On rainy nights in that part of Boston, the Charles Street area, antique gas lamps lighted the narrow side streets which were swollen with a paving of cobblestones. Like the lamps, the stones had been left intact, and they were so carefully preserved in a way that caused such inconvenience that the nostalgia they represented was vulgar, an obnoxious pride. There was no love in it. It is that way with keeping old things: they are flaunted and handled and gaped at. Collectors and conservers are arrogant; many Bostonians are that way, and several I knew flinched when I told them how I had once seen my cousin tear the brass guts out of an expensive Victorian oil lamp and solder in a light socket. He thought it looked better with a plastic flex trailing from a hole he punched in its base. My cousin should have seen those gas lamps in Boston. Their clean windows framed small bags of white light and made the cobblestones gleam like glazed loaf tops.

With the love knot in my pocket Walnut Street was my destination, but all those streets had the same effect on me: turning into one from the traffic and honkings of busy Charles, I began to walk more slowly, as if I had been hurried back a hundred years and cooled on the way. I didn’t see the nostalgia as arrogance: the discovery of this oldness was private and all my own, not urged on me by an anxious host. Because I was young and a stranger and because my first experience of that city had been vicarious in the most distancing way – through reading about it in novels – I wished to prolong these sensations of the age I understood, the city of quaintness and crime. By slowing down and remembering, I exhumed in my memory of grateful reverence for the solidness and the apparent calm, and hoped that the feeling would remain at least until I reached that crusted hydrant or that angular leaning house with the mullioned windows at the corner. I strained to hear the hoofbeats and creaking leather of a gasping horse, the wobbling clatter of carriage wheels approaching, or the man in the black opera cape tapping his cane toward a doorway draped in fog boas. I saw no one’s face and I sensed that behind the brick walls of houses lay intrigue’s moist dread and expectancy: a shadowy drawing room, chairs arrayed facing each other like old aunts who refuse to die, a cold fire, untouched sandwiches curling on the edges of a plate, a mantelpiece clock set in porcelain, an odor of foreign tobacco, a male corpse lying in a posture of frozen hilarity, some blood running into the pile of an expensive carpet – all the props in the literary stage set of a finished murder.

I was a student then, and on an errand, and if I made a great deal of the atmosphere it was because I had recently arrived from the worst city in the world, my birthplace, Calcutta – not, as I was often forced to explain to Americans, a fancifully named town in a Midwestern state, but the real place, in Bengal. Having left Calcutta I knew I

would never go back, though I was bonded to the Government of West Bengal and I had promised that on my return I would work at a low salary for five years in the civil service to repay the loan that had been given to me. I am not a liar by nature; it hurt me to make the promise of returning after I earned my degree. But my family no longer exists for me: most are dead, and those who are not dead I never knew well. It was my plan to flee. The university in the Boston suburb was also part of my plan – I would not have gone anywhere else.

The idea of crime in those parts was not wholly literary remembrance of Bostonians with swords sheathed in walking sticks or genteel poisonings (strychnine has the sound and feel of a long, sharp knife – the sword-cane and the poisoning are linked in my imagination). All this was ten years ago, a time when so many women, most of them elderly, were sexually outraged and then strangled – I may have reversed the order here – by a lunatic handyman. On my first visit to Walnut Street a daily newspaper displayed in a steel rack in front of a drugstore had the alarming headline FEAR STALKS THE HILL. Idling foreigners were reported to the police, and I expected to be stopped and subjected to a frisking and made to explain my errand. I was a total stranger in that place. Although my mother was a white American and my father a German, my passport was Indian and so is my accent still: I speak with my lips pursed and subtly transpose the first letters of the words very well. I had always been taught to think of myself as an Indian, more particularly Bengali, for in addition to being born near Calcutta, I lived there until the age of twenty-one, at which time I received my bursary. In Boston at the time of these stranglings, I felt that I, an Indian, was conspicuous. I was surprised that no one took the slightest notice of me. In coffee shops and, occasionally, buying subway tokens, I was asked to repeat myself; the requests were extremely polite. But in large cities speech is seldom necessary, and when it is used it is functional phrase-book language; except for the few times when I was asked to repeat what I said, a number or the name of a subway station, my accent went unnoticed. My color, of course, blended perfectly. At that time the word colored was still used to describe black people. I was not taken for, though I felt, colored.

My background was of interest to the girls I dated, and the information that I had resolved to suppress I found myself elaborating upon, as soon as I saw that it caused no discomfort to the listener. I am not a gregarious person and these petty details of my life were a relief from small talk. It soon reached the point where if I was not asked, I offered, saying, ‘Did you know that I’m an Indian?’ which never failed to produce the question, ‘You mean an Indian Indian or the other kind?’ I was envied for my origins but I selected, leaving many details unspoken, for I had once dwelt on some squalid aspects of my upbringing with a girl I especially liked, thinking of ways to interest her and casting about in my memory for impressive sorrows and hardships, and I was so absorbed in this that it was some time before I looked up and saw that I was making her cry.

The love knot, in gold, I found among my mother’s possessions after she died, of an

illness diagnosed as cerebral malaria, in our house in Calcutta in 1957. It was in an envelope sealed on the flap with red wax, a buff-paper envelope, much thumbed and furry with use, bearing on the front an address in my mother's handwriting, To: George Chowdree, 22 Walnut Street, Boston, Massachusetts. It was with three bangles, an out-of-date passport, my birth certificate and some things of my father's (his spectacles, some old coins, green-brown paper money, his copy of the Ramayana in a German translation), items of no value. He had died years before, alone my mother said, in another city in India. The sealed envelope had been addressed a very long time ago, and it looked as if it had been carried around, for the corners were tearing and the wrinkles and bulges in the envelope were a shadowy pattern the shape of the small object inside. It could not be mailed. I opened it, for these reasons and also because I was curious. There was no note inside, only the love knot, worked in the most delicate filigree perhaps by one of our Bengali goldsmiths. That the name was George Chowdree amused me. He was obviously a Christian Indian, one of a group my mother detested: she spat at the sight of a black priest and she said that if I ever entered a Catholic church she would kill me. This anger in her was rare. She was a peaceful soul, and she was a very devout Hindu.

I am, I suppose, a Hindu myself. My interest in the name George Chowdree lay in the fact that its pattern was nearly my own name in reverse: my first name is Hindu and my surname European. Danny, as I'm called, is given as Daneeda on my passport; my surname, Schum, which is German, rhymed with zoom in India and now, in America, it rhymes with thumb. Persons of mixed identity like me find it simpler to agree with the stranger's assessment. I am what other people take me for; I never challenge their assumptions. When they say, 'I guess your father went to India during the war,' I say he did. They are probably right. I never knew my father, and the little I know of my background is enough to prevent me from wondering further. It was my mother who raised me, her only child; she took me to the temple, she enrolled me in school and stitched and mended my uniforms, she encouraged me to get a job in the civil service, she tried to keep me innocent. While she was certainly puritanical, she had developed the Indian habit of going to the movies on Saturday afternoons; it was her one recreation, and I shared it purely to please her. The films were extremely boring, their plots predictable and melodramatic (defiant lovers, feuding families, women dying in childbirth), but the songs – a dozen or so in each movie – were pleasant. My mother hummed them as she cooked, crouching next to a smoky fire and stirring and slapping dough cakes and turning from the smoke to sigh and push her hair – which was light brown – out of her eyes. I know now that my mother was a very beautiful woman; it is something that one discovers late – it may even be the mark of manhood to see one's mother as a woman who was once beautiful. As an orthodox Hindu, my mother never wore jewelry; her only ornament was a vermilion caste mark, the shape of a narrow candle flame, on her very white forehead. It surprised me that she had owned a love knot.

But there it was, after her cremation, in my hand. I slipped it into a clean envelope and

wrote out the address of George Chowdree, and for weeks afterward I repeated the address to myself. I took the same comfortable refuge in it that one does in an incantation. Studying for my Higher School Certificate, I copied this address on the flyleaf of my volume of The Secret Agent, which was one of the set books in English that year and which, now that I think of it, may have provided some of the London atmosphere that I later associated with that area of Boston: Verloc could have managed his seedy shop on Charles Street, and Winnie's carriage bumped over cobblestones just like those I saw on Walnut. I made one alteration in the address. Instead of Chowdree's name, I wrote, with the yearning one feels in the solitude of early youth, my own name, and under it Walnut Street and the city. For as long as I could remember I had wanted to escape from India, and now I had a place to escape to. It might have been the reason I did so well in my examinations.

In my mind I saw a street in America lined with walnut trees; there was only one house on the street that I could see clearly, the others were smaller and much blurred. Number twenty-two was a cheerful house, freshly painted, and it resembled a colonnaded house in Calcutta I was fond of walking past, an elegant but deserted one, where an Englishman had once lived. My scholarship went through after some delays; I was given a folder of directions and authorizations, printed on villainous paper; and I sailed from Madras.

I did not go to Walnut Street immediately. I wanted to discover the place slowly, as one does a painting in a museum, approaching it from a great distance and picking out details as one draws nearer for the close, final dazzle. I bought a map; I studied that. I walked in other parts of the city, where the docks are, where the insurance companies are, the bookstores, the Irish bars with old photographs of bare-fisted boxers in the windows, along the river near the hospitals, the Chinese district of four streets bordered by strip clubs and a large school of dentistry. And when I had explored the peripheries of the Charles Street area, noticing on the way a gloomy building housing the Theosophical Society, many antique shops and boarding houses (the doors ajar, pay phones on the wall), I walked to the corner of Beacon and Charles and then down Charles, pausing often, to Walnut, where I first saw that newspaper headline. I examined my map one last time. It was late on a rainy afternoon in August and I shielded the map in my hand as I looked from it to the street sign and then down the sidewalk. People walked quickly past me in the warm drizzle with their heads down, holding bright umbrellas or, if they had no umbrella, making visors over their eyes with their hands. I was splashed by a car just before I turned into Walnut; but this was not the street I expected. The antique gas lamps were lighted, and so were most of the cobbles beneath them, glazed individually in pools of illumination. But the rest was dark, and there were few trees, all with wet, heavy green leaves, planted in holes in the sidewalk and protected by cylindrical wooden fences. The houses were all three-storied, most of them joined, with narrow plots of grass at the fronts. The even numbers were on the opposite side of the street. I went cautiously and found number twenty-two, watched for a moment, then walked around the block to a coffee shop

where I had a sandwich and tea. The darkness outside was false, caused by the storm; I wanted night, and I walked until it enclosed the city. I went back to Walnut Street again, and passing the house, I saw through the lighted front window a girl's face, laughing at someone I could not see, and the face of the girl was as dark as all those I had left in Calcutta.

That was strange. I had prepared myself for a man's face, and, even more, for a particular man, one I had seen in a Bengali film, a plump-necked actor who always played the role of a businessman, a frequent traveler, a man of some importance; I had superimposed this important actor's face on George Chowdree. He was my stereotype – healthy Indians traveled, skinny ones stayed at home. Here I betray the theatrical side of my plan. It was melodrama, worthy of the Indian film which is filled with such paraphernalia: my dead mother's piece of ornate jewelry always in my pocket, my cleverly obtained scholarship, my search, my wanderings about the city – striking poses as if I was being watched. And soon I fitted that dark girl's face into this melodrama, as more appropriate than the man's I expected.

It was not my purpose to knock on the door and introduce myself. The busy strangler made everyone suspicious, doors were closed to strangers; it was not even a time for casual visiting, for people were no less anxious on an unfamiliar sidewalk than they were in their own houses, and footsteps behind one took on the jarring insistence of summoning nighttime knocks on a door.

I saw the girl's face; I was satisfied; I went away. For many days I called the laughing face to mind, the street, the lighted window, until all the anticipated details of my previous fantasy had been replaced by the actual details – unanticipated but now appropriate – of what I saw that evening. It was still fantasy, but substantiated by enough reality to make me patient in my errand. Something of my patience, deliberately exercised to sustain my little drama, may be seen when I say that I did not look up Chowdree's name in the telephone directory until after I visited the house. I could have done this as soon as I landed in America. I did not. And finally, when I did, it was as I expected, the only one in the book, at the right address. But to my surprise his initials were followed by the abbreviation for medical doctor.

For minutes I searched for credible symptoms, envisaging an allusive chat with Chowdree the physician as he tapped my back and crushed the wooden tongue depresser into his wastebasket. I could become his patient. I rejected this as too convenient and, as I had by now become acquainted with American medical charges, too expensive. I think I might have tried it, but after I saw that girl's face I knew my approach would be through her. She was about my own age; she was pretty, probably a student like me and, quite black, was me in negative. It was a symmetry I enjoyed. While I thought about this I fancied that the shadow I cast in that late summer reverie was like this girl, dark and altering in rippling angles as I walked on uneven ground, a foreshortened reflection of my own personality, changeable and intriguing, joined at

my foot sole.

I did what the solitary person or the lonely lover often does. He knows that it is morbid to sit in his room and chew on his misery; he goes out and, at the slightest suggestion, he follows women, marking them in buses or in stores and then trailing after them, keeping at a safe undetectable distance and relentlessly keeping them in sight, so that their resolution – those quick woman's steps – becomes this, promising fulfillment. Women march more hectically than men and as they approach their destination they become positively frantic because women do not watch their feet or swing their arms, and when they speed up they acquire a mechanical bustle, and nearly always their calves stand out in smooth oblongs and the backs of their ankles become hard and pinched. A foreigner in a city watches other people; he tries to imitate their rhythm so he studies their movements. The reason I assigned for the women's speeding up was that unlike men they never glanced around as they walked and I decided that this provoked uneasiness and, consequently, a nervous speed.

So it was with this dark girl. She attended a school of fine arts that was housed in an old building on Marlborough Street; I had followed her to the place and later wrote a letter asking whether I might do a part-time course with them. The fees were out of the question. I continued to follow the girl to other likely spots. She used the Boston Public Library twice a week, the section devoted to Oriental art. I applied for a borrower's card and began studying there myself twice a week at the little tables adjacent to the ones she used. When she entered a stack, I entered a parallel one and, pretending to read, peered at her back. One day I saw her take a book; the subject was Indian miniatures of the Mogul period. She used it for the afternoon. I stayed at my desk, watching. After she was gone I looked on the shelf and saw that it was not there. She had checked it out.

A month later, on a day when normally she did not use the library, I looked for the book. It was not on the shelf. I looked it up in the card catalogue and noted down the author's name, and then I requested it at the main desk. The white-haired lady there wore spectacles hung on a chain around her neck. I showed her the card and asked when the book was due to be returned. Spectacles were put on, drawers pulled out, index cards flipped and thumbed. The book had not been borrowed, said the lady, and was I absolutely sure it was not on the shelf? She repeated the call number. I said no. She said, rising, that it may have been put on another shelf.

We searched; she for a long time, I for only a few minutes. I knew then the book had been stolen.

And I knew the thief! A discovery! I had found her laughing and recorded her way of walking; I knew her subject and her school and many of her habits. These were obvious things. Now I had discovered a weakness, a deep secret. Many husbands would have trouble discovering this in their wives, but I was more patient than any

husband, and more persistent than most lovers. I fantasized the kind of device necessary for such a theft: a sling, a pocket hung between her thighs on straps attached to a belt, the whole business hidden by her long skirt. (I knew her complete wardrobe and the ways she varied it, though once she surprised me with a new silk scarf.)

Her long skirts were out of fashion, but her face was so pretty that in clothes cut the wrong length, and so plain and featureless, she seemed to be anticipating a bold fashion. Her face was the same shade as her arms, deeply colored, with a high dark polish, the gloss of the race, a prominent nose balanced above by a strong forehead and brow, and below by full brown lips. She was Bengali, there was no doubt of that; the face, the thick black hair told it, the warm melancholy of her large eyes, the thin arms and sharp elbows, the long fingers, busy with mischief and pencils, nacreous fingernails, her air of independence, walking so swiftly, her responsible innocence concealing her crime.

I had followed her for months, through Boston streets, in department stores, stood with my back to her and watched her reflection in the window of a travel agency as she walked like a ghost through the sign Puerto Rico $49, as she browsed among the sidewalk bins of a secondhand bookshop. Her movements were unchanging: I could meet her bus, join her discreetly at the Hayes-Bickford for a coffee or follow her blindly, streets away, walking parallel on Boylston as she walked on Commonwealth Avenue, and I knew precisely when I could turn and allow our paths to cross. I was daring in the Main Reading Room of the library, sitting across the varnished table from her, memorizing her hands, for the lamps at eye level prevented her from seeing me. I kept maps of her movements; I could meet her head-on; I passed by her school and rehearsed conversations with her, and during her school's winter break, when her movements became slightly irregular (no school, more stores and library) I was half in love with her.

Her name was Dorothy Chowdree. I learned that early in December in the ridiculously painstaking way I had found out that she stole the book on Indian miniatures (and two others, also about Indian art). Now borrowing is done with numbers, but at that time the borrower wrote his name on two cards that were kept in a brown pocket glued to the inside back cover of the book; these cards were handed over when the book was taken out. I noted one book she had taken; it was returned on the date due; it bore her name. Simple. I noticed one other thing from my watching slot in Middle Eastern Art: there was a book she always used but never took out. It wasn't possible for her to steal this one; it was very large, with color plates, bound in full calf. Its subject was Indian ornaments and jewelry.

For several weeks in March I neither followed her nor used the library, and toward the beginning of April I picked up again and found her exactly where I knew she would be, at 4:30 on a Friday, walking away from her school to a cup of coffee at the

Hayes-Bickford and then a two-hour session in the Oriental collection. I saw her disappear around the corner; I lingered at the school and then went in. Some students, long-haired girls with green book bags and bulging portfolios were clomping down a wooden, spiral staircase. They paused at a bulletin board, read, and passed by me. I had a look at the bulletin board myself: a tea was announced ('Pourer, B. Yardley'), a lecture at a museum, a summer school in Vermont. Dorothy's name was given twice, as organizer of a dance at the Biltmore for the Spring Weekend ('Single, $3.50') and as chairman of a lecture on Mondrian. The lecture was in a week's time, the dance in mid-May. Savoring the pure pleasure of expectation, I decided on the dance.

The weather grew mild; it still rained often, but the rain did not dry so quickly on the streets as it had done in the winter freeze. Streets, grass and sidewalks stayed wet, and in the early evenings and at night there were reflections on Walnut Street, reminding me of my first day, when I discovered that house and Dorothy's face in the lighted window. I was less patient now, for I had decided that Dorothy's industry at the library must mean that she was in her last year at the school. It would not be easy to trace her after her graduation. All my energies went into planning for the dance. I ferreted out a student from my college who knew where tickets could be bought for the Spring Weekend dance at the Biltmore. I borrowed money, bought a dark suit and a new tie and had my shoes resoled. Dorothy was also preparing for the dance: she bought shoes and yards and yards of silk from an importer just off Washington Street.

A week before the dance I entered the library early and went to the Oriental section. Dorothy had not arrived. I found the large leather volume on Indian ornaments and slipped an envelope inside. It was a new envelope, addressed to Dorothy; inside was my mother's love knot. I replaced the book on the shelf and took my usual place at Middle Eastern Art. I could see a tweed coat moving slowly through Dorothy's stack, fingering the spines. A man's ringed hand took a book from the shelf, opened it to the flyleaf, put it back. He then sidled toward the Indian ornaments book and, just as quickly, stepped away. Dorothy was beside him, her shoes clicking, heaving the book down.

American bars are the darkest places imaginable. In the Biltmore bar I had a whiskey and watched the students, dressed for the dance, walking past the window of the bar into the hotel lobby. I counted them so as to be sure that the ballroom would be full when I arrived, and when I had thirty-two couples I followed. Dorothy had not passed the bar, but I knew that as organizer she must have arrived early. I saw her as soon as I entered the ballroom; she was not hard to miss.

She was wearing a sari, blue with a gold border and not the shoes I had seen her buy but small embroidered slippers with curling toes. Her dress was correct, the sort that might be worn for an Indian festival or a wedding. She wore bangles on both wrists and one on her left ankle and when I saw her she was deep in conversation with an elderly gentleman whom I took to be the president of her school; he was bearded and

wore a silk handkerchief in his breast pocket. I remained in a corner, near a palm, an intruder, and I saw, as I expected, that Dorothy was wearing the love knot on a chain around her neck. I squinted and made out a neatly painted caste mark on her forehead, vermilion.

I do not know how to dance, and although I had prepared for the dance by deviously getting the ticket and borrowing money for my clothes, I should have included a few dancing lessons, for I knew that I was going to talk to Dorothy this evening. The conversation I had practiced I imagined taking place as we were twirling around the room. But the band was playing loudly and I could see from the couples already on the floor that this dance step was beyond me. Half a dozen songs and an hour later I decided that unless the lights were lowered and the band was playing more slowly my plans would be ruined. A bad dancer can fake it if the music is slow and no one is watching. I went out of the ballroom and found a man in overalls and genially bribed him to dim the lights.

The first slow number was ‘Blue Moon.’ Dorothy danced with the elderly bearded gentleman. So she was a bad dancer, too! As she moved around the floor I edged over to where she had been standing; the music ended. There was clapping. She walked toward me. I smiled at her, an over-rehearsed grin that was nearly wild, but she returned it. I had to speak to her now.

I did so, but to this day I have no idea what happened to my tongue. I often think of this – I think of it as much as I do her face – and I still cannot understand it; there seems no explanation. I opened my mouth; my sentence was ‘I’ve been admiring your sari all evening,’ but I spoke it not in English but in Bengali.

Her eyes widened. I blushed and stared at the love knot, and I saw it as I had once done, in my hands in my mother’s room in Calcutta.

‘You speak Hindi,’ said Dorothy. An American accent in that beautiful Bengali mouth.

‘No,’ I said in Bengali, and then, ‘No, not Hindi,’ I said in English, with my Indian accent. I was not doing well.

She wrinkled her nose.

‘I have been admiring your sari all evening,’ I said, almost in panic. ‘But when I saw your jewel – it is a Bengali jewel, is it not? – I felt I had to speak in Bengali.’

‘Where did you learn it?’ she asked, eager.

‘A few lessons … private teacher …’

‘Can you give me his name? I’m trying to learn –’

‘He died,’ I said, and she made me regret my lie.

‘Oh, I’m awfully sorry,’ she said, her face going sad.

‘A long time ago,’ I added, and hearing ‘These Foolish Things’ asked her to dance. My head was swimming.

She placed her hand on my shoulder; I embraced her and we were off, intimate as lovers. She said, ‘Some idiot put practically all the lights off. You can’t see your hand in front of your face.’

It was true. Perhaps I had given the man in overalls too much money. I said, ‘Oh, but I can see you wery vell.’

She was humming the song in my ear.

‘You must have lived in the States for a long time to pick up such a strong American accent. Not so?’

‘I was born here,’ said Dorothy. ‘But my father was born in India, in Calcutta.’

‘Imagine that,’ I said. ‘And your mother?’

‘Indian, too. But born in England. Kinda complicated, huh?’

‘They met here?’

‘In England,’ she said, ‘where my father was studying.’

‘Forgive my questions.’

‘That’s okay. I have to explain this about once a week. As a matter of fact I was just saying the same thing to the dean. That’s him over there with the beard, if you can see him in this spooky room.’

‘Odd,’ I said, ‘your father coming all this way. To America.’

‘Not so odd when you consider that his first wife was an American. But like they say, that was in another country.’

I had no more questions. The dance ended. People were clapping.

But she was saying, ‘I can’t understand why he came here. I’m leaving for India the day after tomorrow. I can hardly wait.’

‘Who knows,’ I said. ‘You might meet an Indian boy and marry him and never leave India.’

‘Not if my father has anything to do with it!’ she said, and she raised her eyebrows and laughed loudly and I watched the love knot rising and falling at her throat, a jewel pulsing warmly on that dark velvet skin. She excused herself and disappeared, but I still saw the love knot, the gold threads of the filigree, meeting and crossing and meeting again. And I had a vision of a child I once saw in Calcutta, tracing figure eights in the dust with a wobbling stick. I watched and he drew a dozen or more, and the more he traced the more the figure changed, so that just before he left off, the final lines in each figure which had touched with such symmetry at the beginning ceased to meet at all and left a line curving at an angle in the dust, the open hourglass of an imperfect eight.