

The Wind Haunted Village

Some where on the south eastern coast of India there is a village that is haunted by the wind. At twilight as the light fades and the last crows skate shrieking across the sky, mothers call in their children, workers hurry home from the fields, and the boats are secured upon the sand. The night belongs to the wind, and none dare venture out of doors when the crows have been replaced by skittering clouds of bats, and the light has trickled away to darkness.

With the doors shut, and the lamp lighted, mothers tell their children the story of the wind's brothers. A long time ago when there was nothing, there was wind. Calling wind. Crying wind. Longing for playmates, brothers to ride out with as it moved restlessly over the waters. One day it was given birds for it's brothers.

The wind was delighted with it's multitude of playmates - sparrows that chattered across the sky, pigeons that heaved themselves flapping skywards, sibilantly swooping owls, slow languid kites spinning endlessly, eagles with arrogance spread stiffly from wing tip to wing tip..All day long they exuberantly played rough and tumble in the sky. Turning over and over, spinning on vast waterspouts of wind, hanging shrieking to the last shreds of a ragged gust. But when evening came they returned to their nests, though the wind called yearningly after them. Then the wind was lonely again and wished a companion for the night.

It remembered the dust it had once stirred with sluggish breath. The dust that had moved and spoken and gone

out to live in the world. The dust that still bore the whorled imprint of the breath that blew through it on its fingertips. Then it came searching for that dust because it had heard that man was not afraid of the night. That he had become master of fire and land and the horse, and all creatures feared him. It found him tending his fishing nets on the shore.

'Come with me' said the wind, 'and I will show you unknown lands and fantastic seas.'

'And who will look after my fields?' replied the man.

'Come with me and I will teach you the secrets of wind and rain.' Said the wind.

'And who will tend my fire?' replied the man

'Come with me and I will teach you to fly.' Said the wind

' And who will look after my wife and child?' said the man.

Then the wind was angry and said to the man. 'There is a little bit of me inside you. A small bit that pulses in and out all day, and when it stops you are dust again. Beware, for I shall return to claim what is mine. Tend to your fields and fire and wife and child in the day. At night you are mine.'

So man tends his fishing nets and fields in the day, and in the night locks the doors securely. The wind rattles the door and rubs against the windows. But all good children stay in bed and fast asleep.

Minoti's grandmother told her the story when she was a little child who cried when the wind whistled and sang in many voices through the roof. 'What happens to people who stay outside in the darkness?' she asked.

Amma said 'The wind takes them for it's own. In the morning they are gone - blown far far away to strange and terrible lands. Or the wind leaves them here, but it creeps through their ears and blows inside their heads.'

'Then what happens?'

'It tumbles everything that is in their heads into one vast heap. Stirs together memories and happiness and sadness and everything. So that they can neither speak nor think, nor talk.'

'And then?'

'Then they spend all day running in the fields and all night playing with the wind on the shore.'

As she grew up, Minoti thought of new questions 'Where does the wind take them Amma?'

'Across the sea, across seven mountains, sometimes as far as the moon.'

'Do they fly Amma?'

'Like birds. As fast as eagles, as far as the seagulls go.'

'Does it bring them back?'

'Never. They are gone. Lost for always.'

'And the ones it leaves here?'

'It creeps in through their ears and blows round and round in their brain until they know nothing. So cover your ears and go to sleep quick.'

In later years Minoti refused to cover her ears 'What lands Amma?' she asked 'What is that side of the sea? Is that where my mother has gone?'

'Too many questions' Amma grumbled 'Children who ask too many questions are one day given to the wind.' All the mothers told their children that, and no child dared linger outside once the sun was gone. But Minoti stayed out later and later as she grew older, until sometimes Amma was frantic with worry.

'Where have you been? It is almost dark. Everyone from the village is home.'

Minoti was sixteen. She laughed at Amma's alarm ' I was watching the sun set. I came in before it was fully dark.'

'Little bit more and you would have been out in the night.'

'Never' she said, glancing at the window and shivering a little.

'Where were you? Tell me the truth.'

Minoti only smiled. She was at the age where you learnt to keep secrets. To smile coquettishly, and to watch the men straining and heaving at the nets.

Later and later she came. Sometimes racing up the slope to the house with the wind shouting at her heels. Inside the house she would stand trembling for a while as the wind shook the door in fury at being denied. She had grown afraid of the wind, as the lands it visited grew far away and grey in her mind. There was delight enough in planting the fields, in watching the men hauling in the catch, singing in calling voices.

One evening when she came scrambling through the door and slammed it, it was already dark - the dark of a night with no moon. The wind snickered and growled and prised at the door with multiple fingers. Amma had been praying for her.

'Tell me where you have been' said Amma.

Minoti listened to the prowling wind and said nothing.

'You are growing fat' said Amma 'Tell me you are growing fat.'

Minoti shook her head.

'Who is he?' said Amma ' I will get you married.'

Minoti wouldn't tell.

'Is he already married?'

'No' said Minoti 'It will be all right Amma. He wants to marry me. But I am not to tell until he has told his father.'

'Who is it?' said Amma, taking her arm and shaking her 'Why don't you tell me his name? I don't trust these secrets.'

Minoti laughed and wouldn't tell. 'It will be all right Amma. I shall marry him and buy for you a house with a real tin roof. And steel pots for you to cook in.'

'And will you buy for yourself the silence of the village?' said Amma 'Their sniggers? Their sliding looks? Who will buy those for you? They will notice very soon.'

Minoti laughed and hugged Amma and told her that she would be glad when she knew, but she could not tell.

The village noticed soon enough, and the Headman sent for Amma. They did not wish for any scandal in the village. If Minoti spoke the name of the boy, as was their custom, they would get them married. Minoti stood silent in front of the headman when she was called.

'Tell us his name' said the Headman.

'He will tell you himself' said Minoti and that was all that she would say.

The Headman did not summon them again for a few weeks. He was busy organising the marriage of his son. He was to wed a girl from the city and it was going to be the largest wedding that the village had ever seen. There were many things to be arranged, and the Headman was very busy. He called them a few days before the wedding.

'My son is getting married.' He said ' A good girl of his choice. We cannot have a disgrace parading in the village when the girl's parents and family arrive. For the last time I am asking you - who is he?' He held Minoti's eye.

'If he wishes to marry me, he will say so himself' she said quietly.

'And if he does not?'

Minoti smiled 'Then he does not. But he loves me. I know he will claim me.'

'We shall have to put it to the test as is the custom' said the Headman. 'You will spend a night out of doors in the wind. Let he who wishes open his door to you.'

'No' said Amma, weeping 'she is a foolish girl. Does it matter who he is? I will look after her. I will keep her

away from the village. No one will see her. Not for years if you so wish. But do not send her out into the night. You yourself would not dare to go.'

Minoti raised her head and looked at the Headman 'He will open his door to me. And then all of you will know.'

'You have a bold grand daughter' said the Headman 'I remember her mother well. If she wishes to be tested, let it be done immediately. The wedding is two days away, and this must be over before then.'

'Yes' said Minoti 'It must.'

That evening the wind rose spinning blackly above the sea.

'What if he does not open his door to you?' said Amma

'Then he never loved me.' Said Minoti ' I shall be the bride of the wind.'

'Don't say that!' said Amma weeping 'I shall beg the Headman to choose another night. Not a night like this.'

The Headman was adamant. 'She chose. Now let her see it through. See that she is at my house before darkness.'

Minoti hugged Amma at the door of the house. 'Do not fear' she said 'He loves me. I know nothing else but that he loves me. He will not allow this to happen.'

Outside the wind was slashing at the trees, boiling across the water and spurting against the houses. They struggled to get to the Headman's house. Amma whispered in Minoti's ear 'Come home. I will open the door for you if he does not.' Minoti shook her head.

The Headman waited until even twilight had been dragged from the sky. Then he opened the door. The wind hurled itself at the open door with a shout.

The Headman yelled above the wind 'Go' he said and released Minoti's arm. 'Let us see who's door will open to a slut like you.'

Minoti stood for a second at the door and looked at him. 'Yours will' she said. Then she stepped forward and the wind snatched at her and dragged her reeling into the night.

At the first light of morning Amma went searching for Minoti. She searched through the bearded fields of grey grass that were so beloved of the wind. Through the trees that straggled down to the shore. She found her running on the sand, arms held wide open, hair lashed by the streaming breeze. The wind ran beside her, pouncing and flailing, making a plaything of the edge of her saree and her long hair. The wind was inside her as well. She ran by the waves, laughing and singing just ahead of Amma until the old woman was out of breath from calling her and had to sit down on the rocks. The wind gambolled happily beside her, and she sang - strange words to a strange tune that went undulating over the water. She would not be led home.

For many days then the wind was happy. It had a companion to run through the fields with, to toss trees for, to sing endlessly to. And Minoti was as happy as if all her untroubled childhood had been returned to her. Together they played on the ridge where the wind pounced from one frayed tree to another. It chased her through the white fields of grass, circled crooning around her while she slept.

Every night Minoti came to Amma's door for the food that was left out for her and every morning Amma went searching for her to try and lead her home. She would skip ahead of Amma, singing her strange lullabies and ignoring her pleading.

The months passed and she grew bloated and heavy and the wind tugged at her uncomprehending. It flung vast spouts of leaves into the air, dragged the birds screaming across the sky for her delight, but she could no longer run like she used to. Bewildered it cried around her as she sat heavily in the grass, too tired now to move.

Minoti's son was born one night when agony screamed in the wind, tearing through the gullet of rotting clouds. Amma heard the knocking because she had been listening for it, knowing Minoti was near her time and wondering where she was. She had listened anxiously to the rising wind all evening. Now it thrashed and writhed around the house, and somewhere a tree jarred and shuddered to the ground. The knocking was hesitant.

Amma opened the door and the wind slammed her against the ground with a body blow that jarred all her old bones painfully. She tried to struggle back to her feet, but the wind slashed at her, its jagged edges studded with sharp rain. Minoti was bent against the wind and the agony, both hands pressed to her belly. The wind reared and writhed around her, clawing at her with many fingers. Amma crawled towards Minoti and held her ankle. But her old woman's strength was no match for the convulsing wind. It dragged at Minoti, pulling her stumbling and crying from the old woman. Amma tried to follow her, but the jealous wind slapped her to the ground and held her there. Minoti reeled into the rain. Her child was born somewhere in the night, while the wind exulted and

towered skywards, ripping the clouds into shreds, flailing the rain in every direction.

For five years Amma watched the boy grow, as ragged as a wind whipped thorn bush. Every night the two of them came creeping to her doorstep. Many nights she sat, ear pressed to the door, straining to hear their voices. Minoti sang to her son. Meaningless words strung beaded on a strange undulating tune. He chattered back to her in a language that only the two of them shared. She never knew what they talked about. Perhaps all the strange vistas that the wind had blown into Minoti's head.

Five years after the night of the birthing there was again a knock at the door. Amma struggled out of sleep and opened the door to find the boy sitting there. He was wet through and shivering. Amma coaxed him into the house and dried him and held him. He sat knotted and tense in her lap, listening to the falling rain. There seemed to be no wind but if you listened carefully, under the rush of the rain you could hear the wind crying softly and tiredly to itself.

Amma searched for Minoti the next day, but could find her nowhere. In the village they said the wind had taken her finally. Amma thought of her granddaughter being carried away - falling up and away, twisting and turning like a rag on the spiralling wind. Blowing out across the sea to the new lands that rose up to snatch at her.

The boy lived with Amma for a while. Every morning however early she got up, he was already standing at the door, impatient to be out. All day he played by the shore among the fishing boats. She had to go searching for him in the evenings and lead him back, holding tight to one skinny arm. He hated being in at night and spent his time pressed against the window, while the wind prowled helpless outside.

Many times she caught him wetting his hands in the water pot, so that when he held them through the window he could feel the wind caressing each knuckle, sliding between his fingers, running across his palm. It crooned to him through the bars, whispering and laughing, tugging at him to come out and play.

He slept restlessly, waking each time the wind changed it's tone. Late at night she would wake and find him staring out of the window, singing the nonsense songs his mother had taught him, while the wind fretted the night away, waiting for it's playmate to be returned to it.

In the morning he ran without pausing all the way to the sea shore, wind flowing gladly around him, day spilling incandescent light before him.

He never learned to speak like other people did. He responded to no name so they called him the Boy. As he grew older, more and more often Amma returned from the shore without him. He was gone one night, then two, and then for weeks on end. At last he took to appearing only for meals, and then dancing away again, too fast for an old lady to catch. She let him go eventually because he was the wind's son and no harm could come to him. When she died three years later, he never slept under a roof again.

The summer that Amma died was also the summer that the wind first spoke to the Headman's son. He woke one morning and it was calling his name as he took the path that wound down through the fields to the sea. He recognised the voice though he had not heard it for eight years. It called to him as it eddied around him, stroking his arm, ruffling his hair. It spoke endlessly to him until he began to understand it's longing. Until the longing blew inside him across the length of that hot summer.

Every morning he woke to find the wind feeling it's way across his face gently, crooning to itself. Touching him in slow silken benediction. It frisked around him as he walked to the shore, teasingly tugging him on.

In the afternoon it lay languid and inviting in every field, stroking across the curves of the earth as they turned to ripe gold. He saw it's shape as it sighed and stretched languorously in the grass

At twilight it moaned it's longing in voices that slid against his ear. In the half light, with every breath something of himself flowed out and became one with what circled yearningly outside. He sat unmoving at his window and knew he was joined to something that had been across the sea, across seven mountains to the moon. Each breath searched his intimate secret places and then went winging out -to her.

Late at night when the wind chimes swayed on their pliant plait of straw, he started half awake, dreaming it was her anklets and she was standing at the door again. He removed the chimes and they still sounded through his sleep.

Finally one night he opened the door. It was a warm night with a rippling breeze. It breathed his name in a silken sigh that settled rustling around him. It slid against his skin, coiled sinously around him, ran it's fingers through his hair as it led him on.

Trees bent streaming to wave him in the direction he had to go. The moon flowed quietly through a deep river of stars. He walked on, the scent of the night rich in his nostrils, heart easing to the gentle breathing of the wind.

It led him to the fields of grass and he lay down among the whispering laughing tufts. Above him the grasses tossed to show him snatches of the stars that fell streaming towards him. The wind settled across him, murmuring, stroking him with a hundred soft fingers, teasing him. He closed his eyes and finally spoke the name that he had carried inside him like an incantation for so many years.

He was found the third day by children playing hide and seek in the fields. Curled up in his bed of flattened grass he looked as if he was fast asleep. Sitting by his head was the Boy, watching him curiously. When the men came and carried him away, the Boy waited until the grass had stopped swaying in the direction that they went. Then he slid into the bed where the headman's son had lain and curled up.

Only the Boy is left now and he belongs wholly to the wind. He is its son and brother. He is its companion in the day and at night. When the nights are warm and when storms savage the skies. Fishermen delayed on the sea hurry through the grass escorted by the Boy who terrifies them with his fierce singing. Only the wind understands the words. And the wind sings with him as it stalks through the jittering grass, swoops against the boy and leaps skyward laughing exultantly.

He knows when the weather is changing, for the wind has taught him the secrets of wind and rain. It has taught him the secret pathways of the air. Soon it will teach him the secret of flying and the two of them will be off. Across the sea. Across seven mountains. As far away as the moon.