Tick, Tock

Padma can hear it: there’s nothing like a countdown for building suspense. I watched my dung-flower at work today, stirring vats like a whirlwind, as if that would make the time go faster. (And perhaps it did; time, in my experience, has been as variable and inconstant as Bombay’s electric power supply. Just telephone the speaking clock if you don’t believe me — tied to electricity, it’s usually a few hours wrong. Unless we’re the ones who are wrong... no people whose word for ‘yesterday’ is the same as their word for ‘tomorrow’ can be said to have a firm grip on the time.)

But today, Padma heard Mountbatten’s ticktock... English-made, it beats with relentless accuracy. And now the factory is empty; fumes linger, but the vats are still; and I’ve kept my word. Dressed up to the nines, I greet Padma as she rushes to my desk, flounces down on the floor beside me, commands: ‘Begin.’ I give a little satisfied smile; feel the children of midnight queuing up in my head, pushing and jostling like Koli fishwives; I tell them to wait, it won’t be long now; I clear my throat, give my pen a little shake; and start.

Thirty-two years before the transfer of power, my grandfather bumped his nose against Kashmiri earth. There were rubies and diamonds. There was the ice of the future, waiting beneath the water’s skin. There was an oath: not to bow down before god or man. The oath created a hole, which would temporarily be filled by a woman behind a perforated sheet. A boatman who had once prophesied dynasties lurking in my grandfather’s nose ferried him angrily across a lake. There were blind landowners and lady wrestlers. And there was a sheet in a gloomy room. On that day, my inheritance began to form — the blue of Kashmiri sky which dripped into my grandfather’s eyes; the long sufferings of my great-grandmother which would become the forbearance of my own mother and the late steeliness of Naseem Aziz; my great-grandfather’s gift of conversing with birds which would descend through meandering bloodlines into the veins of my sister the Brass Monkey; the conflict between grandpaternal scepticism and grandmaternal credulity; and above all the ghostly essence of that perforated sheet, which doomed my mother to learn to love a man in segments, and which condemned me to see my own life — its meanings, its structures — in fragments also; so that by the time I understood it, it was far too late.

Years ticking away — and my inheritance grows, because now I have the mythical golden teeth of the boatman Tai, and his brandy bottle which foretold my father’s alcoholic djinnis; I have Ilse Lubin for suicide and pickled snakes for virility; I have Tai-for-changelessness opposed to Aadam-for-progress; and have, too, the odours of the unwashed boatman which drove my grandparent south, and made Bombay a possibility.

... And now, driven by Padma and ticktock, I move on, acquiring Mahatma Gandhi and his harthal, ingesting thumb-and-forefinger, swallowing the moment at which Aadam Aziz did not know whether he was Kashmiri or Indian now I’m drinking Mercurochrome and stains the shape of hands which will recur in spilt betel-juice, and I’m gulping down Dyer, moustache and all; my grandfather is saved by his nose and a bruise appears on his chest, never to fade, so that he and I find in its ceaseless throbbing the answer to the question Indian or Kashmiri? Stained by the bruise of a Heidelberg bag’s clasp, we throw our lot in with India; but the alienness of blue eyes remains. Tai dies, but his magic hangs over us still, and makes us men apart.

... Hurting on, I pause to pick up the game of hit-the-spittoon. Five years before the birth of a nation, my inheritance grows, to include an optimism disease which would flare up again in my own time, and cracks in the earth which will-be-have-been reborn in my skin, and ex-conjuror Hummingbird who began the long line of street-entertainers which has run in parallel with my life, and my grandmother’s moles like witch nipples and hatred of photo graphs, and whatsisname, and wars of starvation and silence, and the wisdom of my aunt Alia which turned into spinsterhood and bitterness and finally burs out in deadly revenge, and the love of Emerald and Zulfikar which would enable me to start a revolution, and crescent knives, fatal moons echoed by my mother’s love-name for me, her innocent chand-ka-tukra, her affectionate piece-of-the... growing larger now, floating in the amniotic fluid of the past, feed on a hum that rose higher until dogs came to the rescue, on a escape into a cornfield and a rescue by Rashid the rickshaw-wallah with hi Gai-Wallah antics as he ran — FULL-TILT! — screaming silently, as he reveals the secrets of locks made in India and brought Nadir Khan into a toile containing a washing-chest; yes, I’m getting heavier by the second, fattening up on washing-chests and the under-the-carpet love of Muntaz and the rhymeless bard, plumping out as I swallow Zulfikar’s dream of a bath by his bedside and an underground Taj Mahal and a silver spittoon encrusted with lapis lazuli; marriage disintegrates, and feeds me; an aunt runs traitorously through Agr streets, without her honour, and that feeds me too; and now false starts ar over, and Amina has stopped being Muntaz, and Ahmed Sinai has become, it a sense, her father as well as her husband... my inheritance includes this gift
the gift of inventing new parents for myself whenever necessary. The power of giving birth to fathers and mothers: which Ahmed wanted and never had.

Through my umbilical cord, I'm taking in fare dodgers and the dangers of purchasing peacock-feather fans; Amina's assiduity seeps into me, and more ominous things — clattering footsteps, my mother's need to plead for money until the napkin in my father's lap began to quiver and make a little tent — and the cremated ashes of Arjuna Indiabikes, and a peepshow into which Lifafa Das tried to put everything in the world, and rapschallons perpetrators of outrages; many-headed monsters swell inside me — masked Ravanas, eight-year-old girls with lisps and one continuous eyebrow, mobs crying Rapist. Public announcements nurture me as I grow towards my time, and there are only seven months left to go.

How many things people notions we bring with us into the world, how many possibilities and also restrictions of possibility! — Because all of these were the parents of the child born that midnight, and for every one of the midnight children there were as many more. Among the parents of midnight: the failure of the Cabinet Mission scheme; the determination of M. A. Jinnah, who was dying and wanted see Pakistan formed in his lifetime, and would have done anything to ensure it — that same Jinnah whom my father, missing a turn as usual, refused to meet; and Mountbatten with his extraordinary haste and his chicken-breast-eater of a wife; and more and more — Red Fort and Old Fort, monkeys and vultures dropping hands, and white transvestites, and bone-setters and mongoose-trainers and Shri Ramraksh Seth who made too much prophecy. And my father's dream of rearranging the Quran has its place; and the burning of a godown which turned him into a man of property and not leathercloth; and the piece of Ahmed which Amina could not love. To understand just one life, you have to swallow the world. I told you that.

And fishermen, and Catharine of Braganza, and Mumbadevi coconuts rice; Sivaji's statue and Methwold's Estate; a swimming pool in the shape of British India and a two-storey hillock; a centre-parting and a nose from Bergerac; an inoperable clocktow and a little circus-ring; an Englishman's lust for an Indian allegory and the seduction of an accordionist's wife. Budgerigars, ceiling fans, the Times of India are all part of the luggage I brought into the world... do you wonder, then, that I was a heavy child? Blue Jesus leaked into me; and Mary's desperation, and Joseph's revolutionary wildness, and the flightiness of Alice Pereira... all these made me, too.

If I seem a little bizarre, remember the wild profusion of my inheritance... perhaps, if one wishes to remain an individual in the midst of the teeming multitudes, one must make oneself grotesque.

'At last,' Padma says with satisfaction, 'you've learned how to tell things really fast.'

August 13th, 1947: discontent in the heavens. Jupiter, Saturn and Venus are in quarrelsome vein; moreover, the three crossed stars are moving into the most ill-favoured house of all. Benarsi astrologers name it fearfully: 'Karamstan! They enter Karamstan!'

While astrologers make frantic representations to Congress Party bosses, my mother lies down for her afternoon nap. While Earl Mountbatten deplores the lack of trained occultists on his General Staff, the slowly turning shadows of a ceiling fan caress Amina into sleep. While M. A. Jinnah, secure in the knowledge that his Pakistan will be born in just eleven hours, a full day before independent India, for which there are still thirty-five hours to go, is scoffing at the protestations of horoscope-mongers, shaking his head in amusement. Amina's head, too, is moving from side to side.

But she is asleep. And in these days of her boulder-like pregnancy, an enigmatic dream of flypaper has been plaguing her sleeping hours... in which she wanders now, as before, in a crystal sphere filled with dangling strips of the sticky brown material, which adhere to her clothing and rip it off as she stumbles through the impenetrable papery forest; and now she struggles, tears at paper, but it grabs at her, until she is naked, with the baby kicking inside her, and long tendrils of flypaper stream out to seize her by her undulating womb; paper glues itself to her hair nose teeth breasts thighs, and as she opens her mouth to shout a brown adhesive gag falls across her parting lips...

'Amina Begum!' Musa is saying. 'Wake up! Bad dream, Begum Sahiba!'

Incidents of those last few hours — the last dregs of my inheritance: when there were thirty-five hours to go, my mother dreamed of being glued to brown paper like a fly. And at the cocktail hour (thirty hours to go) William Methwold visited my father in the garden of Buckingham Villa. Centre-parting strolling beside and above big toe, Mr Methwold reminisced. Tales of the first Methwold, who had dreamed the city into existence, filled the evening air in that penultimate sunset. And my father — apeing Oxford drawl, anxious to impress the departing Englishman — responded with, 'Actually, old chap, ours is a pretty distinguished family, too.' Methwold listening: head cocked, rec rose in cream lapel, wide-brimmed hat concealing parted hair, a veiled hint of amusement in his eyes... Ahmed Sinai, lubricated by whisky, driven on by self-importance, warms to his theme. 'Mughal blood, as a matter of fact.' To which Methwold, 'No! Really? You're pulling my leg.' And Ahmed, beyonce the point of no return, is obliged to press on. 'Wrong side of the blanket, of course; but Mughal, certainly.'

That was how, thirty hours before my birth, my father demonstrated that he too, longed for fictional ancestors... how he came to invent a family pedigree that, in later years, when whisky had blurred the edges of his memory and
djinn-bottles came to confuse him, would obliterate all traces of reality . . . and how, to hammer his point home, he introduced into our lives the idea of the family curse.

‘Oh yes,’ my father said as Methwold cocked a grave unsmiling head, ‘many old families possessed such curses. In our line, it is handed down from eldest son to eldest son — in writing only, because merely to speak it is to unleash its power, you know.’ Now Methwold: ‘Amazing! And you know the words?’ My father nods, lip jutting, toe still as he taps his forehead for emphasis. ‘All in here; all memorized. Hasn’t been used since an ancestor quarreled with the Emperor Babar and put the curse on his son Humayun . . . terrible story, that — every schoolboy knows.’

And the time would come when my father, in the throes of his utter retreat from reality, would lock himself in a blue room and try to remember a curse which he had dreamed up one evening in the gardens of his house while he stood tapping his temple beside the descendant of William Methwold.

Saddled now with flypaper-dreams and imaginary ancestors, I am still over a day away from being born . . . but now the remorseless ticktock reasserts itself: twenty-nine hours to go, twenty-eight, twenty-seven . . .

What other dreams were dreamed on that last night? Was it then — yes, why not — that Dr Narlikar, ignorant of the drama that was about to unfold at his Nursing Home, first dreamed of tetrapods? Was it on that last night — while Pakistan was being born to the north and west of Bombay — that my uncle Hanif, who had come (like his sister) to Bombay, and who had fallen in love with an actress, the divine Pia (‘Her face is her fortune!’ the Illustrated Weekly once said), first imagined the cinematic device which would soon give him the first of his three hit pictures? . . . It seems likely; myths, nightmares, fantasies were in the air. This much is certain: on that last night, my grandfather Aadam Aziz, alone now in the big old house in Cornwallis Road — except for a wife whose strength of will seemed to increase as Aziz was ground down by age, and for a daughter, Alia, whose embittered virginity would last until a bomb split her in two over eighteen years later — was suddenly imprisoned by great metal hoops of nostalgia, and lay awake as they pressed down upon his chest; until finally, at five o’clock in the morning of August 14th — nineteen hours to go — he was pushed out of bed by an invisible force and drawn towards an old tin trunk. Opening it, he found: old copies of German magazines; Lenin’s What Is To Be Done?; a folded prayer-mat; and at last the thing which he had felt an irresistible urge to see once more — white and folded and glowing faintly in the dawn — my grandfather drew out, from the tin trunk of his past, a stained and perforated sheet, and discovered that the hole had grown; that there were other, smaller holes in the surrounding fabric; and in the grip of a wild nostalgic rage he shook his wife awake and astounded her by yelling, as he waved her history under her nose:

‘Moth-eaten! Look, Begum: moth-eaten! You forgot to put in any naphthalene balls!’

But now the countdown will not be denied . . . eighteen hours; seventeen; sixteen . . . and already, at Dr Narlikar’s Nursing Home, it is possible to hear the shrieks of a woman in labour. Wee Willie Winkie is here; and his wife Vanita; she has been in a protracted, unproductive labour for eight hours now. The first pangs hit her just as, hundreds of miles away, M. A. Jinnah announced the midnight birth of a Muslim nation . . . but still she writhes on a bed in the Narlikar Home’s ‘charity ward’ (reserved for the babies of the poor) . . . her eyes are standing halfway out of her head; her body glistens with sweat, but the baby shows no signs of coming, nor is its father present; it is eight o’clock in the morning, but there is still the possibility that, given the circumstances, the baby could be waiting for midnight.

Rumours in the city: ‘The statue galloped last night!’ . . . ‘And the stars are unfavourable!’ . . . But despite these signs of ill-omen, the city was poised, with a new myth glinting in the corners of its eyes. August in Bombay: a month of festivals, the month of Krishna’s birthday and Coconut Day; and this year — fourteen hours to go, thirteen, twelve — there was an extra festival on the calendar, a new myth to celebrate, because a nation which had never previously existed was about to win its freedom, catapulting us into a world which, although it had five thousand years of history, although it had invented the game of chess and traded with Middle Kingdom Egypt, was nevertheless quite imaginary; into a mythical land, a country which would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal collective will — except in a dream we all agreed to dream; it was a mass fantasy shared in varying degrees by Bengali and Punjabi, Madrasi and Jat, and would periodically need the sanctification and renewal which can only be provided by rituals of blood. India, the new myth — a collective fiction in which anything was possible, a fable riddled only by the two other mighty fantasies: money and God.

I have been, in my time, the living proof of the fabulous nature of this collective dream; but for the moment, I shall turn away from these generalized, macrocosmic notions to concentrate upon a more private ritual; I shall not describe the mass blood-letting in progress on the frontiers of the divided Punjab (where the partitioned nations are washing themselves in one another’s blood, and a certain punchinello-faced Major Zulfiqar is buying refugee property at absurdly low prices, laying the foundations of a fortune that will rival the Nizam of Hyderabad’s); I shall avert my eyes from the violence in Bengal and the long pacifying walk of Mahatma Gandhi. Selfish? Narrow-minded? Well, perhaps; but excusably so, in my opinion. After all, one is not born every day.

Twelve hours to go. Amina Sinai, having awakened from her flypaper nightmare, will not sleep again until after . . . Ramram Seth is filling her head,
she is adrift in a turbulent sea in which waves of excitement alternate with deep, giddy, dark, watery hollows of fear. But something else is in operation, too. Watch her hands — as, without any conscious instructions, they press down, hard, upon her womb; watch her lips, muttering without her knowledge: ‘Come on, slowpoke, you don’t want to be late for the newspapers’!

Eight hours to go . . . at four o’clock that afternoon, William Methwold drives up the two-storey hillock in his black 1946 Rover. He parks in the circus-ring between the four noble villas; but today he visits neither goldfish-pond nor cactus-garden; he does not greet Lila Sabarmatti with his customary, ‘How goes the pianola? Everything tickety-boo?’ — nor does he salute old man Ibrahim who sits in the shade of a ground-floor verandah, rocking in a rocking-chair and musing about isal; looking neither towards Catrack nor Sinai; he takes up his position in the exact centre of the circus-ring. Rose in lapel, cream hat held stiffly against his chest, centre-parting glinting in afternoon light, William Methwold stares straight ahead, past clocktower and Warden Road, beyond Breach Candy’s map-shaped pool, across the golden four o’clock waves, and salutes; while out there, above the horizon, the sun begins its long dive towards the sea.

Six hours to go. The cocktail hour. The successors of William Methwold are in their gardens — except that Amina sits in her tower-room, avoiding the mildly competitive glances being flung in her direction by Nussie-next-door, who is also, perhaps, urging her Sonny down and out between her legs; curiously they watch the Englishman, who stands as still and stiff as the ramrod to which we have previously compared his centre-parting; until they are distracted by a new arrival. A long, stringy man, wearing three rows of beads around his neck, and a belt of chicken-bones around his waist; his dark skin stained with ashes, his hair loose and long — naked except for beads and ashes, the sadhu strides up amongst the red-tiled mansions. Musa, the old bearer, descends upon him to shoo him away; but hangs back, not knowing how to command a holy man. Cleaving through the veils of Musa’s indecision, the sadhu enters the garden of Buckingham Villa; walks straight past my astonished father; seats himself, cross-legged, beneath the dripping garden tap.

‘What do you want here, sadhuji?’ — Musa, unable to avoid deference; to which the sadhu, calm as a lake: ‘I have come to await the coming of the One. The Mubarak — He who is Blessed. It will happen very soon.’

Believe it or not: I was prophesied twice! And on that day on which everything was so remarkably well-timed, my mother’s sense of timing did not fail her; no sooner had the sadhu’s last word left his lips than there issued, from a first-floor tower-room with glass tulips dancing in the windows, a piercing yell, a cocktail containing equal proportions of panic, excitement and triumph . . . ‘Arré Ahmed!’ Amina Sinai yelled, ‘Janum, the baby! It’s coming — bang on time!’

Suddenly everything is saffron and green. Amina Sinai in a room with saffron walls and green woodwork. In a neighbouring room, Wee Willie Winkie’s Vanita, green-skinned, the whites of her eyes shot with saffron, the baby finally beginning its descent through inner passages that are also, no doubt, similarly colourful. Saffron minutes and green seconds tick away on the clocks on the walls. Outside Dr Narlikar’s Nursing Home, there are fireworks and crowds, also conforming to the colours of the night — saffron rockets, green sparkling rain; the men in shirts of zafaran hue, the women in sari of lime. On a saffron-and-green carpet, Dr Narlikar talks to Ahmed Sinai. ‘I shall see to your Begum personally,’ he says, in gentle tones the colour of the evening, ‘Nothing
to worry about. You wait here; plenty of room to pace,' Dr Narlikar, who dislikes babies, is nevertheless an expert gynaecologist. In his spare time he lectures writes pamphlets berates the nation on the subject of contraception. ‘Birth Control,’ he says, ‘is Public Priority Number One. The day will come when I get that through people’s thick heads, and then I’ll be out of a job.’ Ahmed Sinai smiles, awkward, nervous. ‘Just for tonight,’ my father says, ‘forget lectures – deliver my child.’

It is twenty-nine minutes to midnight. Dr Narlikar’s Nursing Home is running on a skeleton staff; there are many absentees, many employees who have preferred to celebrate the imminent birth of the nation, and will not assist tonight at the births of children. Saffron-shirted, green-skirted, they throng in the illuminated streets, beneath the infinite balconies of the city on which little dia-lamps of earthenware have been filled with mysterious oils; wicks float in the lamps which line every balcony and rooftops, and these wicks, too, conform to our two-tone colour scheme: half the lamps burn saffron, the others flame with green.

Threading its way through the many-headed monster of the crowd is a police car, the yellow and blue of its occupants’ uniforms transformed by the unearthly lamplight into saffron and green. (We are on Colaba Causeway now, just for a moment, to reveal that at twenty-seven minutes to midnight, the police are hunting for a dangerous criminal. His name: Joseph D’Costa. The orderly is absent, has been absent for several days, from his work at the Nursing Home, from his room near the slaughterhouse, and from the life of a distraught virginal Mary.)

Twenty minutes pass, with aaahs from Amina Sinai, coming harder and faster by the minute, and weak tiring aaahs from Vanita in the next room. The monster in the streets has already begun to celebrate; the new myth courses through its veins, replacing its blood with corpuscles of saffron and green. And in Delhi, a wiry serious man sits in the Assembly Hall and prepares to make a speech. At Methwold’s Estate goldfish hang still in ponds while the residents go from house to house bearing pistachio sweetmeats, embracing and kissing one another – green pistachio is eaten, and saffron laddoo-balls. Two children move down secret passages while in Agra an ageing doctor sits with his wife, who has two moles on her face like witchnipples, and in the midst of sleeping geese and moth-eaten memories they are somehow struck silent, and can find nothing to say. And in all the cities all the towns all the villages the little dia-lamps burn on window-sills porches verandahs, while trains burn in the Punjab, with the green flames of blistering paint and the glaring saffron of fired fuel, like the biggest dias in the world.

And the city of Lahore, too, is burning.

The wiry serious man is getting to his feet. Anointed with holy water from the Tanjore River, he rises; his forehead smeared with sanctified ash, he clears his throat. Without written speech in hand, without having memorized any prepared words, Jawaharlal Nehru begins: ‘... Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny; and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge – not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially...’

It is two minutes to twelve. At Dr Narlikar’s Nursing Home, the dark glowing doctor, accompanied by a midwife called Flory, a thin kind lady of no importance, encourages Amina Sinai: ‘Push! Harder!... I can see the head!...’ while in the neighbouring room one Dr Bose – with Miss Mary Pereira by his side – presides over the terminal stages of Vanita’s twenty-four-hour labour... ‘Yes; now; just one last try, come on; at last, and then it will be over!...’ Women wail and shriek while in another room men are silent. Wee Willie Winkie – incapable of song – squats in a corner, rocking back and forth, back and forth... and Ahmed Sinai is looking for a chair. But there are no chairs in this room; it is a room designated for pacing; so Ahmed Sinai opens a door, finds a chair at a deserted receptionist’s desk, lifts it, carries it back into the pacing room, where Wee Willie Winkie rocks, rocks, his eyes as empty as a blind man’s... will she live? won’t she? and now, and at last, it is midnight.

The monster in the streets has begun to roar, while in Delhi a wiry man is saying, ‘... At the stroke of the midnight hour, while the world sleeps, India awakens to life and freedom...’ And beneath the roar of the monster there are two more yells, cries, bellows, the howls of children arriving in the world, their unavailing protests mingling with the din of independence which hangs saffron-and-green in the night sky – ‘A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new; when an age ends; and when the soul of a nation long suppressed finds utterance...’ while in a room with saffron-and-green carpet Ahmed Sinai is still clutching a chair when Dr Narlikar enters to inform him: ‘On the stroke of midnight, Sinai brother, your Begum Sahiba gave birth to a large, healthy child: a son!’ Now my father began to think about me (not knowing...); with the image of my face filling his thoughts he forgot about the chair; possessed by the love of me (even though...), filled with it from top of head to fingertips, he let the chair fall.

Yes, it was my fault (despite everything)... it was the power of my face, mine and nobody else’s, which caused Ahmed Sinai’s hands to release the chair; which caused the chair to drop, accelerating at thirty-two feet per second, and as Jawaharlal Nehru told the Assembly Hall, ‘We end today a period of ill-fortune,’ as conch-shells blared out the news of freedom, it was on my account that my father cried out too, because the falling chair shattered his toe.

And now we come to it: the noise brought everyone running; my father and his injury grabbed a brief moment of limelight from the two aching mothers, the two, synchronous midnight births – because Vanita had finally been delivered of a baby of remarkable size: ‘You wouldn’t have believed it,’ Dr
Bose said, 'It just kept on coming, more and more of the boy forcing its way out, it's a real ten-chip whopper all right!' And Narlikar, washing himself: 'Mine, too.' But that was a little later — just now Narlikar and Bose were tending Ahmed Sinai's toe; midwives had been instructed to wash and swaddle the new-born pair; and now Miss Mary Pereira made her contribution.

'Go, go,' she said to poor Flory, 'see if you can help. I can do all right here.'

And when she was alone — two babies in her hands — two lives in her power — she did it for Joseph, her own private revolutionary act, thinking He will certainly love me for this, as she changed name-tags on the two huge infants, giving the poor baby a life of privilege and condemning the rich-born child to accords and poverty ... 'Love me, Joseph!' was in Mary Pereira's mind, and then it was done. On the ankle of a ten-chip whopper with eyes as blue as Kashmiri sky — which were also eyes as blue as Methwold's — and a nose as dramatic as a Kashmiri grandfather's — which was also the nose of a grandmother from France — she placed this name: Sinai.

Saffron swaddled me as, thanks to the crime of Mary Pereira, I became the chosen child of midnight, whose parents were not his parents, whose son would not be his own ... Mary took the child of my mother's womb, who was not to be her son, another ten-chip pomfret, but with eyes which were already turning brown, and knees as knobblily as Ahmed Sinai's, wrapped it in green, and brought it to Wee Willie Winkie — who was staring at her blind-eyed, who hardly saw his new son, who never knew about centre-partings ... Wee Willie Winkie, who had just learned that Vanita had not managed to survive her childbearing. At three minutes past midnight, while doctors fussed over broken toe, Vanita had haemorrhaged and died.

So I was brought to my mother; and she never doubted my authenticity for an instant. Ahmed Sinai, toe in splint, sat on her bed as she said: 'Look, janum, the poor fellow, he's got his grandfather's nose.' He watched mystified as she made sure there was only one head; and then she relaxed completely, understanding that even fortune-tellers have only limited gifts.

'Janum,' my mother said excitedly, 'you must call the papers. Call them at the Times of India. What did I tell you? I won.'

'... This is no time for petty or destructive criticism,' Jawaharlal Nehru told the Assembly. 'No time for ill-will. We have to build the noble mansion of free India, where all her children may dwell.' A flag unfurls: it is saffron, white and green.

'An Anglo?' Padma exclaims in horror. 'What are you telling me? You are an Anglo-Indian? Your name is not your own?'

'I am Saleem Sinai,' I told her, 'Snotnose, Stainface, Sniffer, Baldy, Piece-of-
irresistibly attractive as the hairpiece of William Methwold had made the Englishman. Girls (Evie, the Brass Monkey, others) reached out to stroke his little valleys . . . it would lead to difficulties between us.

But I've saved the most interesting snippet for the last. So let me reveal now that, on the day after I was born, my mother and I were visted in a saffron and green bedroom by two persons from the *Times of India* (Bombay edition). I lay in a green crib, swaddled in saffron, and looked up at them. There was a reporter, who spent his time interviewing my mother; and a tall, aquiline photographer who devoted his attentions to me. The next day, words as well as pictures appeared in newsprint . . .

Quite recently, I visited a cactus-garden where once, many years back, I buried a toy tin globe, which was badly dented and stuck together with Scotch Tape; and extracted from its insides the things I had placed there all those years ago. Holding them in my left hand now, as I write, I can still see — despite yellowing and mildew — that one is a letter, a personal letter to myself, signed by the Prime Minister of India; but the other is a newspaper cutting.

It has a headline: MIDNIGHT'S CHILD.

And a text: 'A charming pose of Baby Saleem Sinai, who was born last night at the exact moment of our Nation's independence — the happy Child of that glorious Hour!'

And a large photograph: an A-1 top-quality front-page jumbo-sized baby-snap, in which it is still possible to make out a child with birthmarks staining his cheeks and a runny and glistening nose. (The picture is captioned: *Photo by Kalidas Gupta.*)

Despite headline, text and photograph, I must accuse our visitors of the crime of trivialization; mere journalists, looking no further than the next day's paper, they had no idea of the importance of the event they were covering. To them, it was no more than a human-interest drama.

How do I know this? Because, at the end of the interview, the photographer presented my mother with a cheque — for one hundred rupees.

One hundred rupees! Is it possible to imagine a more piddling, derisory sum? It is a sum by which one could, were one of a mind to do so, feel insulted. I shall, however, merely thank them for celebrating my arrival, and forgive them for their lack of a genuine historical sense.

'Don't be vain,' Padma says grumpily. 'One hundred rupees is not so little; after all, everybody gets born, it's not such a big big thing.'