

## MASSUD FARZAN



### *The Plane Reservation*

*Born in 1936 in Tabriz, Iran, Massud Farzan was educated at Tabriz University, receiving his undergraduate degree there in 1958. At the University of Michigan he earned his masters in 1961 and his doctorate in 1964. In the United States, Farzan has been on the faculties of English departments at several universities; since 1982, he has been visiting professor of English at Boston University and a teacher of writing at Harvard University. Between 1973 and the beginning of the Iranian revolution in 1980, he also taught English and comparative literature at Pahlavi University (now Shiraz University) in Shiraz, Iran.*

*Farzan has written, edited, and translated a number of books. One of his books, a collection of his poems and poems in translation, published by Pahlavi University Press in 1974 (second edition, 1977), is entitled *Kashan to Kalamazoo*. The title reflects with good humor the two worlds that Farzan has made home, both in his life and his writing.*

*Most of Farzan's work concerns itself with intercultural dilemmas, although not by conscious design. "It was one of those stories that had to be written," Farzan says of "The Plane Reservation," "because in no other way could I bring the ambivalence to resolution. Strangely," he explains further, "the process continued beyond the writing. Soon after the story was published, a number of Iranian journals printed it in Persian translation. One of those versions got into the hands of my father who, much to my surprise, was affected by it in a very positive manner. Whether by coincidence or not, thereafter the relationship between my father and mother improved noticeably."*

**Before you read "A Plane Reservation," write about a time in your life when, upon returning home, you realized that although things were still the**

same there, you were not quite the same. What happened to make you see things differently, and what did you decide to do?

**W**e lived on 23 Sadness Street. But it was a narrow street—cars couldn't enter—so I asked the cabdriver to drop me on the corner of Sadness and Pomegranate Blossoms. I paid the fare we had settled at the airport, plus a generous tip. The driver asked for more, speaking slowly and with funny gestures. I said no, and why do you speak like that, I am not a foreigner; I am just a Persian like yourself. He became embarrassed and I paid him a little more. He then helped me carry the heavy suitcase as far as 23 Sadness Street.

I knocked the horseshoe knocker that dangled in the afternoon breeze. An old woman opened the door a crack, peeped and immediately ran back into the house. "Khanom, my baksheesh! Mr. Morad come!" I recognized the voice of the old laundress and remembered how I used to eavesdrop her conversations with herself. I passed the dark vestibule, knocked my head on the transom overhead and figured out how much taller I must have gotten since I had last passed under it. The little brick-covered yard, surrounded by four big walls, had been watered for coolness. In front of the yard stood the two little flowerbeds with flowers of many colors and with assorted vegetables. In the middle there was the little pond. A goldfish hung from the water surface, eating bubbles.

My mother rushed through the sitting room window to the yard, her prayer chador safety-pinned under her chin. "My son! Thanks Allah!" She opened her arms. My head down, I saw her shoulders shake. I stood wordless, without tears of happiness. I did not feel happy.

"Have you lost some weight, Morad? You look so different. Come through the window. That's all right, you needn't take off your shoes."

The living room was covered with thick native rugs, from wall to wall. There was no furniture except for a chair in a corner. Against the wall facing the yard and the flowerbeds there were two cushions. In the middle of the room my mother's prayer-spread lay open on the floor.

"You aren't through with your prayer, Mom. Go ahead and finish it first."

"I am going to. But first let me fix you a glass of quince sharbat, it is good for the heart. Why did you sit on the floor? We have put the chair for you."

"I don't need to sit on the chair, Mom. It feels so good to spread my legs on these thick rugs."

"Drink your sharbat, it is good for the heart."

"All right. You go ahead and finish your prayer now."

She stood before her prayer-spread, facing Mecca, and began to move her lips. I noticed that she was saying her prayer slowly and deliberately and that her chador reached the floor, covering her entire feet. I remembered that she didn't used to wear her chador so long. Nor was her rosary so big. Mother must be getting old.

Outside, a man was selling ice. And in a distance a voice called out: THIS EVENING! IT WILL HAPPEN THIS EVENING AT EIGHT!

I sipped the quince sharbat and watched the yard. The flowerbeds were certainly my father's work; carefully cultivated and yet going wild and wayward. So many things in that ten by fifteen feet. Vivid green spotted with flowers red and yellow, pink and blue. Red roses surrounded by lettuce. Little violets at the foot of delpheniums. Petunias everywhere.

Four walls, thick and tall, surrounded the yard, keeping out whatever rays there were left of the setting sun.

A little clay-roofed closet huddled back in the corner, on the other side of the flowerbeds. It was the toilet. It had no stool, no toilet seat. You merely squatted over a funnel-shaped pit, dark and deep. You could keep the door open, if you wished, watching the flowers, the rooftops, and the sky. Nobody to see you except maybe a couple of sparrows or a lone pigeon. I remembered how my father used to sit there, sometimes for half an hour or more. My mother would then go to wash her hands in the pond and call out, "Aren't you going to come out of that toilet?" Or, "Do you know you have been sitting in there for forty minutes?" My father wouldn't say anything. I knew that he didn't want to come out. He liked very much to think or meditate without being disturbed. My mother would make snide remarks whenever she caught him in deep reflection. "Inventing again, eh?" she would say and disturb his thoughts.

My father was an inventor. He had invented many things, although none of them had worked out. With each invention, he thought that he would make lots of money. He never told anybody what he would do once he got rich. But I knew what he would do. He would buy a house with a bigger yard, perhaps a garden, with a big pond; have a lot of goldfish; cultivate a great variety of flowers and vegetables. He would go on pilgrimage to Mecca and give to the poor. He would elicit respect from those he didn't like. He would cease to worry about his future in this world and beyond. But with each invention something would go wrong at the last moment, and he would abandon it only to start inventing something else. That would make my mother bolder and wavier. She thought that whenever my father was silent and staring into the blank, he was conceiving a new invention. So she was always on the watch for those moments.

One day my father had come home with a big box under his arms. He had bought a radio. We all rejoiced. Every evening we sat on the rugs and listened. My father seemed to listen more attentively than everyone else. But it did not take long before my mother discovered what he was really doing. I think what gave him away was the faraway look in his eyes and the faint motionless smile on his face. My mother called him a sneak, a hopeless dreamer and other names. My father looked quite embarrassed. From then on he used to spend more time in the toilet at the corner of the yard.

That was many years ago. My mother was getting old; my father must be getting older. Maybe now they understood their common lot and forgave each other's foibles.

Once again the voice outside called out: IT WILL HAPPEN THIS EVENING AT EIGHT!

My mother finished her prayer. She carefully folded the prayer-spread and put it away on the shelf by the radio. "Tell me what you'd like to eat and I'll cook it for you. You really look so dark and thin."

I didn't know what to answer. "Am I? Maybe that's because I am now taller than I was when I left."

"As a boy you were so good looking," she went on. "We were all thinking you would come back from America fat and white."

Suddenly it occurred to me that she was blaming me.

"Look at that picture of your brother over your head. See the belly, *mashallah*? Isn't that something? He's married, that's right. Maybe that is the reason. Which reminds me, you haven't gotten married, have you?"

"No, Mom, not yet. As a matter of fact, I may get married here."

"Good, I tell everybody that you are my wisest son. Is that why you came back?"

"Well, not really. To be frank, Mom, I came back in order to see what I can do for, I mean to have a close look at you and Pop and make sure that you are happy together. Now tell me, how are you getting along? How is Pop?"

"Don't worry about him. The bad vessel is seldom broken, as the saying goes."

THIS EVENING. . . .

My mother turned to the door. "He's not inventing anymore, if that's what you mean, but he's taken something else."

I listened.

"He's now buying lottery tickets *every* week. He also writes poetry. He thinks that—"

Just then the door opened and my father came in, holding a full grocery bag under his chin and a melon in the curve of his arm. The melon rolled on the floor; we salaamed and embraced.

"You've kept yourself pretty well," I lied. "You look good, Pop."

"Do I really?" He smiled diffidently and watched my mother from the corner of his eye. "How do you find our little house? I mean next to American houses. Modest, eh?"

"I never saw flowerbeds like this anywhere," I said. My father smiled with mild contentment. "You should've seen it last month, Morad, we had roses as big as sunflowers." He walked to the window and gently threw the melon into the pond to get cool there.

THIS EVENING AT EIGHT! The voice was now very close, loud and clear.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

My father's face lit up. My mother looked at him reproachfully. "He's selling lottery tickets," he finally said. "The draw is this evening at eight." He stole a look at the clock on the radio.

My mother went out to the kitchen. I thought it was time to ask him if he

was happy in his job and at home, whether he got along well with Mom. But just then he took his ashtray and cushion and sat beside me. "There is something I wanted to tell you," he began in a low, confidential tone, "I hope you won't mind it. What I wanted to say, Morad, you see, maybe you've forgotten all this time you were abroad, but in this country people look at your appearance and judge you accordingly; as the poet said: Feel the skin of a melon/Before thou purchaseth one. You see, if you were fat and white, if you had a nice double chin and a potbelly, then there wouldn't be any problem and I wouldn't take up your time telling you all this. I mean people would then think that you're rich; you would be respected wherever you went in the country. But unfortunately you and I are the wiry type and rather dark. It would be a blasphemy to complain about it. Allah must have wanted it to be that way and we just can't do anything about it. But there is something we *can* do."

He leaned over and whispered, "Buy yourself a nice new suit and change your necktie. What is that you're wearing? As the poet said: What is in my weary heart/That while I'm quiet, it's in turmoil? Maybe that is not the appropriate poem; there is a better one in Sa'di's *Rose Garden*. I can't remember it now, but it doesn't matter. What I am trying to tell you, Morad, I'm really ashamed to mention it, but the barber on the corner of Pomegranate Street wears a better tie than yours. I always watch him closely when he cuts my hair, he wears genuine Silka tie, I am not lying to you. And his shoes are always polished. I myself can't afford to be very well dressed, but at least I can have a crease in my trousers. I can afford to have a shoeshine once in a while. I'll be darned if I can tell when it was last you got a shoeshine."

His face was quite somber. Apparently he wasn't any more pleased with his returning son than my mother was. Why did they keep asking me to go back? What made them believe that I would return someone other than I was, fatter and whiter than I was, as young as I was ten years ago? One thing was clear—they were disillusioned at the one who had returned. But I didn't resent that at all. If only I could make sure that they got along together, that they were a bit happier than I remembered them to be.

My father put half a cigarette in a cigarette holder. "That's all I wanted to say, Morad. But I am not a narrow-minded old man; you'll of course do whatever you choose. As the poet has said: I advise whatever methinks fit/You either profit by it or resent it."

Just then my mother came, hugging the big copper tray of supper. "What were you whispering to each other?" she asked.

"I was just telling Morad how he would look like a real gentleman if he had his shoes shined."

She said she agreed with him on that. I fetched the melon from the pond. After supper my mother went to the kitchen to do the dishes. My father took a pencil and a piece of paper. He then turned on the radio. "I have a little lottery ticket. Who knows, Morad, maybe you've brought good luck to our house tonight."

At eight o'clock the radio chimed eight times, followed by a minute of silence. Then the announcer said that the draw procedures were being broadcast live from the Horizon Hall. My father took out his ticket and put it upside down on the floor beside his cigarette case and abacus. He then began to jot down the winning numbers on the sheet of paper.

My mother finished the dishes while the draw was still going on. She came in with a small tray of green beans and sat down to string them. I noticed that she was watching my father from the corner of her eye.

Having written all the winning numbers, my father turned over the ticket and began to check its number against the winning numbers. He started with the top prize and went down. His hand hovered over each number for a second before going to the next. The pencil trembled a little. My mother held a bean and forgot to string it. My eyes raced from him to her and back to him.

Suddenly my father threw the pencil up in the air. "Ten tumans! won ten tumans!" Immediately I made a mental calculation: one dollar and twenty-five cents. My mother was now bending over the tray, stringing rapidly; she didn't want father to see the broad smile that had spread all over her face.

I found myself outside in the yard. The night had fallen. I had to think. I sat over the deep pit. I left the door open. There was a full moon and the crickets sang. I sat there for several minutes, my chin propped in my hand. I wanted to sit more, but I thought that they might wonder where I was and get worried. I went back to the living room. My father was now sitting beside my mother, helping her string the beans; I dropped a bulb into my Agfa and snapped a picture. They smiled. I hurried back to the yard. The goldfish was motionless at the bottom of the pond. The night smelled of petunias. I sat over the pit again. I thought, what a marvelous picture that will be. Stringing beans together in peace and harmony!

In the morning I would get my shoes shined. I would also buy a few fish for the pond and make a plane reservation.

### *Questions for Discussion and Writing*

1. What are the conflicts of this story? In what ways are they generational—the inevitable differences between the lives of parents and their children? In what ways are they cultural—the result of the son living in another country for a long time?
2. Why does the son return to Iran? Why does he leave so soon?
3. What symbols does Farzan use to create the feelings and moods of the son's return, the setting, and the family relationships? How do these symbols create meaning in the story?