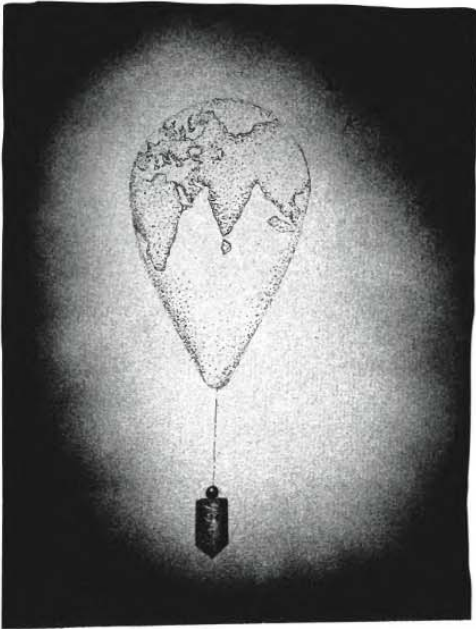


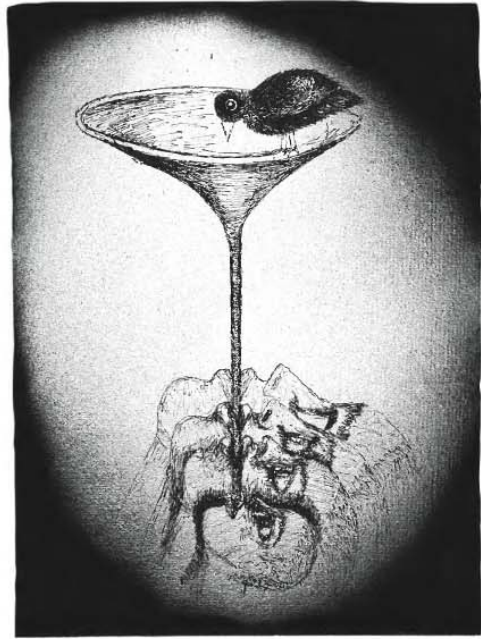
FICTION

IN THE SOUTH

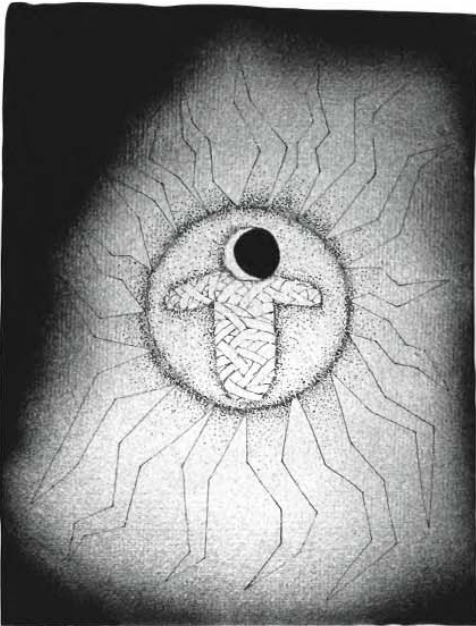
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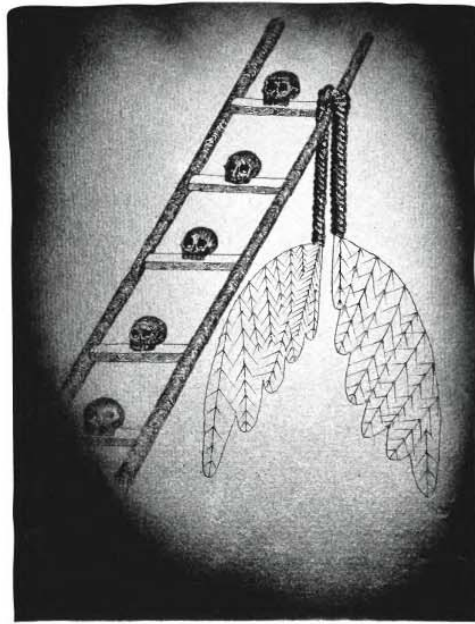
WE ARE MEN OF THE SOUTH



JUNIOR AND SENIOR SPOKE WITH ONE VOICE



BABYDOM IS NOT ONLY OUR PAST, BUT OUR FUTURE TOO



WHAT ELSE WOMAN, IS DEATH?

The day that Junior fell down began like any other day: the explosion of heat rippling the air, the trumpeting sunlight, the traffic's tidal surges, the prayer chants in the distance, the cheap film music rising from the floor below, the loud pelvic thrusts of an "item number" dancing across a neighbor's TV, a child's cry, a mother's rebuke, unexplained laughter, scarlet expectorations, bicycles, the newly plaited hair of schoolgirls, the smell of strong sweet coffee, a green wing flashing in a tree. Senior and Junior, two very old men, opened their eyes in their bedrooms on the fourth floor of a sea-green building on a leafy lane, just out of sight of Elliot's Beach, where, that evening, the young would congregate, as they always did, to perform the rites of youth, not far from the village of the fisherfolk, who had no time for such frivolity. The poor were puritans by night and day. As for the old, they had rites of their own and did not need to wait for evening. With the sun stabbing at them through their window blinds, the two old men struggled to their feet and lurched out onto their adjacent verandas, emerging at almost the same moment, like characters in an ancient tale, trapped in fateful coincidences, unable to escape the consequences of chance.

Almost at once they began to speak. Their words were not new. These were ritual speeches, obeisances to the new day, offered in call-and-response format, like the rhythmic dialogues or "duels" of the virtuosos of Carnatic music during the annual December festival.

"Be thankful we are men of the south," Junior said, stretching and yawning. "Southerners are we, in the south of our city in the south of our country in the south of our continent. God be praised. We are warm, slow, and sensual guys, not like the cold fishes of the north." Senior, scratching first his belly and then the back of his neck, contradicted him at once. "In the first place," Senior said, "the south is a fiction, existing only because men have agreed to call it that. Suppose men had imagined the earth the other way up! We would be the northerners then. The universe does not understand up and down; neither does a dog. To a dog, there is no north or south. In this regard, the points of the compass are like money, which has value only because men say that it does. And in the second place you're not that

warm a character, and a woman would laugh to hear you call yourself sensual. But you are slow—that is beyond a doubt."

This was how they were: they fought, going at each other like ancient wrestlers whose left feet were tied together at the ankles. The rope that bound them so tightly was their name. By a curious chance—which they had come to think of as "destiny" or, as they more often called it, "a curse"—they shared a name, a long name like so many names of the south, a name that neither of them cared to speak. By banishing the name, by reducing it to its initial letter, "V," they made the rope invisible, which did not mean that it did not exist. They echoed each other in other ways—their voices were high, they were of a similarly wiry build and medium height, they were both nearsighted, and, after a lifetime of priding themselves on the quality of their teeth, they had both surrendered to the humiliating inevitability of dentures—but it was the unused name, that symmetrical V., the Name That Could Not Be Spoken, that had joined them together, like Siamese twins, for decades. The two old men did not share a birthday, however. One was seventeen days older than the other. That must have been how "Senior" and "Junior" got started, though the nicknames had been in use so long now that nobody could remember who had originally thought them up. V. Senior and V. Junior they had become, Junior V. and Senior V. forevermore, quarrelling to the death. They were eighty-one years old.

"You look terrible," Junior told Senior, as he did every morning. "You look like a man who is only waiting to die."

Senior—nodding gravely, and also speaking in accordance with their private tradition—responded, "That is better than looking, as you do, like a man who is still waiting to live."

Neither man slept well anymore. At night they lay on hard beds without pillows and, behind their closed eyelids, their unsettled thoughts ran in opposite directions. Of the two men, V. Senior had lived by far the fuller life. He had been the youngest of ten brothers, all of whom had excelled in their chosen fields—as athletes, scientists, teachers, soldiers, priests. He himself had begun his career as a college-champion long-distance runner, had then risen to a senior position with the

railway company, and for years had travelled the railroads, covering tens of thousands of miles to assure himself and the authorities that the proper safety levels were being maintained. He had married a kind woman and fathered six daughters and three sons, each of whom had proved fertile in his or her turn, providing him with a haul of thirty-three grandchildren. His nine brothers had sired a total of thirty-three more children, his nephews and nieces, who had inflicted upon him no fewer than a hundred and eleven further relatives. To many this would have been proof of his good fortune, for a man blessed with two hundred and four family members was a rich man indeed, but abundance gave the ascetically inclined Senior a permanent low-level headache. "If I had been sterile," he told Junior frequently, "how peaceful life would be."

After his retirement, Senior had been one of a group of ten friends who met every day to discuss politics, chess, poetry, and music at a local Besant Nagar coffeehouse, and several of his commentaries on these topics had been published in the excellent daily newspaper based in the city. Among his friends was the editor of that newspaper, and also one of the editor's employees—a celebrated local figure, a bit of a firebrand and too much of a boozier, but the creator of wonderfully grotesque political cartoons. Then there was the city's finest astrologer, who had been trained as an astronomer but had come to believe that the true messages of the stars could not be received through a telescope; and a fellow who for many years had fired the starting pistol at the race-track's well-attended meets; and so on. Senior had revelled in the company of these men, telling his wife that it was a grand thing for a man to have friends from whom he could learn something new every day. But now they were all dead. His friends had gone up in flames one by one, and the coffeehouse that might have preserved their memory had been torn down, too. Of the ten brothers only he remained, and the brothers' wives, too, were long departed. Even his own kindly wife was dead, and he had remarried, finding himself a woman with a wooden leg, toward whom he behaved with an irritability that surprised his children and grandchildren. "Not having much choice at my age," he would say to her, hurtfully, "I chose you." She retaliated

by ignoring his simplest demands, even requests for water, which no civilized person should ever refuse. Her name was Aarthi, but he never used it. Nor did he call her by a diminutive or an endearment. To him she was always "Woman" or "Wife."

Senior endured the multiple health problems of the very old, the daily penances of bowel and urethra, of back and knee, the milkiness climbing in his eyes, the breathing troubles, the nightmares, the slow failing of the soft machine. His days emptied out into tedious inaction. Once, he had given lessons in mathematics, singing, and the Vedas to pass the time. But his pupils had all gone away. There remained the wife with the wooden leg, the blurry television set, and Junior. It was not, by a long chalk, enough. Each morning he regretted that he had not died in the night. Of his two hundred and four family members, quite a few had already gone to their fiery rest. He forgot exactly how many, and their names, inevitably, eluded him. Many of the survivors came to see him and treated him with gentleness and care. When he said that he was ready to die, which was often, their faces took on hurt expressions and their bodies sagged or stiffened, depending on their nature, and they spoke to him reassuringly, encouragingly, and, of course, in injured tones, of the value of a life so full of love. But love had begun to annoy him, like everything else. His was a family of mosquitoes, he thought, a buzzing swarm, and love was their itchy bite. "If only there were a coil one could light to keep one's relations away," he told Junior. "If only there were a net around one's cot that kept them out."

Junior's life had been a disappointment to him. He had not expected to be ordinary. He had been reared by doting parents who had instilled in him a sense of destiny and entitlement, but he had turned out to be an average sort of fellow, doomed by average academic achievement to a life of clerical work in the offices of the municipal water board. His above-average dreams—of road travel, rail travel, air travel, perhaps even space travel—had long since been abandoned. Yet he was not an unhappy man. The discovery of his affliction with the incurable disease of mediocrity might have cowed a less ebullient spirit, but he remained bright-eyed, with a

ready smile for the world. Still, in spite of his apparent enthusiasm for life, there was a certain deficiency in the energy department. He did not run but walked, and walked slowly—had done so even in the distant years of his youth. He abhorred exercise and had a way of poking gentle fun at those who took it. Nor did he interest himself in politics, or the all-pervasive popular culture of the cinema and the music that it spawned. In all significant particulars, he had failed to be a participant in the parade of life. He had not married. The great events of eight decades had managed to occur without any effort on his part to help them along. He had stood by and watched as an empire fell and a nation rose, and avoided expressing an opinion on the matter. He had been a man at a desk. Maintaining the flow of the municipality's water had been a sufficient challenge for him. Yet he gave every appearance of being a man for whom living was still a joy. He had been an only child, so there were few relatives to look out for him in his advanced years. Senior's immense family had adopted him long ago and brought him tiffin and attended to his needs.

The question of the dividing wall between Senior's and Junior's adjoining apartments was sometimes raised by the visiting hordes of Senior's blood kin: whether it should be taken down so that the two old men could share their lives more easily. On this matter, however, Junior and Senior spoke with one voice.

"No!" Junior said.

"Over my dead body," Senior clarified.

"Which would make the whole exercise pointless, anyhow," Junior said, as if that settled things.

The wall remained in place.

Junior had one friend, D'Mello, a man twenty years younger than him, an old colleague from his water-board days. D'Mello had grown up in another city, Mumbai, the legendary bitch-city, *urbs prima in Indis*, and had to be spoken to in English. Whenever D'Mello visited Junior, Senior sulked and refused to speak, even though, secretly, he was proud of his prowess in what he called "the world's No. 1 tongue." Junior tried to hide from Senior how much he looked forward to D'Mello's comings; the younger man bubbled with a kind of cosmopolitan brio that Junior found inspirational. D'Mello always arrived with stories—sometimes angry accounts of injustices against the poor in a Mumbai slum,

sometimes funny anecdotes about the characters who took their ease at the Wayside Inn, the famous Mumbai café in the Kala Ghoda area, named for a no longer present equestrian statue, "the Black Horse district from which the black horse has been exiled." D'Mello fell in love with movie stars (from a distance, of course), and provided gory details of the killing spree of a not-yet-arrested madman in the district of Trombay. "The miscreant is still at large!" he cried gaily. His conversation was littered with wonderful names: Worli Sea Face, Bandra, Hornby Vellard, Breach Candy, Pali Hill. These places sounded altogether more exotic than the prosaic localities to which Junior was accustomed: Besant Nagar, Adyar, Mylapore.

D'Mello's most heartbreaking Mumbai story was his tale of the great poet of the city, who had surrendered to Alzheimer's disease. The poet still walked to his small magazine-infested office every day, without knowing why he went there. His feet knew the way, and so he went and sat looking into space until it was time to go home again and his feet walked him back to his shabby residence, through the evening crowds massing outside Churchgate station—the jasmine sellers, the hustling urchins, the roar of the B.E.S.T. buses, the girls on their Vespas, the sniffing, hungry dogs.

When D'Mello was present and talking, Junior had the sense that he was living another, very different life, a life of action and color; that he was becoming, vicariously, the type of man he had never been—dynamic, passionate, engaged with the world. Senior, observing the light in Junior's eyes, inevitably became cross. One day, when D'Mello was speaking of Mumbai and its people with his habitual, gesticulating fervor, Senior, breaking his rule of silence, snapped at him in English, "Why your body doesn't return there only since your head has already gone?" But D'Mello shook his head sadly. He no longer had a foothold in his city of origin. Only in his dreams and conversations was it still his home. "I will die here," he answered Senior. "In the south, among sour fruits like you."

Senior's wife, the lady with the wooden leg, increasingly took her revenge upon her unloving husband by filling their apartment with family members. She, too, came from a large family, of hundreds

of persons, and she began most particularly to invite her younger relations, the great-nephews and great-nieces, with their wives and husbands and, especially, their babies in tow. The presence in the small apartment of large numbers of babies, toddlers, high-speed pigtailed girls, and slow plump boys fulfilled her own matriarchal ambitions, and also, very satisfyingly, drove Senior wild. It was the babies-in-law that really got his goat. The babies-in-law rattled their rattles and giggled their giggles and screamed their baby screams. They slept, and then Senior had to be quiet, or they woke up, and then Senior could not hear himself think. They ate and defecated and puked, and the smell of excrement and vomit remained in the apartment, even when the babies-in-law had gone, mingling with a smell that Senior disliked even more: that of talcum powder. "At the end of life," he complained to Junior, in whose apartment

he often took refuge from the squalling hordes of his and his wife's blood kin, "nothing stinks worse than the smells of life's sweet beginning—bibs and ribbons and warm bottled milk and formula, and farting, talcumed behinds." Junior could not help replying, "Soon you also will be helpless and need someone to tend to your natural functions. Babydom is not only our past but our future, too." The thunderous expression on Senior's face revealed that the words had hit their mark.

For, it's true, they were both fortunate men. They were neither wholly blind nor wholly deaf, and their minds had not betrayed them like the Mumbai poet's. The food they ate was soft and easily digestible, but it was not old buggers' mush. Above all they were still ambulatory, still able, once a week, to climb slowly down their building's stairs to street level, and then to shuffle along, helped by walking sticks and frequent little rest stops, to the local post office, where they cashed their pension slips. They did not need to do this. Many of the young who thronged Senior's apartment, driving him next door to quarrel with Junior, would readily have dashed down the street to cash the checks for the frail old gentlemen. But the gentlemen did not care to allow the young to dash for them. It was a point of pride to cash one's own pension slip—on this, if on nothing else, they agreed—to travel under one's own steam to the counter where, behind a metal grille, a postal-ser-



vices operative waited to dispense the weekly sum that was their return for a lifetime's service. "You can see the respect in the fellow's expression," Senior said loudly to Junior, who kept mum, because what he saw behind the grille was something more like boredom, or contempt.

To Senior the pension trip was an act of validation; the weekly sum, small as it was, honored his deeds, transmuted into banknotes society's gratitude for his life. Junior thought of the journey more as an act of defiance. "You care nothing for me," he once said flatly to the face behind the grille. "It means nothing to you to count out the cash. But, when your turn comes to stand where I stand, then you will comprehend." One of the few privileges of very old age was that you were allowed to say exactly what you thought, even to strangers. Nobody told you to keep your mouth shut, and few people had the guts to answer back. They think we will soon be dead, Junior thought, so there's no point getting into a fight with us. He understood the nature of the contempt in the eyes of the post-office employee. It was the scorn of life for death.

On the day that Junior fell down, he and Senior set forth on their errand at their customary midmorning hour. It was late in the year. The local Christians, D'Mello included, had just finished celebrating their Savior's birth, and the consequent proximity of New Year's Eve—with its promise of a future, of, indeed, an in-

terminable future in which a sequence of such Eves stretched out at their predetermined intervals toward infinity—was bothering Senior. "Either I will die in the next five days, meaning that there will be no new year for me," he told Junior, "or else a year will begin in which my end will surely come, which is hardly a thing to look forward to." Junior sighed. "Your gloom and doom," he moaned, "will be the death of me." This sentence struck them both as so funny that they laughed heartily, and then for a while they had to huff and puff for breath. They were descending their building's staircase at this point, so the laughter was not without danger. They clung to the bannisters and panted. Junior was lower down than Senior, past the second-floor landing. This was how they customarily descended, some distance apart, so that if one of them should fall he would not drag the other down with him. They were too unsteady to trust each other. Trust, too, was a casualty of age.

In the front yard they paused briefly by the golden-shower tree that stood there. They had watched it grow from a tiny shoot to its present sixty-foot grandeur. It had grown quickly, and, though they did not say so, this rapid growth had disturbed them, suggesting, as it did, the speed of the passing of the years. The Indian laburnum: that was another name for it, a name among many names. It was *konrai* in their own, southern language, *amaltas* in the tongue of the north, *Cassia fistula* in the language of flowers and trees. "It has

stopped growing now," Junior said, approvingly, "having understood that eternity is better than progress. In the eye of God, time is eternal. This even animals and trees can comprehend. Only men have the illusion that time moves." Senior snorted. "The tree has stopped," he said, "because that is in its nature, just as it is in ours. We, too, will stop soon enough." He placed his gray trilby on his head and moved through the gate into the lane. Junior was bare-headed and traditionally dressed in a white *veshti* and a long blue checked shirt and sandals, but Senior liked to go to the post office in the guise of a European gentleman, wearing a suit and hat and twirling a silver-handled walking stick, like that Beau-somebody of Piccadilly of whom he had read, or the man in the old song he liked, *who walked along the Bois de Boulogne with an independent air*, the Man That Broke the Bank at Monte Caaar-lo.

The shady lane gave way to the brilliant sun-soaked street, where the noise of traffic drowned out the softer music of the sea. The beach was just four blocks away, but the city didn't care. Junior and Senior shuffled slowly past the homeopathy shop, the pharmacy where prescription drugs could easily be bought without troubling any doctor, the general store, with its jars of nuts and chilies, its tins of clarified butter and its imported cheese, and the sidewalk bookstall, with its many pirated editions of popular books brazenly on display, and set their sights on the traffic lights a hundred yards ahead. There they would have to cross the lawless main road, where a dozen forms of transport battled for space. After that a left turn, and another hundred yards of walking, and then they would be at the post office. A five-minute journey for the young, half an hour each way, minimum, for the two old men. The sun was behind them, and both men, inching slowly forward, were looking down at their shadows, which lay side by side upon the dusty pavement. Like lovers, they both thought, but neither of them spoke, their habit of opposition being too ingrained to permit them to express so fond an idea.

Afterward, Senior regretted that he had not spoken. "He was my shadow," he said to the woman with the wooden leg, "and I was his. Two shadows, each shadowing the other, to that we were reduced, that is so. The old move through the world of the young like shades, unseen, of no concern. But the shadows see each other and know

who they are. So it was with us. We knew, let me say this, who we were. And now I am a shadow without a shadow or shadow. He who knew me knows nothing now, and therefore I am not known. What else, woman, is death?"

"The day you stop talking," she replied. "The day these tomfool notions stop dropping from your mouth. When your mouth itself has been eaten by the fire. That will be the day." It was the most she had said to him in more than a year, and he understood from it that she hated him, and was sorry that Junior was the one who had fallen.

It happened because of the girls on the Vespa, the girls on their new Vespa making their way to college, pigtailed horizontal behind them as, giggling, they rode toward murder. Their faces were vivid in Senior's mind, the long thin one driving the scooter and her chubbier friend behind her, holding on *for dear life*. But life was not dear to such persons. Life was cheap, like a garment idly flung away after a single use, like their music, like their thoughts. This was how he judged them, and when he discovered afterward that they were not at all like his unjust characterization it was too late to change his mind. They were serious students, the thin one of electrical engineering and the other of architecture, and, far from being unaffected by the accident, they both went into dreadful, guilt-ridden shock, and for weeks afterward they could be seen almost every day standing silently with lowered heads across the lane from Junior's home, just standing there, heads bowed in expiation, waiting for forgiveness. But there was nobody to forgive them; the one who would have done so had died, and the one who could have done so would not. Haughty Senior looked down upon them with disdain. What did they think a human life was? Could it be so cheaply bought off? No, it could not. Let them stand there for a thousand years, it would not be long enough.

The Vespa had wobbled, no doubt about that; its young driver was inexperienced and it had wobbled too close to where Junior stood, waiting to cross the

road. Of late he had been complaining of a weakness in his ankles. He had said, "Sometimes when I get out of bed I do not think that they will bear my weight." He had also said, "Sometimes when I go down the stairs I worry that an ankle will turn. I never used to worry about my ankles, but now I do." Senior had responded adversarially, as was customary. "Worry about your interior," he had said. "Your kidneys or your liver will fail long before your ankle does." However, he had been wrong. The Vespa had come too close and Junior had leaped back. When he landed on his left foot, his ankle had indeed turned, and that had induced a second half-leap, as Junior tried to save himself. So it had been a strange fall, more like a hop and a skip, but at the end there was the tumble, and Junior, toppling backward to the sidewalk, had bumped his head, not hard enough to be knocked out, but, still, hard enough. He was winded, too. Air left him in a great *whoosh* as he clattered down.

Senior was too busy shouting at the terrified girls on the Vespa, calling them assassins and worse things, to notice the moment when the thing happened that must happen to us all in the end, when the last little puff of vapor pops out of our mouths and dissolves into fetid air. "The spirit, whatever it is," Junior used to say. "I do not believe in an immortal soul, but I also do not believe that we are only flesh and bone. I believe in a mortal soul, the non-corporeal essence of ourselves, lurking within our flesh like a parasite, flourishing when we flourish, and dying when we die." Senior was more formal in his religious beliefs. He read the ancient texts often, and the sound of Sanskrit was for him akin to the music of the spheres—the subtlety and profundity of those texts, which were capable of questioning whether even the creative entity itself understood its creation. Once, he had discussed these texts with his students, but there had not been any students for a long time, and he had been obliged to keep his own counsel on the grand matters of being. The ancient ambiguities gave him joy; Junior's lay-philosophical invention of a soul that died was banal by comparison.

So Senior thought, and, ranting as he was, he missed the telltale little puff of air that might have persuaded him to think again. An instant later there was no Junior



anymore, just a body on the sidewalk, a thing to be disposed of before the heat of the tropics did its malodorous worst. There was only one thing to be done. Senior reached into his friend's pocket and took out the pension slip. Then, sending the Vespa girls to his apartment to speak to his wife and relations, he set off on his mission alone. There would be time for death to be respected. In the traditions of the Palakkad Aiyars or Iyers, from whom both he and Junior were descended, the rites in honor of the dead lasted for thirteen days.

The next morning, in the south of the planet, far away from Senior's home town, but not far enough, there was a great earthquake under the ocean's surface, and the mighty water, answering the agony of the land beneath it with an agony of its own, gathered itself up into a series of waves and hurled its pain across the globe. Two such waves travelled across the Indian Ocean and, at a quarter to seven in the morning, Senior felt his bed begin to shake. It was a violent and puzzling vibration, because there had never been an earthquake in this city. Senior got up and went out onto his veranda. The veranda next door was empty, of course. Junior was gone. Junior was ashes now. The neighbors were all out in the lane, improperly dressed, hugging blankets around their shoulders. Everyone had a radio on. The earthquake's epicenter had been near the distant island of Sumatra. The tremors stopped and people went on with their day. Two and a quarter hours later, the first giant wave arrived.

The coastal areas were smashed. Elliot's Beach, Marina Beach, the beachfront houses, the cars, the Vespas, the people. At ten o'clock in the morning, the sea made a second such assault. The numbers of the dead grew: the lost dead, taken by the sea, the marooned dead, washed up on the remnants of the sands, the broken dead, everywhere the dead. The waves did not get as far as Senior's house. Senior's lane was undamaged. Everybody lived.

Except Junior.

It was fortunate that the waves arrived at Elliot's Beach in the morning. The romantic young who laughed and flirted there in the evenings would all have been slain if the waves had come at night. So young friends and lovers survived. The fishermen were not so lucky. The nearby fishing village—its name was Nochikup-

pam—ceased to exist. A seaside temple remained standing, but the fishermen's huts and catamarans and many of the fisherfolk themselves were lost. After that day the fishermen who survived said that they hated the sea and refused to return to it. For a long time it was hard to buy fish in the markets.

Senior did not like the Japanese word everyone used to name the waters of death. To him the waves were Death itself and needed no other name. Death had come to his city, had come a-harvesting and had taken Junior and many strangers away. In the aftermath of the waves, there grew up all around him, like a forest, the noises and actions that inevitably follow on calamity—the good behavior of the kind, the bad behavior of the desperate and the powerful, the surging aimless crowds. He was lost in the forest of the aftermath and saw nothing except the empty veranda next to his own and, in the lane below, the girls with the lowered heads. News came that D'Mello was among the lost. D'Mello, too, was gone. Perhaps he was not dead. Perhaps he had simply gone home, at last, to his storied city of Mumbai, on the country's other coast, that city which was neither of the north nor of the south but a frontiville, the greatest, most wondrous, and most dreadful of all such places, the megalopolis of the borderlands, the place of in-between. Or, on the other hand, perhaps D'Mello had drowned and Death, swallowing him, had denied his body the Christian dignity of a grave.

He, Senior, was the one who had asked for death. Yet Death had left him alive, had taken so many others, had taken even Junior and D'Mello, but left him untouched. The world was meaningless. There was no meaning to be found in it, he thought. The texts were empty and his eyes were blind. Perhaps he said some of this aloud. He may even have shouted it out. The girls in the lane below were looking up at him, and the green birds in the golden-shower tree were disturbed. Then, all of a sudden, he imagined that across the way, on the empty adjacent veranda, he saw a shadow move. He had cried out, "Why not me?" and in response a shadow had flickered where Junior used to stand. Death and life were just adjacent verandas. Senior stood on one of them as he always had, and on the other, continuing their tradition of many years, was Junior, his shadow, his namesake, arguing. ♦

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