

ZEN
and
GONE

EMILY FRANCE

SOHO
TEEN

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For my son.

May I be with you every precious moment I'm with you.

ZEN
and
GONE



PART I

THE FIRST NOBLE TRUTH:

Duhkha exists.

Duhkha (thoohkhh), noun. Sanskrit. Direct English translation unavailable. Derived from a word meaning “wheel out of kilter.”

The persistent, recurring feeling that life doesn’t feel like it should; it’s uncomfortable and painful in a million different ways. It never really satisfies. You don’t get what you want. Or you get what want, and you don’t want it anymore. You want things to stay the same, and they change. Or you want things to change, and they stay the same. You want to feel stable, grounded, safe, happy. You want things to be better and different. You want to feel good. You want to feel high.

Sometimes you’ve got it. For a moment.

It’s all just right.

And then it slips away.

Good and bad. Here and gone.

Over and over.

And you suffer.

That’s duhkha.



June 23

3 A.M.

1

ESSA

It was her job to keep Puck safe.

Puck—Essa’s nine-year-old sister, the budding genius, the girl she lived for. The royal pain in the ass who wasn’t supposed to be on this trip in the first place. It was Essa’s job to keep an ear out, an eye out, to be aware of any danger. It always had been. But it was especially true up here. Especially true tonight.

Essa bolted upright, her eyes wide. She saw nothing but consuming blackness.

Was that a noise?

Footsteps?

It couldn’t be the deadfall; they hadn’t reset it after they’d caught a mouse. Essa rubbed her hands together for warmth, wiggled her icy toes inside her boots, pulled her knees to her chest. Her eyes adjusted to the night, and she could see snippets of moonlight sneaking through gaps in the walls of their tiny brush shelter. A stiff mountain wind whistled through the pine boughs and dead leaves they’d layered to keep the weather out. They’d been stuck in the storm for hours; everything had gotten wet. Even though it was June, Essa was cold. She knew it couldn’t be true, but she felt like it had dipped into the thirties.

She shifted on the forest floor. They’d forgotten to cover it with a layer of brush to insulate them before they went to sleep. All night, a chill had been reaching up from the ground,

climbing through her thin hiking pants, sliding down her legs, wrapping around her ankles and toes. It felt like it had a mind of its own, the cold. Like it was out for her, thrilled that they were here, ten thousand feet up in the Mummy Range, lost, with barely the clothes on their backs. Like it was determined to make one thing understood:

If you make it out of here alive, don't come back.

She heard it again.

Snap.

Louder this time. She couldn't tell if it was coming from inside or outside. She looked up at their shelter roof, but couldn't see well enough to check the large tree branch they'd used as the main support beam. She hoped her bowline knot was holding.

Shuffle. Snap.

She heard it again, and this time, she was sure it was outside the shelter. She told herself it was a raccoon sniffing around their camp. She told herself it wasn't a bear that was about to rip through the sides of their pitiful homemade walls and attack. That it wasn't the random creepy guy they saw earlier walking through the woods. That he wasn't out there, stalking them in the darkness, lurking with an ax.

She tried to calm down and picture herself back in the Zendo in Boulder, meditating on a cushion. She imagined that the sounds outside the shelter were nothing but the gentle shuffling of her Zen teacher's robes as he settled just before zazen. It was one of her favorite sounds.

Silently she recited the gatha she'd crafted with her teacher:

Breathing in, I know my breath is the wheel of the ship.

Breathing out, I know the storm will pass.

Her mind didn't stay with her breathing. It did what it normally did: it reached for thoughts like a frantic monkey, grasping at one random idea after the other, feeding on disorder, on chaos. She thought about her mom back down in Boulder, more out of control by the day. About her best friend Micah, gently snoring next to her. How annoying he'd been at the party two weeks

ago with the weed gummies he'd snatched from Pure Buds. She thought about sitting by the campfire last night, outside their shelter, after everyone else had gone to sleep. Exhausted. Wet. Cold. Her belly aching with hunger, getting nothing from a granola bar and a few sips of pine needle tea. Afraid to eat the food they'd brought, not sure how long it was going to have to last. She thought about the soft firelight on Oliver's skin. Oliver, the boy from Chicago she'd met not even a month ago. The one who felt so familiar, so fast. The one with the sister who was sick; the one who seemed to understand. The one who had pulled her close and kissed her . . .

She tried to return to her breath.

To another gatha.

Fears are clouds drifting by a mountain.

Watch them. Tend to them.

But know

You're the mountain.

Another sound split the night.

Crack.

It was even closer. Something or someone was out there. She reached over and nudged Micah. "Hey," she hissed. "Get up. I hear something."

"Dude," Micah groaned. He snorted briefly and rolled over and went back to sleep. She shook him again.

"Wake up. Seriously." When he didn't move, she grabbed a handful of his thick black hair and gave it a few firm tugs.

"What the hell?"

"I hear something," she hissed again. "Outside."

Micah propped himself on one arm to listen. Just outside the shelter, off to their right, she heard it again. Movement. Footsteps. Or something being dragged along the ground.

"Probably just a raccoon," Micah mumbled. But he didn't sound convinced. "We have no food in here for a bear to come after. It's all outside. Unless you count the mouse I roasted last night. And man, this ground is *ice cold*."

"We smell like *people*," she said. "That's all the incentive a bear needs."

Crack. Snap.

The sounds rang through the darkness. Her mind flashed to the guide Oliver left back in the car. They were in the Comanche Peak Wilderness. Full of bears, mountain lions, coyotes. Fear sent her mind racing through other things that could be out there: Serial killers? Runaway felons? Ghosts?

"What if it's that guy we saw?" she whispered.

She noticed for the first time that she was shivering. Her arms and chest quaked as she thought about the random guy they'd seen in the woods before they'd realized they were lost. He wasn't wearing stuff hikers or hunters wore. He was in baggy black cotton pants. A preppy blue sweater. A straw fedora. Rubbery black plastic clogs and white socks. He looked wildly out of place, like a snake in the bottom of a kid's toy chest. A knife tangled up in your bedsheets. He claimed he was out looking for the site of a plane crash. Essa knew there was a trail to an old WWII B17 crash site somewhere in the area. But the man claimed the plane had been his grandfather's, that it had been full of valuable Japanese antiques. He said he'd been searching the woods for years, looking for any that might have survived the crash. He said no one believed him.

Essa didn't, either.

She shivered again and wondered if it was the cold or the fear making her core temperature drop. "You think he could've followed us?"

"Dude. Chill," Micah said. "That guy was harmless. Just a crazy dude out for a hike."

Goosebumps tumbled down Essa's spine, and instinctively, she leaned over and reached for Puck. Last night, Puck had gone to sleep at her side, Essa's face nuzzled in her sister's tangled blonde hair, the smell of Puck's cherry lollipop dinner wafting up her nose. Now she gently felt in the darkness for the reassurance of Puck's tiny, warm body.

Her hand landed on cold ground.

She groped in the dark a little farther to the left. And then to the right.

“Puck?”

Silence.

“Puck!” Essa hissed, frantically searching. “Puck!”

Her breath hitched in the back of her throat, but she tried to stay calm. Maybe Puck had rolled over to a new spot in the night. Essa strained her eyes in the darkness, but she couldn’t see. “Micah? Is she next to you?”

She heard Micah search the shelter around him. “No. I don’t feel her.”

“Nudge Oliver awake,” Essa said.

“He’s not over here, either.”

“Oliver? Puck?”

No one answered. A cold wind hissed through the shelter wall next to her. She knocked into Micah as she scrambled onto all fours, searching every inch of their tiny home, running her hands along the ground, up the walls. She felt Puck’s backpack.

“That’s probably what we heard outside,” Micah said. “They probably got up to go to the bathroom or—”

Essa didn’t wait to hear the end of his sentence. She bolted out the small exit hole of the shelter and got to her feet.

“Puck!” she called into the dark woods. It felt like her voice was swallowed by the rushing wind around her. It died down for just a moment. “Puck! Oliver?”

Silence.

She looked into the sky, searching for the moon, begging it to shine down on their camp, to light up Puck’s stringy blonde hair, her blueberry eyes, her lips that were perpetually candy-stained red. But the moon was nearly doused, obscured by clouds and a muddy, stubborn blackness.

Puck was gone.

And so was Oliver.



June 5

2

ESSA

Essa was down on Pearl Street listening to a band called My Brother's Keeper. The guitarist sucked, and he'd pinned a long, real fur tail to his pants. As he strummed, the tail quivered and shook. The guy on the banjo wore a tiny tambourine around the toe of his shoe, and he tap, tap, tapped. The lead singer had a scruffy beard, and he was wearing a flowing tie-dyed skirt. It was a typical Boulder band, and Essa was about to bail on music altogether and search Pearl for a decent magician or maybe for the contortionist who could squeeze himself into a tiny glass box. Or maybe for the guy she saw last week who'd set up a little table, a typewriter, and a sign: POETRY ON DEMAND. But then the band started a new song, and the lyrics caught her, like good lyrics did, and she found herself swaying back and forth, back and forth. Sometimes music was like a strong wind. Invisible and without warning, it *moved* her.

She was distracted by the woman in front of her. Dreadlocks rested on top of the woman's head like so many intertwined, sleeping snakes. Thin lines of marijuana smoke rose from her joint and settled around the snake pile like an incoming fog. She swayed to the music like Essa had, her gauzy dress revealing her threadbare bra. She took another long drag off her joint and blew the smoke straight up in the air this time. An actual wind kicked up, and the smoke drifted into Essa's face.

Annoyed, Essa tapped her shoulder. “Hey,” she said. “Mom. Blow that way.”

“Sorry, Essa.” Her mom smiled a slow, stoned smile, like she knew a complicated secret she wasn’t sharing. “You want?”

Essa looked at the glowing cherry, beckoning, promising escape. Like a magical doorway made of smoke, opening right there on Pearl Street.

All I’d have to do is inhale to go through. To somewhere else. To wherever my mom is most of the time, blissed out, and just . . . not here.

But she’d never smoked. She couldn’t. She had to stay put, stuck in what she sometimes feared was the crappier reality on this side of her mom’s magical smoke doorway. Because of Puck. She needed Essa, the one person in the family who had her shit together.

She stared at the joint again, sniffed its weedy, swampy smoke. She thought about the Zen priest; hoped he was right. A line from one of her favorite Dharma talks flooded her mind; she held onto it, steadied herself with it.

Escape doesn’t work. It doesn’t cure duhkha.

Stay in this moment. Present moment.

“You know I don’t want,” Essa said.

Her mom shrugged and gave her a red eye roll. “Essence McKree. Oldest teenager I know.”

Whatever.

She was almost late for work. And so was her mom. They both had jobs in Pearl Street shops that were a few doors down from each other. And Essa hated to be late for the thing that funded nearly everything in her life: her job at a little kite shop called Above the Clouds.

“Time to go,” Essa said, standing and offering her mom a hand. Her mother’s lips melted into a little frown, but she reached out. Essa pulled, and her mom’s body slid up, all gooey and easy like a piece of warm caramel. She was smiling.

“You’re a peach,” her mom said.

They strolled down the wide brick street, and her mom dug

in her faded patchwork purse for a cigarette. She lit it and took a drag. A sweet, dry mountain breeze twirled her dress and then Essa's. They passed jugglers, fiddlers, dancers, and poets. They dotted Pearl like tie-dyed roses, each one a burst of color, a reward for all the shoppers who'd come to this open-air plaza of indie stores.

"Shit," her mom said. She tossed her cigarette on the uneven bricks and mashed it with her sandal. "Beth's in there."

They were in front of her mom's work now. The sign above them creaked in the wind: **PURE BUDS, 100% ORGANIC CANNABIS**. It was the first legal pot shop to go organic in Boulder. Essa looked in the big glass windows at the sleek interior of the store. No hippie crap here. Behind beautiful reclaimed wooden shelves, the walls were painted a fresh apple green. Big mason jars full of buds sported black labels with names written in chalk: *Bubba Kush, Pineapple Express, Skywalker OG*. Behind the register, bright glass cabinets showcased the edibles: marijuana-infused cookies, multicolored lollipops, shiny gummies, thick fudge brownies. It looked like a high-end bakery.

Beth, the owner of the store and her mom's boss, came out to meet them. She didn't look happy. "Was that a cigarette?" she asked. Essa's mom looked at the ground and nodded in shame. "They're so *bad for you*," Beth whined.

Beth didn't say any more, but her judgment oozed around them like a melting marijuana gummy. She looked Essa's mom up and down, surveying her dreadlocks, her gauzy dress. Beth was wearing the exact opposite: sleek black stretchy pants, a gray wrap-around top. Essa's mom called Beth's style "Smart Yoga" or, alternatively, "Make Me Puke." Beth gave Essa's mom a job baking edibles. In the back.

"I'll be in just a second," her mom said.

Beth nodded and gave Essa a *you poor kid* smile. "Good to see you, Essa." Then she went back into Pure Buds.

Essa's mom rolled her eyes. "I thought Beth was mad because I messed up a batch of gummy pineapples. I made them with

Willie Nelson's new brand—Willie's Reserve. They came out looking more like ducks than fruit." She smiled, but it faded quickly. "Fucking potrepeneurs." Essa's mom thought all the East Coast business people who were moving to Colorado and taking over the old-school pot scene were a real drag. She always said that they were changing the culture.

Essa just didn't want to be late for work. "I don't get off until six," she said. "You're five-thirty?"

Her mom nodded. "I don't really know. Can't remember. Just come straight home after."

Essa raised her eyebrows.

"There's someone I want you to meet," her mom said. "We'll have dinner at the house."

Another new one?

Essa didn't say it out loud, but she made a face. Her mom instantly broke into salesperson mode. "He's really great, Essa," she said. "Really. I think you'll like him. His name is Ronnie."

"Hope springs eternal, Mom."

Her mother rolled her eyes again. "Don't be an asshole." But she said it lovingly. She stepped close, ran a hand through Essa's hair, making her butterfly hairclip slide askew. "Why don't you bring a date? You must have a crush on *someone*. One of your camping buddies? A guy? A girl? I don't care which. You know that."

Essa straightened her butterfly clip and swatted her mom away like a persistent fly. Actually, her mom wasn't like a fly at all. She was more like a butterfly. Wispy. Colorful. Hard to catch.

"We don't really *camp*. We do orienteering up there. It's different," Essa said. "And you know I don't date."

Her mom shook her head. "Have it your way," she sighed. "Just be home for dinner, okay?"

3

OLIVER

“Maybe you’ll fall in love with this place.”

His mom knew that the likelihood of this happening was some very small fraction of zero. But she was trying to be upbeat. To encourage him. It was obvious that he was two nanoseconds away from bailing on this plan to live with Aunt Sophie in Boulder for the summer. It wasn’t his plan, anyway; he hadn’t really been given a choice.

Oliver looked out the window, through his aunt’s dangling Tibetan prayer flags, at the car that was waiting to take his mom back to the airport and back to Chicago. He felt terrible for agreeing to come here. Like the worst person in the world.

“She got you an internship at a tech startup. How great is that? Maybe they’ll turn out to be the next Google? You never know. Plus, you need this,” his mom urged. “What happened with Lilly was—”

“Can I have my bag?” He cut her off. He couldn’t stand to think about that night a few weeks ago. What he did to his sister. The sound of his parents fighting. The sound of his voice when he totally and completely lost his shit. The sound of Lilly’s screams when the paramedics came. How she called him a traitor. He took his last duffel bag from his mom’s hands. And felt like a coward.

“Your room is almost ready!” Aunt Sophie called from down the hall.

"Promise me you won't try pot," his mom whispered. "Boulder is a little . . . *bohemian*." She gently ran a hand against his cheek, and her gold watch slid down her arm toward her elbow.

"But it's legal here. I don't see a problem." Oliver grinned for the first time in weeks. Maybe months.

"*Oliver.*" She wasn't seriously worried. He was Oliver Burnham, the good kid. The one who wouldn't even take a sip of ouzo at New Year's Eve dinner at YaYa's house. Even though it offended his Greek grandmother, he didn't drink. He didn't do anything. Oliver was the kid who—at least until a few weeks ago—had been trying not to cause any problems. They had enough of those in their family already.

"Maybe you can hike or something," his mom added. "I think they do a lot of that here."

"Yeah, sure," Oliver lied. Like he would ever actually choose to trek off into the woods or opt to be outside more than was absolutely necessary. He tossed his duffel on his aunt's sofa. "Lots of hiking. No getting wasted."

And even though that had always been his policy—never getting wasted—that last night with his sister, he would've had an entire bottle of ouzo if he'd had the chance. After it was all over, after Lilly was admitted to the hospital, his mom and dad kept fighting. About his sister. About Oliver. About the fact that his dad had filed for divorce. After what had happened that night, he didn't know what to do with himself. His dad left, and his mom poured herself a giant glass of red wine. The curvy glass seemed almost as big as her head. As big as a fishbowl. Oliver sat there across from her. After a few long sips, her breath got a little slower. A little deeper. He caught himself staring at her wine in this weird way. It looked good. Really good.

But he didn't drink. Instead, he got a Coke out of the fridge and went to his room. He tried to forget what he'd done. He tried to journal like their family therapist had told them to, but he couldn't. He remembered throwing the empty diary across

the room. He remembered doing this half-choking, half-crying thing he'd never done before. He remembered nearly breaking his fist against the wall. Over and over. His mom called his aunt Sophie in Colorado and cried into the phone. She announced the Boulder summer plan the next morning.

"Your room's all done," Sophie said, breezing in. She flipped her long black braid over her shoulder and linked an arm with his. Oliver nearly choked. She smelled like flowers. And lemons. And herbs. She seemed so *eager* to have him here. He knew he should be grateful and all. Instead, he was annoyed.

His mom moved on to Sophie. "Thank you so much," she said, hugging her sister. "For getting him the internship. For everything."

The tech internship that Sophie had gotten him was what had ultimately convinced Oliver to come out here. So he could put that last episode with Lilly out of his mind. So he could "cool off" and "settle down." So he could put the job on his college applications and try to get into a decent school so he could . . . he didn't really know what. Or why.

"I'm happy to have him," Sophie said, her feather earrings brushing his mom's shoulder. Oliver's mom always said that Sophie got all the creative genes. That Sophie was the only one genetically capable of having fun in the family. He suspected his mom had always envied her. "And when you get home, don't let Bill yell at you anymore."

"I'll try. I canceled that stupid dinner party. I had a deposition. A huge trial coming up. What was I going to do? *That's* the last straw?"

Sophie kept hugging Oliver's mom. Didn't say anything.

Finally, his mom pulled away and flashed Oliver a goodbye smile. Like he was a baton she'd handed off to the next racer. Like the next leg wasn't up to her. Like she wanted to forget this last part of the race altogether. She teetered out the door and down the sidewalk on her high heels.

"Mom," Oliver called after her, holding the door open. She

stopped and looked back. Held a hand over her eyes to see her son better. The sun was so bright, the sky so blistering blue in Boulder. To Oliver, it felt like a different sun, a different sky. “Tell Lilly I’m sorry.”

His mom looked lost for a second. “I don’t think I should say anything about . . . It’s too soon, I—”

“For leaving. Just tell her I’m sorry for leaving.”

Oliver could tell it made her sad. What he said. Really, really sad. She nodded and then headed for the car. The driver held the back passenger door open, and his mom checked her cell as she slid in. If she looked back or waved one more time, Oliver couldn’t see it. The windows were tinted.

The car disappeared around the corner, and he stepped outside. A mountain range loomed in the skyline above the town. As he squinted at the craggy peaks, he felt like he was on some hostile planet. And his sister was back on earth. He panicked then, breathed too fast. He knew it was more than the thin mountain air. It was the light-years between his sister and him. Light-years.

He tried to calm down, and his fingers itched for his phone. He’d downloaded a mountain locator app before he flew here, so he held his phone up to the mountains and got a result: the Flatirons. It said he was looking at the “small foothills of the Rocky Mountains.”

Small?

The bigger Rockies were farther off in the distance, covered by clouds. The screen loaded with names of peaks like Green and Bear. The only other time he’d visited Sophie in Boulder was when he was six years old. He didn’t remember the mountains looking so huge. So empty. He thought about home. Riding the L every day. The clacking trains. The skyscrapers. The pavement and the people and the noise. There was hardly any traffic around Sophie’s house. Not by Chicago standards, anyway. He watched three cars rumble down the street. He noticed their tags, one by one:

PHD-390

PHD-723

MPO-147

Then it was quiet again. All he could hear was the wind.

He'd read that Boulder had the highest PhDs per capita in the country. But did they all have to be asshats and put it on their license plates?

He missed Chicago.

He went back inside.

"You okay?" Sophie asked. She was at the stove. "I'm making chai. Want some?"

"No, thanks," he said. "And why does everybody have to brag that they have a PhD here?"

"What?"

"License plates. I saw two in a row with 'PHD' on them."

Sophie smiled as a spicy smell filled the condo. The sun beat through the colored cloth squares of the prayer flags in the window. "They're not bragging. That's just how Colorado tags are. Three letters. Three numbers. Doesn't mean anything." She stirred her tea. "But the town is *full* of smart people. It's a little intimidating."

Oliver shrugged and flopped onto Sophie's couch. Everything felt so neat in the apartment. Oliver couldn't decide if he liked it or if it was creepy, but everything was . . . peaceful or something. There was a big pot of bamboo in one corner; water tinkled over a small stone fountain in another. The sofa was white. The big chair was white. Bookshelves were dotted with little black bowls full of moss and smooth rocks. On the back wall, there was a simple wooden table that kind of looked like an altar. On it, there was a two-foot white stone Buddha statue. A little red bowl of sand with a single stick of incense jutting out. A tall, skinny vase with a single white flower. And a framed white sign that read in curly, thick black letters:

ALL WE WANT IS TO WAKE UP.

Oliver had no idea what that meant. He read it again.

Does Sophie have a hard time staying awake? And even if she does, why does she need an altar dedicated to not falling asleep?

Super weird.

A text came in then, and he hoped it was his mom. He wanted her to say that she was turning the driver around, that she was coming to get him—that this whole Boulder summer plan was off.

And it was from his mom. But it didn't say any of that.

It was a warning. A really annoying Mom Warning:
Be a good houseguest.