

*A Step Back Excerpt: Kathmandu, Nepal*

I stood in the middle of the dirt street awash in colorful confusion, staring. It stared back. I sipped from the tiny bottle of water and returned the stare. This cow had a look in his eyes as he stopped in the middle of the street gazing at us. He seemed to sense that we were out of place, and indeed, we were. We were in the back, dark, crowded streets, the part of the city no tourist would ever find in a book, or would even care to see. It's the real life of Nepal, one where dogs and cows roam the dusty streets freely, where you are constantly meandering through the never-ending, dense thicket of people, and kids don't go to school. It's a place where the people live in one-room homes and hope each day to be fortunate enough to scrape together a single meal for their family; it's a place where physical survival dominates daily life and renders much else meaningless.

We had arrived at the foothills of the Himalayas in Kathmandu.

We walked onward through immigration and exited the airport only to find that the taxi drivers were on strike, so we were immediately swarmed with enthusiastic touts throwing offers to take us on their rickshaw (a three-wheel pedal cycle). We had no choice, but to accept. What would have been a twenty-minute taxi ride then instantly became a two-hour journey through the appalling squalor of one of the world's poorest countries. As we bounced along in the cramped rickshaw, I felt like I did the first time that we visited Bangkok when pure culture shock held us tightly in its powerful grip. There was no escape, no hiding from the stinging vision of poverty as we could only go as fast as our driver's legs would take us. I felt suffocated, I desperately took deeper and deeper breaths in an attempt to calm myself, but the sheer force of these oppressive images strangled my soul. In Thailand, the poverty seemed controlled by a people who seemingly walked with a purpose, yet here in the midst of this back-alley view, the people wandered aimlessly, almost without reason, they just wandered. I cringed at their dusty trail, their seemingly hollow life, for it stood out in profound opposition to the way of life in America. This place – what could I call it, for it failed to meet any definition I knew – was virtually incomprehensible, and my brain boiled simply trying to meagerly wrap itself around this haunting vision. Yes, these were the same beings that roamed American soil and yet painfully, they lived so palpably different.

At times, our driver struggled terribly peddling us, the two well-fed Americans and our massive bags of goodies, and so in fighting off my lingering paralysis I jumped out to help – by pushing the cart from behind. It then became amusing to the locals, who rarely see foreigners in these parts of the city, let alone one pushing the back of a rickshaw with two hefty backpacks and a western woman in it. A soft murmur weaved through the throngs as we approached and many turned to stop and observe this seemingly bizarre sight. I didn't know why it was odd, although indeed, I felt odd, so far from home, so out of place, so ashamed of the lavish being I was and that I now walked among them.

How would I feel if I was one of them? I was haunted by this steely apparition—I was among these gawking masses—and I knew that I would resent this image of golden fortune ambling through the poverty of my streets. With this thought plainly visualized, I pushed even harder, I pushed that rickshaw as if my life depended upon it—which of course, unlike the people I walked amongst, I've never experienced such desperation. This was their home, and for the first time in my life, I felt that my mere presence, the fact that I existed was utterly disrespectful to another. I thought to myself: I was a brazen fool, for what have I done here? I bring myself and arrogantly sweep through their city displaying the fruits of a labor they'll never touch in their lifetimes. Worse, there was nothing I could do. I couldn't give all we had to them—for what would a few items do for the thousands, I couldn't provide any immediate service to them; no, I only took from these people a piece of their dignity, a piece of the pride they had by showing them what they had so little of.

We came to the corner in the middle of this destitute land and stopped. The driver could pedal no further and needed a break. As I bent over with my hands on my knees attempting to catch my breath, beads of sweat covered my face and dripped to the dirt road below. I quickly turned as an elderly man stood before me in his bare feet, torn rags hung on his frail, skinny body, and his grayish hair disheveled. He gave me a fragile toothless smile as he extended his shaking hand offering me a bottle of water.

"He wants to give you the water for helping me...he saw you," our driver said as the man stood undeterred still holding the bottle outward to me.

"I can't take it," I returned to the driver, not knowing really where the water came from—if it truly was bottled water.

The old man held it out further to me, and his gaze caught my eye. Much to my surprise they glowed, there was much to this old man and I could see it plainly. I couldn't help but return his gaze with a soft smile.

I looked over to Bren, who shrugged her shoulders not knowing what to say.

"Well, ask him how much?" I said to the driver.

"Nothing. You take. He sees you helping me. He sees you pushing cart." My stomach turned, my heart ached. I couldn't fathom the gesture. It stripped me whole, and left me in pieces. He was the poorest person I'd ever seen in my life, and yet here he stood offering me a bottle of water, a person he could rightfully resent, all for helping out a guy he probably didn't even know.

I glanced to Bren. Tears were flooding her eyes, and she quickly looked up to the sky to prevent shedding the tears.

I gingerly took the water from his trembling hand, smiled once again, bent towards him in a gesture of thanks, and began drinking the water. He patted me on the shoulder, bowed, and walked away melding into the throng of people surrounding us. I stood lost, confounded by that man and all he represented, awash in colorful confusion staring at the cow in the middle of the street.