

On this occasion, our client was unconcerned with the potential for future growth. No, our mandate was to determine how much fat could be cut. Call centers, it was evident, could be outsourced; truck rolls could be reduced; purchasing could be consolidated with our client's existing operations. The potential for headcount reduction was substantial—and hence the reception our team received from the employees of the company was frosty indeed. Our telephone extensions and fax machines would mysteriously stop working; our security badges and notebooks would disappear. Often I would emerge into the car park to find that one of the tires of my rental car was punctured—far too often for it to be mere coincidence.

Once this happened when Jim had come out for the day; he had asked me to give him a ride back to the city. He shook his head as I brought out the spare. “Don’t let it get you down, Changez,” he said. “Time only moves in one direction. Remember that. Things always change.” He loosened the metal strap of his watch, a solid, diver’s chronometer, and let it slide to his knuckles. “When I was in college,” he went on, “the economy was in bad shape. It was the seventies. Stagflation. But you could just smell the opportunity. America was shifting from manufacturing to services, a huge shift, bigger than anything we’d ever seen. My father had lived and died making things with his hands, so I knew from up close that that time was past.” He refastened the clasp of his watch. Then he made a fist and twisted his thick forearm from side to side, slowly, until the instrument found its level. There was an almost ritualistic quality to his movements, like a batsman—or even, I would say, a knight—donning his gloves before striding onto a field of contest.

“The economy’s an animal,” Jim continued. “It evolves. First it needed muscle. Now all the blood it could spare was rushing to its brain. That’s where I wanted to be. In finance. In the coordination business. And that’s where you are. You’re blood brought from some part of the body that the species doesn’t need anymore. The tailbone. Like me. We came from places that were wasting away.” I had finished replacing the tire, so I shut the boot and unlocked the doors. “Most people don’t recognize that, kid,” he said, buckling himself in beside me and nodding his head in the direction of the darkened building we had left. “They try to resist change. Power comes from becoming change.”