

As I approached Nis, I saw that the hills were getting steeper all around. Here were forested ravines along both sides of the road and mountains in the distance. The road itself took on more grade, and there were sharper curves. I took an exit for Nis, where I gassed up. Back on the road, I saw from the map that I was in the Morava River Valley, which passed between mountain peaks that it said were between twenty-two hundred to forty-five hundred feet high. I figured top speed on this road would be sixty kilometers per hour.

There were narrow bridges, which allowed the road to pass over the water, but none of them had guardrails or warning signs. If there had ever been a center line painted on the road, it had long since vanished. The road was paved; otherwise it was more like a country trail. I saw signs in Cyrillic, obviously meaningless to me.

I realized I was going to have to concentrate totally on the road, so I dialed the bike down to fifty kilometers per hour because I was about to enter a steep gorge with hills close on either side and the river just thirty feet below with no guardrail in case a car or truck should be coming the other way. This was rugged country.

I rounded a sharp curve and saw a tall mountain on my left, figuring it to be over five thousand feet when compared with the others. But I was forced to keep my attention on the edge of the road to my right where there was no guardrail or shoulder and a drop-off into the river of over a hundred feet. I kept the bike at fifty kilometers per hour because I wanted to get this stretch of road behind me as fast as I could. It wasn't that fast, but I realized that if I hit a stone in the road or a truck came the other way, I could be knocked off the road and down into the river.

I navigated a couple of sharp curves and then saw another meaningless road sign in Cyrillic, so I kept going. And then I was upon the entrance of a tunnel. And then I was driving in the tunnel at fifty kilometers per hour, and it was *pitch-black* all around. I was driving blind! I couldn't see anything ahead or on either side of me. My stunned brain processed the fact that the first thing I had to do was to stop the bike, so I slowly

braked while disengaging the gearbox. I rolled to a stop and put my feet on the ground.

I took off my sunglasses and immediately saw that they were a part of the problem. Once my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I turned to see some light at the entrance of the tunnel when I turned my head. The tunnel was curved so that if you were inside it, you couldn't see the far end. Of course, in these mountains, there were no electric lights in the tunnel for safety. *Maybe that's what the sign was about*, I thought.

I understood that by staying cool, I had saved my life, but I also realized that I was still in imminent danger. My blind braking job had left me two feet from the wall of the tunnel on the *wrong side* of the road. Anyone entering the tunnel in that lane would have run me down in an instant. Further, I saw that I couldn't remain motionless in the tunnel on either side because cars entering either way wouldn't be able to see me and stop before smashing into me. I had to get out of the tunnel.

I was too stunned to drive the bike, so I turned the headlight on, put my sunglasses on top of my head, and walked it out of the tunnel. When I was out of it, I discovered the road was in the same condition as on the other side. There was no place to pull over and collect myself. I kept walking the bike up the road until I found a spot where I could see both ways, park the bike, and sit on a stone overlooking the river. I knew I could have been killed, and I kept repeating the hotel manager's words, "There's no one to help you out there."

I determined that I had stared death right in the face, and that face was pitch-black. If death had arms, it would have grabbed me, but either it didn't have them or I had evaded them. My legs were actually shaking as I sat on the stone. I didn't see how I was going to get on that bike again after this experience. For the first time, I saw the true danger in riding a motorcycle, and I wanted no more of it.