

All the Most Beautiful Girls Are in Sikkim

There are days in Darjeeling when the banks of cloud meld into the whiteness of the Himalayas, and you cannot tell if you are looking at sky or stone. The cap of Mount Everest floats among the white wisps suspended in formless blue air. As you are coming up on the queen of hills one clear morning in October you will see these mountains levitating – appearing cheap like a parlor trick – but it is real.

No flight will take you to Darjeeling. You will need to take a bus to the lowland city of Siliguri and a taxi up the hills from there. I intended to do just that. I stood in a dark dirt lot filled with dozens of buses at 8:30 PM in the nowhere city of Darbhanga as a white cow with a hump a foot high began eating garbage off the dirt beside me and a mother dog with six nipples hanging from her stomach darted through.

The bus driver was a large old man who reminded me of a decorated general. He had short white hair and a brick-like singular face with a smile entrenched in it. When the bus

stopped less than an hour outside of Darbhanga, its only meal break for the journey, passengers left to walk into a pavilion in the darkness off the highway where men cooked roti and subji over open flames, an oasis in the black night on all sides.

The general, sitting and eating with his bare hands, gestured for me to come sit with him. He offered me water, milk, rice. I didn't eat. I wasn't hungry and my stomach hurt. If I had diarrhea on this cramped bus I would have to kill myself. Or worse, demand to be let off in an emergency and end up alone and abandoned in the highways of Bihar, pants full of ruin.

We sat together in relative silence at a picnic table in the crowded, fiery pavilion.

"You do not speak any Hindi, and I do not speak much English," he said.

"Yes," I replied, laughing. I didn't know what to say. So I said nothing else. And I sat, in silence as he ate, scooping up rice and subji with his bare hands, and I was glad, and I think he was too, that I did not waste any breath on talk. We understood each other's silence. When we boarded the bus, he offered me one of the staff bunk beds toward the front. I assumed it was because I was American, and he wanted a bribe. I took the bed.

I would have bribed him, too, if not for a moment of forgetfulness as I stepped out of the bus in the morning, his hand open, and mine slinking away, his fingers closing to a fist.

When the bus empties in Siliguri you will be confronted by a dozen men all shouting the names of cities in a huffing crowd. "Gangtok!" No. "Darjeeling!" Yes. I follow an older man in a brown jacket named Hari into his van and put my life in his hands. It's as simple as that. If Hari decides to drive off the road and shoot me, then I will be shot. If Hari veers off the mountainside and smashes nose-first into a tree then that is the end for me. I must have faith that Hari is a great guy. The unspoken heroes of India, the drivers, the rickshaw bikers, the men who spend all day

every single day desperately looking for people to move from one place to another – these are the linchpins who spin the wheel. A three-hour drive through the mountains is 2,000 rupees, or only thirty bucks. Try asking an Uber to take you around treacherous cliffs for three hours, and offer that sum as recompense.

Hari and I in his taxi pass through a military fort and a wildlife sanctuary where a gang of monkeys hang onto a bridge and a tank sits on a hill past a concrete wall. Infant monkeys are grasped and cuddled by their mothers as the car's tires grind past on the stones. The monkeys cling in fear, their mothers scooping them up into their arms. The forest in the distance beyond the military police checkpoint is misty. Hari tells me this is the “elephant forest”. I do not see any elephants, though I could imagine things far more enormous stalking the mists. These forests are raw in a way American forests are not. Twisted, loose bramble grows, and you can try to grasp a vine and direct it straight, but the forest wills itself crooked. And yet, the shrubs are flat, as if they were cleanly cut, like fine stones pressed into one another. At once, the primal fury of the forest is unleashed and finely contained, a maelstrom of shapes and visions aligning flawlessly in tune with human control.

When you come up on the mountains they stare at you like titans, overwhelming your vision. You will climb these foreboding hills in your taxi and as you ascend they will multiply. The knuckles and spines of great green beastly hills manifest by the dozens out of the fog. The higher you go the more grow out of the Earth. A turn on a sharp road past a trickling waterfall and a tobacco stand reveals a white abyss, and half-buried in its roil, more monstrous ridges rise from below, caressed by the breath of the dense pale sky. As your eyes trace up from where you have been to the horizon, only more mountains, dark shades, patrol the distance, still eclipsing your vision, penetrating the clouds.

One ridge of lush green cuts across the sky lined with homes, and miles behind it, another going farther yet, God's fingertips stretching out into the blue, each surpassing the last. These knuckles, vertebrae and ribbed fingers are the body of the hills, the queen of the highlands, and you are her guest. Like seaback beasts, they crest over the wake of the clouds.

The road seems, like the city, to constantly go over the edge into nothingness, to fail, to be broken by the whims of the twisting mountainside, swallowed by the mother of all mothers. But the road does not break. The road, and the city, are not shattered by the insanity of the landscape, and its tempest queen. Six-thousand eight-hundred and twelve feet into the air, these cities pierce the clouds and wrestle with the breath of India, China, Bhutan and Nepal. All the winds of Asia flow together into the mountains that rival any on Earth. Each treetop reveals a new ridge, a new valley, and a new shade eclipsing it and your own small taxi climbing up your own small hill. Above and below, the space is impossibly huge. You couldn't get any higher. And yet, you turn the corner, and the hill goes for miles higher still. The road weaves through tiny market stands and soon enough you see old Asian men in their puffy jackets jogging up and down the hills, nearby their homes. Two men do yoga in a primordial haze of white. The car jerks away from them, up another hill. Beneath them the fog is so thick a thousand valleys could have slumbered beneath those early morning exercises unseen.

I anticipate these men's lives, seeing the small houses on the side of the road, cars parked on concrete scaffolds overhanging the edge, and more concrete spires of houses being built above them, men and women and children planning to domesticate these haggard hills into a home. I think of my own life, my time spent on Twitter, life wasted. I blink. I see a motorcycle, a cliffside house, a wife, and a daughter, built onto the edge of a lush ridge. I seriously consider making a Facebook post with photos of these hills, captioned: "Taking applications for a wife to

move to Darjeeling with me and raise a bilingual English-Nepali child in the hills. Dead serious. Anyone who wants this for their life should contact me immediately.” Of course, I deleted Facebook, and never reached out to the anonymous crowd in this absurd and desperate way.

Unlike the rest of India, especially the northern state of Bihar, there are no cows in Darjeeling. I have seen no goats either. There are a handful of monkeys scattered in the hills, those loyal tribes, but the streets of Darjeeling belong to the dogs. Each breed and manner of shaggy, powerful, intimidating dog is here. I had not seen nature, really, until I saw a female dog with six tits strolling the streets, pouring out from her belly, the life of her pups. I saw this animal everywhere, this source of milk. American dogs have nothing on the dogs of India. They own the streets, they set the rules, they patrol the limits.

I have seen a housecat once, and a cat in Darjeeling is in a precarious position. The monkeys on their treetops might argue: “We know the air and the sky, we live close to God.” And the dogs might scoff, professing: “You have lost touch with the ground, you airy monks.” But the housecats of Darjeeling, finally, would respond: “You sully yourselves with argument. Both of you have removed yourselves from being-itself, and both of you make mockeries of God.” The housecat is the Martin Heidegger of the animal world. Heidegger, in his love of being with no addition, was the housecat perched upon the porch in the vertical city of Darjeeling, staring into the houses that cascaded down the hills, red and blue lines of rooftops and windowsills below, a lattice grid in the midst of winding streets lined and strapped with metal pipes and dangerous low-hanging wires, electricity woven black through the alleyways, forcing you to duck beneath the currents that flooded the city with lightning.

The cats of Darjeeling are like Easter eggs. They stay in odd and peculiar places, tucked away in their hideaways, always sleeping. On a rooftop, you'll spot an orange cat curled into itself, avoiding scrutiny. Beneath a thick stone rail, two cats will be resting, hiding from the bustling noise of the street. A cat in a patch of weeds, eyes closed, balled up behind a locked gate. A little black and white kitten tugging on her mother's tail on some impossible surface, where only the pigeons go.

The pigeons follow water and clothesline. They land on ledges beside the streams that run through the city. Long walls of water, pouring down stone inclines and rock steps between the houses, windows and porches hanging with technicolor clothing drying on wires, blue and orange homes pressed together like tectonic plates, and all the while a river runs through them, pouring down inclines, down the stone steps, beneath majestic patchwork flags of yellow, orange and white, signifying the presence of a monastery above the hills.

Buddhist monks in red robes walk all in a band around their crimson fortress at the height of the city, water-slicked rocks slipping down the hills along the waves of houses, the flow of settlements on the queen's terms, the smell of chicken momo and fresh mountain wind blending together as the alchemical mixture of air and fire, India's specialty.

I can go no further in this story without addressing a point of profound anxiety and hardship. All the women in Darjeeling are beautiful. At least, it is the only place in India where I have felt a burning sense of missing out on romance because the full smiles and gorgeous faces of the women here make me think I have lost something truly dear by not approaching one of them. Of course, despite my heritage I do not speak Nepali or Bengali. That's the blasted thing about India – a thousand tongues writhe here. I could learn Hindi flawlessly and then be dumb

and deaf as a dove in the mountains bordering Nepal. Or I could go to the south, where Tamil is spoken, and have nothing to show for all my work learning a northern language. I even hear that the Ghorka people of Darjeeling have twenty-six separate dialects, and none overlap perfectly. Uncles and nephews half-guess at another's words.

So talking to these girls is out of the question. But I haven't been with a woman in three years, at all. And it is not entitlement that makes that painful but the obvious fact that human beings are social, touch-oriented creatures. We are not meant to be aliens to one another. I lived in Manhattan for a year, and did not meet a single neighbor. On the last day of my idiot lease, I asked my roommate if he ever saw the same person twice on his daily commute. He said no. There is no potential to be touched if there is no potential to even meet a person. In the dark metal hedges of Manhattan or the windswept streets of Darjeeling, there is the same fate – the alien, walking the world alone, incoherent to everyone but himself.

I arch over a bridge overlooking a vast and crowded marketplace, split in two by the elevated road, the cobblestone torn between slopes, and I notice a girl to my right with a round, sweet face and narrow, attractive eyes. Her hair is short to her shoulders. I see her, in the corner of my vision, sitting in a chair in front of a pharmacy, maybe waiting for something. People bustle by. I should say something to her. If I don't, I'll walk through life never saying anything to anybody, and eventually, I'll be old and I'll know in my heart that I never met a like-minded soul because I never had the courage to talk to anybody new. I know that's the future that awaits me. I know I'll be alone because I just couldn't talk to a stranger, I just couldn't dare to try.

To little surprise, I have settled into a religious mood in the city that clings to clouds the way most cities abide by rivers. This was to be expected. In the queen of hills I have been

reading Thomas Merton's *Seven Storey Mountain*, the Trappist monk's classic autobiography of how he stumbled into the world in 1915, finding the gravity of moral infinity in the Catholic mysteries twenty-three years later, then dying an extremely ambiguous death involving an electrical fan and a head wound on a visit to Thailand in 1968.

Like most lonely people, I do believe in God. Like most lost people, I wish to become a Catholic. Even though I don't believe in the sacraments at all, the notion of conversion still holds a certain appeal. Thomas Merton was a Catholic because he needed a home. The German inversion of the Hindu swastika tells you all you need to know about the sheer cliffsides of our mystical depths. The fact that bad trips are even possible, that someone on a drug like DMT can see dark jesters who humiliate them when they expect to see the lattice-gridded face of God, should show you quite plainly why there are Catholics. Because mysticism without a home is the road to hell.

The Hindu Gods bring me to the opposing side of my mystical agony, the antithesis of Catholic yearning, instead rejecting all strict tradition and adhering to the perennial, progressive faith that all religions hold an eternal truth. I, the American Christian, am supposed to go to India and be enlightened by the universality of God. Like Huxley, like Hesse, like countless others, my journey to the East should knock me out of my narrow Christianity and into the misted seas of eternal spiritual unity.

But this has not happened. If only for my own internal prejudice or this needling hatred for half of me, Hinduism terrifies me. The Hindu temples contain shrines for the worship of the great and terrible Gods. On a rock mantle above a narrow cave, a pantheon stirs. One foot of Shiva crushes a dwarf while the other is lifted upward in denial of gravity. Buddhas and beasts juxtapose ego death with a moral nihilism sanctioned by nirvana. Durga, a different impaling

spear in each of her hands, rides the back of a snarling lion beside the Gautama Buddha, who grins, holds out his palm, and Ganesha, who appears in person more squidlike than any Earthly elephant, also holds out his palm, in deference to fortune, mere chance, the God of idols. A modest temple inside the boulder contains a shrine with the scorched black face of Kali, tongue hanging out, weapons in her hands, a ring of human heads around her neck. We take off our shoes and go and pray to an idol who does not respect life. This is what human beings have done for all of history. The Gods do not respect us. There is no dignity in our communications anymore.

Hinduism, like all mysticism (and all writing), is an entangled hypocrisy yearning for ultimate catharsis. There is a living cloudhead of flawed Gods to whom human beings owe everything. Every Indian apartment complex and home I have stayed in holds a shrine, a portrait of a God, some statue of Shiva inside the rim of the wheel of the world dancing, or Hanuman kneeling, tearing his chest apart with his own hands, revealing Lord Rama and Sita inside the cavity of the monkey God's heart. Taxi drivers keep figures of Ganesha on their dashboards, ringed in flower petals. The polluted Ganges, where my grandfather's ashes are now drowned, is held sacred. The cow, who wanders freely in almost every Indian city unmolested, is rescued from mechanization and the butcher by dogma alone. And yet, every child I have seen who is homeless has been black. I am certain it relates to caste.

In India, the poorest of the poor tend to be black. Darkness is a mark of error. The caste system is twisted Plato reborn, souls of gold and lead, my uncle who I love proudly declaring "I am a Brahmin" before tossing a plastic cup into the littered street. Then, he tells me God blesses those who give to the poor, and he hands a few coins to a black beggar.

Religion is lived in India in ways it has died long ago in the West. In Darjeeling, I have seen cemeteries with crosses on stone graves. Crosses. Not Swastikas. A statue of Christ sits in the lower hills, on a bed of stone, beneath a main road. White text on the back window of a taxi pronounces “Jesus Christ, Savior of the World”. St. Joseph’s College, ornate, grand as any church, sits at the edge of a mountainside filled with young Ghorka boys in their black uniforms and Nepali girls in their black skirts, talking to one another and hurrying along the crisp, eternally October streets, swept in brisk Himalayan air.

A wall beside a girl’s college holds the handprints of a whole class, pleading for an end to sexual slavery. I have heard that Nepali girls are more beautiful than Indian girls. And I have seen more beautiful girls in Darjeeling than anywhere else in India. I see the handprints of those girls upon the wall, and I know the lust of men does not distinguish between teenagers and adults. I know my own grandmother was married away as a child. Thankfully, she was betrothed to a decent man. But rape and pedophilia are inextricably linked in a way that the darkness of Kali may notice. The great and terrible Goddess forces puberty on girls as young as twelve. Girls are trafficked, sold, because men will pay to sleep with young girls. Even in God’s world, everything is permitted. And that’s the paradox at the core of it all. If there is a God, then everything is still permitted.

And yet, look at a blue house on a cliffside, porch covered in potted plants, overlooking the fog of the Himalayas and a statue of Christ, threatened to be engulfed in eternal mist, and tell me that grace does not exist. I know nothing of grace. I cannot be a Catholic because I do not yet believe in miracles. I do not believe that Saints can save the Earth from itself. And yet, I believe in grace. I have felt grace, and I have felt its opposite, and I have acted from both. Grace is never

manic the way that its opposite is. I can hardly even name this supposed opposite. Perhaps it is called amygdala, limbic system, the mammal that therefore I am.

When the sun rises on Tiger Hill, and the ocean of mist is slowly illuminated by sunlight, it resembles the firmament of the waters and you genuinely believe you are witnessing anew the days of creation. I pleaded in my heart, please, God, holy sun, chorus of angels, billion blazing chariots, exorcise this fog, remove this phantom from the world. Make clear the sky. Illuminate everything.

But it doesn't happen. Always, the mountains remain shrouded. Eternal, cut off from the world, they float in their austere abyss and the sun only reflects red heat upon them in the early morning, a scarlet cloak that vanishes with the rising day.

I have read of the second fall, as an aesthetic curiosity, the day when the angels will peer down again from heaven with lust in their hearts and be struck by the amazements we have created. The angels will rebel once more and climb down from the spiritual world for a hint of heroin, a puff of smoke, a jolt of electrical entertainment. The angels fell once before. Why would they not fall again? Why would the Earth become *less* appealing over time? Its wonders only grow.

And so the kingdoms of God alight slowly fill the kingdoms of Earth in fog, and the balance of spirit and matter will tilt irrevocably toward the clouded maya-matrix called matter. This would mean cutting off humankind forever from its guardian angels, from the bodhisattva and Christ alike. If the spiritual beings guiding you fall, then there is no link left above. You are on Earth forever, doomed to live and never die. You are as eternal as the Himalayas. You are the crystal wall at the end of history. And what do you have? Just the empty prayers that the sun will lift the mist and grant you perfect sight. But you will remain levitating in this place that is no

place, neither stone nor sky, a thing that is ambiguous, eyes still clouded by the sea, and you will live in uncertainty forever.

As my lonely and beautiful days in the sky-sea of Sikkim vanished before me I recalled my uncle waiting for me in Bihar, in Darbhanga, and that it was my last day of this strange vacation following my grandfather's funeral rites, and that I had met no girl, and I had not seen the figure of Our Lady cast in her sunlight.

I had been unable to shower the night before because the water was cold and working the water heater was more complicated than reading Joyce, whose *Ulysses* I had started and put down some twenty pages later. I sort of hated Joyce, by the way, because he made a sacrament out of his writing, and turned away from God. Just like I'm doing. We hate our mirror-reflections most deeply, ourselves from the Outside are the strangest beings in creation.

I found myself attracted, by the grace of magnetic north, to a KFC. And all at once, the phantom of the horrible country I had come here to avoid came blaring back louder than the howling of wolves through my hostel's paper-thin walls. I would soon return to the United States, I would have to make my pilgrimage back to the nation that is like cooling cinders, an autopsied corpse, after witnessing with clear eyes a culture on the upswing. It was back to Wegmans and Walmarts and 24-hour gas stations, long partitions of dark Upstate New York road, and my parents' home, my damned parent's home, the place I have written all my stories and is stale with the memory of memories refracted against themselves a thousand times over.

Worse, it would be winter. No more hikes through the green of the streams of the settled country. No more priestly stoned explorations of the forests, no more nature as a refuge from the innards of that great colonial home. There would be nothing to find outdoors but cold, and all the

paths would be cramped with snow, and every blunt would be held in quickness, in the freeze outside, eager to return indoors – back to the great nothing that occupied our mimetic techno-mystical yet still avowedly atheistic lives.

I grew incredibly depressed in the plastic red booth of that KFC. All my works, all my insights and heights and all that has come up now descending, all the *Seven Storey Mountain* and Our Lady, queen of the hills, triumphant Darjeeling, would amount to little more than a memory stored to peek at in moments of profound boredom like a cynical snowglobe. All my works were for absolutely naught. I was a Western Christian at the end of Western Christendom, and I was roped in and bound to my fate.

In theory, I could start fresh in India. But not really. I'd need a working visa. So I'd need a job. And doing what? I am no monk. Could I haul great thatches of tea leaves up and down these mountains every day, without a friend in the world, and be satisfied? Unlikely. And yet, I'm not so sure. Maybe, my monastery is here... (*This thought was a delusion, once an American always an American*).

It was in the thrall of this great dread that I looked up and noticed a young woman sitting across from me, her back to the window, where false portraits of freedom hang. Men in blue plaid shirts wiping down motorcycles in the California sun, frontiers ahead. Beautiful women with sun-stricken brown hair walking past the signs, reading 'Route 86' beside their smooth legs, idealizations so pathetic, so quaint, that they struck me as the reversed archetype of the noble savage.

This woman had only glanced at me, and I glanced at her. I looked away, carrying only a spoonful of memory of her expression in my cusped meager hands. She had black hair with black bangs. It was long to her shoulders. She looked Nepali, with light skin, but too light, as if

she was part European mess like me. She was dressed in a simple black jacket and had ear muffs stationed around the back of her neck. I thought she was beautiful. Thin, tall and serene, Our Lady of the hills.

Immediately, a deeper dread sank within me. *Talk to her*. For fuck's sake. What for? I'm leaving here tomorrow. There is no point to meeting a fleeting person like this. And first of all, there's no proof that she even speaks English, and second of all, no, I cannot approach her.

I felt so weak, so burdened, so empty and so incapable at the thought of actually introducing myself. Of transforming an accidental half-glance into a meeting. Forcing my perceptions into reality. No. I couldn't dare to do it. What arrogance! What profound, miserable arrogance that would entail!

She finished her fried chicken. She stood, threading her bag around her shoulder. She put on a knit magenta hat, on her smooth head of silky ebon hair, and smiled out of the corner of her mouth, maybe at me, maybe at no one, and she walked off out of the KFC and into the bustling market of Darjeeling, where I watched her hand a coin to a crusted looking beggar outdoors before turning and making her way up the cobblestone hill.

I wanted to choke myself to death as the familiar refrains started to profess their agendas. Yes, I had blown it again. Yes, by my own choice. Yes, I loved being alone, I loved stewing in hell, in horror, I wanted nothing more than to never meet a woman again as long as I lived.

The feeling was like a crystal ball scooped of its innards, left with a great excavator's mark in its dazzling ruin. A bucket of water with a bag of ashes poured inside, sinking to the bottom, never stirred. A goldfish dead in a pond, rising to the surface, hanging there as a photograph was taken. I couldn't stand it. So I shot to my feet, and I followed her.

Yes, I walked up that same cobblestone hill, hoping for a miracle. Hoping that somehow we could still talk. Jesus Christ. This had the potential to go very, very wrong. In fact, I already knew I was no better than a moth, or a fish, to a flaming hook suspended in the gutters of the bowels of the Styx. I walked with my hands in my Underarmor jacket pockets, dressed in black, black shorts and a cashmere scarf, an English-Nepali boy, confused, storming up the hill.

I watched her go in the distance ahead and eventually she led me into the open square where a golden statue of the poet who wrote the Ramayana stood, Nepal's national hero. He was an unassuming, unattractive man with an unattractive mustache. When I think of a man, I think of something ugly. An animal who gets what he wants, who tries to change destiny. Behind this courageous and hideous man, a great Chinese gate was painted with the scales of red dragons at the top of a ghat of stone steps, and suspended beside the work in progress was a screen displaying a game of world series golf. But the ghat's steps, draped with high schoolers in their gray uniforms, was not where she went. To the right of the ugly man, down a narrow market pathway, she walked along the edge of the soaking hills.

Beyond the screen radiating golf over the Himalayas there was a small pathway through a market bazaar on one side and a sloping cliff into the breach on the other. The mist was high today. The fog was so thick that the buildings on the wharfs of the mountainside appeared to be falling into the whitened surf. In the expanse before me, I could barely make out the lights of houses on an opposing hill. I could confirm nothing.

I lost her in the sky and the crowds and she vanished, like many other potential futures, into the world. The place was so huge I never should have gone looking. Once I knew I wouldn't find her I stopped and sat down on a bench in the winding forest trail, tears forming in my eyes.

My heroic meeting had failed to happen. My redemption, my change into a mighty person who could talk to a stranger and make a lover out of nothing was not possible. But it is men like me who are the problem with the world. Men who want a job, a community, a wife. When we don't end up with what we want, we break things. Often, we start with ourselves. But the damage always spreads. Men don't believe anymore, in the world. And we will believe in anything if we don't believe in the world.