



CHAPTER 1

“PERHAPS, SIR, YOU WILL SOMEDAY COME BACK WITH BOOKS”

AN ICY WIND BLEW OFF THE MOUNTAIN AS I ZIPPED MY FLEECE jacket against the encroaching night. Looking up from my journal, I watched the sun sink behind the soaring snowcapped Himalayas. Clouds appeared massed behind the ridgeline, ready to march into the valley like night sentries. A young Nepali boy interrupted to offer a drink. This eight-year-old appeared to be running the small trekker’s lodge on his own; I had seen no one else during my two hours at the table.

I asked if they had beer.

“Yes!” was his enthusiastic reply.

As I wondered about child labor laws, and whether this might be the youngest bartender I’d ever been served by, he ran off.

On a normal day I would be ordering another coffee at sundown, preparing for the three or four hours left in my workday as a marketing director at Microsoft. Today was blissfully different—the first of 21 days of trekking in the Himalayas. I wanted the beer to toast the start of my longest holiday in nine years, and a break from the treadmill of life in the software industry during the break-neck 1990s. Ahead lay three weeks without e-mail, phone calls, meetings, or a commute. Three weeks where the biggest challenge

was walking 200 miles over “donkey trails” with all my gear on my back. On day ten, the trek would reach a Himalayan pass at 18,000 feet. This would be the highest I had ever climbed to in life. The challenging mountain pass and the long break would be a fitting reward for years of nonstop work.

My bartender returned with a dusty bottle of Tuborg, which he wiped on his black shirt. “*No chiso, tato*,” he said, apologizing for the beer being at room temperature. Then his face lit up. “*Tin minut*,” he said as his spindly legs carried his body recklessly down to the river. As I waited the requested three minutes, he plunged the bottle into the icy glacier melt, smiled, and waved.

A middle-aged Nepali man at the next table laughed aloud at the boy’s clever, low-tech solution. “Who needs a refrigerator?” I asked as a way to start conversation. “Are all the children in Nepal this clever?” He replied that the people here needed to learn to make do, because they had so little. For example, dinner was cooked over a wood fire because people lacked luxuries like stoves and ovens.

The boy returned with a very cold beer—and a look of triumph.

Pasupathi appeared to be in his mid-50s, with thick glasses, weather-beaten dark pants, a Windbreaker, and a traditional Nepalese *topi* cloth cap. The sun and wind had carved fine lines of wisdom into his face over the years. The Nepalis, I quickly learned, are a friendly and welcoming people, and I struck up conversations with almost everyone.

Pasupathi was eager to tell me about Nepal, so I asked him what he did for a living. “District resource person for Lamjung Province,” he explained. He was responsible for finding resources for the 17 schools in this rural province. I noticed his worn-out tennis shoes. In Nepal, that meant that most of the schools were off the main road and far out on the dirt paths I had spent the last seven hours trekking.

I told Pasupathi that I had always loved school as a child and asked whether Nepalese children were eager learners.

“Here in the rural areas we have many smart children,” he replied with a rapid-fire assessment. “They are very eager to learn. But we do not have enough schools. We do not have sufficient

school supplies. Everyone is poor so we cannot make much investment in education. In this village, we have a primary school, but no secondary school. So after grade five, no more schooling takes place unless the children can walk two hours to the nearest school that teaches grades six and above. But because the people are poor, and they need their children to help with farming, so many of the students stop education too early."

As Pasupathi poured himself tea, he told me more.

"Some days I am very sad for my country. I want the children to get a good education, but I am failing them."

Eager to learn more, I peppered him with questions. I found it hard to imagine a world in which something as random as where you were born could result in lifelong illiteracy. Had I taken my own education for granted?

Pasupathi told me that Nepal's illiteracy rate, at 70 percent, was among the world's highest. This was not the result of apathy on the part of the people, he insisted. They believed in education. The communities and the government were simply too poor to afford enough schools, teachers, and books for their rapidly growing population. His job could be frustrating. Every day he heard about villages that lacked schools, or schools where three children were sharing a textbook. "I am the education resource person, yet I have hardly any resources."

He had many dreams. For example, he wanted to help one village move up from a one-room building in which grades one to five were taught in shifts because the school was crammed into a small space. His enthusiastic voice dropped as he next described the reality of having no budget. All he could do was listen to the requests and hope that one day he could say yes.

Our conversation drew me into his world and incited my curiosity. Here was a potential opportunity to learn about the real Nepal, rather than the trekker's version of the country. I asked where he was headed next. I lucked out. He was leaving in the morning to visit a school in the village of Bahundanda, which was along the trekking route. It was a three-hour walk up steep hills. I asked if I might join him. He agreed. "I would be proud to show you our school. Please meet me here again at seven for tea."

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I DIDN'T EXPECT TO BE IN THE MIDDLE OF THE HIMALAYAS AT THIS POINT of my life. My notions of a serious adulthood didn't include backpacks and hiking boots. But I was doing more than recapturing my lost adolescence when I went to Nepal.

One factor was exhaustion. I had been working at Microsoft for only seven years, but it felt as if decades had passed. I joined the company shortly after graduate school. The period from 1991 through 1998 was one of tumultuous and exciting growth for the technology industry, and for Microsoft. But the only way to keep up was to work crazy hours. My job had an additional complication. I was a specialist in international markets, and as a result I was always trying to be in seven places at once. It was like a game of Twister played on a global scale. *Be in Johannesburg on Friday and Taiwan on Monday, ready to do presentations, take meetings, and do press interviews.*

The job was financially rewarding but full of high pressure and stress.

It seemed as if my mantra was "You can sleep when you are dead and buried."

Seven years in, though, that nagging question continually popped up: Is this all there is—longer hours and bigger payoffs? I had adopted the commando lifestyle of a corporate warrior. Vacation was for people who were soft. Real players worked weekends, racked up hundreds of thousands of air miles, and built mini-empires within the expanding global colossus called Microsoft. Complainers simply did not care about the company's future.

I was, however, increasingly aware of the price I was paying. Relationships—starved of my time and attention—fell flat as a result. Family members grumbled when I canceled yet another Christmas reunion. I was a regular last-minute dropout for friends' weddings. Whenever friends proposed an adventure trip, I would usually have an immovable meeting standing in my way. The company could rely on me, but friends and family could not.

I remember a late-night return to my Sydney flat after a ten-day business trip to Thailand and Singapore. "The answering machine

must be broken," I thought. "The light is not blinking." I push the button anyway. "Beep. You . . . have . . . no . . . new . . . messages," the mechanical voice announced. It might as well have added the word "loser" at the end.

With the software industry doubling every year, and Microsoft fighting to capture market share in every major category, the stakes seemed high enough to justify self-sacrifice. The corporate culture reinforced this mania. It wasn't until I finished a set of meetings with Steve Ballmer, Microsoft's hard-charging, demanding, and voluble second-in-command, that I convinced myself that I had earned a break. Ballmer was in Sydney reviewing our work in Asia. When we finished his business-review meetings, a two-day-long event where Ballmer tended to shout and harangue, a colleague—Ben—suggested we unwind by going to a slide show about trekking in Nepal given by a local adventure travel company.

Seeing those unbelievable mountain ranges squared it away. I was long overdue for a holiday. When the presenter mentioned that the Annapurna Circuit was a "classic trek that takes three weeks, covers two hundred miles, and gets you as far out in the Himalayas as you could imagine," I mentally began booking the time off. Next stop, Nepal. Over a Mongolian hot-pot dinner with Ben, I joked that *maybe* if you went high enough into the Himalayas, you could not hear Steve Ballmer screaming at you.

BACK IN NEPAL, CROWING ROOSTERS WOKE ME JUST BEFORE SUNRISE. The Timex Ironman read six o'clock. I debated snoozing a bit longer before meeting with Pasupathi for tea. The Himalayan dawn was cold; the four-season North Face bag felt like a pizza oven. But excitement over finally being in Nepal won out. I put on a warm thermal layer before leaving the bag.

Fog blanketed the river valley. The lodge's stone patio was deserted. The eight-year-old host delivered a steaming cup of *dudh chia* (milk tea). I clutched it beneath my face. From the battered cardboard menu I asked for a cheese omelet with toast. The boy ran back to the kitchen where his mother was stoking a wood fire.

As I waited for Pasupathi, I studied the day's route on the An-

napurna Circuit map. The trail to Bahundanda followed the Marsy-
endi River. We'd be walking upstream, between the deep canyons
the strong, icy river had carved over centuries of its headlong rush
toward the Indian plain and the Bay of Bengal. The first two hours
of the day's trek looked to be relatively flat, after which we'd ascend
thirteen hundred vertical feet in just under a mile. At the top of that
climb lay Bahundanda, the village where we would visit Pasupathi's
school.

Along with a sizzling omelet, my young host presented the bill
for my stay. I felt guilty over its size. I had been given a bed, a beer,
dinner, breakfast, and unlimited cups of milk tea. Five dollars. Tip-
ping was considered an insult, and I wondered what else I could do
to thank this boy and his family. My musings were interrupted
by Pasupathi, who appeared out of nowhere, wearing the same
clothes he had been in the night before. He said that he was ready
to start moving, so I quickly scarfed down the eggs and grabbed
my pack.

No day that starts with a trek in the morning sunlight can be a
bad day. We walked along the boulder-strewn river. A surprisingly
large volume of water rushed downstream. Green, terraced rice
fields were carved impossibly high into the steep hillside. As the sun
burned off the morning chill, the only sound was that of the river
and two pairs of feet making good time along the dirt trail. All
seemed right with the world.

After two hours of flat terrain, we confronted a steep series of
switchbacks—the approach to Bahundanda. It was the first of the
dozens of difficult ascents I'd experience with burning pain in the
legs over the next few weeks. The village clung to a lofty perch on
the side of the hill, looking down into the river valley.

Pasupathi, twenty years my senior and on his third cigarette of
the morning, was still in front of me. He crested the hill and without
waiting marched toward the school. Children clad in uniforms of
dark blue pants and powder blue shirts ran by us as a clanking bell
signaled the start of the school day. They smiled at and greeted the
foreign backpacker. "Namaste." "Hello, sir."

Pasupathi introduced the headmaster, who offered a tour. The
first-grade classroom spilled over with students. There were 70 in a

room that looked as though its capacity was half that. The floor was packed earth, and the sheet-metal roof intensified the late-morning springtime sun, baking the room. The children sat on rows of long benches, crammed close together. Lacking desks, they balanced notebooks on bony, little knees.

We visited each of the eight classrooms; all were equally packed. As we entered, every student stood, without prompting, and yelled, "Good morning, sir," in perfect English. The headmaster next took us to the school's library. A sign outside the door proudly announced SCHOOL LIBRARY, but inside, the room was empty and the only thing covering the walls was one old, dog-eared world map. It showed, ten years after the fall of the Iron Curtain, the Soviet Union, East Germany, Yugoslavia, and other countries that had ceased to exist. The books were noticeable only in their absence.

I phrased my question in the most polite way possible:

"This is a beautiful library room. Thank you for showing it to me. I have only one question. Where, exactly, are your books?"

The headmaster stepped out of the room and began yelling. A teacher appeared with the one key to the rusty padlock on the cabinet where the books were locked up.

The headmaster explained. Books were considered precious. The school had so few that the teachers did not want to risk the children damaging them. I wondered how a book could impart knowledge if it was locked up, but kept that thought to myself.

My heart sank as the school's treasure trove was revealed. A Danielle Steel romance with a couple locked in passionate and semi-clothed embrace on the front cover. A thick Umberto Eco novel, written in Italian. The *Lonely Planet Guide to Mongolia*. And what children's library would be complete without *Finnegans Wake*? The books appeared to be backpacker castoffs that would be inaccessible (both physically and intellectually) to the young students.

I asked about the school's enrollment and learned there were 450 students. Four hundred and fifty kids without books. How could this be happening in a world with such an abundance of material goods?

Without prompting, the headmaster then said:

"Yes, I can see that you also realize that this is a very big prob-

lem. We wish to inculcate in our students the habit of reading. But that is impossible when this is all we have.”

I thought that any educator who used the word *inculcate* in a sentence deserved to have better teaching materials. I wanted to help, but would it be considered condescending if I offered? The headmaster saved me the trouble of thinking this through. His next sentence would forever change the course of my life:

“Perhaps, sir, you will someday come back with books.”

THE TEACHERS INVITED PASUPATHI AND ME TO “TAKE TEA.” I BEGGED off, insisting that they needed to be back in their classrooms. They insisted harder.

We talked about the library. Two teachers repeated the request for books. “I’d love to help. But in Sydney, where I live, or America, where I am from, I would only be able to collect English books. Would they be useful?”

The grade-eight teacher assured me that these books would be eagerly accepted. The school—as per the government curriculum—taught English from grade one, in addition to Nepali.

Once I nodded and smiled, the floodgates opened. The teachers were not shy in outlining their wish list: storybooks, books about animals, ABCs and 1-2-3s, geography, basic science, colors. I asked if 200 to 300 books would be enough, and the teachers, in chorus, assured me that this would make a huge difference for the school.

One teacher looked skeptical. He asked for confirmation that I would honor my pledge. “Many trekkers come through this area, and many have said that they will help us. But they do not come back and we do not hear from them again.” I assured the teachers of Bahundanda that I would be true to my word. As I left, the school’s English teacher shook my hand. “Please, sir, when you come back with books, you will be very welcome. The children, their heads will hit the ceiling because they will be jumping up and down with excitement.”

I imagined what that day would be like. I pictured loading several hundred books onto the back of a rented yak and returning to a warm welcome. This morning’s hike had been beautiful. How much

more fun would it be if I was anticipating our arrival at the school? I remembered my own childhood excitement every time my parents bought a new Clifford the Big Red Dog or Curious George book and wondered how these students might react to similar brightly colored books.

This image of my return, accompanied by a yak with hundreds of books on its back, burned in my mind.

"I promise you, we will meet again."