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The Plunge

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The Plunge

When I first landed in China, the Peace Corps worker who met my group of volunteers at the airport asked if we had any worries. Most people asked about the food, about getting mail from home, about the toilets. “Bus plunge,” I said. Everyone laughed, and conversation moved on to how much their Teva sandals cost (*Too much*), if Chinese shot pool (*Yes*) and whether we could date the “Host Country Nationals” (*No*).

But I had answered truthfully; a lifetime of reading newspapers had convinced me that a bus plunge waited overseas. That summer’s headlines had included: *Seven Dead After School Bus Plunges into River*; *Six Dead After Bus Plunge*; *Four Die, Seven Hurt When Bus Plunges from Bridge*. The single-paragraph story included details such as: *Firemen could not reach passengers trapped inside the wreckage until three cranes arrived to lift it off the ground. They arrived too late.*

The cranes always arrived too late.

I know now that editors regularly run these items because they can be pulled off the wire and trimmed to fill page gaps during layout. But back then all I knew was that Third World buses couldn’t stop plunging off cliffs, down embankments, and into rivers. *At Least 38 Dead After Bus Plunges into Ravine*. I made a mental note to steer clear of ravines.

During Peace Corps training, I took my first Chinese lessons, learned how to use chopsticks, and practiced nodding affirmatively to every suggestion, lest I lose face. After a month, our teachers instructed us to take a weekend away from our Chengdu city classroom and practice these skills. I had always loved trains, and I felt a surge of accomplishment at using Chinese to buy a train ticket to one of southwest Sichuan province’s Yangtze River ports. My plan was to ride the rails seven hours south, disembark, then take the overnight train straight back.

The train was great. This was in 1995, the end of an era when steam engines still ran, and the journey was a rolling town square. Passengers chatted and shared dumplings and sunflower seeds, kids scampered up to yell “Good morning teacher!”, and my replies showed that my Chinese was improving. But at the line’s terminus, when I asked for a return ticket, the clerk said, “*Meiyou.*” Have none. After each entreaty, she repeated *meiyou* with emotionless finality, sounding as chilling as the raven’s *nevermore*.

"I need a ticket," I pleaded, adding the popular phrase Chinese used to entreat foreign guests: "It's for our friendship."

"*Meiyou*," the clerk repeated. "Take the bus. It leaves tomorrow at dawn."

I had miscalculated terribly. There were no train tickets, and only one hotel in town accepted foreigners. I was lucky they took me in, since I had forgotten to bring my passport. The concierge registered my little green passbook that identified me as a "U.S.–China Friendship Volunteer"; under Mao, the name Peace Corps had been discredited as a CIA front. My key opened the door to a room whose walls were a gallery of smashed roaches framed by shoe prints. Next door, a karaoke hall pulsed with the sound of wounded hearts bleating Karen Carpenter's every *sha la la la la* as if it were their last.

I arrived at the bus station at dawn with swollen, sleepless eyes. A billowing black balloon crowned each bus. "It holds natural gas for the engine," the driver said, offering a cigarette. So: our plunge would end in a movie-perfect fireball. I didn't smoke, so I tucked the butt behind my ear, just as Peace Corps training had instructed. *Always be polite. Don't make others lose face.* No one taught me how to ask if a bus would be traversing ravines.

"You're going back to Chengdu?" the driver asked. "Get on my bus. I'm going to Mount Emei. You'll be there by four. You can catch a bus to town and be there for dinner." Mount Emei is one of China's four sacred Buddhist peaks, historically seen as a place of enlightenment. Pilgrims were often plunge victims, but the passengers on this bus looked like they were heading back to home and work, not a temple.

"Please sit down," a young man in the front seat said, in English. He wore stonewashed shorts sheathed in plastic. Miniature \$100 bills smiled out from the casing. "My English name is Franklin, my foreign friend."

Franklin studied at the local teacher's college. His introduction exhausted most of his English. I tried Chinese. When the bus rumbled to life five minutes later, we'd run out of things to say. Franklin looked out the window.

A half hour after departure, the bus broke down. The driver stopped, opened the engine compartment at his right hand, and stared into the smoke, calmly prodding while passengers coughed. After the repair, the speeding bus met a man who fell off his bike just ahead; the driver pulled hard on the wheel, sending us all gasping and leaning, then pulled hard the other way, straightening out, avoiding the man and bike while not once tapping the brake pedal. Only a barrier where a flood had

washed away the road could stop him. The driver handed cigarettes to the repair crew and swung the bus into an open field, bumping along two ruts.

“Road’s gone!” he said. “No problem! I’ll make my own!”

Franklin laughed nervously. I scanned the horizon for danger.

The bus bounced along furrows, past farmers harvesting bright yellow rapeseed. The afternoon slipped away; I would not reach Mount Emei, let alone Chengdu, by dark. I wondered if I had enough cash for another hotel room but remembered a lesson from training: *It is rude to count money in public*. The bus slowed. Ahead, I saw three young men standing in the field, an open bottle in hand. Our draining momentum gave me a rapid increase of dread. *Keep going keep going keep going*. But the conductor removed the screwdriver holding the door shut.

The three men boarded and yelped at the sight of a foreigner. They leaned into my face, laughing and mewling “Hello” with breath reeking of liquor. Franklin turned to the window. I turned around to see the entire bus looking in every possible direction away from the three men. One wore a black shirt, one wore a white shirt, and one was bare-chested. A large knife dangled from each of their belts.

I froze when the word *laowai* came barking from their lips. It was the first time I’d heard the term “foreigner” spat with such malevolence. The bus labored on. The shirtless man kneeled and blew into my ear.

Training had taught me to avoid conflict. *Always be polite*. Black Shirt said, in singsong English, “Hello, are you an English fellow?”

Where had he learned that? I laughed, softening. “I’m American,” I said in elementary Chinese.

He raised his thumb. “Very good!” He drained clear liquor from his bottle. He leaned close and asked more questions that I couldn’t understand. I leaned on Franklin, but still the man came, repeating the questions louder in my ear.

The conductor asked for money. White Shirt pushed him away. The bus driver glanced back but kept steering. Black Shirt’s eyes held mine. Over his right shoulder I watched an elderly passenger rise from his seat to tap his back. The old man spoke too quickly and harshly for me to understand. White Shirt, however, responded by smashing his liquor bottle over the old man’s head. Blood, booze, and glass showered over me. Black Shirt turned and punched the old man’s slumping body.

White Shirt pushed the old man off him and turned to me, wrapping his hands around my throat. Shirtless kicked at the old man. Black Shirt pulled his knife.

Franklin jumped over his seat onto a grandmother. The rest of the passengers surged to the back of the bus. From the corner of my eye, I saw the conductor remove the screwdriver from the doorjamb.

He brought down Shirtless from behind, with a stab to the shoulder. The bus driver slammed on the brakes, causing Black Shirt to pitch forward into the aisle. White Shirt still held my neck. The driver unscrewed the metal gear stick from its floor housing and swung it at the clear plastic dividing his seat and mine. The panel cracked and fell. I saw the sole of the driver's shoe as he stepped, planted, and swung the gear shift hard. The hands around my throat loosened with each subsequent blow to the head, until White Shirt let go.

The bus stopped. And then the sound of shattering glass. Black Shirt and Shirtless were standing on the dirt road, pelting the windows with rocks. White Shirt's body slumped in the aisle.

I saw then that we had made it to a village before stopping. Five cops ran to the circle of local men pinning Black Shirt and Shirtless to the ground.

I had never met Chinese police and guessed it was not a pleasant experience. I also realized that forgetting to bring my passport was about to become more than an inconvenience. My left leg jackhammered from fear. Villagers ringed the bus, pointing and staring and murmuring *laowai laowai laowai*.

"Please," a voice asked in slow, gentle Chinese. "Get off the bus. Come with me."

A white-gloved hand rested on my shoulder. The man showed me his arm patch that spelled "Public Security" in characters. Those I recognized from training.

A cop grabbed White Shirt's lifeless body by the ankles. His head thudded loudly down the bus's steps.

"Please," the officer repeated.

Since arriving in China, I'd subsisted on a diet of Cultural Revolution memoirs. To get off the bus seemed tantamount to erasure. I would walk through the gates, up the station driveway, and then slowly fade from view.

The officer realized he had a situation. The old man, driver, and conductor waved from the driveway. Two more officers boarded. "Foreign friend," one urged, in halting English. "Please."

Only if I could bring someone, I said. They agreed. I stood and pointed at Franklin. His face said: *This is what happens when you practice English with a foreigner.*

The police led us through open gates to the station. We entered a courtyard between one-story buildings with barred windows. Tied at the base of two poles, with hands fastened behind their backs, Black Shirt and Shirtless slouched silently in the dirt.

Inside, the driver sat smoking at a desk that faced a seated officer, looking as unfazed as ever. The cop took notes. The men nodded when I entered and sat on a bench with Franklin. "Tea? Cigarettes?" a cop asked. The driver smiled as he spoke. The listening officer smiled as he wrote. The old man wandered by a window outside with a large white bandage taped to his head.

Then the screaming started. The howls collapsed into sobs, then rose again.

"The bad men," explained Franklin.

The driver kept talking. The conductor gave his account in another room. I feared that our retellings wouldn't match. If they blamed it all on the foreigner, they could get back on the bus. Surely they had coordinated their stories and release. For the first time in my life, I accepted an offered cigarette.

After my eighth smoke, of drags punctuated by silence and screams, a Toyota Land Cruiser arrived. More officers. A thin young man in street clothes handed me a card that said, in English, Office of Foreign Affairs. "I am an English teacher!" he announced.

The man taught middle school. The call went out that an interpreter was needed at the police station, and he was the closest they could find. The Land Cruiser flew across the fields. His head, he said, was sore from bumping it on the roof. He rubbed it theatrically. I was the first foreigner he had ever met, and he wore the thrill on his face. He motioned to a room where a group of officers sat around a large table. They stood when I entered. Tea was poured, more cigarettes distributed.

The officers asked: What did the suspects look like? What had they done to me?

"Would you like some watermelon?" the interpreter asked. "It's so sweet." The officer read back my statement, followed by their summary of the others' tellings. Between slurps of watermelon, the interpreter said that our facts matched. I could leave.

The officer produced a red ink pad. "Sign each page and stamp your thumbprint next to your name."

"What's going to happen to the two men?"

The interpreter relayed: "They will be punished."

I stained my thumb red, trustingly. The interpreter said, “The police have decided the criminals now will be beaten until you are satisfied justice has been achieved.”

The sun had set. In the halo of a moth-smearred floodlight, the two men sat bound to the pole, faces blurred by blood and snot. As if taking a penalty kick, a policeman skipped forward and booted one in the face.

Flinching, I said: “I am satisfied justice has been achieved.”

The chief nodded toward the gate. With a smile, he said, in English, “Bye-bye.”

The bus waited, quiet and dark. The driver snapped awake and tossed me the smokes. He was out of Marlboros; these were Famous Dogs, whose package showed a mirthful, panting spaniel. I passed the pack to the old man, whose bottle-lacerated head was sheathed in white gauze. Franklin had gestured for me to sit beside him. Only this time, he greeted me in Chinese.

The damp night air rushed through the smashed windows. Passengers heaped jackets atop me. They held my shoulder and smiled and praised my Chinese and said America was good and China’s friend. “We are friends,” they said.

I realized that as unsure as I had felt at the station, the police and passengers had felt just as unsure. The officers ignored my absent passport and lack of an emergency contact number and called for a middle-school teacher as interpreter. Over the hours, the driver and conductor retold what happened, while a bus full of passengers waited in the dark.

The driver asked if I liked to sing. In U.S.–China Friendship Volunteer training, I had been compelled to learn a popular folk song that begins: *Paoma liu liude shan shang*. The mountain streams with running horses.

Laughter filled the bus, and the second line rang out strong from many throats. *Yi duo liu liude yun you*. A piece of cloud whisks across the sky.

I forgot what came next, so waited for the chorus.

Yueliang wan wan. Crescent moon.

Kangding liu liude qing you. Love fills Mount Kangding.

The bus sang the second verse together: The mountain streams with running horses. A piece of cloud whisks across the sky.

The dark bus drifted across the night.

When we pulled into the Mount Emei bus station, the attendants stared wide-eyed at the smashed, windowless vehicle. The passengers said good-bye, while Franklin, the driver, and the old man with the bandaged head argued over the best place to leave me for the night. I said I didn’t have much money. They argued some more.

They woke a guesthouse clerk, paid for a room, and escorted me to the door. The man with the bandaged head made sure the shower had hot water. Franklin filled the tea thermoses at the hallway samovar. The driver lit the room's mosquito coil. I closed the door and fell on the bed. The clock said 12:20 a.m.

Five minutes later: a knock on the door. I opened it to hear, "You haven't eaten all day! Come come come! Our treat! Fish! How's fish? Get his shorts! Get his shoes!"

We prowled the silent streets in the shattered bus before waking a restaurant's staff. A popular decorative poster hanging above the fish tank showed a rose in a crystal vase complementing a plateful of fried eggs, sausage, toast, and orange juice. I said I wanted that. The driver chose an unlucky fish from the tank. The boss raised it above her head and slammed it to the cement floor.

The driver ordered an entire case of Five Star beer. He said, "Chinese are good. Americans are our friends." He placed the fish's head in my bowl to prove it. "For our friendship." We raised toasts and began extinguishing our adrenaline. Looking back now, after twenty years living in and writing about China, I see that their actions prevented me from packing my suitcase and catching the next flight home. I, not the bus, was the one who plunged.

The men played a popular singsong drinking and finger game called Guessing from Chaos. You cocked a fist and shouted a number while making puns. I grasped the idea, but not its execution. Exasperated, the driver placed a chopstick in my hand and said, "We'll play a very simple game, instead. Even children can do it."

He banged his own stick on the rim of a bowl and chanted, "*Bang bang bang*." The word meant "stick." This much I understood. The driver motioned for me to mimic him. Together we went, "*Bang bang bang bang*."

The driver shouted, "Tiger!"

I didn't shout anything. The table shook with laughter.

The driver scratched his head comically. "You speak when I speak. Say *stick, worm, chicken, or tiger*."

"You can say human, too," Franklin added.

"What?" the driver demanded. "You can't say human."

"You can! Worm eats stick, chicken eats worm, tiger eats chicken, and human beats tiger!"

"No! Tiger is the biggest. A human can't beat a tiger!" For the first time all day, the driver looked tense. "Who taught you this game?"

Franklin sat up straight. "My father taught me this game!"

"I understand now," I offered. "Let's play. Ready?"

The table fell silent and we leaned over our bowls. Then we clinked our chopsticks against the rim.

"Bang bang bang bang."

The driver shouted, "Stick!" just as I screamed, "Human!"

"Stick beats human," Franklin said with finality.

"Correct!" the driver said, filing my glass with Five Star. Then he tossed his chopstick on the table and held his fist up to his ear. "No more kids' games! Guessing from Chaos! Ready? A one and a two and a..."