

Eaten Alive by Birds

Somewhere in Himachal Pradesh, India

by Nick Mistretta

Inevitably, one of the first things a fellow traveler will ask you is, how long have you been out. I remember well that feeling, in the very beginning, of being a novice. More than a novice, though, like a fetus. Like a non person who was just starting a new life, surrounded by those in the know. I knew nothing and it showed. I've been traveling two weeks or three weeks, I would say. But all those I met seemed to have been backpacking for many months and some for many years. They had what I wanted, that experience, and I was envious of them. But you never feel as deeply as you do in the beginning. Every single experience, good or bad, was new to me. And this made everything feel like more than it was. Life was like a rollercoaster then. It was all so magnificent and overwhelming, but it was *this* that made every single moment special. Nothing went unnoticed, unfelt. I would later learn that this feeling, the brute strength of it, would eventually fade away. And for this reason, I am quite certain that my fellow travelers were envious of *me*.

I was growing up fast in this new life of mine, but I still had so much to learn, such as navigating through my first squat toilet experience. I awoke at 6am after maybe an hour of sleep. My eyes drooped, my body ached and sagged. My room had no bathroom, so I went to the communal one outside. I opened the door and saw a sight I would see so many times but never really come to understand. There was a hole in the floor, and built around the hole was a porcelain structure about half a foot high with what looked like foot pedals where a person was supposed to stand. It looked dangerous, at the very least awkward. Why go to the trouble of building anything if all there is to do is squat over a hole? And why, if building something over the hole, not fashion it into a seat? This perplexed me then and still does. But I was tired and excited to get back on the bike, so I did my best and did it quickly and awkwardly and tried hard as I could, successfully too, to not shit on myself or slip and crack open my head. Of course, there was no toilet paper. Only a pail of brown water to clean myself with. Essentially the ass juice of those that came before me.

Isn't travel romantic?

The sun was just rising and the whole scene draped in a soft aqua morning tint that made me hopeful for another great day on the bike. But by 7am I was out of water, dripping with sweat and huffing and puffing the bike up a mountain. I could see the winding road laid out before me, stretching to the clouds like a super snake coiled from valley to peak. I could see it was going to be a rough day. Around 10am I came to the first of several small villages. I desperately needed water but found only Coca-Cola. I drank one down and ordered another, becoming more dehydrated as a result of the caffeine.

By noon my legs were moving on will alone, and the nerves above my shoulder blades screamed with pain from the hunchback pushing posture I had assumed. I had long given up pedaling, and the thrill of the previous day was lost in a cloud of mental and physical anguish. The sun became inescapable. My mouth was dry, my tongue like sandpaper. It was about 3pm when I came to another tiny village, which also had no bottled water. There was an antique water pump in the center of the village and I walked over to investigate. After a few pumps on the handle, I knelt down and watched helplessly as the brown water filled my plastic bottle. I casually

tossed in two purifying tablets, then two more and took a big sniff. Then I stood up and noticed that a few townspeople had taken an interest in me. They looked truly horrified, worried perhaps, mumbling to themselves and shaking their heads. Wondering what to do with my big stiff corpse should I drink the brown water. Can we bury him behind that boulder, they wonder? I quickly poured it out then decided to throw away the bottle, too. I walked to the nearest shopkeeper and ordered two citrus sodas, three oranges and some cookies, then sat down completely deflated. I was still a long way from my destination, which was also the next town on my map. After slicing through an orange, I looked up to find what looked like the entire village approaching in a big circle with zombie urgency and glazed donut eyes. Some were close enough to touch me, others were fingering the bike. The old woman who sold me the oranges pinched my Swiss army knife and began cutting tomatoes. It's a strange thing to have a village of people staring at you for 20 minutes with no change in expression or any words spoken. Like they were watching television outdoors. Waiting for me to perform for them, sing a little ditty, shake my ass to some Kool & The Gang. I got up, retrieved my knife and thanked them all for freaking me out.

I would have sworn it impossible but the road conditions grew worse and the incline steeper. Each time I approached a bend I anticipated the road reaching its peak and winding back down the other side. I prayed out loud for this, pleading with God to toss me a freaking bone. And yet with each corner rounded, the path continued to reach skyward. My body was shutting down, and my mind had begun to tip off its axis. I was reduced to a blubbering idiot talking to God with weepy desperation. Making promises I knew I couldn't keep. I quit pushing the bike and dropped to the ground. I couldn't go more than 10 minutes without having to take a break, and it was really slowing me down. I was lying on my back, thinking about the sweet release of death when ...

"Walk ... walk ... walk"

I noticed several large birds flying circles overhead, inspiring me to keep moving. Or perhaps arguing amongst themselves over the tastiest body parts. Their barking sounded like they were saying "walk" and it was starting to make me itch. They were really pushing my buttons, these birds. I love animals, even the ones that aren't delicious, and would never think to harm one. But I must say that for a not-so-brief moment, what I wanted more than anything else in the world was a big god damn gun. And a bullet vest. Rambo goes to India. Bird hunting! *Bing. Bang. Blotto!* I was about to crack or had already, it being difficult to tell. The mad ones never know, do they?

"Walk ... walk ... walk"

"ROT IN HELL YOU STUPID BIRDS!"

While working on my journalism degree, I began reading authors like Jack Kerouac, Hunter S. Thompson and Henry Miller. They awoke in me a passion for reading, a passion for words and eventually a passion for writing. And they had amazing adventures. They loathed the work-a-daily life and all the nuisances and responsibilities that come with it. Life is meant to be lived, man, and they knew this. They took dreary old life and flipped it upside down and covered it with sprinkles then pissed all over and set it ablaze. They did whatever they wanted. They were free. Miller bummed food and francs for years from his little gang of misfits, anything to avoid work. Kerouac bounced around with a knapsack full of unpublished books and didn't give a god damn that they were unpublished. Thompson wanted to swallow society whole, and nearly did swallow Aspen. There was no rule or law big enough to control him. These guys lived on the fringe, that place I was now being drawn to. They were the grand starving artist heroes of the

past. And this provoked in me a romantic delusion for writing so strong it would eventually take me over. They were also one of the reasons I was now in India. I never knew anyone who took off to a foreign country to live and work or backpack around for months and months with no plans. Where I grew up, this was unheard of. But then Kerouac went to Mexico and Thompson went to Puerto Rico and Miller went to Paris. Finally, there were people in my life that I could look to and say, yes, that's the way. *That's* how it's done. Spend a year or two traveling, I thought, and then write a book. Easy breezy! Like connect the dots. I never accounted for any turmoil or hardship. Never accounted for a situation where I could get eaten alive by birds. That would be silly.

“Walk ... walk”

“FUCK OOOOOFFFFF!”

What in the hell am I doing here, I wondered? No really, India? Where'd I get that from? More importantly, what am I doing pushing a bike loaded with everything I own in the world through the Himalayas. *This* was the question that I could not shake, nor could I answer it. I have this wonderful family that feels no reluctance in telling me when I'm doing something stupid or about to. A necessity, I admit. Yet there I was, pushing, sobbing, wondering how this, my most insane idea to date, had escaped everyone's ridicule. I guess I wanted to be that person, you know. The one that cycles around the world, intimately exploring places untouched by tour buses, getting toned and tan. A billboard image of myself manufactured by National Geographic and Nike. *Just do it!* I thought, hey, if others can do it, so can I. *That's right, man, just do it.* I had never done any long distance cycling before, and now I was challenging the greatest mountain range on the planet. *No biggie!* No biggie, I thought. *That's right!* This is the kind of thinking I've come to expect from myself. Romantic delusions always trumping practicality. But what about my family, my friends? Surely they thought I was nuts. So why no words of wisdom or condemnation from those accustomed to questioning my endless string of bad decisions? It's a damn conspiracy, I told myself as I mopped the tears from my eyes. Then I cursed them for their silence.

“Walk”

“SHUT UUUUUUUPPP!”

OK, the truth is India forces you to change, and if you don't accept these mental alterations, well then, you will go mad. You get used to the dogs that bark throughout the night, you get used to the anorexic cows eating plastic bags of garbage until eventually their stomachs explode, you get used to the five or ten power failures each and every night that leave you faltering through the maze like a lab rat in search of that little piece of street that leads you somewhere in the blackout night on those so-called streets, for these are simple trails of dirt mounds and big holes that lay unfilled for months and broken to pieces, pieces of pavement that try without success to hold together the order and the people from slipping through the cracks and the mobs of people and animals and rickshaws and taxis and buses and motorcycles and deformed beggars, these all add to the destruction of the uneven, narrow, polluted, cluttered, shit-stanked streets, you get used to those deformed beggars, too, cradling future deformed beggars yelling, “Sir, oh sir, please sir ... sir,” no fingers, stumps for legs, mangled and broken beyond repair – *Does intentional mutilation for the purpose of increased earnings continue in this our 21st century?* You get used to asking yourself questions of unquestionable bad taste but realize that in this world those are questions that are relevant, those are questions that should be asked. Those are questions that you DO NOT want the answers to.

“Walk”

“LEAVE ME ALONE ... I’M NOT AS DELICIOUS AS I LOOK!”

“*Walk*”

“AAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHH!”

And that’s what happens when, after many years of bowing to fate and settling on the fact that someday I would be worm food, I suddenly realized in my last conscious moments that those damn birds were going to pick me apart before I was dead. Bird food! Getting eaten by birds was a form of dying I had never even considered. Ever. And on the subject of manly, that’s-the-way-I-wanna-go deaths ... I mean, what kind of asshole would let himself get eaten by birds? Ah, but wait. Several weeks later someone would say to me that everything always works out in India. “Yah,” I responded, “but it treats you like Job in the process.” So on day two of the bike experiment, I, Job, the Ugly American, was saved. I found my miracle and it even came with a hot shower. But first ...