



DISTANT THUNDER

Alhamra

THE elevator ride scared me and the corridor felt like a long dark mile, but I knew that at the end there was a door that opened into my special world. I cannot recall the true shape and limits of the apartment but the memory of that room is clear as if I have just walked into it. It was a warm and happy room full of things I knew as my friends. Though they all sat motionless and mute, I called them by their special names and even made them talk to one another. The window seemed way above my eyes and I could see clouds in the sky. The bed was bouncy and the blanket soft with wide-eyed gazelles silently talking to one another in a forest of tall trees. The wooden chest was too heavy for me to open, but I knew it contained things that belonged to me. On the mirror cut in the shape of a lotus, lying on the bed, as my eyes would succumb to the burden of sleep, I would steal one long, lingering look at her beautiful face in the mirror.

In my sleep all my toys would become alive and accompany me into the magical world of her stories. The clouds of my window became the snow-covered mountains in the distance. The room opened up like a tulip, the walls folded out and melted with the floor into a green blanket of hills. The thick forest of pine and cypress was alive with gazelles, nightingales and sparrows. Forming the peak of the mountain was the castle-like palace hiding a thousand and one secrets. Its towers were squarish, opaque and of earthly red colour, very much like the chest in my room. Her voice would give me wings and draw me into a garden courtyard full of myrtle and jasmine. In the centre was a pool as quiet as the mirror and as the sky came down to visit the earth the pool felt exactly like my window. At the head of the garden was an arcade as gentle as the tassles on her shawl. And beyond that another room whose ceiling was the frozen symphony of a star-lit sky. There against the centre of the wall, on the axis of

the garden, was a golden throne on which she sat in her smiling majesty. She was my mother and I her only son. In that timeless domain it seemed I dwelt forever.

Her voice would awaken me in the morning. She used to sing a hymn that enumerated the blessings of God that I too had come to understand. I would jump out of bed and run to her in the kitchen. She would turn round and, without any interruption in her prayer, open her arms to me. I would say greetings to her using the secret code words she had taught me. She in turn would kiss me and engulf me in her fragrance.

At breakfast there were little innocent games and plans for the rest of the day and the tomorrows which felt like unwrapped gifts. And then came the time for what she called 'our special lesson'. First there was the washing of hands, arms, face and feet and some additional gestures that made my hair feel wet and cool. A prayer mat was spread on the floor and on that the wooden book-stand was unfolded. The Book was carefully seated and its green satin cover opened with pious caution. The peacock feather book-mark distracted my attention so she would quickly hide it in the back cover. I tried to duplicate the sound and rhythm of whatever she recited. And as we did that she held the first finger of my right hand and made it trace the intricate and flowing writings. When I achieved a special success in reciting a difficult verse, she would kiss my forehead and stroke my back. Slowly I learnt to recognize the forms of the words and recite the text from my memory.

At lunch I would not eat very well as the anxiety of what was coming built up deep inside me. She would know without I ever telling her and putting an arm around me say: "It will be only four hours, my darling, and then I will be back and we will have lots of fun". That promise, and the tone of her voice would calm me down, however temporarily. "Why do you have to go anyway? I miss you and get scared that you won't come back". And she would hold me with special tenderness and tell me, "I

have a promise with God of our Book that He will always make me come back".

The time would come every day when I was reluctantly led by my hand through the musty corridor, the noisy elevator, a dark forest of columns and many cars, through a metal door, a set of black stairs, another door, yet another corridor and finally into a room full of other children. There were hundreds of toys but we could touch only by permission. The two ladies were always telling us to behave and be quiet. Most of the games felt like a drill and the story reading did not allow any question. The ordeal was slow and drawn out.

She would be there waiting for me at the door. On sunny days we would go to the park. I would hold on to her warm hand and when crossing the road my grip would tighten and her ring would press into my palm. She would push me on the swings, help me up the ladder to the top of the slide and run to catch me at the end. She would chase me, catch me and tickle me until it hurt with laughter. Soon after supper she helped me change, and back in my own room, she read me the story and helped me recite my prayer. Gazing through the mirror I would slip into my dream. Those were the bright times full of love and laughter and the memories got carved in the sacred recesses of my mind.

I grew up to realise that the mirror was made in Granada, the city of Alhamra. Her ring bore a coded inscription: "Sufficient is God for me and He is the Best of the Protectors". Her stories were set in the Spain of Ibn Arabi. She was a fifteenth generation immigrant to America. They were Moorish people brought under trying circumstances. Stripped of their names and made to adopt the dogma of their masters, they kept their Islam as a treasured secret passed through the loving heartbeat of mothers. She gifted me the Book and also gave me her ring. My name is no longer Ferdinand. I have declared myself as Yousseff Abdullah. The mirror now hangs in Ameena's room. She is my little daughter. ■