

WH/7E 7EE7H

wide-lapelled overcoat carefully over his volatile crotch, waved rather lamely, sat back down.

'Say "Hello, Mr Iqbal."

'HELLO, MR ICK-BALL,' came the resounding chorus from all but two of the musicians.

'Now: don't we want to play thrice as well because we have an audience?'

'YES, MISS BURT-JONES.'

'And not only is Mr Iqbal our audience for today, but he's a very special audience. It's because of Mr Iqbal that next week we won't be playing *Swan Lake* any more.'

A great roar met this announcement, accompanied by a stray chorus of trumpet hoots, drum rolls, a cymbal.

'All right, all right, enough. I didn't expect quite so much joyous approval.'

Samad smiled. She had humour, then. There was wit there, a bit of sharpness – but why think the more reasons there were to sin, the smaller the sin was? He was thinking like a Christian again; he was saying *Can't say fairer than that to the Creator.*

'Instruments down. Yes, you, Marvin. Thank you very much.'

'What'll we be doin' instead, then, Miss?'

'Well ...' began Poppy Burt-Jones, the same half-coy, half-daring smile he had noticed before. 'Something very exciting. Next week I want to try to experiment with some Indian music.'

The cymbal player, dubious of what place he would occupy in such a radical change of genre, took it upon himself to be the first to ridicule the scheme. 'What, you mean that Eeeee EEEAaaaa EEEeee AOoooo music?' he said, doing a creditable impression of the strains to be found at the beginning of a Hindi musical, or in the back-room of an 'Indian' restaurant, along with attendant head movements. The class let out a blast of laughter as loud as the brass section and echoed the gag en masse: Eeee Eaaaaa OOOAaaah Eeee OOOiiiiiii ... This, along

⑦ HXB41017 + CULTURE

with screeching parodic violins, penetrated Samad's deep, erotic half-slumber and sent his imagination into a garden, a garden encased in marble where he found himself dressed in white and hiding behind a large tree, spying on a be-saried, bindi-wearing Poppy Burt-Jones, as she wound flirtatiously in and out of some fountains; sometimes visible, sometimes not.

'I don't think –' began Poppy Burt-Jones, trying to force her voice above the hoo-hah, then, raising it several decibels, 'I DON'T THINK IT IS VERY NICE TO –' and here her voice slipped back to normal as the class registered the angry tone and quietened down. *I don't think it is very nice to make fun of somebody else's culture.*

The orchestra, unaware that this is what they had been doing, but aware that this was the most heinous crime in the Manor School rule book, looked to their collective feet.

'Do you? Do you? How would you like it, Sophie, if someone made fun of Queen?'

Sophie, a vaguely retarded twelve-year-old covered from head to toe in that particular rock band's paraphernalia, glared over a pair of bottle-top spectacles.

'Wouldn't like it, Miss.'

'No, you wouldn't, would you?'

'No, Miss.'

'Because Freddie Mercury is from your culture.'

Samad had heard the rumours that ran through the rank and file of the Palace waiters to the effect that this Mercury character was in actual fact a very light-skin Persian called Farookh, whom the head chef remembered from school in Panchgani, near Bombay. But who wished to split hairs? Not wanting to stop the lovely Burt-Jones while she was in something of a flow, Samad kept the information to himself.

'Sometimes we find other people's music strange because their culture is different from ours,' said Miss Burt-Jones solemnly. 'But that doesn't mean it isn't equally good, now does it?'

'NO, MISS.'

'And we can learn about each other through each other's culture, can't we?'

'YES, MISS.'

For example, what music do you like, Millat?

Millat thought for a moment, swung his saxophone to his side and began fingering it like a guitar. 'Bo-orn to ruun! Da da da da daaa! Bruce Springsteen, Miss! Da da da da daaa! Baby, we were bo-orn -

'Umm, nothing - nothing else? Something you listen to at home, maybe?'

Millat's face fell, troubled that his answer did not seem to be the right one. He looked over at his father, who was gesticulating wildly behind the teacher, trying to convey the jerky head and hand movements of *bharata naryam*, the form of dance *Alsana* had once enjoyed before sadness weighted her heart, and babies tied down her hands and feet.

'Thriiii-ller!' sang Millat, full throated, believing he had caught his father's gist. 'Thriiii-ller night! Michael Jackson, Miss! Michael Jackson!'

Samad put his head in his hands. Miss Burt-Jones looked queerly at the small child standing on a chair, gyrating and grabbing his crotch before her. 'OK, thank you, Millat. Thank you for sharing . . . that.'

Millat grinned. 'No problem, Miss.'

While the children queued up to exchange twenty pence for two dry digestives and a cup of tasteless squash, Samad followed the light foot of Poppy Burt-Jones like a predator - into the music cupboard, a tiny room, windowless, with no means of escape, and full of instruments, filing cabinets overbrimming with sheet music, and a scent Samad had thought hers but now identified as the maturing leather of violin cases mixed with the mellowing odour of cat-gut.

'This,' said Samad, spotting a desk beneath a mountain of paper, 'is where you work?'

Poppy blushed. 'Tiny, isn't it? Music budgets get cut every year until this year there was nothing left to cut from. It's got to the point where they're putting desks in cupboards and calling them offices. If it wasn't for the GLC, there wouldn't even be a desk.'

'It is certainly small,' said Samad, scanning the room desperately for some spot where he might stand that would put her out of arm's reach. 'One might almost say, claustrophobic.'

'I know, it's awful - but won't you sit down?'

Samad looked for the chair she might be referring to.

'Oh God! I'm sorry! It's *here*.' She swept paper, books and rubbish on to the floor with one hand, revealing a perilous-looking stool. 'I made it - but it's pretty safe.'

'You excel in carpentry?' inquired Samad, searching once again for more good reasons to commit a bad sin. 'An artisan as well as a musician?'

'No, no, no - I went to a few night classes - nothing special. I made that and a foot stool, and the foot stool broke. I'm no - do you know I can't think of a single carpenter!'

'There is always Jesus.'

'But I can't very well say "I'm no Jesus" . . . I mean, obviously I'm not, but for other reasons.'

Samad took his wobbly seat as Poppy Burt-Jones went to sit behind her desk. 'Meaning you are not a good person?'

Samad saw that he had flustered her with the accidental solemnity of the question; she drew her fingers through her fringe, fiddled with a small tortoiseshell button on her blouse, laughed shakily. 'I like to think I'm not all bad.'

'And that is enough?'

'Well . . . I . . .'

'Oh my dear, I apologize . . .' began Samad. 'I was not being serious, Miss Burt-Jones.'

She dived into her handbag, and in the attenuated minute in which she scrambled through lipsticks and car-keys and spare change, two things happened.

1.1 Samad closed his eyes and heard the words *To the pure all things are pure* and then, almost immediately afterwards, *Can't say fairer than that*.

1.2 Samad opened his eyes and saw quite clearly by the bandstand his two sons, their white teeth biting into two waxy apples, waving, smiling.

And then Poppy resurfaced, triumphant, with a piece of red plastic in her hand.

'A toothbrush,' she said.

the toothbrush
reluctant to present it to Poppy
dead

② O'CONNELL'S POOL
8 Mitosis HOURS = LABELS

The stranger who wanders into O'Connell's Pool House at random, hoping for the soft rise and fall of his grandfather's pool brogue, perhaps, or seeking to rebound a red ball off the side cushion and into the corner pocket, is immediately disappointed to find the place is neither Irish nor a pool house. He will survey the carpeted walls, the reproductions of George Stubbs's racehorse paintings, the framed fragments of some foreign, Eastern script, with not a little confusion. He will look for a snooker table and find instead a tall, brown man with terrible acne standing behind a counter, frying up eggs and mushrooms. His eye will land with suspicion upon an Irish flag and a map of the Arab Emirates knotted together and hung from wall to wall, partitioning him from the rest of the customers. Then he will become aware of several pairs of eyes upon him, some condescending, some incredulous; the hapless stranger will stumble out, warily, backwards, knocking over the life-size cut-out of Viv Richards as he goes. The customers will laugh. O'Connell's is no place for strangers.

O'Connell's is the kind of place family men come to for a different kind of family. Unlike blood relations, it is necessary here to *earn* one's position in the community; it takes years of devoted fucking around, time-wasting, laying-about, shooting the breeze, watching paint dry – far more dedication than men invest in the careless moment of procreation. You need to *know* the place. For example, there are reasons why O'Connell's is an Irish pool house run by Arabs with no pool tables. And there are reasons why the pustule-covered Mickey will cook you chips, egg and beans, or egg, chips and beans, or beans, chips, eggs and

③ MANUEL PANDE

without fire as surely as there are deep wounds that draw no blood?

'Of course, I see your point of view, Archie, I do. But my point is, and has always been, from the very first time we discussed the subject; my point is that this is not the *full story*. And, yes, I realize that we have several times thoroughly investigated the matter, but the fact remains: full stories are as rare as honesty, precious as diamonds. If you are lucky enough to uncover one, a full story will sit on your brain like lead. They are difficult. They are long-winded. They are epic. They are like the stories God tells: full of impossibly particular information. You *don't* find them in the dictionary.'

'All right, all right, Professor. Let's hear *your* version.'

Often you see old men in the corner of dark pubs, discussing and gesticulating, using beer mugs and salt-cellars to represent long-dead people and far-off places. At that moment they display a vitality missing in every other area of their lives. They light up. Unpacking a full story on to the table – here is Churchill-fork, over there is Czechoslovakia-serviette, here we find the accumulation of German troops represented by a collection of cold peas – they are reborn. But when Archie and Samad had these table-top debates during the eighties, knives and forks were not enough. The whole of the steamy Indian summer of 1857, the whole of that year of mutiny and massacre would be hauled into O'Connell's and brought to semi-consciousness by these two makeshift historians. The area stretching from the jukebox to the fruit machine became Delhi; Viv Richards silently complied as Pandé's English superior, Captain Hearsay; Clarence and Denzel continued to play dominoes while simultaneously being cast as the restless sepoy hordes of the British army. Each man brought the pieces of his argument, laid them out and assembled them for the other to see. Scenes were set. Paths of bullets traced. Disagreement reigned.

According to the legend, during the spring of 1857 in a factory in Dum-Dum, a new kind of British bullet went into production. Designed to be used in English guns by Indian soldiers, like most bullets at the time they had a casing that must be bitten in order to fit the barrel. There seemed nothing exceptional about them, until it was discovered by some canny factory worker that they were covered in a grease – a grease made from the fat of pigs, monstrous to Muslims, and the fat of cows, sacred to Hindus. It was an innocent mistake – as far as anything is innocent on stolen land – an infamous British blunder. But what a feverish turmoil must have engulfed the people on first hearing the news! Under the specious pretext of new weaponry, the English were intending to destroy their caste, their honour, their standing in the eyes of Gods and men – everything, in short, that made life worth living. A rumour like this could not be kept secret; it spread like wildfire through the dry lands of India that summer, down the production line, out on to the streets, through town houses and country shacks, through barrack after barrack, until the whole country was ablaze with the desire for a mutiny. The rumour reached the large unsightly ears of Mangal Pande, an unknown sepoy in the small town of Barrackpore, who swaggered into his parade ground – 29 March 1857 – stepping forward from the throng to make a certain kind of history. 'Make a fool of himself, more like,' Archie will say (for these days he does not swallow Pandy-ology as gullibly as he once did).

'You totally misunderstand his sacrifice,' Samad will reply.

'What sacrifice? He couldn't even kill himself properly! The problem with you, Sam, is you won't listen to the evidence. I've read up on it all. The truth is the truth, no matter how nasty it may taste.'

'Really. Well, please, my friend, since you are apparently an expert in the doings of my family, please, enlighten me. Let us hear your version.'

*

Now, the average school student nowadays is aware of the complex forces, movements and deep currents that motivate wars and spark revolutions. But when Archie was in school the world seemed far more open to its own fictionalization. History was a different business then: taught with one eye on narrative, the other on drama, no matter how unlikely or chronologically inaccurate. According to this schema, the Russian Revolution began because everyone hated Rasputin. The Roman Empire declined and fell because Antony was having it off with Cleopatra. Henry V triumphed at Agincourt because the French were too busy admiring their own outfits. And the Great Indian Mutiny of 1857 began when a drunken fool called Mangal Pande shot a bullet. Despite Samad's opposition, each time Archie read the following he found himself more convinced:

The scene is Barrackpore, the date 29 March 1857. It is Sunday afternoon; but on the dusty floor of the parade ground a drama is being enacted which is suggestive of anything but Sabbath peace. There chatters and sways and eddies a confused mass of Sepoys, in all stages of dress and undress; some armed, some unarmed; but all fermenting with excitement. Some thirty yards in front of the line of the 34th swaggers to and fro a Sepoy named Mangal Pande. He is half drunk with bhang, and wholly drunk with religious fanaticism. Chin in air, loaded musket in hand, he struts backwards and forwards, at a sort of half dance, shouting in shrill and nasal monotone, 'Come out, you blackguards! Turn out, all of you! The English are upon us. Through biting these cartridges we shall all be made infidels!'

The man, in fact, is in that condition of mingled bhang and 'nerves' which makes a Malay run amok; and every shout from his lips runs like a sudden flame through the brains and along the nerves of the listening crowd of fellow Sepoys, as the crowd gets bigger, the excitement more intense. A human powder magazine, in a word, is about to explode.

And explode it did. Pande shot at his lieutenant and missed him. Then he took out a large sword, a tulwar, and cowardly lunged while his lieutenant's back was turned, catching him on the shoulder. A sepoy tried to restrain him, but Pande battled on. Then came reinforcements: one Captain Hearsay rushed forward, his son at his side, both armed and honourable and prepared to die for their country. ('Hearsay is precisely what it is! Rubbish. Fabrication!') At which point Pande saw the game was up, pointed his enormous gun at his own head and dramatically pulled the trigger with his left foot. He missed. A few days later, Pande stood trial and was found guilty. From the other side of the country, on a chaise longue in Delhi, his execution was ordered by one General Henry Havelock (a man honoured, much to Samad's fury, by a statue just outside the Palace Restaurant, Trafalgar Square, to the right of Nelson), who added – in a postscript to his written instruction – that he *did* hope that this would put an end to all the rash talk of mutiny one kept hearing recently. But it was too late. As Pande swung in the sultry breeze, hanging from a makeshift gallows, his disbanded comrades from the 34th were heading for Delhi, determined to join the rebel forces of what was to become one of the bloodiest failed mutinies of this or any century.

This version of events – by a contemporary historian named Fitchett – was enough to send Samad into spasms of fury. When a man has nothing but his blood to commend him, each drop of it matters, matters terribly; it must be jealously defended. It must be protected against assailants and detractors. It must be fought for. But like a Chinese whisper, Fitchett's intoxicated, incompetent Pande had passed down a line of subsequent historians, the truth mutating, bending, receding as the whisper continued. It didn't matter that bhang, a hemp drink taken in small doses for medicinal purposes, was extremely unlikely to cause intoxication of this kind or that Pande, a strict Hindu, was extremely unlikely to drink it. It didn't matter that Samad could find not

one piece of corroborating evidence that Pande had taken bhang that morning. The story still clung, like a gigantic misquote, to the Iqbal reputation, as solid and seemingly irremovable as the misconception that Hamlet ever said he knew Yorick 'well'.

'Enough! It makes no difference how many times you read these things to me, Archibald.' (Archie usually came armed with a plastic bag full of Brent Library books, anti-Pande propaganda, misquotes galore.) 'It is like a gang of children caught with their hands in an enormous honey jar: they are all going to tell me the same lie. I am not interested in this kind of slander. I am not interested in puppet theatre or tragic farce. Action interests me, friend.' And here Samad would mime the final zipping up of his lips, the throwing away of a key. 'True action. Not words. I tell you, Archibald, Mangal Pande sacrificed his life in the name of justice for India, not because he was intoxicated or insane. Pass me the ketchup.'

It was the 1989 New Year's Eve shift in O'Connell's, and the debate was in full swing.

'True, he was not a hero in the way you in the West like your heroes – he did not succeed except in the manner of his honourable death. But imagine it: there he sat.' Samad pointed to Denzel, about to play his winning domino. 'At the trial, knowing death was upon him, refusing ever to reveal the names of his fellow conspirators –'

'Now, *that*,' said Archie, patting his pile of sceptics, Michael Edwardes, P. J. O. Taylor, Syed Moinul Haq and the rest, 'depends what you read.'

'No, Archie. That is a common mistake. The truth does not depend on what you read. Please let us not get into the nature of truth. Then you do not have to draw with my cheese and I can avoid eating your chalk.'

'All right, then: Pande. What did he achieve? Nothing! All he did was start a mutiny – too early, mind, before the agreed date – and excuse my French, but that's a fucking disaster in military

terms. You *plan*, you don't act on instinct. He caused unnecessary casualties. English and Indian.'

'With respect, I don't believe that to be the case.'

'Well, you're wrong.'

'With respect, I believe I am right.'

'It's like this, Sam: imagine here' – he gathered a pile of dirty plates that Mickey was about to put in the dishwasher – 'are all the people who have written about your Pande in the last hundred-and-whatever years. Now: here's the ones that agree with me.' He placed ten plates on his side of the table and pushed one over to Samad. 'And that's the madman on your side.'

'A. S. Misra. Respected Indian civil servant. Not a madman.'

'Right. Well, it would take you at least another hundred-and-whatever years to get as many plates as I have, even if you were going to make them all yourself, and the likelihood is, once you had them, no bugger would want to eat off them anyway. Metaphorically speaking. Know what I mean?'

Which left only A. S. Misra. One of Samad's nephews, Rajnu, had written to him in the spring of '81 from his Cambridge college, mentioning casually that he had found a book which might be of some interest to his uncle. In it, he said, could be found an eloquent defence of their shared ancestor, one Mangal Pande. The only surviving copy was in his college library, it was by a man named Misra. Had he heard of it already? If not, might it not serve (Rajnu added in a cautious P. S.) as a pleasant excuse to see his uncle again?

Samad arrived on the train the very next day and stood on the platform, warmly greeting his soft-spoken nephew in the pouring rain, shaking his hand several times and talking as if it were going out of fashion.

'A great day,' he repeated over and over, until both men were soaked to the skin. 'A great day for our family, Rajnu, a great day for the truth.'

Wet men not being allowed in college libraries, they spent the morning drying off in a stuffy upstairs café, full of the right type of ladies having the right type of tea. Rajnu, ever the good listener, sat patiently as his uncle babbled wildly – Oh, the importance of the discovery, Oh, how long he had waited for this moment – nodding in all the right places and smiling sweetly as Samad brushed tears from the corners of his eyes. 'It is a great book, isn't it, Rajnu?' asked Samad pleadingly, as his nephew left a generous tip for the sour-faced waitresses who did not appreciate overexcited Indians spending three hours over one cream tea and leaving wet prints all over the furniture. 'It is recognized, isn't it?'

Rajnu knew in his heart that the book was an inferior, insignificant, forgotten piece of scholarship, but he loved his uncle, so he smiled, nodded and smiled firmly again.

Once in the library, Samad was asked to fill in the visitors' book:

Name: Samad Miah Iqbal

College: Educated elsewhere (Delhi)

Research project: Truth

Rajnu, tickled by this last entry, picked up the pen, adding 'and Tragedy'.

'Truth and Tragedy,' said a deadpan librarian, turning the book back round. 'Any particular kind?'

'Don't worry,' said Samad genially. 'We'll find it.'

It took a stepladder to reach it but it was well worth the stretch. When Rajnu passed the book to his uncle, Samad felt his fingers tingle and, looking at its cover, shape and colour, saw that it was all he had dreamt of. It was heavy, many paged, bound in a tan leather and covered in the light dust that denotes something incredibly precious, something rarely touched.

'I left a marker in it. There is much to read but there is

something I thought you'd like to see first,' said Rajnu, laying it down on a desk. The heavy thud of one side of the book hit the table, and Samad looked at the appointed page. It was more than he could have hoped for.

'It's only an artist's impression, but the similarity between –' 'Don't speak,' said Samad, tracing his fingers across the picture. 'This is our blood, Rajnu. I never thought I would see... What eyebrows! What a nose! I have his nose!'

'You have his face, Uncle. More dashing, naturally.' 'And what – what does it say underneath. Damn! Where are my reading glasses... read it for me, Rajnu, it is too small.'

'The caption? Mangal Pande fired the first bullet of the 1857 movement. His self-sacrifice gave the siren to the nation to take up arms against an alien ruler, culminating in a mass-uprising with no parallel in world history. Though the effort failed in its immediate consequences, it succeeded in laying the foundations of the Independence to be won in 1947. For his patriotism he paid with his life. But until his last breath he refused to disclose the names of those who were preparing for, and instigating, the great uprising.'

Samad sat down on the bottom rung of the stepladder and wept.

'So. Let me get this straight. Now you're telling me that without Pande there'd be no Gandhi. That without your mad granddad there'd be no bloody Independence –'

'Great-grandad.'

'No, let me finish, Sam. Is that what you're seriously asking us' – Archie clapped an uninterested Clarence and Denzel on the back – 'to believe? Do you believe it?' he asked Clarence.

'Me kyan believe dat!' said Clarence, having no idea of the topic.

Denzel blew his nose into a napkin. 'Troof be tol, me nah like to believe any ting. Hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil. Dat my motto.'

over a school. Glenard Oak had a complex geography. Not that it was particularly labyrinthine in design. It had been built in two simple stages, first in 1886 as a workhouse (result: large red monstrosity, Victorian asylum) and then added to in 1963 when it became a school (result: grey monolith, Brave New Council Estate). The two monstrosities were then linked in 1974 by an enormous perspex tubular footbridge. But a bridge was not enough to make the two places one, or to slow down the student body's determination to splinter and factionalize. The school had learnt to its cost that you cannot unite a thousand children under one Latin tag (school code: *Laborare est Orare*, To Labour is to Pray): kids are like pissing cats or burrowing moles, marking off land within land, each section with its own rules, beliefs, laws of engagement. Despite every attempt to suppress it, the school contained and sustained patches, hang-outs, disputed territories, satellite states, states of emergency, ghettos, enclaves, islands. There were no maps, but common sense told you, for example, not to fuck with the area between the refuse bins and the craft department. There had been casualties there (notably some poor sod called Keith who had his head placed in a vice), and the scrawny, sinewy kids who patrolled this area were not to be messed with – they were the thin sons of the fat men with vicious tabloids primed in their back pockets like handguns, the fat men who believe in rough justice – *a life for a life, hanging's too good for them*.

Across from there: the Benches, three of them in a line. These were for the surreptitious dealing of tiny tiny amounts of drugs. Things like £2.50 of marijuana resin, so small it was likely to be lost in your pencil case and confused with a shredded piece of eraser. Or a quarter of an E, the greatest use of which was soothing particularly persistent period pains. The gullible could also purchase a variety of household goods – jasmine tea, garden grass, aspirin, liquorice, flour – all masquerading as Class A intoxicants to be smoked or swallowed round the back, in the

hollow behind the drama department. This concave section of wall, depending where you stood, provided low teacher-visibility for smokers too young to smoke in the smoker's garden (a concrete garden for those who had reached sixteen and were allowed to smoke themselves silly – are there any schools like this any more?). The drama hollow was to be avoided. These were hard little bastards, twelve, thirteen-year-old chain-smokers; they didn't give a shit. They *really* didn't give a shit – your health, their health, teachers, parents, police – whatever. Smoking was their answer to the universe, their 42, their *raison d'être*. They were passionate about fags. Not connoisseurs, not fussy about brand, just fags. They pulled at them like babies at teats, and when they were finally finished they ground them into the mud with wet eyes. They fucking loved it. Fags, fags, fags. Their only interest outside fags was politics, or more precisely, this fucker, the chancellor, who kept on putting up the price of fags. Because there was never enough money and there were never enough fags. You had to become an expert in bumming, cadging, begging, stealing fags. A popular ploy was to blow a week's pocket money on twenty, give them out to all and sundry, and spend the next month reminding those with fags about that time when you gave them a fag. But this was a high-risk policy. Better to have an utterly forgettable face, better to be able to cadge a fag and come back five minutes after for another without being remembered. Better to cultivate a cipher-like persona, be a little featureless squib called Mart, Jules, Ian. Otherwise you had to rely on charity and fag *sharing*. One fag could be split in a myriad of ways. It worked like this: someone (whoever had actually bought a pack of fags) lights up. Someone shouts 'halves'. At the halfway point the fag is passed over. As soon as it reaches the second person we hear 'thirds', then 'saves' (which is half a third) then 'butti', then, if the day is cold and the need for a fag overwhelming, 'last toke!' But last toke is only for the desperate; it is beyond the perforation, beyond the brand name of the

something compelling about them. More so than Elgin the dwarf or Moloch the sorcerer. He liked being connected with them, however tenuously. He had been plucked by the two of them out of nerddom, accidentally whisked from obscurity into the school spotlight. He wasn't going back without a struggle.

'Is this true, Joshua?'

'Yes ... umm, it started small, but now I believe I have a real problem. I don't *want* to deal drugs, obviously I don't, but it's like a *compulsion* -'

'Oh, for God's sake ...'

'Now, Irie, you have to let Joshua have his say. His say is as valid as your say.'

Millat reached over to the headmaster's pocket and pulled out his heavy packet of tobacco. He poured the contents out on to the small coffee table.

'Oi. Chalfen. Ghetto-boy. Measure out an eighth.'

Joshua looked at the stinking mountain of brown. 'A European eighth or an English eighth?'

'Could you just do as Millat suggests,' said the headmaster irritably, leaning forward in his chair to inspect the tobacco. 'So we can settle this.'

Fingers shaking, Joshua drew a section of tobacco on to his palm and held it up. The headmaster brought Joshua's hand up under Millat's nose for inspection.

'Barely a five-pound draw,' said Millat scornfully. 'I wouldn't buy shit from you.'

'OK, Joshua,' said the headmaster, putting the tobacco back in its pouch. 'I think we can safely say the game's up. Even I knew that wasn't anywhere near an eighth. But it does concern me that you felt the need to lie and we're going to have to schedule a time to talk about that.'

'Yes, sir.'

'In the meantime, I've talked to your parents, and in-line with the school policy move *away* from behaviour chastisement and

towards constructive conduct management, they've very generously suggested a two-month programme.'

'Programme?'

'Every Tuesday and Thursday, you, Millat, and you, Irie, will go to Joshua's house and join him in a two-hour after-school study group split between maths and biology, your weaker subjects and his stronger.'

Irie snorted, 'You're not serious?'

'You know, I *am* serious. I think it's a really interesting idea. This way Joshua's strengths can be shared equally amongst you, and the two of you can go to a stable environment, and one with the added advantage of keeping you both off the streets. I've talked to your parents and they are happy with the, you know, *arrangement*. And what's really exciting is that Joshua's father is something of an eminent scientist and his mother is a horticulturalist, I believe, so, you know, you'll really get a lot out of it. You two have a lot of potential, but I feel you're getting caught up with things that really are damaging to that potential - whether that's family environment or personal hassles, I don't know - but this is a really good opportunity to escape those. I hope you'll see that it's more than punishment. It's constructive. It's people helping people. And I really hope you'll do this wholeheartedly, you know? This kind of thing is very much in the history, the spirit, the whole *ethos* of Glenard Oak, ever since Sir Glenard himself.'

The history, spirit and ethos of Glenard Oak, as any Glenardian worth their salt knew, could be traced back to Sir Edmund Flecker Glenard (1842-1907), whom the school had decided to remember as their kindly Victorian benefactor. The official party line stated that Glenard had donated the money for the original building out of a devoted interest in the social improvement of the disadvantaged. Rather than *workhouse*, the official PTA

booklet described it as a 'shelter, workplace and educational institute' used in its time by a mixture of English and Caribbean people. According to the PTA booklet, the founder of Glenard Oak was an educational philanthropist. But then, according to the PTA booklet, 'post-class aberration consideration period' was a suitable replacement for the word 'detention'.

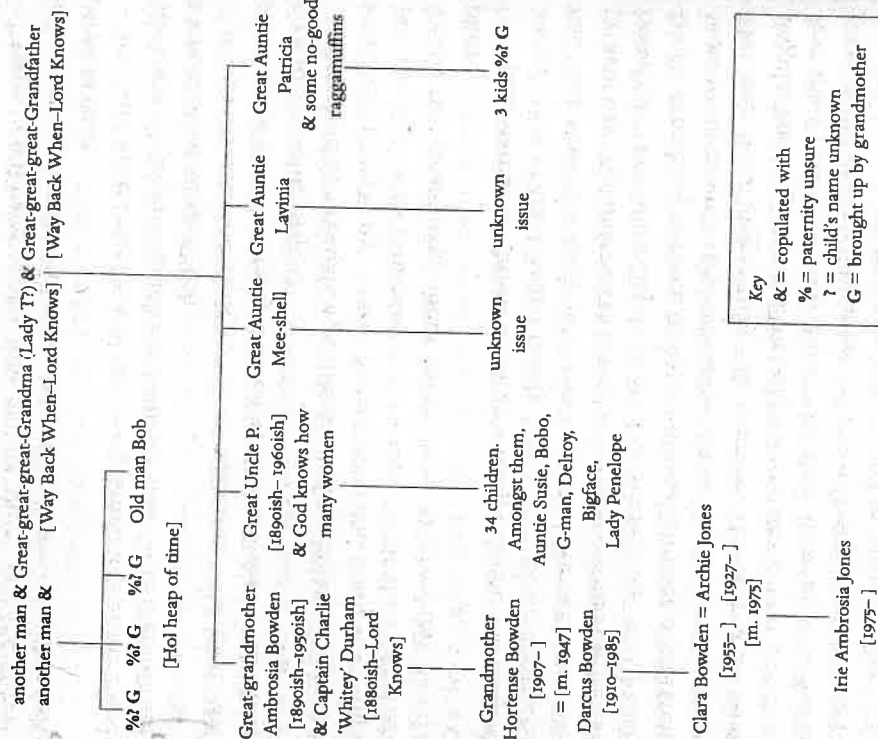
A more thorough investigation in the archives of the local Grange Library would reveal Sir Edmund Flecker Glenard as a successful colonial who had made a pretty sum in Jamaica farming tobacco, or rather overseeing great tracts of land where tobacco was being farmed. At the end of twenty years of this, having acquired far more money than was necessary, Sir Edmund sat back in his impressive leather armchair and asked himself if there were not something he could do. Something to send him into his dotage cushioned by a feeling of goodwill and worthiness. Something for the people. The ones he could see from his window. Out there in the field.

For a few months Sir Edmund was stumped. Then one Sunday, while taking a leisurely late afternoon stroll through Kingston, he heard a familiar sound that struck him differently. Godly singing. Hand-clapping. Weeping and wailing. Noise and heat and ecstatic movement coming from church after church and moving through the thick air of Jamaica like a choir invisible. Now, there was something, thought Sir Edmund. For, unlike many of his ex-patriot peers, who branded the singing caterwauling and accused it of being heathen, Sir Edmund had always been touched by the devotion of Jamaican Christians. He liked the idea of a jolly church, where one could sniff or cough or make a sudden movement without the vicar looking at one queerly. Sir Edmund felt certain that God, in all his wisdom, had never meant church to be a stiff-collared miserable affair as it was in Tunbridge Wells, but rather a joyous thing, a singing and dancing thing, a foot-stamping hand-clapping thing. The Jamaicans understood this. Sometimes it seemed to be the only thing they *did* under-

stand. Stopping for a moment outside one particularly vibrant church, Sir Edmund took the opportunity to muse upon this conundrum: the remarkable difference between a Jamaican's devotion to his God in comparison to his devotion towards his employer. It was a subject he'd had cause to consider many times in the past. Only this month, as he sat in his study trying to concentrate on the problem he had set himself, his wardens came to him with news of three strikes, various men found asleep or drugged while at work, and a whole collective of mothers (Bowden women amongst them) complaining about low pay, refusing to work. Now you see, that was the rub of it, right there. You could get a Jamaican to pray any hour of the day or night, they would roll into church for any date of religious note, even the most obscure – but if you took your eye off 'em for one minute in the tobacco fields, then work ground to a halt. When they worshipped they were full of energy, moving like jumping beans, bawling in the aisles... yet when they worked they were sullen and uncooperative. The question so puzzled him he had written a letter on the subject to the *Gleaner* earlier in the year inviting correspondence, but received no satisfactory replies. The more Edmund thought about it, the more it became clear to him that the situation was quite the opposite in England. One was impressed by the Jamaican's faith but despairing of his work ethic and education. Vice versa, one admired the Englishman's work ethic and education but despaired of his poorly kept faith. And now, as Sir Edmund turned to go back to his estate, he realized that he was in a position to influence the situation – nay, more than that – transform it! Sir Edmund, who was a fairly corpulent man, a man who looked as if he might be hiding another man within him, practically skipped all the way home.

The very next day he wrote an electrifying letter to *The Times* and donated forty thousand pounds to a missionary group on the condition that it went towards a large property in London. Here Jamaicans could work side by side with Englishmen packaging

thirty-four children, but could only state definitively that her own mother was born at 2.45 p.m. 14 January 1907, in a Catholic church in the middle of the Kingston earthquake. The rest was rumour, folk-tale and myth:



'You guys go so far back,' said Irie, as Marcus came up behind her to see what was of interest. 'It's incredible. I can't imagine what that must feel like.'

'Nonsensical statement. We all go back as far as each other. It's just that the Chalfens have always written things down,' said Marcus thoughtfully, stuffing his pipe with fresh tobacco. 'It helps if you want to be remembered.'

'I guess my family's more of an oral tradition,' said Irie with a shrug. 'But, man, you should ask Millat about his. He's the descendant of -'

'A great revolutionary. So I've heard. I wouldn't take any of that seriously, if I were you. One part truth to three parts fiction in that family, I fancy. Any historical figure of note in your lot?' asked Marcus, and then, immediately uninterested in his own question, returned to his search of filing cabinet number two.

'No... no one... significant. But my grandmother was born in January 1907, during the Kingston -'
'Here we are!'

Marcus emerged triumphant from a steel drawer, brandishing a thin plastic folder with a few pieces of paper in it.

'Photographs. Especially for you. If the animal-rights lot saw these, I'd have a contract out on my life. One by one now. Don't grab.'

Marcus passed Irie the first photo. It was of a mouse on its back. Its stomach was littered with little mushroom-like growths, brown and puffy. Its mouth was unnaturally extended, by the prostrate position, into a cry of agony. But not genuine agony, Irie thought, more like theatrical agony. More like a mouse who was making a big show of something. A ham-mouse. A luvvie-mouse. There was something sarcastic about it.

'You see, embryo cells are all very well, they help us understand the genetic elements that may contribute to cancer, but what you really want to know is how a tumour progresses in living tissue. I mean, you can't approximate that in a culture, not really. So then you move on to introducing chemical carcinogens in a target organ but...'

Irie was half listening, half engrossed in the pictures passed to

adjective, 'at least he makes a decision and sticks by it. At least Archie's consistent.'

'Oh surely, yes,' said Alsana acidly. 'The same way that a stone is consistent, the same way my dear *babba* is consistent for very simple reason that she's been buried underground for -'
'Oh, shut up,' said Irie.

Alsana was silenced for a moment, and then the shock subsided and she found her tongue. 'Irie Jones, don't you tell me -'

'No, I will tell you,' said Irie, going very red in the face, 'actually. Yeah, I will. Shut up. Shut up, Alsana. And shut up the lot of you. All right? Just shut up. In case you didn't notice, there are, like, *other people* on this bus and, believe it or not, not everyone in the *universe* wants to listen to you lot. So shut it. Go on. Try it. *Silence*. Ah.' She reached into the air as if trying to touch the quiet she had created. 'Isn't that something? Did you know this is how other families are? They're *quiet*. Ask one of these people sitting here. They'll tell you. They've got families. *This is how some families are all the time*. And some people like to call these families repressed, or emotionally stunted or whatever, but do you know what I say?'

The Iqbals and the Joneses, astonished into silence along with the rest of the bus (even the loud-mouthed Ragga girls on their way to a Brixton dance hall New Year ting), had no answer.

'I say, *lucky fuckers*. Lucky, lucky fuckers.'

'Irie Jones!' cried Clara. 'Watch your mouth!' But Irie couldn't be stopped.

'What a peaceful existence. What a joy their lives must be. They open a door and all they've got behind it is a bathroom or a lounge. Just neutral spaces. And not this endless maze of present rooms and past rooms and the things said in them years ago and everybody's old historical shit all over the place. They're not constantly making the same old mistakes. They're not always hearing the same old shit. They don't do public performances of angst on public transport. Really, these people exist. I'm telling

6 IRIE PREGNANT The Final Space
you. The biggest traumas of their lives are things like recarpeting. Bill-paying. Gate-fixing. They don't mind what their kids do in life as long as they're reasonably, you know, *healthy*. Happy. And every single fucking day is not this huge battle between who they are and who they should be, what they were and what they will be. Go on, ask them. And they'll tell you. No mosque. Maybe a little church. Hardly any sin. Plenty of forgiveness. No attics. No shit in attics. No skeletons in cupboards. No great-grandfathers. I will put twenty quid down now that Samad is the only person in here who knows the inside bloody leg measurement of his great-grandfather. And you know why they don't know? Because it *doesn't fucking matter*. As far as they're concerned, it's the *past*. This is what it's like in other families. They're not self-indulgent. They don't run around, relishing, *relishing* the fact that they are utterly dysfunctional. They don't spend their time trying to find ways to make their lives more complex. They just *get on with it*. Lucky bastards. Lucky motherfuckers.'

The enormous adrenalin rush that sprang from this peculiar outburst surged through Irie's body, increased her heart-beat to a gallop and tickled the nerve ends of her unborn child, for Irie was eight weeks pregnant and she knew it. What she didn't know, and what she realized she may *never know* (the very moment she saw the ghostly pastel blue lines materialize on the home test, like the face of the madonna in the zucchini of an Italian housewife), was the identity of the father. No test on earth would tell her. Same thick black hair. Same twinkling eyes. Same habit of chewing the tops of pens. Same shoe size. Same deoxyribonucleic acid. She could not know her body's decision, what choice it had made, in the race to the gamete, between the saved and the unsaved. She could not know if the choice would make any difference. Because whichever brother it was, it was the other one too. She would never know.

At first this fact seemed ineffably sad to Irie; instinctively she sentimentalized the biological facts, adding her own invalid

sylogism: if it was not somebody's child, could it be that it was nobody's child? She thought of those elaborate fictional cartograms that folded out of Joshua's old sci-fi books, his Fantasy Adventures. That is how her child seemed. A perfectly plotted thing with no real coordinates. A map to an imaginary fatherland. But then, after weeping and pacing and rolling it over and over in her mind, she thought: *whatever, you know? Whatever.* It was always going to turn out like this, not precisely like this, but involved like this. This was the Iqbals we were talking about, but This was the Joneses. How could she ever have expected anything less?

And so she calmed herself, putting her hand over her palpitating chest and breathing deeply as the bus approached the square and the pigeons circled. She would tell one of them and not the other; she would decide which; she would do it tonight.

'You all right, love?' Archie asked her, after a long period of silence had set in, putting his big pink hand on her knee, dotted with liver-spots like tea stains. 'A lot on your chest, then.'

'Fine, Dad. I'm fine.'

Archie smiled at her, and tucked a stray hair behind her ear.

'Dad.'

'Yes?'

'The thing about the bus tickets.'

'Yes?'

'One theory goes it's because so many people pay less than they should for their journey. Over the past few years the bus companies have been suffering from larger and larger deficits. You see where it says *Retain for Inspection*? That's so they can check later. It's got all the details there, so you can't get away with it.'

And in the past, Archie wondered, was it just that fewer people cheated? Were they more honest, and did they leave their front doors open, did they leave their kids with the neighbours, pay social calls, run up tabs with the butcher? The funny thing about

getting old in a country is people always want to hear that from you. They want to hear it really was once a green and pleasant land. They need it. Archie wondered if his daughter needed it. She was looking at him funny. Her mouth downturned, her eyes almost pleading. But what could he tell her? New Years come and go, but no amount of resolutions seem to change the fact that there are bad blokes. There were always plenty of bad blokes.

'When I was a kid,' said Irie softly, ringing the bell for their stop, 'I used to think they were little alibis. Bus tickets. I mean, look: they've got the time. The date. The place. And if I was up in court, and I had to defend myself, and prove I wasn't where they said I was, doing what they said I did, when they said I did it, I'd pull out one of those.'

Archie was silent and Irie, assuming the conversation was over, was surprised when several minutes later, after they had struggled through the happy New Year crowd and tourists standing round aimlessly, as they were walking up the steps of the Perret Institute, her father said, 'Now, I never thought of that. I'll remember that. Because you never know, do you? I mean, do you? Well. There's a thought. You should pick them up off the street, I suppose. Put 'em all in a jar. An alibi for every occasion.'

∞

And all these people are heading for the same room. The final space. A big room, one of many in the Perret Institute; a room separate from the exhibition yet called an Exhibition Room; a corporate place, a clean slate; white/chrome/pure/plain (this was the design brief) used for the meetings of people who want to meet somewhere neutral at the end of the twentieth century; a virtual place where their business (be that rebranding, lingerie or rebranding lingerie) can be done in an emptiness, an untaminated cavity; the logical endpoint of a thousand years of

spaces too crowded and bloody. This one is pared down, sterilized, made new every day by a Nigerian cleaning lady with an industrial Hoover and guarded through the night by Mr De Winter, a Polish nightwatchman (that's what he calls himself – his job title is Asset Security Coordinator); he can be seen protecting the space, walking the borders of the space with a Walkman playing Polish folk-tunes; you can see him, you can see it through a huge glass front if you walk by – the acres of protected vacuity and a sign with the prices per square foot of these square feet of space of space longer than it is wide and tall enough to fit head-to-toe three Archies and at least half an Alsana and tonight there are (there will not be tomorrow) two huge, matching posters, slick across two sides of the room like wallpaper and the text says MILLENNIAL SCIENCE COMMISSION in a wide variety of fonts ranging from the deliberate archaism of *vikings* to the modernity of *impact* in order to get a feel of a thousand years in lettering (this was the brief), and all of it in the alternate colours grey, light blue and dark green because these are the colours research reveals people associate with 'science and technology' (purples and reds denote the arts, royal blue signifies 'quality and/or approved merchandise'), because fortunately after years of corporate synaesthesia (salt & vinegarblue, cheese & oniongreen) people can finally give the answers required when a space is being designed, or when something is being rebranded, a room/furniture/Britain (that was the brief: a new British room, a space for Britain, Britishness, space of Britain, British industrial space cultural space space); they know what is meant when asked how matt chrome makes them feel; and they know what is meant by national identity? symbols? paintings? maps? music? air-conditioning? smiling black children or smiling Chinese children or [tick the box]? world music? shag or pile? tile or floorboards? plants? running water?

they know what they want, especially those who've lived this century, forced from one space to another like Mr De Winter (né

Wojciech), renamed, rebranded, the answer to every questionaire nothing nothing space please just space nothing please nothing space

not much of a thinker, when you get down to it. That's the best I can offer. All right, here goes.'

The coin rose and flipped as a coin would rise and flip every time in a perfect world, flashing its light and then revealing its dark enough times to mesmerize a man. Then, at some point in its triumphant ascension, it began to arc, and the arc went wrong, and Archibald realized that it was not coming back to him at all but going behind him, a fair way behind him, and he turned round to watch it fall in the dirt. He was bending to pick it up when a shot rang out, and he felt a blistering pain in his right thigh. He looked down. Blood. The bullet had passed straight through, just missing the bone, but leaving a shard of the cap embedded deep in the flesh. The pain was excruciating and strangely distant at the same time. Archie turned back round to see Dr Sick, half bent over, the gun hanging weakly in his right hand.

'For fuckssake, why did you do that?' said Archie furious, grabbing the gun off the Doctor, easily and forcefully. 'It's tails. See? It's tails. Look. Tails. It was tails.'

THE END

So Archie is there, there in the trajectory of the bullet, about to do something unusual, even for TV: save the same man twice and with no more reason or rhyme than the first time. And it's a messy business, this saving people lark. Everybody in the room watches in horror as he takes it in the thigh, right in the femur, spins round with some melodrama and falls right through the mouse's glass box. Shards of glass all over the gaff. What a performance. If it were TV you would hear the saxophone around now; the credits would be rolling.

But first the endgames. Because it seems no matter what you think of them, they must be played, even if, like the independence of India or Jamaica, like the signing of peace treaties or the docking of passenger boats, the end is simply the beginning of an

even longer story. The same focus group who picked out the colour of this room, the carpet, the font for the posters, the height of the table, would no doubt tick the box that asks to see all these things played to their finish ... and there is surely a demographic pattern to all those who wish to see the eyewitness statements that identified Magid as many times as Millat, the confusing transcripts, the videotape of uncooperating victim and families, a court case so impossible the judge gave in and issued four hundred hours community service to both twins, which they served, naturally, as gardeners in Joyce's new project, a huge millennial park by the banks of the Thames ...

And is it young professional women aged eighteen to thirty-two who would like a snapshot seven years hence of Irie, Joshua and Hortense sitting by a Caribbean sea (for Irie and Joshua become lovers in the end; you can only avoid your fate for so long), while Irie's fatherless little girl writes affectionate postcards to *Bad Uncle Millat* and *Good Uncle Magid* and feels free as Pinocchio, a puppet clipped of paternal strings? And could it be that it is largely the criminal class and the elderly who find themselves wanting to make bets on the winner of a blackjack game, the one played by Alsana and Samad, Archie and Clara, in O'Connell's, 31 December 1999, that historic night when Abdul-Mickey finally opened his doors to women?

But surely to tell these tall tales and others like them would be to speed the myth, the wicked lie, that the past is always tense and the future, perfect. And as Archie knows, it's not like that. It's never been like that.

It would make an interesting survey (what kind would be your decision) to examine the present and divide the onlookers into two groups: those whose eyes fell upon a bleeding man, slumped across a table, and those who watched the getaway of a small brown rebel mouse. Archie, for one, watched the mouse. He watched it stand very still for a second with a smug look as if it expected nothing less. He watched it scurry away, over his

hand. He watched it dash along the table, and through the hands of those who wished to pin it down. He watched it leap off the end and disappear through an air vent. Go on my son! thought

Archie.

Archie
more enigma into
future !!