

# *Windblown Clouds*

## EXCERPT No. 5

### Kingdom of the Road

The day I left the monastery atop the mountain Pantokrator my Greek visa was running out, so I took a ferry to Italy. Getting on the same ferry for its return trip to Greece, I happened to sit down next to Ed Spencer, an elderly American man dressed rather like a bum, whose probing questions about the inner dimension of my experience on the mountain led me to conclude correctly that there was something extraordinary about him. He was an ex-Harvard professor, turned wandering holy man who did not believe in money. He was returning to India, where he had lived for over forty years. When he said he thought I should go with him to India within an hour of our meeting, I realized our meeting wasn't mere chance and that I hadn't much choice. The following excerpt takes place when our boat lands on the Greek mainland.

When the boat landed in Greece we passed easily through customs and stepped together through the final gate. It was nighttime and everything was closed except the kiosk-like exchange bank. Walking just ahead of me, Ed passed this kiosk as if it were nothing. I called to him, "Hey, the bank. We'll be needing money." I had a money belt full of traveler's checks. He had told me that while in the States a friend had suggested he apply for Social Security. He had taught at Harvard just long enough to qualify, and I knew he had traveler's checks too. I also knew we hadn't a single Greek Drachma between us. It was a Saturday night, and money exchanges were closed on Sundays. Besides, we were in Patras, a city on the Peloponnese. Athens was a few hours' drive away. A bus to Athens was waiting.

Ed stopped and turned. He had a toothpick in his mouth, as he always did. He took it out of his mouth and asked what we needed money for. I was taken aback.

"For starters, we'll need food and a place to spend the night. This isn't Athens, you know. We'll have to get there. That's what the bus is for; it's taking people to Athens—and the bus isn't free. There are many things we'll need money for." It was like talking to a child.

Ed looked at me as if I were crazy. He knitted his brow and sighed. Hadn't I understood, he seemed to be saying? It was then I realized the gulf that stood between this

man and me, between this man and the rest of humanity. At first I had been impressed by his stories of traveling with nothing, and relying on the goodness of the human heart to see him through. I had nodded my head in agreement when he described an exchange of money as an unloving act, as an act that debases the human being into doing for others and having others do for you, always conscious of the rate of exchange, always calculating how much you receive for what you give. Ed believed in both giving and receiving freely. He wanted love to be the unit of exchange. But these weren't just ideas for him. It came right down to how one fills one's stomach or finds shelter for the night.

To pass that money exchange would have been to dive headfirst into an ocean whose depth I could not judge. I was sure my head would strike bottom. I was sure I would die of starvation that very night. The spaghetti in Brindisi had been inedible, and food on the boat had been expensive. I was hoping to find a taverna in which I could order a meal. I thought about a bed for the night. I thought about the comforts afforded by those printed paper notes and those stamped metal disks.

We stood there in the night, the neon light of the money exchange illuminating our faces as people from the boat lined up like a herd of docile cows. They were exchanging one piece of paper for another, the rate of exchange clearly marked on the window placard. Ed was watching me, his eyes questioning, gauging whether I was made of the right stuff.

I wish I could report that I passed muster, that I shrugged and laughed off the thought of possessing money in a foreign country. Instead, I did the prudent thing: I pulled out my traveler's checks. He did too, and we waited in line with the others. I felt dirtied by the affair, but still I felt I'd done the prudent thing. I didn't see how else we would put food in our mouths or shelter over our heads for the night.

We came away from the exchange window and Ed held out his hands, now full of bank notes and coins. "Here," he said. "You can be our official money carrier." He handed me the money, uncounted. He had no idea how much he had—or what it was worth. He treated the money with total disregard. I stuffed it into my money belt with a feeling of shame.

Then the bus driver approached us. He pointed to his vehicle and told us to climb aboard. Ed wagged his finger at him and said testily, "No. No. We will walk." The man didn't understand. I explained in Greek, "Tha perpatísume," we will walk. "But everybody gets on the bus here," he said. "With boat ticket, only one hundred drachmae. Only one

hundred drachmae! You can't walk to Athens." I started telling Ed how little it would cost to get to Athens, but Ed just started walking.

The urge came over me to jump on that bus and part ways with Ed Spencer right then and there. I thought maybe he really was cracked. But I had all his money. I couldn't just take off. I had no choice: I had to follow.

Adjusting the straps on my pack and trotting to keep up, I followed Ed away from the docks and into the unlit streets of the dirty port. Ed was a tall man, standing well over six feet. His stride was great; he was a powerful walker. There was certainty in his step, as if he knew exactly where he was going.

We passed boarded-up warehouses and derelict, old brick buildings. This port had seen better times. There wasn't a soul in sight. I kept looking behind me, expecting someone lurking in the shadows to pluck me off the street.

I wondered if he was trying to lose me, but something bound us together. He could no more lose me in those darkened streets than I could have lost him by simply jumping on the bus.

As he led the way down smaller and smaller roads, I could never quite catch up to him to ask where we were going. My pack grew heavier with every step. I stumbled. I tried not to lose him. I trotted, ever attempting to catch up. His feet hit the pavement with perfect regularity, the snap, snap, snap of his sandals echoing from the deserted buildings in perfect measure. He held his head erect, not stiffly on his neck, but proudly. He turned neither right nor left. His back was straight, his shoulders square and firm, as if nothing could stop him, as if an invisible force, a hidden source of strength, was leading him on.

Ed was in his element. He had spoken of being on the road, of the years he had spent walking: now I saw him in action. He was indefatigable. He was tall and lean. His shortly cropped hair was shockingly white. In the darkest shadows it was all I could see of him. In the darkness I could imagine him as a clothed skeleton. I couldn't even remember his face. I had only known him a few hours. What madness. What total madness!

We came to a slightly wider street. A deep rumble and bright swath of headlights announced a huge truck rounding the corner. It was a tractor-trailer truck and it was working through its gears and gradually gaining speed. When it came abreast of us Ed put out his thumb, and the truck stopped with a loud hissing of its air brakes. We ran to the cab. Ed jumped up and grabbed the door. I was surprised by his agility. He opened the door

to a blast of full-volume bouzouki music and jumped inside. I hoisted him my pack, climbed in, and slammed the door shut.

Icons of saints were glued to the dashboard, and from the windshield hung colorful fringes, talismans, and ornaments. Colored dashboard lights washed us in hues of pink and red and green. The driver was a large man, his face bony and angular and covered with stubble. He was pleased to have companions and hummed along with the radio as he shifted through the gears.

The driver offered us cigarettes and a half-eaten loaf of bread. Ed ripped a piece off the loaf and handed the loaf to me. I took the bread and caught his eye—or rather he caught mine. Without uttering a word he was telling me to pay attention. With his eyes he said, ‘See, now we’re humming along, we’ve gotten a ride and now we have something to eat.’

The bread seemed a feast.

It was as if Ed had brought me to his kingdom and now he was showing me its riches. He was the one who, possessing nothing, has it all. I was still unsure of his realm. It wasn’t mine.

Then I realized we had no idea where this truck, and its driver, was taking us. Ed seemed to care less, as if the thought hadn’t crossed his mind. All the normal concerns of travel seemed to elude him. Silently chewing his bread and following the headlights’ beam in the darkness, he was happy just to be on the move.

When we came to a larger road, there was a sign for Athens. I pointed to the sign. “You go to Athens?” I asked the driver in Greek. “Yes, to Athens,” came the reply.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Ed smile. He was ruminating with his toothpick, deep in thought. He didn’t say a word.