

The Master Director

EXCERPT No. 3

Village Idiot

(from Chapter 12)

This excerpt takes place one morning when I was with Gurudev in his home village. We were alone in his room eating breakfast when the village idiot came in.

Later, Gurudev is sitting on his bed. I am on a chair opposite, and we are eating breakfast when the village idiot comes in. I use the term 'idiot' advisedly and in a non-derogatory sense. While people with severe mental and physical handicaps are shunned and institutionalized in the West, they are looked after by the family and indeed entire villages in the Hills. While children, especially boys, sometimes play pranks on them, they have a place in the society and I've often seen them shown great kindness.

The idiot of Gurudev's village is a man with a permanent smile plastered on his face, protruding useless ears, and a throat that produces only animal grunts. It is clear that not only is he deaf and mute, but his brain is also wired in a pretty simple way.

His entrance is accompanied by the most delightful, happy sounds we all might produce if we ceased to filter our joy through the medium of language and found a truer expression, more directly expressive of delight. It is impossible not to be infected by his simple joy.

He is holding in his hand a dusty, half-crushed flower he plucked from the side of the road, which he presents to Gurudev. Gurudev takes the flower and throws it across the room into a bowl of water that has been placed at the base of the family shrine. To the idiot, this minor feat of dexterity is a miracle. You can see it in his widened, wonder-filled eyes. He claps ecstatically, squealing with delight. Gurudev motions him closer and hands him a ten-rupee note. The idiot takes it between his thumb and forefinger and examines it as if he were a mime examining a dirty rag. The tragic look on his face, the way he points at the offending note, makes clear what he is saying: 'That's all? Only ten rupees? I might be a fool, but even *I* know this is next to nothing.'

Then, to show that he is deserving of more because of recent misfortune, he puts the money in his back pocket and demonstrates how he has recently lost money from that very pocket. He turns all his pockets inside out to demonstrate his destitution.

The idiot turns everyone into a mime. Gurudev lifts an imaginary bottle to show that if he gives him more money he would buy drink with it. But no, the idiot shows, I've had a great misfortune: I had money in my back pocket, and it fell out. He throws the money on the ground and pretends to walk away.

Gurudev turns to me and speaks. Dawa interprets: 'He is saying that you cannot change a man's fate. If you give a drunkard money, it only increases his misfortune.'

Finally, in exchange for a promise that it won't be used for drink, Gurudev gives him another ten rupees. The idiot is ecstatic. Gurudev takes a *khata*, a ceremonial scarf, and ties it around the idiot's head. He takes a peacock feather and tucks it under the scarf. The idiot is crowned for the day. He leaves, making little noises of delight.

