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Opening Extract from...

The Namesake

Written by Jhumpa Lahiri

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1.

1968

On a sticky august evening two weeks before her due date, Ashima Ganguli stands in the kitchen of a Central Square apartment, combining Rice Krispies and Planters peanuts and chopped red onion in a bowl. She adds salt, lemon juice, thin slices of green chili pepper, wishing there were mustard oil to pour into the mix. Ashima has been consuming this concoction throughout her pregnancy, a humble approximation of the snack sold for pennies on Calcutta sidewalks and on railway platforms throughout India, spilling from newspaper cones. Even now that there is barely space inside her, it is the one thing she craves. Tasting from a cupped palm, she frowns; as usual, there's something missing. She stares blankly at the pegboard behind the countertop where her cooking utensils hang, all slightly coated with grease. She wipes sweat from her face with the free end of her sari. Her swollen feet ache against speckled gray linoleum. Her pelvis aches from the baby's weight. She opens a cupboard, the shelves lined with a grimy yellow-and-white-checkered paper she's been meaning to replace, and reaches for another onion, frowning again as she pulls at its crisp magenta skin. A curious warmth floods her abdomen, followed by a tightening so severe

she doubles over, gasping without sound, dropping the onion with a thud on the floor.

The sensation passes, only to be followed by a more enduring spasm of discomfort. In the bathroom she discovers, on her underpants, a solid streak of brownish blood. She calls out to her husband, Ashoke, a doctoral candidate in electrical engineering at MIT, who is studying in the bedroom. He leans over a card table; the edge of their bed, two twin mattresses pushed together under a red and purple batik spread, serves as his chair. When she calls out to Ashoke, she doesn't say his name. Ashima never thinks of her husband's name when she thinks of her husband, even though she knows perfectly well what it is. She has adopted his surname but refuses, for propriety's sake, to utter his first. It's not the type of thing Bengali wives do. Like a kiss or caress in a Hindi movie, a husband's name is something intimate and therefore unspoken, cleverly patched over. And so, instead of saying Ashoke's name, she utters the interrogative that has come to replace it, which translates roughly as "Are you listening to me?"

At dawn a taxi is called to ferry them through deserted Cambridge streets, up Massachusetts Avenue and past Harvard Yard, to Mount Auburn Hospital. Ashima registers, answering questions about the frequency and duration of the contractions, as Ashoke fills out the forms. She is seated in a wheelchair and pushed through the shining, brightly lit corridors, whisked into an elevator more spacious than her kitchen. On the maternity floor she is assigned to a bed by a window, in a room at the end of the hall. She is asked to remove her Murshidabad silk sari in favor of a flowered cotton gown that, to her mild embarrassment, only reaches her knees. A nurse offers to fold up the sari but, exasperated by the six slippery yards, ends up stuffing the material into Ashima's slate blue suitcase. Her obstetrician, Dr. Ashley, gauntly handsome in a Lord Mountbatten sort of way, with fine sand-colored hair swept back from his temples, arrives

to examine her progress. The baby's head is in the proper position, has already begun its descent. She is told that she is still in early labor, three centimeters dilated, beginning to efface. "What does it mean, dilated?" she asks, and Dr. Ashley holds up two fingers side by side, then draws them apart, explaining the unimaginable thing her body must do in order for the baby to pass. The process will take some time, Dr. Ashley tells her; given that this is her first pregnancy, labor can take twenty-four hours, sometimes more. She searches for Ashoke's face, but he has stepped behind the curtain the doctor has drawn. "I'll be back," Ashoke says to her in Bengali, and then a nurse adds: "Don't you worry, Mr. Ganguli. She's got a long ways to go. We can take over from here."

Now she is alone, cut off by curtains from the three other women in the room. One woman's name, she gathers from bits of conversation, is Beverly. Another is Lois. Carol lies to her left. "Goddamnit, goddamn you, this is hell," she hears one of them say. And then a man's voice: "I love you, sweetheart." Words Ashima has neither heard nor expects to hear from her own husband; this is not how they are. It is the first time in her life she has slept alone, surrounded by strangers; all her life she has slept either in a room with her parents, or with Ashoke at her side. She wishes the curtains were open, so that she could talk to the American women. Perhaps one of them has given birth before, can tell her what to expect. But she has gathered that Americans, in spite of their public declarations of affection, in spite of their miniskirts and bikinis, in spite of their hand-holding on the street and lying on top of each other on the Cambridge Common, prefer their privacy. She spreads her fingers over the taut, enormous drum her middle has become, wondering where the baby's feet and hands are at this moment. The child is no longer restless; for the past few days, apart from the occasional flutter, she has not felt it punch or kick or press against her ribs. She wonders if she is the only Indian person in the hospital, but a gentle twitch from the baby reminds her

that she is, technically speaking, not alone. Ashima thinks it's strange that her child will be born in a place most people enter either to suffer or to die. There is nothing to comfort her in the off-white tiles of the floor, the off-white panels of the ceiling, the white sheets tucked tightly into the bed. In India, she thinks to herself, women go home to their parents to give birth, away from husbands and in-laws and household cares, retreating briefly to childhood when the baby arrives.

Another contraction begins, more violent than the last. She cries out, pressing her head against the pillow. Her fingers grip the chilly rails of the bed. No one hears her, no nurse rushes to her side. She has been instructed to time the duration of the contractions and so she consults her watch, a bon voyage gift from her parents, slipped over her wrist the last time she saw them, amid airport confusion and tears. It wasn't until she was on the plane, flying for the first time in her life on a BOAC VC-10 whose deafening ascent twenty-six members of her family had watched from the balcony at Dum Dum Airport, as she was drifting over parts of India she'd never set foot in, and then even farther, outside India itself, that she'd noticed the watch among the cavalcade of matrimonial bracelets on both her arms: iron, gold, coral, conch. Now, in addition, she wears a plastic bracelet with a typed label identifying her as a patient of the hospital. She keeps the watch face turned to the inside of her wrist. On the back, surrounded by the words *waterproof*, *antimagnetic*, and *shock-protected*, her married initials, *A.G.*, are inscribed.

American seconds tick on top of her pulse point. For half a minute, a band of pain wraps around her stomach, radiating toward her back and shooting down her legs. And then, again, relief. She calculates the Indian time on her hands. The tip of her thumb strikes each rung of the brown ladders etched onto the backs of her fingers, then stops at the middle of the third: it is nine and a half hours ahead in Calcutta, already evening, half past eight. In the kitchen of her parents' flat on Amherst Street,

at this very moment, a servant is pouring after-dinner tea into steaming glasses, arranging Marie biscuits on a tray. Her mother, very soon to be a grandmother, is standing at the mirror of her dressing table, untangling waist-length hair, still more black than gray, with her fingers. Her father hunches over his slanted ink-stained table by the window, sketching, smoking, listening to the Voice of America. Her younger brother, Rana, studies for a physics exam on the bed. She pictures clearly the gray cement floor of her parents' sitting room, feels its solid chill underfoot even on the hottest days. An enormous black-and-white photograph of her deceased paternal grandfather looms at one end against the pink plaster wall; opposite, an alcove shielded by clouded panes of glass is stuffed with books and papers and her father's watercolor tins. For an instant the weight of the baby vanishes, replaced by the scene that passes before her eyes, only to be replaced once more by a blue strip of the Charles River, thick green treetops, cars gliding up and down Memorial Drive.

In Cambridge it is eleven in the morning, already lunchtime in the hospital's accelerated day. A tray holding warm apple juice, Jell-O, ice cream, and cold baked chicken is brought to her side. Patty, the friendly nurse with the diamond engagement ring and a fringe of reddish hair beneath her cap, tells Ashima to consume only the Jell-O and the apple juice. It's just as well. Ashima would not have touched the chicken, even if permitted; Americans eat their chicken in its skin, though Ashima has recently found a kind butcher on Prospect Street willing to pull it off for her. Patty comes to fluff the pillows, tidy the bed. Dr. Ashley pokes in his head from time to time. "No need to worry," he chirps, putting a stethoscope to Ashima's belly, patting her hand, admiring her various bracelets. "Everything is looking perfectly normal. We are expecting a perfectly normal delivery, Mrs. Ganguli."

But nothing feels normal to Ashima. For the past eighteen months, ever since she's arrived in Cambridge, nothing has felt

normal at all. It's not so much the pain, which she knows, somehow, she will survive. It's the consequence: motherhood in a foreign land. For it was one thing to be pregnant, to suffer the queasy mornings in bed, the sleepless nights, the dull throbbing in her back, the countless visits to the bathroom. Throughout the experience, in spite of her growing discomfort, she'd been astonished by her body's ability to make life, exactly as her mother and grandmother and all her great-grandmothers had done. That it was happening so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved, had made it more miraculous still. But she is terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare.

"How about a little walk? It might do you good," Patty asks when she comes to clear the lunch tray.

Ashima looks up from a tattered copy of *Desh* magazine that she'd brought to read on her plane ride to Boston and still cannot bring herself to throw away. The printed pages of Bengali type, slightly rough to the touch, are a perpetual comfort to her. She's read each of the short stories and poems and articles a dozen times. There is a pen-and-ink drawing on page eleven by her father, an illustrator for the magazine: a view of the North Calcutta skyline sketched from the roof of their flat one foggy January morning. She had stood behind her father as he'd drawn it, watching as he crouched over his easel, a cigarette dangling from his lips, his shoulders wrapped in a black Kashmiri shawl.

"Yes, all right," Ashima says.

Patty helps Ashima out of bed, tucks her feet one by one into slippers, drapes a second nightgown around her shoulders. "Just think," Patty says as Ashima struggles to stand. "In a day or two you'll be half the size." She takes Ashima's arm as they step out of the room, into the hallway. After a few feet Ashima stops, her legs trembling as another wave of pain surges through her body. She shakes her head, her eyes filling with tears. "I cannot."

"You can. Squeeze my hand. Squeeze as tight as you like."

After a minute they continue on, toward the nurses' station. "Hoping for a boy or a girl?" Patty asks.

"As long as there are ten finger and ten toe," Ashima replies. For these anatomical details, these particular signs of life, are the ones she has the most difficulty picturing when she imagines the baby in her arms.

Patty smiles, a little too widely, and suddenly Ashima realizes her error, knows she should have said "fingers" and "toes." This error pains her almost as much as her last contraction. English had been her subject. In Calcutta, before she was married, she was working toward a college degree. She used to tutor neighborhood schoolchildren in their homes, on their verandas and beds, helping them to memorize Tennyson and Wordsworth, to pronounce words like *sign* and *cough*, to understand the difference between Aristotelian and Shakespearean tragedy. But in Bengali, a finger can also mean fingers, a toe toes.

It had been after tutoring one day that Ashima's mother had met her at the door, told her to go straight to the bedroom and prepare herself; a man was waiting to see her. He was the third in as many months. The first had been a widower with four children. The second, a newspaper cartoonist who knew her father, had been hit by a bus in Esplanade and lost his left arm. To her great relief they had both rejected her. She was nineteen, in the middle of her studies, in no rush to be a bride. And so, obediently but without expectation, she had untangled and rebraided her hair, wiped away the kohl that had smudged below her eyes, patted some Cuticura powder from a velvet puff onto her skin. The sheer parrot green sari she pleated and tucked into her petticoat had been laid out for her on the bed by her mother. Before entering the sitting room, Ashima had paused in the corridor. She could hear her mother saying, "She is fond of cooking, and she can knit extremely well. Within a week she finished this cardigan I am wearing."

Ashima smiled, amused by her mother's salesmanship; it had

taken her the better part of a year to finish the cardigan, and still her mother had had to do the sleeves. Glancing at the floor where visitors customarily removed their slippers, she noticed, beside two sets of chappals, a pair of men's shoes that were not like any she'd ever seen on the streets and trams and buses of Calcutta, or even in the windows of Bata. They were brown shoes with black heels and off-white laces and stitching. There was a band of lentil-sized holes embossed on either side of each shoe, and at the tips was a pretty pattern pricked into the leather as if with a needle. Looking more closely, she saw the shoemaker's name written on the insides, in gold lettering that had all but faded: something and sons, it said. She saw the size, eight and a half, and the initials U.S.A. And as her mother continued to sing her praises, Ashima, unable to resist a sudden and overwhelming urge, stepped into the shoes at her feet. Lingering sweat from the owner's feet mingled with hers, causing her heart to race; it was the closest thing she had ever experienced to the touch of a man. The leather was creased, heavy, and still warm. On the left shoe she had noticed that one of the crisscrossing laces had missed a hole, and this oversight set her at ease.

She extracted her feet, entered the room. The man was sitting in a rattan chair, his parents perched on the edge of the twin bed where her brother slept at night. He was slightly plump, scholarly-looking but still youthful, with black thick-framed glasses and a sharp, prominent nose. A neatly trimmed mustache connected to a beard that covered only his chin lent him an elegant, vaguely aristocratic air. He wore brown socks and brown trousers and a green-and-white-striped shirt and was staring glumly at his knees.

He did not look up when she appeared. Though she was aware of his gaze as she crossed the room, by the time she managed to steal another look at him he was once again indifferent, focused on his knees. He cleared his throat as if to speak but then said nothing. Instead it was his father who did the talking,

saying that the man had gone to St. Xavier's, and then B.E. College, graduating first-class-first from both institutions. Ashima took her seat and smoothed the pleats of her sari. She sensed the mother eyeing her with approval. Ashima was five feet four inches, tall for a Bengali woman, ninety-nine pounds. Her complexion was on the dark side of fair, but she had been compared on more than one occasion to the actress Madhabi Mukherjee. Her nails were admirably long, her fingers, like her father's, artistically slim. They inquired after her studies and she was asked to recite a few stanzas from "The Daffodils." The man's family lived in Alipore. The father was a labor officer for the customs department of a shipping company. "My son has been living abroad for two years," the man's father said, "earning a Ph.D. in Boston, researching in the field of fiber optics." Ashima had never heard of Boston, or of fiber optics. She was asked whether she was willing to fly on a plane and then if she was capable of living in a city characterized by severe, snowy winters, alone.

"Won't he be there?" she'd asked, pointing to the man whose shoes she'd briefly occupied, but who had yet to say a word to her.

It was only after the betrothal that she'd learned his name. One week later the invitations were printed, and two weeks after that she was adorned and adjusted by countless aunts, countless cousins hovering around her. These were her last moments as Ashima Bhaduri, before becoming Ashima Ganguli. Her lips were darkened, her brow and cheeks dotted with sandalwood paste, her hair wound up, bound with flowers, held in place by a hundred wire pins that would take an hour to remove once the wedding was finally over. Her head was draped with scarlet netting. The air was damp, and in spite of the pins Ashima's hair, thickest of all the cousins', would not lie flat. She wore all the necklaces and chokers and bracelets that were destined to live most of their lives in an extra-large safety deposit box in a bank vault in New England. At the designated hour

she was seated on a piri that her father had decorated, hoisted five feet off the ground, carried out to meet the groom. She had hidden her face with a heart-shaped betel leaf, kept her head bent low until she had circled him seven times.

Eight thousand miles away in Cambridge, she has come to know him. In the evenings she cooks for him, hoping to please, with the unrationed, remarkably unblemished sugar, flour, rice, and salt she had written about to her mother in her very first letter home. By now she has learned that her husband likes his food on the salty side, that his favorite thing about lamb curry is the potatoes, and that he likes to finish his dinner with a small final helping of rice and dal. At night, lying beside her in bed, he listens to her describe the events of her day: her walks along Massachusetts Avenue, the shops she visits, the Hare Krishnas who pester her with their leaflets, the pistachio ice cream cones she treats herself to in Harvard Square. In spite of his meager graduate student wages he sets aside money to send every few months to his father to help put an extension on his parents' house. He is fastidious about his clothing; their first argument had been over a sweater she'd shrunk in the washing machine. As soon as he comes home from the university the first thing he does is hang up his shirt and trousers, donning a pair of drawstring pajamas and a pullover if it's cold. On Sundays he spends an hour occupied with his tins of shoe polishes and his three pairs of shoes, two black and one brown. The brown ones are the ones he'd been wearing when he'd first come to see her. The sight of him cross-legged on newspapers spread on the floor, intently whisking a brush over the leather, always reminds her of her indiscretion in her parents' corridor. It is a moment that shocks her still, and that she prefers, in spite of all she tells him at night about the life they now share, to keep to herself.

On another floor of the hospital, in a waiting room, Ashoke hunches over a *Boston Globe* from a month ago, abandoned on a

neighboring chair. He reads about the riots that took place during the Democratic National Convention in Chicago and about Dr. Benjamin Spock, the baby doctor, being sentenced to two years in jail for threatening to counsel draft evaders. The Favre Leuba strapped to his wrist is running six minutes ahead of the large gray-faced clock on the wall. It is four-thirty in the morning. An hour before, Ashoke had been fast asleep, at home, Ashima's side of the bed covered with exams he'd been grading late at night, when the telephone rang. Ashima was fully dilated and being taken to the delivery room, the person on the other end had said. Upon arrival at the hospital he was told that she was pushing, that it could be any minute now. Any minute. And yet it seemed only the other day, one steel-colored winter's morning when the windows of the house were being pelted with hail, that she had spit out her tea, accusing him of mistaking the salt for sugar. To prove himself right he had taken a sip of the sweet liquid from her cup, but she had insisted on its bitterness, and poured it down the sink. That was the first thing that had caused her to suspect, and then the doctor had confirmed it, and then he would wake to the sounds, every morning when she went to brush her teeth, of her retching. Before he left for the university he would leave a cup of tea by the side of the bed, where she lay listless and silent. Often, returning in the evenings, he would find her still lying there, the tea untouched.

He now desperately needs a cup of tea for himself, not having managed to make one before leaving the house. But the machine in the corridor dispenses only coffee, tepid at best, in paper cups. He takes off his thick-rimmed glasses, fitted by a Calcutta optometrist, polishes the lenses with the cotton handkerchief he always keeps in his pocket, *A* for *Ashoke* embroidered by his mother in light blue thread. His black hair, normally combed back neatly from his forehead, is disheveled, sections of it on end. He stands and begins pacing as the other expectant fathers do. So far, the door to the waiting room has

opened twice, and a nurse has announced that one of them has a boy or a girl. There are handshakes all around, pats on the back, before the father is escorted away. The men wait with cigars, flowers, address books, bottles of champagne. They smoke cigarettes, ashing onto the floor. Ashoke is indifferent to such indulgences. He neither smokes nor drinks alcohol of any kind. Ashima is the one who keeps all their addresses, in a small notebook she carries in her purse. It has never occurred to him to buy his wife flowers.

He returns to the *Globe*, still pacing as he reads. A slight limp causes Ashoke's right foot to drag almost imperceptibly with each step. Since childhood he has had the habit and the ability to read while walking, holding a book in one hand on his way to school, from room to room in his parents' three-story house in Alipore, and up and down the red clay stairs. Nothing roused him. Nothing distracted him. Nothing caused him to stumble. As a teenager he had gone through all of Dickens. He read newer authors as well, Graham Greene and Somerset Maugham, all purchased from his favorite stall on College Street with pujo money. But most of all he loved the Russians. His paternal grandfather, a former professor of European literature at Calcutta University, had read from them aloud in English translations when Ashoke was a boy. Each day at tea time, as his brothers and sisters played kabadi and cricket outside, Ashoke would go to his grandfather's room, and for an hour his grandfather would read supine on the bed, his ankles crossed and the book propped open on his chest, Ashoke curled at his side. For that hour Ashoke was deaf and blind to the world around him. He did not hear his brothers and sisters laughing on the rooftop, or see the tiny, dusty, cluttered room in which his grandfather read. "Read all the Russians, and then reread them," his grandfather had said. "They will never fail you." When Ashoke's English was good enough, he began to read the books himself. It was while walking on some of the world's noisiest, busiest streets, on Chowringhee and Gariahat

Road, that he had read pages of *The Brothers Karamazov*, and *Anna Karenina*, and *Fathers and Sons*. Once, a younger cousin who had tried to imitate him had fallen down the red clay staircase in Ashoke's house and broken an arm. Ashoke's mother was always convinced that her eldest son would be hit by a bus or a tram, his nose deep into *War and Peace*. That he would be reading a book the moment he died.

One day, in the earliest hours of October 20, 1961, this nearly happened. Ashoke was twenty-two, a student at B.E. College. He was traveling on the 83 Up Howrah–Ranchi Express to visit his grandparents for the holidays; they had moved from Calcutta to Jamshedpur upon his grandfather's retirement from the university. Ashoke had never spent the holidays away from his family. But his grandfather had recently gone blind, and he had requested Ashoke's company specifically, to read him *The Statesman* in the morning, Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy in the afternoon. Ashoke accepted the invitation eagerly. He carried two suitcases, the first one containing clothes and gifts, the second empty. For it would be on this visit, his grandfather had said, that the books in his glass-fronted case, collected over a lifetime and preserved under lock and key, would be given to Ashoke. The books had been promised to Ashoke throughout his childhood, and for as long as he could remember he had coveted them more than anything else in the world. He had already received a few in recent years, given to him on birthdays and other special occasions. But now that the day had come to inherit the rest, a day his grandfather could no longer read the books himself, Ashoke was saddened, and as he placed the empty suitcase under his seat, he was disconcerted by its weightlessness, regretful of the circumstances that would cause it, upon his return, to be full.

He carried a single volume for the journey, a hardbound collection of short stories by Nikolai Gogol, which his grandfather had given him when he'd graduated from class twelve. On the title page, beneath his grandfather's signature, Ashoke

had written his own. Because of Ashoke's passion for this particular book, the spine had recently split, threatening to divide the pages into two sections. His favorite story in the book was the last, "The Overcoat," and that was the one Ashoke had begun to reread as the train pulled out of Howrah Station late in the evening with a prolonged and deafening shriek, away from his parents and his six younger brothers and sisters, all of whom had come to see him off and had huddled until the last moment by the window, waving to him from the long dusky platform. He had read "The Overcoat" too many times to count, certain sentences and phrases embedded in his memory. Each time he was captivated by the absurd, tragic, yet oddly inspiring story of Akaky Akakyevich, the impoverished main character who spends his life meekly copying documents written by others and suffering the ridicule of absolutely everyone. His heart went out to poor Akaky, a humble clerk just as Ashoke's father had been at the start of his career. Each time, reading the account of Akaky's christening, and the series of queer names his mother had rejected, Ashoke laughed aloud. He shuddered at the description of the tailor Petrovich's big toe, "with its deformed nail as thick and hard as the shell of a tortoise." His mouth watered at the cold veal and cream pastries and champagne Akaky consumed the night his precious coat was stolen, in spite of the fact that Ashoke had never tasted these things himself. Ashoke was always devastated when Akaky was robbed in "a square that looked to him like a dreadful desert," leaving him cold and vulnerable, and Akaky's death, some pages later, never failed to bring tears to his eyes. In some ways the story made less sense each time he read it, the scenes he pictured so vividly, and absorbed so fully, growing more elusive and profound. Just as Akaky's ghost haunted the final pages, so did it haunt a place deep in Ashoke's soul, shedding light on all that was irrational, all that was inevitable about the world.

Outside the view turned quickly black, the scattered lights

of Howrah giving way to nothing at all. He had a second-class sleeper in the seventh bogie, behind the air-conditioned coach. Because of the season, the train was especially crowded, especially raucous, filled with families on holiday. Small children were wearing their best clothing, the girls with brightly colored ribbons in their hair. Though he had had his dinner before leaving for the station, a four-layer tiffin carrier packed by his mother sat at his feet, in the event that hunger should attack him in the night. He shared his compartment with three others. There was a middle-aged Bihari couple who, he gathered from overhearing their conversation, had just married off their eldest daughter, and a friendly, potbellied, middle-aged Bengali businessman wearing a suit and tie, by the name of Ghosh. Ghosh told Ashoke that he had recently returned to India after spending two years in England on a job voucher, but that he had come back home because his wife was inconsolably miserable abroad. Ghosh spoke reverently of England. The sparkling, empty streets, the polished black cars, the rows of gleaming white houses, he said, were like a dream. Trains departed and arrived according to schedule, Ghosh said. No one spat on the sidewalks. It was in a British hospital that his son had been born.

"Seen much of this world?" Ghosh asked Ashoke, untying his shoes and settling himself cross-legged on the berth. He pulled a packet of Dunhill cigarettes from his jacket pocket, offering them around the compartment before lighting one for himself.

"Once to Delhi," Ashoke replied. "And lately once a year to Jamshedpur."

Ghosh extended his arm out the window, flicking the glowing tip of his cigarette into the night. "Not this world," he said, glancing disappointedly about the interior of the train. He tilted his head toward the window. "England. America," he said, as if the nameless villages they passed had been replaced by those countries. "Have you considered going there?"

"My professors mention it from time to time. But I have a family," Ashoke said.

Ghosh frowned. "Already married?"

"No. A mother and father and six siblings. I am the eldest."

"And in a few years you will be married and living in your parents' house," Ghosh speculated.

"I suppose."

Ghosh shook his head. "You are still young. Free," he said, spreading his hands apart for emphasis. "Do yourself a favor. Before it's too late, without thinking too much about it first, pack a pillow and a blanket and see as much of the world as you can. You will not regret it. One day it will be too late."

"My grandfather always says that's what books are for," Ashoke said, using the opportunity to open the volume in his hands. "To travel without moving an inch."

"To each his own," Ghosh said. He tipped his head politely to one side, letting the last of the cigarette drop from his fingertips. He reached into a bag by his feet and took out his diary, turning to the twentieth of October. The page was blank and on it, with a fountain pen whose cap he ceremoniously unscrewed, he wrote his name and address. He ripped out the page and handed it to Ashoke. "If you ever change your mind and need contacts, let me know. I live in Tollygunge, just behind the tram depot."

"Thank you," Ashoke said, folding up the information and putting it at the back of his book.

"How about a game of cards?" Ghosh suggested. He pulled out a well-worn deck from his suit pocket, with Big Ben's image on the back. But Ashoke politely declined, for he knew no card games, and besides which, he preferred to read. One by one the passengers brushed their teeth in the vestibule, changed into their pajamas, fastened the curtain around their compartments, and went to sleep. Ghosh offered to take the upper berth, climbing barefoot up the ladder, his suit carefully folded away, so that Ashoke had the window to himself. The

Bihari couple shared some sweets from a box and drank water from the same cup without either of them putting their lips to the rim, then settled into their berths as well, switching off the lights and turning their heads to the wall.

Only Ashoke continued to read, still seated, still dressed. A single small bulb glowed dimly over his head. From time to time he looked through the open window at the inky Bengal night, at the vague shapes of palm trees and the simplest of homes. Carefully he turned the soft yellow pages of his book, a few delicately tunneled by worms. The steam engine puffed reassuringly, powerfully. Deep in his chest he felt the rough jostle of the wheels. Sparks from the smokestack passed by his window. A fine layer of sticky soot dotted one side of his face, his eyelid, his arm, his neck; his grandmother would insist that he scrub himself with a cake of Margo soap as soon as he arrived. Immersed in the sartorial plight of Akaky Akakyevich, lost in the wide, snow-white, windy avenues of St. Petersburg, unaware that one day he was to dwell in a snowy place himself, Ashoke was still reading at two-thirty in the morning, one of the few passengers on the train who was awake, when the locomotive engine and seven bogies derailed from the broad-gauge line. The sound was like a bomb exploding. The first four bogies capsized into a depression alongside the track. The fifth and sixth, containing the first-class and air-conditioned passengers, telescoped into each other, killing the passengers in their sleep. The seventh, where Ashoke was sitting, capsized as well, flung by the speed of the crash farther into the field. The accident occurred 209 kilometers from Calcutta, between the Ghatshila and Dhalbumgarh stations. The train guard's portable phone would not work; it was only after the guard ran nearly five kilometers from the site of the accident, to Ghatshila, that he was able to transmit the first message for help. Over an hour passed before the rescuers arrived, bearing lanterns and shovels and axes to pry bodies from the cars.

Ashoke can still remember their shouts, asking if anyone

was alive. He remembers trying to shout back, unsuccessfully, his mouth emitting nothing but the faintest rasp. He remembers the sound of people half-dead around him, moaning and tapping on the walls of the train, whispering hoarsely for help, words that only those who were also trapped and injured could possibly hear. Blood drenched his chest and the right arm of his shirt. He had been thrust partway out the window. He remembers being unable to see anything at all; for the first hours he thought that perhaps, like his grandfather whom he was on his way to visit, he'd gone blind. He remembers the acrid odor of flames, the buzzing of flies, children crying, the taste of dust and blood on his tongue. They were nowhere, somewhere in a field. Milling about them were villagers, police inspectors, a few doctors. He remembers believing that he was dying, that perhaps he was already dead. He could not feel the lower half of his body, and so was unaware that the mangled limbs of Ghosh were draped over his legs. Eventually he saw the cold, unfriendly blue of earliest morning, the moon and a few stars still lingering in the sky. The pages of his book, which had been tossed from his hand, fluttered in two sections a few feet away from the train. The glare from a search lantern briefly caught the pages, momentarily distracting one of the rescuers. "Nothing here," Ashoke heard someone say. "Let's keep going."

But the lantern's light lingered, just long enough for Ashoke to raise his hand, a gesture that he believed would consume the small fragment of life left in him. He was still clutching a single page of "The Overcoat," crumpled tightly in his fist, and when he raised his hand the wad of paper dropped from his fingers. "Wait!" he heard a voice cry out. "The fellow by that book. I saw him move."

He was pulled from the wreckage, placed on a stretcher, transported on another train to a hospital in Tatanagar. He had broken his pelvis, his right femur, and three of his ribs on the right side. For the next year of his life he lay flat on his back, ordered to keep as still as possible as the bones of his body healed. There was a risk that his right leg might be perma-

nently paralyzed. He was transferred to Calcutta Medical College, where two screws were put into his hips. By December he had returned to his parents' house in Alipore, carried through the courtyard and up the red clay stairs like a corpse, hoisted on the shoulders of his four brothers. Three times a day he was spoon-fed. He urinated and defecated into a tin pan. Doctors and visitors came and went. Even his blind grandfather from Jamshedpur paid a visit. His family had saved the newspaper accounts. In a photograph, he observed the train smashed to shards, piled jaggedly against the sky, security guards sitting on the unclaimed belongings. He learned that fishplates and bolts had been found several feet from the main track, giving rise to the suspicion, never subsequently confirmed, of sabotage. That bodies had been mutilated beyond recognition. "Holiday-Makers' Tryst with Death," the *Times of India* had written.

In the beginning, for most of the day, he had stared at his bedroom ceiling, at the three beige blades of the fan churning at its center, their edges grimy. He could hear the top edge of a calendar scraping against the wall behind him when the fan was on. If he moved his neck to the right he had a view of a window with a dusty bottle of Dettol on its ledge and, if the shutters were open, the concrete of the wall that surrounded the house, the pale brown geckos that scampered there. He listened to the constant parade of sounds outside, footsteps, bicycle bells, the incessant squawking of crows and of the horns of cycle rickshaws in the lane so narrow that taxis could not fit. He heard the tube well at the corner being pumped into urns. Every evening at dusk he heard a conch shell being blown in the house next door to signal the hour for prayer. He could smell but not see the shimmering green sludge that collected in the open sewer. Life within the house continued. His father came and went from work, his brothers and sisters from school. His mother worked in the kitchen, checking in on him periodically, her lap stained with turmeric. Twice daily the maid twisted rags into buckets of water and wiped the floors.

During the day he was groggy from painkillers. At night he

dreamed either that he was still trapped inside the train or, worse, that the accident had never happened, that he was walking down a street, taking a bath, sitting cross-legged on the floor and eating a plate of food. And then he would wake up, coated in sweat, tears streaming down his face, convinced that he would never live to do such things again. Eventually, in an attempt to avoid his nightmares, he began to read, late at night, which was when his motionless body felt most restless, his mind agile and clear. Yet he refused to read the Russians his grandfather had brought to his bedside, or any novels, for that matter. Those books, set in countries he had never seen, reminded him only of his confinement. Instead he read his engineering books, trying his best to keep up with his courses, solving equations by flashlight. In those silent hours, he thought often of Ghosh. "Pack a pillow and a blanket," he heard Ghosh say. He remembered the address Ghosh had written on a page of his diary, somewhere behind the tram depot in Tollygunge. Now it was the home of a widow, a fatherless son. Each day, to bolster his spirits, his family reminded him of the future, the day he would stand unassisted, walk across the room. It was for this, each day, that his father and mother prayed. For this that his mother gave up meat on Wednesdays. But as the months passed, Ashoke began to envision another sort of future. He imagined not only walking, but walking away, as far as he could from the place in which he was born and in which he had nearly died. The following year, with the aid of a cane, he returned to college and graduated, and without telling his parents he applied to continue his engineering studies abroad. Only after he'd been accepted with a full fellowship, a newly issued passport in hand, did he inform them of his plans. "But we already nearly lost you once," his bewildered father had protested. His siblings had pleaded and wept. His mother, speechless, had refused food for three days. In spite of all that, he'd gone.

Seven years later, there are still certain images that wipe him flat. They lurk around a corner as he rushes through the

engineering department at MIT, checks his campus mail. They hover by his shoulder as he leans over a plate of rice at dinnertime or nestles against Ashima's limbs at night. At every turning point in his life—at his wedding when he stood behind Ashima, encircling her waist and peering over her shoulder as they poured puffed rice into a fire, or during his first hours in America, seeing a small gray city caked with snow—he has tried but failed to push these images away: the twisted, battered, capsized bogies of the train, his body twisted below it, the terrible crunching sound he had heard but not comprehended, his bones crushed as fine as flour. It is not the memory of pain that haunts him; he has no memory of that. It is the memory of waiting before he was rescued, and the persistent fear, rising up in his throat, that he might not have been rescued at all. To this day he is claustrophobic, holding his breath in elevators, feels pent-up in cars unless the windows are open on both sides. On planes he requests the bulkhead seat. At times the wailing of children fills him with deepest dread. At times he still presses his ribs to make sure they are solid.

He presses them now, in the hospital, shaking his head in relief, disbelief. Although it is Ashima who carries the child, he, too, feels heavy, with the thought of life, of his life and the life about to come from it. He was raised without running water, nearly killed at twenty-two. Again he tastes the dust on his tongue, sees the twisted train, the giant overturned iron wheels. None of this was supposed to happen. But no, he had survived it. He was born twice in India, and then a third time, in America. Three lives by thirty. For this he thanks his parents, and their parents, and the parents of their parents. He does not thank God; he openly reveres Marx and quietly refuses religion. But there is one more dead soul he has to thank. He cannot thank the book; the book has perished, as he nearly did, in scattered pieces, in the earliest hours of an October day, in a field 209 kilometers from Calcutta. Instead of thanking God he thanks Gogol, the Russian writer who had saved his life, when Patty enters the waiting room.