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Opening Extract from...

Little Princes

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Prologue



December 20, 2006

IT WAS WELL AFTER nightfall when I realized we had gone the wrong way. The village I had been looking for was somewhere up the mountain. In my condition, it would be several hours' walk up a rocky trail, if we could even find the trail in the pitch-dark. My two porters and I had been walking for thirteen hours straight. Winter at night in the mountains of northwestern Nepal is bitterly cold, and we had no shelter. Two of our three flashlights had burned out. Worse, we were deep in a Maoist rebel stronghold, not far from where a colleague had been kidnapped almost exactly one year before. I would have shared this fact with my porters, but we were unable to communicate; I spoke only a few words of the local dialect.

Exhausted, I slumped down beside them. I zipped up my jacket and knotted my arms tightly around my chest to keep out the cold. Six days had passed since I split from my team. I had sent them home, back to their villages, promising them that I would be okay. My guide, Rinjin, tried to stay with me. Just to make sure the helicopter comes, he had said. I assured him everything would be fine and pushed him to leave with the others. The trek back to their villages would take the men several days, and they had been away

from their families for almost three weeks. Rinjin had taken a last look at the empty sky, shaken his head at my stubbornness, and clasped my hand in farewell. Then he hurried to catch up with the others already descending the trail.

I reached into my bag, looking for food. I pushed aside the weather-beaten folder, crammed with my handwritten notes and photos of young children, children who had been taken from these mountains years before. The notes had been my only clues to finding their families in remote villages accessible only by foot.

Behind a crumpled, rain-stained map, my hand touched two tangerines—the last of our food. I passed them to the two porters.

I wondered how things would have been different if I hadn't gotten hurt. Or if I hadn't split from my team, or if I hadn't decided to wait on that mountain for a helicopter that never came. It didn't matter now. What did matter was figuring out how we would get through the night.

Part I

THE LITTLE PRINCES

November 2004–January 2005

One



THE BROCHURES FOR VOLUNTEERING in Nepal had said *civil war*. Being an American, I assumed the writers of the brochure were doing what I did all the time—exaggerating. No organization was going to send volunteers into a conflict zone.

Still, I made sure to point out that particular line to everybody I knew. "An orphanage in Nepal, for two months," I would tell women I'd met in bars. "Sure, there's a civil war going on. And yes, it might be dangerous. But I can't think about that," I would shout over the noise of the bar, trying to appear misty-eyed. "I have to think about the children."

Now, as I left the Kathmandu airport in a beat-up old taxi, I couldn't help but notice that the gate was guarded by men in camouflage. They peered in at me as we slowed to pass them, the barrels of their machine guns a few inches from my window. Outside the gate, sandbagged bunkers lined the airport perimeter, where young men in fatigues aimed heavy weapons at passing cars. Government buildings were wrapped in barbed wire. Gas stations were protected by armored vehicles; soldiers inspected each car in the mile-long line for gas.

In the backseat of the taxi, I dug the brochure out of my backpack and quickly flipped to the Nepal section. *Civil war,* it said again, in the same breezy font used to describe the country's

fauna. Couldn't they have added exclamation points? Maybe put it in huge red letters, and followed it with "No lie!" or "Not your kind of thing!" How was I supposed to know they were telling the truth?

As we bounced along the potholed road, I turned longingly to the other opportunities in the volunteering brochure, ones that offered a six-week tour of duty in some Australian coastal paradise, petting baby koalas that were stricken—stricken!—with loneliness. I never could have gotten away with that. I needed this volunteering stint to sound as challenging as possible to my friends and family back home. In that, at least, I had succeeded: I would be taking care of orphans in one of the poorest countries in the world. It was the perfect way to begin my year-long adventure.

Nepal was merely the first stop in a one-year, solo round-the-world trip. I had spent the previous eight years working for the EastWest Institute, an international public policy think tank, out of their Prague office, and, later, the Brussels office. It had been my first and only job out of college, and I loved it. Eight years later, though, I was bored and desperately needed some kind of radical change.

Luckily, for the first time in my life, I had some real savings. I was raised in a thrifty Irish-American household; living in inexpensive Prague for six years allowed me to save much of my income. Moreover, I was single, had no mortgage or plans to get married or have kids any time in the next several decades. So I decided—rather quickly and rashly—to spend my entire net worth on a trip around the world. I couldn't get much more radical than that. I wasted no time in telling my friends about my plan, confident that it would impress them.

I soon discovered that such a trip, while sounding extremely cool, also sounded unrepentantly self-indulgent. Even my most party-hardened friends, on whom I had counted to support this adventure, hinted that this might not be the wisest life decision.

They used words I hadn't heard from them before, like "retirement savings" and "your children's college fund" (I had to look that last one up—it turned out to be a real thing). More disapproval was bound to follow.

But there was something about volunteering in a Third World orphanage at the outset of my trip that would squash any potential criticism. Who would dare begrudge me my year of fun after doing something like that? If I caught any flak for my decision to travel, I would have a devastating comeback ready, like: "Well frankly Mom, I didn't peg you for somebody who hates orphans," and I would make sure to say the word *orphans* really loudly so everybody within earshot knew how selfless I was.

I looked out the dirty taxi window. Through the swarm of motorcycles and overcrowded buses, I saw a small park that had been converted into a base for military vehicles. Some children had gotten through the barbed wire fence and were playing soccer. The soldiers merely watched them, hands resting on their weapons. I took a last look at the photo of the lonely koalas, sighed, and put the brochure away. In two and a half months I would be far away from here, preferably on a conflict-free beach.

After a half hour of driving through choking traffic over a pockmarked slab of highway known as the Kathmandu Ring Road, then through a maze of smaller streets, I noticed the scene outside had changed. Moments earlier it had been a chaotic mass of poverty and pollution; this new neighborhood was almost peaceful in comparison. There were very few cars, save the occasional taxi. The shops had changed from selling household necessities like tools and plastic buckets and rice to selling more expensive, tourist-oriented things like carpets, prayer wheels, and mandalas, the beautifully detailed paintings of Buddhist and Hindu origin used by monks as a way of focusing their spiritual attention. Vendors leaned in the window as my taxi edged its way through them, offering carvings of elephants or wooden flutes or apples perched

precariously on round trays. Bob Marley blared out of tinny speakers.

The biggest change was that the pedestrians were now overwhelmingly white. They fell into two broad categories: hippies in loose clothing, with beaded, kinky hair, or sunburned climbers in North Face trekking pants and boots heavy enough to kick through cinder blocks. There were no soldiers to be seen. We had arrived in the famed Thamel district.

There are really two Kathmandus: the district of Thamel and the rest. In the general madness of Nepal's capital, Thamel is a six-block embassy compound for those who want to drink beer and eat pizza and meat that they pretend is beef but is almost certainly yak or water buffalo. Backpackers and climbers set up camp here before touring the local temples or hiking into the mountains for a trek or white-water rafting. It is safe and comfortable, with the only real danger being that the street vendors may well drive you to lunacy. It was like the Nepal that you might find at Epcot Center at Disney World. I finally felt at ease. I would spend my first hours in the Thamel district, and by God I was going to enjoy it.

Orientation for the volunteer program began the next day, held at the office of the nonprofit organization known as CERV Nepal. I sat with the other dozen volunteers, mostly Americans and Canadians, and tried to focus on the presentation. The presenter was speaking in slowly enunciated detail about Nepalese culture and history. The presentation was frightfully boring. I found it impossible to keep my attention focused on the speaker, even when I concentrated and dug my nails into the palms of my hands. By the second hour, I would hear phrases like "Remember, this is Nepal, so whatever you do, try not to—" and then notice a leaf flittering past the window and get distracted again.

That changed about an hour and a half into the presentation when the entire group visibly perked up at the mention of the word *toilet*.

Travel to the developing world and you will quickly learn that toilets in the United States are the exception rather than the rule. I readily admit to my own cultural bias, but to me, toilets in America are the Bentleys of toilets, at the cutting edge of toilet technology and comfort, standing head and shoulders above what appeared to be the relatively primitive toilets of South Asia. Unfortunately, those toilets are often first discovered at terribly inopportune moments, sometimes at a full run after eating something less than sanitary, bursting through a restroom door to discover a contraption that you do not quite recognize. If there is ever a moment for panic, that is the moment.

So when I heard Deepak say "You may have noticed toilets here are different" my ears twitched. Deepak then took a deep breath and said, "Hari will now demonstrate how to use the squat toilet."

I wondered if I had heard that correctly.

Hari walked to the middle of the circle of suddenly alert volunteers. Jen, a girl from Toronto sitting a few feet away, summed up what everybody must have been thinking with a panicked whisper: "Is he gonna crap in the room?"

Hari reached for his belt. I heard somebody shout "Oh no!" but I couldn't take my eyes off the nightmare unfolding in front of me.

But wait—he was only miming undoing his belt. He then mimed lowering his trousers, mimed squatting down, mimed whistling for a few seconds, then mimed using an invisible water bucket to clean the areas that shall not be named. He stood up and gave a little "voilà!" flourish, then quickly left the circle and walked past Deepak out the door, his face bright red.

Clearly Deepak outranked Hari.

I wanted to applaud. It was the first truly practical thing we'd learned. For months afterward, I often thought of Hari at those precise moments, and I silently thanked him every time I watched a hapless tourist step into a bathroom and saw their brow furrow as the door closed behind them.

The in-office orientation lasted just one day, and then we piled into the backs of old 4x4s and drove south out of Kathmandu toward the village of Bistachhap, where we would continue our week-long orientation. We would be placed with families, one volunteer per home, to get acclimated to village life in Nepal.

Bistachhap is a tiny village on the floor of a valley surrounded by what I would have called mountains back in the United States, rising about two thousand feet above the village. With the Himalaya in the background, though, they looked like good-sized hills. These hills formed the southern wall of the Kathmandu Valley. The valley floor was covered with rice paddies and terraced mustard fields, blooming in bright yellow. Bistachhap itself was little more than a small collection of about twenty-five homes, mostly mud but some concrete, a dirt path connecting them like the wire on a set of Christmas lights. The houses sat on the north side of the floor of the valley, each one providing a view of the rice paddies on the other side of the path. I was assigned to a concrete yellow house, which looked pretty snazzy sitting next to the mud ones, though inside revealed a simple structure. I had my own bedroom, a simple affair with a single bed on a mattress of straw and a swatch of handmade carpet spread out on the floor. It was clear that somebody else in the house had vacated their room for me.

After dropping my backpack in the room, I went to formally introduce myself to my host mother, proud to be able to use one of the three expressions I had learned in Nepali: "Mero naam Conor ho." My host mother, in the middle of her workday, was caught off guard by my apparent comprehension of her language. She dropped her water bucket and raised her hands over her head in excitement and launched into a monologue about God knows what. I took a step back and held up my hands, saying "Whoa whoa whoa whoa!" for the entire time she spoke. In Nepali that must mean "Continue! I completely understand you, and I enjoy this conversation!" because damn if she didn't go on for several

minutes, getting more and more excited, until her daughter, a little girl of perhaps six or seven, took my hand and dragged me away.

The daughter, whose name I would learn was Susmita, walked me out to the front porch and plopped down on a straw mat, inviting me to do the same. She pointed to the mat and said a word in Nepali, waiting for me to repeat it. I did so. Then she repeated this with the house, the door, the garden, and anything else she could think of. I repeated each word and let her correct me until I had nailed it. Her face lit up. She was going to teach me Nepali, and I was going to learn. She disappeared, returning a few moments later with her homework, wherein she drew a single character in Sanskrit over and over, as one might practice a capital *B,* pointing to each one for my benefit until her mother fetched her to help with dinner preparation.

Unsure of what to do, as I could see no other volunteers anywhere, I took a walk through the village. I called out "Namaste!" to every villager I passed, and usually received a "Namaste" in return, though they seemed oddly reluctant.

This turned out to be, not surprisingly, my own fault. I had thought "Namaste" was like "Hey there!" or "What's up?" but I would later learn that it was a far more formal greeting than this. Yoga enthusiasts will recognize it and may even know the translation, which is along the lines of "I salute the God within you." Heavy stuff. Yet I yelled it to everybody, the same way you might yell "Dude!" or "My man!" to your buddies. I accompanied it with a big friendly wave. I said it to children. I said it to people I'd just seen four minutes earlier. I saw a stray dog and bent down to give him a scratch behind the ears and saluted the God within him. I saluted the God within a mother carrying a baby, then saluted the God within the baby.

Down the path, I saw my host mother outside looking around for me. She recognized me from a distance and waved me in. I was late for dinner. I followed her into what I supposed was the

kitchen. There was a mud floor, an open fire in the corner, and two boys of perhaps nine years old sitting Indian style on the floor next to Susmita, who sat next to their father. The boys patted the ground next to them happily, pleased that I was joining them. The mother, meanwhile, had squatted next to the large pot. She picked up a metal plate and dumped what looked like several pounds of rice onto it for the family, and placed it in front of me. I was about to take some and pass it along, when I saw her preparing an even bigger mountain of rice and placing it in front of the father.

After placing similar plates in front of her children, she took a ladle out of the other pot and poured steaming hot lentil soup over the rice on our plates: *daal bhat,* literally, "lentils with rice." Daal bhat is eaten by about 90 percent of Nepalese people, twice a day. The mother added some curried vegetables to my plate, at the same time shooing away a stray chicken.

When everyone was served, the mother put her hand to her mouth, indicating that I should eat. I nodded in thanks, then looked around for some kind of utensil. There was no utensil. I watched the rest of the family stick their hands into the hot goo, mash it up, and begin shoveling it into their mouths.

After maybe half a minute watching my host family eat, my jaw hanging slack near my collarbone, I noticed that they had stopped eating, one by one, and were staring at me, wondering why I wasn't eating. I came to my senses. I had been with my host family for all of ten minutes and was on the verge of causing some irrevocable offense. I forced a smile, took a chunk of rice and daal and a smidge of some kind of pickled vegetable, and placed it gently into my mouth.

It was spicy. Spicy in the way that your eyes instantly flood with tears and your sinuses feel like the last flight of the *Hindenburg,* as if somebody inside my skull had ordered a full evacuation. The children started giggling. Even the chicken stopped pecking to watch what would happen next.

What happened next was that I opened my mouth to breathe, but the back draft only fanned the flames in my throat. I grasped for the tin cup of water next to me, oblivious to the shouts of the father, mother, and three children, and realized, too late, that my hand was burning because the water in the tin cup was still boiling.

I opened my mouth and let out a kind of "Mwaaaaaaa" sound, very loudly, and used my hands, so recently used as eating utensils, to fan myself, spraying a light mist of rice and lentils into my face and hair. I opened my eyes to see the family trying to decide if I needed assistance, and if so, what that assistance might look like.

You can't go through that experience with a family and not become closer. The older of the two boys, whose name I learned was Govardhan, had a Nepali-English phrasebook with him, and we had the most basic of conversations, the one where you say Nepal is beautiful, then, because this is a phrase that I apparently got right, they began asking if the house was beautiful, if the mountains were beautiful, if the chicken was beautiful, if their mother's hair was beautiful, and so on until everybody had finished their pile of rice.

I had eaten as fast as I could through all this; my stomach felt like I'd swallowed a bag of sand. I looked down to see that I had made it through just over a third of my food. I pointed at the rice and told the mother that the rice was truly beautiful, but that my stomach (I pointed at my belly button) was not beautiful. She laughed and with a wave of her hand excused me. I waved a good night "Namaste!" and headed up to my room.

I walked outside later to brush my teeth from the water bucket, as there was no running water. I was careful not to swallow any. I brushed slowly under the thick coat of stars. The quiet was absolute. The neighbors' homes were lit by candles, with an occasional lightbulb shining in the windows of the wealthier houses. I could just make out another volunteer two houses down, also brushing

his teeth using an old water bucket, also staring straight up at the stars, and maybe also wondering if he was really here, if he was really standing on the opposite side of the planet from his home. This was one of those moments I wanted to capture, to hold on to and to stare into like a snow globe. This world was already completely different from anything I had ever experienced—and this was just day one.

The immersion week was useful in getting us at least partially accustomed to this strange new culture. The most valuable part of it was practicing Nepali with Susmita. She made sounds slowly, pointing at pictures, and I repeated them. When I tried to show off my knowledge of animal names for the rest of the family on my final night in Bistachhap, they frowned and consulted each other, trying to work out what I was saying.

Finally I took Govardhan out behind the house, next to the outhouse, and pointed at the goat. I said my word, which sounded like "Faalllaaaagh." He shook his head: "Hoina, hoina," he said, which I knew meant "no." He pointed at the goat. "Kasi," he said.

Kasi? That sounded nothing like *faalllaaaagh*. Had I gotten the wrong animal?

"Who say?" Govardhan asked in English. It was the first English he had spoken.

I told him Susmita, his little sister, had told me. His eyes popped wide, and he literally doubled over laughing and ran in to tell his family. I discovered later that Susmita, my lovely little teacher, was deaf.



HARI, OF TOILET-MIMING FAME, picked me up from Bistachhap in the jeep and threw my backpack in the back. He pointed across the valley.

"That is Godawari," he said, pronouncing it go-DOW-ry. "That is where you will be volunteer. I will see you very often there—I

work there also. I am part-time house manager for the orphanage where you go."

I had seen the house from a distance during a trek up one of the large hills, but I knew little about it. The orphanage was called the Little Princes Children's Home, named after the French novella by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Le Petit Prince*. It had been started by a French woman in her late twenties.

I nodded and made a vague comment about how excited I was to get started. But my mind was elsewhere. It would be two weeks before I would actually show up for orphan duty; before that, I would be fulfilling my dream of trekking to Everest Base Camp. I had been moved by Jon Krakauer's harrowing account of climbing Mt. Everest in a storm in 1996, on a day when eight climbers perished. The summit of the world's tallest mountain is just shy of thirty thousand feet—the cruising altitude of a Boeing 747. I would never in my life have the strength to climb the mountain, but I was dying to see it. When I learned that Everest was in Nepal (a country that I had previously confused with Tibet), I decided it was the perfect country to volunteer in—I could combine my volunteering experience with a trek to Base Camp. I was in good physical condition, so it wasn't as if I was going to keel over from altitude sickness. I couldn't wait to get started.



WHEN I WASN'T LYING on the side of the trail, winded and dry-heaving from altitude sickness, I managed to take a lot of photos. There was no shortage of things to photograph: the trek up to Base Camp was spectacular. Every step is a step skyward, through simple Buddhist villages that seem to be glued to the sides of impossibly tall mountains. The Sherpa people are native to that region, having come over the mountains from Tibet hundreds of years earlier. They are traditionally Buddhist. In every village you could see carved oversized Sanskrit prayers chiseled into boulders

and blackened, like tattoos. Trekkers were expected to walk to the left of these Mani Stones, clockwise, to respect the faith of the local community.

With the extraordinary Himalayas taking up most of the sky, it was difficult to keep an eye on the trail. Yet keeping an eye on the trail was essential to survival. Enormous, shaggy yaks, laden with hundreds of pounds of climbing gear, would come barreling down the trail, seeming not to notice humans at all. The first few I saw were a novelty, but after that we loathed them as dangerous pains in the ass.

But there were bigger dangers. In the village of Lukla, the start and end point of the Everest Base Camp trek, a few dozen soldiers manned an outpost. Everest National Park (known in Nepal as Sagarmatha National Park) was one of the few regions left in Nepal over which the royal government claimed control, but even that was under constant threat by Maoist rebels who controlled the surrounding area. As I waited for a small plane to take me back to Kathmandu, sirens blared and soldiers ran past the door of the tea shop, automatic weapons in hand. There was no fighting, and I got the impression that it may have all been a drill. But when I got back to Kathmandu, I decided I had seen just about enough of the rest of this country. The Kathmandu Valley was safe from rebel attack; I wouldn't leave again for the duration of my three-month stay in Nepal.



I HAD ONE FULL day to relax in the Thamel district of Kathmandu. But there was no more putting it off. I reported for duty the next day at the CERV office.

"We're ready to go—are you excited?" Hari asked.

"I sure am!" I practically shouted, because I believed that to be the only answer I could give without sounding like I was having second thoughts about this whole orphanage thing.

We drove to the village of Godawari. It was only six miles south of Kathmandu, but it felt like a different world. Inside Kathmandu's Ring Road, people, buildings, buses, and soldiers were all crammed into a small space. There was almost nothing peaceful about the city. But outside the Ring Road, the world opened up. Suddenly there were fields everywhere. The roads disappeared, save for the single road that led south to Godawari, which ended at the base of the hills that surround the Kathmandu Valley. The air was cleaner, people walked slower, and I started to see many homes made of hardened mud.

When the paved road ended, we turned onto a small dirt road and took it a short distance. Hari stopped in front of a brick wall. There was a single blue metal gate leading into the compound. He lifted my backpack out of the back, and held it while I put it on, strapping the waist buckle. With a hearty handshake, he bade me farewell, wished me luck, and climbed back into the jeep. He backed out the way we had come in.

I watched Hari drive away, then turned back to the blue metal gate that led into the Little Princes Children's Home.

I hadn't realized until that moment how much I did not want to walk through that gate. What I wanted was to *tell* people I had volunteered in an orphanage. Now that I was actually here, the whole idea of my volunteering in this country seemed ludicrous. This had not been lost on my friends back home, a number of whom had gently suggested that caring for orphans might not be exactly what God had in mind for me. They were right, of course. I stood there and tried to come up with even a single skill that I possessed that would be applicable to working with kids, other than the ability to pick up objects from the floor. I couldn't recall ever spending time around kids, let alone looking after them.

I took a deep breath and pushed open the gate, wondering what I was supposed to do once I was inside.

As it turns out, wondering what you're supposed to do in an orphanage is like wondering what you're supposed to do at the running of the bulls in Spain—you work it out pretty quickly. I carefully closed the gate behind me, turned, and stared for the first time at a sea of wide-eyed Nepali children staring right back at me. A moment passed as we stared at one another, then I opened my mouth to introduce myself.

Before I could utter a word I was set upon—charged at, leaped on, overrun—by a herd of laughing kids, like bulls in Pamplona.



THE LITTLE PRINCES CHILDREN'S Home was a well-constructed building by Nepalese standards: it was concrete, had several rooms, an indoor toilet (huzzah!), running water—though not potable—and electricity. The house was surrounded by a six-foot-high brick wall that enclosed a small garden, maybe fifty feet long by thirty feet wide. Inside the walls, half the garden was used for planting vegetables and the other half was, at least in the dry season, a hard dirt patch where the children played marbles and other games that I would come to refer to as "Rubber Band Ball Hacky Sack" and "I Kick You."

All games ceased immediately when I stepped through the gate. Soon I was lugging not only my backpack but also several small people hanging off me. Any chance of making a graceful first impression evaporated as I took slow, heavy steps toward the house. One especially small boy of about four years old hung from my neck so that his face was about three inches from my face and kept yelling "Namaste, Brother!" over and over, eyes squeezed shut to generate more decibels. In the background I saw two volunteers standing on the porch, chuckling happily as I struggled toward them.

"Hello!" cried the older one, a French woman in her late twenties who I knew to be Sandra, the founder of Little Princes. "Welcome! That boy hanging on your face is Raju."

"He's calling me 'brother.'"

"It is Nepalese custom to call men 'brother' and women 'sister.' Didn't they teach you that at the orientation?"

I had no idea if they had or not. "I should have put down my backpack before coming in," I called back, panting. "I don't know if I can make it to the house."

"Yes, they are really getting big, these children," she said thoughtfully, which was less helpful than "Children, get off the nice man." One boy was hanging by my wrist, calling up to me, "Brother, you can swing your arms, maybe?"

I collapsed onto the concrete porch with the children, which initiated a pileup. I could see only glimmers of light through various arms and legs. It was like being in a mining accident.

"Are they always this excited?" I asked when I had managed to squirm free.

"Yes, always," said Sandra. "Come inside, we're about to have daal bhat."

I went upstairs to put my stuff down in the volunteers' room, trailed by several children. We were five volunteers in total. Jenny was an American girl, a college student, who had arrived a month earlier. Chris, a German volunteer, would arrive a week later. Farid was a young French guy, thin build and my height, twenty-one years old, with long black dreadlocks. I first assumed Farid was shy, since he was not speaking much to the others, but soon realized that he was only shy about his English.

I was the last to arrive for daal bhat. I entered the dining area, a stone-floored room with two windows and no furniture save a few low bamboo stools reserved for the volunteers. The children sat on the floor with their backs against the wall, Indian style. They were arranged from youngest to oldest, right to left against three walls of the room. As they waited patiently for their food to be served, I got my first good look at them.

I counted eighteen children in total, sixteen boys and two girls. Each child seemed to be wearing every stitch of clothing he or she owned, including woolen hats. I had not worn a hat to dinner and was already regretting it. The house had no indoor heating and I could practically see my breath. Most of their jackets and sweaters had French logos on them, as the clothes were mostly donations from France. I studied their faces. The girls were easy to identify, as there were only two of them, but the boys would be more difficult to distinguish. A few really stood out—the six-year-old boy with the missing front teeth, the boy with the Tibetan facial features, the bright smile of another older boy, the diminutive size of the two youngest boys in the house. But otherwise, the only identifying features to my untrained eye would be their clothes.

Before daal bhat was served, Sandra asked the children to stand and introduce themselves, beginning with the youngest boy, Raju. He was far more shy now than when he had been clinging to my face. The other boys whispered loud encouragements to him to get up, and his tiny neighbor, Nuraj, dug an elbow into his ribs. Finally he popped up, clapped his hands together as if in prayer, the traditional greeting in Nepal, said "Namaste-my-name-is-Raju" and collapsed back into a seated position flashing a proud grin to the others. The rest of the kids followed suit, until it had come full circle back to me.

I stood up and imitated what they had done and sat back down. They erupted in chatter.

"I do not think they understood your name," Sandra whispered to me.

"Oh, sorry—it's Conor," I said, speaking slowly. I could hear a volley of versions of my name lobbed back and forth across the room as the children corrected one another.

"Kundar?"

"*Hoina*! Krondor *ho*! Yes, Brother? Your name Krondor, yes?"

"No, no, it's *Conor*," I clarified, louder this time.

"Krondor!" they shouted in unison.

"Conor!" I repeated, shouting it.

"Krondor!"

One of the older boys spoke up helpfully: "Yes, Brother, you are saying Krondor!"

Trust me—I wasn't saying "Krondor." The children were staring earnestly at my lips and trying to repeat it exactly.

"No, boys—everybody—it's *Conor*!" This time I shouted it with a growl, hoping to change the intonation to a least get them off Krondor, which made me sound like a Vulcan.

There was a surprised pause. Then the children went nuts. "*Conor*!!" they growled, imitating the comical bicep flex I had performed (instinctively, I'm sorry to say) when I shouted my name.

"Exactly!" I said, pleased with myself.

Sandra looked around and nodded in approval. "I think you will get along with these children very well," she predicted. "Okay, children, you may begin," she said, and the children attacked their food as if they hadn't eaten in days. They spent the rest of dinner with mouths full of rice and lentils, looking at each other and growling "*Conor*!!!" flashing their muscles like tiny professional wrestlers.

There was no way to keep up the blistering pace set by the kids when they ate. They had literally licked their plates clean when I was maybe half finished. I would have to concentrate in the future. No talking, no thinking, just eating. There was far too much food on my plate, albeit mostly rice. The worst part about it was that I couldn't give the rest of mine away, since once you touched your food with your hands it was considered *juto,* or unclean, to others. The very idea of throwing away food here was unthinkable, especially with eighteen children watching you, waiting for you to finish. I force-fed myself every last grain as fast as I could, guiltily replaying scenes from my life of dumping half-full plates of food into the trash.

When I had finished, Sandra made a few announcements in English. The children understood English quite well after spending time with volunteers, and the little ones who didn't understand as well had it translated by the older children sitting near them.

The big announcement of that particular evening was the introduction of three new garbage cans that had been placed out front, one marked "Plastic and Glass," one "Paper," and one "Other." Sandra explained their fairly straightforward functions. She was rewarded with eighteen blank stares. Trash in Nepal, like all Third World countries, is a constant problem. Littering is the norm, and environmental protection falls very low on the government's priority list, well below the challenges of keeping the citizens alive with food and basic health care. Farid took a stab at explaining the concept of protecting Mother Earth, but the children still struggled to understand why anybody would categorize garbage.

"Maybe we should demonstrate it?" I suggested.

Sandra smiled. "That is a great idea. Go ahead, Conor."

This was a big moment. I had never interacted with children before in this way; I had no nieces, no nephews, no close friends with children, no baby cousins. I steeled myself for this interaction. Fact: I knew I could talk to people. Fact: Children were little people. Little, scary people. I took solace in the fact that if this demonstration went horribly wrong, I could probably outrun them.

"Okay, kids!" I declared, psyching myself up. I rubbed my hands together to let them know that fun was on the way. "Time for a demonstration!"

I picked up a piece of paper leaning against my stool and crumpled it up. I walked over to Hriteek, one of the five-year-old boys, and handed it to him.

"Okay, Hriteek, now I want you to take this and throw it in the proper garbage can!" I spoke loudly, theatrically.

Hriteek took the paper in his little hand and held it for a few seconds, looking at the three green bins lined up with their labels

visible. Then he started to cry. I hadn't expected that. But I knew that kids sometimes cried—I had seen it on TV. This was no time to quit.

"C'mon, buddy," I urged him. "It's not tough—throw the trash in the right bin," I said, nodding toward the "Paper" bin.

No luck. Finally I took it from him, giving him an understanding pat on the shoulder, and walked over to throw it in the proper bin.

"Brother!" called out Anish, one of the older kids sitting opposite us. "Brother—wait, no throw, he make for you! Picture!"

I uncrumpled the paper to discover a crude but colorful picture of a large pointy mountain and a man—me, judging by the white crayon he used for skin tone—holding hands with a cow. On the bottom it was signed in large red letters: HRITEEK. *Uh-oh.*

"Hriteek! Yes! Great picture! Not trash, Hriteek! Not trash!" I said quickly. He cried louder.

Sandra leaned over to me. "It's no problem, Conor," she said, and took Hriteek's hand. "Hriteek, you do not need to cry. Conor Brother is still learning. He doesn't understand much yet. You will have to teach him." This brought a laugh from the children, and Hriteek, despite himself, started giggling.

"Sorry, Hriteek!" I said over Sandra's shoulder. "My bad, Hriteek! Your picture was very beautiful, I'm keeping it!" I smoothed it out against my chest as Hriteek eyed me suspiciously.

"Okay, everybody," Sandra said, clapping her hands. "Bedtime!"

The children leaped up, brought their plates to the kitchen, cleaned up, and marched up to bed. Anish, the eight-year-old who had informed me of my traumatic error, lingered in the kitchen to help wash the pots at the outdoor tap. By the time he finished helping clean up, the rest of the children had already gone up to their rooms. He lifted his arms to me to be carried upstairs. "We are very happy you are here, Conor Brother!" he said happily.

"I am very happy to be here, too," I replied, stretching the truth to its breaking point. I was relieved, at least, to have the first day over with. I lifted Anish and carried him up the stairs.

That night, huddled in my sleeping bag wearing three layers of clothing plus a hat, I slept more soundly than I had in a long time. I was more exhausted than I'd been after trekking to the foot of Everest, and I'd only spent two hours with the children.



I WOKE THE NEXT day to the general mayhem of children sprinting through the house, half-crazed with happiness. I dove deeper into my sleeping bag and wondered what in human biology caused children around the world to take such pleasure in running as fast as they could moments after they had woken up. Unable to fall back to sleep, I nosed just far enough out of my bag to peek through the thin curtains. The sun had not yet risen above the tall hills behind the orphanage. The only source of heat in the village was direct sunlight, so I waited. At exactly 7:38 A.M. the sun flashed into the window. I got up and wandered downstairs.

Farid was sipping milk tea outside in the sun, his breath steaming in the morning chill. As I sat down next to him, a woman entered the gate, straining under the weight of an enormous pot, filled to the brim with what looked to be milk.

"Namaste, *didi*!" he called to her, lifting his tea in greeting. "She is our neighbor," he explained. He had a thick French accent that took me a minute to get used to. "She brings milk every day from her cow for the children to put in their tea."

"What did you call her? Dee-dee?"

"*Didi*. It means—do you speak French?"

"A little. Not very well I'm afraid," I apologized.

"It is okay—I must improve my English, I know it is very bad," he said. "So I saying? Ah yes—*didi*. It means 'older sister,' it is a