Sacred Games

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ff
faber and faber

Policeman's Day

A white Pomeranian named Fluffy flew out of a fifth-floor window in Panna, which was a brand-new building with the painter's scaffolding still around it. Fluffy screamed in her little lap-dog voice all the way down, like a little white kettle losing steam, bounced off the bonnet of a Cielo, and skidded to a halt near the rank of schoolgirls waiting for the St Mary's Convent bus. There was remarkably little blood, but the sight of Fluffy's brains did send the conventeers into hysterics, and meanwhile, above, the man who had swung Fluffy around his head by one leg, who had slung Fluffy into the void, one Mr Mahesh Pandey of Mirage Textiles, that man was leaning on his windowsill and laughing. Mrs Kamala Pandey, who in talking to Fluffy always spoke of herself as 'Mummy', now staggered and ran to her kitchen and plucked from the magnetic holder a knife nine inches long and two wide. When Sartaj and Katekar broke open the door to apartment 502, Mrs Pandey was standing in front of the bedroom door, looking intensely at a dense circle of two-inch-long wounds in the wood, about chest-high. As Sartaj watched, she sighed, raised her hand and stabbed the door again. She had to struggle with both hands on the handle to get the knife out.

'Mrs Pandey,' Sartaj said.

She turned to them, the knife still in a double-handed grip, held high. She had a pale, tear-stained face and tiny bare feet under her white nightie.

'Mrs Pandey, I am Inspector Sartaj Singh,' Sartaj said. 'I'd like you to put down that knife, please.' He took a step, hands held up and palms forward. 'Please,' he said. But Mrs Pandey's eyes were wide and blank, and except for the quivering of her forearms she was quite still. The hallway they were in was narrow, and Sartaj could feel Katekar behind him, wanting to pass. Sartaj stopped moving. Another step and he would be comfortably within a swing of the knife.

'Police?' a voice said from behind the bedroom door. 'Police?'

Mrs Pandey started, as if remembering something, and then she said, 'Bastard, bastard,' and slashed at the door again. She was tired now, and the point bounced off the wood and raked across it, and Sartaj bent her

wrist back and took the knife quite easily from her. But she smashed at the door with her hands, breaking her bangles, and her last wiry burst of anger was hard to hold and contain. Finally they sat her down on the green sofa in the drawing room.

'Shoot him,' she said. '*Shoot* him.' Then she put her head in her hands. There were green and blue bruises on her shoulder. Katekar was back at the bedroom door, murmuring.

'What did you fight about?' Sartaj said.

'He wants me not to fly any more.'

'What?'

'I'm an air-hostess. He thinks . . .'

'Yes?'

She had startling light-brown eyes, and she was angry at Sartaj for asking. 'He thinks since I'm an air hostess, I keep hostessing the pilots on stopovers,' she said, and turned her face to the window.

Katekar was walking the husband over now, with a hand on his neck. Mr Pandey hitched up his silky red-and-black striped pyjamas, and smiled confidentially at Sartaj. 'Thank you,' he said. 'Thanks for coming.'

'So you like to hit your wife, Mr Pandey?' Sartaj barked, leaning forward. Katekar sat the man down, hard, while he still had his mouth open. It was nicely done. Katekar was a senior constable, an old subordinate, a colleague really – they had worked together for almost seven years now, off and on. 'You like to hit her, and then you throw a poor puppy out of a window? And then you call us to save you?'

'She said I hit her?'

'I have eyes. I can see.'

'Then look at this,' Mr Pandey said, his jaw twisting. 'Look, look, look at this.' And he pulled up his left pyjama jacket sleeve, revealing a shiny silver watch and four evenly spaced scratches, livid and deep, running from the inside of the wrist around to the elbow. 'More, I've got more,' Mr Pandey said, and bowed low at the waist and lowered his head and twisted to raise his collar away from the skin. Sartaj got up and walked around the coffee table. There was a corrugated red welt on Mr Pandey's shoulder blade, and Sartaj couldn't see how far down it went.

'What's that from?' Sartaj said.

'She broke a Kashmiri walking stick on my back. This thick, it was,' Mr Pandey said, holding up his thumb and forefinger circled.

Sartaj walked to the window. There was a group of uniformed boys clustering around the small white body below, pushing each other closer

to it. The St Mary's girls were squealing, holding their hands to their mouths, and begging the boys to stop. In the drawing room, Mrs Pandey was gazing brightly at her husband, her chin tucked into her chest. 'Love,' Sartaj said softly. 'Love is a murdering gaandu. Poor Fluffy.'

'Namaskar, Sartaj Saab,' PSI Kamble called across the station house. 'Parulkar Saab was asking after you.' The room was some twenty-five feet across, with four desks lined up across the breadth of it. There was a six-foot poster of Sai Baba on the wall, and a Ganesha under the glass on Kamble's desk, and Sartaj had felt impelled to add a picture of Guru Gobind Singh on the other wall, in a somewhat twisted assertion of secularism. Five constables came jerkily to attention, and then subsided into their usual sprawl on white plastic chairs.

'Where is Parulkar Saab?'

'With a pack of reporters. He's giving them tea and telling them about our new initiative against crime.'

Parulkar was the deputy commissioner for Zone 13, and his office was next door, in a separate building that was the zonal headquarters. He loved reporters, and had a genius for being jovial with them, and a recent knack for declaiming couplets during interviews. Sartaj wondered sometimes if he sat up late with books of poetry, practising in front of a mirror. 'Good,' Sartaj said. 'Somebody has to tell them about all our hard work.'

Kamble let out a snort of laughter.

Sartaj sat at the desk next to Kamble and flipped open a copy of the *Indian Express*. Two members of the Gaitonde gang had been shot to death in an encounter with the Flying Squad in Bhayander. The police had acted on received intelligence and intercepted the two as they proceeded to a factory office in that locality; the two extortionists had been hailed and told to surrender, but they had instantly fired at the squad, who then retaliated, et cetera, et cetera. There was a colour photograph of plainclothes men bending over two oblong red stains on the ground. In other news, there had been two break-ins in Andheri East, one in Worli, and this last one had ended in the fatal stabbing of a young couple. As Sartaj read, he could hear the elderly man sitting across from Kamble talking about slow death. His eighty-year-old mausi had fallen down a flight of stairs and broken her hip. They had checked her into the Shivsagar Polyclinic, where she had borne with her usual stoicism the unrelenting pain in her old bones. After all, she had marched with Gandhi-ji in forty-two and had suffered her first fracture then – of the collarbone from a

mounted policeman's lathi – and also the bare floors of jail cells afterwards. She had an old-fashioned strength, which saw sacrifice of the self as one's duty in the world. But when the pressure ulcers flowered their deep red wounds on her arms and shoulders and back, even she had said, perhaps it is time for me to die. The elderly man had never heard her say anything of the like, but now she groaned, I want to die. And it took her twenty-two days to find relief, twenty-two days before blessed darkness. If you had seen her, the elderly man said, you too would have cried.

Kamble was flipping pages in a register. Sartaj completely believed the elderly man's story, and understood his problem: the Shivsagar Polyclinic wouldn't let him take the body without a No Objection Certificate endorsed by the police. The handwritten note on Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation stationery would say that the police were satisfied that the death in question was natural, that there was no foul play involved, that the body could be released to relatives for disposal. This was supposed to prevent murders – dowry killings and suchlike – from being passed off as accidents, and Police Sub Inspector Kamble was supposed to sign it on behalf of the ever watchful, khaki-clad guardians of Mumbai, but he had it sitting next to his elbow and he was studiously scribbling in his register. The elderly man had his hands folded together, and his white hair fell over his forehead, and he was looking at the indifferent Kamble with moist eyes. 'Please, sir,' he said.

Sartaj thought it was on the whole a finely considered performance, and that the grief was genuine, but the bit about Gandhi-ji and broken collarbones quite excessively and melodramatically reproving. Both the elderly man and Kamble knew well that a payment would have to be made before the certificate was signed. Kamble would probably hold out for eight hundred rupees; the old man wanted to give only five hundred or so, but the sacrifices of the elders had been done to death in the movies, and Kamble was quite indifferent to the degeneration-of-India gambit. He now closed his red register and reached for a green one. He studied it closely. The old man began the whole story again, from the fall down the stairs. Sartaj got up, stretched, and walked out into the courtyard of the station. In the shade of the gallery that ran along the front of the building, and under the tin portico, there was the usual crowd of touts, hangers-on, relatives of those chained in the detection room inside, messengers and representatives from local businessmen, favour-seekers, and, here and there, those marked by misfortune and sudden misery, now looking up at him in mingled hope and bitterness.

Sartaj walked past them all. There was an eight-foot wall around the whole complex, of the same reddish-brown brick as the station house and the zonal headquarters. Both buildings were two storeys high, with identical red-tiled roofs and oval-topped windows. There was a promise in the grim arches, in the thickness of the walls and the uncompromising weight of the façades, there was the reassurance of bulky power, and so law and order. A sentry snapped to attention as Sartaj went up the stairs. Sartaj heard the laughter from Parulkar's cabin well before he could see it, while he was still twisting through the warren of cubicles piled high with paper. Sartaj knocked sharply on the lustrous wood of Parulkar's door, then pushed it open. There was a quick upturning of laughing faces, and Sartaj saw that even the national newspapers had come out for the story of Parulkar's initiative, or at least for his poetry. He was good copy.

'Gentlemen, gentlemen,' Parulkar said, raising one proud, pointing hand. 'My most daring officer, Sartaj Singh.' The correspondents lowered their teacups with a long clatter and looked at Sartaj sceptically. Parulkar walked around the desk, tugging at his belt. 'One minute, please. I'll talk to him outside for a moment, then he will tell you about our initiative.'

Parulkar shut the door, and led Sartaj around the back of the cabin, to a very small kitchen which now boasted a gleaming new Brittex water filter on its wall. Parulkar pressed buttons and a bright stream of water fell into the glass he held below.

'It tastes very pure, sir,' Sartaj said. 'Very good indeed.'

Parulkar was drinking deep draughts from a steel tumbler. 'I asked them for their best model,' he said. 'Because clean water is absolutely necessary.'

'Yes, sir.' Sartaj took a sip. 'Sir – "daring"?'

'They like daring. And you had better be daring if you want to stay in this job.'

Parulkar had sloping shoulders and a pear-shaped body that defeated the best tailors, and his uniform was crumpled already, but that was only usual. There was a sag in his voice, a resignation in his sideways glance that Sartaj had never known. 'Is something wrong, sir? Is there some complication with the initiative, sir?'

'No, no, no complication with the initiative. No, nothing to do with that at all. It is something else.'

'Yes, sir?'

'They are after me.'

'Who, sir?'

'Who else?' Parulkar said with unusual asperity. 'The government. They want me out. They think I've gone high enough.'

Parulkar was now a deputy commissioner of police, and he had once been a lowly sub-inspector. He had risen through the Maharashtra State Police, and he had made that near-impossible leap into the august Indian Police Service, and he had done it alone, with good police work, a sense of humour, and very long hours. It had been an astonishing and unparalleled career, and he had risen to become Sartaj's mentor. He emptied his glass, and poured more water from his new Brittex filter.

'Why, sir?' Sartaj said. 'Why?'

'I was too close to the previous government. They think I'm a Congress man.'

'So they may want you out. That doesn't mean anything. You have lots of years left before retirement.'

'You remember Dharmesh Mathija?'

'Yes, that's the fellow who built our wall.' Mathija was a builder, one of the more conspicuously successful ones in the northern suburbs, a man whose ambition showed like a sweaty fever on his forehead. He had built, in record time, the extension of the compound wall at the rear of the station, around the recently filled lowland. There was now a Hanuman temple and a small lawn and young trees that you could see from the offices to the rear of the building. Parulkar's passion was improvement. He said it often: we must improve. Mathija and Sons had improved the station, and of course they had done it for free. 'So what about Mathija, sir?'

Parulkar was taking little sips of water, swirling it about in his mouth. 'I was called to the DG's office yesterday, early.'

'Yes, sir.'

'The DG had a call from the home minister. Mathija has threatened to file a case. He said he was forced to do some work for me. Construction.'

'That's absurd, sir. He came himself. How many times he visited you here. We all saw that. He was happy to do it.'

'Not our wall here. At my home.'

'At your home?'

'The roof needed work urgently. As you know, it's a very old house. My ancestral abode really. Also, it needed a new bathroom. Mamta and my granddaughters have moved back home. As you know. So.'

'And?'

'Mathija did it. He did good work. But now he says he has me on tape threatening him.'

'Sir?'

'I remember phoning him to tell him to hurry up. Finish the work before the last monsoons. I may have used some strong language.'

'But so what, sir? Let him go to court. Let him do what he wants. Let him see what we do to his life here, sir. At his sites, all his offices . . .'

'Sartaj, that's just their excuse. It's a way to put pressure on me, and let me know I am not wanted. They're not satisfied with just transferring me, they want to get rid of me.'

'You will fight back, sir.'

'Yes.' Parulkar was the best player of the political game Sartaj had ever known: he was a grandmaster of the subtle art of contact and double-contact and back-channel, of ministers and corporators cultivated and kept happy, business interests allowed room for profits, backslapping and exchanges with commissioners of police, favours finely weighed and dispensed and remembered, deals made and forgotten – he was an aficionado of the subtle sport, he was simply the best. It was incredible that he was so tired. His collar sagged, and the swell of his belly was no longer jaunty, only weighted by regret. He drank another glass of water, fast. 'You had better get in there, Sartaj. They're waiting for you.'

'I'm sorry, sir.'

'I know you are.'

'Sir.' Sartaj thought he should say something else, something full of gratitude and somehow conclusive about what Parulkar had meant to him – the years together, the cases solved and the ones left and abandoned, the manoeuvres learnt, how to live and work and survive as a policeman in the city – and yet Sartaj was able only to come to rigid attention. Parulkar nodded. Sartaj was certain he understood.

Outside the cabin, Sartaj checked the tuck of his shirt, ran a hand over his turban. Then he stepped in, and told the reporters about more policemen on more streets, about community interaction, about strict supervision and transparency, about how things were going to get better.

For lunch Sartaj had an uttapam sent to the station from the next-door Udipi Restaurant. The keen kick of the chillies was invigorating, but when he was finished, Sartaj was unable to get up from his chair. It had been a very light meal but he was crushed, pulped by lassitude. He was barely able to get up and pull the bench from the wall, to slip off his shoes and lie flat and very straight on the wood. His arms were crossed on his chest. A deep breath, then another, and the edge cutting into the back of

his thigh receded, and in the swimming drowsiness he was able to forget details, and the world became a receding white blur. Yet a sharp undertow flung him into anger, and after a moment he was able to remember what he was restless about. All of Parulkar's triumphs were going to be wiped away, made meaningless by an engineered disgrace. And once Parulkar was gone, what of Sartaj? What would become of him? Sartaj had begun recently to feel that he himself had accomplished nothing in his life. He was past forty, a divorced police inspector with middling professional prospects. Others from his batch had climbed past him, he was just pedalling along, doing his job. He looked into his future and saw that he would not achieve as much as his own father, and much less than the redoubtable Parulkar. I am quite useless, Sartaj thought, and felt very bleak. He sat up, rubbed his face, shook his head violently, and pulled on his shoes. He stalked into the front room, where PSI Kamble was rubbing his stomach lightly in circles. He looked quite satisfied.

'Good lunch?' Sartaj said.

'Absolute top first-class biryani from that new Laziz Restaurant on S.T. Road,' Kamble said. 'In a fancy clay pot, you know. We're getting very pish-posh in Kailashpada.' Kamble straightened up and leaned closer. 'Listen. You know those two gaandus who were encountered yesterday by the Flying Squad in Bhayander?'

'Gaitonde gang, yes?'

'Right. You know the Gaitonde gang and the Suleiman Isa gang have been stepping up their war again, right? So, I heard the two hits yesterday were a supari given by the S-Company. I heard that the Flying Squad boys made twenty lakhs.'

'You'd better get in the squad then.'

'Boss, what do you think I'm saving up for? I hear the going rate to get in is twenty-five lakhs.'

'Very expensive.'

'Very,' Kamble said. His face was aglow, every pore open and alight. 'But money makes it all happen, my friend, and to make money you have to spend money.'

Sartaj nodded, and Kamble sank into a register again. Sartaj had once heard it from a slumlord convicted of murder, the bitter secret of life in the metropolis: *paisa phek, tamasha dekh*. They had literally bumped into each other, walking round a corner in a basti in Andheri. They had recognized each other instantly, despite Sartaj's plain clothes and the slumlord's new paunch. Sartaj said, arre, Bahzad Hussain, aren't you supposed to be

serving fifteen years for offing Anwar Yeda? And Bahzad Hussain laughed nervously, and said, Inspector saab, you know how it is, I got parole and now it says in my file that I'm absconding in Bahrain, *paisa phek, tamasha dekh*. Which was absolutely true: if you had money to throw, you could watch the spectacle – the judges and magistrates trapezing blithely, the hoop-jumping politicians, the happy, red-nosed cops. Bahzad Hussain had the grace and good sense to come quietly to the station, and he was very confident, and wanted only a cup of tea and a chance to make a few phone calls. He made jokes and laughed a lot. Yes, he had thrown his money and watched the spectacle. All of this police jhanjhat was only a slight waste of time, nothing more. *Paisa phek, tamasha dekh*.

Kamble now had a family standing in front of him, a mother and a father and a son in blue-uniform short pants. The father was a tailor who had come back home from the shop early in the afternoon, to get some suiting material he had forgotten. On the way he had taken a short-cut and seen his son, who was supposed to be in school, playing marbles against the factory wall with some faltu street kids. The mother was doing the talking now. 'Saab, I beat him, his father shouts at him, nothing helps. The teachers have given up. He shouts back at us, my son. He thinks he's too smart. He thinks he doesn't need school. I'm tired of it, saab. You take him. You put him in jail.' She made the motion of emptying her hands, and dabbed at her eyes with the end of her blue pallu. Looking at her hands and finely muscled forearms, Sartaj was certain that she worked as a bai, that she washed dishes and clothes for the wives of executives in the Shiva Housing Colony. The son had his head down, and was scraping the side of one shoe against the other.

Sartaj crooked a finger. 'Come here.' The boy shuffled sideways. 'What's your name?'

'Sailesh.' He was about thirteen, quite wise, with a stylish floppy hairdo and flashing black eyes.

'Hello, Sailesh.'

'Hello.'

Sartaj smashed a hand down on to the table. It was very loud, and Sailesh started and backed away. Sartaj grabbed him by the collar and twisted him around the end of the desk. 'You think you're tough, Sailesh? You're so tough you're not scared of anyone, Sailesh? Let me show you what we do with tough taporis like you, Sailesh.' Sartaj walked him around the room and through a door and into the detection room, lifting him off the floor with every stride. Katekar was sitting with another con-

stable at the end of the room, near the squatting line of chained prisoners.

'Katekar,' Sartaj called.

'Sir.'

'Which is the toughest of this lot?'

'This one, sir, thinks he's hard. Narain Swami, pickpocket.'

Sartaj shook Sailesh so that his head wobbled and snapped. 'This big man here thinks he's harder than all of us. Let him see. Give Narain Swami some dum and let the big man see.'

Katekar lifted the cringing Narain Swami and bent him over, and Swami struggled and jingled his chains, but when the first open-palmed blow landed on his back with an awful popping noise he got the idea. With the second one he howled quite creditably. After the third and fourth he was sobbing. 'Please, please, saab. No more.' After the sixth, Sailesh was weeping fat tears. He turned his face away and Sartaj forced his chin around.

'Want to see more, Sailesh? You know what we do next?' Sartaj pointed at the thick white bar that ran from one wall to the other, close to the ceiling. 'We put Swami on the ghodi. We string him up on the bar, hands and feet, and give it to him with the patta. Show him the patta, Katekar.'

But Sailesh, looking at the thick length of the strap, whispered, 'No, don't.'

'What?'

'Please don't.'

'You want to end up here, Sailesh? Like Narain Swami?'

'No.'

'What's that?'

'No, saab. Please.'

'You will, you know. If you keep going like you are.'

'I won't, saab. I won't.'

Sartaj turned him around, both hands on his shoulders, and walked him towards the door. Narain Swami was still bent over, and flashing an upside-down grin. Outside, sitting on a metal chair with a Coke bottle clutched between his knees, Sailesh listened quietly to Sartaj. He sipped his Coke and Sartaj told him how people like Narain Swami ended up, beaten up, used up, addicted, in jail and out of it, wasted and tired and finally dead. All of it from not going to school and disobeying his mother.

'I'll go,' Sailesh said.

'Promise?'

'Promise,' Sailesh said and touched his throat.

'Better keep it,' Sartaj said. 'I hate people who break promises. I'll come after you.'

Sailesh nodded, and Sartaj led him out. At the station gate, the mother hung back. She came close to Sartaj and held up her fisted hands and opened them. In the right there was the twisted end of her pallu, and in the left a neatly folded hundred rupee note. 'Saab,' she said.

'No,' Sartaj said. 'No.'

She had oiled hair and reddened eyes. She smiled, barely, and held up her hands higher, and opened them further.

'No,' Sartaj said. He turned and walked away.

Katekar drove with an easy grace that found the gaps in the traffic with balletic timing. Sartaj pushed his seat back and drowsily watched him change gears and snake the Gypsy between trucks and autos with less than inches to spare. Sartaj had long ago learned to relax. He still anticipated a crash every few minutes, but he had learned from Katekar not to care. It was all confidence. You went forward, and someone always backed off at the last moment, and it was always the other gaandu. Katekar scratched at his crotch, growled 'Eh, bhenchod,' and stared down a double-decker driver, forced him to an absolute stop. They took a left, and Sartaj grinned at the wide swagger of the turn. 'Tell me, Katekar,' Sartaj said, 'who is your favourite hero?'

'Film hero?'

'What else?'

Katekar was embarrassed. 'When I do watch movies –' He jiggled the gear stick, and wiped a spot of dust from the windscreen. 'When there is some film on television,' – which was only all the time – 'I like to watch Dev Anand.'

'Dev Anand? Really?'

'Yes, sir.'

'But he's my favourite also.' Sartaj liked the old black-and-white ones where Dev Anand listed across the screen at an impossible angle, unbelievably dashing and sublimely suave. In his limp perfection there was an odd comfort, a nostalgia for a simplicity that Sartaj had never known. But he had expected Katekar to be an Amitabh Bachchan extremist, or an enthusiast of the muscle boys, Sunil Shetty or Akshay Kumar, who stood huge on the posters like some new gigantic and bulging species. 'Which Dev Anand film do you like best, Katekar?'

Katekar smiled, and tipped his head to the side. It was a perfect Dev Anand waggle. 'Why, sir, *Guide*, sir. Of course.'

Sartaj nodded. 'Of course.' *Guide* was in bright sixties colour, all the better to savour the intense and ecstatic love that Dev found for Waheeda, and the bitterness of his final tragedy. Sartaj had always found the long-drawn-out death of the guide almost unbearable to watch, all his loneliness and his withered love. But here was Katekar with his unexpected Dev-sympathies. Sartaj laughed, and sang, '*Gata rahe mera dil . . .*' Katekar bobbed his head, and when Sartaj forgot the lyrics after '*Tu hi meri manzil*,' he sang the next couplet, all the way until the antra. Now they were grinning at each other.

'They don't make movies like that any more,' Sartaj said.

'No, they don't, sir,' Katekar said. They had a clear stretch of road now, all the way up to the intersection at Karanth Chowk. They sped past clusters of apartment buildings to the right, ensconced behind a long grey wall, and on the left the untidy shacks of a basti opened doors directly on to the road. Katekar stopped at the light smoothly, coming from headlong velocity to an even halt.

'There are rumours about Parulkar Saab,' he said, wiping the inside of the steering wheel with his forefinger.

'What kind of rumours?'

'That he's ill, and is thinking of leaving the force.'

'What's his illness?'

'Heart.'

This was a good rumour, Sartaj thought, as rumours went. It might have been Parulkar himself who'd started this one, working from the basic operational principle that a secret was impossible to keep, that everybody would know something soon, and that it was better you should shape the wild theorizing that would take place, steer it and find advantage in it. 'I don't know about him leaving,' Sartaj said, 'but he is considering his options.'

'For his heart?'

'Something like that.'

Katekar nodded. He didn't seem too concerned. Sartaj knew that Katekar wasn't a great fan of Parulkar Saab, although he would never speak badly of him in front of Sartaj. He had said once, though, that he didn't trust Parulkar. He had offered no reasons, and Sartaj had put his suspicions down to enduring anti-Brahminism. Katekar didn't trust Brahmins, and he disliked Marathas for their middle-caste grabbiness

and greed and kshatriya pretensions. Sartaj could see that from Katekar's OBC point of view, there was justification enough for his prejudices. Look at history, he had said more than once. And Sartaj had always accepted, without question, that the backward castes had been treated horribly for interminable centuries. But he argued the caste politics of the past and present with Katekar, and challenged his conclusions. They had always left those dangerous topics amiably enough. Finally, Sartaj was just glad that Katekar's history hadn't included uppity Jatt Sikhs in any immediate way. They had known each other for a long time, and Sartaj had come to depend on him.

They pulled into a narrow parking space in front of the Sindoor Restaurant, Fine Indian and Continental Dining. Sartaj reached back behind his seat for a white Air India bag. He squeezed out past a Peugeot, past a paan-wallah at the gate, and then waited for a line of white-shirted executives to pass. From where he was standing, he could see, at a diagonal across the road, a large white sign with red lettering: 'Delite Dance Bar and Restaurant'. Sartaj's shirt was drenched, plastered to his back from the shoulders to the belt. Inside Sindoor, the decor was altogether wedding-shamiana, down to the band instruments behind the cashier's booth and the mehndi-frills around the edges of the menu. Katekar sat across from Sartaj in a four-customer booth, and they both lowered their heads gratefully under the heavy wash of cold air from a vent just above. A waiter brought two Pepsis, and they both gulped fast, but before they were half-way through, Shambhu Shetty was with them. He slid smoothly in next to Sartaj, neat and trim as always in blue jeans and a blue denim shirt.

'Hello, saab.'

'All good, Shambhu?'

'Yes, saab.' Shambhu shook hands with both of them. Sartaj had his usual moment of envy for the iron of Shambhu's grip, for his taut shoulders and his smooth, twenty-four-year-old face. Once, the year before, he had leaned back in the booth and raised his shirt and shown them his biscuited belly, the little triangles of muscle rising up to his chest. A waiter brought Shambhu a fresh pineapple juice. He never drank aerated drinks, or anything with sugar in it.

'Been trekking, Shambhu?' Katekar said.

'Going early next week, my friend. To Pindari glacier.'

On the red rexine of the seat, between Sartaj and Shambhu, there was a heavy brown envelope. Sartaj slid it into his lap, and raised the flap.

Inside, there were the usual ten stacks of hundred-rupee notes, stapled and rubber-banded by the bank into little ten-thousand-rupee bricks.

'Pindari?' Katekar said.

Shambhu was amazed. 'Boss, do you ever leave Bombay? Pindari is in the Himalayas. Above Nainital.'

'Ah,' Katekar said. 'Gone for how long?'

'Ten days. Don't worry, I'll be back by next time.'

Sartaj pulled the Air India bag from between his feet, unzipped it, and slid the envelope in. The station and the Delite Dance Bar had a monthly arrangement. Shambhu and he were merely representatives of the two organizations, dispensing and collecting. The money was not personal, and they had been seeing each other for a year and some months now, ever since Shambhu had taken over as manager of Delite, and they had grown to like each other. He was a good fellow, Shambhu, efficient, low-profile, and very fit. He was trying to persuade Katekar to climb mountains.

'It'll clear out your head,' Shambhu said. 'Why do you think the great yogis always did tapasya way up there? It's the air. It improves meditation, brings peace. It's good for you.'

Katekar raised his empty Pepsi glass. 'My tapasya is here, brother. Here only I find enlightenment every night.'

Shambhu laughed, and clinked glasses with Katekar. 'Don't burn us with your fierce austerities, O master. I'll have to send apsaras to distract you.'

They giggled together, and Sartaj had to smile at the thought of Katekar seated cross-legged on a deerskin, effulgent with pent-up energy. He tugged at the zipper on the bag, and nudged Shambhu with his elbow. 'Listen, Shambhu-rishi,' Sartaj said. 'We have to do a raid.'

'What, again? We just had one not five weeks ago.'

'About seven, I think. Almost two months. But, Shambhu, the government's changed. Things have changed.' Things had indeed changed. The Rakshaks were the new government in the state. What had once been a muscular right-wing organization, proud of its disciplined and looming cadres, was now trying to become a party of statesmen. As state ministers and cabinet secretaries, they had toned down their ranting nationalism, but they would not give up their battle against cultural degeneration and western corruption. 'They promised to reform the city.'

'Yes,' Shambhu said. 'That bastard Bipin Bhonsle. All those speeches about cleaning up corruption since he became minister. And what's all

that noise about protecting Indian culture he's been throwing around lately? What are we but Indian? And aren't we protecting our culture also? Aren't the girls doing Indian dances?'

They were doing that exactly, spinning under disco lights to filmi music, quite respectably covered up in cholis and saris, while men held up fans of twenty and fifty-rupee notes for them to pick from, but the Delite Dance Bar as a temple of culture was an audacity that silenced Sartaj and Katekar completely. Then they both said 'Shambhu' together, and he held up his hands. 'Okay, okay. When?'

'Next week,' Sartaj said.

'Do it before I leave. Monday.'

'Fine. Midnight, then.' Under the new edict, the bars were supposed to close at eleven-thirty.

'Oh, come, come, saab. You're taking the rotis from the mouths of poor girls. That's too-too early.'

'Twelve-thirty.'

'At least one, please. Have some mercy. As it is, that's half the night's earning gone.'

'One, then. But you better still have some girls there when we come in. We'll have to arrest some.'

'That bastard Bhonsle. Close down the bars, but what is this new shosha of arresting girls? Why? What for? All they're trying to do is make a living.'

'The new shosha is ruthless discipline and honesty, Shambhu. Five girls in the van. Ask for volunteers. They can give whatever names they like. And it'll be short. Home by three, three-thirty. We'll drop them.'

Shambhu nodded. He did really seem to like his girls, and they him, and from what Sartaj heard, he never tried to push his take of the dancers' tips beyond the standard sixty per cent. From the really popular ones he took only forty. A happy girl is a better earner, he had once said to Sartaj. He was a good businessman. Sartaj had great hopes for him.

'Okay, boss,' Shambhu said. 'Will be organized. No problem.' Outside, he walked in front of the Gypsy as they backed out into the thickening traffic, grinning and grinning.

'What?' Sartaj said.

'Saab, you know, if I can tell the girls you are coming on the raid, you your very own self, I bet I'll get ten volunteers.'

'Listen, chutiya,' Sartaj said.

'Twelve even, if you escorted them in the van,' Shambhu said. 'That

Manika asks about you all the time. So brave he is, she says. So handsome.'

Katekar was very serious. 'I know her. Nice home-loving girl.'

'Fair-complexioned,' Shambhu said. 'Good at cooking, embroidery.'

'Bastards,' Sartaj said. 'Bhenchods. Come on, Katekar, drive. We're late.'

Katekar drove, making no attempt to hide a smile as big as Shambhu's. A swarm of sparrows dipped crazily out of the sky, grazing the bonnet of the Gypsy. It was almost evening.

There was a murder waiting at the station for them. Majid Khan, who was the senior inspector on duty, said it had been half an hour since the call had come in from Navnagar, from the Bengali Bura. 'There's nobody else here to take it,' he said. 'Falls to you, Sartaj.'

Sartaj nodded. A murder case three hours before the end of the shift was something that the other officers would be happy to have missed, unless it was especially interesting. The Bengali Bura in Navnagar was very poor, and dead bodies there were just dead, devoid of any enlivening possibilities of professional praise, or press, or money.

'Have a cup of tea, Sartaj,' Majid said. He flipped through the stacks of Delite money, and then put them in the drawer on the right-hand side of the desk. Later he would move the money to the locker of the Godrej cupboard behind his desk, where the larger part of the operating budget of the station was kept. It was all cash, and none of it came from state funds, which weren't enough to pay for the paper the investigating officers wrote the panchanamas on, or the vehicles that they drove, or the petrol they used, or even for the cups of tea that they and a thousand visitors drank. Some of the Delite money Majid would keep, as part of his perquisites as senior inspector, and some of it would be passed on, upwards.

'No, I'd better not,' Sartaj said. 'Better get out there. Sooner there, sooner to sleep.'

Majid was stroking his moustache, which was a flamboyant handlebar like his army father's. He maintained it with faithful indulgence, with foreign unguents and delicate pruning, in the face of all mockery. 'Your bhabhi was remembering you,' he said. 'When are you coming to dinner?'

Sartaj stood up. 'Tell her I said thanks, Majid. And next week, yes? Wednesday? Khima, yes?' Majid's wife was actually not a very good cook, but her khima was not offensive, and so Sartaj professed a great passion for it. Since his divorce the officers' wives had been feeding him regularly, and he suspected that there was other scheming afoot. 'I'm off.'

'Right,' Majid said. 'Wednesday. I'll clear it with the general and let you know.'

In the jeep, Sartaj considered Majid and Rehana, happy couple. At their table, eating their food, he saw the economy of gesture between them, how each simple sentence contained whole histories of years together, and he watched Farah of sixteen and her exasperated teasing of Imtiaz, thirteen and impatient and sure of himself, and Sartaj was part of the easeful sprawl on the carpet afterwards, as they watched some favourite game show. They wanted him there, and most often he couldn't stop wanting to leave. He went each time eagerly, glad to be in a home, with a family, with family. But their happiness made his chest ache. He felt that he was getting used to being alone, he must be, but he also knew he would never be completely reconciled to it. I'm monstrous, he thought, not this and not that, and then he glanced around guiltily to the back of the Gypsy, where four constables sat in identical poses, their two rifles and two lathis hugged close to the chest. They were looking, all of them, at the dirty metal flooring, swaying gently one way and then the other. The sky behind was yellow and drifting rivulets of blue.

The dead man's father was waiting for them at the edge of Navnagar, below the gentle slope covered from nullah to road with hovels. He was small and nondescript, a man who had spent a lifetime effacing himself. Sartaj stepped after him through the uneven lanes. Although they were going up the slope, Sartaj had a feeling of descent. Everything was smaller, closer, the pathways narrow between the uneven walls of cardboard and cloth and wood, the tumbling roofs covered with plastic. They were well into the Bengali Bura, which was the very poorest part of Navnagar. Most of the shacks were less than a man's standing height, and the citizens of the Bengali Bura sat in their doorways, tattered and ragged, and the barefooted children ran before the police party. On Katekar's face there was furious contempt for jhopadpatti-dwellers who let dirt and filth and garbage pile up not two feet from their own doors, who let their little daughters squat to make a mess exactly where their sons played. These are the people who ruin Mumbai, he had said often to Sartaj, these ganwars who come from Bihar or Andhra or maderchod Bangladesh and live like animals here. These were indeed from maderchod Bangladesh, Sartaj thought, although they all no doubt had papers that said they were from Bengal, that each was a bona fide Indian citizen. Anyway, there was nowhere in their watery delta to send them back to, not half a bigha of land that was theirs, that would hold them all. They came in their thou-

sands, to work as servants and on the roads and on the construction sites. And one of them was dead here.

He had fallen across a doorway, chest inside, feet splayed out. He was young, not yet out of his teens. He wore expensive keds, good jeans and a blue collarless shirt. The forearms were slashed deep, to the bone, which was common in assaults with choppers, when the victim typically tried to ward off the blows. The cuts were clean, and deeper at one end than the other. The left hand had only a small oozing stump where the little finger had been, and Sartaj knew there was no use looking for it. There were rats about. Inside the shack it was hard to see, hard to make out anything through the buzzing darkness. Katekar clicked on an Eveready torch, and in the circle of light Sartaj flapped the flies away. There were cuts on the chest and forehead, and a good strong one had gone nearly through the neck. He might have already been walking dead from the other wounds, but that one had killed him, dropped him down with a thud. The floor was dark, wet mud.

'Name?' Sartaj said.

'His, saab?' the father said. He was facing away from the door, trying not to look at his son.

'Yes.'

'Shamsul Shah.'

'Yours?'

'Nurul, saab.'

'They used choppers?'

'Yes, saab.'

'How many of them?'

'Two, saab.'

'You know them?'

'Bazil Chaudhary and Faraj Ali, saab. They live close by. They are friends of my son.'

Katekar was scribbling in a notebook, his lips moving tightly with the unfamiliar names.

'Where are you from?' Sartaj said.

'Village Duipara, Chapra block, district Nadia, West Bengal, saab.' It came out all in a little rush, and Sartaj knew he had rehearsed it many times at night, had studied it on the papers he had bought as soon as he had reached Bombay. A murder case involving Bangladeshis was unusual because they usually kept their heads low, worked, tried to make a living, and tried very hard to avoid attracting attention.

'And the others? Also from there?'

'Their parents are from Chapra.'

'Same village?'

'Yes, saab.' He had that Urdu-sprinkled Bangladeshi diction that Sartaj had learnt to recognize. He was lying about the country the village was in, that was all. The rest was all true. The fathers of the victim and the murderers had probably grown up together, splashing in the same rivulets.

'Are they related to you, those two?'

'No, saab.'

'You saw this?'

'No, saab. Some people shouted for me to come.'

'Which people?'

'I don't know, saab.' From down the lane there was a muttering, a rise and fall of voices, but there was nobody to be seen. None of the neighbours wanted to be caught up in police business.

'Whose house is this?'

'Ahsan Naeem, saab. But he wasn't here. Only his mother was in the house, she is with the neighbours now.'

'She saw this?'

Nurul Shah shrugged. Nobody wanted to be a witness, but the old woman would not be able to avoid it. Perhaps she would plead shortness of vision.

'Your son was running?'

'Yes, saab, from over there. They were sitting in Faraj's house.'

So the dead boy had been trying to get home. He must have tired, and tried to get into a house. The door was a piece of tin hung off the bamboo vertical with three pieces of wire. Sartaj stepped away from the body, away from the heavy smell of blood and wet clay. 'Why did they do this? What happened?'

'They all had been drinking together, saab. They had a fight.'

'What about?'

'I don't know. Saab, will you catch them?'

'We'll write it down,' Sartaj said.

At eleven Sartaj stood under a pounding stream of cold water, his face held up to it. The pressure in the pipes was very good, so he lingered under the shower, moving the sting from one shoulder to the other. He was thinking, despite himself and the rush of water in his ears, about

Kamble and money. When Sartaj had been married, he had taken a certain pride in never accepting cash, but after the divorce he had realized how much Megha's money had protected him from the world, from the necessities of the streets he lived in. A nine-hundred-rupee monthly transportation allowance hardly paid for three days of fuel for his Bullet, and of the many notes he dropped into the hands of informants every day, maybe one or two came from his minuscule khabari allowance, and there was nothing left for the investigation of a young man's death in Navnagar. So Sartaj took cash now, and was grateful for it. Sala Sardar is no longer the sala of rich bastards, so he's woken up: he knew the officers and men said this with satisfaction, and they were right. He had woken up. He took a breath and moved his head so that the solid thrust at the centre of the flow pummelled him between the eyes. The lashing noise of it filled his head.

Outside, in his drawing room, it was very quiet. That there was no sleep yet, however tired he was and despite his yearning for it, he knew. He lay on his sofa, with a bottle of Royal Challenge whisky and one of water on the table next to him. He drank in accurate little sips, timed regularly. He allowed himself two tall glasses at the end of working days, and had been resisting the urge recently to go to three. He lay with his head away from the window, so he could watch the sky, lit still by the city. To the left was a long grey sliver, the building next door, turned by the window frame into a crenellated abstraction, and to the right what was called darkness, what disintegrated softly under the eye into an amorphous and relentless yellow illumination. Sartaj knew where it came from, what made it, but as always he was awed by it. He remembered playing cricket on a Dadar street, the fast *pok* of the tennis ball and the faces of friends, and the feeling that he could hold the whole city in his heart, from Colaba to Bandra. Now it was too vast, escaped from him, each family adding to the next and the next until there was that cool and endless glow, impossible to know, or escape. Had it really existed, that small empty street, clean for the children's cricket games and dabba-ispies and tikkar-billa, or had he stolen it from some grainy black-and-white footage? Given it to himself in gift, the memory of a happier place?

Sartaj stood up. Leaning against the side of the window, he finished the whisky, tipping the glass far over to get the last drop. He leaned out, trying to find a breeze. The horizon was hazy and far, with lights burning hard underneath. He looked down, and saw a glint in the car park far below, a piece of glass, mica. He thought suddenly how easy it would be

to keep leaning over, tipping until the weight carried him. He saw himself falling, the white kurta flapping frantically, the bare chest and stomach underneath, the nada trailing, a blue-and-white bathroom rubber chappal tumbling, the feet rotating, and before a whole circle was complete the crack of the skull, a quick crack and then silence.

Sartaj stepped back from the window. He put the glass down on the coffee table, very carefully. Where did that come from? He said it aloud, 'Where did that come from?' Then he sat on the floor, and found that it was painful to bend his knees. His thighs were aching. He put both his hands on the table, palms down, and looked at the white wall opposite. He was quiet.

Katekar was eating left-over Sunday mutton. There was a muscle in his back, to the right and low, that was fluttering, but there was the thick, hot consolation of the mutton with its simple richness of potato and rice, and the stinging pleasure of the green-chilli pickle – with his lips burning he could forget the spasms, or at least ignore them.

'More?' Shalini said.

He shook his head. He settled back in his chair and burped. 'You have some,' he said.

Shalini shook her head. 'I ate,' she said. She was able to resist mutton very late at night, but it was not this alone that kept her arms as thin as the day they had married, nineteen years ago almost to the day. Katekar watched her as she turned the knob on the stove to the left with a single clean movement, high burn to off. There was a pleasing accuracy in her movements as she scoured and stacked the utensils for the wash tomorrow, a clean efficiency that lived very functionally in the very small space that was her. She was a spare woman, inside and out, and she fed his appetites.

'Come, Shalu,' he said, wiping his mouth decisively. 'It's late. Let's sleep.'

He watched as she wiped the tabletop, hard, with her glass bangles clinking. The kholi was small but very clean on the inside. When she had finished, he unlatched the folding legs to the table and swung it up against the wall. The two chairs went in the corners. While she organized the kitchen, he unrolled two chatais where the table had been. Then one mattress on her chatai, and a pillow, and a pillow for himself, but his back would tolerate only the hard ground, and so then the beds were ready. He took a glass of water from the matka, and a box of Monkey tooth pow-

der, and went outside and down the lane, stepping carefully. There was the crowded huddle of kholis, mostly pucca, with electrical wire strung over the roofs and through doorways. The municipal tap was dry at this hour, of course, but there was a puddle of water under the brick wall behind it. Katekar leaned on the wall, dabbed some tooth powder on his forefinger and cleaned his teeth, conserving the water precisely, so that the last mouthful he spat out left his mouth clean.

Shalini was lying on her side when he came into the kholi. 'Did you go?' she said, still facing away. He put the glass down on a shelf in the kitchen. 'Go,' Shalini said. 'Or you'll wake up in an hour.'

At the other end of the lane there was a turn, then another, and then a sudden opening out into an open slope falling to the highway. There was a dense smell rising from the ground, and Katekar squatted into it, and surprised himself with the furious stream that he sent down the tilt, and he sighed and watched the lights approach and vanish below. He came back to the kholi, clicked off the light bulb, took off his banian and pants and lowered himself to his chatai. He lay flat on his back, right leg spread wide, left arm and thigh against Shalini's mattress. After a moment she shifted her weight and settled slowly against him. He felt her shoulder blade on his chest, her hip against the rise of his stomach. She sank into him and he was still. Now, with the quiet and his own silence he could hear, on the other side of the black sheet that divided the kholi into two, the twinned breathing of his sons. They were nine and fifteen, Mohit and Rohit. Katekar listened to his family, and after a while, even in the darkness, he could see the shape of his home. On his side of the sheet there was a small colour television on a shelf, and next to it pictures of his parents and Shalini's parents, all garlanded, and also a large gold-framed photograph of the boys at the zoo. There was a Lux soap calendar turned to June and Madhubala. Under it, a green phone with a lock on the dial. At the foot of the chatais, a whirring table-fan. Behind his head, he knew, there was a two-in-one and his collection of tapes, songs from old Marathi films. Two black trunks stacked on top of each other. Clothes hanging on hooks, his shirt and pants on a hanger. Shalini's shelf with its brass figures of Ambabai and Bhavani, and a garlanded picture of Sai Baba. And the kitchen, with racks all the way to the roof and rows and rows of gleaming steel utensils. And then on the other side of the black sheet, the shelves with schoolbooks, two posters of Sachin Tendulkar at bat, one small desk piled high with pens and notebooks and old magazines. A metal cupboard with two exactly equal compartments.

Katekar smiled. At night he liked to survey his possessions, to feel them solid and real under his heavy-lidded gaze. He lay poised on some twilight border, still far from sleep, the twitch moving up and down his back but not able to travel across the mass of his body to Shalini, and the things he had earned from life encircled him, and he knew how fragile this fortification was, but it was comfortable. In it he was calm. He felt the bulk of his arms and legs lighten, and he was floating in the streaming air, his eyes closed. He slept.

With the sleek little television remote in his hand, Sartaj flicked fast from a car race in Detroit to a dubbed American show about women detectives to a slug, slick and brown, in some huge winding river and then to a filmi countdown show. Two heroines in red miniskirts, smiling and curvy and neither more than eighteen, danced on top of the arches of the vine-wrapped ruin of a palace. Sartaj clicked again. Against a trembling background of news-file clips cut fast, a blonde VJ chattered fast about a bhangra singer from London and his new album. The VJ was Indian, but her name was Kit and her glittering blonde hair hung to her bare shoulders. She thrust a hand at the camera and now suddenly she was in a huge mirrored room filled from end to end with dancers moving together and happy. Kit laughed and the camera moved close to her face and Sartaj saw the lovely angular planes of her face and felt the delicious contentment of her slim legs. He snapped off the television and stood up.

Sartaj walked stiffly to the window. Beyond the fizzing yellow lamps in the compound of the neighbouring building, there was the darkness of the sea, and far ahead, a sprinkling of bright blue and orange that was Bandra. With a good pair of binoculars you could even see Nariman Point, not so far across the sea but at least an hour away on empty night-time roads, and very far from Zone 13. Sartaj felt a sudden ache in his chest. It was as if two blunt stones were grinding against each other, creating not fire but a dull, steady glow, a persistent and unquiet desire. It rose into his throat and his decision was made.

Twelve minutes of fast driving took him through the underpass and on to the highway. The open stretches of road and the wheel slipping easily through his fingers were exhilarating, and he laughed at the speed. But in Tardeo the traffic was backed up between the brightly-lit shops, and Sartaj was suddenly angry at himself, and wanted to turn around and go back. The question came to him with the drumming of his fingers on the dashboard: What are you doing? What are you doing? Where are you

going in your ex-wife's car which she left you out of kindness, which might fall to pieces under your gaand on this pitted horror of a road? But it was too late, the journey half-done even though the first glad momentum was gone, and he drove on. By the time he pulled up, parked and walked to the Cave, it was almost one and now he was very tired. But here he was and he could see the crowd around the back door, which was the one open after closing time at eleven-thirty.

They parted for him and let him through. He was older, yes, maybe even much older, but there was no reason for the curious stares and the silence as he stepped through. They were dressed in loose shiny shirts, shorter dresses than he had ever seen, and they made him very nervous. He fumbled at the door, and finally a girl with a silver ring through her lower lip reached out and held it open for him. By the time it occurred to him that he should thank her, he was already inside and the door was closing. He squared his shoulders and found a corner at the bar. With a draught beer in his hand, he had something to do, and so he turned to face the room. He was hedged in close, and it was hard to see more than a few feet, and everywhere they were talking animatedly, leaning close to each other and shouting against the music. He drank his beer quickly, as if he were interested in it. Then his mug was empty and he ordered another one. There were women on all sides, and he looked at each in turn, trying to imagine himself with each one. No, that was too far ahead, so he tried to think of what he would say to any one of them. Hello. No, Hi. Hi, I'm Sartaj. Try to speak English only. And with a smile. Then what? He tried to listen to the conversation on his left. They were talking about music, an American band that he had never heard of, but that was only to be expected, and a girl with her back to Sartaj said, 'The last cut was too slow,' and Sartaj lost the response from the ponytailed boy facing her, but the other girl with the small upturned nose said, 'It was cool, bitch.' Sartaj upended his mug and wiped his mouth. The desire that had brought him across the city had vanished suddenly, leaving a dark residue of bitterness. It was very late and he was finished.

He paid quickly and left. There was a different lot near the door now, but again with the same silence, the same stares, the same beaded necklaces and piercings and practised dishevelment, and he understood that his elegant blue trousers marked him fatally as an outsider. By the time he reached the end of the lane he had no confidence in his white shirt with the button-down collar either. He navigated the right turn on to the main road carefully, stepping over two boys sleeping on the pavement, and

walked towards the Crossroads Mall, where he had parked. His feet fell soundlessly on the littered pavement and the shuttered shop doors loomed above. I can't be this drunk on two beers, he thought, but the lampposts seemed very far away and he wanted very much to shut his eyes.

Sartaj went home. He fell into his bed. Now he was able to sleep, it slid heavily on to his shoulders like a choking black landslide. And then instantly it was morning and the shrill grinding of the telephone was in his ear. He groped his way to it.

'Sartaj Singh?' The voice was a man's, peremptory and commanding.

'Yes?'

'Do you want Ganesh Gaitonde?'

Siege in Kailashpada

'You're never going to get in here,' the voice of Gaitonde said over the speaker after they had been working on the door for three hours. They had tried a cold chisel on the lock first, but what had looked like brown wood from a few feet away was in fact some kind of painted metal, and although it turned white under the blade and rang like a sharp temple bell, the door didn't give. Then they had moved to the lintels with tools borrowed from a road crew, but even when the road men took over, wielding the sledgehammers with long, expert swings and huffing breaths, the concrete bounced their blows off blithely, and the Sony speaker next to the door laughed at them. 'You're behind the times,' Gaitonde crackled.

'If I'm not getting in, you're not getting out,' Sartaj said.

'What? I can't hear you.'

Sartaj stepped up to the door. The building was a precise cube, white with green windows, on a large plot of land in Kailashpada, which was on the still-developing northern edge of Zone 13. Here, among the heavy machinery groping at swamp, edging Bombay out farther and wider, Sartaj had come to arrest the great Ganesh Gaitonde, gangster, boss of the G-Company and wily and eternal survivor.

'How long are you going to stay in there, Gaitonde?' Sartaj said, craning his neck up. The deep, round video eye of the camera above the door swivelled from side to side and then settled on him.

'You're looking tired, Sardar-ji,' Gaitonde said.

'I am tired,' Sartaj said.

'It's very hot today,' Gaitonde said sympathetically. 'I don't know how you sardars manage under those turbans.'

There were two Sikh commissioners on the force, but Sartaj was the only Sikh inspector in the whole city, and so was used to being identified by his turban and beard. He was known also for the cut of his pants, which he had tailored at a very film-starry boutique in Bandra, and also for his profile, which had once been featured by *Modern Woman* magazine in 'The City's Best-Looking Bachelors'. Katekar, on the other hand,

had a large paunch that sat on top of his belt like a suitcase, and a perfectly square face and very thick hands, and now he came around the corner of the building and stood wide-legged, with his hands in his pockets. He shook his head.

'Where are you going, Sardar-ji?' Gaitonde said.

'Just some matters I have to take care of,' Sartaj said. He and Katekar walked to the corner together, and now Sartaj could see the ladder they had going up to the ventilator.

'That's not a ventilator,' Katekar said. 'It only looks like one. There's just concrete behind it. All the windows are like that. What is this place, sir?'

'I don't know,' Sartaj said. It was somehow deeply satisfying that even Katekar, Mumbai native and practitioner of a very superior Bhuleshwar-bred cynicism, was startled by an impregnable white cube suddenly grown in Kailashpada, with a black, swivel-mounted Sony video camera above the door. 'I don't know. And he sounds very strange, you know. Sad almost.'

'What I have heard about him, he enjoys life. Good food, lots of women.'

'Today he's sad.'

'But what's he doing here in Kailashpada?'

Sartaj shrugged. The Gaitonde they had read about in police reports and in the newspapers dallied with bejewelled starlets, bankrolled politicians and bought them and sold them – his daily skim from Bombay's various criminal dhandas was said to be greater than annual corporate incomes, and his name was used to frighten the recalcitrant. Gaitonde Bhai said so, you said, and the stubborn saw reason, and all roads were smoothed, and there was peace. But he had been in exile for many years – on the Indonesian coast in a gilded yacht, it was rumoured – far but only a phone call away. Which meant that he might as well have been next door, or as it turned out, amazingly enough, in dusty Kailashpada. The early-morning man with the tip-off had hung up abruptly, and Sartaj had jumped out of bed and called the station while pulling on his pants, and the police party had come roaring to Kailashpada in a hasty caravan bristling with rifles. 'I don't know,' Sartaj said. 'But now that he's here, he's ours.'

'He's a prize, yes, sir,' Katekar said. He had that densely snobbish look he always assumed when he thought Sartaj was being naïve. 'But you're sure you want to make him yours? Why not wait for someone senior to arrive?'

'They'll be a long time getting here. They have other business going on.' Sartaj was hoping ardently that no commissioner would arrive to seize his prize. 'And anyway, Gaitonde's already mine, only he doesn't know it.' He turned to walk back towards the door. 'All right. Cut off his power.'

'Sardar-ji,' Gaitonde said, 'are you married?'

'No.'

'I was married once –'

And his voice stopped short, as if cut by a knife.

Sartaj turned from the door. Now it was a matter of waiting, and an hour or two under a hot June sun would turn the unventilated, unpowered building into a furnace that even Gaitonde, who was a graduate of many jails and footpaths and slums, would find as hard to bear as the corridors of hell. And Gaitonde had been lately very successful and thus a little softened, so perhaps it would be closer to an hour. But Sartaj had taken only two steps when he felt a deep hum rising through his toes and into his knees, and Gaitonde was back.

'What, you thought it would be so easy?' Gaitonde said. 'Just a power cut? What, you think I'm a fool?'

So there was a generator somewhere in the cube. Gaitonde had been the first man in any of the city's jails, perhaps the first man in all of Mumbai, to own a cellular phone. With it, safe in his cell, he had run the essential trades of drugs, matka, smuggling and construction. 'No, I don't think you're a fool,' Sartaj said. 'This, this building is very impressive. Who designed it for you?'

'Never mind who designed it, Sardar-ji. The question is, how are you going to get in?'

'Why don't you just come out? It'll save us all a lot of time. It's really hot out here, and I'm getting a headache.'

There was a silence, filled with the murmuring of the spectators who were gathering at the end of the lane.

'I can't come out.'

'Why not?'

'I'm alone. I'm only me by myself.'

'I thought you had friends everywhere, Gaitonde. Everyone everywhere is a friend of Gaitonde Bhai's, isn't it? In the government, in the press, even in the police force? How is it then that you are alone?'

'Do you know I get applications, Sardar-ji? I probably get more applications than you police chutiyas. Don't believe me? Here, I'll read you one. Hold on. Here's one. This one's from Wardha. Here it is.'

'Gaitonde!'

'"Respected Shri Gaitonde." Hear that, Sardar-ji? "Respected." So then . . . "I am a twenty-two-year-old young man living in Wardha, Maharashtra. Currently I am doing my MCom, having passed my BCom exam with seventy-one per cent marks. I am also known in my college as the best athlete. I am captain of the cricket team." Then there's a lot of nonsense about how bold and strong he is, how everyone in town's scared of him. OK, then he goes on: "I am sure that I can be of use to you. I have for long followed your daring exploits in our newspapers, which print very often these stories of your great power and powerful politics. You are the biggest man in Mumbai. Many times when my friends get together, we talk about your famous adventures. Please, Shri Gaitonde, I respectfully submit to you my vita, and some small clippings about me. I will do whatever work you ask. I am very poor, Shri Gaitonde. I fully believe that you will give me a chance to make a life. Yours faithfully, Amit Shivraj Patil." Hear that, Sardar-ji?'

'Yes, Gaitonde,' Sartaj said, 'I do. He sounds like a fine recruit.'

'He sounds like a lodu, Sardar-ji,' Gaitonde said. 'I wouldn't hire him to wash my cars. But he would do well as a policeman.'

'I'm getting tired of this, Gaitonde,' Sartaj said. Katekar had his shoulders tensed, he was glowering at Sartaj, wanting him to curse Gaitonde, to shut him up by telling him exactly what kind of bhenchod he was, that they were going to string him up and shove a lathi up his filthy gaand. But, it seemed to Sartaj, to shout abuse at an unhinged man inside an impregnable cube would be spectacularly useless, if momentarily satisfying.

Gaitonde laughed bitterly. 'Are your feelings hurt, saab? Should I be more respectful? Should I tell you about the wonderful and astonishing feats of the police, our defenders who give their lives in service without a thought for their own profit?'

'Gaitonde?'

'What?'

'I'll be back. I need a cold drink.'

Gaitonde became avuncular, affectionate. 'Yes, yes, of course you do. Hot out there.'

'For you also? A Thums Up?'

'I've a fridge in here, chikniya. Just because you're so fair and so hero-like good looking doesn't mean you're extra smart. You get your drink.'

'I will. I'll be back.'

'What else would you do, Sardar-ji? Go, go.'

Sartaj walked down the street, and Katekar fell in beside him. The cracked black tarmac swam and shimmered in the heat. The street had emptied, the spectators bored by the lack of explosions and bullets and hungry for lunch. Between Bhagwan Tailors and Trimurti Music, they found the straightforwardly named Best Cafe, which had tables scattered under a neem tree and rattling black floor fans. Sartaj pulled desperately at a Coke, and Katekar sipped at fresh lime and soda, only slightly sweet. He was trying to lose weight. From where they sat they could see Gaitonde's white bunker. What was Gaitonde doing back in the city? Who was the informant who had given him to Sartaj? All these were questions for later. First catch the man, Sartaj thought, then worry about why and when and how, and he took another sip.

'Let's blow it up,' Katekar said.

'With what?' Sartaj said. 'And that'll kill him for sure.'

Katekar grinned. 'Yes, sir. So what, sir?'

'And what would the intelligence boys say?'

'Sahib, excuse me, but the intelligence boys are mainly useless bhadwas. Why didn't they know he was building this thing?'

'Now, that would have been very-very intelligent, wouldn't it?' Sartaj said. He leaned back in his chair and stretched. 'You think we can find a bulldozer?'

Sartaj had a metal chair brought to the front of the bunker, and he sat on it, patting his face with a cold, wet towel. He was sleepy. The video camera was unmoving and silent.

'Ay, Gaitonde!' Sartaj said. 'You there?'

The camera made its very small buzzing machine noise, nosed about blindly and found Sartaj. 'I'm here,' Gaitonde said. 'Did you get a drink? Shall I phone and order something for you to eat?'

Sartaj thought suddenly that Gaitonde had learned that big voice from the movies, from Prithviraj Kapoor in a smoking jacket being magnanimous to the lowly. 'I'm fine. Why don't you order something for yourself?'

'I don't want food.'

'You'll stay hungry?' Sartaj was trying to calculate the chances of starving Gaitonde out. But he remembered that Gandhi-ji had lasted for weeks on water and juice. The bulldozer would arrive in an hour, an hour and a half, at most.

'There's plenty of food in here, enough for months. And I've been hungry before,' Gaitonde said. 'More hungry than you could imagine.'

'Listen, it's too hot out here,' Sartaj said. 'Come out and back at the station you can tell me all about how hungry you were.'

'I can't come out.'

'I'll take care of you, Gaitonde. There are all sorts of people trying to kill you, I know. But no danger, I promise. This is not going to turn into an encounter. You come out now and we'll be back at the station in six minutes. You'll be absolutely safe. From there you can call your friends. Safe, ekdum safe. You have my promise.'

But Gaitonde wasn't interested in promises. 'Back when I was very young, I left the country for the first time. It was on a boat, you know. Those days, that was the business: get on a boat, go to Dubai, go to Bahrain, come back with gold biscuits. I was excited, because I had never left the country before. Not even to Nepal, you understand. Okay, Sardar-ji, establishing shot: there was the small boat, five of us on it, sea, sun, all that kind of chutmaari atmosphere. Salim Kaka was the leader, a six-foot Pathan with a long beard, good man with a sword. Then there was Mathu, narrow and thin everywhere, always picking his nose, supposed to be a tough boy. Me, nineteen and didn't know a thing. And there was Gaston, the owner of the boat, and Pascal, his assistant, two small dark men from somewhere in the south. It was Salim Kaka's deal, his contacts there, and his money that hired the boat, and his experience, when to go out, when to come back, everything was his. Mathu and I were his boys, behind him all the time. Got it?'

Katekar rolled his eyes. Sartaj said, 'Yes, Salim Kaka was the leader, you and Mathu were the guns and Gaston and Pascal sailed the boat. Got it.'

Katekar propped himself against the wall next to the door and spilled paan masala into his palm. The speaker gleamed a hard, metallic silver. Sartaj shut his eyes.

Gaitonde went on. 'I had never seen such a huge sky before. Purple and gold and purple. Mathu was combing his hair again and again into a Dev Anand puff. Salim Kaka sat on the deck with us. He had huge feet, square and blunt, each cracked like a piece of wood, and a beard that was smooth and red like a flame. That night he told us about his first job, robbing an angadia couriering cash from Surat to Mumbai. They caught the angadia as he got off the bus, tossed him in the back of an Ambassador and went roaring away to an empty chemical godown in the industrial estates at Vikhroli. In the godown they stripped him of his shirt, his ban-

ian, his pants, everything, and found sewn inside the pants, over the thighs, four lakhs in five-hundred-rupee notes. Also a money belt with sixteen thousand in it. He was standing there baby-naked, his big paunch shaking, holding his hands over his shrunken lauda, as they left. Clear?'

Sartaj opened his eyes. 'A courier, they got him, they made some money. So what?'

'So the story's not over yet, smart Sardar-ji. Salim Kaka was closing the door, but then he turned around and came back. He caught the guy by the throat, lifted him up and around and put a knee between his legs. "Come on, Salim Pathan," someone yelled to him. "This is no time to take a boy's gaand." And Salim Kaka, who was groping the angadia's bum, said, "Sometimes if you squeeze a beautiful ass, as you would a peach, it reveals all the secrets of the world," and he held up a little brown silk packet which the angadia had taped behind his balls. In it were a good dozen of the highest-quality diamonds, agleam and aglitter, which they fenced the next week at fifty per cent, and Salim Kaka's cut alone was one lakh, and this was in the days when a lakh meant something. "But," Salim Kaka said, "the lakh was the least of it, money is only money." But after that he was known as a lustrous talent, a sharp lad. "I'll squeeze you like a peach," he'd say, cocking a craggy eyebrow, and the poor unfortunate at the receiving end would spill cash, cocaine, secrets, anything.

'"How did you know with the angadia, Salim Kaka?" I asked, and Salim Kaka said, "It is very simple. I looked at him from the door and he was still afraid. When I had my knife at his throat he had said to me in a child's little trembling voice, 'Please don't kill me, my baap.' I hadn't killed him, he was still alive and holding his lauda, the money was gone, but it wasn't his, we were leaving, so why was he still afraid? A man who is afraid is a man who still has something to lose."'

'Very impressive,' Sartaj said. He shifted in his chair, and regretted it immediately as his shoulder blade found a curve of heated metal. He adjusted his turban and tried to breathe slowly, evenly. Katekar was fanning himself with a folded afternoon newspaper, his eyes abstracted and his forehead slack, while into the slow stirring of the air came Gaitonde's voice with its cool electronic hiss.

'I resolved to be sharply watchful for ever after, for I was ambitious. That night I laid my body down along the bow, as close as I could get to the onrushing water, and I dreamed. Did I tell you I was nineteen? I was nineteen and I made myself stories about cars and a high house and myself entering a party and flashbulbs popping.

'Mathu came and sat beside me. He lit a cigarette for himself and gave me one. I drew hard on it like him. In the dark I could see the puff of his hair, his haggard shoulders, and I tried to remember his features, which were too bony to be anywhere close to Dev Anand's, but still every day he stroked talcum powder on to that pointy rat's face and tried. I felt suddenly kindly towards him. "Isn't this beautiful?" I said. He laughed. "Beautiful? We could drown," he said, "and nobody would know what happened to us. We would disappear, *phat*, gone." His cigarette made spirals in the dark. "What do you mean?" I asked. "Oh, you pitiful dehati idiot," he said. "Don't you know? Nobody knows we are out here." "But," I said, "Salim Kaka's people know, his boss knows." I could feel him laughing at me, his knee jogging against my shoulder. "No, they don't." He was leaning closer to me, whispering, and I could smell his banian and see the pale phosphorescence of his eyes. "Nobody knows, he didn't tell his boss. Don't you get it? This is his own deal. Why do you think we're on this little khatara of a boat, not a trawler? Why do you think we are with him, one dehati smelling of farm dirt and a very-very junior member of the company? Eh? Why? This is Salim Kaka's own little operation. He wants to go independent, and to go independent, what do you need? Capital. That's what. That's why we're out here slopping away in this chodu, wheezing tin trap, one pitch away from the big fishes. He thinks he's going to make enough to start himself all new and fresh and shiny. Capital, capital, you understand?"

'I sat up then. He put a hand on my shoulder and swung himself up. "Gaandu," he said, "if you want to live in the city you have to think ahead three turns, and look behind a lie to see the truth and then behind that truth to see the lie. And then, and then, if you want to live well, you need a bankroll. Think about it." Mathu patted my shoulder and drew back. I saw his face for a second in dim light as he lowered himself into the cabin. And I did think about it.'

Under the speaker Katekar turned his head, right and left, and Sartaj heard the small clicking noise of the bones in his neck. 'I remember this Salim Kaka,' Katekar said softly. 'I remember seeing him in Andheri, walking around in a red lungi and a silk kurta. The kurtas were of different colours, but the lungi was always red. He worked with Haji Salman's gang, and he had a woman in Andheri, I remember hearing.'

Sartaj nodded. Katekar's face was puffy, as if he had just woken from sleep. 'Love?' Sartaj said.

Katekar grinned. 'Judging by the silk, it must have been,' he said. 'Or

maybe it was just that she was seventeen and had a rear like a prancing deer's. She was an auto mechanic's daughter, I think.'

'Don't believe in love, Katekar?'

'Saab, I believe in silk, and in everything that is soft, and everything else that is hard, but . . .'

Above their heads the speaker rumbled. 'What are you mumbling about, Sardar-ji?'

'Go on, go on,' Sartaj said. 'Just minor instructions.'

'So listen. The next afternoon, we started to see tree branches in the water, pieces of old crates, bottles bobbing down and up, tyres, once the whole wooden roof of a house floating upside down. Gaston stayed on deck the whole time now, one arm around the mast, looking this way and that with binoculars, never stopping. I asked Mathu, "Are we close?" He shrugged. Salim Kaka came up in a new kurta. He stood by the bow, looking to the north, and I saw his fingers dabbing at the silver taveez at his chest. I wanted to ask him where we were, but there was a seriousness on his face that kept me from speaking.'

Sartaj remembered the pictures of Gaitonde, the medium-sized body and the medium face, neither ugly nor handsome, all of it instantly forgettable despite the bright blue and red cashmere sweaters, everything quite commonplace. But now there was this voice, quiet and urgent, and Sartaj tipped his head towards the speaker.

'As night came, in the last failing light, there was a pinpoint of red winking steadily to the north. We dropped anchor, then headed towards it in a dinghy. Mathu rowed and Salim Kaka sat opposite, watching our beacon, and I between them. I was expecting a wall, like I had seen near the Gateway of India, but instead there were high rushes that towered above our heads. Salim Kaka took a pole and pushed us through the feathered banks that creaked and whispered, and although I wasn't told to, I had my ghoda in my hand, loaded and ready. Then the wood scraped under my feet, hard on ground. Flashlight in hand, Salim Kaka led us up the island – that's what it was, a soft wet rising in the swamp. We walked for a long time, half an hour maybe, Salim Kaka in front, under a rising moon. He had a brown canvas bag over his shoulder, big as a wheat sack. Then I saw the beacon again, over the top of the stalks. It was a torch tied to a pole. I could smell the tallow; the flames jumped two feet high. Under it there were three men. They were dressed like city people, and in the leaping light I could see their fair skin, their bushy black eyebrows, their big noses. Turks? Iranis? Arabs? I don't know still, but two of them had

rifles, muzzles pointed just a little away from us. My trigger was cool and sweaty on my finger. I cramped and thought, You'll fire and finish us all. I took a breath, turned my wrist, feeling the butt against my thumb, and watched them. Salim Kaka and one of them spoke, their heads close together. Now the bag was offered, and a suitcase in return. I saw a gleam of yellow, and heard the clicks of locks shutting. My arm ached.

'Salim Kaka stepped backward, and we edged away from the foreigners. I felt the smooth, wet rim of a stalk against my neck, and I couldn't find a way out, only the yielding pressure of vegetation, and panic. Then Salim Kaka turned abruptly and slipped between the bushes, the faint beam of his flashlight marking his way, and then Mathu. I came last, sideways, my revolver hand held low, my neck taut. I can still see them watching, the three men. I see the gleam of the metal bands around the rifle muzzles, and their shaded eyes. We were walking fast. I felt as if we were flying, and the tall grass that had pulled and clawed at me at first now brushed softly along my sides. Salim Kaka turned his head, and I saw his frantic smile. We were happy, running.

'Salim Kaka paused at the edge of a little stream where water had cut a drop of three feet, maybe four, and he reached down with his right foot and found a place for his heel. Mathu looked at me, his face cut into angles by the gaunt moonlight, and I looked at him. Before Salim Kaka had completed his step, I knew where we were going. The report of the revolver bounced off the water into my belly. I knew the butt had bruised the base of my thumb. Only when the flare left my eyes could I see again, and my stomach was twisting and loosening and twisting, and at the bottom of the ditch Salim Kaka's feet were treading steadily, as if he were still finding his way to the boat. The water thrashed and boiled. 'Fire, Mathu,' I said. 'Fire, maderchod.' Those were the first words I had spoken since we'd come ashore. My voice was firm and strange, the sound of it alien. Mathu tilted his head and pointed his barrel. Again, a flash brought the weeds out from the shadows, but still those feet clambered away, going steadily somewhere. I aimed my revolver into the round, frothy turbulence, and at the first discharge all movement stopped, but I put another one in just to make sure. "Come on," I said, "let's go home." Mathu nodded, as if I were in charge, and he jumped into the ditch and scrabbled for the suitcase. The flashlight was glowing under the water, a luminous yellow bubble that embraced exactly half of Salim Kaka's head. I snapped it up as I went through, though all the way back to the dinghy the fat moon was low overhead and lit us to safety.'

Sartaj and Katekar heard Gaitonde drink now. They heard, clearly, every long gulp and the glass emptying. 'Whisky?' Sartaj whispered. 'Beer?'

Katekar shook his head. 'No, he doesn't drink. Doesn't smoke either. Very health-conscious don he is. Exercises every day. He's drinking water. Bisleri with a twist of lime in it.'

Gaitonde went on, hurrying now. 'When the sun came up on the boat the next day, Mathu and I were still awake. We had spent the night sitting in the cabin, across from each other, with the suitcase tucked under Mathu's bunk but still visible. I had my revolver in my lap, and I could see Mathu's under his thigh. The roof above my head creaked out a stealthy step. We had told Gaston and Pascal that we had been ambushed by the police, the police of whatever country we had been in. Pascal had wept, and they were both moving very gently now, in respect for our mourning. Behind Mathu's head there was the dark brown of the wood, and the white of his banian floating and dipping with the swell of the waves. There was the hazy distance between us, and I knew what he was thinking. So I decided. I put my revolver on the pillow, put my feet up on the bunk. "I'm going to sleep," I said. "Wake me up in three hours and then you can rest." I turned to the wood, with my back towards Mathu, and shut my eyes. Very low down on my back there was a single circle on my skin which twitched and crawled. It expected a bullet. I could not calm it. But I kept my breathing steady, my knuckles against my lips. There are some things you can control.

'When I woke it was evening. There was a thick orange light pushing into the cabin from the hatch, colouring the wood like fire. My tongue filled my throat and mouth, and my hand when I tried to move it had become a loathsome bloated weight. I thought the bullet had found me, or I had found the bullet, but then I jerked once and my heart was thudding painfully and I sat up. My stomach was covered with sweat. Mathu was asleep, his face down on the pillow. I tucked my revolver into my waistband and went up. Pascal smiled at me out of his black little face. The clouds were piled above us, enormous and bulging, higher and higher into the red heaven. And this boat a twig on the water. My legs shook and I sat down and shook. I trembled and stopped and then trembled again. When it was dark, I asked Pascal for two strong bags. He gave me two white sacks made of canvas, with drawstrings.

'"Wake up," I said to Mathu when I went downstairs, and kicked his bunk. He came awake groping for his revolver, which he couldn't find

until I pointed to it, between the mattress and the wall. "Calm down, you jumpy chut. Just calm down. We have to share." He said, "Don't ever do that again." He was growling, stretching his shoulders up like a rooster heaving its feathers. I smiled at him. "Listen," I said, "you bhenchod sleepy son of maderchod Kumbhkaran, do you want your half or what?" He calculated for a moment, still all swollen and angry, but then he subsided with a laugh. "Yes, yes," he said. "Half-half. Half-half."

'Gold is good. It moves and slips on your fingers with a satisfying smoothness. When it is near to pure it has that healthy reddish glow that reminds you of apple cheeks. But that afternoon, as we moved the bars from the suitcase into the sacks, one by one, one for one and then one for the other, what I liked best was the weight. The bars were small, a little longer than the breadth of my palm, much smaller than I had expected, but they felt so dense and plump I could hardly bear to put each in my sack. My face was warm and my heart congested and I knew I had done right. When we got to the last bar, which was mine, I put it in my left pants pocket, where I could feel it always, slapping against me. Then the revolver on the other side, at the back of my waistband. Mathu nodded. "Almost home," he said. "How much do you think it's worth?" His smile was slow and faltering. He picked at his nose, as he always did when he was nervous, which was most of the time. I looked down at him and felt only contempt. I knew absolutely and for certain and in one instant that he would always be a tapori, nothing more, maybe even with ten or twelve people working for him, but always nothing more than a nerve-racked small-time local buffoon, jacked up into tottery brutishness with a gun and a chopper under his shirt, that's all. If you think in rupees, you're a sweep-carrying bhangi, nothing more. Because lakhs are dirt, and crores are shit. I thought, what is golden is the future in your pocket, the endless possibility of it. So I shoved the sack under my bunk, nudging the last of it under with my foot as Mathu watched with wide eyes. I turned my back on him and climbed up to the deck, laughing to myself. I was no longer afraid. I knew him now. That night I slept like a baby.'

Katekar snorted, and shook his head. 'And for years he slept a restful sleep every night, while the bodies fell right and left.' Sartaj held up a warning hand, and Katekar wiped the sweat from his face and muttered quietly, 'They're all of them the swinish same, maderchod greedy bastards. The trouble is, when one gets killed, five come up to take his place.'

'Quiet,' Sartaj said. 'I want to hear this.'

The speaker growled again. 'The day after the next, I saw, over the

water, a faraway hillock. "What is that?" I asked Gaston. "Home," he said. From the bow Pascal called to another boat leaning out towards the horizon. "Aaa-hooooooooo," he called, and the long cry and its echoing reply wrapped about my shoulders. I was home.

'We helped to beach the boat, and then took leave of Pascal and Gaston. Mathu was whispering threats at them, but I shouldered him aside, not too gently, and said, "Listen, boys, keep this quiet, very quiet, and we'll do business again." I gave them a gold bar each from my share, and shook hands with them, and they grinned and were my fellows for life. Mathu and I walked a little way down the road, to the bus stop, with our white sacks dragging over our shoulders. I waved down an auto-rickshaw and nodded at Mathu. I left him standing there, his finger at his nose, buffeted by exhaust. I knew he wanted to come with me, but he thought more of himself than he was, and he would've forced me to kill him, sooner or later. I had no time for him. I was going to Bombay.'

The speaker was silent. Sartaj stood up, turned and looked up and down the street. 'Eh, Gaitonde?' he said.

A moment passed, and then the answer came: 'Yes, Sartaj?'

'The bulldozer's here.'

Indeed it was there, a black leviathan that now appeared at the very end of the street with a throaty clanking that caused a crowd to appear instantly. The machine had a certain dignity, and the driver had a cap on his head, worn with the flair of a specialist.

'Get those people out of the road,' Sartaj said to Katekar. 'And that thing up here. Pointed this way.'

'I can hear it now,' Gaitonde said. The video lens moved in its housing restlessly.

'You'll see it soon,' Sartaj said. The policemen near the vans were checking their weapons. 'Listen, Gaitonde, this is all a farce that I don't like one bit. We've never met, but still we've spent the afternoon talking. Let's be gentlemen. There's no need for this. Just come out and we can go back to the station.'

'I can't do that,' Gaitonde said.

'Stop it,' Sartaj said. 'Stop acting the filmi villain, you're better than that. This isn't some schoolboy game.'

'It is a game, my friend,' Gaitonde said. 'It is only a game, it is leela.'

Sartaj turned away from the door. He wanted, with an excruciating desire, a cup of tea. 'All right. What's your name?' he said to the driver of the bulldozer, who was leaning against a gargantuan track.

'Bashir Ali.'

'You know what to do?'

Bashir Ali twisted his blue cap in his hands.

'It's my responsibility, Bashir Ali. I'm giving you an order as a police inspector, so you don't have to worry about it. Let's get that door down.'

Bashir Ali cleared his throat. 'But that's Gaitonde in there, Inspector sahib,' he said tentatively.

Sartaj took Bashir Ali by the elbow and walked him to the door.

'Gaitonde?'

'Yes, Sardar-ji?'

'This is Bashir Ali, the driver of the bulldozer. He's afraid of helping us. He's frightened of you.'

'Bashir Ali,' Gaitonde said. The voice was commanding, like an emperor's, sure of its consonants and its generosity.

Bashir Ali was looking at the middle of the door. Sartaj pointed up at the video camera, and Ali blinked up at it. 'Yes, Gaitonde Bhai?' he said.

'Don't worry. I won't forgive you –' Bashir Ali blanched '– because there's nothing to forgive. We are both trapped, you on that side of the door and me on this. Do what they tell you to do, get it over with and go home to your children. Nothing will happen to you. Not now and not later. I give you my word.' There was a pause. 'The word of Ganesh Gaitonde.'

By the time Bashir Ali had climbed up to his seat on top of the bulldozer he had understood, it seemed, his starring role in the situation. He put his cap on his head with a twirl and pointed it backward. The engine grunted and then settled into a steady roar. Sartaj leaned close to the speaker. The left side of his head, from the nape of the neck to the temples, was caught in a sweeping pulse of heat and pain.

'Gaitonde?'

'Speak, Sardar-ji, I'm listening.'

'Just open this door.'

'You want me to just open this door? I know, Sardar-ji, I know.'

'Know what?'

'I know what you want. You want me to just open this door. Then you want to arrest me and take me to the station. You want to be a hero in the newspapers. You want a promotion. Two promotions. Deep down you want even more. You want to be rich. You want to be an all-India hero. You want the President to give you a medal on Republic Day. You want the medal in full colour on television. You want to be seen with film stars.'

'Gaitonde . . .'

'But you know, I've had all that. And I'll beat you. Even in this last game I'll beat you.'

'How? You have some of your boys in there with you?'

'No. Not one. I told you, I'm alone.'

'A tunnel? A helicopter hidden inside?'

Gaitonde chuckled. 'No, no.'

'What then? You have a battery of Bofors guns?'

'No. But I'll beat you.'

The bulldozer was shimmering on the black road, flanked by grim-eyed policemen. Their choices were narrowing rapidly, leading them inevitably to this metal door, and they were determined, and helpless, and afraid.

'Gaitonde,' Sartaj said, rubbing his eyes. 'Last chance. Come on, yaar. This is stupid.'

'I can't do it. Sorry.'

'All right. Just stay back from the door when we come in. And have your hands up.'

'Don't worry,' Gaitonde said. 'I'm no danger.'

Sartaj stood up straight, his back to the door, and checked his revolver. He rotated the cylinder, and the yellow bullets sat fat and round in the metal. The heat came through the soles of his shoes, into his feet.

Suddenly the speaker came to life again against his shoulder blade. 'Sartaj, you called me yaar. So I'll tell you something. Build it big or small, there is no house that is safe. To win is to lose everything, and the game always wins.'

Sartaj could feel the tinny trembling in his chest from the speaker. The machine in front of him produced a blare that pressed him back against the door, and it was enough. He palmed the cylinder back into the revolver, and stepped off the porch. 'All right,' he shouted. 'Let's go, let's go, let's go.' He waved towards the door with the weapon. The speaker was buzzing again, but Sartaj wasn't listening. As he walked away, he thought that under the engine's roar he heard a last fragment, a question: 'Sartaj Singh, do you believe in God?'

Sartaj called, 'Come on, Bashir Ali, move.' Bashir Ali raised a hand, and Sartaj pointed a rigid finger at him. 'Get that thing moving.'

Bashir Ali crouched in his high seat, and the behemoth lurched forward, past Sartaj, and smashed against the building with a dull crunch, raising a soaring cloud of plaster. But after a moment, when the bulldozer pulled back, the building still stood complete and sacrosanct, the door

not even dented. Only the video camera had been injured: it lay next to the door, flattened neatly half-way along its length. A long jeer rose from the crowd down the street. It grew louder when Bashir Ali switched off his engine.

'What was that?' Sartaj said when Bashir Ali stepped down into the bulldozer's shadow.

'What do you expect when you won't let me do it the way it should be done?'

They were both wiping plaster from their noses. On the sunlit side of the bulldozer the crowd was chanting, 'Jai Gaitonde.'

'Do you know the way to do it?'

Bashir Ali shrugged. 'I have an idea.'

'All right,' Sartaj said. 'Fine. Do it how you want.'

'Get out of my way then. And get your men back from the building.'

As Bashir Ali spun his steed on the gravel, Sartaj saw that he was an artist. He operated with flicks and thumps of his hands on the driving sticks, leaning into the direction of his turns, in sympathy with the groaning gears underneath. He raised and then lowered his blade, positioning it precisely, with its lower extended edge level with the door. He reversed ten feet, twenty, thirty, his arm jauntily on the back of his seat. He came at the building at a diagonal, and as he went past Sartaj he gleamed a white grin. This time there was a scream of metal, and when the violent juddering of the bulldozer had ceased, Sartaj saw that the door had been peeled back, inward. A crack ran three feet up into the masonry.

'Back!' Sartaj shouted. He was running forward, revolver held in front of him. 'Get back, get back.' Then Bashir Ali was gone, and Sartaj was leaning against one side of the doorway, and Katekar on the other. An icy wind came out and Sartaj felt it drying the sweat on his face and his forearms. Suddenly, for a moment, he envied Gaitonde all his air-conditioners, the frigid climate control won by his audacity. And for a moment, rising from somewhere deep in his hips, unbidden and nauseating, like a buoyant dribble of bile, was a tiny bubble of admiration. He took a deep breath. 'Do you think the building will hold?' he said.

Katekar nodded. He was looking in, through the door, and his face was dark with rage. Sartaj touched the tip of his tongue to his upper lip, felt the dryness, and then they went in. Sartaj went ahead, and at the first door inside Katekar went by him. Behind them followed the rustling of the others. Sartaj was trying to hear above the thunderous unclenching of his heart. He had done entries like this before, and it never got better. It

was very cold inside the building, and the light was low and luxurious. There was carpet under their feet. There were four square rooms, all white, all empty. And at the exact centre of the building was a very steep, almost vertical, metal staircase going downward through the floor. Sartaj nodded at Katekar, and then followed him down. The metal door at the bottom opened easily, but it was very heavy, and when Katekar finally had it back Sartaj saw that it was as thick as a hatch to a bank vault. Inside it was dark. Sartaj was shivering uncontrollably. He moved past Katekar, and now he saw a bluish light on the left. Katekar slid past his shoulders and went out wide, and then they shuffled forward, weapons held rigidly before them. Another step and now in the new angle Sartaj saw a figure, shoulders, in front of a bank of haze-filled TV monitors, a brown hand near the controls on a black panel.

'Gaitonde!' Sartaj hadn't meant to shout – a gentle admonitory assertion was the preferred tone – and now he squeezed his voice down. 'Gaitonde, put your hands up very slowly.' There was no movement from the figure in the darkness. Sartaj tightened his finger painfully on his trigger, and fought the urge to fire, and fire again. 'Gaitonde. Gaitonde?'

From Sartaj's right, where Katekar was, came a very small click, and even as Sartaj turned his head the room was flooded with white neon radiance, generous and encompassing and clean. And in the universal illumination Gaitonde sat revealed, a black pistol in his left hand, and half his head gone.

Gaitonde's right eye bulged with a bloodshot and manic intensity. Sartaj could see the fragile tracery of pink lines, the hard black of the pupil, the shining seep of fluid from the inside corner, which despite himself he thought of as a tear. But it was only the body reacting to the gigantic blow which had sheared off everything from the chin up on the other side, slicing from the left nostril up into the forehead and spraying a creamy mess on to the white ceiling. A tooth winked pearl-like, whole and undamaged, from the raw red where Gaitonde's tight-lipped grimace stopped abruptly.

'Sir,' Katekar said. Sartaj jerked, and followed the rigidly pointing barrel of Katekar's revolver to a doorway in the white wall. Just where the boundary lay between sharp brightness and darkness, in that shadow, were two small bare feet, toes pointing up at the ceiling. Sartaj stepped up, and he couldn't see the body clearly, just the cuffs of white pants, but he knew somehow, from the indistinct spread of the hips, that it was a woman. Again Katekar found a switch, and there she was, yes, a woman,

wearing tight white pants, slung low – Sartaj knew they were called hipsters. She wore a tight pink top, it was elegant. It showed her belly, she must have been proud of the narrowness of her waist and the perfect navel. And there was a hole in her chest, just under the downy spot on her thorax where the top clipped shut.

'He shot her,' Sartaj said.

'Yes,' Katekar said. 'She must have been standing in the doorway.'

Her face was turned to the left, with long hair falling over her cheek.

'Check the rest,' Sartaj said. In the square room where the girl lay, there were three bare beds, in a row, with white night-stands next to each. It looked rather like a dormitory. Against the wall, an exercise cycle and a row of graduated weights on a rack. DVDs of old black-and-white movies. A steel cabinet with a row of AK-56 rifles, and pistols underneath. And there were showers and western-style toilets in a bathroom, and three cupboards full of men's clothing and shoes and boots. In the central room Katekar had finished his survey, and they stood together over Gaitonde.

There was a press of armed policemen behind Sartaj, jostling shoulders and clanking rifle butts as they craned forward to see what the great Gaitonde had come to, and his murdered girlfriend. 'Enough,' Sartaj said. 'What is this, a free tamasha? A film show? I want everyone up and out of here.' But he knew his voice was full of relief and released tension, and they grinned at him as they turned away. He propped himself on the edge of the long desk and waited for the strange liquid elasticity behind his kneecaps to subside. From the back of Gaitonde's chair there was a steady drip on to the floor.

Katekar was opening and shutting the white cabinets that lined the central room, with a blue handkerchief draped over his fingers. He was always methodical in the wake of gunshots, and Sartaj found comfort in the breadth and solidity of his shoulders and the serious set of his jaw.

'Nothing in here, sir,' Katekar said. 'Not one thing.'

Next to Sartaj's leg, there was a drawer in the desk. Sartaj found his own handkerchief and pulled at the handle. A small black book sat in the exact centre of the drawer, the edges lined up with the sides of the drawer.

'Diary?' Katekar said.

It was an album, black pages covered with sticky film, behind which photographs had been inserted. Sartaj flipped the pages by the very corners. Women, some very young, in posed studio shots, looking over shoulders and holding their faces and cocking their hips, decently dressed but all glamorous.

'All his women,' Sartaj said.

'All his randis,' Katekar said. He flipped his blue handkerchief over his index finger and edged open the waist-high filing cabinet that stood at the other end of the desk. Sartaj heard the intake of his breath even over the low hum of the generators. 'Sir.'

The filing cabinet was full of money. The money was new money, five-hundred-rupee notes in clean little bundles still in the Central Bank of India wrappers and rubber bands, and the bundles were held together in bricks of five by crisp shrink-wrapped plastic. Katekar pushed at the top layer, into the crack between the stacks. There was more underneath. And then more.

'How much?' Sartaj said.

Katekar thumped the side of the cabinet gently, thoughtfully. 'It's full all the way down. That's a lot of money. Fifty lakhs? More.'

It was more money than either had ever seen in one place before. There was a decision to be made, and they looked at each other frankly, and Sartaj decided. He nudged the cabinet shut with his knee. 'Too much money,' he said.

Katekar exhaled. He was unmistakably wistful for a second, that was all. But it had been him who had taught Sartaj this important lesson of survival, that to lunge for big prizes without enough information was to invite disaster. He shook himself loose now of the enchantment of big money with a huffing noise and a big grin. 'The big people will take care of Gaitonde's money,' he said. 'Now we wait?'

'We wait.'

The bunker was full. There were lab technicians and photographers, and senior officers from three zones and the Crime Branch. Gaitonde sat in the middle, well-lit and somehow shrunken. Sartaj watched as Parulkar leaned over Gaitonde, pointing something out to another zonal commissioner. Parulkar was in his element, discussing a successful operation with those who mattered, and Sartaj was grateful to him. He was sure that Parulkar would polish and improve the story, and give him more credit than he was due. This was a talent Parulkar had. Sartaj depended on him for it.

Three men came down the staircase, moving fast. Sartaj had never seen them before. The one in the lead had his hair cut so close to the skull that Sartaj could see the scalp under the neat grey. This one spoke to Parulkar, and flashed an ID card. Parulkar listened, and although he didn't give

anything away, Sartaj saw him become very still. He nodded, and then led Flat-head and the other two over to Sartaj.

'This is the officer,' Parulkar said to Flat-head. 'Inspector Sartaj Singh.'

'I am SP Makand, CBI.' Flat-head was very curt. 'Did you find anything?'

'The money,' Sartaj said. 'An album. We didn't go through his pockets yet, we were waiting until . . .'

'Good,' Makand said. 'We will take over now.'

'Can we do anything?'

'No. We will be in touch. Have your men clear the location.' Makand's two flankers were already moving around the room, telling the technicians to pack up.

Sartaj nodded. That Gaitonde would be taken from him he had expected. That Gaitonde had appeared in Zone 13 was inexplicable, that his career had come to a sudden stop in Kailashpada was a professional gift altogether too perfect to be left to Sartaj alone. Life did not allow such undiluted felicities. But Makand's dismissal – even coming from a man from an elite central agency – was altogether too abrupt. And yet here was Parulkar being as bland as desi butter, with not a protest or small objection. So Sartaj followed his lead, summoned Katekar and got out.

It was evening. Sartaj stood in the lee of the metal door, in the shadows, and he could see the reporters waiting on the other side of the row of police jeeps. Parulkar was next to him, smartening himself up for the press. 'Sir,' Sartaj said, 'why did they kick us out? The CBI doesn't need local help any more?'

Parulkar tucked his shirt in, and tugged at his belt. 'They seemed very tense. My feeling was that they were afraid something in there would get exposed.'

'They're trying to cover something up?'

Parulkar tilted his head and allowed himself to look canny. 'Beta,' he said, 'when someone is willing to be that rude to us, it usually means they are trying to hide something. Come on. Let's go and tell our friends from the press how you brought down the great don Ganesh Gaitonde.'

So Sartaj stepped out into the flare of flashbulbs and told the journalists of his coup. He told them that he had talked to Gaitonde before they had knocked down the door, that Gaitonde had seemed unafraid and rational. He did not tell them Gaitonde's story about gold. And he did not tell them, or Katekar or Parulkar, about the question he thought

Gaitonde had asked, at the last. He wasn't sure he had heard it, anyway. So he told the reporters about the anonymous tip that morning, and what had followed, and he said no, he had no idea why a mafia don would want to kill himself.

But later, at home that night, he remembered Gaitonde's grandiloquent voice, his rapid speech, his sadness. He had never met Ganesh Gaitonde, and now their lives had crossed and the man was dead. On the edge of sleep, Sartaj remembered all that he had heard and read about Gaitonde, the rumours and legends, the intelligence reports and the news-magazine interviews. He tried to connect the public image to the voice he had heard, and couldn't. There had been the famous gangster, and there was the man this afternoon. But what did it matter, any of it? Gaitonde was dead. Sartaj turned over, thumped his pillows determinedly, arranged them, and lay down his head and slept.