But here is Padma at my elbow, bullying me back into the world of linear narrative, the universe of what-happened-next: 'At this rate,' Padma com- plains, 'you'll be two hundred years old before you manage to tell about you birth.' She is affecting nonchalance, jutting a careless hip in my genera direction, but doesn't fool me. I know now that she is, despite all her protestations, hooked. No doubt about it: my story has her by the throat, so that all a once she's stopped nagging me to go home, to take more baths, to change my vinegar-stained clothes, to abandon even for a moment this darkling pickle factory where the smells of spices are forever frothing in the air...now my dung goddess simply makes up a cot in the corner of this office and prepares my food on two blackened gas-rings, only interrupting my Anglepoise-lit writing to expostulate, 'You better get a move on or you'll die before you get yourself born.' Fighting down the proper pride of the successful story-teller, I attempt to educate her. 'Things -- even people -- have a way of leaking into each other,' I explain, 'like flavours when you cook. Ilse Lubin's suicide, for example, leaked into old Adam and sat there in a puddle until he saw God. Likewise,' I intone earnestly, 'the past has dripped into me... so we can't ignore it...'
Her shrug, which does pleasantly wavvy things to her chest, cuts me off. 'To me it's a crazy way of telling your life story,' she cries, 'if you can't even get to where your father met your mother.'

... And certainly Padma is leaking into me. As history pours out of my fissured body, my lotus is quietly dripping in, with her down-to-earthery, and her paradoxical superstition, her contradictory love of the fabulous -- so it's appropriate that I'm about to tell the story of the death of Mian Abdullah. The doomed Hummingbird: a legend of our times.

... And Padma is a generous woman, because she stays by me in these last days, although I can't do much for her. That's right -- and once again, it's a fitting thing to mention before I launch into the tale of Nadir Khan -- I am unmanned. Despite Padma's many and varied gifts and ministrations, I can't leak into her, not even when she puts her left foot on my right, winds her right leg around my waist, inclines her head up toward mine and makes cooing noises; not even when she whispers in my ear, 'So now that the writery is done, let's see if we can make your other pencil work!'; despite everything she tries, I cannot hit her spittoon.

Enough confessions. Bowing to the ineluctable Padma-pressures of what-happened-nextness, and remembering the finite quantity of time at my disposal, I leap forwards from Mercurochrome and land in 1942. (I'm keen to get my parents together, too.)

It seems that in the late summer of that year my grandfather, Doctor Aadam Aziz, contracted a highly dangerous form of optimism. Bicycling around Agra, he whistled piercingly, badly, but very happily. He was by no means alone, because, despite strenuous efforts by the authorities to stamp it out, this
virulent disease had been breaking out all over India that year, and drastic steps were to be taken before it was brought under control. The old men at the paan-shop at the top of Cornwallis Road chewed betel and suspected a trick. ‘I have lived twice as long as I should have,’ the oldest one said, his voice cracking like an old radio because decades were rubbing up against each other around his vocal chords, ‘and I’ve never seen so many people so cheerful in such a bad time. It is the devil’s work.’ It was, indeed, a resilient virus — the weather alone should have discouraged such germs from breeding, since it had become clear that the rains had failed. The earth was cracking. Dust ate the edges of roads, and on some days huge gaping fissures appeared in the midst of macadamied intersections. The betel-chewers at the paan-shop had begun to talk about omens; calming themselves with their game of hit-the-spittoon, they speculated upon the numberless nameless Godknowswhats that might now issue from the fissuring earth. Apparently a Sikh from the bicycle-repair shop had had his turban pushed off his head in the heat of one afternoon, when his hair, without any reason, had suddenly stood on end. And, more prosaically, the water shortage had reached the point where milkmen could no longer find clean water with which to adulterate the milk . . . Far away, there was a World War in progress once again. In Agra, the heat mounted. But still my grandfather whisked. The old men at the paan-shop found his whisking in rather poor taste, given the circumstances.

(And I, like them, expectorate and rise above fissures.)

Astride his bicycle, leather attaché attached to carrier, my grandfather whisked. Despite irritations of the nose, his lips pursed. Despite a bruise on his chest which had refused to fade for twenty-three years, his good humour was unimpaired. Air passed his lips and was transmuted into sound. He whisked an old German tune: Tannenbaum.

The optimism epidemic had been caused by one single human being, whose name, Mian Abdullah, was only used by newspapermen. To everyone else, he was the Hummingbird, a creature which would be impossible if it did not exist. ‘Magician turned conjurer,’ the newspapermen wrote, ‘Mian Abdullah rose from the famous magicians’ ghetto in Delhi to become the hope of India’s hundred million Muslims.’ The Hummingbird was the founder, chairman, unifier and moving spirit of the Free Islam Convocation; and in 1942, marques and rostrums were being erected on the Agra maiden, where the Convocation’s second annual assembly was about to take place. My grandfather, fifty-two years old, his hair turned white by the years and other afflictions, had begun whistling as he passed the maiden. Now he leaned round corners on his bicycle, taking them at a jaunty angle, threading his way between cowpats and children . . . and, in another time and place, told his friend the Rani of Cooch Naheen: ‘I started off as a Kashmiri and not much of a Muslim. Then I got a bruise on the chest that turned me into an Indian. I’m still not much of a Muslim, but I’m all for Abdullah. He’s fighting my fight.’ His eyes were still the blue of Kashinir sky . . . he arrived home, and although his eyes retained a glimmer of contentment, the whistling stopped; because waiting for him in the courtyard filled with malevolent geese were the disapproving features of my grandma, Naseem Aziz, whom he had made the mistake of loving ir fragments, and who was now unified and transmuted into the formidable figure she would always remain, and who was always known by the curious title of Reverend Mother.

She had become a prematurely old, wide woman, with two enormous moles like witch’s nipples on her face; and she lived within an invisible fortress of her own making, an ironclad citadel of traditions and certainties. Earlier that year Aadam Aziz had commissioned life-size blow-up photographs of his family to hang on the living-room wall; the three girls and two boys had posed dutifully enough, but Reverend Mother had rebelled when her turn came. Eventually the photographer had tried to catch her unawares, but she seized his camera and broke it over his skull. Fortunately, he lived; but there are no photographs of my grandmother anywhere on the earth. She was not one to be trapped in anyone’s little black box. It was enough for her that she must live in unveiled, barefaced shamelessness — there was no question of allowing the fact to be recorded.

It was perhaps the obligation of facial nudity, coupled with Aziz’s constant requests for her to move beneath him, that had driven her to the barricades; and the domestic rules she established were a system of self-defence so impregnable that Aziz, after many fruitless attempts, had more or less given up trying to storm her many ravelins and bastions, leaving her, like a large smug spider, to rule her chosen domain. (Perhaps, too, it wasn’t a system of self-defence at all, but a means of defence against her self.) Among the things to which she denied entry were all political matters. When Doctor Aziz wished to talk about such things, he visited his friend the Rani, and Reverend Mother sulked; but not very hard, because she knew his visits represented a victory for her.

The twin hearts of her kingdom were her kitchen and her pantry. I never entered the former, but remembered staring through the pantry’s locked screen-doors at the enigmatic world within, a world of hanging wire baskets covered with linen cloths to keep out the flies, of tins which I knew to be full of gur and other sweets, of locked chests with neat square labels, of nuts and turnips and sacks of grain, of goose-eggs and wooden brooms. Pantry and kitchen were her inalienable territory; and she defended them ferociously. When she was carrying her last child, my aunt Emerald, her husband offered to relieve her of the chore of supervising the cook. She did not reply; but the next day, when Aziz approached the kitchen, she emerged from it with a metal pot in her hands and barred the doorway. She was fat and also pregnant, so there was
not much room left in the doorway. Aadam Aziz frowned. ‘What is this, wife?’ To which my grandmother answered, ‘This, what is name, is a very heavy pot; and if just once I catch you in here, what is name, I’ll push your head into it, add some dahi, and make, what is name, a korma.’ I don’t know how my grandmother came to adopt the term what is name as her leitmotif, but as the years passed it invaded her sentences more and more often. I like to think of it as an unconscious cry for help ... as a seriously-meant question. Reverend Mother was giving us a hint that, for all her presence and bulk, she was adrift in the universe. She didn’t know, you see, what it was called.

... And at the dinner-table, imperiously, she continued to rule. No food was set upon the table, no plates were laid. Curry and crockery were marshalled upon a low side-table by her right hand, and Aziz and the children ate what she dished out. It is a sign of the power of this custom that, even when her husband was afflicted by constipation, she never once permitted him to choose his food, and listened to no requests nor words of advice. A fortress may not move. Not even when its dependants’ movements become irregular.

During the long concealment of Nadir Khan, during the visits to the house on Cornwallis Road of young Zulfikar who fell in love with Emerald and of the prosperous recine-and-leathercloth merchant named Ahmed Sinai who hurt my aunt Alia so badly that she bore a grudge for twenty-five years before discharging it cruelly upon my mother, Reverend Mother’s iron grip upon her household never faltered; and even before Nadir’s arrival precipitated the great silence, Aadam Aziz had tried to break this grip, and been obliged to go to war with his wife. (All this helps to show how remarkable his affliction by optimism actually was.)

... In 1912, ten years earlier, he had taken control of his children’s education. Reverend Mother was dismayed; but it was a father’s traditional role, so she could not object. Alia was eleven; the second daughter, Mumtaz, was almost nine. The two boys, Hanif and Mustapha, were eight and six, and young Emerald was not yet five. Reverend Mother took to confiding her fears to the family cook, Daoud. ‘He fills their heads with I don’t know what foreign languages, what is name, and other rubbish also, no doubt.’ Daoud stirred pots and Reverend Mother cried, ‘Do you wonder, what is name, that the little one calls herself Emerald? In English, what is name? That man will ruin my children for me. Put less cumin in that, what is name, you should pay more attention to your cooking and less to minding other people’s business.’

She made only one educational stipulation: religious instruction. Unlike Aziz, who was racked by ambiguity, she had remained devout. ‘You have your Hummingbird,’ she told him, ‘but I, what is name, have the Call of God. A better noise, what is name, than that man’s hum.’ It was one of her rare political comments ... and then the day arrived when Aziz threw out the

religious tutor. Thumb and forefinger closed around the maulvi’s ear. Naseem Aziz saw her husband leading the stragglebearded wretch to the door in the garden wall; gasped; then cried out as her husband’s foot was applied to the divine’s fleshy parts. Unleashing thunderbolts, Reverend Mother sailed into battle.

‘Man without dignity!’ she cursed her husband, and, ‘Man without, what is name, shame!’ Children watched from the safety of the back verandah. Anc Aziz, ‘Do you know what that man was teaching your children?’ And Reverend Mother hurling question against question, ‘What will you not do to bring disaster, what is name, on our heads?’ — But now Aziz, ‘You think it was Nastaliq script? Eh?’ — to which his wife, warming up: ‘Would you eat pig? What is name? Would you spit on the Quran?’ And, voice rising, the doctor ripostes, ‘Or was it some verses of “The Cow”? You think that...’ Paying no attention, Reverend Mother arrives at her climax: ‘Would you marry your daughters to Germans?!” And pauses, fighting for breath, letting my grandfather reveal, ‘He was teaching them to hate, wife. He tells them to hate Hindus and Buddhists and Jains and Sikhs and who knows what other vegetarians. Will you have hateful children, woman?’

‘Will you have godless ones?’ Reverend Mother envisages the legions of the Archangel Gabriel descending at night to carry her heathen brood to hell. She has vivid pictures of hell. It is as hot as Rajputana in June and everyone is made to learn seven foreign languages ... ‘I take this oath, what is name,’ my grandmother said, ‘I swear no food will come from my kitchen to your lips. No, not one chapati, until you bring the maulvi sahib back and kiss his what is name, feet!’

The war of starvation which began that day very nearly became a duel to the death. True to her word, Reverend Mother did not hand her husband, at mealtimes, so much as an empty plate. Doctor Aziz took immediate reprisals by refusing to feed himself when he was out. Day by day the five children watched their father disappearing, while their mother grimly guarded the dishes of food. ‘Will you be able to vanish completely?’ Emerald asked with interest, adding solicitously, ‘Don’t do it unless you know how to come back again.’ Aziz’s face acquired craters; even his nose appeared to be getting thinner. His body had become a battlefield and each day a piece of it was blasted away. He told Alia, his eldest, the wise child: ‘In any war, the field of battle suffers worse devastation than either army. This is natural.’ He began to take rickshaws when he did his rounds. Hamdard the rickshaw-wallah began to worry about him.

The Rani of Cooch Naheen sent emissaries to plead with Reverend Mother ‘India isn’t full enough of starving people?’ the emissaries asked Naseem, and she unleashed a basilisk glare which was already becoming a legend. Hands clasped in her lap, a muslin dupatta wound miser-tight around her head, shi
pierced her visitors with lidless eyes and stared them down. Their voices turned to stone; their hearts froze; and alone in a room with strange men, my grandmother sat in triumph, surrounded by downcast eyes. ‘Full enough, whatisitsname?’ she crowed. ‘Well, perhaps. But also, perhaps not.’

But the truth was that Naseem Aziz was very anxious; because while Aziz’s death by starvation would be a clear demonstration of the superiority of her idea of the world over his, she was unwilling to be widowed for a mere principle; yet she could see no way out of the situation which did not involve her in backing down and losing face, and having learned to bare her face, my grandmother was most reluctant to lose any of it.

‘Fall ill, why don’t you?’ — Alia, the wise child, found the solution. Reverend Mother beat a tactical retreat, announced a pain, a killing pain absolutely, whatisitsname, and took to her bed. In her absence Alia extended the olive branch to her father, in the shape of a bowl of chicken soup. Two days later, Reverend Mother rose (having refused to be examined by her husband for the first time in her life), reassumed her powers, and with a shrug of acquiescence in her daughter’s decision, passed Aziz his food as though it were a mere trifle of a business.

That was ten years earlier; but still, in 1942, the old men at the paan-shop are stirred by the sight of the whistling doctor into giggling memories of the time when his wife had nearly made him do a disappearing trick, even though he didn’t know how to come back. Late into the evening they nudge each other with, ‘Do you remember when — ’ and ‘Dried up like a skeleton on a washing line! He couldn’t even ride his — ’ and — I tell you, baba, that woman could do terrible things. I heard she could even dream her daughters’ dreams, just to know what they were getting up to!’ But as evening settles in the nudes die away, because it is time for the contest. Rhythmically, in silence, their jaws move; then all of a sudden there is a pursing of lips, but what emerges is not air-made-sound. No whistle, but instead a long red jet of betel-juice passes decr ipt lips, and moves in unerring accuracy towards an old brass spittoon. There is much slapping of thighs and self-admiring utterance of ‘Wah, wah, sir!’ and, ‘Absolute master shot!’ . Around the oldsters, the town fades into dusky evening pastimes. Children play hoop and kabaddi and draw bead on posters of Mian Abdullah. And now the old men place the spittoon in the street, further and further from their squatting-place, and aim longer and longer jets at it. Still the fluid flies true. ‘Oh too good, yara!’ The street urchins make a game of dodging in and out between the red streams, superimposing this game of chicken upon the serious art of hit-the-spittoon. . . . But here is an army staff car, scattering urchins as it comes . . . here, Brigadier Dodson, the town’s military commander, stiffing with heat . . . and here, his A.D.C., Major Zulfikar, passing him a towel. Dodson mops his face; urchins scatter; the car knocks over the spittoon. A dark red fluid with clots in it like blood congeals like a red hand in the dust of the street and points accusingly at the retreating power of the Raj.

Memory of a mildewing photograph (perhaps the work of the same poc brained photographer whose life-size blow-ups so nearly cost him his life) Aadam Aziz, aglow with optimism-fever, shakes hands with a man of sixty c so, an impatient, sprightly type with a lock of white hair falling across his brow like a kindly scar. It is Mian Abdullah, the Hummingbird. ‘You see, Doct Sahib, I keep myself fit. You wish to hit me in the stomach? Try, try. I’m i tiptop shape.’ . . . In the photograph, folds of a loose white shirt conceal th stomach, and my grandfather’s fist is not clenched, but swelled up by th hand of the ex-conjuror.) And behind them, looking benignly on, the Rani of Cooch Naheen, who was going white in blotches, a disease which leaked into history and erupted on an enormous scale shortly after Independence. . . . ‘I at the victim,’ the Rani whispers, through photographed lips that never move ‘the hapless victim of my cross-cultural concerns. My skin is the outward expression of the internationalism of my spirit.’ Yes, there is a conversation going on in this photograph, as like expert ventriloquists the optimists meet their leader. Beside the Rani — listen carefully now; history and ancestry at about to meet! — stands a peculiar fellow, soft and paunchy, his eyes like stagnant ponds, his hair long like a poet’s. Nadir Khan, the Hummingbird personal secretary. His feet, if they were not frozen by the snapshot, would be shuffling in embarrassment. He mouths through his foolish, rigid smile, ‘It’s true; I have written verses . . .’ Whereupon Mian Abdullah interrupts, booz ing through his open mouth with glints of pointy teeth: ‘But what verses! No one rhyme in page after page! . . .’ And the Rani, gently: ‘A modernist, then: And Nadir, shyly: ‘Yes.’ What tensions there are now in the still, immobile scene! What edgy banter, as the Hummingbird speaks: ‘Never mind abot that; art should uplift; it should remind us of our glorious literary heritage!’ . . . And is that a shadow, or a frown on his secretary’s brow? . . . Nadir’s voice issuing in a slow from the fading picture: ‘I do not believe in high art, Mia Sahib. Now art must be beyond categories; my poetry and — oh — the game c hit-the-spittoon are equals.’ . . . So now the Rani, kind woman that she is jokes, ‘Well, I shall set aside a room, perhaps; for paan-eating and spittoon h...
presence has brought us two threads which will pursue me through all my days: the thread that leads to the ghetto of the magicians; and the thread that tells the story of Nadir the rhymeless, verbless poet and a priceless silver spittoon.

‘What nonsense,’ our Padma says. ‘How can a picture talk? Stop now; you must be too tired to think.’ But when I say to her that Mian Abdullah had the strange trait of humming without pause, humming in a strange way, neither musical nor unmusical, but somehow mechanical, the hum of an engine or dynamo, she swallows it easily enough, saying judiciously, ‘Well, if he was such an energetic man, it's no surprise to me.’ She's all ears again; so I warm to my theme and report that Mian Abdullah’s hum rose and fell in direct relationship to his work rate. It was a hum that could fall low enough to give you toothache, and when it rose to its highest, most feverish pitch, it had the ability of inducing erections in anyone within its vicinity. (‘Arré baap,’ Padma laughs, ‘no wonder he was so popular with the men!’) Nadir Khan, as his secretary, was attacked constantly by his master’s vibratory quirk, and his ears jaw penis were forever behaving according to the dictates of the Hummingbird. Why, then, did Nadir stay, despite erections which embarrassed him in the company of strangers, despite aching molars and a work schedule which often occupied twenty-two hours in every twenty-four? Not – I believe – because he saw it as his poetic duty to get close to the centre of events and transmute them into literature. Nor because he wanted fame for himself. No: but Nadir had one thing in common with my grandfather, and it was enough. He, too, suffered from the optimism disease.

Like Aadam Aziz, like the Rani of Cooch Naheen, Nadir Khan loathed the Muslim League (‘That bunch of toadies!’ the Rani cried in her silvery voice, swooping around the octaves like a skier. ‘Landowners with vested interests to protect! What do they have to do with Muslims? They go like toads to the British and form governments for them, now that the Congress refuses to do it!’ It was the year of the ‘Quit India’ resolution. ‘And what’s more,’ the Rani said with finality, ‘they are mad. Otherwise why would they want to partition India?’)

Mian Abdullah, the Hummingbird, had created the Free Islam Convocation almost single-handedly. He invited the leaders of the dozens of Muslim splinter groups to form a loosely federated alternative to the dogmatism and vested interests of the Leaguers. It had been a great conjuring trick, because they had all come. That was the first Convocation, in Lahore; Agra would see the second. The marquises would be filled with members of agrarian movements, urban labourers’ syndicates, religious divines and regional groupings. It would see confirmed what the first assembly had intimated: that the League, with its demand for a partitioned India, spoke on nobody’s behalf but its own. ‘They have turned their backs on us,’ said the Convocation’s posters, ‘and now they claim we’re standing behind them!’ Mian Abdullah opposed the partition.

In the throes of the optimism epidemic, the Hummingbird’s patron, the Rani of Cooch Naheen, never mentioned the clouds on the horizon. She never pointed out that Agra was a Muslim League stronghold, saying only, ‘Aadam my boy, if the Hummingbird wants to hold Convocation here, I’m not about to suggest he goes to Allahabad.’ She was bearing the entire expense of the event without complaint or interference; not, let it be said, without making enemies in the town. The Rani did not live like other Indian princes. Instead of teetar-hunts, she endowed scholarships. Instead of hotel scandals, she had politics. And so the rumours began. ‘These scholars of hers, man, everyone knows they have to perform extra-curricular duties. They go to her bedroom in the dark, and she never lets them see her blotchy face, but bewitches them into bed with her voice of a singing witch!’ Aadam Aziz had never believed in witches. He enjoyed her brilliant circle of friends who were as much at home in Persian as they were in German. But Naseem Aziz, who half-believed the stories about the Rani, never accompanied him to the princess’s house. ‘If God meant people to speak many tongues,’ she argued, ‘why did he put only one in our heads?’

And so it was that none of the Hummingbird’s optimists were prepared for what happened. They played hit-the-spittoon, and ignored the cracks in the earth.

Sometimes legends make reality, and become more useful than the facts. According to legend, then – according to the polished gossip of the ancients at the paan-shop – Mian Abdullah owed his downfall to his purchase, at Agra railway station, of a peacock-feather fan, despite Nadir Khan’s warning about bad luck. What is more, on that night of crescent moons, Abdullah had been working with Nadir, so that when the new moon rose they both saw it through glass. ‘These things matter,’ the betel-chewers say. ‘We have been alive too long, and we know.’ (Padma is nodding her head in agreement.)

The Convocation offices were on the ground floor of the historical faculty building at the University campus. Abdullah and Nadir were coming to the end of their night’s work; the Hummingbird’s hum was low-pitched and Nadir’s teeth were on edge. There was a poster on the office wall, expressing Abdullah’s favourite anti-Partition sentiment, a quote from the poet Iqbal: ‘Where can we find a land that is foreign to God?’ And now the assassins reached the campus.

Facts: Abdullah had plenty of enemies. The British attitude to him was always ambiguous. Brigadier Dodson hadn’t wanted him in town. There was a
knock on the door and Nadir answered it. Six new moons came into the room, six crescent knives held by men dressed all in black, with covered faces. Two men held Nadir while the others moved towards the Hummingbird.

At this point,' the betel-chewers say, the Hummingbird’s hum became higher. Higher and higher, yara, and the assassins’ eyes became wide as their members made tents under their robes. Then – Allah, then! – the knives began to sing and Abdullah sang louder, humming high-high like he’d never hummed before. His body was hard and the long curved blades had trouble killing him; one broke on a rib, but the others quickly became stained with red. But now – listen! – Abdullah’s humming rose out of the range of our human ears, and was heard by the dogs of the town. In Agra there are maybe eight thousand four hundred and twenty pie-dogs. On that night, it is certain that some were eating, others dying; there were some who fornicated and others who did not hear the call. Say about two thousand of these; that left six thousand four hundred and twenty of the curs, and all of these turned and ran for the University, many of them rushing across the railway tracks from the wrong side of town. It is well known that this is true. Everyone in town saw it, except those who were asleep. They went noisily, like an army, and afterwards their trail was littered with bones and dung and bits of hair ... and all the time Abdullah was humming, humming-humming, and the knives were singing. And know this: suddenly one of the killers’ eyes cracked and fell out of its socket. Afterwards the pieces of glass were found, ground into the carpet!'

They say, ‘When the dogs came Abdullah was nearly dead and the knives were blunt ... they came like wild things, leaping through the window, which had no glass because Abdullah’s hum had shattered it ... they thudded against the door until the wood broke ... and then they were everywhere, baba! ... some without legs, others lacking hair, but most of them had some teeth at least, and some of these were sharp ... And now see this: the assassins cannot have feared interruption, because they had posted no guards; so the dogs got them by surprise ... the two men holding Nadir Khan, that spineless one, fell beneath the weight of the beasts, with maybe sixty-eight dogs on their necks ... afterwards the killers were so badly damaged that nobody could say who they were.’

‘At some point,’ they say, ‘Nadir dived out of the window and ran. The dogs and assassins were too busy to follow him.’

Dogs? Assassins? ... If you don’t believe me, check. Find out about Mian Abdullah and his Convocations. Discover how we’ve swept his story under the carpet ... then let me tell how Nadir Khan, his lieutenant, spent three years under my family’s rugs.

As a young man he had shared a room with a painter whose paintings had grown larger and larger as he tried to get the whole of life into his art. ‘Look at me,’ he said before he killed himself, ‘I wanted to be a miniaturist and I’ve got elephantiasis instead!’ The swollen events of the night of the crescent knives reminded Nadir Khan of his room-mate, because life had once again, perversely, refused to remain life-sized. It had turned melodramatic: and that embarrassed him.

How did Nadir Khan run across the night town without being noticed? I put it down to his being a bad poet, and as such, a born survivor. As he ran, there was a self-consciousness about him, his body appearing to apologize for behaving as if it were in a cheap thriller, of the sort hawkers sell on railway stations, or give away free with bottles of green medicine that can cure colds, typhoid, impotence, homesickness and poverty ... On Cornwallis Road, it was a warm night. A coal-brazier stood empty by the deserted rickshaw rank. The paan-shop was closed and the old men were asleep on the roof, dreaming of tomorrow’s game. An insomnia cow, idly chewing a Red and White cigarette packet, strolled by a bundled street-sleeper, which meant he would wake in the morning, because a cow will ignore a sleeping man unless he’s about to die. Then it nuzzles at him thoughtfully. Sacred cows eat anything.

My grandfather’s large old stone house, bought from the proceeds of the gemstone shops and blind Ghani’s dowry settlement, stood in the darkness, set back a dignified distance from the road. There was a walled-in garden at the rear and by the garden door was the low outhouse rented cheaply to the family of old Hammad and his son Rashid the rickshaw boy. In front of the outhouse was the well with its cow-driven waterwheel, from which irrigation channels ran down to the small cornfield which lined the house all the way to the gate in the perimeter wall along Cornwallis Road. Between house and field ran a small gully for pedestrians and rickshaws. In Agra the cycle-rickshaw had recently replaced the kind where a man stood between wooden shafts. There was still trade for the horse-drawn tongas, but it was dwindling ... Nadir Khan ducked in through the gate, squatted for a moment with his back to the perimeter wall, reddening as he passed his water. Then, seemingly upset by the vulgarity of his decision, he fled to the cornfield and plunged in. Partially concealed by the sun-withered stalks, he lay down in the foetal position.

Rashid the rickshaw boy was seventeen and on his way home from the cinema. That morning he’d seen two men pushing a low trolley on which were mounted two enormous hand-painted posters, back-to-back, advertising the new film Gai-Wallah, starring Rashid’s favourite actor Dev. FRESH FROM FIFTY FIERCE WEEKS IN DELHI! STRAIGHT FROM SIXTY-THREE SHARPSHOOTER WEEKS IN BOMBAY! the posters cried. SECOND RIP-ROARIOUS YEAR! The film was an eastern Western. Its hero, Dev, who was not slim, rode the range alone. It looked very like the Indo-Gangetic plain. Gai-Wallah means cow-fellow and Dev played a sort of one-man vigilante force for the protection of cows. SINGLE-HANDED! and DOUBLE-BARRELLED!, he stalked the many herds of cattle which were being driven across the range to the slaughterhouse,
vanquished the cattlemen and liberated the sacred beasts. (The film was made for Hindu audiences; in Delhi it had caused riots. Muslim Leaguers had driven cows past cinemas to the slaughter, and had been mobbed.) The songs and dances were good and there was a beautiful nautch girl who would have looked more graceful if they hadn’t made her dance in a ten-gallon cowboy hat. Rashid sat on a bench in the front stalls and joined in the whistles and cheers. He ate two samosas, spending too much money; his mother would be hurt but he’d had a fine time. As he pedalled his rickshaw home he practised some of the fancy riding he’d seen in the film, hanging down low on one side, freewheeling down a slight slope, using the rickshaw the way Gai-Wallah used his horse to conceal him from his enemies. Eventually he reached up, turned the handlebars and to his delight the rickshaw moved sweetly through the gate and down the gully by the cornfield. Gai-Wallah had used this trick to steal up on a gang of cattlemen as they sat in the brush, drinking and gambling. Rashid applied the brakes and flung himself into the cornfield, running — **FULL-tilT**! — at the unsuspecting cattlemen, his guns cocked and ready. As he neared their campfire he released his ‘yell of hate’ to frighten them. YAAAAAAAAA! Obviously he did not really shout so close to the Doctor Sahib’s house, but he distended his mouth as he ran, screaming silently. BLAMM! BLAMM! Nadir Khan had been finding sleep hard to come by and now he opened his eyes. He saw — EEEYAAAH! — a wild stringy figure coming at him like a mail-train, yelling at the top of his voice — but maybe he had gone deaf, because there wasn’t any **noise**! — and he was rising to his feet, the shriek was just passing his over-plump lips, when Rashid saw him and found voice as well. Hooting in terrified unison, they both turned tail and ran. Then they stopped, each having noted the other’s flight, and peered at one another through the shrivelling corn. Rashid recognized Nadir Khan, saw his torn clothes and was deeply troubled.

‘I am a friend,’ Nadir said foolishly. ‘I must see Doctor Aziz.’

‘But the Doctor is asleep, and is not in the cornfield.’ Pull yourself together, Rashid told himself, stop talking nonsense! This is Mian Abdullah’s friend! . . . But Nadir didn’t seem to have noticed; his face was working furiously, trying to get out some words which had stuck like shreds of chicken between his teeth . . . ‘My life,’ he managed it at last, ‘is in danger.’

And now Rashid, still full of the spirit of Gai-Wallah, came to the rescue. He led Nadir to a door in the side of the house. It was bolted and locked; but Rashid pulled, and the lock came away in his hand. ‘Indian-made,’ he whispered, as if that explained everything. And, as Nadir stepped inside, Rashid hissed, ‘Count on me completely, sahib. Mum’s the word! I swear on my mother’s grey hairs.’

He replaced the lock on the outside. To have actually saved the Hummingbird’s right-hand man! . . . But from what? Whom? . . . Well, real life was better than the pictures, sometimes.

‘Is that him?’ Padma asks, in some confusion. ‘That fat soft cowardly plumpie? Is he going to be your father?’