

# ALICE

I met her in a second-hand bookstore in the tourist area of Kathmandu. Thamel was always buzzing, assaulting its passers-by with colours, smells, loud noises. I'd been in that store on different occasions, buying books other people had read, leafing through the pages of well-travelled novels. Soaked in the smell of old paper, I felt safe, grounded, saw glimpses of myself reflected in the words of others.

I'd travelled to Nepal to research women's rites and rituals, to write a story, make a film, be an artist – or so I thought. But, in truth, this was a way for me to avoid dealing with something that was still red and raw, that was bleeding me, one drop at a time: I was desperately trying to let go of a relationship, which had left me exposed and scarred.

Although I'd been in Nepal for some months, I had no idea I was sick, I'd had no symptoms, until now. Malta Fever. I'd contracted it in a village comprised of three families, one makeshift cheese factory and an abandoned Buddhist monastery, where I'd eaten some unpasteurised cheese. It had finally taken its toll on me. I'd become increasingly weak. Unbearable headaches clouded my thinking and dulled my enjoyment of everything. Pain in my guts and diarrhoea left me aching for days on end. It was in this condition, broken and confused, that I found Alice. Or she found me. Or we found each other. I am not too sure which way around it happened, all I know is that that's when she came into my life, one hot, muggy day at the end of July, a day that clung about my neck, stifling me, making it hard to breathe.

She was sitting on the rough wooden floor, curled up with a book in the children's section. I don't remember what she was reading. I hardly noticed her let alone the title of her book: my health and emotional state were all I could think about at the time.

At first I couldn't see her face, hidden behind her long, white-blond hair, couldn't tell how young she was. All I knew was that she was a child, not a native, and alone in a second-hand foreign bookstore, reading on the floor.

I didn't pay her much attention. I looked through shelves of mixed-up titles, picked some out, put some back, read a page or two. I was in my own insular frame of mind, too self-involved to notice. I can't remember how we started talking. Maybe she smiled or asked me a question. I don't know. That part is a blank, has disappeared into some darkness I'm not sure I'll ever get access to again. But, that's not what mattered.

Within a short while, I was sitting on the floor next to her, lost in the purity and clarity of her disarming blue eyes. She told me her name was Alice, and we discussed books.

'Oh, I read fantasy,' she said. She was from Australia, and her accent sounded unfamiliar and twangy to my ears.

'Really? And what sort of fantasy do you prefer?'

'Anything I can get my hands on. But not adult stuff. Just for children.'

'I see. And why's that?' I asked.

'Because that's where the magic happens,' she replied, brushing her hair casually off her face.

I agreed. Growing up, I read a great deal. It allowed me to travel, gave me leave to be swept into worlds full of wondrous images and unfamiliar sensations, it unleashed my imagination. My hunger for anything unusual, my curiosity and love of what seemed impossible was satisfied in these stories. It's true. That *is* where the magic happened.

'Since you like stories,' I said, 'would you like me to show you one?'

Her eyes grew big, her freckles became more prominent. 'Oh, yes, please!'

I took out a piece of paper I had in my bag, and started folding it into various shapes: a square, a boat, a strange tree. By bending one flap down, a different image appeared, and with each form, a new story evolved. I am no origami expert, but my story must have been at least a little entertaining, because she put her book down, leaned on her crossed legs and turned to face me, staring at my fidgeting fingers.

'That's not a bear!' Alice said, her eyebrows gathered together.

'Oh. Well, maybe it isn't a bear. But, a dog. A bear-eating dog,' I said, 'whose belly has grown so fat from having eaten the bear, that it now looks like a mango!'

She squinted in concentration.

'What do *you* think it looks like?' I asked, handing her the creased paper.

'I don't know. Maybe a seal, or a whale.'

'Hmm....perhaps a whale that's swallowed the bear-eating dog?'

Her laughter blasted through the bookstore, a number of people peered at us from behind shelves.

‘Don’t be silly!’ she said, and giggled behind her hand. She held the paper in her fingers, turned it this way and that, examining it, then placed it in her pocket.

‘I’m hungry,’ I said, getting up to leave.

‘So am I.’

‘Is your mother in the bookstore? Should we all go for lunch?’

Alice remained seated on the floor, her eyes cast down.

‘She’s not here.’

‘Ah, is she in another shop? Should we go find her?’ I asked.

She shook her head.

‘No. I won’t see her today.’

For a moment, I didn’t know how to reply to this. I didn’t have any children of my own, yet, but my family was very close, and my mother would never have left any of us alone in a foreign city.

‘I don’t understand,’ I said. ‘What do you mean you’re not going to see her today? Is your father with you?’

‘He’s not here. I don’t know where he is.’

I sat down again, placed my bag between my legs. Suddenly, I didn’t feel that hungry any more.

‘So, who’s taking care of you? Are you all alone?’

‘No,’ she said, her voice light, still not raising her eyes. ‘My brother is with me.’

‘Ah, all right.’

Relief flowed through me. Her older brother was somewhere close by.

‘Shall we find him, then? Is he in here?’

Again, she shook her head.

‘No. He’s in another shop.’

‘Well, let’s go,’ I said, and made an attempt to move.

‘He’s six.’

‘Six what?’

‘Six years old.’

Silence descended on us immediately. The book-covered walls of the store drew closer together.

‘How old are you, Alice?’ I asked, fearing the answer.

‘I’m nine.’

My throat dried up. I could hear my heartbeat in my ears.

‘Nine? And...you’re all alone?’

She shrugged her shoulders. Her fringe slipped in front of her face.

‘And where’s your mother?’

‘In a place, with other people.’

‘What other people?’

‘They sing and pray all day. It’s boring there.’

I rubbed my forehead. The heat crawled under my skin, seeped in my veins.

‘Well...when will she come and get you and your brother?’

‘She can’t leave for another week,’ she replied, and flicked through the pages of the book she was holding.

I don’t know what I was expecting to hear, but it was not this. I had no idea what to say or do.

‘How long has she been there for?’ I asked.

‘I don’t know. Three, four days.’

‘And what have you been doing all this time? Is there really no one else to look after you? Where exactly is your brother now, and why is he not with you?’ I was attacking her, I knew that. But the questions wouldn’t stop coming. They flew out of my mouth before I’d even had a chance to filter them, spell them out to myself.

She remained silent for what seemed like a long time.

I heard someone clearing their throat and turned to look. The owner of the store stood above us, eyebrows raised in way of an apology.

‘I’m sorry, but either you buy a book, or you have to go.’ He smiled, and I noticed one gold tooth.

‘Yes, you’re right,’ I said, standing up. I glanced at the book in my hands. ‘I’ll buy this.’ It was *The Black Madonna*, a collection of short stories by Doris Lessing.

‘Ah, excellent!’ The man took the book from my hands, and made his way to the cash register.

I was about to follow him, but stopped. Turning towards Alice, I bent down and held out my hand.

‘Come,’ I said. She looked up at me, an almost blank expression in her face. ‘Let’s go have some lunch.’

She placed her hand in mine. It was cold in this suffocating humidity.

Lunch was a quiet affair. I took her to Bluebell vegetarian restaurant, a discovery I’d made on one of my first nights in Kathmandu and returned to religiously, for their mushroom and spinach burger was unrivalled. We now sat opposite each other, at a table next to the window, watching people in vibrantly-coloured clothes walk by. At least, I did. She simply sipped her iced lemonade, bit into her veggie burger, nibbled on her fries. I ate, all the while stealing glances at her. She was so involved with her food, I didn’t want to disturb her, and I didn’t know when she’d last had a proper meal. My questions had made her clam up, yet, I sensed that she wanted my company. She needed it.

Alice ate another burger, and then a pie, asking for a dollop of whipped cream on top. I ordered some tea, specifying that I wanted it without sugar or milk; the Nepalese idea of tea – milk, tea leaves and about a kilo of sugar – was not my idea at all. Our meal over, I paid and we left. Hardly a word had been passed between us.

We walked around the streets of Thamel and beyond, to Durbar Square. I talked about the brown brick temples, the intricately carved wooden shutters and panels, the statue of Hanuman, the Monkey God, covered with layers of red and gold fabric, looking more like a non-descript blob than a monkey. I found a fruit stall and bought us a freshly squeezed orange juice, a twist of black pepper ground on top. We climbed the steps of the central temple, watched the multi-coloured *tuk-tuks* and rickshaws as they hurried by, crammed to the brink with people, goats and chickens. And still not a single word from Alice.

‘I think we’d best be heading back,’ I said, noticing the mellowing oranges and ultramarine blues in the sky, and she nodded.

The need to be by myself suddenly overwhelmed me. Eating, walking, sitting together, feeling an immense sense of responsibility for this little stranger, yet not hearing her voice unnerved me. I wanted to get back to my hostel, undress, wash the sticky monsoon heat off my body. ‘I’ll walk you to your hotel.’

We reached the bookstore where we’d met, side by silent side.

‘I’ll stop here,’ she said.

I stared at her.

‘Don’t you have a place to stay?’

‘I do, but I don’t want to go there, yet.’

I glanced at the sky, now an inky mauve. The glow of the gas lamps cast chiaroscuro shadows on our faces, the way they did in the Renaissance paintings I’d studied in Art College.

‘What will you do?’ I asked.

‘I’ll read some books and wait for my brother,’ she said, waving her hand dismissively, one frail, gentle gesture that was quickly swallowed by the darkness.

‘But, I can’t leave you here. It’s late.’ An oppressive feeling crept into my stomach.

‘I’ll be safe. Don’t worry,’ she said, flashing me a weak smile.

‘But...’

‘Can we spend tomorrow together?’

‘Yes, of course,’ I replied, unwilling to let her go. ‘But...’

‘Bye,’ she said, and disappeared behind stacks of books.

I remained motionless outside the store for some time, then, seeing as she wasn’t coming out again, I walked away, headed towards my run-down hostel with its stone floor and cheap rates. I climbed up the three flights of stairs to my room, collapsed on my bed fully dressed. Exhausted, I closed my eyes, turned onto my side and quickly fell asleep.

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Next morning found me just as tired as the previous night. No matter how much I rested, my joints ached, my limbs were frail. Weeks later, when I discovered what was wrong with me, I began to understand this debilitating and frustrating tiredness,

but at the time, I put it down to the heat, the humidity and my crumbling emotions. I washed, got dressed, and went to The Pumpernickel Bakery for some breakfast. I placed a bagel, plain tea and a small bowl of peanut butter on my tray, and walked out into the garden round the back, where green plants and a straw awning offered some shade.

I sat with my friends, an English girl called Emma, her sister Janice, my friend Jhangjup and two Tibetan men, 'The Two Tenzings' as I called them. They were people I spent a fair amount of time with, but have since lost contact, a hazard I grew to recognise the more I travelled. So many people appeared and disappeared, from all walks of life, and more countries than I can remember. We shared moments of laughter, became close, then drifted apart, like waves meeting at the shoreline. I grew to appreciate these meetings for what they were: a foreign place made less alien, the world made smaller, recognisable, a safe haven in an expansive oftentimes harsh world. I needed to believe this.

I was deep in conversation with one of the sisters, when I felt a tap on my shoulder.

'Hi,' Alice said, a fresh smile on her lips.

'Oh, hi,' I replied. I had completely forgotten about her.

I pulled out the chair beside me, and she plopped herself in it, throwing a small scruffy bag on the table. I introduced her to my friends, and got her some breakfast.

'Where's your brother?' I asked, and she shrugged her shoulders.

'Around here somewhere.'

‘You should have brought him with you,’ I said, but regretted it immediately as she crossed her arms in front of her chest and looked sullen. I didn’t pursue the matter, although it burnt in my mind.

I asked her how she knew where to find me, and she told me it hadn’t been that difficult – all travellers came to The Pumpnickel Bakery for breakfast. I smiled at her ingenuity then resumed the conversation with my friends discussing and comparing notes on different foods we’d tasted, places we’d visited and people we’d met.

‘Are you staying in Kathmandu long?’ Alice asked.

Her question surprised me. I told her that I would be leaving the day after tomorrow.

She made no response, but I could tell my answer troubled her.

‘Since I won’t be here much longer,’ I said, ‘shall we go on a little outing?’

Her smile was broad, immediate.

Jhangjup said he’d join us.

‘Where shall we go?’ I asked.

‘Well, that’s easy,’ Jhangjup said. ‘Let’s go to a safari park I know. It’s a little out of the way, but it might be fun.’

Alice jumped to her feet, clapping her hands. We said goodbye to the sisters and ‘The Two Tenzings’, and together, we set off for a day-trip outside Kathmandu, near the town of Boudhanath, to the half-deserted safari park my friend knew. I worried

that her mother would be concerned about her, wonder where she was. But I could get nothing out of Alice, so I had to worry alone.

We clambered inside a taxi. The driver sang to the music playing on the radio, and occasionally spat some burnt-red tobacco out of the window. Conversation flowed easily. Alice sat between Jhangjup and me, holding both our hands. I closed my fingers round hers, all knuckles and joints, felt the sweat gathering between our palms.

After an hour's drive, the taxi came to a halt, and we got out, still connected to each other.

Dark green vegetation and birds' calls greeted us. In the distance, we saw a forest of giant lofty *shala* trees, feathery mimosas displaying their yellow blossoms, and numerous silky oak, maple and firs wrapped with vines. The grounds were protected by the presence of the faraway Himalayan mountains. I prayed we wouldn't get bitten by any snakes as we marched through tall grasses, but there was nowhere else to walk – this safari park was truly deserted and wild. Despite the increased humidity, I found myself forgetting about everything that had clung to me until now, no pains, no wounds to heal, only a lush expanse of land ahead, beckoning us into its depths.

We reached a forest, heard leaves and twigs crunch and break beneath our tread.

'Look there,' Jhangjup said, pointing through the trees to an enclosed grassland on our right.

Alice covered her mouth with her hand in an attempt to suppress her squeal of excitement. Deer. A herd of chital deer, walking casually between trees, unhurried, so close and yet keeping their distance, their coat of pinkish taupe speckled with white

dots and white underbelly stood out against the evergreens. They could see us and we could see them, but we did not disrupt their midday walk. They nibbled on *shala* leaves and casually sauntered off again on their long graceful legs.

‘Did you see how *many* of them there were?’ Alice said, her little shoulders shaking with exhilaration.

We walked on further into the untamed forest, found a small clearing with a little river running through it, and sat down to have our picnic of Danish pastries, pretzels and bottled water. I hadn’t realised how hungry I was until we ate. Jhangjup and Alice told each other jokes. Alice had a few bites, then decided it would be more fun to take off her shoes and splash about in the river.

‘No, wait,’ I cried, afraid of how deep it might be, whether there were sharp or slippery rocks in it. I ran after her, caught up as she was stepping into the water.

‘It’s great!’ she said. ‘Come in!’

Although I had no desire to join her, I took off my shoes and socks and stepped into the river. It was, indeed, cool. No slimy surfaces or jutting edges. The running water refreshed me. Jhangjup joined us, and he and Alice started splashing each other. We were all soaked through before I could climb out and run back to our picnic spot, laughing.

I sat on the flattened grass, ready to dry my feet, when I noticed strange worm-like creatures on them, so dark they were almost black.

‘What *are* they?’ I said, trying to sweep them off my toes.

Jhangjup knelt by me.

‘They’re leeches. Don’t try to pull them off.’

‘Leeches!’ I cried.

‘Here, sit still,’ he said, taking out a lighter and a pack of cigarettes from his trouser pocket. He lit one up.

‘Now, don’t move. I will try to smoke them off, but if you’re not still, I might burn you,’ he said, taking hold of my feet.

I nodded.

The de-leeching process took longer than I expected and I was amazed at how those little bloodsuckers refused to detach themselves, how they stubbornly clung on. I watched as Jhangjup held the cigarette next to their squirming black bodies. They lifted one side off first, then peeling backwards like a curly wooden shaving, dropped off my feet one by one.

I thanked Jangjup and stared at the red sores on my skin.

‘It might take about a week for those bites to disappear,’ he said, ‘but, don’t worry, they’re not infected.’

My feet covered once more, I sat back, watched Alice as she bounced around us, chasing white butterflies that had appeared out of nowhere.

‘I’m worried about her,’ I said.

Jhangjup turned to look at me. ‘Why?’

‘She’s all alone, her mother’s off in an ashram or a monastery, from what I can gather, and her younger brother is wondering around Kathmandu on his own.’

My friend studied Alice for a few minutes.

‘Don’t worry,’ Jhangjup said.

‘How can you say that?’

‘Because she has good survival skills.’

‘What do you mean?’ I asked.

‘I think she instinctively knows who to trust, enjoys every moment, yet lets go of it easily. Maybe this will change when she’s older, and she might either become overly attached to people or unable to connect to them. I don’t know. Anything’s possible. But, right now...look at her...’

Her carefree prancing about showed me nothing else existed for Alice. No worries clouded her joy. Pure, innocent, untamed childhood. Jhangjup was right – it probably wouldn’t last. She’d grow up, clutter her mind, become aware of the missing pieces in her life, as happened to every adult. It was unavoidable. Still, I envied the ease with which she accepted whatever came her way without judging or asking questions.

‘This is the best day *ever!*’ Alice said, running towards us.

‘Really? In what way?’ I asked.

‘Are you joking?’ she exclaimed. ‘A picnic, deer...leeches? How can it get better than *that?*’

I smiled.

Jhangjup glanced at his watch.

‘It’s getting late. We’d better go.’ We all agreed, gathered our stuff, and started walking back in the direction we’d come with Alice skipping ahead of us.

The late afternoon sky was beginning to turn a rich orange-yellow, tinged with ribbons of lavender. Small noises tickled our ears, insects flitted and unseen animals scurried in the thickets.

‘What was that?’ Alice said all of a sudden, her voice a little above a whisper. ‘Did you hear it?’

We stopped in our tracks, extended our necks, hardly dared to breathe. I must admit, I heard nothing. I looked at Jhangjup and he placed his finger over his lips, warning us not to speak.

And then it came, a heavy footfall, slow, steady, getting louder as it approached. Alice took a step in my direction, grabbed hold of my hand, squeezed it so tight I thought the blood would stop pumping. The sound seemed to be coming from various directions; it was up high amongst the tallest branches, as well as on the ground.

A man’s voice, one long drawn-out note ascending in pitch, bounced off the trees. My heart raced. It came again, his call, and then a thumping sound, getting closer and closer. Alice moved slowly behind me, still holding my hand.

That’s when we saw it. An elephant. A massive, breathtaking beast of an animal, so large we had to bend our heads back to see the man sitting on top, balancing his weight, holding onto nothing at all. We stood paralysed, simply watched as it ambled before us, swaying its hips and trunk, the ground shaking with each thudding footstep. Its only acknowledgement of us was a flap of its ears.

I felt Alice push against my back, nudge me closer to the elephant. Without thinking, I reached out, brushed my fingertips across its tough grey skin, held my breath as its energy and strength jolted through my body electrifying it. This was life! And I was living it again, thanks to Alice's gentle push.

The man on its back raised his arm in greeting, and continued on. Alice ventured a few steps away from me, following in the elephant's direction.

We stood still long after it had gone, unable, or unwilling – I wasn't sure which – to move. Darkness started descending around us. We hurried to the exit.

We reached the road, now quite desolate and streaked with plentiful shadows, then walked for about another hour to the nearby town of Boudhanath. Exhausted, we hailed a taxi and drove back to Kathmandu.

'I've never seen a *real* elephant, only photos in books,' Alice said as we were nearing Thamel. 'I'll never forget this day.'

I smiled and placed a kiss on the top of her head.

The taxi reached my hostel and we all got out. Jhangjup wished us both good night, and left, saying he'd meet us tomorrow at The Pumpernickel Bakery for breakfast. I walked Alice back to the bookstore.

She turned and entered. I stood staring after her oblivious to everything around me, until the cry of a rickshaw driver brought me back to the present.

'Watch out!' he cried. 'Out of the way! Can't stop! Can't stop!'

**THE END**