

Delinquent Chacha

1967

I COULDN'T let you go without a heart-to-heart talk, could I, Mohan?" my uncle asked, eyeing me closely. He bulged, expanded, under his long golden coat, tight white pajamas, and starched muslin turban—his attire for festive occasions.

"No," I said. I was leaving New Delhi the next day, to work for a degree in literature at Oxford, and we were having a farewell brunch in the upstairs room of our favorite coffeehouse.

"There has been a special, extra-special bond between us ever since you learned to say 'Chacha,' hasn't there?"

"Of course," I said reassuringly. My uncle was without question the greatest failure in the memory of our family. As if he were born with a foreknowledge of the role he was destined to play, he thought up the appellation "Delinquent Chacha" for himself—"*chacha*" means "uncle" in Hindustani—when he was eight years old and his eldest sister had her first child. Throughout his years at British College, Lahore, instead of slaving over books, he chain-smoked and played poker, and he achieved the notoriety of scoring the lowest marks in the college. Though all my other uncles had successfully competed

for government jobs and had become important, he worked for his living only once, as a master carpenter, in a shop my father bought him. By the end of the first week, Delinquent Chacha had mortgaged the establishment, lost the money in one hand of Five Card Draw, and started on his long and successful career as a poor relation. His brothers, according to their means, all helped to support him. Some aided him by direct monthly contributions, others by taking him and his wife, Padma, regularly into their houses, still others by adopting one, two, or three of his thirteen children. He farmed out his babies with a benign smile, saying, "Sister, I have great good news—a son. He's yours—the bountiful God has given him to you through my offices." Whenever it became known that his wife was with child once again, his brothers called down curses on his head, for they were certain this time it would be a daughter and they would have to start putting aside money for her dowry. But when the child arrived, it almost always turned out to be a boy, and so great was the relief throughout the family that there was more celebration at the arrival of Delinquent Chacha's children than at the arrival of almost anyone else's. With the passing of each year, he fortified, in legend, his favored place with the gods, acquiring a position all his own among the elders. We children found him incomparable also, for he was the only grownup always at our beck and call. Indeed, he spent most of his time with us; he was a referee at our

games, a peacemaker in our squabbles. Later, in our troubled teens, we discovered in our childhood friend an instructor in the harsh ways of the world.