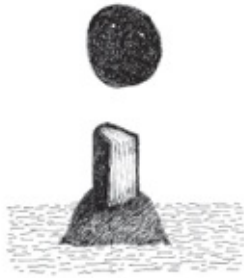




ARE WE NOT THERE YET?

TRAVELS IN NEPAL, NORTH INDIA, AND BHUTAN

CHUCK ROSENTHAL



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LOS ANGELES

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For Gail, my Diosa.

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PREFACE

IN EARLY SEPTEMBER, 2006, poet Gail Wronsky and I traveled to North India and the Himalayas with thirteen college students, including our daughter, Marlana, as part of the Travel Abroad Program for our university. Via Bangkok, we traveled to Kolkata, trained in Varanasi and Sarnath, then based in Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim, taught and jeeped throughout the eastern Himalayas: Rumtek, Pemayangtse, Darjiling, Kalimpong, the Chinese border, and much more. We traveled to Kathmandu in Nepal, through western Bhutan and finally to Delhi. All in all, we were there almost four months.

Sikkim is a tiny, Himalayan state, once a kingdom, sandwiched between Nepal and Bhutan on the west and east, Tibet (China) to the north, West Bengal and Bangladesh to the south. It was an adventure sometimes hilarious and often perilous. We learned a lot about the religions and politics of the Himalayas, a region beset by the threat of China, the rising economic power of India, and political unrest everywhere.

If the politics was a bit of a revelation to me, the religion was not. I began studying Buddhism as a graduate student in philosophy in 1973 and have continued a private practice since. I was well acquainted with the Mahayana Emptiness School and Zen, as well as the six major philosophical schools of Hinduism. I began serious study of Tibetan Buddhism and the religious aspects of Hinduism and Islam, as well as the history of India and the Himalayan region, in the year before we left and I continued to study during our stay, and since.

In that regard, there are three concepts essential to India's major religions, excluding Islam: *dharma*, moral duty; *karma*, moral causality, meaning you reap what you sow, now and in your next incarnation; *maya*, illusion, in fact everything is illusion but the fundamental reality of God.

A note on names. Throughout, I've tried to use the names and spellings of cities and places that are the parlance in India now, for example Kolkata for Calcutta, Varanasi for Benares, Mumbai for Bombay, etc. All the names of people and places here are the actual ones, but for three exceptions. My daughter changed her name to Jesus in Jr. High when she was a member of the rock group Les Gods and she kept the name. I use it here in deference to her, but it also adds some humor and irony in a lot of circumstances. Gail goes by the nickname Diosa, and I've used that here, as well. I have a lot of nicknames. On this trip for some reason everybody called me Roscoe and that's what they call me in this story.

This narrative makes no attempt to recapitulate everywhere we went and everything we did. Nor is it yet another spiritual quest story set in the Himalayas. But as you find out about India over time, you don't have to go looking for God. God finds you.

SHOULD I WEAR THIS HAT?

BEFORE YOU LEAVE FOR international travel you're likely to read a lot of travel writing. There are lots of different kinds of travel writing, natural adventure, for one, but likely you don't have the means or connections to hire a guide and interpreter and six sherpas to go looking for Yetis in the Himalayas and no one's going to pay you to spend two sleepless weeks partying in the nightclubs of Kathmandu. Do you even want to? Every time I see one of those adventure films on PBS, where the narrator/adventurer is struggling, facing death in the jungle/ice/wilderness/mountains, I always think about the cameraman. Where is the cameraman anyways? In other words, those adventurers, natural and urban, receive a lot of material, technological, and financial support, usually right there on the ground with them. It's the same for those restaurant adventurers in Tuscany and those antique bridge heroes in Vermont. They don't go it alone. Call it American *maya*, we are all illusion tolerant, willing to ignore one thing in order to believe another.

Your tour book will talk about your destination and traveling in it, where you can eat and stay and all the things you should see, but likely it won't discuss the travails of simply getting there, that is, you, the ordinary person who is not a diplomat or a diplomat's son, not a travel writer or a tour book writer who's done it a million times, or the daughter of an editor at *Newsweek*, or a retired military *attaché*, not a frequent flyer member of the airline's President's Club flying first class. No, you, who has never been to India before, flying coach row 60 in the middle aisle of a 61 row jumbo jet.

In fact, unlike you, Diosa and I had a vast university infrastructure that put us through several dinners and day-long disorientations where we were told contradictory things about India by a dozen different people, including the people who just returned. It's a lot like trying to find out what's going to happen after you die. Turn off the TV. Throw away the paper. House sitter? Has he ever watered plants or fed pets or run a vacuum cleaner? Does he know where the fuse box is? Does he care? Will he pay the bills? Water. Phone. DSL. Electricity. Home insurance. You mean I have to insure my cars while I'm gone? How about your property taxes which won't be billed to you until you're gone (they won't do it early, I called them and sat on hold for an hour to find that out) and will be due before you return, with a substantial late fee. They won't bill by email, and ever try to reach the Los Angeles County Treasurer on the Internet?

For me, the greatest travail was the care of my sweet little horse, Jackie O. It took three months for me to find trustworthy people to ride her, shoe her, care for her; I had to make arrangements with the ranch manager, the wranglers, the vet. I rode her six days a week for eleven years and now I was going away for four months.

You'll leave your life at home unfinished, in the middle of everything, only partially prepared and, anyway, no matter how well you prepare you won't have something you need. Even if you bought it, you'll forget it. Or something will happen. On the evening before we left for India my daughter, Jesus, phoned.

"Just wrecked my car, Father," Jesus said.

The wreck happened after five, so the heap had to be towed to our home in Topanga Canyon. The morning of our departure day, as the sun poked over the east canyon wall,

stood on the road in front of my home with the house phone in one ear, waiting for a call from the tow truck driver, my cell phone on the other ear on hold for my insurance agent during rush hour traffic buzzing by. Our trusty house sitter, a poet about to attend USC, emerged and stood at the top of the steps, sagging, a 24 oz. can of Bud Lite in hand. I looked at him silently. His eyes collapsed like sliding garage doors. "I've wasted my life," he said. Great.

That was the life I was leaving. Now how about the Afterlife. Here's what we were told: India is the most beautiful country in the world except you won't be able to leave your hotel room because you'll be sickened by all the poverty and physical mutilation. The food is all the same and very bland. The food is so spicy you can't eat it. Indians are the sweetest people in the world but for the fact they'll fleece you in a blink. They're absolutely trustworthy. They're notorious pickpockets. Everything you buy in India can be easily shipped to the US. It will take four months. It will take one month. It will never arrive. India is the new world center of advanced technology. There are no working machines in India, everything is done by hand. The Internet is everywhere. It never works. How long does it take to get from LA to Bangkok? Twelve to seventeen hours, depending. Depending on what? There's great booze in India and it's easy to get a drink. It's impossible to get a drink in India and when you do, it sucks, besides you can't have ice because it's made out of the undrinkable water, even if you can find ice, which is unlikely. The electricity in India is constantly erratic and the voltage could climb from 100 to 240 and drop to zero in seconds. Take your own power pack to India. Bring a circuit breaker with a voltage regulator and line conditioner. That's nuts, you won't need anything. Bring vitamins. Get inoculated for everything! Never ride in taxis because they drive crazily and fast, then you'll get in a horrible accident and the hospital will have no blood or blood with AIDS and dirty needles so bring your own I.V. needles and bring your own blood! You will never go faster than two miles an hour in a taxi in India. They have the best doctors and hospitals in the world. India is a land of multifarious cultures, ethnicities, and religions. India is only Hindu. No, India has Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs, Jews, Parsees, Zoroastrians, and Christians living in quiet harmony except for the occasional riot when they riot for weeks and burn each other alive and slit each other's throats. Remember this is the Information Age. There's nothing we can't find out. Now let's go.

Pema Topgyal, our on-site Tibetan guide, flew to LA and attended our last disorientation session. "Pema," I said, "I read in *The Snow Leopard* that the monsoons can last into October in the Himalayas. Will we need rain gear?"

"The monsoons end in late August or early September. There's no chance of rain," Pema said.

"I won't need a raincoat."

That's when I got my very first Indian sideways head nod which meant, as I came to learn, well, just about anything.

At that last meeting I wore my infamous straw cowboy hat that I wore during trail rides on my sweet little horse. It was sweat stained and its band stuffed with feathers that I found as I rode down the trails. I'd been asking friends if I should wear it in India.

"Don't wear a cowboy hat in Asia," said my closest friend, a European traveler. "People hate Americans now. You'll get killed."

"I'm six-one and blond," I said. "I can't hide."

"Get a tan. Die your hair black."

I took it to an Australian, a woman who kept her horses near mine at the ranch.

“Adele, should I wear my hat in India?”

“I wouldn’t even wear that in Indiana.”

Who was left to ask? Pema.

“Should I wear this hat?” I said.

Sideways head nod. So I wore it.

Then it was time to leave. I left my daughter’s wrecked car in the hands of my brother-in-law and, with my family, met the twelve other students and our yoga teacher, Shanna, at the airport at 8 p.m. for our 11 o’clock flight. We had to arrive three hours early for the international flight because the plot to blow up American flights between London and the U.S. had just been exposed in Britain. Lots of flight paranoia and you couldn’t take liquids or creams or lotions of any kind on board the seventeen hour plane flight. Thai Air had just lifted their ban on small electronics for flights across the Pacific, to the relief of most of the students who had electrodes in their heads for hook ups to their hand-held video game/pod/cell phone/video camera/email devices. We met outside the terminal (lots of crying parents and emotional affiliates in tow) and were told that Thai Air wouldn’t begin initial baggage inspection for our flight till nine. That must be why it was so important to get there by eight.

It was a very odd feeling, the bunch of us who barely knew each other, sitting on our bags on the floor of LAX waiting to go to India for four months.

After that wait we had to wait for a baggage inspector to put our luggage through the X-ray machine and wait for it to come back out, but the bags could only come out on carts that were organized by family and group travel, and you had to wait for your group or family stuff to come out all together so the inspector could take it to check-in; you couldn’t just pick out your luggage because it’s *against the law to touch your own luggage!* but the attendant mixed up all the groups and families and had to take everything back in and mix it up again and again without looking at the name tags or listening to any of the passengers who were trying to yell to them what went where *because passengers aren’t allowed inside the inspection area!* so the inspectors got really pissed off at everybody. The wronger they are, the madder they get. This is a universal law.

Escaping that, we had to wait in line interminably to check in our baggage. The attendant shuffles your papers with one hand and whacks incessantly on her keyboard with the other on and on, over and over, without looking up. “May I see your passport?” “You have my passport.” “Your ticket?” “I gave you my ticket.” “Your passport?” “I gave you my passport.” You point to them over the counter. They swat your hand away. “What time does your flight leave?” “It’s on my ticket.” “Where is your ticket?” “You have it. It’s with my passport.” “Are anyone traveling with you?” If you’ve ever been arrested, it’s a lot like that. It’s why it took thirty minutes for the family in front of you to clear. Why the line behind you is a mile long. Why you’ll take any seat they give you. And you notice, inadvertently, that there are six attendants over in the first class section attending to no one at all while the huddled masses in coach, hundreds of you who paid a mere \$1,500 for your little seat, press upon each other Disneyland-like, between the twisting Naugahyde ropes in front of two ticket lieutenants. You console yourself with the realization that the university booked the flight on Thai Air because India Air is state run and a nightmare of inefficiency. How much better it is to be in the hands

of a private, profit-motivated corporation.

Now we were in danger of missing the flight. But at X-ray security only one carry-on was permitted under the new regulations, including purses and laptops and women weren't permitted to put their purses inside their carry-on. The fighting was close and bloody. Making it to the gate with boarding in process, the carry-ons were hand-checked for liquids again at the door. I forgot and accidentally packed my prescription cream for jock itch. It got through. I found it in Bangkok, but I couldn't put it in my check-in luggage because my baggage was checked through to Kolkata. Now what? I decided against fessing up to the authorities in Bangkok, packed it in my carry-on, and got through again.

Anyway, on the way to Bangkok nobody said anything about my hat.

THAI BONES

IT TAKES ABOUT FIFTEEN HOURS to get to Bangkok from LA. You can sleep, but sleeping on a plane is like getting kidnapped by aliens, you wake up later in the same seat and you feel worse. We hit Bangkok at dawn, Thai time, fourteen hours in the future, and changed our dollars to Thai bahts, about thirty to a buck, then caught cabs to the Bangkok Palace Hotel in the bowels of downtown, the sun creeping red into the brown Bangkok air that smelled, according to Diosa, like someone had poured artificially sweetened disinfectant on her face (I am blessed by being born deaf in the nose). The university had, at the last minute, mercifully booked rooms for our ten hour layover and, at 7:30 a.m., twenty-three and a half hours into the ordeal, the sixteen of us stood, dazed, in the lobby of the Bangkok Palace under a giant crystal chandelier, sorting out room keys.

The floors were marble, but cracking. The rugs were threadbare. An intricate, brightly colored wooden balcony surrounded us from above. The bellhops and desk help wore clean, if tattered, uniforms. English was nobody's second language, which is perfectly okay, though rudiments of checking into a hotel can be handled with facial expressions, head nods, and hand signals. Outside the lobby stood two of those giant, cement style-ized dragon-dogs and some feeble fountains. The clientele seemed to be groups of forty to fifty high school and college aged Thai students who rumbled through the lobby in droves. On top of that, honestly, the place was run-down. Don't stay there.

"Let's rest till eleven, then meet down here and decide how to spend our afternoon," Shanna said.

The students scattered and by 11 a.m. they were all drunk.

Diosa and I tried to rest in our unmemorable little room on the billionth floor with a view of dirt encrusted rooftops but, too exhausted and filled with daylight, we were up in an hour, staggering through the grimy streets around the Palace Hotel, situated near freight train tracks and a freeway overpass. It didn't look like one of the better parts of town. The streets were narrow and filled with motorcycles, bicycles, and small cars, the sidewalks, where they existed, were crowded and filthy, the buildings, two to six stories high, had shops on the bottom floors selling small sound technology, cell phones, clothes, shoes, sundries. The stores were all very tiny and packed with merchandise, stuff piled on stuff, enough space for only a few customers. The bars and restaurants looked pretty fucking unsavory. I wore my hat. Nobody seemed to hate me. Though groups of men stood in the streets, smoking, and stared at us as we walked by. From every telephone pole hung a banner with a picture of the king.

"They sure like the fucking king around here," I said.

"Somebody does" said Diosa.

"Maybe the king," I said.

Before you go somewhere, you should study about it, but we were only staying ten hours in Bangkok, we didn't even know if we'd get out of the airport and now, boom, we were in the streets. I knew this much. Thailand used to be Siam. The British colonized it, like in *The King and I*. Thais were notoriously friendly. They were majority Buddhist, Hinayan Theravadan, unlike the Mahayana Tibetans, though the southern part, the strip that ran along the ocean, was Islamic and they were raising some hell down there now. Thailand was

America's closest ally in Southeast Asia and they had the strongest economy. Americans didn't even need visas to enter and stay. They had some kind of constitutional monarchy, though there'd just been a military coup that threw out the prime minister and congress, not the king. I assumed it was because they'd been too soft on the Islamic insurrection.

I remembered that Bangkok sat at the bottom of the fat part of Thailand, before the country stretched out for miles in a thin line between the Gulf of Thailand and the Andaman Sea in the Indian Ocean; that's where all the famous beaches and resorts were, and inland were poor Muslim farmers. Nice mix. Bangkok sat on the Mekong River Delta, on the river, just north of the Bay. Northwest lay Myanmar, then Bangladesh (once East Bengal and after that East Pakistan) and just west of that, Kolkata, where we'd fly in a few hours.

Most of the people on the street were men. They wore slacks and leather shoes, button-down shirts open at the collar, or those golf shirts, the kind with short collars and three buttons at the neck, used to have an alligator or a bear cub or a dancing frog or something on the left breast back in the days. A lot of guys were wearing bright yellow ones with a red insignia over the left chest. The women wore the kind of stuff you see in China Town, a nylon or silk printed top, almost knee length, over pants, flat shoes; heels would be hell on those pocked, uneven streets, though some younger women risked them. Most the women carried a handkerchief or cloth that they intermittently raised to cover their nose.

"I need one of those," Diosa said. "Or I'm going to puke."

We circled back and met everybody at the hotel lounge. The boys were blasted, waving bottles of Singha Beer. "Amsterdam of the Orient! Let's get drunker! Let's find drugs! Get massages!" The girls, equally drunk, were more circumspect and made fun of the boys. We should have all just gone to sleep, but instead we caught cabs to the famous Bangkok Bazaar.

Outside it was difficult to tell whether you were being steamed or broiled; the air hung like a hot wet coat. We agreed to meet in three hours at the gate where we entered, Gate 4. Gate 41 seemed an odd name because there didn't seem to be any other gates. And in ten minutes we regretted the next two and a half hours of the future. The crowding and heat were oppressive. Our grad student, Tom, walked by and handed me a beer. I grabbed Jesus, who was vulnerable to heat stroke, and said, "Get some water. Stay close to Shanna and Diosa."

"Right," said Jesus, and immediately wandered into the crowd by herself and disappeared.

The size of the Bazaar is incomprehensible. You can walk for a day and not see all of it. There appeared to be one main thoroughfare that opened to the sky, but once you left it you fell into a labyrinth of connected tents and meandering pathways. There are no aisles. There are no directions. You can't head straight anywhere. Diosa went in search of a silk handkerchief and some scent to douse it with because her knees were shaking from the oppressive, sweet odor that filled the air. She asked merchants, pointing to women with handkerchiefs on their noses. People pointed. We followed. Found nothing. Wandered deep into the crowded morass.

"How do we get out?" I said.

No one seemed able to answer that question. I finally found a European couple who turned out to be Dutch. "We're lost," they told me.

"I'm going to pass out," said Diosa.

"What about Jesus?" I said.

"I can't help her. I'm going to pass out," Diosa said.

"Where?"

"That's why I haven't passed out," Diosa said.

Everything you can think of and things you have never thought of are for sale in the Bangkok Bazaar grouped vaguely in retail zones: cell phones, stereos, computers, I-pods, hot tubs, plumbing fixtures, tools, engines, motorcycles, construction material, lumber, brick, stones, granite, boulders, paint, cement, plaster, stucco, drywall, boards, bamboo, install porches and greenhouses, Western clothing, Thai clothing, cloth, cloth, and more cloth (but not handkerchiefs), bronze statues of animals, particularly elephants, of Buddha, the Tibetan deities, the Hindu deities, wooden carvings as big as your thumb or eight feet tall, glass sculpture, comic books, coloring books, illustrated novels, stationery, notebooks, easels and brushes, pens and pencils, paintings of Thai or Western landscapes, Louis Quatorze furniture, Thai furniture, beach furniture, tents, canopies, chairs, tables, waterbeds, water pipes, ceramic and plastic plates and cups, glasses, electronic remote toys, wind up toy plastic toys, cheap metal toys, antique Western toys, games, action figures, robots, vacuum cleaners, rubber hoses, hookahs, handguns, rifles, automatic weapons, knives, whips, karate weapons, household appliances, noodles, baked goods, vegetables, fruits, spices, prepared food, raw food, sea food, crustaceans and shell fish, fresh and cooked, and animals, if alive kept in dirty and overcrowded cages; you could buy your baby squirrels cooked, raw, or alive, in fact there were animals cooked, raw, or alive that I had never seen before; there were lizards, fish, rodents, pigs, goats, chickens, ducks, geese, doves, wrens, insects like grasshoppers and scorpions alive or deep fried, kittens, and a square mile of puppies big and small packed into cages so tightly they couldn't move; what one did with those puppies after purchase was, I supposed, your own business, but I didn't see any cooked ones on the premises. Here, the horrid sweet smell gave way to another oppressive smell, said Diosa, which I imagined to be some kind of over-crowded animal stink.

Then I saw daylight. "There," I said, pointing to a strip of light below the tent roof.

"Can't go that direction," said Diosa.

The strip of light was above a long row of plastic outhouses, the Third Deadly Smell.

We wandered, staggered, finally we hit a high fence covered with plastic, the sound of traffic on the other side. We were in the book section.

"Books," I said. "The end of the line. This must be the back end of something."

"We could follow the wall," said Diosa.

"Or walk perpendicular to the wall," I said.

But you could do neither.

"I hope Jesus doesn't die," I said.

"It would really complicate things," Diosa said.

"I haven't heard any sirens," I said.

"They probably sell them here somewhere," said Diosa.

"In the siren section," I said.

"If Jesus isn't dying, I'm dying," said Diosa.

"Maybe we could buy an ambulance," I said.

Whatever our worries about killing three hours in the Bazaar, they were now over. In desperation I adopted a theory of light pursuit. I guided us, vaguely, in the direction of the

least pallor. We weaved, we despaired, some brightness appeared; we hit the thoroughfare. We turned left, recognized the motorcycle and hot tub shop. Diosa found a little booth that sold handkerchiefs and perfume, too. The owner, a middle-aged woman with glasses and a handkerchief over her nose, nodded approvingly. We emerged and saw Shanna, Jesus, and three of the other girls drinking bottles of Coke at a crowded, outdoor café. There was no room, but the seat was a tiny bench. Everybody moved over. I could only fit half my butt on the bench.

“We got lost,” I said.

“I got lost,” said Jesus.

“Everybody got lost,” Shanna said.

“People are drinking ice drinks,” said Diosa.

“They’re from here. Don’t risk it,” Shanna said.

I ordered a coke. Diosa got a ginger tea that blew up in your mouth. I tasted it. I said, “Holy shit!”

“Pure ginger,” said Diosa. She held the handkerchief over her nose.

“Where’d you get that?” said Kimberly. She was tall, half-Jamaican, dark skinned, with long, wavy black hair pulled back.

Diosa pointed across the alley. The three girls took off.

“Don’t get lost!” yelled Shanna.

“I love this town!” I said.

“Why is everybody wearing those fucking yellow shirts?” said Diosa.

A young Thai next to us who was sharing an iced coffee with his girlfriend, two straw hats, said, “It’s the 50th Anniversary of the Accession of the King.”

Well, that answered the banners and shirts question.

“He must have been king since he was two,” said Diosa.

“You guys sure love the king,” I said.

The kid had on a horizontally striped golf shirt, but it wasn’t yellow. He wore glasses, but I saw him shift and eyebrow. He curled his lip just slightly.

“That’s a good answer,” I said.

“I’m going to die if it smells like this everywhere,” said Diosa. “If Bangkok smells like this, what will Kolkata smell like?”

“Did you see the animals?” I said to Jesus.

“I wept,” Jesus said.

Everybody met right at Gate 41, near the honey-dipped deep fried scorpion stand. The boys were drunker than ever and held bottles of beer. One girl, a Romanian named Anda, had so many plastic sacks of clothes she looked like a balloon man.

“Boy did we get some foot massages!” said Tom. “But they made us sing!”

Then into the cabs, back to the hotel, pack up and head back to the airport. Shanna ran around trying to get boarding passes for everybody in one fell swoop, but it just multiplied the bureaucracy. Diosa and I stood over the students who sprawled on the dirty airport floor in a pile of each other and their own bags, in the middle of everything, drunk or hungover, it was hard to tell; there, in the middle of a concourse in the Bangkok airport, they finally started to pass out as Shanna ran back and forth collecting passports, giving them back, collecting them again. I cruised the money exchange booths only to find out that you can

change bahts to Indian rupees in the Thai airport. You can change your bahts to for different kinds of international currency, but not to Indian rupees. And good thing, because after two hours of negotiating for boarding passes we got turned away from the baggage inspection entrance because, like a lot of countries, you have to pay to leave Thailand and we didn't have exit tickets that cost exactly 500 bahts each, no change given and no foreign currency taken, not even the sacred dollar.

Suddenly the students didn't have a baht on them, so with 8,140 bahts to my name I bought our way out of Bangkok for 8,000. The ticket counter was next to the inspection entrance. You bought your exit ticket, took one step to the right and handed the ticket to the entrance guard, then stood in line inside switchback metal fences for an hour until they opened up in bedlam in front of two baggage inspection stations. People poured out in front of them. It was gruesome, if relatively benign. But you had to stand your ground because mostly Indians were flying from Bangkok to Kolkata and Indians don't believe in lines, even while standing in them. You'll often find an Indian step up to a line and ponder it for a moment, right hand on chin, before stepping into it somewhere near the front. What the pondering is about is a mystery, but if you give them an opening they step in front of you. Some of our female students were actually moving backwards.

We had to reorganize. I put Shanna in the front, Diosa in the back, and ran the line like in a trail ride. Heyah! Heyah! Stay close together! When we finally got everybody through the X-ray and metal inspection, I stood in front of a small soldier in a beret who grinned and grinned and ran his metal detection prod up and down my sides. I stood, arms raised. The soldier grinned and grinned some more; he ran the prod up and down, up and down. I grinned. The soldier grinned.

"Where from?" the soldier said.

"California," I said. "Los Angeles."

The soldier laughed. "Great hat," he said.

It took three hours to fly to Kolkata, 2 a.m. Bangkok time, though in India it was only 12:30 a.m. Why you're fourteen hours ahead of California time in Thailand, then fly three more hours west and end up only 12 ½ hours ahead is a sacred mystery of the Orient, east of Greenwich, you choose. Another few hundred miles west and you're 12 ¾ hours ahead in Nepal. Somewhere it's yesterday. Somewhere else, tomorrow. It took an hour and a half for the bags to come out, so it got to be 2 a.m. again without moving a step.

Pema met us at reception and piled us onto a bus. At four in the morning, Kolkata is as asleep as any town in the world. Outside the Fairlawn Hotel, a half-dozen men in loin cloth slept on the sidewalk. We staggered through the iron gates onto the long driveway and into a huge, wooden columned portico, pale green, hung with thick vines; it felt like we'd been dropped into the 19th century. We divided up keys, found our rooms. Met downstairs to say goodnight.

"It doesn't smell like Bangkok," said Diosa.

"Should we have a beer?" said Tom.

"It's afternoon somewhere," I said. And we all sat down under the vines in pale, green wicker chairs drinking half-liter Kingfishers in the thick, morning air of Kolkata, West Bengal, India.

RICKSHAWS AND SAINTS

A FEW HOURS LATER Pema rattled all our doors and we staggered into the dining area of the Fairlawn Hotel, drank mango juice and tea or weak coffee, ate porridge or eggs or vegetable cutlets. The waiters were curt and formal, particularly to the women. They wore jackets and hats, Nehru style. Later, Diosa found out that they were Muslims. Does that matter? Then the owner, a heavy-set woman in her nineties, lots of make-up, a big brown wig and long dress, joined us. Scenes from *City of Joy*, some of it shot at the Fairlawn, hung on the walls. There was a photo of Patrick Swayze and underneath it said, *City of Joy*. "I hate Patrick Swayze. He's a horrible man," the owner said.

We finished breakfast, got up, and staggered through the terrace area and into the long driveway where nine rickshaws and their drivers, is that what they were called, men who pulled rickshaws, drivers? waited inside the gates.

Outside, away from the giant ceiling fans, the air fell on us like a pancake. The drivers were barefoot. They wore shabby white cotton pants, shirts like tunics that fell to the knees, short vests. Some wore scarves around their necks and others around their heads. Outside the gates lay labyrinthine Kolkata, the city we'd been prepared for in tour books and orientation meetings, teeming with armless and legless beggars, emaciated orphans, starving humanity. Diosa's older brother, a businessman from Cincinnati, said he left his hotel in Kolkata only once, that he wept at the depravation and never emerged again until he caught his plane out. "Want some advice?" he said. "Don't go." One of the Study Abroad counselors told us that outside the gates of the Fairlawn we might encounter an impoverished multitude of beggars who shoved unspeakable deformities into your face, a vision of living hell.

What's more, I had to decide whether or not to get in a rickshaw, to let a barefoot man pull me through these infernal avenues, its denizens' hands clinging to my calves. Raised working class, I'd found a focus for my resentment of the rich in college reading Marx: *The 1848 Manuscripts*, *The German Ideology*, *Capital*. Despite the disasters of Communism turned totalitarian, I still preferred the model of "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need," to the bet on Capitalist technology and the trickle down from greed which had brought the world to environmental crisis and nuclear crisis, this world division of rich and poor that I was about to face. As one of the rich. And what would you call the crisis of radical Muslim fundamentalism? Didn't it, among other things, mask world scale class warfare? What do you do? I wouldn't be the first man to ride a rickshaw, or the last in the land, this India, rich and poor, suffering under the yoke of the Aryans, the Mughals, the British, the Raj, suffering for six thousand years.

"Gurus to the front!" yelled Pema, and I took Diosa's hand and walked to the second rickshaw, helped her get in, then jumped up. But we didn't fit. I was just too big to fit in a rickshaw with anybody else.

"She'll have to ride with you," I yelled to Pema. Students were piling into rickshaws. A deluge of voices and horns poured over the hotel gates.

I helped Diosa get down and she got into Pema's rickshaw at the front. I got back in minutes alone. My driver was a stocky man, unshaven like me, his beard like pepper, black and white against his brown skin.

“Nice hat, boss,” he said.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Let’s go!” said Pema.

The gates swung open. My driver immediately leapt forward and pulled his rickshaw to the front of Diosa and Pema. And I got to be the one thing I didn’t ever want to be: a big white guy in a feathered cowboy hat at the very front of a line of nine rickshaws in the back street of Kolkata.

You cannot prepare for India. You can talk to a hundred people and read a thousand books, look at ten thousand pictures, watch shows on Discovery and PBS, listen to NPR, study Islam and Jainism, Buddhism and Hinduism for thirty-five years, read tour books, travel books, novels, creative journalism, read Rushdie, read Paz, read Amartya Sen, meditate and listen to tabla and sitar music till you turn blue. You can’t prepare. And afterward, it can’t be described.

The Fairlawn is in the center of the city. Yet when we first emerged onto Sudder Street, it seemed that Kolkata was as shocked to see us as we it. There were no beggars or cripples outside the hotel. The street fell silent. I heard the wheels of the rickshaws clatter against the uneven road, the pad of my driver’s calloused feet scratching on the crumbling street, some mixture of macadam, dirt, and stone. Then the noise began to rise and suddenly Kolkata collapsed around us. Streets filled with taxis, autos, people, motorcycles, trucks, buses, bicycles, people, rickshaws, dogs, goats, people, sheep, chickens, bicycles, taxis, taxis, taxi, yellow taxis, pigs, dogs, goats, people, cows, yes, cows, and bulls, rickshaws, chickens, taxis, dogs, goats, and people.

The noise was cacophonous. No city matches it, not New York, not London, not Mexico City. Shouting and horns. Engines, shouting, and horns, horns, horns, constant and blistering horns; in the streets of Kolkata there is never a moment between the sound of horns.

We turned right onto a narrow side street of dirt and suddenly into the depths. People hurried from the sides of buildings that seemed to fall into each other in the gap of space above the street. Shops the size of closets, people sleeping on the street, bathing on the street in troughs filled by hand pumps, old men, young men, and teenagers, naked but for girded loins, mothers bathing their babies in the brick troughs. People raised their arms to heaven, they touched their hands palm to palm. There, in the streets, in the daylight, under the blare of honking horns they raised their eyes to the sky. They prayed.

Women wore colorful saris. Men carried loads of fabric, wood, food, and car parts on their heads. Two wheeled carts filled with wood or metal rods or bamboo pulled by men, the cargo extending out six feet front and back. Carts of fruit and vegetables. Boys on bicycles dangling a dozen live chickens held by their feet. Three wheeled tricycles piled high with enough wood or cloth or metal to fill a small pickup truck. On the front of buildings, shelves stacked one upon another upon which people slept or sat or reclined. Dogs and goats and cows everywhere.

Through the narrow, dirt streets we crossed from Chowringhee to Beniapukur. People waved joyously at the rickshaws. They shouted, “Hullo! Hullo!” They shouted at me, “Hey Boss! Hey cowboy! Hey New York cowboy!” But mostly “Boss! Boss!” and “Nice hat!” Calls slowed as we passed. A face appeared. “Nice hat, Boss!” Hands reached at me, but not to grab or beg, but to touch my hands as we plodded by. My driver took obvious pride in the

notoriety of his passenger. He grinned and nodded and threw his head back in my direction. If I had to say, "Look what I got." In fact, the rickshaw men, immigrants from the rural areas, from the lowest caste, working one of the worst jobs in the city, carried themselves with tremendous dignity, heads up, moving steadily through the streets, giving no quarter to cars or taxis, ignoring the blare of horns, taking the right of way at corners, jingling their wire bells to clear their path.

And then, because this is what happens to you in India again and again, I didn't feel separate from any of it, felt as if I had been here before, had lived lives here, had been born here and died here, not as some Raj or Brahman or businessman, but as one of these people. I felt for the first time the rhythm of eternal and recurring life; in these throngs that often pressed so close that you couldn't move without touching several people at once, among these sweating and dusty masses of animals and people, there were, inexplicably, lives filled with meaning and joy. If you don't weep in the streets of Kolkata, then you will never weep for anything but the nothing that is yourself; if you do not see God in the streets of Kolkata, you will never see God.

This is what Mother Teresa knew. In the streets of Kolkata, Christians, Jews, Jain Buddhists, Muslims, and Hindus speak her name with a reverence only matched by the name of Gandhi. The tiny woman who dominated Indian spirituality by caring for the dying, the sick, the orphaned; battling two of the most vast bureaucracies in the world, the Indian government and that of her own Catholic church, she created a system of universal caring, Catholic feeding the starving Hindus, a holy woman, a woman, not a man, publically disregarding the caste system to give to the lowest the love and material care that each human being deserved by birth under God's providence. It is the miracle of Mother Teresa and of India, too, that this could have happened, that one tenacious, humble woman could change the world. You needn't believe in God or God's providence or sainthood to know that Mother Teresa was a saint, and whether the Catholics canonized her or not, in India she is bodhisattva, the White Tara, the Goddess of compassion.

At her grave, nuns handed out holy cards and, as Mother Teresa herself did, four small medals of the Virgin Mary. Our students, like the others around them, dropped to their knees around her tomb. The racket of Kolkata dropped to a mumble under the soft chanting of women, nuns, on the floor above. The attitude of sympathy, India's primal virtue, was visceral. Whatever the craven reputation of the Catholic Church, here they do not ask for money, they ask for prayer and the miracle of your compassion.

Back through the streets of Kolkata again, in its raucous, crowded, dirty noise and feverish celebration, touching hands, "Hullo! Hullo!" and back to the Fairlawn. My driver, Chandra, shook my hand. Bowed. Tried to sell me his bell for Rs 50. I didn't want a rickshaw bell. I offered him the 50 rupees anyway, but Chandra wouldn't take it. "Okay, give me the bell," he said, but it was too late for that.

"How much did you pay them?" the owner shouted to Pema.

"200 rupees each," said Pema.

"A week's wages," said the owner. "Their lucky day."

Later, on a tour, our guide, Ravi, a Hindu and a Communist—West Bengal had been governed by the Communist Party for almost three decades—said that the government was trying to outlaw rickshaws because it was degrading, but till now it was the only work for the

men who flooded into Kolkata from the countryside and it was hard to stop it until the government could supply other work. Pema scoffed at Bengali communism. "They're not real Communists," he said. "Just liberal intellectuals. Besides, everything run by the Indian government is a disaster. The only hope for India is privatization."

I guessed that real Communists were Chinese, the ones who ran Pema's family out of Tibet. That was the problem with being a Communist nowadays, if you weren't a ruthless totalitarian you were nothing, or at best an ineffective liberal wimp botching up the economy.

Regardless, though I saw Chandra in the streets several more times in Kolkata, and shook his hand when we met, I never took another rickshaw ride by human or bicycle, not in Kolkata, nor Varanasi, nor Delhi, nor Bangkok, nor Kathmandu. When I could, I walked because cabbies in India, like cabbies all over the world, no matter how small their city and no matter how long they've lived in it, have somehow never heard of the place you want to go and so must circle forever down the wrong one way streets with the meter running or more likely, broken, and because of all their trouble must renegotiate the fare, and hating the interpersonal anyway I just wanted to say, "Just fucking take me there and I'll pay you double!" but this is not how the world is anywhere; you must let the cabbie earn his devotional due and gain through device what you would have given him anyway with a tip; then he will grumble that the ride was too short and the tip too small because he is overworked and underpaid and this, in the beginning and the end, is the conflict between the employer and the employed played out again and again, and this is the reason that I agreed with Ravi, though despite the fact that Chandra and his fellow rickshaw men kept their dignity and needed the work, it was not the simple happy happy joy joy work of the simple grateful man like Patrick Swayze's *City of Joy*, but a relationship where the barefoot man who dragged you through the streets was impoverished and degraded whether his dignity permitted him to admit it or not, and that there was resentment there, and, all karma aside, when you degraded someone you degraded yourself and contributed to the cycle of degradation and resentment. Equal opportunity, in America or India, was yet more maya.

Of course, this changes nothing. And it's hard to know whether the struggle of poverty and wealth is as eternal as humanity or that politics holds it in place or can redeem us from it, or whether the world will only be changed when each of us becomes like Mother Teresa and trades the war in our heart for compassion. Nonetheless, this does not change what the Muslim man who sat next to Diosa on the plane said when he heard she was traveling to Kolkata. "Kolkata," he said, "is the most blessed city in the world."

KALI GHAT: NEVER THE TWAIN

OUR THIRD DAY IN KOLKATA we took a bus to the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, a huge complex of temples and gardens surrounding a large, eclectic temple dedicated to all religions. Its founder, Rama Krishna, was the first man to preach Hinduism to the west at the first International Conference of Religion in Chicago in 1898. He was the first true ecumenical thinker, at least the first one affiliated with any of the major religions, and his main temple exhibits the styles of Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Muslim, and Christian worship (not Sikh, Jain, or Zoroastrian). He espoused that all the major religions really sought and expressed the same eternal truths. He was the guru of Yogi Nanda (author of *Autobiography of a Yogi*) who brought his teachings to the United States in the form of the Self-Realization Institute. Yogi Nanda built his own shrines in Malibu and Hollywood. Anyway, whatever good they'd done for the religious world, it made them both filthy rich, a perfectly acceptable result of holiness in India as well as in the West.

Back when our daughter, Jesus, was a baby and Diosa and I lived in the Oakwood ghetto area of Venice Beach, we used to drive up the PCH to Sunset Blvd. and Yogi Nanda's Self-Realization Institute Shrine. Overlooking the ocean, it was built around a pond that Paramount once used for movie sets, so its architecture, left over from that period, was as eclectic as its religious advocacy: Roman arches, a boat bow, a Dutch wind mill housing a meditation room, a bougainvillea shrouded Spanish style wedding chapel, artificial waterfall, statues of Krishna, Jesus, Buddha, an outdoor shrine with an elaborate stone sarcophagus holding some of Gandhi's ashes; no Goddesses, but there was an alcove dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary (now gone). A path led you through and around all of this, amidst a gorgeous, meticulously cared-for, thick garden that muffled the sounds of Sunset Blvd.

The pond had a huge circular water fountain that spouted long streams of water into the air, an island full of sunning turtles, two white swans, and dozens of gigantic coys that you could feed bread crumbs to from the deck of a Japanese pagoda. There was a rose garden dedicated to the five major religions, benches and alcoves for meditation. There was a museum room with pictures and relics of Yogi Nanda, and a gift shop that sold jewelry, bronze and wooden statuary (mostly Hindu manifestations of Vishnu, Shiva, and Parvati, though some of Buddha), and some soft-sell books on Hinduism, including *Autobiography of a Yogi*. It was quiet; an escape from the guns and rumble of Oakwood, and it was free.

In the early 70's, when I was a grad student in philosophy and just getting into Buddhism and Vedanta, I tried to read *Autobiography of a Yogi*, but found it a lot of hokey magic and fantastic stories. And during my four months in India, however many yogis could levitate and lamas walk on water, I never saw it. I'd also just read in *Freedom at Midnight* that all of Gandhi's ashes, according to his strict prescriptions, were mixed with cow's milk in a copper urn and carried to the middle of the junction of the Yamuna and Ganges Rivers outside Allahabad, there to be carried to his Eternal Mother, the sea. Well, there are enough of Buddha's bones to rebuild Asoka's stupas and enough pieces of Christ's cross to bridge the Dead Sea. The ladder to truth is made of shadows.

Back in Kolkata, our group took a bus with our local guide, Ravi Shankar. Ravi was a quintessential Bengali, short with thick black hair and a mustache, he prefaced everything

with “You should be knowing,” and “You must now be seeing the very famous.” Often you couldn’t see it and when you did, it wasn’t famous. “On your left you must now be seeing the very famous lights of the Kolkata Cricket Stadium.”

On the way to the Rama Krishna Shrine we parked next to some railroad tracks caked with trash, stepped through a hole in a wire fence, crossed the tracks and walked down to the riverfront. From there we could see the Howrah Bridge stretching over the Hugli-Ganges to the north, the Vidyasagar Setu Bridge to the south. Barges moved up and down the brown river, more of them rotted on the shore next to rotting iron hulls of ships. Monkeys, some as big as a child, chattered and hung from trees festooned with bones and feathers and bits of cloth; small holes dug into them effused burning incense; each tree the home of some God. Black birds with a large white stripe across their wings yakked from limb to limb. The monkeys swung down with scooped palms, screamed, and swooped away. The students pointed and cheered. Monkeys! In the middle of a city!

Tattered men stood by the tracks. A train approached, rumbling, full of men; a dozen cars in which men hung out the windows, out the doors, between the cars, sat on top the train. They threw garbage. Some, hanging between the moving cars, peed onto the tracks.

By now, the sun was well up and the sulking heat of Kolkata hung like wet blankets; you don’t move through the air in Kolkata, you don’t breathe it, you wear it. We followed a crumbling, betel stained ramp down to a cement platform enclosed by an iron railing, bent and rusted. A sign said: Tourist View. No smoking. No littering. No spitting. The place was covered with garbage, cigarette butts, and the purple stains of betel leaf spittle. In Kolkata you crawl through a fence and over railroad tracks to get to a scenic viewpoint covered with trash. Across the river, the hulking square black barns and rising smokestacks of industrial Kolkata; steel mills and cotton and wool manufacturing. Ravi Shankar pointed north. “You must now be seeing the very famous Howrah Bridge,” he said. “The busiest bridge in the world.” Ravi chattered on and on about everything, though you could hardly listen and no one did. It was beyond listening.

We walked back along the tracks to some steps down to the river. These river approaches are called *ghats* and this was the Babu Ghat. In a cement portico above the steps, people, mostly men, but several women, dressed and dried themselves and chanted. Some men wrapped in white cloth or wearing only a dhoti, a cloth wrapped around their groin, walked down the steps into the muddy water. Another emerged and sat on shore to have his head shaved and painted red, an act of mourning for a dead relative. A crowd gathered around the students and it was getting tough to tell who was gawking at whom. We trundled back to the bus.

Krishna Consciousness Temple was huge and pastoral, though outside the gates there was the usual press of street merchants selling statuettes of the Gods, cheap toys, and body paint as well as beggars, some deformed or feigning deformity, women with babies on their hips, carried empty baby bottles and begged, putting their fingers to their lips. Guards kept beggars and peddlers from coming inside.

There, within the gates, sprawling green lawns spread between rows of cypress trees. Along the cement walkways, older women in saris shook their fingers and chided the students. “No camera! No camera!” The kids smiled and waved at them. “Don’t worry. We promise.”

The temple itself is huge, but modest, constructed of brown sandstone outside, marble

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