

The Sky Beneath.

Looking out of the window of a jumbo jet it is normal to see the clouds, and land peeping out, several miles beneath the flight path. Above, there is a deepening blue reaching up to touch space, a reminder of just how thin the earth's atmosphere is and how much we depend on its fragile existence. But, on this particular flight, there is a sense of disorientation; the land is not where it should be. Sure enough, there are clouds and land beneath, but cast your eyes above the clouds at surreal peaks of sharply contoured meringue and you'll soon realise that you are entering a world where land and sky seem to swirl and become indistinct from each other. This is the approach into Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal, a country where it is normal to live above the clouds with the sky beneath.

I was en route to the village of Nagarkot, some thirty-two slow and steep kilometres from Kathmandu, at an elevation of 2,200 metres. Our mini-bus climbed out of the Kathmandu valley, its engine grumbling up the rough tracks into night-time darkness – a darkness that became so deep that I lost all sense of topography, except for the continuous sensation of climbing. The only artificial light streamed from the van's headlights. It was then that I noticed bright flickering lights appearing out of the side window, and I realised that I was surrounded by starlight, above, and also below me, so it appeared. We had journeyed to touch the sky. And I had journeyed to visit a place that had stirred an inner, inchoate desire within me since childhood. I was visiting the Himalayas, and I was not sure if my mind would ever possess the words to express an emotion so powerful it was almost an out-of-body experience. Ecstasy was not what I thought it would feel like; it was haunting and full of silent tears.

'Set your alarm for 4.30 a.m. and be out on the hotel balcony for breakfast. Whatever you do, don't miss the sunrise.'

I stumbled into my bedroom late that evening, by torchlight, in a fog of exhaustion – jet-lagged and muzzy-headed. Did I have a greater need for a full night's sleep or to see a sunrise? Doubts cast aside, I set my alarm and duly dragged myself on to the balcony for breakfast next morning.

The village of Nagarkot is perched on a mountain side with one of the most expansive views eastwards, over eight Himalayan ranges, including Annapurna, Manaslu and Everest. And my hotel balcony clung to vertical mountain rock with uninterrupted vistas over the valley to the mountain ranges beyond. The advertising blurb states that 'when sunrise comes, it just might be the most beautiful place on earth.' I clutch a warming coffee and wait.

Below me is a sea of cloud. I had worried that there would be no view because of the cloud cover, and had not understood how high we were above the cumulus clouds. As the sky grows lighter, tinged with purples, blues and pinks, the ghostly forms of mountains in the sky begin to appear – impossibly high peaks capped with wind-blown snowdrift. The guide begins pointing them out, naming them – an incantation: Annapurna, Manaslu, Langtang, Ganesh himal, Rolwaling, Jugal, Mahalangur... *Of course*, the local people believe these mountains are the sacred dwelling places of gods. Who wouldn't? And then, in the distance, made insignificant by perspective, the indistinct mound of the world's highest point becomes visible – Everest. Chomolungma. Holy Mother.

And then it happened. A shift in time and light. An altered sense of reality and consciousness. The snow-covered mountains become a changing kaleidoscope of iridescence, until the first rays of sun rise between their lowest peaks. We all stand in silence and then, a Chinese lady screams her wild delight and throws her arms in the air. Others join her in a salutation to the sun. As more reserved Brits, we gaze with lumps in our throats and weep tears of a joy we don't fully understand. The scene seems to shimmer and dance, like a ballet of rainbow light in the pit of my stomach. My legs feel weak and disconnected, unwilling to move and powerless. No words. To this day, there are no words.

I later learned that we were 'so lucky... last week the hotel was shrouded in complete fog and the group saw nothing'. Meanwhile, for the peasant farmers who eke out a subsistence-living on the terraced fields below, this is just another normal start to a normal day. Another hard, back-breaking

day lived in one of the world's poorest countries, above the clouds with the sky beneath and a Holy Mother watching over them.