

Hitchhike 1967

I had known Jeff for about a year. He was from Melbourne and was on the fringes of the Melbourne Push, a sort of post-beatnik group. One day he said he was going to India and added, "Why don't you come along You can meet me in Athens." He gave me a timescale and place, Constitution Square at midday and left. I worked as hard as I could but I only managed to save £60. I couldn't afford a sleeping bag so I bought a sheet of polythene from Selfridges. I already had a blanket. I started to pack. I had a very cumbersome bag and put a change of clothes in it. I could put my head on them and wrap myself in the blanket and polythene sheet. I hoped I would be reasonably comfortable during the nights, even if it rained.

I hard boiled eighteen eggs to feed on during my journey .

I set off. I crossed the channel to Ostend. I joined the end of a long queue of hitchhikers. A driver soon pulled up and I was off. The driver said he didn't want to pick up any hippies. It was 1967.

I got a lift into Germany. I started hitchhiking on a motorway. A car drew up and the driver shouted at me, "Get in quick hitchhiking is forbidden on the autobahn.

I got in and was driven to the outskirts of a small town.

The was a circular bit of grass. I decided to camp out on it. As I was all snuggled up a bus arrived and a whole lot of people got out. It was the bus terminus. I had to find somewhere else to sleep.

The next morning I got a lift from an American. As we entered Austria he switched the radio on.

“God has chosen America to save the world.
God has chosen America to save humanity.”

Really! It didn't say that in the Bible! Not the bits I've read, anyway!
I was embarrassed just listening to it. I would have been more embarrassed to submit anyone else to it. I couldn't complain. I needed the ride.

I got stuck in Bad Aussee. I don't know how far I was from the town. It was just a few houses on a hillside.

Three days in the rain I was. The nights I spent with my head in my bag and all wrapped up in my blanket and the sheet of polythene.

I had a map of Europe that was two by three inches.

I entered Yugoslavia. I got to Belgrade.

I found a park area and camped down under a seat. Someone sat on the seat and started pissing. Well, at least the polythene sheet was waterproof.

I heard other men walking and coughing. I wondered if they had T B. I had found the gay cruising ground. Did I want a bed for the night?

I didn't want T.B..

Going to Belgrade was a big mistake. It was miles from the motorway. Not like in England where roads go to places and don't bypass them. I should have invested in a larger map. Too late now! I had to back track

to the motorway. I got a lift from an Ethiopian. I thought he must have been royalty by the size of his car. Handsome, he was too.

There had been an earthquake around Skopje in southern Yugoslavia, now in Northern Macedonia. The houses had many cracks in them. Big ones, too.

I entered Greece. The border post was crowded. I sat on a table and a soldier shouted at me "Get off that table." It was during the military takeover. I got up. I didn't want to be shot.

I met Jeff in Athens.

He was reading a Dostoevsky novel. You know the type of book. Thick. I had read the Idiot so I knew how thick they were. As Jeff and I waited by the roadside for a lift, he would read a page and tear it out and throw it to the wind. Read the next page and so on.

We crossed the border into Turkey. We got a lift from an Armenian. We arrived in the great city of Istanbul. Silly Greeks, taking off more than they could chew.

I visited Saint Sofia. There isn't another city like it until one gets to India. Jeff rented two beds in a boarding house for us. There were other Europeans sharing the room too.

The room started to grate and shake.

"It's an earthquake," someone said.

I went to the window and saw minarets swaying. I wondered if I should jump onto the flat roof below. I didn't. The quake subsided. Seventy people were killed towards the epicentre. Only one in Istanbul.

We heard that someone had gone to sell blood. His bloodless body was found in the Bosphorus.

We were on our way to Ankara when we saw some lights moving back and forth to the south. We had to walk for miles before we entered a village. Or so it seemed. The villagers were grinding corn in the dark. A beast was walking in circles, pulling a beam that moved the grind stone. There were lights to illuminate the track the beast had to follow.

The villagers were surprised by our arrival. They greeted us and we were taken into a house, brought some bedding and we slept the night. In the morning there was this banquet laid out for us to eat. I couldn't eat half of it and wondered if it would appear an insult if we left any.

The villagers couldn't have been more friendly, not to mention hospitable.

We said our goodbyes and set off again. Lots of hills around.

We got a lift on the back of a truck. Some Americans joined us. They started taking photographs with flashy cameras. The truck stopped and the truckers started demanding money. "Parum Yok!" we said. The drivers didn't believe us so they left us. Jeff and I left the Americans and started hitchhiking together, again. We had to get a visa for Iran in Ankara which we did without any trouble.

As we got closer to the Iranian border we met up with other travelers.

One night we walked through the night. We heard dogs barking.

“We might be attacked by dogs,” someone said.

“If they’re barking, they’re guard dogs. If they were going to attack us we wouldn’t hear them,” I said.

Eventually, we crossed into Iran. The first big city we were heading for was Tabris. There was this very long line of lights. We didn’t seem to be getting any closer. We were of course but it took us a long time.

I went begging for some bread. I got a piece that was in the shape of an animal’s skin. They had put the dough on very hot pebbles which had to be shaken off when cooked. It was delicious.

In Teheran we went to the Blood Bank and sold some of our blood. One has to put one’s arm through a cashier hole. The needle goes in and blood is taken. And one gets paid. There were portraits of the Shah in every shop window.

Jeff and I parted and once again I was on my own. I got a lift and found myself in another town. I walked to the east of it and started putting my hand out with my thumb pointing upwards. A policeman asked me what I was doing.

“I have to get to India and I don’t have enough money for transport,” I said.

He told me to sit on his crossbar with my bag somewhere on his handle bars. He rode me to the local police station. I had to sleep outside the

compound. He told me he would put me on a bus the next morning, which he did. I crossed halfway from Teheran to Afghanistan that way.

I arrived at the passport control post in Iran. There were a few Europeans there. We waited in a queue.

There was this youth checking the passports. He looked about fifteen and asked, "Why are you here?"

"We're tired of London," some guy said.

"When you're tired of London, you're tired of Life. Do you know who said that?" The Iranian asked.

To our shame, none of us did.

"Dr. Johnson," he informed us.

It was getting dark but we decided to set off for Afghanistan. The sky was dark with lots of sparkling stars. Some shooting stars, too. Not that they are stars, just small particles or dust, heated up as they enter and travel through the Earth's atmosphere.

We arrived at the Iranian border post, manned by soldiers. They wouldn't let us pass in case the Afghans shot us.

In the morning we were let through. We arrived at the Afghanistan passport control border. I took the bus for Herat. Hitchhiking was impossible. The bus stopped by a holy shrine. Most of the Afghan men got out and prayed. They got on the bus again. The road disappeared and we were riding over rough ground. It was soon sunset and the bus

stopped again. The Afghan men got out to pray. We stopped and had something to eat. It was a big mistake. My stomach swelled up and I was in great pain. I won't describe the force of which the liquid contents came out of me. I went to a doctor and was given a charcoal tablet or two and that did it.

I had to go to Kandahar first where I met Jeff. A day travelling, seated on a wooden seat on a bus. Jeff and I took a ride in a horse drawn carriage. We were about to enter a big square. The traffic policeman stopped us. There was no other vehicle on any of the approach roads. I guessed he felt the need to do something! He waved us on. Jeff was flying to Kabul later that day.

I took the bus to Kabul and met Jeff.

In Kabul, I saw a butcher spraying D.D.T. over his raw meat. Was it to keep the flies away or to kill them? I didn't know how many times he'd sprayed them that day!

Jeff and I took the bus to Pakistan, through the Khyber Pass. There were men sat on the backs of seats with their feet on the opposite seat backs. All were carrying rifles with bullets on straps across their chests.

Peshawar looked like a village in England. Bungalows with gardens around them and British type trees.

We crossed into India. Jeff bought me some pyjamas.

We took the train to Delhi and another train to Pathankot. We went through canyons and took a bus to Middle Dharamshala. One day I went for a walk. I entered a graveyard and read the inscriptions on the gravestones. I was surprised just how many people had been killed by bears. I walked a little further on and looked around me. I was surrounded by long grey haired baboons. All of them were looking at me. I withdrew, discreetly. Jeff and I took a bus and a train to Delhi. We took another train to Varanasi. We stayed on a houseboat on the Ganges.

Jeff and I split up and met again in Katmandu. I could imagine the houses to be in medieval England.

After a month I took the bus down to the Indian plains. I decided to go to Calcutta. I crossed the bridge over the river Ganges and travelled for some days. I entered a village and the children were running away from me. I asked an adult why.

“Because they thought you are a ghost! The last white man in the village was a German boxer and that was 19 years ago.”

That’s how lost I was. I decided to head for Agra. I wanted to do some sightseeing. I wanted to see the Taj Mahal. Which I did. It felt so cold after the British had stripped all the gold decorations from it.

Jeff and I were to meet in Goa.

At least I arrived at Calangute Beach and not Colva. He had rented a beach bungalow. Right on the beach. It was a beach holiday. What more can I say?

After a while, I split. I wasn't hitchhiking for very long when a car pulled up with two men in it. After a short while one of them said, "A tiger has just crossed the road."

I was snoozing on the back seat and missed it. I went to Delhi and met a British, performance poet. We went to Kerala via Madras. And we ended up a couple of villages away from where, *The God of Small Things* was set. We bathed in the river in the mornings with other men.

The fish would pull the hairs on my legs. One morning I swam further out. I heard people shouting on the bank. I wasn't sure why. I couldn't understand the language. I soon found out, though. I came face to face with a snake. It was only a meter away. I splashed the water and splashed it, right in its face. It swam away. I did, too. Right back to the bank. That's how to deal with such things, I tried to convey as I walked onto the bank. I smiled. However, the crowd didn't know just how hard my heart was beating.

I returned back to Bombay via Goa. In Bombay I went to the Times of India and had a suite of drawings published in *Sarika*, a Hindi magazine. I went back to Rawalpindi ready to hitchhike back to Blighty. Unfortunately, there was an outbreak of Cholera in Iran and I had to return to India. I had been in India for two years and three months. I was growing tired of begging and applied to the British Consulate in Bombay to be repatriated, which made me feel quite a failure.

The End.