



"Beat it!"

Then on a summer evening just two months short of the second year, the slap of the newspaper sounded, falling against the doormat, and the newsboy crunched his way out of the gate as usual. I dashed out to the front steps from sheer habit, shuffling cursorily past the political items to get to the cartoon. That was when his name sprang out from a blur of print. It was a brief paragraph again, and on the third page again: a report of the death in Edinburgh of Dr. Karl Jacob Schlamm, of 1238 Mount Road. Later, we heard the facts—that he had gone to the mu-

sic festival, that he had listened to a Wagner concert, that he had come home and put a bullet through his head. The world braked to a stop; I could neither move nor breathe, standing on the doormat trembling and trying to call out. When they took the paper from my hand, part of the business of growing up was over and nothing could be the same again, either for me or for the rest of the neighborhood.

The auctioneers were closed on the following Sunday, "In memory of Dr. Karl Jacob Schlamm." As if in an appropriate coda to the question he had

asked my mother about religion, our great-aunt observed the Hindu ritual of his death anniversary, cooking his favorite food and giving it away in charity; Joe's mother offered her prayers in church; the landlord offered his at the mosque. The runny-nosed two-year-olds who had come to the clinic on the veranda cried, whether from grief or hunger. And nobody ever used the hedge. That gap was soon overgrown, and scratched across with tentative new twigs: a bedraggled testament to the coming and the going between us.

—PADMA PERERA