

Gulzar
Harder



DISTANT THUNDER

My Friends

JAMSHID is my friend from times before I can even remember. We have been teammates in all playgrounds and have won, lost and been hurt together. He has always been a dreamer and has grown into a visionary without much discipline. He is always in love, with imaginary, if not real things. I remember him telling me about his dreams of butterflies dancing around his head and raindrops resting on his eyelashes. I also remember his plans to build a garden as beautiful as the Shalimar but for the poor and the destitute. His emotions, like a restless ocean are always wrestling with some rocky shore.

When we were young, Jamshid would read my palm and paint idyllic landscapes of my future. He predicted the number of my children and the happiness of my marriage. Fate proved him to be only partially right. As his own life has turned out to be not according to his dreams he consoles himself and me with legends of unfulfilled love. All great men, he says, have suffered in pursuit of their visions. So he suffers, posing as a great man, but without any cause. He is a pitiable romantic. But to me he is a dear friend is trustee of the most precious memories of my life.

Nazim is my friend from high school days. I remember my first encounter with him. Sitting in the grade eight drawing class, I could not keep track of either my tools or my techniques. The compass would not hold the pencil, the eraser was always lost and the drawing often ran over the edges of the paper. His desk was next to mine and enviously I watched his meticulous habits. He opened his geometry box with the elegance of a magician. He laid out his tools as if a surgical operation were being set up. Pencils were pre-sharpened and color coded for hardness, compass was shining and its hinge was tuned to adequate tightness. Plastic triangles, set-squares as we called them, were free of smudges. And his drawings turned out to be precise, perfectly centered and spotless. There was a refined method to all his school work. There was a system developed for margins and paragraphs for his English essays. Exactly the same kind of blue was used in all geography assignments. Notebooks were jacketed with papers of different colours for easy identification. The Waterman fountain pen inherited from his grandfather still kept in its original box.

Noticing the characteristic clumsiness and nervous chaos in my state of affairs, he volunteered to adopt me. He taught me how to make lists. He gave me hints on time management. He made me write birthday resolutions covering all aspects of my life. I felt secure in his friendship and he must have felt altruistic, paternal, and powerful in having me under his wing. It was a beautiful relationship of mutual necessity. Slowly we became absolutely essential for to other. Thirty years have past and he still calls me to ask if I need help with my income tax or whether I have followed his advice to set up a data base for organizing the extensive collection of my slides. He is dear to me like an old, reliable watch. He keeps ticking with a predictable rhythm. And if I listen to him too intently I cannot go to sleep.

My friend, Abdullah, had started a Muslim student's organization six years before I became a student on the same campus. The first Friday after my arrival, he dragged me to the Friday prayer where I listened to his defense of polygamy in Islam. Slowly but surely he convinced me that it was my Islamic duty to become the secretary of his organization. He and I took turns in delivering Friday sermons. Abdullah was a true Biblical shepherd rounding up the lost sheep on the campus and I felt like his faithful dog. I had little in common with him but I must confess that I got satisfaction and importance in executing his programs that years later seemed to me to be extremely ineffective in the cause of Islam. I recall typing letters to all Muslims on the campus exhorting them to discard the pigskin shoes regardless of their price and comfort. And in those early years, Abdullah and I would spend long hours planning the setting up of a Muslim university in the religious wilderness of North America. Though I slowly weaned myself from his programs, I never ceased to wish him well and defend his causes. He, in turn, never gave up hope for me and as both of us have grown old, I can still get a call from somewhere on his lecture tours on the future of Islam and be embarrassed into doing something for him in the Name of Allah. It is a pleasure to be awakened by that familiar voice on the phone ever so unsubtly reminding me about the Fajr prayer and asking me if I could send a sketch design of yet another mosque that

could have the potential of one day growing into an Islamic University. Abdullah is dear to me because he has always reminded me of how futile is action without thought and how crippling is the thought without action.

And then I have this friend who has a beautiful voice and he sings hymns of love for someone whom he refuses to name. I think I know who his beloved is but I never press him to reveal. I first met him as we were sitting next to one another in the bus from Jeddah to Makkah. Face covered with hands, he was quietly sobbing. The body was in a shrinking posture that expressed a state of crippling anticipation. I startled him as I touched his shoulder, as if I woke him up from a rapturous dream. I have never forgotten the way he looked at me. He smiled, his eyes still very tearful, and I felt that I had known him all my life. I cannot recall the substance of what he said during that journey. I only remember the sensations of his voice. Late that night, sitting outside one of the entrances of Harem al-Sharif he first recited the Qur'an and then, in a forlorn voice, sang to his beloved. After that, he gave me his name and the city he had come from, embraced me, asked me to pray for him and disappeared in the darkness. I write him long letters, I address him by different names and ask him many questions. He never fails to answer. Every year he sends me a tape of his hymns. For me he has opened the gate to a city of love, learning and servitude. But if he is not with me, I cannot see very well and bleed as I run into blind walls.

I suddenly woke up. For a few seconds I could not recognize where I was. I was disoriented and scared. Next to my pillow was an unfinished poem written in the recognizable hand of Jamshid. Pinned to the lampshade next to the bed, Nazim had left a list of things that I must do on this coming day. Draped on the chair back was a prayer rug and on the chair seat, a qibla finder that Abdullah had given me as a gift. Mewlana's flute from Konya was still playing in my portable tape recorder. This was a hotel room in Pittsburgh. The time was only two thirty, hardly an hour after I had dozed off in this strange bed.

I really have no friends. My body is a squatter colony of dichotomous spirits. No wonder I cannot sleep well. ■