



# JOURNEY TO INDIA

## Chapter one: Getting to Kashmir

*Rex Maurice Oppenheimer*

It was in 1979. I had been sitting on the roof of my Mother's house in Phoenix smoking a joint and playing my Moroccan drums. It was hot in the Phoenix sun, and I'd gone inside to wash my face in cold water. Suddenly, for no apparent reason, I looked up into the mirror and said aloud, "If I got a letter from Greg from India, I'd go."

The last I'd heard from Greg had been six months prior to that. He was in Greece and there had been no mention of going anywhere else, let alone India. Yet the next day a letter arrived from Greg. It was from India.

I had been at my mother's house for nearly three years recovering from my motorcycle accident. My head had been smashed, my skull fractured, one side of my nose torn loose from my face and one eyelid slit neatly down the middle. My eye was spared, but had the incision been deeper by a hair, I would have lost my sight.

My physical recovery progressed rather rapidly, but emotionally I was still in pieces. My mother's house in Phoenix proved to be the perfect hideaway. I was staying in my brother's former bedroom, which, with its adjoining bathroom, was the only room upstairs. It had sliding glass doors that led out onto a deck on the roof.

I spent hours sitting on the floor in front of my portable typewriter, trying to chart a poetic course. The deck on the roof was a vantage point, surrounded by deep blue sky. Fueled by intoxicants, I'd drift with the clouds across Saharan dunes, Jamaican beaches, Moroccan rooftops and the bodies of imaginary lovers.

I would run upstairs when the doorbell rang. I refused to see anyone. I had lost all faith and confidence and felt completely lost. Little by little I would see a few people. A woman I had known for some time, and by whom I didn't feel threatened, became my sexual partner and poetic companion, as we sought stardom in the suburbs of an alternative reality.

Another friend supplied my marijuana, while the drive-in liquor store on the corner was my daily stop for beer, bourbon, or a bottle of Courvoisier. The latter was for when I would buy a cigar and pretend I was Winston Churchill on a bad night.

Juice Newton recorded my song, "Come to Me," sometime during this period. I think in 1977, and I did leave Phoenix for six months or more when I went back to Santa Barbara. Except for one quick trip down to L.A. to meet up with Robbie and Juice about writing some new songs, which was just more of an escape into illusion. I remained very separate from society.

My friend Greg, whose letter from India I had somehow conjured out of thin air, had been with me on the motorcycle trip when I'd had my accident.

When his letter from India arrived, I replied with a telegram, which said, "Where meet, what bring?" It had been

more than a month with no word, but in my mind I was going to India. So, I took off for New York to stay with Frankie at his mansion in Forest Hills Gardens and await Greg's response.

Time spent with Frankie was always fun. I remember lunches at Tutto Bene in Forest Hills, with the tables full of Wiseguys, like Willie the Shy, and the night we snorted cocaine at the table in an Italian Restaurant in Long Island City, where we'd gone so Frankie could pay off some union guy. It was foreign to me, but I'd blend in like a chameleon. Just like when I was around anyone that lived in a world separate from mine, like big drug dealers, or bankers, I could take my cues from their language and values and seem to get along. There were also the cruises out to Montauk on Frankie's yacht.

Then one day my mother called to say a letter from Greg had arrived. It wasn't from India, but from Rome. Greg's daughter back in Los Angeles was having some problems, and he was headed back there. He proposed that perhaps, if I could jump on a plane, we could meet in Rome. But my momentum was for India.

I walked to a travel agency I'd picked at random in Forest Hills and said I wanted to buy a one-way ticket for India. The agent, an attractive Israeli woman, said, "A one-way ticket is \$750, but a round trip is only \$920. Don't you want a round trip?"

"How long is it good for?" I replied. "Four months," she said.

I smiled, "I have no idea where I'll be in four months, just give me the one way."

"Do you want a hotel reservation?"

"No, I'll just play it by ear."

I remember her amazement to find out I knew no one in India, had no idea where I was going or what I was going to do and didn't want hotel reservations.

I really didn't know where I was going and have very little idea what I thought might happen. I had illusions of being swept up into a life that would accommodate my then addictions and desires. Primitive visions of smoke and sex in exotic locales. Or of stumbling into some entrepreneurial business venture or writing great poetry or prose. No idea of anything real.

My one-way ticket took me to Delhi, where, after passing through customs, I got a cab. I think one of the first things I told the driver was that I wanted was some hash, and then a cheap hotel.

Driving through early morning India was startling, people swathed in all kinds and colors of fabrics, strange faces, tattoos, and turbans. The streets sang with an operatic vision of life's passionate struggle. Animals, women balancing brass urns, barbers squatting before their customers and giving them a shave, street sellers offering spices and strange leaf-wrapped items, people washing in puddles by the side of the road, all combined with taxis, cars and busses honking and weaving in and out of a maze where centuries seemed to intersect at every crossroad.

The hotel may have been cheap by U.S. standards; I think it was about eight dollars a night, but it was far more than I'd planned on spending. On return trips to Delhi, after I'd learned my way around India, I stayed at the Venus Hotel in Paharganj for about a dollar a night. But for my first night in India, it would do.

I had something to eat and went to buy a ticket for Kashmir, which was the place Greg had written me from, and the only place I knew to go. Being new in the country, and not yet having any idea of how to live and travel cheaply, I followed some advice and bought an Air India plane ticket for Srinagar.

On the plane I met an Italian, Marco, who was also going to Kashmir. He said a friend of his that worked for the U.N. had given him the name of a houseboat to rent on Nagin Lake, and that's where we headed.

The Houseboat was fairly large and very beautiful, but unfortunately it was already booked. The owner, who had the appearance of an Arab Pasha, said that the guests weren't coming for a few days and we could have the boat for two nights, which we agreed to. The boat had the air of luxury, with thick brocades and furniture made from beautiful woods, yet there were no sheets.

After the two days Marco and I moved to another less opulent craft where we stayed for a week until two of his friends arrived from Italy, a woman named Maria, with some of the most beautiful shoulders I've ever seen, and a guy whose name I don't remember. They had all planned to meet up and take off for Ladakh, which after a few nights together they did.

I then moved to a smaller boat across the lake. It had a bathroom, bedroom, a table and sitting area. There was what could be called a little porch outside at the stern, or back of the boat. The toilet worked, flushing directly into the lake below, but the shower was woeful, and there was no hot water.

In order to get on and off my boat, which was tethered to the owner's boat next to it, I had to walk across narrow boards that had been laid deck-to-deck connecting the boats. My only way to get anywhere was to cross the lake by shikara and then take a taxi or bus into Srinagar.

For the first day or two I had to find someone to row me across the lake. But then I convinced the landlord to let me have a shikara of my own. The shikara is a long, narrow canoe. You sit at the very front of the slender craft, like some native in a picture from an old National Geographic, so far forward it seems as if the boat should just tip over.

At first, no matter what I tried, rowing on either side, fast or slow, I just went in circles. With further observation of the Kashmiri oarsmen, I'd gotten the hang of it, putting the oar in and twisting it as I stroked, pulling it out with its blade parallel to the boat. I would use the little boat every day to go across the lake to where there were a few local shops, and where I could catch the bus into Srinagar.

Shikaras transported almost everything on the lake. The flower seller guided his from houseboat to houseboat, singing out the beauty of his freshly cut blossoms. The curd man, his beard long and gray, like his worn cotton kurta, paddled from houseboat to houseboat, his craft's hull laden with clay pots full of fresh yogurt.

Vendors, who sold cloisonné, clayware and carpets, would cruise past and call out to the tourist-occupants of the moored houseboats, seeking a chance to come on board to display their wares. Their boy would unpack and unfurl each and every piece, until the floor was strewn with baskets, pots and trinkets, and the customers felt obliged to buy at least something.

All of this coming and going made the lake feel like a village, full of purposeful activity. Much of the action took place around the houseboats, which provided the community's main source of income. Although some were rather small and nondescript, such as mine, others seemed holdovers from the Victorian age, when the Raj

reigned and the British, if they weren't in Simla, would spend summers relaxing on the lake, with servants lodged in smaller boats moored in the shadow of the floating palaces.

The landlord's family on the boat next to mine always seemed to be arguing. Yet their bonds were strong, passed down through centuries of tradition and now shouted between generations as they went about their daily tasks.

The lake could be very busy, but it was also the essence of peacefulness. At dusk, I would row my shikara through the various tributaries and channels, passing women in saris doing laundry at the water's edge and singing verses full of lament in unison. I'd weave through floating gardens of lilies and lotus and watch the wizened old men squatting and smoking their hookahs in scenes that seemed to spring from the thirteenth Century.

I met many fellow travelers, mostly from European countries and Australia. There was a sharp distinction between tourists and travelers. With my one-way ticket and a tumbleweed's sense of direction, I fell into the latter category. Tourists are tourists and need no further definition. Travelers were a mixed bag. Time was a factor; most travelers were on the road for months or years. For many it was a gypsy-like way of life. Others, like myself, were just on an open-ended adventure. Some were running from the law or a life they couldn't stand; some were chasing a dream they could not find.

The hippie era had passed or was at least waning, yet in 1979-1980, it was still very evident. A lot of the travelers were an extension of the days of the hippie overland trail across Asia. We dressed in Indian clothes, whether kurta pajama, silks or the exotic, mirrored cloths of Rajasthan, with scarves draped over shoulders or wrapped around the head, it was right out of the hippie handbook, and the primitive lifestyle at times seemed the ideal objectified by so many 1960s communes. Of course another vital aspect was lack of societal status symbols or the veneration of wealth. The goal was pleasure and experience sought through drugs, sex, travel, adventure, and, of course, new-age spirituality.

There were also many interesting people other than travelers whose paths I crossed. One such local in Kashmir was Lassa, a sort of black market Don Juan, as in Carlos Castaneda, not the romantic legend.

Lassa, who owned a small café on the other side of the lake, sold me charras and opium and provided a good place to rest, hear stories and learn about the local customs. It was there I also met Juanita, a beautiful Mexican healer, with long, black hair, coffee-colored skin and piercing obsidian eyes.

My fellow travelers were a vital source of information, as it related to where to go, when to go, and how to get there. I learned about the traveler's world in India: Delhi, Rishikesh, Dharamsala, Manali, Kerala, Goa, Varanasi.

As romantic as Kashmir and Nagin Lake were, they were not without problems. The constant come-on and hassle and hustle, particularly in Srinagar, the isolation on the boat, and just the fact that this was just my first stop in India, and I'd already been there a month, made me anxious to move on.

I went to Srinagar and bought a bus ticket for Dharamsala. My bus left in a few days at 7:30 a.m. Since transportation from Nagin Lake to Srinagar was not particularly dependable, and the trip could take more than an hour, I was a little apprehensive and wanted to arrange for my passage in advance. When I asked the Landlord and his family how I would get to the bus station, they all wagged their heads in that inimitable Indian way, and with broad smiles said, "No problem, you take taxi."

"But can I find a taxi at 5:30 in the morning?"

# STEEL

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With heads wagging and beaming smiles they all reassured me, “Oh yes, no problem.”

Just to be sure I asked that same question several times over the next few days. Always looking at me like I was either an idiot or a child, they smiled, “No problem. Plenty taxis.”

The night before I was to depart, I was paying my bill, when the landlord asked, “And how are you getting to Srinagar?” He had to be joking. He had told me to take a taxi, and I’d asked several times if he was sure that I could get one that early in the morning. “Why, I’m taking a taxi,” I said.

“No taxis,” he said, wagging his head, “No taxi so early in morning.”

What could I do? There were no phones; I had a ticket leaving Srinagar at 7:30 the next morning, and there was no way to change things. “Don’t worry,” he said, “my cousin-brother will meet you with taxi,” and he went off to notify him.

The next morning it was pouring with rain. I still had my large red suitcase, which I balanced in my narrow shikara, and took off rowing, battling wind-driven rain, until I’d reached the other side. The bank beside the lake sloped down at least eight feet, and it had turned to slick, slippery mud. Dragging my large suitcase and scrambling up the muddy bank, I made it up the side. When I finally reached the road there were no taxis, no cousin-brother, no one at all.

I lugged my suitcase the few blocks into the village, where I spotted a taxi parked in front of a shop above which was a house. Setting down my suitcase and picking up some small pebbles I began to toss them against the windows above where the taxi was parked. Finally a man opened the window and leaned out, yelling at me. I told him I needed a taxi to go into Srinigar. It’s an emergency I begged, offering five rupees above the normal price. Thank god he agreed, and a short time later we were on our way to Srinagar.

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