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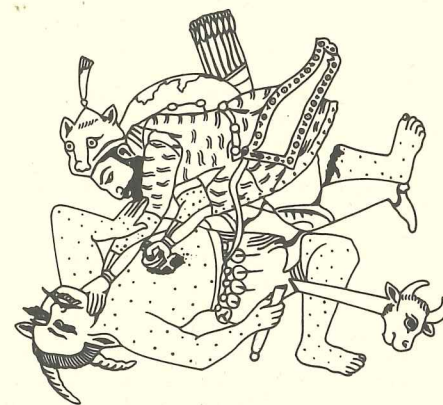
Grimus
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NON-FICTION

The Jaguar Smile: A Nicaraguan Journey

The SATANIC VERSES

Salman Rushdie



VIKING

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For Marianne

Satan, being thus confined to a vagabond, wandering, unsettled condition, is without any certain abode; for though he has, in consequence of his angelic nature, a kind of empire in the liquid waste or air, yet this is certainly part of his punishment, that he is . . . without any fixed place, or space, allowed him to rest the sole of his foot upon.

Daniel Defoe, *The History of the Devil*

I
The
Angel Gibreel

'To be born again,' sang Gibreel Farishta tumbling from the heavens, 'first you have to die. Ho ji! Ho ji! To land upon the bosomy earth, first one needs to fly. Tat-taa! Taka-thun! How to ever smile again, if first you won't cry? How to win the darling's love, mister, without a sigh? Baba, if you want to get born again . . .' Just before dawn one winter's morning, New Year's Day or thereabouts, two real, full-grown, living men fell from a great height, twenty-nine thousand and two feet, towards the English Channel, without benefit of parachutes or wings, out of a clear sky.

'I tell you, you must die, I tell you, I tell you,' and thusly and so beneath a moon of alabaster until a loud cry crossed the night, 'To the devil with your tunes,' the words hanging crystalline in the iced white night, 'in the movies you only mimed to playback singers, so spare me these infernal noises now.'

Gibreel, the tuneless soloist, had been cavorting in moonlight as he sang his impromptu gazal, swimming in air, butterfly-stroke, breast-stroke, bunching himself into a ball, spredeagling himself against the almost-infinity of the almost-dawn, adopting heraldic postures, rampant, couchant, pitting levity against gravity. Now he rolled happily towards the sardonic voice. 'Ohé, Salad baba, it's you, too good. What-ho, old Chumch.' At which the other, a fastidious shadow falling headfirst in a grey suit with all the jacket buttons done up, arms by his sides, taking for granted the improbability of the bowler hat on his head, pulled a nickname-hater's face. 'Hey, Spoono,' Gibreel yelled, eliciting a second inverted wince, 'Proper London, bhai! Here we come! Those bastards down there won't know what hit them. Meteor or lightning or vengeance of God. Out of thin air, baby. *Dharrraaamm!* Wham, na? What an entrance, yaar. I swear: splat.'

Out of thin air: a big bang, followed by falling stars. A universal beginning, a miniature echo of the birth of time . . . the jumbo jet *Bostan*, Flight A I-420, blew apart without any warning, high above the great, rotting, beautiful, snow-white, illuminated city, Mahagonny, Babylon, Alphaville. But Gibreel has already named it, I mustn't interfere: Proper London, capital of Vilayet, winked blinked nodded in the night. While at Himalayan height a brief and premature sun burst into the powdery January air, a blip vanished from radar screens, and the thin air was full of bodies, descending from the Everest of the catastrophe to the milky paleness of the sea.

Who am I?

Who else is there?

The aircraft cracked in half, a seed-pod giving up its spores, an egg yielding its mystery. Two actors, prancing Gibreel and buttony, pursed Mr Saladin Chamcha, fell like titbits of tobacco from a broken old cigar. Above, behind, below them in the void there hung reclining seats, stereophonic headsets, drinks trolleys, motion discomfort receptacles, disembarkation cards, duty-free video games, braided caps, paper cups, blankets, oxygen masks. Also – for there had been more than a few migrants aboard, yes, quite a quantity of wives who had been grilled by reasonable, doing-their-job officials about the length of and distinguishing moles upon their husbands' genitalia, a sufficiency of children upon whose legitimacy the British Government had cast its ever-reasonable doubts – mingling with the remnants of the plane, equally fragmented, equally absurd, there floated the debris of the soul, broken memories, sloughed-off selves, severed mother-tongues, violated privacies, untranslatable jokes, extinguished futures, lost loves, the forgotten meaning of hollow, booming words, *land, belonging, home*. Knocked a little silly by the blast, Gibreel and Saladin plummeted like bundles dropped by some carelessly open-beaked stork, and because Chamcha was going down head first, in the recommended position for babies entering the birth canal, he commenced to feel a low irritation at the other's refusal to fall in plain fashion. Saladin nosedived while Farishta embraced air, hugging it with his arms and legs, a flailing,

overwrought actor without techniques of restraint. Below, cloud-covered, awaiting their entrance, the slow congealed currents of the English Sleeve, the appointed zone of their watery reincarnation.

'O, my shoes are Japanese,' Gibreel sang, translating the old song into English in semi-conscious deference to the uprushing host-nation, 'These trousers English, if you please. On my head, red Russian hat; my heart's Indian for all that.' The clouds were bubbling up towards them, and perhaps it was on account of that great mystification of cumulus and cumulo-nimbus, the mighty rolling thunderheads standing like hammers in the dawn, or perhaps it was the singing (the one busy performing, the other booing the performance), or their blast-delirium that spared them full foreknowledge of the imminent . . . but for whatever reason, the two men, Gibreelsaladin Farishtachamcha, condemned to this endless but also ending angelicdevilish fall, did not become aware of the moment at which the processes of their transmutation began.

Mutation?

Yessir, but not random. Up there in air-space, in that soft, imperceptible field which had been made possible by the century and which, thereafter, made the century possible, becoming one of its defining locations, the place of movement and of war, the planet-shrinker and power-vacuum, most insecure and transitory of zones, illusory, discontinuous, metamorphic, – because when you throw everything up in the air anything becomes possible – wayupthere, at any rate, changes took place in delirious actors that would have gladdened the heart of old Mr Lamarck: under extreme environmental pressure, characteristics were acquired.

What characteristics which? Slow down; you think Creation happens in a rush? So then, neither does revelation . . . take a look at the pair of them. Notice anything unusual? Just two brown men, falling hard, nothing so new about that, you may think; climbed too high, got above themselves, flew too close to the sun, is that it?

That's not it. Listen:

Mr Saladin Chamcha, appalled by the noises emanating from

Gibreel Farishta's mouth, fought back with verses of his own. What Farishta heard wafting across the improbable night sky was an old song, too, lyrics by Mr James Thomson, seventeen-hundred to seventeen-forty-eight. '... at Heaven's command,' Chamcha carolled through lips turned jingoistically redwhiteblue by the cold, 'arooooose from out the aaaazure main.' Farishta, horrified, sang louder and louder of Japanese shoes, Russian hats, inviolately subcontinental hearts, but could not still Saladin's wild recital: 'And guardian aaaaangels sung the strain.'

Let's face it: it was impossible for them to have heard one another, much less conversed and also competed thus in song. Accelerating towards the planet, atmosphere roaring around them, how could they? But let's face this, too: they did.

Downdown they hurtled, and the winter cold frosting their eyelashes and threatening to freeze their hearts was on the point of waking them from their delirious daydream, they were about to become aware of the miracle of the singing, the rain of limbs and babies of which they were a part, and the terror of the destiny rushing at them from below, when they hit, were drenched and instantly iced by, the degree-zero boiling of the clouds.

They were in what appeared to be a long, vertical tunnel. Chamcha, prim, rigid, and still upside-down, saw Gibreel Farishta in his purple bush-shirt come swimming towards him across that cloud-walled funnel, and would have shouted, 'Keep away, get away from me,' except that something prevented him, the beginning of a little fluttery screamy thing in his intestines, so instead of uttering words of rejection he opened his arms and Farishta swam into them until they were embracing head-to-tail, and the force of their collision sent them tumbling end over end, performing their geminate cartwheels all the way down and along the hole that went to Wonderland; while pushing their way out of the white came a succession of cloudforms, ceaselessly metamorphosing, gods into bulls, women into spiders, men into wolves. Hybrid cloud-creatures pressed in upon them, gigantic flowers with human breasts dangling from fleshy stalks, winged cats, centaurs, and Chamcha in his semi-consciousness was seized

by the notion that he, too, had acquired the quality of cloudiness, becoming metamorphic, hybrid, as if he were growing into the person whose head nestled now between his legs and whose legs were wrapped around his long, patrician neck.

This person had, however, no time for such 'high falutions'; was, indeed, incapable of faluting at all; having just seen, emerging from the swirl of cloud, the figure of a glamorous woman of a certain age, wearing a brocade sari in green and gold, with a diamond in her nose and lacquer defending her high-coiled hair against the pressure of the wind at these altitudes, as she sat, equably, upon a flying carpet. 'Rekha Merchant,' Gibreel greeted her. 'You couldn't find your way to heaven or what?' Insensitive words to speak to a dead woman! But his concussed, plummeting condition may be offered in mitigation ... Chamcha, clutching his legs, made an uncomprehending query: 'What the hell?'

'You don't see her?' Gibreel shouted. 'You don't see her goddamn Bokhara rug?'

No, no, Gibbo, her voice whispered in his ears, don't expect him to confirm. I am strictly for your eyes only, maybe you are going crazy, what do you think, you namaqool, you piece of pig excrement, my love. With death comes honesty, my beloved, so I can call you by your true names.

Cloudy Rekha murmured sour nothings, but Gibreel cried again to Chamcha: 'Spoon? You see her or you don't?'

Saladin Chamcha saw nothing, heard nothing, said nothing. Gibreel faced her alone. 'You shouldn't have done it,' he admonished her. 'No, sir. A sin. A suchmuch thing.'

O, you can lecture me now, she laughed. You are the one with the high moral tone, that's a good one. It was you who left me, her voice reminded his ear, seeming to nibble at the lobe. It was you, O moon of my delight, who hid behind a cloud. And I in darkness, blinded, lost, for love.

He became afraid. 'What do you want? No, don't tell, just go.'

When you were sick I could not see you, in case of scandal, you knew I could not, that I stayed away for your sake, but

afterwards you punished, you used it as your excuse to leave, your cloud to hide behind. That, and also her, the icewoman. Bastard. Now that I am dead I have forgotten how to forgive. I curse you, my Gibreel, may your life be hell. Hell, because that's where you sent me, damn you, where you came from, devil, where you're going, sucker, enjoy the bloody dip. Rekha's curse; and after that, verses in a language he did not understand, all harshnesses and sibillances, in which he thought he made out, but maybe not, the repeated name *Al-Lat*.

He clutched at Chamcha; they burst through the bottom of the clouds.

Speed, the sensation of speed, returned, whistling its fearful note. The roof of cloud fled upwards, the water-floor zoomed closer, their eyes opened. A scream, that same scream that had fluttered in his guts when Gibreel swam across the sky, burst from Chamcha's lips; a shaft of sunlight pierced his open mouth and set it free. But they had fallen through the transformations of the clouds, Chamcha and Farishta, and there was a fluidity, an indistinctness, at the edges of them, and as the sunlight hit Chamcha it released more than noise:

'Fly,' Chamcha shrieked at Gibreel. 'Start flying, now.' And added, without knowing its source, the second command: 'And sing.'

How does newness come into the world? How is it born?

Of what fusions, translations, conjoinings is it made?

How does it survive, extreme and dangerous as it is? What compromises, what deals, what betrayals of its secret nature must it make to stave off the wrecking crew, the exterminating angel, the guillotine?

Is birth always a fall?

Do angels have wings? Can men fly?

When Mr Saladin Chamcha fell out of the clouds over the English Channel he felt his heart being gripped by a force so implacable that he understood it was impossible for him to die. Afterwards, when his feet were once more firmly planted on the ground, he

would begin to doubt this, to ascribe the implausibilities of his transit to the scrambling of his perceptions by the blast, and to attribute his survival, his and Gibreel's, to blind, dumb luck. But at the time he had no doubt; what had taken him over was the will to live, unadulterated, irresistible, pure, and the first thing it did was to inform him that it wanted nothing to do with his pathetic personality, that half-reconstructed affair of mimicry and voices, it intended to bypass all that, and he found himself surrendering to it, yes, go on, as if he were a bystander in his own mind, in his own body, because it began in the very centre of his body and spread outwards, turning his blood to iron, changing his flesh to steel, except that it also felt like a fist that enveloped him from outside, holding him in a way that was both unbearably tight and intolerably gentle; until finally it had conquered him totally and could work his mouth, his fingers, whatever it chose, and once it was sure of its dominion it spread outward from his body and grabbed Gibreel Farishta by the balls.

'Fly,' it commanded Gibreel. 'Sing.'

Chamcha held on to Gibreel while the other began, slowly at first and then with increasing rapidity and force, to flap his arms. Harder and harder he flapped, and as he flapped a song burst out of him, and like the song of the spectre of Rekha Merchant it was sung in a language he did not know to a tune he had never heard. Gibreel never repudiated the miracle; unlike Chamcha, who tried to reason it out of existence, he never stopped saying that the gazal had been celestial, that without the song the flapping would have been for nothing, and without the flapping it was a sure thing that they would have hit the waves like rocks or what and simply burst into pieces on making contact with the taut drum of the sea. Whereas instead they began to slow down. The more emphatically Gibreel flapped and sang, sang and flapped, the more pronounced the deceleration, until finally the two of them were floating down to the Channel like scraps of paper in a breeze.

They were the only survivors of the wreck, the only ones who fell from *Bostan* and lived. They were found washed up on a

beach. The more voluble of the two, the one in the purple shirt, swore in his wild ramblings that they had walked upon the water, that the waves had borne them gently in to shore; but the other, to whose head a soggy bowler hat clung as if by magic, denied this. 'God, we were lucky,' he said. 'How lucky can you get?'

I know the truth, obviously. I watched the whole thing. As to omnipresence and -potence, I'm making no claims at present, but I can manage this much, I hope. Chamcha willed it and Farishta did what was willed.

Which was the miracle worker?

Of what type - angelic, satanic - was Farishta's song?

Who am I?

Let's put it this way: who has the best tunes?

These were the first words Gibreel Farishta said when he awoke on the snowbound English beach with the improbability of a starfish by his ear: 'Born again, Spoono, you and me. Happy birthday, mister; happy birthday to you.'

Whereupon Saladin Chamcha coughed, spluttered, opened his eyes, and, as befitted a new-born babe, burst into foolish tears.

Reincarnation was always a big topic with Gibreel, for fifteen years the biggest star in the history of the Indian movies, even before he 'miraculously' defeated the Phantom Bug that everyone had begun to believe would terminate his contracts. So maybe someone should have been able to forecast, only nobody did, that when he was up and about again he would sotospeak succeed where the germs had failed and walk out of his old life forever within a week of his fortieth birthday, vanishing, poof!, like a trick, *into thin air*.

The first people to notice his absence were the four members of his film-studio wheelchair-team. Long before his illness he had formed the habit of being transported from set to set on the great D. W. Rama lot by this group of speedy, trusted athletes, because a man who makes up to eleven movies 'sy-multaneous' needs to conserve his energies. Guided by a complex coding system of slashes, circles and dots which Gibreel remembered from his childhood among the fabled lunch-runners of Bombay (of which more later), the chair-men zoomed him from role to role, delivering him as punctually and unerringly as once his father had delivered lunch. And after each take Gibreel would skip back into the chair and be navigated at high speed towards the next set, to be re-costumed, made up and handed his lines. 'A career in the Bombay talkies,' he told his loyal crew, 'is more like a wheelchair race with one-two pit stops along the route.'

After the illness, the Ghostly Germ, the Mystery Malaise, the Bug, he had returned to work, easing himself in, only seven pictures at a time . . . and then, justlikethat, he wasn't there. The wheelchair stood empty among the silenced sound-stages; his absence revealed the tawdry shamming of the sets. Wheelchairmen, one to four, made excuses for the missing star when

movie executives descended upon them in wrath: Ji, he must be sick, he has always been famous for his punctual, no, why to criticize, maharaj, great artists must from time to time be permitted their temperament, na, and for their protestations they became the first casualties of Farishta's unexplained hey-presto, being fired, four three two one, ekdumjaldi, ejected from studio gates so that a wheelchair lay abandoned and gathering dust beneath the painted coco-palms around a sawdust beach.

Where was Gibreel? Movie producers, left in seven lurches, panicked expensively. See, there, at the Willingdon Club golf links – only nine holes nowadays, skyscrapers having sprouted out of the other nine like giant weeds, or, let's say, like tombstones marking the sites where the torn corpse of the old city lay – there, right there, upper-echelon executives, missing the simplest putts; and, look above, tufts of anguished hair, torn from senior heads, wafting down from high-level windows. The agitation of the producers was easy to understand, because in those days of declining audiences and the creation of historical soap operas and contemporary crusading housewives by the television network, there was but a single name which, when set above a picture's title, could still offer a sure-fire, cent-per-cent guarantee of an Ultrahit, a Smashation, and the owner of said name had departed, up, down or sideways, but certainly and unarguably vamoosed . . .

All over the city, after telephones, motorcyclists, cops, frogmen and trawlers dragging the harbour for his body had laboured mightily but to no avail, epitaphs began to be spoken in memory of the darkened star. On one of Rama Studios' seven impotent stages, Miss Pimple Billimoria, the latest chilli-and-spices bombshell – *she's no flibberti-gibberti mamzell, but a whir-stir-get-lost-sir bundla dynamite* – clad in temple-dancer veiled undress and positioned beneath writhing cardboard representations of copulating Tantric figures from the Chandela period, – and perceiving that her major scene was not to be, her big break lay in pieces – offered up a spiteful farewell before an audience of sound recordists and electricians smoking their cynical beedis. Attended by a dumbly distressed ayah, all elbows, Pimple

attempted scorn. 'God, what a stroke of luck, for Pete's sake,' she cried. 'I mean today it was the love scene, chhi chhi, I was just dying inside, thinking how to go near to that fatmouth with his breath of rotting cockroach dung.' Bell-heavy anklets jingled as she stamped. 'Damn good for him the movies don't smell, or he wouldn't get one job as a leper even.' Here Pimple's soliloquy climaxed in such a torrent of obscenities that the beedi-smokers sat up for the first time and commenced animatedly to compare Pimple's vocabulary with that of the infamous bandit queen Phoolan Devi whose oaths could melt rifle barrels and turn journalists' pencils to rubber in a trice.

Exit Pimple, weeping, censored, a scrap on a cutting-room floor. Rhinestones fell from her navel as she went, mirroring her tears . . . in the matter of Farishta's halitosis she was not, however, altogether wrong; if anything, she had a little understated the case. Gibreel's exhalations, those ochre clouds of sulphur and brimstone, had always given him – when taken together with his pronounced widow's peak and crowblack hair – an air more saturnine than haloed, in spite of his archangelic name. It was said after he disappeared that he ought to have been easy to find, all it took was a halfway decent nose . . . and one week after he took off, an exit more tragic than Pimple Billimoria's did much to intensify the devilish odour that was beginning to attach itself to that forsolong sweet-smelling name. You could say that he had stepped out of the screen into the world, and in life, unlike the cinema, people know it if you stink.

We are creatures of air, Our roots in dreams And clouds, reborn In flight. Goodbye. The enigmatic note discovered by the police in Gibreel Farishta's penthouse, located on the top floor of the Everest Vilas skyscraper on Malabar Hill, the highest home in the highest building on the highest ground in the city, one of those double-vista apartments from which you could look this way across the evening necklace of Marine Drive or that way out to Scandal Point and the sea, permitted the newspaper headlines to prolong their cacophonies. FARISHTA DIVES UNDERGROUND, opined *Blitz* in somewhat macabre fashion, while *Busybee* in *The Daily* preferred GIBREEL FLIES COOP. Many photographs

were published of that fabled residence in which French interior decorators bearing letters of commendation from Reza Pahlevi for the work they had done at Persepolis had spent a million dollars re-creating at this exalted altitude the effect of a Bedouin tent. Another illusion unmade by his absence; GIBREEL STRIKES CAMP, the headlines yelled, but had he gone up or down or sideways? No one knew. In that metropolis of tongues and whispers, not even the sharpest ears heard anything reliable. But Mrs Rekha Merchant, reading all the papers, listening to all the radio broadcasts, staying glued to the Doordarshan TV programmes, gleaned something from Farishta's message, heard a note that eluded everyone else, and took her two daughters and one son for a walk on the roof of her high-rise home. Its name was Everest Vilas.

His neighbour; as a matter of fact, from the apartment directly beneath his own. His neighbour and his friend; why should I say any more? Of course the scandal-pointed malice-magazines of the city filled their columns with hint innuendo and nudge, but that's no reason for sinking to their level. Why tarnish her reputation now?

Who was she? Rich, certainly, but then Everest Vilas was not exactly a tenement in Kurla, eh? Married, yessir, thirteen years, with a husband big in ball-bearings. Independent, her carpet and antique showrooms thriving at their prime Colaba sites. She called her carpets *klims* and *kleens* and the ancient artefacts were *anti-queues*. Yes, and she was beautiful, beautiful in the hard, glossy manner of those rarefied occupants of the city's sky-homes, her bones skin posture all bearing witness to her long divorce from the impoverished, heavy, pullulating earth. Everyone agreed she had a strong personality, drank *like a fish* from Lalique crystal and hung her hat *shameless* on a Chola Natraj and knew what she wanted and how to get it, fast. The husband was a mouse with money and a good squash wrist. Rekha Merchant read Gibreel Farishta's farewell note in the newspapers, wrote a letter of her own, gathered her children, summoned the elevator, and rose heavenward (one storey) to meet her chosen fate.

'Many years ago,' her letter read, 'I married out of cowardice.

Now, finally, I'm doing something brave.' She left a newspaper on her bed with Gibreel's message circled in red and heavily underscored – three harsh lines, one of them ripping the page in fury. So naturally the bitch-journals went to town and it was all LOVELY'S LOVELORN LEAP, and BROKEN-HEARTED BEAUTY TAKES LAST DIVE. But:

Perhaps she, too, had the rebirth bug, and Gibreel, not understanding the terrible power of metaphor, had recommended flight. *To be born again, first you have to* and she was a creature of the sky, she drank Lalique champagne, she lived on Everest, and one of her fellow-Olympians had flown; and if he could, then she, too, could be winged, and rooted in dreams.

She didn't make it. The lala who was employed as gatekeeper of the Everest Vilas compound offered the world his blunt testimony. 'I was walking, here here, in the compound only, when there came a thud, *tharaap*. I turned. It was the body of the oldest daughter. Her skull was completely crushed. I looked up and saw the boy falling, and after him the younger girl. What to say, they almost hit me where I stood. I put my hand on my mouth and came to them. The young girl was whining softly. Then I looked up a further time and the Begum was coming. Her sari was floating out like a big balloon and all her hair was loose. I took my eyes away from her because she was falling and it was not respectful to look up inside her clothes.'

Rekha and her children fell from Everest; no survivors. The whispers blamed Gibreel. Let's leave it at that for the moment.

Oh: don't forget: he saw her after she died. He saw her several times. It was a long time before people understood how sick the great man was. Gibreel, the star. Gibreel, who vanquished the Nameless Ailment. Gibreel, who feared sleep.

After he departed the ubiquitous images of his face began to rot. On the gigantic, luridly coloured hoardings from which he had watched over the populace, his lazy eyelids started flaking and crumbling, drooping further and further until his irises looked like two moons sliced by clouds, or by the soft knives of his long

lashes. Finally the eyelids fell off, giving a wild, bulging look to his painted eyes. Outside the picture palaces of Bombay, mammoth cardboard effigies of Gibreel were seen to decay and list. Dangling limply on their sustaining scaffolds, they lost arms, withered, snapped at the neck. His portraits on the covers of movie magazines acquired the pallor of death, a nullity about the eye, a hollowness. At last his images simply faded off the printed page, so that the shiny covers of *Celebrity* and *Society* and *Illustrated Weekly* went blank at the bookstalls and their publishers fired the printers and blamed the quality of the ink. Even on the silver screen itself, high above his worshippers in the dark, that supposedly immortal physiognomy began to putrefy, blister and bleach; projectors jammed unaccountably every time he passed through the gate, his films ground to a halt, and the lamp-heat of the malfunctioning projectors burned his celluloid memory away: a star gone supernova, with the consuming fire spreading outwards, as was fitting, from his lips.

It was the death of God. Or something very like it; for had not that outsize face, suspended over its devotees in the artificial cinematic night, shone like that of some supernal Entity that had its being at least halfway between the mortal and the divine? More than halfway, many would have argued, for Gibreel had spent the greater part of his unique career incarnating, with absolute conviction, the countless deities of the subcontinent in the popular genre movies known as 'theologicals'. It was part of the magic of his persona that he succeeded in crossing religious boundaries without giving offence. Blue-skinned as Krishna he danced, flute in hand, amongst the beauteous gopis and their udder-heavy cows; with upturned palms, serene, he meditated (as Gautama) upon humanity's suffering beneath a studio-rickety bodhi-tree. On those infrequent occasions when he descended from the heavens he never went too far, playing, for example, both the Grand Mughal and his famously wily minister in the classic *Akbar and Birbal*. For over a decade and a half he had represented, to hundreds of millions of believers in that country in which, to this day, the human population outnumbers the divine by less than three to one, the most acceptable, and

instantly recognizable, face of the Supreme. For many of his fans, the boundary separating the performer and his roles had long ago ceased to exist.

The fans, yes, and? How about Gibreel?

That face. In real life, reduced to life-size, set amongst ordinary mortals, it stood revealed as oddly un-starry. Those low-slung eyelids could give him an exhausted look. There was, too, something coarse about the nose, the mouth was too well fleshed to be strong, the ears were long-lobed like young, knurled jackfruit. The most profane of faces, the most sensual of faces. In which, of late, it had been possible to make out the seams mined by his recent, near-fatal illness. And yet, in spite of profanity and debilitation, this was a face inextricably mixed up with holiness, perfection, grace: God stuff. No accounting for tastes, that's all. At any rate, you'll agree that for such an actor (for any actor, maybe, even for Chamcha, but most of all for him) to have a bee in his bonnet about *avatars*, like much-metamorphosed Vishnu, was not so very surprising. Rebirth: that's God stuff, too.

Or, but, then again . . . not always. There are secular re-incarnations, too. Gibreel Farishta had been born Ismail Najmuddin in Poona, British Poona at the empire's fag-end, long before the Pune of Rajneesh etc. (Pune, Vadodara, Mumbai; even towns can take stage names nowadays.) Ismail after the child involved in the sacrifice of Ibrahim, and Najmuddin, *star of the faith*; he'd given up quite a name when he took the angel's.

Afterwards, when the aircraft *Bostan* was in the grip of the hijackers, and the passengers, fearing for their futures, were regressing into their pasts, Gibreel confided to Saladin Chamcha that his choice of pseudonym had been his way of making a homage to the memory of his dead mother, 'my mummyji, Spoono, my one and only Mamo, because who else was it who started the whole angel business, her personal angel, she called me, *farishta*, because apparently I was too damn sweet, believe it or not, I was good as goddamn gold.'

Poona couldn't hold him; he was taken in his infancy to the

bitch-city, his first migration; his father got a job amongst the fleet-footed inspirers of future wheelchair quartets, the lunch-porters or dabbawallas of Bombay. And Ismail the farishta followed, at thirteen, in his father's footsteps.

Gibreel, captive aboard AI-420, sank into forgivable rhapsodies, fixing Chamcha with his glittering eye, explicating the mysteries of the runners' coding system, black swastika red circle yellow slash dot, running in his mind's eye the entire relay from home to office desk, that improbable system by which two thousand dabbawallas delivered, each day, over one hundred thousand lunch-pails, and on a bad day, Spoono, maybe fifteen got misled, we were illiterate, mostly, but the signs were our secret tongue.

Bostan circled London, gunmen patrolling the gangways, and the lights in the passenger cabins had been switched off, but Gibreel's energy illuminated the gloom. On the grubby movie screen on which, earlier in the journey, the inflight inevitability of Walter Matthau had stumbled lugubriously into the aerial ubiquity of Goldie Hawn, there were shadows moving, projected by the nostalgia of the hostages, and the most sharply defined of them was this spindly adolescent, Ismail Najmuddin, mummy's angel in a Gandhi cap, running tiffins across the town. The young dabbawalla skipped nimbly through the shadow-crowd, because he was used to such conditions, think, Spoono, picture, thirty-forty tiffins in a long wooden tray on your head, and when the local train stops you have maybe one minute to push on or off, and then running in the streets, flat out, yaar, with the trucks buses scooters cycles and what-all, one-two, one-two, lunch, lunch, the dabbas must get through, and in the monsoon running down the railway line when the train broke down, or waist-deep in water in some flooded street, and there were gangs, Salad baba, truly, organized gangs of dabba-stealers, it's a hungry city, baby, what to tell you, but we could handle them, we were everywhere, knew everything, what thieves could escape our eyes and ears, we never went to any policia, we looked after our own.

At night father and son would return exhausted to their shack by the airport runway at Santacruz and when Ismail's mother

saw him approaching, illuminated by the green red yellow of the departing jet-planes, she would say that simply to lay eyes on him made all her dreams come true, which was the first indication that there was something peculiar about Gibreel, because from the beginning, it seemed, he could fulfil people's most secret desires without having any idea of how he did it. His father Najmuddin Senior never seemed to mind that his wife had eyes only for her son, that the boy's feet received nightly pressings while the father's went unstroked. A son is a blessing and a blessing requires the gratitude of the blest.

Naima Najmuddin died. A bus hit her and that was that, Gibreel wasn't around to answer her prayers for life. Neither father nor son ever spoke of grief. Silently, as though it were customary and expected, they buried their sadness beneath extra work, engaging in an inarticulate contest, who could carry the most dabbas on his head, who could acquire the most new contracts per month, who could run faster, as though the greater labour would indicate the greater love. When he saw his father at night, the knotted veins bulging in his neck and at his temples, Ismail Najmuddin would understand how much the older man had resented him, and how important it was for the father to defeat the son and regain, thereby, his usurped primacy in the affections of his dead wife. Once he realized this, the youth eased off, but his father's zeal remained unrelenting, and pretty soon he was getting promotion, no longer a mere runner but one of the organizing muqaddams. When Gibreel was nineteen, Najmuddin Senior became a member of the lunch-runners' guild, the Bombay Tiffin Carriers' Association, and when Gibreel was twenty, his father was dead, stopped in his tracks by a stroke that almost blew him apart. 'He just ran himself into the ground,' said the guild's General Secretary, Babasaheb Mhatre himself. 'That poor bastard, he just ran out of steam.' But the orphan knew better. He knew that his father had finally run hard enough and long enough to wear down the frontiers between the worlds, he had run clear out of his skin and into the arms of his wife, to whom he had proved, once and for all, the superiority of his love. Some migrants are happy to depart.

Babasaheb Mhatre sat in a blue office behind a green door above a labyrinthine bazaar, an awesome figure, buddha-fat, one of the great moving forces of the metropolis, possessing the occult gift of remaining absolutely still, never shifting from his room, and yet being everywhere important and meeting everyone who mattered in Bombay. The day after young Ismail's father ran across the border to see Naima, the Babasaheb summoned the young man into his presence. 'So? Upset or what?' The reply, with downcast eyes: ji, thank you, Babaji, I am okay. 'Shut your face,' said Babasaheb Mhatre. 'From today you live with me.' Butbut, Babaji . . . 'But me no buts. Already I have informed my goodwife. I have spoken.' Please excuse Babaji but how what why? 'I have spoken.'

Gibreel Farishta was never told why the Babasaheb had decided to take pity on him and pluck him from the futurelessness of the streets, but after a while he began to have an idea. Mrs Mhatre was a thin woman, like a pencil beside the rubbery Babasaheb, but she was filled so full of mother-love that she should have been fat like a potato. When the Baba came home she put sweets into his mouth with her own hands, and at nights the newcomer to the household could hear the great General Secretary of the BTCA protesting, Let me go, wife, I can undress myself. At breakfast she spoon-fed Mhatre with large helpings of malt, and before he went to work she brushed his hair. They were a childless couple, and young Najmuddin understood that the Babasaheb wanted him to share the load. Oddly enough, however, the Begum did not treat the young man as a child. 'You see, he is a grown fellow,' she told her husband when poor Mhatre pleaded, 'Give the boy the blasted spoon of malt.' Yes, a grown fellow, 'we must make a man of him, husband, no babying for him.' 'Then damn it to hell,' the Babasaheb exploded, 'why do you do it to me?' Mrs Mhatre burst into tears. 'But you are everything to me,' she wept, 'you are my father, my lover, my baby too. You are my lord and my suckling child. If I displease you then I have no life.'

Babasaheb Mhatre, accepting defeat, swallowed the tablespoon of malt.

He was a kindly man, which he disguised with insults and noise. To console the orphaned youth he would speak to him, in the blue office, about the philosophy of rebirth, convincing him that his parents were already being scheduled for re-entry somewhere, unless of course their lives had been so holy that they had attained the final grace. So it was Mhatre who started Farishta off on the whole reincarnation business, and not just reincarnation. The Babasaheb was an amateur psychic, a tapper of table-legs and a bringer of spirits into glasses. 'But I gave that up,' he told his protégé, with many suitably melodramatic inflections, gestures, frowns, 'after I got the fright of my bloody life.'

Once (Mhatre recounted) the glass had been visited by the most co-operative of spirits, such a too-friendly fellow, see, so I thought to ask him some big questions. *Is there a God*, and that glass which had been running round like a mouse or so just stopped dead, middle of table, not a twitch, completely phutt, kaput. So, then, okay, I said, if you won't answer that try this one instead, and I came right out with it, *Is there a Devil*. After that the glass – baprebap! – began to shake – catch your ears! – slowslow at first, then faster-faster, like a jelly, until it jumped! – ai-hai! – up from the table, into the air, fell down on its side, and – o-ho! – into a thousand and one pieces, smashed. Believe don't believe, Babasaheb Mhatre told his charge, but thenandthere I learned my lesson: don't meddle, Mhatre, in what you do not comprehend.

This story had a profound effect on the consciousness of the young listener, because even before his mother's death he had become convinced of the existence of the supernatural world. Sometimes when he looked around him, especially in the afternoon heat when the air turned glutinous, the visible world, its features and inhabitants and things, seemed to be sticking up through the atmosphere like a profusion of hot icebergs, and he had the idea that everything continued down below the surface of the soupy air: people, motor-cars, dogs, movie billboards, trees, nine-tenths of their reality concealed from his eyes. He would blink, and the illusion would fade, but the sense of it never left him. He grew up believing in God, angels, demons,

afreets, djinns, as matter-of-factly as if they were bullock-carts or lamp-posts, and it struck him as a failure in his own sight that he had never seen a ghost. He would dream of discovering a magic optometrist from whom he would purchase a pair of green-tinted spectacles which would correct his regrettable myopia, and after that he would be able to see through the dense, blinding air to the fabulous world beneath.

From his mother Naima Najmuddin he heard a great many stories of the Prophet, and if inaccuracies had crept into her versions he wasn't interested in knowing what they were. 'What a man!' he thought. 'What angel would not wish to speak to him?' Sometimes, though, he caught himself in the act of forming blasphemous thoughts, for example when without meaning to, as he drifted off to sleep in his cot at the Mhatre residence, his somnolent fancy began to compare his own condition with that of the Prophet at the time when, having been orphaned and short of funds, he made a great success of his job as the business manager of the wealthy widow Khadija, and ended up marrying her as well. As he slipped into sleep he saw himself sitting on a rose-strewn dais, simpering shyly beneath the sari-pallu which he had placed demurely over his face, while his new husband, Babasaheb Mhatre, reached lovingly towards him to remove the fabric, and gaze at his features in a mirror placed in his lap. This dream of marrying the Babasaheb brought him awake, flushing hotly for shame, and after that he began to worry about the impurity in his make-up that could create such terrible visions.

Mostly, however, his religious faith was a low-key thing, a part of him that required no more special attention than any other. When Babasaheb Mhatre took him into his home it confirmed to the young man that he was not alone in the world, that something was taking care of him, so he was not entirely surprised when the Babasaheb called him into the blue office on the morning of his twenty-first birthday and sacked him without even being prepared to listen to an appeal.

'You're fired,' Mhatre emphasized, beaming. 'Cashiered, had your chips. Dis-miss.'

'But, uncle,'

'Shut your face.'

Then the Babasaheb gave the orphan the greatest present of his life, informing him that a meeting had been arranged for him at the studios of the legendary film magnate Mr D. W. Rama; an audition. 'It is for appearance only,' the Babasaheb said. 'Rama is my good friend and we have discussed. A small part to begin, then it is up to you. Now get out of my sight and stop pulling such humble faces, it does not suit.'

'But, uncle,'

'Boy like you is too damn goodlooking to carry tiffins on his head all his life. Get gone now, go, be a homosexual movie actor. I fired you five minutes back.'

'But, uncle,'

'I have spoken. Thank your lucky stars.'

He became Gibreel Farishta, but for four years he did not become a star, serving his apprenticeship in a succession of minor knockabout comic parts. He remained calm, unhurried, as though he could see the future, and his apparent lack of ambition made him something of an outsider in that most self-seeking of industries. He was thought to be stupid or arrogant or both. And throughout the four wilderness years he failed to kiss a single woman on the mouth.

On-screen, he played the fall guy, the idiot who loves the beauty and can't see that she wouldn't go for him in a thousand years, the funny uncle, the poor relation, the village idiot, the servant, the incompetent crook, none of them the type of part that ever rates a love scene. Women kicked him, slapped him, teased him, laughed at him, but never, on celluloid, looked at him or sang to him or danced around him with cinematic love in their eyes. Off-screen, he lived alone in two empty rooms near the studios and tried to imagine what women looked like without clothes on. To get his mind off the subject of love and desire, he studied, becoming an omnivorous autodidact, devouring the metamorphic myths of Greece and Rome, the avatars of Jupiter,