Jeevan often met people from India or Pakistan or Kenya or the Ukraine or Somalia. Some of them were clients. He helped them with their taxes, filled out their loan applications, looked over their property purchase papers when they got to the point that they could buy something. These people either talked a lot about the moment when they left home and came here or they never talked about it, but either way Jeevan could see that in their minds their lives were divided into two parts. In the early days they felt that it could perhaps be undone, something like the feeling that comes when a person dies. He will wake again, he will live again. How can this unnatural state be the truth of his life, of my life? But as the days passed and the documents accumulated – social security card, driver's license, grocery store discount card – the possibility of reversal began to recede. The people who returned home within a few months made it back successfully. The rest stayed. The realization that they were never going to return came one day when they woke up and it occurred to them that it had been weeks since they had thought of what their life would have been like if they had never left home. On that morning they would try hard to rekindle the reverie but they wouldn't be able to, and they would recall how it used to come to them all the time in the early days to the point where they wished it didn't and drank too much to make it

go away. Finally they would stop thinking about it because they were late for work.

Later in the day, standing near the dumpster behind the store on their cigarette break, these same people would realize that they didn't know anymore – that they would never know again – what their life would have been like if they had stayed on in Karachi or Delhi. The thread is broken, they would think. Some people would be disturbed when this happened, they would start planning short trips home or they would think of going to the temple or mosque more often, or they would feel like listening to Hindi film songs and think that they should buy a few new cassettes of old movie soundtracks. The rest of them would just stub out their cigarettes and return to work.

A few months after Jeevan left India, he found himself in New York. He had traveled across the border with a man who told him that there were plenty of jobs for taxi drivers in New York and that he could get Jeevan one. The man had asked for two hundred dollars. And because Jeevan had worked in a restaurant in Toronto where he ate leftovers and slept in the kitchen at night, he had the money to give.

In New York Jeevan found that everyone around him was working towards something. They tried to save money so they could get married or, if they were already married, they saved money so that their wives and children could come over to the US. Those whose wives and children were already here worked hard so they could move from where they were to a better place, maybe out to New Jersey.

There were days when Jeevan tried to want the things that they wanted. If nothing else, he thought, it would give him

something to contribute to the conversation. But whenever he tried, he failed, so he stopped trying.

At first the thing Jeevan liked best about New York was that he could work all night and all day if he wanted. He turned to his cab when he found his mind growing empty and quiet. The lives and conversations of the people who rode with him diverted him. He drove to all corners of the city, picked up all kinds of people. It never bothered him that some areas were more dangerous than others or that some people were more likely to tip well and others weren't. Guns were pointed at him and knives held at his neck, and he gave the money that he had. And he gave it as calmly as anyone can when death is that close. He was still afraid of dying, but he did not fear losing money. What he earned was a lot more than what he needed for rent and food and for the few shirts and socks, some underwear, one pair of pants and one pair of shoes he bought himself every year. So, when he got mugged, he made a report of it to the police because that was a civic duty, then just shrugged it off and went back to the streets.

Finally the very thing that kept him driving cabs for long hours on the streets of New York drove him off them. Thinking about it later, he couldn't remember when or for what reason he had begun feeling that more and more of his fares were unhappy with their lives. There would be a week when everyone was going to the hospital. Some weekends he would find one person after another coming into his cab high on something, either animated beyond reason or with their eyes unfocused, the whites showing. Many of those rides also ended in the hospital. There would be couples

who screamed at each other, or looked away from each other as he drove. There would be women who rode with besotted men they did not love, and men who got in with women they were probably going to use. The prostitutes – from all the various price ranges – and their johns also traveled by cab. And then there were people who were simply, without any label to label them with, in despair. He began dreading taking fares. Sometimes a person would wave him down and Jeevan would speed past after one look at their face. But after a while even the happy people appeared to be deceiving themselves, and Jeevan began to feel that the problem did not lie in his fares; it lay in him.

Jeevan left New York for Baltimore. When the bus had rolled over the bridges and through the tunnels, he turned back and saw the island of Manhattan shining in the bright light of day, and he realized that he had always thought of this place as a way-station, that he would never want to return.

An acquaintance had given Jeevan the name and address of a cousin of his, Shabbir Ahmad. He owns a few houses there, he had said, he'll find you a place to live. Shabbir rented Jeevan the place on 26th Street. He offered to rent him a taxi as well and, out of politeness rather than necessity, Jeevan accepted. But his taxi-driving days were effectively over and he realized this a few weeks into his stay in Baltimore.

It happened one evening in early fall. Jeevan picked up two men near Patterson Park. They gave him an address up on Harford Road. A baseball game was playing on the radio, the Orioles seemed to be beating the Yankees. It was the

fifth inning and darkness had fallen by the time the cab reached Clifton Park. The Orioles had put two big innings on the board.

'Yankees going to lose bad tonight,' Jeevan said.

'Pull up over here, man,' one of them replied.

'Already?'

'Just pull up,' said the other.

Jeevan felt something cold on his neck. This was where he was supposed to say, slowly and clearly, I'll give you all the money I have, please don't hurt me. But Jeevan didn't say anything. Every sense within him seemed to be focused on the cool feeling on his neck. He swallowed and the sharp edge nicked his skin. Drops of blood oozed out. The pain tingled down to his chest and up to his jaw. And suddenly he felt himself silently urging the knife on, as if it were a person, urging it to slash into him.

'Where's the money, man?'

And the feeling passed.

Later, when the men had left, Jeevan felt fear. He started up the car and drove straight home, speeding as he went, scared that if someone else mugged him he would die, he would make himself die. It was the last time he drove a taxi.