

5     Considering the length of Subramaniam's service, it was remarkable that he still  
came to the Fisherman's Rest. When I started going there, he had been retired for six  
years from the Ministry of Defence, after a run of forty-one years that had left him a  
joint-secretary. I was young, and I had just started working at a software company  
which had its air-conditioned and very streamlined head offices just off the Fountain,  
and I must confess the first time I heard him speak it was to chastise me. He had been  
10     introduced to me at a table on the balcony, sitting with three other older men, and my  
friend Ramani, who had taken me there, told me that they had been coming there for  
as long as they had worked and longer. Subramaniam had white hair, he was thin,  
and in the falling dusk he looked very small to me, the kind of man who would while  
away the endless boredom of his life in a bar off Sasoon Dock, and so I shaped him up  
15     in my mind, and weighed him and dropped him.

I should have noticed then that the waiters brought his drinks to him without being  
asked, and that the others talked around his silence but always with their faces  
turned towards him, but I was holding forth on the miserable state of computers in  
Bombay. The bar was on the second floor of an old house, looking towards the sea,  
20     and you wouldn't have known it was there, there was certainly no sign, and it  
couldn't be seen from the street. There were old trophy fish, half a century old at  
least, strung along the walls, and on the door to the bathroom there was a picture of a  
hill stream cut from a magazine, British by the look of it. When the wind came in  
from the sea it fluttered old flowered curtains and a 1971 calendar, and I was restless  
25     already, but I owed at least a drink to the courtesy of my friend Ramani, who  
understood my loneliness in Bombay and was maybe trying to mix me in with the  
right circle. So I watched a navy ship, a frigate maybe, wheel into the sun, sipped my  
drink (despite everything, I noticed, a perfect gin sling), and listened to them talk.

Ramani had been to Bandra that day, and he was telling them about a bungalow on  
30     the seafront. It was one of those old three-storied houses with balconies that ran all  
the way around, set in the middle of a garden filled with palms and fish ponds. It sat  
stubbornly in the middle of towering apartment buildings, and it had been empty as  
far back as anyone could remember, and so of course the story that explained this  
waste of golden real estate was one of ghosts and screams in the night.

35     "They say it's unsellable," said Ramani. "They say a Gujarati seth bought it and died  
within the month. Nobody'll buy it. Bad place."

“What nonsense,” I said. “These are all family property disputes. The cases drag on for years and years in courts, and the houses lie vacant because no one will let anyone else live in them.” I spoke at length then, about superstition and ignorance and the state of our benighted nation, in which educated men and women believed in  
5 banshees and ghouls. “Even in the information age we will never be free,” I said. I went on, and I was particularly witty and sharp, I thought. I vanquished every argument with efficiency and dispatch.

After a while my glass was empty and I stopped to look for the bearer. In the pause the waves gathered against the rocks below, and then Subramaniam spoke. He had a  
10 small whispery voice, a departmental voice, I thought, it was full of intrigues and secrets and nuances. “I knew a man once who met a ghost,” he said. I still had my body turned around in the seat, but the rest of them turned to him expectantly. He said, “Some people meet their ghosts, and some don’t. But we’re all haunted by them.” Now I turned, too, and he was looking straight at me, and his white hair stood  
15 clearly against the extravagant red of the sunset behind him, but his eyes were shadowed and hidden. “Listen,” he said.

\* \* \* \* \*

On the day that Major General Jago Antia turned fifty, his missing leg began to ache. He had been told by the doctors about phantom pain, but the leg had been gone for  
20 twenty years without a twinge, and so when he felt a twisting ache two inches under his plastic knee, he stumbled not out of agony but surprise. It was only a little stumble, but the officers who surrounded him turned away out of sympathy, because he was Jago Antia, and he never stumbled. The younger lieutenants flushed with emotion, because they knew for certain that Jago Antia was invincible, and this little  
25 lapse, and the way he recovered himself, how he came back to his ramrod straightness, this reminded them of the metallic density of his discipline, which you could see in his grey eyes. He was famous for his stare, for the cold blackness of his anger, for his tactical skill and his ability to read ground, his whole career from the gold medal at Kharakvasla to the combat and medals in Leh and NEFA. He was  
30 famous for all this, but the leg was the centre of the legend, and there was something terrible about it, about the story, and so it was never talked about. He drove himself across jungle terrain and shamed men twenty years younger, and it was as if the leg had never been lost. This is why his politeness, his fastidiousness, the delicate way he handled his fork and knife, his slow smile, all these Jago quirks were imitated by even  
35 the cadets at the Academy: they wished for his certainty, and believed that his loneliness was the mark of his genius.

So when he left the bara khana his men looked after him with reverence, and curiously the lapse made them believe in his strength all the more. They had done the

party to mark an obscure regimental battle day from half a century before, because he would never have allowed a celebration for himself. After he left they lolled on sofas, sipping from their drinks, and told stories about him. His name was Jehangir Antia, but for thirty years, in their stories, he had been Jago Antia. Some of them didn't  
5 know his real name.

Meanwhile, Jago Antia lay on his bed under a mosquito net, his arms flat by his sides, his one leg out as if at attention, the other standing by the bed, and waited for his dream to take him. Every night he thought of falling endlessly through the night, slipping through the cold air, and then somewhere it became a dream, and he was  
10 asleep, still falling. He had been doing it for as long as he could remember, long before para school and long before the drop at Sylhet, towards the hostile guns and the treacherous ground. It had been with him from long ago, this leap, and he knew where it took him, but this night a pain grew in that part of him that he no longer had, and he tried to fight it away, imagining the rush of air against his neck, the  
15 flapping of his clothes, the complete darkness, but it was no use. He was still awake. When he raised his left hand and uncovered the luminous dial it was oh-four-hundred, and then he gave up and strapped his leg on. He went into the study and spread out some maps and began to work on operational orders. The contour maps were covered with markers, and his mind moved easily among the mountains, seeing  
20 the units, the routes of supply, the staging areas. They were fighting an insurgency, and he knew of course that he was doing good work, that his concentration was keen, but he knew he would be tired the next day, and this annoyed him. When he found himself kneading his plastic shin with one hand, he was so angry that he went out on the porch and puffed out a hundred quick push-ups, and in the morning his puzzled  
25 sahayak found him striding up and down the garden walk as the sun came up behind a gaunt ridge.

“What are you doing out here?” Thapa said. Jago Antia had never married. They had known each other for three decades, since Jago Antia had been a captain, and they had long ago discarded with the formalities of master and batman.

30 “Couldn't sleep, Thapa. Don't know what it was.”

Thapa raised an eyebrow. “Eat well then.”

“Right. Ten minutes?”

Thapa turned smartly and strode off. He was a small, round man, not fat but bulging everywhere with the compact muscles of the mountains.

35 “Thapa?” Jago Antia called.

“Yes.”

“Nothing.” He had for a moment wanted to say something about the pain, but then the habit of a lifetime asserted itself, and he threw back his shoulders and shook his head. Thapa waited for a moment and then walked into the house. Now Jago Antia  
5 looked up at the razor edge of the ridge far above, and he could see, if he turned his head to one side, a line of tiny figures walking down it. They would be woodcutters, and perhaps some of the men he was fighting. They were committed, hardy, and well trained. He watched them. He was better. The sun was high now, and Jago Antia went to his work.

\* \* \* \* \*

The pain didn’t go away, and Jago Antia couldn’t sleep. Sometimes he was sure he was in his dream, and he was grateful for the velocity of the fall, and he could feel the cold on his face, the dark, but then he would sense something, a tiny glowing pinpoint that spun and grew and finally became a bright hurling maelstrom that wrenched him  
15 back into wakefulness. Against this he had no defence: no matter how tired he made himself, how much he exhausted his body, he could not make his mind insensible to his phantom pain, and so his discipline, honed over the years, was made useless. Finally he conquered his shame, and asked—in the strictest confidence—an Army Medical Corps colonel for medication, and got, along with a very puzzled stare, a  
20 bottle full of yellow pills, which he felt in his pocket all day, against his chest. But at night these pills too proved no match for the ferocity of the pain, which by now Jago Antia imagined as a beast of some sort, a low growling animal that camouflaged itself until he was almost at rest and then came rushing out to worry at his flesh, or at the memory of his flesh. It was not that Jago Antia minded the defeat, because he had  
25 learnt to accept defeat and casualties and loss, but it was that he had once defeated this flesh, it was he who had swung the kukri, but it had come back now and surprised him. He felt outflanked, and this infuriated him, and further, there was nothing he could do about it, there was nothing to do anything about. So his work suffered, and he felt the surprise of those around him. It shamed him more than  
30 anything else that they were not disappointed but sympathetic. They brought him tea without being asked, he noticed that his aides spoke amongst themselves in whispers, his headquarters ran—if it was possible—even more efficiently than before, with the gleam of spit and polish about it. But now he was tired, and when he looked at the maps he felt the effort he had to make to grasp the flow of the battle—not the facts,  
35 which were important, though finally trivial—but the thrust and the energy of the struggle, the movement of the initiative, the flux and ebb of the chaotic thing. One afternoon he sat in his office, the pain a constant hum just below his attention, and the rain beat down in gusts against the windows, and the gleam of lightning startled him into realizing that his jaw was slack, that he had been staring aimlessly out of the

window at the green side of the mountain, that he had become the sort of commander he despised, a man who because of his rank allowed himself to become careless. He knew he would soon make the sort of mistake that would get some of his boys killed, and that was unacceptable: without hesitation he called the AMC colonel and asked to  
5 be relieved of his command for medical reasons.

\* \* \* \* \*

The train ride to Bombay from Calcutta was two days long, and there was a kind of relief in the long rhythms of the wheels, in the lonely clangings of the tracks at night. Jago Antia sat next to a window in a first class compartment and watched the  
10 landscape change, taken back somehow to a fifth-grade classroom and lessons on the crops of the Deccan. Thapa had taken a week's leave to go to his family in Darjeeling and was to join up in Bombay later. Jago Antia was used to solitude, but the relief from immediate responsibility brought with it a rush of memory, and he found the unbidden recall of images from the past annoying, because it all seemed so useless. He  
15 tried to take up the time usefully by reading NATO journals, but even under the hard edge of his concentration the pain throbbed in time with the wheels, and he found himself remembering an afternoon at school when they had run out of history class to watch two fighter planes fly low over the city. By the time the train pulled into Bombay Central, he felt as if he were covered not only with sweat and grit, but also  
20 with an oily film of recollection, and he marched through the crowd towards the taxi stand, eager for a shower.

The house stood in a square plot on prime residential land in Khar, surrounded by new, extravagant constructions coloured the pink and green of new money. But it was mostly dark brown, stained by decades of sea air and monsoon rains, and in the  
25 late-afternoon sun it seemed to gather the light about it as it sat surrounded by trees and untidy bushes. There was, in its three stories, in the elegant arches on the balconies, and in the rows of shuttered windows, something rich and dense and heavy, like the smell of gun oil on an old hunting rifle, and the taxi driver sighed, "They don't build them like that anymore."

"No, they're draughty and take a fortune to keep up," said Jago Antia curtly as he handed him the money. It was true. Amir Khan the housekeeper was waving slowly from the porch. He was very old, with a thin neck and a white beard that gave him the appearance of a heron, and by the time he was halfway down the flight of stairs Jago Antia had the bags out of the car and up to the house. Inside, with Amir Khan  
35 puffing behind him, he paused to let his eyes take to the darkness, but it felt as if he were pushing his way through something substantial and insidious, more clear than fog but as inescapable. It was still much as he had left it many years ago to go to the Academy. There were the Victorian couches covered with faded flower prints, the

gold-rimmed paintings on the wall of his grandparents and uncles. He noticed suddenly how quiet it was, as if the street and the city outside had vanished.

"I'll take these bags upstairs," he said.

5 "Can't," Amir Khan said. "It's been closed up for years. All just sheets on the furniture. Even your parents slept in the old study. They moved a bed into it."

Jago Antia shrugged. It was more convenient on the ground floor in any case. "It's all right. It's just for a few days. I have some work here. I'll see Todywalla too."

"What about?"

"Well, I want to sell the house."

10 "You want to sell the house?"

"Yes."

15 Amir Khan shuffled away to the kitchen, and Jago Antia heard him knocking about with cups and saucers. He had no intention of using the house again, and he saw no other alternative. His parents were dead, gone one after another in a year. He had been a distant son, meeting them on leave in Delhi and Lucknow while they were on vacation. Wherever they had met, far away from Bombay, he had always seen the old disappointment and weariness in their eyes. Now it was over, and he wanted not to think about the house anymore.

"Good, sell this house." It was Amir Khan with a cup of tea. "Sell it."

20 "I will."

"Sell it."

25 Jago Antia noticed that Amir Khan's hands were shaking, and he remembered suddenly an afternoon in the garden when he had made him throw ball after ball to his off side, and his own attempts at elegant square cuts, and the sun high overhead through the palm trees.

"Well do something for you," said Jago Antia. "Don't worry."

"Sell it," Amir Khan said. "I'm tired of it."

\* \* \* \* \*

Jago Antia tried to dream of falling, but his ache stayed with him, and besides the gusts of water against the windows were loud and unceasing. It had begun to rain with nightfall, and now the white illumination of lightning threw the whole room into sharp relief. He was thinking about the Academy, about how he had been named

5 Jago, two weeks after his arrival. His roommate had found him at five o'clock on a Saturday morning doing push-ups on the gravel outside their room, and rubbing his eyes he had said, "Antia, you're an enthusiast." He had never known where the nickname Jago came from, but after the second week nobody except his parents had called him Jehangir again. When he had won the gold medal for best cadet even the

10 major-general who was commandant of the Academy had said to him at the reviewing stand, "Good show, Jago." He had been marked for advancement early, and he had never betrayal his promise. He was thinking of this, and the wind flapped the curtains above him, and when he first heard the voice far away he thought it was a trick of the air, but then he heard it again. It was muffled by distance and the rain

15 but he heard it clearly. He could not make out what it was saying. He was alert instantly and strapped on his leg. Even though he knew it was probably Amir Khan talking to himself, flicking away with a duster in the imagined light of some long-gone day, he moved cautiously, back against the wall. At the bottom of the hallway he paused, and heard it again, small but distinct, above him. He found the staircase and

20 went up, his thighs tense, moving in a fluid half-squat. Now he was truly watchful, because the voice was too young to be Amir Khan. On the first landing, near an open door, he sensed a rush of motion on the balcony that ran around the outside of the house; he came to the corner, feeling his way with his hands. Everything in the darkness appeared as shades, blackness and deeper blackness. He darted a look

25 around the corner, and the balcony was empty, he was sure of it. He came around the corner, back against the wall. Then he heard the movement again, not distinct footsteps but the swish of feet on the ground, one after another. He froze. Whatever it was, it was coming towards him. His eyes ached in the darkness, but he could see nothing. Then the white blaze of lightning swept across the lawn, throwing the

30 filigreed ironwork of the railing sharply on the wall, across Jago Antia's belly, and in the long light he saw on the floor the clearly outlined shape of shoes, one after another, the patches of water a sharp black in the light, and as he watched another footprint appeared on the tile, and then another, coming towards him. Before it was dark again he was halfway down the stairs. He stopped, alone with the beating of his

35 heart. He forced himself to stand up straight, to look carefully about and above the staircase for dead ground and lines of fire. He had learnt long ago that professionalism was a much better way to defeat fear than self-castigation and shame, and now he applied himself to the problem. The only possible conclusion was that it had been a trick of the light on the water, and so he was able to move up the

40 staircase, smooth and graceful once again. But on the landing a breath of air curled around his ankle like a flow of cool liquid, and he began to shiver. It was a freezing chill that spread up his thighs and into his groin, and it caught him so suddenly that

he let his teeth chatter for a moment. Then he bit down, but despite his straining he could hardly take a step before he stopped again. It was so cold that his fingers ached. His eyes filled with moisture and suddenly the dark was full of soft shadows. Again he heard the voice, far away, melancholy and low. With a groan he collapsed against the banister and slid down the stairs, all the way to the bottom, his leg rattling on the steps. Through the night he tried it again and again, and once he made it to the middle of the landing, but the fear took the strength from his hips, so that he had to crawl on hands and knees to the descent. At dawn he sat shaken and weak on the first step, his arm around the comforting curve of the thick round post.

\* \* \* \* \*

Finally it was the shock in Thapa's eyes that raised Jago Antia from the stupor he had fallen into. For three days he had been pacing, unshaven and unwashed, at the bottom of the stairs, watching the light make golden shapes in the air. Now Thapa had walked through the front door, and it was his face, slack, and the fact that he forgot to salute that conveyed to Jago Antia how changed he was, how shocking he was.

"It's all right," Jago Antia said. "I'm all right."

Thapa still had his bag in his right hand and an umbrella in the left, and he said nothing. Jago Antia remembered then a story that was a part of his own legend: he had once reduced a lieutenant to tears because of a tea stain on his shirt. It was quite true.

"Put out a change of clothes," he said. "And close your mouth."

The water in the shower drummed against Jago Antia's head and cleared it. He saw the insanity of what had gone on for three days, and he was sure it was exhaustion. There was nothing there, and the important thing was to get to the hospital, and then to sell the house. He ate breakfast eagerly, and felt almost relaxed. Then Amir Khan walked in with a glass of milk on a tray. For three days he had been bringing milk instead of tea, and now when Jago Antia told him to take it back to the kitchen, he said, "Baba, you have to drink it. Mummy said so. You know you're not allowed to drink tea." And he shuffled away, walking through a suddenly revived age when Jehangir Antia was a boy in knickers, agile and confident on two sunburnt legs. For a moment Jago Antia felt time slipping around him like a dark wave, but then he shook away the feeling and stood up.

"Call a taxi," he said to Thapa.

The doctors at Jaslok were crisp and confident in their poking and prodding, and the hum of machinery comforted him. But Todywalla, sitting in his disorderly office, said bluntly, "Sell that house? Na, impossible. There's something in it."

"Oh don't be ridiculous," said Jago Antia vehemently. "That's absurd."

- 5 Todywalla looked keenly at him. Todywalla was a toothless old man with a round black cap squarely on the middle of his head. "Ah," he said. "So you've heard it too."

"I haven't heard a damn thing," Jago Antia said. "Be rational."

"You may be a rationalist," Todywalla said. "But I sell houses in Bombay." He sipped tea noisily from a chipped cup. "There's something in that house."

10 \* \* \* \* \*

When the taxi pulled through the gate Thapa was standing in the street outside, talking to a vegetable seller and two other men. As Jago Antia pulled off his shoes in the living room, Thapa came in and went to the kitchen. He came back a few minutes later with a glass of water.

- 15 "Tomorrow I will find my cousin at the bank at Nariman Point," he said. "And we will get somebody to come to this house. We shouldn't sleep here."

"What do you mean, somebody?"

"Somebody who can clean it up." Thapa's round face was tight, and there were white crescents around his temples. "Somebody who knows."

- 20 "Knows what exactly? What are you talking about?"

Thapa nodded towards the gate. "No one on this street will come near this place after dark. Everyone knows. They were telling me not to stay here."

"Nonsense."

"We can't fight this, saab," Thapa said. After a pause: "Not even you."

- 25 Jago Antia stood erect. "I will sleep tonight quietly and so will you. No more of this foolishness." He marched into the study and lay on the bed, loosening his body bit by bit, and under the surface of his concentration the leg throbbed evenly. The night came on and passed. He thought finally that nothing would happen, and there was a grey outside the window, but then he heard again the incessant calling. He took a

deep breath, and walked into the drawing room. Thapa was standing by the door, his whole body straining away from the stairs. Jago Antia took two steps forward. "Come on," he said. His voice rustled across the room, and both of them jerked. He read the white tightness of terror around Thapa's mouth, and as he had done many times  
5 before, he led by example. He felt his legs move far away, towards the stairs, and he did not look behind him to see if Thapa was following. He knew the same pride and shame which was taking him up the stairs would bring Thapa: as long as each saw himself in the other's eyes he would not let the other down. He had tested this in front of machine guns and found it to be true. So now they moved, Thapa a little  
10 behind and flanking, up the stairs. This time he came up to the landing and was able to move out, through the door, onto the balcony. He was moving, moving. But then the voice came around a corner and he stood still, feeling a rush in his veins. It was amazing, he found himself thinking, how localized it was. He could tell from moment to moment where it was on the balcony. It was not a trick of the wind, not a  
15 hallucination. Thapa was still against the wall, his palms against it, his mouth working back and forth, looking exactly where Jago Antia was. It came closer, and now Jago Antia was able to hear what it was saying: "Where shall I go?" The question was asked with a sob in it, like a tearing hiccup, so close that Jago Antia heard it shake the small frame that asked it. He felt a sound in his own throat, a moan, something  
20 like pain, sympathy. Then he felt the thing pause, and though there was nothing but the air he felt it coming at him, first hesitating, then faster, asking again, where shall I go, where, and he backed away from it, fast, tripping over his heels, and he felt the railing of the balcony on his thighs, hard, and then he was falling.

\* \* \* \* \*

25 The night was dark below. They plummeted headfirst from the belly of the plane into the cool pit at a thousand feet, and Jago Antia relished the leap into reality. They had been training long enough, and now he did not turn his head to see if the stick was tight because he knew his men and their skill. The chute popped with a flap, and after the jerk he flew the sky with his legs easy in the harness. The only feature he could  
30 see was the silver curve of the river far below, and then quite suddenly the dark mass of trees and the swathe of fields. There were no lights in the city of Sylhet, but he knew it was there, to the east, and he knew the men who were in it, defending against him, and he saw the problem clearly and the movements across the terrain below.

35 Then he was rolling across the ground, and the chute was off. Around him was the controlled confusion of a nighttime drop, and swiftly out of that formed the shape of his battalion. He had the command group around him, and in a few minutes they were racing towards their first objectives. Now he was sweating freely, and the weight of his pistol swung against his hip. He could smell the cardamom seeds his

radioman was chewing. In the first grey, to the east, the harsh tearing noise of LMG fire flung the birds out of the trees. Delta Bravo I have contact over. As Jago Antia thumbed the mouthpiece, his radioman smiled at him, nineteen and glowing in the dawn. Delta Bravo, bunkers, platoon strength, I am going in now. Alpha Company  
5 had engaged.

As the day came they moved into the burning city, and the buildings were torn by explosions and the shriek of rockets skimming low over the streets and ringing off the walls. Now the noise echoed and boomed, and it was difficult to tell where it was coming from, but Jago Antia still saw it all forming on his map, which was stained  
10 black now with sweat here and there, and dust, and the plaster knocked from the walls by bullets. He was icy now, his mind holding it all, and as an excited captain reported to him he listened silently, and there was the flat crack of a grenade, not far off, and the captain flinched, then blushed as he saw that Jago Antia was calm as if he were walking down a golf course in Wellington, not a street shining with glass,  
15 thousands of shards sharp as death, no, he was meditative and easy. So the captain went back to his boys with something of Jago Antia's slow watchfulness in his walk, and he put away his nervousness and smiled at them, and they nodded, crouched behind cracked walls, sure of each other and Jago Antia.

Now in the morning the guns echoed over the city, and a plummy BBC voice sounded  
20 over a Bush radio in the remnants of a tailor's shop: "Elements of the Indian Para Brigade are said to be in the outskirts of Sylhet. Pakistani troops are dug in ..." Jago Antia was looking at the rounded curves of the radio on the tailor's shelf, at the strange white knobs and the dial from decades ago, at the deep brown wood, and a shiver came from low on his back into his heart, a whisper of something so tiny that  
25 he could not name it, and yet it broke his concentration and took him away from his body and this room with its drapes of cloth to somewhere else, a flickering vision of a room, curtains blowing in a gusting wind, a feeling of confusion, he shook his head and swallowed. He curled the knob with the back of his hand so that it snapped the voice off and broke with a crack. Outside he could feel the fight approaching a crisis,  
30 the keen whiplash of the carbines and the rattle of the submachine guns and the heavier Pakistani fire, cresting and falling like waves but always higher, it was likely the deciding movement. He had learnt the waiting that was the hardest part of commanding, and now the reports came quickly, and he felt the battle forming to a crescendo; he had a reserve, sixty men, and he knew now where he was going to put  
35 them. They trotted down the street to the east and paused on a dusty street corner (the relentless braying scream of an LMG near by), and Jung the radioman pointed to a house at the end of the street, a white three-storied house with a decorative vine running down the front in concrete, now chipped and holed. "Tall enough," Jago Antia said: he wanted a vantage point to see the city laid out for him. He started off  
40 confidently across the street, and then all the sound in the world vanished, leaving a

smooth silence, he had no recollection of being thrown, but now he was falling through the air, down, he felt distinctly the impact of the ground, but again there was nothing, no sound.

5 After a while he was able to see the men above him as he was lifted, their lips moving serenely even though their faces were twisted with emotion, they appeared curved and bent inwards against a spherical sky. He shut and opened his eyes several times, searching for connections that seemed severed. They carried him into a house. Then he was slowly able to hear again, and with the sound he began to feel the pain. His ears hurt sharply and deep inside his head, in a place in which he had never felt pain  
10 before. But he strained and finally he was able to find, inside, some part of himself, and his body jerked, and they held him still. His jaw cracked, and he said: "What?"

It was a mine on the corner, they told him. Now he was fighting it, he was using his mind, he felt his strength coming back, he could find his hands, and he pushed against the bed and sat up. A fiercely moustached nursing-assistant pushed at his shoulders,  
15 but he struck the hands away and took a deep breath. Then he saw his leg. Below his right knee the flesh was white and twisted away from the bone. Below the ankle was a shapeless bulk of matter, and the nursing-assistant was looking for the artery, but as Jago Antia watched the black blood seeped out onto the floor. Outside, the firing was ceaseless now, and Jago Antia was looking at his leg, and he realized that he no  
20 longer knew where his boys were. The confusion came and howled around his head, and for a moment he was lost. "Cut it off," he said then. "Off."

But, said the nursing-assistant, holding up the useless bandages, but I have nothing, and Jago Antia felt his head swim on an endless swell of pain, it took him up and away and he could no longer see, and it left him breathless and full of loss. "No time. Cut it  
25 off now," he said, but the nursing-assistant was dabbing with the bandages. Jago Antia said to Jung: "You do it, now. Quickly." They were all staring at him, and he knew he could not make them cut him. "Give me your kukri," he said to Jung. The boy hesitated, but then the blade came out of its scabbard with a hiss that Jago Antia heard despite the ceaseless roar outside. He steadied himself and gripped it with both  
30 hands and shut his eyes for a moment, and there was impossibly the sound of the sea inside him, a sob rising in his throat, he opened his eyes and fought it, pulled against it with his shoulders as he raised the kukri above his head, against darkness and mad sorrow, and then he brought the blade down below his knee. What surprised him was the crunch it made against the bone. In four strokes he was through. Each was easier.  
35 "Now," he said, and the nursing-assistant tied it off. Jago Antia waved off the morphine, and he saw that Jung the radioman was crying. On the radio Jago Antia's voice was steady. He took his reports, and then he sent his reserve in. They heard his voice across Sylhet. "Now then," he said. "Finish it."

The room that Jago Antia woke up in had a cracked white ceiling, and for a long time he did not know where he was, in Sylhet (he could feel an ache under his right knee), in the house of his childhood after a fall from the balcony, or in some other room,  
5 unknown: everything seemed to be thrown together in his eyes without shape or distinction, and from moment to moment he forgot the flow of time, and found himself talking to Amir Khan about cricket, and then suddenly it was evening. Finally he was able to sit up in bed, and a doctor fussed about him: there were no injuries, the ground was soft from the rain, his paratrooper's reflexes had turned him in the air  
10 and rolled him on the ground, but he was bruised, and a concussion could not be ruled out. He was to stay in bed and rest. When the doctor left Thapa brought in a plate of rice and dal, and stood at the foot of the bed with his arms behind him. "I will talk to my cousin tonight."

Jago Antia nodded. There was nothing to say. But when the exorcist came two days  
15 later he was not the slaving tribal magician that Jago Antia was expecting, but a sales manager from a large electronics Company. Without haste and without stopping he put his briefcase down, stripped off his black pants and white shirt and blue tie, and bathed under the tap in the middle of the garden. Then he put on a white dhoti and daubed his forehead with a white powder, and meanwhile Thapa was  
20 preparing a thali with little mounds of rice and various kinds of coloured paste and a small diya, with the wick floating in the oil. Then the man took the thali from Thapa and walked slowly into the house, and as he came closer Jago Antia saw that he was in his late forties, that he was heavyset, that he was neither ugly nor handsome. "My name is Thakker," he said to Jago Antia before he sat cross-legged in the middle of the  
25 living room, in front of the stairs, and lit the diya. It was evening now, and the flame was tiny and flickering in the enormous darkness of the room.

As Thakker began to chant and throw fistfuls of rice from his thali into the room Jago Antia felt all the old irritation return, and he was disgusted with himself for letting this insanity gather around him. He walked out into the garden and stood with the  
30 grass rustling against his pants. There was a huge bank of clouds on the horizon, mass upon mass of dark heads piled up thousands of feet high, and as he watched a silver dart of lightning flickered noiselessly, and then another. Now his back began to ache slightly, and he shook his head slowly, overwhelmed by the certainty that he no longer knew anything. He turned around and looked up the path, into the house, and  
35 through the twilight he could see the tiny gleam of Thakker's diya, and as he watched Thakker lifted the thali and walked slowly towards the stairs, into the shadow, so that finally it seemed that the flame was rising up the stairs. Then Thapa came out, and they stood in the garden together, and the breeze from the sea was full of the promise of rain. They waited as night fell, and sometimes they heard Thakker's

voice, lifted high and chanting, and then, very faint, that other voice, blown away by the gusts of wind. Finally—Jago Antia did not know what time it was—Thakker came down the stairs, carrying the thali, but the diya was blown out. They walked up to meet him on the patio, under the faint light of a single bulb.

5     “It is very strong,” he said.

“What is it?” said Jago Antia angrily.

Thakker shrugged. “It is most unmovable.” His face was drawn and pale. “It is a child. It is looking for something. Most terrible. Very strong.”

“Well, get it out.”

10    “I cannot. Nobody can move a child.”

Jago Antia felt a rush of panic, like a steady pressure against his chest.

Thapa said, “What can we do?”

Thakker walked past them, down the stairs, and then he turned and looked up at them. “Do you know who it is?” Jago Antia said nothing, his lips held tightly together  
15    to stop them from trembling. “It is most powerful because it is a child and because it is helpless and because it is alone. Only one who knows it and who is from its family can help it. Such a person must go up there naked and alone. Remember, alone and naked, and ask it what it seeks.” Thakker wiped away the white powder from his forehead slowly, and then he turned and walked away. It was now drizzling, fat drops  
20    that fell out of the sky insistently.

Out of the darkness Thakker called. “You must go.” Then a pause in which Jago Antia could hear, somewhere, rushing water. “Help him.”

\* \* \* \* \*

At the bottom of the stairs Jago Antia felt his loneliness like a bitterness in his  
25    nostrils, like a stench. Thapa watched from the door, remote already, and there seemed to be nothing in the world but the shadows ahead, the creaking of the old house, the wind in the balconies. As Jago Antia walked slowly up the stairs, unbuttoning his shirt, his pulse was rushing in his head, each beat like an explosion, not out of fear anymore but from a kind of anticipation, because now he knew who it  
30    was, who waited for him. On the landing he kicked off his shoes and unbuckled his belt, and whispered, “What can you want from me? I was a child too.” He walked slowly around the balcony, and the rain dashed against his shoulders and rolled down

his back. He came to the end of the balcony, at a door with bevelled glass, and he peered through it, and he could dimly make out the ornate curves of his mother's dressing table, the huge mirror, and beyond that the bed now covered with sheets, he stood with his face against the cool pane. He shut his eyes. Somewhere deep came the  
5 poisonous seep of memory, he felt it in his stomach like a living stream, and his mother was looking at him, her eyes unfocussed in a kind of daze. She was a very beautiful woman, and she was sitting in front of her mirror now as she always did, but her hair was untidy, and she was wearing a white sari. He was sitting on the edge of her bed, his feet stuck out, and he was looking at his black shoes and white socks,  
10 and he was trying to be very still because he did not know what was going to happen next. He was dressed up, and the house was full of people, but it was very quiet and the only sounds were the pigeons on the balcony. He was afraid to move, and after a while he began to count his breaths, in and out. Then his father came in, he stood next to his mother, put a hand on her shoulder, and they looked at each other for a  
15 long time, and he wanted to say that they looked like their picture on the mantelpiece, only older and in white, but he knew he couldn't so he kept himself still and waited. Then his father said to his mother, come, and they rose and he walked behind them a little. She was leaning on his father, and they came down the stairs and everyone watched them. Downstairs he saw his uncles and aunts and other  
20 people he didn't know, and in the middle of the room there was a couch and on it lay his brother Sohrab. Sohrab had been laid out and draped in a white sheet. There was a kind of oil lamp with a wick burning near Sohrab's head, and a man was whispering a prayer into his ear. There was a smell of sandalwood in the air. Then his mother said, "Soli, Soli," and his father turned his face away, and a breath passed through the  
25 room, and he saw many people crying. That was what they always called Sohrab. He was Soli, and that was how Jehangir always thought of him. His mother was kneeling next to Soli, and his father too, and he was alone, and he didn't know what to do, but he stood straight up, and he kept his hands by his sides. Then two men came forward, and they covered Soli's face, and then other people lifted him up, and they took him  
30 through the door, and for a long time he could see them walking through the garden towards the gate. His mother was sitting on the sofa with her sisters, and after a while he turned around and walked up the stairs, and above there was nobody, and he walked through the rooms and around the balcony, and after a while he thought he was waiting for something to happen, but it never did.

35 Jago Antia's forehead trembled against the glass and now he turned and walked down the corridor that ran around the house, through darkness and sudden light, and he walked by a playroom, and then his father's study, and as he walked he felt that it was walking beside him, in front of him, around him. He heard the voice asking its question, but his own desperate question seemed to twist in his throat and come out  
40 only as a sound, a sort of sob of anger. It went into the room that had been his room and Soli's room, and he stopped at the door, his chest shaking, looking at the floor

where they had wrestled each other, the bureau between the beds on which they had stacked their books and their toys. The door creaked open under his hand, and inside he sat on this bed, in the middle, where he used to, and they were listening to the Binaca Geet Mala on the radio, Soli loved his radio and the Binaca Geet Mala. He was  
5 lying on the bed in his red pyjamas and the song went Maine shayad tumhe pahale bhi kahin dekha hai, Soli sang along with it, Jehangir was not allowed to touch the radio, but when Soli was away he sometimes played with the knobs, and once he switched it on and heard a hiss and a voice far away speaking angrily in a language he didn't understand, it scared him and he ran away from it, and Soli found his radio on, and  
10 then there was a fight. Jehangir lost the fight, but Soli always won, even with the other boys on the street, he was fearless, and he jumped over walls, and he led them all, and at cricket he was always the captain of one side, and sometimes in the evenings, still in his barrister's clothes, their father watched their games in the garden, and he said that Soli had a lovely style. When he said this the first time  
15 Jehangir raised his head and blinked because he understood instantly what his father meant, he had known it all along but now he knew the words for it, and he said it to himself sometimes under his breath, a lovely style, a lovely style. Now Soli raised himself up in bed on an elbow, and Amir Khan brought in two glasses of milk on a tray, and then their mother came in and sat as she did on Soli's bed, and tonight she  
20 had The Illustrated Weekly of India in her hand, folded open to a tall picture of a man with a moustache and a bat, and she said, "Look at him, he was the Prince." So she told them about Ranjitsinhji, who was really a prince, who went to England where they called him nigger and wog, but he showed them, he was the most beautiful batsman, like a dancer he turned their bouncers to the boundaries with his wrists, he  
25 drove with clean elegance, he had good manners, and he said nothing to their insults, and he showed them all he was the best of them all, he was the Prince, he was lovely. After their mother left Soli put The Illustrated Weekly in his private drawer, and after that Jehangir would see him take it out and look at it, and sometimes he would let Jehangir look at it, and Jehangir would look at the long face and the pride in the  
30 stance and the dark opaque eyes, and he would feel a surge of pride himself, and Soli would have his wiry hand on his shoulder, and they would both say together, Ranjitsinhji, Ranji.

That summer one Sunday afternoon they were dozing in the heat when suddenly Burjor Mama came in and tumbled them both out of bed, roaring what a pair of  
35 sleepyhead sissy types, and they laughed with delight because he was their favourite uncle. They knew his arrival meant at least two weeks of unexpected pleasures, excursions to Juhu, sailing trips, films, shows, and sizzling forbidden pavement foods. Their mother came in and hugged him close, and they were embarrassed by her tears, Burjor was her only younger brother and more precious for his profession of  
40 soldiering, she was exclaiming now how he was burnt black by the sun, what are they doing to you now, and he was really dark, but Jehangir liked his unceasing whiplike

energy and the sharp pointed ends of his handlebar moustache. Barely pausing to thump down his hold-all and his suitcase, he gathered up the whole family, Amir Khan included, and he whisked them off for a drive, and he whistled as he drove. On the way back Jehangir, weighted down with ice cream, fell asleep with his head in his mother's lap, and once for a moment he awoke and saw, close to his face, his mother's hand holding her brother's wrist tenderly and close, her delicate fingers very pale against his skin with the strong corded muscles underneath.

And Jago Antia, walking down the corridor, walking, felt the sticky sleep of childhood and the cosy hum of the car and safety. And then he was at the bottom of a flight of stairs, he knew he had to go up, because it had gone before him, and now he stumbled because the pain came, and it was full of fear, he went up, one two three, and then leaned over, choking. Above him the stairs angled into darkness and the roof he knew so well, and he couldn't move, again he was trembling, and the voice was speaking somewhere ahead, he said, "I don't want to go," but then he heard it again. He knew his hands were shaking, and he said, "All right you bastard, naked, naked," and he tore at the straps, and then the leg rolled down the stairs to the bottom. He went up, hunching, on hands and knees, his lips curled back and breathing in huge gasps.

Burjor Mama bought them a kite. On Monday morning he had to report in Colaba for work, and so Jehangir's mother brought up his pressed uniform and put it on the bed in the guest room. Jehangir lay on the bed next to the uniform and took in its peculiar smell, it was a deep olive green, and the bars on the front were of many colours but mainly red and orange, and above a breast pocket it said, B. MEHTA. Jehangir's mother sat on the bed too and smoothed out the uniform with an open palm, and then Burjor Mama came out of the bathroom in a towel. As he picked up the shirt, Jehangir saw under the sadra, under and behind his left arm, a scar shaped like a star, brown and hard against the pale skin. Then Jehangir looked up and he saw his mother's face, tender and proud and a little angry as she looked at Burjor. After breakfast Soli and Jehangir walked with him to the gate, and he said, "See you later, alligators," and in the afternoon they waited on the porch for him, reading comics and sipping at huge glasses of squash. When the taxi stopped at the gate they had run forward, whooping, because even before he was out they had seen the large triangle of the kite, and then they ran up without pause to the roof, Soli holding the kite at the ends, and Jehangir following behind with the roll of string. Jehangir held the roll as Soli spun off the manjha, and Soli said, watch your fingers, and Burjor showed them how to tie the kite string, once up, once down, and then they had it up in the air, it was doing spirals and rolls, and Soli said, "Yaar, that's a fighting kite!" Nobody was flying to fight with nearby, but when their father came up he laughed and watched them, and when they went down to tea Soli's fingers were cut from the manjha, and when Jehangir asked, Burjor Mama said, "It's ground glass on the line."

Now he came up the stairs, his stump bumping on the edges of the stone, and his palm scraped against something metal, but he felt the sting distantly and without interest. The next day Soli lay stretched across the roof, his mouth open. Jago Antia pulled himself up, his arms around a wooden post, and he could see the same two-level roof, Amir Khan's old room to one side, with its sloping roof coming to the green posts holding it up, beyond that the expanse of brick open to the sky, and then a three-foot drop with a metal ladder leading to the lower level of the roof, and beyond that the treetops and the cold stretch of the ocean. He let go of the post and swayed gently in the rain. Soli walked in front of him, his hands looping back the string, sending the kite fluttering strongly through the sky, and Jehangir held the coil and took up the slack. It flew in circles above them. "Let me fly it," Jehangir said. "Let me fly it." But Soli said, "You can't hold this, it'll cut you." "I can hold anything. I can." "You can't, it'll hurt you." "It won't. I won't let it." And Jehangir ran forward, Soli danced away, light and confident, backwards, and then for a moment his face was surprised, and then he was lying below, three feet below on the ground, and the string flew away from him. Jago Antia dropped to his knee, then fell heavily on his side. He pulled himself through the water, to the edge, next to the metal stairs, and he peered down trying to see the bottom but it seemed endless, but he knew it was only three feet below. How can somebody die falling three feet? He heard the voice asking its question, where shall I go, and he roared into the night, "What do you want? What the hell is it you want?" But it wouldn't stop, and Jago Antia knelt on the edge and wept, "What do you want," and finally he said, "Look, look," and he pushed himself up, leaned forward, and let himself go, and he fell: he saw again Soli backing away, Jehangir reaching up trying to take his hand away from the string, Soli holding his hand far up, and Jehangir helpless against his strength. Then Soli smiling, standing, and Jehangir shouting and running forward and jumping, the solid impact of his small body against Soli's legs, Soli's look of surprise, he's falling, reaching wildly, Jehangir's hand under the bottom of Soli's shorts, he holds on and tries, holds and pulls, but then he feels the weight taking him over, and he won't let go, but he hasn't the strength, he's falling with Soli, he feels the impact of the bricks through Soli's body.

When Jago Antia stirred weakly on the roof, when he looked up, it was dawn. He held himself up and said, "Are you still here? Tell me what you want." Then he saw at the parapet, very dim and shifting in the grey light, the shape of a small body, a boy looking down over the edge towards the ocean. As Jago Antia watched, the boy turned slowly, and in the weak light he saw that the boy was wearing a uniform of olive green, and he asked, "Where shall I go?" Jago Antia began to speak, but then his voice caught, because he was remembering his next and seventh birthday, the first party without Soli, and his parents holding him between them, soothing him, saying you must want something, and he looking up at their faces, at the lines in his father's face, the exhaustion in his mother's eyes. Burjor Mama sits on the carpet behind him

with head down, and Amir Khan stands behind, and Jehangir shakes his head, nothing. His mother's eyes fill with tears, and she kisses him on the forehead, "Baba, it's all right, let us give you a present," and his heart breaks beneath a surging weight, but he stands up straight, and looking at her and his father, he says, "I want a  
5 uniform." So Jago Antia looked at the boy as he came closer, and he saw the small letters above the pocket, J. ANTIA, and the sun came up, and he saw the boy clearly, he saw the enormous dark eyes, and in the eyes he saw his vicious and ravenous strength, his courage and his devotion, his silence and his pain, his whole misshapen and magnificent life, and Jago Antia said, "Jehangir, Jehangir, you're already at  
10 home."

\* \* \* \* \*

Thapa and Amir Khan came up the stairs slowly, and he called out to them, "Come, come. I'm all right." He was sitting crosslegged, watching the sun move in and out of the clouds.

15 Thapa squatted beside him. "Was it here?"

"He's gone. I saw him, and then he vanished."

"Who?"

Jago Antia shook his head. "Someone I didn't know before."

"What was he doing here then?"

20 "He was lost." He leaned on both their shoulders, one arm around each, for the descent down the stairs. Somehow, naked and hopping from stair to stair, he was smiling. He knew that nothing had changed. He knew he was still and forever Jago Antia, that for him it was too late for anything but a kind of solitude, that he would give his body to the fire, that in the implacable hills to the north, among the rocks, he  
25 and other men and women, each with histories of their own, would find each other for life and for death. And yet he felt free. He sat on the porch, strapping his leg on, and Amir Khan brought out three cups of tea. Thapa wrapped a sheet around Jago Antia, and looking at each other they both laughed. "Thank you," Jago Antia said. Then they drank the tea together.