tant event. She tried to find out from various people if they could help locate Peche but was told that there was not a single Muslim officer in the capital’s police force at the moment. She suddenly remembered that she could find out about him in the Control Room. She looked at her watch. The city had been under curfew for many days. She felt for her curfew pass in her handbag and borrowed a fellow-worker’s car without bothering to inform him. Then she drove at a furious speed towards the Clock Tower. She speeded up as usual, pressing on the accelerator and tearing along deserted roads, till she stopped in front of Municipal Hall.

“Halt! who goes there?” the sentry called out mechanically.

“Friend”, she replied breathlessly.

He let her enter the gate. The headlights of the car lit up the entrance of the guard-house. She alighted from the car and entered the tent. The officer on duty rose from the chair and smiled politely.

This smile—in the night of terror—something unbelievable, to her a memory to be treasured in the years to come. She returned to the car after speaking with the officer, but was confronted by another man in uniform.

“Stop!” he cried authoritatively.

In the full light of the headlights on his face, she saw that it was the long-forgotten Khurshid.

“Khurshid …” she gasped.

He stood there very tense for a moment, then relaxed a little and began lighting his cigarette nonchalantly. “Khurshid,” she cried again in utter bewilderment, “What on earth are you doing here … and that too, in uniform.” It suddenly occurred to her that for the last two weeks she had been working with Party members in the workers’ camp and here was Khurshid facing her, in army uniform … But so many terrible things had happened recently that the situation didn’t seem funny at all.

“Don’t worry about me, but what, may I ask, are you doing here? No, they’re frightfully busy in the Control Room … Whom do you want to see anyway?” He came up to the car window. For the first time in her life, she saw him looking well-fed and well-dressed, quite smart in his uniform. The tiny letters on his shoulder epaulette spelt ‘Pakistan’ …

“Khurshid, how did you end up here?” she gasped.

“Ah … no time to pour the story of my life into your eager ears, Rakshanda Begum. Though I’m sure, being the romantic old soul that you are, you’d find it absolutely thrilling. You see, Rakshanda Begum,” he whispered leaning on the window, “one fine morning I made a tremendous discovery. I found that the good things of life were not reserved for the owners of Karwaha Raj. Anybody who was prepared to give up the habit of thinking could enjoy and partake of the good things of life. See what I mean? Therefore I gave up the habit of thinking. I am leaving for Rawalpindi tomorrow and have been attached to the Supreme Defence Council for the last few weeks. Why are you looking so pale, Roshi? Have you also become a thought-addict? That would be most unfortunate,” he said with mock-seriousness. “Anyway,” he added, lighting another cigarette, “what brings you here, dear cousin? Honestly, you are the limit. It’s ten o’clock at night, there is rioting in the city and here you are gallivanting about in the car all alone, as if it were the Mall in Lucknow …”

At that moment a despatch-rider entered the gate and saluted him. The officer on duty came out of the tent. The despatch rider went into the tent with him and was followed by Khurshid. She saw the officer bending over the telephone and saying something into the mouthpiece. Rakshanda kept sitting in the car, waiting. Nobody seemed to be bothered about her. Some more jeeps arrived and other officers went into the building. Half an hour passed. At last she got out of the car and went into the tent. The duty officer was sitting still.

“Hello,” he smiled again. “What can I do for you, ma’am?” Khurshid had disappeared in the meantime.

“Look,” she said, “I’ve been here for the last one hour waiting to go in …”
“I’m sorry, Ma’am, I thought Capt. Khurshid had taken you inside to see the officer concerned . . .”

“I merely wanted to know if my brother was somewhere around . . .”

“What is his name? Is he . . .?” He dialled a number. “Col. Chopra,” he said, “a lady wants to see you, Sir. She is a worker from the Red Fort . . . Yes, Sir . . .”
She met Col. Chopra in the verandah of the building and they went into his room.
“I wanted to find out about my brother. He is a police officer . . .”

“Your brother . . .” the Colonel hesitated, “Is his name . . .”
He tried to read the name on a message which lay on the table in front of him.
“Yes that’s him, that’s him” she cried. “Where is he, Colonel Sahib?”

“Would you like to have some tea, Miss Ali . . .”

“No, thanks . . . but look, Colonel, . . .”

“Do you smoke?” the Colonel nervously offered her a cigarette.
Then the bombshell fell.
Another officer entered the room and addressed the Colonel briefly. “Sir, we have received this message from Shahdara . . .”

“Yes . . . yes . . . I know.”

“The commanding officer at Shahdara was killed on duty this evening at 1800 hours.”

“Yes, yes . . .”

“I have to report to you, Sir, that Mr. Prithvipal Singh of I.P. has been sent there immediately as replacement . . .” The Colonel returned to her after the officer had left.

“Miss Irfan Ali,” he cleared his throat, “I’m afraid you’ll have to be very brave about this . . . your brother is dead. He died this evening at 1800 hours. He was killed by a mob . . .”

Peechu was dead. Peechu was DEAD . . . Death. Absolute, final extinction. No, dying is not easy, it is not a joke. It’s not as easy as when you read about it in books or hear about it in songs or think about it. It can’t be easy to die for the country or for the cause of humanity or for the sake of what have you. It’s no joke dying for anything, for that matter . . . you can’t just get up and feel heroic and noble and brave and valiant and go and get yourself murdered. And don’t you believe a word of what these writers and poets say about it, it’s sheer baloney. Peechu died when he was young. His world was young and flowers bloomed on the river-bank and rain fell on the mango groves. He quietly fell off this cycle of existence, if you prefer to call it that, and closed his eyes . . .

Peechu was in Shillong when the circular reached his office. It had been sent out by Sardar Patel to all officials of the Government of India, inquiring about their choice of country. They could continue to serve in India or they could go to the new dominion. Peechu, being a nationalist, opted for India. A few days later he was transferred to Delhi. This was when the riots were at their height in the still undivided Punjab, and the Partition Plan had been announced.

He was staying at the Maidens’ Hotel and spent most of his time in the office. He hardly ever thought of home. He had no time to brood over personal griefs—the country was in the grip of a civil war which raged in the Punjab and in the states around Delhi and in the North-West. One day he was scanning Lucknow’s National Times in which the byline of a dear, familiar name caught his eye. He began reading impatiently, by K.B. Katju, our special correspondent in New Delhi.

... I’m writing this from the lounge of the Imperial Hotel. The Plan has just been announced. Only a few hours before the Congress and Muslim League agreed to accept this Plan, the Maulana rushed to the League Secretary’s residence. It is reported that he requested him not to accept it as he thought it would set both new nations at each other’s throats ever afterwards. He is also reported to have requested the League Secretary to somehow stop the Muslims from opting, en masse,
for the new dominion. He said that the Cabinet Mission proposals could still be accepted. But, the Plan was announced. Two separate countries have come into existence. The Boundary Commission has been set up and the Boundary Force has come into being and god’s people have been divided into two enemy camps. A vast yawning gulf of hatred and mutual suspicion has separated them from each other and they will never be one again ... Blessed are those who presented and accepted and implemented this plan ... and ...

Good old Kiran shedding buckets of tears again, thought Peechu. Kiran has still not become a hard-boiled cynical journalist. He’s still a poet and a visionary. After reading this, Peechu suddenly realized that he too had to face a new reality. He was sitting in an office in Delhi, a member of the minority community that had remained in India, while most of his co-religionist colleagues had left for Pakistan. He tried to think. If the Two-Nation theory is carried to its logical conclusion then I am a Pakistani while all the Hindus living in East Pakistan should be Indians. But he was Indian and East Bengali Hindus were Pakistanis.

His head reeled as he tried to forget all this and concentrate on his gruesome job which was a constant reminder of what was happening around him. Now he couldn’t escape. Here he was, face to face with life ...

The 1600 Muslim constables of Delhi police had been turned out by the new regime ... He was one of the few senior Muslim officers attached to the Supreme Defence Council as he was one of the most popular officers in his service. He was put in charge of Pakistan-bound trains and convoys and now spent all his time touring the city in his jeep while battles raged in the streets all round him. From the newspaper he learnt that Kiran was in Delhi. He had also come to know that his father had died and that Rakshanda had gone to Bombay to see Christabel off. Also, that Ginnie was about to get married and that Diamond had left for Pakistan, that Salim was in Allahabad with his wife and was about to go abroad. One day he telephoned the Press Club to get in touch with Kiran and was informed that Mr. Katju had just left for Bombay, so he returned to his tent and continued observing the caravans of shattered humanity that poured in from West Pakistan, and other caravans of shattered humanity that were crossing the border into West Pakistan. Thousands, millions of men and women and children on foot, and in bullock-carts and on trucks and blood-soaked trains ... Thousands of women from both sides were being kidnapped, their children torn to pieces in front of their eyes, and young girls were stripped and raped on the streets in front of their fathers. Men were being cut into pieces and burnt alive. Cameras clicked ceaselessly as correspondents of glossy western magazines filmed the carnage and Louis McNiece wrote sensitive poems sitting in riot-torn Delhi. Photographs were published in Life and Post with sensational captions like “India’s Religious War”. While high officials and their wives danced in the Imperial Gymkhana, tears glittered in Pandit Nehru’s eyes for he was also a poet and a visionary living in a world which was suddenly filled with beasts. Lady Pamela Mountbatten went into refugee camps and talked to terror-stricken women from West Pakistan, and shook hands with them.

He watched all this with his hand on his pistol. He saw people going mad when they saw their daughters being raped, and he heard old men crying in the camps when they were reunited with their young womenfolk who had been abducted during the holocaust and were recovered from across the border. “Think of what has happened, for God’s sake,” they tore their hair and cried frantically, “our wives and sisters and daughters were raped and have come to us carrying the children of those accursed dogs in their wombs ... How are we going to take them back? What is going to happen to them? But Mridula Sarabhai says to us that we must accept them and try to forget what happened to them, and accept the children that are going to be born ... Has the world witnessed greater insanity than this?”
No, the world hadn't witnessed greater insanity than this. Thousands of Punjabi, Hindu and Sikh women had been carried away forcibly to Muslim homes on the other side of the border. Thousands of Muslim women had been abducted and forcibly carried away to Hindu and Sikh homes in East Punjab. Inquiries poured in every minute at police headquarters about lost families and murdered husbands and mutilated children. The mind refused to work any more. God the Merciful, the Beneficient, had either gone off to sleep or, being Muslim, had Himself been killed in the riots. Surely all this couldn't happen in a world which was supposed to be ruled by the Almighty God of the Holy Quran.

Peechu sat in his office and heard the doleful conversation of his colleagues. Lahore is safe for you, you know. I personally think you should finally opt for Pakistan. Delhi is safe for us, we are Indian and you are Pakiastani. Our national language is Hindi, yours is Urdu. We wear a top-knot on our heads, you are beef-eaters. We are two separate nations, divided by beef and top-knots. You have handed over your country to us and turned us out of our home provinces. We're going to drive you out of your home provinces.

It went on and on for several dreadful weeks, the firings and blood baths and death-trains. And Peechu went through it all with his mind on his duty, his duty to protect other lives.

Tonight he was killed. His death, the end of a beautiful life created by the god of beautiful creations, had not made much difference to anything in the world. The cemetery in Shahdara remained shrouded in its usual silence. The addition of another grave (another mound of dug-up earth) didn't even increase its ghoulishness. Death, like life, was so ineffectual. Work continued in the Control Room in the centre of the city. The Imperial Gymkhana glimmered with lights. Tears still glittered in Pandit Nehru's eyes. The trains still pulled out of Shahdara station as they had done at six o'clock this evening when all the Pakistan-bound passengers were ordered to step down on the platform and made to stand in a row and then shot down by the attackers.

The trigger-happy Dogra and Baluch armed guards of the train had wiped each other out instantly. And during this pitched battle on the platform a young officer of the Indian Police had been shot down, too, while he was trying, single-handedly, to defend a compartment full of women and children. Another death-train had steamed out of the station and after that the platform had plunged into total silence, the silence which falls over platforms the world over when a train leaves. According to the report in the next morning's newspapers, this was a minor and stray incident in the suburbs which had been controlled effectively by the police soon after (the report wasn't complete, as the reporter in his hurry hadn't been able to get the full name of the murdered police officer. And besides, there had been such a spate of deaths recently that one more didn't really matter. After filing the story, the reporter had gone to the Press Club to have a drink, and the next day the reporter, too, was killed).

But you see, all this happens in abnormal circumstances. Revolutions and wars and civil strife ... Look at what happened in Europe just two years earlier. What is human life, after all, and human happiness and the yearning for peace and sanity, when such great issues as the birth of new nations and the readjustment of political frontiers are at stake? Out of this bloodbath has emerged a new India and the fifth largest Muslim state in the world.

And these four little cold lines in 12-point type on the back page of national dailies merely communicated the fact that one more young man, twenty-eight years old, with his share of dreams—about the world and about his personal happiness, an attractive and vivacious youth, had been pierced by bullets and had died.

Peechu, who was a great nationalist and had written fiery articles during his student days, who was a loyal and devoted servant of the Indian Union and who had been spending sleepless nights guarding the lives of refugees from Pakistan, had been mowed down by a shower of bullets and had crossed the valley.
of darkness and gone beyond. He had a golden brown complexion and beautifully carved lips and big childlike eyes, and his hair glimmered like the blue-black waves of a benighted sea. As a child, he used to look like a Christmas card angel and when he grew up, he looked like a grown-up Christmas card angel, but anyway, he was no more and his golden brown complexion had turned ashen. A whole lot of blood had caked around his carved lips and the blue-black waves of his hair were covered with dust and the purity of youth and of life had finally mingled with muddy blood and rain-soaked earth.

He lay there on the cold hard platform in a pool of his own warm bright red blood. He had so easily flashed across the valley of darkness that he couldn’t have felt the agony of death. The first bullet penetrated his skull and then a barrage of bullets made a big sieve of his body, but by this time he had died. Still the rioters were not satisfied. They cut off his arms. Then they severed his feet. After that nothing much could be done to him so they left him there and turned upon other victims.

The train had left and the attackers had disappeared. Night fell and his colleagues arrived from headquarters and carried him on their shoulders to bury him somewhere. Storm clouds had descended very low, it was pitch dark and winds whistled sharply in the cemetery at Shahdara. They posted an armed guard around the cemetery as Jats and Sikhs were still loitering about in the vicinity. His colleagues who had carried him for burial were all Hindus and there was no Muslim in the battalion either, so they went out in search of a Muslim to perform the last rites. They managed to get hold of one with great difficulty in the neighbourhood. They held out their torch-lights under which the villager read the last prayer, consulting a tattered book of funeral rites which they had borrowed from the sexton who, frightened at seeing so many policemen, had run away without digging the grave. The words of the Last Prayer wavered and undulated in the light of the torches as the villager struggled with them. “O God ...,” he read out in Arabic, “He is going ahead of us ... make him for us the head of the Caravan ... make him for us the

head of the Caravan ...” Then Peechu’s Hindu colleagues wept bitterly, dug the grave and lowered him in his uniform into the dark pit.

He hadn’t been safe from fellow humans above the earth, but now within this pit, his body would be safe, at least for a few days till the worms set to work ...

The officers returned to the city and the storm broke. With the downpour of rain the newly-made grave was filled with water, and was washed away.

“Give my love to Peechu if he has returned to Lucknow by this time, Roshi darling, I haven’t a clue about where you all are at the moment. Anyway, I’m sending this letter on the Ghufran Manzil address ...,” wrote Diamond, sitting in her streamlined bedroom in Lahore, nibbling a chocolate,

“Darling, we’ve occupied a huge and very beautiful, lavishly furnished house in Model Town. There are thirty-five exquisite Persian carpets in the rooms. Just think ... not one or two, a full thirty-five Persian carpets, in all the corridors and verandahs and everywhere. There is a grand piano in the drawing-room, a guest house and a tennis court and a summer house and a swimming pool down in the garden. This must have been the house of a multi-millionaire. I wonder where that poor fellow is today, and living under what circumstances. When we moved in, we found the tea-things still lying on the dining-table and the radio was on and all the lights were burning. It looked as if the occupants had just gone out for a walk, maybe. Most of its expensive bric-a-brac and the furniture was looted, but the goondas probably couldn’t carry away the carpets because of the weight ... I found one of the dressing rooms full of lovely saris and the dressing-table littered with bangles and other trinkets.

“Lahore is a lovely city, Roshi darling. This is the city, my dear, where expensive teak and mahogany furniture was burnt in bonfires on roadsides, and countless expensive radiograms
and jewellery and other stuff was recovered from the houses of respectable women-leaders. In this booty one could see young brides’ trousseaus and peoples’ life-time savings, and books, yes books … Tagore and Iqbal and Premchand … One could find millions and millions of books lying around everywhere, they were of no use to the vandals. Many well-known local intellectuals merrily carried these books home and set up priceless libraries of their own.

“One could see from this booty of books that the Punjabi Hindus and Sikhs were people of good taste and liked to read good books. They were apparently very fond of Urdu, too, because most of these private collections, lying on the roadside, consist mainly of Urdu literature. Nearly all the houses which are deserted, or occupied by refugees or enterprising local people, are full of these books. Their owners were either killed or if they fled to India, they couldn’t possibly carry Gitanjali and Bana-i-Dara with them, could they now? In this Mansion of ours too, our servants used books as fuel in the kitchen till I took control of the situation …

“As I told you, Lahore is a beautiful city, but frightfully dirty. Although it is said that it was a very gay place till a few months ago and was called the Paris of India, what with those smart college girls and well-dressed young men. The Punjabis were fun-loving people, I’m told. But anyhow, today it looks like a ghost town with thousands of refugees shivering in rags on footpaths, and dying of hunger and cold and disease. And besides, they are going to pass the Shariat Bill one of these days and the country will become an Islamic state and be strictly virtuous and puritanical … you know what I mean. Still, there are a few nice clubs and restaurants and the coffee house reminds me of our Lucknow coffee house, it’s a branch of the same chain of India Coffee House, but they are going to call it by a different name. It can’t be called India Coffee House any longer, can it? Let’s accept the fact that this is another country, and an independent country, and what’s more, it’s here to stay. It has given me protection so it would be a great folly to continue harping on the past and about what has happened. This is my country now, right or wrong. Darling, the only snag about Lahore is that it is full of Punjabis … but then I think I shouldn’t be a provincialist and shouldn’t pooh-pooh them and go about parading my cultural superiority … If I were so keen on preserving my cultural integrity, I shouldn’t have fled from India, should have stayed back in good old UP … ahem, Uttar Pradesh to you now!

“It’s such a bother that war has broken out in Kashmir, horrid isn’t it? I consoled myself with the idea, while migrating, that if we were giving up Mussoorie, Nainital and Darjeeling and all the lovely hill-stations in the South, at least our loss would be compensated by Kashmir. Why, Dad was even thinking of buying a villa in Srinagar. But now the war has broken out there, too … Not just riots, a full-scale war. Golly. I hope everything gets all right by next summer so that we can go there. You, too, must come and meet us in Srinagar—it would be such fun!

“But this Kashmir business is very exciting all the same … more work parties, Red Cross relief work and all that.

“As I told you Roshi, the wardrobes in our house were full of the most expensive saris and things, and yesterday that inspector came who checks everything in evacuee houses and transferred it to the Baitual Mal (though, between you and me, all this booty is again divided among more people), but Mummy said why should we hand it over to the government? After all, our own property worth many lakhs was also looted in Mussoorie before we came here. But Dad said his conscience wouldn’t allow it …

“Where could G.B. be at the moment? Have you any idea? And all the other folk … the entire gang, Kiran and everybody …? Ah Lucknow … Lucknow …”

It was quite late in the evening and she was feeling very sleepy, so she postponed finishing the letter till the morning, switched off the lamp and went to sleep on the huge rosewood bed. Out-
side, the twilight was turning into darkness and wild geese were flying towards the north, crying incessantly, fluttering their wings in the blank expanse of a winter sky ...

Twilight had given way to night. Snow-covered mountains and frosty valleys and rows of eucalyptus and pines were covered by misty darkness. The wild geese were flying on ... laughing their raucous laugh ... Death ... Death ... Death, my dear sir, is a terrifying business and no nonsense about it ... Wish I had died during the '42 Rebellion ... Wish I had been killed in Indonesia, fighting by the side of a flat-nosed gentle-faced partisan ... Wish I had died a martyr's death killing a Tommy during the Battle of Balia. This is not martyrdom that I am facing now, it is merely death, a state of cold lifelessness in this frozen valley. Now, when I do meet my end through the bullet of an invading Pathan tribesman, how will I prove to myself that I died a very glorious death at the end of my very glorious life?

The cold biting wind danced around him coming from distant glaciers. The wild geese, journeying north from their southern abodes, laughed hideously again and flew past. Full and glorious, what rot you're talking, you blithering idiot. Full and glorious, my foot (as the girls said). Humanity ... justice ... democracy ... United India. The vision of the Discovery of India, the great and glorious Indian Nation. Hindus and Muslims are brothers ... Fiddlesticks. The wind was intensely cold and sent a shiver down every limb of his body. Spring was far away, the spring of Kashmir, of Gulmarg ... Hello, Kiran Katju, nice to meet you ... Oh, wasn't he Kiran Bahadur Katju, Public Relations Officer of the Indian Army? Wasn't he sitting in the tent near the little kangri, intending to write a long letter to Roshi (his dear Roshi Bibi whom he loved like his own sister)? He would write to Roshi, to Vimal and to Pechu ... and then he would finish his article about the Kashmir War and send it to Roshi for The New Era ... She would be so happy to read it. Pechu too. He was longing to see Pechu and discuss the latest military strategy with him, essentially, man-to-man talk between a war correspondent and a police officer ... Yes, that's what they were, in spite of all their belief in pacifism and non-violence. Such a pity he didn't have time to meet Pechu in Delhi. Someone did tell me at the Press Club that Pechu was probably there, the silly old goat.

He picked up the fountain pen, the tent curtains flapped in the strong gale. It had started to snow. Warm and soft snow fell softly like flakes of cotton-wool. In the other corner of the tent, Brig. Shamsher Singh and Col. Chadha reclined on their camp-cots, sipping green tea. They were silent. The whole world was soundless, but from time to time, the wind brought with it the resounding fire of machine-guns. Once in a while, a bomber roared overhead. He picked up his fountain pen and unconsciously jotted 'Om' on top of the note-paper. (When, as a little boy, he used to go around scribbling on stray sheets and announce that he was going to be a great writer, his mother told him he should always begin writing with the sacred syllables of 'Om'. His mother was pious and deeply religious, as all mothers are, and he was a good Brahmin too, so he went on writing 'Om' in his school books. But then he grew up and became an agnostic, and for a full three years was a believing communist too. Yet somehow, the childhood habit persisted.) He was very grown-up today and had seen a lot of life and a lot of death and as always, wrote the sacred syllables, then as usual cut them out. Then he tried to begin his letter.

He was about to start when he heard a sound. Was anyone there? He turned. What was it? He looked out—what was it? Flames leapt in his eyes and a tremendous vibration cut through his body and his limbs and his heart and his brain like a flash of lightning, and all the storms of the cosmos thundered with their gathered might in his ears, and he tried very hard to open his eyes in the crimson darkness and look around. Then he fell down, he fell somewhere deep down ...

(If the son-of-a-pig dead ...? one of the Pathan attackers who had wiped out this outpost of the Indian army asked his comrade in the dark. They went out, jumping over the corpses of Brig. Singh and Col. Chadha, and disappeared in the snow-
storm.) He went on falling, he didn’t quite know where he was but he was slowly and steadily descending deeper … deeper … deeper. The music rose steadily. He tried desperately to hear it, tried to find the source from where it was rising. What is all this? He made another effort to figure it out. What’s happening to me? Who am I? Yes … who on earth am I? Well, I am Kiran Bahadur Katju of Allahabad and Lucknow (the tiny red and black specks in time and space. Red specks … red … specks). Had a brilliant academic career, became a famous journalist, covered important assignments, Jakarta, Peking, New Delhi, loved Ginnie Kaul. That’s correct. Loved Ginnie Kaul. This is a very cold January night. Bitterly cold, pitch black, shot with streaks of fiery red … like a canvas by Oshir Lahiri … ha … ha … ha … below freezing point. At the end of this night, day will break. At dawn tomorrow, they will celebrate the ritual of Pushpa Puja and long gold ear-ornaments will adorn her pink-and-white ears. And flowers will rain on her and on the man sitting opposite her under the canopy of a red shawl and girls will sing dawn-hymns at the time of Ginnie Kaul’s Pushpa Puja. All this will happen. All this is going to take place tomorrow morning at 5 a.m., Indian Standard Time, a few hours from now. And you, Kiran Bahadur Katju, you will die in this wilderness of dimension-less snow. You are about to breathe your last. You are already dead. Dead … he went on falling deeper and deeper … The red darkness became redder and darker … Pitch Black Night With Red Dancing Spots Dimension-less …

So he was dying. He opened his death-heavy eyelids with great difficulty and tried hard to recognize the Dark. So this was certain, that he was dying. He had very nearly kicked the bucket. He opened his eyes suddenly and with a great clarity of vision, looked around. Lightning flashed all over and a piercing shaft lit up a lot of blood. He stretched his legs and arms and observed his wounds from which fresh warm red blood flowed out. The grass is green the rose is red remember me till I am dead dead dead … The red roses of spring the red wounds of Kiran Bahadur Katju … The wind brought a shower of soft and warm and cool and rest-giving flakes of snow like flakes of Lux Toilet Soap. The gale was icy and sent an acute chill through his dying body, doubling his death-agony. The current of wind in the northern Himalayas at this time of the year … the altitude and latitude and the economic situation of the Indian state of Kashmir … Life, the current of, Gulf Steam … Life is great, holy and pure, human life, sanctity of, he went on typing busily in his mind, his brain had started functioning furiously. He had to finish so many newsletters, heaps of lead articles. He must finish this story first. He closed his eyes and clenched his teeth. The pain became more intense and his entire body was covered with blood which was now turning cold and very uncomfortable. He continued typing his lead article … Yes, dear readers, as we often say about life that it … Wake up, Nasim, brace up your girdles, roll up your bedding for the Night is short and the Day is about to dawn—he remembered the voice of Roshi Bibi who often quoted this Urdu couplet when she arrived with the Gang early in the morning to wake him up and take him hunting or fishing. The music resounded again as if it were a deep well. The music was imprisoned in it, he could only hear snatches. Yes, we were writing about life. Life which is beautiful and holy and … my left toe, Kiran Bhai, it ain’t bootiful or hooly. You are right, Roshi Bibi, mind your grammer, Roshi Bibi … Yes, my dear, all this is baloney, all this mumbo-jumbo about life’s greatness. The actuality is nauseating. The body is wounded and the soul is wounded and you can’t find Mukti anywhere. All sublime thoughts, glorious hopes and rosy ideals, all lovely stories, poems, beautiful scenes that the eyes saw, pleasant thoughts that the mind thought, restful moments that you spent with your friends, all this comes to an end. Only the clots of red-black blood and the heat of the fever and red gaping wounds remain, and perhaps if you hadn’t been left to die on your own in the wilderness, then the smell of disinfectants and the furlongs of black tar-painted walls and red blankets … red-blankets … And the body is snuffed out. The body is s-n-u-f-e-d out. Atma, poor little thing, is badly mutilated. All my gods will die with
the death of my body. My body will come to an end forever ...

Is the son-of-a-pig dead? Someone called out from behind a
wall of ice. No, he's still breathing, he'll die in a couple of min-
utes, leave him there. Pick up their guns and come here quickly—
we must wipe out the other post of these curs before daybreak ...
The voices and the thunder of machine-guns receded in the
muffled stillness, and vanished. But he must see what lies be-
yond this darkness. He will ... oh ... my god ... what is all this ...
Sat, Chit ... and Anand ... where are you, dear brothers ...
Sat, Chit and Anand ... The gale fluttered the canvas curtains of
the tent.

All of a sudden the gale rose and developed into a trema-
dous cyclone. The snow-storm thundered with utmost ferocity.
The music came very, very close. He had gone beyond the dark.
The spirit of life traversed the deserts of time. The spirit of life
which roams twilight lands and dark primeval forests.

The storm continued lashing its wrath with great force. Dark-
ness fell all around. She descended the verandah steps and came
out into the darkened garden. Her hair flew about in the wind
and a handful of stars glimmered in the night sky. Clouds floated
everywhere as the wind gathered momentum. She removed a
lock of hair from her high and wide forehead and looked around.
This was the front garden of Sir Krishna Narain Kaul’s bunga-
low. She herself was Ginnie Kaul whose hair always fell in cas-
cades of rippling brown waves on her shoulders. In whose eyes
was a strange new glint of peace. Who always wore a white sari
and imagined that she had become an ascetic like Mira. She was
Ginnie Kaul. And this was the garden of her famous father’s
house. And till late tonight they had been erecting a huge red-
and-gold canopy on the lawn for tomorrow’s wedding. It was
covered with multicoloured lights and Chinese lanterns. Poles
had been installed for loudspeakers on which they had tested the
film records they were going to play and the wedding songs they
were going to recite. The main altar in the middle of the garden had been
artistically adorned with banana leaves and tons and tons of flow-
ers. Everybody had worked with terrifying enthusiasm and jovi-
ality till midnight. The girls had been singing and cracking jokes
among themselves and the servants had been shouting and cous-
ins laughing and working ... working ... preparing for the Big
Day. Now all was quiet. The storm that had arisen a little while
ago had come and gone. The bungalow behind the trees was
quiet. Cousins and aunts and uncles and servants were quiet and
had gone to sleep after the day’s enthusiastic work. The entire
universe seemed to have gained its long-lost equilibrium after
the storm passed. She wrapped her sari around her waist very
carefully and entered the benighted garden.

She opened her big brown eyes very wide and looked around.
Who are you, brother? she whispered again very softly. I am I ...
he answered. The leaves rustled in the wind. Who are you?
she persisted, obstinately wanting all the answers.

I ...? I myself.

You ... Yourself ...?

Yes. I who am alive and I who am dead. I who was wounded
and I who have been saved from all wounds, he replied in the
same voice. Withered branches creaked loudly overhead.

Who is this, and what is he saying? she wondered. Then she
parted the branches in front of her and advanced in the dark.

From where, she asked softly, are you coming? You ought to
ask me where I am off to ...

Where are you off to, she repeated slowly.

You, Pushpamala Kaul, you have returned from Mathura and
Vrindavan and Amarnath. What have you brought from there ...
? She remained silent. The winds sang again.

I am going in search of what you wished to find in all those
places. You, Pushpamala Kaul, will go on wandering in the same
cycle ... go on wandering in the same ...

Will it be possible for you and I to meet on some other cross-
roads? she asked. A honey-coloured moon suddenly emerged
out of the clouds and began shining intensely. No, he replied. In
his steady voice echoed the thunder of eternity, like some distant moonlit waterfall. No, we shall not meet at any other crossroads ... we shall not meet on any other ... We have to wander alone in our separate cycles. You, Pushpamala Kaul, will go on wandering in your own lonely cycle.

The gale rose again and all the trees joined in the chorus, picking up his last words as their refrain ...

She stood very still on the garden path. The honey-coloured moon began to dim slowly and finally slipped back behind the clouds. Come in, Ginnie darling, it is terribly cold outside. Whatever are you doing there at this time, you silly child? her mother, Lady Yashodhara Kaul called out from the verandah. The wind howled. Her hair blew this way and that in the wind. Ginnie darling, Ginnie darling, silly child ... the trees chorused and echoed ...

Mummy, I have to go on wandering in this very cycle, she whispered. Go on wandering in this very cycle, the wind repeated ...

Black clouds were dispersed again by the tempest, the winds don't seem to stop for a moment. O, my God ... Ramania exclaimed to her co-widow, Gainda, as she yawned and poked the cinders in their hut in a village near Lucknow. She was completely at peace with her rival. They lived together after their husband Ram Bharose had been killed in the refugee riots in Manather, and now they had nobody in the world except each other for shelter and support. Kunwar Rani had married her kinsman, Chowdhry Shamim and gone away to Sandila, and Kunwar Polu had rented out Ghufran Manzil to the government which had established one of the new departments dealing with refugee rehabilitation there. Gainda yawned in agreement and raised her head from her knees as she began poking the cinders with a little pair of tongs.

Epilogue

Wintry winds continued to blow all day and all night. At four o'clock in the afternoon Prakaram Vimaleshwar of All India Radio entered a bungalow on Cowper Road, and with leaden feet ascended the steps of the porch. (This had been the official residence of the late Kunwar Salman Ali Khan IP., but as he used to live in his own house on Outram Road, one of his departmental offices had been shifted here. A suite of rooms was always reserved for him however). He entered the verandah and knocked at the gallery door. Yellow leaves and bits of old newspaper danced in the wind in the huge dreary-looking compound. Spots of mobile-oil on the brick floor of the porch had faded and dust had settled on their black and shiny surface. It was clear that the house had not been used for a long time.

Prakaram Vimaleshwar knocked again and waited for someone to respond.

The door was flung open by a stray gust of wind. At the end of the gallery, the dark-eyed Rajkumari Rakshandha Begum of Karwaha Raj stood blinking, as if trying to recognize something in the dark. She was suddenly confronted with daylight and looked somewhat strange and absent-minded. The whole day has gone ... she muttered, half-talking to herself and half-addressing the stranger who stood facing her, whole day has gone ... She spoke in a monotone. Then she bent forward and blinked again, trying to get accustomed to the daylight.

Prakaram Vimaleshwar came in. "Who are you?" she asked stepping back, a little frightened.

"I ..." he was stunned at this and stepped back, too, in sudden fright.

She walked the length of the gallery like a shadow. "Who are you, please?" she asked very politely and rubbed her eyes. The glare was too painful and she was still in a daze.

"I ..." Prakaram Vimaleshwar replied with a sinking heart," I am Vimal, Roshi Bibi, Vimal Kumar Chattopadhaya ..." he reminded her very tenderly.
“Oh, you are Vimal Bhai ...” she said without any enthusiasm, in the same flat unemotional voice. “Do come in, Vimal Bhai ... whole day is gone ... whole day ...” she repeated to herself. They crossed the dusty corridor and went into a large and shabby drawing-room. They sat down on two sofas, facing each other. The room had the high vaulted ceiling of all cantonment bungalows, the floor was covered with a jute carpet, the walls were bordered with black tarcoal paint. Rakshanda of Karwaha Raj sank down on a broken red sofa, cupped her face in her palms and repeated the same maddening phrase, whole day ... has gone ...

Leaves blew about outside the windows.

All of a sudden she leaned forward as if she was going to divulge a great secret to this man sitting in front of her ... “Do you know?” she whispered importantly: “They have killed Peechu ... Peechu died you see—”

“Hmm,” the man replied. They became quiet.

She tried hard to identify this visitor. Yes, she knew who he was, but there was still something missing. The picture was incomplete—something—missing. They always came together—

This man and another ... suddenly the fog in her mind cleared. Yes, she remembered. This is right ... he is Vimal. Vimal Kumar Chattopadhyya ... he always has Kiran with him, Kiran Bahadur Katju. So she asked serenely, “Vimal Bhai, Kiran didn’t come with you?”

“Eh ...” Prakaram Vimleshwar pretended he hadn’t heard. “Eh ...” he repeated foolishly.

“He must have come back by now. Is he staying with you? He should have come from Delhi before me ...,” now her mind was functioning with greater clarity.

“Kiran ...?” Prakaram Vimleshwar repeated like an imbecile. “Ring him up, Vimal Bhai ...” she said with some enthusiasm and feeling. Then she relapsed into her monotone, forgetting what she had just said. Whole day ... she was mumbling again.

“Kiran ...” he cleared his throat with great difficulty and began, “Kiran ... actually, the thing is that ... they have killed Kiran, too. Kiran is dead, as a matter of fact ...”

He didn’t feel the need to complete his sentence. He fell silent, as if a very satisfying piece of dialogue had taken place and it didn’t warrant any further conversation. It was nothing of consequence. He stared at the flames in the fireplace like a moron. A big shield was placed on the fireplace, which had probably been won by the military police of the central range of the province at the time of Sir Harry Haig. A large picture of the king and queen of England hung on the wall over the shield—it must have been taken out of the Coronation Number of The Times of India. Its paper had turned pale and the faces were laden with dust. The room was full of cobwebs. The wind still whistled fearfully outside.

Rakshanda of Karwaha Raj mumbled something to herself and waved her hand. It had started raining. He remained silent. Scratched his nose. Then he plucked one or two hair from his head. Rewound his watch. Studied his nails carefully. Next he peeped out to see if the untimely winter rain had stopped. He looked at this girl who sat on broken springs of the horsehair sofa, looking blankly into the void.

Then the wind stopped whistling and the rain stopped. They got up without saying a word to each other, and came out of the room. The door of the gallery closed automatically, as it were, by the wind. It was getting dark.

“Vimal Bhai, would you like to have some tea?” Her brain which had started functioning again like a bad clock, made her think that perhaps she should have asked him this question earlier. But she continued walking with him till they emerged onto the road. They traversed the rain-drenched and pleasant Cowper Road, and went past Loretto convent and Government House and Christ Church till they reached the crossroads near the General Post Office. They turned as if by habit towards the radio station, but she stopped suddenly. “Vimal Bhai, are you going to the studios?” she asked.

“Yes, Roshi.”

“Okay. Goodnight.”
“Goodnight, my dear.” He didn’t want to ask her where she was going in this dark and cold evening all by herself. He climbed onto his bicycle and was soon obliterated by the crowds.

She continued walking. Crossed the roundabout and came onto Outram Road. She bypassed the coffee house, left all the other familiar landmarks behind and just kept on walking. All she felt was her legs moving on the road, that was the only sensation she had. There was a total black-out all around. When she reached a particular gate on Outram Road she looked around but didn’t remember why she was there. Why had she stopped at that gate? She saw a very large and old-fashioned double-storeyed house in front of her. A lot of benches and office tables lay cluttered in great disorder on the front verandah. Many notice-boards were hung on the wall. A couple of trucks stood under the moolisirs. A few peons sat on a pile of wood, lighting their cigarettes.

When she stopped near the gate, she was noticed by a sentry who walked away, humming a nostalgic tune. But when she lingered there for quite some time, the sentry eyed her suspiciously and walked up to her.

“What do you want?” Ram Singh, the refugee from Lahore, had been in the local home guard. He righted his Gandhi cap, scratched his left ear, and said, “Shrimatiji, the employment office for women has been opened in Aminabad. This office is for men only. You can meet Trilokinanda Babu there, after ten tomorrow morning.” After imparting this information, he took a half-smoked cigarette from behind his right ear and began humming the latest hit, “Udan Khatole pe Urh Jaoon” from a popular Hindi film.

The evening mist had enveloped the street and a gust of cold westerly wind hit her in the face as she turned and walked away.

_Dilkusha_
_Lucknow, 1947_