

Rickshaw! Rickshaw!

Somehow, the old man tracked us down every night. Just before midnight curfew, when all the bars and restaurants closed for the night, he would wait amongst the armed police officers and taxi drivers that ushered out all the tourists and other late night revelers of Thamel. He shouted at us every time we emerged and then obstinately follow us before finally retreating back from wherever he came.

It took us a few days to realize it was the exact same old man. A lifetime of hard labor had left a topography of sweaty contour lines on his clothes. Lean and thin, as if made from a bundle of rusted wire, he was permanently stooped, and what yellowing teeth remained told us he was probably in the autumn of his life. We avoided him as politely as we could at first, like a sheepish game of tag, until one unbearably cold night, we realized we were completely wrong about him.

Kathmandu's ramshackle collection of Jenga towers aren't made to withstand the winters. Instead, all buildings in the Kathmandu valley are designed to provide relief in the hotter months when one constantly searches for shade and breeze. But when the shade begins to curl your toes beneath themselves, the relative reprieve of the indoors moves outside where people gather around makeshift firepits on the sidewalks. During the colder months, one begins to actively avoid the shade and search for the sunnier side of the street. I had never experienced a winter where I could wear sandals during the day but had to switch to hiking boots at night, where I wore a thin sweater outside but wrapped myself in pastel yak-wool blankets and sleeping bags inside. Coupled with the load-shedding schedule that limited our power to ten erratic hours per day, our house quickly became inhospitable, an ever increasing cocoon of blankets and sweaters to crawl under.

Despite the frigid inconvenience, the ubiquitous breath of winter had one opportune consequence, which was to spend each and every night at one of the bars in Thamel that had constant fireplaces burning. For those nights, we were immigrant squatters in hiking gear sustaining ourselves on stale popcorn and tasteless beer. We lived, ate, and worked around the fire, our fingers and toes stretching and dancing towards the flames.

Close to midnight, when the fires and Wi-Fi were extinguished, shepherded out by the armed Nepali guards that annexed the streets, our courteous seesaw of offers and refusals would begin with the old man. He seemed to always know where we were.

"Rickshaw! Rickshaw!" He gestured after us. At first we responded with smiling "no's" under our breaths, instinctively shook our heads, or politely avoided our eyes. The insistence of his penury made us see the canyon that existed between us, the unfair lottery of birth and circumstance. We didn't want that chasm widened. We explained, "We can walk. We live down the street. It's really no

trouble.” And it honestly wasn’t. We were young and healthy and didn’t want an old man exerting himself for us. We took pity on him and thought we were doing him a favor. But we weren’t at all.

As an off-season downpour caged us in the doorway of a shuttered shop one night, we heard that familiar old yell again. The old man pulled up doused in a garbage bag, his green cap ladling water onto his lap, and once more asked, “Rickshaw? Rickshaw?”

Reluctantly taking up his offer, we squeezed ourselves on the padded seats of his rickshaw. He began cycling uneasily, as if his sinewy legs were no longer up to the task. Refusing our offer to get off and find a taxi, he jumped down from his seat, pushed the rickshaw forward, and climbing back on, and began to pedal. Building momentum with every breath, we seemed to lift off and gallop through the streets. He was only warming up. Jostling us around the neighborhood in a non-existent race, he gave a rapid-fire tour of all the late night restaurants, clandestine bars, and brothels that sprouted at the end of alleys. When he finally stopped close to our home, we paid and tipped him, and he thanked us for helping him feed his children. It occurred to us then that our politeness, our refusal to be driven in his rickshaw this whole time, this collective guilt we have about having another person work hard for us, was depriving him of an opportunity to provide for his family, a chance to be dignified.

That rickshaw cackle welcomed us home every night of our stay. And after a few more rides, we sometimes gave him the night off, sat him in the padded seats he reserves for others, and drove home ourselves. It wasn’t easy work.