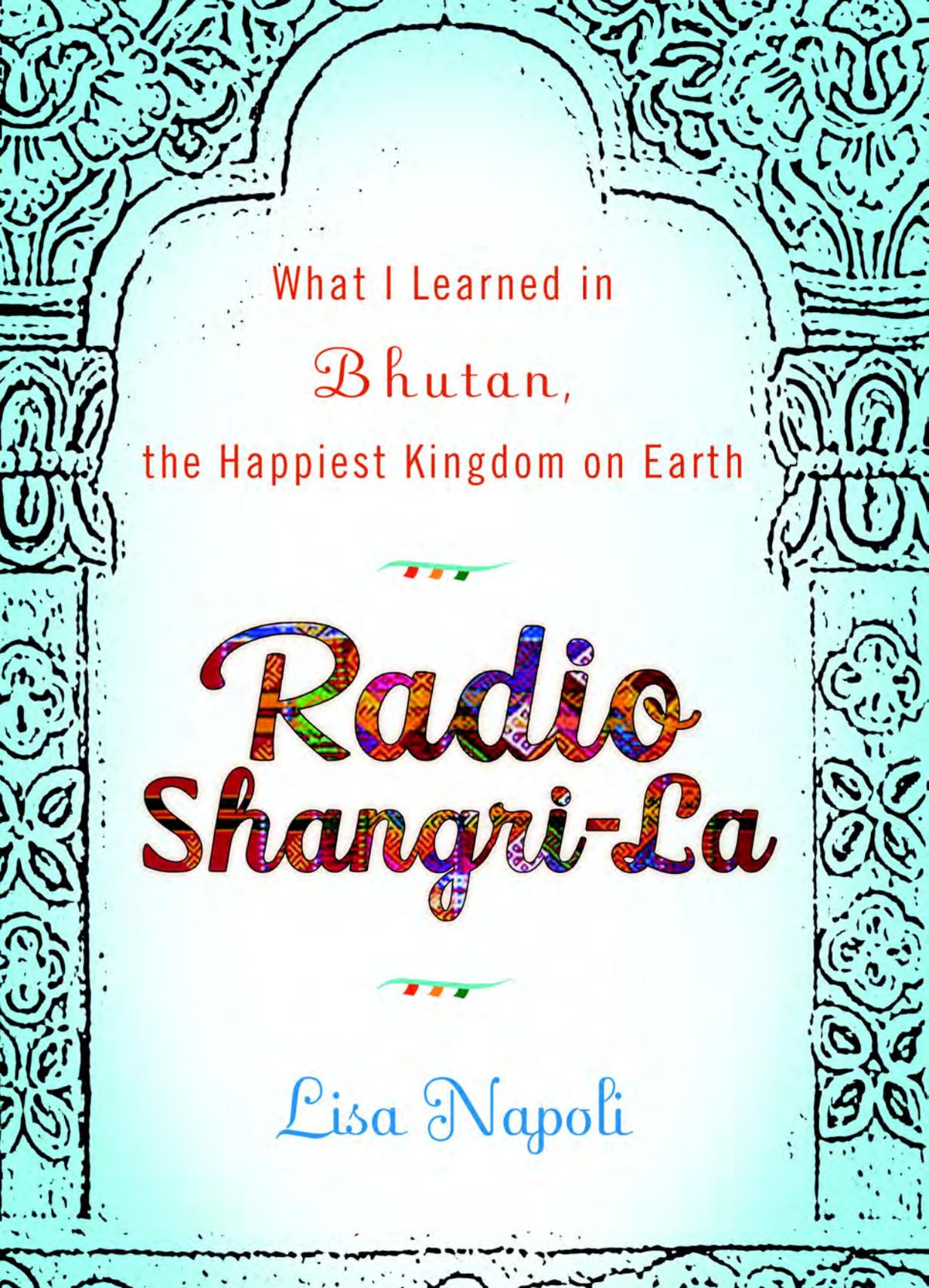


What I Learned in
Bhutan,
the Happiest Kingdom on Earth



Radio
Shangri-La



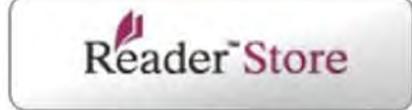
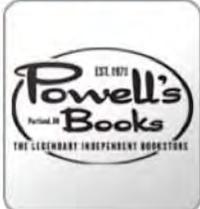
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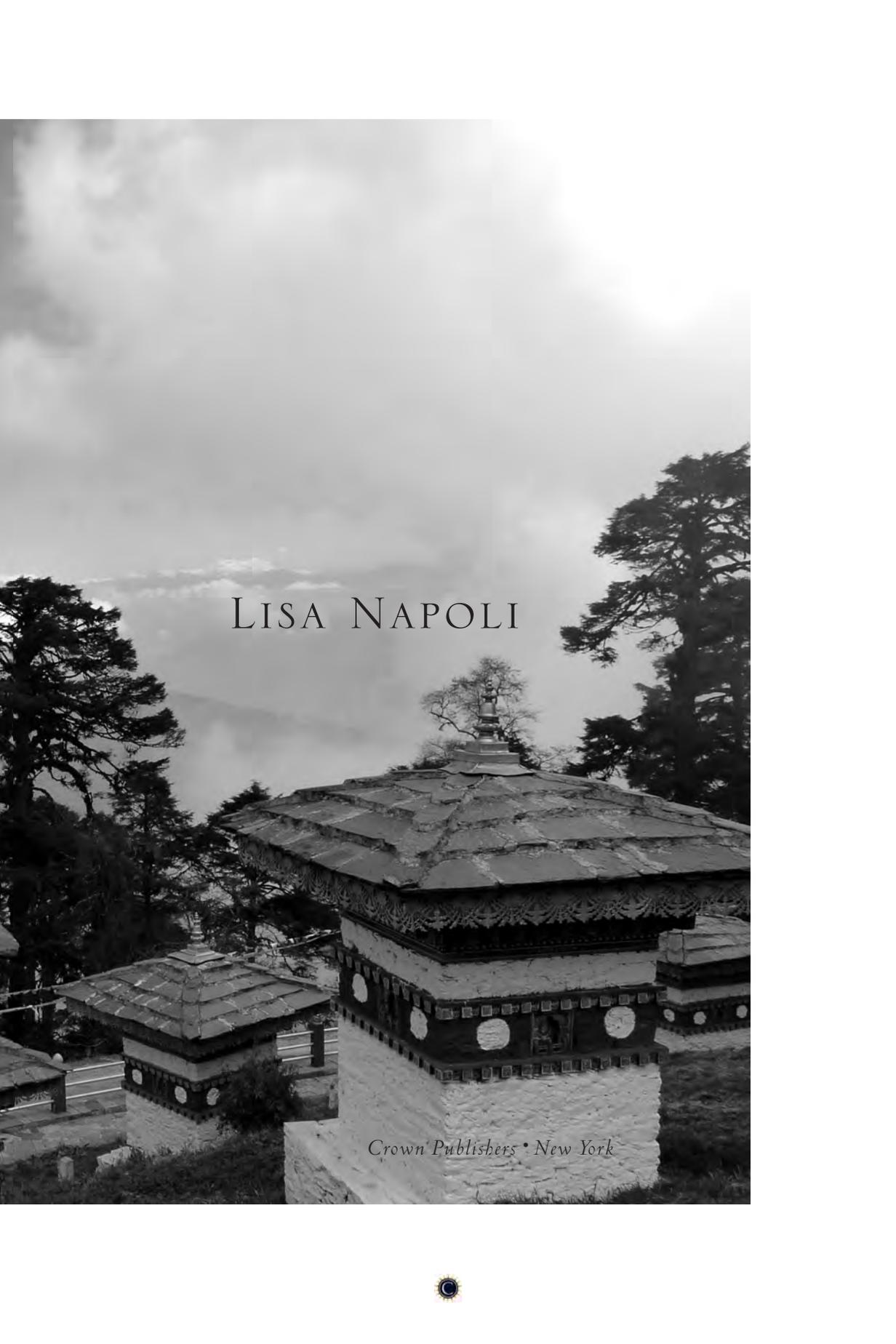
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What I Learned in the Happiest Kingdom on Earth





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First Edition



PREFACE: THREE GOOD THINGS

THE APPROACH TO the most sacred monastery in the Kingdom of Bhutan is steep and winding and, especially as you near the top, treacherous. You are sure with one false step you'll plummet off the edge. Had I been here during certain times over the last few years, I might have hoped I would. It is a cold winter's Saturday, dark and overcast. Misty gray clouds, pregnant with snow, hug the mountains.

My companions are several of the twenty-somethings who staff the new radio station in Bhutan's capital city, where I've come to volunteer. Kuzoo FM 90: The voice of the youth. Pema is wearing jeans and a sweatshirt and flat white dress shoes, the kind you might put on with a demure frock for a tea party. Ngawang's wearing the same stuff on top, but she's got sneakers on her feet. Each woman carries a satchel stuffed with her *kira*, the official national dress, requisite attire for Bhutanese who reach the summit. Kesang is already wearing his *gho*, the male equivalent. Over it, he's carrying a backpack filled with ten pounds of oil to fuel dozens of butter lamps, offerings to be left for the gods. Me, I'm twenty years older, and



practicality reigns: I've got on my thick-soled boots, an ugly long black down coat with a hood, and six layers of clothing underneath.

So much for the strength I've gained from my daily swimming regime; I am huffing and puffing against the altitude and the intensity of the climb. My new friends modulate their sprints to let me keep up.

Bhutanese are hearty in many matters—they are used to living off the land, the hard lives of farmers—but they are particularly strong when it involves making the trek to this place called Takshang, built on a sheer cliff that soars ten thousand feet into the sky. The depth of their devotion becomes abundantly clear when, out of nowhere, a radiant twelve-year-old boy scurries down past us, stark naked, completely unaffected by the temperature and the incline. He's trailed by a solemn entourage of grown men. Not one of them misses a step. Later, we learn this beatific adolescent is a reincarnated lama on pilgrimage from the remote eastern reaches of this tiny country.

A pilgrimage to Takshang is the highlight of a trip to Bhutan, but it is commonplace for the Bhutanese. They are carried here from babyhood. Slight, frail seniors navigate the twists and turns and inclines deftly from memory, in a fraction of the time it takes foreigners half their age. Tales are told of people with physical disabilities who labor for twelve hours so they might reach the top, where a cluster of temples awaits. The most sacred of the altar rooms there is open to the general public only once a year.

It is believed that meditating for just one minute at Takshang will bring you exponentially greater blessings than meditating for months at any other sacred site. If you travel here on a day the calendars deem to be auspicious, the merit



you accumulate will be even more abundant. Ngawang tells us that the first time she remembers visiting was two decades ago, when she was four years old; her mother had died and the monks sent her here to pray.

What Takshang promises all who visit is cleansing and renewal. Into this valley in the eighth century a sage named Guru Rinpoche rode in on the back of a tigress. Then he retreated to a cave for three months and, with the most powerful weapon there is—his mind—swashbuckled away evil spirits. In so doing, he persuaded the Bhutanese to adopt Buddhism as their guiding light. Hundreds of years later, to mark the feat, a colony of structures was built in this precarious location—testament to how the people of Bhutan have long revered him, this being they consider the Second Buddha.

As we climb higher and higher, and as the gold-topped Takshang comes into view, I can feel Guru Rinpoche's strength bolstering my own, diminishing demons, softening my heart.

THIS IS THE STORY of my midlife crisis—and how I wrestled with and then transcended it, thanks to a chance encounter that led me to a mysterious kingdom in Asia few have visited. In the march of years leading up to my fortieth birthday, and on the rapid ascent into that menacing decade, I'd found myself Monday-morning quarterbacking every step of my life, haunted by the revisionist history of regret. A near-continuous looping chorus of “what ifs” and “if onlys” became my soundtrack:

Why had I failed to have a family with a man I loved?

Why had I squandered my youth so haphazardly?



Why had I stuck with a profession that infuriated me so intensely?

What could I do with the second half of my life to make it more meaningful than the first?

How was I going to grow old gracefully?

Inhaling the cold, clear air on that trek up to Takshang, on the other side of the world from home, the pain and noise of those questions began, finally, to melt away. To morph into a sense of acceptance and peace. No longer did I feel stuck on a treadmill of emptiness; now my life story read as full, exciting, wondrous—with limitless possibilities for the future.

And we hadn't even reached the most sacred spot on the mountain.

THE GROUNDWORK FOR this awakening had been laid months earlier, when I had only the vaguest of ideas where this place called Bhutan was on the planet.

Every Wednesday evening, I headed west on the clogged I-10 freeway in Los Angeles for an experimental workshop in positive psychology. In classic therapy—where you endlessly review all your personal history—you work to gain a better understanding of why you are the way you are, have done what you've done. But it isn't necessarily designed to help you move forward, much less reframe the way you look at the world. By now, with the help of various counselors, I'd navel-gazed a giant gaping hole in my belly button, dissecting my own personal history the way a Proust scholar did *Remembrance of Things Past*. And yet I still found myself swirling in a vortex of despair.



I summoned a sense of optimism about this “happiness” class and hoped that it might at least be a salve, if not a cure, for how poorly I’d been handling the approach into middle age. It seemed unlikely, though, that a six-week class could possibly jolt me into contentment, or anything approximating “happiness.”

Since the workshop wasn’t yet fully developed, the teacher, Johnny, asked for our patience. We’d be acting as guinea pigs for this program, he said, and there wouldn’t be any charge. A romp into positive thinking—gratis? I couldn’t resist.

One of the first things Johnny taught us was a Zulu warrior greeting. Everyone paired off, standing an arm’s length across from his partner. Then we looked deep into each other’s eyes. When you felt a connection, you were supposed to say, “I have come to see you.” The other would respond, “I have come to be seen.” The gazing would continue until that person felt the click and proclaimed, “I have come to see you.” Then, you moved on to the next classmate. Each session began this way, to affirm that we were here for real, pure, honest interaction, heart to heart. You weren’t supposed to say you had come to see and be seen until and unless you really meant it.

Doing this exercise made me want to stare right into the eyeballs of every single person I encountered, to make up for all the times I’d distractedly engaged in “conversation.” Gazing intensely at people I hardly knew reinforced how rarely I looked directly at the people I did know. We were all perennially distracted, attempting to triage the various competing demands on our time, multitasking our days away. Almost worse was communicating with the family and longtime friends who lived in other zip codes and time zones altogether. Static-filled cell phone conversations and emails were the hollow tools that



connected us, eye contact sorely lacking. I craved meaningful human contact.

Other simple assignments from Johnny were crafted to help us discover what we appreciated in ourselves, and what inspired us about others.

“Describe in detail a person you love—and why”; “Write a toast to four difficult periods in your life, and how you handled them”; “Summarize your life story as if you were ninety and telling a child.”

The themes were the same for me each time. I could see that it was a triumph to have made my way in the world, despite various misguided choices with men, the random steps that comprised my career, even an act of violence I’d experienced as a young woman. I saw how fortunate I was to have been cloaked in love and support all along. How, in the absence of creating a traditional family for myself, I’d cobbled together an army of dear friends around the world with whom I enjoyed rich, textured relationships. It moved me how many of the people I knew ended our conversations with the words “I love you.” That counted for something. It counted for a lot.

No, it wasn’t perfect. What was that, anyway? No one I knew would say their choices had yielded an ideal existence. Maybe my life wasn’t conventional, by some old-fashioned definition of convention. The years had been flawed, but they had been leavened with much good. Such were the ingredients of a life.

At the end of the third session, almost as a throwaway, Johnny assigned an exercise that really started to bring the jumble in my brain to order. It was a simple nightly ritual, and it taught me how to appreciate life in the most basic terms.



“I want you to keep a notebook by your bed,” he said. “And every night, before you go to sleep, I want you to review your day. Make a short list of three things that happened that were good.”

“What if three good things didn’t happen?” several of us asked in unison. Clearly, we weren’t naturally wired with a positive way of looking at the world.

“Well, that’s the point,” he said. “This exercise challenges you to find three good things in each day. They don’t have to be big things. In fact, most of the time they’re *not* going to be big things. Big, important things don’t happen to us every day. Winning an award, getting married, starting a new job, going on vacation. It’s the big spaces of time in between those monumental events that make up life. Right? The idea here is that little things have power. An interaction with someone in an elevator, or a clerk in a store. Small victories, like fixing something that’s been annoying you in the house. Going for a really long run. I want you to see that every single day, three good things do happen. It will help you discover that goodness exists all around us, already.”

You could feel the more skeptical of the class participants sigh. They wanted a different formula for happiness than that, the equivalent of a diet pill for the spirit. A “do this, do that, don’t do this” list of action points, where they could just fill in the blanks and come out on the other end in a matter of weeks, angst-free—blissful. But what Johnny said resonated with me, immediately. An image of my UPS man popped into my mind’s eye, one of the few consistent characters in my life; each day, he delivered packages to both my apartment building and the office complex just across the street that housed my em-



ployer, a public radio show. Even though our exchanges rarely amounted to anything more than pleasantries and chatter about the weather, his kindly presence was often one of the day's highlights. Especially when I was working the graveyard shift and trying to adjust to sleeping during the day, he was often the most pleasant human interaction I'd experience.

People wouldn't be all I'd consider for my three good things. Since I'd moved to Los Angeles, no matter how uneventful or difficult the day had been, I'd marveled at the dance of light at sunset from my apartment on the eighteenth floor. That would undoubtedly make it onto my lists.

One of the more optimistic in our group asked, "What if you have more than three good things?"

"Lucky you!" said Johnny, laughing. "Well, write them all down. But try to pick the top three. Over time, you'll start to see which things make you happiest. It probably isn't what you think."

That night, I couldn't wait to go home and go to bed with my notebook.

THREE GOOD THINGS

1. Chris the sound engineer saying he was looking forward to working with me again
2. My friend Michael, who I never get to see because of work schedules and L.A. geography, taking me to a pre-birthday lunch
3. Happiness class

Throughout the next few days, I found myself taking mental notes of the interactions and experiences that might make



my written list each night. There were many bedtimes when I had to search for the good things, when the three items of note might simply be my daily swim, the Goodyear blimp gliding by my building on its way to nearby Dodger Stadium, and the taste of a pork chop I'd fried up.

Food items, the glow of the magnificent Southern California "golden hour," and quick, often silent exchanges with strangers frequently made my lists. So did shared meals, especially shared lunches, which I got to have only when I worked those overnight hours. Writing down that the food and the friend I'd enjoyed it with were great countered all that wasn't about having to get up and go to work at one in the morning as often as I did.

And, of course, this was the point. Something good actually happened, even on the crummiest, hardest days. And those good things, the simplest things, were the most nourishing.

The ritual of this nightly exercise worked like a gym for the brain; over time, the lists started to strengthen me, to reverse my march of distress. I began to reframe the way I'd been thinking about life the past few long, heavy years, excavating the positive developments that had come out of it: How, after a painful end to an engagement when I was thirty-seven, I'd learned to swim, and now made the activity an essential part of every day. How, during a long period of unemployment, I'd taught myself to make soufflés, so I could continue hosting friends for dinner while not breaking my very tight budget.

Most important, I was learning to slow down, to sit with myself and the uncertainties of the future. To enjoy not knowing what was next, instead of fearing and panicking over what



might be. To appreciate the successes I'd had, instead of dwelling on my failure to have accomplished more.

As I sat in bed each night with my notebook, I didn't completely understand what was happening. I didn't see that I was making peace with myself, relaxing after a long war. Then came that day on the mountain in Bhutan, when my fog began to lift, and my life began to focus.





THE THUNDERBOLT,
PART ONE

HARRIS SAID HE'D BE AT THE COOKBOOK PARTY BY 7:00 p.m., which gave me an hour to hang out with him there before I headed uptown to have dinner with another old friend and his family. The party was a bit out of the way, and I almost skipped it, but since I was only in my hometown, New York City, on rare occasions, I figured I might as well get out and see as many of the people I loved as I could. What had brought me here from Los Angeles was the chance to fill in for a month at the New York bureau of the radio show where I was on staff as a reporter. I bolstered my energy for a busy evening of flitting around the city in hyper-social butterfly mode—a way of life I rarely indulged in anymore.

The walk from the office on East 47th Street to the party on 66th Street filled me with wonder and made me wistful for this place I loved so dearly. In early autumn, twilight in New York is magical; the sky glimmers and there's energy in the streets. You feel powerful, invincible, as if every gritty bit of the city is yours. I found myself doing a mental trick I hadn't



done since I'd moved away: reciting the address of my destination while I walked as if it were the lyrics to a song. *Two-three-four / East Sixty-sixth Street*, I sang to myself over and over again this September evening, the clunky tune mingling with the click-clack of my bright pink "comfort" high heels. Inevitably, after all that repetition, I would muck up the street number, and I did this time, too. But there was such a crowd in front of one particularly gorgeous old brownstone, I didn't need to check the little slip of paper in my purse to know I'd arrived.

Crazy busy. Some swanky food magazine editor was debuting a new cookbook. Harris had long been a foodie, and in the last few years had broken into writing about all things gourmet. Good for him to be mingling in such well-fed company. Now it seemed I'd have to fight a dreaded crowd to find him. How could I be a city person and hate mob scenes?

As I made my way to the front door, I took a look up the staircase. It was packed with a crush of people. In the thick of it, facing in my direction, was *the* most handsome man. He had a shock of brown hair and big brown eyes to match. I know it sounds ridiculous, but in that instant, the mob seemed to disappear. Much to my surprise and delight, I saw him looking right back. Not just in my direction, but at *me*. Our eyes locked, and, even from a distance, I could swear a sort of chemical reaction erupted between us.

I'd read about these celebrated *coups de foudre*, thunderbolts, where people met and fell in love at first sight. I knew from experience that an instant attraction could be intoxicating—and dangerous. As was the impulse to imagine that a momentary connection was something larger. But this thunderbolt felt different. This was a beautiful, instant intensity I'd never, ever experienced.



Practical me prevailed: I had to find Harris. Time was tight. I peeled my eyes away from the handsome stranger and pushed through the thicket of people. After a series of wrong turns, I spotted him holding court in a corner of the room, smiling and gesturing as if he owned the place. Harris was so good at making people feel welcome, connected. Everyone clutched goblets of wine—no disposable plastic cups for this crowd. My friend did a round of introductions, and as he got to the end of the group, I was happily surprised to see the man from the staircase.

“Lisa, this is my friend Sebastian I’ve been telling you about, who I’m going to Asia with next week. You know, for that story I’m writing for *Gourmet* magazine. And Sebastian, this is Lisa, my friend who works in public radio out in L.A.”

He was better looking now that I could see him up close, and there was a warmth about him, an easy friendliness. I felt a bit self-conscious and suddenly a little off-kilter in my pink shoes.

Long ago, I’d been one of those kids who hid under her mother’s armpit to avoid looking at strangers. Then I went into the news business. Earning my living posing questions to people I didn’t know had cured me of my innate shyness. Confidence was a good quality, one I was happy to have cultivated—especially now faced with this handsome man. Right at this instant, though, I found myself feeling unsure about how to proceed. I wanted to say something clever and prophetic, but I couldn’t find the words. So I stuck out my hand, and he stuck out his, and we shook. Sebastian asked if I wanted a drink, and I said yes, and he said he’d get me one from upstairs, and I said I’d go with him, and there we were, presto, in our own conversational bubble. We talked a bit



about public radio—always reliable upscale cocktail-party chitchat. With everyone captive in their cars, and smart programming in short supply thanks to budget cutbacks and media consolidation, the public-radio audience tuned in with almost cultlike devotion. Personally, I was sick of the news, and tried to avoid it as much as possible. At the same time, I appreciated the attention those commuters paid our show, and was grateful to have a job at a news outlet that had such an enormous, attentive audience. Better than having no audience at all. I'd been out of work a number of times, and underemployed, so I knew well what that was like. I also was very aware that in situations like this one, my profession converted into useful social currency.

Once we had my wine and a refill for him, I started plying Sebastian with questions about his upcoming trip to Asia. He ticked off the itinerary: a swing through Hong Kong, a few provinces in China I had never heard of, two places in India whose names I knew simply because of their tea—Assam and Darjeeling—and, for a few days, the tiny neighboring Kingdom of Bhutan.

“Ahh. The happiest place on earth,” I said. I hoped my being dimly familiar with one relatively unknown country in all of Asia—and knowing the factoid that it was purportedly filled with blissfully happy people—might impress him. Although I'd never come anywhere close to the continent. I wasn't even certain just where on the continent Bhutan *was*.

“Yes,” he said, smiling. “Exactly.”

“I've always been curious about this happiness thing and Bhutan. It has to have something to do with the fact that television is banned there, right?” I'd now exhausted the extent of my knowledge about the obscure little nation.



“Right, although His Majesty did let TV in a few years back,” Sebastian said, his smile broadening and his eyes intense. “But it’s still a very happy place. Hey, get a visa and come with us. Harris and I will be your guides.”

What I wanted to say was that I would have driven to the airport and boarded a rocket to another galaxy with this man, whether or not my dear old friend Harris came along as chaperone. We kept talking, but I really don’t remember what we said. I was lost in Sebastian.

Then, a sort of internal alarm rang and jolted him into remembering he was looking for quarters for the parking meter. After I dug a bunch out of my purse and handed them over, I asked the time and discovered that the clock was ticking for me, too. I needed to head to the other side of town for dinner.

A quick good-bye, and off I ran. The friend I was meeting turned out to be running very late; I sat at the restaurant with his family as he called every five minutes with updates from the traffic jam. Ordinarily this would have annoyed me, but not tonight. Just knowing Sebastian was out there in the world improved my disposition immeasurably.

THE NEXT DAY, I sat in our midtown offices trying to motivate myself to research a story about rich young couples who were trading the plush suburbs surrounding New York City for a new crop of multimillion-dollar kid-friendly condo complexes being built right in the heart of Manhattan. With enough money, you could now have a family without disrupting your metropolitan lifestyle. Among other luxuries, like on-staff dog walkers and a wine cellar, these buildings offered concierges to assist the nannies. An email popped into my inbox and saved



me from my internal rant about conspicuous consumption and the decline of civilization. The very sight of the man's name made my heart beat faster.

Dear Lisa:

It was great to meet you last night. I owe you a drink for all that change you dug up for me. When can you get together?

—Sebastian

Sebastian and Harris were leaving on their journey in just a few days, and by the time they returned, I'd be back home in Los Angeles. I could find a way to see him tonight. My calendar was totally open after work. I liked it that way, and this invitation reinforced why: The most interesting experiences seemed to happen spontaneously—just the opposite of how most everything worked in New York City, where every moment had to be planned by the quarter hour, lest you felt as if you might be “wasting” a bit of your precious time.

And yet I found myself hesitating to accept this invitation. I'd witnessed many a friend as they sabotaged or just plain avoided opportunities out of some sort of unexpressed fear that success or happiness might result. They became riddled with anxiety and self-loathing before they'd even sent in that cover letter or gone on that date. Now here I was, similarly paralyzed.

The voice of this other me politely declined. It was easy to justify not seeing him. We lived on opposite sides of the country; launching into a relationship that was destined to be long-distance was preposterous, a mistake I'd made in the past that



I'd vowed not to repeat. My, I was getting way, way ahead of myself.

Of course, none of this meant I just forgot him. Clicking out of the Web sites about yuppie family-friendly condos, I did what any smart, savvy person in the age of the Internet would do. I Googled him.

He appeared, from what I could deduce, to be about my age. He had been in the tea business for a decade. He had been going to Bhutan, it seemed, for twenty years. It looked like he'd started as a guide, leading people there on exotic treks.

Exhausting what I could dig up about him, I then searched for "Bhutan," and realized his offhand comment about my tagging along was a joke. There was no just "getting a visa" to this remote Himalayan nation. Tourism to Bhutan had been permitted only since the 1970s, a time when the nation began to step out of its long-imposed isolation. An airport hadn't been built until 1984, and even now there were many restrictions; the government-run airline owned only two planes. You couldn't just tool around the country unescorted; you had to hire a guide to travel with you, and some areas still remained off-limits. To keep out all but the wealthiest visitors, a \$200 per person, per day tourist tax was imposed.

Other colorful, curious facts unfolded: Bhutan was considered the last Buddhist kingdom, as others around it like Tibet and Sikkim had been swallowed up in political battles waged by giant neighbors China and India. Little, independent Bhutan had been known as the Land of the Thunder Dragon since the twelfth century, when an important religious man heard a clap of thunder—believed to be the voice of a dragon—as he consecrated a new monastery. The nation had long deflected colonization and outside influence. Christian missionaries had



come calling in 1627, but the only lasting legacy of these Jesuit priests from Portugal is a detailed written description of their travels there and the hospitality they enjoyed from the locals, who politely resisted conversion.

Today, the majority of the people subsist by farming. There isn't a single traffic light anywhere in the country, not even in the capital city, the only capital in the world without them; instead, a uniformed police officer directs cars at a handful of particularly tricky intersections. As part of a campaign to preserve the culture, citizens are obliged to wear the traditional dress—intricate, colorful hand-woven pieces of cloth called *kira* and *gho*.

The reigning king had married four sisters simultaneously—the queens, they were called. Among them they had had ten children—eight of them born before an official marriage ceremony had taken place in 1988. There was a surreal portrait of the women standing shoulder to shoulder, wrapped meticulously in brightly colored *kira*, perfect as dolls, each one gorgeous and just slightly different from the next. What was *that* family dynamic like? Multiple simultaneous marriages weren't reserved for royalty, it seemed; this practice was allowed for all the citizens of Bhutan. Men and women, both. An Internet search didn't reveal how common this was.

King Jigme Singye Wangchuck and his father before him had been progressive in a variety of ways: They'd been responsible for nudging, then catapulting Bhutan into the modern world after years of seclusion. Hard currency, roads, schools other than that of the monastic variety—all had been introduced in only the past forty years. Since Bhutanese would now need to study abroad to become doctors and lawyers and scientists necessary for the health and measured growth of the na-



tion, the native tongue, Dzongkha, was replaced by English as the language of instruction. The ability to speak English was perceived as a passport to almost anywhere, a vital connection to the outside world as Bhutan moved into an era of progress and relative openness it had previously worked to avoid.

Despite its isolationism, Bhutan had been at the vanguard in other ways. Long before the rest of the world started flaunting environmental concerns as a trendy marketing strategy, Bhutan's king had been winning awards for his genuine commitment to conservation. Clear-cutting was not allowed, and if a single tree was chopped, three had to be planted in exchange. By royal covenant, he had committed that 60 percent of Bhutan's forests would always be preserved. Unlike many Asian countries, Bhutan had not been transformed into a giant pollution-generating smokestack, nor was it overpopulated, with only 650,000 citizens. It was poor, but it prided itself on the fact that no beggars were on its streets. Babies weren't left on the doorsteps of orphanages; such institutions didn't exist. Everyone had roofs over their heads and something to eat. The people took care of one other. A royal form of welfare called *kidu* allowed citizens in the most dire circumstances to petition the king for help.

Perhaps the most unusual and intriguing aspect of this Land of the Thunder Dragon was its attitude toward development and consumerism—the policy that catapulted Bhutan to the formidable (if unqualifiable) distinction as a place populated with supremely happy people. Instead of measuring its economic progress by calculating the gross national product—a complex matrix detailing the monetary value of what a country churns out—His Majesty created a different scale. He proclaimed this philosophy, ironically, poetically, “Gross National



Happiness.” Economic progress at any cost, went the thinking, was not progress at all. Any force that threatened Bhutan’s traditions or environment was cause for concern—and not worth inviting into the country. The well-being of the people was to be considered before the sheer generation of goods and cash, before rampant growth just for the sake of an upward slope on a graph. Quality of life was to take precedence over financial and material success. Compassion toward and cooperation with your fellow citizens was fundamental, essential, rather than mowing down the other guy with abandon so you could succeed.

Social scientists and economists around the globe curiously studied GNH and this place that because of it had been dubbed “the happiest place on earth.” What would the New York City couples buying \$2.7 million apartments with nannies to assist their nannies think about these ideals? How about the audience and staff of the radio show where I worked, where the theme was money and business? Being, not having. Happiness above wealth. It sounded great to me; Bhutan certainly appeared to have its priorities straight. At least, it seemed to have the same priorities I was craving more of in my world.

Could it be real? Or was it brilliant sloganeering, a marketing mirage? Maybe I’d figure out a way to get to Bhutan one day, to find out for myself.

THREE WEEKS LATER, I’d returned to Los Angeles. One particularly frustrating day at work, I was sitting around, trying to invent some idea for a fifty-second story that would please the editors and fill the news hole in the next morning’s show. Once the idea was approved, I’d begin chasing down sources by phone and begging for just five minutes for an interview.



At least this wasn't one of the weeks where I had to go to work at 1:00 a.m. That shift required a different sort of madness than wrangling sound bites into radio news blurbs.

Sebastian's name in my inbox provided relief once again. It was ridiculous how excited I got just seeing an email from him. I didn't think I was capable of being so smitten.

Hi Lisa. How are you? Hope all's well in L.A. Harris is being an excellent sherpa on this trip.

How would you like to go work for a start-up radio station in Bhutan? If so, let me know and I'll make an introduction to a friend of mine here who knows someone who needs help. Seems like a good way to get to Bhutan and up your alley, too?

—Sebastian

Was this for real? He couldn't be making up this kind of offer just to impress me. Could he? Suddenly, an exotic foreign experience seemed the antidote to my malaise; without thinking it through I wrote back and said yes.

As soon as I hit Send, the questions surfaced: How would I take more than a week off? I was constantly reminded at work that younger and therefore less expensive talent lurked in the wings; I'd been unemployed for so long before taking this job, I couldn't just frivolously run away. Besides, impetuous work-related decisions weren't my style. And yet, even though I had no idea how it would sort out, I didn't worry for long. The possibility that my few skills might be useful to people in this faraway "happiest place on earth" warmed me.



Sebastian virtually introduced me to a Mr. Phub Dorji and we began an email correspondence. He asked for my résumé, inquired how soon I could get to Bhutan, and told me that if I paid my own way, the station would cover the cost of my room and board. A plane ticket seemed a small price for this kind of experience; who knew what it might lead to? Mr. Dorji sent along a list of goals he hoped I could achieve: taking the station national, improving the professionalism of the on-air talent, figuring out how to better report on and deliver news, creating and selling radio advertisements.

The station was called Kuzoo FM. *Kuzu zampo* was Dzongkha for hello, which is how in truncated form it became the name of the radio station. The accompanying Web site, *Kuzoo.net*, looked to be a kind of social-networking hub for Bhutanese kids—as if that would cordon them off from everywhere else on the Net, keep them from interacting beyond Bhutan’s borders, I thought cynically.

“Kuzoo was started by the crown prince for the young people of Bhutan,” Mr. Dorji wrote.

Naturally, I thought, in this happy kingdom, the royalty would be in touch with the youth. When I asked him his exact role at Kuzoo, he was elusive: “I will keep that a mystery until you get here.”

As I worked out the details with this mysterious man on the other side of the world, a steady stream of communication with Sebastian erupted. He became my live human resource for all things Bhutanese. Was there really a radio station? Had he heard it? Were women respected? Was it safe for me to travel to Bhutan alone? While he patiently reviewed my many questions and offered as many answers as he could, I got the sense that he didn’t understand what I was worried about.



When you've been visiting a place for so long, very little about it seems daunting.

One query Sebastian didn't (or wouldn't) answer was how he first got involved with Bhutan. Becoming a tour guide in Bhutan twenty years ago wasn't like picking up and heading to Tahoe to be a ski instructor. You had to have an in. "Ask one of these guys to tell you the story when you get there," he said coyly, and he attached to his email a list of people to look up when I arrived.

Soon, our trip consultations graduated to the telephone. We were talking practically every day. He'd call with a quick thought or reminder. Like the importance of bringing long black socks as gifts for the men I'd meet; Sebastian said this leg covering was essential not just for warmth in winter but for style.

"Buy half a dozen pairs, or more. They prefer the Gold Toe brand, because they stay up better and last longer. Get them in solid black. Bring lip gloss or boxes of tea for women." Not fancy Asian loose tea, he added. Plain old tea bags from America would impress. I trekked to Target and loaded up on a dozen pairs of Gold Toes, boxes of Celestial Seasonings, and various lipsticks.

Finally, the most important detail of the trip had been arranged: I had in my hands a faxed copy of my visa from the Royal Government of Bhutan permitting me to enter the country. Now it was official. That's when I marched into my boss's office to propose an unpaid leave of absence of no more than six weeks. I was surprised at how easily he said yes. "Isn't that the place where there's a two-hundred-dollar-a-day tourist tax? And you don't have to pay? Go for it. What an amazing opportunity." Then he muttered something about an old



acquaintance who'd visited the place a decade before, and how while I was there I should try to file some stories for our shows, before he swung back around to his mound of paperwork.

The only not-so-smooth part of the plan came from my father, who couldn't quite grok the adventure I was about to have:

YOUR GOING TO A THIRD WORLD COUNTRY TO DO WHAT FOR FREE? he wrote in an email, which, given the block letters and misspelling, conveyed the concern he felt about his dear and only daughter going off to a foreign land he'd initially thought was in Africa. (As did many people, although most were too timid to even venture a geographic guess.) What had happened to me as a young woman years ago weighed heavy on his heart. The fact that he'd read online that the United States didn't have a diplomatic presence in Bhutan made this already faraway place seem even riskier. I assured him I wouldn't be going if I didn't feel safe.

But my safety wasn't what I was thinking about. I had absolutely no idea what I would find on the other end—and that was the point.

A FEW WEEKS before my departure, I did a routine online check of the government-owned Bhutanese newspaper *Kuensel*. It published in hard copy twice a week, but new stories were added online every day. In anticipation of my trip, I'd taken to looking at the Web site every morning while my editors decided the fate of us reporters for the day. I hadn't read the news in my own country so closely or with such interest in years.

Even for a newbie to "Bhutanalia," the enormity of the newly published lead item was evident.



“His Majesty Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck becomes the fifth Druk Gyalpo,” read the headline. *Druk Gyalpo* meant “Dragon King.” The tone was so subtle, it read like a whisper. No *New York Post*-style fanfare trumpeting this news. The matter-of-fact report detailed how the fourth king had announced his abdication during a speech to a group of yak herders in a remote village. By handing over the throne now, he would allow his eldest son to reign for a few years before democratic elections would be held.

A constitutional monarchy, the king rationalized, was a more modern form of government, one he wanted to gift to his people during a peaceful time. He’d been slowly giving up power over the last two decades, establishing councils of advisors for various matters. Now, he said, was the time for his son to lead, and he was confident that under his guidance, “the Bhutanese people would enjoy a greater level of contentment and happiness.”

The newspaper described the reaction of his subjects as “stunned.” They wanted nothing of this, no dilution of power for their monarchy. They weren’t ready for this ruler to step down yet, either. The king was only fifty.

The only person I could talk to about this—the only person I knew who would care—was Sebastian. He wasn’t a slave to a computer all day and probably hadn’t seen the news, so I called him. My hunch that this was big and unexpected was right.

“*What?*” he exclaimed. “Can you read that to me, please? Every word!” And I did.

“I just can’t believe it,” he said.

“But it’s not that big a surprise, is it?”

“Well, yes, in a way. Everyone loves the king.”



I imagined Sebastian shaking his head, stunned—the same reaction as the people of Bhutan. “But, no, of course we knew this would happen eventually,” he said with a sigh. “Now it’ll be impossible to see him anymore.”

“Him, like the new king?”

“Yeah.”

“You know the crown prince?”

“Yeah, he’s a nice guy. I’ve known him since he was a kid. But he’ll be off-limits now. Wow.”

My curiosity intensified. Sebastian knew the crown prince. The crown prince had founded the station where I was going to work. Now he would rule as king. Was this who had asked Sebastian for an American radio volunteer? Was Phub Dorji connected to the king? Maybe Phub Dorji was a pseudonym for the king! Of course, that was ridiculous. But who knew? There were so many vagaries, so many dangling threads. These speculations made me even more eager to go.

And so, in January 2007, I embarked on my journey to Bhutan. Where I would be working with the eager young staff of newly launched radio station Kuzoo FM. Which I took on faith actually existed. To do what exactly wasn’t clear. All because of an email introduction from a devastatingly attractive man I’d met once, for twenty minutes, at a party I almost didn’t bother attending.

It all seemed completely strange, and yet, completely normal, the way huge, life-altering experiences can feel almost like an invention, or a dream. Except that never in your wildest imagination could you have made them up.



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