

"I may be back late tonight," Raman said buttoning his *bandgala*.

Then he turned towards Vishalam and added lugubriously- " But, then again, it is not compulsory. I don't see why I have to go."

"Go, go," she said, thinking as ever of Jaya, "only be careful- you can't trust these Muslims, you know."

And, reassured, because she still believed it was a Muslim- Anwar Haq- who had invited him, she continued urging him to go.

And, so, he had come. Raman stood at the door of Nasser's bungalow waiting for the bell to be answered.

"What is it," he kept asking himself, "that so attracts me to this place?"

Whiskey? Hardly. His brother in laws, were perpetually pressing the hard stuff on him. It was their standing joke.

"Those bastards would, quite gladly, sacrifice a month's liquor ration just to get me drunk, one time."

But, if it wasn't whiskey, what was it? Companionship? He could get plenty of that by joining one or the other of the *addas*- the informal clubs- that his colleagues patronised.

Was it the chimera of Culture? The lure of Literary conversation? But, there were *addas* that catered for that sort of thing too.

No, what he had briefly tasted, at Nasser's table, the other night was something he hadn't met with since his college days. What was it called? Dammit, what is the word ?! Oof, I've become so stupid, bloody clerking all day ...

The door opened. A uniformed bearer admitted him. He entered the drawing room. Nasser overwhelmed him with Salaams, with protestations of his unworthiness to be so honoured, and with an introduction to the assembly that threatened to exceed even the extravagance of a Farsi encomium.

But through all this- Nasser's assiduity, the assemblage's awe - nagging at him like a stifled guilt- always the question-

"What is it? Why am I here ? Oof, if only I could remember the word..."

Being thus distracted Raman took in little of the company. Nasser's over-elaborate courtesy had somewhat poisoned the apple of intimacy. Nor were the faces he saw around him particularly prepossessing. Toad-like men, in baggy suits, squatting on Sofas. Nasser conducted him to a princely armchair. He was being treated like the guest of Honour, yet, obscurely, he felt this show of courtesy was intended as a rebuke to the others.

"We are expecting a foreign guest," Nasser whispered- perhaps in apology for the atmosphere of constraint- "An Italian. Signior Vico- a great man- a true scholar- a lover of poetry- a lover of Indian Culture- a lover of distinguished conversation. Really, frankly speaking, the Italians hardly fall into the category of *Mleccha*. They are children of the Sun just as we are."

Raman was amused to hear the word *Mleccha*- a pejorative term for the non-Sanskrit speaker- in the mouth of a Muslim. After forty years of strenuous Secularism only the least attractive prejudices of their two Religions were being pooled. Hindus now affected a disdain for Jews and Muslims called the Europeans *Mleccha*.

"What is the occasion?" Raman asked.

"Oh, it's nothing like that! You see- Signior Vico is in the import-export business. He is our main contact in Milan. My uncle, you know, has a big organisation in Bombay. Herbs, pharmaceuticals- that sort of thing. Well, he asked me to look after Signior Vico- introduce him to cultured people, show him a *nautch*, get him to sample Indian cuisine and so on. After all, we would not want him to go away thinking there is no *adaab*- no literary Culture- in India."

"I see," said Raman, feeling somewhat out of his depth, "I'd never have come if I thought I'd be in the way."

"Ooof! How can you say such a thing, Raman Sahib? Your coming has added just the right touch of class. Our friends, you understand," Nasser said, sotto voce, indicating the assemblage, "though very good people in their own way- are not- how should I put it?- they are not exactly on the same plane as your good self."

"But, my dear Nasser," Raman said in alarm, "I'm a mere nobody! A Deputy Director in a God forsaken Department in a joke of a Ministry. I am scarcely a trophy to be displayed!"

"Ah! Raman Sahib- your characteristic modesty," Nasser said laughingly, "You place such a low valuation on yourself! You are perhaps unaware that the Italians have the highest regard for Bureaucratic titles! You just see how Seignior Vico fawns over you when he hears you are a Deputy Director! But, all that is by the way. We, at any rate, are Indian. And, in India we look at the man not the title. You are out honoured guest and if the foreigner looks down his nose at you it will be he who is shown the door! "

Raman, bemusedly, wondered whether he had, perchance, strayed out of India crossing this threshold, so strange was it to hear that, in India, people looked at the man, not his official position.

Raman glanced about him and took in, once again, the fat, increasingly flustered, faces of the silent, seated, company. There were about twelve of them and they sat on the edges of their seats, feet splayed massively beneath them. Some looked at watches, others played a curious game of semaphore between themselves

whereby each would take turns catching another's eye and then both would go through a truncated pantomime of greeting, solicitation, deprecation and farewell. Their swollen and massive features were yet so mobile that, once again, Raman feared being transfixed by a darting tongue.

It was all so strange. Raman was surprised that he had not been offered a drink. The others, too, were empty handed.

Nasser, who was somewhat overdressed in courtier's costume and mirror embroidered Shia cap, sat beside Raman as silently- if less self consciously- as any of the others. Raman resigned himself to waiting, determined to leave as soon as decency permitted.

From outside came the swish of a car sweeping up the drive. Nasser appeared oblivious. Raman nudged him. Nasser smiled sweetly and cast his eyes downwards.

For some moments nothing happened. Then suddenly the door was thrown open and a tall saturnine European walked in.

"Namaste, Salaam Aleikhum, Sat Sri Akal, Vanakam!" Seignior Vico boomed, gesturing grandiloquently, in parody of Oriental greeting. "Ciao! Sai Bai Noo! How're you doin?! Nazdroveey! Jambo!"

He beamed at each of them for a moment still keeping up this ridiculous pantomime. The toad like men gulped, bobbed their heads, gulped. One or two made half hearted attempts to rise to their feet. The Italian windmilled his arms at them

"No! No! No! No! Sit! Sit! Sit!"

Having beamed at them once more, he advanced on Raman. "Ciao! I am Allesandro, I am so happy to meet you."

Raman rose and shook hands. "Raman," he said gruffly, "Delighted "

The Italian was shorter than Raman but more sturdily built. Raman felt intimidated by the scrutiny of those shrewd, resinous, eyes.

Nasser pressed forward.

"This is Deputy Director Raman. He honours our house."

"I bet he does!" the Italian said, rubbing his hands.

"Raman Sahib is from the Ministry of Culture," Nasser said somewhat defensively .

Vico directed a sharp glance at Nasser and then laughed uproariously- "Better watch out, *fratello mio*," he warned Raman, "this young man fancies himself a poet. He will be pestering you to get his stuff published."

"I didn't invite him for that!" Nasser said tearfully, "I am not *matlabi*- how do you say- manipulative- what I have done, I have done for you only ! I am of the sort of whom it is said-

" *Vayaz ko bulate hain hum mareez kayf-o-sharab ke*

Hooran-e-Khuld se sikhenge gum, Husn behijab ki

"I am of those drunkards who consult a Divine, e'en 'fore their healths fail; who'd, amongst the Houris, repine, recalling the Veil!"

"*Hijab!*" said the Italian, "Very good! A veil- a cover...I understand you perfectly. Let us have, then, an evening of Culture. Nasser, I hope you have called your friends. It's been a long time since I've seen them."

"*Muddat hui hai yaar ko mehmaan kiye hue*

"*Josh-e-qadah se bazm chiragaan kiye hue "*

Nasser quoted happily-" because Raman Sahib is Hindu, today we will celebrate Diwali. Though 'tis sinful wine we pour, instead of sacred oil, the little clay lamps, that are our hearts, will so brightly toil, that amongst the stars, tonight, the rumour will arise, yonder a brighter Galaxy lies - yonder the Republic of Light!"

Raman was touched. "A *Kaffir* I may be," he said, "but such a *Kaffir* as is no disgrace. My life was, but, a long *Ramadan* till I saw your moon like face!"

Nasser accepted the conventional compliment as though it were anything but conventional. Claspng Raman in his arms he darted a glance at Vico.

"Where are the drinks?" the Italian bellowed, "without liquor how can there be a Party?"

As if by magic, liveried servants appeared at every doorway bearing cut glass tumblers of Whiskey.

Nasser plucked at Vico's arm and the two left the room together. Raman was left alone with the toad men.

He felt obliged to attempt conversation.

"It seems we are going to enjoy a Cultural feast!" he remarked to his neighbour.

"What is this Ministry of Culture?" the other shot back- greatly aggrieved at having been singled out- "I have never heard of it. Where is it based?"

"I am in the Ministry of Information, actually." Raman was shaken by the massive scale of the retaliation.

"Oh! Ministry of Information, by God!" the other replied using up the last of his H-Bombs. He jerked his head at his allies inviting them to join in the railery, "See, Ministry of Information, no less!"

Maddened enough to attempt M.A.D- mutually assured destruction- Raman staunched his wounds with whiskey long enough to ask- "And yourself?" .

"Oh, we just manage to get by somehow! Our Ministries are quite insignificant! But then, none of us is a Deputy Director!"

Raman understood that, though his interlocutors were lower in rank than himself, they partook of Power- perhaps by delaying a licence or querying a disbursement- whereas he was simply a supernumerary seamstress to a State, long since turned slattern.

Nasser was, perhaps, too young to understand the magnitude of his faux pas in lionising so insignificant a person as himself- maybe it was, that peon, Hari Lal's fault- when there were genuine satraps of the "Licence Raj" to be conciliated.

The toads, to a man, turned their backs on him and began an indecipherable discussion of high politics in which great men were obliquely referred to and earth shaking events were traced back to their trifling squabbles. Again and again an elaborate hypothesis, erected on the premise of a pair of courtier's mutual antagonism, came to grief when a croaked contention that the two had been observed being civil to each other led, with bewildering rapidity, to the conclusion being unanimously drawn that the two were secretly in concert and that a trap was being laid for the unlikeliest of third parties.

In all this the only player who never featured as a volitional agent was the P.M himself.

Raman, like the Rajiv of the toad men's imagining, began to feel that he, too, had ceased to exist except as an emanation of his "kurse"- the imposing armchair that gave him his pre-eminence in this company.

The whiskey, too, had been rendered phantasmal. It became whiskey only in the glasses of the others, the toads, the real people. On them it was having all the effects Whiskey is supposed to have. The company appeared to have cast lots for the depiction of the different stages of drunken palaver that Shakespeare described- here rang out the reproof courteous, there hissed the lie in the teeth- Raman alone was excluded. He drained his glass, refilled noiselessly by an equally spectral bearer, and tugged at it again- chill'd to find himself unwarm'd, maddened to find himself still sober- a shade lapping up blood, blanching that he remains a shade- panicked into a "bottoms up", positive it was only his chair-benumbed bottom that remained to him- the rest having been amputated.

Raman gathered his wits and reapplied himself to the task- now horribly urgent- of following the conversation- but it had suddenly become as menacing, as meaningless, as the croaking of frogs- they were talking nonsense or all sense was a secret. Whiskey had lost its secret or he wot not a secret.

Language, now, a cipher, abandoned for broken. Language, incessant, for never needing to be spoken. Wine turned to Water for the Word is undone- & Words, Credit revoked, provoked do us dun.

---9/III---

"It is a curious thing," said Signior Vico, lighting a cigar for Mr. Avtar Singh Dhillon, "Tobacco never tastes quite so good as when it is being taken in company with a Sikh gentleman."

"Why are you singling out us Sikhs?" Dhillon replied, "For my part, I enjoy Wine most when it is being poured by a Haji like our friend Salahuddin."

"And I," said Salahuddin, pressing a kebab on Vivek Aiyar, "never relish meat so much as when sharing it with my Brahmin friends!"

"What about you Italians?" Aiyar piped up, "What is your contribution to our festivities? What prohibition does your Religion place upon you that we can all share in the glory of defying?"

The Italian winked at Nasser but remained silent. Dhillon- who, like Aiyar, lived in London- felt moved to cover Nasser's shame by attacking the foreigner.

"The Italians worship Beauty alone. Their only prohibition is against Ugliness. But, that is precisely why the Italian is the indispensable ally of the degenerate. Their delight in debasing Beauty, debauching purity, brutalising Sensitivity, is of the exemplary order of the Art-for-Art's-sake poetaster.

"A Naples without cholera, a Florence without condottieri, a Venice that does not stink- for the true Italian these are abominations perpetrated by a censorious world. It is an affront they revenge through the Mafia which supplies the World with the staple of Ugliness- Heroin."

"You surprise me, Mr. Dhillon," Vico said silkily, "In my ignorance, I had thought it was to Asia that the World was indebted to for the cultivation of the poppy. Mine is the country of the vine."

Aiyar- who was contemplating the depletion of the whiskey bottle with the anxiety of the true Alcoholic- hurriedly interposed to make peace .

"The Vine, my friends! Let us drink to the great God Bacchus, for, in the country of Mahatma Gandhi, Bacchus must always be given the highest place in the pantheon!"

"How so?" asked Raman, smiling at his fellow Tamil.

"Herodotus tells us that the great God Bacchus- and his votaries- were the first espousers of the noble precept of Ahimsa- Non -Violence- in this our Himsa afflicted Land. The invasion of the lyre, lute and vine, accomplished by Bacchus and his petal pelting pards- how different from the incursion of Indra-shaker of Cities- or Islam- enslaver of the Arya- or the English- forgers of freedom's fetters- or Coca Cola- which is reducing us all to the rotten toothed smile of American imbecility!"

Vico smiled, recalling Camoens. This was a style of Indian eloquence that he could approve. He nodded to the bearer and a fresh bottle was placed at Aiyar's side.

Raman felt at peace. Nasser and his literary friends- who had responded with demeaning alacrity to his invitation- were making much of him. The toad men from the Ministries remained on their lowly Sofas- reduced to dissembling their resentment at being excluded from the conversation by assuming an air of gravity and abstraction- somewhat diminished by the furtive swigs they occasionally took from their glasses.

Prompted to speak less by the desire to shine than to pile coals on the heads of the toad men- Raman had been casting about in his mind for a topic. Aiyar's mention of Mahatma Gandhi provided him with an opening.

"Gandhi," he began musingly, "is the Father of our Nation. I'd be the last to gainsay him that title. But why is it that we have always turned our eyes away from his treatment of his own sons- not to speak of great nieces- to see what sort of father he really was? Why did his eldest son, Harilal, become an alcoholic? Some even say he converted to Islam. Even if that is a lie- the fact remains that, to be a son of Gandhi was no easy task.

"Hinduism is unusual amongst World Religions in that the father's duty to the son is emphasised more strongly than the son's duty to the father. A son, according to Manu, may even kill his father to protect his own life- but, for the sin of son-killing there can be no forgiveness.

"What made Gandhi so odd a Father figure for us Indians to pitch upon was his utterly un-Indian egotism, in that he sacrificed his own sons' futures to a purely personal scruple that had no grounding in Hindu customary morality. Refusing them the English education they were entitled to by virtue of his position- he ensured that they would not inherit even a portion of his mantle.

"Gandhi was a bright light- a very bright light- while he lived India was lit up like a stage. But Gandhi was a light which knew it would fail- and, yet, which shone all the brighter, as if taking a perverse satisfaction in the knowledge of the utter darkness it would leave behind. Like Tagore, he was a mighty banyan, and- like Tagore- nothing grew in his shade. How quickly all his satellites burnt out- being plunged back into our sublunary atmosphere- after his assassination! Cranks and faddists- that is all they ever were, except briefly.

"Gandhi only accepted the title of "Father of the Nation" from us because he pitied our degradation. Become his orphans, only our degradation has increased. The World, which hears only of our fratricidal wars, taunts us, taking the name of the great atavist, Gandhi, and absolves itself of blame- imputing all India's troubles to the Indians' incorrigible atavism.

"Yet there was a time when Gandhi and the Ali brothers, between them, could have liberated India and set up a powerful Secular State that would have defended all communities as ruthlessly as it resisted foreign encroachment. But Gandhi called off the Non Cooperation movement. Why? Ultimately Gandhi did not trust the Indian people. He- more even than the Colonialist- thought Indians were beasts that must never be allowed to taste blood.

"But, a people whose leader does not trust them to use the language of violence, even in their own Defence, is a people who can never bespeak their own Freedom- who can never set up their own State.

"Jinnah- who, after all, came from the same sub caste as Gandhi- said that Gandhi was a great Hindu but not a great Indian. It is the function of Religion to be distrustful of the people. Why else would we have Religion? But a patriot should not distrust his own people.

"The function of a State is to monopolise the instruments of coercion. To monopolise the language of Violence. And a masochistic State- like Allende's Chile or Bela Kun's Hungary- it is doomed.

"The British, when they ruled us, were quite happy to paeon India's antiquity while exaggerating the barbarism of their own ancestors. It was a subtle ploy to make India's enslavement appear the function of some mysterious endemic malaise rather than what it actually was- the product of forces the British understood only too well- shifts in the pattern of International Trade and the balance of Global Power.

"Gandhi, who should have known better, played into their hands by insisting that the only path to salvation, for India, lay in avowing a Credo of inhuman Moral Perfection.

"What foolishness! Our great asset- now as in the past- is our vast market. America could begin to impose its tastes on Europe once it had the greater effective demand in its home market. An India devoted to sensuality- as it was in the past- would be a rich India because able to export its luxuries rather than- as now happens- its staples. We need a Saviour who will offer us Life- but, Life more abundantly- who will turn bullock carts into cars, homespun into silk, water into Wine!"

"Ah!" said Signior Vico with a saturnine smile, "I begin to get your drift! It seems you are engaged in Government propaganda after all! The Messiah whose Gospel you are singing is none other than Rajiv Gandhi! Has he not said that what India needs now is more 5 star hotels like the Taj or the Shalimar or even the Kubera Hotel our friend Ganesan has just opened?"

"Phir se bephool hai har Puja, bemuezzin har minar"

Mubarak ho munaffe pe, taajir-e-Taj-e-Shalimar!"

(Once again no petal remains for the offering, no Muezzin calls from the Minar

Our plaudits on your profit margin! Thou Merchant of the Taj and Shalimar!)

Aiyar's poetic interruption drew a frown from Vico. Salahuddin- an Iraqi Kurd, with a flair for diplomacy, stepped in to cover for his fellow guest.

"Your Mr. Gandhi should watch out," he said gaily, "In this part of the world every Messiah has his Tara Masih!"

The reference to Bhutto's executioner was lost on Raman. Salahuddin- whose business took him to Pakistan frequently- had not yet grasped that Indians were, in general, very ignorant of events in their western neighbour.

"I don't agree with you, Raman Sahib," Avtar Singh Dhillon hastily interposed. Having many Pakistani friends in London, Dhillon had understood the Kurd's epigram and- being a Sikh- was anxious to turn the conversation away from the suggestion that Rajiv Gandhi, too, might meet the fate of his mother.

"The problem we face in India is that, as we make Economic progress, more and more money comes into the hands of the lower middle class. I am talking about the kulak, the workshop owner, the petty official, the bazaari petit bourgeoisie- that sort of person. Each is the creation of the Government in one sense or another. Their prosperity can be wiped out at any moment by a change in Government policy- a revision of fertilizer prices, an alteration in the number of hours of Electricity supplied, a withdrawal of concessions given to cottage industries, a crackdown on corruption, a lifting of price controls. By historic standards this class now enjoys a good life- at least in the more dynamic States. But, this is merely an Indian summer. The historical inevitability of the marginalisation of the mode of production they represent finds expression in their reactionary opposition to the Central Government. Their haughty self assertion- they alone are the "salt of the Earth"- is a pathetic delusion of grandeur. Just as, in America, the traditional blue collar class is doomed- this class too is doomed. Fred and Wilma Flinstone may have put a man in the White House who shares their paranoid fantasies- but, the fact remains- like the Stone Age hunter/gatherers Marshall Sahlins describes in "The Original Affluent Society"- their Future is the Past.

"This new class which emerged in the shadow of the State- meshing with the petty Bureaucracy- finds the burden of that shadow intolerable. Its insecurity- arising from the fact that as a class it is doomed to destroy itself- is so great that it wishes the canopy of the State to wither away revealing a mighty arsenal. For some reason, this class believes that once War breaks out- in other words once Destruction becomes the avowed purpose of the State- then the autolytic enzymes that are already undoing its own existence will be arrested.

"The petit Bourgeois dream is the free ride, the free lunch, the niche in the Rock of Power crawling into which, alone, one can safely declare one's Independence of that Power.

"Rousseau boasted of his independence from the Great by reason of his Income as Music Copyist. Those illedgible productions- he himself tells us they were filled with inaccuracies- are also the type of shoddy stuff this vaunted class of counter jumping artisans are happiest turning out. Without the patronage of the Great they would be paupers.

"But they have the patronage of the Great. Why? Because the Great are no longer Great hearted. They share in the petit bourgeoisie dream. They have already abdicated moral responsibility. They propitiate the Gods of the suburbanites and lay up treasure in their Tax havens.

"But, that in itself is only venality and venality is, merely, a venial sin. What makes the irresponsibility of the Great so truly culpable- what makes them comparable to the Taimurs and Genghis Khans- is that their appeasement of the petit bourgeoisie leads inevitably to bloodshed- whether internecine or Colonial.

"Why? It is because when a class begins to rise above its Ecological subsistence level- when its members begin to enjoy the Whiskey, the Scooter, the silk salwar kameez- what happens? They get a feeling of Pride. They become resentful of the, in India, English educated, elite who are selflessly ruling the country. To give voice to their new sense of Pride, their ancient resentment, a class of troublemakers mushrooms overnight. They are unable to take on the elite at their own game of serious debate on Socio -Economic issues. So they just bang the drum of linguistic sub-nationalism or Sectarian chauvinism. This brings them Power and Money. Why? Their language, being more visceral, appears more violent than that of the State. Generally, they are just a paper Tiger. But, the language of violence is the machine code of the State and so anyone who speaks it with impunity acquires a measure of legitimacy and fiscal viability. That in itself is bad enough. But, they are greedy bastards. Once foreign money is on the table the bombs start to fly. The minute the Centre shows weakness they degenerate into a protection racket. Soon you have a situation like the Punjab. Things deteriorate on the Economic side because Businessmen are scared off and Investment comes to a halt. Once the Army moves in, Economic decline becomes inevitable. Ten years go by and a Province which was once prosperous has become a basket case. The fires of chauvinism die out for lack of Economic fuel. It is a familiar pattern. What keeps India a low growth country is just this- every time a Province begins to prosper- the bigoted kulaks raise their ugly heads. The sectarian brush fire breaks out. The fruits of Progress wither on the vine till Universal Pauperization re-establishes Peace.

"I am a Marxist myself. But, I feel that India desperately needs the spirit of the Mahatma. I know it is fashionable to laugh at his obsession with things like Khadi¹ and Prohibition. But you must understand that Gandhi used the language of symbols. For him, Mill cloth was a Nessus shirt of pain because it was steeped in the poisons of, hydra headed, Capitalism. Similarly, Prohibition was important because, if the elite refused to forego their occasional Cocktail party, then the intermediate class would refuse to forego its Saturnalias of blood letting. You see Gandhi's *swadeshi*² should be understood symbolically just as Hafiz's Wine is understood symbolically."

"*Arre Hafiz ka sharab haqiqi hai, majazi tera Aql hoga!*" Aiyar shouted, maddened by this affront to one of his most sacred beliefs.

“ “ Hafiz didn't drink ; the Wine is a metaphor”

"A nostrum I think! A noggin I'm better for!"

Voice fervent, from too frequent self quoting, hands fevered from constant self courting, the Tamil was a terrible sight to behold.

Though temperamentally fearless, the Marxist Sikh felt obliged to apologise for offending his fellow Londoner's sensibilities.

Aiyar continued to tremble. The great prisms of his spectacles lashed laser beams of outrage at them as his oiled head swivelled wildly in distress.

"Read us a poem, Aiyar!" Nasser pleaded. Being of tender years, his giving way to panic was, perhaps, excusable.

Nasser's ploy worked like a charm.

"My latest poem," Aiyar said, hugely mollified, "is dedicated to the great Tamil, modernist, poet Annachithi. As you know, he was Tambimuttu's arch-rival, in London, when the latter was busy revolutionising English Literature with his magazine 'Poetry London'. T.S.Eliot, you will recall, never quite recovered from reading Annachithi's 'Poetry *Mera Lund*'.

"I visited Madras in order to make obeisance to the lotus like feet of Annachithi, and was greatly distressed by the cruel D.M.K policy of rigorously enforcing Prohibition. This poem was the outcome of my interview with Annachithi. Any resemblance between it and the poem "Old Shantih Town" by the vile traducer Clive James is of course wholly imaginary."

Aiyar cleared his throat and declaimed in highly artificial accents-

"Old Shantih town

A poem by Vivek Aiyar Esq (fail)

An old man in a "Dry" State

talking of Eliot

"*Anna! Anna! Yenai Venum?*"

kedai keepers cry

Teasing because they know what-he-wants

they cannot supply

But then it's his own fault

Self determination he sued for

Liberty he forgot.

"Very keen on the Empire- Eliot

"Oh yes! I-am-telling-you, he was

"That time we went on hunger strike

"he was mocking us

"Tamils trying to pass through eye-of-the-needle

"We were, for him, that-was-all

"He was much given to childish puns

"As Clive Bell, regretfully, records."

"A Peter pun syndrome!"

I said and he laughed

Almost, I decided there-and-then, to breach the excise seal

¹ Khadi- homespun cloth

² Swadeshi- Autarky. The notion that every community should be as self sufficient as possible.

On my bottle of Black label. But
 delaying decision, I ordered two "thumbs up "
 "Awful if- "
 He said and I decided
 "we know Him not through metaphor, epiphany, amphiboly
 "not "as through a Glass darkly"
 "But
 ""these fragments I have shored against my ruin"
 "Merely puns."

Aiyar's poetic effusion was greeted by stunned silence. Happily he took this as a condign tribute to his talents. Salahuddin- whose work on behalf of his own people necessitated the cultivation of the arts of diplomacy- broke the awkward silence.

"They were heroes indeed who, thirsting the wine of Freedom, risked the hangman's noose. But, that Independence would mean the enactment of Prohibition, they little bargained for. In India, as in Pakistan, it is as Faiz says-

*"Kuchh Muhtasibon ke khilwat mein, kuchh Wayaz ke ghar jaati hai
 "Hum Baada kashon ke hisse ko jaam mein kam kam aathi hai!"*

(Some goes to the Morals Inspectorate
 Some to the Preacher's home
 To the share of the wine bibbing reprobate
 Falls barely a bubble of foam!)

Raman thought, guiltily, of the time when he had worked in the Censorship Bureau during Mrs. Gandhi's brief flirtation with authoritarianism. It had been a coveted position simply because it gave access to the Free Press of the West.

"A simple Kurd like me," Salahuddin continued, "finds all this too difficult to understand. You quoted T.S.Eliot. Faiz, too, held him in veneration. Yet, Eliot had no sympathy for your National struggle. Perhaps, you secretly fear Freedom. How unequal has been the exchange between our two parts of the world! We sent you Rumi, you send us Maulana Maudoodi! When we get our Independence, by God's grace, we will take a different road. We will tolerate no Prohibitions and no religious Police. Why? Because, for the Kurd, Freedom is the essence of his soul. We will never grovel for its grudging dole. Either we will drink our fill at its well, or else the blood of the tyrant in Hell!"
 "Freedom," said Aiyar, "word of fear-

"Much as I would
 cleanse the stain of selfhood
 Nor Zem spring, nor Ganges water
 nor the Grape's, nor Eve's daughter
 Can ever sufficiently lave
 or free, Freedom's slave."

"That is not the Marxist view of Freedom," Dhillon said reprovingly, "That is the Bourgeois, Kantian, notion of Freedom as absence of restraint. It is what Hegel condemned as the bad Infinite. It is the Freedom to press or not press the Nuclear button. "Live Free or Die!" as they say in the States.

"The life blood of Capitalism, as Schumpeter said, is Creative Destruction. Capitalism displaced Despotism, despite the fact that the latter ought to have been more effective in mobilising the resources of a Nation for Warfare, quite simply because Capitalism, alone, unleashes man's genius for Destructive Creations. The Hegelian State lost the Thymotic battle to the Anglo Saxon brand of individualistic Imperialism. Why? Because only Capitalism creates an ethos where Man's relationship to Man is utterly mediated by the Thymotic urge. Only in Capitalism does each consciousness ceaselessly will the destruction of every other consciousness. In the Hegelian State, Man can still become the Meissen shepherd of Being because the State is running the slaughterhouse. Think how clumsy and costly Hitler's gas chambers were compared to Union Carbide's Bhopal plant!

"The Star Wars Technology of the Americans, too- a myth though it might be- has shown that Soviet Science can, at best, be imitative in the Armaments field. And this, the failure of Socialised Man's Science has, probably, sealed the doom of Scientific Socialism. Already there are whispers of a second N.E.P in Moscow. Once again the peace loving powers will try to appease the war mongers by attempting to imitate them. How foolish! Lenin showed how just such emulation led to the First World War. All Hot Wars are Looking Glass wars. The Ancient Chinese knew this. The first War was between the people of the Looking Glass world and our own

"The Mirror people subdued by the Yellow Emperor's Magic
 Conjured our image to elude or the tryst to be tragic

In the Cold War of Cultures the direst hawk is the Dove
Hate starves the Vultures, an H Bomb is Love!

"And, who should know this better than us Indians? Here different communities can live in peace for millennia so long as their mutual loathing makes them appear scarcely human in each other's eyes. They ignore each other, they are oblivious to each other- all is well. The minute a sneaking admiration creeps in, the second mischievous *Kama Deva* upsets the apple cart- all Hell breaks lose!"

Dhillon paused to refresh himself with whiskey.

"I think I understand what you mean about the looking glass," Vico said musingly, "Though, perhaps, it is something peculiar to you Orientals. You see, I had a friend- a very dear friend- a Turk. I say he was a Turk. Actually he was completely German. You should have heard him recite that poem of Heine's which- to our ears- seems to so strangely foreshadow the fate of the Yiddishe- you should have seen the tears cluster thickly on his curling eyelashes as he intoned

*"Ich hatte einst ein schonnes Vaterland
Der Eichenbaum
Wuchs dorst so hoch, die veilchen nickten sanft
Es war ein Traum
(I had a wonderful Fatherland
Once upon a time
Whose oaks were tall, whose violets shyly beckoned
It was just a dream)*

He'd been born in Germany. He probably lives in Germany to this day. But they spoilt him for me- those Germans. You see, he could never become one of them. Why? Because he once loved one of them. He was like that slave Heine writes about- again prophetically- that slave whose tribe was the Beni Asra who die when they fall in Love."

*"Qaum-e-banu-Udhra ke hain mere qatil, Ishq-e-sitam zareef
"Marte, marte, mange dua, Mansoor, Sultan ko na kar Shareef!"*

Aiyar quoted -

"Because the culprit's a clan fellow, the Beni Asra with bier bordered breath
Conjures his Murderer never mellow, for Love, loving, then indeed, were Death!"

Vico had remained lost in thought. Now he looked up and laughed. "Ah! For you people the realisation that Irony is the only self consistent Theodicy comes as such a calamity! Really, you make such heavy work of it- you are as bad as the Germans!

"Now, for us Latins there is always Life- even in the midst of Death. Why? Because we are, by Nature, gladiators. For us nothing is real except the contest in which every base trick is honourable, even cowardice- provided that blood lust be not lost- the urge to kill be not conceded. Our Latin cruelty has kept us as innocent as children. Why, even Dante saw the game of Love in terms of a Vendetta-

*"Canzone vattene dritto a quella donna
che m'ha ferito il core eche m'invola
quello ond io hu piu gola
e dalle per lo cor d'una saetta
che' bell 'onor s'acquito in far vendetta"*
(Song speed you straight with unerring aim
to bruise that unblemished bosom I blame
for this wound that festers in my heart
Nor spare any searing affect of Art
to return this injury to its only begetter
for all honour is in successful vendetta!)

A race of cruel children. And there is Cruelty in children? Raman set down his glass. Something had been nagging at him all evening. What was it? Childhood. God had lied to him as a child. No that wasn't it.

*"He gave me the World, then snatched it away
I was a child and He meant, but, to play."*

"Vendettas," Salahuddin said musingly, "We Kurds have in plenty. Our Mountains echo as incessantly to the report of a carbine as with the refrain to one of Shirwan Pekar's Anthems. But those vendettas cost us our Freedom. With us, it is as with the Somalis or the Pathans. It is our very attachment to Independence that has allowed less war-like races to divide and hence enslave us. The crisscrossing boundaries of six nations scar the very breast of our Mountain motherland. Why? Because we never recognised that there is no Freedom without boundaries."

"That is also why the Italians," said Dhillon, "despite all their passion and brilliance, remain, innocent regarding the true nature of Sexual Love. Their vendetta of Love- vindicating their individuality- permitting them the eternal childhood of cruelty- leaves them tearful at sundown- clamouring for Grandmother Church to change their nappies."

Vico frowned. Aiyar- who was deeply conscious that Vico might vent his displeasure by not calling for another a bottle- leapt into the breach.

"Pay no attention to him, Signior! You must understand that our Jat friends are never so delighted as when mistaken for Italians. Italy, it seems is, is the name Sardar Dhillon has chosen to give his mirror! The Jats take great pride in their Scythian descent and look down on us poor darkies! But, I can tell you this, it is only when engaged on one of their internecine vendettas that they are truly happy! Why else did Dhillon Muslims make common cause with dark skinned Mujahirs and espouse Pakistan except because they calculated that it represented the most favourable prospect for killing off fellow Dhillons- albeit Sikhs or Hindus? Why do Dhillon Sikhs now make common cause with dark skinned Mazabis and espouse Khalistan, except so as to have the pleasure of killing Dhillon Hindus? You may think it is a matter of Religion. Nothing could be further from the Truth. The Dhillon is generally the follower of a particular Saint who is venerated by all three communities. Nor is it a matter of differences in language or custom. No such differences exist. Why, then, do they kill each other?"

"We are not the senseless butchers you describe!" Dhillon said, flushed from the struggle not to unsheath his *kirpan*, "There was always more communal harmony in our part of the Punjab than elsewhere in India. Even now- in London- old neighbours from undivided Punjab fall into each others' arms as if the Genocidal madness of Partition never took place. We share a guilt expressed in the song-

*"It, at least, embraced all men
of what is my shadow guilty
That it should die with me?"*

"But, all this is beside the point. The travail of the Punjab is part and parcel of the inevitable workings out of the contradictions inherent in nascent Bourgeois Nationalism."

"Spare us the Marxist jargon!" Aiyar shouted- anxious because Vico had made no move to order another whiskey bottle- "The Theology of Atheism, too, has had its harvest of lives on this sub- continent. The Truth is that History is simply eternal recurrence. Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. New ideologies and Nations are thrown up only so that the familiar tale of totem and taboo can be retold. Again and again sons band together to rebel against the celibacy their Primal Father- Gandhi like- enforced, so that Civilization can recommence its incestuous orgy.

*"He said "a primal parricide is all Religions root"
But, ritual fratricide as the State's seed and shoot
Freud's silence still surprises
& Remus dies and Rome arises."*

Since Vico showed no sign of beckoning the bearer, Aiyar became desperate and started spouting, without even the pretense of relevance, yet more samples of his atrocious poetry-

*...The Erinyes evicted by each Matricide
Become the Eumenides of all Civic pride
From Sanjay Gandhi to Nero Each urbane hero
to Beautify the City First slays Pity....*

Finally, in response to the dumb misery of the rest of the assemblage, Vico relented and signed to the bearer to bring another bottle. Noticing this, Aiyar abruptly shut up and gratefully drained his glass.

Raman looked at his fellow South Indian. It was difficult to tell how old he was. Like Raman, he was tall and dark. The only difference was that Vivek Aiyar lived in London. Actually there was no difference. Raman lived in New Delhi.

-----10-----

A *Musth* Elephant came charging out of the forest. The toilers in the flint quarry ran. One of the old men was unlucky. This was a King Elephant. Because in heat, it trampled the old man down. The flint quarry was abandoned. But now, for the first time, it had an unanimous name- "Elephant-man-killing". The place name's agglutinative grammar, too, was something new. It promised a parley with the relentlessly hostile Environment as much as a truce 'twixt the restless hostilities of their competing hunter-bands' incipient tongues. Being uncomplacent in the beginnings of settled Culture- for retaining its fearsome name- it became a sacred spot- perhaps condignly- for having been the scene of a great advance in Human Civilization.

Millennia went by. Man had tamed the Elephants. *Elephant-man-killing* was the seat of the King. People trembled at his name even ten miles away. The King was ritually trampled to death by a *Musth* Elephant on the first day of the mating Season.

Millennia went by. A Great King had built a palace of sandalwood at *Man-Elephant-Conquering*. His ships departed loaded with Ivory. They returned bearing iron hoes and the Sea-dark Wine of the *Yavanas*. This curious beverage had the effect of making the Great King *Musth*- just like a bull Elephant in the Mating season. On such occasions the King would command- quite blasphemously- the killing of a bull Elephant. He would, himself, eat of its meat. The people trembled for they knew it would be themselves who would have to pay for their King's impiety. The better sort of person started to slip away from the settlement. Better to hack out a paddy field in the Jungle with simple flint tools rather than continue to live under the reign of such a King.

Another millennium passed. *King-Elephant-Man-conquering* was the seat of a great Empire. Elephants came in ships from colonies across the black water. The domestic sort, though painstakingly bred, were so much smaller than these barbaric imports. Also there was the prejudice of the local people to consider. They- little better than beasts of burden themselves- were so attached to their animals. To chose a local specimen for the Great Sacrifice would be out of the question. Not that the praetorian guard could not cope with the native rabble. The natives are cowards. Indeed their pusillanimity seems to have infected their animals as well. Year by year the native levies of men and mounts are deteriorating in martial spirit. But, the natives are a sly lot. They have their secret societies and forest hideouts. They may go *Musth* one of these days. Damn it! Our men have become like Elephants!

A millennia passes. Numberless usurpations by foreign mercenaries, numberless revolutions led by the descendants of those who had retreated into the Forest and now- and again without number-these beggarly Brahmins descending upon us! The prospects for *Man-On-Elephant-Heaven-Conquering*, have never seemed so bleak. Will no one address the crisis in the Middle East? Its consequences for our Balance of Trade could be quite catastrophic!

The slow contagion of the Centuries, the silting up of our harbours, the pall that seems to have settled over the Eritrean Sea- the Gods have never seemed harsher, yet the people never more devout. "Justice!" is the cry in the streets. The Magistrates have never been milder- and, our God- Kings, stupefied from birth by the Brahmin's incense smoke, hardly stir out of the Elephant Palace. Yet it is those dastardly sycophants- the Brahmins- who are responsible for the spreading of this grotesque cult of the God who takes the form of an Elephant to punish a wicked King! These mushrooms of yesterday claim to know our language better than we do ourselves! They- even the better sort, who suffer not the hereditary taint of meagre melanin- have the effrontery to claim that the original meaning of our Capital city's name was "Elephant-man-killing" rather than, as everybody knows, *Celestial-Emperor-condescending-to-on-Elephant-a-little-Man-killing*.

A Century passes. The cult of the sacred Elephant has triumphed. *Elephant-man-Killing* will never again be the centre of the Ivory trade. It's just as well. What had been Wealth harbouring Jungle is now a wilderness of paddy fields. The Palace of the God King is now a Temple. A sacred Elephant- symbol of the incarnation responsible for punishing the impiety of the Great King- now roams in its courts.

A millennia passes. Here is Raman's ancestor. He is a Saivite. He is at the head of a mob. They are going to save the sacred Elephant which is starving at the hands of the venal Porhar Priests. Those infidels even eat buffalo meat! All meat is disgraceful to the votary of the sacred Elephant because it reminds of the blasphemy of the Demon-King. The Porhars are confident because their bardic services are valued by the distant Pandya Emperor. Raman's ancestor disabuses them. At the end of the day it is the Porhars who have to take up the mendicants begging bowl. The Elephant now wears the caste mark of Shiva on its brow. The Millennium dawns for Airavata is restored.

Centuries pass. The original egalitarianism of the Saivites has degenerated. Levelled by Love, levelling the Gods for revelling in the Love of Shiva- they too were levelled- Love's revelry so brief- and, re-entering the quotidian world, they became, again, subjects to Shiva, becoming, again, but, objects to each other.

Smarahara- Shiva's sincerest surname- Thou, Destroyer of, even, the Memory of Love- and Memory and Desire stem from the same root as Eliot, perhaps, had conned from his Eliot-deep study off Sanskrit- but, *Snehat Smarahara*- from Love comes the Destroyer of Love- wis they Vishnu- brief illusion of Love that is all we can preserve of Love- now, wish they Vishnu- vintner of the poisons He holds in his epiglottis.

Nevertheless, it was inevitable- what had Vivek Aiyar said about ritual fratricide?- from Vishnu come the Vaishnavites- puling runts of Ramanuja- disputing with Shiv's Shankara- and the sacred Elephant- Raman's sacred Elephant- now bore the Vaishnavite caste mark.

Then began a Law Suit- the longest on-going Law Suit in the History of the World- between Raman's family of Saivite priests, demanding the right to restore the original Saivite caste mark to the head of the Elephant- and ... and the Ways of the World.

Under the Hindu Raj the Case was kept up as a matter of urgent Soteriological interest. A cadet branch of Raman's family- abandoning their native Tamil for the synthetic sacredness of Sanskrit- made a lucrative business out of bringing Pundits from all over India to the Conferences successive Kings held to shed light on this matter and- incidentally- on the glory of his own forbears. Raman's family remained starvation strict Saivites, sustained for adherents- albeit distant- of their own advocates.

The interregnum of Moslem Rule changed little except that a quite distinct branch of the Raman family contested the right of advocacy by virtue of their superior command over the Persian language.

The accession of the East India Company similarly empowered an English speaking branch.

By the time the sempiternality of the Victorian noonday dawned on the, "Please Saar! late rising, not uprising!" Raman clan, it was already too late- bewigged Englishmen and, later, bewagged, Indian running dogs, sat in judgement over courts which were scrupulous in giving equal weight to the claims of Sanskrit Pundits, Persian Ustads and English speaking Babus- all the while engrossing the British Lion's share of the revenues the, increasingly desperate, natives deposited at the feet of the indifferent Elephant.

But, because the British made the benign assumption that Hindu Law was as barbaric as that of Eighteenth Century England in terms of allowing rights of inheritance in the perquisites of Office- each cadet family of advocates now dissolved under the pressure of avarice- the Courts now entertained suits to distraint a portion of the hereditary dues of the advocate of each Language, because a brother could always be found to contest the applicability of that Language's Laws, his family Profession was to protest, in that it, unfairly, allotted him- wholly idle though he was- a smaller portion than certain of his second or third cousins.

And through all this rigamarole had come, for Raman's family, utter impoverishment. Yet the people still came to them to plead for their Elephant. Raman Senior was thrown in Jail by the British for marching at the head of a deputation of these starving peasants. The District Magistrate, who- unusually for an I.C.S man- had actually mingled socially with Indians- albeit at Oxford- knew full well that these wily Oriental could never be straightforward enough to come out and say what they meant. All this fuss about the caste mark on an Elephant was obviously a Bolshevik ruse- the Indians were too stupid to think of it themselves. The Russians- who of course are, basically, Tartars- have duped these child like Hindoos- over whom God has placed us in loco parentis- with all this nonsense about Communism. Well, it is time to show them that we too can use Stalinist methods!

"A wog, a woman and a walnut tree

The more you beat them the better they'll be!"

By sending Raman Senior to prison, the British- had they but known it- were conferring on Raman's family the most worthwhile hereditary honour they still had in their gift. The fortune of many families in Post Independence India was made by the whim of an English Magistrate who, sentencing a hapless youth to Prison, enrolled him in the Academy for India's future rulers.

But this was to reckon without Raman Senior's obstinacy. He completely antagonised his *Congresswallah* cell mates by insisting that he did not know anything about this *Swaraj- Faraj*, all he wanted was his Elephant. When the Quit India Movement began, the British- satisfied he was still a Communist- offered Raman Senior bail. The stipulated sum- though quite reasonable for a member of a Political party- was far beyond the means of Raman's impoverished family. Raman Senior resolved to stay in jail.

Somehow the story got out. Suddenly there were peasants thronging the streets of *Kaiserabad* (the word Ceasar, after all, derives from the Punic for Elephant) with their pennies clenched in their fists. The British SP let the old priest out of Jail with a stern warning to pacify the mob. Raman's father faced his parishioners.

"Give this money to my wife, not to the Englishman." he said to them, "Let it be so, at least, my baby son has a future. If we send him to School, perhaps he will grow up able to do something. For myself, it is already too late. I may as well rot in Jail. Speaking only Tamil, what can I do for our Elephant?"

And so Raman's father died in Jail. And so Raman was sent to an English medium School. Because his mother was constantly on guard lest her own inauspiciousness as a widow somehow rub off on her son- Raman was doubly orphaned.

He remembered the night he had returned from Madras with the news that he had matriculated. His mother was squatting on the floor polishing his boots. He was sitting on the bed. The bed she never used- being a widow. He wanted, again, to lift her up and put her on the bed and- and just spend his whole life looking

after her, dammit! But she loved him so much, it would hurt her too much if he even touched her. There had been too many arguments in the past. When he was a child he- with the cruelty of children- had defied her shamefully.

Defied her by hugging her, by kissing her- by loudly insisting that she, too, should wear beautiful sarees, that she should put flowers in her hair, that she should, herself, taste the delicacies she procured for him. He had wanted her to have all the things the other children's mothers had. He had wanted her to be the Goddess to whom he could offer service, dammit! How could he accept that she was a widow? He was sure his father would not have wanted her to live like this.

But, at the end of the day, it was she who was the pure Brahmin widow. It was she who had *Shaktee*. She was powerless, because she was a widow, and it would be taking cruel advantage of her weakness- not to speak of her maternal partiality- if he persisted in the cruelty of pressing kisses on one denied her husband's kisses. The Brahmin widow is inauspicious precisely because- having renounced Passion- she is the locus of Power. The Widow, more even than the ascetic- is so overbrimming with sacred Power that it is best to avoid her- not so much because one is afraid of unwittingly giving offence- but that she might, on an impulse of generosity, dissipate the merit accumulated by her sacrifice and thus throw the Moral Economy of the Universe out of kilter.

And so Raman, still young enough to make so big a sacrifice, accepted his Mother's sacrifice, sitting on the bed while she squatted on the floor.

But, Raman was too young to understand the workings of the Brahminical Cosmos for whose preservation ordinary people were prepared to make such enormous Sacrifices. Though he knew his duty was to study Law in order to rescue the Elephant, his inclination led him elsewhere. India was now a Republic. The miasma of communalism that had stained Freedom's Dawn had dissolved so completely once free Elections were held, that India, her favourite sons' vision vindicated, appeared capable of exceeding even the dreams of Gandhi and Nehru.

And, it was the common people who had done this. People like his mother. How fitting, that the one service she would permit him to perform for her was that of reading out Nehru's speeches from the newspaper! Squatting on the floor- eyes modestly downcast- she would listen to the cadenced English- his cruder Tamil translation- and then something mysterious would happen- the years would be stripped away- her spine straightened- her eyes- those lovely eyes!- how many hues did they show?

It is impossible to say what Nehru was for us. Those rambling speeches of his that even young I.A.S officers found baffling- now taking in an International Conference, now touching on the second five year plan, now mentioning a recent Archaeological find in Crete, now condemning a poet's imprisonment in Argentina- only the peasants understood how such disparate developments could be so intimately implicated in limning the emerging shape of Ind's ancient destiny.

When Raman announced that he was going to enrol in Law College his Mother rebuked him sharply-

"No Law-Shaw!" she said rising from the floor, "Enough Lawyers there are already! Learn English! Perfect your English! India's duty is to speak out in front of the World! See, how worried *he* is about this Suez business? How long can *he* carry the burden alone?! Shameless! Law, you are wanting to study!"

"But, *Amma*," said Raman, astonished, "What about the Elephant?"

"*Yaen Da?*!" his Mother scolded, "By whose Grace do you think we have this marvellous four-days-guest? You are the man of the house now. Your duty is to the guest. Leave us to look after the Elephant. Each should do his Duty. Better to do one's own Duty badly than another's Duty well."

She had refused him the thousand and one small pleasures of a filial son's Duty- so much had she taken her widowhood to heart- but, she had reserved for herself the far greater pleasure of knowing that the hand that lit her funeral pyre- itself a shadow of that of her beloved four-days-guest- had done its Duty- her son had sacrificed a well paid job in order to become a writer for Nehru.

But for Raman- already, in '64, beginning his petitioning for Gazetted status- what was left of his Duty?- his Mother now Ash- what was left of his Mother?- now sifting Ash was his Duty.

-----9/V-----

""Fire is our flag," Aiyar regretfully quoted, "Ashes our Fatherland!""

"*Arre!* what do you Tamils have to complain off?" Nasser interrupted bitterly, "Look what happened to us U.P Muslims! What was your leader's perfidy compared with ours?"

"Truly is it said

*"Paida hua Vakeel tho Shaitan ne kaha
Lo, Aaj hum bhi Sahib-e-Aulad ban gaye!"*

(When a lawyer is born the Devil hands out cigars !)

"Our Jinnah was such a great lawyer- look what he did to us!

*"This Patriotism, even peasants understand!"
hissed lawyers, arsenious,
But, that it meant quitting the Motherland
Took a Jinnah's genius!"*

"Arre, what are you raising such a hue and cry for?" Dhillon asked his young friend angrily, "You have not one but *two* homelands! What about us Sikhs? We are the ones who lost out to the squabbling lawyers. The Hindus had Patel, the Muslims had Jinnah- *arre!* even the untouchables had Ambedkar- but us Sikhs- simple soldiers that we were- whom did we have?"

"India is like a Joint family that has split up," Raman said, "only the lawyers have benefited and we children are left just looking into each other's faces and not understanding why we are no longer brothers- why our different mothers no longer take us into their lap without distinction. What has changed?"

"That's something I've never understood," Vico interrupted, "I haven't met a cultured man on either side of the Indo-Pak border who has not wept into his whiskey over the Partition of India. Yet the irrevocability of that Partition is the one thing that India and Pakistan are entirely agreed on. If it was all a lawyer's trick why does it still stand?"

"You will never understand India," Dhillon said crossly. Being the eldest person present the whiskey was taking its toll on him. "The real India is not in Delhi or Karachi- it is in the villages!"

"So?" Vico enquired, "Surely Gandhi travelled to the villages?"

"Arre! Gandhi and Nehru were constantly visiting the villages. Antaeus like, they drew strength from their contact with the clay of Mother India for the coming battle against Communalism."

Dhillon relapsed into moody silence.

"Yet they lost." Vico pressed his adversary .

"Of course they, bloody, lost!" Dhillon shouted angrily. "They only visited the villages. That sly fox Jinnah, went one better than them. He actually moved to a village- Hampstead Village- the ideal Village- far better than Aiyar Sahib's Fulham village- Hampstead Village which knows all the answers to India's myriad problems. Jinnah moved, lock stock and barrel, to that Village. He even tried to immerse himself in the local Politics. When he returned to India he trounced Gandhi and Nehru with one hand tied behind his back!"

"*Jinhe Naaz hai Hind pe, woh kahan hain?*" Nasser quoted Sahir Ludhianvi's question- "Where are they- the people who are so proud of being Indian?"- before proceeding to supply the answer himself- "They are in London. Where else?"

"I little stir from my flat and stray not from Fulham
Companion'd for all that, for in my Cave of Adullam
Fortune's frauds I expose in my "Fulhams of Fiction"
For so fraught my repose, on Fulham Benediction!"

Aiyar was moved to make this poetic interjection in defence of his native village- from which, in truth, he never strayed- because it was there that he had learnt Urdu from the local Pakistani Refugee community.

" Of Elam's flame, one foolish ember
is your heart. Heart remember
Hope is England, let Despair dismember
What was your body
Drink bitter, not toddy."

Reminded of his disloyalty to his Mother tongue, Aiyar- good expatriate that he was- quickly cleared himself of the suspicion of being a patriot by quoting this secessionist stanza.

Raman checked his irritation. After all, the fellow lived in London. How could he be expected to appreciate the true meaning of Tamil Elam?

The trouble with you Indians," Salahuddin said, losing patience, "is that you cannot bring yourself to admit that you are one Nation. That is your tragedy. We too have made mistakes. Too often we have espoused other peoples' causes. Our nation is too generous spirited. Saladin was the shield of Islam, but what defence did he leave for his own community? The Ba'athist, Sami Shawkat said that, to achieve Nationhood, a People must excel in *sin'at al mawt*- the manufacture of Death- but, our Bakr Sidqi who massacred the Assyrians for Feisal- as the Hamidiye massacred the Armenians for Abdul Hamid- what machinery of death did he leave his own people? He was assassinated by the Pan Arabists not because he was a Kurdish patriot but because he was an *Iraqi* Patrio!. You see, the meaning of being Iraqi- like the meaning of being Indian, or the meaning of being Pakistani- has been so twisted that those who put their country first are the ones who are branded traitors!

"To be an Indian, in your Congress era, is to espouse all sorts of worthless Third World causes to the detriment of your own Motherland. It is to clamour for a U.N seat for Communist China at the same time as China is annexing Tibet and erecting fortifications on your own sovereign soil. As for Pakistan, is not its Pan-Islamism as ridiculous as the Iraqi's Pan-Arabism? Ultimately the proud Bedouin- though happy

enough to see you hobble your Industrial progress by adopting his Medieval code- will fight a war rather than succumb to the fraternal embrace of you peoples of the river- you tillers of the soil.

"But, you peasants will never learn! The World holds you in contempt and, still, you don't understand that until you look to your own interests- until you grow rich- as only peasants can grow rich- your Internationalist aspirations are taken as simple *shu'ubiya*- self hatred- it seems you are content to be anything- imitation Englishmen, ersatz Americans, forged Farsis, bogus Bolsheviks, notional Nordics, carbon copy Catholics- anything, anything at all, except the one thing you can not stop being in the eyes of the World- Indians! Just Indians! Create as many Pakistans and Khalistans and Bantustans as you like- you will always be *al-hindi*!"

"It is true," Nasser said thoughtfully, "I have seen it for myself in the Gulf. We, alone, are the fools. Akbar Illahabadi wrote the epitaph of the Intelligence of our race when he said-

*"Payt masroof hai clerki main
Dil hai Iran aur Turki main!"*

(Tis but the belly makes necessary the clerk's white collar
Our heart never forsakes, Janissary and Ayatollah !)

" But, how do they see us in Iran? The biggest slur the Shah's SAVAK could come up with to cast in the teeth of Ayatollah Khomeini was that he was *al-hindi*. That his grandfather had been contaminated by a brief stay in Kashmir. And the Turks- they now say they are Europeans. They kill themselves laughing when we mention the Ali brothers and the sacrifices we made during the Khilafat movement."

"It is true," Aiyar piped up, "In South Africa they call us Sammy, in England, Paki. Sammy is a corruption of Swami- so the South African Muslim can take comfort that his oppressor calls him by the Hindu word for God. And in England the skinhead addresses us Hindus respectfully with the Muslim title of "Spiritually pure!"

"It is true," said Salahuddin, "the two wars the World never ceases to delight in is the war between India and Pakistan and the war between Iraq and Iran. Why? Because both are fratricidal wars in which there can be no victory. Look at the headlines today- twenty thousand have died in the battle for Majnoon island. Majnoon! The word means "mad". You all know the story of Lailah and Majnoon. But, this Majnoon was not made by God from clay. It was men who made this Majnoon Island out of the mud thrown up by their oil drilling. Twice already this tiny island has been, literally, drenched in blood.

*"O say not Majnoon went mad because Lailah was fair!
Who made Majnoon from mud, then fought and died there "*

"What could be more delightful to the World than the Knowledge that God has committed suicide inside the lethal chamber of the human heart? Is the World not the enemy of God? Does the World not rush to assist anyone who will take on the responsibility of exterminating God's own people- the Kurds? How quickly the British rallied to Feisal- Bomber Harris, himself, was on hand to bomb our villages with poison gas. In '73 it was Kissinger who personally ordered us not to press our advantage- dependent as we were on Israel and Iran. As for the death factories of the Ba'athists- even Mitterand- whose wife is so passionately for us- can't stop Europe falling over itself to keep them supplied. As for the wings of Az'rael- the Iraqi Air force- even you- you Mother fucking, Gandhi betraying, bastards- how prompt you were to stand in for the French when they went AWOL! Nehru spoke up for us in '24 when Kemal turned from being the mighty sword of anti- Imperialism to his own reactionary dreams of Pan-Turanianism. But, what did Nehru's daughter do for us? When the Shah betrayed us, she was quick enough to seize petty advantages for herself- leaving the tyrant to his dreams of an Achaemenid revival. Your betrayal is greater than that of the Americans. You are the Democracy in this Region. It is you who should be pushing through Wilsonism. Instead what do you do? You kow tow to every Dictator in sight. You are cowards- all right, you can't help it- I understand that. But, your mother fucking *hypocrisy* ..."

Salahuddin had lost control of himself. In any other country he'd have been beaten to a pulp. This was India and the Indians hung their heads in shame.

"Bastards!," Salahuddin wept, "Do you know that Kurdistan is now a *Kabristan*³? There is nothing left but graves in my country. And, still, the bombs rain down! I have seen cemeteries explode- corpses dancing in the air- and- and, you bastards, which vital interest of yours was so threatened that you had to step in, in '68, to train the Iraqi Air Force?"

Salahuddin had broken down completely. Dhillon extended a hand. The Kurd shook it off.

"Bastards ! I will have revenge ..." he spluttered.

Vico shot to his feet. He slapped the weeping man twice across the face.

"Remember where you are!" he said sharply, "This country has taken you in. Do the same to it!"

The Kurd sobered with puzzling alacrity.

³ Kabristan- A grave yard

"Forgive me, my friends," he said urbanely, "I got carried away. My anger is against Saddam, not you people of Gandhi. But, still, despite my offence, I ask one favour of you. Correct the grammar in this, my little, poem. You Indians speak such good English."

Immediately the Indians were mollified. They forgot to feel even puzzlement at the Kurd's abrupt volte face. Dhillon stroked his beard. Aiyar put down his glass. Even Raman smiled encouragingly .

*"Graves gape, is this the Resurrection ?
Bombs rain down on this vast Kabristan
Speak Saddam- whose is the Insurrection ?
Or show a warrant from Az'rael for Kurdistan!"*

Salahuddin uttered the quatrain in histrionic accents, glancing sideways at Vico. The Indians fell into his trap. They grew so absorbed in deprecating the Kurd's prosody that his offence was purged from their minds. Vico relaxed, but made a sign to Salahuddin not to drink any more.

-----9/VI-----

Ajit was drunk.

"Take a shot of Whiskey," Vijay advised him, " That will do the trick. You've got to put on your best English accent, now we have reached Puhar Jail. Remember you are a *Burra Sahib!*"

"*Hai!*" Ajit wailed in drunken terror, "What English you are asking from me now? You have gone completely mad! Look, this savage beast is trying to eat me!"

This was an exaggeration.

Vijay had instructed Sub Inspector Ram Prakash to drive them to New Delhi Zoo. Once there, Vijay had got the Assistant Curator out of bed. He had, somehow, persuaded his fellow Ethologist to release the Zoo's recently acquired star attraction- a six foot tall giant Panda- into their custody. Ajit had been too dumbstruck to make more than token resistance to the massive Chinese beast being installed in the back seat alongside him. The Panda- though famously asexual- had taken a fancy to him. Its enormous paws smothered his protests on the long drive to Puhar Jail.

Vijay- who was refreshing himself from Ajit's Whiskey bottle with worrying frequency- had taken advantage of Ajit's enforced silence to outline his cunning plan to foil Saxena.

This- it turned out- had been inspired by Ajit's sarcastic enquiry as to whether Vijay was secretly related to Rajiv Gandhi.

"*Yaar,*" Vijay pontificated, "what is the one thing which holds India together? Is it not the Nehru dynasty? Is there anything else left sacred in India? Without some member of the Nehru family to act as talisman, who dares confront the forces of communalism? Now, we know that Saxena is plotting, at this very moment, to turn the Raman Affair into an anti Muslim cause celebre. If we turn up at Puhar Jail alone- simple Hindus that we are- we are done for. But, even Saxena will be stymied if we have a member of the Nehru family to shelter behind. It won't do to try and use a human impostor. This is India where people have a sixth sense for caste. That is where Chou-Chou comes in. We Indians are hopeless at Zoology. Who is to say this Chinese Panda is not the offspring of Bhimsa and Pema- the famous pet, Himalayan, Pandas that delighted the childhood of Rajiv and Sanjay, of blessed memory? By taking it with us we have the protection- not only of Rajiv and Sonia- who, after all, might be assassinated at any moment- but, of the next generation of Nehru-Gandhis as well!

"I, incidentally, shall pose as the Hindi tutor to Rahul and Priyanka. However- just to hedge our bets- I will drop heavy hints that I am not persona non grata with Menaka either. The fact that the children sent along their favourite pet- tomorrow being a School day they could not come themselves- is the most convincing proof that Rajiv is behind us. *Arre,* Rajiv nothing, the kids are behind us! Saxena dare not oppose!"

Nor did Ajit, wholly absorbed in defending his virginity, oppose.

His mouth was too full of fur.

-----9/VII-----

"Prison!" said Aiyar, "*Arré,* I am a true patriot of the wine bottle! In Fulham all the Bobbies come to attention when they catch a glimpse of me. Why? Because-

*"Between policeman and publican
My domicile is never in doubt
The one so anxious to take me in
The other to throw me out!"*

"If I lived in India, I'd have got, at least, a Legislative assembly seat by now in recognition of the amount of time I have spent behind bars!"

"Given the amount of time you spend in topless bars- I am surprised the English police do not assume you really are an Indian M.L.A!" Dhillon said curtly.

"God forbid!" Aiyar said fervently, "I have not yet been reduced to shop lifting!"

"It is a curious thing about Freedom's votaries, in this country," Raman said thoughtfully, "they remain utterly insecure as to the worth and authenticity of their own Passion- until the Government imprisons them for it."

*"Bulbul ne aashiana chaman se utha liya
Uske bala se boom basay ya Huma rahay,"*
(The nightingale returns not to garden bowers
Who cares if Owl roosts or Huma hovers?)

Nasser was quoting the couplet Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Moghul Emperor, scribbled on his *kurta* while standing in British conqueror's dock, awaiting sentencing for his part in the Indian War of Independence.

"What is the Owl of Minerva or Huma- the bird of Fortune, the touch of whose shadow confers Empery- to us now that the bulbul- the Nightingale- has flown? The Blue Bird of Freedom is just a rumour that we picked up from the Europeans. Can it replace the Nightingale they exterminated ?

"Anarkali was just a song bird. How could she love a noble boy like Salim? The Emperor merely asked his caged bird to release Salim's image from the cage of her heart and put his own in its place. He paid a song bird the complement of implying that song birds can choose their song. How foolish was the song bird! Every song bird loves Freedom. But that very Freedom is the song that invites mens' snare! So, what is the Freedom of these women? What is woman, anyway, outside her cage? Even Anarkali- whom, by common repute, was the best of her sex- had so little faith in her own fidelity that she allowed herself to be bricked up alive by the Moghul. A man would have submitted to the Emperor while extorting benefits for the true Love of his heart. Why was this impossible for Anarkali? Would Ayaz have needed brick walls to hold Mahmud the prisoner of his heart? But, where is Ayaz and where is Anarkali!? How compare the Lover and the infatue? All the Anarkalis of the Congress Party and the Muslim League ran after the shadow of Huma. We were different. We sheltered in the shadow of Ali. We submit to everything, but we pluck benefits for the Love of our hearts.

*"Like a winged shadow falling from the air
The sudden unloosening, the tumult of her hair
And tho' the touch of that shadow confer Empery
The shadow I shelter in suffices for me"*

"Writing from Prison," Raman said musingly, "Nehru, for whom the Past was a Prison, confessed that he never lifted the veil of what, the mystic, Aurobindo called the Pure and Virgin Present, without also reviling himself for adding another recruit to the harlotry of the ages. Instead, unable to will as he would, acting as he willed, he often wished himself a Yeatsian aviator escaping his private "Nightmare of History," in the clouds of an alien conflict. His deepest craving was for that "lonely impulse of Delight"- that negating of one's History- for being negated by History- that moment of sovereign irresponsibility, being responsible for, but, disinterested slaughter, which would allow him, in all sincerity, to avow this epitaph -

*"I balanced all, brought all to mind
The years to come seemed waste of breath
A waste of breath the years behind
In balance with this life, this Death"*

Raman stopped speaking. Quoting from Nehru is an emotional business. He took a sip of Whiskey.

"And the boy Rajiv- what of him?" he continued, "he is as often in an aeroplane nowadays as he was when he was a Professional pilot. But, does he ever break through the clouds his grandfather sowed so thickly with his own confusions?"

Aiyar uttered a couplet to cover the silence

*"Prisoner! Your petitions fail, for your penitence is but Art
"Fitting 'tis for freedom's Jail, is the misprision of your Heart!"*

"Ofcourse!" said Salahuddin jovially, "In this part of the world how else could it be? It is as Faiz wrote from Prison-

*"Maqaam Faiz kisse raah me jacha he nahin
Jo kue yaar se nikle tho sue daar chale!"*

(If he trod another path, his heart would taste but of aloes

Quitting the beloved's hearth, Faiz makes straight for the gallows!)

"Our tragedy," said Raman remembering Shankara, "is that we are a race of idol carvers who have avowed an iconoclastic creed. We worship the Real- but, can't help turning it into a Fiction. Every successive Goddess of Freedom we erect becomes the hypostasis of our own slavery!"

*"Mir ke din o Mazhab," Nasser quoted, "ab puchthe kya ho?
Un ne tho kashka keencha, dar pe baita, kab ka tarq Islam kiya!"*

(Of Mir's Islamic zeal 'twere better not to enquire
On Piety's wheel, he's turned worshipper of Fire!)

"What you say is true of the quest for a more purely Islamic Society as well. By trying to be stricter with ourselves than the Prophet- who in his humanity, interceded for us so successfully- we become as proud and sinful as the Idolaters.

"The *Mu'tazilite* and his *mihnah*- the Ideologue and his Inquisition- are themselves the cloud of occultation in which the Imam is hidden. "Vision comprehendeth him not," says the Koran but the Hadith tell us that "You shall see Him as you see the full moon when there is perfect agreement between yourselves regarding His Vision." The Ideologue takes this as a license to war against those who do not share his vision. But, as surely as the Koran takes precedence over the Hadith, even so certain is it that the individual's Vision- no matter how many fanatics share it- cannot take in His Awesome Reality. "Vision comprehendeth Him not"- it is as Blake says: "The vision of Christ that thou dost see, is my visions greatest Enemy"- but, "Perfect Agreement" does! And "Perfect Agreement" is not something achieved by the Inquisitor's torture rack.

"What I don't understand is why, in Hindustan, every Lover has to be such a fanatic. This acid Love corrodes even the Iron man. What would happen to the petal-like beloved should she ever be exposed to the sting of its vapours?

"There is only one path forward for us. We must never let the struggle to selfhood cease. So-

"The Freedom fighter must never be released from Prison- so that Freedom is saved.

"The *Muhtasib*⁴ must he persuaded to relinquish his Mission- so that Islam is saved.

"Men must struggle hopelessly to become Men- so Hope is saved.

"It is as Iqbal says-

*"Majnoon ne shehr chodda hai, Sahara bhi chorr de
Nazare ke Hawas ho tho Lailah bhi chorr de !"*

(Tormented by Love, he quit the Town
Quit the Desert too Majnoon

If, with Success, your quest you'd crown
Desert Lailah too Majnoon!)

"Futile this struggle for selfhood," Dhillon said effortfully, "Man is a creature which lives only in Language. And Language is, always, only, our Being for Others. A private Language is impossible. Hence, as Pater says, "each mind holds prisoner its own dream of a world." But, even dreams- Freud's Royal road to the Unconscious- even dreams are complicit, for, as Satre says, "there is no mental process that is not intentional or that is not bogged down, deviated, betrayed by Language- but, reciprocally- we are the accomplices of the Treasons that constitute our own depths.""

*"We are all in part a prisoner of others' Perception
And all faith in parole, Criminal Self-Deception
Freedom's a fractal jail with this refinement
All condemn all to solitary confinement!"*

Aiyar interjected- taking advantage of Dhillon's relapse into drunken silence. The hoary old Sardar shook his head slowly. Spittle stained his beard.

"No," he muttered, "No! No!"

And then rallying one last time, "It's worse than that. Much worse. We aren't speaking. We are spoken. Lacan saw that the Unconscious is the discourse of the Other. Ricouer discovered that words really do dream. We are dead. We are finished. We have no dreams left. But words continue to dream us. Language is a virus that has not yet completed its migration from carbon to silicon. In this interregnum, words dream, but- in India, at any rate- they dream of blood. Words dream of blood." And, abruptly, the glass fell from his hand. He keeled over. The others started to their feet in consternation. A moment later their ears were assailed by a thunderous snore.

Aiyar too was drunk. "Enough words," he said tiredly. Cradling the whiskey bottle against his breast, he sank down on to the carpet. He crawled off to a corner, crooning the while-

*"Why needlessly encumber Language?
Trying to say what we needn't or can't
Who'd eat a cucumber sandwich?
In the house of a Maiden Aunt!"*

-----9/VIII-----

"What the Hell is that?!"

Chief Superintendent Saxena's eyes were bulging out of their sockets. He got, painfully, to his feet from out of the depths of the Prison Governor's swivel chair.

⁴ Muhtasib- literally Market Inspector. In this context, Religious Police.

"Respected elder," Vijay said in the chaste Hindi of the Youth Congress leader, "Please do not trouble to rise. Our distinguished visitor does not wish to disrupt your office routine. His slogan is "More work, less talk!" He becomes quite furious when officials make a fuss over him. "I don't want garlands, I want results!" is his slogan."

"What the hell is that?!"

Saxena repeated his question. He was gripping his forehead with both hands. His entourage of dangerous looking Prison trustees were equally non plussed.

Vijay frowned at the Chief Superintendent.

"Bhimsajee," he said turning to the Panda- still contentedly cuddling a petrified Ajit- "CSP Sahib is under too much strain. Please, not to take offence."

"Have I gone mad!" Saxena shouted, "Is that a bear I see before me? What *tamasha* is this?"

"A bear?" Vijay said angrily, "Have a care S.P. Sahib! More senior officers than you have been transferred for lesser offence! Just because Bhimsajee has preferred to remain out of the limelight does not mean to say that he can be insulted with impunity!"

"What insult? Which Bhimsa?" Saxena burred, "All I can see is a huge, hulking, bear!"

"Bhimsajee is a Panda." Vijay said coldly.

"A *Panda*? A Banarasi priest?" Saxena shouted wildly, "Are you trying to pass off that hulking hairy bear as a Brahmin priest?"

"Oof! Such ignorance!" Vijay fulminated, "You police *wallahs* are such duffers. Don't you know the difference between a bear and a Panda? What is a bear except a dancing freak show? The Panda is of a much nobler caste. It is true devotee of Mahatma Gandhi. It is famous for its non violence, its sexual continence and the fact that- alone of all the carnivores- it voluntarily gave up meat eating in order to live entirely upon the holy bamboo shoot. Why else do you think the Mahatma's favourite disciple- our own beloved *Chacha* Nehru- chose the Panda, before all other creatures, as the most fitting pet and playmate for his beloved grandchildren? Bhimsajee- whose late parents, Shree Bhimsapanda and Shrimati Pemapanda, were the childhood companions of Rajiv (and Sanjay of blessed memory)- has already performed a great service to the Motherland. Surely, even you have heard of it?"

"What service?" Saxena asked clutching his hair wildly.

"*Arre*, after Sanjay's tragic death, it was Bhimsa who consoled our grief stricken Madam. He alone showed that, though Sanju was gone, the loyalty remained. When Menaka broke her Mother-in-law's heart by leaving the family house with baby Varun- which of the vaunted loyalists came forward to staunch the bereaved Mother's flowing tears? It was Bhimsa alone- whom Madam, in her moment of weakness, had agreed could go with Menaka- only for Varun *Baba's* sake, you understand- it was Bhimsa, alone, who stood firm. He refused to get into the car with Menaka. He treated Menaka's promises of support on Environmental issues with scorn. Even baby Varun's tears could not move him. "I remain loyal to the family," he seemed to say, "Though I may be only an animal, I can see who is to blame for this breaking up of the Family. I don't say anything. I don't take sides. But- know this also- I will have no part in treachery!"

"It was that one gesture of Bhimsajee that put renewed heart into Madam. Little Priyanka- who has inherited both her grandmother's strength and her sweetness- went rushing up to Bhimsajee and, putting her arms around him, she sobbed- "Don't be sad Bhimoo, don't be sad! This family won't break up! I am a big girl now, Bhimoo- but, see, I will play with you Bhimoo! You won't be lonely Bhimoo! You won't be lonely, I promise! Don't cry Bhimoo, don't cry! See, am I crying? And you are so much bigger than me, so don't cry Bhimoo! Who says Varun *Baba* won't come back? Let them say it in front of me! I'll go and sort them out Bhimoo! It's only filthy Politics, Bhimoo! Why should *you* have to cry?!"

"Seeing this, Sonia- who (being, after all, a foreigner) had not wanted to intervene- Sonia could not stop herself. She rushed up to Madam and hugged her and said,

"Mummy! You still have one daughter left, Mummy!" And she- who was so soon to be holding the bullet shattered body of her Mummy in her arms- she was crying and being hugged by her Mummy.

And then Rajiv *Bhaiyya*- who was still adamantly refusing to come into Politics- he too could not just stand by. He went to his Mother and said, "Ma! When I was little and Sanjay was born, I got jealous. I used to cry. You asked me why I was crying, but I could never tell you. I used to say, "I don't want to cry. The tears just come." You gave me a beautiful piece of advice. You said- "when you feel like crying just go into the garden- next to the beautiful fountain- and cry there." You knew that, once I was in the garden, Bhimsa and Pema would come up and distract me. I would forget my tears. And, I forgot my tears, Ma! I forgot my tears! But, I also forgot that it was that same mean minded jealousy of Sanjay that kept me from coming to your aid the way Sanjay came to your aid, Ma! the way Sanjay came to your aid!"

"Ma, today I admit my jealousy- not to you- when did I ever need to tell you what was in my heart?- no, Ma, it is to myself that I am making this confession!

"Ma, I have'nt cried for so long, Ma! I haven't cried for so long. Not since those days when Pema would come and put her paws on my shoulders, Ma! Today her son Bhimsa has refused to desert you and see, there are tears in my eyes, Ma! There are tears in my eyes!"

"It was then that Madamjee- great hearted lady that she was- always looking to National interest- Indirajee said to her son- "*Beta*, your sister-in-law, Menaka has only been misled by sinister politicians who know that I do not have much time left on Earth. They have told her that unless she comes into Politics she will be powerless to save baby Varun after my assassination. The enemies of India are aware that they are not safe so long as a single one of us is left alive. *Beta*, it is now your duty to come into the family business immediately. It is for the protection of the whole family, because, God has made whole of India our family."

Vijay fell silent. The Panda ate Ajit's collar. Sub Inspector Ram Prakash breathed out a fervent "*Hé Ram!*" Saxena vented his fury on his junior officer.

"You! Sub Inspector! Give salute!"

Ram Prakash snapped to attention and saluted smartly.

"Give report! What is all this nonsense?!" Saxena shouted.

"Sir, what do I know, Sir? I was just eating *paan* when Sharma Sahib is coming up to me and giving me order. Order is for driving car. When I am hearing what is destination, I am obeying. Sir, we are going P.M's residence. Sharma Sahib is going in. I am sitting in car. Two hours later Sonia Mem Sahib is coming out. She is giving me *pakoras*. Sir, what I do, Sir? Sir, I don't raise my eyes to look. Sir, *pakoras* I am keeping safe. Sir- for you- you are wanting? Sir, for me it is like *prasad*- holy food. Untouchable like me, where would I get the presumption to touch holy food? Sonia Mem is speaking to me in Hindi, Sir! What did this unworthy do in previous life to be vouchsafed such Grace? The children also came out- God like beauty, Sir! From whence such Grace showered on this unworthy? Sir, I never asked for it. Sir, I am knowing my place. Sir, even if the Thakurs kill my whole village, even if they blind us as they blinded Bhagalpur⁵, Sir, this they cannot take away from my eyes! This I have seen, Sir! This I have seen!"

Two enormous tears swelled out of the Sub Inspector's swollen eyes. Vijay, though it was he who had coached the policeman, could not help being impressed by Ram Prakash's testimony.

Saxena was baffled. Nevertheless, he continued to browbeat his junior-

"And what about this Panda ? Who is giving authorization for its transport in a Police vehicle?"

"Sir, I know nothing, Sir." Ram Prakash said sulkily. "But Rahul *Baba* is putting Pandajee into car. He is saying to me- "You better take good care of him." Priyanka *beti* is laughing and saying, "Bhimoo is a member of the family!" Sir, this much English, I am understanding. Vijay Maharaj is children's Hindi Pundit. He is scolding them to finish homework and saying that he, himself, will take care of everything. Sonia Mem is waving goodbye. Sir, what can I do, Sir? I am just nothing. I only drive car. What Vijay Maharaj is saying how I should understand? For me is it not forbidden to understand such high flown language? I am just sitting there- but I am like stone. Some terrible punishment will be visited on us because I have seen too much. But, remember, Sir, I did not ask for it! Now it has happened, the Thakurs can do anything they like! I no longer care! My sequence of lives has been made successful!"

Ram Prakash closed his eyes. His eyelids were bulging barrages barely holding back a flood of tears powerful enough to sweep them all away.

Once again Vijay was beset by doubt. Was it all a story he had, himself, fabricated, or was it the Truth? Thoroughly Indian- unlike his friend Ajit- he knew that in India the only Truths that counted are Truths of the heart.

"What has all this to do with me?" Saxena wailed.

"Quite simple, CSP Sahib," Vijay said mildly, "Release Raman into Mr.Sharma's custody."

"Impossible!" Saxena shouted .

"Have a care," Vijay warned," Remember our guest."

"What nonsense!" Saxena shouted, "Has our Indian obsession with the Nehru family come to this that we will bow our heads before even their dog? Is the I.P.S to be reduced to being pooper scoopers to Nehru's pets?"

"*Bhai* Sahib!" Vijay said silkily, "You are truly a courageous man! You are a credit to the force! What the Police need is more brave men like you! Don't worry about giving offence to the Family. Believe me, the

⁵ Bhagalpur- scene of an terrible atrocity where high caste landowners (Thakurs) blinded several scheduled caste men.

thing the Family likes least is the sycophancy of you Bureaucrats! They want only to be treated like ordinary people. It is because you people have still not understood that you are no longer serving a foreign conqueror- it is because you still do not treat the ordinary people like human beings- it is for that reason alone that they have not yet put down the burden of office, in order to enjoy life like ordinary Citizens."

Saxena had visibly blanched at being called courageous. Vijay kept up the attack.

"But, why should you worry, Saxena? I will tell the children how courageous you are. What need you fear from Rajiv *Bhaiyya*? He will be furious with the children when he learns that they have started to take interest in Politics. He still has the dream that they will be spared his burden. Take my word for it, he will personally intervene to prevent your being transferred. While he is alive, you have nothing to fear. Truly, the children will always remember your courage. Varun *Baba* too will hear, when he next visits Bhimsa, of your unexampled stand. That little fellow has inherited his father's temper! But why should you worry? While Rajivji is *alive* you are safe. As for me, I am going home. Sharma Sahib can break the news to the children. For myself- better I start looking for a new position."

"*Arre*, talking, talking, from where to where have you not gone?" Saxena, asked, sketching an ingratiating smile, "*Bhai* Sahib! Vijay Maharaj! Gurujee! Is this the way to treat a simple soldier of the Law? See- we are rough- we are tough- but, are we not also tender hearted? For me Rahul and Varun- are they less than Krishna and Balram? Is Priyanka *Beti* less than *Durga Ma*? See I growl, I show my teeth, but, do I complain when they ride on my back? *Arre*- if they don't pull my whiskers- that!- that! I am telling you- that alone would be intolerable!"

"Less talk, more work!" Vijay said sternly, "Release custody! Do needful! Less talk, more work!"

"But, Vijay Maharaj," Saxena pleaded, "without proper authorization, how I can ..."

"Oof!" Vijay said angrily, "Red tape! Which side are you on? Less talk, more work!"

"But ... Bhimsajee! Panda Sahib," Saxena in the extremity of his despair was now addressing the Panda directly, "Bhimoo! Thou who seest into my heart, Bhimoo!" Saxena was now openly praying in Hindi, "*Hai* Bhimoo! *Arre* O Bhimoo! *Hai*, Thou who, alone, knowst my difficulties, Bhimoo! The whole world has turned against me, Bhimoo! They call me a traitor, Bhimoo! Me! Traitor! Bhimoo, you alone know me! Speak Bhimoo, how long will you remain silent?- can't you see your *bandha*⁶ is being maligned?"

"Less talk, more work," Vijay said for form's sake- nodding his head all the time as if Saxena's was a routine conversion hysteria he had witnessed many times before.

"Bhimoo!" wailed Saxena, "They call you a bear Bhimoo!! But it is me, Bhimoo, it is me that they bait! How long will you remain silent, Bhimoo? How long will you permit these atrocities against your own little bear, Bhimoo?"

"Less talk, more work," Vijay- the officiating priest at this conversion- chanted in desultory fashion.

"Bhimoooo! Thou beloved of Indiraaaa! See, what all they are saying, Bhimoo! The Brahmins call me blasphemer, Bhimoo! But, this bear has tasted your honey Bhimoo! It is the Brahmins who don't know you, Bhimoo! It is these Brahmins who don't know you ..."

Saxena was weeping. The Panda was touched. It released Ajit briefly, in order to wave a paw at Saxena. The Chief Superintendent drew strength from this gesture.

"More work, less talk," Vijay said absently, his face registering awe at the magnitude of the favour the Panda had chosen to confer upon the Policemen.

Some of Saxena's thugs echoed Vijay's English slogan with heartfelt Hindu piety.

"You Brahmins!" Saxena said turning on Vijay, "You Brahmins and Mullahs and Intellectuals and Leaders- you are simply terrorists! You take the name of God- or Progress- or Gandhi, or Nehru- just to put a ring through the nose of us unsophisticated bears! Only Bhimoo knows what all crimes we have not committed at your bidding in His holy name! But see, Bhimoo is standing up for his bear! See, this poor bear is not afraid of you today! Bhimoo is giving me strength! So I say to you- if you will deign to hear the words of a simple little bear like me- give me the written authorization! Show me the sign! Too long have we been the dupes of you heartless Brahmins! Today, in front of the beloved who has come out of the Heart's deep cave, I have the strength to defy you! I am no longer afraid of the opprobrious names you know so well how to attach to us! How will you accuse me of disloyalty before the Nehrus when Nehru-Panda himself is the witness? So clever you thought you were! Where is your cleverness now, Maharaj? I am only a Kayastha- *dush-kayastha-kula*, miserable writer-caste as Raajat says- so, come on!- show me the writing! Without the sign I will do nothing! That is the duty of the caste into which this bear was born! You who brought Bhimoo here- it was you who did not believe in him! For you he was just brute bear. Only for us true devotees is He the Supreme Panda of Truth!"

"Correct!" said Vijay. He turned to the thugs and wagged a finger at them- "See! All this is only through *karishma* of Bhimsajee only! Understand?"

⁶ bandha- votary

He then turned to Saxena.

"You are right," he said soberly, "Too many people have been using Gandhi name for their own nefarious purposes. I do not take offense at your suspicion. You are a worthy man as is evidenced by your recognition of the quality of your guest. That in itself would, ordinarily, have been enough for me. However I am on a mission. God knows what I might not have done to you- worthy man though you are- had not Priyanka *Devi*- who has inherited her great-grand father's quick wits- anticipated your reaction. She whispered in my ear the sign that I should give you- provided, of course, that you proved worthy of being vouchsafed such Grace."

Vijay turned and shouted at the orderly.

"You! Yes, you! Go, run, get the thickest iron chain that there is in this Prison!"

The orderly glanced at Saxena for confirmation. Saxena was too dumbstruck to react.

"On the double! Go!"

The orderly loped off. Vijay, pacified, began a low chanting of "Less talk, more work," which the thugs, reverently, echoed.

The orderly returned, almost doubled over by the weight of a stretch of thick iron chain that had been left over from the British era.

Vijay passed his hand over it a few times. He then offered it to the Panda.

"Raman is in chains," Vijay said to Saxena, "Look at this iron chain. Can any creature break it? See Bhimoo will now break it."

The Panda bit at the chain- which Vijay had flavoured with *ghee*- and the assemblage resumed their chanting of "More talk, less work."

The Panda had bitten through the iron chain. Blessed with the strongest jaws in Creation, not for nothing did the ancient Chinese call the Panda the beast that eats iron. The prison trustees raised a great shout of joy. Some sank down on their knees. Saxena himself was weeping. Vijay instructed the orderly to fetch Raman. The orderly replied that he dared not- Raman was being guarded by Sikh and Hindu fundamentalists. Saxena had put them up to it. But, even Saxena could not control them now because they had scented a political advantage in hanging on to Raman.

"Don't worry!" Vijay said, "Bhimoo will free Raman! What are iron bars to him? Who dares stand in his way?"

For Ajit- still in the arms of the amorous Chinese beast- the next fifteen minutes passed like a surreal dream. They walked through a Jail that had already been alerted to the extraordinary nature of the creature. It bit through iron chains! It released innocent prisoners! The convicts- in their iron cages- cheered and wept and throw offerings. Food! These starving bastards are throwing food! It was pathetic. It was grand. Cry, damn you, cry! Ajit cried and cried. The Panda comforted him. They were back in the car. Raman had been squeezed in between Vijay and Ram Prakash.

Ajit cried into the fur. The Panda ate his buttons.

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"It is getting late," Raman said somewhat regretfully, "I should be going."

"*Arre*, Raman Sahib!" Nasser exclaimed shaking his head in feigned disappointment, "This, I had not expected from you!"

"Raman is a traitor to Wine!" the chief of the toad men shouted. As the evening progressed and the two literary men- Dhillon and Aiyar- succumbed to drink- the toad men had felt emboldened to draw near.

"Arrest him, I say!" the chief toad continued, hugely delighted with his own metaphor,

"Treachery can't go unpunished!"

"Please Raman Sahib," Nasser wheedled, "See- the evening has not even begun. What we have eaten are simply horse doves- as the French call appetizers- the main dinner is yet to come!

"And, what is more, we have engaged the best *Marasins*. You must, at least, stay for the first part of their performance. Otherwise, they will take it as an insult. Even the Moghul Emperor would never have dreamed of insulting an artiste. And, because you are the highest ranking officer here, you represent the new, *topee* crowned, Sultans of Delhi, and hence your leaving will reflect upon the *adaab*- the breeding- of the Congress Raj!"

Raman bowed his head and threw up his hands. His head felt full of cotton wool and his eyes were stinging from the tobacco smoke. He took off his glasses and took a small sip of whiskey.