stay with my uncle in New Delhi.

'No.' She shook her head. 'Leave me here.'

'You're not happy here,' he said, and the unexpectedness of these words made her look up at him, questioning. 'Look at your face — so sad, so worried.' He even came close to her and touched her cheek, very lightly, as if he could hardly bear the unpleasant contact but forced himself to do it out of compassion. 'If only you would come with me, I would show you how to be happy. How to be active and busy — and then you would be happy. If you came.'

But she shook her head. She felt she had followed him enough, it had been such an enormous strain, always pushing against her grain, it had drained her of too much strength, now she could only collapse, inevitably collapse.

Bakul had married her when she was eighteen. He knew her. He left her, saying 'Then I'll tell Uncle you are busy with your own family and will come another time,' and went out to wait for the car.

He passed Bim as he went through the drawing room. Bim was holding court there — seated on the divan with her legs drawn up under her — like Tara, she had not dressed yet and was still in her nightdress — and on the carpet below sat the students, a brightly coloured bunch of young girls in jeans and in salwar-kameez, laughing and eyeing each other and him as he went through. He raised his eyebrows at Bim and gave her a significant look as if to say 'This — your history lesson?'

Bim nodded and laughed and wagged her toes and wagged her pencil, completely at ease and without the least sense of guilt. 'No, no, you won't,' he heard her say as he went out onto the veranda, 'you won't get me started on the empress Razia — nor on the empress Nur Jehan. I refuse. We must be serious. We are going to discuss the war between Shivaji and Aurangzeb — no empresses.'

The girls groaned exaggeratedly. 'Please, miss,' he heard them beg as he sat down on a creaking cane chair to wait, 'please let's talk about something interesting, miss. You will enjoy it too, miss.'

'Enjoy? You rascals, I haven't asked you here to enjoy yourselves. Come on, Keya, please begin — I'm listening —' and then there was some semblance of order and of a tutorial going on that Bakul could almost recognise and approve. He wondered, placing one leg over the other reflectively, as he had sometimes wondered when he had first started coming to this house, as a young man who had just entered the foreign service and was in a position to look around for a suitable wife, if Bim were not, for all her plainness and brusqueness, the superior of the two sisters, if she had not those qualities — decision, firmness, resolve — that he admired and tried to instil in his wife who lacked them so deplorably. If only Bim had not that rather coarse laugh and way of sitting with her legs up... now Tara would never... and if her nose were not so large unlike Tara's which was small... and Tara was gentler, more tender...

He sighed a bit, shifting his bottom on the broken rattan seat of the chair. Things were as they were and had to be made the most of, he always said. At least in this country, he sighed, and just then his uncle's car appeared at the gate, slowly turned in, its windshield flooded by the sun, and came up the drive to park beneath the bougainvilleas.

Bim did get Tara to smile before the morning was over, however. Tara was leaning against the veranda pillar, watching the parrots quarrel in the guava trees, listening for a sound from Baba's room, hoping to hear a record played, when Bim came out with her band of girls and suddenly shouted 'Ice-cream! Caryhom Ice-cream-wallah!' and, before Tara's startled eyes, a bicycle with a small painted van attached to it that had been rolling down the empty, blazing road, stopped and turned in at the gate with its Sikh driver bearing broadly at the laughing girls and their professor.

Seeing Tara, Bim called out 'Look at these babies, Tara. When they hear the Caryhom ice-cream man going by they just stop paying any attention to my lecture. I can't do anything till I've handed each of them a cone. I suppose strawberry cones are what you all want, you babies? Strawberry cones for all of them, Sardarji,' she ordered and stood laughing on the steps as she watched him fill the cones with large helpings of pink ice-cream and hand them to the girls who were giggling, Tara realised, as much at their professor as at this childish diversion.

Bim noticed nothing. Swinging her arms about, she saw to it that each girl got her cone and then had one of them, a pretty child dressed in salwar-kameez patterned with pink and green parrots, carry a dripping cone down the veranda to Tara. 'Tara,' she called, 'that's for you. Sardarji made it specially for you,' she laughed, smiling at the ice-cream man who had a slightly embarrassed look, Tara thought. Embarrassed herself, she took the slopping cone from the girl and licked it to please Bim, her tongue recoiling at the synthetic sweetness. 'Oh Bim, if my daughters were to see me now — or Bakul,' she murmured, as Bim walked past holding like a cornucopia a specially heaped and specially pink ice-cream cone into Baba's room. Tara stopped licking, stared, trying to probe the bamboo screen into the room where there had been silence and shadows all morning. She heard Bim's voice, loud and gay, and although Baba made no audible answer, she saw Bim come out without the cone and knew Baba was eating it, perhaps quite
happily. There was something magnetic about the icy pink sweetness, the synthetic sweet pinkness, she reflected, licking.

Now Bim let out a shout and began to scold. One of the girls had tipped the remains of her cone onto the veranda steps for the dog to lick - she had seen him standing by, watching, his tongue lolling and leaking. ‘You silly, don’t you know dogs shouldn’t eat anything sweet? His hair will fall out – he’ll get worms – it’ll be your fault – he’ll be spoilt – he won’t eat his bread and soup now.’

‘Let him enjoy himself, miss,’ said the girl, smirking at the others because they all knew perfectly well how pleased Bim was to see them spoil her dog.

Tara narrowed her eyes at the spectacle of Bim scolding her students and smiling with pleasure because of the attention they had paid her dog, who had now licked up all the ice-cream and was continuing to lick and lick the floor as if it might have absorbed some of the delicious stuff. Remembering how Bim used to scold her for not disciplining her little daughters and making them eat up everything on their plates or go to bed on time, she shook her head slightly.

But the ice-cream did have, she had to admit, a beneficial effect all round: in a little while, as the students began to leave the house, prettily covering their heads against the sun with coloured veils and squealing as the heat of the earth burnt through their slippers, the gramophone in Baba’s room stirred and rumbled into life again. Tara was grateful for it. She wished Bakul could see them now – her family.

When Bakul did come, late in the afternoon, almost comatose from the heat and the heavy lunch he had eaten, to fall onto his bed and sleep, this passage of lightness was over, or overcome again by the spirit of the house.

Tara, upright in a chair, tried first to write a letter to her daughters, then decided it was too soon, she would wait till she had more to say to them, and put the letter away in her case and tried to read instead, a book from the drawing room bookshelf that had been there even when she was a child – Jawaharlal Nehru’s Letters To A Daughter in a green cloth binding – and sitting on the stuffed chair, spongy and clammy to touch, she felt that heavy spirit come and weigh down her eyelids and the back of her neck so that she was pinned down under it, motionless.

It seemed to her that the dullness and the boredom of her childhood, her youth, were stored here in the room under the worn dusty red rugs, in the blunted brassware, amongst the dried dusty flowers in the swollen vases, behind the yellowed photographs in the oval frames – everything, everything that she had so hated as a child and that was still preserved here as if this were the storeroom of some dull, uninviting provincial museum.

She stared sullenly, without lifting her head, at a water-colour above the plaster mantelpiece – red canna with some watery fluid that had trickled weakly down the brown paper: who could have painted that? Why was it hung here? How could Bim bear to look at it for all of her life? Had she developed no taste of her own, no likings that made her wish to sweep the old house of all its rubbish and place in it things of her own choice? Tara thought with longing of the neat, china-white flat in Washington, its cleanliness, its floweriness. She wished she had the will to get to her feet and escape from this room – where to? Even the veranda would be better, with the pigeons cooing soothingly, expressing their individual genius for combining complaint and contentment in one tone, and the spiky bougainvilleas scraping the outer walls and scattering their papery magenta flowers in the hot, sulphur-yellow wind. She actually got up and went to the door and lifted the bamboo screen that hung there, but the blank white glare of afternoon slanted in and slashed at her with its flashing knives so that she quickly dropped the screen. It creaked into place, releasing a noiseful of dust. On the wall a gecko clucked loudly and disapprovingly at this untoward disturbance. She went back to the chair. If she could sleep, she might forget where she was, but it was not possible to sleep with the sweat trickling down one’s face in rivulets and the heat enclosing one in its ring of fire.

Bakul said one could rise above the climate, that one could ignore it if one filled one’s mind with so many thoughts and activities that there was no room for it. ‘Look at me,’ he had said the winter that they froze in Moscow. ‘I don’t let the cold immobilize me, do I?’ and she and the girls, swaddled in all their warm clothing and the quilts and blankets off their beds, had had to agree that he did not. And gradually he had trained her and made her into an active, organised woman who looked up her engagement book every morning, made plans and programmes for the day ahead and then walked her way through them to retire to her room at night, tired with the triumphant tiredness of the virtuous and the dutiful.

Now the engagement book lay at the bottom of her trunk. Bim had said nothing of engagements and, really, she could not bear to have any in this heat. The day stretched out like a sheet of glass that reflected the sun – too bare, too exposed to be faced.

Out in the garden only the coppersmiths were awake, clinging to the tree-trunks, beating out their mechanical call – tonk-tonk-tonk. Tonk-tonk-tonk.

Here in the house it was not just the empty, hopeless atmosphere
of childhood, but the very spirits of her parents that brooded on—here they still sat, crouched about the little green baize folding table that was now shoved into a corner with a pile of old *Illustrated Weeklies* and a brass pot full of red and yellow spotted canna lilies on it as if to hold it firmly down, keep it from opening up with a snap and spilling out those stacks of cards, those long note-books and thin pencils with which her parents had sat, day after day and year after year till their deaths, playing bridge with friends like themselves, mostly silent, heads bent so that the knobs in their necks protruded, soft stained hands shuffled the cards, now and then speaking those names and numbers that remained a mystery to the children who were not allowed within the room while a game was in progress, who had sometimes folded themselves into the dusty curtains and stood peeping out, wondering at this strange, all-absorbing occupation that kept their parents sucked down into the silent centre of a deep, shadowy vortex while they floated on the surface, staring down into the underworld, their eyes popping with incomprehension.

Raja used to swear that one day he would leap up onto the table in a lion-mask, brandishing a torch, and set fire to this paper-world of theirs, while Bim flashed her sewing scissors in the sunlight and declared she would creep in secretly at night and snip all the cards into bits. But Tara simply sucked her finger and retreated down the veranda to Aunt Mira’s room where she could always tuck herself up in the plum-coloured quilt that smelt so comfortingly of the aged relation and her ginger cat, lay her head down beside that purring creature and feel such a warmth, such a softness of comfort and protection as not to feel the need to wreck her parents’ occupation or divert their attention. It would have frightened her a bit if they had come away, followed her and tried to communicate with her.

And now she stirred uneasily in her chair although it held her damply as if with suckers, almost afraid that they would rise from their seats, drop their cards on the table and come towards her with papery faces, softly shuffling fingers, smoky breath, and welcome her back, welcome her home.

Once her father had risen, padded quietly to her mother’s bedroom behind that closed door, and Tara had slipped in behind him, folded herself silently into the faded curtain and watched. She had seen him lean over her mother’s bed and quickly, smoothly press a little shining syringe into her mother’s arm that lay crookedly on the blue cover, press it in very hard so that she tilted her head back with a quick gasp of shock, or pain—Tara saw her chin rising up into the air and the grey head sinking back into the pillow and heard a long, whimpering sigh like an air-bug minutely punctured so that Tara had fled, trembling, because she was sure she had seen her father kill her mother.

All her life Tara had experienced that fear—her father had killed her mother. Even after Aunt Mira and Bim and Raja had explained to her what it was he did, what he kept on doing daily, Tara could not rid herself of the feel of that original stab of suspicion. Sometimes, edging up close to her mother, she would study the flabby, floury skin punctured with a hundred minute needle-holes, and catch her breath in an effort not to cry out. Surely these were the signs of death, she felt, not of healing?

Now she stared fixedly at the door in the wall, varnished a bright hideous brown with the varnish swelling into blisters or cracking into spider patterns in the heat, and felt the same morbid, uncontrollable fear of it opening and death stalking out in the form of a pair of dreadfully familiar ghosts that gave out a sound of paper and filled her nostrils with white insidious dust.

In the sleeping garden the coppersmiths beat on and on monotonously like mechanics at work on a metal sheet—tonk-tonk-tonk.

To look at Bim one would not think she had lived through the same childhood, the same experiences as Tara. She led the way so briskly up the stairs on the outside of the house to the flat rooftop where, as children, they had flown kites and hidden secrets, that it was clear she feared no ghosts to meet her there. Now they leant upon the stucco balustrade and looked down at the garden patterned with the light and shade of early evening. The heat of the day and the heavy dust were being sluiced and washed away by the garden hose as the gardener trained it now on the jasmines, now on the palms, bringing out the green scent of watered earth and refreshed plants. Flocks of parrots came winging in, a lurid, shrieking green, to settle on the sunflowers and rip their black-seeded centres to bits, while mynahs hopped up and down on the lawn, quarrelling over insects. Bim’s cat, jet-black, picked her way carefully between the puddles left by the gardener’s generously splashing, spraying hose, and twitched her whiskers and went ‘meh-meh-meh’ with annoyance when the mynahs shrieked at the sight of her and came to swoop over and divebomb her till she retreated under the hedge. A pair of hoopoes promenaded sedately up and down the lawn, furling and unfurling the striped fans on their heads. A scent of spider lilies rose from the flowerpots massed on the veranda steps as soon as they were watered, like ladies newly bathed, powdered and scented for the evening.

On either side of their garden were more gardens, neighbours’
houses, as still and faded and shabby as theirs, the gardens as overgrown and neglected and teeming with wild, uncontrolled life. From the roof-top they could see the pink and yellow and grey stucco walls, peeling and spotted, or an occasional gol mohur tree scarlet with summer blossom.

Outside the sagging garden gate the road led down to the Jumna river. It had shrunk now to a mere rivulet of mud that Tara could barely make out in the huge flat expanse of sand that stretched out to the furry yellow horizon like some sleeping lion, shabby and old. There were no boats on the river except for a flat-bottomed ferry boat that idled slowly back and forth. There was no sign of life beyond an occasional washerman picking his washing off the sand dunes and loading it onto his donkey, and a few hairless pai dogs that slunk about the mud flats, nosing about for a dead fish or a frog to devour. A fisherman strode out into the river, flung out his net with a wave of his wrists and then drew in an empty net.

Tara could tell it was empty because he did not bend to pick up anything. There was nothing. 'Imagine,' she said, with wonder, for she could not believe the long-remembered, always-remembered childhood had had a backdrop as drab as this, 'we used to like playing there - in that dust and mud. What could we have seen in it - in that muddy little trickles? Why, it's hardly a river - it's nothing, just nothing.'

'Now Tara, your travels have made you very snobbish,' Bim protested, but lazily, good-naturedly. She was leaning heavily on her elbows, letting her grey-streaked hair tumble in whatever bit of breeze came off the river up to them, and now she turned to lean back against the balustrade and look up at the sky that was no longer flat and white-hot but patterned and wrinkled with pale brushed-strokes of blue and grey and mauve. A flock of white egrets rose from the river bed and stitched their way slowly and evenly across this faded cloth. 'Nothing!' she repeated Tara's judgement. 'The holy river Jumna? On whose banks Krishna played his flute and Radha danced?'

'Oh Bim, it is nothing of the sort,' Tara dared to say, sure she was being teased. 'It's a little trickle of mud with banks of dust on either side.'

'It's where my ashes will be thrown after I am dead and burnt,' Bim said unexpectedly and abruptly. 'It is where Mira-masi's ashes were thrown. Then they go down into the sea.' Seeing Tara start and quiver, she added more lightly 'It's where we played as children - ran races on the dunes and dug holes to bury ourselves in and bullied the ferryman into giving us free rides to the melon fields. Don't you remember the melons baking in the hot sand and splitting them open and eating them all warm and red and pouring with pink juice?'

'That was you and Raja,' Tara reminded her. 'I never dared get into that boat, and of course Baba stayed at home. It was you and Raja who used to play there, Bim.'

'I and Raja,' Bim mused, continuing to look up at the sky till the egrets pierced through the soft cloth of it and disappeared into the dusk like so many needles lost. 'I and Raja,' she said, 'I and Raja.' Then 'And the white horse and Hyder Ali Sahib going for his evening ride?' she asked Tara almost roughly, trying to shake out of her some corroborations if she were unsure if this image were real or only imagined. It had the making of a legend, with the merest seed of truth. 'Can you remember playing on the sand late in the evening and the white horse riding by, Hyder Ali Sahib up on it, high above us, and his peon running in front of him, shouting, and his dog behind him, barking?' She laughed quite excitedly, seeing it again, this half-remembered picture. 'We stood up to watch them go past and he wouldn't even look at us. The peon shouted to us to get out of the way. I think Hyder Ali Sahib used to think of himself as some kind of prince, a nawab. And Raja loved that.' Her eyes gleamed as much with malice as with remembrance. 'Raja stood up straight and stared and stared and I'm sure he longed to ride on a white horse with a dog to run behind him just as old Hyder Ali did. Hyder Ali Sahib was always Raja's ideal, wasn't he?' she ended up.

Her words had cut a deep furrow through Tara's forehead. She too pressed down on her elbows, feeling the balustrade cut into her flesh as she tried to remember. Did she really remember or was it only Bim's picture that she saw, in shades of white and black and scarlet, out there on the shadowy sand-bank? To cover up a confusion she failed to resolve, she said 'Yes, and d'you remember Raja marching up and down here on the roof, swinging his arms and reciting his poems to us while we sat here on the balustrade, swinging our legs and listening? I used to feel like crying, it was so beautiful - those poems about death, and love, and wine, and flames.'

'They weren't. They were terrible,' Bim said icily, tossing her head with a stubborn air, like a bad-tempered mare's. 'Terrible verses he wrote.'

'Oh Bim,' Tara exclaimed in dismay, widening her eyes in horror at such sacrilege. It was a family dictum that Raja was a poet and wrote great poetry. Now Bim, his favourite sister, was denying this doctrine. What had happened?

'Of course it was, Tara - terrible, terrible,' Bim insisted. 'We're not fifteen and ten years old any more - you and I. Have you tried reading it recently? It's nauseating. Can you remember any two
lines of it that wouldn’t make you sick with embarrassment now?"

Tara was too astounded, and too stricken to speak. Throughout her childhood, she had always stood on the outside of that enclosed world of love and admiration in which Bim and Raja moved, watching them, sucking her finger, excluded. Now here was Bim, cruelly and wilfully smashing up that charmed world with her cynicism, her criticism. She stood dismayed.

Bim was fierce. She no longer leant on the balustrade, drooping with reminiscences. She walked up and down agitatedly, swinging her arms in agitation, as Raja had done when quoting poetry in those days when he was a poet, at least to them. "If you'll just come to my room," she said, suddenly stopping, "I'll show you some of those poems — I think they must be still lying around although I don't know why I haven't torn them all up."

"Of course you wouldn't!" Tara exclaimed.

"Why not?" Bim flung at her. "Come and see, tell me if you think it worth keeping," and she swept down the stairs with a martial step, looking back once to shout at Tara. "And, apart from poetry recitals, Tara, this terrace is where I cut your hair for you and made you cry. What an uproar there was." She gave her head a quick, jerky toss. "And here you are, with your hair grown long again, and it's mine that's cut short. Only no one cared when I cut mine."

Tara hung back. She had been perfectly content to pace the terrace in the faint breeze, watch the evening darken, wait for the stars to come out and talk about the old days. Even if it was about the haircut, painful as that had been. But Bim was clattering down the stone stairs, the bells of the pink-spined temple at the bend of the river were suddenly clanging loudly and discordantly, the sky had turned a deep green with a wide purple channel through it for the night to come flowing in, and there was nothing for it but to follow Bim down the stairs, into the house, now unbearably warm and stuffy after the freshness and cool of the terrace, and then into Bim's cluttered, untidy room.

It had been their father's office room and the furniture in it was still office furniture — steel cupboards to hold safes and files, metal slotted shelves piled with registers and books, and the roll-top desk, towards which Bim marched as Tara hesitated unwillingly by the door. Throwing down the lid, Bim started pulling out papers from the pigeon-holes and opening drawers and rifling through files and tutorial papers and college registers. Out of this mass of paper she separated some sheets and held them out to Tara with an absent-minded air.

Tara, glancing down at them, saw that they were in Urdu, a language she had not learnt. It was quite useless her holding these sheets in her hand and pretending to read the verses that Raja had once recited to them and that had thrilled her then with their Persian glamour. But Bim did not notice her predicament, she was still occupied with the contents of the rifled desk. Finally she found what she was looking for and handed that, too, to Tara with a grim set of her mouth that made Tara quake.

"What is this, Bim?" she asked, looking down and seeing it was in Raja's English handwriting.

"A letter Raja wrote — read it. Read it," she repeated as Tara hesitated, and walked across to the window and stood there staring out silently, compelling Tara to read while she tensely waited.

Tara read — unwillingly, unbelievingly.

Raja had written it years ago, she saw, and tried to link the written date with some event in their family history that might provide it with a context.

You will have got our wire with the news of Hyder Ali Sahib's death. I know you will have been as saddened by it as we are. Perhaps you are also a bit worried about the future. But you must remember that when I left you, I promised I would always look after you, Bim. When Hyder Ali Sahib was ill and making out his will, Benazar herself spoke to him about the house and asked him to allow you to keep it at the same rent we used to pay him when father and mother were alive. He agreed — you know he never cared for money, only for friendship — and I want to assure you that now that he is dead and has left all his property to us, you may continue to have it at the same rent, I shall never think of raising it or of selling the house as long as you and Baba need it. If you have any worries, Bim, you have only to tell — Raja.

It took Tara some minutes to think out all the implications of this letter. To begin with, she studied the date and tried to recall when Hyder Ali had died. Instead a series of pictures of the Hyder Ali family flickered in the half-dark of the room. There was Hyder Ali, once their neighbour and their landlord, as handsome and stately as a commissioned oil painting hung over a mantelpiece, all in silver and grey and scarlet as he had been on the white horse on which he rode along the river bank in the evenings while the children stood and watched. He had cultivated the best roses in Old Delhi and given parties to which poets and musicians came. Their parents were not amongst his friends. Then there was his daughter Benazar, a very young girl, plump and pretty, a veil thrown over her head as she hurried into the closed carriage that took her to school, and the Begum whom they seldom saw, she lived in the closed quarters of
the house, but at Id sent them, and their other tenant-neighbours, rich sweets covered with fine silver foil on a tray decked with embroidered napkins. They had lived in the tall stucco house across the road, distinguished from all the others by its wealth of decorative touches like the coloured fanlight above the front door, the china tiles along the veranda walls and the coloured glass chandeliers and lamps. They had owned half the houses on that road. When they left Delhi during the partition riots of 1947, they sold most of these houses to their Hindu tenants for a song — all except for Bim’s house which she did not try to buy and which he continued to let to her at the same rent as before. It was to this that Raja, his only son-in-law and inheritor of his considerable property, referred in his letter. It was a very old letter.

Still confused, she said slowly ‘But, Bim, it’s a very old letter — years old.’

‘But I still have it,’ Bim said sharply, staring out of the window as if she too saw pictures in the dark. ‘I still keep it in my desk — to remind me. Whenever I begin to wish to see Raja again or wish he would come and see us, then I take out that letter and read it again.

Oh, I can tell you, I could write him such an answer, he wouldn’t forget it for many years either!’ She gave a short laugh and ended it with a kind of a choke, saying ‘You say I should come to Hyderabad with you for his daughter’s wedding. How can I? How can I enter his house — my landlord’s house? I, such a poor tenant? Because of me, he can’t raise the rent or sell the house and make a profit — imagine that. The sacrifice!’

‘Oh Bim,’ Tara said helplessly. Whenever she saw a tangle, an emotional tangle of this kind, rise up before her, she wanted only to turn and flee into that neat, sanitary, disinfected land in which she lived with Bakul, with its set of rules and regulations, its neatness and orderliness. And seemliness too — seemliness. She sat down wearily on the edge of Bim’s bed, putting the letter down on the bedside table beside a pile of history books. She turned the pages of Sir Mortimer Wheeler’s Early India and Pakistan and thought how relevant such a title was to the situation in their family, their brother’s marriage to Hyder Ali’s daughter. She wished she dared lighten the atmosphere by suggesting this to Bim, but Bim stood with her back arched, martial and defiant. ‘Why let this go on and on?’ she sighed instead. ‘Why not end it now by going to Moyna’s wedding, and then forget it all?’

‘I have ended it already,’ Bim said stubbornly, ‘by not going to see them and not having them here either. It is ended. But I don’t forget, no.’

‘I wouldn’t have ever believed — no one would ever have believed

that you and Raja who were so close — so close — could be against each other ever. It’s just unbelievable, Bim, and so — unnecessary, too,’ she ended in a wail.

‘Yes?’ said Bim with scorn, turning around to stare at her sister. ‘I don’t think so. I don’t think it is unnecessary to take offence when you are insulted. What was he trying to say to me? Was he trying to make me thank him — go down on my knees and thank him for this house in which we all grew up? Was he trying to threaten me with eviction and warn me what might happen if I ever stopped praising him and admiring him?’

‘Of course not, Bim. He simply didn’t know quite what he was writing. I suppose he was in a state — his father-in-law having just died, and you know how he always felt about him — and then having to take over Benazir’s family business and all that. He just didn’t know what he was writing.’

‘A poet — not knowing what he was writing?’ Bim laughed sarcastically as she came and picked up the letter and put it back in the desk. It seemed to have a pigeon-hole all to itself as if it were a holy relic like fingernails or a crooked yellow tooth.

‘Do tear it up,’ cried Tara, jumping up. ‘Don’t put it back there to take out and look at and hold against Raja. Tear it up, Bim, throw it away,’ she urged.

Bim put the lid up with a harsh set to her mouth. ‘I will keep it. I must look at it and remind myself every now and then. Whenever you come here and ask why I don’t go to Hyderabad and visit him and see my little nieces and nephews — well then, I feel I have to explain to you, prove to you . . . ’ She stammered a bit and faltered to a stop.

‘Why, Bim?’

But Bim would not tell her why she needed this bitterness and insult and anger. She picked up an old grey hairbrush that had lost half its bristles and was so matted with tangles of hair that Tara shuddered at the sight of it, and began to brush her hair with short, hard strokes. ‘Come, let’s go and visit the Misras. They’ve been asking about you, they want to see you. Ask Bakul to come, too — he must be getting bored. And he knows the Misras. You met him at their house — I’d nearly forgotten,’ she laughed, a bit distractedly.

Tara followed her out, relieved to be in the open again, out of the dense, musty web of Bim’s room, Bim’s entanglements, and to see the evening light and the garden. A bush of green flowers beside the veranda shook out its night scent as they came out and covered them with its powdery billows. Badshah rushed up, whining with expectation.
The sound of a 1940s foxtrot on Baba's gramophone followed them down the drive to the gate as if a mechanical bird had replaced the koels and pigeons of daylight. Here Bim stopped and told Badshah firmly to sit. They stood watching, waiting for him to obey. He made protesting sounds, turned around in circles, pawed Bim's feet with his claws, even whined a bit under his breath. Finally he yawned in resignation and sank onto his haunches. Then they turned out of the gate and ceased to hear the tinny rattle of the wartime foxtrot.

Walking up the Misras' driveway, they could hear instead the sounds of the music and dance lessons that the Misra sisters gave in the evenings after their little nursery school had closed for the day, for it seemed that they never ceased to toil and the pursuit of a living was unending. Out on the dusty lawn cane chairs were set in a circle and here the Misra brothers sat taking their rest—which they also never ceased to do—dressed in summer clothes of fine muslin, drinking iced drinks and discussing the day which meant very little since the day for them had been as blank and unblemished as an empty glass.

They immediately rose to welcome their neighbours but Bim stood apart, feeling a half-malicious desire to go into the house and watch the two grey-haired, spectacled, middle-aged women—one married but both rejected by their husbands soon after their marriage—giving themselves up to demonstrations of ecstatic song and dance, the songs always Radha's in praise of Krishna, the dance always of Radha pining for Krishna. She hadn't the heart after all and instead of joining the men on the lawn, she went up the steps to the veranda where the old father half-sat, half-reclined against the bolsters on a wooden divan, a glass of soda water in his hand, looking out and listening to his sons and occasionally shouting a command at them that went unheard, then sadly, meditatively burping. Tara and Bakul sat down with the brothers on the lawn and talked and listened to the voices of pupils and teachers mournfully rising and falling down the scales played on a lugubrious harmonium and tried, while talking of Delhi and Washington, politics and travel, to imagine the improbable scene indoors. Eventually the little pupils came out, drooping and perspiring, and rushed off down the drive to the gate where their ayahs waited for them, chatting and chewing betel leaves. After a while, the teachers, too, emerged onto the veranda. They too drooped and perspired and were grey with fatigue. There was nothing remotely amusing about them.

'Bim, Bim, why must you sit here with Papa? Come into the garden and have a drink,' they cried at once, together.

But Bim would not listen. She tucked up her feet under her to make it plain she was not getting up. 'No, no, I want to listen to Uncle,' she said, not wishing to add that she had no liking for his sons' company. 'Uncle is telling me how he was sent to England to study law but somehow landed up in Burma and made a fortune instead. I want to hear the whole story. And you must go and meet Tara and Bakul. They've come.'

'Tara and Bakul?' cried the two sisters and, straightening their spectacles and smoothing down their hair and their saris, they rushed down into the garden while Bim stayed by the sick old man.

'But Uncle, is it a true story?' she teased him. 'I never know with you.'

'Can't you see the proof?' he asked, waving his glass of soda water so that it split and frothed andizzled down his arm. 'Now if I had gone north and had to work in a cold climate, learnt to wear a tie and button a jacket and keep my shoes laced and polished, I would have returned a proper person, a disciplined man. Instead, as you see, I went east, in order to fulfil a swami's prophecy, and there I could make money without working, and had to undress to keep cool, and sleep all afternoon, and drink all evening—and so I came back with money and no discipline and no degree,' he laughed, deliberately spilling some more soda water as if in a gesture of fatalism.

'What, all to satisfy a swami?'

'Yes, yes, it is true, Bimla. My father used to go to this swami-ji, no great man, just one of those common little swamis who sit outside the railway station and catch those people who come from the village to make their fortunes in the city. 'Swami-ji, swami-ji, will I have luck?' they ask, and he puts his hand on their heads in blessing and says 'Yes, son, if you first put five rupees in my pocket.' That sort of man. My father went to him to buy a blessing for me—I was leaving for England next day. My trunk was packed, my passage booked, my mother was already weeping. But perhaps my father didn't give the swami-ji enough money. He said 'Your son go to England? To Vilayat? Certainly not. He will never go north. He will go east.' 'No, no,' said my father, 'his passage is already booked on a P & O boat, he is leaving for Bombay tomorrow to catch it, he is going to study law in a great college in England.' But swami-ji only shook his head and refused to say another word. So, as my father was walking home, very slowly and thoughtfully, who should bump into him, outside the Kashmir Gate post office, but an old friend of his who had been in school with him and then gone to Burma to set up in the teak business. And this man, this scoundrel, may he perish—oh, I forget! He perished
long ago, Bimla, leaving me all his money - he clasped my father in his arms and said "You are like a brother to me. Your son is my son. Send him to me, let him work for me and I will make a man of him." And so my passage was cancelled, I gave up my studies and went east, to Burma.' He gulped down half a glass of soda water suddenly, thirstily. 'That swami-ji,' he burped.

'And do you think if the swami-ji had not made that prophecy, your father would not have accepted his friend's offer?' asked Bim, filled with curiosity.

'Who can tell?' groaned the old man, shifting about in search of a more comfortable position. 'Fate - they talk about Fate. What is it?' He struck his head dramatically. 'This fate?'

'What is it, uncle? Does it pain?' Bim asked because his face, normally as smooth and bland as butter, was furrowed and gleaming with sweat.

He sank back, sighing 'Nothing, nothing, Bimla, my daughter, it is only old age. Just fate and old age and none of us escapes from either. You won't. You don't know, you don't think - and then suddenly it is there, it has come. When it comes, you too will know.'

Bim laughed, helping herself to some of the betel leaves in the silver box at his side. As she smeared them with lime and sprinkled them with aniseed and cardamom, she said 'You think one doesn't know pain when one is young, uncle? You should sit down some day with ninety examination papers to correct and try and make out ninety different kinds of handwriting, all illegible, and see that your class has presented you with ninety different versions of what you taught them - all wrong!' She laughed and rolled up the betel leaf and packed it into her mouth. 'That is what I have been doing all day and it has given me a fine pain, too.' She grasped her head theatricaly and the old man laughed. Bim had always made him laugh, even when she was a little girl and did tricks on her bicycle going round the drive while his two daughters screamed 'Bim, you'll fall!'

'You work too hard,' he said. 'You don't know how to enjoy life. You and my two girls - you are too alike - you work and let the brothers enjoy. Look at my sons there - he waved his arm at them, the muslin sleeve of his shirt falling back to reveal an amulet tied to his arm with a black thread running through the thick growth of white hair. 'Look at them - fat, lazy slobs, drinking whisky. Drinking whisky all day that their sisters have to pay for - did you ever hear of such a thing?' In my day, our sisters used to tie coloured threads on our wrists on Rakhibhandhan day, begging for our protection, and we gave them gifts and promised to protect them and take care of them, and even if it was only a custom, an annual festival, we at least meant it. When my sister's husband died, I brought her to live here with us. She has lived here for years, she and her children. Perhaps she is still here. I don't know, I haven't seen her,' he trailed off vaguely, then ended up with a forceful 'But they - they let their sisters do the same ceremony, and they just don't care what it means as long as they can get their whisky and have the time to sit on their backsides, drinking it. Useless rubbish, my sons. Everything they ever did has failed...'

'What, not the new business as well? The real estate business that Brij started? Has that failed already?'

'Of course,' cried the old man, almost with delight. 'Of course it has. Can it succeed when Brij, the manager, cannot go to the office because he thinks it is degrading and refuses to speak to his clients because they are Punjabis, from Pakistan, and don't belong to the old families of Delhi? What is one to do with a fool like that? Am I to kick him out of the house and fling him down the road to the office? And look at Mulk - our great musician - all he does is wave his hand in the air and look at the stars in the daytime sky, and sing. Sing! He only wants to sing. Why? For whom? Who asked him to sing? Nobody. He just wants to, that is all. He doesn't think anyone should ask him to work or earn money - they should only ask him to sing.'

Out on the lawn there was a burst of laughter.

'And what about the old business they ran - the ice factory and soda water business? They had a good manager to run that.'

'Good manager - ho, yes! Very good manager. Had them eating out of his hand. They thought he was an angel on earth - a farishta - slaving for their sakes, to fill their coffers with gold - till one day they went to the office to open the coffer for some gold - they must have needed it for those Grant Road women they go to, those song-and-dance women - and they found it empty, and the money gone.'

'And the manager?'

'Gone! He took care of money - the money went - he went with it.' The old man roared, slapping his thigh so that a fold of his dhoti fell aside, revealing the grey-haired stretch of old, slack flesh. Straightening it casually, he added 'What did they think? Someone else will work so that they can eat?'

'I didn't know about that,' said Bim, concerned. She had thought the Misras had at least one secure business behind them, as her own family still had their father's insurance business that still existed quietly and unspectacularly without their aid and kept them housed and fed. If the manager made more money than he ought to, Bim did not grudge him that. She earned her own living to supplement that unearned income, and it was really only Baba who needed to
be supported. But the Misra boys – fat, hairy brutes – why should others look after them? The poor Misra girls, so grey and bony and needle-faced, still prancing through their Radha-Krishna dances and impersonating lovelorn maidens in order to earn their living... Bim shook her head.

‘Fools,’ the old man was still muttering as he fumbled about, looking for something under the pillows and bolster and not finding it. Bim knew it was the hookah he was no longer allowed to smoke. ‘Ugh,’ he cried, the corners of his mouth turned down as though he were about to cry, like a baby. ‘Not even my hookah any more. The doctor has said no, and the girls listen to the doctor, not to their father. What it is to be a father, to live without a smoke, or drink...’

Out on the lawn they were laughing again, their laughter spiralling up, up in the dark, as light as smoke.

‘Laugh, laugh,’ said the old man. ‘Yes, laugh now – before it is all up with you and you are like me – washed up. But never mind, never mind,’ he said to Bim, straightening his head and folding his arms so that he looked composed again, like a piece of stone sculpture. ‘When I was young, when I was their age – do you think I was any better?’ He winked suddenly at the surprised Bim. ‘Was I a saint?’ he laughed. ‘I can tell you, I was just as fat, as greedy, as stupid, as wicked as any of them,’ he suddenly roared, flinging out an arm as if to push them out of his way in contempt. ‘A boozier, a womaniser, a bankrupt – running after drink, women, money – that was all I did, just like them, worse than them, any of them...’ he chuckled and now his head wobbled on his neck as if something had come loose. ‘Much worse than any of them,’ he repeated with desperate pride.

Bim, red-faced in the dark shadows, let down her feet cautiously and searched for her slippers.

And here was Jaya coming up the steps to fetch her. ‘Bim, come and join us,’ she called. ‘Tara is telling us about Washington – it is such fun – and Papa should eat his dinner and go to sleep. Papa, I’m sending the cook with your dinner – and she rushed off towards the kitchen while Bim went down the steps into the garden. The old man had sunk back against the bolsters and shut his eyes. She even thought he might have fallen asleep, he was so still, but a little later she heard him call ‘The pickle, Jaya – don’t forget the black lemon pickle – let me have a little of it, will you?’

Out on the lawn the talk was more sober, more predictable in spite of the whisky that accompanied it. Someone brought Bim a tall glass that chattered with ice. Could it be from their factory, Bim wondered, sipping, stretching her bare feet in the grass and feeling its dry tackle.

‘Bakul-bhai, tell me,’ said the older brother, rolling the ice cubes around in his glass, ‘as a diplomat in an Indian embassy, how do you explain the situation to foreigners? Now when the foreign press asks you, perhaps you just say “No comment”, but when you meet friends at a party, and they ask you what is going on here – how can a Prime Minister behave as ours does – how can ministers get away with all they do here – what is being done about the problems of this country – who is going to solve them – how, why is it like this? – then what do you say to them, Bakul-bhai?’

Bim, who was lighting herself a cigarette, stopped to watch her brother-in-law cope with this interrogation. It was quite dark on the lawn and although a light had been switched on in the veranda so that the old father could see to eat his dinner, it only threw a pale rectangle of light across the beds of canna close to the house, and did not illuminate Bakul’s face. He kept them all waiting in silence as he considered and then began his measured and diplomatic reply.

Elegantly holding his cigarette in its holder at arm’s length, Bakul told them in his ripest, roundest tones, ‘What I feel is my duty, my vocation, when I am abroad, is to be my country’s ambassador. All of us abroad are, in varying degrees, ambassadors. I refuse to talk about famine or drought or caste wars or – or political disputes. I refuse – I refuse to discuss such things. “No comment” is the answer if I am asked. I can discuss such things here, with you, but not with foreigners, not in a foreign land. There I am an ambassador and I choose to show them and inform them only of the best, the finest.’

‘The Taj Mahal?’ asked Bim, blowing out a spume of smoke that waivered in the darkness, and avoiding Tara’s eye, watchful and wary.

‘Yes, exactly,’ said Bakul promptly. ‘The Taj Mahal – the Bhagavad Gita – Indian philosophy – music – art – the great, immortal values of ancient India. But why talk of local politics, party disputes, election malpractices, Nehru, his daughter, his grandson – such matters as will soon pass into oblivion? These aren’t important when compared with India, eternal India –’

‘Yes, it does help to live abroad if you feel that way,’ mused Bim, while her foot played with the hem of her sari and she looked carefully away from Tara who watched. ‘If you lived here, and particularly if you served the Government here, I think you would be obliged to notice such things: you would see their importance. I’m not sure if you could ignore bribery and corruption, red-tapism,