

the boy who became a flower, the spider-woman, Circe, everything; and the theosophy of Annie Besant, and unified field theory, and the incident of the Satanic verses in the early career of the Prophet, and the politics of Muhammad's harem after his return to Mecca in triumph; and the surrealism of the newspapers, in which butterflies could fly into young girls' mouths, asking to be consumed, and children were born with no faces, and young boys dreamed in impossible detail of earlier incarnations, for instance in a golden fortress filled with precious stones. He filled himself up with God knows what, but he could not deny, in the small hours of his insomniac nights, that he was full of something that had never been used, that he did not know how to begin to use, that is, love. In his dreams he was tormented by women of unbearable sweetness and beauty, so he preferred to stay awake and force himself to rehearse some part of his general knowledge in order to blot out the tragic feeling of being endowed with a larger-than-usual capacity for love, without a single person on earth to offer it to.

His big break arrived with the coming of the theological movies. Once the formula of making films based on the puranas, and adding the usual mixture of songs, dances, funny uncles etc., had paid off, every god in the pantheon got his or her chance to be a star. When D. W. Rama scheduled a production based on the story of Ganesh, none of the leading box-office names of the time were willing to spend an entire movie concealed inside an elephant's head. Gibreel jumped at the chance. That was his first hit, *Ganpati Baba*, and suddenly he was a superstar, but only with the trunk and ears on. After six movies playing the elephant-headed god he was permitted to remove the thick, pendulous, grey mask and put on, instead, a long, hairy tail, in order to play Hanuman the monkey king in a sequence of adventure movies that owed more to a certain cheap television series emanating from Hong Kong than it did to the Ramayana. This series proved so popular that monkey-tails became *de rigueur* for the city's young bucks at the kind of parties frequented by convent girls known as 'firecrackers' because of their readiness to go off with a bang.

After Hanuman there was no stopping Gibreel, and his phenom-

enal success deepened his belief in a guardian angel. But it also led to a more regrettable development.

(I see that I must, after all, spill poor Rekha's beans.)

Even before he replaced false head with fake tail he had become irresistibly attractive to women. The seductions of his fame had grown so great that several of these young ladies asked him if he would keep the Ganesh-mask on while they made love, but he refused out of respect for the dignity of the god. Owing to the innocence of his upbringing he could not at that time differentiate between quantity and quality and accordingly felt the need to make up for lost time. He had so many sexual partners that it was not uncommon for him to forget their names even before they had left his room. Not only did he become a philanderer of the worst type, but he also learned the arts of dissimulation, because a man who plays gods must be above reproach. So skilfully did he conceal his life of scandal and debauch that his old patron, Babasaheb Mhatre, lying on his deathbed a decade after he sent a young dabbawalla out into the world of illusion, black-money and lust, begged him to get married to prove he was a man. 'God-sake, mister,' the Babasaheb pleaded, 'when I told you back then to go and be a homo I never thought you would take me seriously, there is a limit to respecting one's elders, after all.' Gibreel threw up his hands and swore that he was no such disgraceful thing, and that when the right girl came along he would of course undergo nuptials with a will. 'What you waiting? Some goddess from heaven? Greta Garbo, Gracekali, who?' cried the old man, coughing blood, but Gibreel left him with the enigma of a smile that allowed him to die without having his mind set entirely at rest.

The avalanche of sex in which Gibreel Farishta was trapped managed to bury his greatest talent so deep that it might easily have been lost forever, his talent, that is, for loving genuinely, deeply and without holding back, the rare and delicate gift which he had never been able to employ. By the time of his illness he had all but forgotten the anguish he used to experience owing to his longing for love, which had twisted and turned in him like a sorcerer's knife. Now, at the end of each gymnastic night,



he slept easily and long, as if he had never been plagued by dream-women, as if he had never hoped to lose his heart.

'Your trouble,' Rekha Merchant told him when she materialized out of the clouds, 'is everybody always forgave you, God knows why, you always got let off, you got away with murder. Nobody ever held you responsible for what you did.' He couldn't argue. 'God's gift,' she screamed at him, 'God knows where you thought you were from, jumped-up type from the gutter, God knows what diseases you brought.'

But that was what women did, he thought in those days, they were the vessels into which he could pour himself, and when he moved on, they would understand that it was his nature, and forgive. And it was true that nobody blamed him for leaving, for his thousand and one pieces of thoughtlessness, how many abortions, Rekha demanded in the cloud-hole, how many broken hearts. In all those years he was the beneficiary of the infinite generosity of women, but he was its victim, too, because their forgiveness made possible the deepest and sweetest corruption of all, namely the idea that he was doing nothing wrong.

Rekha: she entered his life when he bought the penthouse at Everest Vilas and she offered, as a neighbour and businesswoman, to show him her carpets and antiques. Her husband was at a world-wide congress of ball-bearings manufacturers in Gothenburg, Sweden, and in his absence she invited Gibreel into her apartment of stone lattices from Jaisalmer and carved wooden handrails from Keralan palaces and a stone Mughal chhatra or cupola turned into a whirlpool bath; while she poured him French champagne she leaned against marbled walls and felt the cool veins of the stone against her back. When he sipped the champagne she teased him, surely gods should not partake of alcohol, and he answered with a line he had once read in an interview with the Aga Khan, O, you know, this champagne is only for outward show, the moment it touches my lips it turns to water. After that it didn't take long for her to touch his lips and deliquesce into his arms. By the time her children returned from school with the ayah she was immaculately dressed and coiffed, and sat with him in the drawing-room, revealing the secrets of

the carpet business, confessing that art silk stood for artificial not artistic, telling him not to be fooled by her brochure in which a rug was seductively described as being made of wool plucked from the throats of baby lambs, which means, you see, only *low-grade wool*, advertising, what to do, this is how it is.

He did not love her, was not faithful to her, forgot her birthdays, failed to return her phone calls, turned up when it was most inconvenient owing to the presence in her home of dinner guests from the world of the ball-bearing, and like everyone else she forgave him. But her forgiveness was not the silent, mousy let-off he got from the others. Rekha complained like crazy, she gave him hell, she bawled him out and cursed him for a useless *lafanga* and *haramzada* and *salah* and even, in extremis, for being guilty of the impossible feat of fucking the sister he did not have. She spared him nothing, accusing him of being a creature of surfaces, like a movie screen, and then she went ahead and forgave him anyway and allowed him to unhook her blouse. Gibreel could not resist the operatic forgiveness of Rekha Merchant, which was all the more moving on account of the flaw in her own position, her infidelity to the ball-bearing king, which Gibreel forbore to mention, taking his verbal beatings like a man. So that whereas the pardons he got from the rest of his women left him cold and he forgot them the moment they were uttered, he kept coming back to Rekha, so that she could abuse him and then console him as only she knew how.

Then he almost died.

He was filming at Kanya Kumari, standing on the very tip of Asia, taking part in a fight scene set at the point on Cape Comorin where it seems that three oceans are truly smashing into one another. Three sets of waves rolled in from the west east south and collided in a mighty clapping of watery hands just as Gibreel took a punch on the jaw, perfect timing, and he passed out on the spot, falling backwards into tri-oceanic spume. He did not get up.

To begin with everybody blamed the giant English stunt-man Eustace Brown, who had delivered the punch. He protested vehemently. Was he not the same fellow who had performed



opposite Chief Minister N. T. Rama Rao in his many theological movie roles? Had he not perfected the art of making the old man look good in combat without hurting him? Had he ever complained that NTR never pulled *his* punches, so that he, Eustace, invariably ended up black and blue, having been beaten stupid by a little old guy whom he could've eaten for breakfast, on *toast*, and had he ever, even once, lost his temper? Well, then? How could anyone think he would hurt the immortal Gibreel? — They fired him anyway and the police put him in the lock-up, just in case.

But it was not the punch that had flattened Gibreel. After the star had been flown into Bombay's Breach Candy Hospital in an Air Force jet made available for the purpose; after exhaustive tests had come up with almost nothing; and while he lay unconscious, dying, with a blood-count that had fallen from his normal fifteen to a murderous four point two, a hospital spokesman faced the national press on Breach Candy's wide white steps. 'It is a freak mystery,' he gave out. 'Call it, if you so please, an act of God.'

Gibreel Farishta had begun to haemorrhage all over his insides for no apparent reason, and was quite simply bleeding to death inside his skin. At the worst moment the blood began to seep out through his rectum and penis, and it seemed that at any moment it might burst torrentially through his nose and ears and out of the corners of his eyes. For seven days he bled, and received transfusions, and every clotting agent known to medical science, including a concentrated form of rat poison, and although the treatment resulted in a marginal improvement the doctors gave him up for lost.

The whole of India was at Gibreel's bedside. His condition was the lead item on every radio bulletin, it was the subject of hourly news-flashes on the national television network, and the crowd that gathered in Warden Road was so large that the police had to disperse it with lathi-charges and tear-gas, which they used even though every one of the half-million mourners was already tearful and wailing. The Prime Minister cancelled her appointments and flew to visit him. Her son the airline pilot sat in

Farishta's bedroom, holding the actor's hand. A mood of apprehension settled over the nation, because if God had unleashed such an act of retribution against his most celebrated incarnation, what did he have in store for the rest of the country? If Gibreel died, could India be far behind? In the mosques and temples of the nation, packed congregations prayed, not only for the life of the dying actor, but for the future, for themselves.

Who did not visit Gibreel in hospital? Who never wrote, made no telephone call, despatched no flowers, sent in no tiffins of delicious home cooking? While many lovers shamelessly sent him get-well cards and lamb pasandas, who, loving him most of all, kept herself to herself, unsuspected by her ball-bearing of a husband? Rekha Merchant placed iron around her heart, and went through the motions of her daily life, playing with her children, chit-chatting with her husband, acting as his hostess when required, and never, not once, revealed the bleak devastation of her soul.

He recovered.

The recovery was as mysterious as the illness, and as rapid. It, too, was called (by hospital, journalists, friends) an act of the Supreme. A national holiday was declared; fireworks were set off up and down the land. But when Gibreel regained his strength, it became clear that he had changed, and to a startling degree, because he had lost his faith.

On the day he was discharged from hospital he went under police escort through the immense crowd that had gathered to celebrate its own deliverance as well as his, climbed into his Mercedes and told the driver to give all the pursuing vehicles the slip, which took seven hours and fifty-one minutes, and by the end of the manoeuvre he had worked out what had to be done. He got out of the limousine at the Taj hotel and without looking left or right went directly into the great dining-room with its buffet table groaning under the weight of forbidden foods, and he loaded his plate with all of it, the pork sausages from Wiltshire and the cured York hams and the rashers of bacon from god-knowswhere; with the gammon steaks of his unbelief and the pig's trotters of secularism; and then, standing there in the middle of



the hall, while photographers popped up from nowhere, he began to eat as fast as possible, stuffing the dead pigs into his face so rapidly that bacon rashers hung out of the sides of his mouth.

During his illness he had spent every minute of consciousness calling upon God, every second of every minute. Ya Allah whose servant lies bleeding do not abandon me now after watching over me so long. Ya Allah show me some sign, some small mark of your favour, that I may find in myself the strength to cure my ills. O God most beneficent most merciful, be with me in this my time of need, my most grievous need. Then it occurred to him that he was being punished, and for a time that made it possible to suffer the pain, but after a time he got angry. Enough, God, his unspoken words demanded, why must I die when I have not killed, are you vengeance or are you love? The anger with God carried him through another day, but then it faded, and in its place there came a terrible emptiness, an isolation, as he realized he was talking to *thin air*, that there was nobody there at all, and then he felt more foolish than ever in his life, and he began to plead into the emptiness, ya Allah, just be there, damn it, just be. But he felt nothing, nothing nothing, and then one day he found that he no longer needed there to be anything to feel. On that day of metamorphosis the illness changed and his recovery began. And to prove to himself the non-existence of God, he now stood in the dining-hall of the city's most famous hotel, with pigs falling out of his face.

He looked up from his plate to find a woman watching him. Her hair was so fair that it was almost white, and her skin possessed the colour and translucency of mountain ice. She laughed at him and turned away.

'Don't you get it?' he shouted after her, spewing sausage fragments from the corners of his mouth. 'No thunderbolt. That's the point.'

She came back to stand in front of him. 'You're alive,' she told him. 'You got your life back. *That's* the point.'

He told Rekha: the moment she turned around and started

walking back I fell in love with her. Alleluia Cone, climber of mountains, vanquisher of Everest, blonde yahudan, ice queen. Her challenge, *change your life, or did you get it back for nothing*, I couldn't resist.

'You and your reincarnation junk,' Rekha cajoled him. 'Such a nonsense head. You come out of hospital, back through death's door, and it goes to your head, crazy boy, at once you must have some escapade thing, and there she is, hey presto, the blonde mame. Don't think I don't know what you're like, Gibbo, so what now, you want me to forgive you or what?'

No need, he said. He left Rekha's apartment (its mistress wept, face-down, on the floor); and never entered it again.

Three days after he met her with his mouth full of unclean meat Allie got into an aeroplane and left. Three days out of time behind a do-not-disturb sign, but in the end they agreed that the world was real, what was possible was possible and what was impossible was im-, brief encounter, ships that pass, love in a transit lounge. After she left, Gibreel rested, tried to shut his ears to her challenge, resolved to get his life back to normal. Just because he'd lost his belief it didn't mean he couldn't do his job, and in spite of the scandal of the ham-eating photographs, the first scandal ever to attach itself to his name, he signed movie contracts and went back to work.

And then, one morning, a wheelchair stood empty and he had gone. A bearded passenger, one Ismail Najmuddin, boarded Flight AI-420 to London. The 747 was named after one of the gardens of Paradise, not Gulistan but *Bostan*. 'To be born again,' Gibreel Farishta said to Saladin Chamcha much later, 'first you have to die. Me, I only half-expired, but I did it on two occasions, hospital and plane, so it adds up, it counts. And now, Spoono my friend, here I stand before you in Proper London, Vilayet, regenerated, a new man with a new life. Spoono, is this not a bloody fine thing?'

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Why did he leave?

Because of her, the challenge of her, the newness, the fierceness of the two of them together, the inexorability of an impossible thing that was insisting on its right to become.

And, or, maybe: because after he ate the pigs the retribution began, a nocturnal retribution, a punishment of dreams.

Once the flight to London had taken off, thanks to his magic trick of crossing two pairs of fingers on each hand and rotating his thumbs, the narrow, fortyish fellow who sat in a non-smoking window seat watching the city of his birth fall away from him like old snakeskin allowed a relieved expression to pass briefly across his face. This face was handsome in a somewhat sour, patrician fashion, with long, thick, downturned lips like those of a disgusted turbot, and thin eyebrows arching sharply over eyes that watched the world with a kind of alert contempt. Mr Saladin Chamcha had constructed this face with care – it had taken him several years to get it just right – and for many more years now he had thought of it simply as *his own* – indeed, he had forgotten what he had looked like before it. Furthermore, he had shaped himself a voice to go with the face, a voice whose languid, almost lazy vowels contrasted disconcertingly with the sawn-off abruptness of the consonants. The combination of face and voice was a potent one; but, during his recent visit to his home town, his first such visit in fifteen years (the exact period, I should observe, of Gibreel Farishta's film stardom), there had been strange and worrying developments. It was unfortunately the case that his voice (the first to go) and, subsequently, his face itself, had begun to let him down.

It started – Chamcha, allowing fingers and thumbs to relax and hoping, in some embarrassment, that his last remaining superstition had gone unobserved by his fellow-passengers, closed his eyes and remembered with a delicate shudder of horror – on his flight east some weeks ago. He had fallen into a torpid sleep, high above the desert sands of the Persian Gulf, and been visited in a dream by a bizarre stranger, a man with a glass skin, who rapped his knuckles mournfully against the thin, brittle mem-



brane covering his entire body and begged Saladin to help him, to release him from the prison of his skin. Chamcha picked up a stone and began to batter at the glass. At once a latticework of blood oozed up through the cracked surface of the stranger's body, and when Chamcha tried to pick off the broken shards the other began to scream, because chunks of his flesh were coming away with the glass. At this point an air stewardess bent over the sleeping Chamcha and demanded, with the pitiless hospitality of her tribe: *Something to drink, sir? A drink?* and Saladin, emerging from the dream, found his speech unaccountably metamorphosed into the Bombay lilt he had so diligently (and so long ago!) unmade. 'Achha, means what?' he mumbled. 'Alcoholic beverage or what?' And, when the stewardess reassured him, whatever you wish, sir, all beverages are gratis, he heard, once again, his traitor voice: 'So, okay, bibi, give one whiskysoda only.'

What a nasty surprise! He had come awake with a jolt, and sat stiffly in his chair, ignoring alcohol and peanuts. How had the past bubbled up, in transmogrified vowels and vocab? What next? Would he take to putting coconut-oil in his hair? Would he take to squeezing his nostrils between thumb and forefinger, blowing noisily and drawing forth a glutinous silver arc of muck? Would he become a devotee of professional wrestling? What further, diabolic humiliations were in store? He should have known it was a mistake to *go home*, after so long, how could it be other than a regression; it was an unnatural journey; a denial of time; a revolt against history; the whole thing was bound to be a disaster.

*I'm not myself*, he thought as a faint fluttering feeling began in the vicinity of his heart. But what does that mean, anyway, he added bitterly. After all, 'les acteurs ne sont pas des gens', as the great ham Frederick had explained in *Les Enfants du Paradis*. Masks beneath masks until suddenly the bare bloodless skull.

The seatbelt light came on, the captain's voice warned of air turbulence, they dropped in and out of air pockets. The desert lurched about beneath them and the migrant labourer who had boarded at Qatar clutched at his giant transistor radio and began

to retch. Chamcha noticed that the man had not fastened his belt, and pulled himself together, bringing his voice back to its haughtiest English pitch. 'Look here, why don't you . . .' he indicated, but the sick man, between bursts of heaving into the paper bag which Saladin had handed him just in time, shook his head, shrugged, replied: 'Sahib, for what? If Allah wishes me to die, I shall die. If he does not, I shall not. Then of what use is the safety?'

Damn you, India, Saladin Chamcha cursed silently, sinking back into his seat. To hell with you, I escaped your clutches long ago, you won't get your hooks into me again, you cannot drag me back.



Once upon a time — *it was and it was not so*, as the old stories used to say, *it happened and it never did* — maybe, then, or maybe not, a ten-year-old boy from Scandal Point in Bombay found a wallet lying in the street outside his home. He was on the way home from school, having just descended from the school bus on which he had been obliged to sit squashed between the adhesive sweatiness of boys in shorts and be deafened by their noise, and because even in those days he was a person who recoiled from raucousness, jostling and the perspiration of strangers he was feeling faintly nauseated by the long, bumpy ride home. However, when he saw the black leather billfold lying at his feet, the nausea vanished, and he bent down excitedly and grabbed, — opened, — and found, to his delight, that it was full of cash, — and not merely rupees, but real money, negotiable on black markets and international exchanges, — pounds! Pounds sterling, from Proper London in the fabled country of Vilayet across the black water and far away. Dazzled by the thick wad of foreign currency, the boy raised his eyes to make sure he had not been observed, and for a moment it seemed to him that a rainbow had arched down to him from the heavens, a rainbow like an angel's breath, like an answered prayer, coming to an end in the very spot on which he stood. His fingers trembled as they reached into the wallet, towards the fabulous hoard.



'Give it.' It seemed to him in later life that his father had been spying on him throughout his childhood, and even though Changez Chamchawala was a big man, a giant even, to say nothing of his wealth and public standing, he still always had the lightness of foot and also the inclination to sneak up behind his son and spoil whatever he was doing, whipping the young Salahuddin's bedsheet off at night to reveal the shameful penis in the clutching, red hand. And he could smell money from a hundred and one miles away, even through the stink of chemicals and fertilizer that always hung around him owing to his being the country's largest manufacturer of agricultural sprays and fluids and artificial dung. Changez Chamchawala, philanthropist, philanderer, living legend, leading light of the nationalist movement, sprang from the gateway of his home to pluck a bulging wallet from his son's frustrated hand. 'Tch tch,' he admonished, pocketing the pounds sterling, 'you should not pick things up from the street. The ground is dirty, and money is dirtier, anyway.'

On a shelf of Changez Chamchawala's teak-lined study, beside a ten-volume set of the Richard Burton translation of the *Arabian Nights*, which was being slowly devoured by mildew and bookworm owing to the deep-seated prejudice against books which led Changez to own thousands of the pernicious things in order to humiliate them by leaving them to rot unread, there stood a magic lamp, a brightly polished copper-and-brass avatar of Aladdin's very own genie-container: a lamp begging to be rubbed. But Changez neither rubbed it nor permitted it to be rubbed by, for example, his son. 'One day,' he assured the boy, 'you'll have it for yourself. Then rub and rub as much as you like and see what doesn't come to you. Just now, but, it is mine.' The promise of the magic lamp infected Master Salahuddin with the notion that one day his troubles would end and his innermost desires would be gratified, and all he had to do was wait it out; but then there was the incident of the wallet, when the magic of a rainbow had worked for him, not for his father but for him, and Changez Chamchawala had stolen the crock of gold. After that the son became convinced that his father would smother all

his hopes unless he got away, and from that moment he became desperate to leave, to escape, to place oceans between the great man and himself.

Salahuddin Chamchawala had understood by his thirteenth year that he was destined for that cool Vilayet full of the crisp promises of pounds sterling at which the magic billfold had hinted, and he grew increasingly impatient of that Bombay of dust, vulgarity, policemen in shorts, transvestites, movie fanzines, pavement sleepers and the rumoured singing whores of Grant Road who had begun as devotees of the Yellamma cult in Karnataka but ended up here as dancers in the more prosaic temples of the flesh. He was fed up of textile factories and local trains and all the confusion and superabundance of the place, and longed for that dream-Vilayet of poise and moderation that had come to obsess him by night and day. His favourite playground rhymes were those that yearned for foreign cities: kitchy-con kitchy-ki kitchy-con stanty-eye kitchy-ople kitchy-cople kitchy-Con-stanti-nople. And his favourite game was the version of grandmother's footsteps in which, when he was *it*, he would turn his back on upcreeping playmates to gabble out, like a mantra, like a spell, the six letters of his dream-city, *ellowen deeowen*. In his secret heart, he crept silently up on London, letter by letter, just as his friends crept up to him. *Ellowen deeowen London*.

The mutation of Salahuddin Chamchawala into Saladin Chamcha began, it will be seen, in old Bombay, long before he got close enough to hear the lions of Trafalgar roar. When the England cricket team played India at the Brabourne Stadium, he prayed for an England victory, for the game's creators to defeat the local upstarts, for the proper order of things to be maintained. (But the games were invariably drawn, owing to the featherbed somnolence of the Brabourne Stadium wicket; the great issue, creator versus imitator, colonizer against colonized, had perforce to remain unresolved.)

In his thirteenth year he was old enough to play on the rocks at Scandal Point without having to be watched over by his ayah, Kasturba. And one day (it was so, it was not so), he strolled out of the house, that ample, crumbling, salt-caked building in the



Parsi style, all columns and shutters and little balconies, and through the garden that was his father's pride and joy and which in a certain evening light could give the impression of being infinite (and which was also enigmatic, an unsolved riddle, because nobody, not his father, not the gardener, could tell him the names of most of the plants and trees), and out through the main gateway, a grandiose folly, a reproduction of the Roman triumphal arch of Septimius Severus, and across the wild insanity of the street, and over the sea wall, and so at last on to the broad expanse of shiny black rocks with their little shrimpy pools. Christian girls giggled in frocks, men with furled umbrellas stood silent and fixed upon the blue horizon. In a hollow of black stone Salahuddin saw a man in a dhoti bending over a pool. Their eyes met, and the man beckoned him with a single finger which he then laid across his lips. *Shh*, and the mystery of rock-pools drew the boy towards the stranger. He was a creature of bone. Spectacles framed in what might have been ivory. His finger curling, curling, like a baited hook, come. When Salahuddin came down the other grasped him, put a hand around his mouth and forced his young hand between old and fleshless legs, to feel the fleshbone there. The dhoti open to the winds. Salahuddin had never known how to fight; he did what he was forced to do, and then the other simply turned away from him and let him go.

After that Salahuddin never went to the rocks at Scandal Point; nor did he tell anyone what had happened, knowing the neurasthenic crises it would unleash in his mother and suspecting that his father would say it was his own fault. It seemed to him that everything loathsome, everything he had come to revile about his home town, had come together in the stranger's bony embrace, and now that he had escaped that evil skeleton he must also escape Bombay, or die. He began to concentrate fiercely upon this idea, to fix his will upon it at all times, eating shitting sleeping, convincing himself that he could make the miracle happen even without his father's lamp to help him out. He dreamed of flying out of his bedroom window to discover that there, below him, was – not Bombay – but Proper London itself, Bigben Nelsonscolumn Lordstavern Bloodytower Queen. But

as he floated out over the great metropolis he felt himself beginning to lose height, and no matter how hard he struggled kicked swam-in-air he continued to spiral slowly downwards to earth, then faster, then faster still, until he was screaming headfirst down towards the city, Saintpauls, Puddinglane, Threadneedle-street, zeroing in on London like a bomb.



When the impossible happened, and his father, out of the blue, offered him an English education, *to get me out of the way*, he thought, *otherwise why, it's obvious, but don't look a gift horse andsoforth*, his mother Nasreen Chamchawala refused to cry, and volunteered, instead, the benefit of her advice. 'Don't go dirty like those English,' she warned him. 'They wipe their bee tee cms with paper only. Also, they get into each other's dirty bathwater.' These vile slanders proved to Salahuddin that his mother was doing her damndest to prevent him from leaving, and in spite of their mutual love he replied, 'It is inconceivable, Ammi, what you say. England is a great civilization, what are you talking, bunk.'

She smiled her little nervy smile and did not argue. And, later, stood dry-eyed beneath the triumphal arch of a gateway and would not go to Santacruz airport to see him off. Her only child. She heaped garlands around his neck until he grew dizzy with the cloying perfumes of mother-love.

Nasreen Chamchawala was the slightest, most fragile of women, her bones like tinkas, like minute slivers of wood. To make up for her physical insignificance she took at an early age to dressing with a certain outrageous, excessive verve. Her sari-patterns were dazzling, even garish: lemon silk adorned with huge brocade diamonds, dizzy black-and-white Op Art swirls, gigantic lipstick kisses on a bright white ground. People forgave her her lurid taste because she wore the blinding garments with such innocence; because the voice emanating from that textile cacophony was so tiny and hesitant and proper. And because of her soirées.



Each Friday of her married life, Nasreen would fill the halls of the Chamchawala residence, those usually tenebrous chambers like great hollow burial vaults, with bright light and brittle friends. When Salahuddin was a little boy he had insisted on playing doorman, and would greet the jewelled and lacquered guests with great gravity, permitting them to pat him on the head and call him *cuteso* and *chweetie-pie*. On Fridays the house was full of noise; there were musicians, singers, dancers, the latest Western hits as heard on Radio Ceylon, raucous puppet-shows in which painted clay rajahs rode puppet-stallions, decapitating enemy marionettes with imprecations and wooden swords. During the rest of the week, however, Nasreen would stalk the house warily, a pigeon of a woman walking on tiptoed feet through the gloom, as if she were afraid to disturb the shadowed silence; and her son, walking in her footsteps, also learned to lighten his footfall lest he rouse whatever goblin or afreet might be lying in wait.

But: Nasreen Chamchawala's caution failed to save her life. The horror seized and murdered her when she believed herself most safe, clad in a sari covered in cheap newspaper photos and headlines, bathed in chandelier-light, surrounded by her friends.



By then five and a half years had passed since young Salahuddin, garlanded and warned, boarded a Douglas DC-8 and journeyed into the west. Ahead of him, England; beside him, his father, Changez Chamchawala; below him, home and beauty. Like Nasreen, the future Saladin had never found it easy to cry.

On that first aeroplane he read science fiction tales of interplanetary migration: Asimov's *Foundation*, Ray Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles*. He imagined the DC-8 was the mother ship, bearing the Chosen, the Elect of God and man, across unthinkable distances, travelling for generations, breeding eugenically, that their seed might one day take root somewhere in a brave new world beneath a yellow sun. He corrected himself: not the mother but the father ship, because there he was, after all, the great man,

Abbu, Dad. Thirteen-year-old Salahuddin, setting aside recent doubts and grievances, entered once again his childish adoration of his father, because he had, had, had worshipped him, he was a great father until you started growing a mind of your own, and then to argue with him was called a betrayal of his love, but never mind that now, *I accuse him of becoming my supreme being, so that what happened was like a loss of faith* . . . yes, the father ship, an aircraft was not a flying womb but a metal phallus, and the passengers were spermatozoa waiting to be spilt.

Five and a half hours of time zones; turn your watch upside down in Bombay and you see the time in London. *My father*, Chamcha would think, years later, in the midst of his bitterness. *I accuse him of inverting Time*.

How far did they fly? Five and a half thousand as the crow. Or: from Indianness to Englishness, an immeasurable distance. Or, not very far at all, because they rose from one great city, fell to another. The distance between cities is always small; a villager, travelling a hundred miles to town, traverses emptier, darker, more terrifying space.

What Changez Chamchawala did when the aeroplane took off: trying not to let his son see him doing it, he crossed two pairs of fingers on each hand, and rotated both his thumbs.

And when they were installed in a hotel within a few feet of the ancient location of the Tyburn tree, Changez said to his son: 'Take. This belongs to you.' And held out, at arm's length, a black billfold about whose identity there could be no mistake. 'You are a man now. Take.'

The return of the confiscated wallet, complete with all its currency, proved to be one of Changez Chamchawala's little traps. Salahuddin had been deceived by these all his life. Whenever his father wanted to punish him, he would offer him a present, a bar of imported chocolate or a tin of Kraft cheese, and would then grab him when he came to get it. 'Donkey,' Changez scorned his infant son. 'Always, always, the carrot leads you to my stick.'



Salahuddin in London took the proffered wallet, accepting the gift of manhood; whereupon his father said: 'Now that you are a man, it is for you to look after your old father while we are in London town. You pay all the bills.'

January, 1961. A year you could turn upside down and it would still, unlike your watch, tell the same time. It was winter; but when Salahuddin Chamchawala began to shiver in his hotel room, it was because he was scared halfway out of his wits; his crock of gold had turned, suddenly, into a sorcerer's curse.

Those two weeks in London before he went to his boarding school turned into a nightmare of cash-tills and calculations, because Changez had meant exactly what he said and never put his hand into his own pocket once. Salahuddin had to buy his own clothes, such as a double-breasted blue serge mackintosh and seven blue-and-white striped Van Heusen shirts with detachable semi-stiff collars which Changez made him wear every day, to get used to the studs, and Salahuddin felt as if a blunt knife were being pushed in just beneath his newly broken Adam's-apple; and he had to make sure there would be enough for the hotel room, and everything, so that he was too nervous to ask his father if they could go to a movie, not even one, not even *The Pure Hell of St Trinians*, or to eat out, not a single Chinese meal, and in later years he would remember nothing of his first fortnight in his beloved Ellowen Deeowen except pounds shillings pence, like the disciple of the philosopher-king Chanakya who asked the great man what he meant by saying one could live in the world and also not live in it, and who was told to carry a brim-full pitcher of water through a holiday crowd without spilling a drop, on pain of death, so that when he returned he was unable to describe the day's festivities, having been like a blind man, seeing only the jug on his head.

Changez Chamchawala became very still in those days, seeming not to care if he ate or drank or did any damn thing, he was happy sitting in the hotel room watching television, especially when the Flintstones were on, because, he told his son, that Wilma bibi reminded him of Nasreen. Salahuddin tried to prove he was a man by fasting right along with his father, trying to

outlast him, but he never managed it, and when the pangs got too strong he went out of the hotel to the cheap joint nearby where you could buy take-away roast chickens that hung greasily in the window, turning slowly on their spits. When he brought the chicken into the hotel lobby he became embarrassed, not wanting the staff to see, so he stuffed it inside double-breasted serge and went up in the lift reeking of spit-roast, his mackintosh bulging, his face turning red. Chicken-breasted beneath the gaze of dowagers and liftwallahs he felt the birth of that implacable rage which would burn within him, undiminished, for over a quarter of a century; which would boil away his childhood father-worship and make him a secular man, who would do his best, thereafter, to live without a god of any type; which would fuel, perhaps, his determination to become the thing his father was-not-could-never-be, that is, a goodandproper Englishman. Yes, an English, even if his mother had been right all along, even if there was only paper in the toilets and tepid, used water full of mud and soap to step into after taking exercise, even if it meant a lifetime spent amongst winter-naked trees whose fingers clutched despairingly at the few, pale hours of watery, filtered light. On winter nights he, who had never slept beneath more than a sheet, lay beneath mountains of wool and felt like a figure in an ancient myth, condemned by the gods to have a boulder pressing down upon his chest; but never mind, he would be English, even if his classmates giggled at his voice and excluded him from their secrets, because these exclusions only increased his determination, and that was when he began to act, to find masks that these fellows would recognize, paleface masks, clown-masks, until he fooled them into thinking he was *okay*, he was *people-like-us*. He fooled them the way a sensitive human being can persuade gorillas to accept him into their family, to fondle and caress and stuff bananas in his mouth.

(After he had settled up the last bill, and the wallet he had once found at a rainbow's end was empty, his father said to him: 'See now. You pay your way. I've made a man of you.' But what man? That's what fathers never know. Not in advance; not until it's too late.)



One day soon after he started at the school he came down to breakfast to find a kipper on his plate. He sat there staring at it, not knowing where to begin. Then he cut into it, and got a mouthful of tiny bones. And after extracting them all, another mouthful, more bones. His fellow-pupils watched him suffer in silence; not one of them said, here, let me show you, you eat it in this way. It took him ninety minutes to eat the fish and he was not permitted to rise from the table until it was done. By that time he was shaking, and if he had been able to cry he would have done so. Then the thought occurred to him that he had been taught an important lesson. England was a peculiar-tasting smoked fish full of spikes and bones, and nobody would ever tell him how to eat it. He discovered that he was a bloody-minded person. 'I'll show them all,' he swore. 'You see if I don't.' The eaten kipper was his first victory, the first step in his conquest of England.

William the Conqueror, it is said, began by eating a mouthful of English sand.



Five years later he was back home after leaving school, waiting until the English university term began, and his transmutation into a Vilayeti was well advanced. 'See how well he complains,' Nasreen teased him in front of his father. 'About everything he has such big-big criticisms, the fans are fixed too loosely to the roof and will fall to slice our heads off in our sleep, he says, and the food is too fattening, why we don't cook some things without frying, he wants to know, the top-floor balconies are unsafe and the paint is peeled, why can't we take pride in our surroundings, isn't it, and the garden is overgrown, we are just jungle people, he thinks so, and look how coarse our movies are, now he doesn't enjoy, and so much disease you can't even drink water from the tap, my god, he really got an education, husband, our little Sallu, England-returned, and talking so fine and all.'

They were walking on the lawn in the evening, watching the sun dive into the sea, wandering in the shade of those great

spreading trees, some snaky some bearded, which Salahuddin (who now called himself Saladin after the fashion of the English school, but would remain Chamchawala for a while yet, until a theatrical agent shortened his name for commercial reasons) had begun to be able to name, jackfruit, banyan, jacaranda, flame of the forest, plane. Small chhooi-mooi touch-me-not plants grew at the foot of the tree of his own life, the walnut-tree that Changez had planted with his own hands on the day of the coming of the son. Father and son at the birth-tree were both awkward, unable to respond properly to Nasreen's gentle fun. Saladin had been seized by the melancholy notion that the garden had been a better place before he knew its names, that something had been lost which he would never be able to regain. And Changez Chamchawala found that he could no longer look his son in the eye, because the bitterness he saw came close to freezing his heart. When he spoke, turning roughly away from the eighteen-year-old walnut in which, at times during their long separations, he had imagined his only son's soul to reside, the words came out incorrectly and made him sound like the rigid, cold figure he had hoped he would never become, and feared he could not avoid.

'Tell your son,' Changez boomed at Nasreen, 'that if he went abroad to learn contempt for his own kind, then his own kind can feel nothing but scorn for him. What is he? A fauntleroy, a grand panjandrum? Is this my fate: to lose a son and find a freak?'

'Whatever I am, father dear,' Saladin told the older man, 'I owe it all to you.'

It was their last family chat. All that summer feelings continued to run high, for all Nasreen's attempts at mediation, *you must apologize to your father, darling, poor man is suffering like the devil but his pride won't let him hug you*. Even the ayah Kasturba and the old bearer Vallabh, her husband, attempted to mediate but neither father nor son would bend. 'Same material is the problem,' Kasturba told Nasreen. 'Daddy and sonny, same material, same to same.'

When the war with Pakistan began that September Nasreen decided, with a kind of defiance, that she would not cancel her



Friday parties, 'to show that Hindus-Muslims can love as well as hate,' she pointed out. Changez saw a look in her eyes and did not attempt to argue, but set the servants to putting blackout curtains over all the windows instead. That night, for the last time, Saladin Chamchawala played his old role of doorman, dressed up in an English dinner-jacket, and when the guests came – the same old guests, dusted with the grey powders of age but otherwise the same – they bestowed upon him the same old pats and kisses, the nostalgic benedictions of his youth. 'Look how grown,' they were saying. 'Just a darling, what to say.' They were all trying to hide their fear of the war, *danger of air-raids*, the radio said, and when they ruffled Saladin's hair their hands were a little too shaky, or alternatively a little too rough.

Late that evening the sirens sang and the guests ran for cover, hiding under beds, in cupboards, anywhere. Nasreen Chamchawala found herself alone by a food-laden table, and attempted to reassure the company by standing there in her newsprint sari, munching a piece of fish as if nothing were the matter. So it was that when she started choking on the fishbone of her death there was nobody to help her, they were all crouching in corners with their eyes shut; even Saladin, conqueror of kippers, Saladin of the England-returned upper lip, had lost his nerve. Nasreen Chamchawala fell, twitched, gasped, died, and when the all-clear sounded the guests emerged sheepishly to find their hostess extinct in the middle of the dining-room, stolen away by the exterminating angel, khali-pili khalaas, as Bombay-talk has it, finished off for no reason, gone for good.



Less than a year after the death of Nasreen Chamchawala from her inability to triumph over fishbones in the manner of her foreign-educated son, Changez married again without a word of warning to anyone. Saladin in his English college received a letter from his father commanding him, in the irritatingly orotund and obsolescent phraseology that Changez always used in correspondence, to be happy. 'Rejoice,' the letter said, 'for

what is lost is reborn.' The explanation for this somewhat cryptic sentence came lower down in the aerogramme, and when Saladin learned that his new stepmother was also called Nasreen, something went wrong in his head, and he wrote his father a letter full of cruelty and anger, whose violence was of the type that exists only between fathers and sons, and which differs from that between daughters and mothers in that there lurks behind it the possibility of actual, jaw-breaking fisticuffs. Changez wrote back by return of post; a brief letter, four lines of archaic abuse, cad rotter bounder scoundrel varlet whoreson rogue. 'Kindly consider all family connections irreparably sundered,' it concluded. 'Consequences your responsibility.'

After a year of silence, Saladin received a further communication, a letter of forgiveness that was in all particulars harder to take than the earlier, excommunicatory thunderbolt. 'When you become a father, O my son,' Changez Chamchawala confided, 'then shall you know those moments – ah! Too sweet! – when, for love, one dandles the bonny babe upon one's knee; whereupon, without warning or provocation, the blessed creature – may I be frank? – it *wets* one. Perhaps for a moment one feels the gorge rising, a tide of anger swells within the blood – but then it dies away, as quickly as it came. For do we not, as adults, understand that the little one is not to blame? He knows not what he does.'

Deeply offended at being compared to a urinating baby, Saladin maintained what he hoped was a dignified silence. By the time of his graduation he had acquired a British passport, because he had arrived in the country just before the laws tightened up, so he was able to inform Changez in a brief note that he intended to settle down in London and look for work as an actor. Changez Chamchawala's reply came by express mail. 'Might as well be a confounded gigolo. It's my belief some devil has got into you and turned your wits. You who have been given so much: do you not feel you owe anything to anyone? To your country? To the memory of your dear mother? To your own mind? Will you spend your life jiggling and preening under bright lights, kissing blonde women under the gaze of strangers who have paid to



watch your shame? You are no son of mine, but a *ghoul*, a *hoosh*, a demon up from hell. An actor! Answer me this: what am I to tell my friends?'

And beneath a signature, the pathetic, petulant postscript. 'Now that you have your own bad djinni, do not think you will inherit the magic lamp.'



After that, Changez Chamchawala wrote to his son at irregular intervals, and in every letter he returned to the theme of demons and possession: 'A man untrue to himself becomes a two-legged lie, and such beasts are Shaitan's best work,' he wrote, and also, in more sentimental vein: 'I have your soul kept safe, my son, here in this walnut-tree. The devil has only your body. When you are free of him, return and claim your immortal spirit. It flourishes in the garden.'

The handwriting in these letters altered over the years, changing from the florid confidence that had made it instantly identifiable and becoming narrower, undecorated, purified. Eventually the letters stopped, but Saladin heard from other sources that his father's preoccupation with the supernatural had continued to deepen, until finally he had become a recluse, perhaps in order to escape this world in which demons could steal his own son's body, a world unsafe for a man of true religious faith.

His father's transformation disconcerted Saladin, even at such a great distance. His parents had been Muslims in the lackadaisical, light manner of Bombayites; Changez Chamchawala had seemed far more godlike to his infant son than any Allah. That this father, this profane deity (albeit now discredited), had dropped to his knees in his old age and started bowing towards Mecca was hard for his godless son to accept.

'I blame that witch,' he told himself, falling for rhetorical purposes into the same language of spells and goblins that his father had commenced to employ. 'That Nasreen Two. Is it I who have been the subject of devilment, am I the one possessed? It's not my handwriting that changed.'

The letters didn't come any more. Years passed; and then Saladin Chamcha, actor, self-made man, returned to Bombay with the Prospero Players, to interpret the role of the Indian doctor in *The Millionairess* by George Bernard Shaw. On stage, he tailored his voice to the requirements of the part, but those long-suppressed locutions, those discarded vowels and consonants, began to leak out of his mouth out of the theatre as well. His voice was betraying him; and he discovered his component parts to be capable of other treasons, too.



A man who sets out to make himself up is taking on the Creator's role, according to one way of seeing things; he's unnatural, a blasphemer, an abomination of abominations. From another angle, you could see pathos in him, heroism in his struggle, in his willingness to risk: not all mutants survive. Or, consider him sociopolitically: most migrants learn, and can become disguises. Our own false descriptions to counter the falsehoods invented about us, concealing for reasons of security our secret selves.

A man who invents himself needs someone to believe in him, to prove he's managed it. Playing God again, you could say. Or you could come down a few notches, and think of Tinkerbell; fairies don't exist if children don't clap their hands. Or you might simply say: it's just like being a man.

Not only the need to be believed in, but to believe in another. You've got it: Love.

Saladin Chamcha met Pamela Lovelace five and a half days before the end of the 1960s, when women still wore bandannas in their hair. She stood at the centre of a room full of Trotskyist actresses and fixed him with eyes so bright, so bright. He monopolized her all evening and she never stopped smiling and she left with another man. He went home to dream of her eyes and smile, the slenderness of her, her skin. He pursued her for two years. England yields her treasures with reluctance. He was astonished by his own perseverance, and understood that she had become the custodian of his destiny, that if she did not relent