

Windblown Clouds

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.