

EXCERPTS From

Windblown Clouds

by

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Excerpt No. 1

The Preface

This book describes a journey I took many years ago, when I was twenty-two. As with all good things in life, journeys tend to be round, they circle round to their beginnings. This journey was no exception. One goes off, one comes home again, and then one reflects. This journey began and ended in Vermont. During the two years following my return, I spent most of my time writing about my experiences. I wrote the story through from the beginning to the end without stopping to revise or correct what I had written. The resulting manuscript of over six hundred typed and hand-written pages was the first draft of the pages that follow.

Both traveling and writing are bugs for which I have never found a cure. Before I had time to edit the manuscript and shape it for others to read, I was stricken again with the travel bug and set off on other travels. I left the manuscript with my sister, who lives in Washington DC, for safekeeping. When I returned from that journey, I wrote of other things, and quite got on with my life.

About a year ago I started thinking about that old manuscript. It had been many years since I'd seen it. I didn't necessarily want to work on it; I was merely curious. I only wanted to take a look. Like the Indian shopkeeper garnering customers off the street with the call, "Looking only, no buying," I thought I could simply take a peek. So I called my sister and asked her to send it.

My sister had been carefully guarding the manuscript all those years, and she was not keen to give it up to the US Postal Service. She reminded me that it was the only copy in existence and insisted on sending it by overnight express delivery.

I live at the end of a very long driveway off a dirt road that couriers often have difficulty finding. So, just to be safe, I had my sister send the manuscript in care of a friend, Kate Jones.

When I gave my sister the address, she said, “Kate Jones, what an unfortunate name.”

I asked her what she meant.

“It’s like Jane Doe,” she said.

I assured her that Kate received overnight mail regularly and told her not to worry.

A week later Kate had received no package for me, so I called my sister again.

My sister lives a busy life. She apologized for forgetting to send the manuscript and promised again to send it right away. I must have only half believed her, for a good month went by and I hardly gave the manuscript a thought. Then it was her birthday and we were talking on the phone. I reminded her again, and this time she swore she would find the manuscript the moment she got off the phone and would send it the very next day.

Half a week later I called her again. I was beginning to grow tired of her promises and told her so. But she stopped me. She had sent it. It should have arrived four days earlier. She commented again on my friend’s unfortunate name.

I called Fed-X, and they tracked the package. The driver claimed he’d been unable to locate Kate’s residence, so he’d done what he always did when he had difficulty locating someone in our area: he went to Sam’s Septic Service. Since Sam emptied every septic tank in town, he knew precisely where everyone lived.

Sam told the driver that there was a K. Jones living just around the corner. He pointed out the apartment building.

The Kate Jones I know is my neighbor; she lives on a farm, miles away from the village.

But I knew the building Sam had referred to. It had long ago been nicknamed—by its residents, no less—the ‘Brown Slum.’ It is known for its transient and more down-and-out residents.

So the news couldn’t have been worse. And as if that wasn’t enough, he’d delivered it not to the K. Jones who lived there, but to a man loitering in front of the building that claimed to know her. He’d signed his name ‘J. Miller.’

I was horrified.

I rushed down to the Brown Slum and started knocking on doors. The first door on which I knocked was opened by a man who worked the graveyard shift, and he was decidedly not happy to be awakened at nine-thirty in the morning. He said he had neither seen the package, nor had he heard of the man who’d signed for it, but he told me that indeed a woman named Jones did live in the building, though her name was not Kate, it was Kay. He pointed to the door across the hall. “She lives there,” he said.

Kay Jones herself answered my knock. She had the pallid look of someone who hadn’t seen the sun in years. The homemade tattoos that ran up and down her arms had a decidedly jailhouse look. She was haggard and tired, a woman worn to the bone by life’s vicissitudes.

I pictured this woman opening my package on the off chance that it contained something of value, discovering only pages and pages of my barely legible scribbling, certainly worthless to her, and hiding it under a bed, or throwing it out so as not to be caught having opened someone else’s mail.

She stood with the door half open, her hand clutching the doorknob, blocking entrance to her apartment. I explained why I was there.

“I never seen a package,” she said, eyeing me closely.

I told her about J. Miller, who had signed for it.

“I never heard of no J. Miller,” she said.

I had to think fast. If I assumed that she was lying, then my best chance was to make her sympathetic to my cause. So I launched into a long plea, explaining how the missing package contained the only copy of a manuscript I had spent years writing, and how it had no worth to anyone but me. She relaxed a bit and stepped back from the door, allowing me to enter her apartment.

Taking her into my confidence, I told her how I would understand if one of her neighbors had taken the package—just to see what was in it. I even said I might have done the same myself. I stressed that no questions would be asked. I even suggested that an anonymous phone call telling me the manuscript was sitting in a hall would suit me fine.

All I wanted was to have the manuscript back.

The entire time I was making my plea for help, I was moving around the room, trying to pick up some clue amidst piles of dirty clothes and overflowing bags of garbage. I was looking for the corner of a Fed-X envelope, or a box of the right dimensions.

At first she was rather cold. I was, after all, barging into her apartment and basically accusing her of stealing my mail.

But how could anyone feel bad toward someone in my predicament?

Soon she was looking worried for me, especially when I told her that if it was truly gone I'd probably go mad and start banging my head against the closest wall.

What else could I say?

It was the truth.

Before the manuscript had been lost I was merely curious to see it. I had pictured myself flipping through the pages, cringing the whole while at my abuse of the English language, and perhaps recalling a few details of a journey that the years had swept from my mind.

But when I first heard the manuscript had not been delivered, its stock had risen a notch. And as the situation became more hopeless, I had even begun to see myself working on it again. Now that it was probably gone forever, I felt the full tragedy of its loss.

So I made a promise, a solemn vow. I vowed that if I could find the manuscript, I would complete it. I even believed the manuscript had become lost only to extract such a promise from me. I felt destiny at work.

I left my name and phone number with Kay Jones. That was all I could do. She promised to call if she heard anything.

Then I proceeded to knock on doors up and down the halls of the Brown Slum. At every door I repeated the entire story, left my phone number if they'd let me, and grew more desperate as the word gone rose like a lump in my throat.

By the time I reached the last door, and delivered my story for the umpteenth time, this time to a middle-aged woman dressed in an old coffee-stained bathrobe, I was entirely discouraged and thoroughly depressed. Still I tried to remain upbeat.

But it was no use. Halfway through my impassioned plea the phone rang. The woman answered it and started arguing with a man from a collection agency. He was threatening her with court and jail and worse if she didn't come up with a certain sum in short order. “I have no money,” she said, “especially none to give you!” She argued desperately for a good ten minutes while I stood in the doorway. Finally I gave up.

I went back outside and started walking away. None of the people to whom I'd

made my plea seemed likely to go out of their way to help.

I went over again what must have happened. Someone must have gotten their hands on the package, (most likely Kay Jones but there was no telling), and thrown it away.

Then it hit me: if so, it would probably have ended up in the tenement's dumpster.

I went to the parking lot, lifted the dumpster's lid, and was almost blown off my feet by the stench of death. Holding my nose, afraid of what I might find, I looked inside.

There on top of dozens of plastic bags of trash were the remains of a slaughtered pig. Huge ball joints—the cartilage still white and glistening—leg bones, and whole sides of fat—from which, under happier circumstances, bacon would be cut—were all draped over the shiny black bags, slowly decaying beneath a thick cloud of flies that rose when I opened the lid, then settled again on their quarry.

Holding both my breath and my nose, I looked beneath the carnage for something resembling a box of paper. But I saw no such box. I thought of ripping the bags open, but the festering pig flesh and the flies turned my stomach.

I could not endure it.

So I closed the dumpster and walked away, riling against the fate of having lost the manuscript at precisely the moment I realized its importance. I tried to get used to the fact that I would never see the manuscript again.

I couldn't.

That dumpster was my only chance.

I found a broken broom handle lying underneath a bush and returned to the scene of the carnage. I opened the dumpster again, held my breath, and started poking the bags of trash, ripping them open, and trying to see what lay beneath.

I worked my way systematically through the dumpster, from one side to the other. When I reached the farthest corner and moved the very last bag of garbage I spied a plastic grocery bag tied shut around something the size of a ream of paper. Catching the handle with the stick, I moved the bag to the side. Then I held my breath, leaned deep into the dumpster, and snatched it out.

I opened the bag and there it was, hundreds of typed and handwritten pages that I hadn't seen in a decade. Someone had ripped open the box, taken the pages out, shuffled through them, and then stuffed the whole mess into the bag. Every single page was there.

Having literally saved the manuscript from the jaws of death, I walked away from that dumpster clutching the plastic bag to my breast.

And so it was I had no choice but to finish the project I had begun so long ago.



Excerpt No. 2

Low Cloud Pierced by High Mountain

Having been invited to live in the stone monastery atop Mount Pantokrator, the highest mountain on the Greek island of Corfu, by an old monk, the monastery's sole inhabitant, I become his first companion atop the stony peak in over four decades. The following excerpt takes place after the monk goes on an overnight journey to a nearby village to perform a ritual, leaving me alone for the first time on the mountain.

Late that afternoon I was writing at my desk when I looked up from the page to see the room being plunged into darkness. I glanced out the window, but the window had fogged, or so I thought, for all was a uniform shade of dark gray. I could see neither the stunted trees in the courtyard nor the building on the other side. I opened the door, but that did nothing to better the visibility. A cool blast of heavy, foggy air rushed into the room, saturating the room with moisture; I felt my beard and it was wet.

Crossing the threshold, I entered the dense, windblown cloud, which penetrated my skin and burrowed deep into my bones. Walking to the low wall beyond the kitchen, I was met straight on with a full-force gale, a gale of pea-soup fog, of low cloud pierced by high mountain.

The fog defined a circle through which my eyes could not penetrate. Beneath me the wall faded before reaching the rocky slope, and even my hands looked less sharp than they had inside. Before, all had been keenly defined: my hand holding the pen, the pen's sharp point touching the paper, the letters forming into words on the page. It had all been so clear, so black and white. I knew how one word would be followed by the next and how upon the foundation of the last the next would build. But that continuity had been broken. The light had dimmed. I had stepped outside into opacity, a world at once less defined and more immediate.

Here was no intermediary, no screen through which the mind could pigeonhole reality. Here, at the edge of a sea of nothingness, clutching a wall that faded into insubstantiality, my feet anchored in a ground that seemed no longer foundational, the mind was bypassed by the marrow.

It was as if I were the lookout on a ship's prow, peering into the shadowless obscurity, looking for a nuance of something tangible by which to guide my ship. The mist, like a continual spray, drove the water deep into my clothes and made me shiver. I awaited the massive wave that would crash over me. I awaited the shudder that would resonate through the ship's hull. But no wave came. The rock beneath my feet remained firm, though it faded so quickly from sight.

Then came an opening, a crack in the fog. I was staring straight up the edge of a vertical column of cloud, a puffy cottony wall, towering, threatening to tumble hundreds of feet onto my head. The top glowed pink, red, and golden from the sun, which was setting, no doubt peacefully, beyond the tumult. It was a sudden reminder of the continuity of astronomical cycles unaffected by the happenings down below. Then the column closed, and the circle closed in on me again.

I went inside to find my jacket. I put on my hat and gloves. The simple passing of clouds, which from a village along the coast was a fleeting phenomenon of the sky, was from the monastery a spectacular event full of immediacy. This was the layer of the atmosphere in which warm and cold met and played out their battle. From where I was there was no observation, it was all participation.

When I went back out to the wall it was as if my ship had been dashed upon the shore: I was on an island surrounded by a sea of white, a white of turbulence and change. The cone of Pantokrator was bathed in the last reddened rays of the setting sun, clean and shining as if it had been washed by the cloud. But my island illusion didn't last, for suddenly the sea lifted in great puffy veils of movement and engulfed me, leaving me submerged once again.

Then, as if the great sea that I was in the bottom of was parting, hues of blue peeked out high overhead and the sky was revealed again, only to be obliterated a moment later by a wave of crashing cloud. From being a creature of the land, upon an island in an expanse of white, I became a creature of the seas, practically drinking the air through my mouth-gills. Then, as the clouds parted, I became a creature of the sky, an eagle soaring high over the island of Corfu.

Each time the sea of white opened around me I could see a line of clouds growing in the distance, boiling internally and mounting to terrific heights. And as the last light of the sun faded, these nearing clouds shone with flashes of their own light. They were thunderheads coming my way, and before them the wind howled. The air became charged. And just before the wall of seething cloud slammed into the mountain, the wind, which had been rushing out ahead of the storm, suddenly switched direction and started rushing toward the cloud. The oncoming thunderhead was consuming the surrounding air, sucking the air into it, sucking the mountain into its sphere as well. Suddenly I was in the middle of the seething cross-currents of the cloud's interior, my skin bitten by rain driven horizontally now over the monastery wall.

The ferocity of the storm drove me from that wall into the courtyard's interior. Wind and rain buffeted me from all sides. It was all I could do to keep my balance in the whirlwind. I huddled against a wall just to feel something solid, something rooted in the earth, something unchanging.

Gusts eddied around unseen corners, hitting me like the disembodied souls of the monastery's former inhabitants. They came out of the gray like cool hands upon the back of my neck, making my spine tingle with waves of sensation. With my mind unhinged by the tempest, I did not know whether it was from the cold and the wet or from these hands whipping out of the whirlwind that these waves of sensation flowed over me. I turned with a start, certain that someone had tapped me on the shoulder. But the same gray was staring back at me.

The rushing wind made the monastery's mute stone speak. The top of the monastery wall moaned with a hollow sound, and the buildings howled furiously, as if scores of multi-pitched and out of tune strings were being played with varying intensity by a thousand bows. No one string could be discerned out of the mismatched chorus. The droning in my ears never reached a crescendo, never found resolution as

the ever-rising wind drove the cold and rain ever deeper into my bones.

The whole while that I was being tossed by the storm, enclosed in a tiny ball of gray, stumbling like a nearsighted fool, walking into walls and being buffeted by the eddies of wind forming off the corners of the buildings, I was aware too that I was over half a mile above the sea, over an hour and a half from the nearest human being, running around beneath thick walls, on a mountain in the center of a thunderhead. The whole while I was in the thick of it I was also strangely outside of it, aware—graphically, spatially, with the clarity of looking down on a topographical map—exactly where I was. While never losing for an instant the sharp immediacy of my surroundings, I could practically see the great globe itself and where I stood on it.

My greatest security came from knowing I was within the confines of high stone walls that had weathered the storms of over half a millennium. But this security faded when the distant rumbles I had taken little account of grew louder than the howling wind. Fear overtook me as the thick fog became illuminated with blinding flashes of light that lacked direction of origin, flashes that illuminated equally my entire field of perception with a ghostly light. Flash followed flash, followed by echoing rumbles.

I decided to take my bearings and head inside.

But it was too late.

A crash of unimaginable magnitude shook the mountain to its very foundations, a crash that was concurrent with a blinding flash that rendered my eyes useless for a few agonizing moments, moments during which another clap of thunder crashed around me followed by another and yet another. The lightning bolts were distinct now through the thick fog, arcing less than a hundred feet above my head. They were close enough to gauge their thickness—thick as a man's arm, thick as a horse's torso. Others originated *below* me and shot up the side of the mountain, branching directly overhead. Their zigzag paths were etched on my retinas, etched in burning red.

Panic seized me to the marrow, wiping out all sense of sport I had felt toward the storm. It was no longer a playful game to be walking in the tempest. So I ran, trying to anticipate the next bolt of lightning. I knew if I stopped I would be hit. I ran like a jackrabbit dodging the hunter's shot, all the while hearing the boom, boom, boom from all directions. I came to a high wall and ran alongside it until it turned a corner away from me. I missed it, ran straight on, and was again at sea without an anchor or point of reference.

The storm rendered my will inoperative; in its place was pure and raw instinct, an instinct as old as time itself, the instinct that calls out from the primal depths for shelter. I became a being in search of a cave, a niche, or a burrow in which to find protection from the storm.

And then, off in the distance, I heard, between claps of thunder, the eerie sound of something ringing. I ran toward the sound and it became more distinct. I recognized it: it was the bell that hung over the monastery's front gate. What manner of being could be out on a night like this? It must be the monk. He has returned, found me missing, and now he's calling me back! Or perhaps it was more of those cool hands that had brushed me on the back of the neck.

I followed the sound to the gate. I stared into the flashing darkness, searching desperately for an outlined figure. But no figure was there beneath the bell, just the rope flying in the frenzy of the wind. The storm itself was ringing the bell. Knowing now where I was, I quickly found my room and slid in through the door.

Excerpt No. 3

To the Coast

After having lived in the monastery atop the Mountain Pantokrator for some time our larder grew thin. So I took a trip to Corfu Town along the coast to buy food. I decided to walk down the slope of the mountain to the coast because there was an abandoned village on the way I wanted to explore. The following excerpt begins while I was in that village.

I aimed toward the church on the knoll, which had once been the center for the villagers who lived in the now silent and abandoned streets. But as I neared where the land rose to meet the church's door the way became so thick with brambles that I became entangled; thorns scratched my arms and brought blood. I gave up. The church had been the center of the villagers' existence. Perhaps now that the villagers were gone it was best if this center remained obscured and seen from a distance only, crumbling slowly under the hand of nature.

I walked to the edge of the village and climbed into the terraced fields so I could pick a route to the coast. Though I still couldn't see the coast I did see a stream that ran below the village, and I knew it would take the most direct route to the sea. I followed the contour of the land to where the stream dipped into a shallow ravine. There I turned to take one last look at the monastery, which loomed high on top of the rocky slope.

For so long I had been looking down into the scene I was about to enter; I had seen the road snaking along the coast toward Corfu Town like a ribbon of black rising and falling over the land's gentle undulations. I had seen Corfu Town itself, its white buildings changing hue in the light of the many-hued sun. I had watched boats docking and departing at the port, and I had watched as they slipped over the horizon toward Italy in the west and Patras on the Greek mainland in the south. I had watched the comings and goings of people on the island and I had seen the towns and villages in which they lived and worked. The whole while I had taken note, but not taken part. I had thought the thoughts of one in a clarified and more rarefied atmosphere. My feelings must have been close to those of William Butler Yeats when he wrote,

I have always sought to bring my mind close to the mind of Indian and Japanese poets..., lay brothers whom I imagine dreaming in some mediaeval monastery the dreams of their village, learned authors who refer all to antiquity; to immerse it in the general mind where that mind is scarce separable from what we have begun to call 'the subconscious'; to liberate it from all that comes of counsels and committees, from the world as it is seen from universities or populous towns...and [I] have put myself to school where all things are seen...

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Following the stream until the ravine became too narrow to continue, I climbed the riverbank. There I came upon a small trail. At first the size of an animal track, it quickly widened as it followed the slope of the mountain toward the coast. Soon I saw donkey tracks and knew I was nearing a village.

Rounding a corner, I came upon an elderly peasant woman clad in an old and patched dress. She was picking wild greens and stuffing them into a cloth sack. When she saw me her mouth gaped in toothless wonder at one the likes of me descending the mountain. She asked where I had come from.

“From the mountain,” I said, “I came from the monastery. I live there.”

Her face lit up. “You are a monk?”

“No, but I live with the monk who lives there.”

“The monk is a very good man,” she said as she tied the sack with a piece of rope. “He is generous and wise.”

She threw the sack over her shoulder and walked with me down the path.

“You are not Greek,” she said. “Your words come too slowly.”

“I am from America.”

“Ah, America! It is very good there, no?”

“Yes, it is; but it is good here too.”

“Yes, it is good here,” she said after thinking it over. “I have my house and my family. I have olive trees and a donkey, and I can pick greens. My life is good.”

I saw that she was feeling the strain of the sack on her back. So I took it from her and put it over my shoulder. “Thank you,” she said. “You are young and strong. I am old now. When you are old it is hard to carry heavy loads.”

As we passed the first house at the edge of the village she called out to a woman sitting under a grape arbor surrounded by young children. “Anna, look what I’ve found! He’s from America, and now he lives at the monastery on top of the mountain.”

Anna came to take a better look. The children hid behind their mother’s dress, giggling, peering out at me from time to time. Never addressing me directly, Anna asked the elderly woman some questions about me, and the old woman answered, beaming as if I were a new possession. As we took our leave, the children, who hadn’t yet dared to say a word to me, called after us, “Yassas, yassas,” good-bye. They ran back to their veranda giggling the entire way.

Soon we came upon a low, whitewashed house surrounded by fruit trees. “This is my house,” she said. “Come, I will give you coffee.”

I deposited the sack of greens by the front door. She brought out a chair and put it in the shade of a mulberry tree. She told me to sit while she prepared the coffee. Soon an old man appeared at the door. He was bent with age and his face was deeply wrinkled. His whiskers were thick and long, almost like a cat’s. He dragged a chair next to mine and letting out a long sigh, he sat. Then he said, “You are from America, no?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Good, very good,” then he stared through the olive grove on the other side of the dirt track as if he were trying to remember something. Then his eyes lit up and he raised his hand, forming it into a make-believe gun. “Bang-bang!” he said. “Chicago? No?”

His wife brought out a small table, covered it with a tablecloth, and carefully smoothed out the wrinkles. She then brought a tray with two small cups of Greek coffee, half a loaf of homemade bread, and a plate of olives and feta cheese. Occasionally someone passed the house, old women leading donkeys laden with sticks

gathered on the mountain, or children returning from school in blue uniforms dirty from a day's wear.

"Look, he is from America," my hosts called to these passers-by. "We found him on the mountain!"

I finished my coffee in the shade of the mulberry tree then thanked them warmly for their hospitality. Promising to visit on my next trip down the mountain, I bid them good-bye. Then I walked down to the coast and hitched a ride to town.



Excerpt No. 4

Alone With The Mountain

Having left the monastery to buy food in Corfu Town, I took a bus to Strinilas, the highest village on the island, above which loomed the mountain Pantokrator. When I got off the bus in the late afternoon, laden with as much food as I could carry up the mountain, it was storming.

When the bus stopped in the village everybody scattered for their houses, leaving me alone in the heavy rain, feeling wet and forlorn. Hoisting the pack and looping the bags of food through my arms, I threw my poncho over my shoulders and picked up the two jugs of wine. The road that led through the village was deserted except for a few wet dogs curled up together in a doorway, shivering in their sleep. The wind howled, ballooning the poncho behind me.

When I reached the last stone house of the village, whose back door opened to the mountain's wild, untamed slope, an old woman came running out to me. She stood before me in the rain, her face wrinkled and her eyes large and soft with compassion. Her dress was the color of the earth; her apron had flour on it. She stared at me, taking stock of my situation. Then she pointed toward the mountain and said, "Epáno?" Up? I said yes, and she muttered something beneath her breath. A look of consternation crossed her face as if it were she who was going up. She wanted to relieve me of my suffering and discomfort by taking them upon herself, as we stood frozen in time with wisps of fog enveloping us. She held out her hand, caught some drops of rain, and said, "Vroní," rain. I nodded. Another moment passed. She turned. She took a few steps; then she stopped to see if I was really going epáno. Seeing I was, she crossed herself and scurried to the shelter of her house, leaving me alone to face the mountain.

By the time I reached the dirt track that led to the monastery, the wind had risen to a ferocious howl. As I climbed the trail I entered the low clouds. This was the point

of no return: I could still turn back—surely the woman at that last house would put me up—but if I continued I'd have to reach the top. Although the wind blew right through me, I heard no thunder; nor did I see flashes of lightning. Uncorking the bottle of white wine, I took some large gulps, and with renewed confidence pushed on through the boulder-strewn landscape. I prayed that the monk was at the lower monastery, and that there would be a fire and supper waiting for me when I arrived. I could just see the kitchen suffused with the fire's warm glow.

But that was all in my mind's eye. What I actually saw I took at first for an apparition. In the gathering darkness, two dark figures emerged from the thick fog. It was beyond my wildest imaginings that I would encounter others where I myself felt like a stranger amid the forces of nature. Panic seized me. I slipped quietly behind a huge boulder. Their wavering forms quickly took shape: one was short and stout and bent almost double against the wind, and the other, taller and more erect, was wearing a long robe that billowed in the gusting wind. It was the monk and a man from the village.

I jumped out from my hiding place, causing both of them to gasp in fright.

"Thomás," the monk yelled, "eh, Thomás!"

Then he said, "A woman in the village has died. I must go to the church. The lower monastery is locked. Go to the upper monastery. I will meet you there in a few days. May God be with you! The storm is raging upon the mountain!"

And with that he was gone. He didn't even stop to tell me the news. He told me in passing, as he and the villager continued toward the safety of the village. I stood watching the two men dissolve into the darkening night, taking with them all hope of a warm fire at the end of my journey. Instead of the monk cooking chicken while I warmed myself before the fire, I now saw the cool and damp bed that awaited me. I cursed it all. "Eh, Thomás," I said aloud, donning the monk's raspy voice, "you are a crazy man!"

Ahead of me was nothing but storm and fog-obscured mountain. Putting my hands out before me, I touched the soft limits of what I could discern. The fog deepened. Opacity turned to night.

Nothing of what I knew would be of help here. Darkness had descended. I was alone with the mountain. Much of who I was fell away at that moment. I was both closer to the animal and to the divine. My senses sharpened. Into me flowed the raw forces of nature. The mountain stood solid and unmoving—a mass of bare rock forced to the sky, pounded by rough weather. The air was thick with cloud and cold. Rain was falling heavily now. Everywhere rivulets flowed and merged together. Distant rumblings of thunder sharpened my awareness to a keen edge, and in the distance through the rain-filled fog dim flashes reached my eyes.

I felt strong, as if I too were an element along with mountain, cloud, rain, and lightning. We had all existed before in this heightened tension of warring elements. And strange as it may sound, I now felt completely at home so far from anything human. I came to know myself in elemental simplicity as the warring forces called me into their sphere.

I felt myself as one with every human being who has gone to the edge of the earth, to the bottom of the ocean, or to the roof of the world. My steps were their steps; we walked in a timeless moment of interpenetration.

The thunder came closer and the lightning became more intense. But I was not afraid. I was behind myself, watching my eyes watch the world, hearing my ears listen to the whirl of the wind, and feeling my body weak from the cold and the weight of my load. I felt what Thomas felt, saw what he saw, and heard what he heard; yet I

was behind it all, unmoved and unconcerned.

I would have felt with equal indifference if lightning had struck a tree on the slopes or a rock on the path, smashing it to pieces; I would have felt the same if it had been me who had been struck. It would have mattered little. Would the winds have ceased to howl? Would the rain have ceased to lash? Or how about the mountain: would it cease to expose its rocky face to the pounding elements?

I was walking up a barren mountain road, yet I didn't know how long I'd been on it. As I progressed from one turn of the road to the next, I felt like the sailor whose boat is being dashed by the storm: he cares little of his final destination. The trough of one wave and the crest of the next is as far as his senses will take him

Finally, I heard the clanging of a bell and knew its sound as a fledgling bird knows its mother's call. It was the bell above the monastery gate being rung by the wind. I went through the gate with the sense of relief that a sailor feels when his storm-racked boat comes in sight of land, and he recognizes it as his own harbor as he glides in through the well-known channel, knowing that his feet will soon touch solid earth. I opened the door to my little room, dumped the food and wine on the floor, and lay on the bed, falling instantly into a deep sleep.



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.



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.



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 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.



Excerpt No. 8

The Main Trunk Road to the Interior

After having spent a few weeks in Bombay with friends of Ed's, he and I started walking and hitch-hiking into the heart of South India.

The fine red dust left billowing behind each passing truck was already ground between our teeth; it covered us like a shroud and penetrated our clothes, turning milky red as beads of sweat ran down our necks.

Whoosh—another truck passed. Shielding our faces from the passing cloud, we looked with squinted eyes to see if it would stop: it slowed, but only for a cow that blocked the road. The trucker blared his horn and kept going, which just covered us all the more in the fine red dust as we pushed onward.

Sandwiched between two cinderblock truck mechanic shops was a well, obviously a relic of the time when this place on the outskirts of Bombay was a rural village. Women gathered around it, raising water in wooden buckets. The sun's rays played upon the water's surface. The women's jeweled nose studs sparkled, points of light on their smooth, dark faces. When Ed asked for water, they flashed broad smiles. "Pani," he said, and one of the women nimbly drew a bucket. She poured some over our hands while the others stood in a circle around us. We cupped our hands and rinsed our mouths. We lowered our heads for her to wet our hair. To the women's delight, our wet hair and beards dripped onto our shirts. They laughed and clicked their tongues in their strange language. We wet our gumchas and wrapped them around our heads.

The only other word we exchanged with them was namaste, as we inclined our heads and pressed our palms together.

Then we were on the road again, our heads protected from the sun, water still dripping from our beards. We waved down a truck, and it stopped. We ran to the cab, but it was already full of people. They pointed to the back.

As the truck pulled away, long, dark arms reached down and lifted us onto the open flatbed. The truck was full of road workers who were also catching a lift. They were dressed only in loincloths and turbans of red and gold to shield their heads from the sun. Their skin was hard and cracked. The wind was hot and dry and bit the skin. We sat with the others, our backs to the wall of the cab. Ed pulled out some oranges we had brought from Matunga Road. He broke them open and passed the pieces around as the sprawling tentacles of Bombay receded down the long road to India's interior.

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Our departure from Matunga Road had been long and drawn out. We were barely out of bed when the Vyas's, Rindani and his family, and a few other miscellaneous friends all converged on the apartment. We should have known better than to believe we could make our departure as quiet and sudden as our arrival.

The whole morning Bimal kept saying, "Mr. Tom, you must come back Bombay." Over and over he repeated that sentence. Again and again, his eyes moist, his voice choking: "You must come back Bombay."

Bimal and Kaitan worked on their father until he agreed to let them walk with us toward the edge of the city. Of course Arvind, Bipin, Indrijit, and all the other men wanted to walk with us as well. So the men all decided to be late for work.

They walked with us for an hour, until we reached a bridge where Ed announced we would go on alone. We stood facing our Bombay friends in silence, all of us with moist eyes.

"Namaste," we said with palms pressed together, raised to the third-eye center, above the eyebrows.

We turned and walked away from them. We were halfway across the bridge when Bimal cried out, "Mr. Tom! You must come back Bombay!"

I turned. They were still standing where we'd left them. Ed and I crossed the bridge in silence.

On the other side of the bridge a mad confusion of roads came together. Out of that confusion began the Main Trunk Road to the interior, which began in total chaos, a mad swirl of exhaust and blaring horns, trilling rickshaw and bicycle bells, trucks grinding their gears, buses bulging with riders, roofs sagging under the weight of both luggage and people. No known rules of the road applied here. I felt like an ant dodging feet on a busy sidewalk.

Life at Matunga Road had suited me well. Within the Dholakia's home, peace reigned. Every day had had its even measure. Though I had agreed with Ed to leave Bombay, never would it have occurred to me to leave that comfort for this chaos.

Ed mistrusted comfort. Comfort led to complacency. When you're complacent you're more apt to compromise your ideals. Ed believed the world's problems began with people who were comfortable and wanted to stay that way at the expense of others. On the road everything is cut to the bone. Ed had longed for the road. And now that we were on the road, his feet propelled him at a pace I could barely match. He was leaning into his stride, a toothpick stuck between his teeth, his eyes focused, but far away. People either stared at us or ignored us; I couldn't decide which I preferred. The dust ground between our teeth and parched our throats.

We were passing through a district of truck repair shops where grease-covered men in loincloths were lifting engines out of chassis and rummaging through mountains of discarded metal parts. Metal filings covered everything and everyone. At wood-burning forges, men operated hand-worked bellows to fashion parts out of raw metal.

Everywhere the industrial had overtaken the pastoral. The four-chambered heart of the bullock had been replaced by the chambers of firing pistons. And the city, like an industrial nightmare, had sprawled over outlying villages. Between a truck repair shop littered with the rusted carcasses of industrialization on one side and a low, mud-brick factory billowing foul black smoke on the other was an ancient stone temple. From within its richly carved portal wafted timeless songs of devotion to the Unchanging. Within that ancient doorway time's currents ceased. They lapped like waves upon an island's shore. Inside that temple, India was still India. I would have liked to take refuge from the teaming chaos by entering that temple and diving into that timelessness, but that was more alien still than the teaming chaos.

I felt as if I were entering a dark labyrinth. I longed to turn back, to retreat into security; but the only security I now had was Ed Spencer. Ed knew how to navigate the noisy, smoky, billowy, mad streets of India. Without him, I would have perished in a moment. I wouldn't have had a chance.

We passed a man sitting in the dust on the side of the road who was drooling and incontinent, staring into the middle-space of a dimension entirely his own. Fear welled up within me, and I realized I feared I could end up like this man.

I recalled Ed's stories about traveling in India, the stories he'd recounted when we had first met and were still on the boat to Greece. His stories were really parables, occurring in a far-away time and place. I had been sure the guy was enlightened; and though I knew that in these troubled times one must be mad to be wise, it was only the wisdom I saw. Now his stories sounded like those of a madman. How strong I had thought him, how invincible, for being able to follow his will—to the extreme of eating nothing but the leaves of the betel tree. I now realized that if one started out upon a journey as we had, it was probably inevitable that one would end up eating nothing but leaves in the end. Since I was unwilling to go that far, why was I setting out as if I was?

It occurred to me that Ed Spencer might actually be mad. In following Ed, I thought I might somehow gain wisdom. But what would I find by following this obviously disturbed man into India's endless maze? Would I ever find my way out? Would I end up like him? I became submerged in doubt, flooded by endless questions, my feet slogging as if my doubts had turned the hot baked ground to mire as we went farther into the dark labyrinth of Indian chaos.

How strange, I thought, to have as my sole guide a madman. How strange to follow a man dressed in loose cotton pants suspiciously like those worn by the inmates in an asylum.

But Ed was undoubtedly destined for this type of travel. One of the stories he'd told me on the boat to Greece was of his first hitchhiking experience, at age eight. He was at a summer camp in upstate New York, and one day he wandered into the woods and became lost. After some time he stumbled onto a dirt road. By and by a big black car came down the road, and Ed put out his thumb. The car stopped. Two elderly gentlemen were in the car. Ed told the old men he was lost, and he told them the name of the camp. The man driving knew the camp and told him to jump in. When they arrived at the camp, the counselors were grateful and relieved to have their charge back, but they were also obviously totally wowed by his deliverers. As the car

drove away, Ed asked who the men were. The man driving was Thomas Edison. The other man was George Bernard Shaw. Edison's laboratory was not far away. George Bernard Shaw had been visiting him.

Ed and the road were obviously meant to be together. Even so, he hadn't come to his present way of travel at the beginning. It was only after living in India for decades that he began to travel without a penny in his pocket.

Traveling with Ed was like entering the cave of a holy man who has been meditating for longer than you've been alive. You meet him. He invites you into his cave. He assumes his crossed-legged posture and then he enters a state of deep meditation. You imitate his posture, but after five minutes you begin to squirm.

That was how I felt.

Traveling was Ed's spiritual practice. I knew I couldn't make it. My feet kept stumbling on rocks, bits of broken, sun-baked brick. I was ready to fall. I wasn't hungry yet, but I anticipated the time when hunger would wrack my frame. Already I felt the weariness of walking through the ninety-five degree heat. Sweat poured down my back. I would have turned back, but that was not possible.

With this being my state of mind only a few hours into the journey, it was difficult for me to imagine how I was going to last. I knew the only way for Ed and me to survive was for me to let go of my fears. But I couldn't change just like that. Ed had first taken to the road when I was three years old. His pilgrimage came after a long and very personal story. For me to overcome the obstacles I would have to surmount, I would have to emulate him. But why should I be like him? I riled against him—all within the first few hours of being on the road, 'in his element.' I felt pitiful, weak. I wondered what Ed thought of me. Surely he must hate me, hate me for being so damned slow. Though he was nearing seventy, he could out walk me. Had he not slowed his pace to match mine, he would have left me behind. But he was good about it; he was ever willing to show me consideration.

It was just when I'd lost all sense of why we were trudging down that road that the truck with the road workers in back had stopped for us. We ate oranges with the men, and the wind dried our sweat. The laborers pounded on the cab's hot metal roof at the first town the truck approached. The driver slowed the truck, and the laborers jumped off—all except for one old man.



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!”



Excerpt No. 10

Echo of the Inner Walls

Ed and my trip into the heart of South India culminated on this day when we were swept into a frenzied crowd.

A town appeared in the distance, over which loomed an ancient stone temple with richly carved towers, darkened by age. We entered the town and moved with the crowd through the winding streets toward the center. The townspeople were adorned in their finest saris—bright red and orange, pink and gold, and the purest white. Even the children were decked out that day.

Everywhere flowers were for sale, huge bouquets and garlands. Flower heads were stacked six feet high. Knots of bright color set aflame women’s jet-black hair. Men wore garlands around their bare brown necks. Even the cows had flowers in strings around their horns, or braided into their tails. Doorways were strewn with the brightest colors. People threw huge handfuls of flowers into the air, and the flowers fell to the ground where thousands of bare feet trampled over them. Petals stuck to sweaty flesh. Arms and legs were speckled with color; even the crowns of those with shaved heads were transformed into colorful patchworks.

An ever richer and denser stream of color was sweeping us into its sphere. And we had no choice but to follow the flow; for every alley by which we might have escaped was packed with more people pressing forward to enter the mad flow. The crowd became tighter and tighter, and we became submerged in the joyous crowd’s single mind. Now we moved as a single body, a myriad of legs, arms, and shoulders. A single life or spirit flowed through us, a frenzied, quivering anticipation. The crowd strained

forward toward a culmination, a consummation of what brought us all together.

Streaming down the town's main road, I jumped up to see where we were going, but all I saw was a stream of people—identical in its color, in its density, and in its mad frenzy—heading straight towards us. Where the two streams of people met, I heard screams of agony, and of joy. The heavy beat of drums shook the ground. The soaring notes of flutes hovered in the air. The screams grew louder, babies squealed and wailed. We were all treading that thin line between fear and joy.

Though swept into the frenzy, I still feared I'd stumble and fall, be trodden, and split apart. It was impossible to tell whether we were moving headlong toward our deaths, or to a meeting with God. All that was clear was that we were heading toward dissolution. The drumbeats grew deafeningly loud. With each beat we drew closer, both to our destination and to each other, for it was as if we were single cells passing through a vein, nearing the heart. The valve of the heart would open with a pound, the sound would echo off the inner walls of the pulsating chamber, and we would have arrived, arrived at the center, at the pulsing heart of South India.

Our stream merged with the other. A way opened. It was a short side road at the end of which loomed the temple's main gate. Carved into the Temple's ancient stone were numberless gods and goddesses who stared down at us, their myriad arms and legs frozen for all time, their faces in attitudes of bliss and despair. There were gods making love with other gods, with men, and with beasts. Gods dancing in ecstasy, blood dripping from their lips, garlands of skulls hung round their necks. There were gods riding elephants, peacocks, and rats, and other gods with the heads of elephants, monkeys, and beasts unknown to mortal eyes. Every emotion, thought, and feeling of man had been etched into the stones of the tower centuries ago by the hands of men long forgotten—but still they spoke. They mirrored the ecstasy that flowed through the throng, the ecstasy of being on the edge of fear and joy, where everything is exaggerated, where the stream of colors merge with the ocean of light, where each becomes lost not only to his companions, but to himself, and is found again in the identity with the whole of the rainbow, with the ocean, and with the gods on the tower. For now the gods spoke. They waved their arms and flashed their tongues and light came to their eyes. They laughed for all of humanity's happiness and cried for all the sorrows. They cried for the beggars who lined the way to the temple. They cried for those whose bodies disease had laid waste, whose faces pain had disfigured, who stood by the side of the road with hands outstretched. And they cried for the lepers who ripped open the wounds in their eroding limbs and writhed on the ground with pain, who waved their bloody, festering limbs and scratched at their faces to elicit both pity and horror. The crowd showered these leprous beggars with coins. The gods took pity too, and they cried. They cried for the lepers and they cried for those showering coins. They cried for us all and for all the pain and sorrows we'd have to endure. They cried, but they also laughed. They laughed with the babies held tightly in their mother's arms, who tried to wriggle free in order to crawl over the top of the crowd and climb the high tower to play with the baby gods. The gods laughed for all the good harvests, the sunny days, the days of ease and prosperity, and of marriage and birth. And they laughed too at the moment of death. For they stood on their tower high above the turmoil and saw that the world was spinning round and round and round again. They saw as in a single moment the rise and fall of generations; they saw birth and death and birth again, and they laughed over all of it, for it was all part of the endless dance of creation. They laughed over the sick, the poor, the homeless, and the ones racked with leprosy, for that too was life, and all life was one. They laughed over all of it, and they cried too, for all of life is pain and joy, suffering and

health, birth and death.

The crowd lunged forward toward the gaping hole of the tower's gate, which was open wide to receive us. The drums beat on my eardrums. Everyone screamed and groaned and pushed. People pushed me forward, and I had no choice but to push forward the people in front of me. Suddenly, a shower of bananas and oranges were thrown in the air, and I turned to see the fruit hitting the sides of a huge carriage. The carriage's wooden wheels were twenty feet in diameter and the canopy was forty feet off the ground. A god made of wood sat in the carriage's seat. It was wrapped in colorful cloths, its face anointed with oil and ghee. The fruit hit the wooden wheels and the sides of the carriage then fell to the ground. A line of priests with sandalwood paste smeared across their faces and chests held onto long, thick ropes and pulled the god's carriage with all their might. They cried out to the beat of the drum as they pulled the carriage. Ho! Ho! Ho! The wheels creaked, and the carriage moved. A frenzied woman rushed toward the carriage and tried to hurl herself beneath the wheels. Then another and another followed suit. A line of burly attendants lifted them off the ground, holding them back. Forces beyond the women's control had taken hold of them. They bit and screamed and tried repeatedly to throw themselves beneath the wheels.

Now we were beneath the tower and it looked as if the tower and all its gods would fall right on top of us. We were close enough to receive the gods' tears on our heads, their drools, their drops of blood. A mile of humanity pushed us from behind, and with a pounding of the drum we passed inside.

