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Such a Long Journey

ROHINTON MISTRY

Such a Long Journey

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EMBLEM EDITIONS

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He assembled the aged priests and put questions to them concerning the kings who had once possessed the world. 'How did they,' he inquired, 'hold the world in the beginning, and what is it that it has been left to us in such a sorry state? And how was it that they were able to live free of care during the days of their heroic labours?'

Firdausi, *Shah-Nama*

A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey ...

T. S. Eliot, 'Journey of the Magi'

And when old words die out on the tongue, new
melodies break forth from the heart; and where the
old tracks are lost, new country is revealed with its wonders.

Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali*

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The first light of morning barely illumined the sky as Gustad Noble faced eastward to offer his orisons to Ahura Mazda. The hour was approaching six, and up in the compound's solitary tree the sparrows began to call. Gustad listened to their chirping every morning while reciting his *kusti* prayers. There was something reassuring about it. Always, the sparrows were first; the cawing of crows came later.

From a few flats away, the metallic clatter of pots and pans began nibbling at the edges of stillness. The *bhaiya* sat on his haunches beside the tall aluminium can and dispensed milk into the vessels of housewives. His little measure with its long, hooked handle dipped into the container and emerged, dipped and emerged, rapidly, with scarcely a drip. After each customer was served, he let the dipper hang in the milk can, adjusted his dhoti, and rubbed his bare knees while waiting to be paid. Flakes of dry dead skin fell from his fingers. The women blanched with disgust, but the tranquil hour and early light preserved the peace.

Gustad Noble eased his prayer cap slightly, away from the wide forehead with its numerous lines, until it settled comfortably on his grey-white hair. The black velvet of the cap contrasted starkly with his cinereous sideburns, but his thick, groomed moustache was just as black and velvety. Tall and broad-shouldered, Gustad was the envy and admiration of friends and relatives whenever health or sickness was being discussed. For a man swimming in the tidewater of his fifth decade of life, they said, he looked so solid. Especially for one who had suffered a serious accident just a few years ago; and even that left him with nothing graver than a slight limp. His wife hated this kind of talk. Touch wood, Dilnavaz would say to herself, and look around for a suitable table or chair to make surreptitious contact with her fingers. But Gustad did not mind telling about his accident, about the day he had risked his own life to save his eldest.

Over the busy clatter of the milk container, he heard a screech: '*Muà* thief! In the hands of the police only we should put you! When they break your arms we will see how you act in water!' The voice was Miss Kutpitia's, and the peace of dawn reluctantly made way for a frenetic new day.

Miss Kutpitia's threats lacked any real conviction. She never bought the *bhaiya's* milk for herself but firmly believed that periodic berating kept him in line, and was in the interest of the others. Somebody had to let these crooks know that there were no fools living here, in the Khodadad Building. She was a wizened woman of seventy, and seldom went out these days, she said, since her bones got stiffer day by day.

But there were not many in the building she could talk to about her bones, or anything else, for that matter, because of the reputation she had acquired over the years, of being mean and cranky and abusive. To children, Miss Kutpitia was the ubiquitous witch of the fairy stories come to life. They would flee past her door, screaming, 'Run from the *daaken*! Run from the *daaken*!' as much from fear as to provoke her to mutter and curse, and shake her fist. Stiff bones or not, she could be seen moving with astonishing alacrity when she

wanted to, darting from window to balcony to stairs if there were events taking place in the outside world that she wished to observe.

The *bhaiya* was accustomed to hearing that faceless voice. He mumbled for the benefit of his customers: 'As if I make the milk. Cow does that. The *malik* says go, sell the milk, and that is all I do. What good comes from harassing a poor man like me?'

The women's resigned and weary faces, in the undecided early light, were transformed fleetingly into visages of gentle dignity. They were anxious to purchase the sickly, watered-down white fluid and return to their chores. Dilnavaz also waited, aluminium pan in one hand and money in the other. A slight woman, she had had her dark brown hair bobbed for their daughter Roshan's first birthday party, eight years ago, and still wore it that way. She was not sure if it suited her now, although Gustad said it certainly did. She never could trust his taste. When mini-skirts came into fashion, just for a joke she had hiked up her dress and sashayed across the room, making little Roshan burst into laughter. But he thought she should seriously consider it – imagine, a woman of forty-four, mini-skirted. 'Fashions are for the young,' she had said, a little flustered. Then he began singing that Nat King Cole song, in his deep voice:

You will never grow old,
While there's love in your heart,
Time may silver your dark brown hair,
As you dream in an old rocking chair ...

She loved it when Gustad changed the song's words from 'golden hair', always breaking into a big smile at the third line.

Traces of yesterday's milk lingered in the pan she was holding. The last drops had just been used by Gustad and herself in their tea, and she had not had time to wash it out. There would have been time enough, she felt, if she hadn't sat for so long, listening to Gustad read to her from the newspaper. And before that, talking about their eldest, and how he would soon be studying at the Indian Institute of Technology. 'Sohrab will make a name for himself, you see, if he doesn't,' Gustad had said with a father's just pride. 'At last our sacrifices will prove worthwhile.' What had come over her this morning, she could not say, sitting and chatting away, wasting time like that. But then, it wasn't every day such good news arrived for the son.

Dilnavaz edged forward as some women left, her turn was approaching. Like the other of the Nobles were endlessly awaiting a milk ration card from the government office. In the meantime she had to patronize the *bhaiya*, whose thin, short tail of hair growing from the centre of his otherwise perfectly shaven head never ceased to amuse her. She knew it was a Hindu custom in some particular caste, she was not exactly sure, but couldn't help thinking that it resembled a grey rat's tail. On mornings when he oiled his scalp, the tail glistened.

She purchased his milk and remembered the days when ration cards were only for the poor or the servants, the days when she and Gustad could afford to buy the fine creamy product of Parsi Dairy Farm (for Miss Kutpitia it was still affordable), before the prices started to go up, up, up, and never came down. She wished Miss Kutpitia would stop screaming at the *bhaiya*. It did no good, only made him resent them more. God knows what he might do to the milk

as it was, these poor people in slum shacks and *jhopadpattis* in and around Bombay looked you sometimes as if they wanted to throw you out of your home and move in with their own families.

She knew Miss Kutpitia's intentions were good, despite the bizarre stories about the old woman that had circulated for years in the building. Gustad wanted to have as little to do with Miss Kutpitia. He said her crazy rubbish could make even a sane brazen somersault permanently. Dilnavaz was perhaps the only friend Miss Kutpitia had. Her childhood training to show unconditional respect for elders made it easy for her to accept Miss Kutpitia's idiosyncrasies. She found nothing repugnant or irritating about them, sometimes amusing, sometimes tiresome, yes. But never offensive. After all, for the most part Miss Kutpitia only wanted to offer help and advice on matters unexplainable by the laws of nature. She claimed to know about curses and spells: both to cast and remove; about magic, black and white; about omens and auguries; about dreams and their interpretation. Most important of all, according to Miss Kutpitia, was the ability to understand the hidden meaning of mundane events and chance occurrences; and her fanciful, fantastical imagination could be entertaining at times.

Dilnavaz made sure never to unduly encourage her. But she realized that at Miss Kutpitia's age, a patient ear was more important than anything else. Besides, was there a person anywhere who, at one time or another, had not found it difficult to disbelieve completely in things supernatural?

The clatter and chatter around the milkman seemed remote to Gustad Noble while he softly murmured his prayers under the neem tree, his handsome white-clad figure favoured by the morning light. He recited the appropriate sections and unknotted the *kusti* from around his waist. When he had unwound all nine feet of its slim, sacred, hand-woven length, he cracked it, whip-like: once, twice, thrice. And thus was Ahriman, the evil one, driven away – with that expert flip of the wrist, possessed only by those who performed their *kusti* regularly.

This part of the prayers Gustad enjoyed most, even as a child, when he used to imagine himself a mighty hunter plunging fearlessly into unexplored jungles, deep in uncharted lands, armed with nothing except his powerfully holy *kusti*. Lashing that sacred cord through the air, he would slice off the heads of behemoths, disembowel sabre-toothed tigers, lay waste to savage cannibal armies. One day, while exploring the shelves in his father's bookstore, he found the story of England's beloved dragon-slayer. From then on, whenever he said his prayers, Gustad was a Parsi Saint George, cleaving dragons with his trusty *kusti* wherever he found them: under the dining-table, in the cupboard, below his bed, even hiding behind the clothes-horse. From everywhere there tumbled the gory, dismembered heads of fire-breathing monsters.

Doors opened and slammed shut, money jingled, a voice called out with special instructions for the *bhaiya's* next delivery. Someone joked with the man: 'Arré *bhaiya*, why not sell the milk and water separately? Better for the customer, easier for you also – no mixing to do.' This was followed by the *bhaiya's* usual impassioned denial.

The early morning news on government-controlled All-India Radio emerged softly and cautiously, from an open window. The clear mellifluousness of its Hindi vocables tested the morning air, and presently offered a confident counterpoint to the BBC World Service that

brashly cut in from another flat, bristling with short-wave crackle and hiss.

Gustad's prayers were not disturbed by the banter nor distracted by the radio. Today the news was powerless to tempt him into irreverence, for he had already seen *The Times of India*. Unable to sleep, he had risen earlier than usual. When he turned on the tap to gargle and brush his teeth, the water burst through in a loud wet explosion. It caught him by surprise. He jumped back, snatching away his hand. Air, he told himself, being discharged from the pipes empty since seven a.m. yesterday, when the municipality had ended the daily water quota. He felt foolish. Scared by a noisy tap. He turned off the water, then rotated the handle slowly, just a little. It continued to gurgle threateningly.

For Dilnavaz, that familiar hissing, spitting, blustering was a summons to waken. She sensed the empty bed beside her and smiled to herself, for she had expected Gustad to be up first today. She stared sleepily at the clock till it yielded the time, then turned over on to her stomach and closed her eyes.

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Long before the sun had risen that morning, before it was time to pray, Gustad had been waiting anxiously for *The Times of India*. It was pitch dark but he did not switch on the light for the darkness made everything seem clear and well-ordered. He caressed the arms of the chair he sat in, thinking of the decades since his grandfather had lovingly crafted it in his furniture workshop. And this black desk. Gustad remembered the sign on the store, he could see it even now. Clearly, as though it is a photograph before my eyes: *Noble & Sons, Makers of Fine Furniture*, and I also remember the first time I saw the sign – too young to read the words, but not to recognize the pictures that danced around the words. A glass-fronted cabinet with gleaming cherry-coloured wood; an enormous four-postered canopy bed; chairs with carved backs and splendidly proportioned cabrioles; a profoundly dignified black desk – all of it like the furniture in my childhood home.

Some of it now here, in my house. Saved from the clutches of bankruptcy – the word comes as a chisel. The sound cruel and sharp and relentless as the metal cleats on the bailiff's shoes. The cleats had sounded their malicious clatter on the stone tiles. Bastard bailiff – seized whatever he could get his filthy hands on. My poor father. Lost everything. Except the few pieces I rescued. With Malcolm's help, in the old van. Bailiff never found out. What a good friend was Malcolm Saldanha. Sad, he and I did not keep in touch. A true friend. Like Major Bilimoria used to be.

The last name made Gustad shake his head. That bloody Bilimoria. After the shameless way he behaved, he had a nerve, writing now to ask for a favour, as though nothing had happened. He could wait till his dying day for a reply. Gustad pushed the Major's audacious letter out of his mind, it threatened to disrupt the well-ordered darkness. Once again, the furniture from his childhood gathered comfortingly about him. The pieces stood like parentheses around his entire life, the sentinels of his sanity.

He heard the metal flap of the mail slot lift and, almost simultaneously, discerned the white outline of the newspaper as it slid into the room. Still he sat, unmoving: let the mail pass, no need for him to know I am waiting. Why he did this, he could not say.

When the bicycle pedalled away, all was quiet again. Gustad switched on the light and put on his glasses. He ignored the grim headlines about Pakistan, barely glanced at the half-naked mother weeping with a dead child in her arms. The photo caption, which he did not stop to read because the picture looked the same as the others that had appeared regularly in the past few weeks, was about soldiers using Bengali babies for bayonet practice. He turned to the inside page, the one which listed the Indian Institute of Technology's entrance exam results. He laid the page flat on the dining-table. From the sideboard he fetched the little piece of paper with Sohrab's roll number, checked, and went to wake Dilnavaz.

'Come on, get up! He got admission!' He stroked her shoulder. There was affection and impatience. Also some guilt: that letter. He had hidden Major Bilimoria's letter from her.

Dilnavaz rolled over and smiled. 'I told you he would. Simply at all you kept worrying.' She went to the bathroom and connected the transparent plastic hose to fill the water drum even though today there was time enough to brush her teeth first, and make tea. It was only five o'clock – two whole hours before the taps went dry. She turned the brass handle, and the head of water surged through the hose. A long tail of air bubbles followed close behind. Like the bubbles that used to gush in her younger son's little fish tank. How fond Darius had been of the tiny colourful creatures with the pretty names he proudly recited when showing them off: guppy, black molly, angelfish, neon tetra, kissing gourami – for a little while they had been the centre of his universe.

But the tank was empty now. And the birdcages. They lay covered in dust and cobwebs on the dark shelf in the *chawl* beside the WC, along with Sohrab's butterfly display case. And that silly book he won long ago on Prize Distribution Day. *Learning About Entomo ... something-or-other*. There had been such an argument just because she said it was cruel to kill the colourful little things. But Gustad said that Sohrab should be encouraged – he persevered and took it up in college, doing research and all that, he could make a world famous name for himself.

The rusted mounting pins still held a few thoraxes in place, but little else. An assortment of wings, like fallen petals of exotic flowers, littered the bottom of the case, mingled with broken antennae and tiny heads which did not resemble heads after they separated from the thoraxes. They had once made Dilnavaz wonder, briefly, how whole black pepper had found its way inside, till she realized with a shudder what the round things were.

The gush of water, the effervescent upstream rush, the quickening of the hose, always engaged her senses. Then the flow became regular, and it might have been an empty piece of tubing but for the slight throb felt in her palm where she held the hose to keep it from slipping out of the drum.

Gustad wanted to wake Sohrab. Dilnavaz stopped him. 'Let him sleep. His admission result is not going to change if he knows it one hour later.'

He agreed readily. All the same, he went to the back room. In the darkness he could see the slatted frame-door he had hinged to the side of the bed fifteen years ago for Sohrab, who had been a turbulent little sleeper, as though his mischievous daytime games were continuing into the night. The nightly barricade they used to form alongside the bed with dining chairs did not work, he always pushed the chairs away. So the slatted door it had to be. Sohrab promptly named it the bed-with-the-door, and found the addition a useful appendage when he

constructed a bed-house out of all the bolsters and blankets and pillows he could gather.

The bed-with-the-door now belonged to Roshan. One of her skinny arms, having found its way out between the door slats, hung over the side. It would soon be her ninth birthday. Gustad took after her mother, thought Gustad, gazing upon her fragile figure. He turned his eyes to the corner where Sohrab slept, on the narrow *dholni* which was rolled away under Darius's bed during the day. Gustad had always wanted to get a proper third bed, but there was no place for it in the small room.

Looking upon his son, his eyes filled with joyful pride, and he was reassured: the face of a nineteen-year-old was still untroubled, as it used to be during the childhood nights in the bed-with-the-door. He wondered if time would put an end to it. For himself, the day had come, he knew, when his father's bookstore had been treacherously despoiled and ruined. The shock and the shame of it had made his mother ill. How swiftly moved the finger of poverty, soiling and contaminating. Soon afterwards, his mother had died. Sleep was no longer a happy thing for him then, but a time when all anxieties intensified, and anger grew – a strange, unfocused anger – and helplessness; and he would wake up exhausted to curse the day that was dawning.

And so, as he watched Sohrab sleep his innocent sleep, with the face that seemed on the verge of a smile; and Darius, at fifteen a younger, shorter reflection of his father's muscular frame; and little Roshan, who filled such a small part of the bed-with-the-door, her two plain legs sidelong on the pillow: as Gustad observed them silently, in turn, he wished for all the nights in his sons' and daughter's lives to be filled with peace and tranquillity. Very, very softly, he hummed the wartime song he had adapted to sing them to sleep when they were little:

Bless them all, bless them all,
Bless my Sohrab and Darius and all,
Bless my Sohrab and Darius
And Roshan and ...

Sohrab turned in his sleep, and Gustad stopped humming. The room was dark like the other in the flat, with blackout paper taped over the glass panes of the windows and ventilator. Gustad had put it up nine years ago, the year of the war with China. How much happened that year, he thought. Roshan's birth, and then my terrible accident. What luck. In bed for twelve weeks, with the broken hip between Madhiwalla Bonesetter's sandbags. And riots in the city – curfews and lathi charges and burning buses everywhere. What a dreadful year 1962 had been. And such a humiliating defeat, everywhere people talking of nothing but the way the Chinese had advanced, as though the Indian Army consisted of tin soldiers. To think that till the very end both sides had been proclaiming peace and brotherhood. Especially Jawaharlal Nehru, with his favourite slogan, 'Hindi-Chinee *bhai-bhai*', insisting that Chou En-lai was a brother, the two nations were great friends. And refusing to believe any talk of war even though the Chinese had earlier invaded Tibet, positioning several divisions along the border. 'Hindi-Chinee *bhai-bhai*', all the time, as though repeating it often enough would verily make them brothers.

And when the Chinese came pouring over the mountains, everyone said it confirmed the treacherous nature of the yellow race. Chinese restaurants and Chinese hair salons lost the

clientele, and the Chinaman quickly became the number one bogeyman. Dilnavaz used to caution Darius, 'The wicked Chino will carry you off if you don't finish your food.' But Darius would defy her, he was not afraid. He had made his plans after discussions with his first standard classmates about the yellow fellows who collected children to make a stew, along with rats, cats, and puppy dogs. He said he would get his Diwali cap pistol, put a roll of tobacco in it and bang-bang, kill the Chino if he ever dared come near their flat.

But much to Darius's disappointment, no Chinese soldiers approached Khodadad Building. Instead, teams of fund-raising politicians toured the neighbourhood. Depending on which party they belonged to, they made speeches praising the Congress government's heroic stand or denouncing its incompetency for sending brave Indian Jawans, with outdated weapons and summer clothing, to die in the Himalayas at Chinese hands. Every political party unleashed flag-emblazoned lorries to crisscross the city with banners that were paradigms of ingenuity, weaving together support for the party and support for the soldiers, while the fundraisers shouted themselves hoarse through megaphones, exhorting people to be as selfless as the Jawans who were reddening the Himalayan snow with their precious blood to defend Bharat Mata.

And the people were moved to staunch the flow of yellow invaders. They threw blankets and sweaters and scarves out of their windows into the open lorries that passed below. In some wealthy localities, the collection drive turned into a competition, with neighbours trying to outdo one another in their attempts to simultaneously seem rich, patriotic and compassionate. Women removed gold bangles and earrings and finger rings from their persons and gave them away. Money – notes and loose change – was wrapped in handkerchiefs and tossed into the fund-raisers' grateful hands. Men tore shirts and jackets off their backs, yanked shoes off their feet, belts off their waists, and flung them into the lorries. What a time it was, and it brought tears of pride and joy into the eyes of everyone to see such solidarity, such generosity. Afterwards, it was said that some of the donated goods had turned up for sale in Chor Bazaar and Nul Bazaar, and in the stalls of roadside hawkers everywhere, though not much attention was paid to that nasty allegation; the glow of national unity was still warm and comforting.

But everyone knew that the war with China froze Jawaharlal Nehru's heart, then broke it. He never recovered from what he perceived to be Chou En-lai's betrayal. The country's beloved Panditji, everyone's Chacha Nehru, the unflinching humanist, the great visionary, turned bitter and rancorous. From now on, he would brook no criticism, take no advice. With his appetite for philosophy and dreams lost for ever, he resigned himself to political intrigue and internal squabbles, although signs of his tyrannical ill temper and petulance had emerged even before the China war. His feud with his son-in-law, the thorn in his political side, was well known. Nehru never forgave Feroze Gandhi for exposing scandals in the government; he no longer had any use for defenders of the downtrodden and champions of the poor, roles he had himself once played with great gusto and tremendous success. His one overwhelming obsession now was, how to ensure that his darling daughter Indira, the only one, he claimed, who loved him truly, who had even abandoned her worthless husband in order to be with her father – how to ensure that she would become Prime Minister after him. This monomaniacal fixation occupied his days and nights, days and nights which the treachery of Chou En-lai had blighted for ever, darkened permanently, unlike the blacked-out cities, which returned

light after the conflict ended and people uncovered their doors and windows.

Gustad, however, left his blackout paper undisturbed. He said it helped the children sleep better. Dilnavaz thought the idea was ridiculous, but she did not argue because her father had passed away recently in the nursing home. Perhaps, she thought, he found the darkness soothing after death's recent visitation.

'Remove the black paper whenever you are ready, baba. Far be it from me to force you,' she said, but registered pointed observations at regular intervals: the paper collected dust and was difficult to clean; it gave spiders ideal places to spin their webs; it provided perfect cover for cockroaches to lay their eggs; and it made the whole house dark and depressing.

Weeks went by, then months, with paper restricting the ingress of all forms of light, earthly and celestial. 'In this house, the morning never seems to come,' Dilnavaz continued to complain. By and by, she learned new ways to deal with dust, webs, and household pests. The family grew accustomed to living in less light, as if blackout paper had always covered the windows. Occasionally, though, when Dilnavaz was feeling particularly harassed by quotidian matters, the paper became the target of her frustration: 'Very nice this is. So it collects butterflies and moths, father collects spiders and cockroaches. Soon Khodada Building will become one big insect museum.'

But three years later, the Pakistanis attacked to try to get a piece of Kashmir as they had done right after Partition, and blackout was declared once again. Then Gustad triumphantly pointed out to her the wisdom of his decision.

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He left his sleeping children and returned to read the rest of the paper. It was not yet time for his prayers: light had not yet broken on the horizon. He followed Dilnavaz to the kitchen and read the headline for her benefit: 'Reign of Terror in East Pakistan'.

'Wait, I am filling the *matloo*,' she said, unable to hear over the gush of running water. The water pressure was low today, the drums took longer to fill. She wondered why, washing the square of lawn cloth to strain and store the day's drinking water. She tossed the soggy cloth flat over the open mouth of the earthen pot. It landed with a sharp, wet slap. She bowed downwards expertly at its centre, with her fingers, to create a cloth funnel.

'It says that the Republic of Bangladesh has been proclaimed by the Awami League,' Gustad continued when the tap was turned off. 'In the canteen at lunch-time I told all the fellows that is exactly what would happen. They were saying that General Yahya would allow Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to form the government. My right hand I will cut off and give you, I said, those fanatics and dictators respect the election results.'

'What will happen now?' He ignored her question and read silently, about Bengali refugees streaming over the border with tales of terror and bestiality, of torture and killings and mutilations; of women in ditches with their breasts sliced off, babies impaled on bayonets, charred bodies everywhere, whole villages razed.

The earthen pot was full to the brim. Dilnavaz measured six drops of the dark crimson solution. It never stopped nagging her that they did not boil the water. But Gustad said the

straining and adding potassium permanganate was precaution enough. She tried to wring dry a soaked corner of her faded floral nightgown. The veins, prominently blue on her much-to-rapidly ageing hands, swelled with the effort. The lid of the boiling kettle jiggled and rattled.

‘I wonder what Major Bilimoria would have thought,’ she said, scooping in three spoons of Brooke Bond. The kettle’s noisy gurgles became soft murmurs. She hated making tea directly in the kettle, but the dark brown English teapot they had used for more than twenty years had cracked. The frayed tea cozy, spilling mildewy stuffing, also needed to be replaced.

‘Major Bilimoria? Thought of what?’ He wondered if she suspected anything about the hidden letter, and tried to sound indifferent.

‘About this trouble in Pakistan, people saying there will be war. With his army background he would have inside information.’

Major Jimmy Bilimoria had lived in Khodadad Building for almost as long as the Noble Gustad always pointed him out to the children as a good example, urging them to walk erect with chest out and stomach in, like Major Uncle. The retired major loved to regale Sohra and Darius with tales from his glorious days of army and battle. For his young listeners, the stories quickly acquired the stature of legend, with their Major Uncle the legendary hero, as he told of the cowardly Pakistanis who turned tail and ran in 1948, when confronted by Indian soldiers in Kashmir, or about the fiasco of the dreaded tribesmen from the North-West Frontier, who had been the scourge of the mighty British Army in the days of Empire. To the wild and ferocious tribesmen, said Major Uncle, fighting and killing was no more than a favourite game. Turned loose by the Pakistanis, they got drunk and began to loot the first village they passed through, instead of pushing on to attack the capital. The hours went by as they hacked up their victims and went from house to house in search of money and jewels and women. All their fun and games, said Major Uncle, provided precious time for Indian reinforcements to arrive. Kashmir was safe, the battle was won. Then the children would heave a sigh of relief and applaud. His stories, as he described the various episodes – the crossing of Banihal Pass, the battle for Baramullah, the siege of Srinagar – were so fascinating that Gustad and Dilnavaz too would listen, enthralled.

Last year, Major Bilimoria vanished from Khodadad Building. He left without a word to anyone, and no one could guess as to his whereabouts. Shortly after, a lorry had arrived with a key to his flat and instructions to take away his belongings. Hand-painted on its rear fender was a message in letters heavily ornate with curlicues: *Trust In God – Horn Please To Pass*. When questioned by the neighbours, the driver and his helper would say nothing: *Hum kuch nahin maaloom*, we don’t know anything, was all that could be got out of them.

The Major’s abrupt departure had wounded Gustad Noble more than he allowed anyone to see. Only Dilnavaz could sense the depth of his pain. ‘To leave like this, after being neighbours for so many years, is a shameful way of behaving. Bloody bad manners.’ He said no more than that on the subject.

But although Gustad would not admit it, Jimmy Bilimoria had been more than just a neighbour. At the very least, he had been like a loving brother. Almost one of the family, a second father to the children. Gustad had even considered appointing him as their guardian in his will, should something untimely happen to himself and Dilnavaz. A year after the disappearance, he still could not think of Jimmy without the old hurt returning. He wished

Dilnavaz had not brought up his name. Receiving that letter had been bad enough. And such letter – makes my blood boil, every time I think of it.

Trying to maintain his posture of indifference, he overdid the sarcasm: ‘How would I know what Jimmy would think about Pakistan? He didn’t leave us his new address, did he? Or would he have written and asked for his expert opinion.’

‘You are still upset,’ said Dilnavaz. ‘But I still believe that without a good reason he would not have left like that. One day we will find out why. He was a good man.’ She nodded meditatively, stirring the tea in the aluminium kettle. The colour seemed right, and she poured two cups. From the icebox, she fetched the bit of milk left over from yesterday: the *bhaiya* had not yet arrived but this would do for now. Gustad filled his saucer and blew on it. By the time he finished the newspaper, it was almost prayer time, so he fetched his black velvet prayer cap and stepped outside. The sparrows were twittering reassuringly in the solitary tree in the compound.

And when he reached halfway into the *kusti* recitation and the radio started somewhere first in Hindi, and then mingled with the BBC World Service, he was not distracted because he already knew all the news.

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The Hindi broadcast ended, and the radio began a series of jingles and ads: Amul Butter (‘... utterly, butterly delicious ...’), Hamam Soap, Cherry Blossom Shoe Polish. The other set tuned to the rasping, crackling BBC, was switched off.

Gustad finished retying the *kusti* round his waist and noted with satisfaction that the two ends, as usual, were of equal length. He raised and lowered his shoulders to let his *sudras* settle comfortably around him. The vest slid from under the *kusti* in response to the movement, providing the slack he liked to feel around his stomach. A draught crept across his lower back. It reminded him of the vertical tear. Most of his *sudras* had rents in them, and Dilnavaz kept fretting that a new batch was needed. Mending was useless – no sooner was one tear sewn up than another appeared because the mulmul itself was worn. He told her not to worry: ‘A little air-conditioning does no harm,’ laughing away, as usual, the signs of the straitened circumstances.

He turned his face to the sky, eyes closed, and began reciting the Sarosh Baaj, silently forming the words with his lips, when the domestic sounds of the building were drowned by the roar of a diesel engine. A lorry? The engine idled for a few moments, and he resisted turning around to see. There was nothing he disliked more than to permit a break in his morning prayers. Bad manners, that’s what it was. He would not rudely interrupt when talking to another human being, so why do it with Dada Ormuzd? Especially today, when there was so much to be grateful for, with Sohrab’s admission to IIT which, with one wonderful, blessed stroke redeemed all his efforts, all the hardships.

The thundering lorry pulled away, leaving a cloud of diesel fumes to linger at the gate. By and by, the morning air carried in the acrid smell. Gustad wrinkled his nostrils and continued with the Sarosh Baaj.

By the time he finished, the lorry was quite forgotten. He went to the two bushes growing in the small patch of dusty earth under his window, opposite the black stone wall, and performed his daily bit of gardening. There were scraps of paper tangled in the leaves. Every morning he tended both bushes, although the vinca was the only one he had planted – the mint had begun to sprout of its own accord one day. Assuming it was a weed, he had almost uprooted it. But Miss Kutpitia, watching from her balcony upstairs, had deftly elucidated the medicinal uses of this particular variety. ‘That is a very rare *subjo*, very rare!’ she shouted down. ‘The fragrance controls high blood-pressure!’ And the tiny two-lipped white flowers growing in spikes, contained seeds which, soaked in water and ingested, cured numerous maladies of the stomach. So Dilnavaz insisted that he let the plant stay, to please the old woman if for nothing else. Word of the newly discovered medicine had spread quickly, however, and people stopped by to ask for its leaves or the magic seeds. The daily demand for *subjo* kept in check its vigorous growth, which threatened to overwhelm the vinca and its five-petalled pink blooms that gave Gustad such joy.

He cleared away the paper scraps, cellophane sweet-wrappers, a Kwality ice-cream stick and attended next to his rose plant. He had secured its pot by thick picture-hanging wire to a post within the entrance-way, with several complicated loops and knots, so that anyone with mischief in mind would have to spend hours undoing the intricacies. He picked up the petals of a faded rose. Then the smell of diesel fumes came again, and drew him to the gate.

A notice was pasted to the pillar, while a shining black oil puddle marked the spot where the lorry had stopped. The official document from the municipality bulged in places with glue and air bubbles. He did some quick calculations after reading it. The bloody bastards were out of their minds. What was the need to widen the road? He measured the ground with hurried strides. The compound would shrink to less than half its present width, and the black stone wall would loom like a mountain before the ground-floor tenants. More a prison camp than a building, all cooped up like sheep or chickens. With the road noise and nuisance so much closer. The flies, the mosquitoes, the horrible stink, with bloody shameless people peeing, squatting alongside the wall. Late at night it became like a wholesale public latrine.

But it was just a proposal, nothing would come of it. Surely the landlord would not give away half his compound for the ‘fair market value’ that the municipality offered. It was hard to find anything these days more unfair than the government’s fair market value. The landlord would certainly go to court.

The diesel smell persisted, following him through the compound as he returned home. It reminded him of the day of his accident, nine years ago, when such a smell had been present, also strong and undiminishing, while he lay in the road with his shattered hip, in the path of oncoming cars. He wrinkled his nose and wished the wind would change. His hip, the one which made him limp, began to hurt a little as he entered the flat.

Dilnavaz decided to be of no help to Gustad, not while he was embarked on his mad and wholly impractical scheme. A live chicken in the house! Whatever next? Never had he meddled like this in her kitchen. It was true he came sometimes and sniffed in her pots and especially on Sundays, cajoled her to make a *kutchoomber* of onions, coriander and hot green chillies to go with the *dhansak* simmering on the stove. But in twenty-one years this was the first time he was interfering in kitchen-and-cookery in a very fundamental manner, and she was not sure what it meant or where it was leading.

‘Where did we get this basket from anyway?’ asked Gustad, covering the chicken with the wide wicker basket that had hung for ages on a nail near the kitchen ceiling. He did not really care to know, just wanting words to flow again between them, get rid of the chill she had been exuding since he got back from Crawford Market with the throbbing, unquiet bulge in his shopping bag.

‘I don’t know where the basket came from.’ Curt and frigid was her reply.

He suspected that Miss Kutpitia may have been advising her about omens, but prudence made him return to his peace-making voice. ‘At last we have a use for this basket. Good thing we did not throw it away. Where did it come from, I wonder.’

‘I told you once, I don’t know.’

‘Yes, yes, you did, Dilnoo-darling,’ he said soothingly. ‘Now, for two days it will be a rooster over the chicken’s head. They relax and sleep quietly, put on more weight, if they are covered with a basket.’

‘How would I know? In my family a chicken was always brought home slaughtered.’

‘You will taste the difference, trust me, when it is swimming in your brown sauce in two days. With onions and potatoes. Ah ha ha, that brown sauce! So perfect you make it, Dilnoo.’ He smacked his lips.

The entire plan had come to Gustad yesterday. He had dreamt of his childhood the previous night, and remembered the dream in detail on waking: it was a day of great gaiety and celebration, of laughter ringing through the house, flowers filling up the rooms – vases, in strands of *tohrun* over doorways – and music, music all day long: ‘Tales From the Vienna Woods’, ‘Gold and Silver Waltz’, ‘Skater’s Waltz’, ‘Voices of Spring’, the overture to *Die Fledermaus*, and much, much more, playing non-stop on the gramophone, playing in his dream, while his grandmother sent the servants out repeatedly to buy special herbs and *masala* for the feast cooking under her supervision.

There was such excitement and happiness filling his beloved childhood home, the sadness in his heart was acute when he awoke. He could not remember the exact occasion being celebrated in the dream – probably some birthday or anniversary. But live chickens had been brought home from the market by his father, and fattened for two days before the feast. And what a feast it had been.

When Gustad was a little boy, live chickens were standard procedure in his father's house. Grandma would have it no other way. Not for her the scraggy fowl brought home slaughtered and plucked and gutted. Gustad remembered them arriving in a covered basket balanced on the head of the servant who walked behind his father, sometimes two, sometimes four, sometimes eight, depending on how many guests were invited. Grandma would inspect the birds, invariably applauding her son's choice selections as they clucked away, then check off the packets of spices and ingredients against her list.

But spices, ingredients, were only half the secret. 'Chicken if you buy,' she would say when praised for her delicious cooking, 'then you must buy alive and squawking, *jeevti-jaagti*, or don't buy at all. First feed it for two days, less will not do. And always feed best grain, the very best: Always remember: what goes in chicken-stomach, at the end comes back to our stomach. After two days prepare the pot, light the stove, get *masala* ready. Then slaughter clean, and cook. Quick-quick-quick, no wasting time.' And what a difference that made to the taste of the meat, she would claim, juicy and fresh and sweet, and so much more than the stringy scraps which clad the bones of the scrawny, market-fed birds two days ago.

Gustad's dream about those blissful, long-ago times stayed with him all through the day. For once, he was determined, just once – for one day at least, this humble flat would fill with the happiness and merriment that used to reside in his childhood home. And that day, he decided, would be Saturday. Invite one or two people from the bank for dinner – my old friend Dinshawji for sure – just a small party. With chicken, never mind the extra expense. To celebrate Roshan's birthday and Sohrab's admission to IIT.

As the basket descended over the bird, it peered curiously through the narrow slits in the wickerwork. Safe under the protective dome, it began to cluck intermittently. 'A little rice now,' said Gustad.

'I'm not going to touch the chicken,' snapped Dilnavaz. If he thought she could be tricked into looking after the creature, he was sadly mistaken.

'Boarding and lodging is my department,' he had joked earlier, to win her over. But there was an edge in his voice now. 'Who is asking you to touch? Just put a little rice in a small pan and give me.' His peace-making voice was flagging in its efforts. He had gone straight from work to Crawford Market, and was still in his office clothes: tie, white shirt, white trousers. White except for where the chicken soiled it while he was tying it to the kitchen table-leg with a yard of bristly coir twist. It had been a long day, and he was tired.

Besides, Crawford Market was a place he despised at the best of times. Unlike his father before him, who used to relish the trip and looked on it as a challenge: to venture boldly into the den of scoundrels, as he called it; then to badger and bargain with the shopkeepers, tease and mock them, their produce, their habits, but always preserving the correct tone that trod the narrow line between badinage and belligerence; and finally, to emerge unscathed and triumphant, banner held high, having got the better of the rogues. Unlike his father, who enjoyed this game, Gustad felt intimidated by Crawford Market.

Perhaps it was due to their different circumstances: his father always accompanied by at least one servant, arriving and leaving by taxi; Gustad alone, with his meagre wallet and a worn basket lined with newspaper to soak up meat juices that could start dripping in the bus, causing embarrassment or, worse still, angry protests from vegetarian passengers. Throughout

the trip he felt anxious and guilty – felt that in his basket was something deadlier than a bomb. For was he not carrying the potential source of Hindu-Muslim riots? Riots which often started due to offences of the flesh, usually of porcine or bovine origins?

For Gustad, Crawford Market held no charms. It was a dirty, smelly, overcrowded place where the floors were slippery with animal ooze and vegetable waste, where the cavernous hall of meat was dark and forbidding, with huge, wicked-looking meat hooks hanging from the ceiling (some empty, some with sides of beef – the empty ones more threatening) and the butchers trying various tactics to snare a customer – now importuning or wheedling, the boasting of the excellence of their meat while issuing dire warnings about the taintedness of their rivals', and always at the top of their voices. In the dim light and smelly air abuzz with bold and bellicose flies, everything acquired a menacing edge: the butchers' voices, hoarse from their incessant bellowings; the runnels of sweat streaming down their faces and bare arms on to their sticky, crimson-stained vests and loongis; the sight and smell of blood (sometimes trickling, sometimes coagulated) and bone (gory, or stripped to whiteness); and the constant, sinister flash of a meat cleaver or butcher's knife which, more often than not, was brandished in the vendor's wild hand as he bargained and gesticulated.

Gustad knew his fear of Crawford Market had its origins in his grandmother's warnings about butchers. 'Never argue with a *goaswalla*,' she would caution. 'If he loses his temper then bhup! he will stick you with his knife. Won't stop to even think about it.' Then, in milder tones, less terror-striking but more pedagogic, she revealed the underpinnings from whence this wise dictum rose. 'Remember, the *goaswalla*'s whole life, his training, his occupation, is about butchering. Second nature. *Bismillah*, he says, that is all, and the knife descends.'

If she was teased about it, Grandma would staunchly claim to have witnessed a situation where a *goaswalla* had gone bhup! With his knife into flesh of the human sort. Gustad had relished the gruesome tale in those days, and when he began shopping at Crawford Market he would remember her words with a nervous amusement. He never could feel quite at ease in that place.

He tried to select a chicken for Roshan's birthday. It was hard for him to tell under a those feathers, as the shopkeeper held up bird after bird for inspection. 'Look at this one, *seth*, good one, this. See under wing. Spread it, spread it, does not hurt the *murgi*, not worry. See, poke here. How thick, how much meat.' He did this with one chicken after another, holding its legs and dangling it upside-down, hefting it to emphasize the weight.

Gustad watched, thoroughly confused, squeezing and prodding to pretend he knew what he was doing. But each chicken was very much like the next. When he finally approved one, it was the vocal protestations of the bird, seemingly louder than the others, that made him decide. He would have been the first to admit his inexperience with poultry. The number of times he had been able to afford chicken for his family in the last twenty years, he could count on the fingertips of one hand without using up the digits. Chicken was definitely not his area of expertise.

But beef was a different matter. Beef was Gustad's speciality. Years ago, his college friend Malcolm Saldanha, had taught him all about cows and buffaloes. It was around the same time that Malcolm had helped him hide the furniture from the clutches of the vulturous

bankruptcy bailiff.

The loss of the bookstore had turned Gustad's father into a broken and dispirited man, no longer interested in those weekly expeditions to Crawford Market. When his beloved bookshop and his business disappeared, his appetite was also misplaced, somewhere in the labyrinth of legal proceedings. Gustad worried deeply as his father visibly shrank. He did the best he could now as breadwinner, with his meagre income from private tuitions to schoolchildren. But under Malcolm's advice and guidance, the rupees were stretched further than he had imagined possible.

Malcolm was tall and exceedingly fair-skinned for a Goan. He was fond of explaining his skin colour by telling about the blood of Portuguese colonizers that had mingled with the local stuff. He had thick red lips and slick, gleaming black hair, always parted on the left, brushed back. Malcolm's father, whom Malcolm closely resembled in looks and talents, taught piano and violin, and prepared his students for the examinations periodically held in Bombay by the Royal School of Music and Trinity College. Malcolm's mother played first violin with the Bombay Chamber Orchestra, and his elder brother, the oboe. Malcolm played the piano for the college choir's practices and performances. He was going to be a professional musician, he said, but his father insisted on the BA to round out his education.

Gustad admired Malcolm, even slightly envied him, wishing he, too, could play some instrument. For all the music that had filled his home in happier times – his father's huge radiogram in its dark cabinet of polished *seesum*, the records lining row upon row of shelves – there was not a single musical instrument in the house. The closest Gustad came to one was in a photograph of his mother as a child, posing with her mandolin. The photograph intrigued him, and sometimes, her eyes far away, she would describe the mandolin for Gustad, telling him about the songs she used to play, in her gentle, accepting voice which lacked the necessary force to influence things in the Noble household.

Though he was the odd one out, Gustad was always welcomed at Malcolm's home. Sometimes, Mr Saldanha performed a piece for solo violin, or Malcolm accompanied his father, and Gustad forgot his troubles for a while. In those extremely lean days, when even an anna, every paisa counted, Malcolm the musician taught him to eat beef and mitigate the strain on his pocket-book. 'Lucky for us,' Malcolm always said, 'that we are minorities in a nation of Hindus. Let them eat pulses and grams and beans, spiced with their stinky *asafoetida* – what they call *hing*. Let them fart their lives away. The modernized Hindus eat mutton. Or chicken, if they want to be more fashionable. But we will get our protein from their sacred cow.' At other times he would say, mimicking their economics professor, 'Law of supply and demand, always remember. That's the key. Keeps down the price of beef. And it's healthier because it is holier.'

On Sunday mornings, Gustad would set off with Malcolm for Crawford Market, but the first stop was always the church where Malcolm attended Mass. Gustad went in with him, dipping his fingers in the font of holy water and crossing himself, imitating his friend closely to fit in and not give offence to anyone.

The first time, Gustad was quite intrigued by the church and its rituals, so different from what went on in the fire-temple. But he was on his guard, conditioned as he had been from childhood to resist the call of other faiths. All religions were equal, he was taught

nevertheless, one had to remain true to one's own because religions were not like garment styles that could be changed at whim or to follow fashion. His parents had been painstaking on this point, conversion and apostasy being as rife as it was, and rooted in the very history of the land.

So Gustad quickly decided that while the music was good and the glittering icons and sumptuous vestments were highly impressive, he preferred the sense of peaceful mystery and individual serenity that prevailed in the fire-temple. Sometimes it made him wonder, though, if Malcolm was not making an amateurish, half-hearted attempt at proselytism.

Whatever Malcolm the musician's intentions, over the course of several Sunday mornings he presented a prelude on Catholicism before launching into the theme of beef and variations thereon. Christianity came to India over nineteen hundred years ago, when Apostle Thomas landed on the Malabar coast amongst fishermen, said Malcolm. 'Long before you Parsis came in the seventh century from Persia,' he teased, 'running away from the Muslims.'

'That may be,' rejoined Gustad, 'but our prophet Zarathustra lived more than fifteen hundred years before your Son of God was even born; a thousand years before the Buddha, two hundred years before Moses. And do you know how much Zoroastrianism influenced Judaism, Christianity, and Islam?'

'OK man, OK!' Malcolm laughed. 'I give up.' Since Crawford Market was only a short walk from the church, they were soon in the great hall of meat. There, Gustad received an overview about beef: its nutritional value, the best ways to cook it, the choicest parts, and most importantly, the butchers in Crawford Market who sold the choicest parts.

The following Sunday, Malcolm continued the story of Christianity. Saint Thomas was approached courteously by Hindu holy men, by brahmins, sadhus and acharyas, who wanted to know who he was and why he was loitering around these parts. The meeting took place on the sea-shore. Saint Thomas revealed his name, then said, Do me a favour, cup your palms and immerse them under water, and fling water to the sky. They did so, and the water splashed upwards and fell back into the sea. Saint Thomas asked, Can your God keep the water from falling back? What nonsense, Mister Thomas, said the Hindu holy men, it is the law of gravity, the law of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, so it must fall back.

Then Malcolm the meat maestro pointed out a most critical point about beef-buying: if the fat had a yellowish tint, it came from a cow, not as desirable as buffalo, whose fat was white. And it was not easy, he said, to distinguish between the two – there was such a variety of gradations, and the light in that huge hall of meat could play tricks, so that very often yellow seemed white. After the first few times, he let Gustad lead the way, to give him practice, he said, practice and more practice, the secret weapon of all virtuosi.

Then Saint Thomas turned to the fishermen and asked, If my God can do it – if He can keep the water from falling back – will you worship Him and forsake your multitude of pagan gods and goddesses, your shoals of idols and deities? And the Hindu holy men whispered amongst themselves, Let us have a little bit of fun, let us humour this Thomasbhai, this crazy foreigner. They said to him, Yes, yes, we will, Thomasji, most definitely.

So Saint Thomas briskly waded out a few feet, cupped his hands, and flung sea-water to the sky. And, lo and behold, it stayed suspended in the air: all of it: the tiny droplets, the b

drops, the elongated ones and the round ones, all stood suspended, and refracted the sunlight and sparkled most wondrously, with the perfect glory of the Lord God who created all things. And the crowds gathered on the beach: the fisherfolk, foreign tourists, pilgrims, diplomats, committee chairmen, bankers, mendicants, scallywags, lazy idle loafers, vagabonds, along with the Hindu holy men, all fell promptly to their knees and asked Saint Thomas to tell them more about his God so they too could worship Him.

The last step (after learning to distinguish between buffalo and cow) involved the ability to identify the choicest sections. Malcolm revealed that the neck portion, which the butchers called neckie, was the tenderest, with the least fat, and quickest to cook, thus saving on fuel bills. Neckie was also the sweetest-tasting, and Malcolm assured Gustad that once he learned to appreciate it, he would never return to mutton, not even if he could afford it some day.

Years later, when Gustad was shopping on his own, he was always willing to share Malcolm's wisdom with friends and neighbours. He wanted to train them in the art of beef-eating, so they too could give up the expensive mutton habit. No one, however, was as receptive to the idea as he had been with Malcolm. Eventually, Gustad had to abandon all hope of spreading the gospel of beef.

And a time also arrived when Gustad himself shopped no more at Crawford Market, settling instead for whatever stringy bits of goat, cow or buffalo that the door-to-door *goaswalla* of Khodadad Building brought. By this time, he had lost touch with Malcolm, and was spared embarrassing explanations about the tenuous, tangled connection between his desertion of Crawford Market and the sadhus' nationwide protest against cow slaughter. It was easier to remain the silent, unknown apostate of beef.

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Roshan peered through the cracks in the wickerwork and refused to feed the chicken. She had never seen a live chicken, or even a dead one that had not been cooked. 'Come on, don't be frightened,' said her father. 'Picture it on your birthday dinner-plate and you won't be afraid.' He lifted the basket. Roshan flung the grain and snatched away her hand.

The chicken was used to its new surroundings by now, and pecked busily at the grain, clucking contentedly. Roshan was fascinated by the bird and its movements. She imagined the chicken as her pet. It would be like a dog story in her *English Reader*. She could take it out to the compound for a walk, holding the bristly coir cord like a leash, or it could perch on her shoulder, like the picture in the *Reader* of a green parrot with a boy.

She was still dreaming in the kitchen when Darius and Sohrab came to inspect the chicken. Darius put rice on his palm. The chicken ate from his hand.

'Show-off,' said Sohrab, stroking its wings.

'Does the beak hurt?' asked Roshan.

'No, just tickles a little,' Darius answered. Now Roshan wanted to pet it too and reached out gingerly, but the chicken was suddenly nervous again. It flapped its wings, evacuated its bowels and retreated.

'It did chhee-chhee!' exclaimed Roshan.

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