

CRIME

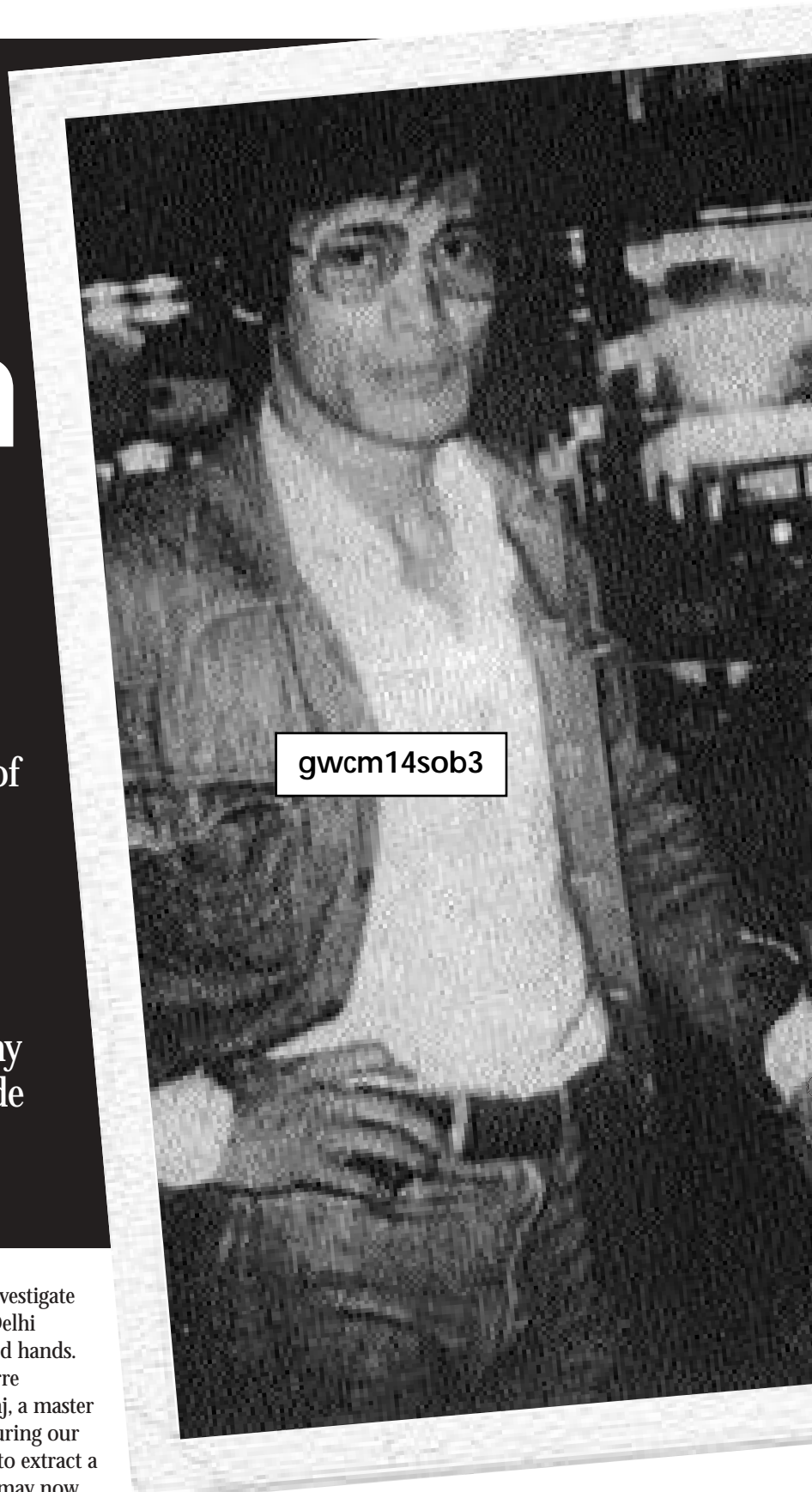
You're a bad man

Charles Sobhraj

He used his charm and a cocktail of poisons on young tourists across Asia – and got away with it. Now, bizarrely, he's returned to the only country that could nail him for murder. Richard Neville, who first met Sobhraj in the '70s, looks at why – and recalls a rash promise he made to this master manipulator.



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WHEN CHARLES SOBHRAJ WAS arrested last October in a casino in Kathmandu for the 1975 murders of two backpackers, it marked a bizarre turn in the life of this notorious criminal. For years, Sobhraj has been living as a free man, based in Paris. On the surface, then, his return to the scene of a grisly double murder is a mystery – he knew only too well when he flew into Kathmandu that this was one country that still had active murder charges against him.

In Thailand, where five other young travellers had been savagely murdered around the same time, the wily Sobhraj had tricked his way out of being extradited. Even in India, where he was arrested in 1976 after two more travellers had been killed in his wake, he managed to get one conviction for murder reduced to manslaughter and the other case thrown out. The Indian authorities eventually managed to jail him on other charges, but he's never been imprisoned for murder. In 1997, after spending 20 years in Delhi's Tihar jail, he was deported to France.

So why go back to Kathmandu? Those who have followed his criminal career know to expect the unexpected and in many ways his flight back to the heart of the furnace is true to type. It had been the pattern of his whole

life – a life I started to investigate in 1977 when I flew to Delhi and shook his handcuffed hands. It was the start of a bizarre relationship with Sobhraj, a master of manipulation who, during our time together, managed to extract a promise from me that I may now live to regret.

Our meeting took place at the crossroads of the counter-culture. Sobhraj was contemptuous of the drop-out lifestyle of the people he preyed upon, the satori-seeking stoners drifting across the Asian hippie trail. I had been one of its promoters. My 1970 book, *Playpower*, a guide to the “international underground” had enthused at length about the Road to Kathmandu (“paved with cannabis ... and holy men”). At the end of that road, for some unfortunates, lay Charles Sobhraj.

BACK IN JULY 1977, I STOOD IN THE COMPOUND of Old Delhi's Tishasari courthouse waiting for Sobhraj to be brought in to face a variety of charges. These included a jewellery heist, an escape from custody and the poisoning of a French traveller. After a while, a battered jungle-green bus pulled up. Two dozen men in berets and military fatigues clambered out, engulfing a fit, charismatic young man wearing

a V-neck T shirt, crisp blue chinos and tennis shoes. In the corridors which honeycombed the courthouse, the crowds moved back against the walls as the soldiers and the prisoner passed. It began as a whisper, but others soon picked up the cry and repeated it louder: “It's Mr Charles! It's Mr Charles!”

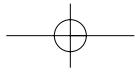
Thin brown boys in ragged white clothes ran behind; women in chains looked on with frightened eyes as “Mr Charles” moved down the corridor like a VIP, despite his fetters. Thick steel cuffs circled his ankles and these were attached to an iron bar 50 centimetres long, which locked onto the belt of his trousers.

“Don't be fooled by all these chains,” were the first words he said to me, smiling and extending his clanking hand. “It was much worse in Greece.” (Two years earlier, he had escaped from a high security jail on a Greek island.) “Just ignore these children,” he said as he gestured at the soldiers, a gold Omega

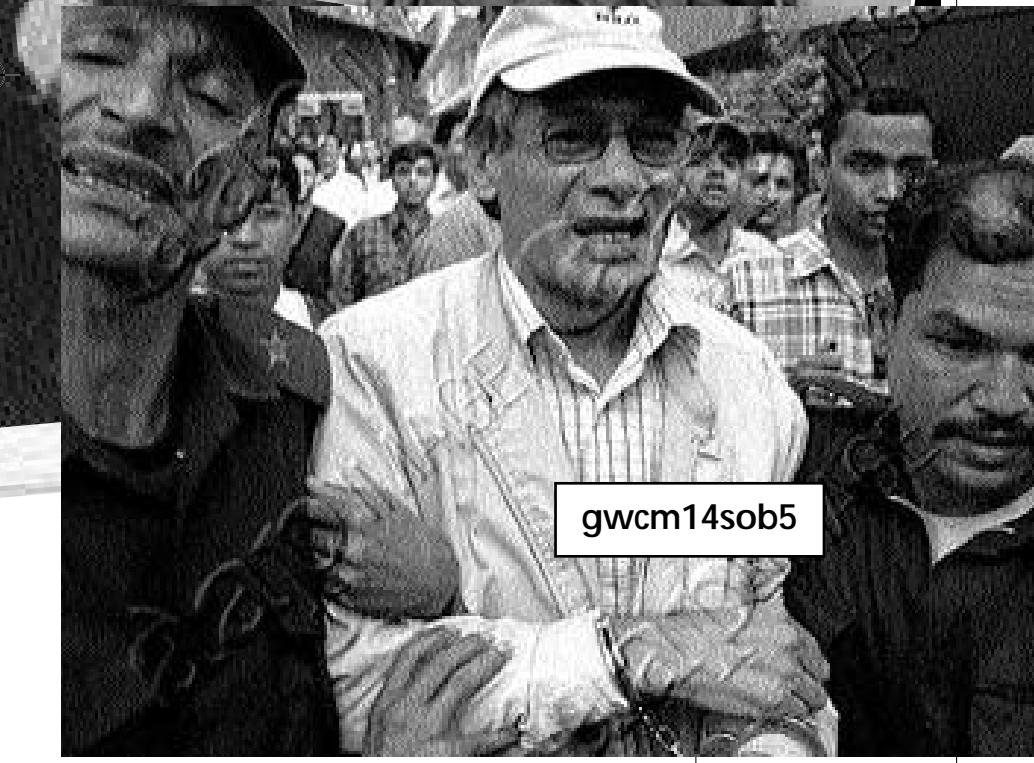
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Charming, urbane and self-assured: (top) Sobhraj in 1977, with the author, as he is escorted to a court in Delhi; (above) piecing the evidence together – Neville's book, co-written with Julie Clarke.



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prospect of jail didn't faze him. (Later, he'd become known as the Maharaja of Tihar, renowned for noisy parties and conjugal visits, his cell reportedly carpet-clad and spacious, with an ensuite bathroom, the latest stereo system, a private gym and a fridge stocked with imported liquor.)

On August 3, 1977, in a stifling courtroom cell, he finally told me that he would tell the truth and not gloss over the crimes. In a deal with a Bangkok businessman, he had swapped the "true story of his life" in return for help with legal fees. The project was passed on to Random House, New York, who commissioned my girlfriend, journalist Julie Clarke, and me to write his biography. And so our talks began – talks that often took place during courtroom sittings while victims of long-ago burglaries identified the ropes with which Sobhraj had bound them as he emptied the hotel safe.

At first, Charles skirted the subject of the murders and reminisced about his early buccaneering days; the great escapes, the mad dashes across Asia with his first wife, Chantal, and their child, Usha. As he talked, cajoling, confiding, rounding off an anecdote with a poetic turn of phrase, often touching me to emphasise a point, I sometimes felt myself losing contact with the real world – the world in which Charles was an indisputably malignant force.

"As long as I can talk to people, I can manipulate them," he would say in the soothing voice of an old, close friend, implying that our own relationship was immune to his tricks, keying his observations to match what he guessed were my own prejudices. In those first few weeks I felt sympathy for this spirited prisoner, chained and shackled, surrounded by soldiers, his future bleak.

The more I nodded and smiled and took notes, the more Charles began, with the air of a war hero reliving old skirmishes, to pour forth stories of his traps and trickeries, of how he would spike drinks with laxatives and sleeping pills, of how he would rob the sleeping victims and steal their passports.

But I was becoming impatient. After almost a month of interviews,

Charles had still not directly answered my questions about his involvement in the murders of the travellers in Thailand and Nepal. "If I have ever killed," he would reply with his cryptic smile, "or have ordered killings, then it was purely for reasons of business, just a job, like a general in the army."

"Why the mutilations?" I asked, thinking of the burned bodies of a Dutch couple found in Bangkok. "Why the stabbings?" In Kathmandu a throat had been cut, a chest slashed.

"Either it is sadism," he would say, still keeping the discussion abstract, "or it is an advertisement. You know, a warning to other parties in the heroin business."

And then one day he announced, "I have taken the decision to speak to you about the cleanings, Richard, but on one condition." His voice was soft, tense and, once again, intimate. "You must never give evidence against me in a court of law."

"But it will all be in the book, Charles."

"Your book won't stand up alone in court, not even a Thai court."

Comforting myself with the belief that the book would be the strongest evidence against Sobhraj, and anxious for "the story", I agreed, and flicked on the tape.

Charles began his confessions with the tale of the first of his five known victims in Thailand, Teresa Knowlton, a young American from Seattle who stopped off in Bangkok on her way to study Tibetan Buddhism at the Kopan Monastery in Kathmandu. Teresa had been picked up at the Malaysia Hotel – a hippie favourite – in Bangkok in October 1975 by an accomplice, Ajay Chowdhury, and invited back to Sobhraj's apartment. After disagreeing on the finer points of Buddhism with her host, Teresa asked him, "Have you ever dropped acid?" Never, said Sobhraj, he didn't even smoke pot. He despised it. Still, Sobhraj invited the animated American to join his friends on a weekend jaunt to Pattaya, and drove her to a field on the edge of a deserted beach. There, he told me, he accused her of being a drug courier. As the Indian guards stood sleepily at the barred windows, Sobhraj re-enacted the conversation, aiming his words at the concealed mike: "Tell me, Teresa," that world-weary voice recited, "do you have to take something from here to Kathmandu?"

"No," she said.

"Come, Teresa, I think you do have to do a little business."

"Did you put something in my drink?" she asked. "I'm feeling weird."

"It was only to relax you, Teresa, because I think I have to do something bad to you."

His detailed account of the rest of the scene was deeply upsetting.

Sobhraj told me he had forced Teresa to drink coffee laced with sleeping pills and ordered his accomplice, Chowdhury, to drag her body out into the sea. "It's funny, Richard," he mused. "Teresa didn't like to drink coffee, but I told her that this time she must make an exception."

In the days that followed, Charles confessed to the five known murders in Thailand and the two in Nepal, often dropping into the conversation such hints as how to stop petrol evaporating from a body before setting it alight or giving me a demonstration of how he broke one victim's neck.

"But how do you feel about what you did, Charles?" I asked. "What if I showed you now the photographs of the bodies of your two Dutch house guests?" Gruesomely disfigured by the flames, the corpses were still smouldering when discovered.

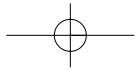
As he answered, I was looking at his strong, sinewy hands: "You ask such a question from the point of view of a man of one culture who has seen little. I have travelled a lot and seen a

watch flashing at his wrist. "Indians are all quantity and no quality."

The French accent had a world-weary lilt but the intensity of its delivery made it strangely intimate – an intimacy he tried to exploit, appealing to me and the problems I'd faced with the law in both England and Australia, as the editor of *Oz* magazine. "In some ways," he said, "my life has been a protest against the French legal system which stole so many years of my youth." His eyes were burning, defiant, like those of a political martyr. "All I wanted was to win them back."

Despite his predicament, Charles was charming, urbane and self-assured. The

"As long as I can talk to people, I can manipulate them": (main photo) Sobhraj with lover and accomplice Marie-Andrée Leclerc in a Bangkok bar; (insets, top and above) outside a Delhi court in 1986 and a Kathmandu court four months ago.



lot. My heart is hardened." His eyes were cold. "Clack! Clack! Clack!" he went on. "All these deaths in a row. Suddenly, in just a few months." He paused, like a detective discussing a case. "Why?" He was relishing the mystery of the motive.

Why indeed? Sobhraj had suffered a difficult childhood. As he was being born in Saigon in 1944 to a Vietnamese mother and an Indian father, the bombs of Viet Minh guerrillas shook the hospital; when he was four, his father returned to Poona for an arranged marriage, and a shy French army officer became his stepfather. Charles despised this interloper. When the family moved to France he played truant, stowed away on ships and snatched bags until, in 1962, aged 18, he was jailed for stealing cars.

He used his French cell for self-development, brushing up on languages, martial arts, international law, psychology and creative pharmacology. Once free, Sobhraj moved on to armed robbery and more brushes with the law. By the early '70s he had become a famous figure on the hippie trail, known to the victims he drugged and robbed and the police who pursued him by numerous names and disguises.

But suddenly, after breaking out of the Greek jail in April 1975, his career took a more sinister turn. Charles picked up a young French-Canadian woman, Marie-Andrée Leclerc, on a houseboat in Kashmir and the pair moved into a Bangkok apartment. Over the next few months, at least five young travellers were to die in Thailand before the

couple fled. The first victim was Teresa Knowlton, the next Vitali Hakim, a flamboyant drug dealer from Ibiza who came to Bangkok to buy heroin and was murdered. Stephanie Parry, a French girl who travelled from Ibiza to Bangkok to collect Hakim's false-bottomed suitcase, was found strangled in a ditch. And in December a young couple from Amsterdam, Cornelia Hemker and Henricus Bintanja – "Cocky and Henk" – were befriended by Sobhraj and became his house guests. Their charred bodies were found dumped on the side of the road to Bangkok airport. The slaughter was not over yet.

Adopting the identities of the dead Dutch couple, Sobhraj and his girlfriend made a quick trip to Kathmandu, which resulted in the murders of Connie Jo Bronzich from

California and Laurent Carriere of Manitoba, Canada. It is for these two murders that Sobhraj is now being held in Nepal.

After the killings, Sobhraj flew to Paris. He was selling gems to a prefect of police when the story of the murders broke. Now the subject of an international manhunt, Sobhraj fled to India. In July 1976, desperate for funds and fresh passports, he drugged a busload of French students he had befriended on a trip to the Taj Mahal. By the time police arrived at the Vikram Hotel in Delhi, more than 20 students lay in the lobby, either comatose or

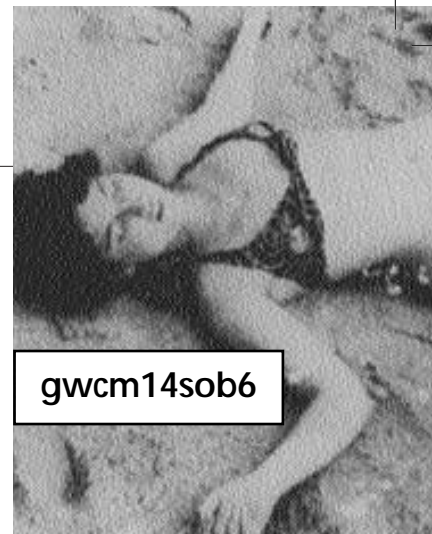
convulsing from stomach pains – Charles had misjudged the doses. Maintaining his pose as the group's medical adviser, he almost eluded suspicion until a detective pulled up Sobhraj's shirt to expose an identifying scar. The manhunt was over.

Sobhraj spent the next 20 years in Tihar jail. He managed to turn even that to his advantage. On the eve of his release from Tihar in 1986, he broke out and fled to the popular tourist resort of Goa, where he allowed himself to be re-captured. The extra time imposed for this "unlawful escape" led to

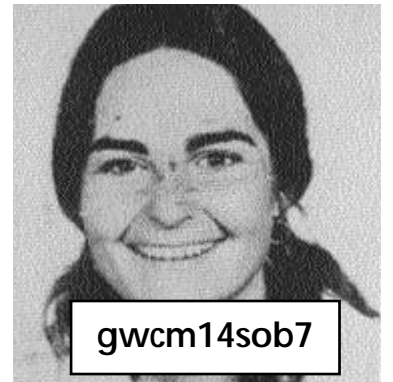
Sobhraj claimed his victims were junkies and of little consequence, He called their murders "cleanings". "I know I never killed good people."

the dropping of his extradition to Thailand, because of the statute of limitations. That is how Sobhraj managed to swing deportation to France in 1997 as a free man.

Remorse was a foreign concept to Sobhraj. As far as he was concerned, the people killed were of little consequence. They were "heroin junkies", he claimed, and were involved in the drug trade. He was, he said, acting on behalf of a Hong Kong-based syndicate that wanted to control the market, expand the trade and, as a welcome by-product, debilitate Western youth. "I consider myself a businessman," he told me,



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And then they met Charles: traveller Teresa Knowlton (pictured above in Seattle) was the first known Thailand victim – her body was found off a beach in 1975 (top); Canadian Laurent Carriere (left) and Californian Connie Jo Bronzich died in Nepal. Right: Sobhraj with his mother in the 1960s.



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“not a criminal. And I know I never killed good people.” Nevertheless, after he had described the drowning of Teresa, he smuggled a message to our hotel room late the same night: “Just coming back from the court after I spoke with you and I must say that I’m very disturbed. I have really to fight with myself to speak the truth about my illegal life. I feel I am betraying not only others, but also myself, and my rules. What is happening between you and me, it is like the surgeon and the patient.” Yes, I wondered, but which of us is which?

Our last meeting took place in Tihar jail in October 1977, when Sobhraj again expressed concern about the tapes, and the less-than-friendly attitude of my co-author. (Julie had been dealing with the police and interviewing the families of the victims, becoming ever more upset.) When the prison officers arrived to escort me from the jail, he seemed sorry to see me go: “Au revoir, Richard,” he said. “I hope your tapes won’t hang me one day.”

OUR SUITCASES BURSTING WITH POLICE FILES, tapes, transcripts and court records, Julie and I were relieved to be flying out of Delhi. We were now obsessed with finding the truth. Were all the murder victims really drug couriers? We spent almost two years writing the book and interviewing people all over the world, including Sobhraj’s friends, former accomplices and the victims who had survived. (Some still counted their time with him as the most thrilling of their lives, despite waking up on a tropical beach groggy and bereft of wallet and passport.) To balance these black tales, we

set ourselves another quest, to find the heroes.

Who were they? Not the official guardians of law and order. When Sobhraj had boasted that he was “protected” in Thailand, he was right. As for Interpol, at that time it was a joke, little more than a broken telex in an abandoned office. Those who gathered the evidence were a bunch of daring amateurs: one of Sobhraj’s former house guests, courageous neighbours, a Dutch diplomat, and backpackers. But not all were novices: in Kathmandu, Julie and I met the ever-courteous Superintendent Chandrabir Rai.

According to contacts in Nepal, Sobhraj has been boasting that there’s no case against him and he’ll be out any minute. After all, he says, what is the evidence he was even in the country at the time of the murders? In 1977, in an office lined with well-thumbed copies of Sherlock Holmes stories, Superintendent Rai took us through his own investigation.

After the discovery of the two bodies on the outskirts of Kathmandu, Charles Sobhraj and Marie-Andrée Leclerc had been taken in for questioning. The pair were using the passports of the murdered Dutch couple: “I’m a sociologist at the University of Amsterdam,” Charles told the superintendent. “My wife is a TV celebrity.”

Placed under house arrest in their hotel, the two fled from room 415 of the Oberoi, and we were later shown the contents of the suitcases left behind: 11 empty tins of chocolate-flavoured laxatives; boxes of coloured pencils; a protractor (part of Charles’s forging kit); handfuls of sapphires and amethysts. The

jumble of paperbacks included Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*. Everything we saw tallied with other trails left by Sobhraj.

We also spoke to two backpackers who had been staying in Kathmandu's Freak Street at the relevant time. Our informants – one from Texas, the other from Melbourne – had spent time with the Californian, Connie Jo Bronzich, and had briefly met her newfound friend Laurent Carriere, who was telling people he planned to trek to the Everest base camp. As for Connie Jo, she had excitedly described her "first decent shower since Istanbul" – taken in Charles Sobhraj's hotel room.

On Christmas morning, the traveller from Melbourne had encountered Sobhraj at the police station, where he was being questioned by Chandrabir Rai. Sobhraj's "cold eyes bored through me", she told me, and she "started to shake from the menace of his gaze".

Sobhraj claimed that Connie Jo had been killed because her name had been given to him by his Hong Kong employers. She had, he said, been hired to pass on a consignment of heroin to friends due to arrive from Santa Cruz. He made a similar claim about Laurent Carriere. In the case of Connie Jo, as Julie discovered, the claim was believable. (During the preparation of this piece, a relative confirmed that "Connie Jo had been a mule"). In Carriere's case, it seems less likely.

Their end, though, was all too clear. Connie Jo's chest had been repeatedly slashed, Carriere's throat had been cut so deeply from ear to ear that his head seemed decapitated. Both bodies had been doused in petrol and burned almost

beyond recognition. Sobhraj admitted to me that these "cleanings were a bit overdone" and blamed the excessive force on Ajay Chowdhury, who is still at large. "These Indians, they stab 15 times when once would do."

Despite his protestations, the Kathmandu case against him is tight. It is laid out in detail in our book, as are the murders in Thailand.

So why, six years after winning his freedom, has Charles Sobhraj returned to Kathmandu? Whatever the reason, he probably has a low opinion of Nepal's ability to keep him contained. When I once asked the secret of his multiple jail escapes, he replied: "The desire of the guards to keep me locked up is no match for my will to be free". But maybe his will to be free is no match for his desire to be back in the spotlight.

There was initially plenty of publicity after his release in 1997. The first press photos showed him in a beret, strolling the Boulevard St Germain with baguettes under his arm, and kissing the altar at Notre Dame. The first time he went to the family home in Marseilles to see his mother, with a US network TV crew in tow, she refused to open the door. In a way, you couldn't blame her, although on the matter of his parenting she was hardly an example of enlightened motherhood. She had handled her son's bed-wetting by tying up his penis with string.

So he began life as a free man in Paris. He made frequent trips to London, did a movie deal, and even re-sold his life story; his English literary agent complained that his new client

was "a mental bully, relentless about getting money out of you". Whatever drew him back to Kathmandu, it was certainly not a sudden interest in trading pashmina shawls, as he is telling the police.

There are hints, possibly originating from Charles himself, of criminal endeavours on a global scale involving arms dealing, the Taliban and al-Qaeda, but one would have thought that such organisations would avoid such a high-profile career criminal. In reality, during his six years of freedom, he could be

Sobhraj's mother was hardly an example of enlightened parenting. She handled his bed-wetting by tying up his penis with string.

found in European casinos, and later in the car parks on his mobile, demanding petrol money from media contacts.

The truth, as it seems to me, is that Charles Sobhraj cannot function effectively as an everyday citizen, looking for a job, buying the milk, paying the electricity bills. It is in the world's courtrooms and jails that he comes into his power, where his love of intrigue suits the system, his genius for manipulation makes life comfortable and his notoriety ensures a steady supply of enthralled visitors. Perhaps it is only when he finds himself in fetters that Charles Sobhraj can truly find himself. ■