



# On a Journey...

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By Susan Griffith-Jones, Exclusive

It's the guy from the OCI (Overseas Citizens of India) office, who had come to our house a couple of weeks ago along with another fellow! In the comfort of our little sitting room, they tell us they're in the process of checking up on all the resident foreigners in the valley, finding out who's still living there and who has left. At the time, I'm happy to answer their questions and give them photocopies of the documents they need and we chat a bit about our life there. Now, as I continue getting onto the bus, my immediate thought is "What a coincidence that he's on the same bus as me!" but brush the reaction aside, as he's probably frequently going between Delhi and Manali. I question him about his presence there and he tells me that he's been dropping off some documents to his office and is on his way back. Immediately it fleetingly crosses my mind that I may be being 'followed', but then why on earth would that be so, and how would he know I'm on this particular bus! He seats himself in the row just behind me and we don't stop chatting from that moment on until around 2am in the morning.

But the key moment comes when he admits to me that he is not actually from the OCI office, but from some sort of undercover government police department. We are being investigated, because local people have reported us for selling cat placentas to use in Chinese black magic rituals! At this point, I

don't know if I'm dreaming or not, because this is by far the most absurd thing I have ever heard in my life! I can't even react to it, because I'm stunned into a flabbergasted state and simply and calmly question him whether that kind of thing even exists. "Yes, it does!" he tells me, for as a result of the accusation, he's investigated whether there's a market for cat placentas or not and there actually is one. Apparently just one of them will sell for more than a lakh of rupees, more than a thousand pounds! I have never even heard about such a trade, let alone to be accused of actually doing it, nor if it is even illegal! It's also now clear that this guy is not randomly on the bus. I am certainly under further investigation, whether it's for trading cat placentas, or maybe that too is simply an absurd excuse to talk further to me. Perhaps they're investigating all the foreigners in the valley to get to the bottom of something else. The fact that I'm under scrutiny hits me at many different levels, from sheer comedy to utmost horror. However, to take off the edge, the fellow does tell me that he's owning up to me about having not told us his real identity at first, because the moment he came into our house he could feel such a peaceful energy in there that it was impossible that something funny may be going on.

Indians are superstitious about cats and the fact we have so many, may seem very suspicious to them. From our side, there's a simple explanation. The veterinary services in the valley are so basic that there's only a 50/50 chance of a female surviving being spayed and I'm not go-

ing to risk their lives. We therefore accept that kittens will be born, grow up and then the dominant ones of each gender will become territorial towards the others and kick them out. Like this, we have a stream of cats pouring through our home, year by year and they've become such an integral part of our lives. We love their presence, as they create such a delightful energy in the house, plus it's said that cats can sense 'energies' and deflect harm from their owners, which is why they are commonly kept in temples and in sacred spaces. Perhaps it's this magical quality that makes Indians suspicious of them.

To be honest, from this moment on, my reality of the Kullu-Manali valley shifts a number of notches. If the crazy cat placenta story is indeed true, then this is indeed a classic Indian way of some locals trying to scare us by reporting such a phenomenon to the police, a way of telling us who's in control and perhaps a way to gently nudge us out of their clan-locked pen. The fact that I'm living within this kind of 'medieval' consciousness suddenly feels deeply disturbing to me and realising this may be a scare tactic is even more sinister. Honestly speaking, I simply don't want such a thing to be occurring in my life.

But right now, I just don't care anymore, it's so beyond me to even be in this position that I decide to just enjoy the conversation and learn a bit more about what's going on in the valley from his perspective. Now I know he's an undercover something or other, I quiz him about so many things that results in a complete shake up my understanding of the place. I learn that there's a far shadier side to the naive beauty of the valley that I ordinarily see, going on in its underworld; the massive trade in drugs, addiction levels affecting a large proportion of the population and how gangs get young kids hooked on hard drugs, prostitution etc... Because Jamyang and I do not hang out in the bars and restaurants of the town at night and largely keep ourselves to ourselves, we don't have a personal understanding of what is going on there from firsthand experience. It suddenly strikes me that all of this is going on right under our noses, and these are all things that do not fit into my world picture. It also makes me feel a bit insecure about continuing to live here, and more than that, no longer 'wanting' to stay in such a place. When my eyelids are literally dropping, as I've hardly had any sleep the night before since the Vietnamese group arrived late into Delhi, I politely tell him that I need to rest now. Plus I'll also have to look after the programme for the whole of the next day and will need



Group enjoying the apples on the walk to the forest, Kullu-Manali valley, India



Traditional Himalayan house in the village of Dashal, Kullu-Manali valley, India

to have some energy for that too!

When we get off the bus at Patlikuhl, we hire three taxis up to the village of Sarsai underneath where our house is, where we've booked the group into a lovely home stay nearby. I'm exhausted, but relieved to be home and shove the conversation I've just had with the guy on the bus into a pocket for the time being. After resting, washing and brushing up, we set off quite late in the morning on foot. Today, we're not going that far away from the village. It's the most perfect weather and the mood of the group is so high that we all get infected with joy and carefree ease. They play around on the footpath, stopping to pick apples and to take selfies and photos of each other along the way and I now acknowledge the value of having gone through the excessive exercise of getting the sim cards just after their arrival, as they want to instantly post their photos on Facebook etc! Today is our 'Water day' and after stopping to meditate a while at an ancient Shiva temple at the top of the beautiful Himalayan village of Dashal, we eat our picnic in the forest near little irrigation streams and then swim in the lovely cool water of the main river that's tumbling down from mountainous glaciers above our house. I'm surprised at how much they love the water! I had imagined that some of them would have shied off from the cold and the steep climb down to the river, but everyone is enthusiastically joining in splashing and dipping, as well as sitting quietly in meditation on the rocks, while also posing for more pictures!

After the swim, we trek up into the Soyal valley above the place we've been swimming and find a lovely area nearby the river upstream where we can do our group meditation together. We can hear the sound of the water rushing by as we sit there in a circle and I invite them to meet the water element within themselves. Since our biological organism itself is made up of 70% water, we are very connected to it in all ways, so it's not a difficult thing to attain. A lovely buffet dinner is ready for us when we get back to their guesthouse, but we're all absolutely shattered and decide not to continue with the discussion time that I'd scheduled in for the evening.

Jamyang and I then walk up the hill to our home and are about to drop into bed without thinking about anything else, except feeding the cats and fish, when we discover that our eldest female cat, Tashima is having kittens! Within an hour or so, she's produced 2 of them and I grin with the irony of the situation, as I watch her eating the placentas after each of the births. This is a necessary pack of vitamins for the female after giving birth, also to start her production of milk and my mind trickles over the conversation I've been having with the guy on the bus. In my extreme tiredness of now, it's just all too strange to contemplate!

To be continued...

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Group posing in front of a traditional Himalayan house, Dashal, Kullu-Manali valley, India