



I spent most of the winter chanting and studying in Vrindavan. Then, in the early spring, I headed for South Africa for a number of preaching programs, including the Ratha-yatra festival in Durban.

I was also looking forward to writing again. In Vrindavan I had been sitting in one place, so there had been little material for new chapters. Several devotees had written to ask if I'd stopped writing.

“As much as I love to write,” I replied, “I have to wait for something to happen.”

After leaving India, I didn't have to wait long.

As soon as I arrived in Johannesburg I caught a connecting flight to Durban. On the plane I was struck by the diversity of the passengers. "Muslims, Hindus, Christians, and Jews," I thought as I made my way to my seat. "People of African, European, and Chinese descent. It's all here. I'm happy to be back in the Rainbow Nation."

The weather was perfect, typical of South Africa in April, and we enjoyed a smooth one-hour flight down to the coast. But as we circled to land at Durban's new airport, twenty kilometers north of the city, a strong wind shook the plane.

"Wow!" I thought. "That's unsettling."

I heard some people gasp. I looked around. The other passengers were talking excitedly to each other or sitting up tensely. A man was wiping his forehead.

“They're unsettled too,” I thought.

Moments later we were on our final approach, but the closer we got, the stronger the wind became. At one point the plane shook violently. I took my japa beads and began chanting softly, and then louder as the wind became even stronger. Suddenly the man sitting next to me spoke up.

“You really think praying is going to save you?” he said.

I turned toward him. “Yes sir,” I said. “I do.”

He turned his nose up a little bit. “Hmm,” he said. “So, there’s a God somewhere up here in the sky listening to you, right?”

“Yes there is,” I replied.

“Has he ever saved you before?” he asked.

“A number of times,” I said. “Twice in the Amazon jungle, once in Sarajevo, and several times on the streets of Poland, to name only a few.”

“That’s ridiculous!” he shot back. “It was just good luck. God’s a figment of your imagination.”

As we neared the ground the wind picked up and the plane trembled so strongly that a number of passengers grabbed their armrests. Suddenly the wind hit the plane with terrible force.

“Hare Krsna!” I shouted.

“Jesus!” screamed the man across the aisle.

“Allahu Akbar!” shouted the woman behind me.

“Oh God! Oh God Almighty!” shouted people in the back of the plane.

“Goddamn son of a bitch!” the man next to me shouted and started screaming dirty words.

The pilot turned the plane sharply to the right and upward. Within moments we were above the wind. Obviously, it was too dangerous to land.

The man next to me heaved a sigh. “That was close,” he said.

I smiled. “Yeah,” I said. “Lady Luck saved us.”

“Very funny,” he said sarcastically.

As we circled the airport waiting for a chance to land, the man turned to me again. “It’s not prayer,” he said. “It’s science and medicine that save people from disease and suffering.”

“But eventually everyone dies,” I said. “Science only prolongs the process. Only by going back to the spiritual world can we rise above suffering altogether.”

Minutes later, as the pilot maneuvered for another try at landing, I began chanting japa again, this time even louder.

“Why waste your breath?” muttered the man.

As we came in for landing the wind suddenly picked up and began shaking the plane again. I started to wonder if the pilot was taking too much risk. Suddenly, a hundred feet above the tarmac another huge gust of wind hit the plane, and people screamed again.

“Hare Krsna!” I yelled.

The pilot quickly turned the plane upwards again. I looked at the man next to me. He was shaking and was as white as a ghost. He touched my arm. “Is there a bag for vomit?” he asked in a trembling voice.

I took a bag from the seat-pocket and gave it to him. He remained silent, holding on tight to the seat in front of him.

“This is the captain,” came the voice over the loudspeakers. “Please remain calm. There’s nothing to worry about. We’ll try to land one more time, but if it doesn’t work, we will have to return to Johannesburg.”

People shifted uneasily in their seats. Ten minutes later the plane began its descent again. The man was sweating and turning and rubbing his head.

“Okay!” he blurted out. “What name of God should I say?”

“Any one will do,” I said. “They're all absolute.”

“Yeah, yeah, okay,” he said. “But what’s the one you've been mumbling? I mean it worked for you a bunch of times.”

“Oh,” I said. “It’s Hare Krsna.”

“Just Hare Krsna?” he said.

“Well, there’s more to it,” I said. “There are thirty-two syllables.”



The wind started shaking the plane again.

“Hurry up,” he said. “Tell me the whole thing.”

“Here it is,” I said. “Hare Krsna, Hare Krsna, Krsna Krsna, Hare Hare – ”

“Wait!” he interrupted. “How am I supposed to remember all that?”

“Then just say Hare Krsna,” I said, “and try to – ”

Before I could finish, another strong blast of wind hit us.

“Hare Krsna!” screamed the man.

Others screamed too, but suddenly we touched down and everything became peaceful. Moments later we were taxiing to the terminal.

“Welcome to Durban,” said the captain over the loudspeakers. “Sorry about the rough ride.”

I waited until we had almost arrived at the gate, then turned to the man.

“See?” I said with a smile. “It works.”

He didn’t say anything, just stared out the window. I remained silent for a moment.

“Well?” I said. “Now do you believe there’s a God out there?”

“Maybe,” he said, still looking out the window.

“Well,” I said, “a maybe is better than a no.”

“I’ll think about it some more,” he said as we pulled up to the gate.

“Here’s my card,” I said. “Anytime you want to talk it over, just give me a call.”

“Yes,” he said. “Maybe I will. That was quite an experience.”

I put my hand on his shoulder. “Remember,” I said with a wink, “soldiers say there are no atheists in foxholes.”