The Perforated Sheet

I was born in the city of Bombay... once upon a time. No, that won’t do, there’s no getting away from the date: I was born in Doctor Narlikar’s Nursing Home on August 15th, 1947. And the time? The time matters, too. Well then: at night. No, it’s important to be more... On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact. Clock-hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came. Oh, spell it out, spell it out: at the precise instant of India’s arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world. There were gasps. And, outside the window, fireworks and crowds. A few seconds later, my father broke his big toe; but his accident was a mere trifle when set beside what had befallen me in that benighted moment, because thanks to the occult tyrannies of those blandly saluting clocks I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country. For the next three decades, there was to be no escape. Soothsayers had prophesied me, newspapers celebrated my arrival, politics ratified my authenticity. I was left entirely without a say in the matter. I, Saleem Sinai, later variously called Snotnose, Stainface, Baldy, Sniffer, Buddha and even Piece-of-the-Moon, had become heavily embroiled in Fate— at the best of times a dangerous sort of involvement. And I couldn’t even wipe my own nose at the time.

Now, however, time (having no further use for me) is running out. I will soon be thirty-one years old. Perhaps. If my crumbling, over-used body permits. But I have no hope of saving my life, nor can I count on having even a thousand nights and a night. I must work fast, faster than Scheherazade, if I am to end up meaning—yes, meaning—something. I admit it: above all things, I fear absurdity.

And there are so many stories to tell, too many, such an excess of intertwined lives events miracles places rumours, so dense a commingling of the improbable and the mundane! I have been a swallow of lives; and to know me, just the one of me, you’ll have to swallow the lot as well. Consumed multitudes are jostling and shoving inside me; and guided only by the memory of a large white bedsheet with a roughly circular hole some seven inches in diameter cut into the centre, clutching at the dream of that holey, mutilated square of linen, which is my talisman, my open-sesame, I must commence the business of
One Kashmiri morning in the early spring of 1915, my grandfather Aadam Aziz hit his nose against a frost-hardened tussock of earth while attempting to pray. Three drops of blood plopped out of his left nostril, hardened instantly in the brittle air and lay before his eyes on the prayer-mat, transformed into rubies. Lurching back until he knelt with his head once more upright, he found that the tears which had sprung to his eyes had solidified, too; and at that moment, as he brushed diamonds contemptuously from his lashes, he resolved never again to kiss earth for any god or man. This decision, however, made a hole in him, a vacancy in a vital inner chamber, leaving him vulnerable to women and history. Unaware of this at first, despite his recently completed medical training, he stood up, rolled the prayer-mat into a thick cheroot, and holding it under his right arm surveyed the valley through clear, diamond-free eyes.

The world was new again. After a winter’s gestation in its eggshell of ice, the valley had beaked its way out into the open, moist and yellow. The new grass bided its time underground; the mountains were retreating to their hill-stations for the warm season. (In the winter, when the valley shrank under the ice, the mountains closed in and snarled like angry jaws around the city on the lake.)

In those days the radio mast had not been built and the temple of Sankara Acharya, a little black blister on a khaki hill, still dominated the streets and lake of Srinagar. In those days there was no army camp at the lakeside, no endless snakes of camouflage trucks and jeeps clogged the narrow mountain roads, no soldiers hid behind the crests of the mountains past Baramulla and Gulmarg. In those days travellers were not shot as spies if they took photographs of bridges, and apart from the Englishmen’s houseboats on the lake, the valley had hardly changed since the Mughal Empire, for all its springtime renewals; but my grandfather’s eyes — which were, like the rest of him, twenty-five years old — saw things differently... and his nose had started to itch.

To reveal the secret of my grandfather’s altered vision: he had spent five years, five springs, away from home. (The tussock of earth, crucial though its presence was as it crouched under a chance wrinkle of the prayer-mat, was at bottom no more than a catalyst.) Now, returning, he saw through travelled eyes. Instead of the beauty of the tiny valley circled by giant teeth, he noticed the narrowness, the proximity of the horizon; and felt sad, to be at home and feel so utterly enclosed. He also felt — inexplicably — as though the old place resented his educated, stethoscoped return. Beneath the winter ice, it had been coldly neutral, but now there was no doubt: the years in Germany had returned him to a hostile environment. Many years later, when the hole inside him had been clogged up with hate, and he came to sacrifice himself at the shrine of the black stone god in the temple on the hill, he would try and recall his childhood springs in Paradise, the way it was before travel and tussocks and army tank messed everything up.

On the morning when the valley, gloved in a prayer-mat, punched him in the nose, he had been trying, absurdly, to pretend that nothing had changed. So he had risen in the bitter cold of four-fifteen, washed himself in the prescribed fashion, dressed up on his father’s astrakhan cap; after which he has carried the rolled cheroot of the prayer-mat into the small lakeside garden in front of their old dark house and unrolled it over the waiting tussock. The ground felt deceptively soft under his feet and made him simultaneous in uncertain and unwary. ‘In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful...’ — the exordium, spoken with hands joined before him like a book comforted a part of him, made another, larger part feel uneasy — ‘...Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Creation...’ — but now Heidelberg invaded his head here was Ingrid, briefly his Ingrid, her face scorning him for this Mecca-turne parroting; here, their friends Oskar and Ilse Lubin the anarchists, mocking his prayer with their anti-ideologies — ‘... The Compassionate, the Merciful King of the Last Judgment!...’ — Heidelberg, in which, along with medic politics, he learned that India — like radium — had been ‘discovered’ by the Europeans; even Oskar was filled with admiration for Vasco da Gama, and this was what finally separated Aadam Aziz from his friends, this belief of theirs that he was somehow the invention of their ancestors — ‘... You alone we worship, and to You alone we pray for help...’ — so here he was, despite their presence in his head, attempting to re-unite himself with an earlier self which ignored their influence but knew everything it ought to have known about submission for example, about what he was doing now, as his hands guided by old memories, fluttered upwards, thumbs pressed to ears, finger spread, as he sank to his knees — ‘... Guide us to the straight path, Path of those whom You have favoured...’ — But it was no good, he was caught in strange middle ground, trapped between belief and disbelief, and this was only a charade after all — ‘... Not of those who have incurred Your wrath, Nor of those who have gone astray.’ My grandfather bent his forehead towards the earth. Forward he bent, and the earth, prayer-mat-covered, curved upward toward him. And now it was the tussock’s time. At one and the same time a rebuke from Ilse-Oskar-Ingrid-Heidelberg as well as valley-And-God, it smote him upon the point of the nose. Three drops fell. There were rubies and diamonds...
And my grandfather, lurching upright, made a resolve. Stood. Rolled cheroot. Stared across the lake. And was knocked forever into that middle place, unable to worship a God in whose existence he could not wholly disbelieve. Permanent alteration: a hole.

The young, newly-qualified Doctor Aadam Aziz stood facing the springtime lake, sniffing the whiffs of change; while his back (which was extremely straight) was turned upon yet more changes. His father had had a stroke in his absence abroad, and his mother had kept it a secret. His mother’s voice, whispering stoically: ‘...Because your studies were too important, son.’ This mother, who had spent her life housebound, in purdah, had suddenly found enormous strength and gone out to run the small gemstone business (turquoises, rubies, diamonds) which had put Aadam through medical college, with the help of a scholarship; so he returned to find the seemingly immutable order of his family turned upside down, his mother going out to work while his father sat hidden behind the veil which the stroke had dropped over his brain ... in a wooden chair, in a darkened room, he sat and made bird-noises. Thirty different species of birds visited him and sat on the sill outside his shuttered window conversing about this and that. He seemed happy enough.

(... And already I can see the repetitions beginning; because didn’t my grandmother also find enormous ... and the stroke, too, was not the only ... and the Brass Monkey had her birds ... the curse begins already, and we haven’t even got to the noses yet!)

The lake was no longer frozen over. The thaw had come rapidly, as usual; many of the small boats, the shikaras, had been caught napping, which was also normal. But while these sluggards slept on, on dry land, snoring peacefully beside their owners, the oldest boat was up at the crack as old folk often are, and was therefore the first craft to move across the unfrozen lake. Tai’s shikara ... this, too, was customary.

Watch how the old boatman, Tai, makes good time through the misty water, standing stooped over at the back of his craft! How his oar, a wooden heart on a yellow stick, drives jerkily through the weeds! In these parts he’s considered very odd because he rows standing up ... among other reasons. Tai, bringing an urgent summons to Doctor Aziz, is about to set history in motion ... while Aadam, looking down into the water, recalls what Tai taught him years ago: ‘The ice is always waiting, Aadam baba, just under the water’s skin.’ Aadam’s eyes are a clear blue, the astonishing blue of mountain sky, which has a habit of dripping into the pupils of Kashmiri men; they have not forgotten how to look. They see — there! like the skeleton of a ghost, just beneath the surface of Lake Dal! — the delicate tracery, the intricate crisscross of colourless lines, the cold waiting veins of the future. His German years, which have blurred so much else, haven’t deprived him of the gift of seeing. Tai’s gift. He looks up, sees the approaching V of Tai’s boat, waves a greeting. Tai’s arm rises — but this is a command. ‘Wait!’ My grandfather waits; and during this hiatus, as he experiences the last peace of his life, a muddy, ominous sort of peace, I had better get round to describing him.

Keeping out of my voice the natural envy of the ugly man for the strikingly impressive, I record that Doctor Aziz was a tall man. Pressed flat against a wall of his family home, he measured twenty-five bricks (a brick for each year of his life), or just over six foot two. A strong man also. His beard was thick and red — and annoyed his mother, who said only Hajis, men who had made the pilgrimage to Mecca, should grow red beards. His hair, however, was rather darker. His sky-eyes you know about. Ingrid had said, ‘They went mad with the colours when they made your face’. But the central feature of my grandfather’s anatomy was neither colour nor height, neither strength of arm nor straightness of back. There it was, reflected in the water, undulating like a mad plantain in the centre of his face ... Aadam Aziz, waiting for Tai, watches his rippling nose. It would have dominated less dramatic faces than his easily; even on him, it is what one sees first and remembers longest. ‘A cyanose,’ Ilse Lubin said, and Oskar added, ‘A proboscissimus.’ Ingrid announced, ‘You could cross a river on that nose.’ (Its bridge was wide.)

My grandfather’s nose: nostrils flaring, curvaceous as dancers. Between them swells the nose’s triumphal arch, first up and out, then down and under, sweeping in to his upper lip with a superb and at present red-tipped flick. An easy nose to hit a tussock with. I wish to place on record my gratitude to this mighty organ — if not for it, who would ever have believed me to be truly my mother’s son, my grandfather’s grandson? — this colossal apparatus which was to be my birthright, too. Doctor Aziz’s nose — comparable only to the trunk of the elephant-headed god Ganes — established incontrovertibly his right to be a patriarch. It was Tai who taught him that, too. When young Aadam was barely past puberty the dilapidated boatman said, ‘That’s a nose to start a family on, my princeling. There’d be no mistaking whose brood they were. Mughal Emperors would have given their right hands for noses like that one. There are dynasties waiting inside it,’ and here Tai lapsed into coarseness — ‘like snot.’

On Aadam Aziz, the nose assumed a patriarchal aspect. On my mother, it looked noble and a little long-suffering; on my aunt Emerald, snobbish; on my aunt Alia, intellectual; on my uncle Hanif it was the organ of an unsuccessful genius; my uncle Mustapha made it a second-rater’s sniffer; the Brass Monkey escaped it completely; but on me — on me, it was something else again. But I mustn’t reveal all my secrets at once.

(Tai is getting nearer. He, who revealed the power of the nose, and who is now bringing my grandfather the message which will catapult him into his future, is stroking his shikara through the early morning lake ...)

Nobody could remember when Tai had been young. He had been plying this
same boat, standing in the same hunched position, across the Dal and Nageen Lakes... forever. As far as anyone knew, he lived somewhere in the insanitary bowels of the old wooden-house quarter and his wife grew lotus roots and other curious vegetables on one of the many ‘floating gardens’ lifting on the surface of the spring and summer water. Tai himself cheerfully admitted he had no idea of his age. Neither did his wife — he was, she said, already leathery when they married. His face was a sculpture of wind on water: ripples made of hide. He had two golden teeth and no others. In the town, he had few friends. Few boatmen or traders invited him to share a hookah when he floated past the shikara moorings or one of the lakes’ many ramshackle, waterside provision-stores and tea-shops.

The general opinion of Tai had been voiced long ago by Aadam Aziz’s father the gemstone merchant: ‘His brain fell out with his teeth.’ (But now old Aziz sahib sat lost in bird tweets while Tai simply, grandly, continued.) It was an impression the boatman fostered by his chatter, which was fantastic, grandiloquent and ceaseless, and as often as not addressed only to himself. Sound carries over water, and the lake people giggled at his monologues; but with undertones of awe, and even fear. Awe, because the old halfwit knew the lakes and hills better than any of his detractors; fear, because of his claim to an antiquity so immense it defied numbering, and moreover hung so lightly round his chicken’s neck that it hadn’t prevented him from winning a highly desirable wife and fathering four sons upon her... and a few more, the story went, on other lakeside wives. The young bucks at the shikara moorings were convinced he had a pile of money hidden away somewhere — a hoard, perhaps, of priceless golden teeth, rattling in a sack like walnuts. Years later, when Uncle Puffs tried to sell me his daughter by offering to have her teeth drawn and replaced in gold, I thought of Tai’s forgotten treasure... and, as a child, Aadam Aziz had loved him.

He made his living as a simple ferryman, despite all the rumours of wealth, taking hay and goats and vegetables and wood across the lakes for cash; people, too. When he was running his taxi-service he erected a pavilion in the centre of the shikara, a gay affair of flowered-patterned curtains and canopy, with cushions to match; and deodorised his boat with incense. The sight of Tai’s shikara approaching, curtains flying, had always been for Doctor Aziz one of the defining images of the coming of spring. Soon the English sahibs would arrive and Tai would ferry them to the Shalimar Gardens and the King’s Spring, chattering and pointy and stooped. He was the living antithesis of Oskar-Ilse-Ingrid’s belief in the inevitability of change... a quirky, enduring familiar spirit of the valley. A watery Caliban, rather too fond of cheap Kashmiri brandy.

Memory of my blue bedroom wall: on which, next to the P.M.’s letter, the Boy Raleigh hung for many years, gazing rapturously at an old fisherman in what looked like a red dhoti, who sat on — what? — driftwood? — and pointed out to sea as he told his fishy tales... and the Boy Aadam, my grand-father-to-be, fell in love with the boatman Tai precisely because of the endless verbiage which made others think him cracked. It was magical talk, word-pouring from him like fools’ money, past his two gold teeth, laced with hiccup and brandy, soaring up to the most remote Himalayas of the past, the swooping shrewdly on some present detail, Aadam’s nose for instance, to vivisept its meaning like a mouse. This friendship had plunged Aadam into hot water with great regularity. (Boiling water. Literally. While his mother said ‘We’ll kill that boatman’s bugs if it kills you.’) But still the old soliloquist would dawdle in his boat at the garden’s lakeside toes and Aziz would sit at his feast until voices summoned him indoors to be lectured on Tai’s flyliness and warned about the pillaging armies of germs his mother envisaged leaping from that hospitably ancient body on to her son’s starched white loose-pajamas. But always Aadam returned to the water’s edge to scan the mists for the ragged, reprobate’s hunched-up frame steering its magical boat through the enchanter waters of the morning.

‘But how old are you really, Taiji?’ (Doctor Aziz, adult, redbearded, slanting towards the future, remembers the day he asked the unaskable question.) For an instant, silence, noisier than a waterfall. The monologue, interrupted. Slag of oar in water. He was riding in the shikara with Tai, squatting amongst goats on a pile of straw, in full knowledge of the stick and bathtub waiting for him at home. He had come for stories — and with one question had silenced the storyteller.

‘No, tell, Taiji, how old, truly?’ And now a brandy bottle, materialising from nowhere: cheap liquor from the folds of the great warm chugha-coat. Then shudder, a belch, a glare. Glint of gold. And — at last! — speech. ‘How old You ask how old, you little wet-head, you nosey...’ Tai, forecasting the fisherman on my wall, pointed at the mountains. ‘So old, nakkoo! Aadam, th nakkoo, the nosey one, followed his pointing finger. ‘I have watched th mountains being born; I have seen Emperors die. Listen. Listen, nakkoo... — the brandy bottle again, followed by brandy-voice, and words more it intoxicating than booze — ’... I saw that Isa, that Christ, when he came t Kashmir. Smile, smile, it is your history I am keeping in my head. Once was set down in old lost books. Once I knew where there was a grave wit pierced feet carved on the tombstone, which bled once a year. Even m memory is going now; but I know, although I can’t read.’ Illiteracy, disembrace with a flourish; literature crumbled beneath the rage of his sweeping hanc. Which sweeps again to chugha-pocket, to brandy bottle, to lips chapped wit cold. Tai always had woman’s lips. ‘Nakkoo, listen, listen. I have seen plenty Yara, you should’ve seen that Isa when he came, beard down to his balls, bal as an egg on his head. He was old and fagged-out but he knew his manner.
women who come to this water to drown,' Tai said. 'Sometimes they know it, sometimes they don't, but I know the minute I smell them. They hide under the water from God knows what or who — but they can't hide from me, baba!' Tai's laugh, emerging to infect Aadam — a huge, booming laugh that seemed macabre when it crashed out of that old, wizened body, but which was so natural in my giant grandfather that nobody knew, in later times, that it wasn't really his (my uncle Hanif inherited this laugh; so until he died, a piece of Tai lived in Bombay). And, also from Tai, my grandfather heard about noses.

Tai tapped his left nostril. 'You know what this is, nakkoo? It's the place where the outside world meets the world inside you. If they don't get on, you feel it here. Then you rub your nose with embarrassment to make the itch go away. A nose like that, little idiot, is a great gift. I say: trust it. When it warns you, look out or you'll be finished. Follow your nose and you'll go far.' He cleared his throat; his eyes rolled away into the mountains of the past. Aziz settled back on the straw. 'I knew one officer once — in the army of that Iskandar the Great. Never mind his name. He had a vegetable just like yours hanging between his eyes. When the army halted near Gandhara, he fell in love with some local floozy. At once his nose itched like crazy. He scratched it, but that was useless. He inhaled vapours from crushed boiled eucalyptus leaves. Still no good, baba! The itching sent him wild; but the damn fool dug in his heels and stayed with his little witch when the army went home. He became — what? — a stupid thing, neither this nor that, a half-and-half with a nagging wife and an itch in the nose, and in the end he pushed his sword into his stomach. What do you think of that?'

... Doctor Aziz in 1915, whom rubies and diamonds have turned into a half-and-halter, remembers this story as Tai enters hailing distance. His nose is itching still. He scratches, shrugs, tosses his head; and then Tai shouts.

'Oh! Doctor Sahib! Ghani the landowner's daughter is sick.'

The message, delivered curtly, shouted unceremoniously across the surface of the lake although boatman and pupil have not met for half a decade, mouthed by woman's lips that are not smiling in long-time-no-see greeting, sends time into a speeding, whirling, blurry fluster of excitement ...

... 'Just think, son,' Aadam's mother is saying as she sips fresh lime water, reclining on a takht in an attitude of resigned exhaustion, 'how life does turn out. For so many years even my ankles were a secret, and now I must be stared at by strange persons who are not even family members.'

... While Ghani the landowner stands beneath a large oil painting of Diana the Huntress, framed in squiggly gold. He wears thick dark glasses and his famous poisonous smile, and discusses art. 'I purchased it from an Englishman down on his luck, Doctor Sahib. Five hundred rupees only — and I did not trouble to beat him down. What are five hundred chips? You see, I am a lover of culture.'
‘See, my son,’ Aadam’s mother is saying as he begins to examine her, ‘what a mother will not do for her child. Look how I suffer. You are a doctor... feel these rashes, these blotchy bits, understand that my head aches morning noon and night. Refill my glass, child.’

But the young Doctor has entered the throes of a most unhippocratic excitement at the boatman’s cry, and shouts, ‘I’m coming just now! Just let me bring my things!’ The shikara’s prow touches the garden’s hem. Aadam is rushing indoors, prayer-mat rolled like cheroot under one arm, blue eyes blinking in the sudden interior gloom; he has placed the cheroot on a high shelf on top of stacked copies of Vorwärts and Lenin’s What Is To Be Done? and other pamphlets, dusty echoes of his half-faded German life; he is pulling out, from under his, a second-hand leather case which his mother called his ‘doctori-attaché’, and as he swings it and himself upwards and runs from the room, the word heidelberg is briefly visible, burned into the leather on the bottom of the bag. A landowner’s daughter is good news indeed to a doctor with a career to make, even if she is ill. No: because she is ill.

While I sit like an empty pickle jar in a pool of Anglepoised light, visited by this vision of my grandfather sixty-three years ago, which demands to be recorded, filling my nostrils with the acrid stench of his mother’s embarrassment which has brought her out in boils, with the vinegar force of Aadam Aziz’s determination to establish a practice so successful that she’ll never have to return to the gemstone-shop, with the blind mustiness of a big shadowy house in which the young Doctor stands, ill-at-ease, before a painting of a plain girl with lively eyes and a stag transfixed behind her on the horizon, speared by a dart from her bow. Most of what matters in our lives takes place in our absence: but I seem to have found from somewhere the trick of filling in the gaps in my knowledge, so that everything is in my head, down to the last detail, such as the way the mist seemed to slant across the early morning air... everything, and not just the few clues one stumbles across, for instance by opening an old tin trunk which should have remained cobwebby and closed.

Aadam refills his mother’s glass and continues, worriedly, to examine her. ‘Put some cream on these rashes and blotches, Amma. For the headache, there are pills. The boils must be lanced. But maybe if you wore purdah when you sat in the store... so that no disrespectful eyes could... such complaints often begin in the mind...’

Slap of oar in water. Plop of spittle in lake. Tai clears his throat and mutters angrily, ‘A fine business. A wet-head nakkoo child goes away before he’s learned one damn thing and he comes back a big doctor sahib with a big bag full of foreign machines, and he’s still as silly as an owl. I swear: a too bad business.’

Doctor Aziz is shifting uneasily, from foot to foot, under the influence of the landowner’s smile, in whose presence it is not possible to feel relaxed; and is waiting for some tic of reaction to his own extraordinary appearance. He has grown accustomed to these involuntary twitches of surprise at his size, his face of many colours, his nose... but Ghanie makes no sign, and the young Doctor resolves, in return, not to let his uneasiness show. He stops shifting his weight. They face each other, each suppressing (or so it seems) his view of the other, establishing the basis of their future relationship. And now Ghanie alters, changing from art-lover to tough-guy. ‘This is a big chance for you, young man,’ he says. Aziz’s eyes have strayed to Diana. Wide expanses of her blemished pink skin are visible.

His mother is moaning, shaking her head. ‘No, what do you know, child, you have become a big-shot doctor but the gemstone business is different. Who would buy a turquoise from a woman hidden inside a black hood? It is a question of establishing trust. So they must look at me; and I must get pains and boils. Go, go, don’t worry your head about your poor mother.’

‘Big shot,’ Tai is spitting into the lake, ‘big bag, big shot. Pah! We haven’t got enough bags at home that you must bring back that thing made of a pig’s skin that makes one unclean just by looking at it? And inside, God knows what all.’ Doctor Aziz, seated amongst flowery curtains and the smell of incense, has his thoughts wrenched away from the patient waiting across the lake. Tai’s bitter monologue breaks into his consciousness, creating a sense of dull shock, a smell like a casualty ward overpowering the incense... the old man is clearly furious about something, possessed by an incomprehensible rage that appears to be directed at his erstwhile acolyte, or, more precisely and oddly, at his bag. Doctor Aziz attempts to make small talk... ‘Your wife is well? Do they still talk about your bag of golden teeth?’... tries to remake an old friendship; but Tai is in full flight now, a stream of inventive pouring out of him. The Heidelberg bag quakes under the torrent of abuse. ‘Sistersleeping pigskin bag from Abroad full of foreigner’s tricks. Big-shot bag. Now if a man breaks an arm that bag will not let the bonesetter bind it in leaves. Now a man must let his wife lie beside that bag and watch knives come and cut her open. A fine business, what these foreigners put in our young men’s heads. I swear: it is a too-bad thing. That bag should fry in Hell with the testicles of the ungodly.’

Ghani the landowner snaps his braces with his thumbs. ‘A big chance, yes indeed. They are saying good things about you in town. Good medical training. Good... good enough... family. And now our own lady doctor is sick so you get your opportunity. That woman, always sick these days, too old, I am thinking, and not up in the latest developments also, what-what? I say: physician heal thyself. And I tell you this: I am wholly objective in my business relations. Feelings, love, I keep for my family only. If a person is not doing a first-class job for me, out she goes! You understand me? So: my daughter Naseem is not well. You will treat her excellently. Remember I have friends; and ill-health strikes high and low alike.’
... ‘Do you still pickle water-snakes in brandy to give you virility, Taiji? Do you still like to eat lotus-root without any spices?’ Hesitant questions, brushed aside by the torrent of Tai’s fury. Doctor Aziz begins to diagnose. To the ferryman, the bag represents Abroad; it is the alien thing, the invader, progress. And yes, it has indeed taken possession of the young Doctor’s mind; and yes, it contains knives, and cures for cholera and malaria and smallpox; and yes, it sits between doctor and boatman, and has made them antagonists. Doctor Aziz begins to fight, against sadness, and against Tai’s anger, which is beginning to infect him, to become his own, which erupts only rarely, but comes, when it does come, unheralded in a roar from his deepest places, laying waste everything in sight; and then vanishes, leaving him wondering why everyone is so upset... They are approaching Ghani’s house. A bearer awaits the shikara, standing with clasped hands on a little wooden jetty. Aziz fixes his mind on the job in hand.

... ‘Has your usual doctor agreed to my visit, Ghani Sahib?’ ... Again, a hesitant question is brushed lightly aside. The landowner says, ‘Oh, she will agree. Now follow me, please.’

... The bearer is waiting on the jetty. Holding the shikara steady as Aadam Aziz climbs out, bag in hand. And now, at last, Tai speaks directly to my grandfather. Scorn in his face, Tai asks, ‘Tell me this, Doctor Sahib: have you got in that bag made of dead pigs one of those machines that foreign doctors use to smell with?’ Aadam shakes his head, not understanding. Tai’s voice gathers new layers of disgust. ‘You know, sir, a thing like an elephant’s trunk.’ Aziz, seeing what he means, replies: ‘A stethoscope? Naturally.’ Tai pushes the shikara off from the jetty. Spits. Begins to row away. ‘I knew it,’ he says, ‘You will use such a machine now, instead of your own big nose.’

My grandfather does not trouble to explain that a stethoscope is more like a pair of ears than a nose. He is stilling his own irritation, the resentful anger of a cast-off child; and besides, there is a patient waiting. Time settles down and concentrates on the importance of the moment.

The house was opulent but badly lit. Ghani was a widower and the servants clearly took advantage. There were cobwebs in corners and layers of dust on ledges. They walked down a long corridor; one of the doors was ajar and through it Aziz saw a room in a state of violent disorder. This glimpse, connected with a glint of light in Ghani’s dark glasses, suddenly informed Aziz that the landowner was blind. This aggravated his sense of unease: a blind man who claimed to appreciate European paintings? He was, also, impressed, because Ghani hadn’t bumped into anything... they halted outside a thick teak door. Ghani said, ‘Wait here two moments’, and went into the room behind the door.

In later years, Doctor Aadam Aziz swore that during those two moments of solitude in the gloomy spidery corridors of the landowner’s mansion he was gripped by an almost uncontrollable desire to turn and run away as fast as his legs would carry him. Unnerved by the enigma of the blind art-lover, his insides filled with tiny scrabbling insects as a result of the insidious venom of Tai’s mutterings, his nostrils itching to the point of convincing him that he had somehow contracted venereal disease, he felt his feet begin slowly, as though encased in boots of lead, to turn; felt blood pounding in his temples; and was seized by so powerful a sensation of standing upon a point of no return that he very nearly wet his German woolen trousers. He began, without knowing it, to blush furiously; and at this point his mother appeared before him, seated on the floor before a low desk, a rash spreading like a blush across her face as she held a turquoise up to the light. His mother’s face had acquired all the scorn of the boatman Tai. ‘Go, go, run,’ she told him in Tai’s voice, ‘Don’t worry about your poor old mother.’ Doctor Aziz found himself stammering, ‘What a useless son you’ve got, Amma; can’t you see there’s a hole in the middle of me the size of a melon?’ His mother smiled a pained smile. ‘You always were a heartless boy,’ she sighed, and then turned into a lizard on the wall of the corridor and stuck her tongue out at him. Doctor Aziz stopped feeling dizzy, became unsure that he’d actually spoken aloud, wondered what he’d meant by that business about the hole, found that his feet were no longer trying to escape, and realized that he was being watched. A woman with the biceps of a wrestler was staring at him, beckoning him to follow her into the room. The state of her sari told him that she was a servant; but she was not servile. ‘You look green as a fish,’ she said, ‘You young doctors. You come into a strange house and your liver turns to jelly. Come, Doctor Sahib, they are waiting for you.’ Clutching his bag a fraction too tightly, he followed her through the dark teak door.

... Into a spacious bedchamber that was as ill-lit as the rest of the house; although here there were shafts of dusty sunlight seeping in through a fanlight high on one wall. These dusty rays illuminated a scene as remarkable as anything the Doctor had ever witnessed: a tableau of such surpassing strangeness that his feet began to twitch towards the door once again. Two more women, also built like professional wrestlers, stood stiffly in the light, each holding one corner of an enormous white bedsheet, their arms raised high above their heads so that the sheet hung between them like a curtain. Mr Ghani welled up out of the murk surrounding the sunlit sheet and permitted the nonplussed Aadam to stare stupidly at the peculiar tableau for perhaps half a minute, at the end of which, and before a word had been spoken, the Doctor made a discovery:

In the very centre of the sheet, a hole had been cut, a crude circle about seven inches in diameter.

‘Close the door, ayah,’ Ghani instructed the first of the lady wrestlers, and
then, turning to Aziz, became confidential. ‘This town contains many good-for-nothings who have on occasion tried to climb into my daughter’s room. She needs,’ he nodded at the three musclebound women, ‘protectors.’

Aziz was still looking at the perforated sheet. Ghani said, ‘All right, come on, you will examine my Naseem right now. Pronto.’

My grandfather peered around the room. ‘But where is she, Ghani Sahib?’ he blurted out finally. The lady wrestlers adopted supercilious expressions and, it seemed to him, tightened their musculatures, just in case he intended to try something fancy.

‘Ah, I see your confusion,’ Ghani said, his poisonous smile broadening, ‘You Europe-returned chappies forget certain things. Doctor Sahib, my daughter is a decent girl, it goes without saying. She does not flaunt her body under the noses of strange men. You will understand that you cannot be permitted to see her, no, not in any circumstances; accordingly I have required her to be positioned behind that sheet. She stands there, like a good girl.’

A frantic note had crept into Doctor Aziz’s voice. ‘Ghani Sahib, tell me how I am to examine her without looking at her?’ Ghani smiled on.

‘You will kindly specify which portion of my daughter it is necessary to inspect. I will then issue her with my instructions to place the required segment against that hole which you see there. And so, in this fashion the thing may be achieved.’

‘But what, in any event, does the lady complain of?’ — my grandfather, despairingly. To which Mr Ghani, his eyes rising upwards in their sockets, his smile twisting into a grimace of grief, replied: ‘The poor child! She has a terrible, a too dreadful stomach-ache.’

‘In that case,’ Doctor Aziz said with some restraint, ‘will she show me her stomach, please.’

Mercurochrome

Padma — our plump Padma — is sulking magnificently. (She can’t read and, like all fish-lovers, dislikes other people knowing anything she doesn’t. Padma: strong, jolly, a consolation for my last days. But definitely a bitch-in-the-manger.) She attempts to cajole me from my desk: ‘Eat, na, food is spoiling.’ I remain stubbornly hunched over paper. ‘But what is so precious,’ Padma demands, her right hand slicing the air upside down in exasperation, ‘to need all this writing-shitting?’ I reply: now that I’ve let out the details of my birth, now that the perforated sheet stands between doctor and patient, there’s no going back. Padma snorts. Wrist smacks against forehead. ‘Okay, starve starve, who cares two pice?’ Another louder, conclusive snort... but I take no exception to her attitude. She stirs a bubbling vat all day for a living; something hot and vinegary has steamed her up tonight. Thick of waist, somewhat hairy of forearm, she flounces, gesticulates, exits. Poor Padma. Things are always getting her goat. Perhaps even her name: understandably enough, since her mother told her, when she was only small, that she had been named after the lotus goddess, whose most common appellation amongst village folk is ‘The One Who Possesses Dung’.

In the renewed silence, I return to sheets of paper which smell just a little of turmeric, ready and willing to put out of its misery a narrative which I left yesterday hanging in mid-air — just as Scheherazade, depending for her very survival on leaving Prince Shahryar eaten up by curiosity, used to do night after night! I’ll begin at once: by revealing that my grandfather’s premonitions in the corridor were not without foundation. In the succeeding months and years, he fell under what I can only describe as the sorcerer’s spell of that enormous and as yet unstained — perforated cloth.

‘Again?’ Aadam’s mother said, rolling her eyes. ‘I tell you, my child, that girl is so sickly from too much soft living only. Too much sweetmeats and spoiling, because of the absence of a mother’s firm hand. But go, take care of your invisible patient, your mother is all right with her little nothing of a headache.’

In those years, you see, the landowner’s daughter Naseem Ghani contracted a quite extraordinary number of minor illnesses, and each time a shikarawallah was despatched to summon the tall young Doctor sahib with the big