

What To Do When You Miss a Smell

by Sambriddhi Nepal

1. Identify the smell.

My mother turns to my partner, reaching out with something in her hands. As they move awkwardly toward each other, I can tell they're both asking themselves how this is going to work. It's a cloudless afternoon in December 2016 and my mother is attempting to give my partner Chris a shawl, putting it around his neck like a garland. It's black and green, with red and gold traditional Dhaka pattern hand-embroidered on it. It's a parting gift.

Chris and I have been in my hometown of Kathmandu, Nepal for two weeks, and we're flying back to my adopted home of Vancouver that evening. This visit to Nepal is his first, and I'm overjoyed to be here with him. Wandering the narrow alleys of Kathmandu with my cousins, we try to catch Chris up on decades of family stories and inside jokes. Chris, busy taking photos of temples, gets lost in the throngs of people, cars, motorcycles, and roadside stalls at the market in Asan. We eat oranges under peepal trees and drink beer on bright rooftops with my oldest friends. We laugh and reminisce in the perfect blend of Nepali and English. We rejoice in and lament all the changes growing up and moving away bring.

We did not plan on seeing my parents during this trip. Two years prior, I told them I didn't want to move back to Kathmandu and have an arranged marriage. This news, combined with their newfound knowledge of my decidedly non-Nepali partner, sent them into a spiral. At first, they called me incessantly, wanting to talk, but refusing to listen. Then they stopped calling, the silence louder than any of the cruel things they'd said. I knew they didn't know how to mend their broken hearts. This coping mechanism was familiar to me. I'd endured being a source of

disappointment for much of my upbringing. The length of their mourning, however, was not familiar at all. It had been over 600 days since we'd last spoken. I grieved, too, counting each day.

We get to this moment, with that shawl, the four of us standing on the edge of an unpaved street in Kathmandu, thanks to the only tactic they know how to use: a violation of boundaries.

When we arrived in Nepal, our plane landed on an unseasonably warm afternoon at Tribhuvan International Airport. Crossing customs and immigration involved predictable difficulties with customs officials - they always seem to reserve some special attention for Nepali women travelling with non-Nepali men - and lost baggage. Finally, Chris and I emerged from the airport into the dusty, exposed parking lot. Standing there with his hands buried in his pockets was my father, who had experienced a sudden change of heart.

He insisted on driving Chris and me to our guesthouse. He called me, inviting me multiple times to have dinner with him and my mom. He texted often, saying "hey chori, ke chha?" After hundreds of days of silence, suddenly I was being asked how I was and being called his daughter again. Every pleasant visit with my brother and cousins was interrupted by one of them reluctantly asking me if I'd answered my father's messages. Eventually, I relented. Chris and I joined my parents for a meal that was punctuated by awkward silences and my stomach's nervous churning.

Somehow, over this dinner that was noticeably at a restaurant and not at my childhood home, we come to an unspoken, uneasy agreement. Speak only of the weather, cars, and inflation. Smile and nod. Never speak of the deep divides, the huge hurts, the broken hearts and the lost time.

Chris and I return to Vancouver with our belongings. Nestled among the packets of Nepali instant noodles, bangles, and yak wool blankets is the dhaka shawl. I pull it out and wrap myself in it. In an instant, the world around me stops.

As soon as I inhale, I am transported to my parents' bedroom. The walls are painted a shade of minty green familiar to many desis, and I sit cross-legged on their flowery bedspread. In my mind's eye, I see the "secret compartment" underneath my parents' bed. Quickly, I'm seeing an assortment of images, an amalgamation of afternoons spent watching my mother move the mattress, pull aside the wood board covering, and reveal the magic within. Scarves, saris, kurtas. All meticulously wrapped in crinkling cellophane. Sequins, string, bangles. Shining so brightly, like birds displaying their brightest feathers, asking to be picked for the next special occasion.

I imagine my mother picking out this particular scarf to give to this particular man. This man living with her daughter. He came from another world. He looked nothing like the other men the other daughters married. Her daughter was nothing like those other daughters.

What did she think as she selected this scarf for this occasion? I'm sure I'll never find out.

2. Decide whether you really miss it.

I hang the shawl in our closet, among all my other shawls, in an Ikea scarf organizer that takes up more space than it looks like it would. Every so often, I pull it out. After a few tries, I find the perfect outfit to wear it with: a black turtleneck sweater dress, a little silver necklace with a prayer wheel on it, red lipstick, brown boots.

When people ask me where my scarf is from, I say “Nepal,” skipping over the more painful origin story. But after a few wears, I realize I can’t comfortably wrap it around me anymore.

It’s that smell. I’m worried it’s fading away, along with my memories of sitting on that bed and my vision of what I would be as a grown-up Nepali woman.

3. Once you know, take an unreasonable action that a friend, if they knew, would gently talk you out of.

I move the scarf from the hanger that didn’t do it justice. Ignoring my partner’s confusion why he, the recipient of this gift, can’t ever wear it, I fold it carefully and set it in my closet, high up on a shelf. Sometimes, I find myself standing in the closet, talking myself out of doing it. My impulses get the better of me. I can’t help myself. I take the scarf down, bring it to my nose, inhale, close my eyes, and there I am, back in that house, back in that room. Feeling the tightness building in my chest, I put the scarf away. I knew I shouldn’t have done it. I always hurt more afterwards.

I wonder if I should put it in a plastic bag. Or a vacuum bag. Or an airtight container. What kind of bag will preserve a smell? I talk myself out of googling it and leave the scarf up there.

4. Rather than processing your feelings in a healthy way, bottle them up.

The tense agreement my parents and I had come to continues on. A year after our last visit, my parents and I still only speak in pleasantries. Occasionally, I gather the courage to ask my mom for her recipes - she is a very good cook - and I jot them down on yellow legal pads.

But we never go any deeper, and I begin to resent them and our relationship. Where is this going? Do they love me? Do I love them?

In these moments, I feel no different than I did when I was their young child, no older than seven or eight, pleading with them to stop yelling and just listen. They didn't then, and they don't now. My grieving parents are so adamant that I'm doing something to hurt them. They don't see that I am not doing anything *to* them at all. I am simply doing, being, developing relationships, and experiencing what they didn't have the skills to give me: unwavering love and support. Maybe that's what hurts them so much.

5. Experience a major life change that adds to the panic.

On a Saturday morning in March 2018, I take a pregnancy test in the bathroom a few feet away from the closet where my portal to Nepal was resting. The test is positive. I'm pregnant! My excitement is almost immediately followed by the dread of having to tell my parents about this. I knew and didn't know how they'd react.

I hold off for as long as I can, finally telling them when I'm 4 months pregnant. They're back in their spiral. Their mourning is back, followed closely by the familiar silence and rejection. This news, their daughter's unmarried status, her lack of willingness to indulge their pleas to do what they think she should - these are all reminders of how they had lost their daughter to this far-flung country.

I sit on the sofa in our living room, looking out the window at the lush green trees on our street, thinking about how in 5 months' time, the sky will cloud over, the leaves will be orange, and my baby will be here with me. My tears are for my half-Nepali baby. They are for my Nepali self. I don't know how to hold on to all these parts of me.

6. Come to terms, for small moments, with straddling two worlds at once.

Sometimes I'm okay with this pair. The two places I love dearly, the two languages I speak to my daughter. I teach her and my stepson about Nepali holidays. I show them photos of my hometown and tell them the same stories I'd heard growing up about my cousins and my brother. I mourn that they don't feel the same pangs of love that I feel for the places that raised me. As my pressure cooker whistles or whole spices sizzle in the bottom of a pot, I hope cumin and saffron will be part of the smell of home for them.

I still can't wear that scarf. It sits in the back of one of my drawers. I keep it there, safe from the scents of Vancouver.

7. Replace your fear of loss with the hope of gain.

There's no neat resolution for this pain. The closest I can get to is hope. The global pandemic we're living in has so many of us unable to travel to our places of origin. I find my sense of longing for my first home is stronger than ever.

I hope that I can soon wander the alleys of Kathmandu and buy my daughter her own dhaka scarf. We'd find our way to a small shop, where the shopkeeper would pull dozens of packages off dusty shelves. She'd take her time, examining dozens of colour combinations before settling on the right one. We'd bring it back to Vancouver, unpacking our suitcases, snacking on our favourite treats that we brought with us to prolong our travels. I'd say, "This smells like Kathmandu, doesn't it?"

The memory would make her smile. I hope she'd actually wear her scarf. Maybe it would give me the courage to take mine out and wear it too.