

## Her American Sister

I remember her smiling up at me one evening. The light was fading in the sky, and the Dhorpatan hills out beyond the village were turning blue in the gathering dark. The stars would be out soon, and maybe a moon. She laughed as she swatted the ox with a short stick, urging him into the barn for the night. “He is my husband,” she joked, slapping the black haunches again, “Isn’t he handsome?”

She was seventeen, a high-caste girl, from a good family. I was barely twenty-two and fresh from a liberal arts college in Oregon. In Peace Corps training we learned that Nepalese women are demure, that they laugh quietly and keep their eyes downcast. Saraswati was different. She was loud. When she laughed her whole mouth opened, and her eyes crinkled shut. She shouted when she talked. She taught me to curse in Nepalese. She was named for the Goddess of Learning, a Hindu deity who rides a swan and consorts with Brahma. I realized quickly I was the only one who used her name. To her family she was *kanchi*, youngest daughter, and when she married, she’d be *srimati*, wife. Names meant little. Even my own was forgotten. For two years I was “Aasa.” A common Nepalese moniker; my real name awkward and hard in their mouths.

Saraswati was older than most of the unmarried girls in Pula, the tiny mountain hamlet high in the Annapurna foothills where we lived, but her twice-failed exams made her dreams of university impossible. So she woke early, casting aside her blankets and dipping her thick hands in cold red mud that she washed daily over her family’s earthen floor. She gathered wood before I even woke up, started the fire, made tea, sifted the rice free of stones. She banged on my door every morning at dawn, “Aasa, *didi!*” she’d yell,

“*Chia kanay!*” She’d set a hot metal cup of sweet tea, thick with water buffalo milk, on the stoop outside my door, and dash off again, her flip-flop soles flashing as she ran, her full, dark arms gathering her sheet of black hair back and up in her favorite purple barrette.

Sarasawti asked me questions. In the early afternoons when the morning work was finished, and dinner had yet to be started, she huddled on my doorstep, resting her chin on her knees, and hugging her sturdy thighs close to her chest. She was round and full; womanly, and her childlike posture was disconcerting. She wondered why I wasn’t married. I told her in America all marriages are love-matches, and that twenty-two was too young to marry. She laughed, awestruck. Later, she told me her best friend had hanged herself when her parents denied her a love-match and instead promised her to an older man who lived in a village two days walk away.

Saraswati took me to the first wedding I attended in the village. The bride was one of my English students, 11 year-old Ram Maya. When we crowded into the narrow room where Ram Maya was getting dressed, Saraswati took charge; “She can’t get married in a t-shirt! Someone get her a choli!” It was Saraswati who made Ram Maya and a sullen girl I’d never seen switch tops. Ram Maya sobbed the whole time. Dutifully she lifted her braids so her sister could button the tight choli up her back. She stood ramrod straight while her crimson sari was wrapped around her, the *pallu* draped over her head. She didn’t try to stop the tears. When it was time to lead her out to the ceremony where she’d meet her husband for the first time, Ram Maya filed past me. She was so close I could feel her ragged breath on my arm.

Saraswati held my hand the next day when we went back to see the *janti*, the procession that would lead Ram Maya forever out of Pula and into her husband's village. Ram Maya was shrieking when we got there. Her family grasped at her hands and pulled her to where her husband waited. Ram Maya's feet clawed at the earth beneath her. Saraswati whispered; "Brides are supposed to do that. It would offend her parents if she wasn't sad to leave them." But her grip tightened around my arm.

I taught in Pula for two years. The months I spent in the village were contrasted with my trips into Kathmandu where I drank beer, smoked cigarettes, and flirted shamelessly with the male Peace Corps volunteers in from their far-flung sites. Saraswati had no idea of my other life. In Pula I never spoke of Kathmandu, of dancing all night long in smoky discos. My behavior would have shocked her. I never told her I wondered if I'd ever fall in love, that I yearned for marriage as strongly as she dreaded it.

I laughed when Saraswati told me that if she didn't like the man her parents promised her to, she would run away to India. I high-fived her when she swore she'd hit any husband who beat her. Who was I to remind her of her fate? We both knew we would be spun away from here, inevitably and intractably. We both knew that our intersection was a blink in the vast breadth of our lives. I was her American sister, she my Nepalese *behini*, but only for an instant.

I was ready to leave Pula after two years. My future tugged at me, home beckoned. Saraswati and I both cried on my final afternoon. But when I strode down the dirt path out of the village that last time, I didn't look back. My volunteer years there had filled me with confidence and courage; if I could make a life in Pula, I could do anything I wanted. The world sparkled before me like a shell, opening wide.

It's been thirteen years since I last saw Saraswati. In the meantime I married and had two sons, made a life in three different cities. Years ago I received a letter from her older brother. He wrote that Saraswati had married just after I left. She moved to a village to the West, a place nestled in the curve of those same Dhorpatan hills that I used to watch darkening from my door in Pula. I was glad had I missed her wedding, missed her stumbling through her *janti*, missed her tears.

Sometimes I dream about Pula. I see the sunlight slanting on the poinsettia flowers, the mud brown houses, and the students lined up outside the village school where I taught. In my dreams, I never see Saraswati as she was; a girl folded up on my doorstep; a girl rising with the roosters to help her mother; a young woman terrified of her inescapable future. But sometimes, just before I wake, I see Pula floating away below me, my dream panning out like a movie, and I hear a familiar whoop from a hilltop in the distance. When I look, when I try to find her, all I can see is a shadow hovering there, arms outstretched, face tipped towards the sky. Not Saraswati at all, not her. Just a bird-girl, wings cocked to catch the updrafts, soaring away above the mountains, her song like laughter, captured in the breeze.