

Windblown Clouds

EXCERPT No. 9

Into the Heart of the South

The following excerpt takes place after Ed and I had been traveling for some time into South India.

When we left the train station that morning we walked into rural India and stepped back in time. We moved in a realm that the internal combustion engine sullied only occasionally. Our rides came not in trucks of rattling steel, but in bullock carts with wooden wheels and wood slat backs and sides of bamboo.

In the country, India's rough edges were rounded, and I found it easier to follow Ed's lead and not worry about what might happen to us. Ed's great confidence was born of a tremendous trust. Though reluctant at first to follow suit and stop struggling to stay afloat—reluctant to allow a force as natural as the body's buoyancy in water to uphold me—in the end I had no choice.

The same embrace I had felt at Matunga Road now embraced me again. The same warm smiles greeted us. I knew now something of India's character. Matunga Road had not been unique. That care for the guest comes from deep in India's heart.

We walked to the south, finding rides on bullock carts, stopping at village wells. Occasionally we came to a larger road and jumped on the back of a truck that brought us to a new landscape. We were in the tropics. Banana and papaya grew wild. We passed through gentle hills of coffee. We crossed a deserted landscape.

One night a young man in a tea stall invited us to a cup of tea. He was a petition writer at the district court. He invited us to his home for a meal and a place to sleep. He lived with his parents, two brothers, and three sisters in a house made of homemade red mud bricks. Its roof was made of thatch and it was in the middle of green fields. They shared with us their simple meal of rice, dhal, and vegetables. Then we slept on the floor next to his brothers and sisters.

In the morning, when we were ready to leave, our host interpreted for his aging parents. "They are asking," he said, looking Ed square in the eye, "that you stay here with us." The boy's mother nodded her head in eager agreement, her soft eyes imploring. "They will build an extra room onto the house. They want you to live here for the rest of your days. We would feed you, and if you got sick we would take care of you. We would do anything, if only you would stay."

Ed regarded the elderly couple gently. He shook his head. “No,” he said, raising his pressed palms to his forehead. “We will move on. We cannot stay.”

The boy’s parents understood. Tears welled up in the old woman’s eyes.

When we left, the entire family lined up in front of the house. The sun was just lifting over the trees. The breeze was as gentle as the tender looks that followed us as we threaded through the fields to the road.

One day, as we passed through a hilly region, a Jeep full of geology students from Lucknow stopped for us. They were heading to a mine somewhere in the hinterland. They spoke English well. None of them had been in these hills before, so we all looked excitedly about as we crossed each ridge and a new vista of hills and valleys opened before us; all of us except Ed. Only Ed acted as if he had been there before. He sat and stared at the road receding behind the Jeep. The radio was tuned to a station playing local music. Maybe he was listening to that, maybe not. A toothpick was in his mouth and he was ruminating deeply. He was a million miles away.

The man sitting next to Ed tapped him on the shoulder. Ed turned. The man said, “What is the purpose of your travel?”

“The purpose?” Ed said. “Unless we talked longer or you knew me better, you’d not understand.”

“But what is the purpose of your travel?” The man was not to be deterred.

“Well,” Ed said, “I travel for love.” He intoned the last word with strength in his voice.

“Love?” the young man asked. “Love for what?”

“You see,” Ed said, turning to me. “I told you he wouldn’t understand. As if love has to have an object!”