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MACALESTER

City of Dreams

Pranaya S.J.B. Rana

Kanti grew up in the middle of Kathmandu, in a two-storey brick house with wrought iron windows. When young, he played marbles in the alleys of Lazimpat with the boys from the neighborhood. Eventually, Kanti developed an uncanny aim, able to hit a marble the size of a pea from five long steps away. It was luck, his friends always complained, but Kanti knew it was something more than that. He was gifted.

The belief that there was something special about him solidified when his mother took him to Asan for the first time. He was six then and had just been accepted into Class 1 at the Guheswari English Medium School. In Asan, they were to fit Kanti with two sets of school uniforms—navy blue pants with a crisp white shirt. He would wear one set for three days and the second set for two. The school itself would provide a striped red tie for a one-time cost of 150 rupees. In the winter, he would be allowed a navy blue sweater and a navy blue blazer. But sweaters and blazers cost more money, so for now they were in Asan only to get shirts and pants.

Kanti was walking beside his mother but not holding her hand because he had started school now. She led him through the labyrinth of Asan's streets with an ease honed by years of familiarity. After all, she was a Kathmandu Newar, birthed and broken in the *gallis* of Jhonchhe. Asan, with its warren of alleyways, its narrow matchbox buildings that blotted out the sun, and a thousand bodies bustling to and fro, was her backyard. Kanti's mother weaved through people, never once bumping into anyone. Kanti tried to keep pace but he was small and people often didn't see him. He was jostled by purses, backpacks, umbrellas and bicycles. But it didn't bother him any. Kanti was used to such adventures. Besides, he wasn't bumping into people, *people* were bumping into him.

It was only when his mother slipped into a sari store that Kanti lost sight of her. He had been following closely but had been forced to slow down after spying some Nagraj comics on display. He didn't dare go up to the store, so he slowed his pace, squinted his eyes and tried to make out just which villain Nagraj was beating up this time. To his utter astonishment, Nagraj was actually being beaten by none other than machine-gun-toting, dog-mask-wearing vigilante crime-fighter, Doga. By the time Kanti had finished ogling, his mother had vanished. Unperturbed, he continued to walk, passing the very store she was in, and slipped into Asan *chowk* where five stone-paved roads and a number of smaller pathways fed into one large courtyard teeming with people. Kanti picked a lane and trundled along, peering between people for the sea-blue *kurta* his mother was wearing. Neither the fact that he had lost his mother nor his not knowing where he was going bothered him. He was content exploring the city. The air was pungent with the smell of spices and there were all kinds of men and women about. He even spied a *sadhu baba*, naked except for a maroon loincloth, holding out a metal canister for rice and money. He wished he had something to give so that he could receive a long vermilion *tika* in return.

He had sauntered for close to fifteen minutes and had almost reached New Road when he decided to turn back. Although he was enjoying the walk immensely, he knew his mother would be worried. He strode quickly on the way back because he had already seen most of the interesting bits. He almost reached the stationery store with the comic books when he saw his mother, frantically searching this way and that for him. She looked harried, her hair was coming loose from its ponytail and her purse hung limply from one slumped shoulder. When she saw him, she ran to him, slapped him across the face and twisted his ear.

Kanti didn't cry or say anything. He knew he shouldn't have wandered off. All the way to the uniform tailor, his mother scolded him for his transgression. Kanti listened to her rebukes with one stinging ear, nursing one red cheek. He had answers to all her rhetorical questions, but chose to keep quiet to avoid aggravating her further. So she went on—what if she had never found him? What if he had been kidnapped? What if he had got lost?

If only she knew—she wouldn't have had to find him; he would've found her.

* * *

By the time Kanti secured his school leaving certificate in Class 10, he had explored almost every road, *galli* and nook of Central Kathmandu. From the five-star hotels of Lazimpat, the spacious old-world walled compounds of Bishalnagar, the urban sprawl that is Dhumbarahi, and the nondescript Battisputali, to the messy, dirty, pungent Bagbazaar, the chaos of New Road, and the madness of Asan, back home to Lazimpat—Kanti considered all this Kathmandu proper, his own Kathmandu, and he walked it like an explorer, a cartographer, a preserver even. He ducked into alleys that turned into roads, into doorways that opened up into courtyards. He traced new pathways through empty lots and negotiated the tops of low brick walls. He cut across front yards and snuck through backyards. He climbed trees and jumped fences. He avoided wide roads and squeezed sideways in between houses built too close. He knew to keep the setting sun to his left and the far-off hill with the conspicuously naked rocky outcropping to his right. And, despite the fact that he rarely took the same path twice, he always knew, as if by instinct, which path led where.

After Class 10, Kanti joined a new high school in the north-western end of Kathmandu Valley, along the Ring Road. It was some distance from his home but the walk to and fro was always the best part of his day. He left home at eight in the morning, committed to an hour's brisk march; the new pathways he discovered were often strange and sometimes dangerous. Once, two boys, barely older than him, eyes red and speech slurred, asked him for a hundred rupees. When he said that he didn't have the money, they pushed him down and punched him in the face twice before filching the fifty rupees he had in his pockets. The punches had been weak, and except for Kanti's ego, nothing was severely hurt. Another time, a skinny, scraggly mutt with a broken ear chased him for nearly ten minutes. Kanti had dealt with dogs before. Usually, a stamp of the foot was enough to send them off, but this one was especially difficult. Soon Kanti was running, his backpack

clutched tight against his body and the dog snapping at the heels of his black school shoes. Eventually, Kanti managed to hop on to a wall high enough to keep the dog out. Since then he avoided those two particular paths.

At school—and later, college—Kanti's male friends had motorbikes and a number of his female friends had scooters. Those who didn't had girlfriends and boyfriends who did. The few who rode the bus and microbus were seen as straitlaced and gently ridiculed. But no one walked like Kanti did. His classmates thought him eccentric and tried to give him rides. He always refused, politely but firmly. When it rained, he carried an umbrella and arrived home with his shoes full of water and his pants dripping.

Of course, these long walks in relative silence did little to quell neighborhood rumours about that strange '*hidirakhne keto*,' the boy who walks. Onlookers would see him wandering and wonder just where it was he was going to and where he was coming from. They wondered why he didn't ride the microbus or buy a motorbike like most boys his age and of his standing. After all, his parents—one an engineer and the other a nurse—weren't exactly poor.

Kanti's parents, naturally, were worried. They took him to see a *gyotish* in Bagbazaar during his first year of college, when his daily wanderings showed no signs of stopping. The *gyotish* was a middle-aged Brahmin with a paunch and a long saffron *tika* on his forehead. He wore cotton pants and a cotton shirt, no dhoti like Kanti had imagined. He perused Kanti's *cheena*, noted down his birth day, month, year and hour. He repeated Kanti's name out loud five times while making calculations on a scrap of paper. Then he looked up and announced that since Mangalgraha, or Mars, was in an unbeneficial quadrant with Sunny, or Saturn, things did not look too good. A *puja* would have to be performed. In the meantime, he would give Kanti an herb packed into a little pouch to wear around his neck. This would kill his desire to go wandering.

The parents left the *gyotish*'s relieved. But the very next day, Kanti was walking to school; he even started returning home later than usual.

* * *

Eventually, Kanti secured a job. It wasn't anything special but it was one that his father's close friend had got especially for him. So he did the best he could—the same thing every day, just like the ten or so people who worked around him. He filed, copied, stamped, and signed. He passed on and was passed up. He talked little and laughed even less, again earning a reputation as a strange one. Women seemed oddly attracted to him and often took the

effort to solicit his attention, whether he replied favourably or not. In any case, he wasn't particularly interested in women, nor did he care much for the company of men; he already had a paramour of his own.

Kanti ate his lunch in the office canteen, sitting by himself and always in a corner. He brought his food from home, which his mother packed in a neat metal tiffin box. Usually, his lunch consisted of four *rotis* and one vegetable *tarkari*, with chicken every Monday and fish every Friday. He ate fast, rolling up the vegetables or meat in his *roti* and eating it in three large bites. He then spent the rest of his hour-long break exploring the city. His office, located on the fifth floor of a shiny new concrete building with a glass façade, was in Baneshwor, all of which he surveyed within a few months. After that, he started riding a bus, any bus, in a random direction, travelling until he reached somewhere he had never been before, and then getting off. He'd then find a path back to his office.

Kanti couldn't jump across walls and climb trees like he used to anymore but he found that new roads were always open to the enterprising. An air of self-importance could get you into any building in the city, he discovered. So he began to dress better—tailoring a suit in a clean, sweet-smelling shop in Durbar Marg; keeping his hair always neatly parted to the side; and ensuring that his face remained free of any unsightly stubble. He polished his shoes blindingly bright and pressed his tie stiff each morning. He ate well, and never drank nor smoked. So when he walked into offices, restaurants and private homes in his quest for a new path, he looked like he was there for a reason. No one stopped this man who barely spoke—or spoke in short, steady bursts when trespassing gated homes—but who always walked with an air of confidence and smiled at everyone who met his gaze. Besides, he left as fast he could, quickly scoping out an exit—a kitchen door, a back door, a side door—through the building instead of around it. If no one was around, he'd slip out of windows.

Buildings, roads and bridges made up the city, Kanti knew that. So did trees, rivers and hills. But he had never quite thought about people. He was told that that they, too, were integral parts of a metropolis; if Kathmandu were an organism, people were its red blood cells, navigating busily through road-veins and street-arteries. But Kanti didn't welcome humanity's presence. To him, people were appendages, vestigial organs that had served their purpose. The fact remained—in every social situation, Kanti always felt like he did not belong. Among people, he was truly lost.

Once, he walked into a narrow alley in between two *bhattis* where three teenage boys were smoking ganja and passing around a half-bottle of cheap whisky. They hastily stepped on the joint and hid the bottle behind their backs when they saw him and his suit. But Kanti simply smiled at them and deftly squeezed through a crevice in the wall they were leaning against. Another time, he walked down a dark first-floor corridor of one of the hundreds of massage parlours in Thamel and, inside a side room with a curtain for a door, saw a clothed man and a naked woman on a rickety cot in an amorous embrace. The woman screamed and the man cursed when they saw a suited gentleman looking in.

Kanti met, or rather surveyed, all kinds of people during his travels. Most people he saw but once. They were blurs, shadow people in a city alive. But some he found intriguing—like an unexpected modern anomaly on a fifteenth century temple *dabali* in Basantapur, they surprised him. He chanced upon two hairdressers kissing behind a black water tank, each with a cigarette in his hand. He saw a young kid, barely fifteen, selling brown sugar to an older kid, barely twenty, who was swaying on his feet. He walked into a studio space, in the middle of a photo shoot, and saw the most beautiful girl he had ever laid eyes on. She was standing stark against a dazzling white background as three high-powered lights shone down. She had an oversized floppy hat on her head and a short Chinese dress that showed off her legs all the way to her thighs. She had spotted Kanti and, instead of being annoyed at being interrupted, she had smiled, a tiny mole by the side of her lips rising with the corners of her mouth. Kanti left the studio the way he had entered it, predictably shaken out of his confidence by a beautiful woman. Another day he heard, through the thin walls of a rented room, a couple breaking up, the man's voice trembling and sorrowful and the woman's steady and callous—no, she hadn't found another man, she just didn't like him anymore.

Over time, Kanti passed by grieving corpse-bearers, reveling groomsmen, jaunty bikers at motorcycle rallies, strike enforcers, citizen protestors, armed policemen, political leaders, British Gurkha hopefuls, women's rights activists and Hindu nation fanatics.

Kanti knew that he was not one of these people. To them, the city was just the streets they walked and the buildings they entered. To Kanti, Kathmandu was something infinitely more. This city—at once vibrant and chaotic, capricious and whimsical—was friend, lover, mother and sister. She was time and eternity. She was Saraswati, Lakshmi, Parvati. Everyone else could cut her trees, suck

her waters dry and spit on her buildings. But not Kanti, no—he cared for Kathmandu. He mourned her imperfections, like a teenager would a wart, a pimple, a scar. And slowly, he came to accept them, too—for, his love came with no conditions. Despite having known the city for more than twenty-five years, Kanti still explored her like a man learning a new lover.

The arrow of time may be infinite but space is limited; time can stretch forward but space can only fold into itself. Finally there are only so many paths to take, and Kanti found himself repeating alleyways once too often. He had always recognized places but now he came to expect them. He had always known where he was but now he knew where he was going and how he was going to get there. He began seeing familiar faces. This disturbed him deeply and he lay awake many nights. Sometimes, he considered now-recognizable figures; at times he traced paths in his head. He wondered if he ought to move to Patan or Bhaktapur and start over. It wasn't that he didn't want to live in Kathmandu anymore but that he had become too comfortable. He feared lapsing into a routine, as happened with so many intimate relationships. Then he would be no better than anyone else and together they would be no better than ants, wandering aimlessly, bumping into each other and then going the opposite way.

* * *

It was on one of these sleepless nights that Kanti decided to take a walk. It was well past ten, his usual bedtime, when he ventured out of his house and into the moonlight. The neighbours, whose accusatory gazes Kanti avoided each time he passed them by, were all in their homes, in front of TVs and under warm covers. He walked quietly and slowly. He had hardly passed the giant *peepal*-bot that divided his ward from the next when a strange exhilaration came over him. Beneath the pale, jaundiced moon, the houses loomed tall, the walls stretched to infinity and even the asphalt roads shone with a dull glow. There were shadows everywhere, long, deep ones that seemed to reach out with tapering fingers when Kanti came near. Except for the occasional car horn and the roar of a passing motorcycle, the air was punctuated only with the staccato barking of dogs. And here, even in the heart of the city, Kanti heard the trill of crickets.

He wandered further, driven by a rush of adrenaline. He recognized streets, stop signs and storefronts but suddenly they were of a quality vastly different; in semi-darkness, he found new textures, colours and shapes. The lettering on billboards seemed to shimmer and blend into each other with every passing motorist. Corners were sharper,

angles more acute and every nook and cranny looked like the entrance to an underground extension. Sounds floated in intermittently from across town and he heard snatches of hushed conversation, the monotone of the television and the stifled moans of couples in love. Once, he heard a solitary scream pierce the night sky like an arrow and wondered if someone was trapped in a nightmare he couldn't wake up from. Even the smells were different. No longer did the air reek of burning rubber on asphalt or the noxious fumes of a thousand vehicles. Instead, the air was heavy with earthy scents and dampness—like just before rain—and the sickly sweet scent of decay. To Kanti, this was all oddly satisfying.

And so, nights became Kanti's refuge. He still took his daily walks but they were merely preparatory, a warm-up for what was to come. After his first nocturnal jaunt, he started rationing his time outdoors, staying out three hours at the most in darkness, and always setting forth after his parents had fallen asleep. On returning home from such excursions, it would take him at least another hour to calm his double-beating heart and fall asleep. The next day, Kanti would go to work with swollen eyes.

Gradually, he began waking up late, then still later, and, as if in a daze, even found himself taking the bus to work. He filed, copied, stamped and signed fewer papers and lunchtime was often spent at his desk, slumped over and asleep. His co-workers, who already thought him strange, began to avoid him, even the women. His parents stopped asking him where he was off to, even when they would catch him on their way to the bathroom, going in or coming out at odd hours. But Kanti himself was happier than he had been in a long while. He was a child again, exploring his neighbourhood for the first time.

It was an early April night when Kanti came across something he had never seen before. Idling by a corner of the main road, turning to the Radisson hotel incline was a bus. Kanti was very familiar with the kinds of buses that plied Kathmandu's streets and this was not one of them. It was deep crimson in colour, slightly longer than the average public bus but shorter than the distended tourist buses. It bore no lettering, not even a logo, and was humming steadily with its headlights on. Kanti got closer and saw that the bus' number plate was black—clearly it was a public bus.

Inside he could spot silhouettes of people. Kanti wondered if Kathmandu's ill-fated night-bus service had restarted. On a whim, he slunk in through the bus' open doors. There was no conductor to collect the fare. A row of lights illuminated the passenger section of the bus but the driver was

shrouded in darkness. Kanti took an empty seat and looked around. Up ahead, a middle-aged woman in a formal office skirt and red lipstick stared unblinkingly out of her window. To his right, on the seat across the aisle, was an older man, maybe fifty years old, in a cream *daura-suruwal* and a black *bhadgaunle topi*. His hands were folded across his lap and he was staring at them intently. Kanti turned, and directly behind him sat another man, closer to his age, sunglasses perched on top of his head, a white polo shirt open at the neck and a thick gold chain girdling a forest of dark chest hair; this man seemed to be staring at an imaginary point somewhere past Kanti.

There were others. But before Kanti could observe them, the lights went out and the bus started to move. He tried to keep track of the route but everything looked distorted from his window. He started to get uneasy, not knowing where he was headed, so he tried asking the passengers. No one seemed to hear him. He called out to the driver but there was no answer. He waited for a while, hoping that the bus would make a stop and he could get off. But it kept moving. Kanti willed himself to get up and approach the driver, when finally the bus came to a halt. Kanti hurriedly got off. No conductor came to collect the fare and the bus, after dropping him off, silently slunk into the darkness.

The bus had travelled for less than ten minutes and within that radius, Kanti knew every square metre. And yet he found himself confused, directionless and, for the first time in his young life, lost. This wasn't simply a trick of the night; the territory was alien. The buildings were impossibly tall, reaching for the clouds. The signs couldn't be read; Kanti recognized the individual letters but when he tried to put them together as words, they made no sense. Robbed of a cartographer's instinct, and rudderless in this vast, inky darkness, Kanti began to panic. This was a kind of fear that he had never experienced before and it spread through his body like a fever.

Kanti forced himself to walk and soon he was running, frantic, looking this way and that for any sign of familiarity, a corner, a cold store, a *paan-pasal*, anything. But the streets were as unfamiliar as the topography of a far-off, hostile planet. There was no sound, not even of dogs or crickets, and the sky changed and fluctuated, turning dark and light intermittently. He thought he passed people but he recognized nobody.

A heavy weight seemed to descend on Kanti. He finally stopped, out of breath and panting. Up ahead was a set of old wooden doors, the kind you find at the mouths of Asan's narrow corridors that lead to homes and courtyards. The doors were slightly ajar and Kanti entered one,

not knowing what else to do. Within was a long, dark foyer, illuminated at the far end by a lone hanging bulb. Ahead were stairs leading up, each step branded by the tell-tale crimson of *paan* stains. As if beckoned, Kanti walked up the stairs, one hand on the cold metal railing. He reached the second floor, and another corridor. This corridor, too, was long and dark, illuminated, once more, at the far end by a lone hanging bulb. Again ahead of him were stairs leading up, each step also branded by *paan* stains. A set of old wooden doors waited by the bulb. Kanti pushed them open, calling out into the darkness. He hoped to find a room or an office when he entered one of them, but he emerged into the street instead, back to the place from where he had entered.

Kanti did not go back in. Ahead was a brightly lit store window, its fluorescent glow attracting moths and abnormally large flies. Kanti was gripped by a reflection on the glass. Where he expected to see his own unsmiling visage, Kanti saw only the back of his head. Himself, looking at himself in the glass, looking at himself on the glass. Kanti thought back absurdly to the Colin glass cleaner his mother used around the house. The bottle had a picture of a woman holding a bottle of Colin with a picture of a woman holding a bottle of Colin.

'*Thik cha, bhai?*' A man, seemingly both young and old, came up to Kanti.

'Where am I?' Kanti asked, startled.

'Kathmandu,' said the man, either an indulgent smile or an annoying smirk playing on his lips.

'No,' said Kanti. 'I know Kathmandu and this is not it.'

'Isn't that a little vain?' asked the man, this time definitely sardonic.

'What is?'

'To assume that a place is not what it is simply because you don't recognize it. Cities, too, have masks.'

'Is this Kathmandu's mask?'

'*Huna sakcha*, all I know is that right now, this is the face she is choosing to show us. *Suna*. Just listen.'

At first, Kanti heard nothing, but then, slowly, beginning somewhere deep underneath his feet, he sensed a long, continuous rumble. The air around him quickened as the rumble rose from the earth and shook the air. Everything around seemed to vibrate, and then, abruptly — a dead calm.

'A breath.' Kanti knew it. He had always known it.

The man turned to go but Kanti called after him. 'How do I get back to Lazimpat?'

'Where is that?' asked the young-old man.

'Home,' said Kanti. '*Ghar*.'

'You're already home,' came the cryptic reply.

Kanti called after him but the man was already dissolving into the darkness. When Kanti followed, he found no trace of him, even though the street stretched on, straight and unrelenting, and a strange brightness seemed to have touched the air.

Kanti continued to wander. At times walking, at times running. The initial fear he had felt dissipated as Kanti lost himself in the ways the buildings seemed to sway in a nonexistent breeze, like trees. Temples larger than hills loomed in the distance, their giant pagoda roofs like spreading umbrellas. In front of him, in the distance, was the Dharahara tower, jutting out like a defiant finger and, to his right, two more Dharaharas, two more fingers. Kanti looked to his left and when he turned around, all of the Dharaharas were crumbling to the ground. The vista was endlessly shifting shape and there seemed to be no limit to its permutations.

Maybe this truly was the real Kathmandu, thought Kanti. Or perhaps it was Kathmandu as she would like to be. Or even Kathmandu's dream. Kanti liked that last one. He liked to think of himself as being in Kathmandu's dream, just like Kathmandu had invaded his dreams on so many nights.

Kanti felt as if he had left himself behind somewhere, back in the old, familiar Kathmandu. Here, in the city's dreams, he was just a seeing eye, with no personality, no individuality. He might as well have been a seamless part of the city, a stone waterspout, a broken-down railing, a Basantapur *pati*, a New Road brick.

And, just as suddenly, Kanti woke up. This wasn't a waking from sleep, for he had never gone to sleep. But Kanti knew from experience that one didn't have to be asleep to wake up. Just as one didn't have to be awake to go to sleep. He found himself standing in the middle of a street in Asan. The close familiarity of the space rushed in like a wave and Kanti almost retched while people jostled him and bikes screeched. There were dogs, birds, cats and cows and so, so many people crowding around like midges. It was day, the light was too bright and Kanti felt too tired to walk home. So he did something he had never done before. He took a taxi home.

Kanti wondered where he had been and if he had ever really been there at all. The impressions of that fugue were already fading and Kanti found it harder and harder to retain memory. Those infinite towers, those flashes of light and day, those endless vicissitudes, arrangement upon arrangement. Sitting in a chair in his room, the same room he had had for twenty-five years, the same chair he had had for ten years, he came to the realization that he hated them both. The sameness was chafing, the fit was too tight and he began to feel suffocated. He grasped at the last fleeting recollection of the mutating vistas and found in them a kind of comfort he had never found in the still and the static.

In the coming days, Kanti discovered that his zeal for walking had ebbed. The sense of permeating calm he found in his daily sojourns gave way to a discomfort at every sight, every smell and every sound. More and more he confined himself to his room and, on especially quiet days, he stopped and listened hard, hoping to hear the city breathing. He knew now that the city slept and dreamed itself into being. He wondered just how many buildings, roads and hills were dream figments. He wondered the same about the residents of Kathmandu, the men, women and children who traversed the streets, blissful, while underneath the city roiled and rumbled. Often, Kanti threw open the windows of his room, whose rusty, corrugated hinges squeaked mightily the first few times, and stared out at the city, unblinking. The distant hills were the same—green-brown and undulating. The roofs of buildings were the same, each sporting the same matte black cylindrical water tanks. The roads were the same, corners marked by rats' nests of wires atop telephone poles. Nothing had changed—and yet nothing was the same.

Pranaya S.J.B. Rana is a writer, editor, and columnist. He grew up in Kathmandu, where he has worked as a journalist for *Nepali Times* and *The Kathmandu Post*. He enjoys art films and hip-hop. This story was previously published in the collection *City of Dreams: Stories* (Delhi: Rupa Publications) and is reprinted in *HIMALAYA* with permission of the publisher and author.