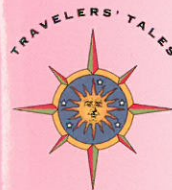


EDITED BY  
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Whose  
panties  
are  
these?  
?



More Misadventures from Funny Women  
on the Road

Sequel to the award-winning bestseller *SAND IN MY BRA*



ANNE CALCAGNO

\* \* \*

## Emboldened by Women in High Heels

*The masses revolt against the petty tyrants.*

I DIDN'T WANT TO GO TO THE GREAT WALL. IN BEIJING, I HAD contracted the Mongolian Revenge and had spent the previous two days dashing from bed to bathroom, in a wildly fevered state. I had come to appreciate that the Beijing Palace Hotel has lovely bathrooms with peach-red marble, and plenty of toilet paper. I had also staggered downstairs and found a front desk assistant who was a French intern in-training. She hoped to represent Guerlain cosmetics at a later date, in China. For now, she perfected her Chinese on my behalf, leafing enthusiastically through the dictionary, unable to solve my request. It wasn't until she located the restaurant manager who, with dignity and concern, wrote "broth" in ideograms on a hotel card for me, that I had hope. For breakfast, lunch and supper, all that next week, I pulled out my magic card, something I have saved in my scrap-book, life saver that it was.

The Great Wall is known to many for its t-shirt stands. I already had one claiming: "I climbed the Great Wall," brought back by my parents years ago. But the wall is not

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known for its toilets. Any of the photos surveying the continuous stretch of wall along the former Mongolian border reveal its remarkable continuity in the *absence* of human comforts. Fortitude, not dependence, is its credo. Still, I thought I might be on the upswing, and when you are going to China or returning, the principal question is, "How about that Great Wall?" The ancient Chinese proverb in my guide-book warned: "One who fails to reach the Great Wall is no hero." So I climbed onto the tour bus at 6 A.M., loaded on Imodium.

I was traveling with an American tour group, which presented its own challenge. We had been to Taiwan and Hong Kong and were now in Beijing. Next we would travel to Nanjing, Xi'an, and Shanghai. We were a group of disparate needs, gestures, and attitudes, twenty professionals tossed together by our dreams of the Orient. We were a mixed salad, and a bad choice put together. For one, the group's stalwart leaders seemed to hate us. Though they were assigned to guide us through thick and thin into the amazing adventure of cultural difference, you could tell they would push you off a bridge if you leaned over in wonder.

Our female leader was revisiting her own Mexican ancestry. Though she was clearly in the wrong location, she sought to circumvent this horrible mistake by refusing to speak English. I am not a language purist—I, too, was raised with the privilege and disconnect of growing up bilingual—but this person works for my same employer in English.

When I asked if a doctor could be summoned to review my high fever and deleterious body fluid loss, this leader deflected my urgent request, demanding imperiously whether I knew that a Latino member of our group was also sick. Was I concerned for her? The next day, when I went to



console my fellow sufferer she said she wasn't sick at all. I don't speak Spanish, though, so perhaps she lost her troubles in translation.

Our other leader practiced the ancient Zen Art of Absolute Indifference. Standing aloof from our group, say at the entrance to the Beijing's Summer Palace, he moved only to zoom in like a falcon, replicating a sport once beloved by the Han Dynasty and its royal court, of taloning smaller animals into submission. For instance, when I whispered to someone next to me, "What date did the guide say Empress Cixi imprisoned Emperor Guangxu?" a sharp talon stabbed my shoulder bone, "The rest of us can't hear when you're talking." When a woman was three minutes late for the tour bus leaving the Forbidden City, he pecked out, "We've all paid for this, we're all waiting. You have no right to hold all of us up." He gained fleeting joy watching her slouch into her seat, publicly humiliated. Still, only the women in the group got reprimanded. It *would* have been helpful to predict which leader was going to appear: The Zen Master of Absolute Indifference or The Falcon Who Attacks Women.

One time, later in the trip, when nearly all had filled the bus and settled in on time as we were eager to greet the air conditioned relief that so contrasted with the July heat we had absorbed walking around Nanjing's massive palace walls and walks, the bus did not move, and we sat and sat and sat. Until one of the middle seats near a large vent began billowing thick, noxious smoke. I had never before considered how fast smoke fills an enclosed space. Billowing is the right word. Someone began screaming, "Fire! Fire!" and in a spastic rush we hopped, leapt, and desperately clambered out. Outside, our one leader gesticulated in Spanish, while the Falcon leader zoomed in on the three agitated women who had

been closest to the source of fire, "This is exactly what happens when people arrive late."

"But we weren't late!" they protested.

"The bus was waiting, with its air conditioning on, and it's very hot outside. If the bus sits for too long, the apparatus explodes and catches fire."

"Why didn't you tell us that before?"

"Ah," he said, transforming into the One Who Displays Absolute Indifference, "because *that is not my role.*"

But we were all adults, right? Who needs leaders? I, for one, was mainly concerned with the toilet strategies necessary for The Great Wall. On this June day, I hoped to return without embarrassment.

To be fair, our Zen Master of Misanthropy chose the excellent, less-touristed Jinshanling section of the Great Wall, a two-hour drive from Beijing. It is true that our weaknesses are also our strengths, and his decision made for an astonishing experience. The Great Wall at Badaling can be a Tower of Babel, tour guides shouting in various lan-



**T**ruth be told, I was looking for this adventure-of-a-lifetime to well, sort of, basically change my life. I know it's a lot to ask, but I was shelling out \$3,000-plus and figured, lost among the sales verbiage or fine print, there was something to that effect—a promise of personal salvation, clarity of vision, great sex, something. I mean, come on, how can an exotic, physically-challenging trip halfway across the world not realign the stars or transmute my DNA or deliver me from evil? How could it not?



—Laurie Frankel,  
"Kili Me Softly"



guages, t-shirts flying from inter-crossing vendor lines, hordes of people steam-rolling through. Not Jinshanling.

It had been raining for three days in Beijing and the sky remained overcast. We were dressed in layers, ready for a range of conditions. Our poised guide had prepared us: "They say in the mountains, the weather is like a child's face, very unpredictable." We bumped along, watching the landscape turn hilly, relishing the deep shades of green the weather wrought, lost in thought, which brought to my mind my other problem.

Like a high school girl who simply cannot stop herself, I had started hanging with the wrong crowd, a good girl pulled into a bad circle. Every day I promised to extricate myself, but these folks were magnetic. They slinked off and talked about what they *saw*. When our guide in Taiwan showed us an intact bronze *ding* tripod, we veered off to look at an intricately carved ceramic *fang zun* (at which point we were exclaiming: *this was made 9,000 years Before Christ, that's 11,000 years ago!!* losing ourselves to the mystery of human talent and inventiveness) and we missed the proper selection of archaeological discoveries, fully annoying our long-suffering leaders. My bad influences included a linguist, a historian, and a poet, the latter who might have been the real root of the problem, as he frequently wondered: "How can I make a poem of this? How?"

Because the Falcon had already targeted us as trouble, I planned to find safer companions at the Great Wall. I sat alone on the bus.

Suddenly our group became focused and alert as the small white van in front of us started littering inordinately. "Ah! They're heading to a funeral," our guide explained, "It's paper money. They throw it so the devil won't follow them." These plastered themselves onto our bus. They were "Hell Bank

Notes," the kind you can buy at Taoist temples to bribe the gods, which flew around us tantalizing in happy swirls. Unfortunately, they did not redeem us to prevent what came next.

We veered off into a narrow old road, curving along a dry riverbed as it climbed farther and farther up toward pine trees. At the half-way point, we found the road was under repair. Piles of rock and dirt interrupted by deep craters tightened our road into a one-lane alley. Still, our driver rounded corners speedily, until all of a sudden we nearly collided with a royal blue work truck. The dance began: which vehicle would back up? Our enormous bus? The boulder-filled truck? Dipping toward the ravine? Crushed against the rugged stone wall? The first time, we backed up, inch by inch by inch. Many from our group fled the front of the bus; others began yelling untranslatable suggestions to our superb Chinese driver. We engaged in this drama, again and again, always inches from disaster, pressing forward, inching back, as if in a nightmare of recurring blue demons.

But we did make it. We arrived at a wide parking lot, the only bus, and we descended. We agreed to find a toilet immediately which thrilled me. In the meantime, the air had lifted. Moist drizzle had become a white mist wafting through the parking lot, the air cool and bright. We were at Jinshanling, ready to greet this UNESCO World Heritage Site, to walk this wall built 2,500 years and many dynasties ago. We learned that the Great Wall stretches for over 50,000 kilometers, across seventeen provinces. Most sections one traverses today were probably built during the Ming Dynasty, but that doesn't make it less impressive. Extending from the Shanhai Pass on the east coast to Jiayu pass in the Gobi desert in the west, it is said to be the only man-made feature visible on earth from the moon.



Because there were no tourists but us, vendors, in a one-to-one ratio now appeared from nowhere, and each targeted a specific individual from our group, walking and talking non-stop, shoving books and replicas at chin level. We hurried up a rugged stairway, surrounded by the swarm of vendors. My blond hair, which always seemed to promise the most foreignness, thus the greatest likelihood of a sale, did not go unnoticed, though that promise was as false as the color. It would be no less than an hour later that I finally bought a Great Wall picture book from the woman who followed me all that time. With her saleswoman's zeal and sheer perseverance, she deserved to be rewarded. Besides, her face was lined and worn, and I had the discomfiting awareness that I have so much more in my life than some books to sell. But apparently I overpaid at eight dollars, the rumor flew, and every other vendor came to point at me, exemplar, to convince others of the rightness of an excessive price.

From the mess of steps and twists and vendors, we stepped up onto the ramparts of the Great Wall, astonished to find former Mongolia, ranging mountain crest after mountain crest as far as the eye could see. A sun-burned, brilliant white mist danced between mountains, drawing out their soft outlines in gray and sage and faded green. In the middle of these, like an arrow on a trajectory, the Great Wall at Jinshanling pierced the landscape. It dipped, rose into crenellated ramparts and towers, then tossed itself downhill, to rise next along a mountain crest like a phoenix. I had come here to justify my "I climbed the Great Wall" t-shirt. Instead, I was stunned and unprepared. Wind whistled through the vast landscape, not a soul in sight but us and our vendors.

Our Zen Master Now of Good Ideas had organized an outdoor picnic lunch on the Great Wall. Long foldable tables,

with plastic plates full of rice, dumplings, and skewers of barbequed chicken and pork, awaited us. It didn't matter that I couldn't eat the food; the place, the moment were enough. In this dreamy state, I ended up slipping into a chair next to my troubled old friends. Our leaders told the tour we had one-and-a-half hours to ourselves before we must be back at the bus. We could either walk a couple of miles to the cable station where we would be gondola'd back to the parking lot, or rest here and make the short descent back.

Half an hour later, my group still sat staring, amazed to have eaten on the Great Wall, in a silence so fierce it was beautiful. Then a rush of energy hit us, and we rose, propelling ourselves forward, our destination: the cable station. We believed we were young and strong, though we're all middle-aged and mostly hopeful.

Walking the Great Wall turns out to be no jaunt. The Wall dips steeply enough to feel like a downhill race. The steps that follow the inevitable subsequent rise are gigantic, so that you grasp the step above with your hands as you pull up. I was told these steps were built for horses to climb, and I believe it. But we did hike and pause and feel amazed and resume onward, sweating. During that one hour and half we saw only one other group, a Scottish family with three sons, bewildered and awe-struck like us. I bless our Zen Master to this day for his choice, which made the Great Wall what it should be: astonishing.

Our group philosophized and photographed. At one tower, we found a cot, and imagined living, sleeping, eating here, a guard in this vast solitude. "I'd do it in a minute," the poet claimed. I worried about the toilet issues.

The irony is that we behaved well on this day. We arrived at the cable station installed modernly to the side of a tower,



sweaty but happy (actually overjoyed) to find a vendor selling cold drinks. No one else was about. We had fifteen minutes to spare to get to the bus on time. My Imodium had worked splendidly. We were golden. We got our cable tickets, smiling at the woman handing them out, and descended about twenty steps to the cable platform. Four women, with up-turned hairdos, in elegant dark and light blue outfits, each in high heels, were huddled against the cable.

We pointed to ourselves, smiling. But they did not smile back. We gesticulated, pointing down hill, indicating our desired destination. But they shook their heads. We began to shout, stupidly, "Us! Down! Now! Go!" But they bowed politely and still shook their heads. I remember losing control and yelling, "Absolutely yes!" They looked chagrined.

Then we saw it, the broken cable. It had taken the previous group down then had broken. I don't know how we pieced this information together. With great concern we were refunded our ticket money. And? We stared at each other, sweat visibly forming on my remaindered group. In a normal situation, it would have been no more than an issue of distance and time, and perhaps a little exhaustion, but our stalwart leaders had made the return time clear. We had a two-and-a-half-hour trip back to Beijing. I remembered being the audience to our Mexican leader one previous time, when she stood at the front of the bus, like Mussolini on his balcony arms raised in a wide V, ordering the bus to "drive off and leave" the stragglers. This she said in English.

We all started shouting again, which did nothing. Which didn't stop us from shouting more. Suddenly one of the elegant women, placed her compact purse under her arm, and gestured to us to follow her. The others nodded. In their spotless apparel, they sinuously curved out the way to a small

path veering steeply from the Great Wall. Though the dirt path was nearly vertical for much of its descent, we were emboldened by these women in high heels to take our chances and plunge. They hurried and kept their poise all at once. Those of us on Imodium didn't exhibit the same grace, bolting nervously, clutching our innards.

But we made it. We descended the path where no fee-paying, vendor-enticing tourist goes, guided by cable maidens. We arrived late, of course, but our leaders thought someone had broken a leg, and our cable story unfolded, so we were welcomed, sort of, back onto the bus. "We were going to open your bags and take everything you left," one friendly member spat out. "Yeah, you're lucky we didn't take off." But for us, victory was clear: we climbed the Great Wall just when the cable car broke. We were lost and found. Amazed and bemused. There's something unbeatable about coming in last.

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