

## Condemned Compassion

We see the world through our own illusions. In a sense, we are selectively blind, only seeing what we want to see, omitting the pain of depravity and fear because it is a weight we think is too heavy for our souls to carry. But sometimes we do see through our own illusions. Something breaks through the walls our mind has created, squeezing our hearts and settling itself on our souls. So, we see. We feel. And while we try to shake this new moment from our minds, it ingrains itself in the soul. Call it what you will: a scar, a weight, a truth. But in the end, it is still there. And it changes us forever.

The day was bright, almost pleasant in the vibrancy of an Indian Spring. It was not cold, in the sense the winter winds and early spring rains had passed. Yet it was not stifling from the humidity and the heat that came from summer's proximity to the full force of the sun. But the humid air still clung the clothes to our bodies, and the temperature was just high enough to lead beads of sweat occasionally rolling down a forehead.

We were only visitors at the time. We were not ignorant of life in this strange world, but we were also foreign, accustomed to a very different way of living. My eyes focused on the pieces of history rising from the grass. What I failed to see, or perhaps just did not want to, was the peeing in the streets, the one-armed child pick-pocketing a shop-owner, or the wild dogs fighting behind tin-roofed shacks. How could I have been expected to see it? It was not what we were looking for.

Instead I saw the temples, the history of long ago times when the western images of brightly colored silks, jeweled maharajas, a cross-legged yogi permeating wisdom beneath a Banyan tree, and the vibrancy of festivals for the Hindu deities filled a younger city. I saw the city, but as a visitor, naïve and blind from the chock of a vastly different world. I saw the city, but not for what it truly was.

I was also in a unique position. I was a child, caught in between the simplicity of being young, and the dawning rays of a higher thinking. I remember the temples and palaces were important, but I remember little about when they were built, who lived there, or why they were there. I do remember the rich red of stone, and the intricate designs of flowers and geometric complexities. I remember my awe, and the way the marble floors blended with the beds of flowers and dusty paths. I remember running over the ancient tiles with a smile on my face,

chasing a younger brother whose three-year old form could never outrun me, just as two children may have done a few hundred years previous. But most of all, I remember the girl.

For a moment the illusion of temples vanished and a street girl no older than six years old came through the cracks. I do not know what my mother saw in her. She was not the first beggar child we had seen, nor would she be last. We were not ignorant of extreme poverty. We were already living in a similarly impoverished country. We were used to paper-thin street children, and the sight of people living in shacks clustered so close together it looked like a quilt of tin from above. It was normal to see beggars in the streets. We had come to ignore them. So why was this child any different?

Perhaps it was because the child was no older than me that she penetrated my mother's defenses; a girl who could have just as easily been me if I was born in a different place, in a different circumstance. Perhaps for an instant, my mother thought about the girl's future: the abuse she would suffer, the prostitution, the starvation. Perhaps my mother could not bear it any longer, the sight of hundreds of children slowly chiseling away at her heart's armor.

Whatever the reason, money bled from my mother's heart to the girl's outstretched palm, caked in the grime of New Delhi's streets. As the money left her hand, my mother turned abruptly, casting her eyes from the girl. It was unclear if it was out of shame or the knowledge of the girl's inevitable fate. Most likely it was both.

The girl dashed away without a word, ecstatic from her luck. I looked on content, even as my mother dragged me away. I figured the girl would have a meal now. I was too young to know what would happen. Or perhaps I was just too naïve to realize its inevitability.

"You shouldn't have done that," My Dad told my mother.

My mother was quiet, grimacing in her stagnant pause. Finally, she replied, "I know."

No one else spoke. I could not grasp why a foreboding feeling brewed in the pit of my stomach. I recalled one of the first things my parents had told me upon arriving in South Asia for the first time over a year ago:

*Don't give anything to the beggars.*

*Don't roll down your window when they come to tap on the car.*

*Don't meet your eyes with the street children.*

Of course, I had asked, "why?" But the answer had always lacked an appropriate reason, despite its logic:

*Because it won't help.*

I watched the girl try to pocket the money in the ragged dress she wore, whose colors had long since been faded and covered by India's grime. Two boys emerged from the alley way, as if materializing from the shadows themselves. I could not hear them, but I could tell by the girl's cowering and their hawkish bearing that they were confronting her. I heard shouts, and then everything happened at once.

Seconds of violent fists pounded the girl to the ground. I could not tear my eyes away as the girl curled into a fetal position like the roly-polies I would poke at during my summers in the States. I must have shrieked at the suddenness of it, because my family was alerted to the shifting moment. The memories are fragmented, but I do know my parents froze in the horror of the moment. I remember their eyes, full of guilt, anger, sadness, but not surprise. They turned away, but I could not. I was struck, from both horror and morbid curiosity.

My mother tried to hold me to her chest as we walked to shield me somehow from the scene, but I could still see the girl through the crook in my mother's arm. One of the teenagers held a small glint aloft in triumph. I realized it was the coin my mother had given the girl. The other boy gave the girl a final kick before scampering back into the shadows. By now, my parents had ushered us far away from the scene. I could still see the girl get up, and while I may have imagined it, I saw blood pouring out of her nose. Perhaps I was just looking for evidence of the savagery I had just witnessed. I wondered if the girl was about to cry.

But the girl stood against the ancient palace wall as if nothing had happened. She acted like it was normal. I was then hit with the realization that it was. The girl was just waiting for the next ignorant tourist to show her some semblance of compassion that would do her no good. What other choice did she have?

My family and I continued walking until the girl vanished from my sight. We continued the day, trying to put the moment behind us. Soon enough the brutality began to fade in our minds. We saw more ancient temples and palaces, we ate authentic meals in silk-cushioned chairs, and even over the memories of the girl we found reasons to enjoy the vacation. In some twisted sense, our minds had also dismissed the break in illusion as a sense of normalcy.

In a few days, we returned home to a similarly impoverished country. I still saw the disabled, the poor, and the dirt-caked children tapping on car windows every day. I watched

them suffer in the streets in a cramped city of millions. My parents' words swirled through my mind as I watched them on the way to school:

*Because it won't help.*

Except now these words had meaning. Now when I heard those words, I saw the girl receiving punches from a pair of teenage boys. I saw a child getting beaten for a five-rupee coin, valued at less than 10 American cents. I knew now what my parents' words really meant.

*It won't help. It will just make things worse.*

Even after living in South Asia for four years, we were still no more than visitors. We always had the opportunity to escape the choking smog, the unbearable poverty, and look beyond the filth in the streets to see beauty in the vibrant culture, history, and postcard setting most people only dream of seeing.

But I still saw. I saw too many snapshots of the strange world my family and I were stationed in. I saw moments of love struggle to survive as it was taken by those driven to cruelty by power, fear, and hunger. I saw compassion condemned, and eventually, I too passed it by.