

# THE KILLING

Why did the members of an isolated Buddhist village murder seven young men? The answer is simple: money, sex – and caterpillars

WRITTEN BY NEIL MUNSHI PHOTOGRAPHED BY APOORVA GUPTAY

**I AM STANDING** in a pen meant for goats and sheep, 4,200m high in the Himalayas of Nepal. Weak, hazy light spills through the open roof, and a suspicious Pasang Ghale leers at me warily from above. He clammers down a rough-hewn ladder with his friend Chorden Song. “If you agree to buy it for Rs 200 per piece, then you can see it,” Song says, the stud pierced below his lower lip glinting in the sun. It’s a strong-arm tactic. But my knees ache. My muscles are sore. My breath is shallow. I’ve hiked nearly 100km over the past five days, under waterfalls and over thundering rivers, traversing climates from subtropical to alpine, losing five kilos in the process – all for a taste of the drug he’s peddling. And, granted, it’s a hard-on pill. But this isn’t some Internet spambot scam that clogs your inbox promising bigger better faster longer – this is the real deal. Clinically tried, university tested, board certified and approved. But that’s only the sexy

part, the neon lights – it’s also, potentially, so much more. Think cancer cure, HIV antiviral, diabetes treatment. In other words, a miracle drug. So I am hardly the first man – young, virile or otherwise – to make an arduous journey for this tiny mushroom. Because, honestly, can any voyage be too long, any trek too difficult in pursuit of eternal youth?

I seek a drug whose virtues are so vaunted, its priapic prowess so renowned that, for millennia, Chinese emperors reserved its consumption for themselves alone. A drug whose sale is so lucrative that on a dark night last June it brought murder to this isolated Buddhist village. Of course I’m going to say yes.

Ghale’s wrinkled mother shakes 50 or 60 pieces of *yarsagumba* into a large steel bowl. *Yarsagumba* means “winter worm, summer grass” in Tibetan, and that’s what they look like – inch-and-a-half-long, thin yellow worms with

brown stems protruding from their brows. Half-insect, half-plant. I pick out 10. Later, when I have left this place, a place so remote that the Nepali government wasn’t even aware of its existence until 1960, I boil some tea and drop one in to let it steep. I drink deeply, and eat the entire mushroom.

Seven young men died for this drug. The members of a once-peaceful village turned into mass murderers for this fungus. Not for something so fleeting as an erection, so abstract as eternal youth, but for survival. *Yarsagumba* brought this village out of isolation, it promised a better life to a desperate tribe, and when that promise was threatened by invaders, they reacted violently. And so, men were stabbed in the chest. They had their heads crushed by huge stones and iron rods shoved through their mouths. Bodies were thrown from cliffs. Or hacked to pieces and thrown in the river. All for these measly little brown-and-yellow worms. →



**WINTER  
WORM**

Yarsagumba only grows above 4,000m - its discovery near Nar changed the village forever

**ISOLATION**

The terraced barley fields of Nar stretch out before the remote stacked-and-tiered grey village

**NAR LIES HIGH** in the Himalayas, far above the treeline. It is a rickety village of 60-odd stone homes stacked precariously in tiered steps and criss-crossed with derelict electricity and telephone lines. Uneven masonry and crude woodwork lend it an abandoned air, which is only heightened by its sheer isolation. It makes for a bleak picture: a pallid ghost town in an unforgiving landscape. Tattered, faded Buddhist prayer flags flutter and dance, strung from terrace to terrace, while the brown-green barley fields that have sustained Nar's people for centuries stretch out to the valley's closure. Stark grey, ash and monochromatic, it's the sort of place Picasso would have painted in his cubist years if he'd had a Grey Period.

If Nepal is considered remote from the rest of the world, and the Manang district is remote within Nepal, then Nar is what the remote dwellers of a remote region in a remote country consider truly remote. It's a blind spot most Manangis thought nothing of, and cared even less about, until that night last June when the village brought shame

on the entire district. They say little about Nar besides that they've never been there and that the Nar people are "different". It is a village of 2,000 surly yaks, but only 300 people, of Tibetan descent. The treacherous two-day trek from the district headquarters, Chame, wends through a gnarled Brothers

**It was on this green and ruddy plain that 70 Nar men are alleged to have chased, beaten, stoned, hacked and stabbed seven young Gurkhas**

Grimm forest of knotty pines and spindly bamboo and culminates in a narrow, half-metre-wide cliff-side path that is, essentially, one long, surprisingly active landslide – a crumbling pass constantly threatening to shut Nar off from the rest of the world.

To get to their harvesting fields, the Narpas must walk between four hours and a full day, past the nine Buddhist monuments that guard them against bad omens, and a long prayer wall full of stone tablets carved by their ancestors. They must cross the quicksilver Nar river and follow it as it snakes low past mountain and gorge until it climbs a steep hill to Jhunam Kharka, where the fields lie shrouded in cumulonimbus clouds. This green and ruddy plain is where the crop whose sale has fed and clothed the Nar people for the past 10 years grows. And it was here that 70 Nar men are said to have chased, beaten, stoned, hacked and stabbed seven young Gurkhali men.

And it is here, among a few other fields, that the elusive, lucrative "Himalayan Viagra", or *yarsagumba*, →

## THE KILLING

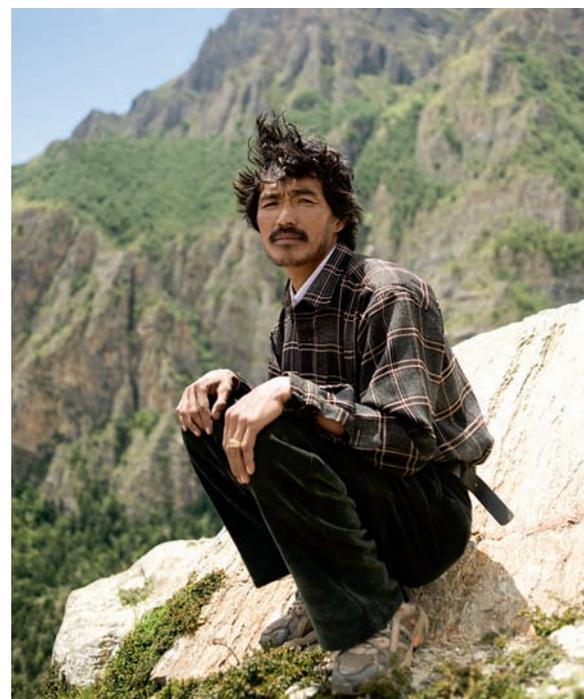
can be found. It is through these clouds that the spores of the *Cordyceps sinensis* fungus float, landing on the heads of bat-moth larvae. The mushroom feeds on the caterpillar, consuming it from within, mummifying it and ultimately growing through its body until the fungus protrudes from the insect's head and through the ground, where discerning eyes can spot and pick it.

It is the most expensive traditional Chinese medicine in the world – and at over Rs 21 lakh per retail kilo, is literally worth its weight in gold. The Chinese have harvested *yarsagumba* from the Tibetan plateau for centuries, and the powers they ascribe to it are many – from combating arrhythmias, cancer, cirrhosis and diabetes to increased energy and renal, neural and respiratory vitality. But the true promise of *yarsagumba*, the one it is most known and coveted for, is its ability to give a fellow an erection his lady won't soon forget. That it allows him to last longer, go again sooner and produce more sperm – and that all of this has been proven in studies at universities in China and at Stanford University – justifies, perhaps, its astronomical value.

For centuries, the Nar people used *yarsagumba* as a homeopathic remedy. They knew that, when consumed in a stew or with warm yak's milk, *yarsagumba*'s power was, indeed, transformative – revitalizing the weary, curing the sick. What they didn't realize was what a group of travellers from the Rukum district told them 15 years ago:

***Yarsagumba, and the promise it held, brought Nar out of isolation, connecting it to the rest of Manang, and, importantly, the rest of the world***

when it was sold to Nepali agents, who then sold it to Chinese traders, its power was even greater. And so, in the early 2000s, the Narpas set about creating a proper business. Where before they'd eaten what they grew and clothed themselves in their livestock's wool, they now made enough money selling *yarsagumba* to buy food and clothing on par with that of other Manangis, whose lives have been enriched by the roughly 60,000 tourists from around the world who travel the Annapurna Circuit each year. *Yarsagumba* was Nar's ticket out of poverty – the Nepalese government reserved the nearby fields solely for Nar



### LIFE SENTENCE

(Above) Phurpa Lama, who was imprisoned and then released. (Right) The accused play volleyball in the yard of the former Manang District Education office on the trial day



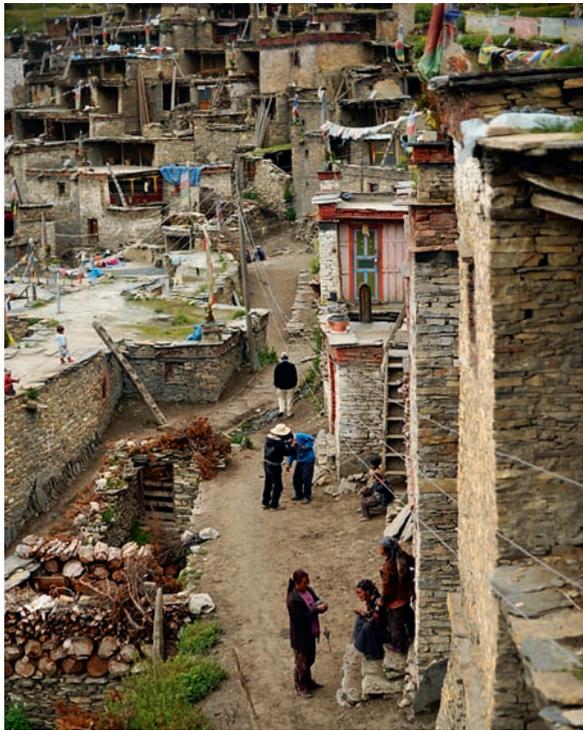
villagers, and each year they picked thousands of pieces from their fields, making more money in the month after the monsoon harvest than most had made in the previous year. Though many Manangis insist the Narpas have become quite wealthy, a visit to the village seems to suggest otherwise – the buildings are still rickety, the streets dirty, modernity all but nonexistent. But they could send their children to monasteries in Kathmandu and Pokhara. (During my visit, the village was eerily devoid of adolescents, most of whom are off studying.) *Yarsagumba*, and the promise it held, brought Nar out of isolation, connecting it to Manang

and the world beyond. The government began regulating the *yarsagumba* trade by issuing Rs 1,250 permits, and around 2002, just as the business was picking up, opened up the Narphu Valley to outsiders, including trekkers, tourists and, presumably, traders.

The best years for the business, most Manangis agree, were 2007 and 2008. Whether it is a coincidence that these were the years leading up to the Beijing Summer Olympics is unclear. But in his book *Healing Mushrooms*, Dr Georges Halpern, a world-renowned mycologist, writes about the Chinese breaking multiple world records during the 1993 National Games in Beijing, while →



**A HIMALAYAN DRUG DEAL**  
 (Left) Pasang Ghale's mother shows off her wares on a roof in Nar. (Right) One of Nar's two lanes



## First, a mushroom kills an insect, and then a human kills the mushroom. Perhaps it was only a matter of time before humans were killed, too

using a legal *yarsagumba*-based elixir – and it seems reasonable that they might have wanted to stock up before their global coming-out party. Back then, there was little reason for the Narpas to think the good times wouldn't last forever. But this year, the mushrooms aren't growing due to a weak monsoon, and fewer Chinese traders are coming to Kathmandu – business has declined precipitously. (Those traders that are still coming face increased danger. On July 9, four Chinese men were robbed, at gunpoint, of Rs 1.64 lakh and a cache of *yarsagumba*. It was later reported in the Nepalese media that Kali Bahadur Kham, a chief commander in Nepal's Maoist army, had masterminded the crime and that police found 8kg of the fungus at his home.)

Maybe the decline in business was

cosmic retribution: after all, there's something decidedly un-Buddhist about a drug that fosters a desire for sexual satisfaction. And, karma-wise, the situation is even grimmer: first, a mushroom kills an insect, and then a human kills the mushroom. Perhaps it was only a matter of time before humans were killed, too.

**FOUR YEARS AGO**, a group of Gurkha men sat in the fields above Nar, picking *yarsagumba*. Pemba Sange, a member of the committee that issued harvesting permits, went to find out if they had proper clearance. He was set upon and beaten to death with sticks. It would not be the last time an incursion on Nar land would end in death.

"The Nar people are Buddhist, and... to harvest even one caterpillar is to take a life – it is itself an act of murder," says Sher Bahadur Gurung, sitting at the dining table of his daughter's guesthouse in Dharapani, a three-day journey from Nar. Gurung is 72, and has lived in Manang his entire life, serving in either local or district administrative roles for the past 50 years. He knows Manang, and is one of the few locals who talks about Nar without saying it is "different". The electricity is out, and the old man talks by candlelight, speaking rapidly while his hands fly from him, pointing, tracing a horizon, a line in the sand, a continuum, waving something off, clutching his heart, holding his hand up like he's taking an oath. He talks, through a translator, about a man known simply as "Kan Thade" – "long ears" in Nepali – who stalks

the Annapurna trail, far from Nar and its people, who he believes are after him. But he often stops for tea at this guesthouse, and is known by quite a few people on the trail. Kan Thade was an outsider, Gurung says, but was working as a yak-herd in Nar that night last June. He saw what happened. And as revenge for the beatings he had received at the hands of some Nar youths, he told the police how a group of men came to be brutally slaughtered by a small Buddhist village.

Based on his testimony, and confessions obtained by the Deputy Superintendent of Police in Chame, the story is quite simple. Last June, seven young men from Laprak village in the Gurkha district made the gruelling five-day journey to Nar. They arrived late on the night of June 10, and, obscured by trees, set up camp near Jhunam Kharka. They spent one night there before the Nar people found out and, as tribal law dictates, sent one man from each of Nar's nearly 60-odd houses to deal with the Gurkhas.

When the Nar men confronted the intruders, fights erupted, and two fled. Police say 15 or 20 Narpas chased them up the winding mountain path behind Jhunam Kharka, cornering them at the very top, 800m above their comrades. The Gurkhas had a decision to make: face certain death by jumping into the gorge behind them, or face the villagers and have some chance at survival. The Narpas evened the odds. They drew their *kukris* – the curved blades synonymous with the bravery of Nepali soldiers – picked up stones and began →

They drew their *kukris*, picked up stones and began to beat and slash the men... They threw the bodies into the gorge





**THE KILLING  
FIELDS**  
Two Nar villagers  
point towards  
Jhunam Kharka,  
the site of the  
slaughter



## THE KILLING

### DOWN ON THE CORNER

Mingmar Phuntsok talks about the hardships Nar has endured

to beat and slash the men, slicing their chests and faces. They threw the bodies into the gorge. When they returned to where their fellow villagers had caught the other five Gurkhas below, they were greeted as heroes, each receiving Rs 1,000 as a reward; and then they told the other villagers that they must kill the remaining Gurkhas, or the entire village would go to jail.

To this day, none of the Narpas can or will say exactly how it happened, but according to confessions obtained by the police, the killings of the remaining Gurkhas were as frenzied and gruesome as the guilt was collective. One man had an iron rod shoved through the roof of his mouth and into his brain. As another lay dying on the ground, a Nar man picked up a large stone and dropped it on his face, crushing him. When the killers saw their tribesmen standing idly by, they pulled them in and forced them to strike a blow. Within 10 minutes, all five were dead. The bodies were buried in a clearing, and, from all accounts, little was said about the incident.

“When it comes to groups of people, there is crowd, there is mob and there is riot,” says Manang Deputy Superintendent of Police Nal Prasad Upadhyaya. “A crowd has a leader. But when it comes to mob, no one listens to the leader. And when it comes to riot, there is no leader. Nar is like a riot.” It was a riot – an escalation in karmic killings. Mushroom kills insect, man kills mushroom, man kills man.

**THREE WEEKS LATER**, the families of the Gurkhas sent a delegation to Chame

to inquire about the whereabouts of their kin. Around the same time, four Nar villagers arrived in Chame attempting to find out if anyone was asking about the missing Gurkhas. Chame is a small town, and when strangers start asking questions, everyone from the innkeeper to the teacher to the police chief hears about it. The Narpas were promptly arrested and, Upadhyaya says, when the news got back to Nar, their fellow villagers dug up the five Gurkhas, hacked their rotting bodies into pieces and threw them, along with most of their weapons, into the Nar river. They have never been recovered.

When the police arrived in Nar a few days later, the village had called a general body meeting of the male heads of each household. It was early in the morning, and they sat in a clearing just

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above the village, discussing what to do now that the murders had been found out. The attendees ranged in age from 11 to over 70 years old. Thirty policemen surrounded the group, arresting all of Nar’s men and boys, and marched them down to Chame for interrogation. The Narpas had counted on the two bodies they’d thrown off the cliff never being found, but one of Upadhyaya’s officers and a relative of the Gurkhas descended from the 6,000m peak, with store-bought rope and no supplementary oxygen, to where the bodies lay 600m below, and retrieved them.

In the stone courtyard of the police station in Chame, Upadhyaya flips through the two-dictionary-thick case file. It is full of thin sheets of onion skin with four photos pasted on each page. One image that appears over and over, from different angles, shows the ash-coloured body of a young Gurkha. He can’t be more than 17 years old, and he is bent over a low stone, with bare legs and green underwear. He looks as if he might have been getting ready for bed when the Narpas stormed his camp, as if his toothbrush might be laying nearby. Another shows the other man’s anguished face, a gash running from the corner of his mouth to his left ear, exposing his twisted teeth. A third seems to show a small pile of *yarsagumba*, golden in the sun, and when he’s asked if that is indeed what it is, Upadhyaya laughs – it is a pile of maggots, writhing in the wounds of the deceased.

The Nar people, of course, tell a very different story. In their version, a group of villagers chased two Gurkhas up the mountain, and they fell off the side and died. It is tragic. But it was an accident. And any cuts or wounds on the bodies were simply due to their 600m fall. As for the other five Gurkhas: their bodies were never found. Full stop.

Two weeks after the initial arrests, the village hired a lawyer, Krishna Bahadur Thapa, for the first time in its history. After the children, the elderly and those who simply were not in Nar when the murders occurred were released, 36 men remained. Earlier this year, Thapa filed an appeal in the Pokhara High Court for the release, on bail, of 17 of his clients. They will also stand trial, but their chances of acquittal are higher. The story they tell, →

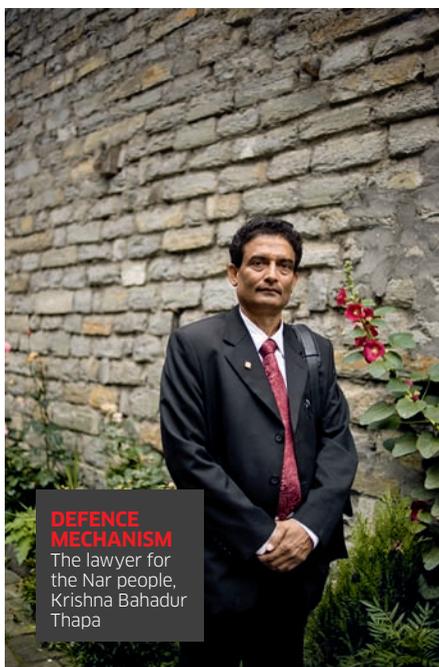
## THE KILLING

independently, and to a person, of their time in police custody is one of coercion, beatings, pressure and torture. Since the confessions have been entered into open court, however, there's little hope of them being dismissed by the judge. "The police have pressurized [my clients] very much, and even after they were charged, I could not speak to or advise the accused," says Thapa, a week before the trial. "The situation in Chame was horrible... and the investigation was by force, by physical torture and by pressure – even in the court, the accused could not give their statement of their own will. The police were standing next to them, and if they didn't repeat what they'd said to the police, they'd be beaten that night."

Phurpa Lama, the 41-year-old president of the Village Development Committee, was arrested and imprisoned, and like the other men who have since been released from prison, he says he was tortured, beaten and forced to confess to crimes he didn't commit. Of the murders, he says, as do most of the released men, "I don't know what happened, because when I arrived, it was already over." He wasn't there, he says, and so couldn't tell the police anything – so they hit him harder, hung him from his ankles and beat the soles of his feet. After a month, he was released.

Because of the murders, Lama says, the government has opened up harvesting to all Manangis, and though only 40 received permits – compared with 150 to 200 Narpas – in a low-yield year, when buyers aren't showing up, every piece counts. "Yarsagumba is the most important thing to the Nar economy," he says. "If the villagers can't harvest, it will affect their life [profoundly] – it is the only real income source for the Nar people." Lama sits on a ridge overlooking the Nar river and Jhunam Kharka. He is on his way to Chame to talk to the District Development Committee about help in building a school – Nar has a government school and a health clinic, but the teacher and health workers only show up for a month each year, collect their salaries and leave. Lama will stay in Chame for the trial of his brother-in-law and nephew.

**IT IS TWO** nights before the trial, and a dozen or so Narpas are gathered outside



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the tiny Buddhist temple across from one of the town's three functioning water taps. The men talk of innocence, and about how things were simpler 15 years ago, before the travellers from the Rukum district visited. Back then, the villagers would take their yaks to graze on Jhunam Kharka, and parents might pick some *yarsagumba* for their own use while their children played. But they do not seem forlorn – they still believe in the promise of *yarsagumba*, and what it can one day do for their village. Yet, they talk about neglect. "The government, they treat the Nar like animals," 22-year-old Krishna Lama says. "No one cared about what happened here, until the murders." For decades, the village has been a backwater joke in Manang, whose citizens became worldly, picked up English and met people from countries far and wide because of the Annapurna trail. Their children might

get sponsored by an altruistic German backpacker and sent to a monastery in Kathmandu for studies. Manangis watched Indian television shows, listened to Bollywood songs, read the newspaper. But none of that was available in Nar. Nar was shut off completely, bereft of tourists, shunned by locals – until *yarsagumba* came along.

And the Gurkhas were trying to take all that *yarsagumba* promised – but hadn't yet delivered – away from Nar. So there's very little talk of sympathy for them, or their people, only talk of how the murders have affected the village. And in the muddy, litter-strewn lanes of Nar, it is impossible to meet someone who hasn't been profoundly affected – and it isn't just those who committed the crimes.

The Nar women dress like cold-weather gypsies, in long woollen skirts and big hoop earrings. They tend to flocks of small children, or weave sheep's wool blankets for the winter season in the grubby town square. They, too, speak of the devastation the murders have wrought on their lives. Chho Sangme is a widow, and both of her sons are locked up. An old woman in Nar with no man in the house is virtually helpless – she can't collect wood or tend to her yaks, let alone spot tiny pieces of *yarsagumba* poking out of the ground a half-day hike from home. Young women are not much better off: 30-year-old Lakpa Yangjen's husband is in jail, and she struggles to tend to her 70 yaks and four children without any help.

Next to her, Mingmar Phuntsok, a man whose 72-year-old father was locked up for a month after the initial police sweep, and whose younger brother remains imprisoned, points out the children running around. "You see? If you see a child with nice clothes, it means his father is still here – but if they are in dirty clothes, their father is in the jail," he says, as a short, dishevelled man with boozy, glassy eyes stumbles past and into the small temple. He begins to chant, a droning, funereal dirge, prayers that his son, Prasant Funchok, will be released. Phuntsok says the man has been drinking every day since his son was arrested, and when I see him in Chame two days later, he is similarly afflicted: beady eyes glassy, thousand-mile stare vacant. →

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### FATE DELAYED

Police lead the Nar inmates from the Manang District Court House

**IT IS AN** hour before the trial, and the 19 prisoners are being handcuffed to each other in the yard of the former Manang District Education Office. Manang had never had a prison before the incident in Nar, after which this rough stone building was surrounded by two makeshift chain-link fences with boxing-glove-sized holes and a lazy-looped coil of rusted barbed wire. By the end of the day, the men will find out whether this will be their home for the next 20 years – the maximum allowed by Nepali law. Armed policemen in blue-and-black camouflage lead them on the 60m journey to the District Court House. They wander up the stone path to the building, go through the building to the courtyard behind it and sit on the ground. The trial is 20 minutes away when the court registrar announces that it has been postponed by 90 days. The families of the dead Gurkhas want their own lawyer present at the proceedings, and he has been delayed by the rains. When the Narpas' lawyer finds out, he is livid, exasperated. The Nar men look unfazed. In the end, the date of the trial matters little – the evidence is overwhelming, and despite the allegations of torture and beatings, it will all likely remain admissible. Ninety days isn't so long when you're facing an almost guaranteed 20 years.

**THE STORY OF** Nar is one of the corrupting lure of money, and of man's eternal quest for virility – this time, however incongruously, in the form of a shrivelled yellow worm. But Nar's is also a story of isolation and neglect, of how far

**That's what *yarsagumba* is for the Nar people – a promise, potential, possibility. Even if it's an illusion, and it never made them all that rich – it's a promise**

desperation can drive us, of promises unfulfilled and potential unrealized. *Yarsagumba* changed Nar, certainly, but not in the way any of the Nar expected or the way any of Manang thinks. On the Annapurna Circuit trail, even in this remote region, the locals, when told of a trip to Nar, laugh nervously, flash a quizzical look and say that the Nar people are “different”. They use that word over and over – “different”. They mean remote, but also foreign, backward, alien: in Nepal, but not of Nepal.

Even before they discovered the magical worm that grows in the fields above their small corner of the world – before they realized its transformative power, before the trail opened up to meagre scraps of adventurous tourists and brought Chinese traders and local agents to this tiny, isolated village – Nar

was always different. But Nar's story shows, if nothing else, the violence that erupts when desperate men feel their livelihood is threatened. And so maybe Nar is not so different after all.

*Yarsagumba* was the Narpas' ticket out of poverty and into the world. *Yarsagumba* sent their children to Kathmandu for school. It fed and clothed them. It's what got the electricity lines installed, even if they don't work. But that's what *yarsagumba* is for Nar – a promise, potential, possibility. It represents something you thought was unobtainable that's now right there in front of you. Even if it's just an illusion of wealth, a feint of modernity, even if it never made them all that rich, even if the trade was only really good for two years – it's a promise. And if that's all you've got, you'll fight to keep it.

Seven men died for this drug. A tiny Buddhist village turned into crazed killers for this fungus. So when I return to Mumbai, I remove the plastic bag containing my 10 pieces of *yarsagumba*. I wrap them, as Pasang Ghale instructed me, in a handkerchief, and put it somewhere cool, dark and dry. But I remove one piece and place it at the bottom of a coffee mug. I bring two cups of water to boil in a tea kettle and fill the mug. I add ginger and sugar. I let it steep for five minutes, and the golden-brown colour of the *yarsagumba* seems to leak into the water, slowly. I drink deeply, and fill the cup again, as if this might somehow enhance the fungus' potency. I eat the worm, and it tastes earthy and feels gummy in my mouth. And while I know it doesn't work like actual Viagra – these are not, and I don't need, erections on demand – I expect to feel *something*. A jolt of energy, a rush of adrenalin, a moment of clarity. And yet: nothing. So I make another cup of tea. And eat another piece of fungus. And the next day, I do it again.

Seven men died for this. This miracle drug that promises eternal youth. And I am convinced that it must work – it has to do *something* – enamoured of the potential locked inside this little worm, because this is a drug whose transformative powers have been proven. That is the promise of *yarsagumba*. So I keep trying because, as the Nar people know, even a promise unfulfilled is better than no promise at all. ☹