

Gulzar
Haider

DISTANT THUNDER

Cracked Mirrors

PRESENT was filled with carefree laughter and future was the arena of idealism. I had many friends who shared with me their secrets. Together we had hopes for a blissful eternity. But it has turned out to be quite different.

Armaan and Shireen had a storybook marriage. They were an ideal for me. Educated, artistic, scholarly and totally dedicated to their work, they exuded happiness and creative energy. Together they would go to conferences, visit historic sites and write about their impressions and ideas. They socialised with great thinkers and important people. They received patronage from the Western universities where they had studied and an Eastern King to whom they were loyal. I used to take pride in the fact that they responded to my letters.

They co-authored a beautiful book but soon after their own life turned ugly. Symbols of unity, they metamorphosed into totally antagonistic opposites. He wanders in a mist naively hoping that life is about to reveal some profound secret to him and that soon he will understand the true meaning of life. Shireen has patiently brought up her children and since 1979 joined a movement. She struggles endlessly, driven by her dedication to a global vision that few can grasp and perhaps no one understands.

I read their old writings and try hard to forget that time has taken its toll.

Khalid and Parveen are old friends too. She was a student from Pakistan and he, from India. It was a love affair that became talk of that small university town in Texas. Their marriage was presided over by the Foreign Students Advisor who introduced it as an event of great international significance. Their love, to him, was a profound symbolic gesture of political ecumenism among two warring states. In the heat of the moment he wished that one of them was a Hindu so that the world could learn even more from the courageous step they had taken.

Together they became the proverbially good foreign student couple on the campus. They memorised the Declaration of

Independence and publically professed their reverence for Jefferson and Lincoln. Eager to talk to clubs and church audiences they never failed to conclude by expressing their gratitude to America.

Privately, they continuously discussed and frequently disagreed. Two strong egos were battling for supremacy. Youthful mutual attractions would heal many injuries but some bruises were too deep and they left permanent scars.

Thirteen years after the marriage they made the historic trip to India and Pakistan. Their respective families treated them with extravagant hospitality. But Parveen found herself surrounded by jealous women who could not fathom her education, independence and courage. They all branded her as "advanced" and defiant towards "our traditional femininity". She felt ignored in Lucknow because he spent too much time chasing his memories most of which she felt were childish and even deviant. According to her he showed unnaturally excessive love towards his sisters and was too eager to go away with his male friends who brought him garlands and put their arms around his shoulders. She did not talk to Khalid for days after she caught him playing with Sultana's little girl. Sultana was his cousin and informally engaged to him before he had left for Texas.

In Lahore he felt overwhelmed by the obsessive political paranoia of his retired Major-General father-in-law. Tired of listening to self-righteous analysis of history he did dare raise the question of Pakistan's Islamic responsibility towards the Muslims of India. The old General and his entire family jumped on him and branded him and other millions as sell-outs and traitors to the Islamic cause. Khalid was surprised how Parveen became her father's loyal soldier and sniped at him all the time. In her parents' house he felt like a grudgingly tolerated stranger.

They came back to their North American retreat from the battlefields of their families, their cultures and their nations. Things were never to be the same again. Progressively they have become apart to the point that they are opposites of each other now. He is in search of connections between science and Eastern mysticism. She believes econometrics is an exact science. He loves Carl Jung. She adores Skinner. He is shedding his possessions. She talks endlessly of stocks,

bonds and securities. He is a member of the Green Party and attends the peace marches. She campaigns for the conservatives.

Only the fear of societal disapproval, perhaps the only shared emotion left amongst them, keeps them together. Publically they pose as model parents and the loving couple. Privately they are argumentative and unforgiving. Their life is now a cracked mirror held together in a fragile frame.

Rafiq and Rafia are also friends. Their life is a well drawn map. They carefully strategise and meticulously execute their plans. He follows the seven commandants of successful life inherited from his grandfather. She loves to cook, sew and knit. She also knows the hottest sale in town, current price of gold as well as the list of marriageable Muslim boys and girls in the community. They do laundry by turns and wash dishes together. Daily excitement comes from watching the weather forecast. They never disagree because they have nothing to discuss. They are usually quiet because their views are already printed in the local newspaper. A visit with them is no different from a long wait in a sterilised clinic. Nobody hates them but I do not know anybody, other than their old parents, who longs for their presence. Like polished granite their existence is permanent and lifeless.

I meet all my friends but separately. I am surprised that they all trust me. Shireen's son, a shy and bookish art historian is madly in love with Parveen's daughter Nazli, a vivacious, self-assured and highly competitive medical student. She is exclusively in love with herself. Armaan wants me to help the young man in his pursuit. Shireen wants me to pray that he sees the Truth and gives her up. Parveen just does not like his personality. Khalid is stoic about it all. Rafiq and Rafia are convinced that Nazli will bring stability, health and countable fortune to their son's life who is totally possessed by his mission of spreading Islam among the prison inmates. Rafia is convinced that only I can make the girl's parents see the wisdom of what they are proposing.

These friends of my dreamlike past, these co-prisoners of nightmarish present, these sculptors of the coming reality, they are all accomplished actors in this grand drama of deception. But they neither know, nor are they willing to find out. ■