

SKINNER

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PROLOGUE

Gravity of the Sun

The cimetière Montmartre.

Skinner is staring at a headstone, puzzling at the name carved there.

Reistroff Guenard Spy.

No one to hear him, he sounds the name to himself. His French spoken with the accent and affect of an advanced language tape.

With a brief pause, he adds a silent comma to the name.

‘Reistroff Guenard, spy.’

Changing the last syllable into a profession. Smiling.

One hundred and fifty meters away, down the Avenue de la Croix in the 28th Division, he finds the mausoleum of the Lazarous family. That name, masoned from granite, Gothic script, arched, *Lazarous*. The cuteness of it was too much for someone to resist. The designer of the op. And too easy for someone else to recognize. He hardly needs to open the door to know what he will find. A suspicion further strengthened when he reaches into the stone urn on the step and finds that the key that is meant to be there is missing. Skinner reflects on one of his favorite metaphors, all too applicable in his life, Schroedinger’s cat. Until he, Skinner, opens the mausoleum door, his asset is both alive and dead inside. He is tempted to turn his back and leave, allowing for the possibility that, unobserved, the man within will remain in a suspended state of uncertainty forever. But that is not the

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contract. So, an unlocked gate and behind it an unlocked door, and, behind that, a corpse that will never rise. By any reasonable standard his contract is now complete. Was complete the second his asset was shot and killed. Except that Skinner has special clauses in his contracts. Invisible codicils. But known to everyone.

So he inspects the body.

Someone was direct and professional, anonymously so. First two bullets in the chest, a large target for a shot from a handgun from over twenty meters away, and the final bullet in the head, a small target that offers a level of certainty when shooting from within five meters. Two shots to bring the asset down quickly from a distance; a third shot, after closing that distance, for peace of mind.

So to speak.

Skinner looks at the rectangle of sunlight that leads out of the mausoleum. It invites observation from without, encourages a watcher. In the box himself now, neither alive nor dead. A definitive state will be arrived at on the other side of the rectangle.

A chest shooter. Conservative. Closing for the head shot.

Skinner considers, and steps through the rectangle into the sunlight, pauses on the step that leads down from the mausoleum, pulling tight the belt of the half-length khaki trench coat he chose to wear today because of the anonymity it offers in a city where the garment is ubiquitous every spring. He pushes his hands into his pockets and the first bullet hits him in the chest, pushing him back into the darkness of the mausoleum, the second bullet hitting within fifteen centimeters of the first before his upper body can quite disappear into the shadows. The shots are muffled but resonant, coughs from the throat of a large jungle cat (a cliché that Skinner knows to be accurate, having had occasion to hear a jungle cat cough). Pigeons fly from nearby horse chestnut trees, then settle again in the branches. Skinner's

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legs and feet, protruding from the stone mouth of the tomb, are motionless, the scuffed catspaw covering the leather soles of his dark brown oxford boots presented for inspection.

The man who emerges from the doorway of a 112-year-old maintenance hutch 27 meters down de la Croix trots with a directness that matches his methodology. Straight line, weapon held alongside his thigh so it won't be noticed by any tourists as they return from taking a rubbing of Truffaut's gravestone, eyes fixed on Skinner's feet, alert to any sudden movement.

Skinner can discern nothing specific of the man's features. Looking into the bright sun from within the tomb, all he sees is a black silhouette, its edge blurring in pulses as waves of pain continue to radiate from his chest.

Two meters from Skinner's feet, the silhouette raises its gun.

Skinner imagines that the assassin is now close enough that he can make out his own pale oval of face in the darkness. Target for one final bullet. Close enough to register also that Skinner's trench coat, while ripped open by the first two rounds, is unstained by blood. Does he, in fact, see the silhouette flinch as this revelation arrives in the assassin's brain? Doubtful. And, in any case, impossible to accurately determine, as the realization, if it exists at all, is reached at virtually the same instant that the silhouette registers the muzzle flash from the Bersa Concealed Carry pistol in Skinner's right hand, followed in an all but immeasurably short flicker of a moment by the sound of the shot as it echoes from the mausoleum; any further thoughts cut short by the .380 subsonic bullet that trails the waves of light and sound.

Though tending toward conservatism in these matters himself, a fact attested to by the BAE Systems armored vest he wears under his trench coat, Skinner understands the value of taking a high-percentage, close-range head shot whenever circumstances present one. Rising to a seated position as the man is falling back,

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he takes a second bead on the ruined face, waits for the body to hit the ground, and squeezes off another round.

Certainty is all.

Stepping into the light, Skinner looks at the dead man. Any ID the man carries will be worse than useless; engineered to mislead. That doesn't matter. His face has been smeared by the impact of Skinner's bullet, but an ID is possible. The man's name was Lentz. Skinner has met him, a professional introduction, made by a friend. Recently.

A breeze moves the branches of a chestnut tree, sunlight flickers and tickles his ear, and Skinner knows he is being watched. He knows this, feels it as a kind of pressure, atmospheric. He looks and sees, several divisions away down de la Croix, a middle-aged man frozen in his tracks, ranks of gravestones between them. The man flaps his open mouth and runs. Standing near the two corpses, Skinner is painfully aware that he is in danger of playing out a scenario reminiscent of Eric Ambler. Man of mystery, fleeing through the aisles of the dead, pursued by gendarmes, his avenues of escape cut off at every turn by the flash of yet another blue uniform.

He tosses the Bersa away, skimming it over the stone floor into the mausoleum, leaving behind the dead, those entombed and those not, walking northward toward the wall that runs along the Rue Etex, stripping off the ruined trench coat as he goes, peeling the straps of Velcro that hold his armor in place, letting it drop, an audible thud that leaves him nearly two kilos lighter, a man in slacks, shirt collar peeking from the neck of his dark sweater. Against the chill he knots the scarlet scarf he'd worn tucked inside his coat, unharmed but for a burn that might easily have come from the coal of a too casually held cigarette.

As the sirens become audible, the Hôpital Bretonneau comes into view beyond the cemetery wall. A few quick steps and

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Skinner jumps, grabs fistfuls of green vines, the toes of his boots planted in notches between blocks of granite. He pulls, swings his legs up, lies flat atop the wall. Quiet street. After midday, high sun, the French are in the cafés, none of which is here. His chest hurts where the bullets embedded in the armor. He thinks about the gamble of having stepped into the light, trusting that the man outside the mausoleum would shoot him where he had shot the asset. Trusting that the man was as good a shot as the evidence suggested.

When did he start trusting such things? When did he start trusting anything?

To have died in the tomb of Lazarous.

That would have been foolish.

He smiles at the thought, rolls from the wall, and walks away.

Later, when detectives from the Brigade Criminelle canvass the area, a patient in the hospital, an elderly man who often spends his day peering out the window at the cemetery, as if casting into a glass of the future, will tell them that he saw a man of uncertain age, average height and weight, bland hair color, in trousers that might have been blue or brown or black, and a sweater that was similar, jump to the top of the wall and pause there, easing his head into a pillow of ivy, as if to take a nap, and then roll himself over, dropping to the sidewalk with a hesitation that suggested he might be slightly injured, before walking up the street and disappearing once he reached the corner. The only item remembered being the flash of red around his neck, streaming behind him in a sudden wind, like a trail of blood.

An account the detectives find less than helpful, but one that is, as it happens, quite accurate.

A gift of Skinner's, to cause people who view him to see only what he wants them to see. A gift cultivated during a long childhood spent on the object side of a glass pane, scrutinized by eyes

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that never saw, in all their years of observation, that they had bred a killer. Or caused one to be made.

A short while later, emerging from the Métro at Saint-Paul, topping the stairs next to the newsstand on the island between Rue de Rivoli and Rue Saint-Antoine, staring into the faultless blue of a Parisian afternoon crisscrossed by the vapor trails of jets on approach and departure to and from De Gaulle, Skinner experiences a memory: The infinite wall of sky that he saw for the first time when a child welfare officer, escorted by several sheriff's deputies, took him from his parents' home at the age of twelve. The shock of that vastness having swallowed in an instant more than a decade of containment and solitude. The sky. When all there had been before was Plexiglas, and beyond that the basement ceiling, unfinished, sheets of cotton candy pink insulation stapled between the joists. Skinner's heavens. In the arms of the stranger, everyone other than his mother and father a stranger, he had wrenched and squirmed, convinced he was falling upward, where that small, intensely bright ball of light would burn him.

He freezes, staring upward, face to the sun.

He is going to have to kill a great many people soon. Someone has taken his asset, and now he will have to hunt and kill any and all who were involved in that misjudgment. *Skinner's Maxim* demands it: *The only way to secure an asset is to ensure that the cost of acquiring it is greater than its value.*

Skinner has no formula to determine the value of his lost asset, the man Lentz killed in the mausoleum. He only knows that it must have exceeded any previous price he has exacted. He thinks about some of the things he has done in the past, the exertions that have firmly established his reputation in the community of asset specialists. He thinks about fingers. Scalps. Innocent family members. A thin stainless steel rod heated until it glowed white.

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He remembers a warehouse near the last standing panels of the Berlin Wall. The headline that ran on the cover of *Bild am Sonntag* the day after the Landespolizei found what he'd left inside. 'Schlachthaus.'

And he wonders why the people who engineered this bizarrely incompetent attempt on his life couldn't have left his asset alone and spared him the tedium of creating yet another slaughterhouse.

Acquisitions had been easier for him. The measures of success and failure so absolute. Either you acquired the asset or you did not. Protection is uncertainty manifest. Unless an overt acquisition is attempted you may never know if your precautions have been sufficient. If no one tries to take what you have, is it because they cannot hope to claim it or because they simply don't care?

But, in the long run, he'd failed at acquisitions. Temperament. Some nuance in his conditioning, hard to locate. A node of morality, he suspects. Over time it had come to irritate him, a pebble scraping at an obscure region of his brain. There had been consequences. Emotions. Very strong. Far outside the limits of his conditioning. He'd lacked the tools to feel these things and survive. Quitting acquisitions was the only option. But what then to do with his skills? A very specific set of abilities that fulfilled him as all talented people are fulfilled by what it is they do better than anyone else.

Protection held the answer.

He could resume the application of his trade, do those things that came to him most naturally, and do them without qualm. All that was required to ease the abraded sensitivity that the conditioning had instilled in him was to restrict the use of his talents to killing in the name of protecting others.

There were complications. The hallmarks of his work in acquisitions, corpses that appeared to materialize around bullets hovering in the air waiting for them, parties who evaporated from

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existence on cloudy days; these ephemeral deaths would not do. He'd had to demonstrate his commitment to the maxim. More than once. But, with time, the conditioning he impressed upon the community required only infrequent reinforcement. Still, the market forces of security guaranteed that there would always be someone willing to test the limits of the maxim. His name commanded a premium that ensured his assets would always be of great enough value that someone might be tempted to risk abomination. Skinner was not perfect; not all of his assets survived. But those who claimed the assets always lost more in the long run.

Over the years Skinner himself lost three toes from his left foot. His back had the texture of wax melted and rehardened, the result of third-degree burns and only moderately successful skin grafts. The tip of a Gryphon M30A1 combat stiletto that had snapped off between the eighth and ninth ribs on his left side could not be surgically removed with any convenience. Calcium began to encase it; it grew into his rib cage. And though it caused him discomfort, he decided to leave it there. The blade in his bones. Gray appeared in his hair.

And now Montmartre.

Lentz.

Introduced to Lentz just weeks ago. By a friend.

A woman, attractive, as Parisian as the sky, comes up the stairs behind Skinner, sees the bemused look on the face turned up to the sun, and smiles as she sidles around him, hoping, a little, to catch the eye of the intriguing stranger, but failing to do so. Skinner is busy making a mental list of the future dead. Those he must kill in order to make safe those he will come to protect. The most discouraging aspect being that the people he'll have to kill are his current employers.

And his friend. Or, rather, *the friend*. Skinner's only friend.

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With great suddenness, Skinner wants horribly not to kill his friend.

He loses his footing, feels the upward tug of the sky as a physical thing in his chest. All it manages to tear from him is his breath, but it is no less shocking a sensation than if his heart had been ripped free by the gravity of the sun.

Life, he thinks, was much easier in the box.

He blinks the sun from his eyes, mounts the final step, feels that he is unwatched, and fits himself into the flow of the sidewalks, eyes flicking upward, setting forth on a course plotted along the axis of one of the contrails that scar the otherwise perfect sky.

It is only after several days have passed and none of the people who were involved in the Montmartre Incident has died that they realize the truth.

Skinner has disappeared.

A fact that leaves none of them at ease.

Bringer of the Ball

All Raj wants to do is go outside and play soccer with the other boys.

He kicks the ball, toes it, centimeters at a time, closer to the door. As if he is merely following where it leads. The leather shiny, new, white that reflects the brightly colored light filtering through curtains his mother has made from a sari worn too thin for decency. The color shifts as he nudges the ball again. The leather will never be this bright again. Outside it will be coated in dust in the dry months, mud in the rains, dung always. Scuffed, scratched, patched after it is inevitably kicked against an edge of sharp, rusted steel protruding from the roofline of a shanty or booted into a scatter of freshly broken glass shards that no one has yet scavenged.

Only now is it new and clean. Only now can he take it outside, trophy, to show the other boys. Shine in their eyes as bright as the ball.

The ball thumps against the open door, mahogany planks his father has cut from a tabletop salvaged in the city center, rejoined, cloth-hinged, and hung. A door. Such a luxury in Dharavi. Open now, only halfway, stopped by wall-mounted shelves, vertically slotted to hold his mother's plates and pans. In a one-room home, space allowing a door to open flush to its wall is an impossible waste.

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The men and women crowded inside the single room of their home, packed around the small table, do not look up. Their conversation continues. His father is showing the others something on the screen of his laptop. An Acer Aspire with rubber guards, hand-cut from old car tires, epoxied at the corners to protect it from drops. On the screen, a diagram, electrical. Color-coded lines running in parallel, making abrupt right-angle turns, knotting themselves, unspooling, streaking to another page. His father has played games with him using diagrams like these.

Follow the green line, Rajiv, use your finger, find where it ends. Yes, yes. Oh! But now there are two green lines. Which is the right one? Follow it, follow it.

When he was five, the games became lessons. Positive, negative, erg, watt, voltage, amp. Now, at twelve, Raj can look at a diagram without knowing what it is for and determine its purpose on his first try. Or his second try, sometimes his third. And he can also rewire any of the slum's rat's-nest circuit boxes all by himself. Or with only a little help from his father. The diagram on the laptop screen is for something large. A fragment of something massive. The lines draw him almost more than the ball. Almost. But he has seen them before. Watched as his father used the software on his laptop to design that massive maze of circuits. Old hat. The ball is new.

He kicks it against the door again. And again no one looks up.

His mother kneels next to the bright orange Envirofit cookstove. Envy of the neighbors. A bed of wood-chip coals glowing in the base of the small cylinder; on the cooktop, a kettle coming to the boil. Tea soon. She arranges cups on a brass-colored tin tray.

Another kick. Thump of the ball against hardwood.

Only two eyes turn his way. The baby, Tajma, nestled in another of his mother's retired saris, at the foot of the cot that mother, father, and baby all share. Too big now to have a place

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on the cot, Raj has a mat and blanket. *No problem*, he says. A mat and a blanket, more than so many boys his age.

The baby's eyes are on the ball. Raj kicks it once more, her eyes dart to follow it, her mouth opening in surprise when it bounces sharply off the door.

It goes this way, and then that way!

She waits for more.

Raj kicks again, a little more force, a little backspin, a slightly different angle; the ball skips to a stop just against the door frame, half its circumference exposed to the sun.

Taji's eyes widen, her mouth an O.

Outside the door, dirt packed hard against the hump of an enormous water main running half buried down the middle of the narrow lane between the shanties and their patchwork walls of cinderblock, corrugated steel, scrap wood, wadding, tin, and cardboard. At the far end, a scrum of filthy boys passing in and out of sight where the street opens onto a small square in front of the great shed that serves as shared factory space for the many industries of Dharavi Nagar, in the heart of Dharavi slum.

Raj's gaze travels from the boys to the ball at his feet. With his toe he scuffs the dust just inside the door on his mother's otherwise spotless floor. Fighting the dirt and mud, an endless task, like keeping her family fed. He brings his foot back; a light kick, an accident, will send the ball outside. What choice but to follow? And once outside. Well, he will deal later with the consequences of not returning immediately. When he returns, hero to the boys. Bringer of the ball.

'Rajiv.'

He jerks his head around at the sound of his father's voice, his bare toe stubbing against the tile.

'Close the door.'

He hops, lifting his throbbing foot from the ground.

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His father snaps his fingers.

‘Now, now.’

On one foot, Raj bends, picks up his ball, the sun falling full on his face as he does so, the screams of the boys in the square coming to his ears clearly.

‘Inside, Rajiv.’

His mother, hooking the collar of his overwashed *Transformers* t-shirt, pulling him inside as she swings the door closed and seats the latch.

‘Sit with your sister.’

Raj, looking at the door, ball tight to his stomach.

His mother yanks his collar again.

‘Later, later. Sit, sit.’

Raj backs away from the door, limping slightly on his bruised toe. Eight steps to cross the room, this tiny journey an epic today because of all the guests he must edge around and squeeze between, his path taking him past the little table and its mismatch of chairs filled with the most senior and honored of their visitors.

His father grabs his arm.

‘Come see.’

Raj’s mother, the rattling tray of tiny cups in her hands.

‘Aasif.’

His father looks at her.

‘I want him to see.’

‘Let him play with Taj.’

His father still with a grip on the boy’s arm.

‘He should see. Why else if not for him? He should see.’

She sets the tray suddenly on the table, one of the men pulling the laptop out of the way.

‘Yes, yes. For him.’

Without serving, she takes three steps to the cot and scoops up Taj.

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‘And also for her.’

Aasif raises a hand.

‘For her also, yes, Damini. Bring her here.’

One of the men at the table is staring at Raj. The one who brought him the ball. He also brought a stuffed tiger for Taj, almost as big as her. And a bag of aavakaaya for his mother. Pickled mangoes from his home to the east in Gadchiroli district, now heaped in a bowl on the tea tray. Small, dark, hair cropped close; hands calloused thick and smooth, compact muscles suggesting years swinging a hammer or an axe, but a potbelly at his middle. A voice, Hindi accented by the forests. They call him Naxalite sometimes, but Raj knows that his real name is Sudhir.

‘Like the ball, little Raj, for you.’

He holds up his hands, ready to catch. Raj tosses the ball and it smacks into the easterner’s hard hands. He spins it between his fingers.

‘Someone will tell you that it’s not real. They’ll say, *There’s no hologram, Rajiv. How can it be real if there’s no hologram.* As if the only way we know a real thing is if it has a sticker. A hologram that says FIFA. But don’t believe them. The ball is real. It was made by real hands. Feel.’

He throws the ball, shoving it two-handed so that it sends the boy back a step when he catches it.

‘Real?’

Raj nods.

The man reaches for the teapot, using a small square of clean rag to pick it up by its wire handle so as not to be burned by the heat conducted by the cheap tin. He begins to pour, filling the cups one by one, setting the pot aside, adding the milk and sugar he also brought, making thick chai, passing the cups to the others at the table, Raj’s mother first. There are some mutters from the old men of the nagar panchayat, the informal local council and

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arbiters of disputes: *Should they not be served first, and by the hostess rather than this jungle communist?* But Sudhir seems not to notice, pouring tea as if he were a wallah in an office, passing the cups to the women of the Social Ills Assistance Foundation, the representative of the Dharavi Business Is Booming Board, the boss of the electricity goons whom Raj's father has known for many years, a Bombay Municipal Corporation man who has something to do with water treatment, the heads of the potters' and tanners' guilds, and also men speaking for the welders and recyclers, a smalltime boss from the gangwar, a woman from a Muslim micro-bank that loans tiny sums to women of all religions to start small businesses, and a young policeman. These, and several other dignitaries and lowlifes of the slum, are packed into Raj's home, being served tea by this outsider, Naxalite. Not here are any of the water goons or men from the Shiv Sena or the Congress party. The water goons have threatened the entire proceeding and pledged their noncooperation unless they are paid an ungodly sum. The Sena were approached, but communications broke down. And the local Congress man seems most content to pretend nothing is happening.

Raj has seen all of them here at one time or another, but never all at once. Things are happening, exciting things, but still he only wants to go play with his new ball.

Sudhir passes the last of the cups, many of them borrowed from neighbors to accommodate such a large gathering.

'People will tell you, Raj, your whole life, what is real and what is not. What you can believe in and what you can't. Don't let them say, *This is something you don't think it is. You don't understand, you couldn't understand.* It is what you think it is, you do understand it. Believe me.'

He smiles.

'Or don't believe me. You decide.'

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He sips his chai.

‘Rajiv.’

A whisper.

‘Rajiv, if I tell you that your father is a very rich man, do you believe me?’

Raj looks at his father, the educated outcast of Dharavi. Madman of the wires. His quest to bring the wire to every home of the nagar, safely engineered. His family lacks for nothing that can be had in the slum, but rich?

He shakes his head.

The man puts a hand on Raj’s father’s shoulder.

‘But he is. He’s rich. He owns a castle, Rajiv, in this wealthy land.’

He gestures with his other arm, taking in the hut and its contents, drawing some laughter and some discontent from the gathering. This is serious business they are here for, not games.

Aasif touches Sudhir’s hand with his own, brushing it off his shoulder.

‘Don’t confuse him.’

The man stares at Raj, brown eyes, jungle green in their depths.

‘I’m not teasing him. I’m telling him the future.’

Raj’s father looks into his teacup.

‘It is *his* future. If there are riches, they are not mine. Here.’

His fingers dip into the breast pocket of his loose orange short-sleeved collared shirt, coming out holding a Nokia 1100. Indestructible brick phone of the slums. He looks at the screen of his laptop, his thumb working the phone’s rubberized buttons. He studies the tiny LED screen, his lips moving as he reads something, reads it over again, and once more.

‘Yes. Correct.’

He weighs the phone on his palm, looks around the room.

‘This. And then after. I don’t know.’

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Some of them nod, some don't move.

Raj's father looks at his wife and his baby girl, then at his son.

'Rajiv.'

He offers the phone.

'Take it.'

Raj tucks his ball under one arm, scooping the Nokia from his father's hand. He looks at the screen. A string of letters, numbers, and symbols. He tries to let it translate itself into something intelligible. Some lengthy equivalent to *lol* or ;(. Sees only randomness.

He looks from the screen to the others in the room. More than one set of lips is moving in silent prayer to one of many gods. He looks at the one they call Naxalite, sees the forest in his eyes. Trees, tall and green, creaking in a breeze, footsteps muffled by layered mulch and deadfall, single-file, booted feet. Guns.

He looks at his mother and sister, his father. The family it will be his job to provide for one day when he is older.

His father touches his shoulder, light press, then gone.

'Send it, Rajiv.'

Raj rests his thumb on the large select button marked with a short green horizontal line. On the screen, *SEND*, highlighted. Waiting for the button. He presses down, satisfying firm click of sturdy technology, slight give of the button's thin rubber cover. The message on the screen blinks; a little bar, empty of color, appears, quickly filling, liquid crystal gray.

MESSAGE SENT

There are many exhalations in the room, more prayers, a few laughs; someone is crying.

His father takes the phone and drops it back in his pocket.

Sudhir rubs his palms together, wood on wood.

'They will say it is not the future, Rajiv. But do not believe them. It is the future. You have touched it with your own hands. You have made it.'

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Aasif places a hand on his son's head, pushes him gently.

'Go play with your ball.'

Raj turns, five steps to the door, snagged by his mother's finger, held as she bends and kisses his cheek.

'Play, Rajiv.'

She unlatches the door, sending him sprinting into the light, ball held tight to his chest, bare feet slapping the curve of the water main, hot metal. The boys, seeing him from the square, the ball, starting to scream his name. He runs to glory, raising the ball high, as if it is the future the man they call Naxalite has said is his.