

# Down and Out in Kathmandu

*adventures in backpacking*

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*Down and Out in Kathmandu: adventures in backpacking*  
(Adventures of Zelda Richardson Volume 1)

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## Chapter One

Compact soldiers fidgeted with their machine guns as the newest arrivals entered the airport. Zelda joined the visa queue and took out a paperback. As the long line nudged forward, she noticed that the owner of the backpack behind her seemed to have disappeared. Begrudgingly she dragged the lonely luggage forward with her own. The stocky, dread-locked man soon returned, apparently not noticing his bag had moved.

"You should really be more careful," she said.

"Pardon?"

"You should really watch out more, you know, be more careful. There are probably pickpockets and thieves all over the place just waiting for a chance to grab your bag."

"What?"

"Your backpack! If you haven't noticed it's pretty chaotic in here and I can't be held responsible if anything happens, so you should watch out for your own stuff. I could have stolen from you twice now and you never would have noticed."

"You can do what you like but it's not bloody likely that you'd get too far, in case you hadn't notice those blokes with Uzi's," he replied, gesturing towards the armed men dotted around the hall. "Besides, I don't recall asking you to watch my bag."

Kicking herself again for not getting her visa ahead of time and now starting off so badly with the ruggedly attractive stranger behind her, Zelda took a deep breath and began again. "I noticed you getting on in Bangkok, where did you connect from?"

The man let out a deep sigh, followed by a long stretch and a yawn. "Australia. Man, what I wouldn't give to be on a sandy beach smoking a joint right about now." He started into upper-body twists, his springy dread-locks danced around his bronze face. "Say, do you know how much the visa is gonna cost?"

"Twenty-five dollars for one month."

"American dollars?"

"Uh, yeah," replied Zelda sarcastically, not realizing Australians used dollars too.

"Oh. Don't suppose customs take traveler's cheques, do they?"

"No, but there's a currency exchange right back there that I'm sure would be happy to help you – in case you didn't notice in your earlier wanderings."

"Fantastic! Would you mind watching my bag just once more? Cheers..." He was already walking towards the booth, digging a passport and traveler's cheques out of his money belt.

"What a jerk," Zelda mumbled. Unable to concentrate on the book in her hand, she glanced around the crowded arrivals hall, purposefully avoiding setting her eyes on the man's bag. It seemed like every available surface was covered with paintings or carvings of fierce-looking demons and other strange creatures she vaguely recognized from her guidebooks. She knew she should be excited to finally see these things in real life, but her fascination was outweighed by her overwhelming sense of fatigue. All she wanted to do was to get to her hotel room and lay down on a real bed. The weather certainly didn't help her mood. Nepal was a heck of a lot warmer than she thought it would be, and the airport didn't seem to be air-conditioned. After pulling her long brown hair into a ponytail with a scrunchie, Zelda carefully wiped the sweat off her face and black-framed glasses with a Kleenex.

A few feet later, the bubbly blonde stranger returned. "Cheers for that! You're a sport. Do you need to change money yourself? I'll watch your rucksack for ya..."

"Thanks, but no. I've got everything under control." Zelda twisted back to face the slowly shortening queue. She pulled out her wallet anyway and silently counted her cash. It wouldn't hurt to get more rupees while she had the chance, she thought. The exchange rates here had to be better than at Seattle-Tacoma International airport. A few moments later she turned to face the Australian again. "Actually, I would like to get some more money, as this line isn't really moving very fast. If you don't mind?"

"No, not at all. I'll be here."

Zelda sprinted to the currency exchange, changing greenbacks for rupees in record time. Racing back, she was relieved to see her bags still safely in line and seemingly unmolested. Sure, there were armed guards everywhere, she thought, but those bags were filled with gifts for the families she'd be staying with and that guy was a complete stranger. Zelda muttered a "thanks" while casually checking the zips on her bags.

"No worries," he replied cheerfully. "So, how long are you going to be in Nepal anyway?"

"Oh, about three months or so I think. Everything's open-ended at the moment." Zelda couldn't help chuckling for the first time in days. After thirty-two hours of flights, bad food and long layovers, she was actually in Kathmandu, well, at least technically. She could feel a smile spreading across her face. The months of preparations – sub-letting her apartment, quitting her job as a computer programmer, getting several rounds of vaccinations, and arranging all the tickets – finally seemed worth it. Everything was going as planned and soon, very soon, she would begin her own amazing adventure. She was sure of it. Somehow the delays at the airport didn't count.

The man behind her slammed one hand into his forehead and thrust the other towards her chest. "Where are my manners? G'day, the name's Ian."

"Hi, I'm Zelda, my name is Zelda," she said, her own hand extending automatically to grip Ian's right palm.

"Goodtameetcha. This is my first time abroad, at least by myself," Ian confided. "I'm planning on traveling around the world – so long as my money lasts anyway," he announced with a big wink and a grin.

Before they could continue, Zelda noticed the armed guards were motioning for her to move. "Oh, it's my turn! Good luck Ian," she sang, whilst throwing on her biggest smile for the customs officer and two soldiers flanking his sides. A few flurries of his brown wrist and she was charging downstairs towards baggage claim.

"Where the hell are my bags?" Zelda demanded from no one in particular. Even though she had spent the last forty minutes crossing the arrivals hall inches at a time, the luggage from her plane had still not been unloaded. Other western tourists who had smugly breezed through the visa holders' control point, now sat slouched and folded in frustrated heaps along the rusty conveyor belt. Zelda took a seat and began waiting semi-patiently, tapping her foot on the bare concrete floor. In America she never had to wait for luggage.

A few minutes later, Ian bounced into view. His face was split open by a set of teeth that would make an oyster envious. "Beauty ain't it?" Smiling at his passport's freshly violated pages, he didn't seem to notice Zelda rolling her eyes.

The conveyor belt grumbled to life. A large group of well-equipped Asian tourists – cameras at the ready – shuffled forward *en masse* and retrieved their matching bags, before re-assembling around a plump woman furiously waving a pennant-on-a-stick. The two frosty pieces of glass marked 'Exit' slid open. On the other side, a squirming mass of human bodies convulsed towards the pack of fresh arrivals. Shouting men in long tunics waving signs announcing hotels, tours and guides, competed with each other for lucrative tourist dollars. Thin barricades and more armed guards lined both sides of the exit. The doors slid shut before the crowd's screams could register as anything other than primal.

Zelda's eyes felt as if they were going to pop out of her head. An over-stuffed blue backpack, jerking towards her on the conveyer belt, snapped her back to reality. She rose, grabbed her heavy bag and returned her attention to Ian.

"Sorry?"

"How exactly do you get to the tourist district from here anyway? Do ya reckon there's a bus?"

"You mean Thamel, right? That's where most of the backpackers head to, according to my guidebook. I know you can take a taxi. I'm not sure if there's a bus or where you'd catch it. I don't think you can walk there from here though. I have my travel guide in here somewhere, if you want to take a look?"

Ian refused her offer with a wave and a grunt. "How are you getting into the city?"

"I have a ride waiting for me." Zelda's words reverberated in her head. She wouldn't have to fight with *that* crowd for transport or shelter. Immediate relief swept over her, amplified by the sight of her second piece of baggage – seventy-two pounds of donated schoolbooks – heaving towards them on the visibly straining conveyor belt.

"How's that? You have a ride waiting for you? How do you reckon?"

"I'm here to volunteer. The director is picking me up and taking me to my hotel. That's why I know I have a ride." Zelda looked around the hall, noticing that while they were talking everyone – save a few concerned-looking souls – had emptied out of the baggage claim area. "Speaking of which, I really should go out and find him. Almost everyone from our plane has left already. I don't want Ganesh to think I missed my flight!"

"Bloody hell! Did someone steal my rucksack?" Ian swore under his breath as he followed her gaze around the empty hall. "Listen, I'm sure your friends are used to the airline being delayed. Do you reckon you can wait around a few more minutes?" Before she could answer, Ian darted over to the lone Royal Nepal Airlines representative, already surrounded by a small mob of angry, well-dressed Europeans. Momentarily interrupting their heated conversation, Ian asked, "Sorry, whom do I ask about lost luggage?" The uniformed man pointed tiredly at himself. Ian raced back towards Zelda.

"I reckon I'll be a while. I have to see that bloke about my bags. Where are you staying?" Ian asked distractedly, watching for any escape attempts from the airline's representative.

"The Royal Guesthouse...or Hotel, something like that. It's supposed to be just outside Thamel proper. I have the address in here somewhere if you want it, but I really need to get going."

"Right. Don't worry about the address. If you can wait outside for me that would be bloody brilliant, otherwise I'm sure the taxi driver will know where it's at. See you soon." He was already trotting back to the small Nepalese man and foreigners, now swearing in French.

Zelda shrugged the books and backpacks onto her shoulders and arms. Once balanced she moved slowly towards the exit. As the doors slid open, her nasal cavities were assaulted by a wave of feces, unknown spices and body odor. Piercing, unintelligible screams echoed off the high concrete roof. The kaleidoscope of colors, languages and noises overwhelmed her. As the doors to the airport closed swiftly behind her, Zelda repressed an intense urge to jump back through and declare this experiment a huge mistake.

She pushed her way through the seething crowd, exiting onto the open parking lot unharmed but sweatier for the experience. Wiping her forehead off with the back of her hand, Zelda squinting against the unrelenting afternoon sun and took her first real look at the scenery around her. Blinding light reflected off tin-roof shacks. Swirling brown earth thickened the already heavy, humid air. It looked as if the city center was far off in the distance. Where were the snow-capped peaks and serene monasteries? Why was it so hot, weren't they at the top of the world? She wasn't sure what she should do next; Ian was already a memory. The chaos she had just witnessed wasn't part of the plan. Zelda assumed that when she got off the plane someone from the volunteer program would be patiently waiting for her at the gate.

Rifling through her daypack for her program coordinator's phone number, she did not notice the well-dressed man rapidly approaching her.

"Excuse me, Miss Zelda Marie Richardson?"

His welcoming grin and moisture-free appearance affected Zelda more than him knowing her name. "Mr. Ganesh Pundam, I presume," she exclaimed, "I am so pleased to meet you!" She shook his hand fervently, melting with relief. No wonder he'd wanted passport photographs *before* she'd arrived.

"I am pleased to meet you also! Tell me, did you not see the sign?" he asked, gesturing behind him towards a young boy sitting on the hood of an old taxi, holding an enormous sign stating her full name.

"Sorry, I didn't see it. I guess I was a bit overwhelmed by all the people," she replied sheepishly. Zelda certainly hadn't expected Ganesh to be waiting for her in the parking lot.

"Yes, yes. It is not a problem. Please to come with me." The large grin was back in force.

Attempting to be gentlemanly, Ganesh nearly dislocated his shoulder when he lifted Zelda's box of books. "Oh my gods. May I inquire, what is inside this?" he rasped, carefully setting her oversized luggage into the undersized trunk.

"Books." Zelda replied, beaming. "Donated by a few elementary schools in my old neighborhood for my school's library. My school here in Nepal, I mean."

Ganesh looked up at her – clearly astonished – but said nothing, only wrestled further with the trunk, finally using a piece of rope to tie it closed.

A few minutes and strained muscles later, Ganesh hopped onto his bright red motorcycle, promising to meet them back at the hotel. The shy young boy – "my cousin" Ganesh reassured – would guide the taxi to the hotel. As soon as his uncle sputtered off, the boy jumped into the front left-hand seat, ready to follow. Zelda was about to protest – there's no way he could have been more than ten years old – before realizing that the steering wheel was on the other side of the car. Hugging her backpack, she braced herself for the drive to Thamel, wondering what else was going to be backwards here.

Zelda didn't know if the manufacturer of the tiny automobile she was jammed into intended the car to be driven so quickly over the incredibly narrow and potholed streets. Insane motorcyclists, belching buses, three-wheeled breadboxes, kamikaze bicycles and brightly-dressed women competed with her cab for room. Whenever she dared to look ahead, another vehicle would be hurtling towards them, darting back into place at the very last moment. Zelda didn't like being part of this constant game of chicken, but figured she would be worse off walking than riding. At least the car would absorb some of the impact.

Approaching a major intersection, Zelda saw a flustered policeman perched atop a raised cement circle, angrily motioning traffic into the city center. Thankfully the drivers heeded his whistles and waves. So far Zelda couldn't remember any part of the road being straight, their cab was continually winding around ornate squares, pools of water and colorfully decorated temples.

It was so exotically different Zelda was having trouble processing it. She tried her best to relax and enjoy the scenery, but her body seemed to be shutting down. Her head started to droop as they approached a heavily guarded building, towering high above the thick stone wall protecting it. She was trying to figure out if the Royal Palace was supposed to look like a series of melting snow cones, when she crashed out on her backpack.

*Rap, rap, rap.* "Miss Zelda? Excuse me, please to get out now?" Ganesh was peering into the backseat. Her box of books and daypack already sat on the hotel's steps. Wiping the drool off her hand, she stepped out of the cab and into a quiet, tree-filled courtyard. Only the chirping of birds and whisks of brooms filled the air.

"Come, come. This way." Ganesh said, encouraging her with a wave of his hand to get out of the cab.

She followed her program coordinator and his cousin into the guesthouse. The group climbed three flights of stairs before the hotel owner produced a key the size of his forearm and jiggled the creaky lock open. He motioned for the tall foreigner to enter her temporary chambers. Zelda was pleasantly surprised by the large mustard-colored room and two single beds. A vase filled with flowers stood on a small writing table, filling the room with a glorious scent. The four of them dragged her luggage inside before returning to the hallway for a brief round of goodbyes.

"I will return in three days' time. We will have tea in the garden and talk more about the program. Then you will meet your first family!" exclaimed Ganesh.

"Fantastic! How many volunteers are there in total? Is anyone else here already?" Zelda asked.

"There are only four of you. It is a small group this time, better for you. One volunteer arrives tomorrow and another a few hours before we meet again. The fourth is an American lady – like you – staying two rooms down," he said gesturing towards the end of the brightly-lit hallway. "But she is not here now. I made a program for her to go to Dhulikhel. She will return in two days' time! Would you also like to see Dhulikhel before beginning the volunteer program? It is not difficult to arrange."

"Thank you but I want to explore Kathmandu before we begin. I won't be volunteering in the city,

right?" Zelda replied, not really sure what or where Dhulikhel was.

"That is not a problem. The American lady did not like Kathmandu, but she arrived one week ago. Perhaps she had too much time to explore on her own," said Ganesh, laughing. Zelda didn't get the joke. Before she could push him for details, he continued. "Tomorrow there is a transportation strike; none of the taxis or tempos will be working. It is of utmost importance that you take caution when you go out in the city. Perhaps you should only walk around the city center? Durbar Square is quite beautiful, there are many temples for you to see there," he offered.

"Oh, okay." Zelda replied slowly, processing his words. "Wait, the taxi drivers aren't mad at foreigners, are they? How is the other volunteer going to get to the hotel then?"

"No, no. Foreigners are not the issue. I will meet the lady from New Zealand at the airport and bring her back here on my motorbike. It will be great! It is not a problem." said Ganesh. Clapping his hands together with a loud crack, the small group snapped to attention for his final words. "So Zelda, we will leave you now to rest. Enjoy Kathmandu. Welcome to the Kingdom of Nepal!" With a deep bow and palms pressed together, Ganesh bid her the first of many dramatic farewells, taking his shy cousin and the hotel owner down the stairs with him.

Zelda closed the door and twisted the deadbolt. Lying down on one of the feather beds, she closed her eyes and within seconds was fast asleep.

## Chapter Two

Two hours of forms, declarations and sworn statements later, Ian finally found himself speeding towards Thamel, or at least to a hotel his cabbie told him was in Thamel. Too physically exhausted to barter with the manic crowd, he jumped at a hotel sign dancing centimeters from his face promising 'cheapest price' and a free ride. Dropping his meager possessions into the taxi's torn backseat, he did ask about the Imperial Guesthouse but the driver swore it was full and Ian didn't care enough to push.

He clambered seven floors up the midget-sized stairwell before finally being able to right himself again in the narrow hallway. The lock practically fell open to reveal a tiny concrete room and two fold-up army cots. Cheap? Yes. Comfortable? Not really, but he hadn't come to Nepal for the accommodations. Noticing a large family of red ants crisscrossing the shower wall, Ian decided to skip cleaning up and hit the streets in search of something native to smoke.

His mates back in Darwin told him it was dead easy to find hashish and sometimes weed in Thamel. It was their stories about pipe-smoking priests and temples dedicated to ganja, which had sent Nepal shooting to number one on Ian's list of countries to see. He knew well enough that drugs were easy to come by in other Asian countries; he just liked the idea it was worshipped here. And besides, all of his mates had been to Nepal before and had their own stories to tell. He was tired of being the odd man out.

Ian stepped out of his hotel and immediately into the chaotic heart of Thamel. All around him he heard whispered calls beneath high-pitched touts: "green sticky bud, hashish, brown hash cakes, Shiva's best mar-u-ana." Ian smiled broadly; his mates hadn't been putting him on after all. Walking slowly up and down the main drag, Ian checked out which little boys were selling what, and noted where the policemen were hanging out. Casually approaching a kid wearing a faded *Are You Experienced?* T-shirt, Ian made eye contact, grinning widely. The boy smiled back.

"Oi, can I get some –"

Shaking his head violently, the boy put two fingers over his lips, his eyes lingering on a group of policemen congregating around a water spout. He motioned for Ian to follow. At the next intersection the boy looked up at Ian expectantly: "You want?" he asked.

Ian nodded yes.

The boy whispered, "Then you follow me." He darted off into the crowd, expertly weaving his way through the throngs of tourists. Just a few meters ahead, Ian could see his would-be dealer turn left. Ian sprinted to catch up. Rounding the corner, he almost knocked over a group of soldiers busy moving street beggars along. Ian grunted his excuses while keeping his head down, but they didn't seem to take any notice of him. Heart racing, he speed-walked through the masses, frantically searching for any sign of the Jimi Hendrix T-shirt. He caught sight of the kid just as he disappeared behind a screaming street vendor. Ian pushed aside carpets and bracelets in time to see the boy pause at the head of a narrow alleyway. His dealer made eye contact, nodded, and then disappeared.

Ian forced himself not to run. At the alley's entrance he hesitated – it was so dark and quiet. His instincts told him to walk away, leave it and try again later. But curiosity and a need for weed got the better of him. Besides, he was three times the size of his dealer. Squinting, he could just make the boy out a few meters further ahead, walking very slowly. Ian charged on, into a maze of alleyways; the boy always staying just in front of him. When Ian finally caught up, they had reached an intersection of sorts. Three other alleyways met here creating a small, shit-filled square.

The boy turned to face him, illuminated by a cobweb of light. "You want the mar-u-ana or hashish?" he asked.

Ian wiped the back of his hand across his forehead. "Marijuana please. One hundred rupees worth."

Peals of laughter erupted from the young boy, quickly replaced by an intense businessman's calm. "One *thousand* rupees, not one hundred. Too little. One thousand rupees for everything." He shook a black film canister in Ian's face.

Ian pretended to double-check his wallet. "All I have is...five hundred, that's it. I don't have any more."

"No, no. One thousand rupees, not five hundred. One thousand for everything."

"Look, I said all I have is five hundred. See? Five hundred," Ian waved a handful of rupees in the boy's face.

The boy spat in disgust, gesturing at Ian's chest. "You have more, yes?"

Ian was momentarily taken aback by the boy's savvy but finally raised his shirt, revealing an apparently belt-less chest, nothing more. Man was he glad his money belt was riding quite low on his hips.

A deep sigh emerged from the little dealer. Apparently used to bargaining, he held his palms up to Ian. "Okay, okay. You go over there," the boy said, pointing to a filthy corner of the square.

Obediently Ian turned to face the mud-brick wall, slyly watching the boy divide the canister's contents into two. The mere thought of kicking back with a joint and a beer got him salivating. They'd passed plenty of bars along the way, but where could he light up? His room didn't have any windows but there must be somewhere nearby where Westerners could smoke in peace. He chided himself for not scoping out his hotel's rooftop terrace before he left, or asking his mates in Darwin more.

Something broke his train of thought; Ian looked around distractedly. His mind registered human voices refracting off the brick walls. He couldn't tell how near they were, but it seemed like they were closing in fast. Ian looked over at the boy, but he was still bent over the film canisters. Ian didn't know what to do. Should he just walk away or say something first? He hadn't given his dealer any money yet, he could bolt and nobody would be the wiser. But then where would he be?

The voices were definitely getting closer and the boy didn't seem to notice. Ian could feel his heart pounding as sweat began pouring out of him. He wanted to score but not get caught doing it. "Oi, I'm gone," Ian mumbled to himself, turning to walk away just as the boy briefly touched his sleeve.

"Okay, five hundred," the young drug dealer said, shoving a black canister into one of Ian's hands and grabbing the rupees from the other.

The voices rounded the corner; a group of street children appearing just in time to see the final transaction. The tiny gang crushed around Ian's legs, screaming incomprehensibly. His little dealer high-tailed it, running off into the darkness. The boys tore at his clothes and chest, pulling on his pockets. Ian could only make out "Rupee, rupee, rupee!"

"Hey stop that! Bugger off!" Ian swatted at hands and legs, kicking himself free of his mini-assailants. Adrenaline propelled him through a crossing and down a darkened passageway. He looked back to see five boys in hot pursuit. Ian heard only the beat of his heart as he tore down the alley. Blinded by panic, he tripped over a pile of rubbish whilst rounding a corner, sending rats scurrying. His screams, as they scrambled over his body, masked the boys' approach. He didn't notice the rocks until they sailed past his head.

"You shits!" Ian turned to see his assailants re-arming themselves with loose bricks. His legs kicked into overdrive as reddish-brown chunks shattered on the walls penning him in. He hung a right, launching himself down a light-filled alleyway. Thamel was just ahead. Another brick exploded behind him. Ian focused on the white faces and large backpacks at the end of the alley, not daring to look back. He sprinted the last meter, knocking over a woman covered in gortex.

"Hey look out buddy!"

"Sorry," Ian panted, helping her up.

She brushed off her pants. "No harm done, just watch where you're going next time, okay?"

Ian nodded, grabbing his sides as he tried to catch his breath. The woman looked at him strangely but kept walking.

Ian glanced back down the alleyway and saw two boys still running towards him. "Bloody hell! Why don't you just give it up?" Ian screamed at his pursers as he jumped to his feet, running up the crowded road. A few meters further on, he saw a large sign announcing the 'Trekks English Language Bookstore' and dove inside.

He stood by the front door panting heavily, willing his heart to slow down. He peered cautiously

out the window but saw neither children nor police racing towards the store. Ian took a handkerchief out of his pocket to wipe the sweat off his face, almost spilling his expensive purchase onto the ground. Looking around quickly to see if anyone had noticed, Ian realized that no one would find a sweaty, poorly-dressed backpacker with film canisters strange in this tourist-oriented shop. White faces speaking a multitude of languages surrounded him. A plethora of standing bookshelves was crammed into the single-story structure, with maps and souvenirs filling the gaps in-between. The sweet smell of chai tea wafted through the aisles. Turning his nose to the source, Ian could make out a café towards the back of the store.

He glanced over their exotic selection before sauntering over to an extensive collection of coffee table books. Many were adorned by the unmistakable Mount Everest. The gorgeous moonlit photos of that mysterious triangle of black granite captivated Ian completely. He picked up a weighty volume and began flipping through it, when the overwhelming stench of pot attracted his attention. He instinctively grabbed for the film canister before noticing a far likelier candidate. A skinny, similarly dread-locked man stood next to him, searching through a bin full of maps outlining treks through places with incomprehensible names. After a few moments he stopped and looked over at Ian with a bemused expression.

"Can I help you?" the stranger asked.

Ian didn't realize he had been staring open-mouthed. Here he was freaking out about purchasing a small quantity of weed and this guy walks around smelling as if he just put out an enormous spliff. Ian couldn't help but bust out laughing. "No, sorry for staring man, how are ya? Name's Ian." He offered his hand to the stranger.

"My name's Jake. I'm fine thanks, and yourself?" he responded politely.

"Doing fine now. Say, I'm going back to my hotel to smoke out. Care to join me? I just landed in Kathmandu and suspect you already have a few stories to tell."

The stinky American laughed out loud. "Why not? I've got some time. Let me grab a map and we can head out. I don't know where your hotel is, but there's a 'kind pub' across the way."

"A what?"

The stranger smiled warmly. "A kind pub, a place we can smoke out, without trouble."

"Brilliant. Take your time eh? I'm still absorbing all these crazy book titles," Ian returned his attentions to the volume in his hands. Realizing the store probably saved him from the police, Ian got behind Jake in line at the counter. He purchased the coffee table book and a set of Buddha postcards from a heavily bejeweled woman wrapped in a fancy bed sheet.

Jake, so far a quiet companion, waited patiently for Ian to sort through his rupees and collect his purchases. "Shall we?" he asked, holding the door open for the Australian.

Ian paused before setting foot outside the shop's walls. He took a long look down both sides of the busy street, hoping his drug-dealing friends had already forgotten about him and moved on with their prosperous day. No cops were waiting outside to jump him. He sidled up alongside Jake, following him willingly to the kind pub.

Two quick twists and turns down the main street brought them to another dark entryway. A colorful sign above the doorway promised cheap, late-night happy hour drinks and appetizers, but the building looked more like run-down apartments than a bar. Most of the windows were covered by shutters carved out of a dark brown wood, their intricate patterns casting trippy shadows across the alleyway. From the lower stories a few dirty-faced children peeked out over tiny balconies, staring curiously at the strangers below.

It was only two in the afternoon but Jake ducked inside and began climbing the stairs anyway. A slight ripple of paranoia washed over Ian; he wondered if this was some elaborate set-up or just normal for Nepal. He wasn't sure he could find this place again, or get out in a hurry if he had to. Too fresh off the plane to know any better and dying to smoke some herb, Ian followed, albeit slowly. Two flights of stairs later and another sign appeared, this one featuring large marijuana leaves. Ian smiled and picked up his pace.

Jake was waiting on the fifth floor. They entered into what Ian could only imagine a modern

Turkish hash tent would look like if set up indoors and decorated by a rebellious sixteen-year-old. The entire top floor had been converted into a series of small rooms, each decorated with an assortment of pillows, low couches and long tables. Ornate hookahs and water pipes lined the walls. Black lights revealed fluorescent Bob Marley's, Jamaican flags and Pink Floyd prisms tacked to the ceiling. Trails of scented smoke wafted from cones of incense scattered around.

In the center of the club, a beach cabana had been reconstructed for serving drinks. As Jake and Ian entered the inner chamber, a voice announced, "Welcome to the Sherpa Club! Is it time for a safety break?"

Ian correctly assumed the disembodied voice meant, "Do you want to smoke marijuana?" and nearly cried with relief. Meeting Jake must be some kind of omen, he thought, this was bound to be a great trip. His new mate walked up to the bar and ordered mango lassis with vodka for the two of them, after greeting the bartender affectionately. The man behind the bar was a short, stocky man who had seen his share of bar brawls. A jagged cut, visible just under the collar of his T-shirt, was still healing.

Jake grabbed an enormous silver hookah off the cabana counter, gesturing for Ian to follow. He moved to a low table and stuffed a large sticky bud into the hookah's vertical stem.

When Ian sat down, the film container pushed into his leg. He suddenly remembered he'd never looked at his own supply. It was so dark inside the club that Ian had to dump the can's meager contents onto a paper menu and walk it over to a crack of light emerging from the shuttered windows. He didn't need much illumination to see it was not exactly high quality. More like crappy desert weed – dry and crispy with little green sticking to the thin stems. No wonder hash was so popular here. Ian tried to hide his disappointment in his recent purchase as he meandered back to the table and carefully refilled the black container.

Ian's new friend handed him a snake-like tube fitted with an ornate silver mouthpiece. Snapping open a Zippo, Jake held the flame to the large central bowl while sucking on his own hose like a vacuum cleaner. Ian joined suit, knocking his mind out of commission for the rest of the afternoon. He could feel the jet leg leaving his body with every exhale. He let his body sink into the fluffy cushions, becoming one with the room. Above him a Pink Floyd prism pulsed in time with the heavy bass pumping out of hidden speaker boxes. At some point the bartender set the drinks on their table and disappeared behind a tapestry with OHM embroidered into it.

After a few minutes of meditative contemplation, Ian sat up and began stuffing some of his dry shake into the hookah's wide stem. Jake, previously motionless, grabbed the bowl and dumped its pathetic contents onto the table.

"That's okay. Go ahead and keep your stash." he said, stuffing another sticky bud into the hookah.

"Fair enough." Ian replied, giggling like a tipsy schoolgirl. "Least I can do is buy the next round of drinks, eh? This mango concoction is brilliant," he said, taking another frothy drag of the yogurt-based drink.

"Don't worry about it." Jake waved his offer away, stretching out on the thick Persian carpet. He re-lit the bowl. "So when did you get here anyway?"

"Dunno, few hours before I met you I reckon." Ian replied, smiling at the thought. That's what he loved some much about traveling; less than twenty-four hours ago he'd been pounding beers and bowls on the beach, now he was chilling with a like-minded brother in Kath-man-fucking-du.

"Wow, that's a record! You must have scored as soon as you got in. Too bad about the quality, it's kind of a grab bag with the kids here."

"Ah, no worries. I took my chances." Ian answered quickly, not ready to share his recent experience. "Mind if I ask where you got that?" he said, pointing at Jake's sizable zip-lock bag. "It looks better than the weed I buy back home."

"This?" Jake responded with a quick grin. "I harvested it myself over in the Annapurna range. Most of the places we trekked through had healthy crops growing out in the wild, unattended. I picked a few buds here and there as we walked and wrapped 'em up in newspaper to dry them out. Some of the plants were taller than the locals."

"Right! Where is Annapurna?"

"Man, you did just get off the plane. Have you heard of Pokhara?"

Ian shook his head slightly.

"It's a day's bus ride to the West, a sweet little village right on the shores of Phewa Lake. It's kind of a like a base camp for the Annapurna mountain range."

"Sounds right to me."

"Yeah, it's pretty damn nice. You can do all sorts of treks out of Pokhara. I did the Sanctuary loop. The trail is pretty crowded right now, but the scenery is so beautiful it's easy to ignore the others. A buddy is flying in from the States in a few days and we're going over to do Everest." Jake, sniffing his sleeve as if noticing his strong scent for the first time, blushed slightly before adding, "I, ah, just got back this morning and obviously haven't done laundry yet."

"No worries! When you came up next to me in the store, I thought maybe my pocket had caught fire. If you didn't smell like a pothead, I never would have said anything to you." Ian smiled as he handed his new friend one of the mouthpieces, repeating the American's actions. "Nothing better than a hookah," he said, lifting the tube to his mouth.

"Hey so, you're Australian right?"

"Full-blooded Ozzie at your service." Ian attempted a seated bow, just missing knocking over their empty glasses.

"Where's home exactly?"

"Darwin, up north."

"Oh yeah, I know the place. Me and a buddy did some hikes out of Darwin, to Kakadu National Park I think. You know, with all the crazy rock paintings and moon landscapes. And there were these little grey kangaroos jumping around everywhere."

"Wallabies."

"Oh yeah right, wallabies. Probably the best bit was a two-day bush hike in this gem called Litchfield. Swimming with crocodiles and shit. Wicked man, truly wicked."

"I could have been your trip leader! I mean, I used to lead tours through Litchfield and Kakadu in the summers to earn a bit of extra cash. A mate back in Darwin runs an outback tour company."

"Wow man, what a great way to earn a living. Pretty hard core, right?"

"I dunno 'bout that."

"Now yeah, the meanest things we have to worry about back home are cougars, or maybe getting frostbite. It seems like everything in Australia could kill you."

"Cheers to frostbite then."

After a few more vodkas and bowls, Jake stood up and stretched, "It's time to find a laundromat; this stench has to be rectified."

"Okay. I'll see you later this week then?"

"Maybe, we're probably heading out in a few days. But if I don't see you again, the Sanctuary Loop is totally worth doing."

"Cheers for that, and this." Ian held up his film canister, now filled with some of Jake's stash. They walked down the stairs together.

"Take care man," Jake hugged Ian warmly before disappearing into the crowded street.

Ian floated back to his hotel room and spread out on one of the tiny cots. He rolled a joint with some of Jake's Annapurna bud, mixed with his own dubious purchase. A bottle of Coca Cola and banana pancakes were already waiting for him on the rooftop patio. Ian wolfed back his food between drags of his funky cigarette. Finally sated, he drifted off to sleep, dreaming about forests of marijuana plants, brown-body toga parties and hot showers. Momentarily afraid he had pee'd his pants while napping, Ian woke up disoriented to stinging hot rain pelting him from a low-lying summer cloud. The change in weather motivated him to return to his room for a proper nap, while his only set of clothes dried on the spare cot.

## Chapter Three

An enormous Sidis tree squawked to life as Kookaburras and green-tailed parrots cavorted in the morning sun. Vanilla-topped peaks shimmered in the distance. Staring across the vast city center before her, Zelda could hardly believe she was in Kathmandu, capitol of the only Hindu Kingdom in the world. Or at least the only one she'd heard about. She would have to ask somebody about that.

Despite the spectacular view from her rooftop terrace, Zelda was having trouble sitting still and finishing her breakfast. All she wanted to do was run downstairs and get lost in the maze-like streets of the inner city. She only had two days to herself before beginning her volunteer program, and she wanted to make the most of her new-found freedom.

Zelda let her eyelids close as she tried to remember the last time she'd done what she *wanted* to do, not what was expected of her. But she couldn't. Her life in Seattle had become one big boring routine. Every morning jumping in her car to join the same slow-motion race to the office, just to tweak some code and push a few pixels, then sit in another traffic jam to get home in time for dinner and Colbert. She felt like her life had become programmed, and she didn't know how to break the cycle.

When her boss offered her a full-time contract a few months ago, her parents had been so proud, talking enthusiastically about pension plans, stock options and all the security a blue badge would bring. Zelda knew right then and there that she *had* to get the hell out of Seattle. She was only twenty-six-years old for God's sake. Did they really expect her to work eighty-hours a week for the next forty-four years and be *happy* about it? There had to be more to life than sitting behind a computer all day. But she felt so trapped, so *stuck*, that she didn't know what those other options might be. Who knew if coming to Nepal was the right choice, but at least it got her out of her Seattle doldrums.

Zelda wolfed back the rest of her muesli and yogurt, before skipping downstairs to pay her breakfast bill and find out more about the day's events. The hotelkeeper, a friendly older man quick to smile, filled her in.

"The Maoists are upset with the government again, so they have organized the strike today. There are many strikes in Kathmandu, it is not a problem. But be wary of large groups, especially if they are throwing stones at renegade taxi or tempo drivers trying to make money from lack of service," he said.

Zelda grinned broadly, there were some things she could figure out on her own. She decided to stick to her original plan and walk to Durbar Square, forgetting to ask who the Maoists were and what they wanted. Her friend Randy, a retired climbing guide, had warned her to watch out for "some dangerous guys from the West." But she was in central Nepal. She'd have to find an English language newspaper before volunteering; best to have some idea of the major happenings in the country she would be residing in for the next few months, she thought.

Zelda had studied her guidebooks last night, carefully planning out a winding route along many of the inner city's larger temples. Friends had given her plenty of tips and reassured her that, even though the city center was huge, most of the 'must-sees' were in Durbar Square, a short walk from her hotel. As she exited onto her hotel's wide steps, Zelda took out her tourist map, double-checking the name of her first turn. A moment later, the high-pitched sound of a flute pierced the air. Lowering her map, Zelda noticed two snake charmers only a few feet away, seducing their keep with reed flutes. She rubbed her eyes, sure she was dreaming. As she walked closer, she saw that the snakes were kind of dancing, swaying in time with the rhythm as they rose slowly out of their woven baskets. Entranced, she moved closer, mimicking the snake's motions. One of the men began shaking his hat at her, calling out for rupees. Zelda moved on.

Only three blocks separated her room from the tourist district. In that short distance the tranquility of her tree-filled hotel block was replaced by a whirlwind of street vendors hawking jewelry, tiger balm and hand-carved elephants to wide-eyed tourists. Crippled beggars dragged their shattered bodies through the muddy streets, alms cups jingling around their necks. Scrawny cows and mangy goats rooted around in rotting piles of garbage searching for a tasty meal. Rats – many the size of a small cat – scurried into homes and restaurants, flaunting health codes. Diesel exhaust, trapped by the

tall buildings, hovered in a visible layer down most streets. Both sides of the streets burst full with restaurants, bars and souvenir shops.

Zelda paused at the mouth of Jyatha Road, taking it in. Crunching her hands into fists, she forced herself to stay put and not turn tail and run back to the hotel. Everything she had seen, heard and read about Nepal flashed through her head like a PowerPoint presentation, her friends' accounts of their own Asian adventures serving as voice-over. The streets *did* look just like the pictures she had seen in all those travel magazines, however their two-dimensionality had not prepared her for the overpowering noise and smells. Surely her friends had never said anything about the unbelievable filthiness of it all? Zelda hoped her vaccinations were working. Sucking up her courage, she hunched up her shoulders and launched herself into the heart of the tourist district.

By the time she had reached her first major turn, Zelda had stepped in too many piles of cow, goat, dog and human shit to count. She rounded the corner, distractedly looking for something to wipe her shoes off with. A low guttural noise attracted her attention. She looked up to see a group of protesting strikers marching stridently towards her. It looked like a witch hunt, something out of the middle ages. Hundreds of men shouted in protest, most carrying large sticks set ablaze. Banners and signs bobbed violently above their heads. She stood there frozen; momentarily entranced by the dancing torches, before the men's angry cries brought her out of her daze.

Terror-stricken, she backed quickly up the street, ducking into a small side alley. Sweat streaming down her face, she willed herself to become part of the brick wall. Columns of angry young men marched past. She didn't know what to do, make a break for it or stand still until they were gone. There were so many of them. After a moment's hesitation, she turned and bolted in the opposite direction, running as fast as her legs would take her.

Zelda didn't know how many intersections she had crossed before finally stopping. Leaning against a parked tempo, she wheezed like mad as she tried to catch her breath. She strained to hear the protesters' cries, but they were gone. Willing herself to relax, Zelda took out her tourist map and tried to orient herself, but to no avail – the street names were scrawled in Nepali script, not with Western letters. Her map was useless. Zelda let out a sigh of frustration. Well, she wasn't sure where she was or how to get back to Durbar Square, so she might as well try and enjoy whatever sites she did run into.

Looking around, Zelda saw a promising-looking shrine further up the street. She was walking towards it when he found her. A well-dressed young man, not really a boy but farther from manhood than his pencil-thin moustache suggested, stepped in front of her, blocking her way. His black-as-night hair and dazzling grin reminded her of a painfully thin Wayne Newton.

"Would you like a guide for the day? I am very helpful to you," he said, smiling widely.

"No, thank you, I just want to walk around by myself. I'm in no rush. Thanks," she said, striding away from him and towards a small stream of locals flowing in and out of a nearby courtyard. She quickly found herself staring at one of the most ornate temples she would see in Kathmandu. Silver and gold statues of dancing gods stared at her from above. Captivated by the delicate metal sculptures surrounding her, Zelda did not notice that the persistent young man had followed her into the courtyard. He whispered in her ear, "The Monkey Temple is more beautiful than this place."

She jumped a foot out of fright before landing in front of the unruffled man. "What do you want?"

"I am Khamel! I will take you to the Monkey temple, not on the tourist way, but through the back of the city. It is very beautiful. I take foreigners this way all the time; they say it is very educational." Khamel spoke like the men in Hindu movies, straightforward statements delivered in an irresistible singsong. Still, Zelda sensed trouble. Sure he was small, but she had already seen that size didn't matter in a country where most children could easily kill her with their karate skills, and every man seemed to have a large metal blade attached to their belts. Besides, Zelda had spent hours studying her guidebook's list of the most important sites in Kathmandu, but didn't remember any mention of a Monkey Temple. "Can you please go away, I don't want to go to the Monkey Temple, not today, not with you."

"But you must go to the Monkey Temple! It is the most important temple in all of Kathmandu, all

of Nepal! I will show you the way. It is much better than this," Khamel looked around the courtyard, crowded with prostrating worshippers, with revulsion. Undeterred by her harsh words and reproachful gaze, the boy began listing off information to make his services known.

"That is Vishnu," he said, pointing to a handsomely effeminate god with long hair riding what looked like a winged bull, only it had a man's head and bird's beak. "And that is Shiva..."

Zelda wasn't sure what to do. She didn't need or want a guide. She loved the idea of getting lost in the city, imagining it to be the best way to see the inner workings of real Nepalese culture. On the other hand, it would be great to know more about the various gods and goddesses governing Nepalese life. She *could* look each one up in her guidebook, but that would take forever. After a few more questions and explanations about the deities covering the building and surrounding structures, Zelda decided to make Khamel her day's companion.

She followed him the 'non-tourist back way' to the Monkey Temple – as he repeatedly reminded her. Huge apartment buildings lined the banks of the Bagmati River, on the outskirts of Kathmandu. They crossed over the river on what Khamel quaintly referred to as a "cart trail". The thin metal bridge was clogged with ox-driven carts and mobile street vendors moving between the city center and suburbs. Zelda pushed her fear of heights aside, refusing to look straight down. Instead, she used their higher vantage point to look up the wide river. Its banks were filled with locals brushing their teeth, bathing, shaving, urinating, washing vegetables, doing laundry, and defecating, all within a few feet of each other. Islands of rotting garbage and decaying animal carcasses floated down the middle. Zelda blinked in amazement, slowing her pace as she tried to take it all in.

She still didn't really understand where they were headed, but frankly no longer cared. This glimpse into daily city life was totally worth whatever she'd end up paying Khamel. She couldn't have ever *imagined* the type of poverty surrounding her. Zelda felt the spring returning to her step. If she could whistle, she would have. *This* was the Nepal she had hoped and expected to find. And besides, an important temple crawling with monkeys sounded like a perfect destination for her second day abroad.

Khamel, to ensure Zelda didn't forget his worth, prattled on about the impending temple and its religious attributes. It has the most beautiful view of Kathmandu in all of Nepal. Holy men from Tibet congregate there. Lots of shrines to Shiva and scores of dread-locked priests. Khamel created his own mantra, repeating between pauses, "It is very sacred", as if the holiness alone would stun Zelda beyond words.

They rounded a large bend in the road and suddenly they were there: a small square filled with taxis, confused tourists and screaming merchants. In the middle of the dusty clearing stood a fantastically decorated gate. It appeared to mark the beginning of a long path that wandered up the substantial hill before them.

"Swayambhunath! The Monkey Temple!" announced Khamel triumphantly.

After a moment of silence Zelda asked, "Where exactly *is* the temple?" All she saw were weathered stone statues scattered alongside a series of tree-shaded staircases.

Khamel let out a frustrated sigh. "There," he said, pointing to the very top of the mini-mountain before them. "This staircase is the main entrance. They say if you can climb all three-hundred and sixty steps it brings you good luck." Khamel was already charging upwards.

Zelda followed slowly, drawn to the top by the chatter of birds and screeches of unseen primates.

She paid her entry fee and rushed through the last gate, anxious to get inside. An enormous eye stopped her in her tracks. It floated ominously above a half-dome the height of a five-story building, painted completely white.

"What is that?"

"It is a Tibetan stupa, a holy place for Buddhist peoples. The eye of Buddha reminds us he is always watching."

"And that one there?" Zelda pointed towards a large stone cylinder, covered in ornate carvings.

"That is an Indian stupa, Hindu people pray there."

"But they are right next to each other!"

"Yes?" Khamel looked at her quizzically before moving on.

Zelda wandered slowly through the statues and holy sites surrounding her. What she assumed would be one big temple was a complex filled with hundreds of mind-bogglingly beautiful shrines, stupas, temples and monasteries known collectively as Swayambhunath. All of which was squeezed onto a sliver of land sticking up in the middle of the Kathmandu Valley, "like a lotus flower blooming from Vishnu's belly" according to Khamel.

Zelda followed him obediently, listening attentively to his descriptions of the temples and deities surrounding them. They'd just reached the entrance of a large Hindu structure when Zelda imagined she heard someone calling out her name. Shaking her head slightly, Zelda refocused her attentions on Khamel's explanation of the Hindu temple's attributes. A moment later she heard a distinct, "G'day Zelda!" from behind. She turned to see the guy from the airport. *What was he doing here?*

"G'day, how ya' going?" Ian called out as he approached.

"Hey, Ian? Fancy meeting you in a place like this," she exclaimed, misquoting the old Casablanca line.

"It's not really much of a surprise now is it? Swayambhunath is one of the top attractions in Kathmandu. And with the transportation strike today, I reckoned it was a good day to walk around and stretch me legs a bit."

"Did you finally buy a guidebook?"

He smirked at her. "No, I chatted up the hotel owner."

"Oh. Did you at least get your bags back?"

"No, not yet. They reckon it'll be in later this week."

"How will they contact you?"

"I was going to go back to the airport tomorrow and check." Ian said.

"Oh what a pain. Maybe you can give them your hotel's telephone number?"

"Maybe. It doesn't really matter to me, so long as they find 'em. All my trekking gear's in those bags!"

Zelda noticed that Khamel was practically dancing with impatience. "Hey, how did you get up to the temple anyway? Have you been here long?" she asked.

Ian shrugged his shoulders. "I just walked. I've been here for a while; the monkeys are great."

"Well, this is Khamel, he's been showing me around." Zelda said, waving the suddenly shy boy over.

"G'day." He tried to shake the boy's hand, but Khamel turned away. Ian looked over at Zelda, "Good if I join ya?"

She glanced over at her guide, but the boy was avoiding her gaze as well. She shrugged her shoulders, "I guess not."

"Brilliant. I like your glasses by the way, very librarian-slash-dominatrix."

Zelda, to her great surprise, found herself blushing at his remark. "Oh these? I've had them for years. I usually wear contacts but there's so much crap floating around in the air..."

"They look good."

Her cheeks felt as if they were on fire. She dare not use her voice, only grinned at him in response. She hadn't taken a really good look at Ian at the airport, but now she couldn't help noticing how his muscles rippled across his legs as he charged up the stairs. Ian must work out a lot. He was pretty sexy in a wiry, grungy sort of way. A bit short and too tan for her tastes, but still.

They started up another winding staircase, elbows touching. Khamel followed closely behind, their unwilling chaperon. A strange noise began to drift down the tree-lined trail. Zelda thought at first it was birds, but the closer they got to the source the more surreal it became. Almost guttural, but in a bizarre range of tones. As her group entered a large clearing, they were immediately confronted with a brightly-painted building. Zelda recognized it as Tibetan from her guidebooks.

She ran noisily up to one of the massive metal-plated doors, pressing her ear to it so she could better decipher those incredible sounds. "It is a Buddhist lamastary", Khamel called after her. The door next to her swung open; an older monk in saffron robes poked his head out, looking for the

source of the commotion. Zelda began to blush, looking down at her shoes, embarrassed for having made such a ruckus. With a laugh, the monk waved them all inside.

It took her eyes a moment to adjust to the dark interior. Hundreds of butter candles lit up the colorful walls. It seemed as if every available surface had been painted with delicate flowers, ferocious dragons and fanciful birds. In the center of the room, around thirty monks of various ages were chanting in a range of volumes and tones. The devout men were clearly distracted by the outsiders' presence, some staring openly at Ian's wild blonde hair, others at Zelda's long, uncovered legs.

"They are reciting their daily scriptures," Khamel whispered in Zelda's ear. She didn't want to believe him, the sound was too heavenly to be routine.

Zelda followed Ian and Khamel around the large hall, taking in the extensive collection of paintings and statues. *Thangkas* – stylized deities painted on cotton and silk by mediating monks – hung from every rafter. At the front of the building, six of the *Thangkas* were covered by a colorful curtain of silk.

"Why are those gods covered up and not the others?" Zelda asked Khamel.

"They are sleeping now. If we come back later, perhaps they shall be awake." Khamel said.

Zelda wasn't sure if he was being sarcastic or serious, but let the topic drop and returned her attentions to the holy beings that were still conscious.

Within twenty minutes of their arrival, the choir came to a ragged offbeat finish as each monk sang their final lines of prayer. As the last words were uttered into the now still air, the head monk rang a bell. As if launched from a single gun, the previously sedentary holy men jumped up and shot out of the room. The tiny man who let them in came over and said in halting English: "lunchtime". With a sheepish grin he followed his brothers' path and pace out the door.

The Westerners went back outside, Khamel tagging closely behind. The three strangers walked leisurely around the brilliantly-colored temples and grey stone statues dotted around Swayambhunath. On her right, a group of worshipers slowly circled a Tibetan stupa, turning prayer beads and wheels over and over in their hands. To her left stood a life-sized statue of Buddha, its golden hue reflected in the pool of water surrounding it. The serene statue seemed to attract both primates and *Homo sapiens* in large numbers.

As she watched tourists fight monkeys for granola bars and camera bags, Zelda couldn't help but wonder what her co-workers were doing right at that moment. Definitely writing a bit of code, worrying about compatibility issues, and fighting with her old manager about software updates. She thanked whichever gods were listening that she was here, far, far away from her office at Microsoft.

Zelda could feel Ian's eyes on her. When she looked up, he asked, "So why did you chose Nepal anyway? I thought Americans went to Hawaii or Mexico?"

"Give me a break! Not every American swears by all-inclusive vacations." She kicked a pebble into the dense shrubbery surrounding them. A baby monkey chased after it, testing it for food. Zelda breathed through her nose, willing herself to calm down.

"Not too long ago my friend Mary took six months out. Just like that –" Zelda snapped her fingers, "– she quit her job and backpacked around the world with her partner. After they got back Mary couldn't stop talking about her travels which, of course, did sound amazing." Zelda paused again, regarding Ian cautiously. He was still very much a stranger to her. Would he laugh at her like so many of her colleagues? But his face held no sign of disappointment or admonishment. She took a deep breath and continued in a rush, eager to get her story out.

"And so I asked to see her pictures and we got to talking and, I don't know, I just asked her straight out: 'What was your favorite place?' And without a moment's hesitation she responded 'Nepal.'" Zelda paused, thinking back to that magical moment in her basement apartment only a few short months ago.

"And, I still don't know why, but that was it for me. As soon as she left, I started looking online for options. The next day I bought a few travel books and read about the different volunteer programs they have in Nepal. It sounded so amazing, to help people so directly I mean. It's totally different than writing out a check to some charity, you know? Besides, I haven't had a real vacation in five years and

was getting pretty burned out. Volunteering sounded like a great way to see more of the world at the same time. After I found this program everything kind of fell into place. And five months later I'm sitting here with you, dodging monkeys and listening to real Buddhist monks sing."

"Good on ya, Zelda. What are you going to do anyway? Build some houses or dig a well?"

"Teach English," she replied, positively beaming. "I'm going to be one of those teaching-English-as-a-second-language people."

Ian stopped mid-walk, staring at Zelda, dumbfounded. "*You* are going to be a *teacher*?"

Zelda felt her face flushing red. "Yeah, but only for a few months. Teaching is like a noble thing. I mean I don't really have much experience or anything, but I'm sure they will be giving us lessons next week. At least I think they will. And besides, volunteers can make a world of difference. How else can these kids *really* learn how to speak English? If no one like me was willing to take a few months out of their lives to come here and teach them, where would they be then? Okay, so I'm not backpacking around willy-nilly, but I'm still going to have plenty of time to see more of Nepal and Asia afterwards if I want to."

Ian held up his hands in mock defense. "Hey that's great, I'm happy for ya."

Zelda swore she could see a smile forming on his lips. Her blood pressure began to rise. "What? What is it?" she demanded.

"Look, I know that teaching is a noble profession, I am one. I just quite can't believe that come next month *you* will be standing before a classroom." Ian began to chuckle. "They are going to eat you alive!" he exclaimed, not trying to contain his belly laughs.

Zelda stared open-mouthed. She'd written Ian off as a loser, some sort of surfer dude whose great ambition in life was selling drinks on the beach between waves.

Ian smiled wryly, "Don't let the dreadlocks fool you, missy. These are new. My hair was already long. After my request for sabbatical got approved, I dreaded it and have been growing 'em out ever since, in preparation for this trip."

"Wow, I really didn't expect *you* of all people to be a teacher. I took you for beach bum." She twisted her hand into the 'hang loose' sign, unsuccessfully. "Sorry."

Zelda studied Ian critically, trying to re-work her image of him. All her teachers had been stuffy and old – she couldn't imagine even one of them traveling around the world in their spare time, let alone growing dreadlocks. "Yeah, well, do you have any tips for me?"

It took Ian a minute or two to control his laughter. "Don't underestimate the little bastards. Kids are smart, much smarter than most adults give them credit for. Just watch you back."

Khamel had been hanging back, chatting with the other little guides hanging around Swayambhunath while keeping one eye on Zelda the whole time. But when the sun began slowly lowering itself behind the jagged peaks hemming in the Kathmandu Valley, he marched over to her and pointed to his watch. "We go back to the city now?" he asked.

Zelda looked over at Ian, asking for his approval by raising her eyebrows.

Ian shrugged, "Why not?"

They rose, following Khamel back towards the main entrance. They'd almost reached it when the cries of a large group of worshippers attracted Zelda's attention. She led her group over to the source of the sorrow. A Hindu priest was passionately chanting scriptures while throwing rice and flowers onto a shrine. Sarded women offered endless bowls of meat, rice and flowers to the small central statue, sprinkling red powder around the gods' feet.

"What's going on Khamel?" Zelda asked.

Her guide gestured to a tiny boy lying motionless in his mother's protective arms. "He is sick. The priest is praying for him to feel better."

"Don't they have doctors here?" she exclaimed.

Khamel replied simply, "Of course. But why not ask for the gods' help too?"