



DISTANT THUNDER

Old Man From Marrakesh

MY father was a professor of economics at a famous university in Chicago. He built for himself an international reputation by theorising and explaining away the mass poverty. He also built himself a luxurious house in an exclusive area along lake Michigan. My mother, a Ph.D. in industrial psychology, was the well-known author of a book about the role of music in achieving higher productivity on the assembly lines. When she was not busy planning her consulting and speaking engagements, she spent all her energies on competing with her husband. They were both too global to be bothered with a local problem like me. Father would spend weeks writing his World Bank reports or refining his next keynote address and the mother would disappear for days advising the plant managers how to squeeze more sweat for the dollar. When I demanded their attention I would get lectures on the value and virtue of independence, self-reliance and public libraries. Their lies were naked and excuses transparent. I became convinced that I was an unwanted biological accident and a legal liability in the lives of these two heady hypocrites. Slowly I ceased to expect anything from them and surrendered myself to the warm labyrinth of the Lincoln Library. She shared with me, generously, silently and without malice, what my self-indulgent parents could never give. The break with them was complete and final.

I read the required texts for my courses. Most were like training manuals for preparing soldiers in service of the economy. So I rewarded myself by taking home the books that would challenge me, awaken me, give me aesthetic pleasure, pose me questions and dare my American beliefs. Rachel Carson, Paul Ehrlich, Ivan Illich, Buckminster Fuller, Schumacher, Barbara Ward and Hazel Henderson fed my deep seated disdain for the world of my parents. The glossy, technicolour American dream slowly turned grey. I felt angry, anchorless and helpless. I read St. Augustine, Lao Tsu, Krishnamurti, Tagore, Buber, Eliade, and Bateson. They helped calm my anxieties and I became serious about my search for a world-view, a system of thought, a guiding framework within

which I could order my life. Quite innocently I registered for a course in comparative religion. The professor was an agnostic well on his way to atheism. In fourteen weeks I was subjected to analysis that invariably led to the conclusion that religion had long outlived its usefulness. It was the declared mission of our professor to free our generation from the shackles of faith so that humanity, of course led by his students, could make the necessary civilisational leap. The experience left me groping in yet another dark existential forest. Once again I sought refuge in the library, my sanctum, my surrogate mother. A year later I was hired as the late shift attendant at the reference desk of the Lincoln.

One Thursday night, about half an hour before our closing time, an old man approached my desk and greeted me with a kind, generous smile. His hair were longish and silver white, he had metal glasses, and his delicate and frail fingers held the pen with great respect and caution. "Young man, I need your help. I have been looking for this old book. I cannot find it. I need it very badly. I was told that you are good at searching books especially from libraries far away ..." He wrote the name of the book on a small piece of paper and guessing my inner fascination proceeded to explain, "this legend was revealed to the great Ibn Sina at the dawn of the eleventh century. But it was in the twelfth century that Ibn Tufail al-Qaisi, an enlightened man indeed, who came forth from Wadi Ash in Andalusia and ended his earthly journey in Marrakesh, recorded it as a pure journey of the soul in search of its Creator. I hear that an English translation was done by a certain Simon Oakley in 1708. That is what I am looking for." I filled out a form and promised that I will treat this search as a personal mission. He blessed me with unusual grace and left contented and smiling.

Three months later the brown padded envelope finally arrived from Oxford. I sent a letter but the old man never came to pick up the book. My second letter returned with a note in the characteristically female script: "Has returned to Marrakesh. Wanted you to keep the book. May God enlighten us

all."

"The old man had willed this book to me! This gift, in fact, had been ordered especially for me. I was destined to inherit this vision of Ibn Sina and Ibn Tufail ...", I could not help my intense emotion as I slowly and carefully started to read that faded facsimile of the small book. The allegorical journey of Hayy Bin Yaqzan, from the helplessness of an infant prince abandoned on the virgin stage of nature, to the alive, aware and awake adulthood, cognisant of the Hidden Creator and in harmony with the manifest Reality, made my anguished soul turn inside out. "Yes!", spoke my conscience to me, "indeed it is possible, in fact inevitable that the alphabet of all knowledge lie within, and that the book of creation be deciphered through direct experience, and only then may the knower become a true believer and ultimately evolve into the one worthy of God's vicegerency."

I felt driven to seek the lady who returned my second letter. She received me like a mother and hosted me for seven days. Only then did she give me the address in Marrakesh. Though my travel took weeks, the journey of the spirit was swift. There he sat, leaning against a column, in the courtyard of his madrassah. He stood up to receive me, "I knew you would come. Come, come, let's sit in my library. You look thirsty. Here, this is a drink that Ibn Sina prescribed for the travellers like you. This is your home, rest here for some days or as long as you want. You are my long lost son and now that you have come, I can spend more time with my teacher who dwells in the mosque just two streets away ..."

I adopted the name Abdul-Hayye, slave of the Ever-Living. For years I served his library in Marrakesh. And then, one day, a museum man came and declared all manuscripts as Arab-national heritage and locked them behind glass cases. I was branded an undesirable foreigner and asked to leave. I visited Ibn Tufail in the mosque for the last time, gathered some memories of the old man and left forever. I now serve the Yaqzaan Bookshop on the Charing Cross Road in London.