

# HEADLINE

**By Milan Perkins**

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It was a drizzle infested evening. I was on the bus from Paris to Amsterdam. The hushed voices of French and Dutch were only broken by the cries of a child. We had been backpacking through Asia and Europe for over a year now and at every transient moment there had been a crying child. It seemed almost obligatory.

The seats were always impossible to sleep in because their designers had never even been on a bus, let alone tried to sleep on one in one of their chairs of torture, for seven hours.

People ate sandwiches, drank drinks that went 'psst' when opened, like they had a secret to tell and just when you finally managed to nod off, either the child cried or someone would wrestle with an insanely loud packet of chips in an attempt to open it and indulge their palates. The noisy stuffing of these chips into their mouths was a sound reminiscent of a horse crunching sugar cubes, the whole of their craniums resonating.

Sounds are always intensified when confined spaces are concerned. The treble, machine-like ticking of the headphones on the twenty-something in the seat behind me, the whoosh of a passing car or truck, all added to the soundscape that made this bus ride almost unbearable. I thought this was the worst of it but there was something ground shaking about to happen to us all.

To add discomfort to the pin cushion, the air was thick with cheese and cheap coffee breath and our bus driver, who I had befriended at the station, because of his French attitude, had discretionary control over our air conditioning. Conditioned air has never been my favourite type of oxygen, I find it dries me out and clogs me up. Simultaneously, everyone's hands reached upwards like they were all going to light lighters at a Beatles concert, to check their fans. We all seemed to begin to sweat. Well I did at least and after all the Brie and café au laits I had in Paris, I didn't smell too fresh either.

If this wasn't enough, the toilet door handle had been removed and the cubicle was locked. This in turn caused all the bodily gases being stored by all to reach critical mass. As a result, someone did a gut-wrenching fart. Something was rotten in the state of Denmark.

Trucks flashed and roared past as the rain sprinkled like sugar onto cornflakes, providing the sound of nature's television static. Coughing and sneezing punctuated the orchestration as well.

The rain was getting thicker. The wipers were moving faster. Someone started snoring like a doped out bull. It was the guy in the row in front of us.

The driver was growing a little tired. He had chain-smoked three Gauloise -very strong French cigarettes- before starting the engine, which would have starved him of the oxygen required to stay alert for the seven hour over night drive.

The Child kept chatting to its Mother and she whispered back. Occasionally a loud cry or protest would be heard from the little girl.

Trucks hurtled past.

My girlfriend had managed to fall asleep upright, jammed between the snoring Arab who had reclined his seat entirely into her personal space and the six-foot-five Afro-French guy whose knees came up too high for her to recline her own chair.

We passed a sign with the symbol of a jumping deer on it. They were everywhere in Europe, these signs, but I never saw a live one. Plenty of severed deer heads on stupid plaques in Austria and Croatia, not to mention the pride-leeched, stuffed bear holding a wooden spoon in a truckie cum hunters roadside pit stop in Croatia. Sad and eerie. The bear's two sidekicks were the real irony cake-takers; two stuffed hares with shotguns! Probably the ones that had killed them, in their own paws.

The only deer I even heard about was in Austria, which was killed by a really nice guy who drove too fast.

"It really screwed up my car" he said, after first expressing his sympathy and remorse.

I sat with my reading light on, engrossed in John Irving, even though I usually found it too difficult to read with so many distractions, Irving's 'World According To Garp' had me in its addictive grip and I literally couldn't stop. I was hooked.

We had left the bus station a lot later than the scheduled eleven o'clock, possibly around eleven thirty p.m., so our driver was trying to make up for lost time. The signs said sixty kilometres per hour but it felt like we were doing a lot closer to ninety. Being a musician who's played to metronomes for many years, I'm quite a good estimator of speed. I watched while the signposts on the side of the road snapped past rapidly and grew a little more uncomfortable. It wasn't just my sweaty underpants either.

The blurred lights of the trucks came at us like eyes, staring us down. The rain split their fake glow into thousands of stars on our windshields. Some of the trucks looked evil, their eyes seemingly glaring at us as they passed.

The snoring man now sounded more like a shovel being dragged over concrete. Somehow his wife managed to sleep through it right next to him.

I was now the only one with my reading light on. I noticed that the wind had picked up and the bus would sway a little whenever we hit the open stretches. Cars streamed past, overtaking us at a speed I could only guess was around one hundred kilometres per hour.

The headphones were now onto something faster, break-neck techno, and loud enough for me to hear it quite clearly. Its owner was dead to the world. I admit I felt nervous. I often do on forms of transport overseas. Not petrified, no butterflies, just over-aware and far too imaginative. At home in Australia I don't feel like it's so possible to be a newspaper clipping but "Two Australians killed in French bus disaster" sounds too much like a realistic headline for my liking.

I was the only one awake now, everyone was dozing, except the human buzz saw.

Now I find it quite difficult not to feel just a little tired when I'm surrounded by people with their eyes closed, in a confined space of little oxygen, with dream-like rain falling all around, especially at two o'clock in the morning and even more so if I have to stare at a black road with repetitive hypnotising white lines on it. It was at this time that I wanted to know how long our driver had been doing this job and more specifically, this route. I began to yawn heavily. The type of yawn that makes it almost impossible to read, especially if your book is bouncing lightly in your hands.

Something that happens quite frequently on long-distance, overnight buses is the sensation of waking up with pins and needles from having slept in ludicrous positions to remain vaguely comfortable. My girlfriend had once awoken, feeling paralysed from the waist down. She freaked out and so did I when she startlingly woke me out of my bank robbery dream, in which I was hiding from terrorists.

“I can’t feel my legs”, she had cried in a panic that suggested that she may have pinched a nerve and done some damage to her spinal chord.

That bus had arrived at our stop in Vienna after twenty-two hours (!!!) and we were panicked by the fact that we needed to get off before it continued into the neighbouring country.

I went to rub my eyes, assess the situation and perhaps sympathise but both of my hands and arms were still asleep, so when I tried to pinch them awake, I looked a like a tequila-drunk chimpanzee. A couple of kooks trying to slap each other into feeling, we had to laugh at ourselves. That long trip had literally driven us delirious.

The rain blanketed down now, turning the windshield into a Las Vegas Milky Way. The wind blew us a little and we swayed some. The buzz-saw man gasped and snorted. ‘Garp’ was getting extremely suspenseful.

We came out of one of the longer tunnels at an alarming rate and we were blown quite intensely into the right hand lane where we clipped the front left hand side of a small Renault Clio.

The dozing passengers awoke. As the driver corrected the bus I saw my first living deer. It gracefully hurdled the low barricade and bolted with incredible agility in front of the braking Renault, which caused our driver to swerve left to avoid it. This plunged our bus through the pathetic red and white plastic centre barrier, which divided the highway.

Our bus continued into the momentary gap in oncoming traffic and ricocheted off an approaching truck, which veered left and ground it’s way down our right hand side, shattering a few of our windows with it’s mirror. Some screamed, some leapt from their seats and others dodged in fear as our bus tipped onto it’s left side -my

side- and slid sparkingly across the other lane. People were flipped onto each other and the windows on my side cracked and imploded for many reasons.

The driver had been knocked out by someone's briefcase and his bus hit a stone wall, smashing the front windshields, covering him in brilliant diamonds.

My girlfriend and I had been in the seats directly opposite the exit door in the middle of the bus, so no one had fallen onto us. Some had broken bones and bleeding gashes from hitting the ceiling, swiping cracked windows or from jammed appendages in the bar-like arm rests they previously rested upon. A lot of them couldn't move because they had pins and needles, which caused more hysteria than was absolutely necessary.

The child was crying frantically. Her Mother had luckily only been knocked out but she looked dead to the child. The snoring man had stopped, the Walkman had been smashed into smithereens on impact of hitting the window and what not and the trucks grinding had jammed the exit door in.

To everyone's amazement, the worst injuries were one broken arm, two broken ribs, someone lost three teeth, the truckie gashed his elbow on his door and the deer had run off bewildered.

My girlfriend and I managed to smash out the emergency hatch with the little red metal hammer attached to the wall brace and pull every wounded person out into the rain safely. Having seen more than my fair share of movies I could all too easily picture our bus leaking petrol onto a sparking wire and exploding. I was relieved when everyone was at a safe distance.

When the emergency services arrived, I had to be the one to explain the entire incident, having been the only one awake for the whole experience.

The policeman's greatest surprise after taking my whole statement was that there were still deer in that neck of the woods. He'd never seen one either.