

# *Windblown Clouds*

## EXCERPT No. 7

### **Market at Matunga Road, Bombay**

When we first arrived in India, Ed and I stayed with friends of his, a family that lived at Matunga Road, Bombay. The following excerpt takes place on my second evening in India.

That evening after dinner some of us went for a walk down the market street around the corner from Matunga Road. The wide street was flanked with tea houses and stalls that sold rice, grains, and lentils out of sacks that overflowed onto the street, sweet shops, whose counters swarmed with honey bees, and shops that offered saris and dhotis and long lengths of printed cloth. Roaming venders of cheap books, hawkers of brightly printed images of the Hindu gods, and venders of herbal remedies all called out their wares. The sidewalks were clogged with women selling produce stacked on sheets upon the ground, their wares lit by oil lanterns. The road itself was bare earth trampled flat by the thousands of feet that struck it every hour. Motor rickshaws, buzzing their horns, pushed through the crowd, as did carts pulled by both horses and men.

This market off Matunga Road which, no matter how deeply one penetrated, always stretched farther than the eye could see, contained more sights and smells and varieties of humanity than one would encounter by crossing the entire United States by foot. I say this without exaggeration. I could walk down that road forever and never cease to find wonder in the barrage on my senses: the intensity of the colors and smells, the variety of people, the clothing they wore, the languages they spoke, the odd vegetables and medicinal remedies they sold, the strange cries they used to announce their wares, the shrines built around ancient trees billowing clouds of incense, the bells over their portals rung by devotees laying wreaths of flowers at the stone gods' feet, the riches of the tropical harvest juxtaposed with the rag-attired begging denizens, whose well-to-do live in cardboard lean-tos and whose unfortunates get chased from the broken sidewalks by others who have staked claim to every inch of Bombay's streets, fighting over the space before a rich man's door, where liveried guards protect their master's riches for pennies, where malnourishment, like a ghost, haunts the perfectly stacked pyramids of jackfruit, mango, and papaya, where open sacks are filled with as many varieties of rice as there are stars in the sky, where there are as many hues, colors, and sizes of lentils as there are gods in the Hindu pantheon, and whose vastness is measured out with brass scoops, where the sacred Brahma cow roams free and though owned by no one

has painted horns tipped with brass balls, eats the market's detritus, cleans the gutters, and is shown more respect than the destitute, is given wider berth by screaming rickshaws, whose dung is collected like gold to dry in the sun and be used as fuel to boil the rice.

Despite its vast size and dizzying, monumental array, despite the fact that it stood in the middle of a city of over eight million, the market street at Matunga Road retained the atmosphere of village India. One could feel the weight of the past and know just how very ancient India was. And despite the electric lights and the tangles of electrical wires, despite the high whine of the rickshaws' internal combustion engines, the pace was still that of the human foot and of the bovine hoof, and in reality the cow set the pace. For the animal was still wedded to the human, right there in the middle of Bombay. People communicated from mouth to ear. Many things are closer together in India than they are in the West: the animal and the human, the well fed and the hungry, the healthy and the sick, the living and the dead, the sacred and the profane, the human and the divine. For India is inclusive. It is vast and absorbing. Everything is part of the great round. That is why India is such a great spiritual homeland. In India the spiritual is more fully human and the human being is more fully divine. To walk down the market street at Matunga Road was to swim in an atmosphere at once exotic and totally familiar. A shopping mall, though a product of my own culture, makes me feel uneasy and out of place. At Matunga Road something moved in my blood; I felt as if I was remembering something from a past so old it was ancestral.