



## DISTANT THUNDER

WE listened to her in abject amazement and occasional fear. She spun exotic tales of magic, temptation and sin. Evil was confronted with miracle and crimes required severe, redemptive punishments. There were lightnings, floods, earthquakes, partings of the sea and the disobedients turning into rocks of salt. The characters were somehow fundamentally faltering and prone to moral mistakes. Though every saga had a cast of thousands the plot was usually simple. The entire mankind was burdened with the shame of a mistake that involved two persons in a garden, a horned red creature with a mischievous smile, a snake and an apple. What actually happened was never revealed and left to our imagination. All we saw in the illustrations of our book was that they were leaving the gates of their paradise with their faces covered in sorrowful shame. So serious, permanent and perennial was the mistake that God had to send his only son to suffer in order that the humanity be saved.

Mary White was our Sunday school teacher. Repeatedly she concluded her lessons that summarised in my mind as: "This kindly, sad yet smiling person with a ring of thorns around his head and a little lamb in his arms was for sure the son of God and my saviour. I will find salvation only through him and he is essential for all that is good in my life, from my mother's love to the toy trains that my father bought me, from Christmas to teddy bear and even ice cream..." The way she presented it, the system was simple, complete and forever. How could I ever do anything to disappoint her and add to the sufferings of my saviour. I became the obedient and thus the blessed lamb in her flock. I won the shining cross that hung over the headboard of my bed. I felt safe and saved. Days were bright and nights peaceful.

Life progressed happily and the school years kept the rhythm of time. My church-going father had strict rules of conduct and a severe code of reward and punishment. He introduced me to the visitors as "my

# Rain From Heaven

good son" and I tired myself to the bones every day to retain this title. His discipline lent structure to my adolescent existence. Quite innocently I believed that my world will last forever.

And then, as if by some magical law of nature, the secure and contented order of my existence was shattered. On my sixteenth birthday, which arrived on a Sunday, I refused to go to the church. My father was furious and mother tearful. I asked questions to which none of us had the answers. I was impatient and openly defiant and my father taunted me as the irreverent, blasphemous traitor to the pious tradition of the family. Anguished by what was happening to me, my mother took me to the priest. He asked me to confess the crimes that I was not convinced I had committed. He wanted me to repent my original sin through the saviour but that no longer made any sense to me. He attempted to inject the fear in my heart which provoked me to reject him and his pious empire. In the end he told my mother that I was possessed with satanic doubt and she should make redemptive contributions to the church so that the whole congregation could pray for her lost son. As I left his luxurious but stuffy office the air outside felt fresher and the sun brighter. My father ordered me to leave the house. My conscience had burst forth from the prison of dogma and the search had begun. I felt very free but thirsty.

My rebellion against the original sin made me a perfect catch for the *Nirvana* commune where nothing was sinful. In the idyllic foothills of Oregon was this dreamy little world of smiling, beautiful, perfumed and garlanded people walking barefoot, gently treading on earth, ready to touch and embrace at the slightest provocation. Little brass bells, hyacinth and jasmine perfume; saffron beads, incense, muslin embroidered shirts, faded jeans, posters of multi-armed and animal headed gods, natural prescriptions to revitalise the body and books to awaken the soul, all were available from the shop run by the *guru's* brother-in-law. My head was shaven except a strand. I was given a single syllable Sanskrit name and a *mantra* customised for my troubled soul. Among my fellow devotees, who eagerly shared with me

all, I felt warm pleasure that was unknown to my prudent past. Only the cross-legged yoga was hard on my American knees but it was explained away as the stiffness of my soul to accept the transcendent truth. When I complained about the exorbitant prices of food and the essential accessories of worship I was told that only through parting with my possessions shall I take the first step towards *Nirvana*. The first under-the-tree sermon by the *guru* informed me that I was god. But so was the goat standing next to me attempting to munch at the few hair I had left. I was also blessed with other profundities like "the truth is everything of everything; that falsehood is nothing of nothing; that love is all; that silence is the song of gods..." Only four weeks later, with my pockets empty and mind under the serious threat of evaporating forever, I left.

There were years of searching, experimenting and wandering in the world of philosophy, religion, magic, martial arts, angry music and mountain climbing. Having believed in too many ideas I had dulled my abilities to discern. I found myself agreeing with all and having nothing to say myself. The thirst became sharper and the emptiness bigger.

I was a student of design and registered in Muhammed Mahfouz's course on geometry. Lectures were precise and so were the forms we studied but the discussions always led to issues of form and meaning, content and expression, speculation and reality. One day he showed us a slide of *Muqarnas*, the stalactite geometric transformation between the cube and the sphere, and spoke about the earth's thirst for knowledge and the heaven's mercy of guidance. Never had I heard him with such emotional energy and intellectual clarity. That afternoon I found myself in his office. The simple, unambiguous profession of a faith started to wash the multiple layers of doubt and confusion. He gave me the Book and asked me to read it as if it was addressed to me. The rain started to get to the parched soul. Islam spread its beneficent arms and I surrendered myself to the embrace. Around the eternal ordering framework of the Quran, life has not ceased to unfold in ever beautiful forms.