

## The Road to Tawang

The road to Tawang begins at Tezpur in Assam, the road to Tezpur begins at Guwahati, the road to Guwahati begins at Calcutta, and the road to Calcutta begins at Bangalore. Wherever you are, there is a road going wherever you want to reach. However, for Arunachal Pradesh, like some other North Eastern states, you need a special permit; even if you are an Indian citizen. Foreigners are scrutinized even more cautiously. No wonder, the people from these states do not feel they belong to India.

My journey to Tawang began at Guwahati where I reached by Sarighat Express from Calcutta on an afternoon in February. I checked into Hotel Belle Vue, where Sanjoy Hazarika had stayed when he was writing ‘Strangers in the Mist’ and asked for Arunachal Bhavan. The manager started calculating how long it would take me to reach there. I was short on time, intending the whole visit to be a bird’s eye view and was already wondering whether it would be worth wasting four days on Tawang. Though I knew if I had to make it, it would have to be now. The snow had started clearing and the road had opened up for a few months. This was my first visit to the North East and I had no idea when I would come here again. Walking next to the expansive bed of the Brahmaputra I must have asked some fifteen people, but was met with no luck. It was already 4 PM. When I did take three autos that hardly crawled on the dusty roads, I realized the people too were like the traffic. They were pointing in every direction except the one intended.

I expected the Arunachal Bhavan to echo the beauty of Arunachal Pradesh. I had visualised a majestic structure in the Buddhist tradition like the scenic beauty I had seen in odd calendars and books on the state. However, this was one of the shabbiest buildings in Guwahati. It was a dirty cream double-storey structure, tucked inside a nondescript colony. The only access to which was on foot through muddy roads. Yet, right in front of the building stood a deep blue Mercedes Benz C 2000. Who would come here in one of the richest of rich vehicles, I wondered.

The dark peon in his sweaty shirt looked irritated after a whole day of answering people’s queries. “You can apply only tomorrow. No, only to one place. Different permits for different places. Every time new permit.”

“Tomorrow? But I am already late, I do not have so much time.”

“It will take three days for permission.”

“Three days! I am not going,” I muttered to myself, “I’ll cancel Tawang, Shillong would be much better.” Still I asked, “Okay, can I meet your boss? I’ll talk to him.”

“He is there,” said the man with a casual gesture of someone who knew that tourists often asked to meet the boss as a way of threatening the lowly peon. “What will you say to him that you can’t tell me?”

“That man?” On the way into the Bhavan I had noticed a man chewing *paan* on the side of the road. He had almost spat on my way. He had the crookedest teeth I had ever seen. “I mean big boss, not the clerk.”

“Yes, he is big boss. Commissioner.”

I crossed the road and geared up to meet him. “Sir, I want to speak to you.”

“No, I cannot help you. Pass will be for fourteen days only. I can’t extend your stay,” he was guessing my thoughts and mumbling through his red, stained lips.

I smiled. “I just need permission for four days.”

“Then what is the problem? Apply today. In three days you shall get the pass.” He said spitting a mouthful of juices in the open drain next to the road.

“But I do not have three days, am wondering whether to go at all.”

He looked up, removed his silver framed spectacles, and pulled out a dirty handkerchief to wipe them. He looked at his eyes with me. “Giving up?”

“Heard the journey is tough, and there is no night driving?”

“Six feet snow, where are you from?” He was amused that I could even think of a night drive.

“Bangalore.”

“You can’t come so far and return without seeing Tawang.”

I liked this man. He was pushing me to beat time.

“Come in,” he said, walking into his office.

On the board behind his seat, I saw his name: R S Baidya, Resident Commissioner. Year of joining -- 1999. This was 2005. His was the longest tenure on the list. I mused to myself: who would want to stay in this run down place when there was more money to be made smuggling timber inside Arunachal?

“Sir, I do not know whether you can arrange the pass to be hurried up.” I paused noticing the cobwebs hanging from his fan.

“It is not impossible. Go on,” he said.

“Please improve this building. I mean, no one would like to go to Arunachal once one sees the conditions here.”

He handed me a coloured brochure, with telephone numbers of hotels at Tawang, Itanagar, and Ziro. It also had the distances and modes of conveyance. Everything that the Lonely Planet does not have. “Yes, but I have been trying, sitting here and trying. This building is on rent, you know how much I have to lobby with the government for our own land,” he replied, lost in the memories of his petitions. “I have met the Chief Minister so many times, each time they say next time. Are you a journalist?”

“I am a writer.”

“Writing about the North East?” I could see his eyes light up behind soda glasses.

“Not yet, I feel there is so much to understand about the North East. Came here to learn things.” I said slowly.

“Things are bad, there are no jobs, hardly any government funds. You see the state has no industry and no permission to start industries. Anyway, come tomorrow at 10.30 AM. We shall see what we can do. Would it be okay if you get the pass in one day?” He gave me his hand.

“It would be great, thanks.” I shook hands warmly.

I went out and came back again. I knocked at the door, peeped in and asked, “Sir, I have my passport and voter ID card. Do I need any more documents?”

“I do not need those documents. The only question I ask every one who applies is: Are you an Indian? I look into the eyes of the person while he answers and I know all I need to know. Come tomorrow; let us see what we can do.”

I went out, the Mercedes had vanished. I ate *momos*, and returned for tea and cigarettes to a shop opposite the street that went to the Bhavan. R S Baidya was there, accompanied by two peons; the one I had met earlier was holding a small black leather folder. R S Baidya was waiting for his car and treating the peons to snacks. “Here, keep

my card, if you need anything in Guwahati let me know,” he said. The Mercedes appeared again and he climbed into the front seat.

I woke up the next morning to the news of a corruption scandal in the recruitment of police officers in Assam. The opposition had alleged that Bangladeshis, who had applied but did not have adequate papers to prove citizenship, had been appointed at the cost of indigenous people. The Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) had called for a *bandh* the next day; the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) had joined the call. It did not matter to me. Strikes were common enough in India. I reached the Bhavan and R S Baidya was not there. The previous day he had mentioned a little ominously, “If I reach.” Now I wondered about his choice of phrase.

I filled up the form and paid Rs 10 to the clerk, who asked me to come back after three days. I mentioned my talk with the Resident Commissioner. He nodded absently, and I moved out of the verandah, waiting for R S Baidya to show up.

I saw the clerk looking at me from the corner of his eye and filling out a yellow card. He wrote the details, checked the spelling of my name with me.

After ten minutes, he called me. “Here, take this.” He handed me the card.

“But the Commissioner has to sign it.” I refused to extend my hand.

“Look at it,” the clerk grinned. A woman behind him smiled.

I took it and saw the Commissioner’s seal and signature. “Wow! I have the card!” I exclaimed in joy.

“Welcome to Tawang,” said the clerk. “*Sahib* signed it immediately after he met you. What did you say to him?” The clerk looked puzzled and I smiled back.

I rushed back to the hotel and checked the map: the only way to reach Tawang was through Tezpur. My hotel manager called and booked me a room there.

The seats in the luxury bus could incline but the passenger behind me tapped the seat as I moved it back. I turned back in irritation and he said, “Seat inclining only at night. Rules.”

Though a little uncomfortable I did not argue. We stopped at Nagaon and I remembered reading about it being a major ULFA camp. This is where, in 1985, the ULFA merged with the disintegrating Assam People Liberation Army (ALPA). This is from where the ULFA had started its anti-state activities. The town was full of long lanes of houses and shops touching each other, stacked like thin plywood play houses. They seemed a little weather-blown and a little tired for having witnessed the Army and ULFA blood spill for the last fifteen years.

The green countryside comprising of small, even paddy plots stretched on the sides of the road. The scenery was an unending expanse, punctuated only by coconut trees, and lined by mountains that were neither too far nor too near. I calculated the hours. It had been four and a half hours when the noise outside changed. The familiar rattle of the windows and honks of the bus journey changed to a more rhythmic beat, like a drum in slow motion. The bus lost speed and I looked out to find us on a bridge over an almost dry riverbed. The drumming sound continued and I noticed we had been on the bridge for more than fifteen minutes. What bridge was this? I looked over the seats in front, through the driver’s view, and saw the unending railings on the side of the road.

It was dark when we entered Tezpur. Army areas had replaced the green fields of the day. The kids on the seats behind mine had vomited and the muck had started moving

towards my feet. The man, probably their father, did not allow them to open the window. Rules!

I moved ahead and stood at the bus door for a while, absorbing the cold air. We finally reached the bus stop. I got down, lit a cigarette, and asked for directions to the Tata Sumo stalls from where I could get a ride to Tawang the next day. Somebody mentioned the bandh and I froze. I had checked on the map: the Arunachal border is just 35 km from Tezpur. I had hoped to be able to get out of Tezpur before the daybreak. The coffee shop boy, Ravi, took me to a Tata Sumo stall. I asked, heart filled with trepidation, if we would be going the next day and sighed in relief when the stall owner, a muscular short man, said, "Yes, if we start early." I booked a seat for myself on the only vehicle leaving town the next morning.

Hotel Luit, named after the tributaries of the sprawling Brahmaputra we had crossed on the way to Tezpur, was big and neat, and had spacious rooms. The waiter got me Royal Challenge whiskey and I took a peg before I set out to explore whatever little of the city I could see before it became very dark. I checked the bookstores for a detailed map of Arunachal Pradesh but drew a blank. The cyber cafes were good and I was pleased to see them updated with the latest patches of the Microsoft operating system. I could access gmail, which needed the latest browser, something I could not do even at Calcutta.

The cheerful Tata Sumo stall keeper had told me to be ready by 4.30 AM. His plan was to leave town by 5 AM, before the bandh picked force. Though I did not want to get out of the comfortable bed, I bathed and was at the reception in time.

No one came. It became 5 AM, then 5.15 AM. I fumbled for the ticket and called a mobile number mentioned on it. Someone picked and said, "Yes, they're on the way." The hotel was hardly a five-minute walk from the bus stop. I wondered what 'on the way' meant. I waited another twenty minutes and began to panic. I was not so worried about the Rs 350 I had paid; my worry was I would not be able to make it to Tawang. I had not counted on the bandh, or on the Sumo driver abandoning me. I called again. Again, someone said, "Wait." People here had noticed that I was an outsider, were they taking me for a ride? Why was Ravi so helpful? Why was the hotel manager not taking interest? Had we not called him from Guwahati? I knocked on the hotel manager's door. He did not open it. The waiter had disappeared. The fog had crawled in from the semi-open outer glass door, and everything seemed a little cloudy. There was no watchman, it was dark, and the hotel looked ominous with its dark lights. I felt stranded. I paced the road outside, but did not dare to go to the bus stop, lest I miss the Sumo that might take another route to fetch me. I did not notice how much time had passed. It was still dark.

Finally, Ravi arrived. "I told you, don't worry," he grinned from his motorbike.

I quietly sat behind him and he explained in broken Hindi, "Too many people today *saab*. They are running two Sumos. But don't worry; we have kept room for you."

I mumbled my thanks as we parked at the bus stop. The vehicles looked jam-packed and yet Ravi waved me to the front of one of them. "Room for you."

But there were three people on the seat. I walked up to the stout stall manager. He noticed my face and grinned. "Bandh *na saab*, too many people. We have to adjust." He guided me to the second seat of another Sumo. I requested for the window and people were gracious, they granted me the seat. Now we were five of us squeezed on the second

seat (including two women on the far side), three men in front (one of them cursing in Hindi), and four quiet men behind. The Tatas advertise the Sumo to be good for 10 + 1 people. Thirteen was not too far off the count, I thought.

When they arrived, I realized we had two drivers. A well-dressed man in blue jeans, deep brown turtleneck sweater, and shining black shoes took the wheel; another lean man around twenty-five years old climbed to the back and somehow fit in there. Now we were fourteen in the Sumo. I must take a picture, I mused; maybe sell it to the Tatas. The driver backed the Sumo and pulled it up close to a wall. I pushed the window to see how close he had reached and was surprised to see the wheel of the Sumo at the edge of a drain; one inch more and we would have had to get down to push. I looked at the driver; he was calm and composed. He lit a *beedi* with one hand and pulled ahead. No jerks. He moved out of the bus stop and hit the road. There were some bicycles and an odd motorbike on the road. The Sumo was ducking them, slowing down, and picking up speed. Still no jerks. I wondered if the Sumo had super-absorbent shock absorbers. We were finally on the way to Tawang, a journey of 532 km. It was 7 AM.

We had covered 10 km from Tezpur when we saw a crowd far ahead on the road; the passengers gripped their seats in anticipation. In his gruff voice, broken by his *beedi* smoking, the driver said, "If asked everyone say we were coming from Guwahati in the night and had a puncture so are delayed. We intend to cross over into Arunachal and are sorry we are here while the bandh is on."

We neared the crowd and were pleasantly surprised to see they were teenagers and had come for recruitment into the Army. A number of jawans lined the road, getting the boys into order. I saw the driver's hands on the steering wheel; the *beedi* firmly held between his index finger and thumb, its ash precariously tipped to fall on his jeans. Just before that could happen, he lifted the *beedi* to his mouth and casually flicked the ash on the floor. Fields extended on the sides. Next to me was someone whose features were North Indian. He said, "Earlier this was all jungle, they started cutting trees inside to smuggle wood and slowly this is what is left." He pointed towards the single file of trees lining the road.

"You speak Hindi and English here?" I asked, pleased to know I would not have a real communication problem.

He nodded in affirmation. "People prefer it to local languages."

We cruised down the slightly bumpy road, still no jerks. I stared out of the windows as the fields receded in my vision. Dark and wiry women walked along the road with haystacks on their heads. They were perfectly poised, the stacks perfectly still on their heads, their legs marching in step, their tightly wrapped maroon and brown saris hugging their bodies. Many of them had a baby slung on their backs. When they turned to look at our vehicle, I saw them smiling and singing in low voices. Some men carrying spades walked down the other side of the road. The morning light bathed the landscape in a white haze. As the sun rose, the light mist lifted and distant cottages come into view, smoke rising from behind some of them. It was almost too calm to be true, especially when two days back, at the same hour, I had haggled with the *taxi wallah* on the way to Mother Teresa's home in Calcutta.

In about an hour, we reached a grey, unpainted, concrete archway and found the road barricaded. The driver parked the Sumo on the side of the road and got down to talk

to the policemen. Some of the passengers started fumbling for papers in their pockets. They got down and proceeded towards the check-post. The policemen checked their credentials. The man next to me nudged me to go down. The two women did not have papers and the main driver took the policemen to the side to decide on the favour they would need to exempt the women traveling without the permit. After the formalities we moved to tiny ramshackle hotels on the sides of the road. Women stood in front of New Bhalukpong Hotel and almost all of us trickled in there. I ordered coffee without sugar and women in the kitchen started preparing breakfast for the other travellers. I was careful not to eat any solids, intending to manage with protein biscuits.

“What *maderchod*, they are wasting time here,” said the grumbling passenger from the front seat, a shawl slung on his shoulders.

“It is okay, where do you have to go?” Asked the man next to me.

“Dirang, have been traveling for three fucking days. Delhi is so bloody far away.” The grumbling passenger replied in a whining tone, seeking our sympathy.

The woman who brought the coffee had deep, sad eyes. Their glassy look spoke of the difficulties of the roadside existence, probably a drunkard husband, and probably many children. Though one can never be sure about such things, I realized I was imposing an idea on her reality. I felt an urge to speak to her. Since there was also a provision store in front I asked, “Can I get a pair of nail clippers here?”

“Twenty rupees,” she said coldly.

I paid her and noticed the outline of the sitting Buddha drawn in pencil and filled with *mantras* in a language I did not understand. Someone had drawn it on dusty paper pasted under the signboard of the hotel. Later when I was going to the toilet through the hotel, I saw the woman chatting animatedly with the main driver.

When the driver came out of the hotel, I decided to ask, “What is your name?”

“Call me Mama, that’s what everyone calls me,” he replied in a husky voice.

“See, I have just one full day at Tawang. Can I see it? Fully?”

“The Sumo returns day after, if you want I can ask the other driver to take you to the China border, but it might be risky. Depends on the snow.” He was patient with me, as if explaining the world to a child.

“You mean if it snows I can’t go? Will it snow?” I had never seen proper snowfall and was excited about the idea.

“If it snows you can go, part of the path is over a frozen lake. If it snows the lake will get a new cover.”

Oh! Inclement weather could also be a good thing, I said to myself wondering about the strangeness of the terrain. We resumed our journey. The road was smooth and passed over many small bridges and culverts, but there was little water in the brooks. The landscape was different from earlier. A thick tree cover lined the road. Dense, deep green leaves held back the view of the valley that was beginning to emerge as the road tilted upwards. Suddenly there were vehicles coming down opposite us. It was an Army convoy. To my surprise they did not stop and we had to move the Sumo to the side. I asked my neighbour, “Isn’t this wrong? Normally the vehicle climbing up has right of way.”

He smiled. “Not when the vehicles coming down belong to the Army. Here the Army gets whatever it asks for. By the way, I am Doctor Lok Nath Singh.”

“And I am Aman, from Bangalore. Where are you from?” I asked.

“I am settled here, but originally from Bihar.”

“You are an MBBS doctor?”

“Yes. I belong to the Health department, been here for twenty years now,” he said. “It’s a nice place, people are good.” His face spoke of years of monotonous work.

“No feelings against outsiders?” I was trying to be politically conscious.

He laughed. “Poor people sir, they don’t have food, they die of illnesses. What do they care who gives them some nourishment.”

“But what work do they do? The state has no industry, no infrastructure?”

“People do agriculture. You know, it is the state with the lowest density of population, thirteen people per square kilometre. I handle West Kemang, with two other doctors. Sometimes it takes me a week to reach a village; in the meantime, the patient can die. The only way to the huts is on foot.” He was speaking mechanically, as someone who knows his life was bound and could not change.

“And what are the diseases?”

“Cholera, malaria, these people cannot store drinking water. They do not know how to store water, the government does not teach them. Yet, there is so much water here, see the river below.” I looked out to see a breathtaking view of the Kemang River. The mountains on either side cut into a small V at the bottom, letting the river through. The Kemang was rushing furiously down the gorge; its speedy water touched rocks and the froth made tiny islands of white in the blue expanse.

“No AIDS? HIV?” I was carrying over my impression of Manipur and Nagaland into Arunachal. “We plains people think all hill people are alike.”

“Not a single case till now. No drugs even, in the villages. Some towns are getting infected though, Bomdilla is suffering. The problem here is local liquor. People will not drink tea, but cannot live without liquor. Men and women alike,” the doctor said with the understanding of someone who has tried hard to kill the evil, but has resigned himself to the permanent enemy.

The Sumo was climbing higher. The road was breaking at points but the driver was good and we were moving at an even pace, no jerks. Small waterfalls draped the sides of our mountain and fell into the river below but disappeared long before it reached there. I looked back towards the river. It was thinning down, a bright blue pencil mark in the wide expanse of alpine green around it. The bends of the road were getting sharper. The vehicles from the opposite side honked before turning down; so did our driver. As they crossed each other they exchanged a few words gathering information about conditions ahead. The air was getting cleaner. I lit a cigarette. No one objected.

I resumed the conversation. “So what about your family?”

“Two daughters and one son. Now daughter studies in Guwahati, she is in +2.” Then he suddenly asked, “How is Bangalore?”

“Bangalore is a nice place. Why?”

He was serious. “What to do? No good schools and colleges here. They have hostels for boys there?”

“Yes, there are many schools.”

“Are they very expensive?”

I nodded and he fell back into his reverie. I could almost guess his thoughts: he had given twenty years to this state, and yet he did not have enough to get a good education for his children. He was a doctor, what about the common people? I wondered.

“What about the men and women here? I mean I see so few men. In that hotel, all the workers were women.” I tried to change the topic.

“Men marry multiple times,” he said.

“That’s nice. I guess I will settle here.” I made light of the situation.

“You can’t, unless you marry a local person,” he replied with a smile. “And you can’t marry a local person unless you have *mithuns*.”

“*Mithuns*?”

“Hill buffalos.”

“So that is the catch?”

“Yes, first fowl, then deer and then the parents of the girl decide how many *mithuns*. I had a health worker once who had seven wives. He was very rich to start with. Finally, the women kicked him out and he had no money left. None of his twenty-three children support him. He is a drunkard.”

“I see.”

The doctor’s small hamlet came and he got off. We exchanged addresses and I promised to help him any way I could. The drivers exchanged places and the main driver came and sat next to me. “Cigarette, sir?” He asked.

I handed him the Gold Flake pack and said, “Mama, you drive very well.”

He smiled.

“What is your real name?”

He kept his smile. “Women here would be shocked if I were to be brother to every one of them. But people have been calling me Mama for long. So that is my name.”

“How old are you?”

“Guess.”

“Thirty-five.”

He dismissed my answer with a nod. “I want to know your story,” I requested.

“What is there to know? I was six years old when China attacked.” He said casually.

“No way, you can’t be nearing fifty!” I exclaimed.

“Why?”

I looked at him closely. No streaks of grey, shiny black eyes, a flat nose, black lips, a brown face, and cheeks flushed with blood. No, he did not look a day older than thirty-five. But, I had read, hill men looked young through life.

“And what have you been doing all these years? Driving?”

“Yes. Not a single accident. I ran away from home when the war broke out.”

“Why?” I realized he had stopped looking at me. He took long puffs on the cigarette, blew out the smoke to the front seats.

We were passing over a flat stretch of road. The road was wide enough for the big Shaktiman Army trucks to cross us. On the left, the green river flowing in the opposite direction was leveling against our path. The river was wider and the water was so clear one could see the cream and red pebbles at the base. Some children were playing alongside, throwing stones to see whose went farthest.

An Army base began. I saw boards saying ‘Forget Not’ on the sides of the tin and bamboo Army structures facing the road. For a while, I had been noticing yellow signboards saying ‘Forget Not’. I had not realized that the boards were displaying the name of a base. Why would they call themselves ‘Forget Not’? Was the Army trying to

etch its place in the people's consciousness? Was it a declaration that without the Army the road could not sustain itself? Was it a reminder of what happened on the higher reaches in 1961? The road atlas said this road was constructed after the 1961 debacle.

"My uncle was a school teacher and he was very strict. One day he hit me hard so I ran away from home," Mama replied slowly, pondering each word.

"Where was home?"

"Nagaon, my father was a farmer. My mother cried a lot; she later told me she had given me up for dead till I returned after fifteen years."

"Where did you go?"

"Where else? Guwahati. I took up work in a hotel, supplying tea and cleaning tables. After one whole year of working, the owner paid me Rs 7. That is when I ran away from there." He had an impish grin.

"And then?"

"A *Babu* used to come to the hotel. He liked me so he took me to his house in Shillong. My job was to play with the *Babu's* child. His wife used to go away every afternoon, and the *Babu* used to be at work. So, they wanted someone at home. I worked there for two years. They were nice to me. But I was bored, so I came back to Guwahati." I could make out Mama's eyes were glassy, though they were not looking at me directly.

I listened quietly; the man was getting into his element. "I went back to the same hotel and this time the owner hired me back for Rs 100 for a year. A *Sahib* used to come to this hotel every evening. He started liking me and I started keeping table for him. After serving him tea, I would rush out to wipe his car and to see my face on its bonnet. By the time he finished I would have polished the vehicle sparkling clean. Finally he took me home." Mama lit another cigarette. I liked his ease with my cigarette pack.

"He was a motor parts shop owner. I stayed with him and his wife for four years and learnt everything about the trade. They were from Madhya Pradesh and treated me like their own child. They had no other children. I even gave my earnings to Aunty. She would never eat until her husband I had eaten dinner. It was a lot of love, but then I met a truck driver who told me he could teach me driving. So I decided to leave."

"But they loved you."

"Well, love was there, but I wanted to drive. When I told them, they said I could learn to drive the car. I wanted to drive on the highway. After they spent a whole evening crying and trying to convince me to give up my plans, I sneaked out in the night. Even left all my money with Aunty."

"Did you ever get the money back?"

"Yes, after two years I drove down in my truck. They were very happy to see me. Aunty gave me the whole money tied in a cloth."

"But what happened after you left them?"

"That truck driver refused to take me. He said if I joined him, he would never be able to show his face at the motor parts shop. I was on my own again, and without any money. I hitchhiked to Itanagar, learnt driving there. I used to take trucks from Itanagar to Kanyakumari and back." His voice turned huskier with pride.

The Sumo began its steep climb again. Now the road was becoming bad. It had potholes, and in places mud from the mountainside had fallen on the path. The pace was slow, the ride also mildly jerky. After all, I thought, Mama was no longer driving. I saw

the deep valley on the side. The river was again a pencil mark, but slowly the pine trees came into view. The air was getting colder.

“Many years after that I went back home. No one recognized me. My mother’s tears had dried. She had given up on me, thinking I was dead. She had aged, so had my father. I gave them money to marry off my younger sister. The children from the whole town came to see my car. They touched it, climbed on it. I gave them rides. My parents were happy. My father felt I had made something of myself.” I could see him swelling in happiness. And then, he whispered, “I have never said this to anyone.”

“Not even your wife?” I dared to think he was married.

“I tried, two or three times in the earlier days. Just after marriage, you know. But she was always asleep by the time I started telling her this.” He blushed.

“How many children do you have?”

“Two, daughters. Married them off.” He sounded like he did not want to talk about his children.

“You didn’t want sons?”

“For what?”

“You know, to take care of you?”

“No child really takes care. Why do I need care? I could have been very rich, but I chose to drive. I ran fleets of taxis for others, never wanted my own. Have provided for my wife, married my daughters. What more do I need? My two educated brothers are worse off than me. One runs a *paan* shop in Tezpur, the other has gone mad.”

I was quiet, listening.

“You know, in those days there was a respect for drivers. People would not trust their lives into anybody’s hands. They trusted the drivers. There were very few like me. None of the other drivers were locals. I loved that respect. I was uneducated, though now I can speak English and Hindi. Then I knew only Assamese. I loved the way people looked at me,” he said slowly, confidently, as a man who has reached where he wanted to reach. “That is why I am driving today. These days I drive selectively, only on days when I feel like it or when there is an external reason and drivers do not want to risk themselves.”

“Are you a local?”

He smiled. “From my birth yes, but our family is from Bangladesh. I am Salim and that guy,” he pointed to the current driver, “is Islam.” I looked into his face and he said, “Bomdilla has come. We shall break for tea.”

Bomdilla is one of the big towns of Arunachal Pradesh. It is spread over hills, the roads dipping in and rising suddenly. There was hardly any traffic, as the people preferred to walk instead of juggling their vehicles around the place. As it was the Losar festival that day, the high school grounds had a fair.

When we stopped for tea and snacks, the person who was earlier cursing the Sumo drivers for the break was most eager to eat snacks. I stopped him and offered him protein biscuits instead, telling him that such rushed eating would result in vomiting. “We *faujis* are strong, nothing happens to us.” He refused my offering.

“Oh, are you from the Army?” I was surprised. “But you have not eaten properly for some time.”

“So?” He growled at me.

He started throwing up as soon as we started driving. I asked Islam to park on the side and gave the man an Avomine tablet. Within a few minutes, he was asleep. The Sumo stayed on its upward course, steadily inching over the broken road. I saw boulders on the side; some Army jawans were digging the mountainside and levelling the road. The river disappeared on the other side of the road but a new vista opened up. I could see mist gathered near the peaks on the upper reaches of the mountains. Some of the trees there had a white cover. The cover was fragile and did not extend throughout the eye line. The sights were on one side of the mountains and whenever the Sumo turned, they disappeared. The other side was a deep valley extending many kilometres.

Mama was still sitting next to me and I asked, "It must be something to drive on this road every day. Do you train people also?"

"Islam is my student. I have trained two others," he said, and asked, "Are you writing a book?"

"I am not sure, just came to experience the North East. Will come again soon, this time in my own car. Will you drive me around?"

"We'll see." He smiled and I asked, "Who were the two others you trained?"

"One of them, poor guy, lost his hearing partially."

"Why?"

"We were on top of a bus, removing some stuff and I slapped him. I used to get very angry. He fell down and there was blood from his ear. He went running to my wife. She treated him. No one said anything to me and the boy came back. Then I trained him." He kept looking the other way while he spoke.

"Was it *praschit*?"

"We don't believe in atonement. I felt if he could come back even after what I did, he deserved to get the best I could offer."

The Sumo slowed down to a crawl. I looked ahead and saw stones and water. There was no road. Islam was having difficulty and looked towards Mama. Mama smiled and bid him to give another try. Islam raised the accelerator, compressed the clutch, shifted to the first gear, and slowly released the clutch when the Sumo was revving heavily. The Sumo spurted, raised itself over the stones, and suddenly stopped; Islam had released the full clutch.

Mama said, "Now get it right," and then spoke to everyone, "Get down please."

Islam was again on the steering. The Sumo crossed the patch. The Army man was dozing off inside. We walked ahead, the men urinated on the roadside, and Mama said, "It is not that the road is bad. They fix it, but it always breaks again. Once a big Army gun fell down a ravine. What is it called? Bofors? It took them one week to get it out. Traffic stopped on the road completely."

"Can I ask you something?" I asked cautiously while walking next to him.

"Haven't you asked everything?" He smiled.

"No, I haven't asked something yet. Do you know the ULFA?"

He went quiet. "We should not be talking about these things," he whispered.

"I know, that is why I am asking here, when we are not in the Sumo," I answered.

"Yes, I know some of their people. During Operation Bajrang in November 1990 the Army learnt that I was a driver and ferried messages for the ULFA. They took me with them to Lakhpathar." He seemed unsure on how much he should tell me.

"And what did you do there?"

“I chose not to co-operate with the Army.”

“Why?”

“See Sir, I do not know if ULFA is right or not. But the Army was certainly wrong in insulting innocent people and in torturing them to reach ULFA,” he said with a trace of anger in his voice.

“But you are a Bangladeshi, was the ULFA not against you.” I knew I could be direct with him now.

“How is the Army concerned? Or Delhi? They are hardly here when the Brahmaputra floods every year, who are they to tell us how we should live? Actually, the ULFA did show us that it was possible to have good roads and *bunds* to stem the floods. ULFA was not against Bangladeshis. It wanted an independent Assam.” Mama was not looking at me but I could see anger rising in his eyes. His anger was at the world getting the ULFA wrong.

I tried to calm him down. “So did you see the football match Paresh Barua played with the police?” It was rumoured that one of the principal architects of the ULFA had actually played a match and scored many goals in broad daylight against a team from the Assam police.

He laughed. “I wouldn’t know, sir. Barua is God for people around here. No one has seen the God. We won’t even know if he was to be sitting in the Sumo with us.”

I was silent.

“In 1991 the Army also took me to the Namsai forests of Lohit district in Arunachal to help in their operation. Operation Rhino. Again it was a flop, but they did push the boys into Assam.” We reached the Sumo that had now moved ahead of us.

We got back into the Sumo and drove ahead at a slow and steady pace. More Army vehicles were crossing, and every time they came we had to lurch to the side of the road. The views were getting better; the river appeared again and the journey was now downhill. We continued in silence for an hour or so. I was completely taken up by the view outside. We reached Dirang. “Lunch here,” Mama announced, and we parked near a small hotel on the bank of the river. The green-blue water was clean and some of us washed our faces. The matron of the hotel was already smiling and hovering around Mama. He went into a back room, and took Islam and me along. The matron served us steaming hot pork curry and rice. I ate a little, scared of falling ill or asleep and missing the sights. After tea, Mama decided to stay back. “I shall meet you tomorrow, at Tawang,” he said, removing his shoes. The matron put them away, and he reclined back on a cot. The matron saw us off and shouted something to her kitchen staff.

After a while, near an Army gate, the Army man woke up and got down to walk towards his base. I sat on the front seat and we moved on.

Soon after that, the mountaintops changed and the icy blanket was visible again. The clouds gathered on the peaks and a light snow covered the pine trees. The air was chilly, so we rolled up the windows. The road started deteriorating. It was now a bumpy ride over many kilometers. At many places, the sides of the roads were broken, and the vertical stone slabs, which lined the edges, were missing. The brown earth was licking its tongue upwards. Shortly after Dirang we crossed a point where the river turned away, and we were now alone on the road. For many kilometres, no vehicle crossed us. When I rolled down the windows to puff out the cigarette I was smoking. The vehicle filled up

with cottony moisture. As I wiped my face a man from behind said, “These are clouds.” It was absolutely silent; the only sound was the swish-swash of the tires on the road.

As the Sumo moved ahead, the vegetation decreased and the brown and grey steep inclines emerged. Slowly we started seeing wider patches of snow, now covering the sides of the mountains. The road was wet. At some places it had fissures running through it, and the road was cracking up in the middle. Islam had to keep one foot on the brake all the time; the vehicle bore the brunt of it. I asked, “How often do you change the tires and brake shoes?”

“Once in six months.” He spoke softly. Mama had talked about trusting the driver. I realized for the last one hour, on a road that was extremely treacherous, I had trusted Islam without even knowing how he spoke.

The grey, dirty snow started covering entire mountains and as we turned on the curves, the snowfields kept increasing. We saw large expanses of snow, at some places broken by lines of short black poles. “Those poles tell you where the river flows,” the man beside me said.

“Which river?” I asked.

“Kemang, the Army has made a boundary on its two sides. It is risky to walk over it, even if it has snowed. There might be water underneath.” He smiled knowingly, guessing that I had assumed we had lost the river behind. I had.

The snow started changing colour; now it was whiter and seemed fresher. I looked on in awe and mentally noted the kilometres to Tawang: 181. Suddenly, we turned on the side of what seemed like a valley. But there was no valley. It was clouds, a huge bundle of clouds encompassing everything down below. It must have been more than a couple of kilometers wide and broad. The vehicle went over wet mud and started skidding. Islam pushed through, and on the other side, I saw a similar vast expanse of cloud with snow-covered peaks on the far side shining white and bright. The sun had suddenly come out of the clouds and the snow on the valley edge glistened. A huge board on the side said: You are at 14,700 feet, the highest point on this road. The snow was getting thicker. Where it had been an inch earlier, it was at least two feet now. Soft flakes from the previous night covered the entire road. The road was completely slippery; that the Sumo held on to it was a miracle.

We pulled up next to a solitary house made entirely of wood planks. As we entered, I saw a huge furnace in the middle with a chimney releasing the smoke out of the roof. It had a small hole on the side, to throw in wood. The three men on the back seat went to a counter and ordered a pint of liquor each. They drank it neat. “Nothing else can beat the cold,” said and grinned one of them. My hands were freezing; with difficulty, I lit a cigarette and drank the hot tea. The man who had grinned at me came out of the shop behind me and said, “That is Sella Shiv Temple, go pay your respects.”

I walked towards the red structure. It had small strips of cloth tied all over: on the door, and from strings on the walls and ceiling. Inside was the portrait of Shiv and a woman: Sella. I wondered whether to enter. I would have had to remove my shoes. I was uncertain about the cold. I bent, touched the steps to the temple, and moved back.

“Sella and Noor were with Baba Jaswant Singh when the Chinese attacked. Jaswant Singh was alone; the girls provided him food and ammunition. The Indian forces were yet to come but Jaswant Singh held the Chinese back for 72 hours. When they learnt that he was alone they overpowered him. 3000 Chinese soldiers and one Baba Jaswant.

When they hanged him, Sella and Noor jumped off from the cliffs,” the man beside me told me as we resumed our journey. The snow on the road was now more than three to four feet deep. The Sumo kept skidding and advancing.

Islam continued where the man left off, “The Chinese had reached up till Tezpur. They could have taken the bridge on Brahmaputra, and rolled into Assam. But the war came to an end. India accepted defeat.”

Boards said: No Photography. The Army structures were camouflaged. The roofs of all the tin sheds were white, and the sides painted in dirty green and brown. The patterns were haphazard and could cheat even a pilot flying overhead, unless he was too low. Islam told me, if he were that close, the anti-aircraft guns hidden at strategic corners under straw mats would pick the plane. I saw another vast expanse of white fenced in with the short black poles. “That is a lake,” said Islam.

Soon after that, the river came into sight again. But this time it meandered through blocks of snow. As the Sumo went over a single vehicle bridge the notice on the side said: Constructed in record time: 18 days. The team was awarded the president’s medal for the most difficult construction of the year 2001.

Again, Army vehicles crossed us; however, this time the drivers on both sides were cautious. They gave way depending upon whose situation was more perilous. No one could afford a vehicle falling here. It would be the Army’s responsibility to bring it out. If someone died, the body would stay frozen forever in these deep cold pits. The Army had everything here: big burly dogs to helipads, big guns to the wet canteen. We moved on in silence, Islam jostling the Sumo over the tough terrain.

After around fifty kilometres and two hours, the ride became easier. The road was wider, and a small white temple showed up on the side. Islam parked the Sumo. I walked up to find Baba Jaswant’s memorial. On one side was a glass room with a bronze bust of the man. In a small alcove near it were two pictures of the man, some letters of his, and cash lying under a small stone. No one touched it. Beside those were his belt, stars, and a strip showing his regiment colours.

“The watchman here has to clean the stars and belt every day,” said Islam as he finished bowing.

“What could happen if he does not do that?”

Islam smiled. “They say three times in the last forty years the watchman on duty forgot to clean them and those nights he got a beating. Baba’s ghost wanders here still, seeing to it that he is respected.”

We had crossed one mountain range and the movement was downhill. The range behind us looked azure in the fading light, while the one we were on was brown with small patches of green. There was snow on the sides but the texture was finer, lighter. Some pines started showing themselves, so did some rhododendrons. It was already 5 PM and the lights in the next valley were up. From a point on the road, Islam showed me Tawang. The town was dim lights covering a whole side of a mountain, like fireflies on a solitary gigantic tree on the side of a lonely road.

“Will we reach by 7 PM?” I asked. As the Sumo glided downwards, some cars and jeeps passed by. “People are getting back from work,” Islam answered.

Suddenly it was dark and we were reaching Jang when at a corner a boy waved us to stop. “Four seats for tomorrow,” he shouted.

“We come back the day after,” Islam replied.

“Then what will you do tomorrow?” the boy asked.

“What business is it of yours?” Islam raced the Sumo.

We stopped at Evergreen Hotel. It also had an all-women crew. Islam washed the side of the Sumo dirtied by the Army man and we helped ourselves to tea and coffee. As we resumed the journey into Jang, a group of young boys stopped our Sumo. “We are students, we need some money,” one of them shouted, “It is our function today.”

“No money,” Islam replied brusquely.

“We are Indians, we are proud to be Indian. Money?” The boy did not let go.

Islam looked inside and asked if we would dole out money. I nodded. Islam handed a Rs. 20 note. “Thank you,” the boy screamed, “India, Hip, hip, hurray!”

After this, the road broke down completely. Now, in the dark, the difficulties seem to increase. The headlights could not pick far ahead and we slowed down to a crawl. Loose mud, stones, boulders, gravel, and water formed the road. After another hour and a half -- though we covered just 20 km -- and we reached our destination.

Tawang was dark. Clouds roamed the streets. No shop was open. Small yellow windows peeked out in the black line of sight. “It is Losar today,” said Islam, as if that explained everything.

“But where are the people?” I asked incredulously. All over India cities, towns, villages are open on the day of a festival.

“They celebrated in the day. Now they are locked at home. Which hotel?”

“Hotel Buddha.”

Islam dropped me off and asked for the Rs 20. As I handed it over to him he said, “Mama will come here tomorrow afternoon. I will tell him your hotel name. I am at New Friends Hotel.” He vanished in the dark.

I climbed up the steep wooden stairs, my bag on my back. “I had booked a room here,” I told the short young man at the counter.

“Aman?” he asked. I nodded.

He gave me the key. “Room 202.”

The room was all wood, the panels, the floor; I turned on the television. The young man was still in the room when I asked him for warm water. “No warm water, only tomorrow. Overhead tank frozen. Today is festival. Staff out in a party.”

I stared uncomprehendingly. “It is minus seven degrees Centigrade,” he said.

“Food? Soda? Cigarettes?” I had some liquor from the previous day in my bag.

“Nothing.” He marched off.

I closed the door and walked out. I was determined to feed myself, have a drink and a smoke. It was so bloody cold. I walked the streets. After around half an hour of walking and not meeting anybody, and realizing that I was going in circles, I finally saw a small open door. I walked in to see three men working on sewing machine. It was a tailoring shop.

“Excuse me; will I get some cigarettes and food at this hour?” I asked tentatively.

One of them looked at me and smiled. “Nothing, the town is closed.”

“And what are you doing here? Working at this hour?”

“Deciding whether to go for the party or not. There is police there,” another man said.

“What party?”

“The tribals are having a party at the club.”

“Then why can’t you go?”

“Because we are not tribals,” the second man replied.

“And the police? What is police doing there?”

“Stopping outsiders from going in,” the first man replied.

The third man said, “There is one place where you could get something. It is a small shop called Vaishali’s shop run by a young girl. Might be open.”

“Where is it?”

“Go down straight and turn left at the crossing. It is right there.”

I hurried off, and found the shop partly open, they supplied me with mixture, soda, and cigarettes. On my way back, I saw a lit STD booth. When I knocked, a boy led me to a room where some men were playing carrom. In the dim light, the cigarette smoke and the fine white powder that rose onto the ghostly men made them look eerie. Those silent ghosts, wrapped in thick shawls, sounding off their strikes in a damp, quiet room were tucked away from the cares of the world. I felt I did not belong to the real world I had left behind that morning.

The phone was on the other end of the room. I called some friends, wanting them to know that they were getting a call from probably the farthest point in India. Tawang is on the West of Arunachal but there are no roads on the East. At least in the road atlas.

It was a very quiet 10 PM. I went back to my room, and found a plate with cold rice and daal on the table. I poured my drink, watched television, and fell into a restless sleep. I felt my body aflame and my mind alert. It was 2.30 AM; I tossed in bed watching time through the dark windows. Some images flitted across the TV screen. I got up and wore my shoes.

I opened the room door and started walking down the steps. The place was still. Either it was devoid of all the noise and clutter of a normal town or the fog not only reduced visibility but also the auditory senses. I seemed to be moving like an apparition through a cloud of silence in the dim yellow light of the stairs. The place felt pure, sanctified. I got out and the streetlight was a dull white haze somewhere close to the skies. I started walking downtown and suddenly noticed a glow in the sky. Dawn might be still a few hours away but the sky was gently lit in a pale orange light, and the fog had lifted from the streets. I was at a crossroad and on all sides I saw roads flowing down. I took the path in front of me; somehow I felt that it would lead to the monastery. As I walked between the grey buildings I reached a dead-end. I turned back and took another road, in the same general direction. Yesterday, Islam had pointed out the hill that had the monastery. I started walking towards it.

The shrubs on the slopes looked darker, but the mountains looked friendly and inviting. They beckoned me to climb them. The path wound out as stony steps through bushy undergrowth with the trees looming large. It led on to trails in the dense jungle and I kept taking them on instinct, sometimes even feeling I was moving away from the monastery. I continued walking as rabbits scuttled in and out of bushes and birds made their early morning calls. The sky was still visible through the trees but I wished to see dawn breaking over Tawang.

My pants were wet with dew, and my sweater torn on the sleeve from a thorny bush when I moved out of the tree cover just in time to see the sky turning pink, then purple. In a few minutes it was deep red and finally again orange as dawn broke over the

Tawang Chuu Valley. The snow on the mountains changed colour as the sky lit up. I felt the peaks were brighter than the sun. The world could be beautiful if you looked at it from a point beyond the creator and the created, the doer and the deed. As the sun peeked its head from behind the hills I looked sideways and realized I had crossed ahead of the monastery. I climbed back and proceeded towards it, panting from my cigarette-blackened lungs.

Lamas in maroon robes chanting the shlokas greeted me on the path. The 400-year-old stone monastery, Galden Namgyal Lhaste, was the second oldest in Asia and biggest in India. This was where the sixth Dalai Lama was born. It is laid out like a small fortress with steep paths and beguiling facades. Where you expect to find a path, there stands a blockade and as soon as you turn away from a wall, a path was revealed.

I came in front of the main building and I realized I did not know how to enter. In deference to all the temples in India, I left my shoes out and hesitatingly took a few steps inside. The Parkhang Hall of the monastery houses a library that has rare handwritten and block-printed Thankas or manuscripts of revered books like Tangym, Kangyur, and Sunghbum. Other uncommon works of Buddhist literature include 108 gold embossed manuscripts of the Teachings of Lord Buddha and 225 volumes of the explanations of Buddha's teachings covered with specially designed mothproof silk adorned with paintings.

I saw the base of the golden Buddha. On its side was a fat monk holding a piece of bread. The light was dim and slowly I could make out other figures, children in the aisles and the sides. They all had milk and bread in their hands. A huge bell hung close to the floor just in front of the Buddha but I did not know if it was proper to touch it. I bowed to the main monk and found my way out. I felt unnerved at having entered a sanctum sanctorum without knowing the manners of the place. I felt embarrassed at finding myself an outsider in the closed community of Buddhist brethren. From the outside I saw steps go up; someone in the Sumo had mentioned that the Buddha at the monastery is nine meters tall. I climbed up; scared if I was breaking a rule but I found no one on the way who could tell me if I was doing the right thing. I was tempted to see the Buddha. From the middle floor, I could see the palms of the Buddha in front of his massive body. One palm outstretched and another straight, pointing upwards and revealing the Buddhist belief: Give, Be Compassionate, Be Self-Controlled.

I climbed up to the third floor and from here I could see the whole of the Buddha. He looked serene, and composed, and made you feel that you had come to a point in the world where you could make a new beginning. I admired the ease with which I was able to reach here, though I had never intended to come this far to reach him. The journey, the years I could not come here, seemed to pale in significance of this one meeting. It felt like everything had been worth it. In fact, it seemed like this meeting was not even required to make me feel like my visit was worth it; the journey itself had been the experience.

I reached the hotel and found a delicious bucket of hot water waiting for me in the bathroom. I bathed, rested, and went out to visit the town by early afternoon. The young man from yesterday came over and I asked him, "Where are you from? You do not look tribal." His features were sharp and from his accent he seemed like he was from Calcutta.

"I am Mukti Chowdary, from Rajasthan." He smiled.

“And how come here? Is this your hotel?”

“No, I work here. A few years back my family asked me to find work and I decided to come here.”

“And what about people in the hotel? They too do not seem tribal.”

“The hotel belongs to an MLA; we are all from Rajasthan, Assam, Bengal. Tribals do not work here,” he said. “Tribals hardly work anywhere. They make shawls.”

“Then what was the party last night? The only party I know of was of the tribals.”

“Oh, that. Our boss also gave a party; we made it a *marwari* party. All *marwaris* and their friends went for it.” He began to understand my question.

“I see, and why on the day of the tribal festival?” I asked a little harshly. I did not like this parochial way of talking about one community.

“It was coincidental. We had been thinking of a party for the last ten days and thought why not have it when the town is closed. We can all close shops early.”

I nodded; my breakfast of eggs and bread arrived. I ate it and left to see the native Monpas scattered across the town on their small terrace farm holdings. Almost every house had butter lamps in front, from the previous night. Some had lit them again, even during the day. Hand woven shawls and wood handicraft pieces – walking sticks, peacocks, fruit bowls, pen stands, and mats – were displayed in verandahs. I bought some, haggling over the price. Again women conducted most of the business, while men tended to the cattle and yaks.

A young man started following me around. He was handsome, dressed in a navy-blue blazer and pants. I noticed others gravitating towards him. He caught up with me and asked, “Mukti told me about you. You from Bangalore?”

“Yes. And you? Who are you?”

“I am Nitin, from Nepal. I run the PlayWin centre.” He looked too confident.

“How much is the maximum someone has won through PlayWin here?” I consider online lottery to be a big sham.

“45 lakhs, the District Commissioner won it,” he smiled. “Want to talk business?”

“45 lakhs?”

I noticed Salim sitting on the steps of a shop playing cards. I called him aside to take me to the Urgelling, Rigyalling, and Taktsang monasteries. We left the handsome PlayWin boy and visited the monasteries and the Martyrs’ Memorial. Mama met us at the centre of town at around 2 PM and I asked him for a visit to the border.

He checked with a few people and decided to take me. The board said 32 km to the border post. The road was full of snow, some fallen last night. It was fluffy and wet. Often Islam had to get down to clear the windshield and we passed over a stretch that, Mama said, was actually a lake now covered with thick snow. The landscape was pristine white and when we reached the border, we found heavily clothed Army jawans standing near a post. There was no gate, unlike Wagah near Amritsar. It was just barren, white, beautiful land.

“Is this China?” I was excited.

The sentry laughed. “Yes it is. You want to go in?”

“If possible *saab*, would just come back,” I requested while Mama and Islam stand there smoking *beedis*.

The sentry laughingly waved me on.

“But there are no Chinese guards here.”

“They are there, a little away. It has snowed so you cannot see them,” the sentry said. “And they are here all the time and we are there all the time. Disguised as *sherpas*. We keep roaming the areas, checking for information.”

I took my first steps into China. After a few paces, I returned. Been there, done that. “Who is your enemy?” I asked the sentry.

He smiled. “The cold. The countries are hardly going to fight each other again.”

On the way back I asked Mama, “What is the problem with Tawang? I see such a difference between outsiders and tribals.”

“The problem is the road. Now they have made one through Bhutan, to Guwahati. That takes just six hours. Once that is open Tawang is dead.”

“The road? I thought roads were good, they brought development.”

“Is that so?” He asked and I wondered.

To change the topic a little bit I asked, “And you? What will you do when that happens? Who would want to travel twenty hours when they can make it in six?”

“I will be here, on my road. I chose this over everything in life because this is one of the toughest roads in the world.” He turned and for the first time locked eyes with me. “I want to drive here, die here.”