

**THE
TWENTY-SEVENTH
CITY**

JONATHAN FRANZEN



Praise for *the Twenty-Seventh City*

“Insettling and visionary *The Twenty-Seventh City* is not a novel that can be quickly dismissed or

...easily forgotten: it has elements of both 'Great' and 'American.' ...A book of memorable characters, surprising situations, and provocative ideas.”

—Michele Slung, *The Washington Post*

“Franzen’s tour de force (to call it a “first novel” is to do it an injustice) is a sinister fun-house-mirror reflection of urban America in the 1980s.... There’s a lot of reality out there. *The Twenty-Seventh City*, in its larger-than-life way, is a brave and exhilarating attempt to master it.”

—Michael Upchurch, *The Seattle Times*

“Franzen goes for broke here—he’s out to expose the soul of a city and all the bloody details of the way we live.... Franzen has written a book of range, pith, intelligence.”

—Margo Jefferson, *Vogue*

“A weird hybrid of realism and fantasy: municipal science fiction. Everything proceeds from a daring, outrageously unlikely premise.”

—Terrence Rafferty, *The New York Times*

“Mr. Franzen has proved with this immodestly ambitious first novel that he has talent to spare. His is a worthwhile entertainment, this picaresque tale the principal vagabond of which is its own sinuous plot.”

—Donna Rifkind, *The Wall Street Journal*

“He has the kind of ability that can take what one would have thought the most mundane of cities and render it as an utterly persuasive labyrinth of mystery and meaning.”

—Mark Feeney, *The Boston Sunday Globe*

“An imaginative and riveting examination of our flawed society. *The Twenty-Seventh City* provides a rare blend of entertainment and profound social commentary.”

—Christine Vogel, *Chicago Sun-Times*

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Jonathan Franzen

*Picador USA
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New York*

This story is set in a year somewhat like 1984 and in a place very much like St. Louis. Many actual public achievements, policies and products have been attributed to various characters and groups; these should not be confused with any actual person or organization. The lives and opinions of the characters are entirely imaginary.

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In early June Chief William O'Connell of the St. Louis Police Department announced his retirement, and the Board of Police Commissioners, passing over the favored candidates of the city political establishment, the black community, the press, the Officers Association and the Missouri governor, selected a woman, formerly with the police in Bombay, India, to begin a five-year term as chief. The city was appalled, but the woman—one S. Jammu—assumed the post before anyone could stop her.

This was on August 1. On August 4, the Subcontinent again made the local news when the most eligible bachelor in St. Louis married a princess from Bombay. The groom was Sidney Hammaker, president of the Hammaker Brewing Company, the city's flagship industry. The bride was rumored to be fabulously wealthy. Newspaper accounts of the wedding confirmed reports that she owned a diamond pendant insured for \$11 million, and that she had brought a retinue of eighteen servants to staff the Hammaker estate in suburban Ladue. A fireworks display at the wedding reception rained cinders on lawns up to a mile away.

A week later the sightings began. An Indian family of ten was seen standing on a traffic island one block east of the Cervantes Convention Center. The women wore saris, the men dark business suits, the children gym shorts and T-shirts. All of them wore expressions of controlled annoyance.

By the beginning of September, scenes like this had become a fixture of daily life in the city. Indians were noticed lounging with no evident purpose on the skybridge between Dillard's and the St. Louis Centre. They were observed spreading blankets in the art museum parking lot and preparing a hot lunch on a Primus stove, playing card games on the sidewalk in front of the National Bowling Hall of Fame, viewing houses for sale in Kirkwood and Sunset Hills, taking snapshots outside the Amtrak station downtown, and clustering around the raised hood of a Delta 88 stalled on the Forest Park Parkway. The children invariably appeared well behaved.

Early autumn was also the season of another, more familiar Eastern visitor to St. Louis, the Veiled Prophet of Khorassan. A group of businessmen had conjured up the Prophet in the nineteenth century to help raise funds for worthy causes. Each year He returned and incarnated Himself in a different leading citizen whose identity was always a closely guarded secret, and with His non-denominational mysteries He brought a playful glamour to the city. It had been written:

*There on that throne, to which the blind belief
Of millions rais'd him, sat the Prophet-Chief,
The Great Mokanna. O'er his features bung
The Veil, the Silver Veil, which he had flung
In mercy there, to hide from mortal sight
His dazzling brow, till man could bear its light.*

It rained only once in September, on the day of the Veiled Prophet Parade. Water streamed down the tuba bells in the marching bands, and trumpeters experienced difficulties with their embouchure. Pom-poms wilted, staining the girls' hands with dye, which they smeared on their foreheads when they pushed back their hair. Several of the floats sank.

On the night of the Veiled Prophet Ball, the year's premier society event, high winds knocked

down power lines all over the city. In the Khorassan Room of the Chase-Park Plaza Hotel, the debbing had just concluded when the lights went out. Waiters rushed in with candelabras, and when the first of them were lit the ballroom filled with murmurs of surprise and consternation: the Prophet's throne was empty.

On Kingshighway a black Ferrari 275 was speeding past the windowless supermarkets and fortified churches of the city's north side. Observers might have glimpsed a snow-white robe behind the windshield, a crown on the passenger seat. The Prophet was driving to the airport. Parking in a fire lane, He dashed into the lobby of the Marriott Hotel.

"You got some kind of problem there?" a bellhop said.

"I'm the Veiled Prophet, twit."

On the top floor of the hotel He stopped outside a door and knocked. The door was opened by a tall dark woman in a jogging suit. She was very pretty. She burst out laughing.

When the sky began to lighten, low in the east over southern Illinois, the birds were the first to know it. Along the riverfront and in all the downtown parks and plazas, the trees began to chirp and rustle. It was the first Monday morning in October. The birds downtown were waking up.

North of the business district, where the poorest people lived, an early morning breeze carried smells of used liquor and unnatural perspiration out of alleyways where nothing moved; a slamming door was heard for blocks around. In the railyards of the city's central basin, amid the buzzing of faulty chargers and the sudden ghostly shiverings of Cyclone fences, men with flattops dozed in square-headed towers while rolling stock regrouped below them. Three-star hotels and private hospitals with an abject visibility occupied the higher ground. Farther west, the land grew hilly and healthier trees knit the settlements together, but this was not St. Louis anymore, it was suburb. On the south side there were rows upon rows of cubical brick houses where widows and widowers lay in bed and the blinds in the windows, lowered in a different era, would not be raised all day.

But no part of the city was deader than downtown. Here in the heart of St. Louis, in the lee of the whining all-night traffic on four expressways, was a wealth of parking spaces. Here sparrows bickered and pigeons ate. Here City Hall, a hip-roofed copy of the Hôtel de Ville in Paris, rose in two-dimensional splendor from a flat, vacant block. The air on Market Street, the central thoroughfare, was wholesome. On either side of it you could hear the birds both singly and in chorus—it was like a meadow. It was like a back yard.

The keeper of this peace had been awake all night on Clark Avenue, just south of City Hall. Chief Jammu, on the fifth floor of police headquarters, was opening the morning paper and spreading it out beneath her desk lamp. It was still dark in her office, and from the neck down, with her hunched, narrow shoulders and her bony knees in knee socks and her restless feet, the Chief looked for all the world like a schoolgirl who'd been cramming.

Her head was older. As she leaned over the newspaper, the lamplight picked out white strands in the silky black hair above her left ear. Like Indira Gandhi, who on this October morning was still alive and the prime minister of India, Jammu showed signs of asymmetric graying. She kept her hair just long enough to pin it up in back. She had a large forehead, a hooked and narrow nose, and wide lips that looked blood-starved, bluish. When she was rested, her dark eyes dominated her face, but this morning they were cloudy and crowded by pouches. Wrinkles cut the smooth skin around her mouth.

Turning a page of the *Post-Dispatch* she found what she wanted, a picture of her taken on a good day. She was smiling, her eyes engaging. The caption—*Jammu: an eye to the personal*—brought the same smile back. The accompanying article, by Joseph Feig, had run under the headline A NEW LEASE ON LIFE. She began to read.

Few people remember it now, but the name Jammu first appeared in American newspapers nearly a decade ago. The year was 1975. The Indian subcontinent was in turmoil following Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's suspension of civil rights and her crackdown on her political foes.

Amid conflicting, heavily censored reports, a strange story from the city of Bombay began to unfold in the Western press. The reports concerned an operation known as Project Poori, implemented by a police official named Jammu. In Bombay, it seemed, the police department had gone into the wholesale food business.

The operation sounded crazy then; it sounds hardly less crazy today. But now that a twist of fate has brought Jammu to St. Louis in the role of police chief, people here are asking themselves whether Project Poori was really so crazy after all.

In a recent interview in her spacious Clark Avenue office, Jammu spoke of the circumstances that led up to the project.

"Before Mrs. Gandhi dispensed with the constitution the country was like Gertrude's Denmark—rotten to the core. But with the imposition of President's Rule, we in law enforcement had our chance to do something about it. In Bombay alone we were locking up 1,500 lawbreakers a week and impounding 30 million rupees in illegal goods and cash. When we evaluated our efforts after two months, we realized we'd hardly made one speck of progress," Jammu recalled.

President's Rule devolves from a clause in the Indian constitution giving the central government sweeping powers in times of emergency. For this reason, the 19 months of such rule were referred to as the Emergency.

In 1975 a rupee was worth about ten U.S. cents.

"I was an assistant commissioner at the time," Jammu said. "I suggested a different approach. Since threats and arrests weren't working, why not try defeating corruption on its own terms?"

"Why not enter a business ourselves and use our resources and influence to achieve a freer market? We chose an essential commodity: food," she said.

It was thus that Project Poori was conceived. A *poori* is a deep-fried puff-bread, popular in India. By the end of 1975, Bombay was known to Western journalists as the one city in India where groceries were plentiful and the prices uninflated.

Naturally, attention centered on Jammu. Her handling of the operation, as detailed in the dailies and in *Time* and *Newsweek*, caught the imagination of police forces in this country. But certainly no one would have guessed that one day she would be in St. Louis wearing the Chief's badge on her blouse and a department revolver on her hip.

Colonel Jammu, however, entering her third month in office, would have it seem the most natural thing in the world. "A good chief stresses personal involvement at all levels of the organization," she said. "Carrying a revolver is one symbol of my commitment.

"Of course, it's also an instrument of lethal force," she continued, leaning back in her office chair.

Jammu's frank, gutsy style of law-enforcement management has earned a reputation that is literally world-wide. When the search for a replacement for former Chief William O'Connell ended in its deadlock of opposing factions, Jammu's name was among the first mentioned as a compromise candidate. And despite the fact that she had no previous law-enforcement experience in the U.S., the Police Board confirmed her appointment less than a

week after she arrived in St. Louis for interviews.

To many here, it came as a surprise that this Indian woman met the citizenship requirements necessary for her job. But Jammu, who was born in Los Angeles and whose father was American, says she went to great lengths to preserve her citizenship. Since she was a child she has dreamed of settling in America.

“I’m terribly patriotic,” she said with a smile. “New residents, like myself, often are. I’m looking forward to spending many years in St. Louis. I’m here to stay.”

Jammu speaks with slightly British intonations and striking clarity of thought. With her fine features and delicate build, she could hardly be less like the stereotype of the gruff, male American police chief. But her record gives an altogether different impression.

Within five years of entering the Indian Police Service in 1969, she became a deputy to the Inspector-General of Police in Maharashtra Province. Five years later, at the astonishing age of 31, she was named Commissioner of the Bombay police. At 35, she is both the youngest police chief in modern St. Louis history and the first woman to hold the post.

Before joining the Indian police she received a B.A. in electrical science from the University of Srinagar in Kashmir. She also did three semesters of postgraduate work in economics at the University of Chicago.

“I’ve worked hard,” she said. “I’ve had plenty of luck, too. I doubt I’d have this job had I not received good press from Project Poori. But of course the real problem was always my sex. It wasn’t easy to buck five millennia of sexual discrimination.

“Until I became a superintendent I routinely dressed as a man,” Jammu reminisced.

Apparently, experiences like this played a key role in the Commissioners’ selection of Jammu. In a city still struggling to overcome its image as a “loser,” the Board’s unorthodox choice makes good public-relations sense. St. Louis is now the largest U.S. city to have a female police chief.

Nelson A. Nelson, president of the Board, believes St. Louis should take credit for its leading role in making city government accessible to women. “It’s affirmative action in the truest sense of the word,” he commented.

Jammu, however, appeared to discount the issue. “Yes, I’m a woman, all right,” she said with a smile.

As one of her primary goals, she names making city streets safer. While not offering to comment on the performances of past chiefs in this area, she did say that she was working closely with City Hall to devise a comprehensive plan for fighting street crime.

“The city needs a new lease on life, a fundamental shake-up. If we can get the business community and citizens’ groups to aid us—if we can make people see that this is a *regional* problem—I’m convinced that in a very short time we can make the streets safe again,” she said.

Chief Jammu is not afraid of making her ambitions known. One might venture to guess that she will meet with jealous opposition in whatever she attempts. But her accomplishments in India show her to be a formidable adversary, and a political figure well worth keeping an eye on.

“Project Poori is a good illustration,” she pointed out. “We applied a new set of terms to a situation that appeared hopeless. We set up bazaars outside every station house. It improved our public image, and it improved morale. For the first time in decades we had no trouble attracting well-qualified recruits. Indian police have a reputation for corruption and brutality which is largely due to the inability to recruit responsible, well-educated constables. Project Poori began to change things.”

Some of Jammu's critics have voiced fears that a police chief accustomed to the more authoritarian atmosphere of India might be insensitive to civil-rights issues in St. Louis. Charles Grady, spokesman for the local chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, has gone even further, urging that Jammu be dismissed before a "constitutional disaster" occurs.

Jammu strenuously rejects these criticisms. "I've been quite surprised by the reactions of the liberal community here," she said.

"Their concern arises, I believe, from an abiding distrust of the Third World in general. They overlook the fact that India's system of government has been deeply influenced by Western ideals, particularly, of course, by the British. They fail to distinguish between the Indian police rank-and-file, and the national officer corps, of which I was a member.

"We were trained in the British tradition of civil service. Standards were extremely high. We were continually torn between sticking up for our troops and sticking up for our ideals. My critics overlook the fact that it was this very conflict which made a position in the United States attractive to me.

"In fact, what strikes me now about Project Poori is how American our approach was. Into a clogged and bankrupt economy we injected a harsh dose of free enterprise. Soon hoarders found their goods worth half of what they'd paid for them. Profiteers went begging for customers. On a small scale, we achieved a genuine *Wirtschaftswunder*," Jammu recalled, referring to postwar Germany's "economic miracle."

Can she work similar wonders in St. Louis? Upon taking office, other chiefs in recent memory have stressed loyalty, training, and technical advances. Jammu sees the crucial factors as innovation, hard work, and confidence.

"For too long," she said, "our officers have accepted the idea that their mission is merely to ensure that St. Louis deteriorates in the most orderly possible way.

"This has done wonders for morale," she said sarcastically.

It was perhaps inevitable that many of the officers here, especially the older ones, would react to Jammu's appointment with skepticism. But attitudes have already begun to change. The sentiment most often voiced in the precinct houses these days seems to be: "She's OK."

Five minutes into Joseph Feig's interview, Jammu had smelled sweat from her underarms, a mildewy feral stink. Feig had a nose; he didn't need a polygraph.

"Isn't Jammu the name of a city in Kashmir?" he asked.

"It's the capital during the winter."

"I see." He looked at her fixedly for several long seconds. Then he asked: "What's it like switching countries like this in the middle of your life?"

"I'm terribly patriotic," she said, with a smile. She was surprised he hadn't pursued the question of her past. These profiles were a rite of passage in St. Louis, and Feig, a senior editor, was generally acknowledged to be the dean of local feature writing. When he first walked in the door, in his wrinkled tweed jacket and his week-old beard, fierce and gray, he'd looked so investigative that Jammu had actually blushed. She'd imagined the worst:

FEIG: Colonel Jammu, you claim you wanted to escape the violence of Indian society, the personal and caste conflicts, but the fact remains that you did spend fifteen years in the leadership of a force whose brutality is notorious. We aren't stupid, Colonel. We've heard about India. The

hammered elbows, the tooth extractions, the rifle rapes. The candles, the acid, the lathis, the cattle prods—

JAMMU: The mess was generally cleaned up before I got there.

FEIG: Colonel Jammu, given Mrs. Gandhi's almost obsessive distrust of her subordinates and given your own central involvement in Project Poori, I have to wonder if you're at all related to the Prime Minister. I don't see how else a woman could have made commissioner, especially a woman with an American father—

JAMMU: It isn't clear to me what difference it makes to St. Louis if I'm related to certain people in India.

But the article was in print now, definitive and unretractable. The windows of Jammu's office were beginning to fill with light. She rested her chin on her hands and let the print below her wander out of focus. She was happy with the article but worried about Feig. How could someone so obviously intelligent be a mere transcriber of platitudes? It seemed impossible. Perhaps he was just paying out the rope, "giving" her an interview like a final cigarette at dawn, while behind her back he marshalled his facts into an efficient, deadly squad...

Her head was sinking towards her desk. She reached for the lamp switch and slumped, with a dry splash, onto the newspaper. She closed her eyes and immediately began to dream. In the dream, Joseph Feig was her father. He was interviewing her. He smiled as she spoke of her triumphs, the delicious aftertaste of lies that people fell for, the escape from airless India. In his eyes she read a shared awareness of the world's credulity. "You're a scrappy girl," he said. She leaned over her desk and nestled her head in the crook of her elbow, thinking: scrappy girl. Then she heard her interviewer tiptoe around behind her chair. She reached around to feel his leg, but her hands swung through empty air. His bristly face pushed aside her hair and brushed her neck. His tongue fell out of his mouth. Heavy, warm, doughlike, it lay against her skin.

She woke up with a shudder.

Jammu's father had been killed in 1974 when a helicopter carrying foreign journalists and some South Vietnamese military personnel was downed near the Cambodian border by a communist rocket. A second helicopter captured the crash on film before escaping to Saigon. Jammu and her mother had learned the news from the Paris edition of the *Herald Tribune*, their sole link with the man. It was from a week-old *Herald Tribune* that Jammu, more than a decade earlier, had first learned his name. Ever since she'd been old enough to ask, her mother had evaded her questions, dismissing the subject brusquely whenever Jammu tried to bring it up. Then, in the spring before she entered the university, her mother spoke. They were at the breakfast table on the veranda, Maman with her *Herald Tribune* and Jammu with her algebra book. Her mother nudged the paper across the table and scraped a long fingernail across an article at the bottom of the front page:

TENSION MOUNTS ON SINO-INDIAN BORDER

Peter B. Clancy

Jammu read a few paragraphs, but she didn't know why. She looked up for an explanation.

"That's your father."

The tone was typically matter-of-fact. Maman spoke only English to Jammu, and spoke it with a

perverse disdain, as if she didn't accept the language's word for anything. Jammu scanned the article again. Countercharges. Secessionist. Bleak vistas. Peter B. Clancy. "A reporter?" she said.

"Mm."

Her mother wouldn't say what he was like. Having acknowledged his existence, she proceeded to ridicule her daughter's curiosity. There was no story to tell, she said. They'd met in Kashmir. They'd left the country and spent two years in Los Angeles, where Clancy took a degree of some sort. Then Maman had returned, alone, to Bombay, not Srinagar, with her baby, and had lived there ever since. Nowhere in this obituary narrative did she suggest that Clancy was anything more than a second set of luggage. Jammu got the idea—things hadn't worked out. It didn't matter, either. The city was full of bastards, and Maman, in any case, was oblivious to public opinion. The newspapers called her the "laughing jackal of real estate." Laughing all the way to the bank, they meant. She was a speculator and slumlord, one of the more successful in a town of speculation and slums.

Jammu selected two Tylenols and a Dexedrine from her top drawer and swallowed them with coffee dregs. She'd finished the night's reading sooner than she'd planned. It was only 6:30. In Bombay it was 5:00 in the evening—Indian time was a quaint half hour out of step with the rest of the world—and Maman was probably at home, upstairs, pouring her first drink. Jammu reached for the phone, got the international operator, and gave her the numbers.

The connection hissed with the difficult spanning of half a world. Of course in India even local calls hissed this way. Maman answered.

"It's me," Jammu said.

"Oh, hello."

"Hello. Are there any messages?"

"No. The town seems empty without your friends." Her mother laughed. "Homesick?"

"Not especially."

"Apropos—has the Enlightened Despot called you?"

"Ha ha."

"Seriously. She's in New York. The U.N. General Session opened."

"That's a thousand miles from here."

"Oh, she could afford to call. She chooses not to. Yes. She simply chooses not to. I read this morning—do you still read the papers?"

"When I have time."

"That's right. When you have time. I read about her mini-summit with American intellectuals is what I was going to say. Front page, column one. Asimov, Sagan—futurists. She's a wonder. Study her and you can learn. Not that she's infallible. I noticed Asimov was eating ribs in the picture they ran. But anyway—How is St. Louis?"

"Temperate. Very dry."

"And you with your sinuses. How is Singh?"

"Singh is Singh. I'm expecting him any minute."

"Just don't let him handle your accounts."

"He's handling my accounts."

"Willful child. I'll have to send Bhandari over later this month to check the arrangements. Singh is not—"

"Here? You're sending Karam here?"

"Only for a few days. Expect him on the twenty-ninth or so."

"Don't send Karam. I don't like him."

"And I don't like Singh." There was a faint sound that Jammu recognized as the rattle of ice in a tumbler. "Listen dear, I'll talk to you tomorrow."

“All right. Good-bye.”

~~Maman and Indira were blood relations, Kashmiri Brahmins, sharing a great-grandfather on the~~ Nehru side. It was no coincidence that Jammu had been admitted to the Indian Police Service less than a year after Indira became prime minister. Once she was in the Service, no one had been ordered to promote her, of course, but occasional phone calls from the Ministry would let the pertinent officials know that her career was being watched “with interest.” Over the years she herself had received hundreds of calls similar in their vagueness, though more immediate in their concerns. A Maharashtra state legislator would express great interest in a particular prosecution, a Congress Party boss would express great distress over a particular opponent’s business dealings. Very seldom did a call originate from higher up than the governor’s office; Indira was a great student of detail, but only in curricular subjects. Like any entrenched leader, she made sure to place plenty of buffers between herself and questionable operations, and Jammu’s political operations had been questionable at best. The two of them had spoken privately only once—just after Jammu and her mother concocted Project Poori. Jammu flew to Delhi and spent seventy minutes in the garden of Madam’s residence on Safdarjang Road. Madam, in a canvas chair, watched Jammu closely, her brown eyes protuberant and her head turned slightly to one side, her lips curled in a smile that now and then made her gums click, a smile in which Jammu saw nothing but machinery. Shifting her gaze a quarter turn, towards a hedge of rosebushes behind which machine-gun muzzles sauntered, Madam spoke. “Please understand that this wholesaling project won’t work. You do understand that, you’re a sensible young woman. But we’re going to fund it anyway.”

A shoe squeaked in Jammu’s outer office. She sat up straight. “Who’s—” She cleared her throat. “Who’s there?”

Balwan Singh walked in. He was wearing pleated gray pants, a fitted white shirt, and an azure necktie with fine yellow stripes. His air was so competent and trustworthy that he scarcely needed to show his clearance papers to get upstairs. “It’s me,” he said. He set a white paper bag on Jammu’s desk.

“You were eavesdropping.”

“Me? Eavesdropping?” Singh walked to the windows. He was tall and broad-shouldered, and his light skin had received additional sunniness from some Middle Eastern ancestor. Only an old friend and ex-lover like Jammu could detect the moments when the grace of his movements passed over into swishiness. She still admired him as an ornament. For a man who up until July had been living in Dharavi squalor, he would have seemed remarkably—suspiciously—dapper if he hadn’t dressed exactly the same way among his so-called comrades in Bombay, whose tastes ran to velour and Dacron and sleazy knits. Singh was a marxist of the aesthetic variety, attracted to the notion of exportable revolution at least partly because Continental stylishness was exported along with it. His haberdasher was located on Marine Drive. Jammu had long suspected he’d forsaken Sikhism as a youth because he considered a beard disfiguring.

Singh nodded at the paper bag on her desk. “There’s some breakfast if you want it.”

She placed the bag on her lap and opened it. Inside were two chocolate doughnuts and a cup of coffee. “I was listening to some tapes,” she said. “Who put the mikes in the St. Louis Club bathrooms?”

“I did.”

“That’s what I thought. Baxti’s mikes sound like they’re wrapped in chewing gum. Yours do pretty well. I heard some useful exchanges. General Norris, Buzz Wismer—”

“His wife is a terrible bitch,” Singh said absently.

“Wismer’s?”

“Yes. ‘Bev’ is the name. Of all the women here who will never forgive Asha for marrying Sidne

Hammaker, or Hammaker for marrying Asha—and there are a great many of these women—Bev is the nastiest.”

“I’ve been hearing the same complaints on all the tapes,” Jammu said. “At least from the women. The men are more likely to say they’re ‘ambivalent’ about Asha. They keep referring to her intelligence.”

“Meaning her bewitching beauty.”

“And her fabulous wealth.”

“Wismer, at any rate, is one of the ambivalent ones. Bev can’t stand it. She taunts him constantly.”

Jammu dropped the lid from her coffee cup into the wastebasket. “Why does he put up with it?”

“He’s strange. A shy genius.” Singh frowned and sat down on the windowsill. “I started hearing about Wismer jets twenty years ago. Nobody makes a better one.”

“So?”

“So he isn’t the man I expected. The voice is all wrong.”

“You’ve been doing a lot of listening.”

“A hundred fifty hours maybe. What do you think I do all day?”

Jammu shrugged. She could be certain Singh wasn’t exaggerating the amount of time he’d spent on the job. He was studiously beyond reproach. With no distractions (except for an occasional blond boy) and no responsibilities (except to her), he had time to lead an ordered life. A precious life. She, who had a pair of jobs that each took sixty hours a week to perform, was no match for Singh when it came to details. Her foot began to tap of its own accord, which meant the Dexedrine was working. “I’m taking you off the Wismer case,” she said.

“Oh yes?”

“I’m putting you in charge of Martin Probst.”

“All right.”

“So you’re going to have to start all over. You can forget Wismer, forget your hundred fifty hours.”

“That was just the tapes. Try three hundred.”

“Baxti handed in Probst’s file. You start immediately.”

“Is this something you only just decided?”

“No, it is not. I already *spoke* to Baxti, he already handed *in* his file, that’s what you’re *here* for. To pick it up.”

“Fine.”

“So pick it up.” She nodded at a tea-stained folder by her desk lamp.

Singh walked to the desk and picked it up. “Anything else?”

“Yes. Put the file down.”

He put it down.

“Go get me a glass of water and turn up the heat in here.”

He left the room.

Martin Probst was the general contractor whose company had built the Gateway Arch. He was also chairman of Municipal Growth Inc., a benevolent organization consisting of the chief executives of the St. Louis area’s major corporations and financial institutions. Municipal Growth was a model of efficacy and an object of almost universal reverence. If someone needed sponsors for an urban renewal project, Municipal Growth found them. If a neighborhood opposed the construction of a highway, Municipal Growth paid for an impact study. If Jammu wanted to alter the power structure of metropolitan St. Louis, she had to contend with Municipal Growth.

Singh returned with a Dixie cup. “Baxti is looking for new worlds to conquer?”

“Get a chair and sit down.”

He did so.

“Baxti’s obviously only marginally competent, so why make an issue of it?”

He shook a clove cigarette from a caramel-colored pack and struck a match, shielding the flame from a hypothetical breeze. “Because I don’t see why we’re switching.”

“I guess you’ll just have to trust me.”

“Guess so.”

“I assume you know the basics already—Probst’s charming wife Barbara, their charming eighteen-year-old daughter Luisa. They live in Webster Groves, which is interesting. It’s wealthy but hardly the wealthiest of the suburbs. There’s a gardener who lives on the property, though...Baxti terms their home life ‘very tranquil.’”

“Mikes?”

“Kitchen and dining room.”

“The bedroom would have been more telling.”

“We don’t have that many frequencies. And there’s a TV in the bedroom.”

“Fine. What else?”

Jammu opened the Probst file. Baxti’s Hindi scrawl made her blink. “First of all, he only uses non-union labor. There was a big legal fight back in the sixties. His chief attorney was Charles Wilson, Barbara’s father, now his father-in-law. That’s how they met. Probst’s employees have never been on strike. Union wages or better. Company insurance, disability, unemployment and retirement plans, some of which are unique in the business. It’s paternalism at its best. Probst isn’t any Vashni Lal. In fact he has a quote reputation unquote for personal involvement at all levels of the business.”

“An eye to the personal.”

“Ha ha. He’s currently chairman of Municipal Growth, term to run through next June. That’s important. Beyond that—Zoo Board member ’76 through present. Board member Botanical Gardens, East-West Gateway Coordinating Council. Sustaining membership in Channel 9. That isn’t so important. Splits his ticket, as they say. Baxti did some interesting fieldwork. Went through old newspapers, spoke with the man in the street—”

“I wish I’d seen it.”

“His English is improving. It seems the Globe-Democrat sees Probst as a saint of the American Way, rags to riches, a nobody in 1950, built the Arch in the sixties, along with the structural work on the stadium, and then quite a list of things. That’s also very significant.”

“He spreads himself thin.”

“Don’t we all.”

Singh yawned. “And he’s really that important.”

“Yes.” Jammu squinted in the clove smoke. “Don’t yawn at me. He’s first among equals at Municipal Growth, and they’re the people we’re working on if we want capital moving downtown. He’s nonpartisan and Christ-like in his incorruptibility. He’s a symbol. Have you been noticing how this city likes symbols?”

“You mean the Arch?”

“The Arch, the Veiled Prophet, the whole Spirit of St. Louis mythos. And Probst too, apparently. If only for the votes he’ll bring, we need him.”

“When did you decide all this?”

Jammu shrugged. “I hadn’t given him much thought until I spoke with Baxti last week. He’d just eliminated Probst’s dog, a first step towards putting Probst in the State—”

“The State, yes.”

“—although at this point it’s little more than bald terrorism. For what it’s worth, the operation

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