

Gulzar
Holder

DISTANT THUNDER

'Dr Khan's residence!', a Caribbean voice straining to sound British.

'Who is calling?', a sternness well-practised to scare unwelcome patients who do not have Dr. Khan's special number.

'I have been invited by the Khans tonight; I will appreciate some directions. This is my first time'.

'He will be with you in a minute'. It felt considerably longer than a minute and then, 'Oh, hello brother Gulzar sorry to keep you waiting, I had an emergency consult and I was on my other phone in the den, plus Martha did not let me know right away, a bit slow in the head but she is loyal, you know these people, and who needs smart servants any way... sorry it took so long, so how are you brother...' I am glad he did not give me any chance to tell how I was.

'Aniqa and I have heard so much about you but strange that we have been in the same town for seven years and have never met'. To me it was not strange at all.

'Could you please give me some directions'.

'Where are you going to come from?'

'Hopeville Heights, on the south side of the train tracks'.

'Ah, Hopeville!' an uncomfortable silence as if Khalil Khan had suddenly shook hands with a leper.

'I think I know the area. Martha's daughter lives there.'

'Alright! let's start, please come north on Progress Avenue, till you see the Salvation Army Headquarter sign. Take a right turn loop to get on to Queensway West. Drive for nineteen kilometers and take the Horizon Road North Exit. You will pass the Makenzie Riding Club. Take a good look at the pavilion of our club because we are planning to invite you one evening to show your slides to the club members. They will want to know your impressions of the building. Anyhow, seven kilometers and you will see the signs of Milkway Estates. Second turn right is Paradise Lane. There are only four houses. Let us see if you can

Paradise Lane

recognise our 'humble cottage'.

I had no difficulty spotting the humbleness. The two door Mercedes parked outside the three door garage had a custom licence plate: ANIQA. A curved path led to the door. To the right was a pond bordered with slate stone. In the centre a white mermaid riding a black swan. Three gentle steps up and I was standing under a neo-classical portico with fluted fake Greek columns made of white painted sheet metal. I tapped the metal with my knuckles as if to taunt its masquerade.

I resolved to be gracious and civilised towards my hosts who, I knew, had invited me expecting an approval of this masterpiece of their life's struggle, this self-designed, custom-built house. I braced myself for an evening of hypocrisy through an odyssey of bad taste.

A uniformed Martha opened the door before I had a chance to ring the bell.

'Please do come in, he had to go to attend a very important patient but she will be with you in a minute. Let me take your coat'. I found myself in a space which was neither a foyer, nor a grand stair hall, not even an atrium. Too ill-defined, it was trying to be all these miserably failing in all. A marble tiled floor, a golden velvety wall with embossed maroon arabesque, carriage lights on the wall, a plastic bubble skylight with a chandelier hanging in the middle. An oversized ceramic vase with silk flowers, a flaked antique hat rack with an oval mirror and a grandfather clock. A pedestal fountain in the centre with a confused cupid. And around all this an oversized spiral staircase. I felt I was in a cheap Egyptian take-off on a bad American movie.

For a moment I felt that the space had shrunk even further, the cupid was making faces at me and the chandelier was going to come crashing down. I wanted to run out when Dr. Aniqa Khan appeared on top of the spiral. With well rehearsed grace she started walking down.

'Sorry to keep you waiting, Doctor Sahib, Salam-o-alaikum, we have heard so much..., this house has kept us occupied otherwise we would have invited you earlier. Now that it is complete we are not embarrassed by the friends visiting us. We were like gypsies before. Oh, please sit down. Poor Khalil! he had to run out again.... I think life is

not complete without a house that fits one's personality like a glove.... Martha!, what would you like Dr. Sahib, or can I call you by your name...' Overwhelmed by this barrage of pronouncements and mannerisms, I almost fell down in a chair.

The living room had one big Chinese and two small oriental look-alike Belgian carpets. A large round onyx slab sat on ugly brass legs all imported from the home country. A walnut screen, supposedly from Kashmir, was in the corner screening nothing. Another crystal chandelier, some 'original' art picked from the sidewalk galleries of touristic Europe and a gallery of embroidered cushions. But on the centre of the end wall, above the fire place my eyes saw an unearthly blackness and got frozen.

'I knew you would like this', her voice startled me. 'You must know Sami, he used to be the counsellor from Kuwait. Khalil removed a large black ugly mole from his father's face and he gave us this as a token of appreciation. He was some big man in the Kuwaiti system and used to lead official delegations to Hajj...'. Oblivious to the story, I was totally possessed by this pirated, exiled piece of Kaaba's *hijab*, imprisoned in a grotesque golden frame, chained to a few nails in this temple of conspicuous waste.

I don't remember when Dr. Khalil came back. Absentmindedly and with faked keenness I survived through the guided tour. Vaguely I remember Roman bath, gold-plated faucets, marbled mirrors, scalloped soap dishes and a walk-in closet the size of my study in the Hopeville Heights. We came back to the living room for tea. As I tried to divert my mind decoding a pattern in an embroidered cushion, as I unsuccessfully tried to rein my thoughts, from the centre of the end wall came a voice, 'Arise! Run away from this mausoleum of Muslim dreams, escape this graveyard of abandoned hopes. They have broken their covenant to serve humanity as healers. So we have made them build a palace of their desires. Here they will yearn, unconsciously, for the peace they consciously buried with their own hands. Here they shall remain imprisoned'.

Driving south on Progress Avenue I thanked my Creator for the fresh air and the distance from Paradise Lane. ■