

SORROW RIDES A FAST HORSE

BY

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Their fate was to travel like the wind - from the marble temples of Greece to the blazing sands of Arabia, from Taj Mahal to high Himalayas. For behind them always fell the phantom hoofbeats of memory.

When my mother died everyone in Green Valley said what a selfless and patient woman she had been, and how wonderfully she had managed to raise two sons alone. "A modest, uncomplaining woman," the minister said at her funeral. "A woman who was born in this town and who died in this town and never went beyond it, but cultivated wisdom in her own small garden."

When he said this my brother Rufus nudged me and smiled. People forget, of course—and anyway, the minister had lived in Green Valley for only twelve years, so he couldn't have known. Certainly mother would never have told him about what Rufus and I tacitly referred to as That Year; when it was over, mother never talked of it with us or anyone. I don't think she was ashamed or sorry so much as embarrassed about it because she could not explain her actions even to herself. Only once did she even admit that it had taken place, and I can imagine the effort this cost her. It happened when I was in the ninth grade at Green Valley School and Miss Larkin showed us a film slide of the Taj Mahal. She made a few remarks about it, saying she was sorry she could not show us a picture of the interior, but that no photographs of it had as yet been allowed.

I raised my hand and told her that inside it was glittering and white, with words from the Koran carved on the walls, and flower designs, and colored stones set into the marble.

"And from what book did you get that, John?"

"I didn't get it from a book," I told her. "I've been there. I've seen the Taj Mahal."

After school Miss Larkin took me aside and told me sternly that I must not tell lies like that; I had done it only to gain attention, but people would like me much better if I told the truth. "Now I want you to admit that you've never visited the Taj Mahal."

"But I have," I protested.

She rapped my knuckles and said I would have to stay after school every day until I confessed to the class that I had never seen the Taj Mahal and had not been telling the truth. I almost lost my paper route from being punished and that was how mother learned about it. The next day she walked into Miss Larkin's room looking pale and nervous. Standing just inside the door she said stiffly, "Miss Larkin, John was not lying; he has seen the Taj Mahal," and without another word she walked out of the room.

Since that day two wars ago the boys and men of Green Valley have seen quite a exotic corners of the earth, but when I was a child no one in Green Valley traveled abroad. There was neither the time nor the money for such frivolity. The town was—and still is—farmland with only a few stores, two churches and one school. My father taught in that school until one day he was reading lines from Kubla Khan to his class and reached the words 'Down to a sunless sea' and crumpled suddenly to the floor. Three hours later he died of a cerebral hemorrhage.

My brother Rufus was seven and I was nine. It's difficult to realize that my mother was only thirty-one. She didn't cry when they told her; she stiffened as if she had been hit, her chin went up and her eyes glittered strangely. The first thing she did when everyone had gone was to go into the kitchen and begin scrubbing the floor. Even after the relatives arrived nobody could make her stop working; our Aunt Agatha said she was like a woman possessed.

After the funeral we were glad to go back to school because it seemed to us we had lost mother, too; when we spoke to her she looked at us blankly, as if she'd forgotten who we were. She was still that way when the insurance man arrived. He spent an hour in the study with mother and when he left she looked chilled.

"What's that pink paper you've got?" Rufus asked.

"It's a check," mother said, staring down at it contemptuously. "A check for fifteen thousand dollars. When I think of what it could have bought us—the things we could have done together——" For one moment I thought she was going to cry and then her face froze and she walked back into the kitchen. But the check must have put the idea into her mind; here was all this money, so utterly meaningless to her now that she wanted only to destroy it, and if not to destroy at least abuse it. And besides, she had cleaned the house from attic to cellar and there was nothing left to clean.

Two weeks later Rufus and I came home from school to find mother standing in the hall with three suitcases on the floor. She was dressed in her good black coat and the plain blue dress that she wore to Sunday school. In those days her brown hair was parted in the center and pulled into a tight bun at her neck, but little tendrils always succeeded in escaping to soften her small, delicate-boned face. "You won't be going to school tomorrow," she told us. "We're going away.

"When will we be back?" I asked.

She gave me that impatient blind glance that I was growing accustomed to now. "I don't know when we'll be back," she said in a voice that meant she didn't care when we came back. "We're going around the world."

"I can't go around the world tomorrow," I told her. "I've got an arithmetic exam."

"I'm sorry," she said politely, "but we are leaving in one hour and we are going around the world."

It was late October when we landed in England, and in London we settled into a hotel room and mother made arrangements for two weeks of sight-seeing. After we'd watched the changing of the guard at the palace Rufus and I decided England might be fun, but after four days of London mother decided we must go to Wales. A week later we were in Holland and soon after that we left for Austria. I remember that we spent Christmas in Paris, but we had no sooner visited the Eiffel Tower and the Bastille than mother announced that we must pack our bags again. That was the way it was all through the winter and spring—we packed and unpacked our bags through Spain, Portugal and Morocco. We were like bees flitting nervously from flower to flower: one week riding a camel in Morocco, the next week a rented bicycle in Italy. Rome held us briefly, but mother found Naples too beautiful and so we did not even unpack our bags there but left immediately for Florence. Then we moved to Greece, Rufus and I picking up foreign words like crumbs begged from shopkeepers, concierges, sailors and chambermaids. We behaved very badly as well, I remember, and despaired when mother did not notice. We were alone, really alone, for the first time in our young and sheltered lives and we resented being shut out of mother's life. But in the manner of children everywhere, I suppose some kind of adjustment took place in us. It was to me that Rufus looked for comfort, and I to him; and if we hated mother's indifference we also took advantage of it, eating sweets when we chose and going to bed when we pleased and saying "No" to her in half a dozen languages.

In July we came to Baghdad, a city of houses the color of yellow sand, and of blazing sun and minarets puncturing the sky with their polished gold domes. The streets were narrow and dim, overflowing with dust, sheep and people, the men with tender dark eyes, the women soft and mysterious behind veils. In the *suqs* Rufus and I ate

yogurt with our fingers from earthenware pots, we drank bitterly strong coffee and sat cross-legged for hours watching men work gold or silver into filigree or hammer out huge jugs of copper. We did not go back to our hotel except at night. There were other Americans in that hotel because the first oil well had been brought in only a few years earlier, but we scorned these men; they talked only of geological surveys and gushers and pipelines.

No one had questioned mother until we reached Baghdad, when an English colonel stopped one night beside our table in the dining room. It was Rufus's eighth birthday and we were attempting some kind of celebration. The colonel told mother that Rufus reminded him of his grandson, and after a few minutes he sat down and asked us where we were going. Mother explained that we were on our way to India to see the Taj Mahal and to spend a week in Kashmir. But first, she added, we were going across the mountains to Tehran and then to Meshed to see the place where Harun al-Rashid, the caliph of the Arabian Nights, was buried.

The colonel's jaw dropped. "Across the mountains! What on earth can you be thinking of? This isn't England, you know."

"I didn't think it was," mother told him with asperity.

"You're in Asia now. Those mountains are full of smugglers and thieves—not safe at all. Unthinkable. I can't imagine who planned your itinerary."

"My husband did," said mother in an even voice. "Some years ago."

The colonel snorted. "Well, you can't just look at a map and go the shortest way in these countries. If you won't listen to me I'll go to your consul first thing in the morning and tell him what you're up to. He'll stop you."

But of course by the next day we were gone. Mother had already visited the consulates and she had had the foresight to acquire a visa for Persia and a man to drive us across the border and over the mountains. In those days the idea of a woman traveling alone in Asia with two children was so unthinkable that it must never have occurred to anyone—except the colonel—to ask her questions. I think the authorities, most of whom spoke little or no English, assumed mother was traveling with one child and a husband, and mother did not discourage them. Certainly she did not look like an adventuress and she met no one wise enough to see her ruthlessness. They did not know that mother was courting self-destruction. As for endangering the lives of two children, no appeal in that direction could have touched her because she was, as Aunt Agatha said, a woman possessed. We scarcely existed for her then.

Our driver was an Afghan named Mohammed Aslam and there was so much affection in his first glance at us that we stopped acting like spoiled and precocious children. As mother handed him our three suitcases she inquired—dutifully and with not much interest—if there really were thieves in the mountains ahead.

Aslam gave her a gay smile accompanied by a shrug. "A few, perhaps. The people are poor, poorer than anybody else in that country. But in my good car, we go fast."

We looked at his car, a patched and ancient Ford truck. "She goes," he told us proudly, patting its fender. And indeed she did go; and did not break down until we needed her most.

A child does not remember the same things an adult remembers. You may take a child to the Louvre, and he will remember the guard who picked his nose, or the organ grinder on the street outside, or the chocolate treat on the way home. Only the adults remember the Mona Lisa. For us this journey into Persia was Aslam, dust, heat, and picnics eaten beside the truck. In this queer, convulsed corner of the world even mother seemed more cheerful, as if its bleakness matched hers. We slept for two nights on rugs beside the car with a canvas stretched from the truck to a pole. No one passed us along the way; we might have been the only four people in the world. At dawn we would eat mast, a kind of curds dried into a hard white ball, and mother and Aslam would drink chai while we had milk from a goatskin kept cool in a bucket of water. Then we would be off, climbing slowly toward the mountain

range before us. It was barren, desolate country covered not with scrub but with thistles, as tall as a man and bearing blossoms the size of an apple. The truck gave out when we had reached what seemed like the top of the world. It simply stopped. We piled out, trying not to look into the canyon below, and waited while Aslam cheerfully peered under and into the engine.

At last he shook his head. "No *benzine*."

"You're out of gas?"

"*Bali*." He led us to the rear and showed us the gas tank, which had a hole in it the size of a twenty-five-cent piece.

Mother appeared unconcerned; she asked Aslam what he proposed to do next. He replied—still very cheerfully—that we must not worry, he would get us to Hamadan, *inshallah*. I did not remind mother that *inshallah* meant if God wills it. He asked for money, which mother trustingly gave him, and said he would be back in a few hours with donkeys. Five hours later, when we were nearly prostrate from the heat, he did indeed return, from heaven knows where, leading four emaciated donkeys. He had bought them in a Lur village some miles away and he said he would return them when he came back for his truck. The donkeys, Aslam told me, were for my *mader*, my *barader* and me; upon the fourth he would pile our baggage and food and water while he himself would walk. Although we protested at this he was very insistent, saying that he could walk faster than any of us. I did not realize until later that he was afraid. It did not occur to us that in these mountains a man with enough money to buy donkeys draws attention to himself.

We made poor time, but we traveled until long past sunset. The border was far behind us now. Another day's traveling, Aslam said, and we would reach Kermanshah, where he could purchase benzine and—he hoped—the means to repair his tank. In the meantime we would stop here—we had reached a plateau rimmed with jagged rocks—and cook a little rice and spread our rugs. He began to make a small fire, leaning over it, blowing on it and crooning to it. Mother sat slumped on her donkey, too tired to dismount, while Rufus and I stood beside ours wondering how to tether them.

It was several moments before we realized we were not alone.

There were six of them, and they had stepped out of the darkness like wraiths. The poverty of them, and the desolateness of our surroundings, made my heart jump in a sickening fashion. They were bearded, fierce and ragged. They wore loose, pantaloonly black trousers, but neither sashes nor shirts. Only three of them owned turbans. They looked so terribly poor—and so fierce—that I suddenly realized how wealthy we must look to them with our rugs and our donkeys.

"Who are they?" asked mother with a faint look of surprise.

Aslam stood up cautiously and spoke to them. The tallest of the six men—heavily bearded and wearing a turban so that only his eyes and the sharpness of his cheekbones showed—replied at some length. When he had finished speaking he laughed and showed Aslam the heavy stick he carried in one hand.

"Who are they?" repeated mother, still not afraid.

Aslam looked a little sick. "Bandits."

"Then give them food," mother said impatiently.

Aslam said uneasily, "They do not want food."

"Then give them what money we have."

Still Aslam hesitated.

"Well?" asked mother curtly. "What is it they want?"

Keeping his eyes on the ground, Aslam said, "They want you and the children as well as the food and money. I have told them you are American, but they do not know what American is."

Mother frowned. "They intend to capture us?"

Aslam gave her a fleeting look of surprise. "They have already captured us."

"But what on earth do they want us for?"

Aslam's eyes returned to the ground. He said nothing, which was thoughtful of him, for none of the possibilities would have pleased us. The leader of the bandits stepped forward and made a gesture to mother to get down from her donkey. She stared at him unbelievably and then she turned to look at the five other men and at Rufus and me. Her gaze moved from us to the deep night sky and then to the jagged black rocks and I saw a shudder run through her as if she were shaking herself out of a deep trance. The blind look had gone from her eyes. I realized that at last she was clearly seeing us and her surroundings. Such a look of horror crossed her face that I thought she was going to scream.

"Please," Aslam begged in a low voice. "There is no hope just now. Wait. Do nothing to resist. These men are dangerous."

Mother seemed dazed. "Not resist? Aslam, they must not capture us!"

Aslam said sadly, "It must be your *qismat*— your fate—to stop here."

Mother gave a bitter, half-strangled laugh. Her cheeks were flushed and her hair undone; she looked wild and strange. "My *qismat*?" she said harshly. "Tell this man I must travel like the wind—that is my *qismat*. Tell him," she went on fiercely, "that Sorrow rides behind me on a fast horse—if he listens closely he may hear the hoof beats. Tell him that if he captures me he will capture Sorrow as well— because where I go Sorrow follows and where I stop Sorrow will stop."

Where did she find those words? I don't know. My mother had never spoken in that manner before and I never heard her speak that way again. Aslam obediently translated her words for the bandit chief and I saw him narrow his eyes. I wondered if instead of capturing us they might kill us then and there. The bandits began to speak among themselves and to gesticulate, one of them pointing in the direction from which we had come, and another giving us an angry, accusing glance. After interminable moments the bandit chief turned to mother and spoke.

Aslam said breathlessly, "He says it has been a hard year, with many people dead in their village. Sheep have sickened and died. He says they do not wish for more Sorrow. If Sorrow follows behind you then you must leave these mountains at once. You must not stop even to sleep."

Mother closed her eyes. She looked suddenly drained.

"He and his men will guide us out of the mountains to speed us on our way."

Mother opened her eyes and said with dignity, "Tell him that we are ready to go."

The bandits were as good as their word. All night we rode behind them and when dawn came we were only an hour from Kermanshah. We dismounted and the bandits took the donkeys from us, as well as our food and money, but left us our baggage. As they turned to go the bandit chief walked up to mother and gave her a hard, searching

glance. Aslam, translating his words, said, "He wants you to know that his wife died last month and a son last year. He is well acquainted with Sorrow. He has taken your food and money, but he gives you the gift of a copper water jug. Which he probably captured from somebody else," Aslam added dryly. "He says to you '*Istali mashi*,' which means 'May you never be tired.' In return you must say to him '*Kwar mashi*' which means 'May you never be poor.'"

There were tears in mother's eyes. "*Kwar mashi*," she replied to the bandit chief.

We stood and watched them ride away on our donkeys and then mother said quietly,

"I think it is time we began making arrangements to go home now."

We had left Green Valley in October and we returned in October and when we entered our front yard mother looked at the sagging front steps and said in a matter-of-fact voice, "You and I will have to mend those tomorrow, John." She took off her black coat and hung it in the hall closet and said to Rufus, "You're beginning to look like your father, Rufus." Then she went upstairs to unpack our suitcases, still only three in number because mother had not brought home any Persian rugs or Haviland china or any of the souvenirs that tourists collect; there was only the copper jug which she wrapped and put away in a chest. To the neighbors she said, "We did a little traveling, here and there." And in the spring she went to work in the public library and never, never did she talk to us of That Year so that after a while it seemed to Rufus and me like a dream that we happened to dream at the same time.

After the funeral Rufus and I came back to the empty house and rebuilt the fire on the kitchen hearth and made coffee. When it had been poured we sat quietly for a few minutes, neither of us speaking, and then Rufus got up and went to the chest in the living room and brought back a bulky package of flannel and newspaper. He unwrapped the copper jug.

'A quiet, uneventful life,' I quoted dryly.

Rufus nodded. "She would have agreed with the minister, you know."

"It was insane,- every moment of it," I said. "We were fortunate to escape with our lives."

Rufus smiled. "There is a proverb that says to nearly lose your life is to find it. Of course it was madness, all of it. And yet ——"

"Yes?" I said curiously, for it had been a long time since we had talked of this.

He said softly, "We learned from her how perverse, how unpredictable, how astonishing and how courageous a human being can be."

I lifted my cup. "To our legacy, then," I said, smiling at him. "*Istali mashi*."

"*Kwar mashi*," he replied, and we drank to That Year.

THE END

