

TRAVELING IN THEORY

by

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This thesis is a creative work of travel literature. While I did take the trip described in this work and all the stories told are essentially true, it is fiction in the sense that I have internalized the themes into the structure and imposed an agenda of meaning onto the events. It is non-fiction intended to be read as fiction.

I traveled for eight months with my girlfriend in Holland, Turkey, Georgia, and India. Through accounts of our adventures in these countries, I explore the possibilities and limitations of the outsider's perspective of traveling. Above all, however, I attempt to entertain.

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Critical Review

Travel writing is at once a very broad and a quite specific genre. It is broadly defined because it does not dictate whether a work of travel writing is fiction or non-fiction, essay or narrative. Anything from a cross-continental murder mystery to an essayistic reflection on geo-economic disparities to a mountain climbing adventure-story to verse reflections on the nature of spirituality, may fall into the category of travel writing. Travel writing is impossible to pin down within the confines of a more general class of literature: a platypus of the literary kingdom. Yet it is a narrowly defined genre in the sense that any work of travel writing is about the author's interaction with a foreign environment. This fairly straightforward and universal aspect of travel writing poses the question of whether the subject of the book is the place of the author's travels or the author himself.

Subjectivity is one of the great doctrines of this century. It is tempting to assert that the author is, and must necessarily be, the subject of his own book because his reflections on his travels can only reflect himself. I believe, however, that only bad travel writing is so limited as to be solely self-reflective. Good travel writing uses the character of the author, the narrator, as a lens between the author's native land and the land of his travels. The value of travel writing is that this lens is unique. As a result characteristics about both cultures are brought into focus which are not only difficult to discern without the cross-cultural comparison, but which would not be seen through a different lens. To a

certain extent, the more unusual the lens--the stronger the prescription--the more valuable the book. The very subjectivity of the author is what makes his observations and insights about the land he has left and the land he moves through interesting and valid.

We live in an age in which we take it for granted that biologists have combed the depths of nearly every mountain range and forest identifying even the dullest and most obscure of bugs; that anthropologists have charted the kinship lines of obscure, isolated Amazonian tribes; that a satellite orbiting somewhere between the atmosphere and outer-space can send a live picture of tanks breaking up a demonstration in Myanmar into our hotel room in Buenos Aires; that there are more English speakers in India than in America; that the other side of the world is a night's sleep away; and the frontier is another planet. Travel writers today are writing about places that have already been written about, photographed, surveyed, exported from and imported to, and, as often as not, traveled in by their readership. Travel writers are no longer responsible for inventing the places they visit, only for reinventing them.

Of course, this is true only for a certain sort of travel book, which I will classify as literary travel writing. This class of travel writing is what I aspired to in Traveling In Theory, and so it is the primary focus of this review. But before discussing the trends of literary travel writing, it is important to note that the bulk of travel literature is not concerned with reinventing places or with the strength of the prescription of the lens that is the narrator.

Probably the most popular kind of travel literature is adventure travel. In books like Himalayan Passage by Jeremy Schmidt, Running the Amazon by Joe Kane, and Tracy Johnston's Shooting the Boh the authors focus on accurately chronicling their adventures: a bike tour circumnavigating the Himalayas, a first decent of the entire Amazon, and, as the subtitle tells us, "a woman's voyage

down the wildest river in Borneo." These books are always structured around a^{vii} final destination which the author is usually obsessed with making but, in at least at one point in the story, seems unlikely to reach. This motivation of a final goal insures a fairly linear narrative since this is the best structure for creating suspense. What is important to adventure writers is the unbelievable nature of their feat, which the reader must be convinced is told just like it really happened. The whole appeal of this type of travel writing is that the adventure is incredible yet real. Clearly, an emphasis of subjectivity does not further the sense of reality adventure writers must foster.

These stories are full of vivid descriptions and a host of native characters; it would be wrong to say that they are all plot and ignore issues of cultural difference. The sense of place is just as important in these books as in the more intellectual travel books, but it functions more as the stage of events than it does as an inspiration for philosophizing. What this sort of travel writing is particularly good at--other than being an exciting, suspenseful read--is charting the personal growth of the author as he or she pushes her limits of endurance and gains self-knowledge, and examining the group dynamics which arise in circumstances of stress.

Another popular form of travel literature, which does not comply with my assertion that subjectivity validates the travel book, is what I think of as the quest trip. The author follows in the footsteps of a famous journey undertaken by a historical figure or military campaign, joins a pilgrimage, or searches for a mysterious person or landmark. Like the adventure story, the quest trip involves an ultimate goal. Unlike the adventure story, the excitement of the quest trip is generated by the discovery of information rather than by physical danger. This sort of travel literature is common in publications like the *New Yorker* and *Harpers*.

An excellent example of the quest trip is Lloyd Jones' Biografi, in which the narrator visits Albania just after the fall of Communism in search of a nearly mythic man who served as a double for Enver Hoxha, the longtime Communist dictator of Albania, at public events which posed danger to the leader, were inconvenient, or which Hoxha was to infirm to attend in person. Jones explores the history and mystery of this bizarre, isolated country through this quest for the Hoxha impersonator. Biografi and other quest trip books are often histories livened up by the structure of a journey. As history, the role of the narrator as a unique lens is more an impediment than a strength.

This does not mean, however, that either the adventure or quest writer is truly objective. Rather they fight to maintain objectivity--or at least the impression of objectivity--and convey the gestalt of the place they visit (I use "place" in the broadest possible sense to signify both the physical space of a land and its culture). But, in all likelihood, the gestalt of a place which a particular traveler discovers will bear little resemblance to the gestalt another traveler finds. The literary travelers with whom I associate my own work with do not fight to maintain objectivity. Instead, they indulge themselves in manipulating their observations and experiences to express a certain aspect of a place which furthers their intellectual agenda. To this sort of a travel writer, the very ignorance of a traveler is an advantage because it frees the author of prejudices and preconceptions that limit his freedom of invention, his subjective potential.

In the preface to the second edition of Journey Without Maps, Graham Greene emphasizes the subjectivity of a traveler by noting the different sense of the same area of Liberia that he had on two different experiences there:

I can look back now with a certain regret at the hard words I used about Freetown, for Freetown is now one of the homes I have lived and worked in through all the seasons. I have been able to recognize in myself after a year's sojourn the inertia which as a tourist I condemned

so harshly in other people. But if there are fallacies into which the passing visitor falls, there are fallacies too which come from a close acquaintance. After a little while there is so much one ceases to notice, and if I were writing of Freetown now, how unnaturally rosy would my picture be, for I begin to remember mainly the sunsets when all the laterite paths turned suddenly for a few minutes the colour of rose, the old slavers' fort with the cannon lying in the grass, the abandoned railway track with the chickens pecking in and out of the little empty rotting station, the taste of the first pink gin at six o'clock. I have begun to forget what the visitor noticed so clearly--the squalor and the unhappiness and the involuntary injustices of tired men. But as that picture is true too, I let it stand.

Greene's reflections on his different perceptions of the same place as a traveler and a resident suggest the nearly random nature of judgments passed upon a place by a person passing through. There is a town in Northern Madhya Pradesh that I remember with particular disdain as a muggy, hostile, lethargic tourist trap even though I know my assessment has more to do with the onset of dengue fever I experienced there than the qualities of the town itself. A place itself is also subject to mood swings and shifts in character. What appears a tourist trap in June is usually a quaint, quiet town in January; a festival may transform the drabest of town's into a sea of color for a single day each year. Freetown became one of Greene's homes because it is one of the places he "lived and worked in through all the seasons." It is pointless to argue with the cliché that you can't really know a place until you've lived there.

This proverbial truth is more obviously true now in reference to travel writing than at any other time in history because authors from every continent and every major language have been translated into English. If I really wanted insight into the culture of Liberia, I would try to find a book written by a Liberian. The travel writings of a self-absorbed, alcoholic Englishman would certainly not be my first choice. Nearly every population has its own accessible literary voice, and so the observations of the visitor no longer need to speak for the visited. A traveler's observations speak only for the traveler.

On the other hand, while Green expresses "a certain regret at the hard words [he] used about Freetown," he isn't interested in renouncing them as wrong. Instead, he concludes, "But as that picture is true too, I let it stand." In fact, the visitor can see aspects of Freetown "so clearly" which over time the resident becomes inured to and ceases to remember; sometimes a fleeting glimpse can reveal a profound detail that becomes blurred after a long stare.

As an outsider the traveler has a fresh perspective, unhabituated to the native reality. He is like a reader that recognizes flaws and insights in a work which the author, because he is the author, cannot. Since the traveler has left the confines of his own world and entered another culture's reality, he also gains a degree of outsider perspective on his native culture. The traveler exists between the worlds of his native culture and the one he is visiting. He is in a unique position to observe and compare the two realities he vacillates between. However, he is also isolated, caught in a lonely transience with nothing solid to ground him. There is the opportunity for profound insight, but also the dangers of irrelevance and incomprehension.

In her superbly titled book Karma Cola: Marketing the Mystic East, Gita Mehta fumes over the consequences of these two dangers of casual culture exchange that modern mass tourism has engendered. Through a series of anecdotes, Mehta describes how the spiritual tourism of Westerners in India has resulted in the stupidification of Indian philosophy. Complex and extremely difficult concepts must be watered down in order to be made digestible by a foreign population. This cheapening of culture to make it suitable for mass consumption results in the cultural exchange of nothing of value. Mutual incomprehension is packaged as profound understanding:

The art of dialing has replaced the art of dialogue. When the person on the other end of the receiver doesn't understand the conversation, then drop the hard part, beam out the essence, and

describe the resulting homogeneity as successful correspondence and cultural exchange. (Mehta 118)

As an outsider the traveler has a fresh perspective, but it is an outsider's perspective. It is limited in its depth of perception. Worse yet, a cure for athletes foot can be mistook for a spiritual cleansing.

Nevertheless, the very superficiality of a visitor's observations can provide inspiration. In Empire of Signs, Roland Barthes actually emphasizes his ignorance of Japanese culture because he believes it frees him from the tyranny of meaning. He warns the reader repeatedly that, though he was physically present in Japan, he is writing of a "fictive nation" because he embraces his role as an outsider. This quality of travel lends itself to Barthes' post-structuralist ambition to divorce signs from meaning. In the final analysis, the form of expression is all there is to expression. He writes about Japan in order to reveal a quality of his own culture that is extremely difficult to see from the inside.

Travel distances Barthes from his own culture so that he can escape from the maze of issues and details which is cultural meaning. The increased perspective allows him to see the whole structure of a signifying system. In this sense, the fictive nation he creates has as much in common with France as it does with Japan. But though he writes of a fictive nation, I think Empire of Signs is a beautiful description of an aspect of Japanese culture. It is full of vivid descriptions of Japanese customs, costumes and landscapes, and the profundity of the Japanese sense of the aesthetic is brilliantly captured. It is fictive in the sense that any author's writings are a reproduction of the real world filtered through the warping lens of his interior world. Though Barthes embraces his warping powers, Japan still exists in Empire of Signs. Certainly in the logic of the book it exists, for he gives us the forms of Japanese expression: the exterior which he says in the end is all that is real in the world. He uses the outsider's perspective

of the traveler to contemplate questions so broad that they are relevant to both^{xii} France and Japan.

Unlike the wishy-washy spiritual tourists and self-promoting gurus that Mehta derides, Barthes does not pretend the culture he visits holds a secret short cut to enlightenment, nor does he "go native" in any sense. Instead, he uses the extremely provocative experience of being in a foreign place as a means to rejuvenate his vocabulary of images; he is more free to think new thoughts in a new context. Empire of Signs creates a fictive nation that enriches our understanding of France and Japan, America and China. At the bookstore it wouldn't collect dust in the travel literature section, it would be sentenced to literary theory or criticism. But for me it stands as a hallmark of travel writing because its obsession with the surface of symbols, the forms of culture is an obsession with a traveler's perspective. Empire of Signs shows the profound potential of this liberating vantage point.

Barthes' essays on Japan are completely different in structure, tone, and objective than Greene's Journey Without Maps, but they are similar in the sense that both revel in creating fictive places out of the real places they visit. Both not only accept the subjectivity of their observations as travelers, but also emphasize it. Since Greene believed that his observations as a visitor were "true too,"--that there was no ultimate truth to discover and reveal, but many truths to invent--he was free to actively and intentionally shape the reality of the Liberia he created to fit his artistic needs.

In Journey Without Maps, the physical journey into the heart of Liberia is mirrored by a psychological journey into Greene's childhood. It is travel as psychoanalysis:

I avoided them [childhood fears] as I avoided ideas I didn't like, the idea of eternal life and damnation. But in Africa one couldn't avoid them any more than one could avoid the supernatural. The

method of psychoanalysis is to bring the patient back to the idea which he is repressing: a long journey backwards without maps, catching a clue here and a clue there, as I caught the names of villages from this man and that, until one has to face the general idea, the pain or the memory. (Greene 96-97)

Like Barthes, Greene imposes an intellectual agenda upon the land he visits. He uses his journey through Liberia to explore ideas and emotions he brings with him from England. That it is a journey into Greene's own repressed childhood pain and fear suggests that Journey Without Maps is a psychological study whose subject matter is essentially Greene. However, that Greene chooses Africa to make his "long journey backwards" sheds light on the English attitude towards Africa and Africans. The metaphor of the journey into Africa as a journey into the past, as well as Greene's persistent portrayal of the native adults as simplistic children, reveals the social Darwinist racism which made colonialism possible. Just beneath the book's surface is the idea of evolution as progress from inferior to superior, coupled with the notion of Africans as primitives several rungs down the evolutionary ladder from Europeans. The book is more interesting when Greene's psychoanalytic experiment is seen as a cultural analysis rather than a personal one. The narrator can be read as a metaphor. Greene makes an interesting lens through which to view the relationship of England to Africa.

Greene thinks that traveling, and traveling in Africa in particular, has psychoanalytic potential because it will force him to face repressed fears. In England, he lived in a luxury that excluded rats and nasty bugs. He associated, one assumes, with white intellectual types, and he always had access to plenty of liquor. The safety of his homogenous scene and the repetition of daily life dulled the memory of childhood fears, "but in Africa one couldn't avoid them." This concept of leaving home in order to see or face what is all around you at home, but which in your native environment is indiscernible, is the same rational which Barthes' employs for visiting Japan to further his study of semiotics. In

Greene's case, he hopes that Africa will possess the same elements he feared in^{xiv} England, but that they will be so much more intense he will be forced to reconcile with them. Barthes seeks a strangeness that allows him to construct a radical new world view without getting hung up on the old familiar stumbling blocks of conventional wisdom. Both hope to see what is in front of their noses but hidden from view.

This is the trick of literary travel literature. There are really two journeys: the physical one through Liberia, Japan, or Sardinia, and the conceptual one through psychoanalytic introspection, semiotics, or the evolution of civilization. In Journey Without Maps and Empire of Signs, the outer journey is clearly subservient to the inner journey (though in the end the reader may find Greene's nearly fatal outer journey more compelling). This sort of intellectual travel writing was particularly popular in the early part of this century. In Abroad: British Travel Writing Between the Wars, Paul Fussell goes so far as to describe the travel book as an essay collection in disguise:

A fact of modern publishing history is the virtual disappearance of the essay as a salable commodity...The more we attend to what's going on in the travel book between the wars, the more we perceive that the genre is a device for getting published essays which, without the travel 'menstruum' (as Coleridge would say), would appear too old-fashioned for generic credit, too reminiscent of Lamb and Stevenson and Chesterton. (Fussell 204)

Though Fussell is referring to the modernist travel writers of the twenties and thirties, his observation is accurate for the more intellectual travel writers of the rest of this century. In fact, some travel writers these days do not deign to disguise the essayistic nature of their reflections. Pico Iyer's Video Night in Katmandu, for example, does not follow the chronology of his trip. He skips around an assortment of Asian countries without attempting to weave together a plausible plot to explain his country hopping. The physical chronology of his

a plausible plot to explain his country hopping. The physical chronology of his^{xv} Asian tour is subverted by the intellectual chronology of his discourse on postmodern global culture's fusion of East and West. Instead of events unfolding, ideas unfold. Little of excitement happens to the body of the narrator; there is no great adventure or anticipated destination. The persona of Pico Iyer hardly exists as a physical entity. He is a walking opinion, and his chapters are uninhibited essays peppered with dialogue.

Another example of a conceptual narrator is Caryl Phillips in his book The European Tribe. In the preface, Phillips tells us that his travels chronicle "nearly a year's wandering from Europe's closest neighbor, Morocco, to her furthest flung capital, Moscow" (Phillips XV). Certainly there is potential for some exciting adventures in these wanderings to the "furthest flung"-- opportunities for suspense. But like Video Night in Katmandu, even when Phillips wanders into the bad section of town or visits an isolated, eccentric Eastern European capital, the emphasis is not on the danger or bizzareness of his experience but on how the places or peoples he encounters embellish his understanding of race relations in Europe. The European Tribe is a series of angry essays in which Phillips attempts to come to terms with being black in Europe both on an individual and on a sociological/historical level.

But although both Iyer and Phillips abandon the traditional chronology of a travel book and are less interested in the beauty of a harbor than its symbolic significance, the travel menstruum is more than just a disguise for a collection of essays. In Iyer's case, the very lack of chronology and the abrupt jumps from Bali to Tibet to Malaysia is a comment on the pace of travel and the irrelevance of geography in the age of airplanes. The drive from San Francisco to Seattle is longer than the flight from San Francisco to Tokyo. Travel is an essential part of our business life and our leisure life; our cultures are modified and molded by

travel. Iyer understands that travel is a worthy subject matter in its own right,^{xvi} and his writing seeks to explore the implications of our mobile lives.

Travel is essential to both books because it provides a sense of place that grounds them in the real world, thus legitimizing them. Iyer could have written about the exportation of trashy, muscle bound media to Asia without leaving Los Angeles by analyzing Hollywood studio profits. The economic analysis might have been more objective, but it wouldn't have conveyed the sad irony of the phenomena as well as the description of the huge posters of Rambo that lurked around every corner of his journey. Iyer's descriptions not only express that Rambo is popular in Malaysia and Indonesia, but also help frame the significance of his popularity. By writing about the "stubbornness of colonial pride" through a series of images and interactions from his stay in Gibraltar, Phillips gives this phrase tangible meaning:

I looked down and realized that my meal had been served on off-white Pyrex school regulation crockery. The after-dinner coffee was of the do-it-yourself variety; a jug of hot water and a sachet of powder. I retired to the lounge. The hotel took the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Express*.. 'No, of course we don't have any other papers, Mr. Phillips.'

(Phillips 22)

While visual details and dialogue lend credence to the opinions of Iyer and Phillips by providing real-world examples, the images and events which they draw from also work in a fictional sense. As in a novel, the narrators of Video Night in Katmandu, The European Tribe, and all other travel books project themselves and their ideas onto the world they describe. In the very selection of the images and events they choose to relate, the authors promote those aspects of the place they visit which they want emphasized and which further their intellectual agenda. Phillips wanders for nearly a year and everything he chooses to write about relates to his theme of post-colonial Europe

and being a black man in a white man's club; he tells us which papers the hotel^{xvii} took *because* they are the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Express*.

Details become important because they carry symbolic meaning--they were chosen for a reason. The travel writer has all the tools of the fiction writer at his disposal: the structure of the authors trip can be framed to mirror the thematic journey of the book, a community of characters can be made to voice a range of perspectives without committing the author, visual images can carry metaphorical power, conflicts can create adventures that keep the reader's interest. Nevertheless, the author is not free to purely invent--to write about a trip he never took, for example--because then his book is a novel and not a travel book. Travel writing is, therefore, non-fiction best read as fiction.

Place is very important in fiction, but in travel writing the sense of place is elevated to the center stage. I have been harping about the use of travel writing as a vehicle to express the authors intellectual theories, but either the author's theories are inspired by the place he visits, or he brings them with him and they are remade in the image of the place. In both cases, the power of place is extreme. I have said that the narrator is the lens through which we view the foreign place and through which we look back at ourselves. I have also said that the narrator is a walking opinion, a warm-blooded manifestation of a theory. Thus, the theory can also be seen as a lens through which we view the place. At the same time, the place is the subject on which the experiment of the idea is conducted. Literary travel writing is the intersection of thought and space.

I have taken this notion of the narrator as a manifestation of a theory, and as a lens through which the place that is written to and the place that is written about view each other as the guiding principle of Traveling In Theory. The concept which imbues Perrin's observations, judgments, and perspective is that truth must be personalized. In a sense, this is just an acceptance of the tenet of

subjectivity, and that is not much of a guiding principle. In fact, I have already^{xviii} stated that an acceptance of subjectivity is what makes all literary travel writing interesting and valid. In this sense, Traveling In Theory is an examination of the benefits and flaws of travel writing. The degree to which Perrin indulges in this notion, however, also makes the work a sort of declaration of independence. Since inherent in the concept of personalized truth is the realization of multiple truths, Perrin is not interested in being correct, but in being unique--in adding to the number of realities and thus enriching the depth of reality.

This lens is appropriate because it embodies a traveler's wisdom. Traveling In Theory is a commentary on the possibilities and the limitations of the outsider's perspective, where what is real is what one has experienced and no more. Like Video Night in Katmandu and much of Iyer's writing, it is travel writing about traveling. For this reason, the work is completely devoid of references to other travel books and there are no quotations from historical, anthropological or other sources. For Perrin, citing another author to bolster his opinion would be an undermining of his opinions validity since its sense of uniqueness would be destroyed. (Of course, everything has more or less been thought before, but still the illusion of originality is a wonderful thing.)

Like any theory taken to its extreme, this is a ludicrous belief system. It is so ludicrous that I do not feel obliged to point out its flaws. I am sure the reader's mind is currently flooded with objections. Instead, allow me to outline the ways the traveling experience pushed me into acceptance of this ultra-subjectivity. There are four main reasons: First, leaving my circle of friends, the toys I use to distract myself and define myself by (i.e. bicycle, skis, music collection, car etc.), the newspapers and radio stations that create my sense of the planet, in short, the whole cultural context within which I exist isolated me as an individual. Severed from my context--the world in which I think I know what's

real and what's a lie, whom to trust and whom to doubt--and surrounded by scammers, government-run newspapers, and unintelligible languages, I had nothing to rely on to discern the truth but my own intuition and judgment. It is a lonely feeling, but it is also liberating and empowering.

Second, being in another people's context, I realized how small my own context was. I was in a position to appreciate that most of the world does not operate under the same assumptions I have absorbed and that much of the information which I'd previously accepted about the places I visited was inaccurate, incomplete, and largely irrelevant. Traveling reinforced my already strong sense of the degree to which one's reality is relative. Not only was I severed from my cultural context, but I was aware that the context I left behind was no more reliable as a guide to reality than the one in which I was adrift. This further radicalized my sense that the only reliable reality was the one I created from empirical experience.

Third, my experience that people in every place I visited did not share my sense of the relativity of reality turned me into a preacher of independence of thought. People think that their reality is the correct one, and are hostile and condescending to those realities they define theirs against. I'm talking about racism, nationalism, and, the kingpin of dogma, religious faith. My reaction against this trinity of righteousness was the factor most responsible for the extremity to which I let Perrin take his refusal to accept common wisdom. If everybody is responsible for creating their own reality and understands that it is just one of five or six billion realities, then a certain humility is inevitable and the trinity is crushed. This is why whenever Perrin boldly states his opinions there is the sense that he is undermining them, leaving the edges frayed and inviting the reader to disagree. He fears the dangers of creating a club of right thinking by bullying with eloquence and logic.

Fourth, I think this ultra-subjectivity is representative of the attitude of ^{xx} the community of long-term (several months to several years), low budget, often young world travelers. In this traveler's scene, every conversation seems to start with the question, "Where've you been?" What matters is what you've seen and experienced first hand. To a certain extent the weirder your experiences, the more exotic your resume of places, the more respect you are accorded. In other words, the more unique the reality you have created for yourself, the more you are expected to discourse.

A traveler's status in this world goes beyond where he has been and what he has experienced, though. There is also an almost competitive attitude about how weird, how far out you are as an individual. Travelers, particularly in India but increasingly all over, are fond of referring to themselves as freaks: an anomaly, aberration; a person or animal on exhibition as an example of a strange deviation from nature. Travelers go on the road to see the world, but also to find and define themselves. They see themselves as deviations from the norm while back home their counterparts strive to become the norm. Ultra-subjectivity is the traveler culture's reality, and it is the lens through which Traveling In Theory views Turkey, Georgia, and India.

Of course, Traveling In Theory does not read like an essay in the way Video Night In Katmandu or The European Tribe does. It tells traveler's tales and maintains a sense of excitement and adventure in the story line. I am attracted to intense experiences--good or bad, it hardly matters. The stories I choose to tell for the most part are about intense times, even though most of traveling is really quite dull. Yet I was fearful that the intensity of these experiences would drown out the concepts I was trying to express, and so I found myself understating the actual events of the stories I told--making them less

dangerous, uncomfortable, and dramatic. If I had told what actually happened,^{xxi}
the tension would have been so great that the lens might have cracked.

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Introduction

I am aware that the typical travel literature involves the author circumnavigating the globe without ever leaving the Earth's crust, taking a train clear across Asia or biking the length of the Andes. There is usually a self-imposed transportational limitation or predetermined thematic route that holds the trip together, gives it a sense of suspense as the reader anticipates the end. I, however, have rejected the rejection of twentieth-century transportational technologies, and the theme I have chosen to hold this work together is precisely that concept which breaks it apart. I can move in a single paragraph from Istanbul to Delhi; I don't know what I'm searching for until I remember finding it. It's too late to deny the airplane or pretend we are last centuries explorers. I am the only thing that provides a sense of continuity and coherence. To my way of thinking, any other structure would be either a gimmick or a lie.

This does not mean that we didn't have adventures; it's just that we didn't know what adventures we were going to have until we'd had them. I prefer it that way; ignorance makes traveling more exciting. I knew I was going to have adventures because I was traveling with my girlfriend of several years, and whenever the Lion Queen is around, adventure is sure to be found. Her real name is Lucy Quinn, but Lucy is not cool enough for her, so she goes by LQ. I've thought of her as the Lion Queen since we started going out because she's always read to pounce. That's why we make such good traveling companions. It's always prudent to have somebody along to disagree with you when you are on

the road. Otherwise there is nothing to stop you from getting too carried away by bizarre theories. Also, with LQ along I was sure something would happen worth writing about. And even if nothing did, I could always analyze what nine months of solitary confinement in sleazy, roach infested hotels did to our relationship. Lucky for you, this wasn't necessary.

We were flying in to Amsterdam before we started our Asian adventure because it was the cheapest ticket out of the Bay Area. We'd scheduled a week layover in Amsterdam because in our minds it ranked as the coolest city in Europe, even though we'd never been there. We'd heard about the music scene, the canals and narrow streets, the businessmen in suits commuting to work on bicycles, and the abundance of liberty. This last part was a particularly big draw because Amsterdam gave us a last chance to indulge in our favorite vice before we flew to Istanbul and clean living.

This was the fact that stood out most in my mind about Turkey: mandatory life sentences for drug possession. I knew a few other things, too. I knew, for example, that before World War I, Turkey was a massive empire, that it was an Islamic country with a secular government, that the father of modern Turkey was named Ataturk and that he'd tried hard to Europeanize his country. But this sort of knowledge didn't really interest me, I was going to Turkey and to wherever else I went to learn personal histories not political histories. I wanted to know how long Mustafa had owned his land and what he thought of the E.U. I wanted to drink a glass of Raki with Muhamet and see how many young women still wore purda. I wanted to meet individuals, tap into the wondrously unreliable rumor mill of history, and see things for myself. We were going to Turkey, not the library.

Amsterdam was certainly not the library either. We had a raucous week in the great city, almost too good because at the end of it we weren't sure we were really ready to leave the luxuries of the West. But we had our tickets, and this trip was supposed to be an Eastern exploration, not a party. So we left Amsterdam, and in the time it takes to drive from Portland to Seattle we flew to Istanbul--the gateway to the Orient.

Chapter 1

Looking for Adventure

Our first night in Istanbul we went to bed excited by the exotic, hectic sounds of the street below. By four in the morning, however, our excitement had been displaced by rage at the schmuck with the synthesizer at the mysterious bar next door who wouldn't shut up. The second night was spent cheering on the schmuck with the synthesizer at the mysterious bar. The third night was passed on one of the spotless, air conditioned Mercedes buses that ply the highways of Turkey. It was a relatively painless twelve-hour bus ride to the Turquoise coast. Our guide book promised beautiful white sand beaches and recommended Fethiye as the least developed and most authentic of the resort towns which occupy every desirable Mediterranean beaches.

No doubt the main reason we had little appreciation for the charms of Fethiye was that we had little from which to recover. We were not on a two-week furlough from a cubicle cell, nor were we familiar with a two-hour, forty-mile commute. To properly enjoy spending all day crisping under sub-tropical rays, it is necessary to feel that it is a well-deserved reward. Our winter of skiing and socializing in the spectacularly mellow San Miguel mountains of Southern Colorado didn't seem to entitle us to the hedonistic coma of an authentic beach resort. If we were going to spend the next eight or nine months traveling, then it had to be an expanding, challenging, outrageous experience. When you are a little concerned that your life is an unproductive pleasure, relaxing with several

hundred pre-packaged tourists on a hand-raked strip of sand is about as satisfying as a hot dog after cheese cake.

But I think that there was also an insidious element to Fethiye, and beach resorts in general, that fueled our dramatic reaction to the experience. The problem is that people have become too lazy to explore their own tastes. Instead, they learn what to like from beer commercials. I don't mean to imply that there is anything inherently wrong with resort vacations. In fact, I find the extreme hedonism of beach resorts admirable. There is a sense of humility in the simple, sensuous pleasure of relaxing on the beach; as if the act of breathing in sync with the surf is enough. But the utter lack of creativity, the standardization of resorts, and of beach resorts in particular, I find repulsive.

This does not mean that the people who visit beach resorts are inherently conformists. They are merely worn out urban warriors, the pasty rank, spent from the toils of work-life, home-life, mental-life. For them paradise is not having to think too hard. I say too hard because even when one books a comprehensive one-week guaranteed-to-satisfy vacation package, there are still choices to be made: Whether to use suntan oil or lotion, whether to read "Hard Bodies, Hard Times" or "The Royal Affair," what kind of fish to have for dinner, whether to get in the water today. The choices have just become so standardized that it is possible to travel to any continent, go to the beach, and be on any continent.

We were frustrated by the popularity of Fethiye; it made us feel like an old retired couple before we'd even gotten what we refer to as a "real job." We were angry, but the dumpy package tourists were too pathetic to make proper scapegoats (their crimson skin was evidence that they are being mercilessly

punished anyway), the corporations or investment groups that have developed the beaches are too vague an entity to hold accountable, and so we were left to bake in the high powered rays of the sun along with several thousand Europeans who shared our interest in the prone position, and no one to blame but ourselves.

And so we ran. We ran East to the poorer, more rural, and less traveled regions of Turkey. We ran by bus, and though we passed through quaint towns, marveled at the view from the tops of spectacularly perched castles, and were graced with the most sincere and filling hospitality I have ever experienced, our repulsion from the blandness of Fethiye propelled us clear to Turkey's farthest border. In a few days short of a month we found ourselves more or less accidentally being dropped off at the Georgian border by our Dolmus (Dolmuses are privately owned mini-vans that transport passengers through all the spaces the big Mercedes bus routes skip). We had no map, no guide book or phrase book, no Georgian money, and neither of us spoke a word of Russian, let alone Georgian. The only literature that we could find on Georgia, or Gurgestan as it is known in Turkey and in Georgia itself, was a "Foreign Investors Guide" full of bar graphs and tax exemptions. Two weeks later, we would come back across the border and kiss Turkish soil in relief, but even then, with all of Turkey to recross, we knew that the best part of Turkey was Georgia.

We made the decisive commitment to visit Georgia when we failed to secure an Indian visa in Ankara. I had spent a couple of months in India four years before and wanted to return for a longer stay to try and make some sense of my jumble of brightly scented memories. Our hunt for the Indian embassy began with a triumphant bus ride from the congested chaos of the old Ankara

neighborhood where we were staying clear across town to the spacious vacant streets of modern Ankara where all of the foreign embassies are located.

Using public transportation in a three million person city in a foreign country is an imposing process. There are four possible strategies to choose from in determining which bus to board, whether it is necessary to pay on the bus or buy tickets beforehand, and where to get off: Option one is to research bus schedules and procedures ahead of time. Option two is to ask fellow bus riders. Option three, really a passive version of option two, is to look stupid and lost until someone takes pity on you. Finally, option four is to rely on your intuitive sense.

Researching bus schedules is boring, tedious, and time consuming. We had only been traveling for a few weeks at this point and had not yet experienced the liberation of the total loss of shame that enables one to ask seventeen people the same dumb question until one finds an English speaker with a knowledge of bus routes, or to emit the bewildered tourist vibe that attracts the knowledgeable English speaker. We didn't recognize the value of projected ignorance. We were left with option four: intuitive feel of bus routes and general sense of direction. While this fourth choice has a slightly lower success ratio, the victorious feeling that comes after successfully relying on instinctual urban public transport skills far out-shines the thrill of asking directions. When we used strategy four and got off the bus at the precise corner we intended, we were certain that this was an omen of good luck.

Unfortunately, the precise corner in our guide book's map of Ankara bore little resemblance to the corner we found ourselves on. The street names were the same and the North-South orientation seemed accurate, but where the map

clearly showed the Indian embassy was the Iranian embassy. It took us an hour of wandering before we determined conclusively that all the embassies were randomly scattered around a several square kilometer area and that not one was in its proper place. We were forced to resort to shameless questioning. After three hours of hot leads and wrong turns, we finally found the Indian embassy at a few minutes after one o'clock. By this time our sense of elation from the morning bus ride had disappeared without a trace and we were ready to kill each other.

The nice Indian woman at the front desk gave us a sincere smile and informed us that visa applications were only accepted from nine to one and that, this being Friday, we would have to wait until Monday to find out if we could even apply since she wasn't sure whether they were authorized to issue visas to non-Turks. We left the Indian embassy in a daze. We had no desire to be in Ankara and had traveled several hundred kilometers to get there with the express purpose of getting an Indian visa. Now we were told that we would have to spend three extra days in the capital just to find out if we were even eligible to apply for a visa. (When we showed up at exactly nine o'clock on Monday morning, it took the official in charge of visas a full twenty-three seconds to tell us that we could not get a visa in Ankara, but that they were readily available to foreigners in no more than five business days in Istanbul.)

We were total failures. An entire morning wasted wandering lost through the hot, boring streets of new Ankara, and we had accomplished nothing. We were back where we started, but now we had to spend the weekend wondering whether we could even get a visa to India, the one country we knew we wanted to visit. We desperately needed to accomplish something in order to raise our

morale. Since we were already in the embassy area, we decided that we might as well see if we could find the Georgian embassy.

Though we'd searched many bookstores, inquired at dozens of travel agents, and interviewed all the travelers we met, we had been unsuccessful in finding out what lay across Turkey's Northeastern border. The only piece of data we'd acquired regarding traveling in Georgia was a second-hand warning of unsolicited vodka drinking bouts and impossible navigation. The embassy was the last place we could think of to find information on tourism in Georgia, and if we didn't find any there we decided not to risk it.

To our surprise, we found the obscure, well-hidden embassy within an hour (no easy feat considering that only one in ten Turks seems to be aware that their two Northeastern neighbors are no longer a part of the Soviet Union). Though we knew that the small two-story house was the correct embassy from the bronze identification plaque beside the door, we were confused upon entering because, unlike most embassies, there was no one in sight and not even a desk or chair to indicate that someone was expected to greet visitors. We exchanged incredulous glances and began loudly repeating "hello." Our success in finding the Georgian embassy had mollified our mutual irritation and replaced it with contempt for the disorganized, unhelpful, incompetence of Turks, Indians, and now Georgians.

After acknowledging our own greetings several times, we wandered around the official residence and eventually ended up in the basement. This appeared to be the real meat and potatoes of the operation since there was a bulletin board upon which were tacked official notices, including a time schedule that indicated we had missed visa application hours by twenty

minutes. This didn't faze us, however, because our exasperating day had given us that attitude--a close cousin to shamelessness--which is a traveler's best friend: strike first, show no mercy, and never take no for an answer. We knocked loudly on the door next to the bulletin board, barged in, and demanded a tourist visa from the smiling bureaucrat behind the cheap desk. Before we had time to realize that we had overstepped our true purpose, the kind official had issued us two fifteen-day visas, collected sixty U.S. dollars, and wished us good luck with a disturbing smile. It was only then that we asked for a map, guide book, tourist brochure, or any information that would help a couple of clueless travelers. The ambassador handed us a "Foreign Investors Guide," probably the first the embassy had ever managed to unload.

If we'd been successful in securing an Indian visa, I doubt that we would have even tried to find the Georgian embassy. Certainly if we hadn't been infuriated at the authors of our British guide book who placed embassies on their maps as if they were drawing borders in Africa, at the condescending woman at the Indian embassy, and at everybody who'd been too proud to admit they didn't know where the embassy was and given us directions to their favorite chai stand instead, we never would have had the chutzpah to demand a visa to a country we knew absolutely nothing about. We were pushed into the Georgian embassy by seemingly hostile forces and entered our great adventure, as many great adventures are begun, stumbling and whining. Our heroic morning bus ride was indeed an omen of good things to come, but, like most omens, it operated in a grander time scale than we did.

Chapter 2

Cowboy Wisdom

Our first conclusive evidence that Georgia was going to be nothing like Turkey came in the bustling Turkish town of Trabzon. Trabzon is an important port on the Black Sea, the first big city West of the Georgian border. It has an excellent history of dissent dating back to Byzantine times and is home to a significant minority population. These auspicious facts are not empty trivia: Trabzon has lots of character and energy. We stayed on a street right off the main square which was a popular shopping arcade by day and one big, boisterous brothel by night. I think we were the only people in our hotel using the beds for multiple purposes. But we had a pleasant room, clean sheets, and hot water for only a few hundred thousand Turkish Lira.

A street packed with prostitutes is not a common sight in Turkey, and these weren't subtle, incognito prostitutes either. They strutted the street in spiked heels, fish-net nylons, lime green vinyl miniskirts, sleeveless sweaters stretched to bursting point, and several pounds of white pancake under broad strokes of red lipstick. We're talking Trash. These women were not the same species as the Turkish tent women (so called because of their habit of hiding their bodies in four-person tents made of clashing patterns) who always seemed like they'd make good mothers. These were Georgians who'd crossed the border to seek their fortune in Turkey and had found an untapped market (Trabzon is a port town after all).

There were three or four hotels on our street and on the roof of each lace braziers and thong bikinis flapped proudly in the wind. Apparently the Turkish police were not as picky about prostitution as they were about some other things, or maybe they got complimentary blow jobs, because the waiting room/viewing parlor was about as covert as Chinese propaganda. It was located in an exceptionally well furnished sweet shop. On one side of the snacking area sheepish Turkish men consumed an assortment of overpriced Turkish sweets and sipped miniature glasses of chai or, for the real badboys, coffee. They sat in groups of two or three and ogled the gaudy, full figured, extremely loud peroxide blondes on the other side of the room.

The clients stopped their furtive staring and the whores' banter descended a decibel or two when we walked through the door. Though Trabzon gets its share of tourists for Eastern Turkey, I don't think many had checked out the Turkish delight in this particular sweet shop. Perhaps it is not customary for a man to take his date to the local brothel for a night on the town in Turkey (little did they know that the Lion Queen was the driving force behind this foray).

I hadn't got three steps into the establishment before my path was barred by a less trashy than average Georgian whore. There was no way past her. I strained to keep my eyes focused above her shoulders as she stared at my Teva clad feet and slowly worked her blue rimmed eyes up my disintegrating Levi's, paused at waist level, proceeded to my chai stained T-shirt, and finally to my face. She gave me a rather melodramatic but ambiguous smirk and turned aside to visit the ladies room.

We chose a small table in the no-man's land between the two camps and ordered a couple of Turkish coffees from the nervously attentive waiter. We just

wanted to drink our coffees, check out the cultural exchange, and get out.

Normally, neither of us would feel comfortable blatantly people-watching in a brothel, but the sweet shop element and the extremism of the prostitutes gave the crowded room an amusing, twisted innocence. The whores themselves seemed at home--right out of a corny old Western. They looked confident and seemed to have all the men in town a little intimidated.

Just as we had begun to rinse our mouths out, an annoying side effect of drinking coffee which is two-thirds fine ground bean, and were preparing to make our escape, a man who had distinguished himself by matching volume with the feminine side of the sweet shop, appeared out of nowhere and sat down at our little table.

"Where are you from?"

"America."

"Which place? I go Chicago. I am sailor. Go every part of the world."

This was a difficult question for me to answer as I didn't really have a base camp. I believe at this point of the trip I was saying Colorado. But before I could tell him "which place," he was on to question two: "You married?" This was clearly the key question, and he was rooting hard for sin. We had two responses to this oft asked question, the truth and what was most convenient. This was a clear call.

"Yes," LQ immediately asserted without giving me an opportunity to blunder. The man hadn't looked at LQ since he'd sat down, and he continued to look at me, nodding his head in disappointed congratulations. After much observation, I have identified two common strategies used by young to middle-aged men who have had no previous experience with women in jeans. When

they sit across the table from the Lion Queen they either totally ignore her, or they don't take their eyes off her and totally ignore me. In the present context I was pleased that the sailor employed the former, a real gentleman.

The third question is the easiest: "You like this?" Normally it is best to just answer, "Oh, yes. Very much," with a big smile whatever the this refers to (usually a Mosque, doner kebab, or an all encompassing cultural assessment). The horny sailor made it clear with a conspiratorial head jut that he meant the caricatures in high heels. It was an interesting question, and as such I felt a need to answer it truthfully, but I didn't want to spoil his enthusiasm or give the working women bad P.R..

Luckily, I managed to be both truthful and tactful by answering his question with innocent literalism: "Oh, yes. Very much." I did think the Georgian women were fantastic Amazons; I was awed by the sheer power of their presence. They were the pink flamingoes in the baby Jesus crèche and they made no apologies. Prostitutes are societal outcasts, and as such they are in a position to provide a valuable rejection of seldom-questioned values. Usually, they just provide a sad reminder of what happens when values are not properly learned, but these were a fart in the face of prudeness. I liked them because I'm a traveler, and I'd never seen anything like them.

My heroic image of the prostitutes in Trabzon was demolished as soon as the van we'd caught a ride in for the half hour trip from the border to Batumi, the third largest city in Georgia, reached the outskirts of town. With us were three sailors who could afford the steep five dollar fare, returning home to their families for the first time in six months. One spoke a little English and had a relaxed concern for a couple of clueless tourists that was easy to recognize as

genuine. We were grateful to have a trustworthy friend since we had no idea where to start looking for a room, change travelers checks, eat dinner, or just be tourists. LQ tried to strengthen the tenuous bond that had formed when I half-heartedly asked him, "Where do you go?" and he unexpectedly replied, "We are going to Batum. You need a ride?" We felt blessed to have an English speaker with us, and it was this connection that LQ used to build a relationship, "How did you learn such good English?"

"I am a sailor. I go everywhere; everywhere they speak English. But not here. I am not coming home for six months."

"Wow! That is a long time. You must be excited, happy," I enunciated.

"I am happy to see my family. But it is difficult come home after seeing Europe. I come from Buenos Aires, Amsterdam, Trabzon. My country is so poor; it is so stupid. These buildings they said be factories six years ago. Never finished. The roads never repair. I love my country, but I am ashamed. My country is falling to shit."

And so it was. We passed several massive cement carcasses left to slowly decay, reminders of a future that never was; factories started in the Soviet era with promises of jobs but forgotten in the chaos and corruption of independence. At some corners old women sold petrol from tin cans and at others they displayed vodka, beer, cigarettes and champagne on tables. They looked bored and resigned, as if they didn't expect to sell anything but had no where better to wait until dark.

As we passed through the industrial wasteland which circled Batum and entered the city proper, I was struck by the similarity of the large apartment buildings to the uncompleted factories. They shared an aesthetic of death and a

thick layer of grime. Every building in Batum looked like it hadn't been painted in a good deal more than six years. Every building was scarred by broken windows, kicked in doors, black soot. The mangy dogs which rummaged through the garbage-covered streets had the unmistakable sickliness reserved for the mutts of the poorest countries. One word came to mind as we silently gazed out the window of the van: Trash.

The garish makeup of the whores in Trabzon no longer seemed a humorous style statement of independence and good natured blasphemy, but a painted mask worn to cover up the disappointment of uncompleted factories, the shame of poverty, the broken promises of the Soviet Union and of independence. The fashion choices which we'd seen as a parody of prostitution in Trabzon, were the convention in Batum. All the young women wore cherry red painted smiles over rotten yellow teeth.

We spent two days in Batum--which I came to think of as Portland after a nuclear bomb--figuring out how to get out of the city and where to go. There was something profoundly familiar to me about the gray eroding bleakness of the city, though at first I couldn't recall ever being anywhere like it except inner Detroit, and that was not the association I felt.

Finally, on the second day it came to me: Batum reminded me of photographs I'd seen and descriptions I'd read of Jewish Ghettos in Eastern Europe in the thirties. Perhaps this is when I remembered that somewhere on my Father's side my ancestors had emigrated from Georgia. While this recollection helped forge a strong bond of brotherhood with several of my long-lost countrymen, my Dad informed me when I called home to tell him I'd visited our

homeland a few weeks later, that unless Poland now bordered Turkey I hadn't been to the ancestral home.

Batum was depressing, ugly, and intimidating, but though we weren't particularly happy to be there, the sense of triviality and dullness, the feeling that what we saw had been sapped of meaning by the eyes of a thousand other tourists, which had haunted us in Fethiye and chased us across Turkey, was gone. The very ugliness of Batum made it somehow important that we were there; we were really seeing something now. The pasty masses steered well clear of Georgia. This was traveling on the edge; this was adventure.

Still, we wanted out of Batum. It was inconceivable that the rest of the country was as ugly as this pit, and so we headed East and South to a town whose name we weren't sure how to pronounce, but which several people had written down for us in their wild script that didn't seem to have a single straight line when we were able to convey our question, "We go where?" (the question is really asked with eyebrows, shoulders, and upturned palms, but a little vocal accompaniment adds a personal touch). All that we were able to learn about our destination were the words, "mountains," "water," "health," and "beautiful."

We'd found the bus station the day before we actually left after several hours of wandering during which LQ pretended to be a bus driver and I played the part of a cheerful passenger to amused Georgians who may not have known what we were trying to communicate but always gave us detailed directions. The station was packed with passengers, vendors, and suspicious hangers-on. The vendors' hottest selling item was an egg, salami, onion, ketchup, and butter sandwich cooked in a customized waffle maker that reminded me of the recipes of my own country's trash.

Fifteen buses were lined up in the vacant lot behind the food vendors, and all of them looked about as old as me. Each one slumped precariously to one side or other and had several layers of tape holding together cracked windshields in addition to its own unique war wounds. We got double confirmation that bus number four was going to the place some stranger had written down on the back of our Investors Guide, found two seats that had relatively few parts missing, and settled down for the ride.

Between the bus, which stalled the moment the driver stopped revving the engine and outright broke down three times, and the road, which resembled a cross-section of Swiss cheese, we were lucky to average twenty kilometers an hour. The condition of the road was particularly baffling because it was obviously Georgia's equivalent to India's Grand Trunk Road. Turkish trucks ran in a steady stream bringing goods to Tbilisi, the capital, and passing through Georgia to Russia and Azerbaidzhan and Ukraine. This was Georgia's main artery, and it was in worse condition than an Indian vein. Why weren't they taxing the trucks and buses and maintaining their roads? In fact, we had originally planned to take a Turkish bus from Trabzon to Tbilisi, but the fare was an inordinate thirty dollars, which was over our budget. Our bus ride from Istanbul all the way to the Southern coast had cost less than ten dollars. When we asked why it cost so much to take a bus into Georgia, we were told that Georgia charged massive border fees. As we slowly lurched down the strip of cleared earth--one couldn't call it a road--I was no longer amused with the official at the border who had been so blatant as to make change out of his own wallet for the rather vague two dollar fee he'd insisted we pay.

This discrepancy between the trucks loaded with tens of thousands of dollars worth of merchandise and the horrendous condition of the road was far from unusual. In Batum I had been shocked at the number of Mercedes Benzes and BMW's, nice ones, that cruised past stray dogs with festering wounds and broken buildings. At dusk women in spiked heels and designer dresses paraded their obnoxious little dogs past the broken benches, dead trees, burnt out street lamps that lined the city's beach promenade. Not everyone in Georgia was poor, but what wealth there was was tainted by the omnipresent gray poverty. In this quickly decomposing landscape, anything new or fresh seemed out of place, rude.

I had plenty of time to contemplate the incongruity of German luxury cars in a Jewish ghetto during the endless bus ride. About five hours into the trip we stopped in a particularly dirty, dismal city for lunch, and while I went to buy some fried food for lunch from one of the aggressive bus-stand vendors, the Lion Queen stood watch over our backpacks. When I returned with my fat-filled booty, LQ was surrounded by three massive, potato shaped men who looked like professional wrestlers. I reluctantly joined her and together we tried to make small talk with the oversized barbarians.

Perhaps the most important skill acquired traveling is the ability to interpret first impressions accurately. Every time you cross a border there is a period of reeducation, since you must learn some of the mannerisms and customs of a new culture and become familiar with the features of another race. In some countries it is remarkably easy to make character assessments. Indians, for example, have faces so expressive they seem to distill the essence of their personalities. In other countries it is almost impossible to separate the bag

slashing thieves from the generous benefactors. In China a taxi driver who scammed two dollars off us continued to smile like a figure skater as I spit on his shoes. Georgia was a difficult country in which to quickly judge strangers because most everybody looked like a hit man in a seventies B movie. This was only our third day in Georgia, but I had no trouble sizing these lugs up as the scum of a scummy town.

This realization wasn't overly helpful, however. We couldn't leave the general vicinity of the bus because we had no idea how long it would take the driver to finish his sandwich, and we couldn't tell the three brutes to leave because that would make our relationship openly hostile, which was far less appealing than suspiciously friendly. I tried to befriend them by offering some cheese filled fried bread, and this seemed to establish a rapport. The biggest, whose sheer bulk established him as the leader, reciprocated by buying me a bottle of homemade beer from the requisite bus beer stand. The beer had a nice fruity hoppiness and was plenty strong, unlike tasteless lagers we'd been forced to drink in Turkey. I began to wonder if I'd just made the common mistake of assuming big and ugly meant mean and dangerous.

I held the bottle above my head and made sounds usually reserved for the bedroom to show just how much I appreciated the beer and just what an enthusiastic, likable guy I am. The Alpha potato briefly held up his beer and made a loud exclamation before downing the entire bottle in three loud gulps. His friends looked expectantly at me, so I tried to follow suit but only managed to get half the bottle down. I handed it to LQ and she disposed of the rest to the boisterous approval of our potential assailants.

Things seemed to be going well, so I decided to try a little biographical exchange. I pointed to LQ and then pounded my chest while repeating, "America, America" in an uncharacteristic show of patriotism. All three of them grunted in excited approval. It was their turn to share. The leader pointed to the shorter of his two associates, who, though he was only about a hundred and seventy centimeters, was built like a tree trunk and bellowed, "Israel, Israel." He stopped to laugh before clarifying, "Gurgestan, Israel." I couldn't help being excited to meet one of my fellow Georgian Jews, and though I generally don't appreciate being identified with any sort of group, club, institution, country, clan, state, party, race, gender, tax bracket, trend, or tribe unless somebody questions my right to membership, I didn't even mind when LQ seized the opportunity to strengthen our budding friendship and began pointing to me and shouting, "Israel, Jew, Israel!" The second biggest and first ugliest of the two goyishas raised his eyebrows in a very believable expression of confusion and asked, "America? Israel?" LQ responded by pointing first to the tree trunk and then to me, saying slowly, and really quite eloquently, "Georgia: Israel. America: Israel."

By this time the driver had finished his sandwich and beer and, after several attempts, succeeded in starting the bus. We smiled the smile of the rich and kind to the poor and crude, and quickly boarded the bus. As I was turning to slide into my seat, I felt someone rudely trying to push past me, which was odd because there were only about ten passengers on the whole bus. I surprised myself by reacting quickly. I stepped away from the pusher, turned, and slapped the not-so-nimble hand that was tugging on my wallet. The result of this

evasive maneuver was that I ended up face to face with the incompetent pick pocket. For a moment my long lost tribal brother and I made eye contact.

This encounter left me with an adrenaline rush that had no outlet, an inflated ego, and the disturbing realization of how helpless we would be in the middle of Georgia without our three hundred dollar bills. It's easy to play the intrepid traveller when you've got U.S. currency. The attempt on my wallet brought home the reality that, despite my ripped jeans and dirty sweat shirt, I was one of the out-of-place wealthy. I was also an ignorant stranger trusting in the kindness and generosity of a people that had been used and abused.

I'd spent the first half of the bus ride feeling righteous and enraged at the abuse of power that allowed the corrupt few to become moderately rich, and gave me a sore ass from bouncing up and down on a bus whose seat cushions had long since decomposed, on a road that was so old you just about needed a tracker to follow it. (How thankful I was for that sore ass now that its hypersensitivity had alerted me to the intrusive hand.) The incident with the thief provided me with a much more satisfying topic to ponder for the second half of the ride. Before the driver had even closed the doors behind the stocky thief, I was reliving for LQ how I had dexterously pushed the thick fingers away with a downward chopping motion. By the time the bus was struggling out of town, I was beginning my first series of mental drop kicks, uppercuts, and bone-breaking body slams.

For the next three hours I was able to maintain high spirits by distracting myself with fantasies of the violent revenge I could have wreaked if I'd only thought of it in time. By the fourth hour, unfortunately, I ran out of variations of this macho daydream. It didn't help my daydream along any when LQ, who

hadn't even noticed the attempted robbery, commented, "I'm glad he just ran away. He was a scrappy looking fucker, and thick. Those two giants were probably waiting outside too. Thank God you didn't get hurt."

I spent the last hour absorbing the unpleasant and growing sense that we were speeding farther and farther behind enemy lines. The only encouraging sign was the lush greenness of the countryside. The Southeastern coast of the Black Sea is a very wet place. As we climbed up into the coastal range, the reward of all that water was evident in emerald green fields, frothing clear creeks, and impressive stands of conifers and deciduous trees in full bloom. We crossed three passes and from the top of each saw taller and taller, mountains.

"I think when we get there we should just spend every day exploring the mountains and stay the hell out of town. All this crumbling concrete in the towns is just too depressing. I can't believe how many trees are left though," I said to LQ whose expression made it obvious that she was having her doubts about whether it was a good idea to have crossed the border.

"I just hope there's somewhere to stay when we get there. I don't feel like begging for beds right now. Not that we'll even know when we're there," she reminded me.

Both these problems had also been on my mind. In Batumi the hotel which the friendly sailor had instructed the driver to take us to had cost forty-five dollars a night. At that rate we would spend all our money in seven days, just on rooms. We'd kept asking around until someone finally took us to a woman who had an extra room for rent at twelve dollars a day, still over our budget, but acceptable for a couple of days. We'd expected Georgia to be cheaper than Turkey and were surprised to find that it was more expensive, though everything

about it felt cheap. Furthermore, Batum was a relatively big city. If it only had one hotel, there was no reason to believe that wherever we were going had any at any price.

The problem of knowing when we'd arrived was not that there weren't signs in the Roman alphabet. For reasons which remain a mystery to me, signs for everything from pawn shops to bare shelved department stores to road signs appeared in English, as well as Georgian and Russian. It was as if these signs had been painted just for us since nobody else seemed to be able to read them. The problem was that we couldn't get anyone to write our destination in an alphabet we could decipher.

But I had shown the driver our illegible goal five or six times until he made it clear that if I shoved the investment guide in his face one more time he was going to throw it out the window. In a town labeled Boorgomi he motioned us off the bus. Boorgomi was nestled in a narrow valley on either side of a wide, fast river. Steep, densely forested mountains started their ascent almost from the river banks, so that the town had been forced to spread in two slim strips for a couple kilometers. It was a spectacular setting, so beautiful that we almost didn't notice that the buildings had the same boarded up windows, the shops the same bare shelves, and the streets the same pock-marked dilapidation as all the towns we passed through in Georgia.

The sun had already disappeared behind the mountains on the river's right bank, and we were anxious to find accommodation before dark. We were at the intersection of the highway and the main bridge connecting the two sides of town. This appeared to be downtown: a "Department Store" that stocked only vodka, champagne, candy bars and three or four sweaters; a few street vendors;

a large institutional-looking building that turned out to be the farmer's market; a group of spectators watching two red faced drunks abuse each other. Next to the bridge's entrance there was a line of a few beat-up old sedans that had the look of taxis. We went up to the first one and shouted, "Hotel. Hotel. Bed," at the gray-haired driver while putting our heads on imaginary pillows and feigning sleep. The taxi drivers had a brief conference and then the one we'd approached held out five fingers. Five lari, four dollars to take us to a hotel: the eight hour bus ride had only cost six lari each. We had no idea where the prospective hotel was, or if we could even afford it for that matter. We were in the common but aggravating position of bargaining without the faintest idea of the "real price." LQ acted offended and held out two fingers. The driver held out five fingers and smiled. Apparently it was no secret that we weren't locals. After a couple minutes of fruitless finger bargaining, I lost patience and agreed to the five laris, maybe it was a long ways. Wherever it was, we would be hard put to find it in the hour of daylight left without a ride.

We crossed the river, drove two-hundred yards and pulled up in front of an eight-story, half-a-football-field-long concrete structure. One thing was certain: we could afford to stay here. The top story was black with soot and had no windows or interior walls left. The other seven stories weren't far behind. There were no lights on and no signs of life. "Hotel?" I asked skeptically. Our driver nodded vigorously, took the five lari, and departed for the forty second drive back to his parking spot.

There was nothing for it but to confirm that we had been ripped off and dropped in front of an abandoned hotel, for the building had clearly been a hotel at some point in the last thirty years. We pushed open the large cracked glass ..

doors and entered the huge lobby. To our surprise, a man and woman were positioned behind an ancient hotel reception desk. For a mere six lari a night we received a fourth floor room with a balcony that had a view of the entire town, the river, and the green mountains. True, it smelled strongly of mildew, the walls were splotted with strange yellow stains, the floor was even lumpier than the beds, the window was cracked, and the interior decoration proved that the seventies had been a relatively conservative period in the U.S.. Though we had a bathroom, it smelled like an outhouse and only had running water one hour a day. There was intermittent electricity. We were the only guests staying in the whole three-hundred room hotel, but we had neighbors because the hotel staff occupied the rooms on either side of us.

We threw our backpacks on the floor and literally ran out of the hotel. As it turned out, we spent a week in the room and my memories of it now are primarily breathtaking sunsets from the balcony. But that first night the sense that we were vacationing in the ruins of a post nuclear holocaust society was too depressing. We needed to find life, hope, a drink.

On the verge of tears, we set out to find a restaurant. We wandered up and down the streets that flanked the river, and though we passed several establishments with signs that read "Cafe" or "Canteen," they were all decidedly closed and looked like they had been that way for several years. Finally, as the last of the alpen glow was fading from the tops of the tallest mountains, we found an open restaurant.

There were eight empty tables in the main room, but in the farthest corner a sort of banquet cubicle big enough for a table of eight had been erected, and from behind its plywood walls came the sounds of a party loud enough for

twenty. We chose one of the empty tables and sat down. Nothing happened. We used this time to discuss strategy. Assuming this was a restaurant, we had to: a) find somebody who worked here, b) convince them to bring us whatever food they felt appropriate other than salami, cheese, and bread, seven meals straight of these three staples was our limit, and c) not get too outrageously ripped off.

Task "c" was essentially out of our control since we had no idea what a reasonable price was, and it is difficult to convincingly pretend you know what you're doing when you have to mime shoving a fork in your mouth to signal hunger. Task "b" would have been greatly simplified if there had been other patrons in open view, since we could have just pointed to whatever looked good on their plates. But questions "b" and "c" were both moot anyway until we accomplished "a".

After a couple of long minutes of looking at an empty room and hearing a raucous party, problem "a" was solved when the group in the cubicle rang a bell. A sweet looking middle-aged woman in an apron quickly appeared out of the kitchen with a couple bottles of vodka. Her eyes widened in surprise when she saw us, and she said something that sounded like, "I'll be with you in just one minute," before she opened the curtain to deliver the booze to the banquet. The open curtain revealed just the end of a rectangular table covered in empty fifths of vodka, stacks of cold cuts, steaming bowls, salads, cheese, half eaten fish, and a flushed man with a shot glass raised in the air shouting earnestly.

"We should just wait until he passes out and eat his food. No way he's going to finish half of what's on his plate," said LQ with typical concern for wasted food. Fortunately, we did not follow this line of thought. Ten hours

later, when the first light of dawn was appearing, we were still waiting for him to pass out.

After joking with the locals for a few moments and pointing us out to them, the matronly woman came over to our table with the drunken toaster. She said something which we interpreted as, "Whadya want?" to which we replied by pointing to our mouths and holding our hands wide apart to indicate we wanted big food. The man she had brought with her asked us something in a booming voice. Undoubtedly this was question number one. We simultaneously pounded our chests and shouted back, for the hundred and eighty-first time of the trip, "America." Both of their mouths opened in disbelief to show what was left of matching sets of yellow, rotted teeth. The woman blushed and put her right hand over her heart.

The man grabbed my hand with his huge, thick-fingered paw and just about dragged me into the kitchen where a cook covered in blood was hacking at a cow's leg with a machete and a woman was pinching closed little U shaped dumplings. I pointed to the dumplings and gave the thumbs up sign. He dragged me back to the table where the woman was still gazing affectionately at LQ, and shoved me into my chair. "You drink vodka?" he asked. "No. You drink wine," he answered. He gave the star-struck waitress a few directions and then returned to his party.

We were served a wonderful meal of dumplings in sour cream, salad, smoked fish, a full jug of sweet pink wine that the waitress indicated she had made herself, and, of course, bread, cheese and salami. The party behind the curtain continued to provide a festive soundtrack. Halfway through the meal we had the privilege of shaking the hands of all eight of the drunk celebrators, each

of whom identified himself as Dr. something, though generally they looked more like coal miners.

When we paid the extraordinarily reasonable bill, the combination of a nice buzz, full stomachs, and the admiration of our gentle host made us completely forget our depression of only an hour before. We were actually looking forward to going back to the most decrepit hotel on Earth --at least it wasn't the second most decrepit.

But we never made it to our hotel that night. On our way out the door I was jerked to a stop by the big hand of our Doctor friend on my shoulder. He pulled me over to an ancient car that looked like an old Toyota land cruiser, but which I think was of Soviet make. "My friend! My home! I love my home! You my home! My car, animal machine! You my home?" he shouted at me in drunken enthusiasm.

"Oh, thank you very much! But we go hotel! Tired, need rest! We love hotel!" I shouted back. He hadn't let go of my shoulder, and now he grabbed LQ's hand and repeated, "Animal machine! My friend come my home! My name Ilya!" It was quite clear that this was not a request, and I quickly accepted the invitation this time in order to save my shoulder from his crushing grip. I wasn't sure about Georgian etiquette, and it's usually considered good manners to decline an invitation a few times before accepting even if you want to go. Plus, I wanted to make a little show of good judgment to cover my bases before we got in a car driven by a stumbling drunk giant. Now I could always reflect at a later date that we'd had no choice, which is probably true.

Of course I wanted to go to his house. He was obviously a deviant freak of the highest order who didn't care about etiquette or what other people thought.

He was a character, an eccentric, and I have a special place in my heart for eccentrics. This was what we left Turkey for, this was adventure, and I'd already downed half a jug of homemade wine. I didn't have to even look at the Lion Queen to know she was behind my decision. If he'd asked her, she wouldn't have even risked the first insincere but polite refusal.

LQ and I got behind the animal machine and pushed it off the sidewalk and into the street. Iliya jump started it and we climbed in. On the way out of town, he pulled up to the general vicinity of the curb in front of a table which boasted several brands of vodka and champagne. He told me to choose between a bottle of peach and a bottle of lemon flavored vodka that the old toothless man brought to my window. While I was debating over the vodka with LQ, a man in uniform suddenly stuck his head through the driver's window. For a brief second I thought our friend was busted and our adventure was nipped in the bud, but then the man's breath hit me. Iliya grabbed the officer by the collar and said, "My friend police man. My friend long time. Animal man! Natural man!"

"Very nice" I said.

"American friend! Clinton friend," Ilya shouted at his friend.

"I love America! I love American friends! I love you! I love you!" shouted the police man.

"I love you too," I said while pretending that I didn't notice the animal man wanted to seal our friendship with a kiss.

"Everybody's so fuckin' friendly it makes me want to puke," LQ commented from the back seat.

"You're just jealous 'cause he didn't try and kiss you."

Ilya let go of the police officer's collar, which turned out to be the only thing holding the officer upright. As we screeched away from the curb with our bottle of lemon flavored vodka, we could see him sitting in the middle of the street by the light of the full moon.

We drove at a speed ranging from five to thirty kilometers, sometimes with headlights and sometimes by moonlight, four or five kilometers upriver. Ilya made full use of both lanes of the road though he seldom looked at it because he was too busy making eye contact with LQ and me as he ranted and raved about his love for his home and the beastly nature of his automobile. He was clearly frustrated by his limited vocabulary and periodically banged the steering wheel with excessive force when he was stuck describing yet another aspect of his life as "animal" or "natural." LQ and I didn't take our eyes off the road in futile hope that our diligence would rub off on Ilya.

Finally we turned off the semi-paved highway onto an ungraded dirt road and had the privilege of seeing the animal machine in action as Iliya accelerated through huge puddles and caught air over dirt mounds. I actually felt safer now because at least he was watching the road and not arbitrarily turning the headlights off. He continued to babble as we bounced along: "My home here. Natural home. I love my home. I love life! I love my life! I doctor. I have two assistants. Two assistants my home. My home book. Georgia: English book my home. English school in Russia long time. I English bad. I love life!"

All the while we continued to speed up into the mountains. We had already come too far to walk back to the hotel tonight, and considering our driver was already wasted and we had another fifth of vodka with us, it was

suddenly obvious that "My friend. My home," was an invitation to spend the night and not just stop over for a drink.

This was not the first time I had been driven out into the country by a drunken stranger whose sanity was highly questionable on the night of the full moon, but even though I was experienced in this sort of endeavor, I couldn't help feeling a tad uneasy. Ilya claimed to be a doctor, but he didn't look like any practicing doctor I'd ever seen. First, there were his teeth, or rather the lack of teeth. Second there were his huge, thickly callused hands. They were the hands of a construction worker or mechanic or serial strangler. They were not the hands of a doctor. But it is hard to believe that a man who won't shut up about how much he loves life is a killer, or even a thief, and as he pulled off the road and into a driveway leading up to a two-story, A-framed house and sighed, "My home," I felt my eyes moisten with second-hand pride (I suppose it could have been the second-hand smoke from the filterless cigarettes he was continuously lighting and throwing out the window).

Ilya threw open the door and we stepped into a large empty room with unfinished concrete walls and no glass in the large windows. "My home!" he shouted. "No duh!" LQ shouted back with infectious enthusiasm. One of the wonderful things about not speaking the same language is that you can say what you really think as long as you borrow the emphasis and gestures that go with what you're supposed to say.

Ilya threw open a door leading off the unfinished main room and shouted, "My assistants!" Lying side by side on a neatly made bed watching TV were two women. One was thin, sallow, and homely with black hair. The other was a

curvy blond. They both jumped up in surprise when they saw their unexpected guests, smiled at us and started tidying up the room.

The room was about six meters by three meters and was furnished with a double bed, a large old TV, a bookshelf, a dresser, a framed picture of Jesus on the cross complete with bloody crown of thorns, old black and white photographs of dead relatives in traditional costume, a few chairs, and several stacks of unopened storage boxes. A double doorway to another room was curtained off, but Ilya led us back into the main room while his two assistants set up tables and chairs for us. We crossed the room and entered the bathroom, which also had cement walls and floor. The bathroom looked like a prison cell. Though we tried to hide it, Ilya saw that we were not overly excited by his bathroom. He said, "Luxury? No luxury," and turned on the water to the big claw-foot bathtub, the one impressive feature. He grabbed my hand and held it under the water. It was scalding hot. "Luxury!" he cried triumphantly.

By the time we got back to the only completed room in the house, a small table had been brought in and set with cheese, bread, shelled walnuts, shot glasses, and our bottle of lemon flavored vodka. The two assistants resumed their place on the bed, and the three of us sat down to business. He hadn't yet asked us our names, profession, or whether we liked his country. Apparently we were going to answer those three questions at the table. Our glasses were already full, and I lifted one to test its odor as a safety precaution, but Ilya stopped me cold with an emphatic exclamation and bade me set the glass down with his gaze. Then he lifted his cup, and gave the first toast. He blurted something out in Georgian, caught himself and gazed solemnly at the Technicolor print of Jesus on the wall. "To Jesus," he said and spread his arms out to indicate "on the cross."

"But Perrin's Jewish" noted the Lion Queen. That something was amiss clearly registered, but he couldn't make out the exact nature of the problem.

"Israel," I said. When I feel the need to communicate my religious breeding in exotic locations, I find that the only effective means is the word "Israel." Ilya was no exception. He raised his eyebrows in disbelief, then shook his head at the joke. "Israel, Israel," I repeated and shrugged my shoulders. He shrugged his shoulders and gave an amended toast, "To God. Your God. My God. All God," he said with the appropriate pointing and swirling gestures.

"To God" we responded and together the three of us drained our glasses while the assistants took unobtrusive sips.

"Shit. This is shit," Iliya said in his first full sentence. It was shit, too; there's nothing worse than unnecessary artificial bubble gum flavorings in Vodka. But it was all we had, and Ilya wasted no time in refilling our glasses. "To the motherland: My motherland, your Motherland, all Motherland. Africa Motherland, China Motherland, Russia Motherland, Gurgestan Motherland, America Motherland."

"To the motherland," we fairly shouted, and the three of us drained our glasses. We proceeded to toast our ancestors, all our relatives--not individually--our friends, our presidents, all the vegetables and animals we ate, and ourselves. Ilya often consulted an historic Georgian-English dictionary to help elucidate which aspect of vegetables we were toasting or to insure we understood that "all family" included in-laws. He looked frustrated that he couldn't give the toasts the eloquence and wit they deserved, but we were taking care of the fundamentals of the ceremony quite handily. Within an hour we had drained the offensive bottle of lemon drink, and for a second I thought we were through.

Ilya still hadn't asked our names, so I grasped on this as a subject that could be successfully communicated, "My name is Perrin."

"No good name. I give you good name, Georgian name. Your name Sassos. Sassos Stalin name in Georgia. Animal man, Georgian man!"

"No way. No Sassos. Stalin murderer man, evil man, bad man! Gulag, millions of people killed. You like Stalin?"

"No. I no like Stalin. Stalin no Jesus, no church. I no like Stalin. But Stalin animal man, strong man! I like Stalin strong man. Good name--you are Sassos."

"We've found the last Stalinist, Sassos," said LQ. "He likes Stalin because he was macho. He's proud that Stalin came from Georgia because it shows that Georgians are animal men. You can't really argue with that."

"If you call me Sassos, I'll start calling you Dumpling. It's like, like. It ain't like anything, there's nothing more extreme. Admiring Stalin for his power, that he was enough of an animal man to kill more people than anybody else. But not supporting him because he was against the Church. If he'd killed for the Church, Ilya'd probably have a picture of Stalin with a halo."

"Lighten up. What'd Stalin ever do to you. At least one person in one of their families probably died because of him. You're missing the point. We've found the last Stalinist!"

There was a lag in the conversation. I noticed the Lion Queen didn't ask what her Georgian name was despite her enthusiasm for Sassos. We'd finished the bottle and needed a new focus. I ate a walnut, found it to be the sweetest, most tender walnut I'd ever had, and began rapid, uncontrollable consumption. LQ swayed back and forth, apparently trying to get a better angle on the Princes, Counts, and Ladies on the TV in what appeared to be a Russian movie adaptation

of War and Peace. Just as the lack of stimulus was causing my vision to blur, Ilya smacked his head and shouted out something to his two assistants. He was clearly wasted, but a more dynamic force than I, and he had been at the doctor's banquet before this.

The pale assistant went into the curtained off section of the room, while the blond got a green jar from the book case and filled our glasses for one last toast. Ilya pawed through the dictionary like he was looking for a note he'd hidden in some book years ago, and then handed it to his voluptuous assistant. "Oh, boy. Just like the Wheel of Fortune," said LQ when she handed the dictionary back to Ilya. He looked at it and nodded his head vigorously. He formed the word slowly with his lips to make sure he had it right, and said with excellent emphasis, "To chance."

"To chance," I cried in drunken earnestness, and together the three of us drained our glasses. Whatever was in the green jar, it was definitely flammable. It burned from my throat right down to my sternum. Later we learned that this was a traditional toast which was better translated as, "Good Luck," also an excellent toast but kind of whiny, not the nitty gritty, straight-ahead honesty of "To chance."

The sallow assistant came back from behind the curtain with a small rifle. My first thought was that this was where they blew our heads off, fed us to the abused dog we had passed on the way in, and took our three hundred dollars and passports. But then I realized that this was a stupid fear. If they wanted to rob us, they could save ammo by waiting twenty minutes for the last toast to hit, at which time we would certainly voice no objections to being fed to a dog. Ilya grabbed the gun, stood up, and charged into the main room. It turned out that

the main room just looked unfinished. In fact, it had no windows and concrete walls because it was the shooting gallery. The indentation in the far wall with the smoke stains that I, the dumb tourist, had taken for a fireplace was actually the target area. Ilya put our empty bottle on the hearth and handed the gun to LQ and asked, "Sniper?"

"Hell yes. Perrin, hold my hat," said LQ. She took aim like the bottle was a butterfly and the puff of concrete showed she'd just missed the fireplace.

"No sniper, no sniper," Ilya said with a forgiving look that pissed off LQ. "You sniper man, Sassos?" Ilya asked me.

"Sure as shit, Adolf," I said and took aim. This was my first time shooting a gun. I'd shot a bb. gun at cans a few times but never a real, fully loaded mammal-killing gun. I had no trouble relaxing, thanks to the very bottle I was attempting to annihilate. I held the rifle like on TV, pulled the trigger, and when I heard the glass shatter, assumed somebody had dropped a bottle.

"Animal man! Natural man! Sniper man!" shouted Iliya. I'd done it --the pinnacle of manliness. I'd done drunk half a jug of wine, a third of a bottle of vodka, and not only stood up, but hit a bottle from thirty feet with a .22 rifle inside! I was a Natural Man and all I could think to say was, "Yeehaa!" Ilya set up another bottle and broke it. He set up another bottle and I killed this one too. He set up another bottle and broke it. He set up another bottle, and I missed it on purpose to end the game.

Fortunately, my marksmanship didn't fool him and he saw that we both needed something to support our encroaching fall. He led us behind the curtain into a room that was just a little smaller than the TV room. There was one inviting double bed and a twin bed arranged kitty-corner in the room. To my

relief, Ilya pointed to the double bed, whose sheets looked as though they had been changed for us, and left. I looked at my watch before passing out: one-thirty in the morning.

It turned out that Ilya and the assistants were just waiting for us to go to bed to really start the party. While LQ and I were in the room, the two women sat quietly watching the three of us and occasionally rolling their eyes if Ilya was particularly crude. Now we heard them laughing and squealing. It even sounded like they were dancing. I vacillated between drunken oblivion and semi-conscious awe and aggravation at the endurance of this middle-aged man who claimed to be a doctor and his two assistants. Finally, at five in the morning I surfaced from my nervous sleep to sweet silence.

But it wasn't complete silence. From the twin bed in the corner came hushed dialogue. Soon the hush and dialogue was replaced by unmuffled groans and moans. I slowly turned my head so as not to draw attention, and took a peak at the bed just a few feet away. There was no need for the covertness since the only way I could have been seen was if Iliya had an eyeball for an asshole. The blond assistant's feet were pointing at the ceiling and she was emitting little puppy dog sounds while Ilya kneeled between her legs pumping away like a jack hammer and grunting like he was stacking wood. There was a big double bed in the other room and their love making was far from furtive. This was clearly for our benefit; the gracious host providing entertainment. Maybe there were hopes of some full contact cultural exchange.

I looked over at LQ and was relieved to see she was still asleep. Normally I might have been a more appreciative audience, but it was an hour until dawn, I had a throbbing headache, and watching Ilya's technique was as romantic as

watching hippos mate. Besides, I had a bad angle. I rolled over and my eyes fell on a faded black and white photograph on a box that served as the bedside table. The picture looked like it was from the turn of the century, but then everything in Georgia looked like it was thirty years older than it was. Three men with huge mustaches, wide brimmed hats, and shaggy chaps sat erect on horses with huge shotguns slung across their chests. There were a couple of big dogs of the same breed as the dog Ilya kept chained to the house, though these looked content and confident--working dogs no doubt.

Suddenly it all made sense: Ilya was a cowboy. Not because he was a domineering, macho, alcoholic pig whose greatest love was his four-by-four rig--these are merely common side effects of a cowboy disposition. Ilya was a real cowboy, the kind that's hard to find in the lower forty-eight these days. The kind of cowboy I'm talking about is identifiable not by the music he listens to or the size of his truck, but by four characteristics: self-sufficiency, complete disregard for what others think, a tendency towards excess, and big-hearted generosity.

I felt LQ's hand groping for mine and turned my head to look at her. Her eyes were wide open and disturbed. LQ has spent a few summers on dude ranches in Alaska and Montana and has an understanding of cowboys. In her own way aspires to their ideal of independence. I was excited to share my discovery with her. "Ilya's a cowboy; look at this picture," I whispered.

"Well, if he keeps riding that hard, his mare's gonna be mighty saddle sore in the morning. He even fucks like a Stalinist." This observation proved to be all too accurate. Stalin's reign was remarkable both for the length of its duration and its excessive force. For the next fifty minutes, approximately two minutes for every year Stalin held power, Ilya hammered away. LQ and I held hands and

stared at the ceiling, trying not to attract attention. The copulation on the other side of the room seemed to consist of a series of unsuccessful five-minute plans. Just as the grunting and slapping sounds appeared to be building to a climax, they would suddenly halt for a few moments, only to begin the labor all over again, without even bothering to change positions. Finally, as the sky outside was beginning to brighten, Ilya gave a final grunt, rolled off his assistant and commenced the snoring portion of the evening.

We were both too shaken up from this display to fall back into our unsatisfying sleep, and continued to lie staring at the ceiling and longing for the privacy of our hotel room in town. Only an hour later the blond assistant climbed out of bed and started cleaning. She and the sallow assistant mopped the floors and tidied up both the furnished rooms while Ilya snored and LQ and I lay in bed feeling sorry for ourselves. An hour after the women got up, Ilya shouted something and the blond assistant brought him his pants from the night before.

While Ilya went to the bathroom, LQ and I got dressed. We both had monumental hangovers and were dying for a glass of water. Before we even asked, the sallow assistant brought us two bottles of award winning Boorgomi mineral water. By the time we were done with the slightly sulfuric water, we were being herded into the animal machine with the two assistants. I wanted nothing more than a case of mineral water and my bed in our wonderful hotel room. But it was not to be.

We pulled into a parking lot just across the river from our hotel in front of a typically dirty, three story concrete building complete with broken windows. "My clinic. You come in." Ilya declared. The two assistants hopped out of the

car and unlocked the padlocked door. I couldn't believe it: the two women were really his medical assistants, Iliya really was a doctor, and we were hostages of hospitality.

Inside the two assistants and Ilya left us in the main office and disappeared. I rummaged through a couple of big boxes marked UNESCO. Inside one were hundreds of sample sized antacid bottles. "Great, UNESCO's really sending in the vitally needed, life saving medicines--ten thousand bottles of antacid," I said.

"Hey, from what I've seen that's probably the most appropriate medical relief UNESCO's ever sent. Give me a bottle quick, I think I'm going to puke." While LQ and I took double doses of the antacid, a man who looked a few years younger than us came running into the room and panted out in the best English we'd heard in a couple weeks, "Hello. My name is Zura. You come with me for traditional Georgian breakfast. My father is Doctor you met last night. He is in the car. We go now, Ilya come later. Yes?"

Twenty minutes later, at exactly nine seventeen on Saturday morning, we found ourselves sitting at a long table in Boorgomi's other restaurant with all eight of the doctors from the night before plus Zura, who served as translator and explainer. The table was covered in little dishes: cheese, smoked white fish, three kinds of cold cuts, two types of greens, bread and butter. There were also three fifths of vodka, and each guest was equipped with a shot glass.

"You drink vodka at the traditional Georgian breakfast?" I asked the obvious.

"Vodka or wine. Wine is more traditional. Wine is invented in Georgia. But these days, after Russia, we drink much vodka too. The traditional Georgian

breakfast is the morning after. The morning after you drink all night. The traditional breakfast is special Georgian soup. Very good, very good taste. What is the word?"

"Delicious."

"Yes thank you. I study English in Moscow. I study business economics and English. But I forget already. It is good for me talk to you. I never know American. You have good night with Ilya? He is good man, but a little crazy."

Three of the doctors filled the shot glasses and the doctor at the head of the table raised his glass and gave a short toast in Georgian which Zura translated as "Good morning." We all tossed back our morning shot, all except for LQ who just took a sip to be polite. Ilya, who was sitting next to her looked at her disapprovingly and said, "Okay, okay. Woman can't drink," which showed he had LQ's number. She drained her glass for the rest of the meal without complaining once.

"He is the tamada," said Zura, indicating the toast giver, "He gives the tamada, the toast. No one drink unless there is tamada and then you drink all the glass."

"How do you choose the tamada?"

"He is the funniest, the best talking, or the most important. He is director of hospital, host. But Ilya good tamada too. Oh, here is the soup." The pungent smell of a dumpster in the sunshine after a heavy dew permeated the room.

"Cow, no not cow. Cow with big shoulder. How do you say?"

"Ox," said LQ.

"Yes, leg of ox soup. Take whole leg of ox and boil for eight hours."

On this trip I ate brain, lung, goat intestines and dog rump and liked them all. I picked maggots off dried apricots and happily munched away. I ate watery lentils for twelve straight days and picked the meat from between the eyes of a boiled chicken head. Like they say in Guangzhuo, if it has four legs and is not a table, I'll eat it. But boiled ox leg soup was too much. I have never eaten garbage, and know that there must be as many flavors of garbage as there are things we throw away, but both LQ and I recognized the distinctive flavor of garbage. Apparently Zura's instructions for making the soup were complete; there didn't appear to be any spices or vegetables added to the broth, and the leg of ox hadn't been skinned. There was a quarter inch thick layer of rubbery yellow skin covering each morsel of meat. In my bowl the ox's knee joint lay in piss yellow broth with pale blotches of liquid fat floating on top. The doctor across from me was less fortunate, in his bowl lay the hoof of the ox.

LQ and I played with our soup while the doctors slurped away until it was time for the next toast. Again Zura translated: "To the guests from Tbilisi. Those two are inspectors. Government inspectors of the hospital. After breakfast we go to hospital and they make report."

"The inspectors will be in a generous mood by the time breakfast is over, that's for sure," said LQ.

"What?" asked Zura.

"Nothing."

Breakfast was over when the fourth bottle of vodka was empty, and all of us except Ilya piled into three cars and drove to the hospital. By this time we were all in a generous mood, and my hangover was a distant memory. The hospital was located in a pine grove a few hundred feet above the river and

afforded a beautiful Western view. From a distance it looked like a peaceful place to recuperate.

At one time it must have been a first rate facility, but as soon as the warped door was unlocked and pushed open, it was clear why the doctors found it necessary to sit down to a traditional Georgian breakfast before doing their rounds. The linoleum floors looked like they'd been put through a paper shredder, the paint three coats down was peeling off the walls, and half the windows were cracked. When I went to expel some of the vodka, the stench from the toilet was so bad it reminded me of the traditional Georgian soup. Like the rest of Boorgomi, the hospital only had running water for an hour or two a day and apparently nobody had tried to flush it during this time period in several weeks.

While the doctors saw their patients and the inspectors inspected, we were entertained by Zura and the director of the hospital in the director's dark office (the hospital only had sporadic electricity as well). "Your country is very beautiful," I said, sensing Zura's embarrassment at the condition of the hospital. I was telling the truth, too; Georgia is a spectacular, lush, mountainous country with breathtaking granite peaks, stunningly situated quaint old churches and castles, and raging rivers.

"Yes it is. But everything is broken. Six years ago we were the richest country, state, in the Soviet Union. Now everything is broken. Six years ago people came from all over to this hospital, to the spa for the mineral water also. Stalin came here, Breshnev, Kruschev, Jimmy Carter, all come here. Now everything is broken. The roads broken, the park broken, the hospital broken. And now is the good time. In the winter it is very cold and there is no heat

because Georgia cannot pay for the gas. The electricity comes from rivers and all the rivers ice, no electricity. Only kerosene. The Mafia buys all the kerosene, then the price very high. They say that people pay more for private generators than it costs to give electricity to all the people. Everything is broken now."

"But people do not seem so poor. I mean, people may be poor, but not this poor," I said motioning the broken window in the office, "Do you pay taxes?"

"Taxes? You do not understand. Everything is corrupt. If I want to be a policeman, I must pay one thousand dollars to government official, maybe four thousand dollars to be officer. Then I get no salary. Police man very rich. Custom man the best job in the country. I study business economics in Moscow, best school, but I cannot work in my country. They do not understand marketing or growth or advertising. Every Georgian think only himself, fast money. Nobody can do business with Georgia. I will go to Russia, there they understand business and there is much money."

"Too many cowboys and not enough dudes," I said.

"What?"

"Nothing. Do you wish you were still a part of the Soviet Union?"

"No, then they close all the churches. I love Georgia and Georgia is my country. We are a proud people, a strong people. But the roads, hospitals, parks were better before. Maybe it is better in five years. It is better this year than last year. Now the Mafia not control the country so much. Who knows, everything changes."

The dying hospital atmosphere was something of a buzz kill, and the long night and early morning caught up to me. After a short debate, I convinced Zura that we needed to return to our hotel to recover from our association with Ilya.

When he dropped us off, we made plans to meet him and his friends the next morning to go swimming at the local hot springs. For the next week Zura and his friends took it upon themselves to show us all the deserted tourist attractions Boorgomi had once been famous for and treat us to the exhausting customs of Georgian hospitality. The younger generation was less committed to drinking themselves to death by the age of fifty (at the local cemetery LQ and I couldn't find a single gravestone of a male who lived past fifty-two) and preferred the traditional sweet wine to vodka. But a day never went by without a tamada ceremony, and we kept our hangovers until we returned to the sobriety of Turkey. More than once, when we were just walking down the street a group of gray-haired men would call us over to honor us with a toast and act offended if we left walking a straight line.

But Georgian hospitality was more than just ritualized mass addiction. People consistently went out of their way to help us get on the right bus, find a hotel, or make sure we weren't bored. There wasn't the feeling that they were helping us out of a sense of duty or hope that somehow their kindness would lead to material rewards or a kind of celebrity worship of anybody American that we so often experienced in other countries. Georgians helped us and befriended us only if they truly wanted to, and all they expected in return was a friend to drink with. There was almost never any in between: either we were ignored, or we were taken into the family.

It was a good thing that people were so generous to us because not only were we without any guidebook, map, and language skills, but we were running out of money fast. While Georgia seemed to be falling, or rather had fallen, apart economically and there appeared to be basically no infrastructure, for some

reason it was quite a bit more expensive than Turkey. According to a U.S. embassy official we met, the lari had undergone thirty-percent inflation in terms of what it actually bought, but the exchange rate hadn't budged a cent. The IMF was apparently artificially supporting the lari in the world market in order to bolster Georgia's transition to a free-trade economy. Whatever their reasons, the effect on us was that after a week in Borgoomi (during which we only paid for a third of our meals, and those behind the backs of our ferociously generous hosts), we had only half our money left.

We decided to leave our room with the spectacular view and our new friends and go to Tbilisi, where it was rumored we could get more money with my American Express card. After a bus ride so miserable I almost enjoyed it, we arrived in the famous capital. The old Russian saying went, "Erivan is where you go to make the money, and Tbilisi is where you go to spend it." While its status as a party city and cultural center left with the Soviets, Tbilisi was much less run down than anywhere else we saw in Georgia. Some of the buildings that had been destroyed in the civil war a couple years before had actually been rebuilt--the only sign of effective government spending we saw--though for the most part the five- or six-block area in downtown that had been the battlefield where the whole war was fought remained uninhabitable ruins.

Still, there were designer clothes stores, jazz clubs, Chinese restaurants, art galleries, swimming pools, high-tech banks, a five star hotel, and a ballet. Tbilisi made me realize how much worse it not only could be, but was. The hotel we stayed at was another of the huge, rectangular edifices that the Soviets built and which was now impossible to imagine ever being necessary. But unlike the hotel in Boorgomi, this one was far from empty. Mischievous boys ran through the

lobby trying to soak each other with buckets of water; every balcony was packed with rugs, blankets, and pieces of furniture that wouldn't fit in the rooms; a constant stream of men and women looking for work flowed in and out of the spacious lobby. Nine of the ten floors of the hotel had been given over to housing for refugees from Azerbaidzhan.

In the previous week it hadn't occurred to me that anybody would seek refuge in this wasted country, but now I was staying in a hotel packed like a prison with people who had grabbed what possessions they could and escaped to the relative safety and prosperity of Georgia. On our fourth day in Tbilisi a couple of locals who'd adopted us took us on a day trip to see the enormous Caucasus mountains, and just four hours outside Tbilisi we found ourselves at the Chechnyan border. That night, back in our hotel with nine floors of refugees above us, the comforting and disconcerting simple truth which traveling reveals became tangible to me: things can always be better and things can always be worse.

This newly appreciated wisdom proved very helpful when, on the last day of our fifteen-day tourist visa, we took a Turkish bus from Tbilisi all the way back to Trabzon. It turned out that American Express had pulled out of all the former Soviet Republics the month before, and we weren't able to get any money in Tbilisi. In order to buy the bus ticket back to Turkey we had to find someone willing to change Turkish lira into lari (no easy feat considering that Turkey doesn't receive the same favor from the IMF as Georgia, and the lira experiences eighty-percent inflation). This put us in the amusing and delicate position of being the only people on the whole bus without U.S. dollars.

The ride took over twenty hours, partly because of the outrageous condition of the roads and partly because once we were within forty kilometers of the border, we were stopped at ten-minute intervals by Georgian police who demanded U.S. dollars from the bus driver. Actually, the driver didn't do the bribe negotiating. Instead a man whose sole job seemed to be dealing with the Georgian police was in charge of the payoffs. It also took the bus four hours to cross the border because the negotiations with the overstuffed customs officials were particularly heated. During this long, painfully slow journey, I kept myself from the agony of self-pity by concentrating on people on the bus who looked more uncomfortable than me; the knowledge that it could be worse made the ride better.

In the end, of course, it doesn't really matter whether things are better or worse. Julia was born to the poverty, corruption, and instability of Georgia; or she was born to the peace, stability, and opportunity of Georgia depending on whether she is seen by an American tourist or an Azerbaidzhan refugee. Life is more than just the ultimate compare and contrast essay. When I remember Georgia, I remember standing in a half-built, already falling apart house while a nearly toothless doctor yells like he has just won the lottery, "I love my home! I love life!" When we returned to our hotel/brothel in Trabzon, I thought I saw the strength, pride, and love of life in the Georgian whores that I had seen a fortnight before and then doubted when I saw the condition of their homeland.

We were in Georgia for such a short period that the whole experience really amounted to only a glance. Perhaps this is why it left such a strong impression on us--we left before the experience had time to evolve from

extraordinary and bewildering into routine and commonplace. The fleeting glance is the language of traveling, and it is a powerful language.

Chapter 3

The Litter Principle

After two weeks of hard living in Georgia, we welcomed the security, convenience, and familiarity of Turkey. I hadn't realized how comfortable we'd become with the habits of Turkey. Corba and ekmek (corba is soup, usually lentil or tripe, and ek mek is white bread which you dunk in the corba) seemed like what I'd always eaten for breakfast, and spending an afternoon sipping chai from the ubiquitous miniature glasses had the nostalgic satisfaction of a long-practiced tradition. The best part of being back in Turkey, though, was the ATM machines. I withdrew a couple million Turkish Lira from my accountant in Oakland, and we were ready to roll.

We weren't as antsy to stay off the tourist trail as we had been our first month. In fact, the prospect of running into other tourists was appealing, now that we had temporarily quenched our thirst for adventure. We decided to make our way to Yusufeli, a small town at the confluence of the Coruh and Barhal rivers that is a center of tourism in Eastern Turkey because it offers excellent access to hiking in the Kackar mountains and is the base of several rafting companies. We had almost exactly a month before our flight left Istanbul for New Delhi, though, and were in no hurry. We decided to make a short detour to the small town of Ayder, only a half-day dolmus ride from Trabzon.

Just as our guide book promised, Ayder was "stunningly situated" on the banks of a raging river all of whose tributaries seemed to be spectacular

waterfalls. It was only from the boulders that had rolled into the river and the edges of the waterfalls that we knew the mountains that rose up into the clouds were made of granite. Every inch that wasn't scrubbed clean by white-water was covered in lush green. The Kackars begin their rise almost from the banks of the Black Sea and, while the whole range is decidedly wet, the sea side of the mountains where Ayder is located is a legitimate cloud forest. In the three days we spent in Ayder, I doubt we could ever see more than a half-mile in any direction, and usually the trees were swallowed up in white mist within a hundred yards. It was like God had turned sentimental and frosted the edges of every view in the style of a cheesy wedding portrait.

Everything about Ayder was breathtakingly beautiful except Ayder itself. The town was made up of the same ugly, multi-story concrete rectangles that seem to be the only structures Turks know how to build. The total absence of any aesthetic concerns in modern Turkish architecture is bewildering in light of its history of monumental building and the fact that it is a country on the rise and proud of its cultural identity. It is all the sadder because the structures they are erecting look as sturdy as they are tasteless and will undoubtedly continue to uglify the landscape for decades to come. Perhaps the lack of style and creativity of the clunky buildings can be understood as another example of Ataturk's campaign to eliminate old fashioned quirky Turkish traditions like the fez and hooka in order to bring Turkey up to date with twentieth century Europe.

But we were in Ayder to hike and were accustomed to the characterless practicality anyway. After a night in one of the numerous identical hotels, we woke up to the sound of water dripping on the window sill. It was obvious that this part of the country almost never saw the sun, and so even though it was a wet

day LQ and I decided to take our ekmek, cheese, cucumber, and tomatoes and go for a hike. It wasn't exactly raining, but the air was permeated with moisture. Water hovered in thick veils and mistook our Gortex gear for cotton clothes. The ground was completely saturated so that with each step we left a puddle instead of a footprint. The path our hotel proprietor had recommended went straight up the steep valley wall without switch backs, and we soon found ourselves on our hands and knees crawling through the mud and grabbing at roots and shrubs to stop from sliding back down the mountain.

It wasn't exactly a pleasant day hike, but there was an element of slapstick that appealed to me (I'm not so old that I don't still like playing in mud, too). It was really the mystery of the scenery that drew us on, though. Enormous trees melted in and out of the mist; we would hear the murmur of a creek close by but never see it; a sudden breeze would blow and for a moment a tall waterfall would appear on a cliff clear across the valley. Underneath the towering trees, pools of water formed in the umbrella-sized leaves of prehistoric plants. Best of all, the rhododendrons were in full flower and at times whole slopes were taken over with shades of yellow, pink, and white fragrance. It was a timeless, magical landscape that belonged to the Jurassic period.

After four hours of slogging and slipping through the mud, however, we were soaked to the bone, shivering with cold, and a little scared that we were wandering to our demise. To make matters worse, LQ was hit with untimely hemorrhaging. Traveling often disrupts the regularity of a woman's period, and LQ had an extra dose of hormones implanted in her arm. The combination of chemical birth control and travel resulted in an inverted menstruation cycle. That it had happened before didn't seem to comfort LQ, she was fed up with

bleeding. Also, we'd run out of tampons and she'd forgotten a pad, so she was forced to make do with a wad of toilet paper. Like everything else we had with us, the toilet paper was wet.

I was too busy wondering whether we were on the correct trail to comfort LQ, though. The trail we were supposed to be on led to a yayla named Hazalitek and then on to two more yaylas in the process of looping back to Ayder (a yayla is the name of the seasonally inhabited, high altitude communities of cow herders that exist all over the Kackar range). We'd been walking and crawling for half a day and hadn't even reached the first yayla. The trail was hard to follow because of the tenacity of the plant-life, and orientation without a compass in a cloud is all but impossible. We gradually lost sight of the surreal beauty of the cloud forest and slipped into indulgent death fantasies.

It was with relief as well as awe, then, that we greeted the appearance of the strange stone, wood, and sod house through a break in the cloud. After the characterless concrete atrocities of a thousand meters down the mountain, this home was inspirationally beautiful. It had the feel of ancient authenticity that is the elusive goal of tourism. The waves of white that blew by and occasionally obscured the scene added a Transylvanian ambiance. From the ground to shoulder level the structure was made of watermelon-sized granite boulders mortared together. Above the granite, dark wood boards rose up to a sod A-frame roof that was covered in healthy green grass. Smoke floated out of a stove pipe and was quickly absorbed into the cloud, so we knew that people were home, but we couldn't see in because the small windows were shuttered against the wet.

We walked past the yayla and for the next fifty meters nearly identical stone and wood houses lined both sides of the path which was dimpled with hoof prints. The only variation I noticed was that in about half the houses the sod had been replaced by corrugated steel. Other than this, the community must have looked the same as it did in the eighteenth century. We walked slowly through Hazalitek, charmed by its quaint, mysterious atmosphere. Though smoke rose out of nearly every stovepipe, the only other sign that the houses were inhabited was a brief glimpse of a wide, aproned woman tossing a bowl of steaming liquid out a window.

All too soon we had passed through the community and found ourselves at a fork in the paths. A new wooden sign with "Samstal" (the next yayla on our route) carved into it pointed ambiguously towards the space in-between the two paths. We chose the one that looked more popular and gloomily set out. We were still cold and wet, and now we could add hunger to our list of grievances. There seemed little point in continuing the hike since we couldn't see more than fifty meters ahead and the foreground generally looked the same anyway. But the thought of retracing our climb wasn't appealing either since without an ice-ax I wasn't sure how we could control our slide through the mud to the valley floor.

Within a hundred meters, our well worn trail had diffused into a maze of meandering cow paths. I followed a couple of the more official looking paths until they vanished, while LQ retreated behind a large rhododendron with the last wad of wet toilet paper. Then we went back to try the other fork. We would have just given up at this point but for the new sign which promised Samstal with the authority of the written word. Despite the sign, however, we had the

same luck with the second fork and after a half-hour of growing frustration, we turned back defeated. Now we were cold, wet, hungry, and demoralized. The walk back seemed like an impossible, hellacious task, and LQ was once again ready to kill me for yet again refusing to turn around.

We walked slowly back through the town to begin our death march, but as we passed the second-to-last yayla a lanky teenage boy ran out and took my hand and said the sweetest words I'd ever heard: "Chai, chai." We were so cold and wet that I didn't even refuse once; nothing like hospitality when you actually need it. I repeated, "Teshekur ederem" over and over as he led us into the warmth of his shelter.

Inside what were clearly the Grandfather and father sat by an old small wood stove in the corner. They were dressed in the uniform of the Turkish laborer, as was the adolescent: leather boots, wool pants, a couple of button-up shirts under a thin wool sweater, a tweed jacket, and a wool skull cap. Up here in the middle of a cloud the outfit seemed appropriate, but down in the sweltering plains LQ, and I were consistently baffled by the old Turkish men comfortably smoking their cigarettes under three or four layers of wool, while sweat soaked through our T-shirts. Both men's browned faces opened up in smiles so gorgeous they would have been sustenance enough for our trudge back to Ayder.

But their gold teeth were just the beginning of our good fortune. Grandpa stood up and insisted that we take his place next to the stove, and the father had poured us a couple of cups of deliciously hot sugar water he called chai before we even had time to introduce ourselves. As we sipped, the father pointed tapped his chest and said, "Mustafa." I smiled in recognition and said, "Mustafa.

Turkey: Mustafa, Mustafa, Mustafa. Mustafa, I know." All three men broke into huge laughs like I'd told a good joke, and from that point on our communication consisted mostly of unsolicited, but satisfying belly-laughs. After they finished laughing, we found out that the adolescent's name was Himil, and the grandpa's name was Mohamud.

Inside the home was very simple. There was the main room with the stove and two small adjoining rooms with wooden platforms covered in cow hides which served as beds. There were no decorations on the walls, but dates starting in the fifties and names were carved into just about every board. I noticed with a twinge of jealousy the names "Ruth and Andy" on a beam. The whole place smelled extremely fertile and I heard noises coming from underneath the floor boards. After a quick charades session, we found out that there were three cows beneath us. Apparently even the cows weren't dumb enough to venture out on a day like this.

Mustafa refilled our glasses and stirred a large bowl of milk that was heating on top of the stove. He again tapped his chest, then pointed to the floor and to the bowl of milk and said the new English word he'd just learned, "Cow," while tapping his own chest again. Then he pointed to me. To their hearty approval, I bellowed loudly, "Mooo, mooo!"

"No, no, he doesn't want to milk you. He means: he's a cowboy, what are you? Perrin is a slacker. Slacker," said LQ while pointing at me.

"No I'm not," I defended myself, "I'm an over-achiever in disguise."

"That's some pretty deep cover."

"You can't be too careful, but I'm safe here."

I was right too, the three Turks smiled in feigned recognition at our babble, and we moved on to other topics. Himil knew about as much English as we knew Turkish, and we took turns counting to ten in each other's languages and revealing the names of the various objects in the room. Though our oral communication was extremely limited, the three Turks had incredibly expressive faces and superb body language, and we were able to share lots of information. They were from Pasar, a small town on the Black Sea just thirty-odd kilometers East of Trabzon and lived in the *yayla* just for the summer. Though he was fifteen, Himil still liked coming to the traditional family retreat, but his mother didn't like the arduous climb so she stayed in Pasar with his sister. The three men missed her cooking.

Mustafa took a pan of muffins out of the stove and gave us each a couple. We were very hungry and wolfed them down while making appreciative grunts, but I empathized with them over the loss of the mother's cooking skills. I took out the last of our food, a bag of dried apricots, and after several minutes of insistence succeeded in forcing them to help themselves. They appeared to be living on homemade yogurt, cheese and terrible baked goods and relished the sweet fruit.

The whole time Himil fiddled with a small transistor radio that received a surprising number of stations. He changed from one Turkish pop station to the next and occasionally found a classical Turkish music station. Both LQ and I liked both pop and classic Turkish music and were pleased to have the radio playing because it filled the empty space of our conversation. As I was chewing the last bite of muffin, Himil was randomly turning the dial when suddenly the glorious sound of the Duke Ellington Orchestra playing "Caravan" replaced

static. Muffin crumbs flew from my mouth as I blurted out, "Stop! Stop! Holy Shit, it's Duke Ellington!"

Himil quickly turned the dial back to Ellington, and Mustafa smiled and shook his head a couple of times to the beat trying to fake enthusiasm for the sweet swing. For the next forty-five minutes we were treated to our own non-stop classic jazz music festival. Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Count Basie all magically emerged from the little radio, the only article in the yayla other than ourselves that looked like it belonged to the twentieth century.

Sitting in a yayla in the middle of a cloud forest on the top of a mountain in a remote corner of a Muslim country listening to thirties jazz on the radio with three generations of cow herds is the special privilege of the post-modern traveler. Ruth and Andy may have spoiled the sense of exploration, but jazz in a yayla, Jackie Chan in Varanasi, the Village People in a remote Chinese disco, the Miss World swimsuit competition in Bangalore are ironic pleasures that, to my mind, more than compensate for the egoistic thrill of first discovery.

I could have joked with the three Turks all night, and they made it clear that they wanted us to spend the night, but we needed to change our clothes and didn't want to eat up all their provisions (maybe if the matriarch had been there, this would have been a more tempting prospect). After our sixth cup of chai and our fourth muffin, we convinced Mustafa that we really did need to go, and Himil escorted us back into the cold wet and past the last yayla to the start of our mud slide down to the valley floor.

He had taken the plastic bag full of apricots with him, and when we were parting ways he popped the last two in his mouth. He gently held the plastic bag between his thumb and index finger, and, as it slowly filled, he raised onto his tip

toes, releasing it with an elegant flourish when it was full of air. He waved goodbye like the Queen of England to the plastic bag as it floated off into the mist and then smiled complicitly at us. I rolled my eyes, shook my head, and thanked him one last time for the good time.

After our respite in Hazalitek, the journey back to town was almost fun. Within two hours we were bathing in the hot waters of Ayder's brand new, state of the art hamam. Unlike most Turkish baths which center around a heated platform and are more like a sauna than what we associate with a bath, this hamam consisted of two swimming pool-sized hot tubs (one for each gender, though Turks are so prudish that the mandate of modesty is still observed and everyone wears swimming trunks). The water was piped in from a natural hot springs and was said to be rich in minerals and a cure for just about anything. The facility was enormously popular with Turks, who came from far away to holiday at the spa, while Western tourists came to Ayder to hike.

While my body temperature gently rose as I floated in the clear hot water of the faux marble pool, it occurred to me that the biggest enemy of the traveler is not hardships like cold, crime, dengue, diarrhea, dirt, disease (of course, occasionally these will kill, but only rarely); no the real enemy is slower, more methodical. Repetition and routine are what wear you down. The pleasure of sharing a cup of chai is much sweeter after a period of cold and wet, and the cold and wet is a nice break from the hot and dry. But a cup of chai can feel like a sophisticated form of Chinese water torture if it is one's only idle pleasure. What it takes to travel is the creative force to fill the space between eating and sleeping, moving and being stationary.

This power is my great gift, though not always my great asset. It can lead to a form of distraction that results in missed buses, unbalanced checkbooks, blown deadlines, even tooth decay. It is not a skill that generally leads to fame, fortune, or foundation forming (its negative manifestation is sometimes identified as that great sin of a free citizen: apathy), though it answers the question of what to do while you wait for the water to boil. In fact, after a few weeks of traveling, the nagging question of what the hell the point of my trip was lost its domination of my mind, and I found the contemplation that the empty time of traveling allows to be its great reward. The act of contemplation while on the road is more intense and meaningful than contemplation while absorbed in the routine of routine life. On the road, one might ponder the art of communication, while at home one is more likely to calculate the phone bill. Traveling not only provides new perspectives and provocations, it also eliminates any sense of productiveness or work. Contemplation fills the work void and gradually comes to be understood as a productive, creative act. Every good traveler is a self-employed analyst.

Contemplation while traveling is such a different form of reflection than what normally passes for contemplation that I think it deserves its own nomenclature: passive creation. Sometimes practicing passive creation is tedious work, like sitting at a dusty village train station for eight hours, but often I found myself in a delightful setting in which to examine the big picture or count the hairs on an ant. Certainly, floating in the mineral rich hot waters of Ayder was a pleasant place to contemplate the nature of time, and two days later I found myself in another wonderful locale for autolocation. Sitting in the warm

afternoon sun on a chai patio perched above the frisky Barhal river, I lost myself in one of my favorite activities: watching the waves roll still.

Though I thoroughly enjoy wave gazing, I wasn't spending the afternoon sipping chai by choice. We couldn't explore the orange-red-brown side canyons of the river or the granite peaks from which it flowed because our shoes were still soaked from our Ayder experience. Although Yusufeli is in the same mountain range as Ayder, it is on the other side of the mountains and is much dryer. There wasn't a cloud in the sky and, it being an hour from sunset, the light was perfect for LQ to sketch the old wooden suspension bridge that connected the chai shops on either side of the river. Unfortunately, she was having trouble concentrating because a middle-aged man with thinning hair was incessantly repeating different variations of the words, "Problem? No problem," in her ear.

This is one of the two most common touristic conversations in Turkey. By changing emphasis, raising or lowering pitch, gesticulating, and a few extra words, one is forced to divide the world into two categories; those things which were "problem" and those which were "no problem." The other staple conversation was equally banal. It is generally initiated by the younger generations and involves the repetition of celebrities' names with a question mark at the end indicating that one is supposed to pronounce judgment on the worth of the movie star or musician.

The man talking at LQ was the undisputed king of problem, no problem. For fourteen minutes straight he had bombarded her with phrases like, "Turkey Inflation problem. America inflation no problem" or "Job Turkey problem. America job problem, no problem?" or "Turkey hotel problem, no problem?" I pretended to be so absorbed in my wave watching that I didn't notice LQ's

predicament, but finally she couldn't take it anymore and mercilessly drew me into the conversation. "What do you think Perrin, Turkey-Greece problem or no problem?" she said and buried her head in her sketch book. The burden of banality shifted to me.

The Turk seemed pleased to have a new audience and began the conversation he'd had with LQ over from the beginning. When he was on problem, no problem topic number three, I saw my opportunity to liven up the conversation. Over my assaulter's shoulder a teenage boy was emptying a garbage can directly into the Barhal. This was the same garbage can that LQ and I had spent half-an-hour looking for in order to properly dispose of a bag of candy wrappers and other assorted waste we had collected. Finding a garbage can is not an easy task in Turkey, and we were pleased with ourselves for making the extra effort to be conscientious consumers. I pointed to the kid dumping my trash into the river and said, "Problem." The Turk looked over his shoulder and replied emphatically, "No problem! Inflation problem, job problem; that no problem."

The dilemma of whether littering was a problem or not had been in the back of my mind ever since our first day in Turkey when I was left with an empty paper cup and nowhere to throw it away. Since our hike in Ayder, however, the image of Himil the joyous litterer nearly obsessed me. I seized the opportunity to take the conversational offensive and also solidify my thoughts through vocalization: "I'm sure that littering doesn't seem like a problem when you've got eighty percent inflation and are unemployed, but in America we think it is a problem. We are guests in your country, and as such it could be said that we should adopt the values, the customs of your culture. Especially with questions

like littering where one's actions are primarily symbolic. In a whole country of avowed litterbugs, what does it matter if a couple tourists throw their wrappers in trash cans? And even when we find the trash can, it gets dumped in the river anyway; practically speaking we might as well say, 'no problem.'

"However, since we have already determined that littering is a symbolic act, what does it matter if it is practically pointless? To not throw one's waste into the river is a show of respect to the river. The ritual of throwing your trash away internalizes respect for the Earth. Therefore, it is still vital that we put our garbage in the proper receptacle even if that receptacle is then emptied into the river. Once we realize that we are only one of more than five billion people on the planet, we realize that all our value-based actions are, in the big picture, symbolic. But this doesn't make them less important.

"Furthermore, almost everyone we have met in Turkey has said that they would like to visit America but can't afford it: money problem. Wherever we go many more people are staring at us and watching our every move than we watch; traveling is at least as much exhibitionism as it is voyeurism. We are your glimpse of America, just as you are our window into Turkey. It is, therefore, incumbent upon us to preserve those customs, values, and habits which we believe to be essential to our definition of ourselves so that you have the opportunity to see something of America, even if it's only one three-hundred millionth of the U.S.A. That is why I say, 'problem!'" I said, pointing down to the river where an empty bleach bottle bobbed in an eddy.

Of course, the Turk understood nothing of my tirade except for the final exclamation. But he listened attentively and grasped the depth of my passion. I had broken the restricting structure of the conversation, and he now felt free to

expand upon his own assertion that the dumping of the trash can into the river was no problem. To my surprise, he had also apparently spent much time forming opinions on the subject and lectured me for what felt like twice as long as I had lectured him. Of course, I couldn't understand a single word until the final pronouncement, "No problem!" which he said while pointing down to the river where no garbage now floated.

My new friend's monologue had apparently worn him out, for he joined me in watching the river where the wave still rolled. Perhaps he was right. Perhaps he said that the demonization of the litterbug in Western culture is an insidious plot undertaken by the invisible powers of the disposable economy to hide the actual problems of garbage accumulation. "Where is the 'away' of 'throw away?'" he might of asked. More likely, his speech simply expanded upon the relative effects of unemployment and eighty percent inflation against the effects of litter, and definitively proved that the scope of the problems were so ridiculously out of proportion that litter was reduced to "no problem."

As the distance between myself and the clear water shrunk until my whole world was that smooth wave, it occurred to me that if our values are to mean anything in the modern world, then we must stick with them even when a shifting context makes them appear obsolete, silly, rude, wrong. If our values are to mean anything in the modern world, then we must always be listening for fresh perspectives that show them to be obsolete, silly, rude, wrong. Values are like the English language: "I" before "e" except after "c", and every once in a while when "e" comes before "i."

We spent another week exploring the fields of wild flowers, alpine lakes, and massive granite cliffs in the mountains above Yusufeli and then headed back

West and arrived in Istanbul after spending ten days in the bizarre and beautiful volcanic tuft region of Cappadocia. We spent possibly the worst week of the trip trying to take care of important business in Istanbul. Temporary catastrophes piled on top of each other, while slimy Turkish touts inanely shouted, "Hello, yes, please" relentlessly at us. Nevertheless, at the end of the week we found ourselves on board a Gulf Air flight to New Delhi via Bahrain.

Chapter 4

Geologic Spiritualism

As you probably already know, India is a very intense place. It is intense because of the extreme crowding, the flamboyant colors, the wretched poverty, the humid heat, the chaotic traffic, the overpowering smells of complex spices and shit, the stump-limbed lepers, the eye-watering yet distant beauty of the women, the sense of antiquity, the violent omnipresence of its gods, the speed with which diesel buses pass camel carts, the endemic gregariousness of its citizens, the accelerated decomposition of architecture, the incomprehensible jumble of cultures, the barefoot bankers, the intricate, highly symbolic codes of behavior. With time, however, I realized that lists of India's weirdness like these are misleading and inadequate because they imply that India's overcrowding, economic disparities, sights and sounds and tastes are like everywhere else's, but more intense.

In reality, India is completely different from everywhere else. The most obvious reason that India is so different is that, with the exception of an insignificant island or two and the tens of millions of Indians who have emigrated, the subcontinent is the only place in the world that practices Hinduism (despite this, Hinduism is still Asia's largest religion). Of course, difference doesn't necessarily assure intensity. Cricket, for example, is quite different from baseball, but I would never describe a cricket match as intense (unless I was at a stadium in Calcutta or Bombay, but then it would be the

fanaticism of the crowd and not the game itself which would inspire the comment). It is still vital to identify that aspect of Hindu culture which is uniquely intense.

India is intense because Hinduism is a cannibalistic culture. It consumes any culture which manages to climb the Himalayan wall or cross the oceans which isolate the flame of land that licks at the equator. Just like literal cannibals, India doesn't devour intruding cultures in order to eliminate them; instead, it digests them and absorbs them into itself, growing ever more complex in the process. It is not a finicky cannibal, and over the centuries it has feasted upon the gods, traditions, styles, and ideologies of foreigners as different and substantial as the Moguls and the British (of course, both of these were a lot to swallow and have caused violent, and chronic, indigestion). Perhaps even more impressive is India's ability to absorb its own numerous, wildly diverse offspring. Nothing is too spicy, bland, mushy, or crisp for the Indian palette.

The Indian traveler senses his host's cannibalistic nature. The tension between the tourist's desire to consume foreign cultures, and India's wont to consume tourists, creates the intensity of the Indian experience; if you're not careful, India will eat you too.

It is not that traveling in India is difficult. In many ways it is one of the easiest countries in the world to travel in: English is the official national language, buses and trains constantly depart to almost every conceivable destination, rooms are cheap and plentiful, even small towns usually have a dhaba or two serving a range of food from assorted vegetables reheated for a week until they become a formless paste, to superb tandoori fish, and there is a long tradition of tourism, so the routes are well worn. Most importantly, just

walking down the street usually provides more than enough stimuli to satisfy even a jaded traveler.

On the international traveling circuit, it is popular wisdom that you'll either love India or you'll hate it. I love it and so explain away those that hate it by saying, "it must be too intense for them." In reality it is more likely the miserable weather that drives them away. We arrived in Delhi early in August, deep in the monsoon. Over the course of the next five months, Delhi turned out to serve as a sort of metropolitan base: we returned to the Capital city whenever we needed to replenish our cash supply, buy international plane tickets, or, most importantly, restock our mobile library at one of the excellent bookstores on Connaught Place. We would grow to love the eccentric, teeming neighborhoods of old Delhi. But the smothering, muggy, grimy, debilitating heat of August combined with the anxious shock of the transition from orderly Turkey to entropic India made us desperate to flee the big city for a more laid-back insanity.

The day after our plane landed, we were on board a bus to Simla, the old British hill station, which in colonial times served as the summer capital. The British retreated from the Delhi monsoon to the Himalayan foothills every summer as a medical necessity, and Simla was certainly a less debilitating environment than Delhi. But it was still raining every afternoon, and the continuous cloud cover hid the reportedly spectacular views. We decided to escape the wet altogether behind the rain shadow of the Himalayas. A week after our plane landed in Delhi, we were in Ladakh, a desert area in the Tibetan plateau. Ladakh is geographically, culturally, and historically part of Tibet. Politically it is part of India or, more precisely, a region on the Eastern edge of

the state of Jammu Kashmir. Ladakh, however, suffers none of the separatist, Indo-Pakistani tensions of the rest of Kashmir. Maybe it would be more accurate to say little of the tensions since on the day we arrived in the capital city, Leh (my birthday, more universally known as the anniversary of Indian independence), two pipe bombs exploded. Ladakh has benefited economically from the terrorism-induced decline in Kashmiri tourism. During the few summer months that Ladakh is accessible by road, a constant flow of tourists fills the buses that make the harrowing two-day journey, and reservations must be made many months in advance if you want to take the daily flight from Delhi to Leh.

Our bus ride turned out to be a three-day affair because we were forced to wait a day while malnourished laborers in flip-flops dumped rocks into a ten meter long, three meter deep section of road which had slid off the cliff, while pudgy ghee-fed army officers shouted commands. This kind of delay must be routine because the one-bus width road constantly runs along valley walls and over passes where no road could be expected to endure. There are four particularly high-altitude passes. The highest is 5,328 meters, making it the second highest motorable pass in the world (the first highest is also in Ladakh; though I suspect, like many records of this sort, a host of other countries make the same claim). The road is so bumpy that passengers in the back of the bus occasionally hit their heads on the ceiling. Some of the best fate acceptance therapy I've ever experienced were those many hours spent coasting down impossibly tight switch backs so steep that looking straight down out of the window you see not the road under the bus's tires, but the valley floor a thousand feet below you.

It is rumored that the plane flight into and out of Leh is one of the most spectacular in the world. Judging from the bus trip, this is probably only a slight exaggeration. What makes the bus trip so memorable is less the staggering altimeter readings, or even the glaciers and waterfalls of the first day and the swirling mineral colors of the desert mountains of the second than it is the sheer vast expanse of emptiness--the scale of the landscape. The view remains the same for hours as the bus bounces along a valley floor. It climbs twenty-seven enormous switch backs to gain the top of a pass and a new view is revealed. The bus coasts down eighteen enormous switch backs to gain a valley floor, and then it bounces along for hours without the view changing. There are a few villages toward the beginning and end of the road, but for the brunt of the trip there are only a sparse scattering of seasonal truck stops. The Earth feels like an infinitely large planet.

This same feeling of personal, and even collective, insignificance imbues Ladakh. The landscape is vast and the silence is complete. Only thin strips of green lining glacial streams break the eternal topography of orange-yellow-brown rock. For the whole fortnight we were in Ladakh, I had the same feeling I sometimes experience when gazing at the universe on a dark clear night: the sweet loneliness of the experience of a more fundamental time scale; the quiet relief of noticing a delicate green weed pushing through concrete in a suburban mall parking lot.

The loneliness of Ladakh was particularly striking because we came from the overpopulated crush of Northern India. Indeed, Ladakh is trapped between China and India, the only billion-plus people countries. Both countries have long histories of civilization, and the landscapes of both are dramatically altered

by terracing, deforestation, roads, dams, buildings. Traveling through both countries, but especially India, I was overwhelmed by the sheer number of individuals: the feeling that I am just one of five billion bipedal, big-headed primates. Of course, we always know this fact on an abstract level, but India makes it palpable like nowhere else I've been.

The things that one comes to rely on to feel important and unique--a job, political allegiance, hobby, network of friends--are left behind when you hit the road. You get off the plane in Delhi and step into a new world where none of your cutting-edge political analysis counts, your travel shorts feel dorky, and not only does nobody know who the latest international rock'n' roll sensation is, nobody cares. It is a lonely feeling when all of the little codes you use to distinguish yourself are stripped of meaning, your ornaments of individuality lose their luster, and you find yourself in a land where nobody can recognize you. It is fundamentally lonely because you realize that none of these ornaments is really you, essentially you, and that the bonds that grew around them and the image they created are, therefore, trivial. You are trivial, a redundancy.

This loneliness is the loneliness that a single point of paint feels in a pointillist painting. The comforts of single-point loneliness are more elusive than the beauty of the divine loneliness of Ladakh. The wide open plateaus and endless rows of naked peaks are a natural setting for the Buddhist monasteries which cling to the Earth's crust on knolls and ridges overlooking glacial streams. Like all the multi-storied buildings in Ladakh, the monasteries are made of mud bricks from the Earth they were built on and look like what they are: the humble sculpting of a microscopic speck of dirt. It is easier to understand the profound beauty and peace of emptiness when there is a life-sized model.

Guide books enjoy describing Ladakh as "more Tibetan than Tibet." The Indian government hasn't made it its policy to destroy monasteries (called gompas by their inhabitants) and systematically dilute the native population with the national ethnic majority, so this is probably true. But the boldly painted fang-toothed demons and warriors, the many armed and headed gods, the visually blunt but allegorically complex style of Tibetan Buddhism reminds one that Buddhism came out of Hinduism theologically and out of the subcontinent physically.

Hindus certainly remember this, though they probably wouldn't put it quite that way. They believe that Buddha was the most recent incarnation of Vishnu (sent to Earth to lure the wicked with sophistry according to a booklet we picked up at a temple in Southern India). At one of the gompas we saw a sign forbidding Hindus to worship Kali in the image of a large Buddhist many armed female warrior image. The cannibal culture has an appetite for Buddhism.

But Ladakh is still isolated deep in a high Himalayan desert and is such an unlikely place for humans to live that the masses haven't yet packed full the empty spaces. Tibetan culture endures in relative peace. Ironically, one of the biggest threats to the humble charm of the culture, and even to the environmental feasibility of human habitation on the plateau, are the thousands of tourists that arrive each summer in ever-increasing hordes. Not only do they bring the lure of a glamorous modern culture and technology, thereby corrupting the quaintness of the place, they consume at such a high rate that it is questionable whether the desert can produce enough to support them.

On the other hand, tourists must buy a few rupee ticket every time they visit a gompa, and many of the buildings sport recent renovation or even

additions paid for in part by the revenue from these tickets. Tourism must certainly be by far the biggest sector of the cash economy in this historically self-sufficient region.

Whether tourists are good or bad for Ladakh, Ladakh is ideal for tourists. We certainly enjoyed the two weeks we spent there and were sad to leave. At the moment, I can't seem to remember why we left Ladakh since we had at least a couple of more weeks before there was any danger of being cut off from the main land by snow. I suppose that while Ladakh was lovely, we had had just a taste of the enormity and complexity of India and wanted a bigger serving. In the end, we are simply two extremely curious people who always wonder what's around the next bend.

What surprises me more than the fact that we left this tourist utopia are my two most vivid memories. (I'm an honest writer--I'm not writing about what I thought was important at the time but which turned out not to leave any significant impression. There is no crib sheet of notes hidden next to my computer. I am writing everything exactly as I remember it.) The intriguing century-old paintings, the three-story-tall intricately carved Buddhas, even the otherworldly chanting of the monks performing the morning puja have blended with documentaries, photographs, artifacts in trendy ethnic art galleries, and the descriptions of other authors. I'm already forgetting what I went to see.

The first of my vivid memories is an image I saw out the window of the bus just after dawn on the morning we left Ladakh. It was a film noir vision of hell: out of a black cloud of visibly toxic smoke flowing from several oil drums emerged the wiry figures of workers dressed in rags and flip flops; only two wore rubber boots. They were all completely black. From their feet to the hair

on their heads not an inch of flesh or fabric was spared the thick coating of tar. Some were on their knees with tin cans full of steaming tar which they spread onto the road with wooden blocks and bare hands. Others used sticks to stir steaming troughs of black. Even the fires under the troughs looked black. A few stood around and watched the bus pass. They were completely black except for their eyes, which were red and black. As we drove by I made eye contact with a pair of red-rimmed, black eyes. For several seconds we stared directly at each other until he disappeared in the thick black smoke. In those long moments of eye contact, nothing flowed between us. The rest of the day I noticed hundreds of black-coated oil barrels pushed off the side of the road in the occasional paved sections.

We still had a good eighteen hours of the bus ride left after we passed the group of transportation employees. I didn't realize what a strong impression the tar-covered man's eyes had made on me, and my thoughts turned to our experiences in Ladakh. We'd stayed a week in a tiny town named Alchi, hiking to the tops of various peaks which rose almost vertically from the edge of town, and visiting several old gompas. At night we would return to a small guest house that an enterprising Ladakhi farmer had built onto his home and drink chang--milky homemade Tibetan beer made from barley or rice or seemingly any available grain--with a full-fledged character named Matt (really we drank the chang since Matt "never touched the stuff," probably because he hadn't figured out yet how to talk and swallow at the same time). Matt was a Welshman, though judging from his looks, he could have been Eastern-European, Persian, Turkish, Russian, or Chinese.

When you heard him talk, though, there was no doubt of his origin. I don't think I'd ever heard a real Welsh accent before, only actors' weak imitations, and I suspect that the rest of the Welsh people sound like weak imitations of Matt. It was as if he never merely talked, he sang. Every night for a week we sat under a big apricot tree and listened to Matt sing his song. The topic was always the same, the adventures and declarations of Matt, but we never tired of it. We stayed in Alchi for a week, to hear his ramblings as much as anything, and only left when the stories started to turn into reruns.

He professed the strongest opinions of anyone I've ever met, but I think he would have been offended if you agreed with many of them. On the subject of religious observance and faith, for example, Matt declared, "I believe what my mother used to say when I was but a kiddy: 'If you've got to believe in something, believe in garlic.'" He did indeed believe in it, in fact he believed in garlic passionately. Garlic for colds, garlic for general immunity, garlic for malaria prevention. Five cloves of strong, raw garlic a day for good health. Another of his culinary/health convictions was: "anything that walks, crawls, or just fuckin' moves; bang 'em over the head and throw 'em in the pot." But chili peppers were roughly equivalent to sticking a gun in your mouth and pulling the trigger. Apricot oil is not only a cure for cracked skin and any surface malady, it is nature's sun screen. His opinions were based entirely on his own tastes and experiences. He had irrefutable, well-documented proof that he was right: he was sixty-seven years old, healthy and happy.

He told the most incredible stories that I've ever heard, and I think he's the only one who believed most of them. Stories of joining nomadic sheep herders in Turkey for a season; disguising himself as an Afganhi trader in order to join a

camel caravan and sneaking illegally into Afghanistan for several months; vague references to the "British Home Office" and the permeability of the Iron Curtain. He had spent most of the last eleven years wandering through China, but his current journey was a tour of all China's neighbors. His plan was to stay in Ladakh through September, winter in Pakistan where he would buy a couple of horses, cross the Himalayas in the spring, and continue on horseback through the former Soviet Republics, Afghanistan and Mongolia to the Pacific Ocean. He figured three years to complete the whole journey.

LQ and I enjoyed discussing the likelihood of Matt's past escapades and the feasibility of his future plans. I deftly started another conversation on this subject: "Matt is so cool."

"He's crazy," LQ said with ill-disguised awe, "for a trip that long you've got to have three horses so that you can rotate them around to rest them enough. One to carry the gear and one to carry you while the other rests. He'll never make it with two horses."

"That's quibbling. I mean, he says he's never even ridden a horse before! I think it's pretty good he knew he'd need more than one horse," I said.

"And his sandals. He says he's put nothing but those Chinese sandals on his feet for five years and that boots are the reason eighty-eight percent of Europeans have sore or diseased feet. You can't wear sandals when your only friends are a couple of horses. You've gotta have boots," LQ lectured me.

"You're still quibbling. He just figures he's sixty-seven years old and has figured out how to do a hell of a lot of things in those years, and there's no reason he can't figure out horses. He's got no time limit but the final one, so he has time

to learn to ride a horse or die trying. Besides he's never tried to ride a horse barefoot, so he sees no reason to believe it'll pose a problem."

"You make him sound like some sort of super hero. He takes advantage of the fact that we're forty-five years younger than him to make take his bullshit like it was the gospel," said LQ.

"Not like the gospel, because the gospel is the word of God, and Matt's never claimed to hear a word of God's. He preaches the word of Matt, and it's based entirely on his own experience and so is fully customized. He doesn't expect us or even want us to treat his words as gospel--the great wisdom of an elder spiel--because that would mean that his crazy ideas weren't as unique. If we believe his bullshit, then his experiences are less unique because his bullshit is a direct result of his own experiences. Clearly, if his ideas and experiences aren't unique, then he isn't unique. For people like Matt, that's the biggest fear, that we're not one of a kind."

"So he says that Tibet was better off after the Chinese invaded because it freed them from the authoritarian dictatorship of the monasteries just to be different?" asked LQ.

"He had some good points: one boy from every family, like it or not, indentured to the monastery; peasants couldn't leave their land without permission from the monastery; a quarter of the crops to the monastery. Sounds like a theocratic serfdom to me. But that's not the point. The point is that everybody loves Tibet because they're getting beat up on so badly. Tibet's one of the great causes of the righteous do-gooders. Everybody just accepts that Tibet was a little garden of Eden before the fall. The enlightened masses can't get enough of the cute little monks, but they've never even bothered to think the

whole thing through. They just believe it because it's the fashionable belief. They're not thinking for themselves. They're not really making their own choices because they don't really have their own convictions. They're not really living they're own lives. The Free Tibetans are the rank and file of the Great March. They don't live by Matt's credo, 'one likes to be self-sufficient,'" I said.

"It sounds like all you have to do to be a unique individual, to have your own convictions and make your own choices--"

"--to obtain free will!"

"--is always disagree. As long as you don't agree with anybody else, you're special. It's easy to be anti."

"I can't argue with that, now can I." I wasn't going to fall in that trap.

"What I don't understand about you, Perrin, is you're always talking about how to live a free life you have to go your own way, do your own thing. What's your phrase?"

"The noble freak."

"Yes, but you don't look like a freak at all, just a slob, and you never really do anything outrageous. Behind your back people say, 'Perrin, he's a nice guy.'"

"The bastards. I've got them all fooled though, I'm an undercover freak! I've got a long way to go before I catch up to Matt, but I'm pacing myself. I can't wait to hear what kind of crazy B.S. I'm spewing when I'm Matt's age, but there's no hurry. That's Matt's great gift to us; he exists in a larger time scale than we do. He tells time by the seasons, he watches a mountain and sees it pushing up as it falls down. He knows that in every life there are probably only a few periods that are actually threshold moments--turning points that in retrospect define whole decades of our lives. In the geologic record they're called unconformities: the

fossil record of the border between two distinct periods of deposition and uplift. In the human record they're called divorce or breakdown or coming out of the closet or the birth of a child. But the event is really secondary to the aftermath, because it's in the aftermath that you find out who you really are."

"So other than these great unconformities, we're just killing time waiting for the big one?" asked LQ.

"No, well yes, but these periods--maybe ninety-six percent of our lives--are more important than the unconformities. It's the periods on either side of an unconformity that are responsible for the deposition of sediments that create the rock that is the substance of the Earth's crust. It is these long, slow periods that are productive. An unconformity is just a border between two periods, though I wouldn't say it quite like that to a parent whose child has died.

"The periods on either side of an unconformity are when we have the opportunity to marvel at the wonder of life. Nothing is more important than that, now is it? This is also the time of real change, when we have the opportunity to integrate our values, beliefs, observations with our soul through the labor of contemplation, so that when an unconformity occurs we react with integrity and don't discover that we're hypocrites. But it's a nearly imperceptible process. If you attempt to monitor your progress, it's like watching grass grow."

"Traveling certainly provides plenty of time for contemplation. Only another twelve hours 'til we get to get off this bus," said LQ.

"What I'm talking about is the wisdom of travelers because travelers spend more time performing passive creation than anybody else. Contemplation is the center ring in the traveling circus. We are the ones with the vantage point to

notice the nature of time, because we're not caught up in it. We are always outsiders, observing the routines of other people's lives. Travelers exist in between cultures, on the periphery looking in, like a geologist observing a cross-section of rock instead of a particle in the cross-section. Outside of time and outside of society, the traveling freak learns to understand the processes of life from empirical experience."

"Only eleven hours fifty-nine minutes 'til we get to get off this bus. This is great, Perrin, I've never heard you talk so much. Usually you just stare out the window, or write as you call staring out the window, and leave me to make faces at the lecherous men. But if you see life in geologic time, then you're just climbing out of the primordial ooze. I thought you were going to wait until you were Matt's age to start spewing theories."

"This is just guesswork, I don't speak with authority. Anyway, geologic spiritualism is my theory, and the fewer people who buy it, the more legitimate a theory it becomes for me. It's not really my theory though; it's Matt's because I developed it through observing him. He is like one of those old wandering Chinese monks the beats wrote about. He even looks like it with his bald head, long white mustache, short walking stick and baggy cotton clothes. He's got that ageless spring in his step, and he'll laugh at anything no matter how repulsive or painful. He wanders the world spreading his gospel of blasphemy."

This is my second vivid memory: my description to LQ of Matt as a nomadic atheist monk while we bounced along through the larger-than-life landscape of the Himalayas. The freaks one meets on the road are one of traveling's the great rewards. Over the course of our eight-month trip, we bumped into upwards of twenty-seven genuinely interesting people, by my

estimates three times as many as in sedentary life. They all shared a quirky independence of thought founded in a belief in knowledge gained from personal experience. They all possessed a mind-boggling wealth of experience.

Chapter 5

Gold and God

Unfortunately, most tourists aren't genuinely interesting like me and you. When the bus finally reached Manali the next day, we found ourselves awash in a sea of tourists. Like Goa, Manali is a base for a specific breed of Western tourist identifiable by their belief that the smoking of hash is not only an activity, it is the main event. If you are in India and suspect that you are in the presence of this species, simply ask them how they liked Goa, and if they say, "It's really great, not like India at all," then you know you've got one.

Manali is nestled in the spectacular Kullu valley. From almost any point you can see multiple waterfalls pouring down tremendous granite cliffs. Tall fields of marijuana grow wild in the spaces between apple orchards and in the fall the whole valley wrecks of the sweet, rich odor of the weed. We needed time off from bus travel after our two-day ride from Leh, but after a couple of days of listening to spaced-out Europeans and Israelis condescend to tell us that the secret to traveling was to stay in the same place, we fled from the paradisaical valley to the famous hill station, Dharmasala.

Dharmasala is famous because it is the residence in exile of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. In reality, H.H. the Dalai Lama is far too popular a figure to stay cooped up in an out-of-the-way hill station in Himachal Pradesh and spends most of the year doing gigs on the lecture circuit. But Dharmasala is filled with his presence anyway. It is a community of Tibetan refugees--at this point I would

venture to call them immigrants--and its whole economy seems to be based on the consumption of Tibetan Buddhism by Western tourists. There are almost as many meditators in Dharmasala as there are hash-heads in Manali. We were still searching for India, and so we fled Dharmasala after only a couple days. The tourist industry in India is so well established that if you're not careful, you could travel for months, from the tip of Kerala to the top of Himachal without leaving the security of tacky tourist enclaves.

I want to be clear that I have nothing against either meditators or hash-heads. Meditation is a form of passive creation and both are schools of contemplation; as I've made abundantly clear, I am a proponent of all forms of contemplation. Some of my best friends could hold their own in the marathon inebriation sessions of the hash-heads. In fact, I fear that people who have overheard my ramblings often mistake me for one or both of these species of tourist. What I find repulsive and incomprehensible about the phenomena of Manali and Dharmasala, is the magnetic--really anti-magnetic--attraction these people feel towards people just like themselves. They have traveled halfway around the world, endured violent attacks of diarrhea, and endangered their lives on perilous roads in order to surround themselves with other Europeans who like the same things they like and value the same things they value. LQ and I went to India to see something different; we found the like-mindedness of the meditators and the hash-heads downright oppressive.

While it would be possible to travel from the tip of Kerala to the top of Himachal without leaving the security of tourist enclaves, it is probably impossible to make the trip without passing through one of India's holy cities. At times it feels like every town in India is considered sacred by some sect, every

inch of the earth the sight of some divine event. Religion imbues India, but it is not the vague omnipresence of the nebulous mystery God I am accustomed to ignoring. Indian gods are alive and active and appear in a variety of colors from sky blue to blood red; miracles happen every day.

We left the capital in exile of His Holiness the Dalai Lama by bus and arrived eight hours later in Amritsar, the sacred home of the Granth Sahib. The Granth Sahib is the final incarnation of the ten Sikh gurus and never leaves the Golden Temple, the Sikh's holiest shrine. All day Granth Sahib lies in the gold-plated inner temple and is gently fanned by attentive men who have undergone amrit, the Sikh equivalent of baptism. Most Sikhs, at least eighty percent, are not baptized because after amrit one is expected to follow all of the religion's strict rules. At ten o'clock in the evening, the Granth Sahib is carried out of the inner temple on a soft mattress with fresh silk sheets and taken to a special room to rest until the next morning. A baptized Sikh sleeps on the marble floor outside the door to insure the Granth Sahib's safety for the night. Every morning it is carried back to the inner temple for another day's reading. The Granth Sahib is a book, though the Sikhs treat their sacred text as a living being.

Part of the Sikh identity is a sense of duty to show generosity and hospitality to any benevolent being. In practice this means that not only can non-Sikhs visit any gurdwara (as Sikh temples are called), but every visitor is offered shelter and a bit to eat at any gurdwara. We couldn't pass up an opportunity to stay at the Golden Temple, and we spent two days in a spotlessly clean, newly constructed room inside the gurdwara compound. We divided our time between absorbing the serenity of the Golden Temple and wandering through the maze of narrow, bustling streets of Amritsar.

Although neither the Lion Queen nor I have a particularly keen interest in churches, mosques or temples, like all obedient tourists we found ourselves visiting a place of worship almost daily. The temples and mosques of India are fascinating and beautifully crafted. Indeed, the intricate carvings and ornate designs of many Hindu temples are some the most intriguing tourist sites I've ever seen both on a purely aesthetic level and a historical/mythological level. Of the hundreds of places of worship I've visited in my two trips to India, the Golden Temple has to rank as the most evocative of a feeling of divine peace. The massive Jama Masjid mosque in Delhi is certainly more impressive in terms of pure size, and the incredibly intricate, delicate marble carvings of the Dilwara temples in Southern Rajasthan make craftsmanship of the Golden Temple appear almost crude. But in terms of holy serenity nothing matches Hari Mandir.

The compound is made of slabs of cool white marble which are washed every night with milk by an army of volunteers. Inside this frame of white is a huge square pool of clear, holy water into which pilgrims dip themselves, and in the very center of this pool is the gilded temple itself which is accessed by a walkway called the Gurus' Bridge. Musicians inside the Golden Temple perform hypnotic hymns that are broadcast throughout the whole temple on a state-of-the-art Swiss sound system, and I think it is the combination of the rhythms of the tabla and the silent reflections of the water that produce the overpowering sense of peace.

The peaceful atmosphere of the Golden Temple contrasts perfectly with the bustling streets of the city. The Punjab is called the bread basket of India because the industrious Sikhs have turned their state into one of the richest in India. The relative wealth of the Punjab is evident in the impressive girth of

many of Amritsar's citizens. Strolling through the narrow alleys and chaotic streets of the old section of town, it is obvious how the Sikhs have transferred their economic prosperity into a fat reserve: whole milk, ghee (clarified butter) saturated breads and vegetable dishes, and the best and fattiest lassis (a yogurt drink, either sweet or salty) in India. Amritsar had the most consistently delicious food we found in India and our outings from the confines of the Golden Temple followed this general pattern: devour a kulfi (cashew ice cream) popsicle, wander aimlessly until we had room to consume a thick cold lassi, wander aimlessly until we could force down a lunch of ghee-saturated aborigine, wander aimlessly until we found a juice stall and drink a pint of pineapple or pomegranate juice, waddle back to the Golden Temple, stopping to buy a hundred grams of jalebis (a popular Indian sweet resembling fried honey) to digest. If we had stayed in Amritsar much longer than we did, even my protruding ribs would have disappeared under a blanket of fat.

Other than the rich food, I'd have to say it was the turbans that made Amritsar such a wonderful place to explore. All over India men and women mark themselves in ways which to Western eyes are bizarre and exotic, but there is something satisfyingly weird about the sight of a whole city where the majority of men dress in slacks, typical collared bank manager shirts, and massive, immaculately wrapped, color-coordinated turbans and full beards. Turbans on bikes, turbans on scooters, turbans in cars, turbans asleep on a park bench, turbans milking cows, turbans selling bananas, neon green turbans, hot pink turbans, deep red turbans.

I found the turbans exciting because they were so commonplace, like a tie on Wall Street or a cowboy hat in Montana, that I felt naked without one. They

were yet another example of the ordinary seeming extraordinary. LQ wasn't interested in my philosophical appreciation of the turbans. She found the turbans just plain sexy. She even tried to get me to wear one on the grounds that it would be a sort of kinky sexual aide, but I reminded her that I can't even tie a tie, let alone wrap several meters of fabric into a sexy turban.

On one of our gluttonous expeditions outside of the peaceful confines of the Golden Temple we met Sunil. Although he had an engaging smile and bright eyes, he was an unturbaned Hindu so I didn't have to worry about LQ's wandering eyes. Sunil certainly didn't have wandering eyes. He was a confirmed member of that category of men from gender-segregated societies who, when talking to a woman in jeans, never take their eyes off her. We took a cup of chai with him at an upscale sweet shop next door to the "pure vegetarian" restaurant where we'd eaten lunch, and for the entire forty-five minutes that we sat with him he never once took his eyes off LQ's face, even when I was asking him a question. This was nice for me because it meant that I didn't have to feign interest when he described the details of his various business ventures. But forty-five minutes of intense eye contact was exhausting for the Lion Queen.

Sunil was what LQ and I referred to as a "my friender." A my friender is a native, in our experience almost always a man, who searches out tourists and starts conversations with them whether or not they are interested in conversing. Within forty-five seconds a my friender will commence referring to cornered tourists as "my friend," and within five minutes will consider the tourist to be, "like a brother to me" (Sunil claimed my brotherhood without shifting his eyes from my girlfriend's face).

Like many my frienders, Sunil showed us snapshots of himself with other Westerners and told us the details of his friends' visits to Amritsar in order to establish his credentials as a friend to tourists. This habit of presenting a friendship resume is indicative of the problem of making friends in countries where tourism has been well established for many years. Once tourists are no longer a novelty, most locals lose interest in them. However, a few find that friendships with tourists can be very lucrative and become experts at forming quick relationships. My frienders are pests, like drooling hound dogs relentlessly begging for a doggy bone. Normally we did not tolerate these insincere simperers, but Sunil caught us at a vulnerable moment. We had just finished gorging ourselves on Punjabi cheese stuffed tomatoes and were too satisfied to be rude.

Sunil was also more open about his personal life than most my frienders. He shared with us the dynamics of his joint family household. Everybody likes to bemoan the "break up of the American family," but I thank God I come from a broken home rather than a joint family; the mother-in-law thing ain't no joke in India. He also told us stories about the early and mid-eighties when Sikh terrorists rode around Amritsar on scooters randomly gunning down Hindus with assault rifles and the Indian army invaded the Golden Temple to end a standoff with Bhindranwale and his separatist militia.

However, it was difficult to keep Sunil on these interesting topics. He wanted to talk about two things: spirituality and money. "I have super psychic powers," he told LQ with an intense look and then fell silent, forcing her to ask, "What are your powers?" But we had had this conversation before, and LQ just said, "Oh, that's very nice for you, how handy."

"I can know minds, tell futures, feel your energy. You have very strong energy, beautiful eyes, but many fears. I will tell you when you were born."

"I already know when I was born."

"You were born in February, nineteen seventy, no seventy-one. People want to give me money to tell their future. A lady from Holland said to me, 'Sunil, I must give you one hundred dollars you tell my future so well.' But I tell her, 'no, it is my gift; God gave me this gift, and I cannot charge money for what is God's gift.' I do not care about having money; I do not need too much money. I want to lead a simple life, a good life and be a good husband. But I do not need to be rich. My cousin in Ludhiana is very rich, four cars a big house, many servants. Every year he goes to America. But he is not happy."

"Don't worry, I wasn't going to offer you any money, especially not for making me two years older," said LQ.

"What? I am not rich, but I am happy. My cousin, he asks me, 'Sunil, I am so rich, I have four cars, my children are in school in London, I have many servants, but I am not happy. Why aren't I happy.' People always ask me questions like this because they know I have powers. I tell my cousin, 'Cousin look at me. I am not rich, I make only one thousand rupees a month, but I am happy, so happy. Money does not bring happiness; it is the simple life that brings happiness.' I do not care about money, I just want to be a good husband for my wife and help others with my super psychic powers."

"What is your job?" I asked, hoping against hope to distract Sunil from his diatribe.

"I work in the bank, assistant manager," he answered still staring intently into LQ's eyes. "I will tell you more, I feel your energy very strong. You have

too much feelings, but you are scared to use them. You must learn to let them out, but you must be careful that it is the right person. Also, you are very generous, but your friends borrow your money and do not pay you back."

"Ah ha, I see. How do you tell these things? They just pop into your head?" asked LQ in an unintentionally skeptical voice. It is much easier for everybody if a super-psychic's skills go unquestioned, but Sunil was making that difficult.

"I have these powers since I was twelve years old. Everybody wants to give me money to tell their futures, but I do not care about money. Europe people--Holland, Germany, Norway--they want Indian spirituality; they have strong feelings. My friend from Germany she tells me, 'Sunil, you have such a beautiful life, such a simple life. I have too much money, and yet I am not happy, but you are happy. I am in too much hurry all the time.' I tell her future; she is my friend. Americans do not understand Indian spirituality. Americans love only money, the material world. They cannot understand how I tell the future. Europe people I love very much, they come to India to learn spirituality, but Americans do not understand their feelings. They do not have spirituality life."

"All your friends seem to be women," said LQ.

"I love women," Sunil said still staring straight at LQ, "European women have strong energy; men love the material world too much. European women I love very much, but Indian women are the best in the world."

"I wouldn't know. Indian women never sit down and talk to me like you do. They never even make eye contact with me, look me in the eyes," I said.

"Indian women are the best, the most happy in the world, because they have safe place in the home. Indian women queen of home, Indian women love family, Indian women do not have worries like European women. They are too much happy because they do not worry about material world. Indian women are most beautiful in the world: too much soft. My wife, she thinks only of being good wife, good mother to our son, good daughter to mother, and so she is too much happy. American women have too fast life, she has job and money worries. American family not strong like Indian family. You do not have safety like Indian women."

"Safety, we don't need no stinking safety," roared the Lion Queen. "How does your wife like you talking to all these wonderful European women?"

"My wife knows me, she trusts me. She knows I have super psychic powers and I must help these people. I would invite you to my house for dinner tonight, my wife is too much good cook, but she is out of house now. According to Hindu law, the wife cannot cook when she is out of house; I cannot have guests to my house when my wife is in that time. You must come to dinner with me tonight at a restaurant. You will be my guest. I know restaurant too much delicious food. Pure vegetarian restaurant. I am pure vegetarian. Man is not made to eat meat. If we were made to eat meat, we would have teeth like tiger, but man teeth are not sharp for tearing flesh. It is not natural for man to eat meat. You come to dinner with me and try Indian food, my friend. You like Indian food? Sometimes Indian food too spicy for Westerner, but I think Indian food best in the world."

"We love Indian food, but we have just eaten paneer tomatoes, too much ghee. I don't think we can eat again.," said LQ.

"Not now, tonight. You are my guests. In India friends must eat together. You meet me tonight at eight o'clock in front of Golden Temple, you are my guest."

"Am I invited?" I asked. Sunil seemed to be trying to use his super-psychic powers to make me disappear.

"Of course, you are my guest, my friend," he said and glanced in my direction for the first time. There was no doubt that he was a jerk, but we agreed to meet him for dinner after it became obvious that he wasn't going to let us leave without our promising to be his guests.

We both assumed that we would just blow off our engagement on the grounds that we weren't really obligated because it was an acceptance under duress. After careful consideration, however, we decided to meet him for the following three reasons: first, it is always nice to have a local ordering the food; second, we dined alone almost every night and at least Sunil livened up the conversation; third, we felt sorry for Sunil and knew we'd feel guilty if we stood him up.

The restaurant he took us to was packed with upper-middle-class Indian families. All the women wore at least a little gold jewelry and most had gold bracelets, necklaces, and earrings. It was divided into two sections, AC and non-AC. The AC section was not actually air-conditioned, but it had fancier decor and, though the menu was the same and there was only one kitchen, the prices were fifteen percent higher. It was a status thing to eat in the AC section, and Sunil, the non-materialist, insisted that as his guests we dine there. I suspect that the division of restaurants into AC and non-AC dining halls throughout India is a remnant of the days when the restaurants had separate dining facilities for

Brahmins (A Brahmin cannot eat food that has been prepared or touched by a non-Brahmin, and strict Brahmins cannot even eat food that the shadow of a scheduled cast's person has passed over. There are many other rules that Brahmins must obey regarding food preparation and consumption, of course, and most practicing Brahmins don't eat food prepared outside their home at all.).

The food was the best of our whole trip to that point, and there was plenty of it because Sunil ordered three times as much as we could eat. It was more expensive than a grimy Indian dhaba, but still quite a bit cheaper than the tourist restaurants which serve disgusting "Western" cuisine and bland Indian dishes to weak-palated travelers. All over India, once you know what to look for, you can find these clean, efficient, delicious restaurants catering to the Indian middle class, yet most tourists still patronize the overpriced and universally shitty tourist restaurants. The only explanation for this phenomenon, which is certainly not limited to India, is that people tend to like what they are expected to like.

This phenomenon is responsible for the effectiveness of advertisements that proclaim, "eight out of ten people prefer carbonated enemas to traditional enemas!" It's why public opinion polls influence public opinion. It's why cowboys listen to country music; Los Angeles lawyers drive sports utility vehicles to work; sit-coms are funnier with a laugh track; and chartreuse is this year's spring color.

I had plenty of time to contemplate my superior taste and independence of thought in peace, because Sunil started where he'd left off in the afternoon. He continued to intensely stare into LQ's eyes while he revealed the secrets of life. The main trick to living a happy and blessed life, according to Sunil, was positive thinking. As long as you don't think anything bad will happen, nothing

bad will. This was not the first nor the last time that we were lectured on the virtues of positive thinking. This theory of Indian existentialism is the reason that when you ask how long a bus ride will take, you are always quoted the fastest time a bus has ever made the journey; and why when you inquire about the possibility of receiving a permit to visit a restricted area, you are told it will be no problem even though it is highly unlikely it will ever be issued. To admit the possibility of the undesired is tantamount to causing it.

In an attempt to stop Sunil's monologue on the powers of positive thinking, LQ asked him to identify the turbaned man with the long white beard in a religious portrait on the wall (you could tell it was a religious painting because of the colored lights that blinked on and off forming a sort of halo over his head). Sunil's face filled with excitement when he told us that this was the guru Babaji from Beas, just an hour South of Amritsar. Apparently he was the leader of some sort of utopian community.

It was difficult to understand exactly what Beas was, but we could determine that it was located on the banks of a large river and was a very sacred place where all sorts of things could be bought very cheaply. "There is too much temples in Beas, very big, very holy," said Sunil, "How much you pay for one Samosa?"

"Two or three rupees," said LQ.

"In Beas one samosa, one rupee! A bar of Luv soap in Amritsar eight rupees. In Beas four rupees. Everything in Beas very cheap, very clean. A room in Beas very cheap, twenty rupees. Very clean room. Babaji a very holy man. He is the fifth guru of Beas. He has great powers. You must go to Beas. If you go to

Beas you never forget it, not in your whole life. You live one hundred years, you never forget it."

These were strong words. For the rest of the meal I speculated on what sort of place could provoke such passionate enthusiasm from Sunil. When we finished the main dishes, Sunil ordered a selection of sweets and chai. I was painfully bloated from the dinner but couldn't resist the tasty milk sweets. Finally, we could eat no more. I paid the entire bill (a staggering two hundred rupees or six dollars, but then we had ordered enough food to easily feed six people), and we left.

Back at the Golden Temple, LQ took out our guide book and we looked up Beas. It wasn't in the book. That settled it, we were going to Beas. We'd been in India for three weeks now, and all the places we'd visited were in the *Lonely Planet*. We felt like we were being followed. There was one English guy who we'd met in Leh and then seen in Manali, Dharmasala, and now Amritsar. He was a nice guy, but he had curly hair and I've got curly hair, and his trip was starting to look like my trip, and I wanted off the L.P. corridor. Beas, the Sadhu Supermarket of Sacred Savings, certainly wasn't in any guidebooks.

Chapter 6

The Fangs of Faith

After a few more days relishing the peace and beauty of the Golden Temple, we went to the bus stand to see about getting a bus to Beas. It turned out to be no problem. When we asked our rickshaw wallah where the bus to Beas left from, his eyes lit up like Sunil's when he'd told us about Babaji, and he told us enthusiastically number four. At platform number four, a decent looking green bus was idling loudly and spewing out black smoke in impatience. The conductor leaned out the door, looked us right in the eyes and shouted, "Beasbeasbeasbeas." We quickly boarded the bus and were surprised to find two empty seats. The engine roared, the conductor hollered, and nothing happened. For the next twelve minutes the driver revved the engine to show that the bus was about to leave any second. Finally, when the bus was packed so full that a couple of young men were actually hanging out the door with just the toes of a single foot on the bottom step, we lumbered out of the parking lot.

This was no super express, express, deluxe, or even semi-deluxe bus; this was the stop-to-pick-up-the-lady-going-to-the-well, extra-ordinary bus. It took us two and a half hours to drive the forty or fifty kilometers to Beas. But we were in a good mood, and even though it was scorching hot, it was a dry heat and not completely miserable. The trip was almost fun--we had seats after all. Everyone on the bus seemed to be in a good mood. There was much loud teasing between the passengers which kept us entertained.

There was no doubt when we arrived in Beas. We'd told the conductor where we were going, and he had apparently spread the news because when we arrived in Beas there was a raucous commotion at our expense. A sharp young man with a turned up collar, thin gold chain with a Shiva pendant, and a stylish pompadour yelled something to us that made the whole bus erupt in laughter. I acknowledged the crowd with a wave, and we pushed our way to the door. As we squeezed off the bus an old toothless man in gauzy white pajamas said to me, "Ah, Dehra, it is paradise on Earth." He was wearing glasses so thick I couldn't see his eyes. I asked, "Dehra, I thought this was Beas, I thought Beas was paradise." The old man just wagged his head in approval. A big bellied Sikh sitting next to the old man said, "Beas, Dehra; same, same," and wagged his head to indicate the irrelevance of it all. By this time we were off the bus, and it roared off in a cloud of black smoke.

We were right in front of the main market, which was perhaps a little livelier than most, but not particularly distinctive. There was a fruit juice stall with pints of pineapple juice for eight rupees instead of ten. A good deal, but certainly nothing paradisaical. We wandered through the long thin strip of drink stalls, past piles of bananas, three-foot garlands of cloyingly fragrant flowers, pyramids of apples, radioactively bright mounds of dye, heaps of onions and potatoes. The strip of stalls was only two booths wide. On either side of the line of stalls, streets branched off on a perpendicular so that we could see almost their entire length. One street was full of metal pot manufacturers and distributors, small print shops claimed the next, the third was for postcard and calendar shops, the fourth had a couple of restaurants, a scooter repair shop, and two barber shacks, and the next three streets were textile retailers.

At the printers' street we were spotted by a group of girls who surrounded us and commenced pinching our forearms and pleading in aggressive whines, "Baksheesh, baksheesh, Babaji. Babaji, baksheesh." Three Sadhus in saffron robes, one wielding a six foot trident, strode past us. We tried to ignore the girls, but they sensed our strategy and persisted in their painful pinches past the postcard and calendar shops and the restaurants. I bumped into a tall, turbaned man in a linen suit carrying a briefcase. Our persecutors were all dressed in Punjabi suits (baggy trousers, knee-length shirts, and long shawls). We were carrying our backpacks, vulnerable to the old under-the-shawl-slice-and-grab. These girls made the normally torturous decision not to give money to a beggar easy. An elegant lady draped in a canary yellow sari looked me in the eyes and wagged her head in a resigned apology for the pestering we were undergoing and for the in-your-face pervasiveness of Indian poverty in general. LQ tightened her rolled up "Indian Times" and administered a medium-hard smack upside the head of the lead pincher. The fourteen-year-old girl straightened up, and her eyes widened in surprise. You just don't mess with the Lion Queen's personal space. All five of them drifted off, shouting at us in histrionic wails.

Beas was a typical town. Maybe a little more dynamic and a little more crowded than most, but typical nonetheless. We didn't see the "too much temples" that Sunil had promised, and its garbage factor was about average. At the end of the market we discovered the train station. "BEAS" was painted in large blue letters so we had proof. We went to the inquiry window to inquire, but weren't sure exactly what we were looking for. I asked a question I would have bet a hundred rupees I would never ask in my life, even if I lived to be a hundred years old, "Where is Babaji?" It was the right question. "This is Beas,

you go Dehra. Dehra like heaven on Earth. The train one o'clock, better you take the bus. Bus three rupees, fifteen kilometers, leaves five minutes, over there," said a fast-talking man with spectacles and white stripes painted across his forehead.

We found the bus, bought a three-rupee ticket, and twenty-five minutes later we were dropped off in front of gates labeled "C." Gate C was a secured passage through a seven-meter-high brick wall, which appeared to surround a small city. The wall was somewhere between brick red and strip mall adobe red. It looked new. Anything that looks new is a rare sight in India, particularly city walls which tend to be several hundred years old. Outside the gate was a huge parking lot full of cars, another anomaly in India.

We were caught up in a general movement towards gate C and then separated into male and female lines. I put my backpack on a tarp like all the other luggage carriers, and a plainclothes guard told me to unlock it. He unzipped it and asked me if I had a camera, video camera, or sound recorder. I pulled out my old Olympus and a mini Dictaphone we had never used, and the guard pointed me over to a kiosk. At the kiosk another guard wrote me a receipt and took my recorders.

When I retrieved my backpack, the guard told me to report to the accommodation office and directed me into the line of men filing through gate C. Inside the compound walls, I was relieved to see LQ waiting for me with a big smile on her face. The smile was a smile of complicity--we had discovered Indian paradise. We were on a street so wide I'd call it a boulevard, and on this boulevard was none of the stinking diesel cars, ox carts, scooters, Tata trucks, auto rickshaws, camel carts, stray dogs with festering wounds, piles of cow shit,

garbage grazing cows, crippled beggars, shoe wallahs, paan wallahs, rickshaw wallahs--none of the things that make an Indian street distinctly Indian. The street was also cleaner than any plate I'd eaten on in the last three weeks.

Not that it wasn't still clearly an Indian world. A cross section of Indian society strolled up and down the red brick boulevard. The pedestrians appeared to be mostly middle class to poor families (middle class in India isn't quite the same as middle class in America; to the best of my knowledge it means having enough to eat and has nothing to do with disposable income). There were also a sizable number of men in well-tailored slacks and gold chains who had Bombay written all over them and plump women with heavy gold earrings and bracelets. The street was full, but not really crowded.

We walked away from Gate C deeper into Dehra. The community was divided into perfectly square blocks, and at each intersection there was a sign clearly designating the block by a series of Roman letters and numbers. Every building was made of the same bricks as the city wall and was built in the same square, oh-so practical style. Garbage cans stood sentry at every other corner, but I didn't find them comforting. In fact, I didn't find the cleanliness either satisfying or relieving. I simply found it and the well-ordered uniformity of Dehra sterile. Normally, sterile is the worst insult I can think of: it means an environment which nothing creative can grow out of, which can't evolve. But in the context of India, which is anything but sterile, both LQ and I found the sterility intriguing.

Dehra conjured up two contradictory worlds in the map of my imagination. Its pleasantness reminded me of the horrors of American suburbia. The wide boulevards full of similarly colored and dressed people, the neatness

and well trimmedness, the sense that the whole community was built with a theme in mind, the strip mall adobe redness of the place were all unmistakably suburban. But Dehra was standardized beyond even suburbia. Every building and every sign was just one of a large number of identical buildings and signs differentiated only by a series of letters and numbers. There was a utopian fairness to Dehra that reminded me of the horrors of the communist ideal. We were reporting to the "accommodation office," after all. My first impression of Dehra was of a communist suburbia.

Everybody on the street seemed very friendly and went out of their way to smile at us and greet us with their palms together muttering, "Ram Ram" or other unintelligible greetings of spiritual brotherhood. We found the standardization disorienting. Since everything looked roughly the same, it was almost impossible to get a sense of the layout of the community. We were forced to ask several of the friendly Ram Ramers how to get to the accommodation office. Eventually one of them took pity on us, grabbed my hand, and led us to the office. He was one of the gold-chained Bombayites, a stock speculator/investment banker, but he wasn't interested in talking business now; he had meditation and enlightenment on his mind. Unfortunately, he didn't realize how little we knew about Dehra, and he started right in on concepts we couldn't understand. He praised Babaji as "our father" and assumed we shared his enthusiasm for Dehra's particular species of meditation. After all, what were doing in Dehra if we weren't followers of Babaji?

"Are you on the path?" he asked.

"We are still searching for the path." LQ responded with lightening quick B.S.

"Ah, yes. My daughter, too, is still searching for the path. But you are young and have time. I am very sure you will find the light. The next day after tomorrow Babaji will give a special Satsang; you must go; it will help your search very much."

"A special Satsang, we wouldn't miss it for the world." I said and then had the uneasy but exhilarating realization that we were impostors.

"Babaji very popular with Americans, Germans, French, English--all Westerners. In October Dehra is full of Westerners; you must come back in one month; then Babaji gives Satsang in English. Too much Westerners like you in Dehra. Here is the accommodation office; they will give you a good room, very clean. Do not worry, I am sure you will find the path. Babaji will show you the way to die." With that enigmatic assurance, our guide disappeared into the crowd of relaxed strollers that seemed to be aimlessly wandering the boulevards.

In the accommodation office our passport numbers were recorded, and we were assigned to hostel 4, the foreign guest quarters. A young man who spoke no English escorted us through the maze of identical red brick buildings and insisted on carrying both our backpacks to hostel 4, where a large sign forbid me to tip him. To my surprise, he shook my hand and disappeared without even a pause to see if I'd seen the sign. The woman at the registration desk took the piece of paper we'd been given at the accommodation office and gave us a room key in return. Nobody had mentioned a word about money, and we weren't about to broach the subject. This being a religious institution, I was pretty sure they were doing just fine.

Our room was spotlessly clean, cool, and had hot water. Outside our door was an electric drinking water cooler. It was tempting to relax in the cool white

room (it wasn't muggy outside, but it was still well over thirty degrees Celsius), but we hadn't yet seen a single temple or found the divine bargains Sunil had promised. We didn't really understand what the hell Dehra was. So we ventured back out into the heat of communist suburbia to investigate.

The streets were still full of lazy strollers, and we joined a flow which seemed to be heading further into the center of the colony. We passed a couple of blocks of hostels identical to ours, took a right turn on a major boulevard, and suddenly a massive, six-minareted fairy tale castle on sweeping lush green grounds loomed before us. The minarets and a large central dome recalled Mogul architecture, but the building was made of the same red bricks as the rest of Dehra, and this context gave it a sort of Disney, over-the-top fantasy quality, as if it was built in an Indian theme park instead of in India. The grounds were enclosed by a three-meter-high iron fence, so we couldn't get within fifty yards of the building, but we assumed that this was the great temple Sunil had told us about--it was certainly too much.

Not that this phantasmal kitschiness was inauthentic. Quite the opposite; we knew it was the temple because it was so ridiculously fantastic. In Amritsar we'd seen a temple that used paper maché to reconstruct ancient Hindu monuments from around India and visitors crawled through a plastic reproduction of a famous cave pilgrimage site in the Himalayas. It even employed a sort of wading pool to represent the Ganges. In Varanasi itself there is a temple where mechanical toy Gods act out various scenes of Hindu mythology in shoddy dioramas. Modern Hindu art and architecture screams of Las Vegas.

We wandered past the gaudy temple and back into the burbs. After a couple of blocks, we came to a large open dusty square where five tents were set up. In front of each tent was a frenzy of activity which we quickly identified as what Indians call a queue. It is well known that an Indian queue is a very different phenomena than an American line, and despite the holiness and cleanliness of Dehra, these queues were as physically demanding as average.

This square and a couple of similar squares strategically located throughout the colony were the home of Sunil's coveted bargains. But instead of the samosas he'd promised, the tents sold Pepsi for three rupees instead of seven, Nescafe for the low, low price of one rupee, the popular "mango frooti" beverage, as well as several varieties of hermetically sealed, mass produced snacks at half their retail value.

The cornerstone of my love for India is the wonderful food. Indian snacks, in my opinion, are unrivaled in terms of variety, complexity, and pure satisfaction. The snacks are served on dried leaves or wrapped up in newspapers and never cost more than a few rupees. There are as many varieties of Indian snacks as there are dialects of Indian languages: potatoes fried in spices that make French fries and even jo-jo's seem as dull as a Des Moines suburb; chaana tikka, potato pancakes fried in ghee and smothered in a spicy chick pea sauce; pau bhaji, a Maharashtra and Gujarati specialty of mashed tomatoes and a hundred other ingredients; nan king, peanuts mixed with onions, chili peppers, lemon and whatever else seems fit to include; chaat, samosas, dosas, uttapam, and on and on. Every region has its own snack specialties which can be purchased from mobile vendors or from more permanent shops on any town or city street, and every vendor has his own style--you'll never get the same snack

twice. The creativity and imagination that goes into their preparation is what makes Indian snacks so wonderful.

LQ and I stood on the edge of the dusty square and watched in horror as people jostled for position to buy the coveted Pepsis and factory-made, preservative-laced, plastic-wrapped, quality-controlled, standardized packages of nan king. I am not one to bemoan progress because I recognize progress as just change in retrospect, and change is what makes life interesting. Nevertheless, I found myself saying, "This is as bad as the first time I saw pre-peeled garlic packaged in plastic. When I was in India just four years ago they didn't even have Coca-Cola, now Coca-Cola owns Thums Up and Limca."

"Dehra sucks! It's a spiritual Costco. They're selling Nescafe and packaged snacks at half price like a drug dealer giving away free samples. They've taken the worst of the West--standardization and a thirty-year shelf life--and combined it with the Indian queue in a nightmare vision of the future!" fumed LQ.

"It makes me feel sick, I can feel my stomach turning. Wait here and I'll get us a couple of Pepsis." I used an elbow hook move to cut in front of a scrawny teenager, and used my rebounding skills to box out and keep my place in line. Within a couple of minutes I had our "cold drinks," as Indians call sodas.

We spent another hour wandering around Dehra and came upon two more dusty squares where pilgrims fought over the same discounted snacks. We also found a small store where bulk detergents, big bags of potato chips, economy size boxes of sanitary napkins and double sized packages of "biscuits" (really cookies) were on sale, adding credence to LQ's assessment of Dehra as a spiritual Costco. But we also found an eye clinic (where we were told that every

year thousands of poor people with cataracts come for free surgery performed by volunteer doctors) and a general free clinic that distributed medicine and advice to the poor and ill who visit Dehra.

My stomach hadn't settled down from the nauseous sight of the first snack sale, and I felt like I needed to put something in it to calm it down. We had skipped lunch by mistake, as often happens on a travel day. We were hungry, but we were determined not to eat any of the evil junk food, most of which we'd already tried at the regular price and disliked anyway. However, we'd wandered around Dehra for two hours and hadn't seen a single place that sold any fresh food. Though the sun was near the horizon, it was still quite hot, and the combination of heat and an empty stomach made me feel a little dizzy.

We decided to seek help at our hostel and quickly found it. The receptionist at the registration desk of hostel four was a large woman with a very round head and a light blue sari that made her look like an on-duty nurse. A very round bindi the size of a quarter was stuck in the center of her forehead about an inch above her thick mono-brow. It was clearly stuck there as proof that she was married, rather than as a stylish, yet traditional fashion accessory.

"Namascar," LQ and I greeted her in unison.

"Ram Ram," she smiled back at us.

"Where can we get a meal? Where?" asked LQ.

"Meals are served in fifteen minutes at the canteen. Three meals a day, five rupees one meal."

"Where is the canteen? Where?" asked LQ.

"Hostel canteen just two-minute walk. Go out the door. Turn to the right. All the food is personally blessed by Babaji every day. Every day more than

twenty thousand meals personally blessed. Tomorrow is satsang, more than one hundred thousand meals. The next day special satsang, too much meals," she said proudly.

"Babaji must be a very busy man," said LQ.

"Oh, yes Babaji very busy man, very great man. You know Babaji? Have you found the path?" she asked.

"Were still looking," said LQ sincerely.

"For the canteen," I mumbled.

In ten minutes we were at the canteen. We bought the five rupee meal ticket at a booth outside the entrance. There was already a line of at least two hundred people waiting to be fed. I didn't know if I could take the wait. My stomach was really rumbling, now and I was so light headed I could barely stand up. But in just a few minutes the gates opened and, to my surprise, the entire line streamed into a massive open-aired dining hall. On either side of an aisle were eight long, narrow, waist-high tables without chairs. As we walked in, we were each handed a large metal plate that was divided into three sections, one big and two small, and were ushered single file in-between the tables. There was room for fifteen people to stand on one side of each table, and our plates took up the entire width of the table.

Before half the tables were full, an army of servers was released on us. First a man on either side of the aisle carried a huge bowl of rice between the tables and spooned out a large serving onto the big compartment of each plate. He was followed by the dal man who, depending on the whim of the diner, either covered the rice in or filled one of the smaller compartments with a slightly

watery yellow dal. Next was the subgee man followed by the chapati man, and finally the chutney and chili pepper man.

The man on my left was tearing off big chunks of his chapati and wolfing down his dal and rice. LQ was shoving her fingers deep into her subgee pile--it looked like cauliflower and cabbage this time--and had finished it off before the chutney had even arrived. I still hadn't taken a single bite because as soon as the dal was ladled on top of my rice, I lost my appetite. I could feel and hear the substances in my stomach bubbling. But we'd already bought our five rupee tickets, just fifteen cents for all you could eat, and I didn't want to miss out on a deal that good. Besides, I'd been complaining about how hungry I was for two hours, and felt like I was committed to consuming now. I carefully tore off a triangular piece of chapati and folded over one corner to make the perfect food pincher. I pushed the piece of chapati down in the middle of my pile of dal and rice and squeezed several times until I gripped a compact cone of rice in my pincher. There was nothing left to do but eat. I popped the cone in my mouth with a flick of my thumb and chewed. My body resisted, but I forced myself to swallow.

"I've got to take a shit," I said.

"What," said LQ, "you've only taken one bite. Shut up and eat, here comes the rice dude again. You're gonna miss out on seconds because you're too busy playing with your food. You know you've got to pack this stuff in there if you don't want to be hungry again in an hour."

"I said, I've got to take a shit," I said.

"Well, if you wait to take a shit until after you've eaten the blessed meal, then you'll be taking a holy shit, and just think how much more satisfying that

would be," LQ comforted me. I blew a huff of air out my nose to acknowledge her pun, but when I contracted my stomach my nose was not the only orifice from which I blew.

"Holy Shit! My pants."

"What?"

"I shit my pants," I said angrily, "I'll see you back at the room. Enjoy your goddamn meal." I rushed off as fast as I could rush with the heavy load I bore.

I spent the rest of the night and all the next day lying in bed reading Kundera's Immortality and feeling extremely mortal. I had a fever, and whenever I stood up my head throbbed. Several times I nearly blacked out. It really wasn't too bad, though, because it was hotter than it had been the night before and our room was pleasantly cool with the fan going. If you have to be sick, then it's nice to have a clean room, a soft bed to suffer in, and a good book to keep you company.

LQ also kept me company, but she spent most of the day exploring Dehra. She reported that at around ten o'clock in the morning the streets were so full of people for one hour that it was impossible to walk against the crowd. Apparently she'd been swept in the opposite direction she intended to go for several minutes before she was able to escape onto a small alley where she waited until the streets returned to normal. She thought it was the crowd leaving satsang. The next day's satsang was supposed to be even bigger. This was a spectacle I had to see.

I was feeling a little better in the evening, probably because I hadn't eaten a single thing since my last, disastrous bite. The next morning I woke up early, feeling much better. When I sat up I didn't feel dizzy. I wasn't hungry yet, but

my stomach wasn't gurgling like an aquarium either. It was seven in the morning and satsang wasn't until nine. LQ said she didn't need breakfast either, so we decided to see about getting train tickets to Delhi at the reservation booking office.

As soon as we left the cool confines of the room, we were wet with sweat. It was already in the thirties and the sun had only been up for an hour. LQ had found the booking office the day before, but she still couldn't find her way around the maze of identical red brick buildings. We left hostel four and looked for people to ask for directions. The first likely candidates were a huge man whose tremendous belly hung well below his waist and his teenage daughter. She was wearing blue jeans and a dorky light blue and white sweat shirt that read "Go For It." An Indian woman in jeans is not a common sight. It meant that they were well off, admired Western culture, and almost defiantly spoke English.

I walked up to the whale of a father and asked, "Excuse me, where is the railroad booking office?"

"My father does not speak English," the young woman answered and then conferred with her father before telling us, "He says that he tried to learn at the business English class, but is a stupid student. He says to tell you that whatever you need, we will help you. Where are you from?"

"We are from America," said LQ. The young woman's eyes grew wide, and she hid a smile behind a plump hand. She passed the news on to her father, and they had a brief conference.

"You speak very good English. How did you learn?" I asked.

"I learn English at school. I attend a Catholic school; all my classes are taught in English, except Urdu. But my English is not so good, I think. I have

never met anybody from America before; you must come with us. My father says we will take you to the booking office. My father is a very kind man."

We started walking slowly and kept up a polite conversation. They were from Ludhiana, the business capital of Punjab and one of the leading business centers in India even though at just over a million people it is a relatively small city for India. It was a two-hour drive from Dehra to Ludhiana.

"Do you come to Dehra often?" I asked.

"Oh yes, we come almost every weekend. We come to hear Babaji give satsang every weekend. My father was lost before Babaji showed him the path to light. He drank too much beer and had too much fear. Now my father has seen the light."

"Have you seen the light?" asked LQ.

"Oh, no," she said, blushing again. "I am only eighteen. You cannot see the light before you are married. But after I am married, my husband and I will go to Babaji, and I hope that he will show us the light. Have you seen the light?"

"No, we are still searching too. We did not know about Babaji until we came to Dehra," LQ admitted.

"Are you married?" she popped the question.

"No, we do not believe in marriage," I said.

"You do not believe in marriage?" she asked incredulous. "Babaji says that marriage is the sacred bond between man and woman. In America people do not believe in marriage?"

"People in America believe in marriage very much," I said, "But we do not believe in marriage because it is supposed to be final, the last word. People say that it is about commitment, but really it is the end of commitment because it is a

final answer after which there is, theoretically anyway, no more question. That means that the decision is no longer yours whether to be with the person or not. Any real commitment must be constantly reexamined; otherwise, it's just habit or inertia."

"Shut up, Perrin, and don't try and include me in your theories either." said LQ.

"I believe in marriage, but I do not want to leave my father too soon. I will wait until I am twenty-three or twenty-four, and then my father will find me a good match. It is much easier for young people in India than America, I think. It is the father's responsibility to find a match. I do not have to worry."

We were slowly walking the same direction as most of the people on the street and came to one of the bargain snack squares. The father told us to wait and headed for the Pepsi line. He was soon back with a Pepsi for everyone and then went back to another line, this one for Good Day biscuits, my favorite. I wasn't sure if it was safe for me to eat yet, but I felt a little awkward about my anti-marriage outburst, and so I threw my convictions to the wind (again) and entered a turbulent snack line to show that I did believe in gestures of kindness. When at last I'd fought my way to the counter, I bought two Raj sized bags of masala-flavored nan king for just five rupees apiece. I brought my booty back to our spontaneous potluck and discovered that the big guy had already bought each of us a bag of Bengali style potato chips in addition to two packages of biscuits.

He told his daughter something in Punjabi, gesturing towards the bags I held. Before I realized what was going on, he shoved two crumpled ten rupee notes in my free hand. I tried to hand them back, but he shoved his big belly

between us and made it quite clear that there was no way he was taking them back, not even if he lived to be one hundred years old. I looked helplessly at LQ and slipped the twenty rupees into the wad in my left front pocket.

"My father says that you are our guests in Dehra, and if you want anything you must only tell him. My father is a very generous man. Babaji says that if you have much, you must give. Babaji says that money is necessary, but it is not important. We should not worry about it. We should not love it. Before Babaji showed him the path, my father loved money too much. Now he knows it is not important," said the daughter while the father smiled at us.

"What is your name?" I asked, but I thought, "I'm not the one tripping over it." First Sunil, now this pair, all of a sudden everybody wanted to talk about money.

"My name is Mona," said Mona.

"I know someone named Mona in America! Is that your real name or did you learn it in your school."

"My father named me Mona. You are very lucky that you came today because Babaji is giving a special satsang today. Many times different gurus give satsang; Babaji travels very much. He is very popular in Europe and America. Have you heard of him in America?"

"No, I do not think I have ever heard of him in America. It is difficult for us to find the path in America because Babaji is in India and India is so far away," said LQ.

"You must buy a book. Babaji has written too much books, they are all for sale in Dehra. I would give you mine, but they are Hindi. You must buy The Eternal Light or Living to Die. My favorite is Living to Die. Babaji says that the

only thing we are afraid of is death. But through meditation we can learn to die. He teaches a special meditation; you see a light in your head when you meditate. The light is the light you see when you die. Death is good; it is great peace. When we are not afraid of death, then we have no fears."

"You are only afraid of death? There is nothing else you are afraid of?" asked LQ.

"Babaji says that we are afraid only of death; other fear comes from our fear of death." Mona was interrupted by her father who asked her a question and then smiled at us and wagged his head to show his foolishness for not knowing English.

"He asks about your parents. Don't you miss them? How can you leave home for so long? I could never leave my father for even one week."

"We left home when we were seventeen and we wanted very much to leave home. We miss our parents, but we are going home in a few months, and we call home every month," said LQ.

"You have never left your father or mother even for a month?" I asked.

"Once I left for nine days with my class. We went on a field trip to Madras. It was fun; Madras is very beautiful. There is the longest beach in the world. But every day I cry so much because I miss my father. I call home crying every day. When I come back, I say to my Mother and Father, I never leave home again," she said with great pride. She relayed to her father our family dynamics, and he responded with a fit of head wagging. Apparently the scandalous state of the American family wasn't news to him. He smiled at us kindly. He had cute round cheeks, the kind of face that made you want to ruffle his hair.

Mona turned back to us: "My father says that while you are in India, you must think of him as your father. We are your family, anything you need we give you. Do not worry about money." The big guy asked his daughter something, and she translated: "Are you traveling first class or sleeper?"

"We always go sleeper. It is plenty good enough for us," said LQ.

"You must go first class. My father will buy you the ticket."

"No, no. It's okay; he doesn't have to buy us the ticket; that's ridiculous," I said.

"You cannot stop him. My father is a very generous man," she said. He smiled at us and took my hand in his doughy hand. We turned a corner, and suddenly the street was twice as crowded. People were walking quickly every which way; the atmosphere was tense. There were almost no women, and all the men looked alert, ready to strike. I was a head taller than almost everyone else, and so I could see over the crowd to a big banner that read, "Railroad Booking Office." I groaned audibly. Paradise on Earth was too popular for its own good. There was no way that we were going to make it to the reservation window, not that there would be any tickets left anyway. My heart sunk. I didn't want to spend another day in the burbs, and if the trains were this crowded, the buses would be just as bad.

"Today is the birthday of the fourth Guru. There are five-hundred-thousand people here for satsang today. You do not have a reservation?" said Mona.

"No."

The big guy and Mona had a conference, while LQ and I waited for them to tell us how they were going to save us. "You must come with us to Ludhiana.

In Ludhiana you can take a train or a bus to Delhi. Better you take the bus. It is faster and cheaper."

"Thank you, thank you, thank you," I said and squeezed the big guy's hand.

"First, we must go to satsang. It starts in one hour. Father and I will show you where satsang is held. But we must then leave you; we must call home before satsang. Mother is sick. She had to stay home this weekend."

"I am sorry. I hope she feels better," said LQ.

"She is very often sick: she will be okay. After satsang you must meet us outside gate C. We will wait for you at the taxi stand. You are very lucky to hear Babaji today."

It was a ten-minute walk to the field where satsang was held. At each intersection more people pushed on to our street, all heading to satsang at near-jogging speed. Finding satsang was certainly not a concern; it would have been a hard upstream swim to miss it. Nevertheless, Mona and her father escorted us all the way to the edge of the satsang tent. It was hard to get a sense of how big it was because of the disorienting frenzy of people walking along the perimeter of the tent. Mona reminded us that we were to meet at the taxi stand outside gate C, but I barely heard her.

I was overcome by awe at the size of the tent. To call it a tent is somewhat misleading because one imagines a circus tent or an army mobile command tent or a revivalist rally tent when one thinks of big tents. But this tent was in another ballpark altogether. Indeed, at least a couple of ballparks could have easily fit inside. It was far too large and the ceiling was too low to ever see the entire structure at one time. It was as if the tent was so big that the horizon dropped out

of sight before the canvas ended. Suddenly it occurred to me that Mona had said there were going to be five hundred thousand people at satsang. A half a million people is a big crowd.

Mona said, "Good-bye, I love you. You are like my brother and sister. We will see you after satsang. Do not forget, Gate C." I was still clutching my two big bags of nan king, but the big guy shoved an unopened bag of Bengali potato chips at me. When I refused to take it, he dropped it on the ground, bent down to pick it up, no mean feat for a man of his stature, and pushed it back at me. I took it, and he gave LQ a package of biscuits before he disappeared into the crowd with his daughter. We stuffed all our excess, unwanted snacks into the small backpack LQ was carrying and took a few deep breaths to prepare ourselves for whatever we faced inside the tent.

We stepped into the powerful flow of people skirting the outside of the tent. Soon we fell into a trot to keep up with the swift current. All of a sudden, all of the women took a sharp right turn into the tent while the men plunged straight ahead. LQ, along with all the colorful elements of our river, was suddenly gone and I was left alone with two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand men. After another fifty yards, my line of males was channeled into an opening in the tent and we poured under the canvas ceiling.

Once inside I was able to see that the tent was built out of barn-sized canvas tarps sewn together with rope and held up by a grid of ten-meter poles. The poles were arranged in twenty-five-meter squares, and ropes were staked into the ground to pull the tarps tight. The ground was covered in cool green grass to my left, but to my right men sat so close to each other it was impossible

to see what they were sitting on. Between every pole was a television set. Green metal bullhorn speakers formed a crown around the top of each pole.

At the end of the tent the audience faced, I made out a raised stage, but it was too far away to see if anybody was on it. It wasn't necessary to look at the stage anyway. Two big-screen television sets per canvas tarp radiated identical images of the empty stage. A glossy blue curtain that draped to the ground covered the entire stage. In the silken center was a small platform with a simple, red-cushioned top. A jointed microphone stand suspended a microphone in front of the expectant cushion.

The group of men I was walking with suddenly began to sit down, and I followed suit. For the first minute, I had a little border of cool green grass around me. Soon this was gone, but more and more men continued to squeeze into our section until I was forced to sit either cross-legged or with my knees tucked under my chin. Either way, various body parts pressed against my entire periphery. Even though the tent shaded us from the sun, it was still oppressively hot, and the body contact was unpleasant. Sweat beaded up on everybody's arms, my T-shirt was soaked through and my eyes stung from sweat. Since I suffer from polyhydrosis, I felt worse for the people pressed against me than I did for myself.

I was somewhat cramped, but the spectacle was too overwhelming for me to care. The excitement of the crowd infused me. It wasn't that the crowd was excited, but being in the crowd was exciting. The men around me joked with each other, dozed off, or joined me in people-watching. It was more subdued than the other Indian crowds I'd been in, but there were so many of us you could

sense our power. I could feel the air vibrating with the chatter of a half million people.

A ripple passed through the buzzing air, and suddenly the camera switched from an image of the empty stage to an elegant Ambassador with tinted windows cruising slowly down the street. The brown car continued driving for another few seconds and then came to a stop. The driver got out and opened the rear door, the buzz intensified, and a man in flowing white pajamas and a white turban stepped out of the car. He walked a few paces and then the image switched back to the empty stage.

I looked away from the television to the physical stage, but the geometry of poles made it difficult for me to stay oriented, and I couldn't find it. It was like being a microscopic mite trapped in a layer of crystal--an infinite symmetry of sticks. I looked back at the screen and saw Babaji walk alone onto the stage, climb onto the platform, and fold himself into the lotus position. As soon as he appeared on the screen everyone around me put their palms together, touched their thumbs to their forehead, bowed and held their hands high in the air. I imitated them with vague gestures and half bowed my head, but nobody seemed to be watching anyway. I hadn't seen another white Westerner since we'd come to Dehra, but nobody seemed surprised to see us. It takes more than an out-of-place tourist to excite an Indian.

Babaji adjusted the microphone while the crowd quieted down. After a few moments the air was calm, but Babaji still sat silent, staring calmly into the camera. He waited a full minute, and then began speaking in a clear, strong voice. He spoke in smooth rhythms and sounded confident yet empathetic. He spoke in Hindi, so I couldn't understand a word, but he sounded very serious

and not at all inflammatory. He clearly wasn't trying to whip the crowd into a frenzy like a Southern Baptist preacher, or to provoke an ecstatic trance like some Hindu ceremonies. He was delivering a thoughtful, edifying sermon.

I could tell that he wasn't just delivering inspirational rhetoric because after a few minutes the man next to me stopped staring at the television and diverted himself by sticking blades of grass into the butt crack of the man in front of him. Others talked and giggled in hushed whispers, stared blankly into space, or took a midmorning siesta. A few men seemed to be paying close attention, but these were the exception. The crowd reminded me of students in a first year psychology class taught in a gymnasium.

At first I managed to maintain interest by watching the close-up of Babaji and trying to judge whether he was a greedy proselytizer or not. He had a long black beard with streaks of white, and determined black eyes. I decided that he looked and sounded sincere. He had no TelePrompTer or notes, yet he never stuttered. His delivery was flawless yet authentic. He must have been discoursing on a very complex subject because he talked for thirty minutes without pausing.

After half an hour his intonation told me he'd reached a conclusion, and he stopped talking. A sitar and tabla immediately began playing a captivating tune, and the crowd collectively shifted positions. After a minute, the sitar and tabla stopped, and Babaji began talking again. He spoke for another half hour without stopping. My legs were beginning to rebel against satsang, and I was forced to change from knees under chin to cross legged every two minutes. I noticed that all the men around me were also getting a little antsy, but although nobody was

paying much attention, they were still observing a respectful silence, and no one had left.

Halfway through the second stage of the sermon, I decided to leave as soon as the opportunity presented itself. I didn't want to leave until someone else did because I had no idea in which direction to attempt an escape, and I felt awkward about disrupting the satsang. I was completely surrounded by sitting men. I couldn't even see where the women were sitting, let alone where the closest exit was. When the sitar and tabla started again after another half hour, I was sure that satsang was over.

To my disappointment, and, if body language can be trusted, the disappointment of everybody watching my television but one mean-looking man with good posture, Babaji began again. Whatever he was saying was quite involved, and, judging from the frequency with which he extended his long index finger, not to be taken lightly. I didn't really mind not being able to understand what he was saying because it made the scene more exotic and mysterious. By now, however, any vestige of mystery and exotica was gone. I was bored, my knees ached, I was hot, and I was starting to feel the throb of dehydration in my head.

After just fifteen minutes this time, the instruments gave Babaji a rest. This time the sitar and tabla were accompanied by a male singer, and the segue was about twice as long. Babaji spoke for another ten minutes in the same clear, calm voice, and then the music started again. He spoke for five minutes and then abruptly stopped. The crowd stirred and a few men around me started to shift their legs into a position they could rise from.

Satsang was over. I breathed a sigh of relief and pushed myself onto all fours before forcing my legs to straighten underneath me. Everybody was rushing around, but they were rushing every which way, and I couldn't tell which direction was out. In the frenzy I felt the prelude to panic. I made a break in the direction I thought I'd come from as fast as I could. I needed to get out, get to gate C, but so did a half million other people. It was either fight for the front or fall to the back.

The problem was that I still didn't know which way was out. I jumped over a little fence that was set up and before me a stream of bright colors flowed in a straight line towards light. It was a line of women headed for the outside--I was close to freedom! I entered the line, and within seconds I could see the edge of the tent less than fifty yards from me. But then a strong hand grabbed my elbow and yanked me from the line. A stern Sikh with an identification tag pinned to his shirt pocket yelled something in my face and gestured wildly at the women and then at me. I'd been caught in the women's line. He pushed me back in the direction I'd come from. Now I was desperate for blue sky.

The line of women had disappeared, and all the men were struggling in the same direction. Satsang was over, so I assumed everyone was trying to get out. I joined the no-holds-barred rush and pushed my way forward. As usual, I was bigger than almost everyone else and could see over the mob. I was able to determine that we were heading towards the end of the tent with the stage, but the pack was far too violent to allow me a long enough look to see if Babaji was still on his cushion. I didn't care anyway; I just wanted out.

I used my size to shove smaller men out of my way and unleashed my whole repertoire of elbow hooks, leg cross-overs, and shoulder drops to keep

moving forward. The crowd was still moving slowly towards the stage, but most of the men were just baby stepping and trying not to get pushed over by the ripples which surged through the crowd. Only older teenagers and some aggressive adults were still trying to push forward. I out-pushed and maneuvered everybody. I'd sat through a ninety-minute sermon I didn't understand a word of just to be polite--now I wanted out.

I made it to another waist-high, metal fence and used someone's shoulder to boost myself over it. I fell into the bodies on the other side in an almost horizontal position, but the men were packed too closely together for me to fall to the ground. I pushed my feet down and found the ground. One of my arms was pinned above my head, and it took me a few moments of energetic wiggling before I created enough space to bring my elbow down to protect my ribs from bruising. We were pressed together so tightly that the shirt buttons from the man behind me left red imprints on my back.

Suddenly all movement ceased. Apparently we'd reached critical crowd mass. I no longer was concerned with my polyhydrosis. We were all dripping sweat; all of our clothes were saturated with all of our sweat. I couldn't move an inch, but every few minutes we were suddenly tossed in a random direction as if we were on a ship that had unexpectedly run aground. Most of the men wore a pained expression, but a few looked amused and I concentrated on contriving a look of bemused confidence. Now that I was stuck, helpless, the panic which had led me to push old men out of the way and step on hundreds of toes was gone. I was able to return to my traveling persona of detached observer.

A few heads in front of me, two eight-year-old boys sat on their father's or uncle's shoulders. They looked scared, but at least they were above the crush of

the crowd and with their fathers. I smiled at one of the boys to cheer him up. I wasn't scared anymore, but I was confused. Why had we all fought so violently to get to the middle of the tent? Why had we stopped moving?

I hadn't eaten a meal in almost two days and had drunk only one glass of water in the morning. The smothering heat of all the bodies pressed against me, and the energy I had expended to get myself in this position, left me with rubbery legs and a strange clear headedness. On the one hand, my face was flushed, each breath was an unsatisfying gasp, and I felt as if I might pass out at any moment. But I also saw the world in vivid slow motion; outlines were more distinct, and images seemed to linger in my mind a few moments after their Earthly forms had disappeared into the melee. I endured my heat exhaustion from a distance, with detached curiosity.

We stayed like that for forty minutes: absolutely still except for every few minutes when a spontaneous surge tossed us in an arbitrary direction. It was as if we were packed so tightly together that if one person pushed another a hundred meters away, the force of that push would spread outwards, growing without losing momentum, until it had passed through every body. Almost everyone seemed calm now, like they were old hands at this kind of thing, which they probably were.

The exception, of course, were the old men and the young boys. Several boys under ten succumbed to terrified hysterics within my earshot. A couple of these were passed kicking and screaming over our heads to a man with an identification tag pinned to his shirt pocket who stood shouting directions at us from the safety of a small fenced off square that was soon full of dazed little boys. A few of the smaller boys had lost consciousness and lay in a pile at the feet of the

Dehra official. Most of the crowd was made up of men in their twenties or thirties, but there were a few old, wrinkled men too, and these were dropping like flies. They were too big to pass overhead. The best we could do was try and hold them upright and fan them with a free hand.

I wondered if on the other side of the tent the women were packed together like we were. I wondered if LQ was sandwiched between two women in saris. How can Indian women wear eight meters of silk in a crowd that made a mosh pit feel like a lonely place? Sweat ran into my eyes and blinded me. I passed a limp child over my head and wondered how long it would be before the heat and pressure of the mob of half a million religious zealots squeezed out the last of my strength.

Then, as suddenly as we had stopped moving, we were once again a frenzy of pushing and squirming bodies. I kept my arms at my side to protect my body and struggled to stay upright as we slowly yet violently moved towards the stage. There was no apparent need for all the shoving and general frenzy. If anything, it was slowing our progress down. It wasn't like we were waiting in line to get a ticket for the train and were worried that it would sell out before we got to the window. In fact, I still wasn't sure what we were all excited about.

This question was finally answered after a few more minutes of ruthless progress. We were viewing Babaji. We got to within about fifty meters of the stage, and I caught one quick glimpse of him, sitting on a chair now and not even looking in our direction before I tripped over the legs of an old man who had fallen to his knees and was being pressed against a section of metal fence. I stopped, and along with a middle-aged man whose beard was trimmed in the Hindu fashion, blocked the flow of faithful so that the old man wasn't trampled

to death. His eyes were glazed over and he was staring vacantly at the ground. A thin stream of drool hung from his cracked bottom lip. He continued to stare at the ground, and I didn't know what to do.

The men that streamed past me paid no attention to the skinny old man on his knees. They were too preoccupied with getting a view of Babaji. The thing to do, apparently, was to raise your hands above your head in a namaste directed at the stage while you said, "Hari om, Babaji," or something to that effect. This was quite a challenge, however, because your arms were pinned to your body by the pressure of the crowd, and only about half the men managed to get their arms above shoulder level. Once your arms were raised, it was almost impossible to lower them again; you were forced to proceed with your torso unprotected and your shoulders pressed against your ears. The best part was that Babaji was still half a football field away and a much smaller image than he had been on the large screen TV every one had become bored of watching.

Someone smashed into me from behind, and the impact carried me back into the current. I didn't know what to do for the old man anyway. I was a tourist not a paramedic. As I was swept along in the torrent of believers, I experienced my first ever revelation. I should have been ready for it since I had been having a mild out-of-body experience for the last half hour or so, but the last thing I came to Dehra for was a Goddamn revelation, and its force took me by surprise, though I was already familiar with its content.

For those of you that have never experienced a revelation, let me say that the difference between a revelation and an insight is that a revelation is when you are shown the truth, and an insight is when you discover a truth. The truth which

was revealed to me was that faith is the replacement of comprehension with enthusiasm, contemplation with conviction, question with answer.

Babaji had given a serious, thoughtful sermon for an hour and a half. I didn't understand a word of it, but clearly he was struggling to reveal meaning in the complexities and contradictions of life. But the faithful are not interested in complexities and contradictions: they are interested in reaping the rewards of faith. The intense heat and the danger of the mob were sufferings to be endured to prove the strength of one's faith. Everyone was frantic to push his way in front of everyone else to show that he was more faithful than everyone else. By shifting the question from what you believe to how much you believe, faith turns the trampling to death of an old man into an act of worship.

It was revealed to me that the evil nature of faith is not restricted to religious observance but is insidiously incorporated into politics and business, psychology and anthropology, physics and ecology. Everywhere that people believe they have seen *the* truth faith bares its bloody fangs. Bloody from the slaughter of Muslim infidels killed for the love of Jesus; bloody from extermination of six million Jews for the purity of the master race; bloody from the occupation of Palestine for the redemption of the chosen race; bloody from the starvation of ten million peasants for the glory of the people; bloody from the bodies of farmers killed to prevent the spread of communism. The dirt of the Punjab is still wet with the blood of peaceful demonstrators shot by English soldiers with faith in the United Kingdom and the chain of command, of Hindus and Muslims beaten to death by Muslims and Hindus because they believed a different faith, of Hindus randomly shot from the backs of scooters by Sikhs. It

seems it doesn't matter what you believe, if you believe it enough, eventually someone's head is gonna roll.

I was not one of Babaji's faithful followers, but it would have been impossible for an outsider who observed me elbowing and pushing to stay afloat in the tide of men to tell the difference. Finally, we reached the end of the tent. Before we stepped out into the sunshine, we were funneled inbetween long tables covered in bags of puffed rice. The reward for our faith was holy food, undoubtedly doubly blessed by Babaji. How appropriate, I thought, that the blessed food is airy, insubstantial, inflated shells of rice. Yet I couldn't help feeling a little proud of my bag of holy food since I had fought so hard to get it.

Outside of the tent, the crowds were a little less extreme, but it was still impossible to move against the flow. I was carried a few minutes in the wrong direction before I could get to the edge of the boulevard and turn in the direction of our hostel. Every one of the wide streets was saturated with men and women--it no longer looked like communist suburbia.

Eventually I made it back to the hostel where LQ was waiting for me. She was worried, of course, and upset that I had kept her waiting. Apparently she'd made a big fuss and forced the receptionist lady to call the Dehra clinic to find out if I'd been injured. Satsang had been over for two hours, and Mona and her father were probably gone. I peeled off my shorts and T-shirt and turned on the cold water in the shower. I explained how I had been caught in the mob, how I had suffered, and how I had wanted nothing more than to get out of satsang after the first thirty minutes of the sermon. I explained all this to her as I stood in the cold shower still sweating. Then, I got out of the shower and drank a gallon of water before I shared my revelation with her.

I concluded my diatribe and LQ was silent for a few minutes. She looked skeptical. Finally she said, "That's great and all--I mean I'm glad you got something out of satsang, but this doesn't seem like anything new to you. You've always railed against closed mindedness, faith, whatever. Don't you think calling it a revelation is a little extreme?"

"It was definitely a revelation," I said and explained the difference to her. "I've always thought that faith was dangerous, but now I know it is the most dangerous weapon of the forces of evil."

"You better go cleanse the world of the faithful then," said LQ, "There's still a couple hundred thousand zealots on the street for you to attack."

We stuffed our backpacks full and set out for gate C on the off chance that our ride hadn't left. To our astonishment, Mona was waiting for us at the taxi stand. She was overjoyed to see us and said that they had been very worried. The big guy had apparently gone to enlist a force of volunteers to perform a search and rescue mission, and we had to wait about ten minutes until he returned.

They drove us to Ludhiana, stopping several times to buy quantities of delicious Indian snacks that I had no trouble consuming. At a stop light an emaciated, lactating mother with a pathetic little girl on her hip approached the car and asked me for baksheesh. "Don't give her any," said Mona, "Father never gives them money because it only encourages them." The faithful have a principle for everything.

They tried to get us to spend the night as guests in their home, but after my revelation I wasn't about to risk it and insisted on being taken to the bus stand. He bought us two tickets to Delhi on an express bus and carried our bags on for

us. He made an old woman move so that we could have the best seat and refused to leave until I'd accepted two hundred rupees and promised that I'd come back to Dehra in one month when Babaji gave satsang in English. Finally, the bus coughed to life, and he left us. As we pulled out of the bus stand, I realized that after my terrifying experience in paradise on Earth, I couldn't wait to get back to the sanity of Delhi.

Epilogue

When we got back to Delhi we were three months into our nine-month trip, though we didn't know the denominator at the time. These stories aren't the half of it, but perhaps they are the more interesting fraction. My revelation in Dehra was a minor unconformity with which I became a trifle obsessed. In the period before satsang I was somewhat more probing in my investigations. The world was unfamiliar to me, and so I carried few assumptions. Much of my energy in the period after satsang was spent mitigating the truth of the fangs of faith.

I hadn't come to Asia for a revelation. Revelations don't even appeal to me. My revelation was worse than most, too. Not only did it condemn me along with most of the world, it condemned me because I'd had the revelation. I now thought I knew *the* truth, not the whole truth, but a big chunk of it. In the period after my unconformity, I saw the teeth marks of faith everywhere. I became preoccupied with overcoming my own faith in the perils of faith. It was an overreaction, still more proof that revelation blinds with self-importance.

There was more than enough of life that remained a mystery to me to balance my belief in this one absolute truth--to preserve my humility before the infinite complexity of consciousness. I am prone to tirades against those who refuse to think for themselves yet know they are right anyway. But these outbursts are relatively harmless, and nobody seems to take them seriously anyway. My virtuosity at passive creation renders even the most dangerous of

weapons impotent because they are worn dull through repeated testings inside my head before they have the opportunity to draw blood in the world.

Besides, every thought needs a foundation from which to grow. A sense that final answers are neither possible nor desirable seems to me an excellent axiom. Unlike most axioms, it thrives on contradiction. Inherent in it is the knowledge that all truth is partial, a contradiction in itself. It liberates one's thought structure by freeing one from the stifling assumption that there is one correct answer to every question and somebody else has already figured it out. Such an assumption quells one's curiosity and leads to faith in an ideology or creed. It seeks to obscure the difficulty of accepting the contradictory nature of life by discounting sub-truths through approximation. But though approximation runs our world, in the end contradiction still rules it.

I am not interested in statistical analysis, scientific proofs, sociological studies, or revealed truths. Percentages, probabilities, and the scientific process don't mean jack when the test group numbers one: me. I don't even want my own revelations, let alone someone else's. I crave personal wisdom, gained from experience and interpreted through contemplation. I'm after cowboy wisdom, traveler's truth: first hand, fully customized, flexible reality: the kind of reality that you can carry with you to Asunción, Oakland, Oslo, Maiduguri, Baghdad, Shanghai.

I found it, too--at least for a little while. After six more months of traveling through India and China, we finally arrived back in Oakland and I was surprised to find that I didn't experience culture shock. It was as if we'd been in so many different cultures, crossed so many borders, that we'd developed an immunity to culture shock. Instead, coming back home felt just like visiting another foreign

country. I saw things as if I were seeing them for the first time, and so I saw things I'd stopped seeing years ago: the beautiful gardens, the speed with which neighborhoods change from prosperous to poor, the number of inter-racial families, the clean clothes, the open spaces. I spent my first days back in the states doing what I'd done for the last few months--wandering the streets to see what was different about this place.

What I saw was that the whole world was in my hometown. This is most explicit in the culinary options one faces when going out to dinner. Walking down the yuppified street that is the commercial center of my neighborhood, I pass Tai, Japanese, Italian, Chinese, French provincial, Mexican, Vietnamese, Cambodian, pizza and hamburger restaurants--there is even a Burmese place. After fifteen minutes of walking, Indian, Ethiopian, Mediterranean, and Middle Eastern restaurants begin to cut into the market share. Most of the restaurants are decorated in the angular, sleek, understated style that is currently popular and have only a faint ethnic hint--a couple paintings, a row of characters down the entrance door--that reveals their identity. These are no longer theme restaurants. They are not exotic. They are mainstream, a part of California cuisine. At lunch more business people slurp soup at the Vietnamese noodle houses than stuff their faces at the burger joints.

To me, this culinary diversity means more than just the possibility of eating a different cuisine every meal of the week. First of all, these restaurants are almost universally opened by entrepreneurs from the countries whose cuisine they serve. While there are so many Southeast Asian restaurants that one suspects that every immigrant from this part of the world must be a restaurateur, this is, of course, a silly notion. Only a tiny fraction of immigrants have the means, or skills, to open a restaurant. The plethora of Southeast Asian

restaurants indicates the number of Southeast Asians that have immigrated to Oakland in the past couple decades, not that Southeast Asians have a particular propensity for opening restaurants.

White, native English speakers like myself are a minority in my hometown. I wander into the grocery store and hear three or four different languages spoken other than English or Spanish. I pass a small shopping complex that boasts a Korean bar-be-que, a Korean video and music store, a Korean supermarket, and a Korean herbalist. Just about everybody in the two or three blocks around this little mall looks Korean. On another street, men in turbans and women in saris and Punjabi suits outnumber the pedestrians in "Western" garb. Every block on this one street has two or three sari shops and all the restaurants seem to specialize in North Indian cuisine. A mile away is a microhood that caters exclusively to Ethiopians. These pockets of ethnicity seem sprinkled almost at random through the city; their boundaries undefined, they melt in and out of each other and more traditionally American neighborhoods.

But what are the more traditionally American neighborhoods? They are where the children that play in these culturally distinct, foreign neighborhoods move when they grow-up. They are these ever changing "foreign" communities. It is popular to bemoan the Americanization of diverse cultures, to fear the spread of a monstrous American monoculture. But to me, this misses the point. It is based on an essential misconception of what American culture is. American culture is, at least where I come from, a little bit of everything: a big buffet table with blintzes next to burritos next to borscht--and there is always room for another dish. The whole world is in my hometown, and any day of the week I can go out to dinner and have a taste of whichever culture I have a hankering for.