

able. The custom has sprung up elsewhere: on Fashion Avenue in New York, I walk over Claire McCardell's and Norman Norell's plaques; in the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, that borough's native-born Ruby Stevens, better known as Barbara Stanwyck, has a paving stone among the greenery; on Toronto's King Street is Canada's Walk of Fame, about which 'nuff said. And in each place, the over-riding sense one has is of, if not having intruded exactly, then at least being witness to something that ultimately doesn't involve one. A Walk of Fame by its nature turns out to be a very local phenomenon.

I take one final stroll over to Vine on my last morning on the Boulevard. Most of the businesses are still shuttered. The tourists have yet to arrive at Grauman's. I pass Dan Avey's star once again. It is all of four days old, but I see that it is patched. No doubt it left the workshop patched. There, against the salmon pink of the five-pointed star, is a cloud of darker red, like a bruise or the small beating heart of a tiny creature. There is such hope and poignancy, an almost animal frailty in that blemish, that I stop in my tracks for a minute. People have been coming out West with stars in their eyes for so long, and for just as long, some have returned to where they came from, their hopes dashed. But if the fulfillment of one's dreams is the only referendum on whether they are beautiful or worth dreaming, then no one would wish for anything. And that would be so much sadder.

GEORGE SAUNDERS

The Incredible Buddha Boy

FROM GQ

LAST DECEMBER, I got an e-mail from my editor at GQ. A fifteen-year-old boy in Nepal had supposedly been meditating for the past seven months without any food or water. Would I like to look into this?

I went online. The boy's name was Ram Bahadur Bomjon. He was sitting in the roots of a pipal tree near the Indian border. The site was being overrun by pilgrims, thousands a week, who were calling this boy "the new Buddha." He'd twice been bitten by poisonous snakes; both times he'd refused medicine and cured himself via meditation. Skeptics said he was being fed at night behind a curtain, that his guru was building himself a temple, that his parents were building themselves a mansion, that the Maoist rebels, in on the hoax, were raking in tens of thousands of dollars in donations.

I e-mailed my editor back: I was pretty busy, what with the teaching and all, besides which Christmas break was coming up and I hadn't been to the gym once the preceding semester, plus it would be great to, uh, get an early start on my taxes.

Then we embarked on the usual Christmas frenzy, but I couldn't get this boy off my mind. At parties, I noted two general reactions to the statement *Hey, I heard this kid in Nepal has been meditating uninterruptedly in the jungle for the past seven months without any food or water.*

One type of American — let's call them Realists — will react by making a snack-related joke ("So he finally gets up, and turns out he's sitting on a big pile of Butterfinger wrappers!") and will then

explain that it's physically impossible to survive even one week without food or water, much less seven months.

A second type — let's call them Believers — will say, "Wow, that's amazing," they wish they could go to Nepal tomorrow, and will then segue into a story about a transparent spiritual being who once appeared on a friend's pool deck with a message about world peace.

Try it: go up to the next person you see, and say, *Hey, I heard this kid in Nepal has been meditating uninterruptedly in the jungle for the past seven months without any food or water.*

See what they say.

Or say it to yourself, and see what you say. What I said, finally, was: This I have to see.

Austrian Airlines is big on hot rolls. Red-clad flight attendants continually tout their hot rolls in the accents of many nations, including, one feels, nations that haven't actually been founded yet. ("Hot roolz?" "Har rahls?" "Hoor rowls?") The in-flight safety video is troubling: it's animated and features a Sims-like guy with what looks like a skullless, skeletal death s-head who keeps turning to leer at a slim Sims lady who keeps looking away, alarmed, while trying to get her long legs tucked away somewhere so Death can't see them. Later she slides down the emergency slide, holding a Sims baby. Death still pursuing her.

Ancient Mariner-style, my seatmate, a Kosovar, tells me about a Serbian paramilitary group called the Black Hand that left a childhood friend of his on a hillside, "cut into tiny pieces." During the occupation, he says, the Serbs often killed babies in front of their parents. He is kindly, polite, awed by the horrible things he's seen, grateful that, as an American citizen, he no longer has to worry about murdered babies or hacked-up friends, except, it would appear, in memory, constantly.

Story told, he goes off to sleep.

But I can't. I'm too uncomfortable. I'm mad at myself for eating two roolz during the last Round of Roolz, roolz that seem to have instantaneously made my pants tighter. I've already read all my books and magazines, already stood looking out the little window in the flight-attendant area, already complimented a severe blond flight attendant on Austrian Airlines' excellent service, which elic-

ited an oddly Austrian reaction: she immediately seemed to find me reprehensible and weak.

On the bright side, only six more hours on this plane, then two hours in the Vienna airport and an eight-hour flight to Kathmandu. I decide to close my eyes and sit motionless, to make the time pass.

Somebody slides up their window shade and, feeling the change in light on my eyelids, I am filled with sudden curiosity: has the shade really been lifted? By someone? Gosh, who was it? What did they look like? What were they trying to accomplish by lifting the shade? I badly want to open my eyes and confirm that a shade has indeed been lifted, by someone, for some purpose. Then I notice a sore patch on the tip of my tongue and feel a strong desire to interrupt my experiment to record the interesting sore-tongue observation in my notebook. Then I begin having Restless Leg Syndrome, Restless Arm Syndrome, and even a little Restless Neck Syndrome. Gosh, am I thirsty. Boy, is my breath going to be bad when this stupid experiment is over. I imagine a waterfall of minty water flowing into my mouth, a waterfall that does not have to be requested via the stern flight attendant but just comes on automatically when I press a button on the overhead console marked MINTY WATER.

The mind is a machine that is constantly asking: What would I prefer? Close your eyes, refuse to move, and watch what your mind does. What it does is become discontent with that-which-is. A desire arises, you satisfy that desire, and another arises in its place. This wanting and rewanting is an endless cycle for which, turns out, there is already a name: samsara. Samsara is at the heart of the vast human carnival: greed, neurosis, mad ambition, adultery, crimes of passion, the hacking to death of a terrified man on a hillside in the name of A More Pure and Thus Perfect Nation — and all of this takes place because we believe we will be made happy once our desires have been satisfied.

I know this. But still I'm full of desire. I want my legs to stop hurting. I want something to drink. I even kind of want another hot roll.

Seven months, I think? The kid has been sitting there seven months?

*

We arrive in Katmandu just before midnight. The city is as dark a city as I've ever seen: no streetlights, no neon, each building lit by one or two small bulbs or a single hanging lantern. It's like a medieval city, smoke-smelling, the buildings leaning into narrow unsquared roads. It's as if the city has been time-transported back to the age of kings and squalor, and we are making our way through the squalor to the palace, which is the Hyatt. A garbage-eating cow appears in our headlights. We pass a lonely green-lit mod ATM kiosk that looks like it's been dropped in from the future.

The Hyatt lobby is empty except for rows of Buddha statues: a maze with no guests. The Business Center manageress not only has heard of the boy but is also of the opinion that he is being fed by snakes. Their venom, she says, is actually milk to him.

I go to bed, sleep the odd post-trip sleep from which you wake up unsure of where, or who, you are.

I throw open the curtains, and there is Katmandu: a sprawling Senussian city where prayer flags extend from wacky tower to strange veranda to fluting spire-of-uncertain-purpose. Beyond Scuss City: the Himalayas, pure, Platonically white, the white there was before other colors were invented. In the foreground is the massive, drained, under-repair Hyatt pool, in a field of dead, dry Hyatt grass, and a woman tending to the first of an endless row of shrubs, in a vignette that should be titled *Patience Will Prevail*.

I take a walk.

The level of noise, energy, and squalor of Katmandu makes even the poorest section of the most wild American city seem placid and urban-planned. Some guys squat in a trash-strewn field, inexplicably beating the crap out of what looks like purple cotton candy. A woman whose face has been burned or torn off walks past me, running some small errand, an errand made heart-breaking by the way she carries herself, which seems to signify: I'm sure this will be a very good day! Here is a former Pepsi kiosk, now barbed-wired and manned by Nepalese soldiers armed for Maoists; here a Ping-Pong table made of slate, with brick legs. I cross a mythical bleak vacant lot I've seen in dreams, a lot surrounded by cliffs, if the lake were dry and high rises like a lake surrounded by cliffs, if the lake were dry and had a squatting, peeing lady in the middle of it. Averting my eyes, I see another woman, with baby, and teeth that jut, terrifyingly, straight out of her mouth, horizontally, as if her gums had loos-

ened up and she had tilted her teeth out at ninety degrees. She stretches out a hand, jiggles the baby with the other, as if to say: *This baby, these teeth, come on, how are we supposed to live?*

Off to one side of the road is a strange sunken hollow — like a shallow basement excavation — filled with rows of wooden benches on which hundreds of the dustiest men, women, and children imaginable wait for something with the sad patience of animals. It's like a bus station, but there's no road in sight. Several Westerners huddle near a gate, hairied-looking, admitting people or not. A blind man is expelled from the lot and lingers by the gate, acting casual, like he was not just expelled. What's going on here? Three hundred people in a kind of open-air jail, no blind guys allowed.

I go in, walk through the crowd ("Good morning how on you I am fahh!"), and corner a harried Western woman with several mouth sores.

"What is all this?" I say.

"Soup kitchen," she says.

"For . . . ?" I say.

"Anybody who needs," she says.

And there are many who need: two hundred, three hundred people a sitting, she says, two sittings a day, never an empty seat.

This, I think, explains the expelled blind man: he came too late. Life is suffering, the Buddha said, by which he did not mean *Every moment of life is unbearable* but rather *All happiness/nest/contentment is transient; all appearances of permanence are illusory*.

The faceless woman, the odd-toothed woman, the dusty elderly people with babies in their laps, waiting for a meal, the blind guy by the gate, feigning indifference: in Nepal, it occurs to me, life is suffering, nothing esoteric about it.

Then, at the end of a road too narrow for a car, appears the famous Boudha stupa: huge, pale, glacial, rising out of the surrounding dusty squalor like Hope itself.

A stupa is a huge three-dimensional Buddhist prayer aid, usually dome-shaped, often containing some holy relic, a bone or lock of hair from the historical Buddha. This particular stupa has been accreting for many centuries; some accounts date it back to 500 A.D. It is ringed by a circular street filled with hundreds of circumambulating Buddhist pilgrims from all over Nepal, Tibet, Bhutan,

India: wild costumes in every hue of purple, red, and orange; odd piercings and hairstyles. A shop blares a version of the *om mani padme hung* chant over and over, all day. A woman with a goiter the size of a bowling ball gossips with some friends.

The stupa is multileveled, terraced; people circumambulate on each level. Pigeon shadows flee across multiple planar surfaces, along with the shadows of thousands of prayer flags. Barefoot boys lug buckets of yellowish whitewash to the top level and sling these across the surface of the dome, leaving jagged yellow thunderbolts. The only sounds are birdsong and the occasional clanging of a bell and, in the distance, a power saw.

I do lap after lap, praying for everybody I know. For me, this has been a tough year: a beloved uncle died, my parents' house was destroyed by Katrina, a kindhearted cousin shipped off to Iraq, a car accident left my teenage daughter sobbing by the side of the road on a dark, freezing night, I've found myself loving my wife of eighteen years more than I'd even known you could love another human being — a good thing, except that it involves a terrifying downside: the realization that there must someday come a parting.

Today, at the stupa, it occurs to me that this low-level ambient fear constitutes a decent working definition of the human: a human being is someone who, having lived a while, becomes terrified and, having become terrified, deeply craves an end to the fear.

All of this — the stupa, the millions of people who have circumambulated it during the hundreds of years since it was built (in Shakespeare's time, while Washington lived, during the Civil War, as Glenn Miller played), the shops, the iconography, the statues, the *tangka* paintings, the chanting, the hundreds of thousands of human lives spent in meditation — all of this began when one man walked into the woods, sat down, and tried to end his fear by doing something purely internal: working on his mind.

As I'm leaving the stupa, a kid drags me into a little room to the side of the main gate. Inside are two massive prayer wheels. He shows me how to spin them. Three laps is recommended for maximum blessing. In one corner sits a midget in monk's robes, praying.

"Lama," my guide says as we pass.

On the second lap, he points out a collection of images of great Buddhist saints, stuck above a small window. Here is the Dalai

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Lama. Here is Guru Rinpoche, who first brought Buddhism to Tibet. Here is Bomjon, the meditating boy.

The photo shows a boy of about twelve: a chubby crewcut smiling little guy, shy but proud: like a Little Leaguer, but instead of a baseball uniform, he's wearing monk's robes.

"Bomjon," I say.

"You are very talent!" says my guide.

Back at the Hyatt, I meet Subel, my translator, a kindly, media-savvy twenty-three-year-old who looks like a Nepali Robert Downey Jr. We take a terrifying ride through Katmandu on his motorcycle to a darkened travel agency, where we buy plane tickets by candlelight; Katmandu is under a program called "load shedding," which, in the name of conservation, cuts power to a different part of town every night. The agent processes our tickets sacramentally in the light from three red candles tilted on sheets of newspaper.

Given Nepal's political situation, there's something ominous about the darkened travel agency, a suggestion of bleaker conditions soon to come.

More than ten thousand Nepalis have died in the past ten years in an ongoing war between the monarchy and the Maoists. Over the past three years, the new king has basically canceled the burgeoning but inefficient democracy and seized back all power. A week after I leave, he will arrest opposition leaders, and the most serious attacks yet on Katmandu will take place.

Over dinner, Subel (like some prerevolutionary Russian intellectual, a Herzen or Belinsky, personally offended by the cruelty of his government) gets tears in his eyes telling me about a twenty-year-old Nepali woman who died in a distant airport, unable to get to the Katmandu hospital because the inefficient airline canceled all flights for three days straight; tells about the arrogant Nepali soldiers who pulled over two friends of his, singers, and made them sing on the street as the soldiers laughed at them. He doesn't want to ever leave Nepal, he says, unless in doing so he can acquire a useful skill and come back and "make some differences."


The country is scared, wired, suffering, dreading an imminent explosion that will take a catastrophically poor country and turn it into a catastrophically poor country in a state of civil war. In Katmandu it seems everybody knows about the meditating boy, fol-

lows news of him avidly, believes he's doing what he's said to be doing, and wishes him luck. They feel him, you sense, as a kind of savior-from-within, a radical new solution to festering old problems. Political pragmatism exhausted, they're looking for something, anything, to save them.

A friend of Subel's tells me he hopes the meditating boy will do "something good for this country," meaning, to my ear, *something good for this poor, beaten-down country, which I dearly love*.

Next morning we fly to the southern village of Simra in a sub-marine-like plane that has, for a sun visor, a piece of newspaper taped to the windshield. The seats are webbed and metal-framed like lawn chairs, the floor made of carpetless deeded metal. We pass, barely, over one-room farms perched atop cartoonishly steep mountains, entire spreads consisting of just a postage-stamp-sized green terrace dug out of a gray mountainside. From Simra we take a jeep to Baganj and spend a restless night in a Coscofian hotel where the bathroom lights buzz even when off, and I am perplexed by a mysterious panel of seven switches that never seem to control the same light twice.

Next morning we're off to see the boy.

We head back through Simra by minivan and then beyond, through a swirl of the maddest poverty: girls plod out of deep woods with stacks of huge leaves on their backs to feed some animal; a woman squats to , yards away from a muddy pond where another woman draws water; men pound metal things with other metal things; dirty kids are sniffling by dirty dogs as dogs and kids stand in trash.

After a couple of hours, we pull off into a kind of gravel staging area overhanging with red welcome banners. On a large billboard — the only one I've seen all morning — ~~_____~~

"Is this it?" I say.

"This is it," Subel says.

Beyond the staging area, the road goes single-vehicle, double-tracked. I try taking notes, but the road is too bumpy. *CRWIFF???* I write. *FIIWUDD???*

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The jungle gets denser; a dry riverbed on the right disappears into the trees. Finally, we reach a kind of minivillage of crude wooden stalls. Boy-related postcards and framed photos and pamphlets are for sale, along with flowers and scarves to present as offerings. We leave the van and walk along a dirt road. Pilgrim-related garbage lines the ditches on either side. A TV on a rickety roadside table blares a Hollywood video: a woman so sexy she captures a shipful of genial sailors. At a climactic moment, she drops backward into a giant cup of tea, causing a blind man to lose his treasured burkap sack.

A mile further on, we leave our shoes in a kind of Shoe Corral, take a narrow path worn smooth by tens of thousands of pilgrim feet. The path passes through the roots of a large pipal tree hung with pictures of the boy. A quarter-mile more and we reach a tree-posted sign in Nepali, requesting quiet and forbidding flash photography, especially flash photography aimed at the meditating boy. Beyond the sign, seven or eight recently arrived pilgrims stand at a gate in a barbed-wire fence, craning to see the boy while stuffing small bills into a wooden donation box mounted on the fence.

Though I can't see him from here, he's *there*, right over there somewhere, maybe five hundred feet away, in that exact cluster of trees.

I step through the pilgrims, to the fence, and look inside.

Online accounts say that at night a curtain is drawn around the boy. This is presumably how he's being fed: at night, behind the curtain. So I expect to see the drawn-back curtain hanging from . . . what? The tree itself? Or maybe they've built some kind of structure into the tree: an adjacent room, a kind of backstage area — a place where his followers hang out and keep the food they're sneaking him at night.

In my projection of it, the site resembles the only large-capacity outdoor venue I'm familiar with: a rock concert, with the boy at center stage.

I step through the pilgrims, to the fence, and look inside.

The first impression is zoo-like. You are looking into an enclosure. Inside the enclosure are dozens of smallish pipal trees fes-

toned with a startling density of prayer flags (red, green, yellow, many faded to white from the sun and rain). This Enclosure also has a vaguely military feel: something recently and hastily constructed, with security in mind.

I scan the Enclosure, looking for That Which Is Enclosed. Nothing. I look closer, focusing on three or four larger trees that, unlike the smaller trees, have the characteristic flaring pipal roots. This too feels zoolike: the scanning, the rescanning, the sudden sense of Ah, *there* he is!

Because there he is.

At this distance (about two hundred feet), it's hard to distinguish where the boy's body ends and the tree roots begin. I can make out his black hair, one arm, one shoulder.

The effect is now oddly crèche-like. You are glimpsing an ancient vignette that will someday become mythic but that for now is occurring in real time, human-scaled, warts and all: small, sloppy concrete blobs at the base of the fence posts; an abandoned tree-house-like platform near the boy's tree; a red plastic chair midway between the two fences.

No secret tree-adjacent room.

No curtain, and nowhere to hang a curtain, although there is a kind of prayer-flag sleeve about ten feet above the boy's head that could conceivably be slid down at night.

There's nobody inside the Enclosure but the boy.

And a young monk standing near the gate. The monk's bangs appear bowl-cut. He's wearing a St. Francis-evoking robe. There is something striking about him, an odd spiritual intensity/charisma. He appears very young and very old at the same time. There is a suggestion of the extraterrestrial about his head-body ratio, his posture, his quality of birdlike concentration.

Between the gate and the inner fence is a wide dirt path leading up to where the boy is sitting. Only dignitaries and journalists are allowed inside the Enclosure. Subel has assured me we'll be able to get in.

I sit on a log. What I'll do is hang out here for an hour or so, get my bearings, take a few notes on the general site layout, and — "OK, man," Subel says tersely. "We go in now."

"Now?" I say.

"Uh, if you want to go in?" Subel says. "Now is it."

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Meaning: Now or never, bro. I just barely talked you in.

The crowd parts. Some Village Guy — head of a Village Committee formed to maintain the site and provide security for the boy — unlocks the gate. The young monk looks me over. He's not suspicious exactly; protective, maybe. He makes me feel (or I make me feel) that I'm disturbing the boy for frivolous reasons, like the embodiment of Western Triviality, field rep for the Society of International Travel Voyeurs.

We step inside, followed by a gray-haired lama in purple robes. The lama and the young monk start down a wide path that leads to the inner fence, ending directly in front of, and about fifty feet away from, the boy.

Subel and I follow.

My mouth is dry, and I have a sudden feeling of gratitude/reverence/terror. What a privilege. Oh God, I have somehow underestimated the gravity of this place and moment. I am potentially at a great religious site, in the original, mythic time: at Christ's manger, say, with Shakyamuni at Bodhi Gaya, watching Moses come down from the Mount. I don't want to go any farther, actually. We're in the boy's sight line now, if somebody with eyes closed can be said to have a sight line, closing fast, walking directly at him. It's quieter and tenser than I could have imagined. We are walking down the aisle of a silent church toward a stern, judging priest.

We reach the inner fence: as far as anyone is allowed to go.

At this distance, I can really see him. His quality of nonmotion is startling. His head doesn't move. His arms, hands, don't move. Nothing moves. His chest does not constrict/expand with breathing. He could be dead. He could be carved from the same wood as the tree. He is thinner than in the photos; that is, his one exposed arm is thinner. Thinner but not emaciated. He still has good muscle tone. Dust is on everything. His dusty hair has grown past the tip of his nose. His hair is like a helmet. He wears a sleeveless brown garment. His hands are in one of the mudras in which the Buddha's hands are traditionally depicted. He is absolutely beautiful: beautiful as the central part of this crèche-like, timeless vignette, beautiful in his devotion. I feel a stab of something for him. Allegiance? Pity? Urge-to-Protect? My heart rate is going through the roof.

The gray-haired lama, off to my right, drops, does three quick

prostrations: a Buddhist sign of respect, a way of reminding oneself of the illuminated nature of all beings, performed in the presence of spiritually advanced beings in whom this illuminated nature is readily apparent.

The lama begins his second prostration. *Me too, I mutter, and down I go.* Dropping, I think I glimpse the boy's hand move. Is he signaling me? Does he recognize, in me, something special? Has he been, you know, kind of *waiting* for me? In the midst of my final prostration, I realize: his hand didn't move, dumbass. It was wishful thinking. It was ego, nimrod: the boy doesn't move for seven months but can't help but move when George arrives, since George is George and has always been George, something very George-special?

My face is flushed from the prostrations and the effort of neurotic self-flagellation.

The gray-haired lama takes off at a fast walk, circumambulating the boy clockwise on a path along the fence.

The young monk says something to Subel, who tells me it's time to take my photo. My photo? I have a camera but don't want to risk disturbing the boy with the digital shutter sound. Plus, I don't know how to turn off the flash, so I will be, at close range, taking a flash photo directly into the boy's sight line, the one thing explicitly prohibited by that sign back there.

"You have to," Subel says. "That's how they know you're a journalist."

I hold up my notebook. Maybe I could just take some notes?

"They're simple people, man," he says. "You have to take a photo."

I set the camera to video mode (no flash involved), pan back and forth across the strangely beautiful Enclosure, zoom in on the boy.

It's one thing to imagine seven months of nonmotion, but to see, in person, even ten minutes of such utter nonmotion is stunning. I think, Has he really been sitting like that since *May? May?* All through the London bombings, the Cairo bombings, the unmasking of Deep Throat, Katrina, the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, the Lyndie England trial, the Bali bombing, the Kashmir earthquake, the Paris riots, the White Sox World Series victory, the N.Y.C. transit strike, through every thought and purchase and self-recrimination of the entire Christmas season?

Suddenly, the question of his not eating seems almost beside the point.

The young monk says that if we like, we may now do a circumambulation.

Meaning: Time's up.

We start off, the young monk accompanying us.

His name, he says, is Prem.

Prem grew up with the boy; they're distant cousins, but he characterizes them as "more friends than relatives." They became monks at the same time, just after fourth grade. A couple of years ago, they traveled together to Lumbini, the birthplace of the Buddha, for a ten-day Buddhist ceremony being led by a renowned teacher from Debra Dun, India. There the boy was invited to undertake a three-year retreat at this lama's monastery.

But after one year, the boy left the monastery — *flad* is the verb Prem uses — with just the clothes on his back. Prem doesn't know why. Nobody does. The boy came home briefly, vanished again, after a dream in which a God appeared to him and told him that if he didn't leave home he would die. His distraught family found him under this tree, rarely speaking, refusing food. The family and the villagers were mortified, embarrassed, demanded he stop. He was teased, poked with sticks, tempted with food, but still refused to eat. Three months into his meditation, he called for Prem, asked him to manage the site, minimize the noise. Prem is now his main attendant, here every day from early morning until dusk.

"Who is inside the enclosure with him at night?" I ask.

"Nobody," Prem says.

Prem shows us an area just inside the fence where, per the boy's request, Prem performs Buddhist rituals: a puja table, incense pots, texts.

It was just here, he tells us, that the first snake, crawling in, got stuck under the fence. The monks assisting at the time couldn't kill it, for religious reasons, and were struggling inefficiently to free it. Finally, the boy got up from his meditation, walked over, and freed the snake. As he did so, the snake lunged up and bit him.

"What kind of snake was it?" I ask, trying to be journalistic.

"It was . . . a big jungle snake," Subel translates.

"Ah," I say.

The snakes, Prem says, were "arrows" sent by older lamas, jealous because they'd practiced all their lives and hadn't attained this level of realization.

I ask about the boy's meditation practice. What exactly is he doing? Does Prem know?

Prem hesitates, says something to Subel in a softer voice.

"His belief is, this boy is God," Subel says. "God has come to earth in the form of this boy."

I look at Prem. He looks at me. In his eyes, I see that he knows this statement sounds a little wacky. I try, with my eyes, to communicate my basic acceptance of the possibility.

We have a moment.

Does the boy ever move or adjust his posture?

Prem smiles for the first time, laughs even. The sense is: Ha, very funny, believe me, he *never* moves. People accuse us all the time, he says. They say, This is not a boy, it is a statue, a dummy, something carved from clay.

What was the boy like as a cousin, as a friend?

A good boy. Very sweet-hearted. Never cursed. Did not drink alcohol or eat meat.

He would always smile first, then speak.

Back near the Shoe Corral, we talk with the Village Guy. He seems frazzled, overworked, cognizant of the fact that anybody with a lick of sense would suspect him and the Committee of being at the heart of any hoax, anxious to address such concerns in a straightforward way. He reminds me of one of my down-to-earth Chicago uncles, if one of my Chicago uncles suddenly found himself neglecting everything else in his life to tend to a miracle. His attitude seems to be: *Why should I lie? You think I'm enjoying this? You want to take over?* So far the Committee has collected approximately four hundred forty-five thousand rupees (about sixty-five hundred dollars). A portion of this is used for site maintenance and the small salaries of eighteen volunteers; the rest is being held in a bank for the boy.

Something occurs to me: it's one thing to, from afar, project a scheming, greedy group of villagers in a faraway land, but when you actually get to the land, you see that, before they were scheming, they had intact, in-place lives, lives that did not involve schem-

ing. They were fathers, husbands, grandfathers, keepers-of-back-yard-gardens, local merchants. They had reputations. For someone to risk these preexisting lives (lives which are, in this case, small, impoverished, precarious) would take a considerable level of forethought, risk, and diabolical organization. Imagine that first meeting: *OK, so what will do is get a kid to pretend to be meditating and not eating, then sneak him food and water and get the word out internationally, and before long — bingo — we've got six grand in the bank! Everyone in agreement? Ready? Let's go!*

After lunch, bound for the boy's village, we cross a dry riverbed of coarse gray sand, like cremated ashes, into which some men are sinking a water well.

When a fairy tale says, *He left his village and set out to seek his fortune*, this is the village you might imagine the hero leaving: a cluster of huts along a dirt track. Mustard and corn growing on rounded slopes, higher than your head. Kids racing in dust clouds behind the minivan, baby chicks skittering off into high weeds, as if dropping out of the children's clothes.

The boy's mother is home but unhappy to see me. I would describe her reaction as a wince, if a wince could be accomplished without a change of facial expression: as Subel introduces me, she undergoes a kind of full-body stiffening, then plucks three glasses off a tray with the fingers of one hand and disappears brusquely inside the house.

So much for that, I think.

But then a little girl comes out with the three glasses, now full of tea. The mother sits, submitting to torture in the name of politeness. She's an older woman, pretty, with a nose ring, answers my questions without ever once looking at me.

When he was born, he didn't cry the way other babies do. Instead, he made a different kind of sound, a sound she describes as a sharp scream.

He kind of shouted out, she says.

As a child, he was totally different from her other children. He was a loner, always wandering off on his own. When people would scold or bully him, he would just smile. When he came back from the monastery in India, his speech patterns had changed: if he kept to small sentences he was fine, but when he tried to talk in

longer sentences he would get anxious and agitated and descend into gibberish; no one could understand him. She thought maybe some kind of curse had been put on him by the lama he'd fled. But now she understands: he was going through a profound change. The main problem at this point, she says, is the noise. He can't concentrate on his meditation. They have gone so far as to outlaw one group from coming to the site, a sect from a particular part of the Tarai, known for being loud. (Subel later relays a common slur about this group: you can't tell if they're laughing, or screaming in agony.)

All of this is happening for a reason, she says. There is a God in him that is helping him feed himself. She sits quietly, grieved, flies landing on her face, waiting for this to be over.

She puts me in mind, of course, of the Virgin Mary: a simple countrywoman, mother of a son who appears in a time of historical crisis representing a solution and a hope above politics.

We walk back to the van, followed by the flock of kids, who still seem to be miraculously sprouting baby chicks.

Our plan is: Go back to the hotel, get some rest. Come back tomorrow, spend the night, see if some kind of Secret Eating is taking place.

It's misty, getting cold. There are open fires along the road, and local governments are distributing free firewood, concerned that people will freeze to death tonight in the countryside.

And they do. During this night, over a hundred people die of exposure across India, Nepal, and Bangladesh, including one old man in this district. Temperatures in Delhi reach their coldest recorded levels in over seventy years.

And tomorrow night, the driver tells us, it's going to be even colder.

Next evening the driver drops us at the Shoe Corral.

He'll return tomorrow morning at eight.

Nearby is a kind of crude tent: four trees hacked into tent poles, with what looks like a parachute draped over them. This is the Committee Tent, where volunteer members of the Committee stay overnight to provide security. But tonight there's no Committee, just the boy's brother and a friend. Though not expecting us, they have no objection to our staying. Three lamas from Eastern Nepal

will also be here, meditating all night. Will we need mais? Do I want to sleep near the lamas down by the gate, or up here at the tent near the fire?

We leave our shoes at the tent. The lamas are seated in front of the gate on a single mat, canoe-style. The brother puts my mat ten feet or so behind them, placing it carefully so leaf moisture won't fall on me.

Prem has left for the night. The brother checks the padlock on the gate. Sitting, I can't see the boy, but if I crane around the monks, I can see his tree. I'm wearing thermal long Johns under a pair of khaki pants, a long-sleeve thermal undershirt, a sweater, and a sleeveless down vest.

This won't be bad, I think.

It gets dark fast. A big moon rises, just short of full. The brother and his pal hiss angrily back and forth, then launch off on a perimeter check, their flashlight bobbing away in the dark.

From inside the Enclosure, or maybe the far side of it, I hear what sounds like a cough. Sound is traveling strangely. Was that the boy? Did the boy just cough? To note this possible cough in my notebook, I devise a system: I take out my mini flashlight, mute the light with my hand, so as not to disturb the boy, record the time, make my note.

At 7:20, oddly, a car alarm goes off. How many cars in deep rural Nepal have alarms? It goes on and on. Finally it dawns on me, when the car alarm moves to a different tree, that the car alarm is a bird.

The Car-Alarm Bird of Southern Nepal keeps it up for ten minutes, then falls silent for the rest of the night.

In this quiet, even the slightest posture adjustment is deafening. If a tiny breeze picks up, you notice. If a drop of moisture falls, you jump. So when one of the lamas stands up and goes to the fence, it's a major event. The other lamas whisper, point excitedly. The first lama paces back to me, gestures by touching his fingers to his forehead and flinging something outward. I don't get it. He has a headache? His head is really sweating? He motions for me to return with him. Soon I'm sitting canoe-style between Lama One and Lama Two. I can hear Lama One mumbling mantras under his breath. Suddenly he turns to me, again makes the gesture, points into the Enclosure. I get it now: the gesture means, *Look, there is something emanating from the boy's forehead!*

Do I see it?

Actually, I do: vivid red and blue lights (like flares) are hovering, drifting up from approximately where the boy is sitting, as if borne upward on an impossibly light updraft.

What the heck, I think. My face goes hot. Is this what a miracle looks like, feels like, in real time? I close my eyes, open them. The lights are still drifting up.

A noise begins, a steady drumlike thumping from inside the Enclosure, like an impossibly loud heartbeat.

For several concept-free seconds, it's just: colored up-floating lights and the boy's amplified heartbeat.

I look through the binoculars. Yes, red and blue sparks, yep, and now, wow, green. And orange. Then suddenly, they're all orange. They look — actually, they look like orange cinders. Like orange cinders floating up from a fire. A campfire, say. I lower the binoculars. Seen with the naked eye, the sparks look to be coming not from inside the Enclosure but from just beyond it. Slowly, a campfire resolves itself in the distance. The heartbeat becomes synopated. The heartbeat is coming from off to my right and just behind me and is actually, I can now tell, a drum.

I stand up, go to the gate. That, I think, is a campfire. I've never seen, it's true, red/blue/green cinders, but still, that is, I am almost positive, a campfire. I'm embarrassed on the boy's behalf for his motley, boisterous, easily excited entourage.

But maybe, part of me protests, this is how a miracle happens?

Another part answers: it has all the marks of a Sunday school.

I return to my assigned spot, resolve to ignore all future faux-ecitement, and just watch.

At 8:30, I take my winter hat and gloves from my pack. Abruptly the lamas rise and exit in a group. What, I think, the lamas are chicken-ing out? I'm tougher than the lamas? Soon they return, laden with mattresses and fat sleeping rolls and plump pillows. What, I think, the lamas are incredibly well prepared for what is shaping up to be a damn cold night?

Subel goes back to the Committee Tent to sit by the fire.

Now it's just me and the snoring, sleep-moaning lamas.

From near the source of the drumming, I suddenly hear dozens of barking dogs. The drum patterns morph into Native American

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patterns from old Westerns, as if what they're doing over in that village is planning to attack and overrun our little outpost here, using their constantly barking attack dogs.

Before long the dogs and drums fade and I'm lapsing into odd exhausted waking dreams: The boy sticks a pole into my chest, which is made of fiberboard, so the pole goes in easily and painlessly. *Don't go for the heart, he says. I don't get it. Should I write about you?* I ask. *Sure, he says, go ahead, just tell the truth, doubts and contradictions and all. I don't mind.*

Soon my legs and feet are freezing. I take my socks out of my pocket and put them on. The vest/sweater combo is keeping my torso warm, but my neck and legs are becoming problematic. I drape a pair of dirty sweatpants around my neck, take out my coat (a shell that's supposed to have a fleece lining, which I've somehow managed to lose), arrange it over my legs. Subel returns from the fire and stretches out behind me, trying to sleep. I think of him back there: no socks, just a flannel shirt and a light windbreaker. I have an emergency blanket in my pack, a tinfoil-ish thing in a small cardboard box. I throw it back to him, he unrolls it for what seems like hours: the noisiest thing I've ever heard.

"Am I being too loud?" he asks sweetly.

By 10:30, he's asleep. I'm fading fast. The dogs sound distant, goose-like. The drummer seems tired. I try to feel the boy sitting out there, and really I can't. How are you doing this? I think. Forget eating, how do you sit so long? My back hurts, my legs hurt, the deep soreness in my  seems to connote Permanent Damage.

At 10:58, a jet passes overhead, bound for Katmandu.

At 11:05, I take the dirty sweatpants from around my neck, stand up, put them on over my khakis. I put the coat/shell on, drawstring it tight, tuck my chin down, so none of my face is exposed. With a rush of happiness, I remember there are two more dirty pairs of pants in my pack! I drape them like blankets over my legs and feet. What else do I have? Two pairs of dirty underwear, which I briefly consider putting on my head.

By 11:22, I can see my breath.

Even in my socks, my feet are freezing. I sit still; any move may cause an increase in Coldness, and any increased Coldness is, at this point, unacceptable. I remember a certain yoga move that involves tightening the rectum to get a heat tingle to surge up the

spine, and do this, and it feels better, but not better enough to justify the exhausting rectal flexing.

At 11:55, dozing off, I wake to the sound of a woman's voice, possibly my wife, shouting my name from near the Committee Tent.

Time slows way down. I wait and wait to check my watch. Three hours go by, slow, torturous hours. It is now, I calculate, around three in the morning. Excellent: next will come predawn, then dawn, then the minivan, the hotel, America. As a special treat, I allow myself to check my watch.

It's 12:10. Fifteen minutes — fifteen minutes? — have passed since my wife called my name. [redacted] I find myself in the strange position of being angry at Time.

Subel stirs, gets up, says he's going back to the tent: his feet are too cold.

I take out the flashlight, carefully write: *If it gets colder than this I'm [redacted]*.

It gets colder.

Soon I'm making no effort to stay awake or, ha ha, meditate: just trying not to freak out, because if I freak out and flee into the Nepali darkness, it will still be freezing and I'll still have eight hours to wait (eight hours? [redacted]) before the minivan returns.

At 12:15, time officially stops. My current posture (sitting up cross-legged) becomes untenable. I can't help it. I fall over on my side. This is going to invalidate the whole idea of: stay up all night, confirm no Overnight Feeding. Oh, [redacted] that, I think. The ground is hard and cold through the thin mat. I bail the dirty pants up around my frozen feet. The drums start again, accompanied by the inexplicable smell of burning rubber. Wherefore burning rubber? I can't figure it.

It starts to rain.

To say I fall asleep would be inaccurate. It's more like I pass out: unwilling, involuntary, unstoppable. Out I go, totally, like a wino on whom a clothes hamper has exploded.

I would characterize the quality of my sleep as: terrified/defiant. I am think-dreaming: hypothermia! People died out here last night, people who were probably wrapped in blankets. People are probably dying right now. This is serious; try and wake up, really.

I won't wake up, I won't, I answer myself. Because if I wake up, I'll be back where I was before, trapped in that freezing endless torment of a night.

But finally I do wake up, with a start, shivering, colder than I've ever been in my life. I struggle back to a sitting position, find my flashlight, groggily check the time.

It's 1:20.

I've slept an hour.

[redacted] the night is still young.

It starts to rain harder. The flashlight makes a little hiss-pop and goes out — possibly, it occurs to me, the boy's way of saying: Lights out.

Looking into the darkness, I think: Still there? Through all of this, and much more, so many other intolerable nights, before I even knew you existed? If Snake One bit you on a night like this, did you hear it coming? Did you think of bolting, screaming out, calling for your mother?

Poor kid is just sitting in the dark all alone. Tonight, anyway, nobody seems to have the slightest interest in feeding him.

Something powerful starts to dawn on me.

No one has entered the Enclosure all night. After a couple of early checks, the brother and his pal hightailed it back to the Committee Tent. The only entry, the front gate, has been locked since we arrived.

The fact that the Powers That Be (tonight, just the brother and his pal) let us spend the night with no advance notice argues against the existence of a Secret Feeding Plan, because any such Plan would therefore constantly be at the mercy of Drop-Ins, i.e., would have to be aborted anytime anyone showed up to spend the night. There could theoretically be days in a row, weeks even, when it would be impossible to perform the food sneakage.

A suave, logical Devil's Advocate arrives in my mind.

Come on, think aggressively, he says. Don't be a sucker. Is there any possible way they can be sneaking him food?

They could theoretically, I answer, be hiding food in the woods and bringing it in over the fence at a position far from the gate.

Could a person get over that fence without making any noise? he says.

I don't think so, I say. I can hear it anytime anyone leaves the tent, even to pee. And besides, how does an earnest hyperreligious monk who dreams of a God telling him to flee his home become a boy who willingly and sneakily accepts food and water when he has publicly forsworn these?

Good point, says the Devil's Advocate.
Doesn't ring true, I say.

No it doesn't, the Devil's Advocate says, and fades away.

No light appears in the distance to signal dawn, not at all: it just keeps getting darker. I'm shivering, desperate for the paradise of that sad little gray van. I'll put my feet up on the seat, have the driver crank up the heat! We'll stop for tea; I'll pour the tea down my freezing three pairs of pants! I hallucinate a Georgia O'Keeffe flower that opens and closes in megastow motion while changing colors. I walk downhill into some sacred cave, part of a line of chanting Eastern Holy Men. One of the Holy Men asks a ponderous Zen question, which I answer in a comedian voice via some kind of fart joke. A laugh track sounds in my mind. The Holy Men are not amused. The boy intervenes: *That is his way of being profound*, he says, *leave him alone*.

I'm so tired, says the Devil's Advocate, who has now come back.
Oh God, me too, I say.

Finally, I give up on getting comfortable, and this seems to help. It's a strange thing, staying up all night in the jungle to see if a teenager pulls a fast one via eating. The pain I am feeling at every sensor is making me kind of giddy. Being beyond tired, beyond cold, completely stripped of control, I'm finding, has the effect of clearing the mind.

You know that feeling at the end of the day, when the anxiety of that-which-I-must-do falls away and, for maybe the first time that day, you see, with some clarity, the people you love and the ways you love, during that day, slightly ignored them, turned away from them to get back to what you were doing, blunted out some mildly hurtful thing, projected, instead of the deep love you really feel, a surge of defensiveness or self-protection or suspicion? That moment when you think, Oh God, what have I done with this day? And what am I doing with my life? And how must I change to avoid catastrophic end-of-life regrets?

I feel like that now: tired of the Me I've always been, tired of making the same mistakes, repetitively stumbling after the same small ego strokes, being caught in the same loops of anxiety and defensiveness. At the end of my life, I know I won't be wishing I'd held more back, been less effusive, more often stood on ceremony, for-

given less, spent more days oblivious to the secret wishes and fears of the people around me. So what is stopping me from stepping outside my habitual ?

My mind, my limited mind.

The story of life is the story of the same basic mind readdressing the same problems in the same already discredited ways. First order of business: feed the trap. Work the hours to feed the trap. Having fed the trap, shit, piss, preparing to again feed the trap. Because it is your trap, defend it at all costs.

Because we feel ourselves first and foremost as physical beings, the physical comes to dominate us: beloved uncles die, parents are displaced, cousins go to war, children suffer misfortune, love becomes a trap. The deeper in you go, the more it hurts to get out. Disaster (sickness, death, loss) is guaranteed and in fact is already en route, and when it comes, it hurts and may even destroy us.

We fight this by making ourselves less vulnerable, mastering the physical, becoming richer, making bigger safety nets, safer cars, better medicines.

But it's nowhere near enough.

What if the boy is making this fight in a new way, by struggling against the thousands-of-years-old usage patterns of the brain? What if he is the first of a new breed — or the most recent manifestation of an occasionally appearing breed — sent to show us something new about ourselves, a new way our bodies and minds can work?

Could it be? Could it?

Part of me wants to hop the outer fence, hop the inner fence, sit knee to knee with him, demand to know what the hell is going on.

I get up, but just to take a . It's so dark I can't tell where I've left the trail. There are dim shapes on the ground, but I can't tell if they're holes, shrubs, or shadows. I think of snakes, I think: Bring them on. Then I think: Foo boy, no no, don't bring them on. I try to get deep enough into the woods that nobody will, tomorrow, step in my . When I do go, it's Niagara-esque, so loud the boy must hear it, if in fact he's still hearing things.

Sorry, sorry, I think, I just really had to go.

I look up into the vast Nepali sky. Night, I conclude, is a very long thing. Is he suffering in there as much as I'm suffering out here? I wonder.

If so, then what he's doing is a monumental, insane feat of will-power.

If not, it's something even stranger.

Hours later, at a moment that (in the quality of light, a slight shift in the ambient sound) feels like the Beginning of the Beginning of Morning — the colored lights appear again.

I struggle to the fence, trying not to tread upon any sleeping lammas. Scattered across the ground inside the Enclosure are thousands of snowflake-like silverish glittering flecks. I perform a test, developed back in my acid days: Are the flecks also on my hands? They are. Are they still visible when I close my eyes? They are. Therefore they are an optical illusion, albeit one I have never had before or heard of anyone else ever having.

Oh man, I think, I have no idea what's going on here. The line between miracle and hallucination is all but gone. I am so tired. The center is not . . . What is it the center is sometimes said not to do? Hanging? Having? The center are not hanging.

The lights go white, then orange. Definitely orange. I visually compare this new orange bulk of light to the orange bulk of light I know is the fire back at the Committee Tent.

Again I conclude that the miracle is a campfire.

And yet.

And yet.

Undeniably, over an indefinite period of time, during which time continues not to pass, it gets lighter. The canoeful of lammas rises up, confers briefly, rushes off on a good-morning circumambulation.

I go to the fence.

The sun comes up.

The boy is revealed, sitting, still sitting, in exactly the same position as when I last saw him, at sundown. How did you do it, I think, in your thin sleeveless garment? All night bare to the cold, matless on the cold ground, in full lotus: no coat, no gloves, no socks, no hope of an early-morning rescue.

It seems impossible he's not dead. He looks made of stone, utterly motionless, as impervious to the night as the tree he appears to be part of. Can I see his breath? I can't. Does his chest expand and contract? It doesn't, not that I can see.

Because this night was hard for me, part of me expects it was

hard for him and won't be surprised if he stands up and announces he's quitting.

But then I remember he's already spent on the order of two hundred nights out here.

I take what I know will be my last look at him, hoping for . . . I'm not sure what. Some indication that he's alive, that he's operating within the same physical constraints as I am: an adjustment of posture, a clearing of the throat, a weary sigh.

Nothing.

I feel, to gravely understate it, the monumental distance between his abilities and mine.

Pilgrims begin arriving. They step to the fence, gape in wonder, dash off along the circular path, chatting loudly, speculating on what he's doing and why he's doing it.

In short, a new day begins.

I rejoin Subel at the Committee Tent.

"I salute you," he says.

"I salute you," I say.

Both of us are in a state of sleep-deprived paranoia. It has separately occurred to us that the boy must be dead or in a coma. When Subel brought this up last night at the fire, the brother's only explanation was that since the boy sits leaning slightly forward, if he does die, he'll topple forward. Subel asks me how long it takes a body to decay. We try to remember: didn't Prem tell us that he goes to the ditch every morning and checks to make sure the boy is breathing?

We are relatively sure he did.

The family, Subel tells me, desperate to prove that this is real, is livid with the government and the media for not arranging appropriate scientific tests. They will do anything to help; their only condition is that the boy not be touched, since this would interfere with his meditation.

We experience the deep delight of putting our shoes on again. At one of the stalls, we stop for tea. We have breakfast at another. We are escaped from the boy, from his asceticism, like guilty holiday-makers, lowering ourselves back into the deliriously physical, the realm where any discomfort is instantly reckoned with.

We drive back to Birgunj. Subel is thoughtful: he came out here doubting this boy, he says, but now thinks there is something there, the boy seems to have some power . . .

An early-morning fog is on everything. In the heavy traffic, we

have several gravel-crunching close calls. But soon enough, we're sleeping through even these.

Back at the hotel, under every blanket I can find, including the reclaimed emergency blanket, I sleep all afternoon, a deep, dream-drenched sleep: more O'Keeffe flowers; more secret communiqués from the boy; finally, a series of impossibly detailed *tangka*-like patterns in reds and yellows, constituting themselves into being from right to left. The patterns are intricate, encoded, terrifying in their complexity, full of love and challenge and cocky intelligence, beautiful and original in ways I wouldn't have believed possible if I weren't seeing it right in front of me, with my own eyes.

Two months later, on March 11, 2006, I get an e-mail from Subel: "A very bad thing has happened. The Buddha Boy suddenly vanished last night. He is not there anymore. There are so many reports and stories, but nothing is certain. He might have shifted to another location, but no one knows. The Committee has no idea where he might have gone. They have denied the possibility that he has been abducted. They are all, including the police and the local administration, looking for the boy."

I'm kind of blown away by this. It occurs to me that I've developed a faith in this boy, a confidence that, six years from now, he'll have just finished his sitting, and I'll be able to come back to Nepal and ask him what he learned, what I should do, what we all should do, based on what he's learned.

Over the next week, more rumors: The fence was cut. His clothes were left under the tree. He was seen by a villager, walking slowly into the jungle. The boy turned, placed his hands together in greeting, continued. Hundreds of people were out searching for him but had so far found nothing.

Then, on March 20, the BBC reported that the boy had briefly reappeared for a secret meeting with the chairman of the Village Committee. He said he was going into hiding and would reappear again in six years. He asked that monks perform purification prayers at the spot of his meditation. He was quoted as saying, "I left because there is no peace here. Tell my parents not to worry."

So it's a mystery, even more than it was a mystery before, when it was already pretty damn mysterious.

But I imagine him the night of his escape, making his way through

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the woods in the moonlight, weak on his feet from months of fasting and sitting, his eyes really open for the first time since May. The world, the beautiful world, is fleeing past, and he's seeing it in a way we can't imagine. He's come so far and is desperate to get somewhere beyond the reach of the world, so he can finish what he's started.

He hasn't eaten in ten months, and isn't hungry.