

VINTAGE **DESAI**

Clear
Light
of Day

VINTAGE

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About the Book

To the family living in the shabby, dusty house in Delhi, Tara's visit brings a sharp reminder of life outside tradition. For Bim, coping endlessly with their problems, there is a renewal of the old jealousies for, unlike her sister, she has failed to escape. Looking at both the cruelty and the beauty of family life and the harshness of India's modern history, *Clear Light of Day* brilliantly evokes the painful process of confronting and healing old wounds.

About the Author

Born and educated in India, **Anita Desai** is the author of many novels and short stories, and has been shortlisted for the Booker Prize three times for her novels *Clear Light of Day*, *In Custody* and *Fasting, Feasting*. She is the Emerita John E. Burchard Professor of Humanities at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a Fellow of both the American Academy of Arts and the Royal Society of Literature.

ALSO BY ANITA DESAI

Cry, the Peacock
Voices in the City
Bye-Bye, Blackbird
Where Shall We Go This Summer?
Games at Twilight
Fire on the Mountain
Village by the Sea
In Custody
Baumgartner's Bombay
Journey to Ithaca
Fasting, Feasting
Diamond Dust
The Zigzag Way
The Artist of Disappearance
The Complete Stories

For Didi and Pip

ANITA DESAI

Clear Light of Day

VINTAGE

Memory is a strange bell -
Jubilee and knell -

Emily Dickinson

See, now they vanish,
The faces and places, with the self which,
as it could, loved them,
To become renewed, transfigured, in
another pattern.

T.S. Eliot

The koels began to call before daylight. Their voices rang out from the dark trees like an arrangement of bells, calling and echoing each other's calls, mocking and enticing each other into ever higher and shriller calls. More and more joined in as the sun rose and when Tara could no longer bear the querulous demand in their voices, she got up and went out onto the veranda to find the blank white glare of the summer sun thrusting in between the round pillars and the purple bougainvillea. Wincing, she shielded her eyes as she searched for the birds that had clamoured for her appearance, but saw nothing. The cane chairs on the veranda stood empty. A silent line of ants filed past her feet and down the steps into the garden. Then she saw her sister's figure in white, slowly meandering along what as children they had called 'the rose walk'.

Dropping her hands to pick up the hem of her long nightdress, Tara ran down the steps, bowing her head to the morning sun that came slicing down like a blade of steel onto the back of her neck, and crossed the dry crackling grass of the lawn to join her sister who stood watching, smiling.

The rose walk was a strip of grass, still streaked green and grey, between two long beds of roses at the far end of the lawn where a line of trees fringed the garden – fig and silver oak, mulberry and eucalyptus. Here there was still shade and, it seemed to Tara, the only bit of cultivation left; everything else, even the papaya and lemon trees, the bushes of hibiscus and oleander, the beds of canna lilies,

seemed abandoned to dust and neglect, to struggle as they could against the heat and sun of summer.

But the rose walk had been maintained almost as it was. Or was it? It seemed to Tara that there had been far more roses in it when she was a child – luscious shaggy pink ones, small crisp white ones tinged with green, silky yellow ones that smelt of tea – and not just these small negligible crimson heads that lolled weakly on their thin stems. Tara had grown to know them on those mornings when she had trailed up and down after her mother who was expecting her youngest child and had been advised by her doctor to take some exercise. Her mother had not liked exercise, perhaps not the new baby either, and had paced up and down with her arms folded and her head sunk in thought while the koels mocked and screamed and dive-bombed the trees. Tara had danced and skipped after her, chattering, till she spied something flashing from under a pile of fallen rose petals – a pearl, or a silver ring? – and swooped upon it with a cry that broke into her mother's reverie and made her stop and frown. Tara had excitedly swept aside the petals and uncovered – a small, blanched snail. Her face wrinkling with disgust, her mother turned and paced on without a word, leaving Tara on her knees to contemplate the quality of disillusion.

But here was Bim. Bim, grey and heavy now and not so unlike their mother in appearance, only awake, watchful, gazing at her with her fullest attention and appraisal. Bim laughed when she saw Tara panting slightly in her eagerness.

Tara laughed back. 'Bim, the old rose walk is still here.'

'Of course,' said Bim, 'only the roses grow smaller and sicker every year,' and she bent to shake a long spindly branch from which a fully bloomed rose dangled. It came apart instantly, revealing a small naked centre and a few pathetic stamens clinging to the bald head while the petals fell in a bunch to the chocolate earth below.

Tara's mouth opened in dismay at the destruction of a rose in full bloom – she would never have done what Bim did – and then she saw the petals that had clung together in a bunch in their fall part and scatter themselves. As she stared, a petal rose and tumbled onto its back and she saw uncovered the gleam of a – a pearl? a silver ring? Something that gleamed, something that flashed, then flowed – and she saw it was her childhood snail slowly, resignedly making its way from under the flower up a clod of earth only to tumble off the top onto its side – an eternal, miniature Sisyphus. She brought her hands together in a clap and cried, 'Look, a snail!'

Bim watched her sister in surprise and amusement. Was Tara, grown woman, mother of grown daughters, still child enough to play with a snail? Would she go down on her knees to scoop it up on a leaf and watch it draw its albuminous trail, lift its tiny antennae, gaze about it with protruding eyes and then, the instant before the leaf dipped and it slid downwards, draw itself into its pale pod?

As Tara performed the rites of childhood over the handy creature, Bim stood with lowered head, tugging at the hair that hung loosely about her face as she had done when she had sat beside her brother's bed that summer that he was ill, with her forehead lowered to the wooden edge of the bed, a book of poetry open on her lap, reading aloud the lines:

*Now sleeps the crimson petal, now the white;
Nor waves the cypress in the palace walk;
Nor winks the gold fin in the porphyry font:
The firefly wakens...*

Her lips moved to the lines she had forgotten she remembered till she saw the crimson petals fall in a heap on the snail in the mud, but she would not say them aloud to Tara. She had no wish to use the lines as an incantation to

revive that year, that summer when he had been ill and she had nursed him and so much had happened in a rush. To bury it all again, she put out her toe and scattered the petals evenly over the damp soil.

Now Tara's hand trembled, the leaf she held dipped and the doomed creature slid soundlessly back to earth.

They both stood staring as it lay there, shocked and still.

Tara murmured 'You looked so like Mama from a distance, Bim - I mean, it's so - the sun -' for she realised at once that Bim would not like the comparison.

But Bim did not seem to hear, or care. 'Did you sleep at all?' she asked instead, for last night on arriving from the airport Tara had laughed and chattered and claimed to be too excited to sleep.

'How could I?' cried Tara, laughing, and talked of the koels in the morning, and the dog barking in the night, and the mosquitoes singing and stinging in the dark, as they walked together up the grassy path, Tara in her elegant pale blue nylon nightgown and elegant silver slippers and Bim in a curious shapeless hand-made garment that Tara could see she had fashioned out of an old cotton sari by sewing it up at both sides, leaving enough room for her arms to come through and cutting out a wide scoop for her neck. At the feet a border of blue and green peacocks redeemed the dress from total shabbiness and was - Tara laughed lightly - original. 'How he barks,' she repeated. 'Don't the neighbours complain?'

'I think they've grown used to him at last, or else they've realised it does no good to complain - I never will chain him up and, as I tell them when they do protest, he has such a beautiful voice, it's a pleasure to hear him. Not like the yipping and yapping of other people's little lap dogs,' she said with a toss of her grey head.

Although they spoke softly, no louder than a pair of birds to each other, the dog must have heard his name or realised he was being discussed. When Tara had come out onto the

veranda he had been asleep under the wooden divan, hidden from her by the striped cotton rug with which it was covered, and he had only twitched his whiskers when he heard her pass by. Now he was suddenly out there on the grass walk with them, standing with his four legs very wide apart, his nose diving down into the clods of earth where the snail still lay futilely struggling to upright itself. As it finally flipped onto its edge, he gave a thunderous sneeze.

‘Badshah!’ cried Bim, delighted with his theatrical performance, and his one eye gleamed at the approval in her voice while the other followed the snail. But it disappeared under the rose petals once more and he came lolloping towards them, stubbed his moist nose into their legs, scuffed his dirty claws into their heels, salivated over their feet and then rushed past them in a show of leadership.

‘He does like to be first always,’ Bim explained.

‘Is he nine now, Bim, or ten?’

‘Twelve,’ exclaimed Bim. ‘See his old whiskers all white,’ she said, diving forwards at his head and catching him by the ears, making him stand still with his head against her thigh. He closed his eyes and smiled a foolish smile of pleasure at her attention, then drew away with a long line of saliva dribbling from his jaws onto the grass, more copious and irregular than the fluent snail’s. ‘He is Begum’s son, you know, and she lived to be – fourteen?’

Tara lifted her hair from the back of her neck and let it fall again, luxuriantly, with a sigh. ‘How everything goes on and on here, and never changes,’ she said. ‘I used to think about it all,’ and she waved her arm in a circular swoop to encompass the dripping tap at the end of the grass walk, the trees that quivered and shook with birds, the loping dog, the roses – ‘and it is all exactly the same, whenever we come home.’

‘Does that disappoint you?’ Bim asked drily, giving her a quick sideways look. ‘Would you like to come back and find

it changed?’

Tara’s face was suddenly wound up tightly in a frown as if such a thought had never struck her before and she found it confusing. ‘Changed? How? You mean the house newly painted, the garden newly planted, new people coming and going? Oh no, how could I, Bim?’ and she seemed truly shocked by the possibility.

‘But you wouldn’t want to return to life as it used to be, would you?’ Bim continued to tease her in that dry voice. ‘All that dullness, boredom, waiting. Would you care to live that over again? Of course not. Do you know anyone who would – secretly, sincerely, in his innermost self – *really* prefer to return to childhood?’

Still frowning, Tara murmured meaninglessly ‘Prefer to what?’

‘Oh, to going on – to growing up – leaving – going away – into the world – something wider, freer – brighter,’ Bim laughed. ‘Brighter! Brighter!’ she called, shading her eyes against the brightness.

Tara’s head sank low, her frown deepened. She could not trust Bim to be quite serious: in her experience, the elder sister did not take the younger seriously – and so all she said was a murmured ‘But you didn’t, Bim.’

‘I?’ said Bim flatly, with her eyes still shaded against the light that streamed across the parched lawn and pressed against the trees at the fringe. ‘Oh, I never go anywhere. It must seem strange to you and Bakul who have travelled so much – to come back and find people like Baba and me who have never travelled at all. And if we still had *Mira-masi* with us, wouldn’t that complete the picture? This faded old picture in its petrified frame?’ She stopped to pluck the dead heads off a rose bush dusted grey with disease. ‘*Mira-masi* swigging secretly from her brandy bottle. Baba winding up his gramophone. And Raja, if Raja were here, playing Lord Byron on his death-bed. I, reading to him. That is what

you might have come back to, Tara. How would you have liked that?’

Tara stood staring at her silver toes, at the clods of upturned earth in the beds and the scattered dead heads, and felt a prickle of distrust in Bim. Was Bim being cruel again? There could be no other motive. There could be no reply. She made none and Bim swung away and marched on, striding beside Badshah.

‘That is the risk of coming home to Old Delhi,’ she announced in the hard voice that had started up the prickle of distrust that ran over the tips of the hairs on Tara’s arms, rippling them. ‘Old Delhi does not change. It only decays. My students tell me it is a great cemetery, every house a tomb. Nothing but sleeping graves. Now *New* Delhi, they say is different. That is where things happen. The way they describe it, it sounds like a nest of fleas. So much happens there, it must be a jumping place. I never go. Baba never goes. And here, here nothing happens at all. Whatever happened, happened long ago – in the time of the Tughlaqs, the Khiljis, the Sultanate, the Moghuls – that lot.’ She snapped her fingers in time to her words, smartly. ‘And then the British built New Delhi and moved everything out. Here we are left rocking on the back-waters, getting duller and greyer, I suppose. Anyone who isn’t dull and grey goes away – to New Delhi, to England, to Canada, the Middle East. They don’t come back.’

‘I must be peculiar then,’ Tara’s voice rose bravely. ‘I keep coming back. And Bakul.’

‘They pay your fare, don’t they?’ her sister said.

‘But we *like* to come, Bim. We *must* come – if we are not to lose touch, I with all of you, with home, and he with the country. He’s been planning this trip for months. When the girls arrive, and we go to Hyderabad for the wedding, Bakul wants to go on from there and do a tour of the whole country. He did it ten years ago and he says it is time to do it again, to make sure –’

‘Of what?’

The question was sarcastic but Tara gave her head a toss of assurance and pride. Her voice too had taken on the strength and sureness that Bim noticed it usually did when she spoke of her husband. She told Bim evenly ‘That he hasn’t forgotten, or lost touch with the way things are here. If you lose touch, then you can’t represent your country, can you?’ she ended, on an artificial note.

Bim of course detected that. She grunted ‘Hmph. I don’t know. If that is what they tell you in the diplomatic service then that is what you must say.’

‘But it’s true,’ Tara exclaimed, immediately dropping artificiality and sounding earnest. ‘One has to come back, every few years, to find out and make sure again. I’d like to travel with him really. But there’s the wedding in Raja’s house, I suppose that will be enough to keep us busy. Are you coming, Bim? You and Baba? Couldn’t we all go together? Then it will be a proper family reunion. Say you’ll come! You have your summer vacation now. What will you do alone in Delhi, in the heat? Say you’ll come!’

Bim said nothing. In the small silence a flock of mynahs suddenly burst out of the green domes of the trees and, in a loud commotion of yellow beaks and brown wings, disappeared into the sun. While their shrieks and cackles still rang in the air, they heard another sound, one that made Bim stop and stare and the dog lift his head, prick up his ears and then charge madly across to the eucalyptus trees that grew in a cluster by the wall. Rearing up on his hind legs, he tore long strips of blue and mauve bark off the silken pink tree trunks and, throwing back his head, bellowed in that magnificent voice that Bim admired so much and that soured – or spiced – her relations with the neighbours.

‘What is it?’ called Tara as Bim ran forwards, lifting the peacock-edged nightie in order to hurry.

It was her cat, crouched in the fork of the blue and pink tree, black and bitter at being stranded where she could not make her way down. Discovered first by the mynahs and then by Badshah, she felt disgraced.

Bim stood below her, stretching out her arms and calling, imploring her to jump. Badshah warned her not to do anything of the sort in a series of excited barks and whines. Tara waited, laughing, while the cat turned her angry face from one to the other, wondering whom to trust. At last Bim coaxed her down and she came slithering along the satiny bark, growling and grumbling with petulance and complaint at her undignified descent. Then she was in Bim's arms, safely cradled and shielded from Badshah's boisterous bumps and jumps, cuddled and cushioned and petted with such an extravagance of affection that Tara could not help raising her eyebrows in embarrassment and wonder.

Although Bim was rubbing her chin on the cat's flat-topped head and kissing the cold tips of her ears, she seemed to notice Tara's expression. 'I know what you're thinking,' she said. 'You're thinking how old spinsters go ga-ga over their pets because they haven't children. Children are the *real* thing, you think.'

Tara's look of surprise changed to guilt. 'What makes you say that? Actually, I was thinking about the girls. I was wondering -'

'Exactly. That's what I said. You think animals take the place of babies for us love-starved spinsters,' Bim said with a certain satisfaction and lowered the rumped cat to the gravel walk as they came up to the house. 'But you're wrong,' she said, striding across the sun-slashed drive. 'You can't possibly feel for them what I do about these wretched animals of mine.'

'Oh Bim,' protested Tara, recognising the moment when Bim went too far with which all their encounters had ended throughout their childhood, but she was prevented from explaining herself by the approach of a monstrous body of

noise that seemed to be pushing its way out through a tight tunnel, rustily grinding through, and then emerged into full brassy volume, making the pigeons that lived on the ledge under the veranda ceiling throw up their wings and depart as if at a shot. It was not Bakul who was responsible for the cacophony. He was sitting – flabbily, flaccidly – in one of the cane chairs on the veranda with the tea tray in front of him, waiting for someone to come and pour. The noise beat and thrummed in one of the curtained rooms behind him. ‘Sm-o-o-ke gets in your eyes,’ moaned an agonised voice, and Tara sighed, and her shoulders drooped by a visible inch or two.

‘Baba still plays the same old records?’ she asked as they went slowly up the wide stairs between the massed pots of spider lilies and asparagus fern to the veranda.

‘He never stops,’ said Bim, smiling. ‘Not for a day.’

‘Don’t you mind the noise?’

‘Not any more,’ said Bim, the lightness of her tone carefully contrived. ‘I don’t hear it any more.’

‘It’s loud,’ complained Tara in a distressed voice. ‘I used to look for records to send Baba – I thought he’d like some new ones – but they don’t make 78s any more.’

‘Oh he doesn’t want any new records,’ said Bim. ‘He wouldn’t play them. He loves his old ones.’

‘Isn’t it strange,’ said Tara, wincing at the unmodulated roar that swept across the still, shady veranda in an almost visible onslaught of destruction.

‘We *are* strange, I *told* you,’ laughed Bim, striding across the tiled floor to the cane chairs and the tea tray. ‘Oh, Bakul – *bhai*, you’re up. Did you sleep?’ she asked carelessly, sitting down in front of the tray. But instead of pouring out the tea she only lifted the milk jug and, bending down, filled a saucer for the cat who crouched before it and began to lap even before Bim had finished pouring so that some drops fell on her ears and on her whiskers, a sight that made Bim laugh as she held the jug, waiting for the cat to finish the milk. Then she bent and refilled the saucer. Tara, who had

poured out a cup of tea for Bakul, waited for her to surrender the milk jug. When she did, there was very little left in it for Bakul's tea. Tara shook it to bring out a few reluctant drops.

'Is that enough?' she asked uneasily, even guiltily, handing the cup to Bakul.

He shrugged, making no reply, his lower lip thrust out in the beginning of a sulk. It may not have been the lack of milk, though, it might have been the din that stood about them like sheets of corrugated iron, making conversation impossible. As he stirred his tea thoughtfully with a little spoon, the song rose to its raucous crescendo as though the singer had a dagger plunged into his breast and were letting fly the heartfelt notes of his last plaint on earth. Then at last the rusty needle ground to a halt in the felt-embedded groove of the antique record and they all sighed, simultaneously, and sank back in their chairs, exhausted.

The pigeons that had retreated to the roof came fluttering back to their nests and settled down with small complaining sounds, guttural and comfortable. The bamboo screen in the doorway lifted and Baba came out for his tea.

He did not look as if he could be held responsible for any degree of noise whatsoever. Coming out into the veranda, he blinked as if the sun surprised him. He was in his pyjamas - an old pair with frayed ends, over which he wore a grey bush-shirt worn and washed almost to translucency. His face, too, was blanched, like a plant grown underground or in deepest shade, and his hair was quite white, giving his young, fine face a ghostly look that made people start whenever he appeared.

But no one on the veranda started. Instead, they turned on him their most careful smiles, trying to make their smiles express feelings that were comforting, reassuring, not startling.

Then Bim began to bustle. Now she called out for more milk and a freshly refilled jug appeared from the pantry, full to the brim, before Bakul's widened eyes. Baba's cup was filled not with tea at all but with milk that had seemed so short a moment ago. Then, to top it, a spoonful of sugar was poured in as well and all stirred up with a tremendous clatter and handed, generously slopping, to Baba who took it without any expression of distaste or embarrassment and sat down on his little cane stool to sip it. Even the cat was transfixed by the spectacle and sat back on her haunches, staring at him with eyes that were circles of sharp green glass.

Only Bim seemed to notice nothing odd. Nor did she seem to think it necessary to speak to or be spoken to by Baba. She said, 'Look at her. You'd think I had given her enough but no, if we take any ourselves, she feels it's come out of her share.'

After a minute Tara realised she was speaking of the cat. Tara had lost the childhood habit of including animals in the family once she had married and begun the perpetual travels and moves that precluded the keeping of pets. It was with a small effort that she tore her eyes away from her brother and regarded the reproachful cat.

'She's too fat,' she said, thinking pet-owners generally liked such remarks. It was not a truthful one: the cat was thin as a string.

Bim put out her toe and scratched the creature under her ear but the cat turned angrily away, refusing such advances, and kept her eyes riveted on Baba till he had sipped the last drop of milk and put the cup back on the saucer with an unmistakably empty ring. Then she dropped sulkily onto the tiles and lay there noisily tearing at her fur with a sandpapered tongue of an angry red.

While the two women sat upright and tense and seethed with unspoken speech, the two men seemed dehydrated, emptied out, with not a word to say about anything. Only

the pigeons cooed on and on, too lazy even to open their beaks, content to mutter in their throats rather than sing or call. The dog, stretched out at Bim's feet, writhed and coiled, now catching his tail between his teeth, now scrabbling with his paws, then bit at fleas and chewed his hair, weaving a thick mat of sound together with the cat who was busy with herself.

Bakul could bear it no longer. When his expression had grown so thin and so sour that it was about to split, he said, in a voice meant to be sonorous, 'Our first morning in Delhi.' To Bim's wonder and astonishment, Tara smiled at this radiantly as though he had made a profound remark on which he was to be congratulated. He gave her a small, confidential smile in return. 'What shall we do with it?'

Bim suddenly scratched her head as if the dog had started up something there. 'I don't know about you,' she said, 'but I have some of my students coming over this morning.'

'Students? But Bim, I thought your summer vacation had begun.'

'Yes, yes, but I wanted to give them some reading lists so they don't waste all their time walking up and down the Mall in Simla or going to the pictures. Then they reminded me I had missed a tutorial and had to see some of their papers. You see, it isn't just I who makes them work - they make me work, too. So I asked them to come down here - they love to come, I don't know why. I'll go and get ready - I'm late. And you? You two? What will you do?'

Tara gazed at her husband for answer till he finally lowered his eyes by careful inches from the plaster moulding under the ceiling where the pigeons strutted and squatted and puffed themselves, and said 'Perhaps I could ask my uncle to send us a car. Then we could go and call on some of my relations in New Delhi. They will be expecting us.'

'I'll get ready,' said Tara, instantly getting to her feet as if in relief.

Bim, who remembered her as a languid little girl, listless, a dawdler, noted her quick movements, her efficient briskness, with some surprise, but said nothing. Instead, she turned to Baba and drawled, slowly, 'And Baba,' as she bent forwards and started stacking the cups onto the wooden tray. The others got up and stretched and walked about the veranda except for Baba who sat calmly with his long white hands dangling loosely on either side of him. When Bim said 'Baba' again, he smiled gently at the floor. 'Baba,' she said again in a very low voice so that Bakul, standing on the steps and scrutinizing the bougainvilleas at the pillars, would not hear her, 'do you think you might go to the office today?'

Tara, who was at the door at the end of the veranda, about to lift the bamboo curtain and go in, paused. Somehow she had heard. Even in her rush to get dressed and be ready for anything her husband might suggest, she paused in shock to find that Bim still made attempts to send Baba to the office. Considering their futility, she thought they must have been given up long ago. She could not help stopping and turning round to see Bim piling up the tea tray and Baba seated on his small child's stool, smiling, his hands helplessly dangling, the busy dog licking, scratching, while the morning took another stride forward and stood with its feet planted on the tiled floor.

'Won't you go today, Baba?' Bim asked softly, not looking at him, looking at the tea cups. 'Do go. You could catch a bus. It'll make a change. We'll all be busy. Then come home to lunch. Or stay if you find it interesting.'

Baba smiled at the bare tiles. His hands swung as if loose in their sockets, as if in a light breeze. But there was no breeze: the heat dropped out of the sky and stood before them like a sheet of foil.

Then Bim got up and lifted the tray and went barefoot down the other end of the veranda to the pantry. Tara could hear her talking to the cook in her normal speaking voice.

She turned and went into the room herself, unable to face the sight of Baba alone and hopeless on the veranda. But Baba did not stay either. He must have gone back to his room, too, for in another minute or two she heard that ominous roar pushing its way through the tunnel and emerging as the maudlin clamour of 'Lilli Marlene'.

'Now this is precisely what I told you,' Bakul said, bustling into the bedroom after making his phone call. 'I pointed out to you how much more convenient it would be to stay with my uncle and aunt, right in the centre of town, on Aurangzeb Road, how it would save us all the trouble of finding a car to travel up and down in...'

Tara, who was bending over the bed, laying out his clothes, straightened and said in a strained voice 'But I had not meant to go anywhere. I only wanted to stay at home.'

He flicked his silk dressing gown open and said impatiently 'You know you can't do that when there's so much to do - relations to visit, colleagues to look up, all that shopping you had planned to do -'

'I'll wait till the girls come. I'll go shopping with them,' said Tara with an unaccustomed stubbornness. She held up a cluster of ties and waited, a bit sullenly, for him to choose one.

He put out his hand and picked one of broadly striped raw silk and said 'You surely don't mean that. You can't just sit about with your brother and sister all day, doing nothing.'

'But it's what I want - just to be at home again, with them. And of course there are the neighbours - I'll see them. But I don't want to go anywhere today, and I don't want to go to New Delhi at all.'

'Of course you will come,' Bakul said quite sharply, going towards the bathroom with an immense towel he had picked up. 'There's no question about that.'

When the bathroom door had shut, Tara went out onto the veranda again. The veranda ran all around the house and

every room opened out onto it. This room had been hers and Bim's when they were girls. It opened onto the dense grove of guava trees that separated the back of the house from the row of servants' quarters. Bright morning sounds of activity came from them – a water tap running, a child crying, a cock crowing, a bicycle bell ringing – but the house was separated from them by the thick screen of low, dusty guava trees in which invisible parrots screamed and quarrelled over the fruit. Now and then one fell to the ground with a soft thud. Tara could see some lying in the dust with chunks bitten out by the parrots. If she had been younger – no, if she had been sure Bakul would not look out and see – she would have run down the veranda steps and searched for one that was whole. Her mouth tingled with longing to bite into that hard astringent flesh under the green rind. She wondered if her girls would do it when they arrived to spend their holidays here. No, they would not. Much travelled, brought up in embassies, fluent in several languages, they were far too sophisticated for such rustic pleasures, she knew, and felt guilty over her own lack of that desirable quality. She had fooled Bakul into believing that she had acquired it, that he had shown her how to acquire it. But it was all just dust thrown into his eyes, dust.

Further up the veranda was Baba's room and from behind the light bamboo curtain that hung in the doorway came the guttural rattling of 'Don't Fence Me In'. For a while Tara leant her head against a pillar, listening. It was not unfamiliar, yet it disturbed.

A part of her was sinking languidly down into the passive pleasure of having returned to the familiar – like a pebble, she had been picked up and hurled back into the pond, and sunk down through the layer of green scum, through the secret cool depths to the soft rich mud at the bottom, sending up a line of bubbles of relief and joy. A part of her twitched, stirred like a fin in resentment: why was the pond

so muddy and stagnant? Why had nothing changed? She had changed – why did it not keep up with her?

Why did Bim allow nothing to change? Surely Baba ought to begin to grow and develop at last, to unfold and reach out and stretch. But whenever she saw them, at intervals of three or five years, all was exactly as before.

Drawing away from the pillar, she moved towards his room, propelled by her disturbance, by her resentment at this petrified state in which her family lived. Bakul was right to criticise it, disapprove of it. Yes, he was right, she told herself and, lifting the dusty bamboo curtain, slipped into Baba's room.

He was sitting on his bed, a string cot spread with a cotton rug and an old sheet, that stood in the centre of the room under the slowly revolving electric fan. He was crouched low, listening raptly to the last of 'Don't Fence Me In' unwinding itself on the old HMV gramophone on a small bamboo table beside his bed. The records, not so very many of them – there must have been breakages after all – were stacked on a shelf beneath the table in their tattered yellow sleeves. The string cot, the table, the HMV gramophone, a canvas chair and a wardrobe – nothing else. It was a large room and looked bare. Once it had been Aunt Mira's room, and crowded. Baba looked up at her.

Tara stood staring, made speechless by his fine, serene face, the shapeliness of his long fingers, his hands that either moved lightly as if in a breeze or rested calmly at his sides. He was an angel, she told herself, catching her lip between her teeth – an angel descended to earth, unsoiled by any of it.

But then why did he spend his days and years listening to this appalling noise? Her daughters could not live through a day without their record-player either; they, too, kept it heaped with records that slipped down onto the turntable in a regular sequence, keeping them supplied with an almost uninterrupted flow of music to which they worked and