



IN THE SNOW WHITE COFFIN

Tuesday, January 3, 2017 – from Khajuraho to Bhopal (India)

(23.955103,78.893055)

I will not shut my eyes tonight. not for a moment. I will withstand it, I will last it out. There is no going back to the good fortune of solid ground under one's feet, no opportunity to get off.

If only the bus would travel a little faster! At walking speed the old Renault plows through the darkness. Every now and then a small fire glows by the roadside, and the outlines of men emerge from the dense fog on the ground. They warm their hands by the fire, their heads hidden in thick shawls. Rarely glows a solitary oil lamp within a house. The petrol pumps shine the brightest.

I should have insisted on getting a regular seat. As it turns out I find they've locked me, with all my luggage, into a Snow White coffin. The narrow, just-about-150-cm-long bunk I'm trapped in, is called a sleeper. In different circumstances,

a sleeper would not be so uncomfortable – but, in the cold! These buses are made for warm nights, and bus companies clearly find investing in a heater for just the few cold hours of the year not worth their while. The wind hisses icily in through the rattling window, whistling venomously through the cracks, and winter enters my limbs through every pore in the skin. The window-pane is misty, water is dripping onto my trousers. I push my feet under my luggage to keep them warm. I crawl into the thin, synthetic fibre blanket I bought shortly before departure, and fold myself into a packet, a bundle, in a bid to reduce my body surface smaller, to make it shrink. But not every position is possible, or helpful, and as the bus leaves no hole covered, the wind proceeds to hit my spine like hammer blows, to turn my ribs blue. A vice sits on my



neck, another sticks into my stomach. From time to time, a coughing bout shakes me. Then I drink sugar water, it helps.

We roll into a small town. Nobody on the street at this hour. I see a skinny cow pushing with all her might against a steel rolling-shutter on which «Hunter» is written in large letters.

The bus rattles into a place, honks loud and cheery, brakes, splutters, trembles, and then suddenly stands still. Through the window I look down on two illuminated handcarts: peanutseller and fruitseller. I could get out, stretch my legs, have a cup of tea. But my body feels so stiff that I'm afraid that I will be unable to fold myself into my glass coffin afterwards. I also feel a pressure on my bladder. No doubt it would be wise to go to

the loo. But I do not want to give away anything from me now. So I stay put and count the minutes to the departure. It is one o'clock in the morning and my destination is still distant, at least four hours away.

I reckon I knew just how uncomfortable this night would be. But there is only one bus from Khajuraho to Bhopal. The trip didn't just happen to me: I had decided I could endure it, that I'd survive it. And even if I'm cold now, if my back hurts, if my stomach feels grim, even if I'm coughing and sugar water seems to be the only friend in my immediate surroundings, I still experience a sense of luck – of sorts.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.