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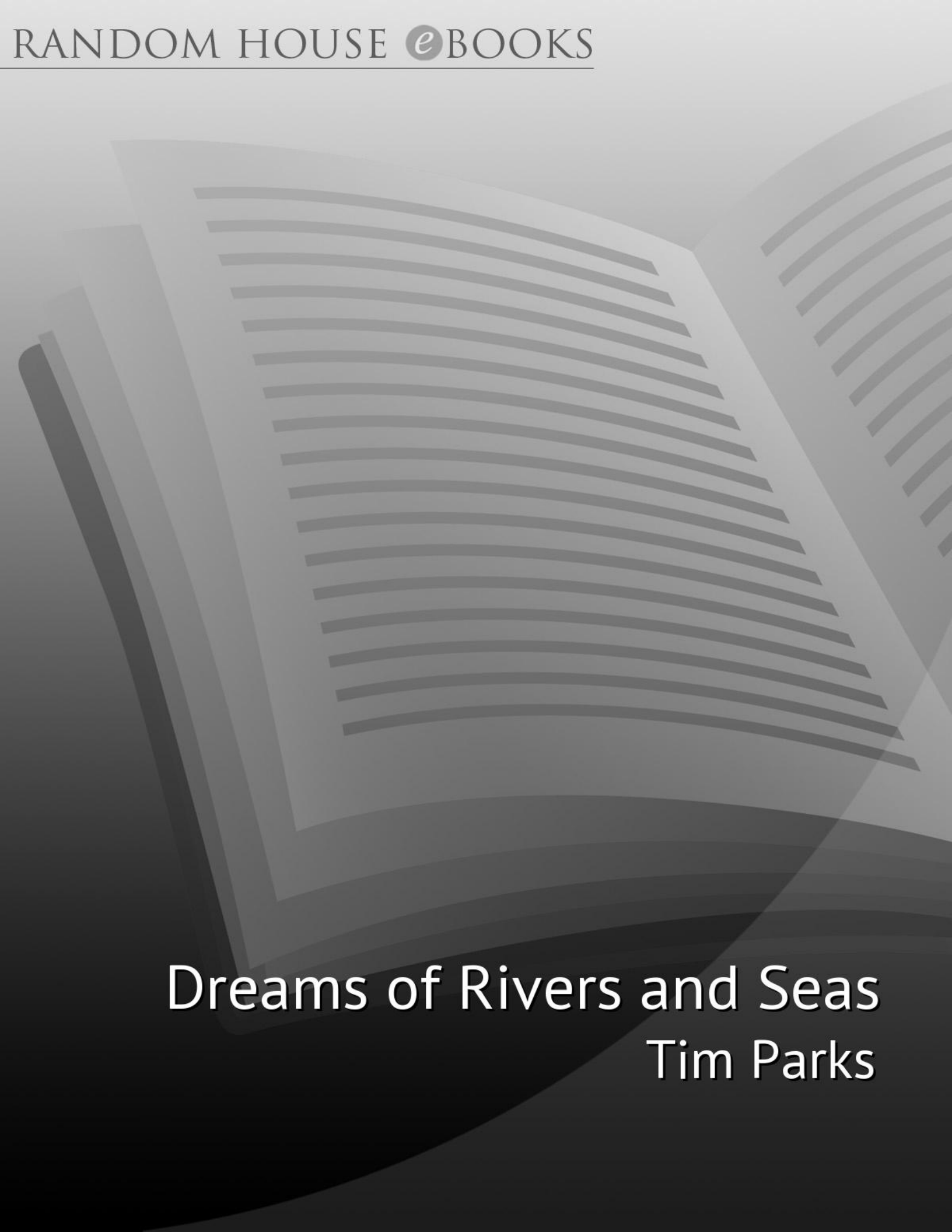

Dreams of Rivers and Seas

Tim Parks

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About the Book

‘For some time now, I have been plagued, perhaps blessed, by dreams of rivers and seas, dreams of water.’

Just days after Albert James writes these lines to his son John, in London, he is dead. Abandoning a pretty girlfriend and the lab where he is completing his PhD, John flies to Delhi to join his mother in mourning.

A brilliant and controversial anthropologist, the nature of Albert James’s research, and the circumstances of his death, are far from clear. On top of this, John must confront his mother’s coolness, and the strangeness of the cremation ceremony that she has organised for his father. No sooner is the body consigned to the flames than a journalist arrives, determined to write a biography of the dead man. The widow will have nothing to do with the project, yet seems incapable of keeping away from the journalist.

In Tim Parks’s masterly new novel, India, with its vast strangeness, the density and intensity of its street life, its indifference to all distinctions between the religious and the secular, is a constant source of distraction to these westerners in search of clarity and identity. To John, the enigma of his father’s dreams of rivers and seas appears to be one with the greater mystery of the country.

About the Author

Tim Parks studied at Cambridge and Harvard. He lives near Verona with his wife and three children. His novel *Europa* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. *Destiny* and *Judge Savage* were longlisted in 2000 and 2003.

Also by Tim Parks

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The Fighter

TIM PARKS

Dreams of Rivers and Seas

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

We go on doing research and thinking about all sorts of problems, as if we could one day reach the thought that would set us free.

Gregory Bateson

Those familiar with Gregory Bateson and his work will realise that I have used elements from his life and writings to create the character of Albert James. Equally, it will be clear that only some aspects of their lives are similar: Bateson never lived in Delhi nor was he ever accused of any wrongdoing; then, unlike James, he married more than once and had many children. Readers who want to find out about his remarkable work should certainly not consult these pages, which are entirely fictional.

PART ONE

THREE ELEPHANTS

CHAPTER ONE

ON RECEPTION OF his mother's brief phone call announcing his father's death, John James took a deep breath, booked himself onto the first available flight for Delhi, had Elaine drive him to Heathrow, travelled towards the coming night and arrived at Indira Gandhi Airport to find the weather much cooler than expected. The funeral was to be the following morning. His mother was not in the apartment, but the elderly maid let him in and told him that Mrs James had gone as usual to the clinic. 'To clinic,' she said. 'Madam has gone to clinic.' John put his bag in the one spare room and sat on the bed. He stared at the bookshelves and sighed. Shall I take a shower? Suddenly he felt a loss of momentum, a faint giddiness. No, the important thing was to see Dad's body.

John stood up and went back to the kitchen where the maid was sweeping the floor. Did she have a phone number, he asked, for his mother? A mobile or work phone? The woman's head wobbled strangely as she looked at him. She seemed to have trouble understanding. John repeated the question. 'I need to phone my mother, at the clinic.' 'Clinic,' the woman said, her head still wobbling. She began to give directions for how to get there. She used her arms, miming a person going out of a door and turning right. John decided the walk would do him good and set off.

Outside, despite the cooler temperature, there was the same glazed and glaring light he remembered from other trips east, the same sour smell in the air, the same odd mix

of frenetic traffic, roadside cooking, languid animals and persistent beggars. He liked it. He felt on holiday. I work too hard, he decided. This would blow away the cobwebs.

Somebody tried to sell him postcards of the old town, trinkets, necklaces, sacred images. He smiled and shook his head. But he couldn't find the clinic. The broad streets seemed one block of buildings after another, some at considerable distances, all enclosed by decaying red walls. There were big trees between the buildings and swarms of crows cawing in the foliage. John pulled a mobile from his pocket and texted Elaine: 'Can you believe it! Mum not home, and left no phone number. Now I'm getting lost looking for her. Wish you were here. Kisses. J.'

John's father had died of cancer, but the end had come unexpectedly soon. From what John had found out about prostate cancer, there should have been no immediate concern. Even in India, such things could be kept at bay for many years. Some Westerners actually went to Delhi for cheaper operations. And Dad could always have come back to the UK if he needed special treatment. 'John, your father died this morning,' his mother had said. He hadn't been able to gauge her voice. He had been in the basement lab at the Centre; the centrifuge was noisy and the signal poor. But she certainly wasn't crying. Mum was a tough one. And his own response had been quiet to say the least. He hadn't wept. He wasn't close to weeping. So all Dad's famous research has come to nothing; those were the first words that crossed his mind. It didn't upset him. Rather the contrary, as if something poignant had been sensibly cut short.

Only talking to Elaine, did he manage to feel the drama of it. 'Oh my God, John,' she cried. 'My God! John!' She forgot her own problems. There was the flight to arrange. 'How awful – you must check if your visa is still valid. It's so sudden. The poor thing, your poor mother!' Was she going to bury him out there? Surely not. And what about money?

That John had nothing in his current account was common knowledge. He used his credit card to pay for the flight. ‘What about the future, though: your poor mother, your allowance?’ Elaine found a cash dispenser and insisted he accept £200, though she too was living off her parents.

Yet all this urgent talk, John sensed as they drove to the airport, was just buzz. His girlfriend was getting a chance to see how her man reacted in a crisis and to show how practical and sensible she could be. He adored her, but this was theatre. She was playing. Her vocation was theatre after all. Everything dramatic was fun for Elaine.

No, the only significant thought, he realised now, of these twenty-four hours that had followed his mother’s phone call, had been the knowledge that he would never see his father again. The words had come to him on the plane. They had been showing a movie in Hindi about a man who was supposed to be marrying one woman but in fact was very evidently in love with another who, for reasons John hadn’t grasped, was quite unsuitable. ‘You will never see him again,’ he suddenly found himself muttering.

The moment the words came into his head he felt a fresh alertness. It was much sharper than the phone call or anything Mother had said. Then, trying to picture his father, while at the same time watching the film, because the girls were pretty and he liked the brilliant colours and a certain charming artificiality you get in these Indian romances, he realised that there was no image of Dad in his mind: greenish-grey eyes, lanky, balding from the front, sandy hair, fine nose, a slightly distracted, sometimes aloof air. It wasn’t much more than an identikit. Or not even. I won’t see Dad again, he thought. And he decided that the first thing he must do on arrival in Delhi was view his father’s body. He would see his dead father and fix the man in his memory for life to come. Except that now, wandering down a broad avenue of New Delhi with dry grass waving

on the verges and here and there destitutes wrapped in rags, he couldn't find Mother's clinic; he didn't know where his father was.

It was fantastic that you could send text messages back and forth between India and Maida Vale, you could chat with Elaine 6,000 miles away, and yet you couldn't find your mother round the corner. The maid had seemed very confident. 'Straight, sir, just straight!' She had made a confident gesture with her hand, lifting the purple cloth of her sari. 'Just straight. Then left turn at the red light. Yes. Yes. Road very long, sir.' She wore a yellow blouse. Perhaps she had imagined he had a driver. 'I wish I could be with you too,' Elaine wrote back. 'Audition at the Rep today. Fingers crossed.' 'Good luck, Beautiful,' he replied.

I should ask someone, John decided, but there were no pedestrians in this part of town. A man squatting with his back to a tree simply shook his shawled head. He had his fingers in a bowl. Eventually an autorickshaw pulled in and began to follow him at a walking pace.

John turned. 'Is there a clinic near here?' he asked.

The vehicle stopped. 'Clinic, sir, which clinic?' The man's eyes were sunk in deep hollows. 'You are not well, sir? You need doctor?' He too had a shawl round his head, loose robes on his body. His wrists on the handlebar were uncannily thin. 'Yes, I take you, sir. Get in. I take you.'

John remembered that you were supposed to agree on a price first. 'Fifty rupees,' the man said. Only fifty rupees. It hardly seemed worth haggling. They swerved about through chaotic, honking traffic. When a jam forced them to stop, the driver shooed away beggars. A little girl moved her arms in a quite unnatural way. The driver shouted in Hindi. This really can't be what the maid meant, John thought, and in fact when he walked through mud and broken brick into the reception of a small private hospital they had no knowledge of Dr James.

'Helen James,' John repeated.

‘No, sir. I’m afraid not, sir. There is no one of that name on our staff, sir.’

John took a regular taxi back to the apartment. The maid let him in. It seemed pointless recounting his adventures. Looking at his watch, he realised it was still very early, only lunchtime. I’m jet-lagged, he decided. He went to the fridge and found it almost empty but for two six-packs of Coca-Cola. He smiled. Even in these circumstances, Mum had remembered his Coke.

John opened a can, found some dry biscuits and cheese and went to sit on the sofa. The furnishings in the room were Western, but spare. It was typical of the Jameses. In all their travels there had never been any question of going native; they were largely impervious to the cultures they helped and studied; but nor did they seem to need the comforts that other expats demanded. John munched. The only impression of fullness came from the walls, which were stacked from floor to ceiling with books, box files, old audio cassettes, carefully labelled videos. I’ll find a photo album, he decided.

He couldn’t find an album. The folders were scientific journals, many of them photocopied. There were files full of notes, typed notes, handwritten notes. Some of them were very old. The videos were his father’s work and wouldn’t contain images of him, nor would the audio tapes have his voice. John knew these things. It was a family that produced generation after generation of scientists. If anything his father had been the least of them, too meditative to be a real achiever. A castles-in-the-air man. I will overtake him, John reflected. Perhaps I already have.

Eventually, he found a small black and white contributor’s photo. ‘Towards an Epistemology of Instinct’, Dad’s article was called. John peered at the grainy image. The paper was poor and yellowed. There was a wry grin on his face. John looked more closely. He remembered that grin. Or was it just a pained twist of the mouth? He took

the photo to the window, but the image seemed to dissolve in the Indian glare. He couldn’t make it out. Still, clear or not clear, it was definitely Dad. There was a way his hair had of falling in wisps, a mild cragginess about the jaw. Outside, in the distance, a column of smoke was rising above the apartment buildings, rather as if rubber tyres were burning on the edge of town. John went to take a shower.

CHAPTER TWO

RETURNING FROM AN eight-hour shift at the clinic, Helen James came home to find her maid pointing excitedly at the bedroom, one finger over her mouth. ‘Mr John is here! Your son, madam!’ Helen opened the door to the spare room. John lay on the bed, fully clothed, his handsome face smoothed in sleep, a blond forearm on the pillow. What an improbable presence, she thought. He bore no resemblance really to herself or Albert, so lithe and so relaxed.

Helen had been very much tempted, two or three days ago, not to tell her son about this at all. Why tell anyone? She would definitely have preferred to wind up her marriage by herself. She would have preferred a funeral with no public but herself, or no funeral at all, the bare cremation. In a dream, not three weeks before, she had seen herself carrying her husband’s body to a funeral pyre by the riverside – he wasn’t heavy at all – laying him down on the mud at the water’s edge while the crematorium wallahs heaped on the wood, then holding his hand and talking to him while he burned and sang and the river flowed by. An oddly Indian dream, she thought. When she woke he was shuffling back from the bathroom. She would have liked to cremate him herself, push the coffin into the furnace herself, collect the ashes herself, sweeping them into the skirts of her dress, and hide them herself, on her own, in a place that only she knew. Yes, yes, she had dreamed of doing that; she daydreamed. Yet the morning after the long and terrible last night she had called John on

his mobile. ‘Your father died this morning.’ It was a duty. You can’t deny a son the death of his father. John is a duty and a burden to me, she thought. She shook her head. What fine clothes he was wearing. He seemed unthinkably large and adult. There were two empty Coke cans beside the bed. ‘We’ll have to talk about money, my boy,’ she muttered.

Helen changed out of her work clothes, then sat at the table in the sitting room looking through the newspaper and drinking tea. Every few moments she stopped, her head cocked, as if listening. These are fragile days, she thought, but in the end she would get through. The death of a partner is not the worst way for a relationship to end. Suddenly, Helen decided that she didn’t want to eat alone with her son. She called a colleague, then woke the boy towards seven. ‘John, love, we’re going out to eat, do you mind?’

When John appeared in the sitting room, Kulwant Singh was already there. A Sikh. The young man had meant to ask at once how it had been, how his father had died so quickly when only a couple of months before the doctors had been talking of normal life expectancy; had he left any special message for his son? But Mrs James was already shooing them out of the apartment; there was a small place she hadn’t been to for a long time, she said. ‘I don’t digest properly if I eat late.’ She seemed so much her ordinary self that her son was taken aback.

Kulwant was a jowly, jovial, heavily built man recently returned from a trip to London and very much amused, he declared, by this marriage of Charles and Camilla. ‘It is too funny,’ he kept saying as they ate their meal, ‘these old folks marrying, you know. It’s too funny.’

Exactly as if he were in a pub with Elaine’s friends in London, John began to get worked up about the complete idiocy of royalty. It was incredible, he protested, that even foreigners were seduced by this soap opera.

For a moment the Indian doctor seemed offended – ‘Indians are not ordinary foreigners’ – he complained. Then he chose to be indulgent and chuckled. ‘No, it’s too funny!’

‘How old are they, exactly?’ Helen asked. She couldn’t recall.

‘Late fifties,’ Kulwant said. ‘Far beyond childbearing age, you see.’

‘But who cares how old they are?’ John insisted. ‘It’s the attention they get from the press that’s so maddening and mindless, when anyone who’s halfway talented is eternally ignored.’

‘We must not speak only of talented people,’ Kulwant laughed. ‘There are so few of them!’

Eating quietly, Helen was grateful that no one had mentioned Albert. She herself was fifty-three.

‘I like it here,’ John talked enthusiastically as they walked a little way before finding a cab. Kulwant had hurried off in an autorickshaw. ‘I like the way the air smells and the rickshaws and animals.’ He was looking at a girl in a sari swaying side-saddle on a scooter. ‘Are you going to stay?’

‘Why shouldn’t I?’ Helen told him. ‘I have the clinic. I have my patients.’

‘I’m glad. We’ll come and visit.’ He meant Elaine.

‘You didn’t appear to like Kulwant very much,’ his mother said.

‘Oh no, he was nice. Just that it drives me crazy to think I’m sitting in a restaurant in the heart of the subcontinent eating whatever spicy stuff it was with a man in a bright green turban and all he wants to talk about is whether Harry was the butler’s son and did Charles have the balls to murder Di.’

‘So what did you want to talk about?’

‘I don’t know,’ John laughed. ‘The colour of his turban maybe. Are the colours symbolic or something?’

‘Why didn’t you ask?’

At this point John pulled a couple of coins from his pocket to get rid of two little boys who had been tugging at his sleeves. At once, a dozen more appeared. Poorly lit, the street was still busy. So many people seemed to be carrying things, in their arms, on their heads, with carts and bicycles, as if life were an endless to and fro of bulky packages. Many more squatted on the kerb. Helen shooed the boys away.

‘I didn’t want to offend,’ John said. ‘You know? I’m never sure what I can ask and what I can’t.’

‘Kulwant is busy arranging the marriage of his daughter,’ Helen said. ‘Unfortunately, the girl damaged a knee just when everything seemed settled. She was getting off a bus in traffic and a motorbike hit her. Quite near here, actually. They had to use the money they’d saved for the wedding to pay for her operation. These things aren’t free here. So now the groom’s family has turned cool.’

‘Oh,’ was all John could think to say. ‘I thought they’d stopped arranging marriages.’

‘Not at all.’ Helen stopped on the kerb and waved for a taxi.

‘How come the London trip, then, if he’s short of money?’

‘Financed by the drug companies, so that he’ll prescribe the right things, to those who can afford them of course. If my patients only got what they could afford, they’d never be treated at all.’

Mother and son were silent on the drive back to their apartment, but when they were settled in the sitting room, John at last said: ‘I was hoping to see Dad, tomorrow, before the funeral.’

Helen had gone to sit at her place at the room’s big table. She sighed. ‘I knew you’d want to, but I had the coffin sealed this morning.’

After a short silence, John tried: ‘Can’t they open it?’

His mother looked at her boy. The young man was so well made, with his grey, wide-set eyes, his soft thick hair. She sighed. ‘It’s not a nice sight, John. Best think of him as he was.’

‘I’m not a child,’ John protested.

‘It’s been forty-eight hours now,’ Helen said. ‘And he’s not in a deep freeze. They usually do things right away here you know.’

‘Mum, I spend all my time studying the difference between live cells and dead cells. We’re in the same business.’

His mother didn’t reply.

John turned to the window. ‘How come it happened so quickly?’

‘There were metastases.’

‘So why didn’t he fly back to England?’

‘You know how he was, John.’

The young man felt thwarted. He had imagined himself sympathising with his mother. She would share with him how the end had been. His father would have left a message of some kind, some words for him to mull over. They would look at photographs together. Dad’s had been a rich life, full of travel and ideas. They would feel consoled and close and talk about the future. Instead, the son felt frustrated, even angry. He walked into the kitchen, opened the fridge, took out a Coke and went to sit on the sofa opposite the television.

‘You remembered the Cokes,’ he said grudgingly.

‘How could I forget?’ she smiled. ‘Tell me about yourself, John. How’s the thesis going?’

‘Pretty well finished,’ he said. ‘But the thesis is a detail compared with the research itself. It’s a whole new approach to TB.’

‘And this girl?’

‘Elaine?’ He softened. ‘She’s fine. Looking for her first acting jobs.’

‘Well, let’s hope this time,’ his mother said.

John had a way of being left by pretty girlfriends. His mother would smile wryly. John didn’t reply.

‘And you finish when?’

‘If things in the lab go well, this spring.’

‘After which?’

‘They’ll take me on for the project we’re doing.’

‘You’re sure?’

‘I’m the best.’

His mother watched him. ‘Don’t you think it might be an idea to get some experience first? Often it helps your research if you’ve seen a few things. There are plenty of TB patients to study here, if you’re interested. You know your father …’

‘Mum,’ John shook his head. ‘In the field I’m in, just to understand all the information you need to make even the tiniest step forward takes a lifetime. You have to specialise, specialise, specialise. There’s no time to fool around. And it’s done in the lab, not looking at patients. You don’t need to see the sufferers.’

They sat in silence, Helen behind the big table, John with his leg over the arm of the sofa, swirling his Coke round in its can as if it were cognac. Very soon, he knew, she was going to get up and say goodnight. All his life his mother had preferred to sit at table rather than in an armchair or on the sofa. Wherever they lived, one end of the sitting-room table would have her papers and correspondence, more recently her laptop, a couple of magazines: *Medical Digest*, *BMA News and Quarterly*. It was as if Helen James created a little office or nest of her own within the larger nest of the home.

And in the past, of course, Albert would have been present too, listening over and over to his audio recordings, watching the videos he had made, writing his interminable notes. When she wasn’t in the clinic, when he wasn’t off on his researches, it had been rare for the two of them not to

be in the same room. They discussed his ideas. Dad was the one who had the ideas, sitting on the floor usually, sorting through piles of old tapes and books and notes. The whole house was Albert's office, and his kitchen and bedroom. He drew no boundaries.

'Listen to this,' he would say, and then they would argue some hypothesis back and forth – they rarely agreed – getting quite worked up sometimes, until she would get to her feet – she was a tall, graceful, angular woman – put aside a book that she hadn't really been reading, or a letter that hadn't quite got written, and announce that she was going to bed: 'I don't know about anybody else,' she would say, 'but this old girl needs to be fresh for the clinic in the morning.' She needed energy, she said, for her patients and their diseases. She had lives to save. It wasn't for the likes of her – but she was smiling – to spend her days idly videoing other people's conversations.

Afterwards, his father would sit up for another hour and more, or perhaps for half the night, playing and replaying the same four or five minutes of video, a conversation he had filmed, in the market, at the bank, in the hospital, at a religious ceremony, often in languages he didn't understand. And as he watched he would say, 'Ha!' Or, 'No! No, it's not that,' taking no notice at all of his son, never explaining quite what it was he was after or up to. It was a situation that had allowed John to get away with a great deal over the years.

'Well, I'm off to bed,' Helen James announced abruptly. She stood up. 'To be honest, John, I've had a difficult couple of months. I need to get my strength back. And we're short of staff at the moment.'

Her son stood up to embrace her. As he recalled, the places his mother worked in had always been short of staff. 'Didn't Dad say anything for me?' he asked.

Her eyes flickered away from his.

‘I don’t know,’ he tried. He wasn’t sure if he was asking too much. ‘Some advice, some message?’

Helen James embraced her son and held him tightly. It was the first real contact. Each was looking over the other’s shoulder. ‘Your dad was ill,’ she whispered. John pressed his cheek against hers. ‘A couple of days before the end he said, “If John has time to come out, make sure he visits at least the Sufi tombs, and if possible takes the trip to Agra to see the Taj.”’

‘Oh God, that’s so Dad!’ John laughed, but he almost cried too. ‘How can I? I’m leaving Thursday, Mum. Otherwise all the lab work will get behind.’

‘Two days is plenty,’ she said. She stood back and held him at arm’s length. There were tears in her eyes, but she was smiling. ‘You hardly need to hang about here with your old mum, do you?’

When his mother had gone to bed, John flicked through the TV channels. Why did I get so heated about Charles and Camilla? he wondered. He felt wide awake now and uneasy. What would happen at the lab if he wasn’t there to keep track of things? He was the only person who was always present.

Going to the spare room, he took out his laptop and scrolled through lists of readings they had been taking. ‘How did the audition go?’ he texted Elaine. ‘Everything okay, here. Mum making a big show of being in control.’

The girl did not reply. John pulled out a copy of a journal on communications theory. There was no wall space without its bookshelves and every book and magazine was covered with his father’s scrawl. Some words were underlined, others crossed out. The comments in the margin spilled over onto the page. Not all of them appeared to have much to do with the text they had been written beside. On an article entitled ‘Cybernetics and Invertebrates’, Albert James had written: ‘START AND END WITH BREATHING.’ And then beneath that, in a tiny,

heavily slanted scribble: '*drink every evening ceremonial substitute for thing that hasn't happened. But what thing?*'

John shook his head. It was the kind of distraction that had always prevented his father from producing anything concrete. Mother at least changed people's lives day by day with her diagnoses and medicines. Midway through an article on left-lobe anomalies in chronic schizophrenics, he found the note: '*Not to KNOW anything! Only observations, stories*.'

Again John frowned. Perhaps his father's real problem, he thought, had been his difficulty working together in a team, with other people, towards a shared goal, something essential these days given the sheer amount of spadework that was required to get to grips with anything. You had to be a link in a larger chain, contribute one thing, whereas Dad was always out on his own, trying to solve the whole world himself.

Not properly tired, John lay on the small bed, waiting for sleep. It was impossible to think usefully of his work without being in the lab. Breaking down the smallest particles and isolating even smaller ones, to manipulate them, even the most unimaginably tiny coils of DNA, RNA, ribosomes, every phospholipid: that was the way to progress. That was the way to put new drugs in the hands of people like his mother. Not scribbling queer thoughts over other people's publications. John felt uneasy. It was frustrating that he hadn't seen Dad's body. What did I come here for after all?

Suddenly he was dreaming. It was a troubled sleep. He was walking down the same broad avenues he had walked this morning, but wearing one ordinary, really rather elegant leather sandal, while the toe of his other foot was crammed into a tiny, white, child's shoe, a little girl's shoe, it seemed, which he was dragging along on the pavement because there was no way his foot would ever actually get inside it. And what irritated him enormously – it was an

angry sleep – was that when the Indian man in the airport shop had told him that they only had one right-footed sandal in his size and that the best thing was to take that together with this strange little white feminine thing for his left foot, he had actually accepted this stupid solution. How dumb can you be! If there's one thing you need two of, John, and the same size, it's shoes! 'Symmetry!' Dad always used to say: 'At the heart of life is symmetry!' And shuffling along the broken pavement among the beggars and with car horns blaring and rickshaw drivers soliciting, he was torn between going back to the shop to protest, because he had actually paid £17 for the things – £17 of my parents' money! – and setting off instead to the Sufi tombs where he was to see his father's body for the last time.

'John!' A voice whispered. 'John. Time to get up.' His mother was shaking his shoulder. The funeral was at ten.

CHAPTER THREE

ELAINE HAD REMINDED John he must take a black suit. John didn't have a suit. He had dug out a dark blue jacket. Elaine had helped him pack. He didn't have a tie either. 'I haven't worn a tie since school,' he said. He had laughed. But dressing now, he felt anxious. It would have been right to wear a tie for his father's funeral. Should he ask Mum if there was one in the flat? The hesitation surprised him. When did I ever worry about dress? Dad never cared. His father had scandalised many a prestigious audience by turning up to deliver lectures in an old tee-shirt. He always wore the same clothes. It was family legend, more memorable really than the kind of things he had talked about.

How had they dressed Dad for his coffin? John wondered. The thought stopped him. He breathed deeply. In his old jeans, with the zip that never stayed up? When he went through to the living room he found his mother wearing a very formal black dress. This too he hadn't foreseen. She had even found a black hat. Perhaps bonnet was the word. 'Am I all right?' he asked. 'How do you mean?' Helen James was putting papers in her handbag. She hadn't noticed how her son was dressed. Nor had there been any mention of breakfast. 'The driver is waiting,' she said.

Only in the car did it occur to John to wonder what kind of funeral his mother had arranged. They were in India. He had no idea what an Indian funeral was like. He had never

thought about his father's funeral. But it wouldn't be Indian, surely? 'Have you invited a lot of people?' he asked. Helen James seemed distant. She held her back erect. 'I wondered if there might have been an obituary somewhere,' he went on. It was still in the back of John's mind that he might insist on seeing the body at the undertaker's. He felt it was his right and he mustn't forego it.

'I beg your pardon?' she asked.

The car had stopped outside a place John imagined must be a hardware store but it turned out to be the funeral parlour. There were cars and autorickshaws double-parked and his mother jumped out and crossed the deep gutter to speak to a rather distinguished elderly man in a loose double-breasted black jacket, but rather incongruously wearing a yellow woollen hat and yellow gloves. It wasn't that cold. John saw her fussing with her handbag and pulling out papers, then rummaging to look for something else. They were gestures that took him back to childhood. He was aware of feeling simultaneously sorry for his mother, being widowed so early like this, and intimidated too. What was the point in my coming, if she didn't want me to see him? She saw death almost daily in her work of course. Then he realised four men were struggling to squeeze between the double-parked cars with a coffin swaying over their heads. A hearse, dilapidated yet oddly American-looking, had come round the corner and stopped in a third row, blocking the road, pumping out fumes. A din of horns began. A woman with a large basket on her head threaded the traffic. Drivers were shouting at each other while the four men struggled to get the coffin between the parked cars. The bulky, lacquered box seemed extremely cumbersome. Could he really ask them to open it?

'How much will it all cost?' John enquired when his mother climbed back in and slammed the door. The hearse was moving off ahead. 'I beg your pardon?' she said again.

John couldn’t tell if she was suffering or just distracted. ‘I was wondering if it was expensive,’ he repeated. ‘Everything’s expensive, dear,’ she said.

They drove through the streets following the hearse in the always chaotic traffic. ‘We’re going to a Protestant cemetery to the north of town,’ Helen James now explained. ‘It’s an old military place; a lot of the expats and local Christians use it. They’ve just added a modern crematorium because they’re running out of burial space.’ She frowned at a ramshackle block of low, brick buildings thronged with women milling around fruit carts. ‘The Christians here are rather down on cremation,’ she went on. ‘They tend to insist on those parts of the Bible that suggest the body needs to remain intact until the day of resurrection. But probably the real hitch is that cremation is a Hindu tradition. It would be easier for the Christians to adopt it, if the Hindus did something else, if you see what I mean.’ John recognised his father’s kind of reasoning.

‘And the funeral will be at the cemetery?’ he said.

‘There is no funeral,’ Helen replied. ‘As such.’

John fretted. This was not how his father’s death should have been. But all his childhood had been lived in the knowledge that other families were integrated in the world in a way the Jameses were not. The Jameses were on the move, with a mission, always studying and helping wherever they went, but never really part of things. It was good when it came to impressing girls with the different places you had grown up. ‘I don’t know how you can settle for Maida Vale after the childhood you’ve had,’ Elaine would shake her head. She herself had protective parents in Finchley; they were dead against her being an actress. John wanted to text her now, but it seemed inappropriate to pull his phone out sitting beside his mother as they followed Father’s hearse through the clogged roads. A girl was walking in the gutter beside them, rolling a used car tyre with extended arms.