

# HORSES LIKE LIGHTNING

A STORY OF PASSAGE THROUGH THE HIMALAYAS



ADVANCE READER'S COPY • UNCORRECTED • JUNE 2008 • NOT FOR SALE

*Sienna Craig*

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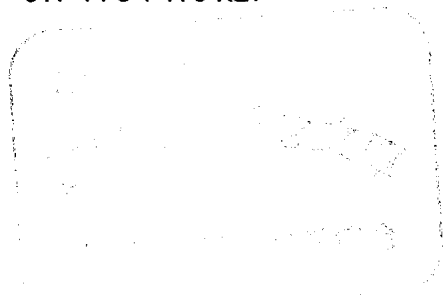
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## PROLOGUE

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*Beauty is the moment of transition, as if the form were  
just ready to flow into other forms.*

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON

MY FATHER IS TRAINED as an archaeologist. He has sculptor's hands and an astral stare that can see right through me. When I was small, he wore a beard and often smelled of earth. In those years, he worked with Chumash Indians who lived in and around Santa Barbara. We took long walks together, and he would point out arrowheads and shards of pottery in the dirt. Archaeology eyes, he called them. To me, his perceptiveness was a small miracle. He was a scavenger, a finder of lost things. His imagination could piece together village histories from soil, sky, and stones. There was hawk in him: piercing, graceful, and often alone.

My mother is a painter. To her, anything torn apart could be reassembled. There were no wrong lines. This sense of creativity enlivened her. That seized moment of seeing and then seeing again is etched into her. Even now, more than three decades after I was born, I can imagine her as the young mother she once was, a long braid down her back, her knees rough with paint. Her studio is sacred space—a place where she can be alone, most fully herself. It was an intimate place, which she rarely opened up to others. But as her child, and therefore as an extension of herself, I sometimes joined her. I drew and wrote stories, watching as she worked a piece, moving across her medium of collage, the white expanse of walls cluttered with her different reckonings of art. She kept a shrine in the corner—feathers and stones and other found

offerings—above which was tacked a small piece of paper. “Go, little picture!” it read.

I suppose that California in the seventies was anything but *normal*, but when I was small, Kraft macaroni and cheese and Barbie dolls were my exotica. Instead of a swing set in my backyard, we had a sweat lodge. On weekends or after long days at a dig, the house would be given over to my father’s colleagues. I watched as the crew of Chumash and longhaired white folk stripped down in the California sun and crawled into the lodge, with its willow branch spine and eucalyptus leaf skin. Part of me was embarrassed by the bareness of it all—the incongruity in what was otherwise a suburban tract house neighborhood, near the freeway—but I still love the smell of white sage and steam rising off rocks.

Sometimes the discrepancies between my upbringing and those of my schoolmates jarred, embarrassed, disappointed me. I can remember longing for my mother to pick me up from school wearing anything but her shimmering Dolphin running shorts and cutoff T-shirt, invariably splattered with paint. “My mom is an artist,” I would say to my friends as they glanced at their mothers with their station wagons and matching pantsuits, and then stared at my mom. In my heart, I felt I knew what being an artist or an archaeologist meant. I could sense, if not articulate, something of the intersubjective tension that is at the creative heart of what has also become my discipline, my vocation: the practice of moving between worlds, charting differences, and understanding how meaning is made across human experience. But I also learned to live this dissonance, and to accept the fact that some things would not translate. In that sense, I have been preparing for Mustang for as long as I can remember.

My parents have nourished my curiosity and, by virtue of their own choices, have helped me to feel comfortable living between worlds. And, as much as painting and archaeology are intuitive, my parents gave me confidence in my own ability to decipher, to draw lines, to dig things up.

I remember being small, thigh-high against my father’s wiry legs. He had taken me out to an archaeological site on the northern edge of Santa Barbara, near Point Conception, the most westerly jut of the California coastline and the point at which, according to Chumash cosmology, spir-

its leave this world. Although at the time I simply knew it as a place where dolphin streamed through the Pacific and osprey flew in circles overhead, I could still appreciate it as sacred ground.

When we arrived at the site, my father and I began to explore, looking for things. Eucalyptus trees rustled in the afternoon wind and the air grew still. An eagle feather lying on the ground caught my attention and I reached down to pick it up. The shaft of cartilage felt cool in my hand. I knew eagles were rare, and the brittle plume felt like a gift.

I shook the feather. As I shook it, the earth itself began to shake. In seconds, the asphalt buckled and kneeled. My father picked me up—feather and all. We tried to stand still while the ground beneath our feet swayed and rumbled. As a native Californian, I had experienced earthquakes before, but, for me, there have been none like this one since.

When the ground stopped shaking, my eyes darted between the wrinkled road and the feather I still held in my hand. “Papasan, did I do that?” I finally squeaked. “Maybe,” he said, smiling. He had seen me shake the feather, and had witnessed the sense of power and magic that accompanied this gesture and its aftermath. Despite our own rationality, for that first kinetic moment, my shake was eagle and earth and energy through me, beyond me, toward something deeper—the ways humans and other animals share worlds, bleed into each other.

I am an only child. As parents went, and as far as I could tell as a young child, mine seemed well matched. But this match, made when they were young themselves, ended with difficulty by their early thirties, as I was turning ten. I was given my first horse around the time of their separation, and my adolescence passed mostly at the barn. I mucked out stalls, fed oat hay and alfalfa pellets to my four-legged charges, and swept the aisles. These tasks helped to earn my horse’s keep. My fingernails were never clean, but my mare’s coat glistened like a wet seal in the sun. I kept my brushes and hoof pick, fly spray and bandages in a tin trunk painted blue. It bent easily, and after a few weeks of my sitting on it as I pulled on my riding boots, the top caved in. But it was mine, and the mare was mine, and that was enough.

In the years when my parents’ marriage incinerated, I found solace at the barn. The other girls who hung out at the stables were more sisters



than any friendships since. We spoke first of horses and only later of boys. Gathered on the fence like crows when our trainer schooled a horse, we were initiates, learning through participation and observation to belong to this horse culture, to know its language. After our rides, we played in the hay barns until dusk. But my barn sisters had their own families to contend with, and there was little to say or talk through with them about my parent's dissolving marriage. I could talk to horses, though.

Summit, a chestnut-colored gelding with a dished face, was neither the strongest nor the most beautiful horse I ever rode, but he was the best listener. On days when I didn't want to be found, I would sit in the corner of his stall, just talking quietly to him. Summit would nibble alfalfa, using his upper lip to separate it from the wood shavings that made his bed, as I confided in him about late-night arguments and my worries about our dissolving family. If I happened upon Summit early in the morning or late in the evening, when he was lying down in his stall, he would let me curl up next to him—something horses don't usually tolerate. That gesture felt more intimate than the arms of most lovers since. One winter, when Summit was nearly dead from pneumonia, he took to laying his entire neck and head in my lap—a heavy weight for a twelve-year-old girl to bear. But I was strong and I managed. I would stroke him between the ears as he labored for breath.

By the time I was a teenager, I had ridden and cared for a succession of horses, each more challenging than the last, and had had success in competitions. The ribbons that lined my bedroom walls insulated me from the domestic chaos beyond them. While my parents were breaking up, I think I spoke to their answering machines more than I did to them. I would tell all to the tape: school grades, slumber party schemes, details of that afternoon's riding lesson, or even deeper murmurings. That way my parents would register something of my daily life, would know where I was, and would show up on time, I hoped, to take me home.

College wasn't really a place for riding. I dreamed about horses, though, and counted paces in horse strides. I even spent some time as a member of the Brown University Equestrian Team. But the Californian in me had a difficult time riding indoors, and the academic

demands of college precluded long afternoons at the barn, when time seemed to stop.

During my tenure at Brown, the world's cultures and religions fascinated me and likewise directed my studies. I knew that I wanted to go abroad and was drawn to Asia. In 1993, during my junior year, I went to Nepal for the first time. The last month of that semester was to be devoted to conducting an independent project, and I entertained the idea of living with Tibetan nuns. That is, until I found out that there were horses and a rich "horse culture"—in a place called Mustang, no less.



# PART I

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*We often walked away from the town in the late afternoon sunset.*

*There were no paved roads and no fences—no trees—it was like the ocean but it was wide, wide land. The evening star would be high in the sunset sky when it was still broad daylight. That evening star fascinated me. It was in some way very exciting to me.*

*I had nothing but to walk into nowhere and the wide sunset space with the star.*

—Georgia O'Keefe

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## FINDING MUSTANG

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**M**Y MIDDLE NAME, Radha, recalls the days when my parents ate too much bee pollen and brown rice, when they stuffed Robert Graves' poetry and the *Bhagavad Gita* in their pockets. Radha is the consort of Krishna, the playful yet fierce incarnation of Vishnu the Preserver within the Hindu pantheon. This young girl, a simple cowherd by birth, is often depicted in gardens, reclining on swings, listening to Krishna play his flute. At once demure and powerful, Radha keeps Krishna—that blue-skinned scamp, that trickster—coming back.

When I was a teenager, I despised the name Radha. My best friend at the time was Rebecca, a girl nearly three years my senior with freckles and blonde hair whose life, in contrast to mine, seemed exceedingly normal. I'm not sure when I made the decision to change my middle name—without informing my parents—but my diploma from high school reads Rebecca, not Radha. And by then I had read the *Bhagavad Gita* myself.

Yet by the time I first traveled to Nepal, Radha was back on my passport.

"Ah, Radha," a portly Nepali immigration official with a betelnut-stained smile remarked as I waited for him to stamp my student visa. "Good Hindu name," he offered. "Welcome in Nepal." And I was.

I emerged from the Tribhuvan International Airport and was overcome by contrast: aural, sensory, aesthetic, natural. Enormous cumulus clouds billowed above fluorescent paddies, bursting with moisture. Even the most dilapidated of brick buildings shone in the afternoon light. On first impression, this city seemed burnished and used, by turns. There was the smell of *chiya*, Nepali sweet tea, petrol fumes, and cow dung. As

my fellow students and I were driven by bus through the capitol's crowded, narrow streets toward our program house. I was struck not so much by abject signs of poverty as much as I was moved by a sense of resourcefulness: children transforming discarded paper clips, rubber bands, and empty bags of instant noodles into the stuff of play, while others combed rubbish piles for bits of recyclable material; entire families shuttling through traffic on one motorcycle; tailors sewing scrap pieces of fabric into coin purses or baby slippers. In contrast, the sense of waste, and of excess, that seemed to me so obvious about my own country was made more so after only hours in Nepal. Those first few weeks in the country, as I began studying Nepali language, learning more of the country's history, and experiencing its culture by participating in my homestay family's daily rhythms, I felt at once overwhelmed and deeply happy.

Kathmandu at the end of the twentieth century was also a city of paradox and multiplicity, and made me acutely aware of the passage of time. Stone statues of gods, thousands of years old and more delicate than the flowers offered them, stood along thoroughfares and in back alleys, near motorcycle repair shops and stores that sold pirated videos from Singapore and New Delhi. Women on their way to work as beauticians at five-star hotels took the time to offer vermilion and incense to temple deities. On the streets, lorries halted for befuddled cows. White-gloved policemen conducted traffic: three-wheeled electric cars called "tempo," stuffed full of school children and commuters; porters weighted down by wide-screen televisions or refrigerators; diplomats and Nepali politicians in imported SUVs with tinted windows. The country captured me immediately.

By early October, Kathmandu still rode on the edges of a verdant monsoon, yet the days dawned crisp, and pockets of morning fog whisped and gathered like a long, smooth veil. On this morning, as I peddled my bicycle to the program house, I felt grateful that the night's downpour had cleansed the polluted city air. I could see the Himalayas rising up from the northern horizon. I pulled in to the program house, parked my bicycle, and joined some of my fellow college students on the roof. Some were smoking Yak cigarettes, others were sipping *chiya* before the day officially began. Downstairs in the kitchen, Lawa, the Tibetan cook, was

chopping onions for the midday meal, reciting Buddhist prayers as he worked. He had been a monk before he left Tibet and still carried with him something of a monastic presence.

The unstructured lull of morning was broken by the sound of a bell ringing downstairs, signaling that it was time for lecture. Charles Ramble, a British anthropologist, had come to give a talk about Mustang, one of Nepal's seventy-five districts nestled deep in the Himalayas, and the site of his research for much of the past decade. In anticipation of his lecture, my fellow students and I had read some of Charles' work. As with other visits to our program house by Nepali and foreign experts, it was not lost on this rather motley crew of American college students that this was a precious way to learn. My fellow students and I filed into the common room, sat down on cushions or the low platforms that lined the space, and listened.

"I'd like you to think for a moment," Charles began, "about the difference between cultural and political borders, about how language and religion relate to the landscape." Charles sat cross-legged on the floor in front of us. His hands looked more like those of a muleskinner than a scholar. He wore years in the corners of his eyes and had a beguiling smile.

"Mustang is a good example. It lies between Dhaulagiri, the sixth tallest mountain in the world, and the Annapurna massif. In the southern reaches of this district, the Kali Gandaki River forms earth's deepest gorge." Charles showed a slide, taken from out the window of an airplane, to illustrate. A serpentine of frothy gray-green water coursed through crags and solid rock, conifers clinging at all angles from the gorge's edge. Even from this arial view, I could sense the power of this river—a visceral understanding of this landscape's extreme nature, of beauty and danger, both.

As Charles spoke, I learned that Mustang was located in Nepal's Karnali Zone, and that Jomsom, Mustang's district headquarters, was about a five-day walk away from Pokhara, a mid-hills town below the Annapurnas. Though there were flights between Pokhara and Jomsom, most people from Mustang walked this passage. What did it mean, I wondered, to measure distance not in miles, but in days, in footsteps?

That morning, I learned that the Kali Gandaki valley was not only the



deepest gorge on earth, but also that it had been a thoroughfare of trans-Himalayan trade for centuries. Pictures of mule trains and yak caravans bespoke an ancient exchange—highland salt for lowland grains—as much as they also captured a sense of Mustang’s place as a trekking destination *par excellence*. Some of the animals in Charles’s slides were loaded down with crates of Coca Cola bottles, Rara instant noodles, Cadbury chocolate bars, and muesli.

Charles flipped through more slides. Images of a stark landscape came into focus. Soil and sky seemed to part irrevocably here. Cliffs and ruins resembled eroding sandcastles—not an inaccurate description considering that hundreds of millions of years ago, all of the Himalayan range was ocean floor, above which ran the salty currents of the Tythes Sea. As we watched, two of my Nepali language teachers, high-caste Hindus from Kathmandu, whispered to each other.

“Oh my! Can you believe people live there?”

“I’ve been to Mustang once, to go on pilgrimage to the temples at Muktinath. The wind blew so hard that I couldn’t see. Everything was dirty!”

Slides of coniferous forests and apple orchards in southern Mustang soothed their tone. Beneath the whir of the slide projector, they conferred about the price of Mustang apples in Kathmandu markets. But even southern Mustang, with its forests and glacial streams, was rough country. Windswept and arid, most of Mustang’s villages lie between eight and twelve thousand feet.

I was entranced by this landscape. Homes, monasteries, and trailside cairns were striped with earthen pigments of gray, white, and red. These marks symbolized Rigsum Gompo, a trinity of Buddhist deities—Avalokitesvara, Manjushri, and Vajrapani—that protected this sacred geography. Doors and windows seemed built on a Hobbit-sized scale, and some were marked with suns and moons. Charles explained that these doors were small to ensure that people bent over as they entered—to prevent *ro lang*, or zombies, from entering homes. Stones the size and shape of ostrich eggs were brought up from riverbeds and formed the foundations of homes. Groves of poplars and willows rustled along riverbanks in an otherwise treeless place. Wood is wealth here, I learned.