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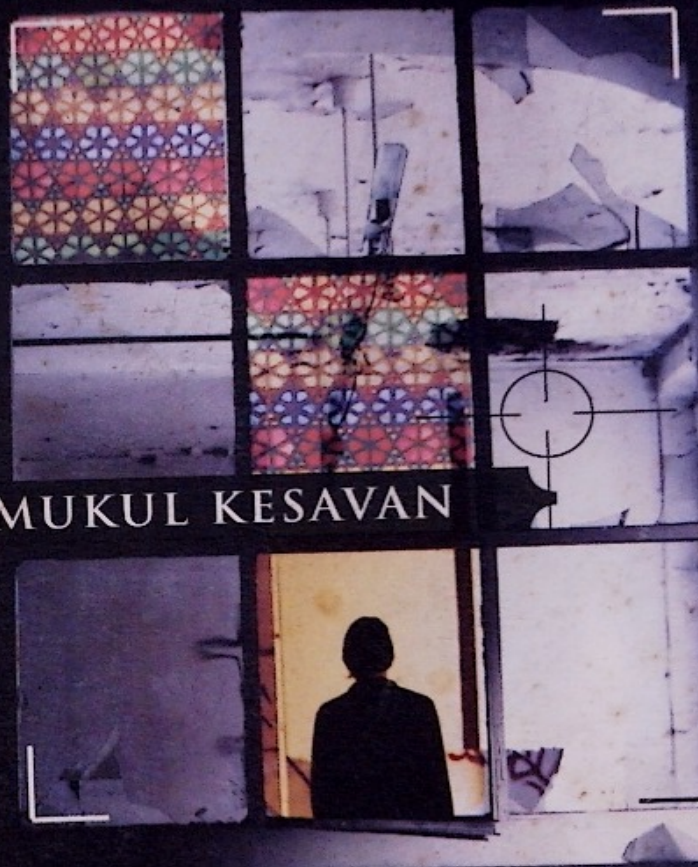
MUKUL KESAVAN

LOOKING THROUGH GLASS

A NOVEL



MUKUL KESAVAN

'[*Looking Through Glass*] represents an all-too-rare event in publishing—an important book that is a pleasure to read.'
—*New York Times Book Review*

RAVI DAYAL

Contents

Deathbed Guilt

ALL THAT WAS left of her when we returned the next morning was ash and bone grit. Dadi was eighty-eight when her heart failed and she burned like brittle paper. She would have been pleased, I thought, leaning over the extinguished pyre to sift the dust for bits of bone. She had hated leftovers. Mealtimes in her Kashmiri Gate house were grimly policed. The grandchildren were served measured portions and she stood over us till we had picked our plates clean. Malingerers were reminded of the red-hot kitchen tongs buried in the choolha. She never needed to show them to us – we knew, just as the adults did, that Dadi was a woman of her word.

When her husband died, she continued to live in the Kashmiri Gate house, attended by a single maid, refusing the half-hearted hospitality of her children: my father had planned to share her on a half-yearly basis with his younger brother. I grew up hearing relatives routinely marvelling at her self-sufficiency, at that iron independence undented by age. No leftover food, no unpaid dues: herself a social worker in the field of fallen women, she was determined not to become an object of charity.

My parents didn't visit her much in the decade after Dadaji's death, and I became close to her only after I discovered my school's darkroom. Mr D'Mello, the teacher-in-charge, was fond of saying that black-and-white photography was about texture and grain. Texture and grain, he would say, holding up an enormous blow-up of a thumbprint, texture and grain. This seemed a substantial insight to me at eighteen, so that when the *Illustrated Weekly of India* announced a competition for photo-portraits, I borrowed my father's Rolleiflex and hurried down the road from Ludlow Castle to Kashmiri Gate, shuffling angles in my mind, greedy for the wrinkles and pouches of Dadi's oldness.

I didn't win a prize for my picture of her sitting behind the

blurred wheel of a charkha, spinning, but my visits continued, once a month on an average till she died. In the beginning it was the house that drew me . . . its flaking whitewashed walls, the latticed shadows of its window-grilles, its mosaic floors erratically lit by sunlight sloping down from high ventilators. It wasn't a house – it was a box of pictures waiting to be taken.

I took them and the cumulative result – which I learnt to call a portfolio – gave me a start in life as a freelance photographer. But there was a price I paid for those pictures; an hour of every visit was spent listening patiently to Dadi's first person account of the struggle for Independence. In the early days it was an epic tale; she gave me a wide-angle picture of the Gandhian decades, but after the first few visits she zoomed in on the great Salt Satyagraha led by the Mahatma in 1930. There, in the high theatre of civil disobedience, Dadi replayed, with ever more detailed props, the single scene of which she was the heroine.

Actually, I knew that scene in outline well before Dadi relived it for me; it was part of family folklore. With my unweaned father at her breast, Dadi had answered Gandhi's call by picketing the liquor shop in the Kashmiri Gate arcade. She lay on its threshold daring customers to step over her. No one did, but the police finally dragged the picketers away – so Dadi and my father spent six months in a colonial jail.

I knew the story in all its hundred versions by the time my black-and-white phase came to an end. The repetition didn't mean that she was senile or crazed with loneliness. Retelling that story was a strong woman's single self-indulgence. It was also her way of teaching me that I, like the rest of her grandchildren, was amongst the first citizens of free India – because she had paid my dues. In her mind there was an absolute distinction between the status of her descendants and those of women who had suffered nothing in the cause of freedom. The others were independent India's charity children, orphans sustained by the benevolence of the state, whereas we, by birthright, were shareholders in the nation. Dadi was dedicated to balancing books and it gave her huge satisfaction that her family was solidly in the black.

It was a terrible irony, then, that this hard-won sense of self was destroyed when the Republic officially recognized her patriotic credentials. One Independence Day, the government decided to honour a lengthy roll of freedom fighters. This meant a copper citation and a pension of four hundred rupees a month. My father was proud of her and a little relieved: he thought it was appropriate and useful that his mother's sacrifices for freedom should underwrite her own independence in old age.

My visits had tapered off around that time because I had just switched to colour photography and moved away from Dadi and her Kashmiri Gate house to other subjects. Breaking into the colour supplements was hard work because the commissions went to elaborately equipped professionals and all I had was my father's Rolleiflex, state-of-the-art circa 1957. I needed money. My parents had none to give me because every rupee of their savings had gone into building a house before my father retired. So, nine months after my last visit, I returned to Kashmiri Gate, for reasons more material than inspiration in black-and-white.

Dadi was sitting at her charkha – but she wasn't spinning. She was staring at it as if she had never seen a spinning wheel before. Her hair, normally scraped back, had escaped its neat little knot, to straggle around her face in dirty white tendrils. She was looking ill and inches thinner. Why, I thought, taken aback, she's just an old woman now. Then she did something completely out of character.

I need your help, she said.

There was something seriously wrong if she could bring herself to ask, so I went and sat by her side.

Wait, she said, struggling to her feet, using my shoulder willingly to push herself up. She disappeared into her little store room and came out holding something that looked like a necklace box. I want you to find the office that sent me this and return it to the officer concerned. Painfully, she settled down behind the spinning wheel again. And tell him, she continued in the mechanical tone of a lawyer reading a will, to stop sending me money. She took a tired breath . . . make sure he crosses my name off his ledger.

I opened the box and saw my face distorted in still untarnished copper. It was Dadi's citation. It was this that she wanted to return; this and the pension that came with it.

I have the three thousand six hundred rupees they've sent me so far, she said. I haven't spent any of it. You must take it to the accountant in that office and give it back to him . . . don't forget to get a receipt for it.

But why was she doing this? It was a government honour, a government pension; there was no taint to either. She had fought for freedom, she had been jailed, she had risked the well-being of her family, she was entitled –

No I am not, she interrupted vehemently. Her rigid uprightness sagged a little and she allowed herself to lean against the takht behind her. Then she explained her unworthiness . . .

She had been pleased when the official letter announcing the recognition first arrived. Pleased and only a little sad that her husband wasn't alive to share her joy as she had shared his when he was made a Companion of the Indian Empire in 1942. 1942. She hadn't thought of that date in forty years.

And yet, it had been a year to remember, a sacred year in the memory of the Nation, the year of the Quit India rebellion.

For two weeks that August, said Dadi, her eyes filling with long ago pride, the Raj didn't exist in north India. There were republics inaugurated in Ballia and Azamgarh . . . they didn't last of course, because the British had whole armies in India to fight the Japanese and they won in the end. But the empire trembled. That's why the British left five years later, explained Dadi. They had been taught their lesson in 1942.

But Dadi hadn't been one of the teachers and that was the root of it all. When the rebellion began, twelve long years had passed since the passion of the Salt Satyagraha, and Dadi's world had changed. She was a decade older, her husband was a Judge now and her sons were at a new but promising boarding school in the hills. She had grown used to paying her tithe to the Nation in the coin of social work – so when the call came to man the barricades, she looked away.

I still didn't understand. Why this anguish now? After forty years?

She tried to explain. There had been guilt even then, but her family, her home for fallen women and her spinning had crowded it out. Then freedom came and it was easy to forget the past because there was a future to think about.

It wasn't until she reached Rashtrapati Bhavan, where she and a hundred others were to be given their citations in a public ceremony, that the guilt stirred again. Sitting in her red plush chair, waiting her turn, listening to the master of ceremonies call out their names and summarize their sacrifices, she realized that everyone there had been beaten, wounded or jailed in 1942. Every patriot of her generation seemed to have participated in both the satyagraha of '30 and the rebellion of '42. Everyone except her. That was when the guilt returned.

Had I done what she asked of me that afternoon – returned the citation and the uncashed pension cheques – she might have made her peace with the past. But I didn't. I didn't because I needed her money to pay for a zoom lens that would bring me close to horizons otherwise unreachable. I played upon her love for me and took from her the three thousand six hundred rupees that she hadn't spent. That was the down payment. But the rest of the money had to be paid in instalments so in the end, for my sake, Dadi kept her stipend on, always in the hope of eventually returning every paisa . . . when I paid her back as I swore I would but never did.

I thought she was being silly, but the guilt consumed her. Every month I found her thinner and more obsessed than before. She agonized about the debit mounting against her name each time the pension cheque arrived. She wasn't a shareholder in the Republic any more, just a debtor, a drain on the Nation's resources, accepting money which she hadn't earned.

After the first eighteen months of the pension, she couldn't think on any other subject for more than ten minutes continuously. She got a reader's ticket to the public library and went there every day to look through their newspaper archives. She went through every paper of the time to catch up with those heroic days in August that she had missed out on. Then, when I visited her for the money, she would relate in awful detail some aspect of the insurrection she had just read

up . . . to highlight the enormity of what she had not done. She never spoke of what she actually did in '42, of her children, her husband, their life together. The August rebellion became a black hole in her memory that sucked in everything that ever happened to her afterwards, that collapsed her entire life into a single non-event.

She didn't lose her mind, though. Till the end, with the help of Jumna her maid, she coped with the present well enough to live on her own. It was her terror of becoming dependent on her sons that kept her this side of sanity; her legendary self-sufficiency was all she had left. She died as she would have wanted to, in her home in Kashmiri Gate, sitting by her old charkha, spinning.

She had told us all and written it in her will that we weren't to burn her in the ovens of the electric crematorium – she wanted to burn in the open air. So we took her to Nigambodh Ghat by the Jamuna, less than a mile away, where she burned briskly and well.

After I finished scrabbling through the ashes, what was left of her filled less than a third of the little clay urn I had been given. I covered the mouth of the urn with a cloth and carried it to the temple across the road. The brahmin there tied a sling around its neck and hung it on a branch of the huge peepul that grew in the temple's courtyard. It would hang there till I retrieved it the next evening, before setting off on a journey that would take me via Lucknow to Banaras, where on the steps of Dasashwamedh Ghat I would tip her ashes into the Ganga.

It was nine hours to Lucknow by the overnight Mail and, having managed to avoid an aisle berth, I knew I would sleep well. The camera bag was my pillow because it was my first time out with the zoom and I was looking out for thieves. It was the kind of assignment I would never have got without the long lens. I had been commissioned by the *India Magazine* to illustrate an essay on the Use of Lime Plaster and Stucco in Nawabi Lucknow and the author wanted blown-up details of moulding and ornament and glaze. And since these details

lived on column capitals or unclimbable domes, the only way of getting close enough was a zoom. I owned every inch of its potent length – Dadi's last pension cheque had closed that chapter neatly.

Her ashes were travelling in a thermos flask which (on my mother's advice) I wore strapped across my body, even in sleep. She had transferred the ashes from the urn because she was afraid it would break during the two train journeys. I was taking the ashes to Banaras because Dadi had written it in her will that she wanted them tipped into the Ganga at Kashi. Everyone in the family thought they understood why but they didn't. Dadi's wish had nothing to do with the holiness of Banaras; it was her salaam-in-death to the martyrs of 1942, many of whom had come from Banaras and its neighbourhood, her last attempt to be part of the Quit India rebellion. She died at a convenient time because I was already headed east for the Lucknow commission. I volunteered to take the ashes – I owed her a debt and this was a good way of squaring the books.

The night went well. For once the purple nightlight didn't stir up ugly dreams and the chai-chai rasp at echoing midnight halts didn't wake me up. I woke to the rhythms of summer's loveliest sound – rain, drumming the roof of my carriage as it chugged through the uneventful flatness of the Ganga's plain. My watch showed five; there was still an hour for Lucknow. I reached for the camera bag and felt about . . . the lens was there, reassuring in its solid length. On the other side of me was the flask. I touched them both again and stretched contentedly. Between the exciting nearness of magnified horizons and the tidy prospect of sinking Dadi's leftovers, I was happy.

It seemed wrong to taste this happiness through unbrushed teeth, so I climbed down from my bunk and made my way to the washbasin at the end of the aisle. It was awkward standing there, waiting my turn, with the others looking curiously at the camera bag and flask, but I couldn't risk being separated from them. Embarrassment was a small price to pay for secure possession. In the lavatory, afterwards, I bent my rule and hung the flask on the door peg before squatting.

The aisle seats by the window were unoccupied when I

returned to the compartment and I settled down on one of them to watch the rain outside without the distraction of company. I lifted the glass shutter without getting soaked because the rain was slanting away from the window in a crosswise gale. After fifteen minutes of breathing in the damp freshness, fifteen minutes of the breeze glancing off my face, I was within a heartbeat of bliss. And then, as if to flag off my just-brushed teeth, a sketchily uniformed attendant appeared, selling tea. I let it cool in the saucer and wondered if someone was fine-tuning the world to my frequency. I should have touched wood.

The train halted at the last station before Lucknow. The card-players threw in their hands and rushed out on to the platform to buy things to eat. I kept to my seat and day-dreamed about the magical properties of my new lens. I hadn't taken a single picture with it yet – it would be blooded on this trip. The power of it . . . the world close-up from an invulnerable distance! the grimace of a straining rickshawallah, the graffiti on a peeling dome – it was mine in all the detail I wanted, mine without the risks of proximity.

A whistle blew and the train started to move. The platform slid away and wet greenness filled my window again. On impulse I unzipped the camera bag and took out the lens. Ignoring the interested stares of the card-players who had stopped playing on this last lap to Lucknow, I fitted its length to the camera body. Then, remembering the rain and what it might do to the surface of the virgin lens, I capped it and sat back, and tried to be inconspicuous. The others in the compartment probably thought that I'd been showing off and who could blame them. Fiddling with the camera case I looked determinedly out of the window, sick of rain and vegetation now, longing for the journey to end.

But half an hour short of Lucknow, as we were going over a bridge, the train slowed and ground to a halt. Immediately the compartment began rustling with restlessness as everyone went to the doors and peered out. Then, down the long, running aisle that linked the carriages crept the explanatory rumour – line not clear – and people settled down again.

The train had stopped on the bridge, just short of land.

Through the girders of the bridge I could see the sluggish green surface of the river and the brown of its gently sloping bank on which tiny figures were moving metronomically. When I looked at them through my magic eye, they became dhobis, slapping clothes on washing stones.

Dhobis? What were they doing in the rain? I looked through the lens again and saw it wasn't in fact raining on the riverbank – there were sharply cast shadows miming the movements of the washermen. Looking up at the sky, I saw a great fault in the massed cloud above us through which watery sunlight was shining down on the river. I stuck my head out of the window and surveyed the bank we had left behind. That was sunlit too, though beyond it the landscape was still curtained off by rain. Just the river, its banks, the bridge and the train stuck on it were being shone upon.

It was slanted, enigmatic light, the kind that limns photographers' frames with easy mystery. I took aim through the window again, but from inside the train there was no clean angle on the dhobis: the girders kept getting in the way.

There was a look-out point, though, in line with my window, where the straight lines of the bridge were broken by an observation platform which jutted further out over the river. It was less than six feet from my compartment; already a nonchalant passenger had crossed the single girder joining the observation platform to the track and smoked a cigarette there. Then, as casually, he strolled over it again and resumed his place in the revived card game. It made me dizzy to watch him – there was nothing for his hands to hold on to; just emptiness on either side, all the way down to the river.

I wouldn't have dared if it hadn't been for the rainbow. Suddenly it was there, spanning cloudbank and riverbank in a great gaudy arc. The card-players peered through the windows again and smiled – for them it was only a spectacle; for me, with kodachrome in my camera and a lens to blood, it was a sign.

The train hadn't whistled yet, so I had time. Taking a deep breath, I walked down the aisle to the door and strode over the girder without once looking down or exhaling. My heart

thudded with daring and excitement, as I leaned on the platform's railing to steady the lens. But in the five minutes I was there, I took no photographs because there wasn't after all a great picture to be taken. I managed to section the dhobis off into several worthy frames but turbaned heads and saris spread to dry on sand had been done to death: for the inaugural use of this hard-won lens I needed an exceptional subject. I straightened up reluctantly and nerved myself to return to the train – the girder had to be risked again. I steadied myself; first by pushing the flask, which I still had slung round me, till it rested against my buttocks and then by wedging the camera under one arm so that it didn't dangle and tip me off balance. Approaching that narrow walkway, cross-eyed with the effort of concentrating on its eighteen-inch breadth, I was distracted by a figure in my peripheral vision.

It, or rather he, was standing where the bridge's last column sank into the riverbank, knee deep in water . . . looking up. I stepped back from the girder and tried to train the camera on him, but he had now disappeared from view, cut off by the platform's edge. So, crouching, I inched up to the girder till he came into frame again. I pushed the lens out and zoomed in on him. I would have laughed out loud if my perch had been more secure, because a man in a white kurta much like mine, was looking up at the train through a little telescope. Man-with-a-lens – here was the picture I had been looking for. I broadened the frame to take in his rolled-up pajamas and the water, but just then he moved two steps to his left and spoilt it all. Made brave by the lens (which exorcised vertigo by eliminating distance), I moved up a foot and braced my left leg on the girder. For a few seconds as I focused and set aperture, we stared at each other through layers of ground glass and I felt a quick affection for this unidentical twin. If nothing else, he would make a good, eccentric study.

And then . . . well, it wasn't any one thing. It was the whistle going as I made to click; that clap of thunder in the distance, the flask rolling round my behind – it was all of these. But most of all it was the weight of the lens. I had braced myself and allowed for its weight, but as I tensed to shoot, it suddenly became

twice as heavy and in the nanosecond that it took to squeeze the shutter button, ten times its normal weight and more, as it dragged me downwards. Then I was falling, hurtling towards the green river, the downswinging dhobis, the man with the telescope – and just before I knew nothing I saw my free-falling ten-ton lens beat me to the water. It made a big splash.

I woke to the sound of someone choking. It was me. Breathing wasn't automatic anymore; I had to be awake to think it through. After a minute of frightening vacuum sounds, the rhythm returned and I fell back on the couch to weep gratefully. It took me a minute to recover enough to smell the frying liver and see the grimy chandelier hanging over me. There was a large bolster-like thing under my head. I was lying under a white sheet. Nothing felt wet.

But my chest felt raw and my forehead was pulsing like a skinned sinus. My hand obeyed when I made it wipe my eyes though it worked in slow motion. Then I heard a door open, the smell of liver grew stronger and assorted footsteps approached me. Two women appeared at the foot of the couch, two men by its side.

I asked after my camera but what came out was a strangled rattle. The older woman shook her head and put a finger to her lips. The younger man and the girl were clearly related: they were both good-looking in a light-skinned, sharp-featured way. The fat woman trying to keep me quiet was their mother, I decided, because even with dark glasses on, she looked like the boy. The odd one out was the sallow man with bristling moustaches, who propped me up with cushions and gave me a cup of tea. He was the one who explained.

I had been saved from the river by Masroor. The fine-looking son smiled reassuringly and I knew him at once – he was the man with the telescope. I had fallen close to the bank and he had pulled me out quickly. But the shock and the sucked-in water had kept me unconscious right through the resuscitation on the riverbank and the rickshaw-ride. You're in a state of shock, said Moustaches severely. He obviously thought that I

was suicidal. Rest, he commanded, then they backed off and left me alone again, without a word to explain why Masroor had been peering up at a train through a telescope.

But the advice was good. I needed sleep. Only, I still wasn't sure about the breathing, so I rubbed my eyes and stayed propped up on the cushions. It was an old house. The room I was in looked into a courtyard through three green-painted metal arches fitted with doors – these had been left open to let in the air. Though the chandelier needed cleaning, the furniture and fittings were nicely period and the whole interior was of a piece with the age of the house: nothing plastic – every object was wood metal glass leather wool. The rugs seemed worn enough to be ancestral and the doors had panes of orange and green glass of a kind not used any more. The mantel clock on a side table was an unnecessary touch, but the other pieces in the living room seemed to belong there, better than the junk that had cluttered Dadi's house.

Dadi. My heart stopped and my breathing broke down again. I coughed great tearing coughs till strings of mucous dribbled from my mouth on to the sheet. I wiped my face and looked about wildly – then cried real tears when I saw the flask on a little table by the head of the couch. Fumbling, I unscrewed the cap and looked inside; the ashes were there, dry as the day she was burnt. I stood the flask on the floor this time, within arm's reach. Then I lay back on the cushions and concentrated on the problem of unselfconscious breathing.

Thinking of other things was useless because tiredness wouldn't let me think. So I tried reading: if what I read was dull enough there was a chance that I'd fall asleep without my lungs noticing. They had left newspapers on the couchside table. The Urdu ones were no good for me but under them was one called the *Pioneer*. I could tell that it was a provincial paper from its masthead; no metropolitan broadsheet had used a Gothic face in years. Even the layout was primitive, with headlines compressed into two columns. Soviets Bomb Nazi Shipping on the Volga: they had used three lines to cram it in. And the Million Men Mobilized in Manchukuo had been stuffed into a single column. Manchukuo? Sleep vanished; my

eyes focused on the date under the masthead. It matched . . . It matched the Gothic masthead and the headlines and the period furniture. 4 August, 1942.

For the second time that morning I saw the end of the world and then knew nothing.

Inside

I DIDN'T ASK after the camera again. Or about Masroor's telescope though I worked that out for myself, later, without being told. Amnesia had its rules and I kept to them. Once 1942 became undeniable, I chose to lose my memory. I didn't have a choice; any other course would have meant impossible explanations. So I didn't stint – I even lost my name.

Masroor's sister, Asharfi, found me another but that was later. It was strange managing without a name. Masroor cleared his throat at me; Asharfi called me bhaisahib; Ammi their mother just shouted 'arrey' when she wanted my attention and the whiskered man whose name was Haasan called me Chinna. He took my amnesia hardest. Till you remember your family, he said worriedly, I am your uncle.

I met no one else for the first five days, so namelessness wasn't a real embarrassment. It may even have helped; it turned me from a grown man into a homeless waif. This was probably one reason for Ammi's unwary hospitality. There were others: Masroor felt proprietorial about me in the absence of other claimants – he had, after all, breathed new life into me. Later, when Asharfi renamed me, I became her handiwork as well.

But for that first week I didn't care why they kept me, so long as they left me alone. Ammi had put me in a room on the upper floor. It was a large house built before the 1857 Mutiny, stuccoed and plastered to no purpose in the absence of my camera. I spent my mornings sitting in the verandah that overlooked the courtyard, drinking tea and not reading the newspaper. The courtyard was roofed over by a grid of thin metal rods, strong enough to be walked upon but fine enough to let the sunlight through. I spent whole days looking through this metal grille at the bustle in the courtyard below. On the days that it was impossible to accept that this was 1942, I felt I was watching a command performance of some endless period play.

When it wasn't raining, unfurled black umbrellas lolled by the entrance to the hall, drying. Mother and daughter didn't go out much; the umbrellas belonged to Masroor or his friends. He lived in a room across the courtyard on the ground floor, from which he emerged every morning at six, passed under the grille and went through the door into Massaldan Lane. I knew it was called that because Asharfi once tried to explain the location of the house in case I ever got lost. Since I didn't intend stepping out of the house till the morning of the ninth (and then never to return), her directions were wasted on me. I tried not to listen; my fate hinged on perfect insulation from everything around me – even to learn directions was to let this world leak in.

But Massaldan Lane stuck in my mind, as did other bits of dangerous information because Asharfi was both too kind and too beautiful to be easily ignored. Masroor visited me too – after lunch sometimes, or in between the long huddled conversations he had with his friends, all of them sitting in the courtyard if the weather was fine, in the hall if it was raining. He didn't say much to me; he just asked after my health or my memory and occasionally he would offer to buy me anything I needed from the shops outside. And when I refused (always more vehemently than I meant to) he would nod and smile and return to whispered conversations with his indefinably covert friends.

I wasn't curious. He was none of my business. Nothing in this world was. There was a desolate sort of comfort in that certainty. Six days from the day I had fallen into the river, the Mail would run again and take me home. I planned to board it at Charbagh station so that when it passed through that time warp on the bridge, I'd find my time again. Once again there would be sun on the river and gloom on land, men playing cards and dhobis on the banks. And me . . . without a haunted camera lens to tip me over. This time, when the train drew into Delhi station, I would step out into the real world of colour television and people I knew.

If I stayed indoors as quietly and deafly and indifferently as possible, I would return to a present unchanged by its past. In

the gigantic surge of history, the tiny splash I had made would pass unnoticed. Not everything that happened in the past was history and when the facts of this rewound time were sifted by historians, I wanted to be sifted out. So I had decided to be more rigorously detached from August 1942 than even poor Dadi had been.

Indifference was easiest between eight and lunch when Asharfi was away at college and Masroor pedalled off to La Martinière where he taught history. Every day after they left, I climbed down the stairs and crept into one of the huge armchairs in the hall. The room doubled as a library so there was plenty to read. Most mornings I had Ammi for company but she was so busy that it was safe being with her.

Once she had supervised the cleaning of the house and told Moonis the lunch menu, the mornings belonged to the magazine which she edited and published each quarter, *Khatoon*. *Khatoon* was ten years old, it had two hundred and eleven subscribers and nothing in common with other women's journals like *Tahzib-un-Niswan* or *Ismat*, which relentlessly strove to rescue Muslim women from ignorance through home hints and homilies. We have no interest in these matters, she was fond of saying grandly. What can I tell a woman about babies and recipes that she won't discover for herself? My khatoons, she would say, need to live, not learn. It was living that they couldn't do in their homes, tied down as they were by the domestic round . . . so four times a year, she mailed them other lives.

She wrote the entire magazine – every article, sometimes even the letters to the editor when her readers failed her. In fact the first time she mentioned *Khatoon* to me was because she wanted me to read the July issue and to write her a letter. She wanted it to be three hundred words long and signed by Waheed Jahan who was one of her regular proxies, but she didn't have time for her in this issue. I was so obliged to Ammi for refuge that I agreed. But when she gave the relevant issue of *Khatoon* to me it was in Urdu, written in the Persian script, as barred to me as a Martian cipher. After this, she used me for the heavy work; I carried great stacks of newsprint to the old zenana. The zenana was connected to the hall by a steep

spiral stairway and the first time I went there I discovered that its rooms looked into the hall, through screened windows. From where secluded women had once peeped at male festivity, I had a top view of Ammi writing a brisk account of the Haj. As soon as it was finished it would be rushed to the press which lived in the zenana and was worked by Masroor.

Ammi tried out bits of the Haj piece on me by reading them out. It was in the first person. All the articles in *Khatoon* were in the first person; it was one of Ammi's rules. There was nothing like the first person to help readers live other lives. She had stopped accepting articles from outsiders because they tended to peddle information in the third person. Now she wrote whole issues under half-a-dozen pen names, so that the readers got exactly what she wanted.

The current issue, which was running behind schedule, featured a walking tour of Moorish Granada (including a description in cinematic detail of the Alhambra and its unparalleled stucco and plaster ornamentation), a memoir of the great and bloody Moplah rebellion of 1921 in Kerala by a Gentlewoman of Calicut, a letter about a rail journey from Istanbul to Paris by an emancipated Turkish lady and, of course, the Haj pilgrimage to Mecca by the widowed Shakila Rehman of Mymensingh, who, Ammi declared in her editorial introduction, was an inspiration to us all.

Great chunks of each of these were read out to me and I was happy to listen because all the accounts were made up by Ammi; the I in each case was pseudonymous, the narratives were imaginary, the geography impressionistic (the gentlewoman from Calicut remembered a Malabar lapped by the Bay of Bengal) and such facts as she worked in were randomly cribbed from books and newspapers. The articles were so removed from the reality of 1942 that there was no risk of them infecting me with the present.

Ammi didn't mind admitting that nothing in *Khatoon* grew out of real-life experience. The Haj story for example; Lucknow was the furthest west she had been. But the absence of first-hand knowledge didn't worry her. If I start waiting on experience, she said to me once, I'll have to fill *Khatoon* with recipes.

She was sceptical about the relevance of real life: till women re-invent the world, she said to me, who will let them live in it? This suited me; until the tenth when the Mail came round to take me back to my own time, I wanted no dealings with reality.

Detachment got harder at lunchtime because Masroor came home to eat and he seemed to bring the world in with him. He was often accompanied by unannounced friends, but even when he came by himself the cushioned peace of the house was given restless edges. After three days of sharing lunch with him, I knew that he was worried about something. Fortunately his preferred mealtime manner was troubled taciturnity and for this I was grateful. Ignorance is best cultivated in silence. Through the fourth, fifth and sixth of August, then, I managed to ignore his boding quiet, Ammi's mute concern for her edgy son and Masroor's savagely bitten finger nails. I would eat as quickly as decency permitted and retire on grounds of weakness to my room. Here, like a wintering bear, I built myself a den of sleep.

But on the seventh I was denied both sleep and innocence. The morning had passed restfully and at two, Ammi, Asharfi and I had sat down to lunch after waiting half an hour for Masroor. It had been raining hard in the courtyard so Ammi finally decided that he was waiting it out and instructed Moonis to serve the meal. But barely had we begun than the courtyard door was flung open and Masroor with Haasan close behind him, rushed in. They dropped their umbrellas in the courtyard when they made the shelter of the hall's arches and remembered to slip their shoes off before walking into the eating area. They joined us at the table in less time than it took to swallow a mouthful, so though I sensed there was trouble brewing, I was trapped in the procedures of lunch.

The days-old dam of pent-up feeling burst immediately.

You wouldn't believe me, Masroor accused his mother. Just a rumour, you said, when I told you about the match. Well it isn't a rumour. I know for certain now because they're playing the match on our school's cricket field. The headmaster's agreed – he wants to be knighted.

Ammi looked worriedly at Haasan who nodded and confirmed the story. Aligarh Muslim University was playing Banaras Hindu University at cricket over three days, starting on the eleventh. It was the U.P. Governor's scheme for raising money for the War Fund. Tickets were eight annas and one rupee.

Having recited the salient facts, Haasan stopped, without explaining why a cricket match had so upset Masroor.

They're putting up stands, said Haasan angrily. The Governor wants four thousand spectators on the school ground on the eleventh, watching eleven Hindus play eleven Muslims.

He did a quick circuit of the room biting his lips in fury.

What a splendid idea, he said throatily. Cricket, healthy competition and a collection for our lovely war. Lovely, lovely . . . marquees, sunshine, lemonade, whites on the field and rupees in the war chest. Masroor stopped pacing. Hallett's gone mad; one bad decision and we'll have short legs and long legs lying lopped off in the stands.

Rubbish, protested Haasan. There's never been a Hindu-Muslim riot in Lucknow.

That's what they said in Allahabad till 1938, snapped Masroor sarcastically. And in Banaras till 1939 – but the riots happened anyway. There's always a first time.

Haasan shook his head. Nothing will happen, he said. There have been crowds in Lucknow before. I've been here twenty years and lived through dozens of huge, mixed gatherings.

Masroor took a deep breath.

That was then. It's different now. In the United Provinces of 1942, he said with savage deliberation, there are still occasions when large numbers of Hindus and Muslims gather in public and mix uninhibitedly, without restraint or any thought for normal social distance . . . we call them riots.

That's ridiculous, said Haasan, unamused. I tell you nothing will happen.

And when it does, you'll spend hours in your coffee house, discussing whether it was inevitable or just an accident, said Masroor cuttingly. Well, there's been enough killing in the last five years for a riot on the eleventh to be a real possibility. I'm going to make sure that the possibility doesn't arise.

He strode out of the house as impetuously as he had entered

it. Ammi called after him but he had gone. She looked imploringly at Haasan who sighed and, more slowly than Masroor had done, followed him out of the courtyard. Asharfi shut the door after him and now it was Ammi's turn to sigh. I bent over my plate and began eating at a tremendous rate. I wanted neither explanations nor confidences. No doubt Masroor had his reasons, but these, like everything else in this world, had no claim on me.

Do you know what your brother plans to do? she asked her daughter. Asharfi shook her head. There was silence for a while as Ammi stared across the courtyard at the bolted door.

I wish he could talk to Intezar, she whispered to no one in particular. There was such sadness in those words that I looked up from my plate. Tears were running unwiped down her round face; even in my willed ignorance I could tell that she wasn't weeping for Masroor. Asharfi walked around the table and cradled her mother's head; I bolted my meal and fled upstairs.

That evening, after my nap, I was sitting in bed, wondering if it was wise to risk new names and fresh disclosures by going down for tea, when Haasan, who generally came around after finishing work at the coffee house, walked into my room. He was carrying a tray of tea things. Even as he poured, I had the uneasy feeling that in his role as uncle he was going to give me the context of this household's afternoon crisis.

From the day I had made it clear that I was amnesiac, Haasan had taken upon himself the job of refurnishing my emptied mind. Until now his strategy had been to lure me outside the house so that I could accumulate new memories at first hand. Every day, he invited me to lunch with him at the coffee house near Hazrat Ganj where he was the manager, and every day I refused. But today was different. He handed me a cup of tea and started talking. Having failed to draw me out, he had decided, instead, to fill me in.

Intezar, he explained, was one of the names of Ammi's lost husband. The other one, the one he had answered to for the first twenty-four years of his life, was Charandass, Charandass Ganjoo. Charandass into Intezar: the story of this mutation was the key to Ammi's tears and Masroor's crusading rage.

Masroor's father was born to Kalidass Ganjoo, a brahmin of Kashmiri descent domiciled in Lucknow. Kalidass' grandfather, Makhandass (just Makhandass, surnames were optional in 1825), the founder of the Lucknow line had migrated from Srinagar to find employment in the court of the Nawab of Awadh. Makhandass, and later his son Purshottamdass, rose modestly to become serishtadars in the Nawab's service.

Vital to the continued prosperity of their line was their ability to read the direction of the prevailing wind. In the confusion of 1857, they fled mutinous Lucknow and headed unerringly for the British encampment in Meerut. They returned with the redcoat army and played a crucial supporting role by (here Haasan pulled out a battered leather-bound book and read from it) 'procuring towards the close of the siége, tolerable, constant and trustworthy information from their contacts in the city'.

Upon this weathercock agility, unreasonably called traitorous (for where was the nation then) were the family fortunes founded. Haasan riffled through the pages of the book which was titled *The History and Destiny of the Ganjoos* and read out the text of the grant that Makhandass had received as his reward:

> The Right Hon. the Governor-General of India on the 25th October 1858, in consideration of such loyal conduct was pleased to confer on Makhandass and the linear heirs lawfully begotten of his body, a plot of land 125 Acres, 2 Roods and 25 Poles in area, situated in Malihabad near Lucknow, being the confiscated property of the rebel Syed Hussain, as also the aforementioned rebel's haveli or town house in the locality of Lal Baugh in Lucknow, rent free in perpetuity during the pleasure of the British Government.'

Apart from the dead rebel's lands, all his dependants, including the women in his zenana, fell to the share of Makhandass and those lawfully sprung from his loins. Hussain's women didn't protest overmuch: being kept by a comfortable kafir in those troubled times was better than making ends meet on the street. So Purshottamdass' new, expanded household (Makhandass was taken by the 'flu the same year that the grant was

made) functioned smoothly . . . so smoothly that when a boy was born to his long-barren wife, the city's gossips credited the child to Ummehani Begum, the youngest and most exquisite relict of the expended Hussain. But the begum lived out her span in the seclusion of the zenana, now home to the *Khatoon*'s press, and the rumour died unconfirmed. The boy grew to manhood and assumed his inheritance as the rightful heir.

As soon as he inherited the family's estate, Kalidass helped tradition along by taking on and maintaining at great expense two Muslim mistresses. One of them, in fact, died in unexplained circumstances soon after Intezar was born; there might have been a scandal if Kalidass hadn't become so impregnably successful.

The secret of his success lay in his pushfulness. When he left St Stephen's College after finishing his B.A. in 1897, the year of his father's death, he made sure he left with recommendations from the Principal, S.S. Allnutt who was white and A.C. Maitland M.A., the professor of English Literature, who was white as well. He had copies made of these and of every other testimonial his family had collected since turning its coat in '57 and enclosed them in his applications to every civil servant of the rank of Commissioner and above, petitioning for a sinecure. Sometimes in addition to the commendations of his teachers and the certificates of unrelenting loyalty, he would enclose rhymed eulogies to the officer concerned, and, occasionally, a Bokhara rug.

After appearing twice for a tehsildari examinations and failing both times, he took to enclosing evidence of his failure. He respectfully argued that since the avenue of merit had been exhausted, it was the more needful that he be nominated to a job. Not just any job, but one commensurate with the social standing of his family, its pioneering role in female education (he had endowed a small primary school for girls) and, since with Kalidass nothing went without saying, its loyalty to the Raj.

It worked. Pandit Kalidass Ganjoo was made not a mere tehsildar – which was what his father had managed with similar importuning – but an E.A.C., the highest rank to which a native Indian could aspire. Or, as Appendix XIV of the family history compiled by the great man himself put it:

> (Revenue Secretary to Senior Secretary Finance Commission, Letter No. 229, 14 August 1897) . . . I am directed to say that the Lt. Governor is pleased to accept Pandit Kalidass Ganjoo s/o Pandit Purshottamdass Ganjoo as a candidate for the post of Extra Asistant Commissioner under Rule 160 of the rules under the Land Revenue Act 1887. The original enclosures of your letter are returned.

Well, not all the enclosures – at least no one returned the Bokhara rug – but Kalidass was pleased to get his certificates back which he inserted as appendices into his history of the clan Ganjoo. The last chapter of the first volume of this work (the second was about the family's destiny), was Kalidass' account of the naming of his son.

According to Kalidass, when the bustle and whispering in the zenana was drowned by the shrieks of his crumpled son, he turned to the picture of Victoria enthroned, hung prominently in the hall, kissed the gathered hem roughly where her feet might have been, and resolved to call his new-born Charandass. Never one to waste a good story, he had the chronicle printed and bound – with a footnote explaining that Charandass meant 'slave at the feet of' – and sent it with his Christmas greetings to his English superiors – a humble saga of unstinting service to Mallika Victoria.

Blessed like all the Ganjoos with a keen nose for the coming thing, Kalidass had planned for his son a career in the law. He had decided that at age fifteen, Charandass would take the P&O steamer to Dover. Once in England, he would acquire some public school starch, go up to Oxford and then eat his way through the Inns of Court. Money was no consideration: the orchards at Malihabad were yielding well and their revenues, when added to his salary and topped off by honest graft, made him a wealthy man. But for reasons beyond his control, none of this came to be; on Charandass' fifteenth birthday came the Great War.

But not everything was lost. Kalidass put his son through

worthy Indian substitutes: St Stephen's College (fledgeling child of the Cambridge Mission); the University of Allahabad (cradle of lawyers, Oxford of the East) and Charandass set up practice in Lucknow, as English as India could make him.

I didn't know him then, said Haasan. The first time we met was in 1924. In 1921 I had troubles of my own in Malabar. But others who knew him around that time always said that he was remarkably pukka for someone who wasn't really foreign returned. But under that shell of starch, something had changed, and his father sensed this. It wasn't politics, though Kalidass knew that his son was a closet Congressman. He didn't mind: long-sighted as ever he was impressed by the force of Gandhi's non-co-operation movement, raging around him at that time, and he recognized it as the coming thing. A patriot in the family was useful insurance; so he indulged Charandass when he obeyed Gandhi's call to boycott the law courts when he should have been building his practice.

But it wasn't nationalism that was churning Charandass' insides; it was a more dangerous obsession: the deadly worm of Urdu verse was nibbling at his soul. It had been feeding some years, ever since the first mushaira he had attended while still at college in Delhi. The first inkling Kalidass had of his son's secret passion was when Charandass organized a reading of militantly anti-British verse at the Lalbagh house.

Kalidass raised no objection. Himself schooled in Urdu and Persian, he could, like any educated man, turn a rhyme or quote the telling couplet. So when the mushaira began, he good-naturedly took his place in the audience. It was a good time for political verse in Urdu and Kalidass enjoyed it all in a remote sort of way, at a great ideological distance. Then, at the end, everyone insisted that Charandass read something of his own to round the mushaira off – that's when unease first stirred.

Charandass got to his feet reluctantly, blushing with embarrassment and took his place at the centre of the ragged semicircle of listeners. He had nothing of his own to offer, he said nervously, so he would recite some passages from a poem by Hali that was close to his heart. Then he began.

Kalidass knew it at once as who would not – it was Hali's

Musaddas, his legendary lament on the decline of Islam. At a time when politically minded Indians were agitating against the move by the victorious Allies to abolish Islam's last caliphate, it was a good poem with which to complete an evening of rousing declamation.

So it wasn't the poem but the manner of its recitation that worried Kalidass. Less than half a minute after he had begun, tears stood large and bright in Charadass' eyes, and then, as his father watched in horror, rolled down his face. And it went on like that. Though he knew the passages by heart, Charandass never managed to say ten lines continuously, because his voice would quiver, or he would stop to wipe his eyes. For ten minutes, undeterred by emotion, he soldiered on while his father cringed in embarrassment and alarm. When he finished, the gathering was profoundly silent . . . whether out of shock, grief or good manners, it was impossible to say.

Afterwards, when the guests had left, Kalidass gingerly questioned his son about his performance.

What happened to you? he asked. Was it something in the poem?

No, answered Charandass, and his father breathed again – it wasn't some eccentric nostalgia for the glories of Islam.

According to Charandass his tears had nothing to do with what *Musaddas* said. No, it was just the words of it, those rustling, throaty, half-learnt words that raised a lump of unrefined emotion and made him choke. It happened to him a lot – and not only with *Musaddas*. The tears had first come in middle school while reading a poem in English class. 'Then they shot him down on the highway/Down like a dog on the highway/And he lay in his blood on the highway/With a bunch of lace at his throat.' He had forgotten everything about the poem except this verse because when his turn to read had come, his lips trembled and his voice tripped over every second syllable. It wasn't so much what the poem said as the sound of it, he told his father, the heart-squeezing beat of those lines.

With that Kalidass had to be content because it was the only explanation Charandass gave. He was even a little relieved – at least his son wasn't infatuated with Islam, even if he

seemed a little touched in respect to other things. But no premonition, no second sight warned him where Charandass' aural passion was going to lead him. Yet when it happened, it seemed predictable: in the course of rushing from one mushaira to another, Charandass met Kamran Gulmargi, a poet as old as his father – with a daughter as young as him. Kulsum.

Kulsum? I wondered aloud.

Yes, Kulsum, said Haasan irritably, peeved at being interrupted in full flow. Ammi has a name you know.

They got married, Kulsum and Charandass. She was a Muslim of course, but that wasn't why he married her. He wasn't suddenly consumed by some apostate passion for Islam. He married her for a perfectly secular reason: love.

You didn't need a reason for falling in love with Kulsum, said Haasan, shaking his head in remembered wonder. She was prettier than Ruby Myers.

He married her after the necessary preliminary of becoming a Muslim and here, certainly, *Musaddas* and the magic of Urdu helped in making Islam a painless prospect. Painless for Charandass, that is, not for his father – who in one fell evening heard that besides marrying the ultimate non-Hindu, his son had turned Muslim and changed his name.

He didn't really change his name. Charandass had invented the mushaira persona of Intezar long before he ever met Kulsum. Intezar was his nom de plume, his takhallus. He had chosen it because it staked his claim to poethood and simultaneously accounted for the absence of poems. Intezar. Waiting. Stern, silent poet waiting for the Muse. So after marriage he didn't take on a second name – he simply discarded the first one.

But his father was too devastated to worry about such nice distinctions. For him it was the end of the world, or, at the very least, of history. He, Kalidass, whose ancestors had moved to Kashmir from the clean Aryan climes of Jalalabad in the third century before Christ, whose ancestor Kalhana was the first to write India into history, whose forbears had for a thousand years affirmed old Aryan gods even as lesser tribes all round them embraced Islam, he, of all men, had in the wink

of an eye acquired a semite son who knelt to the west, never bathed and washed his bum with a beak-spout kettle.

It meant that the *Destiny of the Ganjoos* would never be completed. His son, a Muslim! Anything else he could have reconciled with his vision of the family's future. He had accommodated divergences with reality before. After all, in the *Destiny of the Ganjoos*, he had predicted an English education for his son. When that didn't come to pass he had extemporized a good Indian approximation, without altering the original chapter because he believed that destinies were vindicated by the unfolding truth of their essence, not by trifling matters of detail. But this marriage . . . this marriage wasn't a hiccup in the life of the Ganjoos – it was a heart attack. No son called Intezar could be grafted on to the family tree. In fact now there wasn't a family left . . . just a severed lineage dangling in time. Intezar was his only son.

Face to face with oblivion, Kalidass sent the servants away, locked the doors and shut out the meaningless world. A week later when they battered down the courtyard door and rushed into the soundless house, he was slumped over his desk with a pen in his hand and his face in a pool of blue ink.

He had been trying to write his way out of his destiny's dead end. The table was piled high with scored-out sheets, the waste-basket crammed with crumpled desperation. Some of them were half-hearted schemes to prolong just anyhow the future of his family so that his blighted opus, the *Destiny of the Ganjoos*, could come to a dignified end. One of the twists of paper in the basket revealed that he had considered adoption, then rejected it on the principled view that the future of any family worth its salt unfolded on its own without gerrymandering. Remarriage and a natural heir had held him longer: the pros and cons spilled over many sheets. Eligible widower, just turned fifty, wealthy, fair-complexioned, sound of mind – he wouldn't lack offers. But in the end this route was pot-holed by too many ifs: a fecund woman; a male child who would live to manhood, immune to epidemics and disease; who would be a filial son and steer the charted course, deaf to the siren sounds of love and poetry. The things he might have taken for granted

as a young man were Chinese walls in late middle-age. So he scored it out – remarriage was an act of faith he couldn't sustain. The armour of hope was made for younger men.

There were other plans, few of which went past the second sentence, and those that did tailed off a little later. By the time he died, he had forsaken the future; he was merely trying to write himself an end. The last few sheets, the papers that he lay slumped on, were full of closely written penance. He saw that he had been punished for hubris, for his presumption in trying to prescribe his family's destiny and with proper contrition he submitted himself to fate. He remembered an older prescription that bade the householder with adult children to forsake his family and eke out his remaining years in mendicant wandering. A saffron dhoti, beads, a begging bowl, some ash . . . he would get Kashinath to take the old Stonely out and drive him down to Banaras, which, he knew, was the best place for renouncers to be. And then . . . and then he died; not quite having writ, moved on – with his nose in royal blue ink.

Fortunately for Intezar and Kulsum, in all those heaps of scribbled paper, there was no will. This meant that the erstwhile Charandass came into the house and everything else besides in the normal way, without litigation or other trouble. One of the more problematic articles that he inherited was Kalidass' corpse. It wasn't smelling or anything like that – in fact for a body some days dead, it was remarkably preserved, almost as if time had stopped in the house through the days of the dead man's brooding. But it had to be cremated and Intezar after his conversion couldn't do it and there was no one else. Eventually it was Kashinath, the driver, who offered to light his master's pyre. Afterwards, he drove his ashes down to Kashi in the old Stonely so Kalidass had his last wish fulfilled, though only after a fashion. Then he returned the car and gave in his notice. Having seen off the old master, he abandoned the new one – like Kalidass he had strong views on apostasy.

By the time Intezar and Kulsum moved into the house, the Khilafat movement was ebbing and when Kemal Pasha abolished the Caliphate in Turkey, it whimpered out. It was time to think about work again, so Intezar lined the hall with

law reports and began a desultory practice. But he didn't really need to earn a living so most of his time was spent being instructed in the Koran. He was a conscientious convert; if he never achieved the pinnacle of belief, he managed the foothills of literal understanding.

But his interest in the Koran wasn't theological; it was, in effect, an extension of his passion for Urdu verse. He had often wondered why poetry in Urdu, wonderful and stirring as it was, sounded so banal in translation. Where did its magic lie? Not in its grammar, that much was certain because it shared its syntax with Hindi and verse in that prosy language had all the potency of a bullock. Which left its vocabulary, nourished by Persian and Arabic, where Hindi had fed off Sanskrit. It was the resonance of Urdu's words that was untranslatable. So he groped through the Koran to find the fountainhead of Urdu's genius.

Each day the maulvi came and led him like a child through the verses, paraphrasing them in Urdu till, after an eternity of lessons, Intezar decided that this was folly. When mortal inspiration rhymed in Urdu fared so badly in another language, how could translation cope with the subtlety and grandeur of God's revelation in the chosen tongue? It was not for nothing that the Koran in translation wasn't allowed the authority of revelation.

Suddenly, the way seemed clear to him. It was Arabic he needed to learn first, if he wanted to come to grips with Urdu. For it struck him that if Arabic words spliced on to an alien grammar could give Urdu such force, what undreamt magic must they work embedded in their native syntax, in the land of the revealed version.

So with Kulsum's amused consent he planned a year-long stay in Mecca. Perhaps Arabic, he said half-jokingly to his wife, as they were packing his bags for the Haj, perhaps Arabic will finally push me into poetry. Kulsum smiled. You'll need a new pen-name then, she said, because then the waiting will be over.

The terrible irony of that reply came back to haunt her in the years of shrinking hope that followed his departure. I had known him for four years then, said Haasan, introducing

himself into the plot in a minor role. And I knew he meant to return within a year of leaving. In that last month, he used to come to the coffee house every day and worry aloud about the children and how his absence would affect them. There was no question that he meant to come back. But he never did. Never once in nearly eleven years. Not a letter or a message, not even a rumour. He just disappeared.

Haasan stopped . . . just as it was getting interesting. I wanted to kick him. A story couldn't end with the main character vanishing. Not that I had any stake in Intezar's fate, but in my role as audience I was entitled to an ending.

Then he started again.

For the first year, Masroor didn't sleep for missing his father. In the normal course, he would have got over his loss and Intezar would have become a set of happy memories. But then, one winter's day in 1932, the restless ghost of Kalidass ambushed Masroor. He had been pulling quilts out of a cabin trunk stored in the old zenana, when he found a moth-balled copy of his grandfather's incomplete epic: *The History and Destiny of the Ganjoos*.

Like all chroniclers of the relatively recent past, Kalidass ran out of history when he ran up against the present. But since he had a very developed sense of chosen-ness, he solved the problem by commencing a history of his family's future. Being ambitious for his descendants, he merged the destiny of the Ganjoos with the triumph of Indian nationalism. It began with Charandass' return from England, the equal of any Englishman in Englishry, a pukka barrister. But instead of making money out of English law, he adopted the cause of the Nation. And in spite of his privileged growing up, and despite the fact that he had never earned an honest day's wages, the masses took him to their hearts. The people danced to his commands, the British yielded to his arguments, and finally he plucked the flame of liberty from Westminster and set it burning amongst his people somewhere under India Gate. The grateful citizens of the sovereign nation made him their ruler and he

ruled them till he died, after which his children ruled and then his children's children.

That's how it went, finished Haasan hurriedly, anxious to keep my attention. All rubbish of course, just fantasy, but you have to remember that when he read it, Masroor was only fourteen, very young. His father's life had diverged cruelly from his prescribed destiny; far from helping India find her way, he had managed to lose himself. Worse still, the future predicted for his father, had actually come to pass for someone else; Intezar's destiny had been hijacked by a Kashmiri contemporary further east, Allahabad's Nehru, the younger one.

Worst of all, Masroor read his grandfather's book just after the second civil disobedience campaign of 1932 led by Gandhi with Nehru as his right hand man. Jawaharlal's face figured on the front pages every day around that time. While Masroor's father, for whom this part had been written, had disappeared. Once that fatal comparison was made, Masroor remembered Intezar not as a gentle father or a vanished pilgrim, but as a barren poet, an absurd adult who went around losing himself, a dilettante who had failed to live up to his future.

Since then, Masroor had spent every waking minute of his life making sure that the same would never be said of him. There wasn't a cause or a party that he didn't make his own. He joined the Congress, he joined the Muslim League. In the elections of 1937 he ran errands for both. When the two fell out, he stayed with the Congress because Nehru should have been his father. Now he distrusted all the parties; he just wanted to help keep the peace. That's why he was so worked up about the cricket match.

He's too intense, said Haasan. It's too much feeling for a little cricket match.

He shook his head. In an earlier time, this intensity would have made him a leader of men, but by 1942 it was too late. Between Gandhi, Jinnah and the man who had stolen his father's future, all the shares in India's liberation were taken.

Haasan stopped again and this time it wasn't a pause – he was done. He still hadn't satisfactorily explained Intezar's disappearance but he had done what he had set out to do:

paraphrase the family's history to explain Masroor. He was looking at me expectantly, waiting for a reaction to his family saga.

He didn't get it. I said instead that I wanted to wash my hair and excused myself. It was true – I did. My scalp had been itching right through the tale. I turned on the bathroom tap and scratched my head as the bucket filled. It had prickled all day. Was it premonition?

No. It was lice.

Outside

LICE. CRAWLING.

This sank in properly only after I had smeared three on the bathroom wall. Then the day's food vaulted out of my insides without notice once, twice and endlessly. I lay in bed and let my head hang over the edge to help the beasts drop off. Lice belonged in the orange hair of traffic-light urchins. What did they have to do with me?

Whose were they? Not Ammi's or Asharfi's. Because (a) my head had never been close enough to theirs and (b) they didn't show the guilt or shame that nits and eggs must bring. Ditto with Moonis the cook and Uncle Haasan. That left nobody; there was no one else I had met in 1942. Perhaps the lice had boarded on the train, then hatched and multiplied in the time that I had been convalescing in the house. This was the theory that I favoured; it allowed me to be infested by my contemporaries. I didn't want to be assimilated to 1942 by lice.

But what was I to do with them? I didn't think that they could be combed out. And I couldn't ask my hosts to pick them out. If I soaked my head in a disinfectant there would be questions about the smell and I couldn't tell them the truth – even Ammi would baulk at a lousy house-guest. No one gave vermin the benefit of the doubt. Instead of going down for dinner that night, I tied on a bath-towel turban to quarantine the beasts and went to bed.

I was troubled all night by bookish nightmares. In the morning I counted my feet, examined the inside of the towel, brushed my teeth and went down the stairs for breakfast. Masroor didn't flinch when I took the chair next to his at the dining table; Moonis poured me a cup of tea without comment; Ammi read out for my benefit the final instalment of Shakila Rahman's intrepid pilgrimage – as if nothing had happened, as if my hair wasn't alive with crawling filth. The kind are blind.

Haasan suddenly emerged from the kitchen carrying a large frying pan with an omelette in it. He transferred it on to his plate and said:

And you'll never be able to unscrew the fish-plates.

Masroor left the table to stand defiantly framed in one of the three arched doorways that opened on to the courtyard.

I had arrived in the middle of an argument.

Haasan cut the omelette into two squares and called to Moonis to hurry up with the toast.

Masroor stayed where he was.

Even if Bhukay gets a spanner the right size and gauge, continued Haasan, deaf to Masroor's silence. Even then.

He stopped again and worked his jaws till his mouth was half empty. Then he held out his thumb and forefinger, half an inch apart, and said:

The nuts will be rusted that deep into the washers. That deep. You'll need King Kong or Gama to turn those screws. Which one do you have?

The question was rhetorical but Masroor answered it.

Bhukay, Bihari and me, he said, in the even tones of a patient man goaded to the limit.

So there are three of you, said Haasan pretending to count. Let's be optimistic. We'll assume that someone has been oiling the fish-plate screws every week since the lines were laid and that they open at the first turn of the spanner. Fifteen minutes of unscrewing and all four fish-plates are free and there's nothing holding that section of track down any more. There's just one small job left – shifting that section. Not removing it completely – just enough to disturb the alignment of the track. Because if you leave it as it is, it's likely that the free rail will stay in place under the weight of the train . . . and the Mail will get to Charbagh station with the Aligarh team in time for the match.

Masroor, in an armchair now, with his head thrown back and his face organized into a look of beleaguered disdain, stared at the ceiling in silence.

Haasan sectioned his second toast-and-omelette into square mouthfuls. Do you know, have you any idea, how much a ten-foot section of rail line weighs? The three of you had better start lifting weights at the Kaisarbagh akhara if you're serious about sabotage.

Masroor refused to rise. In fact he became progressively more casual and nonchalant as Haasan strove to shock him out of his ardent lunacy by pointing up the absurdity of his plan. Haasan succeeded only in persuading Ammi that no one, not even her passionate son, could be serious about such an idiotic scheme. Once Haasan had established the impossibility of the whole idea, she looked relieved and instructed a harassed-looking Moonis to make up a batch of shami kababs by way of thanksgiving. By the time breakfast ended Haasan had given up and the argument seemed laid to rest. Ammi had gone back to being preoccupied with the next issue of *Khatoon*. As Masroor left for work, she called out a reminder: he was to help her with the printing of the next issue tomorrow. Masroor said something in reply as he lifted his bicycle over the threshold of the courtyard door which Ammi seemed to understand. Then Haasan and Asharfi left for the coffee house and I.T. College respectively, and it became a normal day again.

That evening, I took advantage of the calm to confide in Masroor. He had disappeared into his room after dinner, where I followed him, weak with shame and nervousness. When he opened his door I saw that he was working. In the wash of angle-poised light on his table, a book lay open. It was a Bradshaw, a railway timetable. But he seemed pleased to see me, so instead of muttering I'd come later, I let him sit me down. Then I told him.

I have lice. Like that. Straight. I'd have liked to lead up to it but nothing, no path-clearing preliminaries occurred to me. What is that book? I have lice or do you smoke? I do but I have lice, sounded silly so I just told him.

Then, to pre-empt silence, I kept talking. I had only just found out, I explained desperately. The bed sheets were free of the infestation and I could stay in my room if he felt there was any danger of my giving it to others. All I wanted was advice on killing them.

He heard me out without horror or amusement. Even more

reassuring was the way he listened. He didn't steeple his fingers or sit back, or watch the ceiling . . . that is, he didn't seem or look to be considering. He sat leaning forward in his chair, elbows on knees, hands knit in a double-fist . . . he looked interested in the story of my lice. So when I ran out of things to say, I felt bold enough to ask in a forlorn way it he could keep the story to himself because I didn't want Ammi and Asharfi to know.

It was a lot to ask. He had brought me home and now his house-guest was host to vermin. He would have been within his rights to consult his mother. But my instinct was true.

Don't worry, he said. We don't have to worry Ammi with this. He thought for a while. I had lice in Class IX, he said finally, forehead wrinkling as he strenuously called up his past for a guiding precedent. I think Ammi . . . wait a minute, he said, walking up to a shelf. Reaching up he brought down a dusty horizontal book. It was a photograph album made up of stiff black sheets interleaved with cobwebby tracing paper. He found what he was looking for in the last ten pages which were pasted with group photographs of Masroor and his classmates as they worked their way up the ten-rung ladder of school. They looked like ten copies of the same print – the class was always arranged on a set of steps, the background was always filled by a mad-looking building that looked like something assembled from the leftovers of assorted ruins, the boys were always wearing blazers and ties, and there was always an adult in the middle. This central seated adult was the only variable – the other faces stayed the same.

Masroor riffled through the pages for a bit, then grunted. In the relevant picture a completely bald Masroor is standing in the tall row, grinning hugely into the camera. The shutter has caught the boy on his left with his head turned and his hand raised to stroke Masroor's baldness. Masroor grinned again across the distance of a dozen years. Gaya got caned for spoiling the picture, he said.

There it was in black-and-white: Masroor had had lice in Class IX and Ammi had got his hair shaved off. Right here, in the courtyard, he explained. The barber used to come home

every Saturday till I refused to have my hair cut in front of the family because it was childish. I wanted it done at a barber's like a man.

So he began cycling off to the barbershop which was miles away in Aminabad. It used to take him half an hour to get there. Ammi wanted him to go to a barbershop in Lalbagh, but Masroor enjoyed the ride because setting off early on Sunday morning was independence and adventure. He still went there every other week.

We could go there early tomorrow if you want, he said. Unless you want to have it done in the house. I could send word and he'll bring his scissors here.

I shook my head in silent horror at the prospect of being deloused in full view of Ammi and Asharfi.

We'll leave at seven tomorrow morning, then, said Masroor.

I nodded.

Can you cycle?

I nodded again.

Good, said Masroor encouragingly. You can take Moonis' bicycle. Don't worry about your hair. We'll be back by breakfast and you'll be clean.

Thanks, I whispered, fighting the grateful urge to tell him everything. I climbed the stairs to my room and settled into bed.

Hours later, just as I was finally drifting into sleep, I heard the muffled chimes of the mantel clock downstairs. It was striking twelve. Drowsily it came to me that the eighth day of August 1942 was done. The inaugural date of the movement that had haunted my grandmother's last years, had come and gone and nothing had happened.

Early morning on the ninth of August. I woke to the sound of radio static and the breathless thought that this was my last whole day in 1942. By 7 a.m. tomorrow I would be sitting in the Mail, headed back to Delhi and my own time.

I brushed my teeth and gingerly combed my hair and hurried down the steps to Masroor's room. When I walked in, Masroor

was twiddling the knob of a large radio in a round cabinet. The room was filled with amplified gabble as the impatiently spun needle glanced off unwanted frequencies. He turned the volume down and poured me a glass of tea. It was the third pot he had brewed; he had been through the first two in the past hour, trying to catch the news.

News of what, I asked timidly, cradling the too hot tea.

For a second his brows knit in irritation, then he looked contrite.

I'm sorry, he said. I keep forgetting that you don't remember anything. I'm trying to get news of what was decided in the Congress session at Bombay. They were debating the Quit India resolution last night.

Then he began to explain, not knowing that, thanks to Dadi, I probably knew the Quit India resolution better than the Congressmen who had discussed it.

Masroor was against it. Not because of what the resolution said: it wanted the British to hand over the government of India to Indians. He was for that. But there was a war on. And there were Muslims who didn't trust the Congress. Only six months ago Gandhi himself had said that he wouldn't start a civil disobedience movement without a settlement of the Hindu-Muslim question. But now, said Masroor agitatedly pouring himself another cup, he's asking us to do or die! He shook his head and drank the tea. If they go ahead with this Quit India business, he said more quietly, Jinnah will have his Pakistan by the end of the decade.

I didn't have to take his word for it. I knew. Jinnah had got his Pakistan well before the decade was out. On 14 August 1947, to be precise, which made Pakistan one day older than my Republic. My armies had fought three wars with that upstart state and here was Masroor hoping that the resolution wouldn't be passed, that the August movement wouldn't happen, that Partition wouldn't come to pass. For a moment I felt the joyless superiority of a ninety-year-old listening to the enthusiasms of a child. Masroor, who would stop trains for his cause, who crept out of the house after dark, like a turn-of-the-century anarchist off to kill the Czar, seemed suddenly

as absurd as the canteen radicals I had known on campus. Hindsight makes cartoonists of all.

After a minute more of useless twiddling, Masroor remembered the barbershop and switched the set off. Toothbrush in one hand and toothpowder in the other, he tiptoed to the washbasin stuck on the wall in a corner of the courtyard and then rent the morning calm by hawking and spitting and blowing his nose and gagging as he scraped the root of his tongue and dredged up ancient deposits of phlegm. All the while the lice were digging in.

By the time we were ready to leave I was smelling of mothballs because Masroor had found me clothes to go out in from a trunk in his room in which Ammi had preserved his old school uniforms. He must have been a large schoolboy because the trousers had to be lashed to my waist with a knotted belt and the short-sleeved shirt hung over my elbows. But his feet were only two sizes larger and the brick-brown canvas shoes almost fitted. He had thought of everything – he gave me a sola topi to cover my baldness with on the way back. He was wearing one too. The leather on its chin-strap was cracked and it looked older than Masroor. Pushing our bicycles over the threshold, I wondered if the topis had belonged to his father, and shivered. It felt strange, wearing the hat of a disappeared man.

When we set off it was half-past six and pleasant, but our cycle ride took so long that by the time we reached Aminabad the early morning cool was a memory in the wet heat of an August day. Masroor wanted to revisit his memories, because he was due to stop a train and didn't know what the future held, so we meandered past the G.P.O., his old school, La Martinière, Haasan's coffee house, the ruined Residency, the lunatic asylum in Kaisarbagh, the Bara Imambara . . . everywhere, he dismounted, stood quietly in what looked like a two-minute silence in memoriam, and set off again.

After forty minutes of this tour by tangents, I became nervous. I had thought that this once-only exposure to the world outside the Lalbagh house would be a quick sortie. But here I was, drifting promiscuously through this alien time, infecting

more and more of it with my presence and being lathered by its dust in return.

We finally entered Aminabad through a narrow lane shared out in little shops. They hadn't opened for business yet so the lane was still except for the creaking of a large black machine being fed bunched sticks of sugarcane by a sweating man. Just as we turned left into the main street of the bazaar, a tonga passed us, piled high with baskets, bedrolls, one man in a grey sherwani, two women in obscuring burqas and some children. Its wheels and hooves sounded clearly in the decrepit silence. It reminded me of a troubling film I couldn't name.

But the barber's name was clear at once because Masroor called out to him as soon as we entered the shop. It was a large saloon with six high-backed chairs with cushioned head-rests each drawn up to a washbasin and a mirror, arranged two to a wall along three walls. One chair was occupied by an enormously fat man who was red in the face with the effort of tucking his chin in as the barber did the back of his head.

Bhukay, the proprietor, had a proper name according to Masroor but an enormous adolescent appetite founded on stomach worms had forever lumbered him with Bhukay. Masroor had a whispered word with Bhukay who nodded and waved me into the chair next to the fat man, while he finished with the subtly Anglo-Indian head he was working on. I settled in feeling nervous and ashamed, hoping that Masroor would stay in the saloon for the duration of the haircut. I could watch him in the mirror, sitting on a bench, rummaging through an untidy heap of magazines. He knocked the sola topi off the bench with his elbow, then picked it up and jammed it on his head for safe-keeping and resumed his search. Where's today's paper? he asked Bhukay. It hadn't yet arrived.

The barber on my left had finished with the fat man's hair. He was now giving him a massage, slapping and kneading his head with his fingers, knuckles and the heels of his palms. His customer's piggy little features had relaxed to the point where his face looked like a happy round of creaseless fat. When the massage was done, the barber powdered his neck and whisked unwanted hair away. He untied the sheet that did duty as a

giant bib and stood to one side solicitously as the fat man heaved himself out of the chair, covered his haircut with a black topi and waddled out of the shop.

Bhukay completed a short back-and-sides on the Anglo-Indian and made his way to my chair. He undid the buttons of my shirt, wrapped a flat strip of cotton wool round my neck and knotted a clean sheet around it. With a bottle-pump he sprayed my hair with water. Then he pushed my head over the washbasin and squeezed and cuffed the surplus water out. That done, he slicked my hair back with a comb and set to work. His scissors chattered like a bird by my ear; I sighed and closed my eyes. For the first time since falling into the Gomti, I relaxed. I was in good hands: a professional was taking care of my troubles.

In less than ten minutes he had cropped my hair into a ragged poll. He discarded the scissors and gave my lice a shower again. Then he stropped his razor. I watched timidly in the mirror – cut-throats made me nervous. But he was an artist. A few absent passes over my head and then a series of unhurried strokes which peeled off running strips of hair till there was nothing. He wasn't finished; he poured a little disinfecting spirit into an enamel bowl and with swabs of cotton he rubbed it into my shaven head, making it tingle. There was more. Before I could stop him, he picked up a yellow flannel, the kind most often used for cleaning cars, and polished my scalp till it glowed. In the end I didn't really care: I was relieved and tired and the chair was comfortable. So I just lay there, slumped and drowsy, gleaming like a copper doorknob.

He hated hair. Hated it. He said it seriously, credo-wise. Dandruff, scurf, dirt, smells, lice, dead-alive parasite feeding off our heads. Thick thin long short straight curly oily dry – the disorder of it. The skull was the perfect form, just as the egg was. Hair was pointless. It had been a pleasure, shaving me bald. Most days he compromised his art and his principles to make a living. He trimmed whiskers, shaped sideburns, helped balding men cover their goodness with lank threads of shame. But even with material like me, he sculpted on sand. His was a hopeless cause. Already my hair was invisibly growing; no

matter how close he shaved me, the ugly black stubble would surface again. Like shaving faces: every victory was an admission of defeat. Nothing stayed still – time and life kept crawling in.

When Bhukay finished with me, Masroor was still darting in and out of the saloon looking for a newspaper boy. We left the saloon and stepped into the heat of a sunrisen summer morning. My back prickled because of the heat and the tiny hair that had sneaked through the cordon of the bib-sheet down my neck. I was walking towards our bicycles parked in the shade a few yards away from the barber's when Masroor caught me by the elbow and steered me in the opposite direction – there was one stop left in this morning's tour of his life and times in Lucknow.

We didn't have far to go. Less than a furlong down the road Masroor stopped in front of a mostly shuttered sweet-shop. Only one part of its façade, on the extreme left, was open for business, where a man in a fraying vest was making jalebis. This was Bihari Halvai. Masroor knew him well from the time he had been a boy, helping his father out at the same shop. Masroor seemed on first name terms with most of Lucknow.

The shop was old – its right wall was jammed against the crumbling whitewashed brick of a tiny tomb. And that was exactly how the sweet-shop styled itself: The Famous Old Sweet-shop Hard by the Tomb. Apart from some brick and half a hollow dome, not much was visible. From where I was standing I couldn't see the door into the monument because the tomb was smothered by an enormous banyan. The parent stem had long since vanished; now there was a whole grove of interconnected trunks which had once been aerial roots that had reached the ground and burrowed in. Some hadn't got that far; they had simply grown into another branch or trunk on the way down and there they remained, fixed in ambiguity, at once branch, root and thwarted trunk. Everyday monkeys peered through the obscuring mass of its rain-green leaves at the sweet-shop.

Bihari bobbed his head when he saw Masroor and motioned us towards the wooden benches scattered on the broad pavement in front of the shop. He was sitting cross-legged on a low

takht, deftly squeezing spirals of white flour paste into a vat of simmering oil which alchemized them into a translucent yellow gold. When his bag of paste was done, he pushed the newly inscribed batch about with a perforated iron ladle and watched the whorls change colour. His customers at this early hour were mainly servants sent to make milk and jalebi breakfasts possible for their masters.

But after making two batches he turned to serve a bent old man whose skullcap and beard declared he was Muslim. He was obviously an old customer because Bihari began making up his order without a word being exchanged. Bag in hand he began writing from right to left on the smoking oil. By the time he'd spanned the diameter of that massive vat, even I, illiterate as I was, could recognize the loops and curves of the Arabic script. He laid another strip of script below the first and then another and so on until one hemisphere was dense with words and the other, nakedly bubbling. He sat back, still frowning with concentration, and looked at the old man standing quietly by.

Here, Jamal Mian, he said. Your lines.

Jamal Mian gazed reverently at the letters of gold trembling on the oil and nodded. Bihari broke the strips up into manageable words and syllables, then wrapped them in newspaper. The old man tucked his stick under his arm, the better to hold the parcel with, and began walking carefully in the direction of the overgrown tomb.

What was all that for? asked Masroor curiously, watching Jamal Mian as he disappeared into the mystery of the banyan and the tomb.

That is Haji Jamaluddin, said Bihari affectionately. And he's carrying lines from the Quran.

You've never done that before, said Masroor.

That's because you don't usually visit at this hour, answered the jalebi maker. I've done it every day for five years now. But only for him.

Was it any verse from the Quran or did Jamal Mian choose? This was Masroor again, endlessly curious about the world around him. We had been outdoors for an hour and a half

now, knocking around in a time that didn't belong to me. The longer I loitered and the more people I met, the greater was the possibility of my being there making a difference. With a train to catch to my mislaid present early next morning, I wasn't going to tempt fate. I didn't care who chose the verse. I just wanted to kick Masroor for asking.

Bihari smiled and shook his head. Jamal Mian's illiterate. He can't even read Urdu, let alone the Quran. There's no choosing business. We just follow the book in sequence, one line after the other.

So you could write anything, I said offensively, hoping to cut this exchange short, and he wouldn't know the difference.

It didn't work. Bihari disarmed me by admitting that he had done just that, three years ago, in '39. This was a daily visit Jamal Mian made; he had been coming since the winter of 1936, the year he went to Mecca on the Haj. On his way back in the boat, Baba Farid – the saint in the tomb – who had been dead three hundred years, came to him in a vision. He complained that his rest had of late been disturbed by the rising tide of violence in the land. The Word had been forgotten. So he wanted Jamal, who was a Haji, to read him the Quran verse by verse from beginning to end and then start up again from the beginning. And the apparition promised that as long as Jamal kept this up, the violence that stalked the world would never reach Lucknow.

Jamal Mian didn't know what to do. He couldn't have read the book aloud because he couldn't read. His family was originally from the east, weavers from Banaras, illiterate from the beginning of time. Then one day he put his problem to Bihari who suggested the way out. The Quran inscribed in jalebi, a line each day. This way he could simultaneously be true to his vision and make the edible offering that was customary at Baba Farid's graveside.

How had he learnt enough of the Quran to write it in jalebi? What I meant of course was how did a cook come by a working knowledge of classical Arabic.

Again he took no offence, though I must have overdone the scepticism because Masroor frowned at my tone. My father, he said, had a Maulvi teach me the Quran for two hours every early morning till I was fourteen. Bihari Halvai is what my friends call me but I was named Omar, Omar Qureishi.

I flushed to the roots of my shaven hair. I hadn't thought he was Muslim because I'd never come upon a Muslim halvai before. I made no further attempts to speed matters up.

Then one day, resumed Bihari, two and a half years after Jamal Mian had started doing this morning round, I gave him instead of the usual line from the Quran, the headlines from an old newspaper that I used to wrap the jalebis in. I don't know what made me do it – boredom I suppose; we had been through the Quran once already and we were more than half way through it the second time round. Perhaps it was the heat . . . it was around the middle of June. In fact it was the nineteenth day of June. I remember the date because the next morning's newspaper carried two-inch headlines on the riot in Kanpur. It was the biggest communal riot in years; there were four hundred dead and twice as many injured. And Kanpur was less than seventy miles away from Lucknow.

I'm not a superstitious man, said Bihari grimly, but sometimes it's hard to ignore a sign. I never dishonoured Jamal Mian's pledge again.

He gave us a second serving of the jalebis. Eating the first batch had turned my hands and mouth into flypaper, airports for every coasting fleck. He squeezed in another lot and settled back, wiping the sweat off his face with a shoulder cloth. He pointed at the tomb:

One day, just one day I gave Jamal Mian the wrong words and the killing came as close as Kanpur. If I fry the right verses till the Day of Judgement I still won't bring the Kanpur dead to life. That's why I'm coming with you to stop the Aligarh train. I want to help Baba Farid keep his promise to Jamal Mian – the killing mustn't come to Lucknow.

With a flourish he laid two parallel lines of paste on the oil's surface and before they could drift apart, he joined them with short horizontal strokes at equal intervals. When he finished it looked like a ladder, but it wasn't. Given the context it was plainly meant to be a length of railway track. When it

was the right colour, Bihari picked it out and snapped it in two. Casually. Only Masroor wasn't there to applaud his bravado because he had spotted a newspaper boy at last and rushed across the road, without a thought for the traffic. Not that there was much motor traffic at eight on a Sunday morning in 1942 . . . just the odd khaki jeep or camouflaged truck, headed for some distant cantonment.

Masroor paid the newspaper boy and spread the paper out. I could have told him what it said; Dadi had rehearsed the headlines of the ninth of August for years. Do or Die Says Gandhi; Congress Passes Quit India Resolution; Gandhi and Others Arrested; Congress Banned; Jinnah Condemns Congress Blackmail; Attack On Public Buildings. Not all of these of course, but depending on the paper Masroor had bought, at least a mix of two or three.

So I wasn't surprised when Masroor sank hopelessly to his knees on the further pavement to read on all fours this confirmation of everything he had feared. I wasn't surprised but I wanted to cross the road and put an arm around him and offer the comfort of hindsight. I wanted to tell him that there would be no communal riots for the duration of the civil disobedience movement that had just begun. There would be tracks blown up, telegraph wires cut, police stations attacked, townships machine-gunned from the air, thousands jailed and many killed, but the violence would be between the Raj and the rebels, not Hindus and Muslims. The killing he thought would result from a unilateral declaration of independence by the Congress didn't actually happen. I got to my feet to reassure him . . . then stopped and settled back on the bench. How would I say it? Don't worry, the movement will be dead in a couple of months and there won't be any riots in that time? Don't worry, there is a time and place for everything, even your despair and the time for that is not now but five years from now, when the British quit India in fact and the killings begin in earnest.

I stayed on the bench and left him alone to cope with the news. Properly speaking, it was his future he was agonized about, not mine; having mislaid my present, I could hardly

start counselling him on his. Besides, my train was due at seven the next morning and I was on parole.

Just as I had decided not to get involved, Masroor got to his feet, leaving the newspaper lying on the ground. He turned and began walking towards us, grim-faced, tipping his sola topi back, shirtsleeves flapping, shoulders braced against the worst the world could do. For many months afterwards, that was how I remembered Masroor each time I thought of him. He had paused on the edge of the pavement before stepping on the road when I heard the engine sound to my left. I turned to look and saw a military lorry hurtling down the road. Masroor had stopped to let a knot of cyclists pass, so he must have seen the lorry because it was coming from the same direction. But inexplicably he made to cross as soon as the cyclists passed; he hadn't taken two steps when the lorry was upon him. Brakes shrieked, I jerked my head away, hands clenched, eyes tightly shut.

When I opened them, the lorry had squealed to a halt. I surged towards the accident where, amazingly, no crowd had gathered. Fearfully I ran round the back of the truck to the further pavement. I steeled myself to look at the front wheel and the bumper. No blood, no mangled Masroor. With a huge effort I kept myself from retching and squatted lower to get a sight of the underside of the lorry. He wasn't mixed into its innards nor smeared on the road.

Abruptly, the lorry began moving and half-squatting still, I stumbled backwards to the safety of the pavement. As the lorry gathered speed, a recruiting advertisement painted right across its side passed slowly before my eyes. Take the Kings's Commission, read the caption, The Noblest Life on Earth. Where the letters ended, two moustachioed men in epauletted khaki gazed sternly into my eyes. Next to them, not front-on but in profile, was a figure in loose khaki trousers and a white short-sleeved shirt. His feet shod in red-brown Home Guard shoes were in the air – or off the lower edge of the advertisement – in a painterly study of motion. One half-raised hand was either sketching a salute or tipping back a sola topi. As the truck pulled away, I raced alongside, trying to keep the advertisement

in view, till I couldn't breathe, till I was gagging on the thick cloud of its exhaust. Well after the smoke had cleared and the truck was lost in the distance, I stood rooted in the middle of the road, frozenly trying to work out how a three-dimensional man could be ironed on to a flat surface: because that third figure on the side of the lorry wasn't a soldier – it was Masroor.

I forget how long it took me to get to the Lalbagh house but I ran all the way. Without a thought for our bicycles parked by the barbershop or for Bihari who had also seen the truck run Masroor over, I raced through unknown streets, losing my way at every turn until I found myself on the road by the G.P.O.'s spire, from where I turned left and sprinted home. The morning wore on as I ran and the roads filled up with rickshaws and cycles and people but the animation flashing past me seemed contrived and remote like the back-projected traffic whizzing past the windows of a studio car. Guru Dutt in *Aar Paar* driving a stationary Buick with the streets of Bombay worked carefully into his rear windscreen. No one was taken in but nobody complained because what mattered were the stars and they were real. I laughed hysterically (still running) at the thought that I was the hero of this one. By the time I reached the lane which led to the Lalbagh house, I was light-headed and breathless. I knew there was nothing real or substantial about my surroundings so I didn't bother to knock on the courtyard door, I just ran through it.

I must have fainted with the pain. I remember an explosion in my nose as it burst and another in my crotch as the groin-level bolt on the door rebuffed it. I dropped to the ground, holding myself in both hands, unable to breathe or scream. And just as Asharfi's worried voice asked Kaun? from behind the door, a second before I fainted, I felt a surge of irritation at the inconsistency of this film. It was like letting a studio car actually run into Flora Fountain. You have to make up your mind, director-sahib, I thought crossly. Things can't be make-believe at random and real when they choose to be.

Haasan Takes Over

WHEN HAASAN CAME around that evening, I was sitting in the courtyard with Ammi and Asharfi, tense with not knowing how to begin. Shocked by Masroor's disappearance and dazed after the collision, I had offered no explanation for my baldness and they hadn't enquired. Masroor's comings and goings were so eccentric that Ammi and Asharfi didn't even ask after him. Ammi dabbed mercurochrome over my nose and shooed me up to my room to recover. At lunchtime Asharfi brought me a tray of food and left me to sleep through the afternoon. Sometime during this troubled siesta I dreamed that Bihari had visited and told them everything so that was taken care of, I wouldn't be the one to break it to them, I didn't need a beginning.

But when I went down for tea, they were so cheerful that I knew it was up to me. Asharfi handed me a cup and grinned encouragingly.

You're part of the family now, she said, looking at my shaven head. Proper baldy you look – every inch a Ganjoo!

The pun unnerved me. How could I tell her that she had lost a Ganjoo, not found one. That her brother was riding the side of a five-ton truck, selling the army in two dimensions. Why not just say that I had dropped from the future without a parachute.

Not that I had to tell them anything. I was leaving this world and its improbabilities early next morning. But I wanted to. Partly because I owed them the truth for their goodness to me, but mainly to purge myself of the intolerable absurdity of the morning's happenings. I didn't want to carry the morning like a solitary secret into my own time. It had to be handed over in the here and now; if it was unfinished business, it was the unfinished business of 1942 and its residents: they could have it.

Haasan came in looking grim and asked what had happened. That made it easy. The fact that he knew or seemed to know there was something wrong meant that I wouldn't have to start from scratch. No sooner had he asked than I told them everything. For nearly an hour I bore unstopped witness to the morning's events. It was a good story and I told it recklessly, so I told it well. When I described the vanishing Ammi and Asharfi gasped – a minute later they didn't believe me but the telling took their breath away.

Still, the comfort of disbelief came easily because I was the storyteller: an amnesiac baldy from nowhere who ran full tilt into bolted doors. Oh, nobody said as much but Ammi asked for another round of tea and worried aloud if Masroor would be back in time that evening to finish printing the *Khatoon*'s August run. I was hurt by that, which was silly, because I had expected disbelief. But when it came, I resented it.

By the time we finished tea, I decided not to care. Even if they believed every word, what difference would it make to me? I'd be gone in the morning to a time where news of Masroor would never reach me. Even if I went looking for them in the Lucknow of my time, Ammi would be very likely dead, Asharfi would be seventy and Masroor – if he wasn't peeling off the side of an ancient lorry – would be a grandfather, not the dauntless man I knew. So I returned to the room upstairs without pressing the truth of my story and put together the few things that I would need early the next morning: a change of clothes (another of Masroor's khaki and white school uniforms); money for the fare (lent me by Masroor); Home Guard shoes (Masroor's) and the only thing there that was truly mine: the thermos flask that was my grandmother's urn. Then I went downstairs for one last meal in the Lalbagh house.

For one breathless moment when I walked into the hall, I wondered if they knew I was leaving because the long dark table was aglow with the dancing light of a branched candelabra. It looked like the setting for a valedictory dinner. Only it wasn't – a fuse had blown, dousing the lights on the ground floor. But fuse or not, it felt grand sitting around one end of the table as Moonis served up the food, turning our poshly

shadowed faces this way and that like a bunch of old paintings in conversation. Haasan had stayed on for dinner so there were four of us in that dining room.

I was so excited by the thought of going home the next morning that it wasn't until I had mopped up the first serving of korma with my second roti that I realized the faces around me were strained and worried in the kindly candlelight. Of course – Masroor hadn't returned for dinner. He had been gone twelve hours now and Ammi was looking edgy.

It was Haasan who broke the building silence. I've just been to Bihari's shop, he said quietly. He said he had been bending over the vat squeezing in a new lot of jalebis when he heard the brakes shriek. When he looked up he thought he saw a glimpse of Masroor (at least it was a man wearing a sola topi the kind Masroor had on that morning) and then the truck was upon him. It took him a few seconds to get off his perch, but when he got to the road, the truck was still standing there. He squatted and looked under it but Masroor wasn't there; the only face he saw was yours, doing the same thing from the other side of the lorry. Then the driver crashed the gears and it moved off, with you running alongside. He says he shouted after you to stop but you didn't and that was the last he saw of either you or the truck or Masroor.

Haasan cleared his throat. I asked him about the picture you saw, he said carefully, glancing at Ammi who was staring at me. He didn't see anything like that . . . at least not on the side of the truck that he could see.

So we don't know what to think, said Ammi to me, anxiously. All I know is that he never misses dinner without telling me – and he isn't home. Tell me, couldn't it have been a window in the truck that you saw him through . . . or a door?

Perversely, I felt vindicated by the anxiety all round me. This would teach them not to dismiss the improbable. I had been living with the improbable for a week now. They had just lost a relative – I had lost a world.

Then I remembered that my salvation was at hand, that at seven tomorrow morning I'd be on my way home. The thought made me more generous, benign I was warmed by pity, not

only because they had lost Masroor but because the end of the world they knew was due. In less than five years there would be murder, arson, rape, flight, migration, butchered trains, refugees, dispossession, enemy aliens . . . in short, Partition. And here they were, Asharfi, Ammi and Haasan, living in the lull and thinking it the storm. It made me feel omniscient: I felt like a historian brought up face to face with some lost cause, some extinct line that he had chronicled.

So I gave them hope.

I pleaded a state of shock, I cited the time-lag between the truck screeching to a stop and my reaching it, I even invoked the obscuring smoke of its exhaust. The truck had been moving quite fast and keeping up had taken all my energy so yes it might have been Masroor in a window, briefly, or, why not, a door. And then there was the delirium of exhaustion, the treachery of recall and, of course, my amnesia which might selectively extend to the immediate past. Concussion had to be considered too: my head had been bashed by the courtyard door. Already a red and purple bruise disfigured my head, right where the forehead receded into the scalp.

I don't know if they swallowed this revised version, because all of them, including Ammi (who wanted desperately to be persuaded), still looked troubled when I finished. But there wasn't much more I could do. I had told them the truth at tea-time and taught them doubt at dinner; no professional historian could have done more. I had done my best by this alien time. I had treated its characters like flesh and blood equals, as free, self-willed individuals carving out their destinies. Like me. When in reality they were cardboard figures playing bit roles in a tightly scripted play without a happy ending. In fact, Masroor right now had rather less depth than a paper cut-out. Perhaps he is in hiding, I said, tossing them a final crumb of comfort, thinking vaguely of the mahdi figure in Islam. That was a nice little touch it seemed to me, just the right note. It should strike a fuzzy chord in them somewhere – they were Muslims after all. That done, I wished them good-night forever, without a pang.

The next morning I woke up crisp and clear-eyed. No gum

in my eyes, no fur in my mouth, both nostrils unclogged and smoothly breathing. The alarm in my head had gone at four so I brushed my teeth in near-darkness, though I hardly needed to, since my teeth felt new. But I did anyway because a few hours from now I would be starting life over again in the world I had lost and it didn't seem right to carry over the dirt of another time.

Washed and dressed, I strapped the thermos on, counted the money and set off. I peered through the grille that roofed the courtyard – the house was still. I crept down the stairs, steadying the flask against my hip. There was a light in the courtyard that I hadn't seen from above: the frosted window-panes on Ammi's bathroom door were glowing orange; did she always shit this early in the morning or was it worry? Quietly I sped across the courtyard in my canvas shoes as I had done the previous morning, though yesterday it had been brighter and I hadn't been alone.

The courtyard door frightened me with a great metallic squawk, but then I was out of the house and into the lane, the first leg of my journey home. My plan was to walk to Charbagh station and buy myself a reservation – I wasn't chancing the horror of not getting a place on the train. Nor was I going to walk up Gomti Bridge and wait. It would have been properly symmetrical to climb on where I had dropped off, just as if the dropping-off hadn't happened, but what if the signal wasn't red this time and the train didn't stop? It was safer to board the train at Charbagh station and go directly on to Banaras to drown Dadi's ashes. There was no point stopping in Lucknow, even a Lucknow of my own time, because I had lost my camera to the Gomti. No, Banaras was the better bet. I would drown Dadi's ashes and then recover from this misadventure at home, in Delhi. In a Delhi where Kingsway and Queensway were Rajpath and Janpath, where a republican president lived in a once viceregal palace. I didn't once consider the possibility that the train might not reach me back to my own time, that my displacement in time might not be reversible . . . some things are matters of faith and for me the Mail was sacred.

The first bad sign was the soldiery. Scores of men in khaki carrying rifles were patrolling the streets and they weren't policemen. They had called out the army. But military men keeping the peace was normal where I came from so I didn't really notice. But I was struck by the emptiness of Charbagh station. The floor was clear of people; there were no overnighters asleep on spread-out bedrolls. The ticket counters were generally deserted and that did send a premonitory chill slithering down my neck, but the counter for the Mail and other eastbound trains had a small crocodile of eight or nine travellers in front of it which gave me hope. I joined the queue and felt excitement build again as the window got closer minute by minute. When an old man came and stood behind me, I relaxed. I felt secured.

My turn came suddenly because the three in front barely bent to the level of the ticket window before they straightened up and moved to a side, looking disconsolate. Almost before I knew it, I was looking through dirty glass at a bald man with a Hitler moustache. One seat to Banaras on the Mail, I said. I didn't know how the words came out because my mouth was dry and my ears were filled with the hammering of my heart.

The ticket clerk had a long suck at the tea cooling in a saucer. He put it down and looked at me sourly.

How many times do I have to tell you (the dirty ticket window had smudged all his clients into one incorrigible ticket buyer) that the Mail from Delhi is cancelled. All Delhi trains are cancelled till further notice because of sabotage. But, he said putting on spectacles and peering at an illegibly chalked-over slate, if you want to go to Banaras, there is a special train starting from Lucknow at eleven tonight.

I left the counter, stunned. Another train. What would I do with another train. I needed the Mail, the train I had come on – only that could haul me back again. And it was cancelled. These Quit India heroes had ruined me. Do or Die I remembered Dadi muttering. Do or Die – Gandhi's rallying cry for the August rebels. Well, they had done . . . and I wished them dead. They had done me in just as surely as they had done Dadi; worse if anything. She had been eaten up by the

remembrance of things past, but these nameless patriots had buggered up my future.

I lowered myself on to a bench by the main entrance and sat there for hours, unable to think or move. Lifetimes later – from the heat overhead it must have been ten o'clock at least – I rose and walked slowly back, not to the Lalbagh house, but in the general direction of Hazrat Ganj.

By the time I passed the legislative assembly building, I had recovered enough to knit a few rags of hope together. The Mail was bound to start running once the troubles were over. Another fortnight, a month perhaps and I could try again. If I kept to myself and stayed away from lice and other trouble, there was still a chance. By the time I got to Hazrat Ganj I had even thought up a reason for Ammi and Asharfi to explain my early morning getaway: I had been scouring the streets of Aminabad for Masroor.

But virgin hope, the innocent faith of true believers – that had gone. For a week I had never once doubted that the Mail would arrive on the morning of the tenth and whisk me away to my time. I had put my faith in the impossible happening because it had happened before. I had watched and waited and schemed to be struck again by lightning, but the bolt had been deferred, my faith had wavered and doubt and common sense had scurried in. Why should it happen? Why should it happen again? Why should it happen again to me? By the time my feet walked me into Haasan's coffee house, my plan was more a mantra than a blueprint . . . not an amulet, just a prayer bead.

Between the yellow colonnade that fronted the coffee house and its green fly-mesh doors, ran a broad corridor. One section of it to the right of the doors had been blocked off by a newspaperwallah sitting with his back to the wall on a low stool, surrounded by stacks of papers. I bought the *Pioneer* – it would give me something to do while I breakfasted in solitude. It would also give me a reason for ignoring Haasan.

I stepped through the doors and entered a dark world wrapped in coolness. For a moment I could see nothing but the glow of shaded bulbs suspended midway to the ceiling like grimy moons in a murky ether. Gradually as I groped and felt

my way to a corner table, the deep-sea aquarium changed into an eating place. A waiter wearing a cockaded turban and a green-and-gold cummerbund appeared from somewhere. He swept the crumbs and wetness from the tabletop on to the floor with a folded rag which smelt strongly of damp and waited without otherwise acknowledging my presence.

Timidity stopped me from asking for a menu so out of college canteen memories I hazarded an order: coffee, mutton dosa, vada-sambar. That seemed acceptable because he turned and moved away without a word.

The *Pioneer*'s front page was dense with news of the government's crackdown on the Congress. Even the war on the eastern front had been moved to the right of the masthead to make room for it. Jinnah had denounced the Quit India movement in small headlines, while Rajagopalachari, ex-Premier of Madras Presidency and Congress maverick, had condemned the sabotage of railway tracks and ascribed it to a class of non-Congress villains called miscreants.

There was a letter on the editorial page about the cricket match Masroor had plotted to stop, written by a Madrasi maharaja.

> Sir, Committed as I am to the defence of civilization against fascism, I pause in my strivings for the Allied cause, to pen a protest against the patronage extended by H.E., the Governor of the United Provinces to sectarian sport. I refer to the tie to be played between the cricket teams of Banaras Hindu and Aligarh Muslim universities, in aid of the Provincial War Fund. It is repugnant that India's cricket and her war effort should be tainted by communal division and that the same British government that is fighting this war to assert the resilience of democracy and the brotherhood of man, should still support the arbitrary bond of religion as an organizing principle in sport. May I earnestly appeal to his Excellency, Sir Maurice Hallett to cancel this fixture and arrange for some less provocative way of filling the war chest.
>
> Yours etc., Maharajakumar Masulipatanam
>
> P.S. I do not advocate regional teams either. Parochialism is no better than sectarianism. Instead, the principle of property

> or education can be fruitfully applied. Thus landlords could play tenants or graduates could take on illiterates. The lower orders would inevitably have a great number to choose an eleven from but this advantage would be balanced by our qual- itative superiority. Teams constituted in this manner would have the merit of reflecting real social arrangements instead of the false and arbitrary divisions that exist only in the minds of bigots.

The food when it came was wonderful. The dosa was folded into a triangular envelope and filled with finely ground meat. In form it wasn't different from the mutton dosas I had eaten as an undergraduate but otherwise there was no comparison. The filling was squishily tender and not at all like minced and salted rubber. The coffee didn't taste of chlorine. It was authentic, like the ur-cuisine of a pre-lapsarian coffee house from which its republican descendants had strayed.

I nibbled at the corners of the dosa, saving up the middle where the meat mainly was for a couple of huge, tongue-swamping bites. Then Haasan found me – in spite of the newspaper, my not looking up and the gloomy corner I had chosen. He was wearing a white bush-shirt over a pair of dark trousers and an expression of conspiratorial anxiety.

Where have you been? he asked, not wanting to know. I've been visiting everyone this morning telling them to get to the coffee house by eleven. Bhukay and Bihari said they would come. Ammi thought it was improper for her and Asharfi to be seen in a coffee house. So I reminded her that the point of the meeting, the only item on its agenda was Masroor's disappearance and what to do about it. Also that nobody would recognize them in their burqas. She agreed in the end.

I took a big sip of the coffee and tried to make sense of what he was saying. But why do Ammi and Asharfi have to come here? I asked. Why can't we go to the Lalbagh house?

Because I can't leave the coffee house till the evening and this Masroor business needs to be sorted out at once, answered Haasan simply. Besides, with Masroor gone, there isn't a man left in the house. It wouldn't be right for us to visit.

I thought of Moonis but servants clearly didn't count. There