



Nangkha!

Harlan Yarbrough

Tshering's favorite teacher, Mr. Bart, stood by the end of the dining hall's long serving table, near the door to the kitchen, waiting to set his cleaned lunch tray on the stack. Tshering stood almost beside him, scraping a small amount of food waste into the compost barrel. As Bart Sir set his tray on the stack and began to turn toward the exit at the other end of the big room, Tshering felt the floor move beneath their feet. Knowing five stories of concrete building swayed above them inclined her to vacate that spot without delay.

The layout of the building, with the kitchen and pantries a single-story addition at the back, made effecting an exit through the kitchen an attractive option. Mr. Bart evidently thought the same; he squeezed Tshering's wrist and said,

“Quickly, Tshering, follow me!” She heard several voices shouting “*Nangkha!*” as she and Bart Sir dodged around the end of the serving table and into the main kitchen. Two steps took them to the doorway of the main kitchen, where everything shook and jumped and rattled. Another two rapid steps took teacher and student through the kitchen and into the first pantry. Tshering and her companion dashed through the two pantries and out the back door.

Sir Bart made a stirrup with his hands and boosted Tshering up a stone wall onto a terrace and said, “Run!”

“How far?” Tshering asked, as she began running.

“To the bench! Get under the bench! Don’t try to cross the bridge,” her erstwhile teacher shouted, as he pulled himself up to the terrace and followed her. Tshering dove beneath the bench and looked back to see that Mr. Bart could barely walk with the violent shaking. He approached the bench just as a “T” made of steel pipe fell onto it. Tshering couldn’t hear the pipe strike because of the roar of the building collapsing beyond him. The shaking began to subside, as her erstwhile favorite teacher lifted the steel clothesline support off the bench and asked, “Are you alright?”

“Yes, sir, I think so. It’s a good thing I was under the bench.”

The concrete footbridge lay as a heap of rubble, which Bart Sir studied for a minute or two. Tshering felt almost overwhelmed with shock and horror as she looked at the three collapsed dormitories and asked, “Where will we go?”

“The athletic field’ll prob’ly be the safest place, ’cause there’ll be more shocks.”

Bart Sir carefully picked his way across the remains of the footbridge and then back to Tshering. “If we’re quick,” he said, “we can probably get across there before an aftershock hits.”

At the same moment Mister Bart said “hits”, the ground moved again, and he quickly sat beside the bench and pulled

his companion down beside him. “Or not,” he said, as the shaking diminished.

Sir Bart picked his way through the barbed wire of a mostly fallen fence and helped Tshering through, then said, “This way,” and walked past and away from a collapsed row of shanties provided as teacher housing. Mister Bart said he would like to explore the wreckage and see if anyone could be saved but wanted to get Tshering to safety first.

He led her through the familiar neighboring apple orchard that appeared undisturbed. As they walked through the orchard, Mr. Bart asked his companion, “Does *nangkha* mean ‘earthquake’?”

“*Een*. Yes,” Tshering said, as he helped her through another fence and onto the school’s athletic field.

Bart Sir said, “Wait here,” and jogged the length of the field to the site of a building that had been under construction but now lay as a smaller heap of rubble. Tshering wanted as little distance between them as possible, so she ignored his injunction and followed him across the field. Her erstwhile teacher combed the rubble and began removing pieces before noticing Tshering had followed him. When he saw her, he said he remembered seeing several tarpaulins on the building site. The first one he found, unfortunately, lay beneath a pair of concrete beams too heavy to move. He continued looking and found another tarp under a smaller and lighter overburden. Bart Sir began removing the rubble, and Tshering began removing smaller pieces to help. Together, they freed the tarp and carried it back to the south end of the athletic field, the furthest spot from anything that could fall.

The pair returned to the building site and retrieved several short pieces of wire and short pieces of rope. These, they took back to the south end of the field and with them secured the tarpaulin to the steel frames of two soccer goals pushed face-to-face, thereby creating a spacious tent. Once the improvised

tent seemed secure, Mister Bart suggested seeing what they could salvage from his kitchen in a nearby building. They carefully skirted the remains of the large masonry auditorium-cum-gymnasium, where four days earlier Sir Bart had played his violin while Tshering and several of her classmates danced, and came to the remains of the rooms he had occupied.

The two refugees found the single-story masonry buildings lay partially collapsed rather than reduced to rubble. Bart Sir turned to Tshering and grasped her hand and said, “Don’t follow me this time. I’m not going far—I’ll be right there.” He nodded toward the remains of the kitchen. “Wait right here—or if it starts shaking again, you might want to move over by the f—”

At that point, another aftershock struck, and Bart Sir led his companion away from the buildings onto the drive. Once the shaking stopped, he said, “You might want to just wait right here,” and walked back to what used to be his kitchen.

Tshering followed Sir Bart and reached out to grab his arm, as he prepared to enter the collapsed structure. He stopped and turned to Tshering, as she said, “Wait! Are you sure you’ll be OK?”

He held her hand and said, “No, I’m not sure, but I’ll be careful and I *think* I can get in and out safely. Don’t worry.” With that, he released her hand and turned and squeezed through the diagonal doorframe and under a piece of the roof. She did worry, but he returned less than ten minutes later with two containers of brown rice and two smaller containers holding lentils and beans respectively. On a second trip, he retrieved several containers of tree nuts and peanuts, a bag of carrots, and an intact quart bottle full of water. A third trip yielded two containers of fruit juice, a saucepan and lid, and a large handful of plastic bags.

“I’ve always thought of these as pollution,” Mr. Bart said, “but now they’ll come in handy.”

Another aftershock dispelled thoughts of a fourth expedition, and the two carried their booty back to their makeshift tent. With everything stashed under the tarp, Mister Bart said, “Indian military helicopters might show up to evacuate us tomorrow, but we might be stuck here for a long time. I think we need to be prepared to camp here for months, just in case we have to.”

Tshering put her arms around Sir Bart and held him in a tight embrace, as she laid her head on his chest. To her delight, Mister Bart hugged her in return. He said nothing for several minutes and through one mild aftershock, then asked, “Are you OK?”

“As long as you hold me, I’m OK.”

Her erstwhile teacher replied, “Oh, Tshering, I like holding you. I’m prob’ly not s’posed to, but I do.”

“Why not supposed to? Do you have a wife back in the U.S. you never told us about?”

“No, dear, but you’re my student. I’m your teacher. Teachers aren’t allowed to—”

Another aftershock interrupted their colloquy. When the shaking ended, Tshering spoke before Sir Bart could resume. “No, you aren’t. There’s no school, no students, no teachers. If there’s no school, then I’m not a student and you aren’t my teacher.”

“But a school is more than the buildings.”

“OK, true. You could say a school is the people—but they’re all gone, except for us. We are not a school, so I am not a student and you are not my teacher.”

The conversation, punctuated by aftershocks, might have continued for hours, but Mister Bart said, “OK, no school. I’m not a teacher, and you’re not a student. We’ll need to discuss that more later. Right now, I want to see what else I can

salvage. Also, I'd like to get my instruments out, if I can, and see if they're OK."

The two survivors walked back around to the other side of the gym-auditorium ruins, and the suddenly unemployed teacher assessed the state of his rooms. As with the kitchen, the single-story structure looked terrifying to Tshering; but Mr. Bart said it looked safe enough for a careful entry. The two-story masonry wall at the east side had collapsed away from the teacher's quarters, leaving hope a cautious salvage operation might be worthwhile. Tshering said, "I'm scared for you to go in there."

"Don't worry. I'll be *very* careful," Bart Sir replied.

In fifteen nerve-wracking minutes, he managed to retrieve his violin case, intact except for a broken handle, and, with considerably more effort, the mattress off his smashed bed. They carried those items to their camp, waited through the strongest aftershock yet, then returned for another salvage mission.

"No. It's too dangerous," Tshering told her former teacher.

"Mmmmm . . . Things have moved, in that last shake, but they've prob'ly settled. I suspect they're even more stable now than they were before."

The pair shared an animosity-free argument for several minutes and stopped for a milder aftershock. "See," Mister Bart said, "nothing moved. I'll just have a quick check. If anything moves at all, I'll shoot right back out. Don't worry."

Tshering did worry but didn't continue arguing. Mr. Bart slipped into the remains of the building and worked his way to his guitar in its heavy fibreglass case. Freeing the case from the pieces of roof framing lying on top of it took some effort and some time, but eventually the guitarist wormed his way back out with the intact case and unharmed contents. He also

presented his erstwhile student with a box of band-aids he'd retrieved on the way out.

"One more trip," he said. "Only one."

Bart Sir had just insinuated himself into the parallelogram of the doorframe of the unoccupied apartment beside his, when another aftershock rumbled through. He flung himself backward out of the opening and landed on the ground beside Tshering.

"Are you alright?" she asked, afraid he might be hurt.

"Yeah. I just didn't want to be in there, while it was shaking," he replied, as he repeated his entry maneuvers. Five minutes later, he was back outside, saying, "I think we'll both have to pull to get that out."

They both reached through the remains of the doorframe and grasped the mattress he had maneuvered thither. At one point, the doorframe sounded as if it might collapse further, so they stopped and waited and listened. Within twenty minutes, though, they had the mattress outside and carried it to their tarpaulin tent.

"Why do we need two mattresses?" Tshering asked. "I sure don't want to sleep that far away from you."

"Tshering dear, we are not allowed—I am not allowed t—"

"Of course you are."

"I am not. You are only fourteen, a—"

"Oh, no. You're quite mistaken, sir. I am sixteen."

"You can't be. You're in s—"

"No, I was a student in the senior school, before the earthquake."

"You were not. You were in my s—"

"Prove it!"

“What!?”

“Prove it. Prove I’m not sixteen.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Exactly! Neither can anyone else.”

“But, Tshering—”

That argument, also without animosity, but with a good deal of what sounded like pleading on each side, continued for three hours, interrupted by several aftershocks and one more trip to Sir Bart’s kitchen to retrieve six small boxes of matches. Similar discussion continued, while the two survivors cooked a small pot of rice and lentils and then sat on a nearby low stone terrace and ate their dinner. When they retired for the night, Tshering began removing her clothes, and Mister Bart said, “Better keep those on.”

“Why? That’s just silly.”

“I’m keeping mine on, and you’re likely to get cold if you take yours off.”

“I’m sure you could warm me up.”

“Yes, dear, and you know I’d like to. Tonight, though, we’d better keep our clothes on. Keep ’em on, and I’ll wrap myself around you to keep you warm. I should’ve got some blankets for us. That was stupid of me.”

“It isn’t like you didn’t have plenty of other things to deal with.”

Tshering kept her clothes on and cuddled as close as she could to Bart Sir, who held her in a comforting embrace as they drifted off to sleep. She came half awake in the dawn light but drifted back to sleep in the reassuring circle of her beloved Mister Bart’s arms. Twenty minutes later, she woke again, and memories of the previous day rolled across her mind like a flood inundating a low-lying valley. Her mind accelerated, as

she began a mental inventory of what she could do to ensure the survival of herself and the wonderful man beside her.

She opened her eyes and felt a thrill run through her as she looked into Bart Sir's beautiful blue eyes inches from her own. Tshering smiled to see Mister Bart's look of rapture as he gazed at her. She moved her arms to encircle his neck and pulled him near to bring their lips into contact.

The erstwhile teacher attempted to bestow a chaste peck, but his companion persisted and delivered a passionate, lingering kiss that aroused Mr. Bart despite his best intentions. The layers of fabric between them didn't prevent Tshering from feeling him growing hard. Once their lips parted, she said, "There is no reason for us not to be lovers." She paused, then continued, "Unless you just don't want me. Maybe I'm too skinny for you. My tits are too small."

"Tshering, you are by far the most beautiful girl in the whole school—maybe in the whole country."

"Only because all the others were killed."

"No, dear, I meant *before* the earthquake."

"Then why don't you want me?"

"I do, Tshering. Surely you know that. I just don't want to do anything wrong. I especially don't want to do anything that might be bad for you."

"Listen, Sir Bart, every time you say 'No,' every time you refuse to be my lover, you are doing something that not only *might* be bad for me, you're doing something that *is* bad for me."

That argument, too, went on for a long time; animosity-free, it consumed much of the next four days. In the meantime, Bart Sir retrieved blankets and bedlinens, a half-full five-kilogram bag of rolled oats, his multi-tool, his backpack—intact except for one broken zipper—and several other useful items.

Although the survivors lacked fresh vegetables for the present, their diet from Mister Bart's provisions otherwise supplied better nutrition than the school had provided in the dining hall.

The two chatted and debated as they dug through nearby former building sites, looking for tools, intact cups and plates, or other useful items. They debated as they raided abandoned gardens for greens and other fresh vegetables. They debated as they prepared meals and as they consumed them. Early on the fifth day after the earthquake, as Tshering dropped an adjustable square—intact save the glass of the tool's little level—into Mister Bart's backpack, she said, "I'm surprised we haven't seen any rescue crews."

"Yeah, I am, too. I s'pose they're concentrating on the cities and towns, where there are more people to be saved." Tshering agreed. A minute later, Bart Sir continued, "We don't know where the epicenter was. The destruction might have been even worse in other places."

"Worse! How could it be any worse?"

"Oh, it could," Bart replied. "Except for over by the senior school's admin building and that property on the other side of it, there doesn't seem to have been much soil liquefaction. It could've been a *lot* worse, I suspect. If we weren't close to the epicenter, the 'quake could've been *much* stronger than what we felt. A really big one could've brought down those buildings they say are earthquake-proof."

Thinking about the devastation made Tshering upset. Seeing that, Sir Bart took her in his arms. She said, "But—" and then didn't continue.

"What I mean is, think about if the center of the quake was in Sikkim, for example, or Assam. That's a long ways from here, so the movement there would've been a lot worse."

The two survivors intensified their scavenging efforts over the following days. Bart Sir wanted to recover the hand tools—hammer, screwdrivers, pliers, that sort of thing—from his former quarters, but he didn't trust the wreckage. When he'd retrieved an armload of winter clothing the previous day, some of the larger pieces of debris seemed to move a little, leaving Tshering terrified. *They don't have to move much to allow something heavy to fall or to trap him inside*, she thought. In the end, he braved another trip inside the pile of debris and recovered his small stash of tools.

“Why did you want them?” Tshering asked.

“We don't know how long we're going to be here, and we need to be prepared for winter.”

Tshering nodded and said, “Yeah, OK, that makes sense.”

“Also,” her inamorato said, “there are dogs wandering around, and that tent is not at all secure.”

His companion nodded again and agreed, as she thought, *I love Sir Bart and want to take care of him and keep him safe and healthy*. Her beloved nevertheless continued to resist her blandishments.

Changing the subject, he explained that he wanted to salvage materials to build a little cabin for them. They continued searching the various building sites and the places where the laborers had lived. Together and separately, they salvaged many lengths of 2 x 4 lumber and several intact 2 x 8 and 2 x 10 pieces, and Bart set about removing nails and straightening them for re-use. He spent four days doing almost nothing but removing and straightening nails and amassed a collection of almost two thousand he said were probably useable, ranging in size from inch-and-a-half to four-inch.

The one necessary tool they lacked was a saw. They searched the remains of all the nearby buildings and, with especial care, new construction sites for three days and half of another. They

found many corpses and three electric circular saws, of no use to anyone at that moment, but no handsaws. Mister Bart described a man at the town market who sold tools—the teacher had purchased his hammer and several screwdrivers from the man—and the man’s inventory sometimes included handsaws. After contemplating the problem and possible solutions for a day, Mr. Bart decided to walk into town and see what he could find. He suggested Tshering wait at their camp. “It would be safer for you, I think,” he said.

“No,” Tshering replied, “If anything happens to you, I will not survive—and won’t want to—so I might as well go with you. I would rather be with you anyway.”

The couple shared another discussion or animosity-free argument, and Tshering accompanied her beloved companion to town. The walk, punctuated in places by having to climb over gaps in the road or uplifted slabs of roadway, took a little longer than the hour-and-a-half the same distance took before the earthquake. About halfway into town, they saw a man and a woman on the opposite side of a large rice paddy, but apparently neither couple felt confident about approaching the other.

The town’s taller buildings meant masses of rubble filled all the streets, but Tshering and Mr. Bart picked their way through the debris without any great difficulty. They saw three people, of whom the first two ran away at sight of the two strangers. The third walked up to them and affected friendship. After a moment, he asked what they could give him to help him out. Mister Bart unslung his backpack from his shoulders and showed the man it was empty. At that point, the man said, “I’m sure you have something for me,” as he pulled a large knife from the back of his waistband.

Sir Bart reached out with his right hand and pushed Tshering behind him, as he stepped back and pulled his own large knife from his waistband. “That isn’t a nice way to behave,” he said

to the other man. “We never meant you any harm. You’d better put that away, before you get hurt.”

The stranger snarled and lunged at Bart Sir, who stepped to the side and brought his knife up to the other man’s neck. At the same time, he kicked the side of the man’s knee, and the man collapsed, bleeding profusely. Seeing their assailant disabled, Sir Bart took Tshering’s elbow and continued further into the town.

“But you’re bleeding!” she exclaimed, grabbing his arm.

They both looked, where the other man’s knife had nicked her beloved’s arm and Bart Sir said, “I think it’ll be OK. We’ll bandage it, when we get back to our camp. There’s probably nothing around here clean enough to use for a bandage anyway.”

Over intermittent protests from Tshering, they made their way to the old market area. Two more people ran away from them, as they walked through the space that had been the market. At the old tool vendor’s spot, they picked up several tools, but the only saw was a small backsaw. Bart Sir put it in his pack, saying, “Better than nothing, I guess, in case we don’t find anything else.”

After scavenging all they could, including several pounds of fairly wholesome-looking carrots, they left the market area and moved west toward where Mister Bart remembered a hardware store. Although the earthquake had reduced the entire building to rubble, forty minutes of intense but cautious searching turned up hinges, boxes of roofing nails, and a pristine crosscut saw. Bart Sir put so many roofing nails in his backpack, he could barely carry it. He lashed the saw carefully to the outside of the pack, then the treasure hunters headed back up the valley to their makeshift home.

They interrupted their construction project to spend a week tracing the annihilated school’s water supply line up and across the hill and up the side valley to its source at that

valley's creek and then back down again. Over the course of the first three days, the two survivors determined the path of the line, found four major breaks, and mended one. After devoting a day to sourcing more alkathene tubing and connectors in the appropriate size, they repaired the other three leaks and found six more. In the end, to save time, they ran replacement pipe on top of the ground for the last two hundred yards and felt quite pleased with themselves to have running water at their camp.

The two scavengers had found several long 4x4's, and Mister Bart used four of them as corner posts, framing first two end walls. At his request, his companion searched the nearest building sites for longer pieces of wire and returned with a dozen. Bart Sir in the meantime had dragged and rolled six large chunks of broken concrete to where he planned to erect the cabin. With a long length of rope they'd found earlier and Tshering's help, he got one of his end frames vertical and braced it in position.

That done, he used the long lengths of wire to secure the two vertical posts to large chunks of broken concrete. Tshering looked a question at him, so Mr. Bart explained, "That'll keep 'em stable, while I build the rest of the structure. Once it's all together, it'll keep the wind from moving it. I hope."

"We don't get that much wind here," Tshering said, "because we're sheltered by the mountains. Some of the Indian labourers' shacks are not fastened down at all. They just sit there by their own weight."

"OK, good," her companion replied, "so this'll be enough."

The two repeated their efforts at the opposite end and then raised a third 'end' in the middle. In response to Tshering's questioning glance, her companion said only, "More stable," and she nodded. Once he had all the studs in place connecting the sills to the top plates and all connected to the frames they'd raised, progress accelerated. They worked all day every

day, except for scavenging expeditions, meal breaks, and when Tshering asked him to take a break and comfort her with a hug—an interruption she always enjoyed—measuring, sawing, and driving nails. After three weeks and with all the rafters in place, Sir Bart hung a salvaged mixture of composite and plywood panels on the outside of the windward southern wall and then began nailing purlins across the rafters.

A couple of aftershocks interrupted construction, but those became weaker and less frequent. The scavengers had retrieved corrugated metal roofing whenever and wherever the opportunity arose since the week of the earthquake. As a result, with Tshering helping wrestle the sheets up onto the purlins, they had the entire building covered, minus a ridge cap, in seven days. Mister Bart improvised a ridge cap from pieces of roofing metal run lengthwise along the top of the roof and then began cladding the remaining three walls. That done, he made two doors and hung them in the openings he had built into the framed walls.

“Why do we need two,” Tshering asked.

“My paranoia about fire,” her beloved replied. “With only one door, the fire could be between us and the door. With two, we always have a way out.”

No amount of scavenging could procure pieces of glass large enough for the modest window openings Bart Sir had built into the wall frames, so she and her beloved companion walked to town and retrieved a roll of what he called window screening and she called mosquito netting, along with a staple gun, staples, a dozen substantial hinges, and other useful items. After securing screens over each of the openings, they installed a one-piece horizontal shutter over each of the windows to close them against the increasingly cold weather. Finally, they nailed two layers of flooring perpendicular to each other on the floor joists and pronounced the cabin provisionally finished.

Sir Bart spent two whole days dismantling a woodstove amid the wreckage of a nearby house, and he and Tshering spent another two days moving the firebox to their cabin. Another day of re-assembling the stove and a day of scavenging and installing stovepipe saw the stove, sitting on three layers of corrugated roofing at right angles to each other and with two layers between it and the nearest wall, ready to use. Although the nearest source of traditional cordwood for heating and cooking lay a mile away, an abundance of wooden framing materials from the wreckage of nearby buildings meant they never lacked for fuel.

Once they had moved all their supplies and possessions into the new structure, Tshering renewed and intensified her entreaties for Sir Bart to consummate their *de facto* relationship.

“We are living in our own house,” she would say, “a house you built for us.”

“*We* built.”

“*You* built. I helped. You built a house for us, you wonderful man, and now we are living in it. Don’t you see it is altogether appropriate for us to live as man and wife now?”

Mister Bart obviously worried about propriety and Tshering’s welfare and therefore continued to resist. He expressed his desire and his love as well as his concern. She kept reiterating that as far as the rest of the world might know, she was sixteen and therefore of a legal age. He worried and resisted and almost wept to think he was disappointing her. She insisted he accept her new identity as a former student of the senior school.

“You know—Sonam’s sister.” Tshering stopped and burst into tears. Sir Bart encircled her in a hug and held her without saying anything. After Tshering stopped weeping, she wailed, “They’re all *gone*, all of them—Tandin and Sonam and Jigme and Tenzin and Ugyen and— They’re all *dead*.” She sobbed

once and buried her face in her beloved's chest. Panting a little at first, she relaxed in Mister Bart's embrace. She took a deep breath and raised her head to look at him, then planted on his lips a tender, affectionate kiss he returned in kind. Looking into his eyes, she said, "If only one other person was going to survive, I'm so glad that one person was you."

Mister Bart said nothing, just held Tshering and kissed her forehead and held her some more. His embrace comforted her, so she resumed her earlier explanation of her plan. "If—or probably 'when'—rescuers arrive, they will take us to some kind of official refugee camp or some such thing," she said. Bart Sir nodded, and Tshering continued, "At the camp, they will ask us our names, where we're from, and all that."

Sir Bart nodded again and gave an affirmative grunt and began to release his hug. Tshering said, "*Men*," meaning "No," and tightened her arms around him. He reciprocated and earned a smile before Tshering continued, "If you say you're a teacher—and obviously a foreign one—and I say I'm a student, they will put us in different places." She looked up to see if Bart Sir understood her concerns and continued, "They might evacuate you to Delhi or Kolkata, so you can fly home. They would probably put me in a camp in Sikkim or Assam or West Bengal. I don't want that. Do you?"

Mister Bart tightened his hug and said, "No, of course not. I want to take care of you until I know you'll be OK, until I know you're safe and secure an—"

"Until *what*?" Tshering shrieked in a voice filled with horror. "Until you can get rid of me without feeling guilty?"

Her companion shook his head and said, "No, of c—"

"I want you to take care of me until one of us drops dead." Tshering burst into tears again.

As she wept, Sir Bart hugged her with his right arm as he stroked her head with his left hand, kissing the hair on the top

of her head occasionally and saying, “Tshering, Tshering, darling Tshering! That’s what I want, too.”

Tshering raised her head again and looked into her inamorato’s eyes as she said, “But you don’t really want that, do you?”

“Most of the people we know—” Mister Bart stopped for a short moment and resumed, “*knew*—most of the people in this country, or in the U.S. for that matter, would think I am evil for saying it, but yes, I do. That is exactly what I want, what I want more than anything else in the world.”

Tshering squeezed him in a tight embrace and nuzzled her face against his chest. She looked up at him again and said, “You are not evil. I have watched you closely since almost the start of the year—maybe you didn’t notice, Mister Bart, but I have watched you like the *shingyur*. Do you know them? The hunting bird that flies very high.”

“A hawk?” As Tshering nodded, her erstwhile teacher added, “Or maybe an eagle?”

“Yes! Except I think the *shingyur* is called both. Do you know? A hawk eagle.”

Bart Sir nodded and said, “OK.”

His temptress continued, “Did you know,” she said, pointing toward the highest visible peak, northwest of their cabin, “from on top of that mountain, they can see a little mouse down here where we are?”

Mister Bart nodded and gave an affirmative grunt, and Tshering continued again, “I have watched you like that. You are not an evil person. You have never done anything evil. I have never even seen you do anything a little unkind—or, at least, not until you started saying ‘No’ to me.”

Before Mister Bart could speak, she said, “Please tell me again. Say what you want.”

He began, “Tshering dear,” then paused and resumed, “in the English-speaking world, the text for wedding ceremonies usually includes a promise by the bride and groom to care for each other ‘until death do us part’. That is exactly what I want for us.”

“Anyone who thinks you are evil is wrong,” his friend replied. “For a year, almost a whole year, I have watched you. I have never heard you say anything that wasn’t true. What you have told me makes me very happy, if it is true—and coming from you, it must be true. If that is true, then it is wrong for us *not* to be lovers.”

Mister Bart stifled a moan, as he squeezed her tighter and nuzzled his face against the top of her head. She pressed her argument. “Either one of us could die at any time. What a tragedy if that happened before we joined ourselves together in our love, before we celebrated the love we have for each other—no, what is the word?”

She paused, and Mister Bart said, “Consummated?” as they moved to a low stone terrace that served as a good, if hard, bench.

“Yes, it would be a great tragedy if one of us or both of us died before we consummated our love. One tragedy is enough, Sir Bart. Please, let us prevent that one.”

“If you want to convince them I’m not your teacher, you’d better stop calling me Sir Bart and Mister Bart and things like that.”

A look of panic flashed across Tshering’s face. She nodded and said, “Aiee! Yes, I’d better learn not to do that, and quick, in case they show up soon. Thank you.” Before Bart could say more, she asked, “But do you see what I mean?”

Bart stifled another moan, took a deep breath, and said, “Yes, dear, but I still don’t want to do anything that could cause you any harm.”

“Good, then stop saying ‘No’.”

“Darling Tshering, I will work on that. Remember, I have decades of conditioning to overcome. I have learned my whole life that such a relationship is wrong.”

“But they have been common here always. Only in recent times have people made laws to say a woman must be sixteen to enjoy a lover.”

“Yes, dear, and I’m aware that in half of Europe the age of consent is fourteen. But I would be breaking the law *here*.”

“*Men*—I mean no. You are forgetting I am sixteen.”

Bart groaned, and Tshering wrapped her arms around him again, saying, “It’s OK, Sir—*Cece*. It really is OK. We can be together, if you want to, and it will be good for both of us.”

“What is *cece*? I don’t know that word.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t hear it from most of the girls at school. It is like ‘darling’ or...ummm...what is that word that you see in old texts, a word for someone who is loved, in old English?”

“Old English is a different language. Neither of us could understand it. Do you mean old writing in modern English?”

“Yes, I think so. Old writing in English, like we speak—well, like you speak. Someone who is loved. In that writing, maybe a hundred years ago or two hundred.”

“Tshering, dear, you speak English *very* well. Y—”

“Thanks to you.”

“Partly—and partly thanks to your good ear and your hard work. But, anyway, are you thinking of the word ‘beloved’?”

“Yes, exactly! That’s what *cece* means, it is like ‘beloved’. You are my beloved, so I call you *cece*.”

Bart obviously continued to worry about possible adverse impacts on this person who, he admitted, was his beloved.

“Do you want me to spend the next five years in a refugee camp?” she continued. “Then, I will be old enough to be with you anywhere, but how will I ever find you? And we will have lost five years we could have been together. Do you want to be with me, or do you not? If you want to be with me, why should we be apart for five years—or more, it might take another five years to find each other—why should we be apart for ten years, when we can be together”

He wavered and worried, and kept saying the relationship they both wanted might be detrimental to her long term well-being. Tshering’s importunate pleas and active verbal and physical efforts at seduction overcame Bart’s worries and resistance in about two weeks. To say they both enjoyed the result vastly understates their experience.

Scavenging raids on the remains of half a dozen stores in town left the happy couple well supplied with canned foodstuffs and candles and seeds to plant in the Spring. The candles became increasingly useful, as the weather necessitated keeping the shutters closed more of the time, although their conjugal activities obviated any need for illumination many hours of each day. That almost idyllic situation continued for close to two months, although colder weather brought more trips to wrecked buildings for firewood.

The two lovebirds ran outside eight weeks later in response to the sound of a motor. Expecting a helicopter, they saw instead a twin-engine fixed-wing aircraft flying up the valley. Probably in response to the smoke from the cabin’s chimney, the airplane circled twice before continuing up the valley and then once more on its way south. Three days later, the unmistakable sound of a helicopter brought the two lovers back outside again. They ran back inside to escape the dust

kicked up by the craft's downdraft, as it landed on the athletic field between their cabin and the now denuded soccer goal.

As expected, the helicopter brought members of the Indian military. Tshering spoke a little, albeit very little, Hindi, but two of the military personnel spoke passable English. That facilitated communication sufficient to allow the rescuers to depart understanding that these survivors did not require immediate evacuation and suffered only from a lack of fresh vegetables and dairy products and a diminishing supply of rice. Bart and Tshering told their visitors at least a dozen others survived in the remains of the town. The helicopter crew in turn informed the couple the earthquake's epicenter lay east of the capital, which city had suffered devastation far worse than that seen locally.

Bart and Tshering insisted on providing the flight and rescue crew, cups of tea and apologized for the inability to provide biscuits. The grateful military personnel thanked the two survivors and told them what news they could. The king and his family had survived, they said, and begun working to reconstruct a government amid the chaos and almost total destruction of the city and its people. Sikkim and Assam both suffered enormous damage but neither as bad as what Tshering and Bart had seen in the local area. None of the roads in and out of the western half of the country remained intact or capable of carrying traffic.

The sergeant in charge of the rescue crew thanked Bart and Tshering again and said he expected to return within a week and bring supplies. He asked if they wanted him to convey messages to anyone, and they thanked him but declined his offer. The two hurried back inside, as the helicopter lifted off and headed back south. Deprived of physical contact with each other for more than an hour, they also hurried to resume their connubial activities.

Eight days later, a different helicopter arrived with a different crew, and delivered a welcome fifty pound bag of rice and ten pound bag of beans and assurances that the authorities would visit the valley every month or so to check on survivors' welfare. After sharing news and tea with the military personnel, the lovers returned to the life they enjoyed sharing. In anticipation of a distant Spring, they resumed gathering packets of seeds from three of the wrecked stores in town.

By the time the first representatives of the reconstituted government arrived over the barely navigable semi-restored highway from the capital a year later, Bart and Tshering and their son enjoyed the produce of a large garden, although the little fellow didn't yet consume much solid food. With Bart remaining silent except in answer to direct questions, Tshering succeeded in convincing the government people the couple had married shortly before the earthquake. Because noone asked, Bart did not mention he had not obtained a divorce from the wife who had moved out of his life four years earlier.

Tshering's efforts resulted, almost a year later, in a document granting Bart permission to reside in the country as the spouse of a citizen. Three years after that, in the absence of surviving members of the family of the previous owners, the king granted Tshering ownership of the athletic field and the adjacent orchard and part of the school grounds, subject to their clearing the debris. On one of the building sites they cleared, Bart, with Tshering's help, spent seven months building a larger, tighter house on a conventional foundation and even managed to obtain glass for all the windows. They moved in two months before the birth of their third child and first daughter.

Harlan Yarbrough

Educated as a scientist, graduated as a mathematician, but a full-time professional entertainer most of his life, including a stint as a regular performer on the prestigious Grand Ol' Opry, Harlan Yarbrough attempted to escape the entertainment industry, working as a librarian, physics teacher, syndicated newspaper columnist, and town planner. Harlan lives, writes, and struggles to improve his dzongkha pronunciation and vocabulary in Bhutan. In the past seven years, his short fiction has appeared in the *Galway Review*, *Indiana Voice Journal*, *Green Hills Literary Lantern*, and seventy-seven other literary journals and won the Fair Australia Prize.

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