

Brotherly Love

by Jhumpa Lahiri

1.

East of the Tolly Club, after Deshapran Sashmal Road splits in two, there is a small mosque. A turn leads to a quiet enclave. A warren of narrow lanes and modest middle-class homes.

Once, within this enclave, there were two ponds, oblong, side by side. Behind them was a lowland spanning a few acres.

After the monsoon, the ponds would rise so that the embankment built between them could not be seen. The lowland also filled with rain, three or four feet deep, the water remaining for a portion of the year.

The flooded plain was thick with water hyacinth. The floating weed grew aggressively. Its leaves caused the surface to appear solid – green in contrast to the blue of the sky.

Simple huts stood here and there along the periphery. The poor waded in to forage for what was edible. In autumn, egrets arrived, their white feathers darkened by the city's soot, waiting motionless for their prey.

In the humid climate of Calcutta, evaporation was slow. But eventually the sun burned off most of the floodwater, exposing damp ground again.

So many times Subhash and Udayan had walked across the lowland. It was a shortcut to a field on the outskirts of the neighborhood, where they went to play football. Avoiding puddles, stepping over mats of hyacinth leaves that remained in place, breathing the dank air.

They'd never set foot in the Tolly Club, although they'd passed by its wooden gate, its brick walls, hundreds of times.

Until the mid-forties, their father used to watch horses racing around its track. He'd watched from the street, standing among the bettors and other spectators unable to afford a ticket or to enter the club's grounds. But after the Second World War, around the time Subhash and Udayan were born, the height of the wall was raised, so that the public could no longer see in.

Bismillah, a neighbor, worked as a caddy at the club. He was a Muslim who had stayed on in Tollygunge after Partition. For a few paise he sold them golf balls that had been lost or abandoned on the course. Some were sliced like a gash in one's skin, revealing a pink rubbery interior.

At first they hit the dimpled balls back and forth with sticks. Then Bismillah sold them a putting iron with a shaft that was slightly bent. A frustrated player had damaged it, striking it against a tree. Bismillah showed them how to lean forward, where to place their hands. Loosely determining the objective of the game, they dug holes in the dirt and tried to coax the balls in. But golf wasn't like football or cricket – it was not a sport the brothers could satisfactorily improvise.

In the dirt of the playing field Bismillah scratched out a map of the Tolly Club. He told them about the swimming pool, the stables, the tennis court. Restaurants where tea was poured from silver pots, special rooms in the clubhouse for billiards and bridge. Gramophones playing music. Bartenders in white coats who prepared drinks called pink lady and gin fizz.

The club's management had recently put up more boundary walls, to keep intruders away. But Bismillah said that there were still sections along the western edge where one might enter.

They waited until close to dusk, when the golfers headed off the course to avoid the mosquitoes. They kept the plan to themselves, not mentioning it to the other boys in the neighborhood. They walked to the mosque at their corner, its red-and-white minarets distinct from the surrounding buildings. They turned onto the main road carrying the putting iron, and two empty kerosene tins.

They headed toward the paddy fields where the Adi Ganga once flowed, where the British had once sailed boats to the delta.

These days it was stagnant, lined with settlements of Hindus who'd fled from Dhaka, from Rajshahi, from Chittagong. A displaced population that Calcutta accommodated but ignored. Since Partition, a decade ago, they had overwhelmed parts of Tollygunge, the way monsoon rain obscured the lowland.

A rapid trickle, then a flood. Subhash and Udayan remembered it. A grim procession, a human herd. A few bundles on their heads, infants strapped to parents' chests. They lived without sanitation, without electricity. In shanties next to garbage heaps, in any available space.

Subhash and Udayan stopped at a spot where the wall was low enough to scale. They were wearing shorts. Their pockets were stuffed with golf balls. Bismillah said they would find plenty more inside the club.

Udayan flung the putting iron over the wall. Then one of the kerosene tins. Standing on the remaining tin would give Subhash enough leverage to make it over. But Udayan was a few inches shorter in those days.

Lace your fingers, Udayan said.

Subhash brought his hands together. He felt the weight of his brother's foot, the worn sole of his sandal, then his whole body, bearing down for an instant. Quickly Udayan hoisted himself up. He straddled the wall.

Should I stand guard on this side while you explore? Subhash asked him.

What fun would that be?

What do you see?

Come see for yourself.

Subhash nudged the kerosene tin closer to the wall. He stepped onto it, feeling the hollow structure wobble beneath him.

Let's go, Subhash.

Udayan readjusted himself, dropping down so that only his fingertips were visible. Then he released his hands and fell. Subhash could hear him breathing hard from the effort.

You're all right?

Of course. Now you.

Subhash gripped the wall with his hands, hugging it to his chest, scraping his knees. As usual, he was uncertain whether he was more frustrated by Udayan's daring or with himself for his lack of it. Subhash was thirteen, older by fifteen months. But he had no sense of himself without Udayan. From his earliest memories, at every point his brother was there.

Suddenly, they were no longer in Tollygunge. They could hear the traffic continuing down the street but could not see it. They were surrounded by massive trees: cannonball and eucalyptus, bottlebrush and frangipani.

Subhash had never seen such grass, as uniform as a carpet, unfurled over sloping contours of earth. Undulating like dunes in a desert, or gentle dips and swells in a sea. It was shorn so finely on the putting green that it felt like moss when he pressed against it.

They were both giddy from the thrill of trespassing, from the fear of being caught. But no guard on foot or horseback, no groundsman spotted them. No one came to chase them away.

They kept far from the main entrance, not venturing toward the clubhouse, where foreign couples walked arm in arm or sat on cane chairs under the trees. From time to time, Bismillah had said, there was a birthday party for the child of a British family, with ice cream and pony rides, a cake on which candles burned. Though Nehru was Prime Minister, it was the new Queen of England, Elizabeth II, whose portrait presided in the main drawing room.

In their neglected corner, Udayan swung forcefully. Raising his arms over his head, assuming poses, brandishing the putting iron like a sword. He broke apart the pristine turf, losing a few golf balls in one of the bodies of water. They searched in the rough for replacements.

Subhash was the lookout, listening for the approach of horses' hooves on the broad red-dirt paths. He heard the taps of a woodpecker. The faint strikes of a sickle as a section of grass elsewhere in the club was trimmed by hand.

Groups of jackals sat erect in packs, their tawny hides mottled with gray. As the light dwindled, a few began to search for food. Their distraught howling, echoing within the club, signaled that it was late, time for the brothers to go home.

They left the two kerosene tins, the one on the outside to mark the place. They made sure to hide the one inside the club behind some shrubbery.

On subsequent visits, Subhash collected feathers and wild almonds. He saw vultures bathing in puddles, spreading their wings to dry. Once, he found an egg that had dropped, intact, from a warbler's nest. Carefully, he carried it home with him, placing it in a terra-cotta container from a sweet shop, covering it with twigs. Digging a hole for it in the garden behind their house, at the base of the mango tree, when the egg did not hatch.

Then one evening, throwing over the putting iron from inside the club, climbing back over the wall, they noticed that the tin on the other side was missing.

Someone took it, Udayan said. He started to search. The light was scant.

Is this what you boys are looking for?

It was a policeman, appearing from nowhere, patrolling the area around the club.

He took a few steps toward them. Spotting the putting iron on the ground, he picked it up, inspecting it. He switched on a flashlight, focusing its beam on each of their faces, then down the length of their bodies.

Brothers?

Subhash nodded.

What's in your pockets?

They removed the golf balls and surrendered them. They watched the policeman put them in his own pockets. He kept one out, tossing it into the air and catching it in his hand.

How did you come to acquire these?

They were silent.

Someone invited you today, to play golf at the club?

They shook their heads.

You don't need me to tell you that these grounds are restricted, the policeman said. He rested the shaft of the putting iron lightly against Subhash's arm.

Was this your idea? Aren't you old enough to know better?

It was my idea, Udayan said.

You have a loyal brother, the policeman said to Subhash. Wanting to protect you. Willing to take the blame.

I'll do you a favor this time, he continued. I won't mention it to the club. As long as you don't intend to try it again.

We won't return, Subhash said.

Very well. Shall I escort you home to your parents or should we conclude our conversation here?

Here.

Turn around, then. Only you.

Subhash faced the wall.

Take another step.

He felt the steel shaft striking his haunches, then the backs of his legs. The force of the second blow, only an instant of contact, brought him to his hands and knees. It would take days for the welts to go down.

Their parents had never beaten them. He felt nothing at first, only numbness. Then a sensation that was like boiling water tossed from a pan against his skin.

Stop it, Udayan shouted to the policeman. He crouched next to Subhash, throwing an arm across his shoulders, attempting to shield him. Together, pressed against each other, they braced themselves. But nothing more happened. They heard the sound of the putting iron being tossed over the wall, landing a final time inside the club. Then the policeman, who wanted nothing more to do with them, retreating.

Since childhood, Subhash had been cautious. His mother never had to run after him. He kept her company, watching as she cooked or sewed.

While Subhash stayed in clear view, Udayan was disappearing: even in their two-room house, when he was a boy, he hid compulsively, under the bed, behind the doors, in the crate where winter quilts were stored.

He played this game without announcing it, spontaneously vanishing, sneaking into the back garden, climbing into a tree, forcing their mother, when she called and he did not answer, to stop what she was doing. As she looked for him, as she humored him and called his name, Subhash saw the momentary panic in her face, that perhaps she would not find him.

When they were old enough, when they were permitted to leave the house, they were told not to lose sight of each other. Together they wandered down the winding lanes of the enclave, across the lowland, to the playing field, where they sometimes met up with other boys. They went to the mosque at the corner, to sit on the cool of its marble steps, listening to a football game on someone's shortwave.

Eventually, they were allowed to leave the enclave and to enter the greater city. To board trams and buses by themselves. They began to linger outside Technicians' Studio, where Bengali film stars spent their days. They caught sight of the actors and actresses as they emerged from their dressing rooms or stepped into waiting cars. Udayan was the one brave enough to ask them for autographs. He was blind to self-constraints, like an animal incapable of perceiving certain colors.

In spite of their differences, one was perpetually confused with the other, so that when either name was called both were conditioned to answer. They were similar enough in build to draw from a single pile of clothes. Their complexions, a light coppery compound derived from their parents, were identical. Their double-jointed fingers, the sharp cut of their features, the wavy texture of their hair.

Subhash wondered if his placid nature was regarded as a lack of inventiveness, perhaps even a failing, in his parents' eyes. His parents did not have to worry about him, and yet they did not favor him. It became his mission to obey them, given that it wasn't possible to surprise or impress them. That was what Udayan did.

Subhash might have started school a year earlier. But for the sake of convenience – also because Udayan had protested at the notion of Subhash going without him – they were put into the same class at the same time. A Bengali medium school for boys from ordinary families, beyond the tram depot, past the Christian cemetery.

In matching notebooks, they summarized the history of India, the founding of Calcutta. They drew maps to learn the geography of the world.

In high school the brothers studied optics and forces, the atomic numbers of the elements, the properties of light and sound. They learned about Hertz's discovery of electromagnetic waves and Marconi's experiments with wireless transmissions.

Each evening, at opposite sides of a metal table, they sat with their textbooks, copybooks, pencils, and erasers, a chess game in progress at the same time. They stayed up late, working on equations and formulas. It was quiet enough at night to hear the jackals howling in the Tolly Club. At times, they were still awake when the crows began quarrelling, signaling the start of another day.

Udayan wasn't afraid to contradict their teachers about hydraulics, about plate tectonics. He gesticulated to illustrate his points, to emphasize his opinions, the vivid interplay of his hands suggesting that molecules and particles were within his grasp. At times, he was asked by their Sirs to step outside the room, told that he was holding up his classmates, when in fact he'd moved beyond them.

After studying basic circuitry, Udayan familiarized himself with the wiring system of their home. One day, he set about installing a buzzer for the house. He mounted a transformer on the fuse box and a black button to push by the main door. Hammering a hole in the wall, he fed wires through. Once the buzzer was in place, Udayan said they should use it to practice Morse code. Finding a book about telegraphy at a library, he wrote out two copies of the dots and dashes that corresponded to the letters of the alphabet, one for each of them to consult.

They concocted scenarios, pretending to be soldiers or spies in distress. Covertly communicating from a mountain pass in China, a Russian forest, a cane field in Cuba.

Ready?

Clear.

Coordinates?

Unknown.

Survivors?

Two.

Losses?

Pressing the buzzer, they would tell each other that they were hungry, that they should play football, that a pretty girl had just passed the house.

They were admitted to two of the city's best colleges. Udayan to Presidency to study physics. Subhash, for chemical engineering, to Jadavpur. They were the only boys in their neighborhood, the only students from their unremarkable high school, to have done so well.

Their father had started working at nineteen to help support his family. Not having a college degree was his sole regret. He had a clerical position with the Indian Railways. As word spread of his sons' success, he said he could no longer step outside the house without being stopped and congratulated.

Asked what they wanted as a celebratory gift, Subhash suggested a new chess set. Udayan said a shortwave radio. He wanted more news of the world than what was printed in the daily Bengali paper, rolled slim as a twig and thrown over the courtyard wall in the mornings.

They put it together themselves, searching in New Market, in junk shops, finding parts from Indian Army surplus. When it was finally assembled, it looked like a little suitcase, with a squared-off handle. Made of metal, bound in black. They took turns sitting by the window, holding the receiver in their hands, adjusting the antenna, manipulating two controls at once.

They searched for any foreign signal. News bulletins from Radio Moscow, Voice of America, the BBC. They heard arbitrary information, snippets from thousands of miles away, emerging from great thickets of interference that tossed like an ocean, that wavered like a wind.

It was 1964. The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution authorized America to use military force against North Vietnam. In Calcutta another wave of riots between Muslims and Hindus killed more than a hundred people after a relic was stolen from a mosque in Srinagar. Among the Communists in India there was dissent over the border war with China two years before. A breakaway group, sympathetic to China, called itself the Communist Party of India, Marxist: the CPI(M).

In the mornings, now that they were beginning to shave, they held up a hand mirror and a pan of warm water for each other in the courtyard.

On separate sides of the city, they made different friends, mixing with boys who'd gone to English medium schools. They took exams on different schedules, studying with different professors, running different experiments in their labs.

Because Udayan's campus was farther away, it took him longer to get home. The battered chessboard stood neglected on the study table, until Subhash began to play against himself. Still, each day of his life began and ended with Udayan beside him.

In 1967, in the papers and on All India Radio, they started hearing about a place called Naxalbari. It was one of a string of villages in the Darjeeling District, a narrow corridor at the northern tip of West Bengal. Tucked into the foothills of the Himalayas, nearly four hundred miles from Calcutta, closer to Tibet than to Tollygunge.

Most of the villagers were tribal peasants who worked on tea plantations and large estates. For generations, they'd lived under a feudal system that hadn't substantially changed. They were manipulated by wealthy landowners. They were pushed off fields they'd cultivated, denied revenue from crops they'd grown.

That March, when a sharecropper in Naxalbari tried to plow land from which he'd been illegally evicted, his landlord sent thugs to beat him. The police had refused to intervene. After this, groups of sharecroppers began retaliating. They started burning deeds and records that had cheated them. Forcibly occupying land.

It wasn't the first instance of peasants in the Darjeeling District revolting. But this time their tactics were militant. Armed with primitive weapons, carrying red flags, shouting "Long Live Mao Tse-tung."

Two Bengali Communists, Charu Majumdar and Kanu Sanyal, were helping to organize the peasants. They'd met in prison. Majumdar was a college dropout from a landowning family, a lawyer's son. In the papers there were pictures of a frail man with a bony face, a hooked nose, bushy hair. He was an asthmatic, a Marxist-Leninist theoretician. Some of the senior Communists called him a madman. Sanyal was a disciple of Majumdar's, a Brahman who'd learned the tribal dialects and refused to own property.

As the rebellion spread, the police started patrolling the area. Imposing undeclared curfews, making arbitrary arrests.

In May, it was reported that a group of peasants, men and women, had attacked a police inspector with bows and arrows, killing him. The next day, the local police force encountered a rioting crowd on the road. An arrow struck one of the sergeants in the arm, and the crowd was ordered to disband. When it didn't, the police fired. Eleven people were killed, eight of them women.

At night, listening to the radio, secretly smoking after their parents had gone to bed, Subhash and Udayan talked about what was unfolding.

Do you think it was worth it? Subhash asked. What the peasants did?

Of course it was worth it. They rose up. They risked everything. People with nothing. People those in power do nothing to protect.

But will it make a difference? What good are bows and arrows against a modern state?

Udayan pressed his fingertips together, as if to clasp a few grains of rice. If you were born into that life, what would you do?

By autumn, Sanyal and Majumdar had both gone into hiding. It was the same autumn that Che Guevara was executed in Bolivia, his hands cut off to prove his death.

In India, journalists started publishing their own periodicals. *Liberation* in English, *Deshabrati* in Bengali. They reproduced articles from Chinese Communist magazines. Udayan began bringing them home.

This rhetoric is nothing new, their father said, leafing through a copy. Our generation read Marx, too.

Your generation didn't solve anything, Udayan said.

We built a nation. We're independent. The country is ours.

It's not enough, Baba. Where did it get us? Who has it helped?

These things take time.

Their father dismissed Naxalbari. He said young people were getting excited over nothing. I've already lived through change in this country, he said. I know what it takes for one system to replace another. Not you.

But Udayan persisted. He started challenging their father the way he used to challenge their teachers at school. If he was so proud that India was independent, why hadn't he protested the British at the time? Why had he never joined a labor union? Why had he never taken a stand?

Both Subhash and Udayan knew the answer. Because their father was a government employee, he was barred from joining any party or union. During Independence, he was forbidden to speak out; those were the terms of his job.

It was for our sake. He was being responsible, Subhash said.

But Udayan didn't see it that way.

Now, if they happened to pass the Tolly Club together, Udayan called it an affront. People still filled slums all over the city; children were born and raised on the streets. Why were a hundred acres walled off for the enjoyment of a few?

Subhash remembered the imported trees, the jackals, the bird cries. The golf balls heavy in their pockets, the undulating green of the course. He remembered Udayan going over the wall first, challenging him to follow. Crouching on the ground the last evening they were there, trying to shield him.

But Udayan said that golf was the pastime of the comprador bourgeoisie. He said the Tolly Club was proof that India was still a semi-colonial country, behaving as if the British had never left.

He pointed out that Che, who had worked as a caddy on a golf course in Argentina, had come to the same conclusion. That after the Cuban revolution getting rid of the golf courses was one of the first things Castro had done.

Under their bed, against the wall, there was a can of red paint and a brush. Beneath their mattress Subhash found a folded piece of paper containing a list of slogans, copied out in Udayan's hand. "China's Chairman is our Chairman!" "Down with elections!" "Our path is the path of Naxalbari!"

The walls of the city were turning thick with them now. The walls of campus buildings, the high walls of the film studios. The lower walls flanking the lanes of their enclave.

One night, Subhash heard Udayan come into the house and go straight to the bathroom. He heard the sound of water hitting the floor. Subhash was sitting at the study table. Udayan pushed the can of paint beneath their bed.

Subhash closed his notebook, replaced the cap on his pen. What were you doing just now?

Rinsing off.

Udayan crossed the room and sat in a chair by the window. He was wearing white cotton pajamas that hung on him loosely. His skin was damp, the hair dark on his chest. He put a cigarette to his lips and slid open a matchbox. It took him a few strikes to light the match.

You were painting slogans? Subhash asked him.

The ruling class puts its propaganda everywhere. Why should they be allowed to influence people and no one else?

What happens if the police catch you?

They won't.

He turned the radio on. If we don't stand up to a problem, we contribute to it, he said.

After a pause he added, Come with me tomorrow, if you want.

Again Subhash was the lookout. Again alert to every sound. They'd told their parents that they were going to a late showing of a film.

He stood close. The pond frogs were calling, monotonous, insistent. He watched as Udayan dipped the paintbrush into the can.

Subhash was not afraid of being caught this time. Perhaps it was foolish of him, but something told him that such a thing could only happen once. Yet Subhash was angry with himself for going along with it. For still needing to prove he could. He was sick of the fear that always rose up in him: that he would cease to exist, and that somehow he and Udayan would cease to be brothers, were Subhash to resist him.

After their studies ended, they were among so many others in their generation who were overqualified and unemployed. They began tutoring to bring in money, contributing their earnings to the household. Udayan found a job teaching science at a technical high school close to Tollygunge. He seemed satisfied with an ordinary occupation, indifferent to the idea of building up a career.

Subhash decided to apply to a few Ph.D programs in the United States. The immigration laws had changed, making it easier for Indian students to enter. While studying for his master's degree at Jadavpur, he'd begun to focus his research on chemistry and the environment. The effects of petroleum and nitrogen on oceans and streams and lakes.

He suggested that Udayan should go abroad, too, where there were more jobs, where it might be easier for both of them. He mentioned the famous universities that supported the world's most gifted scientists: MIT, Princeton, where Einstein had been.

But none of this impressed Udayan. How can you walk away from what's happening? There, of all places?

It's a degree program. It's only a matter of a few years.

Udayan shook his head. If you go, you won't come back.

How do you know?

Because I know you. Because you think only of yourself.

Subhash stared at his brother. Lounging on their bed, smoking, preoccupied by the newspapers.

You don't think what you're doing is selfish?

Udayan turned a page of the newspaper, not bothering to look up. I don't think wanting to make a difference is selfish, no.

This isn't a game you're playing. What if the police come to the house? What if you get arrested? What would Ma and Baba think?

There's more to life than what they think.

What's happened to you, Udayan? They're the people who raised you. Who continue to feed and clothe you. You'd amount to nothing if it weren't for them.

Udayan got up and strode out of the room. A moment later he was back. He stood before Subhash, his face lowered. His anger, quick to flare, had already left him.

You're the other side of me, Subhash. It's without you that I'm nothing. Don't go.

It was the only time he'd admitted such a thing. He'd said it with love in his voice. With need.

But Subhash heard it as a command, one of so many he'd capitulated to all his life. Another exhortation to do as Udayan did, to follow him.

2.

The university had begun as an agricultural school. A land-grant college still surrounded by greenhouses, orchards, fields of corn. On the outskirts were lush pastures of scientifically cultivated grass, nicer than the grass that grew inside the walls of the Tolly Club.

But Subhash was no longer in Tollygunge. He had stepped out of it as he had stepped so many mornings out of dreams, its reality and its particular logic rendered meaningless in the light of day. The difference was so extreme that he could not accommodate the two places together in his mind. In this enormous new country, there seemed to be nowhere for the old to reside. There was nothing to link them; he was the sole link. Here life ceased to obstruct or assault him. Here was a place where humanity was not always pushing, rushing, running as if with a fire at its back.

And yet certain physical aspects of Rhode Island corresponded roughly to those of Calcutta, within India. Mountains to the north, an ocean to the east. As Tollygunge, in a previous era, had been flooded by the sea, all of Rhode Island had once been covered with sheets of ice. The advance and retreat of glaciers had created marshes and the bay, dunes and moraines. They had shaped the current shore.

He found a room in a white wooden house, sharing a kitchen and bathroom with another Ph.D student, named Richard Grifalconi. A student of sociology, he came from a Quaker family in Wisconsin. He told Subhash that he'd just turned thirty. For the sake of the next generation, he'd decided to become a professor. He'd travelled to the South as an undergraduate, to protest segregation on public transportation. He'd spent two weeks in a Mississippi jail. Gandhi was a hero to him, he said. Udayan would have scoffed, Subhash thought, saying that Gandhi had sided with enemies of the people. That he had disarmed India in the name of liberation.

The oceanography campus, where most of his classes were held, overlooked Narragansett Bay. He studied the gases that were dissolved in the sea's solution, the isotopes found in deep sediments. The iodine found in seaweed, the carbon in plankton, the copper in the blood of crabs.

At the foot of the campus, at the base of a steep hill, there was a small beach strewn with gray-and-yellow stones where he liked to eat his lunch. On cloudy days, at intervals, the sound of a foghorn pierced the air, like the conch shells that were blown in Calcutta to ward off evil. At the top of the hill, there was a church with white shingles arranged like a honeycomb. The central portion rose to a steeple. The paint was no longer fresh, the wood beneath it absorbing so much salt from the air, so many storms that had travelled up the

Rhode Island coast. It reminded him of the small mosque in Tollygunge. A place of worship designated for others, which had served as a landmark in his life.

One afternoon, he was surprised to see cars lining the road. A group of people, adults and children, stood outside the open doors of the church. A couple on the steps were smiling, ducking their heads as the group showered them with rice.

For the first time, he thought of his own marriage. He wondered what woman his parents would choose for him. He wondered when it would be. Getting married would mean returning to Calcutta. In that sense, he was in no hurry. He was proud to have come alone to America. To learn it, as he once must have learned to stand and walk and speak. He'd wanted so much to leave Calcutta, not only for the sake of his education but also – he could admit this to himself now – to take a step that Udayan never would.

One day, walking past the quadrangle on the main campus, Subhash saw Richard at the center of a group of students and faculty, wearing a black armband. Speaking through a megaphone, Richard argued that Vietnam was a mistake, that the American government had had no right to intervene.

Some people called out or cheered, but most of them just listened and clapped, as they might at the theatre. They sprawled back on their elbows in the grass of Rhode Island, sunning their faces, listening to Richard protest a war that was being fought thousands of miles away.

It was nothing like the demonstrations that erupted now in Calcutta. Disorganized mobs representing rival Communist parties, running helter-skelter through the streets. Chanting, unrelenting. They were demonstrations that almost always turned violent.

Subhash drifted away. He didn't support the war in Vietnam, either. But, like his father, he knew he had to be careful. He knew he could get arrested in America for denouncing the government, perhaps even for holding up a sign. He was here courtesy of a student visa, studying thanks to a fellowship. He'd been invited to America as Nixon's guest.

Here, each day, he remembered how he'd felt those evenings he and Udayan had snuck into the Tolly Club. This time he'd been admitted officially, and yet he remained vigilant, at the threshold. He knew that the door could close just as arbitrarily as it had opened.

Most nights, Richard was out at dinnertime, but if he happened to be home he accepted Subhash's invitation to share a meal, bringing out his ashtray and a packet of cigarettes, offering one of his beers as Subhash boiled a pot of rice.

There's going to be a protest in Boston, Richard said one evening. The story of My Lai had just broken, and they'd been talking about the reports of a mass murder, bodies in ditches, an American lieutenant under investigation. I have friends there who can put us up for a night. Why don't you come with me?

I don't think so.

You're not angry about the war?

It's not my place to object.

He found that he could be honest with Richard. Richard listened to him. He didn't merely try to convert him.

Richard asked Subhash about India, about its caste system, its poverty. Who was to blame?

I don't know. These days everyone just blames everyone else.

But is there a solution? Where does the government stand?

Subhash didn't know how to describe India's fractious politics, its complicated society, to an American. He said it was an ancient place that was also young, still struggling to know itself. You should be talking to my brother, he said.

You have a brother?

He nodded.

You've never mentioned him. What's his name?

He paused, then uttered Udayan's name for the first time since he'd arrived in Rhode Island.

Well, what would Udayan say?

He would say that an agrarian economy based on feudalism is the problem. He would say the country needs a more egalitarian structure. Better land reforms.

Sounds like a Chinese model.

It is. He supports Naxalbari.

Naxalbari? What's that?

A few days later, in his mailbox at his department, he found a letter from Udayan. Paragraphs in Bengali, dark-blue ink against the lighter blue of the aerogram. It had been mailed in October; it was November now.

If this reaches you destroy it. No need to compromise either of us. But given that my only chance to invade the United States is by letter, I can't resist. I've just returned from another trip outside the city. I met Comrade Sanyal. I was able to sit with him, speak with him. I had to wear a blindfold. I'll tell you about it sometime.

Why no news? No doubt the flora and fauna of the world's greatest capitalist power captivate you. But if you can bear to tear yourself away try to make yourself useful. I hear the antiwar movement there is in full swing.

Here developments are encouraging. A Red Guard is forming, travelling to villages, propagating Mao Tse-tung's quotations. Our generation is the vanguard; the struggle of students is part of the armed peasant struggle, Majumdar says.

You'll come back to an altered country, a more just society, I'm confident of this. A changed home, too. Baba's taken out a loan. They're adding to what we already have. They seem to think it's necessary. That we won't get married and raise families under the same roof if the house stays the way it is.

I told them it was a waste, an extravagance, given that you don't even live here. But they didn't listen and now it's too late, an architect came and the scaffolding's gone up. They claim they'll be finished in a year or two.

The days are dull without you. And though I refuse to forgive you for not supporting a movement that will only improve the lives of millions of people, I hope you can forgive me for giving you a hard time. Will you hurry up with whatever it is you're doing? An embrace from your brother.

He'd concluded with a quotation: "War will bring the revolution; revolution will stop the war."

Subhash reread the letter several times. It was as if Udayan were there, speaking to him, teasing him. Perhaps the letter would have been safe among his possessions in Rhode Island, but the next day he took it to his lab, lingering on some pretense at the end of the session, waiting to be alone. Ceremonially he placed it on the dark stone counter, striking a match, watching the edges blacken, his brother's words disappear.

A new decade began: 1970. In winter, when the trees stood naked, the stiff ground covered with snow, a second letter came from Udayan, in an envelope this time.

Subhash tore it open and found a small black-and-white photograph of a young woman, standing, her slender arms folded across her chest.

She was at ease, also a little skeptical. Her head turned partly to one side, her lips closed but playful, her smile slightly askew. Her hair was in a braid, draped over the front of one shoulder. Her complexion was deep.

She was compelling without being pretty. Nothing like the demure girls that his mother used to point out to Udayan and Subhash at weddings. It was a candid shot, snapped somewhere on the streets of Calcutta. He wondered if Udayan had taken the picture, if he'd inspired the playful expression on her face.

This is in lieu of a formal introduction, and it will be as formal an announcement as you will get. But it's time that you met her. I've known her for a couple of years. We kept it quiet, but you know how it is. Her name is Gauri and she's finishing a degree in philosophy at Presidency. A girl from North Calcutta, Cornwallis Street. Both her parents are dead, she lives with her brother – a friend of mine – and some relatives. She prefers books to jewels and saris. She believes as I do.

Like Chairman Mao, I reject the idea of an arranged marriage. It is one thing, I admit, that I admire about the West. And so I've married her. Don't worry, apart from running off with her there's no scandal. You're not about to be an uncle. Not yet, anyway. Too many children are victims of our defective social structure. This needs first to be fixed.

I wish you could have been here, but you didn't miss any type of celebration. It was a civil registration. I told Ma and Baba after the fact, as I am telling you.

They are still in shock, upset with me and also for no reason with Gauri, but we're with them now, learning to live with one another. They can't bear to tell you what I've done. So I'm telling you myself.

At the end of the letter, he asked Subhash to buy a few books for Gauri, saying that they would be easier to find in the States.

Don't bother putting them in the mail, they'll only get lost or stolen. Bring them with you. You will show up to congratulate me one of these days, won't you?

This time he didn't reread the letter. Once was enough.

Not only had Udayan married before Subhash but he'd married a woman of his choosing. On his own he'd taken a step that Subhash believed was their parents' place to decide. Here was another example of Udayan forging ahead of Subhash, of denying that he'd come second.

The back of the photograph was dated in Udayan's handwriting. It was from more than a year ago, 1968. Udayan had got to know her and fallen in love with her while Subhash was still in Calcutta. All that time, Udayan had kept Gauri to himself.

Once more Subhash destroyed the letter. The photograph he kept, at the back of one of his textbooks, as proof of what Udayan had done.

From time to time he drew out the picture and looked at it. He wondered when he would meet Gauri and what he would think of her, now that they were connected. And part of him felt defeated by Udayan all over again, for having found a girl like that.

In the spring semester of his second year, for three weeks, Subhash boarded a research vessel with a group of students and professors. As the ship pulled away, the water cleaved a foaming trail that vanished

even as it was being formed. The shoreline receded, resting calmly like a thin brown snake upon the water. He saw the earth's mass shrinking, turning faint.

Under the sun's glare, as the ship picked up speed, he felt the wind's motion on his face, the wild turbulence of the atmosphere. He watched the life that circled the ship, gannets with creamy heads and black-and-white wings, dolphins that leaped in pairs. Humpback whales spouted mists as they breathed, playfully breaching in the water, sometimes swimming beneath the ship without disturbing it, emerging on the other side.

Sailing even slightly east reminded Subhash of how far away he was from his family. He thought of the time it took to cross even a tiny portion of the earth's surface.

Isolated on the ship with the scientists and other students and crew, he felt doubly alone. Unable to fathom his future, severed from his past. In Tollygunge his family did not have a phone line. He was learning to live without hearing their voices, to receive news of them only in writing.

Udayan's letters no longer referred to Naxalbari or ended with slogans. He didn't explain why this was so. Instead he wrote about football scores, or about this or that in the neighborhood – a certain store closing down, a family they'd known moving away. The latest film by Mrinal Sen.

Subhash saved a few of these letters, since it no longer seemed necessary to throw them away. But their blandness puzzled him. Though the handwriting was the same, it was almost as if they'd been written by a different person.

Letters from his parents referred only obliquely to Gauri, and only as an example of what not to do.

We hope, when the time comes, you will trust us to settle your future, to choose your wife and to be present at your wedding. We hope you will not disregard our wishes, as your brother did.

He replied, reassuring his father and mother that his marriage was up to them to arrange. He sent a portion of his stipend to help pay for the work on the house, and wrote that he was eager to see them. And yet, day after day, cut off from them, he ignored them.

He began his third autumn in Rhode Island. Once more the leaves of the trees lost their chlorophyll, replaced by the shades he had left behind: vivid hues of cayenne and turmeric and ginger pounded fresh every morning in the kitchen, to season the food his mother prepared. The colors intensified until the leaves began to dwindle, foliage clustered here and there among the branches, like butterflies feeding at the same source, before falling to the ground.

He thought of Durga Puja coming again to Calcutta. The past two years, he'd received a battered parcel from his parents, containing gifts for him. Kurtas too thin to wear most of the time in Rhode Island, bars of sandalwood soap, Darjeeling tea.

He thought of the Mahalaya playing on All India Radio, coming through the shortwave. Throughout Tollygunge, across Calcutta and the whole of West Bengal, people were waking up in darkness to listen to the oratorio as light crept into the sky, invoking Durga as she descended to earth with her four children. Every year at this time, Hindu Bengalis believed, she came to stay with her father, Himalaya. For the days of Puja, she relinquished her husband, Shiva, before returning once more to married life.

This year no parcel came from his family. Only a telegram. The message consisted of two sentences, lifeless, drifting at the top of a sea.

Udayan killed. Come back if you can.

3.

He left behind the brief winter days, the obscure place where he'd grieved alone. He took a bus to Boston and boarded a night flight to Europe. The second flight involved a layover in the Middle East. At last he landed in Delhi. From there he boarded an overnight train to Howrah Station.

As he travelled halfway across India, from companions on the train he heard about what had been taking place in Calcutta while he'd been away. Information that neither Udayan nor his parents had mentioned in letters. Events Subhash had not come across in any newspaper in Rhode Island.

By 1970, people told him, things had taken a turn. By then the Naxalites were operating underground. Members surfaced only to carry out dramatic attacks. They ransacked schools and colleges across the city. In the middle of the night, they burned records and defaced portraits, raising red flags. They plastered Calcutta with images of Mao. They intimidated voters, hoping to disrupt the elections. They fired pipe guns on the city's streets. They hid bombs in public places, so that people were afraid to sit in a cinema or stand in line at a bank.

Then the targets turned specific: unarmed traffic constables at busy intersections, wealthy businessmen, certain educators, members of the rival party, the CPI(M). The killings were sadistic, gruesome, intended to shock. The wife of the French consul was murdered in her sleep. They assassinated Gopal Sen, the vice-chancellor of Jadavpur University, while he was taking his evening walk. It was the day before he'd planned to retire. They bludgeoned him with steel bars, and stabbed him four times.

They took control of certain neighborhoods, calling them Red Zones. They took control of Tollygunge. They set up makeshift hospitals, safe houses.

But then new legislation was passed, an old law was renewed. Laws that authorized the police and the paramilitary to enter homes without a warrant, to arrest young men without charges. The old law had been created by the British, to counter Independence, to cut off its legs.

After that, the police started to cordon off and search the neighborhoods of the city. Sealing exits, knocking on doors, interrogating Calcutta's young men. The police had killed Udayan. This much Subhash was able to surmise.

Only two people had come to receive him in the early morning at Howrah Station. A younger cousin of his father's, Biren Kaka, and his wife. They were standing by a fruit vender, unable to smile when they spotted him. He understood this diminished welcome, but he could not understand why, after he'd travelled for more than two days, after he'd been away for more than two years, his parents were unwilling to come even this far to acknowledge his return. When he left India, his mother had promised a hero's welcome, a garland of flowers draped around his neck.

The streets were as he remembered. Crowded with cycle rickshaws in the early-morning light, the squawking of their horns sounding to his ears like a flock of agitated geese.

The walls of the film studios and the Tolly Club were covered in slogans. "Make 1970s the decade of liberation." "Rifles bring freedom, and freedom is coming."

As they turned beside the small mosque, Subhash felt his prolonged journey ending too soon. He was assaulted by the sour, septic smell of his neighborhood, of his childhood. The smell of standing water. The stink of algae, of open drains.

As they approached the two ponds, he saw that the small home he'd left behind had been replaced by something impressive, ungainly. Long terraces, like airy corridors, ran from front to back along the new upper portion of the house. They were enclosed by grilles forged in a trefoil pattern. The emerald paint was glossy. Through one of the grilles he saw his parents, sitting on the top floor. He strained to see their expressions but could make out nothing.

He pressed the buzzer that Udayan had installed. It still worked.

His parents did not stand or say his name. They did not come downstairs to greet him. Instead, his father lowered a key on a string through the ironwork. Subhash opened a heavy padlock at the side of the house. Finally, he heard his father clearing his throat, seeming to loosen the secretions of a long silence.

Lock the gate behind you, he instructed Subhash, before retracting the key.

Subhash climbed a staircase with smooth black bannisters, sky-blue walls. Biren Kaka and his wife followed behind. When he saw his parents, standing together on the terrace, he bent over to touch their feet. He was an only son.

In spite of the picture that hung in his parents' new room, which they took him to see, he could not believe that Udayan was nowhere. But here was the proof. The photo had been taken nearly ten years earlier by a relative who owned a camera. It was the day he and Udayan had got the results of their higher secondary exams, the day his father said had been the proudest of his life. They had posed side by side in the courtyard. Subhash saw an inch of his own shoulder, pressed up beside Udayan's. The rest of him, in order to make the death portrait, had been cut away.

He stood before the image and wept, his head cradled in his arm, in an awkward embrace of himself. But his parents, beyond the shock of it, observed him as they might an actor on a stage, waiting for the scene to end.

From the terrace he had an open view of the neighborhood. Lower rooftops of tin or tile with squash vines trailing over them. The tops of walls, dotted white, splattered with excrement from crows. The two oblong ponds on the other side of the lane. The lowland, looking to him like a mudflat at low tide.

He'd been told to eat his lunch upstairs. That was where the kitchen was now. On the floor of his parents' bedroom, plates had been set out for his father, for Biren Kaka and his wife, for Subhash. His mother would eat after serving them, as she always did.

He sat with his back to the portrait. He could not bear to look at it again.

He was ravenous for the simple meal: dal and slices of fried bitter melon, rice and fish stew. Sweet pabda fish from the river, their cooked eyes like yellow pebbles.

Drinking water was poured from a black clay urn in the corner of the room. The cup heavy in his hand, the rim slightly too wide for his mouth.

Where is she? he asked.

Who?

Gauri.

His mother ladled the dal onto his rice. She takes her meals in the kitchen, she said.

Why?

She prefers it.

He didn't believe her. He didn't say what came to his mind. That Udayan would have hated them for segregating her, for observing such customs.

Is she there now? I would like to meet her.

She's resting. She's not feeling well today.

Have you called a doctor?

His mother looked down, preoccupied with the food she was serving.

There's no need for that.

Is it serious?

Finally, she explained herself.

She is expecting a child, she said.

After lunch, he went out, walking past the two ponds. There were scattered clumps of water hyacinth, and still enough water to form puddles here and there.

He noticed a small stone marker. On it was Udayan's name. Beneath that, the years of his birth and death: 1945-1971.

It was a memorial tablet, erected for political martyrs. Here where the water came and went, where it collected and vanished, was where his brother's Party comrades had chosen to put it.

He returned to the house, intending to rest briefly, but fell into a deep sleep. When he woke up it was late, past the hour his parents normally ate dinner. He'd slept through the meal. The fan wasn't moving; the current had gone. He found a flashlight under the mattress, switched it on. Going upstairs to see if there was anything left to eat in the kitchen, he saw Gauri sitting on the floor, with a candle lit beside her.

He recognized her at once, from the snapshot Udayan had sent. But she was no longer the relaxed college girl who had smiled for his brother. That picture of her had been in black-and-white, but the absence of color now, even in the warm light of the candle, was more profound.

Her long hair was pulled back above her neck. She sat with her head down, her wrists bare, dressed in a sari of crisp white. She was thin, with no visible trace of the life she was carrying. She wore glasses, a detail withheld from the photograph. When she looked up at him, he saw in spite of the glasses another thing the photo had not fully conveyed. The frank beauty of her eyes.

He took her in but did not speak to her, watching her eat some dal and rice. She was dragging a few grains of salt with her index finger from the little pile at the edge of her plate and mixing it into her food. He saw that the fish he had been served at lunch had not been given to her.

I am Subhash, he said.

I know.

I don't mean to disturb you.

They tried to wake you for dinner.

I'm wide awake now.

She started to get up. Let me fix a plate for you.

Finish your meal. I can get it myself.

He felt her eyes on him as he scanned the shelves with his flashlight, retrieved a dish, uncovered the pots and pans that had been left for him.

You sound just like him, she said.

He sat down beside her, the candle between them, facing her but not looking at her. He saw her hand resting over her plate, the tips of her fingers coated with food.

Is it because of my parents that you're not eating fish?

She ignored his question. You have the same voice, she said.

Belatedly, he was presented with his gifts for Durga Puja. There was gray material for trousers, striped material for shirts. Two sets of each, for he was also given Udayan's share. More than once, offering him a biscuit, asking if he needed more tea, his mother called him Udayan instead of Subhash. And more than once he answered, not correcting her.

His parents asked no questions about America. Inches away, they avoided looking Subhash in the eye. He wondered whether his parents would ask him to remain in Calcutta, to abandon his life in Rhode Island. But there was no mention of this. Nor was there mention of the possibility of their arranging a marriage for him. They were in no position to plan a wedding, to think about his future.

In the early evening, always at the same time, his mother gathered a few flowers from the pots in the courtyard and left the house. From the terrace, he saw her walking past the ponds.

She stopped at the marker by the edge of the lowland, rinsing the stone clean with water she drew from a small brass urn, the one she had used to bathe him and Udayan when they were small, and then she placed the flowers on top. Without asking, he knew that this was the hour; that this had been the time of day.

On the radio, they listened to the news of East Pakistan turning into Bangladesh after thirteen days of war. For Muslim Bengalis it meant liberation, but for Calcutta the conflict had meant another surge of refugees from across the border.

Though the police raids had ended, his father still kept the key to the padlocked house under his pillow when he slept.

They did not talk of Udayan. For days his name did not escape their lips.

Then one evening Subhash asked, How did it happen?

His father's face was impassive, as if he hadn't heard.

I thought he'd quit the Party, Subhash pressed. That he'd drifted away from it. Had he?

I was at home, his father said, not acknowledging the question.

When were you at home?

That day. I opened the gate for them. I let them in.

Who?

The police.

Finally, he was getting somewhere. At the same time, Subhash felt worse now that his suspicion had been confirmed.

Why didn't you tell me he was in danger?

It would not have made a difference.

Well, tell me now. Why did they kill him?

His mother reacted then, glaring at Subhash. She had a small face, with just enough space for what it contained. She was still youthful, her dark hair decorated with its bright column of vermilion to signify that she had a husband.

He was your brother, she said. How can you ask such a thing?

The next morning, he sought Gauri out, knocking on the door of her room. Her hair had just been washed. She was wearing it loose to let it dry.

In his hand was a paperback book he'd bought for her at Udayan's request. "One-Dimensional Man," by Herbert Marcuse. He gave it to her.

This is for you. From Udayan. He'd asked me.

You are kind to bring it, she said.

It was no trouble.

He wanted to talk to her. But there was nowhere in the house where they might have a conversation alone.

Shall we go for a walk?

Not now.

She stepped to one side and pointed to a chair.

He hesitated, then entered. It was dim, until Gauri pushed open the shutters of the two windows, admitting a stark white glow. A square of sunlight fell onto the bed, a calm bright patch containing the vertical shadows of the window bars.

The bed was low to the floor, with slender posts. There was also a short armoire and a small dressing table with a bench. Instead of powders and combs, there were notebooks, fountain pens, bottles of ink. The room smelled sharply of teak, emanating from the furniture. He could smell the fragrance of her freshly washed hair.

The light is nice, he said.

Only now. In a few minutes, the sun will be too high and the angle will be lost.

She perched on the edge of the bed. He saw other books spread open, face down, covered in smooth brown paper, on which she had written the titles. He watched as she retrieved an old section of newspaper and began to wrap the cover of the book he'd given her. He and Udayan used to do this together, after buying their new schoolbooks for the year.

No one does that over there.

Why not?

I don't know. Maybe the covers are more durable. Or maybe they don't mind them looking old.

He asked Gauri about her studies, and she told him she'd completed her bachelor's in philosophy earlier in the year. It had taken longer than it should have. It had been difficult, because of the unrest. She said that she'd been considering a master's program, before Udayan was killed. Before she learned she was pregnant.

Did Udayan know he was going to be a father?

No.

Her waist was still small. But Udayan's ghost was palpable within her, preserved in this room where she spent all her time. When she spoke of him it was an evocation of him. She had not shut down as his parents had.

When will the baby be born?

In summer.

How is it for you here in the house? With my parents?

She said nothing. He waited, then realized he was staring at her, distracted by a small dark mole on the side of her neck. He looked away.

I can take you somewhere else, he suggested. Would you like to visit your family for a while? Your aunts and uncles?

She shook her head.

Why not?

For the first time, a smile nearly came to her face, the uneven smile he remembered from the photograph, slightly favoring one side of her mouth. Because I ran off and married your brother, she said.

Even now they don't want to see you?

She shrugged. They're nervous. I don't blame them. I might compromise their safety, even your parents' safety, who knows?

But surely there's someone?

My brother came to see me after it happened. He and Udayan were friends. But it's not up to him.

Can you tell me something else?

What do you want to know?

I want to know what happened to my brother, he said.

4.

It was the week before Durga Puja. The month of Ashvin, the first phase of the waxing moon.

At the tram depot, Gauri and her mother-in-law hired a cycle rickshaw to take them home. They settled themselves on the bench of the rickshaw, packets and bags on their laps and heaped at their feet. They were returning from a day of shopping, a little later than they'd intended.

The packets contained gifts for extended family, also for themselves. New saris. New sheets to sleep on, new slippers. Towels to dry their bodies, combs to untangle their hair.

As they approached the mosque at the corner, her mother-in-law told the driver to slow down and turn left. But the driver stopped pedalling, telling them that he was unwilling to travel off the main road, so they finished the journey on foot, carrying the things they'd bought.

The lane hooked to the right, past the pandal in their enclave, the deities adorned but unattended. No families were walking about. Soon the two ponds across from the house came into view.

On the bank of the first pond, Gauri saw a van belonging to the Central Reserve Police. Policemen and soldiers stood here and there, in their olive uniforms and helmets. Not many, but enough of them to form a loose constellation wherever she looked.

No one stopped them from walking through the swinging wooden doors into the courtyard. They saw that the iron gate at the side of the house was open. The key was dangling in the padlock, opened in haste.

They removed their street slippers and set down their bags. They began to climb the first set of steps. Halfway up, Gauri saw her father-in-law descending, his hands raised over his head.

An officer followed him. He was pointing a rifle at his back. Gauri and her mother-in-law were instructed to turn around, to walk back downstairs. There was no opportunity to go farther into the house, to see the rooms that had been overturned. Clothes knocked off the drying lines strung along the terrace, wardrobe doors flung open. Pillows and quilts pulled off the beds, coals dumped from the coal basket, lentils and grains tossed out of the Glaxo tins in the kitchen. As if they were looking for a scrap of paper and not a man.

The three of them – her father-in-law, her mother-in-law, and Gauri – were ordered to exit the house, walk through the courtyard and back onto the street. They were told to proceed in single file, past the two ponds, toward the lowland. The rains had been heavy, and it had flooded again. Water hyacinth shrouded the surface like a moth-eaten cloak. Gauri felt people in the surrounding homes taking in what was happening. Watching through chinks in their shutters, standing still in darkened rooms.

They were arranged in a row, their shoulders touching. The gun was still trained on her father-in-law.

She heard a conch shell blowing, the ringing of a bell. The sounds carried in from another neighborhood. Somewhere, in some house or temple, someone was praying, giving offerings at the end of another day.

We are under orders to locate and arrest Udayan Mitra, the soldier who seemed to be commanding the others said. He announced this through a megaphone. If anyone in this locality knows where he is hiding, if anyone is harboring him, you are required to step forward.

No one said anything.

My son is in America, her mother-in-law said quietly. A lie that was also the truth.

The officer ignored her. He stepped over to Gauri. His eyes were a lighter brown than his skin. He studied her, pointing his gun at her, moving it closer until she was no longer able to see it. She felt the tip, a cold pendant at the base of her throat.

You are the wife of this family? The wife of Udayan Mitra?

Yes.

Where is your husband?

She had no voice. She was unable to speak.

We know he is here. We have had him followed. We have searched the house. We have blocked off the means of egress. He is wasting our time.

Gauri was aware of a painful current travelling up and down the backs of her legs.

Where is he? the officer repeated, pressing the gun against her throat a little harder.

I don't know, she managed to say.

I think you are lying. I think you must know where he is.

Behind the water hyacinth, in the floodwater of the lowland: this was where, if the neighborhood was raided, Udayan had told her he would hide. He said there was a section where the growth was particularly dense. He kept a kerosene tin behind the house, to help him over the back wall. He'd practiced it, late at night, a few times.

We think he might be hiding in the water, the soldier continued, not removing his eyes from her.

No, she said to herself. She heard the word in her head. But then she realized that her mouth was open, like an idiot's. Had she said something? Whispered it?

What did you say?

I said nothing.

The tip of the gun was still steady at her throat. But suddenly it was removed, the officer tipping his head toward the lowland, stepping away.

He's there, he told the others.

Again the officer began speaking through a megaphone.

Udayan Mitra, step forward, surrender yourself, he said, the words at once distorted and piercing, audible throughout the enclave. If you hesitate, we are prepared to eliminate the members of your family.

At first, nothing happened. Some of the soldiers were wading into the water, aiming rifles. One of them fired a shot. Then, from somewhere in the lowland, she heard the sound of the water's surface breaking.

Udayan appeared. Amid the hyacinth, in water up to his waist. Bent over, coughing, gasping for air. His hair was sticking to his scalp, his shirt sticking to his skin. His beard and mustache needed trimming. He raised his arms over his head.

Good. Walk toward us now.

He stepped through the weeds, out of the water, until he stood only a few feet away. He was shivering, struggling to regulate his breathing. She saw the lips that never fully met, leaving a small diamond-shaped gap at the center. She saw flecks of algae coating his neck, his forearms.

He was told to bend down and touch his parents' feet. He was told to ask for their forgiveness. He stood before his mother and bent down. Forgive me, he said.

What are we to forgive? her father-in-law asked, his voice cracking, when Udayan bent before him. He appealed to the officers. You are making a mistake.

Your son has betrayed his country. It is he who has made a mistake.

His hands were bound by a rope. She saw him wince as it was tightened.

This way, the officer said, pointing with his gun.

Udayan paused, and glanced at her. He looked at her face as he always did, absorbing its details as if for the first time.

They pushed him into the van and slammed the door shut. Gauri and her in-laws were ordered back into the house. One of the soldiers escorted them. She wondered which prison they would take him to. What they would do to him there.

They heard the van starting. But instead of reversing and heading out of the enclave, toward the main road, it travelled over the damp grass that edged the lowland, the tires leaving thick tracks. Over toward the empty field that was on the other side of it.

Inside the house they climbed to the third floor, to the terrace. They could make out the van, which had stopped now, and then Udayan standing next to it. It would have been impossible for anyone else in their neighborhood to witness what was happening. But the top floor of the house, recently completed, afforded them this view.

They saw one of the soldiers undoing the rope around Udayan's wrists. They saw Udayan walking across the field, away from the paramilitary. He was walking toward the lowland, back toward the house, his arms raised over his head.

Gauri remembered all the times she'd watched him from her grandparents' balcony in North Calcutta, crossing the busy street, coming to visit her.

For a moment, it was as if they were letting him go. But then a gun was fired, the bullet aimed at his back. The sound of the shot was brief, unambiguous. There was a second shot, then a third.

She watched his arms flapping, his body leaping forward, seizing up before falling to the ground. There was the clean sound of the shots, followed by the sound of crows, coarsely calling, scattering.

In their bedroom, under the mattress, forgotten among folded sections of newspaper they'd not bothered to toss, was a diary the police had discovered while Gauri and her mother-in-law were out shopping. It contained all the proof they needed. Among the equations and notes on routine formulas and experiments was a page of instructions for how to put together a Molotov cocktail, a homemade bomb. Notes on the difference in effect between methanol and gasoline. Potassium chlorate versus nitric acid. Storm matches versus a kerosene wick.

In the diary there was also a map Udayan had sketched of the layout of the Tolly Club. The locations and names of the buildings, the stables, the caretaker's cottage. The arrangement of the driveway, the configuration of the walking paths.

Certain times of day had been jotted down, a schedule of when the guards moved around, when employees went on and off duty. Various places where a person might enter and exit the premises, targets where one might throw an explosive or leave a timed device behind.

5.

The day after speaking to Gauri, Subhash went out, alone, into the city for the first time. He took the material his parents had given him, his share and Udayan's, to a tailoring shop. He didn't need new shirts and trousers, and yet he felt obligated, not wanting the material to go to waste. The news that American clothing was all ready-made had come to his parents as a surprise. It was the first detail of his life there they'd openly reacted to.

He got on a bus after he left the tailor's, riding with no destination in mind, getting out close to Esplanade. He saw foreigners on the streets, Europeans wearing kurtas, beads. Exploring Calcutta, passing through. Though he looked like any other Bengali, he felt an allegiance with the foreigners now. He shared with them a knowledge of elsewhere. Another life to go back to. The ability to leave.

He stopped to light a cigarette, Wills, the brand Udayan had smoked. Feeling tired, he stood in front of a store that sold embroidered shawls.

What would you like to see? the owner asked. He was from Kashmir, his face pale, his eyes light, a cotton cap on his head.

Nothing.

Come have a look. Have a cup of tea.

He had forgotten about such gestures of hospitality. He entered and sat on a stool, watching as the woolen shawls were spread out on a large white cushion on the floor. The generosity of the effort, the faith implicit in it, touched him. He decided to buy one for his mother, realizing only now that he'd brought her nothing from America.

I'll take this, he said, fingering a navy-blue shawl, thinking she would appreciate the softness of the wool, the intricacy of the stitch.

What else?

That's all, he said, but then he pictured Gauri. He recalled her profile as she'd told him about Udayan. The way she'd stared straight ahead at nothing as she told him what he'd wanted to know.

He sifted through the choices at his feet. Ivory, gray, a brown that was lighter than the tea he'd been given to drink. These were considered appropriate for her now. But a vivid turquoise one with a border of minute embroidery caught his eye.

He imagined it wrapped around her shoulders, trailing over one side. Brightening her face.

Also this one, he said.

His parents were on their terrace, waiting. They asked what had taken him so long. They said it still wasn't safe to wander so late on the streets.

Though their concern was reasonable, it annoyed him. I'm not Udayan, he was tempted to say. I would never have put you through that.

He gave his mother the shawl he'd bought for her. Then he showed her the one for Gauri.

I'd like to give her this.

You should know better, she said. Stop trying to befriend her.

He was silent.

I heard the two of you talking yesterday.

I'm not supposed to talk to her?

What did she tell you?

He didn't say. Instead, he asked, Why don't you ever talk to her?

Now it was his mother who was silent.

You've taken away her colored clothes, the fish and meat from her plate.

These are our customs, his mother said.

It's demeaning. Udayan would never have wanted her to live this way.

He was not used to quarrelling with his mother. But a new energy flowed through him, and he could not restrain himself.

Does it mean nothing that she's going to give you a grandchild?

It means everything. It's the only thing left to us, his mother said.

And what about Gauri?

She has a place here if she chooses.

What do you mean, if she chooses?

She could go somewhere to continue her studies. She might prefer it.

What makes you think that?

She's too withdrawn, too aloof to be a mother.

His temples were throbbing. Have you discussed any of this with her?

There's no point in worrying her about it now.

You can't separate them. For Udayan's sake, accept her.

His mother lost her patience. She was angry with him, too. Shut your mouth, she said. Don't tell me how to honor my own son.

That night, under the mosquito netting, Subhash was unable to sleep.

Udayan had given his life to a movement that had been misguided, that had caused only damage, that had already been dismantled. The only thing he'd altered was what their family had been.

He had kept Subhash, and probably to a great degree his parents, deliberately in the dark. The deeper his involvement had become, the more evasive he'd turned. Writing letters as if the movement no longer mattered to him. Hoping to throw Subhash off the trail as he put together bombs, as he sketched maps of the Tolly Club.

Gauri was the one he'd trusted. He'd inserted her into their lives, only to strand her there. Subhash thought of her remaining with his parents, living by their rules. His mother's coldness toward her was insulting, but his father's passivity was just as cruel.

And it wasn't simply cruelty. Their treatment of Gauri was deliberate, intended to drive her out. He thought of her becoming a mother, only to lose control of the child. He thought of the child being raised in a joyless house.

The only way to prevent it was to take Gauri away. It was all he could do to help her, the only alternative he could provide. And the only way to take her away was to marry her. To take his brother's place, to raise his child, to come to love her as Udayan had. To follow him in a way that felt perverse, that felt ordained. That felt at once right and wrong.

He mentioned nothing to his parents, knowing that the solution he'd arrived at would appall them. He went to her directly.

This is for you, he said, standing in her doorway, giving her the shawl.

She lifted the cover of the box and looked at it.

I'd like for you to wear it, he said.

He watched her step into the room and open her wardrobe. She placed the shawl, still folded in the box, inside.

When she turned to face him again, he observed that a mosquito had landed at the very edge of her forehead, close to the hairline. He wanted to reach over and brush it away, but she stood, unflinching, perhaps unaware.

I hate how my parents treat you, he said.

She was silent. She sat down at the desk, in front of the book and the notebook spread there. She was waiting for him to go.

He lost his nerve. The idea was ridiculous. She would not wear the turquoise shawl, she would never agree to marry him and go to Rhode Island. She was mourning for Udayan, carrying his child. Subhash knew he was nothing to her.

The following afternoon, at a time when no one was expected, the buzzer rang. Subhash was sitting on the balcony, reading the papers. His father was at work, his mother had gone out on an errand. Gauri was in her room.

Downstairs, he found three men standing on the other side of the gate. Two policemen carrying guns and an investigator from the Intelligence Bureau. The investigator introduced himself. He wanted to speak to Gauri.

She's sleeping.

Go wake her.

He unlocked the gate and took them to the second floor. He asked them to wait on the landing.

When Gauri opened her door, she was not wearing her glasses. Her hair was dishevelled, the material of her sari wrinkled. The bed was unmade.

He told her who had come. I'll stay with you, he said.

She tied back her hair and put on her glasses. She made the bed and told him she was ready. She was composed, betraying none of the nervousness he felt.

The investigator stepped into the room first. The policemen followed, standing in the doorway. They were smoking cigarettes, allowing the ashes to fall onto the floor.

The investigator was observing the walls, the ceiling, taking in certain details. He picked up one of the books on Gauri's desk, thumbing through a few pages. He took a notepad and pen out of his shirt pocket.

You're the brother? he asked, not bothering to look up at Subhash.

Yes.

The one in America?

He nodded, but the investigator was already focused on Gauri.

You met your husband in what year?

Nineteen-sixty-eight.

While you were a student at Presidency?

Yes.

You were sympathetic to his beliefs?

In the beginning.

Are you currently a member of any political organization?

No.

I'd like to go over some photographs. They're of some people your husband knew.

All right.

He took an envelope out of his pocket. He began handing her pictures. Small snapshots Subhash was unable to see.

Do you recognize any of these people?

No.

You've never met them? Your husband never introduced you to them?

No.

Subhash swallowed, and glanced at her. She was lying, he was sure.

Look carefully, please.

I have.

The investigator put the snapshots back into the envelope, careful not to smudge them. We'll return if we have further questions, he said.

When do you go back to America? the investigator asked Subhash.

In a few weeks.

You're nothing like your brother, he remarked, then turned to go.

Gauri was waiting for him on the terrace, sitting on one of the folding chairs.

You're all right? he asked.

Yes.

How long before they come back?

They won't come again.

How can you be sure?

She raised her head, then her eyes. Because I have nothing else to tell them, she said, her expression neutral, composed. He wanted to believe her.

You're not safe here, he said. Even if the police leave you alone, my parents won't.

What do you mean?

They want you out of this house, Gauri. They don't want to take care of you. They want their grandchild to themselves.

Then he said the only things he could think of, the most obvious of facts: That in America no one knew about the movement, no one would bother her. She could go on with her studies. It would be an opportunity to begin again.

Because she said nothing to interrupt him, he went on, explaining that the child needed a father. In America it could be raised without the burden of what had happened. He told her he knew she still loved Udayan. He told her not to think about what people might say. If she went with him to America, it would all cease to matter.

You don't have to do this, Gauri said to Subhash the following morning.

It's not only for you.

He wouldn't have wanted this.

I understand.

I'm not talking about our getting married.

What, then?

He told me we needed to wait. That it wasn't right to begin a family. After the revolution was successful, he said, that was when we should bring a new generation into the world. And yet –

She stopped herself.

What?

He once told me, because he got married before you, that he wanted you to be the first to have a child.