

Little Princes



One Man's Promise to Bring Home the Lost Children of Nepal

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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 fluttering 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.

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, over-run—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.

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