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**From Dawn to Dusk**  
**A Day In The Life of a Nepali Child**

The first opaque strands of sunlight bite through the morning dew and into my room. The smell of cooking fires and spices. The braying of a goat. Another day begins, stubborn and worn out. I am late. The morning has awakened without me, leaving me behind to face Grandmother's harsh words and Father's slap. Soft shadows fill the small room and the sleeping figures of the littler ones, my sister and brothers, huddle on the floor around me. Little Chitra, my younger sister of nine years, and the boys, Dilip and Ravi, are curled up on straw mats near the fire, their sleeping forms seeming to draw the last traces of warmth from the coals. Sleeping on the floor leaves me with aching joints and chilled bones but this is nothing new.

I roll stiffly onto my side bleary eyed and shivering. Immediately I know I have over slept, because the sun is already peaking through the window. Quietly I pad to the door, small hands delicately pulling my hair back into a ponytail. Lifting the large wooden bucket by the door, I begin my daily journey down the winding path to the brook.

I am always first to wake, it is my job to carry the water to the house each day before the day has begun. It is my favorite job. It is my favorite time of day, when everything is quiet except for the birds song and I can imagine that nothing is wrong or ever will be again. I can pretend I am the only person alive. I can escape.

The long walk down the crimson path finally comes to a patch of trees, and to the warble of the little creek just beyond, my favorite music. I dip the bucket into the clean cool water; next I carefully wash my hands, face and feet. Balancing the load on my head, I slowly make the long walk back up the hill. One foot in front of the other, lining my back heel up with the front of my large toe, staring at my feet and the clouds of red dust rising around them. I can feel my dark neck arching toward the beautiful blue sky while my eyes concentrate on the path ahead. My mother, Vidya or Ama as we all call her, calls to me from the door. I do not look up, but speed up my pace slightly.

The rice terraces below are now bathed in sunlight as I begin to boil the water, careful not to burn my hands, which I have done too many times before. “You child, are late,” Ama, says under her breath as she kneads the flour and water to make flat bread. She looks at me with a mock frown and continues her work, smiling.

I giggle, though only slightly, and hurry to pour tea into a clay mug for grandmother. Baby Jafar wails and I hurry to hush him. Grandmother hates his crying and tends to blame me whenever he will not be quiet. Jafar is smelly and very whiny and howls mercilessly when no one is paying attention to him. Still, he is only a baby and though annoying is also adorable, something to care about.

Grandmother lies huddled on her mat in the corner of the back room. Her skin is leathery and wrinkled like a baby bird's, but her scowl is as harsh as a raven's glare. I set the mug down beside her before hurrying away, hoping to avoid reprimand. Father snores on the mat across the room and I tiptoe past. Jafar sobs into my shoulder and I rub his head of curls hushing him over and over. I set him besides Ama on the kitchen floor and gently begin waking Chitra and the boys. The kitchen is smoky and bathed in dull sunlight. The fire burns and the hut feels too warm, too crowded.

I rest my head against the window listening to the crow of a rooster, and watch the goats nibble a tree as yesterday's laundry blows in the wind. Chitra tugs at my elbow. I look down at her little face and smile, if not to make her feel better than maybe to help myself feel better. I can smell the flat bread, but I know already there will be none for me. Although my stomach aches, I have learned to ignore it. I know all too well how to chew sticks and trick myself into feeling well nourished, and I also know that women are the last to eat and the first to starve. When food is scarce it is my stomach that must go hungry and there is no point crying over that. That is simply how things are.

The kitchen's smoky and my eyes burn as I help my Ama make the flat bread. Jafar kicks and screams in Chitra's lap until finally I make him eat his breakfast of flour, water, and salt. He giggles and smacks his fat lips as Chitra looks on hungrily. She too realizes there will be no breakfast for us girls this

morning. Chitra is only nine and still a child; and everyday her little eyes grow harder, more severe.

Father is awakened by the smell of breakfast and Jafar's screams; he strides heavily into the kitchen. My father is tall and strong with a beard as dark as the bottom of a well. Chitra and I lower our eyes, neither of us wanting to be on his bad side today. His eyes, however, are only for the food and he pays no one much attention. My father is quiet and his moods are often as dark as his beard, with a quick hand and hard blow. He works in the village as a carpenter of sorts leaving Grandmother, Ama and the rest of us children to mind the farm. He was the first to agree to selling Kirti for only 1,000 rupees, and I'm afraid he wouldn't hesitate at selling me for less.

Jafar is squirming again. I put him on my back and begin my work. As soon as I step outside, Bumari, Bupti and Bashu, my three hens, crowd around squawking noisily and pecking at my feet. I throw them what's left of the grain and they peck indignantly at it, their feathers slick with dew. As they eat, I look down the hill at the terraces overflowing with vegetables and rice and at the many houses exactly like ours, their wooden roofs looking exhausted and worn out. Four girls are walking to school; they wear white shirts and little blue skirts and are skipping as if they haven't a care. Then again, perhaps they don't.

Someday I hope to go to school like those girls. Someday I, too, want to wear my hair in braids and skip to school and not have to worry about another

beating from father or whether or not I shall eat tonight. But in the back of my mind, I know that no matter how I may wish I will always have to worry about whether I will starve today, or if tomorrow I will be sold by my very own family. The best I can hope for is a husband who will not beat me more than necessary, a small dowry, many children, and to live through the next week.

The goats nibble at the stiff laundry blowing in the breeze. It's the wind that I grew up listening to. It chilled me to the bone at night as monsters chased me from nightmare to nightmare. It is the breath of the Himalayas, the Nepalese nights and dawns all in one. It is my Ama's voice and the shriek of my grandmother. I close my eyes and hold my breath. I let the wind blow away my bruises and father's fists on my skin. Kirti always said that the only important noise was that of the wind. I wonder if she is listening to it now.

Jafar is heavy and the cloth of his sweater is rough against my neck. As I walk, he bounces up and down, his sleeve chaffing the back of my neck. My next chore is feeding the goats, and it is the job I hate most. The goats are loud and pushy and always try to eat my dress. I do not complain however, it is my duty.

I hurry to finish feeding our goats; it will soon be time to begin the rice harvest, a task that I dread. The sun is high in the sky now and it is warm though nothing like the heat of the monsoon season. It is September and the great celebration of Indra Jatra has just ended along with the monsoons. Indra

Jatra is the celebration of the Lord Indra, God of rain and King of Heaven; it lasts for eight days and is celebrated by both the Hindu and Buddhist religions. Nepal has many celebrations and festivals, but Indra Jatra is one of my favorites. It marks the end of the monsoon season and the promise of the harvest season. It lasts for eight days and is full of festivities and wonderful traditions.

Now the harvest season is finally come; it is a bittersweet feeling. The long hot and wet months of the monsoon are gone and it is time to reap our rewards, but there is the threat of the winter close behind and the profits from the harvest will not last forever. I know that if the harvest is not plentiful I will be forced to follow in Kirti and Ajit's footsteps.

For the meantime, however, I must concentrate on what is expected of me now. I make my way down the path to the rice terraces thick with the heavy stems of the rice plants, ready to be picked. The bases of the stems are yellow and the tops droop lazily, this is a sign that they are ripe. Grandmother, Ama and the little ones have already begun the hard work, they bend and slice the stalks with ease and speed using sharp dangerous knives and sickles before throwing the harvested crops into the huge woven baskets on their backs.

My family owns only a small plot of land, with room for only a few small terraces of rice. We live on a small hill that slopes gently up away from the village below. It is as if the small village nestles along the base of the little

mountain that is my home. Many others live on the small green mountain and on the steeper, larger ones behind. These mountains make up the larger Kathmandu Valley, Kathmandu is not so far away, nor is the city of Bhaktapur.

The rice terraces are about three feet wide and drop about a foot down into the next terrace. Our house sits just above them nestled behind a small patch of tea trees and bushes. The house is balanced on two wooden poles at the front, jutting out about two feet from the uneven ground. Beside the house grows a large chestnut tree where I used to play with Kirti. On the other side is Ama's small garden, and beyond that the small wooden outhouse. The plants grow thick all around me, freshly nourished after the recent monsoons.

I swing Jafar around to my front so that I may strap the large basket used for harvesting onto my back. I fall in besides Ama and immediately begin work. I hunch over, Jafar's weight pulling me forward and straining my back, as I carefully slice through stem after stem of rice shoot. The blade of the scythe is sharp and the handle leaves splinters in my hand. Every so often I slip and a fresh wound is added to the many that cover my arms hands and legs.

It is already midday and the sun is high in the sky, it's rays beating down onto our backs. Sweat trickles down my cheeks, stinging my eyes and chapping my lips. However, I do not dare stop to wipe it away. I know that if we do not get most of the rice in by tonight, Fathers fist shall seek me out first. Jafar grows bored and hot and begins to wail and squirm. Ama nods at me signaling

for me to put him down, and I untie him from around my neck with a relieved sigh. Grandmother glares at me and I quickly return to my job as Ama comforts Jafar and lays him in the shade of a nearby tree. We work in silence for hours, our backs ache from the strain of bending for so long, but I do not complain. Even little Ravi who is only four is quiet as he solemnly slices the rice and places them in the basket on my back. He is too small to carry one of his own but is still expected to work. I, too, was working in these very same fields at the age of four and have been ever since. My stomach churns from lack of food but I bite my tongue and keep going, knowing that the more rice we get in today the more generous Ama will be with dinner.

By the time we finish for the day, the sun is already sinking low and Father will be home soon. We lay the rice in the small shed beside the house where it will be safe for tonight. Although there seems to be plenty of rice I do not know if it will be enough. I look at Grandmother's face for a clue but I see none. This rice will determine whether I will be here come next monsoon.

I hurry to lock the goats in their pen, my back still throbbing from the day in the field. My hands are bloody and sore, and my feet damp and mud covered, but I ignore this and continue to hurry to finish my chores. The sun is sinking slowly, bathing the landscape an inky blue. I hurry to make my second trip to the brook, bucket in hand.



As I walk down the path I see the same four girls I saw earlier skipping home from school. I stop and stare as they laugh and giggle, shout and squeal. I want to laugh like that and be loud and skip. But Father always says that children should not be loud, and that laughing is something only the rich have the privilege of doing. So, instead I bow my head and shuffle the rest of the way to the brook, careful not to look back.

As I boil the water, Ama says that next week is when Kirti is due to return, but secretly I fear that Kirti is not coming home, not ever again. A woman in the village whispered to me a rumor, a rumor about what they really use the girls from the little villages for. She says that they sell them to people in India. Bad people who make them do terrible things. I cannot begin to imagine what is happening to my big sister, but I know this, I will most definitely never see her again.

Father returns home later than usual but happy with the harvest so far. I just hope it stays that way. My home is my home no matter how father beats me or how hungry my stomach becomes, and I do not ever want to leave.

The night comes quiet and solid, seeping into the corners of every room. I scrub the small tin pot Ama uses to cook rice. Tomorrow I shall rise with the sun and not sleep until the moon is high above the Himalayas. Perhaps tomorrow it will be time to leave my home, my Ama. Perhaps tomorrow shall be my last tomorrow, I cannot know, I can only continue.