

One Deep Breath

Award-winning National Geographic Traveler Essay, based on a volunteering trip to Mother's Teresa's orphanage in Chennai, India

The air is thick and murky. Sienna clouds choke my lungs and I cough black dust. As soon as I step out of the pattering rickshaw, I spin around and realize that I am alone. Alone in the subcontinent, a crying nation long forgotten by the bastardizing effects of the British Empire. The India of Gandhi and Mother Teresa is covered in a dusty layer of oppression and despair.

Two nuns open a squeaky gate and soon I find myself in a small, dark room. I slip off my dusty Nikes and kneel in silence in front of a tiny altar. Tamil hymns and prayers echo off the thick walls, candle light flickers, and

I take my only deep breath of the day.

The song ends and we walk from the peaceful chapel into the main complex of the orphanage. In a shadowy corner, a little girl sits humbly. She is 16, but the poverty of malnutrition has robbed her of an adolescence.

While the nun's back is turned, the girl grabs my hand and pulls me down a narrow hallway. In front of us is a waist-high gate that protects the entrance to a nursery. Twenty beautiful white cribs are lined up in neat rows, and tiny babies in blue and pink pajamas sleep peacefully under a warm breeze.

The girl softly reaches her hand through the slats in the gate. She points into the beautiful room and a tear rolls down her cheek. I suddenly realize that the sleeping babies in the back nursery will be adopted. The

nun catches up with us and guides me away from the idyllic nursery, without time to contemplate what I've just seen.

In an upstairs room, little boys squirm on their backs and cry out, their muscles too weak to sit up. I approach one crib, and as soon as I place a hand on the little boy's protruding stomach, he is instantly soothed. I immediately think of the little children in the secret nursery, and wonder how they sleep so peacefully in the midst of all the chaos. Maybe they know they have a future. Maybe they've already forgotten the day they were left at the doorstep of the sisters' orphanage.

I take a shallow breath and tears come quickly to my eyes. Goosebumps cover my arms and legs, despite the sweltering humidity. This may be the first time in my life I feel truly alive. Thoughts of the life I left behind slip away, and I suddenly realize that this is real life, this is real emotion.

As the day slips away and the sun begins to drop into the red earth, I have to say goodbye. As I close the gate behind me, I wave goodbye to the nuns, and silently admire their dedication and faith in a project that has no visible end.

Every day I still think of them, from thousands of miles away, and every day, I lose that deep breath again.