

## The Jinn

(From The Jinn of the Prophet and other stories)

Aunt Tahmineh somehow knew that she would remain barren until she had found a name for her future child. So for the first twenty-five years of their marriage, she and her husband fought over what they would call this unconceived offspring. She liked authentic Iranian names, while her husband, a religious man, insisted on a character from the Koran. Finally they came to an agreement. If the child were a girl, they would name her Farangis, an ancient Iranian heroine. If it were a boy, they would name him Esma'il, a Koranic name which also appears in the Bible as Ishmael, the son of Abraham. Esma'il means "God listens." Presumably, "God listens to us and has answered our prayer for a child."

Yet when Esma'il was finally born, it turned out that God hadn't listened very well. The infant came out of the womb so blue and sickly that the family doctor gave him no chance of surviving the night. Aunt Tahmineh had also called a midwife to the birthing, and this midwife had another thought.

"This isn't your child, dear," she told the exhausted Tahmineh. "It belongs to a mother Jinn. The jealous Jinn has swapped your beautiful and healthy baby with her own sickly child. You must return this infant to the Jinn and get your own baby back."

So the midwife wrapped the newborn in warm clothing and took him out to the far side of the property where she placed it on floor of the outhouse and closed the door. This would let the Jinn know that the human mother had not been fooled by the swap.

The old doctor knew that the outcome of this ritual would not be a healthy baby. Infants with this condition lived only minutes. Yet he humored the midwife's idea—and her far-fetched wisdom. The separation would disrupt the parental bonding and perhaps shorten the mother's grief.

Throughout the night everyone stayed awake to keep the vigil. At sunrise the midwife went to fetch the infant, while Tahmineh's sisters consoled her and prepared her for the news. Like petals falling on a garden stone, their words of comfort did nothing to break the impermeable resignation on Aunt Tahmineh's face. Hearing the midwife's returning footsteps, everyone braced for grief and wailing. They were quite unprepared for what they saw. The midwife stopped at the doorjamb, looking as though something had struck her. Her puzzled stare was directed at the doctor. After the moment it took him to overcome his disbelief, he suddenly leapt up, snatched the bundle away from the midwife, and began frantically to unravel it. No one could have known the tenacity with which the infant would cling to life and survive the night in the outhouse at the end of the property.

The parents were assured that the Jinn had swapped the baby back, and that he needed to be nursed back to health after the trauma of the kidnapping. They accepted him, of course, but didn't give him the name Esma'il, "God listens." Instead they named him Nader.

Now Nader is a very nice Arabic name. Things that are *nader* are difficult to find, like diamonds or geniuses. Events that are *nader* are great victories, big inventions, the appearance of a messiah. But there is nothing that says the words "*nader*" and "preciousness" must go together. *Nader* standing by itself just means rare and unusual. Applied to my cousin, it could just as easily mean "oddball." Did his parents really mean to name their child "oddball"? Maybe, but there are other interpretations. For instance, Nader was also the name of a powerful Iranian conqueror who invaded India and looted its treasures. One such treasure was the "Kooch-I-Noor" diamond, the mountain of light. I saw it once in a museum. The diamond reminded me of a precious object, stolen. As in a healthy baby named Ishmael, kidnapped by a Jinn.

A few of the relatives grumbled that it was bad luck to slight the answer to a prayer. They felt Tahmineh and her husband were breaking a covenant with God by not giving the boy the promised name "God listens." God *had* listened. At Tahmineh's age conception was a wonder. Giving birth to a live child, however sickly, was a miracle. What did she expect?

Of course, the relatives were being unfair to Nader's parents. Aunt Tahmineh and her husband tried their best to love the child they had prayed for. But it was as though God was deliberately making it difficult. I remember one day Nader's father was wiping his thick glasses with his handkerchief. Any time he cried, he used to take off his glasses and keep wiping them, as though the tears were coming from his spectacles. He was wiping and wiping because Nader had come down with typhoid fever. The child was so hot you could blister your hands touching him. Aunt Tahmineh's servant woman used to tell stories about how Nader's bed sheets had scorch marks on them the next day, and it wasn't because she had been forgetful while ironing the linen. No human has ever survived such a high temperature. That night Nader's father was standing outside the door, red-eyed, wiping his glasses. He was angrily explaining to my mother, "How many times? How many times must I say goodbye to my son? The first year he can't breathe, the next year it's his heart, then he falls on his head, after that it's the rabies shots, not to mention the blood poisoning. Then it's this illness, then it's that accident. How many times, I ask you? When father Abraham went to sacrifice his son, and God said it was OK, his son didn't have to die, suppose the next day God kicks Abraham awake and says, 'Guess what, I'm God and I've changed my mind. Your son must die.' So father Abraham takes the child to the rock, ties him up again, and is ready to make the sacrifice, when God says 'It's OK, he can live.' And the next day the same, and the next day the same, over and over again. I don't want to say anything blasphemous, but even father Abraham































