

A SMALL SACRIFICE
FOR AN ENORMOUS
HAPPINESS

Stories

JAI CHAKRABARTI

AUTHOR OF *A PLAY FOR THE END OF THE WORLD*

ALSO BY JAI CHAKRABARTI

A Play for the End of the World

*A Small Sacrifice for an
Enormous Happiness*

❧ STORIES ❧

Jai Chakrabarti



ALFRED A. KNOPF · NEW YORK · 2023

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www.aaknopf.com

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Several pieces first appeared in the following publications: “A Small Sacrifice for an Enormous Happiness” in *A Public Space*; “Daisy Lane” in *Slice*; “Searching for Elijah” in *Michigan Quarterly Review*; “Mendel’s Wall” in *Coffin Factory*; “Lost Things” in *The Collagist*; “A Mother’s Work” in *One Story*; “Prodigal Son” in *Electric Literature*; “Lilavati’s Fire” in *Conjunctions*. “Lessons with Father” was commissioned by Symphony Space’s *Selected Shorts*, and was published in *Small Odysseys* by Algonquin Books.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Chakrabarti, Jai, author.

Title: A small sacrifice for an enormous happiness : stories / Jai Chakrabarti.

Description: First edition. | New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 2023. | “This is a Borzoi book”—
Title page verso. |

Identifiers: LCCN 2022012709 (print) | LCCN 2022012710 (ebook) | ISBN 9780525658948
(hardcover) | ISBN 9780525658955 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Short stories.

Classification: LCC PS3603.H33548 s63 2023 (print) | LCC PS3603.H33548 (ebook) | DDC
813/.6—dc23/eng/20220317

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022012709>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022012710>

Ebook ISBN 9780525658955

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Cover photograph by Alex Plechko

Cover design by Janet Hansen

ep_prh_6.0_142492539_c0_r0

For Surya

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A Small Sacrifice for an Enormous Happiness

From his balcony, Nikhil waited and watched the street as hyacinth braiders tied floral knots, rum sellers hauled bags of ice, and the row of elderly typists, who had seemed elderly to him since he'd been a boy, struck the last notes of their daily work. Beside him on the balcony, his servant, Kanu, plucked at the hair that grew from his ears.

“Keep a lookout for babu,” Nikhil shouted to Kanu. “I’ll check on the tea.”

Kanu was so old he could neither see nor hear well, but he still accepted each responsibility with enthusiasm.

The tea was ready, as were the sweets, the whole conical pile of them—the base layer of pistachio mounds, the center almond bars that Nikhil had rolled by hand himself, and on the top three lychees from the garden, so precariously balanced, a single misstep would have upset their delectable geometry.

When he returned to the balcony he saw Sharma walking up the cobbled lane, his oiled hair shining in the late-afternoon light. The typists greeted him with a verse from a Bollywood number—Sharma’s boxer’s jaw and darling eyes reminded the typists of an emerging movie star—and Sharma shook his head and laughed.

Kanu limped downstairs to let Sharma in, and Nikhil waited in the living room while the two of them made their way up.

“And what is the special occasion?” Sharma asked, eyeing the pile of confections with a boyish grin.

Nikhil refused to say. He allowed Sharma to have his fill, watching with satisfaction as his fingers became honey-glazed from the offering.

Afterward, when they lay on the great divan—hand-carved and older than his mother’s ghost—Nikhil breathed deeply to calm his heart. He feared the words would be eaten in his chest, but he’d been planning to tell

Sharma for days, and there was no going back now. As evening settled, the air between them became heavy with the sweetness of secrecy, but secrecy had a short wick.

“My dearest, fairest boy,” he said. “I want our love to increase.”

Sharma raised his eyebrows, those lines thickly drawn, nearly fused. Who better than Sharma to know Nikhil’s heart?

“I desire to have a child with you,” Nikhil said.

Nikhil had trouble reading Sharma’s expression in the waning light, so he repeated himself. His fingers were shaking, but he took Sharma’s hand anyway, gave it a squeeze.

“I heard you the first time,” Sharma said.

A rare cool wind had prompted Nikhil to turn off the ceiling fan, and now he could hear the rum sellers on the street enunciating prices in singsong Urdu.

He touched Sharma’s face, traced the line of his jaw, unsure still of how his lover had received his news. Likely, Sharma was still mulling—he formed his opinions, Nikhil believed, at the pace the street cows strolled.

Nikhil waited out the silence as long as he could. “Listen,” he finally said. “The country is changing.”

“A child diapered by two men,” said Sharma. “Your country is changing faster than my country is changing. What about the boys from Kerala?”

They had learned about a schoolteacher and a postal clerk who had secretly made a life together. Unfashionably attired and chubby cheeked, they seemed too dull for the news. A few months ago, locals threw acid in their faces. Even in the black and white of the photographs, their scars, along the jaw, the nose, the better half of a cheek. Ten years since man had landed on the moon, and still.

“We are not boys from Kerala. We are protected.”

No ruse better than a woman in the home, Nikhil had argued over a year ago, and eventually Sharma had agreed to a marriage of convenience. Kanu, who had loved Nikhil through his childhood and even through his years of chasing prostitutes, had arranged for a village woman who knew about the two men’s relationship but would never tell.

Nikhil rummaged through his almirah and returned with a gift in his hands. "You close your eyes now."

"Oh, Nikhil." But Sharma did as he was told, accustomed now perhaps to receiving precious things.

Around Sharma's neck, Nikhil tied his dead mother's necklace. It had been dipped in twenty-four carats of gold by master artisans of Agra. Miniature busts of Queen Victoria decorated its circumference. A piece for the museums, a jeweler had once explained, but Nikhil wanted Sharma to have it. That morning, when he'd visited the family vault to retrieve it, he'd startled himself with the enormity of what he was giving away, but what better time than now, as they were about to begin a family?

"Promise you'll dream about a child with me."

"It is beautiful, and I will wear it every day, even though people will wonder what is that under my shirt."

"Let them wonder."

"You are entirely mad. Mad is what you are."

Nikhil was pulled back to the divan. Sharma, lifting Nikhil's shirt, placed a molasses square on his belly, teasing a trail of sweetness with his tongue. Nikhil closed his eyes and allowed himself to be enjoyed. Down below, the rum sellers negotiated, the prices of bottles fluctuating wildly.

Afterward, they retired to the roof. Their chadors cut off the cold, but Nikhil still shivered. When Sharma asked what the matter was, Nikhil kissed the spot where his eyebrows met. There was another old roof across the street, where grandmothers were known to gossip and eavesdrop, but he did not care. *Let them see, he thought, let them feel this wind of enormous change.*

The next morning, while Sharma washed, Nikhil said, "I want you to toss the idea to your wife. Get Tripti used to the matter."

Sharma dried himself so quickly he left behind footprints on the bathroom's marble floor. "Toss the idea to my wife. Get her used to the matter," Sharma repeated, before he changed into his working clothes, leaving Nikhil to brood alone.

Tripti would have few issues with the arrangement of a child, Nikhil believed. After all, at the time of her marriage to Sharma, her family was mired in bankruptcy, her father had left them nothing but a reputation for

drink and dishonesty, and she herself—insofar as he recalled from his sole meeting with her, at the wedding—was a dour, spiritless creature who deserved little of the bounty that Nikhil had provided her. What little else he knew was from Kanu’s reports. Extremely pliable, Kanu had first said. Then, closer to the wedding: little stubborn about the choice of sweets. She wants village kind. On that note, Nikhil had wilted—let her have her desserts, he’d said, the wedding paid for, and the matter removed from mind.

The next few days, when Sharma was away at the village and at the foundry, Nikhil paced around the house, overcome by the idea of a child. He’d always dreamed of becoming a father but had never believed it would be possible until this year’s monsoon, when, in the middle of a deluge, his forty-two-year-old sister had given birth to a girl. The rain had been so fierce no ambulance could ferry them to the hospital, so the elderly women of the family assumed the duties of midwifery and delivered the child themselves. The first moment he saw his niece he nearly believed in God and, strangely, in his own ability—his *right*—to produce so perfect a thing.

He couldn’t bring Sharma to his sister’s house to meet his new niece, so the next week he’d spent their Thursday together sharing photos; if Sharma experienced the same lightness of being, he didn’t let it show. All he said was, “Quite a healthy baby she is.”

It was true. She’d been born nine pounds two ounces. The family had purchased a cow so that fresh milk would always be available.

...

Nikhil convinced himself that he had opened Sharma’s heart to the idea of becoming a father, but the exuberance of this conclusion led to certain practical questions. Sharma’s wife would carry the child, but where would the child live? In Sharma’s house in the village, or in Nikhil’s house here in the city? If she lived in the village, which Nikhil admitted was the safer option, how would Nikhil father her, how would she receive a proper education?

These questions consumed the hours. When he went to check on his tenants, he was distracted and unable to focus on their concerns. A leaky

toilet, a broken window, the group of vagrants who'd squatted outside one of his properties—all these matters seemed trivial compared to his imagined child's needs.

The next week, the afternoon before he would see Sharma again, he stepped into a clothing store on Rashbehari Avenue to calm his mind. It was a shop he'd frequented to purchase silk kurtas for Sharma or paisley shirts for himself. He told the attendants he needed an exceptional outfit for his niece. They combed the shelves and found a white dress with a lacy pink bow. He imagined his own daughter wearing it. From his dreaming he was certain a girl would come out of their love—Shristi was what he'd named her—Shristi enunciating like a princess, Shristi riding her bicycle up and down Kakulia Lane.

Early on, they'd agreed that Nikhil would avoid the foundry, but he was feeling so full of promise for Shristi that he did not deter himself from continuing down Rashbehari Avenue toward Tollygunge Phari, nor did he prevent himself from walking to the entrance of Mahesh Steel and asking for his *friend*.

Sharma emerged from the uneven music of metalworking with a cigarette between his lips. His Apollonian features were smeared with grease. His hands were constricted by thick welding gloves, which excluded the possibility of even an accidental touch. When he saw Nikhil, Sharma scowled. "Sir," he said, "you'll have the parts tomorrow."

Though he knew Sharma was treating him as a customer for good reason, the tone still stung. Nikhil whispered, "See what I have brought." He produced the perfect baby girl dress.

"You have lost your soup," Sharma whispered back. Then, so everyone could hear, "Babu, you'll have the parts tomorrow. Latest, tomorrow."

Nikhil tried again: "Do you see the collar, the sweet lace?"

"You should go to your home now," Sharma said. "Tomorrow, I'll see you."

But that Thursday Sharma failed to visit. Nikhil and Kanu waited until half past nine and then ate their meal together by lamplight.

...

They met on Thursdays because it was on a Thursday that they had first met three years ago, at that time of year when the city is at its most bearable. When the smell of wild hyacinth cannot be outdone by the stench of the gutters, because it is after the city's short winter, which manages, despite its brevity, to birth more funerals than any other time of year. In the city's spring, two men walking the long road from Santiniketan back to Kolkata—because the bus has broken and no one is interested in its repair—are not entirely oblivious to the smells abounding in the wildflower fields, not oblivious at all to their own smells.

He supposed he had fetishized Sharma's smell from the beginning, that scent of a day's honest work. The smell of steel, of the cheapest soap. The smell of a shirt that had been laundered beyond its time. The smell of his night-bound stubble. He allowed his hand to linger on Sharma's wrist, pretending he was trying to see the hour. An hour before sunset. An hour after. He did not remember exactly when they parted. What did it matter.

What mattered were the coincidences of love. The day he saw Sharma for the second time he counted among the small miracles of his life.

Sharma was drinking tea at the tea stall on Kakulia Lane. He was leaning the weight of his body on the rotting wood of the counter, listening to the chai wallah recount stories. Later, he would learn that Sharma had landed a job at a nearby foundry and that this tea stall was simply the closest one, but in that moment he did not think of foundries or work or any other encumbrance, he thought instead of the way Sharma cradled his earthen teacup, as if it were the Koh-i-noor.

Oh, he had said, did you and I...that broken bus...What an evening, yes?

A question that led to Thursdays. Two years of Thursdays haunted by fear of discovery, which led to a wedding, because a married man who arrived regularly at Kakulia Lane could not be doing anything but playing backgammon with his happenstance friend. What followed was a year of bliss. He considered this time their honeymoon. They were as seriously committed as any partners who'd ever shared a covenant, and shouldn't that show?

...

Sharma did visit the following Thursday, though the matter of his absence the week before was not raised. Instead of their usual feast at home, they ate chili noodles doused with sugary tomato sauce at Jimmy's Chinese Kitchen, along with stale pastries for dessert. Sharma was wearing Nikhil's family necklace under his shirt, with just an edge of the queen's image peeking out from the collar. Seeing his gift on his lover's body released Nikhil from his brood, and for the first time that night, he met Sharma's gaze.

"You're cross with me," Sharma offered.

It wasn't an apology, but Nikhil was warming to the idea of a reconciliation.

"Anyway, Tripti and I have been discussing the issue of the baby."

Tripti and I. He so rarely heard the name Tripti from Sharma's lips, but that she could be in league with him, discussing an *issue*? Unjust was what it was.

"It's in part the physical act. We eat our meals together. We take walks to the bazaar or to the pond. But that, no, we do not do that."

"Don't worry," Nikhil said. "I shall do the deed. I shall be the child's father." While it was unpleasant to imagine the act of copulation itself, he'd studied the intricacies of the reproductive process and believed his chances were excellent for a single, well-timed session to yield its fruit.

"But you can barely stand the smell of a woman."

What passed over Sharma's face could best be described as amusement, but Nikhil refused to believe that his lover wasn't taking him seriously—not now that he'd opened his heart like a salvaged piano. "Sharma," Nikhil said. "It shall be a small sacrifice for an enormous happiness."

"Oh, Nikhil, do you not see that we are already happy? Anything more might upset what we have. We should not tempt the gods."

Nikhil ground away at the pastry in his mouth until the memory of sweetness dispersed. The things Sharma said. As if there were a cap on happiness in this world. It was Sharma's village religion talking again, but there was something more. He sensed in the way Sharma held his hands in his lap, the way he kept to the far side of the bed when they retired for the night, that Tripti had wormed something rotten into him. He was vulnerable that way, Sharma was.

When Nikhil awoke the next morning, Sharma had already departed, but in the bathroom, which he'd lovingly reconstructed from Parisian prints, with a claw-foot tub and a nearly functioning bidet, he found Sharma's stubble littering the marble sink. Sharma had always been fastidious in the house, taking care to wipe away evidence of his coming and going, and the patches of facial hair offended Nikhil. He studied their formations, searching for patterns. When nothing could be discerned, he called for Kanu to clean the mess.

...

Only one train went to Bilaspur, a commuter local. For two hours, Nikhil was stuck next to the village yeoman, who'd gone to the city to peddle his chickens and was clutching the feet of the aging pair he'd been unable to sell, and the bleary-eyed dairyman, who smelled of curd and urine. The only distraction was the girl with the henna-tinged hair who'd boarded between stops to plead for money, whose face looked entirely too much like the child he envisioned fathering.

When he reached the Bilaspur terminus, he was relieved to see the rows of wildflowers on either side of the tracks, to smell the bloom of begonias planted by the stationmaster's post.

It wasn't difficult finding Sharma's home. With money from the foundry and regular gifts of cash from Nikhil, Sharma had purchased several hectares of hilltop land and built a concrete slab of a house, garrisoned with a garden of squash, cucumber, and eggplant, and with large windows marking the combined living and dining area. Nikhil found the structure too modern, but that was Sharma's way—he had never swooned over the old colonials of Kakulia Lane.

From inside the house, Nikhil could hear the BBC broadcast, which was strange given that Tripti didn't understand English. Nikhil tiptoed toward the open living room window, and from there he spied. Sharma's wife was holding a book on her lap, mouthing back the words of the BBC announcer.

“BER-LIN WALL,” she said. “DOWN-ING STREET.”

She had a proud bookish nose—adequately sized for the resting of eyeglasses—a forehead that jutted too far forward, reminding Nikhil of a

depiction of Neanderthal gatherers, and the slightest of chins, which gave to her appearance a quality of perpetual meekness. Her sari was stained with years of cooking. Her only adornments were the bright red bindi on her forehead and the brass bangles that made music whenever she turned a page.

There were certain topics Nikhil and Sharma had left to the wind, foremost the matter of Sharma's marriage. In the beginning, Nikhil experienced a shooting pain in his abdomen whenever he thought about Sharma and Tripti coexisting in domestic harmony, though over the past few months that pain had numbed; the less he'd thought of Tripti, the less she existed, but here she was now—the would-be mother of his child. He rapped on the grill of her window.

“Just leave it there,” Tripti said without looking up from her book.

It was the first time she'd ever spoken to him. Her voice, which was composed of rich baritones, seemed rather forceful, and her demeanor, that of the lady of a proper house, left him feeling uncertain about his next move. At last, he said in a Bengali so refined it could have passed for the old tongue of Sanskrit, “Perhaps you've mistaken me for the bringer of milk. I am not he. Madam, you know me but you do not know me.”

The words had sounded elegant in his head, but when spoken aloud he flushed at their foolishness.

She looked up to study his face, then his outfit, even his leather sandals now rimmed with the village's mud. “I know who you are,” she finally said. “Why don't you come inside?”

He had not planned beyond this moment. He had allowed his feet to step onto the train at Howrah, imagined a brief meeting, a quick exchange at the doorstep, ending with a mutually desirable pact.

“I can't stay long,” he said. Sharma would be home in another hour, and Nikhil had no wish to see him in the same vicinity as his wife.

While he settled into the living room, Tripti pattered around the kitchen. The house was decorated with wood carvings and paintings of gods and goddesses. Parvati, the wife of Shiva, smiled beatifically from a gilded frame, and her son the remover of obstacles was frozen inside a copper statuette. From the plans Sharma had shared with pride, Nikhil knew that a hallway connected the three bedrooms of the house—one for

Tripti, one for Sharma, and the last a prayer room—and he wondered now how their mornings were arranged, what politics were discussed, what arguments were had, where the laundry was piled.

Tripti brought two cups of tea and a plate of sweets. “Homemade,” she said. He’d been raised to fear milk sweets from unfamiliar places, but out of politeness he took the first bite—a little lumpy, only mildly flavorful.

“Sharma is always praising your cooking,” he said, but it was a lie. They never bothered to discuss Tripti’s cooking; in fact, Nikhil had teased that they were lovers because of his own talents in the kitchen. Still, it felt appropriate to compliment this woman, and he continued in this fashion, standing to admire the Parvati painting, which he described as “terribly and modernly artful.”

“Nikhil-babu,” she interrupted. “Are you here to discuss the matter of the child?”

He sighed with relief. Until that moment, he’d been unsure about how to broach the subject.

“You know,” she said. “We discuss our days. We may not be lovers, but we are fair friends.”

He experienced what felt like an arthritic pain in his shoulder, but it was only the collar of his jealousy. At least they were not *best* friends.

She pointed to the book on her coffee table, an English-language primer. “Unfortunately, it’s just not on our horizon. You see, I’m going to university. I shall be a teacher.”

“University,” he said. “But you did not even finish eighth grade.”

“That is true, but at Bilaspur College, the principal is willing to accept students who display enormous curiosities.”

He found it improbable that she would be able to absorb the principles of higher learning, but he had no particular wish to impede her efforts. Education was a challenge he understood. “You want to improve yourself? Wonderful. If you are with child, I will have tutors come to you. Not professors from Bilaspur College. Real academics from the city.”

But it was as if she had not heard him at all. She submerged a biscuit in her tea and stared out into the garden.

“Whose happiness are you after, Nikhil-babu?” she said. “Yours and yours only?”

He found himself grinding his teeth. The great bane of modernity. Though the country had opened itself to the pleasures of the other world—cream-filled pastries, the films of Godard, a penchant for pristine white-sand beaches—he did not care for the consequences, the dissolution of ordering traditions, with whose loss came poor speech, thoughtless conduct. A village woman addressing him without the slightest deference.

“Perhaps you should enroll in a school for proper manners,” he said.

Tripti eased her teacup down. He followed the geometry of her sloping wrist, but there was no break of anger in her face.

“Listen,” he said. But how could he explain that his want for a child had become rooted in his body, in the bones of his hands and the ridges of his knees, where just that afternoon the girl on the train who’d emerged from the rice fields to beg in the vestibules, whose outstretched palm he would normally loathe—there was no way to lift the country by satisfying beggars—had touched him. Had he not smiled back and touched her hair?

“If you’re planning to catch the last train back,” she said, “it’s best you go now.”

He chewed another of Tripti’s lumpy sweets. When properly masticated, it would have the consistency to be spat and to land right between Tripti’s eyes. But Tripti had turned away from him and resumed her studies. Soon he was all chewed out; he had to show himself out of the house.

...

By the time he reached the train station, the six o’clock was arriving at the platform. He squatted behind the begonias by the stationmaster’s post and waited to see if Sharma was aboard. With the afternoon’s disappointment, he felt he deserved to see Sharma’s face, even if only covertly. See but remain unseen. In that moment, he could not have explained why he did not peek his head out of the tangle of flowers, though a glimmer of an idea came, something to do with the freedom of others—how, in this village of Sharma’s birth, unknown and burdened, Nikhil could never be himself. Sweat pooled where his hairline had receded. How old the skin of his forehead felt to the touch.

As passengers began to disembark, those who were headed for the city clambered aboard. He looked at the faces passing by but did not see Sharma. The first warning bell sounded, then the second, and the stationmaster announced that the train was nearly city bound.

He saw Sharma as the crowd was thinning out. He was walking with someone dressed in the atrocious nylon pants that were the fashion, and perhaps they were telling jokes, because Sharma was doubled over laughing. In all their evenings together, he couldn't recall seeing Sharma laugh with so little inhibition as he now did, so little concern about who would hear that joyous voice—who would think, *What are those two doing?* He watched Sharma walk along the dirt road toward his house, but it was an entirely different progress; he was stopping to inspect the rows of wildflowers on the path, to chat up the farmer who'd bellowed his name.

He kept watching Sharma's retreating form until he could see nothing but the faint shape of a man crossing the road. It was then he realized that the city-bound train, the last of the day, had left without him; he sprinted into the stationmaster's booth and phoned his house. It took several rings for Kanu to answer. "Yello?"

"Oh, Kanu," he said. "You must send a car. You must get me. I am at Bilaspur."

The connection was poor, but he could hear Kanu saying, "Babu? What is happening? What is wrong?"

There was no way to express how wounded the afternoon had left him, and he knew the odds of securing a car at this hour, so he yelled back into the phone, "Don't wait for me, Kanu. Make dinner, go to bed!"

He asked the stationmaster if there were any hotels in the village. A room just till the morning, he said. The stationmaster shrugged and pointed vaguely in the direction of the dirt road.

...

There were no hotels, he soon discovered. Either he would sleep underneath the stars or he would announce himself at Sharma's house to spend the night. He was certain he couldn't do the latter—what a loss of face that would be—but the former, with its cold and its unknown night animals, seemed nearly as terrifying.

He paced the town's only road until he grew hungry. Then he headed in the direction of Sharma's house, following a field where fireflies alighted on piles of ash. He had no wish to be discovered, but in the waning daylight that would soon turn into uninterrupted darkness, he felt as anonymous as any of the mosquitoes making dinner of his feet.

When he reached the entrance to Sharma's house, he could smell the evening's meal: lentil soup, rice softened with clarified butter. He could see the two of them together in the kitchen. Sharma was slicing cucumbers and Tripti was stirring a pot. The way Sharma's knife passed over the counter seemed like an act of magic. Such grace and precision. Soon, he knew the lentils and rice would be combined, a pair of onions diced, ginger infused into the stew, the table set, the meal consumed. He watched, waiting for the first word to be spoken, but they were silent partners, unified by the rhythm of their hands.

They moved into the dining room with their meal, and he crawled to the open kitchen window. Sharma had left his mother's necklace on the kitchen counter, next to the cheap china atop the stains of all meals past. What he was seeing couldn't be dismissed: Sharma had treated his greatest gift as if it were nothing more than a kitchen ornament. Nikhil's hand snaked through the window to recover the heirloom, and he knocked over a steel pan in the process.

Sharma rushed to the kitchen and began to yell, "Thief, stop," as if it were a mantra. Nikhil scurried down the hill, the necklace secure in his grip, and when he paused at the mouth of the town's only road and turned back, he thought he saw Sharma's hands in the window, making signs that reminded him of their first meeting, when in the darkness those dark fingers had beckoned. Nikhil almost called back, but too much distance lay between them. Whatever he said now wouldn't be heard.