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FICTION

INNOCENCE

by Ruth Prawer Jhabvala

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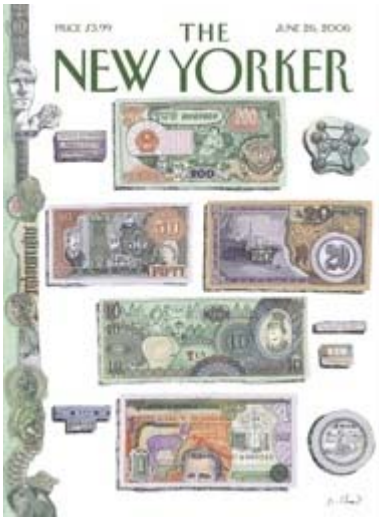

Dinesh never became a famous writer, but he did become a writer, and he published several novels. I translated one of these from the original Hindi into English and tried to get it published here, but I was told that the background was too unfamiliar to be of interest to an American audience. Of course, it was very familiar to me; I had actually lived in New Delhi and was not only a witness to the principal events but a part of them.

In the novel, I was called Elisabeth (not my name). Dinesh himself, who was the narrator, became D. The fictional Elisabeth and the real me had both come to India to absorb the wisdom of a woman saint who lived in a tenement building near the Old Delhi railway station. The building was ancient, and so crammed with tenants and subtenants that it appeared to be leaning sideways. It was also very noisy, but the two rooms that our teacher occupied had a peaceful atmosphere. Her disciples sat cross-legged in a circle around her while she spoke of the Absolute, both in its aspect of the inconceivably immense and as the tiny Person no bigger than a thumb within the human heart.

The real Dinesh and the fictional D. had the same attitude toward our absorption in this heady stuff. He said that we lived in an India that had been invented in the nineteenth century by German professors, and that, by keeping our eyes fixed on mystical and mythical abstractions, we failed to look down at the earth and the people crowding it. It was only, he said, when something unpleasant happened to us—a sickness, or some fat shopkeeper cheating us, or a youth groping us on a bus—it was only then that we recognized that we were living in a real place, in a city like any other; and at once our noble, our spiritual India was degraded into a country of thievery and lechery. By the time he got to this point, the real Dinesh, like the fictional D., was very worked up, but, unlike D., he recovered himself quickly and said, “Not you, of course—this is not personal,” and he flashed me a smile in which both his teeth and his glasses participated.

Dinesh and I were fellow-lodgers in the house of Mr. and Mrs. Malhotra, a childless middle-aged couple who looked more like brother and sister than like husband and wife. Both were small and delicate, and had ivory complexions, much fairer than Dinesh’s slightly pockmarked skin. They had one servant, Gochi, an old and tattered sweeper woman who called her employers Sahibji and Bibiji—respectful forms of address that I, too, adopted. At first, Dinesh and I were the only lodgers, though there was another room available. The advantage of the house was that it was centrally situated—it was almost the only small domestic residence left in the area and was surrounded on all sides by huge commercial buildings—but it was tiny, and badly in need of whitewashing, with many cracks, which expanded during the monsoon season. There was a central courtyard with a series of little rooms opening out from it. In front, there was also a patch of garden in which a tree stood, with a single living branch and a few sickly leaves hanging from it.

I was glad to be staying in an Indian household, for I had not received a lot of invitations to local homes. At that time, there were many Westerners like me, in love with India, and people tended to laugh at us—perhaps because those of us who

wore saris sometimes tripped over them, and although we were rapt while listening to Indian music, we couldn't tell one raga from another. Also, some of the foreign girls got involved with respectable Indian boys, whose families then had to rush to find brides for them or send them away for higher studies.

There was nothing like that between Dinesh and me, though we became good friends. He was from Kanpur, the son of a poor widow; he had won a scholarship to Delhi University and, after graduating, had got a job with All India Radio. He wanted to be a writer, and so did some of his friends, all of them with very little money to spare after sending most of their salaries home. Many of these friends were gloomy and bitter, but Dinesh seemed always to be in a good mood, though I noticed that his cheerfulness often became exaggerated in times of stress. He had a very bony face, and his pitch-black hair was straight and lank; his teeth were too numerous and too large for his mouth, but he was charming when he smiled.

He and I walked around the public parks and gardens, taking shelter from the hot sun in mausoleums or pavilions as we carried on our discussions. He laughed at my idea that it was almost impossible for anyone not Indian to understand India. "Oh, I see," he said with the amused irony that was his favorite mode of debate. "So it is your opinion that we are not like other humans but completely different, monstrous and bizarre? And, by the way, what about you? What about this?" he said, indicating my sari. "Why are you wearing it? Why are you loving our music, not to mention our food, our parathas and tandoori rotis and so on? And also, may I ask, why are you here at all? Isn't that bizarre?" He didn't give me time to answer—and, anyway, what was there to say? We, all of us here in Delhi, all of us pale foreigners, talked about it over and over—what we were looking for, and finding, in India. "Yes, yes, yes," Dinesh said, smiling with all his teeth. "I've heard about it—our spiritual dimension. Only where is it? Can you tell me that? Can you show it to me? Never mind. Let's speak about something more interesting, like, for instance—"

"The Malhotras," I said. "Our landlords."

Dinesh disliked gossip, but he had, reluctantly, told me a bit about them. They were obviously middle-class, educated people—both spoke good English, and he was, or had been, a lawyer—but their status had been marred by a scandal many years earlier. Dinesh briefly indicated that it had had something to do with gold smuggling, and that both of them had been involved. I was surprised: both of them? It was not so difficult to believe this of Sahib—there was something anxious about him, as if he wanted very much to be liked, or perhaps forgiven. He was always eager to make conversation—when he was at home, that is, which was not all that much. He would leave in the morning, in his black tie and panama hat, giving the impression that he was going out to conduct some business. But we tended to run into him in a modest coffeehouse, sitting over a cup of coffee and talking to the waiter. One afternoon, I saw him standing in the ticket line at a cinema, and when he noticed me he laid his finger on his lips, amused and tolerant of himself. He usually came home late at night, and then Bibiji would tell us that he had been delayed at the office. She said it in a very serious tone, which gave us no ground to suspect that there was no office.

Sahib liked to talk about how he had studied law in England and had eaten dinners at the Inns of Court. When he spoke of England, it was as if he were talking about a familiar friend. He was interested in hearing about the States, too; he had never been there but was hoping to go sometime—as a tourist, not as a student. What, he joked, was there left to study, at his age? Then he regularly asked me to guess how old he was. When I, as regularly, said thirty-five, which was at least ten years younger than he could have been, he smoothed his hair and chuckled that he had always been able to fool the world about his age.

Had he actually been in jail? He sometimes referred to his "trouble," as though he expected everyone to know what this had been. Dinesh told me, after I persisted in asking, that he had done time as a prisoner awaiting trial. Then he had been at least partially cleared, and placed on probation, though stripped of his license to practice law. It was the two other men accused in the case who had been given long jail sentences; they were more palpably guilty than Sahib, who had been their dupe. And what about her? Dinesh shrugged, and said that she'd had to make several court appearances before the case against her was dropped. When I asked him how he knew, he said that it had all been in the papers. After that, he changed the subject.

It was impossible to think of Bibiji's having been involved in a criminal case. She was so proud and dainty, with the folds of her sari falling smoothly to her feet; her bangles were only glass, but probably they replaced some gold jewelry that was, due to circumstances, temporarily absent. Unlike her husband, Bibiji did not leave the house very often. Maybe she was afraid of meeting people and having to wonder what they were thinking. In every exchange I had with her, she scanned my face for information—not about me but about herself, about how much I knew. Still, like her husband she seemed eager for conversation with her lodgers. There were never any visitors to the house, though she was fully set up to receive them in the living room, which was furnished with a blue sofa, two matching armchairs, and a carpet. She owned a china tea set, and every afternoon she took it out and sat on the sofa to enjoy several cups of tea with digestive cookies.

Whenever I happened to be at home, she invited me to join her. She repeatedly impressed upon me the details of how Sahib had studied in England and was a professional person, and how she herself had been educated at a ladies' college, where she had studied domestic arts and music. Sometimes she took out her harmonium and sat on the floor with it, singing

songs that were a mixture of the erotic and the spiritual. She told me that she appreciated my love of Indian culture, and then she passed from talking about me to talking about Dinesh.

She said that she had first met him at a bus stop. When the bus arrived, there was the usual rush to board, in which she was pushed to the ground. In the scramble, only one person bothered to stop and help her up: Dinesh, thereby missing the bus himself. But he didn't care about that; he wanted only to make sure that she was unhurt. Even before they knew each other, he had responded to something delicate in her nature, as she had to the same in his. When she said that, she looked at me directly for the first time, and not, as usual, aslant with shyness and anxiety.

Dinesh was very attentive to her. He took care to fill the water buckets for her during the hours when the municipal supply was turned on. He noticed whenever she was running short of tea leaves and refilled her little cannister, buying tea with his own money, though, of course, she always paid him back. Neither of them could afford to be as generous as they may have wanted to be. But she took care of him as he did of her; she said that he was like a younger brother to her. When his glasses broke, she mended them with tape; or she cooked a little extra of the dish that she was preparing for her and her husband's evening meal. This meal she and Sahib always ate alone in their bedroom, with the door shut. It was only on reading Dinesh's novel that I learned that they had eaten not in silence but amid fierce and bitter whispers, in which each blamed the other for what had happened.

It was the fictional D. who described for me how Sahib had first met his two fellow-conspirators. It had happened in the sort of coffeehouse where he could still be found—over the same ketchup-stained tablecloths—but at that time he had been part of a very jolly group of friends, which included freelance journalists, a doctor who had lost his license, and the younger son of an industrialist. This last was trying to start a business of his own, and he introduced his prospective partner into the circle of friends. The new man was a different type from the rest, with cruder jokes and more oil on his hair. A businessman, he called himself; eager to please, he treated the others to a round of chicken kebabs.

Sahib had completed his studies several years before, but had not yet rented an office—he intended to do so the moment he had some clients; so it was at home that the two partners came to visit him. They said that they needed a lawyer to draw up their contracts and that he was just the person they were looking for. Bibiji served glasses of sugared lime water in order to get a look at them for herself. Later, she confided to D. that she'd had doubts about the businessman from the start, but that she'd liked the son of the industrialist. He was not much more than a boy, well-spoken, and with manners learned at one of the best schools in the country.

They came every day, and soon they offered Sahib a partnership in their venture. All they asked in return was a small investment to help with the initial purchase of gold from certain reliable sources, to be resold at fantastic profits via other reliable sources. Sahib was hesitant; he said that he would have to consult his wife. Bibiji objected, citing their total lack of business experience; he mentioned the promised profits, and they argued to and fro.

Then one morning, when Sahib was out, the son of the industrialist came to see Bibiji. She was just enjoying a cup of tea and chatting with Gochi, her old sweeper woman, who squatted nearby with the glass of tea that was part of her wages. When the visitor arrived, Gochi absented herself, and Bibiji took out another cup to serve her guest. He admired everything—not only the cup but the sofa, the carpet, and the wall hanging of Little Boy Blue in cross-stitch, which she admitted to be the work of her own hands. It was obvious to the industrialist's son, who was himself from a fine home, that she and Sahib came from good families. He acknowledged that this could not be said of his partner—but then he went on to describe a deal that this partner had already successfully concluded, with astonishing profits. The same result could confidently be expected of their own project, he said. One day, he promised, there would be an even costlier carpet on this floor, even larger, heavier bangles on Bibiji's wrists. And maybe she wouldn't be in this house at all but in one of the new mansions in the diplomatic enclave, with a motorcar standing before the door. No, he said, smiling, no need for her to learn to drive—a chauffeur would be at her disposal day and night.

The industrialist's son had to pay Bibiji only two more morning visits before she informed her husband that she was adding her jewelry to their input of capital. At that, Sahib cried out in shock and touched the gold that had adorned her since the day of their wedding. She laughed at him: bigger, better bracelets would be bought, rings, and ropes of pearls, and what would he say to a motorcar with chauffeur?

All this was described in Dinesh's novel—how Bibiji had persuaded her husband, brought him around. His account is in no way censorious; it is with affection that D. describes Bibiji's joyful cries and gestures at the prospect ahead. It is in subsequent chapters that D. narrates the scenes of nightly whispering behind the bedroom door, in which each blames the other for what eventually happened. "You were lucky," Sahib tells his wife. "It was you—you who should have gone, you who were guilty, not I." In answer, Bibiji simply raises her thin arms, whose sole adornment now is some colored glass bangles bought from a street hawker.

One day, I found Bibiji on her sofa with Gochi squatting near her on the floor, both of them in tears. What had happened? It was explained to me that Gochi's daughter and son-in-law had forbidden her to come here anymore. Another job had been found for her where the salary was higher and was also paid regularly. Gochi clutched Bibiji's feet

and wet them with her tears, and Bibiji's tears fell on the spot on Gochi's head where the sparse hennaed hair had worn away. Both of them were helpless and hopeless in their different kinds of poverty.

I suggested that more income could be brought in by way of a third tenant for the empty room. And that was how Karuna—or Kay, as she told us to call her—came to us. I had met her in the Tibetan Colony, where impecunious foreigners like myself ate delicious messes that sometimes made us sick. We were joined there by a new group of young Indians—who were modern enough to drop out of school and leave home and family to discover (using the same terminology that we did) their own identity. Kay had not run away from home, exactly, but she had staked her claim for self-expression—which her father may not have understood but had tolerantly indulged. He was a brigadier in the Army, in charge of a hill-station cantonment. She often spoke of him, and seemed to admire him, though she laughed at what she called "his dodo ways." He supported her with checks and frequent calls and letters that she only sometimes answered.

When I met her, she was living in a Y.W.C.A. hostel. She made scornful jokes about this place, and, when I told her about our empty room, she was ready to move in at once. I have to say here that the three rooms for rent in the house were no more than cubicles, each furnished with a string cot, a commercial calendar, and a water jug on a stand. This spartan interior was what Dinesh was used to—he had never known anything else—and it suited me perfectly, asceticism being what I had come to India for. It suited Kay, too, mainly because it was different from her home. Anyway, she soon had a rug on the cement floor and had replaced the calendar with a poster of a dead rock star.

Bibiji liked her immediately, and was fascinated by her, which Kay seemed to find natural. She was used to people wanting to be in her company, and she chattered away to Bibiji and to Sahib, who was also fascinated by her. I don't think she ever told them anything new or interesting; it was she herself that was so for them—the way she spoke and laughed at nothing in particular, unless it was the Y.W.C.A. or her hopelessly bourgeois family.

Dinesh got her hired in the English section of All India Radio. She became the disk jockey for a request program called "Yours, with Love," playing recent pop songs from England and America that had been selected by listeners with messages for their loved ones. She read these messages in a seductive voice—"This is for Bunny, and a million billion thanks, darling, for the fabulous times"—which made Sahib nod and smile in some sort of recognition, while Bibiji looked down shyly, as if she were the one being addressed.

To get Kay to work on time, Dinesh often had to wake her. He shouted from outside her door, and then, too shy to see a woman asleep in bed, he sent me in. She lay on her stomach, one hot flushed cheek pressed into the pillow, moaning for coffee. Sahib had bought a tin of Nescafé specially for her, and it gave him great pleasure to rush into the kitchen, where he otherwise never set foot, to pour water over the powder and stir it before handing it over to Bibiji or me to deliver. Dinesh stood outside the door, looking up at the ceiling in simulated disgust.

But he, too, seemed to enjoy Kay's company. He spoke to her in his usual torrent of often disconnected ideas—and although she kept saying, "Fantastic," she didn't really listen, and she interrupted him at intervals, usually with something so far removed from what he was saying that he stopped short in astonishment. I suppose her head was full of thoughts of her own that left little room for anything else.

But one evening she asked Dinesh, "What about them? . . . You know. " She gestured in the direction of the Malhotras' bedroom, where, presumably, our landlords were already asleep, or talking together in voices so low that no sound could be heard.

The three of us—their "paying guests," as they called us—were in the courtyard, which was like a well with the sun pouring in all day, though at night some cool air descended.

"Their case," she went on.

Dinesh waved his hand impatiently. "That was twelve years ago."

"Twelve years! I was only eight."

"You must have been a nasty little brat."

"I looked like an angel, and I *was* one. Everyone said so." She ignored his exaggerated laughter. She was combing her hair, which fell around her in dark waves with auburn glints. I could see neither of them clearly in the dim starlight, but I was aware of Dinesh's eyes gleaming—or maybe I was aware only of his stifled excitement. We could hear the comb as she slowly, lovingly drew it through all that silken luxury; at the same time she said, "Shall I cut it off? It's such a nuisance."

"If you cut it off, you might get to work on time and not be fired, which will happen any day now," Dinesh said.

"Nobody is going to fire me. They love me too much. But, seriously, were they both in jail?"

"Who's been talking to you?"

"Oh, everyone talks. As soon as anyone hears where I'm living: 'Aren't those the people in the gold-smuggling case?' I suppose no one ever forgets."

"I suppose no one ever learns to mind his own business," Dinesh said.

"Do you think they're listening?" She lowered her voice. "The two of them with their ears glued to the door?"

It was easy to imagine—the small couple crouched behind the closed bedroom door, their hearts beating, wondering, What are they saying? Are they talking about us? What do they know? The thought seemed to make Dinesh angry and

ashamed, and he turned on Kay: "So you sit gossiping with your friends? 'My landlords did this, my landlords did that—' "

"Well, did they? *Both* of them?"

Now he didn't trust himself to speak. He turned away and left us.

"But why's he mad at me?" Kay wondered.

She was truly puzzled by Dinesh's attitude. She was used to being admired by men and took it as her due. There was Sahib, every morning, lingering in wait for the cry for coffee, and in the evenings he came home earlier than he had before. Part of a lively social set, Kay was often on the point of going out when Sahib arrived—curses could be heard from her room, where she kept discarding one outfit for another. He hovered, smiling, around the door, clutching a book, and, as soon as she emerged, he held it up for her: "Are you acquainted with this book? What is your opinion of the writing?" Mostly, she had no time to answer him; she'd brush past on a wave of energy and fresh perfume that drowned his disappointment in sheer pleasure.

When she was home, she wandered all over the house, talking to anyone who was around. If she had to write a letter to her family—with much underlining and many exclamation points—she preferred to do it in the living room, where we could keep her company. This was Sahib's opportunity. He had found a tattered old copy of a novel by Françoise Sagan, and it fascinated him. He questioned Kay: "Is it true? Is this how modern girls behave, so free and knowing so much about sex?" The word "sex"—enticing, expectant—sat on his lips, waiting for her to take it up. Her laugh hinted at kingdoms hidden from him. He lowered the book. "And you? Do you have someone for your friend? A cavalier?" He shut one eye. "A *boy* friend?" More laughter from her, and he laughed, too, enjoying the conversation, enjoying being teased by her, enjoying her. At such moments, his true nature—spry, humorous—seemed to shine out from under its eclipse of disgrace and humiliation.

When Dinesh heard Sahib question Kay about books, he would say, "What makes you think she's ever read one?"

"That's all you know!" she cried, adding, "Dinesh hates me," but with a smile that showed she suspected that this was not quite true.

In his novel (in the character of D.), Dinesh admitted that he had never met anyone like Kay, an emancipated girl from her class. The only women he had ever been close to were his mother and his sisters. There was a constant exchange of letters between them, and it was easy to tell when one arrived with bad news. Later in the day, he'd announce that he was taking a leave from the radio station and would be departing on the evening train. When he returned, after a few days, he appeared to have settled whatever trouble he had found at home, or, at least, to have accepted it.

When Dinesh was away, Bibiji did not sing to her harmonium. But the day he came back she took it out again and accompanied herself to one of her ambiguous songs of love, human or divine. Sometimes Sahib stood behind her, with his fingers in his ears, playfully grimacing at us. But Dinesh, who was a great lover of Indian music and could recognize each raga from the first few notes, listened respectfully. If she made a mistake, he hummed the right notes for her. He hated the pop songs that Kay presented on her program; and if he found the Malhotras listening to her show he made a disgusted face. "Why are you listening to that stuff?" he'd say. "It's for idiots, by idiots."

Once Sahib answered him. "I love it. It's the music for young people. Don't you like young people?" He became coy, the way he did when he was on the brink of saying something he called "spicy." "I know *one* young person you like."

Perhaps we should have guessed Bibiji's feelings from her explosion of anger then. But how could we, how could anyone? Dinesh's attitude toward women had always been a protective one, and that was how he felt toward Bibiji. He accepted her description of him as a brother to her. It was the only relationship with a woman that he really knew.

With Kay, he thought of himself as a detached observer, analyzing her and her type. Probably he kept notes about her, as did D. in the novel. She had far less time to think about him. Often, she didn't come home after work but went with her friends to fashionable places that he had never seen. Some of her girlfriends were fugitives from arranged marriages, or had, like Kay herself, simply raised the flag of independence and made their families salute it. Away from their mothers and their ayahs for the first time, they were untidy and scatterbrained and gave parties at night, with music and dancing and drinks. Dinesh, of course, was not invited to these parties, but Kay told him, "They all want to meet you."

"Who wants to meet me?"

"My friends."

"What an honor," he said. He knew some of these girls from the radio station; they ignored him, as they did all the others who worked there for a living. But now Kay had told them that he was a writer, and this raised his status with them, for writers had articles written about them in magazines, with photographs of the foreign girlfriends who had followed them to India. Dinesh quite fiercely denied being a writer—he said that he hadn't published anything yet and perhaps never would.

"Then what is it you're scribbling all night?" I heard her challenge him, for, however late she returned from her outings, the light was always on in his room.

She was standing looking into his room, where he sat cross-legged on his bed, a notebook in his lap. She had let her hair

fall loose—this scene was in the novel as well—and, winding a strand around her finger, said, “Are you writing a novel? Am I in it?” It didn’t bother her that he ignored her. “What are you writing about me? Let me see—or is it too horrible and mean?”

Then he did look up—only to drop his eyes again immediately, for she hadn’t noticed, or just didn’t care, that the upper part of her sari had dropped down, revealing her breasts in their inadequate little blouse. He said, “Kindly shut my door and don’t ever open it again.”

“Listen to Mr. Grumpy! What’s wrong with you? Did a monkey bite you?”

That night, D. wrote in his notebook, “If she weren’t stupid and a fool, she’d be a whore.” But elsewhere in the novel it was himself he called stupid and a fool.

It wasn’t long before she left us. This happened a day or two after her father, the brigadier, came to visit—or, rather, to look us over. His Army jeep, standing outside, seemed as large as the house, and he himself overflowed the chair he occupied, with one stout leg laid across the thigh of the other. Sahib could not stop trying to make conversation. He spoke of golf, the latest cricket test matches, and other topics that should have been of interest to his visitor. But the brigadier kept studying the watch on his hairy wrist and asking when Kay was expected back. No one wanted to tell him that her hours were as unpredictable as she was.

He had plenty of time to size us up, and evidently we did not pass muster. I was the sort of foreigner he had no respect for (a “hippie type”), and the way he looked at Dinesh, with his much laundered shirt and his glasses mended with tape, made Sahib quickly explain, “Mr. Dinesh is a writer.” When the brigadier just went on grimly tapping his boot with his Army baton, Bibiji added, “He is writing a novel.”

“Where is she?” was the brigadier’s only reaction, and, when we told him that she was out with friends, he said, “What friends? Who are they?”

But, actually, he knew very well where a girl like his daughter could go to amuse herself on the sort of allowance that he sent her. He had no objection to those friends—the children of other Army officers or of high-ranking bureaucrats. What he did object to was her living in the house with us.

When he returned the next day, he stayed outside in the jeep while Kay packed up her belongings. Silent in shock, we stood and watched her. She was in tears but not disconsolate. It seemed that her father had wasted no time finding a more suitable place for her: a room in the house of a colonel’s widow. “Those are the only sort of people Daddy knows,” she said. “Dodos like himself and boring bourgeois.” But the house was near where some of her other friends lived and gave parties. “I’ll come to see you,” she promised. “We had so much fun.” But she said it a bit absently, while fastening her suitcase and biting her lip, the way people do when they are hoping they haven’t forgotten anything.

The days after Kay left were intensely hot—it was the middle of June—and, as always at such times, the atmosphere in the city was exceptionally charged. So was the atmosphere in the Malhotra house. There seemed to have been a change in the relationship between husband and wife. They were suddenly bitter and angry with each other. Perhaps this was the way they had always been once their bedroom door was shut, but now they didn’t wait to be alone. They fought about Kay’s departure, blaming each other for having let her father get the wrong impression.

Bibiji said, “You should have told him that you’re a lawyer who has studied abroad, instead of all that nonsense about golf. And I didn’t like the way he was looking at Dineshji.”

Sahib explained, “You can be a famous writer, an M.A. from Oxford University—if you can’t talk about whiskey and golf, then you’re not fit to lick their boots. But with me he knew he was dealing with a person like himself. A gentleman.”

“Yes, and what else do you think he knew?”

“Nothing! He knew nothing!”

“And, when you walk in the street, no one knows anything?” She lowered her voice to a whisper. “No one says, ‘He’s been inside’?”

He came up closer, threatening. “*You* put me there.”

She didn’t retreat an inch. “It’s my fault. Everything is my fault. This is my fault.” Here she shook her arms with the thin glass bangles on them. “Like a sweeper woman. That’s what he thought—‘My poor daughter, having to live in the house of a sweeper woman.’ ”

Sahib stepped back. He lowered his voice. “No one thinks that. They wouldn’t dare.”

“When you’re poor, they all dare. They push you in the street.” Bibiji had begun to shed little tears. “The milkman who hasn’t been paid calls you bad names.”

He whispered, “I’ll pay him tomorrow. They’ll all be paid. Don’t. You’re still my princess. ”

I was not there to witness the beginning of their next fight, and neither was Dinesh. This fight was actually about him, and he reconstructed it in his novel. The scene, in my translation, goes like this:

“What he didn’t like was D. living in the same house with his daughter. *Looking* at her,” Sahib said.

“He never looks at her,” Bibiji said.

"Is it my fault that you have no eyes to see?"

"He has never in his life looked at her!"

"Not even when she is combing her hair?" Smiling, he made the slow, sensual gesture of a woman drawing a comb through her hair, each strand alive, tumbling over her shoulders and down her back. "I wouldn't like you to know what happens to him then." He came closer to whisper in her ear. "Like a dog. You've seen a dog?"

It was at this moment that D. in the novel—and perhaps also Dinesh in real life—came home. Full of fun, Sahib turned to him. "Don't you miss her?" he said, repeating the motion of the comb through waves of hair. D. couldn't even pretend not to understand, and, without looking at him, Bibiji fled into the kitchen. Her hands trembling, she began to peel potatoes.

Sahib was glad to be alone with D. He chuckled, man to man. "These girls—they're sent by the Devil to drive us poor devils mad. But isn't it a nice way to become a raving lunatic?"

"She's gone now," D. said. "So you can relax. "

"Who wants to relax? That's for dead men. Who do you think she liked—you or me?"

D. went to his room. His landlord eagerly followed. He sat on D.'s bed and watched him change the shirt he wore at work for the one that was too frayed for outside. D.'s shoulders, now revealed by his undershirt, were not broad or manly, but Sahib said, "At least you're young—you have a chance. Perhaps she liked you. Perhaps she is saying to her daddy at this moment, 'Take me back to him!' Don't you think I have a good imagination? I should be writing the books, not you." He laughed loud enough for Bibiji to hear, so that she came out of the kitchen with the potato she was peeling.

"Did you hear that?" Sahib asked her. "He thinks I should write books and become a famous author."

"Why are you sitting on his bed? Get up."

"And when I'm a famous author all the girls will run after me, and it is for me that she will say, 'Daddy, why did you take me away from him?' "

"Oh, my friend," D. said. "You're talking such nonsense."

Sahib winked at his wife. "Did you hear that? What sort of books can a person write if he thinks love and romance are nonsense?"

D. was struggling into his shirt, for he was both shy and ashamed of his undershirt, which was torn. "Yes, put on your clothes, man," Sahib urged him. "Don't show yourself before my wife. She imagines things."

"It's he," Bibiji desperately told D. "He's been imagining things—about you and her. All lies. You're a liar," she said, turning on Sahib. "And come out of his room—you shouldn't be there with your *thoughts*."

"And what about *your* thoughts?" Sahib said, enjoying the mischief rising in him. "Don't I know you have them? Haven't I been married to you for twenty years, lying next to you in bed while you had your thoughts? . . . Oh, not about me—what am I, a ruined wreck—but others, like your guest, your paying guest, a guest who pays you, what luck!"

Was there, as described in the novel, a dust storm blowing that day? It was the season of such storms—day after day of furnace heat, and then, suddenly, wildly, winds laden with the dust of the desert whirling through the city. I seem to remember returning from my teacher's house in such a storm, but it may have been that Dinesh's novel suggested it to me (for he was skilled at such effects). Wherever it came from, my memory of that scene in the Malhotra house is set within swirling columns of dust, lashing the tree outside, bending its sickly trunk, and stripping it down to the last of its dying leaves. Dust thick in my mouth, stinging my eyes, I groped my way inside. The first thing I noticed was that the windows had not been shut, so that the storm whistled around the room as freely as it did outside. It was only when I had managed to shut each window in the house that I became aware of the people in it.

They were in the living room: Bibiji on the floor, on her carpet, not as she usually sat there, singing to her harmonium, but with her knees drawn up and her face hidden in her hands. Dinesh was bending over the sofa, and he turned to me and said, "Get a doctor."

I heard Sahib groan, "Let me die," before I actually saw him laid out on the sofa.

Dinesh asked Bibiji, "Where is there a doctor nearby?" Sahib's groans of pain changed to a moan of panic: "No doctor."

"Should we let you bleed to death?" Dinesh said. Blood was seeping through Sahib's shirt and slowly spreading over his chest. His eyes were shut. His face had the pallor of a dead man's, but he was energetic enough to insist again, "No doctor."

I went to find a sheet to tear up for a bandage. Crossing the courtyard, I saw a half-peeled potato lying on the ground, and not far away, as though it had been flung there, the knife with which it had been peeled. I picked up the knife and found that, in addition to potato peel, it had blood on it. Dinesh was calling "Hurry!," so instead of a sheet I quickly tore the top part of my sari. I helped Dinesh raise our landlord to a sitting position so that we could bandage him. Sahib groaned and cried between us, but when we asked if we were hurting him he denied it and said for the third time, "No doctor," and now Bibiji echoed him.

Her voice roused him; he became animated. "She wants me to die. . . . Why else did she murder me?"

Dinesh said to me, "What's that knife?" I had completely forgotten about it. I picked it up from where I had dropped it.

Sahib, now bandaged and prone on the sofa, said, "Get rid of the murder weapon."

Bibiji got up and took it from me. She regarded it front and back. She told Sahib, “You can say you did it yourself.” She demonstrated, raising the knife toward her heart.

“Why should I wish to kill myself and not you?” Sahib said.

“People often kill themselves. You yourself, at that time, and if I hadn’t found it—”

“I bought it for the rats!”

“You wrote a note.” She whispered, “A suicide note. The police took it. It is in their hands.”

He, too, was whispering now—out of weakness and pain, but also because that was the way they spoke to each other when they had bad things to say. “I wanted to die. This is the second time you’ve killed me.” To Dinesh and me he said, “Yes, call the doctor. Let him fetch the police. Let them take *her* away this time. ”

“So, all right, I’ll go,” she said indifferently.

“You! As if you could stand it there. . . . Wipe the handle.” She did so on a cushion, but not thoroughly, so that he said, “More, more . . . Now give it to me—don’t touch it! What a fool. Hold it with your sari.”

That was the way she handed it to him. He pressed his fingers around it but was too weak to hold on, and it fell to the floor. We all looked at it. No one wanted to pick it up.

At last Dinesh said, “Suicide is also considered a criminal offense.”

Bibiji cried, “He didn’t do anything!”

He opened his eyes. He murmured, “I tried to kill myself. I stabbed myself with a knife.”

“It was I!” She turned to Dinesh. “You saw me. And you heard what he said. The lies he told about you. That’s why I did it. I couldn’t stand his lies.” She sank to the floor. Her shoulders shook with sobs—silent ones, but they were more than her husband could bear.

He told her, “It was a joke. You know how I love to make jokes.” To Dinesh he said, “Tell her the girl was nothing to you. Tell her.”

Dinesh had lowered his eyes. When he spoke, he did so in the strangled voice of a truthful person making up a lie. But Sahib appeared satisfied. He said, “My poor wife. She doesn’t understand that, when there is a girl, it’s human nature to make jokes. Everyone does it. But really there’s only one person, and when she sings and plays her harmonium—oh! oh!”

“I think he’s fainted,” I said, for his face was drained and he had shut his eyes again.

“No.” With an effort he motioned for Dinesh to move closer. “Tell her it’s true about her singing: how you love it—because it is very good and because it is she who sings.” When Dinesh confirmed this in the same strangled voice as before, Sahib appeared satisfied and said nothing more.

In the novel, the husband dies in the night, and the wife goes mad with grief and remorse. But Sahib didn’t die, and Bibiji didn’t go mad. Instead, she proved herself very practical. It was she who nursed him and dressed his wound every day. I tore up the rest of my saris, and Dinesh and I rolled them into bandages. We never called a doctor. The only person to help us was Gochi, who brought an herbal ointment that helped to heal the wound. She asked no questions at all; she was probably familiar with difficult, even violent family situations and was more knowing than the rest of us.

But we, too, had learned to be less innocent. Since it was necessary to find a new tenant for Kay’s room, we took care that it should be not a young but a middle-aged lady who moved in with us. Shortly afterward, Dinesh asked for a transfer to his home town (he said that his family needed him), and, to replace him, I found another, even older lady, whom I had met at my teacher’s house. Bibiji began to cook for her paying guests, which increased her income. The Malhotras no longer ate alone behind the closed door but sat together with their boarders on the living-room carpet to eat in the traditional way, with their fingers from little bowls. Sometimes Bibiji took out her harmonium, though more rarely now, and her songs were no longer ambiguous but definitely spiritual. The visits to my teacher’s house became less satisfying to me. Also, I missed Dinesh. Soon after he left for Kanpur, I, too, decided to go home.

In my farewell letter to him, I described the new household: “Sometimes the three ladies are all sad together, so I guess they are telling one another their troubles. Gochi squats nearby, drinking tea and contributing her own comments on life’s vicissitudes. I can’t always understand what they are saying, and I’m beginning to think that you’re right and that instead of struggling with the Upanishads, etc., I’d have done better to learn more Hindi. I can just see your face—you’re thinking, Ah-ha, she’s had enough at last of our ancient wisdom. But it’s only that it’s difficult for me to think of everything in the world, including ourselves, as merely an illusion. I don’t think human misery is an illusion, and, rather than go into total denial about it, I’d like to learn of some ways to deal with it. I’ve found out that there’s a Buddhist teaching center in Connecticut, not far from my parents’ house. So now, if you like, you can think of me with my head shaved, wearing a Buddhist robe instead of my saris. In any case, as you know, I don’t have any saris left—they’ve all been rolled into bandages. But I’m definitely going to learn Hindi, so that I can translate your novel. As Kay would say, ‘Am I in it?’ And the Malhotras? And Kay herself, so fatefully combing her hair?” ♦