



DISTANT THUNDER

The Long Train Home

THE train was leaving the old station of New Orleans. Face pressed against the window, I was ready to greet the wonders I had never seen before. The world beyond, I knew only through my dreams or in old issues of *Life* magazine. My mother worked as a cleaning woman in homes of the rich. Little wonder that my whole environment, including the magazines, came from what the rich did not need anymore. But now I was going to Chicago where my uncle was going to make us rich!

Chicago was a dream turned nightmare. My uncle worked as a porter during the day and a door-keeper bouncer at a southside discotheque during the night. I had a strange feeling that my uncle was much more than a porter and was hiding many things from many people, especially his sister. The police took him away one day and I never saw him again. My mother tried to keep her job as the cafeteria kitchen help at the Illinois Central but not for long.

The gnawing demands of a growing young stomach led me to a small theft. Afraid of the police and the shame it would bring my mother, I left home. The black, drug-infested labyrinth of Chicago adopted me and absorbed me into her vast family of street children.

Juvenile crime is dangerously exciting. The games many children play in their fantasies were being acted out in real. There was the perpetual fear of being caught by the law and there was always the challenge of acting out total innocence in the precinct police station. My reputation was based on my physical and emotional agility and that I could become totally invisible in the crowds at the slightest hints of danger.

One cold winter night, I got caught. Those who supplied me, disowned me completely. It was hard for me to believe that I could be so dispensable and insignificant to the crime machine I had served with all loyalty and diligence.

The prison was a fearful place. Cruel men with stonehard faces! They were threatening and hurtful as they welcomed me to the crowded cell. I felt helpless and weak and in the hope of some sympathy I volunteered the story of my life. And then one of them made an obscene remark about my mother.

All I remember is the sensation of a volcano erupting deep inside me. With the energy of a million molten mountains the fire burnt right through me and took possession of my entire body. I leaped forward to choke the voice of insult against my tyrannised mother. I am certain I reached his throat. My last recollection is a sharp splitting pain.

I woke up in a complete unfamiliar place. My head was wrapped up in bandages and my beard indicated that I must have been there for many days.

Her gentle touch opened my eyes. Standing next to my bed was the lady in a long dress. Her head was wrapped up in a white scarf that framed a shiny black face. There was a mysterious familiarity. It were her big black, sparkling eyes that I felt I had known since eternity. She extended her hand, touched my forehead and uttered a word that I had never heard before: "Asslaam-o-Aleikum". Her voice and the sound of those beautiful words brought my mother back to me. There she was smiling at me exactly as I had always known her. Only the melancholy was gone. There was no tired look, no despair, no dirt, no poverty. She spoke to me and I kept listening in absolute wonder. Waves after powerful waves washed right over me. Without moving anywhere I made the vast journey from some unmanageable darkness to a subliminally understandable light. I too accepted Islam.

Released from the hospital I was sent back to the prison. I was already paying for the crimes of my delinquent youth. For those I was angry at the society. For the rebellious assault to protect my mother's name and for the reassertion of the faith my Creator had gifted me at birth, I was proud. Life in prison became harder for me but I felt a special inner strength to bear it all. I was driven by my thirst to know more about Islam but there was not much available in the library. My request for the Qur'an took six months to process. The books she brought for me were kept for weeks for clearance and only a few were released to me. During her visits she taught me the prayers and as the month of Ramadhan came I fasted as she instructed me. The past became a reference for change and present an arena for struggle towards a life of

Islam.

Diligently I acquired the skills of operating and maintaining a printing machine. Through the craft shop I acquired the art of graphic layouts and book-binding. I established a world-wide network of Muslim pen-friends who all made me feel I was the member of a much larger family. Naquib from Malaysia taught me how to respect the Prophet. Idrees from India informed me about the rights of Muslim minorities. Murtaza from Iran introduced me to the enlightening power of Islamic thought. Ihsan of Istanbul gave me lessons on the sublime art of calligraphy. And Hassan from Egypt told me about the wisdom and beauty of a man building his own house with his own hands. At the 1979 annual open-house of the state correctional programme my work was exhibited, I was awarded a certificate of exemplary reform and released back to the society. My mother and I established a little print shop in the southside of Chicago. We printed and sold books to help the troubled humanity around us.

This year I decided to take her to Hajj. The sight of the Kaaba possessed her like I had never imagined. She knelt down and then fell on the ground. All I could hear was the sobs of this slave girl from New Orleans. The long lost daughter of Hajira had returned home. She wanted to complain on behalf of all the destroyed lives of the struggling slaves. Twice she screamed out in utter emotion calling the names of God the Merciful. Each time she was quietened by keepers of the pious order. The third time she shouted the name of God the Greatest, a stone-faced bearded, uniformed man pushed her. Her body was trampled and her white scarf soiled by a thousand feet. The volcano within me that I thought had frozen cold forever, erupted with a force I felt would inundate the globe. Shouting God's Names I leapt at his throat.

She is buried in an unmarked grave in the sacred valley. I am returning home in a train from New York to Chicago. My left shoulder and leg is in a cast. Like the little boy from New Orleans, my face is pressed against the train window. But this time there are no innocent dreams. Only hard challenges of the time to come. ■