

## Chapter One

In the gunny sacks were the makings of a man. There were two bags, roughly dividing the bones for the upper and lower halves of the body, and no one had wanted them inside the room. Her father said they should not be kept out in the balcony during the monsoons, where she had left them immediately upon receiving them last month, in case of sudden rain. Jaya hesitated before removing the rib cage from a bag and laid it on an old sheet spread over the dhurrie in the bedroom. She got up to close the door. She took out the brownish basin of the pelvis, searched for the long shaft of the thigh, and found a fully formed foot, all the knotty bones threaded together. These were new bones to her, she had not dared to assemble them like this before. Mummy had grimaced at Daddy when he instructed the servant to place the bags on top of her clothes cupboard. Whenever Jaya needed them, the servant could easily retrieve them by climbing a stool. But she had started storing the sacks in the narrow space between the side of the cupboard and the wall so she didn't have to fetch the servant every time she was ready to do her work. No one liked to see her laying the bones on the floor and taking her red chalk to draw a line where a muscle originated and mark in blue chalk where the muscle inserted.

The first couple of times she had asked Kamlesh to stay in the room with her. It was frightening to search inside the sack, all sorts of forms coming into her hands, rough protrusions and smooth cavities, and have to pull a number of bones out until she found the ones for the arm they were dissecting in college. Kamlesh had frowned, her expression so disturbed that Jaya decided it was better to take the bones out in privacy, without having to worry about their effect on her sister. Bebeji, their grandmother, usually read in bed early in the evenings at the back of the bedroom, which the three of them shared, and when Jaya took the bones out, she'd ask her grandmother to leave the room because Bebeji felt it was ungodly to bring human remains into the house. Bones became more earthly matter than animal over time, Jaya had read, that's why they turned brittle with age. What was the age of these bones? She hadn't realized so many bodies went unclaimed in the roads and gutters and railway stations. The morgue prepared a skeleton for each medical student.

From her writing table she brought her pen and ink bottle and tore a sheet from a tablet of thin paper she used for sketching, placed it upon a small plank as an easel and sat on the floor. Leaning against Kamlesh's curio cabinet, considering the skull with its tight, gritting set of teeth and hollow eyes, the winged whole of the rib cage, one rod of the leg and the fanlike foot, she began to sketch the skull. It was a clean oval, the shape of the skull imprinted in her eyes from the Anatomy Museum, where they were given lectures among cabinets of bones and fetuses swimming in bottles. One cupboard was full of rows of human skulls. Here were the pieces of a man. Who? Jaya drew the rib cage with a slower hand, it's more complex form, the trunk of the sternum and looping branches of ribs needed close attention to be given form as a whole with line and shading. She got a blotch of black ink on the half-made foot, the toes sharp like pincers, and under the foot a sentence came to her, *How do you become someone?* She wrote the words

like a banner in fluttering script and capped the pen, lifted the board from her lap.

For a moment she let herself drift, closing her eyes, trying to feel some connection to him, to who he had been. The other pouch contained the arm bones she needed to mark with her chinks, yet she slid a few feet away from the figure she had laid out. Drawing her body parallel to his she lay down, wondering if she could assess the man's height. The front door banged shut. Clicking steps came down the passageway, her mother's voice calling out. Get up, Jaya thought, and she pushed herself up as her sister opened the door and saw her sitting beside the partially constructed skeleton. Kamlesh made a face, staring in a kind of disgust, hugging parcels to her chest. "What are you doing? Making up the whole thing?"

"I wanted to try drawing it," Jaya arranged her sari, stood up. Kamlesh, with eyes blazing, said, "They want you to draw the whole skeleton?"

"No," said Jaya, "I just wanted to see how it fits together."

"Just like that?" Kamlesh turned to her for the truth.

"Just like that," said Jaya, bending over to gather her art materials, then the bones.

In the rainy dark that night she wondered if she should try sketching all the bones as an exercise, to become familiar with the body of the anonymous man in the room, to gain some understanding of him. Listening to the battering downpour, Jaya opened and closed her fist in front of her face, her fingers bursting out like petals, but nothing could be seen. She had vanished into the night, become formless, unknowable, existing only in her thoughts. It was difficult to talk about the things she saw in college, so it was an altogether lonelier time. That's the way it would be from now on. She couldn't tell anyone about the corpses, not even her sister—who could speak about such things? Her father didn't ask about the dissection hall. It was something

she was meant to bear, like everyone else. When the exam results for inter-science, her premedical course, were published in the paper, they knew right away from her high second division she would be going to Grant Medical College, which took the top one hundred students in Bombay. No one could turn down such a seat. Daddy had never been happier. He'd laughed in relief, having tutored her from readings in his nature cure books. As a reward, he gave her fifty-one rupees. Jaya heard her name echo against the watery noises, her sister murmuring to her. Kamlesh must have heard her shifting this way and that. The rain came crashing through the coconut trees around their building, fronds sputtering in the wind. The curtain flapped in the doorway. They'd left the balcony doors open for the breeze before they went to bed, before it started to rain. Now Jaya could hear the waves thrashing the seawall as if she were just inches away, a rhythmic pounding of water on stone. Some mornings they woke up to find Marine Drive flooded with seawater, cars gliding through the ripples like bulky boats. Often when she slept the man's face came to her unbidden—he would break into a dream, like someone she was running away from who'd caught up with her. Other times, some inner defense sealed her dreams off against him, though her body was tense and stiff all night. When she opened her eyes at daybreak, she was filled with dread, realizing she would be back in the dissection hall soon.

Her sister called out in a hollow voice, "Jaya?" Kamlesh would want her to close the doors. She was always asking Jaya to do things she could do on her own, as if taking permission. Jaya made a sound of protest. She knew she ought to get up, though, to bring in the painting she'd left outside to dry, but the cold wind whisking through the room was lovely.

"Should I close the doors?" Kamlesh's clear words startled her, cutting through the shudder of rain. "I'm shivering. Just see." Kamlesh kept summoning her, sounding wide awake, keen to talk. They'd slept with their beds joined together when they were younger, comforted by

each other's nearness. "Feel my legs. They're ice cold," Kamlesh moaned. "Come here. Where are you?"

Jaya hesitated, ignoring her sister's summons. But she could not keep resisting her twin's voice and got up, blundering across the black air, clutching her pillow and sheet. Clumsily she climbed in from the foot of Kamlesh's bed, because of the curio cabinet pushed along its side like a defensive wall. Once meant as a barrier against her, Jaya knew. On the narrow mattress, they adjusted her sheet over their doubled bodies, Kamlesh scraping her chilled feet against Jaya's for warmth, giggling as their legs got entangled. Jaya pressed her hand over her twin's mouth, reminding her of their grandmother asleep on the other end of the room—"Bebeji!"—and then removed it.

"No, don't," Kamlesh cried, making a pretense of flinging off Jaya's hands. Eagerly Jaya grabbed her twin's fine wrists and soft elbows, her round, full shoulder. It was the antics of her college friends, Kamlesh was bursting to talk about. This afternoon Meher had piled the whole gang into her father's car, then driven them up and down Worli seaface—racing the car along the promenade, though it was only her third time at the wheel! "How could you do that? Drive with someone who doesn't know driving?" Jaya scolded Kamlesh, taking up her role as the cautious, elder sister, if elder only by twenty minutes. Kamlesh kept giggling and struggling against her, trying to pry off her fingers, as Jaya gave little pinches to her waist. All Kamlesh's strength was physical, her hands iron-hard from the gestures of her dance, her spine straight as a beam of wood. Jaya could hear her feet slapping the stone floor for a whole hour practicing her *adavus* in the bedroom. Kamlesh would shape her hands into Krishna's flute at her lips, or set them quivering as flowery arrows shot by the god of love, demonstrating her mudras to Jaya. Growing up, Kamlesh had always been the one to cling to her, to look for her opinions, and now Jaya was

aware of a slight reversal, trying to catch hold of her twin with an odd need for protection, because of the things they didn't share anymore, being at different colleges, having different friends. Jaya, closing her eyes, imagined painting a curve of rounded female hips and thighs. The dancing figure burned in her head, a sudden lamp, then vanished. Kamlesh gushed about their friend Meher attending teatimes dances at the Cricket Club—on Thursdays now she danced to Chic Chocolate blowing his horn. Do you know what a tag dance is? Kamlesh challenged Jaya. When another boy can cut in on your partner, she squealed. So instead of dancing with her cousins, Meher had danced with all sorts of boys, Jaya learned, Anglo-Indians, even a short Punjabi fellow. They're Parsis, Jaya reminded her. Parsis were more English than Indian, practically anything was permitted to the girls. Kamlesh was exuberant—the Radio Club was built like a boat on the seaside, and Meher said dancing on the verandah felt like she was dancing on the sea. “You know what else she says?” Kamlesh lowered her voice, hesitating. “She wants to have a love marriage. No, wait on, she wants to experience ‘the rapture of falling in love’—that's what she called it. Such rubbish she talks.”

“A mad-hatter,” Jaya declared, laughing. She was reminded of a girl she'd become friendly with over five weeks at medical college. “Hema's just like that.” Though she really wasn't. None of the girls in medical college were like Kamlesh's friends at Sophia College, or their old classmates at St. Cecilia's—purely social girls, competitive about clothes and family connections. The medical college girls had not an ounce of glamour in them; shy, bookish students from orthodox homes, they were barely able to speak in public, bashful in front of the professors. Hema, a brash Poona girl, had a low, mannish voice, she had a blunt wit. ‘I don't know how she does some of the things she does,’ Jaya confessed to her twin.

Kamlesh wanted to know what things, but it wasn't easy to tell her. Silence had become

comfortable to Jaya, a very large place in which for her to wander. She was floating in a state of mind these days that kept her feeling distant from everyone, even her sister. Maybe she was just stunned to realize that the things she thought awaited her at the threshold of adulthood were not there. The future was taking an entirely different path than what she grew up dreaming, this entry into medical college was nothing she imagined. In the library at her old school was a mural of Mother India in a white sari, atop a pyramid of village emblems—cartwheel, peasant, scythe, sun. The figure of the painter painting the portrait with his palette in hand stood at the bottom of the mural, and she had always pictured herself there, in his place.

Gingerly Kamlesh laid an arm over her, as if that might enable her to speak, but Jaya didn't return her sister's touch. Kamlesh had always studied among girls, her college run by sisters of the Sacred Heart, all her ideas of romance coming from the cinema hall. Still, it was to tell her twin something, Jaya realized, she had come to her bed. "There's a Parsi fellow much senior to us, Mr. Wadia—Hema's gone out with him for coffee and whatnot," she spoke up. The story of Hema's flirtation over table tennis in the Boys' Common Room spilled out, without the admission they had violated college rules, trespassing into a hall meant only for male students.

"Is he very interested in her? Is he keen on marrying her, do you think?" Kamlesh bubbled over, not knowing what to make of the clandestine meetings. Nor did Jaya. No other boy and girl in the entire college, from what she could tell, had openly paired up. But then, Hema only met Naval outside college, where no one could see them. Jaya laughed to herself, thinking of the pudgy, bespectacled, well-mannered Naval Wadia and Hema, demanding, quick-spoken, as a married couple. And then she turned away, onto her side, and forced herself to say, "Hema says this fellow Naval has a friend, and this friend, if you please, has been asking about me." Asking what? Kamlesh wanted to know. "Asking my name. Asking, 'Who's that girl who

always wears yellow clothes?’ I didn’t know I wore so much yellow. Is it so obvious?’

“Which fellow?”

“I haven’t a clue. A Bengali chap, I’m told. I may have seen him in passing, I’m not at all sure.” She wouldn’t give away everything about him, not the vividly dark impression of his face, not his remarkable height. She’d noticed him immediately in the common room. Last time she’d sat in the hall, as Hema played table tennis, pretending to read a book alone at a table, and felt someone’s eyes piercing her back. She turned to look and caught him staring hard. Aggressive eyes under thick black brows. A giant of a boy. Must be a six-footer.

“Do you want to meet him?” Kamlesh’s voice was low, awed. Jaya didn’t respond. If Sunday could be missed, she would have rushed to college straightaway tomorrow, though she was usually glad to flee in the opposite direction, away from the grim, hulking, century-old hospital. She turned again and reached into the black air, smoothing back her twin’s hair through heavy tresses that lay along her arm like strands of her own hair.

A watery ripple of light shifted over the bed, beaming through the air behind them. Their grandmother’s torch dipped down to the curio cabinet, grazing a trio of black porcelain cats connected by chains and Kamlesh’s film magazines spread out in a fan. “Did we wake you?” Kamlesh sat up, apologetic, shielding her eyes with from the beam with her hand. The torch darted up to her face, illuminating lush hair falling over the shoulders of her satiny lime-green nightdress, her narrowed eyes glistening with a vitality Jaya hadn’t imagined in the dark.

“You shouldn’t walk alone in the pitch dark.” Jaya looked away, refusing the light.

“This rain woke me up, as if the sky falling is down,” Bebeji said. “Then I could make out your voices, *khuss-puss, khuss-puss*, going on and on.” Shakily the beam climbed the blue wall and Bebeji grew visible, a stout widow in white garments, dragging her feet as though she



found her body a burden. Her thinning silver hair was pulled away from her face in a feeble plait, exposing heavy jowls and earlobes drooping with long stretched-out holes. “Sleep now. You’ll be tired tomorrow. I’ll close the doors, there’s too much noise from the rain.” She sighed, resting a hand on the cabinet, and gave a startled moan, bending to touch her legs.

“Is something paining you?” said Jaya.

“Here—in the insides of the knees.” Bebeji suffered from arthritis, and the pain seemed to grow worse in the rainy season dampness. Jaya asked how bad it was now but Bebeji only winced as she raised her broad, unsmiling face, a map of deep lines. Rolls of loose flesh hung over her petticoat, her nightshirt gathered above her cascading stomach. Almost by habit, she slept poorly and little, getting up at five-thirty every morning to sing her muffled hymns in her puja corner. A deep balcony at the back of the bedroom had been enclosed into an alcove for her when she came to live with them five years ago. She came soon after the death of their grandfather, Lalaji, exactly a year after her eldest son was killed in the Partition at their ancestral home. Mornings Bebeji sat in a whitewash of light, watching the empty sea from the front balcony. ‘Everything lost at once,’ Bebeji was sometimes heard to mutter. Jaya didn’t have to ask her what she meant. She knew the month of August 1947 was the ruin of everything, and the year after that Lalaji had died.

“Go to sleep,” Bebeji told them firmly, moving toward the balcony doors.

“But,” Jaya objected, then stopped herself. The room belonged to the three of them—she could not force her way. She slipped the torch from Bebeji’s hand to close the doors herself. Bebeji might not notice if the floor was wet; she would have to struggle to reach the latch. Her composure was slipping with August looming close, the month of both death anniversaries, her husband’s and her son’s.

The beam in Jaya's hand swung over the bulky wooden cupboard, across her stale drawings on the wall of a footbridge in a snowy wood and a wedding party riding a bullock cart, the gold nucleus of light sliding onto the dressing table's triple mirrors. Often she entered the room and was caught by someone else's reflection, either her sister's radiant face or the mask of old age in Bebeji's discouraged expression. In the mirrors' murky surfaces, she glimpsed volumes of hair, her flowered orange tunic, the imprint of her sister's fine features. Though Kamlesh was the more beautiful one, her skin as clear and bright as a child's, her face a fine oval, they had the same large, light-brown eyes—doe's eyes, Bebeji called them—thin nose that pleased Mummy, and abundant hair that fell below the waist. Strangers mixed them up and in photographs the impression was of identical twins, but everyone in the family could see the differences.

The beam skimmed a slippery patch of rain that had blown onto the balcony floor. Jaya leaned over the rail to view the burning eye of a gas lamp on Marine Drive, water drawing silver streaks in its glow. Headlamps passed on the road and a dull yellow light burned in a window in the next building, but she could see nothing of the city beyond these faint illuminations. She untwisted the rope, letting the heavy reed-blinds down.

Her painting of roses, beaded with water, stood timidly against the hobbled sideboard containing her paints. The cabinet, missing a leg, was lifted on bricks. Jaya traced the torchlight over the blotchy stalks of pinkish-red roses against a clotted blue ground, the flower crammed into a narrow vase with a glass frill around its neck. Handles curved along its sides like a pair of brittle arms. They were another dead thing in her life, these flowers stiff in their brown urn. She hadn't signed her name to the painting, only the year in a snaky black script, *1953*. Banging the doors shut inside, she drew the thick, wet mango-leaf print curtain over them. "Everything is

soaking wet,” she called, her wounded tone implying some damage had been done. Without the wind blowing inside, the room was already tight, already close and stale, but she said nothing as she ushered her grandmother to bed.

In the mornings, as she went up the stairs of the anatomy building, Jaya could smell the sweet, charred odor of the dissection hall before she entered the room, or maybe the odor never left her. It struck her first as a rich, cloying aroma of cooking, of a bakery where something sugary, smoky and chemical was burning, and then quickly ripened in her nostrils into the thick, pungent stench of rubbish heaps rotting in the heat. This morning, still climbing the stairs, she heard boys shouting and an animal screeching. She stepped to the side as some of her class fellows rushed past her. At the entry door, warily she watched Sheshadri and a thick-set Gujarati fellow, Mr. Joshi, batting the air with the bamboo poles kept under the washing trough to drive out birds. Two crows were flapping around in the high arches of the great hall, black arrows veering this way and that over the graveyard of bodies. Sheshadri tried to swat one of the cawing birds toward a transom, Hema and others shouting directions to him. A couple of boys tried to help, clapping their hands loudly to scare the birds. Vanita hung her head down, laughing. Even Dr. Rekapalli rose from her chair, sluggishly crossing her arms over her heavy bosom, watching to see if the bird would escape from the window slit. Pigeons and crows occasionally flew in through the open transoms above the tall jalousie windows but found their way out quickly or perched on the sills. But these birds, shrieking over the tables laid with corpses, seemed to be caught in the bright trap of the room.

Jaya followed the line of a shallow gutter across the hall to the lockers at the back where

she kept her apron. She buttoned her smock over her sari, dismayed to see the front she'd thought clean last week smeared with fat and grime. The uproar over the birds had subsided—one of them had been driven out by the boys and the other she couldn't see. Making her way to her group between the rows of high tables laid with cadavers, she was relieved to walk almost casually among the dead. Last month, at the start of medical college, the sight of the nude bodies rigid on their backs had horrified her. They were mostly male, their dark, shriveled skin glistening with chemical solution; their tongues, lips and teeth intact. The scalps had been shaved to stubble. The bodies were always wet, always dripping fluid so a hole was cut in the middle of each marble top to let the liquid drain onto the floor, then dribble into the gutters running across the room. The second-year students left only stubs on the tables. A torso leaning upright against wooden blocks. A head and neck, the skin peeled away from the scalp, exposing the cranium's dome. A worker with a bucket scrubbed an empty yellowed marble slab, nodding to her as she passed. She glimpsed an open abdomen packed with a coil of intestines like white rubber tubing. She could look and not think the bodies human. Even close up, despite the reek of chemicals mingled with flesh, they didn't seem quite real. They never appeared completely real until she had to touch them with bare hands.

“Come on, Miss Malhotra. We're all ready.” Mr. Nigrani, a pompous fellow who considered himself the in-charge of the group, seemed irritated she was the last one at the dissecting table again, although everyone had been distracted by the birds. Hema looked up, brusquely smiling, eyeliner making her eyes dramatic. Jaya stood next to her, the only other girl in the group. Hands clasped firmly behind her back, a diligent student at attention, she forced herself to watch Nigrani draw his blade obliquely across the cadaver's left forearm, make two bangles of transverse cuts at either end, Hema reading sternly aloud from *Cunningham's Manual of Practical Anatomy* to guide him. Mr. Sheshadri and the other boy, Sharma, leaned in across the table to watch Mr.

Nigrani pull the tough mahogany skin back, cutting away the sticky fat and cellophane of fascia with vigorous little flicks of his knife. Sharma moved around helpfully to hold up a long flap of skin as Nigrani used his scalpel and bare fingers, too, to unloosen the skin from the flesh of the arm. On the first day of college, the five of them had gathered around the feet of the cadaver with their heads bowed and scalpels in hand like devotees before an idol. When the demonstrator, Dr. Rekapalli, announced the study of gross anatomy would begin with the superior extremity, they guardedly moved up the table and Jaya dared to look the dead man in the eye.

His eyeballs were a jaded yellow, his face compact like his body, a sleek Maratha with a clipped mustache flaring under his nose. Soiled brown teeth protruding from a mouth left permanently open were his only flaw. Pushing her knife into his skin for the first time, Jaya had felt light-headed, her stomach convulsing beneath her ribs so forcefully she was afraid she might vomit at the table. A couple of times she'd run out to the passageway during a dissection, hanging her head over the trough where they washed their hands, swallowing hard against nausea. Hema had followed her, telling her not to worry what anyone thought, but it was clear she couldn't keep coming to the dissection hall every day anxious to flee, feeling dizzy as her turn to dissect approached. Sometimes, the boys, being gentlemanly, offered her the easier dissection or allowed her to take her turn last. After five weeks, though, they seemed to tire of shielding her from the work. Nigrani, a cocksure type, seemed in the mood to challenge her now. "*Chalo*, why don't you take over, Miss Malhotra?"

"Well, all right. Fine, Mr. Nigrani." Jaya looked at him firmly, keeping her composure, though the way he'd said it made her feel adversarial. She picked up her scalpel and studied the man's taut, smoothly angled jawline, wondering who he'd been. The mortuary was packed to the ceiling with unclaimed bodies, it was said. Hema located the appropriate passage in

*Cunningham's* and began to read out loud how Jaya should separate the muscle to reach the passage through which the medial nerve was threaded. He was not old, no more than thirty, thirty-five. Of medium height, slender. Not a blemish on his body when they began dissecting. What had happened to him? Jaya gripped his hard knobby wrist with her free hand, pressing her razor below the double head of the pronator teres into the swell of pinkish-brown muscle, trying to imagine she was tracing the bowed edge of his arm, taking the charcoal stick with its twiggy protrusions around his knuckled fist and one pointing finger. In the end a person was nothing more than meat, gristle and bone—the body's materials. Her left hand slipped around to cradle his leathery fist—she had to get used to the touching. To touch without dissolving in fear. “Friend *banarahi hai*,” someone muttered under his breath. She's making a friend! As if she were trying to hold a boyfriend's hand. Nigrani had said it, smirking at the other boys. Or maybe it was Sheshadri, the way his mouth puckered in a silent laugh. She dropped the rigid hand immediately, humiliated, not daring to glance at any of the boys again.

Scowling to herself, Jaya bore down into the soft cord of muscle, grunting slightly as she parted tissue with knife and forceps, digging for the white line of the nerve, her fingers sliding over the unraveled arm. She was losing track of Hema's instructions, her head starting to spin. The pinkish thread she plucked with her pincers was an artery. Where was the string of the nerve? The nerve passed over the artery, Hema said. Her stomach lurched up with the foul odor of soaked flesh. Turning to her side, she eyed Hema in a stark plea to take over.

At noon, when they left the Anatomy Building, the gardener was burning a pile of leaves and rubbish in the yard, sending up a smoke so acrid Jaya rushed across the grounds with Hema, past the Court of the Coroner of Bombay and the Pathology School, pressing the edge of her sari against her nose as if she could block out the whole morose hospital world around her by

snuffing out its smell. They passed a modern three-story building, the new pediatric ward, and other smaller hospitals of the group before coming to the smutted stone façade of the main hospital. Traversing the length of one of its endless wings, fronted by a deep verandah, they glimpsed sluggish patients in white gowns, small against the gloomy stone arches. The whole hulking structure was built in the form of two crosses joined horizontally at their long ends. It always relieved Jaya to reach the tin-roofed cottage on the other side that was the Central Canteen, a radio blaring out fast film music. Only boys ate there; the girls' canteen was in the Lady Students' Hostel. Hema always took her upstairs to wash up, then they went down to the non-veg mess. It must have been a mile total to Hema's hostel, a network of paths taking them around lawns and through corridors of feathery trees where ward boys pushed wooden wheelchairs and trolleys piled with boxes. As they approached the gray-stone church-like building that housed the Boys' Common Room, Hema suggested they stop in. Jaya hesitated. The Bengali fellow was probably inside playing *teen patti*, gambling for his pocket money as many seniors did. "Let's just play one game," Hema suggested, meaning a table tennis match.

"No, not today. I'm not feeling in the mood." The chance to see him was suddenly too real and Jaya resisted, nervous about courting his attention in such an obvious manner. It was a lounge for boys, and that, too, a room dominated by seniors. The second week of college they'd done it on a lark, Hema leading four girls straight into the hall like some kind of campaigner for social justice, pointedly ignoring the word "Boys," proclaiming in her loud manly voice, "Common Room should mean for all students! Where's the Girls' Common Room?"

Some of the fellows playing cards and carom had shouted it was "gents only" as if they weren't aware of that. The dowdy Gujarati girls Hema had bullied into coming along ran out mumbling, "Oh, God. What is she doing?" Hema had spotted a table tennis table beneath a

window and made that the purpose of their visit, Jaya swatting a ball with her for a full ten minutes, cringing every time it hopped off the table and she ran to fetch it in her sari and sandals.

“You know, Wadia was saying—they’ve all remarked you don’t say a word. Not a peep out of you.” Hema reproached her, shutting her fingers like a beak. Her face was all hard angles, her gaze blunt and probing, a thoroughly middle-class girl who didn’t soften her tone or throw out little courtesies like the girls Jaya went to school with

Jaya felt a sharp spurt of anger. “Why should I talk to every Tom, Dick and Harry in the room?” she tried to affect a superior tone, but felt her face burning. Had the Bengali boy said that about her? Why should she make overtures to boys three or four years her senior? Even her own class boys kept a respectable distance from girls; they were always “Miss” and “Mister” to each other. It wasn’t just Kamlesh, she wasn’t used to studying with boys either—this was her first time in classes with them. Whenever they entered the dingy hall of the common room, loud with men’s voices, Hema took up her paddle and started flirting with her T.T. partner, Wadia, a soft, chubby Parsi fellow in gold-rimmed spectacles. Alone at a table, Jaya lost her nerve and sat locked in silence, her head bent over *Atlas of Histology* or *Surface Marking*, a paper laid inside the pages on which she sketched the angles of a boy’s face, her eye constantly shifting to who was coming in, who was going out. Sometimes she felt acutely conscious of being watched herself.

“No, no. Don’t take it like that,” Hema tried to appease her, giving a husky little laugh. “They don’t understand why you come in, but then keep to yourself. Some of them think you may be wanting them to stay at a distance. That they shouldn’t say anything to you.”

Jaya flicked her head to say that wasn’t necessarily true. “Let’s forget it,” Hema conceded as they passed the Gothic edifice of the Boys’ Common Room with its tall cathedral windows. In



British times it had been an autopsy room, adding to Jaya's reluctance to return there. Once or twice a week she'd allowed herself to follow Hema inside, though she knew she wasn't the only follower between them. With a covetous eye Hema studied her appearance in detail, since many things, small and large, set Jaya apart from her class girls—her schooling at the elite St. Cecilia's; her fluency in English and smattering of French; her imported cosmetics and flame-colored heels. Hema copied her remorselessly, down to her bright-pink lipstick and dark glasses, though she drew her hair up in large, showy buns more elaborate than any hair-do Jaya had worn to college. She'd take a look at Jaya's and make it loud.

Turning into the women's hostel yard, they were stopped by an elderly man, stooping and bowing, deferential to them in their white aprons, asking where he could find a doctor. A small figure trailed behind him, wrapped in a dirty sari, a shawl hanging open to her knees. The woman walked crookedly, deeply weary, her feet rocking from side to side in the mud. The path here was soft from yesterday's rain. It seemed the old couple had wandered in through a side gate, not the main entrance accessing the hospital, but one of the thirteen openings in the perimeter wall that circled the campus. Hema asked what the problem was as Jaya began directing the man to the emergency department, considering the best way to J.J. Hospital, afraid to hear anything. Every day brought someone with a different injury, a different illness she couldn't resolve, every day she became more overwhelmed by people asking the way. The woman said hoarsely, in a tiny, rough voice in Hindi that she had been passing blood in her urine. This morning it had been almost pure blood. Jaya's stomach turned hearing that, she looked down at the woman's mud-spattered feet because what could she do—how could she begin to help these old people? Hema thought they should go to the outpatient clinics in a side lane and indicated the way. The doctors there were very good, she assured them. They were good people, the doctors here; somehow they

summoned the courage to face one hurt after another as if it were nothing. Jaya saw the mud sealing the cracks in the woman's feet and was ashamed she could do nothing. Nothing but offer uncertain directions through this labyrinth of sullen black-stone buildings adorned with towers, turrets and battlements, a menacing fortress for the sick. A bit of gold glinted in the old woman's nostril, a tinge of shine. Her bony face was not dark as much as dry and dull, devoid of any glow. Jaya found her gaze and held it for a moment, though a look wasn't much to offer. Through the milky gray film dimming the old, crinkled eyes, she glimpsed a mild unexpected sweetness.

At the Lady Students' Hostel, she followed Hema up the stairs for a quick wash before lunch. Hema had shifted her box of bones to the wall alongside the door. She had bones sitting on her writing table, the batons of the humerus and ulna in a straight line, and beside them a half-drunk cup of tea. Jaya felt the urge to take a full bath, as she'd done here once before, though she'd bathed and washed her hair this morning. Hema gave her a stiff towel and chunk of soap. Laying her sari across Hema's bed, she hurried down the corridor in Hema's checked housecoat over her blouse and petticoat. In the light of a single electric bulb, squatting on the washroom floor in front of a brass pail brimming with water, she lathered her thighs and arms and head. Traces of the sugary smoke smell coating her neck and hair came off on her fingers and she smelled the cadavers as she flung cupfuls of water at herself, trying to wash away the lingering sensation of mucking about in a dead man's flesh.