sweaty, and my eyes were red. I felt dizzy. “Oh, my God, I can't live in the US in this plight,” I whispered, mopping my face with a towel. All of a sudden, I started crying. Nobody could hear my silent sobbing, except for the four walls that surrounded me. The tears washed the sweat down my face, letting me feel its salty flavor.

My first semester classes had almost begun. The deadline for registration was near. I had not registered for any classes yet because I did not have sufficient money to pay until I was waived from the full load course.

Thinking I would talk with the International Student Admission (ISA) office, I stopped there to talk to Carole, the advisor. She was a very humble, generous, and honest lady. Almost in her mid-sixties, she seemed to have the same zeal and enthusiasm as that of a lady in her mid twenties. She took me to Bulkio, the Director of ISA to talk on my behalf. I told him about my financial problems and asked for a tuition waiver.

“Sir, my father lost his business, so he can't support me financially anymore,” I pleaded. “Now I can't finance my education.”

“That's your problem, not mine,” he said, flipping the pages of a file on his table.

“Sir, at least find me a way. I am a good student,” I said.

“You are a good student, but you have no money,” he said, making fun of me.

“Don't say like that, sir, please,” I said. I was almost about to cry.

“If you can pay the tuition fee, study. If not, go back home. Period!”

“Sir, please sir, find me a way,” I requested.

“I can do nothing for you. I have no money to give you from my pocket. We trusted your bank account, and we provided you an I20,” he said.

Bulkio was right at his point, because he was unaware of how fake the bank statement was that I had made with the desire of coming to the United States and earning a degree from the university. I had mentioned in my bank statement that my father had a poultry farm business, and my mother was a teacher who earned more than \$2000 per month altogether. My father was not a businessman, and my mother was not a teacher. My mother could read and write and that was it. Both of them were very old, and they worked on the farm as a meager source of income.

A day after I talked to Bulkio, I met a student named Samuel from Uzbekistan studying at the same campus. We had the similar story of pain. He had also come to the United States on a student visa by making a fake bank statement. Time and again, he wanted to return to his home country because he had a shortage of money. He told me, “Now, I have a financial problem. I cannot continue my study though I am graduating soon.” I realized that this kind of problem was not only of mine, but the problem of many students who come to the US from developing countries.

I encouraged him not to be a pessimist.

“America is the land of opportunity. Keep patience. One day you will reach your destination. You know thousands of people around the world love to come to the US,” I said.

“America was America because of the people from across the world. People from other countries made this America as America. Every brain is pulled to the country,” he said. I knew he was in a love-hate relationship with America.

Finding the person with the same pain and sufferings and sharing them with each other somehow relieved me.

The next day, I again walked into the office of Bulkio and talked to him for a long time.

“Then, sir, just allow me to drop one course from full load course,” I said.

“No, you can't,” he said adamantly.

“Why not?”

“Because you are an international student. You have to have a full load courses,” he said.

He didn't even look at me, but rather worked on his laptop.

“Right now, I am busy, okay,” he said.

“Sir, I'm an international student. I have nobody else to help me out. If you ignore me.”

He interrupted me and said, “It's not my business. You better go home.”

I started sobbing. The streams of tears rolled down my cheeks. He looked at me.

“Alright, alright! I will let you drop one course,” he said.

“Thank you, sir, thank you so much,” I said, wiping my tears.

“Listen, this is the only chance, but you can't do it next time,” he warned me.

“Sure, sir!”

I nodded my head. Although I was not sure how I was going to pay the tuition fee for other semesters, Bulkio's decision brought a slight smile to my lips. Now, at least I could pay the tuition for my first semester, no matter how I would finance for other semesters in the days ahead. Now, I had to look for a job on-campus as soon as possible. Otherwise, I would have problems like paying rent and paying for other miscellaneous expenditures. I again thought about how I would pay tuition for a second semester in case I was not given a student assistantship.

I visited every office at the college and met the officials in person to find out whether they were hiring students in student assistant positions, but to no avail. I reached the computer lab on campus and asked for a student assistant position. “We have recently hired someone,” the manager said. I emailed my resume to a dozen offices at the college, but none of them responded. I met people in Human Resources to talk about job opportunities, but I returned dismayed. I went to the bookstore to find a job, but I could not. I was simply asked to try next semester. I now had only \$50 in my wallet. I had to pay \$300 rent per month. I had to spend \$200 for kitchen stuff and \$50 for miscellaneous expenditures. I was already broke. I was in despair. My pain and frustration reached the summit.

“What can I do with only \$50 in my hand? I am broke,” I yelled at myself.

I decided to look for an off-campus job. However, it was illegal for an international student to work off-campus. “Is there no one else working off-campus?” I asked myself. One of my friends had told me that he worked at a gas-station. The other friend had told me that he worked at a restaurant. “Then, why cannot I do that?” I questioned myself and determined to look for an off-campus job. To get an off-campus job was easier said than done.

It was a time of economic crisis in America when many people were out of job. The unemployment rate was continuing to increase. There were more than 10 million unemployed persons in the US.

The two political parties, Democratic and Republican, the former led by Barack Obama and the latter led by John McCain, were in the air. They were busy getting support from the people. Many voters were waiting for November 4, the day of the 44th presidential election in the United States. The media were buzzing with political commentary and analysis. Obama was getting loads of support from youngsters and black people. Many of them were hopeful for Obama's presidency. By and by, amidst the economic hardships in America, Obama was elected as the 44th president of the United States.

Everywhere in the US business was slow. Those people who were fired from jobs were looking for jobs wherever they found them, such as at restaurant or gas-stations or subways. Christmas was coming soon. Most of them were in a festive mood as well. However, the people had no more money for celebrating Christmas because many of them were out of jobs. They were holding their money tightly for the future. This economic situation of America also made me sadder and more somber.

I had no idea where to go and how to look for a job. Having no document, it was very hard to find a job despite some Indian stores where I might get a chance to work for little money or low wages.

One day, I was introduced at the university to Bala, who was also from Nepal. He had been living in the US as a US citizen for five years. In his mid twenties, he was an undergrad accounting major. He was of Lilliputian height and had a French-cut beard and black

complexion. He could speak English fluently though his English sounded broken. He pretended to know American culture inside and out though he had a fallible knowledge about it. To meet a compatriot in the US was rare, but I met Bala, and that made me happy.

“I am very happy to meet you here in America, that too, at the university, Bala,” I said to him.

“There are many Nepali people in America, man. There is nothing to be overjoyed about,” he replied in an artificial American accent.

“I need a job, Bala, by hook or by crook. Otherwise, I gotta return to home country, and I cannot continue my education. See, my dreams would be shattered,” I shared my problem with him. “Since you have been here for a long time, you might find a job at some Indian stores for me.”

“That’s not a big deal,” he said. “It’s not easy to find job in US these days, though.”

“I know,” I said.

“You have to be ready to sweep and mop, and that also not easy to get,” he said.

I had to be ready to do whatever he had to do if I was to fulfill my dreams. I had big dreams of earning a PhD and only then going back to my country.

“You are not gonna get any job easily because you have no legal documents to work in the US,” Bala said.

That was a fact. I could not speak a word against what he was saying. I looked into the sky blankly. I saw cumulus clouds hovering over the sky in different shapes and sizes, covering the sun. I felt that nature was making fun of me.

“I have no one else very near and dear to me in the US except you. I have a brotherly feeling toward you. Here is only you to help me. Please help me find a job, no matter what I should work. I must work. I should work,” I said. “I’m ready to work.”

“Okay, that’s not a big deal, bro,” he replied. Overjoyed, I jumped over him and hugged him saying, “Thank you bro very much. I am very happy.”

Bala hesitated, trying to prevent me from touching him. “What the fuck! Don’t touch me. Only the gay person does so. Are you a gay?”

His attitude surprised and saddened me. Nobody had questioned me that way before. I was respected by everyone back in Nepal. The way people used to talk and behave to me was very cordial and gentle, but Bala’s rude way of speaking with me made me feel humiliated and very sad. “Is this the American culture that taught Bala to speak that way?” I asked myself. However, I remained silent. I had come to a different land, where no one would understand me. Bala had come to the US when he was 20 years old. He did not have any family responsibility, nor an idea of practical life. He passed his early twenties with American culture. I did not bother debating with him. “To discuss with him is like degrading my own human value,” I thought. The only thing I was looking for was to meet my goal, and that had nothing to do with his attitude. If he helped me find a job, that would be great, no matter what. That was his personal disposition.

“American lifestyle is different,” Bala said looking around him. “You are not supposed to walk clasping me or holding hands together with me.”

I did not ask him a question like “why” because I did not like to talk to him much. His first impression on me was very bizarre. I simply whispered, “Maybe you are right.”

Bala added, pointing toward my shirt, “Shit! See, you are wearing the pink color shirt. Only a gay person wears that. Don't wear like that.” At that moment, I regretted having a friendly feeling toward him.

Actually, my sister had given me that shirt in *Bhaitika*. *Bhaitika* was the second greatest festival of Hindus, which was celebrated once a year.

“My sister presented me this shirt in *Bhaitika*,” I told him.

“Who cares?” he said.

“Is there possibility to get a job for me, Bala?” I said, trying to change the subject.

“It's not a big deal. Let me try for you, man,” he said, “I have a few stupid people I can contact. I will call them today and try to find job for you.”

“Thank you very much, bro,” I said.

“No problem.”

Bala began to speak in a way that a mentally half-cracked person speaks out of context—
“Actually, I am also happy to find you in US. I have also feelings and sentiments in my heart, but I have laid them aside. Feelings and sentiments do not work in this country. Life is more individualized here. Do for yourself, not for others. Damn it! I have also many friends but the friendship do not long last. I don't know why. Maybe I am straightforward. I call them bastard who use sweet coated words. I wrote poems and stories in my beginning days in US. I left

writing them. I realized there was no value of my poetry. Don't tell me I am harsh. I am harsh by time, by situation, by circumstances. You have to fight for every penny here. If you don't have money, nobody is gonna provide for you, pay for you."

He sounded somehow real and practical. He was right about some points. I realized that he was like that because of the environment in the US he faced, having the company of rude people.

"I got it," I said. "You are right, Bala."

"If I get a job for you, I will call you. That's not a big deal," Bala told me. "But don't be sure." I just nodded my head. And we departed.

Chapter 7

It was six in the morning when I looked at my wrist-watch. I looked out the window. The leaves from the trees had fallen on the ground. The trees stood like abandoned lovers, naked and despairing. I yawned and yawned, stretching and turning over the bed, preparing to get up. Through the window, I saw only the dried leaves of poplar trees fallen on the ground and the squirrels walking around. My heart beat felt like the loud flapping of an eagle. I looked at my hands and felt the thin skin and the bone underneath it. I remembered what I had weighed before leaving for America: one hundred and twenty-two pounds at a height of 5'6. "Something is wrong with me," I whispered. I wanted to gain some weight. Many people in America liked to be slim, but I was aching to gain weight. I was always slim, no matter what or how much I ate.

I saw a few hairs fallen on the bed cover and realized my growing age. I buried my head in my hands and pulled my hairs to the back. I bowed down my head and scratched it, pensive, and stretched my body. The happiness came from nowhere to my spirit like a flash of light and disappeared in no time. I remembered what Martin Heidegger wrote, that anxiety comes from nowhere. Similarly, the happiness came to me from nowhere, and it vanished.

The phone rang, and I knew it was Bala's phone because he had assured me that he would call me at that time.

"Hello," I said, thinking it should be to inform me about my job.

"Hey, what's up?" he said "I got a job for you." He sounded bossy. It was natural for him to sound bossy because he had found a job at a bagel store for me. I appreciated his willingness to help me, no matter how annoying his attitude was.

Bala assured me that he would take me to the work place, where we would talk with the owner of the store. "I will be there soon, be ready," he said and hung up the phone.

Not sure what kind of job I had to do, I waited for Bala to come and pick me up. My feelings went into a lurch.

"Damn it! My life in America," I whispered. "This is my life in America," I repeated the same line louder than the previous one. I just smiled for no reason. I went into the bathroom, brushed my teeth, washed my face, and shaved off my sparse beard. I came out of the bathroom, took some clothes out from my luggage, and put them on. I thought I was going for my first job interview in the US. It reminded me of many job interviews I had faced in my country. On the one hand, I was happy for the possibility of getting a job. On the other hand, I was nervous because I was not sure of what kind of job I would be doing.

"Hey, man, are you ready?" a voice said, knocking at the door. I opened the door. It was Bala, who was already there to pick me up for the bagel store. I didn't like the way he addressed me "hey, man." I thought he was from Nepal, and he should have understood the respectable way of talking to me.

"Yes I am almost ready," I said. "Come on in, just a second."

"Let's go, let's go. I have no enough time. I have a meeting," he said, standing outside the door. "I will wait for you outside. Hurry up." He looked at the time on his cell phone.

I picked up my backpack and put it across my shoulders.

"Why are you carrying this, asshole?" he said. I didn't know what he was talking about. I had never heard the word "asshole" before. I tried to make sense of the word "asshole." I

separated the word into two; one was “ass” which means either “butt” or “a kind of animal” and the other was “hole,” which meant “hollow part,” which is in the centre of ass. So it must be either “the hole of the butt” or must be the “hole of the ass, the animal.” Neither made sense to me. If it was in reference to the former, everyone has one.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Your backpack?”

“Is my backpack an asshole?” I asked him. I was surprised at his word choice.

Bala didn't answer but just laughed aloud and said, “Who cares?”

“This has become my habit,” I said, trying not to take what he said personally. To carry a backpack everywhere was part of my routine. I used to carry a diary or books or other reading materials in it. My uncle used to tease me about always carrying the backpack, saying “your *sujaru*,” which meant a kind of bag that seamstresses carry.

After a half hour drive, we reached the bagel store where I would work. Bala parked the car near the store, saying “I love my car, man. It has been six years since I bought this car, and it has not troubled me.” We got out of the car and entered the bagel store, where I saw a man of about five feet and six inches making bagels.

“Hey, Jalal, what's up?” Bala said, being too informal. He didn't even know how to greet in a humble manner. He greeted Jalal in the way he would greet his peers.

“I am good,” Jalal said, raising his one hand above his head while the other hand was holding a bagel. “How are you?”

“I am fine, thank you. He is my friend, Rames, from Nepal. He is looking for a job. Could you please provide him a job here?” Bala asked, removing his glasses and placing them over his head.

Jalal was the owner of the bagel store. He had been running the store for three years. He was a man in his mid-forties, energetic, hardworking, and smiling. Bala had told me a little bit about him. He had been living in the US for 10 years on a diversity visa. He had come from Bangladesh, a neighboring country of Nepal. He earned around one hundred thousand dollars per year, and he drove an expensive car. When I looked at him, his clothes were very dirty and ragged. He looked like a trash collector.

He smiled, looking up at me, saying, “I am Jalal. Nice to meet you.”

“I am Rames. Nice to meet you too,” I said putting a trace of smile on my lips.

At first he looked reluctant to talk with us. He said, “The business is very slow. I cannot hire anyone at this moment.” He washed his hands in the sink and rubbed them across his dusty pants to let them dry and came towards us. “Let’s talk a little bit,” he said, shaking hands with us and pointing to a bench.

We sat on the bench. The customers were sitting around the tables and enjoying bagels. Some were reading the *Atlanta-Journal Constitution*, while others were sipping coffee and talking over it. A young woman was taking a bite of a bagel and kissing her boyfriend at the same time. “Tonight baby,” I heard a female’s voice, but didn’t know what the context of the statement was. The sizzling sound and the smell coming from the frying eggs, sausages, and bacon tickled my mind. In the same way, a woman in front of me who was showing her cleavage with her breasts raised like hummock of earth tickled me.

“What do you do here?” Jalal asked me.

“I go to college.”

“Where?”

“Georgia University,” I said with my voice louder.

“Speak in a low voice, please,” Jalal said, looking at around him. Maybe he was checking whether somebody was listening to our conversations. I was surprised. Why should I speak in a low voice?

“Yes, if somebody finds you working off campus on a student visa, it's gonna be a problem to both of you: the one who hires a person and the one who is hired, you know?” Bala added.

“Oh, I see,” I said.

“It's okay. How long have you been here?” Jalal said, trying to come to the point of conversation.

“Just for a month.”

“All right,” Jalal said. “Do you have a car?”

“No.”

“Then, how do you come to work?”

“My friend will drop me off.”

“Is that always possible?”

“I am going to buy a bicycle as soon as possible.”

“Okay, then,” Jalal said. “I can pay only 6 dollars per hour in the beginning. But I can increase the wages only after observing your work and how you deal with customers in days to come.”

I nodded my head in approval. Maybe he would only pay me six dollars per hour because I was illegal to work off campus.

“You have to sweep and mop too. You should not feel bad,” He added. “Because many people who come to the US are not used to sweeping and mopping, and they feel very bad doing this kind of job.”

“Okay,” I said, hiding my pain at the thought of sweeping and mopping inside.

“Have you ever swept?” Jalal asked me.

“I did not sweep and mop back in my country. I was an English teacher at a few colleges in my country, and also wrote books during my academic career,” I said. I thought if I talked like that he might not hire me, and I corrected myself and said, “But I don't mind sweeping and mopping.”

“Are you sure?” Jalal said.

“I am sure, sir,” I said.

“Then come tomorrow, and work for just three hours. Your job will begin tomorrow,” Jalal said.

It was going to be a different experience in my life that I had never in my life before.

“See you tomorrow,” I said, and we departed.

Bala drove me home. I was a kind of happy, though the wages were low. At least I got the job, no matter what kind of job it was. Now I could pay the rent, and buy kitchen things. I thought the money I earned from the bagel store would be too little to pay tuition for every semester. “Let’s see, something fortunate will happen by that time,” I thought.

“I am gonna be late, man. I have a meeting,” Bala said, stopping the car to let me get off near the apartment.

“Can’t you cancel the meeting today?” I said, getting off the car.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” he questioned me. His abrupt language hurt me, but I realized that was his personality, which had nothing to do with me.

Bala shut the car’s door, saying “See you later.”

“Thank you, bye,” I said. “I will call you.”

“I may be busy. You can leave a voice message, just in case,” he said, pulling up the car.

I entered the apartment with a heavy head and heart. I began to think of the time of my graduation. “When will I graduate?” I asked myself, sighing. I realized I had just started in my program. I had almost two years to go for graduation, which seemed like a century to me.

Mentally and physically tired, I sat on the floor of my living room, leaning against the wall.

After a few minutes Mariella and Patrik came to the living room, giggling and chuckling. Mariella sat on Patrik's lap, and he kissed her, saying, "My cookie, you have beautiful boobs."

She melted on his lap, saying with shyness, "No, baby, don't talk like that."

"My coy mistress," Patrik said. That phrase "my coy mistress" reminded me of the poem "to his coy mistress" by Andrew Marvell. I always like the second stanza of the poem that reads:

*Thy beauty shall no more be found,
Nor, in thy marble vault, shall sound
My echoing song; then worms shall try
That long preserv'd virginity,
And your quaint honour turn to dust,
And into ashes all my lust.*

A few moments later, Mariella asked, "Hello, Rames, how are you?"

I just said, "I am fine, thank you."

"No, it looks as if you have something wrong. Are you sick?" she said. She stopped playing with Patrik for a minute.

"No, no, I am okay," I said.

Patrik went to the refrigerator and brought ice-cream on a plate, saying, "Hey, Rames take this ice cream. It will make you happy."

Very cold things were never my favorites though they were delicious. It was because if I drank something that was too cold, it would create a problem in my throat, causing tonsillitis or

something like that. But I never knew how to refuse others' offers, so I tried it, saying, "Thank you, Patrik."

"You're welcome." Patrik now sat on Mariella's lap.

Patrik was an inquisitive guy. He was interested in knowing current affairs. He was a generous, friendly, talented, and knowledgeable fellow. He had a knowledge of philosophy, arts and literature, culture and politics, though he was an international business major. He earned good grades in his courses. He possessed all the qualities that a perfect human should have. But his weakness was that he was irascible and adamant in his opinions. He was a bit of an egotist. "I am sorry. Maybe it was the kind of culture where I was born and brought up in," he would say, realizing his mistake. On the other hand Mariella, a nursing major, was a squirrel in her bodily size. She was a clever and egalitarian lady.

Mariella cuddled Patrik, and kissed his lips for a minute. I stared at their kisses like a crane stares into the azure sky for no reason. She expressed a few Spanish words, pouring her love into him. I could only discern some words she used, such as, "amore," "amore" to address her boyfriend. Later I knew she meant "my love," "my love."

While they were kissing in front of me, I thought that my society was very traditional and shy. A husband and wife also would not feel comfortable kissing each other while somebody was present. Here, a boyfriend and girlfriend were openly kissing in public, no matter who was present. "The United States must be the land of excessive personal freedom. Nobody cares about who is doing what," I thought.

"My baby, it's my turn to kiss you again," Patrik said to Mariella, breaking my stream of thought.

“Ummmm...” Patrik came closer to her, and kissed her. The kissing sound escaped from their mouths as a twang of a guitar and hit my eardrum.

I saw Patrik wrapped Mariella in his arms and glued his chest to her breasts that seemed as if they would never be apart. He started planting and pouring the flood of kisses on her forehead, brows, eyes, lips, and her cleavage. I, like a statue of liberty, looked at them blankly, as if I had no emotion, or feeling, or ideas.

They disappeared into their bedroom. I took a small bite of the ice cream I was holding on my hand very quickly, and I sat in front of my laptop to email my sister and my friends. By reading my sister's email, I knew that my parents had a bad dream last night, so they wanted to know how I was doing. I emailed her back: *Everything is fit and fine. I am doing great. Do not worry about me. I started going to campus and taking classes.*

I didn't want to write how lonely I was feeling in the absence of my family and friends, because that would make my parents feel very bad. They would cry. I always wanted to make my parents feel good and remain cheerful.

I felt so lonely that I thought my loneliness would kill me. I had nothing in my mind but the feeling of missing my relatives and friends, and the happiness I had shared with them. Time and again, I thought about returning to my country. “No,” I said. “I should not return to my country now, because I have many things to do. I have to graduate and get a job, earn money, pay loans back, buy a bungalow, and I should collect enough money and marry a beautiful girl back in my country.”

I groaned, “I won't return to that country, where people try to battle for power. Politicians are selfish. Officials are involved in corruption. Economic status is very low. Employment

opportunities are almost zero, and education system is not practical. I won't return to my country. I won't return."

I put my face on my palms and wiped my face slowly and looked at the upstairs of the living room. For a moment, I could not think why I was in the US. I closed my eyes. All of a sudden, I felt an acute stomach pain, and slowly the pain came to my heart preventing me from a long breath. I sweated though the environment outside was cold. I found my hairs soaked with perspiration. I scratched my head, and thought of what was wrong with me. I caught a hard and stiff thing in between my hairs, guessing that might be a miniscule creature in my head, to find merely a dust particle. I snorted, but it vanished like vapor. Someone might call me "a lunatic," but I was not. I felt thirsty, and I went to the refrigerator and came with a bottle of water. I quaffed it. I mused on different weird things. I regretted not being able to decide whether I should go back to my country or not. I realized I should not speak against my country because my land is my mother.

"I have to go back to my country, and contribute to her in any way I can. If we all leave our motherland for developed countries, who will care for her? I have to go back to my country and change the system. I have to try to do something that will help my country develop," I murmured. I put the glass next to me. "But the political situation in my country is not good. Whoever comes to the power, they only want to fulfill their desires and greed." I reached the glass of water and took another sip. "Now the monarchy is gone. The country should run along the path of progression."

Nepal was declared a democratic republic. Maoists, who had launched the “people’s war” in the mid-nineties and continued it for ten years, had come to the main stream of politics in Nepal through many consensus and parleys.

I remembered the “people’s war.” I remembered many widows in their white saris during the “people’s war.” I remembered the statues of kings and queens broken into pieces. Everything came to my mind like a motion picture; dead bodies of Maoists and security forces lie scattered in the Rolpa district, a teacher hangs in a tree with his hands and legs tied, some villagers’ heads are chopped off and buried in the jungle, vehicles burn down, schools and college and public offices shut down, tires burn on highway, bullets and tear gases grenades rattle, bloods spill over the ground and corpses scatter, a sea of humanity with red flags rush against the monarchy, and people with black bands shout along the roads. A Maoist’s leader blared, “We launched the war for restructuring the country.”

Patrik came out of the room and asked, “What are you thinking of, dude?”

“Just Nepal’s politics,” I said, looking up at him.

“I see, by the way, your country has monarchy, right?” he asked.

“Not now. It’s gone,” I said.

“Oh, really?” He made his eyes wide opened. “How?”

“Because people didn’t like it. The king became despotic.”

“I had heard about the royal massacre though. Who caused that?” he asked me.

“Nobody knows. People say that king Birendra’s brother was responsible for that,” I said.

“I had also heard about Nepal that it was divided into many different kingdoms ruled by many kings before,” he said. “Am I right?”

“Yes, you are absolutely right. But that changed once and for all after an audacious prince, Prithvi Narayan Shah, ascended to the throne of Gorkha in mid-eighteenth century at the age of twenty.”

“Oh, I see,” Patrik said. “How did he unify the all kingdoms?”

“Two years later of his ascendancy to the throne, King Prithivi Narayan Shah became able to conquer every small kingdom scattered all across Nepal, and he established his kingdom in the Gorkha district.”

“Wow! So majestic! Have you ever been there?” he asked.

“Oh, yes!” I said.

“What’s it like?”

“It’s a small palace situated at the top of hill where from King Prithivi Narayan could look all around the four directions and point the finger to the direction he would conquer next time. Nobody would be able to attack him so easily while he was in the palace.

“When did he die?” Patrik asked, pronouncing Prithivi as Pirithivi.

“He died when he was fifty-three years old.”

“By the time he died, were there any kingdoms?” he asked.

“Nope! All kingdoms were gone.”

“Awesome! It seems the king's image in Nepal was good. Why did people overthrow the king?”

“There are a lot of things of deception and treachery in the history of Nepalese royal family, dude. I will tell you later,” I said.

After Prithivi Narayan Shah, for the next 70 years, Nepal was ruled by kings and regents who were insane, inept, profligate or promiscuous--or all of the above.

For some years Kings became puppets in the hands of Rana. The stories of beautiful ladies and kings' promiscuity with them would remain secret. People were deprived of the right to information. There were some of the kings who remained decent in the eyes of Nepali people. However, the genealogical history of Shah Dynasty was almost finished with the royal massacre.

Without the consent of the majority of Nepali people, King Gyanendra, the last king of Nepal, was ascended to the throne. Nepali people didn't like that, and they came onto the streets to protest against his ascendancy to the throne, blaming him as a “cousin killer.” They shouted, “Gyanendra is a conspirator of the Royal family.” Curfew was imposed after the Nepali people came onto the streets to protest. People's sentiment was suppressed, and the country collapsed into an autocratic rule.

Even if the country was declared a democratic republic, I had no optimism for my future career living in Nepal. Since then, I had made a plan to leave Nepal for America for a few years in search of mental peace and my career.

Chapter 8

As I woke up in the morning, I could not sense the presence of any human being except for myself. I heard it was drizzling outside and looked at the window. The water slithering on the window's pane had made the scene outside blurred. I grabbed the laptop near me and opened it to check my emails. I read all the emails in the inbox. All of them were my friends' best wishes from Nepal, and I replied to them accordingly. I felt again the pain of missing friends. Then, I listened to the BBC Nepali news online. People had mixed feelings about the prime ministerial position of Prachanda, who was also the chairman of Maoists in Nepal. "We are happy to have Prachanda being the prime minister of Nepal," a local shared his view. The other said, "I am worried about my country. I cannot say what my country would be now because Maoists are very ambitious. Can Nepal be transformed into Switzerland in ten years as Prachanda said? That sounds impractical. Nepal should be like Nepal, not Switzerland."

"Let's see what will happen," I whispered, rubbing my eyes. In the politics of Nepal, every politician assured people with many hopes and aspirations, but they never addressed the Nepali people's problems. No government addressed the problem that women from the Kailai district of Nepal had to sell their bodies to earn a living. Government officials accepted bribes. Government officials became richer and richer, and the common citizens became poorer and poorer. No government cared for the children in the western part of Nepal who had to drop out of the schools because of their poverty. No government made an effort to create jobs for graduates who were obliged to go abroad for a job. Ministers rode in expensive cars and spent money with extravagance, but didn't care for a child in Kailai who died of diarrhea.

Nonetheless, I was sanguine for my country to be developed in the future. I questioned myself, "Why do politicians in Nepal lack good leading qualities? Why don't they make fair policies? Why don't they implement a good political system to run the state? Why don't they follow the party's mandate? Why do they sign agreements and break them time and time again?"

"May God bless my country!" I murmured. I wished I could return to my country with good vision and aspiration.

I got up from the bed and peered out through the window. It was still drizzling. The water was falling off the leaves of the trees. The ground was almost wet, and in some places puddles of water appeared. I thought I could do nothing until the political situation in Nepal improved.

"I can do nothing to change the political situation in Nepal," I mused looking at the patio through the window. Our voice would not be heard. I questioned where those philosophers, thinkers, academicians and intellectuals in my country went. But their ideas were not well respected. "Then, how would my country head toward the path of certainty?" I sighed.

I went to the bathroom and washed my face. I came out the bathroom and went to the kitchen. I came out with a glass of water with two slices of ice in it. With a sip of water, I visited Google earth online to locate how far my country was from the US. I saw my country sandwiched between the two big boulders of India and China. I remembered my social teacher in fifth grade, who had told me that India was 22 times bigger than Nepal and China 65 times bigger. I also remembered the great Nepali poet Laxmi Prasad Devkota's essay "Ke Nepal Sanu chha," meaning "Is Nepal a Small Country?" I remembered the line in that essay. It read "though the human eyeballs are small, they are precise and important, and so is Nepal." But Nepal would

not remain as beautiful as the poets have described if politicians kept on playing dirty politics, I mused.

I thought about my family and remembered what my parents might be doing in my country. I realized that my father might at that moment be tilling the fields and my mother might have been cooking food, rearing cattle, and helping him. I became sentimental. I was not able to send money to my parents, so they had to manage by themselves. However, they were happy because I was in the US. They had faith that one day I would earn a lot of money and bestow happiness and luxury on them.

While remembering my parents, a phone rang, breaking the silent atmosphere.

I picked up the phone and looked at the screen to check where it was from. It said “no number.” I guessed that it had to be an international call.

“Hello,” I said. It was my father calling me from Nepal.

“How is everything?” he said in his trembling voice.

“I am good, *Buba*, daddy,” I said. “What about there?”

“We have a very sad story.”

“What?” I asked him, surprised and nervous.

“Yes, Rames, we are mourning.”

After hearing my father's voice, the beating of my heart speeded up faster and faster. I could not even guess what he was talking about.

“What the hell are you talking about, *Buba*?” I said.

“Yes, Rames, it's very sad news.”

“What's that? Please tell me.”

“You grandmother passed away, today.”

I wailed with pain. I had not even imagined that she would pass so early. She looked old and puckered, but she was hale and hearty. Even in her late nineties, her body was not stooped. Nor did she need a stick as her helper. I thought she would live still ten years more. She always told me that it was her dream to attend my wedding ceremony before she died.

“Don't eat salty food for thirteen days, and also don't eat meat,” my father told me before he hung up the phone. It was our cultural belief that the bereaved family should not to eat salty food for thirteen days. The sons or the ones who cremate the body were supposed to wear white clothes for a year, or at least for forty-five days.

My grandmother called America *Gai Khane Desh*, which means the country where people eat beef. She was a very dogmatic Hindu. She did not even let others touch the food she cooked. If someone touched her food, she would throw it away. She always cooked for herself. She was a strict vegetarian. She would shower if a non-vegetarian touched her. She used to wash not only her hands but also between her legs every time after she urinated. When she entered the bathroom, she always entered with a bucket of water. She had a goiter, and she called it “a bundle of wealth.” She wanted to narrate a religious story to anybody approaching her, even if they were reluctant to hear it. If she found they were uninterested in her story, she said, “It was worthless to narrate for you.” She never liked staying with her sons even in her old age, and

rather chose a dorm adjoining a temple. A dogmatic Hindu like my grandmother liked to live in a temple where small dorms were made with the purpose of providing people like my grandmother with food and shelter. "Make me a temple-like house. I will live there," she said.

"Nobody can resist death," I whispered. Emily Dickinson's poem "Because I could not stop for Death" came to my mind. "Grandma, I will come to meet you soon," I murmured, wiping the tears that appeared in the corners of my eyes. That day every time I ate, I remembered my grandmother. I realized the inevitability of death after life. She had wished her sons would make a temple in her name after she died. "May your soul rest in heaven," I wished her.

Dashain, the greatest festival of Hindus, was coming soon. I would not be able to celebrate *Dashain* that year. I would not be able to be together with all my relatives and share joy and happiness because I was far away from home and my grandmother was passed away. In my culture, if any kith and kin passed away, his/her very nearest relatives could not celebrate the festival for joy. I remembered how Nepali people butchered goats to appease Kali, the goddess of power. I visualized how young and old people played on a swing as a part of the cultural celebration. I also remembered how I received a red *tika* on my forehead and *jamara* across the ears from the hands of my parents and other relatives. I also remembered the lines my parents chanted offering me the benediction. I remembered how everyone, from rags to riches, bought new clothes, and enjoyed delicious food.

The wall-clock rang, reminding me of the time. It was 10 o'clock in the morning. "Shit, it was nearly late," I fussed. I had to be ready for work at the bagel store. I cooked food very quickly, ate it, and rushed to work on foot.

I had no car, and I had no idea of the bus route that went to my work place.

I thought America was technologically advanced, and people here would enjoy a high standard of living. Nearly everyone, it seemed, had a personal car, a laptop, a refrigerator and a washing machine. In developing countries, only the wealthiest families could afford those things, which were considered luxuries rather than necessities.

I remembered my grandmother once again, thinking about her death before fulfilling her dreams to attend my marriage ceremony.

After an hour walk, I reached my work place. I was already exhausted before I got there. Jalal was making bagels at the store. He saw me.

“You arrived?” Jalal asked.

“Yes, sir, I came.” I responded.

“Okay, come inside,” he called me. “Put off your t-shirt and wear this one.” he gave me a t-shirt with a printed tag that read “Sunny Bagel Store.” I entered the restroom and changed into the uniform.

“You should also wear shoes, not sandals,” He instructed me, pointing to the slippers I was wearing.

“Okay, I will do so from tomorrow,” I said.

“See your hair is not cut. You have to have your hair cut, or wear a cap to cover your hair,” he ordered me, pointing out my long hair.

I had not gotten a chance to get my hair cut before I got the US, and it was very expensive here. I could have gotten my hair cut a dozen times in Nepal with the money it cost to get my hair cut one time in the US.

“Yes, Jalal,” I answered. I thought about buying a cap rather than getting my hair cut.

“Now, start sweeping,” he ordered me, pointing to the place where I was supposed to sweep.

I felt humiliated though I had mentally prepared myself to sweep a day before yesterday. It was hard for me to pacify my heart with the broom in my hand. I started visualizing my profession back in Nepal. I worked as a teacher in Nepal, and in America I worked as a sweeper. I could not bridge the yawning gap I was experiencing. I could not move my feet easily while sweeping. My hands and legs trembled. My eyes and face became burned. I became nervous. I had to do this job because I had only two options; either sweep the floor or go back to Nepal. I saw my future sweeping the floor, and I tried to gather confidence with an inner voice in my heart “sweep, Rames, sweep.”

“You need to practice to sweep very quickly and carefully,” Jalal told me, sounding bossy.

“I am trying,” I said with a feeling of humiliation.

Jalal called his other two workers at the bagel store and introduced them to me.

“He is Rames from Nepal,” he said. “And they are Margareta and Daniel from Mexico.”

“Nice to meet you,” I said to them.

“Nice to meet you,” they said in one voice evenly.

“You have to follow them and learn what they say and do,” Jalal said, turning to me.

“Yes, sir,” I said, bowing down my head with respect.

“Follow me,” Daniel said. I followed him. Daniel taught me how to make bagels and serve the customers, how to collect trash, and how to wash dishes. Daniel was a young boy of 17 years old who became my mentor at the bagel store for a few days. I remembered I was a mentor of my contemporaries back in Nepal. I could not even think of what I was doing in the US. Nobody could know the landslide in my feelings. My sentiments hardened. There would be no use in letting my co-workers know what was going on in my heart because they could not feel what I was feeling. They had not experienced the kind of life that I experienced in Nepal.

Take the order of a customer, toast the bagel if they want, cut it in halves, fry an egg or bacon or sausage or whatever they want, put cheese or butter of any kind of cream cheese they want and pack it and give it to them, go to the register and ring, clean everything if there are no customers, check out what is running off, fill up everything, throw trash and sweep and mop.... I started doing all these things according to the order and instruction of my co-workers.

My mind was in a mess at that time. I could not think of what I was doing. My heart had almost lost its humanness. “I hate, hate doing this job,” I told myself.

“Go ahead and take the customer,” Daniel ordered me while I was washing dishes. I approached the customer and asked, “Hello sir, can I help you?”

“Yes, give me an Everything bagel,” the customer ordered. I didn't understand him and remained silent. Daniel went to the box of bagels and picked it up, showing it to me and saying, “This is ‘Everything bagel.’ This is the name of the bagel.”

I had never heard of bagels in my life before I came to the US. My mind was messed up with all those kinds of bagels like everything, garlic, onion, sundried, sesame, cinnamon raisin, plain, egg, herb and many more. In the beginning, I could not even understand the native accent clearly because I was not used to it.

“You go and collect the garbage,” Daniel ordered me. “I will take the customer.”

I collected garbage and then was ready to throw out the trash. Daniel showed me the Dumpster behind the bagel store. It was so stinky that I could hardly tolerate the bad smell. I covered my nose and mouth to block the bad smell, but I could not. I took out the handkerchief my sister gave to me at a festival, *Tihar*, and covered my nose and mouth again.

“Throw there,” Daniel said. He was like a boss to me. A boy younger and less educated than me had never ordered me in that fashion. Nor could I think of anyone being bossy toward me. I could not discern what I was doing in the US was—whether a dream or a reality. Daniel's order hurt me. I felt like my heart had broken into a million pieces, never to be collected again. I wanted to shout and let all workers at the Bagel store know that I would not be working there anymore. I decided that I would not stay there anymore, even for a second. “I will book a plane ticket and go back to my own country,” I mused while throwing out the trash.

I thought I would leave America very quickly and go back to Nepal and stay there, but I hesitated to make such a quick decision. “I should not do that because I have come here to get my future. I have many things to do in my life. The work is not superior or inferior in itself, but it

is my feeling. New experiences in my life will make me a matured person. These experiences should be the source of my progress," I talked to myself.

My desire to stay in America wrestled with the hatred of this manual labor. "I will not kill my emotion, sentiments, feelings, and everything. I cannot live this life. I am dead emotionally," I cried in panic.

But I could do nothing, except keep working, because I needed the money to pay my tuition fee. Jalal approached me and said, "I have also a Subway. You gotta work at Subway too. So be very quick to learn things."

"Alright, I will do my best." I said, nodding my head in approval though my heart was crying in pain.

"Now, your duty is over for today. Come tomorrow at 8 am," Jalal said. I returned to the apartment where I was living a vagabond life. I was so tired that I could not even move my feet. I opened my laptop to check some emails and some news online before crawling up to my bed falling into a deep sleep.

Chapter-9

By the time I woke up, it was late. I would have to hurry to get to work at the bagel store. I drew back the curtain on the window and looked outside to see trees and bushes faded of their verdant color. Dried leaves had fallen off the trees and lay around the bushes.

I also had a few assignments to turn in. If I missed the deadlines, I would not get good grades. I also had to go to the bagel store to work on time. Otherwise, I might be fired. If I was fired, I would not earn money and pay the tuition fees. Luckily, all my classes were in the evening, and I could work the whole day. I could come back from work and go to school even if I was exhausted. I could do the assignments at midnight and sleep only 4 hours a day. I was getting thinner and thinner. On the one hand I thought my future was more important than my skinny body, but on the other hand, my parents always told me to have gained some weight by the time I returned. They wanted my kith and kin to realize that I really enjoyed living in the United States of America. But they would never know how much I was panicking in the US. "Let my body be a skeleton, I am not going to think of anything except for my goal. I can endure any hardship," I concluded.

I got up from the bed and walked into the kitchen to take a slice of bread as my breakfast before I left for the bagel store. I put peanut butter on the bread and gobbled it with a sip of coffee. I put on my uniform and rushed to the bagel store on foot. That day I was going to work at Subway after working an hour or two at the bagel store. After I got to work, Jalal told me to go to the Subway with him immediately.

“Let’s get in the car,” he said. The car was very luxurious, and I realized what Bala had told about his expensive car was right. We drove to the Subway, where a lady who I thought was probably in her late forties was working. Later I found out she was only thirty-six. Jalal had given her all responsibilities in his absence, so she worked there as if she was a manager. Jalal introduced me to her, “Her name is Rita. She is also from Nepal.”

“Oh, really?” I asked, surprised.

“*Didi Namaskar*,” I said, greeting her in the Nepali language. I was happy because I found a person from Nepal in the place where we would work together.

She looked very tired, but she was very determined. Her dealings with customers at Subway sounded rude and bossy because her English was broken and hardly understandable.

“When did you come?” she asked me, cleaning the microwave, during a slow time in the afternoon.

“Just a few months, now,” I answered.

“Do you like it?” she asked me.

“Yes,” I said. “But I am frustrated with this job.”

“This is America, *Bhai*, brother. Don’t think so,” she said.

She had been living in America for four years with her family: a husband and a daughter. She had a good economic status back in Nepal, having a five-storied home and a car. A person who owns a car in Nepal is actually a rich person unlike in the US, where even poor families can own a car. In Nepal, she had hired a worker to sweep and mop her house.

“I started sweeping and mopping after coming to America, which I had never done before in my life,” she said. “It is not only you. There are also some people who were government officials back in Nepal working at a restaurant in the US.”

“My husband was a government official. Now he works at a restaurant,” she added.

She had an average-Nepali-women height and a flat face that had concealed energy and enthusiasm. She was happy with what she was doing because the money she earned working at the Subway was five times more than what she was earning as a teacher at an elementary school back in Nepal.

“I can earn in the US in a day what I earned in a month back in Nepal,” she said with a smile on her face.

She turned to the customer. “Hello, can I help you, sir?” she asked. She took the customer's order.

Cutting a loaf of wheat bread in half, she said to me, “I have been working at this Subway for three years. My seventy hours a week pass making sandwiches, and sweeping and mopping.” After making the customer's sandwich, she rang it up and turned to me.

“I have been doing hard work because I have to do. My child is studying here. I have to think about her future. I cannot support her without working, no matter how wealthy I am in my country,” she said.

“You are right,” I said.

I was completely ignorant of how to make a sandwich because I had never made a sandwich before, nor had I even eaten one.

“*Didi*, you would teach me how to make a sandwich because I know nothing about Subway things,” I told her.

“Don’t worry, *Bhai*,” she said. By calling each other *Bhai* and *Didi*, we established the relationship of brother and sister. “But the one whom I teach might want to keep me under their feet after they are well-trained.”

I was confused about what she actually meant. However, I didn’t ask. Was she warning me not to act superior after I am trained?

She taught me how to make sandwiches. She introduced me to different toppings that could be used in making sandwiches. She even taught me how to sweep and mop.”You also should know how to sweep and mop,” she said.

She had a sharp voice when she spoke. She seemed to have an attitude that no one was superior to her in America. “Everyone who comes to America does the same kind of works that I am doing, no matter what they used to do or how wealthy they were in Nepal,” she said. She was fickle in her manner. She said one thing at one time and said another thing at another time. “My blood pressure is high. I might lose my temper easily,” she said. I did not understand whether it was her warning or just a comment.

“I caught blood pressure,” she told me, “because my blood pressure was high since my mind was haunted with whether my five-story house in Nepal was collapsed after I heard the news about earthquake uprooting many buildings in India.” I just listened to her.

“If you do not know how to sweep and mop, nobody is going to give you a job,” she said. “Sweeping and mopping is the common thing for many Nepali people in the US.”

“You are right,” I said.

I remembered my father who used to say, “My son, study hard. If you don't study and get a good degree, you will have to sweep and mop.”

But in America, I happened to sweep and mop, even if I had a good education and a good degree back in Nepal. The degree I had in Nepal could not work in the US.

My first day at the Subway was a good experience: meeting with a lady from Nepal whom I started calling a sister, being introduced to different kinds of bread and vegetables, and learning to sweep and mop. I was amazed with Rita's dual nature. One moment she would seem very kind and generous, and another time she seemed very mean and rude in the way she talked to me. “Maybe it is human nature,” I realized. “No human is perfect. Everyone has one flaw or two.” She made me a sandwich before I got off work that day.

“Take this sandwich with you and eat it as a dinner,” she said.

“Thank you,” I said and departed.

I didn't work for long that day since it was my first day at the Subway.

Exhausted, I returned home at 7 pm. I slumbered on my bed leaning against the wall for a few minutes. Thirsty and hungry, I could not feel comfortable even if I tried to take a nap. I unwrapped the sandwich Rita had made for me and took a bite of it, but I didn't like its taste because I had never tried a sandwich before in my life. I threw it away. I reached the refrigerator, and looked for food. I ate left over rice and scrambled eggs and drank a glass of water and went to bed. I could not sleep.

It was 7.30 PM. I opened the laptop and listened to a Nepali song on a Nepali online radio. I realized that day was *Dashain* in Nepal. Alone in the apartment, I could see dark nature outside across the window. The trees outside the window looked as if they were waiting for their leaves to fall. Days were becoming gradually shorter, and nights were becoming longer, welcoming Christmas across the US. *Ramadan*, the greatest festival of Muslims, had finished recently after a month of rigorous fasting. With the beginning of October, *Dashain* was in full swing in the houses of every Hindu. "I am missing this year's *Dashain*," I whispered. "My forehead where my parents put *akchhyata, tika*, rice mixed with red color and white yogurt, blessing me for my happiness, prosperity, and reputation, will remain empty."

After a while the online radio blared the 8 o'clock news:

Today Dashain, the greatest festival of Hindus, is in the house of every Nepali. Since today is the first of five days of Dashain, young to old, child to women, all of them have worn smiles on their faces. All of them look colorful in their new dresses and raiment. Juniors are receiving blessings with tika from the hands of their parents and seniors while seniors are busy putting tika on the foreheads of juniors. During the whole five days of Dashain, people visit their families and relatives and exchange their joys and happiness, forgetting every painful event in their lives. They enjoy varieties of delicious foods, regardless of age and sex. No matter how rich or poor they are, they celebrate Dashain with great enthusiasm. In Dashain, the relatives of their family also return from abroad to receive tika from the hands of seniors....

I could not listen to the news anymore because it reminded me of many things I missed back home. I remembered my parents who might have been counting the days to when I will reunite with them. They might not have become happy with *Dashain* because I was not with

them. I was one of three siblings, and my two sisters lived with their husbands. "Dashain might have made my parents sadder," I thought.

I looked outside. It was already dark. The trees were swallowed by the darkness of night time. The light of twinkling stars in the sky illuminated nature. I could hear the squirrels in the tress though I could not see them. There was no difference between the darkness here where I was living and Nepal where my parents were living. The sky was the same, and there were as many stars. I looked at myself. I was the same as I was there. My heart was with them. The only difference was I could not touch them. The more I thought of them the more I yearned to touch them.

"Dashain should have been cancelled for a few years," I complained. "Why does Dashain come every year?"

It was 10 P.M. I was feeling very warm. I came out of the room and walked over to the courtyard outside the apartment with the feeling of uncertainty and anxiety. I wanted to walk over to the gas station and buy cigarettes, so I made my way toward it. A few cars were rushing on the way home. Two Spanish lovers were standing on a sidewalk, hiding their heads in their embrace. "Como estas?" I asked to prevent myself from facing an embarrassing moment and to clear my way.

"Muy bien, y tu?" they replied, trying to maintain their postures.

"Bien," I said, feeling sorry for interfering with their kisses, and escaped with trepidation that they might start talking to me in Spanish. I used the Spanish words I had learned from Marielaa, my Spanish roommate. Although I was not Spanish, those lovers thought I was. If

they had started talking to me in Spanish I might be in trouble because I would know no more than “Como estas?”

I reached the gas station and bought a packet of Newports. Coming outside, I lit one. I didn't like its taste because I had almost quit smoking before coming to Georgia, and I could not even tolerate the smell. I didn't know why I liked to smoke. I smoke forcefully, not desiring it actually. I pretended like I was a chain-smoker. I became dizzy. The roads where I was walking started revolving around me like the moon revolves around the earth. “Why am I killing myself?” I murmured. I sat there until I came back to a normal state. I heard some weird noises like the twang of a guitar. I realized that it was the sound coming from the kisses of those Spanish lovers who were still there behind me. “Oh, my God!” the sound escaped from my lips. I rushed directly home.

It was 12 am. The online Nepali radio was tuned to Nepali classic music, welcoming the aroma of *Dashain* festival across the country. Nepali news sites were filled with different photographs, displaying the pictures of goddesses and devils, signifying the victory of good over evil and the pictures of people putting *tika* on the foreheads of children. The music and photographs brought a landslide of my feelings. I could not pacify my heart. I wanted to touch my parents. My forehead wanted to be touched by my parents' hands. But the room was empty behind me. I could not even hear a human voice in my room. Suddenly, I heard someone knocking at the door. It was almost 1 o'clock. I opened the door very cautiously.

“Hey man, does Leena live here?” he said. The aroma of wine came to my nose from his mouth. He was approximately in his twenties, with a black complexion and curly hair unfurled

onto his shoulder. His one hand was holding his pants which were falling below his thighs and the other hand was busy playing music on his cell phone.

“No, sir,” I said, trying to sound confident.

“Ok man,” he said and went. I shut the door and came back to sit on a couch.

It was 2 am. Many things came to my mind. If I were with my parents now, I would be laughing and enjoying and merrymaking. My parents and relatives would be around me. We would be eating a lot of delicious foods sitting with the family. We would be visiting our relatives' house to receive tika and blessings. I would be playing cards with my father, and my mother would be making delicious *sellrotis*, items made of flour, for me. My eyes became teary. I wiped them with my hands. The more I wiped, the more streams of tears rolled down my cheeks. “I missed many thing, mom,” I cried. “I missed the *sellrotis* you made. I missed *akchhyata* you put on my forehead. I missed the mutton you cooked. I missed you, mom.” I sobbed but no one could hear me except for the wall that surrounded me could hear. I cried for a long while, then I realized that there was no meaning to my crying and rushed to the bathroom to wash my face.

It was 5 am. I thought I must say something to my parents who might be waiting for my call on this auspicious occasion of *Dashain* festival. I took my cell-phone and called them. My father picked up the phone.

“Hello,” my father said.

“Yes, dad, how are you? I said. “How is *Dashain*?”

“We missed you, a lot. We could not even celebrate *Dashain*. Your mom is very sad.”

“Would you please give her the phone?” I said.

My father gave the phone to my mother. My mother started crying on the phone. “I would like to see you. Come home.”

“No mom, it's not possible to come now. I have to wait a year and a half to graduate.”

“Without you, we have no taste for *Dashain*,” she said in a staccato voice made by her sobbing. “Without you *Dashain* is like *Dasha*, blessing is like cursing.”

“Don't say like that, mom. There are many mothers who have lost their sons in the ten years long war between Maoists and security forces. Their sons never came back home. But I am here, struggling for my bright future. I am going to be there soon after I graduate.” And I hung up the phone.

My mother was still sobbing in my heart. My mother might not know how much I was sobbing for missing those days. It was already 6 in the morning. I had to sleep, but there was no sleep in my eyes.