

Fear is Good for the Spine

Delhi to Shimla, India

by Nick Mistretta

The next day I bought a ticket on an overnight bus out of town. A wonderful man working for the hotel reluctantly drove me to the bus stop and assisted with the bike that I had brought thousands of miles only to go unused because of a pulled muscle in my back. The self medication I had imposed on myself had failed miserably. I gave him the secret handshake and muttered something about gratitude. He seemed to understand but looked disgusted nonetheless. I was their poster boy, the Ugly American.

The bus looked on the verge of collapse, and the air was so thick you could chew on it. But at least there was no one sitting next to me. And after a three-hour wait in a field of idling buses, choking on exhaust fumes, we pulled out of Delhi and pointed ourselves north toward Shimla, our early-morning destination. Within an hour the bus stopped on the side of the highway. A fat louse of a drunk climbed on board and stumbled down the aisle, looking for a place to sit. Fuck that, I thought. I tried to look bigger, puffing out on the bench like a blowfish. *No room here! Maybe in the back.* But he dropped himself down beside me anyway then spent the next eight hours passing out on my shoulder, his sticky skull gently pressed against my t-shirt. Every so often he convulsed and woke up slobbering, lifting his head briefly to show off a fresh trail of saliva running down his chin, the tail of it still attached to me. Then he'd look at me like we had met somewhere before and now he just couldn't place me. *Maybe it was that cocktail party at the governor's mansion. Yes, now I remember! The night that schizophrenic transvestite climbed into the punch bowl and sang a duet.* But again he would pass out, his head drifting in a predictable arc down to my shoulder. I wanted to roll his fat ass right off the bus. Create a diversion and shove him out the window. I remember thinking, it can't get much worse.

And soon a busload of people from different backgrounds melded into a single horrified entity flying down the highway. We gasped in unison as the 16-year-old bus driver gunned it and blindly passed everything on the road. Well, this is it, I thought. Time to meet God. My eyes were glued to the road. When death stares you in the face you feel obligated to look back. At one point we passed another bus that had driven off the road, crashing headlong into some trees. Heads swiveled to find the wreckage in the mist. The French woman sitting in front of me sounded loudly with something resembling an orgasm. *FOR FUCK SAKE!* Was that in my head? Could the others hear my cries? I couldn't speak for the rest of the screaming passengers, but I didn't mind arriving a little late. Who do I lodge my complaint with, I wondered. And thank God for that soothing, loud-as-hell Hindi pop music. It nearly drowned out the sound of my bike sliding around on the roof, waiting for just the right moment to flip off and come shooting past my window. Everyone was speaking in excited tones, possibly praying. Others had their hands clasped in prayer, some had them over their eyes. I was frozen with fear. I couldn't shut my eyes or turn my attention from the road. Couldn't even blink. My fingers were bending the bench in front of me, but my posture was perfect. Fear is good for the spine, I remember thinking.