



Everyone wanted to get on: 'I had one person's hair in my face and another's elbow in my groin.' ADAM DARGAVEL

TRIPPING A READER'S WILD TALE FROM THE ROAD

Packed? Try solid human tangle

MATT WHELAN NEPAL

I've had some unhappy birth-days in my time but this was by far the worst. I was on a bus travelling up the Terai; the humid, jungle-carpeted strip of Nepal that is the southern doorstep to the Himalayas, and I was afraid for my life.

It was festival time and only two of the seven buses that run the already risky route between Dhading Besi and Arughat were in service. I'd paid for a seat, and was advised not to stand up for any reason other than wanting to lose my seat. People threw their bags and crawled over me to get to whatever pockets of space might remain in the bus's filthy recesses. They kept coming, until the bus's belly was a solid human tangle. I had one person's hair in my face and another's elbow in my groin.

As the bus began its long, uphill struggle, bouncing and billowing dirty clouds of black diesel exhaust, intense feelings of claustrophobia and misery gave way, regularly, to abject terror. Two days ago, a huge typhoon

had slammed into eastern India, killing at least 100 people and unleashing unseasonable torrents of rain across the Terai, making landslides a serious concern. "Don't worry," wheezed my guide from somewhere unseen amongst the living spaghetti. "Not landslide season." It wasn't rainy season either, but still it came down in great angry sheets.

As the bus's balding black tires grasped at the saturated mud road, I could already see a number of large slides. It looked as though the Earth had vomited, blowing chunks of red rocks the size of recreational vehicles to the valley floor, which I could see clearly, a kilometre below. The bus, absurdly overloaded, swayed violently and constantly, threatening often to lose its grip and send us on our own deadly descent. I began to see headlines.

At the same time, glimpses of the valley's drama and magnitude were visible through gaps in the lattice of limbs and luggage.

It seemed that leaks were bursting from everywhere, spitting forth thin, high-pressure waterfalls that poured in lacy white

lines from the steaming jungle. We passed children playing on bamboo swings and on other, more elaborate contraptions that resembled primitive versions of the Zipper carnival ride. Elsewhere, tufts of cloud stuck like torn cotton balls to the highest trees as yellow-billed cranes flew about searching for cover.

But I was so bluntly aware of my own mortality that a detachment developed, and I could only bring myself to a vague awareness of the beauty of the landscape around me, and felt entirely at its mercy.

An hour before we boarded the bus, I'd been given a tika, a blessing of crimson-dyed rice applied to the centre of my forehead. It had been put there to keep me safe, and I was counting on it now. We bounced and lurched along in this awful manner, all 100 or so of us on a bus designed for 50, for more than four hours, until finally we did arrive, alive, in Arughat. I was 34 years old, and relieved - amazed really - to have a shot at 35.

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