

Also by amitav ghosh  
the hungry tide  
incendiary  
circumstances

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Also by Amitav Ghosh The Hungry Tide Incendiary Circumstances The Glass Palace The Calcutta Chromosome In an Antique Land The Circle of Reason Sea of Poppies River of Smoke The Shadow Lines Amitav Ghosh www.johnmurray.co.uk First published in Great Britain in 1988 by Bloomsbury Publishing Ltd First published in 2011 by John Murray (Publishers) An Hachette UK Company © Amitav Ghosh 1988 The right of Amitav Ghosh to be identified as the Author of the Work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988. All rights reserved.

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Title Page Copyright Page Dedication Going Away Coming Home Going Away In 1939, thirteen years before I was born, my father's aunt, Mayadebi, went to England with her husband and her son, Tridib. It startles me now to discover how readily the name comes off my pen as 'Mayadebi' for I have never spoken of her thus; not aloud, at any rate: as my grandmother's only sister, she was always Mayathakuma to me. But still, from as far back as I

can remember, I have known her, in the secrecy of my mind, as ' Mayadebi' - as though she were a well-known stranger, like a film star or a politician whose picture I had seen in a newspaper.

Perhaps it was merely because I knew her very little, for she was not often in Calcutta. That explanation seems likely enough, but I know it to be untrue. The truth is that I did not want to think of her as a relative: to have done that would have diminished her and herfamily- I could not bring myself to believe that their worth in my eyes could be reduced to something so arbitrary and unimportant as a blood relationship. Mayadebi was twenty-nine when they left, and Tridib was eight.

Over the years, although I cannot remember when it happened any more than I can remember when I first learnt to tell the time or tie my shoelaces, I have come to believe that I was eight too when Tridib first talked to me about that journey. I remember trying very hard to imagine him back to my age, to reduce his height to mine, and to think away the spectacles that were so much a part of him that I really believed he had been born with them. It wasn't easy, for to me he looked old, impossibly old, and I could not remember him looking anything other than old - though, in fact, at that time he could not have been much older than twenty-nine.

In the end, since I had nothing to go on, I had decided that he had looked like me. But my grandmother, when I asked her, was very quick to contradict me. She shook her head firmly, looking up from her schoolbooks, and said: No, he looked completely different - not at all like you. My grandmother didn't approve of Tridib. He's a loafer and a wastrel, I would sometimes hear her

saying to my parents; he doesn't do any proper work, lives off his father's money.

To me, she would only allow herself to say with a sardonic little twist of her mouth: I don't want to see you loafing about with Tridib; Tridib wastes his time. It didn't sound terrible, but in fact, in my grandmother's usage, there was nothing very much worse that could be said of anyone. For her, time was like a toothbrush: it went mouldy if it wasn't used. I asked her once what happened to wasted time. She tossed her small silvery head, screwed up her long nose and said: It begins to stink. As for herself, she had been careful to rid our little flat of everything that might encourage us to let our time stink.

No chessboard nor any pack of cards ever came through our door; there was a battered Ludo set somewhere but I was allowed to play with it only when I was ill. She didn't even approve of my mother listening to the afternoon radio play more than once a week. In our flat we all worked hard at whatever we did: my grandmother at her schoolmistressing; I at my homework; my mother at her housekeeping; my father at his job as a junior executive in a company which dealt in vulcanised rubber. Our time wasn't given the slightest opportunity to grow mouldy.

That was why I loved to listen to Tridib: he never seemed to use his time, but his time didn't stink. Sometimes Tridib would drop in to see us without warning. My grandmother, for all her disapproval of him, would be delighted whenever he came - partly because she was fond of him in her own way, but mainly because Tridib and his family were our only rich relatives, and it flattered her to think that he had gone out of his way to come and see her.

But of course, she knew, though she wouldn't admit it, that he had really come to nurse his stomach.

The truth was that his digestion was a mess; ruined by the rivers of hard-boiled tea he had drunk at roadside stalls all over south Calcutta. Every once in a while a rumble in his bowels would catch him unawares on the streets and he would have to sprint for the nearest clean lavatory. This condition was known to us as Tridib's Gastric. Once every few months or so we would answer the doorbell and find him leaning against the wall, his legs tightly crossed, the sweat starting from his forehead.

But he wouldn't come in right away: there was a careful etiquette attached to these occasions. My parents and grandmother would collect at the doorway and, ignoring his writhings, would proceed to ask him about his family's doings and whereabouts, and he in turn, smiling fixedly, would ask them how they were, and how I was, and finally, when it had been established to everyone's satisfaction that he had come on a Family Visit, he would shoot through the door straight into the lavatory.

When he emerged again he would be his usual nonchalant, collected self; he would sink into our 'good' sofa and the ritual of the Family Visit would begin. My grandmother would hurry into the kitchen to make him an omelette - a leathery little squiggle studded with green chillies, which would lie balefully on its plate, silently challenging Gastric to battle. This was the greatest sign of favour she could show to a visitor - an omelette made with her own hands (it fell to the less favoured to feast on my mother's masterly tidbits - hot shingaras stuffed with mincemeat and raisins, or crisp little alpuris).

Sometimes, watching him as he chewed upon her omelette, she would ask: And how is Gastric? or: Is Gastric better now? Tridib would merely nod casually and change the subject; he didn't like to talk about his digestion - it was the only evidence of prudery I ever saw in him. But since I always heard my grandmother using that word as a proper noun, I grew up believing that 'Gastric' was the name of an organ peculiar to Tridib - a kind of aching tooth that grew out of his belly button.

Of course, I never dared ask to see it. Despite the special omelette, however, my grandmother would not let him stay long. She believed him to be capable of exerting his influence at a distance, like a baneful planet - and since she also believed the male, as a species, to be naturally frail and wayward, she would not allow herself to take the risk of having him for long in our flat where I, or my father, might be tempted to move into his orbit. I didn't mind particularly, for Tridib was never at his best in our flat.

I far preferred to run into him at the street corners in our neighbourhood. It didn't happen very often - no more than once a month perhaps - but still, I took his presence on these streets so much for granted that it never occurred to me that I was lucky to have him in Calcutta at all. Tridib's father was a diplomat, an officer in the Foreign Service. He and Mayadebi were always away, abroad or in Delhi; after intervals of two or three years they would sometimes spend a couple of months in Calcutta, but that was all.

Of Tridib's two brothers, Jatin-kaku, the elder, who was two years older than Tridib, was an economist with the UN. He was always away too, somewhere in Africa or South East Asia, with his wife and his daughter Ila, who was my

age. The third brother, Robi, who was much younger than the other two, having been born after his mother had had several miscarriages, lived with his parents wherever they happened to be posted until he was sent away to boarding school at the age of twelve.

So Tridib was the only person in his family who had spent most of his life in Calcutta. For years he had lived in their vast old family house in Ballygunge Place with his ageing grandmother. My grandmother claimed that he had stayed on in Calcutta only because he didn't get along with his father. This was one of her complaints against him: not that he didn't get along with his father, for she didn't much care for his father either - but that he had allowed something like that to interfere with his prospects and career.

For her, likes and dislikes were unimportant compared to the business of fending for oneself in the world: as far as she was concerned it was not so much odd as irresponsible of Tridib to shut himself away in that old house with his grandmother; it showed him up as an essentially lightweight and frivolous character. She might have changed her opinion if he had been willing to marry and settle down (and she hadn't any doubt at all that she could have found him a rich wife), but every time she suggested it he merely laughed.

This was further proof that he lacked that core of gravity and determination which distinguishes all responsible and grown-up men; a sure sign that he was determined to waste his life in idle self-indulgence. And yet, although she would pretend to dismiss him with a toss of her head, she never ceased to be wary of him, to warn me against his influence: at heart she believed

that all men would be like him if it were not for their mothers and wives. She would often try to persuade me that she pitied him. Poor Tridib, she would say.

There's nothing in the world he couldn't have done with his connections - he could have lived like a lord and run the country. And look at him - oh, poor Tridib - living in that crumbling house, doing nothing. But even as a child I could tell she didn't pity him at all - she feared him. Of course, even she would acknowledge sometimes that Tridib did not really do 'nothing'. In fact, he was working on a PhD in archaeology - something to do with sites associated with the Sena dynasty of Bengal. But this earned him very little credit in my grandmother's eyes.

Being a schoolteacher herself, she had an inordinate respect for academic work of any kind: she saw research as a life-long pilgrimage which ended with a named professorship and a marble bust in the corridors of Calcutta University or the National Library. It would have been a travesty to think of an irresponsible head like Tridib's mounted in those august corridors. Part of the reason why my grandmother was so wary of him was that she had seen him a couple of times at the street corners around Gole Park where we lived. She had a deep horror of the young men who spent their time at the street-corner addas and tea-stalls around there.

All failcases, she would sniff; think of their poor mothers, flung out on dung-heaps, starving ... Seeing Tridib there a few times was enough to persuade her that he spent all his time at those addas, gossiping: it seemed to fit with the rest of him. But the truth was that Tridib came there rarely, not more



than once or twice a month. I would usually hear when he came: Nathu Chaubey, the paanwala who sat in the stall at the corner of our lane, or my friend Montu, who could see the far side of the lane from his bathroom window, or someone at the second-hand bookstalls, would tell me. They all knew I was related to Tridib.

When I go past Gole Park now I often wonder whether that would happen today. I don't know, I can't tell: that world is closed to me, shut off by too many years spent away. Montu went away to America years ago and Nathu Chaubey, I heard, went back to Benares and started a hotel. When I walk past his paan-shop now and look at the crowds thronging through those neon-lit streets, the air-conditioned shops packed in with rickety stalls and the tarpaulin counters of pavement vendors, at the traffic packed as tight as a mail train all the way to the Dhakuria overbridge, somehow, though the paan-shop hasn't changed, I find myself doubting it.

At that time, in the early sixties, there were so few cars around there that we thought nothing of playing football on the streets around the roundabout - making way occasionally for the number 9, or any other bus that happened to come snorting along. There were only a few scattered shacks on Gariahat Road then, put up by the earliest refugees from the east. Gole Park was considered to be more or less outside Calcutta: in school when I said I lived there the boys from central Calcutta would often ask me if I caught a train every morning, as though I lived in some far-flung refugee camp on the border.

I would usually hear that Tridib was around on my way back from our evening cricket game in the park. My cricket game was the one thing for which my grandmother never grudged me time away from my homework: on the contrary, she insisted that I run down to the park by the lake whether I wanted to or not. You can't build a strong country, she would say, pushing me out of the house, without building a strong body. She would watch from her window to make sure I ran all the way to the park.

But if I happened to hear that Tridib was around I would double back through the park and the back lanes. Someone would always be able to tell me where he was: he was a familiar figure within the floating, talkative population of students and would-be footballers and bank clerks and smalltime politicians and all the rest who gravitated towards that conversation-loving stretch of road between Gariahat and Gole Park. It did not occur to me then to wonder why he was well known, or known at all - I simply took the fact for granted, and was grateful for the small privileges his presence secured for me on those streets: for the odd sweet given to me by a shopkeeper of his acquaintance; for being rescued from a fight in the park by some young fellow who knew him. But in fact it seems something of a mystery to me now, why they put up with him: he was never one of them, he didn't even live there, and he often didn't have much to say.

He was usually content to listen to their loud quicksilver conversations in silence: often when he came he would have about him the tired, withdrawn air of a man who has risen from some exhausting labour and ventured out to distract himself. But occasionally, when he was in the mood and somebody

happened to say something that made a breach in his vast reservoirs of abstruse information, he would begin to hold forth on all kinds of subjects - Mesopotamian stelae, East European jazz, the habits of arboreal apes, the plays of Garcia Lorca, there seemed to be no end to the things he could talk about.

On those evenings, looking at the intent faces of his listeners, watching his thin, waspish face, his tousled hair and his bright black eyes glinting behind his gold-rimmed glasses, I would be close to bursting with pride. But even at those times, when he was the centre of everybody's attention, there was always something a little detached about his manner.

He did not seem to want to make friends with the people he was talking to, and that perhaps was why he was happiest in neutral, impersonal places - coffee houses, bars, street-corner addas - the sort of places where people come, talk and go away without expecting to know each other any further. That was also why he chose to come all the way from Ballygunge to Gole Park for his addas - simply because it was far enough for him to be sure that he wouldn't meet any of his neighbours there.

Perhaps they put up with him simply because he wasn't like them, because he was different - partly also because they were a little frightened of him: of the occasional, devastating sharpness of his tongue, and of the oddly disconcerting streams of talk that would suddenly come gushing out of him. But of course, he also had his uses: there was a streak of intensely worldly shrewdness in him which would stand them in good stead every once in a while.

For example, he would give a student precise and detailed instructions on how to write an examination paper, because he happened to know that Professor So-and-so was going to correct it, and he liked answers that were slanted just so, and the student would do as he had said, and get a first class. Or else when someone was going to appear for a job interview he would tell him what he was likely to be asked, and when the interview was over it would turn out that Tridib's predictions had been dead right.

But equally his advice would sometimes seem deliberately misleading, perverse. Once, for instance, he told a young man who was going to be interviewed by a multinational company that the firm, once famous for its stuffiness, had recently been bought by a Marwari businessman and become very nationalist, and that he would not stand any chance at all of getting in unless he went to the interview dressed in a dhoti. The young man went off to the interview duly clad in dhoti, and found that the doorman wouldn't let him in.

Nobody was ever quite sure where they stood with Tridib: there was a casual self-mockery about many of the things he said which left his listeners uncertain about whether they ought to take what he said at face value or believe its opposite. As a result, inevitably, there were all kinds of conflicting rumours about him - especially because he was secretive about his family and his circumstances to an extraordinary degree - even more than was wholly warranted by the fact that everybody young was turning Maoist at that time.

Someone would remark knowingly that he had heard that Tridib's family was rich and powerful, that his father was a diplomat, the son of a wealthy judge, and his brother was a brilliant economist who had a job with the UN and lived abroad. But no sooner would he say it than a sceptical voice would cut him short and say: Where do you live, mairi? D'you think we've all dropped out of the sky that we'll believe all that - don't you know he's married and has three children and lives with his widowed mother in a slum near Santoshpur?

And since there was something just a little improbable about the son of a diplomat, scion of a rich and powerful family, turning up at those street corners for years on end, it was the latter kind of story that people tended to believe. Sometimes I would try to tell them the truth. But I was just a boy and I happened to have a reputation for being wide-eyed and gullible. Besides, they all knew we lived in a small flat down the lane; if I had tried too hard to persuade them that we had rich and powerful relatives they would only have thought that I was giving myself airs. When I was about nine Tridib once stayed away from his haunts in Gole Park for so long that the regulars began to wonder what had happened to him. I was the only one who knew, because I had stopped by at his house once (as I often did in those days) on my way to my maths tutor's house, in the afternoon. This was during the time he was telling me the story of his journey to England in instalments. I had found him, as always, lying on a mat in his room at the top of the house, reading, with a cigarette smouldering in an ashtray beside him.

When I told him that people were asking about him at Gole Park, he put a finger to his lips. Shh, he said. Don't tell them a thing. Do you know what? I

think I may have discovered the mound where the kings of the Sena dynasty used to bury their treasure. If the government finds out, they'll take everything. Don't say a word to anyone and don't come here again for a while - you may be followed by secret agents. I was thrilled: I hugged the secret to my chest every time I was asked about him. He'd gone, I would say. He's vanished. Then, one evening, on my way to the park, I heard he'd surfaced at Gole Park again.

I doubled back and found him at his favourite adda, on the steps of an old house, surrounded by his acquaintances. I waved to him, from between someone's legs, but he was busy answering their questions and didn't see me. Where have you been all this while, Tridib-da? somebody said. It must be three or four months ... I've been away, I heard him say, and nodded secretly to myself. Away? Where? I've been to London, he said. To visit my relatives. His face was grave, his voice steady. What relatives? I have English relatives through marriage, he said. A family called Price.

I thought I'd go and visit them. Ignoring their sceptical grunts, he told them that he had been to stay with old Mrs Price, who was a widow. Her husband had died recently. She lived in north London, he said, on a street called Lymington Road; the number of their house was 44 and the tube station was West Hampstead. Mrs Price had a daughter, who was called May. And what's she like? a voice asked. Sexy? He reflected on that for a moment, and said, no, she wasn't sexy, not in the ordinary way - she was thick-set, with broad shoulders, and not very tall.

She wasn't beautiful or even pretty in the usual sense, for she had a strong face and a square jaw, but she had thick straight hair which came down to her shoulders in a glossy black screen, like a head-dress in an Egyptian frieze, and she had a wonderful, warm smile which lit up her blue eyes and gave her a quality all her own, set her apart. And what does she do? someone sneered. Is she a wrestler or a hairdresser? She's a student, said Tridib. At least, a kind of student - she's studying at the Royal College of Music. She plays the oboe, and one day she's going to join an orchestra.

It was then, I think, that I could restrain myself no longer. I thrust myself forward through the thicket of trousered legs and cried: Tridib-da, you've made a mistake! I met you last month, don't you remember? You were in your room, lying on your mat, smoking a cigarette. You were looking for ... There was a howl of laughter and a chorus of exclamations: You fraud, you liar, you were just making it all up, you haven't been anywhere ... Tridib did not seem to be at all put out, either by what I had said or by their laughter.

He laughed too, shrugging good-naturedly, and said: If you believe anything people tell you, you deserve to be told anything at all ... Leaning towards me, he pinched my cheek and grinned. Isn't that so? he said, with an interrogatory nod, his spectacles glinting in the lamplight. His aplomb gave an uneasy edge to the laughter and the comments around him: it seemed now that he had made them the victims of a complicated private joke. There was an edgy hostility in their voices when he left. You can't believe a word he says, somebody exclaimed, he just likes to bamboozle people and play jokes on them.

But another, sharper voice broke in and said: Joke? He wasn't joking, he believed everything he said: it was no joke, the fact is that he's a nut - he's never been anywhere outside Calcutta. I was furious with myself now for having exposed Tridib to their ridicule. You don't know what you're talking about, I cried. I was shouting at the top of my voice, so they listened. Still shouting, I told them the truth as I knew it: that Tridib had been to London, with his parents, many years ago, when he was a boy. They had taken his father there for an operation, which couldn't be done in India. They had had to go, even though it was 1939 and they knew there might be a war. His brother Jatin had been left behind in Calcutta with his grandparents because he was older and couldn't be away from school for so long. And yes, there was a family called Price, who lived in West Hampstead, but they weren't relatives - they were very, very old friends of Tridib's family, because Mrs Price's father, Lionel Tresawson, had lived in India when the British were here, and he and Tridib's grandfather, who was a very important man, a judge in the Calcutta High Court, had been friends. Long after Lionel Tresawson went back to England his daughter had married a man who had taught her in college, whom everyone called Snipe because his name was S. N. I. Price. When she'd heard that Tridib's father was ill she had written to them and sent telegrams to say that they must stay with her in London, because she'd bought a big house, and she'd been wanting to take in lodgers anyway.

And it was true that she had a daughter called May, but she was a little baby when Tridib was in London, and as far as I knew he hadn't seen her since. And Mrs Price had had a brother too, called Alan, who had been in Germany before the war ... I gave up, exhausted. That's an even better version than



Tridib's, somebody said, with a snort of laughter. It's true, I shouted back at him. If you don't believe me, ask ... Tridib? A voice prompted, and they doubled up with laughter. I pushed my way out and ran all the way down the lane and up the two flights of stairs to our flat.

I was an hour late, and my grandmother was very angry. In her controlled, headmistress's voice she asked me where I had been, and when I didn't answer she raised her hand, drew it back and slapped me. Where have you been? she asked again, and this time I blurted out that I'd been down at the corner. She slapped me again, really hard. Haven't I told you, she said, you're not to go there and waste your time? Time is not for wasting, time is for work. I met May Price for the first time two years after that incident, when she came to Calcutta on a visit.

The next time I met her was seventeen years later, when I went to London myself. I went to England on a year's research grant, to collect material from the India Office Library, where all the old colonial records were kept, for a PhD thesis on the textile trade between India and England in the nineteenth century. More than a month passed after I arrived in London, before I could meet May again. I had to go to a great deal of trouble to find her. She was playing in an orchestra and living on her own in a bedsit in Islington. Mrs Price gave me her phone number and I called her several times, but she was never in.

And then, one morning, while looking through the entertainment page of the Guardian, I saw a notice which said that her orchestra would be playing the Dvorak Cello Concerto that evening at the Royal Festival Hall. I went there

early that evening: I could only afford a ticket for a place on one of the benches behind the orchestra, and I had heard they sometimes sold out very early. But as it turned out I managed to get a seat quite easily: the soloist was a Swedish cellist who clearly did not have much drawing power. When I went in, I discovered that my seat was directly behind the woodwind section.

Soon I saw her; she was fussing with her music-stand, dressed, like all the other women in the orchestra, in a black skirt and white blouse. I watched her as she arranged her music and chatted with an elderly horn player who was sitting in front of her. Her hair was still cut exactly as I remembered it from the time she had stayed with us in Calcutta: falling thick and straight to her shoulders, mantling her neck and the sides of her face; but where I remembered it as dark and shiny, it was streaked now with bands of grey which shimmered when they caught the light.

Her shoulders, always broad for her height, had thickened; she seemed almost top-heavy now, for she hadn't added an inch to her waist. I caught a glimpse of her face when she turned to say something to a woman who was sitting in the row behind. She had deep lines running from the corner of her mouth to her nose, and her eyes, which had once been a clear, bright blue, had grown pale and prominent. Watching her through that concert, I thought of her as she was when she came to stay with us in Calcutta, all those years ago. We had moved to a much larger house then, and she had been given the guest room, downstairs.

In the evenings, whenever I managed to elude my mother and grandmother (who didn't want me to bother her), I would slip into her room, sit on the

floor and listen to her playing scales on the recorder she had brought to practice on. Often she would blush with embarrassment, put her recorder down and say: Look, this must be so boring for you, all these horrible scales. But I wouldn't let her stop. I would insist that she go on playing, and I would sit there entranced, and watch her blowing into her recorder, frowning, the muscles in her cheeks knotting in concentration.

She was not frowning when she played in that concert in the Festival Hall: it was evident that her mastery of her instrument was so complete now that she had to give little thought to the music. All through that concert she, and most of the other musicians around her, performed with a bored mechanical precision, very much like veteran soldiers going through a familiar exercise at their sergeantmajor's command. When the concert was over I waited in my seat until the audience had left and the members of the orchestra were busy packing their instruments.

Then I leant over the railing and called out her name. She looked up, narrowing her eyes. She saw me and gave me a politely puzzled smile. Then, to my surprise, she recognised me, and her face lit up and she waved. Pointing at the exit she mouthed the words: I'll see you outside. I went out into the plush, chandeliered foyer and waited. Five minutes later, I saw her, picking her way through the last stragglers, her shoulders rolling, like a boxer's, as she walked towards me. We met half-way down the foyer and froze in mutual embarrassment.

She put out a tentative hand, and then suddenly she smiled, rose on tiptoe, pulled my head down and kissed me on the cheeks, her oboe clattering

against my neck in its leather case. As we made our way out, I asked her how she had recognised me, after all those years. She gave it a moment's thought and said: I put two and two together I suppose - I knew you were in London; Mother told me. She stopped to give me a quick, appraising look. And besides, she said, it's not as though you don't bear a family resemblance to the boy I met in Calcutta - and I remember him very well.

Her voice had a deep, gravelly, almost masculine texture; I couldn't decide whether it had always been like that or whether it had changed. While she was leading me towards Waterloo tube station through a maze of concrete walkways, she stopped to ask: Have you got anything planned for the rest of the evening? I shook my head, trying not to look too eager. Well, she said, pausing to think; you could always come back with me to my bedsit, for dinner. I can't offer you very much - just a beansprout salad and some grilled fish. I don't know whether you care for that kind of thing?

Yes, I said, nodding. That would be very nice. She gave me a quick smile. If it's any consolation, she said, remember I sprouted the beans myself. In the tube, on our way to Islington, I told her how bored she had looked through the concert. She nodded sheepishly. Yes, she said; you've guessed my guilty secret. I only stay on with the orchestra because I've got to make a living somehow ... She cleared her throat, hesitated, and went on to add: You know - I spend most of my time working for Amnesty and Oxfam and a couple of other relief agencies, small ones, you won't have heard of them.

I asked her a few questions and she described the project she was working on just then with a businesslike briskness: it was something to do with

providing housing for the survivors of an earthquake in Central America. It was evident that she found a great deal of satisfaction in her work. Her room was on the first floor of a house that looked out on Islington Green. As she stepped in and switched on the lights, a television set near her bed lit up too, automatically. She hurried across the room and switched it off. Turning to face me she said, guiltily, as though she were making a confession: I leave it on all the time.

It's my only real indulgence. It fills up the room - it feels a bit empty otherwise. It was a large, pleasant room, full of plants; its windows looked out over the trees on the Green. There was very little furniture in it - an armchair, a desk, and a large bed, pushed up against the wall at the far end of the room. There were also a few cushions, with bright Gujarati mirrorwork covers, scattered on the floor, but they looked as though they had been thrown there more to fill up empty space than to be sat on: it did not look like a room where visitors were often expected.

With a formal, faintly ironic little bow May invited me to amuse myself by looking through her bookshelf while she made our dinner. Glancing through her collection of Russian novels in paperback, miniature music scores and illustrated healthbooks, I came upon an old photograph. It was pinned, along with a dozen other scraps of paper, on to one of those large boards that I had seen hanging over many student desks in London. It was a picture of her, taken a long time ago. While I was looking at it she darted out of her cupboard-like kitchenette to fetch something from the refrigerator.

She noticed me standing in front of her board and came and stood beside me. When she saw what I was looking at she gave me a quick glance and opened her mouth to say something. But then, changing her mind, she whipped around again and went back to the kitchenette. Curious now, I followed her there and stood leaning against the wall, watching her as she bent down to look under the grill. I remarked casually that the picture must have been taken a long time ago: that was exactly how she had looked, if my memory served me right, when she had stayed with us in Calcutta.

Not quite exactly, she said, watching the grill, her voice ironically precise; it was taken at least a couple of years before that. She looked at me, dusting her hands, raising her eyebrows as though in surprise. That was the picture, she said, a copy of which I was once privileged to send to Tridib. Later, when we were eating our dinner, I discovered that in 1959, when he was twenty-seven and she nineteen, they had begun a long correspondence. Tridib had written first, she told me.

He had always sent Mrs Price cards at Christmas, ever since they left London in 1940. But that year he had sent two, one to Mrs Price and one to her. He had inscribed a little note in her card saying that he remembered her very well, though she could not possibly remember him, that it would be a great pity if they lost touch altogether, and he hoped that some day she would find time to write to him. She was both touched and intrigued: she had already heard a great deal about him.

Smiling at the memory, she told me how his card had reached her just when she was trying to get over an adolescent crush on a schoolboy trombonist,

who had had no time for her at all and had not been overly delicate about making that clear. It was nice to feel that someone wanted to befriend her. She had written back, and after that they had written to each other regularly – short, chatty letters, usually. Soon, penfriend-like, they had exchanged photographs. I like to think that Tridib received May's photograph the day he came to Gole Park and told us that made-up story.

Actually my grandmother was wrong about Tridib: he was nothing at all like the hardened gossip-lovers who spent most of their time hanging around the street corners at Gole Park. He was often maliciously dismissive of those people; marine mammals, he would say of them, creatures who sink to the bottom of the sea of heartbreak when they lose sight of the herd. The truth was that, in his own way, Tridib was something of a recluse: even as a child I could tell that he was happiest in that book-lined room of his, right at the top of their old family house.

It was that Tridib whom I liked best; I was a bit unsure of the Tridib of the street corners. His niece Ila and I used to disagree about this. We talked about it once, when we were about sixteen. I was soon to leave to go to college in Delhi, I remember, and Ila and her parents had just flown in from Indonesia for a short holiday. Soon after they arrived in Calcutta, they came to visit us. I still remember how my grandmother gasped when Ila climbed out of the car, the tasselled end of her long thick braid swinging freely in front of her.

Even my grandmother, who was very critical in all matters to do with appearance, especially where Ila and her family were concerned, pinched

her chin and said: Our Ila is growing into a real beauty – she’s taken after Maya. But as for me, I was disappointed: ever since I could remember, Ila had worn clothes the like of which neither I nor anyone else I knew in Calcutta had ever seen, and here she was now, dressed in a simple white sari with a red border, like any Bethune College girl on her way to a lecture.

Soon, growing tired of our parents’ conversation, we went out, the two of us, for a walk. Involuntarily we found ourselves walking towards the lake. But when we reached it and spotted an empty bench, we both remembered how we used to sit on those benches when we were children, with our arms around each other’s waists, pretending to count the birds on the little island in the middle of the lake, and, suddenly embarrassed, we turned and hurried off towards the Lily Pool Bridge, in the distance, the awkwardness of our silence making me trip where there was nothing to trip on.

At last, because I could think of nothing else to say, I asked her whether she remembered those days when we were children and she and Robi used to come to Calcutta in the summers, and three of us used to go up to Tridib’s room whenever we were bored and listen to him, in the still, sultry heat of the afternoons, while he lay on a mat, propped up with pillows, cigarette smoke spiralling out of his fingers, and spoke to us in that soft, deep voice of his, about the behavioural differences between the Elapidae and Viperidae families of snakes, or the design of the temples at Karnak, or the origins of the catamaran.

Or, for example, the time when Robi and I decided to become explorers in the Empty Quarter, and went running up to his room to ask for a few tips



before setting off. He had smiled and gone on to tell us in ghastly detail about the circumcision rites of one of the desert tribes. And then, spectacles glinting, he had said: So before you leave you'd better decide whether you would care to have all that done to your little wee-wees, just in case you're captured. I asked her if she remembered how Robi and I had spread our hands instinctively over our groins, and how angry we had been when she had laughed. Mere vagina-envy, she said, laughing, and I tried to keep my face impassive as though I was accustomed to girls who used words like that. But I could tell she didn't remember. I asked her, then, if she had any memory of the stratagems we used to employ to get Tridib to tell us about the year he had spent in London, during the war; of how we used to pore over his photographs when we could persuade him to bring them out; of how he used to tell us about the people in them, pointing out Mrs Price with May in her arms, or

Alan Tresawsen, her brother, with his bad arm hanging limply at his side, and her husband Snipe, who used to treat himself with Yeast-Vite tonic for his neuralgia and bile beans for his blood, Doan's kidney pills for his backaches and Andrews Salt for his liver, Iglodine for his cuts and Mentholatum for his catarrh; Snipe, who had once sent Tridib to the chemist's shop on West End Lane to buy him a glue called Dentesive so that his dentures would not be shaken out by the bombs. Yes, she said nodding, mildly puzzled by my insistence, she did have a faint recollection, but she could not exactly say she remembered. But how could you forget?

I cried. She shrugged and arched her eyebrows in surprise, and said: It was a long time ago - the real question is, how do you remember? But of course, to me it wasn't a question at all. I tried to tell her, but neither then nor later, though we talked about it often, did I ever succeed in explaining to her that I could not forget because Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and he had given me eyes to see them with; she, who had been travelling around the world since she was a child, could never understand what those hours in Tridib's room had meant to me, a boy who had never been more than a few hundred miles from Calcutta.

I used to listen to her talking sometimes with her father and grandfather about the cafes in the Plaza Mayor in Madrid, or the crispness of the air in Cuzco, and I could see that those names, which were to me a set of magical talismans because Tridib had pointed them out to me on his tattered old Bartholomew's Atlas, had for her a familiarity no less dull than the lake had for me and my friends; the same tired intimacy that made us stop on our way back from the park in the evening and unbutton our shorts and aim our piss through the rusty wrought-iron railings.

I began to tell her how I longed to visit Cairo, to see the world's first pointed arch in the mosque of Ibn Tulun, and touch the stones of the Great Pyramid of Cheops. I had been talking for a while when I noticed that she wasn't listening to me; she was following a train of thought in her mind, frowning with concentration. I watched her, waiting eagerly to hear what she would have to say. Suddenly she clicked her fingers, gave herself a satisfied nod,

and said aloud, inadvertently: Oh yes, Cairo, the Ladies is way on the other side of the departure lounge.

I had a glimpse, at that moment of those names on the map as they appeared to her: a worldwide string of departure lounges, but not for that reason at all similar, but on the contrary, each of them strikingly different, distinctively individual, each with its Ladies hidden away in some yet more unexpected corner of the hall, each with its own peculiarity, like the flushes in Stockholm's Arlanda, so sleekly discreet that she had once missed two flight calls because it had taken her so long to understand how the handle worked.

I imagined her alighting on these daydream names - Addis Ababa, Algiers, Brisbane - and running around the airport to look for the Ladies, not because she wanted to go, but because those were the only fixed points in the shifting landscapes of her childhood. When I went to London, a decade later, often when Ila suggested going out somewhere, to a film in Brixton perhaps, or to a new Vietnamese restaurant in Maida Vale, I would jump to my feet and, before I knew it, I would cry: Yes, let's go, let's go on the Underground. She would burst out laughing and mimic me, saying: You'd think we were going on the bloody Concorde.

To her the Underground was merely a means of shifting venue: it would irritate her to see how excited I got when we stepped on to the escalators; she would watch me as I turned to look at the advertisements flashing past us on the walls, gulped in the netherworld smell of electricity and dampness and stale deodorant, stopped to listen to the music of the buskers booming

eerily through the permanent night of the passageways, and in annoyance she would tug at my elbows and hiss: Hurry, hurry, you can't stop here, you'll hold people up.

And if I still lingered she would snap at me impatiently: For God's sake stop carrying on like a third-world tapioca farmer - it's just the bloody Underground. And I would say to her: You wouldn't understand: to you Cairo was a place to piss in. I could not persuade her that a place does not merely exist, that it has to be invented in one's imagination; that her practical, bustling London was no less invented than mine, neither more nor less true, only very far apart.

It was not her fault that she could not understand, for as Tridib often said of her, the inventions she lived in moved with her, so that although she had lived in many places, she had never travelled at all. All through her childhood, every time her family came back to Calcutta for a holiday, they brought back souvenirs from wherever they happened to be living at that time. Her parents would bring back all kinds of things - Indonesian leather puppets or improbable North African stools with camellike humps.

But there was only one kind of souvenir that Ila ever thought of bringing back and I was the only person to whom she would show them. We would slip away to the shade of the rusty water tanks on the roof of their house, and there, with a tight little smile, she would produce a large manila folder. They were always the same, and in time they came to mean as much to me as they did to her: they were the Yearbooks of the International Schools of

whatever city she happened to be living in at that time. They were always full of photographs.

There would be one of each student and then pages of others - of groups of friends, of parties and tennis matches, of whole classes together. For a long time I could not believe that they were really pictures of a school, because in the pictures the boys and girls were standing around all mixed up together, and besides, not one of them was in uniform. To me, the clothes they were wearing in those pictures seemed to have as little to do with school as the costumes at a circus. Then Ila would point herself out, and there she would be, dressed in jeans or a skirt, and even, once, a Persian lambskin waistcoat.

She would show me her friends, standing beside her, and I would roll their names around my tongue - Teresa Cassano, Mercedes Aguilar, Merfeth ashSharqawi - names of girls mainly at first, and then, as we grew older, boys too - Calouste Malekian, Cetshtwayo James, Juin Nagajima - names which imprinted themselves on my memory so that years later I recognised Mercedes Aguilar at once when she turned up in a photograph two continents away from where she'd been when I had first seen her in those photographs. Ila's closest friends were always the most beautiful, the most talented, the most intelligent girls in the school.

She would point them out to me in the pictures of picnics and fancy-dress dances. The three of us went to that together, she would say, Teresa and Merfeth and I; and we spent the whole evening talking to each other - you should have seen the boys buzzing around us - but Teresa decided that we weren't going to dance that evening, just like that, so ... And she would point

Teresa and Merfeth out to me, laughing, slender girls, making faces at the camera. But somehow, though Ila could tell me everything about those parties and dances, what she said and what she did and what she wore, she herself was always unaccountably absent in the pictures.

When we were fourteen she once pointed to the picture of a boy who, to me, already looked like a grown man, with a face like an American film star, square-jawed and cleft-chinned, with long black hair that curled down to his shoulders. His name is Jamshed Tabrizi, she said, he's a fencing champion and this year his father gave him a BMW sports car for his birthday; he can't drive it yet because he's not old enough, but their chauffeur brought it around to the school one day. It's red, like lipstick, and as soon as he gets his licence, we're going to drive down to the beach at Pattaya on Sundays; it's just a few miles from Bangkok.

And then, in a rush, looking at me sideways, she added: He's my boyfriend. But a few pages later, in their class photograph, there he was, right in the foreground, in the centre of the front row, grinning, broad-shouldered, a head taller than anyone else, with his arms thrown around the shoulders of two laughing blonde girls. And before she flipped the page I caught a glimpse of Ila herself, on the edge of the back row, standing a little apart, unsmiling, in a plain grey skirt, with a book under her right arm.

She saw that I had noticed, and when I came upon that Yearbook again a week later I discovered that that page had been torn out. I felt a constriction in my throat, for suddenly it seemed to me that perhaps she was not so alien, after all, to my own small, puritanical world, in which children were

sent to school to learn how to cling to their gentility by proving themselves in the examination hall. Those schools were all that mattered to Ila; the places themselves went past her in an illusory whirl of movement, like those studio screens in old films which flash past the windows of speeding cars.

I confronted her with this once, in London, when the three of us, she, Robi and I, happened to be together in a pub, the Kembles Head, on Long Acre, a short walk from Covent Garden. Robi was stopping by in London on his way to Harvard. He was on leave from his job in the Indian Administrative Service, so that he could take up a fellowship in administration and public affairs for six months. We had decided to spend the evening together. Ila laughed when I reminded her about those Yearbooks and, picking up her glass of whisky, she said: Of course those schools mattered to me, schools are all that matter to any child, it's only natural.

It's you who were peculiar, sitting in that poky little flat in Calcutta, dreaming about faraway places. I probably did you no end of good; at least you learnt that those cities you saw on maps were real places, not like those fairylands Tridib made up for you. But of course, among other things, Tridib was an archaeologist; he was not interested in fairylands: the one thing he wanted to teach me, he used to say, was to use my imagination with precision. For instance, when Ila and I were ten, her family came to Calcutta from Colombo for a holiday.

Ila came with Tridib and her mother to visit us, and her mother, in her kindly way, knowing how fascinated I was by the countries they lived in, asked Ila to tell me a story about their house that she thought would interest her.

Their house was in a quiet part of Colombo where diplomats and senior civil servants and people like that lived. It was an area where sprawling bungalows with huge lawns were threaded through by lanes that were often flooded with puddles of scarlet gulmohur and yellow jacaranda. Their house was at one end of a very quiet lane.

It was a big house with large verandas and a steeply sloping roof covered with mossy tiles. The garden was at the back. It seemed to stretch out from inside the house; when the French windows were open the tiled floor of the drawing room merged without a break into the lawn. It was a quiet secluded garden, with a bronze vat, taller than a child, standing like a brooding tumulus in a corner. And it had a blue-tiled lily pond in the centre, in which plump, fantailed goldfish flashed their white bellies at the sun. There was only one problem: adjoining the garden at the back was a poultry farm.

This caused Ila's mother a good deal of worry, apart from the bother of the smell and the noise, for she had heard that snakes were certain to appear wherever there were chickens. Still, the house was surrounded by a very high wall, and when the breeze was blowing in the right direction the garden was as tranquil as a Japanese cloister. One morning, soon after they moved in, their cook Ram Dayal came running upstairs and burst in upon Ila's mother who was taking her midmorning nap in an easy chair on a veranda. Muggerr-muchh, shrieked Ram Dayal. Save me, burra-mem bachao me from his crocodile.



He was a tall, willowy, usually drowsy man, but now his eyes were starting from his gaunt face and his lips were flecked with spittle. Never heard of such a thing, Ila's mother said to us. Crocodile in my garden; almost fell out of my easy chair. My grandmother and I looked carefully away from each other, but ever afterwards the thought of Ila's mother, with her rounded figure, as soft and plump as two buns squashed together in a schoolbag, falling out of her easy chair at the thought of a crocodile in her garden, was enough to reduce us to helpless laughter.

Man was in a state, she snorted. Never seen anything like it. But now, being the woman she was, she folded her tiny hands in her lap, pushed her knot of hair back to the top of her head and sat up in her chair in the way the family had come to know so well, that characteristic pose that had earned her the nickname of Queen Victoria. Shatup Ram Dayal, Queen Victoria snapped. Stop bukbukking like a chhokra-boy. Dekho burra-mem, he said again, his thin voice vanishing into a screech. There it is, in the garden. And right he was, Queen Victoria said, her voice shrill with amazement.

Damn and blast, there it was - a heck of a huge great big lizard, all grey and black, nasty greatbig creature, with a little pointed head and a tongue like a bootlace, wandering about in my garden like a governor at a gymkhana. But being, as she was, the daughter of a man who had left his village in Barisal in rags and gone on to earn a knighthood in the old Indian Civil Service, she retained her composure. Muro-it, Ram Dayal, she cried. Catch hold of it before Ila-mem sees it, and cut its head off. (As though it were a penis or something, Ila said to me years later. But Ram Dayal was knocking his head

against the wall now, the whites of his eyes showing, tears zig-zagging down his cheeks. Why did I come to Lanka? he wailed. I knew Ravana would come to get me. Shatup Ram Dayal, Queen Victoria snapped. She rang the little bronze bell she always carried to summon Lizzie, Ila's recently arrived Sinhalese ayah. Yes madam? Lizzie said from the doorway. She was a thin, middle-aged woman with a stern mouth and a small, wasted face, always very neatly dressed in the blouse and sari of her native Kandyan foothills.

Waving a hand with careful nonchalance, Queen Victoria said: Lizzie, at it-garden looking-looking. The animal was sunning itself now, its grey chest raised high on stiff forelegs. Lizzie, what it-thing being-being? Queen Victoria said. She always spoke like that to Lizzie, though Lizzie spoke very good English and even knew a little Hindi. It was a language she had invented on the spot when Lizzie first came to them on the recommendation of a senior Sinhalese civil servant. Lizzie looked at it and laughed. That's a thala-goya madam, she said. Very common here, very gentle animal.

Queen Victoria glared at the reptile. Gentle, by Jove! she said to us. Wretched beast could have passed for a bloody tyrannosaurus. She turned to look at Lizzie. No possible, she said, it-thing killing-killing? Kill it? Lizzie cried, once she had decoded this. But why to kill it? They keep snakes away. She ran downstairs, and a few minutes later they saw her go into the garden with an armful of cabbage stalks and vegetable peel. She scattered them on the grass and the animal darted forward and began to feed. Hai, hai, hai, gasped Ram Dayal. Hai, hai, hai!

Determined not to be outdone by Lizzie, Queen Victoria stiffened her back and went out into the garden herself, taking a few vegetables with her. The animal fixed its eyes balefully upon her as soon as she stepped into the lawn. She froze. Then, drawing on her last reserves of courage, she managed to mutter to it: Eating-eating nice veggie-veggies? which was only her Lizzie-language turned inside out, but the animal's tail seemed to flicker in answer and from that moment onwards she considered it a part of her household: she was always at ease with anything and anybody who would respond to one of her private dialects.

After that, even though many of her Sinhalese acquaintances were alarmed to find a monitor lizard on her lawn and told her stories about how they had been known to break children's shinbones with a swipe of their tails, she allowed it the run of her garden, except, of course, when she had parties, when Lizzie was made to tie it to a tree with a length of rope. One day, early in the morning after one of her parents' parties, when the lawn was still dotted with cigarette stubs and half-eaten snacks, Ila went out into the garden to read.

She had a book with her that she had had to put away the night before when she was only twenty pages from the end, because Lizzie had switched off the lights in her bedroom. She flopped into a deckchair beside the lily pond and in a moment she was absorbed in her book. Ten pages later, still engrossed, she heard a soft splash in the lily pond. It was a very gentle splash, no louder than the sound of a goldfish's tail flicking the surface.

But she stirred, and, not quite taking her eyes off the page, she caught a glimpse of a shadow, as slim and sinuous as a branch of oleander, stretching from the edge of the lawn, under her chair and into the pool. Then the shadow rippled, and this time she looked up properly and saw scales glinting on a long muscular body. She screamed, and the book dropped out of her hands. It hit the edge of her chair and tumbled off, and she heard a dull, fleshy thud as it struck scales and muscle. The whole length of the snake's body flashed past under the chair with an angry rustle, and then, somewhere behind her, she heard a slow prolonged hiss.

She turned, slowly, stiffly, in the way one has to when one knows that one's lungs are suddenly empty and one's muscles have gone rigid with fear. The snake's head was about a foot from her back. Its body lay curled, in tight regular coils, flat on the earth, while its head had reared up, higher than the back of the chair. She was whimpering now, trying to call out, but at the same time, looking at the snake's head, she saw it more clearly than she'd ever seen anything before, with the telescopic clarity of absolute concentration.

She could see its tiny eyes, the flaring nostrils at the end of the sharply pointed head, the tongue, no longer flickering, drawn into the soft pink mouth in readiness, the fangs, erect now, and dripping. Then she heard another sound at the far end of the garden and dimly, without turning her head, she saw the thala-goya thrashing at the end of its rope, battering the tree it was tied to with its tail. The snake heard it too, and it hesitated for a

moment with its body arched. Its eyes settled upon Ila again and its neck bent still further back till it was like a drawn bow.

Then its head flashed forward. At that moment, reflexively, Ila turned her body, a very small movement, but enough to overbalance the chair. She fell, the chair tumbled over with her, and the snake's fangs glanced off its steel legs. It reared back again like a snapping whiplash. Ila tried to push herself up, but her hands slipped and she fell back. And then, with all the suddenness of a knot springing undone, the coiled snake dropped its head on the grass and shot away towards the wall. She looked up to see the thalagoya lumbering after it. It had bitten through the rope.

But the snake was quicker and it had slithered over the wall long before the thalagoya could cross the lawn. So, young chap, Queen Victoria said, patting my head, her eyes twinkling. What do you make of that? I glanced instinctively towards Tridib. He was looking at me, eyes narrowed, head cocked. I was nervous now: I could see that he was waiting to hear what I'd have to say, and I didn't want to disappoint him. My mother and grandmother were exclaiming with horror about the snake, asking Queen Victoria how big it was, whether it was poisonous or not.

Taking my cue from them, I chose a safe course: hoping to earn Tridib's approval by showing him how well I remembered everything he told us, I asked Queen Victoria whether the snake was of the species Boidae or Elapidae. Queen Victoria goggled at me and mumbled something to the effect of: Well that's a bit of an uppercut, young chap; I don't think I could tell you in a month of Sundays. While she was mumbling I stole a glance at

Tridib. He had pursed his lips and was shaking his head in disappointment. I sat out the rest of their visit in crestfallen silence.

On the stairs, when I was going down to see them off, while Ila and her mother lingered over their goodbyes, Tridib said to me casually that, if one thought about it, there was nothing really very interesting about snakes – after all, if I saw one in the lake, for example, what would I do? I'd come back home and tell everyone, but in a few minutes I'd forget about it and get back to my homework: the snake would have nothing whatever to do with my real life. I did not particularly care for the suggestion that my homework was my real life