couldn’t see a mark on her.

‘So, gloomy sis, you managed to enjoy yourself after all.’

In June that year, Mumtaz re-married. Her sister — taking her cue from their mother — would not speak to her until, just before they both died, she saw her chance of revenge. Aadam Aziz and Reverend Mother tried, unsuccessfully, to persuade Alia that these things happen, it was better to find out now than later, and Mumtaz had been badly hurt and needed a man to help her recover . . . besides, Alia had brains, she would be all right.

‘But, but,’ Alia said, ‘nobody ever married a book.’

‘Change your name,’ Ahmed Sinai said. ‘Time for a fresh start. Throw Mumtaz and her Nadir Khan out of the window, I’ll choose you a new name. Amina. Amina Sinai: you’d like that?’

‘Whatever you say, husband,’ my mother said.

‘Anyway,’ Alia, the wise child, wrote in her diary, ‘who wants to get landed with this marrying business? Not me; never; no.’

Mian Abdullah was a false start for a lot of optimistic people; his assistant (whose name could not be spoken in my father’s house) was my mother’s wrong turning. But those were the years of the drought; many crops planted at that time ended up by coming to nothing.

‘What happened to the plumpie?’ Padma asks, crossly. ‘You don’t mean you aren’t going to tell?’

A Public Announcement

There followed an illusionist January, a time so still on its surface that 1947 seemed not to have begun at all. (While, of course, in fact . . .) In which the Cabinet Mission — old Pethick-Lawrence, clever Cripps, military A. V. Alexander — saw their scheme for the transfer of power fail. (But of course, in fact it would only be six months until . . .) In which the viceroy, Wavell, understood that he was finished, washed-up, or in our own expressive word, funtoosh. (Which, of course, in fact only speeded things up, because it let in the last of the viceroys, who . . .) In which Mr Attlee seemed too busy deciding the future of Burma with Mr Aung Sam. (While, of course, in fact he was briefing the last viceroy, before announcing his appointment; the last-viceroy-to-be was visiting the King and being granted plenipotentiary powers; so that soon, soon . . .) In which the Constituent Assembly stood self-adjourned, without having settled on a Constitution. (But, of course, in fact Earl Mountbatten, the last viceroy, would be with us any day, with his inexorable ticktock, his soldier’s knife that could cut continents in three, and his wife who ate chicken breasts secretly behind a locked lavatory door.) And in the midst of the mirror-like stillness through which it was impossible to see the great machineries grinding, my mother, the brand-new Amina Sinai, who also looked still and unchanging although great things were happening beneath her skin, woke up one morning with a head buzzing with insomnia and a tongue thickly coated with unslept sleep and found herself saying aloud, without meaning to at all, ‘What’s the sun doing here, Allah? It’s come up in the wrong place.’

. . . . I must interrupt myself. I wasn’t going to today, because Padma has started getting irritated whenever my narration becomes self-conscious, whenever, like an incompetent puppeteer, I reveal the hands holding the strings; but I simply must register a protest. So, breaking into a chapter which, by a happy chance, I have named ‘A Public Announcement’, I issue (in the strongest possible terms) the following general medical alert: ‘A certain Doctor N. Q. Baliga,’ I wish to proclaim — from the rooftops! Through the loud-hailers of minarets! — ‘is a quack. Ought to be locked up, struck off, defenestrated. Or worse: subjected to his own quackery, brought out in leprous boils
by a mis-prescribed pill. Damn fool,' I underline my point, 'can't see what's under his nose!'

Having let off steam, I must leave my mother to worry for a further moment about the curious behaviour of the sun, to explain that our Padma, alarmed by my references to cracking up, has confided covertly in this Baligga — this ju-ju man! this green-medicine wallah! — and as a result, the charlatan, whom I will not deign to glorify with a description, came to call. I, in all innocence and for Padma’s sake, permitted him to examine me. I should have feared the worst; the worst is what he did. Believe this if you can: the fraud has pronounced me whole! 'I see no cracks,' he intoned mournfully, differing from Nelson at Copenhagen in that he possessed no good eye, his blindness not the choice of stubborn genius but the inevitable curse of his folly! Blindly, he impugned my state of mind, cast doubts on my reliability as a witness, and Godknows-whatever: 'I see no cracks.'

In the end it was Padma who shooed him away. 'Never mind, Doctor Sahib,' Padma said, 'we will look after him ourselves.' On her face I saw a kind of recognition of her own dull guilt ... exit Baligga, never to return to these pages. But good God! Has the medical profession — the calling of Aadam Aziz — sunk so low? To this cess-pool of Baliggas? In the end, if this be true, everyone will do without doctors ... which brings me back to the reason why Amina Sinai awoke one morning with the sun on her lips.

'It's come up in the wrong place!' she yelped, by accident; and then, through the fading buzzing of her bad night's sleep, understood how in this month of illusion she had fallen victim to a trick, because all that had happened was that she had woken up in Delhi, in the home of her new husband, which faced east towards the sun; so the truth of the matter was that the sun was in the right place, and it was her position which had changed ... but even after she grasped this elementary thought, and stored it away with the many similar mistakes she had made since coming here (because her confusion about the sun had been a regular occurrence, as if her mind were refusing to accept the alteration in her circumstances, the new, above-ground position of her bed), something of its jumbling influence remained with her and prevented her from feeling entirely at ease.

'In the end, everyone can do without fathers,' Doctor Aziz told his daughter when he said goodbye; and Reverend Mother added, 'Another orphan in the family, what's his name, but never mind, Muhammad was an orphan too; and you can say this for your Ahmed Sinai, what's his name, at least he is half Kashmiri.' Then, with his own hands, Doctor Aziz had passed a green tin trunk into the railway compartment where Ahmed Sinai awaited his bride. 'The dowry is neither small nor vast as these things go,' my grandfather said. 'We are not crorepatis, you understand. But we have given you enough; Amina will give you more.' Inside the green tin trunk: silver samovars, brocade saris, gold coins given to Doctor Aziz by grateful patients, a museum in which the exhibits represented illnesses cured and lives saved. And now Aadam Aziz lifted his daughter (with his own arms), passing her up after the dowry into the care of this man who had re-named and so re-invented her, thus becoming in a sense her father as well as her new husband ... he walked (with his own feet) along the platform as the train began to move. A relay runner at the end of his lap, he stood wreathed in smoke and comic-book vendors and the confusion of peacock-feather fans and hot snacks and the whole lethargic hullabaloo of squatting porters and plaster animals on trolleys as the train picked up speed and headed for the capital city, accelerating into the next lap of the race. In the compartment the new Amina Sinai sat (in mint condition) with her feet on the green tin trunk which had been an inch too high to fit under the seat. With her sandals bearing down on the locked museum of her father’s achievements she sped away into her new life, leaving Aadam Aziz behind to dedicate himself to an attempt to fuse the skills of Western and hakimi medicine, an attempt which would gradually wear him down, convincing him that the hegemony of superstition, mumbo-jumbo and all things magical would never be broken in India, because the hakims refused to co-operate; and as he aged and the world became less real he began to doubt his own beliefs, so that by the time he saw the God in whom he had never been able to believe or disbelieve he was probably expecting to do so.

As the train pulled out of the station Ahmed Sinai jumped up and bolted the compartment door and pulled down the shutters, much to Amina’s amazement; but then suddenly there were thumps outside and hands moving the doorknobs and voices saying 'Let us in, maharaj! Maharajin, are you there, ask your husband to open.' And always, in all the trains in this story, there were these voices and these fists banging and pleading; in the Frontier Mail to Bombay and in all the expresses of the years; and it was always frightening, until at last I was the one on the outside, hanging on for dear life, and begging, 'Hey, maharaj! Let me in, great sir.'

'Fare dodgers,' Ahmed Sinai said, but they were more than that. They were a prophecy. There were to be others soon.

... And now the sun was in the wrong place. She, my mother, lay in bed and felt ill-at-ease; but also excited by the thing that had happened inside her and which, for the moment, was her secret. At her side, Ahmed Sinai snored richly. No insomnia for him; none, despite the troubles which had made him bring a grey bag full of money and hide it under his bed when he thought Amina wasn’t looking. My father slept soundly, wrapped in the soothing envelope of my mother’s greatest gift, which turned out to be worth a good deal more than the contents of the green tin trunk: Amina Sinai gave Ahmed the gift of her inexhaustible assiduity.

Nobody ever took pains the way Amina did. Dark of skin, glowing of eye,
my mother was by nature the most meticulous person on earth. Assiduously,
she arranged flowers in the corridors and rooms of the Old Delhi house;
carpets were selected with infinite care. She could spend twenty-five minutes
worrying at the positioning of a chair. By the time she'd finished with her
home-making, adding tiny touches here, making fractional alterations there,
Ahmed Sinai found his orphan's dwelling transformed into something gentle
and loving. Amina would rise before he did, her assiduity driving her to dust
everything, even the cane chick-blinds (until he agreed to employ a hamal
for the purpose); but what Ahmed never knew was that his wife's talents were
most dedicatedly, most determinedly applied not to the externals of their lives,
but to the matter of Ahmed Sinai himself.

Why had she married him? – For solace, for children. But at first the
insomnia coating her brain got in the way of her first aim; and children don’t
always come at once. So Amina had found herself dreaming about an
undreamable poet’s face and waking with an unspeakable name on her lips. You
ask: what did she do about it? I answer: she gritted her teeth and set about
putting herself straight. This is what she told herself: ‘You big ungrateful goof,
can’t you see who is your husband now? Don’t you know what a husband
deserves?’ To avoid fruitless controversy about the correct answers to these
questions, let me say that, in my mother’s opinion, a husband deserved
unquestioning loyalty, and unreserved, full-hearted love. But there was a
difficulty: Amina, her mind clogged up with Nadir Khan and insomnia, found
she couldn’t naturally provide Ahmed Sinai with these things. And so, bringing
her gift of assiduity to bear, she began to train herself to love him. To do this
she divided him, mentally, into every single one of his component parts,
physical as well as behavioural, compartmentalizing him into lips and verbal
tics and prejudices and likes . . . in short, she fell under the spell of the
perforated sheet of her own parents, because she resolved to fall in love with
her husband bit by bit.

Each day she selected one fragment of Ahmed Sinai, and concentrated her
total being upon it until it became wholly familiar; until she felt fondness
rising up within her and becoming affection and, finally, love. In this way she
came to adore his over-loud voice and the way it assaulted her eardrums and
made her tremble; and his peculiarity of always being in a good mood until
after he had shaved – after which, each morning, his manner became stern,
gruff, businesslike and distant; and his vulture-hooded eyes which concealed
what she was sure was his inner goodness behind a bleakly ambiguous gaze;
and the way his lower lip jutted out beyond his upper one; and his shortness
which led him to forbid her ever to wear high heels . . . ‘My God,’ she told
herself, ‘it seems that there are a million different things to love about every
man!’ But she was undismayed. ‘Who, after all,’ she reasoned privately, ‘ever
truly knows another human being completely?’ and continued to learn to love
and admire his appetite for fried foods, his ability to quote Persian poetry, the
furrow of anger between his eyebrows . . . ‘At this rate,’ she thought, ‘there will
always be something fresh about him to love; so our marriage just can’t go
stale.’ In this way, assiduously, my mother settled down to life in the old city.
The tin trunk sat unopened in old almirah.

And Ahmed, without knowing or suspecting, found himself and his life
worked upon by his wife until, little by little, he came to resemble – and to live
in a place that resembled – a man he had never known and an underground
chamber he had never seen. Under the influence of a painstaking magic so
obscure that Amina was probably unaware of working it, Ahmed Sinai found
his hair thinning, and what was left becoming lank and greasy; he discovered
that he was willing to let it grow until it began to worm over the tops of his ears.
Also, his stomach began to spread, until it became the yielding, squishy belly in
which I would so often be smothered and which none of us, consciously at
any rate, compared to the pudginess of Nadir Khan. His distant cousin Zohra told
him, coquettishly, ‘You must diet, cousinji, or we won’t be able to reach you to
kiss!’ But it did no good . . . and little by little Amina constructed in Old Delhi a
world of soft cushions and draperies over the windows which let in as little
light as possible . . . she lined the chick-blinds with black cloths; and all these
minute transformations helped her in her Herculean task, the task of accept-
ing, bit by bit, that she must love a new man. (But she remained susceptible to
the forbidden dream-images of . . . and was always drawn to men with soft
stomachs and longish, lankish hair.)

You could not see the new city from the old one. In the new city, a race of
pink conquerors had built palaces in pink stone; but the houses in the narrow
lanes of the old city leaned over, jostled, shuffled, blocked each other’s view of
the roseate edifices of power. Not that anyone ever looked in that direction,
anyway. In the Muslim muhallas or neighbourhoods which clustered around
Chandni Chowk, people were content to look inwards into the screened-off
courtyards of their lives; to roll chick-blinds down over their windows and
verandahs. In the narrow lanes, young loafers held hands and linked arms
and kissed when they met and stood in hip-jutting circles, facing inwards. There
was no greenery and the cows kept away, knowing they weren’t sacred here.
Bicycle bells rang constantly. And above their cacophony sounded the cries of
itinerant fruit-sellers: Come all you greats-O, eat a few dates-O!

To all of which was added, on that January morning when my mother and
father were each concealing secrets from the other, the nervous clatter of the
footsteps of Mr Mustapha Kemal and Mr S. P. Butt; and also the insistent rattle
of Lifafa Das’s dugdugee drum.

When the clattering footsteps were first heard in the gullies of the muhalla,
Lifafa Das and his peepshow and drum were still some distance away. Clatter-feet descended from a taxi and rushed into the narrow lanes; meanwhile, in their corner house, my mother stood in her kitchen stirring khichri for breakfast overhearing my father conversing with his distant cousin Zohra. Feet clacked past fruit salesmen and hand-holding loafers; my mother overheard: ‘... You newlyweds, I can’t stop coming to see, choo chweet I can’t tell you!’ While feet approached, my father actually coloured. In those days he was in the high summer of his charm; his lower lip really didn’t jut so much, the line between his eyebrows was still only faint and Amina, stirring khichri, heard Zohra squeal, ‘Oh look, pink! But then you are so fair, cousinji! ...’ And he was letting her listen to All-India Radio at the table, which Amina was not allowed to do; Lata Mangeshkar was singing a wasily love-song as ‘Just like me, don’t you think,’ Zohra went on. ‘Lovely pink babies we’ll have, a perfect match, no, cousinji, pretty white couples?’ And the feet clattering and the pan being stirred while ‘How awful to be black, cousinji, to wake every morning and see it staring at you, in the mirror to be shown proof of your inferiority! Of course they know; even blackies know white is nicer, don’t you think?’ The feet very close now and Amina stamping into the dining-room pot in hand, concentrating hard at restraining herself, thinking Why must she come today when I have news to tell and also I’ll have to ask for money in front of her. Ahmed Sinai liked to be asked nicely for money, to have it wheeled out of him with caresses and sweet words until his table napkin began to rise in his lap as something moved in his pajamas; and she didn’t mind, with her assiduity she learned to love this also, and when she needed money there were strokes and ‘Janum, my life, please ...’ and ‘... Just a little so that I can make nice food and pay the bills ...’ and ‘Such a generous man, give me whatever you like, I know it will be enough’... the techniques of street beggars and she’d have to do it in front of that one with her saucer eyes and giggly voice and loud chat about blackies. Feet at the door almost and Amina in the dining-room with hot khichri at the ready, so very near to Zohra’s silly head, whereupon Zohra cries, ‘Oh, present company excluded, of course!’ just in case, not being sure whether she’s been overheard or not, and ‘Oh, Ahmed, cousinji, you are really too dreadful to think I meant our lovely Amina who really isn’t so black but only like a white lady standing in the shade!’ While Amina with her pot in hand looks at the pretty head and thinks Should I? And, Do I dare? And calms herself down with: ‘It’s a big day for me; and at least she raised the subject of children; so now it’ll be easy for me to ...’ But it’s too late, the wailing of Lata on the radio has drowned the sound of the doorbell so they haven’t heard old Musa the bearer going to answer the door; Lata has obscured the sound of anxious feet clattering upstairs; but all of a sudden here they are, the feet of Mr Mustapha Kemal and Mr S. P. Butt, coming to a shuffling halt.

‘The rapscallions have perpetrated an outrage!’ Mr Kemal, who is the thinnest man Amina Sinai has ever seen, sets off with his curiously archaic phraseology (derived from his fondness for litigation, as a result of which he has become infected with the cadences of the lawcourts) a kind of chair reaction of farcical panic, to which little, squeaky, spineless S. P. Butt, who has something wild dancing like a monkey in his eyes, adds considerably, by getting out these three words: ‘Yes, the firebugs!’ And now Zohra in an odc reflex action clutches the radio to her bosom, muffling Lata between her breasts, screaming, ‘O God, O God, what firebugs, where? This house? O God, I can feel the heat!’ Amina stands frozen khichri-in-hand staring at the two men in their business suits as her husband, secrecy thrown to the winds now, rises shaven but as-yet-unsuited to his feet and asks, ‘The godown?’

Godown, gudam, warehouse, call it what you like; but no sooner has Ahmed Sinai asked his question than a hush fell upon the room, except for course that Lata Mangeshkar’s voice still issued from Zohra’s cleavage, because these three men shared one such large edifice, located on the industrial estate at the outskirts of the city. ‘Not the godown, God forbid,’ Amina prayed silently, because the recinelle and leathercloth business was doing well through Major Zulfikar, who was now an aide at Military G.H.Q. in Delhi. Ahmed Sinai had landed a contract to supply leathercloth jackets and water-proof table coverings to the Army itself — and large stocks of the material on which their lives depended were stored in that warehouse. ‘But who would do such a thing?’ Zohra wailed in harmony with her singing breasts, ‘What mad people are loose in the world these days?’ ... and that was how Amina heard, for the first time, the name which her husband had hidden from her, and which was, in those times, striking terror into many hearts. ‘It is Ravana,’ said S. P. Butt ... but Ravana is the name of a many-headed demon; are demons, then, abroad in the land? ‘What rubbish is this?’ Amina, speaking with her father’s hatred of superstition, demanded an answer; and Mr Kemal provided it. ‘It is the name of a dastardly crew, Madam; a band of incendiary rogues. These are troubled days; troubled days.’

In the godown: roll upon roll of leathercloth; and the commodities dealt in by Mr Kemal, rice tea lentils — he hoards them all over the country in vast quantities, as a form of protection against the many-headed many-mouthed rapacious monster that is the public, which, if given its heads, would force prices so low in a time of abundance that godfearing entrepreneurs would starve while the monster grew fat ... ‘Economics is scarcity,’ Mr Kemal argues, ‘therefore my hoards not only keep prices at a decent level but underpin the very structure of the economy.’ — And then there is, in the godown, Mr Butt’s stockpile, boxed in cartons bearing the words aag brand. I do not need to tell you that aag means fire. S. P. Butt was a manufacturer of matches.

‘Our informations,’ Mr Kemal says, ‘reveal only the fact of a fire at the estate. The precise godown is not specified.’
But why should it be ours?’ Ahmed Sinai asks. ‘Why, since we still have time to pay?’

‘Pay?’ Amina interrupts. ‘Pay whom? Pay what? Husband, janum, life of mine, what is happening here?’ . . . But ‘We must go,’ S. P. Butt says, and Ahmed Sinai is leaving, crumpled night-pajamas and all, rushing clatterfooted out of the house with the thin one and the spineless one, leaving behind him uneaten khichri, wide-eyed women, muffled Lata, and hanging in the air the name of Ravana . . . ‘a gang of ne’er-do-wells, Madam; unscrupulous cut-throats and bounders to a man!’

And S. P. Butt’s last quavering words: ‘Dammfool Hindu firebugs, Begum Sahiba. But what can we Muslims do?’

What is known about the Ravana gang? That it posed as a fanatical anti-Muslim movement, which, in those days before the Partition riots, in those days when pigs’ heads could be left with impunity in the courtyards of Friday mosques, was nothing unusual. That it sent men out, at dead of night, to paint slogans on the walls of both old and new cities: NO PARTITION OR ELSE PERDITION! MUSLIMS ARE THE JEWS OF ASIA! and so forth. And that it burned down Muslim-owned factories, shops, godowns. But there’s more, and this is not commonly known: behind this façade of racial hatred, the Ravana gang was a brilliantly-conceived commercial enterprise. Anonymous phone calls, letters written with words cut out of newspapers were issued to Muslim businessmen, who were offered the choice between paying a single, once-only cash sum and having their world burned down. Interestingly, the gang proved itself to be ethical. There were no second demands. And they meant business: in the absence of grey bags full of pay-off money, fire would lick at shopfronts factories warehouses. Most people paid, preferring that to the risky alternative of trusting to the police. The police, in 1947, were not to be relied upon by Muslims. And it is said (though I can’t be sure of this) that when the blackmail letters arrived, they contained a list of ‘satisfied customers’ who had paid up and stayed in business. The Ravana gang — like all professionals — gave references.

Two men in business suits, one in pajamas, ran through the narrow gullies of the Muslim mohalla to the taxi waiting on Chandni Chowk. They attracted curious glances: not only because of their varied attire, but because they were trying not to run. ‘Don’t show panic,’ Mr Kemal said, ‘Look calm.’ But their feet kept getting out of control and rushing on. Jerkily, in little rushes of speed followed by a few badly-disciplined steps at walking pace, they left the mohalla; and passed, on their way, a young man with a black metal peepshow box on wheels, a man holding a dudugee drum: Lifafa Das, on his way to the scene of the important annunciation which gives this episode its name. Lifafa Das was rattling his drum and calling: ‘Come see everything, come see everything, come see! Come see Delhi, come see India, come see! Come see, come see!’

But Ahmed Sinai had other things to look at.

The children of the mohalla had their own names for most of the local inhabitants. One group of three neighbours was known as the ‘fighting-cock people’, because they comprised one Sindhi and one Bengali householder whose homes were separated by one of the mohalla’s few Hindu residences. The Sindhi and the Bengali had very little in common — they didn’t speak the same language or cook the same food; but they were both Muslims, and they both detested the interposed Hindu. They dropped garbage on his house from their rooftops. They hurled multilingual abuse at him from their windows. They flung scraps of meat at his door . . . while he, in turn, paid urchins to throw stones at their windows, stones with messages wrapped round them: ‘Wait,’ the messages said, ‘Your turn will come’ . . . the children of the mohalla did not call my father by his right name. They knew him as ‘the man who can’t follow his nose’.

Ahmed Sinai was the possessor of a sense of direction so inept that, left to his own devices, he could even get lost in the winding gullies of his own neighbourhood. Many times the street-arabs in the lanes had come across him, wandering forlornly, and been offered a four-anna chavanni piece to escort him home. I mention this because I believe that my father’s gift for taking wrong turns did not simply afflict him throughout his life; it was also a reason for his attraction to Amina Sinai (because thanks to Nadir Khan, she had shown that she could take wrong turns, too); and, what's more, his inability to follow his own nose dripped into me, to some extent clouding the nasal inheritance I received from other places, and making me, for year after year, incapable of sniffing out my own true road . . . But that’s enough for now, because I’ve given the three businessmen enough time to get to the industrial estate. I shall add only that (in my opinion as a direct consequence of his lack of a sense of direction) my father was a man over whom, even in his moments of triumph, there hung the stink of future failure, the odour of a wrong turning that was just around the corner, an aroma which could not be washed away by his frequent baths. Mr Kemal, who smelled it, would say privately to S. P. Butt, ‘These Kashmiri types, old boy: well-known fact they never wash.’ This slander connects my father to the boatman Tai . . . to Tai in the grip of the self-destructive rage which made him give up being clean.

At the industrial estate, night-watchmen were sleeping peacefully through the noise of the fire-engines. Why? How? Because they had made a deal with the Ravana mob, and, when tipped off about the gang’s impending arrival, would take sleeping draughts and pull their charpoy beds away from the
buildings of the estate. In this way the gang avoided violence, and the night-watchmen augmented their meagre wages. It was an amicable and not unintelligent arrangement.

Amid sleeping night-watchmen, Mr Kemal, my father and S. P. Butt watched cremated bicycles rise up into the sky in thick black clouds. Butt father Kemal stood alongside fire engines, as relief flooded through them, because it was the Arjuna Indiabiike godown that was burning — the Arjuna brand-name, taken from a hero of Hindu mythology, had failed to disguise the fact that the company was Muslim-owned. Washed by relief, father Kemal Butt breathed air filled with incendiary bicycles, coughing and spluttering as the fumes of incinerated wheels, the vaporized ghosts of chains bells saddlebags handlebars, the transubstantiated frames of Arjuna Indiabiikes moved in and out of their lungs. A crude cardboard mask had been nailed to a telegraph pole in front of the flaming godown — a mask of many faces — a devil’s mask of snarling faces with broad curling lips and bright red nostrils. The faces of the many-headed monster, Ravana the demon king, looking angrily down at the bodies of the night-watchmen who were sleeping so soundly that no one, neither the firemen, nor Kemal, nor Butt, nor my father, had the heart to disturb them; while the ashes of pedals and inner tubes fell upon them from the skies.

‘Damn bad business,’ Mr Kemal said. He was not being sympathetic. He was criticizing the owners of the Arjuna Indiabiike Company.

Look: the cloud of the disaster (which is also a relief) rises and gathers like a ball in the discoloured morning sky. See how it thrusts itself westward into the heart of the old city; how it is pointing, good lord, like a finger, pointing down at the Muslim mohalla near Chandni Chowk! . . . Where, right now, Lifafa Das is crying his wares in the Sinai’s very own gully.

‘Come see everything, see the whole world, come see!’

It’s almost time for the public announcement. I won’t deny I’m excited: I’ve been hanging around in the background of my own story for too long, and although it’s still a little while before I can take over, it’s nice to get a look in. So, with a sense of high expectation, I follow the pointing finger in the sky and look down on my parents’ neighbourhood, upon bicycles, upon street-vendorsouting roasted gram in twists of paper, upon the hip-jutting, hand-holding street loafers, upon flying scraps of paper and little clustered whirlwinds of flies around the sweetmeat stalls . . . all of it foreshortened by my high-in-the-sky point of view. And there are children, swarms of them, too, attracted into the street by the magical rattle of Lifafa Das’s dudugee drum and his voice, ‘Dunya dekho’, see the whole world! Boys without shorts on, girls without vests, and other, smarter infants in school whites, their shorts held up by elasticated belts with S-shaped snake-buckles, fat little boys with podgy fingers; all flocking to the black box on wheels, including this one particular girl, a girl with one long hairy continuous eyebrow shading both eyes, the eight-year-old daughter of that same discourteous Sindhi who is even now raising the flag of the still-fictional country of Pakistan on his roof, who is even now hurling abuse at his neighbour, while his daughter rushes into the street with her chavanni in her hand, her expression of a midget queen, and murdely lurking just behind her lips. What’s her name? I don’t know; but I know those eyebrows.

Lifafa Das: who has by an unfortunate chance set up his black peepshow against a wall on which someone has daubed a swastika (in those days you saw them everywhere; the extremist R.S.S.S. party got them on every wall; not the Nazi swastika which was the wrong way round, but the ancient Hindu symbo of power. Svasti is Sanskrit for ‘good’ . . . this Lifafa Das whose arrival I’ve been trumpeting was a young fellow who was invisible until he smiled, when he became beautiful, or rattled his drum, whereupon he became irresistible to children. Dudugee-men: all over India, they shout, ‘Dilli dekho’, ‘come see Delhi!’ But this was Delhi, and Lifafa Das had altered his cry accordingly. ‘See the whole world, come see everything!’ The hyperbolic formula began, after a time, to prey upon his mind; more and more picture postcards went into his peepshow as he tried, desperately, to deliver what he promised, to put every thing into his box. (I am suddenly reminded of Nadir Khan’s friend the painter is this an Indian disease, this urge to encapsulate the whole of reality? Worse am I infected, too?)

Inside the peepshow of Lifafa Das were pictures of the Taj Mahal, and Meenakshi Temple, and the holy Ganges; but as well as these famous sights the peepshow-man had felt the urge to include more contemporary images — Stafford Cripps leaving Nehru’s residence; untouchables being touched; educated persons sleeping in large numbers on railway lines; a publicity still of: European actress with a mountain of fruit on her head — Lifafa called her Carmen Verandah; even a newspaper photograph, mounted on card, of a fire at the industrial estate. Lifafa Das did not believe in shielding his audience from the not-always-pleasant features of the age . . . and often, when he came into these gullies, grown-ups as well as children came to see what was new inside his box on wheels, and among his most frequent customers was Begum Amina Sinai.

But today there is something hysterical in the air; something brittle and menacing has settled on the mohalla as the cloud of cremated Indiabiikes hangs overhead . . . and now it slips its leash, as this girl with her one continuous eyebrow squeals, her voice lisping with an innocence it does not possess, ‘My father! Out of my way . . . let me thee! I can’t thee!’ Because there are already eyes at the holes in the box, there are already children absorbed in the progression of postcards, and Lifafa Das says (without pausing in his work —
womb bursting with its invisible untold secret: ‘Wah, wah,’ she applauded the crowd. ‘What heroes! Heroes, I swear, absolutely! Only fifty of you against this terrible monster of a fellow! Allah, you make my eyes shine with pride.’

. . . And Zohra, ‘Come back, sisterji!’ And the oily quiff, ‘Why speak for this goonda, Begum Sahiba? This is not right acting.’ And Amina, ‘I know this man. He is a decent type. Go, get out, none of you have anything to do! In a Muslim mohalla you would tear a man to pieces? Go, remove yourselves.’ But the mob has stopped being surprised, and is moving forward again . . . and now. Now it comes.

‘Listen,’ my mother shouted, ‘Listen well. I am with child. I am a mother who will have a child, and I am giving this man my shelter. Come on now, if you want to kill, kill a mother also and show the world what men you are!’

That was how it came about that my arrival — the coming of Saleem Sinai — was announced to the assembled masses of the people before my father had heard about it. From the moment of my conception, it seems, I have been public property.

But although my mother was right when she made her public announcement, she was also wrong. This is why: the baby she was carrying did not turn out to be her son.

My mother came to Delhi; worked assiduously at loving her husband; was prevented by Zohra and khichri and clattering feet from telling her husband her news; heard screams; made a public announcement. And it worked. My annunciation saved a life.

After the crowd dispersed, old Musa the bearer went into the street and rescued Lifafa Das’s peepshow, while Amina gave the young man with the beautiful smile glass after glass of fresh lime water. It seemed that his experience had drained him not only of liquid but also sweetness, because he put four spoonfuls of raw sugar into every glass, while Zohra cowered in pretty terror on a sofa. And, at length, Lifafa Das (rehydrated by lime water, sweetened by sugar) said: ‘Begum Sahiba, you are a great lady. If you allow, I bless your house; also your unborn child. But also — please permit — I will do one thing more for you.’

‘Thank you,’ my mother said, ‘but you must do nothing at all.’

But he continued (the sweetness of sugar coating his tongue). ‘My cousin, Shri Ramram Seth, is a great seer, Begum Sahiba. Palmist, astrologer, fortune-teller. You will please come to him, and he will reveal to you the future of your son.’

Soothersayers prophesied me . . . in January 1947, my mother Amina Sinai was offered the gift of a prophecy in return for her gift of a life. And despite Zohra’s ‘It is madness to go with this one, Amina sister, do not even think of it
for one sec, these are times to be careful; despite her memories of her father's scepticism and of his thumbandforefinger closing around a maulvi's ear, the offer touched my mother in a place which answered Yes. Caught up in the illogical wonderment of her brand-new motherhood of which she had only just become certain, 'Yes,' she said, 'Lifafa Das, you will please meet me after some days at the gate to the Red Fort. Then you will take me to your cousin.'

'I shall be waiting every day,' he joined his palms; and left.

Zohra was so stunned that, when Ahmed Sinai came home, she could only shake her head and say, 'You newlyweds; crazy as owls; I must leave you to each other!'

Musa, the old bearer, kept his mouth shut, too. He kept himself in the background of our lives, always, except twice . . . once when he left us; once when he returned to destroy the world by accident.

Many-headed Monsters

Unless, of course, there's no such thing as chance; in which case Musa — for all his age and servility — was nothing less than a time-bomb, ticking softly away until his appointed time; in which case, we should either — optimistically — get up and cheer, because if everything is planned in advance, then we all have a meaning; and are spared the terror of knowing ourselves to be random, without a why; or else, of course, we might — as pessimists — give up right here and now, understanding the futility of thought decision action, since nothing we think makes any difference anyway; things will be as they will. Where, then, is optimism? In fate or in chaos? Was my father being opti- or pessimistic when my mother told him her news (after everyone in the neighbourhood had heard it), and he replied with, 'I told you so; it was only a matter of time.'? My mother's pregnancy, it seems, was fated; my birth, however, owed a good deal to accident.

'It was only a matter of time,' my father said, with every appearance of pleasure; but time has been an unsteady affair, in my experience, not a thing to be relied upon. It could even be partitioned: the clocks in Pakistan would run half an hour ahead of their Indian counterparts . . . Mr Kemal, who wanted nothing to do with Partition, was fond of saying, 'Here's proof of the folly of the scheme! Those Leaguers plan to abscond with a whole thirty minutes! Time Without Partitions,' Mr Kemal cried, 'That's the ticket!' And S. P. Butt said, 'If they can change the time just like that, what's real any more? I ask you? What's true?'

It seems like a day for big questions. I reply across the unreliable years to S. P. Butt, who got his throat slit in the Partition riots and lost interest in time: 'What's real and what's true aren't necessarily the same.' True, for me, was from my earliest days something hidden inside the stories Mary Pereira told me: Mary my ayah who was both more and less than a mother; Mary who knew everything about all of us. True was a thing concealed just over the horizon towards which the fisherman's finger pointed in the picture on my wall, while the young Raleigh listened to his tales. Now, writing this in my Anglepoised pool of light, I measure truth against those early things: Is this how Mary would have told it? I ask. Is this what that fisherman would have said? . . . And