

How to Survive a Chicken Bus Crash

for Amy D. Hayes who died June 2001
before she was done writing

The survey is in, the experts agree, and the statistics show that chances are you will board a red and white or orange and blue or even that childhood memory yellow colored-chicken bus and leave your aldea. Your knobby gringo knees press against the metal plate on the seat in front of you, you sweat in the overheated crush of bodies in the dead air of the terminal, waiting, three bodies stacked in every seat.

Watch the grubby "Diario Diario Prensa Libre!" boys brush past other kids dripping ice cream cones splayed like playing cards in their fingers, the girls with buckets of elotes that reek of burnt corn shucks, and finally the blind beggars passing out Tweety Bird postcards at a quetzal a pop. All this noisy life jostles for your attention as the chicken bus shudders to life, air brakes whining as you creep through the city inside a diesel dragon, going away, going to Guate! Guate!, where there are a hundred new things to do.

The vitamin seller shuffles down the aisle, leaning on shoulders for balance, opening his dusty leather bag to reveal the magic goods as we begin to fly. "Muy buenas tardes hermanos y hermanas, tengo vitaminas increíbles hoy, solo para Ustedes. Hacen en un laboratorio en Los Estados, no se puede comprar estas en Guatemala! Dolor de cabeza, dolor del estomago, o mancha en su cara, toma mis pastillas para sentir mejor. Diez quetzales, amigos, precio especial por el día de hoy! No hay mas barato, no hay mas barato!"

With every heave and grind of the clutch, the seller spills more vitamin samples into the laps of his customers. Under his feet the ground roars by 70 miles per hour, going faster, faster to pass the slow camion full of cattle dripping poop off the trailer. Your heart jumps when the tires chatter on the gravel ditch bare inches from the edge of a thirsty gulch. You have to ask yourself, is this safe? And what am I doing here? You have to ask yourself...

BROTHERS AND SISTERS DO YOU BELIEVE IN FATE? What do you believe keeps those fat tires on that sliver of concrete, what keeps us safe while wind howls through broke bus windows; out, out there down the mountain on the crooked horizon, towards the shiny spread of tin roofs and half skyscrapers in the smoggy valley of Guate, Guate!

Do you think somebody forgot to say their prayers and God knocks us off the road just to say, "Hello, look what I can do?" Or is it chance that put us on this particular chicken bus, maybe you woke up 20 minutes too late, just in time to find this mad driver at the wheel of your bus? Or think of a physics problem: Bus A leaves Point B traveling X miles an hour, multiply by friction halved by the gravity coefficient—but stick your formulas in your ear boy, because the chicken bus crash happens one way or the other and now, now, now we go over the top and all I can say is, what do you believe?

Because this chicken bus jumps the road, gone ZOOM off the mountain, complete with a Mexican rap soundtrack heartbeat, that pounding of a broke snare drum wailing through bus speakers: bump dabump bump Bump... As we tumble upside down, mountain tops touching the ground and green, so green trees glittering above us like pine tipped needles. And inside our skinny tube everybody is an astronaut floating in zero gravity; all of us caught in a snow storm of ticket stubs and chicken feathers; a little boy doggy paddles through the air, his wide eyes still staring at you;

vitamins rattle on the ceiling and Indian blankets unwrap in colorful explosions—all these slow motion seconds tumbling through space in a chicken bus.

And before the crash you must see how beautiful it is to be flying and doomed a thousand miles away from home. No matter why you believe you are here, brothers and sisters, keep those teary eyes wide open and see every last pretty and strange thing that happens to you in this chicken bus crash...

Because two days before my friend Amy died, I walked home in the middle of the night with two trainees named Tate and Tom. We tripped down the hill, a dying flashlight between us, trying to avoid the fifty mad dogs that live between my house and Claire's house in Miramundo. We brought giant cornstalks and my landlord's German Shepherds for protection, these three funny boys high-stepping through the moonless night. It was the first clear night I saw in weeks, a million stars glittering up there like a pile of pearls spilled on top of the wood shacks that glowed with warm firelight inside, these wisps of light snuck through the warped wood.

Five minutes from my house a dog charged our skinny pool of light and the German Shepherds chased him down. Like a signals, chuchos from every corner growled and snapped a half starved chorus in the shadows, and the flashlight died. We ran like bewildered chickens waving cornstalks in our feathered fists all the way up to my house. Nothing touched us, but my hands shook so bad I couldn't even unlock my door.

It was one of those Guatemalan things that happens, dangerous enough to make your heart pound and kind of stupid at the same time, but when you survive with all your pieces you feel like you just lived through a chicken bus crash. Looking up at the stars before I fell asleep that night, I could see dusty galaxies up there in the sky over Amy and me. I watched a star tumble three feet through space and disappear, a lonely light that fell a billion miles in a second.

I imagined looking down on skinny little me from up there with a sort of heaven-camera; tracing the dark square shape of my house, the gentle curve of the mountain beneath me, and the swoop of shadowy forest all the way down to the bottom. I've been here for nine months that went as fast as that star's fall, nine months away from Amy. But watching me standing down there alone, I knew I was supposed to be there, exactly there at that moment under that perfect sky. Two days later, Amy went away while I was still here, and I hope so bad that she thought about me that night— maybe she dreamed about how beautiful this place is sometimes.

Because here we are on that chicken bus turning end over end in space, a red, white and blue camionetta— colored comet streak in the sky. So turn some summersaults or make a funny dance in the Guatemala zero gravity; keep on through all the tumult, the loss and everything we can't understand. Just be wide awake, keeping these stories in your head forever, because we've only got a couple more seconds until this chicken bus comes crashing down home to America.

By Jason Boog