

Dominique's grip tightened on my hand when the Parisian Mayor paused. It signalled my turn to speak, but I suddenly realised that I didn't know the French words for 'I do.'

Three years living in Brussels and ten months of weekend visits to see Dominique in Paris hadn't been enough for me to learn her language properly. I turned my head to see her round, pretty face framed by dark hair. Her narrow brown eyes gazed adoringly at me through silver-rimmed glasses and my breath caught. She's lovely, I thought, but was I ready to change my life so significantly for this woman?

The idea of moving to live in a developing country didn't scare me. While I'd only ever lived in the first world, I'd already come a long way from my home in Australia and had been fascinated by Dominique's stories of living in Chile and Cameroon.

What little I knew about Bhutan came from a half-episode of Michael Palin's *Himalaya* and an article on Gross National Happiness, which the kingdom used in place of economic indicators. They called their country the Land of the Thunder Dragon. It sounded a wonderful country to explore.

Nor did I worry about putting my IT career on hold for a year. My company had promised me a position when I returned and I was looking forward to exploring my creative side and doing some private study.

Dominique gave me an encouraging smile which quickened my pulse and I realised my thoughts were skittering. I focused on the woman in front of me, the woman I was about to commit to forever.

That was my big fear – signing away my independence. Forever was a long time to be with a woman I'd met only last winter. When I'd caught her eye across the crowded cafeteria in the ski fields of the French Alps, I'd had no idea things would go this far. We'd talked about me joining Dominique on this assignment in Bhutan, but when the "Marry him or go alone" ultimatum came through from her employer, there hadn't been time to think.

We'd taken the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs at their word and I'd spent many sleepless nights chasing the papers required from Australia. No matter how today turned out, Dominique would board the next plane to Bhutan. I'd take a couple more weeks to tie up loose ends before following her. Or I'd go back to my old life.

The mayor shifted her weight as the pause extended. Dominique's smile changed to concern, reminding me of the gaps we still had to bridge. Eight years my junior, she was an agro-economical engineer. I didn't even understand what that was, though I knew she'd been called to help Bhutanese farmers build their dairy industry. Then there was her fiery temper, the frequent contrast to her insecurity that often left me scalded. But she was quick to smile again, quick to apologise if the anger had truly been unreasonable. Few women would do that. And she inspired me with her passion, her desire to help feed the developing world.

Marriage to Dominique would be an adventure to be tackled the same way we both attacked languages and travel. It didn't matter if we made mistakes as long as our attitudes were positive and we were ready to learn. With that thought, I knew what to say.

'Oui.'

‘Are you Murray?’ The slim girl who stopped me as I took my first steps onto Bhutanese soil had a round face, narrow brown eyes, olive skin and stood about shoulder height to me, but this girl wasn’t Dominique. Her short black hair and traditional dress marked her clearly as a local.

‘Yes, I am, but I’m sorry. Who are you?’

‘I’m Selden. You’ll be staying in my parents’ house. Dominique’s going to be another hour, so she asked me to meet you. Come and sit down.’

Her calm, assured manner left me little choice. I picked up my bags and followed her to a kiosk window. It looked out over the parking lot to the mountains just fifty metres away.

‘Where’s Dominique?’ I asked as she ordered two teas. And more importantly, ‘Why is she going to be late?’

‘Actually, she’s going to be on time. You’re early. Your flight normally stops in Kathmandu, but because the Maoists have started causing problems again today it flew straight here.’

She picked up the tea and pointed me to a park bench in the sun. I put down my bags and removed my coat. The pilot had announced the temperature as ten degrees Celsius as we landed, but it felt hot. And the red rock and dry scrub on the surrounding slopes would look more at home in a desert than a mountain valley.

‘How did you manage to get here so quickly if Dominique couldn’t?’

‘I work here. In the cargo section.’ She pointed to the furthest building, whitewashed mud like the others, and decorated with the same arched

windows and eaves of painted wood. ‘The cargo won’t be unloaded for another hour, so I was just playing solitaire on the computer.’



The fierce sun beat down on me until I was forced to remove my jumper. ‘Is winter always this hot?’

‘It snowed a couple of days ago and the plane couldn’t land, but it’s always warm in the sun. You’ll be freezing tonight if that makes you feel better.’

I barely caught the smirk.

‘So, how do you like Bhutan so far?’

I looked up at the surrounding hills across the car park. ‘It’s beautiful, like sloping deserts, but there isn’t as much life here as I expected.’ A dog barked in the distance as if to prove me wrong.

‘No, there isn’t much life in winter.’ She stood up. ‘Here they come.’

A tiny red car screeched through the parking lot, shuddering to a halt in front of us, rust flakes floating to the ground. Dominique got out of the passenger seat, looking gorgeous in a pink and brown *kira* – the traditional dress for women. Her hair, not dark enough to be black, set her apart from Selden and the other locals, but in a *kira* she could almost pass as Bhutanese.

We’d been separated for two weeks, but here I was with my wife in Bhutan, starting the adventure of a lifetime. I wanted to pick her up and spin her around. Even more, I wanted to race her home to bed.

Dominique gave me a shy smile as she walked around the car, then moved in for a quick hug. She left one hand held towards me as she stepped back as if nearly touching was the best compromise between desire and protocol.

‘This is Anna,’ she said, indicating the car’s driver.

Anna, the woman Dominique was replacing, was in action as soon as we'd shaken hands. 'We've got to get back for lunch and then there's a lot to cover this afternoon. Bye, Selden.'

The road led out of the airport and along the valley for a short distance before climbing the sides of the hills. I reached back and felt Dominique grab my hand.

Anna chatted away in French-English while accelerating on the fifty-metre straights and slowing to swing the car around each corner. I clutched the handle above the door, glad she drove in the centre of the road as there were few barriers to stop us plummeting hundreds of metres down the steep slope to the river below. 'Are there many accidents here?' I asked as we rounded a blind corner.

A truck appeared in the middle of the road ahead and I stuck my free hand on the dashboard, bracing for either collision or fall.

'Quite a few,' said Anna, slamming on the brakes, but heading straight for the truck. Only once she'd slowed to a crawl did she turn the wheel and ease us over to the left, inches away from flying. Through wide eyes, I noticed the truck do the same, almost stopping before moving to hug the cliff. 'But if you keep your wits about you and don't try to turn while doing fifty, you'll be fine.'

'Does anyone survive a fall like that?'

'Not many. They say the only way to survive is to jump out as soon as you leave the road.' She paused. 'Of course, others say that the only way to survive is to wear your seatbelt. If something did go wrong, it'd be over before you could think about it. My plan is not to go over at all.'

Around the next blind corner, a herd of cattle strolled along in the same direction as us. I cursed as we skidded to a stop just behind the rump of a huge bull. Anna waved at the herder, tooted again and the bull ambled to one side, but there was another cow in front of that.

‘They don’t have any other way of moving cattle, so it’s a shared road.’

From the back seat, Dominique said, ‘I like it. I think it gives the place more atmosphere.’

I turned and shared a smile with her. ‘We’re here! We’re in Bhutan at last.’

Another vehicle approached from the far side so that the herd was pressed between two cars and no amount of horn honking could clear the mess. Anna pushed into any gap that appeared and after minutes of inching along, we were suddenly free and racing off at ski jump speeds again.

‘Dominique says you work in IT.’

‘That’s right.’

‘Great. You’ll be able to help her with the database then.’

I’d heard something of this. ‘The one for tracking the family tree of the cattle?’

‘And the milk production of each cow so that we can mate the best bulls and cows without inbreeding.’

‘Yes, I got that. I usually manage conferencing services, like video-conferencing, but I thought web design might be more useful here so I’ve started learning a bit about databases. I might be able to help, but I don’t understand why you’re not using open source technologies.’

‘Why would we?’

‘Because developing countries would be better off not having to pay for licences.’

‘Who pays for licences in Bhutan?’

‘Ah. I see.’

‘What about your writing?’

‘That’s the main reason I wanted to take the year off. I wrote a book on Japanese culture that I want to get published and I’m trying my hand at science fiction for fun.’

Ahead, the road ducked into a valley and appeared again a scant thirty metres ahead of us. I half expected Anna to try clearing the gap. Thankfully she didn’t and we finally descended into a confluence of rivers, guarded by policemen in blue uniforms decorated with lanyards and epaulettes. Anna stopped to present her licence and the car’s registration papers.

‘Bhutan is broken up into governmental sections called *dzongkhags*,’ she told me, ‘and they control who crosses the borders tightly – especially foreigners.’

The policeman looked at the bags in the back. ‘Coming from the airport?’

‘Yes.’

One of his colleagues held two fingers up to his mouth as if smoking an imaginary cigarette and raised his eyebrows at Anna.

‘Smoking’s just been banned nationally,’ she whispered to me before cautiously offering him her packet. ‘Am I in trouble?’

‘No Ma’am.’ He grinned as he took one. ‘Thank you Ma’am.’



Anna assured me that my bags would be safe in the car and led us into a local store for lunch. The room just inside the front door was set up like a corner store grocery with milk, biscuits, instant noodles, bottled water and whisky among other things. I followed Anna through to a back room where three of Dominique’s male colleagues waited for us, all wearing *ghos* – the traditional costume for men. Made from checked material belted at the waist and hanging just below the knees, it looked like a

dressing gown, but these men wore them with the dignity of Roman senators.

‘With egg or without?’ the one called Phuentso asked me after introductions.

‘Egg with what?’ I hadn’t even seen a menu.

‘Noodles,’ Dominique said. ‘It’s all they serve here.’

Fair enough. Something like a *raamen* bar in Japan, then. I pictured a large bowl filled with noodles and soup, garnished with garlic, pickles, meat, and some vegetables. ‘With.’

‘So,’ said Phuentso, who had a tall, slight build like mine. ‘You’re in Bhutan as Dominique’s dependent.’

‘I guess I am.’

‘How does it feel to be a house husband?’

‘House husband!’ the other Bhutanese repeated, laughing and I found it easy to join in.

‘I hope I’ll be doing more than washing clothes and cooking.’

I leant back to let the waitress place my meal in front of me. A raw egg and a clump of chilli sauce sat beside a small bowl of packet noodles.



‘This is my office,’ Dominique said, when we’d driven a few hundred metres up the hill from the noodle shop. The building looked like a weatherboard version of the sheds used on construction sites. ‘It used to be a piggery, but the Department of Livestock gave up on pigs.’

‘Come on, Dominique.’ Anna jumped out of the car. ‘No time to waste. I have to show you and Phuentso what’s left to do on the database.’

‘Can you take care of yourself for a couple of hours?’ Dominique asked me. ‘Work finishes at four in the winter, so we won’t be long.’

‘Sure,’ I said, disappointed. ‘Where’s the bathroom?’

‘It’d be better to wait until we get home.’ She lowered her voice. ‘The toilets here aren’t much better than on the trains in Romania.’

There, I hadn’t been able to enter the cubicle without retching. ‘I haven’t been since I left the hotel at four this morning. Could I just go outside?’

‘No. Be brave. Go out the door and left to the end.’

The toilet was a typical Asian squat model, which was usually quite hygienic if the men squatted even when they thought it wasn’t absolutely necessary. From the stench and splatter marks, Dominique’s colleagues clearly couldn’t be bothered. I took a deep breath and rushed in. When my bladder was empty, I removed the small bucket from the larger one, scooped it full of water and tipped it over the toilet and surrounding area. I washed my hands from a tap directly over the bucket with a bar of soap I found on the floor.

Dominique gave me a questioning glance when I returned.

‘It wasn’t as bad as I was expecting from your description.’

She leaned away from the computer where Anna was pointing at a database screen. ‘They wash the tea cups in that same bucket. Don’t accept any tea.’

I sat down at Dominique’s desk which, like the others, was partitioned into her own space. Dominique, who’d donned a fleece at the restaurant, had put another layer on when she arrived at the office. I sat huddled in my coat, thinking ten degrees had never felt so cold.

‘There’s a heater under the desk.’

I looked down to see an old radiator with the elements exposed. ‘You’ll catch fire if you try to use this.’

Dominique winced and lifted up her *kira* to show me the burnt hem.

