



# Stand in the Traffic

A Himalayan Adoption Story

Kate Saunders

**MADVILLE**  
P U B L I S H I N G

Lake Dallas, Texas

Copyright © 2020 by Kate Saunders

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, digital scanning, or other electronic or mechanical means, without prior written permission of the publisher. While all events of this memoir are true, individuals' names have been changed to protect their privacy.

FIRST EDITION

Printed in the United States of America

Requests for permission to reprint material from this work should be sent to:

Permissions  
Madville Publishing  
P.O. Box 358  
Lake Dallas, TX 75065

Front Cover Photograph: Kathmandu, Shutterstock Royalty-Free License.

Cover Design: Jacqueline Davis

Photos courtesy of: Kate Saunders

ISBN: 978-1-948692-22-9 paperback, 978-1-948692-23-6 ebook

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019937659

worked well, and Leena and I developed our own hybrid English/Nepali language, often using hilarious mime to bridge the gap.

I've lost an earring, a dangling silver leaf. Under normal circumstances, this wouldn't upset me, but I'm holding some of my personal items especially close, despite my attempts to practice nonattachment. This pair of earrings feels like yet another piece of myself lost forever.

I try to tell Leena about the missing earring by showing her the remaining one.

"Yes, Madam," she answers with a bobblehead nod, and I'm hopeful she'll find it.

Jack is having a challenging morning with Devi, so when it's time for Leena to go to the market, she takes Devi with her.

"Why does *she* get to go?" Jack complains.

"Because it would be hard for me to talk to you if you went along," I smile at him, trying to soften the edge. "Don't pout. You know Leena will bring you something sweet. Come on up to the terrace."

Jack is struggling to enjoy his new sister, to say the least. He'd imagined her to be his protégé, his best friend, his partner in crime, Robin to his Batman. But she is none of these things. She breaks his few toys, tears pages from his books, writes on his school papers, gleefully squeezes his juice box out on the floor. She is a perfect brat, and she's driving him crazy.

Spreading a blanket on the terrace, we stretch out to watch the cotton ball clouds float by while I reassure him that everything is okay; this is just how it goes between brothers and sisters sometimes.

"How would you know? *You* don't have any brothers or sisters," he challenges.

"Because *I'm* the mom and *I* know everything!" I reply in an equally bratty tone. "You know, as the older brother, you have more responsibility. It's up to you to do the right thing, even if that means walking away. That doesn't mean she wins, it's about

learning to live together, and sometimes there are things you just have to let go of and surrender.”

“Surrender? Like in a battle? No way. I don’t wanna do that!”

“The thing is, when you surrender to some of those little things, the big things don’t seem quite so big, and before you know it, there aren’t as many of them to bug you.”

“But then she gets away with it! She can do whatever she wants!”

“That’s how it looks on the outside buddy, but really, how you feel inside, that’s what matters most,” I console. “When you let that stuff go, it’ll feel a lot better than constantly fighting. Surrender isn’t a bad thing, it’s simply saving yourself. You win by not letting her make you nuts. Remember what Spiderman says? ‘With great power comes great responsibility.’”

He looks at me suspiciously.

“If you increase your level of responsibility, like picking up your books, you are surrendering to the reality that if Devi gets her hands on them, they will probably get damaged. Instead of being stubborn, expecting *her* to change because it’s wrong to tear up books, surrender to the reality, increase your responsibility, and you both win. Devi won’t be tempted to do the wrong thing, and you won’t be angry because your stuff was ruined. Everybody wins.”

Jack glares at me, arms crossed, sulk in full swing, but I can tell he’s thinking about it, hating for me to be right. The gate below clank clunks, and Jack is disgusted our alone time is being interrupted. Moments later, Devi bumbles out to the terrace and body slams me.

“Nice surrender, Mom,” Jack chides as I lie on my back under the weight of a victorious Devi. I laugh and wiggle as she giggles with delight. Then I notice, her ears are pierced. Leena is at the door, smiling widely, proud of her accomplishment.

“*Raamro, raamro,*” she chirps, showing off Devi’s earrings as I try not to look shocked. A few weeks before, I had asked Leena about getting Devi’s ears pierced, since they had obviously been pierced before, but now the holes had closed. I guess when I showed her the earring earlier in the morning, she thought I wanted her

to get Devi's ears pierced. Now it's my turn to practice surrender, what's done is done, and I need to let go of the missed milestone. Besides, I didn't have to listen to a single squawk or scream. Surrender is okay with me.

"What? She got earrings?" Jack yelps. "I want my ears pierced, too!"

"What?" I ask, surprised. Jack mentioned his interest to me a few times, but I thought it was just because he was noticing that many of the local boys had their ears pierced, just like the girls.

"If she gets to wear earrings, then I should, too."

I see the determination in his eyes, like when he was four and wanted a haircut, and he wanted it right then. I was busy at the store and told him I would make an appointment, but he was tenacious. He waited until my back was turned, then scaled the front counter, grabbed a pair of scissors, and right there, with customers waiting to put down their purchases, he started chopping. As a crowd of locals grew to watch the show, I played cool Mom, after all, it was only hair and said, "You know, buddy, you're doing a great job, and I think you should go with that look. Come in the bathroom and see how you're looking so far."

Shocked by my easy-going attitude, he let me pluck him off the counter and carry him to the bathroom, leaving a confused cashier to clean up the mess and weigh the next customer's vegetables. I stood him on a milk crate in front of the mirror and said, "Here's the deal, you give yourself the best haircut you can, and when you're done, it'll be my turn, and I'll get to shave it, okay?"

"Yeah!" he exuberantly agreed and was off, chunks of hair falling to the floor.

Now I feel like I'm in a similar situation. I've done my best to raise Jack to be a kind and compassionate person, not a boy or a girl, only wearing certain color clothes, or only playing with certain toys. Still, this decision about the earrings is challenging my parenting worldview, but, how can I say no? No big deal, just little holes in his ears that can close up; it's not like he's getting a tattoo.

"Okay," I sigh, giving in to my boy prince.

"What? Okay? Did you say okay? You said okay, didn't you? You said okay! *Didi, mero ama* say okay!" Jack bounces around

the terrace like he's won a grand prize, and I wait for confetti to shower us from above.

Leena leads the way to where she'd taken Devi, assuring me it was the place for the best price. I can always count on Dinesh and Leena to get the lowest rates, because expats are blatantly charged significantly more than locals. Considering the difference in the exchange rate from dollars to Nepali rupees, I don't mind the sliding scale, and am always happy to get a discount.

As we walk downtown, Jack starts to get nervous, asking Leena, "Will it hurt?" and "Did Devi cry?" To which she answers "yes," and "no," the second answer clearly more bothersome than the first. He debates getting one or both ears pierced, as is customary for the boys in our neighborhood, carefully weighing his options. The closer we get to the jeweler, the more he looks like he might turn tail and run. He takes my hand and asks, "Mom, if I get my ears pierced, will you get yours, too?"

"Mine are already pierced—this one twice. I don't need any more holes in my head." I joke. "You know, you don't have to do this; you can change your mind, or we can come back another day." I offer, secretly hoping to abort the mission.

He eyes Devi, looking down at him from her perch on Leena's hip. "No, I'm doin' it. But you should at least get that other ear pierced again, they need to be even."

"Okay, I'll get the other done. Are you satisfied Mr. Misery-loves-company?"

"All right!" he exclaims, the spring back in his step as we reach the door of the shop labeled "jeweler."

We step inside what is little more than a concrete closet on the ground floor of a large, multi-use building. A jumble of jewelry in a glass case looks like a scattered collection of vending machine prizes, minus their little plastic bubbles. Leena explains to the shopkeeper that Jack and I are here to get our ears pierced, and he smiles widely. Jack's anxiety reignites, so I volunteer to go first, so he can see how it's done, and, hopefully, how little it hurts.

Courageously stepping up to the stool, I take a seat and the jeweler wipes my ear with a grubby rag wet with alcohol, then

marks the spot on my lobe with a purple felt tip marker. I sit still as a statue waiting for the pop of the gun, but all I feel is cold metal, then hear a loud click, and realize the gun is hand powered, like a giant hole punch. Jack is amazed and ready for his turn.

Sitting proudly on the stool, he watches the jeweler mark his ears and heavily considers the location of each dot, eventually offering stoic approval. Then, in one last bit of panic, he turns to me and confesses, “Mom, I think they’re gonna have to give me the knockout gas!”

He closes his eyes and grips my hands as the cold metal of the gun meets his ear. At the point of impact, he flinches, but it’s already over. As if mentally debating how to react, he lifts his hand to his ear and wails, low and miserable, like an angry cat.

“I just want one, Mom! One is fine. I’m done.” and he jumps off the stool to head for the door, while reaching up to protect his virgin ear.

“Here, let me see,” I intercept him before he can escape. Clear of the gun-toting jeweler, he drops his hands so I can admire the new earring.

“Fabulous!” I compliment, then realize, it’s in his right ear. Now, I don’t want to make a big deal of this, and I’m certainly not going to try to explain the social signals men convey when only their right ear is pierced; I just know I need to come up with a way to convince Jack to get the other ear pierced, and quick.

“You know, you really should get the other one done as long as we’re here. Just get it over with.”

“Nu uh, no way. One is enough.”

I say to him, “Well, you know Jack, guys with both ears pierced really look a lot cooler. Crazy Uncle Mike has both of his ears pierced.” I say, reminding him of one of his surrogate fathers, now guiding kayak trips in Alaska. “Really, I can just see you, ten years from now, telling some cute girl about getting your ears pierced in Kathmandu. It will sound so much better if you get both done. I mean, anyone can just have one ear pierced, but two? Wow. *Super cool.*” As I babble, I wonder, *What bizarro world have I slipped into that I am lobbying for my child to get his ears pierced?*

“Maybe,” he considers. “But you have to get another one, too.”

“But I have both of my ears pierced, two times. Look, there isn’t any more room, my ears are too small,” I bend down for him to examine.

“Well, something else then. Your bellybutton. Those look awesome, like Eliza’s!” He daydreams of his favorite deli worker whose t-shirt was always a little too small, revealing the small silver loop in her navel.

“Not a chance. There’s no way he’s getting that thing anywhere near my belly button. Besides, it’s probably illegal here.”

“Okay, then,” he says thinking, finger to temple, like Pooh. “Your nose! You have to pierce your nose!” He cries out triumphantly, happy to even the piercing score.

“I don’t think so. I don’t want something stuck in my nose all the time. Yuck!”

“Aww, come on. All the women in Nepal have their noses pierced. Why not you?”

He has me. Feeling the strain of battle, I surrender to a souvenir I think I can live with. Leena advises the jeweler, visibly delighted, and he goes to a special drawer and takes out what appears to be just another post earring. Then he brings it to me, as if he’s offering me a great treasure, laying it delicately on the faded black velvet tacked to a piece of cardboard. It’s a hideous fake gold heart with an extra thick post. I try to make the appropriate noises and facial gestures to convey approval and he smiles, happy to please, the few teeth he has left gleaming in his gummy mouth as he nods excitedly. Then, to my horror, he takes out a large file and starts to sharpen the end of the earring.

Frantically I look to Leena, whispering, “Is this going to hurt?”

She bobblehead smiles and laughs. “Oh, yes, Madam!”

“Wait, wait . . . Maybe you don’t understand.” I point to my nose, “This. *Aya?*” The Nepali word for ouch.

She giggles again. “Oh, yes! Yes, *dedi aya!*” Very much.

Great. Now Jack’s memory of this day is going to be watching his mother cry while the jeweler sticks giant pliers up her nose. Looking to Jack for a reprieve, I see the deal is done. I swallow hard



and take my seat on the stool, determined not to flinch. At the moment of impact, my face feels like it is going to explode. Tears sting my eyes, and I squeeze them shut, walking past Jack, gasping, “Your turn, buddy.”

“Are you okay, Mom?”

“Just stings a little,” I choke out, stifling a scream.

Jack bravely takes his seat for the final family piercing of the day, and I look around for the portal back to my pre-piercing life.

“Your turn, Leena,” I joke and pay the eager jeweler. As we walk home up the big hill, Leena giggles the whole way, mercilessly mocking and teasing me. “*Aya, Madam?*” she asks, then collapses into a fit of uncontrollable guffaws. Devi thinks she is hilarious, and readily imitates her. Jack is already looking forward to showing Sarresh his new brand of Nepal. I’m distracted by the giant heart protruding from my rapidly swelling nose.



“Kate, is there any chance you can get Dinesh to watch the kids tonight? I have absolutely fabulous plans for us. Tell me you can come,” Nora pleads into the scratchy phone.

“Hang on, Dinesh is in the garden picking greens for dinner.” So far, Nora’s attempts at wild nights out have been a bit of a flop, more often than not featuring drunken trekkers, although the night we ended up three-girls-in-a-tub had been worth the risk. I’m intrigued, and Dinesh kindly agrees to watch the kids.

“Wear something nice,” she sisterly snaps, bringing me to attention.

*Something nice?* Clearly, she has me confused with someone else. I do my best to pacify her and pull out my least worn wardrobe items, shaking out the wrinkles. Nora arrives in a private car just after seven. She’s elegant as ever in all black, with a colorful silk scarf flowing behind her dark mane of hair. I slide on my battered sandals and hop down the steps, feeling like the girl next door, invited out of pity by one of the cool kids.

“Okay, so here’s the deal,” Nora whispers rapid fire as she