

*Nevermind-the-Wailing and the Discarded Husk of a Knight*

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Even though he was a beggar, Nevermind-the-Wailing held a higher standing among the rest of the beggars in the region because he had a rusted tin roof over his head and managed to earn just enough to exist by tickling his single string guitar. He was a gentle and modest fellow who lived in the remnant of a wooden shanty that was so rotten from the incessant morbid rains that it looked like a sunken ship covered with seaweed and mystical underwater cleavers.

Some feet away from his doorstep passed a steep road that led to a couple of Himalayan villages clinging to the top of the mountain. On the other side of his residence fell a gaping abyss that every year, following the seven months long rains, crawled nearer and nearer, threatening to swallow the shanty and its inhabitant into its insatiable belly. As the mountain longed to shake off its uninvited guests, the residence of Nevermind-the-Wailing hung half way over the abyss. This didn't bother its owner much because he had surrendered the reins of fate to Providence long ago. At dusk, when the sun plunged into the infinite abyss next to the shanty, Nevermind-the-Wailing would stand at his small window, in a thick cloud of the acrid smoke, accompanying his lonely nights for decades, and would contemplate life's transience. His way of living and his attitude towards the events decorating his fickle existence corresponded to the attitude to life that was popular all around this region which claimed that a man who is subordinate to various fiendish and divine conspiracies could uphold his dignity only if he spent the rest of his days engulfed in an indolent observation of the paintings that the ubiquitous Providence had on display. People participating in fate's games are doomed to become its pawns. For that reason the most disobedient ones prefer to be carefree stoics who would rather spit on destiny's face than be impotent slaves, tangled up in the net of hopes and illusions.

Early in the morning in a state of putrid hangover Nevermind-the-Wailing came out of his shanty, sat in the dust by the road and arranged carefully the tools that were needed for his work - two dolls that move up and down, pulled by a couple of strings, a bowl for collecting forsaken coins, a pot with incense and a small image of Shiva. When the road was deserted he rolled a cigarette and watched with unshakable forbearance the passing cars covering him with dust while the stray cows tried to occupy his living space. Sometimes he sat like that for hours, until he spotted an auspicious man who looked likely to drop a coin in the bowl. At that point Nevermind-the-Wailing grabbed his single string guitar and started singing the story of his life. It must be noted that he was a very gifted musician, especially if you consider his vocal skills and his unique timbre, which were attained after twenty long years of struggle with ethylated spirits and the harsh mountain tobacco. He always sang the same song, which sometimes lasted for ten seconds and sometimes for two hours, but never changed or underwent any development, because the guitar produced only one note, while the gibberish sounds coming out of his mouth resembled a ghostly melancholy wailing. As he sang, his face radiated unfathomable bliss, which to some extent was the outcome of his continuous retreats to the hemp domains of lost memories that had engraved on his slightly squinted eyes the expression of utopian meekness and bewilderment.

There was hardly anyone who realized that for Nevermind-the-Wailing to achieve the name "honorable balladeer of the Himalayan country song" was a brilliant conclusion of his heroic adolescence, marked with great fervor, bravery and the smell of bad liquor. Not many knew that in his youth the honorable balladeer was an adept bus driver roving the perilous Himalayan roads. Even fewer people

were aware of the dazzling heroic deeds, committed by those venturesome mountain people who dared to become Himalayan bus drivers in those years. May their tombstones, rusting slowly in the dampish canyons of the Kulu Valley, become a symbol of their sacrifice and serve as an example for the future generations!

If somebody wanted to understand the grandeur of Nevermind-the Wailing as a person, he had first to penetrate the mystery that had shrouded the handful of people, who ventured to rebel against the butcher of all living beings:

Pressing the gas pedal to the utmost, a man could give Providence a real hard time by making her decide in a haphazard way which group of fifty people should be thrown in the abyss and which one should be allowed to arrive at its destination still breathing. Most of all, these Knights of the internal-combustion engine showed that the journey with a public bus in the Himalayas is in fact the shortest and most thrilling journey to one's self, especially if one succeeds to overcome the momentary feebleness and continues his deep contemplation on the essence of the universe, while he and the rest of the passengers in the bus descend slowly to the bottom of some infinite precipice.

Every act and motion of the bus drivers is a brilliant manifestation of their zealous knightly character. Every time one of these mighty giants of the pedal and the wheel stops the bus for a tea break and all of a sudden makes off without half of the passengers, laughing at the top of his lungs with the ticket collector, he just expresses his carefree spirit and his complete lack of concern for the mundane aspirations of the wearied voyagers. For how could a true Knight of the internal-combustion engine ever become involved in any worldly intrigues when his frail shoulders bear the responsibility for the moral ascent of the spiritually handicapped rabble of materialists, scrambling with nails and elbows for a seat on his bus? We shouldn't underestimate the influence that the Knights had on the spiritual life of the Himalayan people. For instance reaching some extremely dangerous mountain passes, where the precipices are so bloodthirsty that every year they swallow a frightening number of busses, the shepherds of the spineless herd would transform into priests and present the passengers with one last chance to give up all worldly pleasures and turn their minds to the Beyond. For this purpose they would stop the bus, offer a short prayer to Providence and give out to the passengers little baklava pieces, cooked especially for this occasion, which served as some kind of last sacrament. Of course it goes without saying that those who remained alive after the finalization of this sacred rite would never be the same again, not to mention the ones who didn't.

Yet the most significant pursuits that captivated the minds of the Knights were the duels - rather ordinary contests, which were meant to determine the strength of the will and the spirit of the participants.

The rules for the duels were simple - two busses come from opposite directions, advance with maximum speed and sustain their course until one of the drivers swallows his knightly pride and turns aside, so as to avoid the head-on collision. It's worth mentioning that the more drunk the drivers are, the more difficult it Work them to swallow their knightly pride, which in turn explains why the cases where both drivers come out as winners are so many.

The mental condition of the passengers, watching the duels, always swayed between the extremes of religious fanaticism and total derangement, while their physical state manifested itself as an inexorable longing for continuous and abundant vomiting. People who travel by public buses in the Himalayas throw up as a rule. That is why the preliminary battle for the seats by the window is of paramount importance for the leisure of the passengers for the time of the journey. Unfortunately the troubles weren't over once one got a seat by the window for only the most adept passengers were capable of opening a window, throwing up and closing it at the gap of time when the passengers from the front seats weren't

vomiting. In order to attain a similar degree of proficiency a man should not only be extremely skillful, having in mind that the windows always jammed, but also be very good in taming the untimely eruptions of motion sickness and in the case of severe outburst to be capable of constraining the tempest within the confines of the mouth by inflating the cheeks and goggling one's eyes, and not to let the current escape through the nose - an incident that can lead to sporadic explosions and cause a lot of damage to the passengers in the neighboring seats. Those who haven't developed such skills and throw up whenever they need to, or else can't close the window on time, are bound to amass in their laps a considerable part of the waste discarded by the passengers in the front seats.

And yet is there anything more splendid than a Himalayan bus arriving safely to its final destination? Its whole body bespattered by the giddy passengers, it looks like it has just been delivered from the guts of some huge leviathan. Such an outstanding site would inevitably lead the outsider to the conclusion that people living in the Himalayas feed themselves mainly on grain of all kinds. The multicolored clusters of lentils scattered all over the rusty shell of the bus can be looked at as some sort of festive decoration.

Of course a Knight, who had managed to bring his bus safe and sound to its final destination is not concerned with all that. He expectorates in a kingly manner, puts on the appearance of a saint who works undercover, and walks to the driver's headquarters, where he inscribes his name in a ledger, containing the names of all Knights who had arrived with their buses and a rabble of passengers still breathing.

However Nevermind-the-Wailing didn't put his name in this book, when, on one unforgettable day many years ago, he reached the peak of his fervent yearnings and touched the Beyond in the company of all passengers riding on his bus. Yet the Providence was aware of his aspirations to equalize life and death and decided to bestow on him its highest grant: long time for contemplation. In turn, the honorable balladeer of the Himalayan country song had to part with his lower limbs, which were turned to useless meat beyond recognition.

Hence Nevermind-the-Wailing started a life, devoted to indolent observation in his rotten shanty high in the mountains. During the cold rainy nights the smooth buzzing sound of the kerosene stove would warm his soul and he would fly over the hemp domains of lost memories, leaving behind a string of images that tend to flare up in mind's limitless space and reduce its silence to ashes.

The world had forgotten about him and he had long forgotten about the world, for he was living in a realm where there was no past and no future, hopes or fears. He endured some difficulties only when there was no one to buy him cigarettes and he had to crawl for at least three hundred feet in order to get himself the precious Himalayan tobacco.

Sometimes when a drunken driver rushed by him with his truck and plunged into the abyss, Nevermind-the-Wailing would get lost in thought for an instant, but then he would quickly shake off all the earthly perceptions and continue singing his unchanging tune, as if he had never been interrupted.

It goes without saying that the songs of the blessed ones never change. Moreover words never have any significance for the carefree stoics who devote their lives to indolent observation. That is why the story of the Knight who challenged Destiny doesn't sound so much like a song but rather like a muffled and yet blissful wailing.