In Search of Freedom: Life, Death, and Sovereignty in the Himalaya

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About this Piece

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Chapter 1

In Search of Freedom: Life, Death, and Sovereignty in the Himalaya

I'm sitting in a dusty hotel room in Kathmandu, attempting to call a Spanish airline about my missing luggage.

"We'll have to email our ground staff contractor," they say. I try to protest. "My trek starts tomorrow!" "Please check your email later today, sir." I listen to the click of the agent hanging up the phone.

The hotel is nestled precisely in the middle of Thamel, the tourist district with its colourful flags, rooftop gardens, and too-narrow streets. There is plenty to do in the capital, but after three days of chasing my lost bag in a Kafkaesque system of virtual shrugs and missed callbacks, my energy wanes. I am trapped in the



antipresent, unable to visit any tourist attractions, only capable of reconnecting to the hotel WiFi to refresh my emails for the 800th time in the hope of news. With nothing but time, I feel utterly trapped.

During a 2018 volunteering trip to Nepal, I waited for my opportunity to walk the Annapurna Circuit: a two-week hiking route crossing high paths and winding through tiny Buddhist villages. Instead, I got a call to fly back to the UK. My father had been diagnosed with bowel cancer, and it was terminal. He was the one who introduced me to hiking, taught me to be patient when faced with another false peak, to understand the swirling patterns of clouds, to clean my kit, to be prepared for sudden change, to appreciate in the silence of the wilderness, to be present. Near the end, we talked a lot about hiking.

"When you see a mountain," he said, "think of me." I can't remember what I said in return.

It took eight years to get back to Nepal — grief, travel, COVID, relocation, work, money, rule changes, and procrastination saw to that. After all my posturing about being an advocate for freedom, living my life exactly how I wanted, my fear of closure held me back. I wouldn't gain perspective until I'd seen those mountains again.

Finally, after another two-day delay, I take the first steps of my 18-day trek. The Manang Valley bathes in bright sunlight. We pass apple orchards and fields of buckwheat as we climb to Lower Pisang, but after nearly a week stuck in the hotel, I feel like I could run up the path for hours. I'm not doing this alone; there are ten in my group — other travellers looking for answers in the hills. We get to know each other in the brief moments when we're not gasping for breath in the thinning air.

That night, I fire up my Kindle and read The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas. It's one of my all-time favourites, a short story that's more of a thought experiment. Ursula Le Guin presents a Utopian society of harmony, peace, and joy. In Omelas, life is wonderful for every resident except one: a miserable child, suffering alone in a dungeon. Most residents can ignore the one person whose incarceration guarantees their joy and freedom, but the few who can't leave the citadel forever.

Maybe it's hubris, but I've always considered myself one of those who 'walk away'. I've been willing to give up convenience to claw back some of the sovereignty I'd lost through a corporate job and living in a mediocre London suburb. And here I was on a legendary remote hiking route, perhaps not scaling peaks, but at least challenging myself, climbing higher than I've ever been.

The nights are cold at 4000m above sea level, and my wardrobe is more suited to the Spanish summer than sub-zero temperatures. As we hike farther up, across metal suspension bridges and past well-insulated herds of yaks, I wear my father's old gear — a down vest and the bright red waterproof. It's not a homage; it's purely practical. Still, it gives me some kind of connection.

I feel him silently judging me for walking the 'tourist trail'. He always had to plan the route and bring every bit of kit himself, while a Nepalese porter carries my luggage strapped directly to their forehead. He would also have loved seeing the world's highest peaks up close and listening to the guides' explanations of the dangers, the routes, the climbers. We all live the battle of comfort vs sovereignty.



Figure 1.1: 6ae85c02736386d0dcda424e



The 'tea house' hotels in the Manang valley have a few more mod cons than expected. Some even have hot showers. But today, the power for the whole village is out. As the sun sets, my roommate and I read by the light of our headtorches.

Before the trip, I'd just finished reading *The Gulag Archipelago*, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's brutal account of the anti-freedoms of Communist Russia. That night, I search for a quote that jumped off the page when I read it: 'All those years in our cells and our huts, the state's electricity had seared our souls, and now, darkness was bliss.' Sometimes, our only freedom comes through stoic minimalism and absence. I turned off my reading light and listened to the darkness.

I'm in bed with a worsening cold. The lack of doctors and pharmacies doesn't seem so quaint when you are coughing up your lungs. The 5,416m Thorong La Pass plays on my mind, and I struggle to sleep. It's not just me; another member of the group has a virus, and most of the others are blowing their runny noses in the dry mountain air. We take each day slowly, climbing 500m in altitude, and putting one foot in front of the other. There aren't any other options: turning back involves walking too, and I don't like going backwards.

By this point, we've walked 80km or so. Karl Bushby has just finished walking 50,000km after circumnavigating the globe by foot. I watched a video on his trip just before setting off on mine, and I was most impressed by the fact he had no desire to break records, no charity campaign, no press team. "Every fibre of my being," he says, "every day, has been what I'm doing right now."

Along the way, between icy paths and sneezes, I hit upon the idea that walking is trustless. That's why it is so freeing to Karl Bushby and to all of us. You don't rely on anyone or anything else. It is the rhythm of taking one step at a time. Sometimes things go as expected; sometimes they don't. But freedom is not about control. It depends on adapting to your surroundings and being in sync with the path. Each day, the tea houses serve another group of foreigners. Monks in the small temples perform another ceremony, another meditation. The kitchens produce another hundred plates of dal bhat, accompanied by ginger tea for the sniffling guests. The sun rises over snowy peaks again.

One of the guys in our group walked to Everest Base Camp more than 20 years ago. Things were quite primitive back then. He told me the soundtrack of those two weeks was the constant thunk of cattle bells. That was his rhythm, his surroundings. He bought a heavy metal bell in a Kathmandu market at the end of his trip and still displays it proudly in his New Jersey house.

It's 4 am and -15°C on the day we climb over the pass and down the other side. Lines of headtorches light the steep path up, and the snow crunches under boots fitted with temporary metal spikes. The path ahead is backed up because a girl from another group has fainted. Her partner attempts to carry her up on piggyback, but stops after just a few steps.

As we wait for the last members of our party to arrive, we hop from foot to foot to keep warm. Frank, a German realtor who lives in Cape Town, excitedly tells us he has the WiFi password for a teahouse we've just passed. 'Who cares?' I think. 'You've flown all the way here to cross this pass, and you've gotten up in the dark to do it. Why do you need WiFi?'



Figure 1.3: 6ae85bfb736386d0dcda4174



Figure 1.4: 6ae85bf5736386d0dcda4095

Later, after the girl who collapsed has passed us riding on a yak, after we've taken our photos at the top, and after we've descended to 3,800 meters and bathed in the sun of the afternoon, I reflect on Frank and his need for WiFi passwords. Yes, we are all plugged into our digital worlds, but if you can't spend a few hours away from it, are you really free at all?

I think about the amount of time I spent that day completely disconnected, staring at the contrast of birds of prey crossing white peaks and soaring up into a blue sky. Why do we struggle to think beyond the next unit of time? The next breath, photo, coffee break, the next day, the next WiFi access point. Why do we need to extract immediate value from our physical world?

I can't always rein in my differences from the group. Not everyone has waited eight long years to reconnect with their father by climbing a Nepalese mountain. This is every fibre of my being, not just a social media photo op. My father would have loved to build a homestead, to fix machines, grow cattle, and walk the land, but he chose a secure life so his children could do that.

The next days we pass through small towns celebrating Dashain — a time for families, giving thanks, and taking stock. We stay with a local family and experience life in a small town; while we eat set meals and walk to a strict schedule, it feels like all the Nepalis around us are making their own choices.

We watch old ladies harvesting millet and corn. Heavy machinery continues to shift the earth of roads and riverbanks affected by landslides. We see new entrepreneurs opening restaurants, tea houses, and local stores. I speak to Ram, one of our guides, who is working through the festival period to put his kids through college in Japan. Everyone must hustle to improve their lot because saving in Rupees is futile. Even with remittances from those working abroad, Nepal is constantly playing catch-up. Everyone is building a better life here; no one expects it to be easy.

My final day is spent in Kathmandu. A few of us travel to Durbar Square to see the world's only living goddess. The Kumari is a young girl selected from a northern village. There are strict physical and mental tests as well as a birthdate that matches specific astrological criteria. She is taken from her parents to live in an opulent palace, where her feet may never touch the ground below. If she sheds a drop of blood, she is cast out into the realm of the mortals and is replaced by a new Kumari. Hindus and Buddhists alike come to see her, hoping to be blessed by one of her three daily appearances at her palace window. The current Kumari is just three years old. After waiting an hour for her to appear, I feel like her nervous little wave is an anticlimax. The crowd still gasps.

Later, it occurs to me that she is the living embodiment of the child in The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas. Instead of being tortured or in pain, she is doted on. She has expensive gowns, extravagant makeup, a team of handlers, tutors, and adoring fans, but she is cursed. Her childhood is stolen, and she is imprisoned to bring others luck, joy, and religious harmony. She cannot play, shout, hide, misbehave, cry, laugh, or neglect her duties. She cannot walk where she pleases. To tourists, the Kumari is a sweet anomaly, a curious tradition. To Nepalis, she is a living goddess. Almost everyone is happy with this arrangement.

I went to Nepal to reconnect with emotions I had long since buried. Curiously, I found glimpses of freedom instead of apparitions of my father. Sometimes I saw them in the hawks cruising high above, sometimes in



Figure 1.5: 6ae85bfd736386d0dcda41a4

the industrious lives of locals, and sometimes in the restrictions of those trapped in digital worlds or religious constructs.

If there is one thing I learned on this journey across the Annapurna mountains, it is that freedom is gained one step at a time. You have to know which direction you are heading, and you must understand what you are leaving behind.

Philip Charter is a writer, editor, and the freedom maximalist who swapped the oppressive grey skies of England for the Canary Islands. He is the author of five books of short fiction, editor of the 21 Futures series, and Head of Publishing at Konsensus.



Figure 1.6: 6ae85d29d542268bb4384b50

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