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
by those standards it is undeniably true that, one day in January 1947, my mother heard all about me six months before I turned up, while my father came up against a demon king.

Amina Sinai had been waiting for a suitable moment to accept Lifafa Das’s offer; but for two days after the burning of the Indiabike factory Ahmed Sinai stayed at home, never visiting his office at Connaught Place, as if he were steeling himself for some unpleasant encounter. For two days the grey money-bag lay supposedly secret in its place under his side of their bed. My father showed no desire to talk about the reasons for the grey bag’s presence; so Amina said to herself, ‘Let him be like that; who cares?’ because she had her secret, too, waiting patiently for her by the gates of the Red Fort at the top of Chandni Chowk. Pouting in secret petulance, my mother kept Lifafa Das to herself. ‘Unless-and-until he tells me what he’s up to, why should I tell him?’ she argued.

And then a cold January evening, on which ‘I’ve got to go out tonight’ said Ahmed Sinai; and despite her pleas of ‘It’s cold — you’ll get sick . . .’ he put on his business suit and coat under which the mysterious grey bag made a ridiculously obvious lump; so finally she said, ‘Wrap up warm,’ and sent him off wherever he was going, asking, ‘Will you be late?’ To which he replied, ‘Yes, certainly.’ Five minutes after he left, Amina Sinai set off for the Red Fort, into the heart of her adventure.

One journey began at a fort; one should have ended at a fort, and did not. One foretold the future; the other settled its geographical location. During one journey, monkeys danced entertainingly; while, in the other place, a monkey was also dancing, but with disastrous results. In both adventures, a part was played by vultures. And many-headed monsters lurked at the end of both roads.

One at a time, then . . . and here is Amina Sinai beneath the high walls of the Red Fort, where Mughals ruled, from whose heights the new nation will be proclaimed . . . neither monarch nor herald, my mother is nevertheless greeted with warmth (despite the weather). In the last light of the day, Lifafa Das exclaims, ‘Begum Sahiba! Oh, that is excellent that you came!’ Dark-skinne in a white sari, she beckons him towards the taxi; he reaches for the back door; but the driver snaps, ‘What do you think? Who do you think you are? Come on now, get in the front seat damn smart, leave the lady to sit in the back!’ So Amina shares her seat with a black peepshow on wheels, while Lifafa Das apologizes: ‘Sorry, hey, Begum Sahiba? Good intents are no offence.’

But here, refusing to wait its turn, is another taxi, pausing outside another fort, unloading its cargo of three men in business suits, each carrying a bulky grey bag under his coat . . . one man long as a life and thin as a lie, a second who seems to lack a spine, and a third whose lower lip juts, whose belly tends to squashiness, whose hair is thinning and greasy and worming over the tops of his ears, and between whose eyebrows is the telltale furrow that will, as he ages, deepen into the scar of a bitter, angry man. The taxi-driver is ebullient despite the cold. ‘Purana Qila!’ he calls out, ‘Everybody out, please! Old Fort here we are!’ . . . There have been many, many cities of Delhi, and the Old Fort that blackened ruin, is a Delhi so ancient that beside it our own City is merely a babe in arms. It is to this ruin of an impossibly antique time that Kemal, Butt and Ahmed Sinai have been brought by an anonymous telephon call which ordered, ‘Tonight. Old Fort. Just after sunset. But no police . . . o godown funtoosh!’ Clutching their grey bags, they move into the ancient crumbling world.

. . . Clutching at her handbag, my mother sits beside a peepshow, while Lifafa Das rides in front with the puzzled, irascible driver, and directs the cat into the streets on the wrong side of the General Post Office; and as she enters these causeways where poverty eats away at the tarmac like a drought, where people lead their invisible lives (because they share Lifafa Das’s curse of invisibility, and not all of them have beautiful smiles), something new begins to assail her. Under the pressure of these streets which are growing narrower by the minute, more crowded by the inch, she has lost her ‘city eyes’. When you have city eyes you cannot see the invisible people, the men with elephantiasis of the balls and the beggars in boxcars don’t impinge on you, and the concrete sections of future drainpipes don’t look like dormitories. My mother lost her city eyes and the newness of what she was seeing made her flush, newness like a hailstorm pricking her cheeks. Look, my God, those beautiful children have black teeth! Would you believe . . . girl children baring their nipples! How terrible, truly! And, Allah-tobah, heaven forfend, sweeper women with — no! — how dreadful! — collapsed spines, and bunches of twigs, and no caste marks; untouchables, sweet Allah! . . . and cripples everywhere, mutilated by loving parents to ensure them of a lifelong income from begging . . . yes, beggars in boxcars, grown men with babies’ legs, in crates on wheels, made out of discarded roller-skates and old mango boxes; my mother cries out, ‘Lifafa Das, turn back!’ . . . but he is smiling his beautiful smile, and says, ‘We must walk from here.’ Seeing that there is no going back, she tells the taxi to wait, and the bad-tempered driver says, ‘Yes, of course, for a great lady what is there to do but wait, and when you come I must drive my car in reverse all the way back to main-road, because here is no room to turn!’ . . . Children tugging at the pallu of her sari, heads everywhere staring at my mother, who thinks, it’s like being surrounded by some terrible monster, a creature with heads and heads and heads; but she corrects herself, no, of course not a monster, these poor poor people — what then? A power of some sort, a force which does not know its strength, which has perhaps decayed into impotence through never having
been used ... No, these are not decayed people, despite everything. ‘I’m frightened,’ my mother finds herself thinking, just as a hand touches her arm. Turning, she finds herself looking into the face of — impossible! — a white man, who stretches out a raggedy hand and says in a voice like a high foreign song, ‘Give something, Begum Sahiba . . . ’ and repeats and repeats like a stuck record while she looks with embarrassment into a white face with long eyelashes and a curved patrician nose — embarrassment, because he was white, and begging was not for white people. ‘. . . All the way from Calcutta, on foot,’ he was saying, ‘and covered in ashes, as you see, Begum Sahiba, because of my shame at having been there for the Killing — last August you remember, Begum Sahiba, thousands knifed in four days of screaming . . . ’ Lifafa Das is standing helplessly by, not knowing how to behave with a white man, even a beggar, and ‘. . . Did you hear about the European?’ the beggar asks, ‘. . . Yes, among the killers, Begum Sahiba, walking through the town at night with blood on his shirt, a white man deranged by the coming futility of his kind; did you hear?’ . . . And now a pause in that perplexing song of a voice, and then: ‘He was my husband.’ Only now did my mother see the stifled breasts beneath the rags . . . ‘Give something for my shame.’ Tugging at her arm. Lifafa Das tugging at the other, whispering Hijra, transvestite, come away, Begum Sahiba; and Amina standing still as she is tugged in opposite directions wants to say Wait, white woman, just let me finish my business, I will take you home, feed you clothe you, send you back into your own world; but just then the woman shrugs and walks off empty-handed down the narrowing street, shrinking to a point until she vanishes — now! — into the distant meanness of the lane. And now Lifafa Das, with a curious expression on his face, says, ‘They’re funtoosh! All finished! Soon they will all go; and then we’ll be free to kill each other.’ Touching her belly with one light hand, she follows him into a darkened doorway while her face bursts into flames.

. . . While at the Old Fort, Ahmed Sinai waits for Ravana. My father in the sunset: standing in the darkened doorway of what was once a room in the ruined walls of the fort, lower lip protruding fleshly, hands clasped behind his back, head full of money worries. He was never a happy man. He smelled faintly of future failure; he mistreated servants; perhaps he wished that, instead of following his late father into the leathercloth business, he had had the strength to pursue his original ambition, the re-arrangement of the Quran in accurately chronological order. (He once told me: ‘When Muhammed prophesied, people wrote down what he said on palm leaves, which were kept any old how in a box. After he died, Abubakr and the others tried to remember the correct sequence; but they didn’t have very good memories.’ Another wrong turning: instead of rewriting a sacred book, my father lurked in a ruin, awaiting demons. It’s no wonder he wasn’t happy; and I would be no help. When I was born, I broke his big toe.) . . . My unhappy father, I repeat, thinks bad-temperedly about cash. About his wife, who wheedles rupees out of him and picks his pockets at night. And his ex-wife (who eventually died in an accident, when she argued with a camel-cart driver and was hit in the neck by the camel), who writes him endless begging letters, despite the divorce settlement. And his distant cousin Zohra, who needs dowry money from him, so that she can raise children to marry his and so get her hooks into even more of his cash. And then there are Major Zulfi’s promises of money (at this stage, Major Zulfiy and my father got on very well). The Major had been writing letters saying, ‘You must decide for Pakistan when it comes, as it surely will. It’s certain to be a goldmine for men like us. Please let me introduce you to M. A. J. himself . . . ’ but Ahmed Sinai distrusted Muhammad Ali Jinnah, and never accepted Zulfiy’s offer; so when Jinnah became President of Pakistan, there would be another wrong turning to think about. And, finally, there were letters from my father’s old friend, the gynaecologist Doctor Narlikar, in Bombay. ‘The British are leaving in droves, Sinai bhai. Property is dirt cheap! Sell up; come here; buy; live the rest of your life in luxury!’ Verses of the Quran had no place in a head so full of cash . . . and, in the meantime, here he is, alongside S. P. Butt who will die in a train to Pakistan, and Mustapha Kemal who will be murdered by goondas in his grand Flagstaff Road house and have the words ‘mother-sleeping hoarder’ written on his chest in his own blood . . . alongside these two doomed men, waiting in the secret shadow of a ruin to spy on a blackmailer coming for his money. ‘South-west corner,’ the phone call said, ‘Turret. Stone staircase inside. Climb. Topmost landing. Leave money there. Go. Understood?’ Defying orders, they hide in the ruined room; somewhere above them, on the topmost landing of the turret tower, three grey bags wait in the gathering dark.

. . . In the gathering dark of an airless stairwell, Amina Sinai is climbing towards a prophecy. Lifafa Das is comforting her; because now that she has come by taxi into the narrow bottle of his mercy, he has sensed an alteration in her, a regret at her decision; he reassures her as they climb. The darkened stairwell is full of eyes, eyes glinting through shuttered doors as the spectacle of the climbing dark lady, eyes lapping her up like bright rough cats’ tongues; and as Lifafa talks, soothingly, my mother feels her will ebuing away. What will be, will be, her strength of mind and her hold on the world seeping out of her into the dark sponge of the staircase air. Slugishly her feet follow his, up into the upper reaches of the huge gloomy chawl, the broken-down tenement building in which Lifafa Das and his cousins have a small corner, at the very top . . . here, near the top, she sees dark light filtering down on to the heads of queueing cripples. ‘My number two cousin,’ Lifafa Das says, ‘is bone-setter.’ She climbs past men with broken arms, women with feet twisted backwards at impossible angles, past fallen window-cleaners and splintered bricklayers, a doctor’s daughter entering a world older than syringes and hospitals; until, at
last, Lifafa Das says, ‘Here we are, Begum,’ and leads her through a room in which the bone-setter is fastening twigs and leaves to shattered limbs, wrapping cracked heads in palm-fronds, until his patients begin to resemble artificial trees, sprouting vegetation from their injuries . . . then out on to a flat expanse of cemented roof. Amina, blinking in the dark at the brightness of lanterns, makes out insane shapes on the roof: monkeys dancing; mongoose leaping; snakes swaying in baskets; and on the parapet, the silhouettes of large birds, whose bodies are as hooked and cruel as their beaks: vultures.

‘Arré baap,’ she cries, ‘where are you bringing me?’

‘Nothing to worry, Begum, please,’ Lifafa Das says. ‘These are my cousins here. My number-three-and-four cousins. That one is monkey-dancer . . .’

‘Just practising, Begum!’ a voice calls. ‘See: monkey goes to war and dies for his country!’

‘. . . and there, snake-and-mongoose man.’

‘See mongoose jump, Sahiba! See cobra dance!’

‘. . . But the birds? . . .’

‘Nothing, Madam: only there is Parsee Tower of Silence just near here; and when there are no dead ones there, the vultures come. Now they are asleep; in the days, I think, they like to watch my cousins practising.’

A small room, on the far side of the roof. Light streams through the door as Amina enters . . . to find, inside, a man the same age as her husband, a heavy man with several chins, wearing white stained trousers and a red check shirt and no shoes, munching aniseed and drinking from a bottle of Vimto, sitting cross-legged in a room on whose walls are pictures of Vishnu in each of his avatars, and notices reading, writing taught, and spitting during visit is quite a bad habit. There is no furniture . . . and Shri Ramram Seth is sitting cross-legged, six inches above the ground.

I must admit it: to her shame, my mother screamed . . .

. . . While, at the Old Fort, monkeys scream among ramparts. The ruined city, having been deserted by people, is now the abode of langouros. Long-tailed and black-faced, the monkeys are possessed of an overarching sense of mission. Upupup they clamber, leaping to the topmost heights of the ruin, staking out territories, and thereafter dedicating themselves to the dismemberment, stone by stone, of the entire fortress. Padma, it’s true: you’ve never been there, never stood in the twilight watching straining, resolute, furry creatures working at the stones, pulling and rocking, rocking and pulling, working the stones loose one at a time . . . every day the monkeys send stones rolling down the walls, bouncing off angles and outcrops, crashing down into the ditches below. One day there will be no Old Fort; in the end, nothing but a pile of rubble surmounted by monkeys screaming in triumph . . . and here is one monkey, scurrying along the ramparts – I shall call him Hanuman, after the monkey god who helped Prince Rama defeat the original Ravana, Hanuman of the flying chariots . . . Watch him now as he arrives at this turret — his territory; as he hops chatters runs from corner to corner of his kingdom, rubbering his rear on the stones; and then pauses, sniffs something that should not be here . . . Hanuman races to the alcove here, on the topmost landing, in which the three men have left three soft grey alien things. And, while monkeys dance on a roof behind the post office, Hanuman the monkey dances with rage. Pounces on the grey things. Yes, they are loose enough, won’t take much rocking and pulling, pulling and rocking . . . watch Hanuman now, dragging the soft grey stones to the edge of the long drop of the outside wall of the Fort. See him tear at them: rip! rap! rop! . . . Look how deftly he scoops paper from the insides of the grey things, sending it down like floating rain to bathe the fallen stones in the ditch! . . . Paper falling with lazy, reluctant grace, sinking like a beautiful memory into the jaw of the darkness; and now, kick! thump! and again kick! the three soft grey stones go over the edge, downdown into the dark, and at last there comes a soft disconsolate plop. Hanuman, his work done, loses interest, scurries away to some distant pinnacle of his kingdom, begins to rock on a stone.

. . . While, down below, my father has seen a grotesque figure emerging from the gloom. Not knowing a thing about the disaster which has taken place above, he observes the monster from the shadow of his ruined room: a ragged-pajama’d creature in the head-dress of a demon, a papier-mâché devil-top which has faces grinning on every side of it . . . the appointed representative of the Ravana gang. The collector. Hearts thumping, the three businessmen watch this spectre out of a peasant’s nightmare vanish into the stairwell leading to the landing; and after a moment, in the stillness of the empty night, hear the devil’s perfectly human oaths. ‘Mother-sleepers! Eunuchs from somewhere!’ . . . Uncomprehending, they see their bizarre tormentor emerge, rush away into the darkness, vanish. His imprecations . . . ‘Sodomizers of ass! Sons of pigs! Eaters of their own excrement!’ . . . linger on the breeze. And up they go now, confusion adling their spirits; Butt finds a torn fragment of grey cloth; Mustapha Kemal stoops over a crumpled rupee; and maybe, yes, why not, my father sees a dark flurry of monkey out of the corner of an eye . . . and they guess.

And now their groans and Mr Butt’s shrill curses, which are echoes of the devil’s oaths; and there’s a battle raging, unspoken, in all their heads: money or godown or godown or money? Businessmen ponder, in mute panic, this central riddle — but then, even if they abandon the cash to the depredations of scavenging dogs and humans, how to stop the fire-raisers? — and last, without a word having been spoken, the inexpressible law of cash-in-hand wins them over; they rush down stone stairs, along grassed lawns, through ruined gates, and arrive — PELL-MELL! — at the ditch, to begin scooping rupees into their pockets, shovelling grabbing scrabbling, ignoring pools of urine and
rotting fruit, trusting against all likelihood that tonight — by the grace of — just tonight for once, the gang will fail to wreak its promised revenge. But, of course

... But, of course, Ramram the seer was not really floating in mid-air, six inches above the ground. My mother’s scream faded; her eyes focused; and she noticed the little shelf, protruding from the wall. ‘Cheap trick,’ she told herself, and, ‘What am I doing here in this godforsaken place of sleeping vultures and monkey-dancers, waiting to be told who knows what foolishness by a guru who levitates by sitting on a shelf?’

What Amina Sinai did not know was that, for the second time in history, I was about to make my presence felt. (No: not that fraudulent tadpole in her stomach: I mean myself, in my historical role, of which prime ministers have written ‘. . . it is, in a sense, the mirror of us all.’ Great forces were working that night; and all present were about to feel their power, and be afraid.)

Cousins — one to four — gathering in the doorway through which the dark lady has passed, drawn like moths to the candle of her screech . . . watching her quietly as she advanced, guided by Lifafa Das, towards the unlikely soothsayer, were bone-setter cobra-wallah and monkey-man. Whispers of encouragement now (and were there also gaggles behind rough hands?): ‘O such a too fine fortune he will tell, Sahiba!’ and, ‘Come, cousinji, lady is waiting!’ . . . But what was this Ramram? A huckster, a two-chip palmist, a giver of cute forecasts to silly women — or the genuine article, the holder of the keys? And Lifafa Das: did he see, in my mother, a woman who could be satisfied by a two-rupee fake, or did he see deeper, into the underground heart of her weakness? — And when the prophecy came, were cousins astonished too? — And the frothing at the mouth? What of that? And was it true that my mother, under the dislocating influence of that hysterical evening, relinquished her hold on her habitual self — which she had felt slipping away from her into the absorbing sponge of the lightless air in the stairwell — and entered a state of mind in which anything might happen and be believed? And there is another, more horrible possibility, too; but before I voice my suspicion, I must describe, as nearly as possible in spite of this filmy curtain of ambiguities, what actually happened: I must describe my mother, her palm slanted outwards towards the advancing palmist, her eyes wide and unblinking as a pomfret’s — and the cousins (giggling?), ‘What a reading you are coming to get, Sahiba!’ and, ‘Tell, cousinji, tell!’ — but the curtain descends again, so I cannot be sure — did he begin like a cheap circus-tent man and go through the banal conjugations of life-line heart-line and children who would be multi-millionaires, while cousins cheered, ‘Wah wah!’ and, ‘Absolute master reading, yara!’ — and then, did he change? — did Ramram become stiff — eyes rolling upwards until they were white as eggs — did he, in a voice as strange as a mirror, ask, ‘You permit, Madam, that I touch the place?’ — while cousins fell as silent as sleeping vultures — and did my mother, just as strangely, reply, ‘Yes, I permit,’ so that the seer became only the third man to touch her in her life, apart from her family members? — and was it then, at that instant, that a brief sharp jolt of electricity passed between pudgy fingers and maternal skin? And my mother’s face, rabbit-startled, watching the prophet in the check shirt as he began to circle, his eyes still egglike in the softness of his face; and suddenly a shudder passing through him and again that strange high voice as the words issued through his lips (I must describe those lips, too — but later, because now . . .) ‘A son.’

Silent cousins — monkeys on leashes, ceasing their chatter — cobras coiled in baskets — and the circling fortune-teller, finding history speaking through his lips. (Was that how?) Beginning, ‘A son . . . such a son!’ And then it comes, ‘A son, Sahiba, who will never be older than his motherland — neither older nor younger.’ And now, real fear amongst snake-charmer mongoose-dancer bone-setter and peepshow-wallah, because they have never heard Ramram like this, as he continues, singsong, high-pitched: ‘There will be two heads — but you shall see only one — there will be knees and a nose, a nose and knees.’ Nose and knees and knees and nose . . . listen carefully, Padma; the fellow got nothing wrong! ‘Newspaper praises him, two mothers raise him! Bicyclists love him — but, crowds will shove him! Sisters will weep; cobra will creep . . .’ Ramram, circling fasterfaster, while four cousins murmur, ‘What is this, baba?’ and, ‘Deo, Shiva, guard us!’ While Ramram, ‘Washing will hide him — voices will guide him! Friends mutilate him — blood will betray him!’ And Amina Sinai, ‘What does he mean? I don’t understand — Lifafa Das — what has got into him?’ But, inexorably, whirling egg-eyed around her statue-still presence, goes Ramram Seth: ‘Spittoons will brain him — doctors will drain him — jungle will claim him — wizards reclaim him! Soldiers will try him — tyrants will fry him . . .’ While Amina begs for explanations and the cousins fall into a hand-flapping frenzy of helpless alarm because something has taken over and nobody dares touch Ramram Seth as he whirs to his climax: ‘He will have sons without having sons! He will be old before he is old! And he will die . . . before he is dead.’

Is that how it was? Is that when Ramram Seth, annihilated by the passage through him of a power greater than his own, fell suddenly to the floor and frothed at the mouth? Was mongoose-man’s stick inserted between his twitching teeth? Did Lifafa Das say, ‘Begum Sahiba, you must leave, please: our cousinji has become sick’?

And finally the cobra-wallah — or monkey-man, or bone-setter, or even Lifafa Das of the peepshow on wheels — saying, ‘Too much prophecy, man. Our Ramram made too much damn prophecy tonight.’

Many years later, at the time of her premature dotage, when all kinds of ghosts welled out of her past to dance before her eyes, my mother saw once
again the peepshow man whom she saved by announcing my coming and who repaid her by leading her to too much prophecy, and spoke to him evenly, without rancour. ‘So you’re back,’ she said, ‘Well, let me tell you this: I wish I’d understood what your cousinji meant — about blood, about knees and nose. Because who knows? I might have had a different son.’

Like my grandfather at the beginning, in a webbed corridor in a blind man’s house, and again at the end; like Mary Pereira after she lost her Joseph, and like me, my mother was good at seeing ghosts.

. . . But now, because there are yet more questions and ambiguities, I am obliged to voice certain suspicions. Suspicion, too, is a monster with too many heads; why, then, can’t I stop myself unleashing it at my own mother? . . . What, ask, would be a fair description of the seer’s stomach? And memory — my new, all-knowing memory, which encompasses most of the lives of mother father grandfather grandmother and everyone else — answers: soft; squishy as cornflour pudding. Again, reluctantly, I ask: What was the condition of his lips? And the inevitable response: full; overfleshed; poetic. A third time I interrogate this memory of mine: what of his hair? The reply: thinning; dark; lank; worming over his ears. And now my unreasonable suspicions ask the ultimate question . . . did Amina, pure-as-pure, actually . . . because of her weakness for men who resembled Nadir Khan, could she have . . . in her odd frame of mind, and moved by the seer’s illness, might she not . . . ‘No!’ Padma shouts, furiously. ‘How dare you suggest? About that good woman — your own mother? That she would? You do not know one thing and still you say it?’ And, of course, she is right, as always. If she knew, she would say I was only getting my revenge, for what I certainly did see Amina doing, years later, through the grimy windows of the Pioneer Café; and maybe that’s where my irrational notion was born, to grow illogically backwards in time, and arrive fully mature at this earlier — and yes, almost certainly innocent — adventure. Yes, that must be it. But the monster won’t lie down . . . ‘Ah,’ it says, ‘but what about the matter of her tantrum — the one she threw the day Ahmed announced they were moving to Bombay?’ Now it mimics her: ‘You — always you decide. What about me? Suppose I don’t want . . . I’ve only now got this house straight and already . . .!’ So, Padma: was that housewifely zeal — or a masquerade?

Yes — a doubt lingers. The monster asks, ‘Why did she fail, somehow or other, to tell her husband about her visit?’ Reply of the accursed (voiced by our Padma in my mother’s absence): ‘But think how angry he’d’ve got, my God! Even if there hadn’t been all that firebug business to worry him! Strange men; a woman on her own; he’d’ve gone wild! Wild, completely!’

Unworthy suspicions . . . I must dismiss them; must save my strictures for later, when, in the absence of ambiguity, without the clouding curtain, she gave me hard, clear, irrefutable proofs.

. . . But, of course, when my father came home late that night, with a ditchy smell on him which overpowered his customary reek of future failure, his eyes and cheeks were streaked with ashy tears; there was sulphur in his nostrils and the grey dust of smoked leathercloth on his head . . . because of course they had burned the godown.

‘But the night-watchmen?’ — asleep, Padma, asleep. Warned in advance to take their sleeping draughts just in case . . . Those brave lalas, warrior Pathans who, city-born, had never seen the Khyber, unwrapped little paper packets, poured rust-coloured powders into their bubbling cauldron of tea. They pulled their chappoys well away from my father’s godown to avoid falling beams and showering sparks; and lying on their rope-beds they sipped their tea and entered the bittersweet declensions of the drug. At first they became raucoous, shouting the praises of their favourite whores in Pushhtu; then they fell into wild giggling as the soft fluttering fingers of the drug tickled their ribs . . . until the giggling gave way to dreams and they roamed in the frontier passes of the drug, riding the horses of the drug, and finally reached a dreamless oblivion from which nothing on earth could awaken them until the drug had run its course.

Ahmed, Butt and Kemal arrived by taxi — the taxi-driver, unnerved by the three men who clutched wads of crumpled banknotes which smelled worse than hell on account of the unpleasant substances they had encountered in the ditch, would not have waited, except that they refused to pay him. ‘Let me go, big sirs,’ he pleaded, ‘I am a little man; do not keep me here . . .’ but by then their backs were moving away from him, towards the fire. He watched them as they ran, clutching their rupates that were stained by tomatoes and dogshit; open-mouthed he stared at the burning godown, at the clouds in the night sky, and like everyone else on the scene he was obliged to breathe air filled with leathercloth and matchsticks and burning rice. With his hands over his eyes, watching through his fingers, the little taxi-driver with his incompetent moustache saw Mr Kemal, thin as a demented pencil, lashing and kicking at the sleeping bodies of night-watchmen; and he almost gave up his face and drove off in terror at the instant when my father shouted, ‘Look out!’ . . . but, staying despite it all, he saw the godown as it burst apart under the force of the licking red tongues, he saw pouring out of the godown an improbable lava flow of molten rice lentils chick-peas waterproof jackets matchboxes and pickle, he saw the hot red flowers of the fire bursting skywards as the contents of the warehouse spilled on to the hard yellow ground like a black charred hand of despair. Yes, of course the godown was burned, it fell on their heads from the sky in cinders, it plunged into the open mouths of the bruised, but still snoring, watchmen . . . ‘God save us,’ said Mr Butt, but Mustapha Kemal, more pragmatically, answered: ‘Thank God we are well insured.’
'It was right then,' Ahmed Sinai told his wife later, 'right at that moment that I decided to get out of the leathercloth business. Sell the office, the goodwill, and forget everything I know about the recine trade. Then — not before, not afterwards — I made up my mind, also, to think no more about this Pakistan claptrap of your Emerald's Zulfi. In the heat of that fire, my father revealed — unleashing a wily tantrum — ‘I decided to go to Bombay, and enter the property business. Property is dirt cheap there now,' he told her before her protests could begin, ‘Narlikar knows.’

(But in time, he would call Narlikar a traitor.)

In my family, we always go when we’re pushed — the freeze of ’48 being the only exception to this rule. The boatman Tai drove my grandfather from Kashmir; Mercurochrome chased him out of Amritsar; the collapse of her life under the carpets led directly to my mother’s departure from Agra; and many-headed monsters sent my father to Bombay, so that I could be born there. At the end of that January, history had finally, by a series of shoves, brought itself to the point at which it was almost ready for me to make my entrance. There were mysteries that could not be cleared up until I stepped on to the scene ... the mystery, for example, of Shri Ramram’s most enigmatic remark: ‘There will be a nose and knees: knees, and a nose.’

The insurance money came; January ended; and in the time it took to close down their affairs in Delhi and move to the city in which — as Dr Narlikar the gynaecologist knew — property was temporarily as cheap as dirt, my mother concentrated on her segmented scheme for learning to love her husband. She came to feel a deep affection for the question marks of his ears; for the remarkable depth of his navel, into which her finger could go right up to the first joint, without even pushing; she grew to love the knobbiness of his knees; but, try as she might (and as I’m giving her the benefit of my doubts I shall offer no possible reasons here), there was one part of him which she never managed to love, although it was the one thing he possessed, in full working order, which Nadir Khan had certainly lacked; on those nights when he heaved himself up on top of her, when the baby in her womb was no bigger than a frog — it was just no good at all.

... ‘No, not so quick, jamum, my life, a little longer, please,’ she is saying; and Ahmed, to spin things out, tries to think back to the fire, to the last thing that happened on that blazing night, when just as he was turning to go he heard a dirty screech in the sky, and, looking up, had time to register that a vulture — at night! — a vulture from the Towers of Silence was flying overhead, and that it had dropped a barely-chewed Parsee hand, a right hand, the same hand which — now! — slapped him full in the face as it fell; while Amina, beneath