THE DISASTER GYPSIES
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Dedicated to Brenda, my wife,
who fills me with love and wonder.
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Author’s Note

In a handful of instances in the text I have changed the names of individuals I interviewed. This was only done in two types of cases: first, where I thought the safety of those with whom I met with would be placed at risk by using their real names or even properly recording their names in my field notes, and, second, where the frank comments shared with me by officials would place their careers in jeopardy.
SNAPSHOT

Kathmandu, Nepal 2003. The student demonstrations erupted quickly after the royal government hiked kerosene prices. Nepal was already struggling to cope with a harsh Maoist insurgency that had claimed more than 8,000 lives, and a monarchy that often ruled with blunt force. With most people in the countryside living on less than $200 a year, life in Nepal was hard, no matter how you looked at it.

A persistent series of student protests and general strikes had brought business to a crawl. Shops and small factories drew their metal shutters down as Kathmandu’s colorful and usually congested streets were virtually deserted. Throngs of college students and other demonstrators burned old car tires, chanted, and waved homemade banners in the narrow streets. The demonstrations over kerosene prices had taken on a sharper edge after the police shot and killed a prominent student activist.

I wandered into the protest by accident. The students controlled a stretch of roadway running through the middle of their urban campus. A few tires that had burned down to their steel belts smoldered acridly on the pavement. Broken bricks from an earlier bout of stone throwing littered the road. Students milled about. Two blocks in either direction, large phalanxes of policemen in riot gear looked bored and uneasy. The Nepalese police, never the most disciplined, wore helmets and shin guards as they smoked cigarettes. Several leaned against the long wooden sticks, *lathis*, they carried for crowd control.

I walked into the midst of the students. Despite Nepal’s violence, neither the Maoists nor the government had targeted foreigners the way they were
in Iraq or Afghanistan. Even when I had clandestine meetings with Maoist insurgents, they were unfailingly polite. Safety was not the first thing on my mind.

The students grew animated as a man on a motor scooter veered down the street. Bringing traffic to a stop was a pro forma goal of protests, and the students hurriedly launched a volley of stones and broken bricks in the general direction of the misguided commuter. They were not trying to kill him, nor did they seem particularly concerned if they did. The scooter quickly reversed direction, and the students reacted with glee.

Without the incitement of further traffic, the demonstration soon settled to a lull, and I contemplated walking back to my apartment. But the mood among the students changed abruptly, like a shift in wind before a hard rain. The police were becoming active, and the atmosphere of confrontation caused a ripple of adrenalin to pulse through the crowd. Many of the young men scrambled to pick up bricks and rocks as others looked nervously for escape routes. The police were preparing to charge. The students shouted in defiance.

With the police ready to surge forward, I eased a short distance away from the center of the crowd. I stood with my back against the closed steel shutters of a small kiosk. There were students in front of me with a wave of policemen to the left and right. Then, there was chaos. The police made a mad dash toward the protestors, and a shadow of fear and grim determination was plain on their faces. Students threw bricks and stones at the oncoming rush of blue uniforms before turning to flee toward the entrance of their dorm. Several police picked up stones and hurled them back at the protestors.

The police swirled in front of me, beating students sharply with long sticks. Debris rained down from the dormitory above. A cop repeatedly kicked a young man cowering on the ground who tried to protect his face. Too much resistance would ensure that others would join the beating. The police stormed into the dormitory, and the cacophony of shattering windows, breaking furniture, and angry shouts echoed wildly in the building’s cement interior. Four kids, who could not have been more than ten or eleven, appeared on the third-floor ledge of the dormitory. They crouched low, scared and desperate. Several policemen near the dorm’s side entrance threw broken bricks up at the boys, trying to drive them back into the building.

A number of students stumbled back out into the street, blood running down their faces. No arrests were made in the fracas. The entrance to Nepal’s royal palace was only blocks away, and it was clear that the police would use any means to keep the students away from the king’s gate.

With tumult all around, I stood oddly isolated. No one threw bricks at me. One policeman began to order me away, but seeing I was a foreigner, quickly turned his attention elsewhere. A student sidled up next to me, reasoning that he might find shelter in my translucent bubble of westernness. We talked—an island of conversation among the insanity.
“The police are like criminals,” the student complained gasping to catch his breath. “Look at this: they are throwing bricks at children. They do not follow our own laws. Every time you deal with the police or they stop you on your motorbike, you know they just want rupees. The police only want bribes to make money.”

We winced as we watched police pummel a student. “We are supposed to be a democracy. This is not democracy.” The student was studying engineering. He hoped to move abroad. I asked him questions: What did he think about the war with the Maoists? What about King Gyanendra? What would happen if the king did not restore democracy? Was the violence getting worse? The questions were all part of my job. I was supposed to figure out what was happening on the ground in a country at war—even when it meant trying to make sense of the senseless. I was one of the disaster gypsies.

RESTLESS

I never planned to make conflict and disaster my profession. I grew up in a small rustbelt town in upstate New York, and no one in my upper-middle-class family expressed much interest in foreign affairs. My father was a civil engineer who ran a construction company. My mother was a homemaker who had her hands full with five of us.

Curiously, the first disaster came to me. I was in second grade. Heavy spring rains in Elmira caused the cancellation of the last day of classes. Not knowing better, it felt like an unexpected snow day. We rode our bikes through puddles that stretched half a block long, and our backyard became so saturated that we skimmed across the lawn on old pieces of plywood.

The rains kept coming as Hurricane Agnes worked its way north. There were no gale force winds or overturned cars, just more rain than I had ever seen. The Chemung River, which streamed through the center of downtown Elmira, was normally sleepy. During the summer, it looked shallow enough to walk across.

With the rain, the Chemung changed by the hour, and it soon became broad and improbably powerful. The current swept up entire trees, along with coffins from a low-lying cemetery. The tension in our house rose steadily with the water. After learning that we would soon need to boil the tap water, we filled every possible pot and pan with clean water. My parents moved the furniture up to the second floor, and we packed our bags. Despite reassuring words, the queasy feelings of things going wrong were impossible to ignore.

The river ripped away one of the large bridges that connected Elmira’s two halves. It was almost incomprehensible. Dead cattle tumbled along in the filthy brown torrent. Elmira held its collective breath as the floodwaters worked their way steadily up the dikes that lined the streets of downtown.

For part of a rainy afternoon, the river brimmed at the top of the dike like water held in an overfull drinking glass only by its surface tension. And then
the floodwaters cascaded over the cement walls along Main Street, hungrily seeking low ground. It was not long before water was on the second floor of buildings throughout downtown. The president of the United States came on television and called the flood the worst natural disaster in American history.

Our house on Euclid Avenue was about seven blocks from the river, but up a steady rise. The street looked like some strange American Venice with foul water lapping at every front door. Ultimately, we were incredibly fortunate, and the floodwaters stopped three doors down. A vast lake of damaged homes stretched out between our house and the river.

My mother volunteered at the local college campus to assist those made homeless by the flood. There were hundreds of people sleeping on cots, and the Red Cross served hot meals. It was the first of many times that I would see the blank look of people struggling to comprehend the magnitude of their loss. Bags of soggy donated clothes lined one wall. An army helicopter landed right on the college quad. I looked on in awe.

If you were to go to Elmira today and look at the Chemung River, you would not believe it capable of such destruction. No, I did not go into my line of work because of Hurricane Agnes. But those jarring memories of the flood did teach me one thing I did not forget: comfortable lives can fall apart with stunning speed.

More than anything, the travel bug propelled me toward my choice of profession. After four years of doing just enough to get by college with a degree in psychology, travel felt like a solution. I worked construction to save money, bought a good backpack, and hitchhiked across the States and Canada several times. It did not take long before I struck out for more exotic locales including Nepal, Pakistan, and Peru. Like a legion of other shoestring travelers, I crammed into overcrowded local buses with livestock and nauseous children. I ate rice and lentils, stayed in dingy little rooms, and shared stories and beers with fellow wanderers.

I usually traveled alone, or with friends that I met on the road, and the sense of adventure was intoxicating. The occasional discomforts were a small price to pay to see the Himalayas, Hindu Kush, and Andes. There was a feeling of genuine accomplishment in overcoming the anxiety of heading to places that were completely foreign. It was a big, fascinating world.

I became engrossed by the politics and cultures. The immense disparities between the developing world and America were shocking, as was the incredible turmoil of political life. The day I arrived in Peru, inflation was running over 1,000 percent and rebels tried to blow up the president at his inauguration. In Islamic Pakistan, “Death to America” graffiti was splashed on the mud and concrete walls of mountain villages, but all the men wanted to ask me about whiskey, sex, and American women. In Nicaragua, I watched thousands of fervent Sandinistas flood Managua’s central square to commemorate a faded revolution in a city that had been left devastated by an earthquake and a civil war.
After working for a season aboard a small fishing boat in Pelican, Alaska, I decided to return to school for a graduate degree in public administration, largely focusing on international development. Not long after graduating, I landed a job at the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID), an offshoot of the State Department responsible for delivering American foreign aid.

Initially, I worked as a speechwriter for the head of AID. My job was to find ways to explain the importance of foreign aid programs to the American public—a laughably steep hill to climb. Foreign aid had such a bad reputation that one of my coworkers likened the experience to trying to “sell ground glass as baby food.” But I enjoyed the work. While it was easy for the public to demonize foreign aid, immunizing and educating little kids in far-off lands was not such a bad thing to do.

As I settled into my job, I developed a familiar restlessness. Working in the State Department was not always as glamorous as it sounded. The government deserves its reputation for bureaucracy, and the State Department building was a dreary affair that seemed immune from daylight.

The work of our Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance was a noticeable exception. As the name suggested, the office dealt with humanitarian tragedies around the world, both natural and man-made. Whether it was volcanic eruptions in the Philippines or civil war in the Balkans, these were the people that figured out how to get food, clean water, clothes, and medical supplies to those in need. Because disaster relief, by its very nature, needed rapid delivery, the office did not suffer the same bureaucratic constraints that bogged down the rest of AID. In most cases, the office could deliver supplies or money halfway around the world within twenty-four hours. Its staff was younger and more irreverent than that of other offices. They reminded me of people that I might have met traveling. While some found it off-putting, I smiled when they served the ice for their office Christmas party in a body bag.

The office regularly deployed small squads of relief workers—Disaster Assistance Response Teams, or DARTs—to assess the situation on the ground and coordinate aid. DART teams did not deliver assistance directly to disaster victims. Instead, they channeled supplies and funding to groups like the Red Cross, CARE, and the International Rescue Committee. DART teams served as logistical miracle workers, expediting shipments of relief supplies like food, medicine, and plastic sheeting, while working as liaisons with everyone from the U.S. military to private charities. DART team situation reports were an exceptional source of information for Washington policymakers. DART workers often had the best feel for what was happening on the ground during times of anarchy.

When the Rwandan genocide exploded in 1994, I had only been working at AID for a brief time. Knowing that the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance was overstretched, I offered my services. The first question the head of the office asked me was, “Do you know how to drive a stick?” I did, and it was not long before I was on the ground in Rwanda.
After my time in Rwanda, I quickly returned to do stints with other disaster teams. The contrast between the immediacy of relief work and the day-to-day grind of bureaucratic life in Washington was compelling. Over time, I came to lead a curiously divided life: working as a speechwriter in Washington for nine months out of the year while being detailed to disaster teams the rest of the time. As odd as it sounds, I liked going to disasters. I was hooked.

WORLD ON FIRE

I became involved in the disaster industry at a time when it was experiencing its own crisis. Hopes that the end of the cold war would begin an era of peace and stability foundered as conflicts in Bosnia, Somalia, Rwanda, Chechnya, Afghanistan, Colombia, and Tajikistan spun out of control. Fighting erupted in close to fifty nations by the mid-1990s. The violence drove more than 35 million people from their homes. The death toll from this spate of ugly conflicts quickly climbed over 4 million people. Up to three-quarters of the casualties in many of these conflicts were civilians.

The end of the cold war appeared to usher in an age of savagery, a Pandora’s box full of obscene ethnic violence and territorial rivalries. Significantly, virtually all of these wars were taking place within countries rather than between countries. International institutions were poorly equipped to deal with civil wars under the best of conditions. The State Department and the UN’s respect for the old rules of order led to terrible diplomatic indecision as innocent people were slaughtered. Lacking the lodestar of cold war politics, Washington, Moscow, and the world stared dumfounded as country after country imploded.

Less than six years after the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, relief operations cost more than $8 billion each year. U.S. contributions to emergency aid more than quadrupled. Prevention was largely an afterthought. The United States and its allies were unwilling to deploy a handful of armored personnel carriers and a contingent of peacekeepers to prevent the Rwandan genocide in 1994, but then proceeded to spend several billion dollars dealing with the fallout of the catastrophe. The pattern was no different in Bosnia or the other failed states that darkened the screens of CNN.

Aid workers were angry and frustrated. It was as if humanitarian relief was a substitute for resolving conflicts. Instead of decisive diplomacy or military action, millions of refugees had to make due with blankets and rations as their families were killed and their homes destroyed. A colleague described this approach as applying Band-Aids to gunshot wounds.

Equally appallingly, relief workers became targets. In Somalia during the early 1990s, CARE alone had more than forty employees killed, and militias held hostage more than a dozen aid workers for weeks. Hutu rebels killed six Italian relief workers in eastern Zaire in 1995 and left their decimated
bodies as a stark warning to other aid groups. Insurgents butchered five women working for the Red Cross in Chechnya, four of them nurses, in their beds in December 1996. It was the worst premeditated attack on the Red Cross in its 133-year history, and the organization pulled out of Chechnya within days. The UN lost 140 relief workers in a stretch of five years, and hundreds more from private groups were also killed. The scores and scores of relief workers who have been explicitly targeted and killed in Iraq and Afghanistan since the United States invaded those countries are a sad continuation of this trajectory.

In a grisly new calculus, aid workers were now fair game. Many relief workers felt the United States went to incredible lengths to minimize the loss of military lives, but placed less of a premium on civilians. American soldiers wore full body armor and kept close to their bases in most of the places where I worked. Yet, the international community treated the deaths of individuals working for private aid groups as the cost of doing business in a dangerous world. Other than a headline in a hometown newspaper and the grief of families and friends, the requiem for a relief worker was callously brief. Until Iraq, which remains an unusual case, more relief workers and journalists were actually killed in these conflicts than Western soldiers serving as peacekeepers. It had literally become more dangerous to deliver food in a war zone than it was to be a soldier.

Relief groups did what they could. They added security training, upgraded their communication equipment, and treated more areas as off-limits. But short of hiring private armies, this only made a difference at the margins. It was much easier for a warlord to kill an aid worker than a heavily armed peacekeeper. Killing international aid workers became a means to an end, and warring parties saw it as an easy way to scare off continued Western intervention.

Although still distributing aid on a neutral basis, humanitarian relief workers had come to be seen as part of the West. More than ever before, the disaster business had become ensnared in a web of international politics and military force.

TRANSITIONS

By 1996 I had worked on DART teams in Rwanda, Haiti, and Bosnia, and received some formal training in field assessment. I had gained a much better understanding of the industry and its evolution. There was overdue recognition in Washington and elsewhere that the world needed new tools. The system was at a breaking point. More and more countries were in a nether world, somewhere between peace and war, with shaky ceasefires that threatened to disintegrate back into war. These countries had barely functioning governments, huge reconstruction needs, and multitudes of armed fighters still on the scene.
The United States was struggling to deal with such situations, in part because the conflicts often fell somewhere between the need for emergency humanitarian relief and long-term development programs. For example, a DART team could spend tens of millions to bring in water tanker trucks to save people from dehydration and death, but could not legally fund repairs to wells that would ensure these people had clean water for years to come. A DART team could deliver emergency medical assistance, but could not rebuild hospitals. Emergency funding could be used to feed refugees, but could not help create the jobs that would encourage them to return home.

By the same token, traditional development programs were long-term endeavors, with planning and budgets that required a horizon of years. Most development workers were not comfortable operating in hazardous environments, and they lacked the ability to move quickly and flexibly like a DART. In response, AID established an Office of Transition Initiatives in the mid-1990s to deal with countries trying to emerge from conflict. Like the DART teams, transition assistance was built around the idea of deploying small groups of people able to spend money quickly and effectively on the ground. However, in contrast to humanitarian assistance, which was supposed to maintain strict neutrality, transition programs were explicitly political. Transition programs demobilized former fighters by giving them jobs if they would turn in their weapons. Transition programs helped establish independent local newspapers and trained political parties in how to operate in a democracy.

Transition programs were new, sometimes controversial and usually understaffed. Having become friends with some of the people working in the office, I was soon able to do fieldwork in both Sri Lanka and Papua New Guinea in 1997 and 1998. In many ways, transition programs were an even more interesting challenge than DART teams because they required understanding the dynamics of a conflict rather than just its symptoms. Transition work required getting under the hood of the political, ethnic, and historical forces driving the violence.

Given the lead in designing a program in Sri Lanka—a country that had long suffered through a terrible civil war—I learned everything I could about the place. I was new, enthusiastic, and more naïve than I should have been. Although the program eventually fell apart when the war again intensified, I relished immersing myself in studying conflict. I also realized, despite the size of the U.S. government, there were not many people who got out from behind their desks and learned what was really taking place on the ground. Diplomats stayed within the cocoon of capital cities and cocktail parties.

After leaving AID, I worked for two years at the State Department and again war quickly became the central topic. Only a month into my new job, the United States and Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic lurch into war over Kosovo. NATO launched an intensive bombing campaign against Yugoslavia. Milosevic drove more than 800,000 Kosovar Albanian refugees into neighboring countries and NATO contemplated a ground invasion. I