

Windblown Clouds

EXCERPT No. 6

Arrival in India

Our plane landed at Bombay's Santa Cruz Airport just before the sun set. As we taxied to the terminal, the sun dissolved into the thick air before reaching the horizon. The setting sun lent its color to the entire western sky, which was ablaze in shimmering heat.

When we stepped from the airplane's door we stopped at the top of the gangway to breathe deeply India's thick, fecund air. Nothing could have communicated more deeply nor directly how different a world I was entering than that smell, which was sweet, like the smell of decaying fruit. It was the smell of life at its fullness, at its very peak, which includes its dissolution, its decay, the preying of one form of life on another. The aroma of wood smoke hung in the air. I could even smell curry and incense, right there on the tarmac of Bombay's international airport.

By the time we cleared customs darkness had settled over the city. In front of the airport, dozens of taxi drivers descended upon us, each trying to coax us into his taxi. Ed waved them all away. He told them we would walk. But they persisted, thinking he was holding out for a lower fare. Ed spoke to them in their own language, which surprised them, but still they would not let us alone. They reminded me of the bus driver in Patras, and I found myself siding with them, and against Ed. It was ten miles to the city. Prudence sided with the drivers; beyond the airport's lights, India was a vast darkness. Ed was excited to be back in India. Nothing could stop him. I had no choice but to follow. The taxi drivers called after us in their strange tongue, but we had already plunged into the tropical darkness. I turned and saw them pointing us out to others. They were laughing at us.

The road leading from the airport was long and dark and straight. Ed walked ahead of me and again I sensed his indomitable will; again I questioned the wisdom of following this man—to where? To the other side of the world...

At the end of the airport road was a wide metal gate. Passing through that gate was like passing through the birth canal into a world as new and terrifying and fantastic as any through which a baby has ever entered this world. The barrage on my senses was dizzying: hoards of people in what seemed great migrations were streaming up and down the street, disregarding the distinctions we in the West make between sidewalk and street. As far as the eye could see were the bobbing heads of walking people.

Trucks billowing huge clouds of smoke, their horns blaring, pressed through the human mass, scattering carts full of rags and vegetables. In the distance the sound of cymbals came wafting like wisps of smoke along with voices singing a sacred song. The smell of incense rose from a niche that had been carved into a tree. Within this niche a statue of a multi-armed, tri-headed god stood swaddled in clothes of gaudy colors. Children squatted by the side of the road, emptying their diarrheal guts in streams of open sewage. Corrugated tin and cardboard huts stretched as far as the eye could see.

We passed through vegetable markets where thousands offered their wares stacked in pyramids on squares of cloth. The ground was thick with the detritus of the day's business. The pavement was so old in places that it had reverted to dirt. We entered a market lit only with the light of gas lanterns. It felt as if we were walking down a village road. It was strange, evocative of an earlier age. Children swarmed around us. An old man, standing next to the ornately carved stone portal to a temple, silently watched us pass. Looking into his eyes was like looking into the ages. So old were those eyes, so peaceful amidst the city's incredible bustle, that I could imagine them watching that scene for centuries, unmoved by the masses passing them by.

Ed glided seamlessly through the scene. He nodded to people as if he knew them. Occasionally he stopped to ask directions in a language I didn't understand. Then he set out again. Not once did he turn to check on me, to make sure I wasn't lost.

I was thankful that Ed was tall, standing two or three heads above the others. Once, when we were going through an especially crowded market, I fell back half a block. And while the crowd seemed to part for Ed, I had to push to get through. Ed was just a white shock of hair above the rest. I followed it like a beacon. If I'd lost him then, I knew I might never be found; I might never have made it out of those markets.