Methwold

The fishermen were here first. Before Mountbatten's ticktock, before monsters and public announcements; when underworld marriages were still unimagined and spittoons were unknown; earlier than Mercurochrome; longer ago than lady wrestlers who held up perforated sheets; and back and back, beyond Dalhousie and Elphinstone, before the East India Company built its Fort, before the first William Methwold; at the dawn of time, when Bombay was a dumbbell-shaped island tapering, at the centre, to a narrow shining strand beyond which could be seen the finest and largest natural harbour in Asia, when Mazagaon and Worli, Matunga and Mahim, Salsette and Colaba were islands, too - in short, before reclamation, before tetrapods and sunken piles turned the Seven Isles into a long peninsula like an outstretched, grasping hand, reaching westward into the Arabian Sea; in this primeval world before clocktowers, the fishermen - who were called Kolis - sailed in Arab dhows, spreading red sails and against the setting sun. They caught pomfret and crabs, and made fish-lovers of us all. (Or most of us. Padma has succumbed to their piscine sorceries; but in our house, we were infected with the alieness of Kashmiri blood, with the icy reserve of Kashmiri sky, and remained meat-eaters to a man.)

There were also coconuts and rice. And, above it all, the benign presiding influence of the goddess Mumbadevi, whose name - Mumbadevi, Mumbabai, Mumbai - may well have become the city's. But then, the Portuguese named the place Bom Bahia for its harbour, and not for the goddess of the pomfret folk... the Portuguese were the first invaders, using the harbour to shelter their merchant ships and their men-of-war; but then, one day in 1633, an East India Company Officer named Methwold saw a vision. This vision - a dream of a British Bombay, fortified, defending India's West against all comers - was a notion of such force that it set time in motion. History churned ahead; Methwold died; and in 1660, Charles II of England was betrothed to Catharine of the Portuguese House of Braganza - that same Catharine who would, all her life, play second fiddle to orange-selling Nell. But she has this consolation - that it was her marriage dowry which brought Bombay into British hands, perhaps in a green tin trunk, and brought Methwold's vision a step closer to reality. After that, it wasn't long until September 21st, 1668, when the Company at last got its hands on the island... and then off they went, with their Fort and land-reclamation, and before you could blink there was a city here, Bombay, of which the old tune sang:

Prima in Indis,
Gateway to India,
Star of the East
With her face to the West.

Our Bombay, Padma! It was very different then, there were no night-clubs or pickle factories or Oberoi-Sheraton Hotels or movie studios; but the city grew at breakneck speed, acquiring a cathedral and an equestrian statue of the Mahratta warrior-king Sivaji which (we used to think) came to life at night and galloped awesomely through the city streets - right along Marine Drive! On Chowpatty sands! Past the great houses on Malabar Hill, round Kemp's Corner, giddily along the sea to Scandal Point! And yes, why not, on and on, down my very own Warden Road, right alongside the segregated swimming pools of Breach Candy, right up to huge Mahalaxmi Temple and the old Willingdon Club... Throughout my childhood, whenever bad times came to Bombay, some insomniac nightwalker would report that he had seen the statue moving; disasters, in the city of my youth, danced to the occult music of a horse's grey, stone hooves.

And where are they now, the first inhabitants? Coconuts have done best of all. Coconuts are still beheaded daily on Chowpatty beach; while on Juhu beach, under the languid gaze of film stars at the Sun's Sand hotel, small boys still shin up coconut palms and bring down the bearded fruit. Coconuts even have their own festival, Coconut Day, which was celebrated a few days before my synchronistic birth. You may feel reassured about coconuts. Rice has not been so lucky; rice-paddies lie under concrete now; tenements tower where once rice wallowed within sight of the sea. But still, in the city, we are great rice eaters. Patna rice, Basmati, Kashmiri rice travels to the metropolis daily; so the original, ur-rice has left its mark upon us all, and cannot be said to have died in vain. As for Mumbadevi - she's not so popular these days, having been replaced by elephant-headed Ganesh in the people's affections. The calendar of festivals reveals her decline: Ganesh - 'Ganpati Baba' - has his day of Ganesh Chaturthi, when huge processions are 'taken out' and march to Chowpatty bearing plaster effigies of the god, which they hurl into the sea. Ganesh's day is a rain-making ceremony, it makes the monsoon possible, and it, too, was celebrated in the days before my arrival at the end of the ticktock countdown - but where is Mumbadevi's day? It is not on the calendar. Where the prayers of pomfret folk, the devotions of crab-catchers?... Of all the first inhabitants, the Koli fishermen have come off worst of all. Squashed now into a tiny village...
Villa, Buckingham Villa, Escorial Villa and Sans Souci. Bougainvillea crept across them; goldfish swam in pale blue pools; cacti grew in rock-gardens; tiny touch-me-not plants huddled beneath tamarind trees; there were butterflies and roses and cane chairs on the lawns. And on that day in the middle of June, Mr Methwold sold his empty palaces for ridiculously little — but there were conditions. So without more ado, I present him to you, complete with the centre-parting in his hair... a six-foot Titan, this Methwold, his face the pink of roses and eternal youth. He had a head of thick black brilliantined hair, parted in the centre. We shall speak again of this centre-parting, whose ramrod precision made Methwold irresistible to women, who felt unable to prevent themselves wanting to rumple it up... Methwold's hair, parted in the middle, has a lot to do with my beginnings. It was one of those hairlines along which history and sexuality moved. Like tightrope-walkers. (But despite everything, not even I, who never saw him, never laid eyes on languid gleaming teeth or devastatingly combed hair, am incapable of bearing him any grudge.)

And his nose? What did that look like? Prominent? Yes, it must have been, the legacy of a patrician French grandmother — from Bergerac! — whose blood ran aquamarinely in his veins and darkened his courtly charm with something crueler, some sweet murderous shade of absinthe.

Methwold's Estate was sold on two conditions: that the houses be bought complete with every last thing in them, that the entire contents be retained by the new owners; and that the actual transfer should not take place until midnight on August 15th.

'Everything?' Amina Sinai asked. 'I can't even throw away a spoon? Allah, that lampshade... I can't get rid of one comb?'

'Lock, stock and barrel,' Methwold said, 'Those are my terms. A whim, Mr Sinai... you'll permit a departing colonial his little game? We don't have much left to do, we British, except to play our games.'

'Listen now, listen, Amina,' Ahmed is saying later on, 'You want to stay in this hotel room for ever? It's a fantastic price; fantastic, absolutely. And what can he do after he's transferred the deeds? Then you can throw out any lampshade you like. It's less than two months...'

'You'll take a cocktail in the garden?' Methwold is saying, 'Six o'clock every evening. Cocktail hour. Never varied in twenty years.'

'But my God, the paint... and the cupboards are full of old clothes, janum... we'll have to live out of suitcases, there's nowhere to put one suit!'

'Bad business, Mr Sinai,' Methwold sips his Scotch amid cacti and roses. 'Never seen the like. Hundreds of years of decent government, then suddenly, up and off. You'll admit we weren't all bad: built your roads. Schools, railway trains, parliamentary system, all worthwhile things. Taj Mahal was falling
down until an Englishman bothered to see it. And now, suddenly, independence. Seventy days to get out. I'm dead against it myself, but what's to be done?"

'... And look at the stains on the carpets, Janum; for two months we must live like those Britishers? You've looked in the bathrooms? No water near the pot. I never believed, but it's true, my God, they wipe their bottoms with paper only!'...

'Tell me, Mr Methwold,' Ahmed Sinai's voice has changed, in the presence of an Englishman it has become a hideous mockery of an Oxford drawl, 'why insist on the delay? Quick sale is best business, after all. Get the thing buttoned up.'

'... And pictures of old Englishwomen everywhere, Baba! No place to hang my own father's photo on the wall! ...

'It seems, Mr Sinai,' Mr Methwold is refilling the glasses as the sun dives towards the Arabian Sea behind the Breach Candy pool, 'that beneath this stiff English exterior lurks a mind with a very Indian lust for allegory.'

'And drinking so much, Janum... that's not good.'

'I'm not sure - Mr Methwold, ah - what exactly you mean by...'

'... Oh, you know: after a fashion, I'm transferring power, too. Got a sort of itch to do it at the same time the Raj does. As I said: a game. Humour me, won't you, Sinai? After all: the price, you've admitted, isn't bad.'

'Has his brain gone raw, Janum? What do you think: is it safe to do bargains if he's loony?'

'Now listen, wife,' Ahmed Sinai is saying, 'this has gone on long enough. Mr Methwold is a fine man; a person of breeding; a man of honour; I will not have his name... And besides, the other purchasers aren't making so much noise, I'm sure... Anyway, I have told him yes, so there's an end to it.'

'Have a cracker,' Mr Methwold is saying, proffering a plate, 'Go on, Mr S., do. Yes, a curious affair. Never seen anything like it. My old tenants - old India hands, the lot - suddenly, up and off. Bad show. Lost their stomachs for India. Overwrought. Puzzling to a simple fellow like me. Seemed like they washed their hands - didn't want to take a scrap with them. "Let it go," they said. Fresh start back home. Not short of a shilling, none of them, you understand, but still. Rum. Leaving me holding the baby. Then I had my notion.'

'... Yes, decide, decide,' Amina is saying spiritedly, 'I am sitting here like a lump with a baby, what have I to do with it? I must live in a stranger's house with this child growing, so what? ... Oh, what things you make me do...'

'Don't cry,' Ahmed is saying now, flapping about the hotel room, 'It's a good house. You know you like the house. And two months... less than two... what, is it kicking? Let me feel... Where? Here?'

'There,' Amina says, wiping her nose, 'Such a good big kick.'

'My notion,' Mr Methwold explains, staring at the setting sun, 'is to stage my own transfer of assets. Leave behind everything you see? Select suitable persons - such as yourself, Mr Sinai! - hand everything over absolutely intact: in tiptop working order. Look around you: everything's in fine fettle, don't you agree? Tickety-boo, we used to say. Or, as you say in Hindustani: Sabkuch ticktock hai. Everything's just fine.'

'Nice people are buying the houses,' Ahmed offers Amina his handkerchief, 'nice new neighbours... that Mr Homi Cartrack in Versailles Villa, Parsee chapp, but a racehorse-owner. Produces films and all. And the Ibrahims in Sans Souci, Nussie Ibrahim is having a baby, too, you can be friends... and the old man Ibrahim, with so-big sisal farms in Africa. Good family.'

'... And afterwards I can do what I like with the house...?'

'Yes, afterwards, naturally, he'll be gone...'

'... It's all worked out excellently,' William Methwold says. 'Did you know my ancestor was the chap who had the idea of building this whole city? Sort of Raffles of Bombay. As his descendant, at this important juncture, I feel the, I don't know, need to play my part. Yes, excellently... when d'you move in? Say the word and I'll move off to the Taj Hotel. Tomorrow? Excellent. Sabkuch ticktock hai.'

These were the people amongst whom I spent my childhood: Mr Homi Cartrack, film magnate and racehorse-owner, with his idiot daughter Toxy who had to be locked up with her nurse, Bi-Appah, the most fearsome woman I ever knew; also the Ibrahims in Sans Souci, old man Ibrahim Ibrahim with his goatee and sial, his sons Ismail and Ishaq, and Ismail's tiny flustered helpless wife Nussie, whom we always called Nussie-the-duck on account of her waddling gait, and in whose womb my friend Sonny was growing, even now, getting closer and closer to his misadventure with a pair of gastronomatic forces... Escorial Villa was divided into flats. On the ground floor lived the Dubashes, he a physicist who would become a leading light at the Trombay nuclear research base, she a cipher beneath whose blankness a true religious fanaticism lay concealed — but I'll let it lie, mentioning only that they were the parents of Cyrus (who would not be conceived for a few months yet), my first mentor, who played girls' parts in school plays and was known as Cyrus-the-great. Above them was my father's friend Dr Narlikar, who had bought a flat here too... he was as black as my mother; had the ability of glowing brightly whenever he became excited or aroused; hated children, even though he brought us into the world; and would unleash upon the city, when he died, that tribe of women who could do anything and in whose path no obstacle could stand. And, finally, on the top floor, were Commander Sabarmati and Lila — Sabarmati who was one of the highest flyers in the Navy, and his wife with her expensive tastes; he hadn't been able to believe his luck in getting her a home so
cheaply. They had two sons, aged eighteen months and four months, who would grow up to be slow and boisterous and to be nicknamed Eyeslice and Hairoil; and they didn't know (how could they?) that I would destroy their lives. ... Selected by William Methwold, these people who would form the centre of my world moved into the Estate and tolerated the curious whims of the Englishmen—because the price, after all, was right.

... There are thirty days to go to the transfer of power and Lila Sabarmati is on the telephone, 'How can you stand it, Nussie? In every room here there are talking budgies, and in the almirahs I find moth-eaten dresses and used brassières!' ... And Nussie is telling Amina, 'Goldfish, Allah, I can't stand the creatures, but Methwold sahib comes himself to feed... and there are half-empty pots of Bovril he says I can't throw... it's mad, Amina sister, what are we doing like this?' ... And old man Ibrahim is refusing to switch on the ceiling fan in his bedroom, muttering, 'That machine will fall— it will slice my head off in the night— how long can something so heavy stick on a ceiling?' ... and Homi Cattrack who is something of an ascetic is obliged to lie on a large soft mattress, he is suffering from backache and sleeplessness and the dark rings of inbreeding around his eyes are being circled by the whores of insomnia, and his bearer tells him, 'No wonder the foreign sahibs have all gone away, sahib they must be dying to get some sleep.' But they are all sticking it out; and there are advantages as well as problems. Listen to Lila Sabarmati ('That one— too beautiful to be good, my mother said') ... 'A pianola, Amina sister! And it works! All day I'm sitting sitting, playing God knows what-all! “Pale Hands I Loved Beside The Shalimar”... such fun, too much, just you push the pedals!' ... And Ahmed Sinai finds a cocktail cabinet in Buckingham Villa (which was Methwold's own house before it was ours); he is discovering the delights of fine Scotch whisky and cries, 'So what? Mr Methwold is a little eccentric, that's all— can we not humour him? Our ancient civilization, can we not be as civilized as he?'... and he dries his glass at one go. Advantages and disadvantages: 'All these dogs to look after, Nussie sister,' Lila Sabarmati complains. 'I hate dogs, completely. And my little choochoo cat, echo chweet she is I swear, terrified absolutely!' ... And Dr Narlikar, glowing with pique, 'Above my bed! Pictures of children, Sinai brother! I am telling you: fat! Pink! Three! Is that fair?' ... But now there are twenty days to go, things are settling down, the sharp edges of things are getting blurred, so they have all failed to notice what is happening: the Estate, Methwold's Estate, is changing them. Every evening at six they are out in their gardens, celebrating the cocktail hour, and when William Methwold comes to call they slip effortlessly into their imitation Oxford drawls; and they are learning, about ceiling fans and gas cookers and the correct diet for budgerigars, and Methwold, supervising their transformation, is mumbling under his breath. Listen carefully: what's he saying? Yes, that's it. 'Sambuch ticktock hai,' mumbles William Methwold. All is well.

When the Bombay edition of the Times of India, searching for a catchy human-interest angle to the forthcoming Independence celebrations, announced that it would award a prize to any Bombay mother who could arrange to give birth to a child at the precise instant of the birth of the new nation, Amina Sinai, who had just awoken from a mysterious dream of flypaper, became glued to newsprint. Newsprint was thrust beneath Ahmed Sinai's rose; and Amina's finger, jabbing triumphantly at the page, punctuated the utter certainty of her voice.

'See, janum?' Amina announced. 'That's going to be me.'

There rose, before their eyes, a vision of bold headlines declaring 'A Charming Pose of Baby Sinai— The Child of this Glorious Hour!'— a vision of a top-quality front-page jumbo-sized baby-snaps; but Ahmed began to argue, 'Think of the odds against it, Begum,' until she set her mouth into a clamp of obstinacy and reiterated, 'But me no buts; it's me all right; I just know it for sure. Don't ask me how.'

And although Ahmed repeated his wife's prophecy to William Methwold, as a cocktail-hour joke, Amina remained unshaken, even when Methwold laughed, 'Woman's intuition— splendid thing, Mrs S.! But really, you can scarcely expect us to... ' Even under the pressure of the peevd gaze of her neighbour Nussie-the-duck, who was also pregnant, and had also read the Times of India, Amina stuck to her guns, because Ramram's prediction had sunk deep into her heart.

To tell the truth, as Amina's pregnancy progressed, she had found the words of the fortune-teller pressing more and more heavily down upon her shoulders, her head, her swelling balloon, so that as she became trapped in a web of worries about giving birth to a child with two heads she somehow escaped the subtle magic of Methwold's Estate, remaining uninfected by cocktail-hours, budgerigars, pianolas and English accents... At first, then, there was something equivocal about her certainty that she would win the Times's prize, because she had convinced herself that if this part of the fortune-teller's prognostications were fulfilled, it proved that the rest would be just as accurate, whatever their meaning might be. So it was not in tones of unalloyed pride and anticipation that my mother said, 'Never mind intuition, Mr Methwold. This is guaranteed fact.'

To herself she added: 'And this, too: I'm going to have a son. But he'll need plenty of looking after, or else.'

It seems to me that, running deep in the veins of my mother, perhaps deeper than she knew, the supernatural conceits of Naseem Aziz had begun to influence her thoughts and behaviour— those conceits which persuaded Reverend Mother that aeroplanes were inventions of the devil, and that
cameras could steal your soul, and that ghosts were as obvious a part of reality as Paradise, and that it was nothing less than a sin to place certain sanctified ears between one’s thumb and forefinger, were now whispering in her daughter’s darkling head. ‘Even if we’re sitting in the middle of all this English garbage,’ my mother was beginning to think, ‘this is still India, and people like Ramram Seth know what they know.’ In this way the scepticism of her beloved father was replaced by the credulity of my grandmother; and, at the same time, the adventurous spark which Amina had inherited from Doctor Aziz was being snuffed out by another, and equally heavy, weight.

By the time the rains came at the end of June, the foetus was fully formed inside her womb. Knees and nose were present; and as many heads as would grow were already in position. What had been (at the beginning) no bigger than a full stop had expanded into a comma, a word, a sentence, a paragraph, a chapter; now it was bursting into more complex developments, becoming, one might say, a book — perhaps an encyclopaedia — even a whole language ... which is to say that the lump in the middle of my mother grew so large, and became so heavy, that while Warden Road at the foot of our two-storey hillock became flooded with dirty yellow rainwater and stranded buses began to rust and children swam in the liquid road and newspapers sank soggy beneath the surface, Amina found herself in a circular first-floor tower room, scarcely able to move beneath the weight of her leaden balloon.

Endless rain. Water seeping in under windows in which stained-glass tulips danced along leaded panes. Towels, jammed against window-frames, soaked up water until they became heavy, saturated, useless. The sea: grey and ponderous and stretching out to meet the rainclouds at a narrowed horizon. Rain drumming against my mother’s ears, adding to the confusion of fortuneteller and maternal credulity and the dislocating presence of strangers’ possessions, making her imagine all manner of strange things. Trapped beneath her growing child, Amina pictured herself as a convicted murderer in Mughal times, when death by crushing beneath a boulder had been a common punishment ... and in the years to come, whenever she looked back at that time which was the end of the time before she became a mother, that time in which the ticktock of countdown calendars was rushing everyone towards August 15th, she would say: ‘I don’t know about any of that. To me, it was like time had come to a complete stop. The baby in my stomach stopped the clocks. I’m sure of that. Don’t laugh: you remember the clocktower at the end of the hill? I’m telling you, after that monsoon it never worked again.’

... And Musa, my father’s old servant, who had accompanied the couple to Bombay, went off to tell the other servants, in the kitchens of the red-tiled palaces, in the servants’ quarters at the backs of Versailles and Escorial and Sans Souci: ‘It’s going to be a real ten-rupee baby; yes, sir! A whopper of a ten-chip pomfret, wait and see!’ The servants were pleased; because a birth is a fine thing and a good big baby is best of all...

... And Amina whose belly had stopped the clocks sat immobilised in a room in a tower and told her husband, ‘Put your hand there and feel him... there, did you feel? ... such a big strong boy; our little piece-of-the-moon.

Not until the rains ended, and Amina became so heavy that two manservants had to make a chair with their hands to lift her, did Wee Willie Winkie return to sing in the circus-ring between the four houses; and only then did Amina realize that she had not one, but two serious rivals (two that she knew of) for the Times of India’s prize, and that, prophecy or no prophecy, it was going to be a very close-run finish.

’Wee Willie Winkie is my name; to sing for my supper is my fame!’

Ex-conjurers and peepshow-men and singers... even before I was born, the mould was set. Entertainers would orchestrate my life.

‘I hope you are com-for-table! ... Or are you come-for-tea? Oh, joke-joke ladies and ladahs, let me see you laugh now!’

Tall dark handsome, a clown with an accordion, he stood in the circus-ring in the gardens of Buckingham Villa, my father’s big toe strolled (with its nine colleagues) beside and beneath the centre-parting of William Methwold... sandalled, bulbous, a toe unaware of its coming doom. And Wee Willie Winkie (whose real name we never knew) cracked jokes and sang. From a first-floor verandah, Amina watched and listened; and from the neighbouring verandah felt the prick of the envious competitive gaze of Nussie-the-duck.

... While I, at my desk, feel the sting of Padma’s impatience. (I wish, at times for a more discerning audience, someone who would understand the need for rhythm, pacing, the subtle introduction of minor chords which will later rise, swell, seize the melody; who would know, for instance, that although baby-weight and monsoons have silenced the clock on the Estate clocktower, the steady beat of Mountbatten’s ticktock is still there, soft but inexorable, and that it’s only a matter of time before it fills our ears with its metronomic, drumming music.) Padma says: ‘I don’t want to know about this Winkie now; days and nights I’ve waited and still you won’t get to being born!’ But I counsel patience; everything in its proper place, I admonish my dung-lotus, because Winkie, too, has his purpose and his place, here he is now teasing the pregnant ladies on their verandahs, pausing from singing to say, ‘You’ve heard about the prize, ladies? Me, too. My Vanita will have her time soon, soon-soon; maybe she and not you will have her picture in the paper!’... and Amina is frowning, and Methwold is smiling (is that a forced smile? Why?) beneath his centre-parting, and my father’s lip is jutting judiciously as his big toe strolls and he says, ‘That’s a cheeky fellow; he goes too far.’ But now Methwold in what looks very like embarrassment — even guilt! — reproves Ahmed Sinai, ‘Non-
sense, old chap. The tradition of the fool, you know. Licensed to provoke and tease. Important social safety-valve.' And my father, shrugging, 'Hm.' But he's a clever type, this Winkie, because he's pouring oil on the waters now, saying, 'A birth is a fine thing; two births are two fine! Too fine, madams, joke, you see?' And a switch of mood as he introduces a dramatic notion, an overpowering, crucial thought: 'Ladies, gentlemen, how can you feel comfortable here, in the middle of Mr Methwold sahib's long past? I tell you: it must be strange; not real; but now it is a new place here, ladies, ladahs, and no new place is real until it has seen a birth. The first birth will make you feel at home.' After which, a song: 'Daisy, Daisy ...' And Mr Methwold, joining in, but still there's something dark staining his brow . . .

... And here's the point: yes, it is guilt, because our Winkie may be clever and funny but he's not clever enough, and now it's time to reveal the first secret of the centre-parting of William Methwold, because it has dripped down to stain his face: one day, long before ticktock and lockstockandbarrel sales, Mr Methwold invited Winkie and his Vanita to sing for him, privately, in what is now my parents' main reception room; and after a while he said, 'Look here, Wee Willie, do me a favour, man: I need this prescription filling, terrible headaches, take it to Kemp's Corner and get the chemist to give you the pills, the servants are all down with colds.' Winkie, being a poor man, said Yes sahib at once sahib and left; and then Vanita was alone with the centre-parting, feeling it exert a pull on her fingers that was impossible to resist, and as Methwold sat immobile in a cane chair, wearing a lightweight cream suit with a single rose in the lapel, she found herself approaching him, fingers outstretched, felt fingers touching hair; found centre-parting; and began to rumple it up.

So that now, nine months later, Wee Willie Winkie joked about his wife's imminent baby and a stain appeared on an Englishman's forehead.

'So?' Padma says. 'So what do I care about this Winkie and his wife whom you haven't even told me about?'

Some people are never satisfied; but Padma will be, soon.

And now she's about to get even more frustrated; because, pulling away in a long rising spiral from the events at Methwold's Estate — away from goldfish and dogs and baby contests and centre-partings, away from big toes and tiled roofs — I am flying across the city which is fresh and clean in the aftermath of the rains; leaving Ahmed and Amina to the songs of Wee Willie Winkie, I'm winging towards the Old Fort district, past Flora Fountain, and arriving at a large building filled with dim fustian light and the perfume of swinging censers ... because here, in St Thomas's Cathedral, Miss Mary Pereira is learning about the colour of God.

'Blue,' the young priest said earnestly. 'All available evidence, my daughter, suggests that Our Lord Christ Jesus was the most beauteous, crystal shade of pale sky blue.'

The little woman behind the wooden latticed window of the confessional fell silent for a moment. An anxious, cogitating silence. Then: 'But how, Father? People are not blue. No people are blue in the whole big world!'

Bewilderment of little woman, matched by perplexity of the priest . . . because this is not how she's supposed to react. The Bishop had said, 'Problems with recent converts . . . when they ask about colour they're almost always that . . . important to build bridges, my son. Remember,' thus spake the Bishop, 'God is love; and the Hindu love-god, Krishna, is always depicted with blue skin. Tell them blue; it will be a sort of bridge between the faiths; gently does it, you follow; and besides blue is a neutral sort of colour, avoids the usual colour problems, gets you away from black and white: yes, on the whole I'm sure it's the one to choose.' Even bishops can be wrong, the young father is thinking, but meanwhile he's in quite a spot, because the little woman is clearly getting into a state, has begun issuing a severe reprimand through the wooden grille: 'What type of answer is blue, Father, how to believe such a thing? You should write to Holy Father Pope in Rome, he will surely put you straight; but one does not have to be Pope to know that the men are not ever blue!' The young father closes his eyes; breathes deeply; counter-attacks. 'Skin have been dyed blue,' he stumbles. 'The Picts; the blue Arab nomads; with the benefits of education, my daughter, you would see . . . But now a violent snort echoes in the confessional. 'What, Father? You are comparing Our Lord to junglee wild men? O Lord, I must catch my ears for shame!' . . . And there is more, much more, while the young father whose stomach is giving him hell suddenly has the inspiration that there is something more important lurking behind this blue business, and asks the question; whereupon tirade gives way to tears, and the young father says panicky, 'Come, come, surely the Divine Radiance of Our Lord is not a matter of mere pigment?' . . . And a voice through the flowing salt water: 'Yes, Father, you're not so bad after all; I told him just that, exactly that very thing only, but he said many rude words and would not listen . . . So there it is, him has entered the story, and now it all tumbles out, and Miss Mary Pereira, tiny virginial distraught, makes a confession which gives us a crucial clue about her motives when, on the night of my birth, she made the last and most important contribution to the entire history of twentieth-century India from the time of my grandfather's nose-bump until the time of my adulthood.

Mary Pereira's confession: like every Mary she had her Joseph. Joseph D'Costa, an orderly at a Pedder Road clinic called Dr Narlikar's Nursing Home ('Oho!' Padma sees a connection at last), where she worked as a midwife. Things had been very good at first; he had taken her for cups of tea or lassi or falooda and told her sweet things. He had eyes like road-drills, hard and full of
Salt water washes the confessional floor... and now, is there a new dilemma for the young father? Is he, despite the agonies of an unsettled stomach, weighing in invisible scales the sanctity of the confessional against the danger to civilized society of a man like Joseph D’Costa? Will he, in fact, ask Mary for her Joseph’s address, and then reveal... in short, would this bishop-ridden, stomach-churned young father have behaved like, or unlike, Montgomery Clift in I Confess? (Watching it some years ago at the New Empire cinema, I couldn’t decide.) — But no; once again, I must stifle my baseless suspicions. What happened to Joseph would probably have happened anyway. And in all likelihood the young father’s only relevance to my history is that he was the first outsider to hear about Joseph D’Costa’s virulent hatred of the rich, and of Mary Pereira’s desperate grief.

Tomorrow I’ll have a bath and shave; I am going to put on a brand new kurta, shining and starched, and pajamas to match. I’ll wear mirrorworked slippers curling up at the toes, my hair will be neatly brushed (though not parted in the centre), my teeth gleaming... in a phrase, I’ll look my best. (‘Thank God’ from pouting Padma.)

Tomorrow, at last, there will be an end to stories which I (not having been present at their birth) have to drag out of the whirling recesses of my mind; because the metronome music of Mountbatten’s countdown calendar can be ignored no longer. At Methwold’s Estate, old Musa is still ticking like a time-bomb; but he can’t be heard, because another sound is swelling now, deafening, insistent; the sound of seconds passing, of an approaching, inevitable midnight.