

Windblown Clouds

EXCERPT No. 8

The Main Trunk Road to the Interior

After having spent a few weeks in Bombay with friends of Ed's, he and I started walking and hitch-hiking into the heart of South India.

The fine red dust left billowing behind each passing truck was already ground between our teeth; it covered us like a shroud and penetrated our clothes, turning milky red as beads of sweat ran down our necks.

Whoosh—another truck passed. Shielding our faces from the passing cloud, we looked with squinted eyes to see if it would stop: it slowed, but only for a cow that blocked the road. The trucker blared his horn and kept going, which just covered us all the more in the fine red dust as we pushed onward.

Sandwiched between two cinderblock truck mechanic shops was a well, obviously a relic of the time when this place on the outskirts of Bombay was a rural village. Women gathered around it, raising water in wooden buckets. The sun's rays played upon the water's surface. The women's jeweled nose studs sparkled, points of light on their smooth, dark faces. When Ed asked for water, they flashed broad smiles. "Pani," he said, and one of the women nimbly drew a bucket. She poured some over our hands while the others stood in a circle around us. We cupped our hands and rinsed our mouths. We lowered our heads for her to wet our hair. To the women's delight, our wet hair and beards dripped onto our shirts. They laughed and clicked their tongues in their strange language. We wet our gumchas and wrapped them around our heads. The only other word we exchanged with them was namaste, as we inclined our heads and pressed our palms together.

Then we were on the road again, our heads protected from the sun, water still dripping from our beards. We waved down a truck, and it stopped. We ran to the cab, but it was already full of people. They pointed to the back.

As the truck pulled away, long, dark arms reached down and lifted us onto the open flatbed. The truck was full of road workers who were also catching a lift. They were dressed only in loincloths and turbans of red and gold to shield their heads from the sun. Their skin was hard and cracked. The wind was hot and dry and bit the skin. We sat with the others, our backs to the wall of the cab. Ed pulled out some

oranges we had brought from Matunga Road. He broke them open and passed the pieces around as the sprawling tentacles of Bombay receded down the long road to India's interior.

Our departure from Matunga Road had been long and drawn out. We were barely out of bed when the Vyas's, Rindani and his family, and a few other miscellaneous friends all converged on the apartment. We should have known better than to believe we could make our departure as quiet and sudden as our arrival.

The whole morning Bimal kept saying, "Mr. Tom, you must come back Bombay." Over and over he repeated that sentence. Again and again, his eyes moist, his voice choking: "You must come back Bombay."

Bimal and Kaitan worked on their father until he agreed to let them walk with us toward the edge of the city. Of course Arvind, Bipin, Indrijit, and all the other men wanted to walk with us as well. So the men all decided to be late for work.

They walked with us for an hour, until we reached a bridge where Ed announced we would go on alone. We stood facing our Bombay friends in silence, all of us with moist eyes.

"Namaste," we said with palms pressed together, raised to the third-eye center, above the eyebrows.

We turned and walked away from them. We were halfway across the bridge when Bimal cried out, "Mr. Tom! You must come back Bombay!"

I turned. They were still standing where we'd left them. Ed and I crossed the bridge in silence.

On the other side of the bridge a mad confusion of roads came together. Out of that confusion began the Main Trunk Road to the interior, which began in total chaos, a mad swirl of exhaust and blaring horns, trilling rickshaw and bicycle bells, trucks grinding their gears, buses bulging with riders, roofs sagging under the weight of both luggage and people. No known rules of the road applied here. I felt like an ant dodging feet on a busy sidewalk.

Life at Matunga Road had suited me well. Within the Dholakia's home, peace reigned. Every day had had its even measure. Though I had agreed with Ed to leave Bombay, never would it have occurred to me to leave that comfort for this chaos.

Ed mistrusted comfort. Comfort led to complacency. When you're complacent you're more apt to compromise your ideals. Ed believed the world's problems began with people who were comfortable and wanted to stay that way at the expense of others. On the road everything is cut to the bone. Ed had longed for the road. And now that we were on the road, his feet propelled him at a pace I could barely match. He was leaning into his stride, a toothpick stuck between his teeth, his eyes focused, but far away. People

either stared at us or ignored us; I couldn't decide which I preferred. The dust ground between our teeth and parched our throats.

We were passing through a district of truck repair shops where grease-covered men in loincloths were lifting engines out of chassis and rummaging through mountains of discarded metal parts. Metal filings covered everything and everyone. At wood-burning forges, men operated hand-worked bellows to fashion parts out of raw metal.

Everywhere the industrial had overtaken the pastoral. The four-chambered heart of the bullock had been replaced by the chambers of firing pistons. And the city, like an industrial nightmare, had sprawled over outlying villages. Between a truck repair shop littered with the rusted carcasses of industrialization on one side and a low, mud-brick factory billowing foul black smoke on the other was an ancient stone temple. From within its richly carved portal wafted timeless songs of devotion to the Unchanging. Within that ancient doorway time's currents ceased. They lapped like waves upon an island's shore. Inside that temple, India was still India. I would have liked to take refuge from the teaming chaos by entering that temple and diving into that timelessness, but that was more alien still than the teaming chaos.

I felt as if I were entering a dark labyrinth. I longed to turn back, to retreat into security; but the only security I now had was Ed Spencer. Ed knew how to navigate the noisy, smoky, billowy, mad streets of India. Without him, I would have perished in a moment. I wouldn't have had a chance.

We passed a man sitting in the dust on the side of the road who was drooling and incontinent, staring into the middle-space of a dimension entirely his own. Fear welled up within me, and I realized I feared I could end up like this man.

I recalled Ed's stories about traveling in India, the stories he'd recounted when we had first met and were still on the boat to Greece. His stories were really parables, occurring in a far-away time and place. I had been sure the guy was enlightened; and though I knew that in these troubled times one must be mad to be wise, it was only the wisdom I saw. Now his stories sounded like those of a madman. How strong I had thought him, how invincible, for being able to follow his will—to the extreme of eating nothing but the leaves of the betel tree. I now realized that if one started out upon a journey as we had, it was probably inevitable that one would end up eating nothing but leaves in the end. Since I was unwilling to go that far, why was I setting out as if I was?

It occurred to me that Ed Spencer might actually be mad. In following Ed, I thought I might somehow gain wisdom. But what would I find by following this obviously disturbed man into India's endless maze? Would I ever find my way out? Would I end up like him? I became submerged in doubt, flooded by endless questions, my feet slogging as if my doubts had turned the hot baked ground to mire as we went farther into the dark labyrinth of Indian chaos.

How strange, I thought, to have as my sole guide a madman. How strange to follow a man dressed in loose cotton pants suspiciously like those worn by the inmates in an asylum.

But Ed was undoubtedly destined for this type of travel. One of the stories he'd told me on the boat to Greece was of his first hitchhiking experience, at age eight. He was at a summer camp in upstate New York, and one day he wandered into the woods and became lost. After some time he stumbled onto a dirt road. By and by a big black car came down the road, and Ed put out his thumb. The car stopped. Two elderly gentlemen were in the car. Ed told the old men he was lost, and he told them the name of the camp. The man driving knew the camp and told him to jump in. When they arrived at the camp, the counselors were grateful and relieved to have their charge back, but they were also obviously totally wowed by his deliverers. As the car drove away, Ed asked who the men were. The man driving was Thomas Edison. The other man was George Bernard Shaw. Edison's laboratory was not far away. George Bernard Shaw had been visiting him.

Ed and the road were obviously meant to be together. Even so, he hadn't come to his present way of travel at the beginning. It was only after living in India for decades that he began to travel without a penny in his pocket.

Traveling with Ed was like entering the cave of a holy man who has been meditating for longer than you've been alive. You meet him. He invites you into his cave. He assumes his crossed-legged posture and then he enters a state of deep meditation. You imitate his posture, but after five minutes you begin to squirm.

That was how I felt.

Traveling was Ed's spiritual practice. I knew I couldn't make it. My feet kept stumbling on rocks, bits of broken, sun-baked brick. I was ready to fall. I wasn't hungry yet, but I anticipated the time when hunger would wrack my frame. Already I felt the weariness of walking through the ninety-five degree heat. Sweat poured down my back. I would have turned back, but that was not possible.

With this being my state of mind only a few hours into the journey, it was difficult for me to imagine how I was going to last. I knew the only way for Ed and me to survive was for me to let go of my fears. But I couldn't change just like that. Ed had first taken to the road when I was three years old. His pilgrimage came after a long and very personal story. For me to overcome the obstacles I would have to surmount, I would have to emulate him. But why should I be like him? I riled against him—all within the first few hours of being on the road, 'in his element.' I felt pitiful, weak. I wondered what Ed thought of me. Surely he must hate me, hate me for being so damned slow. Though he was nearing seventy, he could out walk me. Had he not slowed his pace to match mine, he would have left me behind. But he was good about it; he was ever willing to show me consideration.

It was just when I'd lost all sense of why we were trudging down that road that the truck with the road workers in back had stopped for us. We ate oranges with the men, and the wind dried our sweat. The laborers pounded on the cab's hot metal roof at the first town the truck approached. The driver slowed the truck, and the laborers jumped off—all except for one old man.