lace your hand over my head, Mother, the way you used to do when I was little. You’re the only human being left for me in this world. For twenty long years you never reproached me for failing to visit you. But you weren’t the only person I stayed away from; I was far too busy to pay attention to the world around me or even to myself. My wife and old childhood friends didn’t fare any better. I didn’t have time to see my daughter. I barely even
had time to look at my own face. Before going out, I would cast a quick glimpse at myself in
the mirror, only to adjust my tie and make sure there was no colour mismatch between my
shirt and my suit.

I didn’t feel as if I lived in this world, Mother. Was it possible that I could live in another world
without having actually died? Was it possible that I could die without an obituary in the
papers? When eminent ministers like myself passed away, a great obituary would certainly be
published nationwide. There would just as certainly be a solemn funeral procession, with rows
upon rows of mourners. In the middle of the first row there would be the Great Man himself,
wearin a black tie and concealing his tears behind dark glasses. Such a scene often filled me
with so much awe that I wished I were lying in the coffin that was hoisted on people’s
shoulders.

I was completely cut off from your world, Mother. And this was a burden too heavy for my
body and mind to bear. My body sometimes ground to a halt out of sheer exhaustion while my
mind continued working. On the other hand, my mind often got so worn out that it would stop
functioning while my body worked on, moving here and there, going to the office, presiding
over meetings or conferences, receiving delegations at airports, attending parties or travelling
abroad on high-level missions.

I used to feel amazed, when I saw my body move all by itself without my conscious
interference. I became particularly worried when this happened during important meetings
requiring concentration and attention. The only important meetings were those headed by the
Great Man himself. Since I started working for the government, I’ve hated being in a
subordinate position. I was in the habit of keeping my detestation of my superiors a closely
guarded secret, only venting my anger at my subordinates in the office or at my wife at home,
as my father often did with you.

I never let off steam in front of my superior at work, even when he was an ordinary official, let
alone the head of state. I used to sit in my chair, my body and mind alert, my faculties
attentive. I was always worried in case he might ask me a question for which I had no response.
Even if I knew the answer, I was still worried. For the correct answer, I feared, might not be the
required answer.
Our very first lesson in politics is that the correct answer is not necessarily the required answer. But the required answer always turns out to be the correct answer. A minister like myself had to be vigilant, both in body and mind, in order to retrieve correct facts from incorrect information. This is very hard. I would sit at a meeting, my left hand resting motionlessly on my lap and my right hand holding my pen poised on the paper. I needed to be ready to detect any random gesture, any invisible nod of the head, any secret movement of the hand, the finger or the lower lip as it curled or stretched, or any twitch in the muscles around the mouth, nose or eyes. I would spot the movement almost before it happened. My mind was fast in deciphering any such gesture, but, on my best days, my eyes were faster and my ears the fastest of all, for they could hear his voice before he uttered a single word.

As I sat in my chair, my body, mind and soul would become a sensitive mass of nerves: bare radar wires intertwining around each other. My head, arms, chest and belly would shiver as though moved by a continuous electric current. Whenever I chanced to stand near him, my right hand would tremble even though I held it hard with my left. I would keep my hands crossed over my chest or belly. Whether standing or sitting I would keep my legs tightly closed, like a timid virgin.

There is a photograph of me standing beside him. When the spotlight fell on us, I tried to change my posture. I tried to disentangle my right hand from my left, to disengage one leg from another. But my limbs were rigid with paralysis. When this photograph was published, I felt so embarrassed that I hid the paper from my family, especially my daughter. She pointed her finger at my face among the other high-ranking government officials and said to her mother, ‘This isn’t Baba, Mama!’

With the pride of a great man’s wife she responded, ‘It is your Baba, sweetheart, His Excellency the Minister, standing in the first row beside the President’.

I was never so ashamed of myself, as I was in front of my daughter. Her childish eyes were open to the horizon and she exposed me for what I was and revealed my secret. You often affirmed that children were in close touch with the supernatural. I feared the look in my daughter’s eyes. It was a steady, unfaltering look, very different from the look normal children gave their fathers. Even when he is corrupt and depraved, a father is still a father after all.
My father was a womanizing, drinking, gambling man. But he was a god in your eyes, wasn’t he? And you regarded your son as the little cub who would eventually grow up to be a lion like his father. I did become a lion, Mother. I was a tyrant both at home and at work. The more obedient and submissive my subordinates were the more I liked and admired myself. Throughout my life, no woman or man under my authority ever opposed me.

Except for one young woman who came into my office a month or two before the start of the revolution.

She threw me completely off balance. This was neither because she disagreed with me, nor because she was an unemployed young woman of twenty who dared speak her mind to His Excellency, the Minister. Much less was it because as a female she dared speak to a man or because she neglected to use my rightful title. No, she took me by surprise simply because she looked me straight in the eye, steadily and fearlessly. A decent man wouldn’t dare gaze so hard at you, let alone a woman.

I was truly intrigued and became furious not so much at her as at myself. Anger took hold of me, so I issued a summons for her the following day. I left her standing in front of me as I sat at my desk, leaning back and chuckling over the phone line.

I wanted to make her feel worthless. I joked and laughed away but the young woman wasn’t riled. She simply walked around the office as though I didn’t exist, as much at ease as though she were in her own home. She gazed at the paintings on the wall, stopped at one and said sarcastically, ‘The poppy flower?’

I tried to scrutinize her features before she turned towards me, her piercing gaze boring through my skull. It was as if I were sitting there completely naked. Remembering my daughter’s reaction to my photo, and her expression, my anger only grew. I lost my gentleman’s manners. Waving my hand, I said loudly to her, ‘Who are you? No matter who you are, you are no more than a woman. Your place is in bed beneath a man.’

A normal woman would have died of shame upon hearing these words. But she didn’t blush. Nor did she bat an eyelid.
My real tragedy lies not in losing my seat in government. My real tragedy lies in how I lost it.

On that dreadful morning, I opened the paper but couldn’t find my name in the newly appointed Cabinet. I was suddenly a reject, as though I’d been wiped off the registers, as though I no longer had a name. The phone that used to ring day and night suddenly became mute. I was dropped by all.

I realized that the constant ringing of the phone, though a horrible nuisance then, hadn’t really disturbed me at all. I was as addicted to it as I was to alcohol, women, power and wealth. Aren’t all these the God-given pleasures granted to us as men? I sought all God’s pleasures relentlessly, never getting my fill, even when I had forty palaces and forty women.

Yes, Mother, I wasted God’s gifts for a trivial reason. On that miserable, fateful day, I sat at a Cabinet meeting presided over by the Great Man and I was certain that I was sitting in that chair, but I was equally certain that it wasn’t me sitting there. I was incapable of focusing my attention. I wanted to know how I could be sitting as I have always done while things felt quite different. I kept wondering whether it was me sitting or somebody else. Which one of these two people was really me? And then I realized that the cause of my dilemma was this young revolutionary woman. Ever since I laid eyes on her, I have been unable to stop thinking of her.

She wasn’t even pretty, yet she managed to do the extraordinary: she eroded all the beliefs that we’ve upheld throughout our lives.

My right hand was dutifully holding the pen over the paper, ready for any signal or word by His Eminence. But His Eminence noticed the movement of my left hand. His eyes turned to me. He asked me a question. I knew both the correct answer and the required answer, but I was too scared to give either.

I have no idea who actually gave the answer. When the Great Man’s eyes turned towards me, I trembled to my very heart. Whether it was fever or my obsession with the revolutionary young woman, my mind was completely distracted. I sat almost like a statue, completely immobile. His eyes fell as heavily as death on me. When he asked me a second question, the answer was simple and self-evident.
other, the correct answer wasn’t the required one. How did I forget that? How did it lead to my death? I’m not grieving, Mother; I rejoice in eternal peace and salvation. I feel relieved of the load weighing down on my chest. I’m happy to leave this world to say goodbye forever. But the catastrophe is that in spite of the sense of peace I have as I leave this world, I still keep the phone close by, waiting for it to ring. Before I die, I’m still waiting for a single person to call me and say ‘Your Excellency, Mr Minister’.

Photograph by Geoff Parsons